

Conclusion

The Lumumba generation was the child of late colonial elite-making policy, occupying a position within the colonial order aptly described by Andreas Eckert as “intermediary ambivalence.”¹ Moulded by the contradictory elements of Belgian colonial rule, this generation emerged in the field of tension between systematic integration into and exclusion from colonial structures. The key elements here were the development that Congolese were supposed to achieve and the political participation they were denied, unfulfilled promises of social advancement and persistent oppression, the unity that colonial officials called for and the fragmentation they fostered. This was an elite-making policy that sowed subjugation and reaped rebellion.

Summary

The emergence of a Congolese elite represented an integral but subordinate component of Belgian developmental colonialism after 1945. In contrast to the medium-term programme of economic modernization such as the Ten-Year Plan, the development of the elite was regarded as a long-term project that would require a lot more than 10 years. Well aware that within the post-war international order any acknowledgment of colonial subjects’ civilizational maturity would ultimately lead to political self-determination for the African population, Belgium was in no rush to accelerate the process of elite formation. By focusing on the need to foster the *évolués*’ “character,” the Belgian colonial government sought to shift attention away from the international community’s criticism of its failure to implement political reforms. Colonial propaganda in the form of articles, photo series and films bore witness to developmental advances in the colony. The General Government’s official publications presented the *évolués* as perfect inhabitants of the model colony it propagated. To the extent that Belgium, as heir to the atrocities in the Congo Free State under Léopold II, asserted the exemplary character of its colonial policy, the *évolués* were to be the poster child of the civilizing mission. The colonial masters’ need to assert themselves, meanwhile, engendered great expectations and demands of the Congolese elite. While it is true that British, French and Portuguese colonial officials also declared their inten-

1 Eckert, “Cultural Commuters,” 251.

tion to create a “perfect native,”² in the Belgian Congo the goal was to make Africans more perfect still.

Nevertheless, the institutions of elite-making were no mere sites of propaganda. The *évolués* were more than mute supernumeraries of colonial propaganda, so their efforts to negotiate a better place within the future colonial order made a certain impact. Despite protestations to the contrary from a seemingly omnipotent colonial state, the social engineering involved in elite-making was always partly a dialogue with the elites themselves. The flipside of the official discourse on colonial development consisted of the demands and claims that the *évolués* derived from it.

Yet Belgian developmental colonialism left the vernacular elite disillusioned. Belgian politicians with responsibility for colonial policy may well have supported reforms, but for many local actors the goal was to retain their power, and they held fast to hierarchies justified in terms of race and culture. In practice, the fear that elite-making might produce not just loyal middlemen, but also anti-colonial and communist activists resulted in a policy of uneasy stalemate. One step forward rhetorically was matched by one step back in practical terms. The demands of the Belgian Congo’s educated elite for greater participation in political and social life, for greater recognition and equality were met only to a highly limited degree by the colonial state. If the future became a key *topos* in the *évolués*’ discourse, then disappointment was the defining experience of the Lumumba generation,³ which initially sought to influence post-war colonial policy to its advantage. It is one of the ironies of the history of the Belgian Congo’s decolonization that, through its half-hearted reforms after 1945, the colonial state brought about the very thing it had always feared: the emergence of an embittered Congolese elite. The present study thus further substantiates the hypothesis that after the Second World War, “promises of development [aroused] expectations among Africans that could never be fulfilled.”⁴

The fraught debate on *évolué* status and its protracted and at times reluctant implementation stood at the centre of this history of disappointment. The elite’s demand for a special legal status confronted the colonial state with a dilemma due to its symbolic and power-political implications. How much cultural otherness was acceptable if a status reform was to grant the Congolese elite equality with Europeans in the colony in certain domains? How much legal equality could be conceded if completing the civilizing of the elite ultimately meant

2 Eckert, “Kolonialismus, Moderne,” 65.

3 On the generational experience, see Mannheim, *Mensch und Gesellschaft*; Lindner, *Die Stunde*.

4 Eckert, *Herrschen und Verwalten*, 45.

the end of the colonial mission? While the Belgian colonial reformers took their lead from the legal system of the French empire, they lagged behind it in terms of scope and implementation. When the Colonial Ministry, under pressure from the elite, finally managed to carry out the first status reform in 1948, the inhabitants of the *Union Française* had already been granted civil rights. Furthermore, within the French empire, when it came to matters of civil law Africans no longer had to cleave to the cultural templates on which the French legal system was based. They could, as Frederick Cooper states, be citizens and culturally different at the same time.⁵ Meanwhile, after 1945 the elite in the Belgian Congo were denied cultural difference if they wished to enjoy a special status. In contrast to the French reforms, neither the *carte du mérite civique* nor immatriculation granted civil rights, but at best equality under civil law with the European population in the Congo. In common with Belgian settlers, status holders were unable to vote. The gradual awarding of privileges lagged far behind the legal equality demanded by the Congolese elite. If we stick with the metaphor of the waiting room as envisaged by one author, then colonial policy continually asked for just a little more patience.

