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The Power of Silence – Congolese Religious’ Memories of the Colonial and Missionary Past

Mick Feyaerts/Simon Nsielanga/Idesbald Goddeeris

In Belgium, the way the colonization of Congo is remembered has been evolving at a rapid pace. Whereas the half-centenary of Congolese independence in 2010 was celebrated with much nostalgia about the colonial past, the sixtieth anniversary ten years later went together with landmark events. For the first time, monuments to Leopold II – the Belgian king who created the Congo Free State in 1885 – were removed from the public space. Moreover, the current Belgian King Philippe – who had till then, just as his father King Albert II (r. 1993–2013), always been silent about the colonial past, expressed his regret in a letter to the Congolese President Tshisekedi on June, 30, 2020, Congo’s Independence Day. In the following month, the Belgian Parliament created a special commission to research the country’s colonial past and to reflect on the ways how policy-makers should deal with it. After more than two years, the commission eventually failed to come to conclusions, but this does not mean that the decolonization of Belgian mind has now disappeared from the societal agenda. On the contrary, other domains – from the AfricaMuseum to educational institutions – are increasingly working on the theme.¹

This acceleration has several explanations. It follows international developments, first and foremost the Black Lives Matter protest of the summer of 2020. But it also stems from Belgian particularities. Especially the long-lasting absence of postcolonial migration is relevant in this regard. Both before and after 1960, Belgium closed its borders for migrants from its (former) colonies. This changed as late as in the 1990s, when the wars in Central Africa brought large groups of asylum seekers to Europe, including Belgium. The first generation of these refugees was hardly able to take the floor in Belgium. In Flanders, they remained silent because they did not sufficiently master Dutch and in French-speaking

¹ Matthew G. Stanard, *The Leopard, the Lion, and the Cock. Colonial Memories and Monuments in Belgium*, Leuven 2019; Idesbald Goddeeris, *The Decolonization of Belgian Society*, in: *Memoria e Ricerca*, 31/73 (2023), 237–254.

Brussels and Wallonia, they were overshadowed by groups that identify with Belgium and are therefore less critical about its colonial past. However, the second generation has been participating in public debates since the 2010s and has provided critical counterviews to the until then remarkably one-sided narratives.²

Iconoclastic opinions from diaspora groups now dominate the floor. Yet, it is not clear to what extent they represent the entire Congolese (and Rwandan and Burundi) community. Are all people in Belgium of Central African origin so sharply disapproving the colonial past? What is more, their anger seems to contrast the much more benign attitude among people in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). A returning argument in Belgium is that many Congolese are longing for the Belgian presence and even asking them to come back. This can be accounted for by the different frames of reference: people in Africa compare the colonial past to the present-day situation, observing a significant political and infrastructural deterioration and ignoring the violent, exploitative and segregationist aspects of colonial rule, whereas Africans in Belgium frequently experience discrimination and racism and see continuity with the same colonial past. However, one may wonder if this dichotomy is so absolute and if postcolonial memories in the DRC are unanimously positive. In other words, are the black communities in Belgium and Central Africa so homogeneous as one tends to believe?

This article will answer this question by examining how Congolese religious – both in Africa and in Belgium – look back at the colonial past. In this way, it also connects to another aspect of mental decolonization that has thus far largely been neglected: the role of the Church. Missionaries are indeed most often represented in a positive way. Whereas academic literature has pointed to the many links between mission and colonization and Karen Vallgårda has argued that missionaries were threads in larger *imperial webs*,³ many people in Belgium tend to consider them as a human counterbalance of the colonial regime, emphasizing the Church's role in the expansion of education and healthcare or its genuine sympathy with the local population.⁴ Both in Belgium and in the DRC, new monuments to missionaries are being erected still in the 21st century.⁵ Yet, just as regarding the alleged nostalgia for the colonial past in the DRC and the supposedly

² Idesbald Goddeeris, Postcolonial Belgium: the Memory of the Congo, in: *Interventions. International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 17/3 (2015), 434–451.

³ Karen Vallgårda, Were Christian missionaries colonizers? Reorienting the debate and exploring new research trajectories, in: *Interventions. International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 18/6 (2016), 882.

⁴ Maarten Langhendries, The Missionary: Figure of Reconciliation with the Colonial Past in Flanders (2007–2012), in: *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, 97/3 (2019), 751–71.

⁵ Idesbald Goddeeris, Missionarissen. Geschiedenis, herinnering, dekolonisering, Leuven 2021; Idesbald Goddeeris, Belgian Monuments of Colonial Violence: the Commemoration

widely spread criticism within the diaspora, this disconnection between mission and colonization is a simplification of reality and asks for an in-depth analysis. This article aspires to contribute to this by researching the memories of a pivotal group in this regard: Central African Catholic religious.

The article will work with three cases: a male religious order (Jesuits) and a female one (Annonciades) in the DRC, and Congolese clergy in Belgium. The Jesuits – officially the Society of Jesus – were one of the first congregations that settled in Leopold II’s Congo Free State, in 1893, and have ever since become one of the most visible ones, expanding their mission in the Bas-Congo (west of Léopoldville/Kinshasa) and the Kwango and Kwilu (east of the capital), pioneering in different fields (including higher education and training of indigenous clergy) and providing front-rank missionaries such as Joseph Guffens and Jozef Van Wing. The first Congolese Jesuits took their vows in the early 1950s, the first African provincial took office in 1972, and nowadays, there are about three hundred Congolese Jesuits.⁶

The Annonciades, officially the Order of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, sent their first group of missionaries to the then Belgian Congo in 1931. They were stationed in multiple posts in the Jesuit-controlled Kwango mission and especially engaged in education and health care. The first Congolese sisters entered the novitiate in 1958, but their number only gradually increased from about ten in the 1960s and 1970s to thirty in 1988, fifty in 1994, eighty in 2003, and 105 in 2023.⁷ The Annonciades elected their first Congolese regional provincial in 1975, but she was again replaced by a Belgian in 1981. Although in 1993 a Congolese sister took over again, and since then, Belgian Annonciades mostly left the country, the communities in Congo continued to form a region instead of a province, which legally limits the level of autonomy of the superior in Congo.

