# A community of unequals (1952-1956)

# Belgian-Congolese visions and recognition denied

Far from the negligible new rights and privileges, it was above all the everyday experiences of those granted a *carte du mérite civique* or immatriculation that contributed to the early crisis besetting the status reforms. The Congolese elite sometimes felt that their privileges existed on paper only. In 1947, even the members of the commission on status reform had perceived Europeans' failure to recognize the *évolués* as a key problem. By ensuring a strict selection process for *évolué* status, they had hoped to expedite such recognition and thus lay the ground for peaceful coexistence. It soon emerged, however, that those granted such status were particularly likely to suffer indignities.

In July 1951, in an editorial in the Voix du Congolais, editor-in-chief Antoine-Roger Bolamba drew attention to the humiliation meted out by Europeans to bearers of the carte du mérite civique. Bolamba demanded that all policemen and officials in the colony receive official guidance on the rights of status-holders, this "true African elite." His call having initially gone unanswered, the next year the Voix du Congolais again flagged up the urgent need for action, publishing the unusually harsh criticisms of an unnamed correspondent. The carte du mérite civique, he stated, gave its bearers no benefits whatsoever. It was in fact a "sham"; even those in possession of one were still being mocked and disparaged by many Europeans. The card was a "document mpamba" and thus worthless in everyday life. The correspondent also described the discontent in the évolué milieu, in which the prevailing view was that the carte du mérite civique had only been introduced due to pressure from the UN and its acquisition was now being deliberately impeded. Furthermore, the article cast doubt on the credibility of the post-war colonial reforms: "They [the évolués] notice that the civilizers contradict themselves in word and deed. This makes them think that everything is proceeding at an agonizingly slow pace."<sup>3</sup>

The General Government allowed this unadorned critique of colonial policy to appear in the *Voix du Congolais* only because it had already made plans to crack down on the misconduct of European residents and officials. The government sought to avert the nightmare scenario, rekindled by the anonymous critic in the *Voix du Congolais*, in which the official practice of appointment to the elite

<sup>1</sup> Piron, "Le problème," 15.

<sup>2</sup> Bolamba, "A qoui," 351-352.

<sup>3 &</sup>quot;Chronique de la vie indigène," Voix du Congolais no. 75 (June 1952): 629.

might foster rather than impede the emergence of "the embittered, the discontent and conveyors of subversive ideas." Before the article had even been published, Governor General Léon Pétillon sent a circular to the colony's administrative offices complaining that "civil servants" were taking pleasure in publicly mocking the évolués. He cited an incident in which, while carrying out an identity check, a colonial official had described the carte du mérite civique as a worthless piece of paper and thrown it at its holder's feet. The governor general called on his officials to see reason, as such practices alienated the very people one would have to get along with in future. "The age of the whites' total and unconditional domination is over," he warned. The colonial administrators, then, must not approach their Congolese clerks with a complete lack of interest, treating them like "robots" to be used merely "to carry out mechanical tasks." Pétillon threatened to sanction officials who continued to act in a disrespectful way towards the vernacular elite. as such conduct was ultimately contrary to the colonial state's elite-making policy: "The government did in fact create the Carte du Mérite Civique to confer a distinction on the most deserving candidates, granting them a number of privileges and organizing the awarding ceremonies as solemn events. And then the scornful act of an inept employee working for that same government undermines all its efforts."7

The commitment shown by Governor General Pétillon, appointed in January 1952, to achieving recognition for the Congolese elite was an expression of the fact that, under the Christian Social government, Belgian colonial policy had triggered a new phase in colonial development.8 Pétillon, who graduated in law from the Catholic University of Leuven, had been entrusted with senior positions at the Colonial Ministry and in the General Government since 1929. During the Second World War, it was Pétillon who, as Governor General Pierre Ryckmans's secretary, had facilitated communication with the Belgian exile government in London.9 It was not just Pétillon's appointment as governor general by Christian Social Colonial Minister André Dequae, who had succeeded Pierre

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 628.

<sup>5</sup> Letter from the governor general to the provincial governors, 23 September 1952, AA/GG/6150.

<sup>6</sup> Letter from the governor of Équateur province to the district commissioners and territorial administrators, 15 October 1952, AA/GG/6150.

<sup>7</sup> Letter from the governor general to the provincial governors, 23 September 1952, AA/GG/6150.

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed portrait of Pétillon, see A. Stenmans and F. Reyntjens, La pensée politique du gouverneur général Pétillon (Brussels: Académie royale des sciences d'outre-mer, 1993); A.-R. Bolamba, "Hommage à Monsieur le Gouverneur Général Pétillon," Voix du Congolais no. 70 (January 1952).

<sup>9</sup> Stenmans and Reyntjens, La pensée politique, 10.

Wigny in 1950, that reflects the continuities of personnel characteristic of Belgian post-war policy in the Congo. The post of Pétillon's secretary general went to Gustave Sand, who had earlier done much to shape elite-making policy as recipient of the *évolué* memorandum of 1944 and as head of the AIMO.<sup>10</sup>

Henceforth, elite-making policy, with its focus on assimilation, was integrated into a new doctrine of Belgian colonial rule that sought to alter the relationship between Congolese and Europeans. In a two-hour speech before the *Conseil de Gouvernement*, broadcast on *Radio Congo Belge*, Pétillon thus pledged that the European and African residents of the colony would enjoy a shared future. He emphasized the "unavoidable continuance of the duality of the Congolese population," which, in addition to Congolese, included those Belgians who had "settled without intending to return [...] and are thus resident in this country." Pétillon referred in paradigmatic terms to the establishment of a "Belgian-Congolese Community." The "Congo of tomorrow" was to be based on the "association" between, and coming together of, Congolese and Belgians. In addition to the introduction of a "status for the African elite," he described the integration of status-holders into "European society" as a first step in this direction.

The notion of a "community" was inspired by the major European colonial powers, which had redefined the political and social relationship between colony and metropole after the Second World War as part of their efforts to lend new legitimacy to colonial rule. As mentioned earlier, in October 1946 France had already recast its colonial empire by proclaiming the Fourth Republic. The *Union Française* aspired to gradually place the residents of continental France and those of its overseas territories on an equal footing in terms of their rights and obligations, regardless of their religion, culture or ancestry. Meanwhile, howev-

<sup>10</sup> A.-R. Bolamba, "Monsieur Sand, Secrétaire Général," Voix du Congolais no. 70 (January 1952): 8.

<sup>11 &</sup>quot;Ouverture solennelle du Conseil de Gouvernement. Le discours de M. le Gouverneur Général Pétillon," *Voix du Congolais* no. 78 (September 1952): 535.

**<sup>12</sup>** Pétillon first mentioned the Belgian-Congolese Community in a speech during his first official visit to Elisabethville in February 1952. Though he initially asked journalists not to mention this watchword in their articles, the *Voix du Congolais* had already reported it by March 1952; A.-R. Bolamba, "Réflexion," *Voix du Congolais* no. 72 (March 1952): 127. In his memoirs, Pétillon provides detailed reflections on the background to the speech; see L. Pétillon, *Récit-Congo 1929 – 1958* (Brussels: La Renaissance du Livre, 1985), 259 – 263.

<sup>13</sup> Stenmans and Reyntjens, La pensée politique, 38-39.

**<sup>14</sup>** "Ouverture solennelle du Conseil de Gouvernement. Le discours de M. le Gouverneur Général Pétillon," *Voix du Congolais* no. 78 (September 1952): 534–535.

