

## Colonial Masters of Ceremony

### The staging of the *évolués* in the Belgian Congo

Daniel Tödt

Mise en ligne : mars 2025

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.51185/journals/rhca.2025.varia1>

#### Abstract

This article focuses on the public awards ceremonies organized to celebrate those members of the Congolese elite who successfully applied for a new legal status (through the *carte du mérite civique* in 1948 and the immatriculation in 1952). It argues that the colonial state's official publications and photographs of these ceremonies aimed to present the *évolués* as perfect inhabitants of the model colony characterized by the cooperation between the colonial administration and the Congolese elite. The article then shows how the gap between the colonial project to ensure the subordination of the elite in the social order and the Congolese urge for self-empowerment widened. The question of which conflicts inherent in the elite politics were masked and how they nevertheless emerged will be addressed by comparing propaganda with other sources such as administrative documents, articles and letters written by members of the Congolese elite, and photographic self-portraits.

**Keywords:** Congo ; ceremonies ; decolonization ; elite ; photographs

#### *Maître de cérémonie colonial. La mise en scène des évolués au Congo belge*

#### Résumé

Cet article se concentre sur les cérémonies publiques de remise de prix organisées pour célébrer les membres de l'élite congolaise qui ont réussi à obtenir un nouveau statut juridique (par le biais de la carte du mérite civique en 1948 et de l'immatriculation en 1952). Les publications officielles de l'État colonial et les photographies de ces cérémonies visaient à présenter les évolués comme des habitants parfaits de la colonie modèle caractérisée par la coopération entre l'administration coloniale et l'élite congolaise. L'article montre alors comment le fossé entre le projet colonial d'assurer la subordination de l'élite dans l'ordre social et la volonté congolaise de s'émanciper s'est creusé. La question de savoir quels conflits inhérents à la politique de l'élite ont été masqués et comment ils sont néanmoins apparus sera abordée en confrontant les documents de propagande à d'autres sources telles que des documents administratifs, des articles et des lettres rédigés par des membres de l'élite congolaises, ainsi que des autoportraits photographiques.

**Mots clés :** Congo ; cérémonies ; décolonisation ; élite ; photographies



Ce document est mis à disposition selon les termes de la licence Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0). <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>  
<https://oap.unige.ch/journals/rhca> e-ISSN: 2673-7604

On 21 July 1952, the city of Leopoldville (today's Kinshasa) celebrated the Belgian National Day. The Catholic newspaper *Croix du Congo* reported that raffle tickets were dropped from an airplane over the African neighborhoods, and the winners received a bottle of beer, a music record or a pair of slippers. There were also prizes for the winners of sack races, greasy pole contest, or a competition for the most beautiful hairstyle.<sup>1</sup> As every year, the colonial authorities organized decorations of Congolese which they considered worthy: policemen received medals, while in the Parc de Bock, 500 decorations were given to workers with 15 years of loyal service. Furthermore, 11 members of the “civilized” Congolese elite received the so-called *carte du mérite civique* that since 1948 distinguished them in legal terms. The *Voix du Congolais*, a monthly magazine for the Congolese elite published by the General Government, printed the speech of its collaborator Antoine Omari who received the *carte du mérite civique* on that day. Omari, a book-keeper at the colony's biggest construction firm Synkin and president of the *Cercle d'Études et Agréments*, an elite association in Leopoldville, praised the “immortel work” of King Léopold II and the Belgian nation while highlighting that “[t]he Congolese quickly collaborated with their Tutors to assimilate, in a period of time that beats the colonial record for the entire world”. The *Voix du Congolais* illustrated the speech with a portrait photograph of Omari dressed in a tie and collar. The original photo, however, taken by Henri Goldstein, one of the leading photographer for the Information service of the General Government, shows Omari standing in front of a large crowd of Congolese holding the manuscript of his speech<sup>3</sup>.

**Figure n° 1: Antoine Omari gives a speech on the occasion of the awarding of the *carte du mérite civique* at the Parc de Bock in Léopoldville on 12 July 1952.**



Source: HP.1956.15.9115, collection MRAC Tervuren ; Photo H. Goldstein (Inforcongo), 1952, MRAC Tervuren © 2024, ProLitteris, Zurich

<sup>1</sup> Pierre Mbaya, “Léopoldville a fêté le 21 juillet avec un éclat particulier”, *Croix du Congo*, 3 August 1952.

<sup>2</sup> “Au tableau d’Honneur de l’Elite du Congo Belge et du Ruanda-Urundi”, *Voix du Congolais*, September 1952. All quotations from foreign-language literature and sources were translated into English by the author.

<sup>3</sup> The original picture is stored in the photo archive of the Africa Museum in Tervuren.

By cropping everything but Omari's head with upper body, the *Voix du Congolais* deprived the honoree of the aura of the spokesman of a larger group. In any case, other images of such events make the elite appear less like outstanding protagonists than subordinated persons. It therefore speaks volumes that other photos of the awards ceremonies on the National Day appeared uncropped in the press, showing how the district commissioner, dressed in white and wearing a pith helmet, decorates the obediently lined up card-holders<sup>4</sup>. These pictures capture how the colonial masters of ceremony retained the upper hand in the staging of the Congolese elite.

Antoine Omari, who after independence held a state position as the district commissioner of Maniema, may not have been a prominent figure in the history of decolonization in the Belgian Congo. Yet, together with politicians such as Joseph Kasa-Vubu or Patrice Lumumba, he was part of a generation of Congolese elite that was caught in the ambivalence between subordination and empowerment. The *évolués* praised the Belgians as exemplary colonizers and at the same time criticized their inadequate implementation of promised reforms after the end of the Second World War, impending reforms that held out the prospect of modernization and prosperity in general, and more equality, participation and recognition for the Congolese elite in particular. Furthermore, Omari is representative for the relentless post-war struggle of the elite towards legal assimilation, which in a colony like the Belgian Congo, where no political participation was possible, represented the "royal road" to self-empowerment. Yet, the hard-won status reforms – the immatriculation and *carte du mérite civique* – fell short of their expectations and would increasingly frustrate the elite who took over the reins of government after independence in 1960<sup>5</sup>. While political scientists who have tried to explain the Congo Crisis have primarily focused on the political role of the *évolués*<sup>6</sup>, Jean-Marie Mutamba-Makombo's comprehensive study was the first to describe in detail the elite's many forms of involvement with the colonial state and decolonization<sup>7</sup>. More recent studies, influenced by global perspectives on Bourgeois culture and colonial civilizing missions, look at how *The Lumumba Generation* dealt with the fact that colonizers demanded that they first adopt the principles of European bourgeois culture in order to achieve legal equality, while simultaneously questioning the displays of civilized behavior that the Congolese performed to meet their demands<sup>8</sup>. The history of imperial citizenship in late colonial Africa, which had previously been viewed through the lens of legal history<sup>9</sup>, has now been expanded to include its interplay with cultural dynamics. By focusing on the staging, or *mise en scene*, of the holders of elite status in public events and print media, in particular the public awards ceremonies, this article follows this cultural perspective on the history of the legal status of the Congolese elite<sup>10</sup>.

The sources of this article examined here consist largely of reports and pictures dealing with the ceremonies and the awardees. They were printed in newspapers and journals published by the colonial state or the Catholic mission. Directed to a Congolese audience, they appeared neither in the European press in the colony nor in periodicals in Belgium. I systematically investigated all issues of the *Voix du Congolais*, an official publication of the General Government, from 1949 to 1959, a period which covers the introduction of elite status until its end. From the *Croix du Congo*, a weekly newspaper edited by Catholic missionaries in

<sup>4</sup> *Nos Images*, 15 September 1952.

<sup>5</sup> On the politicizing frustrations of the Congolese elite, see Omasombo Tshonda Jean and Delaleuwe Nathalie (2009), "Je veux la civilisation, mais le Blanc ne veut pas de moi' ou le drame du Congo belge au travers de son élite", in N. Tousignant (ed.), *Le manifeste Conscience africaine* (1956). *Élites congolaises et sociétés coloniales. Regards croisés*, Brussels, Presses de l'Université Saint-Louis, pp. 141-182; Monaville Pedro and Tödt Daniel "Without harmful delay nor haste': Colonial education, elite formation, and contested timetables to emancipation in the Belgian Congo", in F. Aurore, F. Muller, X. Rousseaux, N. Tousignant (eds.), *Governing the Colonial State: the Belgian Rule in Africa (1885-1962)*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming.

