

Conclusion: The concession experience

This book has taken the Leverville concession as a starting point to study the experience of colonialism in the Kwilu basin, a region which has often been neglected in the historiography of Central Africa. Leverville was positioned on the margins of the great “arteries” through which power, peoples and commodities flowed in Belgian Congo. However, Leverville remained connected to the colony’s circulatory system and its skeletal network of strategic enclaves and corridors by its very own vessel, the Kwilu river. HCB steamboats were practically the only ones that navigated this waterway, building a bridge between the remote tropical utopia of Lord Leverhulme and the wider world.

Although relatively isolated and certainly peculiar in its strategies of ruling and exploiting, Leverville can nevertheless be used as a vantage point to (re)consider the deployment of colonialism in sub-Saharan Africa and beyond. The concession was a tropical outpost of Lever Brothers, which was already a prominent player in interwar global capitalism. Furthermore, Leverville can be connected with other early 20th century utopian projects fostered in the global South, where private entrepreneurs attempted to build model, “orderly” societies in what they perceived as “savage” environments. Finally, the daily exercise of governance and capitalist extraction in Leverville epitomises the complex and often conflicted relations of European administrations and private companies in colonial settings.

In this book, I employed the overarching concept of *colonial impotence* in order to articulate Leverville’s historical idiosyncrasies with the discernible patterns of colonial intervention it could help illustrate. Colonial impotence forms a red thread, which runs through this book; it is a metaphor that is reflected in the many facets of the daily experience of colonialism I sought to investigate. Colonial impotence speaks of the gap between the virtuous and the violent guises of the Leverville project; of the refusal of Europeans in the field to conform to the behaviours and attitudes demanded from them; of the agency of indigenous communities which hampered HCB’s project; and of the impossibility for the company to bend the Kwilu’s environment to its designs. Archives and memories collected through this research implicitly spoke of the Leverville concession’s impotence by shedding light on the contradictions, frustrations, angers and fears of those who worked and lived in it. However, such conflicted feelings and emotions not only saturated Leverville; they also played a key role in determining the course of many other colonial endeavours. The micro historical study of this enclave can, therefore and hopefully, contribute to a better understanding of the joint deployment of colonialism and capitalism in the field.

The unrealized utopia

In spite of its remoteness, Leverville was the recipient of multifaceted investments. First, it was vested in hopes that it would become the spearhead of a new form of “ethical” colonialism and capitalism, the embodiment of a radical move away from the infamous brutality of the Congo Free State. The forest galleries stretching along the Kwilu river and its tributaries were seen as a blank slate upon which the Belgian state and Lever Brother could write the first chapter of their shared story. Prominent and diverse figures such as Lord Leverhulme, King Albert the 1st, Edmund Morel and Emile Vandervelde, believed in its ambitious promise. They hoped that the implementation of Lever Brothers’ English-born paternalism in the tropics of Central Africa would give birth to a benevolent new breed of imperialism.

This sentimental investment had a significant financial counterpart. Leverville absorbed hundreds of millions of Congolese francs for the building of its infrastructures and the deployment of its social engineering endeavours. In spite of this massive influx of cash, HCB yielded few benefits for its shareholders. After Leverville had been in existence for only a decade, it became increasingly clear that its obsolete business model could not match the productivity of its competitors. However, in spite of disappointing results and of belated attempts to correct the concession’s economic course in the 1930s, the Port Sunlight moth-ership continued to support the *Huileries*. The company’s long-lasting foothold in Central Africa had to do in part with the affective bounds that its founder, Lord Leverhulme, had fostered with this African project.¹

However, the long-held hopes of turning Leverville into a benevolent enclave, nested in a model colony, were inalterably tainted by violence. In the interwar, most fruit cutters were forcibly recruited. Small children were seen performing heavy physical tasks in the concession’s oil mills. Belgian public servants and their Congolese mercenaries preyed upon local communities; confiscated food and cattle; and raped women they coveted. Medical care was often performed under duress. Forced labour and heavy taxation fuelled the resentment of Pende communities targeted to work in Leverville, which contributed to the 1931 *Tupelepele* revolt. The effective act of colonizing the Kwilu basin, jointly performed by Belgian administrators and HCB representatives, imbued the region with a multifaceted brutality.

