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REPORTING ON THE INDEPENDENCE OF THE BELGIAN CONGO: MWISSA CAMUS, THE DEAN OF CONGOLESE JOURNALISTS

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ABSTRACT

Many individuals were involved in the Belgian Congo’s attainment of independence. Born in 1931, Mwissa Camus, the dean of Congolese journalists, is one of them. Even though he was opposed to this idea and struggled to maintain his status as member of a certain ‘elite’, his career sheds light on the advancement of his country towards independence in June 1960. By following his professional career in the years preceding independence, we can see how his development illuminates the emergence of journalism in the Congo, the social position of Congolese journalists, and the ambivalence of their position towards the emancipation process. The road taken by Mwissa Camus – as an actor, witness, extra, and somehow instrument of the events that shook his country – helps understand the Congo’s move towards independence from a particular perspective. History – that of a hurried independence, blatantly unprepared, on which a small elite failed to agree – is revealed through his words and the unveiling of his ‘world.’ This article is essentially based on interviews with Mwissa Camus and on Congolese newspaper articles from 1959, 1960 and 1961.

Keywords: Abako, Adapes, Camus, colonisation, Congo, évolutés, independence, journalism, Manifesto of Conscience africaine, Mobutu
INTRODUCTION

The Belgian Congo’s attainment of independence is the result of a political evolution that involved many individuals, in one way or another. This article follows the career of one of them, Mwissa Camus (hereafter Camus), the dean of Congolese journalists, who was born in 1931. The goal is to understand how his individual path, as a member of what was called a certain ‘elite’, can shed light on the road that led to the country’s independence on 30 June 1960. It also reflects on his position in Congolese society, to explain his stance on, and his reluctance about, separating too quickly from Belgium.

This article adopts a specific approach regarding existing literature on the role of journalism in the evolution of former African colonies (Ainslie 1966; de la Brosse 1999; Kitchen 1956; Perret 2005; Spaas 2007; Tudesq 1998), by following the testimony of a single journalist. Based for the most part on interviews, the article assumes that the latter ‘do not give us “facts” but “words”’. These words express what the subject is going through or has gone through, his view of the “world” which is “his world” and which he defines in his own way, while he appreciates it and tries to convince his interlocutor of its validity (Demazière and Dubar 2004, 7). Camus is thus here considered as an individual who ‘contains, structured in a particular way within himself, the society of his time in its entirety’ (Kaufmann 2007, 59).

We will follow the career of Camus in the political context of the Congo through interviews conducted with him in 2010 and 2012 in Kinshasa, through Congolese newspaper articles from 1959 and 1960, and through second-hand accounts (Ryckmans 2010). By accompanying him throughout the years leading to independence, we will see how his career and his perception thereof can elucidate the emergence of journalism in the Congo. We can evaluate the social and political role of these new ‘professional’ reporters, at the time called ‘rédacteurs’ (writers, editors), and the ambivalence of their position towards the ongoing emancipation process.

This text is part of a broader research project in the field of information and communication. It explores the historical context of the Congo from this perspective.

THE BELGIAN CONGO: A SINGULAR COLONIAL POLICY

In 1908, Belgium inherited the Congo Free State from King Leopold II, whose personal property it had been since 1885. It subsequently became the Belgian Congo. In the wake of scandals surrounding the running of the country – including the exploitation of the population in the so-called ‘red rubber’ case (Hochschild 1998; Ndaywel 2009, 310–319; Stengers 2005; Wauters 1911) – Belgium wanted to reform the administration of the Congo (Ndaywel 2009, 332). It wished to divert attention from Leopold II’s mismanagement and transform the Belgian Congo into a ‘model’
Marie Fierens  
Reporting on the independence of the Belgian Congo

colony. Belgium therefore ruled out any imperialist ambitions and implemented a paternalistic colonial policy.

In this context, education was seen as very important. The Belgians wanted to ensure access to basic education for all Congolese, and thus Catholic missions formed the basis of the education system in the new colony (Tshimanga 2001a). As a consequence, the literacy rate was soon among the highest in Africa. In around 1950, Unesco (cited in Tambwe 2001, 81) observed that 35 to 40 per cent of Congolese were able to read and write, while only one to five per cent of the population of French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa were literate. However, few Congolese had access to post-primary education. According to Octave Louwers (the representative of the Belgian Congo at the 1931 conference of the International Colonial Institute), further studies were not required because ‘unlike primary education, the main purpose of secondary and especially higher education is not to educate’ (Louwers cited in Tambwe 2001, 80). Less explicitly, Belgium intended to protect itself from potentially embarrassing claims made by educated people.

Despite these precautions, the lack of priests, schoolteachers and administrative staff soon made itself felt and resulted in the development of an elite (Mutamba 2009, 96) that was not afraid to give voice to its views about the coloniser (Spaas 2007). In 1956, a group of Congolese drafted the manifesto of Conscience africaine. The authors’ claims were moderate, but marked the beginning of a liberation movement that culminated four years later in the country’s independence. Camus participated in this adventure.