<sup>6</sup> For the scholarship of the 1960s, see Anstey Roger (1970), "Belgian Rule in the Congo and the Aspirations of the 'Évolué' Class", in P. Duignan and L. H. Gann (eds.), *Colonialism in Africa 1870-1960*, vol. 2, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 220-223; De Schrevel Michel (1970), *Les forces politiques de la décolonisation congolaise jusqu'à la veille de l'indépendance*, Louvain, Impr. M. & L. Symons, p. 63-75; Young Crawford (1965), *Politics in the Congo. Decolonization and Independence*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, pp. 73-87.

<sup>7</sup> Mutamba-Makombo Jean-Marie (1998), *Du Congo belge au Congo indépendant. Émergence des 'évolués' et genèse du nationalisme*, Kinshasa, Publications de l'Institut de formation et études politiques.

<sup>8</sup> Tödt Daniel (2021), *The Lumumba Generation. African Bourgeoisie and Colonial Distinction in the Belgian Congo*, Berlin, De Gruyter.

<sup>9</sup> For a programmatic account, see Cooper Frederick (2014), *Citizenship between Empire and Nation. Remaking France and French Africa, 1945-1960*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.

<sup>10</sup> For a focus on colonial legal periodicals, see Landmeters Romain and Tousignant Nathalie (2019), "Civiliser les 'indigènes' par le droit. Antoine Sohier et les revues juridiques coloniales (1925-1960)", *Revue interdisciplinaire d'études juridiques*, 2(83), pp. 81-100.

Leopoldville, the years 1949 and 1950 as well as 1958 where scrutinized while the time period in-between were consulted on a random basis. Additionally, all issues of the *Nos Images* were consulted<sup>11</sup>. It was an illustrated magazine published from 1948 to 1959 by the General Government for a mostly illiterate or non-francophone readership, existing in bilingual editions, each in French with translation into Swahili or Lingala. In contrast to the two previously mentioned text-heavy print media, which could be purchased by subscription and were often displayed in the clubs of the Congolese elite, *Nos Images* reached a wider audience and was considerably more accessible. This was not only due to the fact that the texts were written in French and visual content predominated. The issues were also publicly displayed in showcases in many places in the colony, such as in front of colonial state institutions in the African neighborhoods of the cities and administrative buildings in the regions, districts and territories. With the many reports and photographs on these events, widely untapped sources are analyzed below; only the recent exhibition *Recaptioning Congo* curated by historian Sandrine Colard and the accompanying catalogue feature photos of the award ceremonies makes an exception<sup>12</sup>. Yet, much historical research has been conducted on the propaganda and photography in colonial Congo<sup>13</sup>. The colonial state did everything in his power to control the world of images by granting its propaganda institutions – from 1950 under the name *Centre d'Information et de Documentation du Congo Belge et du Ruanda-Urundi*, and 1955 split into *Congopresse* in Léopoldville and *Inforcongo* in Brussels – a monopoly on the photographs produced and circulated in Belgium, in the colony, and around the world<sup>14</sup>. “In a spectacular reversal of the much more famous ‘atrocities pictures’ circulated against King Leopold’s regime at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,” Sandrine Colard writes, “the late colonial regime of the Belgian Congo produced a massive and controlled photographic archive that attempted to visually – and politically – bind colonizers and colonized<sup>15</sup>”.

Finally, some methodological remarks on the use of photographs for writing African history: The dynamic field, which has been growing for more than two decades, has shown that images were undoubtedly produced and diffused to display imperial rule and colonial ideology<sup>16</sup>. Yet, it made also clear that a closer reading of photographs allows us to see more than a mere illustration of dominance. A wide range of interpretations can be established when a photograph is seen through contextual information (for example, by whom and for what it was produced, its relation to audiences and political institutions) and combined with intertextual meanings (the relation to other textual and visual material)<sup>17</sup>. Therefore, my analytic approach takes into account different types of written and visual sources such as reports and pictures of ceremonies, captions of photographs and photographic self-portrayals, administrative documents as well as articles and letters of the Congolese elite.

This article argues that the colonial state’s official publications and photographs aimed to present the *évolués* as perfect inhabitants of the model colony characterized by the cooperation between the colonial administration and the Congolese elite. Making the selected *évolués* visible and controlling their image as the ‘poster child’ of the civilizing mission took on a prominent role in late colonial propaganda. The following analyses how the power relationship between colonizers and colonized was publicly staged in these

<sup>11</sup> The *Voix du Congolais* was consulted in the Africa Museum in Tervuren, the *Nos Images* in the Royal Library Brussels, the *Croix du Congo* in the Africa library at the in Colonial Archive in Brussels and the Bontinck library in Kinshasa.

<sup>12</sup> See Colard Sandrine (2022), *Recaptioning Congo*, Tiel, Lanoo Publishers, p. 140. Her dissertation is putting colonial propaganda and African self-imaging into dialogue: Colard Sandrine (2016), “Photography in the Colonial Congo (1885-1960)”, PhD thesis, Columbia University.

<sup>13</sup> On the photographs of human suffering in the Congo Free State, see Sliwinski Sharon (2006), “The Childhood of Human Rights: The Kodak on the Congo”, *Journal of Visual Culture*, 5(3), pp. 333-363. On photographic propaganda in late-colonial Congo, see Cornet Anne and Gillet Florence (2010), *Congo-Belgique, 1955–1965. Entre propagande et réalité*, Brussels, Renaissance du Livre. For a visual-historical analysis on the production of ethnicity, see De Rezende Isabelle M., “Visuality and Colonialism in the Congo: From the ‘Arab War’ to Patrice Lumumba, 1880s to 1961”, PhD thesis, University of Michigan.

<sup>14</sup> See Colard S., “Photography in the Colonial Congo...”, *op. cit.*, p. 103. On different forms of Belgian colonial propaganda, see Stanard Matthew G. (2012), *Selling the Congo. A History of European Pro-Empire Propaganda and the Making of Belgian Imperialism*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska.

<sup>15</sup> Colard Sandrine (2018), “The Afterlife of a Colonial Photographic Archive: The Subjective Legacy of InforCongo”, *Critical Interventions*, 12(2), pp. 117-139.

<sup>16</sup> For early interventions in this field, see Landau Paul S. and Kaspian Deborah D. (2002), *Images and Empires: Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa*, Berkeley, University of California Press. For new questions and critical approaches, see Hayes Patricia and Minkley Gary (2019), *Ambivalent. Photography and Visibility in African History*, Athens, Ohio University Press.

<sup>17</sup> Gordon Robert and Kurzweily Jonatan (2018), “Photographs as Sources in African History”, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*. En ligne, consulté le 20/06/2024. DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.250.



ceremonies and pictures. After a brief introduction to late colonial elite politics and the status reforms, the article will show how the Belgians' desire to make their elite selections visible was translated into the language of ceremonies. Then, it will be scrutinize the extent to which the power struggle between the colonial project to ensure the subordination of the elite and the Congolese urge for self-empowerment became visible. To this end, the question of which conflicts inherent in the elite politics were airbrushed from the ceremonies and how they nevertheless remain partially visible will be addressed by holding the official documents up to the light of other sources.

## Selecting a Congolese elite in late colonial Congo

In the 1930s, the *évolués*, an educated elite, made their voices heard in the Belgian Congo. The use of the collective term "*évolués*" – also widespread in French colonial Africa – was a particularly striking expression of the ideology of evolutionism, which assumed universally valid cultural stages of civilization. On this view, a highly developed and civilized European culture was at the top of the hierarchy, with a supposedly primitive and savage African culture at the bottom. This racist idea legitimized and cemented the political and social hierarchies of colonial rule<sup>18</sup>.

The vague term *évolués* addressed a heterogeneous social group that is difficult to quantify. The groups of those subsumed under this term mainly included Congolese graduates of secondary mission schools and qualified workers. According to estimates from 1947, there were no more than 40 000 who worked as clerks in the colonial administration or in companies, as doctor's assistants, teachers and foremen<sup>19</sup>. However, the number grew steadily after the Second World War. This was in part due to the colonial state's pursuit of developmental colonialism with its modernization programs that required collaborative elites capable of meeting the new administrative challenges and versed in the technical knowledge these demanded. The educated workers, foremen, artisans, traders and the self-employed were grouped together by the administration as one specific social group to which the designation *évolués* was potentially aimed. Settled among the working population, in urban centers especially, their numbers grew to more than 110,000 people by 1956<sup>20</sup>.

