TÖDT Daniel. — *Elitenbildung und Dekolonisierung. Die Évolués in Belgisch Kongo, 1944-1960*

Christian Hadorn

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/etudesafriaines/27184>

DOI: 10.4000/etudesafriaines.27184

ISSN: 1777-5353

Publisher

Éditions de l'EHESS

Printed version

Date of publication: 15 September 2019

Number of pages: 929-933

ISSN: 0008-0055

Electronic reference

Christian Hadorn, "TÖDT Daniel. — *Elitenbildung und Dekolonisierung. Die Évolués in Belgisch Kongo, 1944-1960*", *Cahiers d'études africaines* [Online], 235 | 2019, Online since 15 September 2019, connection on 07 January 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesafriaines/27184> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesafriaines.27184>

This text was automatically generated on 7 January 2022.

© Cahiers d'Études africaines

TÖDT Daniel. — *Elitenbildung und Dekolonisierung. Die Évolués in Belgisch Kongo, 1944-1960*

Christian Hadorn

REFERENCES

TÖDT Daniel. — *Elitenbildung und Dekolonisierung. Die Évolués in Belgisch Kongo, 1944-1960*. Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht (« Kritische Studien zur Geschichtswissenschaft », 228), 2018, 392 p., bibl., index, ill. The work on this review has been funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF).

- 1 Over the last two decades, the study of post-WWII development colonialism and decolonisation in Africa has increasingly benefited from approaches related to social history. This current of scholarship is now enriched by Daniel Tödt's careful study on the late colonial reforms in the Belgian Congo. Originating in a dissertation in history conceived at the Humboldt University of Berlin, this book analyses the interplay between educated Africans' demand for equality with Europeans and the latter's attempts to make Africans' advancement conditional on their incorporation of European bourgeois norms and values. By means of newspapers, associations and privileged legal status, Belgian officials emulated other colonial powers' policies to form and accommodate a loyal moral elite who would extend the colonial transformation of African society. This debate on individual cultural "improvement" contradicted the older idea of insurmountable racial difference. By advocating their virtues as *évolués*, educated Africans thus championed their entitlement to legal and social advancement. Retracing their novel expectations, experiences and, ultimately, disappointments in a non-teleological way is one important achievement of this book.
- 2 Educated elites are a long-standing issue in Congolese historiography. However, as Tödt rightfully underscores, the hitherto prevailing focus on their role within anti-colonial

movements neglected “aspects which did not [...] bear immediate political consequences”² (p. 27). The author thus aims to contribute to the still great desideratum regarding the social history of elites in Africa. As colonial hierarchy would have been crucially legitimised by cultural ascriptions, Tödt convincingly deploys a methodology to incorporate these into his analysis. Taking into account scholarship on the European bourgeoisie and its global civilising mission in the 19th and 20th centuries, Tödt grasps the ways in which Africans adapted the Belgian propaganda as “cultural embourgeoisement.”³ Referring to Bourdieu’s concepts, he understands this as “a strategy of empowerment by colonial subjects [...], which is founded on the individual accumulation of social and cultural capital within the [colonial] institutions of African elite formation” (p. 22). As this enabled colonial subjects to demand social promotion, colonial rulers tended to accuse them of a yet incomplete “bourgeois-ness” (p. 23). To investigate the resulting tension between “empowerment and disempowerment” in empirical terms, Tödt aims to examine “various situations, places, media, biographies and life trajectories” by a combined investigation of discourse and practice in “everyday colonial situations” (p. 24). The author presents bourgeois gender roles as a core component of colonial elite formation (pp. 22-24), whose ramifications in specific contexts are discussed throughout the study.

