

Debating the *évolué* status (1944–1948)

Law and colonial order: segregation by civility

In the second issue of the *Voix du Congolais* Paul Lomami-Tshibamba, who worked for the General Government and was one of the newspaper's founders, raised the issue of the *évolués*' role in colonial society.¹ Lomami-Tshibamba thought it unacceptable that the “developed inhabitants of the Belgian Congo” were still being treated like “natives.”² In his article he described the *évolués*' ambivalent social role and their desire for equality with Europeans:

Torn between the morals and attitudes of the natives, who are described as primitive, on the one hand, and Europeanism [*l'eupéanisme*] on the other, we do not know where to turn. In light of our native environment and our cultural orientation we believe with complete conviction that only total assimilation to our benefactors can represent our true social fate. Unfortunately, however, witness to, or ourselves victims of, the actions, gestures and attitudes of those to whom we believed we had assimilated ourselves, our aggrieved and embittered souls prompt us to believe that we have gone stray, or rather that we have deliberately been led astray from the path that must inevitably lead men to their social fate.³

Lomami-Tshibamba laid bare Belgian colonial policy's unfulfilled promise to grant the *évolués* legal assimilation on the premise of cultural assimilation. The explosive power of his article is evident in the fact that he suffered repression for writing it. The district commissioner responsible for the area in which Lomami-Tshibamba lived could not believe a Congolese had written these lines without a European's help, so he had Lomami-Tshibamba interrogated by the colonial police for three weeks.⁴ But as there was no accomplice whose identity he might have revealed, he is said to have been flogged daily with a hippopotamus-hide whip, always early in the morning to avoid making him late for

1 On Lomami-Tshibamba's biography, see P. Haffner, “Une mémoire singulière. Un entretien avec Paul Lomani Tchibamba (1914–1985),” in *Papier blanc, encre noire. Cent ans de culture francophone en Afrique centrale (Zaïre, Rwanda et Burundi)*, eds. M. Quaghebeur and E. Balberghe (Brussels: Labor, 1992).

2 Lomami-Tshibamba, “Quelle sera notre place,” 49.

3 Ibid.

4 To quote the account given by Lomami-Tshibamba to a Belgian television crew in the early 1980s: M. Stameschkine, *Boula Matari, Chronique des années coloniales* (Brussels: RTBF, 1984).

his job at the General Government.⁵ When Lomami-Tshibamba finally confided in his superior, the governor general intervened and brought the drastic sanctions to an end.⁶ Lomami-Tshibamba's combative article kicked off an intensive debate on a special legal status for the aspiring Congolese elite. To understand why this debate represented such a great threat to the colonial order, it is helpful to scrutinize its historical background.

Generally speaking, colonial law reflected the colonial order,⁷ with Africans and Europeans being segregated by differing legal systems.⁸ While the colonial state applied the same civil and penal law to Europeans as in the mother country and granted them civil rights, different laws applied to Africans. The colonial state defined Africans as "other" and this included their status as legal subjects. As with the colony's other institutions, segregation in the legal system was justified with reference to differing levels of civilization.⁹

To each group, as classified on a racist basis, its law: this principle found reflection, in the German colonies for example, in "native law"¹⁰ and in the British territories in "customary law."¹¹ Within the legal system of the Belgian Congo it was the *indigénat* that served as template. In the course of French colonial ex-

5 See Haffner, "Une mémoire," 130; Mutamba-Makombo, "Les évolués," 101; Mutamba-Makombo, *Du Congo belge*, 45; Riva, *Nouvelle histoire*, 40.

6 Stameschkiné, *Boula Matari*.

7 For an introduction to this topic, see K. Mann and R. L. Roberts, *Law in Colonial Africa* (London: James Currey, 1991). A brief overview is provided by Marx, *Geschichte Afrikas*, 167; for case studies, see U. Schaper, "Law and Colonial Order. Legal Policy in German Cameroon between Civilising and Public Peace," *Comparativ. Zeitschrift für Globalgeschichte und vergleichende Gesellschaftsforschung* 19 (2009); N. Camilleri, "Colonial Subjects and Others: Racism and Inequality during Italian Rule in the Horn of Africa," *Northeast African Studies* 20, no. 1–2 (2020).

8 See O. Le Cour Grandmaison, *De l'indigénat. Anatomie d'un "monstre" juridique: le droit colonial en Algérie et dans l'Empire français* (Paris: Zone, 2015); E. Saada, "The Empire of Law. Dignity, Prestige, and Domination in the Colonial Situation," *French Politics, Culture and Society* 20 (2002); G. Mann, "What was the Indigénat? The Empire of Law in French West Africa," *Journal of African History* 50, no. 3 (2009); I. Merle, "L'État français, le droit et la violence coloniale: Le régime de l'indigénat," in *Figurationen des Staates in Deutschland und Frankreich 1870–1945*, eds. A. Chatriot and D. Gosewinkel (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2006); J. L. Comaroff, "Colonialism, Culture and the Law: A Foreword," *Law and Social Inquiry* 26, no. 2 (2006).

9 Saada, "Empire of Law," 110.

10 On native law in the German colonies, see U. Schaper, "Entanglements and Interactions within the Plural Legal Order: The Case of the German Colony Cameroon 1884–1916," in *One Law for All. Western Models and Local Practices in (Post-)Imperial Contexts*, ed. S. B. Kirmse (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2012); U. Schaper, *Koloniale Verhandlungen. Gerichtsbarkeit, Verwaltung und Herrschaft in Kamerun 1884–1916* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2012).

11 See B. Ibhawoh, *Imperial Justice. Africans in Empire's Court* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

pansion since the 1830s, this system had initially been developed in Algeria to distinguish between subjects and citizens, and later it provided the legal foundation for the authorities' approach to the population in other French colonial possessions.¹² It was a system that brought together legal regulations and obligations, issued incrementally by the colonial government and applying exclusively to the African population, the so-called *indigènes*.¹³ On the basis of a difference legitimized in racist and later cultural terms, though both were conceptualized as similarly immutable, the colonial state passed special laws and imposed repressive, often collective punishments with the help of the *indigénat*. Social and legal segregation as well as the absence of civil rights, political participation and freedom of opinion were the order of the day. Bespoke tribunals were established for Africans that drew on supposedly traditional laws. In the French empire the *indigénat* embodied the "legal inferiority of and systematic discrimination against the 'indigènes' and their subjugation to an often-arbitrary form of colonial power."¹⁴ Emmanuelle Saada fittingly describes the *indigénat* as a repeatedly adjusted but permanent process of boundary-drawing between Europeans and Africans.¹⁵

In the Belgian Congo too, the law had many faces. The colonial territory was subdivided into many administrative units, to which Africans were assigned as legal subjects. Every district had a *chef indigène* appointed by the colonial administration, who was responsible for the administration of justice. As a result, the local authorities enjoyed substantial powers, while a patchwork of legal systems emerged in the *tribunal chefferies*.¹⁶ In the course of an administrative reform in the 1930s, the colonial government transferred authority from the *chefs indigènes* to traditional courts,¹⁷ which continued to rule on the basis of

¹² An overview of the emergence and development of the *indigénat* is provided by Gosewinkel, *Schutz und Freiheit?*, 302–303.

¹³ On the *indigénat* in Algeria and other French colonies in Africa, see Le Cour Grandmaison, *De l'indigénat*; Saada, "Empire of Law"; G. Mann, "What was the Indigénat?" For a case study of New Caledonia, see I. Merle, *Expériences Coloniales. La Nouvelle-Calédonie. 1853–1920* (Paris: Belin, 1995).

¹⁴ Gosewinkel, *Schutz und Freiheit?*, 317.

¹⁵ Saada, "Empire of Law," 109.

¹⁶ The division into *tribunal chefferies* was carried out on an arbitrary basis and without regard for established communities. The 3,643 chefferies of 1914 had grown to a total of 6,069 within three years. See Ch. D. Gondola, *The History of Congo* (Westport: Greenwood, 2002), 78–81.

¹⁷ Liberal colonial minister Louis Franck first called for a reduction in the number of districts in 1920, in order to equip them with a modern administrative system. The authorities got started on this in 1938, so that there were 594 chefferies by 1945. Among other things, this entailed their merger into sectors; Brausch, *Belgian Administration*, 42.

supposedly African notions of law.¹⁸ Taken together, these regulations constituted the *statut coutumier* as applied to the African population.¹⁹ Every coercive measure and emergency law emanating from the colonial state applied to the members of this group: they could be obliged to work or resettled, they were censured by the territorial administrator for acts that Europeans were not punished for, and could expect draconian punishments (such as flogging). In Belgian and French Africa, the *indigénat* was a means of enforcing colonial rule, one that guaranteed the free disposability of colonial subjects but was given a legal veneer.

There were, however, exceptions to legal segregation. The emergence of intermediaries between the colonized and colonizing society, who included Christian converts, *évolués*, war veterans and the offspring of African-European parents, necessitated new legal categories.²⁰ Could mission school graduates and office workers in the cities have the same legal status and be subject to the same harsh *indigénat* as uneducated peasants in the rural areas? Gearing itself towards the French example, Belgium adopted the option of a limited shift of status from subject to citizen, dependent on numerous preconditions.²¹ In light of the growing group of Africans who were dissociating themselves from their supposedly traditional milieu and embracing European values, Belgian legal experts questioned the general validity of the *statut coutumier*. Should Congolese who were styled “civilized” not perforce be dealt with in a more civilized way – particularly before the law?

This theoretical prospect of assimilation and inclusion, writes historian Gregory Mann regarding emancipation from the French *indigénat*, exercised great appeal for the educated African elite. Things were no different in the Belgian Congo: the *évolués* hoped that a special status would free them from the jurisdiction of traditional courts and the arbitrary decisions of a territorial official with the authority to impose punishments.

The Belgian colonial state had faced the issue of a differentiated legal status for Africans before the Second World War: it was as old as the colonial project in the Congo itself. This issue was thrown up by a group of Africans that was small

¹⁸ On the traditional courts in the Belgian Congo, see E. Boelaert, “L’Histoire de l’immatriculation,” *Aequatoria* 14 (1951): 7–8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁰ E. Saada, “Citoyens et sujets de l’Empire français. Les usages du droit en situation coloniale,” *Genèses* 53, no. 4 (2003): 21. For a study of the legal situation of the so-called *métis*, the offspring of African and European parents, in the French colonies, see Saada, *Les enfants de la colonie*.

²¹ On change of status in the French empire, see Gosewinkel, *Schutz und Freiheit?*, 314–315.

in number but important to the colonial project, individuals who worked for Europeans and sought to emulate their way of life, but who were nonetheless treated like the indigenous population in everyday contexts and within the justice system.