1938–1949: MISSIONARY EDUCATION AND THE STATUS OF ‘ÉVOLUÉ’

Camus was born in the Belgian Congo in 1931, in the capital Léopoldville, now renamed Kinshasa (Camus 2011, 86). His parents were illiterate, but at the age of seven he attended one of the first primary schools in the Congo. ‘[His] parents wanted to turn [him] into a “half-White”’ (Camus 2012) and encouraged him to get an education. In the 1930s, the Congolese began sending their children to school. They were proud to see them gain access to the ‘knowledge of the Whites’ (Camus 2011, 14). Education was mainly in the hands of the missions – one of the three pillars of the Belgian colonial system, along with the administration and the trusts.

Education was less centralised than in the French colonies. In French West Africa and in French Equatorial Africa, education mainly aimed to turn the children of the empire into French citizens (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1992, 25). In the Congo, the missionaries did not try to create a Belgian identity. Although they wanted the Congolese to adopt their religion, they especially wanted to teach as many as possible to read and write (Spaas 2007, 28–31; Tambwe 2001, 76–92). It is in this context that Camus entered primary school. He explains the enthusiasm of the Congolese
Reporting on the independence of the Belgian Congo

Marie Fierens

Marie Fierens

for missionary education: ‘In 1935–1936, sensational news spread across the city: it was said that a new religion had appeared in Kinshasa and that it “produced” literate people as if by magic. All you had to do was to join this new religion and get an intravenous injection!’ (Camus 2011, 14). Embodied by the missionaries, Catholicism was therefore virtually synonymous with instruction, to the extent that rumour had it that converting to the religion of the whites could suffice to gain their ‘knowledge’.

In 1949, Camus was among the 13 first graduates of Collège Saint-Joseph (ibid, 43), and one of the few Congolese to reach post-primary education. He is conscious of having belonged to a privileged group: ‘Ours was the first generation of “intellectuals” in this country; the others were still in [primary] school; and there were not many secondary schools’ (Camus 2012, see also Ndaywel 2009, 416).

Camus concedes that he owes the missionaries his education, status and intellectual emancipation: ‘The elite was trained by the missionaries and for that we were automatically grateful to [them], even tacitly. I was educated by the missionaries, and I owe my emancipation in Congolese society to them only’ (Camus 2012).

He thus became an ‘évolué’, a ‘mundele ndombe’ in Lingala, a ‘black white’, a ‘man who has severed social relations with his group, having gained access to another system of motivations, another system of values’ (Doucy 1957, 114; Mutamba 2009, 83–115). The emergence of this category was linked to the education system established by the missionaries. It would form the basis of awareness among the Congolese elite (Ryckmans 2010, 93). Schools were obviously part of this education system, but so were some organisations, which allowed the ‘évolués’ to share ideas. This was the case with Adapes,4 the alumni association of the Scheut Fathers,5 which Camus joined, having attended one of their schools for more than a decade (Camus 2011, 86). These associations brought together the ‘intellectuals’, the Congolese who had attended school. Camus knows the association is primarily an exchange forum for educated people: ‘[Adapes] was the leading organisation in Léopoldville. All topics were discussed; we wanted to be at the forefront in all areas’ (Camus 2012).

1950: FIRST STEPS IN JOURNALISM AND INTELLECTUAL POSITIONING

In 1950, Camus entered the field of journalism, in part due to the training given by the missionaries. More than a vocation, it was chance that led him into a newspaper office.

In school, I was very good in French literature. […] In 1950, at the end of my secondary education, the Belgian Catholic newspaper Le Courrier d’Afrique wanted to experiment something and hire the first black journalist to join a white editorial board. Jean-Jacques Kande and I were hired because we were the best in French literature […]. I was 19 years old.
[...] We were the two first black journalists to be hired, in the whole of the Belgian Congo, to join a newspaper run by whites. (Camus 2010)

However, Camus could not address political topics in Le Courrier d’Afrique, only sports. In this way, the Belgian government sought to control the information circulating in the colony. It wanted to avoid the troubles that the press could provoke (Durieux 1958, 11).

Until 1959 it was the governor general who oversaw the printing and dissemination of newspapers (Mutamba 1998, 297). But early on the missionaries, in turn, encouraged the development of a Congolese press (Tshibola Kalengayi 1992, 537). They published newspapers in local languages and were at the head of French publications, including Le Courrier d’Afrique, which owed its existence to Father Dorvilers, from the Scheut Fathers. Professional journalists such as Georges-André Caprasse and Albert Gille, respectively director (Académie Royale des Sciences d’Outre-Mer 1977, 44) and editor of the journal (Vandeleene 2003, 35–36), assisted him in this project. The first issue of Le Courrier d’Afrique appeared on 11 January 1930 (Van Bol 1959, 11). It initially targeted a European audience, but the ‘évolués’ quickly took to the habit of reading it (Ndaywel 1998, 457). Since its inception, the newspaper aimed to inform the public and defend the colonial policy. Le Courrier d’Afrique wanted to ‘synchronise’ white and black politics in order to make the Congo a prosperous colony contributing to the benefits of Christian civilisation (Vandeleene 2003, 41).