<sup>15</sup> See Cooper, Africa, 38-41; Eckert, Herrschen, 97-110.

er, African delegates in the National Assembly had extended their demands for citizenship rights and socio-political assimilation into the metropole to the degree that France had begun to gradually distance itself from a policy of integration. In view of the supposedly disastrous consequences of the comprehensive incorporation of Africans into the political structures of the mother country, some French colonial officials went so far as to praise the Portuguese model of the restrictive integration of preselected educated elites into merely consultative organs, as also practised by the Belgian colonial state. <sup>16</sup> While France and its colonies had moved closer together, <sup>17</sup> after 1945 Great Britain had embraced decentralization. Within the overarching framework of the Commonwealth, the various territories of the British empire were granted varying forms of self-determination and political participation. In addition to states that had already become independent, such as India, the Commonwealth included colonies in Africa whose inhabitants, following initial experiences of government at the local level, were promised full responsibility for their political fate. 18 This process had advanced furthest in the Gold Coast, West Africa. In the wake of mass protests and strikes, an electoral victory gave the Convention's People Party a majority in the colony's legislative councils. The British governor thus had to come to terms with Kwame Nkrumah as the head of a Ghanaian cabinet, a man who had previously been arrested as a fighter for independence socialized in London in anti-imperialist and pan-Africanist circles.<sup>19</sup> Portugal had followed the French model of imperial integration, at least rhetorically, and, since the constitutional reform of 1951, no longer viewed its African possessions as colonies, but as overseas provinces.<sup>20</sup> As the leader of the Estado Novo, António de Oliveira Salazar underlined the distinctive character of the Portuguese empire, established in the fifteenth century, and invoked "a brotherhood of peoples, cemented by centuries of peaceful lives and Christian understanding."21 He thus rejected as interference in Portugal's internal affairs the pressure for reform emanating from the UN, which regarded Portuguese Africa as consisting of "non-autonomous territories." The Portuguese empire remained a dictatorship.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>16</sup> See Keese, Living, 248-249.

<sup>17</sup> Cooper, Colonialism, 153.

<sup>18</sup> Eckert, Herrschen, 247; Osterhammel and Jansen, Dekolonisation, 43-44.

**<sup>19</sup>** Cooper, *Africa*, 52–53.

<sup>20</sup> For a detailed account, see Bandeira Jéronimo and Costa Pinto, "A Modernising Empire?,"

<sup>21</sup> Speech by Salazar of 11 July 1947, quoted in ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Albertini, Dekolonisation, 589.

Belgian politicians concerned with colonial policy kept an eve on the reforms carried out by other empires. Given the unintended dynamics they unleashed, which saw the African elite putting forward ever more far-reaching demands, they regarded these strategies as having failed. Guided by the notion that things moved at a slower pace in the Congo than in other parts of Africa, for a long time they felt no need to explore the potential for a novel form of association between metropole and colony. As early as 1947, in the wake of their trip through the Congo, Belgian senators had in fact stated, in the style characteristic of French integration policy, that the area would "one day be a Belgian overseas territory and its inhabitants citizens, who will participate in the transformed public life of metropolitan and African Belgium." Yet such ideas were restricted to a small group of experts.<sup>23</sup> Similar plans for reform first appeared in the early 1950s in strategy papers produced by the PSC's Colonial Commission, established in 1946. Pierre Wigny, who had stepped down as colonial minister shortly before, became chair of this commission in spring 1952; in a leading Belgian daily he had already presented the "formation of a new community of whites and blacks" as a guarantee that "the Congo [would remain] definitively Belgian."<sup>24</sup> The new colonial strategy adopted by the governing PSC assumed the "indissoluble unity of European Belgium and [its] overseas [territories]," but left open whether the envisaged form of association should entail a political federation or a union.<sup>25</sup> In the first instance the new policy merely called for reform of the colonial state's institutions. The goal was to prevent the domination of a white minority and ensure close links between Belgium and the Congo in order to achieve the controlled and gradual introduction of democratic political structures in the colony.<sup>26</sup> While the Parti Libéral and the PSB continued to show a lack of interest in colonial issues, the plans drawn up for the future of the Congo bore a Christian Social signature.

The new doctrine of colonial rule, however, was made public not in Brussels but in Léopoldville, where Catholic Governor General Pétillon made the case for the "Belgian-Congolese Community" in 1952.<sup>27</sup> In consultation with the Colonial Ministry, Pétillon also held out the prospect of advancing the territory's political development through measures that dovetailed with the cautious programme put forward by the Christian Social Colonial Commission.

<sup>23</sup> Report of the senators' visit, quoted in Mutamba-Makombo, Du Congo belge, 198.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Vanthemsche, La Belgique et le Congo, 120.

<sup>25</sup> Internal strategy paper, quoted in ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

**<sup>27</sup>** "Ouverture solennelle du Conseil de Gouvernement. Le discours de M. le Gouverneur Général Pétillon," *Voix du Congolais* no. 78, September 1952, 534.

There were two aspects to the Belgian-Congolese Community, though its architects were vague about what concrete form these ought to take. First, it implied a notion of political order encompassing metropole and colony. There was a consensus that Belgium and the Congo, as well as Belgians and Congolese, must be associated as a political community. But there should be no rush to introduce the relevant reforms.<sup>28</sup> Here, those responsible adhered to the founding principle of Belgian colonial rule, whose superiority they derived from observation of events, some of them occurring in breathless succession, in British and French Africa. While progressive voices within the Catholic milieu insisted that the prevailing paternalism must give way to self-government, the consensus was that the "political education of the natives" alone would require several decades. A conference in Brussels on the political future of the Belgian Congo, attended by scholars from several Belgian universities, favoured the idea of first familiarizing Congolese with political processes at the local level.<sup>29</sup> Guy Malengreau, professor of law at the Catholic University of Leuven, considered the Native Administrations in the British protectorate of Tanganyika a model worth emulating.<sup>30</sup> There, Africans were integrated into councils at the lowest administrative level only and learned the principles of Western democracy under the supervision of the colonial state.<sup>31</sup> The reform project being considered at the same time by the Belgian Colonial Ministry, which provided for the participation of Congolese and Europeans on equal terms in select municipal councils, also resembled the administrative reform in Tanganyika, where an equal number of Asians, Europeans and Africans were appointed to council posts. It is no coincidence that Belgium took its lead from the reforms in Tanganyika: of the British empire's African possessions, this east African territory was viewed as particularly backward.<sup>32</sup>

For the Colonial Ministry, more urgent than reforms facilitating political participation was the step-by-step implementation of the social vision underpinning the concept of a Belgian-Congolese Community, a vision the ministry declared the prerequisite for political association. In a keynote speech, Governor General Pétillon thus called for solidarity between Congolese and Belgians in the colony: "With immediate effect, our policy seeks to achieve a convergence of cultures

<sup>28</sup> Vanthemsche, Belgium and the Congo, 84-85; W. B. Norton, "Review," African Historical Studies 3, no. 1 (1969): 163.

<sup>29</sup> Mutamba-Makombo, Du Congo belge, 234-245.

<sup>30</sup> G. Malengreau, "La formation politique des Congolais," Problèmes d'Afrique centrale 14,

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 235. On Tanganyika's reformed local administration, see Eckert, Herrschen.

**<sup>32</sup>** Ibid, 114.

and interests. If we pursue the goal of an association, a union, without being blown off course, then we will have the best prospect of a favourable outcome."33

As a concept of social order, the Belgian-Congolese Community served not least to bolster an ideological counter-offensive, through which Belgian colonial policy once again sought to resist the pressure for reform emanating from the UN.<sup>34</sup> The so-called Belgian thesis aimed to detach the international debate on the social and political integration of supposedly backward populations from the context of colonial power relations. Did the already independent countries of Brazil and India not have to struggle with a "native problem" as well? Did these countries not, therefore, have to answer to the international community just as much as the European colonial powers? It was with questions such as these that former governor general Pierre Ryckmans rebuffed the UN Trusteeship Council as Belgian envoy. In the mid-1950s, Belgian apologists for colonialism sought to reframe the colonial question as a global social question concerning the "relations between the races." 35

One of the key goals of the Belgian-Congolese Community was to breathe new life into the colonial state's elite-making policy. With this social vision, Pétillon was responding in part to the Congolese elite's mounting criticisms of the disappointing status reforms and persistent discrimination in everyday life. The Voix du Congolais acclaimed the "policy of full integration" of the Congolese elite into European society: "This assimilation [...] admits of the greatest hopes. We readily endorse this political doctrine, which aims to ensure the advancement of the black man,"36 wrote Antoine-Roger Bolamba. Henceforth, then, elite-mak-

<sup>33 &</sup>quot;Ouverture solennelle de Conseil de Gouvernement, Le discours de M. le Gouverneur Général Pétillon," Voix du Congolais no. 78 (September 1952): 535.

