



## Colonial Response to Population Depletion in Early Congo, ca. 1890–1936

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**Abstract.** – This article demonstrates that even when the desire for quick economic returns was at the zenith, the administration, companies, and missions took initiatives to reduce the destruction of population, “for the sake of agriculture and mines.” While the colonial administration yearned to alter household structure, private companies pursued the policy of high child-births. In contrast to colonial government officials and private companies’ administrators, Catholic missionaries endeavored to change local ideologies, which underpinned biological reproduction, and institutions, which in their understanding created sexual imbalance and low fertility. In different but complementary ways, they sought to eradicate diseases and minimize the negative effects of migrations, portage, and recruitments on the reproductive capacity of local communities. [*Congo, demography, colonial population policies, economy, mining, labor migrations, women*]

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### Introduction

We have to convince ourselves that an economy based on agriculture has nothing but land and hands (AA 1957).

This statement shows that to colonial officials and company managers, the death of an African repre-

sented a loss of a potential worker and of a commodity producer. In an unpublished text entitled “Working for the Tax Man Makes People Thinner. Economy and Demography in Early Congo, ca. 1890–1936,” I examined the interactions between economic activities and demographic situations. I showed that colonialism created environments that affected negatively the principal components of demography. This article shows that even when the desire for quick economic returns was at the zenith, the administration, companies, and missions took initiatives to reduce the destruction of population “for the sake of agriculture and mines” (Lepplae 1914: 17). Although they differed in their ideologies and emphasis, the colonial administration, missions, and companies interacted when looking for solutions to population depletion. While the colonial administration yearned to alter household structure and transform individual sexual behavior to increase fertility, private companies pursued the policy of high childbirths by distributing material incentives and fighting prostitution in their labor camps. In contrast to colonial government officials and private companies’ administrators, Catholic missionaries endeavored to change local ideologies, which underpinned biological reproduction, and institutions, which they believed created sexual imbalance and low fertility. In different but often complementary ways, they all sought to eradicate diseases and minimize the negative effects of migrations, portage, and recruitments to restore the reproductive capacity of local communities.

## Colonial Administration and Population Policies

It is an obligation for our personnel to preserve native populations (AA 1920).

A consensus emerged in the 1920s among colonial officials that the Congo had become a depopulated colony. Most territorial administrators and government agronomists, who implemented government policies and who were the most concerned with population decline, then shared the conclusion drawn in 1906 by most reports that the African population was dying out (Cattier 1906: 346).

Motivated by political and economic reasons, the taking of censuses was among the first responses of the colonial government to deal with the scarcity and decline of populations. It started in 1891 when a decree required the district commissioner to report when organizing existing lineages into chiefdoms, not only their name and geographic location but also the number of houses, men, women, and children. Although colonial officials implemented the legislation only in the communities located near state posts, these censuses definitely allowed the calculation of the ratios of men to women, and of women to children. Limited and imperfect, these censuses nevertheless gave colonial officials glimpses into the state of the reproductive capacity of Congolese villages.

Under the pressure of the Congo Reform Association and of the Commission of Inquiry, which looked at the atrocities of rubber wars, the legislation of 1906 on *chefferies* continued these efforts. In addition to counting men, women, and children, the decree compelled African chiefs to inform the district commissioner of epidemics in their *chefferies*, and appointed African messengers to work with these local leaders to obtain in timely fashion vital information on dysentery, meningitis, cholera, and smallpox, epidemics that killed a great deal of people every time they stroke a region. Nevertheless, the ravages caused by smallpox in Mahagi in 1920 and by meningitis in Geti in 1925 and 1928 show that despite the colonial government efforts, effective control of epidemics to protect village communities was still elusive (AA 1927, 1928a, 1929a).

Colonial officials received two additional legal means when the government enacted two legislations in 1910 and 1917 to cope with population issues. The primary objectives of the colonial government were to tighten control over Africans and facilitate the taking of censuses, the collection of taxes, the recruitment of workers, and the manda-