From the 1950s onwards, some newspapers began to participate in the emancipation of the Congo, and Camus was one of the writers who took part in this movement. In 1957 he joined the Catholic newspaper La Croix du Congo, subtitled ‘the newspaper of the Congolese “évolués”’. He refined his style and matured his reflection (Camus 2012). In 1959, the paper changed its name to Horizons, and Camus became its editor (Artigue 1961, 352). His intention was to use the newspaper to direct the ‘masses’ and defend Catholic values.

Today our newspaper [Horizons] [...] can face public opinion and clearly define the line of conduct to be followed. We are a Christian newspaper, a Catholic one moreover. We are not afraid to say so to anyone. Our role will always be first and foremost to protect the Church from the pitfalls of materialism and we are equipped to do so. (Camus 1959b)

He also became the editor of the newspapers La Nation congolaise and Actualités africaines (Artigue 1961, 352). It is in the offices of Actualités africaines that Camus met a certain Joseph Mobutu, who was then a press correspondent.

Well aware of belonging to the elite, Camus gave himself special status as a journalist: he saw himself as an intellectual whose main task was to ‘educate the people’ and ‘raise awareness’. The newspapers for which he worked at the time, La Croix du Congo and then Horizons, served as means to achieve this ‘mission’.
During the colonial era, there were three categories of Congolese [...]. The first group consisted of what at the time we could call the ‘intellectuals’ [...]. The ‘semi-literate’ composed the second group. They worked for European companies [...]. They wore a tie or a bow tie. In the evening, they went dancing. At 9 p.m., the bugle of the perpetual curfew of colonization rang out. It was time to sleep. That was the second group, those who were ‘civilized on the surface.’ [...] The third category consisted of the vast ‘ignorant masses,’ with no more than two or three years of primary school [...]. The newspaper La Croix du Congo served to teach these different social classes. Our articles were therefore aimed at training, at mentoring Congolese society, and teaching it moral standards. (Camus 2010)

By dividing the Congolese into three distinct groups, Camus in fact adopts the colonial imagery that separated Congolese society into three categories: the ‘évolués’ (the ‘evolved’), the ‘évoluants’ (the ‘evolving’) and the ‘savages’. Camus speaks of ‘intellectuals’, ‘semi-literate people’ and the ‘ignorant mass’. This categorisation of society illustrates the foundations of his belonging to the category of the ‘évolués’, the ‘mundele ndombe’, the ‘black whites’. He had indeed severed social relations with his group – the Congolese as a whole, those who formed (in his words) ‘the masses’ – and gained another value system (Mutamba 1998, 11) – that of the Congolese elite, who tended to adopt the representation system of the whites. He nevertheless refused to try to obtain a “civic merit card”6 – a card created by the colonial authorities in 1948 to meet the demands of the ‘évolués’ who wanted to benefit from special status within the colony (Ndaywel 1998, 454–455). The ‘registration regime’ introduced in 1952 had the same objective, but Camus was not interested: ‘The people of my generation did not want it. Because it was a joke. [The Belgians] just looked at your table manners, or how your wife set the table. Seriously…. ’ (Camus 2012). The card was indeed granted after an examination of the conduct of the applicant and his family, his financial possibilities, and his adherence to certain standards of hygiene. As for registration, the Bulletin officiel du Congo belge of 1952 claims that it was only intended for the indigenous elite who had truly attained a Western type of civilisation (Mutamba 2009, 105). Camus’ attitude reflects the fact that by the second half of the 1950s, the mentality of the ‘évolués’ had changed: Congolese ‘intellectuals’ preferred to be called the ‘elite’ or ‘thinking Congolese’ rather than ‘évolués’ – a word coined at the end of World War II (ibid, 83–84). This is significant for the changes that occurred among these Congolese (Mutamba 1998, 12).

During this period, Camus did not consider his role in the newspapers as political. In his view, such a role was simply non-existent, even inconceivable: ‘Politics did not exist in the Belgian Congo until King Baudouin’s visit in 1955! We never talked about politics at all. But from 1956 it began to “bubble up.” The first “supporter” of this development was the Catholic Church’ (Ryckmans 2010, 115).

The issue of independence was never raised or even addressed in the colony. Since the end of World War II, the ‘évolués’ had asked for better treatment from the whites, more equality and fairness, but the presence of the Belgians was not questioned (Mutamba 1998, 43), nor did Belgium even consider the colony’s
independence. ‘Because,’ says Camus, ‘the Congolese people were good-natured and accepted everything. [...] But all it took was one unpredictable little spark for it to blow up!’ (Ryckmans 2010, 115).

Independence was so unthinkable for the Belgians that, when Van Bilsen proposed the 30-year plan for the political emancipation of Belgian Africa in 1955, it provoked strong reactions in the metropolis (Quaghebeur and Vilain 1992, 37). So began the gradual emancipation of the Congo over three decades; independence was not expected before 1985.

