

“Perfected Blacks” and malcontents (1945–1952)

Cultural tropes and discourses of elite self-affirmation

If opinions differed on how far special legal treatment for the Congolese elite ought to go, opinion leaders in the colonial public sphere agreed that the existing generation of *évolués* were distinguished above all else by their inadequacies. The *évolués*’ defining feature was their pursuit of perfectibility – and thus the assumption that they were imperfect. A prominent example of this way of thinking are the aforementioned articles on post-war elite formation published in the *Essor du Congo* in 1944 and 1945. Both supporters and opponents of a special *évolué* status accused most members of the elite of vanity, pretentiousness, pomposity and hypocrisy – they were educated, certainly, but morally stunted.¹ These authors saw it as a major problem that the *évolués* had been uprooted from their original milieu and had yet to find a secure foothold in their new environment. European commentators bewailed the fact that, in their behaviour towards the *indigènes*, what they generally showed was contempt rather than a sense of responsibility for their development.² The prevailing view was that the *évolués*, as unfinished business of the civilizing mission, required yet more guidance and tutoring from Europeans: “The *évolué* is an unfinished product; he must be honed and perfected.”³

These statements reflect the ambivalence of the colonial discourse on the *évolués*: on the one hand they were viewed as deficient beings, but on the other they represented the potential model of the civilized Congolese, one that was supposed to aid the development of the population as a whole. In this reading of society, the antithesis of the civilizational elite was the majority of ignorant *indigènes*. But because the “developmental role model” had to be created before it could function as social template, European journalists were unanimous in calling for the expansion of the *évolués*’ moral education beyond the mission schools.

As we have seen, in the debate on status reform both European experts and Congolese authors continued to wrestle with the definition of the term *évolués*. This social category was contentious and highly malleable – both horizontally

1 Rubbens, “Le problème des évolués,” *Essor du Congo* (18 October 1944), reprinted in Rubbens, *Dettes*, 113–117.

2 Ibid.

3 L. Ballegeer, “Le rôle social des évolués,” *Essor du Congo* (5 May 1945), reprinted in Rubbens, *Dettes*, 138.

and vertically. Because it assumed several levels of development, the term *évolués* represented a vertical concept of social classification: some found themselves at a higher level than others; one could move up and back down again.⁴ The term thus codified the unfinished, processual nature of colonial subject-making. It stabilized semantically the hierarchy within the colony's social order, with the European colonial master at the top of the developmental ladder, a figure African subjects literally looked up to. At the same time, *évolués* was a horizontal concept encompassing a heterogeneous social group, whose members were integrated into the structures of the colonial state and fit the supposed group characteristics to varying degrees. It was thus unclear what the attributes of a "true" *évolué* were.

Manners books, published by several authors in the Belgian Congo's missionary and colonial state milieu, promised to provide guidance on a desirable lifestyle and were aimed at the aspiring *évolué*. May 1945 saw the publication of *L'Évolué* by Jean Comélieau. As head of a Jesuit mission station in Leverville, the centre of the palm oil industry, he had founded the *Bibliothèque des évolués* shortly before in an attempt to ensure that educated Congolese in a rural setting had access to books.⁵ In forty-six pages, Comélieau informed the reader of what constituted exemplary conduct and what distinguished the "false *évolué*" from the "real *évolué*."⁶ The brochure invited the reader to place himself on a point scale with the help of three differently weighted criteria. One's level of educational attainment and salary could garner up to twenty-five points each, while "morality"⁷ was worth up to fifty points. Even more clearly than in the case of Antoine-Roger Bolamba's definition of *évolués* in the *Voix du Congolais*, Comélieau believed he could derive a person's level of civilizational development from a rigorous evaluation of his moral conduct,⁸ "the solid ground on which every edifice of development must be built."⁹ Unsurprisingly, what the missionary Comélieau meant by this first and foremost was the Christian religion, one's "inner

4 My thanks to Frederick Cooper for alerting me to the vertical and horizontal dimensions of the *évolué* concept.

5 On the history of this institution, renamed the *Bibliothèque de l'Étoile* in 1948, and on Comélieau's career, see Kadima-Nzuji, *Littérature*, 278–294. On the Leverville concession, see B. Henriët, *Colonial Impotence. Virtue and Violence in a Congolese Concession (1911–1940)* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021).

6 J. Comélieau, *L'Évolué* (Leverville: Bibliothèque de l'étoile, 1945), 11 and 13.

7 *Ibid.*, 26.

8 *Ibid.*, 29–31.

9 *Ibid.*, 26. This book may also be understood as an early intervention by missionaries in the status debate. According to Comélieau, one had to reach 80 percent to merit such special treatment.

life,”¹⁰ and only secondarily external hallmarks such as the absence of criminal convictions and the fulfilment of one’s obligations to family and society. For Comélieau, anyone achieving one hundred points in the self-test was “a perfect *évolué*,” less than 60 percent meant that one had just begun to develop, while those gaining less than fifty points “still [had it] all to learn.”¹¹ While the book was printed in small numbers and was soon out of print, newspapers read by *évolués*, such as the *Croix du Congo*, referred to it time and again as a key source of information.¹²

One successor to this manners book was *Élite noire*, published in 1948 by the General Government’s AIMO. Rather than a missionary, this was the work of a colonial official, namely Jean-Marie Domont, advisor to the *Voix du Congolais*. In the preface, Gustave Sand, who had championed the introduction of the *carte du mérite civique* as head of the AIMO, extolled the book as the first comprehensive etiquette manual, one that offered the reader advice on a daily basis: “The reader learns what he owes to himself, his family, his employer, society, the fatherland. On a case by case basis, then, he need only open up and leaf through this book to find an appropriate rule of conduct.”¹³

The book’s title says it all. This 135-page corpus of rules was aimed at those *évolués* who wished to belong to a Congolese elite “whose task it will be, in the Congo of the future, to replace Europeans in leading positions.”¹⁴ What the colonial official Domont meant by elite was dutiful *évolués* who were determined to work on themselves and serve as role models for the masses.¹⁵ What the book preached to the reader, then, was physical, intellectual and moral perfection, for “without this complete self-perfecting, they [*évolués*] cannot lay claim to a

¹⁰ Ibid., 33.

¹¹ Ibid., 46.

¹² The *Croix du Congo*, in particular, continued to cite the book as an important work of reference. The newspaper responded in the negative, for example, when a reader asked whether an *évolué* could be polygamous, by referring to Comélieau’s book; “Nouvelle de Partout,” *Croix du Congo* (1 September 1946). The newspaper *Étoile Nyota*, published by the colonial government in Katanga, published excerpts from the book, thus contributing to its dissemination; *Étoile Nyota* (13 June 1946). An indication that *L’Évolué* was out of print by 1949 can be found in the *Croix du Congo* of 26 June 1949, which advises its readers to circulate the book among their friends.

¹³ Domont, *Élite noire*, 8.

¹⁴ Ibid., 134. The educated elite was treated as an elite-to-come contemporaneously in other African colonies. The British viewed “educated men” as the “ruling class of the future.” See Eckert, *Herrschen*, 97.

¹⁵ Domont, *Élite noire*, 19.

role in the native society of tomorrow.”¹⁶ In its essential features and thrust, the book resembled its missionary forerunner, accentuating its rhetoric of perfectibility.

Despite the similarities between the two manners books, however, we must bear in mind that after 1945 missions and the colonial state increasingly began to compete in their efforts to forge a vernacular elite. This was apparent in the field of advice literature, particularly when the topic at issue was the importance of religion in perfecting oneself. A good example of this is the review of *Élite noire* in the daily *Croix du Congo*, which was close to the missions.¹⁷ The reviewer complained that while the book was written in the Christian spirit, it kept quiet about the religious origin of its content. In his book, Domont, who had himself been a pupil at a Catholic boarding school in Belgium before studying at the Colonial University in Antwerp, described religion as conducive to “moral perfection” and Christian civilization as the foundation of Western civilization.¹⁸ But clearly this did not go far enough for Catholic Action’s press organ in the Belgian Congo. The *Croix du Congo* was of course in competition with the *Voix du Congolais*, with both seeking to attract *évolués*, and this critique was partly inspired by the fact that Domont was the colonial state’s adviser to the latter publication. The representatives of Catholic Action, then, knew they had fallen behind the colonial state with respect to the *évolué* press, but would not let this go unchallenged.

By no means did this turf war lessen the potency of the debate on a Congolese elite for its addressees. The ideas of perfectibility and a moral elite were dominant not just in the discourse led by colonial policymakers and missionaries, but also in Congolese authors’ discourse of self-affirmation. These *topoi* became particularly prominent in the newspapers *Voix du Congolais* and *Croix du Congo* in parallel to the debate on elite-making policy after 1944. Reading the *Voix du Congolais* conveys the impression that in his 1948 etiquette manual for *évolués* Domont had merely summarized the quintessence of all those articles in which Congolese authors engaged in a mutual exchange about who they were, or to be more precise: who they ought to be.

While the Congolese authors used the subjunctive mood when putting their demands and aspirations to the colonial state, their discourse of self-affirmation was dominated by the imperative. But they directed the discourse of perfecting primarily against themselves. Perfect Congolese, then, were not merely the object

¹⁶ Ibid., 131.

¹⁷ *Croix du Congo* (14 March 1948).

¹⁸ Domont, *Élite noire*, 54.

of the debate on an elite: the authors made themselves its subject. In their articles, for example, they referred to themselves as the “core, the elite of indigenous society,”¹⁹ and laid claim to the role, allocated to them by European actors, as the *avant-garde* of an entire society’s development. Antoine-Roger Bolamba, editor-in-chief of the *Voix du Congolais*, referred in ideal-typical terms to “perfected blacks.”²⁰ But how did these authors benefit from setting themselves up as moral apostles to their readers and invoking social obligations?

The *topos* of individual perfectibility presented the *évolués* with the prospect of nothing less than an improved social position and social prestige. In contrast to the racist ideologies so common in colonial discourse, which asserted an ultimately immutable difference between Europeans and Africans, the idea of perfecting, with its Enlightenment roots, implied that they might catch up culturally with the bourgeois European, who was regarded as an ideal-typical role model.²¹

Perfectibility, education and *avant-garde* elite: the *évolués*’ developmental programme exhibited clear parallels with the ideas of intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois and his bourgeois conception of the so-called *new negro*. In the early twentieth century, he saw a classical education as the royal road to upward social mobility for African Americans and he was convinced that they must be led by an elite group, the so-called “talented tenth.”²² In both the Belgian Congo and the United States, the social ascent of the *new negro* constituted a direct challenge to a social order based on racial hierarchy. And in the struggle for recognition and equality, both Congolese and African Americans seeking upward mobility availed themselves of a “soft weapon”: culture.

But the *évolués*’ discourse of perfectibility could not omit reference to their deficiencies. As the supposed masterpiece of the Belgian civilizing mission, they had long been subject to vehement criticism from the Europeans resident in the Congo. One recurrent accusation was that the *évolué* put his civility on display but had not necessarily internalized it. In the 1920s the pejorative term “*vernivolués*”²³ did the rounds, which imputed to Congolese a form of development

19 A. Kagame, “L’*évolué* réel de l’Afrique Belge,” *Voix du Congolais* no. 9 (May-June 1946): 356.

20 Bolamba, “Le Problème des *évolués*,” 685.

21 On the discourse of perfectibility in the Enlightenment, one of whose proponents was Jean-Jacques Rousseau, see E. Behler, *Unendliche Perfektibilität. Europäische Romantik und Französische Revolution* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1989).

