

Rereading *La Voix du Congolais*: Little Magazines in Francophone & Congolesse Literature

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The critical study of little magazines (*les petites revues*) allows scholars the opportunity to trace the formation of cultural and linguistic practices across regional, national, and transnational contexts. Throughout the French-speaking world, little magazines emerge in the 20th century as an important medium for reaching literary communities in a way books and other media could not (Bulson 2). The rise of print technology contributes to the spread of the newspaper and magazine form in the West and later to their colonies in Africa, the Americas, and Asia.¹ The widespread distribution of this periodical form circulates new concepts of literary genre and linguistic practices equipping this print medium a unique insight into the development of both regional and transnational Francophone literature (Peterson 6-7). Established in Europe since the 19th century, French language magazines and newspapers were initially developed in the colonies by colonial regimes and missionaries for educational purposes and to regulate information, in the case of the missionaries these publications were often in indigenous languages (*Zaïroise* 19; Peterson 7). Yet soon, these magazines were engaged by local writers living in the colonies and educated in French as an emerging cultural and social space to expand new concepts of literary genre or identity. One sees examples of this in magazines like *La Revue indigène* in Haiti (1927-28), *Tropiques* in Martinique (1941-45), and *Présence africaine* in Dakar and Paris (1947).² Another such publication from the former Belgian Congo³ (now Democratic Republic of the Congo), entitled *La Voix du Congolais*, presents a little magazine that is constitutive of cultural identity and literary practices in the pivotal years of transition from colonial occupation to independence. In what follows, I argue that this publication furnishes a cultural space to cultivate concepts of identity based on collective historical experiences and future social interests within an emerging independent Franco-Congolesse society by circulating a multiplicity of didactic discourses as well as subversive literary forms and genres.

The scholar Mukala Kadima-Nzuji has comprehensively documented the history of Congolesse writing in the French language demonstrating that poets and writers emerged separately from *La Voix du congolais* but were also bolstered by the

little magazine's opportunities and output (*Zaïroise, Demi-siècle*). For example, the poet Antoine-Roger Bolamba,⁴ established his literary reputation in 1939 by winning the first *Prix « littérature orale indigène »* followed by Paul Lomami-Tshibamba who won the prestigious *Prix littéraire de la Foire coloniale de Bruxelles* in 1948 for his play *Ngando*. Both men were major contributors to the little magazine filling editorial and leadership positions while engaging the publication as a vehicle to circulate their literary texts and social critiques. In this article, first, I establish a brief account of the details surrounding the formation of the magazine as well as its most important figure, the editor in chief, Antoine-Roger Bolamba. Additionally, I examine the double function of the journal as a colonial tool and cultural literary production. The following section will analyze the use of literary prize competitions by *La Voix du Congolais* to attract and expand readership as well as reimagine cultural practices and social norms through the valorization of specific linguistic and literary styles. These competitions helped to institutionalize and circulate the literary aesthetics and forms of the developing postcolonial Franco-Congolese identity. Lastly, I highlight specific articles focusing on education published in the magazine to demonstrate the subversive methods employed by the contributing writers. Kadima-Nzuji summarizes the period in Franco-Congolese literary history in which the magazine was produced as maintaining: « [...] la volonté manifestée par ces « évolués » de prouver au colonisateur qu'ils s'étaient assimilés sa langue et qu'ils étaient capables de la pratiquer avec habileté » (*Demi-siècle* 75). Despite this linguistic acquiescence by the writers noted by Kadima-Nzuji, I find that *La Voix du Congolais* offers a unique opportunity to study how little magazines arose from the importation of both a European mode of representation (periodical print media) and linguistic cultural tradition (French language), allowing Congolese writers a means to express their experiences and ideas in a rapidly changing socio-political climate that outpaced other cultural forms such as novels or poetry. Little magazines, specifically *La Voix du Congolais*, are revealed to be influential cultural vehicles to craft regional concepts of literary genre and generate emerging cultural spaces for the development of a collective French speaking Congolese identity in the face of colonialism and decolonization.

In 1944, the colonial Belgian *Service des Affaires Indigènes de Gouvernement Général de Léopoldville* established a media division known as the *Comité Consultatif de la Voix du Congolais*, which operated in the four sectors of press, cinema, libraries, and radio. This colonial expansion to occupy further social spaces led to the development of a bimonthly print publication *La Voix du Congolais* from 1945-1959, later to become monthly in 1947, financed by the colonial regime and by the income generated through advertisements and circulation (*Zaïroise* 41). The articles of the magazine operated under Belgian censorship in Léopoldville (now Kinshasa) but presented a wide variety of subjects from art reviews, education, political editorials, upcoming social gatherings, to poetry and serialized fiction. Subscriptions to the periodical were available not only throughout the Belgian colonies in Africa, but were also obtainable in Belgium and

