

Mother Metropole

Adoptions of Rwandan Minors in Postcolonial Belgium (1970-1994)

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Despite Africa's position as today's primary 'donor' of adoptable children, the historiography on the development of adoption networks on the African continent is close to non-existent. Even fewer publications elaborate on the missionary and religious roots of transnational adoptions in Africa. This article investigates transnational adoption practices of Rwandan and, to a lesser extent, Burundian minors in postcolonial Belgium (1970-1994). Additionally, it explicates continuities and departures with regards to colonial child separation practices in the former Belgian mandate territory Ruanda-Urundi. By studying the heterogeneous content of individual adoption case files from the two main agencies that organised the transfers, we uncover the language and practices that rendered the children 'adoptable' and we address how the Belgian intermediaries legitimated the relocations, and, more specifically what this teaches us about the ways they envisioned ideals of childhood, family, solidarity and society. I furthermore argue that the mediators styled Belgium as a caring and colour-blind 'motherland', shifting its former patriarchal role of the 'humanising' coloniser to one in which the nation becomes a 'mother' of children from the previously colonised territories. As such, this research contributes to a better understanding of how postcolonial attitudes, practices and networks were shaped and maintained in Belgium during the second half of the twentieth century.

Hoewel de meeste adoptiekinderen vandaag uit Afrika komen, staat de historiografie rond de ontwikkeling van adoptienetwerken op het Afrikaanse continent in de kinderschoenen. Nog minder publicaties gaan op zoek naar de religieuze en missionaire wortels van transnationale adoptie in Afrika. Dit artikel bestudeert transnationale adoptiepraktijken van Rwandese en, in mindere mate, Burundese minderjarigen in het postkoloniale België (1970-1994). In het bijzonder expliciteert dit artikel continuïteiten en veranderingen met koloniale praktijken

van kinderverplaatsingen in het voormalige Belgische mandaatgebied Ruanda-Urundi. Door de heterogene inhoud van individuele adoptiedossiers van de twee voornaamste adoptiewerken die de verplaatsingen organiseerden te onderzoeken, komen we de taal en praktijken op het spoor die de kinderen ‘adoptabel’ maakten, kunnen we beschrijven hoe Belgische bemiddelaars de verplaatsingen legitimeerden en wat dit ons leert over de manieren waarop zij idealen over kindertijd, familie, solidariteit en maatschappij verbeeld hebben. Ik demonstreer verder dat deze bemiddelaars België presenteerden als een zorgzaam en kleurenblind ‘moederland’. Hierbij bogen zij de patriarchale rol van de ‘humaniserende’ kolonisator om en beschouwden zij de natie als een ‘moeder’ voor de kinderen van de voormalige kolonies. Zo draagt dit onderzoek bij tot een beter begrip van de manieren waarop postkoloniale attitudes, praktijken en netwerken in het België van de tweede helft van de twintigste eeuw gevormd en in stand gehouden werden.

Introduction¹

On 21 July 1976, the city of Brussels hosted a celebratory parade to honour the 25th anniversary of King Baudouin’s reign. During the festivities, thousands of Belgians flocked to the capital to catch a glimpse of the royal Highnesses. The photograph below depicts the King and Queen greeting and hugging a young girl who was born in the former Ruanda-Urundi.² In 1971, she and seven other *métis* children were brought from Bujumbura to Belgium, where they were placed with white families who adopted the children as their legal daughters and sons.³ The picture was featured as the centrefold of an issue of *De Vreugdezaaier* (Joy Sowers), the quarterly leaflet of the adoption agency of the same name that facilitated the relocations and selected the foster families. Alongside the photograph, the following caption was added: ‘His Majesty smiles as he watches his queen and the little Burundian become sisters’.⁴

1 This research was financed by the University Research Fund (BOF) of the University of Antwerp. I thank Henk de Smaele and Roschanack Shaery-Yazdi for their remarks, as well as the researchers affiliated with the COACC network. My gratitude goes to the advocacy group Rwanda & Zoveel Meer (RZM) and in particular to Miranda Aerts, for their guidance in the selection of the illustrations included in this article.

2 Following the invasion by Belgian and Congolese troops during the First World War against the German coloniser, Rwanda and Burundi were placed under Belgian supervision from 1919 until

1962. From 1924, the Belgian government ruled ‘Ruanda-Urundi’ as a League of Nations mandate territory.

3 In this article, I use the French term *métis* to refer to a person with one parent who is black or *métis* and of sub-Saharan descent and one parent who is white and of European descent. *Métis* is advanced as the preferred term by the advocacy group *Métis de Belgique*. Historically, this group was referred to as *mulat* or *mulâtre*.

4 ‘Een mooie herinnering aan de Koningsdag’, *De Vreugdezaaier* 11:3 (1976) 9. All translations from Dutch or French to English are my own.

For Vreugdezaaiers, the picture was a testament to the success of its adoption work, as it showcased a happy-looking Burundian girl getting acquainted and even ‘becoming sisters’ with the popular Queen Fabiola, thus conveying the impression that the adoption was successful and benevolent. But the photograph also attests to children’s powerful political and social symbolism. As historian Karen Dubinsky has argued, ‘the social category “child” is at once real and metaphorical’.⁵ Children make great symbols of nations’ aspirations, simultaneously embodying the well-being of the said nation or community in the present and in the future. The royal couple – who remained involuntarily childless – was eager to have their picture taken with children, as proven by the hundreds of official photographs in which children are featured alongside them. This provided visual support to their public image and reputation as devout Catholic altruists and benefactors of many local charities, especially those that targeted women and children (of colour) from vulnerable groups.⁶ When taking into account that the adoption agency’s mission statement was to ‘build bridges between races and nations’, it can be argued that the picture not only served as proof of the girl’s well-being and justification for her displacement, but also helped to imagine Belgian society’s transition from a former colonial power that enforced racial segregation into a caring and ‘colour-blind’ community, literally embracing the children from the formerly colonised territories.

In the approximately twenty-five years to come, this girl would be joined by at least 364 minors from present-day Rwanda and 139 children from Burundi, all to become part of the ‘big Belgo-Rwandan family’ put forward by the Belgian intermediaries.⁷ Despite the emerging histories of child separations in the former European empires, few studies elaborate on the postcolonial genealogies of these systems.⁸ In case of the Belgian empire, Sarah Heynssens and Assumani Budagwa have reconstructed the story of approximately 300 *métis* children from Ruanda-Urundi who were transferred to Belgium on the eve of the decolonisation conflict.⁹ By revealing the links

5 Karen Dubinsky, *Babies without Borders: Adoption and Migration across the Americas* (New York 2010) 5. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442686120>.

6 Machteld De Metsenaere, ‘Boudewijn en de vrouwenproblematiek’, *Bijdragen tot de Eigentijdse Geschiedenis* 5 (1998) 207-218.

7 No official data exist on the number of children who migrated to Belgium for adoption prior to 1981. The numbers presented here are based on statistics from the Belgian Immigration Office and lists of files held at the Flemish Central Adoption Authority (FCAA).

8 Notable exceptions are Christina Firpo, *The Uprooted: Race, Children and Imperialism in French*

Indochina, 1890-1980 (Honolulu 2016) 133-163; Yves Denéchère (ed.), *Enjeux postcoloniaux de l'enfance et de la jeunesse: Espace francophone (1945-1980)* (Bern 2020). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3726/b15409>.