tory production of cash crops. Nevertheless, the two legislations dealt with important aspects of populations. The 1910 legislation required Africans to carry a pass card, which allowed colonial officials to monitor population movements. It also established “model villages” in healthy locations, which were preferably the seats of chiefdoms. Furthermore, the colonial administration designed the program of “model village” to reverse the decline of populations in two ways. First, it aimed at changing diets by encouraging mixed economy and introducing fruit trees, namely avocado, orange, papaya, lime, guava, and pineapple. Although the consumption of these fruits varied from one group to another, they provided vitamins A and C where Africans included them into their diets (Janzen 1978: 13, 31). Second, it sought to improve public health by building dispensaries and leper colonies.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, the objectives of “model villages” did not entirely come to fruition. The main reason for the failure was the colonial government’s lack of commitment to supply funds needed to build schools and hospitals, and to dig wells for clean drinking water, the basic infrastructure required to support the concentration of population exceeding one thousand in many cases. High concentration of population quickly depleted farming land, game, and fish resources in the environs of “model villages.” To engage in subsistence activities, Congolese moved back and forth between “model villages” and old settlements, a predicament that generated resentment and ultimately forced the colonial administration to discontinue the initiative.

For Africans living outside “model villages” in communities near administrative and trading posts, the colonial government attempted to improve public health and to raise the living standards by urging Congolese to build better houses, and to improve methods of food production. Colonial officials moreover designed community programs and schools’ curricula to train adults and teach children Western notions of hygiene and protection against mosquitoes and tsetse flies to reduce incidences of malaria and of the sleeping sickness.

The decree of 1917 extended these concerns to the village by forbidding Congolese from settling in swampy regions, deemed by colonial officials to be tsetse fly environments. This legislation, as the one previously discussed, allowed colonial officials to monitor and to redistribute the Congolese populations responding to the need of labor for private companies.

<sup>1</sup> AA n.d. a; 1930; APO 1917a; Pakasa 1974: 100.

Colonial government officials associated low childbirths and the decline of population with polygyny, just as missionaries did. They argued that polygyny locked young women into marital unions with a fewer old men, creating sexual imbalance in communities. To liberate young wives who were in the prime of their reproductive capacity from polygamous marriages, and so alter pre-existing family structure, the colonial government welcomed the First World War efforts, and imposed taxes on polygyny in 1914. However, while implementing the legislation, colonial officials were more interested in collecting taxes than in abolishing polygyny. As a matter of fact, the turning point in fighting polygyny came in 1926 when the colonial government created native courts, which officials successfully converted into weapons against polygynous men and tax defaulters.

In addition to using native courts to gather taxes, colonial officials also employed the institutions to settle marital disputes, conflicts over the reimbursement of bridewealth, and elopements. They were concerned that unless they were resolved, such conflicts could destroy the stability of the households and communities, and unsettle local administrations. Despite differences in the ways in which the colonial officials combined the implementation of the two legislations to achieve both goals, the transcripts of native courts show that colonial government officials employed the institutions to fight polygyny. In Coquilathville Province, for example, territorial administrators in 1919 settled disputes over the reimbursement of bridewealth to polygynous men in favor of the wives. Some confiscated bridewealth from polygynous husbands and allocated it to schools and organizations fighting polygyny. Others yet legalized the marriage of unmarried men with the wives of polygynous men or lowered the amounts of bridewealth to reimburse the latter (Magotte 1938; AA 1921a).

These measures liberated wives from polygynous husbands. However, colonial officials ran into difficulties because of the usefulness of the institution to the colonial administration and economy, and because they undermined the stability of local communities. Regardless of their polygynous status, the colonial administration rarely dismissed Congolese chiefs whom they had integrated into the lower level of the administration to carry out critical tasks. Chiefs were instrumental in recruiting labor, collecting taxes, and running native courts. They were instrumental in transforming native courts into the real avenue of negotiations between colonial officials and ordinary Africans (Likaka 1997b: 472–473). While the alliance of

African chiefs with the colonial administration allowed them to even become and remain polygynous, strong economic motives protected ordinary polygynous men. As the mandatory system of cash crops compelled every male to cultivate, labor to hire was not available. The scarcity of labor and the absence of mechanization in peasant agriculture made polygyny the only way for males to mobilize sizeable labor within the household to boost the production of cash crops. The role of polygyny in boosting production and the need for meeting production quotas encouraged colonial officials to oppose the complete abolition of polygyny, because achieving production targets influenced positively their promotion. Congolese polygynous men obtained also the unwitting support of colonial officials who feared that the elimination of polygyny could cause prostitution, which they believed, was more harmful to childbirths than long intervals between childbirths caused by polygyny. In addition, because tax on polygyny brought money in local treasuries, many colonial officials rarely took a strong stand against the institution. As I will show later, men resisted polygyny-taxation, and their opposition found its way into native courts all controlled by men. In reality, when using customary law in the native courts, male elders commonly set rules that accommodated polygyny (AA 1921a).