elsewhere overseas. The cost of the subscriptions varied depending on the location and origin of the subscriber – with different rates for Congolese and natives of other Belgian colonies versus Europeans or those living abroad. For example, a yearlong subscription (*abonnement d'honneur*) in 1948 would cost a European subscriber 250 *francs congolais* while a native resident of the *Congo belge* or another colony would pay 100 *fr. congolais*. The cost of an individual copy of the magazine was 8 *fr. congolais*. One important appeal of the magazine to readers was its assertion of being made « *Pour les congolais, par les congolais* ». Indeed, the question of audience begins to unveil the complicated networks in which *La Voix du Congolais* functioned as both a production of colonial expansion and a cultural production expanding ideas of Congolese identity and literature. As a consequence of the education system instituted by the Belgians, a new social class emerged in the urban centers of the *Congo belge* deemed the *évolués* who were known for the mastery of the French language and middle-class professional careers. The editors and writers of *La Voix du Congolais* belonged to this particularly educated class and addressed the articles and advertisements of the publication to their peers, who comprised a small minority of the population. Their goal was to broaden the appeal of literature in the French language to the larger Congolese society. Nonetheless, the magazine occupied a substantial space to cultivate new concepts of culture and self in the years leading up to independence in 1960. Despite the magazine's authoritarian origins, it marks a pivotal moment in the expansion of Francophone African literature in the postwar years, which coincides with a new era in Congolese poetry and prose writing in French (*Zaïroise* 309).

In addition to close readings of the texts printed in *La Voix du Congolais*, my research for this article engages both recent critical scholarship on little magazines and print culture in African or postcolonial contexts as well as academic material gathered by scholars during the original printing of *La Voix du Congolais* in the years leading to the end of colonialism. I use the term “little magazine” (*les petites revues*) as defined by Eric Bulson in his critical work *Little Magazines, World Form* where he argues that little magazines are a literary form that travels across global networks of communication connecting complex systems of cultural and literary exchange (Bulson 2-3). Bulson explains that the term “little” is preferred to “literary” due to the amount of non-literary content published alongside the poems and prose. Furthermore, he acknowledges the implication of “little” in reference to the limited publication budget or small readership size, but he is careful to point out that he in no way wishes to diminish the perception of these magazines as possessing anything less than significant cultural and social influence. One essential element that is common to these publications is that each little magazine is shaped by specific social, political, and economic realities unique to the milieu in which it is produced (Bulson 4). By concentrating on *La Voix du Congolais*, I hope to ascertain the specific cultural and socio-political factors that shaped the magazine's important contributions to literature and cultural identity in the region.

Indeed, there is little contemporary scholarship or documentation focusing on *La Voix du Congolais* and even less so outside of Belgian and Congolese contexts.⁵ To fill this void in the archive, one must consult the ethnographical and anthropological studies by European academics in the 1940s and 50s found in research journals like Cambridge's *Africa: The journal of the International African Institute* amongst others. Although the articles were corrupted by their colonial biases, the researchers documented the issues and articles of the little magazine alongside their own commentary, which provides today's scholars with insights on how the reception of specific types of writing published in the magazine by the colonizer.

I. Belgian Colonialism in Congolese Society

In 1957, the Belgian research journal, *Aequatoria*, published a short article critiquing the colonial government's hypocrisy in preaching a rhetoric of national privatization while simultaneously launching state run media platforms in the Congo. The author states that the government runs several publications, such as *La Voix du Congolais* and *Nos Images*: "To bring their message to the native populations, the [Belgian] Government prints educational brochures, and equally, they possess the incomparable tools of propaganda that are the radio, a public-address system, and the cinema..." (Vinck 108). The industrialization of the colonies required that the population was divided into different sectors of skilled and unskilled laborers, consequently establishing an indigenous social hierarchy. The so-called *évolués* of the *Congo belge* may have been high on the regional social ladder but they were not the most elevated indigenous class, those with academic degrees from Europe were at the top. Further, they did not hold any local political authority. In examining the colonial hierarchy in 1949, the Cambridge journal, *Africa*, published the article "The Modern Evolution of African Populations in the Belgian Congo" that attempted to categorize the class divisions implemented by the Belgian regime. The Belgian anthropologist, Jacques J. Maquet, established that approximately 11 million Congolese living in the *Congo belge* inhabited one of several colonially imposed social groups. The first and largest group, encompassing about 80-85% of the population, were people who lived in the countryside under the direct control of local chiefs. This type of socio-political unit known as a *chefferie* was financially autonomous with the leaders possessing restricted judicial and political power under the oppressive control of the Belgians. Colonialism introduced the social institutions of formal public education and Christianity to further disrupt the preexisting rural culture and society. Education in the Belgian Congo until World War II was conducted primarily by missionaries in one of four local languages (Kikongo, Lingala, Tshiluba, and Swahili), which established a division in the colony over who could access the French language and the social benefits with which it came. Only Congolese individuals, who worked directly with the European colonials, and

students, who were permitted to a certain level of education, could receive instruction in French (*Zairoise* 8).

