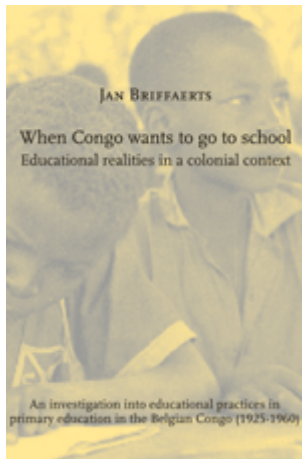


When Congo Wants To Go To School - As Justification And Conclusion



“It puzzled me that colonialism belonged to our recent past. Its legacy was bound to mark our present. I was eager to join in the current research on colonialism that was developing in anthropology. Having completed the study, I remain convinced the Congo was worthy of scholarly attention, although perhaps for different reasons. What strikes me now is that my research illuminates general human processes. I would say that its major significance lies less with either an understanding of the thoughts of Belgian former colonial officers (however these may be needed) or an implicit critique of the literature of the colonial discourse than with an acute perception of the difficulty of attaining knowledge in anthropology. In turn this should make us, as human beings, morally humble and wary of any claim whose legitimacy derives from an easy brand of political correctness. Such a conclusion is not specific of colonialism; it applies to all walks of life.”[i]

I have already tried to summarise the main points arising from the “descriptive” chapters in parts II and III in the considerations concluding these chapters. There is consequently little cause to do so again. Rather than repeating these conclusions in this section I would like to consider a number of elements that struck me while studying those realities and practices, and which seem important to me for a proper understanding of the past. It should allow me to formulate a number of considerations or questions concerning the meaning of that image and that past: what does it mean and how should we deal with it?

Colonial education: made in Belgium.

The image of the interaction between the missionaries and the pupils, the method of teaching used or which should have been used in the classroom, the material used - all this points in the same direction: the North. In the Belgian Congo a system was established that was not only loosely based on that implemented in the homeland but that was a very similar copy of it. It is true that a number of

differences arose in the quantity of material taught and that a selection of that material was being made, 'adapted' to the local circumstances. That does not detract from the essential conclusion that in this case a western educational system was transplanted to the colony. With all its components: the framework, the buildings, the setting, the administrative body, the daily timetable, the teaching method and naturally also the discipline. The first reaction to this was undoubtedly: "But could it have been any different?" The fact that we find it hard to imagine anything else perhaps precisely indicates the importance of this conclusion. In any event it puts matters in the right perspective. In keeping with the quotation by Fabian which I cited in the introduction: we are used to looking back at colonial history and consequently also at the history of Belgian colonisation of the Congo from the perspective of the results achieved. As a result we often forget that it did not have to be like that. Our frameworks of reference restrict us and that is not any different with regard to colonial education.

Two major conclusions follow from this with regard to this study. Firstly, the discussion of the difference between adaptationism and assimilationism must first be brought back to its true proportions: discussions about differences in styles, about the way matters had to be approached. Both movements operated within a framework that remained western in essence. The question of whether indigenism, as a local variant of adaptationism, was also truly more progressive than assimilationism must be answered rather negatively. In the beliefs of the people who gave indigenism its name and who applied it themselves (Hulstaert, Boelaert and other MSC members) it may have been "progressive". They wanted to defend the Congolese. That belief by Hulstaert and his followers may seem logical, insofar as they compared themselves to other people or groups of colonisers who were much less interested in the welfare of the Congolese. At the same time that is precisely where the shoe doesn't fit. Hulstaert and his followers seem to act from a genuine conviction, often a type of moral indignation. However, in many cases that moral indignation of the MSC was aimed against modernity. They were truly concerned with the welfare of the Congolese but that primarily meant that they wanted to protect them from themselves and the modern world. However, the fact that at some times their assumptions contrasted sharply with those of the authorities or other players within colonial society gave the MSC an "alternative" aura. It is perhaps better not to say "progressive" because if we associate that with "emancipatory" we must conclude that the actions of the MSC show clear indications of the opposite. The way in which they

handled the pupils in practice rather gives an image of a very paternalistic attitude.

