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The Economics of the Kwango Rubber Trade, c. 1900

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At a frontier passage in the far north-eastern corner of Angola's Congo district, near the Kwilo River's estuary in the Kwango, in 1902 soldiers of the Congo Free State arrested two African men for the crime of "fraud". As they happened to be resident on Angolan territory and were therefore subjects of the Portuguese crown the two men soon made their way into diplomatic correspondence.[1] One of them, Kitumbu, was identified as a native from Zombo, a country reputed for its widespread commercial networks. His companion, Kalumbatungu, came from a riverside village named Kimbinda. Chief Kimbinda, a tributary of the Yaka chief Kianvo Kia N'Zadi, had not too long ago moved his village from the Free State into Angola across the Kwango river which made up the frontier between the two colonial domains. The people of the village, however, still crossed the river for their crops and their trade. Several other Yaka populations strategically nested along the caravan routes that crossed the Kwango between Kassongo-Lunda and Popokabaka had also either partly or completely moved to Portuguese territory. These settlements played a dual role in the long-distance trade that passed through the Kwango region. They lived off the trade by taxing Zombo caravans for passage or lodging; but they sometimes also served as middle-men and as such were traders themselves. During the Free State's repression of the free rubber trade, they caused what one State official called an "exodus of our riverside villages towards the Portuguese Congo."[2] After their migration into Angola they continued to have a crucial position in the cross-border trade and often came into violent conflict with soldiers of the State.

This paper is an attempt to lay bare the logic of the Kwango rubber trade in the environment of the Congo Free State. I will leave aside the precise historical description of these Yaka movements and the analysis of their significance in the colonial context. Nor will I deal in detail with the adaptation of the Zombo entrepreneurs to the new reality of a colonial frontier.[3] Instead I intend to explain why the rubber trade was at the root of so much of the commotion – from the mentioned Yaka migrations to Zombo plans to attack

[1] This case is described in Archives africaines (Brussels, abbreviated below as AA), Affaires Etrangères (abbreviated as AE), *260/294, Rapport fait par le Substitut Pattarino au sujet de l'incident de frontière du Kwango-Kwilu.*

[2] AA, AE, *260/294, Popokabaka 10-9-1901, le commissaire de district au G.G., no. 60/G.*

[3] This paper is a brief excursion away from a chapter of my PhD thesis (School of Oriental and African Studies, forthcoming). While the thesis interprets the history of the Kongo in northern Angola between 1880 and 1915, the chapter deals particularly with the responses of the Zombo and neighbouring populations to European political and economic encroachment in the eastern part of the Congo district and adjacent zones in the Congo Free State.

the *Bula Matari*[4] with the help of the Portuguese – which I found described in government and missionary papers from both sides of the frontier. The question I try to answer in this context is about how this trade was conducted and in which ways it conflicted with the interests of the Congo Free State.

I

Between 1890 and 1910 many African economies experienced a boom in the production of wild rubber, caused by a growing demand for rubber in Europe and a subsequent increase in world-market prices. One of the major supply zones for the European market was West-Central Africa. Angola and the Congo Free State were among the five leading rubber producers in the world in 1900 (other leading producers were French Guinea, Gold Coast and Ivory Coast). The boom came to an end after 1910, when inexpensive, high-quality rubber from Southeast Asia began to arrive in Europe.[5] Export of rubber from modern-day Angola started in 1867 through the by then unoccupied and independent ports of the Kongo coast.[6] By 1896 rubber had become the single most important export product in Angola. By that time the main ports for the rubber export were Luanda, Benguela and the collection of smaller ports in the Congo district, of which Ambrizete was the most important. Export levels reached a peak of almost 4,000 tons in 1899, fell sharply to about 1,500 tons in 1902 and then recovered until 1913, when European imports from Southeast Asia began devaluating African rubber. In the Congo district, the highest export level had already been reached by 1893, when in total almost 800 tons of rubber were taxed by colonial customs officers. Structural decline seemed to occur for the first time in 1900, when the level fell to about 400 tons, while after 1906 exports sank to the level of 300 tons.

The rubber passing through the district's customs houses was mainly coming from the regions around the river Kwango, which formed the district's eastern border with the Congo Free State. Initially the rubber was transported to the European factories established on the Atlantic coast. But when in the early 1890's larger trading vessels managed to navigate the river Zaire up to Noki, which was much closer situated to the production zones, this town became the district's main port for the export of rubber.[7]

The late 19th century rubber and ivory trade in the triangular region between Kinshasa, the Kwango and the lower Zaire was predominantly in the hands of the Zombo.[8] In the early 1890s their caravans began serving the European houses that had settled in their capital town, Makela do Zombo, to collect and store rubber. Earlier than the colonial government, which occupied Makela in 1896, these trade houses had understood the town's central location in the rubber trade. From that point onward Makela was transformed from a regional market into one of the district's main economic centres. From Makela rubber was easily transported to Noki and then shipped off to various ports in Europe.