9 Sarah Heynssens, *De kinderen van Save: Een geschiedenis tussen Afrika en België* (Antwerp 2017); Sarah Heynssens, ‘Practices of Displacement: Forced Migration of Mixed-Race Children from Colonial Ruanda-Urundi to Belgium’, *Journal of Migration History* 2:1 (2016) 1-31. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/23519924-00201001>; Assumani Budagwa, *Noirs-blancs, Métis: La Belgique et la ségrégation des Métis du Congo belge et du Ruanda-Urundi (1908-1960)* (Céroux-Mousty 2014).



Excerpt from the leaflet of the Belgian adoption agency Vreugdezaaiers [Joy Sowers] depicting an encounter between a Burundian adoptee and the Belgian royal couple, Boudewijn and Fabiola, in 1976. The original caption states: 'His Majesty watches smilingly how his queen becomes sisters with a little Burundian'.¹⁰

10 De Vreugdezaaier 11:3 (1976) 9. © Joy for Kids vzw.

between their so-called evacuation and the colonial policies that steered their removal from their first families, these studies not only paved the way for a much-needed academic and societal re-thinking of Belgium's colonial governmentality and legacy, they also opened the conversation on how transnational adoptions in Belgium could be rooted in practices that pre-date the second half of the previous century.¹¹

Taking the aforementioned studies as a starting point, this contribution continues the story in a postcolonial direction. This article brings a first historical exploration of the practices and policies behind the adoptions and reallocations of black and *métis* children from Rwanda to Belgium during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Here, I limit the investigation to the Belgian intermediaries and their mutual relationships, and I analyse their structures, discourses and practices. I will pay particular attention to the narratives these intermediaries used to present the adoptions as justified and necessary. While there exists a plethora of literature on the histories of adoption in Asian and Latin American countries, barely any work has been done to illuminate the development of adoption networks on the African continent, despite Africa's position as today's primary 'supplier' of adoptable children.¹² This calls for a much-needed attempt to excavate the religious and missionary roots of these adoptions and to discern continuities and departures from the colonial period.

This article furthermore contributes to the current postcolonial turn in adoption studies by reflecting on how transnational adoptions have also shaped and transformed the former metropole.¹³ Similar to how missionary actors regarded children as key tools in shaping colonial societies, transnational adoptees have been given important symbolic roles in styling national imaginations, being portrayed as 'the best possible immigrants' or as ambassadors of racial and social pluralism.¹⁴ Taking inspiration from

11 In addition to the term 'birth family', which has been introduced by psychologists in the 1970s as a more 'positive' alternative to 'biological' or 'natural' parents', I employ the term 'first family' to more aptly capture the relationships between the adoptees and their Rwandan parents, with whom they often spent multiple years prior to their adoption. The term furthermore includes non-parental caretakers and relationships with extensive family members.

12 For case studies on American adoptions, see Laura Briggs, *Somebody's Children: The Politics of Transracial and Transnational Adoption* (Durham 2012). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822394952>. For Europe, see Yves Denéchère, *Des enfants venus*

du loin: Histoire de l'adoption internationale en France (Paris 2011); Peter Selman, 'Global trends in intercountry adoption: 2003-2013' in: Ballard et al. (eds.), *The Intercountry Adoption Debate: Dialogues across Disciplines* (Newcastle 2015) 9-48.

13 See also Olga Nieuwenhuys, 'Theorizing childhood(s): Why we need postcolonial perspectives', *Childhood* 20:1 (2013) 3-8. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568212465534>.

14 Rachel Winslow, *The Best Possible Immigrants: International Adoption and the American Family* (Philadelphia 2017); Bruno Perreau, *The Politics of Adoption: Gender and the Making of French Citizenship* (Cambridge 2014). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9780262027229.001.0001>.

Christina Klein's analysis of the role of transracial adoption in restyling the United States as a caring rather than a coercive global power, this article explores whether and how transnational adoption has been used by the Belgian mediators to depict the nation's relationship with its former colonies.¹⁵

I return to this question in the closing sections. First, the article provides a chronological account on the development of an adoption network between Belgium and Rwanda in the postcolonial decades, while articulating the (dis)continuities in actors, practices and narratives with regard to the colonial period. The findings presented here are primarily drawn from publications and archival sources from the two Catholic agencies that have been the driving force behind the vast majority of these adoptions. I have also examined reports from the Flemish agency for child welfare (Kind en Gezin), which has been responsible for the inspection and authorisation of adoption agencies since 1989. Additionally, I have consulted adoption case files at the Flemish Central Adoption Authority (FCAA).¹⁶ This is a heterogeneous corpus of documents, letters, medical and social work reports, excerpts from the civil registry, and court case files. These case files allow the reconstruction of the voices and contributions of various actors involved at different stages of the adoption process, capturing, as Barbara Yngvesson puts it, 'a sense of simultaneously making and unmaking not only the child who is adopted but the nations and families that are involved in this process as well'.¹⁷

From evacuation to adoption project (1958-1980)

In European adoption historiography, the emergence of transnational adoption is typically situated in the 1950s and 1960s and seen as a successor project of domestic adoptions.¹⁸ While transnational adoptions, in particular of Korean children in the context of the Korean War, indeed gained momentum around that time, the accommodation of foreign children can hardly be understood as a new phenomenon on the European continent. Since the interwar years, Belgium has accommodated several groups of

15 Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (Berkeley 2003) 143-190.

16 I thank the Data Protection Authority for its positive recommendation.

17 Barbara Yngvesson, *Belonging in an Adopted World: Race, Identity, and Transnational Adoption* (Chicago 2010) 37. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226964485.001.0001>.

18 René Hoksbergen, *Kinderen die niet konden blijven: Zestig jaar adoptie in beeld* (Soesterberg 2011) 51-66. Elisabeth Wesseling questions this assumption in 'Creating Historical Genealogies for Intercountry Adoption', *Adoption & Culture* 6:1 (2018) 30-32. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26818/adoptionculture.6.1.0001>.

children who were temporarily or permanently relocated from various countries, either in the aftermath of violent conflicts or as a way to provide ‘relief’ to a problematic childhood.¹⁹ Although these intra-continental initiatives had their heyday during the first half of the twentieth century, when they enjoyed immense popularity among middle-class families as a form of charity work, similar initiatives continued to flourish well into the second half of the century.