**<sup>34</sup>** On this paragraph, see Vanthemsche, Belgium and the Congo, 138-139.

<sup>35</sup> In the mid-1950s, scholars and experts from the United States and Europe discussed "race relations" as a global challenge. For Great Britain and France, given the increased immigration from the colonies to the metropole, such relations were increasingly a national question as well. One expression of the scholarly interest in this is the anthology arising from a UNESCO conference, which includes articles by renowned authors such as Herbert Blumer and Georges Balandier; see A. W. Lind, ed., Race Relations in World Perspective (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1955). On the emergence of institutionalized research on "race relations" in Great Britain, see R. Tamme, "Von den dark strangers zum Subproletariat: Wissenschaftliche Deutungen der multiethnischen Gesellschaft in Großbritannien von den 1950er bis Anfang der 1970er Jahre," in Das Andere denken. Repräsentationen von Migration in Westeuropa und den USA im 20. Jahrhundert, ed. G. Metzler (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2013); G. Metzler, "Einleitung," in Das Andere denken. Repräsentationen von Migration in Westeuropa und den USA im 20. Jahrhundert, ed. G. Metzler (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2013).

<sup>36</sup> A.-R. Bolamba, "Une politique de pleine intégration," Voix du Congolais no. 82 (January 1953): 3.

ing policy had to be assessed partly in light of the place not just assigned to but actually occupied by the vernacular elite within the Belgian-Congolese Community.

### **Humiliated Congolese, imperfect Belgians**

For Belgian colonial policy, the officially appointed Congolese elite represented its first interlocutor as it sought to cautiously and gradually construct a Belgian-Congolese community. Holders of the *carte du mérite civique* and the immatriculated, as individuals "tested by the colonial state," were to be absorbed into the circles of European colonial society as a culturally assimilated bourgeois *avantgarde*. Yet the heated debate on the status reforms in the colonial public sphere had left the relationship between Europeans, particularly within the settlers' milieu, and the Congolese elite, highly tense. Moreover, the European population included avowed opponents of elite-making policy, who now took up the cudgels against the idea of a Belgian-Congolese Community as well.

To expedite the development of a Belgian-Congolese Community, the General Government initiated several projects from 1953 on. Even after a change of government in Brussels that sent the PSC into opposition in April 1954, there was continuity of personnel and substance within the Socialist-Liberal coalition when it came to elite-making policy. In addition to Governor General Pétillon, who was linked with the PSC but remained in office, Colonial Minister Auguste Buisseret of the *Parti Libéral* also supported the idea of a Belgian-Congolese Community. In view of further upheavals in the colonial world – the independence of Libya in 1951, the defeat of the French army in Indochina and the start of the Algerian War in 1954 – the new Belgian government expected the Belgian-Congolese Community to constitute an attractive alternative to a struggle for independence, one that could ensure the perpetuation of colonial rule.<sup>37</sup>

At the behest of Liberal colonial minister Buisseret, the officials serving in the various administrative units were instructed to allow holders of the *carte du mérite civique* and the immatriculated to participate in the social and cultural life of European colonial society. Every opportunity must be taken to publicly

**<sup>37</sup>** The "community" was undoubtedly a ground-breaking political concept in the 1950s. During this period, Western European governments were deliberating over ways of harnessing possible forces for unification and pacification through an economic or military community. On the ways in which the formation of a European community was interwoven with the development of a late colonial European-African community, see P. Hansen and S. Jonsson, *Eurafrica. The Untold History of European Integration and Colonialism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

demonstrate the social integration of the Congolese elite.<sup>38</sup> The General Government also availed itself of the tools of "social engineering," which had already been brought to bear in the colonial state's efforts to create an elite. The *Groupement Culturel Belgo-Congolais* in Léopoldville, discussed earlier, served as the prototype for a number of associations established across the colony.<sup>39</sup> These associations took up the cause of uniting the official vernacular elite with the European population.<sup>40</sup> The General Government and the Colonial Ministry requested annual reports on the activities of these associations in the various provinces.<sup>41</sup> These documents extolled the associations as the "shared foundation" of the "Eurafrican community":<sup>42</sup> through conviviality today they were supposed to pre-empt the society of tomorrow. Much like bourgeois associations in Western Europe, they were characterized by an "excess of utopianism."<sup>43</sup> But beyond these sheltered islands of social utopia, the promise of a respectful encounter between Europeans and Congolese seldom bore up to reality.

The influence of the colonial government on its officials, scattered across the territory, again proved limited. Complaints of discrimination against status-holders, which the colonial government continued to receive, demonstrated that the ideology of the merging of Europeans and vernacular elite did not always penetrate down into the local administration. In April 1953, for example, an anonymous account of the abuse meted out to a holder of the *carte du mérite civique* 

**<sup>38</sup>** See for example the letter from the governor of Équateur province to territorial officials, 20 September 1954, AA/GG/6150.

**<sup>39</sup>** Here we can discern parallels with the United Kenya Club, founded in Nairobi in 1946 as the forerunner of a "multi-racial society." See D. Connan, "La Décolonisation des clubs Kenyans. Socialisation et constitution morale des élites africaines dans le Kenya contemporain" (PhD diss., Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, Paris, 2014).

**<sup>40</sup>** Among others, Patrice Lumumba was involved in the foundation of the *Union Belgo- Congolaise* in Stanleyville in 1956; he also held the post of vice-president. Correspondence between association and district commissioner, 22 February 1956, AA/GG/17717; Mutamba-Makombo, *Patrice Lumumba*.

**<sup>41</sup>** A list arranged by province includes all Belgian-Congolese associations together with their annual activities. It indicates that in 1956 there was a total of 16 such associations in Léopold-ville, one in Matadi, 35 in Kasai, 21 in Katanga, 5 in Kivu, 8 in Orientale and 19 in Équateur. In the case of certain provinces, however, the local *évolué* associations, in which Europeans were involved chiefly as advisors and patrons, were included in these figures; AA/A54/Infopresse/51; letter from the governor general to the colonial minister, 23 December 1955, AA/GG/18356.

**<sup>42</sup>** Letter from the governor of Equateur province to the officials in his administrative area, 19 October 1955, AA/GG/6150.

<sup>43</sup> Hoffmann, Geselligkeit, 53.

in the town of Inongo was submitted to the *Voix du Congolais*.<sup>44</sup> While the article was not published, it prompted the General Government to look into the allegations. The newspaper was still serving as a medium for monitoring the implementation of colonial reforms.

The authorities' investigation brought to light an incident in which Herman M. played a central role. He was the foreman in a joiner's workshop dedicated to state construction projects and the active president of the 130-member Cercle d'Action Catholique, which championed evangelization and acted as mediator in so-called "domestic disputes." <sup>45</sup> Herman M. had received the carte du mérite civique in late October 1951. The awarding ceremony, as the Voix du Congolais reported, was also attended by a majority of the 2,000 Congolese residents. 46 Less than three weeks later, the claim did the rounds that the publicly honoured M. had endured vicious slurs. Following a difference of opinion, a European colonial official had branded him a "shit-eater" in the presence of his colleagues. In the course of the investigation initiated by the General Government, Herman M. explained to the territorial administrator who had been called in to investigate that he had taken these "insults" on the chin and had not reported them. He also maintained that he had not contacted the Voix du Congolais. 48 The district commissioner, duly reporting this to the provincial governor, came to the defence of the accused colonial official. He went so far as to justify his conduct by mentioning that the incident had occurred early in the morning, a part of the day when the tropical climate made many "colonial gentlemen" irascible. 49 In the eyes of the district commissioner, this was not a case of slander, but a "rebuke, of a somewhat brutal nature, expressed in rather vulgar terms." Conversely, he accused the anonymous correspondent for the Voix du Congolais of a lack of trust in the local administration and of seeking to bring the Europeans of Inongo

**<sup>44</sup>** Letter from the governor general to the governor of Léopoldville province, 15 April 1953, AA/GG/15726.

**<sup>45</sup>** This association was a branch of the Scheut mission's Catholic Action organization. The divisions for women, men and youths met up to five times a week. This emerges from an annual report on the association's activities dispatched by Herman M. to the Catholic Action office in Léopoldville; report on the *Cercle d'action catholique d'Oshwe*, 9 December 1950, KADOC/P/II/a/4/4.