When it came to civil law, the distinction between European and African legal systems already existed in the Congo Free State.²² Africans, however, were in principle ascribed two types of civil status: immatriculation placed them under the purview of the civil law applying to the territory's European residents, while those not immatriculated continued to be subject to traditional legal notions and institutions. Upon the establishment of the Congo Free State, two decrees presented all Africans with the prospect of entry, without precondition, into the so-called Register of Civilized Persons, in other words, immatriculation. By 1890, however, the governor general had already restricted the right to immatriculation to certain groups: soldiers who had served in the *Force Publique* for several years, graduates of the mission schools and workers employed in European establishments on a long-term basis. In much the same way as in the French empire at the same time, change of status, initially dependent on the will of the individual, thus gave way to the principle of assimilation, based on the "slowly advancing supra-individual evolutionary process of civilizing, through which individuals grow to maturity."²³ Immatriculation was intended for Africans in direct contact with Europeans and their institutions. The associated legislation was linked with the expectation, as part and parcel of the civilizing mission, that once subject to European civil law the immatriculated would gradually internalize European conceptions of morality and monogamous marriage. The officials charged with its implementation, however, viewed immatriculation as proof of assimilation rather than its prerequisite.²⁴ And because they considered Africans' way of life and values incompatible with European civil law, they soon began to refuse to immatriculate them. Henceforth, in fact, even those already immatriculated, about whose number no data is available, came under the traditional legal system, eliminating the incentivizing force of immatriculation.²⁵ In 1908, however, after the Congo Free State had morphed into the colony of the Belgian Congo, the Belgian state drew up the *Charte colo-*

²² A chronological overview of the European debate on a specific status for particular Africans in the Belgian Congo is provided by De Schrevel, *Les forces politiques*, 129–159 and Young, *Politics*, 73–87.

²³ Gosewinkel, *Schutz und Freiheit?*, 310.

²⁴ L. Lotar, "Le Statut des Immatriculés," *Congo* 4 (1923): 453–457.

²⁵ Sohler, "Le statut personnel des autochtones au Congo Belge," *Civilisations* 3, no. 2 (1953): 181.

niale, a constitution-like legal document that embraced the principle of immatriculation for Africans.

Yet initially immatriculation was no more than a theoretical possibility. Since the scope of the ascribed rights and the criteria for registration remained unclear, in the early 1920s the General Government sent out a circular advising territorial officials not to grant such status.²⁶ In the inter-war period, however, a growing number of actors spoke in favour of a more open-minded assimilation policy towards those Congolese who had left their villages to live in the cities and workers' settlements. It is no coincidence that the provincial council in Katanga was the first major body to advocate the reform of immatriculation, in 1923, as the influx of African workers had caused dramatic growth in this industrial region's urban settlements.²⁷

That same year, the *Commission Permanente de la Protection des Indigènes* (CPPI) called for civil law to be extended to Africans once and for all.²⁸ After taking over the Congo, the Belgian state had founded the CPPI in 1909 as a symbol of the relaunching of the colonial project on a humanitarian basis. This advisory board was made up of representatives of the missionary orders active in the Belgian Congo, who were to protect Congolese interests and ensure the improvement of their moral and material lot, and the Belgian colonial government consulted it whenever legislative proposals or reform projects affecting the Congolese population were discussed. In the 1920s the CPPI subjected the topic of equality under civil law to in-depth scrutiny. That the missionaries came out in favour of such equality was ultimately due to their pious desire to see converts upholding a "morally strict" way of life: only on this premise were Congolese permitted a civil wedding, which the missionaries expected to strengthen monogamous marriage. The only ones who were supposed to benefit from immatriculation were those who had married in church, had been educated in mission schools and were in permanent contact with Europeans: "every black whose material or moral state of development no longer fits the traditional legal order."²⁹ That Africans' legal status must be geared towards their "state of development"³⁰ was an argumentational trope that remained the central theme of the debate on status reform after the Second World War.

²⁶ See De Schrevel, *Les forces politiques*, 132.

²⁷ Young, *Politics*, 75–76.

²⁸ On this section, see De Schrevel, *Les forces politiques*, 132–135.

²⁹ L. Guebels, *Relation complète des travaux de la Commission permanente pour la protection des indigènes* (Gembloux: Duculot, 1951), 341.

³⁰ Ibid.

Yet eight years were to pass before the CPPI proposed a two-tiered form of immatriculation to the General Government in 1931. “Major immatriculation” promised to provide for the assimilation, under civil and penal law, of those holding a university degree or a comparable level of education, something that no one had yet attained due to the rudimentary education system.³¹ Those who had attended the *grand séminaire* came closest, though by the end of the 1930s not more than 135 Congolese had done so.³² Individuals applying for this “major immatriculation” were to be considered by a commission on a case-by-case basis. The “minor immatriculation,” meanwhile, was to apply to the larger group of mission school graduates living in monogamous relationships, whose legal status was only gradually to be brought into line with that of Europeans.

The Colonial Ministry in turn presented the CPPI’s proposed reform to another special commission, which drew up an alternative plan three years later. This provided for just one form of immatriculation. The CPPI objected that this legislative proposal from Brussels was too vague about the criteria for immatriculation. Two years later, in 1938, the CPPI presented the Colonial Ministry with an expanded catalogue of criteria, namely a minimum age of twenty-one, a high level of education, no criminal record, loyalty to the colonial state, conduct and lifestyle on a par with the European milieu, and monogamous marriage.³³ Because the immatriculated were to be placed on the same level as Europeans under civil law, the CPPI thought it crucial that candidates be subject to strict selection.³⁴ The Belgian discussion was very much in line with the state of the French debate on the criteria for the naturalization of colonial subjects. In the 1930s the colonial authorities worked on the assumption of group-specific and, in the French empire, spatially divergent levels of assimilation. This graduated model of ideal-typical civility purported to be inclusive, as it rewarded individual adaptation to the cultural concepts and values of French civilization; once again the nuclear family and a monogamous marriage played a central role. But at the same time this approach had an exclusionary effect because it still peddled the idea of differences based on ‘race,’ resulting in a highly restrictive practice of naturalization. Within the imperial ranking of differing levels of

³¹ Ibid.

³² Statistics in this vein can be found in Markowitz, *Cross and Sword*, 115.

³³ De Schrevel, *Les forces politiques*, 133–136.

³⁴ Boelaert, “L’Histoire de l’Immatriculation,” 9.

civilization, Indochina was placed above West Africa, while the eastern and central African territories came in last.³⁵

On balance, all that remained of the inter-war debate on reform of the contentious system of immatriculation was an assemblage of proposals and counter-proposals. The reform project then came to a complete standstill with the outbreak of the Second World War. Besides, those actors tasked with tackling the issue had failed to agree which criteria ought to govern immatriculation and to what extent beneficiaries should enjoy legal equality with Europeans. The commissions and experts did agree that level of civility must determine the allocation of rights. But how this civility should be measured and who ought to benefit remained open questions.

Viewed from the perspective of the maintenance of colonial rule, the reform attempted and postponed time and again between 1890 and 1940 enabled the authorities to put off a decision on the controversial topic of a graduated legal system for the African population. Recognition of legal equality would have placed a question mark over the asymmetrical power relationship between Europeans and Africans within the colonial order, which was based on the unceasing production of difference.

Controversies within the colonial public sphere

But the debate on a special status for the vernacular elite flared up again during the Second World War.³⁶ This time the impetus came from educated Congolese themselves, who had aired their dissatisfaction at the still unresolved legal situation in the memorandum described in the first chapter. Signalling a new elite policy, when the war ended Gustave Sand took over as head of the *Affaires Indigènes et de la Main-d'Oeuvre* (AIMO), the very colonial official who had received the *évolués'* demands for status reform in Luluabourg in 1944 and had urged the

³⁵ See E. Saada, *Empire's Children. Race, Filiation, and Citizenship in the French Colonies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 111–112; Gosewinkel, *Schutz und Freiheit?*, 308–309.

³⁶ A similar picture prevailed in France's African colonies, where a special status under civil law for "elite natives" was discussed by the *Conseil Supérieur des Colonies* in the late 1920s. But in much the same way as in the Belgian Congo, it was a long time before the debate on this legal category between *sujet* and *citoyen* produced any results. Only in 1941 was this policy implemented in AEF through the introduction of the *statut des notables évolués*, which occurred as preparations were being made for the Brazzaville Conference of 1944. See Saada, "Empire of Law," 109.

Colonial Ministry to meet their demands.³⁷ The institution within the General Government that Sand now headed was in charge of the *Voix du Congolais*, whose authors joined in the debate on status.

Given the background to, and implications of, legal equality for Africans, the article by Paul Lomami-Tshibamba quoted at the start of this chapter, which was published in the *Voix du Congolais* in March 1945, was a highly charged contribution. Here Lomami-Tshibamba critiqued the colonial legal order, which assigned Africans and Europeans to segregated legal systems.³⁸ Yet he did not criticize the fact that the unequal distribution of rights was legitimized with reference to differing levels of cultural civility. Instead, Lomami-Tshibamba argued that a standing rule must finally be established for the *évolués* in light of their feats of cultural assimilation: not only should they no longer be subject to the African legal system, they should also be spared all those draconian coercive measures that enabled the colonial authorities to place the African population at its disposal. Ultimately, Lomami-Tshibamba was objecting to the failure to grant the *évolués* equality with Europeans under civil law, which the system of immatriculation prior to the Second World War had in principle provided for:

It is true that the legislature devised immatriculation to benefit us. According to the wording in the statute book of the Belgian Congo, this represents the “beginning of civilization” and, for us, a “means of attaining ALL CIVIL RIGHTS.” But in view of the actual consequences of this formality we must give up our illusions. Far from being a “means of attaining all civil rights,” the immatriculation of the civilized natives of the Belgian Congo is no more than an empty promise.

Lomami-Tshibamba not only reminded the colonial government of its unfulfilled promises but went further in his demands. According to him, the fate of the Congolese elite must be “total assimilation.” What Lomami-Tshibamba was calling into question was the existing division between “civilized natives” and Europeans within the colonial legal order. The debate in the *Voix du Congolais* on the *évolués*’ legal status thus got off to a spectacular start.

Lomami-Tshibamba’s demands evidently went too far for the colonial government. Henceforth, it used its patronage of the newspaper to exercise greater influence over the selection of articles on status reform.³⁹ Between 1945 and 1948 this topic became the key focus of the newspaper, which simultaneously moderated the debate in the true sense of the term.

³⁷ Drawing on press reports we may reconstruct an organigramme of the AIMO. “Chronique de la vie indigène,” *Voix du Congolais* no. 13 (January 1947): 573–574.

³⁸ On the following section, see Lomami-Tshibamba, “Quelle sera notre place,” 49–50.

³⁹ Kadima-Nzuji, “Autour,” 20.

In the issue following the one in which Lomami-Tshibamba's article had appeared, editor-in-chief Antoine-Roger Bolamba announced that "we have reached a point where blacks' progress necessitates the establishment of a special status for the *évolués*." Bolamba presented a ten-page exposition as the basis for discussion, which contended that candidates for this special status should have an educational qualification, an above-average income, a high degree of morality, "family discipline" and "professional conscientiousness." They should be granted certain privileges, namely equality with Europeans under civil law, their own class within public institutions and exemption from flogging.⁴⁰

In response to Bolamba's proposal many readers sent in letters, some of which could be read in the next issue of the *Voix du Congolais*.⁴¹ They expressed divergent views about who was and was not an *évolué*, in other words about who had earned the status of *évolué* in the first place. The Léopoldville-based author of one of the letters protested against the notion of having to prove that one had completed a certain amount of schooling, suggesting that mastery of a European language was sufficient. Another author championed the criterion of loyal service to Europeans, while another rejected the binary division of Congolese society into "natives" and *évolués*: he was against the idea of subsuming priests under the latter term. After all, he asserted, they were already "civilized blacks" due to their education and thus constituted a class in their own right. Antoine Omari in Stanleyville, a seminary graduate, submitted that status reform must guarantee the *évolués* better pay. What he had in mind here were Congolese employed by the colonial authorities, a group of which he was a member. Another reader highlighted the background to the question of what criteria ought to apply to an *évolué*, citing assessments made by the CPPI in the late 1930s. Another based his definition of *évolué* on the views articulated shortly before by a territorial official in the daily newspaper with the widest circulation in Léopoldville, the Catholic *Courrier d'Afrique*.⁴² The discussion among the readers of the *Voix du Congolais* concerning the status of the *évolués* threw up more questions than it answered. The views they expressed were concerned not so much with the scope of this status but chiefly with who should and should not be consid-

40 A.-R. Bolamba, "Opportunité de créer un statut pour les évolués," *Voix du Congolais* no. 3 (May-June 1945).

41 "Discussion du Statut des évolués," *Voix du Congolais* no. 4 (July-August 1945): 140–148.

