

Swarthmore College

## Works

---

French & Francophone Studies Faculty Works

French & Francophone Studies

---

2008

### Anti-Colonial Resistance In The Former Belgian Colonies

Carina Yervasi

*Swarthmore College*, [cyervas1@swarthmore.edu](mailto:cyervas1@swarthmore.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-french>



Part of the [French and Francophone Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Carina Yervasi. (2008). "Anti-Colonial Resistance In The Former Belgian Colonies". *A Historical Companion To Postcolonial Literatures: Continental Europe And Its Empires*.

<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-french/45>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in French & Francophone Studies Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact [myworks@swarthmore.edu](mailto:myworks@swarthmore.edu).

- Couttenier, Maarten (2005), *Congo Tontoongesteld. Een geschiedenis van de Belgische antropologie en het museum van Tervuren (1882–1925)*, Leuven: Acco.
- Fraiture, Pierre-Philippe (2007), *La Mesure de l'autre. Afrique subsaharienne et roman ethnographique de Belgique et de France (1918–1940)*, Paris: Éditions Champion.
- Mudimbe, Valentin Yves (1988), *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge*, Bloomington, IN and London: Indiana University Press.
- Petridis, Constantijn (2001), *Frans Olbrechts 1899–1958. Op zoek naar kunst in Afrika*. Antwerpen: Etnografisch Museum Antwerpen.
- Pirotte, Jean (1973), *Périodiques missionnaires belges d'expression française. Reflets de cinquante années d'évolution d'une mentalité 1889–1940*, Louvain: Publications Universitaires de Louvain.
- Vellut, Jean-Luc (1994), 'Ressources scientifiques, culturelles et humaines de l'africanisme en Belgique. Perspectives sur un patrimoine d'outre-mer et sa mise en valeur', *Cahiers Africains* 9-10-11: 115–44.

### Anti-colonial Resistance in the Former Belgian Colonies

The Democratic Republic of the Congo, Republic of Rwanda, and Republic of Burundi have different histories of anti-colonial resistance movements, due to the different conditions under which each became a colony of Belgium. The largest of the three former colonies, Congo, was not at first a colony, but a private domain of King Leopold II before becoming a colony in 1908. Congo was annexed to Belgium under the Charte Coloniale Belge, whereas Rwanda and Burundi were under the control of the German Residency in colonial German East Africa from 1890 to 1919. During World War I, the areas that are now Rwanda and Burundi were occupied by the Belgian Force Publique (the colonial army), and in 1919 they became a Belgian-controlled League of Nations mandate under the name of Ruanda-Urundi. In 1946, Ruanda-Urundi became a United Nation's trust territory overseen by Belgium. Rwanda and Burundi became separate governing entities in April 1962, after delegates from the two countries failed to reach an agreement on a common independent future.

The historians B. Jewsiewicki and Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja differentiate among various stages of anti-colonial resistance. They distinguish between the primary rebellion, which was directed against the initial European presence and the slave trade in the earliest colonial period, and such collective anti-colonial uprisings as religious movements, rural peasant rebellions and urban trade unionism. The former were isolated and regional and the latter were the forerunners that led to the nationalist and independence movements in Congo, Rwanda and Burundi. Anti-colonial resistance in the Congo can be attributed to a state of constant oppression experienced through the social, political and economic policies of King Leopold, the Belgian colonial government, and the concessions and enterprises that were supported by the government: the *corvée* or forced labour practices (in ivory, rubber and mineral extraction), which were driven by cruel punishment, such as the loss of limbs or flogging with the *chicotte*; *portage*; compulsory crop farming and taxes; the *chefferie* system, in which local leaders were chosen not according to tradition, but for their loyalty to Belgian colonial authorities; and racial segregation.