**<sup>46</sup>** "Au tableau d'honneur de l'Elite congolaise," *Voix du Congolais* no. 69 (December 1951): 691.

**<sup>47</sup>** In the original: "*mangeur de Tufi*." *Tufi* means 'excrement' in Lingala. See letter from Herman M. to the territorial official, 21 April 1953, AA/GG/15726.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

**<sup>49</sup>** The tropical climate was often blamed for Europeans' misconduct in the colonies. On this explanatory model, see Lauro, *Coloniaux*, 55–58.

into disrepute.<sup>50</sup> No mention at all was made of how such public abuse must have impacted on the holder of the carte du mérite civique. The local official was concerned solely with defending the area's Europeans. The problem of recognition suffered by the Congolese elite was less the result of colonial officials' ignorance than of their unwillingness to show respect.

This affair brought home to the colonial government once again that the "climate of cooperation"51 invoked by Governor General Pétillon was not something that could be decreed. Local colonial officials arbitrarily flouting the colonial government's instructions was not a phenomenon restricted to the Belgian Congo, but also occurred, for example, in the French colonies; after 1945, the abolition of the *indigénat* was simply ignored in some places.<sup>52</sup>

In 1954, the General Government began to document incidents in which holders of the carte du mérite civique and the immatriculated were discriminated against. Such cases had seen a further increase since the authorities began to propagate a Belgian-Congolese Community.<sup>53</sup> Even the young King Baudouin, who expressed vociferous support for this Community during his tour through the colony in 1955 and had described "relations between people" as the greatest challenge of colonial society,<sup>54</sup> was largely ignored by the European population. The more the authorities pressed for convergence between the Congolese elite and European society, the more Europeans sought to emphasize their differences.

This development must be viewed against the background of increased European immigration to the Belgian Congo. While the number of Europeans was just 3,000 in 1908, by 1945 it had grown to 36,080, tripling to almost 100,000 by 1958. The European population was also becoming ever more Belgian: in 1945, 65.5 percent were of Belgian nationality, and no less than 78.8 percent in 1959.55 With the slogan "100,000 Belgian settlers within ten years, otherwise the Congo will no longer be Belgian," in 1952 the settler associations launched a campaign for a policy of increased immigration and privileged treatment for the Belgian colonial population.<sup>56</sup> Those who immigrated in the 1950s were no

<sup>50</sup> Letter from the district commissioner of Lac Léopold II to the governor of Léopoldville province, 22 May 1953, AA/GG/15726.

<sup>51 &</sup>quot;Ouverture solennelle du Conseil de Gouvernement, Le discours de M. le Gouverneur Général Pétillon," Voix du Congolais no. 78, September 1952, 535.

<sup>52</sup> See Mann, "What was the Indigénat?," 350.

<sup>53</sup> See files on "Security: Racist Discrimination," AA/GG/18356.

**<sup>54</sup>** Young, *Politics*, 52.

<sup>55</sup> Vanthemsche, La Belgique et le Congo, 352.

<sup>56</sup> Stengers, Congo, 223.

longer overwhelmingly single men, but increasingly families as well. As the new European presence engendered the emergence of a colonial bourgeoisie, European residential areas, as well as the realms of consumption and recreation, changed due to the new clientele of nuclear families.<sup>57</sup> Europeans now also settled beyond the industrialized province of Katanga and the agriculturally strong regions in Kivu and Kasai: the Belgian Congo was gradually developing into a settler colony. The trend towards the spatial and social segregation of the Congolese population intensified as a result of this demographic shift. It is one of the ironies of the history of decolonization that the propagation of a Belgian-Congolese Community coincided with an increased need for distinction on the part of Europeans. The hyphen in this phrase may have been imagined as articulating a social bond. But in practice it became a line of division.

To promote greater recognition for the Congolese elite and compliance with anti-discrimination policies among the European population, from 1955 on the General Government mandated extensive propaganda campaigns. A pamphlet entitled From One Person to Another was published, which aimed to familiarize European readers with the reorientation of colonial policy.<sup>58</sup> The author of the text was Jean-Marie Domont, the patron of the Voix du Congolais who had already written the manners book Élite noire. Now Domont was educating Europeans about "relations between races." 59 The pamphlet, written in French and Dutch, was systematically distributed throughout the colony by the General Government. In addition, talks inspired by this text were held in firms, associations and administrative offices to promote greater tolerance for the vernacular elite.<sup>60</sup> In the spirit of the Belgian-Congolese Community, the colonial government extended its programme of colonial subject formation to the European population.

Congolese authors readily seized on the fact the General Government was publicly criticizing Europeans. In articles and letters, they expressed indignation at their ignoble treatment at European hands, which, they contended, contradicted the basic thrust of the new social order. In Elisabethville, for example, the po-

<sup>57</sup> For a vivid account, see Van Reybrouck, Congo, 244-246.

<sup>58</sup> J.-M. Domont, D'homme à homme/Van mens tot mens (Léopoldville: Service de l'information du Gouvernement général du Conge Belge, 1955).

<sup>59</sup> On the planning and conception of the pamphlet and the subsequent speaking tours, see correspondence between Domont and the governor general, 1955, GG/AA/5952.

<sup>60</sup> See for example the letter from the governor general to the governor of Équateur province, 24 February 1956, AA/GG/5952.

lice denied the editor-in-chief of évolué periodical Etoile-Nyota his certified right, as holder of the carte du mérite civique, to go out during the nightly curfew.61

A book by Thomas Kanza, published in 1956, attracted particular interest. As the top pupil at the Scheut mission school of St. Anne, Kanza, from Léopoldville, had been selected by his former teacher Raphael de la Kethulle to study at the Catholic University of Leuven, as one of the first Congolese to do so. After his return to the colony, the trained educator first worked as a teacher at the St. Anne mission school.<sup>62</sup> In his book *Pays de deux évolués*, Kanza, deploying the familiar language of perfectibility, addressed himself to the inhabitants of the Belgian Congo. The title itself indicated that the author was reminding not just Congolese, but also Europeans of their duty to improve their behaviour and manners. 63 The topos of the imperfect évolué was transformed in the mid-1950s: now it included Europeans as well.<sup>64</sup>

# Differences, not equality

But it was not just because of the discrimination and exclusion they suffered that the Congolese elite was dissatisfied. The ideology of a "community of equals" was still being hindered by the unequal distribution of rights.

Initially, the political doctrine of a Belgian-Congolese Community seemed to encourage the vernacular elite to give voice to their discontent. In Léopoldville there were protests in 1953, albeit behind closed doors, due to the meagre scope of the long-anticipated status reforms. A group of the immatriculated paid a visit en bloc to the king's procurator in Léopoldville, who was largely responsible for the application process. They returned their immatriculation documents to him in protest.65 In March 1953, Jacques Massa,66 as Congolese repre-

<sup>61</sup> Letter from Bonaventura Makonga to the head of AIMO in Elisabethville, 29 November 1955, AA/GG/6302.