22 See W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Talented Tenth,” in *The Negro Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative Negroes of Today*, ed. Booker T. Washington (New York: J. Pott & Co, 1903). On the configuration of African American intellectuals, see A. Pochmara, *The Making of the New Negro. Black Authorship, Masculinity, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011).

23 Mutamba-Makombo, “Les *évolués*,” 84.

as superficial as nail varnish – and just as liable to crack. What came to light when the polished layer chipped off was a recurrent question in the colonial discourse on assimilated Africans, not just in Belgian territory but also in the French, Portuguese and British empires.²⁴ Descriptions in articles by European authors on *évolué* status, which I have cited several times in the present book, point to a continuity in this invective, whose roots lay just as much in racist prejudices as in fears of the symbolic questioning of colonial rule. In these texts the *évolués* are described as “deplorably spoiled children,”²⁵ “cosmetic Christians”²⁶ and “semi-developed”; they are cast as individuals who “despite their Europeanized appearance remain atavistic at bottom.”²⁷ More than a few Europeans imputed to the *évolués* infantility, clumsiness and falsity and sneered at the “aping”²⁸ of civilized behaviour by Congolese.

Belgian publications from the 1890s on, and later newspapers in the Congo as well, increasingly featured, in addition to cannibals, African colonial dandies.²⁹ These figures of fun, with their imitation of a European lifestyle, were a source of amusement in advertising imagery and strip cartoons in the dailies. The most prominent example is the early work of Belgian cartoonist Hergé entitled *Tintin in the Congo*.³⁰ When Tintin gruffly commands a group of thick-lipped and very black Congolese to right a derailed train, one of them refuses to help in broken French: “But...me get dirty.”³¹ Hergé portrays the grumbler as a dandy in hat and tails, a black-and-green striped tie, white collar and cuffs, but bare-chested. A grotesque half-naked man in a tie, unwilling to work so as not to get his hands dirty – the racist stereotype of the “semi-developed” is neatly captured in this caricature.

24 On the French and Portuguese cases, see Keese, *Living*, 101–102, 107. On British Tanganyika, see Eckert, *Herrschen*, 145–147.

25 Rubbens, “Le problème des évolués,” *Essor du Congo* (18 October 1944), reprinted in Rubbens, *Dettes*, 113.

26 Zuyderhoff, “La solution isolationniste,” reprinted in Rubbens, *Dettes*, 118.

27 L. Ballegeer, “Le rôle social des évolués,” *Essor du Congo* (5 May 1945), reprinted in Rubbens, *Dettes*, 139.

28 References to “aping” can be found both in contemporary accounts on the denigration of the *évolués* and in statements in interviews that take a critical view of this group’s role. J. Vandelin-den, *Pierre Ryckmans*, 726; interview with Mwissa-Camus, Kinshasa, 24 August 2010; A. Varney, “Au sujet d’une conférence,” *Croix du Congo* (21 December 1952).

29 On this section, see N. R. Hunt, “Tintin and the Interruptions of Congolese Comics,” in *Images and Empires. Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa*, eds. P. S. Landau and D. D. Kaspian (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 100 and 113.

30 Hergé, *Tintin in the Congo* (Brussels: Casterman, 1952). To quote the original: “Mais... mais... moi va salir moi.”

31 Ibid., 20.

But the unmasking of Africans who had appropriated European culture was by no means specific to the Belgian Congo. In Hergé’s depictions of Congolese we can discern a template, namely the minstrel shows. In the United States of the nineteenth century, these shows brought whites in blackface to the stage, parodying African Americans through overblown characters, and holding up to ridicule their pursuit of social integration at a time when the abolition of slavery was underway.³² But the depictions of *évolués*, which imputed to them a craving for status, charlatanry and absurdity, not only resembled the characters in the minstrel shows, but also the racist depictions commonly found in other European countries of educated Africans dressed in European style. In the German Empire, for example, “trouserred *Negro*” had been a source of amusement since the 1880s.³³ But this was laughter that merely provided temporary relief from fears of the “crossing of a racial status barrier,”³⁴ for an African with a Europeanized manner always represented a threat to a social order based on the colonial distinction between Europeans as rulers and Africans as ruled.

Against this background it is no surprise, particularly in the course of the debate on status after 1945, that reports of the symbolic violation of norms by *évolués* began to mount up in the Belgian Congo, with their supposedly exaggerated conduct becoming the object of mockery. While many educated Congolese adopted European first names when they were baptized, some also adorned themselves with imaginative European versions of their surnames. Patrice Lumumba called himself Mumbard³⁵ for a time, while Mafinge became Maffighet; others chose Whykyyz and Massoudith as pseudonyms.³⁶ In everyday life, the core idea underpinning the civilizing mission, namely that colonial subjects would learn to lead a civilized life by imitating Europeans, was drowned out by guffaws of laughter. Europeans’ mockery prompted authors writing for the *Voix du Congolais* to call for a new self-description: “The term *évolués* has become a nightmare for us, for certain Europeans say it with outright derision.”³⁷ Henceforth, their articles increasingly referred to a special group that conceived of itself as a “civilizational elite.”

Further, what European and Congolese authors both complained about within the public debate was some *évolués*’ demonstrative aversion to the less edu-

32 On the history of the minstrel show, see R. C. Toll, *Blackening Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

33 Osterhammel, *Transformation*, 237.

34 *Ibid.*, 238.

35 Mutamba-Makombo, *Du Congo belge*, 72.

36 J. Selemani, “Les évolués et leurs noms,” *Nyota Etoile* (6 March 1947): 2.

37 A.-R. Bolamba, “Le problème des évolués,” 684–686.

cated. We might concede that such mockery, which sometimes featured in the encounter between elite and masses, was a successful imitation of the kind of European conduct to which the *évolués* were often exposed. In any case, these accounts played a part in ensuring that the term “snobs”³⁸ became established within the normative elite discourse on “false” *évolués*. The term had already gained currency in Great Britain in the eighteenth century as a term for social climbers who believed they could ascend within society by imitating the cultural practices of the nobility and behaved with haughty arrogance towards their lower-class group of origin.³⁹ The origin of the term explains why the British administration in Tanganyika in the 1950s also referred to “social snobs” when complaining about the educated elites’ lack of contact with ordinary workers.⁴⁰ Whether in British or Belgian Africa: in the context of late colonial elite formation, the snob appeared as the polar opposite of the “perfected black.”

Congolese authors challenged Europeans’ critique and derision. By affirming their perfectibility and calling for exemplary conduct in media such as the *Voix du Congolais*, they sought to counter European commentators who intended to torpedo the reform of elite status by highlighting the *évolués*’ inadequacies. These authors lent weight to their claim to distinction in articles propagating an idealized representation of the *évolués*, along with their attributes and duties in the new Congolese society. The newspapers increasingly functioned as a medial site of colonial subject formation that endeavoured to help create the elite. Here elite discourse produced two “cultural figures”⁴¹ that were diametrically opposed: the “perfected black,” a virtuous figure whose values and behaviours were considered European and civilized in the colonial idiom, and the snob or “presumptuous *évolué*,”⁴² who lacked these qualities. These figures condensed the debates on the desirable and undesirable conduct of the elite Congolese,

38 Domont referred contemptuously to a “certain snobbishness” characteristic of the elite; Domont, *Élite noire*, 28.

39 W. M. Thackeray, *Book of Snobs* (London: Punch, 1868).

40 Eckert, *Herrschen*, 146.

41 The analytical concept of the cultural figure has the advantage that it covers not just stereotypes circulated in the media and cultural representations, but also their individual embodiment in practice. This is precisely what I am getting at in the following remarks. For a discussion of the term, see M. Ege, *Ein Proll mit Klasse. Mode, Popkultur und soziale Unterschichten unter jungen Männern in Berlin* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2013), 36–73. In terms of the history of concepts, the cultural trope combines aspects of “stereotypes, media images, constructs of identity and proposed modes of subjectification”; M. Ege, “Zur Performativität von ‘wannabees,’” in *Orte – Situationen – Atmosphären. Kulturanalytische Skizzen*, ed. B. Binder et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2010), 302 and 289–290.

42 L. Embae, “Il y a ‘évolués’ et ‘évolués,’” *Voix du Congolais* no. 19 (October 1947): 816.

his legitimate cultural practices and social spaces, his role as head of a nuclear family and as civilizational role model for African society. It was through these tropes that it became clear who ought to be regarded as a “genuine” and “false” *évolué*. This was a normative discourse that resembled, in its style and the institutions it propagated, the debate unfolding in Belgium since the mid-nineteenth century on “good” and “bad” workers; they too were so identified according to the extent to which they complied with the imperative of a moral lifestyle.⁴³ These cultural tropes figures also identificatory overtures for readers, and the elite newspapers spent a lot of time discussing to what extent these ideal-typical qualities had been internalized. This discussion furnishes us with a perspective on models of living and social practices that reveal the ambivalent results of elite formation. As Congolese appropriated certain modes of conduct within their everyday life, cultural bourgeoisification oscillated between incorporation and contradiction.

Education and character building

More than anything else, the debate on the new elite identified education as its hallmark. It was the graduates of mission secondary schools who were generally regarded as *évolués*: education was their symbolic and cultural capital. As the primary site of colonial subject formation,⁴⁴ the Catholic mission schools drilled their pupils to work on themselves, physically and mentally.⁴⁵ In associations, meanwhile, *évolués* had to continue to work on their self-optimization outside school, which meant proving their rhetorical abilities and intellectual proficiency. The most assiduous association members published their talks in the press, with titles that are testimony to their didactic style, such as “How does one get married?”⁴⁶ and “How does one raise one’s children?”⁴⁷ The eloquent *évolué*, as

⁴³ On the ideology and practice of the moralization and cultural bourgeoisification of the Belgian working class, see J. Puissant, “Le bon ouvrier.”

⁴⁴ Wirz, “Einleitung,” 9.

⁴⁵ But it was not just in the Belgian Congo that character-building was on the curriculum. In British Tanganyika, the Government School in Tabora, where administrative staff were trained, emphasized – in addition to the imparting of knowledge – above all the training of character, by means, for example, of team sports and work of use to the community. See Eckert, *Herrschen*.

⁴⁶ E. Ngandu, “Comment se marier,” *Voix du Congolais* no. 11 (September–October 1946).