The dynamics of the colonial economy reinforced the resiliency of polygyny to attacks by the colonial administration. With the introduction of the new currency in 1910, bride-price increased in the 1920s and 1930s, hurting unmarried young men who could have benefited from the legislation. Because these young men did not have the bride-price, the introduction of the new currency maintained polygyny among the affluent and the powerful who surreptitiously fought back. More often than not, polygynous men hid some wives from tax collectors and census takers, and introduced the youngest to officials as daughters. In reality, African men opposed polygyny-taxation. The usefulness of the institution, combined with local resistance explains why at the time of its imposition in 1914, the Governor General made polygyny illegal only among Congolese employees of the colonial government, and outlawed it in 1920 only among the retirees, two small groups of African population (APO 1948–52, 1914–29). The size of the groups, targeted by the colonial administration, testifies to the ability of polygynous men to resist the administration and the interaction of polygyny with changing political and economic situations.

Faced with local opposition, colonial officials now wrestled to change local gender ideologies

and women's roles in production and reproduction. The objective was to convince Congolese men to change the idea that "polygyny amounted to the hoarding of wealth," the belief that "the more a husband has wives the more his farms will produce and the more his livestock will thrive," and the shared assumption that "a woman constituted a source of wealth" (AA 1919b).

It is definitely difficult to gauge the impact of colonial officials' undertaking. Nevertheless, the resiliency of polygyny suggests that these campaigns did not entirely achieve the expected results. The failure of the campaigns was one of the reasons why the colonial administration introduced better farming tools to undercut polygyny as a method of female labor mobilization in mandatory cash crop cultivation (AA 1923).

To expand cash crop cultivation, district commissioners and territorial administrators periodically exempted entire villages from paying taxes in kind and in labor when economic stresses and epidemics stroke these communities. In its pursuit of demographic regimes with high birth rates and of changing family structure, the colonial government started in 1921 to grant tax exemptions to households with more than four children. Congolese appreciated tax exemptions not only because the initiative was a major financial relief (Anstey 1966; Merlier 1962: 82), but also because by encouraging high fertility the initiative resonated with local ideologies of biological reproduction. In the languages of the Mongo and Mbole, who live in the center of the Congo Basin, the verb *ota* means to give birth, and it is proto-Bantu as is the term *likondo*, meaning banana tree. Because of its high yield, the banana tree is a metaphor for high human fertility. Even in wartime and famine when food becomes scarce and the raising of children a challenge, the views of biological reproduction held by peoples of the Congo Basin still favored high childbirths. Using the analogy of the high yield of the banana tree, the Mongo would say, "The health of a banana is found in the number of its leaves" (Hulstaert 1958: 214, No. 772). The meaning of bridewealth is equally revealing of the ideology of biological reproduction. The Mongo set the amount of bridewealth proportionate to the age of the bride because a young woman, the ideal wife, would have many children. Similarly, the Mbole would say, "From banana seedlings, come banana trees." The Mbole saying, "You must always have children even if your brother has many" likewise expressed the desirability of having many children. The mutual support among siblings justified the need for large families because "being two siblings

was better than being alone."<sup>2</sup> In summary, the need for relief from tax burden and the policy resonance with local ideologies of reproduction won over Congolese couples.

Temporary labor migrations and heavy recruiting deprived communities of healthy males, diminished food production, upset sex ratios, and created involuntary sexual abstinence among wives in migrants-sending communities (AA 1929a, 1929b). Policies to alleviate the negative effects of migrations came earlier when the colonial administration monitored the movements of men and women living in *chefferies* and *secteurs* by enforcing the pass cards law of 1910. Nevertheless, Congolese who lived in mining camps, state posts, and trading stations escaped administrative monitoring. A commission in 1918 restricted the movements of these Congolese as it criminalized "vagrancies," and regulated female sexuality. For mere accusations of prostitution and promiscuous sexual behaviors, it, moreover, authorized colonial officials to arrest and send back to their villages female adolescents, unmarried young women, and widows who lived in these agglomerations. It also authorized them to round up and compel valid unemployed men to enter the workforce or to join the colonial army (AA 1921b).