The format of these ‘relief projects’ was expanded in a transcontinental and transracial direction when approximately 300 biracial minors were relocated from Ruanda-Urundi to Belgium between 1958 and 1961. The majority of these children resided in the Save institute for ‘mixed’ children, founded by the Catholic Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Africa (also known as the ‘White Sisters’) and located in the south of present-day Rwanda. The transfer, which has been extensively studied by Sarah Heynssens, remains a highly controversial episode in Belgium’s colonial history because, as Heynssens argues, the children had been subjected to a ‘double dislocation’.²⁰ Prior to their displacement to Belgium, these Eurafican children and teenagers, of whom the vast majority had black mothers and white fathers, had already been separated from their parents and placed in specialised institutions where they received adapted education under Belgian supervision. Fearing that the children would become victims of ethnic violence during the decolonisation conflict, the headmistress of the Save institute Sister Lutgardis directed an emotional plea for the children’s ‘patriation’ to Belgium to both local and overseas authorities. Between 1958 and 1961, on the eve of the Rwandan independence, she successfully lobbied with both the colonial government and several charitable groups for the financing and practical organisation of the ‘evacuation’ of 283 pupils from the institutes in Save, Byimana and Nyangezi, portraying their transfer to Belgium as a humanitarian emergency.²¹

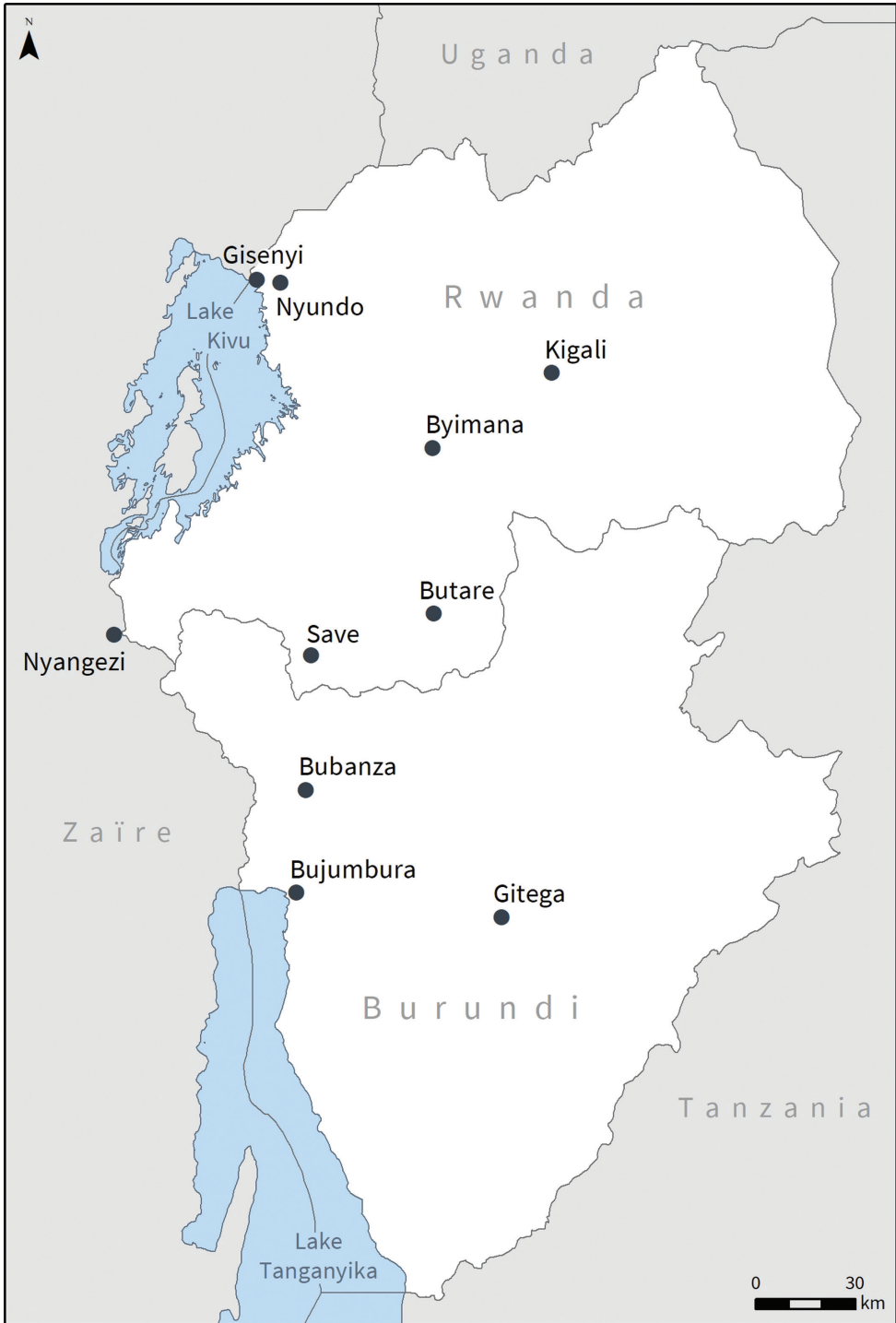
Sister Lutgardis found one of her most ardent supporters in Father René Delooz, a member of the Franciscan order who, at the time of the Save displacements, coordinated the study centre of the Belgian Catholic women’s association Christelijke Middenstands- en Burgervrouwen (Christian Middle-class and Bourgeois Women). While on a study trip to Ruanda-Urundi in 1958, Sister Lutgardis convinced Father Delooz of the necessity of the pupils’

19 Vera Hajtó, *Milk Sauce and Paprika: Migration, Childhood and Memories of the Interwar Belgian-Hungarian Child Relief Project* (Leuven 2016). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1rjts5t>; Frank Caestecker and Sarah Eloy, ‘De opvang van Spaanse minderjarige oorlogsvluchtelingen in België’, in: Hilde Pauwels (ed.), *Los Niños: Tien*

vluchtelingenkinderen uit de Spaanse Burgeroorlog vertellen (Antwerp 2007) 199–220.

20 Heynssens, ‘Practices of Displacement’, 2–3. For more testimonials, see Kathleen Ghequière and Sibö Kanobana, *De bastaards van onze kolonie: Verzwegen verhalen van Belgische metissen* (Roeselare 2010).

21 Heynssens, ‘Practices of Displacement’, 21.



Administrative and political map of Rwanda and Burundi around 1975. © Hans Blomme.

relocation to Belgium and encouraged him to scout families who could accommodate the children. In the years and decades thereafter, Father Delooz would assert himself as one of the most prominent actors in the Belgian adoption network. In 1970, he set up what would become the country's largest and longest-running adoption programme for orphaned infants from India.²² Meanwhile, as this article will demonstrate, Father Delooz continued to bring children from Rwanda to Belgium, yet this time to have them fully and legally adopted by Belgian families. It was after all, according to his own words, Sister Lutgardis who had brought him 'on the path of the forsaken youth'.²³

The first possibilities of setting up an adoption network between the former Ruanda-Urundi and Belgium were explored by Sister Lutgardis herself, who had stayed in the now-independent Burundi and worked as a teacher in Bujumbura. After a trip to Rwanda in 1971, Delooz optimistically reported on the success of the 'prospection trip' and the transfer of eight *métis* children to Belgium.²⁴ The development of their Rwandan adoption branch was, however, temporarily halted when Sister Lutgardis fled Burundi on the eve of the 1972 Hutu rebellion.²⁵ She nonetheless continued to work for Vreugdezaaiers and brought Father Delooz into contact with Rita Van Caillie, a Belgian nurse who had resided in Rwanda since the colonial period and who worked as head overseer of the Nyundo orphanage near Gisenyi in Northern Rwanda. Under Belgian colonial governance, many educational and child-rearing responsibilities were outsourced to Catholic missions and private initiatives.²⁶ In an effort to counter the laicisation of child education in the 1950s, the Nyundo orphanage was established in 1954 by Mgr. Bigirumwami, the first indigenous bishop of Belgian Africa.²⁷

Between 1954 and 1973, 619 children would be permitted into the Nyundo orphanage.²⁸ The majority of children would, however, return to their extended families before they reached the age of three. Despite being

22 For an in-depth account on Vreugdezaaiers and the ideology behind its adoption work, see Chiara Candaele, 'Catholic Humanitarianism and Transnational Adoptions of Orphaned Indian Youth (Belgium, 1970-1984)', in: Beatrice Scutaru and Simone Paoli (eds.), *Child Migration and Biopolitics: Old and New Experiences in Europe* (London 2020) 64-84. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429424953>.

