

Chapter 5: The concession embodied

Introduction

This chapter delves into the history of Congolese bodies in Leverville as seen through the lens of HCB's civilizational endeavours. Policies of eating, clothing, and healing enforced in the concession shed light on how the company put its workers' bodies front and centre of its paternalist ambitions. A visible improvement of their physical and "moral" standing through the rationalisation of their food intakes, the covering of their skin and the improvement of their health would have testified of HCB's successful civilizational prospects. However, the shortcomings of these policies brought instead the tensions between Leverville's virtuous and violent guises to the fore. Rations were insufficient, garments scarcely distributed, screenings and shots thoroughly avoided. Rather than compensating for coerced recruitment or poor working conditions, these strategies formed an integral part of the continuum of constraint imposed upon the concession's inhabitants.

Eating, clothing and healing constitute many ways to observe how the concession was *embodied*. If bodies are the vessels people use to navigate and act upon the world, *embodiment* refers to how the world, in return, influences and shapes those vessels. For Steven van Wolputte, "embodiment" speaks of "the "lived" experience people have of their bodies."¹ Embodiment determines one's "being-in-the-world," for one's thoughts and actions, as well as one's morals and movements, are inextricably tied to physicality. Human beings cannot experience the world without a body, and no mind can function without one.² Furthermore, the "lived experiences" which bodies go through are profoundly influenced by the time and space in which people find themselves. An individual's social status in any given culture shapes her or his embodied experience. Every society has its own rules, which dictate "proper" bodily conducts, movements, or ornaments from undesirable ones.³ These rules often embody social hierarchies, for some actions, garments, or gestures might be expected from certain groups of people while being restricted for others.

1 Steven van Wolputte, "Hang on to Your Self: of Bodies, Embodiment and Selves," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 33 (2004): 254.

2 Malcolm MacLachlan, *Embodiment: Clinical, Critical and Cultural Perspectives on Health and Illness* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2004), 2–4.

3 See for instance the seminal article of Marcel Mauss on "body techniques": Marcel Mauss, "Les Techniques du Corps," *Journal de Psychologie* 32:3–4 (1934).

In this chapter, I resort to the conceptual framework of embodiment to demonstrate that the concession did not only exist as physical enclave, but also as a field of social interactions. Being part of Leverville meant undergoing a series of shared corporeal experiences. Eating rations and wearing imported clothes, visiting company hospitals, encountering medical examiners, or actively trying to avoid them were as many embodied ways to live the concession.

Embodying colonialism

In order to understand the corporeal aspects of Leverville, it is necessary to briefly review the ways embodiment has previously been mobilised by scholars of colonialism. The historiography of empires has led to two major strands of research regarding “colonised” bodies. Some historians have investigated the multifaceted processes of disciplining underwent by indigenous populations under colonial regimes. Others studied the ability of imperial subjects to use their bodies against oppressive power structures. Both approaches can be productively combined in order to paint a complex picture of colonialism as an embodied experience.

The historiography of embodiment in the 19th and 20th century world owes a great deal to the trailblazing work of Michel Foucault. According to Foucault, “modern” bodies undergo a multifaceted process of disciplining to ensure their smooth incorporation into economic and political rationalities, a process he calls “anatomo-politics.”⁴ Institutions such as schools, barracks, prisons or factories produce “docile” bodies which will eventually find a useful and productive purpose.⁵ Foucauldian readings of embodiment have long inspired scholars of colonialism, who both echoed and nuanced his observations in a diverse array of settings and chronologies.⁶

⁴ Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la Sexualité I: La Volonté de Savoir*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1976, 2010), 182–3.

⁵ Bryan S. Turner, *The Body & Society* (London: Sage, 2008), 3.

⁶ See for instance: James S Duncan, *In the Shadows of the Tropics: Climate, Race and Biopower in Nineteenth Century Ceylon*, (Aldershot: Ashgate 2007); David Scott, “Colonial Governmentality,” *Social Text* 43 (1995), 191–220; Steven Pierce, Anumpama Rao (ed.), *Discipline and the Other Body. Correction, Corporeality, Colonialism* (Durham-London: Duke University Press, 2006); Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire. Foucault’s History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham-London: Duke University Press, 1995); Meghan Vaughan, *Curing their Ills: Colonial Power and African Illness* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

Drawing on Foucault's study of medical institutions as crucial nodes in the disciplining of bodies, Alexander Butchart retraces for instance the "construction" of African bodies by European gaze and healing techniques. By borrowing Foucauldian readings of the body as a "fabricated entity," he observes how Africans were apprehended as "objects of knowledge and targets for intervention"⁷ from the 16th century onwards. They were successively used as subjects to be classified by taxonomy, cured and converted by missionaries, and exploited by colonial capitalism.

However, Foucauldian frameworks leave little place to agency. "Disciplined" bodies are hardly able to escape the entangled straitjacket of power relations which constrain them. A parallel strand of research has attempted to shed light on how individuals could use their bodies to revolt and resist. For Carrie Noland, if culture is embodied, it could also be challenged through corporeal performance.⁸ If "modern" bodies are shaped and disciplined to conform socio-cultural expectations, it is through the very performance of what she calls "non-normative gestures" that groups and individuals can confront an oppressive status quo and alter historical trajectories in unexpected ways.⁹ In a similar vein, Yolanda Covington-Ward traced back the *longue durée* history of "embodied resistance" in Congo. For her, bodies are "sites of power struggles," which means that "strategic uses of the body" – such as religious performances – could challenge existing power structures. She convincingly retraces how movements like trembling and jumping enacted by early followers of Simon Kimbangu were interpreted as signs of dissent by colonial authorities, and were deemed as sufficient motives for their arrest.¹⁰ The history of eating, clothing, and healing in Leverville demonstrate how both approaches can be simultaneously mobilised to study different forms of embodiment.

Colonies in general, and colonial enclaves such as Leverville in particular, are privileged spots for the observation of collision and coalescence between culturally-determined embodiments. According to Marcel Mauss, societies shape bodies differently, even in their most mundane aspects. Seated positions, for instance, are markedly different from one point of the globe to the other.¹¹ In that

⁷ Alexander Butchart, *The Anatomy of Power: European Constructions of the African Body* (London-New York: Zed Books, 1998).

⁸ Carrie Noland, *Agency & Embodiment. Performing Gestures/Producing Cultures* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 2.

⁹ Noland, *Agency & Embodiment*, 30.

¹⁰ Yolanda Covington-Ward, *Gesture and Power: Religion, Nationalism and Everyday Resistance in Congo* (Durham-London: Duke University Press, 2016), 71–106.

¹¹ Mauss, "Les Techniques."

extent, cultural encounters could also induce profound transformations of embodiments. Colonialism did not create entirely new embodiments, but rather stimulated new ways of being-in-the-world which both drew upon and coexisted with previous uses. Furthermore, these embodiments could also be contested or reclaimed by colonial subjects. The study of eating, clothing, and healing in Leverville shows therefore how a seemingly totalizing paternalist project effectively faced different limitations.

This project was first limited by impotence, by the unbridgeable contradiction between the principles and the practices of colonial rule in the concession. The second issue was the agency of the Congolese; how workers and local communities escaped and challenged HCB's social policies. Third, some of HCB policies were strategically scaled down by company agents to ensure the viability of the concession. Taken together, these three focal points and limitations shed light on a single defining feature: the fluidity of embodiments. Disciplined, yet autonomous, moving between villages, palm groves and HCB outposts, alternately clothed and bare skinned, Congolese bodies in Leverville were not transformed once and for all by a colonial machinery. They experienced instead forms of embodiments which fluctuated through time and space.