In comparison to French as well as British colonial policy, the imperial world of tomorrow, as presented to the elite by Belgian developmental colonialism, was a world of yesterday. The ambitious plans for economic modernization and welfare programmes were paired with an apolitical, paternalistic and authoritarian approach that brought Belgian post-war colonialism close to the repressive Portuguese model. The figure of the *évolué* laid bare the anachronistic nature of Belgian colonial reforms after 1945. But the colonial state's resolute adherence to the hegemony-legitimizing distinctions so central to the social order entailed tremendous potential for conflict. The educated elite itself was well aware of the contrast with the reforms in France's empire in particular – in Léopoldville, all one had to do was look across the Congo River to Brazzaville. In view of the systematic discrimination, they faced despite their feats of assimilation, the *évolués*, eager to advance socially, increasingly pushed for an end to colonial rule. To the extent that the Belgian colonial state cast doubt on the elite's capacity for development, the *évolués* lost their faith in the colonial state's capacity for development.

Nonetheless, it is pointless to contemplate which variant of developmental colonialism would have had the greatest prospect of retaining the vernacular elite as the cornerstones of the Belgian colonial state. The French variant of developmental colonialism, which involved integrating the population step-by-step

⁵ See Cooper, *Citizenship*, 12.

in political and civil terms, had already come to an end by the mid-1950s. African politicians' demands for equality had become too costly for the metropole. Moreover, this far-reaching integration policy could by no means prevent spirals of violence, as evident in the Algerian War. Nor did the British empire, with its gradual decentralization of political processes to the benefit of specific colonial territories, offer a viable blueprint. Tellingly, the Belgians took the gradual integration of the elite into consultative bodies, as was occurring in the East and Central African territories regarded as least developed, as their role model. The flexible British post-war policy ultimately entailed a plethora of decolonial developmental paths, which culminated in the early independence of Ghana, but also in settler states in Southern Africa and a colonial war in Kenya. Regardless of the political course adopted by the imperial powers, in 1960 alone the Belgian Congo attained independence along with thirteen French and two British colonies in Africa. In the manner of a domino effect, across much of the continent, which had become "the last refuge for the imperial illusion of permanence after 1945,"⁶ over the next few years Africans shook off colonial rule.

Global bourgeoisie and colonial Africa

The history of the Lumumba generation also provides new insights into "bourgeois culture in a colonial world."⁷ It challenges narratives on the decolonization of Africa that cast insufficient light on bourgeoisified intermediaries. But this history also casts doubt on the narrative typical of research on the global bourgeoisie, which has focussed on the heyday of the imperial bourgeois age in the long nineteenth century and lost sight not only of the period after the Second World War, but also the crucial decades of decolonization in Africa. In contrast, the present book has emphasized the leading role of the African bourgeoisie in the "short century"⁸ of decolonization after 1945 and has shown the value of scrutinizing the "spatiality and temporality"⁹ of global bourgeois culture. I thus conclude by recapitulating and fleshing out a few crucial findings.

⁶ Osterhammel and Jansen, *Dekolonisation*, 73.

⁷ To modify the subtitle of the following book: F. Cooper and A. L. Stoler, *Tensions of Empire. Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

⁸ O. Enwezor, *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1994* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2001).

⁹ For a programmatic account, see Sebastian Conrad, "Enlightenment in Global History: A Historiographical Critique," *American Historical Review* 117, no. 4 (2012): 1026.

We have seen that notions of bourgeois culture and associated concepts played a leading role in the colonial civilizing mission in the Belgian Congo. The institutions intended to discipline and educate the vernacular elite, introduced by missions and the colonial state in the form of schools, associations and periodicals, aimed to impart values, cultural techniques and behavioural codes dubbed “civilized.” Certainly, the contemporary sources constantly refer to the assimilation of the African elite to “European culture,” but what this book revealed behind this is a “hegemony of bourgeois culture” that shone through the colonial civilizing mission.¹⁰ In the objectives and vocabulary of the various colonial powers’ civilizing missions we can recognize historically mutable and quasi-national differences in bourgeois culture, as also characteristic of the “precarious unity”¹¹ of the European bourgeoisie. For educated Africans in the British Gold Coast around 1900, for example, the Victorian model of the gentleman was the measure of all things.¹² In Cape Coast, the Anglo-Fanti wore frock coats and had tea (the meal) at five o’clock in the afternoon.¹³ In AEF, meanwhile, the *évolués* showed their zeal for French culture by playing the accordion. What Belgium, after the Second World War, understood as presentable bourgeois culture, featured fine differences from the British and French variants.¹⁴ The Belgian version of European civility, which underpinned elite-making in the Congo, assumed a French-speaking African loyal to the state, one involved in associations and upholding a Catholic version of bourgeois culture.

The role of the Christian missions in the imparting of bourgeois culture in colonial Africa can scarcely be overstated, particularly in the case of the Belgian colonial project. While religion and church were long tackled as a marginal topic

¹⁰ Cooper and Stoler, *Tensions of Empire*, 30.

¹¹ Kocka, “Europäische Muster,” 9–21.