The strict regulation of education by the Belgians underscores their efforts to divide social groups by controlling and censoring the transmission of culture and knowledge. Colonial education in the *Congo belge* consisted of vocational training and the acquisition of job skills; schools were prohibited from engaging any literary pedagogy (*Zairoise* 8). This lack of formal instruction in literature separates the Belgian colonies from the French held territories in Africa where colonial education relied on literary pedagogy as essential to the assimilation process. The next category on the colonial hierarchy were the students and workers who were subjected to the meager education system. They numbered around one and a half million people who reached a certain level of education or skill and are called the “detrribalized” in Maquet’s study (Maquet 267). This social group lived in centers developed by Europeans, such as work camps, industrial plants or native cities adjacent to colonial settler populations and avowed no political authority to the rural *chefferies*. These urbanizing centers were quite stable in population and in line with colonial doctrine which favored settled family units and discouraged the flux migration traditional to the region in pre-colonial times. Amongst this social group, one can divide it further into three additional sections. First, the manual laborers who worked outside the *chefferies*. Then, in the following group, Maquet identifies the *évolués* who worked as accountants, clerks, teachers, medical assistants, shopkeepers, etc. The editors and writers of *La Voix du Congolais* belonged to this segment of the population. The magazine’s disclaimer states « *La Voix du Congolais* s’adresse à l’élite congolaise ». The editors and writers sought to establish a new cultural space with the publication of the magazine in the collective imagination of various social groups in the *Congo belge*. By limiting those who can participate or access these spaces, the magazine explores new ways to conceptualize or define cultural identity through literary and socially engaged writing, especially in the French language, that employs both colonial and Congolese discourses and themes. Achille Mbembe exposes the overlap between colonialism with culture and language in his study on the postcolony : « Elle [la colonisation] s’infiltré aussi bien dans l’économie, dans la vie domestique que dans le langage, les consciences et les mentalités [...] Elle produit une culture : elle est une pratique culturelle » (Mbembe 219-20). The restrictive boundaries of the colonial hierarchy are reproduced in the cultural space of the little magazine that must limit itself to a select audience. To support its imperialist imperatives, the Belgian regime purposefully inhibits the expansion of the French language and any cultural productions from which it is produced. Thus, the writers of the publication turn to cultural representations, like literature, to engage and expand their audience by incorporating regional influences or themes within the socially imposed European forms and modes of representation.

Why would the colonial government concern itself with the financing of a niche magazine targeted to such a minority group within the population? The achievements of the expanding French-speaking Congolese social group did not go unnoticed by the colonial regime or other writers throughout Africa and in Europe and the Americas. The Belgians not only afforded the *évolués* the means to represent their artistic and literary interests with *La Voix du Congolais*, but they also facilitated a method for the regime to access the *état d'esprit* of a critical segment of the colonial work force. Therefore, the little magazine began under these two visions of colonial occupation and cultural representation.⁶ There were approximately 40,000 members of the *évolués* class by 1949 and they were directly linked to the third “detrribalized” social group of Congolese in the *Congo belge* as defined by Maquet. The most-elevated indigenous class, who can be considered the elite of the elites, have obtained advanced degrees in Europe and notably “[they] live with and exactly like their European colleagues” (Maquet 268). According to Maquet, this class maintained a great symbolic value for the *évolués* since it illustrated that a person of African origin could thrive in European settings, especially the universities. In comparison, the *évolués* were often presented as, “the prefiguration of what the majority of the Congolese are going to experience tomorrow” (Maquet 268). From this perspective, one can see the vested interest the Belgians had in financing a print periodical produced and targeted to this marginal, yet crucial social group. Mukala Kadima-Nzuzi’s extensive research on the history of Congolese literature in French exposes that « La création de *La Voix du Congolais* constitua, au même titre que la fondation des cercles dont elle fut le trait d’union et le seul organe d’expression, un des moyens utilisés par le pouvoir colonial aux fins d’exercer son contrôle sur les « évolués » qui devenaient de plus en plus nombreux et dangereux pour sa survie » (*Zaïroise* 40). The *évolués*, educated in the style of the colonizer, began to employ their education to examine and question their own position in society and among a transnational literary network. The Belgian regime seems to assist rather than repress the circulation of ideas and information, while concurrently advancing their own objectives of economic and social control. Kadima-Nzuzi finds: « C’est que, en définitive, le but principal de *La Voix du Congolais* était de permettre d’une part aux « évolués » d’échanger leurs idées, de faire l’apprentissage de la presse, et, d’autre part, à l’administration d’être éclairée constamment sur leur état d’esprit » (*Zaïroise* 46). Therefore, a double function of the magazine is unveiled with the colonial regime patrolling this new cultural and social space, in contrast to Bolamba and the other writers who seek to define and expand it. A recent critical study on colonial print culture in Africa asserts that the majority of Francophone African literature produced between 1913-1960 was published by periodical presses⁷. Print technology allowed political groups new tools for the self-constitution of cultural and civic ideas and a widening the channels of communication (Peterson 4). Throughout the course of its publication, the two polarities of *La Voix du*

Congolais as both an authoritarian colonial product and self-constitutive literary tool interact and influence each other, while coming into opposition at times.

