



Colonial Response to Population Depletion in Early Congo, ca. 1890–1936

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Abstract. – This article demonstrates that even when the desire for quick economic returns was at the zenith, the administration, companies, and missions took initiatives to reduce the destruction of population, “for the sake of agriculture and mines.” While the colonial administration yearned to alter household structure, private companies pursued the policy of high child-births. In contrast to colonial government officials and private companies’ administrators, Catholic missionaries endeavored to change local ideologies, which underpinned biological reproduction, and institutions, which in their understanding created sexual imbalance and low fertility. In different but complementary ways, they sought to eradicate diseases and minimize the negative effects of migrations, portage, and recruitments on the reproductive capacity of local communities. [*Congo, demography, colonial population policies, economy, mining, labor migrations, women*]

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Introduction

We have to convince ourselves that an economy based on agriculture has nothing but land and hands (AA 1957).

This statement shows that to colonial officials and company managers, the death of an African repre-

sented a loss of a potential worker and of a commodity producer. In an unpublished text entitled “Working for the Tax Man Makes People Thinner. Economy and Demography in Early Congo, ca. 1890–1936,” I examined the interactions between economic activities and demographic situations. I showed that colonialism created environments that affected negatively the principal components of demography. This article shows that even when the desire for quick economic returns was at the zenith, the administration, companies, and missions took initiatives to reduce the destruction of population “for the sake of agriculture and mines” (Leplae 1914: 17). Although they differed in their ideologies and emphasis, the colonial administration, missions, and companies interacted when looking for solutions to population depletion. While the colonial administration yearned to alter household structure and transform individual sexual behavior to increase fertility, private companies pursued the policy of high childbirths by distributing material incentives and fighting prostitution in their labor camps. In contrast to colonial government officials and private companies’ administrators, Catholic missionaries endeavored to change local ideologies, which underpinned biological reproduction, and institutions, which they believed created sexual imbalance and low fertility. In different but often complementary ways, they all sought to eradicate diseases and minimize the negative effects of migrations, portage, and recruitments to restore the reproductive capacity of local communities.