Contested rations

Food was a crucial topic for the actors involved in managing Leverville. For the company, it was necessary to both guarantee the reproduction of its workers' labour force, albeit at a minimal cost. For the colonial administration, public health imperatives required that Congolese diets should be monitored and "scientifically" quantified. HCB workers, on their end, looked to be sufficiently fed with foodstuffs matching their tastes. The manifold tensions arising from these contradictory agendas shed light on the effective limitation of colonial aspirations to supervise and standardise the food intakes of the concession's workforce.

Since its inception, HCB was contractually obligated to provide a daily ration to its workers, as stipulated in its 1911 founding convention.¹² However, the Kwango-Kwilu's environment and social fabric were detrimental to the implementation of large-scale farming schemes. Small crops were usually laid out

¹² "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.

on the outskirts of villages to provide cassava, millet, or amaranth to a community without generating much surplus.¹³ Few inhabitants devoted themselves to cattle breeding. According to a 1931 report, most of the flocks in the Kwango district were goats and hens, the former being widely used to pay taxes, bridewealth or settle palavers.¹⁴ The limited scope of agriculture and animal husbandry both hampered the steady supply of food for the HCB's workforce, and generated occasional famines in the district's savannah areas.¹⁵

The main issue faced by the company's management was the provision of meat for its employees; meat was both scarce and in high demand. HCB staff member C.W.S Sellars recalled in his memoirs a particularly vivid scene taking place at Leverville in the early 1930s. Although enlivened by its author's racist gaze, this vignette alluded nonetheless to a structural meat shortage:

One day there was no lack of meat. During the afternoon, crowds flocked into Leverville and all the mill boys were excited. The mystery was solved when the S/W Kwango was sighted. She had been designed for salvage work and had a 30 tons sheerlegs between bridge and bows. On this occasion, she was being used for ordinary cargo purposes but to our astonishment, an elephant was suspended from the sheerlegs, well clear of the water. It was a unique sight. It had been picked up several miles away. It must have died, sink in the water and putrefied. Blown up with noxious gas, it rose again, became partially submerged and was spotted by the crew who had no difficulty in persuading the captain to turn the ship and hoist the elephant out of the water. When he berthed at Leverville, the wharf was teeming with excited natives. The Captain offered the carcass, without success, to anyone willing to pay him 2000 francs (about 12 pounds). He borrowed our butcher boy who with two of the boys carved up the beast, on the wharf, under the glare of the lights. It was rotten with worms but who cared? Meat and worms would all be smoked together to provide a feast fit for chiefs. Three men were inside that mountain of flesh, hacking off lumps. Control was impossible and much of it never paid for.¹⁶

Unintendedly, meat shortage created a business opportunity for HCB by way of Lever Brothers' global networks. Between 1919 and 1922, the company had founded three whaling stations – in the Hebrides on the South-East coast of Africa and in the Shetlands – for the production of whale oil.¹⁷ In July 1924, a plan was hatched to use the mammals' flesh to feed HCB workers. A by-product of oil production, whale meat was unmarketable for Western consumers and usually

¹³ Nicolai, *Le Kwilu*, 227–9.

¹⁴ AAB, RA/CB 157, Rapport agricole pour le district du Kwango, 1931.

¹⁵ An episode of famine occurred in the territory of Feshi in 1937. AAB, AGRI 360, Lettre du gouverneur général Ryckmans au ministre des colonies Rubens, 9 June 1937. Nicolai, *Le Kwilu*, 228.

¹⁶ UA, UAC 1/11/14/3/12, *Congo Memories*, C.W.S Sellars.

¹⁷ Lewis, *So Clean*, 10.

repackaged as animal food.¹⁸ A series of letters exchanged between William Leverhulme Jr. and Max Horn shed light on the management's enthusiasm for this scheme:

We are endeavouring to prepare whale meat by special pickle so that it will keep good for transportation to the Congo. [...] Our food expert, Sir James Crichton Browne and others inform us that whale meat contains a larger percentage of vitamins and nourishment than any other mammal flesh. [...] I have great hopes that in whale meat we may find the solution of providing meat for the Congo native and, as you know, it is meat that the Congo native desires all the time. [...] We could provide many thousands of tons of whale meat for consumption in the Congo if our experiment proves that it is possible.¹⁹

T.M. Knox, Leverhulme's personal secretary, provided additional details about the new business development: "Whale meat from Harris is to be smoked salted and dried, cut into slabs and baled and sent out here, landed at 2,5 francs per kilo and sold at 4 francs. Only workers from HCB will get it for their rations."²⁰ This plan highlighted how the concession became slowly inscribed in the global networks of the Lever Brothers consortium. In addition to providing raw materials for the mass production of consumer goods, the Leverage area also progressively became a potential market for Lever Brothers (by)products.

This project also illustrated how the company's social policies could be used to increase its own profits. Tons of inconvenient mammal flesh, unpalatable to Western consumers, could be turned into a source of revenue. It seems, however, that the plan did not meet the management's expectations. There are few archival mentions of whale meat consumption in the concession, and none seem to indicate that HCB employees favoured it. This absence of data would suggest that the experiment turned short after a few months or years.

As shown in Leverhulme's letter, pickled whale meat was not only envisioned as a way to commodify by-products, but also as a much-needed source of "vitamins and nourishment" for the Congolese. In the interwar, nutrition came to play an increasingly prominent role in the "civilizing mission".²¹ Africans were deemed incapable of properly feeding themselves, and therefore needed the intervention of colonial actors to improve their physical standings. "Colonial experts" downplayed Congolese eating habits, considered both unbalanced and insuffi-

¹⁸ On the persistent distaste of Western consumers for whale meat, see: Nancy Shoemaker, "Whale Meat in American History," *Environmental History*, 10:2 (2005), 269–294.

¹⁹ UA, LBC/229, William Lever, Jr. to Max Horn, 2 July 1924.

²⁰ UA, UAC/2/34/4/1/1, Diary of T.M. Knox, 18 November 1924.

²¹ Vaughan, *Curing*, 141.

ciently nutritive. For instance, René Mouchet, the colony's assisting chief doctor, wrote the following excerpt in 1930:

The Black adopted for unclear reasons a diet where fresh or vitamin-rich foodstuffs are rare. [...] He usually extensively cooks his meals [...]: meat boiled until it becomes fibrous, flour patiently stirred with regular additions of water until obtaining a sticky mash, several types of leaves hacked into spinaches: even bananas are pounded into an endlessly cooked paste.²²

To ensure both the preservation of the Congolese population and to provide colonial companies with a healthy workforce, the composition of the rations given to their indigenous employees were left to specialized doctors, who were in charge of creating standardized meals that had to be “sufficient, healthy and varied, with foodstuffs that could be found on the spot at reasonable prices. One also has to take into account the individual tastes of some races. [...] The doctor's role is to take care of all matters of cooking, organize and supervise them.”²³ It was not only the composition of meals that had to be supervised by doctors, but also the frequency of their distribution:

Rations should always be given in kind. Ration given in cash is always poorly used. [...] It is best to make daily distributions of rations. Provided on lengthy intervals, it is badly distributed. One gorges oneself on the first day without thinking about tomorrow, sells a part of the ration.... Everything suggested by the most extraordinary short-sightedness will be done by the native.²⁴

From 1921 onwards, the colony's provincial governors were in charge of enforcing ordinances regarding the “hygiene and security” of the local workforce, which specified the type of rations they should receive. Their content was elaborated in accordance with the advices of medical teams and local company managers. Legal rations were also composed according to the supposed “physical characteristics” of local populations, the kind of labour they had to perform, and the types of foodstuffs locally available.²⁵ In Congo-Kasaï, rations had to comprise “for one unit of proteins, 0,8 units of fat and 4,5 units of carbohydrates.”²⁶ Workers were subsequently forbidden to either sell or buy a part of their rations.