Since the 1950s, some of these Congolese Jesuits and Annonciades, just as members of other congregations, spent parts of their training and/or subsequent career in Belgium. However, from the 1980s, more and more Central African clergy have settled in Belgium for longer periods (or permanently) and have been called into parish work in order to compensate for the sharp decline of vocations among Belgians. In Dutch-speaking Flanders, there are several dozens of them,

of Martyred Missionaries, in: *Journal of Genocide Research*, 24/4 (2022), 586–603; Idesbald Goddeeris, «Benefactors of Humanity»? Monuments for Missionaries in the Belgian Public Space, in: Jonas Van Mulder/Thomas Coomans/Dries Vanysacker (eds.), *Cross-Cultural Impacts. Critical Approaches to Missionary Heritage*, forthcoming Leuven University Press.

⁶ Alain Deneef/Xavier Dusausoit/Christophe Evers/Maurice Pilette/Xavier Rousseaux (eds.), *De la Mission du Kwango à la Province d’Afrique Centrale. Les Jésuites au Congo-Zaïre Cent Ans d’Epopee*, Bruxelles 1995 and <http://jesuitesace.net/index.php/jesuites/notre-province> (May 11, 2024)

⁷ Ria Christens, *Terra Incognita. 75 jaar annuntiaten in Afrika*, Heverlee 2006, 386–396.

but in the French-speaking dioceses, they now even account for the majority of the presbyterium.⁸

This article studies how selected members of these three groups view and remember the colonial past and the role of missionaries. It is based on written and oral sources. Several Congolese Jesuits and Annonciades wrote works – often published doctoral dissertations and unpublished MA theses – about their congregations' past in Congo and/or manifestos in which they reflected on the impact of colonization. Central African priests in Belgium did also write theses, but we did not find any work with reference to the colonial past. However, Belgian media occasionally pay attention to the phenomenon of so-called *reverse mission* and publish extensive interviews in which African priests also talk about colonization, mission, and decolonization. These *official* or *public* views are supplemented with more intimate opinions expressed during in-depth conversations. Mick Feyaerts, who is preparing a doctoral dissertation on female congregations (including Annonciades) in Kikwit after 1960, talked to six sisters. Simon Nsielanga, who is writing a PhD on the decolonization of the Jesuit Central African Province, interviewed 24 Jesuit fathers, 5 Jesuit brothers and 4 secular priests. Idesbald Goddeeris, who is working on African clergy in Belgium, talked to one Rwandan and two Congolese priests.⁹

In what follows, we will firstly explore the discourses about the colonial and missionary past of Congo that we encountered in the written and oral sources. Secondly, an analysis of these discourses based on existing insights on the workings of collective memory – for instance by Astrid Erll, Jeannette Marie Mageo, Rosalind Shaw and Gerlov van Engelenhoven – will allow us to make sense of what is being said as well as what is being kept silent about. We will argue that the many silences we have discovered serve an import purpose: they meaningfully allow for both the reclaiming of agency and the construction of a collective identity that transcends continental borders. In this way, this article contributes to current scholarly research in three ways. First, it brings in a religious dimension in the debates on the memory of the colonial past. Second, it transcends the juxtaposition between diaspora communities in the former metropoles and voices in

⁸ Tertio, October 15, 2014 and L'Avenir, October 11, 2018.

⁹ Goddeeris presented his first findings at the conference *Bouncing back: The Return of Missionaries in the Low Countries* (KADOC, Leuven, September 22–23, 2022), supervises the MA theses of Thomas Van den Venne and Marguerite de Brouwer on this topic, and aims to submit a first article in the course of 2024. The conclusions of this article are based on his study of Belgian media since the 1990s (digitally available via GoPress) and three interviews he conducted for his presentation in 2022, namely with Gilbert Yamba (Brussels, July 13, 2022), Théogène Havugimana (Leuven, July 20, 2022) and Etienne Miji (Assenede, July 26, 2022). These three respondents remain anonymous in the course of this article.

the former colony. Third, it does not only focus on what is being remembered, but also on what is not said, and tries to give meaning to this silence.

We must acknowledge that our positionality as researchers operating from Belgium might have had an impact on how Congolese religious spoke to us. Idesbald and Mick are white Belgians, and Simon is a Congolese Jesuit who has lived in Belgium for several years now, so it cannot be ruled out that interlocutors catered their narratives to this. The same goes for the dissertations we consulted: some of them were written at European institutions (KU Leuven and Gregoriana in Rome), and the ones that were written at Congolese institutions are often about European missionaries and are kept in the libraries of the congregational motherhouses in Europe. Nevertheless, we should not overestimate the impact we could have had on our interlocutors: it would deny them the agency to remember the colonial past in a way that makes sense to them.

