Chapter 3: Ordering and evading

Introduction

The present chapter focuses on how the autonomous actions of Congolese communities effectively hindered both HCB and the administration’s ambitions, and therefore played a key part in making their respective agents “impotent” (see introduction and chapter 2). I share three case studies, which shed light on the agency deployed by indigenous HCB employees and their families to both counter and make sense of colonial demands. I first document the unsupervised mobility of fruit cutters and their families in and out of the Leverville concession. I then explore how elders attempted to deceive field public servants during official enquiries. Finally, I delve into the ways villages that provided workers to HCB harboured and propagated a forbidden animist cult. Taken together, these phenomena shed light on how inhabitants of the Kwango district both attempted to evade the grip of the Huileries and the state and endeavoured to bring back a form of order to social dynamics, which were profoundly disrupted by colonial demands.

In the spring of 1933, squads of colonial functionaries roamed through the villages of the Kamtsha-Lubue territory. They were on the lookout for any information related to Lukusu, a secretive and rapidly disseminating anti-witchcraft practice. For about twenty years, Lukusu spread along the waterways of the Congo basin before reaching Kamtsha-Lubue, a recruitment pool of the Leverville concession, in late 1932. For Belgian functionaries, Lukusu was difficult to grasp. Its goals, devices and performances seemed to be constantly morphing. Lukusu remained shrouded in mystery; most Congolese were reluctant to disclose any specifics about Lukusu’s inner workings or about the communities which had already adopted it.

Less than two years had passed since the brutal repression of the Kwango uprising when Lukusu was first spotted in villages which previously embraced the Tupelepele (see introduction and chapter 2). Public servants feared that Lukusu would also turn into a new millenarian revolt, which would be even more difficult to suppress than the last. In December 1932, the Congo-Kasai Governor had already stated that local communities were “only waiting for a signal, in this case the passage of large herds of wild animals or flocks of birds, to begin a bloody but victorious insurrection.”¹ Therefore, for Kamtsha-Lubue’s functionar-

¹ AAB, AIMO 1625, Lettre du gouverneur du Congo-Kasaï au commissaire de district du Kwango, 8 December 1932.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110652734-007
ies, locating and understanding *Lukusu* became a top priority. It required them to interrogate elders, chiefs and clan heads, their key informants for all things “traditional,” which mostly remained beyond the functionaries’ reach. Such investigations, however, often turned out to be fruitless. For instance, on 11 May 1933 territorial administrator Weekx questioned a “clan chief” named Manisa. Weekx asked him why his “village danced in honour of the ancestors” several nights earlier. To this query, Manisa simply replied, “we are not dancing at the moment.”

All across colonial empires, individuals and communities mobilised countless strategies to counter, soften or evade the grip of colonial actors. Manisa’s sibylline answer could be seen as one of the many ways for those living under colonial rule to “[work] the system [...] to their minimal disadvantage,” to quote Eric Hobsbawm. Avoiding directly replying to a question meant refusing to disclose information, which in turn hindered the administration’s ability to survey and control indigenous communities.

This chapter focuses on three practices of indigenous communities in and around the Leerverville concession to elude the demands of both HCB and the Belgian administration. First, fruit cutters and their families could settle within the concession’s premises but outside of the administration grasp. By doing so, they took advantage of the diverging goals of company and state to carve up a space of relative autonomy for themselves. Second, elders, chiefs and clan heads consciously provided false information to field public servants performing ethnographic enquiries. This action allowed them to avoid the coerced displacement of their communities by the administration. Third, protean healing techniques such as *Lukusu* could be mobilised to restore a form of balance to a social order profoundly disrupted by colonialism. Far from European prying eyes, *Lukusu* also provided an opportunity for elders to partially reclaim their former paramount position.

For more than six decades, historians have endeavoured to study the ways colonized peoples attempted to counter and respond to the hegemonic longings of colonial institutions. Research on what has broadly been coined as “resistance” against colonialism has, however, encountered several impediments. Frederick Cooper noted that such “resistances” have often been romanticized and idealised by scholars, which has led them to overlook their complexity, lim-

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2 AAB, AIMO 1625, Procès-verbal d’interrogatoire du prévenu Manisa, 11 May 1933.
itations and inner tensions.⁵ For Eric Allina-Pisano, resorting to the framework of “resistance” could turn the multifaceted and sometimes contradictory goals of its actors into a historically inaccurate Manichean narrative, pitting the “good” colonized peoples against the “evil” colonizers.⁶ For instance, Lukusu was not only a secretive way to mend the harm brought upon communities by colonialism; it was also a manner for elders to reinstate their fledging authority. Conflating all Lukusu adepts as uniformly engaged in a struggle against a monolithic colonial oppressor would disregard the plurality of motives and strategies pursued by different segments of local communities.

Historians’ enthusiasm for “resistance” mostly led to two shortcomings. Early studies were strongly influenced by Marxism and anticolonial nationalism. These frameworks often led to simplified readings of the past, which overstated the importance and ideological coherence of violent uprisings.⁷ They also neglected the existence of more low-key and small-scale forms of opposition to colonialism, such as Manisa’s uncooperative behaviour during his interrogation. From the early 1990s onwards, this strand of research was supplanted by the study of “everyday” forms of resistance, which brought to the fore how practices such as foot dragging, flight or false compliance could constitute less spectacular yet highly effective forms of struggle.⁸ In turn, the enthusiasm for the “everyday resistance” framework was not without flaws. It led to some overbearing readings, where almost any action purported by colonized individuals or communities could come to be read as a form of “resistance,” neglecting again the complex and sometimes contradictory motives of the “colonized” engaging in specific behaviours.⁹