23 Vreugdezaaier, 'Zuster Irma de Rijcke 25 jaar', *De Vreugdezaaier* 12:1 (1977) 7.

24 Idem, 'Reizen', *De Vreugdezaaier* 6:2 (1971) 10.

25 Between April and September 1972, an estimated 200,000 Burundian civilians were killed in what is remembered as the *Ikiza*.

26 Ewout Frankema, 'Colonial education and post-colonial governance in the Congo and Indonesia', in: Ewout Frankema and Frans Buelens (eds.), *Colonial Exploitation and Economic Development: The Belgian Congo and The Netherlands Indies Compared* (London 2013) 153-177. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203559406>.

27 James Carney, *Rwanda Before the Genocide: Catholic Politics and Ethnic Discourse in the Late Colonial Era* (New York 2013) 51-60. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199982271.001.0001>.

28 Orphelinat Noël, 'Historique', http://orphelins-rwanda.fr/Nyundo_historique.html. Accessed 15 March 2019.

called an ‘orphanage’, the Nyundo institute functioned more as a temporary shelter for children in a society where childcare was not seen as an exclusive responsibility of the nuclear family, but rather as a task of the greater community.²⁹ Between 1970 and 1980, approximately nineteen children from Nyundo were adopted via Father Delooz.³⁰ What was the rationale behind the displacement of this specific and limited group of children?

Adoption as a solution to a ‘problematic childhood’

Analogous to the displacements between 1958 and 1962, the Vreugdezaaiers’ adoption programme in Rwanda specifically targeted *métis* children. During the colonial era, the Belgian authorities created a specific set of policies for dealing with ‘mixed’ relationships and their offspring, which they discussed as the ‘mulatto problem’.³¹ For the colonial government that aimed to uphold strict legal and societal boundaries between races, ‘racially ambiguous’ children formed a juridical and social conundrum. Heynssens explains how biracial children were simultaneously perceived as a risk to society and as a group ‘at risk’. Eurafricans were considered too ‘white’ to occupy the subaltern positions reserved for black inhabitants, yet the colonisers feared that their ‘Africanness’ made them more susceptible to delinquent behaviour and sexual promiscuity.³²

Sister Lutgardis, who coordinated the Save institute since 1955, felt that *métis* children ultimately belonged in Belgium rather than in their indigenous society. Their segregated upbringing in the institution had to a degree alienated the children from their families and communities. This had stimulated Sister Lutgardis to explore arrangements to bring the pupils to Belgium since her arrival in the institute.³³ Simultaneously, *métis* children were thought of as socially abandoned. The majority of children would remain legally unacknowledged by their European parent, and many colonial authorities believed that they were marginalised and shunned in their African communities. The framework of abandonment served as a legitimating narrative for both the removal from their indigenous households and for the evacuation of the children to Belgium.

Excerpts from the quarterly leaflet and personal case files illustrate how Vreugdezaaiers continued to use this idea of abandonment to give the adoptions that occurred after the decolonisation conflict a moral and legal

29 Heynssens, *De kinderen van Save*, 222. (1918-1940)’, *Journal of Belgian History* 3-4 (2002)

30 Kind en Gezin Archives (hereafter KGA), Vzw 497-535.

Zonder Grenzen, yearly report and overview, 1990. 32 Heynssens, ‘Practices of displacement’, 2-3.

31 Lissia Jeurissen, ‘Les ambitions du 33 Heynssens, *De kinderen van Save*, 139-140.

colonialisme belge pour la “race mûlatre”

framework. The agency left the selection of the adoptees in the hands of Van Caillie, who was cited to be ‘on the look-out to find us many forsaken, unhappy and adoptable children’.³⁴ According to Rwandan civil law, children born out of wedlock or without legal recognition by their father were seen as illegitimate offspring (*enfants naturels*).³⁵ Van Caillie believed that this put the children in a marginalised social position in patrilineal Rwanda and rendered them de facto abandoned, and thus adoptable. Sister Lutgardis’s assumptions about *métis* children thus proved to be a blueprint for Van Caillie’s actions. After a brief stay in Belgium, during which Van Caillie visited some of the foster families, she expressed that ‘she was more than ever convinced that adoption work was the only solution for the half-bloods from the region’.³⁶ The agency frequently published her letters in which she depicted *métis* children as neglected or abused. In these stories, Van Caillie often maligned the indigenous caregivers and presented ‘mixed’ offspring as problematic and illegitimate, in case their European father had not legally recognised them. One of her letters contained a photograph of five *métis* children, captioned: ‘Five children from the same mother, but from a different father’.³⁷ Short announcements, like the one inserted below, not only served to persuade readers that the transfers to Belgium were in the best interest of the children, but also aimed to mobilise candidate-adopters.

WHO WANTS TO HELP: A mulatto boy from Nyundo-Rwanda has been abandoned by his heartless mother, mocked by his entire community. His little face is clearly marked by the beatings from his mother. He is twelve years old. If you want to adopt this boy, write to us immediately!³⁸

Parallel to the Save displacements, Father Delooz exclusively placed the *métis* children with Belgian families, but now only with those who agreed to legally adopt the child.³⁹ All adopters had to sign a declaration in which they pledged to ‘(...) give the child a Christian upbringing, love the child as if it were their own, and ensure its education or allow it to learn a trade’.⁴⁰ Until 1989, there were no official guidelines on the selection and screening of candidate-adopters, and there was no mandatory preparation programme until 2005. Ultimately, the intermediaries decided who was eligible to adopt. While Indian orphans were

34 ‘Adoptienieuws uit Rwanda’, *De Vreugdezaaier* 10:4 (1975) 12.

35 On (the history of) illegitimacy in the Rwandan Civil Code, see Charles Ntampaka, ‘Family Law in Rwanda’, in: Andrew Bainham (ed.), *The International Survey of Family Law*, 1995 (The Hague 1995) 415-433.

36 ‘Adoptienieuws’, *De Vreugdezaaier* 10:3 (1975) 20.

37 ‘Adoptiekandidaatjes’, *De Vreugdezaaier* 2 (1975) 27.

38 ‘Wie wil helpen?’, *De Vreugdezaaier* 7:1 (1972) 8.

39 Other groups involved, such as the Association pour la protection des Mûlatres, relocated the children to institutions, which they preferred over family placements (Heynssens, *De kinderen van Save*, 234-235).

40 FCAA, VZR_4, document ‘Adoptieformaliteiten’, undated. I have encoded the files with an alternative classification system to further ensure the anonymity of the adoptees and their families.

almost exclusively placed with married, and preferably, childless couples, Father Delooz selected the adopters of Rwandan children under different criteria. Most of the adoptees were older children, and some of them were already teenagers. Because adopting *métis* children was primarily seen as an act of altruism and less as a way to provide an involuntarily childless couple with a daughter or son, Father Delooz considered a wide array of living arrangements. Most of the minors were accommodated in larger households with several biological or foster children. Some of the teenagers were placed with tradesmen or shopkeepers, which Father Delooz deemed beneficial to their upbringing and future job opportunities.⁴¹ One pair of siblings was placed with a parish priest and his female housekeeper.⁴² Unconventionally, single women were also eligible to accommodate children.⁴³ At the time, single motherhood was generally seen as a social and pitiful abnormality.⁴⁴ During the 1960s, parliamentary discussions on the reform of adoption law moreover stressed how adoptions by singles should not be encouraged, since the legislators deemed it paramount that children were raised by a mother and a father in a conjugal relationship.⁴⁵ The philanthropic framework around the adoptions of *métis* children, however, provided opportunities for this kind of non-traditional family-building.