The Representation of the Colonial Past

In the Congolese religious’ discourses on the colonial past, a certain level of ambivalence can be observed. Dominantly positive sentiments only occasionally make way for vaguely formulated criticism. Such sporadic denunciations of colonization either remain rather conceptual about the atrocities committed by the Belgian colonizers, or ignore them altogether by focusing on instances of Congolese resistance. Although the atrocities of the Congo Free State had been given much public attention following the publication of Adam Hochschild’s book *King Leopold’s Ghost* in 1998, none of the consulted works mention the severe criticism on Leopold II. The accusation of millions of deaths and the powerful image of severed hands that both take center stage in the public discourse in Belgium are not invoked at all. For example, Jesuit Father Anicet Mbengi N’teba, who in 2010 published his doctoral dissertation on the Jesuits’ contribution to Congolese society in Kwilu between 1901 and 1954, wrote about the «quality of the Belgian delegation members»¹⁰ at the Conference of Berlin in 1885, where Leopold II obtained the Congo. Similarly, he only deals with the transformation of the Congo Free State into the Belgian Congo in 1908 in terms of changes in the administrative organization, without elaborating on the international criticism that led to this shift. Sister Rosalie Kahuma Pemba, who in 2011 graduated in Applied Pedagogy with a thesis on the integration of Congolese sisters in her congregation, emphasizes the humanitarian reasons of Leopold’s colonial enterprise: «putting an end to the slave trade and bringing Western civilization to the black populations of

¹⁰ Anicet N’Teba Mbengi, *La mission de la Compagnie de Jésus au Kwilu. Contribution à la transformation d’une région congolaise*, Roma 2010, 75.

Africa.»¹¹ The authors seem to take over propaganda narratives and describe Congo's colonial history rather positively.

What takes center stage in the discourses of the religious in Congo, both written and oral, is the infrastructural development of the country during the colonial period. Many sources emphasize the materialization of a schooling and health care system, industry, and new technologies. Father N'Teba for example quotes key colonial protagonists, such as a local administrator stating that «the Company HCB [*Huileries du Congo belge*; Oil Mills of the Belgian Congo] can be considered as the prime factor of civilization»¹² or the Belgian Minister of Colonies Louis Franck (1918–1924) praising colonization as «such a beautiful work» that «has always been a title of glory and a source of considerable advantages for the colonizing country.»¹³ He also emphasizes that the end of the rubber trade – due to competition from Southeast Asia – led to better social conditions and solid infrastructure.¹⁴

Once in a while, points of criticism shine through this laudable discourse, but they mostly remain quite vague. Father N'Teba occasionally alludes to aspects such as «economic exploitation», «extraction of wealth», the «population's suffering» and «forced labor». Yet, the praise eclipses these references, and he keeps silent about specific instances, casualties, violent repression and racism. A similar mechanism is at play with the Annonciades: during conversations, many of them invoked the «official narrative» in a history textbook produced for secondary schools, describing the period of the Congo Free State as a «red rubber» regime of exploitation and abuse, but without going into detail. Moreover, they separate the Leopoldian era from the *temps des Belges* after 1908 and mainly describe the latter as a period of material and infrastructural improvement. The book does make mention of the Belgians' paternalistic attitude or the fact that this infrastructure served the colonial system and its revenues, but does not develop this further.¹⁵

Another returning element that carefully shatters the discourse of colonialism as positive is the focus on Congolese agency, capability, and force. The history textbook for example also highlights the instances in which Congolese took matters in their own hands, like episodes of political resistance (the Revolt of the

¹¹ Rosalie Kahuma Pemba, L'intégration des sœurs congolaises dans la congrégation des sœurs annonciades d'Heverlee 1958–2010, BA thesis in Pédagogie appliquée, Institut Supérieur Pédagogique de Kikwit, 2010–2011, 8.

¹² N'Teba Mbengi, La mission de la Compagnie de Jésus au Kwilu (see note 10), 113.

¹³ N'Teba Mbengi, La mission de la Compagnie de Jésus au Kwilu (see note 10), 102.

¹⁴ N'Teba Mbengi, La mission de la Compagnie de Jésus au Kwilu (see note 10), 110.

¹⁵ For instance, Annette Lembagusala (author of a PhD Dissertation in historical pedagogy at KU Leuven), and Evelyne Atuhelusa (who is a graduate in history and a director of a secondary school in Kikwit, where she teaches history) called the textbook *Histoire. 6ième année secondaire* by Rigobert Lupamanyi and Jean-Pierre Lisongo (Kinshasa: Médiaspaul, 2015) «vraiment un bon livre» («a really good book») (interview with Mick Feyaerts, Kikwit, October 16, 2023).

Pende in 1931) or religious movements (Kimbanguism, Kitawala, etc.). In her BA thesis at the Institut Supérieur Pédagogique de Kikwit, Sister Evelyne Atuhelusa wrote that «[b]efore the arrival of the European in the territory of Kwilu-Kwango in general and in Kimbongo in particular, the indigenous populations had experienced a well-structured organization and had nothing to envy of that of the white man.»¹⁶ Jesuit Father Lucien Madiangungu Kikuta elaborates on the Yaka people’s refusal to bow to Belgian colonial rule, which is culturally rooted in their tenancy to the institutions of custom that earned them an extraordinary reputation.¹⁷ Father N’Teba extensively discusses the Revolt of the Pende. Quoting more than three pages from a study by Benoît Verhaegen (a Belgian left-wing historian who taught at Congolese universities between 1959 and 1987)¹⁸, this section is much more critical of the colonial rule than the rest of his book, pointing at the recruitment of workers from faraway regions and giving numbers of casualties. Nevertheless, for the authors, these instances of Congolese power seldom lead to a fundamental critique on colonization. Father N’Teba concludes his section on the Pende Revolt of 1931 by giving the floor to the then Kwango bishop (and Jesuit Father) Sylvain Van Hee, who thought that the rebels «had not yet acquired our concepts of civilization», were «stirred up by some bad figures among the chiefs and sorcerers» and also «denounced the direct action of Satan.»¹⁹ As remarkable is the approach of Sister Charlotte Fuka, who discusses the Pende, but skips their revolt of 1931 and limits herself to their organizational structure and rites. This contrasts her view of another major rebellion in the region, the Mulelist uprising of 1963–1964, which she considers as the cause of poverty.²⁰