²² René Mouchet, *Le Problème Médical au Congo* (Liège: H. Vaillant-Carmann, 1930), 27.

²³ Mouchet, *Le problème*, 34–5.

²⁴ Mouchet, *Le problème*, 35.

²⁵ Giovanni Trolli, “L'alimentation Chez les Travailleurs Indigènes dans les Exploitations Commerciales, Agricoles, Industrielles et Minières du Congo,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 9:2 (1936): 200.

²⁶ Trolli, “L'alimentation,” 202.

The basis for calculating the needs of indigenous households was the daily amount of food deemed necessary for an “able-bodied man,” the primary target of recruitment. Women’s and children’s intakes were calculated as a ratio of the men’s: “3/4 for a woman, 2/3 for a child of older than 10 and 1/3 for younger children.”²⁷ For the Kwango district in 1934, the rations were estimated as follows:²⁸

	Male	Female	Child older than 10	Child younger than 10
Manioc (cassava)	700 gr <i>chikwangué</i> or 500 gr manioc flour	525 gr <i>chikwangué</i> or 375 gr manioc flour	460 gr <i>chikwangué</i> 333, 33 gr manioc flour	260 gr <i>chikwangué</i> 166,66 gr manioc flour
Corn, rice or millet flour	250 gr	187,5 gr	166,66 gr	83, 33 gr
Groundnuts	50 gr	37,5 gr	33,33 gr	16,66 gr
Beans	50 gr	37,5 gr	33,33 gr	16,66 gr
Palm oil	50 gr	37,5 gr	33,33 gr	16,66 gr
Bananas and other supplies	50 gr	37,5 gr	33,33 gr	16,66 gr
Optimal daily ration	950 gr	712,5 gr	633, 33 gr	316,66 gr

These rules and plans highlight the crucial role played by alimentation in the emergence of colonial embodiments. Rations were broken down into legally determined nutrient intakes and standardised amounts of local foodstuffs. This appears to be part of a process of Foucauldian “anatomo-politics,” a reshaping of African bodies to ensure their productive incorporation in the colonial power structure. Furthermore, forbidding workers to commodify rations also played an important part in creating a moral bond between employers and employee, a way for companies to act as benevolent providers of food. However, this moral and rational agenda faced several obstacles and criticism, even within colonial circles.

During a 1923 tour of inspection in the Leverville concession, Dr. Emile Lejeune, the Congo-Kasaï province’s medical supervisor, noted that the four different types of ration provided to HCB workers were all “deficient in albumin, carbohydrates, fat and calories.”²⁹ Palm oil, although produced on the spot, was mostly absent from the rations, and no food was provided to workers on Sundays. According to his report:

²⁷ AAB, RA/CB 157, Bilan de l’alimentation végétale indigène du district du Kwango, 1934.

²⁸ AAB, RA/CB 157, Bilan de l’alimentation végétale indigène du district du Kwango, 1934.

²⁹ AAB, AIMO 1654, Hygiène des travailleurs dans les exploitations des HCB de Lusanga, 1923.

Each team of 20 men is tended to, in principle, by a “kook” (sic) who cooks the daily ration, rice, in a large iron basin. At lunchtime, the rice is distributed on palm leaves, and speedily consumed in the open air with a bit of dried fish that the Blacks eat raw, probably because they lack the pans to cook it. Oil, when there is some, is poured on the rice. The Blacks are only eating once a day. Some keep a part of their meal to eat it cold on the evening. But sometimes there are no cooks. [and] It is usual in Leverville to pretend that the ration is sufficient!!³⁰

Dr. Emile Lejeune’s report was not the first time that a medical official openly criticized HCB’s alimentation policy. A year prior, Belgian Congo’s medical chief Alphonse Rhodain had already warned the company’s management that they were not sufficiently feeding their workers.³¹ Both Lejeune and Rodhain petitioned the authorities to see changes in the *Huileries*’ practices. “I protested against the insufficiency of the ration. [...] these deficiencies came from the fact that for reasons of expediency, starches are provided in rice. In Basongo, the ration amounted to 1800 calories!,” wrote Lejeune to the Congo-Kasaï governor in March 1924.³² Three months earlier, Rodhain had also harshly criticized HCB: “I could not hide my stupefaction when noting that workers were not rationed on Sunday. It is truly shameful.”³³

Furthermore, foodstuffs provided by the *Huileries* were often unpalatable to workers. The most contentious type of food was rice – the ration’s main staple – introduced in the Leverville area by the company. During his 1923 inspection, Dr. Lejeune noted that the company at least tried to provide different type of foods, which might be palatable to the “tastes and habits” of the different populations living in the concession, mostly through the possibility of receiving either manioc, millet or corn flour along dried fish, palm oil and rice. He noted nonetheless, “the idea would be good, but in fact the Blacks do not have a choice; they receive the foodstuffs that are in stock and not always according to the amounts prescribed by the company, which are already insufficient.”³⁴ The same year, Feshi’s territorial administrator wrote to Leverville’s general director following the death of several workers originating from Moyen-Kwenge. Their passing was attributed by their companions to “the alimentation to which they were not accustomed, rice

30 AAB, AIMO 1654, Hygiène des travailleurs dans les exploitations des HCB de Lusanga, 1923.

31 AAB, AIMO 1654, Lettre du médecin provincial Lejeune au gouverneur de la province du Congo-Kasaï, 8 August 1923.

32 AAB, AIMO 1654, Dr. Lejeune, Note pr M. le gouverneur concernant les protestations des HCB à la suite de mes inspections à Leverville, au Kwilu et à Basongo, March 1924.

33 AAB, MOI 3602, Lettre du Dr. Rodhain au gouverneur général Rutten, 25 January 1924.

34 AAB, AIMO 1654, Dr. Lejeune, “Hygiène des Travailleurs dans les exploitations des HCB dans le cercle de Lusanga,” 1923.

or smoked fish, while these folks mostly eat manioc and native vegetables, and sometimes meat [...] few deaths occur after each recruitment and these gossips regarding rice are not made to encourage the natives to go and work for your company.”³⁵

The inadequacy of the company’s food to local tastes seemed to have been a central argument of workers when they refused to be recruited. Still in 1923, Idi- ofa’s territorial administrator reported: “chiefs are all telling me that their people refuse to go to Lusanga for the food imposed to them is rice while their alimentation is millet.”³⁶ Five months later, the Governor General wrote to the Minister of Colonies: “natives originating from Katmcha-Lubue area refuse to reengage in the Lusanga circle because they are malnourished – they receive an alimentation to which they are not accustomed.”³⁷

On the other hand, the company’s management tried to convince public servants that they did their best to provide food suiting the tastes of their workforce. In 1924, the HCB’s delegate administrator wrote to the Congo-Kasaï governor:

We endlessly tried to feed the Black with local products. But our attempts at cultivation have been extremely costly and we had to renounce. On the other hand, we tried in vain to buy foodstuffs to the natives [...] but unfortunately they cannot be stored because they cannot be kept. [...] we bought 30 tonnes of millet flour for the natives we intended to recruit in Kamtcha-Lubue. The government just closed this territory for recruitment. Workers originating from other regions [...] refuse to eat millet flour. We are therefore losing these 30 tons [...] in pure waste.³⁸

Tensions around rations bring to the fore the role of Congolese bodies as sites of colonial contentions. New, “rational” embodiments by the standardisation of food intakes were doubly contested. They were criticised by workers manifesting their distaste for rice, and by medical officials who downplayed their sufficiency.

If both company managers and colonial doctors agreed on the importance to supervise the eating habits of Congolese workers, practical measures remained a topic of dispute, which showed how their social agendas did not always overlap. HCB management relied on the import of foodstuffs such as rice or whale meat

35 AAB, MOI 3602, Lettre de l’administrateur territorial de Feshi au directeur-général du cercle de Leverville, 23 August 1923.