¹² In Tanganyika under British administration the cultural model of the gentleman was also crucially important to African bureaucrats into the 1950s. See Eckert, *Herrschen und Verwalten*, 73; for a more general account, see K. Tidrick, *Empire and the English Character* (London: Bloomsbury, 1992).

¹³ A vivid take on this theme is provided by a satirical play, centred on the educated African elite of the Gold Coast, composed by African author Sekyi as early as 1915; K. Sekyi, *The Blinkards and the Anglo-Fanti. A Comedy* (London: Rex Collings, 1974). The educated class in Sierra Leone, where, after the abolition of the slave trade in the nineteenth century, Great Britain settled enslaved Africans seized at sea, also took its lead from the contemporary Victorian cultural ideal. See Cohen, *Elite Culture*, 23.

¹⁴ On the Portuguese case, see M. Bandeira Jérónimo, *The “Civilising Mission” of Portuguese Colonialism, 1870–1930* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

in the history of the European bourgeoisie,¹⁵ scholars have now demonstrated that religiously motivated “bourgeoisification” represented a strategy of social ascent, particularly for peripheral confessional groups – such as Jews and Catholics within the Protestant-dominated German empire.¹⁶ Furthermore, it was religious initiatives that were chiefly responsible for imparting bourgeois virtues to the working class and lower classes in the metropole.¹⁷ In the Belgian empire, there were comparatively strong political and institutional links between the national and colonial projects of the cultural elevation of peripheral groups. This was mainly due to the *Parti Catholique*’s state-supporting role, which it took on at an early stage in comparative European terms. In close collaboration with the Catholic Church, representatives of the *Parti Catholique* in the Colonial Ministry did much to shape events in the Congo, where the Belgian missionary orders took on state responsibilities in healthcare and schooling. Civilizing, modernizing and conversion went hand in hand. In the metropole too, from the late nineteenth century onwards the Catholic pillar held a position of social and political dominance. The church operated most of the schools, while associations, trades unions, insurance companies and recreational organizations, all of them closely aligned with the *Parti Catholique*, shaped the everyday realities of the majority of the population. Patriarchal models of the family, self-discipline and a “decent” way of life promised to preserve social peace. The idea was that Catholic bourgeois culture would produce “good workers” in Belgium and “good évolués” in the Congo. In the inter-war period, a system of national education intended to achieve moralization, which had been deployed in Belgium since the late nineteenth century, increasingly informed the civilizing mission in the Congo. In the 1920s, the Belgian colonial state, eager to exploit their physical capacity for work, still saw perfect colonial subjects first and foremost as robust, resilient Congolese, but they were soon joined by the educated évolués, who

15 This applied to German research on the bourgeoisie. These gaps have been filled by studies such as T. Mergel, *Zwischen Klasse und Konfession. Katholisches Bürgertum im Rheinland 1794–1914* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994); F.M. Kuhlemann, *Bürgerlichkeit und Religion. Zur Sozial- und Mentalitätsgeschichte der evangelischen Pfarrer in Baden 1860–1914* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001). See also M. Borutta, “Religion und Zivilgesellschaft: Zur Theorie und Geschichte ihrer Beziehung,” *WZB Discussion Paper 4* (2005).

16 In her study of Jewish routes into the German bourgeoisie of the nineteenth century, Simone Lässig referred to a “bourgeois religion.” The Catholic bourgeoisie has been examined by Mergel, *Zwischen Klasse und Konfession*.

17 See Dejung, “From Global Civilizing Missions to Racial Warfare.” The case of educated middle class social reformers in working-class neighbourhoods in the east of Berlin under the German Empire and in the Weimar Republic is investigated by Wietschorke, *Arbeiterfreunde*.

rose to become key intermediaries after the Second World War in connection with the modernization programmes spawned by developmental colonialism.

The “second colonisation of Africa,”¹⁸ which occurred in the Belgian Congo after 1945, thus went hand in hand with a “second civilizing mission.” The *évolués* were not only to be immunized against anti-colonial and communist ideas, but also to mature into moral, pious middlemen loyal to the state. Men passed through Catholic-run secondary schools, sought to achieve the highest level of educational attainment available in the colony at seminaries and got involved in extramural associations and periodicals linked with Catholic Action. At the *foyer sociaux*, their wives learned all about “civilized family life,” which included knitting, cooking in a kitchen and decorating the living room. In addition to the embrace of Christianity, the men’s efforts to advance within society and attain an enhanced legal status chiefly required education, employment closely linked with the state and lived bourgeoisness.

