

Patricia Van Schuylenbergh, *Faune sauvage et colonisation. Une histoire de destruction et de protection de la nature congolaise (1885-1960)* (Brussels, Berlin, Bern, New York, Oxford: Peter Lang, 2020, 372 pp., ISBN 9782807611153).

Patricia Van Schuylenbergh's ambitious *Faune sauvage et colonisation. Une histoire de destruction et de protection de la nature congolaise (1885-1960)* sheds light on the history of environmental governance in the Congo Free State and the Belgian Congo by examining the development of wildlife management policies from the dual perspective of hunting predation and wildlife protection. This work fills a historiographical gap in the history of Congo. Research on Congolese socio-political history concerning rubber extraction and cotton cultivation had previously revealed the inseparability of colonial violence and mass environmental predation, but it has not addressed the nature of the latter. Van Schuylenbergh's research is based on the analysis of a considerable number of documents collected by a systematic examination of royal, colonial, museum and scientific archives, as well as on a fine-tuned analysis of the labyrinthine colonial legal corpus. Relying on these materials, Van Schuylenbergh builds up a history of wildlife management norms and programmes, focusing on the institutional and legal aspects and on key colonial personalities. She also addresses the colonial practices and their effects through research conducted on official statistics, published accounts, and private archives.

Van Schuylenbergh demonstrates the pivotal role of wildlife exploitation in the establishment and development of the Congo Free State regime (1885-1908) through the supply of meat and financial resources from ivory to expeditions and, thereafter, to the stations, posts and garrisons as well as to the building sites. The ivory trade offered the Leopoldian regime one of its main financial resources and fauna rapidly became 'one of the main driving forces of resource plundering organised by the Congo Free State' (37). This exploitation was reliant on earlier socio-environmental disruptions: in the nineteenth century, the exploitation of ivory reached industrial proportions in Central Africa, notably through the actions of Europeans who were stationed at trading posts on the Atlantic coast, as well as of autocratic states which had supplanted the former ruling dynasties. These actors operated wide-ranging trade networks, drawing on political alliances, dependency relationships and brutal modes of exploitation which combined slavery and ivory extraction (48-54). In the 1880s and 1890s, the political strategy of Leopold II consisted of allying with existing commercial networks in the Congo Basin, and then overpowering the Arab-Swahili networks through alliances and armed conflicts. Such politics allowed the regime to develop a systematic and

monopolistically-oriented appropriation of ivory by relying on legislative and administrative measures implemented from 1889 (54-66). The whole process shaped a 'brutal world economy' (37) which took the form of forced labour, crimes, the burning of villages, and colonial wars which were funded in part by ivory.

The Leopoldian regime introduced conservation laws from 1901 onwards, in the context of growing international concern embodied by the adoption of the international Convention for the Preservation of Wild Animals, Birds, and Fish (1900). The colonial legislation, under both the Congo Free State and the Belgian Congo regimes, mainly took the form of hunting regulations and the conversion of land into protected areas (227-265). In addition to reserves, the Belgian authorities established several national parks during the interwar period (267-325). The parks were managed by the Brussels-based Institute of National Parks of the Belgian Congo (INPBC), a 'parastatal' organisation, described by Van Schuylenbergh as having been implemented by means of 'political and constitutional boldness' (278). However, these parks were subject to the control and financing of the ministry of Colonies (279), and their creation and development were thus part of official, colonial environmental politics.

Both hunting regulations and the development of protected areas went hand in hand with socio-environmental redistribution. Opportunities for Westerners to access protected animals through economic, diplomatic, or scientific channels were coupled with a number of exclusions from hunting rights for the Congolese population. As in many other colonial areas, the associated legal and administrative activity also mirrored colonial powerlessness, as embodied by daily resistance and a routine economy of 'poaching'. Furthermore, exclusions of land and hunting rights were regularly met by protests, some of which threatened the existence of the parks.

While Van Schuylenbergh's book offers the first systematic, descriptive account of these long-term dynamics, it also provides food for thought on many cross-cutting research themes which resonate with contemporary historiographical debates. Four will be discussed in this review. The first concerns the socio-political nature of wildlife management, which the author examines through the complex dynamics of conflicts and collaborations uniting the various actors involved in hunting exploitation. Van Schuylenbergh mentions, concerning the national parks, 'a general disapproval of the local populations towards the colonial authority' (298). She also brings to light several forms of collaboration that complicate and refine this dividing line, in line with wider socio-political dynamics. As demonstrated by the author for the Congo Free State era, there was a 'complementarity between Europeans and Africans with respect to hunting, from which, in the end, everyone c[ould] benefit' (46-47). Such collaborations, which materialised daily in the hybrid nature of colonial hunting, however,

took shape within an asymmetrical balance of power, giving rise to switches in allegiances and the occurrence of resistance (56-57).

Oppositions to the colonial measures themselves reveal complex dividing lines. In their struggle to obtain the easing of restrictions, the populations excluded from the national parks regularly benefited from the support of the local colonial administration and legal authorities. Oppositions thus emerged between the metropolitan institutions and local actors, including administrators defending their constituents and colonial magistrates (303-305, 320-322). Moreover, the erosion of colonial hubris also came from within. Some of the criticism of the destructive socio-environmental nature of colonial policies emanated from technical-scientific experts whose work was central to the execution of colonial governance. However, the recognition and integration of African rural expertise in colonial policies remained rare and superficial (256-258) and the Belgian scientists identified solutions only within the framework of their own scientific epistemology.