For the colonial state and the missionaries, the small circle of educated Congolese were both the spearheads and apostles of a long-term civilizing mission. The *évolués* were supposed to embody the notions of the monogamous couple, bourgeois virtues and gender roles. The colonial state's elite-making policy was based chiefly on periodicals and associations. It was in fact through institutions of this kind that the Catholic missionary orders had maintained contact with secondary school graduates since the 1920s. In addition to the older, mission-oriented *Croix du Congo*, the *Voix du Congolais*, stood out within the print media as a monthly post-war magazine written "by Congolese for Congolese". Despite being published and closely monitored by the General Government, which set narrow limits to the freedom of expression, this periodical gave the *évolués* a voice. The *Voix du Congolais* shows what was on *évolués*' minds, reveals how they commented on events and developments in their country – and what demands they made.

What they aspired to was in fact a special legal status, improved living conditions, a greater say and more respect. The introduction of an elite status for the *évolués*, which would spare them the arbitrary and coercive measures typical of the "*indigénat*" and "*droit coutumier*", had been the subject of heated debate since the 1920s<sup>21</sup>. Belgian colonial ideologues, as Romain Landmeters and Nathalie Tousignant underline, "certainly foresaw the possibility of progress for certain black colonized people, but for whom, unless there were a few dissenting voices, the segregation established by the colonial regime should not be called into question<sup>22</sup>". In their eyes, the *évolués*' main characteristic was their pursuit of "civilized" perfectibility – which went hand

<sup>18</sup> For a general account, Saada Emmanuelle M. (2005), "Entre 'assimilation' et 'décivilisation.' L'imitation et le projet colonial républicain", *Terrain. Revue d'ethnologie de l'Europe*, 44, pp. 19-38.

<sup>19</sup> These are the figures quoted by Van Wing (1948), "La formation d'une élite noire au Congo Belge", *Bulletin C.E.P.S.I.*, 5. He was member of the Conseil Colonial which discussed the so-called *évolués* problem.

<sup>20</sup> Mutamba-Makombo uses these figures with reference to the Rapport annuel présenté aux Chambre législatives sur l'administration de la Colonie du Congo belge pendant l'année 1956. See Mutamba-Makombo Jean-Marie (2009), "Les évolués. Situation au Congo Belge", in N. Tousignant (ed.), *Le manifeste Conscience africaine (1956). Élités congolaises et société coloniale. Regards croisés*, Brussels, Presses de l'Université Saint-Louis, p. 84.

<sup>21</sup> See Young C., *Politics in the Congo...*, op. cit., pp. 73-87; De Schrevel M., *Les forces politiques...*, op. cit., pp. 129-159.

<sup>22</sup> Landmeters R. and Tousignant N. (2019), "Civiliser les 'indigènes' par le droit...", art. cit., p. 100.

in hand with the idea that they were still “imperfect” and not ready for full legal equality<sup>23</sup>. Colonial law in the Belgian Congo equated legal assimilation with cultural assimilation. But conceding the African elite’s cultural equality would have shaken the foundations of the colonial social order, whose hierarchies were legitimized with reference to supposedly immutable civilizational differences between Europeans and Africans<sup>24</sup>. Hence, the debate on *évolués* status among Congolese authors, numerous commissions, lawyers, European settlers, missionaries and colonial officials was particularly fierce – but its results negligible.

When the *carte du mérite civique* (1948) and a reformed immatriculation (1952) were finally introduced, the status reforms came nowhere near to providing the legal equality the elite had been demanding for years. The “benefits” entailed the selective dismantling of forms of legal discrimination that continued for the rest of the Congolese population. For the elite living in the racist colonial system, the new status nevertheless offered tangible advantages. They were spared corporal punishment and in case of legal disputes could apply to a European judge. They were permitted to move about freely in the European residential zones and would no longer be subject to the night-time curfew in the African quarters. In addition, they were gradually allowed to drink wine and visit bars and cinemas frequented by Europeans. What distinguished immatriculation from the *carte du mérite civique* was that the full legal equality with Europeans in civil rights it provided applied to the applicant’s entire family. For example, the children were allowed to be taught in European schools<sup>25</sup>. Yet, in order to be partially exempted from the legally enshrined inequality, applicants had to submit to an exacting and intrusive examination by the European-dominated awarding committee. They had to live up to nothing less than the ideal of “perfected blacks<sup>26</sup>”, which the *évolués* themselves had cultivated in their periodicals. To be officially appointed to the elite, they had to be faultless and credibly prove themselves “civilized” and educated workers as well as faithful and monogamous husbands. The *évolués*’ wives, meanwhile, were encouraged to demonstrate a petty-bourgeois form of family life, as they had learned it from female Belgian chaperones in the *foyers sociaux*<sup>27</sup>. Members of the awarding committee paid spontaneous visits to the applicants to investigate their private lives – for example, find out from the neighbors whether an extramarital affair can be alleged – and to take a close look in examining every corner of the house. If there was not enough furniture, if the family did not eat together at the table, if hands were used instead of cutlery, the applicant could be rejected<sup>28</sup>.

In view of these excessive requirements for morally impeccable behavior, which most Europeans in the colony themselves would certainly have failed to meet, the number of unsuccessful applicants was high and the holders of elite status relatively low. If we add up all holders of the *carte du mérite civique* and the immatriculation, including their wives and children, we arrive at a figure of just 2 325 people<sup>29</sup>. Based on the aforementioned figure of 100 000 Congolese to whom the term *évolués* was addressed in the mid-1950s, the awarding committees thus granted elite status to barely more than 2 % of them. Precisely because the criteria for access to elite status were so strict, the colonial state was keen to give visibility to the flawless examples of the *évolués* – and to maintain control over their public staging.

## Setting the stage for loyal and civilized “évolués”

In the Belgian Congo, a whole range of loyal groups to the colonizer have been publicly honored. Besides authority figures such as meritorious police officers and leaders of African neighborhoods, long-serving workers, graduates of household courses, winners of the competition for the most beautiful living room were held up as role models. By organizing public ceremonies in which elite membership was affirmed in a solemn *mise en scene*, Belgian officials clearly drew on a tradition of awarding honors or medals that was already established. In the Congo Free State, an ordinance of 1889 had provided for the awarding of medals

<sup>23</sup> See Tödt D., *The Lumumba Generation...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 118-155.

<sup>24</sup> For an introduction to this topic, E. Saada (2002), “The Empire of Law. Dignity, Prestige, and Domination in the Colonial Situation”, *French Politics, Culture and Society*, 20, pp. 98-120; Mann Gregory (2009), “What was the Indigénat? The Empire of Law in French West Africa”, *Journal of African History* 50(3), pp. 331-353.

<sup>25</sup> On the benefits of the status holders, see Tödt D., *The Lumumba Generation...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 253-256.

<sup>26</sup> Bolamba Antoine-Roger, “Le problème des Évolués”, *Voix du Congolais*, 16, July 1947.

<sup>27</sup> On the *foyers sociaux*, see Hunt Nancy Rose (1990), “Domesticity and Colonialism in Belgian Congo. Usumbura’s foyer social, 1946-1960”, *Signs*, 5, pp. 447-474.

<sup>28</sup> For detailed information on the investigations, see Tödt D., *The Lumumba Generation...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 263-291.

<sup>29</sup> Chambre des représentants, Rapport sur l’administration de la colonie du Congo Belge pendant l’année 1958 présenté aux chambres législatives, Brussels, Ministère des affaires africaines, 1959, p. 104.

to deserving middlemen who helped advance the colonial project<sup>30</sup>. As traditional authorities, these *chefs médaillés* helped underpin an indirect form of colonial rule<sup>31</sup>. While traditional chiefs still had medals hung around their necks, the modern elite received certificates.

The General Government in Leopoldville, which had authority over the administrative authorities in the provinces, made sure that the chosen few who received the *carte du mérite civique* or the immatriculation were also elevated symbolically. Yet, within a year after the reform, the general governor addressed himself to the provincial governors, criticizing the fact that not all district commissioners had organized a ceremony to hand over the card as prescribed<sup>32</sup>. He underlined the symbolic value of the public honoring of cardholders, which aimed at demonstrating to the masses the value of this award:

[...] I deeply deplore the fact that in some major centers cards have been issued and handed out without any publicity, as if it were a document of no value. This discretion does nothing to give the card the value it deserves in the eyes of the general public. I deeply deplore the fact that in some major centers cards have been issued and handed out without any publicity, as if it were a document of no value. This discretion does nothing to give the card the value it deserves in the eyes of the general public<sup>33</sup>.

