

INTERNATIONALES ARCHIVSYMPOSION  
IN DUISBURG (2023)

RELEVANZ DER ARCHIVE FÜR GESELLSCHAFT UND POLITIK

—

ANNALEN

ALGEMEEN RIJKSARCHIEF      ARCHIVES GÉNÉRALES DU ROYAUME  
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RIJKSARCHIEF IN DE PROVINCIEËN      ARCHIVES DE L'ÉTAT DANS LES PROVINCES

GENERALSTAATSARCHIV  
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STAATSARCHIVE IN DER PROVINZ

MISCELLANEA ARCHIVISTICA  
STUDIA

22x

ISBN : 978 94 6391 xxx x

Generalstaatsarchiv – Algemeen Rijksarchief – Archives générales du Royaume  
Ruisbroekstraat 2 rue de Ruysbroeck  
1000 Brüssel – Brussel – Bruxelles

D/2024/531/0xx

Publ. 64xx

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Redaktion – rédaction – redactie  
Els HERREBOUT

BRÜSSEL — BRUXELLES — BRUSSEL

2024

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**Restoring Archives, Restoring Identities?  
A Historical and Archival Inquiry into the  
Treatment of Persons of Mixed European-African  
descent in Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi  
(1885-1962).**

**Ornella ROVETTA<sup>1</sup>**

*“Dear Governor General, I have the honor of writing you a few words about my relative (father). Please assess this situation: my father and his abandoned son, from 1942 until today. When I arrived in Lubunda, not a single letter was addressed to his son. On the contrary, I sent him about thirty letters as his son, and he never replied”<sup>2</sup>..*

This is how A.A.<sup>3</sup> begins his letter on 27 November 1952 to the Governor-General of Belgian Congo. He was a child labeled as legally unknown by the colonial administration and he lived separated from his mother and father for most of his childhood. His personal file contains a letter from his mother and interrogation transcripts of both his parents. Born around 1937, his mother declared that they had been separated when A.A. was about three years old. The tutorship commission and the administrator did not go and look for the father because of the touching letter from his son. They did so to clarify the pension payment to support the child in the catholic boarding school of Lubunda, in the current Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo). His father, N.A., had sent him there around 1942. Yet, N.A. did not “legally” recognize him as his son when the local administrator (“*administrateur territorial*”) questioned him in 1953. Yet, the administrators’ correspondence in the file claimed that the father had cared financially for the child at some point, while it took due note of the paternity denial, in legal terms.

<sup>1</sup> Chiara Candaele presented the project at the International Archives Conference (“Relevance of archives for society and politics”) in Duisburg, on 26 May 2023. The current text draws on the latest research conducted within the “Résolution-Métis” project. The content also relies on a paper presented by the author at the 2023 African Studies Association of Africa Conference in Lubumbashi with Chiara Candaele, “Restoring Archives, Restoring Identities? Silences in the Colonial Past and Voices in the Present (the Case of Rwanda, Burundi and Congo)”.

<sup>2</sup> Translation from French by the author. Handwritten letter from A.A. to the Governor-General of Belgian Congo, 27 November 1952, 1p. FPS Foreign Affairs Archives, Archives of the Government-General, GG 18703, personal file of A.A.

<sup>3</sup> Names have been anonymized.

In summary, A.A. lived through a bureaucracy of concealment and ambiguity. Paradoxically, this bureaucracy has left us with records containing fragmented narratives of the lives of children and adults of mixed European-African descent, whom we refer to as “*métis*” in this text. The Belgian colonial authorities considered children who had not been legally recognized by their European<sup>4</sup> father as abandoned and were convinced that they were rejected by their native community or (primarily maternal) African families who were, in any case, seen as unfit to give children of mixed descent a “civilized” upbringing. Consequently, the children, not considered entirely European either, fell under layers of contradictory and successive colonial policies.

A.A.’s story is only one of many we encounter in the “Resolution-Métis” research program. The name of the program draws from a Resolution adopted by the Belgian Parliament in 2018 and which, among other wishes, commissions the realization of a historical study and urges to identify, analyze and make relevant (personal) records accessible to *métis*. In line with this, the research involves an extensive archival and historical study on the forced separations, displacements, and colonial policies towards persons of mixed European-African descent during Belgian colonial rule in the former Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi from 1885 to 1962. It is conducted at and under the scientific guidance of the State Archives of Belgium and funded by the Belgian Science Policy Agency and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation<sup>5</sup>.

