

5 Inland Indian Ocean Port: Extraterritoriality and Pragmatism

Blackadder: Baldrick, have you no idea what irony is?

Baldrick: Yeah! It's like goldy and bronzy, only it's made of iron.

(*Black Adder the Third*, Amy and Amiability)

Irony and history go together well, as we can see in the case of the *Eisenbahn* (literally iron road) constructed by the German colonial government to connect Dar es Salaam with Kigoma on Lake Tanganyika and hence with East Congo.¹ The railway reached Kigoma on 1 February 1914. On Tuesday, 30 June 1914, the line was handed over from the construction company to the railway company.² On the previous Sunday, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne had been shot in Sarajevo. The subsequent whims of history would inhibit the Germans from using their brand-new railway for what it was meant for: transporting riches from Congo to the Indian Ocean.³

The First World War was soon exported to the European colonies in Africa. Troops under Belgian command from the Belgian Congo, which had become a Belgian colony less than six years before the war started, invaded German East Africa in 1916. The town of Kigoma fell into Belgian hands on 28 July the same year. The place had become the infrastructural pivot for traffic to and from East Central Africa, like Ujiji had been before. Yet, this does not mean that the global commercial and strategic importance of the region remained the same. Long-distance trade activities had seen ups and downs in the nineteenth century. The same holds true for the period under scrutiny in this chapter. A new boom in the economic and commercial domain was short-lived but undeniable for almost a decade from the mid-1920s until the Great Depression. By then, the town of Kigoma was no longer under Belgian control, but its port still was.

In 1921 the Belgians handed over the area under military occupation – including the town of Kigoma – to the British, but they were granted privileges and a concession in Kigoma's port. It was part of the deal to have the Belgians evacuate the territory

1 A previous version of this chapter has been published as Geert Castryck, "The Belgian Base at Kigoma's Railhead (1920s–1930s): Territorial Ambivalence in an Inland Indian Ocean Port," *Comparativ: Zeitschrift für Globalgeschichte und Vergleichende Gesellschaftsforschung* 25, 4 (2015): 70–86.

2 BLCAS, MSS. Afr. s. 900 (1): History of Central Railway by C. Gillman.

3 Jean-Pierre Chrétien, "Le « désenclavement » de la région des Grands Lacs dans les projets économiques allemands au début du XXe siècle" in *Histoire sociale de l'Afrique de l'Est (XIXe-XXe siècle): actes du colloque de Bujumbura (17–24 octobre 1989)*, (eds.) Département d'histoire de l'Université du Burundi (Paris: Karthala, 1991), 342–343.

that they had occupied during the war. Including also a Belgian port in Dar es Salaam on the Indian Ocean coast and a privileged use of the central railway, this deal gave the Belgian Congo and the new Belgian mandate territories of Ruanda-Urundi an all-Belgian outlet to the Indian Ocean. Legally, this Anglo-Belgian agreement is quite straightforward, granting the Belgians some privileges and concessions on the Tanganyika Territory, which had become a British mandate territory in the aftermath of the war. However, the implementation on the ground opened a window of opportunities for all parties involved. This led to a short-lived boom of the Kigoma-Dar es Salaam connection in the late 1920s and early 1930s. One could expect Kigoma to be the minor one of the two ports, funnelling goods to and from the proper Indian Ocean port at Dar es Salaam; but in fact, it was the other way around: Kigoma was the place where the formalities, transactions, logistics, shipping, and handling were primarily taken care of, hence, the actual command centre of the Belgian bases (also referred to as Belbases).

In this chapter, the focus is on the heydays of Kigoma's role as an inland Indian Ocean port in the 1920s and early 1930s (Figure 7). This success was made possible by both stretching and not insisting much on the legal rights of the Belgians in the port of Kigoma. This *de facto* meant that, on the one hand, all port activities took place in the Belgian-run port, and, on the other, the Belgians did not make use of prerogatives which would have required a distinction between Belgian and British port activities. Thus, not only could the agreement as such be seen as an exception to a territorial order in the narrow sense, but also locally, within the port of Kigoma, the spatial organization and the operation of the port was kept ambivalent.

This chapter focuses in particular on the institutional and informal construction of the lake port of Kigoma as a Belgian Indian Ocean port on British territory. The story starts with the Belgian occupation during and immediately after the First World War, followed by privileged presence guaranteed by a British-Belgian treaty, and reaches a decisive turning point in the early 1930s. Primarily highlighting the interwar period, I reveal how territorial ambiguity and improvised pragmatism defied the lines of sovereignty and territoriality in the colonial period both on the local and the international levels.

5.1 The First World War: Settling European Scores (1914–1921)

During the First World War, troops under Belgian command conquered parts of German East Africa as far east as Morogoro, less than 200 kilometres from the Indian Ocean coast. However, only in the westernmost part of the colony including Kigoma and its port did they install an occupation government, leaving the



Figure 7: Port of Kigoma, with railway station (probably 1922).⁴

rest of the territory to the British.⁵ By the end of the war, however, it became clear that the Belgians would not be allowed to maintain their control in the area. As a matter of fact, the northwestern part of the former German East Africa had never been Belgium's priority. The Belgians had hoped to use these territories as diplomatic currency in order to obtain land close to the mouth of the Congo or to loosen the free trade obligations placed on the Belgian Congo.⁶ In the end, however, the Paris Peace Conference would result in Belgium getting the mandate over Rwanda and Burundi, as well as a perpetual lease of port sites in Dar es Salaam and Kigoma for a single Belgian franc per year, allowing Belgian transit to and from the Belgian Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi free of dues, fees, deposits or

⁴ NA-UK, CO.1069/153: TANZANIA / TANGANYIKA 1. Government House, Dar es Salaam, photographs 1922, together with panoramas of Kigoma 1914/17 and a view of Dar es Salaam Harbour, 1938. No date is given in this archival file, but the picture was taken on 16 October 1922 (See BLCAS, MSS. Afr. t. 43, Panoramic views of Kigoma, taken on Monday 16 October 1922 by Alfred Dalton).