⁴⁷ N. Mutombo, “Comment élever nos enfants,” *Voix du Congolais* no. 60 (March 1951).

a type, was in accord with pre-colonial ideals of masculinity, which included skills of oratory as well as hunting.⁴⁸

Due to the rudimentary education system, the exemplary *évolués* became autodidacts who continued to educate themselves after office hours through constant reading. One contributor to the *Voix du Congolais* from Coquilhatville presented the cultural practice of reading as the best way of building character: "Reading is more than a pleasure. It is a must for those *évoluants* who wish to perfect themselves."⁴⁹ The art of reading involved not just reading "correctly," with patience, persistence and a deliberate approach, but also reading the "right" things, such as "work-related material" or "masterpieces of literature."⁵⁰ Selecting books was the preserve of missions and colonial officials, who established a library for the *évolués* in every part of the colony. Mastery of the French language, particularly among authors, was proof of their self-perfecting. In many articles penned by Congolese, the Larousse dictionary served to clarify contested words such as "civilization" and "development"⁵¹ or specialist terms, as in one piece on the care of infants.⁵²

Various actors sought to appeal to Congolese who felt this desire for education and knowledge. A bookshop in the Belgian town of Gozée advertised a 944-page specialist dictionary by Larousse in the *Croix du Congo*. The caption was aimed at *évolués*: "Do you wonder at the whites' science and extensive knowledge? You too can become highly intelligent and know everything thanks to the Larousse dictionary."⁵³ What this business promised its customers was a talisman against ignorance; it was alluding to a common vernacular interpretation that book knowledge and the ability to write were nothing less than the white man's powerful magic. Congolese who had attended school were thus regarded as "great initiates of the mysterious *bwanga* of education, which helps the whites achieve strength and wealth."⁵⁴

But state and missionary actors not only wished to impart knowledge and abilities. For them, the education of *évolués* chiefly meant character-building. The European patrons of Congolese associations, for example, sought to comply with the state's character-enhancing mandate by consciously facilitating discus-

48 Gondola, *Tropical*, 12.

49 R.-P. Mujinga, "La voix de la raison," *Voix du Congolais* no. 36 (March 1949): 111.

50 M. Colin, "L'art de lire," *Voix du Congolais* no. 75 (June 1952): 341.

51 A.-M. Mobé, "Encore un mot au sujet de la Carte du Mérite Civique," *Voix du Congolais* no. 60 (March 1951): 123.

52 Mutombo, "Comment élever nos enfants," 131.

53 Advertisement printed in *Croix du Congo* (27 January 1952).

54 Rubbens, *Dettes*, 113.

sion of texts about a variety of topics, which they had received from the General Government’s Press Department. This they did with varying degrees of success. After a talk on touch typing, a territorial administrator in Djolu cabled Léopoldville to report that his listeners were only interested in the technical aspects, though the main objective had been to impart a work ethic. The participants’ interest may have been due to the fact that clerical work in the administrative system was one of the most lucrative careers for Congolese and the ability to type increased one’s chances of employment. While the association members saw the talk as a welcome source of vocational training, for the colonial official this was merely a misapprehension intrinsic to elite-making policy. For as we saw earlier in the case of the etiquette manual for *évolués*, education was a holistic concept that encompassed knowledge, but even more importantly a canon of values, rules of conduct and ways of life. “A black who can speak French and use a typewriter is not automatically developed,”⁵⁵ as the disgruntled official remarked.

The boundary between acceptable and recalcitrant *évolués* was drawn between character-building and property, in accordance with the notion of an inner and outer form of development. Thus, the critique of *évolués*’ excessively materialistic attitudes, also put forward by Congolese authors, was no coincidence. In the relevant newspapers they evaluated development and civility in the light of moral or Christian criteria. For them, this inner form of education stood in contrast to material dimensions. One correspondent employed at the *Voix du Congolais* in Kabinda thus warned: “Without spiritual development one remains stuck at the stage of savagery seen at the beginning of the century.”⁵⁶ The critique of excessive and immoral consumerism and of a type of self-presentation among *évolués* that, in the view of many authors, went beyond legitimate forms of social distinction, filled the press by the pageful and thus merits close examination.

⁵⁵ Letter from De Walsche to the head of the Information Office in Léopoldville, 11 August 1955, AA/GG/5991.

⁵⁶ P. Kangudie, “La véritable évolution doit être spirituelle et non seulement matérielle,” *Voix du Congolais* no. 52 (July 1950): 414.

Clothes (do not) make évolués

Studies in the cultural history of Africa agree that clothing is by no means just material, but constitutes a “politics of costume.”⁵⁷ In a study of recreational culture in colonial Brazzaville, Phyllis Martin points out that even in the tropical climate of central Africa, clothing and adornments were primarily used to symbolize social difference and status.⁵⁸ Hence, we may view the colonial situation as an encounter between two societies, both of which featured a sense of clothing as a “social skin”⁵⁹ and thus an awareness of outwardly legible “distinction.”⁶⁰

Yet there were not only differing ideas about the functions of clothing and who had to comply with which dress code, but also infringements of the various sartorial orders. For European missionaries, the “fashioning of the colonial subject”⁶¹ was centered on covering up African “nakedness.” On the missionary reading, the wearing of clothes was indicative of an advancing civilizing mission, because they assumed that European clothing had a disciplining effect on its wearers.⁶² But clothing also served as a marker, visible to all, of differences between Europeans and Africans. The social hierarchy was reflected in a “colonial sartorial order.”⁶³ In the world of work, Europeans insisted on compliance with clothing norms that underscored the subordinate role of African employees. Policemen, servants and soldiers were prohibited from wearing shoes, and violations of these symbolic boundaries incurred sanctions.⁶⁴ African staff in administrative offices came closest to the norms of European working clothes: they were allowed to wear socks and shoes to work.⁶⁵

57 J. Picton and J. Mack, *African Textiles: Looms, Weaving and Design* (London: Textile Museum, 1979), 175, quoted in Martin, “Contesting Clothes,” 405. An overview is provided by J. Allmann, ed., *Fashioning Africa. Power and the Politics of Dress* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

58 Martin, “Contesting Clothes,” 401. According to Martin, in equatorial regions of Africa power and prosperity had already been manifested in choice of clothing since early times.

59 T. S. Turner, “The Social Skin,” in *Not Work Alone. A Cross-Cultural View of Activities Superfluous to Survival*, eds. J. Cherfass and R. Lewin (London: Temple Smith, 1980).

60 Bourdieu, *Die feinen Unterschiede*.

61 Comaroff and Comaroff, *Revelation*, 218.

62 Ibid., 218–222.

63 M. Pesek, “Der koloniale Körper in der Krise. Koloniale Repräsentationen, Ordnung und Gewalt während des Ersten Weltkriegs in Ostafrika, 1914–1918,” in *Dem Anderen Begegnen. Eigene und fremde Repräsentationen in sozialen Gemeinschaften*, eds. J. Baberowski et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2009), 68.

64 Martin, “Contesting Clothes,” 408.

65 Ibid.

For the *évolués* in the Belgian Congo too, employment in firms or the colonial administration opened up access to consumer products and styles of clothing with which they could exhibit social prestige. The imagery found in newspapers for Congolese readers was peopled by men wearing ironed suits, white shirts, ties and polished shoes. This bourgeois “hegemonic clothing”⁶⁶ so widespread in the colonial realm and the associated norms of cleanliness promised to turn social standing, individual success and civilizational development from an external to an internal phenomenon.⁶⁷ By wearing bourgeois clothes, the *évolués* also hoped that Europeans would grant them recognition and view them as respectable.

If the Congolese wearers of European clothing sometimes made inappropriate sartorial choices, there were consequences. One reader of the *Voix du Congolais* related how he was refused entry to a ship on which he had booked passage due to his overly “simple” get-up but was allowed on the next day thanks to his “urban attire.” Despite this experience, he was only partially willing to accept the epigram “clothes make the man.”⁶⁸ For as the Congolese authors saw it, it was not enough to appear in European clothing. This must also be worn correctly, and one’s self-stylization as a civilized person must be matched on the inside by advanced moral values.⁶⁹ A lot of ink was spilt over the fact that, often, this congruence was absent.

While the Congolese elite’s working world recognized clear sartorial conventions, their free time opened up a far greater range of possibilities to get dressed up. Some remained in their work clothes as proof of their membership of a prestigious occupational group, while for others the end of the working day ushered in a different reality. The world of spare time revealed the limits of the colonial state’s ability to control local practices of self-presentation and uphold the colonial distinctions in the clothing order. Here we find platforms for self-portraiture featuring attire and behaviours that were absent from the colonial elite-making script. Beyond the working world, European fashion was by no means the pre-

66 A. Meyerrose, *Herren im Anzug. Eine transatlantische Geschichte von Klassengesellschaften im langen 19. Jahrhundert* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2016), 29.

67 As the son of an *évolué* affirmed, one had to prove one’s cleanliness in an intractable environment. His father, he explained, tucked a small cloth into his sock so he could enter his place of work or association buildings with shiny shoes; his bicycle, meanwhile, prevented contact with the dusty terrain. Interview with Jean de la Croix Mobé, Kinshasa, 14 September 2010.

68 H.-D. Katoto, “L’habit ne fait pas le moine,” *Voix du Congolais* no. 18 (September 1947).

69 This was paralleled in the contemporaneous elite discourse on fashion in Congo-Brazzaville. See Martin, “Contesting Clothes,” 421.

serve of clerks; it found its way into a stylistic repertoire that is testimony to a subversive appropriation of the colonial clothing order.⁷⁰

In the *Voix du Congolais* correspondents from all over the country aired their views on violations of the dress code. For them, “the imperfections of these presumptuous *évolués*, whose behaviour is an affront to the noble sensibilities of upright people,”⁷¹ were a threat to the *évolués*’ dignity and respectability. They believed their treatment as civilized people was at stake, as this depended on appropriate conduct.⁷²

The Congolese authors were evidently keen to provide a precise description of a maladjusted appearance, so their articles furnish us with an interesting insight into the distinction-practices of the “false” *évolués*. Also known as “presumptuous *évolués*,” their deviation from the sartorial norm was an inevitable result of the normative discourse on the “true” *évolué*. They were assailed for failing to abide by the “classic rules,”⁷³ while instead indulging in an extravagance bordering on the ridiculous. They wore so-called swing trousers, known in the United States of the 1930s as “Charleston pants,” that were several sizes too large,⁷⁴ waistcoats, with exaggerated shoulder pads, that were either too tight or loose like a frock coat, hats slanted to the point of covering their ears and dark glasses indoors. They also adorned themselves to striking effect, for example with an *aiguillette* from the military wardrobe, bracelets and several pens in their shirt pocket. These “show-offs”⁷⁵ also commanded attention due to their colourful clothing, “jarring ties” and headgear “of a red that would send the calmest of bulls into a rage or of a green that makes the dogs bark.”⁷⁶

The articles penned by the elite hand-wringers articulated their discontent at the fact that this eccentric and over-the-top choice of clothing reinforced claims of the *évolués*’ imperfection. For similar reasons, these authors also rebuked *évolués*’ wives. They advised them to forgo off-the-peg European clothing and make-

70 Ibid., 408.

71 Embae, “Il y a ‘évolués,’” 816.

72 E. Yembe, “Voulons-nous être traités en hommes civilisés?,” *Voix du Congolais* no. 37 (April 1949).

73 Editorial note on *ibid.*, 135.

74 Swing trousers were mentioned in several articles in the *Voix du Congolais*. Yembe, “Voulons-nous,” ; “Chronique de la vie indigène et nouvelles diverses,” *Voix du Congolais* no. 39 (June 1949): 145–146; G. K. Levent, “Pourquoi ne pas le dire,” *Voix du Congolais* no. 53 (August 1950). On swing fashion in central Africa, see P. M. Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 171.