42 Ibid., 147–148. The author was referring to an interview with André Scohy, which was briefly mentioned in the previous edition of the *Voix du Congolais*. "Petites-Annonces," *Voix du Congolais* no. 3 (May-June 1945): 93.

ered an *évolué*, in other words, who ought to be granted such status and under what conditions.⁴³

Beyond this, the spectrum of opinions emerging from the letters conveys the impression that the readers endorsed the proposal made by editor-in-chief Antoine-Roger Bolamba in another crucial sense: the status of *évolué* must only be the first step towards the attainment of legal equality with Europeans. At first glance this seems surprising given that Bolamba's proposal was less ambitious than the "total assimilation"⁴⁴ demanded by Lomami-Tshibamba in his article two months earlier. In contrast to Lomami-Tshibamba, however, Bolamba argued that the *évolués* were not yet sufficiently developed to enjoy legal equality with Europeans. What Bolamba thus had in mind was a transitional solution, with the prospect of ultimate equality at a later point in time: "I am convinced that they will be fairly quick to bring us into line with the Europeans as soon as we are capable of it."⁴⁵

Etienne Ngandu, one of the authors of the *évolués'* Luluabourg memorandum, also wrote in with his views on Bolamba's proposal. His demands, which the colonial authorities had viewed as a provocation just a year earlier, had now become the subject of public debate – one in which Ngandu participated vigorously.⁴⁶ He had sent in his letter to the *Voix du Congolais* from Lodja, a remote town in the east of the colony to which he had briefly been banished as a leading contributor to the *évolués'* memorandum.⁴⁷ He expressed support for Bolamba's proposal, but also recalled Lomami-Tshibamba's more far-reaching demand for complete equality. The planned status, he averred, must not be a permanent state of affairs but rather a "transitional stage," the ultimate goal being total legal equalization with Europeans: "A waiting room, [...] in which we bide our time in the hopes of entering the parlour at any moment."⁴⁸ Inherent in this metaphor is the fundamental motive underlying the demands made by the Bel-

43 The sometimes-heated contributions gave some readers the impression that this status had already come into force. The editors clarified that this was not the case in order to dispel false hopes. "Discussion du Statut des évolués," 148.

44 Lomami-Tshibamba, "Quelle sera notre place," 49.

45 Bolamba, "Opportunité," 81.

46 See for example E. Ngandu, "Ce qui dit le Noir chez-lui," *Voix du Congolais* no. 8 (March-April 1948); E. Ngandu, "La carte d'Évolué est-elle nécessaire," *Voix du Congolais* no. 26 (May 1948); E. Ngandu, "Civisme ou esprit social," *Voix du Congolais* no. 32 (November 1948); E. Ngandu, "Pierre, si tu veux entrer dans un édifice, laisse-toi tailler," *Voix du Congolais* no. 49 (April 1950).

47 On Ngandu's exile, see J.-M. Mutamba-Makombo, "Les auteurs du manifeste de 'Conscience Africaine': blancs ou noirs?," in *Images, mémoires et savoirs. Une histoire en partage avec Bogumil Koss Jewsiwicki*, eds. I. Ndaywel è Nziem and E. Mudimbe-Boyi (Paris: Karthala, 2009), 612.

48 "Discussion du Statut des évolués," *Voix du Congolais* no. 4 (July-August 1945): 140–148.

gian Congo's vernacular elite: unwilling to remain in the "waiting room" of colonial development, they were eager to become equal members of colonial society.

In September 1945, the provisionally final readers' letters on *évolué* status appeared in the *Voix du Congolais*. Probably at the General Government's behest, the editors declared the discussion over for now and entrusted the issue's resolution to the relevant politicians.⁴⁹ The General Government had in fact used the medial forum of the *Voix du Congolais* to gain a sense of its readers' views on *évolué* status. In addition, as publisher of the *Voix du Congolais* the General Government managed to quickly direct the heated debate going on within its pages into orderly channels. It thus took the wind out of the sails of those actors who, like Lomami-Tshibamba, were calling for the rapid implementation of legal equality with Europeans.

Bolamba's proposal for a "special status for the *évolués*" was consonant with an idea that had already been brought into the debate in the European press in January 1945 by AIMO staff. This was for an "*évolué* card" that would grant its holders several advantages and privileges after they had been thoroughly vetted.⁵⁰ On the level of content, then, the newspaper was in alignment with the reform proposals already drawn up by AIMO staff at the behest of the General Government.

The Europeans resident in the colony responded in divergent ways to the announcement that status reform would be the centrepiece of the colonial state's elite-making policy. Here the daily newspaper *Essor du Congo* served as a forum for a debate that had been sparked off as early as 1944. This publication had been founded in 1928 by conservative journalist Jean Sepulchre, previously in charge of an Antwerp-based newspaper specializing in colonial topics.⁵¹ Sepulchre established the *Essor du Congo* in Elisabethville, the capital city of Katanga, the most economically important province in the colony due to European immigration and industrialization. As the daily newspaper with the widest circulation in the province, the *Essor du Congo* developed into the voice of the resident European elite. Despite its publisher's conservative stance, this daily provided politicians concerned with colonial policy in Léopoldville and Brussels with a broad spectrum of opinions held by the European settlers, industrialists

49 "Discussion du Statut des évolués," *Voix du Congolais* no. 5 (September-October 1945): 190.

50 On the scheme for a "special status" produced by the AIMO, see E. T. A., "Évolution ou révolution," *Essor du Congo* (8 February 1945), reprinted in Rubbens, *Dettes*, 126–127.

51 On his career, see Rubbens, "Jean Sepulchre," in *Biographie Belge d'Outre-Mer*, vol. 7-B, ed. Académie Royale des Sciences d'Outre-Mer (Brussels: Librairie Falk fils, 1977).

and educated elites, the latter made up primarily of lawyers.⁵² Under the heading “War Debts,” the *Essor du Congo* published a series of contributions on the controversial elite-making policy. Responsible for the selection was Antoine Rubbens, who had obtained a PhD in Law from the Catholic University of Leuven. After further studies at the Colonial University in Antwerp and a brief stint at the Colonial Ministry in Brussels in the mid-1930s, he had transferred to the local colonial administration of the Belgian Congo. Rubbens then resigned from his post as royal prosecutor during the Second World War before establishing himself as a lawyer in Elisabethville.⁵³ His departure from the administrative service enabled him to make public statements reminding the colonial state of the responsibility it had taken on when it mobilized the Congolese population for war. In the article series he contrasted two views of the colonial state’s elite-making policy, which differed in terms of the place they envisaged for the *évolués* within the colony’s social order. One camp essentially regarded the new elite as an integral part of Congolese society, while the other considered it a separate group.⁵⁴

Advocates of the “isolation solution,”⁵⁵ among them royal prosecutor Louis Zuyderhoff, believed the *évolués* should enjoy their own privileged status and regarded the division of Congolese society into “*évolués*” and “other natives” as a social fact. On this view, city districts of their own, social engineering measures and associations headed by colonial officials were intended to create a “well-run class of *évolués*” and partners both tractable and loyal.⁵⁶ While they backed the *évolué* status, as they saw it Congolese still had a long way to go to catch up with Europeans in a cultural sense. Those holding these views, then, were by no means out to achieve the legal equality of Europeans and Africans. What they had in mind was a legal status consonant with the *évolués*’ supposed level of development, but a status that should be granted only after assessing individuals’ moral, social and intellectual suitability.⁵⁷ Those in favour of promoting a vernacular elite expected this carefully selected “new class of natives” to form an *avant-garde* capable of accelerating the civilizing of Congolese society as a whole: “It is the elites that have always provided the crucial impetus in the life of a nation.

52 On the newspaper’s history and ideological orientation, see Vellut, “Decoster.”

53 On his career, see A. Reyntjens, “Antoine Rubbens,” in *Biographie belge d’outre-mer*, vol. 9, ed. Académie Royale Science d’Outre-Mer (Brussels: Librairie Falk fils, 2015).

54 L. Zuyderhoff, “La solution isolationiste,” reprinted in Rubbens, *Dettes*, 116.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid., 117.

57 Ibid., 124.

Our task, therefore, is to create this elite on the black continent, [...] leaders of the black race on the path to civilization.”⁵⁸

But support for the colonial state’s elite-making policy was not underpinned solely by hopes of apt middleman. Some newspaper articles also articulated fears of the *évolués*’ disaffection. Those failing to acknowledge the development of this elite, warned the anonymous writer of one piece, would face an “inevitable revolution.”⁵⁹

Meanwhile, supporters of the “integration solution” took up the cudgels against the elite-fostering approach adopted by the General Government.⁶⁰ In addition to the aforementioned Antoine Rubbens, this faction included Louis Ballegeer, another young Belgian lawyer. We can place both within the progressive Catholic milieu, which operated beyond Belgium’s colonial circles.⁶¹ But while Ballegeer was closely associated with the settlers’ milieu and the business enterprises of Katanga, Rubbens maintained a certain distance from the province’s establishment. He saw himself as an advocate of the interests of Congolese, whose gradual development as a collective he championed. In a text entitled “Plea for the Savages” he recalled the war effort of the “Congolese masses” at the “rubber front” and called for a policy focussed on the “underdeveloped” rather than the “black elite.”⁶² He even discerned the looming prospect of class struggle should the reforms to elite policy fail to benefit all Congolese.⁶³ Generally speaking, advocates of the integration solution believed that the colonial state’s focus on the *évolués* represented a threat to the cohesion of society. The formation of an “*évolué* class,” they argued, would distance this group even further from the masses.⁶⁴ Certainly, they too favoured the moralization of the elite through associations steered by Europeans.⁶⁵ But for them, Bolamba’s proposed *évolué* status represented the inappropriate privileging of a group that already enjoyed advantages due to its education and living standard. The establishment of the *Voix du*

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ E. T. A., “Évolution ou révolution,” *Essor du Congo* (8 February 1945), reprinted in Rubbens, *Dettes*, 127.

⁶⁰ Rubbens, *Dettes*, 128.

⁶¹ See M. Poncelet, “Colonisation, développement et sciences sociales. Éléments pour une sociologie de la constitution du champ des arts et sciences du développement dans les sciences sociales francophones belges,” *Bulletin de l’APAD* 6 (1993).

⁶² All quotation from A. Rubbens, “Plaidoyer pour le sauvage,” *Essor du Congo* (3 May 1945), reprinted in Rubbens, *Dettes*, 128, 130.

