

Belgium and the Congo, once upon a time...

(second article in the context of the Belgium-Congo reconciliation process)

October 2008

“The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence, but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea - something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to...”¹

Joseph Conrad (Heart of Darkness)

At the time, during the seventies of the 19th century, when the famous explorer, Henry Morton Stanley, discovered the Congo basin whilst endeavouring to cross Africa from east to west, the continent was more or less a white patch on the world atlas. Beginning with the latter part of the 15th century, the Portuguese had established themselves on the banks of the Congo River estuary. From this vantage point, they transported hundreds of thousands of Congolese² to America (as also did the Dutch, British, Spanish and Arabs who exported millions of slaves from other African ports for work on cotton plantations). In this report, the intention is not to dwell on the injustice and unspeakable suffering of African slavery. Rather a new episode of European imperialism at the end of the 19th century will be called into account. This took the form of an insatiable hunger for raw materials and territorial aggrandisement on the international political stage and a thirst for enrichment and adventure at a personal level. This new imperialism was carried forth under the pretext of noble ideas...the fight against Arab enslavement of Africans and the establishment of civilisation. The reality was, in fact, an unbridled and unscrupulous lust for money and power at the expense of millions of other human beings.



¹ Joseph Conrad (Heart of Darkness) (p.20)

In this enlightening novel, Heart of Darkness, (referring to an uncivilised Africa but in particular to the heart of the European “civiliser”), Joseph Conrad describes his personal experiences with the noble aspirations of this civilising idea (“the idea”) in the context of Leopold’s Congo. Francis Coppola’s well-known film “Apocalypse now” is based on Conrad’s book (applied to the situation in Vietnam during American “liberation”).

² The word “Congolese” is a clear anomaly. It would be better to speak of a collection of ethnic tribes and very differing kingdoms, separated from one another by geographical and linguistic barriers, belonging to Central Africa.



Our focus will be set on the region conquered by our second king, Leopold II, which was administered almost privately for him under the name of the Congo Free State. Twenty three years later (1908), under immense international pressure, the king was forced to yield his territory to the Belgian state (he sold it for a vast sum of money). This will have taken place exactly 100 years ago on 15th November of this year.

The present study will mainly concentrate on the events surrounding the formal recognition of the Congo Free state in 1885, its historical context and the motivation behind it³. Again, the intention is not to follow on the footsteps of historians but to invite reflection on our past so that our churches might humble themselves before our King and Saviour and come to repentance (see also preceding document).

In the 19th century, colonisation was regarded as perfectly acceptable by the European powers. The hunger for raw materials, added to the political rivalry between Great Britain, France and Germany, had driven the conquest and partition of enormous sections of the earth. These new colonies were to become supply stations for the “mother countries”. During this period, Belgium found itself in a leading role as the centre of economic development on the continent. However, the country was constrained by its constitution of 1830 to conduct a policy of neutrality towards the great European powers. Belgium had to be careful not to lose this status at an international level.

Nonetheless, our first king, Leopold I, began an exhaustive search for new territories throughout the world. His son, Leopold II, would take up this same search obsessively, inspired by the example of his aunt and uncle, Victoria, queen of Great Britain and her husband, prince Albert von Saksen-Coburg. Already five years prior to his coronation in 1865, the future king (at that time the Prince of Brabant) had presented the Minister of Finances, Frère-Orban, with the gift of a marble plaque originating from the agora of Athens and bearing the inscription “il faut à la Belgique une colonie” (Belgium needs a colony). In that same year, he tried to obtain the Sultanate of Sarawak (North Borneo) and expressed his enthusiasm about the colonial regime in the Dutch East Indies (apparently he had never read the novel attacking this system - Max Havelaar by Multatuli – written a stone’s throw away from the Laeken palace).