⁵ Hew Strachan, *The First World War in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁶ AAB, AE/II, 3289 (1854): Accords Milner-Orts.

guarantees of any description. In one way or another, the port of Kigoma would stay under Belgian management for almost 80 years, despite the British rule and Tanzanian independence.⁷

The extraterritorial Belgian privileges in the Tanganyika Territory, the British mandate territory about to be founded by the newly established League of Nations, were the result of an often-neglected chapter of the 1919 Paris peace negotiations, which dealt with the parts of German East Africa that the Belgian-led troops had conquered and still occupied at the time. The Belgian-Congolese troops had already given up Tabora but still occupied the western part of the former German East Africa from Karema in the south to the Ugandan border in the north, including 250 kilometres of the railway, and kept their access to Lake Victoria. Against this background, the Belgian and British delegates Pierre Orts and Lord Alfred Milner started their negotiations. They both had a strictly territorial agenda. The outcome of their negotiations also fitted nicely within the legal framework of imperial territoriality. The British got the whole of Lake Victoria and almost all of Lake Tanganyika's eastern shore including the railhead at Kigoma. Belgium got the mandate over Rwanda and Burundi, two semi-autonomous districts in the northwest of the former colony.⁸ Territorially, the Belgians got just over five percent of German East Africa's total surface, but demographically this represented over forty percent of the population.⁹ Up until this point, Orts and Milner practised business as usual, carving up the colonial cake amongst European colonizers, thereby respecting the power relations between them.

The devil, however, is in the detail. The compromise that Orts and Milner struck about Kigoma and Belgian access to the Indian Ocean met both the territorial strategic desires of the British and the economic strategic desires of the Belgians. Roughly speaking, the Belgians relinquished the land but could do what they wanted on what became the British territory. This led to a port of Kigoma – as well as a section of the port of Dar es Salaam – that was nominally British but

7 Guido Fallentheyne, "Belbases in Tanzania", <http://belbases.fallentheyne.be/> (accessed 30 September 2024).

8 O. Lauwers, "Hommage à Pierre Orts (3 novembre 1872–12 juin 1958)", *Koninklijke Academie voor Koloniale Wetenschappen – Mededelingen der Zittingen (Nieuwe Reeks)* IV, no. 4 (1958): 913–916; W. Ganshof van der Meersch, "Orts (Pierre-Charles-Auguste-Raphaël)" in *Biographie Belge d'Outre-Mer* (Bruxelles: Académie royale des sciences d'outre-mer: 1973), vol. VII-A, 367–368; Bonaventure Bandira, "Les négociations belgo-britanniques au sujet des concessions belges à Dar-es-Salaam et Kigoma" in *Histoire sociale de l'Afrique de l'Est (XIXe-XXe siècle): actes du colloque de Bujumbura (17–24 octobre 1989)*, (eds.) Département d'histoire de l'Université du Burundi (Paris: Karthala, 1991), 364–367.

9 Chrétien, "Le « désenclavement »", 352.

Belgian in its operations. The outcome was an extraterritorial Belgian Indian Ocean port more than 1,000 kilometres from that ocean.¹⁰

The Orts-Milner Agreement was an agreement of principle signed on 30 May 1919 and accepted by the Paris Peace Conference. Its most important part was undoubtedly the Belgian mandate over Ruanda-Urundi, which became part of the 1923 mandate agreements of the League of Nations. Here, of course, I am more interested in the deal on Belgian traffic through East Africa, including concessions in Kigoma and Dar es Salaam. This part of the agreement was turned into the Convention between Great Britain and Belgium with a View to Facilitate Belgian Traffic through the Territories of East Africa on 15 March 1921.¹¹ The convention consists of a preamble and 12 articles.¹² In the preamble, the parties declare that the convention, which gives effect to the agreement of principle mentioned above, is an outcome of the joint efforts in Africa during the First World War and meant to give access to the sea to portions of the Belgian Congo as well as to the mandate territories of Ruanda-Urundi.

The central article of the convention was Article 2, which specified the underlying principle of freedom of transit to and from the Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi across East Africa. Additionally, it stated that there should be no distinction with how British persons, mail, goods, ships, railway carriages, and trucks were to be treated. Traffic to and from the Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi was exempt from all customs duty or other similar duties, except for a charge of 25 cents per parcel. However, if the transit passed through the Belgian concession ports of Kigoma and Dar es Salaam, even this fee was not due.

Article 5 stipulated the perpetual lease of suitable sites in the ports of Kigoma and Dar es Salaam for an annual rent of one Belgian franc. Apart from compliance with British law and order, the Belgians were free to do as they considered suitable within the limits of these sites and held the right to entrust the workings of the sites to concessionaires for durations of up to twenty-five years (Article 6).

Article 9 freed the Belgian sites from any interference from the British customs authorities for goods in transit to or from the Belgian Congo and Ruanda-

10 William Roger Louis, *Ends of British Imperialism: The Scramble for Empire, Suez, and Decolonization – Collected Essays* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 218–221. That the Belgians could do what they wanted within the concession was stated by Milner during the negotiations (AAB, AE/II, 2948 [717]: Lettre du Ministre des Colonies au Ministre des Affaires Étrangères, 19 novembre 1930).

11 For the negotiations to turn the agreement of principle into a binding convention, see Bandira, “Les négociations belgo-britanniques”.

12 For the English version of the convention, see NA-UK, CO.691/121/8: Belgian leased sites at Dar es Salaam and Kigoma, 1932.

Urundi. Moreover, Belgian-sealed trucks or wagons on the Kigoma–Dar es Salaam railway were also exempt from all British customs formalities (Article 10). This meant that the Belgians could act independently from British interference as far as transit to and from Belgian colonial territories through the concession sites and via the central railway was concerned. The British merely had the right to be present at all times.