The lack of commitment on the part of the local administration may also have had something to do with the fact that during the lengthy debate on status reform, there had been some resistance from European settlers as well as from low-ranking colonial officials. The *carte du mérite civique* was a compromise, which the general governor had to enforce with a decree. Now Leopoldville also had to push hard for the staging of the beneficiaries – be it in public or in the press<sup>34</sup>.

As a government published magazine that had given voice to the demands of the elite for a separate legal status heard, it is not surprising that the *Voix du Congolais* showcased the chosen few. It named new members of the awardees every month in the *Chronique de la vie indigène et nouvelles diverses*<sup>35</sup>. Between March 1950 and December 1952, the periodical even created a special section named “Au tableau d’honneur de l’élite noire<sup>36</sup>”. By December 1956, a total of 266 people had been mentioned by name in this gallery of honor. If we add up other nominations outside this special section until 1959, we come to 374 mentions of holders of the *carte du mérite civique*, which makes up a quarter of the total of 1557 honorees. In terms of immatriculation, of the total of 217 Congolese who met the stricter criteria, only ten received an article during the reporting period, presumably to avoid creating envy towards the extremely small number of successful candidates<sup>37</sup>. The mentions were either mere notifications of those awarded elite status, or they were embedded in the description of the award ceremony.

According to press reports, the ceremonies all took place henceforth in front of a large audience of Congolese onlookers and proceeded according to a similar protocol: speeches by colonial officials and often by those honored as well; mention of the number of guests of honor, including local authority figures, missionaries, those passing through such as representatives of the Colonial Museum in Tervuren<sup>38</sup>, and colonial officials; and a celebratory ending. Sometimes the ceremonies were slightly more ostentatious, as when the colonial minister presented holders of the *carte du mérite civique* in Léopoldville’s Parc de Boeck during his visit in September 1951<sup>39</sup>. The speeches were not limited to congratulations, but reminded all those present of the onus and obligations entailed in the award<sup>40</sup>. The occasional accounts written by association secretaries or the periodical’s correspondents, sometimes illustrated and accompanied by biographical information, praised the exemplary conduct of the awardees and staged them as role models for others to emulate. But it

<sup>30</sup> See Vanhee Hein (2005), “Maîtres et serveurs. Les chefs médaillés dans le Congo colonial”, in J.-L. Vellut (ed.), *La mémoire du Congo. Le temps colonial*, Brussels, Musée royal de l’Afrique centrale, pp. 79-82.

<sup>31</sup> On traditional authorities in the Belgian Congo, see Vansina Jan (2010), *Being Colonized, The Kuba Experience in Rural Congo, 1880-1960*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press; Loffman Reuben A. (2019), *Church, State and Colonialism in Southeastern Congo, 1890-1962*, Basingstoke, Palgrave.

<sup>32</sup> Archives Africaines (AA), GG15726, letter from the general governor to the provincial governor of Léopoldville, 02 May 1949.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> See Tödt D., *The Lumumba Generation...*, op. cit., pp. 118-155.

<sup>35</sup> The first report was published in *Voix du Congolais* in December 1949.

<sup>36</sup> See “Au tableau d’honneur de l’Elite noire”, *Voix du Congolais*, March 1950.

<sup>37</sup> Going by the 1 258 people with the *carte du mérite civique* or immatriculation, it was one in five by that point. These figures are based on my own calculation after systematic perusal of 63 issues of the *Voix du Congolais* (from July 1948 to December 1956).

<sup>38</sup> AA, GG15726, letter from the district commissioner of Lac Léopold II to the provincial governor of Léopoldville, 23 May 1949.

<sup>39</sup> Montingia Jean, “Réception de M. le ministre par les notables congolais”, *Croix du Congo*, 23 Septembre 1951.

<sup>40</sup> “Chronique de la vie indigène et nouvelles diverses”, *Voix du Congolais*, September 1949.

was not only the state press that presented the holders of the elite-status. The *Croix du Congo* also provided its readers with regular reports of varying length, despite the skepticism in the missionary milieu towards the state's attempt to take the elite under his wings, a domain which until then had been left to the missionaries. It printed 32 reports of ceremonies until March 1951, no more than a dozen in 1952 and 1954, and four articles in 1958. The first report was published in July 1949 and emphasized the role of the Catholic missionary school in the formation of the elite. It also highlighted that in Leopoldville, the *carte du mérite civique* was handed over to Joseph Kasa-Vubu and Jean Bolikango – both graduates of Catholic seminary schools who later became famous politicians<sup>41</sup>.

Among the few ceremonies that left traces in newspaper reports and in archival documents is one particular event in Léopoldville in 1950. The ceremony was organized by Emmanuel Capelle, head of the Service de la Population Noire and president of the elite *Cercle d'Étude et d'Agrément*, an association for representatives of the Congolese elite, in which the aforementioned Antoine Omari was also active. Capelle made sure that the ceremony in which also the editor in chief of the *Voix du Congolais*, Roger-Antoine Bolamba, received the award, runs as smoothly as possible. Capelle agreed by telephone with the appropriate district commissioner that the celebration would take place on the occasion of a meeting of the *Conseil de la Cité* at the *Cercle Ruwet*. He reminded the commissioner that the hall had to be thoroughly cleaned and adorned with Belgian and Congolese flags for invited guests of honor. Finally, he summoned photographers from *Congopresse* to ensure felicitous reporting<sup>42</sup>.

The photo archive at the Africa Museum in Tervuren contains three images taken by the professionally trained Belgian photographer, Carlo Lamote. Still in his early twenties, Lamote had just arrived in the Congo to join the services of the General Government. Two of these images provide an impression of the seating arrangement in the hall. At the head of the room, the provincial governor and the district commissioner took their places at the table where the judges normally sat (figure n° 2). The guests of honor from the colonial administration sat in rows behind them. Facing the Belgians were rows of benches, the first two occupied by twenty-two Congolese dressed in suit and tie who were awarded with the *carte du mérite civique*. When Lamote captured the scene, Antoine-Roger Bolamba had been looking directly into the camera<sup>43</sup> (figure n° 3). As the *Voix du Congolais* reported, the district commissioner described the presence of the many European guests in his speech – among them Capelle himself and those responsible for the journal – as recognition of the awardees. Following the prevailing discourse on the *évolués*, he pointed out that the holders of the *carte du mérite civique* had passed a rigorous test demonstrating their “real evolution”<sup>44</sup>. After he had finished his speech, the candidates stepped forward one by one to receive their certificates and handshakes from the provincial governor Lucien Lardinois. In one of the photographs we see that the provincial governor sought eye contact with an awardee as he handed over the certificate, but the recipient looked down, bowing his head in a gesture of respect<sup>45</sup> (figure n° 2). It may be that, despite his new status, an eye-to-eye encounter with high representatives of the colonial authority seemed inappropriate for both the award recipient and the photographer who chose this shot for the press. The fact that the caption of the picture does not name the Congolese awardee, but lists all the Belgian officials depicted, indicates that the picture was first and foremost intended to testify to the generosity of colonial officials and the commitment of all levels of its administration toward the submissive group of the Congolese elite.

<sup>41</sup> *Croix du Congo*, 10 July 1949.

<sup>42</sup> See, AA, GG16996, letter from the director of the Service de la population noire in Léopoldville to the district commissioner of Moyen Congo, 14 November 1950.

