

50 Years of Congolese-Belgian Relations

2010 sees the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of Congo's independence, but the question is whether there will really be much to celebrate. After all, the country's post-colonial history has been one long tale of chaos and misery. Immediately after the declaration of independence on 30 June 1960 the spiral of violence began. Mutinies in the brand new republic's army led to large-scale disorder and Belgian paratroops were deployed to rescue their compatriots. Since this military intervention took place without Congolese permission – two whole weeks after independence – diplomatic relations with the former mother country were broken off. Despite all the splendid ceremonial of the handover, it was this international row that set the tone for relations between the two countries.

Just as with France and North Africa, the Netherlands and Indonesia, and Great Britain and the Commonwealth, however, despite the problems of decolonisation Belgium today still has exceptionally good relations with its former colony. These have been

fostered by a complex of strategic and economic interests, feelings of guilt over colonialism and personal and emotional ties between Belgian and Congolese politicians. If you look at the intensity of the relations, with the passing years the curve undeniably shows a downward trend: from direct neo-colonial policies and economic interventionism in the 1960s to cautious diplomatic relations nowadays, with the accent on remembrance of colonial times and cultural projects. Many people will identify with the way in which Eva Brems, Professor of Human Rights at the University of Ghent, describes the current bilateral state of affairs: *'No, guilt is not what we feel about Congo. What we feel is less intense, but it's also warmer. We are fond of Congo.'* For many Belgians Congo is a place of recollection and sentiment, nurtured by family stories and images from the collective colonial memory.

Trial in Boma, Congo, 1897.
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Such gentle, nostalgic feelings were not yet the norm immediately post-1960. While the repatriated Belgians were coming to terms with the personal traumas resulting from the violence surrounding independence, on a political level extensive technical support and a sophisticated network of lobbyists and advisers was being set up with a view to directing Congo's internal politics. Squeezed between the world powers of the Cold War, caught in a web of intrigues and separatist movements, in those days the enormous country was tossed about like a rudderless ship on the open sea. It was a time when the Congolese leaders were constantly having their ears bent, though rarely to their advantage. One *cause célèbre* is the support the giant (Belgian) enterprise Union Minière du Haut-Katanga gave to Moïse Tsjombe at the time of the breakaway of Katanga, when the Belgians hoped to continue the old policies with a limited decolonisation process. Equally controversial is the role of the Belgian government in the assassination of Patrice Lumumba in 1961: in 2000 a parliamentary committee of enquiry came to the conclusion that the Belgian authorities had a moral responsibility regarding the atrocious death of the then Prime Minister of Congo.

Mobutu's take-over in 1965 put an end to direct intervention by the Belgians. In fact, at first the advent of this former journalist was greeted with jubilation: Mobutu brought peace and unity to the ravaged country. However, it very quickly became apparent that the man was a master tactician who, with extreme shrewdness and often with a great deal of drama and 'palaver', sought to exploit relations with Belgium for his own profit. The Belgian historian Guy Vanthemsche concluded that '*The character traits of the Congolese dictator have had a very strong influence on relations between the two countries.*' Mobutu played Belgian politicians off against each other, flattered and corrupted, and knew how to use emotional blackmail to turn every situation to his own advantage. When it suited his purpose, he could plead the colonial past as eloquently in a glowing speech about mutual friendship as in an argument for compensation for all the humiliations inflicted on his country. Given Belgium's desire to continue to play a part on the international stage via

Congo, and the strange mixture of personal ties and shared histories, Mobutu could get away with a lot. For instance, in the early 1970s he developed a policy of legitimisation and all foreign companies were nationalised under the cloak of 'Zairization'. The departure of the Belgian entrepreneurs had a disastrous effect on the Congolese economy and led to a diplomatic crisis between the two countries that was not resolved until 1975. But as the crises followed each other thicker and faster and the contours of Mobutu's dictatorial terror became clearer – among other things through the leaking of a confidential report from the International Monetary Fund (1982) – the President steadily lost credibility. The vast personal fortune he had amassed, the corruption at every level and the erosion of public services could no longer be ignored. He lost the support of the Belgian media, joint development work was gradually scaled down, and with declining trade figures the economic argument also counted for less. In the early 1980s Premier Wilfried Martens was still prepared publicly to declare his love for '*this country, its people and leaders*'. Ten years later an incident on the Lubumbashi campus was sufficient for the Belgian government to call a halt to co-operation on development and to sever relations with Mobutu. Belgium kept its political distance until he was driven out by the troops of Laurent Désiré Kabila (1997).

Today Belgium's policy with regard to Congo is more businesslike, with a focus on democracy and improved human rights, although emotions and the colonial past can still play a part. Critical comments can still be taken as patronising and paternalistic, as one Belgian minister recently found out. One problem for Belgian policy on Congo is the hot breath of China, which wants to invest billions of dollars unconditionally in the country with its enormous wealth of raw materials. On the cultural side, fortunately, things are taking a more hopeful turn. For a long time the image of Congo in Belgium was fuelled by the traumas and frustrations of a small group of ex-colonials, who through their links with the business world and the political right constituted an important lobby. On the other side was a group of left-wing outsiders who on occasion exposed the crimes of Leopold II in



campaigns that were a gift to the media. Today a new generation of writers, historians and artists is ready to take up the dialogue with Congo without complexes or polarisation. Colonial history is studied in the universities enthusiastically and innovatively. Cultural exchange projects are taking place, like the Royal Flemish Theatre project in Kinshasa. And on national television the entertaining Radio Congo has shown the delights of everyday life below the equator belt.

The flag-bearer of this renewed interest in Congo is the writer and cultural historian David van Reybrouck, who is in the spotlight at the moment with his stage monologue *Mission* (Missie). Van Reybrouck had already written himself out of his guilt complex over colonialism in his 2005 essay *The longing for self-chastisement* (Het verlangen naar zelfkastijding): what Leopold II did with the rubber plantations and the daily humiliations of the colonial system must not be used as an excuse to avoid a meeting with the Congolese

Lovanium, Leopoldstad,
Congo, 2009.

Photo by Carl De Keyzer.

today. Both in the Congo and in Belgium, people will be waiting to see how this meeting will be (re-)experienced in this festive year of 2010. A whole array of books and exhibitions have already been announced.

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The images accompanying this article are taken from:

Carl De Keyzer, *Congo (belge)*, Tielt: Lannoo, 2009.

Carl De Keyzer & Johan Lagae, *Congo belge en images*, Tielt: Lannoo, 2010.