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“Elusive natives”: escaping colonial control in the Leverville oil palm concession, Belgian Congo, 1923–1941

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Abstract

Throughout the inter-war period, in the Belgian Congo’s largest oil palm concession, thousands of colonised workers and their families managed to escape administrative surveillance and authority through schemes of dissimulation and elusiveness. The shared nature of sovereignty imposed on this territory, distributed between private and public agents, along with a sparse territorial occupation, left extended areas unsupervised by Western actors and indirect rulers. In these remote places, palm-fruit cutters, with the blessing of their employers, could settle without having to answer to authority. After exposing the specific policies enforced in the concession, this paper highlights how natives were able to maximise their autonomy regarding both the production imperatives imposed upon them and their obligations to the public authorities. The last part details the administration’s consecutive failures in its endeavours to tackle workers’ elusiveness. The conclusion challenges the notion of “resistance” as an appropriate concept to recover the fruit cutters’ adaptation to the imperatives of colonial rule and large-scale manual labour within the rainforest.

Résumé

Tout au long de l’entre-deux-guerres, dans la plus grande concession de palmier à huile du Congo belge, des milliers d’ouvriers colonisés et leurs familles respectives ont réussi à échapper à la surveillance et à l’autorité administratives en ayant recours à des plans leur permettant de se dissimuler et de rester insaisissables. La nature partagée de la souveraineté imposée sur ce territoire, distribuée entre des agents privés et publics, parallèlement à la faible occupation territoriale, ont fait que des zones d’envergure n’ont pas été supervisées par des acteurs occidentaux ou des dirigeants indirects. Dans ces lieux isolés, les coupeurs de fruits du palmier, avec la bénédiction de leurs employeurs respectifs, pouvaient s’installer sans avoir de comptes à rendre aux autorités. Après avoir révélé les politiques précises appliquées dans la concession, cet article souligne la manière dont les populations autochtones ont été en mesure de maximiser leur autonomie concernant à la fois les impératifs de production qui leur étaient imposés et leurs obligations à l’égard des autorités publiques. La dernière partie décrit en détail les échecs consécutifs de l’administration dans ses efforts en vue de lutter contre le caractère insaisissable des ouvriers. La conclusion soulève la question de savoir si la notion de « résistance » est un concept approprié pour décrire l’adaptation des coupeurs de fruits aux impératifs du régime colonial et de la main-d’œuvre manuelle à grande échelle au sein de la forêt humide.

Keywords: colonialism; labour; migration; interwar; resistance

I Introduction

In metropolitan and colonial contexts, economic migrations have been a recurring consequence of the implementation of wage labour and capitalism in rural areas. In most cases, these population flows have allowed authorities and private actors to tighten their

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grip on workers and their families. They have also aided strategies of control aimed at enhancing productivity and/or preventing social unrest. But in some specific cases, displacement has, on the contrary, provided opportunities for wage labourers to escape institutional surveillance.

In the Leverville circle,¹ the Belgian Congo's largest oil palm (*elais guineensis*) concession, the *Huileries du Congo Belge* (HCB) and public authorities struggled throughout the inter-war period either to prevent or monitor spontaneous native migrations triggered by economic imperatives. The specific nature of sovereignty in such spaces, where power is shared between the administration and the private company exploiting the land, contributed to the emergence of areas in which authority was non-existent or loosely enforced. By taking advantage of competing interests between authorities and inefficient policing strategies, workers communities were able to flee compulsory labour, colonial biopower and local social control (Rabinow and Rose 2006).

Belgian colonial archives hold multiple official reports, exchanges of letters between local government officials and company employees, along with occasional interventions from the Congo's Governor-General, the Minister of the Colonies and European HCB managers. Together, they render a complex picture of how Western private and public actors, colonised labourers and traditional chiefs interacted, forged formal and informal alliances, and constantly adapted their behaviours to each other's actions. As in most studies based on imperial sources, native voices remain out of reach,² but workers' agency can nevertheless be partially highlighted through the strategies implemented by the Europeans to achieve their own goals, be they profit maximisation or territorial control.

After exposing how mobility has been used as an effective tool to get around Western authority, this article will focus on the failures of governmental strategies put in place in order to tackle the loss of control over the African movements. It intends to shed light on the rural communities that are at present hardly visible in the Belgian Congo's historiography. Palm-fruit cutters and their families lie on a blurred social frontier between industrial workers and peasants. Originating from the rainforest's nomadic groups, these men – along with a number of boys and a few women – entered wage labour during the period under review, not to cultivate crops but to harvest fruit from natural palm groves on behalf of a Western company. Their indeterminate status, lying between precolonial and capitalist modes of production, was characteristic of the social fabric of Congolese rurality in the early twentieth century (Jewsiewicki 1980).

Such escape from authority strongly echoes James C. Scott's classic essay *Weapons of the Weak*, dedicated to the analysis of

everyday forms of peasant resistance[...]: the prosaic but constant struggle between the peasantry and those who seek to extract labour, food, taxes, rents and interests from them. [...] Ordinary weapons of powerless groups. [...] They require little or no coordination or planning. (Scott 1985, 29)

Rural resistance consists of a series of strategies devoid of political framework or leading ideology, aimed at improving the agents' living conditions in an environment where power relations are detrimental to their collective interests (Duncan 2007).

Along the lines of Scott's observation, palm-fruit cutters did not seek to directly and violently confront Western administrators, apart from one brutal episode at the beginning of the Great Depression. To quote Eric Hobsbawm, they merely tried to work "the system [...] to their minimal disadvantage" (Hobsbawm 1973, 13). Scott's major contribution to the field of peasant studies has been much challenged, discussed and criticised.³ Through the unveiling of Congolese rural workers' actions within the Leverville concession,

this article investigates whether the notion of resistance is fully adjusted to characterise these schemes of eluding or avoiding Belgian colonial rule.

Worker resistance also draws attention to some practical failures of the colonial rule (Duncan 2007, 2). For more than eighteen years, the administration ineffectively tried to control workers' mobility. These institutional responses illustrate the notion of governmentality in imperial context, allowing the deconstruction of acts of authority as instruments aimed at fulfilling a definite objective through specific methods targeting a selected population, thereby giving concreteness to abstract power relations. The distinction elaborated by Michel Foucault between sovereignty and governmentality – between the use of the law to obtain obedience to power, and the use of specific strategies to fulfil predetermined goals (Scott 1995) – is used throughout this study to characterise the means and methods applied by various authorities, both public and private, metropolitan and colonial, to enforce their rule inside the concession.

II The Leverville concession: a space of shared sovereignty

This first part of the paper illustrates how power was legally shared between the HCB – the company in charge of producing palm oil in the concession – and the state and native authorities. The purpose here is to show how legal measures were taken to ensure that Leverville area was governed according to expectations as well as making efficient use of the local workforce to bolster the colonial economy. Archival material helps us to explain how some of those measures missed their goals, as the peasants proved to be reluctant to submit to their enforcement, or consciously exploited legislative loopholes to their advantage.

A Sharing sovereignty

From the early nineteenth century, palm oil progressively became one of the main agricultural commodities exported from West Africa. Used at first for the greasing of industrial machines, it was later needed for the manufacturing of candles, soap, and finally margarine. These various productions triggered a tremendous demand for the fruit in Western markets. From 1885, one company occupied a prominent place in the transformation of palm oil into mass consumption products: Lever Brothers, the manufacturer of the well-known Sunlight soap, which would in 1930 merge with the Dutch firm Margarine Unie to become the Unilever consortium.

Due to its success, Lever Brothers was in constant need of raw material. In order to secure its supply, the company's director, Sir William Hesketh Lever, turned to British colonial authorities to obtain exclusive concessions in either Nigeria or Sierra Leone. Between 1906 and 1925, in spite of multiple attempts to convince the administration, his wishes were not fulfilled. In West Africa, palm oil production remained in the hands of small local farmers. The granting of a large concession to a Western company was perceived as a threat to social peace, as it would create a class of expropriated labourers, trigger never-ending disputes regarding property, and might need perpetual or punctual financial aid from the state to be economically viable (Dike Nworah 1972).