**<sup>62</sup>** During the Congo Crisis, Thomas Kanza was the Congolese representative at the UN. He was ambassador to Sweden when he died in 2004. On the background to his university years in Leuven, see E. Coppieters, "De Verering van Tata Raphael: Pater de la Kethulle de Ryhove (1890 -1956)," Bulletin des Séances 13, no. 3 (1967); T. Kanza, Sans rancune (London: Scotland, 1965).

<sup>63</sup> T. Kanza, Congo, pays de deux évolués (Léopoldville: Actualités Africaines, 1956).

<sup>64</sup> A former pupil of Thomas Kanza related that he urged him to resist the typical practice of serving Europeans in shops first. As a teacher, he is said to have taught his pupils that equal and respectful treatment was imperative regardless of skin colour; interview with Anselme Mavuela, Kinshasa, 31 August 2010.

<sup>65</sup> Mutamba-Makombo, "Les évolués," 108-109.

sentative on the *Députation Permanente*, which was considering issues relating to elite status at the behest of the General Government, called for the immatriculated to be granted equality with Europeans and for the abolition of all forms of discrimination. Massa, a former seminarian and former employee at the OCA, demanded that the immatriculated finally be treated as consistently promised to the Congolese elite: with respect and on an equal footing "as mature and civilized human beings."67

Despite these calls, the colonial government did not allow itself to be hurried. Responding to them directly, before the Députation Permanente Governor General Pétillon instead advocated holding firm to the gradual social integration of the elite: "Immatriculation thus appears simultaneously as recognition of a certain assimilation and as a pledge, of a precise and solemn character, to those who benefit from it, that they will be integrated, to an ever increasing degree and in every area, into the group of Belgians and Europeans."68

As the first token of the fulfilment of this promise, Pétillon issued a list of instructions to the colonial administrative offices, which were intended to clarify how one ought to deal with the new vernacular elite in future. The colonial government wished to initiate the shift of policy on the social integration of the elite not just through official decrees but also by granting unofficial privileges.<sup>69</sup> Pétillon thus demanded that when it came to legal provisions disadvantageous to Congolese, the immatriculated be treated with forbearance.

In 1953, Pétillon also implemented several confidence-building measures to advance the oft-invoked "convergence of the races": an impartial review of requests by the immatriculated to move to European residential districts, the key criteria being compliance with hygiene regulations and a high standard of living; unconditional freedom of movement in towns and cities and when travelling through the colony; simplified admission to European schools for their children;

<sup>66</sup> Jacques Massa was granted immatriculation on 27 July 1953; list of the immatriculated in Léopoldville province 1953 – 1955, AA/GG/21256.

<sup>67</sup> Request by Jacques Massa at the 24th session of the Députation Permanente on 26 March 1953, quoted in Mutamba-Makombo, Du Congo belge, 206. See also Mutamba-Makombo, "Les évolués," 109. On Massa's biography, see Artigue, Qui sont, 202-203.

**<sup>68</sup>** Speech by Governor General Pétillon before the *Députation Permanente* on 4 May 1953, quoted in A. R. Bolamba, "La communication de M. le Gouverneur Général," Voix du Congolais no. 87 (June 1953): 372. Bolamba rated the speech as an important contribution to "social relations in present-day Congo" and it inspired favorable comments from a number of Congolese authors; "Immatriculation et Assimilation," Voix du Congolais no. 87 (June 1953): 368 - 371.

<sup>69</sup> Letter from the governor general to the provincial governors, 25 April 1953, AA/GG/11096. Here Pétillon explained that "the blacks' admittance to civil law is just one minor aspect of this policy."

and access to first and second class on trains and ships. In addition, the operators of hotels and cultural sites were to be required to grant the immatriculated admission. In particular, the governor general planned to invite the immatriculated to public and cultural events, which he expected to have "a gratifying effect on the attitudes of the European public."70 The General Government also had new symbolic privileges in mind for holders of the carte du mérite civique. Like the immatriculated, they were now to enjoy greater participation in the life of colonial society and be admitted to superior travel classes.<sup>71</sup>

But the attempt to keep the Congolese elite happy with the odd improvement here and there failed at the level of implementation. In practice, once again holders of the carte du mérite civique and the immatriculated quickly came up against the limits of these privileges. In the Voix du Congolais, authors complained that when travelling by boat they continued to be denied entry to the European class.72 In October 1955, Patrice Lumumba expressed his indignation at the restricted access for Congolese to places frequented by the European population of Stanleyville, which shone a negative light on the "relations between the races."73 Investigations in Elisabethville in 1956 revealed that just three out of the 18 proprietors of hotels, restaurants and cafés who had been questioned permitted members of the Congolese elite entry. They would rather put up with complaints of discrimination, they typically explained, than lose their European customers.74

We may assume that it is no coincidence that the colonial administration filed such incidents under the heading "racist discrimination." The return of racist taxonomies, which were proscribed in the international order after 1945 even in the colonial context, was linked with the Belgian Congo's development into a settler colony. In the settler colonies of southern Africa, and thus in immediate proximity to the province of Katanga, it was still common to "biologize" Europeans' "civilizational superiority" and to refer to their rule over Africans as natural.<sup>76</sup> In this racist worldview, the "capacity for [cultural] development"

**<sup>70</sup>** Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Carte du mérite civique, 1952, AA/AI 4743/II/T/4.

<sup>72</sup> For a travel report lamenting undignified treatment on ships operated by Otraco, to which even Africans with elite status were subject, see A. Mongita, "Ce que j'ai vu sur le Lokele bâtiment flottant de l'Otraco," Voix du Congolais no. 115 (October 1955).

<sup>73</sup> See P. Lumumba, "A propos l'accès des Congolais dans les établissements publics pour Européens," Voix du Congolais no. 115 (October 1955).

<sup>74</sup> Letter from the assistant to the district commissioner in Elisabethville to the governor of Katanga province, 3 December 1956, AA/GG/6302.

<sup>75</sup> See the files "Security: Racist Discrimination," AA/GG/18356.

<sup>76</sup> Marx, "Siedlerkolonien," 91.

and "perfectibility" was disputed "through recourse to Africans' inability to learn." In the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, founded in 1953, the propaganda extolling an "association of races" did a poor job of concealing the claim to political supremacy of the European settler minority.<sup>78</sup> In the Congo of tomorrow advocated by settler lobbies in the mid-1950s, évolués eager to assimilate, along with their calls for social and legal equality, would have gone unheeded.

The fact that the vernacular elite still faced forms of discrimination typical of the colonial situation was one reason for the early crisis of the Belgian-Congolese Community. The colonial government's still hesitant attitude to implementing reforms and the European population's rejectionist stance were another increasing source of disappointment within the elite. Last but not least, political participation was still unequally distributed between Europeans and elite Congolese. Certainly, since 1951 the number of Congolese members on the councils serving the various administrative units had increased, and with a few exceptions these were holders of the carte du mérite civique or the immatriculated. But the presence of equal numbers of Europeans and Congolese in this context by no means reflected their share of the total population.<sup>79</sup>

In addition, the fact that the Liberal-Socialist government had taken power with no alternative plan for the political development of the Congo was a major problem. The implementation of the Christian Social reform strategy was delayed. In November 1954, Colonial Minister Auguste Buisseret explained to US-American journalists that "we have temporarily suspended the political reforms, as we are convinced that economic development and efforts to improve the social structure ought to come first."80 In communication with other ministers, Buisseret called for "the authorization of elections, in whatever form, to be delayed as long as possible."81 Prime Minster Achille Van Acker of the PSB also took the view that votes for Congolese would be "dangerous."82 Those in charge

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> On projects of modernization and multi-ethnic "nation-building" in the semi-independent Rhodesia and Nyasaland, see J. Tischler, Light and power for a multiracial nation: the Kariba Dam scheme in the Central African Federation (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). From 1951 on, the ideology of "multi-racial" politics was widespread in areas under British rule as well. On Tanganyika and Kenya, see Eckert, Herrschen, 114.