1956: PARTICIPATION IN THE MANIFESTO OF CONSCIENCE AFRICAINE

But as Camus pointed out, all it took was one little spark. The revolution started in 1956 (Ndjaywel 2009, 424), the year of the manifesto of Conscience africaine, a document that marked the history of the Congo (see Mbungu [2008] for the full text). Published on 1 July 1956, in the journal of the cultural organisation Conscience africaine, this text enumerated a series of claims by the Congolese against the Belgians. Camus says he was the secretary of the group (Camus 2012) and so he participated in what is seen as the first example of Congolese political discourse (Ndjaywel 2009, 425). The editors wanted to represent all the Congolese ‘évolutés’: ‘We are only a small group, but we believe we can speak for many, because we have deliberately limited ourselves to identifying and articulating the aspirations and feelings of the majority of thinking Congolese’ (Mbungu 2008, 223).

The manifesto of Conscience africaine marks the beginning of the country’s political emancipation and of a national awareness of the Congolese elite. It shows that it became possible to publish bold political statements with impunity, and even with the support of some authorities (Verhaegen 2003, 153). It would lead, only four years later, to the country’s independence. However, this document is not ‘revolutionary’: the authors call for greater equality with the Belgians, but still express their gratitude to them. Although the text refers to the Congo’s emancipation, independence is never mentioned.

We want to be civilized Congolese, not ‘Black-skinned Europeans’ [...] We ask the Europeans to give up their attitude of contempt and racial segregation, to avoid the continual vexations that we are subject to. We also ask them to relinquish their condescending attitude that hurts our pride. We do not always like being treated like children. Understand that we are different from you, and that while we assimilate the values of your civilization, we wish to remain ourselves. (Mbungu 2008, 223 and 229)

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the manifesto marked a new step in the Congo’s evolution: claims could now be openly expressed. Political parties and leaders soon emerged from the first Congolese associations (Ryckmans 2010, 113). Camus participated as a member of the cultural organisation Conscience africaine. Once
again, the role of missionary teaching, even if indirect, was crucial since it underlay the group: ‘Since I was a journalist and we were all from the same [Catholic] school, I was included in this group of Conscience africaine. There were 13 of us; I am the only one still alive’ (Camus 2010).

All members of the group were part of the great family of Adapes (Ndaywel 2009, 425). They were more educated than other Congolese and all formed part of the category of ‘évolués’, with their shared norms and values deeply rooted in Catholic ideology (Kalulambi 2009, 68). Considering these facts, we can see that even though Camus does not acknowledge this fact (nor has he ever done so), his belonging to the elite makes him de facto enter the political sphere. Yet, in response to the question: ‘What was the purpose of the group Conscience africaine?’ it is again as an intellectual that he replies, in his view without political bias: ‘The Congo was on the move. So we said, “We could drown, we must avoid that at all price, we must take such and such a decision”’ (Camus 2010).

The group that made up Conscience africaine was thus composed of the elite, the ‘right-thinking’ elite, says Camus (2010), by which he means to make a distinction with regard to the other famous association of ‘évolués’ at the time: Abako, the Association of Bakongo for the unification, conservation and expansion of the Kikongo language. ‘At Abako, there were intelligent people too. But they were bitter, bitter! At Abako, they also served the public interest, but they took a radical approach!’ (ibid.).

Abako was the most organised ethnic and cultural organisation at the time (Ndaywel 1998, 521). Its chairman, Joseph Kasavubu, another alumnus of the Scheut Fathers (Artigue 1961, 319), was general secretary of Adapes from 1944 to 1956 (Mutamba 1998, 214). As we know, he would become president of an independent Congo. Abako was founded in 1950 (Verhaegen 2003, 125). Its objective was cultural and aimed at unifying, preserving and developing Kikongo in Central Africa (ibid, 132–133). As in the case of Adapes, the Abako committee was composed of ‘scholars’ whose education level was higher than that of most Congolese (ibid, 138).

Abako took the opportunity offered by the editors of Conscience africaine to go beyond the arguments put forward in their manifesto (ibid, 155). On 23 August 1956, Kasavubu presented a text outlining the beliefs of the association in contrast to those in the manifesto of Conscience africaine. It served as a foil, without actually influencing the Abako text (ibid, 154). This ‘counter-manifesto’ also matters because it showed that, despite the optimism and willingness of Conscience africaine, members of the Congolese elite, though few, were not all in agreement. If we look at the number of people enrolled in the ‘study groups’ for ‘évolués’, there were only 11 045 in 1956 (Ministry of Colonies in Mutamba 2009, 98; 1998, 53) for an estimated population of 12 768 705 (Romaniuk 2006, 34), i.e., 0.08 per cent. In November of the same year, Léopoldville counted 18 alumni organisations, of which Adapes and Assanef were the most influential. In 1946, they had about 15 000 members each.
But in 1954, the newspaper for ‘évolués’ at the time, *La Voix du Congolais*, reported only 400 members (Mutamba 1998, 214). For its part, in 1955, Abako counted no more than 200 members (Verhaegen 2003, 147).

