50 Years of Congolese-Belgian Relations

2010 sees the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of Congo's independence, but the question is whether there will really be much to celebrate. After all, the country's post-colonial history has been one long tale of chaos and misery. Immediately after the declaration of independence on 30 June 1960 the spiral of violence began. Mutinies in the brand new republic's army led to large-scale disorder and Belgian paratroops were deployed to rescue their compatriots. Since this military intervention took place without Congolese permission - two whole weeks after independence - diplomatic relations with the former mother country were broken off. Despite all the splendid ceremonials of the handover, it was this international row that set the tone for relations between the two countries.

Just as with France and North Africa, the Netherlands and Indonesia, and Great Britain and the Commonwealth, however, despite the problems of decolonisation Belgium today still has exceptionally good relations with its former colony. These have been fostered by a complex of strategic and economic interests, feelings of guilt over colonialism and personal and emotional ties between Belgian and Congolese politicians. If you look at the intensity of the relations, with the passing years the curve undeniably shows a downward trend: from direct neo-colonial policies and economic interventionism in the 1960s to cautious diplomatic relations nowadays, with the accent on remembrance of colonial times and cultural projects. Many people will identify with the way in which Eva Brems, Professor of Human Rights at the University of Ghent, describes the current bilateral state of affairs: 'No, guilt is not what we feel about Congo. What we feel is less intense, but it's also warmer. We are fond of Congo.' For many Belgians Congo is a place of recollection and sentiment, nurtured by family stories and images from the collective colonial memory.

Trial in Boma, Congo, 1897.
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Such gentle, nostalgic feelings were not yet the norm immediately post-1960. While the repatriated Belgians were coming to terms with the personal traumas resulting from the violence surrounding independence, on a political level extensive technical support and a sophisticated network of lobbyists and advisers was being set up with a view to directing Congo's internal politics. Squeezed between the world powers of the Cold War, caught in a web of intrigue and separatist movements, in those days the enormous country was tossed about like a rudderless ship on the open sea. It was a time when the Congolese leaders were constantly having their ears bent, though rarely to their advantage. One cause célèbre is the support the giant (Belgian) enterprise Union Minière du Haut-Katanga gave to Moïse Tshombé at the time of the breakaway of Katanga, when the Belgians hoped to continue the old policies with a limited decolonisation process. Equally controversial is the role of the Belgian government in the assassination of Patrice Lumumba in 1961, in 2000 a parliamentary committee of inquiry came to the conclusion that the Belgian authorities had a moral responsibility regarding the atrocious death of the then Prime Minister of Congo.

Mobutu's take-over in 1965 put an end to direct intervention by the Belgians. In fact, at first the advent of this former journalist was greeted with jubilation: Mobutu brought peace and unity to the ravaged country. However, it very quickly became apparent that the man was a master tactician who, with extreme shrewdness and often with a great deal of drama and 'palaver' sought to explain relations with Belgium for his own profit. The Belgian historian Guy Vanhemmescha concluded that The character traits of the Congolese dictator have had a very strong influence on relations between the two countries. Mobutu played Belgian politicians off against each other, ruffled and corrupted, and knew how to use emotional blackmail to turn every situation to his own advantage. When it suited his purpose, he could plead the colonial past as eloquently in a glowing speech about mutual friendship as in an argument for compensation for all the humiliations inflicted on his country. Given Belgium's desire to continue to play a part on the international stage via campaigns that were a gift to the media. Today a new generation of writers, historians and artists is ready to take up the dialogue with Congo without complexes or polarisation. Colonial history is studied in the universities enthusiastically and innovatively. Cultural exchange projects are taking place, like the Royal Flemish Theatre project in Kinshasa. And on national television the entertaining Radio Congo has shown the delights of everyday life below the equator belt.

The flag-bearer of this renewed interest in Congo is the writer and cultural historian David van Reybrouck, who is in the spotlight at the moment with his stage monologue Mission (Missile). Van Reybrouck had already written himself out of his guilt complex over colonialism in his 2005 essay The longing for self-chastisement (Het verlangen naar zelfkastijding): what Leopold II did with the rubber plantations and the daily humiliations of the colonial system must not be used as an excuse to avoid a meeting with the Congolese today. Both in the Congo and in Belgium, people will be wailing to see how this meeting will be (re-)experienced in this festive year of 2010. A whole array of books and exhibitions have already been announced.

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The image accompanying this article are taken from:
Clart De Keyzer, Congo belge, Tietj: Lannoo, 2009.