A second key point revolves around transfers of concepts and practices which partially de-singularise the colonial ethos. Van Schuylenbergh's study focuses on transfers from Belgium to Congo by examining norms and programmatic intentions rather than the practices (limited and belated in Belgium, and whose study extends beyond the scope of this book). She elucidates the arguments of Belgian naturalists and scientists who were promoting the establishment of nature reserves in Belgium from the early twentieth century onwards. Their claims revolved around the need to 'represent exemplary and intact testimonies of characteristic landscapes before their denaturing' (213). Similar definitions based on the unspoiled character of reserves acting as testimonies of the past would be later applied to the Congo national parks. Moreover, the INPBC scientists would also legitimise the scientific use of protected landscapes thereby transformed into 'labsapes', a concept coined by Robert E. Kohler. While the work of Raf De Bont and Rajesh Heynickx allows us to refine these comparisons, as well as their limits, Van Schuylenbergh illuminates ideational and personal filiations by reconstructing the epistemic networks linking Belgium, as well as the United States and the Dutch Indies, to Congo.

A third theme concerns the environmental nature of protection policies. From the Congo Free State to the Belgian Congo era, Van Schuylenbergh underlines the utilitarian character of hunting regulations and reserves, which were conceived on the basis of 'a utilitarian perspective in which the socio-economic interests of the colony and its populations took precedence' (227). We can therefore discuss Van Schuylenbergh's attribution of the environmental ineffectiveness of protection policies to gaps in the colonial disciplinary framework – 'lack of skills and personnel', lack of control, and 'fraud' (118, 342) – and support the complementary assumption of a conservationist legal corpus which intrinsically bore the seeds of illegalisms

by aiming to redistribute uses of protected animals rather than to prohibit them. Accordingly, the author notes that the Belgian Congo legislation indirectly supported illegal elephant hunting ‘by selling permits’ which, moreover, ‘fed the state budget’ (236). Furthermore, provisions to fight fraud were aimed ‘mainly at curbing and controlling the illicit ivory trafficking for the state’s profit rather than eliminating it in order to protect the species’ (236-237).

In contrast to the hypothesis of an intrinsically utilitarian legal corpus, Van Schuylenbergh also refers to protection policies characterised ‘by a considerable effort to limit environmental destruction’ (15), chiefly through the development of national parks: the programmes pursued by the INPBC aimed to ensure that the parks were protected ‘as sustainably as possible through a scientific kind of nature conservation by which all anthropic action [wa]s, as a matter of principle, excluded’ (228). The parks were thus intended to become ‘enclaves totally or partially excluded from colonial politics and agendas’ (327). However, the colonial scientific, touristic, educational, and recreational forms of animal uses and commodification concerned even the most protected species and areas of Congo. This leads us to discuss the assertion of ‘the important colonial paradox’ of the coexistence of an ‘economic ambition favouring big capital’ and the development of protection laws and ‘protected areas intended to ensure sufficient natural resources for future generations’ (15). We would here contend that on the one hand, as mentioned above and as demonstrated by several examples provided by Van Schuylenbergh, the parks themselves were used to achieve a number of material (and potential) colonial uses of animals, and on the other hand, that the reconfiguration of historical geographies achieved through the development of protected areas acted as a conservationist counterweight which helped to legitimise the rise of capitalist economic activities outside the borders of reserves.

A fourth theme, and one of the book’s highlights, concerns the faunal materiality of the described processes, especially regarding the exploitation of elephants for their ivory, studied on the basis of official statistics. Van Schuylenbergh correlates the Congo Free State’s extractive policy with ‘a major decline in elephant populations’ (27). After the Belgian takeover of Congo, ivory exploitation continued to benefit the state through the collection of revenues from taxes and licenses established through conservationist measures – or the ‘protection of an economically profitable species’ (238). The statistical tables on ivory exploitation for the Belgian Congo era (251-253) reveal inconsistent levels of export from year to year, but which seem, however, to be regularly equivalent to, or higher than, those of the Leopoldian regime. This would demonstrate that the numerous continuities between the Congo Free State regime and the Belgian Congo era identified by Congo historians also concern the predatory management of Congolese wildlife.

We may regret the lack of dialogue in *Faune sauvage et colonisation* with recent historiographical works and debates on the socio-environmental history of Congo. The political ecology works carried out by Judith Verweijen and Esther Marijnen, for example, could have enriched the debates concerning the post-colonial dynamics of wildlife management evoked in both the introduction and the conclusion. Research by Mary-Louise Pratt, Lancelot Arzel or Raf De Bont could have provided additional food for thought regarding the animalisation, naturalisation and deculturation of the colonised worlds. Integrating and discussing such works in the analysis would have allowed for a more in-depth deconstruction of colonial tropes on nature, history, and place, for example concerning the semantics of un- or prehistorical Congolese territories. Despite these reservations, researchers working on the (history of) environmental governance in Congo will find in Van Schuylenbergh's pioneering book an essential work for situating and discussing their own research.

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