In order to avoid the pitfalls of “resistance” as a concept, some historians have resorted to “agency” to approach the scope of actions taken by individuals and communities in the wake of colonisation. Agency could be broadly defined as “the interactive response brought by different actors to the problems posed by changing historical situations”.¹⁰ This angle fostered enticing research. For instance, David Gordon has shed light on forms of “spiritual agency” in Central

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⁵ Cooper, “Conflict and Connection,” 1552.
⁷ Van Walraven, Abbink, “Rethinking,” 32.
Africa by studying how the cult of ancestors’ spirits brought cohesion to different anti-colonial movements. Gordon did not consider such beliefs in the invisible world as “a remnant of tradition,” but rather as “an outcome of and engagement with a particular form of modernity.”¹¹ The ever-morphing nature of Lukusu, endlessly adapting to answer the needs of the communities who adopted it, could be read as form of spiritual agency, stemming from the brutal confrontation of the Congolese with colonial modernising agendas.

Hence, scholars have long demonstrated that people were never passively “colonized,” but rather deployed their agency in countless ways to limit and oppose imperial attempts at domination. I do not intend to rehash these already proven points; instead, I use displays of indigenous agency as a way to study the inner functioning of colonialism in the interwar Kwango district. The previous chapter approached colonial impotence as the discrepancy between the behaviours expected from and performed by Europeans in the field. This chapter sheds light on how the actions of the Congolese “made” colonial actors impotent.

Studying the ways indigenous communities attempted and managed to avoid colonial hegemonic goals also allows me to make two further points. First, it contributes to reveal different fracture lines running through the Kwango district. Rather than suggesting that socially homogenous groups of “colonizers” and “colonized” opposed each other, these case studies shed light on the inner tensions perceptible across these broad categories. On the one hand, the unsupervised settlement of fruit cutters and their families within the Leverville concession but outside of their designated chieftaincies served the HCB’s interests against those of the state, leading in turn to tensions between both institutions. On the other hand, the secrets of Lukusu were shared within circles of elderly initiates who did not hesitate to monetize their knowledge. Monetizing rituals allowed them to improve their social and economic standing at the expense of their own communities.

When these three case studies are read alongside the previous chapter, similarities appear in the strategies put in place by both Europeans and Congolese to find their footing in the colonial order of things. Elders, fruit cutters, HCB recruiters and territorial agents alike seemed to have devised makeshift strategies to secure their position in an environment they perceived as hostile and uncertain. Initiates who mastered Lukusu’s secrets rituals managed to amass money by diffusing the practice, while some territorial agents built small fortunes through the

practice of *prix-état*. In a similar fashion as territorial agents embellishing their reports in order to preserve their own freedom, elders refused to provide information that the administration could use to curtail their autonomy. These observations echo Florence Bernault’s study of the “transactional” nature of colonialism in Gabon. According to Bernault, “proximate, conversant and compatible imaginaries” existed across the racial divide, alongside countless forms of (im)material exchanges tying up both groups together.¹² The present study suggests that not only imaginaries but also practices could echo one another. Far from the orderly private utopia engineered by Lord Leverhulme (see chapter 1), the interwar Leverville concession and its hinterland thus appear as marred by uncertainty and competition.

**Eluding control: the *villages doublures***

This section sheds light on how the Leverville concession’s business model unexpectedly led to the emergence of informal settlements called *villages doublures* and to unsupervised migrations of fruit cutters and their families.¹³ These were specifically consequences of palm oil production and hampered the strict control that the administration endeavoured to hold over both villages and the movements of the Congolese. In the meantime, these arrangements were beneficial for HCB, for they ensured the presence of workers close to its palm groves without costing much to the company. The emergence of *villages doublures* testified to the fruit cutters’ ability to use the contradictory goals of public and private actors in order to improve their social and economic standing.

Contractually speaking, the Leverville concession’s palm oil workers were divided into two categories: fruit furnishers and fruit cutters. Fruit furnishers originated from the concession area. They were not formally employed by HCB and were free to pluck oil palms on their own lands and to sell palm fruits either to oil companies or to private individuals in local markets.¹⁴ However, this workforce was far from sufficient to sustain HCB’s raw material needs. The *Huileries* therefore had to rely on an influx of contractual workers recruited in neighbouring territories.¹⁵ Officially designated as fruit cutters, they were hired to provide

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¹⁴ AAB, AIMO 1855, Note sur les fournisseurs de fruits au Kwango, 25 November 1941.
HCB with 200 crates of palm fruit, each weighing around 35 kg, for their contracts to be fulfilled. Cutters came predominantly from the Gungu territory, which was located South of Leverville. This area was more populated, had fewer palm trees than the lands allotted to HCB. Fruit cutters’ engagement brought them far from home, for they had to cover a distance ranging from 50 to 150 kilometres to reach the palm groves they had to harvest. At the end of each month, these workers were paid in accordance to their productivity. The company was obligated to take their housing, feeding and medical care in charge, as well as providing them with a machete and blankets for the time of their employment (see chapter 5).¹⁶

Fruit cutters usually settled for a limited time inside the groves, living in makeshift villages which they built without giving any notice to the territorial administration. Fruit cutters’ temporary relocation in the concession was also not covered by the mandatory “mutation passport,” which all Congolese were obligated to fill out should they have to reside outside of their designated chieftaincies for more than a month.¹⁷ Furthermore, cutters often did not travel alone; relatives usually accompanied them to the Leverville concession to work as aides or cooks (see chapter 6). New recruits settled in the same spots as the cutters who had fulfilled their contracts and were thus being replaced.¹⁸ As these temporary villages became permanent places of residence, their inhabitants began to grow food crops and to raise cattle.¹⁹ Administrators had to coin a new term to designate these hamlets born out of the labour needs of the Leverville concession; they became known as villages doublures. This neologism alluded to the fact that they represented a “doubling” of the workers’ home villages nested in the concession.