<sup>79</sup> See Mutamba-Makombo, Du Congo belge, 67-68.

<sup>80</sup> Buisseret, 2 November 1954, quoted in Brausch, Belgian Administration, 4.

<sup>81</sup> Buissserat, 17 February 1956, quoted in Vanthemsche, La Belgique et le Congo, 118.

<sup>82</sup> Van Acker, quoted in ibid., 362.

of Belgian colonial policy thus continued to believe they had colonial development under control and that they could initiate reforms at a leisurely pace.

#### The School War and manifestos of self-determination

Nonetheless, under the Socialist-Liberal government the foundations of Belgian colonial rule began to unravel. The trigger was school reforms instigated in parallel in Belgium and the Congo, which brought colony and metropole closer together against the background of a political controversy: as a Belgian-Congolese community of conflict.

In Belgium, the ideological rifts between the Parti Libéral and the PSC had broken open again in the early 1950s. Once again, the two parties were split on the question of whether schooling should be imparted by state or church institutions.<sup>83</sup> Following the School War of the 1880s, church-run schools dominated in Belgium, but it proved possible to defuse the smouldering conflict between the two parties through a series of compromises in favour of state schools. But when the PSC attained an absolute majority in 1950, it gave preferential treatment to the confessional school system. With reference to the human rights adopted in 1948, the PSC argued self-confidently that parents must be free to choose what kind of school their children attended and that, in light of the growing tendency to embrace the Christian faith after the Second World War, it was imperative to support church institutions. The PSC's major programme of state investment in secondary and university education met with resistance from Socialists and Liberals. Following a joint anti-clerical election campaign, the PSB and the Parti Libéral then took power in 1954. Now they attempted to tip the scales in favour of state schools. What followed was the so-called "Second School War," in which the Catholic Church, the PSC and the influential Catholic milieu mobilized large parts of society. In 1955 alone, on average demonstrations took place every other day, bringing a total of 650,620 protesters onto the streets, three times as many as in preceding years. A petition against the school reforms attracted the support of one quarter of the Belgian population. It was not until 1958 that the School War was brought to an end when, following its re-election, the PSC managed to achieve a cross-party compromise in the shape of the socalled "School Pact."

The School War also extended to the Belgian Congo. While it did not engender comparable social upheavals there, it had unintended consequences due to the close cooperation on schooling between the colonial state and missions.<sup>84</sup>

Under the Christian Social government, much as in the metropole the mission-run schools in the Congo received more financial support from 1950 on. In addition, the Belgian Jesuits were permitted to establish the first Congolese institute of higher education, the Catholic University of Lovanium near Léopold-ville, which cooperated closely with the Catholic University of Leuven. <sup>85</sup> The PSC thus torpedoed the agreement reached between the Belgian parties after the war, which envisaged the founding of a university in the colony funded by all the Belgian universities. Furthermore, when secret treaty negotiations between the Belgian Foreign Ministry and the Vatican concerning a reform of the colonial education system came to light shortly before the parliamentary election, the Congo began to feature in the anti-clerical election campaign that brought the Socialist-Liberal coalition to power in 1954. <sup>86</sup>

Colonial Minister Auguste Buisseret was one of the representatives of the *Parti Libéral* who had campaigned for a reform of the school system in the Belgian Congo since the end of the Second World War.<sup>87</sup> As vice-president of the Senate, in 1947 he took part in the senatorial visit to the Congo, arguing vehemently that the "education and intellectual development of the Africans is the state's responsibility."<sup>88</sup> Buisseret now set about continuing the contested reforms in education policy that, under Liberal colonial minister Robert Godding, had been of a merely experimental character when the first state schools for European children were established in 1946–1947.

Shortly after he assumed office, it was Buisseret's task to open the Catholic University of Lovanium in Léopoldville. He used this event as a platform to announce the construction of state schools in every province in the colony. Shortly afterwards, a commission appointed by him reported that the Catholic mission schools' teaching staff suffered a number of shortcomings, while the schools themselves were excessively expensive to run. Further, the schools had neglected the training of skilled workers, which were essential to the local industries, while placing too much emphasis on their function as seminaries. Composed in an anti-clerical tone, the commission's report referred to the Congo as the "one re-

<sup>84</sup> Boyle, "School Wars," 462.

<sup>85</sup> On the history of Lovanium, see Monaville, "Decolonizing the University."

<sup>86</sup> Markowitz, Cross and Sword, 77-82.

<sup>87</sup> Mutamba-Makombo, Du Congo belge, 164.

**<sup>88</sup>** Buisseret, quoted in J.-B. Cuyvers, "Auguste Buisseret," in *Biographie Belge d'Outre-Mer*, vol. 6, ed. Académie Royale des Sciences d'Outre-Mer (Brussels: Librairie Falk fils, 1968).

maining theocratic state."89 The School War between the Liberal and Catholic milieu had spread to Belgium's colony.

Against the background of the School War, Christian Social politicians, missionaries and church representatives saw the new state schools for Congolese children as a declaration of war. While the number of state schools had grown to sixty just one year after Buisseret took office, in accordance with the new allocation formula henceforth 45 percent of state subsidies went to both Catholic and state schools. Protestant schools received 10 percent. The Catholic pre-eminence in schooling was thus maintained; by 1960, 85 percent of Congolese pupils were still attending Catholic institutions, while 10 percent were enrolled in Protestant schools and just 5 percent in state schools. 90 Regardless of this, the Catholic missions balked at the termination of their decades-long monopoly in the colonial education system. The founding of a second university in Elisabethville under the aegis of the state reinforced their fears of having to do without state aid in future. Liberal colonial minister Buisseret also provoked the Catholic missions by breaking with his Christian Social predecessor's practice of granting them most of the public money from the Fonds du Bien Être Indigène. For years, the missions had used this to operate their extensive network of schools, hospitals and social centres.91

The School War in the Congo ended the consensus between the Belgian political parties on keeping metropolitan conflicts out of the colony, where representatives of the Liberal and Catholic milieu now looked for local allies.92 They found them in the Congolese elite, for whom access to education had always been important and who were soon organized into various support groups.<sup>93</sup> Unsurprisingly, the presidents of the most important alumni associations, ADAPES and ASSANEF, expressed their support for a confessionally based education system to the colonial minister. But there were also representatives of the educated elite - increasingly disgruntled in view of the still meagre opportunities for further education in mission schools – who spoke in favour of the Liberal education reforms.

During the School War, the first "friendship associations" affiliated with the *Parti Libéral* and PSB were established in the Congo. 94 One of the members of the

<sup>89</sup> Quoted in Boyle, "School Wars," 459.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 464.

<sup>91</sup> Markowitz, Cross and Sword, 97-98.

<sup>92</sup> On the founding of Congolese supporter groups for the Belgian parties, see Vanthemsche, Belgium and the Congo, 85 – 86.

<sup>93</sup> Letter from ASSANEF to the governor general, 15 November 1950, KADOC/P/II/a/4/2/3/5.

<sup>94</sup> Mutamba-Makombo, Du Congo belge, 168 – 170.

Liberal study circle established in Stanleyville was Patrice Lumumba, who participated actively in several associations in the city as an ever-busy spokesman for the vernacular elite.95 Though Lumumba had only completed the first year of primary education at a Catholic school, subsequently continuing his educational career with the Methodists, as an illustrious representative of the African elite he published in the Catholic Croix du Congo and was a member of ADAPES. But after Lumumba, as president of the AES, had invited Colonial Minister Buisseret to his home during his first official tour of the Congo and later refused to sign a letter of protest against the school reforms penned by the Catholic missions, in the heated climate of the School War he gained a reputation as a supporter of the Parti Libéral.<sup>96</sup> In a letter addressed to the Colonial Ministry of 1956, however, Lumumba by no means presented himself as anti-clerical, but rather as a critic of the missionaries' predominance in the Congo: "I am a Catholic Christian, but also a loyal citizen. [...] If we want things to go well, we Congolese must be good friends with the Catholic missionaries. [...] Their representatives go to Belgium and sit on all the official commissions."97 That same year, Lumumba was a member of a delegation of Congolese who made a tour of Belgium at Buisseret's invitation. 98 For Antoine-Roger Bolamba, editor-in-chief of the Voix du Congolais, advocacy of the Liberal school reforms also paid dividends. In late 1956, the colonial minister made him a member of his cabinet for several months, as the first Congolese to hold such a post.