Turning Africans into Belgians

While the segregation of *métis* children was organised and enforced in a systemic way during the colonial era, the transfer of these children to the Belgian metropole, as was the case for children of the Save Institute, was highly exceptional.⁴⁶ Unlike French Indochina, where Eurasian children could be naturalised prior to their transfer to France, *métis* children from Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi remained legally African.⁴⁷ As a consequence, many children from the Save ‘contingent’ ended up in a precarious legal position and experienced many administrative problems during their lives in Belgium.⁴⁸ The reform of Belgian adoption law in 1969 facilitated the formation of new legal relationships with non-biological children. Since then, a so-called ‘legitimation by adoption’ – later renamed

41 FCAA, VZR_4, letter Delooz to Van Caillie, 21 August 1972.

42 FCAA, VZR_23, recommendation letter, 18 December 1973.

43 Four of the nineteen *métis* children adopted via Vreugdezaaiers were placed with single women. FCAA, VZR_2; VZR_23; VZR_25.

44 Nelleke Bakker, ‘In the interests of the child: psychiatry, adoption, and the emancipation of the single mother and her child – the case of the

Netherlands (1945-1970)’, *Paedagogica Historica* 55:1 (2019) 121-136. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00309230.2018.1514414>.

45 Proceedings of the Belgian Chamber of Representatives 1965, 11 February 1965, 25.

46 For reasons why an organised transfer to Belgium, like the one of the Save children, did not occur in Belgian Congo, see Heynssens, ‘Practices of displacement’, 21.

47 Firpo, *The Uprooted*, 133-138.

48 Heynssens, *De kinderen van Save*, 283-289.

‘plenary adoption’ – irrevocably severed all pre-existing legal ties with the child’s first family.⁴⁹ This procedure entailed the transferral of the nationality of the adoptive parent. Plenary adoption thus solved the nationality issue and permanently turned the adoptees into Belgian citizens, which could not be done for the children from Save. It was, however, not possible to directly adopt the children in Rwanda, as the Rwandan Civil Code only allowed adoption if the adopter was childless and at least 50 years old.⁵⁰ To circumvent this issue, Vreugdezaaiers arranged the adoptions through ‘proxy’ adoptions. Either the Belgian couple gave power of attorney to Van Caillie, who represented the couple in the court of first instance and arranged the transfer of custody on their behalf, or Father Delooz appointed himself as legal custodian of the minor. Although most of the court files included a clause that stated that Father Delooz would become the child’s guardian in the prospect of her/his adoption (*‘mise en tutelle en vue d’adoption’*), the Rwandan parents did not explicitly have to consent with the adoption and its definitive juridical consequences to allow the child to leave Rwanda and enter Belgian territory. In some cases, the transfer of the legal guardianship to the Belgian couple or Father Delooz proved sufficient to take the children out of the country.⁵¹

Even though the agency reported a surge in applications from prospective adopters, mobilising candidates who agreed to take an older Eurafrican child into their homes proved to be a lot more challenging than finding couples for Indian toddlers. The candidates’ motivational letters in the personal files show that the vast majority of the Belgian households that took in Rwandan children had originally applied for an Indian orphan. Adopting a Eurafrican or black child was generally understood as less desirable and primarily as a selfless and charitable deed. Because the province of Limburg had given financial support to the Church in Rwanda for the construction of the orphanage, Father Delooz asked the governor if the province could reimburse the children’s travel costs, arguing that ‘these families are already making too great a sacrifice by occupying themselves with the education of the little mulattos’.⁵²

Moreover, the proxy system proved to be flawed. Almost no children from the Save displacements were actually adopted, because most Rwandan parents had only consented to their child’s transfer to Belgium but not to definitively relinquish them for adoption.⁵³ Although the objective of the 1969 law reform was clearly to facilitate adoptions, similar issues persisted. In 1979 a Belgian judge objected to the plenary adoption of a *métis* girl because the mother had only consented to the transfer of custody ‘to ensure a proper

49 Astrid Pyl, *De evolutie van de adoptie in België in de 19e en 20ste eeuw* (Master’s thesis in law; Ghent University 2010) 75-95.

50 Filip Reyntjens and Jan Gorus (eds.), *Codes et lois du Rwanda* (Butare 1979-1980) 79.

51 FCAA, VZR_1, judgement of the court of the first instance, 14 March 1975.

52 FCAA, VZR_326, letter from Delooz to Roppe, 18 January 1973.

53 Heynssens, *De kinderen van Save*, 223.

education for her child', and ruled that 'it is anything but clear whether she consents to the irrevocable relinquishment of her child and the definitive loss of all maternal rights and custody'.⁵⁴ For reasons that remain unclear, Delooz and Van Caillie had a falling-out around 1980, entailing the end of Rwandan adoptions via Vreugdezaaiers. In the following years, Van Caillie, however, continued to arrange adoptions with the help of several Belgian couples, who functioned as middlemen in the receiving country. The next section investigates how the relocations evolved from a 'patriation' project for biracial minors to an adoption programme for an increasingly expanding category of 'abandoned' black children.

Abandoned children: a category of expansion (1980-1994)

Before 1989, the absence of a regulatory framework created opportunities for non-accredited groups and individuals to explore new adoption ventures and develop a network of loosely governed initiatives. Following the retraction from Father Delooz, Van Caillie relocated her adoption work to (at least) three Flemish families, who had previously adopted Rwandan children and who screened prospective adopters on her behalf. With the help of these families, at least 61 children were brought from the Nyundo orphanage and its neighbouring villages to Belgium between 1980 and 1986.⁵⁵

The majority of these adoptions were arranged by the married couple D., who had set up the charity group Nyundo and collected financial and material donations for the orphanage and its inhabitants. Nyundo was a prime example of a so-called '*missienaaikring*' (missionary sewing society) – a philanthropic collective consisting mostly of women who sewed or donated clothing to stations of religious congregations in the former colonies. The adoptions remained heavily entangled with their charity work, as adoptive families often became donors and vice versa.