It is not possible to assess with complete accuracy the number of people who temporarily resided in villages doublures, for statistical evidences are both patchy and often unreliable. According to 1934 statistics, approximately 11000 fruit cutters were hired every four months to work in Leverville. Given that most of them were accompanied by at least one aide, this meant that in 1934 up to 66000 individuals moved between the concession and their homes, spend-

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¹⁶ AAB, AIMO 1855, Contrat d’engagement coupeur de fruits HCB, September 1923.
ing a few weeks or months in the *villages doublures*.\(^{20}\) Although these figures might be exaggerated, it is certain that thousands of men, women and children travelled in and out of the concession without any form of administrative supervision during the interwar.

*Villages doublures* became a major object of concern for colonial authorities, for two predominant reasons: 1) they were located outside their inhabitant’s chieftaincies; and 2) they were populated by families of varied origins. On paper, each indigenous community of rural Belgian Congo belonged to a chieftaincy, a territorial unit placed under the guardianship of a *chef médaillé*. These authority figures were designated by the territorial administration, and were appointed in principle on the grounds of “local customs.”\(^{21}\) Their key position as representative of the state and depository of “traditional” authority was symbolised by the awarding of a medal, from which they took their name. *Chefs médaillés* were expected to relay and enforce the administration’s demands; for instance, they might facilitate tax collection, guaranteeing the public order and providing workers for compulsory labour.\(^{22}\)

If the effective power of territorial agents greatly fluctuated according to their health, character and embeddedness in local networks (see chapter 2), the authority and legitimacy of *chefs médaillés* likewise depended on the circumstances. The duties purported upon them by the administration had little to do with the roles that “Big Men” played in Central Africa prior to colonization.\(^{23}\) Whereas villages heads were expected to be concerned with their community’s prosperity, colonial chieftainship was mostly responsible for extracting wealth and precious labour force from the community at the benefit of an outer power. If some *chefs médaillés* managed to answer the administration’s demands, often through the mobilisation of coercion, others were frequently punished by territorial administrators for failing to fulfil their obligations.\(^{24}\)

However, by temporarily settling outside of their chieftaincies, fruit cutters and their aides effectively avoided the grasp of their *chefs médaillés*. Given that the obligations binding chiefs and their “subjects” supposedly rested on the precedents of tradition, they did not fall under authority of the local desig-

\(^{20}\) AAB, AIMO 1855, Lettre du commissaire de la province de Léopoldville A. de Beaufort au commissaire de district du Kwango, 5 April 1934.


\(^{22}\) Léon Strouvens, Pierre Piron (ed.), *Codes et Lois du Congo Belge* (Brussels: Larcier, 1958), 769.


nated chief when they resided in the concession.²⁵ They were thus able to avoid their fiscal and labour duties and were also out of reach for screening and vaccination campaigns (see chapter 5).

Movements between the cutters’ homes and villages doublures were not high in number or regularly occurring, but rather spontaneous and happening on an individual basis. Some people settled in the groves for a few days, while others lived there permanently. These villages sheltered its inhabitants from the grip of the state, which seemed to have played a major part in their attractiveness. In June 1937, the Kwango District Commissioner estimated that at least half of the men living there did not work for HCB.²⁶ Furthermore, administrative supervision seemed to have been unwelcomed by their inhabitants. A report from the same year mentioned that when territorial agents attempted to visit some villages doublures, most inhabitants had already fled prior to their arrival.²⁷ In September 1939, it was reported that some cutters would even deliberately slow down their work pace in order to “postpone, as long as possible, the moment when they would have to reintegrate their territory.”²⁸

In the eyes of the administration, villages doublures also led to a worrisome increase of the Leverville concession’s “ethnic” diversity. The dangers arising from perceived intermingling of workers of diverse origins in enclaves of strategic importance was a common concern for Belgian Congo’s employers. In the 1920s, the Union Minière for instance struggled to respond to the emergence of “voluntary associations” among its cosmopolitan workforce. These informal support groups gathered workers of the same origin and merged class- and identity-based solidarities, which potentially threatened the company’s hegemonic designs.²⁹

The administration initiated several strategies to defuse such dangers. Chief-taincies and mutation passports were partly aimed at clearly separating so-called “ethnic groups” and limiting their contacts with one another. Dividing communities on the grounds of what state actors believed to be clearly defined and separated “ethnic identities” was also aimed at preventing the “traditional order” from crumbling under the weight of colonial transformations. For in-

²⁵ AAB, AIMO 1856, Rapport sur la question des villages doublures dans les cercles des HCB, 13 April 1937.
²⁶ AAB, AIMO 1856, Lettre du Commissaire de District H. Vandevenne au Chef de Province de Léopoldville, 9 June 1937.
²⁸ AAB, AIMO 1855, Lettre du Commissaire de District assistant F. Peigneux au Chef de Province de Léopoldville, 7 September 1939.
²⁹ Higginson, A Working Class, 79–85.
stance, some customs were deemed to be necessary to uphold a form of morality in rural areas, including regulating marriage, kinship and sexual behaviours. Public servants feared that once fruit cutters were isolated from their home community, they would be keener to engage in “inter-ethnic” relationships. Authorities feared that these relationships would foster a general state of “debauchery” in the palm groves, encouraging polygamy and unplanned pregnancies. By way of example of this phenomenon, a 1923 letter from the colony’s Governor General mentioned the risk that villages doublures would shelter “stray wives,” who had fled their homes in neighbouring chieftaincies.