One of the central figures deciding the cultural forms and genres circulated by the magazine, Antoine-Roger Bolamba (1913-2002) stands out as the leader in the production of *La Voix du Congolais* from an editorial and literary perspective. Already establishing a reputation as a poet and writer by winning recognition through various publications and prize competitions, Bolamba was appointed the editor in chief who managed the publication through its 14-year run from 1945-1959. During that time, he contributed articles, editorials, reviews, poems, in addition to serialized and short fiction to the magazine, while continuing to establish his literary reputation outside of the Belgian Congo. In 1955, Léopold Sédar Senghor introduced Bolamba in the «*Préface*» to Bolamba's best known collection *Esanzo: Chants pour mon pays* published by Présence africaine. Senghor remarks, « Bolamba n'a pas été amené, il s'est amené dans les Lettres françaises, avec ses idées-forces, ses rythmes et ses images. Je ne parlerai pas des idées de Bolamba. Ce sont les grands thèmes de la Négritude. [...] » (10). This citation helps to reveal the larger transnational networks in which Bolamba and the magazine, where most of Bolamba's poems were first printed, participated. Bolamba and his fellow writers reimagined European modes of representation, such as poetry and various prose forms, in a Congolese context to engage with likeminded French language writers from other colonized regions. Senghor concludes: « Bien sûr, c'est une gageure, pour Bolamba, d'écrire en Français, pour le paysan nègre, dans cette « langue de gentillesse et d'honnêteté ». Les artistes ne manqueront pas de trouver ici des gaucheries. Il se trouve que le Poète s'est proposé de charmer son peuple, mais pas avec les moyens des habiles » (12). Senghor's warning to those critical of Bolamba's language highlights the importance of Bolamba's literary work as invested in the social context from which it was produced. Despite working through imposed modes of representation, Bolamba and the other writers of *La Voix du Congolais* developed localized literary genres to appeal to the larger French-speaking Congolese communities. Senghor applauds Bolamba along the lines, « d'être resté Nègre et Bantou », as opposed to complete assimilation to colonial literary aesthetics or cultural identity. One poem in Bolamba's collection, « Poème mongo », demonstrates one of the more explicit ways the poet conceives regional Congolese and transnational French forms and styles. The poem is presented on the left side of the page in the mongo language alongside the translation of the poem in French. The use of the two languages suggests a willingness to open the literary spaces within the decolonizing society to include a broader range of social groups and cultural styles. Bolamba's interest in Congolese society extends beyond just the literary imagination. He concerns himself with the education and social development of the *évolués*⁸ and French-speaking classes by using journalism and literature as a vehicle to connect with his audience and distribute his work.

In looking at the literature published in *La Voix du Congolais*, Antoine-Roger Bolamba stands out as the most prolific contributor submitting poems, serialized fictions, and sketches. Kadima-Nzuzi determines that the literature developed at this period can be broken down into two parts: 1945-53, which sees a heavily romanticized poetry probably resulting from the French romanticism taught in the textbooks of the education system to the most advanced students; and 1954-60, which marks the development of a new Self in the expanding world (*Avant-Propos* 87). This romantic period is denoted by recurrent themes of nature, rural village life, love and death, etc. However, the literary texts of this time cannot be dismissed as purely repetitious reproductions possessing no cultural or political value. The writers of *La Voix du Congolais* engage with the style and themes of the French romantic movement of the 19th century as well as the discourses of the colonial regime to represent their liminal position between Congolese and Belgian societies and to produce foundational texts in the emerging canon of Franco-Congolese literature. The poem « Le Hibou » by Bolamba, published in 1946, typifies how the poet situates his work within the cross-section of the overlapping Congolese and European cultural and social frameworks. The opening lines state: « Quand tu pleures, hibou, on n'ose fermer l'œil. / Ton accent démoniaque est voilé de mystère » (Bolamba 1946). The genre of romanticism comes across in the narrative voice's direct address to the owl as well as the owl's personification as an otherworldly being. The sensational language projects the fears of the narrative voice onto the owl in a method similar to that of the French Romantics who conflated notions of the Self/Other and Marvelous/Mundane binaries⁹. In her study of the Romance genre in Black Atlantic literature, Yogita Goyal argues, "... romance allows these writers to collapse time and space to give us a whole, or shine a beam of light onto one moment, or even to give us a progressive history read backwards from a future point of redemption" (10). The reading of this genre across the networks of the African diaspora allows Goyal to trace the subversive qualities writers employ by working through a romantic mode. In addition, Goyal traces the communal dialogue these writers craft outside traditional geographic and temporal boundaries. Bolamba's romantic poems express the subversive nature of the genre in an effort to embolden the collective imagination of a literary community amongst the members of the French-speaking Congolese social groups.

