Chapter 2: Impotent agents

No palavers, no troubles, lack of enthusiasm, lack of prestige,... They all contribute to diminish the professional conscience of our public servants. Their relations with the natives progressively take the form of a politic of interests: living cheaply, even making some profits; to sum up, fulfil their mission without troubles and saving as much money as possible.¹

General Commissioner Wauters, October 1931.

Introduction

In late 1931, the aftermaths of the Tupelepele revolt led to a flurry of soul-searching within the colony’s administrative circles (see introduction). The millenarian movement’s perceived virulence, and the difficulties encountered by the authorities to suppress it, highlighted the many shortcomings of Belgian colonialism in the Kwango district in three intertwined ways. First, field public servants failed to contain the Tupelepele’s rapid spread among local communities in the month of May 1931. Second, Tupelepele followers murdered and dismembered a territorial agent in the village of Kilamba on 8 June, which testified to the Belgian officials’ vulnerability outside of secured colonial outposts. Third, the Force Publique only managed to repress the insurrection after long weeks of violent military campaigns, which shed light on the administration’s limited control over the Southwest marshes of the Congo basin. These issues were later addressed in different reports penned either by administrative insiders such as general commissioner Wauters, the right-hand of the Congo-Kasaï’s provincial governor,² or outsiders such as Eugene Jungers,³ the president of Léopoldville’s court of appeal at the time.

These documents offer precious bottom-up insights on colonialism. They could bluntly address uncomfortable issues, such as the disregard of functionaries for the very rules they were tasked to enforce, or the existence of structural practices of corruption between functionaries and concessionary companies. For instance, the abovementioned quote from Wauters crudely depicts the Kwango district’s public servants. They are supposedly unmotivated; they do not uphold to the prestige vested in their function; and they appear to pursue petty objectives – i.e., amassing money – under the guise of their official duties. Wauters’

¹ AAB, AIMO 1820, Notes pour M. le Gouverneur de la Province, undated (1931).
² AAB, AIMO 1820, Notes pour M. le Gouverneur de la Province, undated (1931).
³ AAB, AE 3268, Rapport d’enquête sur la révolte du Kwango, 29 November 1931.

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description alludes to the existence of a significant contradiction between the
time that Belgian rule in Congo was supposed to embody (see chapter 1),
and the triviality of colonialism as it was effectively enforced on the Southwest
marshes of the Congo basin. This very triviality could furthermore be conceptual-
ized as a form of colonial impotence.

Impotence as understood here does not equate to powerlessness, for field
public servants and HCB employees in the Kwango district did enjoy a limited
scope of action. Colonial impotence rather refers to the contradiction at play be-
tween how these agents could effectively act and what was expected from them.
As detailed in the previous chapter, a set of directives enacted in Europe was ex-
pected to ensure the exercise of “virtuous” governance and resource extraction
in Belgian Congo. These rules were rooted in fantasies of exotic otherness more
than in any pre-existing knowledge of the regions to be subjugated. In reality, in
the field, state and company agents did not abide to the model behaviours de-
creed in Brussels or Port Sunlight. They acted, but not how they should have.
If impotent men did not comply with cultural standards of normal masculinity,
“impotent” colonial agents similarly failed to act according to what was expect-
ed of them. They disregarded the “prestige” associated with their function; they
overlooked the rules they were supposed to both follow and enforce; and they
ensured that their personal interests prevailed over the needs of the state.⁴

Studying the effective conducts of these agents calls for a nuanced review of
recent studies on the multifaceted limitations faced by colonial actors. Maurus
Reinkowski and Gregor Thum, for instance, suggested that imperial agents
could be confronted to manifold forms of “helplessness.” Isolated functionaries
could potentially be overpowered by local communities, or lacked the means to
maintain the racial barriers which supported their dominant status. Their struc-
tural weaknesses therefore hampered the overall success of colonial ventures.⁵
Marie Muschalek highlighted the importance for Europeans in the colonies to
uphold their prestige and to preserve their honour. Reputation, either individual
or collective, was crucial to sustain the colonial hierarchy in a context where a
small group of Europeans and their local underlings had to assert their authority

⁴ On similar discrepancies between principles and practices in colonial settings, see: Romain
Tiquet, “Rendre Compte pour ne pas Avoir à Rendre des Comptes: Réflexion sur l’Écrit Admin-
140.
⁵ Maurus Reinkowski, Gregor Thum, “Helpless Imperialists: Introduction,” in Helpless Imperial-
lists: Imperial Failure, Fear and Radicalization, edited by Maurus Reinkowski, and Gregor Thum
on potentially restive local communities. Furthermore, Eva Bisschof showed that a vast array of 19th and 20th century scientific and literary productions tackled the psychological pressure experienced by colonialists. Feelings of alienation and powerlessness could lead them to experience a form of “tropical neurasthenia,” which would manifest itself by a “dramatic loss of self-control, most particularly of the sexual drive and of violent impulses.”

These studies made relevant points on the effective limitedness of colonial hegemonic longings, the importance of statuses in the maintenance of imperial hierarchies, and the brutality exercised by mentally embattled colonialists. However, colonial actors confronted to manifold “failures” could also adopt diverging attitudes and behaviours. First, the limited authority of public servants or company employees in the Kwango district did not make them helpless, but rather expressed itself through the mobilisation of their power in ways that were frowned upon in Europe. Second, the maintenance of prestige and honour appeared to have been more crucial for the higher echelons of the colonial hierarchy than for lower-ranking subordinates in direct contact with the indigenous population. Third, emotions akin to “tropical neurasthenia” did not necessarily lead European men to let loose on their violent impulses. Although violence was ever present in the Leverville concession and its hinterland (see chapter 4), demotivated and isolated public servants also processed their shortcomings in other ways. They could superficially fulfil their duties; use their authority to amass a small private capital; or unlawfully join forces with HCB recruiters, partly to alleviate their loneliness. In short, public servants could prove to be more “petty” than “helpless.” Their impotence became manifest in the discrepancy between the aforementioned behaviours and those expected from them.