- 3 Besides some sources from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and France, the study mainly exploits Belgian archives. Most importantly, Tödt examined innumerable issues of the Belgian Congo’s press, which is archived in the Musée royal d’Afrique centrale in Brussels’ nearby town of Tervuren. Amongst various administrative records, he investigated comprehensive collections on elite associations and commissions for colonial subjects’ legal advancement which had never been previously studied. The author also conducted two dozen interviews with contemporaries or their younger companions and descendants. However, their testimonies are not comprehensively discussed as a distinct layer of oral history, but rather quoted for select pieces of complementary information.
- 4 The book is divided into eight chapters, discussing temporally overlapping themes. An overview on Belgian colonial rule and its delayed policy of fostering an African colonial elite is followed by a chapter on the main official elite magazines. Chapter 3 retraces the debate of hesitant Belgian politicians and legal experts on a special status for Africans sufficiently conforming to “civilized,” *i.e.*, European bourgeois norms and values. The next two chapters discuss the concurrent public debate—involving both European and African authors—regarding exemplary “civilized” behaviour and the associations officially promoted to perfect “the African elite” through guided leisure activities. Another chapter thoroughly investigates the troubling fate of Africans actually applying for privileged status. In his last chapters on the late 1950s project of a Belgo-Congolese Community and its hasty revocation by “the centrifugal forces of decolonisation” (p. 297), Tödt reconsiders political history through his distinct expertise on the politically preponderant *évolués*.
- 5 According to Tödt, the journals by and for *évolués* served “as a means of reciprocal control” for educated Africans supervising the implementation of reforms and for their surveillance by the administration (p. 33). By examining the press debate on the many etiquettes of “true” *évolués* regarding education, dress, drinking and bar culture, marriage, family life, domesticity, consumption and economising, the study presents a panorama of claims and realities in *évolués*’ daily lives. This innovative chapter allows

for some insight into the complex variety of their broader social and familial environment. This debate, Tödt argues, did not question the legitimisation of unequal rights by cultural difference but rather contrasted “perfected Africans” to superficially civilised “snobs.”

- 6 According to Belgian plans, leisure associations would ultimately form “the African elite” as a unified social group. As annexes of institutions such as school or military structures, administrations or private companies, all associations were to be supervised by Belgian members. Associations of former school students—notably the Association des anciens élèves des Pères de Scheut (ADAPES) and the Association des anciens élèves des Frères (ASSANEF)—and urban cultural associations of people sharing the same regional, linguistic and/or ethnic background grew to become the most important. These organisations did not automatically see themselves as equals. As Tödt asserts, in citing frictions around a 1952 football game between ADAPES and ASSANEF teams, they often regarded each other as competitors. The predominance of identification along parallel educational infrastructures or different ethno-regional origins would highlight the limits of colonial social engineering, the author argues. At the same time, associations modelled on those of *évolués* proliferated in African society, a fact from which Tödt concludes that *évolués* were increasingly perceived as mastering approved and captivating social conduct. In fact, many associations departed from the prescribed confines of instructive lectures and engaged in the reprimanded activities of dancing and drinking, often with their Belgian supervisors’ connivance.
- 7 Behind this connivance—which contrasted significantly with the colonial authorities’ swift repression of any political criticism—Tödt believes to have discovered “a priority of retaining power” (p. 221), which would have outweighed reformist rhetoric. As Belgium, by its ratification of the UN Charter, pledged to grant political participation to colonised populations in accordance with their degree of maturity, Belgian actors in international forums could thus point to the peculiar life and activities of these associations to demonstrate the persistence of Africans’ supposed lack of civilisation. The Belgian loss of control over African associations, Tödt suggests, was therefore a “controlled loss of control” (*ibid.*). This represents a major argument of this study, suggesting an additional occurrence of European colonial rulers’ disengagement from their interventions within African societies while putting the responsibility for the consequences on local elites. Tödt’s argument of official discourse being obstructed in a clinging to old power relations is fully convincing, as it is also backed by another issue neglected by the colonial government: the continuing disrespect of many local administrators, especially in rural settings and towns far from Léopoldville, of Africans’ demands to implement the reforms (pp. 205-213).
- 8 Breaking earlier promises of broad access to the *Carte du mérite civique*, the official insistence on perfection led to but a few successful applications (1,774 in total by 1959, p. 265). This fact and the meager benefits of these certificates were additional sources of disappointment. The Belgo-Congolese Community was thus short on support among Africans. Contradicting the old explanation of the postcolonial chaos in the Congo as being due to a lack of elites, Tödt attributes this outcome to the Belgian elite policy, a direct result of its preference for elite factionalism and political inexperience over real transfers of power (p. 326).
- 9 From the perspective of comparative elite research, two issues merit closer scrutiny. The first is related to Tödt’s extensive use of the notions “the African elite” or “the