From today's postcolonial perspective, the imposed cultural forms and educational standards of the colonizer can be peeled away to examine the ways Bolamba and other Congolese writers employed oblique generic modes and language to represent their ideas. In Kadima-Nzuzi's analysis of « Le Hibou », he notes that the figure of the owl represents the messenger of death in many regional cultures in Africa (*Zaïroise* 87). This insight alongside the understanding that the Belgian regime serves as the greatest threat to the Congolese people's existence, allows the reader to interpret the figure of the owl, whose voice is « voilé de mystère », as a colonial figure speaking a

foreign language. The closing stanza of the poem states: « Tes crimes jusqu'au ciel montent avec le vent. / Leur poids finira bien par tomber sur ta tête. / Le soir, sous tous les toits, on murmure souvent / Des propos dédaigneux qui feront ta défaite » (Bolamba). The hushed plotting to overthrow the threatening figure of the owl resembles the struggle led by the Congolese people to liberate themselves from the colonial Belgian regime. The poet invokes the tone and themes of the romantic genre to conceal his critique against the hostile Belgian censorship policies. To advance his literary and social messages, Bolamba's writing must first appease the regulations of the supervising colonial offices before they could be distributed to his audience. In contrast to Kadima-Nzuji's dismissal of this early period of poetry as reproducing European aesthetics, the romantic genre found in Bolamba's early poetry functions as one of many ways that he and other writers incorporated progressive literary ideas in the publication to appeal to a larger public. The implementation of literary prize competitions presents an example of the merging together of the literary and social objectives for both the regime and the Congolese writing staff of the magazine.

II. Literary Prize Competitions

La Voix du Congolais held several prize competitions over the course of its publication, altering themes and guidelines slightly for each competition to valorize specific local or transnational ideals. French-language based literary prize competitions organized or sponsored by local colonial institutions proved not only to be a clever marketing ploy for *La Voix du Congolais*, but they also played an integral part in the development and diffusion of Franco-Congolese literature. Kadima-Nzuji clarifies that:

Historiens et critiques ont souvent souligné l'importance et le rôle des concours dans l'éveil littéraire au Congo belge [...] Il serait cependant inexact de penser que hormis les quelques textes (contes, fables, nouvelles, théâtre, etc.) publiés par des revues et journaux congolais et européens, la production littéraire est demeurée un fait occasionnel, ne surgissant que lors des concours organisés par l'autorité coloniale. (*Zairoise* 161)

Bolamba proved that Franco-Congolese texts could be published on their own, having himself published two collections of poetry in the years leading to independence, in addition to other publications by writers like Désiré-Joseph Basembe¹⁰ and Francisco José Mopila¹¹ around the same time. Unlike literary prize competitions run by other publications and colonial institutions in the French-speaking world,¹² the writing contests of *La Voix du Congolais* advertised and sought specifically the participation of the *évolués* for certain competitions. For a contest held in 1946, the magazine announced:

Un Concours Littéraire Ouvert Aux Évolués – Dans le but de stimuler l'activité intellectuelle des « Évolués » de leur faire prendre conscience des richesses de leur peuple par des recherche méthodique sur des sujets intéressant le monde indigène et de les pousser ainsi à un travail personnel et ordonné pour constituer une Bibliothèque franco-Congolaise qui sera l'œuvre des indigènes eux-mêmes de la colonie et des territoires sous mandat belge ; [...] (*La Voix du Congolais* 1946)

The regulations of the competition specify that the literary entry must treat an element of the indigenous experience in an original and personal style that was open to the French-speaking *évolués* residents of Belgian Equatorial Africa. For the colonizer, the submissions proposed by the colonized middle class offered insights to the Belgian regime of the concerns and issues that appear the most pressing for the members of this social group. Additionally, the initiatives proposed by the prize competitions of *La Voix du Congolais* call for a type of institutional canon forming of Franco-Congolese literary texts as a burgeoning cultural space. The prize competitions working in company with the magazine yielded new literary texts that represented the experiences and the lives of the Congolese people during the final years of the colonial era by indigenous writers who inhabited the region. Kadima-Nzuzi summarizes in his historical study of prize competitions in the *Congo belge*: « En dehors de cet intérêt sociologique qu'ils présentent, les concours n'ont guère apporté d'œuvres majeures empreintes de sceau de l'authenticité de leurs auteurs » (*Zaïroise* 192). Despite the apparent lack of critical or financial success of the pieces submitted to the magazine, this type of literary framework for the prize competitions, based on prefigured cultural expectations, implicitly engages complex political and social networks with relation to both regional and transnational identity and culture. In addition to the sociological interest proposed by Kadima-Nzuzi, recent critical scholarship on literary prize culture and periodical publishing in Africa during the 20th century reveals further understandings of little magazines as “incubators of literary genre” and enforcers of universal values (Peterson 1; Bush 92).