A long list of potential territories in Africa, Asia or Latin America must have passed through his mind. For each one, he began by sifting through to see who possessed “legitimate rights” in the country and he devised schemes for achieving his goal but without success. The lack of enthusiasm of the part of a government fearful of excessive

³ This will be based on several recent studies : Frans Buelens, Congo, 1885-1960, a financial-economic history, 2007 ; Guy Vanthemsche, Congo, the impact of a colony on Belgium, 2007; and several less recent : Daniel Vangroenweghe, blood on the vines, Leopold II and his Congo, 1986; Adam Hochschild, King Leopold’s Ghost, 1998).

expenditure and of violating Belgian neutrality does not seem to have dampened his aspirations. For Leopold, *“the lucrative commercial and colonial businesses that he wishes to establish and engage in must serve the interests and the greatness of Belgium. Further, he is very concerned about the his dynasty’s patrimony, which he both desires to enlarge and to preserve against any dismemberment.”* (Vanthemsche)



In the mid-seventies, the explorers, Stanley and Livingstone, had arrived at the heart of Africa. Now the auspicious time had arrived for Leopold to bring about *“his dream of establishing a colonial empire....in which he viewed the house of Saksen-Coburg⁴ as the new pharaohs of the African continent”*. (Buelens). Even after conquering the vast territory of the Congo, he tried to capture the Sudan (new pharaoh on the Nile?) and Ethiopia, causing himself and our country considerable diplomatic embarrassment.

Both Stanley’s travelogue commenting on his own passage from East to West Africa and episodes drawn from accounts of Leopold’s Congolese affairs read like an adventure story. In order to create a smokescreen to hide his real aims, the king organised a large “International Conference of Geography” at Brussels in 1876, where he convinced an international audience and public opinion of

his noble intentions as bearer of civilisation, patron of research into African ethnology and abolisher of slavery (in central Africa by Arab tribes from Zanzibar). His inaugural discourse was seductively eloquent:

“To open to civilisation the only part of our globe which it has not yet penetrated, to pierce the darkness which hangs over entire peoples, is, I dare say, a crusade worthy of this century of progress(...) It seems to me that Belgium, a centrally located and neutral country, would be a suitable place for such a meeting. Belgium may be a small country but she is happy and satisfied with her fate; I have no other ambition than to serve her well”⁵ (taken from Leopold’s inaugural address at this conference, *op.cit.* Hochschild, p.44/45).

⁴ I have discovered that the patron saint of the town of Coburg (Saxony, Germany) is St. Maurice the Black (Mauritius, Sankt Moritz), who was a bishop in North Africa during Roman times. Is it by accident that the King reserved the African continent for the Coburg dynasties of Europe (Great Britain, Belgium, Greece, Bulgaria)?

⁵ The Congo Free State national hymn (towards the future) makes less attempt to dissemble its true motives: *“time passes by and guides the way to where new ages wave us on. With pride, we follow on this way in commemoration of our illustrious forefathers. If your land here is small, down there is waiting a place as big as the earth where your flag is planted. Keep marching forward, brave followers! May God bless the Belgians, the king and the country”*.

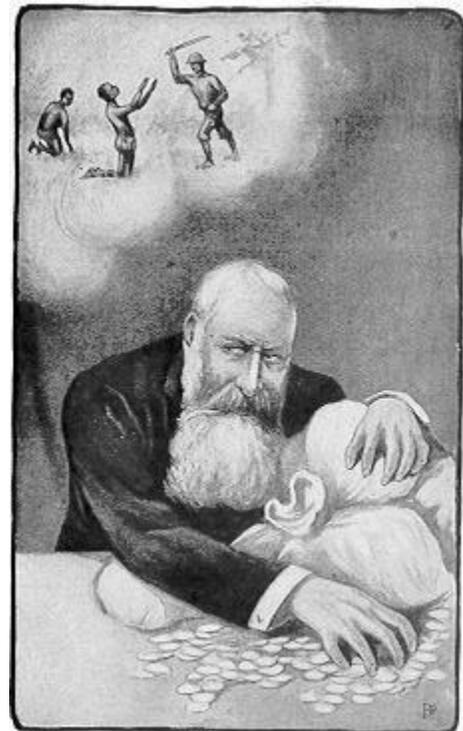
Leopold now engaged the great, famous explorer Stanley on a salaried basis to reconnoitre the Congo basin and its lateral rivers, to set up trading posts and to conclude treaties with tribal chiefs and kings with the purpose of acquiring land. In reality, this



meant that the local chiefs, for example: “for one piece of cloth per month, should freely of their own accord for themselves and for their heirs for ever give up to the said Association⁶ the sovereignty and the sovereign rights to all their territories and to assist by labour or otherwise any works, improvements or expeditions which the said Association shall cause at any time to be carried out in any part of these territories... All roads and waterways running through this country, the rights of collecting tolls on the same, and all game, fishing, mining and forestry rights, are to be the absolute property of the said Association” (op.cit. Hochschild, p.72).