A second conclusion is that there was a very great gap between the general, theoretical and fundamental beliefs on the one hand and the practice in the field on the other. At first sight this conclusion seems to fit well with the principle of the *grammar of schooling*, as formulated and explained by Depaepe and others. Expressed concisely, that principle claims that classroom practice is resistant to innovation to a relatively far-reaching extent. It claims that practice comprises a set of rules, habits, traditions, in which changes are imposed from above but are very hard to implement. The school practices in the Belgian Congo illustrate this very well but not necessarily because so many attempts at innovation were undertaken. This distance between theory and practice may be explained in more detail as a combination of a number of factors. Firstly, the existing (western) *grammar* had taken root to such an extent with the missionaries that it could literally be imported into an entirely different environment. The consequence thereof was that the missionaries automatically applied personal experiences in the new colonial context. That naturally also had a lot to do with the fact that the majority of missionaries also had a very limited, in some cases non-existent, theoretical *background* with regard to educational theory. The basis of colonial education was low on theory. Gustaaf Hulstaert is a telling example of this in the given context, precisely because he felt a need to improve his theoretical knowledge or at least to brush it up in the framework of the discussions (and the power struggle) he entered into with the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

The grammar of schooling also fitted well in the missionary context because it was embedded here in a strongly ideologically coloured environment. Evangelisation had to work from a strong moral mobilisation. Sending people to far-off regions, unaware exactly what was waiting for them, even if they were often driven by a desire for the unknown and adventure, could only succeed if those people were given solid support. In the documents concerning the missionary training it is clear that this support was offered to them through a strong religious experience. People who were imbued with faith were more able to cope with their mission. That this faith was given a traditional, conservative character, especially during the interbellum but also for a long time after that, was also shown clearly. Clearly this must also have influenced school life and the ideas about education. In other words innovative, modern ideas could only be

given a chance in the colonial schools if they were adequately adapted to the religious, Catholic principles.

Concretely, the actual influence and moral authority of Gustaaf Hulstaert at the MSC and the aura of scientific study that he had built about around him was so overwhelming that it was hardly possible to do something innovative without him contradicting it. And he did so to a considerable extent. Both in his position as inspector and as a researcher he had very clear opinions that regularly brought him into conflict with other players. In his wake other MSC members also regularly came to blows about the education the Congolese should receive or the methods they wanted to implement in education. The fact that some subjects were heavily argued over did not however mean that others assumed an essentially different attitude with regard to the Congolese pupils. The other congregations active in the region under the supervision of the MSC should be placed predominately along the same line. The Brothers of the Christian Schools, who also specialised in education, did not differ essentially from others in this and fitted nicely into the colonial canvas. Even the fact that they argued for further Gallicising of education changes little, even if that allowed them to make a better show with the pupils, who considered French as one of the most important instruments for social promotion.

The players

In hindsight it is naturally easy to see the “larger picture” and to put a finger on it. I have already referred to the difficulty of always finding the correct balance and nuance in the assessment of the colonial system of power on the one hand and the players in that system on the other. Naturally, this relates to a problem that arises more often in scientific historical work. With the *plea for modesty* from the introduction in the back of one’s mind, I would still like to defend the claim that this study contributed to finding that balance and nuance and consequently is also situated in a historical critical movement. This does not relate to the discovery of striking new facts or data; it relates more to shifts in interpretations. Those interpretations relate to the image of the two groups that meet each other in the framework of colonial education. I would like to try here to describe these two groups better with regard to those interpretations.

The missionaries

The contemporary image of missionaries is clearly not the same as that thirty or forty years ago. I have the impression that today the traditional image of mission

heroes that was naturally carefully cultivated by the church and the missionaries themselves over many years does not hold up to the same extent. Naturally, that is only my impression, which I have not based on any scientific research in that regard (which does not exist to my knowledge). Yet I still suspect that the presence and work of the missionaries in the colonial context is still mainly considered in so-called 'evolutionary' terms (today this is more likely called "development"). With that I mean that, to use a popular expression, it is still assumed that the missionaries went to the Congo to help people there. That aid is perhaps not always the same as "civilising" in the meaning given to it in the past. However, if that is not the case it does in any event still have the connotation of "helping people out of their misery", ensuring an "improvement" in their situation.