Similar to the anti-colonial uprisings in Congo, the sources of rural rebellions in Ruanda-Urundi often stemmed from the same issues of *corvée* and compulsory farming and taxes, but also from a growing ethnic divide between Tutsi and Hutu, with the colonial

privileging of one group over the other in education and politics. During the German Residency and throughout the Belgian military rule and colonial supervision of Rwanda and Burundi, 'divide and rule' policies included radically reshaping and hierarchising ethnic groups to conform to European standards of categorisation and efficiency. The most unfortunate heirs to this German, and later Belgian creation of castes, were the Hutu, Tutsi and Twa groups in Burundi and Rwanda. Before World War I, pockets of anti-colonial resistance were formed to oppose the German colonial consolidation of independent chiefdoms into one unified kingdom. Chiefs Kilima and Maconco espoused anti-colonial resistance to these German policies, and German colonial troops intervened against them in October 1905, burning all the villages on their path through Kilima's chiefdom. Colonial forces attacked the independent chiefdoms of Kanugunu and Busokoza in 1906 and 1908, respectively. Although interregnum fighting was not unknown to the region, the 1908 policies of German Governor-General von Rechenberg and Resident Captain Fonck increased the tension by recognising, contrary to tradition, a single *mwami* (king). Until World War I, pockets of anti-colonial resistance existed in what is now the north-east regions of Burundi, where Chiefs Mbanzabugabo and Busokoza refused colonial Germany's policy of consolidation. After World War I, the major acts of anti-colonial resistance by autochthonous people were directed against the Belgian *chefferie* system in rural areas, where local leaders were chosen according to the pre-established German system of loyalty to colonial authorities. Historian René Lemarchand identifies four major regions in Burundi and Rwanda where anti-colonial activities stemmed from a confluence of these forces as well as from the economic devastation and natural disasters. He also sees these revolts as precursors to contemporary ethnic conflicts in the two nations.

Mistreatment and oppression coupled with economic hardships in the early 1920s and early 1930s in Congo paved the way for the anti-colonial syncretic mass religious movements of Maria N'koï, the *kitawala*, and Simon Kimbangu. Maria N'koï (Marie aux léopards) in 1915 led a peasant revolt in the south, preaching that the incarnation of the ancestors would intervene to throw the white colonists out and bring in the reign of the righteous in a new world. The *kitawala* movement was also messianic in nature and promised a new order free from 'white' rule, but practised non-violence as a tactic against the oppressive colonial régime and policies. The Kimbanguist movement of the Eglise de Jésus-Christ sur la Terre par le Prophète Simon Kimbangu (EJCSK) was religious in origin, but became politicised after the arrest and life imprisonment of its founder Simon Kimbangu in 1921. In addition, the fight for religious recognition of the movement led its members to become active in the fight for civil and democratic rights. While these religious leaders did not directly link social and economic emancipation to political freedom, the insurrections they led were in regions most permeated by European economic and social programmes, and their beliefs were founded on the idea of a new social order promising that the departure of the white colonists would bring about equal distribution of wealth and social equity. These ideals can be found in similar syncretic religious movements in Rwanda and Burundi, and they also became the basis for later anti-colonial revolts in the decolonisation phase.

Characterised as messianic resistance movements, the rural revolts in Ruanda-Urundi were named after their leaders and often based on a notion of a return to a pre-colonial rule of local kingdoms with an 'ideal king', called *anti-roi* by historians. The Rubengebenge revolt began under German colonial rule in 1912 and continued through to 1922, when Ruanda-Urundi was under Belgian supervision. The Inamuvyeyi Nyavyinshi revolt (1922) took place in the north on the Kagera river, near the border of what is now Rwanda.

Historian Joseph Gahama relates that the Runyota-Kanyarufunzo revolt (1922) was messianic in nature, invoking the spirit of Kiranga (a god favourable to kingship). It came on the heels of a consolidation of power in the Buyenzi region and a catastrophic disease killing 80 per cent of the local cattle. It gained strength from a peasantry angered by road and marshland *corvées* and obligatory coffee growing. Runyota led this rural uprising under the banner of 'righteous anger'.