36 AAB, MOI 3602, Lettre de l’administrateur territorial d’Idi ofa au directeur-général du cercle de Leverville, 31 May 1923.

37 AAB, MOI 3602, Lettre du GG Rutten au ministre des colonies Franck, 11 October 1923.

38 AAB, AIMO 1654, Lettre de l’administrateur délégué des HCB au gouverneur de la province du Congo-Kasaï, 19 January 1924.

while attempting to generate new profit by reselling their own by-products, or by limiting the rations' size. On the contrary, medical officials insisted on more substantial rations composed of local aliments. Although the overall objective of "improving" workers' bodies by rationalisation was broadly agreed upon, it still led to opposing visions, and sometimes to bitter contentions. Both the insufficient size of the ration and the whale meat scheme illustrated how Leverville managers strategically limited the company's civilizational ambitions to safeguard its own profit margins.

Furthermore, if rations materialized colonial beliefs in civilizational and corporeal improvements through rationalisation, they also had a symbolic meaning. By distributing foodstuffs, companies such as HCB acted as benevolent providers and hoped therefore to foster feelings of loyalty among their workforce. Potentially, such exchanges in kind could indeed resonate with pre-existing forms of power relations and bounds of allegiance. Florence Bernault noted that eating constituted a "rich and multi-layered idiom of empowerment and agency"³⁹ in late 19th-century Equatorial Africa. It metaphorically recovered the possibility for an authority figure to increase and redistribute wealth at the benefit of his community.⁴⁰ Furthermore, according to Michael Schatzberg, ensuring that everyone was properly fed was one of the main tokens that a chief properly fulfilled his duties.⁴¹ In Leverville, however, fruit cutters used their distaste for unknown foodstuffs as a prominent argument for avoiding working for the company. Rejecting company rations therefore played a double role. First, workers actively refused to partake of the new "rationalised" embodiment put forward by the company. Second, in complaining about rations they rebuffed HCB's attempts to position itself as a benevolent provider, thereby undermining its overarching civilizing claim.

Taken together, the rations' inadequacies demonstrated how a seemingly totalizing "anatomy-political" project was effectively constrained by multifaceted limitations. Rations were small and unpalatable, unable to effectively fulfil their purpose. However, attempts to alter Congolese bodies in the concession did not stop at the transformation of diets. This action also comprised the covering of workers' and inhabitants' bodies.

³⁹ Bernault, *Colonial Transactions*, 170.

⁴⁰ Bernault, *Colonial Transactions*, 170.

⁴¹ Michael Schatzberg, *Political Legitimacy in Middle Africa. Father, Family, Food*, (Bloomington-Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), 149–50.

The ambivalence of clothing

“Friends and collaborators.” Such was the description written at the back of these two undated pictures (see figures 7 and 8), probably taken in the early 1930s. Behind the imposing figure of Elso Dusseljé and one of his unnamed employees posed a group of Congolese men and women. In the first photograph, most of them are bare-chested, with women kneeled on the foreground. In the second, the same group of Congolese are now fully clothed. The women stand on their feet and wear a colourful variety of *pagnes*, while most men are sporting white shirts. It appears to illustrate the civilizing process at play in Leverville, where half-naked *basenjis*⁴² (“savage”, i.e.) would turn into fully clothed workers.

Such “before and after” tropes regularly appeared in colonial imageries. Photographs taken in industrial settings were often intended to provide visual proofs of successful civilizational endeavours, easily illustrated by the shift from uncovered to covered African bodies.⁴³ The description “friends and collaborators” accordingly highlighted the progress made by the Congolese under the care of the company, incarnated by the presence, front and centre of Elso Dusseljé and his underling. This terminology suggested that previously undressed individuals acquired the taste for “decent” clothing such as *pagnes* and shirts once taken under HCB’s wing.

Several historians of empires studied how the fluid notion of “nakedness” embodied the “primitiveness” of non-Western “others.”⁴⁴ Baring one’s skin was seen as displaying a lack of shame, exacerbated senses and an absence of the modesty associated with European, Christian values.⁴⁵ Social policies destined to enhance the moral status of African workers would therefore comprise a

⁴² *Basenji* is also the name of a breed of dogs originating from Central Africa. In different Western-Bantu languages, these dogs were known as *mbwa na basenji*, “dogs of the bush people”. In the colonial jargon, *basenji* would become a moniker to qualify the Congolese who were considered to have yet to be touched by colonialism. Pierre Ryckmans wrote in 1925 that “*Basenji* is the name with which, all over Congo, we name the savage natives, those leaving in forsaken villages, far from civilization, far from colonial centres, far from the Whites”. See: Pierre Ryckmans, *Dominer Pour Servir* (Brussels; Editions Universelles, 1948), 77.

⁴³ Eric Allina-Pisano, “‘Fallacious Mirrors’: Colonial Anxiety and Images of African Labor in Mozambique, ca. 1929,” *History in Africa*, 24 (1997): 19–20.

⁴⁴ See for instance: Adeline Masquelier (ed.), *Dirt, Undress*; Hildi Hendrickson (ed.), *Clothing and Difference: Embodied Identities in Colonial and Post-Colonial Africa* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

⁴⁵ Philippa Levine, “States of Undress: Nakedness and the Colonial Imagination,” *Victorian Studies*, 50:2 (2008), 190–4.

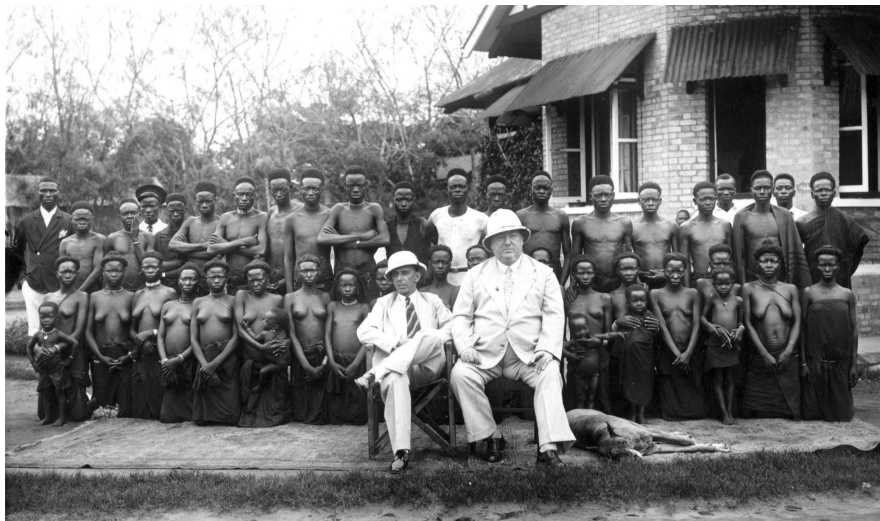


Figure 7: “Friends and Collaborators 1.”, UA, UAC 2/36/7/1/3, undated, c. 1930

set of strategies aimed at clothing their bodies, rendering visible the transformations occurring in their minds and mores under the patronage of Europeans.