Sir Hesketh's projects met a more favourable reception in a neighbouring territory. In 1910, the Belgian authorities invited Lever Brothers to consider the possibility of obtaining large concessions in the Congolese rainforest (Dike Nworah 1972). The former personal colony of King Léopold II was taken back by Belgium in 1908, following scandals surrounding extensive abuses towards natives involved in rubber harvests. At the

time, this colossal territory was sparsely populated and suffered from a great lack of infrastructure. Western presence was minimal; the authorities favoured selected migration, and never intended to instigate massive settlement policies. The government, as well as public opinion in Belgium, wanted the colony to be economically independent, and did not intend to spend much on its development (Seibert 2010). Through the concessionary system, the state could defer the heavy burden of infrastructure building and economic valuation to private companies. Creating spaces of shared sovereignty allowed Belgian authorities to fulfil their double colonial endeavour – exploiting Congolese resources for the benefit of the metropolis, while contributing to “native welfare” – at a minimal price.

Before the First World War, relations between the state and private actors in the Congo followed a *laissez-faire* logic, exemplified by the privatisation of activities formerly controlled by the government. From 1920 onwards, a shift occurred as companies and the administration started to work hand-in-hand to promote the colony’s economic development (Vellut 1982). Policies of delegation followed by close collaboration shaped the Congolese economic landscape in the form of an oligopolistic structure with tendencies to monopolies in specific fields and areas (Buelens and Marysse 2009). Although a few companies were involved in palm-oil production and trade in the colony, the HCB – the branch of Lever Brothers in the Congo – clearly dominated the industry. More importantly, the company intended to eliminate competition in its production zones and the neighbouring lands.

The convention signed on the 14 April 1911 between Lever Brothers and the Belgian government illustrates the delegation of sovereign prerogatives to private partners who dominated the colony’s economic policy in the early twentieth century. The state leased up to 750,000 hectares to the company, lands that had to be selected from within five 60 km “circles”, drawn out around rivers and waterways in the rainforest. Economically speaking, the most important of these circles was drawn around Lusanga, a small village on the Kwilu River approximately 400 km from Léopoldville. Leverageville, the company’s station and administrative headquarters, directly faced Lusanga on the opposite bank of the river. From all the company’s new concessions, the “Leverville area” was the richest in natural palm groves, but the exploitation of its vast resources faced a major issue: the scarcity of the potential workforce and its reluctance to be recruited. Decimated by an outbreak of sleeping sickness (*trypanosomiasis*) and having suffered from poor labour conditions under the Congo Free State’s rule, the Kwilu basin’s communities were not only demographically insufficient but already hostile towards the Lever Brothers’ endeavours (Fieldhouse 1978). HCB’s presence in the area, as well as its intensive quest for new resources, were rapidly acknowledged by the locals. In the 1920s, many young men declaring their love to the object of their affection expressed their feelings as such: “I love you like the Company loves the palm nut”.⁴

According to the convention, HCB had to take charge of the basic education and medical care of the population living in the vicinity of its factories, and could create infrastructural development on their lands – roads, railways, telephone lines and waterways – that could be used free of charge by administrative agents. The state, on the other hand, had the ability to appoint a delegate who could supervise the company’s activities and financial situation, and who was committed to ensuring the security of HCB employees inside the concession.⁵

Beside its legal obligations, the administration also served as an intermediary between the natives and the company. Colonial economies were characterised by a superposition of capitalist modes of production – for instance, the massive harvest of natural products aimed at exportation – and non-capitalist modes of production (Jewsiewicki 1977) – such

as the small-scale processing of palm fruits into oil for personal consumption or selling on local markets. Both legal and practical measures had to be taken by the legitimate authorities – the administration – to articulate those overlapping economic spheres. Distributing lands between newcomers and local communities, ensuring the involvement of peasants in wage labour and conceiving the strategies necessary for harmonising local and colonial rules with regard to the enforcement of concession economy were tasks that only public agents could take charge of.

As demonstrated by the April 1911 convention, HCB concessions were spaces where sovereignty was shared between the company and the state. The former was in charge of extracting resources from the rainforest, building infrastructure and caring for its workers and their relatives. The latter was responsible for police operations and, more importantly, for ensuring also conscription of natives into the colonial production scheme. If a substantial part of power was divided between Western actors, both the HCB and the administration still had to rely on collaborative local authorities and a disciplined workforce to sustain the concession's performance.

B Native policies

Michel Foucault distinguished sovereignty – the enforcement of obedience through law – from governmentality – strategies aimed at fulfilling specific goals which target precise populations (Scott 1995). In order to ensure effective compliance from rural communities, successive colonial authorities undertook several legal measures to share territories between Africans and Westerners and craft a new form of indirect government, as well as stimulating agricultural production. Some of these rules proved to be an inadequate match to Congolese realities, while others provided opportunities for natives to escape formal colonial control.

In 1906, near the end of Leopoldian rule, the Congolese territory was legally divided into private lands, owned by Western individuals, missions or companies, native lands⁶ and public lands. In order to determine what belonged to whom, the 1906 decree provided for the proper delimitation of properties in the near future, a measure that would remain unenforced in the following years. In 1910, to properly distribute peasant lands among the Congolese communities, the Belgian legislator created “chiefdoms [*chefferies*]”, administrative boundaries supposedly based on traditional borders. The district commissioner (the local administrator) was in charge of establishing these limits on the grounds of the traditions, as understood through the enquiries made amongst the local communities.⁷ Nevertheless, their effective delimitation was thwarted by local resistance. In 1934, the Registry Office acknowledged the system's failure; the process of delimitation was expensive and inefficient, as locals never respected the borders. Strictly enforced land repartition went against their way of life as well as their “spirit of freedom”.⁸

Territorial delimitation proved difficult to enforce. Inside the concession, peasant disobedience could impede the proper control of the workforce by either the company or the administration. In 1923, the HCB came forward with a contractual measure that could counter the issues arising from locals' rebuttal to sedentarisation.

The “tripartite agreements [*contrats tripartites*]”, which met with the administration's approval and were even renewed in 1933 and 1958, were also meant to secure the company's aims regarding an effective commercial monopoly over its “circles”, by superseding legal restrictions forbidding the exploitation of peasant lands. Without these agreements, the company's activities were perceived as unsustainable (Fieldhouse 1978). Contracts then had to be signed among HCB representatives, colonial administrators and

customary chiefs. In a given territory rich in natural palm groves, government lands and chiefdoms were delimited before being merged into a joint ownership, managed by the colony. These lands were then leased to the company, which committed not to interfere with prior native settlements. Progressively, the HCB selected specific lands for exploitation, subject to the administration's agreement, which took the form of an official enquiry ruling on their availability. If nomadic communities wished to settle in these selected areas afterwards, they first had to seek the HCB's agreement and pay compensations for their occupation. Once the company's selection was approved, it was granted an exclusive right to gather palm fruits. Locals could still harvest them for their own consumption or to sell them to the HCB, but were forbidden to bring them to other companies or to local markets.⁹

Tripartite agreements illustrate the specificity of ownership regimes in the concession, and also provide a striking illustration of the principles of shared sovereignty. In the spirit of close collaboration characterising public and private relationships in the 1920s, the administration supervised land distribution between peasants and Westerners, and contributed actively to the establishment of HCB commercial monopolies. This policy was also detrimental to local communities, as it impeded their freedom of movement and went against traditions of mobility.