The investment of hubris, capital and violence in the Kwilu basin presided over a dramatic reshuffling of pre-existing power structures, social hierarchies,

¹ Fieldhouse, *Unilever Overseas*, 509.

extractive practices and settlement patterns. Even with the brutality and hegemony wrought by colonial players, these transformations nevertheless remained limited by the unruliness of the people and environments upon which they were imposed. Schemes of population displacement and the setting up of small-holder plantations, destined to anchor indigenous communities where they could easily be supervised and mobilised, did not meet their goals. The standardisation of palm oil production yielded disappointing results. These shortcomings highlighted the inherent complexity of colonial forms of commodification. Plans could be fostered on the grounds of tried and tested formulas, and yet fail once they were enforced.

When considering the history of Leverville, there is a surprising discrepancy between the concession's grandstanding objectives, the enormous means it mobilised, and the poor results it showed. Like comparable ambitious endeavours in tropical capitalism, Leverville was ultimately an unrealized utopia, unable to fulfil its economic and its ethical designs. This inability to realize this colonial vision for the concession stemmed from its utopian nature, from the fact that the concession's founding forces considered the Kwilu basin from the onset as a disordered blank page. This region was barely studied or charted when the concession was founded. Apart from its extraordinary richness in oil palms, the area was a perceived almost as a non-place, devoid of history and characteristics. It was seen as a space which could – and should – therefore, be easily organised and overseen. The disregard for local traditions, social structures and environmental aspects contributed in no small part to its ultimate demise. In believing that Leverville could be scalable at will, its founders overlooked the issues with which they would be confronted.

The Leverville concession's poor economic downturn can be compared to another key player of colonial capitalism in Central Africa: the *Union Minière du Haut-Katanga* (UMHK). UMHK enforced an even more ambitious paternalist program than HCB to “stabilize” its African workforce around its mines. From the 1920s onwards, the mining company set up workers camps, rations, educational, medical and recreative facilities, creating an all-encompassing disciplinary structure, which surrounded mineworkers and their families.² Both ventures shared a similar ethos: merging large-scale resource extraction with an authoritarian civilisational agenda. However, UMHK proved to be more success-

² See: Sean Hanretta, “Space and Conflict in the Elisabethville Mining Camps, 1923–1938”, in *A History of Prison and Confinement in Africa*, edited by Florence Bernault (Portsmouth: Heinman, 2003), 191–220.

ful at achieving the goals it set for itself. Katanga's mining panopticon was both highly profitable and much less porous than the *Huileries'* Kwilu concession.³

To make sense of this discrepancy, it is helpful to go back to Anna Tsing's notion of "salvage accumulation"; that is, "amass[ing] capital without controlling the conditions under which commodities are produced."⁴ UMHK could mobilize capital and technology to efficiently exploit the ores which made its fortune. A mineral deposit is fixed and can be clearly delimited. It is therefore possible, although challenging, to build a strategic enclave around it to extract, process and export its resources. Efficiently managing mines also requires a "stabilized" workforce that the company can oversee and mobilize at will through an overarching, paternalist labour policy.

However, the "scalable" nature of copper or cobalt, the possibility to commodify them through a standardized, relatively straightforward process, puts it at odds with HCB's interwar business model. Palm groves were scattered in an extensive, poorly charted "circle" of sub-equatorial wetlands. Exploiting them required the know-how and skills of highly mobile indigenous workers. These very skills could not be acquired through company training, but to the contrary were passed on within local communities. Furthermore, the very mobility necessary for fruit cutting hampered the supervision of HCB workers, which was either non-existent or counter-productive.