However, the Leverville case calls for nuancing these observations. Although suggested by documents such as “Friends and Collaborators,” the concession brought no permanent changes to sartorial uses. Congolese could vest alternative embodiments according to the circumstances in which they found themselves. Moreover, HCB did not necessarily assign only negative meanings to “nakedness.” Let us look for instance at an August 1930 letter written by the director of Tango station to Dupont, the then general-director of the Leverville area:

We demand that on pay day, cutters and their wives dress properly. Because the best cutter is precisely the one that remained the most *basenji*, and so is his wife. At first when they arrive, they look awkward in these costumes to which they are not used, but soon in the hubbub that follows the pay they already blend among the “civilized.” I believe that this practice greatly contributes to free our cutters from their inferior position.⁴⁶

Two forms of embodiment are at play here. On the one hand, cutters and their wives were expected to be “properly” dressed when entering the “civilized” enclave of the company office to receive their salaries, a ritual which symbolized their “modern” status as wage workers. On the other, the cutter’s nakedness

⁴⁶ L. Van der Eecken à C. Dupont, 14 August 1930, in Vanderlinden (ed.), *Main d'oeuvre*, 10.



Figure 8: “Friends and Collaborators 2.”, UA, UAC 2/36/7/1/3, undated, c. 1930

acts as a proof of his professional ability, the best being, allegedly, “the one that remained the most *basenji*.” This remark sheds light on Leverville’s peculiar business model. As Anna Tsing observed, some commodities are not produced under capitalist control, but through “pericapitalist activities.” Skills such as foraging, for instance, are learned outside of standardised environments like industrial plants or workshop. At the same time, these skills could be mobilized in capitalist modes of production.⁴⁷ In the concession for instance, fruit cutters have to know how to climb palm trees and cut fruit clusters before entering the company’s workforce, skills that they acquire outside of the company’s sphere of influence. It paradoxically leads to a situation where their economic value is directly related to their remoteness from colonial modernity, for the “best cutter” is “the one that remained the most *basenji*,” which, in return, becomes manifest in his inability to dress “properly.”

Three observations can be drawn from this case. First, it shows how concepts such as “anatomy-politics” have to be nuanced in colonial contexts. If the “civilizing” of Congolese bodies could sometimes take the guise of standardisation – as observed with rations – colonial changes brought to embodiments were not always so straightforward. Fruit cutters’ productivity immediately depended on the existence of pericapitalist environments in which they could ac-

⁴⁷ Tsing, *The Mushroom*, 63–6.

quire and pass skills crucial to the company's profitability. Therefore, HCB had to strategically limit its civilizational endeavours – for “uncivilized” embodiments needed to be maintained – even within the enclave of Leverville. Second, it shows how embodiments remained fluid, for the same bodies could alternately assume different guises. Cutters and their wives had to “dress properly” and almost “blend among the civilized” on pay day, yet they had to be *basenji* when they performed their tasks in the palm groves. Finally, it brings to the fore another layer to colonial readings of nakedness. As a marker of otherness, bare skin in colonial contexts has mostly been connoted with immorality, backwardness or sexual proclivity. The present case shows how nakedness could also sometimes be associated with precious labour skills acquired in indigenous surroundings, even within enclaves of capitalist production such as the concession.

From this discussion, it seems clear that imported clothes played an integral role in the process of “civilizing” the native Africans. Imported clothing played a further role as markers of distinction as well. Fruit cutters' pay day experiences showed how they were intimately associated with the “modern” spaces of company outposts, which could hardly be accessed bare-chested. Within these spaces, garments were further used to mark distinctions of rank between manual workers and intermediaries. Oral testimonies pointed out that while fruit cutters wore waistcloths or *culottes* and remained bare chested, *capitas*, *Coastmen* or camp chiefs wore trousers.⁴⁸ In Sissi Kalo's mural, an African protagonist can also be singled out by his physical closeness to the HCB representative and by his blazer, while most of the others are bare-chested.

The following images (figures 9 and 10) depict two groups of men dressed in worn-out European garments. In the first one, unidentified individuals are waiting for a *pirogue* to cross the Kwenge river between Leverville and Soa. The second depicts the rowers and the escort accompanying Elso Dusseljé during his tours of inspection in the concession. The escort can clearly be distinguished by their European attire, while the rowers wear a sort of uniform.

The presence of a significant community of West Africans in the concession must also have played an important role in sartorial tastes and display of status. *Coastmen* employed by the HCB were thought to be the first models of African elegance in interwar Léopoldville/Kinshasa. According to Didier Gondola, they “represented for the Congolese youth the final stage of this new status adventure where colonization was taking them. [...] They were described by the Kikongo ex-

⁴⁸ Georges Zolochi (b.c. 1925–1930), Ifwani/Kakobola, 10 August 2015; Jean Ndeke Lutanda (born c. 1940–1945); Ifwani – Kakobola, 10 August 2015; Lumène Wenge (b. 1931), Nzaji, 11 August 2015; Kunanguka Tungeleko, (b.c. 1930), Nzaji, 11 August 2015.

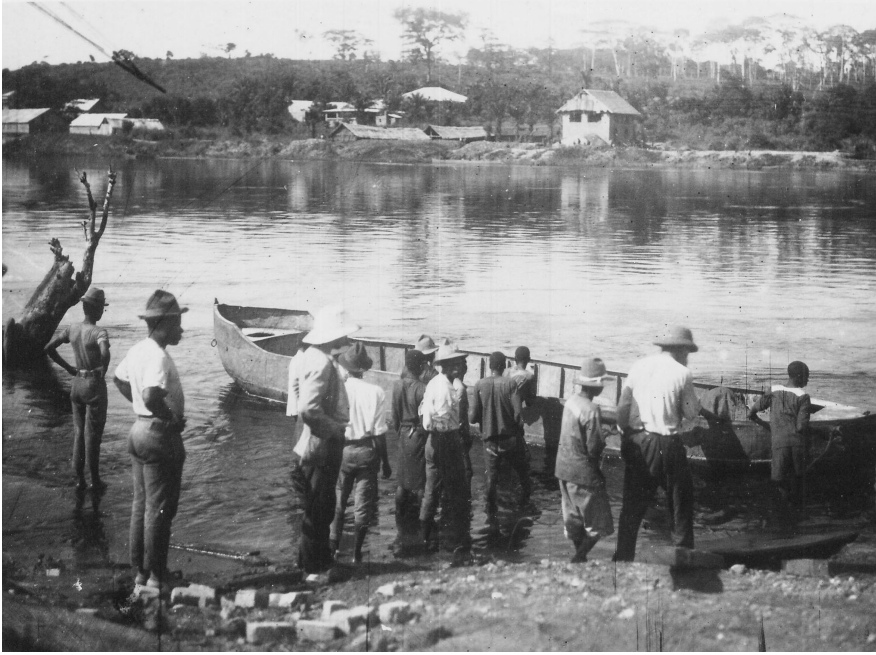


Figure 9: “Waiting to cross the river, Leverville-Soa, 1926–27”, Jesuit Archives, Kinshasa (JAK), B1 J.

pression *mindele ndombi* (‘whites with black skin’).⁴⁹ It was highly probable that similar displays of distinction from West Africans – and in return similar longings for emulation from the Congolese – did take place in Leverville and its hinterland.

Enmeshing garments and status naturally played into pre-existing social uses. In precolonial Central Africa as in other places around the world, clothing and accessories were key elements used to separate power figures from their underlings.⁵⁰ Leaders could also create bounds of allegiance by distributing certain accessories or items of clothing to their close ones, which acted as symbols of distinction.⁵¹ As early as 1916, HCB’s management in Kinshasa contemplated the possibility of tapping into these uses to enhance the social status of fruit cut-

⁴⁹ Didier Gondola, “Dream and Drama: The Search for Elegance among Congolese Youth,” *African Studies Review* 42:1 (1999): 27.

⁵⁰ Phyllis Martin, “Contesting Clothes in Colonial Brazzaville,” *The Journal of African History*, 35:3 (1994): 401.

⁵¹ Martin, “Contesting Clothes,” 410.



