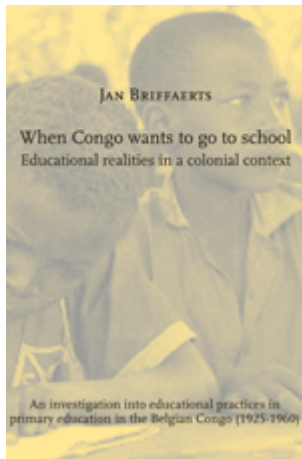


# When Congo Wants To Go To School - The Long Term: Memories



*“We arrive, it is as though it is some amusement, the people are standing there, we left for school, my poor father stood on the road until I disappeared from view. And I occasionally saw him when I turned around. But, he did not enjoy it. But me, on the other hand, I was attracted as if it were a game ...[i]*

## *A final piece of the puzzle*

After reading the Congolese comments in *La Voix* the question naturally arises of whether these points of view corresponded to reality. It has certainly been adequately shown that a rather large gap yawned between the picture the Belgians gave of the situation in the Congo on the one hand and the actual problems of the colonised population on the other. The “elite” of the time were considered in the previous chapter. However, their contributions are situated in a strongly opinion-oriented framework. How education was experienced in practice by the pupils cannot be discovered directly from that. It is a piece that is still missing in the picture I want to reproduce: what was the experience of those who really encountered it? A search into literature on the memories of the education of the colonial period is not very productive. The information is scarce and very scattered. For this reason I considered it useful, in addition to the relatively large amount of written sources available to me, to search for a few people who had been going to school in the period and the region concerned. What they remember, and the way in which they do that, forms a very interesting supplement to the written sources and at the same time clarifies them and also puts them into context. Parts of their testimony have appeared here and there in the previous chapters because they naturally gave information on classroom practices. In this last chapter I want to place the story and the memories of my main witnesses at the centre. What is left from these experiences, what remained

and what is their attitude towards this period?

Within (and perhaps because of) the limitations and uniqueness that accompanies this source of information, it is indisputably very interesting to use it in the context of this study. The image of school practices and realities can certainly be supplemented and shown more sharply by listening to the people who experienced it all as pupils. Concerning oral history and the problems of memories in general there is a great deal of scientific literature and in the context of colonial historiography and anthropology (oral) testimony, interview or conversations are sources of information that are being used more and more frequently. My intention here is not to subject the precise nature of all sources to a thorough analysis but I do want to mention a couple of sensible ideas, in my opinion, on the way in which this sort of information can best be dealt with.

### *Working with memories*

Bogumil Jewsiewicki puts what he calls *récits de vie* at the centre of his social and cultural historical research.[ii] He has even published a number of these life stories and on this occasion formulated some considerations about the nature of these stories. He states that this really relates to a mixed form, something in between *social history* and telling a story. He emphasised the shifting meaning of stories, which change their context continually between 'I' and 'we'. Your own story simultaneously carries that of the family, the village, the people who share the experience with you. Strongly connected with this is the practice of speaking figuratively; this forms a sort of second layer beneath the facts and events used by the people telling the story or those interviewed. The images used really constitute the assignment of meaning given to the facts and events. On a more direct level Jewsiewicki noticed that in the stories of the Congolese a distinction is often made between 'us' and 'them'. The 'them' was primarily the European, the coloniser.

A more personalised implementation of Jewsiewicki's insights into the 'I' and the 'we' may be found in the study by Marie-Bénédicte Dembour, *Recalling the Belgian Congo*. [iii] Dembour pays a great deal of attention to the process of remembering, which seemed to form a central component of her research into the colonial past. From the start of her research she was confronted by the transforming effect of memories and the fact that people integrate their past into their lives and also adapt it. During her interviews Dembour discovered that the interlocutors often gave generally applicable answers and had difficulty in making

a distinction between what they formerly thought and what they now thought: *“Experiences do not get pigeonholed in one’s memory in a chronological order; rather they are amalgamated in what already exists, slightly changing the tone, adding a dimension, or completely ‘distorting’ the images of the past one keeps.”* In the same sense Dembour described a whole series of ways in which memory works: forgetting distasteful things, the incorporation of new facts, striving for coherence and synthesis. Memory continues to modify occurrences with a particular connotation until they get another connotation.

Dembour seems to emphasise the fact that memory works in an active manner, in the sense that memories not only fade but things are also added and modified. In a recent paper (*Forgetful Remembering*) Johannes Fabian emphasised another component.[iv] In this he defends the concept that both components of memory must be considered, remembrance and forgetting. He considers the telling of tales (*narration*) as a combination of both components, both considered as active transactions of the narrator. Fabian gives some convincing examples of what one must expect concretely. In the article in question he begins from a conversation that he had with a Congolese man. The conversation fitted into source research carried out by Fabian into a document from the colonial period about which he wanted to know more. At the same time he became interested in the man’s life story. Fabian writes: *“We cannot help but notice that the various parts of narrative that Baba Ngoie elected to tell us add up to a remarkably thin story of his life. Despite occasional flashes of the concrete - memories that help us to imagine some of the stations of his life - what he reports is the biography of a strangely abstract colonial subject.”* Besides this his attention was mainly drawn to the fact that the interviewee maintained a conscious distance from certain subjects whenever he is asked about them. That can be seen from the way in which a person talks about something: someone can claim not to remember because of his great age but also sometimes because he had paid no attention to it at the time. Sometimes someone reacted with a brusque ‘that could be true’ or an uninterested ‘maybe’. This is what Fabian is interested in, the finer points of the narrative, including the way in which things are *not* mentioned. This particular manner can therefore tell us something, even if it is only about the reason why someone does not know or do something, but also about the way that someone sees himself in society, in his life.

## 2. *Interlocutors*[v]

I made extensive interviews with three former pupils of the MSC in the Belgian Congo.[vi] What the three mainly had in common was that they went to school in MSC schools, that they were good students, that they were able to continue their education after primary school and that they finally ended up in Belgium. They had all been living for a considerable time in Belgium now and have settled there. I would like to introduce them briefly because they will speak in detail below. This biographical information was given to me by the interviewees themselves during the conversations I had with them.

Jean Indenge was born in 1935 in the *territoire de Monkoto*, in the southeast Equatorial province. After attending the village school, he went to primary school in Wafanya with the Sisters of Beveren-Waas. After this he continued his education in Coquilhatville and became a nurse. After independence he also worked there for a short period. After this he went to Leopoldville, at first only to work. Later he resumed his studies there. He became *assistant pharmacien* and worked in the provincial medical services. During the sixties he came to Belgium and finally trained in physiotherapy at the Université Libre de Bruxelles. He received his first degree, his bachelor's. He then worked in a clinic in Brussels. In the 1970s he was called back for a short time to give lessons in Zaïre, while his family remained in Belgium. After this he continued to work in Belgium, in the same hospital, but at the end of the 1980s he had to take early retirement as a consequence of internal restructuring. Papa Indenge is a fairly well known person in the Congolese community in Brussels. At the moment of the interview he was mainly employed in running a café (together with his family), right next to Brussels South station.

Stéphane Boale was born around 1935 in the district of Bokote. He also went to primary school there. Later he studied at the teacher training college with the Brothers of the Christian Schools in Bamanya. He taught for a short time in Bamanya but then did the state examination as a meteorologist. Thanks to that diploma he found employment with the government and was posted to the Equatorial province. In this capacity he also had the opportunity to continue his studies in Belgium, which he did for four years. How long he has lived in Belgium is unclear but probably since the end of the 1970s. He is retired and lives with his wife in Saint-Josse-ten-Noode (Brussels).

Jean Boimbo was born in 1928. Like Indenge he comes from the *territoire de Monkoto*, but from a different village. He also went to school in Wafanya. After

this he went to the teacher training college in Bamanya. After working as a probationary teacher for two years in Lombo Lombo (the leper colony founded by the MSC) he began teaching. After getting his diploma, in 1954, he immediately moved to Leopoldville. When Buisseret started lay education, many extra teachers were sought and he took advantage of this. He taught until immediately after independence and then became *directeur adjoint* and after that headmaster of his primary school. In 1965 he began a career in the civil service. He first worked in the personnel department of the central department of education, after this and after a series of promotions he ended up in the highest ranks of the administration, first as *Agent du protocole d'état* (a department which was under the direct authority of the president), later at the *Commissariat général du Plan*.<sup>[vii]</sup> From the middle of the 1980s he was promoted to cabinet assistant in the ministry of public works. After a change of cabinet and a short period - following his ex-minister - at the *Belgolaise* bank, where he had the title of *Fondé de pouvoir* ("having power of authority"), he was again appointed to a function in a ministry, that of agriculture. Finally Boimbo and his boss were appointed to the *SNCZ* (the Zairese railway company). In 1993 Boimbo retired from this job but he continued to run his own construction company. He moved to Belgium in 1997. He lives in Uccle (Brussels) with his family.