4 *Bula Matari* is, according to some, the name the people of the Lower Congo gave to the "rock breaking" Congo explorer Stanley and which they subsequently used to identify the Congo Free State.

5 Harms 1975: 73-4.

6 "Kongo coast" refers to the Atlantic coast of the old Kingdom of Kongo, between Ambriz and the river Zaire. "Congo" has a more general significance and is used, for example, in "Congo Free State", "Lower Congo", "Portuguese Congo" and "Congo district".

7 *Dados estatísticos...,* 1918*:* 16-7, 28-9, 40.

8 This was noticed, for example, in July 1885 by Richard Büttner, one of a number of German scientists that explored the Congo in the 1880s. See Heintze 1999: 188-189; see also Birmingham 1981: 67.

Under the conditions of free trade existent in the Congo district, ups and downs in the countrywide production and export of rubber generally followed similar movements of world market prices for rubber. Naturally, high prices encouraged African traders and harvesters alike to collect as much rubber as possible. A drop in the rubber price would thus shortly be followed by a decline of production.[9] But in addition to these external influences there were two local factors that had an impact – negative only – on this lucrative economy: the exhaustion of rubber supplies and the occupation of the Kwango frontier zone by the Congo Free State. Because of a continual devastation of the rubber plants, the production zones had moved deeper into the Congo interior. In the words of a Free State official commenting on the Angolan situation in 1900, "the natives… harvest through barbarous processes that kill the source of their riches on the spot, and thus the places where one still finds rubber are further and further away from the coast."[10] For the Congo district this meant that more and more of the rubber exported through its ports was tapped across the Kwango, that is, in Free State territory. From evidence shown below it seems that a veritably large quantity of the rubber exported from the Congo district indeed came from the Free State's Eastern Kwango district.

As long as the frontier was left unoccupied, rubber was of course easily transported to the factories in Makela. But after official explorations had been carried out in the Kwango region between 1889 and 1894[11] the frontier zone was dotted with military posts set up to impede the flow of rubber into Angola. Not long before, the Free State had embarked on a project to monopolise the trade of rubber and ivory in many parts of its territory. In the eyes of many, the methods of appropriation used were illegitimate and illegal. In the case of the Kwango, however, the Free State had the law on its side, as it had the right to impose export duties on the trade.

II

According to the Act of the Berlin Conference of 1885 the Congo Free State, like the Congo district, formed part of the Congo Free Trade Zone, where it was prohibited for colonial governments to levy import duties and where Europeans were free to establish independent business ventures. From 1891-2 onward, however, the Free State developed a political-economic regime "that had the effect of hindering private enterprise by an impassable barrier of state monopoly."[12] The State's policies were embodied in the *regime domanial*, the logic of which is neatly explained in the following passage (Stengers 1969: 265):

> The state had been declared proprietor of all vacant land, which would henceforth constitute its domain. Vacant land, it was decreed, consisted of all the land which was neither occupied nor being exploited by the natives. It happened that almost everywhere in the country the two most remunerative wild products, ivory and wild rubber, came from lands decreed vacant and so might be regarded as products of the state's domain, to be collected by the state alone. As a consequence of this system, a trader might not buy ivory

[9] Harms 1975: 76.

[10] AA, AE, 224/158, *Confidentiel. Note sur le commerce de la Province d'Angola. Lisbonne, novembre 1900. Le Consul General*. Such "barbarous" harvesting practices were also used in the Free State, but there producers were not so much driven by high prices as by effective coercion.

[11] Cornevin 1966: 139.

[12] Stengers 1969: 265.

> or wild rubber from the Africans without becoming receiver of stolen goods – stolen, in effect, from the state.[13]

From an African point of view, the property laws of the Congo Free State forbade most of the Congolese populations to trade rubber and ivory with European merchants. Instead, a labour tax compelled them to collect rubber for the benefit of the State. A system was also introduced to persuade them to work for reward.[14] Crucially, however, the rewards for their harvest were always lower than what would be offered by merchants on a free market. For an African rubber trader selling was much more lucrative in Angola than in the Free State. As one Portuguese observer noted, "selling here for the price he agrees on, this he prefers to committing himself, in the Free State, to hand over [the rubber] for the price officially established."[15] In Makela 600 *reis* was paid for a kilo of *caoutchouc des herbes* and 700 for a kilo of *caoutchouc des lianes*. After subtracting 107 *reis* per kilogram for the transport from Kiloango to Makela, these numbers equated 2.74 and 3.29 francs. By the Free State only 0.70 francs was paid for a kilo of *caoutchouc des herbes*.