Those Congolese designated as *évolués* – and their families – were the target of a colonial “bourgeoisifying mission.” The “ideology of mission [that] legitimized”¹⁹ colonial rule was thus clothed in a garb that was meant to fit the new geopolitical order. Beyond the colony, the idealistic discourse on culturally bourgeoisified *évolués* was an attempt to respond to the international critique of the Belgian colonial system. Through its model *évolué*, Belgium sought to demonstrate the progress of colonial development, particularly to the United Nations. The bourgeoisifying mission also served another purpose for the colonial state: within the colony, the so-called “perfected blacks” functioned not just as a normative developmental model for the cultural perfecting of the elite, but also as cultural intermediaries. Just as, from the 1920s on, the Catholic missions in the Congo had found Congolese converts to be the most successful proselytizers for the Christian faith, the *évolués*, closely linked with the state, were supposed to exercise a civilizing influence on society as a whole through their exemplary lifestyle and morality. The idea of a delegated civilizing mission was embedded in the colonial state’s elite-making. Very much in line with the Africa-focussed sociology of elites as it existed at the time, the small Congolese elite was to function as a “standard-setting group.”²⁰ Creating bourgeoisified intermediaries was a late colonial technique of domination, intended to achieve the “pacification” of colonial society by imparting bourgeois values and lifestyles. Within the framework of developmental colonialism, apart from the tried-and-tested tools of re-

18 Crowder, “Second World War,” 28.

19 Osterhammel, *Kolonialismus*, 21.

20 Nadel, “Concept of Social Elites,” 422.

pression, the Belgian colonial state increasingly relied on “soft power,” that is, indirect rule through cultural means.²¹

The “recasting” of the civilizing mission in the Congo and the “re-recasting of bourgeois Europe”²² were two sides of the same coin. After the Second World War, when missionary work expanded and for the first time the colonial state declared its intention to create an elite, in Belgium too moral reconstruction was underpinned by the Christian-bourgeois impetus of the newly founded PSC. In Western Europe, the emergence of “middle-class societies” led to the “universalization of bourgeois culture” while the “bourgeoisie as a social formation disintegrated.”²³ This has prompted scholars concerned with the global bourgeoisie to neglect the post-war period. In Western European countries such as Belgium with Christian Democratic governments, however, the emphasis on bourgeois virtues and models of life promised a return to the Europe imagined to have existed prior to the civilizational rupture of the Second World War.²⁴ It was not until the 1950s, as a result of the consumer society, Americanization, youth cultures and a cultural conflict between church and state that the conservative model of society came under increasing pressure.²⁵ If we include the Belgian Congo in this picture of an era, it emerges that it was only after the war that bourgeoisness developed into proof of the vernacular elite’s claim to distinction. The elite-making pursued by the colonial administration and missions was imbued by the conservative post-war *zeitgeist*. In the Congo and in Belgium, Christian women’s associations awarded prizes for the most beautiful living room, honouring exemplary wives and mothers of nuclear households. The *évolués* were a projection screen for desired notions of Catholic bourgeois culture, which was once again gaining traction in Belgium as a societal norm. But while the civilizing mission in the Belgian Congo initially represented a global process that Europe had gone through first and that the Congolese elite had to catch up with, in a civilizational sense the “bourgeoisification” of the elite led

21 Decolonization in Africa was a violent process. This was particularly evident in Algeria and Kenya, but also during the Congo Crisis. Fittingly, however, studies of the first two cases refer to “wars of modernization.” This term underlines the fact that in the late colonial era destruction and violence went hand in hand with construction and education. See S. Malinowski, “Modernisierungskriege. Militärische Gewalt und koloniale Modernisierung im Algerienkrieg (1945–1962),” *AfS* 48 (2008).

22 Moyn, *The Last Utopia*, 78.

23 Conze, “Eine bürgerliche Republik?,” 531–532.

24 On the German and Western European post-war phenomenon of a socio-cultural turn to the past, see *ibid.*, 534.

25 On the cultural conflict of the 1950s in Europe, see W. Faulstich, *Die Kultur der 50er Jahre* (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2002).

to the same place European society was supposed to return to. Hence, the roots of the civility propagated to the *évolués* lay not in a European bourgeois age that had ended, but in a post-war society seeking refuge in its own bourgeois past. Elite-making in the post-war Belgian Congo, then, was not an example of colonies as European “laboratories of modernity,”²⁶ but rather as conservators of European notions of tradition. Moderation, religiosity, the nuclear family, a patriarchal gender order: this ideal-typical bourgeois way of life tells us more about the metropolitan than the colonized society. Thus, what comes to light in the ideal of civilized culture that was exported to Central Africa is the – nostalgically romanticized – self-image of a rediscovered Western European bourgeois culture.

But what exactly was the relationship between the synchronous projects of “bourgeoisification” in Belgium and the Congo? This question is especially pressing in the case of Belgian colonial rule, which had little impact on the metropole in comparison with other European imperial powers in the view of most historians. The *cordon sanitaire*, which strongly regulated the exchange of people and ideas between colony and metropole, was a near-insurmountable barrier for the *évolués* as well. Freedom of opinion and movement, international contacts and mobility: in the Belgian empire all of this was subject to especially rigid control. While Congolese were denied entry to Belgium until the late 1950s, the immigration policy in the colony allowed in only colonial officials classed as respectable, a small number of settlers and, above all, Belgian missionaries. In the Belgian empire, then, what we find are essentially one-way channels of transfer.²⁷ When it came to the “bourgeoisifying mission” as well, the influence of the metropole on the colony was far greater than the other way round.²⁸ The *évolués* had to adapt to the ideals of a Belgian post-war bourgeois culture. But we have no evidence that the bourgeoisified *évolués* had direct effects on the notions of order found in post-war Belgian society,²⁹ which has

26 D. van Laak, “Kolonien als ‘Laboratorien der Moderne’?,” in *Das Kaiserreich transnational. Deutschland in der Welt 1871–1914*, eds. S. Conrad and J. Osterhammel (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004).