⁶³ Ibid., 129.

⁶⁴ L. Ballegeer, “Le rôle social des évolués,” *Essor du Congo* (5 May 1945), reprinted in Rubbens, *Dettes*, 137.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 138–139.

Congolais as a voice for the *évolués* and the opportunity granted them to express their views in the debate on the status reform were referred to by one anonymous author as a “pedagogical and psychological error.”⁶⁶ For him, the articles and proposals by Congolese authors on *évolué* status signalled a loss of colonial authority: “It is an odd business when the teachers ask their pupils to draw up a syllabus and to stipulate the method to be used.”⁶⁷ Moreover, as the “integrationist” group saw it, the attention paid to the *évolués’* concerns represented an injustice, as only they had the necessary education to advance their demands, while the “natives” were not in a position to do so.⁶⁸ “The colonial government gives the best and largest piece of cake to the loudest and most demanding child in the family,”⁶⁹ as one author dramatically put it. In sum: the opponents of a special status for the elite condemned the *Voix du Congolais* not for its moderating role, but for amplifying elite interests: “Rather than helping make the voice of the Congolese heard, we have strengthened it.”⁷⁰

Ultimately, the reservations expressed about the *Voix du Congolais* exemplified the scepticism and disapproval that prevailed in parts of the European milieu with respect to the shift in colonial policy announced by the Belgian colonial government after 1945. The debate among European spokesmen in the press of the Belgian Congo shows that it was above all the *évolués’* status that was contested. The critique of the Léopoldville-based General Government’s elite-making policy was particularly vehement in Katanga, where parallel structures were established to promote the *évolués* and the socioeconomic development of the Congolese population. This autonomy was nothing new. In the inter-war period, the UMHK mining company based there had already cooperated with the Catholic Church on school education without the involvement of Brussels or Léopoldville. The *Centre d’études des problèmes sociaux indigènes* (CEPSI) was then established in 1945 in Elisabethville, which sponsored social scientific research and facilitated the publication of texts on the Congolese population. Among the authors were scholars and other actors with an interest in colonial matters from Belgium and Congo, with Congolese contributing here and there. The UMHK financed this research centre, whose findings, as hegemon-

⁶⁶ P. G., “Existe-il un problème des évolués,” *Essor du Congo* (14 July 1945), reprinted in Rubbens, *Dettes*, 133.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ L. Ballegeer, “Le rôle social des évolués,” *Essor du Congo* (5 May 1945), reprinted in Rubbens, *Dettes*, 136.

⁷⁰ From an article in the *Essor du Congo* of 6 May 1945. “Revue de la presse,” *Voix du Congolais* no. 3 (May-June 1945): 92.

onic or rulers' knowledge, were of interest as a means of stabilizing the workforce in this industrial region. The founding members, in addition to colonial officials with anthropological interests, included Anton Rubbens and Louis Ballegeer, prominent advocates of the integration solution for the *évolués*.⁷¹ Ballegeer, who maintained close relations with the UMHK, headed the CEPSE until 1950. On the centre's premises, meanwhile, Rubbens taught courses to the educated elite, which were intended to attune them to their social obligations to the rest of the population; in private correspondence he referred to this approach as an alternative to that of the *Voix du Congolais*.⁷² When it came to elite formation after 1945, the demographically most European province, Katanga, where according to Rubbens "the indigenes [were becoming] ever more Belgian and the Belgians ever more Congolese,"⁷³ retained a degree of independence *vis-à-vis* the colonial power centres in Léopoldville and Brussels.

But how did authors writing for the *Voix du Congolais* respond to the critique emanating from Katanga's European milieu? They commented pointedly on the articles in the *Essor du Congo* and repudiated, for example, accusations of elitism and egotism. In addition, they assured opponents of elite-making policy that the *évolués* were eager to do their best for the country and supported the initiatives of the colonial government.⁷⁴ The Europeans' long-established media and the vernacular elite's newly established newspaper entered into dialogue. The actors involved often disagreed, but they acknowledged the various positions and commented on them. We may interpret this as an initial sign of the emergence of a colonial public sphere, in which it was no longer just Europeans but Congolese authors too who made their voices heard.

The fronts evident in the debates within the media demonstrated to the General Government the socially explosive potential of *évolué* status. It was not long before vehement protests in the European milieu against the introduction of a special status for the elite prompted a change of course. By October 1945, senior members of staff at the AIMO were already referring to a "new orientation" in the *Croix du Congo*.⁷⁵ To counter any notion that they were engaged in the formation of a caste, they no longer made reference to a small group of educated *évolués*, but to a "much broader concept."⁷⁶ In the shape of a so-called "order of civic and

71 On the history of the CEPSE, see Rubbens, "Faire fortune"; Poncelet, "Colonisation."

72 Letter from Rubbens to Hulstaert, 14 February 1946, reprinted in H. Vinck, "In memoriam Anton Rubbens," *Annales Aequatoria* 22 (2001).

73 Rubbens, "Responsabilités coloniales," reprinted in Rubbens, *Dettes*, 248–253.

74 "Revue de la presse," *Voix du Congolais* no. 3 (May–June 1945): 92.

75 "Un ordre mérite Civique," *Croix du Congo* (7 October 1945).

76 Ibid.

professional merit,”⁷⁷ a system was to be created that defined a variety of social groups, each of which was granted particular rights and obligations. This was intended to benefit not just a small elite but also the far larger group of the “detribalized,” that is, non-elite Congolese resident in the towns and cities.⁷⁸

This reorientation was also evident in the editorials of the *Voix du Congolais*, which now resumed its debate on status reform. In March 1946, editor-in-chief Bolamba issued a plea for a reform geared towards the “detribalized”:⁷⁹ “It has been established that it is necessary to organize the detribalized in their entirety. Rather than instituting a special status exclusively for the *évolués*, in this way an order of professional, familial and social merit is to be created.”⁸⁰

The editorials on the *évolués*’ status thus reflected the General Government’s change of political direction. Within seven months, a reform project that had stoked expectations among the educated elite of legal equality with Europeans had turned into a proposed system of the graduated allocation of rights and privileges, one based on the developmental level of different sections of the Congolese population.

But the extension of the reform project from the elite to the larger group of the so-called detribalized by no means settled which criteria ought to underpin the classification of this group or what legal status the various groups ought to be granted. Despite many years of discussion, the press of the Belgian Congo had also failed to produce more precise ideas about who ought to be regarded as an *évolué* and based on which criteria.

Reform gridlock: expert commissions and the *évolués* problem

In 1945, the debate on reform took place chiefly within the colonial public sphere, where it caused ructions. But during the next two years it was expert commissions that shaped its evolution. The Colonial Ministry tasked several actors at once with resolving the *évolués* question. At the behest of the General Government, the AIMO continued to develop the idea of a graduated legal status. The governor of Léopoldville province, meanwhile, established a special commission to draw up a “status for the *évolués*.” The *Congrès National Colonial*,

77 A. Scohy, “Un ordre du mérite civique et professionnel,” *Croix du Congo* (1 October 1945).

78 Ibid.

79 A.-R. Bolamba, “La politique indigène d’après guerre,” *Voix du Congolais* no. 8 (March–April 1946): 298.

80 Ibid.

which had been convened in Brussels, combined their schemes. This was an institution constituted by the Belgian government every five years in order to discuss thorny problems in colonial policy. Consonant with the topic at issue, the *Congrès National Colonial* took the form of a commission of experts, drawn from the chambers of the legislature, the Colonial Ministry, the colonial administration and various interest groups.⁸¹ The “problem of the development of the colonized population” was now high on this commission’s agenda.⁸²

At a time when feelings were running high within the Belgian Congo’s colonial public sphere, the six members of the *Congrès National Colonial* examined the “*évolués* problem” in fulsome detail.⁸³ Before presenting their findings in Brussels in May 1947, they had studied the proposals put forward by various actors within the colonial public sphere, comparing the schemes drawn up by the commissions in Léopoldville as well as revisiting the reform proposals on immatriculation produced during the inter-war period.

The Belgian government had appointed experts on the *évolués* issue to the commission. Pierre Piron, deputy royal prosecutor in the Belgian Congo and a jurist with a doctorate in Law from the Catholic University of Leuven, had advised the AIMO on legal issues since 1942 and had worked intensively on the issue of immatriculation.⁸⁴ Joseph Van Riel, a specialist in tropical medicine and member of the *Conseil de Gouvernement* in Léopoldville, spoke on behalf of the CPPI, the interest group representing the Congolese population that had been consulted on immatriculation issues since the 1930s.⁸⁵ On behalf of the *Conseil Colonial*, the Colonial Ministry’s advisory body appointed by parliament, missionary Joseph Van Wing also participated in the commission. After 30 years working at the Jesuit mission schools of the Belgian Congo, shortly before the bishops there had dispatched him to Brussels to do his best to influence colonial policy. As an “indigenist,” Van Wing called for the preservation of Bakongo cul-

⁸¹ On the institution of the *Congrès National Colonial*, see B. Kambayi, *Blancs et noirs face à la décolonisation du Congo belge* (Kinshasa: Presses universitaires du Zaïre, 1992), 20–23. The influence of expert knowledge on the politics of Europe’s African colonies increased greatly after 1945. For a ground-breaking account, see F. Cooper and R. M. Packard, “Introduction,” in *International Development and the Social Sciences. Essays on the History and Politics of Knowledge*, eds. F. Cooper and R. M. Packard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

⁸² Congrès Colonial National, *Les évolués, VIII. Commission* (Brussels: 1947), 2.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Rubbens, “Pierre Piron.” His studies include P. Piron, “La réforme de l’immatriculation,” *La Revue coloniale belge* 33 (1947); P. Piron, “L’évolution des populations détribalisés,” in *Les évolués*, VIII. Commission, ed. Congrès Colonial National (Brussels: 1947).

⁸⁵ See I. Beghin, “Joseph Van Riel,” in *Biographie Belge d’Outre-Mer*, vol. 9, ed. Académie Royale des Sciences d’Outre-Mer (Brussels: Librairie Falk fils, 2015).

ture. Concerned about the lifestyle of the graduates of the advanced mission schools, however, he also expressed support for the policy of assimilation and made the case for university-level institutions.⁸⁶ Jean-Paul Quix was dispatched by the General Government in Léopoldville. While he had given up his role as patron of the *Voix du Congolais* in the summer of 1946 due to illness, he was closely familiar with the discussions unfolding among the elite. Quix played a leading role in developing the idea of a graduated “order of merit,” as presented by the AIMO in October 1945.⁸⁷ Also on the commission was Julien Van Hove, a political scientist who had worked at the Colonial Ministry for 15 years and was now a ministerial adviser, as well as professor at the Colonial University in Antwerp. The sixth member was Constant Wauters, who had overseen the segregation of the European and African quarters of a rapidly growing Léopoldville in the 1920s. In 1940, he ended his long career as an official in the Belgian Congo as governor of the province of Lusambo, before finally being made honorary governor.⁸⁸

The *Congrès National Colonial* was made up of individuals who were close to the colonial state and signalled the Belgian government’s desire to reform the colonial population’s legal status. For the commission members had previously expressed public support for concessions to the *évolués*. On the other hand, despite all its developmental rhetoric, the expert commission symbolizes the continuity of a paternalistic colonial policy that failed to consult either Congolese or European representatives of the colonial public sphere. After 1945, Colonial Ministry officials continued to work on the assumption that Brussels was best placed to assess what was in the best interest of the Belgian Congo.