The regulations and prizes incentivized the public to take on the implicit objectives of the competitions by influencing the ways writers construct identity through literature. In 1948, the magazine featured a literary competition sponsored by the Rwandan King Mutara III, emphasizing: « Les organisateurs du concours étaient persuadés qu'en demandant un travail relativement court, ils permettaient aux concurrents d'aiguiser leur plume, de porter tous leurs efforts sur la forme afin que celle-ci atteignît la perfection littéraire » (*Zaïroise* 175). The highlighting of literary form in the advertisement demonstrates a certain cultural expectation of conformity and normalization, in this case conforming to the colonial standards of cultural representation indicative to the French language and literary networks of the postwar years leading up to decolonization. The cultural space of the little magazine circulates

the regional interpretations of these global literary forms and genres reimagined and represented within a Franco-Congolese context. Ruth Bush argues in her critical study of Francophone publishing throughout the African diaspora that literary prize culture can reinforce normative ideas of literary value and creative expression, “in response to pressure from political ideology and/or marketplace demands” (93). The competitions endorsed by *La Voix du Congolais* endeavored to systematize the circulation of printed cultural productions developed and represented in the French-speaking milieu of the Belgian Congo. The standards of little magazines as a European mode of representation, along with colonial censorship, exerts a limitation on the content, form, and language that a writer may use. These confines force poets and writers to reimagine the boundaries of genre and language, while operating within the socially accepted literary field.¹³

One literary prize competition in *La Voix du Congolais* stands out in contrast to the other French language dominant contests for its inclusive approach to cultural and linguistic identity. According to Kadima-Nzuji, the 1950 competition called for a Theatrical contest that accepted plays from any native resident of the *Congo belge* or *Rwanda-Urundi* in one of five languages: French, Kikongo, Lingala, Tshiluba, or Kiswahili. The juries were broken up by language and the French jury consisted of the *Procureur général* Léon Guébels, known in colonial literature under the *nom de plume* Olivier de Bouveignes, several representatives from the *bureau de presse de l'information*, and other Belgian colonial cultural figures. In contrast to the previous restrictions of the other competitions as available to the *évolués*, of which the use of the French language is essential, this theatrical prize competition was open to a broader section of society: « Le concours est accessible à tous les autochtones du Congo belge et du Ruanda-Urundi; aucun droit d'inscription n'est exigé » (*Zairoise* 177). The consideration of several indigenous languages illustrates the potential for flexibility within the emerging cultural identity deemed appropriate by an educated liminal social group with the ability to influence the circulation of literary and social ideas. The literary prize competitions helped diffuse the linguistic and literary objectives of the magazine, inspiring the public to participate in these new and developing cultural spaces. Whether for economic ambitions to obtain prize money, literary ambitions to become a writer, or for other reasons, one principal goal of the competitions was to convert a larger audience of the Congolese public to identify as *évolués* and engage the literary forms and styles revered by both the competitions and magazine. To assist in the expansion process, the magazine centers heavily on discourses and themes of education.

III. Debating Education

The subject of education becomes an intriguing point of entry when looking for a rupture between the policies of the colonial regime and the individual ideologies of the

writers of *La Voix du Congolais*. Due to the strict colonial social structure forced on the Congolese society, members of the *évolués* were expected to obtain a certain amount of formal western education and to adopt specific social behaviors to function as a metaphorical bridge between the European colonizer and the larger colonized populations. The writers of the little magazine for the *évolués* incorporate these educational and social ideologies imposed on a limited portion of the colony and undertake to apply this model to greater sections of society than the Belgian regime is willing to permit. Whereas it is in the interest of the writers to uphold an inclusive notion of Franco-Congolese identity, this contrasts with the Belgian policy to control who has access to certain levels of linguistic and vocational knowledge. The scholar Silvia Riva highlights an article in the second volume of the periodical entitled, « Quelle sera notre place dans le monde de demain ? » by Paul Lomami-Tshibamba asserting that the Congolese writers were already questioning the precariousness of colonial society from the very beginning of the magazine's publication. Riva reveals that the Belgian regime flagged the article and punished its writer: « [...] la censure répondit par une leçon exemplaire: pendant trois semaines, avant de se rendre à la rédaction, Lomami-Tshibamba subit une inspection et l'humiliation du fouet » (40). To avoid similar punishments, another article published by the magazine in 1948, « *Le Rêve du Congolais* », by the author Étienne Ngandu, demonstrates how writers toward the end of the colonial era subverted certain ideological policies while invoking colonial discourses. Ngandu explains that the Congolese people should conduct themselves with the understanding that, « la Belgique d'Outre-mer et la Belgique Métropolitaine ne forment en pratique qu'un seul pays [...] » (6). He discusses a return to the principles of Christian morality, the hard work needed to advance the Congolese forward, and the necessity to continue the civilizing mission of the Belgian regime. At the beginning of his article, Ngandu states:

Nous rêvons d'un Congo meilleur, d'un Congo où la famille, base de la société, serait respectée et stabilisée ; d'un Congo où nos enfants recevraient une instruction plus solide que celle qui nous fut dispensée ; d'un Congo où la femme noire serait suffisamment éduquée pour remplir convenablement son rôle de gardienne du foyer ; d'un Congo où il n'y aurait que la sympathie entre les races ; d'un Congo où le Blanc ne serait plus seulement un maître pour le Noir [...] (Ngandu 6)

In his opening remarks to the article, inflected with colonial rhetoric, Ngandu links the issue of education with the most marginalized members of the colonial hierarchy, Congolese women and children. An obstacle to the rise of the *évolués* class became the lack of women who identified with the social group and who shared the same interest in the lifestyle that Western educated Congolese men had come to prefer. This contributed to the writers of *La Voix du Congolais* championing an expansion of the

national education system to not only broaden the *évolués* class, but to also include the participation of women in these social dialogues and spaces. The magazine even published the writings of one of the earliest female Congolese writers, Marie Mboyo, who specialized in regional based short fiction and tales (Riva 40; *Zairoise* 99). Nonetheless, the opinions of the writers and the way they represented the subject of women and education are not without further critique with regard to their adherence to the civilizing mission of the colonizer.