Central African priests in Belgium voiced sentiments very similar to those of the religious in Congo, but made their stance much more explicit through the vocabulary they used. They did make more space for critique, but nevertheless concluded positively. One respondent only highlighted positive things: «We must also recognize that the settlers did many positive things, that the Congolese administration was the best administration in Africa.» Another one tried to put the negative aspects into perspective: «You have to go back to that time. You have to look at this historically, at the situation at that time, with the glasses of that time.

¹⁶ Evelyne Atuhelusa, *Histoire de la mission catholique Kimbongo 1931–1985*, BA thesis in Pédagogie appliquée, Institut Supérieur Pédagogique de Kikwit, 2001, 90.

¹⁷ Lucien Madiangungu Kikuta, *The Historical Environment of Jesuit Missionary Evangelization among the Yaka of Middle Kwango in the Ancient Mission of Kwango (1893–1935)*, Roma 2001, 45–46.

¹⁸ Rudi Van Doorslaer, Interview met Benoît Verhaegen, in: *Soma Berichtenblad*, 29 (1997).

¹⁹ N’Teba Mbengi, *La mission de la Compagnie de Jésus au Kwilu* (see note 10), 116–122.

²⁰ Charlotte Fuka, *L’œuvre de développement des sœurs annonciades d’Everlee dans la paroisse de Totshi/Dioceze de Kikwit*, BA thesis in Sciences Religieuses, Institut Supérieur des Sciences Religieuses Kinshasa/Limete, 2007–2008.

There were good things and bad things, negative things and positive things. Leopold II also did good things. Infrastructure, schools, hospitals.» Even the most critical one was open to positive results: «Colonization is by definition bad. Some consequences may be good, but the starting point is bad. The first objective was not development, it was profit.»²¹

Unlike religious in Congo, Central African priests in Belgium also commented on the current process of mental decolonization in the Western world. On the one hand, they do not subscribe to decolonization activism: «I have never understood why we must try by all means to remove the statue of the king. What will this change?» and «removing statues will not change anything in history». On the other hand, they also show much understanding: «We have to clean up the broken pots. First, we should accept that there are broken pots. Accept that the starting point was bad: the prime trigger of colonization was exploitation. Then together look for solutions. Learn to live with it without denying it.» And last but not least, they wonder whether the focus on symbols is the most urgent one. In Belgium, «children do not learn colonial history» and in the DRC, «there are many things that need special attention.»²²

The Representation of Missionaries

Regarding the Belgian missionaries in Congo there was less ambivalence in the discourses we explored, which can be explained partly by the fact that, in a way, all these religious thank their very state of being to them and their work. Central African priests in Belgium were much more unanimously positive on missionization than they were on colonization. Only one of them admitted that some of them had not always been critical enough and had written things that did not correspond to reality. All the others paid a high tribute to the Belgian missionaries. «I wouldn't know what missionaries have done in a negative sense, I wouldn't be able to say this directly. I was born in 1973. I lived through a different time, with dispensaries every thirty or fifty kilometers. It was really a mission, a life with the population. They went by bicycle to do mass everywhere, and after a month they returned to the mission.»²³

This praise is not surprising. On the one hand, the respondents compared the time of the missionaries to the present-day decline of educational and medical infrastructure: «Now go back to the mission posts of the past: there is nothing left. This is due to a management problem. One still needs to develop a culture among priests or sisters which is not taught in schools. Their mentality needs to be

²¹ Anonymized interviews with Idesbald Goddeeris, July 2022.

²² Anonymized interviews with Idesbald Goddeeris, July 2022.

²³ Anonymized interviews with Idesbald Goddeeris, July 2022.

changed: how do you deal with what is not yours alone, what is common?»²⁴ On the other hand, Central African priests in Belgium often connected their own destiny with the one of their predecessors in their native lands. Father Macaire Gitango-Muzeya, who had arrived to Belgium from Bandundu (DRC) in 2001 in order to continue his MA and then PhD studies and combined this with pastoral work, emphasized that «I am a Belgian product of Jesuit training. If I became a priest, it is because I saw how these missionaries gave of themselves in our parishes. I recognize myself in these values.»²⁵ His Rwandan colleague Jean-Marie Vianey Bizumuremyi, who came to Belgium in 2011, smiled: «Today, it is up to us, the priests..., Africans, to come and re-evangelize the Belgians.»²⁶ The Congolese Scheut Father Martin Mvidubulu Mavinga, who became provincial of the Belgian-Dutch province of his congregation in 2021, noted that «young men – I am 49 years old myself – are now moving to the regions where the missionaries came from who brought the gospel to our native country. I see this explicitly as gratefully giving back what the fathers have given us.»²⁷

This sentiment of indebtedness also steers the memory on Belgian missionaries of Congolese religious in Congo. Father N'Teba, for instance, regularly refers to their passion and their skills or lists the many fields they greatly affected, such as education, health care, economy, religion, culture, and intellectual development. He elaborates on the numerous condemnable practices that missionaries brought to an end: circumcision, polygamy, polyandry, child marriage, ancestor veneration, tribal wars, and the social position of the woman. «The missionaries taught the natives order, method, taste for work and certain more advanced methods of agriculture... They created needs for them, taught them hygiene and cleanliness, gave them notions of morality; they established centers, fought diseases, built villages and traced roads... In short, thanks to the activities of missionaries, civilization began to shine where barbarism reigned.»²⁸

A conversation with one of the first Congolese Annonciades made this clear as well: although she did not refrain from criticizing the first wave of Belgian missionaries that arrived in Congo at the end of the 19th century and labelled them accomplices to the regime of the Congo Free State, she felt great feelings of gratitude for the wave of missionaries that settled in Congo after 1908. Indeed, most sister congregations only took up the missionary apostolate in Congo well into

²⁴ Anonymized interview with Idesbald Goddeeris, July 2022.