In large parts of the Free State the exploitation of rubber and ivory was left to concessionary companies, to which the State conceded huge tracts of its private domain, generally in return for fifty percent of the shares. One of these companies, the *Comptoir Commercial Congolais*, controlled the area east of the Kwango, immediately to the right of the Portuguese Congo.[16] In the mid-1890's, Free State officials visiting the Eastern Kwango district noticed the grounds were rich in rubber. On the markets of Kenge-Diadia one official believed he saw thirty tons of rubber exposed for sale every four days. This rubber used to be exported to Angola. But that was, as Morel commented,

> before the Congo State was paramount in the land; the days when the native could sell his produce on legitimate commercial lines; the days when the native either bartered his rubber with other native traders from Portuguese territory… or direct with European merchants established in Portuguese territory… the rubber which used to belong to the native, and which the native sold is now the property of the Kwango Trust, for which the native is expected to collect it…[17]

Morel's words, though, were politically charged and may not be a precise description of the factual situation. A major puzzle is how far the trust's monopoly, or that of the State, stretched in the Eastern Kwango.

The boundaries between free trade and state monopoly were not always clearly drawn. In 1892 the Free State left the Kasai Basin and the Lower Congo open for trade[18] and between 1893 and 1899 more than a dozen independent trading companies opened factories along the Kasai and its tributaries.[19] At the same time, however, the State imposed the "rubber tax" on the inhabitants of this region, forcing them to collect a certain amount of rubber for the State.[20] In 1902 free trade was fully banned after the companies were converted into a trust, the *Compagnie du Kasai*, fifty percent of whose shares the State

[13] *Ibid.*: 265. For a shrewd analysis of the Free State property laws, see Morel 1904: 78-85.
[14] Slade1962: 177-8.
[15] Morães e Castro 1903: 84.
[16] Cattier 1906: 67-8. Morel (1904: 96) called this company the *Kwango Trust*, while Cornevin (1966: 165) speaks about the *Compagnie du Kwango*.
[17] Morel 1904: 95-6.
[18] Louis and Stengers 1968: 65.
[19] The Portuguese feared these factories would, due to lower transportation costs, out-compete traders established on Angolan territory and draw rubber from Angola into the Free State. See H. de C. 1900-1901: 103-4.
[20] Morel 1904: 189.

retained.[21] Parallels of these developments could be seen in the Lower Congo. The districts together forming the Lower Congo basically covered the part of the Congo Free State south-west of Stanley-Pool, that is, the area right above Angola's Congo district. Although rubber vines were growing in this region, the produce of which was called "Bas-Congo",[22] no rubber tax was imposed until 1903. In certain parts, however, the State claimed a monopoly on groundnuts and submitted the people to a regime of forced production. After 1903 free trade was further undermined when "tax-collectors" were sent out to obtain rubber by force.[23]

The legal patterns in the Free State's Kwango district were as shady as those of the Kasai Basin and the Lower Congo. There was a concessionary company which supposedly had a right to all produce from the land. Meanwhile, however, rubber was sold at local markets and transported to Makela do Zombo. From the documentation in the Belgian archives it seems that the Free State's legal policies in principal allowed for this trade. African traders were free to sell produce to whomever they wanted. Clearly the State tried to extract the rubber growing on its territory for its own benefit, even though in 1896 the Governor-General told the Kwango district commissioner that "it is in our interest to favour and even to stimulate these transactions."[24] The main legal problem was not so much that the Africans "stole" the produce of the land; trouble was caused by the evasion of export duties on the part the Zombo traders.