75 Embae, “Il y a ‘évolués,’” 817.

76 Yembe, “Voulons-nous,” 315.

up, and instead to wear blouses and dresses of “nice native material.”⁷⁷ There were differing views about which motifs were appropriate for printing on the material known as *pagnes*. While the author of one article regarded typewriters, railways and spark plugs as absurd motifs,⁷⁸ the author of a reader’s letter pointed out to him that the clothing worn by European women was adorned with depictions of birds, animals and flowers.⁷⁹ The public wearing, and male authors’ medial defence, of these specific symbols on the *pagnes* of Congolese women highlights the fact, first, that in contrast to male *évolués* the female wardrobe did not copy European women’s fashion. The male-dominated elite newspapers, it is true, propagated a uniforming of women featuring blouses and dresses that reflected the conservative norm of post-war Europe, but insisted on distinction *vis-à-vis* the European women in the colony through home-made clothing. Second, there was a preference for status symbols drawn from modern imaginaries that displayed social ascent and participation in worlds of consumption – an emblematic example is the typewriter as a tool of office workers, who had the most lucrative jobs among educated Congolese.

Inherent in this aesthetic criticism of style advanced by Congolese authors was a critique of consumerism. For even the wearing of correct and proper clothing was rebuked as overblown or was suspected of embodying hedonistic materialism if an individual invested a large portion of his monthly income in a “fancy, brand-new fabric.”⁸⁰ Elite discourse, with its moral critique of consumption, linked external self-presentation to the proportionality of expenditure. Precisely because, in the colonial situation, clothing symbolized social status and civilizational development, authors working for elite newspapers, almost all of whom were better-educated high earners, often mocked those who adorned themselves with “borrowed plumes.” As a result of the “true” *évolués*’ discourse of self-affirmation, it was not just Europeans but also the Congolese elite that monitored compliance with the colonial clothing order. What they had in common were fears of the selective, creative and insubordinate style of dress typical of the “false” *évolués*. Rather than indicating social positions within the colonial order,⁸¹ dress codes were losing their clarity – and thus some of their symbolic power.

77 J. Lomboto, “Pour un peu de mesure,” *Voix du Congolais* no. 34 (January 1949): 18.

78 Yembe, “Voulons-nous,” 315.

79 “Chronique de la vie indigène et nouvelles diverses,” *Voix du Congolais* no. 39 (June 1949): 146.

80 Levent, “Pourquoi,” 476–478.

81 Drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Dominic Thomas argues that the various strategies of self-presentation enabled African authors to attain social power through symbolic acts; D.

The descriptions of “presumptuous *évolués*” in the elite newspapers are reminiscent of the *sapeurs* movement, which rose to prominence from the 1960s onwards in Congo-Brazzaville. Historical writing on the *sapeurs* as Congolese dandies focuses on the post-colonial era and underlines the discrepancy between their marginal social situation and their eccentric, expensive wardrobe. But the existing studies see their historical predecessors in those fashion-conscious and hedonistic milieus of Brazzaville and Léopoldville⁸² that the elite newspapers condemned for their showing off, immoral consumption and norm infringement. These colonial dandies in the Belgian Congo shared with their European dandy forerunners of the *fin de siècle* the transgression of bourgeois norms and acts of outlandish self-staging – the inclination to pursue classiness rather than to seek membership of a class.⁸³ Meanwhile, the colonial dandy shared with his African American counterpart a form of demonstrative “self-fashioning,” which was derided in many quarters despite, or because of, the political call for equality it seemed to entail.⁸⁴

Alcohol and bar culture

It was not just colonial subjects’ outward appearance, but also their lifestyle, social etiquette and sites of sociability that came under critical observation by Congolese authors who expressed their views on the *évolués* in the relevant organs of the press. They were particularly critical of the popular bars as sites of alcohol consumption and vice.

If we can believe the Congolese commentators, bars were places where “presumptuous *évolués*” took things to extremes. Their excessive alcohol consumption supposedly degenerated into contests to establish who could drink the most and who could pay the biggest bill. In the *Voix du Congolais* indignant authors provided detailed accounts of these competitions, which took place in pub-

Thomas, “Fashion Matters. ‘La Sape’ and Vestimentary Codes in Transnational Contexts and Urban Diasporas,” *Modern Language Notes* 118 (2003): 954.

⁸² J.-D. Gandoulou, *Dandies à Baongo* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1989), 32–38 and 40–45; Gondola, *Villes*, 239–248. Elsewhere, Gondola argues convincingly that the Sape movement was a cultural phenomenon that emerged in the 1940s simultaneously in both Brazzaville and Léopoldville: Ch. D. Gondola, “Dream and Drama: The Search for Elegance among Congolese Youth,” *African Studies Review* 42 (1999): 26–27.

⁸³ G. Stein, ed., *Dandy – Snob – Flaneur. Dekadenz und Exzentrik. Kulturfiguren und Sozialcharaktere des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1985).

⁸⁴ See M. L. Miller, “W. E. B. Du Bois and the Dandy as Diasporic Race Man,” *Callaloo* 26, no. 3 (2003).

lic spaces on the first Saturday of the month, that is, payday. Those involved, we are told, ordered twelve bottles of beer at once, “to attract the other guests’ attention through their well-supplied table, an abundance that drew envious glances.”⁸⁵ The consumers outdid each other in their orders: “X pays for six bottles of beer, y demands ten, and z, at the neighbouring table, orders an entire crate. What is this madness?”⁸⁶ Apologists for the “perfected black” were displeased by the poor image conveyed by these supposed *évolués* in public settings. Bar-side status battles ran counter to the authors’ belief that the elite should be distinguished chiefly by moral conduct. Further, the commentators spotted former mission school pupils among the bar-goers and accused them of forgetting the moral lessons of their Christian education.⁸⁷ The motto of one of these bar patrons quoted in the *Voix du Congolais* demonstrates that some school leavers sought to achieve other forms of recognition than the kind propagated in elite moral discourse: “A man of renown has to assert his status in the bar in front of others, and since leaving school I have grown accustomed to indulging my whims.”⁸⁸

What Emmanuel Akyeampong has written of bar culture in the British colony of the Gold Coast, then, pertained in the Belgian Congo as well: sites of public drinking were an important meeting place within an urban culture. Here new city-dwellers could display their success through western fashion, communal drinking and demonstrative consumption. Imported or industrially produced alcohol was particularly significant, because in the villages it was generally the exclusive preserve of respected persons and authorities.⁸⁹ A sip of an imported bottled beer tasted of upward social mobility, and the higher-earning *évolués* in Léopoldville were adept at emphasizing their social position through an expensive after-work Beck’s.⁹⁰

⁸⁵ Lomboto, “Pour un peu,” 19.

⁸⁶ Levent, “Pourquoi,” 477.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Songolo, “Réflexions,” 444.

⁸⁹ E. K. Akyeampong, “‘Wo pe tam won pe ba.’ Urbanization, Individualism & Gender Relation in Colonial Ghana,” in *Africa’s Urban Past*, eds. D. Anderson and R. Rathbone (Portsmouth: James Currey, 2000); E. K. Akyeampong, *Drink, Power and Cultural Change. Social History of Alcohol in Ghana, c. 1800 to Recent Times* (Portsmouth: James Currey, 1996). For an overview of alcohol in Africa, see Ch. Ambler, “Alcohol, Racial Segregation and Popular Politics in Northern Rhodesia,” *Journal of African History* 31, no. 2 (1990); D. Van den Bersselaar, *The King of Drinks. Schnapps Gin from Modernity to Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

⁹⁰ Interview with André Matingu, Kinshasa, 7 September 2010; interview with Mwissa-Camus, Kinshasa, 24 August 2010. In the novel *Ngemena* Paul Lomami-Tshibamba has African office workers in Léopoldville drinking a toast with a bottle of Beck’s beer; P. Lomami-Tshibamba, *Nge-*



Fig. 7: Evening event in a bar in Léopoldville, 1945.

The quantities of alcohol sold also gave the champions of the “true” *évolués* cause for concern, as a study of the African districts in Léopoldville of 1947 underlines. Here Emmanuel Capelle, who was responsible for the Congolese residents of the capital as *chef de la population noire*, concluded that expenditure on the locally produced bottled beer of the Primus brand alone devoured a quarter of the entire population’s monthly earnings. He calculated that on average an adult drank between twenty and thirty bottles a month.⁹¹

In the African quarters of Léopoldville there were just shy of one hundred bars, whose licenses contributed to the colonial administration’s coffers. The colonial administration stipulated that the drinks they sold must not contain more than 4 percent alcohol.⁹² They were thus limited to selling beer. Wine and spirits were forbidden to Congolese, though those with *évolué* status were an exception. Strict laws on alcohol in the Belgian Congo, which permitted only the supposed-

mena (Yaoundé: Cle, 1981), 28. Advertisements for Beck’s that appear to have been devised exclusively for exports to the tropics were already appearing in magazines such as *L’Illustration Congolaise*, aimed at Europeans in the Congo, in the 1930s. These show a rotund man with a monocle against a background of palms, along with slogans extolling the beer’s liberal consumption.

⁹¹ E. Capelle, *La Cité Indigène* (Elisabethville: C.E.P.S.I., 1947), 49–50.

⁹² See *ibid.*

ly more developed consumers to enjoy drinks with a high alcohol content were flanked by a moral debate on the devastating consequences of consuming such beverages for character development.

European and Congolese authors agreed that alcohol was the *évolués*’ enemy. The “risks and wrongdoing [involved in] alcohol”⁹³ were elucidated in talks, articles, posters and brochures that addressed not just the educated stratum but the whole of society. Etienne Ngandu, who worked as a doctor’s assistant, warned that intoxication was a threat to morality, intelligence, the capacity for work, health, the sense of professional and familial duty, fertility and religiosity.⁹⁴ As a correspondent for the *Croix du Congo*, Patrice Lumumba, an up-and-coming postal worker at the time, warned all those who saw themselves as part of the elite: “One develops no further if one drinks a lot.”⁹⁵ Calls for moderate alcohol consumption by the colonial state and its Congolese intermediaries were in continuity with the campaigns launched by the Catholic church as well as the BOP and *Parti Libéral*. In Belgium, they had considered the bourgeois virtues of temperance and abstinence part of the ideal of the “good worker” since the 1880s.⁹⁶

In the eyes of Congolese journalists, it was in significant part the nature of the interaction between men and women in bars that made them dens of vice. Urban bar culture ran counter to the gendered order and moral values imparted by elite discourse. “Take a look at them at the threshold of the modern bar, where the lovers meet,” began an eye-witness report on a Saturday night in Léopoldville, on which the “young people of the elite,” having drunk an ample quantity of beer, danced “in the style of Jean Lemort, the famous dancer from Martinique, [...] the air replete with the noise of jazz, yelling and the loud laughter of drunk women.”⁹⁷ This urban bar culture, with its transatlantic influences, fashions from Martinique and African American music, was not in harmony with the Congo of tomorrow as envisaged by elite authors. Its hedonistic eclecticism clashed with the bourgeois clothing and self-restraint that *évolués* were sup-

93 E. Ngandu, “Dangers et méfaits de l’alcool,” *Voix du Congolais* no. 14 (March-April 1947).

94 E. Ngandu, “L’Alcoolisme et les maux du buveur,” *Voix du Congolais* no. 52 (July 1950). The General Government’s official publications on alcoholism are written in a particularly alarming tone: Éditions Service de l’Information, *Reviens à la vie! L’Élite congolaise contre l’Alcoolisme* (Kalina: 1953). See also the section on alcohol in Domont, *Élite noire*, 28–29.