An additional law further empowered territorial administrators in 1922 to fight abusive methods of recruitments, to summon companies to supply good rations to workers, and to improve healthcare where it badly lacked (AA 1930). The goal was to improve low standards of living, to remedy food shortages, and to diminish morbidity, problems that persisted in the labor camps. Outside labor camps, district commissioners and territorial administrators implemented similar rules by occasionally exempting entire villages for one year from porterage, taxes, and work in the mines and road construction, although high-ranking officials generally opposed these measures because their uncontrolled implementation diminished cash crop production and eventually state revenues. Such measures improved public health. A body of evidence shows that work in road construction caused hardships and deaths. The construction of a road in Lubefu in the Sankuru District in the 1920s is a good illustration. During its construction, some 6,381 Congolese worked on the project but as many as 210 died over three months in 1925 (AA 1926). The new laws authorized district commissioners to order company managers to mechanize their enter-

2 Interview with Osoko, Lelema, July 1980.

prises, to stabilize their workforce, and to improve conditions of work and life. The General Governor put it plainly, when he wrote:

You must guarantee healthy and abundant food, pay handsome wages regularly, make family life easier, and organize labor contracts in a manner that permits workers to be in touch with their villages (AA 1926).

The Governor of Orientale Province A. de Meulemeester struck a similar chord in 1925 in defense of workers at the gold mines of Kilo-Moto:

I am absolutely not willing to maintain mineworkers in slavery ... the Director of the mines must change the situation sooner ... I will no longer authorize the territorial authorities to continue to assist in recruiting labor if the plight of workers does not improve (AA 1925b).

To eliminate portage, which “increased the risk of contamination of sleeping sickness and malaria, and decimated entire groups” (AA 1933, 1936b), the colonial administration ordered private companies to build roads and to increase the number of markets in the areas of their operation in order to reduce distances that peasants traveled to sell their cash crops. Although the construction of these roads still had negative impact on the population as the case of Lubefu Road described earlier showed, the roads reduced portage and exhaustion. Where portage persisted, the colonial administration built rest houses alongside roads. Overall, the impacts of this initiative on demography were mixed (AA 1938).

The most successful initiative that alleviated the negative effects of migrations and excessive recruiting was the implementation of a set of recommendations by the government labor commissions of 1925, 1928, and 1930 (Léonard 1935: 330, 341, 346). The three commissions divided potential recruits into *travailleurs au loin* (long-distance workers), *travailleurs à petite distance* (short-distance workers), and *travailleurs sur place* (on-spot workers), and set precise percentages of healthy males in each category the employers were allowed to recruit from any chiefdom. Based on the recommendations of the commissions, local administrations disallowed to recruit more than 10 per cent of healthy males as long-distance workers from any chiefdom, and half of this percentage would not take the job if the trip to the workplace required two days of walk. The objective was to prevent deaths of migrants and regular workers caused by long trips, change in diets, and maladjustment to new environments and climates. Yogolelo wa Kasimba

has documented that numerous new workers of the “Union Minière du Haut-Katanga” from Maniema died of diarrhea in Ruashi, the outskirts of today Lubumbashi because they did not tolerate a diet based on corn flour (Yogolelo 1974: 100; APO 1924–25, 1928, 1930–31). Similarly, employers could recruit only 15 per cent of villagers as short-distance migrants, and the tasks of these seasonal workers could not interfere with their daily economic activities or the pursuit of entertainments. The goal of this rule was to make rural life pleasurable, although this goal was not attainable during the period studied as *corvée*-labor and compulsory cash crop production still negatively affected the health of peasants and the quality of their nutrition (Bertrand 1955). This rule kept short-distance migrants within their ethnic boundaries, reducing migrations and the spread of diseases. The *travailleurs sur place* consisted of workers the territorial administrators and agronomists considered incapable of adjusting to working conditions outside their “homeland.” Now their role consisted of providing labor to local enterprises at peak labor demands particularly in seasonal activities (Likaka 1997a: 8–14; APO 1948–52). Put differently, the new rules set a ratio of 22 healthy males to 75 women, children, and the old, or disabled. Finally, the division of the country into economic zones in 1928, which created a regional division of labor, reduced labor competition and minimized the impact of excessive labor recruitments on communities. The purpose of all the changes was to serve the capitalist sectors of the economy without undermining the reproductive capacity of households and communities.