I had one or more lengthy conversations with each of these three. With Jean Boimbo I had one conversation of about two hours. With Jean Indenge I had one conversation of two to three hours and a second conversation that was somewhat shorter. With Stéphane Boale I had three conversations, each one a couple of hours long. I always used the same approach in these conversations. However, the conversations showed considerable differences between each other, not only in length but also as far as the style and fluency of communication were concerned. Without drawing any further conclusions out of this, it seems important to me to explain how these conversations proceeded in a rather general way. The way in which the interview was done was always the same (as was also the case for the interviews with the missionaries): a half open interview, in which I worked from a prepared list of questions but allowed the interviewees to expand further and then tried to follow their story insofar as possible. Jean Indenge, whom I interviewed first, had prepared himself carefully for the conversation and had composed a complete list of things that he wanted to say. He expanded considerably on particular topics. Stéphane Boale was the most difficult for me to grasp and I had the most difficulty in communicating with him. He did not stick to

a chronologically based story, and often told me memories and stories that had been told to him, which he did not in the first instance explain as such. At first this rather confused me. Finally, Jean Boimbo answered the questions I asked without preparation and very fluently. Of the three he seemed to have the most feeling for chronology and could usually quickly say from memory what he had experienced and done and where and when things exactly had to be situated.

*To school*[viii]

### *2.1. The great leap forwards*

I spoke in detail with Jean Indenge about his motivation to go to school. Indenge had, like the other two gentlemen from the Equatorial province, first followed lessons in his own village for some years in one of the little bush schools which, in his experience, were relatively widespread: *"You see in each village, there was a basic cell, in each village there were small schools where children of certain age, say 6, 7, 8 years, would enter and spend around two or three years. That was the case for me, almost three years. And when the curricula available there were completed, well it was a question of going to a properly officially recognised school."* At this village school the children did not learn much: *"They taught rudimentary education, reading and writing, you had to know the alphabet, reading and the elements of arithmetic and after three years those that were talented, they would already have exceeded this level of education."* Indenge's school was a Protestant school and that had one difference to other schools: *"What I know is that I finished this school and that I was unemployed, so to speak, for a few years, before going to another school. And during this period of unemployment and because it was a Protestant school I had a book, the same as the moniteur."* Indenge did just the same as the *moniteur*, on the basis of his own book: reading and singing. And his knowledge thus was as developed as that of the teacher.

For him going to the mission school meant he had to leave his familiar environment and make a long journey. I asked to what extent the children had been able to build up a background for taking such a far-reaching decision themselves. I said to him that he must have been very motivated to start this. He answered with a few rhetorical questions: *"When one went to the village schools, at that age, is there an understanding of what one will be doing at that school? All the more so at that time, those guys who were in our village, who hunted, who knew how to write or who sang Protestant songs, would that affect young people?"*

*That, I do not know!*" For himself he had reasoned that behind school there had to be a sort of vocation, although he clearly still had difficulty in explaining this to himself and still seemed to be looking for an explanation: *"But always I was called by something like a wind that attracts you like that. It was only much later that I understood that there was a vocation from I don't know what, attraction, expectation, I don't know what."* Also significant in his case was the fact that his older brothers also went away to school. He described that as the way in which the vocation received an effective form: *"But, in order for the expectation, this call to be effective, it was necessary to have a few brothers in my family who were at the school, even if they stopped in the second or third year of primary education, it was necessary to have that."*

Indenge remembers being very enthusiastic about learning to write. He was a good pupil and practiced diligently, also in the evenings after school. He described his feeling about going to school as a mixture of compulsion and longing: *"It was at the time that we discovered organised school, there were 300, 400 pupils and more, we were not yet completely marked but still we were there because of obligation on the one hand and as though it was a game on the other."* Indenge described a sort of indefinite situation in which the children found themselves and in which they were maintained by the disciplinary rules and the things they had to do, which they sometimes found nice and sometimes not. There was no higher purpose. Indenge was clearly also in that situation and compared that with the European context. He conceded that they had no role models, no reference points: *"Because we did not have any points of reference. The points of reference here (in Belgium, JB), today, that means asking the question to a child of 4, 5 years of age: 'what do you want to be later?' There are those that would say: 'I want to be a policeman', others who say 'I want to be a doctor', etc. etc. What does that mean? What these children are doing is looking for people with whom they can identify."*

He was clearly still thinking about it himself: *"When I ask the question again, it is because it was necessary to have points of references in a person, who works, who has a bicycle or who has 'l'union fait la force', etc. etc. From that moment, one says: 'I, I want to be this ... that occurred then because he was at school.' While we say: 'I am going to school to be like him!'"*<sup>[ix]</sup> That sort of role model was therefore missing and Indenge did not succeed in describing his longing to go to school in more detail. It remained a sort of undefined longing or even

something that people just did because it was the established thing. *“But why did one go to school? This desire was due to what? I am still asking that question because I cannot discover it, it was simply a game like that, and: ‘I have to go to school, we are talking about school!’”* His parents were really not convinced that he should leave and it was obviously his older brothers who persuaded them to let their youngest son go to the big school. It can hardly be anything other than that they saw the importance of this, although according to Indenge they could only just read and write: *“They were not very successful in their level of education, eh”*. This witness indicates that speaking of conscious strategies, made in advance, is not completely correct.

In *Naître et mourir au Zaïre* Jewsiewicki collected some statements from Congolese witnesses about their lives during the colonial period. These were mostly life stories of illiterate people who were recorded by family members, except for a few exceptions. Most of the stories only briefly treat the school history of the protagonists but do report – even if summarily– things mentioned by my interviewees. For example the fact that children in the countryside only began primary education at a rather late age: *“At thirteen years of age, I left my parents to go to the Catholic mission of Libanda in order to receive my First Communion. After having received First Communion, I registered in the first year of primary school to start my studies. If I had started my studies late, that was because there was no school in the Ngiri.”*[x] This is an element that evidently often comes to the fore in people’s memories. That was also the case with Jean Indenge and he referred to the same reasons: *“Well, at that time, when we hadn’t received the required age, which was around 12, 13 years of age, it was not possible to go to that school that was many kilometres from the village, as I will explain a little later.”*

It is not difficult to place this as a memory; it must after all have been a fundamental moment in the young lives of these people. A great adventure, which the person involved liked to talk about in detail so many years later: *“One left one’s small village with a small suitcase. In my case, I may say that I was privileged, I had a metal case with a few pairs of trousers, some shirts, a few coins. And we left for a long time. Over twelve months we only had two holidays. And just think: leaving my home to arrive at this mission in Wafanya was two days’ walk. On foot, barefoot! And the majority of the time, there were real roads suitable for motor vehicles but we could not follow those because that was too far,*



*we preferred the shortcuts. However, the shortcuts required walking on the tracks where we sometimes would face an elephant before us. Well, so we would leave, very early in the morning from our home and then to spend the night in an unknown village. So just picture that in your head (...) Well. We arrived in the village, a stranger, where we asked for hospitality (accommodation, JB), spent the night if we found hospitable people, or you would borrow mats because there were no mattresses and then, very early in the morning at around four a.m., we would rise to continue the walk through ... the most virgin forest that exists to arrive at the edge of a river. The river had to be crossed to arrive at the mission."*

Stéphane Boale also confirmed during the conversations I had with him that people waited a long time before sending children to the mission school. He thought it was because it was a dangerous journey: *"Ah yes, but why did you have to wait? It was because of the killings! It was dangerous. Even getting married: you had to marry women you knew. Not more than one kilometre away. And when sending children, there was nothing heard about them. If a person left, no news was received."* He himself described the journey of over two hundred kilometres as *"une expérience impressionnante"* and he had trouble with homesickness but recovered from it quickly. Indenge expressed the shock of arrival somewhat pithily by describing his first impression as follows: *"We were no longer in our village, we were somewhere!"* He linked that very expressly to the fact that he was now at a place where whites were continually present: *"Now you would see them, not one, but three and continually."* The presence of female religious workers, too, was a new, alienating experience for him: *"We knew that they existed and that they were called "Sisters". But now we could actually visualise these beings called "Sisters". That clearly had an impact on us (laughs, JB)."*

## *2.2. Motivation*

A completely different question naturally relates to the reasons for continuing education, continuing going to school. In the interviews I conducted that element was never explicitly put forward. In hindsight the gentlemen seemed to consider their continued education the obvious thing to do, although that cannot really have been the case in the given context. Boale implied it to some extent. When he was about seventeen he finished primary school. When I mentioned the junior seminary, he told me spontaneously that he would not have been allowed to go there: *"But I did not have the opportunity to go there. I was prepared but my history was not known. In other words, in order to go to the seminary, the priest*

*had to know your origins. I was the third in the class when I left primary school. But I was not known, my identity was not known.”* He certainly suggested that you had to have good connections, be in contact with the right people, to be able to go to the seminary. Obviously he felt obliged to give a few words of explanation: *“And from all those who went to the higher seminary, only one succeeded, all the others were thrown out.”* And then to conclude about himself: *“They did not know where to put me really. I was considered too young to be a teacher.”*

In contrast, with Jean Boimbo everything seemed very clear. After primary school he simply went straight to the teacher training college. Once he was there, there did seem to be some problems, because there were too many candidates and the classes were too crowded. The Brothers therefore organised a *concours* and only those who scored more than 90% could immediately go on to the higher year (Boimbo was 19 at that time). His ambitions were already clear at the time, he says: *“We had goals, eh! We saw our elders who were working for the State, in a good job, or teachers, who were clean and who taught, and there were guys who were poor and we wanted to work so that we could help our family. We had determination, we wanted to become like some (...) we liked school, so that we could become someone later.”* That partly fits in with what Jean Indenge said about the initial motivation for going to primary school. The example of others played an important role for the children at that time.