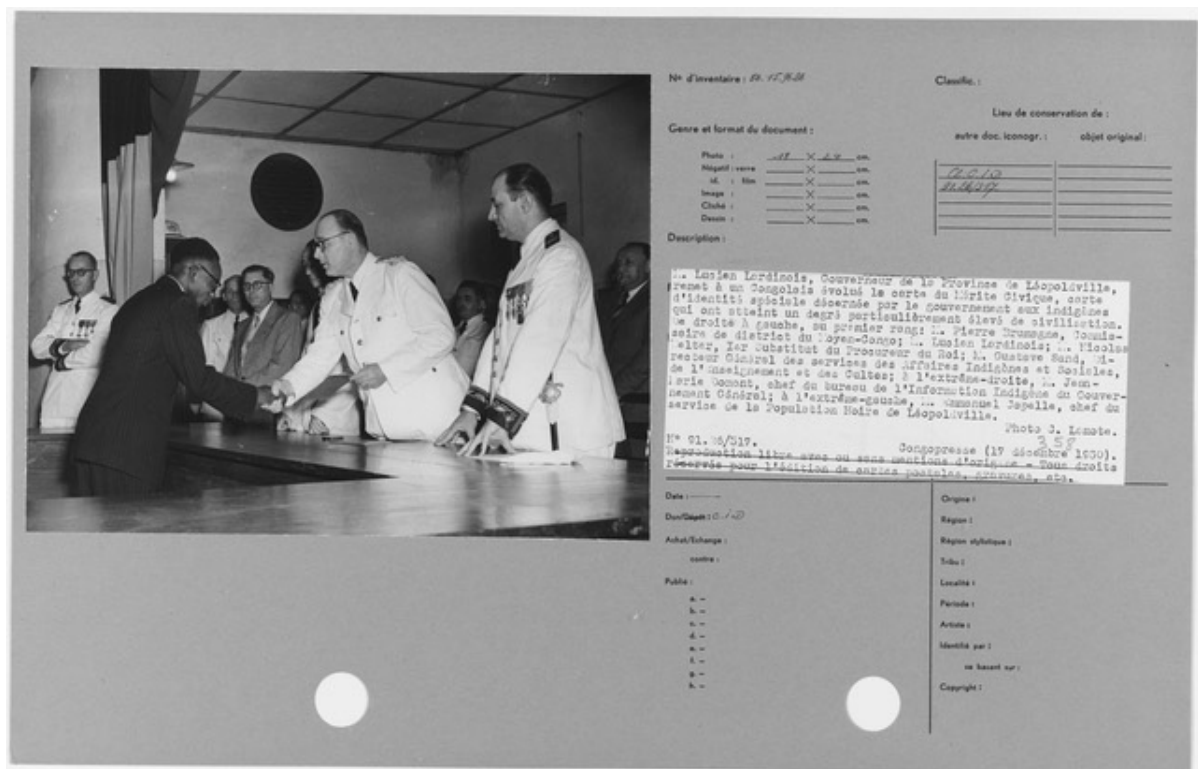
<sup>43</sup> The picture is printed in *Voix du Congolais*, February 1951.

<sup>44</sup> *Voix du Congolais*, January 1951.

<sup>45</sup> The picture is printed in *Voix du Congolais*, February 1951.



Figure n° 2: Provincial governor presents *carte du mérite civique*, reprinted in *Voix du Congolais* 59, February 1951, p. 88.



Source: HP.1956.15.9626, collection RMCA Tervuren; Photo C. Lamote (Inforcongo), 1950, RMCA Tervuren ©

This example is typical of how colonial propaganda attempted to make the elite visible. If one examines the published photos in sequence, certain patterns become apparent. Both elements discussed above, the encounter of obedient and nameless members of the elite with colonial authority and the depiction of the awardees as part of a group, can be identified as two dominant forms of representation. Furthermore, as a visual representation of the “civilized” elite, portraits of honorees as well as depictions of them with their wives and family members occur frequently. Of the 41 pictures printed in the *Voix du Congolais* over the years, every third photo shows a group of anonymous card holders, 8 depict the individual in portrait, 9 together with a colonial official and ten spouse or relatives. Among all 220 issues of *Nos Images*, the richly illustrated periodical of the General Government, 34 cardholders were mentioned by name and, without exception, provided with a photo – they included 9 portraits, 5 group pictures, 6 with a colonial authority and 13 with family members. By contrast, the text-heavy *Croix du Congo* rarely printed photos of the status holders, a mere 4 in total. Yet, one of them was the picture discussed with the submissive gesture of the card holder whose name was not mentioned in the caption. In the text, however, his identity was revealed to the readership: it was Jean Motingia, a former seminary and regular author of the newspaper, a well-known name in the Catholic milieu<sup>46</sup>.

A pair of images accompanying an article in the *Voix du Congolais* about an awards ceremony in Maniema are representative of how the selected elites were captured in pictures together with a colonial administrator or with their own families. At the centre of the first photo is the district commissioner. To his left we see the *chef du centre extra-coutumier*, who is also dressed in the white uniform of colonial administrators<sup>47</sup> (figure n° 4). The representatives of the new elite, can be seen wearing dark suits and white shirts – the uniform appearance of the *évolués*, which they have in common with all 150 beneficiaries depicted in the press –, stand respectively at the edge. While the president of the local *évolué* association is standing to the far left, one of the new holders of the *carte du mérite civique*, a clerk at the trading company Belgika, is next to his wife

<sup>46</sup> *Croix du Congo*, 21 January 1951.

<sup>47</sup> The pictures are printed in *Voix du Congolais*, October 1951, and *Nos Images*, 15 March 1952.

on the right edge of the photograph – under the picture reads, “Madame and Monsieur Louis Okenghe<sup>48</sup>”. Several rows of Congolese spectators stand a few meters apart, witnessing this scene together along with newspaper readers. The composition of the photo stages the social hierarchy in the colony. It gives visual expression to the colonial administration’s unquestioned claim to authority despite its propagandistically declared cooperation with the new elite who were assigned to peripheral seats. The second picture shows the same new holder of the *carte du mérite civique* with family members standing on the tidy courtyard of their brick house (figure n° 5). The awardee, now in a light-colored suit, is at the far left, with one hand on his wife’s shoulder. She is sitting on a chair next to him, while their two youngest children, the daughter in a dress and son in shorts, are standing to the left of their oldest son. The window display-like staging of a nuclear patriarchal family in front of their own home corresponds to the ideal conceptions the selection committee for the *carte du mérite civique* had of “worthy” and “civilized” applicants. These model *évolués* were presented to the local public and a countrywide readership as a masterpiece of Belgian civilizing mission. Yet, when the two images are viewed together the new elite is visually arranged at the top of the hierarchy of the nuclear family but on the periphery of the colonial power structure.

Figure n° 3: Awarding ceremony for the *cartes du mérite civique* in Léopoldville, 1950. At the centre of the picture Antoine-Roger Bolamba, editor-in-chief of the *Voix du Congolais*, is looking at the camera.

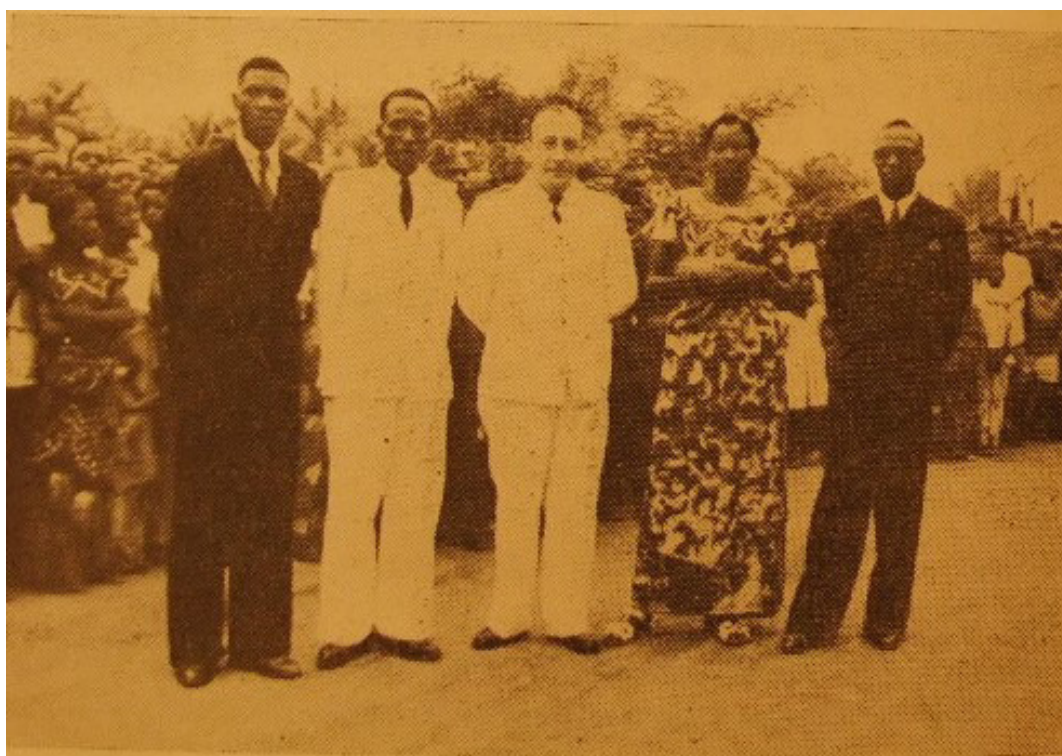


Source: HP.1956.15.9627, collection RMCA Tervuren; Photo C. Lamote (Inforcongo), 1950, RMCA Tervuren ©

<sup>48</sup> See Saidi Gaston, “Au tableau d’honneur de l’élite africaine belge”, *Voix du Congolais*, October 1951.