In this chapter, I will therefore attempt to shed light on manifestations of impotence within the Leverville concession and its hinterland. To do so, I first delve into the structure of public power in the interwar Kwango district. I then tackle the limitations encountered by the state in its attempt to control this area. Finally, I analyse three cases to illustrate the forms that “colonial impotence” could take in the field: 1) tax collection; 2) the practice of the so-called “prix-Etat”; and 3) the tours of inspection functionaries illegally performed with HCB agents.

I will focus predominantly on the lot of public servants, which might seem only loosely related to the Leverville experience. If the scarcity of archival traces left by HCB staff encouraged me to pay more attention to the better documented

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experiences of functionaries, doing so also allowed for placing the concession in its broader social and political context. As an enclave, Leverville remained inseparable from the administrative units in which it was enmeshed; namely, the territories of Kikwit, Bulungu and Niadi, all part of the Kwango district, itself integrated into the Congo-Kasaï province. The daily governance of Leverville required the company to actively collaborate with functionaries attached to these different structures. Furthermore, the Kwango also constituted HCB’s recruitment pool in Southwest Congo, a region toured by its recruiters attempting to round up fruit cutters. This meant that the Huileries’ agents were not only active within the boundaries of the Leverville circle, but also exerted their duties in its surroundings. The social, administrative and economic porosity that existed between the concession and its hinterland called for me to pay special attention to their manifold interactions.

**Agents of empire**

A certain discrepancy existed between the official structure of the Belgian colonial state and the effective distribution of power within its neatly outlined hierarchy. Lawmakers in Brussels set up an administrative device constraining the autonomy of field public servants, in order to avoid a repetition of the Free State’s unchecked brutality (see chapter 1). However, field realities provided low-ranking functionaries in direct contact with indigenous communities with more leverage than expected.

On paper, the administrative power dynamics was centripetal; the Ministry of Colonies in Brussels officially acted as the source of all power.⁸ The closest a public servant was to the minister in the official organogram, the more influence and institutional prominence he could theoretically enjoy. The centripetal nature of Belgian colonial power did not only instate the primacy of metropolitan authorities over their counterparts in Congo; it also asserted the prominence of its administrative capital in the colony’s daily governance. Sitting in Boma until 1923 and then in Léopoldville, the General Governor (GG) was at the helm of the executive branch of the colonial state. Officially charged with enforcing the instructions given by the Minister, GGs enjoyed only a limited autonomy in the pursuit of their duties.⁹ Legally speaking, they could only promulgate or-

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ordinances which specified the terms of application of the laws enacted in Brussels. Further down the ladder stood the province governors, who acted as surrogates of the GGs in their respective regions. They enjoyed an even more limited executive power, embodied in the possible promulgation of decrees, which were subordinated to the GGs’ ordinances. One step below the governors were district commissioners, who were in charge of “controlling and supervising the territories” comprised in the district.

Territories were managed at the local level by a territorial administrator, who was assisted by territorial agents. The former was expected to overlook the building of infrastructures, tax collection, the realisation of censuses and the maintenance of public order. Furthermore, they also operated as police judges for minor offences, which effectively blurred the distinction between executive and judiciary power. Territorial agents were the linchpin of Belgian colonialism and acted as “the direct and active agents of colonisation,” according to Minister of Colonies Louis Franck in 1925. They were expected to maintain “constant contact with native chiefs, uphold or enhance their prestige, preserve and advance native institutions, do everything in [their] power to ease relations between Europeans and natives, the penetration of civilisation and trade and the progressive mise en valeur of [their] territory.” They enabled Belgian colonial dominance by enforcing laws, ordinances and decrees, thereby ensuring the collaboration of indigenous authority figures and overseeing tax collection and public works.

The Belgian colonial organogram suggested that functionaries in the field lacked leverage and autonomy in the pursuit of their duties. They were constrained in theory by the supervision of their chain of command and by their lack of legislative autonomy. In practice, however, ruling Belgian Congo in the interwar turned out to be the affair of largely autonomous agents. Laws, decrees and ordinances were often renegotiated, adapted or simply ignored by governors, commissioners and administrators. They could regard the instructions they received

10 Vanthemsche, La Belgique, 46.
11 Durieux, Institutions Politiques, 45.
12 Vanthemsche, La Belgique, 46.
14 Recueil à l’Usage des Fonctionnaires et des Agents du Service Territorial au Congo Belge (Brussels: Weissenbruch, 1925), 38.
15 Durieux, Institutions Politiques, 46.
as either maladjusted to Congolese realities, or as impossible to enforce given the lack of infrastructure and manpower at their disposal.

The multiple fracture lines running through the Belgian administration were already apparent in 1916. In a despatch to Lord Leverhulme, HCB manager Moseley mentioned a “serious matter” to which the company was confronted; namely, “the state of affairs which appears to exist between the colonial office and the GG.”17 “Boma ignores the wishes and instructions sent out from Europe if they are not in accordance to their own views,”18 wrote Moseley. This hierarchical disregard did not stop at the metropolitan/colonial divide. In districts and territories, commissioners, administrators and agents could benefit from a significant autonomy in the exercise of their prerogatives. The Leverville concession’s hinterland was remote from Boma and Léopoldville, scarcely manned and poorly organised. It was challenging for the higher echelons of the colonial administration to control its field agents. This lack of supervision took on two specific guises.

First, territorial public servants who lived and worked in the field could build a social network, binding them to local power brokers outside of the state structure. Through personal contact, they could foster bonds of affection, solidarity or mutual assistance with missionaries, private company agents or indigenous leaders. These networks could provide low-ranking functionaries with a strategic advantage in the pursuit of their goals, whether it was the functionaries themselves who set these goals or they were imposed by their superiors.19

Second, the management of remote outposts located far from the eyes of their hierarchy gave administrators and agents a significant leverage in how they chose to report on their daily activities. In the interwar Kwango district, field public servants could conceal from their superiors what they did not wish to share, or embellish the facts to their advantage.20 In June 1932 for instance, the governor of the Congo-Kasaï province mentioned the case of a territorial administrator who, “in order to provide [...] a table reflecting an extraordinary activity, stopped returning to his outpost and instead settled in a lodge in the immediate vicinity of his chief-place.”21 This misrepresentation made it possible for

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17 UA, LBC/215, Moseley to Leverhulme, 4 March 1916.
18 UA, LBC/215, Moseley to Leverhulme, 4 March 1916.
the administrator to provide the appearance of tirelessly roaming the roads of his territory, while in reality he remained mostly sedentary and inactive.