Therefore, if UMHK rested on scalability, HCB had to rely on salvage accumulation and could not efficiently oversee a key phase of its commodification process. This key difference put both companies' exploitation models at odds with one another, in spite of cosmetic similarities in terms their paternalist agendas. It helps explain why one was much better than the other at exploiting the colony's resource and at controlling its Congolese workforce.

Finally, it is also worth noting that the troubles faced by the Leverville concession after Congo's independence in 1960 were mostly similar to those already present in the interwar period. The then renamed company, *Plantations Lever au Congo* (PLC), remained inefficient; was resented by its workers; and lacked transparency in its relations with public authorities. First, the company was still unable to effectively compete with Southeast Asian producers, and endured further losses in the post-war era. PLC's value dropped by 35% between 1959 and 1965, while its palm oil production was cut in half in the same time span of time.⁵ Second, the long-established resentment against the palm oil economy in the Kwan-

3 Guy Vanthemsche, *Le Congo*, 200.

4 Tsing, *The Mushroom*, 63.

5 Fieldhouse, *Unilever Overseas*, 541.

go would burst out again thirty years after the *Tupelepele* uprising. Between 1963 and 1966, a rebellion led by Pierre Muelele, a former Minister of the Lumumba cabinet, used the Gungu-Idiofa area as a base to kickstart an ultimately failed revolution.⁶ This region was both the historical recruitment basin of Leverville and the cradle of the 1931 uprisings. The brutality of the *Tupelepele* repression was outmatched by this protracted guerrilla. Mulelist rebels and governmental forces tortured, raped and murdered local inhabitants.⁷

Third, the company remained embroiled in shady political arrangements. In 1973, the newly renamed company, *Plantations Lever au Zaïre* (PLZ), fell prey to the process of *zaïrianisation*, the forced nationalisation of foreign-owned companies decided by then president Mobutu. PLZ was given to a loyal supporter of the regime with no business acumen, which only deepened its economic woes. In September 1977, *zaïrianisation* was reverted in light of its dramatic outcome, and PLZ was repossessed by its former owner. This marked the moment where Lever's Zairian branch decided to fall back on local markets instead of trying to keep up with global competitors.⁸ However, even within Zaïre, PLZ struggled to compete with artisanal palm oil producers. Although their products were of inferior quality, their extremely low prices were more adapted to the buying power of the population. In the beginning of the 1990s, confronted to the lack of profitability of its Kwilu installations, Unilever ultimately sold PLZ to a local businessman and politician, Henri-Désiré Takizala. As of today, the company is in an effective state of bankruptcy. Leverville's oil mills and industrial plants have been progressively stripped off by local communities and sold as scrap metal. Former employees still harvest palm fruits in discarded oil palm plantations and sell their hand-pressed oils to neighbouring clients.

The post-colonial downfall of PLC/PLZ can be better grasped in the light of the present study. Far from only being a victim of post-colonial turmoil and poor governance, the *Huileries* were already marred by issues of solvency, corruption and violence decades before the end of colonisation. A *longue durée* take on the history of capitalism in Africa helps with understanding how North/South economic inequalities are rooted in the very structure of resource extraction and workforce mobilisation, rather than resulting from short- to mid-term conjunctural impediments.

⁶ Mark Traugott, "Economic Origins of the Kwilu Rebellion," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 21:3 (1979), 472.

⁷ Emery Kalema, "Scars, Marked Bodies, and Suffering: The Mulele 'Rebellion' in Postcolonial Congo," *Journal of African History*, 59:2 (2018): 263–282.

⁸ Nicolai, "L'Huile," 2013.

The protean enclave

Throughout this research, I attempted to demonstrate that concessions were multifaceted and comprised multiple guises. The opening chapter began with an overview of the concession's inception as a capitalist utopia. The following one approached Leverville as an impotent machine, hampered by its inability to fulfil the goals set by its founders. Then, the concession was studied as a field of social tensions, where the multifaceted agency of indigenous communities hampered the hegemonic designs of colonial actors. After that, Leverville was considered as space of saturated violence, where the enforcement of HCB's agenda inextricably relied on the exercise of constraint. The concession was also grasped as a bodily experience, where company and administration attempted to determine what the Congolese should eat; what they should wear; and how they should be medically treated. Finally, Leverville was considered as a physical environment, altered and transformed by a series of legal and agricultural interventions.