²⁵ Un «père noir» à La Bruyère, in: *Le Soir*, April 20, 2005.

²⁶ «On me prenait pour un témoin de Jéhovah», in: *La Nouvelle Gazette – Entre Sambre et Meuse*, July 10, 2012.

²⁷ «Ik ben een vrucht van het werk van Vlaamse missionarissen», in: *Tertio*, October 6, 2021.

²⁸ N'Teba Mbengi, *La mission de la Compagnie de Jésus au Kwilu* (see note 10), 446.

the 20th century (as stated above, the Annonciades only arrived in 1931), and it is «thanks to them, thanks to the Church» that she could become religious.

Thus, there is a certain criticism of missionaries, but it is being compensated with nuance, context, and accordingly, praise. Father N'Teba attributes problems in mission stations to a lack of manpower or funds, as well as to the low quality of Congolese catechists. Africans opposed Christianization, but missionaries went for comprise and conciliation. Some would act more brutally, for instance by destroying fetishes, but their attitude went against central directives. Missionaries, just as all Europeans, treated Africans as inferior creatures or children, but this was typical of the era and Jesuits gradually discovered the qualities of Africans and began to believe in them and to realize that Africans were also made in the image of God. Their endeavors disintegrated traditional structures, but «thanks to the Gospel, a new social system was introduced that was quite superior to the primary solidarities that came out of geographic proximity or clan or tribal belonging.»²⁹

Similar to the discourse on colonization, the Congolese religious completely ignore European works critical of missionization and its methods. Around the turn of the century, for example, contemporary opponents heavily criticized the Jesuits' system of chapel farms – auxiliary missionary stations where Congolese children received primary education and provided for themselves with farming and stockbreeding. They spoke of child theft (not all children were redeemed slaves or rescued orphans, but often simply taken during government raids or punitive expeditions), forced labor, and a strict disciplinary regime.³⁰ These statements led to a commission of inquiry and a fierce reaction by the Belgian Parliament, and the system was eventually abolished (1911–1912).³¹ In the 1980s, author Jules Marchal calculated that in the mission of Kimwenza, one of the Jesuits' earliest mission stations (close to present-day Kinshasa), 1,200 children died between 1893 and 1899. He did not shy away from terms such as concentration camps, hecatombs and holocaust to describe the impact of the Jesuit missionaries on the region.³²

Although Marchal published his work in Dutch, it is very unlikely that none of the religious included in this research had heard his criticisms. Léon de Saint-Moulin, an authoritative Belgian Jesuit missionary in Congo, briefly referred to

²⁹ N'Teba Mbengi, *La mission de la Compagnie de Jésus au K wilu* (see note 10), 496.

³⁰ Idesbald Goddeeris, *Missionaries: A human dimension to colonization?*, in: Idesbald Goddeeris/Amandine Lauro/Guy Vanthemsche (eds.), *Colonial Congo. A History in Questions*, Turnhout 2024, 251.

³¹ N'Teba Mbengi, *La mission de la Compagnie de Jésus au K wilu* (see note 10), 456, 455, 453, 449.

³² A.M. Delathuy, *Missie en Staat in Oud-Kongo. Witte Paters, Scheutisten en Jezuïeten. 1880–1914*, Berchem 1992, 308.

Marchal's work in 1993.³³ Nevertheless, none of the Congolese religious make mention of these elements. Father N'Teba even treats the chapel farms in an extremely benevolent way. He makes mention of an MA thesis from 1970 on the media and parliamentary debates and recognizes that the system was eventually reformed, but limits the contents of the criticism to «projects too beautiful, too utopic»³⁴ and concludes that the chapel farms «harmoniously combined evangelization and development.»³⁵ A dissertation that the Congolese Jesuit Gérard Ciparisso wrote in 1972 on the chapel farms, however, also includes criticism. It referred to the testimony of a former catechist, François-Xavier Sita, in 1959, who had questioned old people on this topic and stated that they were unanimous in affirming that the Fathers used force to recruit children for their chapel farms and closely collaborated with agents of Leopold II's Congo Free State.³⁶

It is indeed striking that especially in the 1970s, individual Congolese Jesuits opposed the positive narrative and were very critical of their Belgian predecessors. At a contemplation of African Jesuits in late December 1974, Father Cyrille Mununu complained that African Jesuits felt like «cheap» Jesuits and «guests within the Society [of Jesus].»³⁷ Father Octave Kapita phrased it in a different way: «We have somehow remained strangers, simple spectators or marginal collaborators vis-à-vis the emergence and the growth of the Church and the Society [of Jesus] in Africa and Zaire.»³⁸ He noticed that the Belgian missionaries had imposed their proper views and lifestyles and had prevented African novices from pursuing studies at a higher level because this jeopardized «their secret intentions to supplant, to dominate, to command, to occupy certain positions, etc.»³⁹ According to some African Jesuits, the Western domination and the close link to the colonial power was still existent at that time, almost fifteen years after Congolese

³³ Léon de Saint Moulin, *Cent ans de présence jésuite en Afrique centrale*, in: *Zaïre-Afrique*, 33/279 (1993), 546.

