THE DOUBLE DISAPPEARANCE OF MIXED-RACE CHILDREN STOLEN DURING THE COLONIAL ERA

By Valérie Rosoux

It's late on a Monday afternoon in Brussels. It's cold and already dark outside. I'm taking part in the Parliamentary Commission set up to address Belgium's colonial past. That day, the hearings concern the fate of thousands of mixed-race children who were literally kidnapped in Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi at the end of the 1950s. The meeting is solemn but rather intimate. The MPs are listening to the testimonies of those who, for a long time, were described as the "bastards from the colonies." Among these MPs, some members of far-right parties were fiercely opposed to the creation of the Commission. Yet, on this Monday afternoon, they are all overwhelmed by the gravity of the historical facts. Between 14,000 and 20,000 children born from a relationship between a white man and an African woman were systematically taken away from their mothers and sent to religious institutions hundreds of miles away from their home, or even to institutions or families in Belgium. More than sixty years later, some of them are here, in front of us. They share what they remember in a grave and dignified way. Their stories are not all the same. Some children remember their initial communities. Others were too young to have any clear memories. Some were sent to an orphanage, others to a family. Some were treated with respect, others not. Despite their differences, all their trajectories tell of a twofold disappearance: the disappearance of a child who would never be seen again and, for the stolen child, the disappearance of a mother and an entire family.

The existence of mixed-race children blurred the distinction between "Whites" and "Blacks", which underpinned the whole colonial order. Perceived as a threat to the "natural supremacy of the white race," they had to become invisible. From the Church's perspective, these *Métis* – as they are called in French – were also described as "children of sin," since neither the colonial administration nor the ecclesiastical institutions had any record of their parents' relationships. To solve this "problem", the former Metropole institutionalised the abduction of biracial children from their maternal families. A series of players were involved in this process, from the colonial agents who forcibly took the children from the arms of their mothers, to the nuns or families who raised the children. Aside from this chain of responsibilities, this practice had a radical impact on each mother: the enforced loss of their child.

Many mothers were told that their children would

***Valérie Rosoux** is a Research Director at the Belgian Fund for Scientific Research (FNRS). She teaches International Negotiation, Politics of Memory, and Transitional Justice at UCLouvain (Belgium). She was a member of the two groups of experts appointed by the Belgian Special Parliamentary Commission on the colonial past to assist the commission in its work.*

return after their studies. Nonetheless, the vast majority of these women never saw them again. Morning after morning, they hoped to hear news of them: Were they still alive? The letter they were waiting for never arrived. Most of them died without knowing what had happened to their children, where they were, whether someone was taking care of them, and whether their children would ever know that their mother was waiting for them somewhere, far away. Many of them probably imagined the worst: "My children will never know that I love them, that I have been searching for them all these years." The same questions, day after day. "Is there anybody on earth looking after them?" And always the same silence, until their last breath.

One of the *Métis* present on this Monday afternoon at the Belgian Parliament described this unbearable uncertainty in a few words. As he explained, most mothers brought up their African children and then left their families to settle near one of the institutions for mixed-race children. They were hoping to get some news there. "The only thing they hoped for before they died," he explains, "was to see their lost children again."

THE EAGERNESS OF THE COLONIAL POWERS TO DESTROY ANY AFRICAN ROOTS MEANT THE IRREVOCABLE LOSS OF A MOTHER AND AN ENTIRE COMMUNITY.

The children were generally between three and six years old when they were taken away. Representatives of religious institutions had specified that the *Métis* had to be weaned, potty-trained, and able to walk by themselves before being sent to them. The purpose of this practice was to cut off all links with the African communities. No traces, no dates were left, to make sure that the families could find the children afterwards. This "tabula rasa" strategy was not only the choice of the administrators and religious bodies, but also the

approach favoured by the fathers, who rarely chose to recognise their children, and, unsurprisingly, of the fathers' families, who did not want to hear anything about a shameful and embarrassing episode. These factors explain the efficacy of the disappearances.

As for the children, the eagerness of the colonial powers to destroy any African roots meant the irrevocable loss of a mother and an entire community. The systematic changing of names and birth dates made it almost impossible for them to locate their biological parents. As all the witnesses explained, *Métis* children were called "half-bloods" – meaning only half of their blood was European – or "mulattos", from the Latin word "mulus", the bastard offspring of a horse and a donkey. Besides these scornful stigmas, the children constantly doubted their mothers' love. Segregation was depicted as being in the children's interest. They were told that their mothers were not able to keep them. Did this mean that they were not important in their eyes? That they had soon been replaced by others? That they were forgotten? Like their mothers, the children also imagined the worst: "She didn't love me. She doesn't even remember me. Who am I? Who is my father? Who is my mother? Do I have siblings somewhere? What is my country? Where do I belong?"

IS IT POSSIBLE TO MAKE AMENDS FOR A DOUBLE FORCED DISAPPEARANCE? CAN WE ADDRESS IRREVOCABLE LOSSES? IF SO, HOW?

These nagging questions inflicted the same harm, day after day. One of the Métis looked Belgian MPs in the eyes before summing up the process in a few words: "To live more than 60 years without any identity is just like being a ghost." These words are confirmed by the numerous mental health problems suffered by many *Métis, from suicidal tendencies to various addictions. "We are eternally wounded."* "We were the so-called 'café au lait' children, a phrase which reminded us constantly that we were 'illegitimate kids'." Many thought their mothers had abandoned them and blamed them for their pain. This posture shifted dramatically when some of them received their "archives", kept secretly for decades by the nuns: a box full of letters sent by their mothers over all these years. None of these letters had been passed on to the children. The process of discovering and reading these letters was both extraordinary and cruel. It was extraordinary to know, after such a long time, that they had never been forgotten by their loving mothers. It was cruel since there was nothing they could do to return to the past and reply to these letters. After processing all this, many Métis caught the first flight to Kinshasa, Kigali or Bujumbura, but most arrived too late.

The *Métis* who were separated from their families but stayed in the Great Lakes region suffered the same double disappearance. I still remember the eyes of one of them in Congo, when I was accompanying the members of the parliamentary Commission on a visit to the three former colonies. The testimonies given by the Métis representatives we met at the Belgian embassy in Kinshasa were, in part, similar to those shared by the people sent to Belgium. One major difference was what happened to them when the three countries gained independence. The man I still remember was speaking slowly, describing how they were left behind, without any protection. "Since I was abducted, nobody has ever protected me. Never. You abandoned us. In 1960, the nuns left when the violence started. I stayed in the orphanage with plenty of younger kids around. We were alone. Without anything to eat. Without any protection against the Congolese, who found us and treated us brutally. Most of those I consider as my brothers and sisters were raped. Since then, people have called us 'bats'. Unlike those who were sent to Belgium, we never received any education. That is the reason why I speak slowly. I'm trying not to make any mistakes in French. I am old now, but I have been trying to do my best – all my life. Yet, I still hear the voices of those who repeated over and over again that I was like a piece of waste left on the sidewalk." He then stopped talking before saying in a very impressive way: "Belgian blood flows through me. I am your son."

His words and the silence that followed were powerful. They were sending one message to the Belgian MPs and, beyond them, to all Belgian citizens: we need justice and reparation. As legitimate as this need is, it raises a challenging question for all practitioners and scholars involved in post-conflict settings: is it possible to make amends for a double forced disappearance? Can we address irrevocable losses? If so, how?