How did the commission members envisage the new social order? First of all, they proceeded on the commonly held assumption of a colonial society subject to profound social and cultural transformation.⁸⁹ In the preceding decades, they believed, urbanization and proletarianization had created new needs and lived realities among the population. To evaluate these processes of transformation, in addition to their own publications the experts based themselves chiefly on scholarly findings on the development of colonized societies. From the tiered model produced by French anthropologist Lucien Levy-Bruhl they derived an urgent need for a new colonial policy. Levy-Bruhl defined three stages in the re-

⁸⁶ Denis, “Van Wing.”

⁸⁷ Piron, “L’évolution,” 58.

⁸⁸ On Wauters’s career, see M. A. Crèvecoeur, *Journal d’un commis de l’État au Congo belge: D’après les mémoires de Marc-Armand Crèvecoeur* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2011), 82.

⁸⁹ The following paragraphs are informed by the commission’s report: Congrès Colonial National, *Les évolués*, 2–7.

sponse of African societies to the colonial encounter with an alien culture. During the first stage the colonized accepted the consolidation of European hegemony more or less willingly. During the second stage they accepted the colonizers' superiority and enthusiastically embraced their model of civilization, while rejecting traditional values perceived as inferior. Once the colonized had become familiar with the pros and cons of civilization, the third stage saw a return to the traditional culture, a shift that might lead to conflict and was often accompanied by nationalistic tendencies. The commission considered the *évolués* of the Belgian Congo to be at the stage of willingly adopting European lifestyles. They thus advocated using this "point in time, which is highly favourable to the colonizer" to support the *évolués* in their developmental efforts.

The commission members, then, agreed that the Colonial Ministry must act, but just what it ought to do caused them quite a headache. One reason for this was a crucial question that had proved impossible to answer despite decades of debates, a question the commission now had to grapple with as well: who exactly was to be designated an *évolué*?

In order to describe the ongoing development of the Congolese population in a more conceptually apt way, the experts first agreed to use the umbrella term *évoluants*, the "developing." They supposed those within this group to be at differing stages along the path to cultural convergence with Europeans. The experts committed themselves to a graduated model, with which they intended to arrange the various developmental stages within society in proper order. Thus, rather than assuming the existence of *évolués* as such, that is, a homogenous intermediary class between Congolese and Europeans, the commission added complexity to this social category through several internal distinctions. Their typology consisted of three categories of *évoluants*, each of which entailed a number of subdivisions. The first category, which emphasized the contrast between village and urban lifeworlds, encompassed two sets of people: a small group of mission school graduates, who lived in their traditional milieu, and a second, larger group, whose lives were focused outside the village society in which they had grown up, in the *centre extra-coutumier* (CEC). The second category comprised the inhabitants of urban settlements, who were in turn divided into the "detribalized," who had broken with traditions, and the *évolués*, who differed from the detribalized in their greater degree of education (in terms of both character and vocation), a higher standard of living, European attire, exclusive use of the French language and living conditions comparable with those of Europeans. Even this group of *évolués* was further subdivided to underline the outstanding position of the "elite" employed as office assistants in the administrative system. A third and final category was the "assimilated." Due to their intellectual and moral qualities, they occupied an "honorary position within an exclusively Euro-

pean milieu”; the commission saw this group as consisting mainly of the small number of Congolese priests.

The commission was aware that the *évoluants* made up a fairly small part of the roughly eleven million people in the Belgian Congo. The “detribalized” referred to a few hundred thousand wage labourers in the cities.⁹⁰ The number of the better educated *évolués*, who were frequently referred to as the “African elite,” meanwhile, was estimated by one commission member to be no more than 40,000.⁹¹ The experts, however, were less interested in the present than in the future. They were convinced that the number of *évolués* would grow rapidly as a result of the expansion of schools and increasing urbanization. The semantics of progress evident in the commission’s report recognized just one goal that Congolese were, more or less inevitably, striving to attain: gradual ascent of the developmental ladder towards cultural assimilation. In light of this prognosis, the commission members by no means regarded *évolué* status as a marginal topic. For them, the development of Congolese society was “at present, the core colonial problem.”⁹² What were the commission’s recommended reforms? Given its attempts to differentiate within the category of *évoluants*, it is hardly surprising that it came out in favour of a graduated form of legal status. Ideally, the reform of status ought to take account of the development of Congolese as individuals, granting them specific legal privileges on this basis. The scheme presented by the commission was based on the preliminary work done by member Pierre Piron, who had come up with a tiered model of this kind for the General Government. Taking the three categories of *évoluants* as the starting point, rights and privileges were to be granted gradually through a multilevel form of legal status.⁹³ The lowest level of status was envisaged for the category of the “detribalized”; as a “black proletariat” they were to be allowed to settle permanently in the cities rather than having to return to their villages. The mid-level status was aimed at the category of *évolués*, who Piron also called the “indigenous bourgeoisie” and who were to be granted privileges under civil and penal law. All those who had proved themselves for five years at the *évolué* level were to be automatically elevated to the status of “person of honour” and thus granted more extensive rights and privileges. As the criteria for gaining the status of *évolué* and “person of honour,” Piron identified an education above primary level, monogamous marital relations, professional experience, an absence of criminal convic-

⁹⁰ On the estimates, see “Un ordre mérite Civique,” *Croix du Congo* (7 October 1945).

⁹¹ J. Van Wing, “La formation,” 9.

⁹² Congrès Colonial National, *Les évolués*, 13.

⁹³ On the following section, including the quotations, see Piron, “L’évolution,” 58–71.

tions and the passing of a “maturity test” before a selection panel. The highest level of this status model would guarantee full legal equality with Europeans, making those enjoying this distinction members of “civilized society.” This level was intended for the category of the “assimilated,”⁹⁴ who were subsequently to assert their position within European society. Those applying for this assimilated status were to be subjected to a particularly strict selection process, through which Piron hoped to gain acceptance among the European population for the contentious process of legal and social equalization. As Piron saw it, in his intellect and morals the assimilated individual must in fact be superior to the “average European”: “A gentleman that one can invite to dinner and whose skin colour passes out of mind the moment one hears him speak.”⁹⁵

The jurist Piron expected this tiered model to facilitate a new *modus vivendi* with respect to the unequal allocation of rights. The “discrimination by skin colour” practiced hitherto was to be replaced by a form of “discrimination based on developmental levels.”⁹⁶ “This is the only legally justified form of discrimination,”⁹⁷ Piron concluded. If there was to be inequality of legal status – as we might express the commission’s proposal to the colonial government in somewhat stark terms – it should at least be allocated fairly.

Inspired by Piron’s tiered model, the commission submitted its practical recommendations to the Colonial Ministry. First, the experts suggested to the policy-makers that they should rapidly introduce an “*évolué* status” that “enables the blacks in this category, particularly from a social standpoint, to avoid being mistaken for natives subject to the traditional order, but without putting them on the same footing as the European immigrants.”⁹⁸

This “*évolué* status” was thus conceived as a legal category between Europeans and Africans, intended for all the “detribalized” who fulfilled several criteria, including monogamy, no criminal record and the ability to “demonstrate their maturity.”⁹⁹ Second, the commission’s report proposed a reform of immatriculation for those colonial subjects considered “more developed” due to their education and way of life. But the final statement said nothing about the idea, propagated by the jurist Piron, of granting those “assimilated” persons who

94 Piron, “Le problème des assimilés,” in Congrès Colonial National, *Les évolués*, 15.

95 Ibid., 21.

96 Piron, “L’évolution,” 67.

97 Ibid.

98 Congrès Colonial National, *Les évolués*, 9.

99 Piron, “L’évolution,” 62.

moved exclusively within the European milieu¹⁰⁰ full legal equality with Europeans.¹⁰¹ Piron himself had in fact regarded a reform of this kind as a task for the future: as yet no-one embodied his ideal notion of the assimilated.¹⁰²

Thus, on the one hand the expert commission urged the Colonial Ministry to swiftly introduce an “*évolué* status” that would extend to the large group of the “detribalized.”¹⁰³ But the commission took the view that the time had not yet come for the legal assimilation of some Congolese.¹⁰⁴ Because this issue remained contentious even among the commission members, the colonial minister contented himself with convening another commission, which was, in the near future, to devote itself exclusively to the “status of the civilized Congolese population.”¹⁰⁵

For two years, various commissions and groups of experts in Léopoldville and Brussels had toiled away at proposals in which they defined different social categories, referring at times to *évolués*, at times to *évoluants*, at others to the elite, the detribalized and the assimilated. The fact that colonial subjects were to be classified through developmental levels already signalled a profound shift in the premises of Belgium’s colonial policy, which had previously been dominated by the idea of the uniform development of Congolese society. This venerable ordering principle of “gradual development”¹⁰⁶ was challenged by the *évolués*. The proposed reforms, however, faced resistance at an early stage from some colonial officials and European spokesmen in the Belgian Congo. At the same time as the commission in Brussels was discussing the various reform proposals, the General Government in Léopoldville had gained a sense of the spectrum of opinion in the colony’s provinces. Thus, the schemes for status reform debated in Brussels, as drawn up by the AIMO and the commission initiated by the province of Léopoldville, were also submitted to each *Conseil de Province* for debate.¹⁰⁷ These were advisory bodies at the provincial level convened once a year, in which, since 1945, in addition to colonial officials, repre-

100 P. Piron, “Le problème des assimilés,” in *Les évolués*, VIII. Commission, ed. Congrès Colonial National, (Brussels: 1947), 22.

101 Piron, “L’évolution,” 67.

102 Piron, “Le problème,” 22.

103 Congrès Colonial National, *Les évolués*, 9.

104 *Ibid.*, 11.

105 Letter from Van Hove to the colonial minister, 10 February 1948, AA/AI/4743/III/T/4.

106 See Markowitz, *Cross and Sword*, 105.

107 AIMO report on the provincial councils’ position on the status schemes, 24 January 1947, AA/AI/4743/III/T/4.

representatives of European interest groups also sat for the first time.¹⁰⁸ Their response to the various schemes for status reform was negative. For some, the many criteria intended to define the beneficiaries seemed too vague, while others were unhappy with the “excessively complicated”¹⁰⁹ character of the graduated legal status. Other contributions made the same arguments put forward in the European media against an *évolué* status, such as the fear of splitting the *évolués* off from Congolese society.¹¹⁰

By early 1947, then, the negative opinions in the provinces had shown the General Government that status reform would be viewed with scepticism and concern throughout the colony. The Brussels commission’s temporary retreat from full legal equalization may have been partly due to this negative response from the colony. Nonetheless, an impatient vernacular elite continued to demand concrete political results.

Media interventions: propaganda for status reform

How did the *Voix du Congolais* react to the ongoing discussion and to the first instances of resistance to status reform within the European milieu? The newspaper intervened in the debate, dominated by European expert commissions, colonial officials and opinion leaders, in a range of ways. First, the Congolese authors took issue with the views of those opposed to reform. In their articles they tried to show that the *évolués* were already sufficiently developed. Second, the *Voix du Congolais* intervened in the convoluted debate through articles that articulated the authors’ anger at the reform deadlock. These authors provided the European supporters of status reform with arguments backing their view that the colonial government must match words with actions. But they did not discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the various proposed schemes for status reform. Instead, they focussed on achieving progress, of any kind, at the level of implementation. The third medial intervention by the *Voix du Congolais* thus consisted in advocating the compromise status reform developed by the General Government’s AIMO department, to which the newspaper enjoyed close institutional links.