This was also true for Josephine Bongondo, who was at school in Kinshasa in the 1950s: *“Each person had their own ideas of what they wanted to do: ‘I want to work’; ‘I want to get married’; or: ‘I want to join a religious order’. But I only had one thought, to work. To work like some friends worked at that time.”* In her interview Bongondo agreed that specific expectations existed for the girls at domestic school. Although only a little French was taught, that was still enough to begin to dream of a ‘real’ job in an office: *“Yes, Ma’am Reine, Ma’am France, Ma’am Rumane... They gave us the hope that as we had started to talk a little French, we would be able to work in offices.”* She said that her parents had a typewriter at home. She wrote the letters and digits from the machine down on paper and during playtime at school she wrote them down again in the sand, then she practiced with her friends: *“We even created our own song: ‘We are pupils from middle school, we are to be congratulated, we will work in offices (one day). Love and push (the dance)!’”* These were girls at the domestic school, i.e. a

middle school. In comparison with most Congolese women they had a special position. Still, this picture of the future was not obvious for them; *Mama Bongondo* very clearly remembers the sharp reaction of the Sisters: *“Our sister came: ‘What? You, a black woman, working in an office? A black woman will not work a single day in an office! She will work in her husband’s house! In an office, a black woman would never work! Go on! All of you, you are punished! Go! You, Joséphine, you have invented all these stories! You will remain on your knees for a whole week outside class! Hands raised! You will see, you brat!’”*[xi]

### *The interrelations at the mission*

#### *3.1. The relationship with the missionaries, through the eyes of the pupils*

How close were the missionaries to the young Congolese? In some stories the Sisters appear a faraway spirit, an apparition with whom the pupils had very little contact. *“Sister Josepha, she passed by in the classroom all the time.”* The Sisters, who managed the school, had a purely supervisory function. The moniteurs were supervised closely. This supervision fitted well into the hierarchy of authority at the mission which seemed self-evident to the pupils. The general rule was for the pupils not to speak to or to bother the missionaries unless strictly necessary. If there were problems with the subject matter to be learnt, if they didn’t understand something, they went to the Congolese teaching staff first, who were naturally closest to the pupils. At any rate, that was Boale’s experience: *“You get the idea? Because the moniteurs were not like the professors here. They were the framework. They were close-by. In the mission, close-by.”*

The Sister only became involved if the teacher did not know either: *“While we only went to the Sisters for major problems, that the moniteur could not solve. But it was possible, for example mathematical problems, say the rule of three, algebra ... if the moniteur was unable to understand it, the Sister headmistress would come and explain the method.”* Since there was always a Sister in the neighbourhood, that almost happened automatically: *“The fact that she was present all the time, ‘24 hours a day’, she immediately knew if there was a problem. And consequently she would intervene, either at the time she noticed the problem in the class, she would explain the method, for very complicated problems.”* What exactly was meant by *“complicated problems”*? *“The story of the Holy Trinity, that was a little complicated. Or if the moniteur started to babble, to change the subject abruptly, the Sister would intervene.”* As a second example he used the mathematics lesson. Fractions, dividing by a fraction or decimal

numbers were experienced as difficult. Such things were experienced by the pupils as a form of superiority: *"It was very uncommon!!! Because when we saw that, we said to ourselves that the moniteur concerned did not measure up. That irritated the moniteur."* However, they did know that this superiority was not only because of the higher intelligence of the Sisters: *"She also had help because she had the 'solutionnaires'."*[xii]

Apart from this, the Sisters seemed to be fairly absent from the mission post. Boale said that they just did their job. Once the work was done, they went back to the convent. At the boys' boarding school it was not the Sisters but the Fathers who supervised. Here too, just as in the school itself, tasks were delegated. The Fathers appointed responsible people from among the boys, the *capitas* (*prefects*). The system was probably similar to those used in European boarding schools. These *capitas* had to organise and supervise the others and to report to the responsible Father. He only came along from time to time to check up or if he knew something was not in order. Punishment followed if the rooms were not orderly enough or not clean enough.

Boimbo voiced quite a different opinion, he looked back on a very satisfactory relationship that he had maintained with the Sisters. There are a few explanations for this. At the mission post the Sisters were responsible for the school and therefore they were also responsible for the religion or mathematics lesson. Besides this Boimbo had been a *capita*. Then as an older pupil he had been responsible for younger pupils for some years. In this position he had to hold assemblies and be responsible for the maintenance of good order in his group. In this position he very often came into contact with the Sisters, for he belonged to one of the 'chosen' allowed to work on weaving raffia, an activity that was definitely reserved for pupils who, because of their intelligence, diligence or for other reasons, were in the good books of the religious workers. Boimbo obviously had good memories of this and in the way in which he spoke of it there was still some pride there: *"I assisted. There was a Sister in charge of it and I helped the Sister. I watched the guys who made mistakes. I did the rounds or they came and ordered the raffia. You know what raffia is? Carpets were made from the raffia, with rods. The Sister drew the designs in the evening, with me and the others. For example, a square there, a fish there, in yellow, red. Or the design of a river and a boat."*

However, there was also another side to the iron discipline that both Boale and

Indenge could still picture very well. Boale related spontaneously that although the pupils had to be 'inside' in the evenings and lying in their beds when curfew rang, they still enjoyed a certain freedom during the day. He remembered the boarding school as a domain that was clearly separated from the village (that can also be seen on photographs and maps). But there was no problem in leaving that domain outside the hours of obligatory presence. That more or less meant the pupils could move freely at midday, at some hours in the evenings and probably also at the weekends: *"For example we were allowed to go out and were let back in if we simply wanted to go and buy something to eat. But a person who was in the boarding school and tried to leave during the hours of supervision, or if he could not be found, risked being punished."* He subsequently changed this statement by saying: *"If he did not have a reason for going, he was not allowed to be absent, no? And then, the pupils were there almost all day. In the morning, lessons, at midday, lunch, in the afternoon, more lessons and afterwards it was often study, or the cinema, prayers, activities."*

Indenge expanded on this aspect much more. He particularly made remarkable statements in the context of food provisions. He complained as much about the lack of food as about the quality of what the pupils got to eat (his statement about *peau de cochon* has previously been cited). The consequence of this is that the children exerted themselves to get enough food. Indenge did not give the impression that the Fathers had anything against it. Whoever had money, or could think of something else to trade, could go to the village to buy manioc himself *"At midday, we made do, we said: 'You go and find some water, you go and find manioc flour and another looked for nuts'. In thirty minutes we came back together, we started to prepare it and the manioc leaves we ate contained cyanotic acid (sic)? It had to be heated long enough. But we had less than thirty minutes."* The children obviously had a building available, described by Indenge as a large hangar, where they cooked for themselves. There was no supervision by the missionaries, he said: *"What would they have to supervise? They did not give wood, they did not give anything. We had to make do, as simple as that."*

Boimbo's declarations were less detailed but also fit with these: *"Those who were boarders ate at the boarding school. But there was no refectory as such eh. You had to manage on your own. Each person prepared food for himself."* The missionaries did give food but *"it was bad grub"*. He listed the alternatives: *"There was time until eight p.m. to get yourself food. We would go fishing, we*

were very close to the river. Or we could go and work for somebody to earn money." Again work had to be done to pay the moniteurs for their extra French lessons. If necessary this involved working for the teacher himself: "You would look for kindling or wood for the moniteur's wife or you would iron his trousers, his clothes or his wife's clothes." So leaving the grounds of the boarding school was allowed, as long as one was back before eight o'clock.

Consequently, there seemed to be a certain amount of freedom for the pupils in a number of areas and there were gaps in the timetables and in the supervision and discipline by the missionaries. However, those were exceptions and in the memories of those concerned the strict and regulated life is retained. That is apparent from the statements of all three. For example in the already quoted statement from Boale that there was always something to do. But Boimbo also said: "The days ran to time, eh. We had our occupations, there were no empty hours." And Indenge described the typical course of the days in some detail, from early morning through the curfew to awakening the next morning and concluded with: "And then the chain continued! Every day!"

### 3.2. Authority and how to handle it

#### 3.2.1. Authority

Stéphane Boale explained the general atmosphere between the teaching staff and the pupils in detail: "In the army, if you are told: 'Go there', you go there even if there are insects there. The total submission to a superior. You have to show that you have respect for your superiors. Even if you want to ask a question or pursue it in greater depth because you did not understand something. Or when the teacher wrote a mistake on the board, you were not allowed immediately to say 'You have made a mistake', you had to be much more careful. With submission and denunciation, in a normal degree. You were never allowed to say to a teacher or to the Sister headmistress or a person more authorised than you: 'You know nothing, you do not know any French!' or something similar. In your time, that is possible, democracy allows you to say such things. But not for us, that was not done!"