Buelens adds that where treaties could not be concluded voluntarily, less peaceful methods were resorted to. Moreover, Hochschild states that these contracts implied that the population could be recruited for work i.e. forced labour. In the following, I hope to shed some light on the methods of recruitment and of “labour”. There existed neither any basis in international law nor indigenous cultures for such “transfers of sovereignty”. In this way, the International Association for the Congo progressively attained the ownership of a territory made up of greatly diverse cultures, peoples and kingdoms measuring the size of Eastern Europe. International recognition was obtained some time later under the name of The Congo Free State⁷.

But such a state had not yet come into existence. In the “scramble for Africa”, the vast Congo basin had also attracted the attention of other great European powers. The French had set up posts on the northern side of the Congo estuary. Leopold realised that to



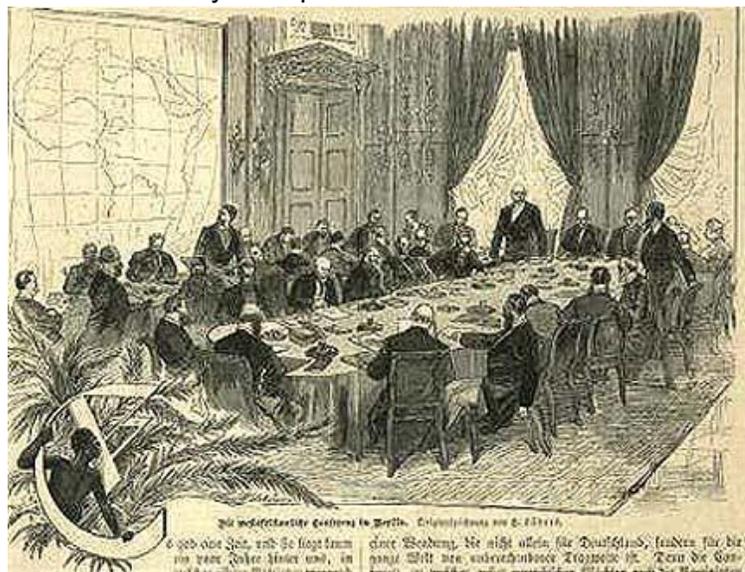
⁶ i.e “The International Association for the Congo”, one of several cover names for Leopold’s crazed desire for conquest.

⁷ To help us understand the significance of such an event, Conrad reverses the order of coloniser/colonised: *So then, if a gang of well-armed blacks carrying all sorts of terrifying weapons took the road between Deal and Gravesend (or from Ostend to Bruges), capturing some poor devils to force them into carrying heavy loads, I imagine that each and every farm and workman’s house would very quickly find itself standing empty. Here, (in the Congo) the houses have disappeared too.* (Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p.39)

keep his free trade zone safe it would be necessary to create a political entity and seek international recognition for his state. The English and Portuguese were equally keen to defend their commercial interests and in 1884 concluded an agreement reaffirming the ancient Portuguese sovereignty over the Congo estuary region (Matadi). This meant a closure to commerce for the regions of the Association by way of the Atlantic and the end of the royal dream. To inveigle himself into their good graces, Leopold then promised the British and Americans free trade rights, whilst simultaneously assuring the French of the first right of acquisition in case the Association's project might fail. France accepted avidly suspecting an imminent demise of Leopold's Congo. The new German empire (under Bismarck), although sceptical at the outset, was satisfied with this solution which maintained the balance of power between his rivals, England and France. In his recent study, Vanthemsche underscores the fact that these geopolitical circumstances, rather than the king's genius, were of decisive importance in the foundation of the Congo Free State. Leopold's cunning diplomatic game would have been to no avail without these European balance of power struggles. In the person of its sovereign, Belgium would be tolerated in Africa as a small neutral player – an acceptable alternative to the great players – thus preventing any imbalance displeasing to one or the other.