elite” in the singular. This might appear as alluding to C. Wright Mill’s term of a unified “power elite,” but that concept is not addressed here. Instead, Tödt aims to deploy this politically charged terminology as a means to analyse how it has been used in its specific historical contexts (pp. 15-17), and he succeeds in scrutinising it from many perspectives. However, its nearly sole usage also implies that the persons subsumed under it are considered an elite mainly through their relationship to the colonial state. This provides but a vague notion of their integration within (rural) African society. (Among other things, a more systematic examination of life trajectories might have produced more insight here.) This terminology also potentially reproduces a prescriptive colonial discourse, which might be related to the consulted sources. It also creates irritation on a conceptual level. More elaborate discussions of the elite concept usually include the assumption of numerous and differing elite positions.⁴ Tödt only mentions “traditional” elites twice in his book, and merely in passing (pp. 15, 111), in spite of the insistence in important newer studies (some of which the author cites in other occasions) on the ongoing importance of chieftaincy in late colonialism and beyond.⁵ More reflection on the elite concept, as well as elucidating why some related issues are not examined, would have significantly enhanced this study.

- 10 Secondly, the author laudably attempts to prevent “analytical tunnel vision on the elite policy in Belgian Congo” by “selectively” comparing it with those of other colonial powers (p. 30). Although mostly instructive, these passages often portray large-scale changes in colonial policy in broad narrative brushstrokes which tend to be imprecise. Tödt claims, for example, that by the interwar period, France and Britain would have placed “by far a larger importance” on higher education for Africans than Belgium (p. 46). While this is not wrong (and certainly more accurate in the British case), it might be seen as a slightly euphemistic portrayal. The École William Ponty, the highest school in French-ruled Africa, south of the Sahara, provided but post-primary vocational education. Until 1947, it was thus nearly impossible to even aspire to the *baccalauréat*.⁶ While British and French administrations “increasingly separated the political and legal integration of colonial subjects from their cultural assimilation [...] the bourgeois-ness of the African elite [...] developed into a central political issue” only in the Belgian Congo, Tödt revealingly argues (p. 72; unfortunately, its relevance for Ruanda-Urundi remains unaddressed). However, without differentiating references—the racially segregated electoral systems in action until 1957 in most French and, even longer, in many British colonies are but one example—such general statements could lead the reader to falsely deduce that these powers had an overly early intention to de-colonise.
- 11 Daniel Tödt’s balanced and multi-layered study is a crucial contribution to the social history of educated Africans within an especially restrictive form of late colonial rule. It presents new analysis regarding the press in colonial Africa and it draws the Belgian Congo into the scholarly debate on colonial/imperial citizenship. Non-specialist readers will benefit from this book as an up-to-date introduction into the history of the Belgian Congo presenting the complex mutual interactions of colonial and metropolitan society and politics in a concise and most readable way. This book deserves a timely translation so that the mostly non-German speaking audiences studying Congo-Kinshasa may engage with it.

NOTES

2. All translations from the German original are my own.

3. The German “Bürger” comprises both English terms “citizen” and “bourgeois.” Tödt is referring to the latter notion; see D. TÖDT, “‘Les Noirs Perfectionnés,’ Cultural Embourgeoisement in Belgian Congo during the 1940s and 1950s,” *Working Papers of the Sonderforschungsbereich 640* (4), 2012, <<http://edoc.hu-berlin.de/series/sfb-640-papers/2012-4/PDF/4.pdf>>.

4. T. D. BAKARY, “Les élites africaines au pouvoir. Problématique, méthodologie, état des travaux,” Talence, Centre d’étude d’Afrique noire, 1990, pp. 25-33 ; A. BEHREND & J. PAULI, “Zwischen Charisma und Korruption. Kontinuitäten und Brüche in der Auseinandersetzung mit Eliten in Afrika,” in T. BIERSCHEK & E. SPIES (eds.), *50 Jahre Unabhängigkeit in Afrika. Kontinuitäten, Brüche, Perspektiven*, Cologne, Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, 2012, pp. 301-320 (see especially pp. 305, 310-312).

5. J.-H. JÉZÉQUEL, *Les “mangeurs de craies”: Socio-histoire d’une catégorie lettrée à l’époque coloniale : les instituteurs diplômés de l’École normale William-Ponty (c.1900-c.1960)*, PhD thesis (Paris: EHESS), 2002.

6. J.-H. JÉZÉQUEL, *op. cit.*, 2002, p. 378.