95 P. Lumumba, “Quand on se connaît soi-même, que reste-il à faire?,” *Croix du Congo* (19 November 1950).

96 On the pro-abstinence propaganda of the Belgian parties, see Vleugels, *Narratives*, 38 and 171.

97 Levent, “Pourquoi,” 477.

posed to embrace. The advocates of perfectibility felt that the hopes they had placed in the next generation of educated Africans had been dashed. From the perspective of Christian and bourgeois values, in fact, they regarded these boozy evenings as veritably vice-ridden.

This moral panic over drinking venues was also triggered by the so-called *femmes libres*, unmarried women who frequented bars and had a special residence status in the cities.⁹⁸ They made a living selling beer or as the proprietors of shops. For those with the status of single *femmes libres*, the Belgian authorities even introduced a tax in the colonial cities.⁹⁹ In addition to their fashion-consciousness they were known for their occasional love affairs or sexual services, preferably involving prosperous Congolese. Elite discourse suspected female bar-goers either of being prostitutes or of practising a concealed form of polygamy. Bars were also viewed as places where supposedly monogamous men could get together with their unofficial second wives. Many were reluctant to report their polygamy to the colonial administration, which once again imposed a tax on this, before making it illegal in 1950. In elite discourse, Congolese authors accused those in the employ of the colonial state in particular of using bars as cover for their continued practice of polygamy while at the same time benefiting from the state's financial support for monogamous marriages.¹⁰⁰

In elite discourse, the lifeworld of the bar was the perfect foil for the legitimate social spaces of the “perfected blacks,” namely recreational associations and the monogamous, bourgeois family home. For while the discourse on “genuine” and “false” *évolués* was first and foremost an exchange between Congolese men regarding a masculinity characterized as “civilized,” it was always also concerned with desired forms of femininity and family. As head of the family, it was the man's task to rule over his wife with a protecting hand and in this way to produce a “civilized gender order.”¹⁰¹

98 On the gender roles in Congo's colonial cities and the social category of *femmes libres*, see Ch. D. Gondola, “Unies pour le meilleur et pour le pire. Femmes africaines et villes coloniale. Une histoire du métissage,” *Clio. Femmes, Genre, Histoire d'Afrique* 6 (1997); For a general account of gender in Africa, see O. Goerg, *Perspectives historiques sur le genre en Afrique* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2007); Miescher, *Making*.

99 On what Nancy Rose Hunt has fittingly described as “moral taxation,” see Hunt, “Noise,” 471–494.

100 This practice was criticised as immoral and illegal by Congolese representatives on the Provincial Council of Équateur province; R.-P. Mujinga, “Indemnités familiales et... polygamie ‘camouflée,’” *Voix du Congolais* no. 48 (March 1950).

101 On this concept, see Frevert and Pernau, “Europa,” 7.

The *évolué* family

The pioneering thinkers of colonial subject formation in the missionary and state contexts regarded the family as the nucleus of the new social order – and as evidence of the *évolués*’ developmental progress.¹⁰² The concept of the new Congolese family, as propagated within the framework of Belgian developmental colonialism, necessitated a shift in ideas about gender roles, childhood and domesticity, as well as repudiation of the widely practised polygamy.¹⁰³ Representations of a bourgeois gender order dominated the newspapers of the Belgian Congo. At the centre of this order stood the male *évolué*, a “respectable man, master of his home and breadwinner.”¹⁰⁴ Photographs commissioned by the General Government’s Propaganda Department showed the married man surrounded by his family, seated at table for dinner with his family, reading in an armchair while his wife takes care of his offspring, and saying goodbye to his wife, who is handing him his hat on the doorstep before he sets off for work.¹⁰⁵ Behind every “real” *évolué* there had to be a “perfected” wife.¹⁰⁶

While the desired shift in gender roles threw up plenty of conflict, it was reinforced by the fact that it was above all men who were trained for paid employment. Because they had to pay for their family’s upkeep, their position of power was cemented within the familial gender order. Women’s traditional forms of work, such as subsistence farming or selling at markets, played no role in this concept. Voices within the elite press expressed opposition to the matriarchal family structures common in some parts of the Belgian Congo, which clashed with the ideal of the devoted and responsible married man as head of the nucle-

102 See P. Taquet, “‘J’attends mon mari’ ou la promotion des familles heureuses au Congo Belge. Aperçu du service social colonial féminine au Congo Belge (1945–1960)” (Master’s diss., Université Libre Bruxelles, Brussels, 2005), 57–60.

103 Hunt, “Noise,” 475–476.

104 B. Jewsiewicki, “Residing in Kinshasa. Between Colonial Modernization and Globalization,” *Research in African Literatures* 39, no. 4 (2008): 107.

105 The images described here can be found in the photograph collection of the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren.

106 For a general discussion of women in the history of the Congo, see Hunt, “Noise”; N. R. Hunt, “Hommes et femmes, sujets du Congo colonial,” in *Les mémoires du Congo. Le temps colonial*, ed. J.-L. Vellut (Gent: Éditions Snoeck, 2005); A. Lauro, “Women in the Democratic Republic of Congo,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*, ed. Thomas Spear (May 2020), accessed March 10, 2021, doi: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.544. G. Mianda, “L’état, le genre et l’iconographie. L’image de la femme au Congo belge,” in *Images, mémoires et savoirs. Une histoire en partage avec Bogumil Koss Jewsiewicki*, eds. I. Ndaywel è Nziem and E. Mudimbe-Boyi (Paris: Karthala, 2009).

ar family. The *Voix du Congolais* reprinted an article from the Dakar-based *Afrique Nouvelle*, in which a priest from the Ivory Coast described the matriarchy as a pan-African hindrance to the emergence of the nuclear family. Because the matriarchy granted guardianship of offspring to the mother's brother rather than the father, the article argued, it discouraged married men from viewing themselves as family heads and providers.¹⁰⁷ From the province of Bas-Congo came articles bidding farewell to the matriarchy that had held sway there and proclaiming the victory of the Christian nuclear family.¹⁰⁸

Fundamental to the *évolué* family as envisaged in missionary and state propaganda was the invention of the Congolese housewife. Her task was to submit to a concept that ended the traditional kin group, featuring a large number of related individuals, and replaced it with the nuclear family, with the man as its sole head. Belgian jurist Antoine Sohier, who was responsible for drawing up a status reform for Congolese regarded as civilized, called on the woman to accept this new conception of the family, "in order to create an independent, 'new family,' which forms the base and the cement of every developed society."¹⁰⁹

The education of the "developed woman"¹¹⁰ consisted in mastering new gender roles and cultural techniques. The first *foyers sociaux* had already been established in the inter-war period in Léopoldville, Elisabethville and Coquilhatville under the leadership of Catholic missionaries and the colonial administration,¹¹¹ their goal to familiarize Congolese women with the "colonized culture of *évolué* domesticity."¹¹² After the Second World War both Christian Social and Liberal colonial ministers granted subsidies to these privately run institutions.¹¹³ The *foyers sociaux* were the female counterpart of the exclusively male *évolué* associations.¹¹⁴ They were headed by the wives of Belgian colonial offi-

107 B. Yage, "Cri d'alarme," *Voix du Congolais* no. 35 (February 1949): 67–68.

108 E. R. T. Kanza, "Adieu Matriarchat!," *Voix du Congolais* no. 75 (June 1952): 346.

109 A. Sohier, "Le rôle de la femme dans la famille indigène congolaise," *Mbandaka* (4 October 1947): 1–2.

110 Y. Lammerant, "La femme congolaise et son évolution," *La femme et le Congo* no. 162 (July 1958).

111 N. R. Hunt, "Domesticity and Colonialism in Belgian Congo. Usumbura's foyer social, 1946–1960," *Signs* 5 (1990): 450.

112 *Ibid.*, 470.

113 On the approach taken by the Liberal colonial minister, see Godding, "La politique indigène"; on his Christian Social equivalent, see J. Vanhove, "Social Service in the Belgian Congo. Present Situation and Future Plans," *Civilisations* 1 (1951).

114 On the *foyers sociaux*, see Hunt, "Domesticity"; Hunt, "Hommes"; Taquet, "J'attends mon mari"; D. Waldburger, "House, Home, Health and Hygiene—Social Engineering of Workers in Elisabethville/Lubumbashi (1940s to 1960s)," in *The Politics of Housing in (Post-)Colonial Africa*.

cials and other Europeans, by women Catholic missionaries or female social workers from the metropole. In much the same way as in Asia, in late colonial Africa European women functioned as “agents of colonial and European modernization.”¹¹⁵ While Belgian women in the metropole remained bit players of modernity in the post-war period, in the Belgian Congo their social importance grew through their active participation in the late colonial civilizing mission. As teachers of bourgeois domesticity and gendered orders, European women embodied a hegemonic femininity *vis-à-vis* Congolese women. The female bringer of civilization in the colonies stood in the tradition of bourgeois women’s associations, who ran Sunday schools for the daughters of workers in the late nineteenth century and thus did their bit to help raise the cultural level of the working class.¹¹⁶

In Belgium *foyers sociaux* had been established as a result of social policy reforms following the worker uprisings of 1886, and since then they had been a stable feature of pillarized social life as female recreational realms. In the decade after the Second World War, the women’s associations of the *Mouvement ouvrier chrétien* (MOC) in particular recorded an enormous surge in membership; every other family in Flanders was a member of this branch of Catholic Action, which was closely affiliated with the PSC.¹¹⁷ The *Ligue ouvrière chrétienne féminine*, as the women’s division of the MOC, imparted the idealized conservative notion of a bourgeois married woman, one who is dedicated to child-rearing and household, embodies a Catholic variant of modern domesticity and abstains from the enjoyable leisure pursuits of urban life.¹¹⁸ As in the metropole, actors within the state and missions in the colonies hoped that disciplining the housewife would help improve the living conditions of the working class and curb its subversive potential.¹¹⁹

Accommodating workers and urban residents, eds. K. Rüther et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020); for the first treatment of women’s associations in colonial Africa, see K. Little, “Voluntary Associations and Social Mobility among West African Women,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 6 (1972).

115 Frevert and Pernau, “Europa,” 9.

116 On the bourgeois women’s associations, see Frevert, *Frauen-Geschichte*, 77 and 98.

117 Floré, “Promoting,” 84–85.

118 *Ibid.*

119 V. Piette, “Conscience Africaine et inconscience belge,” in *Le Manifeste “Conscience africaine”* (1956). *Élites congolaises et société coloniale. Regards croisés*, ed. N. Tousignant (Brussels: Presses de l’Université Saint-Louis, 2009), 52–53; a concise account of the workers’ uprisings and the social policy responses is provided by M. T. Bitsch, *Histoire de la Belgique: De l’Antiquité à nos jours* (Brussels: Editions Complexe, 2004), 113–116.