Initial colonial government public health policies from the beginning to 1933 aimed at eradicating endemic diseases and epidemics.<sup>3</sup> To achieve this goal, the colonial government officials quarantined people afflicted with sleeping sickness and leprosy in special villages, and built dispensaries headed by a physician in each *territoire* (APO 1917b). Through the measures, they attempted to bring modern medicine to the villagers. To sway officials in the central government in Belgium, moreover, high-ranking officials in the Congo underscored the economic dimension of public health by arguing that its improvement was an integral component of the expansion of cash nexus. To promote cotton cultivation in Uele, for example, the Governor of Orientale Province A. de Meulemeester pleaded to the central administration this way:

3 Van der Linden 1948: 371; Cattier 1906; Bertrand 1955.

The Azande is sedentary but the sleeping sickness is awaiting for him ... We should take measures to defend him against the scourge so he can prosper by growing a textile, which the Egyptians in the past taught him how to cultivate, to spin, and to weave (de Meulemeester 1921: 652; APO 1910–1932).

The results of all the initiatives varied. The initiatives reversed demographic distortions in some communities, and failed in most. In 1952, over a decade after the period investigated, the “Conseil de Province Orientale” still concluded, “Despite the protection and medical care they received, the demographic future of some communities was definitely jeopardized” (APO 1952: 77).

To sum up this account of the colonial administration’s efforts to end population decline, I will underline two points. Until the 1920s, the colonial administration was still weak to control the countryside. As a result, private companies continued to create environments conducive to the destruction of Congolese population. Nevertheless, economic reasons and international pressures forced the colonial government to take censuses, to undertake efforts to control epidemics and migrations, and to encourage high childbirths. These measures countered differentially the demographic effects of diseases, portage, and migrations.

### Changing Demographic Regimes: Company Strategies

For the future of the race and the prosperity of our colony, we must count on high childbirths (AA n.d. c).

This quote underscores the common interest the mining companies and the colonial administration shared in halting the destruction of populations. This interest appeared in the common efforts for the stabilization of labor, which, with emphasis on the mechanization of industries and construction of roads and railroads, represented the most important change, which relieved African communities of the burdens of labor demands and notably improved conditions of public health and biological reproduction. Initiatives taken by Forminière, Kilo-Moto mines, and Géomines, which developed similar methods of recruitments and policies regarding rations, housing, and healthcare, resulted in the stability of the households, which remained the units of reproduction and production of exchange values in both villages and workers camps.

Since its foundation in 1910, Géomines had relied on the rotations of migrants and unmarried regular workers for its operation. However, to improve the general demographic situations in its camps, the company undertook several initiatives for the stabilization of its workforce. Going against past practices, it predominantly hired married workers in the mid-1920s, in particular young couples to whom it paid premiums in exchange for high childbirths. The company also promoted the stabilization of the households and population growth by paying the bride-price for unmarried workers. The ultimate goal was the elimination of “*faux mariages*” and prostitution, which spread venereal diseases in its labor camps and affected workers’ fertility. Furthermore, Géomines paid child allowances in the 1920s to encourage workers’ families to shorten birth spacing (AA 1936a). This measure was an attack on a long-standing tradition, which, by allowing a long period of lactation, created long spaces between births and reduced fertility, therefore contributing to the depopulation of the Congo.

In summary, the company’s shift from hiring migrants and unmarried workers to employing regularly married workers and the gifts of money to unmarried workers for the payment of bridewealth reduced migrations and prostitution in the camps. Moreover, the payment of material incentives to the families of workers in exchange for high births and child allowances in return for short birth spaces lured couples to have many children. These initiatives resulted in the stability of the households and high fertility.

Founded jointly in 1906 by the “Société Générale” and two American concerns, Forminière received a diamond mining concession in Kasai, and set up three rubber plantations in the Leopold II Lake District (Vellut 1983). Forminière took similar measures to improve demographic conditions in its mining concessions and hinterlands. The company demonstrated its commitment to the improvement of biological reproduction and family life in its camps by recruiting mainly married workers, and by providing unmarried workers and new recruits with advances in cash to pay for bride-price (AA 1928b, 1929b). More relevant to the company’s efforts of encouraging population growth was its structural reform, aimed at ending portage that decimated porters, migrants, and regular recruits. Besides the use of navigable parts of rivers, the company built six thousand kilometers of roads. By 1927, these roads connected the company’s mines to recruiting centers, and enabled it to move recruits by using beasts of burden, wagons, and trucks (AA 1928b, 1929b).