The convention was signed in London on 15 March 1921. One week later, the Belgians ended their occupation, which lasted for five years, and handed the District of Kigoma over to the governor of Tanganyika.¹³ Upon return from Kigoma, the governor-general of the Belgian Congo wrote to the minister of colonies: “Les Anglais se rendent compte que Kigoma n’a d’intérêt que pour nous” (The English are aware that Kigoma is only of interest to us).¹⁴ What he omitted to state, though, was that the Belgian interest in Kigoma was limited only to the port and railway.

5.2 Territorial Ambivalence in the Golden Decade of the Belgian Base

Pierre Ryckmans, who would become the most influential governor-general and chief ideologist of Belgian colonialism in the decades to come,¹⁵ stayed in Kigoma in 1918. Congolese troops returned from the military operation of Mahenge with meningitis, leading to a forced quarantine during which Ryckmans kept himself busy with investigations into the history of the region under German occupation. His focus was on Burundi not Kigoma.¹⁶ Kigoma was a suitable place from where to look into areas of interest but did not attract much attention itself. Similarly, it would become a pivotal place through which areas of interest would be connected but it was not seen as a place of interest for its own sake. Or put differently, its interest lay in its capacity to connect and dispatch and it was precisely this attribute that became or remained Belgian. Although it did not lead to genuine Belgian interest in the local affairs and populations of Kigoma, the crucial function in linking East Congo with the Indian Ocean via the lake and the railway was soon recognized by this advocate of Belgian colonialism. In a letter to the

¹³ AAB, AE/II, 3288 (1850): Évacuation et remise des territoires aux Anglais.

¹⁴ AAB, AE/II, 2890 (200): Lettre du Gouverneur Général du Congo belge au Ministre des Colonies, 8 août 1921.

¹⁵ See: Pierre Ryckmans, *Dominer pour servir* (Brussels: Albert Dewit, 1931).

¹⁶ Pierre Ryckmans, *Une page d'histoire coloniale: L'occupation allemande dans l'Urundi* (Bruxelles: Institut royal colonial belge, 1953), 3.

minister of colonies in the summer of 1921, Ryckmans – by then resident and acting royal commissioner in Ruanda-Urundi and in this capacity, responsible for the administration of the Belgian bases in Kigoma and Dar es Salaam – made a strong plea to make maximum use of the Belgian connection to the Indian Ocean via Kigoma, Dar es Salaam, and the central railway.¹⁷ He considered Kigoma and Dar es Salaam to be the most “Belgian” connection between Belgium and the Belgian Congo, second only to Matadi (“la plus belge de toutes sauf Matadi”).¹⁸

Against the background of the intended private concession over the Belgian bases in Kigoma and Dar es Salaam to be given to the *Agence commerciale belge de l'Est Africain* (ABEA), Ryckmans pleaded for a Belgian representation by accredited diplomats and customs officials in both towns.¹⁹ The risk of blurring the distinction between official Belgian representation and private commercial interests would lead to several confrontations with the British authorities as well as some private companies a decade later. Although never explicitly confirmed, it is likely that this was why the Belgians hesitated for an entire decade before they finally formalized the running of the Belbases. No sooner than 1930 were the Belbases given by concession to the ABEA, although de facto the ABEA in Dar es Salaam and the *Compagnie des Chemins de Fer du Congo supérieur aux Grands Lacs africains* (CFL) in Kigoma were already running the sites since the beginning of the 1920s. Paradoxically, the decade of improvisation would also turn out to be the golden decade.

Ryckmans' letter to the minister of colonies was a visionary one, to which the minister responded mainly positively. It also was a letter of a colonial official who was sympathetic to the Belgian extraterritorial privileges in Kigoma and willing to make use of them as a tool of global – or trans-imperial, trans-regional, and trans-national – connectedness. However, Ryckmans was not the sole Belgian voice expressing his opinion about the Belgian extraterritorial rights; several other Belgian voices were highly sceptical – not to mention the British, who would increasingly object to what they had agreed to.

In the 1924 annual report on customs in Kigoma, Georges Delaunoit, the head of the Belgian customs in Kigoma at the time, considered it to be a blatant mistake to concentrate Belgian customs in the port of Kigoma, which he understood as nothing more than a lease that every private party could also acquire, albeit most likely at a higher price than one Belgian franc per year. Moreover, in his opinion,

17 The management of the Belgian bases in Kigoma and Dar es Salaam had been given to the administration of Ruanda-Urundi and not the Belgian Congo (AAB, AE/II, 2948 [713]: Lettre du Résident de l'Urundi au Ministre des Colonies, 29 août 1921).

18 TNA, District Officer's Reports: Kigoma District, 1933, 17.

19 AAB, AE/II, 2948 (713): Lettre du Résident de l'Urundi au Ministre des Colonies, 29 août 1921.

the Belgian government faced substantial additional costs in their own bases, which were not applicable in ports like Beira, Port Elizabeth, or Cape Town.²⁰ Inadvertently, what he expressed was in line with the British interpretation, which, as we will see later, would actually prove to be wrong by the time the British openly proclaimed it. Nevertheless, at that time, it was relevant that the head of the Belgian customs on Lake Tanganyika criticized the privileges for which he was locally in charge.

In general, the Belgians struggled with their unusual privileges. If Delaunoy was right in his judgement that the Belgian leased sites were something that any private company could also get, then it would be clear and easy to decide what to do with these sites: have them run as and possibly also by a private company. However, the extraterritorial nature of the bases did not only mean that the Belgian ports of Kigoma and Dar es Salaam were outside of Belgian territory. It also meant at least that British sovereignty was limited in these zones.²¹ The Belgians could virtually do whatever they wanted within their premises, as Lord Milner had already exclaimed during the 1919 negotiations.²² This may sound like an appealing situation for the Belgians, but in fact it was not. The extraterritorial semi-sovereignty was as much unfamiliar terrain for them as it would have been for anyone else during the high days of national and imperial territoriality. Clearly, there were some commercial advantages in unlocking landlocked Ruanda-Urundi as well as East Congo via Lake Tanganyika, Kigoma, the central railway, and Dar es Salaam. With the infrastructure of 1920, this route took two months in contrast to six months, when opting for the western trajectory through Congo and via Boma or Matadi, as well as three fewer transloading operations.²³ Accordingly, the coordination and administration of Belgium's East African trade were concentrated in Kigoma. In 1924, for instance, 4.4 million Belgian francs in customs revenues were generated in Kigoma compared to 1.6 million Belgian francs in the second most important customs station on the lake, Albertville. Moreover, all traffic that was cleared in Albertville or Uvira still had to go through the Belbase in Kigoma.²⁴

²⁰ AAB, AE/II, 2890 (200): Douanes Kigoma – Rapport Annuel 1924; AAB, AE/II, 2948 (712), Annexe à la lettre du Commissaire Royal N° 1442/A/6 du 18 mai 1925, Avis et considérations.