27 A call for a history of entanglements that pays attention to varying degrees of intensity and to directionality has been made, for example, by M. Juneja and M. Pernau, “Lost in Translation? Transcending Boundaries in Comparative History,” in *Comparative and Transnational History. Central European and New Perspectives*, eds. H.-G. Haupt and J. Kocka (New York: Berghahn, 2009).

28 See Vanthemsche, *Belgium and the Congo*; Stanard, “Belgium, the Congo.”

29 That the social history of Belgium has been under-researched was recently emphasized by Vanthemsche, “Introduction,” 12. The associated anthology on the history of social classes in Belgium is a first step towards closing this gap; G. Vanthemsche, *Les classes sociales en Belgique. Deux siècles d'histoire* (Brussels: CRISP, 2017).

much to do with the state-enforced separation of metropole and colony, the negligible degree of engagement with the Congo, which was limited to a small section of Belgian society, and the prohibition on residence in the metropole for Congolese. The prevailing image of the Congo in Belgium was moulded by exhibitions at the Tervuren Museum and *Tintin* comics. The vernacular elite, meanwhile, had no platform from which they might have countered the image of uncivilized Congolese disseminated by colonial propaganda.³⁰ To what extent the history of Belgium's working class and bourgeoisie requires revision in light of the colonized territories is a question for other empirical research projects. In any case, the history of the colonial state's elite-making in the Belgian Congo as presented in this book would have been incomplete had it failed to take account of synchronous metropolitan projects of "bourgeoisification."

Another key argument reinforces the need to focus on the *évolués* as a target of the civilizing mission: a history of bourgeois culture on a global scale must consider the ambivalent processes of the inclusion and exclusion of colonized populations.

The African bourgeoisie furnishes us with an impressive example of the way in which the bourgeois subject was produced through alterity. A number of authors have argued persuasively that this subject took shape historically not just as distinct from the nobility and the lower classes in the metropole, but also *vis-à-vis* the colonized.³¹ The processes of the constitution of bourgeois citizens, workers and the colonized were simultaneous and at times related and they produced social, economic, cultural and ethnic difference in an imperial world in such a way as to stabilize hegemony.³² European actors in the Belgian Congo denied the *évolués* their civilizational development, cementing the ideal of the bourgeois citizen as European, white, male and elitist. But the present book has shown that the Congolese elites dissented from this, shaking the colonial order through their own cultural "bourgeoisification."

The European cultural model of the bourgeois citizen was in fact tied spatially to the mother country within the colonial civilizing mission and, as an object of research, was long limited to European history.³³ Yet, middlemen in colonial Africa also articulated notions of bourgeois culture. If we accept proposed ana-

30 On the images of the Congo found in Belgian colonial propaganda, see Stanard, *Selling*, 154 and 254.

31 See, for example, Dejung, "From Global Civilizing Missions to Racial Warfare"; C. Dejung and M. Langwiler, "Einleitung," in *Ränder der Moderne. Neue Perspektiven auf die Europäische Geschichte (1800–1930)*, eds. C. Dejung and M. Langwiler (Cologne: Böhlau, 2016), 22.

32 Christof Dejung et al., "Worlds of the Bourgeoisie."

33 See Pernau, "Transkulturelle Geschichte," 146.

lyses of a bourgeois way of life as the individual and historically mutable adoption of bourgeois ideals and practices,³⁴ then on the face of it we can find evidence of such a process of diffusion among representatives of the Congolese elite as well. Here the *évolués'* self-descriptions were strikingly reminiscent of the classic bourgeois discourse in Western Europe.³⁵ In articles in periodicals or in talks delivered to association members, the educated elite spoke in favour of values such as the continual civilizing of the self and the perfectibility of character. Authors defended bourgeois models of virtue and education. They promoted the monogamous nuclear family, upright domesticity and sensible recreational pursuits in associations, while highlighting their respectability by condemning the materialism and supposedly immoral pleasures of some "false" *évolués*.

As a *topos* in the discourse on the bourgeois citizen in the post-war Belgian Congo, perfectibility fell on particularly fertile soil. For educated Congolese, the concept held out the prospect of ascending, through their own efforts, the ladder of cultural development within the framework of a universalist civilization. Through their self-perfecting, this group expected to enhance their respectability and rights, though in the colonial situation these were the very things that separated Europeans and Africans.³⁶ The unequal attribution of respectability, which was established on a racist or culturalist basis, legitimized the discriminatory treatment of colonial subjects and a colonial rule that was based on distinctions.³⁷ That the members of the educated elite, the majority of whom worked as office assistants, adopted the polite idiom of administrative correspondence in their everyday language was no doubt partly because this was the exact opposite of the disrespectful forms of address suffered by Africans in the colonial situation. The appeal of the bourgeois figure of the "perfected black" was the sharp contrast it provided with the supposedly primitive and immature *indigène*. In the post-war Belgian Congo, "the well-educated African elite from the cities saw themselves as [bourgeois] citizens and no longer wished [to be] natives."³⁸

Attempts to ascend within, and integrate into, colonial society by adopting bourgeois ways of life are also evident in other African countries. From the 1880s on, the educated elite in British colonies such as the Gold Coast and Nigeria

³⁴ See M. Hettling and S.-L. Hoffmann, "Zur Historisierung bürgerlicher Werte. Eine Einleitung," in *Der bürgerliche Werthimmel. Innenansichten des 19. Jahrhunderts*, eds. M. Hettling and S.-L. Hoffmann (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), 11.

