

## «Tout ça ne nous rendra pas le Congo». 50 years of decolonization and Belgium

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The first years of independence of the former Belgian Congo, full of political turmoil, outbursts of violence and collapse of colonial economics, caused much trauma to Belgian society. Psychological connection with the former colony was disrupted. After the 'zaïrization' of the economy in the 70s and 80s the disappointed Belgians actually turned their back on Africa. After 1990, many aid programs were curtailed and political dialogue between Brussels and Kinshasa almost died out. The Belgian media and remaining public interest in the Congo seemed to be fading away. University African studies were about to come to nought. The Royal Museum for Central Africa at Tervuren, near Brussels, was for a long time neglected and hardly ever visited.

The 2000 Parliamentary investigation of the Belgian role in Patrice Lumumba murder and the BBC film about the 'genocide' of the Congolese under the rule of King Leopold II (2003-2004) revived the Belgians' interest in the African chapter of their history, if only for a short while. In the years that followed, it was only the TV program "Tous ça (ne nous rendra pas le Congo)" – although it had nothing to do with history or Africa – which reminded the French-speaking part of the Belgians of a colony they once had. The 100th anniversary of the declaration of the Congo being a Belgian colony (2008) went totally unnoticed except for a specially issued postal stamp.

50 years of the independent Democratic Republic of the Congo did receive considerable attention. The forthcoming anniversary was in the focus of both Flemish and Walloon media coverage in May and June 2010. There was a heated dispute in the Belgian Parliament, which preceded the arrival of the King of Belgians in Kinshasa to attend the celebrations, on whether it would be appropriate to visit a country plunged in corruption and blatant human rights violation. The history book "Congo: een geschiedenis" by the Flemish author David Van Reybrouck (2010) was third on the bestseller list of the year. Yet, it seems worth describing the specific way this "anniversary without celebration" was received by Belgian society.

- *No historical context.* The events in the Congo of the early 60s are seen as unique, as something that happened to 'us' alone.
- "Belgo-Belgian" character of the debate on 50 years of independence. It was dominated by *domestic* conflicts (the left vs the right; Flemish public opinion vs that of the French-speaking Belgians; colonialist veterans vs young people indifferent to their past).
- Explicit or implicit *nostalgia*. Most articles, documentaries, photography exhibitions and even reports covering journalists' travels around Central Africa today mainly featured memories of "our Congo", the years *preceding* 1960, and major concern about what remained of those times. There was very little interest in Congo as such, out of connection with the Belgians.
- *Negativistic, pessimistic* accents in the coverage of the 50-year way of the independent Congo and its condition today. The key words are: breakdown, depression, bad administration, survival of people left to themselves... New Congolese art, their civic initiatives, education system, etc. arouse solely professional interest.
- The surge of interest in the former colony almost entirely *focused* on 30th June, on the anniversary itself. And as it shows now, half a year later, it didn't changed a thing – Belgian society and young people in particular are as profoundly indifferent to the Congo

as before. Last October, the Queen of the Belgians visited the Museum at Tervuren. As she was leaving, she met a group of French-speaking schoolchildren from Brussels. They didn't know what museum they were about to enter. The Queen explained to them, "C'est un musée de l'Afrique". The children did not understand: "Un musée de la frite?"...