Naturally, that is logical because missionary activity is also always considered in those terms and because during the decolonisation period the discourse of the Catholic church in Africa and the Congo almost seamlessly switched from evangelisation to development cooperation or aid. In addition the missionaries themselves undoubtedly left for Africa with the idea that they would "bring light into darkness". In the sources researched in this study the testimonies and reactions of the missionaries in the field reflect that they were often dedicated to disciplining, training and educating young Congolese people. However, a number of convictions lay at the basis of that activity which are perhaps forgotten now or that have disappeared somewhat in the mists of time. If it is true that these missionaries carried out their work from a strong conviction, then it is surely necessary to situate and explain those convictions clearly here. Those convictions were primarily aimed at making the Africans, and more specifically young Africans, "good people" in the most Christian meaning of the word. The "mechanical" salvation of souls may have been a phenomenon for the Catholic Church that was part of the initial days of the colonisation, in essence the aims of the missions and evangelisation clearly remained geared to the expansion of the ecclesiastical sphere of influence.

Obviously the intention is not to judge and condemn the missionaries and their work *in general*. That was never my aim. That would be as pointless as the idolisation and even literal "canonisation" that was the case in the past. Firstly, the missionaries were obviously people of their time. Colonisation and even the economic exploitation of the Congolese territory, its riches and its inhabitants,

was normal, acceptable or at least justified, depending on the source and the period. Secondly, the correspondence between “ordinary” missionaries clearly shows in a very different way that they were not at all heroes in practice and that the certainty or assertions of their convictions could sometimes waver. One of the MSC members I spoke to in the framework of this research told me that at some point while out there everybody experienced a moment of uncertainty when they asked themselves “what am I doing here?”. If the impression should appear from all the quotations and descriptions cited that I want to represent the missionaries in a negative light I would formally like to deny that here.

However what has become strikingly obvious to me from this research is precisely the contradiction between the very humane inspiration, the good intentions of the people who worked in practice (the missionaries) and the exploitative and oppressive nature of the colonial regime. That is visible in a great many different areas: The contradiction between the love for and simultaneously the deeply racist human conceptions about other people; the strictness, discipline, the often traumatising working conditions that were imposed on the basis of the conviction that it was for the greater good of the children; the conviction that it was better for the Congolese to reside in the countryside to develop a future in their own region and on the basis of their own traditional roots, while simultaneously trying with all their might to pull up those roots by combating typical institutions (family, balance of power, religion). The reactions of the Congolese in relation to the missionaries probably illustrate that contradiction even more clearly.

The Congolese

Parallel to what has been said of the image of the missionaries, our image of the Congo, and of the Congolese themselves, must also be adjusted to some extent. The image that is still overwhelming and almost ineradicable in Flanders is that of a country that should have been happy with our presence and help despite everything. “They only have tribal disputes now the unifying factor has disappeared from there, now there is no longer anyone to keep it all under control” Or “Since we left they have not managed to make much of it, have they?” This image is stronger than ourselves and is absolutely not contradicted in modern conceptualisation, particularly as it is shown us in the media. However, it is very uncommon to ask why that is the case and whether colonial history has something to do with it. In response to this claim it will undoubtedly be said that the way things have gone wrong cannot be blamed on the Belgians forty years

after the events. It is a remark that is also made by many intellectual Congolese today.

Without considering the complex amalgam of power factors influencing the contemporary political situation of the country and the social malaise it is experiencing, I still think that historical research into colonial education can provide part of the explanation. A number of characteristics of colonial education have exercised an essential influence and probably still do so in some way. I would also like to refrain from any moral judgements or issues of guilt in this regard and rather try to remain with the mechanisms in force. The colonial regime had an educational component that served the general social and economic aims that the regime had set itself. However, it is certain that the education given by the missionaries willingly or unwillingly fitted into an economical logic. It contributed as a factor in the differences which arose in the Congo between town and country and as such also to the dislocation of the economy.

The MSC saw that. Their laments about the uprooted were mainly aimed at the derailment of the conservative morality they stood for and which they tried to inculcate thoroughly in the Congolese youth (those young people did not differ from the Flemish young people in Catholic schools). However, they also warned against another form of uprooting that arose as a result of the young people breaking their ties with their traditional environment and falling between two worlds as a result. Ironically enough they played an important role in that themselves. Education in itself did lead to emancipation but that emancipation was incomplete. The image of a derailing locomotive, used by Marc Depaepe in the conclusion of *In het teken van de bevoogding* was also entirely correct in that sense. The colonial educational system was the embodiment of the *contradictio in terminis* that resulted in the creation of the évolués. The concept of the évolué and the identification of the elite as a group was, separate from the legal affirmation of it, mainly linked to the values given in the education and subjects considered in the classroom.