By 1929, the Belgian colonial administration had begun consolidating more small independent chiefdoms to maintain better control of the regions. In Burundi, primarily Bezi and Batare princes (*ganwa*) vied for control, yet demands of *corvée* and taxes by these new chiefs for the colonial government, along with economic hardships on the local peasant populations, created rural unrest in the north-west Ndora region in 1932. In what has become known as the Inamujandi revolt (1934), named after its leader, an elderly woman Inamujandi (or Mujande), protesters burned Christian mission schools and hundreds of huts before being crushed by Force Publique troops. In Rwanda, the German and Belgian colonial policies of country consolidation under one king (*mwami*) were also met with resistance. In the April 1912 campaign led by German Resident Gudovius in northern Rwanda to suppress Chief Ndungutse's rebellion (which was supported by followers of Muhumusa, wife of a Chief and a messianic-style leader of her own rebellion in 1911), colonial troops attacked Ndungutse and his village with orders to burn the village, crops and settlements, and kill all those who resisted. The Belgians encountered the same kind of resistance in the northern Rukiga region.

In the Congo, where there were many regional anti-colonial uprisings in the 1930s, colonial administrators and missionaries documented more rural uprisings among the peasants who were forced to work in the *corvée* or were made to cultivate crops by colonial and corporate orders. In 1931, local growers destroyed cotton plants in the Ndengese region in opposition to forced cultivation practices. In May 1931, the Pende uprising in Kwilu, which then formed part of the Kwango district, was the first collective action taken by a group of peasants (*coupeurs de fruit*) and an ethnic group (Pende) against both the Belgian administration and colonial agricultural industries. Even though slave labour had been abolished legally, as a result of the pressure from the international abolitionist Congo Reform Association in 1897–8, the colonial administration turned a blind eye to company-based *corvées*, which still existed and included forced labour for road building and village relocation. The Pende uprising of the *coupeurs de fruit* was the result of several factors: the fall in palm prices by some 50–60 per cent; imposition of annual taxes which remained the same even though wages decreased significantly; and the continuation of forced labour by the Huileries du Congo Belge (HCB). The swift reprisals by the Force Publique claimed at least 500 Congolese lives.

After several uprisings throughout the 1930s, the Belgian authorities constructed exile or *relégation* camps to contain insurgents. But organised rebellions among Congolese workers continued during the 1940s, immediately before the rise of pan-African independence movements of the 1950s, and can be traced again to the cumulative effect of living under colonial rule and economic hardships imposed on the Congolese during World War II. In December 1941, miners working for Union Minière du Haut Katanga went on strike in Elisabethville (Lumumbashi) demanding equal treatment. The Force Publique repressed the strikers killing 40–60 miners and injuring countless others. Miners in Manono working for Géomines went on strike using *kitawala* principles of non-violence, demanding better working conditions and higher salaries. The strike of dock workers in Matadi, the port city at the mouth of the Congo river, in November 1945, stopped ocean-going traffic. Although

none of the worker-based anti-colonial movements called for the end of colonial rule, they helped identifying the economic and social practices that would become touchstones of the independence movement. However, an earlier uprising, the February 1944 mutiny of Congolese conscripted soldiers in the Force Publique at the garrison in Luluabourg (Kananga), nearly crippled the entire colonial enterprise when the soldiers brought into question the authority of white Belgian officers over black African soldiers. Such sentiment threatened Belgian power at all levels, and the mutiny was quickly brought under control for fear that its ideas of racial discrimination might spill over into the general population and create widespread unrest.