³⁵ See *ibid.*, 12–13.

³⁶ See A. L. Stoler, "Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in 20th Century Colonial Cultures," *American Ethnologist* 16 (November 1989): 643 and 649.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 648.

³⁸ Eckert, *Kolonialismus*, 84.

joined “improvement clubs,” where they sought to live up to a bourgeois cultural ideal.³⁹ Much like the *évolués* in the Congo, the “middle class” in Rhodesia and South Africa also demanded equal rights for equally civilized people.⁴⁰ The effort to achieve social ascent through cultural “bourgeoisification” seems to be a typical attribute of societies in which social segregation and systematic discrimination are justified with reference to racist suppositions of inequality. By the late nineteenth century “with their social clubs, African Americans in the United States were trying to outdo the white middle classes in terms of respectability and civic virtue.”⁴¹

But it is only at first sight that the Belgian Congo provides backing for the idea that “occasionally the most bourgeois of the bourgeois stepped outside the historical trajectory of bourgeois mentality.”⁴² The *évolués*’ life experiences expose the narrative of the global dissemination of Eurocentric bourgeois culture as an “illusion of diffusion.” Bourgeois distinction in the Belgian Congo by no means escaped the colonial logic of exclusionary inclusion. On the one hand, the bourgeoisified elite occupied a position from which they could articulate legitimate criticisms and demands, and they held a status that granted them certain privileges. Hence, the demonstrative display of bourgeois culture could certainly indicate emancipation and rebellion against ascribed civilizational backwardness. On the other hand, the *évolués* had to bow to colonial conceptions of order and accept the resulting limits to their upward social mobility and recognition. Ultimately, cultural “bourgeoisification” was an empowerment strategy pursued by the Congolese elite, but it was a strategy that buttressed the colonial order.

Perfectibility stood at the heart of this paradox. In the nineteenth century, the idea of perfecting had already spurred the Western European bourgeois citizen to pursue cultural self-improvement, but it had always been directed against this individual.⁴³ *Évolués* and European bourgeois citizens sought to achieve a

39 On the Gold Coast, see Newell, “Territory of Elites,” 223–224; Prais, “Imperial Travelers,” 20. On Nigeria, see N. Sawada, “The Educated Elite and Associational Life in Early Lagos Newspapers. In Search of Unity for the Progress of Society” (PhD diss., University of Birmingham, Birmingham, 2011); George, *Making Modern Girls*. On the case of the African Americans who settled in Liberia, see Marx, “Siedlerkolonien,” 90–91.

40 See West, *Rise*, 192–193.; R. Ross, “Missions, Respectability and Civil Rights: The Cape Colony, 1828–1854,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 25, no. 3 (1999).

41 Hoffmann, *Geselligkeit*, 47.

42 J. Osterhammel, “Hierarchies and Connections: Aspects of a Global Social History,” in *An Emerging Modern World: 1750–1870*, eds. S. Conrad and J. Osterhammel (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 832.

43 See Hettling and Hoffmann, “Historisierung,” 15.

state that had to remain unattainable. This “element of future promise,”⁴⁴ that is, the belief that the perfecting of character had to be projected into the future and would inevitably remain incomplete, had different consequences in the late colonial situation. In their articles, the *évolués* presented themselves as evidence of a “completed” civilizing mission. Perfectibility held out the prospect of social ascent, more rights, a political say and equality with Europeans. Yet the unachievability already inherent in the concept of perfectibility served the colonial state as proof that very few Congolese had achieved the kind of cultural development that would have allowed it to accede to their demands in good conscience.

Constant references to the *évolués*’ backwardness is symptomatic of the common twentieth-century trope of the “temporalization of difference.”⁴⁵ This suggests that we can explain European societies’ lead over the rest of the world in terms of their “temporal superiority.”⁴⁶ The colonized societies were required to move on from the “imaginary waiting-room of history”⁴⁷ by making up civilizational ground, yet it was characteristic of racist colonial discourse that it denied them this promised concurrence.⁴⁸ The temporality embedded in the concept of the *évolués* consisted in declaring the incomplete process of self-civilizing a permanent state of affairs. To be a bourgeois citizen meant developing into one.⁴⁹ Being *évolué*, meanwhile, meant being permanently incapable of becoming one.