Institutional pressures to push back and contain the Congolese in government-supervised rural environments characterise the Belgian Congo's ideology (Jewsiewicki 1976). Colonial authorities were never keen on stimulating the emergence of a local elite; rural life within a supposedly traditional framework was perceived as the most beneficial living condition for the masses. In the meantime, local practices, progressively formed in the long term beyond any Western influence, were often perceived as incompatible with the European perception of morality and the proper ruling of the colony. Customs on which the administration intended to build its own form of indirect rule had to be recreated, amended, or entirely invented (Lauro 2013). The 1910 decree regarding chiefdoms clearly stipulated: "chiefs [...] rule in the measure and the way fixed by native customs, as long as it is not contrary to either universal public order, or legislative acts aimed at substituting other rules to customs".¹⁰

Congolese indirect rule relied on the appointment of an individual in every chiefdom to act as a "government chief [*chef médaillé*]". Supposedly acting as both a traditional authority and as an administrative official, the smallest link in the administrative chain of command, government chiefs acted as "liaison agents" between rural communities and the Europeans (Strouvens and Piron 1948, 769). This policy was by no means a Congolese specificity; throughout inter-war colonial Africa, "the routinization of power demanded alliances with local authority figures" (Cooper 1994, 1529). The 1910 decree mentioned that government chiefs were chosen by the district commissioner according to native preferences. They were officially sworn in as administrative agents after pronouncing an oath of obedience to Belgian authorities, and they received a salary for their services.¹¹ In 1933, a new decree broadened the administration's prerogatives; if a chief was disobedient or proved unable to fulfill his tasks, he could be deprived of his income or even relieved of his duties (Strouvens and Piron 1948). Indirect rule did not leave much room for African agents to take the initiative. Their pivotal position between rural communities and the administration hardly allowed them to confront their superiors on the issues raised by their constituents. Furthermore, government chiefs were only authorised to take measures regarding hygiene, public peace and security, as long as they were compatible with colonial laws.¹²

Nevertheless, the elaboration of indirect rule created the opportunity for local authorities to remain elusive to colonial control. Inter-war administrative agents sometimes recognised that most government chiefs were in fact impotent figureheads.¹³ As chiefdoms were progressively established, authentic customary chiefs or prominent elders' councils who refused to submit to Western supervision designated fake rulers to be chosen,¹⁴ hiding the legitimate chain of command behind them.

Chiefdoms played a major role in the mobilisation of the local workforce and the control of spontaneous migration. Censuses were made after their borders were established, and every individual residing inside their limits was then considered as belonging to the given chiefdom, even if he or she was not part of the community.¹⁵ Displacements had to be tightly controlled; the administration introduced a "passeport de mutation", a mandatory document needed by anyone who wished to leave the chiefdom for more than 30 days. The colonial authorities delivered them after a consultation with their African counterpart; they could not be refused to anyone who was willing to work either for the state or for a private company, or to settle in a mission.¹⁶ Government chiefs also had to warn territorial agents of migration movements or village displacements.¹⁷

One of the main objectives of limiting native nomadism was to secure employment pools that could be mobilised for the colony's economic valuation. If families or entire communities were travelling unsupervised, they could escape recruitment. Various schemes were created to ensure the compulsory participation of a substantial Congolese workforce in agriculture and manual labour. Chiefs were in charge of sharing obligatory tasks between able-bodied men (Strouvens and Piron 1948).

In the HCB concessions, authority was legally distributed among three main actors – the administration, the company and the government chiefs, granted with unequal authority. Nevertheless, the imposition of colonial sovereignty schemes through laws and decrees was sometimes countered by the peasants. Dissimulation in the appointment of government chiefs and disobedience in terms of uncontrolled migration across chiefdom borders highlights the inefficiency of legal strategies to impose specific behaviours on the colonised population. Unforeseen legislative loopholes and insufficient control of the territory¹⁸ allowed local communities to maximise their autonomy from within the colonial regime. Their participation in large-scale palm fruit harvest could also intensify the lack of colonial control.

III Settling in grey areas: the "village doublure"

The imposition of a new economic scheme in the Leverville concession had unexpected consequences. The disharmony of the capitalist and non-capitalist modes of production in the rainforest allowed the peasants to develop new strategies that extended their relative autonomy. Unsupervised mobility, along with a surprising community of interests between locals and the HCB, shifted the balance of shared sovereignty to their advantage.

A A consequence of concessionary economy

The palm oil workers were divided into two categories. Fruit furnishers, first, originated from the concession area. Unbound by contractual obligations, they harvested oil palms in their own native lands and freely sold their goods either to private companies or at local markets.¹⁹ But this workforce was far from sufficient to sustain the company's activities. As the southern part of the circle was rich in palm trees but sparsely populated, the company's recruiters had to mobilise workers in neighbouring territories (Nicolai 1963).

These fruit cutters, as they were officially called, were hired to provide the HCB with 200 crates of palm fruits (each weighing approximately 35 kg) with no imposed delay. Mostly originating from the Gungu territory, South of Leversville, which was more populated and less profuse in palm groves, they usually worked in groves 50 to 150 km from their villages, and were paid at the end of each month in a variable amount of Congolese francs according to their productivity. The company was supposed to take care of their housing, food and medical care, as well as providing them with a machete and blankets for the duration of their employment.²⁰ These young men came from the numerous, diverse communities that had developed around the Kwilu and Kwango basins between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries, mostly to escape slavers' raids in southern coastal areas (Mashini 2013), and most of them were of Pende origin, the dominant culture of the Kwilu basin (Strother 2008).²¹

The harvesting of palm fruits was both dangerous and unpopular. Grown elais could grow to a height of more than 10 m, and the fruit clusters at the tops of the trees. The workers had to climb up the trees' branchless trunks, with no safety harness other than a belt made of organic fibres to attach the worker's waist to the tree. HCB outposts were often not located near to the groves, which meant that the cutters had to carry their heavy goods by foot over extensive distances along the rainforest trails. According to a territorial agent, this task was assigned to slaves in precolonial times. Baptised Congolese categorically refused to be recruited by the company, rejecting an activity perceived as "uncivilised".²² To counter the reluctance of young able-bodied men to engage in palm oil labour, HCB agents and local administrators exerted pressure on individuals and groups while rewarding the collaborative chiefs who provided them with contingents of recruits (Seibert 2010).

Fruit-cutter employment triggered new forms of unsupervised migration. While they usually needed four to six months to fulfill their contracts, workers active in areas relatively close to their villages – up to one's day march – usually settled for a limited time within the groves. These precarious installations were usually created without giving the authorities any notice of their presence or asking for the mandatory "passeport de mutation". As they were away from home for a significant time, cutters were often accompanied by their wives and children. New recruits regularly came to the same areas to replace cutters who had fulfilled their contracts;²³ temporary villages became permanent and food-crop cultivation and cattle breeding started to take place.²⁴ A new term was created in administrative jargon to name these settlements, halfway rural settlements and workers' camps: "villages doublures".²⁵

A significant number of Congolese were involved in these displacements, although precise estimations remain difficult. The 1934 data for the Leversville area suggest that approximately 11,000 fruit cutters were hired every four months for short-distance work. Most of them were accompanied by one "boy", referring to a category encompassing teens, young adults and women who helped the workers to carry fruit crates or cooked meals. This would mean that in the early 1930s, up to 66,000 individuals could reside part-time in "villages doublures".²⁶ A 1935 census gives the lower but nonetheless still significant number of 31,985 cutters and boys active in the Leversville concession during the previous year.²⁷

B Escaping colonial control

As thousands of locals were circulating unsupervised between the groves and their homes, duplicate villages became a major source of concern for colonial authorities. Two

characteristics were particularly worrisome in the administration's perspective: they were located outside their inhabitants' chiefdoms, and they were populated by families from disparate origins.²⁸ These informal and temporary migrations allowed entire communities to avoid political domination and physical obligations, and even to gain some economic independence.

By leaving their chiefdoms, fruit cutters effectively escaped the already loose control of their government chiefs. Although they settled on other communities' lands, they were not compelled to obey local authorities,²⁹ as obligations binding chiefs and their "subjects" supposedly rested on the precedents of traditions. Absence from their homes allowed them to evade compulsory recruitment for labour, while they could not be mobilised in their temporary place of residence, as local chiefs had no authority over them. Legally speaking, duplicate villages did not even have a proper status; they were not traditional agglomerations and could not fall into the category of "centres extra-coutumiers", the administrative denomination of native agglomerations in urban areas. The lack of authority figures seemed to suit the inhabitants of this makeshift communities; when encouraged by visiting administrators to appoint a chief among them, none ever seemed to step forward.³⁰

Movement between original and duplicate villages was not massive or periodic, but rather individual and spontaneous, which made it even more difficult to supervise. Some peasants dwelled in the villages for a few days while others built permanent homes in the groves. Sick workers returned to their families for care. When the authorities attempted to ascertain the population of these villages, most of inhabitants would flee into the forest prior to their arrival.³¹ Fleeing was a frequent form of everyday resistance in the Belgian Congo's rural areas, as fear of the administration was widespread among the population (Jewsiewicki 1980).