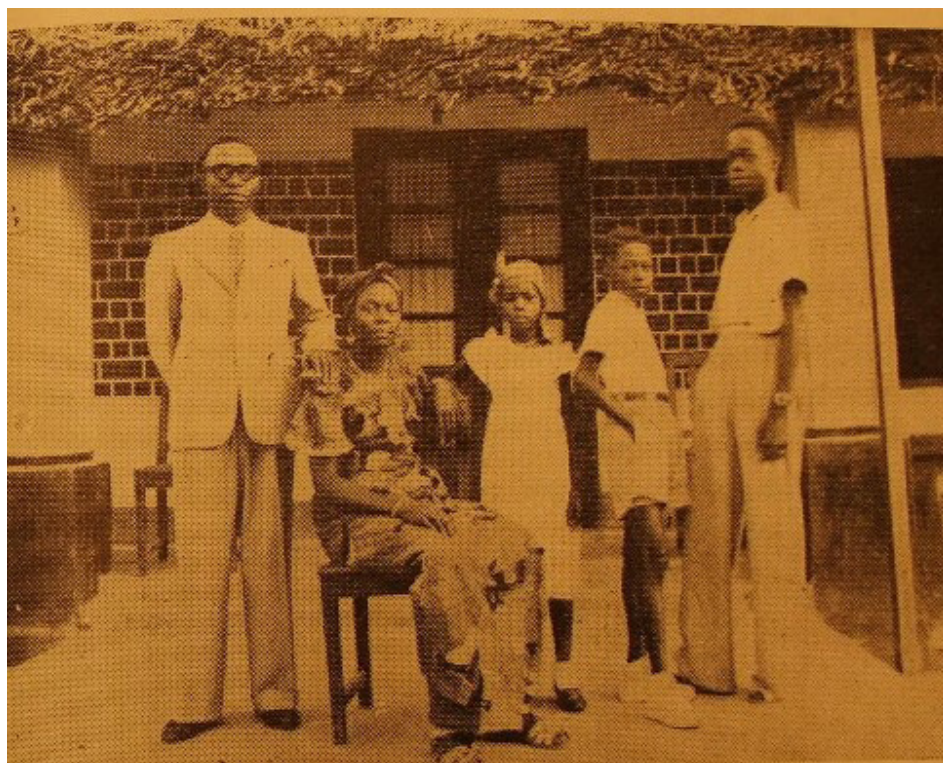


Figure n° 4: Group photo marking the award of the *carte mérite du civique* to Louis Okenghe (first from left)



Source: *Voix du Congolais* 67, October 1951, p. 568.

Figure n° 5: Louis Okenghe and his family



Source: *Voix du Congolais* 67, October 1951, p. 569.

## Behind the scene: Invisible conflicts and frustrations of the Congolese elite

The ceremonial staging and the representation in the media reveal how the colonial state curated the visibility of an exemplary elite. Yet, the colonial masters of ceremony withheld main features of the selection and appointment of elites. When we look beyond the propagandistic gaze and bring different sources into dialogue with each other, invisible aspirations, frustrations and even conflicts come to light<sup>49</sup>.

First, the *mise en scene* of the elite as an impeccable role-model often omitted the selection committees' doubts about the applicants' maturity, doubts which reflected the widespread racist skepticism about the "civilizational development" of the *évolués*. Staging at times silenced application processes that were subject to conflicts, and this was especially the case for the first men to be granted the *carte du mérite civique* in the district of Lac Léopold II. The individual in question was Patrice S., a medical assistant, who, after serving as a field nurse for the *Force Publique* in Burma during the Second World War, had worked in several large cities in Congo<sup>50</sup>. Before the territorial official had even set a date for the public conferment of the *carte du mérite civique*, in September 1950 the district commissioner instructed him to postpone Patrice S.'s application for one year<sup>51</sup>. The reason was an anonymous letter with accusations of unworthy behavior. On 31 December, two weeks after the committee's positive decision, he was accused of having violated the nightly curfew for Congolese and in an alleged state of mild drunkenness. In fact, it is possible that Patrice S. had been celebrating his recent award of the *carte du mérite civique* on New Year's Eve. Unfortunately for him, the nightly curfew for card-holders was only abolished eighteen months later. The committee chair's wish to deprive him of the card permanently, however, was voted down<sup>52</sup>. When the case came before the committee again one year later, the additional investigations favored Patrice S. and refuted the previous accusations.<sup>53</sup> We can only speculate the extent to which the decision was influenced by his status as a war veteran or whether the accusations arose from a rumor spread out of envy by a resident in a small settlement where no one could claim elite status. In any case, in July 1952, he was reissued with his *carte du mérite civique* on a festive ceremony. In the press, the *Croix du Congo* confirmed that the award was "amply deserved"<sup>54</sup> and reports in the *Voix du Congolais* referred to as a "model family father"<sup>55</sup>, which was valued by Congolese and Europeans alike. The published photo of his four children standing in front of thatched huts, dressed in white, with a cross necklace around their necks, was meant to convey this impression.<sup>56</sup> However, the short-term withdrawal of the card by the committee was kept quiet. In general, the public staging of the "model-*évolués*" ironed out controversies and doubts inherent in the entire process.

Second, the distinguished *évolués* were sometimes able to disseminate their own staging which potentially conflicted with the script of the colonial masters of ceremony. Again, the story of Patrice S. is a case in point. *Nos Images* printed a remarkable picture of him, presented as president of an *évolués* association and fresh holder of the *carte du mérite civique*<sup>57</sup>. While the government published magazine used the pictures from their own photographers in general, the so-called *Nos amis* section of the magazine showed photos sent in by readers<sup>58</sup>. These images were produced by Congolese individuals, some of whom offered commissioned work as freelance photographers<sup>59</sup>. From the 1880s onwards, African amateur photographers were already active along the Atlantic near cities of the Lower Congo. From the 1930s, photo studios had been established in Léopoldville and the "circulation of Congolese subjectivities"<sup>60</sup> through self-portraits began to

<sup>49</sup> In the following, personal names are anonymized if private or confidential information about them is given in administrative files or letters. However, this article does not anonymize individuals whose newspaper articles and public appearances are discussed.

<sup>50</sup> See *Voix du Congolais*, October 1952.

<sup>51</sup> AA, GG15726, letter from the district commissioner of Lac Léopold II to the territorial administrator of Mushie, 9 September 1950.

<sup>52</sup> AA, GG15726, minutes of the district committee of Lac Léopold II, 17 August 1950.

<sup>53</sup> AA, GG15726, letter from the district commissioner of Lac Léopold II to the territorial administrator of Mushie, 9 September 1950.

<sup>54</sup> Louis Mayindombe, "Au C.M.C.", *Croix du Congo*, 03 August 1952.

<sup>55</sup> "Au tableau d'honneur de l'élite Congolaise", *Voix du Congolais*, October 1952.

<sup>56</sup> *Voix du Congolais*, September 1952.

<sup>57</sup> *Nos Images*, 10 December 1953.

<sup>58</sup> The title of this section varied including *Chefs, familles, amis* (1949) and *Quelques-uns de nos lecteurs* (1951).

<sup>59</sup> For a Congolese self-taught photographer, see "Une visite chez le photographe Jean-Lambert Mangalibi", *Voix du Congolais*, December 1957.

<sup>60</sup> De Rezende I., "Visuality and Colonialism in the Congo...", *op. cit.*, p. 278.



take off<sup>61</sup>. On the one hand, these independent photographers showing Congolese “in their every mood and personality, respectful of their individual style and ways of being<sup>62</sup>” complemented the colonial imagery of official propaganda. On the other hand, the people depicted had in common a “bourgeois respectability in photographic visuality<sup>63</sup>”. Most of them presented themselves in the best of clothes surrounded by friends, spouses and nuclear families, sometimes posing in front of the camera with the “symbolic markers of évolués status<sup>64</sup>” – a bicycle, a typewriter, a book, a radio, a sewing machine. In *Nos Images*, too, the self-portrayals of readers resembled each other. Yet, the photograph of Patrice S. is an example of a subtle provocation within the prevailing iconography of the évolués. It stands out decisively from the common évolués look, which normally consisted of a three-piece suit, white shirt and tie. The hat, the pipe, especially the black and white Spectator shoes – made famous by its wearers Harry S. Truman and Al Capone – striking to the eye. Patrice S. may not have broken with the official colonial visuality altogether, but he presented himself subtly overdressed. In this particular photograph, the aspirations of the évolués to become more than the subordinate backbone of a colonial system and a poster boy of the model-colony shine through. With his hand tucked into his jacket, Patrice S. strikes a pose widely used in portraits of historical figures that conveys authority and a claim to leadership which challenged the officially propagated political order in the colony.