Unlike the administration, HCB representatives were satisfied with the emergence of villages doublures. “They provide a [...] fortunate solution to the issue of fruit cutters’ housing. [...] Their atmosphere is more favourable to the Black than the atmosphere of an artificial camp, even one equipped with all sanitary facilities. There, the native keeps his crops, his usual diet and the majority of his traditions,” wrote the company’s General-Administrator in 1937. Technically speaking, these spontaneous settlements were not officially considered as workers’ camps. Therefore, the company did not have to provide costly medical and social care to their inhabitants (see chapters 1 and 5).

Villages doublures were a prime example of an unexpected symbiosis between the interests of actors who would, at first sight, appear to be contradictory. Territorial agents complained that fruit cutters escaped the administration’s supervision thanks to the company’s complacency, as HCB managers did practically nothing to report the illegal settlements mushrooming in their concession. A March 1937 letter, written by a medical officer to the colony’s General Governor, suggested that the “greatest freedom” fruit cutters allegedly enjoyed in villages doublures was the company’s “best propaganda” to attract potential workers. By effectively sheltering fruit cutters and their aides from the administration’s demands, Leverville’s management seized the opportunity offered by local com-

32 AAB, AIMO 1856, Lettre de l’administrateur-général des HCB E. Dusseljé au gouverneur général, 1 February 1937.
33 AAB, AIMO 1856, Lettre du chef de province A. De Beaufort au commissaire de district du Kwango, 30 July 1936.
34 AAB, AIMO 1856, Lettre du médecin-directeur du FOREAMI au gouverneur général, 18 March 1937.
munities’ mobility and desire to escape the state’s grip to improve the concession’s fledging productivity.

*Villages doublures* shed light on an interesting paradox resulting from the commodification of “unscalable,” naturally-growing products by colonial capitalism. The administration’s efforts to “stabilize” African workers and their families came to grips with the need for some companies to rely on the very mobility of their workforce to reach and harvest primary resources. Tensions arising between HCB and public authorities were not unique. For instance, logging companies in interwar French Equatorial Africa also needed to secure a steady flow of transient workers between rainforest camps and villages. It came to grips with official policies endeavouring to “stabilize” workers in a fixed place, where they could be optimally supervised.³⁵

Furthermore, the existence of such makeshift arrangements testified to the limited viability of the plans devised in Brussels and Port Sunlight to “virtuously” manage the concession (see chapter 1). Leverville’s power of attraction resided more in the relative shelter it provided from the state than in its ambitious paternalism. Field circumstances and indigenous agency shaped the course of the concession’s history, perhaps even more than Lord Leverhulme’s dreams of building a tropical utopia on the shores of the Kwilu River (see chapter 1).

**Deceiving public servants**

The spontaneous and unsupervised circulation of fruit cutters in and out of *villages doublures* was not the only form of migration related to the foundation of the Leverville concession. The Kwango district’s administration and HCB’s management also envisioned displacing entire communities closer to the *Huileries*’ palm groves in order to answer the company’s ever-pressing need for workers.³⁶ On paper, it was strictly forbidden to forcibly remove Congolese from their home territories to accommodate the economic demands of private actors.³⁷ Public servants nonetheless saw how such plans could also serve the state’s interests. They thought that clustering communities together close to economic centres such as Leverville and based on the grounds of their shared “ethnicity” would simultaneously make them easier to supervise and improve the district’s eco-

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nomic output. However, these schemes relied on the collaboration of elders. They were deemed to be the only ones who knew enough of the history of their community to provide the administration with the necessary information for regrouping clans who were thought to originally belong together. Elders, in turn, took advantage from their pivotal position to deceive state investigators in order to prevent the inception of these forced migrations.

In the interwar, colonial powers all over sub-Saharan Africa commissioned numerous studies on the cultures and histories of the communities they sought to rule. They were mostly carried out by civil servants with no prior background in ethnography.\(^{38}\) One of the main objectives underlying the collection and “rational” classification of this data was to adapt general laws and directives to local contexts.\(^{39}\) Belgian Congo encompassed a vast array of pre-existing polities, each characterized by different organizing principles, forms of power and logics of legitimacy. Better understanding the “customs” which presided over their organisation was crucial to ensure their incorporation in the colonial order.

This official ethnography also sought to alleviate the administrations’ anxiety. Many state actors feared that a brutal dismantling of “traditional” institutions would foster political instability and be detrimental to colonial authority.\(^{40}\) From the early 1920s onwards, functionaries from the Kwango district observed harbingers of this menace in the alleged intermingling of diverse “ethnicities” in the field. A territorial administrator almost poetically described the district’s social organisation, which he compared to “a conglomerate of heterogeneous fragments, hybridized by contacts and infiltration, [...] like the detached leaves of a felled tree, scattered by the winds in all directions.”\(^{41}\)

This metaphor evoked a widely-held belief in Belgian Congo’s administrative circles. Many functionaries envisioned pre-colonial Africa as having been divided between large and “ethnically homogeneous” polities, which held almost no relation to each another. It was believed that these communities came to be fragmented with time, leading to the stratification of Central Africa into smaller and increasingly interwoven groups. In the eyes of the administration, customary leaders therefore lacked authority and legitimacy, which hampered their crucial role as potential chefs médaillés. Such readings of the continent’s past were er-

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\(^{39}\) Poncelet, *L’Invention*, 584.


roneous. To quote Sara Berry, African societies were “changing and dynamic,” and have always been characterized by “fluid and ambiguous” differentiations, far from the rigid identities imagined by colonial public servants. However, to answer this alleged issue, Minister of Colonies Louis Franck encouraged from 1921 onwards the creation of “great chieftaincies,” where one paramount chief invested by the administration would rule over a large community built out of scattered groups deemed to share the same “ethnicity.”