Duplicate villages became known in their vicinities as places of relative freedom. After a 1937 visit to one of them, administrators realised that half of the able-bodied men living there were not HCB workers, which illustrates their attractiveness beyond the economic opportunities they could provide. It was feared that migrants returning to their homes would have to be closely monitored, since their reintegration under indirect rule would prove to be difficult.³² Some groups of workers also deliberately slowed their pace in order to postpone the inevitable return to their chiefdom: "the majority of [natives coming from the Monsengo region] were far from completing their task, [and have] adopted this manoeuvre to postpone, as long as possible, the moment when they will have to reintegrate into their territory".³³

Economic migrations also had another major consequence detrimental to the administration's interests: an increase in ethnic mixing inside the concession. Chiefdoms were partly aimed at dividing the colony's rural areas between well-defined ethnic groups engaged in limited contact with one another. Along with allowing the state to more efficiently rule a divided population, this practice was also perceived as a way of providing social control that would prevent the Congolese from falling into disorder under the increasing weight of colonial reformation. In a 1936 essay, Belgian diplomat Robert Rothschild explained the administration's perspective on the importance of preserving traditional living conditions for the rural masses:

All through his childhood, the little native is induced to learn the tribal morality and law, to respect his parents and the aged, to recognise the authority of the chief, to participate in the economic life [...]. Here again one observes the prevalence of the spirit of collectivism. The education destined to adapt the child to the life of the tribe has nothing individualistic about it. It does not give him a personality; he is not to "live in his own life", but is to be a cell

in the social organism and to lead the same life as his brothers. [...] Tradition dictates his conduct in most of life's circumstances; a severe and vigilant public opinion sees that it is adhered to, banishing those who neglect or violate the traditional law. (Rothschild 1936, 578–579)

This policy, aimed at maintaining a “colonially correct” version of native customs and social constructs echoes similar efforts throughout the continent:

imperial conquerors began by thinking they could remake African society and rationalise the exploitation of the continent; by World War I, they were largely frustrated in such endeavours and began to make – through policies of “indirect rule” and “association” – their failures sound like a policy of conserving African society and culture”. (Cooper 1994, 1531)

Ethnic mixing triggered fears of proletarianisation among HCB workers; new solidarities emerging from similar positions in the economy could replace the community's sense of belonging in duplicate villages, which could become outposts for class-based revolts against the colonial order. Authorities also thought that, while far away from the social control exerted by their communities, peasants would put aside traditional moral constraints. Freed from the burden of traditions regulating marriage, kinship and sexual behaviours, their inhabitants would engage in inter-ethnic relationships that would lead to polygamy, unwanted pregnancies and a general state of debauchery. A 1923 letter from the colony's Governor-General mentions the risk that duplicate villages would shelter African women who had fled from neighbouring chiefdoms,³⁴ echoing the common belief that Congolese women became increasingly unfaithful due to the decay of traditional institutions (Lauro 2013).

Aside from moral imperatives resulting from the tremendous influence of the church in the Belgian Congo, the administration's struggle to control African sexuality has to be understood as a small part of a larger effort to stimulate birth rates. Between 1885 and 1930 the local population is estimated to have decreased by approximately five million, mostly because of an uncontrollable outbreak of sleeping sickness (Sanderson 2000). To counter this alarming trend, the authorities massively invested during the inter-war period in the protection of pregnant women and newborn children, notably by building the largest network of maternity clinics, midwifery schools and orphanages in sub-Saharan Africa (Hunt 1988). As a lack of social control based on tradition was thought to contribute to the decay of traditional families (Lauro 2013), the preservation of ethnic boundaries between communities was also perceived as a way of fighting depopulation.

These efforts were accompanied by the implementation of large-scale healthcare programmes aimed at diagnosing, vaccinating and treating the largest possible number of Congolese. After 1930, medical mobile teams patrolled rural areas biannually to examine entire communities and care for those in need (Hunt 1999). Nevertheless, the uncontrollable mobility of duplicate villages' inhabitants impeded the system. Even if doctors were able to examine a particular fruit cutter on one visit, it was often impossible to find him again a few months later, as he had returned home, or simply moved to another settlement inside the grove.³⁵ Women and children usually fled to the forest when the doctors arrived. Since “boys” were usually travelling without “passeports de mutation”, they could remain unnoticed by medical teams if they did not voluntarily approach them. When fruit cutters fulfilled their contracts in less than three months – between visits from mobile teams – they could also escape examination and treatment. Native elusiveness was further reinforced by the fact that duplicate villages sometimes had no definite settlements; their populations could move inside the palm groves and be charted at several spots on the administration's maps. Once arrived, families could also build their houses remote from

one another, “apparently to be left in peace”, as a visiting doctor commented in 1937.³⁶ If ethnic “interpenetration”³⁷ was perceived as “detrimental to the eugenics”³⁸ of “natives”, unsupervised migration triggered fears of widespread contagion both among imported workers and local communities living in the vicinity of the duplicate villages.³⁹

Avoidance of indirect rule and compulsory labour, along with the unsupervised mobility of the peasants and the amoral behaviours originating from ethnic mixing are just some of the reasons why the administration needed to eliminate the practice of creating these duplicate villages, though they continued to thrive throughout the inter-war period. One might see in this surprising paradox a consequence of concessionary principles of shared sovereignty. Worker migration and informal settlements were the subject of competing interests between private and public actors, a dissension which was fully exploited by native communities in order to create places of relative autonomy for themselves inside the colonial order.

Unlike the administration, HCB representatives were satisfied by the informal presence of the potential workforce inside their palm groves. The company’s General-Administrator wrote in 1937:

They provide a [...] fortunate solution to the issue of the fruit cutters’ housing. [...] The atmosphere is more favourable for the Black than that of an artificial camp, and these places are even equipped with all the necessary sanitary facilities. There, the native keeps his crops, his usual diet and the majority of his traditions.⁴⁰

One of the advantages that the HCB found in this situation lies in the fact that these spontaneous settlements were not technically considered worker’s camps. Therefore, the costly obligation of medical care and basic education that the company should provide to its employees and their families did not apply to them.

This situation illustrates interesting forms of informal collaboration between actors that would usually be considered as antagonists inside the colonial sphere. The common interests of African workers and HCB agents were in opposition to the administration’s thirst for control. Territorial agents complained that fruit cutters escaped supervision due to the company’s complacency, as its employees did little to report the illegal settlements within its concessions.⁴¹ The lack of authority over duplicate villages – the “greatest freedom” granted to the fruit cutters – was perceived by the administration as the company’s “best propaganda” for attracting the potential workforce.⁴²

Aside from the relative shelter from public control, natives could also rely on their own agency to escape government authority. The 1933 decree on chiefdoms stipulated that the Congolese working for either the state, a Western company, or living inside a mission were exempt from compulsory labour (Strouvens and Piron 1948). When asked by the administrators to participate in tasks such as carrying or road maintenance, duplicate village inhabitants refused, invoking their status as HCB employees,⁴³ showing their ability to use legislation to their benefit.

Although they were bound by the obligation to sell the product of their labour to the HCB, the fruit cutters also found a way to gain economic autonomy. When palm oil prices were high in the global market, the company production actually decreased, as locals could then make a living out of the manual extraction of oil from palm kernels, instead of harvesting fruits for the HCB. Sometimes they would also circumvent their contractual obligations, for instance by selling oils and fruits at local markets rather than to the company’s outposts. If the latter reaped benefits from the existence of duplicate villages, their lack of control over their workforce impeded productivity; HCB representatives often complained about the displaced fruit cutters’ lack of efficiency.⁴⁴

Multiple official reports from 1937 describe these settlements' filthiness and advanced state of decay; bushes growing around habitations, domestic garbage lying in front of porches, and the absence of hygienic facilities, which led to the inhabitants relieving themselves anywhere they could. They even "[tore] off hay from their houses to light fires", thus allowing rain to pour inside.⁴⁵ Their poor state was perceived as a direct consequence of their lack of supervision, and was seen as a threat to neighbouring chiefdoms. According to one administrator:

A true state of anarchy prevails in these settlements, whose inhabitants, away from any efficient surveillance, display an independent mind hardly compatible with the principle of authority (village maintenance, sanitary works [...]). These hamlets' deplorable state could represent a danger for surrounding localities.⁴⁶

Such descriptions highlight an interesting parallel made by several public workers, who tended to link the relative liberty enjoyed by the duplicate villages inhabitants with a general state of uncleanness.