After the company had constructed roads to move workers, several communities known as *villages routiers* emerged alongside. Settled first by retired workers, new residents attracted by the prospect of receiving healthcare from Forminière joined the communities. The maintenance of sections of roads and the production of foodstuffs for the company's workforce to improve workers' nutrition, the two major economic roles assigned to these communities, were integral parts of the company's conscious efforts to reverse population decline. An infrastructure of roads, while it alleviated many problems that undermined population growth, did not end the depletion of population, however. The heavy traffic, for example, constantly required labor for road repairs.

Two decades after the operation of Kilo and Moto mines began, the colonial government high-ranking officials' critiques of conditions of work, health, and diets had become voluminous. Colonial officials explicitly compelled the company to expand the medical infrastructure of dispensaries and hospitals, and to improve its methods of supplying foodstuffs to the camps in order to ensure food security and the stability of the households. In responding, the company improved healthcare to reduce the prevalence of dysentery, meningitis, syphilis, ulcers, and yaws, diseases that still affected and killed workers until the late 1920s. In particular, it extended treatments by injections to patients inflicted with syphilis, yaws, and ulcer. As part of "pro-natal" policy, the company created maternity wards supervised by nursing midwives and pediatric clinics managed by Catholic nuns and European women. To fight infant mortality, these services began weighing infants, detecting intestinal parasites, and treating yaws, and provided prenatal consultations and medicines to improve health while simultaneously promoting disease prevention (AA 1929b).

To encourage mothers to utilize hospitals and reduce long intervals between births, the company distributed incentives in cash and in kind. The amount of money and goods given changed over time. In 1928, mothers received 75 francs, loincloths, blankets, and ponchos which they so much appreciated to protect children against the chilly weather of the Ituri District. They also received rice, palm oil, and salt. The stereotype of "African laziness" was as powerful an exploitative practice to justify the appropriation of labor as the distribution of material incentives, which won over the hearts and minds of African peasants. The managers of Kilo and Moto mines labeled workers' wives "lazy" in order to justify the obligation they

imposed on them to grow food on the company's land. To workers' wives, who produced more food for their families, the company distributed production premiums in addition to gifts of household products to those who kept their homes clean. The gifts concealed the exploitative nature of material incentives and encouraged workers' wives to increase food production and to improve the quality of family nutrition (Likaka 1997a: 8–10).

### **Struggle for Fertility and Health: Catholic Missionary Strategies as Paradigm**

Catholic missionaries contributed to the regeneration of the Congolese population by founding dispensaries, denouncing ruthless methods of recruiting workers in their ecclesiastical regions, and by changing traditions and institutions that molded sexual practices and behaviors, and local ideologies that underpinned biological reproduction (APO 1937). Schools and clinics were built to achieve these goals. It was at a mission station dispensary that most Congolese for the first time received *kinini* (linguistic interference of quinine) to treat malaria, castor oil for worms, and Mercurochrome for wounds.<sup>4</sup> Where Catholic missionaries did not own dispensaries, they ran or worked in those owned by private companies. The prospects of education and healthcare influenced Africans' reception of missionaries' discourse on gender, sexuality, and biological reproduction.

The greatest contribution of Catholic missionaries in reversing population decline was in fighting devastating colonial economic practices. They denounced the negative effects of rubber collection from the very beginning by bringing to light the wars and unsanitary conditions in which Congolese villagers collected rubber. Once the collection of rubber collapsed, Catholic missionaries denounced the abusive recruitments done by private companies and nutritional deficiencies brought about by mandatory cash crop cultivation. In this struggle, their membership in advisory institutions such "Commission Permanente pour la Protection des Indigènes" allowed them to influence colonial decisions (Roelens 1923).