²¹ Article 6 of the Anglo-Belgian Convention of 15 March 1921.

²² NA-UK, CO.691/115/8: Lettre du Ministre des Affaires Étrangères (belge) à l'ambassadeur britannique, 31 décembre 1930.

²³ AAB, RA/R-U, 0b (31): Tanganyika Territory, Annual Report 1919–1920, p. 13; Chrétien, “Le « désenclavement »”, 342–343.

²⁴ AAB, AE/II, 2890 (200): Douanes Kigoma – Rapport Annuel 1924.

Taking a closer look at the port activities during the 1920s, the exported goods shipped through the Belgian concession consisted primarily of palm oil, hides, rice, and other local foodstuffs.²⁵ However, the annual report of Belgian customs at Kigoma in 1924 indicates that the export from Congo and Ruanda-Urundi of local foodstuffs as well as cow hides was in decline because of the cattle plague and anti-famine measures. On the other hand, cottons were the most desired import. Printed cotton like kitenge and kanga were in vogue in the urban or so-called European centres, whereas Japanese-made merikani and Indian chadder were in demand in the interior.²⁶ In the course of the 1920s, the product range diversified and increasingly included raw cotton shipped from the port of Uvira in the Kivu, coffee from the ports of Nyanza-Lac and Rumonge in Ruanda-Urundi, and especially copper from Katanga shipped by lake from Albertville to Kigoma.²⁷ With the arrival of the railway, the trade in dagaa (dried small fish) would also extend its range and dagaa became an important long-distance trade good from Kigoma.²⁸ However, this local produce was not part of the transit trade through the Belgian bases and did not appear in the Belgian customs statistics. The fact that not all trade in Kigoma was transit trade would lead to problems in the exploitation of the Belgian port, to which I return later. This combination of regional and global trade had already been a feature of the market in the Kigoma-Ujiji area in the nineteenth century (see Chapter 3). Although the goods involved had – partly – changed, the twentieth-century port of Kigoma was also – or still – characterized by a stable stream of trade in local produce, accompanied by booming and eventually declining or collapsing long-distance trade passing through the strategically situated port.

Concerning copper, the figures give an idea of the significance of this trade through Kigoma. According to the statistics from Tanganyika Railways, 29,997 tonnes of copper were shipped from Congo through Kigoma in 1928 to 1929. After a dip in 1929 to 1930 (18,538 tonnes), the copper traffic reached a peak in 1930 to 1931 with 30,844 tonnes.²⁹ For a comparison, we can check the Belgian customs' figures: all goods combined, a total of 32,200 tonnes was shipped through the Bel-

25 AAB, AE/II, 2948 (713): Lettre du Résident de l'Urundi au Ministre des Colonies, 29 août 1921. Salt was another important export product from the Kigoma region and was loaded on the train directly at the salt pan of Uvinza. Hence, it did not pass through Kigoma and its Belgian base. See TNA, District Officer's Reports: Kigoma District, 1931, 13.

26 AAB, AE/II, 2890 (200): Douanes Kigoma – Rapport Annuel 1924.

27 TNA, District Officer's Reports: Kigoma District, 1927, 16.

28 BLCAS, MSS. Afr. s. 503: John Rooke Johnston, Kigoma District Handing Over Report, 1940, 96.

29 BLCAS, MSS. Afr. s. 900 (1): Clement Gillman, "Important Events in the History of the Railways".

gian base of Kigoma to Congo and Ruanda-Urundi in 1929, whereas 26,672 tonnes of export came from Ruanda-Urundi. Exports from Congo, including copper, were not registered in Kigoma, since these were declared in Albertville or Uvira.³⁰ However, it is clear from these figures that the amount of exported copper corresponded to roughly all imports to Congo and Ruanda-Urundi combined or to all exports from Ruanda-Urundi. Another telling figure was the earnings from traffic to and from Congo, which represented 55 percent of the total earnings of the entire central railway.³¹

The predominant copper-producing enterprise in the Belgian Congo, the Union Minière du Haut Katanga (UMHK) was founded in 1906, boomed in the 1920s, and reached a total production of 139,000 tonnes of copper in 1930.³² Read in combination with the figures from Tanganyika Railways for 1930, this means that the Congolese copper export via the Kigoma connection was close to a quarter of the total production of the UMHK. Kigoma's future looked bright and was inextricably linked with the copper industry in Katanga. The fact that by the end of the 1920s, the political control over the Belgian base at Kigoma was moved from the administration of Ruanda-Urundi to the Province of Katanga is a further indication of the growing importance of copper to the port of Kigoma.³³ Kigoma had evolved from a regional trade centre around Lake Tanganyika into a small gateway in the global copper trade.