108 On the development of the councils in the various colonial administrative units, see Brausch, *Belgian Administration*, 47.

109 AIMO report on the provincial councils’ position on the status schemes, 24 January 1947, AA/AI/4743/III/T/4.

110 Ibid.

The editorials informed readers about the state of the debate and the various stages of *évolué* status, while the correspondents published articles dedicated to the *évolués*' collective characteristics, seeking to oppose the arguments put forward by the opponents of reform. Conspicuously, however, it was not just Belgian experts who assumed the ongoing, sometimes inadequate development of the *évolués*, but also the Congolese authors themselves. They, however, seemed convinced of the perfectibility of the individual character and concomitant habits. That legal equality required cultural equality was a commonplace within the colonial public sphere, one that both the supporters and opponents of status reform could agree on.

Yet it was in articles by Congolese authors that the emancipatory force of this idea of individual development was unleashed. As if they wanted to counter the claim emanating from the European milieu that the *évolués* lacked the civilizational maturity for legal equality, the authors emphasized the very qualities described as civilized conduct within colonial discourse.¹¹¹ Certainly, in their rhetoric, these writers were moving towards a gradual and individually advanced form of assimilation and thus took up the place within the social order granted to them within colonial discourse. From this narrative vantage point, however, they put legitimate demands to the colonial government. As *évolués* they called for a status consonant with their individual feats of development.¹¹² During a time of contentious debates on *évolué* status, the authors thus sought to advance their own interests. In their highly articulate and extremely polite articles they sought to show that there were already Congolese who had internalized those qualities considered civilized and had thus earned a separate status.

In an editorial of July 1947, editor-in-chief Antoine-Roger Bolamba made the case for a “special card.” In contrast to a classificatory system featuring a number of sub-categories, as envisaged by several commissions, a hierarchical approach that Bolamba believed would stoke dissatisfaction, he espoused a “flexible and more practical method.”¹¹³ Ultimately, then, Bolamba was advocating the reform devised by the AIMO, with Jean-Marie Domont, also the newspaper's

111 Exemplary of this line of argument is an article series by Lomami-Tshibamba on the “four disciplines of the *évolués*,” namely “familial discipline,” “professional discipline,” “social discipline” and “spiritual discipline”; P. Lomami-Tshibamba, “Les devoirs des évolués,” *Voix du Congolais* no. 4 (July-August 1945).

112 Lomami-Tshibamba, “Quelle sera notre place,” 47–51.

113 A.-R. Bolamba, “Le problème des Évolués,” *Voix du Congolais* no. 16 (July 1947).

patron, leading the way here.¹¹⁴ The plan for a “special distinction” departed from a graduated form of legal status and instead embraced the idea of a “card” already put forward by the AIMO in 1945.¹¹⁵ As Bolamba saw it, this card ought to grant a large target group a small number of privileges, such as exemption from flogging and improved conditions of travel.¹¹⁶

That the *Voix du Congolais* advocated the compromise solution was a matter of both politics and strategy. The various status reform projects, as developed by the expert commissions, were soon supposed to be submitted to the *Conseil de Gouvernement*. In light of the hostile reaction from the provincial councils consulted earlier, there was a risk that the *Conseil de Gouvernement*, which had been augmented with representatives of European interests in the spirit of the post-war reforms, would also find none of the schemes to its liking.¹¹⁷ In order to avert the risk of presenting the vernacular elite with nothing at all after so many years of negotiation, the AIMO pushed the idea of a “special card,” using the *Voix du Congolais* to propagate this compromise solution.

Immediately before the *Conseil de Gouvernement* met, the newspaper addressed itself to its members. In an editorial, Bolamba urged this body to finally make a decision after years of debate on status reform: “The long wait has exhausted the patience of the native elite. [...] The elites thought they had been deceived and that the status they had spent so much time discussing would never see the light of day.”¹¹⁸ Bolamba elucidated the advantages of the “special card” over the other proposed reforms and commended this solution as reflecting the wishes of the “*évoluants* class”: “As the *évolués* see it, the complicated system of hierarchies and transitional stages ought to be scrapped. [...] From our point of view, it would be better to come up with a simplified method such as issuing a special card to all applicants, to the extent that this is justified by their development.”¹¹⁹

The AIMO made use of the *Voix du Congolais* as the voice of the *évolués* in other ways as well in order to push the card as a route out of the muddled status reform project. When Christian Social colonial minister Pierre Wigny, who had

114 This is evident in a report published in a subsequent issue; A.-R. Bolamba, “Monsieur Pierre Wigny, Ministre des Colonies de Belgique accorde un entretien à une délégation des Évolués de Léopoldville,” *Voix du Congolais* no. 18 (September 1947).

115 *Croix du Congo* (1 October 1945).

116 Bolamba, “Le problème des évolués,” 685.

117 The *Voix du Congolais* had already highlighted this state of affairs; Bolamba, “La politique indigène,” 300.

118 A.-R. Bolamba, “Le Statut des Évolués,” *Voix du Congolais* no. 19 (October 1947): 801.

119 Ibid.

taken office in the spring of 1947, was staying in Léopoldville two months before the sitting of the *Conseil de Gouvernement*, the head of the AIMO, Gustave Sand, arranged a meeting with Antoine-Roger Bolamba and two other authors working for the *Voix du Congolais*. “In conversation with the minister, the delegates insisted on the need for a way of distinguishing the *évolués* other than the status they had been promised,”¹²⁰ as the journal reported on the meeting. In the name of the *évolués*, the three authors asked the minister to introduce a “special pass” as rapidly as possible.¹²¹ Finally, as a consequence of this concord, as staged in the media, between the colonial minister, as the highest representative of the Belgian colonial state, and the Congolese authors, an AIMO staff member also submitted the proposal for a card to the *Conseil de Gouvernement*.

When the latter convened in early November 1947 for its first session since the end of the war, the colonial administrators had some new colleagues to contend with. For the first time, the General Government had appointed representatives of the labourers, firms, settlers’ associations and the justice system, in order to give the European colonial population a greater say.¹²² Precisely because the post-war reforms had not allowed for political participation, despite its purely consultative role the *Conseil de Gouvernement* developed into the most important forum for European interest groups. Behind the scenes, the nomination process was influenced by settlers’ associations, chambers of commerce and business associations as a means of pressing the colonial government to make decisions in their interest.¹²³

At the beginning of the session, AIMO head Sand presented the compromise solution of an “*évolué* card,” as previously propagated in the *Voix du Congolais*. He reminded those present of the “importance the *évolués* attach to this issue” and warned of the bitterness they would feel, as well as the potential for their radicalization, were the reform to fail. He sought to persuade those present that card-holders would enjoy just a few advantages: “We merely wish to send out a signal of recognition, which will cost us little.”¹²⁴ That he failed to gain enough support for this approach was chiefly due to the presence, among the new members of the *Conseil de Gouvernement*, of the most prominent critic of

¹²⁰ Bolamba, “Monsieur Pierre Wigny,” 767. This first-ever meeting between the colonial minister and *évolués* made a major splash in the media, for example in the *Croix du Congo* of 27 September 1947.

¹²¹ Bolamba, “Monsieur Pierre Wigny,” 767.

¹²² On its composition, see *Croix du Congo* (23 November 1947).

¹²³ Young, *Politics*, 28–30.

¹²⁴ Minutes of the meeting of the *Conseil de Gouvernement*, 4 November 1947, AA/AI/4743/III/T/4.

an *évolué* status: the lawyer Antoine Rubbens. Unsurprisingly, he rejected status reform on principle, highlighting the risk of hiving the educated elite off from the rest of the population. Rubbens, who had travelled from Elisabethville, discerned in *évolué* status a project spawned by officials of the General Government, who chiefly had in mind the educated Congolese of Léopoldville, while ignoring opinion in the provinces, particularly the views of the CEPESI research centre in Katanga.¹²⁵ Rubbens demanded that the privileges reserved for a small elite be granted to the entire population.¹²⁶ He may well have had the recent abolition of the *indigénat* in the French empire in the back of his mind. The governors in attendance from those provinces whose advisory bodies had already put forward their objections to the reform endorsed Rubbens's views. The only Congolese representative, Stéphane Kaoze, also rejected the proposed new status.¹²⁷ Kaoze, the first Congolese ordained as a priest in 1917, was the head of a Scheut seminary and had achieved a certain renown, not least after he was granted an audience with King Albert in Brussels. As a member of the CPPI he expressed the view that Europeans ought to treat Congolese in accordance with their developmental level. He was indignant about the fact that, during journeys by boat on Lake Tanganyika, he had had to sit apart from the European members of his order in an intermediate class for Asians.¹²⁸ It is no coincidence that this Catholic priest sympathized with Rubbens's view that it was crucial not to pry the elite apart from Congolese society by granting them a special status: according to the Scheut missionaries, the *évolués*' primary task was still to evangelize their fellows.

Despite the strong push for the compromise solution, the *Conseil de Gouvernement* rejected the proposal. While the Colonial Ministry held the power of decision, Brussels hesitated to bypass the *Conseil de Gouvernement*. Its reform was, after all, intended to embody the colonial society's new opportunities for

125 Members of the CEPESI, including Antoine Rubbens, put forward these arguments in an assessment of *évolué* status: special session of the CEPESI, 6 August 1948, AA/AI/4743/III/T/4.

126 Minutes of the meeting of the *Conseil de Gouvernement*, 4 November 1947, AA/AI/4743/III/T/4.

127 Kaoze is the author of the first literary text written in French by a Congolese, the "Psychologie des Bantu" published in 1910. On his biography, see Bolamba and Cassiau-Haurie, *Carnets de voyage*, 16; Mutamba-Makombo, *Du Congo belge*, 68; M. Quaghebeur, "Des textes sous le boiseau," in *Papier blanc, encre noire. Cent ans de culture francophone en Afrique centrale (Zaïre, Rwanda, Burundi)*, eds. M. Quaghebeur and E. Balberghe (Brussels: Labor, 1992).

128 For biographical information on Kaoze, see J. M. Jadot, "Stéphane Kaoze," in *Biographie Belge d'Outre-Mer*, vol. 6, ed. Académie Royale des Sciences d'Outre-Mer (Brussels: Librairie Falk fils, 1968).

political participation. The much-vaunted status reform thus teetered on the brink.