Ngandu's « *Le Rêve du Congolais* » belongs to a collection of writings published in the little magazine that raised attention for the education of girls in opposition to the colonial doctrines of the Belgian regime. In 1951, the Belgian journal *Aequatoria* published « L'Instruction des filles » highlighting these articles of *La Voix du Congolais* for their subversive nature. The author, G. Hulstaert, attempted to expose the Congolese writers' reasoning as flawed and not compatible within the realm of the colonial mission. The article described the writers as “bitterly complaining” of the lack of education for girls. Hulstaert cites Antoine-Roger Bolamba's essay « Problèmes de l'évolution de la femme noire essor du Congo » (1949) where Bolamba explains one of the failures to develop education for girls in the Belgian Congo resides in the lack of female colonialists who accompanied the men. The main concern of Bolamba in the text is valorizing a Christian/European style institution of marriage in the Congo as a means to incorporate women and children into the *évolués* society. To challenge Bolamba's thesis, Hulstaert cites another Congolese writer, A.G. Bukasa, who simply states that Congolese parents did not see the importance in educating their daughters, which Hulstaert views as a much more likely reason. He writes, “These [Congolese] authors seem to forget all the immense benefits of which they themselves, their families, and their compatriots have been recipients of the disinterested Christian charity, often heroic, of the missionaries” (Hulstaert 129). Hulstaert seeks to dismiss the perspective of the magazine writers, but his engagement with this issue underlines concerns by the Belgian public of the validity of the Congolese writers' reasoning. The *Aequatoria* journal, published from 1937 to 1962, provided a European perspective of colonial practices in the *Congo belge*, but it frequently employed rhetorical discourses to expand Belgian interests in the colonies and further subjugate the Congolese people. The Belgian colonial discourse often tried to embolden itself through the guise of uplifting or civilizing Congolese culture and society. Nevertheless, the subject of education exemplifies how the writers of *La Voix du Congolais* opposed the Belgian regime through the printing press, while possessing their own concepts of cultural identity and social roles in the emerging Congolese nation. The continued insistence on the inclusion of women illustrates a future vision of the *Congo belge* separate from the one imposed by the colonizer, which emphasizes the regional demands of education equality as well as the transnational French language component. The issue of education

becomes one of the areas in which the publication puts itself into dialogue or opposition with the restrictions placed on their culture and society.

In 1952, *Aequatoria*, ran another article signed by V.M. entitled “Cultural Values” that counts three different articles published in the November 1952 issue of *La Voix du Congolais* that promoted indigenous culture.¹⁴ The first article by Ngandu speaks generally about the preservation of traditional customs, institutions, and practices. He is critiqued by the author for failing to understand that any threat to the Belgian colonial order jeopardizes the benefits of the system for future generations. Another article by M.B. Molengo calls into question why the Congolese do not preserve their native languages when speaking with their families or community members. In describing Molengo’s argument, the author said, “He [Molengo] notices that the Whites preserve their native language in the Congo and they teach it to their children. He reasons that the Congolese should do the same” (V.M. 146). This article from Belgium illustrates that the little magazine was monitored from abroad to analyze and document the *évolués* class. It exhibits that the writers of *La Voix du Congolais* were heavily invested in widening the notions of Congolese cultural identity in the social spaces dominated by colonial influence and propaganda. In *African Print Cultures*, Derek R. Peterson and Emma Hunter confirm that newspapers and periodicals played a critical role in the demographic enlargement of politics and gathering popular support in the composition of African nationalism during the 20th century (17). *La Voix du Congolais* develops as a vital space to engage a Franco-Congolese audience and to experiment with new concepts of their cultural and national identities not already predetermined by the colonial regime. At the end of the article “Cultural Values”, the author warns of the inevitable liberation movements to come to the *Congo belge* that have already begun to spread across the continent. The author finds, “The danger resides in the indiscriminate rejection of [Congolese] cultural contributions, like they all have shouted *en bloc*” (V.M. 147). The article points out the destructive and unforeseen consequences of constantly devaluing the cultural practices and regional identities of the Congolese people. The writers of *La Voix du Congolais* take it upon themselves to demonstrate how the expanding identity of the *évolués* class is instrumental to all aspects of Congolese life from art, domestic affairs, education, to politics and religion. The little magazine takes on a foundational role to diffuse pertinent cultural representations to increase and glorify the members of this growing social group. Acts of subversion become a connecting thread through the various issues of the publication leading up to decolonization, appearing in articles and editorials on all topics, including the literary pieces, poems, and fiction.