Although his use of language does not always allow a clear interpretation, a number of remarks between the meanderings of the conversation make it clear that the interaction in class proceeded very strictly and authoritatively: "Or, the teacher would feel that there were children who were disturbing him and he would say that they had to leave, as a punishment. You, you did not talk, but you

*knew who was talking. But you would still accept it. So you were punished, even though you had not done anything. (It was like that at school?) Yes, yes, complete submission. And when you wanted to put things in order, it was with a lot of courtesy.”* The relationship between pupils and Sisters (and by extension all missionaries) was one of military discipline, according to Boale. I called the Sisters at one point “*patronnes de l’école*”, which he obviously found very funny. He asked me if I had ever been in the army. He compared the situation in the class with that of the army. Strangely enough he changed straight over to the moniteurs, although the question was about the Sisters. The authority obviously passed over from the one to the other in particular circumstances.

Authority was everywhere, and penetrated all parts of the lives of the pupils. Everything was being observed. The girls who were at school in Kinshasa referred repeatedly to interference by the Sisters in their lives. Mama Bongondo had had to endure a great deal of criticism: “*And then you know that the religious workers and the priests were very strict people. They did not allow their affairs to be taken jokingly. But I also liked to put on a lot of powder. Also liked being elegant. When we went to Mass, I took Mama’s jewellery, the largest, I wore them in my ears. Ma’am France, Ma’am Romane, Ma’am Gertrie Kanda, all those ma’ams... Eh! They did not joke. Because they were members of a religious order, they also wanted you to be like them: ‘You cannot enter the Sanctuary! If you want to enter, you must wash your face as it should be, well, well, well. Remove all the Joli Soir you used to powder yourself! Remove all the gold you have put around your neck, put it in your pocket and then you may ‘enter the Sanctuary!’”* [xiii]

This same pupil was repeatedly confronted by the Sisters with the fact that she was relatively well off (she was an only child and got many material advantages from her mother). She must for example explain why she came to school by bicycle (unmistakably an expression of luxury). She also remembered how one of the local missionaries made the claim one day that certain pupils were intelligent because they took part in fetishism. Clearly the Father was looking at her, for he asked her – accusingly – for an explanation: “*I was there, not daring to say a single word. I have never in my life been to a fetishist! And well! You understand how much we were misused! During our time, if you (always) dressed well, if you were a person who claimed her rights, you really had a lot of problems.”*

This same Mama Bongondo remembered how she had originally ended up in education. The Sisters had decided that for her: “*We were returning from Mass as*

*we were entering into the enclosure of Saint Petre, our Mother Superior held me back. She said to me: 'Joséphine, from today, you will teach.' I said: 'Eh! Mother superior! What are you telling me?' 'I am telling you, from today, you will be a teacher.' I had to teach in the third year primary. It was subject matter I had never seen. I did not know how to do it but I went anyway."* Intervention in the business of the pupils, both in school and outside, have obviously remained in the memory.

This contrasts with the experiences of their male colleagues in the Equatorial province, who referred much less to that sort of interference. That may naturally also relate to the fact that they went to school in a different sort of environment, an environment which was, if anything, much more controlled by the missionaries. The girls in Kinshasa were confronted daily with two different worlds to live in whenever they went from home to school and back. For the boys 'in the provinces' it was quite different. They were at boarding school and the organisation of their days was ruled by the missionaries. The grip of the missionaries on their daily life could certainly not be less comprehensive than in the city. Still, there was certain interference that the former pupils remembered noticeably well and about which they still got excited. Both Indenge and Boimbo related that with the MSC at the primary school they were not allowed to wear footwear; long trousers were also forbidden: *"We wore our trousers during the holidays. We were only allowed to do so then."* When asked why these rules were imposed Boimbo said that it had something to do with relations with the opposite sex: *"They said, if you had shoes, slippers, if you wore trousers, you would go and seduce the girls."*

### *3.2.2. Punishments*

I asked each one of the three whether the teachers and/or the missionaries were strict and to what extent punishment was imposed. All three went into detail about the grounds for the punishments that were imposed. Boale mentioned physical punishment but said that it was rare. Indenge remembered that some missionaries, and also teachers, possibly on their own initiative and possibly not, would hit the pupils with a hand or a stick. Boimbo reported *peines corporelles* very briefly. According to him a few missionaries, directors or *capitas* could impose corporal punishment or physical work as a punishment, the teachers had to keep to lighter forms of punishment. None of the interviewees seemed to find this subject interesting, they did not seem to have been personally confronted



with it themselves. Boale remarked that this sort of punishment was normal and he asked me “if I had never had to kneel down in the class?”

But they were more vague about the strictness of the missionaries and the teachers. Jean Boimbo remembered strict interventions but these were certainly not common: *“There were only some missionaries who were ... Others kept a little more distance. Like Father Albert, he was not in contact with us, Father Jacques, he was the priest at the mission, he was ... no. Like Father Eugène, he was mean! Sometimes, you would say good day he would lash out. You are a man of God and when people say good day to you, you lash out. That is not a man of God! And when he had trees heavy with fruit, when they fell and we went to gather them from the ground, we were expelled from the school. It was better to let them rot! (...) The moniteurs, that depended, there were some very strict ones, there were also less strict ones, eh. There were mean ones and kind ones.”*

### 3.2.3. Resistance

In the literature on this subject there exists quite a considerable discussion in terms of resistance (whether symbolic or not) by the colonised against the colonisers. It is natural that some forms of resistance were provoked, after all the missionaries exercised strong control over their pupils and they decided what would happen and with whom. Finding expressions of resistance in the testimonies of those involved is another matter. Jean Boimbo referred to it expressly when he talked about the secret organisation of French lessons by the moniteurs: *“We wanted to talk French. We agreed with the masters and were against the priests. Because they did not want to teach us French. We were impatient. We even gave the masters the books. In order to learn conversations. ‘Bonjour monsieur’, ‘Où vas-tu?’, ‘Où est-tu?’. They did that on condition of payment, a phraseology, some kind of dialogue with a gentleman. ‘Où vas-tu?’, ‘Comment allez-vous?’, ‘Tu es malade?’. So, we would have our book and would recite it with a friend.”*

From the fact that the missionaries imposed punishment, one can automatically deduce that disobedience occurred among the ranks of the pupils. Indenge spoke about the boarding school: *“At 8 p.m. the bell for bed. And then the head moniteur would call assembly in case somebody was missing - and occasionally somebody was missing! - The eldest boys slipped out for two reasons, i.e. one of two reasons. Either they had gone night fishing. But nobody would tell them that. Or the head moniteur would perhaps believe they had gone to the city, to look for*

women. Because we were 12, 13 years old, it was not our problem. But there were some boys there who were 18. And then they had to be watched! An absence like that would naturally mean suspension. Not having spent the night inside.”

Of course, not everything punished can be qualified as conscious resistance. Such a thing depends naturally on very concrete circumstances and the individual disposition of people. That is also clear from the answers that the interviewees gave when they were asked about it. To the question of whether there was a good understanding between the teachers and pupils Boimbo’s convinced answer was: “Yes. We plotted. There was an alliance. We got on together very well!” After this he confirmed the hypothesis that the picture of the always obedient pupil was not correct but that a great deal happened that was not supposed to, mainly behind the backs of the missionaries.

By her own admission, Mama Julienne Aboli was also a good, though difficult, pupil. She loved to use make-up, something that the Sisters forbade at school. She liked to wear a *pagne* instead of the school uniform. That was not allowed at school but on their way to school the girls did this anyway; it was probably a sort of rebellious deed against “the authorities”. That was a risky undertaking, for if they were caught they got into difficulties on two fronts: at school for wearing the clothes and at home because it was confiscated. But they also had to take responsibility for other business: “One of my fellow students was called *Hélène Adokozima* and she gave birth. Nevertheless, she was a clever girl. And there she gave birth! And I was a bad girl! Well, when she gave birth, we went to visit her. During Mass, I was called: ‘Why did you go to visit Adokozima? Why?’ I was given punishment. I was suspended from school: ‘You went to visit a person who gave birth in mortal sin.’ ‘The person who has sinned is not her! It is me!’” And this reply (by me) caused the suspension.”

An answer such as this must indeed be seen as a conscious act of resistance, insofar as Aboli must have known that this answer was much too frank. This resistance really did not go very far, which is obvious from the outcome of the incident. “Then we had a religious Sister who taught us dressmaking, her name was *Reine Karl*. She came to the house. She said: ‘Come! You are almost finished. Simply come and ask for pardon.’ I went there – what else could I have done? – I asked for pardon so that I could do the exams.”[xiv] Aboli had no choice. Taking the examinations, and thus being able to progress in the school system and keep the chance of a diploma and a future, played a strong part. She had to ask

forgiveness for a deed that she supported. It is difficult not to see this as a technique to break possible resistance. Both in the interviews with missionaries and correspondence in the MSC archives a great many references to the expulsion of pupils as a punishment can be found. The schoolgirl's reaction shows that the school exercised real power.