The effective autonomy of territorial public servants contradicted their subordinate position in the colonial organogram. Assets such a limited hierarchical control; networks of allies and clients; or the possibility to mobilise the state’s claim on “legitimate violence” to pursue individual goals go against the idea that field functionaries endured a form of colonial “helplessness.” However, their political leeway was also impeded by the administration’s uncertain footing in the Kwango district. The limitations they encountered could have led these public servants towards demotivation and privileging personal gains over their official responsibilities.

The shortcomings of power

The disillusioned quote of general commissioner Wauters in the chapter’s opening sheds light on the limits of colonial rule in the Kwango district. For instance, Wauters regretted that public servants seemed increasingly driven by the pursuit of their own interest in their “relations with the natives,” “relations” which in turn were crucial in the exercise of rule. Enacting colonialism required the maintenance of formalised, almost ritualised, relationships between state representatives and local communities. According to Achille Mbembe, colonizing demanded “a physical contact” between the ruler and the ruled to keep the latter in “a bond of subjection.”

During these contacts, the state’s assertion of sovereignty could take the form of elaborate displays of prestige and might, designed to “impress” its indigenous subjects. Regular visits of state agents to villages for censuses, tax collection or conflict resolution both materialised the state’s existence and asserted its hegemonic claims. The fact that agents used these encounters for personal gains therefore hampered their ability to maintain the legitimacy of the colonial order, as expected by their superiors.

Furthermore, Wauters delved into the emotional dispositions of field agents, noting their lack of “enthusiasm” as one of the causes of the Tupelepele rebellion. It suggested that in an isolated area such as the Kwango, the state of mind of public servants could have a dramatic impact on the public order. The relational nature of colonial rule, and the importance of the mental and physical

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22 Mbembe, The Postcolony, 175.
24 AAB, AIMO 1820, Notes pour M. le Gouverneur de la Province, undated (1931).
state of field agents in its daily exercise shed light on the structural weaknesses of Belgian presence in and around the Leverville concession.

Throughout the interwar period, the public powers’ limited financial means led to a shortage of territorial public servants throughout Equatorial Africa. This situation effectively limited the ability of agents and administrators to set up and maintain relationships with local communities. In March 1913, for instance, the Kikwit territorial administrator mentioned how “relations with chiefs, sub-chiefs and natives” were “very rare [...] because of the lack of sufficient White personnel.” The deficit of state representatives in the field was particularly acute in the Kwango district, which remained of secondary importance during the consolidation of Belgian presence in the Congo basin. In November 1925, the Congo-Kasaï governor wrote, “the efficiency of our intervention, our action, [...] depends on our occupation [...] Very important in well-occupied territories, by the administration as well as by private individuals, as in the Bas-Congo, it remains weak in poorly occupied areas in the South of the Kwango, where the public servant is isolated.”

Between 1919 and 1931, each of the district’s territories were indeed supervised by a maximum of one administrator and three agents. They were expected to work together to oversee hundreds of square kilometres of poorly charted land, which proved to be largely impossible. General commissioner Wauters also invoked the lack of agents to justify administrative deficiencies which contributed to the Tupelepele’s emergence: “The lessening of authority has been accentuated by [...] the reduction to a skeletal state of the detachments stationed in the territories. [...] in regions where the native mentality has not yet evolved, and where it is required to act constantly on the clan or the community, these means are insufficient.”

The shortage of field agents in the Kwango therefore hampered the possibility for the state to affirm its legitimacy; “relations” established between functionaries and local communities were sporadic at best, if not inexistent. Further-

26 AAB, RA/AIMO 190, Rapport trimestriel de l’administrateur territorial de Kikwit, first trimester 1913.
28 AAB, AIMO 1624, Présence moyenne de personnel des Territoires dans le District du Kwango. AAB, AE 3268, Rapport d’enquête sur la révolte du Kwango, 29 November 1931.
29 AAB, AIMO 1820, Commissaire General Wauters, Notes pr M. le Gouverneur de la Province, undated (1931).
more, the emotional and physical dispositions of territorial administrators and agents could also profoundly influence the state’s anchoring in a given region. The scarcity of functionaries implied that indigenous communities would come to associate the colony’s might and legitimacy with its individual representatives. In remote areas, agents and administrators literally embodied public power. Therefore, the stature, behaviours, traits of character, vigour and abilities they displayed during their rare encounters with indigenous interlocutors were crucial in determining how the Congolese would position themselves with regards to the administration’s claims and demands.

The uncertain boundary separating the state and its representatives was symbolised in the expression *Bula Matari*. Meaning “the Breaker of Rocks” in Lingala, *Bula Matari* was allegedly the nickname given to Henry Morton Stanley by his porters. It would later be mobilised by Belgian functionaries to indifferent-ly designate both the overall public power and its individual agents, highlighting how the latter personified the former.³⁰ Furthermore, the individualized nature of colonial rule could also be observed in the vast variety of naming patterns used by the Congolese to designate either functionaries, missionaries or European employees of private companies. Based on their recipients’ appearance, behaviours and attitudes, these names “differentiated situations of oppression and exploitation each European created from those created by his predecessors, contemporaries, and successors,”³¹ according to Osumaka Likaka. If territorial public servants embodied the state for the Congolese who encountered them, their varied features also determined the perception of public power.

Throughout the interwar period, the character of public servants played a key role in securing the state’s footing in the Kwango district. For instance, in 1915 a new territorial administrator sent to Kikwit to replace his deceased predecessor testified to the difficulties he encountered in asserting his authority.

Relations with chiefs and natives are far from cordial. It comes from the death of my late predecessor and of my recent arrival in the territory, during my first trip in the area [...] the village of Kumbi completely fled in the bush (village which previously provided porters to the Kikwit collectors) [...] Natives constantly answered that Malembe (the late Mr Simon) being dead, there was no more *Bula Matari* in Kikwit and that they no longer want one.³²

³² AAB, RA/AIMO 190, Rapport trimestriel de l’administrateur territorial de Kikwit, 1st trimester 1916.
His recollection pointed toward both the polysemy of *Bula Matari* and the importance of individual personalities in anchoring the state in a given region. First, the passing of agent Simon appeared to have coincided with the “death” of the state as a legitimate interlocutor for Kumbi’s inhabitants. Second, Simon’s legitimacy as an embodiment of colonial power was directly related to his character. He was given the name *Malembe*, which could be roughly translated as “slowly” or “gently.” This moniker appeared to suggest that Simon maintained relatively benevolent relations with the local communities, which in turn allowed him to build trust with them. Simon’s disappearance seemed to have undercut any form of allegiance which could have linked the state to its colonial subjects.