The critical study of the little magazine *La Voix du Congolais* reveals the dissident methods used by the writers to oppose colonialism as well as their efforts to develop a Franco-Congolese literary canon and cultural identity. After winning the prestigious *Prix littéraire de la foire coloniale à Bruxelles*, the journal *Présence africaine*

interviewed the 1949 winner, Étienne Ngandu about his motivations as a writer. He remarks: « J'ai collaboré également à la '*Voix du Congolais*'. Dans cette revue, j'ai posé notamment la question : Quelle sera notre place dans le monde de demain ? Cet article souleva certaines polémiques, mais amena sur le tapis le problème du statut des évolués » (Ngandu 316). Ngandu highlights the innovative work of the magazine to imagine an independent Congolese society in addition to the importance that art and culture will occupy once that society is realized. The collected editorials, poems, and fictional writings of the magazine contributed to the formation of a new period in Franco-Congolese literature that would take off in the years after independence in 1960. Bolamba, Ngandu, and the other writers of *La Voix du Congolais* launched the immense effort to define and expand Franco-Congolese identities amidst colonial oppression and decolonization. The articles and literary works published over the years in the magazine constitute an important collection of texts in the rise of both Congolese and Francophone literatures. The publication provided a window into the thoughts and concerns of the *évolués* class for the colonial regime, but additionally, it supplied a literal and metaphoric voice for a burgeoning intellectual class of Congolese artists and writers. Although the French language is central to the cultural identity and literary productions circulated by the magazine, this reading of the publication reveals a more inclusive approach in the ways these identities and productions were formed. Both the literature and the writers remained engaged with the native languages and cultures of the Congo to be inextricable elements in their efforts to shape a postcolonial Congolese society. To develop this emerging social space with concepts of cultural identity based on both regional and transnational values, the significance of literary form and genre in relation to the magazine unveils the global networks in which the writers operated by reimagining the form or genre through their unique interpretations and social positions. *La Voix du Congolais* demonstrates how little magazines furnish new concepts of literature and identities in Francophone Africa and expand local cultural spaces in the face of colonial oppression.

Notes

¹ Eric Bulson explains in *Little Magazines, World Form* (Columbia UP 2017) that little magazines in the West emerge from the increased commercialization of literary culture. Yet, in the colonies they are developed in relation to colonialism and decolonization (195).

² The example of *Présence africaine* stands out as an example of a little magazine that has received a certain level of critical attention due to its publication and circulation in France in contrast to the magazines from Haiti, Martinique, and the Congo. See Bulson and Ruth Bush's *Publishing Africa in French* (Liverpool UP 2016).

³ Belgium officially claimed rights over the Congo territory at the Berlin conference in 1885 changing the name from the Congo Free State to the Belgian Congo from 1908- 1960. After independence, it became known as the Republic of the Congo (*République du Congo*) before changing to the Republic of Zaire from 1971 to 1997. Today, it is known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

⁴ « Depuis qu'en 1972 un changement s'est produit, au Zaïre, dans les appellations d'État Civil, les prénoms d'origine étrangère ayant été remplacés par des post-noms d'inspirations africaine, Antoine-Roger s'appelle Bolamba Lokolé » (Kadima-Nzuji 103). Lokolé was a type of musical instrument used to transmit news, additionally the title of a poem by Bolamaba.

⁵ Two scholars who have covered *La Voix du Congolais* over time are Honoré Vink of the University of Leuven and Mukala Kadima-Nzuji of Marien-Ngouabi University.

⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak defines the two senses of the term “representation” in her landmark piece, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1983). First, the sense of political representation as in speaking on behalf of another. Then, cultural representation as in “re-presenting” in art or philosophy.

⁷ Peterson argues that African literature was produced from newspaper writing (Peterson, etc. 22).

⁸ In addition to his pieces published in *La Voix du Congolais*, Bolamba also published *Les problèmes de l'évolution de la femme noire*, Élisabethville, L'Essor du Congo, 1949 (coll. « Études sociales »).

⁹ See Ali Behdad's *Belated Travelers* (Duke UP 1994) and Yogita Goyal's *Romance, Diaspora, and Black Atlantic Literature* (Cambridge UP 2010).

¹⁰ Désiré-Joseph Basembe, *Les aventures de Mobarom*, Élisabethville, Éditions du Progrès, coll. « Écrivains congolais », 1947, 35p.

¹¹ « le Congolais hispanisant, Francisco José Mopila, qui publie en 1949, à Madrid, sous les auspices de l'Institut Madrilène d'études Africaines, ses *Memorias de un Congoles* » (Kadima-Nzuji 162).

¹² See Ruth Bush's *Publishing Africa in French: Literary Institutions and Decolonization 1945-1967* (Liverpool UP 2016).

¹³ Bulson defines a literary field as a sociological category of the relationship between the writer, the patron, the markets, and guidance in context of social, political, and economic forces (Bulson 36).

¹⁴ The articles were written by E. Ngandu on the institutional protection of cultural beliefs and productions of the Congolese people, by M.B. Molengo on preserving the indigenous languages of the region, and an article by Fr. Anki called « De notre musique ».

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