Fig. 8: Knitting circle organized by European women in Léopoldville.

In the Congo, it was of course only the wives of well-to-do *évolués* who were permitted to visit associations on a regular basis, while all other women were still working in the fields or in the informal sector as they sought to provide for their families.¹²⁰ In the view of European women whose concept of a woman was informed by the Belgian post-war ideal of a Catholic nuclear family centered on bourgeois gender roles, African women still had much to learn. In the *foyers sociaux* they were given a “crash course” in the use of a sewing machine, the boil-washing and maintenance of clothing as well as the preparation of meals inside rather than outside the home. They were also instructed in rules of hygiene and child-rearing methods. During pregnancy they were taught how to deal with new-borns; they were supposed to give birth in a hospital, breast-feed and wean their child off breast milk gradually. The curriculum in the *foyers sociaux* was adapted to women’s supposed developmental level. As with male *évolués*, the course of instruction assumed several stages of female progress. Thus, only model students attended more advanced courses in household economics, home decoration and the preparation of meals – in model homes featuring a dining room, a full complement of furniture and cutlery.

¹²⁰ This paragraph draws on Hunt, “Hommes.”

Some of the African participants, however, used the knowledge acquired in the *foyers sociaux* in a way that would have displeased their Belgian chaperones. Victorine N'Djoli, wife of a noted *évolué*, who had learned how to use a sewing machine, rose to become the best-known dressmaker in Léopoldville in the 1950s after divorcing her husband. She had her friends model her provocative collections in the capital's trendy bars. For N'Djoli, the notion of the *femme libre*, which denoted notoriety in elite discourse, quite literally signified greater freedom.¹²¹

In the Congolese press too the uniformly male authors worried over the developmental state of the woman. The woman was a key prestige object for the *évolués*, one that sent out a message about their own degree of civility.¹²² Men thus had a strong interest in their wives' education. In 1949, Antoine-Roger Bolamba, editor-in-chief of the *Voix du Congolais*, composed a popular etiquette manual for the lady *évolué*. It was dedicated to the “developmental problems of the black woman” and dealt with topics also imparted in the *foyers sociaux*. The book gave advice on choice of partner, respectable married life, the maintenance of domestic peace, but also practical tips on clothing, housecleaning and leisure time – if one goes dancing and drinking, to quote one piece of advice, one should do so not to rumba in a bar but at home, to judiciously chosen records.¹²³ Bolamba constructed the “perfect black woman” as a loyal housewife, the polar opposite of the *femme libre*. Bolamba's book is typical of the paternalistic tone struck by Congolese authors with respect to women. It is no coincidence that the colonial discourse on the imperfection of the male *évolués* found an echo in their references to female developmental deficiencies. For the raising up of the African woman was a task that the colonial state not only delegated to the European women heads of the *foyers sociaux*, but also to the aspiring Congolese elite. But the latter wished to do more than ensure its supremacy within gender relations. The Congolese authors' concern about the development of the woman was always partly a concern for their own respectability and power position within the new gendered order.

¹²¹ Interview with Victorine N'Djoli, Kinshasa, 13 August 2010.

¹²² On marital conflicts arising from the supposed misconduct of *évolués'* wives, see A. Lauro, “‘J'ai honneur de porter plainte contre ma femme.’ Litiges conjugaux et administration colonial au Congo belge (1930 – 1960),” *CLIO. Histoire, femmes et sociétés* 33 (2011). The educated African elite in the Gold Coast also presented their wives as “hallmarks of civilization.” See Prais, “Imperial Travelers,” 59.

¹²³ A. R., Bolamba, *Les problèmes de l'évolution de la femme noire* (Elisabethville: Éditions de l'Essor du Congo, 1949), 77–78.

Interviews with the children of *évolué* families suggest that familiarity with a European lifestyle played a major role in a man's choice of wife. In selecting a partner, many of the interviewees' fathers no longer listened to the family advice but turned to friends and missionaries for advice. One is said to have got to know his wife through an acquaintance in Léopoldville, who recommended her to him as culturally adaptable in light of her primary school education and the domestic science courses she had completed – that she was not from the same region and belonged to a different ethnic group, meanwhile, was of no consequence. Another married the daughter of a Congolese teacher of religion at the behest of his European work colleagues. Due to a lack of schooling, after the wedding she attended the *foyer social* “to learn good manners.”¹²⁴ Women's *savoir-vivre* was in fact key to their receiving respectful treatment in everyday colonial life: time and again correspondents complained about their “worse half,” when, for example, they were refused access to public places due to their wives' inappropriate appearance.¹²⁵ Thus, respectable *évolués* believed they had married well if their wives helped confirm their standing as “perfected blacks.”

The ideal image of the nuclear family was completed by children. They too showcased a civilized life while having notions of civility projected onto them. In the elite newspapers, Congolese authors were unanimous in promoting the strict education typical of mission schools, which emphasized discipline, culture and propriety. The education reform of 1948 under a Christian Social colonial minister met the vernacular elite's demands for better educational opportunities only to a limited degree. The much sought-after places in the new secondary schools, which held out the prospect of a higher education entrance qualification after six years, were as scarce as those in the gender-segregated missionary boarding schools. The education reform had opted not to provide secondary schools for girls and merely established household management schools for the “children of *évolués* or their later partners” in a few urban centres. These acquainted them with a way of life appropriate to the vernacular elite.¹²⁶ While the expansion of these educational institutions progressed gradually in the early 1950s,¹²⁷ some *évolués* looked around for alternatives to the education system

124 Interviews with relatives of office workers (anonymized in this case), Kinshasa, August 2010.

125 Katoto, “L'habit,” 761–762.

126 Congo belge, Service de l'Enseignement, *Organisation de l'enseignement libre subsidié pour indigènes avec le concours des Sociétés de Missions chrétiennes. Disposition générales* (Léopoldville: 1948), 29.

127 A.-R. Bolamba, “A propos des Internats pour des enfants Congolais,” *Voix du Congolais* no. 60 (March 1951): 129–130.

of the Belgian Congo. Well-to-do and education-conscious residents of Léopoldville often sent their children to schools in neighbouring Brazzaville.¹²⁸

After 1945 the Catholic missions in particular expanded recreational opportunities for children and adolescents in order to provide extramural education and disciplining.¹²⁹ These programmes were still institutionally embedded in the *Jeunesse ouvrière chrétienne* (JOC), a youth organization founded in Brussels in 1923 and active across the world, which aimed to furnish young people with a “school of life.”¹³⁰ In Africa too the JOC expected organized leisure activities for youths to provide an effective prophylactic against a lack of moral direction and susceptibility to communist ideas – the youth organizations in the socialist countries served as cautionary cases.¹³¹ In post-war Belgium, the JOC was building on its already preeminent position within organized recreational services for young people.¹³² In the Belgian Congo it focussed its efforts mainly on sports clubs and boy scout groups. In the colonies these organizational forms served as instruments of the civilizing mission, through which missionaries sought to impress upon young people, in their free time, their notions of a moral way of life, hygiene and discipline. It was above all the educated elite in many African colonies that valued this movement as a means of imparting European values, and they expected it to give their children an educational advantage.¹³³ In the Belgian Congo several branches of the JOC were established in the 1950s. Due to their limited resources, however, they often had no more than two dozen members,¹³⁴ most of them from *évolué* families.

The offspring of *évolué* families stood out above all else through their high level of education.¹³⁵ Fathers’ great interest in a good education for their children is understandable, given that they themselves had experienced school attendance as the route to a professional career. No surprise, then, that the father’s duty to educate his children was an integral component of elite discourse.

128 Interview with relatives of an office worker (anonymized in this case), Kinshasa, August 2010.

129 S. Tilman, “L’implantation du scoutisme au Congo belge,” in *Itinéraires croisés de la modernité Congo belge (1920 – 1950)*, ed. J.-L. Vellut (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2001); Van Rompaey, “The Development,” 193 – 213.

130 Letter from JOC to Georges Six, provincial bishop of Léopoldville, 4 April 1950, KADOC/P/II/a/4/14/4.

131 Ibid.

132 Conway, *Sorrows*, 213 – 215.

133 T. H. Parsons, *Race, Resistance, and the Boy Scout Movement in British Colonial Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004).

134 Pasquier, *La jeunesse*, 106.

135 Interview with Anselme Mavuela, Kinshasa, 31 August 2010.

Here the family was ascribed the role of earliest and most intimate locus of the civilizing mission. Etienne Ngandu, author of the *évolué* memorandum of 1944, interpreted family as the elite's didactic workshop of the future: "While the school educates, the family forms the character of all those who will be our chiefs, priests and leaders of tomorrow."¹³⁶ To this day, children of *Voix du Congolais* staff recall reading with their fathers, who helped them with homework and talked to them exclusively in French, while using a vernacular language with their mothers.¹³⁷ The paternalism of elite formation was reflected in the paternalism of child-rearing. Antoine-Marie Mobé, for example, had his oldest son sweep the front yard, signed him up with the boy scouts and took him along to association meetings, where he sometimes played with the children of Europeans. He could not recall having interacted with Congolese children of the same age in the neighbourhood: as the child of an *évolué*, he was given to a "superiority complex"¹³⁸ *vis-à-vis* such children.

Domesticity and perfect homes

The disciplining of the *évolué* family did not stop at the front door. Through the standardization and stabilization of the residential situation in the cities, the colonial state sought to strengthen the nuclear family. Habitats – to draw loosely on Pierre Bourdieu – were meant to rub off on habitus.¹³⁹ In the form of the *Office des Cités Africaines* (OCA), in 1952 the Colonial Ministry created a public enterprise for house-building and urban development, which constructed 40,000 houses within eight years.¹⁴⁰ In the media the OCA propagated the construction of dwellings of durable material and divided into rooms shaped by European notions of residential culture: living room, dining room, bedroom for the married

136 E. Ngandu, "L'école instruit mais la famille forme le caractère," *Voix du Congolais* no. 27 (June 1948): 245.

137 According to the son of Antoine-Marie Mobé and the daughter of Antoine-Roger Bolamba. Interview with Elisabeth Bolamba, Kinshasa, 30 August 2010; interview with Jean de la Croix Mobé, Kinshasa, 31 August 2010.

138 Ibid.

139 P. Bourdieu, "Site Effects," in *The Weight of the World. Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*, ed. P. Bourdieu (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 128.