The concession therefore existed – and continues to exist – in many forms. Its ambitious objectives were put on paper in 1911 as a legally-binding contract signed between Lever Brothers and the Belgian government. Its inscription in the networks of global capitalism was materialised in the Sunlight soap made out of its oil yields, which were used by millions of people all over the world. Leverville also offered a series of very diverse experiences for its employees. The concession provided its reluctant workforce with the experience of eating rations, receiving medical treatment and attempting to evade recruitment; being clothed and unclothed according to circumstances; climbing trees, cutting fruit clusters and transporting them to the buying station. Memories of the concession's physicality continue to circulate in and around the now disbanded enclave, passed down by relatives of long-deceased HCB workers.

These intimate experiences were also inextricably entangled with Leverville's existence as a field of tensions and power struggles. Disputes arose between field agents and their superiors when the former overlooked their responsibilities. Resentment festered from the abuses performed by territorial agents, recruiters, messengers and sentries. These individuals regularly used their fraction of the colonial capacity for violence to improve their own personal standing. Inhabitants distrusted the company; more often than not, they also refused to take part in its plantation scheme. Chiefs and elders deceived colonial functionaries in order to avoid the coerced displacement of their communities, or to disguise the circulation of *Lukusu*.

Leverville also embodied two different physical guises. On a symbolic plane, it was represented as a perfect circle built around its main station, which suggest-

ed an even control and mastering of the large zone put under the *Huilleries*' care in 1911. In practice, however, the concession was closer to a sort of patchwork, formed out of industrial enclaves, plantations and managed palm groves. Outside of this relatively well-controlled grid, HCB had little grip on its "perfect circle." Palm trees were still felled by its inhabitants to produce *malafu* or were burned to leave place to subsistence crops. The loose supervision that the company held on its sphere of influence paradoxically constituted one of its main powers of attraction. Fruit cutters could travel in and out of informal settlements known as *villages doublures*, where they were able to partially escape from the administration's supervision while harvesting palm fruits on behalf of the company.

Although relatively isolated, Leverville remained profoundly vulnerable to outside influences. It was not secluded from its surrounding environment, but rather remained physically and culturally porous, constantly traversed by fruit cutters and their families, influenced by the spiritual agency and healing practices they fostered to make sense of the dramatic changes they experienced. Leverville was also subject to changes wrought by the overarching forces of global capitalism. The emergence of fierce competitors in oil palm markets triggered a radical refashion of the concession's business model. The Great Depression led to an intensification of practices of coerced recruitment.

Finally, Leverville did not constitute a "reset" of imperialism in Central Africa. The concession was envisioned as a fresh start, a new form of colonial venture. At the same time, many of its daily routines were fashioned out on the obsolete practices of the Congo Free State, such as its reliance on naturally-growing palm fruits and on the brutality of sentries and messengers as production incentive. The intimate correspondence between Leverville and the rubber concessions of old was strikingly embodied in the "Congo Atrocities!!!" tableau vivant which was shared in the opening chapter of this book.

In conclusion, Leverville was a liminal space rather than a fully-formed enclave of colonial hegemony. It embodied, on a smaller scale, the fields of tension traversing the colony in general. These tensions wove an uneven tapestry of European control, which was illustrated by the contradicting agendas of its economic and administrative actors; its vulnerability to outside influence; and the determining role played by indigenous communities in determining its historical trajectories.

Impotence, in Leverville and beyond

Impotence was the overarching framework traversing the different components of this book. I used this metaphor to tie together the inability to materialize the virtuous enclave envisioned by Leverhulme and the Belgian government. Furthermore, the structural impotence of the Leverville experience also contributed to further observations on the nature of colonial rule beyond interwar Central Africa.