III

"Fraud is in favour," a report from 1904 said, "and is practised in nearly the whole Kwango district."[25] Streaming parallel to the Kwango, the river Wamba roughly separated the trade flowing from the Kwango district to Makela do Zombo from that pouring through the Lunda frontier into other parts of the Angolan interior. The Lunda frontier was left unoccupied by the Free State until at least 1904, despite the creation of the *Compagnie du Kasai* in 1901. In official circles it was known at the time that traders from Angola, "who enter through the unguarded frontiers freely trade in slaves, ivory and rubber, introducing from their side a large amount of arms and ammunitions."[26] Through the old the State of Muatianvua, north of the Lunda frontier, ivory was passing that came from the Caniuca region. Since 1868 a Luso-African colony had settled and spread there, bringing many Portuguese elements into the local language. Free State agents roaming the area in 1889 had to pretend that they were *filhos do muene puto* by speaking Portuguese.[27] In 1904 traders from Luanda still visited the villages on the eastern side of the Wamba on a regular basis. The far east of the Kasai district, the part between the rivers Kwengo and Kwilu, was a known centre for the ongoing slave trade. There, too, an Angolan mulatto was noticed with a village of his own; it was said he used to buy rubber with pearls and little bells.

21 Cattier 1906: 68-9, 195-7.

22 Goffart 1908: 320-1.

23 Morel 1904: 229-34.

24 AA, AE, 259/293 VIII, *Boma 24-4-1896*.

25 The following description of the Kwango-Makela trade is largely based on this report. AA, AE 260/294, *Kinzamba 10-10-1904, le contrôleur des impôts sup. au G.G., départment des finances no. 27, Rapport sur la mission dans le district Kwango*; *Boma 8-11-1904, idem, suite au rapport no. 27 du 10-10-1904*.

26 *AA, AE 259/293, Lusambo 29-5-1904, le substitut du Lualaba-Kasai au procureur d'Etat*.

27 Arquivo Histórico Ultramar (Lisbon), 1a Rep., 2a Sec., Pasta 9, *Lisboa 3-5-1889, Dias de Carvalho, chefe da expedição, ao Director Geral dos Negocios do Ultramar*.

Interesting as this is, for the purpose of this paper we focus on the region west of the Wamba and north of the town of Panzi. The rubber collected in this area was drained towards Makela through the regions of Kiloango, Kinzamba (alias Pangala-Lele), Kwilo-Fufu, Wamba-Kombo and the river Luitu. In contrast, the regions south of Panzi – those of the François-Joseph Falls and Tungila-Wamba – were known as being less exploited by traders from Angola, a fact that was perhaps due to population scarcity; it was said, on the other hand, that a major trade route between Luanda and the Kasai was passing the frontier region around the François-Joseph Falls which around 1900 the Portuguese authorities began exploring.[28]

Both the 1904 report and a number of official statements from 1907 and 1908 show that the goods most in demand on the Congolese rubber markets were several cheap fabrics, various sorts of cloth, blankets, rifles, gunpowder, salt, pearls and shell currencies called *nzimbu*.[29] Around 1907 rifles became possibly the most popular trade ware. A number of reports from that year mentioned Zombo from Angola travelling north of Kinzamba, up to Popokabaka, and trading only guns for rubber. This change may have been caused by an earlier ban on the rifle trade in the Congo Free State. In fact, since the trade in rifles was rampant in Angola, this ban could only have given a new impulse to the fraudulent export of rubber.[30]

Most detailed information exists on the trade between Kiloango and Popokabaka, the region northeast of Makela. To penetrate this region the factories in Makela usually entrusted their merchandise to African *capitas de négoce*, who then left with their caravans to visit specific markets to buy rubber. Though most of the rubber markets were located in the Free State, some could be found in Angola. The report mentioned two big markets (Saka and Bijuza) near Lula-Lumene in the Stanley-Pool district; a third close to the frontier in Pangala-Lele (alias Kinzamba); and another important one in Pangalu-Matoba in the Portuguese Congo district (west of the river Lubizi's estuary in the Kwilo). But the *capitas* from Makela also used to drive their caravans to the markets of Muanda, Pasingalu and Sona Kiboya to buy rubber, normally following the route from Muanda to Tumba-Mani while passing the frontier around Kiloango.[31] On the Portuguese side of the Kwango, traders concentrated in places such as Kimbuku[32] and Kizanzi, the village of big chief Kianvo Kia N'Zadi.[33]

Another method used by the Makela factories to purchase rubber was to entrust their merchandise to chiefs in the frontier zone, who in turn sent out their men to the local markets or invited Zombo traders to their villages. Many villages on the river Kwango, the one of Kianvo Kia N'Zadi included, were involved in such transactions. Some of the European factories also established collection posts in the Free State. In 1903, for example, it was seen that a *boy de blanc de Makela* was setting up such a post in Kindongo, in the

[28] See AA, AE 259/293 VIII. In 1903, the existence of a Portuguese post was noticed at the Tungila mouth in the Kwango, called Tenda-Banzi by the local population. See AA, AE 260/294, *Chutes François-Joseph 29-6-1903, Pochet au commissaire de district du Kwango oriental, no. 287, Rapport sur la reconnaissance de la Tungila*.