Both manifestos widened the gap between ‘the people from below’, Abako, and ‘the people from the top’, Adapes (Verhaegen 2003, 157, see also 169–192). Abako agreed with *Conscience africaine* on the need to put an end to the colonial regime and to eliminate any racial discrimination. But it advocated a different vision for the future Congo. Above all, it rejected the plan of Van Bilsen, who postponed emancipation for the Congo within 30 years. Abako wanted immediate independence (Ndaywel 2009, 427). It therefore adopted a resolutely political position, although initially its sole purpose had been to defend the Kikongo language. This new direction may partly be explained by the fact that, according to the Abako (general assembly of 1955), before the arrival of the coloniser, ‘Kikongo [was] universally [spoken] throughout the Kingdom’. It thus held the colonial power responsible for the country’s linguistic fragmentation. It implicitly appealed for the abolition of the colonial system to restore the ancient kingdom (Verhaegen 2003, 146–147). In its own manifesto, the organisation advocates a genuine politicisation of the Congo, symbolised by the introduction of a plurality of political parties to put an end to the patronising monologue of the Belgians. This demand went against the foundation of the Belgian colonial system and conflicted with the views of the authors of the manifesto of *Conscience africaine*, who adopted the attitude of the Catholics (Verhaegen 2003, 157–159): ‘These parties are evil and they are useless. [...] These parties are characterized by struggling, whereas we want unity’ (Mbungu 2008, 230).

Logically, since the ‘people from below’ of Abako adopted an anticolonial tone, the administration lent further support to the moderate ‘people from the top’. The missions also stated their preference. In February 1957 (Ndaywel 1998, 469), the Scheut Fathers’ news agency, DIA, published a dispatch aimed at Abako entitled ‘A fanatical revolutionary party’. This led to the deterioration of relations between the organisation and the Catholic missions (Verhaegen 2003, 167).

1956–1960: GESTATION OF POLITICAL IDEAS

In 1956 the manifesto followed by the ‘counter-manifesto’ gave rise to a kind of competition with the public. The ‘quarrel’ between the opposing authors made the Congo advance on the path to emancipation (Ndaywel 2009, 427). As Jef Van Bilsen (in Verhaegen 2003, 158) said in 1958: ‘Africans have discovered both the scope of the divisions that oppose their masters and the profit they could get from it.’ Both manifestos reveal that alumni associations such as Adapes, cultural groups such as *Conscience africaine*, and ethnic associations such as Abako were the first means of raising awareness and then triggering political action in the Belgian Congo. Some of these groups became political movements from 1958 (Gérard-Libois
1960, 3; Ndaywel 2009, 436–437). Camus was one of the first Congolese to ask approval to establish a political organisation: the UPCO.11 Today, however, he is reluctant to recognise his political activity, preferring to be seen as a moderate. The word ‘political’ seems to displease him, as if it were the prerogative of the Abako ‘extremists’ who were the first to advocate the politicisation of the Congo, and were thus opposed to the vision of the Catholic authorities. ‘My role was not political. I wanted – and today I still want in fact – to be someone who could give valuable advice to Congolese society’ (Camus 2010). In practice, at the time he specifically advocated the revision of the Colonial Charter, ‘of which some clauses do not meet current developments’ (Ergo 2008, 257–258).

Camus is a journalist; he participated in the manifesto of Conscience africaine and created his own political organisation. However, he considers himself neither an informant nor a politician, but rather a ‘moralist’ (Camus 2010). His personal goal was to make things advance, ‘but in a logical and balanced way’ (Camus 2012). For him, the Congo was still too young to accede to independence. ‘We could see the evolution of Congolese society and we believed we had not yet reached the stage where we could claim [independence]’ (ibid.). Camus opposed immediate independence.

The Belgians had done everything for us to be comfortable. There was a song that went, ‘In Léopoldville life is a never-ending party.’ ‘Life is good in Léo,’ that was the expression. Everyone came to Léopoldville because it was the good life. So there was no need for independence. (ibid.)

What he wanted was first and foremost more respect and preferential treatment for the elite, over the population. He shared the aspirations of other ‘thinking Congolese’ who wanted to be recognised as ‘modern men’, like the whites (Ndaywel 1998, 445).12

We wanted to be respected, we wanted them to accept that we had evolved in our way of thinking about everything; but the Belgians were not willing to admit this. Independence was not my concern because we knew we were not ready yet. (Camus 2012)