³⁴ N'Teba Mbengi, *La mission de la Compagnie de Jésus au Kwilu* (see note 10), 154.

³⁵ N'Teba Mbengi, *La mission de la Compagnie de Jésus au Kwilu* (see note 10), 490.

³⁶ Gérard Ciparisso, *La méthode des fermes-chapelles chez les Bampagnu (1895–1911)*, Thesis presented to obtain the degree of Doctor in Philosophy and Literature, History Group, Université catholique de Louvain, 1972, 77.

³⁷ Archive of the Central African Province of the Society of Jesus (Kinshasa), Fr. Cyrille Mununu, «*Vocation à la Compagnie et Disponibilité à l'Église*», December 27, 1974.

³⁸ Archive of the Central African Province of the Society of Jesus (Kinshasa), Fr. Octave Kapita, «*Notre engagement par rapport à la Compagnie en Afrique*», in: *Journées de Récollection des Prêtres Jésuites Africains œuvrant dans la partie occidentale de la Province d'Afrique Centrale*, Kimwenza, December 27, 1974–January 1, 1975.

³⁹ Archive of the Central African Province of the Society of Jesus (Kinshasa), Fr. Octave Kapita, «*Notre engagement par rapport à la Compagnie en Afrique*», in: *Journées de Récollection des Prêtres Jésuites Africains œuvrant dans la partie occidentale de la Province d'Afrique Centrale*, Kimwenza, December 27, 1974–January 1, 1975.

independence: «a disguised Western imperialism and a marked tendency to want to justify Western hegemony in perpetuity.»⁴⁰

Such statements were made at internal meetings and have not been published. They should also be understood in the specific context of Africanization following the Second Vatican Council and Paul VI's visit to Uganda in 1969. They seem to be typical of a first generation of African Jesuits: Kapita was born in 1926, Mununu in 1928, and both belonged to the first group of Africans at the new novitiate in Djuma. They had mixed memories about the colonial era and may have been frustrated about their careers being impeded by paternalism and Eurocentrism (although Kapita was the first Congolese Jesuit to obtain a PhD – in Theology from Gregoriana in 1964 – and work as a professor of theology, and Mununu in 1962 became Rector of the Djuma community).⁴¹ Apparently, a new generation of Jesuit Fathers, epitomized by Father N'Teba, was much more lenient about the colonial past and the Belgian Jesuit missionaries.

Yet, we should not magnify such a generation gap. Mixed memories persisted in the 21st century. Sister Evelyne Atuhelusa, for instance, voiced some critical opinions about the Belgian missionaries. In 2004, she wrote that «[b]efore independence, the Church was dependent on the colonial administration. The religious life of that time could not escape this administration. Despite the philanthropic works motivated by the evangelical message, the backdrop remains colonialist.»⁴² Three years earlier, she especially denounced the destruction of traditional culture and noted that «the missionaries who worked in Africa in general and in the Congo in particular did not seek to understand the culture of the natives due to a lack of in-depth knowledge of local languages.»⁴³ Yet, her final judgment was again positive: «it appears today that the Kimbongo region has benefited enormously from the presence of Catholic missionaries».⁴⁴ Thus, the criticism remains subtly hidden in chapters that especially highlighted achievements.

⁴⁰ Archive of the Central African Province of the Society of Jesus (Kinshasa), Report of the commission on Jesuit life in Africa, prepared for the Provincial Congregation of 1974, 2.

⁴¹ Archive of the Central African Province of the Society of Jesus (Kinshasa), Anicet N'Teba. Unpublished Dictionnaire D'Histoire des Jésuites en Afrique Centrale (Kinshasa: Editions Loyola), 269 and 688.

⁴² Evelyne Atuhelusa, *Les sœurs Annonciades d'Heverlee dans la paroisse de Kingandu. Une présence transfiguratrice (1947–2003)*. MA thesis in Pédagogie appliquée option histoire, Institute Supérieure Pédagogique de la Gombe, 2003–2004, 56.

⁴³ Atuhelusa, *Histoire de la mission catholique Kimbongo 1931–1985* (see note 16), 89.

⁴⁴ Atuhelusa, *Histoire de la mission catholique Kimbongo 1931–1985* (see note 16), 91.

Collective Amnesia? Silence as a Vehicle for Empowerment and Identity Making

At first sight, most of these memories are highly positive. Congolese religious keep silent about the atrocities of Leopoldian and Belgian colonial rule and instead especially highlight its achievements and successes. It often even seems that they use the same narrative as the one of the colonial propaganda. Yet, a closer look lays bare some – carefully – critical opinions. It is true that this critique remains rather vague. The discourses rarely give concrete examples of atrocities, abuse, or wrongdoings, let alone mention specific names, places, or a number of casualties. Moreover, the critical utterances that are included mostly remain eclipsed by the praise. Only a limited number of religious included in this study have produced explicitly anti-colonial and anti-mission discourses. What to make of these silences?

The silences do not mean that these elements are forgotten, nor can they be interpreted as a sign of oppression, brainwashing, or even poor education or ignorance. They should not even strike us as surprising – in the making of collective memory, silences are as meaningful and productive as everything that is being voiced. Indeed, collective memory is not a static configuration of discourses about the past, but something that is shaped and reshaped continuously in order to make sense to contemporary minds.⁴⁵ «Collective memories are never a mirror image of the past, but rather an expressive indication of the needs and interests of the person or group doing the remembering in the present.»⁴⁶ Hence, what a group chooses to voice and what to remain silent about is always meaningful.