Against this background, we may interpret the practice of awarding the *carte du mérite civique* and immatriculation as a bureaucratic procedure that was part and parcel of colonial rule and that facilitated the negotiation and assertion of the power-stabilizing distinction between Europeans and Africans. As a rule, the lack of congruence between normative discourse and individual practice was taken as an indication of the *évolués*’ insufficient civility and was interpreted

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Conrad and Eckert, “Globalgeschichte,” 21.

⁴⁶ S. Conrad, “A Cultural History of Global Transformation,” in *An Emerging Modern World: 1750–1870*, eds. S. Conrad and J. Osterhammel (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 554.

⁴⁷ D. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001), 11.

⁴⁸ For a detailed account, see J. Fabian, *The Time and the Other. How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 35; for an introduction, see A. Eckert, “Afrika in der Welt. Afrikanische Geschichte im 20. Jahrhundert,” in *Geschichte denken. Perspektiven auf die Geschichtsschreibung heute*, ed. M. Wildt (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 132.

⁴⁹ See M. Hettling, “Die persönliche Selbständigkeit. Der archimedische Punkt bürgerlicher Lebensführung,” in *Der bürgerliche Werthimmel. Innenansichten des 19. Jahrhunderts*, eds. M. Hettling and S.-L. Hoffmann (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), 58.

as highlighting the unequal developmental level of the Congolese and European populations. The awarding committees sought to assess whether individuals had internalized bourgeois ideals, such that the policy of elite selection stabilized the colonial order, which assumed and affirmed difference. The discourse on the “bourgeoisification” of the elite thus perpetuated the racist narrative of Africans’ imperfection, based on which the Belgian colonial state legitimized its ongoing obligation to pursue the civilizing mission and maintain colonial rule.

This debate on the limits of civilizational development in the Belgian Congo corresponded with a post-war discourse at large within the international community on the political maturity of the colonies. For Belgian colonial policy, the restrictive awarding of elite status was not so much a means of fostering this elite as of questioning whether it existed at all. In a time-consuming process, the awarding committees thus showed that even the elite still lacked the necessary maturity to exercise political rights. Within the context of international diplomacy, the *évolués*’ failure in the court of elite formation served Belgian politicians as an argument for delaying the Congolese population’s political integration.

The colonial state’s elite-making policy in the Belgian Congo was thus a late colonial form of the “politics of difference.”⁵⁰ While the African bourgeoisie went to great lengths to persuade the colonial state that they deserved equality, the authorities expended a great deal of energy showing Congolese how imperfect they were, regardless of their efforts to assimilate. The awarding committees tended to regard the *évolués* as backward rather than as social climbers, as “almost savage” rather than “almost civilized.” Instead of facilitating the legal assimilation of the elite, the status reforms perpetuated colonial distinction: they merely provided for the gradual extension of privileges and rights, as geared towards the *évolués*’ supposed rate of development.

The restrictive process of elite selection in the Belgian Congo thus reinforced the notion that the cultural assimilation of the *évolués* was an impossibility. The more the elite sought to adapt to the bourgeois model, the more the politics of difference came into play. The protracted debates and the complex bureaucracy surrounding the so-called *évolué* status are among the many aspects that underline how the colonial administration produced hegemony-stabilizing distinctions through interaction with African intermediaries. The *évolués* represented the Belgian variant of the “mimic man,” described by Homi Bhabha as “almost the same, but not quite [...] almost the same, but not white.”⁵¹

50 J. Burbank and F. Cooper, *Empires in World History. Power and the Politics of Difference* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010), 11–13.

51 Bhabha, *Location*, 89.

If colonial policy sought to turn the elite into an “indigenous bourgeoisie,”⁵² then it did so half-heartedly at best. In terms of culture and lifestyle, Congolese were supposed to strive to achieve “bourgeoisification,” but this was not to be taken as grounds for any claim to social power, a political say or respectability. More than any other group, the elite experienced the limits of the model of upward social mobility through cultural adaptation and colonial bourgeois culture.⁵³ They climbed to the top of the developmental ladder of civility, only to bump their heads against the glass ceiling of the colonial order.

In the context of colonial history, this finding is consonant with studies that view the disappointment of the educated elite, a group closely aligned with the colonial state, as an important cultural engine for decolonization.⁵⁴ What Jürgen Osterhammel states of colonial Asia also goes for the African continent: “The denial of recognition as equal citizens [...] made some of the ‘most western’ Asians implacable opponents of colonialism.”⁵⁵ Many of the anti-colonial and nationalist leaders had been socialized as bourgeoisified middlemen, attended European-run schools, and held posts as teachers, administrative employees or lawyers, all professions that corresponded with Europe’s lower middle class.

Before Mahatma Gandhi demanded India’s independence clad in a loin-cloth, he practised as a besuited lawyer in South Africa. After receiving an education at mission schools in Dakar, Léopold Sédar Senghor, longstanding deputy in the French National Assembly and later the first president of Senegal, was employed at French universities, where he developed an anti-colonial cultural philosophy supportive of the state during the inter-war period in the shape of *Négritude*.⁵⁶ Regardless of colonial hierarchies and experiences of exclusion in the metropole, such figures increasingly felt destined for greater things, not just culturally, but politically as well. In his study of the middle class in Rhodesia, Michael O. West has already shown that less internationally networked middlemen were as much the bearers as recipients of anti-colonial or at least emancipatory ideas. In the Belgian Congo too, it was the culturally bourgeoisified elite that rapidly staked their claim as political representatives of various population groups and that seized the positions of power in the post-colonial state. At times, for oppressed individuals, the bourgeois promise of respectability, a polit-

⁵² Piron, “L’évolution,” 63.