In June 1932, more than ten years after the inception of the “great chieftaincies” scheme, the Congo-Kasai governor ordered a string of surveys aiming to “better understand the origins, traditions, customs, tribal organization and kinship ties uniting neighbouring groups, the founders of clans and tribes, and the succession of chiefs.” Territorial public servants were ordered to be on the lookout for linguistic, cultural, organizational or “racial” similarities between the communities they visited. They were instructed to interview elders, chiefs and clan heads to sketch out collective genealogies and trace back the “origins” of these “fragmented” communities. When the “original” identity of a group was “scientifically” established, the administration could plan its regrouping with its long-lost “ethnic” fellows under the allegedly legitimate authority of a paramount chief.

Once regrouped, these great chieftaincies could also be settled in strategic areas, such as the Leverville concession and its immediate hinterland, in order to optimize their economic output. Many administrators believed that each “ethnic group” possessed specific aptitudes and talents, which could be potentially put at the service of the colonial economy. A March 1932 report, for example, stated that “the Bahungana are blacksmiths,” while “the Batsamba [are] specialized in the extraction of iron ore and its smelting.” While some communities had indeed developed sophisticated metallurgy techniques, such generalizations reflected a lack of understanding of the complexity of their social structures. Smelters were, for instance, an elite group of initiates who did not share the se-
crets of their craft with the rest of their community. However, essentialist beliefs in the conflation of aptitudes and “ethnicity” partially determined where regrouped “great chieftaincies” would be settled. In the Kwango district, HCB and the territorial administration tried for instance to move Bapende communities from their home territory of Gungu towards the Leverville concession, for they were considered to be specifically gifted at cutting palm fruits. In these enclaves of concentrated European presence, they would also remain within the administration’s reach, which would ease their taxation, medical supervision and mobilisation for compulsory labour (see chapter 2).

Figure 5 illustrates these initiatives and shed light on their scope. It is a reproduction of a sketch from a 1932 aborted project, which sought to displace several villages inside of the Leverville concession. The arrows mark the migration routes that neighbouring communities would have taken towards the areas delimited by numbered rectangles, located either in the heart of the concession’s palm groves or close to HCB outposts such as Leverville and Kwenge.

Before organising the displacement of villages, public servants were required to retrace the origins of the targeted communities, in order to bring an “ethnic” coherence to these schemes. Their enquiries focused especially on the genealogy of their ruling dynasties and the recouping of their migratory movements. Territorial agents sometimes alluded in their report to the existence of legendary long-lost kingdoms to which the Kwango’s inhabitants would have originally belonged. An undated report on the “origins of the Bambala and Bangongo” mentioned “a powerful kingdom on the west coast, which must have occupied vast areas, from which most of the clans that invaded [...] the entire Kwango district seem to have originated.” According to its author, the origin of these scattered communities could be traced back to the “Masanji kingdom,” thought to have crumbled under the pressure of slave raids, invasions, exodus, “usurpation of authority” and “interbreeding with refugee groups.”

The vague output of these ethnographic enquiries reflected the difficulty of collecting reliable data in the field. Elders, chiefs and clan heads were indeed reluctant to act as the administration’s informants. The territorial administrator of Bas-Kwilu noted in 1935 that “the natives are so afraid of being regrouped together [...] that they do everything they can to make their stories differ from one

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another.”⁵¹ Similar practices regularly occurred when indigenous authority figures faced colonial administrators’ need for data. For Sara Berry, African informants of colonial public servants often “[took] advantage of the interest of officials in traditions by providing information that is favourable to them.”⁵²

**Figure 5:** Annotated map envisioning village displacements, AAB, AIMO 1856, map by Iris Vandevelde 1932

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⁵² Berry, “Hegemony,” 334.
Ultimately, the administration’s ethnographic surveys did not lead to large-scale, organised migrations. The government’s inability to collect valuable data on indigenous histories, customs and traditions shed light on the manifold limits of imperial ambitions. Congolese communities retained a significant advantage when functionaries inquired into their social and political organisations. Omitting or concealing information was a powerful tool to concretely counter the hegemonic aspirations of colonial authorities.

The aborted creation of “great chieftaincies” offers crucial information on the power dynamics at play in the interwar Leverville concession and its hinterland. First, it testifies to the widely-held belief by European actors, public and private alike, that their endeavour was to bring order where chaos used to prevail. The Leverville concession was envisioned as a way to introduce an efficient and paternalist form of capitalism on the shores of the Kwilu river, bent on both righting the wrongs of the Free State, and on rationally exploiting the region’s profuse palm groves (see chapters 1 and 6). Similarly, failed attempts at building great chieftaincies endeavored to reinstate long-lost “customary” polities while optimally inserting them in the colony’s economic and administrative order. The ultimate inability of both actors to fulfil these goals once again sheds light on the multifaceted limitations of colonial ambitions.

Second, the collaborations at play in this population regrouping scheme were markedly different than those emerging in the wake of villages doublures. The former relied on the existence of shared interests between HCB and the administration, while the latter brought to the fore how the Huileries could come to shelter its workers from the state’s grip. The existence of simultaneous and yet contradictory migration strategies supported by HCB demonstrated how the supposed “order” that colonialism would bring to the Kwango district effectively materialised in a series of makeshift plans. One of the few common features shared by villages doublures and population regrouping were their illegal nature. It was forbidden for the Congolese to settle outside of their chieftaincies without the administration’s assent, as much as it was forbidden to forcibly displace villages to accommodate the needs of private companies. However, such schemes either took place or were thoroughly considered. Rules and laws could be side-lined in the effective deployment of colonial order in the interwar Kwango district.