But the elite did not share the same idea about the country’s future. Some, like Patrice Lumumba, the head of the Congolese National Movement (MNC), were influenced by the ideas of the Ghanaian Kwame Nkrumah, who advocated immediate independence for Africa (Quaghebeur and Vilain 1992, 37–38). Abako, the force behind the ‘counter-manifesto’, also promoted rapid accession to independence. Camus was opposed to the ideas of both the MNC and Abako, warning: ‘Advocating immediate independence is all well and good. But when the Whites leave tomorrow, who will teach at the university, who will manage the tax department, the justice department, etc.? ’ (Camus 2010). Supporters of a quick independence, the ‘extremists’ and the more ‘moderate’ as Camus calls them, made their demands known through the newspapers. Camus shared his views in Horizons:
Really, we live in this country as if there was nothing else to do except shout ‘Independence’, ‘Capital,’ ‘Trust’… And yet, there are so many things to do, so many… No! More than ever, imperative economic necessities first, political and social ones secondly, command us to stand up as one man to face the future in a spirit of enthusiasm and faith in the creation of a beautiful, powerful and prosperous country. (Camus 1959c)

The Abako newspaper *Notre Kongo* claimed the opposite a few months later:

The Kongo must be a COMPLETELY INDEPENDENT COUNTRY, like Belgium, for example. Our country is FULLY ENTITLED to this TOTAL INDEPENDENCE. It deserves it for various undeniable and legitimate reasons. (Matumona 1959)

Many political parties were created, each owning one or more newspapers which served as propaganda tools. The political context of the time made this situation possible. ‘Shortly before 30 June, Pétillon, an ultra-progressive, was governor general. He tolerated almost everything. There were reactionary newspapers that were publishing all kinds of rubbish [...] They were always filled with rage, whereas we were moderate. Those were the two extremes at the time’ (Camus 2010).

For his part, Camus, who still sees himself as apolitical, continued to advocate moderation:

When we were on the verge of independence and the first political parties began to emerge, then, still in my newspaper *La Croix du Congo*, I was among those who advocated, who accepted the Van Bilsen plan. But I proposed certain adjustments to arrive at a compromise for the coexistence of the two communities that lived in the Belgian Congo, Black and White. (ibid.)

Camus and other Congolese intellectuals defended a certain vision of the ‘Congolese nation’, expressing their ideas in the newspapers. The concepts of nation and of Congolese journalism evolved in tandem. The first issue of *La Nation Congolaise*, of which Camus was the editor, is significant in this regard. In an article written by its founder, Jean Bolikango,¹³ the new publication defines what it intends to be:

A weekly that will immediately start shaping a common will and spirit, an IDEA that must unite us and make us forget everything that divides and differentiates, and will crystallize it in the conscience of the Congolese people that share the same historical origin. (3 May 1960)

Shortly before independence, Camus was still trying to assert his viewpoint through *La Nation Congolaise*. He did not criticise the abuse of power by the colonial ruler, but opposed the politicisation of the Congo.

The political gangrene has awakened the bloodthirsty appetite of a population barely touched by civilization. There are even some militants who argue that if their leader loses, the Congo will be haunted by the spectre of perpetual unrest. So far, the word ‘independence’ has already led to many deaths, 10,000, maybe more in the whole country.
The Fatherland is in danger! It is the duty of all Congolese to assume their responsibilities and prevent the impending anarchy. [...] We solemnly call on all the young Congolese of Assanef, Adapes, post-school associations, the Salvation Army, the AFBMS, the very youths who, yesterday, in the classroom, knew nothing of these ethnic differentiations, to gather all their energy to be present on D-day. (Camus 1960)

He writes about the violence of the riots in Léopoldville on 4 January 1959. These followed the banning of the Abako meeting devoted to the conference on pan-Africanism organised by Kwame Nkrumah in Accra, in December 1958. This conference was a fundamental step in the claim for independence by some Africans. The rioters attacked symbols of the Belgian colonial system, such as administrative buildings, missions and large corporations. ‘The army and police were pelted with stones; businesses, through their shops, were looted; the missionary churches and schools were not spared’ (Ndaywel 2009, 435). The unrest lasted several days, leaving 100 Congolese dead and several Belgians wounded (ibid.). Camus deplored the situation in Horizons:

All this madness ultimately turned against us. We have no schools any more for our children. We ourselves have swelled the ranks of the unemployed and created future bandits (...). WE HAVE TO MAKE AMENDS OURSELVES! (Camus 1959a)

These events accelerated the move towards independence. A few days later, on 13 January 1959, a message from the King of the Belgians asserted the Congo’s right to independence. This was a clear break with the colonial policy conducted until that stage (Gérard-Libois 1960, 3).