In order to accommodate this booming trade, the Belgians made considerable investments in their port and supporting infrastructure. The site leased in 1921 had a lake frontage of 250 metres and was 60 to 70 metres deep, roughly the size of two football fields.³⁴ By the end of the decade, Kigoma was on the rise and this

30 AAB, AE/II, 2948 (717): Rapport par le Contrôleur Principal des douanes à Kigoma 1930, 30 janvier 1931.

31 BLCAS, MSS. Afr. s. 900 (1), Clement Gillman, "Important Events in the History of the Railways".

32 Jan-Frederik Abbeloos, "Belgium's Expansionist History between 1870 and 1930: Imperialism and the Globalisation of Belgian Business" in *Europe and its Empires*, (eds.) Mary N. Harris and Csaba Lévai (Pisa: Ed. PLUS, 2008), 118; Bogumil Jewsiewicki, "Belgian Africa" (translated by Yvonne Brett and Andrew Roberts), in *The Cambridge History of Africa*, (eds.) J.D. Fage and Roland Anthony Oliver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), vol. 7, 482. For a deeper insight into the town of Lubumbashi in this period, see Sofie Boonen, "Une ville construite par des « gens d'ailleurs »: Développement urbain et « gouvernementalité » coloniale à Élisabethville (RDC)", PhD dissertation, Universiteit Gent, 2019.

33 AAB, AE/II, 2948 (717): Rapport par le Contrôleur Principal des douanes à Kigoma 1930, 30 janvier 1931; AAB, Direction de l'énergie, des travaux publics et des communications (FRED), 1180: Lettre de l'inspecteur des douanes au Gouverneur du Katanga, 30 janvier 1931.

34 NA-UK, CO.691/100/14: Request by Belgian Government for extension of concession of trade sites at Kigoma.

was reflected in further Belgian investments in a new wharfage system, quays, a two-storey building comprising offices and warehouses, and five steam cranes and a 25-tonne derrick between 1928 and 1930.³⁵ On top of these, the Belgians built a wireless telegraph station, opened a Belgian bank, a vice-consulate, and a central customs authority for Ruanda-Urundi and East Congo in Kigoma during the 1920s. As early as 1928, which is only seven and a half years after the Belgian bases were established, they had already requested an extension of their Kigoma site primarily for safety reasons and more specifically to be able to store explosives and combustible goods. The British realized that it was in their interests from the point of view of railway traffic that the Belgians expand their use of the Kigoma-Dar es Salaam connection, however, they were reluctant to give them more or even the best parts of the harbour.³⁶ On the ground, however, pragmatism reigned and the British *de facto* operated their comparably small businesses through the Belgian site.

The depiction so far could give the false impression that the British were merely passive bystanders. In fact, they supported and became involved in the Belgian port activities through investments and entrepreneurship of their own. The fleet on the lake was primarily British, and the new slipway that was constructed in 1929 maintained all ships, including the Belgian ones.³⁷ At the same time, the British-run railways were undoubtedly the crucial link in the entire connection from Congo to the Indian Ocean and back.

In addition to Belgians and British, it is important to stress the role of other international trade actors. Arab, Indian, and Swahili traders had already played a significant role in pre- and early-colonial times and were still numerous at the time of Belgian conquest in 1916.³⁸ By 1930, Indian traders, most of whom were from Gujarat or the region around Bombay, numbered up to 250 men; about half of them had their families with them. There were around 100 Arab traders in Kigoma in 1930, most of them Omani and about one-third of them with families. About 20 Greek people were also present in Kigoma in the late 1920s.³⁹ Indian and Arab traders primarily took care of the intricate connections with the surrounding region and its markets and remained important for the commerce

³⁵ TNA, Kigoma Provincial Book; Fallentheyne, "Belbases in Tanzania".

³⁶ NA-UK, CO.691/100/14: Request by Belgian Government for extension of concession of trade sites at Kigoma; TNA, Tang. Sec., 12912: Vol. I, Belgian Concessions at Kigoma (1927–1936).

³⁷ TNA, Kigoma Provincial Book.

³⁸ AAB, RA/R-U, Ob (24): Rapport sur la situation économique du district d'Udjidi [1918].

³⁹ TNA, Kigoma Provincial Book.

around Lake Tanganyika until long after the decline of the Belgian base set in in the early 1930s.⁴⁰

5.3 Formalized Convention, Privatized Concession

At the height of the Belbases' success, the concession over the sites was given to the ABEA. A management agreement was signed on 11 December 1929; the contract was approved by the Belgian and the British government and took effect on 31 January 1931.⁴¹ At that time, however, nobody knew that the times of plenty were drawing to a close. Although the British welcomed the clarity of the new situation and the improved management expected from ABEA in comparison to the CFL,⁴² the de facto privatization and formalization of the exploitation of the Belbases caused disputes about customs procedures, delays in clearing and handling shipments, unequal competition between private companies, and the demarcation of the Belgian premises in Kigoma.

The pragmatic or cooperative attitude of the 1920s was substituted for strict formalism in line with the letter of the 1921 convention. Only now did the British start to discover how much the convention actually entailed, while also firmly discarding what was at odds with it. The British complaints resonated with the sceptical positions that some Belgians had proclaimed since the early 1920s. In the end, the height of Belgian operations in Kigoma would also be a decisive turning point leading to a piecemeal Belgian withdrawal from Kigoma during the first half of the 1930s. By the end of 1931, the copper traffic through Kigoma drastically decreased from over 30,000 tonnes the previous year to 16,343 tonnes.⁴³ The Great Depression was not the only reason. It was also because newer, cheaper, and faster – in short, better – connections linking mineral-rich Katanga with the Atlantic ports in the Belgian Congo and Portuguese Angola became available at about this time.⁴⁴ Kigoma's Indian merchants, whose businesses had branches along the lake in Bujumbura and Rumonge, suffered a chain of bankruptcies in

40 Geert Castryck, "Spheres of Life and Scales of Action among Gujarati and Omani Merchants in the African Great Lakes Region, 1920s–1930s", *Itinerario* 47, no. 1 (2023): 59–75.

41 AAB, FRED, 1180: Organisation douanière Ruanda Urundi, 13 janvier 1931; AAB, AE/II, 2948 (717), Concessions belges à Dar es Salaam et à Kigoma; NA-UK, CO.691/109/10, Concessions to Belgian Government at Kigoma and Dar es Salaam, 1930; TNA, Tang. Sec., 19652: Traffic through Belgian leased sites at Dar es Salaam and Kigoma, vol. I.