From the outset, Catholic missionaries directed numerous campaigns towards the regulation of marriage, the abolition of bridewealth, methods of breast-feeding, and birth spacing, which they be-

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Katayi, Lubumbashi, July 17, 1986. The term *kinini* in many African languages today is the semantic equivalent of pills.

lieved acted as barriers to population increase. Missionaries also targeted the elimination of polygyny. They argued that polygyny lowered fertility and upset sex ratios because the most productive women married fewer old men. We have discussed that the introduction of the money economy increased bride-price in the 1920s and 1930s, hurting unmarried young men. Until the 1930s, these unmarried young men in the Congo Basin and Uele could not easily find wives. The situation forced many to postpone marriage or to migrate. Thus, empirical evidence supported the claims of missionaries. The Catholic clergymen, who have since the 1890s pressured the colonial government to outlaw polygyny, saw their efforts come to fruition when in 1914, as discussed earlier, the colonial government forced polygynous men to pay taxes on every additional wife. The legislation began to play an effective role only after 1926, when the colonial government created native courts, which missionaries successfully used to fight polygyny (APO 1914–29, 1948: 728). Catholic missionaries also offered refuge to “women whose behavior was out of hands” in the eyes of kinfolds. This group consisted of widows who, because of the widespread practice of levirate, could end in polygamous unions, and female adolescents who had objected to an arranged marriage and run away from the authority of the family and lineage (AA n.d. b, 1919a).

Local ideologies underpinning biological reproduction, long-spaced childbirths, postpartum sexual abstinence, methods of abortion, and gender roles in production and reproduction, were the targets of Catholic missionaries’ campaigns. Although missionaries pressured the government to enact antipolygyny legislation, they were convinced that a permanent solution for high childbirths lay in changing local ideologies of biological reproduction. This amounted to the change of traditions and gender ideologies. In reality, Catholic missionaries believed that persuasion through conversations would “awaken women’s conscience of moral value and self-respect” (AA 1923). Postpartum sexual abstinence was a tradition that women followed prior to colonization, and which lasted at least two years while they breast-fed babies. Missionaries believed that long spaces between births were the cause of polygyny and the root of low fertility. They thought that by abolishing the tradition and abortive practices, they could shorten birth intervals and increase fertility. Catholic missionaries’ campaigns against these traditions and practices, part of a discourse of modernity, weakened the traditions. However, they were not entirely successful. Besides the radicalism of these changes, causing

local resistance, the dynamics of regional colonial economy, which had incorporated the households, countered missionaries’ actions. As we have seen, mandatory cash crop production encouraged polygyny, and mining required a large workforce, creating migrations that resulted in sexual imbalance as men left temporarily the village for work. In migrants-sending groups of Watsa, for example, women still aborted in the absence of their husbands working in the mines in spite of missionaries’ campaigns. Chief Sengbwe’s testimony in Watsa, in 1929, is illuminating in this respect and worth quoting at length:

In the past, when the cause of someone’s death was not evident, always a suspect was subjected to a poison ordeal. Since your arrival, you Europeans, the practice has been forbidden. The practice of course put to death innocent persons. However, it always had benefit since women feared to abort in the belief that they would pass through the *benge* [poison ordeal]. Now the tradition has disappeared almost completely and women use frequently medicines to abort. Today the number of abortions is higher than you can imagine. Some practices have no sense in your eyes but they used to create fear of abortions and adultery . . . labor camps are now places where traditions are no longer observed. Mutilations are forbidden, but prostitution is in place and venereal diseases are spreading like fire (AA 1929a).

Between 1886 and 1933, Catholic missionaries created schools, which they transformed into vehicles of cultural change to influence sexual behaviors of younger generations (AA 1921a). Since 1906, a concordat between the Vatican and the Congo Free State granted Catholic missions the right to build schools in exchange for land. Well before the concordat, numerous religious orders had already flooded over the colony to transform the space and the culture of local people. From mission stations, the “pro-natal” discourse extended into local communities. In reality, this treaty had more far-reaching consequences in transforming sexual behavior and the ideologies of biological reproduction because of missionaries’ control over schooling than the polygyny-taxation discussed earlier. In the Vicariate of Higher Congo, created on 3 December 1886, Victor Roelens, who became successively its apostolic administrator in 1893 and bishop in 1896, forged the order’s population strategy. Prior to 1894, the area, which became the Vicariate of Higher Congo, was a slave-exporting region. Low population resulting from the slave trade may have prompted the use of presents to Christian families in exchange for short-spaced childbirth. Any Christian family that had a child within the eighteen



months following a birth, received gifts of clothes, food, soap, and medical advice. Baudouinville (today Moba), the seat of the Vicariate, shows that the White Fathers' program was successful. Founded in 1893, Baudouinville was already a small city by 1898. At that time, slave ransoming and immigration accounted for a rapid increase in population. By 1914, however, the population of the city was 2,000 and included 400 monogamous families, which had an average of four children each.<sup>5</sup> Natural increase explains this late overall population increase.

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