These settlements, and the migration movements at their origin, provide interesting examples of peasant resistance to colonialism. They were low profile, unorganised and well suited both to their environmental context and the effective power struggles taking place inside the concession: "the nature of resistance [was] greatly influenced by the existing forms of labour control and by beliefs about the probability and severity of retaliation" (Scott 1985, 34). Large-scale harvesting in natural palm groves – rarely visited by government agents – and a relative shelter from punishment and compulsory labour in the grey areas where duplicate villages had formed, shaped resistance schemes in the form of unsupervised mobility and elusiveness from control.

The imposition of wage labour and the massive mobilisation of workforce for the palm oil industry in the Leverville area led to the creation of geographical spaces where natives could escape governmental endeavours, a situation that seemed to echo administrators' fears of losing their grip on the extended rural areas. Avoidance of medical care and the poor maintenance of duplicate villages led to angst regarding contagion. Ethnic diversity was perceived as causing promiscuity and impeding birth rates, illustrating how practical and moral imperatives were associated in the government's perspective. The longevity of these settlements also shows how, in a context of shared sovereignty, the existence of common interests between workers and their employers could hamper the prerogatives of public agents. Archival evidence shows that, during the period studied, some communities involved in the palm-oil business for the benefit of other companies also created villages in remote areas to escape taxation and colonial control (Likaka 1994). Nevertheless, the HCB's silent collaboration with their workers' avoidance schemes seems to have been unique.

IV Failures of colonial governmentality

This section of the paper highlights the several obstacles faced by the implementation of colonial rule inside the Leverville concession. The legal measures put in place to secure the peasants' obedience through the government chiefs led in many cases to the appointment of fake authority figures. The sharing of peasant lands between strictly separated chiefdoms was never effectively enforced. Palm-oil production triggered uncontrollable migration and the creation of unsupervised settlements. To counter this last consequence of Western presence, the administration instigated several strategies in an attempt to regain control of duplicate villages and worker mobility. On the contrary to sovereignty, expressing itself through legislative acts, these endeavours are part of the

process of governmentality; “employing tactics rather than laws [...] to arrange things in such a way that, through a certain number of means, such and such ends may be achieved” (Scott 1995, 202). Away from Brussels and the metropolitan authorities, public agents in the Belgian Congo tended to reduce political problems to administrative terms (Vellut 1982). These measures also show that, through the process of resistance, the fruit cutters found a way of making their political agency felt by the authorities, and directly acted to narrow or transform colonial policy options (Scott 1985).

A 1923: failed attempts at creating “model villages”

In late 1923, the HCB General-Delegate in Kinshasa wrote to the Congo-Kasaï Province Governor to suggest a solution to the issues arising from the constant worker migration. The problem resided, in his opinion, in the short duration of employments. As fruit cutters usually fulfilled their duties in a three-month period, population movements arising from the perpetual renewal of workforce caused disorganisation within the communities, was depressing for employees uprooted from their families, and could never produce a stable, disciplined and motivated workforce.

He therefore suggested changing the labour regime by creating “model villages” in the vicinity of the palm groves for the fruit cutters to reside in, with the active help of the administration.⁴⁷ Similar shifts in the organisation of employment occurred in the same timespan throughout the colony. Western companies first preferred short-term engagements that prevented them from having to pay benefits to their workers. Confronted with peasant reluctance to be recruited, this policy became economically unsustainable, as there were great difficulties in renewing the workforce (Seibert 2010).

From the HCB’s perspective, these new villages could be established anywhere on the land within the concessions that were not previously selected by the company through the mechanism of tripartite agreement.⁴⁸ The Provincial Governor was open to the proposition, but warned that public authorities could not coerce the displaced communities into working for them.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, the Governor-General vetoed the plan:

There is no need to demonstrate that the recruitment system desired by [the company], “establishing villages inside the concession by transplanting families detached from native chiefdoms” will inevitably thwart the political organisation that we want to consolidate, weakening the native institutions on which we intend to base the social edifice of the colony. [...] we may bring irreparable harm to customary chiefs because it could obviously be no question of reserving the exclusivity of the ability to create industrial centres at the expense of groups indigenous to the HCB. [...] In any case, the territorial local authorities would have to intervene to suggest or encourage this relocation, whether collective or individual.⁵⁰

But the provincial authorities did not wait for their superiors’ blessing to instigate the proposed migration. In late August 1923, they had already instructed the territorial administrators to convince government chiefs to establish a contingent of natives that would be sent to the HCB palm groves.⁵¹ Their propaganda effort seems to have fallen short however, as the archives reveal no further mention of these model worker villages in the Lusanga area.

Two observations can be drawn from this aborted strategy. First, shared sovereignty did not mean that all levels of power within either the private or the public sectors were systematically sharing a similar approach; the Provincial Governor agreed with the HCB’s view, while the Governor-General opposed it. This fracture seems to correspond to the separation between a sovereign approach to power – the Governor-General’s reluctance to see model villages disrupt chiefdoms – and a governmental perspective – the HCB’s strategy aimed at limiting uncontrolled displacements. Second, less surprisingly, the

hierarchical line of command was not fully respected by state agents, as instructions were already given to subaltern administrators without waiting for the Governor-General's approval.

B 1931–32: failed attempts at controlling population displacements

A second plan emerged in a highly difficult period marked by the shockwave resulting from the global recession and the aftermath of a violent conflict between villagers from the Pende community and the *Force Publique*, the Congolese army. The colony suffered tremendously during the Great Depression, mostly because its economy could not keep on growing at its 1920s rate. Agro-commercial activities based on the large-scale gathering of natural products, short-term workforce and artisanal processing resulting in low-quality outputs could not remain sustainable. As the prices of agricultural products on the global markets plummeted, rural production in the Belgian Congo greatly increased in order to keep the economy afloat (Jewsiewicki 1977).

Inside the concession, intensive pressure on workers, tax increases (Jewsiewicki 1976) and salary reductions exacerbated the already existing feelings of resentment towards colonialism, which led to an outburst of violence during the summer of 1931. The “Kwango uprisings” are considered the most important rebellion of Congolese against colonial order before 1959.

At the end of 1930, a new religious movement appeared in the Gungu territory, where most fruit cutters were recruited. Its leaders exhorted the villagers to reject Western authority, items and symbols, and embrace a revived ancestor cult. They were forbidden to sell fruit to Western companies, engage in employment or pay tax. The first violent encounter between the rebels and the colonial agents occurred on 7 June 1931. Territorial agent Maximilien Balot was sent to collect taxes in the hamlet of Kilamba, where he was killed and dismembered by a group of rebels before his severed limbs were distributed among the traditional chiefs of the area. This brutal event was triggered by the abuses perpetrated in the village a few days before by a company of two private recruiters and a territorial agent. During their four-day stay, they confiscated cattle, lived on the inhabitants' scarce resources and had sex with local women without respecting the Pende customs of offering financial compensation to the husbands.

Military retaliation began in the following days and lasted throughout the summer. Villages peripheral to the movement's influence were easily subjugated, while the core of communities where the uprisings started, where the chiefs shared Balot's limbs, refused to give up until the end of September. No soldiers or white officers were killed during the repression, but army reports mention between 300 and 500 peasants were killed, including more than 30 women and 10 children (Vanderstraeten 2001).