Sixteen years later, another report underlined how the loss of an agent could hamper the overall state authority. “Territorial agent Gaspard, who benefitted of a strong influence in his territory, died six or seven months ago and territorial administrator Verbist, of fragile health, could not pursue the regular contact established with the populations,”³³ wrote the Kwango’s deputy district commissioner. The existence of informal networks of trust and mutual assistance that individual public servants could build during their tenure could not be systematically reclaimed by their successors, which highlighted the personalised nature of colonial rule in the Kwango district.

Furthermore, the relational and affective guise of colonial power in the field went against the idea that functionaries had to imbue their dealings with the Congolese with a uniform sense of prestige and honour. If individual bonds of trust potentially strengthened the state’s anchoring in a remote area, “inappropriate” displays of emotions could hamper the administration’s claims for dominance. In early July 1931, for instance, in the midst of the *Tupelepele* uprising, territorial agent Cotton decided to leave his chief-post against the will of his superior to bring his wife “to safety” in a nearby Protestant mission. The Kwenge’s territorial administrator fumed against his insubordination: “acting as such, [Cotton] provided the Blacks with another proof that the he has no interests in the state’s prestige. Their return here became the object of joyful comments [...] He cannot be employed anymore in the Kwenge region.”³⁴ General Commissioner Wauters was similarly critical: “The allegations purported on this agent shed doubt on his professional qualities and his strength of character. [...] You should not lose sight of the necessity to remove without delay the mediocre ad-

³³ AAB, AIMO 1820, Rapport du commissaire de district adjoint Dewilliambart, 24 June 1931.
³⁴ AAB, AIMO 1820, Lettre de l’administrateur territorial de Kwenge à l’administrateur territorial de Kikwit, 7 July 1931.
ministrators and agents of the colony’s personnel.” By putting his needs before those of the state, Cotton hampered the prestige – and therefore the lasting viability – of the administration. By demonstrating that even he could not rely on the protective power of the very institution he was supposed to embody, the territorial agent bared the state’s uncertain footing in the Kwango.

Isolation, vulnerability and the relational nature of colonial rule hindered territorial public servants in the pursuit of their duties. These issues could mentally burden them, which could lead functionaries to lose their composure, and endanger the supposedly firm behavioural boundary setting colonizers and colonized apart. If such breakdowns could lead to violent behaviours (see chapter 4), they could also manifest themselves in a form of apathy.

In 1931, General Commissioner Wauters described the general state of demotivation prevailing among the Kwango district’s the territorial administration: “too many of our territorial agents perform their duties without enthusiasm. [...] The administrator gets used to limit his relations with the natives to the strict boundaries of his professional duties: tax collection, judiciary enquiries, review of the palavers brought up to him – when he has the time.”

The apathy of lower-ranking functionaries further impeded the already fragile grip of the administration on the Kwango district. Unsupervised and unmotivated public servants could for instance avoid to leave their chief-posts, limiting even more their contacts with both their underlings and local communities. Judge Eugene Jungers noted in his 1931 report on the Tupelepele uprising, “since 1925, none of the district commissioners have inspected the territories of Kikwit and Kandale. [...] This grave deficiency in the Kwango’s administration must be rectified. [...] These inspections should not be limited to motorized displacements from one territory to another and to practically useless inspections of posts.”

The loose attitudes of public servants also led them to neglect their outer appearance, a carelessness perceived by colonial insiders as degrading the state’s paramount position within the colonial hierarchy. General Commissioner Wauters noted the following in response to his observations:

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35 AAB, AIMO 1820, Lettre du commissaire general Wauters au commissaire de district du Kwango, 21 August 1931.
37 AAB, AIMO 1820, Notes pour M. le Gouverneur de la Province, undated (1931).
38 AAB, AE 3268, Rapport d’enquête sur la révolte du Kwango, 29 November 1931.
Previously, territorial chiefs presented themselves with a certain decorum; the hierarchy was well-marked, even in the eyes of the natives, made visible by the uniform. Today, what distinguishes, in the eyes of the natives, the administrator from a travelling salesman, the chief from his deputy? [...] The obligation of wearing a uniform would efficiently oppose the tendency to do “shirt-sleeves politics,” [...] detrimental to our prestige.³⁹

Upholding and displaying prestige through the wearing of uniforms and the strict adoption of racialized codes of conduct was one of the strategies mobilised by colonial actors to assert their claims for dominance in contexts where they found themselves vulnerable.⁴⁰ However, in the interwar Kwango-Kwilu, demotivated public servants appeared to have ignored their superiors’ admonitions to display colonial prestige at all times. Not tending to themselves, remaining in the relative comfort of their chief-posts or displaying an absence of zeal in the exercise of their duties could therefore be perceived as different manifestations of colonial impotence.

These displays of impotence bridged the gap between principles and practices of colonial rule. The racial hierarchy, which acted as the organising principle of colonial societies, rested on the claim that (male) European imperialist were “capable of rational behaviour and self-control,”⁴¹ to the contrary of colonized populations. The inability of some imperialists to rein in on their impulses therefore threatened the colonial order of things. Vulnerable agents of empire were a liability because they were incapable of behaving appropriately.⁴² Impotence shed light on how some Europeans compensated for inabilities to conform to the male imperial ethos. This occurrence suggested that isolation and anxiety did not only resulted in the exercise of violence as a compensation mechanism. “Impotent” public servants kept on performing their duties, yet they acted in ways that were considered unacceptable by their superiors. This chapter’s final sections delve into three examples, which illustrate such displays of impotence: fiscal practices, the so-called “prix-état” and the joined tours illegally performed by public servants and HCB recruiters.