The response to this decision in the next issue of the *Voix du Congolais* was unusually brusque. This was evident first in a visual sense. The artwork normally entwined around the first letters of an editorial, typically featuring symbols with no direct connection with the text, such as a chessboard or animals of various kinds, instead showed a goateed figure in a flat cap with his fist in the air, clearly a representation of Vladimir Lenin.¹²⁹ As yet communism, regarded in Western Europe as a worldwide danger, had received no mention at all in the elite newspaper and his portrait would surely ring no bells with many Congolese readers. It thus seems likely that this imagery was aimed chiefly at European readers and intended to play to their fears of a communist influence on disaffected *évolués*. Since Christian Social politician Pierre Wigny – whose party espoused an explicitly anti-communist stance – had been made colonial minister, the latent fear of a communist infiltration of the Belgium Congo had increased.¹³⁰ In common with every other European colonial power, Belgium saw in educated Africans potential communist sympathizers.¹³¹ But the Belgian colonial minister was focused more on prevention than repression. He took the view that the “only effective means of combating” this risk were welfarist programmes intended to improve living conditions along with “moral measures through education, guidance and above all evangelization.”¹³² The figure of Lenin was a veiled but impressive reminder that satisfying the Congolese elite was in part intended to avert the spread of communism, as emphasized, among others, by European supporters of *évolué* status in the *Essor du Congo*. In line with this, in his editorial editor-in-chief Bolamba accused the *Conseil de Gouvernement* of having made a disastrous “political error.”¹³³ Its negative stance, he contended, had disappointed the “native elite” and nullified three years of work on the various draft schemes. Bolamba countered the rationale put forward by the council members, that rejecting the card was an attempt to prevent the emergence of a caste, by pointing out that the *Conseil de Gouvernement*’s negative stance had just created one: a “caste

129 The image appeared in A.-R. Bolamba, “Erreur politique?,” *Voix du Congolais* no. 21 (December 1947). I was made aware of this by a handwritten note in the papers of Belgian historian Benoît Verhaegen. He remarked: “*Portrait de Lenin! Symbole!*”

130 In spring 1947, the General Government instructed all administrative agencies to keep an eye on the prophetic sects, which were viewed with suspicion and had been considered receptive to communist propaganda since the 1920s. See Gijs, *Le pouvoir*, 161.

131 For Portuguese and French examples of this perspective, see Keese, *Living*, 99–101.

132 Note by the colonial minister, 16 July 1946, quoted in Gijs, *Le pouvoir*, 162.

133 Bolamba, “Erreur politique?,” 894.

of the disaffected.”¹³⁴ Finally, Bolamba pointed out that it was not just the *évolués* who were discontent but also external observers, an allusion to the United Nations, which was attentively following Belgium’s implementation of colonial reforms: “We bitterly regret this decision, whose psychological consequences are keenly felt both within and beyond the Congo.”¹³⁵

This “political error” was headline news in the subsequent issues of the *Voix du Congolais*. From Luozi in the province of Bas-Congo, one prospective office worker reported that “this decision has left the *évolués* I am acquainted with in a state of misery.”¹³⁶ The “special card” that the *Conseil de Gouvernement* had rejected, remarked one author from Léopoldville, would have been an incentive for the masses to follow the good example of those in possession of one and emulate their behaviour. The *Conseil*’s negative stance was thus an “unprecedented act of discouragement.”¹³⁷ Co-author of the *évolués*’ memorandum of 1944, Etienne Ngandu, also underlined the need for an “*évolué* card.” A diligent contributor to the status debate, he sighed: “We are struggling to understand our patrons’ current attitude towards the Congolese elite.”¹³⁸ As the originator of the metaphor, Ngandu probably feared that he would be denied a seat even in the “waiting room” for an indefinite period of time.

The unequivocal views expressed in the *Voix du Congolais* regarding the muddled status debate should come as no surprise. The authors’ demand for a so-called *évolué* card was of course backed by the General Government, which had tasked its own AIMO with drawing up the reform that had failed to sway the *Conseil de Gouvernement*. For the colonial government, the incensed authors were political allies who could help them get their compromise proposal through despite the resistance. We may assume that during this stage of negotiations on status reform the AIMO paid close attention to the content of the editorials and to the selection of published readers’ letters advocating the “special card.” With their calls for an *évolué* card, the *Voix du Congolais* and its authors thus remained on the same page as the General Government.

But we should also acknowledge the authors’ self-interest. While the *Voix du Congolais* had been created to keep elite discourse within orderly channels and in the slipstream of the colonial government, the authors utilized this narrow room for manoeuvre to prevent their demands from being disregarded completely. The newspaper turned the *évolués* into a social fact, an elite interest group

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ A. Kilembi, “Joie et tristesse,” *Voix du Congolais* no. 23 (February 1948): 69.

¹³⁷ G. Mahutama, “Pour la carte des Évolués,” *Voix du Congolais* no. 25 (April 1948): 157.

¹³⁸ Ngandu, “La carte d’évolué,” 201.

that was concerned chiefly with advancing its own agenda. As advocates of civilized Congolese, they lent weight to the latter's demands – and furnished colonial policymakers with a reason to get on with the job.

Due to the dissension in the Belgian Congo regarding status reform, it was some time before the Colonial Ministry issued a statement. The *Conseil de Gouvernement's* intransigence had, in addition to the authors contributing to the *Voix du Congolais*, brought advisors to the Colonial Ministry – members of the expert commissions in Brussels tasked with examining the *évolués* issue – into the debate. In late February 1948, the colonial minister received a letter from Julien Van Hove, director of the section of the Colonial Ministry known as *Affaire Indigène* (AI); as a member of the *Congrès National Colonial*, he had contributed to the various schemes for status reform.¹³⁹ “The *Conseil de Gouvernement's* brusque dismissal cannot be the last word on the *évolués* question,” he stated to the minister. Van Hove backed this up by referring to the phrase “political error” in the *Voix du Congolais*. As if the hint dropped by the Lenin artwork had had an effect, he interpreted the associated editorial as a harbinger of the emergence of a disaffected and anti-colonial elite. Through its decision, according to Van Hove, the *Conseil de Gouvernement* had opened the door to the “intensive pro-independence propaganda of the West African movements,” which “is reaching us first and foremost from Nigeria, AEF [*Afrique-Équatoriale française* or French Equatorial Africa] and AOF [*Afrique-Occidentale française* or French West Africa].”

Van Hove referred explicitly to the neighbouring French colony of AEF, given that the “*évolués* in Léopoldville” had hoped to be granted a similar status to the one created for the “rank of the notables” in the French territory.¹⁴⁰ For while France, with reference to their low level of development, had still denied the inhabitants of AEF the option of naturalization in the inter-war period, in 1941 the French exile government resolved to introduce the *statut des notables évolués*. This occurred in part out of gratitude for the fact that, under Governor General Félix Éboué, AEF was the only colonial territory to refuse allegiance to the Vichy regime.¹⁴¹ In line with the established naturalization policy in other French ter-

139 On the following section, see Letter from Van Hove to the Colonial Minister, 25 February 1948, AA/4743/II/T/4.

140 Ibid.

141 For a detailed account of the role of the central African territories in the French resistance, see E. Jennings, *La France libre fut africaine* (Paris: Perrin, 2014). For an instructive text on elite-making policy in AEF, see E. M'Bokolo, “Forces sociales et idéologies dans la décolonisation de L'A.E.F.,” *Journal of African History* 22, no. 3 (1981). For a general take on elite-making policy in France's African colonies, see Keese, *Living*.

ritories, this status granted to a select group of applicants certain privileges and exemption from the *indigénat*.¹⁴² The proximity of the two capital cities of the AEF and the Belgian Congo, which were separated only by the Congo River, was in fact crucial to the Belgian status reform. The elite-making policy on the French side of the river put Belgian colonial policy in a tight spot: “Our natives are quite aware of this and accuse us of inaction,”¹⁴³ remarked one member of the *Congrès National Colonial* with reference to the *statut des notables évolués*. The *Voix du Congolais* also compared the widely propagated proposal for a card explicitly with the *statut* in the neighbouring colony.¹⁴⁴ Further, it pointed to black Governor General Éboué, who was born in the French Caribbean, as a role model in light of his career.¹⁴⁵ On the occasion of his death it referred to him as the “greatest example of the civilized black.”¹⁴⁶ What the eulogies issuing from Belgian officialdom consciously passed over, however, was the fact that by this point in time *évolué* status had become obsolete in AEF. By 1946, within the context of the drafting of a constitution for the Fourth Republic, representatives from the African and Caribbean colonies, who had been present in the French parliament since the immediate post-war period, had already managed to ensure that the *indigénat* and forced labour were abolished completely for all inhabitants of the colonies.¹⁴⁷ The law named after Senegalese delegate Lamine Guéye also granted them citizenship independent of civil law, so that “equality could be claimed without giving up difference.”¹⁴⁸ The plodding debate on status reform in the Belgian Congo was thus taking place at a point in time when the Africans in the neighbouring colony of AEF were already enjoying their first political rights. The privileges and legal advantages so contested in the Belgian colony already applied to everyone there. From this vantage point, the legal reform in the Belgian Congo was taking its lead from a long abandoned conservative

142 On the genesis and drafting of the *statut des notables évolués*, see Politique indigène du Gouverneur Félix Éboué, 1941–1943, CAOM/GG/AEF/5D202; Politique indigène. Notables évolués, 1942–1947, CAOM/GG/AEF/5D206.

143 Piron, “L’évolution,” 58.

144 Bolamba, “Le problème des évolués,” 687; A.-R. Bolamba, “La position sociale des évolués,” *Voix du Congolais* no. 29 (August 1948): 321.

145 The elimination of the *indigénat* is said to have been a personal matter for Éboué as governor general of AEF. As a young man he had worn a pith helmet to ensure that Europeans did not mistake him for a “native” at the mercy of an arbitrary colonial law. See P. M. Martin, “Contesting, Clothes in Colonial Brazzaville,” *Journal of African History* 35, no. 3 (1994): 413.

146 A.-R. Bolamba, “Souvenirs d’un grand chef,” *Voix du Congolais* no. 14 (March-April 1947): 605.

147 See Cooper, *Citizenship*, 66–67.

148 Cooper, *Colonialism*, 216.

elite-making policy in the neighbouring French colony. If Brazzaville and Léopoldville were “mirror cities,”¹⁴⁹ then what was being mirrored in the Belgian Congo of tomorrow was the French Congo of yesterday. The *évolués* had merely to cross the river to admire a progressive elite-making policy. This is one of the reasons why the Colonial Ministry was so concerned when they learned that *évolués* from Léopoldville had met in Brazzaville with Jean Félix-Tchicaya, one of the delegates from AEF in the French National Assembly.¹⁵⁰ Shortly before, Tchicaya’s party, supported by clerks, had formed a parliamentary group with the French Communist Party, which had in turn established its first cells in Brazzaville.¹⁵¹

As his close adviser, Van Hove suggested to the colonial minister that he ought to introduce the “special identification card,” as developed by the AIMO and championed in the *Voix du Congolais*, as rapidly as possible.¹⁵² In attempting to convince him, however, Van Hove did not refer exclusively to the differing pace of reform in the neighbouring colony. He also dismissed the supposed danger of creating a caste as aired by the *Conseil de Gouvernement*. Van Hove explained to the colonial minister that the *Conseil* was “hostile” to every measure aimed at creating a group, yet the formation of elites was unavoidable, for “the introduction of European civilization throughout the colonial territory inevitably leads to the emergence of an elite.”¹⁵³

Another figure championing the *évolué* card to the colonial minister was jurist Antoine Sohier, who the minister had tasked with creating a commission in order to continue working on the shelved issue of immatriculation. The appointment of Antoine Sohier brings out the tremendous importance of the reform project to colonial policy. After 20 years working as a lawyer in Katanga, where he had also established law journals, Sohier was considered an outstanding expert on colonial law. Since his return to Belgium he had advised its supreme court and now dedicated himself to the question of elite status.¹⁵⁴ In a letter to the colonial minister, Sohier argued, in much the same way as Van Hove, against the opponents of reform on the *Conseil de Gouvernement*: “This class of *évolués* ex-

149 Ch. D. Gondola, *Villes miroirs. Migrations et identités urbaines à Kinshasa et Brazzaville, 1930–1970* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1996).