42 NA-UK, CO.691/109/10: Concessions to Belgian Government at Kigoma and Dar es Salaam, 1930.

43 AAB, FRED, 1181 (9): Renseignements statistiques. Documentation, 1931.

44 Piet Clement, "Het bezoek van Koning Albert I aan Belgisch Congo, 1928: Tussen propaganda en realiteit", *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis* 37, nos. 1–2 (2007): 178–183.

the first half of the 1930s,⁴⁵ while local trade around the lake also suffered heavily due to a combination of economic crisis, locusts, and drought.⁴⁶ Taking place simultaneously, the effects of an already raging global economic crisis were further exacerbated by the partial Belgian retreat from Kigoma. As had been the case in the second half of the nineteenth century in Ujiji,⁴⁷ the boom in long-distance trade in interwar Kigoma was short-lived. Kigoma fell back on its role as regional trade centre for the people living around the lake and the Belgian bases became the transit sites that the British and some Belgians had wished them to be from the very beginning.

This decline is remarkably evident in the Belgian, British, and Tanganyikan archives. Whereas a wealth of files on the Belgian bases is available for the 1920s and early 1930s, the source base all but vanishes by the mid-1930s. The Belgians in Kigoma left hardly any traces in the archives between 1935 and 1950, apart from some necessary revisions of old policy measures or contracts that had to be adapted to new uncertain circumstances,⁴⁸ a handful of references to tensions regarding the war effort in the early 1940s,⁴⁹ and the occasional Belgian representative in the Kigoma Township Authority.⁵⁰ Except for the obvious continuation of the local administration of the urban area, Kigoma as such also virtually disappeared from the archives, which indicates that the town was no longer considered as of special interest by administrators in London, Brussels, or even Dar es Salaam. This situation lasted until the 1950s, when some activity around the port of Kigoma could once again be discerned, but Kigoma would never again reach the promising dynamics of 1930.⁵¹ The turning point for Kigoma was 1930 to 1931. In the following pages, we take a look at the changes and disputes that occurred during this time.

At the beginning of 1930, the Belgians requested the British government's formal approval in order to give the port sites in Kigoma and Dar es Salaam by concession to the ABEA. This coincided with, on the one hand, some British grudging when they understood that the Belgians could and did use their base in Kigoma as the de facto port of entry into Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi, and, on the

45 Castryck, "Spheres of Life".

46 TNA, District Officer's Reports: Kigoma District, 1931, p. 14; TNA, Kigoma Regional Office (523), M5/23: Food Shortage – Kigoma, Letter from District Commissioner Kigoma to Provincial Commissioner Tabora and Kigoma Provinces, 9 February 1932.

47 Brown, "Ujiji"; Gooding, *On the Frontiers*, especially 89–91. Also see Chapter 3.

48 TNA, 63.L.2/354: Kigoma Township Plots, Vol. II: 1937–1958; Fallentheyne, "Belbases in Tanzania".

49 TNA, Tang. Sec., 12912: Vol II: Belgian Concessions at Kigoma (1941); AAB, AE/II, 3289 (1857–1858): Accords Milner-Orts.

50 TNA, Tang. Sec., 19408: Kigoma Township Authority, vol. II: 1941–1953.

51 TNA, District Officer's Reports: Kigoma District 1950, 5; 1953, 5; 1955, 6 and 9.

other, the Belgian announcement that they were considering further expanding the customs activities at Kigoma, thereby turning the Belgian base into the *de jure* port of entry. Given an already existing British dissatisfaction, this only worsened the situation.⁵² Practical, legal, and economic arguments came together in a discussion that would last until 1932, but by then, the economic and commercial situation on local and global scales had become a profoundly different one.

Belgians had already been discussing the use – or uselessness – of their bases since the early 1920s. By the end of the decade, at a time when the port of Kigoma grew spectacularly, some British also started reflecting on the best ways to organize traffic and the limited space at the port of Kigoma. A couple of months before the Belgians gave their bases by concession to the ABEA, the general manager of Tanganyika Railways, Colonel Geoffrey A. P. Maxwell, had listed the problems and opportunities in Kigoma, albeit seen from his particular point of view. The port of Kigoma had become a bottleneck and was too small to absorb the rapidly increasing flows of goods. In his view, the most convenient solution was for the Belgians to use their base as a transit port only, in other words, to ship everything as quickly as possible across the lake or in the opposite direction to the coast – on his trains. In his opinion, the main cause of the delays in the Kigoma port was the inefficient, if not incompetent, operation of the port by the commercial company CFL in combination with allegedly time-consuming Belgian customs formalities, which made Kigoma a port of entry into Congo and Ruanda-Urundi instead of a mere transit site. He was convinced that using of the port as a transit site had always been the intended and still the only appropriate practice for the Belgian port sites. Therefore, he called for the use of Kigoma's Belbase as a transit site only, for an efficient management under – the Belgian – government control, and for a better physical organization of the harbour with fences around the Belgian site.⁵³

Undoubtedly, his envisaged reorganization would have served the needs and interests of the railway company. However, he overlooked the economic and commercial interests involved in the transshipment and clearing activities taking place in Kigoma. Much more than threatening the port and rail activity, the formalities in Kigoma constituted the economic backbone of Kigoma's commercial sector. The primarily British, in these imperial times including Indian, enterprises

52 AAB, AE/II, 2948 (717): Concessions belges à Dar es Salaam et Kigoma; AAB, FRED, 1180: Lettre du Gouverneur Général du Congo belge au Ministre des Colonies, 27 février 1931 (with three annexes); NA-UK, CO.691/109/10: Concessions to Belgian Government at Kigoma and Dar es Salaam, 1930; NA-UK, CO.691/115/8: Letter from the Belgian Chief Comptroller of customs at Kigoma to the Head of customs of Tanganyika Territory at Dar es Salaam, 27 December 1929.