³⁹ AAB, AIMO 1820, Commissaire general Wauters, Notes pr M. le G de la Province, undated (1931).
⁴⁰ Muschalek, Violence as Usual, 35.
⁴² Bisschof, “Tropenkoller,” 123.
In the field, the effective behaviours adopted by territorial agents and administrators could significantly divert from the rules and instructions supposed to guide their conduct. This discrepancy was acutely visible in three sets of practices. First, tax collection in the Kwango district remained sparse and occasional, although it embodied the state’s sovereignty claims. Second, the rare encounters between functionaries and local communities did not only serve to assert the administration’s might and authority. To the contrary, these encounters provided territorial agents with opportunities for prevarication, which were in direct contradiction with the “prestigious” ethos they were supposed to embody. Finally, field public servants sometimes cheated their solitude by joining forces with HCB recruiters during their tours of inspection, a practice thoroughly prohibited by their superiors.

To begin this investigation, I will first focus on taxation. On paper, territorial agents were expected to collect taxes once a year during extensive visits of the region put under their supervision. These fiscal encounters were crucial in exercising the “relational” guise of colonial power. This guise provided field functionaries with the opportunity to practice a series of other administrative acts, which both asserted the state’s claims of sovereignty and furthered the administration’s knowledge of local communities. Territorial agents were expected to seize these opportunities to draft censuses, update identification booklets, or deliver passports and licenses.⁴³ These chores amounted to almost ritualised performances of legal-rationalism, during which the state displayed both its ability and right to levy and to grant, embodied in a formalised demonstration of sovereignty.

Every year, territorial administrators had to determine tax rates, on the grounds of propositions made by their district commissioner. This exercise was the result of a difficult balancing act. On the one hand, if taxes were too high, they would become hard to collect, for villages could flee before the arrival of the tax collector (see chapter 3). The administration’s inability to catch them would therefore undermine the state’s “prestige” and authority. On the other, low tax rates on indigenous households implied that the colony should find other fiscal resources, mostly levied through custom tariffs. However, the author-

⁴³ AAB, AIMO 1403, Lettre du GG Rutten au ministre des colonies Pécher, 23 November 1926.

In the Kwango district, the perception of the head tax on indigenous communities was practically nil in the 1910s. This was another proof of the administration’s limited hold on the region. A 1913 report on the territory of Kikwit shed a crude light on these shortcomings: “the state’s occupation is derisory. [...] What could four state agents do in a region as vast as Belgium and excessively populated? [...] Native tax collection is virtually inexistent.”\footnote{AAB, MOI 3607, Enquête sur le territoire de Kikwit, 21 January 1913.} As time went by, the shortage of agents kept on impeding fiscal policies. A June 1922 report on the occupation of the Moyen-Kwango territory noted that taxes of 1921 never were collected.\footnote{AAB, AIMO 1624, Rapport sur l’occupation de la région du Moyen-Kwango, 11 June 1922.} Still, in January 1931 only 33.7\% of the taxes were allegedly gathered in the district in the previous year, the lowest amount by far in the entire Congo-Kasaï province.\footnote{AAB, AI 4739, Controverses et polémiques suscitées par les événements du Kwango, January 1931.} This limitation meant that accessory administrative tasks were also found wanting. During an inspection of the district in January 1931, the colony’s future Governor General Pierre Ryckmans noted that the Kwango’s censuses were “very incomplete. Every year, people come out of the bush for the medical prospection, who never paid taxes in their entire life.”\footnote{Diary of Pierre Ryckmans, entry of 10 January 1931, in \textit{Main d’oeuvre, Eglise, Capital et Administration dans le Congo des Années Trente}, vol. I, edited by Jacques Vanderlinden (Brussels: ARSOM, 2011), 130.}

In spite of the very practical issues hindering tax collection in the district, the higher echelons of the administration expected field agents to not only pursue their duties as foreseen, but even to increase the fiscal pressure in the wake of the Great Depression. From 1929 onwards, Belgian Congo’s export-based economy was hit hard by the global economic crisis. The value of its main exports, such as copper, cotton, coffee and palm oil, fell to historical lows, drying up the colony’s fiscal revenues.\footnote{Leigh Gardner, \textit{Taxing Colonial Africa: The Political Economy of British Imperialism} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 6–7.} Tax rates were accordingly increased in order to compensate for these structural losses. The crushing fiscal pressure put on the Kwango district’s communities would later be pointed out as having fuelled the resentment of its inhabitants against the administration, which eventually
led to the Tupelepele outburst. In an August 1931 report, the Kwango district assistant commissioner already pointed out excruciating taxes as a widespread grievance circulating among indigenous communities: “th[eir] increase was aimed at countering as much as possible the crisis by an increase in production and therefore of resources, for prices were lower. Making the natives understand this is not easy; the white man paying much less and still selling his goods at high price frustrates them.”

After the brutal “pacification” of the district by the Force Publique and while the excessive fiscal pressure was widely considered as one of the main causes for the uprising, the higher echelons of the administration demonstrated no leniency with regard to tax collection. To the contrary, the Congo-Kasaï’s governor required his underlings to pursue their fiscal duties as thoroughly as possible, even if it required taking harsh measures against the Congolese:

All of the territorial personnel’s efforts must aim at reaching every taxpayer, even in the areas suffering the most from the crisis. One must [...] make the natives understand that they better go to work and gather the amount of money necessary to pay their taxes, rather than [...] expose themselves to the hardships of a prison regime and individual sanctions. [...] Natives who do not get used to the new prices, have to be brought to accept them. No matter what, a lack of production cannot have as a consequence to exempt them from paying their taxes.

The complexity of asserting the state’s fiscal prerogatives shed light on a first guise of colonial impotence. There was a clear discrepancy between the theoretical practice of tax collection and its effective enforcement, which was impeded by the skeletal nature of the Kwango district’s administrative occupation. Furthermore, issues raised by territorial public servants regarding the hostility brewing among indigenous communities against extreme fiscal pressures did not demur higher ranking officials. The possibility of adapting tax rates in accordance to the overall context prevailing in the field was swiftly cast aside by the Congo-Kasaï’s governor. This state of affairs pointed towards the inability for lower-ranking functionaries to effectively pursue their duties within the boundaries set by their superiors. Tax collection in the Kwango district therefore testified to the territorial administration’s impotence in the sense that it could not and did not act as expected. However, if colonial impotence could take root in the structural weaknesses of the state apparatus, it also manifested itself in the attitudes

50 AAB, AI 4739, Relation entre la crise et la révolte, 7 August 1931.
51 AAB, AI 4739, Instructions du gouverneur du Congo-Kasaï aux commissaires de district de la province, 29 January 1932.
and behaviours employed by individual functionaries in their encounters with local communities.