In the presence of this power factor in the lives of the pupils, different sorts of reactions were possible. Someone like Boale presented an image of himself as a well-behaved pupil. That was given in an unconscious way but this only made it clearer. When our conversation came to the point of learning French, I asked him what opinion the pupils had about it. I then asked him if they also demonstrated in favour of this to the teachers or missionaries. To this he answered, somewhat piqued, as if I had said something very stupid, and the following conversation ensued:

*Boale: But yes, but I am going to return the question: When you were under the Dutch authority, were there laws that could be contested? Congo has been colonised by the Belgians. Just as once, they should prepare food to eat for the prisoners. Can the prisoners claim the right of eating sufficiently? Just like Europeans do? No! It's to show you that the curriculum had to be followed to the letter. It never disappeared. We said to each other: What will we do with Mongo (Lomongo, JB), but anyway.*

*JB: But you thought about it anyway?*

*Boale: The thought was not expressed!*

*JB: But there was anyway...*

*Boale: Yes! Just like you think about your future now and later. We thought about that. It exists inside all of us.*

*JB: But you didn't talk about it?*

*Boale: No no! If you talk about it, you go to prison or you get expelled. Sister Josepha or Father Superior, it's not they who made the curriculum! The curriculum was made here!*

Boale had completely accepted the omnipresent authority and control and considered it to be a normal fact of his life. That actually was true for each of the three gentlemen I interviewed: they hadn't found the authority so difficult or in any case did not let that be seen.

*Specific memories of school and school times*

#### 4.1. School lessons

In general it was easier to get the interviewees to talk about the circumstances under which they went to school, and the context in which that happened, than about what happened in the classroom. This observation is also true for the people who were interviewed in Kinshasa, although that can partly be explained by the more brief and general character of the conversations. In fact, I was already conscious of the difficulty of getting detailed descriptions of classroom behaviour before the interviews began. Simply thinking about some possible questions and applying them to my own time at school was sufficient to realise this.

Boale talked about the curriculum and considered what was presented to him at school as similar to the Belgian curriculum. He thought the two ran in parallel, although that was in fact impossible. The fact that he had to learn much about Belgium convinced him that this was really the case: *“The curriculum implemented at that time was completely the same as in Belgium. It only differed in the language because of the geography ... we studied the geography of Belgium. When I was at primary school in Bokote, I already knew the 9 provinces of Belgium! And the Schelde and the Meuse and things like that!”* He was at primary school from the end of the Second World War, so the changes that followed from the reforms of 1948 can hardly have affected him.

Not many memories surfaced about the subject matter to be learnt. After some questions about the *causeries* Boale did remember that fables were told: *“For example La Fontaine (sic) and also Victor Hugo.”* When I referred, in my conversation with Indenge, to the remark frequently made that the history lessons were mainly about Belgian history, he originally answered that there had in fact been a start with Congolese history. I asked him what the content of that was and he referred to the division of the colony into territories, the evolution of the administrative divisions, the travels of Stanley and Livingstone, the exploration travels of the Portuguese in the sixteenth century and the struggle against the slave trade. Indeed, nothing was said at all about ‘pre-colonial’ history. He also insisted on mentioning lessons in physical education, for he remembered those very well: *“There was athletics. There was no swimming because we did not have a swimming pool and there was football, which in my opinion was as much a part of physical education as leisure (...) There was consequently athletics that consisted of long jump, high jump and then, how do you say, sprinting, what else?”*

*There was no gymnastics on the horse and all that, no. There was also wrestling."*

Besides this, I mainly tried to reconstruct the techniques the teachers used when teaching. Repetition also came to the fore as a leading principle in the interviews. The master began a lesson with the repetition of the material from the previous lesson. He tried to find out if everything had been understood by questioning a few pupils. This could not take too long, for often a lesson was only half an hour: *"And if the pupils truly hadn't understood, we mixed yesterday's lesson with today's."* According to Jean Indenge that was also one of the most important elements. *"When teaching, because teaching really was better than that of today... we could not proceed to the next lesson without repeating what had already been seen."* In addition he emphasised that repetition during the lesson was in fact a necessary element for the pupils: *"We did not have any parents to stand behind (us, JB) we always repeated, it was not possible to progress without having understood what had been done. And naturally there were some slowcoaches, who either had limited intellectual capacity due to their age or had been born like that but they did not understand or they understood late!"*

Indenge was also convinced that this was a good method. It was what the pupils needed at that time. *"It was not possible to go too fast like that. It was something entirely new that had to be put into the head of a person, so it had to be exact and certain so that he had sufficient comprehension, so that there was more or less complete assimilation."* Indenge did not seem to want to say that the requirement for repetition was a logical consequence of the lower intelligence of the Congolese, in comparison with others. He even compared it with how it is done now in schools and drew the conclusion from this that much repetition was certainly better, although he implicitly conceded that the subject matter to be learned was not very broad. But that was exactly an additional reason to have a better grasp of the little that they got: *"What we notice today is that we are always running behind. (...) And the number of courses, just see what there is today, there is a plethora, there are a lot of subjects the young people learn today! So they have to run after time. But there, there was something very precise, we taught such and such a thing for the future. So it was essential to master the little we learnt absolutely, there was nothing else for it."*

#### *4.2. Religiosity*

Something that seemed obvious at that time and consequently was probably perceived in a rather unconscious way, is the religious character of the life as set

up in the school and, by extension, at the mission. It is, again, not very explicitly present in the stories that the people tell about it afterwards but it *is* there. It often creeps into particular expressions they use or the way in which they refer to particular things. It is also dependent on the career they have had since. Mama Bongondo recounted the story of the beginning of her professional career as a teacher. After she had mentioned the – for her totally unexpected – decision by the Sisters to put her in front of the class, she said the following: *“I was given a timetable. That was not too complicated for us with the Catholics, we started school with the catechism, you see? As I was also taught the Catechism.”* At another point she just wanted to make clear to the interviewer where she had got to in the chronology of her story and to make it clear that she was talking about the 1950s: *“Then we have passed 1950... The Holy Year was 1950”*.

In fact, I hardly talked about religious aspects with Stéphane Boale. Still, it was very obvious from different details that he was very religious. On my first visit to him, he suddenly suggested praying before we started the interview. Later he repeated the following message a few times: *“In relation to the teachings of Jesus Christ, we are deaf and dumb. We had to be talked to through signs.”* At a certain moment we were talking about the possibilities of relaxation at the boarding school. Because he was talking about *the cinema*, I asked him if anything was organised by the missionaries to keep the boys busy after school, too: *“No, at the primary school level, no, cinema was rather at the teacher training college level. But if not distractions, there were prayers, that was checked; there were the scouts.”* Boale was the only one who said anything about the youth movement; the other two had not been involved in it or did not mention it. In contrast he told me that he had been in the scouts movement and in the “crusades”. He was not in fact able to describe what the crusaders did exactly. *“It formed character”*. And at the scouts civic values and Christian charity were learned.

Indenge and Boimbo, whom in the meantime had clearly distanced themselves from their religious upbringing, still recounted stories about the obligatory attendance of mass. At five or six o’clock in the morning the boys had to go to mass before they had anything to eat. Even the ones who lived in the neighbourhood and could sleep in at home had to get up at that early hour for assembly and to go to mass. Their presence was checked by the *moniteurs*, who were also obliged to take part in the church service: *“If you were not there, you were asked why you had not come and if there was no reason, you were*

*punished.*” They also talked about religion lessons, catechetics, religious history. It was again very clear from these stories how important the religious aspect was in the curriculum but they did not seem to be very concerned about it. For each of them religious education was pretty much a practical concern. Neither of them had been baptised as a Catholic, considering that they had spent their early youth in a Protestant environment. They therefore had to know their bible story perfectly (“the Gospels”), to be baptised: *“And well, you must reply, knowing religion perfectly, the gospels, each gospel that was given, we repeated.”*

Indenge came back to this later in the conversation. I asked him what he thought at that time about the important place that religion played in the curriculum. According to him the boys were not concerned about it: *“We did not think about it. We followed and succeeded. If you did not succeed you would not be baptised. If you were not baptised, you were not a son of God!”* I remarked that he therefore, perhaps unconsciously, must have had a certain desire to be a part of ‘God’s World’. He did not agree with that. Boys of 12, 13 years old did not think about that, he replied. Baptism much more signified entry to further studies: *“We went to school where we left with a certificate that allowed you a kind of ascendancy... You wanted to finish because in that way you would reach a certain class. That is all! So, in order to succeed, everything you were given, you were obliged to learn whether you wanted to or not and to pass the exam.”* That would open doors in the world and allow the pupils to be like others. A second element also surfaced: the appreciation of the people at home, in their original environment, where quite often there was nobody who had a certificate or diploma. It was therefore just as much a symbol of social prestige.