The rebellion had strengthened the local administration's will to reorganise the chiefdoms. Besides the government chiefs' lack of authority, state agents also complained that native territories had been badly delimited. Traditional communities were separated among several chiefdoms, and some lands were wrongly shared among villages. Since the Africans had to be regrouped by “race” in order to reinstate the proper functioning of indirect rule, this process could be accompanied by a controlled displacement of communities towards HCB palm groves in order to maximise economic production.⁵²

A few months before the uprisings, the company tried to take advantage of this initiative to secure the long-term existence of duplicate villages by transforming them

into proper settlements. Considering that most of the able-bodied population from originating communities was already living in the groves, the few individuals still residing in the former settlements could simply join them.⁵³ After the summer of 1931, the HCB came forward with another plan; Pende communities could be displaced on lands covered by tripartite agreements. They would build their own villages, while the company would provide them with supplies for a year until their subsistence crops had grown. In exchange for its active participation in the post-revolt “pacification”, the HCB would hope to rely on a helping hand from the administration to encourage these migrants to work for them, a proposition which the territorial administration answered positively.⁵⁴

Nevertheless, these plans faced a major issue. Legally speaking, villages could only be forcibly displaced for sanitary reasons, which meant that territorial reorganisation could not be undertaken without peasant consent.⁵⁵ In the meantime, it would be impossible to find native communities unanimously willing to migrate. The successful conduct of the regrouping programme therefore had to rely on a minimal use of coercion.⁵⁶

Once again, the clash of political logics between the upper echelons of the administration and their subordinates impeded the process: the Congo-Kasaï Governor expressed his disapproval of population displacement outside cases where traditional authorities spontaneously asked for it without any form of colonial persuasion.⁵⁷ The Minister of the Colonies went even further, stating that displacing populations to the concession was a form of expropriation, went against the principles of free labour and would put entire populations in a state of servitude to the HCB.⁵⁸

C 1934: failed attempts at creating plantations

The agricultural sector crisis kept on worsening in the following years. In 1934, palm-oil prices reached their nadir, at 20% of their 1929 value (Jewsiewicki 1977). In order to counter this alarming trend, the HCB and the public authorities tried to upgrade the production’s quality by increasing the industrial processing of fruits and relying more on supplies coming from selected plantations. This move was also taken as it became obvious to Unilever management that an economic model relying on the harvest of natural palm fruits, as they practised in Belgian Congo, was far less profitable than their extensive plantations in the Cameroons and Sumatra (Fieldhouse 1978).

In early 1934, the colony’s Governor-General suggested that in the ethnically diverse Middle-Kwilu territory – inside the Leveville circle – a necessary programme of chiefdom regrouping should be accompanied by the planned displacements of the new communities along inhabited riverbanks to create oil palm plantations.⁵⁹ The company and the government agreed on a plan: after the delimitation of the occupied native lands adjacent to waterways, vacant areas would be granted up to a maximum of 20,000 migrant families, grouped in accordance with their ethnicity and racial affinities.⁶⁰ In March of the same year, contracts were drafted under the administration’s supervision, establishing planters’ obligations towards the HCB. Families would be given 5 hectares of land and have the obligation to annually plant half a hectare with 50 selected oil palms provided by the company. Fruits had to be sold to the HCB at a government-fixed price, and farmers would be paid in accordance with the number of trees they planted and cared for. If they proved to be negligent, the company would take back its parcel, while tenants would be stripped of their rights on the fruits of their labour.⁶¹

While little dissension emerged between the private and public actors during the programme’s implementation, selected plantations had to face another obstacle: peasant

reluctance. The provincial authorities warned the HCB managers that their will to remain owners of these selected lands would impede the system's functioning.⁶² In March 1937, an inquiry made into selected plantations showed that 31% of the farmers who had settled there in November of the previous year had already left their parcel, while potential workers who could take back the lots refused to do so, arguing that they had no traditional rights over their outputs. "We are currently powerless to prevent or limit this exodus, which seems to be an expression of the natives' aversion to imposed cultivation" admitted the provincial authority.⁶³

D 1936–1938: failed attempts at transforming duplicate villages into worker camps

After years of inability to control worker displacement inside the concession, the provincial administration decided to act by force. In late December 1936, the industrial inspectorate gave notice to the HCB that duplicate villages would no longer be tolerated;⁶⁴ local authorities had to find a way to inscribe them into existing chiefdoms.⁶⁵

Effectively, the settlements were not destroyed, nor were their inhabitants driven out. State agents and HCB representatives toured inside the groves and gave the fruit cutters an ultimatum: they could either be properly hired by the company – the village therefore becoming an HCB camp in which they settled permanently and submitted to the local chief – or they could go back to their settlement of origin. The vast majority of fruit cutters went back home and a handful accepted the offer of recruitment, but practically none chose to integrate into the neighbouring chiefdom,⁶⁶ the solution which was favoured by the administration.⁶⁷

The programme triggered a vital loss of workforce for the company, which provoked conflicts within the administration. Provincial authorities complained that their territorial counterparts – in charge of effectively enforcing the dismantlement – did so without consulting their superiors. The closure of the duplicate villages should have been progressive, and local agents should have encouraged workers to be properly hired by the HCB and patiently explained to them that their obligations would remain the same either in their originating villages or in their current residence.⁶⁸

Facing this employment shortage, the company first turned to the state. Managers asked for their help in securing their workforce needs:

If it is absolutely impossible to allow native communities to establish these villages, you may want to consider the possibility of moving the entire original village to our centres or authorise villages from an unproductive area to settle in our concession, and allow the local administration to encourage this movement.⁶⁹

On the other hand, the provincial authorities hoped that the HCB would properly recruit former fruit cutters who returned home and establish a workers' camp for them, where they would be cared for and supervised according to the principles of the 1911 convention.⁷⁰

In August 1937, the company accepted the need to create "camps artificiels" (workers camps) where fruit furnishers and their families would settle. Management guaranteed the authorities that it would take charge of the policing of the area, grant extensive lands to inhabitants for the cultivation of their own food crops, supervise the installation and maintenance of sanitary facilities, tend to their medical needs and properly compensate them in the case of work-related accidents.⁷¹

This strategy illustrates how the balance of power could easily shift to the benefit of one actor or another. After successfully preventing any public supervision of duplicate

villages, a unilateral decision of the administration compelled the HCB to create worker camps at their own expense. Nevertheless, the decisions made at the highest levels could sometimes be ignored or circumvented in the field.

E 1940: failed attempts at creating traditional villages

In April 1940, the company came forward with a new proposition to “eliminate the perpetual movement between villages and employment areas”, which seems to indicate that the fruit cutters did not end up residing permanently in workers’ camps. The idea was to allow willing groups of Congolese to settle on the extensive lands inside the Levertville circle, which would be given to them as full native property. The HCB intended to eliminate Congolese reluctance to labour on their lands, illustrated by the failure of their plantation scheme. Although 19 families led by a notable local named Kinzashi were ready to migrate, it was estimated that 200 families would be needed to replace the losses in the area’s five existing camps.⁷²

While this move was approved by the provincial authorities, one of the agencies in charge of medical care in rural areas objected on the grounds that these migrations would be detrimental to Africans. By renouncing its property rights, the HCB secured a permanent employment pool at a small expense, as they kept circumventing their obligations regarding employee care and management.⁷³

In the following months, issues arising from the duplicate villages were overwhelmed by the global conflict. While Nazi forces invaded Belgium in May 1940, the Belgian Congo participated in the war alongside the allied forces (Buelens and Marysse 2009). The entire colony was mobilised for the war economy; questions of migration and settlement became secondary as the authorities put maximum pressure on fruit cutters to stimulate their productivity.⁷⁴ After 1945, the company elaborated a plan to benefit from the fruit cutters’ spontaneous settlements. Its agents started to buy some of the duplicate villages’ most solid habitations at the end of the employment period of the current residents, making them available to their successors. Benefiting from the post-war economic boom, the HCB also accelerated the pace of camp building and had created almost 300 fruit-cutter settlements by the end of the 1950s (Nicolai 1963).

The inter-war failures of the colonial government had multiple origins: internal conflicts impeded policy implementations; the peasant rebuttal of organised settlements made plantations ineffective; and the HCB’s unwillingness to create worker camps partially allowed the perpetuation of duplicate villages. Competing interests and clashes of logic of opposing Congolese communities and Western actors, local and central administration, private and public interests, sovereign and governmental logics, proved the inability of the Belgian colonial order to successfully manage these rural areas. They also illustrate how, without formal political action and almost entirely without the use of violence, the natives were able to continuously maintain their own agency outside the control of both the public and private authorities.