Through the emergence of parallel school systems, the Belgian political parties' gradual penetration of the colony, and the first activities of Christian and socialist trades unions, <sup>99</sup> colonial society began to undergo "pillarization." <sup>100</sup> The hostile camps' overtures to the Congolese elite opened up new opportunities for its members to exert an influence. Partly, though not solely, because expenditure on the education sector increased from 10 to 15 percent of the colonial budget from 1954 onwards, <sup>101</sup> the education-focused elite were the School War's only beneficiaries.

Ultimately, the most serious side-effect of the School War was that for the first time the permanence of colonial rule in the Belgian Congo was publicly

<sup>95</sup> Lemarchand, Political, 182, 199.

<sup>96</sup> See Tshonda and Verhaegen, Lumumba: Jeunesse, 226-228.

**<sup>97</sup>** Lumumba letter of 17 January 1956 to the press attaché to the colonial minister, quoted in ibid., 227–228.

<sup>98</sup> L. Zeilig, Lumumba: Africa's Lost Leader (London: Haus, 1998), 51.

<sup>99</sup> On the beginnings of the trades unions, see Mutamba-Makombo, Du Congo belge, 64.

<sup>100</sup> See Piette, "Conscience Africaine," 55.

<sup>101</sup> Boyle, "School Wars," 464.

questioned. It is no coincidence that it was the Catholic milieu that punched the first holes in the facade of an irreversible Belgian presence. Because the PSC found itself in opposition and continued to reject the idea of establishing a Congolese branch, Catholic intellectuals exercised their influence in the metropolitan and colonial public sphere. Jef Van Bilsen was a lecturer at the Institute for Overseas Studies, University of Antwerp. After several study trips through Africa, he was among those Catholic academics who debated the political future of colonial rule, and here he played a leading role, 102 publishing the "Thirty-Year Plan for the Political Emancipation of Belgian-Africa." Van Bilsen's text had appeared in the Dossiers de l'action sociale catholique in February 1956, a monthly journal published by the MOC and close to the PSC. Simply by championing the policy goal of allowing the Congo political self-determination within 30 years, his text was seminal: prior to its publication no one had specified a date for independence. Though Van Bilsen favoured a close political association between the Congo and Belgium in future and referred to emancipation rather than independence, this text caused disgruntlement among conservative colonial experts and politicians. The Thirty-Year Plan set off a chain reaction in Léopoldville.104

First, against the background of the School War between the Liberal Colonial Ministry and the Catholic milieu, the "colonial unity of church and state" began to crumble. In the *Revue Nouvelle*, the leading organ of progressive Catholic intellectuals in Belgium, the secretary general of the Bishopric of the Belgian Congo warned that the "cooperation so far carried out faithfully with the colonial government" might result in the church being held to account by Congolese "for its [the government's] tactical errors and failures." In June 1956, the bishops of the Belgian Congo also let it be known that the "inhabitants of every country have the right to take charge of their shared fate themselves." Scheut mission schools, all of whom were members of a Catholic study circle founded in Léopoldville in 1952, published a riposte to Van Bilsen's plan. The so-called *Man*-

**<sup>102</sup>** F. Reyntjens, "Van Bilsen," in *Biographie belge d'outre-mer*, vol. 9, ed. Académie Royale Science d'Outre-Mer (Brussels: Librairie Falk fils, 2015).

<sup>103</sup> See Young, Politics, 52-54; Lemarchand, Political, 153-158.

**<sup>104</sup>** M. Kalulambi Pongo, "Le manifeste 'Conscience africaine': genèse, influences et réactions," in *Le manifeste "Conscience africaine" (1956). Élites congolaises et société coloniale. Regards croisés*, ed. N. Tousignant (Brussels: Presses de l'Université Saint-Louis, 2009), 74–78.

<sup>105</sup> Boyle, "School Wars," 452.

<sup>106 &</sup>quot;Déclaration solennelle de l'Épiscopat congolais," quoted in Brassinne and Dumont, "Les autorités belges," 14.

ifesto was published in June 1956 in a print run of 10,000 copies. It was a special issue of the journal *Conscience Africaine*, the bulletin of the Catholic study circle, whose founding editors included Joseph Lobeya, a journalist at the *Croix du Congo*, which was closely linked with the missions, and Joseph Iléo, bookkeeper at the OCA, along with an employee of the General Government; their meetings were held at the mission of Abbot Joseph Malula.<sup>107</sup> The authors cleaved closely to Van Bilsen's blueprint and advocated a "Congolese nation, consisting of Africans and Europeans."<sup>108</sup> This, however, should take the form of a fully equal society based on mutual respect. In addition, they called for the ultimate goal of the Thirty-Year Plan to be "total emancipation" and, in the meantime, for Congolese to be allowed a greater say in the process of decolonization. Given the splits within the vernacular elite triggered by the School War, the authors urged all factions to make common cause as a "national popular movement."<sup>109</sup>

That the *Manifesto* could be read throughout the Belgian Congo was due to a Catholic network bridging metropole and colony, of which the Congolese authors writing in *Conscience Africaine* were also members: a professor at the Catholic University of Lovanium obtained provisional permission to publish from Jean Cordy, a cabinet member in the General Government and graduate of the Catholic University of Leuven. Before the text rolled off the Scheut mission's printing press, Jacques Meert had put the finishing touches to it, which brings us back full circle to Van Bilsen: Meert was the founder of the Congolese branch of the MOC, in whose Belgian monthly periodical Van Bilsen's Thirty-Year Plan had already appeared.<sup>110</sup>

Six weeks later, the *Association des Bakongo pour l'unification, la conservation et l'expansion de la langue kikongo* (ABAKO) responded in turn to this bold but moderate scheme put forward by elite Congolese active within the orbit of Léopoldville's Catholic milieu. The ABAKO's so-called *Counter-manifesto* moved away from the Thirty-Year Plan. Its demands were more radical and reflected the increasing impatience of sections of the vernacular elite in view of broken promises of reform: "The limits of our patience have already been ex-

**<sup>107</sup>** On the interpretation and contextualization of the manifesto, see N. Tousignant, ed., *Le manifeste "Conscience africaine" (1956). Elites congolaises et société coloniale. Regards croisés* (Brussels: Presses de l'Université Saint-Louis, 2009). On the authors and members of the study circle, see Mutamba-Makombo, "Les auteurs."

<sup>108 &</sup>quot;Manifeste," Conscience Africaine Numéro Spécial (July-August 1956): 1.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>110</sup> On the manifesto authors' links with progressive Catholic Belgians in the Congo, see Mutamba-Makombo, "Les auteurs," 623.