Impotence and prevarication

In the chapter’s opening quote, general commissioner Wauters mentions the “politic of interests” seemingly prevailing among the Kwango district’s administrative personnel. This euphemism covers, among others, the drive to hoard which seems to have animated the district’s functionaries. Beyond the performance of legal-rational “rituals,” petty abuses indeed punctuated their encounters with the Congolese. In his November 1931 report on the causes of the Tupelo-lepele revolt, judge Eugene Jungers mentioned the role played therein by “the exactions and illegalities perpetrated by some agents of the colony. Their violent methods.” Although strict directives commanded state agents to refrain from abusing their authority, several reports and despatches relayed how they regularly took advantage of their power to further their personal gains.

Spoliations of indigenous communities by functionaries were sufficiently widespread to alarm the colony’s central authorities. In November 1926, General Governor Tilkens mentioned in a letter to the Minister of Colonies that he was “forced to acknowledge” the existence of uses of “prevarication” practiced by European public servants. Among these abusive practices, the so-called prix-état generated a stringent series of condemnations. Prix-état referred to the field administrators’ habit of pressuring Congolese into selling them goods or cattle at lower-than-average prices, “sometimes half of their accepted value,” while presenting these forced rebates as a privilege bestowed upon public servants. This practice apparently allowed some administrators to amass significant gains. In August 1932, Tilkens wrote the following:

The demands of some agents have sometimes overpassed their personal needs and became a truly lucrative operation. Haven’t we witnessed, indeed, administrators and territorial agents constituting for themselves with the prix-état, herds of big and small cattle, to be resold dearly to traders and private individuals and repeat several times this operation during each of their terms?

52 AAB, AE 3268, Rapport d’enquête sur la révolte du Kwango, 29 November 1931.
53 AAB, AIMO 1403, Lettre du GG Tilkens au ministre des colonies Pécher, 23 November 1926.
54 AAB, AI 4739, Lettre du GG Tilkens au ministre des colonies Tschoffen, 13 July 1932.
If “prix-état” participated to the display of might performed by functionaries in their encounters with the Congolese, they were the object of contentious interpretations. Some territorial public servants appeared to justify this practice by framing it as a mere form of gift-giving, which testified of their prominence as state representatives. This justification was swiftly cast aside by General Governor Tilkens:

> It cannot be pretended [...] that when a governmental agent arrives in a chieftaincy, the local chief comes forward, already bearing all the foodstuffs needed by the European, and that it would be insulting to refuse “his present.” Everybody knows indeed that when a Black man, even a chief or an elder, brings a gift to a White man, it is to receive at least its value in exchange.\(^56\)

Judge Eugene Jungers further argued that the Congolese only accepted the *prix-état* under pressure or menace. “It would be naïve to believe that the natives do not feel robbed by this practice. [...] they only reduce the prices under constraint.”\(^57\) Along with excessively high taxation rates, *prix-état* were believed to have contributed to the collective anger of indigenous communities in the build-up to the *Tupelepele* uprising. In June 1932, the Congo-Kasaï governor penned a long letter to the Kwango district commissioner, reiterating the need for his personnel to remain within the boundaries of legality in order to avoid a resurgence of the revolt:

> Illegalities, unfortunately performed too often [...] favour the outbreaks of resistance. [...] The European demands wood, palm wine, eggs, hens. [...] Natives have to cede their huts to new occupiers, who sometimes outnumber them. [...] Women must fetch water and prepare *chikwangues*, while they had to leave their pots and mortars and everything they usually need. [...] It is not surprising that some agents find deserted villages upon their arrival.\(^58\)

In the eyes of governors and magistrates, *prix-état* consisted of a clear abuse of power performed by field functionaries. They were “an exploitation of the prestige of state representatives,”\(^59\) according to Tilkens. However, their widespread condemnation did not seem to lead to their disappearance. *Prix-état* therefore pointed towards another guise of colonial impotence: misconduct. The discrepancy between principle and practices in the exercise of imperial domination was

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\(^{56}\) AAB, AI 4739, Lettre du GG Tilkens au gouverneur du Congo-Kasaï, 30 August 1932.

\(^{57}\) AAB, AE 3268, Rapport d’enquête sur la révolte du Kwango, 29 November 1931.

\(^{58}\) AAB, AIMO 1855, Lettre du gouverneur du Congo-Kasaï au commissaire de district du Kwango, 9 June 1932.

\(^{59}\) AAB, AI 4739, Lettre du GG Tilkens au ministre des colonies Tschoffen, 13 July 1932.
not only rooted in the structural weakness of the state apparatus. It could also stem from field public servant’s conscious disregard for the rules they were expected to follow. Demanding these illegal rebates allowed them to affirm their social prominence while improving their economic standing. Along with territorial functionaries’ neglected outfits and the superficial way they performed their duties, *prix-état* testify of the disregard of field agents for their superiors’ understanding of colonial prestige.

