

Reuben A. Loffman, *Church, State and Colonialism in Southeastern Congo, 1890-1962*.

Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies Series (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019, 281 pp., ISBN 978-3-030-17379-1).

Reuben Loffman's first monograph is a welcome addition to the history of Church and state relations in colonial Congo. This book contributes to ongoing academic debates on the region's pasts while shedding much-needed light on some of its neglected historiographic corners. Firstly, Loffman brings depth and nuance to the study of what has long been depicted as the 'colonial trinity', namely the extensive collaboration of Church, industry and administration in the governance of Belgian Congo.¹ The author looks at state and Church relations from the bottom-up and from the standpoint of the little-studied area of Kongolo in the Tanganyika province. This original approach leads him to demonstrate that the seemingly harmonious relationships between both institutions could effectively be mired by conflict and competition. Secondly, the author embraces a broad diachronic scope, which runs from the first years of the Congo Free State to the country's tumultuous early post-independence. This ambitious time-span which has also been adopted by recent, thought-provoking monographs² allows for a close observation of changing power dynamics in the medium time. Thirdly, although Catholic missions have played a crucial role in shaping the colonial experience in Congo, they have rarely been the object of such in-depth research.

In the introduction, Loffman describes Church and administration in Kongolo as 'competitive collaborators', whose consideration for each other waxed and waned according to circumstances. He also pays attention to the key influence of several local middlemen, Luba chiefs and nobles in this shifting power balance. This approach offers him the opportunity to study colonial chieftainship both in depth and on the field. Chiefs were a linchpin of Belgian colonialism, yet have too often been overlooked in the writing of Congo's political history. Furthermore, the author observes a discrepancy between the mission's grandiose plans for Kongolo in the late nineteenth century and their effective achievements at the dawn of Congo's independence. If the Roman Catholic society of the White Fathers originally dreamt of building a quasi-autonomous missionary 'republic' in Southeastern Belgian Congo, the Church had to content itself with smaller victories. Although the White Fathers and the Spiritans – the two Catholic orders active in Kongolo – managed to make a durable imprint in the region and to pursue their designs in relative autonomy to the state, they could never thoroughly colonise Congolese minds.

In the following chapter, Loffman delves on the socio-political context in which the inception of European colonial efforts in Kongolo took place. Both Church and state had to make do with existing power structures, which had been profoundly reshaped by the traumatic experience of the Zanzibari slave trade. Loffman also describes at length the complex pre-colonial history of the indigenous Luba and Songye cultures, in order to shed light on the havoc wreaked to them by the brutality of late nineteenth-century slavery.

In Chapter 3, the author investigates the early missionary endeavours in Kongolo, insisting on their martial and masculine guise. White Fathers both acted much like frontier pioneers, setting up camps in still-uncharted territories, and followed a hierarchical organisation echoing those of an army. Most importantly, he demonstrates that the Church had preceded the state in the region, playing therefore a key role in its effective colonisation. After detailing the setbacks encountered by the priests in their conversion efforts, Loffman approaches the reorganisation of chieftainships by the colonial administration. Local polities, already turned upside down by the slave trade, were once again radically refashioned in order to fit into the colonial order. The author interestingly flips the traditional historiographic narrative, by investigating the motives of the local 'big men' who chose to collaborate with the newcomers, rather than perceiving chieftainship exclusively from the standpoint of the Belgian state.

Chapter 4 tackles the failure of the Belgian colonial administration's scheme to build 'great chieftainships' after the First World War. It hoped to recreate extensive princedoms, which colonial officials falsely believed to have existed prior to the slave trade. However, local communities did not consider these neo-traditionalist structures as legitimate. The failure of the state to assert its authority allowed the missions to expand their network and influence in and around Kongolo. In doing so, missionaries did not always abide to the benevolent code of conduct expected from them. For instance, they occasionally resorted to corporeal punishment in their conversion endeavours, which directly challenged the state's claim on the monopoly of legitimate violence.

In Chapter 5, Loffman approaches chieftainship in the 1930s through two intertwined dynamics. He first sheds light on the chiefs' role as a transmission belt between colonial actors and indigenous communities, which left them very little leeway in the administration of their 'subjects'. Chiefs were responsible for enforcing mandatory cotton cultivation schemes, which only enhanced their unpopularity. In order to reassert their legitimacy, some chiefs in the Kongolo region actively supported a 'witch-finding'

1 Crawford Young, *Politics in Congo: Decolonization and Independence* (Princeton 1965).

2 See Florence Bernalt, *Colonial Transactions. Imaginaries, Bodies, and Histories in Gabon*. Theory

in Forms (Durham 2019), and Nancy Rose Hunt, *A Nervous State. Violence, Remedies, and Reverie in Colonial Congo* (Durham 2016).

movement, which submitted suspected sorcerers to torture and a poison ordeal.

The Church and the state's more harmonious relationship in the era after the Second World War is investigated by Loffmann in Chapter 6. Missionaries had abandoned their dreams of building a Christian 'republic' in the Tanganyika province, and now focused their energy on their educative efforts. Kongolo's Catholic schools enjoyed a good reputation and attracted a growing number of Congolese pupils after 1945. These schools also supported the emergence of an African 'administrative bourgeoisie', who would come to play a crucial political and social role in the run-up to the country's independence.

Chapter 7 focuses on decolonisation. From the mid-1950s onwards, the relationship between Church and state began to unravel. The government decided to sponsor the opening of public schools in the colony, a domain formerly left exclusively to the missions. In this tense context, Congo's first ever and quite limited local elections took place in 1957, which led to the transformation of 'ethnic association' founded by members of the 'administrative bourgeoisie' into identity-based political parties. The tensions between these political parties turned violent in the days following the country's independence when, on 11 July 1960, Katanga seceded from Congo. In Kongolo, this decision pitted Baluba and Katangese communities against each other. Missionary support for the latter ultimately led to a massacre of Spiritan clerics by anti-Katangese forces on New Year's Eve 1962.

Loffman's thoroughly documented monograph is a precious contribution to its field and will certainly stimulate future intellectual debates on colonial Central Africa. It studies in depth the relationship of two of the main power players of Belgian Congo from the bottom-up, and does so while paying full attention to the agency of African actors. Furthermore, the author resorts to a broad array of written archives produced by colonial administrations and missionary orders, and oral sources that the author collected in the field. However, the richness of his material might be dizzying at times. The second chapter, for instance, is densely packed with facts, making it sometimes difficult for the reader to follow its main argument. Though Loffman makes impeccable use of his data, it would also have been interesting to sometimes have a more direct access to his source material, for example in the form of extensive quotes taken out of both archives and interviews. In spite of these limited issues, this monograph promises to stimulate, enrich and further our knowledge of Central Africa's recent political history.