140 On the OCA, see F. De Boeck and M.-F. Plissard, *Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2004); B. De Demeulder, "OCA (Office des cités africaines, 1952–1960)," in *ArchiAfrika Conference Proceedings: Modern Architecture in East Africa around Independence* (Dar es Salaam: 2005); M. Gemoets et al., eds., *Kinshasa. Architecture et paysage urbains* (Paris: Somogy Editions, 2010), 88.

couple and children’s rooms. Further, it offered the more well-to-do Congolese “accommodation for developed natives”¹⁴¹ for purchase with the help of special loans. In much the same way as in post-war Belgium, where the state offered support to workers wishing to acquire their own home,¹⁴² in the colony too the goal was to awaken an appreciation for property among members of the vernacular elite.¹⁴³ In order to apply for a loan, introduced by Christian Social colonial minister Pierre Wigny as a component of the Ten-Year Plan in 1949,¹⁴⁴ it was essential to prove one’s monogamous marriage and practice of the Christian faith.¹⁴⁵ Homes for *évolués* came in a number of models – a chimney on the roof, in this tropical climate, was not so much a means of combating the cold as an expression in stone of advanced assimilation to European visions of bourgeois culture.¹⁴⁶ Placing photographs of the houses of European residents and *évolués* side by side, one is struck by a certain similarity, though the proportions and furnishings of Europeans’ “ideal colonial house”¹⁴⁷ evince greater wealth. But the *évolués*’ homes stand out when compared with the simple dwellings for the Congolese workers, which were constructed, on a massive scale, by both state agencies and business enterprises.¹⁴⁸ The colonial distinction on which the social hierarchy rested was maintained in residential environments.

Through the new housing estates constructed after the Second World War in many prosperous urban centres, the colonial state met the demands of Congolese who were unhappy with their living situation. In a report from Coquilhatville, which was sent to the *Voix du Congolais* but not published, one of them called for state aid for the construction of a new African quarter. The heat, he explained, made a night in the house virtually unbearable, impairing concentration at work; the inevitable overcrowding of homes made it impossible to receive visitors; and the noise of the neighbourhood prevented residents from reading

141 To cite the title of a construction drawing for a residential building in Léopoldville’s African quarter; *Ibid.*, 90.

142 Floré, “Promoting,” 87.

143 J. Lagae, “Le territoire urbain de Kinshasa: patchwork et palimpseste,” in *Kinshasa. Architecture et paysage urbains*, eds. B. Gemoets et al. (Paris: Somogy Editions, 2010), 18–19.

144 Stenmans and Charlier, “Pierre Wigny.”

145 Gondola, *Tropical*, 153.

146 On these houses, see De Demeulder, “OCA.”

147 J. Lagae, “In Search of a ‘comme chez soi.’ The Ideal Colonial House in Congo (1885–1960),” in *Itinéraires croisés de la modernité Congo belge (1920–1950)*, ed. J.-L. Vellut (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2001).

148 Gemoets, *Kinshasa*, 86.

and pursuing “intellectual work.”¹⁴⁹ The author also complained about the financial problems of those starting out in their careers, who could barely afford to buy appropriate furniture for their home, thus highlighting the living room as a site representative of social status. It was the showcase for the prevailing styles of furnishing, concepts of family, forms of sociability and material belongings.¹⁵⁰

According to Congolese historian Jean-Marie Mutamba-Makombo, who himself grew up in an *évolué* household, in the Belgian Congo the living room served as a “measure of residents’ degree of civilization.”¹⁵¹ The living room’s furnishings and decor were to some extent standardized and were a reflection of bourgeois culture. Ornaments and portraits of the Belgian king or of the colonial state’s officials, often excerpted from newspapers, adorned its walls. Standard furniture included upholstered armchairs and a side table with a crocheted cover featuring a vase of flowers, radio and paraffin lamp. The similarities in furnishing style were due on the one hand to the omnipresence of colonial residential settings in Congolese newspapers and on the other to the presence of decorative techniques on the curriculum of the *foyers sociaux*.¹⁵² The so-called *salon*, the parlour or living room, was an intermediate social space, as much a site of “public representation” as of “private intimacy.”¹⁵³ Here the man of the house would become engrossed in reading and receive visits from friends and work colleagues. It was quite common for elite actors to monitor whether standards of domesticity were being maintained in the African districts. The female heads of the *foyers sociaux* sometimes inspected their students’ homes. In some places, *chefs de cité* carried out home inspections and lauded the most commendable dwellings.¹⁵⁴ The cult of the living room also found public expression in competitions held across the colony to identify the most beautifully furnished homes. The photos of the winners, which appeared in newspapers, entered into the imagery used to advertise consumer products that were the hallmark of an exem-

149 Letter from Paul Ifufa to the territorial administrator in Coquilhatville, 5 April 1945, AA/GG/10384.

150 On the history and significance of living rooms, see K. Hausen, “Das Wohnzimmer,” in *Orte des Alltags. Miniaturen aus der europäischen Kulturgeschichte*, ed. H.-G. Haupt (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1994); H. P. Hahn, “Von der Ethnographie des Wohnzimmers – zur ‘Topographie des Zufalls,’” in *Die Sprache der Dinge. Kulturwissenschaftliche Perspektiven auf die materielle Kultur*, eds. E. Tietmeyer et al. (Münster: Waxmann, 2010).

151 Mutamba-Makombo, “Im Salon,” 156.

152 Hunt, “Hommes,” 56.

153 Hausen, “Das Wohnzimmer,” 139.

154 Information provided by Jean Lema, whose father was in charge of the workers’ settlement established by transport firm Otraco in Léopoldville as *chef de cité*; interview with Jean Lema, Kinshasa, 13 August 2010. On the *chefs de cité*, see Young, *Politics*, 108.

plary *évolué*. These photos served to disseminate in the media an ideal of bourgeois culture and domesticity centred on the nuclear family.¹⁵⁵ Educating people for “good living” (in the sense of residing) was a phenomenon also evident in Belgian post-war society, where women’s associations run by the MOC held beautiful home contests to propagate bourgeois ways of life and Catholic domesticity.¹⁵⁶

As with clothing, Congolese authors writing for elite newspapers also excoriated what they perceived as hyperbolic approaches to home decor. Newspaper articles got worked up about the fact that some people painted their house fronts in colourful tones, writing their name or arithmetic problems on them, or covered interior walls with newspaper excerpts devoid of religious, patriotic or artistic value.¹⁵⁷ Like the women’s associations of the MOC, the exemplary *évolués* extolled modesty as a Christian value and put “outlandish” decor down to moral deficiencies.¹⁵⁸

In metropole and colony, the private home was intended to achieve the “spatial isolation of the [...] nuclear family.”¹⁵⁹ While in Belgium a home of one’s own was meant to provide protection from the modern temptations of the outside world, in the Congo it also represented a refuge for the nuclear family from the traditional demands of the extended family, which was regarded as a threat to the maintenance of the new gender order. After 1945, the culture of domesticity served both as a civilizing instrument for the formation of a Congolese elite and as a means of raising the moral and cultural level of the Belgian working class.¹⁶⁰ In the Belgian Congo, it was the woman of the house who became

155 The findings of ethnographic studies carried out in the former Belgian Congo after independence suggest that these *petit bourgeois* residential worlds enduringly shaped the taste in furnishings of the Congolese. See J. Fabian, “Popular Culture in Africa. Findings and Conjectures,” *Africa* 48 (1978): 318–319; P. Lambertz, *Seekers and Things: Spiritual Movements and Aesthetic Difference in Kinshasa* (New York: Berghahn, 2018), 98–100; B. Plankensteiner, “Wo die Bilder wohnen. Eine Ethnographie des Wohnzimmers und Wandschmucks im urbanen Kongo,” in *An-Sichten. Malerei aus dem Kongo, 1990–2000*, eds. B. Plankensteiner and B. Jew-siewicki (Vienna: Springer, 2001).

156 Floré, “Promoting,” 88–89; T. Van Osselaer, “Religion, Family and Domesticity in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. An Introduction,” in *Christian Homes. Religion, Family and Domesticity in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, eds. T. Van Osselaer and P. Pasture (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2014).

157 Lomboto, “Pour un peu,” 18–19.

158 On the ideology of the good home in post-war Belgium, see Floré, “Promoting,” 90–91.

159 W. Kaschuba, “Das Einfamilienhaus. Zwischen Traum und Trauma?” *archithese* 37, no. 3 (2007): 19.

160 On domesticity in colonial Africa, see K. T. Hansen, “Introduction. Domesticity in Africa,” in *African Encounters with Domesticity*, ed. K. T. Hansen (New Brunswick: Rutgers University

the main actor required to furnish proof of a home that met the high standards highlighted in the idealized *évolué* discourse.

Responsible consumption and saving money

A debate flared up in the Belgian Congo's elite newspapers on approaches to money and the question of how the propagandized family life of the "true" *évolué* ought to be financed. To the same degree that authors in the relevant newspapers ascribed wastefulness to the snob, they urged all those who saw themselves as part of an elite to deal with money responsibly. One correspondent contributing to the *Voix du Congolais*, from Luebo in Kasai province, published a piece on the major differences between stinginess, saving and squandering: "Our development or our progress [...] results solely from the individual work done by all Congolese and the way in which they use the income from their work."¹⁶¹ Other authors endorsed his view that one must refrain from spending large amounts of money on clothing, alcohol and other "trifles."¹⁶² The male authors also warned of wives' excessive material demands. Some women went so far as to insist that their bike must be a Raleigh. They were suspected of misappropriating housekeeping money for jewellery and clothing, which they donned for visits to bars while their husbands were away from home.¹⁶³

The new affluence aroused covetous glances. In Stanleyville concerns were raised that urban wage labourers risked sinking into poverty because distant family members had moved in with and were being kept by them. Calling on the colonial administration to crack down on these "parasitical stays" by issuing fewer travel permits, one author underlined the need to protect the new model of the self-contained nuclear family.¹⁶⁴ Colonial official Emmanuel Capelle, who was responsible for Léopoldville's African quarter, also warned of the financial consequences of relatives' long-term stays. He cited the case of an office assistant who not only provided for his wife and children but for twelve additional indi-

Press, 1992); Comaroff and Comaroff, "Home-Made"; on the Belgian case, see Floré, "Promoting," 85–86.

¹⁶¹ J. D. Moukeba, "Economie et Gaspillage," *Voix du Congolais* no. 53 (August 1950): 458.

¹⁶² A.-M. Mobé, "A propos des devoirs des évolués," *Voix du Congolais* no. 34 (January 1949): 15.

¹⁶³ M. Landu, "Sachons gérer notre avoir," *Voix du Congolais* no. 72 (March 1952): 148.

¹⁶⁴ J.-P. Dubuka, "Le Blanc ignore encore l'âme du Noir et la provenance de sa pauvreté," *Voix du Congolais* no. 22 (January 1948): 15.

viduals.¹⁶⁵ The fruits of wage labour ought to go to the benefit of the nuclear family. Authors who had been praised as exemplary, such as Antoine-Marie Mobé, considered meeting the financial needs of the nuclear family one of the *évolué*’s core duties.¹⁶⁶

The material benefits of saving and its moral desirability were commended to readers of elite newspapers by means of photographs and captions. In one image, a Congolese homeowner could be seen on an extensive property, which he had bought after years of saving.¹⁶⁷ A picture of a group of children was accompanied by the following explanation: “These well-nourished and neatly dressed children belong to respectable and thrifty households.”¹⁶⁸

In newspapers, the Congolese elite propagated the view that consumer culture was a hard-earned achievement: the result of working and saving. Calls for responsible saving thus drowned out scattered appeals for pay rises for Congolese workers.¹⁶⁹ Through didactic articles, Congolese authors sought to oppose the racist claim that an African merely lives from day to day and is incapable of planning ahead.¹⁷⁰ They countered this notion, among other things, by highlighting the widespread tradition of the *likelemba*. These were self-organized savings associations run by a group of friends that helped out members facing major expenditure on such things as weddings, illnesses and funerals.¹⁷¹

To promote and modernize the culture of saving, in 1950 the Colonial Ministry, under the leadership of the PSC, established a Savings Bank for Congolese customers, which was run by the *Caisse Générale d’Épargne et de la Retraite de Belgique*.¹⁷² Once again, this involved a transfer of social reforms, through which Belgian policy in the metropole had sought to moralize the working class and enhance its welfare since the 1870s.¹⁷³ In the inter-war period there was a large number of savings banks in Belgium serving the highly developed Belgian

165 Capelle, *La Cité*, 62–65.

166 Mobé, “A propos des devoirs,” 15.

167 Image in A.-M. Mobé, “Beaucoup d’argent gâte les noirs,” *Voix du Congolais* no. 55 (October 1950): 583.

168 Image in Landu, “Sachons,” 149.

169 Mobé, “Beaucoup d’argent,” 582.

170 Mobé, “A propos des devoirs,” 12–15.

171 Dubuka, “Le Blanc,” 15; A.-R. Bolamba, “Une caisse d’Épargne Congolaise,” *Voix du Congolais* no. 51 (June 1950): 323.