The economic guarantees of a free trade zone as well as the king's prestige as abolitionist and patron of civilisation would do the rest. In April 1884, after lobbying Congress intensely, Leopold's American ambassador, Sanford, succeeded in having the United States adopt a formal recognition of Leopold's rights on his Congo. Senators from the southern states hoped to find a final solution (an American version of the "Endlösung"?) to the problem of the millions of liberated slaves in the USA who would thus be able to find a new homeland – that of their ancestors. Playing on American sentiment, Leopold, through the mouthpiece of Sanford, spoke of civilising influences and counterweight to the atrocious practices of Arab slave traffickers⁸. To charm them still further, he substituted the word "Association" by "Independent States under the

protection of the Association", a designation that was just as easily omitted from later documents. In the run up to the Berlin conference⁹, Germany also recognised the Congo Free State and France was reassured by the right of pre-emption. As this "famous" conference got underway where the African continent was cut up into pieces like a cherry pie by the European powers, king Leopold was not to be found amongst the guests. Nevertheless, he was strongly represented by the illustrious Stanley, who had returned from five year's work for the king in



⁸ A short time later, the Congolese were seeking refuge with these Arab traffickers rather than fall into the hands of the Belgians.

⁹ The Berlin conference (from November 1884 until February 1885) regulated and affirmed commercial treaties and the division of Africa amongst the European states.

the Congo and by Sanford, his American ambassador, who could claim credit for getting the United States to be the first country to recognise Leopold's rights on the Congo. After frequent contacts and intensive negotiations between the king at Brussels and the delegates in Berlin, the English changed their position. The maritime port, Matadi, at the neck of the Congo estuary, was attributed to the king thus guaranteeing free passage for exports and imports to and from the country.

At the conference's final session, Leopold was venerated in absentia with a spontaneous ovation as the great benefactor of Africa. Indirectly and almost unknowingly, Belgium had become involved in a territory 76 times greater in extent than the country itself. As the constitution did not permit for the sovereign to reign over any other country than Belgium, Leopold's ingeniousness would have to take care of the affair (he used the word "king-sovereign" or "owner of the Congo"). All political opposition against his colonial aspirations had been professionally silenced by means of quiet diplomacy and intrigues. The Belgian state was in no way involved in either the commencement or the execution of this business.

It must be mentioned that a thirst for empire, power and money was not just Leopold's privilege. The historian, Hochschild, (p.90) describes this "spirit of Berlin" in the words of Stanley himself :

"More than anyone, Stanley had ignited the great African land rush, but even he felt uneasy about the greed in the air. It reminded him, he said, of how his black followers used to rush with gleaming knives for slaughtered game.

The Berlin conference was the ultimate expression of an age whose newfound enthusiasm for democracy had clear limits, and slaughtered game had no votes... Not a single African was at the table in Berlin."

If we place the Leopold state in the dock, we must also do the same for all European undertakings in Africa and elsewhere. Covered in a varnish of nice speeches about civilisation and science, they were, in fact, revealed merely as an unbridled desire for territory, power and money. Yet, even when taking this European context into consideration, no exoneration can be granted to our king. All the historians consulted are unanimous in their condemnation of the treacherous, lying methods that Leopold used to gain his ends. Even the most delicately shaded, Vanthemsche, does not provide us with a flattering picture :

"The king resorted to any trick to be able to launch his business and then to maintain it at any price. Smokescreens, straw men, humanitarian and philanthropic alibis, the corruption of journalists and propaganda campaigns to influence national and international public opinion ; hypocrisy, the manipulation of official texts, intentional omissions and flagrant lies even to countries like Great Britain and the United States or the government of his own country ; oath breaking, improvisations and surprising turnabouts : all these schemes were underpinned by an unbelievable tenacity, an immense capacity for work and a constant appeal to his personal fortune." (Vanthemsche, p.29)



In a following study, investigations will be made into human rights' violations where the Leopold state was also able to distinguish itself, even when compared to other colonisers.

Despite the fact that Belgium, as a sovereign country, did not approve of Leopold's "Congolese adventure" at the outset:

- Let us repent as Belgians and confess this territorial plundering committed in the name of our king before God and our Congolese brothers and sisters (Exodus 20:15,17).
- Let us confess the blatant lies and the shameless hypocrisy used to justify and embellish this scandalous business (Exodus 20:16).
- Let us confess that this territory never belonged to us and that our presence there can only be justified in serving disinterestedly and in proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ.
- Let us view the activities of the Congo Free State from the perspective of another account of land theft, that of king Ahab (1 Kings 21). Note the similarities (and the differences).

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