Figure 10: “My team of rowers and my escort”, UA, UAC 2/36/7/1/3, undated, c. 1911–1937.

ters and to overcome the reluctance of recruits. In July of the same year, Sidney Edkins wrote to Lord Leverhulme, “I think the work of cutting can be popularized by appealing to the natives’ love of importance. Working upon this line I have instructed the District manager to give each cutter a mark or insignia of his rank. What this is to be has not been decided but it is to take the form of a belt, sash, jersey or special waistcloth.”⁵² Like the provision of rations, distributing garments to create distinction could also be seen as a way for the company to strengthen its emotional bond with its workforce by acting as the provider of rare and desirable items.

Finally, clothing became a point of contention between the company and the administration. HCB’s management rejected public servants’ reiterated demands to provide blankets and loincloths to fruit cutters. In his 1923 report, Dr. Emile Lejeune implicitly accused the company of letting its workers contract illnesses by refusing to properly clothe them: “most of the time, recruits receive no blankets or loincloths. Yet, the nights are cold in the Kwilu, and most deaths are caused by respiratory disorders.” He concluded, “the Blacks are not dressed by HCB.”⁵³ The company’s delegate administrator justified the *Huileries*’ position in January 1924 by resorting to financial arguments. “Providing a loincloth and a

⁵² UA, LB/215, Edkins to Leverhulme, 7 July 1916.

⁵³ AAB, AIMO 1654, Lettre de l’administrateur-délégué des HCB au gouverneur du Congo-Kasaï, 19 January 1924.

blanket to natives hired for only three months means doubling their salaries, and therefore ruining the company.”⁵⁴ Once more, HCB limited its social policies for economic imperatives.

Clothing offers a nuanced perspective on how the concession came to be embodied. The seemingly all-encompassing objective of covering bare-skinned bodies was effectively ambivalent, multi-layered, and thoroughly limited. Garments were used to reinforce the distinction between palm groves and villages, where they were deemed unsuited, and company outposts where they were expected. In the latter, they were used to bring further stratification within the company’s indigenous workforce, and might have been used to foster bounds of allegiance between employers and employees. These multifaceted limitations were also present in their medical strategies.

Coercive healing

HCB’s medical policies were deployed in a climate of public health-related anxiety. Since the late 19th century, Congo underwent a dramatic and multifaceted demographic crisis, fuelled by the colonial expansion. The coerced recruitment of countless young men for portage and labour took its toll on many communities, who lost a significant labour force. Forced migration and the flight of villages attempting to escape colonial agents further contributed to spread diseases such as sleeping sickness (*trypanosomiasis*) far from their basins.⁵⁵ Birth rates were also dwindling all over the continent, menacing the economic viability of colonies, who faced potential shortages of indigenous workers.⁵⁶

This health emergency called for a swift answer from colonial authorities. To stimulate fertility and curb mortality rates, the administration set up ambitious plans to tackle issues as varied as unsupervised migrations, venereal diseases or polygamy.⁵⁷ Public services zeroed their sanitary efforts on the fight against smallpox, sleeping sickness and malaria.⁵⁸

54 AAB, AIMO 1654, Lettre de l’administrateur-délégué des HCB au gouverneur du Congo-Kasaï, 19 January 1924.

55 Jean-Paul Sanderson, *Démographie Coloniale Congolaise: Entre Speculation, Idéologie et Reconstruction Historique* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Presses Universitaires de Louvain), 2018, 20.

56 Vaughan, *Curing*, 141.

57 Nancy Rose Hunt, “STDs, Suffering and their Derivatives in Congo-Zaire: Notes Towards an Historical Ethnography of Diseases,” in *Vivre et Penser le Sida en Afrique*, edited by Charles Becker et al. (Paris: Karthala, 1999), 114.

58 Sanderson, *Démographie Coloniale*, 23.

Sub-Saharan Africa's largest grid of nurseries, midwife schools and orphanages was built in Congo over the course of the interwar.⁵⁹ In parallel, a vast network of dispensaries, hospitals and medical mobile teams were progressively founded by public services, missions and private companies.⁶⁰ The healthcare budget steadily increased, from 4 million francs in 1920 to 76 million in 1929, to a total of 575 million.⁶¹ According to a 1936 report, "social spending regarding, hygiene, education and subsidies to missions, amount to 20 percent of the colony's administrative spending, and absorb almost the entirety of native taxes."⁶²

The massive and diverse efforts to improve the physical standing of the Congolese, lengthen their lifespan and increase their population were inextricably tied to the colony's fortunes. Belgian Congo's prosperity rested on the massive exports of relatively cheap commodities extracted by a considerable workforce. As Dr. Mouchet wrote, "philanthropy put aside, even without taking our moral duties into account towards a race we are using at our benefit, it is an economic necessity, a "good deal" than to preserve and increase if possible the Congo's human capital."⁶³ In Leverville, as well as in other colonial enclaves, "virtuous" endeavours of care were inseparable from productivity imperatives. It required, in return, the resort to violence in order to submit unruly bodies to mandatory medical practices.

At the opposite of Western bourgeois medical care – individual and curative – colonial medicine was both collective and preventive. This differentiation both stemmed from and contributed to the structural racism of colonial power structures.⁶⁴ Just like coercive recruitments were justified on the grounds of the moral benefits of wage labour, force was also deemed necessary to overcome the fears and reluctance of the Congolese towards doctors, nurses, vaccines and screening tests.

Indeed, there were widespread anxieties in sub-Saharan colonies towards European medical practices. According to Luise White, "Africans brought their own epistemologies of causation and cure to European clinics," which often led them to mistrust doctors.⁶⁵ Cultural apprehensions related to conflicting interpretations of healing were not their only source of anxiety. Congolese were for-

⁵⁹ Hunt, "Le bébé", 421

⁶⁰ Poncelet, *L'invention*, 251; Hunt, *A Colonial Lexicon*, 162.

⁶¹ Mouchet, *Le problème*, p. 5.

⁶² RMCA, 54.45.184, La Politique Indigène de la Belgique au Congo, 1^{er} février 1936.

⁶³ Mouchet, *Le problème*, 9.

⁶⁴ Duncan, *In the Shadows*, 107.

⁶⁵ Luise White, *Speaking With Vampires. Rumor and History in Colonial Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 96–7.

cibly pushed into an unknown system of care, founded on drastically different premises, which must have been significantly frightening. This experience was all the more frightening, given that standard sanitary practices such as perfusions or the collection of blood, body parts and bodily fluids played into pre-existing repertoires of malevolent witchcraft.⁶⁶

Coercion was at the very heart of colonial healing policies in Congo, and contributed to both stimulating Congolese medical anxieties and to intensifying the resort to force as a response to refusal. According to Dr. Mouchet in 1930, medical efforts were a totalizing experience which would suffer no delays nor exemptions: “We have to treat in block all of the sick, exert a permanent control on them, looking tirelessly for all the germ-carriers, even if a certain constraint is necessary. The superior interest of the Black race requires it and it would be childish to renounce when facing indolence or prejudice.”⁶⁷

Accordingly, healing endeavours could take a martial guise. Medical mobile teams fashioned on the model of military expeditions were sent to the countryside to subject entire populations to screening or vaccination campaigns.⁶⁸ Such was the goal of the FOREAMI (*Fonds Reine Elisabeth pour l'Aide Médicale aux Indigènes*), a public institution founded in 1930 to enforce a program of “total care and diagnosis” in the Kwango district.⁶⁹ Patients were legally bound to comply: “the law on sleeping sickness gives doctors and aides the right to collective convocation. Chiefs are warned by messengers of the imminent arrival of the medical authority and are required to gather all of their subjects, men, women and children.”⁷⁰ According to Dr. Mouchet, the menace of confinement was “often sufficient” to “ensure the regular presence” of the sick to “injection centres.”⁷¹

As spaces of concentration for a migrant workforce, enclaves such as Leverville played an ambivalent part in these medical efforts. On the one hand, the authorities were aware that recruitment campaigns played a significant role in depopulation, by taking “able-bodied males” away from their communities.⁷² On the other, these enclaves were optimally suited for the implementation of systematic medical efforts. It was easier there to track down, screen, cure and over-

⁶⁶ See: Hunt, *A Colonial*, 7; White, *Speaking*, 90; Bernault, *Colonial Transactions*, 96–118, 168–93.