172 Ibid.

173 E. Gubin and J.-P. Nandrin, *La Belgique libérale et bourgeoise (1846–1878)* (Brussels: Complexe, 2010), 137–138.

culture of saving.¹⁷⁴ In order to stimulate a saving mentality in the colony as well and address new Congolese customers in a targeted way, the Savings Bank announced a competition to create a poster, with prize money totalling 5,000 francs.¹⁷⁵ The winning posters symbolize the ambivalence of saving, the sacrifice and promise it entails. The winner of the first prize shows a hand pouring the contents of a bowl of water into a bulbous calabash, which suggests a link between the mounting contributions to one's savings book and the practice, common throughout much of the territory, of filling the water tank every day to help ensure a supply during times of need.¹⁷⁶ The second-placed poster shows a village scene. A man wearing a shirt is pushing his bicycle in front of a reed-covered house. Next to him stands a sewing machine, while nearby a half-naked child stares in amazement as a man drops a coin into a box marked *Caisse d'Épargne*.¹⁷⁷ He who saves resolutely, as we might sum up the poster's message, can afford to buy those products serving as "symbolic markers of *évolué* status."¹⁷⁸ For to be taken seriously as an *évolué*, recalls Antoine-Marie Mobé's son with respect to family possessions, the minimum requirements were a bicycle, sewing machine and radio.¹⁷⁹

By the end of 1951, just under 39,000 savings books existed in the Belgian Congo containing an average sum of 3,300 francs, roughly equivalent to one and a half times the monthly wage of a Congolese employed in the administrative system.¹⁸⁰ In addition to lack of financial resources, other consumption priorities and saving habits, wider dissemination of the savings books was impeded by a certain scepticism felt by many Congolese towards the books themselves. In 1953, the *chef de la cité indigène* reported to the territorial administrator in Léo-

174 G. Vanthemsche, "De Belgische spaarbanken in België tijdens de Interbellum," in *De Belgische Spaarbanken. Geschiedenis, recht, economische functie en instellingen*, ed. Belgische Spaarbankevereeniging (Tielt: Lanoo, 1986).

175 "Le Secrétaire du Jury, Concours organisé par la Caisse d'Épargne du Congo Belge et du Ruanda-Urundi," *Voix du Congolais* no. 64 (July 1951): 395–396; "Chronique de la vie indigène et nouvelles diverses," *Voix du Congolais* no. 65 (August 1951): 457–458. The Congolese Savings Bank was also promoted by other newspapers such as the *Croix du Congo* and *Nos Images*.

176 Image in *Voix du Congolais* no. 69 (December 1951): 698.

177 Image in *Voix du Congolais* no. 75 (June 1952): 358.

178 Hunt, "Letter-Writing," 203.

179 Interview with Jean de la Croix Mobé, Kinshasa, 1 September 2010.

180 Figures drawn from statistics in the *Voix du Congolais*, though no information was provided on how the data was collected or its source. See statistics accompanying the article by Landu, "Sachons," 149.

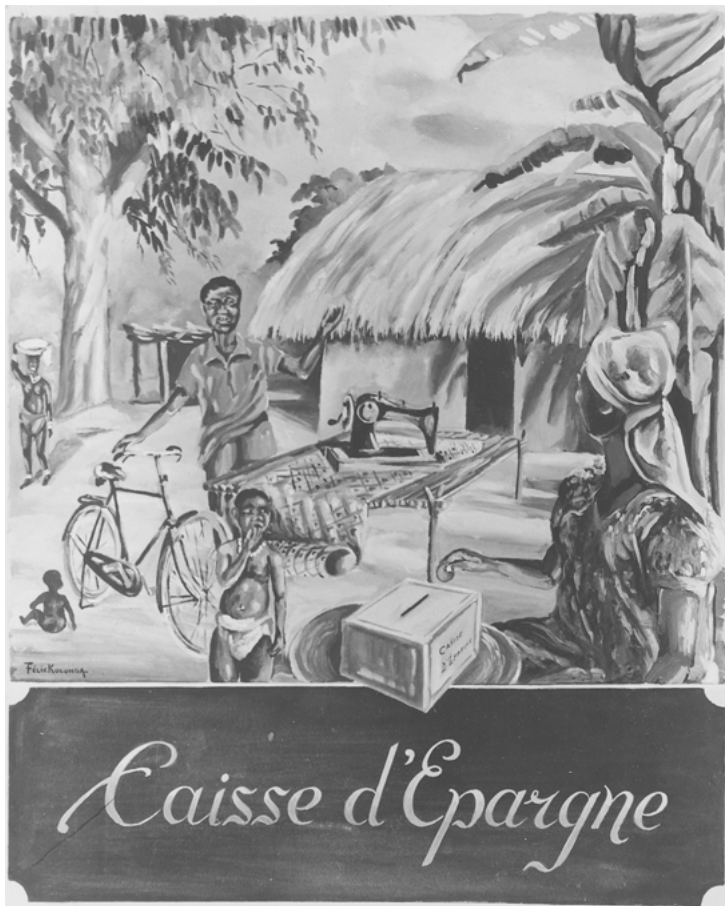


Fig. 9: The second-placed poster by Félix Kolonga.

poldville rumours that the money paid into the savings accounts ended up in the hands of the “European settlers,” paying for their luxurious homes and cars.¹⁸¹

It comes as no surprise that, according to this report, “false” *évolués* were responsible for this malicious gossip, namely a group of well-heeled men and office workers, whose *Élégance* club held sumptuous parties featuring alcohol and women in well-known dance bars.¹⁸² While the informer, through his de-

¹⁸¹ Letter to *chef de la cité indigène* in Léopoldville, 22 July 1953, AA/GG/19596.

¹⁸² Ibid.

mand for action against these deviants and disturbers of the peace, assured the colonial administration of his own uprightness, this incident indicates that even those who were categorized as members of the Congolese elite in light of their jobs could be devotees of a leisure pursuit viewed as immoral. Through processes of assimilation occurring in the context of everyday life, cultural figures diametrically opposed to one another in elite discourse could be combined in a single person. The *évolués*' "situational self"¹⁸³ allowed them to be a "perfected African" during the day and a "snob" at night.

After 1945, the representations of "false" and "real" *évolués* omnipresent in the Congolese media raised great expectations. For the colonial state expected elite formation to produce loyal, diligent and morally exemplary partners, with whose help the Congo of tomorrow could be constructed. The "perfected black" was envisaged as a colonial intermediary, one that would influence culturally not only his own family but the masses as well, while also supporting the latter's development.¹⁸⁴ From this perspective, the civilizing mission was now partly the responsibility of the new vernacular elite as an extension of the colonial state.

Educated Congolese hoped that elite formation and an enhanced legal status would give them greater opportunities for social advancement and result in improved living conditions. In addition, one of the main benefits *évolués* wished to attain was enhanced respectability, something that African society in the colonial situation was generally denied; precisely because of this, it was a much sought-after good for those who interacted with European actors on a daily basis. Thus, the congruence between elite discourse and that of the European actors involved in colonial subject formation is partly due to the strategy pursued by Congolese of demanding social recognition in light of their cultural adaptation to notions of European civility. In view of the elite member's efforts to assim-

183 The concept of the "situational self" is used in a study on the new post-Soviet elite, emphasizing that an individual, "depending on the context and situation, alters his behavioral codes and roles and highlights or conceals different aspects of his self"; A. Vonderau, "Enterprising self. Neue soziale Differenzierung und kulturelle Selbstdeutungen der Wirtschaftselite in Litauen," in *European Economic Elites. Between a New Spirit of Capitalism and the Erosion of State Socialism*, eds. F. Sattler and C. Boyer (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2009), 453.

184 The articles in the *Voix du Congolais* on the African elite's efforts to help the uneducated masses contradict the dichotomous interpretation of the colonial public sphere advanced by Peter P. Ekeh. He argues that the "bourgeois public sphere" in the African colonies represented a space free of morals and that moral obligations to one's fellow human beings were articulated solely in the "primordial public sphere"; P. P. Ekeh, "Colonialisms and the Two Publics in Africa: A Theoretical Statement," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 17 (1975).

ilate, he gained a reputation as a “*mundele ndombe*,”¹⁸⁵ that is, a ‘black white’¹⁸⁶ who imitated the European in every possible way.

For the *évolués*, the self-imposed bourgeoisification, the attempt to become more Belgian than the Belgians, became the “black man’s burden.”¹⁸⁷ For while the discourse of perfectibility certainly provided arguments justifying the attainment of legal distinction, a tremendous burden of proof lay on the prospective elite. When it came to the awarding of status, the difference between is and ought culminated in a rigorous selection procedure governed by distrust. We have seen several examples of the discrepancies between what was expected of the elite and how its members actually behaved. The ideal-typical division between bourgeoisified and snobbish *évolués* was made in light of attributes, lifestyle and self-presentation, as well as by means of social and cultural practices that were considered civilized in colonial discourse and were meant to distinguish the new Congolese elite. Seen from the perspective of the *évolués*’ life-world, the late colonial practice of “social engineering,” a holistic process of intervention in intimate and quotidian areas of life, seems totalistic in its aspirations but weak in its results. The intensive efforts made to create an elite through cultural bourgeoisification provided Congolese actors with a platform for the negotiation of social status, an arena in which moral values, consumption preferences, ideas about gender, acts of self-presentation and strategies for attaining distinction collided in a wide range of ways. Nowhere was this more apparent than in one of the key sites of elite formation, one the colonial state increasingly fostered after 1945 in order to ensure the control and disciplining of Congolese in their free time: associations.

¹⁸⁵ Mutamba-Makombo, “Les évolués,” 94.

¹⁸⁶ This term was used widely in colonial Africa. In Tanganyika, for example, people referred to *wazungu weusi*; Eckert, *Herrschen*, 250.

¹⁸⁷ This phrase, a variant on the histrionic self-description of European colonialism as the “white man’s burden,” is an allusion to the title of Davidson’s book: B. Davidson, *The Black Man’s Burden. Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State* (London: James Currey, 1992).