**Impotence on tour**

The neglect for rules and directives was further visible in the collaboration of territorial functionaries with HCB recruiters. Given the concurrent economic and administrative occupation of the Kwango district (see chapter 1), public servants and employees of the Huileries developed a habit of touring the region together from the early days of the Leverville concession, joining forces in their respective tasks: rounding up fruit cutters and collecting taxes.⁶⁰ In his 1931 report, Eugene Jungers mentioned, “territorial agent Gaspard and HCB recruiter Thys” travelled so frequently with one another that “the natives thought that the former was the assistant of the latter.”⁶¹

Legally speaking, these practices were strictly and repeatedly forbidden. A 1916 *circulaire* prohibited territorial administrators and agents of the Kwango to be accompanied by “traders” in their tours of villages.⁶² In 1924, General Governor Rutten stipulated again that it was “out of the question” that the administration would provide help to HCB by either “forcing the natives to engage or charging our agents to recruit on their behalf.”⁶³ In a mirroring declaration, Lord Leverhulme also stipulated to Elso Dusseljé that he should not expect any kind of special treatment from the administration: “we have no right to and cannot expect the government officials to insist on the natives working for us rather than in their own villages or for other employers. It is up to us to make service so attractive that they prefer to work for us.”⁶⁴

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⁶¹ AAB, AE 3268, Rapport d’enquête sur la révolte du Kwango, 29 November 1931.
⁶² AAB, AIMO 1654, Rappel du commissaire de district du Kwango aux administrateurs territoriaux au sujet du recrutement HCB, 27 October 1923.
⁶⁴ AAB, MOI 3602, Instructions from Lord Leverhulme to Elso Dusseljé, 8 December 1923.
In the field, however, the territorial administration was regularly involved in workforce recruitment for private companies throughout the interwar era. In spite of regional differences in terms of the extent to which public servants lent a helping hand to the deployment of colonial capitalism, state representatives frequently resorted to coercive and deceptive means to increase the ranks of Congolese wage labourers. Functionaries could reward chiefs who forcibly rounded up a contingent of workers, and they could endorse the signing of labour contracts with recruits who were kept in the dark regarding their rights and duties. In the 1920s, territorial agents actively recruited thousands of workers for the UMHK in the Lomami region, and oversaw the drafting of their contracts in their own offices. In the Province Orientale, from 1921 onwards the administration set up cotton concessions, which encapsulated both a plot of land and the villages on which they were settled. Their inhabitants were barred from offering their labour force to competitors, negotiating buying prices or cultivating other cash crops. Such forms of cooperation were so frequent that they led to a formal complaint from the colony’s Catholic vicars, published in the newspaper L’Essor du Congo in January 1929: “frequently, the intervention of the colony’s agents is necessary to round up a [...] number of Blacks, brought, often against their will, to camps and factories.”

Public and private collaborations in workforce mobilisation demonstrated that the close collaboration between HCB and the field administration was neither unique nor exceptional. However, joint tours of tax collection and coerced recruitment were a specific iteration of this general trend, emerging at the crossroads of the concession’s needs and of the existence of short-distance recruitment pools. This specific situation led to a relative tolerance from the Kwango district’s authorities even after the Tupelepele uprising. In February 1932, the district commissioner authorised the joint performance of recruitment and tax collection in cases of force majeure: “[territorial administrators] should abstain from making their agents accompany recruiters. If they deem it absolutely nec-

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necessary, they should establish a comprehensive and justified report, that should be transferred to me.”⁷⁰

The closer we get to the field, the more apparent the disregard for the illegal nature of these collaborations becomes. This state of things can be better understood once considered in the practical context in which the act of colonising effectively took place. Several aforementioned reports and despatches allude to the isolation of public servants, particularly in relatively peripheral areas, such as the Kwango district. Colonial solitude was furthermore widely believed to hamper the mental health of public servants. “Tropical neurasthenia,” its cohort of violent and “inappropriate” behaviours, were detrimental to the colonial hegemony at large, especially in regions where the state presence was still skeletal. Allowing the limited European contingents present in a region to join forces could therefore be considered a lesser evil by district commissioners keen on securing the colony’s grip on hardly reachable indigenous communities. For territorial agents and HCB recruiters alike, touring villages together was a way to alleviate their solitude and offset their vulnerability outside of the relative security of their chief-posts.

These joint tours not only shed light on the room for manoeuvre that district and territorial functionaries effectively enjoyed. They also offer a window into the corruption of public servants by HCB. Several field functionaries reportedly recruited fruit cutters during their tours of inspection on behalf of the Huileries, even when they were not accompanied by a company employee. For instance, the Idiofa territorial administrator complained in November 1923 that “four contingents of workers”⁷¹ were sent to Leverville by his predecessor and handed to the Huileries’ recruiter, who did not even leave his chief-post. According to Eugene Jungers’ November 1931 report, such practices could be directly linked to the existence of a well-oiled, corrupt system through which HCB representatives secured the collaboration of field administrators. “At least half of the government’s agents in relation with HCB are absolutely devoted to it, because of the significant advantages they receive from this powerful company, often via a special accountancy, the ‘General Expenses’ which purpose is to maintain a special and confidential account of these ‘operations.’”⁷² Similar accusations can also be found in an internal dispatch sent by the Leverville area district manager to Lever Brothers’ headquarters in August 1930, where he mentioned his predeces-

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⁷⁰ AAB AIMO 1624, commissaire général Maron au nom du gouverneur de la province de Léopoldville, au commissaire de district du Kwango, February 1932.
⁷² AAB, AE 3268, Rapport d’enquête sur la révolte du Kwango, 29 November 1931.
sor’s habit of granting “gratuitous advantages”⁷³ to state officials. If bonds of informal solidarity were maintained by public and private low-ranking officials, the probable existence of a sustained system of corruption binding state and company together further highlighted the structural discrepancy between the official virtuous guise of colonial efforts in and around Leverville and their unlawful, and at times violent, enforcement.

Indeed, the recruiting of fruit cutters was not the only illegal act that could be jointly performed by HCB recruiters and territorial agents. Far from prying eyes, bolstered by the presence of their armed suite of Congolese auxiliaries and possibly inebriated, the Kwango’s Europeans potentially asserted their might through the arbitrary exercise of manifold brutalities. One specific case has been particularly well documented. This case followed the visit of an HCB employee and a field public servant to the village of Kilamba on 13 May 1931. Less than a month later, territorial agent Maximilien Balot was murdered and dismembered by Tupelepele adepts in this very place.

According to several accounts,⁷⁴ territorial agent Burnotte and HCB recruiter Van Hombeek visited Kilamba to jointly pursue their respective duties. As it often occurred, adult male inhabitants of the village had already fled prior to their arrival in order to escape both taxation and recruitment. Van Hombeek and Burnotte therefore resorted to their usual method of retaliation, hoping this would lead to the men’s return. They set up camp in the village and ordered their armed underlings to seize and detain the remaining women and to confiscate the villagers’ cattle. For four days, Burnotte and Van Hombeek remained in Kilamba, living off the inhabitants’ resources. They were joined every night by the manager of a nearby post of the Compagnie du Kasaï, Collignon. At the end of heavy drinking sessions, the men indulged themselves in the company of local women. Collignon then raped two villagers, Kizela and Kafutshi, the wives of a man named Matemo.