In the Congolese religious' discourses on the colonial past, silences actually play an empowering role. Congolese fathers and sisters mainly limit their criticism to vague denunciations of paternalism, the erasure of tradition and economic exploitation, but refrain from details of mistreatment, racism, and repression as they are reported in the works of Western authors. In doing so, they both overcome a reading of the colonial history of Congo in which Congolese are mere victims, and reclaim control over their own history.⁴⁷ The fact that instances of opposition to colonial rule do have a central place in the collective memory supports this interpretation.

Simultaneously, collective memory is an indispensable vehicle to the solidification of group identity. It steers a process of inclusion and exclusion, and in

⁴⁵ Jeannette Marie Mageo, *Cultural Memory. Reconfiguring History and Identity in the Post-colonial Pacific*, Hawaii 2001, 14.

⁴⁶ Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture*, London 2011, 8; as cited in: Gerlov van Engelenhoven, *Postcolonial Memory in the Netherlands. Meaningful Voices, Meaningful Silences*, Amsterdam 2022, 14.

⁴⁷ Engelenhoven, *Postcolonial Memory in the Netherlands* (see note 46), 143.

doing so defines the boundaries of social groups.⁴⁸ As members of the Jesuits or the Annonciades, Congolese religious are part of international congregations that originate from Europe/Belgium. This transnational context obviously also applies to Central African clergy working in Belgium. The mostly laudable discourses and vague criticisms thus stem from more than just a feeling of indebtedness: explicitly criticizing the missionary history of their institutes based on detailed historical accounts would hamper their own sense of belonging to the congregation specifically and to the Catholic Church in general. In emphasizing the alterity of European missionaries, such criticisms would not only impact the social cohesion of the wider group, but also render the membership of Congolese religious to these institutes questionable. Thus, Congolese religious collectively have little to gain from including the many atrocities in their discourses on the colonial past: it would both deprive them of a level of agency and lead to a crisis of belonging.

Moreover, the dominance of positive elements in these collective colonial memories should also be read against the backdrop of infrastructural decay and political impotence in present-day Congo. Congolese religious cannot but mourn the government's inability to preserve and further develop the country's educational, medical, and technological infrastructure, much of which was erected during the colonial period. The material decline of both their own facilities and those of the state, and the consequent poverty among the population, contrasts sharply with their image of the colonial period. Their portrayal of the Belgian colonial authorities and missionaries as bringers of a civilization with an advanced infrastructure then also serves a political purpose.⁴⁹ It allows for the Congolese religious to implicitly voice an indictment of the presidency and the government, hence keeping them save from repressive actions.

Concluding Remarks

This article discussed the memories of Congolese Jesuits and Annonciades in the DRC and of Central African priests in Belgium about the colonial past and the role of missionaries. It identified the silences that permeate these discourses and argued that these are not symptoms of a misplaced amnesia, but are meaningful in at least three ways. First of all, the silences serve an empowering purpose, for they allow for these Congolese religious to reclaim agency, both in the past and as creators of historical narratives. Secondly, they are indispensable to the mechanisms behind the social formation of the congregations they belong to, and to their individual inclu-

⁴⁸ Engelenhoven, Postcolonial Memory in the Netherlands (see note 46), 15.

⁴⁹ Mageo, Cultural Memory (see note 45), 12.

sion in that group. Lastly, the current political and material situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo equally informs a positive reading of colonizers and missionaries as providers of an advanced and well-functioning infrastructure.

This analysis explains why this discourse contrasts heavily with how the Congolese diaspora in Belgium deals with the colonial past. The frames through which the colonial past is being referred to differ: infrastructural decline in the DRC versus racialized discrimination in Belgium. The ongoing discrimination of people of color in Belgium testifies to the persistence of colonial mental schemes, which forces them to actively look for and condemn the roots of these ideas. The analysis also makes clear why Congolese priests in Belgium, who experience the same racism as other groups within the Central African diaspora, did not really adopt the anti-colonial perspective of the Congolese diaspora. As members of international institutes with many links to Europe and Belgium specifically, their mildness serves the purpose of social cohesion. Thus, Congolese religious' opinions about the colonial and mission past should not be ignored or dismissed as the legacy of brainwashing. Today, the Church is one of the most appreciated institutions in the DRC, and its opinion cannot be neglected.

That being said, this study prompts many more questions that need to be answered in order to maximize our understanding of collective memory of colonialism and missionization among Congolese religious. For example, the recognition of the significance of silences in the context of the formation of an international congregation makes one wonder about the collective memory on colonization among members of autochthonous congregations. Indeed, not all Catholic congregations in Congo are offshoots of European ones; from the 1930s onwards, exclusively Congolese congregations were founded. The objectives were racist – at the time, Congolese were not deemed capable of joining European congregations – and they operate in full autonomy from the Church in Europe/Belgium, so this context might lead to a different reading of the colonial and missionary past. Secondly, by only studying discourse, this article approaches the topic of collective memory in a logocentric way and ignores that remembering involves many other practices that go beyond discourse. Rituals and music, but also objects, bodily movement or locations store and invoke memories of the past without necessarily being accompanied by a narrative.⁵⁰ Studying these in the context of the Roman Catholic Church in Congo (or other churches and religions) will most certainly expand our knowledge about what the colonial past means for contemporary Congolese religious.