When the French President, Charles de Gaulle, offered independence to the French colonies in West Africa in 1945, it triggered a greater drive for pan-African independence movements in the Belgian colonies. In 1956, several leaders including Patrice Lumumba and Joseph Kasavubu gained political prominence as members of a group of anti-colonial leaders who sent a memorandum to Governor-General M. Cornélis of the Belgian Congo, demanding independence and African participation in governance, citing among other things the desire to have the same kind of democratising policies of local elections that had begun in 1953 and 1956 in Ruanda-Urundi. Even though Brussels had created rudimentary local elections in Ruanda-Urundi, colonial caste policies had caused educational, political and social dominance of the Tutsi. In March 1957, a group of nine Hutu intellectuals wrote an anti-colonial manifesto ('Bahutu Manifesto') criticising the Belgian system of governance, demanded a greater voice in local governance and the abandonment of the caste system. From this manifesto developed several anti-colonial political parties, including the Mouvement Social Muhutu (MSM), supported by the Catholic Church, and organised by Grégoire Kayibanda, who later became the first President of independent Rwanda in 1962; the Association pour la Promotion Sociale de la Masse (APROSOMA), which was also committed to the democratisation of Rwanda, but through a mass movement regardless of caste affiliation; and the Union Nationale Rwandaise (UNAR) organised by François Rukeba, which was anti-Belgian and pro-traditionalist and monarchist, especially after the death of King Mutara. In September 1959, Kigali became the centre for a flurry of anti-colonial meetings and the creation of new political parties, including a progressive democratic group called Rassemblement Démocratique Ruandais (RADER) led by Chief Bwanakweli and Kayibanda's new party, the Parti du Mouvement de l'Emancipation Hutu (PARMEHUTU). In November 1959, anti-colonial rioting and inter-ethnic violence swept the country, but was suppressed by Belgian forces after the colonial government rejected a plan for the *mwami* to restore order. The political unrest resulted in tens of thousands of refugees fleeing the country and set the pattern for future violence between ethnic groups. A Belgian-assisted coup d'état on 28 January 1961 in Gitarama placed a republican government in Rwanda. However, the Hutu élite of the PARMEHUTU (although aided by colonial authorities) strategically renamed a local auxiliary administrative post as 'prefect', forcing the Residency to come to terms with anti-colonial sentiment and to announce the changes in the political power structures.

In Burundi, two main political parties from the dynastic traditions of the Batare and Bezi *chefferies* furthered the progress of the anti-colonial movement in the late 1950s. In 1957, Chief Léopold Bihumugani organised the Parti de l'Unité et du Progrès National (UPRONA), after a group of chiefs sent a petition to the UN Visiting Mission protesting the colonial administration's interference in the traditional role of the monarch. The next leader of UPRONA, university-educated Prince Louis Rwagasore, who was more militant in his anti-colonial stance, insisted upon immediate independence from Brussels, and

monarchical legitimacy. Rwagasore's anti-Belgian rhetoric cemented a mixed-ethnic popular and rural nationalist movement until his assassination in 1961. In contrast to Rwagasore's programme, the Parti Démocratique Chrétien (PDC) was not militant in its approach to self-governance, rather the PDC's sense of nation-building was anti-colonial in its desire for a slow economic emancipation and political freedom from Brussels. Burundi became a constitutional monarchy in August 1962 that lasted until 1966 and like Rwanda has suffered from inter-ethnic violence.

In the Congo, the ban on political parties until 1957 limited anti-colonial collective actions. Trade unionism was accepted as a legal form of organisation from 1946 and was a conduit for such future independence leaders as Patrice Lumumba. Due to the restrictive measures for the creation of any Congolese political organisations, other anti-colonial resistance alliances often organised around ethnic or regional groups, which ultimately led to political fragmentation during the final push for independence in the late 1950s. The earliest such group formed was Joseph Kasavubu's ABAKO (Alliance des Bakongo) based around Leopoldville (Kinshasa) in 1950. Later came LUKA (Union Kwangolaise pour l'Indépendance et la Liberté) in the Kwango district; UNIMO (Union Mongo) in the Equateur; BALUBAKAT (Association des Baluba du Katanga) in the Katanga; and the MSM (Mouvement Solidaire Muluba) in the Kasai. They all became political contenders during the first elections in 1959. The Parti National du Progrès (PNP) was a creation of the Belgian colonial authorities and was not respected by leaders of the African-organised anti-colonial resistance groups. Antoine Gizenga's Parti Solidaire Africain (PSA) and Patrice Lumumba's Mouvement National Congolais (MNC), formed in 1958, both espoused a policy of unification and did not identify themselves with one region, thus creating an alliance of working class, peasantry and the *évolués*. The participation in the All African Peoples' Conference in Accra, Ghana, in 1958, intensified Congolese anti-colonial activities and solidified aspirations for independence. September 1959 marked the date of an important joint memorandum by the ABAKO and PSA parties, which other parties joined later, delivered to the colonial authorities. It stated their refusal to participate in anti-democratic local elections in December. But the decisive anti-colonial revolt in Congo took place on 4 January 1959 when the ABAKO party's request to meet was denied. An uncontrollable riot in Leopoldville (Kinshasa) followed, which lasted three days and caused severe damage to European property, Catholic missions and social centres. This led to the arrival of local police forces, the Force Publique and Belgian paratroopers to support Belgian colonial rule and violently to suppress the uprising. Under pressure to negotiate a settlement, Belgian authorities agreed to set independence day for 30 June 1960. Decolonisation was rapid. The anti-colonial resistance begun only some decades earlier in rural regions had become transformed into a mass movement for independence which brought colonial rule to an end.