Third, the conspicuous choice of indigenous informants to deceive public servants illustrated their pivotal role as potential enablers of colonialism. The administration’s effective weakness in the Kwango district implied that territorial functionaries could hardly resort to force or constraint to pursue sovereign prerogatives such as collecting taxes or upholding the public order (see chapter 2). Chefs médailleés were envisioned as a network of trusted relays within local communities who could enforce the state’s decision while ensuring their legitimacy.
thanks to the aura of “customary” authority they supposedly held. However, guaranteeing the articulation of rural communities to the colonial order of things necessitated a thorough knowledge of their inner workings. In the case of forced collective migrations, elders used their position as information brokers to prevent villages from being forcibly displaced. If they occasionally acted as a protecting force, they could also take advantage of their privileged status to reinstate their authority.

**Lukusu and sense-making**

The emergence of *Lukusu* in the Kamtsha-Lubue territory brought field functionaries to interrogate the elders again in order to understand and suppress what appeared to be a potentially seditious movement. As in the case of village displacements, most of these reluctant informants consciously attempted to cloud the issue rather than to enlighten administrators. Maintaining the secrecy surrounding *Lukusu* was necessary to ensure its potency and its ability to regenerate a social order brought upside-down by colonialism. However, this action also allowed the elders, economically and politically marginalised in the colonial hierarchy, to secure or improve their social standing.

The anti-witchcraft and healing practice of *Lukusu* was first mentioned by colonial observers in and around Kamtsha-Lubue in 1932 after spreading along Central African routes for over two decades. *Lukusu* constantly morphed along its journey, gaining new attributes, rites or qualities as it passed from one community to the next. The diffusion of *Lukusu* in the Kwango district, for instance, coincided with the inclusion of a basket containing one or several snakes to its rituals. The snakes were thought to be the mouths through which ancestors’ spirits would speak to their descendants.

The sustained diffusion of *Lukusu* over large stretches of Central Africa testified to the infinite plasticity of “traditions” in the region, highly adaptable and translatable in rapidly changing settings. This very plasticity made such heal-

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53 This section is based on Henriet, “Facing,” 219–241.
ing movements a potential counter-force against colonialism. Their constantly changing nature made them difficult to locate, describe and contain by European forces, marking the limits of the state’s effective power.

*Lukusu* would become widely adopted because of the existence of a shared repertoire of cultural practices among the societies of the Congo basin. Communities believed in the restorative power of *bwanga* such as *Lukusu*. *Bwanga* were “spiritual medications,” which required absorbing certain combinations of substances and strictly avoiding a series of taboos. Made from mineral, vegetal, and animal ingredients, a *bwanga* materialized the influence of spirits in the visible world. According to Wyatt McGaffey, its efficacy did not rely on the medical properties of its components, but rather on “material metaphors,” whereas each ingredient was culturally linked to the powers attributed to the spirit it represented.⁵⁷ Taboos mirrored the metaphoric elements of the charm. By avoiding specific foods and behaviours, the follower put themselves into a relation of similarity with the spirit active in the *bwanga*.⁵⁸ Along the trade routes and waterways of Central Africa, *bwanga* circulated and morphed among populations with similar or connected cosmogonies.⁵⁹ Villages and clans were pervaded by the same anxieties—fear of sickness and barrenness, of curses and witches—and were receptive to the same answers to their woes. Within and across cultural clusters, variants appeared in the narrative of a new *bwanga*, allowing it to be widely adopted. The protean nature of *bwanga* eased its adaptation by communities who could invest different meanings in the same symbols.⁶⁰

Spirits have long played an active part in the historical dynamics Central Africa. They could both either guarantee the stability of the social and political order, or they could disrupt it, mostly by enabling the evil doings of *ndoki* (witches).⁶¹ *Lukusu*, and the promises it carried of answering the personal and collective woes of indigenous communities through the benevolent intervention of ancestors’ spirits, could be seen as a way for Congolese men and women to explain and to solve the dramatic changes they witnessed in their everyday lives.

Asking for the intervention of ancestors’ spirits allowed Congolese communities to both make sense of and attempt to counter their encroachment by colonial forces. Spiritual revivalism under colonialism could take a violent guise,

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⁵⁹ MacGaffey, *Kongo Political Culture*, 74.
⁶⁰ Vansina, “Lukoshi/Lumpambula,” 89.
such as during the Tupelepele revolt of 1931 (see introduction and chapter 2). However, in many cases, engagements with the invisible world attempted to restore a form of balance to a social order profoundly disrupted by the demands of colonial public servants, companies and missionaries. These dynamics could be observed all over colonial Africa, where the collapse of precolonial social order was “filled by an upsurge of crisis cults based on spirit possessions, as if to reconstitute a nostalgic past,”¹ according to Klaas van Walraven and John Abbink.

At its very core, Lukusu remained an anti-witchcraft practice, a way to detect those using “the power of words and thoughts” to hurt others. It had to be adopted by entire villages, children included, to ensure that hidden sorcerers exerting the dark arts on their peers would not escape detection. All of the cultural clusters in which the bwanga spread shared a collective anxiety about the existence of ndoki, hexing their relatives out of jealousy for their prosperity or fertility. Lukusu provided a cure for communities marred by “spiritual insecurity,” where nightmares, sickness, unexpected deaths and barrenness were read as the visible results of dark magic. A 1933 enquiry on Lukusu alluded to ad hominem accusations of witchcraft that could only be dismissed by the ritual absorption of the bwanga. Interrogated on 26 May 1933, “clan chief” Bongo-Betschy was required to justify his rationale for adopting Lukusu:

Q: Why did people take the bwanga [...] in your village?
A: It’s Koie, Kimpata’s village chief, who wanted us to take the Lukusu.

