

Colonial Education in the Belgian Congo

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ABSTRACT

Belgian colonial policy for education can be summarized, for the first half of the century in particular, as follows: (1) support for the expansion of Catholic schools; (2) an almost exclusive interest in elementary education, with an emphasis on moral education rather than knowledge acquisition; (3) the use of indigenous *linguae francae* instead of French (and Dutch); (4) a fundamentally paternalistic pedagogical approach involving unilateral action by Belgium in terms of the actual organization of schools; (5) and Africans having no say in the matter. Emancipation was certainly not in the cards in the colony, especially before the Second World War. It was only beginning in the 1950s that a few minor changes were made to these strategies for colonial education policy, for instance through an attempt to develop a public education network, as well as the cautious opening of university instruction.



"Indigenous children look happy," in *Œuvres catholiques d'assistance en Belgique et aux missions*, n.p. n.d. [1953 ?], p. 100.



“The indigenous language used in the early years does not lend itself to teaching the notions to be learned later on, and is therefore gradually replaced during the course of study by French,” in *Union minière du Haut-Katanga. Monographie 1950*, n.p., 1950, p. 74.



“Primary schools are largely entrusted to Congolese instructors and teachers, under the supervision of Europeans,” in *Union minière du Haut-Katanga*, Brussels, 1954, p. 128.



No Congolese women in Lovanium: “Group of students during the academic year (1956-1957),” in *Université Lovanium de Léopoldville. Academic Year 1956-1957*, Leuven, Imp. Symons, 1957, p. 14.

When it won its independence in 1960, the Congo’s school enrollment rate ranked sixth among African countries for the elementary level and twelfth for the secondary level, while

university instruction remained meager. Despite the desire of colonizers to doctor the results of the colonial education that was put in place, the illiteracy rate was estimated at 60-65%. While the statistics are difficult to interpret, especially due to the haphazard collection of data in such a large country, it is certain that Belgium's efforts almost exclusively focused on developing elementary teaching. The goal of colonial policy was more of maintaining social and political order than training an educated elite.

A Colonial Education Dominated by Catholic Missions

This situation stemmed largely from the central role that Catholic missions had secured in the Congo, where education was associated with evangelization. As part of its policy of colonizing Central Africa for economic ends favorable to Belgium, the Congo Free State (1885-1908) sought to train an auxiliary workforce at reduced cost. This policy remained one of the constants of Belgian school policy in the Congo, and partially explains the massive use of missionaries by Leopold II. The commitment that was stipulated in the convention signed by the Holy See and the Congo Free State in 1906 provided for preferential treatment for the Catholic missions that would serve in the Congolese educational sector. In return, these missions would create schools, and closely follow the guiding principles identified by the state.

Prejudices regarding the local population also contributed to a more unequal educational policy. Africans were regularly considered as being little inclined to theory, lazy by nature, and slaves to their passions. Not only did Belgian educational policy consider that they had inferior intellectual capacities, but in the eyes of the Belgians, these arguments even facilitated the conquest. Colonizing, civilizing, educating, and moralizing were interdependent objectives, as they were in all European colonies. Only Christian "civilization," which was considered superior to African culture, could raise them up to a higher level and prepare them for labor that was useful—from the point of view of colonists. For example, when the Congo became a Belgian colony in 1908, educational curricula focused on manual labor and agriculture, and were combined with a very strict disciplinary regime, with the goal being to provide an employable workforce for colonial commercial operations. Colonial literature and official instruction booklets stressed the need for concrete, practical, and intuitive instruction. It was based on these criteria that missionaries were deemed capable of fulfilling this mission, despite shortcomings in terms of qualifications. Colonization's triumphalist discourse, which was long driven by colonial historiography and Belgian history textbooks, considered missionaries as purveyors of light and modernity amid the darkness of the pagan continent, attributing an undisputed supremacy to Western culture.

A Deliberately Limited Education

The development gap attributed to the Congolese was nevertheless far from being quickly filled by colonists. The project of colonists and missionaries instead involved an "appropriate" introduction to elementary cultural skills (reading, writing, arithmetic), with the acquisition of knowledge being relegated to the background in favor of moralization. In accordance with this pedagogical conception, the expansion of elementary education was relative: in the inter-war period, this pedagogical mentality was mainly reflected in the expansion of part-time primary education, without excluding the fact that children should contribute to food production.

In 1929, the *Projet d'orientation de l'enseignement libre au Congo belge* (Free Education Orientation Project for the Belgian Congo)—published with the support of national mission societies—enshrined the principles of cooperation between government and missions. The Belgian state directly subsidized Catholic missions. It was not until 1948 that a distinction was made between education for the masses and education to select a potential “elite.” The latter was designed to educate junior officers that would meet the growing needs of the working world, and was therefore more characterized by technical and professional instruction than a general secondary education. Under the colonial regime, only the need to train “auxiliary forces” was planned, as all of the key posts remained essentially in the hands of Belgians. According to the paternalistic perspective of the colonists, preparing the “*évolués*” (intelligent, advanced) for independence could be done only if social order were respected, thus leaving the “black elite” with its auxiliary status, without challenging professional stratification. It was also to this effect that the instruction of a European language, for example, was long deemed useless, and that the four *linguae francae* (Tshiluba, Lingala, Kikongo, and Swahili) remained the language of instruction in rural areas.

The Postwar Period: Limited Transformations

In 1948, a public education project was finally developed after demands for reform by African activists. An educational, ideological, and financial struggle opposed these burgeoning new schools with faith-based schools. During the second half of the 1950s, missions were nevertheless able to protect their interests. Between 1954 and 1957, the Congolese school population increased by over one half, although the proportion of public education remained very limited. In 1958, 3% of the elementary school population attended official schools, as opposed to 14% in secondary education (and over 40% in professional education). However, in high schools, which followed the Belgian curriculum, no more than 5% of the students were Congolese, while opportunities to continue with university education were also reserved for the children of colonials. During the first academic year (1954-1955), the Catholic University of Lovanium had just 33 students, only 11 of whom were Congolese. The official university of the Belgian Congo (and of Ruanda-Urundi) was not created until 1956 in Elisabethville. In 1960, only 0.1% of the Congolese school population was enrolled in higher education. This was four times less than proportion for the rest of Africa (0.4%), and thirty times less than the global figure (3%). What’s more, Congolese girls still did not have access to universities. They represented no more than 20% of the school population, and their education focused on so-called feminine professions such as nursing, teaching, and serving as a nun. In the mid-1950s, these sectors adhered to the ideal image of women characteristic of colonizing countries.

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