⁶⁷ Mouchet, *Le Problème*, 10.

⁶⁸ Vaughan, *Curing*, 43.

⁶⁹ Anne Cornet, “Action Sanitaire et Contrôle Social au Ruanda (1920–1940). Femmes, Missions et Politique de Santé” (PhD diss., Université Catholique de Louvain, 2005), 373–4.

⁷⁰ Mouchet, *Le Problème*, 18.

⁷¹ Mouchet, *Le Problème*, 19.

⁷² Sanderson, *Démographie coloniale*, 51, 55.

all “improve” Congolese bodies mobilized in resource extraction.⁷³ The concession was accordingly granted with its own medical network. There were two main hospitals – one in Tango and the other in Leverville – where Europeans and Africans were treated in separate wings. Segregation was an essential tool of colonial medicine, deemed to protect white bodies from those of Africans, perceived as a source of contagion.⁷⁴ Leverville also further hosted a lazaretto for the *dormeurs*, who had attained the advanced, vegetative stage of sleeping sickness.

Mobile teams were also sent to the concession’s camps and villages, to monitor the “sanitary state” of homes and communities. Teams were supposed to fill “hygiene registers” with their observations and subsequent suggestions to improve the living conditions of the visited communities.⁷⁵ These teams were usually composed of a doctor, three to four “sanitary agents” trained in the Belgian School of Tropical Medicine, and African male nurses, a social category on which archival information are crucially missing.⁷⁶

However, these ambitious programs proved extremely complex to enforce. Dr. Schweitz, head of the 1920–1921 Kwango-Kwilu’s sleeping sickness operation, shared his frustrations in his final report of activity:

Soon after my return in the Kwilu area, I had to convince myself that in spite of all my pessimism, I had been too optimistic [...] Instead of being able to work simultaneously in three territories, we had to limit ourselves to a single one, where we could barely end the first round of injections [...] after a whole year of hard work. [...] The number of patients to screen, the great number of infected to cure, the difficulties we faced in the treatment, the ill will of the natives, the shortage of nurses and the need to exert a permanent control over their work. [...] The lack of trust one could have in Black nurses and the natives’ disobedience have furthermore forced the mission’s Europeans to dedicate a significant amount of their time to make the injections themselves, or at least to supervise them.⁷⁷

⁷³ Butchart, *The Anatomy*, 94–5.

⁷⁴ Timothy Burke, *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women: Commodification, Consumption and Cleanliness in Modern Zimbabwe* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 36.

⁷⁵ AAB, AIMO 1856, Lettre du chef de la province de Léopoldville au commissaire de district du Kwango, 29 September 1937.

⁷⁶ Nancy Rose Hunt, “Letter-writing, Nursing Men and Bicycles in the Belgian Congo: Notes Towards the Social Identity of a Colonial Category,” in *Paths Toward the Past. African Historical Essays in Honor of Jan Vansina*, edited by Robert Harms et al, (Atlanta: ASA Press, 1994), 187–8. It is also worth noting that Leslie Sabakinu is currently preparing a PhD thesis on Congolese nurses during the colonial period.

⁷⁷ Jacques Schweitz, “Extrait du Rapport de la Mission Médicale Antitrypanosomique du Kwilu-Kwango,” 1920–1921, *Annales de la Société Belge de Médecine Tropicale*, 1:3 (1921): 3–4.

Schweitz's disappointment was echoed by other colonial medical workers. During a 1923 medical inspection of the concession, Dr. Lejeune witnessed similar incidents of reluctance on the part of the Congolese workers and their families. "[they] lack trust, and when their illness is somewhat important, disappear to be cured or to die in their villages. Doctors in Leverville only see a very small portion of the sick."⁷⁸

Flight and elusiveness once facing coercive medical care can be read as evident displays of "embodied resistance."⁷⁹ If Congolese bodies were sites of power struggles, refusing coercive medicine appear was a way of mobilising one's being against pervasive colonial claims. Furthermore, collectively avoiding doctors and nurses might have contributed to the emergence of shared physical and social experiences among the concession's inhabitants.⁸⁰ New forms of embodiment enforced in the Leverville area were therefore not only shaped by the policies put in place by the company and the administration, they could also stem from active and widespread attempts to escape them. Although these vignettes seem to indicate a systematic distrust for doctors, the reality was certainly more complex. Not all of the beds in Leverville's hospital were once occupied by coerced patients. Meghan Vaughan judiciously points out that Africans displayed a vast array of response to colonial medicine, which could range from fleeing to wilfully checking into a hospital.⁸¹ Someone could escape a *trypanosomiasis* screening one day and look for a doctor on the next one. These varied and fluid responses highlight the crucial role individual agency in corporeal experiences, and demonstrate that conceptual readings such as "embodied resistance" should not be oversimplified and uniformly projected on complex sets of attitudes.

Like rations and clothing, HCB's medical policies were also heavily criticised by administrators. As early as 1915, a report pointed out the "alarming" death rate of Leverville's industrial workers – 18 percent – and the uselessness of its 'sanitary brigade,' "mostly assigned to unrelated tasks."⁸² In 1923, Dr. Lejeune criticized the company's teams of *injecteurs*, in charge of administering *atoxyl* to those afflicted by sleeping sickness, for some of them "did not know the prop-

⁷⁸ AAB, AIMO 1654, Hygiène des Travailleurs dans les exploitations des HCB dans le cercle de Lusanga, 1923.

⁷⁹ See Covington-Ward, *Gesture and Power*, 3.

⁸⁰ See Vaughan, *Curing*, 203.

⁸¹ Vaughan, *Curing*, 43, 52.

⁸² AAB, AIMO 1680, Lettre du commissaire de police de Vos au commissaire de district du Kwango, 19 juin 1915.

er dosages and did not pay attention to instructions,” while their supervisors used them “as a team of porters and rowers.”⁸³

Lejeune also made an extensive and far from flattering description of the Leverville medical facilities. The Europeans’ hospital, “built in wood and toil, with sad and dark rooms, [...] lack maintenance.” African nurses were “negligent, poorly groomed, probably unable to properly take care of a sick European.” The Africans’ hospital had “three poorly built latrines and a morgue with a dirt floor on which infected liquids are dripping, [...] attracting swarms of flies.” There was “an insufficient number of beds. There should be 225 for the 4500 workers of Leverville.” Finally, the lazaretto was “old and miserable,” a place where patients “are sleeping on the ground with no blankets.” His visit left him a “deplorable impression, I was disappointed by the flagrant insufficiency of HCB’s medical service. [...] it is regrettable that after so many years of work and so much money spent, the situation was not more satisfying in Lusanga.”⁸⁴

In the following months, the rift between Congo-Kasaï’s medical authorities and the concession’s management only grew wider. In April 1924, Leverville’s delegate administrator wrote to the provincial governor to explain that the company lacked the means to prove that it “humanely treated [its] natives, fed them satisfyingly, ensured their medical care” when it remained certain that in an enclave as large as HCB’s Kwilu concession, “there will always be room for criticism.”⁸⁵ In a scathing reply, Lejeune lamented, “instead of thanking us and seizing the opportunity of our recommendations, this prominent company constantly criticizes us,” mentioning, for instance, that he “did not find a single nursery with enough medications or sufficient installations and, in several posts, no nursery at all.”⁸⁶

In a 22-page letter written in January 1924, HCB delegate administrator Sidney Edkins systematically rebuked the accusations purported by Lejeune on insufficient rations, lacklustre medical care and unsuitable workers’ camps. For Edkins, there was a structural imbalance between the costs of legally-binding social programs and the *Huileries*’ profitability. Paying a nurse in each HCB’s post would, for instance, “strain our company with costs it could not commercially

⁸³ AAB, AIMO 1654, Lettre du médecin provincial Emile Lejeune au médecin en chef de Leverville, 19 November 1923.