### 4.3. French

French was the ‘subject’ most talked about by everyone. Boale was the most cautious in his comments. He suspected that back then the pupils were already reflecting on what they were going to do later with the Lomongo they had to learn at the MSC school. It was difficult to get him to say that because he did not seem to understand properly what I was getting at. Afterwards, everyone found it natural that they had not had enough French at school, he said. He assumed that the pupils also thought that, but he swore to me that nobody could ever talk about it. Clearly, the fear of punishment was too great for that.

Indenge immediately described the special significance that French had for the children at that time: *“After the second year, we knew the grammar of our native*

*language perfectly, we knew religious history, we had been baptised. In the third year we already felt slightly different because that was when the French lessons started. There were French lessons from the beginning of the third year.”* The content of most subjects was repeated, at least in part, each year, but the difference was, Indenge said, that as from the third year school books in French were used instead of the books in the mother tongue. He also explained the way in which French was taught: *“Eh, there was that, explanations that such and such meant that. That is what you would call French-Lomongo. The introduction, and after that, we only spoke in French. And from time to time, when we had a reading book, on such and such a lesson, we would read and sometimes there were things that were unpronounceable for their level. Well that, they were things they explained to us, pronunciation and what it meant. We were asked the question. Because to some extent we dropped our mother tongue and entered into French but we had to know what these words meant in our own language! Consequently, it was not possible simply to read ‘Je suis, j’ai été, etc. etc.’ to the end, like that, no! We were asked for explanations. We had to explain in Lomongo!”* It is clear from this that they were trying to reach a form of direct method, without really abandoning Lomongo as the language of education.

It has already been shown that Boimbo was yet more interested in French as a medium for social promotion. He raised the question of the ‘forbidden’ French lessons himself and immediately made the connection with the intention of the MSC to educate the children as much as possible in Lomongo and to put the study of French off as long as possible. I asked him explicitly again if he had thought the same about it at that time. He was formal: *“We wanted to speak French. We agreed with the masters and were against the priests. Because they did not want us to learn French.”* Only afterwards, looking at the matter from a distance, he adopted these insights. It is not at all certain that the Fathers had shared their arguments for their choice of Lomongo with the pupils at that time, but in any event Boimbo had only recognised the value of it afterwards: *“But when you think about it, in the long term, it was not bad. But they should have combined the two. When you combine the two you would learn better than those who only learn French. Because they do not know their own language. And we can see the effects of that here, the Congolese born here, they do not have a culture. They are different. They do not know the language, our proverbs, our mechanisms. The respect of the old. They do not have any African and Congolese culture.”*



The pupils considered French an important motor for social promotion. That was also apparent from the story of Mama Bongondo. It was just at the time that the first words of French were taught to them that she began to dream of a real job. With her, just as with Boimbo, the attitude of the missionaries on that subject was very important in the judgement they pronounced on them. Bongondo declared in her interview that the girls from her school were only satisfied with the education given by the Sisters when they began to learn French. In one of the other interviews the interviewee considered the question of whether the education that he had received at the primary school should be considered inferior. He preferred to describe it as an education that was adapted to the needs of the coloniser and mentioned as a first criterion: 'knowing good French'. In comparisons between pupils, language returned as the criterion: "*x writes French better than y, although he only did two years beyond primary school*". Finally it surfaced in the evaluation of girls' education: "*Our mothers and even our spouses had not learned to hold a conversation in French. They were made to stay in the kitchen.*"[xv] French was a world language, Lomongo was much more for the back rooms of civilisation.

#### *The long-term effects: what has been retained?*

Edward Berman already wrote in the 1970s about African reactions to the missionaries.[xvi] He collected a number of stories spread over the whole continent of Africa. Most testimonies in his book came from English-speaking colonies but there was also one from the Congo. This told the story of an Angolese-Congolese man who went to a school in the south of the Congo, run by the Franciscans. He concluded his story with a general evaluation about the time with the missionaries: "*In retrospect I feel that the missionaries have done a great deal for me; without them I certainly would not be where I am today. They taught me self-discipline; their insistence on defining and reaching stated goals has been very helpful. The philosophy behind missionary education, at least in my case, was to make me a Roman Catholic priest so that one day I could 'save' Angolans for the Church. But it was never clear what I should save them for, or from.*" It is obvious that the narrator had profited from his time at school and the knowledge he had acquired and had later been able to use. Furthermore, afterwards he declared explicitly that this had been a conscious choice: "*The missionaries had certain aims and goals for me: they wanted me to be a good Catholic, to go to church everyday and to live their version of a Christian life. (...) While they used me for their purposes, I used the missionaries for my purposes. I think this is a*

*fairly common pattern."*

The narrator then makes it apparent that he was actually never planning to become a priest and had originally wanted to follow a completely different course of education. He was then forced by circumstances to follow secondary education with the priests at the seminary because his family wanted him to do so: *"My uncle had the support of my father, who felt that several years at the seminary would provide a very strong background for other, non-priestly endeavours. After all, he and his brother studied at a minor seminary for several years, with no intention of becoming priests. For them Catholic education at the secondary level was the best available."* This claim makes one suspect that there was a sort of distance between the external behaviour and the internal aims of the youths attending school and that this was true even from the previous generation. It sounds as if they conformed outwardly but rebelled internally. That is very clearly apparent in the huge contradiction between two statements in the last paragraph of this story. On the one hand the person concerned states that the missionaries had done a great deal for him: *"Without them I certainly would not be where I am today."* On the other, he concluded: *"During my schooldays there was, and remains today, a strong resentment towards the missionaries."*

In this testimony two important characteristics of the attitude of the colonised towards the colonisers come to the fore. Firstly: wrath and anger. In spite of the fact that the missionaries had provided an upbringing by which they had made particular skills their own and through these had been able to achieve some things in their lives, the Congolese were certainly not unqualifiedly positive towards their schoolmasters. Secondly, and following from this: the *quid pro quo*, or to put it another way, the fact that the colonised themselves also made strategic use of the coloniser and not just the opposite. These two elements also came to the fore in the conversations that I had myself.

### *5.1. "Resentment": the paper by minister "Renquin"*

Jean Indenge was very well prepared for the interview. After our first conversation, which lasted about three hours, we made another appointment because he was very interested and because I wanted to look again at a number of subjects with him. During this meeting, which took place in his café, he brought "the document" up in conversation at a certain point. Indenge's friends, who had come to sit with us, obviously knew what it was about. "The document" turned out to be a speech, which according to Indenge had been given by the first

Belgian minister of the colonies, Renkin.[xvii] The text contained so-called guidelines from the minister to the first missionaries who came to the Congo. In extremely explicit language it was made clear to them how they must behave towards the Congolese. In summary it seems from this text that the missionaries had to function as an auxiliary of the colonial administration and in this capacity to teach the Congolese to be docile, to turn their attention away from the economic exploitation of the land and try to enrol them as a workforce. The text was, in short, a direct insult to the Congolese and was perceived as such by Indenge and his friends.

As the discussion of this text threatened to steer our conversation in the wrong direction, I did not go any further into it at that point. It was only much later, when I studied the text in detail, that it became clear to me that the text was completely unsound. The name of the minister was not only misspelled (“*Renquin*”), the source that was noted there referred to a Congolese newspaper, *L’Avenir Colonial Belge*, of October 1920. At that time Renkin had not been minister of the colonies for almost two years. There is no doubt that the text is a historical forgery. Anyway, it is possible to find different versions of this text and these are discussed on Congolese websites and forums on the internet. Each of these texts seems to contain more flagrant historical faults than the last: on one of the websites I found Renkin was introduced as governor of Kinshasa in 1883. If that had been true, the subsequent prime minister would have begun his career very young: he was then only 21 years old.[xviii] However, all versions naturally emphasise the injustice of the colonial order: *“The following is an extract from his welcome speech, also serving as directives and regulations to be followed in the colony. The Belgian minister of the colonies talked to the missionaries who had just arrived in the Congo in order to evangelise it. You can find lies, cynicism, mixed with the policy of exploitation and racism in the head of the Belgians in relation to the Congolese citizens, our grandparents. It is that, the troubled heritage of the Congolese on the part of the Belgian colonists (sic). Alas! We should read and realise from where we come and assume an attitude that defies this past and we should inform our children: the best way to prepare for the future of our people, our race and our culture. (Franklin Katunda)”*[xix]

The way in which Indenge laid the document in front of me fitted in well with the position he had previously assumed. He was very interested, had thought out what he wanted to say well and had clearly also prepared himself in writing. He

was happy that someone was coming to listen to his story. During the interview I noticed that on different subjects he formulated very negative criticism of the missionaries. The living conditions, in terms of food and lodging, the heavy work the boys had to carry out and the sometimes unreasonable strictness of the missionaries (the fact that they were not even allowed to pick up fruit that had fallen from the Fathers' trees, in particular) were still painful memories for him. He still got angry about these subjects. When I asked him at the end of the first conversation (and thus before he put the famous document in front of me) what had stayed with him the most, looking back on the period, he gave me a rather neutral answer: *"The aim of the education was to help the colonial authorities to administer this large, extensive territory that is the Congo."* As an answer, it sounded rather strange; it was somewhat general and sounded much less personal than I had expected. However, he stuck by his comment and repeated again: *"The aim of education was generally to relieve the colonial authorities of some work in all areas."* Teachers first, just because there was a general need for education and subsequently *auxiliaires* for office work, *assistants* for agriculture and for doctors and so forth.