30 JUNE 1960: DISAPPOINTMENT

Independence was now a plausible hypothesis. For the proponents of immediate emancipation, such as the MNC and Abako, it was a victory. For Camus, however, it was a real disappointment. Again, the fact that he considers himself a member of the elite influences his perception:

We, the intellectuals, could make sense of things. But the others, like Lumumba, who had spent time in prison because they were too outspoken in the ‘évolutés’ circle, the others who had only had two years after primary school and who could not tolerate the discriminations, when they took power, they took revenge for their pre-independence conditions. (Ryckmans 2010, 55)

The Congolese who advocated immediate autonomy – synonymous, according to them, with the end of ‘enslavement’ (Kapita Mulopo 1992, 127) – confronted those who wanted managers capable of leading the country to be trained beforehand. ‘When the word “independence” was out and when we saw people running behind this myth, we thought, “The country is lost”’ (Camus 2010).
Camus was frightened by the perspective of independence (Camus 2012):

Why? Because (...) Gizenga [vice-president of the Lumumba government in June 1960 (Artigue 1961, 83)], a simple teacher, who played the guitar in his spare time, this former shopkeeper, would become the governor of a province. Another, who was jailed four times for embezzlement in European companies, would become minister. While we proposed to temporarily leave control to the Belgians. Let the Belgians run the justice department, lead the army, run the police until the Congolese were trained for these delicate tasks. (Camus 2010)

In his view, people with limited education did not really understand what ‘independence’ meant: ‘[For the semi-literate], independence meant: “Finally, we are going to have the Whites’ big houses, their cars, the big salaries they refused us!”’ We were left with a majority of leaders who were unprepared for independence’ (Ryckmans 2010, 279).

The principle of a high-level Belgian–Congolese dialogue was adopted. It was intended to prepare for independence and decide the country’s future political structure. A political round table was held in Brussels (20 January–20 February 1960). A resolution adopted by the Belgian and Congolese members fixed the date of independence. From the very start, the Congolese participating in the meeting decided to present a united front, despite their differing political visions for the Congo’s future. Thanks to this coalition, the date of 30 June 1960 was set (Ndaywel 2009, 440–443). The round table experience transformed the Congolese political parties: ‘The prospect of elections had fuelled conflicts, not only between [the parties], but also internally. Almost everywhere, they ceased being monolithic’ (Ndaywel 2009, 445). For Camus (2011, 73), the country’s immediate autonomy was nothing more than a ‘suicide-independence’ – a view shared by many Belgians. It was too much for him, and so he opted to leave the capital: ‘When independence came, I went to [the province of] Equateur, disappointed by the poisonous atmosphere. People went crazy’ (Camus 2012). The date of 30 June 1960 arrived very quickly, and the Congo gained independence. Joseph Kasavubu, of the Abako, became president and Patrice Lumumba, of the MNC, prime minister.

Although Camus has some difficulty admitting it, his work as a journalist made him enter the political sphere, since he expressed his views on the country and its future in his articles. Although he quit journalism in 1960, he did not completely leave politics. That same year, he became the private secretary of Joseph Mobutu (Camus 2012), appointed chief of staff by Lumumba (the two men had met as journalists in Les Actualités africaines). They met again at the time of independence. Camus was then responsible for handling Mobutu’s confidential files (Camus 2012). Even though Camus did not clarify why he chose to follow Mobutu, one can see a form of opportunism in this decision. Some attribute his attitude to the fact that he and Mobutu were from the same province, Equateur.
CONCLUSION

Tracing Mwissa Camus’ career and the road his country took to independence raises questions about how this Congolese journalist should be considered: Was he an ‘actor’, a ‘witness’, an ‘extra’ or an ‘instrument’ of the events that led to decolonisation, if not all four at once?

For him, the answer is very clear: he was an ‘actor’ of Congo’s independence, thanks to his writings and his role in raising awareness (Camus 2012). As a member of Conscience africaine, he participated in drawing up the manifesto, a text that is seen as the first Congolese political document. This text launched a movement that led to the country’s independence. The opportunity Camus was afforded to address newspaper readers also gave him an active role in raising what he calls the ‘awareness of the masses’. The journalist he became was not a passive witness to events. Even though he never ceases to insist on his moderation, he helped shape the Congo’s political landscape and build a certain vision of the Congolese state, by positioning himself against the politicisation advocated by Abako. He participated in the emergence of Congolese journalism and in the design of a new Congolese society, by voicing opposing arguments to those advocates of immediate independence – a form of dialogue which was published in the newspapers. He can therefore be seen as active in the world of journalism, but also in politics; the border between the two was porous ‘because there were no other [actors], everything evolved around a handful of intellectuals’ (Camus 2012). So, Camus acted alternately as editor (who participated in the creation of the manifesto of Conscience africaine) and private secretary to Mobutu. The latter was himself first correspondent, then editor, before becoming chief of staff and then president of the republic. Lumumba was a newspaper correspondent in La Voix du Congolais and director of two publications prior to becoming prime minister.

Camus can also be considered a simple ‘extra’, to the extent that he helplessly witnessed the sudden rush to independence that he somehow helped trigger, but did not want right away. An actor almost despite himself of the emergence of the Congolese press in 1950, then automatically integrated into the group Conscience africaine (because of his education), having joined them to demand greater recognition from the Belgians. But Camus never wanted to exert political pressure. A passive bystander of the domino effect caused by the publication of the manifesto, his own demands were quickly overtaken by the events of the time.