[29] AA, AE 260/294.

[30] AA, AE 209/65.

[31] AA, AE 260/294, *Extrait d'un rapport du contrôleur suppléan des impôts, 7-12-1907, annexe à la lettre du G.G., no. sp. 38 du 28-12-1907*.

[32] AA, AE 260/294, *Résumée de la lettre du G.G. du 2-10-1908*.

[33] AA, AE 260/294, *Boma 12-11-1907, le G.G. au secrétaire d'Etat, no. sp. 890*.

Kinzamba area.[34] In 1899 small stations had been established west of Popokabaka, along the Noki parallel (the international frontier that had still to be demarcated), which had, in the words of the Belgian district governor, “no other reason for existing than that of trading with the *fraudeurs* that exploit part of our territory.”[35] In still other parts of the country *capitas* would go to the production areas themselves; they would bypass the markets and buy the rubber gum straight from the producers. Finally, there were many individual traders who were directly sent by their bosses or trading on their own account.

The 1904 report estimated that from the Kwango annually a total of 900 tons of rubber was illegally brought into Angola: 650 tons to Noki (via Makela) and 250 to Luanda. The manager of a Portuguese firm in Kiloango had informed that the 22 factories in Makela collected 2 tons of *caoutchouc des herbes* per month, which leads up to a total of 528 tons. In 1905, on the other hand, it was estimated that annually 600 tons of rubber illegally passed through the Kwango frontier.[36] Following the report’s calculation, this would roughly amount to 430 tons for Makela and 170 for Luanda. Considering that between 1900 and 1906 exports from the Congo district were fluctuating between 400 to 500 tons of rubber per year, this seems to be a more reasonable estimate. The report furthermore stated that a carrier makes up to four journeys per year and carries at most 20 kilograms. This would mean that every year more than 5,000 carriers were active in the rubber trade between the Kwango district and Makela do Zombo.

IV

The root of the illicit Kwango trade was in the Free State’s creation of a trading monopoly and the concomitant low rewards for collecting rubber. The rubber smuggle undermined the State’s economy in two ways: as produce vanished into a neighbouring colony the State lost part of a profitable business, while at the same time no income was received from duties on the export of this rubber. If in 1896 the Governor-General was still supporting the export for the benefits that could be reaped through taxation, 8 years later the priority had clearly become to contain the rubber inside State territory. The 1904 report’s prime suggestion was to push the Angolan *capitas* out of the market. This was to be done, surprisingly, not so much by means of effective border control as through direct competition with Makela: the report advised to send *capitas récolteurs* to the production centres and to purchase rubber on the spot through white government agents; at the same time competition with the factories could be intensified by supplying goods identical to the commodities these factories merchandised. But whether the Free State was actually going to pay equal prices for rubber is doubtful. Another question is whether the State succeeded in driving the Zombo traders out of the Kwango district at all. At first glance, it seems they did. In 1907 rubber exports from the Portuguese Congo district had dropped to 200 tons from 500 tons in the previous year, and fluctuated around 300 tons per year until 1913. But as pointed out earlier, already in 1900 the export of rubber had fallen in a structural low. Moreover, it is hard to make a comparative assessment of these numbers without precise figures of rubber exports from the Congo Free State.

Finally, any economic comparison between the Congo Free State and the Portuguese Congo district has to account for the competitive advantage the first had due to the

[34] AA, AE 260/294, *Boma 9-5-1904, le vice-G.G. au secrétaire d’Etat, no. 607.*

[35] AA, AE 259/293 VIII, *Popokabaka 22-11-1899, le commissaire de district au G.G., no. 267/G.*

[36] AA, AE 260/294, *Boma 14-7-05, le G.G. au secrétaire d’Etat, no. sp. 296.*

construction of the Congo railway, finished in 1898. Produce that was previously brought down from Kinshasa to the Lower Zaire and the Kongo coast and thus often passed through Portuguese customs could now be rapidly and efficiently transported by train to the port of Matadi. Here the question is, however, whether the railway's economic pull stretched as far as into the Kwango district, where part of the rubber exported from the Portuguese Congo was tapped. An additional question in this respect is how much rubber was actually still produced in this area, considering the steady exhaustion of supplies. Alternatively, the Congo district's loss of trade could be explained by political measures which the Free State government took to keep the Kwango rubber within its borders. Certainly in the experience of the local Yaka and Zombo populations, it was on the military front where the presence of *Bula Matari* was hardest felt.

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