Although the comment was put in rather neutral terms, it could indeed be interpreted as critical. On the question of the degree to which he had been conscious of it at that time, he conceded that he had found this situation normal. I then asked him when he had begun to take a critical position towards the education he had enjoyed. That was much later, he said. In his answer he went on immediately to the fact that the education had been 'too slow'. By this he meant that the evolution to a fully-fledged educational system had progressed much too slowly: *"When did we notice that we were late, that we should go faster? That was when we started to be put together with the Europeans and to demand the same advantages. Then we were told 'Ah, but you haven't seen that, and that...'. So, we thought to ourselves: 'But whose fault is that?' so that is why I say that the Catholics were the cause of the slowness and that the liberals had to come to improve everything."* During the interview, Indenge consequently did not so much speak out critically about the fact that the pupils were used in the colonial system but more about the attitude of the colonisers, particularly the Catholics, who had curbed the development of education too much. Indirectly there is a criticism of the coloniser 'keeping down' the population but that had to be inferred, it was not explicitly present on the surface.

Jean Boimbo was much more explicit. Mention was already made of the importance that he attached to learning French and the consequences or the judgements he associated with that. Boimbo later said that the missionaries were partially right in their preference for the local languages. The fact that he and his contemporaries had seen that differently at the time was because of their haste to make progress. Nevertheless, the only time he became at all excited during the interview was when he was talking about the missionaries and their manoeuvres to slow down the development of the Congolese. What he said then was especially revealing: *“They were the colonisers! They participated in the colonisation! All the administrators, before coming to the Congo, went to the colonial school in Antwerp. There they were taught how to live with the blacks. And I do not know whether Indenge gave you a photocopy of the speeches there. And the missionaries they were also in on it! They were security agents! And they kept us back, they kept us back...”* Boimbo therefore makes an explicit connection between the curbing attitude of the missionaries and the allegations in the document from Indenge.

The tenor of this document is, of course, very explicit. It contains a summing up of all that could be imputed to the colonial system and its collaborators, written in a very critical and even reproachful tone. According to the text there could be no doubt that the missions and the administration had made very definite agreements about the strategy they would use against the colonised people. The fact that both Indenge and Boimbo referred to this text shows that they still cherish the fundamental distrust towards the role the missionaries played in the Belgian Congo. The fact that this text also circulates on the Internet makes one also suspect that it is a relatively well-known text. What significance must be ascribed to this, apart from the more than enormous question marks about the authenticity of this document as a source of historical research? It is certain that some Congolese (including the interviewees) agree eagerly with the interpretation of colonisation that is made in it. According to this interpretation evangelisation was not the most important task of the missionaries: *“Your role essentially consists of facilitating the duties of the administrators and the industrialists”*, the text states literally. The Good News was mainly supposed to serve to prevent the Congolese from acquiring material wealth. It was therefore not so much about what the missionaries taught or the principles they proclaimed, but about their complicity with the administration. This was experienced negatively in any case, as an oppressor. Ceuppens suggested in her

book about colonisation in the memory of the Congolese that this complicity recurs regularly in the imagery and often takes the form of a conspiracy theory. She added: “*On the other hand some Congolese do in fact retain good memories of specific colonial Belgians, especially missionaries.*”[xx] That also came out in the three conversations that I had, although in a different manner.

### 5.2. “Strategic” pupils?

Indenge had very clear memories of Father Pattheeuws, who arrived at the mission post in the 1950s.[xxi] According to Indenge the Father was considered “*rather unruly*” but on closer acquaintance seemed to be a very good man. The fact that he did his best to provide the boys with decent food was particularly appreciated by Indenge: “*Well, I still remember that I was in the group responsible for preparing the food. And that like usual we were given the pig’s skin. He arrived, he asked “what is that?” we explained to him that it was the food that we were given to eat. He got angry and threw it, he went to look for anything with the Sisters, real meat and from that day on we ate real meat!*” Besides, the new Father made sure the boys got soap to wash themselves, which was novel at that time. The fact that he could get shockingly angry or kick the boys did not outweigh the positive impression that Indenge had of him.

Jean Boimbo was also more outspoken on strategic thinking. Probably the difference between the two men has a lot to do with temperament or character traits. From the stories that Boimbo had told me about former times I got the idea that he already knew well what he wanted. He conspired with the *moniteurs*, behind the missionaries’ backs. He was also one of those who made a quick career after independence. That he was a person who knew how to deal with problems was obvious from his achievements at school. He made it, as Indenge also did, to *capita (prefect)*. But in contrast to Indenge he seemed to attach much more importance to it and above all remembered the advantages that the position had brought him. As head of a team of raffia workers he had a rather luxurious position, for he was exempt from the heavy work that the other boys had to do. Later, too, in the teacher training college, he reached the level of *serveur* of the Brothers, which undoubtedly again allowed him to live in relatively comfortable circumstances.

Boimbo made very negative comments about the MSC and he did that very explicitly and spontaneously: “*I must tell you something about the MSC: The Sacred Hearts were not made for teaching. And then, the majority of the priests*

*sent to us were not interested in education. And there were a lot of Flemings, who did not speak French well.”* Taking this position was very clearly directed against the MSC, for he even made a comparison with other congregations: the Brothers of the Christian Schools were, like the Jesuits, certainly intelligent and suited to education. He did mention one MSC member to whom he attributed positive characteristics. Father Cuypers was also one of the Fathers of the new generation:[xxii] *“There was a new parish priest (sic), who had been to the university and he did not agree with the policies of the old priests because we were not taught French. He came and gave French lessons himself in the fourth and fifth years. The moniteurs were seated and he gave the lesson. Grammatical analysis, logical analysis, French expressions, yes, yes.”*

Both Indenge and Boimbo certainly referred once to a missionary or a Sister of whom they had good memories. In both of those cases that seemed to have a lot, if not all, to do with material advantages. The suggestion of the strategic ‘use’ of the coloniser by the colonised, here placed in the context of education and upbringing, must really be taken with a pinch of salt for another reason. It looks strongly like an interpretation that those concerned gave to their own life history in retrospect. At least we get this impression if we go by the testimonies that I collected. It does not look as if there were any conscious tactics or strategies put into effect by the pupils. Certainly, Indenge often let it be known during the conversation that he had only later become conscious of many mechanisms and processes which were going on at school. Boimbo, in contrast, made it appear that he had the reins in his hands from the start. He not only created that image by the way in which he told his tale, to my explicit question about whether he was already conscious of the importance of his actions, he answered without blinking: *“For my part I was always a very ambitious person.”* He also stated that it was thanks to his ambition that he was able to go to teacher training college. Still, it remains difficult to evaluate how consciously someone acted at the time or whether, on the other hand, he had rationalised it *post hoc* and cast it into his story.

### *5.3. History according to Boale*

My third ‘crown witness’ seemed to approach it all in a different way. He seemed, in contrast to the two others, not to be concerned with a critical analysis of the colonial occurrences in general or colonial education in particular. I referred earlier to the problems that we had, or that I had, while talking to each other.

Particularly typical was his reaction when I asked specific questions about occurrences or facts that he told me. He repeatedly reacted very defensively or with rhetorical questions, in the sense of “would you have done it differently?” For example, when I asked him whether he had found it normal as a pupil that he had to learn certain things: *“Well yes, for example, would you contradict your parents, when they discussed the food they were going to prepare? Well no, you would accept it! Exactly! And we, we were colonised by those people and at that time no black would go and say that the Congolese should not study Belgian geography.”* Or he tried to make the things that he told me plausible, by highlighting the difference between Congolese and Belgian circumstances: *“You see, it is different from here. Here people live very close together and they are a lot younger when they start education.”* That in doing this he often unconsciously did make a point is not the question here. From these and other ways of reacting I could deduce that he had internalised his upbringing very strongly and did not question it to this day. He often gave the impression that he preferred the course of affairs then to the present one.

On another occasion we got into a discussion about the way in which he told me about certain occurrences. I corrected him a number of times, from the point of view that I must be able to make a distinction between what he himself had experienced and what he had ‘heard said’. At these times it was clear that we started from different views of what was ‘true’. The verifiability of facts and data was not at all as important to him as it was to me. At a certain moment I made a summary of facts that he had told me about his father at our first meeting. At this he told me that these were really about occurrences that he had learnt by being told and probably through his own reading, too. I understood that they did not necessarily have anything to do with his father. I reacted with irritation and told him that he had therefore really told me wrong things. To which he answered: *“Well ok, that is why I tell you: we need to be together to correct it, History is something one tells you.”* He thought it was quite normal to gather historical knowledge out of stories that he had heard and saw no problems in the knowledge being modified as a function of what other people added or changed.