Carina Yervasi

#### LITERARY WORKS

- Conrad, Joseph (1902), *Heart of Darkness*, Edinburgh and London: Blackwood and Sons.  
 Cornélius, Henri (1954), *Kufa*, Brussels: Renaissance du Livre.  
 Debertry, Léon (1953), *Kitawala*, Elisabethville: Essor du Congo.  
 Gillès, Daniel (1960), *La Termitière*, Paris: Gallimard.  
 Walschap, Gerard [1953] (1956), [*Oproer in Congo*] *Insurrection au Congo*, Brussels: Elsevier.

## HISTORIES

- Adi, Hakim and Marika Sherwood (2003), *Pan-African History: Political Figures from Africa and the Diaspora since 1787*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Anyang' Nyong'o, Peter (ed.) (1987), *Popular Struggles for Democracy in Africa*, London and New Jersey: Zed Books.
- Ewans, Martin (2002), *European Atrocity, African Catastrophe: Leopold II, the Congo Free State and its Aftermath*, London: RoutledgeCurzon.
- Gahama, Joseph (1983), *Le Burundi sous administration belge*, Paris: Karthala.
- (1985), 'La révolte de Runyota-Kanyarufunzo au Burundi (1922)', *Société et Pouvoirs dans l'Afrique des Grands Lacs* 3: 23–39.
- James, C. L. R. (1969), *A History of Pan African Revolt*, Washington, DC: Drum and Spear Press.
- Jewsiewicki, Bogumil (1976), 'La Contestation social et la naissance du prolétariat au Zaïre au cours de la première moitié du XX<sup>e</sup> Siècle', *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 10 (1): pp. 47–70.
- Kanza, Thomas (1972), *Conflict in the Congo: The Rise and Fall of Lumumba*, Harmondsworth: Penguin African Library.
- Lemarchand, René (1994), *Burundi: Ethnocide as Discourse and Practice*, Cambridge: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Cambridge University Press.
- (1970), *Rwanda and Burundi*, New York: Praeger Publishers.
- (1964), *Political Awakening in the Belgian Congo*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Louis, William Roger and Jean Stengers (eds) (1968), *E. D. Morel's History of the Congo Reform Movement*, London: Clarendon Press.
- Markowitz, Marvin D. (1970), 'The Missions and Political Development in the Congo', *The Journal of the International African Institute* 40 (3): 234–7.
- Morel, Edmund Dene (1904), *King Leopold's Rule in Africa*, London: William Heinemann.
- Nelson, Samuel H. (1994), *Colonialism in the Congo Basin, 1880–1940*, Athens, OH: Center for International Studies.
- Nzongola-Ntalaja, Georges (2002), *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila: A People's History*, London and New York: Zed Books.
- Prunier, Gérard (1995), *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Simbandumwe, Samuel S. (1992), 'Understanding the Role of a Modern Prophet in Kimbanguist Hymns', *History of Religions* 32 (2): 165–83.
- Welch, Claude E. (1980), *Anatomy of Rebellion*, Albany, NY: State University Press of New York.
- Witte, Ludo de [1999] (2001), *The Assassination of Lumumba*, London and New York: Verso.
- Woddis, Jack (1960), *Africa: The Roots of Revolt*, New York: The Citadel Press.

**The 'Arab Campaign'**

This armed conflict, which took place from 1892 to 1894, can be described as the war that was fought by Leopold II's Congo Free State against the so-called 'Arabs', Swahili or Afro-Arabs from Zanzibar and the coastal region of East Africa, who had settled in eastern Congo as they became involved in the search for slaves and ivory. Unlike most colonial