### **A Public History Project**

By January 2026, we must deliver a detailed report about the lives of persons of mixed European-African descent born during Belgian colonial rule in the former Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi. The study will address the status of *métis* in colonial society, the justifications and implementation of their forced separations from African families, the (changing) legal framework governing them, displacement practices within the colonized territories and to Belgium, the role of private (families, charity organizations, individuals) and public actors (mainly the colonial administration), the religious institutions where many “abandoned” *métis* children were sent, and the entanglement with Belgian associative networks.

<sup>4</sup> The colonial population of Ruanda-Urundi and Belgian Congo was of an international character. Different nationalities were present (Italians, Greek, French, Swedish,...) which is why we speak about European fathers.

<sup>5</sup> Under the supervision of Pierre-Alain Tallier and Nico Wouters. For more information, please visit <https://www.metis.arch.be/le-projet-et-sa-genese>.

The “*métis* problem” as it was framed at the time, spanned the entirety of colonial society throughout Belgian colonial rule. As a result, a wide range of actors were involved. The *métis* defied the colonial logic that separated society into two categories. This paradoxical position, at the crossroads and frontier of two worlds (European and African), explains why the records documenting this history are fragmented too. Today, we face a complex archival landscape, with many sources, but also significant geographical, institutional, and chronological variability and gaps: certain territories, institutions, and periods are better documented than others. The colonial authorities did not systematically apply the various ordinances, decrees, and regulations governing the status of *métis*. This led to inconsistent administrative practices not only in time but also in space. Certain persons thus have more chances than others to hold a personal file in the archive. Moreover, certain records make more chance to be preserved until today. The research bridges the first decades of independence to document the trajectories of *métis* displaced from Central Africa to Belgium. While these displacements started in the early colonial period in Congo and from the interwar years in Ruanda-Urundi, they intensified at the end of the 1950s. Some of these displaced persons who gathered in advocacy groups in the early 2000s and opened the path to the adoption of the “Resolution-Metis” in the Belgian Parliament in 2018, which forms the legal basis of the research program.

The Resolution acknowledges some of the legal issues *métis* face, like the loss of nationality and the absence of birth certificates (art. 1). It calls for repairing the lack or loss of family ties (art. 2, 7, 8 and 9) and for broad access to records held in Belgium and beyond (art. 3, 4, 5 and 8)<sup>6</sup>. Article 6 of the Resolution requests “to conduct an extensive historical study on the role of civil and religious actors in the treatment of *métis* during the colonial period in Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi”. Obviously, social scientists did not wait for the Belgian Parliament to adopt this Resolution to investigate these questions, whether in Belgium, France, or for other colonial empires<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> Chambre des Représentants de Belgique, *Résolution relative à la ségrégation subie par les métis issus de la colonisation belge en Afrique*, Doc 54 2952/007 (2017-2018). <https://www.lachambre.be/FLWB/pdf/54/2952/54K2952007.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> See for instance: Heynssens, Sarah, *De kinderen van Save. Een geschiedenis tussen Afrika en België*, Antwerpen, Polis, 2017; Budagwa, Assumani, *Noirs-blancs, métis: La Belgique et la ségrégation des métis du Congo belge et du Ruanda-Urundi (1908-1960)*, Cérroux-Mousty, 2014 ; Jeurissen, Lissia, *Quand le métis s'appelait mulâtre. Société, droit et pouvoir coloniaux face à la descendance des couples eurafricains dans l'ancien Congo belge*, Louvain-la-Neuve, Editions Academia, 2003 ; Hennes, Dana, ‘L’identité des métis belges : Entre post-colonisation africaine et globalisation européenne (note de recherche)’, *Anthropologie et Sociétés*, 382

Nevertheless, the scope and context of this public history project creates an entirely new situation. First, the mobilization of *métis* persons and advocacy groups, especially those displaced to Belgium at independence, has been crucial. Second, the project has also boosted the increasing public attention to the colonial past, especially in its relationship with contemporary matters such as decolonizing knowledge and the restitution of museum artifacts. Finally, the 2018 resolution constitutes a political decision that established a link between accessing archives, unveiling past practices, and restoring identities and dignity.