⁸⁴ AAB, AIMO 1654, Dr. Lejeune, Hygiène des Travailleurs dans les exploitations des HCB dans le cercle de Lusanga, 1923.

⁸⁵ AAB, AIMO 1654, Lettre de l’administrateur-délégué des HCB au gouverneur du Congo-Kasaï, 8 April 1924.

⁸⁶ AAB, AIMO 1654, Note pr M. le gouverneur du Congo-Kasaï concernant les protestations des HCB à la suite de mes inspections à Leverville, au Kwilu et à Basongo, March 1924.

sustain.” Hiring a third doctor in the concession, as suggested by the medical administration, was not possible, regarding “the current financial situation of the company.”⁸⁷ The cumulated costs of medical care in the concession would provoke “a 300 franc increase in the price of a ton of palm oil.”⁸⁸ In conclusion, Edkins sketched out a lengthy scenario where paternalistic obligations resting on private shoulders would drive companies out of the colony:

The products of Belgian Congo are heavily entailed by the difficulty of evacuating them [...] to compete with similar productions in neighbouring colonies, it is necessary for our prices to be inferior. But the sudden increase in workforce costs destroys the sole advantage of the Congolese product and will make it impossible to efficiently compete with similar goods produced abroad [...] the Black will be the first victim of the ensuing bankruptcies which will halt its ascent towards a superior moral and material life. Therefore, the consequences of protective measures taken in favour of the coloured workforce appear under an unexpected light. [...]

If at least the legislation imposing to employers such diverse and numerous obligations were compensated by some mirroring obligations purported on the employee, maybe its enforcement would not have [...] endangered the colony’s trade and industry. But who does not see that it is socially unfair and economically unreasonable to constraint the employer to properly feed, properly house, properly dress, properly cure, properly transport its workforce and not constraint, at least, the employees to work properly? [...] In the colony, no obligation to work is imposed upon the worker! The employer unhappy with his employee only has a single resource, consisting in ending his contract, while the worker usually wishes nothing more, so few are his needs and so low are his fiscal obligations.⁸⁹

The tensions did not abate with time. In his November 1931 report on the causes of the Kwango revolt, Judge Eugene Jungers accused the company of not fulfilling its obligations. For the magistrate, HCB hid behind the façade of model workers’ camps and the state of the art hospitals the bleak living conditions and appalling hygiene of the workforce of what he called – in an attempt to distance Belgian officials from his criticism: “the English colony of the ‘Lusanga area’: “The government must 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, able to shelter 4000 men at best while the HCB’s workforce is close to 20,000.”⁹⁰

87 AAB, AIMO 1654, Lettre de l’administrateur-délégué des HCB au gouverneur du Congo-Kasaï, 8 avril 1924.

88 AAB, AIMO 1654, Lettre de l’administrateur-délégué des HCB au gouverneur du Congo-Kasaï, 8 avril 1924.

89 AAB, AIMO 1654, Lettre de l’administrateur-délégué des HCB au gouverneur du Congo-Kasaï, 8 avril 1924.

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

While crucial for both the concession's benevolent image and productivity, medical care also became Leverville's most bitterly contested paternalist endeavour. Fiery exchanges of letters between public servants and company representatives shed a crude light on the dire state of care facilities. Economic arguments, already mobilized by HCB representatives when the company was criticised for failing to fulfil its other philanthropic duties, were again extensively deployed. Along with rations too small and garments too scarce, dirty hospitals and incompetent nurses embody the unbridgeable gap between paternalist policies and practices in Leverville. Places such as industrial outposts and company hospitals were the most susceptible to be visited, which would render the image of Leverville as a tropical iteration of Port Sunlight. It was these venues that were the primary recipients of the company's attention, leaving smaller facilities largely neglected. Although the concession counted more labour force and infrastructures than most parts of Belgian Congo, discrepancies existed between its main industrialized nodes and marginal outposts, deemed of secondary importance.

Medical care was not only a point of dispute within the colonial power structure; it also became a field of conflict with the concessions' inhabitants. Health and sanitary policies were the object of entangled anxieties. Sickness and barrenness alarmed doctors, managers and public servants. The Congolese were tormented by the experience of medical screenings, injections and the collection of bodily samples. Although their response to colonial medicine was more complex than sheer rejection, coercive medical efforts and frustrated reports on the failures of sanitary campaigns highlight how these streams of anxiety collided with one another. The repressive apparatus surrounding care initiatives reinstated Congolese bodies as fields of power struggles between company and workers, as well as between HCB and the administration.

Conclusion

Studying the complex and contested enforcement of paternalism in the Leverville concession has brought its corporeal dimension to light. The concession was not only a spatial enclave, but also a series of embodied experiences. Participating in these experiences could be intimately felt, both on and beneath the skin. Leverville existed in portions of rice hastily served on banana leaves, in *pagnes* and shirts to be worn on pay day, in the invasive palpation of lymph nodes during screening campaigns. It also materialised in the flight before medical mobile teams and in the rejection of unpalatable rations.

In Leverville, colonial strategies aiming to rationalise Congolese bodies co-existed with a diverse array of embodied resistances. Furthermore, if both administration and company envisioned radical refashions of bodies through their shared paternalist visions, archives shed light on the many fracture lines which separated them. Facing the impossibility of both securing their already meagre profit margins and of pursuing their philanthropic agenda, the company's field managers consciously limited the latter. This issue resulted in small and hardly edible rations and poorly tended medical facilities, which only further fed the discontent of public servants.

Embodied resistances and unbridgeable contradictions between profits and "virtue" also bring to the fore the impotence of colonial actors in Leverville. HCB could not perform its paternalist duties as expected. Beyond the limited scope of its policies of care, the company also failed to resort to them in order attract voluntary workers. To the contrary, some of these very realisations – such as the unpopular rations – could be mobilized by workers as arguments to refuse recruitment. Their lack of attractiveness also meant that strategies of coercion put in place by colonial agents did not stop at the forced recruitment of fruit cutters. They were also mobilised during medical campaigns. Instead of alleviating the concession's "violent" guise, its "virtuous" ambitions only widened its scope of constraint.

Finally, investigating embodiments in Leverville contributes to a better understanding of what the concession actually was. Economically speaking, Leverville stood out as an enclave of capitalism, relatively isolated from Belgian Congo's main colonial strongholds. However, upon closer investigation, the stratified nature of the concession became more evident. Neither HCB nor the administration evenly controlled the concession; rather, it was a patchwork of enclaves characterised by a diverse array of power relations and colonial investment. The main company outposts functioned as nodes of colonial modernity; they were granted with the best medical and industrial facilities. These were places where African bodies were expected to be covered, and where garments played a crucial role in social distinction. Established villages and unsupervised indigenous agglomerations, to the contrary, escaped the totalizing gaze of colonial institutions. This negligence, however, was not only a direct result of colonial impotence, for bare chests and *basenji* behaviours were there deemed normal and even desirable by company managers. HCB's peculiar business model rested on the training of cutters in such zones, where they would acquire body techniques that the company was unable to standardise. African bodies in Leverville could not entirely be reshaped, even as knots and bolts of an industrial machine.