On 16 May 1931, Burnotte, Van Hombeek and Collignon eventually left Kilamba, freed the captured women and took ten cutters along. On 2 June 1931, Matemo went to the factory where Collignon worked to confront him with regard to

the rape of the two women, Kizela and Kafutshi.\textsuperscript{75} The two men engaged in a heated argument during which Collignon hit Matemo. Collignon filed a complaint against Matemo on the very same day and was quickly informed that territorial agent Maximilien Balot, on duty in the area, would soon pass by Kilamba to start an investigation.

The joint tours performed by HCB employees and territorial agents shed light on a third guise of colonial impotence: abuse. These frowned-upon collaborations stand at the meeting point of the structural weakness of the state’s presence in the Kwango district and of the effective autonomy that territorial functionaries demonstrated in the exercise of their duties. They remained relatively tolerated in light of field realities, yet they provided both public and private agents with the opportunity to resolutely overpass the boundaries of their functions. Against all rules and directives, HCB employees and territorial agents could exert a regime of terror in the villages they toured. Furthermore, in direct violation of the ethical contract binding state and company together, low-ranking actors appeared to have been bound by practices of concussion. Far from demonstrating a form of “helplessness,” the discrepancy between the goals and the means of colonial domination manifested itself in the resort to illegal and “dishonourable” displays of imperial might.\textsuperscript{76}

\section*{Conclusion}

When the dust settled on the “pacified” Kwango district in late 1931, administrative reports on the possible causes of the \textit{Tupelepele} revolt began to emerge. Both insiders and outsiders painted a bleak portrait of the region’s state of affairs. The administration was weak, and many functionaries were deemed unmotivated, predatory, violent or downright corrupt. Private humiliations, collective spoliations, punitive tax rates and coerced recruitments fuelled the widespread resent-

\textsuperscript{75} For both Vanderstraeten and Jungers, the cause of Matemo’s ire resided less in the rape of his wives than in Collignon’s subsequent negligence to materially compensate him for indulging with them, as “Pende customs” allegedly required. However, given the overall violent context of the trio’s sojourn in Kilamba, there was plausibly little consent in the sexual relations that could occur between Collignon, Kizela and Kafutshi. Explaining Matemo’s behaviour towards Collignon as mainly resulting from the latter’s disregard for customs overlooks the power dynamics in which in which these events took place. See Vanderstraeten, \textit{La Révolte}, 23; Amandine Lauro, \textit{Coloniaux, Ménagères et Prostituées au Congo belge (1885–1930)} (Brussels: Labor, 2005), 40 – 43.

ment of local populations against both public servants and concessionary companies.

These multifaceted shortcomings pointed toward a crucial aspect in the exercise of colonial rule: its relational guise. Colonizing required bringing colonizers and colonized together to assert the power of the former through elaborate displays of dignity and might.

In principle, encounters between state representatives and African “subjects” were designed to affirm the public power’s primacy and singularity among the local European contingent. Functionaries were distinguishable from company employees or missionaries both by their appearance and the ritualised actions they performed. They wore uniforms embodying their prestige and manifesting their rank, and they carried out regal prerogatives such as collecting taxes, establishing censuses or delivering identity booklets. The state’s claim for supremacy among colonial institutions was also materialised in its alleged monopoly on legitimate violence. Functionaries were imbued with the power to punish and repress, which was in principle strictly constricted by sets of rules and regulations.

Colonisation thus required physical contact. For Achille Mbembe, it even necessitated a “phallic” form of contact, akin to a “coitus” granted with “the characteristic feature of making horror and pleasure coincide”⁷⁷ (see introduction). Building on Mbembe’s metaphor, the phallic guise of colonialism, made visible in the physical encounters between the state and its subjects, offered a window into forms of colonial impotence. Like colonialism, impotence is inherently relational; it manifested itself through an “improper” performance during intercourse. When actors of colonialism failed to conform to expected rules, guidelines and attitudes, they displayed metaphorical forms of impotence.

Colonial impotence not only covers their inability to act, embodied in the manifold limitations that actors of imperialism encountered. It also encompasses the diverse ways Europeans made use of their leeway and autonomy to consciously disregard laws and instruction. Failing to uphold to their “prestige” by neglecting their attire or by extorting “prix-état” countered as much the virtuous guise of colonial endeavours than structurally failing to collect taxes or being too ill to perform specific duties. Conceptually speaking, impotence therefore offers a way to consider the multifaceted discrepancies between colonial principles and practices beyond the restrictive framework of “failure” and “weakness,” which can only partially explain the divergences between colonialism imagined and enforced.

⁷⁷ Mbembe, The Postcolony, 175.
Furthermore, these manifestations of “colonial impotence” occurred across the Kwango, a district where the administration was unevenly distributed, as in the rest of the colony. Strategic nodes such as Leverville existed alongside villages where taxes had sometimes never been collected. Frederick Cooper has rightly pointed out that colonial power in Africa was “arterial.” According to Cooper, colonial power was “concentrated spatially and socially, not very nourishing beyond such domains.”\textsuperscript{78} Administrative duties could therefore not be performed in the same way in a well-controlled enclave such as an HCB concession as in a village like Kilamba. However, public agents appeared to have held the same disregard for top-down rules and instructions in both contexts. Colonial impotence could therefore be considered as a red thread, bringing together colonial governance both within and outside of these “arteries,” which are sometimes regarded as markedly different.

Impotence not only refers to a person’s inability to perform their duties for a lack of means of knowledge. This idea also encompasses the person’s ability to coerce and constrain outside of the framework in which those powers were bestowed. Colonial impotence encompasses the manifold ways in which empire building deviated from its expected goals, whether from powerlessness or through disobedient agency.

If impotence alludes to the limits faced by colonial actors in the pursuit of their agendas, the present chapter has only glossed over the main impediment they faced in enforcing their hegemonic longings, namely the agency of indigenous communities. The next chapter turns to the multifaceted ways the Kwango district’s inhabitants avoided, made sense of and countered colonial efforts in the region.