### Looking for Origins (the “*recherche des origines*”)

All these steps and the apologies presented by the Belgian Prime Minister were decisive. In his speech to the Parliament in April 2019, he said that *métis* children had been deprived of basic human rights in the context of the colonial system. The speech was seen as an “ultimate recognition of an injustice” by Georges Kamanayo, one of the *métis*<sup>8</sup>. Yet, these different forms of recognition did not solve all the obstacles, for example in terms of privacy protection, which sometimes prevented records from being made accessible to fellow family members. In March 2023, the law on “allowing access to archives to reunite families following forced cross-border separations” offered new possibilities for opening previously inaccessible personal files and retrieving information from these records to support individual inquiries into family histories<sup>9</sup>.

Since the program started in 2019, more than 360 *métis* and their descendants living in and outside Belgium have come to or contacted the State Archives of Belgium to retrace their personal and family trajectories. In about 75% of the cases, some information can be retrieved from historical records. What brought them to the Archive are article 3 (facilitate access to archives) and 7 of the Resolution: “All personal files [*will*] be catalogued and correlations

(2014), pp. 211–227 ; Saada, Emmanuelle, *Les enfants de la colonie. Les métis de l'Empire français sujétion et citoyenneté*, La Découverte, 2007 ; Tisseau, Violaine, *Être métis en Imerina (Madagascar) aux XIXe-XXe siècles*, Paris, Karthala, 2017 ; Stoler, Ann-Laura, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule*, University of California Press, 2010 ; Peters, Fiona. 2016. *Fostering Mixed Race Children*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> BBC, “Belgian Apology for Mixed-Race Kidnappings in Colonial Era”, April 2019. Online: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-47817530>.

<sup>9</sup> Chambre des Représentants de Belgique, *Loi permettant l'accès aux archives en vue de la reconstitution des familles à la suite des séparations contraintes*, Doc 55 2648/006, March 2023. Online via: <https://www.lachambre.be/doc/flwb/pdf/55/2648/55k2648007.pdf>.



made between them, to find solutions for the problems caused by name changes or misspellings”.

The adoption of the Resolution marked a moment of political endorsement that accessing and identifying archives contributes to restoring dignity. The involved researchers have been tasked to aid and support the “*demandeurs*” in retrieving archival documents containing data about their origins and parentage at the State Archives and in the Archive of the former Ministry of Colonies in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs<sup>10</sup>, which hold the main records series produced by the Belgian colonial administration. Thus, we intend to make archival transparency of an archival legacy that should be available to all, possible, rather than to act as gatekeepers. The research guide we have published in March 2023 responds to this concern. It contains detailed information on available relevant records series for *métis* and proposes a critical approach to their content, providing insights into the context<sup>11</sup>. The guide is primarily aimed at *métis* and their descendants who wish to find archives that can help them make sense of the personal histories of their relatives.

Most of the files consulted by the “*demandeurs*”, in other words, people who have filed a family search application with us, are individual files when they exist. Indeed, sometimes the file either never existed, was lost or is not identified to this day. As far as individual files are concerned – since there was no such thing as a centralized organization dealing with *métis* persons – the following collections are the most widely used, but the research certainly is not limited to these archives. First, the RWABU archive contains records produced by the colonial administration of Ruanda-Urundi between 1916 and 1962. It includes a series of around 900 individual files relating to people from Ruanda-Urundi – and, to a lesser extent, from the Kivu region. However, not all *métis* born in Ruanda-Urundi have an individual file. Moreover, no similar collection has yet been identified for the Congolese *métis*, whose files are scattered and were probably only partially transferred to Belgium. Thus,

<sup>10</sup> On the transfer of the so-called “African archives” to the State Archives, see: Van Eeckenrode, Marie, “Ouvrir les archives coloniales”, in *Belgique, Congo, Rwanda et Burundi. Guide des sources de l’histoire de la colonisation* (under the direction of Pierre-Alain Tallier, Marie Van Eeckenrode & Patricia Van Schuylenbergh), Brepols, 2021, pp. 25-47. See also the website of the State Archives: <https://www.arch.be/index.php?l=fr&m=ressources-en-ligne&r=archives-relatives-a-la-colonisation&sr=le-transfert-des-archives-africaines-aux-archives-de-l-etat>.