In addition, as an essentially western system, that education was a mechanism in which young people were placed and in which they were taught to strive for a number of things which were presented as morally defensible or morally good. The seeds of meritocratic ideas were taught at school as the aim was to get somewhere. The selection mechanisms that were built in and primarily intended

to set boundaries to prevent overload to the system and only allow the necessary elements to proceed clearly had perverse effects. At the same time values like modesty, obedience and docility were considered of paramount importance and literally imposed on the young people. Young Congolese children were absolutely not allowed to think they were better than they were. They remained inferior to the whites, no matter how much the discourse also turned to a “cooperation” and the “Belgian-Congolese community”. The *évolués* also sensed that at the time, undoubtedly often rather subconsciously, but could not or did not dare to mention the problem directly. They looked for explanations but it took a rather long time before they truly dared to conclude that it was their ‘half’ or incomplete emancipation that was the problem.

However, the testimonies from people who were at the mission school during the 1950s suggest another important mechanism. The school was generally considered as an instrument to secure a place in the new society. However, that did not necessarily correspond with the inherent characteristics of mission education, in other words with its contribution with regard to content or the skills that it was expected to teach. Language was generally solely perceived by the pupils as something they had to know and master in order to succeed. In addition, the main concern seemed to be obtaining the diploma that was experienced as a kind of cheque that could be exchanged for an attractive social position, a *poste de bureau* [office job]. That direct link can be found remarkably often in the testimonies recorded. In any event the school itself formed a strong attraction, simply because young Congolese citizens had realised that it could assure them a better life. That was realised “notwithstanding” the fact that attending school and enduring a series of less enjoyable things were necessary. Undoubtedly, further and more detailed research will give a better insight into this but, in any event, it is telling that the people who proved ambitious later on and cleared themselves a path to the top also already used both legal and illegal routes required to achieve a better material or social position at school. Could it be that this defines the foundations of a social mechanism or social practice that has developed fully in the modern Congo in the form of buying diplomas? I am unable to answer this question with the affirmative because according to Pierre Kita this would be precisely one of the things that only pervaded after the influence of the Catholic Church had been short-winged by Mobutu.[\[ii\]](#)

Further research

The fact that documents still circulate today or stories are still told in which the missionaries are depicted without any nuance as the “henchmen” of the colonial regime shows that mutual understanding is still very difficult, even forty years after the events. The need for critical but nuanced studies about the missionaries themselves and their experiences and memories of the colonial period is big because there is still too little non-hagiographical material. The large quantity of material that is currently still available in communities all over Flanders must be catalogued and stories must be told with it. The time has also come to collect the testimonies from the people who experienced this period and are still surviving today. The majority of missionaries who actively worked in the colonial period are now very elderly and it is consequently high time to realise this. It could only contribute to a more realistic conceptualisation of the activities of a large group of Belgians and the Flemish in particular. My argument for adjusting the image is perhaps even more pressing with regard to the Congo and the Congolese because I think that the historian truly has an important role to play here. The need for differentiation is extremely great because it is so much easier to cast what we know of this colonial history in contradictions or to summarise it in clichés rather than representing it with attention for uniqueness, peculiarity, and detail. In other words critical history can find a huge work area here. In that regard I feel strengthened in my scientific task as a researcher. Trying to study the daily life of the various players in a rather intense and important episode from our collective past and then also bring these to the attention of the public is perhaps a rather ungrateful, sometimes not so evident but definitely useful occupation. It is one of the many elements in a larger complex that must contribute to a more contextual approach to history, a less polarised world view and ultimately also to a more respectful interaction with the “other”, in a society in which this is sometimes poignantly lacking.

NOTES

[i] Dembour, M.B. (2000). Recalling the Belgian Congo. p. 11-12.

[ii] Briffaerts, J. (2002). ‘De last van het verleden’ Een bevoorrecht getuige aan het woord over onderwijs in Kongo. In *Basis / Christene School*, CIX, 14 September 2002, p. 27-30.