V Conclusion

Throughout this period, fruit cutters and their families were able to remain mobile and avoid most of the colonial control schemes, thanks to the existence of spaces of relative freedom inside the rainforest, where they could escape compulsory labour and administrative supervision. Rules were implemented to constrain the migration of the colonised natives and an entire network of European and African agents existed to enforce

them. Yet the competing interests of the state and the company created hierarchical fractures regarding the conception of good policing inside the administration, resulting in the inefficient indirect rule and Western-altered customs that in turn led to the existence of legal grey areas, illustrating how sometimes shared sovereignty tends to dissolve authority rather than reinforce it.

“Weapons of the weak” are shaped by the socio-historical context in which they take place. In some colonial plantations, worker resistance could be expressed by foot dragging, small-scale thieving, false compliance and feigned ignorance (Scott 1985; Duncan 2007). But in the Leverville concession, they took the form of elusiveness and mobility: uncontrolled migration between original and duplicate villages, as well as within the palm groves, fleeing from the personnel of the administration and the medical teams, and hiding traditional hierarchies behind decoy authority figures. Violent encounters and open rebellion only occurred for a period of a few months at a time of tremendous economic pressure. However, it was ultimately the resistance tactics which proved to be successful, as for nearly 20 years the rural communities were able to at least partly escape the clutches of colonialism.

Although they extensively mention the administration’s self-admitted incapacity to tackle peasant mobility, the colonial archives remain resolutely silent on Congolese agency. The absence of fruit cutters’ accounts of labour and the everyday experience of the concession economy forces the researcher to articulate an historical narrative from unbalanced sources. Since some able-bodied male residents of duplicate villages were not fruit cutters, and since their population consciously avoided mobile teams of doctors and administrators, one could safely argue that these settlements provided outposts of autonomy to individuals and families seeking to circumvent colonial authority. Nevertheless, without any first-hand testimonies of the locals’ experiences, extrapolations regarding the existence of collective, planned and voluntary strategies of resistance against the shared sovereignty of the state and the company remain uncertain. Nomadism and supposed “ethnic mixing” predate the Belgian presence in the area. Can it therefore be argued that mobility and the creation of informal settlements were *ad hoc* responses to colonial oppression, or were they just the continuation of former uses, inherently transformed by the imposition of the concession rule? The lack of data encourages us to exercise caution in our perception of past events. Rather than resistance, adaptation seems to be a more suitable term to define the practices of elusiveness used to thwart the colonial schemes for surveillance and control.

Historian and anthropologist Achille Mbembe has encouraged humanities researchers to craft portraits of subaltern groups by combining and integrating micro-acts of individual resistance (Mbembe 2014). Throughout the official archives, it is the administrative dispatches and reports which disseminate information on how the implementation of capitalism and Western policies in the Central African rainforest remained hampered by the persistent non-compliance and avoidant practices of the peasants.

Fruit-cutter migration and duplicate villages also provide an interesting standpoint from which to observe the power-plays and collaborations which took place in the Congolese rural areas. The existence of informal links between European employers and African employees beyond the reach of state supervision challenges visions of monolithic oppositions separating workers and managers in colonial contexts. Lasting processes of uncontrolled mobility resulted from competing visions of proper policing, collusion between low-ranking administrators and their private counterparts, and the African ability to tackle authority. Shedding light on these processes renders a complex

portrait of human interactions in the inter-war rainforest. Although a limited case study, the present research could help further our understanding of rural economies in colonial contexts.

Notes

1. Also called “the Lusanga circle [*le cercle de Lusanga*]”, or, in English the “Lusanga area” or “the Levertville area” in the consulted archives. All translations from French to English are made by the author.
2. Although this study is solely based on archival material, fieldwork in this area could lead to the collection of oral traditions and memories of former HCB workers active in the 1950s, which could balance the colonial perspective conveyed by administrative documents.
3. Among other critics, Scott has been mostly reproached for grouping overly disparate actions and behaviours under the generalist notion of “peasant resistance” (Downing 1987, 875; Moore 1987), and exaggerating this notion, elaborated from a single field study in a small Malaysian rural community, to all subordinate classes (Buttel, Scott, and Buttel 1987; Muratorio 1987; Taylor 1987).
4. In Kikongo, “Momo kutonga nge bonso Compagnie kutonda ngashi” (Sindani 1984, 47).
5. Projet de décret approuvant une ocnvention conclue, le 21 février 1911, entre le gouvernement du Congo belge et la société Lever Brothers Ltd., art. 4, 8, 19, in *Bulletin officiel du Congo belge*, Brussels, 1911, 390.
6. “[...] les terres que les indigènes habitent, cultivent ou exploitent d’une manière quelconque conformément aux coutumes et usages locaux”; see “Décret du Roi-Souverain du 3 June 1906”, in *Bulletin officiel de l’Etat Indépendant du Congo*, 21^e année, Brussels, 1906, 226.
7. “the lands [which the natives] inhabit, cultivate or exploit in any way according to local customs and uses”; see “Décret sur les Chefferies et sous-chefferies indigènes”, in *Bulletin officiel du Congo belge 1910*, Brussels, 1910, 457.
8. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, African Archives, Brussels [hereafter AAB]. Affaires Indigènes - Main d’oeuvre [hereafter AIMO] 1855, Lettre du conservateur des titres fonciers au Commissaire de District du Kwango, 23 January 1934.
9. AAB, AIMO 1856, Projet-type de contrat tripartite, 16 August 1923.
10. “Le chef et le sous-chef exercent leur autorité dans la mesure et de la manière fixées par la coutume indigène, en tant qu’elle n’est pas contraire ni à l’ordre public universel, ni aux dispositions législatives ou réglementaires qui ont pour but de substituer d’autres règles aux principes de la coutume indigène”; see “Décret sur les Chefferies et sous-chefferies indigènes”, in *Bulletin officiel du Congo belge 1910*, 463.
11. “Décret sur les Chefferies et sous-chefferies indigènes”, in *Bulletin officiel du Congo belge 1910*, 460–461.
12. Décret sur les Chefferies et sous-chefferies indigènes”, in *Bulletin officiel du Congo belge 1910*, 776.
13. AAB, AIMO 1856, Lettre du Commissaire Général Wauters au Gouverneur du Congo-Kasaï, 18 March 1932.
14. AAB, AIMO 1856, Enquêtes sur le glissement de populations vers les palmeraies HCB, 29 March 1932.
15. Although individuals had to wait three months to ask to be registered as belonging to another chiefdom; see “Décret sur les Chefferies et sous-chefferies indigènes”, in *Bulletin officiel du Congo belge 1910*, 457.
16. “Décret sur les Chefferies et sous-chefferies indigènes”, in *Bulletin officiel du Congo belge 1910*, 458–459.
17. “Décret sur les Chefferies et sous-chefferies indigènes”, in *Bulletin officiel du Congo belge 1910*, 465.
18. “certains administrateurs territoriaux ne se déplaçaient habituellement que le long des pistes carrossables, et souvent rentraient le soir au chef-lieu, négligeant les populations de l’intérieur”; see AAB, AIMO 1855, Remarques du Gouverneur du Congo-Kasaï sur l’administration du district du Kwango, 9 June 1932.
19. AAB, AIMO 1855, Note sur les fournisseurs de fruits au Kwango, 25 November 1941.