Fig. 14: Cover of the special issue of Conscience Africaine, July-August 1956.

ceeded. The time has now come to grant us emancipation, rather than delaying it for another thirty years."<sup>111</sup>

The ABAKO text was also the counter-manifesto of an ethnically defined grouping. The ABAKO, much like the authors writing for the *Conscience Africaine*, protested against the Belgian parties' expansion to the colony and called for the establishment of Congolese parties. But rather than a supra-ethnic party with a national presence, what the ABAKO had in mind was an ethnic unity party for

**<sup>111</sup>** ABAKO Manifesto, reprinted in B. Verhaegen, *L'ABAKO (Association des Bakongo) 1950–1960, documents* (Brussels: Centre de recherche et d'information socio-politiques, 1962), 41.

the region of Bas-Congo, 112 The ABAKO, founded in Léopoldville in 1950, claimed to represent the Bakongo of the capital, who made up the majority of its population and, as the inhabitants of the surrounding areas, had come under the influence of the Jesuits. 113 The initiator of the association, a former pupil of the Jesuit seminary in Kisantu, had been encouraged by Joseph Van Wing to campaign for the preservation of the culture and language of the Bakongo. Van Wing, who had not only proselytized to the Bakongo but had also ascribed a group identity to them through his anthropological research, observed with concern the growing tendency for Bakongo in Léopoldville to speak Lingala. The rapid growth of Léopoldville after the war was based on a massive influx of people from the regions east of the city, from which this lingua franca had spread throughout the colony.<sup>114</sup> Furthermore, the incomers had migrated from areas served by the Scheut missionary order, which was also responsible for Léopoldville. The Scheutists thus welcomed graduates from their mission schools in the colony's interior and integrated the educated elites among them into the order's networks in the capital. Representatives of the Bangala, Baluba and Mongo, then, were often active in elite institutions such as the Croix du Congo or the ADAPES, occupied important positions in the professional world and increasingly outdid the Bakongo, who had been educated by Jesuits. 115 The rivalry between the Catholic missionary orders laid for the foundation for an ethnic rivalry between the capital's évolués. That the ABAKO's founding manifesto began with the demand that "we, as the core of the Congolese elite, [must] improve our knowledge of our native language" and "unite all Bakongo in the capital," was an implicit challenge to other groups of Congolese. 116 In the editors of Conscience Africaine, the ABAKO association president Joseph Kasa-Vubu, who had completed part of his education with the Scheutists and had been secretary general of the ADAPES alumni association shortly before, saw neither association colleagues nor representatives of the aspiring évolués, though he himself had a carte du mérite civique and had been immatriculated.117 For him, the Manifesto was essentially the work of Baluba and Bangala newcomers, who were given preferential treatment by the Scheut missions. 118

<sup>112</sup> Mutamba-Makombo, Du Congo belge, 259.

<sup>113</sup> Lafontaine, City Politics, 40-41.

<sup>114</sup> Verhaegen, L'ABAKO (Association des Bakongo), 178.

<sup>115</sup> Markowitz, Cross and Sword, 158.

**<sup>116</sup>** "Vers l'unification de la langue kikongo manifeste d'un groupe de bakongo" (1950), reprinted in Verhaegen, *L'ABAKO (Association des Bakongo)*, 10 – 13.

<sup>117</sup> Artigue, Qui sont, 132-133.

<sup>118</sup> Verhaegen, L'ABAKO (Association des Bakongo), 178.

The ABAKO was only the best known of the ethnically and regionally defined associations that had developed over the course of the 1950s. <sup>119</sup> These associations elicited a highly favourable response from the colonial administration. It not only welcomed the self-help character of many of these bodies, which was consonant with the policies of the Liberal colonial minister. The administration also discerned in them the Congolese elite's turn, as incessantly called for, towards the masses. The associations were thoroughly committed to the moral, social and cultural development of their members – but it was specific groups rather than the masses to whom they addressed themselves. In 1956, Léopold-ville alone was already home to 137 regionally or ethnically oriented associations, which equated with a doubling within two years. That the number of supra-ethnic associations dwindled at the same time is paradigmatic of the slow shift in the colonial state's elite-making policy away from the postulate of assimilation. <sup>120</sup>

Meanwhile, in a speech before the Conseil de Gouvernement in 1955, Governor General Pétillon had modified his notion of a Belgian-Congolese Community: now the priority was to create an association of all Congolese and Europeans. He considered this more realistic than the integration, as previously envisaged, of a small number of "assimilated" into the European community.<sup>121</sup> On this view, the Congolese must remain Congolese and the Belgians Belgian. The place of the vernacular elite in the world of tomorrow was less clear than ever in this vision. The Colonial Ministry's sudden tendency to present the évolués as leaders of regional or ethnic associations thus points to a strategic reorientation. Yet what the évolués beheld when they turned their attention to Congolese traditions and affiliations was merely the ethnic hotchpotch generated since the 1880s by the mission schools' language and identity policies and the divide-andrule principle so central to colonial policy. The politicized vernacular elite, who suffered from the refusal to recognize them and from their lack of equality with Europeans on a daily basis, no longer saw themselves as the elite imagined by evangelizing missionaries or as the elite subjects envisaged by the colonial state. Henceforth, they staged themselves as an elite of regionally, linguistically or ethnically defined groupings, whose members could be mobilized at future elections. The évolués used the space opened up by the contradictions of the Belgian ideology of adaptation, which demanded assimilation of the Congolese elite

<sup>119</sup> Verhaegen, Les premiers manifestes politiques, 60.

<sup>120</sup> Verhaegen, "Les associations congolaises," 391.

<sup>121</sup> Quoted in Stenmans and Reyntjens, La pensée politique, 41-42.

while lamenting their cultural deracination. Those styled "detribalized" since the inter-war period reinvented themselves: as the "retribalized."

The ethnicization of the Belgian Congo in the mid-1950s should by no means be interpreted as a case of regression to an "archaic" tribal mindset. In fact, this phenomenon also affected the Belgians resident in the Congo. The transfer of the School War to the colony had been facilitated by the increased immigration of Belgians, among whom there were both Flemings and Walloons as well as partisans of the Catholic, socialist and liberal milieus. 122 The struggles of the metropole, which they had brought along with them in their cultural baggage, led to tensions within the Belgian colonial population. In Belgium, the School War had exacerbated the country's regional and linguistic division, which dovetailed with affiliations to political milieus. 123 In overwhelmingly rural Flanders, where society was dominated by the Catholic pillar, the vast majority of schools were confessional. It is no coincidence that the region was the source of just under 80 percent of Belgian missionaries. 124 In the more heavily industrialized Wallonia, on the other hand, home to powerful socialist organizations, it was state schools that predominated. The enduring pre-eminence of the Francophone elites and the French language in the metropole, meanwhile, also made itself felt in the colony. Half of colonial officials were from Flanders. Yet they mostly held subordinate posts, and just one in ten Belgian pupils in the colony was taught in Dutch. 125 The debate, which had intensified since the mid-1950s, on the introduction of Flemish as the second official European language in the Congo, was closely bound up with the concurrent invigoration of the Flemish movement in Belgium. 126

The vision of a Belgian-Congolese Community, then, lost much of its appeal partly, though not solely, because of Belgians' racist reservations about assimilated Congolese and the still limited legal assimilation of the vernacular elite. This shift was also a result of the social tensions and sectionalism of the metropolitan society, which surfaced clearly for the first time in the colony as well. Hence, while in the mid-1950s "the Belgians" in the Congo fragmented into clerical and anti-clerical groups, which often went hand in hand with linguistic communities and political orientations, "the Congolese" too split into ethnic and regional groupings. The Belgian-Congolese Community was supposed to bring together two groups that were both increasingly fractured by centrifugal social

<sup>122</sup> Markowitz, Cross and Sword, 77 and 94.

<sup>123</sup> Dujardin and Dumoulin, L'union, 77.

<sup>124</sup> Vanthemsche, La Belgique et le Congo, 78.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

**<sup>126</sup>** See Stenmans and Reyntjens, *La pensée politique*, 62; Lemarchand, *Political*, 150 – 153.

forces. Yet former Christian Social colonial minister Pierre Wigny still looked through rose-tinted spectacles, viewing the coexistence of Walloons and Flemings in Belgium as evidence that a Community of Belgians and Congolese was an achievable goal. Those responsible for Belgian colonial policy continued to believe that the model of the organized channelling of political, social and linguistic divisions – which had by now failed in the metropole – could be applied to the Belgian Congo. 127 In the wake of the politicization of an even more complex Congolese population, this was to prove a fateful misconception. In Belgium two languages dominated. In the Congo, which was fifty-seven times larger, there were two hundred.

<sup>127</sup> On the Belgian state's approach to the pluralism of its population, see Conway, Sorrows, 6.