The inability to realise the utopian agenda laid out by the concession's founders in 1911 originally stemmed from the structural discrepancy between their objectives and field realities. The makers of Leverville overestimated the willingness of the Congolese to take part in the *Huileries*' holistic project. They failed to see that their business model was already obsolete in the 1910s, and did not envision that producing palm oil would require resorting to the coercion of workers of all genders and ages. They did not envision that land laws protecting "native rights" would have to be circumvented to allow the company to find a sliver of profitability. In short, Lord Leverhulme and the Belgian government believed that paternalism would provide an answer to the violent guise of colonial capitalism, while violence was in fact inherently necessary to impose the virtuous vision they devised. The unbridgeable gap between the "mission to civilize" and the structural violence of imperialism has long been exposed by historians of colonialism.⁹ It constitutes a first aspect of colonial impotence, namely the frequent impossibility for Europeans to fulfil their expected goals in the field.

This deficiency also had much to do with the agency displayed by indigenous communities. Reluctance, elusiveness, protest, secrecy and open violence steered the concession experience in directions that were not part of the original vision of Leverville's founders and power holders. The capacity of Africans to weigh upon the course of colonial affairs has also been previously and extensively demonstrated.¹⁰ The conceptual framework of impotence allowed for the consideration of indigenous agency alongside the inner contradictions of colonial endeavours as widening together the gap between the virtuous and violent guises of colonialism. As detailed in the book's introduction, impotence is inherently relational; it supposes an intimate contact where one partner cannot perform

⁹ See for instance: Alice Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize. The Republican Idea of Empire in France and in West Africa* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997); Tiquet, *Travail Forcé*; Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

¹⁰ See for instance, for Belgian Congo: Jean-Luc Vellut, *Congo: Ambitions et Désenchantement, 1880–1960* (Paris: Karthala, 2017), 165–211; Likaka, *Rural Society*; Hunt, *Nervous State*, 61–135.

accordingly. In the late 19th and early 20th century medical literature, the causes of such an affliction were often pinned on an inadequacy on the part of the ailing male's sexual companion.¹¹ Metaphorically speaking, impotence therefore referred not only to the relative powerlessness of European actors, but also encompassed the inherently relational nature of colonial power relations in the field. If sexual impotence was believed to be rooted in the inappropriate behaviours of women, colonial impotence was also explained as resulting from the unruliness and alleged "backwardness" of Africans, who refused to follow the behavioural patterns expected of them by colonial powers.

Impotence speaks of inadequacy more than it alludes to powerlessness. In its sexual guise, impotence was a problem, for it embodied a gap between social ideals of masculinity and the inability of some men to conform to them in their most intimate contacts. Resorting to the framework of colonial impotence constituted an attempt to transcend the paradigm of "helpless" or "anxious" colonial states. What made a colonial endeavour impotent was less its structural weaknesses than its inability to follow its own objectives. As this book demonstrated, private and public agents active in Leverville were anything but powerless. HCB built extensive infrastructures; forcibly recruited thousands of workers; and produced enormous amounts of palm oil. The company managed to do all of this even in challenging circumstances. However, the company's output did not match its economic nor its moral goals. Similarly, public field servants and their aides were also able to command significant authority. Nevertheless, they often did not mobilise their power in the ways that were expected of them. Many functionaries shunned the "prestige" vested in their function and used their privileges to amass wealth and to satisfy their lust. Governing and exploiting Leverville in the interwar was characterised by a constant and multifaceted disjunction between an inescapable "ugliness" described by some of the concession's visitors and the elevated ideals in the name of which HCB's flagship endured in spite of its lack of profitability.

According to Achille Mbembe, colonialism was akin to a form of phallic violence. As this book suggested, the "phallic" act of colonizing could also lead to forms of impotence. In spite of Leverville's manifold peculiarities, the discrepancy between principle and practices which presided over its interwar history are echoed in other colonial endeavours.

11 McLaren, *Impotence*, 112.