20. AAB, AIMO 1855, Contrat d'engagement coupeur de fruits HCB, September 1923.
21. For more information on the Pende, see Zoe S. Strother, *Pende* (2008).
22. AAB, AIMO 1856, Rapport à M. le gouverneur de la province sur le problème posé par les "Huilleries du CB" au sujet du glissement de populations vers leurs zones d'exploitation de palmeraies, January 1923.
23. AAB, AIMO 1855, Lettre de l'assistant-administrateur Moulin, 25 July 1934.
24. AAB, AIMO 1856, Lettre du Gouverneur Général au Chef de la Province du Congo-Kasaï, 20 April 1938.
25. AAB, AIMO 1856, Rapport du Commissaire Général Wauters au Gouverneur du Congo-Kasaï, 10 January 1932.
26. AAB, AIMO 1855, Lettre du Commissaire de la Province de Léopoldville A. de Beaufort au Commissaire de District du Kwango, 5 April 1934.
27. AAB, AIMO 1855, Lettre du Commissaire de District J. Van Hoeck au Chef de Province de Léopoldville, 20 May 1935.
28. AAB, AIMO 1856, Lettre du Commissaire Général Wauters au Gouverneur Général, 22 May 1931.
29. AAB, AIMO 1856, Rapport sur la question des villages doublures dans les cercles des HCB, 13 April 1937.
30. AAB, AIMO 1856, Note du Chef de District assistant du Kwango, 26 December 1937.
31. AAB, AIMO 1856, Rapport du FOREAMI sur les villages-doublures du Kwango, 1937.
32. AAB, AIMO 1856, Lettre du Commissaire de District H. Vandevenne au Chef de Province de Léopoldville, 9 June 1937.
33. "La majorité [des indigènes de la région de Mosengo] étaient loin d'avoir terminé cette tâche [et ont] adopté cette manœuvre pour retarder, le plus longtemps possible, le moment où ils devaient réintégrer leur territoire"; see AAB, AIMO 1855, Lettre du Commissaire de District assistant F. Peigneux au Chef de Province de Léopoldville, 7 September 1939.
34. AAB, AIMO 1856, Lettre du Gouverneur Général du Congo belge M. Rutten au Gouverneur de la Province du Congo-Kasaï, 11 October 1923.
35. AAB, AIMO 1856, Note du Commissaire de District assistant du Kwango, 26 December 1937.
36. AAB, AIMO 1856, Rapport du FOREAMI dans le District du Kwango, 1937.
37. "Bambala, Bahungana, Bayanzi-Bayeye, Basongo, Bamputu se croisent et se compénètrent"; see AAB, AIMO 1856, Rapport concernant le territoire du Moyen-Kwilo, 1937.
38. "nuisent, au surplus, profondément à l'eugénique de ces groupements"; see AAB, AIMO 1856, Lettre du Chef de Province A. De Beaufort au Commissaire de District du Kwango, 29 September 1937.
39. AAB, AIMO 1856, Lettre du Chef de Province A. De Beaufort au Commissaire de District du Kwango, 23 September 1936.
40. "ils constituent une forme que je n'hésite pas à qualifier d'heureuse – du problème du logement pour les coupeurs de fruits (...). L'atmosphère qui y règne est plus favorable au noir que l'atmosphère d'un camp artificiel même doté de toutes les installations hygiéniques. L'indigène y garde ses plantations, sa nourriture habituelle, la majorité de ses règles traditionnelles de vie"; see AAB, AIMO 1856, Lettre de l'Administrateur-général des HCB J. Dusselgé au Gouverneur Général, 1 February 1937.
41. AAB, AIMO 1856, Lettre du Chef de Province A. De Beaufort au Commissaire de District du Kwango, 30 July 1936.
42. AAB, AIMO 1856, Lettre du Médecin-Directeur du FOREAMI au Gouverneur Général, 18 March 1937.
43. Ibid.
44. AAB, AIMO 1856, Note sur les villages doublures dans le cercle des HCB de Leveville, 22 March 1937.
45. AAB, AIMO 1856, Rapport du FOREAMI dans le District du Kwango, 1937.
46. "Un véritable état d'anarchie règne dans les susdites agglomérations, dont les habitants soustraits à toute surveillance efficace, affichent un esprit d'indépendance peu compatible avec le principe d'autorité (entretien des villages, travaux d'hygiène, etc...). La situation sanitaire de ces hameaux est lamentable, et peut constituer un danger pour les localités environnantes"; see AAB, AIMO 1856, Lettre du Chef de Province A. De Beaufort à l'Administrateur-Délégué des HCB, 21 May 1937.

47. AAB, AIMO 1856, Lettre de l'Administrateur-délégué des HCB au Gouverneur du Congo-Kasaï, 10 November 1923.
48. AAB, AIMO 1856, Lettre de l'Administrateur-délégué des HCB au Gouverneur du Congo-Kasaï, 3 August 1923.
49. AAB, AIMO 1856, Lettre du Gouverneur du Congo-Kasaï à l'Administrateur-délégué des HCB, 29 July 1923.
50. "Il n'est nul besoin de commentaire pour démontrer que le système de recrutement réclamé par la Société des Huileries: « formation de villages dans les concessions par transplantements de familles détachées des chefferies » contrariera fatalement l'organisation politique que nous souhaitons consolider, en affaiblissant les institutions indigènes sur lesquelles nous comptons baser l'édifice social de la colonie. [...], nous risquons de porter une atteinte irréparable aux chefferies coutumières, car il ne pourrait évidemment être question de réserver exclusivement aux HCB la faculté de créer des agglomérations industrielles aux dépens des groupements indigènes. En aucun cas, les autorités territoriales locales n'ont à intervenir pour suggérer ou favoriser ce transplantement, qu'il soit collectif ou individuel"; see AAB, AIMO 1856, Lettre du Gouverneur Général du Congo belge M. Rutten au Gouverneur de la Province du Congo-Kasaï, 11 October 1923.
51. AAB, AIMO 1856, Lettre du Gouverneur du Congo-Kasaï à l'Administrateur-territorial Sørensen, 29 August 1923.
52. AAB, AIMO 1856, Problème du glissement des populations vers les palmeraies du Kwenge et du Kwilu, 29 March 1932.
53. AAB, AIMO 1856, Lettre de l'Administrateur-délégué des HCB au Gouverneur du Congo-Kasaï, 25 March 1931.
54. AAB, AIMO 1856, Lettre du Directeur-général de la Lusanga area au Chef de district du Kwango, 2 October 1931.
55. *Bulletin officiel du Congo belge 1910*, Brussels, 1910, 470.
56. AAB, AIMO 1856, Lettre du Commissaire-général Wauters au Gouverneur du Congo-Kasaï, 17 July 1932.
57. AAB, AIMO 1854, Lettre du Gouverneur du Congo-Kasaï au Commissaire de district Wauters, 4 October 1932.
58. AAB, AIMO 1855, Lettre du Ministre des Colonies au Gouverneur Général, 23 June 1932.
59. AAB, AIMO 1855, Lettre du Commissaire de district Vandevenne au Commissaire de la Province de Léopoldville, 8 February 1934.
60. AAB, AIMO 1855, Compte-rendu de la réunion concernant la mise en valeur des rives du Kwilu et de ses affluents, 27 January 1934.
61. AAB, AIMO 1855, Contrat d'engagement de planteurs, March 1934.
62. AAB, AIMO 1856, Lettre du Chef de Province de Léopoldville à l'Administrateur-délégué des HCB, 5 May 1934.
63. "Nous sommes actuellement impuissants à empêcher ou limiter cet exode qui semble être une manifestation de l'aversion des indigènes pour les cultures imposées"; see AAB, AIMO 1856, Lettre du Chef de Province A. De Beaufort au Gouverneur Général, 30 April 1937.
64. AAB, AIMO 1856, Lettre du vice-Gouverneur Général au Chef de la Province de Léopoldville, 7 February 1934.
65. Ibid.
66. AAB, AIMO 1856, Note du Commissaire de district assistant du Kwango, 26 December 1937.
67. AAB, AIMO 1856, Lettre du Chef de territoire Huyghen au Directeur-Général des HCB, 15 March 1937.
68. AAB, AIMO 1856, Lettre du Chef de Province A. de Beaufort au Gouverneur Général, 14 August 1937.
69. AAB, AIMO 1856, Lettre de l'Administrateur-général des HCB au Chef de la Province de Léopoldville, 1 February 1937.
70. "S'il était absolument impossible d'autoriser les indigènes à établir ces villages, peut-être voudriez-vous considérer la possibilité de déplacer les villages originaux en entier vers nos centres ou encore autoriser des villages situés au loin dans un pays improductif à venir jusque dans notre concession et autoriser l'administration locale à encourager ce mouvement"; see AAB, AIMO 1856, Lettre du Chef de la Province A. De Beaufort au District du Kwango, 21 May 1937.

71. AAB, AIMO 1856, Lettre du Chef de Province A. de Beaufort au Gouverneur Général, 14 August 1937.
72. AAB, AIMO 1856, Lettre du Commissaire de district Cordemans au Chef de la Province de Léopoldville, 18 April 1940.
73. AAB, AIMO 1856, Lettre du Service Provincial des AIMO au Commissaire de District du Kwango, 18 December 1940.
74. AAB, AIMO 1855, Lettre du District du Kwango à la Province de Léopoldville, 9 March 1944.

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