53 NA-UK, CO.691/109/10: Letter from the General Manager of Tanganyika Railways to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Dar es Salaam, 24 October 1929.

of Kigoma depended heavily on the activities relating to handling, clearing, and forwarding in the Belgian port. It was in the British interest that more than only taking goods from train to ship and from ship to train happened in Kigoma. This shared interest between Belgian and British companies and authorities also explains why nobody until that point had felt the need to fence off the Belgian port.

Ironically, the Belgians seemed to have overlooked the same issue, albeit from another angle. The economic opportunities would drastically decrease not only if the port were to become a mere transit site but also if the whole site were to come under the monopoly of a single private company. The management was expected to be more efficient through the ABEA concession, but at the same time the direct government control was reduced and distrust amongst commercial competitors complicated the handling and clearing activities of all companies other than ABEA. The Belgians had underestimated how the ABEA concession would create a monopoly situation at the expense of other firms in Kigoma.

Two records in the colonial archives of the Belgian customs and foreign affairs together with two notes in the British archives of the Colonial Office give an insightful analysis of the conflict between Belgians and British that arose at the time the Belgians expressed their intention to give the Belbases by concession to ABEA and to concentrate their customs for entry into East Congo and Ruanda-Urundi in Kigoma.⁵⁴ In a letter from the British Embassy in Brussels to the Belgian minister of foreign affairs, the British Foreign Office accuses the Belgians of contravening the Anglo-Belgian Convention of 15 March 1921.⁵⁵ According to the British, the Belgians were not entitled to levy customs duties on British soil. Since Kigoma was situated in British territory and entirely surrounded either by British territory or British waters, performing Belgian customs formalities in the port of Kigoma was allegedly in breach of territorial sovereignty. Moreover, in their reading, Article 2 of the convention expressly forbid all “customs duty or other similar duties” as well as “any delays or unnecessary restrictions” for goods in transit across East Africa. The exemption of customs duties was, moreover, reiterated specifically for the port of Kigoma in Article 9 of the convention. The Belgian government disagreed and argued that the Orts-Milner Agreement was nothing more and nothing less than a limitation of British sovereignty in the Belgian-

54 AAB, AE/II, 2948 (717): Concessions belges à Dar es Salaam et Kigoma; AAB, FRED, 1180: Divers Kigoma, 1929–1958; NA-UK, CO.691/109/10: Note by Brigade-General Hammond to Under-Secretary of State Colonial Office, 31 March 1930; NA-UK, CO.691/115/8: Note by Under-Secretary of State Colonial Office, 2 May 1931.

55 AAB, AE/II, 2948 (717): Letter from the British Ambassador to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, 18 August 1930. Same letter in: NA-UK, CO.691/109/10: Concessions to Belgian Government at Kigoma and Dar es Salaam, 1930.

leased sites in Kigoma and Dar es Salaam. The convention limited the British not the Belgian right to levy duties on goods in transit to and from Congo and Ruanda-Urundi.⁵⁶

Interestingly, the weaknesses of each side's own positions were discussed openly in the confidential correspondence on both sides but not communicated to the other. Despite the initial strong accusation, the British soon understood that the Belgians were probably right. Rather than admitting this, they tried to reach the desired outcome based on practical and economic considerations instead of legal and political ones. The Belgians were quite confident that they were right but also aware that the weakness in their position derived from the fact that the convention strictly speaking only applied to goods in transit through and not from or to East Africa. They had no solution for regional trade around the lake or goods otherwise coming from or going to the British territories in East Africa. As long as Belgians and British, convinced of their shared interests, had conducted business in a pragmatic way throughout the 1920s, this distinction was not made and complications were thereby avoided for all parties involved. Once the formalist legal card was played, the situations changed completely. Clarity was detrimental to the successful operation of the inland Indian Ocean port at Kigoma.

Apart from the Belgian and British authorities, the private firms constituted the third party operating in and around Kigoma. For a number of reasons, they did not like the Belgian idea of concentrating customs in Kigoma and they opposed the ABEA concession. They knew that there was nothing legally wrong with this concession per se. Nevertheless, they considered the combination with the envisaged obligatory customs formalities, which would have to take place within the ABEA-run Belbase, indeed questionable. For more than two years, the British authorities continued to receive private complaints. They distrusted the semi-official status of their competitor, whom they could not avoid when trading through or handling in the Belgian bases. That the ABEA had secured the monopoly on certain activities in the port was one thing, but that for the sake of customs formalities, other agents would have to disclose their invoices and hence their business secrets was inadmissible. What is more, when the effects of the Great Depression struck ever harder and made all business activities difficult, the private companies requested the same tariffs and exemptions as the traffic through the Belgian sites in order to circumvent them in a still profitable way. The British authorities were not willing to grant them services that would cost money to the

⁵⁶ AAB, AE/II, 2948 (717): Lettre du Ministre des Colonies au Ministre des Affaires Étrangères, 19 novembre 1930; NA-UK, CO.691/109/10: Letter from Under-Secretary of State Foreign Office to Under-Secretary of State Colonial Office, 18 June 1930; NA-UK, CO.691/115/8: Concessions to Belgian Government at Kigoma and Dar es Salaam, 1931.

government. Nevertheless, the whole situation did lead to the perceived necessity of more clearly distinguishing between and demarcating the Belgian and the British parts of the port, hence undoing the territorial ambiguity on the ground.⁵⁷

Yet, if customs procedures had to take place in the ABEA-run Belbase as was envisaged by the Belgian authorities anyway, not much would be gained with a British “open” port. The catch-22 situation in Kigoma was the simultaneous decision to give the port by concession to ABEA and to concentrate customs in the port. The Belgians had hoped to save costs by concentrating all customs formalities for trade with East Congo and Ruanda-Urundi via Lake Tanganyika in one place. In the 1920s, a hybrid situation had existed, necessitating customs stations in the lake ports of Albertville, Uvira, and Kigoma, while leaving ambiguities in Bujumbura, Nyanza-Lac, Rumonge, and Baraka. Until 1923, everything had taken place in a legal vacuum. From then onwards, imports into Congo could be cleared in Kigoma, but this was not compulsory. Traders could freely decide whether they opted for Kigoma, Albertville or Uvira – in other words, between clearing before or after crossing the lake. For exports from Congo, Kigoma was not authorized as a customs station.