Q: What were his motives?
A: Koie accused us of killing people with spells, to seize their belongings. It is because we killed people he said, that we have a lot of money. If you don’t drink the Lukusu, I will consider you to be witches.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Vansina, “Mouvements Religieux Kuba,” 156.
⁶⁷ AAB, AIMO 1625, P.V. d’interrogatoire du prévenu Bongo-Betschy, 26 May 1933.
The same day, another man, Katshinga, provided similar answer to the investigator:

A: We took Lukusu because we were accused of being sorcerers [...]  
Q: You knew very well that the State was opposed to Lukusu, why did you break the rules?  
A: We were accused of sorcery. What else could I do?  

*Bwanga* such as *Lukusu* were first and foremost designed to regenerate the social body by cleansing families and clans of witchcraft from “the frightening notion that there is hidden aggression and violence where there should be only trust and solidarity.” In the cases of both Bongo-Betsya and Katshinga's, the taking of *Lukusu* appeared to be immediately linked to accusations of participation to occult practices. For the former, the charge was somehow substantiated by his relative wealth, thought to have been extracted at the expense of his “victims.”

If *Lukusu* was a collective endeavour, passing from one village to another, elders played a central role in its diffusion. A community desiring to adopt the *bwanga* had to send a delegation of elders to a neighbouring agglomeration that had already accepted it. An initiate – *capita bakumu* – would then visit the village of the demanding party and provide *Lukusu* to a group of elders, teaching them how it should be prepared. Only then could *Lukusu* begin its proper adoption by the whole community, as related in a confidential note from October 1932:

> The candidate steps over the bell which is placed on the ground; he then sits on his ankles and turns his back on the bell, which is placed underneath him. Then, the *capita bakumu* approaches the back of the candidate, armed with a double-edged knife and mimics twice to strike him on the top of his head; then, he comes in front of the candidate and makes him swallow a pinch of the *bwanga*, before the candidate rises up and steps over the bell backwards.

According to Mulende, a witness interrogated on 26 May 1933, *Lukusu* was accompanied by the following taboos:

> Those who took *Lukusu* are forbidden to eat bananas or any other fruit, or the *ngai-ngai* vegetable (guinea sorrel), should kill and eat white hens and goats, [...] one should not have sexual relations with his wife during the day. When it rains, the wife must leave

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68 AAB, AIMO 1625, P.V. d’interrogatoire du prévenu Katshinga, 26 May 1933.
71 AAB, AIMO 1625, Note sur le Nkisi Lukoi ou le serpent qui parle, 22 October 1932.
the bed and squat down next to it while the husband remains in bed; women are not allowed to cook in the village; it is forbidden for men to look at women as they cook, if a woman is cooking and it starts to rain, she must stop immediately and throw everything on the ground, [...] those who took Lukusu must not wear anything of white colour. Finally, when everyone has taken Lukusu, we can eat again all the forbidden meals.  

The efficiency of a bwanga was thought to depend on the strict following of taboos, for they established a direct relation between the charm and those who benefitted from it. The types of requests detailed above were consistent with the behaviours known to have been attached to other bwanga. Indeed, they often prescribed different rules for men and women, commanded sexual abstinence and enumerated dietary restrictions. By sharpening gender differences and ordering the followers to adopt behaviours markedly dissimilar from their daily conduct, taboos fostered an auspicious social dynamic in which magic could occur. Initiate’s attitudes regarding consumption and relations highlighted and enhanced their difference with non-initiates, thereby strengthening their relationship with the bwanga.  

As early as January 1933, territorial officials of the Kwango received the first information on the diffusion of a bwanga whose characteristics echoed those of Tupelepele. Its rapid expansion and enigmatic nature would encourage officials on the ground to redouble their efforts to identify and arrest its propagators, thus containing the threat of a new rebellion. Between April and June 1933, an official investigation conducted by the administration targeted the elders in particular, perceived as both prime informants and potentially the secret leaders of Lukusu. However, these enquiries ended in failure. On 1 May 1933, territorial agent Mons wrote to his superior: “No one around me wants to inform me [...] I have made many arrests [...] nobody says a word.” The provincial attorney general complained the same month about the inability for officials to gather information: “Interrogation transcripts often mention the things that were said, what the elders said that they wanted, without making a sufficient effort to investigate beyond the vagueness of such declarations. These ‘elders’ need to be named. We can act against individuals, but not against abstractions.”

72 AAB, AIMO 1625, PV. d’interrogatoire du témoin Mulende, 26 May 1933.  
74 AAB, AIMO 1625, Lettre de l’agent territorial Mons à l’administrateur territorial de la Kamtsha-Lubue, 1 May 1933.  
75 AAB, AIMO 1625, Lettre du procureur général au commissaire de district du Kwango, May 1933.
As observed in the case of ethnographic data collection, elders managed to counter public servants’ thirst for information. Some attempted to conceal their reluctance to cooperate, such as “Chief Gamineye,” “showing excessive subservience, which does not prevent him from providing us with false information,” according to a May 1933 report. Others simply denied any involvement in Lukusu, as illustrated by this exchange between territorial administrator Gustave Weekx and “group leader Okubongo”: “You claim not to know the reason for the introduction of Lukusu? – I assure you that I do not know.” Ultimately, interrogations and monitoring of cultural practices provided little comfort to the administrators. “We live in uncertainty,” wrote the Kwango District Commissioner in May 1933 mentioning the “complete silence” of their informants on Lukusu.