In 1986, the flow of Rwandan children was halted, allegedly because Van Caillie returned to Belgium for health reasons. In January 1987, Mrs. D. was contacted by Brother René De Roeck, who was a teacher and accountant at the *Group Scolaire*, an education complex of the Brothers of Charity in Butare, the largest city in Southern Rwanda.⁵⁶ In his letter, he informed Mrs. D. that a local health centre had approached him about two orphan boys and asked

54 FCAA, VZR_24, judgement of the court of first instance, 27 March 1979.

55 KGA, Vzw Zonder Grenzen, yearly report and overview, 1990.

56 The Groupe Scolaire was founded in 1929 and provided secondary education to sons of

indigenous chiefs and elite groups. The complex was later expanded with a 'juvenile' to form future members of the congregation, and an orphanage for older boys was built during the 1960s. See René Stockman, *Liefde in actie: 200 jaar Broeders van Liefde* (Leuven 2006) 256-259.

whether the couple could mediate their adoption.⁵⁷ After the boys' arrival, Mrs. D. sent Brother René a series of highly sentimental letters to encourage him to continue his role as negotiator and bring more children to Belgium. In these letters, she attempted to evoke compassion for both the prospective adopters, 'whose patience has been tested so many times', and the 'numerous children whose future is on the line'.⁵⁸ The plea proved fruitful, and so did Brother René's mediating efforts: he managed to secure the cooperation and approval of several ecclesiastic authorities, local social and legal services and diplomatic instances. Between 1987 and 1993, Brother René arranged the transfer of at least 233 children.⁵⁹ So, almost overnight, Rwanda became one of Belgium's top donor countries of adoptees.⁶⁰ What were the narratives that supported this expansion?

Prior to the 1980s, African children constituted only a minute percentage of overseas adoptions, both on a global and Belgian level. The entrance of mixed-race Rwandan minors into the country was considered justified by the Belgian mediators because the children had not been legally recognised by their European parent, which they believed put them in a precarious and threatened position and in a state of 'abandonment'. The adoptees brought to Belgium by Brother René and the couple D., however, were all black children, ranging from babies to near-teenagers. The influx of black children since the mid-1980s not only testifies to an expansion of adoption networks to meet the higher demand for adoptable children in Belgium but also to the changing narratives that legitimated their displacement.⁶¹

In the 1960s and 1970s, the geographies of transnational adoption were mostly centred on orphans from (post-)conflict areas and illegitimate offspring, with Asian and Latin American countries as its primary frontiers. According to Laura Briggs and Diana Marre, this shifted towards the end of the Cold War, when poverty was increasingly used as a justification to displace children from poor families in the Global South to affluent households in the Global North.⁶² Philanthropic initiatives such as the Nyundo group expanded the notion of abandonment to include

57 KGA, Personal files of René de Roeck, letter from De Roeck to Mrs. D., 20 January 1987.

58 KGA, Personal files of René de Roeck, letter from Mrs. D to De Roeck, 19 November 1987.

59 The FCAA holds 233 files in which Brother René functioned as mediator, including 20 adoptions arranged for other agencies in Brussels and Wallonia.

60 In 1990, Rwanda was Belgium's fourth largest donor country, after India, Romania and Colombia.

61 The first adoptees from Ethiopia arrived in Belgium in 1986. (Black) Haitian children had been entering the country since 1981.

62 Laura Briggs and Diana Marre, 'Introduction: The Circulation of Children', in: Laura Briggs and Diana Marre (eds.), *International Adoption: Global Inequalities and the Circulation of Children* (New York 2009) 1-28. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9780814791011.003.0001>.



Arrival of a group of Rwandan adoptees at Zaventem airport in Belgium in 1988.⁶³

63 Kind en Gezin, Personal files of René de Roeck, non-inventoried photo album. The blurred effects have

been added at the request of the copyright holder.
© Broeders van Liefde.

non-orphaned children growing up in impoverished living conditions, presenting adoption as a means to ‘give the children of Rwanda a chance to live a humane (*‘menswaardig’*) life’.⁶⁴

In the 1980s, Africa moreover took centre stage in the spectacle of Third World philanthropy, with mass fundraising events such as the Live Aid concerts and their ubiquitous iconography of starving black children consolidating representations of the continent as helpless and dependent on the benevolence of Western donors and do-gooders.⁶⁵ The Nyundo institute renamed itself to Zonder Grenzen (Without Borders) and used its leaflet to give the adoptions an aura of selfless solidarity, stating that ‘millions of hungry and helpless children are waiting for a home, a home where they can build a future’.⁶⁶ The mentioned couple D. urged adopters to donate money to their charity group Urukundo (‘Love for Others’ in Kinyarwanda) or to buy some of the ‘African handwork’, sold at the numerous gatherings organised on their behalf, ‘to show that we won’t forget the little curlyheads who had to stay behind’.⁶⁷

The leaflet of Zonder Grenzen rarely mentioned ethnic tensions while the adoptions took place, which is a departure from the displacements in earlier decades when the initiators relentlessly emphasised the threat of ethnic violence and the vulnerability of *métis* children. Poverty and hunger replaced race and illegitimacy as the main criteria that defined the ‘adoptability’ of the minors. The agency’s ubiquitous references to hunger were not wholly inflated, as Rwanda’s food production, especially in the southern prefectures, had suffered from a set of droughts during the mid-to-late 1980s, which fuelled concomitant social and ethnic turbulence.⁶⁸ The agency’s use of famine and poverty as legitimating frameworks for the adoptions, however, rested more on generalising stereotypes of ‘poor black Africans’ and did not engage with the very concrete structural or political causes of hunger and poverty in Rwanda itself. By bringing forward a miserable depiction of Rwanda and its inhabitants, the agency strengthened the perception that Rwanda, and the African continent by extension, hosted an unlimited supply of needy, and therefore adoptable, children.

Although Zonder Grenzen and Brother René labelled the children as ‘homeless’ or ‘abandoned’ in their public discourse, the individual case files indicate that the majority of the adoptees were not raised in orphanages

64 Zonder Grenzen, ‘De voorzitter schrijft ...’, *Zonder Grenzen* 4:1 (1989) 1.

65 Andrew Jones, ‘Band Aid revisited: humanitarianism, consumption and philanthropy in the 1980s’, *Contemporary British History* 31:2 (2017) 189–209. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13619462.2017.1306193>.

66 Zonder Grenzen, ‘Het woordje van de voorzitter ...’, *Zonder Grenzen* 5:4 (1990) 3–5.

67 Zonder Grenzen, ‘Het interview van de jaren 80’, *Zonder Grenzen* 4:4 (1989) 25.

68 André Guichaoua, *From War to Genocide: Criminal Politics in Rwanda, 1990–1994* (Madison 2015) 14.



Brother René hands out passports of Rwandan adoptees at Zaventem airport in 1988.⁶⁹

69 Kind en Gezin, Personal files of René de Roeck, non-inventoried photo album. © Broeders van Liefde.

but were living with members of their nuclear or extended family prior to being adopted. The narrative of abandonment was, therefore, supported by a process of ‘de-kinning’, denoted by sociologist Riitta Högbacka as the legal and discursive practices that obscure the child’s first parents and disconnect the minor from its pre-adoption past.⁷⁰ The Rwandan parents were requested to fill out a ‘*questionnaire concernant l’adoption*’ in French and/or Kinyarwanda in which they consented to the child’s relocation to Europe and the child’s relinquishment.⁷¹ Plenary adoption, however, was alien to Rwandan civil law, as the new Family Code of 1988 explicated that adoptees would not lose their Rwandan nationality and that their adoption did not entail a rupture of the ties with the native family, which ultimately did happen when the adoption procedure was completed in front of the Belgian court.⁷² It is, therefore, difficult to assess whether all parents sufficiently grasped the consequences of the relinquishment.⁷³

Prospective adopters were only given cursory details about the child’s background. In the leaflet, Brother René defended this approach to protect the Rwandan mothers from social stigmatisation and because ‘the child has to be able to start with a clean slate. One has to take a child into one’s home and forget the past’.⁷⁴ In a letter to Mrs. D, who earlier asked whether the adoptees should keep in touch with their Rwandan families, Brother René showed apprehension against this kind of openness: ‘Is the mother going to ask for the address of the Belgian adoptive family? Will this not allow the birth family to keep in contact and profit from the situation?’⁷⁵

The transition from illegitimacy to poverty as the main justifying narrative for the adoptions also altered how Belgian mediators presented the Rwandan mothers. While Van Caillie spoke of the mothers in a derogatory manner, the language of *Zonder Grenzen* was a lot more compassionate and rather portrayed the mothers as passive victims who had no choice but to send their children abroad. One adoptive family published a telling account about the children’s arrival in Belgium: ‘You were born from your good black mother from the far Africa. Perhaps unwanted, but nonetheless cared for and protected against the many dangers from your compatriots. Now your innocent soul has entered our lives like a black pearl in a white

70 Riitta Högbacka, *Global Families, Inequality and Transnational Adoption: The De-Kinning of First Mothers*. Palgrave Macmillan Studies in Family and Intimate Life (Basingstoke 2017) 5. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-52476-8>.