At my second visit to Boale he passed me a paper on which he had written a text with the title *“Création des écoles du village”*. He was probably wrongly convinced that I wanted general information from him about education in the area. I had nevertheless made it clear why I had come and had specified that it



was about his personal testimony, about what he had himself experienced. In the story that he had written down there was not a word about conspiracies against the Congolese. The classical role was attributed to the missionaries in his text: *"They came to evangelise the Belgian Congo in order to allow all the Congolese men and women to be baptised according to their mission entrusted by His Majesty King Leopold II."* The schools were set up for evangelisation because writing was necessary to spread the word of God. After a time, the catechists had convinced their superiors of the necessity of expanding the schools further. The superiors had then informed the administration and this had then begun to award subsidies. That was the start of education that was given following a set curriculum, in contrast to the first rural schools of the catechists.

Boale's text is only two pages long and is a very summary and concise description of the occurrences. In any case the text helped me to better situate his person. What he writes fits in perfectly with the way of writing history at the time of colonisation and the text also contains marked reminders of the style of old school books. It reinforces my interpretation of Boale's attitude towards his school history. He did not feel the need to treat it critically. During my conversations with him that seemed to be very difficult. A good example of this is the moment, during our third conversation, when we talked about the food at the boarding school. Boale's wife was in the room with us at that point and followed the conversation from a distance. I had heard from Jean Indenge that the pupils got too little to eat and wanted to check what he thought of that. He answered that enough food was given in the boarding school but that the pupils could certainly go out to buy food for themselves if they wanted to. Considering the earlier misunderstandings in our conversation and remembering the remarks of Indenge, I did not find that a satisfactory answer. I remarked laughing that Indenge probably had a larger appetite than Boale. At that moment a discussion started between Boale and his wife, of which I only understood fragments. She seemed not to agree with him. When I again asked if the boarders in general got enough to eat, he said to me: *"Eh, if there was no money, how could we make a substantial meal?"*

From reactions such as this I deduced that he showed an inclination to approach the occurrences of the past uncritically, not to call them into question or to see them in rosier colours than they really were. As was stated in the introduction to this chapter, distortions can arise in the reminiscences that someone tells about

their past on many grounds. Still, I got the impression that Boale had just had good experiences with school and the missionaries, that he had simply internalised many things and was therefore simply a good product of his upbringing: obedient and with a great deal of admiration and understanding for the missionaries and other masters.

### *Conclusion*

From the stories told by the eyewitnesses about the past it is primarily obvious that it is not only the past for them but also that it has stayed with them throughout their lives. That can be seen above all in the way they talk about it. It would be difficult, and in this case not very sensible, to draw general conclusions on the basis of these interviews about the way in which the colonial school brought up the people involved. It is even difficult to work out how much the education they enjoyed influenced them in later life, in a positive or negative sense. It seems evident that it did play a role but even between these three people great differences can be seen in the way that this has happened. We cannot even state that all three have come to Belgium thanks to their education. What they do have in common is the awareness that the school could bring them something. It is clear that each dealt with it in their way. One was an obedient pupil, one was a dedicated disciple, and the third a cunning strategist.

That certainly does not prevent these conversations providing useful information in the context of this research. It shows after all that, quite apart from all the problems as experienced and stated by the *évolués* in the 1950s, the school represented an element of great value in the lives of the young Congolese. They did not always appreciate why but Western education exercised a great power of attraction on them. They were drawn, as it were, into that education. As soon as they came to school they were taken up in the unique, internal logic of that education, in which performance was demanded. The school, education, presented itself as the key to the future, although that future was not always clearly perceived.

Separate from all this, the testimonies from these people confirm that the school was a very structured, disciplined and disciplining machine. Again, in the memories of the Congolese, order, discipline and good manners are at the forefront as the central concepts of education. The stories also give more colour to the factual data, such as the existence of resistance, the importance of the knowledge of languages. Above all, a portrait of the opposing players, the

missionaries, is shown in a way it could not and would not be done by themselves. That portrait is certainly one of remote but constantly present controllers. The former pupils also still appear to cherish mixed feelings with respect to their masters. They sometimes appear thankful for the chances missionary education gave them but at other times angry because of the feeling of restriction and suppression they retain from their interaction with the missionaries.

## NOTES

[i] Jean Indenge on the time he left the village of his birth on the way to the mission school. [original quotation in French]

[ii] Jewsiewicki, B. (1993). *Naître et mourir au Zaïre. Un demi-siècle d'histoire au quotidien*. Paris: Karthala; Jewsiewicki, B. & Montal, F. (ed.) (1988). *Récits de vie et mémoires; vers une anthropologie historique du souvenir*. Paris-Québec: L'Harmattan-Safi.

[iii] Dembour, M.B. (2000). *Recalling the Belgian Congo: conversations and introspection*. London: Berghahn Books.

[iv] Fabian, J. (2003). Forgetful Remembering: A colonial life in the Congo. In *Africa*, LXXIII, 4, p. 489-505.

[v] These conversations have already been referred to but because they form the main source of this chapter, I give the full references again. The main subject matter is the conversations I had with Jean Indenge (in Brussels, on 14 July and 14 October 2003), with Stéphane Boale (in St.Joost-ten-Noode, on 18 and 22 September and 24 October 2003) and with Jean Boimbo (in Ukkel, on 25 September 2003). Besides this I have, insofar as possible, also referred to and made use of the material collected by Filip De Boeck and Césarine Bolya, at interviews in Kinshasa, taken during September 2003.

[vi] I was brought into contact with these gentlemen through Césarine Bolya. She was also good enough to introduce me to Jean Indenge.

[vii] The "Plans" referred to were *Plans de développement*, plans for the economic and social development of the country, in the spirit of the ten-year plans of the colonial times.

[viii] The extensive quotations from the interviews that I use here are the result of transcriptions that I made myself. I reproduce the text as literally as possible, in principle, including grammatically incorrect constructions, in order to leave the atmosphere and content of the story of those concerned as intact as possible. I have tried to add a few indications to the text (punctuation, adjectives, changes to the tenses of verbs) where that was really necessary for the comprehension of the

written text.

[ix] A "*l'union fait la force*" refers in this context to civil servants or the military, who wore a uniform with a hat on which the Belgian national arms were inscribed.

[x] "Autobiographie d'Ekoko Munzenga". In Jewsiewicki, B. (1993). *Naître et mourir au Zaïre. Un demi-siècle d'histoire au quotidien*. Paris: Karthala, p. 155-184.

[xi] Interview by Césarine Bolia with Mama Joséphine Nana Bongondo, at Mama Victorine Ndjoli's place - rue Itaga - Kinshasa - 29 September 2003. [original quotation in French]

[xii] By *solutionnaires* Boale meant teachers' answer books that included the solutions to the questions, these were probably just textbooks.

[xiii] Originally in French: "Entrer au Salut", translated into Dutch as "Naar het Lof gaan" or "go to mass" ("religious afternoon or evening practice").

[xiv] Interview by Césarine Bolia with Mama Julienne Aboli, 29 September 2003, at Mama Victorine Ndjoli Elonga's place - rue Itaga - Kinshasa.

[xv] Interview by Césarine Bolya with Bernard Kasusula Djuma Lokali, Kinshasa, 29 September 2003. Strangely enough the opposite system also occurred: in the testimony of another man, who had been to school with the Marist Brothers in the Eastern province, it was related that French was obliged to be spoken and that it was forbidden to speak Swahili. Interview by Césarine Bolya with Donat Salehe Kimbulu, Kinshasa, 16 September 2003.

[xvi] Berman, E.H. (1975). *African reactions to missionary education*. New York: Teachers College Press.

[xvii] The complete text is in Appendix 12.

[xviii] See the biographical note in Dellicour, F. (1954). Renkin (Jules-Laurent-Jean-Louis). In *Bibliographie Belge d'Outre-Mer*. kol. 747-753.

[xix] Commentary with the text of the 'speech' to be found on [www.congoboston.com](http://www.congoboston.com), a *community* website for Congolese and Africans in the United States.

[xx] Ceuppens, B. (2003). *Onze Congo? Congolezen over de kolonisatie*. Leuven: Davidsfonds.

[xxi] Karel Pattheeuws (1912-1981). Worked from 1946 in Bokuma, after that as a travelling Father in the area of Bokote. From 1951 he was responsible for the schools in Wafanya. Vereecken, J. (1992). *Wij gedenken. Derde reeks biografische schetsen van MSC van de Belgische Provincie*. Borgerhout: MSC. p. 53.

[xxii] Louis Cuypers (1916-1999) worked in Coquilhatville between 1946 and 1957

and was at that time baccalaureus in religion. Later, in 1961, he received the degree of Doctor of Canon Law and from 1967 he was a special lecturer in the faculty of Canon Law at the University of Leuven. De Rop, A. & Vlaminck, J. (1971). *Bibliografie van de Missionarissen van het H. Hart Belgische Provincie 1921-1971*. Borgerhout: MSC. p. 50; *MSC Jaarboek van de Belgische Provincie 2001*.