If the intention of Lukusu was to regenerate social bodies by expelling the malevolent forces acting from within, it also allowed senior initiates to enhance both their social and economic status. The sharing of healing rituals among older, high-ranking men was not uncommon in Central Africa. John Janzen showed how Lemba, corporate groups of prominent nganga (healers) present for centuries in Lower Congo, was only accessible to the wealthier elements of their community, who were paid for their services. Similarly, all of those who took Lukusu had to pay beforehand, possibly half a franc for a child and two francs for an adult. In October 1932, a territorial administrator even claimed to have seized the impressive amount of “1300 francs” gathered during initiation rituals. Incidentally, elder initiates who financially benefitted from Lukusu’s diffusion were among those marginalized inside the colonial economic and political rationales for two main reasons.

The first reason was that the state made wages in cash mandatory in 1910 to ensure that the Congo could generate its own fiscal revenues (see chapter 2). This system excluded the elders in principle from the monetized economy, for they were physically unable to make a living using their labour force. Second,

76 AAB, AIMO 1625, Rapport hebdomadaire sur la marche de la promenade militaire effectuée dans la région “Kamitsha,” 11 May 1933.
77 AAB, AIMO 1625, Procès-verbal d’interrogatoire du prévenu Okubongo, 20 May 1933.
78 AAB, AIMO 1625, Lettre du commissaire de district du Kwango au gouverneur du Congo-Kasaï, 29 May 1933.
80 AAB, AIMO 1625, Note sur le Nkisi Lukoio ou le serpent qui parle, 22 October 1932.
81 AAB, AIMO 1625, Contribution à l’enquête sur la secte secrete Lukoshi, par l’administrateur territorial Jalhay, 16 October 1932.
elders also lost political prominence in the colonial hierarchy. In precolonial Central Africa, villages tended to be comprised of a council of clan heads who played a significant role in communal decision making. To the contrary, colonial chieftainship only recognized individual “chiefs” as legitimate interlocutors, thereby side-lining these pre-existing collective institutions. In Lukusu, however, only high ranking elders could become capitā bakumu, which enhanced both their prestige and economic standing. The prominence of the older generations in Lukusu did not escape the notice of the Belgian administration, as the struggle to contain and erase it essentially took the form of a repressive campaign targeting the local elite.

The diffusion of Lukusu sheds light on the multifaceted nature of indigenous reactions to colonialism. “Resisting” did not only mean countering or escaping the most pressing demands of European forces, but also attempting to respond to the havoc from colonialism in Central Africa. Political hierarchies were redesigned by the creation of chieftaincies, economic structures by the introduction of wages and taxes, societies by the mores and values that the state, companies and missions sought to promote. As with other healing movements, Lukusu attempted to bring a form of clarity and metaphysical soothing to distressed communities by easing the benevolent agency of their ancestors’ spirits. Its power of attraction resided in its healing promises, rather than in any rallying potential against colonial power.

To conclude, state agents’ attempts to contain and suppress Lukusu illustrates once again the crucial role played by elders in the colonial order. They were both key informants and potential adversaries for the administration. Furthermore, their pivotal position somehow mirrored the ambiguous role played by the Leverville concession’s management, simultaneously acting as enablers and inhibitors of the public power, according to their own strategic interests. Lukusu demonstrated once more the multiple social fracture line traversing the Kwango district in the interwar.

**Conclusion**

Although disparate at first sight, villages doublures, failed planned migrations and Lukusu appeared to share two overarching, common characteristics. First,
they all alluded to forms of evasion from the grips of the colonial administration. Second, they testified to the attempts pursued by different social categories to bring order to a hostile and uncertain environment.

**Villages doublures** were a way for fruit cutters and their relatives to evade state control by temporarily settling in the Leverville concession. The elders’ ability to withhold information when interrogated both contributed to the derailment of the displacement of villages and shielded *Lukusu* from the prying eyes of public servants. These forms of evasion were neither simultaneous nor coordinated. They did not form a consciously planned strategy to counter colonial longings for hegemony. However, once considered together, they testified to the ability of local communities to set up a variety of obstacles, which, once aggregated, significantly hindered the anchoring of the colonial state in the Kwango district. James C. Scott resorted to the metaphor of a “coral reef” to qualify how the multiplication of “everyday” forms of resistance could organically coalesce and, in time, significantly impede colonial power.86 In and around Leverville, flight, deceit and secrecy significantly contributed to building such a “coral reef,” partially sheltering indigenous communities from colonial encroachment.

To another extent, the displacement of villages and *Lukusu* served to bring order and security to communities marred by a feeling of vulnerability and uncertainty. From the beginning, the Leverville concession was fantasized as the utopian rational ordering of allegedly chaotic “tropics” (see chapter 1). Planned migrations materialised this will to “order” the shores of the Kwilu River. They were seen as a way to both reinstate long-lost “legitimate” authorities under administrative oversight and to improve the concession’s economic turnout. At the same time, *Lukusu* was also a way for indigenous communities reluctantly implicated in the making of the “virtuous” concession to find a form of stability. It allowed invisible forces to play a more active and benevolent part in everyday life and helped to reinstate former elites in their paramount positions. Florence Bernault mentioned the existence of a “conversant imaginary” shared by European and indigenous communities in colonial Gabon. In and around the Leverville concession, plans and practices alluded to a diagnosis shared by Europeans and Congolese alike of a chaotic world in dire need of being mended and organised, a social field where solidarities were fluctuating. Key informants were potential foes, and allies could very well pursue diverging goals.

Those individuals pursuing order and certainty in an attempt to secure their social standing mostly relied on makeshift strategies, such as illegal planned mi-

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grations, informal settlements, or infusing specific meanings into a protean healing practice. However, better understanding these displays of agency requires paying attention to the broader, violent context in which these practices of flight and ordering took place. The Leverville concession and its hinterland were characterized by a multifaceted brutality. This history will be presented in the next chapter.