71 FCAA, ZGR_262, *Questionnaire concernant l’adoption*, 5 January 1990.

72 Ntampaka, ‘Family Law in Rwanda’, 427.

73 Contemporary testimonials in Rwandan newspapers asserted that some first families were unaware of the full relinquishment: ‘Rwanda/Scandale’, *Vérités d’Afrique* 2 (1993) 14-15.

74 *Zonder Grenzen*, ‘Een avond voor de kandidaten’, *Zonder Grenzen* 5:3 (1990) 26.

75 KGA, Personal files of René de Roeck, letter from De Roeck to Mrs. D., 25 October 1987.

world'.⁷⁶ This kind of storytelling not only unmade the child's native environment but also helped to construct a benign portrayal of her/his new surroundings and society, lending further legitimacy to their displacement from 'misery-stricken' Rwanda to 'safe and prosperous' Belgium.

The metropole as maternal society

Through the interplay of discourses that, on the one hand, presented the adoptions as acts of altruism and, on the other hand, imagined the children as poor and malnourished orphans, Zonder Grenzen and Brother René significantly expanded the pool of children that were deemed 'adoptable', as well as the conditions in which an adoption could be justified. While Father Deloos and Van Caillie specifically targeted *métis* children, Brother René selected adoptees from a variety of backgrounds and living conditions. Age and physical condition seemed to be of lesser importance, which was exceptional in a system that became increasingly market-driven and oriented towards infants and childless couples.⁷⁷ At the same time, Zonder Grenzen advanced love and selflessness as characteristics that lent greater weight to prospective adopters' applications than their material or financial conditions.

While most agencies at that time prioritised couples without children, the couple D. showed fondness for larger families and encouraged prospective adopters to adopt siblings or multiple children at once. The media-savvy couple explained in interviews that, 'unlike other agencies', they operated solely on a voluntary basis, which allowed them 'to keep costs low and ensure that working-class people can adopt as well'.⁷⁸ Having adopted six children themselves, the couple idealised middle-class domesticity and advanced 'bringing joy to the forsaken youth by giving them a family' as their main rationale.⁷⁹ The couple D. recurrently referred to themselves as 'Auntie' and 'Uncle' and styled Brother René as a 'true father', presenting themselves as the children's new family while obscuring and anonymising the first parents.

While imageries of abandonment and poverty dominated the portraits of the children's pre-adoption life, the stories about their lives in Belgium offered a contrasting account of love and care. Particularly the accounts in the agency's leaflet about the children's arrival in Belgium emphasised how they left a world of hunger and anguish and entered a caring and maternal haven. Reporting about the landing of a group of children in August 1990, one adoptive family shared their hope 'that those black curlyheads may grow up

76 Zonder Grenzen, 'Symfonie in wit en zwart', *Zonder Grenzen* 4:2 (1989) 9.

77 Brother René, however, refused adoptions of children who tested HIV-positive.

78 '33 Rwandese adoptiekinderen verwelkomd door nieuwe ouders', *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 29 January 1990, 8.

79 Zonder Grenzen, 'Het interview van de jaren 80', 23.

happily and become dignified creatures (*'menswaardige schepsels'*) in their two motherlands'.⁸⁰ In another piece, Mrs. D. reminisced: 'We owe Brother René our eternal gratitude for transforming Zaventem [Belgium's main airport] into one big maternity unit for the black baby Jesuses'.⁸¹

These accounts extended maternal care beyond the realm of the adopting family to Belgian society as a whole. In these stories, Belgium itself becomes a 'motherland', restoring children with the motherly love they had been supposedly deprived of. This 'mothering' of the receiving country can be related to Christina Klein's theorising on the narratives surrounding the adoptions of Asian children in the United States, in which maternal love is imagined as a 'force capable of overcoming racism and a source of benign global power'.⁸² While *Zonder Grenzen* did not often present adoptions as political or as part of a political programme, it did include omnipresent references to 'colour-blindness' in their public discourse. In a particularly sentimental piece from 1990, a member of the organising committee writing under the pseudonym 'Grandpa P.' described how 'black children are being pressed against white bosoms; no difference is made between their own and these children'.⁸³ The anti-racist undertones given to the adoption work became more explicitly articulated when *Zonder Grenzen* launched its youth group *Blank en Zwart* ('White and Black') in 1994, in an effort to increase the sense of belonging among their teenage adoptees and, according to their mission statement, 'to counteract racism'.⁸⁴ The announcement was accompanied by excerpts from the group's 'anthem', a self-made song about 'stopping war and racism' and about creating 'a land where people of all colours go hand in hand'.⁸⁵

Despite *Zonder Grenzen*'s apolitical self-presentation, these statements must be read in the light of concurrent turmoil in Flemish and Belgian politics. In 1987, the Flemish ethno-nationalist party *Vlaams Blok* witnessed a popularity spike among voters. Its electoral sweep in 1991, known as 'Black Sunday' (*Zwarte Zondag*), triggered various anti-racism counter-demonstrations, culminating in the 1992 'Hand in Hand' march that drew 100,000 protestors to Brussels.⁸⁶ Although *Zonder Grenzen* never explicitly

80 *Zonder Grenzen*, 'Laat de kleinen tot ons komen!', *Zonder Grenzen* 5:3 (1990) 9.

81 *Zonder Grenzen*, 'Het woordje van de voorzitter ...', *Zonder Grenzen* 5:4 (1990) 5.

82 Klein, *Cold War Orientalism*, 189.

83 *Zonder Grenzen*, 'Groetjes uit Butare', *Zonder Grenzen* 5:3 (1990) 7.

84 *Zonder Grenzen*, 'Een oproep aan alle jongeren', *Zonder Grenzen* 1 (1994) 10. Note that 'white' is

not a literal translation of *blank*, which rather denotes 'fair'.

85 *Zonder Grenzen*, 'Lied: Menslief ik hou van jou', *Zonder Grenzen* 9:1 (1994) 10.

86 Patrick Stouthuysen, 'De vredes- en antiracismebeweging: De ontmoeting van oude en nieuwe sociale bewegingen', in: Staf Helleman and Marc Hooghe (eds.), *Van 'Mei 68' tot 'Hand in Hand': Nieuwe sociale bewegingen in België, 1965-1995* (Leuven 1995) 69-88, 86-87.