Third and finally, the media and ceremonial staging of the new elites, or the “happy beneficiaries<sup>65</sup>”, as they were commonly referred to in press reports, made invisible the fact that the *carte du mérite civique* and immatriculation were a source of disappointment for the Congolese elite. As discussed earlier, the benefits bore little resemblance to their initial demands for legal equality. On paper, status-holders had a few privileges and were spared some of the crudest discrimination suffered by the Congolese population. Yet, reports about the denial of the benefits officially promised that were forwarded to the colonial government bear witness that some were denied access to the first class of boats or trains, to European restaurants or hotels despite regulations to the contrary. Furthermore, an unnamed correspondent of the *Voix du Congolais* stated that many Europeans continued to mock and disparage them in public. The *carte du mérite civique* was a “document *mpamba*<sup>66</sup>”, in Lingala meaning “void, empty”, virtually worthless in everyday life. In April 1953, another anonymous account was submitted to the *Voix du Congolais*<sup>67</sup>. Despite going unpublished, the letter prompted the General Government to look into the allegations. The authorities brought to light an incident in which the Congolese Herman M. from the town of Inongo played a central role. He was the foreman in a joiner’s workshop and the active president of the *Cercle d’Action Catholique*. Herman M. had received the *carte du mérite civique* in 1951 at an awarding ceremony attended by most of the town’s 2,000 Congolese residents<sup>68</sup>. Less than three weeks later, he had endured vicious slurs; one European colonial official even branded him a “shit-eater<sup>69</sup>”. Even the évolués awarded the elite status who did their utmost to embody the civilizational ideal could not escape the dehumanizing treatment which many Africans continued to experience in everyday colonial situations. This lack of respect can occasionally even be seen in reports of award ceremonies, for example when the territorial official addressed the new member of the elite as if he were on a first-name basis, – a common sign of disdain among Europeans towards Africans.<sup>70</sup>

Returning to Antoine Omari, whose speech at the award ceremony on Belgian National Day in Leopoldville was discussed at the beginning, we can now go through the different chapters of the mounting disappointment for the elite. Omari was among those authors in the *Voix du Congolais* who had vehemently called for the introduction of the elite status only to endure the delays of its implementation. When he had not heard back 11 months after submitting his application, he turned to the territorial administrator: “I have the honor of requesting that you inform me of the answer to my letter of 26 January 1949 concerning my application for the Carte du Mérite Civique<sup>71</sup>.” The polite phrasing in his letter barely conceals the

<sup>61</sup> On Congolese photographers, see Colard S., “Photography in the Colonial Congo...”, *op. cit.*; Fall N’Goné (2001), *Photographies Kinshasa*, Revue Noire, Paris.

<sup>62</sup> Colard S. (2022), *Recaptioning Congo...*, art. cit., p. 84.

<sup>63</sup> De Rezende I., “Visuality and Colonialism in the Congo...”, *op. cit.*, p. 282.

<sup>64</sup> Hunt Nancy Rose (1991), “Noise over Camouflaged Polygamy. Colonial Morality Taxation, and a Woman-Naming Crisis in Belgian Africa”, *Journal of African History*, 32, pp. 471-494.

<sup>65</sup> “Au tableau d’honneur de l’élite”, *Voix du Congolais*, February 1951.

<sup>66</sup> “Chronique de la vie indigène”, *Voix du Congolais*, June 1952.

<sup>67</sup> AA, GG15726, letter from the general governor to the governor of Léopoldville province, 15 April 1953.

<sup>68</sup> “Au tableau d’honneur de l’élite congolaise”, *Voix du Congolais*, December 1951.

<sup>69</sup> See AA, GG15726, letter from Herman M. to the territorial official, 21 April 1953.

<sup>70</sup> “Remise des cartes du Mérite civique”, *Voix du Congolais*, February 1950.

<sup>71</sup> AA, GG/19669, Letter from Antoine Omari, 23 December 1949.

elite's impatience to finally enjoy the privileges – however limited they may have been – that they claimed for themselves in view of their accomplishments. Moreover, Omari had to wait another two and a half years before the elite status would be awarded to him. In 1957, however, he turned to the readership of the *Actualités Africaines* section of the liberally inclined newspaper *L'Avenir* in total disillusionment. Lamenting the “fate of the assimilated,” he contended that while *évolué* status endowed them with the same obligations as Europeans, they were not granted the same privileges, as evident in unequal pay. For Omari, the status-holders were a “sacrificed generation<sup>72</sup>”. Because the half-hearted reforms contradicted their wish to overcome a subordinated position and “to cross the barrier of discrimination and, as a result, be treated as civilized – as equals – by white people.”<sup>73</sup> He also saw the *évolués* as “sacrificed” because they were actually supposed to serve as a civilized role model for the Congolese population, but were now accused of having discarded

all the Bantu customs to adopt a ridiculous Europeanisation. And they are mocked for aspiring to an assimilation that they will never fully enjoy and which, on the other hand, alienates them from their true environment, which they will try in vain to rejoin tomorrow after having rejected it today<sup>74</sup>.

Indeed, with their education, professional career and, above all, their flawless display of a lifestyle deemed civilized, the elite have distanced themselves from the *indigènes* in order to meet the requirements for elite status. In a figurative sense, the isolation from the masses finds its visual analogy in the cropped Omari portrayal discussed at the beginning, in which he was cut off from his Congolese audience at the awarding ceremony.

Furthermore, his remark that the assimilated elite would find it difficult to reconnect with the people in the future was similarly far-sighted. Already that same year, some representatives of the *évolué* elite had to turn to the people when initial democratic participation was permitted in Congolese cities during the mayoral elections from 1957. Once again, the masters of the colonial ceremony staged the election of the mayors as an example of the cooperation between the colonizers and the colonized: photos in the press show how the elected Congolese were decorated with the mayoral scarf in the colors of the Belgian national flag. However, rather than a tool for integrating the Congolese elite into the colonial apparatus, the mayoralities became a platform for anti-colonial agitators – such as Joseph Kasa-Vubu from ABAKO, one of the few holders of the immatriculation – who would later win the first free elections leading to an independent Congo in 1960. On the political stage, the *mise en scene* of the *évolués*-turned-politicians no longer had to please the colonial gaze of Europeans, but instead the “*indigènes*-turned-electorate<sup>75</sup>”. The decisive factor in the election was not a display of civilization but an emphasis on shared linguistic or regional commonalities. Leading figures of some parties, therefore, complemented their self-portrayals with a demonstrative traditionalism. Some appeared in group photos with a traditional spear and draped a leopard skin over their three-piece suits.<sup>76</sup> Karine Ramondy has described the position of the *évolués* as “schizophrenic”, yet typical of many leaders in late colonial Africa who “find themselves detached from their roots and anchored in a new universe that is hostile to them<sup>77</sup>”. It was a position that would be disadvantageous to them in the exercise of their political or economic functions after independence.

\*\*\*

**A**fter the Second World War, late colonial Belgian rule aimed to secure the cooperation of a loyal, educated Congolese elite that demanded more participation and more rights for themselves. Late colonial propaganda integrated the aspiring *évolués* into the imagery of a model colony with its exemplary pupils of the civilizing mission. In order to attain the newly introduced legal elite status, applicants had to meet the idealized criteria of a civilized lifestyle, and were examined in a lengthy administrative process. Building on colonial traditions in awarding traditional authorities, the Belgian administration honored the holders of the *carte du mérite civique* and the immatriculation in public ceremonies. Analyzing reports and photographs of honorees and associated ceremonies in the press, this article discussed how the Congolese elite was staged. Regardless of

<sup>72</sup> Antoine Omari, “Le sort des assimilés”, *Actualités Africaines*, 10 January 1957.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> Antoine Omari, “Immatriculés ou Fantaisistes?”, *Actualités Africaines*, 27 June 1957.

<sup>75</sup> On the transformation of the self-portraits among the first democratic politicians in late colonial Nigeria, see Kunstmann Rouven (2014), “The politics of portrait photographs in southern Nigerian newspapers, 1945–1954”, *Social Dynamics*, 40(3), pp. 514–537.