Was Camus an ‘instrument’ of decolonisation? The answer must be balanced. There is no question that the missionaries, one of the three pillars of the Belgian colonial system, had a major influence on his position as a member of the elite and as a journalist. For example, he rejected Abako’s views on the politicisation of the Congo, which threatened to break the virtual monopoly of Catholics over educational
and cultural institutions. For him, the members of Abako were ‘extremists’, ‘bitter’
‘radicals’ in the same way that the Scheut Fathers regarded Abako as a ‘fanatical’
party. Should we understand his point of view by taking into account the influence
of religion in his social ascent? The son of illiterate parents, it is thanks to the
missionaries that he studied and then integrated into the journalistic sphere and
joined Adapes. He is forever grateful to them. However, other ‘évolués’ who also
benefited from a Catholic education were opposed to the ‘moderates’ with whom
Camus identified, such as Abako. So, although few in number, the members of the
elite were divided.

Camus’ personal path – as actor, witness, extra and (somehow) instrument of
the events that shook the country – helps shed light on the Congo’s move towards
independence from a particular perspective. History – that of a rushed independence,
for a country blatantly unprepared, on which a small elite failed to agree – is revealed
through his words and the unveiling of his ‘world’.

NOTES
1. His real name is Mwissa Camille Auguste. He chose the name ‘Camus’ in reference to
Albert Camus. See Camus, M. Interview with the author, 7 July 2010.
2. Camus is not the first Congolese journalist. Paul Lomami Tchibamba is often considered
as the pioneer of the profession in Congo. Editor-in-chief of La Voix du Congolais,
launched in 1945 by the Belgian government, he was critical towards the Belgian
administration. During the years preceding independence, he lived in Brazzaville
(Haffner 1992).
3. All quotes were translated from French into English.
4. In November 1956, the two most important alumni associations were Adapes, which
consisted almost exclusively of ‘people from the top’ [gens du haut], and Assanef, the
Alumni Association of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. Unlike Adapes, Assanef
apparently did not attempt to play an influential role (Verhaegen 2003, 83–84).
5. Since 1885, Leopold II had wanted to protect the Congo Free State from foreign
interference. With this in mind, he involved the Belgian missionaries in his project. They
were, he believed, the only ones able to assist him effectively in matters of religion and
education. In Léopoldville, the first school for Congolese children was opened in July
1917 at the initiative of Father Arthur Breye. Collège Saint-Joseph was attended by
Mwissa Camus (Tshimanga 2001b, 189–192).
6. The ‘civic merit card’ was regulated by order no. 21/258 dated 12 July 1948 and enacted
by the governor general.
7. ‘Plan de trente ans pour l’émancipation politique de l’Afrique belge.’
8. In Camus, Mwissa. 2011. L’héritage de Tata Raphaël, Edipresse: 86. He mentioned he
was one of the authors of the manifesto of Conscience africaine.
9. Even though the official announcement of its creation only appeared in *Le Courrier d’Afrique* on 10 October 1953.
10. In fact it is more a study of the manifesto of *Conscience africaine* than a genuine ‘counter-manifesto’. The Abako manifesto was entitled ‘Etude du Manifeste de *Conscience africaine* par les Bakongo’ [A study of the manifesto of *Conscience africaine* by the Bakongo] (Verhaegen 2003, 151 and 157).
13. Bolikango’s name recurs in several initiatives that all sought to develop the Congolese elite. A former president of Adapes, he taught most of the young Congolese that made up the editorial board of *Conscience africaine*. He was deputy prime minister, minister of information and of cultural affairs in the second Ileo government (February 1961), and information minister in the first Ileo government (September 1960). He was also responsible for national defence after Moanda’s resignation (21 September 1960). Before that, he was deputy commissioner for information of the general government in Léopoldville (1959), the highest position held by a Congolese in the administration in the Belgian Congo. He gave up this function to participate in the political round table in Brussels in January–February 1960 (Artigue 1961, 43–46).
14. Another meeting, an economic round table, was held in Brussels from 26 April until 16 May 1960.
15. Including the point of view of a journalist in charge of the information department of the general government, Jean Labrique (in Verhaegen 2003, 156), whose column on the political Abako manifesto was entitled ‘The race to suicide’.
16. Mobutu was also a correspondent for *L’Avenir colonial belge*, which became *L’Avenir* (Artigue 1961, 217).
18. *L’Indépendance* and *Uhuru*.

**REFERENCES**

Camus, M. 2010. Tape-recorded interview with the author, July 7, Kinshasa.
Camus, M. 2012. Tape recorded interview with the author, February 20, Kinshasa.


97


**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

**MARIE FIERENS** holds a PhD in Information and Communication. By adopting a comparative perspective, she traced the development of the profession of newspaper journalist in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Côte d’Ivoire, from the end of the colonial era until today. She has continued her research concerning journalism in the Great Lakes region as a postdoctoral fellow, first at the University of Oxford and then at the Université libre de Bruxelles. She is also the author of a book entitled *Le négationnisme du génocide des Tutsi au Rwanda* (Golias, 2009).