One year later, the same regulation also applied for Ruanda-Urundi, although there was *de facto* no operational customs office on the lake in Urundi that could have served as an alternative for Kigoma. In 1927, a new ordinance by the governor of Ruanda-Urundi stated that all customs clearing to and from Ruanda-Urundi via Lake Tanganyika must take place in Kigoma. This situation was both expensive and complicated. By the late 1920s, the Belgian customs authorities were investigating the centralization of their dealings for traffic via Lake Tanganyika in one place. That place could only be Kigoma’s Belbase, because it was the only location where one could reasonably expect all goods to and from East Congo and Ruanda-Urundi to pass through. Yet, not all were in favour of this solution. Firstly, it would make the existing installation in Albertville obsolete, secondly, the port of Kigoma was deemed too small – an argument also expressed by the British –, and thirdly, a growing number of Belgian expats living and working in Kigoma would benefit to the British. Moreover, on the one hand, trade to and from British East Africa was excluded from the Belbase privileges. On the other hand, the Belgians were not allowed to operate outside of the Belbases. Therefore, to impose all customs formalities in Kigoma would require lenience from the British, who were no longer willing to grant it.

57 NA-UK, CO.691/121/8: Belgian leased sites at Dar es Salaam and Kigoma, 1932; NA-UK, CO.691/127/6, Belgian leased sites at Dar es Salaam and Kigoma, 1933.

In the end, although the Belgians had international law on their side, customs have never concentrated in Kigoma. On the contrary, on 25 August 1931, the Belgians declared that the customs station in Kigoma would be closed completely in 1932.⁵⁸ The Banque du Congo Belge in Kigoma closed on 30 September 1934,⁵⁹ the wireless telegraph station was dismantled, and by early 1933, only four Belgians still resided in Kigoma. Meanwhile, the Belgian base was still there and handling most of the traffic going through Kigoma. But apart from that, the Belgian presence in town decreased rapidly and drastically and seemed to have been reduced to the annual laying of a wreath on the Belgian cenotaph on Armistice Day.⁶⁰ The next time the archival sources make mention of the Belgian base in Kigoma was in 1937 when the Belgian authorities put their warehouses at the disposal of the Tanganyika Railways Administration.⁶¹ The days in which the Belgians lacked space in their concessions were far gone. The remaining – primarily Indian – businesspeople in town renegotiated their ground tax obligations, indicating that the economic opportunities in Kigoma no longer allowed them to pay what had seemed reasonable in the late 1920s. The provincial commissioner of the Western Province agreed that there were no grounds to levy ground rents in Kigoma, which were twice as high as, for instance, in Mwanza at Lake Victoria, and stated that “[i]t is quite obvious that the former prosperity as a railhead will never return to Kigoma”.⁶²

Yet again, irony and history go together well. As soon as the extraterritorial half-sovereignty was formally acknowledged, it no longer worked. Although the Belgians had an extraordinary array of extraterritorial rights at their disposal throughout the 1920s, all parties involved in the port of Kigoma improvised pragmatically without bothering too much about the full extent of the Belgian legal prerogatives. A mishmash of customs regulations coexisted, port and railway premises were not clearly demarcated, and an informal openness allowed everyone everywhere to do all that was needed to make the port run smoothly. This mode of operation had turned the Indian Ocean port of Kigoma into a functioning Belgian enclave that was still perceived as British by the British. When the Belgians tried to formalize customs regulations and the utilization of the port, the extraordinary scope of their extraterritorial rights was disclosed in principle but

58 AAB, AE/II, 2948 (717): Note – Dédouanement des marchandises à Kigoma: Rétroactes de la question; Ordonnance 25 août 1931, N°64/DOU.

59 TNA, District Officer's Reports: Kigoma District, 1934, 20.

60 BLCAS, MSS. Afr. s. 503: John Rooke Johnston, Kigoma District – Handing Over Report, 1940.

61 NA-UK, CO.691/154/6: Tanganyika Railways use of Belgian leased sites at Dar es Salaam and Kigoma, 1937.

62 TNA, G3.L.2/354: Minutes by the Governor, 22 March 1937.

instantly closed in practice. There was one legal loophole – the exclusion of trade to and from East Africa from the Belgian extraterritorial rights – but in the end, the economic and practical objections turned out to be the most decisive.

Despite the ultimate failure, I claim that the Belgian base in Kigoma during this episode can be characterized as a portal of globalization, “where institutions and practices for dealing with global connectedness have been developed”.⁶³ The territorial ambiguity during the 1920s had been one not only of Belgian extraterritorial presence in Kigoma but also of pragmatism in the operation of the port itself. The Belgian site had not been fenced off, which actually extended the territorial ambiguity into the entire port. The territorial ambivalence was effective as long as it was also allowed in the operation of the port itself, and there lies the – although only short-lived – innovativeness in dealing with and thereby facilitating global interaction.

5.4 Coda

After the relatively brief phase of ambivalence and success, the Belbases continued to operate under the 1921 agreement as modest port facilities under concession to the Belgian company ABEA, later renamed AMI (*Agence Maritime Internationale*). The “goldy” phase would never return, but irony would strike again after the independence of Tanganyika/Tanzania, Burundi, Congo, and Rwanda. As legal heirs to the Anglo-Belgian agreement, these four states became parties to the agreement, which under international law continued to exist. As they never reached an agreement on how to deal with these peculiar international port privileges, the AMI concession continued until 31 December 1995, which means that a formal Belgian presence in Kigoma – albeit under the guise of a concession to a private company – lasted 80 odd years, considerably longer than Belgium’s colonial history and twice as long as the British rule over Kigoma-Ujiji.

63 Middell and Naumann, “Global history”, 162–163.