‘Turaho Turakomeye’ [here we are], 2018. This mosaic, designed by Nadia Vandenbussche, consists of photographs of Rwandan adoptees depicted as children and as adults, and was curated by the advocacy group Rwanda & Zoveel Meer [Rwanda & So Much More] for the opening of the renovated AfricaMuseum in Tervuren, Brussels. © RZM and Nadia Vandenbussche.

addressed Vlaams Blok in its public discourse, contemporary readers likely interpreted their profiling of transracial adoption as an act of anti-racism as a statement against the political rise of xenophobia. Zonder Grenzen's messages and efforts reveal a certain belief that its work was not just about making families but also, on a more implicit level, about re-imagining society. On a small and communal level, Zonder Grenzen's rhetoric offered a counter-image of Belgium as a new 'motherland' for the children of its former colonies and its own 'Belgo-Rwandan' community as a microcosm of anti-racism and colour-blindness.

This 'mothering' of Belgium became particularly tangible when it was brought up as one of the agency's resilience strategies. The unconventional profiling of the agency soon alerted government authorities, which instructed a thorough inspection of the agency. After *Kind en Gezin* produced a negative verdict, the Flemish Ministry of Welfare suspended the agency from mediating any new adoptions as of December 1990.⁸⁷ This sparked Zonder Grenzen to launch a widespread petition campaign and to encourage adoptive families and supporters to distribute letters to 'anyone of importance in Belgium' to plead for the accreditation of its work.⁸⁸ In addition to various politicians, some families directed their plea to the Royal couple, the country's most revered philanthropists, who Zonder Grenzen portrayed as long-standing supporters of their cause.⁸⁹ In a handwritten letter addressed to Queen Fabiola, one adoptive mother requested the Royal Highnesses' immediate intervention to save their 'cherished life's work'.⁹⁰ Among arguments about the 'life-saving' necessity of the adoptions, the writer also alluded to the maternal duties that would be forsaken if the agency were forced to quit its activities. Referring to the craft items sold by the Urukundo charity, which 'implores all mothers to use their talents' and 'helps the mothers to feed their children', the author invoked a sense of societal motherhood over the mothers of Rwanda and their children 'in desperate need of a motherland where they can have a future'. In 1994, one of the D. family's adopted children authored a letter that pointed more specifically to the society-building merits of Zonder Grenzen. Addressing Prince Filip, the writer lamented the pending termination of the 'White and Black' youth group, 'which the late King Baudouin helped to establish'.⁹¹

87 KGA, Zonder Grenzen, *Inspectierapporten, Ministerieel besluit houdende erkenning aan de vzw adoptiedienst Zonder Grenzen te Turnhout*, 27 November 1990. The 1989 decree on the authorisation of adoption services included transitional measures that allowed the agency to finalise all pending applications.

88 Zonder Grenzen, 'Erkend', *Zonder Grenzen* 5:2 (1990) 3.

89 Zonder Grenzen, 'Twee families in de bloemetjes', *Zonder Grenzen* 4:4 (1989) 8.

90 KGA, Zonder Grenzen, Letter from adoptive mother to Her Majesty Queen Fabiola, 6 December 1990.

91 KGA, Zonder Grenzen, Letter from adoptee to Monseigneur Prince Filip, 20 July 1994. I was unable to verify this claim.

The letter made it clear that the shutdown of Zonder Grenzen would not only entail the cancellation of many future child-rescuing adoptions but also jeopardise ‘King Baudouin’s wish for a more democratic Europe [...] I hope that you will give your support to the recognition of the adoption work of Zonder Grenzen and that, together, we can make the world white and black, without wars or discrimination, indifference etc.’.

Despite these efforts, the Flemish Ministry of Welfare ordered Zonder Grenzen’s definitive suspension in April 1994.⁹² The concurrent outbreak of genocidal violence, which disabled the legal and diplomatic services required to arrange the transfer of the children, led to a general moratorium on adoptions in Rwanda that lasted until the mid-2000s.⁹³ During 1995 and 1996, the agency did, however, continue to arrange adoptions of children from various shelters in Burundi. Today, the agency’s legacy not only remains controversial because of the legal and ethical questions its adoption work provokes, but also because it has fostered the colonial imagination of Rwandans as ‘people who need to be saved’ and Belgians as ‘saviours’ deep into the postcolonial era.

Conclusion

Despite the common portrayal of transnational and transracial adoption as a postcolonial phenomenon, the findings in this article articulate its roots in colonial policies and practices. The adoption system can be assessed as a successor project to the removal of especially Eurafrican children from their native households to specialised institutions, which was common practice during the colonial reign in Ruanda-Urundi. From 1958, some children were permanently relocated to foster families in Belgium. The 1969 reform of adoption law, however, enabled the transmission of Belgian citizenship and the creation of new hereditary bonds, which initiated the gradual shift of the displacements from a charity initiative to a practice of family-building. Analogous to the colonial dislocations, the intermediaries initially targeted *métis* children because they were considered a group ‘at risk’ in their native society. The displacements were motivated through a discourse of abandonment, which denoted the children as a priori neglected by their native caregivers. Since the 1980s, the language of abandonment was expanded to also legitimate the adoptions of black children growing up in impoverished

92 The agency had been granted a temporary accreditation for the periods 26 April 1991 to 26 April 1992 and 1 October 1992 to 30 April 1994.

93 Since then, transnational adoptions in Rwanda have been revived under the impulse of US evangelical

churches. See Kathryn Joyce, *The Child Catchers: Rescue, Trafficking and the New Gospel of Adoption* (New York 2013) 110–119.

circumstances, turning poverty rather than illegitimacy into the dominant rationale that motivated the separations. During these changes, a handful of Catholic actors never lost their key position in the adoption system, holding on to a great deal of leeway in the selection process of both children and adoptive families. The agencies continued to present the adoptions as acts of Catholic altruism and added ample Catholic vernacular to their public discourse.

Throughout history, child migration projects have been frequently implicated in geopolitical attempts at ordering or re-imagining society. Just as children were seen as crucial objects for shaping colonial societies, this article argues that children have been dealt a central position in the image-building of the postcolonial realm, at least by the agencies that mediated the adoptions. While the here analysed adoptions after 1970 cannot be denoted as a state project, unlike the intra- and inter-country displacements before and during the decolonisation of Ruanda-Urundi, the mediators' rhetoric gives a glimpse into the black box of postcolonial sentiments in the former metropole. The adoptions of Rwandan *métis* youth arranged by Delooz and Van Caillie imagined Belgium as a caring, rather than a coercive, power, which no longer 'rescued' *métis* children from their 'harmful' native environments by enforcing racial segregation but by placing them in white homes where they would be embraced as 'one's own' children. By cultivating a rhetoric of 'colour-blindness', Zonder Grenzen presented Belgian society as a maternal haven, where the children would be replenished with the loving and caring family the agency imagined them to be deprived of. The mediators' lofty and well-meant rhetoric about saving 'abandoned children' perpetuated the humanising and paternalistic undertones of the Belgian colonial *mission civilisatrice*, by portraying child-rearing as a task that African families could supposedly not tackle without European interference. If anything, this story illustrates how colonial attitudes have persisted to impact the most intimate aspects of metropolitan life, and how children provide an excellent lens through which we can explore these continuities.

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