<sup>11</sup> Lauwers, Delphine & Rovetta, Ornella (eds.), *(Re)chercher les archives relatives aux métis et à leur histoire familiale*, Bruxelles, Archives de l’État, Jalon de recherche 48, 2023.

second, records produced by tutorship commissions, such as in the introductory case of this text, contain rich materials for retracing information on family histories in these cases. Third, the displacement of some of the *métis* born in Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi outside of Central Africa is documented in the APPM's almost 1000 individual files (*Association pour la protection des mulâtres*, 1932-1988). Finally, personal civil servant (*Service Personnel d'Afrique* – SPA) records are used to retrieve information on the European fathers of the “demandeurs”<sup>12</sup>.

What makes this program different from other historical and political initiatives on the colonial past in Belgium is its public and participative dimensions. Beyond establishing facts and facilitating access to archives, the project deals with the epistemological challenges of using records that colonial and religious administrations once produced to restore fragmented family histories today. To what extent can archives initially created to distort and hide family ties help reconstruct these very fragmented identities? Many *métis* hope to find definitive answers in the records. As we have seen with the case documented in the introduction of this chapter, the whole system of colonial control, paradoxically, left us with many documents trying to investigate situations related to *métis* children and their – most often – “legally unknown” fathers. Where silence, erasure or at least invisibility in the colonial public space was the aim, the result was that many reports, interrogations transcripts, lists of *métis* and correspondence were drafted.

In this context, colonial records appear to be at the crossroads of scientific research and the individual searches of *métis*. However, this central position translates into different expectations. The discrepancy is evident in cases where confrontation with the archive results in the dismissal of its content. Sometimes, *métis* and their relatives contradict the record: “No, this is not true, my mother told me, or I know that this went differently”. A record is never neutral. We believe that, through research and outreach, our role as historians and archivists is to reconcile scientific and individual narratives and to make these subjective approaches to the archive part of our critical analysis. We aim to create interconnected spaces of knowledge production and restoration (individual, collective, academic). The final report will therefore have to strike a delicate balance between historical truth in a traditional sense and the expectations fueled by the experiences of the members of the *métis* community.

<sup>12</sup> For more details about all the available collections, see the Jalon de Recherche (*Re*)chercher les archives relatives aux *métis* et à leur histoire familiale.

## Silences in the Past, Voices in the Present

On 24 April 2023, the town hall of Antwerp hosted an uncommon ceremony. Georges Kamanayo, then 75 years old, received his birth certificate from the city. He had been without this document until then<sup>13</sup>. He was born in Rwanda in the late 1940s. The colonial past is a living history in the present. Is it possible to reconcile the time of reparation and the time of history and to articulate them? Living in Belgium, Burundi, Rwanda, DR Congo, or elsewhere in the world, *métis* born in the Belgian colonial empire do not only wish to consult their records for genealogical purposes but also to find documents necessary to resolve some administrative issues, for which they are asked to deliver proof to corroborate their oral testimonies. Beyond providing access or locating documents, our role is to explain why there are documentary silences and to make this knowledge accessible to policymakers and administrative stakeholders.

The records and the fifty interviews we have conducted with *métis* (in Belgium, France, Rwanda, the DR Congo and Burundi) and with some of our “*demandeurs*” show that current identity interrogations have a history. New challenges are old challenges. Reflecting on the restoration of personhood through historical research also pays tribute to the history of these identity quests, acknowledging that we, as researchers, are not the first to question this. This positionality allows us to transform *métis* individuals from being subjects of research into active, empowered and conscious actors of their history.

<sup>13</sup> A delegation from the Resolution-Métis project was present. See also: Maithé Chini, “Métis son (75) of Rwandan mother and Belgian colonizer finally receives birth certificate”, *The Brussels Time*, 26 April 2023. Online. <https://www.brusselstimes.com/474920/metis-son-75-of-rwandan-mother-and-belgian-coloniser-finally-receives-birth-certificate>.