150 Ibid.

151 F. Bernault, *Démocraties ambiguës en Afrique centrale: Congo-Brazzaville, Gabon, 1940–1965* (Paris: Karthala, 1996).

152 Letter from Van Hove to the colonial minister, 25 February 1948, AA/4743/II/T/4.

153 Ibid.

154 On Sohier’s career, see E. Lamy, “Antoine Sohier,” *Biographie Belge d’Outre-Mer*, vol. 8, ed. Académie Royale des Sciences d’Outre-Mer (Brussels: Librairie Falk fils, 1998).

ists: they cannot be got rid of by ignoring them.”¹⁵⁵ In Sohier’s description of the *évolués* as a group a trope resurfaced that had been shaped by the *Voix du Congolais*: “The key question is whether we want to foster a class of the disaffected.” Well aware that the commission entrusted to him would have to deliberate for longer on the contested issue of legal equality, Sohier supported the “fundamentally provisional measure of the card.” And not because of the legal privileges it granted, but because of its symbolic value: “In the interim it is crucial that we satisfy the *évolués*’ *amour propre* and reassure them that we care about their concerns. This can be done by issuing a card with the small number of privileges it would currently grant.”¹⁵⁶

The letters to the colonial minister show that the champions of an *évolué* status quoted the *Voix du Congolais* as key witness and purveyor of their arguments. The official voice of the vernacular elite brought home to them the bitterness the members of this group felt about the rejection of the status reform and about the discrepancy with the policy in the neighbouring French colony. When it came to their political lobbying, the newspaper served them as an advocate for the Congolese that even the colonial minister could not fail to hear.

Carte du mérite civique: elite status as emergency decree

Ultimately, Colonial Minister Wigny decided to pursue a dual temporary solution, as his advisors suggested. First, he prompted the governor general to introduce the so-called *carte du mérite civique* on 12 July 1948.¹⁵⁷ This card was based on the proposal put forward by the AIMO, as publicly propagated by the *Voix du Congolais* and rejected by the *Conseil de Gouvernement*. Rather than legal equality, the *carte du mérite civique* merely provided for a small number of privileges to be granted gradually, but a broad range of people could apply for it. The minister regarded this as a “stop-gap solution.”¹⁵⁸ In order to avoid the protracted process necessitated by an edict, the governor general issued an emergency de-

155 The following section refers to the letter from Antoine Sohier to the colonial minister, 18 June 1948, AA/4743/II/T/4.

156 Ibid.

157 *Ordonnance N°21/258 AIMO du 12 Juillet 1948 créant une carte du mérite civique*, reprinted in *Voix du Congolais* no. 30 (September 1948): 363–367.

158 The minister already expressed a preference for a “stop-gap solution” on 10 March 1948, which he wanted to forego such controversial terms as “class,” *évolués* and *évoluants* and instead adopt a title such as “carte du mérite civique”; correspondence between colonial minister and Van Hove, 10 March 1948, AA/4743/II/T/4.

cree, which did not require the assent of the *Conseil de Gouvernement*. The minister expected this decision to gain him some time in order to allow the commission headed by Antoine Sohier to resolve the highly contested question of legal equality and a “status for the civilized Congolese population.”¹⁵⁹

With this compromise solution, after a lengthy period of hesitation the Colonial Ministry enforced its will in the face of resistance in the colony. The need to grant the elite privileges of some kind had also been articulated vociferously in 1947 by a delegation of members of the Belgian Chamber of Representatives and Senate following a trip through the Belgian Congo.¹⁶⁰ That same year, moreover, during his trip to Léopoldville Prince Charles of Belgium had affirmed his country’s determination to fulfil the obligations imposed by the UN charter.¹⁶¹ But it was above all Colonial Minister Wigny who expressed his conviction as to the importance of the reform within the framework of his assimilation policy. As he wrote, it not only “placates” the “*évolué* class, which expects our support in its efforts to civilize,” but also provided international observers with evidence of “Belgium’s generous policy *vis-à-vis* the natives entrusted to us.”¹⁶² The politicians in Belgium, then, were less afraid of criticisms from the colonies than of those emanating from the international community. Any attempt to backtrack on elite-making policy would have lent impetus to criticisms made by the United Nations to the effect that the Belgian Congo was bedevilled by racial segregation and a regressive population policy in comparison to French and British Africa.

But how did the *Voix du Congolais* comment on the introduction of the *carte du mérite civique*? Bolamba was effusive in welcoming the minister’s decision and sought to portray the newspaper as its originator:

The *Voix du Congolais* can proudly claim to have been the initiator of the *Carte du mérite civique* and to have defended the efforts made to devise it in good times as well as bad. This newspaper is convinced that its many and loyal readers will never forget the role it has played in this matter.¹⁶³

159 De Schrevel, *Les forces politiques*, 141. Copy of speech by Colonial Minister Pierre Wigny on the introduction of the *carte du mérite civique*. “Chronique de la vie indigène et nouvelles diverses,” *Voix du Congolais* no. 28 (July 1948): 303–306.

160 On the Belgian Senate members’ trip to the Congo, see Young, *Politics*, 77–78; Mutamba-Makombo, *Du Congo belge*, 48.

161 See *ibid.*, 57.

162 Instruction from Colonial Minister Wigny to Governor General Jungers of 14 April 1948, quoted in Tshonda and Delaleuwe, “Je veux la civilisation,” 149–150.

163 A.-R. Bolamba, “Carte du mérite civique. Symbole de devoirs,” *Voix du Congolais* no. 30 (September 1948): 362.

The Colonial Ministry was content to let the *Voix du Congolais* herald its first victory, not least in order to reinforce the newspaper's image as advocate of the *évolués*. But the elite only got the reform most recently extolled in the newspaper. The provincial councils having signalled their resistance, since spring 1947 the *Voix du Congolais* had committed its authors and readers to the "special card" introduced to the debate by the AIMO as a compromise solution. The advantages of such a card, as subsequently demanded in editorials, corresponded precisely to those later supposed to be granted by the *carte du mérite civique*.¹⁶⁴ From this perspective, the only elements the Congolese authors were allowed to push through were those the colonial government was minded to implement anyway. They were colonial reformers tied to their typewriters – at the colonial authorities' beck and call.

Nonetheless, Bolamba saw the *carte du mérite civique* as a means of "fundamentally changing our place in the Congo of tomorrow."¹⁶⁵ This explicit reference to the article published by Paul Lomami-Tshibamba in early 1945, however, masked the fact that after three years of discussion and commission work little remained of his demand for total assimilation. Against this background, the cherished image of victorious authors appears in a different light. The colonial minister had been unwilling to resolve the contested issue of the legal equality of certain Congolese, which was put on hold through the formation of a new expert commission. The leading politicians with responsibility for colonial policy continued to be lulled by a false sense of security, believing there was still plenty of time for this reform.

The *carte du mérite civique* and the establishment of a new commission, then, must be understood as delaying tactics. The much-vaunted reforms to elite-making policy in the Belgian Congo after 1945 were half-hearted when it came to their implementation. The authorities did not justify this interim solution with reference to protests within the European milieu, the unclear findings of the expert commissions, or politicians' reluctance to put the colonial order at risk through a far-reaching legal reform. Instead, the official rationale was still that the *évolués* were simply not advanced enough for legal equality. The preamble to the *carte du mérite civique* thus legitimized the absence of legal assimilation with the well-worn argument that the "state of development reached by the majority of natives in the intellectual and moral spheres does not yet allow for their assimilation."¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴ See for example the following article: Bolamba, "Le problème des évolués," 684–687.

¹⁶⁵ Bolamba, "Carte du mérite," 362.

¹⁶⁶ *Ordonnance N°21/258 AIMO du 12 Juillet 1948 créant une carte du mérite civique*, reprinted in *Voix du Congolais* no. 30 (September 1948): 363.

The introduction of the *carte du mérite civique* in 1948 marked the first tentative step towards a new legal status for the vernacular elite in the Belgian Congo. Within the Belgian empire, however, the institutional inequality between metropole and colony was further exacerbated. That same year, the introduction of female suffrage in Belgium constituted a further shift away from systematic discrimination when it came to civil rights, a move that was long overdue in comparative European perspective.¹⁶⁷ But those living in the Congo, even the Belgians resident there, were excluded from this “core political right of citizenship.”¹⁶⁸ Moreover, as a result of the protracted debate on legal assimilation, Belgian colonial policy created a new form of inequality between the colonial territories in Africa, arising from differing post-war reforms. While Africans in the AEF, which bordered directly on the Belgian Congo, became citizens of the *Union Française*, in the Belgian colony they remained politically emasculated subjects, who were to be dealt with according to the *indigénat*. Apart from Belgium, Portugal was the only country to retain a dualistic legal system that institutionalized discrimination in its African colonies, including neighbouring Angola.¹⁶⁹ Much like the *évolués*, only the *assimilados* could hope to gain an improved legal status, on an individual basis, by demonstrating their civilizational maturity.¹⁷⁰ The refusal to grant rights of political participation of any kind to their colonial subjects was another feature common to Belgian and Portuguese post-war policy in Africa. Yet under António de Oliveira Salazar there was no suffrage either in Portugal or its colonies, whereas in the Belgian case a democratized metropole contrasted with a depoliticized and disenfranchised colony. Though the Belgian Congo benefited from far more extensive welfarist measures and had a more developed educational and health system after 1945

167 Female suffrage was introduced in Great Britain in 1928 and in France in 1944.

168 Gosewinkel, *Schutz und Freiheit?*, 643.

169 On elite-making policy in Angola and Mozambique, see Keese, *Living*. On the post-war reforms in Portuguese colonial policy, see Albertini, *Dekolonisation*, 586–596; M. Bandeira Jérónimo and A. Costa Pinto, “A Modernising Empire? Politics, Culture, and Economy in Portuguese Late Colonialism,” in *The Ends of European Colonial Empires. Cases and Comparisons*, eds. M. Bandeira Jérónimo and A. Costa Pinto (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

170 The Salazar regime introduced *assimilado* status in 1930, which premised legal equality with Portuguese in the metropole on cultural adaptation. On the development of *assimilado* status, see G. J. Bender, *Angola Under the Portuguese: The Myth and the Reality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 149–150; Keese, *Living*, 241–242; D. Morton, “From Racial Discrimination to Class Segregation in Postcolonial Urban Mozambique,” in *Geographies of Privilege*, eds. F.W. Twine and B. Gardner (New York: Routledge, 2013).

than the Portuguese colonies,¹⁷¹ this proximity to Portugal's "repressive developmentalism" when it came to elite-making policy¹⁷² laid bare the increasingly anachronistic character of Belgian colonial rule.

171 Only from 1961 onwards were primary schools and medical facilities expanded in Portuguese Africa; *ibid.*, 153.

172 On Portugal's repressive developmentalism, see Bandeira Jerónimo and Costa Pinto, "A Modernising Empire?," 56–60.