

Mathieu Zana Etambala, *Veroverd. Bezet. Gekoloniseerd. Congo 1876-1914* (Corredijk: Sterck & De Vreese, 2020, 463 pp., ISBN 9789056155148).

Matthieu Zana Etambala's *Veroverd. Bezet. Gekoloniseerd. Congo 1876-1914* is not a conventional overview of King Leopold II's Congo Free State, as the chronological framework of this book might suggest. Rather, this is a detailed history of the way in which different regions of Congo were conquered, occupied and colonised. The regions that are included in this hefty 463-page publication are the Kasai region, the region of the Mai-Ndombe-lake, the Equator region and the Aruwimi-Ituri-area. *Veroverd. Bezet. Gekoloniseerd* has its roots in a research project on different regions of Congo, that was started at the Africa Museum in Tervuren in 2010. Etambala, a recently retired senior researcher at the Africa Museum who also occasionally taught at the universities of, inter alia, Leuven and Ghent, is considered the foremost expert of Belgian colonial history and the white conquest of different areas of Congo. His earlier work includes *De teloorgang van een modelkolonie: Belgisch Congo (1958-1960)* (2008) and *Congo '55-'65* (1999). Etambala's writing of dense overviews of Belgian colonial history in a historiographical field which is dominated by high-quality case studies has also led to his appointment as a member of the special parliamentary commission on the Congo Free State and the Belgian colonial past in Congo and Ruanda-Burundi in July 2020.

This study is based on archives that are located at the Africa Museum in Tervuren. These papers were created by colonial elites, missionaries and local officials. The colonial ethnographies they produced are read critically by the author in an attempt to retrieve the Congolese voices. In all the sources he uses, Etambala always pays attention to the Congolese point of view, something 'Western historians' are doing insufficiently, according to Etambala. Rather they 'abuse' 'exaggerations in some stories', such as the description of a 'river of blood', to 'call the facts into question'. Nevertheless, Etambala contends that his interviews with Congolese people underscore that not the construction of schools and hospitals but the humiliations by colonial officials are most clearly etched in the memory of the Congolese (236).

How can a book accurately gauge the impact of conquest, occupation and colonisation? Etambala provides a model. As with his other books, this monograph is packed with quotes, documents and references from the archives as a way to let the 'subaltern speak' by reading documents 'against the grain'.<sup>1</sup> The drawback of this approach is that Etambala's analytical voice, while incisive, often remains in the background of the manuscript. The reliance on the words of different colonial authors, for instance, engenders

a definition of colonialism that is unique to the Belgian imperial project whereby colonisation is equated, not with violence, but with the creation of power structures and modernisation projects. The violence of imperial exploitation is different from the civilisational projects of colonialism (18). Only at the start of the First World War the interior of the colony was ‘really colonised’ (‘echt gekoloniseerd’), with the ‘creation of medical care and education for the local population’ (425). This definition highlights how the author sees the Belgian imperial project, as a process that went through three phases: conquest, occupation and colonisation.

Etambala highlights time and again how colonial elites should not be lumped together in one group and be understood as misguided ideologues. People with good intentions operated alongside hypocrites, cynics and sadists. This first group – the Belgian-led modernisation project which still had some good outcomes – was involved in ‘colonialism’, whereas the second group was engaged in the ‘conquest’ and ‘occupation’ that preceded it (20). This sharp distinction between exploitation and colonial assistance was already part of Etambala’s earlier work in which he declared no intention to ‘put the Belgian colonial realisations in a bad light’ while still firmly condemning colonialism.<sup>2</sup> This type of nuance and rigorous source critique is what characterises Etambala’s work and this book is no exception. The methodology of critical ethnography, however, makes it difficult to understand colonialism as more than a system of governance. In this way there is little room for seeing colonialism as a violent and destructive ideology of which both African education and forced labour are two sides of the same coin.

The author’s meticulous exploration of the archives has produced an unparalleled and unique in-depth study of how the largest Belgian colony was affected by colonialism and exploitation on a local level (20). In Chapter 1 the conquest of the Kuba empire is analysed in great detail. The author draws on Jan Vansina’s *Geschiedenis van de Kuba: van ongeveer 1500 tot 1904* (1963), as well as the missionary documents of the Congregatio Immaculati Cordis Mariae (‘Paters van Scheut’), who established themselves in the Kuba Kingdom in 1904. Colonial adventurers, like Lieutenant Ghislain de Macar who described the Bakuba as ‘traditional and extremely conservative’, are cited to show how conquerors viewed the African cultures and societies they encountered (35). In the Kuba Kingdom, where the red rubber exploitation was notoriously harsh, the Compagnie du Kasai committed a long list of violent acts which the author sums up on seven pages (41-47). The chapter details how Kuba chiefs were massacred in 1895 by Officer Jean-Léopold Bollen and highlights how some missionaries used violence ‘from time to time’ in the first Kuba mission post they established (72). At the same time, the author also brings other white

1 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Boston 1999).

2 Mathieu Zana Etambala, *De teloorgang van een modelkolonie: Belgisch Congo (1958-1960)* (Leuven 2008) 10.

people to the stage who were not violent and murderous like Fernand Harroy, a trader who admired the art of the Bakuba. This does not mean, however, that Harroy respected the cultures he encountered. He stole many of the art pieces which ended up in museums and personal collections. Other biographies that are included in the chapter highlight how diverse the interaction between Belgians and Africans could be.

In Chapter 2 Etambala looks at the region of the Ikandu, which was not a district but part of the Crown Domain. These pages describe the explorations that took place. One example is Alexandre Delcommune's journey and the creation of the trade expedition of the *Compagnie du Congo pour le Commerce et l'Industrie*. More important, however, is Etambala's clear explanation of the status of the Crown Domain, which was located in the area of the then-named Lake Leopold II, a location from which a lot of the indigenous peoples who were interviewed by the Irish poet Roger Casement in 1903 had fled (190). The murderous reputation of this territory, made famous by Casement and other critics of Leopold's exploitation, was even confirmed by Belgian authors. In 1906, Father Arthur Vermeersch for instance published *La Question Congolaise*, in which he highlighted the profits the Crown Domain generated.

Chapter 3 focuses on the rubber war that broke out as the district of the Equator was conquered and occupied. Etambala describes how Henry Morton Stanley, Georges Grenfell, Ernest Baert and the aforementioned Delcommune occupied the territory and includes a catalogue of atrocities (244-245), which leads him to conclude that this history was more like a crime story than a heroic epic. In Chapter 4 the Ituri area is surveyed, famous for its leopard men and Okapi's, both unique to the Congo.

*Veroverd. Bezet. Gekoloniseerd* is a breathtaking accomplishment because the author has been able to uncover so many new stories from collections that are incredibly difficult to study. Overall, the book's biggest strength is its ability to bring a wide array of actors, such as agents of companies, ministers, missionaries and African *chefs*, together in a historical and detailed study of the local context. The large number of different personalities, however, makes it sometimes difficult to understand what motivated them, leading Etambala to refer to cynicism, racism or sadism as their main drives. In that way the author opens up the big remaining question in the study of the Belgian Congo: how to conceptualise the link between the personal on the one hand and the globally shared project of imperialism on the other? And how to connect the local experience of Belgian colonialism with the Belgian imperial project and its global bifurcations? This book, with its encyclopaedic and biographical style, hints at the many places where historians can begin their study of these questions.