⁵³ West’s study of the African middle class in Rhodesia comes to a similar conclusion: West, *Rise*, 13.

⁵⁴ See West, *Rise*.

⁵⁵ J. Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt. Eine Geschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts* (München: C.H. Beck, 2009), 1094–1095.

⁵⁶ Riesz, *Léopold Sédar Senghor*.

ical say and recognition seemed like a call for the overthrow of colonial power relations.

The demeanour of “bourgeois radicals”⁵⁷ was sometimes irritating to contemporaries. Thirty years before Jomo Kenyatta became prime minister of Kenya, which achieved independence after a lengthy war of liberation, he moved in London’s pan-Africanist circles as a student, the Comintern viewing him as a potential ally in the early 1930s. During Kenyatta’s period of study in Moscow, however, the former mission school pupil’s behaviour led to conflicts with students from other parts of the colonized world with a Marxist background: “(...) we used to call him a petty bourgeois. He used to say, ‘I don’t like this “petty” thing. Why don’t you say I’m a big bourgeois?’”⁵⁸

So far, historians have paid little attention to the ambivalent positionings and convoluted paths followed by bourgeoisified Africans in the age of decolonization. They have shown interest in the biographies of famous politicians but largely failed to consider the generation to which they belonged. Yet the transformation of the loyal elite into anti-colonial politicians is testimony to the “unintended side effects” of colonial policy, which accelerated the process of decolonization in many African countries.⁵⁹ A history of the African bourgeoisie informed by global history thus sheds new light on decolonization, while also promising to provide an enhanced understanding of the genesis of anti-colonialism and post-colonial politics.

To conclude, let’s return to the bourgeois idyll conveyed by the photograph with which this book began. During an interview in Kinshasa, the elderly journalist Auguste Camille Mwissa-Camus recognized a deceased acquaintance in this picture of the “Congolese *évolué* family in Léopoldville.”⁶⁰ He identified the newspaper-reading father as Jean Mavuela. Not part of the political world,

57 C. Anderson, *Bourgeois Radicals. The NAACP and the Struggle for Colonial Liberation 1941–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

58 W. McClellan, “Africans and Black Americans in the Comintern Schools, 1925–1934,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 26 (1993): 380.

59 W. Reinhard, “Dialektik des Kolonialismus. Kolonialismus und die Anderen,” in *Europa und die Dritte Welt. Kolonialismus – Gegenwartsprobleme – Zukunftsperspektiven*, eds. K. Bade and D. Brötel (Hannover: Metzler, 1992), 8. For other case studies, see A. A. Mazrui, *Political Values and the Educated Class in Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978). On the case of Tanganyika, see Eckert, *Herrschen*, 194–203; on Senegal, see Genova, *Colonial Ambivalence*, 275–278; on Zimbabwe, see West, *Rise*, 203–235; on South Africa, see C. Marx, “Verwoerdian Apartheid and African Political Elites in South Africa, 1950–1968,” in *Elites and Decolonization in the Twentieth Century*, eds. J. Dülffer and M. Frey (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); on Ghana, see Kimble, *Political History of Ghana*, 135–140.

60 Interview with Camille Auguste Mwissa-Camus, Kinshasa, 24 August 2010.

he was not at the centre of attention, but in colonial times he was one of the first Congolese lawyers in Léopoldville and a founding member of the illustrious *Cercle d'Études et d'Agrément*. A meeting was arranged at short notice with his son Anselme Mavuela, who happened to be in Kinshasa in his role as manager of the African division of the International Basketball Federation. Holding the photograph in his hands, he laughed out loud: "That's my dad right there!" But then he looked more closely and shook his head repeatedly, as if he had been deceived:

I recognize that radio there. They were big boxes back then. That is our living room. But [...] I'm not sure. Maybe we got that furniture from somewhere else to spruce everything up. That wasn't normal, that was done for the photograph. The children were usually outside, and the mother was in the kitchen. The mother well-dressed, the little kid too. And then that pot for serving coffee? No, no, no. This is a staged photograph. It was set up! [...] When my father was reading, we weren't in the living room, you know?⁶¹

This anecdote brings out the challenge taken up by the present book. I have sought to write a history of the African bourgeoisie that looks behind the curtain of the colonial state's staged elite formation and that takes account not just of the construction of colonial categories, but of the appropriation and reinvention of these categories in everyday contexts. In other words, I have explored how actors filled the label *évolué* with life, associated it with certain demands and reinterpreted it. The concept of the *évolué* oscillated between lifeworld and colonial propaganda, unleashing its full explosive power for the Lumumba generation in the course of decolonization.

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