<sup>76</sup> Lemarchand René (1964), *Political Awakening in the Belgian Congo*, Berkeley, University of California Press, p. 178.

<sup>77</sup> Ramondy Karine (2020), *Leaders assassinés en Afrique centrale: entre construction nationale et régulation des relations internationales*, Paris, L'Harmattan, p. 63.

the promises of reform, the persistence of colonial hierarchies was conveyed through the medial staging of a loyal elite. The *évolués* gained visibility as models of a civilized lifestyle, the head of a monogamous nuclear family, correctly dressed and obedient to the colonial state.

Yet, by taking into account other sources other than official documents, it becomes clear that the press had largely airbrushed instances of negotiation and conflict inherent in the making of the Congolese elite. The artificial character of the awards ceremonies drowned out the fact that the acquisition of elite status was only granted to a few who able to surmount the rigorous hurdles of an application process. Indeed, it was a process orchestrated by the Belgians that was characterized by general doubts about the “civilized” status of the *évolués*, especially because it called into question the hierarchies between the colonized and the colonizers. Furthermore, the examination of the elite’s self-representation has shown that in the colonial visual world, *évolués* walked an equally fine line between empowerment and subordination as they did in everyday colonial situation. This observation is in line with Sandrine Colard’s argument regarding “the relation between the colonial photographic project and Congolese self-portraiture<sup>78</sup>”. According to Colard, Africans expressed their positioning within a clearly racist and unequal colonial order through visual self-representations that were not necessarily acts of resistance or total opposition. As in their articles in the press, some members of the elite conveyed subtle forms of defiant empowerment in their pictures. For example, the self-portrait of Patrice S. indicated a claim to leadership that colonial officials did not envisage for the elite. Finally, the *mise en scene* of the status holders rendered invisible that the benefits and rights associated with the *carte du mérite civique* and immatriculation fell far short of the elite’s expectations. Status-holders did not become legally equal and continued to face everyday racial discrimination. It is one of the ironies of the history of the Belgian Congo’s decolonization that through its half-hearted reforms after 1945 the colonial state brought about the very thing it had always feared: the emergence of an embittered and demanding Congolese elite. As colonial masters of ceremony, Belgian officials set the stage for a struggle for independence that was not in line with their initial script.

Daniel Tödt

Centre Marc Bloch (Allemagne)

## Bibliography

- ANSTEY Roger (1970), “Belgian rule in the Congo and the aspirations of the ‘évolué class’”, in *Colonialism in Africa, 1870-1960*, Lewis H. GANN et Peter DUIGNAN (eds.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 220-223.
- COLARD Sandrine (2016), “Photography in the Colonial Congo (1885-1960)”, PhD thesis, Columbia University.
- COLARD Sandrine (2018), “The Afterlife of a Colonial Photographic Archive: The Subjective Legacy of InforCongo”, *Critical Interventions*, 12(2), pp. 117-139.
- COLARD Sandrine (2022), *Recapturing Congo*, Tiel, Lanoo Publishers.
- COOPER Frederick (2014), *Citizenship between Empire and Nation. Remaking France and French Africa, 1945–1960*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- CORNET Anne and GILLET Florence (2010), *Congo-Belgique, 1955–1965. Entre propagande et réalité*, Brussels, Renaissance du Livre.
- DE REZENDE Isabelle M., “Visuality and Colonialism in the Congo: From the ‘Arab War’ to Patrice Lumumba, 1880s to 1961”, PhD thesis, University of Michigan.
- DE SCHREVEL Michel (1970), *Les forces politiques, de la décolonisation congolaise jusqu’à la veille de l’indépendance*, Louvain, Impr. M. & L. Symons.
- FALL N’Goné (2001), *Photographies Kinshasa*, Revue Noire, Paris.

<sup>78</sup> Colard S., “Photography in the Colonial Congo...”, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

- GORDON Robert and KURZWELLY Jonatan (2018), "Photographs as Sources in African History", *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*. Online, consulted on 20/06/2024. DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.250.
- HAYES Patricia and MINKLEY Gary (2019), *Ambivalent. Photography and Visibility in African History*, Athens, Ohio University Press.
- HUNT Nancy Rose (1990), "Domesticity and Colonialism in Belgian Congo. Usumbura's foyer social, 1946-1960", *Signs* 5, pp. 447-474.
- HUNT Nancy Rose (1991), "Noise over Camouflaged Polygamy. Colonial Morality Taxation, and a Woman-Naming Crisis in Belgian Africa", *Journal of African History*, 32, pp. 471-494.
- KUNSTMANN Rouven (2014), "The politics of portrait photographs in southern Nigerian newspapers, 1945-1954", *Social Dynamics*, 40(3), pp. 514-537.
- LANDAU Paul S. and KASPIN Deborah D. (2002), *Images and Empires: Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa*, Berkeley, University of California Press.
- LANDMETERS Romain and TOUSIGNANT Nathalie (2019), "Civiliser les 'indigènes' par le droit. Antoine Sohier et les revues juridiques coloniales (1925-1960)", *Revue interdisciplinaire d'études juridiques*, 2(83), pp. 81-100.
- LEMARCHAND René (1964), *Political Awakening in the Belgian Congo*, Berkeley, University of California Press.
- LOFFMAN Reuben A. (2019), *Church, State and Colonialism in Southeastern Congo, 1890-1962*, Basingstoke, Palgrave.
- MANN Gregory (2009), "What was the Indigénat? The Empire of Law in French West Africa", *Journal of African History*, 50(3), pp. 331-353.
- MONAVILLE Pedro and TÖDT Daniel "Without harmful delay nor haste': Colonial education, elite formation, and contested timetables to emancipation in the Belgian Congo", in F. Aurore, F. Muller, X. Rousseaux and N. Tousignant (eds.), *Governing the Colonial State: Law, Justice and Biopolitics in Belgian Africa (1885-1962)*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming.
- MUTAMBA-MAKOMBO Jean-Marie (1998), *Du Congo belge au Congo indépendant. Émergence des 'évolués' et genèse du nationalisme*, Kinshasa, Publications de l'Institut de formation et études politiques.
- MUTAMBA-MAKOMBO Jean-Marie (2009), "Les évolués. Situation au Congo Belge", in N. Tousignant (ed.), *Le manifeste Conscience africaine (1956). Élités congolaises et société coloniale. Regards croisés*, Brussels, Presses de l'Université Saint-Louis, pp. 83-115.
- OMASOMBO Tshonda Jean and DELALEEUWE Nathalie (2009), "'Je veux la civilisation, mais le Blanc ne veut pas de moi' ou le drame du Congo belge au travers de son élite", in N. Tousignant (ed.), *Le manifeste Conscience africaine (1956). Élités congolaises et sociétés coloniales. Regards croisés*, Brussels, Presses de l'Université Saint-Louis, pp. 158-159.
- RAMONDY Karine (2020), *Leaders assassinés en Afrique centrale : entre construction nationale et régulation des relations internationales*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2020.
- SAADA Emmanuelle M. (2005), "Entre 'assimilation' et 'décivilisation.' L'imitation et le projet colonial républicain", *Terrain. Revue d'ethnologie de l'Europe*, 44, pp. 19-38.
- SAADA Emmanuelle (2002), "The Empire of Law. Dignity, Prestige, and Domination in the Colonial Situation", *French Politics, Culture and Society*, 20, pp. 98-120.
- SLIWINSKI Sharon (2006), "The Childhood of Human Rights: The Kodak on the Congo", *Journal of Visual Culture*, 5(3), pp. 333-363.
- STANARD Matthew G. (2012), *Selling the Congo. A History of European Pro-Empire Propaganda and the Making of Belgian Imperialism*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska.
- TÖDT Daniel, *The Lumumba Generation: African Bourgeoisie and Colonial Distinction in the Belgian Congo*, De Gruyter, 2021.



- VANHEE Hein (2005), “Maîtres et serviteurs. Les chef médaillés dans le Congo colonial”, in J.-L. Vellut (ed.), *La mémoire du Congo. Le temps colonial*, Brussels, Musée royal de l’Afrique centrale, pp. 79-82.
- VANSINA Jan (2010), *Being Colonized, The Kuba Experience in Rural Congo, 1880-1960*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press.
- VAN WING Joseph (1948), “La formation d’une élite noire au Congo Belge”, *Bulletin C.E.P.S.I.*
- YOUNG Crawford (1965), *Politics, Politics in the Congo. Decolonization and Independence*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press.