

DIGICOLJUST

Colonial Violence, Subaltern Agency and Shared Archival Heritage: A Digital Platform of Colonial Judiciary Sources

DURATION
15/12/2019 - 15/03/2022

BUDGET
314.902 €

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

DIGICOLJUST sits at the crossroads of societal and scientific goals. On the one hand, Belgium’s colonial past has recently dramatically resurfaced. The reopening of the Africa Museum in Tervuren coincided with a UN report advising Belgian authorities to apologize for the country’s colonial ventures. Official excuses by the Prime Minister for the handling of mixed-race children born in “Belgian Africa” who were taken away from their mothers contributed further to public controversy. However necessary, these tense debates too often pitted fantasized “Belgian” and “Congolese” visions of the colonial past one against the other; they also highlight the need for more historical knowledge on the colonization of Central Africa. On the other hand, research on the history of Belgian Congo has faced two major obstacles. First, the written legacy of the Belgian colonial administration is held in Brussels, and is difficult to access for researchers coming from the global South. Second, little research has been done on Congolese experiences of colonization, often because of a lack of available sources. Although bottom-up approaches are gaining ground in the global imperial historiography, the history of Belgian colonialism has mostly been written from the vantage point of colonial agents and institutions.

This project offers a threefold response to these issues. It aims first to make a significant swath of Belgian colonial archives freely and readily accessible to the academic community through a digitization campaign. Second, it ambitions to valorize these archives, through research seminars for students, through scientific publications and through a joint research project between Belgian and Congolese academics. Third, by digitizing unexplored archives uniquely documenting Congolese experiences, it will further our knowledge of the experience of colonial rule.

The trial records of the court martials of the Congo Free State (1885-1908) and of the Belgian Congo (1908-1960) constitute a unique heritage in this regard. Congolese soldiers and Belgian officers were tried by military courts for violations of military and civilian law. These trial archives, more than 5400 of which have been preserved, are of fundamental significance in three ways. First, they hold countless cases of insubordination, theft, desertion, substance abuse or sexual violence, shedding a crude light on the daily troubles agitating Congolese armed forces. Second, they were active both in peace and war time, therefore providing crucial insights in the different guises of military governance. Third, in cases of unrest, entire regions could be placed under “military regime”. Civilian courts were replaced by military ones, in which appeal procedures were restricted. Martial courts sanctioned Congolese for rebelling against the state, thus offering an exceptional insight in the history of their resistance against colonial rule. This project is therefore intended as a useful and original contribution both for histories of colonial violence and for histories of African agency in Central Africa. It will provide new insights into interactions (and intersections) between colonial tools of domination and African strategies of coping, thus contributing to three subfields at the core of international historiographical debates on colonial history that are of particular interest to the Congo colony such as the history of colonial violence, the history of the words and actions of colonized people and of their modes of expression in colonial courtrooms, and the history of colonial security forces and politics of order.



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As part of the larger collection of colonial archives, which are in the process of transfer from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Belgian State Archives, these inquiries and trials form a heritage shared by Belgium and its former colonies. DIGICOLJUST aims to offer concrete and durable digital tools for a shared access, by inventorizing, digitizing and on-line storage and publication of integral/full range collections, in a logic of pilot projects, so as to allow users of the collection so seize the coherence and sheer extent of the archive. Conceived as a pilot project in the development of best practices and of joint dynamics of preservation and exploitation of the State Archives' "colonial" collections, DIGICOLJUST will produce a state of the art inventory of the collection (thereby documenting the "culture of neglect" (Hiribarren 2017) of this collection and identifying related records shattered over other collections); digitize a significant part of the collection to ensure its preservation and accessibility through the internet, worldwide; develop research tools to disclose the records to users from different disciplines, research interests and national academic traditions; and stimulate research at the national and internal level.

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