⁵⁰ Rosalind Shaw, *Memories of the Slave Trade. Ritual and the Historical Imagination in Sierra Leone*, Chicago 2002.

*The Power of Silence – Congolese Religious' Memories
of the Colonial and Missionary Past*

This article examines how Congolese religious – Jesuits and Annonciades in Congo and Congolese clergy in Belgium – look back at the colonial past and at the role of missionaries. It demonstrates that they approach this mostly in positive terms, even with gratitude and praise, although there is also vague criticism and, in the 1970s in the context of Africanization, explicit opposition against the dominant narrative. The silencing of the dark pages of the colonial past can be explained in several ways. In doing so, Congolese religious both overcome a reading of the colonial history of Congo in which Congolese are mere victims, and reclaim control over their own history. They also confirm their belonging to their transnational congregations and to the Catholic Church in general. Finally, the dominance of positive elements in these collective colonial memories should also be read against the backdrop of infrastructural decay and political impotence in present-day Congo. Contrasting this to the colonial era allows for the Congolese religious to implicitly voice an indictment of the authorities while keeping them save from repressive actions.

Missionaries – Memory – Decolonization – Congo – Belgium.

Die Macht des Schweigens – Die Erinnerungen kongolesischer Ordensleute an die koloniale und missionarische Vergangenheit

Dieser Artikel untersucht, wie kongolesische Ordensleute – Jesuiten und Annonciades im Kongo und kongolesische Geistliche in Belgien – auf die koloniale Vergangenheit und die Rolle der Missionare zurückblicken. Es zeigt sich, dass sie sich dem meist positiv nähern, sogar mit Gratifikation und Lob, obwohl es auch vage Kritik und, in den 1970er Jahren im Kontext der Afrikanisierung, explizite Opposition gegen die herrschende Erzählung gibt. Das Verschweigen der dunklen Seiten der kolonialen Vergangenheit kann auf verschiedene Weisen erklärt werden. Zum einen überwinden kongolesische Ordensleute dadurch sowohl eine Lesart der kolonialen Geschichte des Kongo, in der Kongolese lediglich Opfer sind und gewinnen zugleich die Kontrolle über ihre eigene Geschichte zurück. Zum anderen bestätigen damit auch ihre Zugehörigkeit zu ihren transnationalen Kongregationen und zur katholischen Kirche im Allgemeinen. Schliesslich sollte die Dominanz positiver Elemente in diesen kollektiven Kolonialerinnerungen auch vor dem Hintergrund des infrastrukturellen Verfalls und der politischen Ohnmacht im heutigen Kongo betrachtet werden. Der Vergleich mit der Kolonialzeit erlaubt es den kongolesischen Religiösen, implizit eine Anklage gegen die Behörden zu erheben und sie gleichzeitig vor repressiven Massnahmen zu bewahren.

Missionare – Erinnerung – Dekolonisierung – Kongo – Belgien.

Le pouvoir du silence – Souvenirs des religieux congolais du passé colonial et missionnaire

Cet article examine comment les religieux congolais – les Jésuites et les Annonciades au Congo ainsi que le clergé congolais en Belgique – se souviennent du passé colonial et du rôle des missionnaires. Il montre qu'ils l'abordent le plus souvent en termes positifs, voire avec gratitude et louange, bien qu'il y ait aussi de vagues critiques et, dans les années 1970, dans le contexte de l'africanisation, une opposition explicite contre le récit dominant. La mise sous silence des pages sombres du passé colonial peut s'expliquer de plusieurs manières. Ce faisant, les religieux congolais surmontent une lecture de l'histoire coloniale du Congo dans laquelle les Congolais ne sont que des victimes, et reprennent le contrôle de leur propre histoire. Ils confirment également leur appartenance à leurs congrégations transnationales et à l'Église catholique en général. Enfin, la dominance d'éléments positifs

dans ces mémoires collectives coloniales doit également être lue dans le contexte du délabrement des infrastructures et de l'impuissance politique du Congo d'aujourd'hui. Le contraste avec l'époque coloniale permet aux religieux congolais d'exprimer implicitement une mise en accusation des autorités tout en les préservant d'actions répressives.

Missionnaires – mémoire – décolonisation – Congo – Belgique.

*Il potere del silenzio – I ricordi dei religiosi congolesi
del passato coloniale e missionario*

Questo articolo esamina il modo in cui i religiosi congolesi – gesuiti e Annunziati in Congo e clero congolese in Belgio – guardano al passato coloniale e al ruolo dei missionari e dimostra che essi lo affrontano per lo più in termini positivi, persino con gratitudine e lode, anche se non mancano vaghe critiche e, per quanto riguarda gli anni '70 nel contesto dell'africanizzazione, un'opposizione esplicita contro la narrazione dominante. La messa a tacere delle pagine oscure del passato coloniale può essere spiegata in diversi modi. Così facendo, i religiosi congolesi superano una lettura della storia coloniale del Congo in cui i congolesi sono mere vittime e rivendicano il controllo sulla propria storia. Essi confermano inoltre la propria appartenenza alle congregazioni transnazionali e alla Chiesa cattolica in generale. Infine, la predominanza di elementi positivi in queste memorie coloniali collettive deve anche essere letta sullo sfondo del degrado infrastrutturale e dell'impotenza politica del Congo attuale. Il contrasto con l'epoca coloniale permette ai religiosi congolesi di esprimere implicitamente un'accusa nei confronti delle autorità, tenendosi al contempo al riparo da azioni repressive.

Missionari – memoria – decolonizzazione – Congo – Belgio.

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