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*European Memoirs and Colonialism in  
Equatorial Africa:*

*Reflections on the Reminiscences of Alfons  
Vermeulen (1877-1965)*

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## **European Memoirs and Colonialism in Equatorial Africa:**

### **Reflections on the Reminiscences of Alfons Vermeulen (1877-1965)**

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The ASCL's library recently acquired three books that constitute interesting sources for the colonial history of the Equatorial region. All three involve writings by Alfons Vermeulen, an employee of the 'Nieuwe Afrikaansche Handels-Vennootschap' (NAHV), the Dutch trading house active in the wider Congo region in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. Vermeulen began working as a company agent in 1899 and continued, on and off, in the NAHV's employ for the next 30 years. His writings are, from today's perspective, painful and justifiably contentious. For the professional historian, however, they constitute interesting source material, granted they are carefully contextualised, sifting facts from fiction and the pejorative discourse of colonialism.

#### **Novels and memoirs**

Towards the end of his career he published two novels on his life in Equatorial Africa and, while fictional representations of life in the region, they were loosely based on Vermeulen's own experiences and observations: the first book, *De Pioniersdagen van Chicongo: Een Verhaal uit het Pioniersleven in den Congo* (Amsterdam, 1933), was centred on life at a factory ('factorij') in Ibanche, in the Kasai province of the Belgian Congo (Chicongo was the name Vermeulen gave himself, or was given, in the Kasai), while the second (*De Ingang der Hel: Episode uit het Afrikaansche Pioniersleven* [Amsterdam, 1938]), involved stories set in the French-run territories of the Oubanguian region. Jan Vansina in 2012 already discussed the veracity of data in these novels and concluded that they were reliable for numerous aspects of colonial trade as organised in and around factories such as of the NAHV, while yielding detailed descriptions of village life valuable for the reconstruction of the region's social history in colonial times.

For his assessment of the novels Vansina made use of Vermeulen's unpublished memoirs, which were put at his disposal by a member of the latter's family, Fred van den Hoek. It is these personal accounts, conceived largely after World War II, that have now been published for the first time – together with new editions of Vermeulen's pre-war novels – under the title *De Memoires van Chicongo: Laatste Episode over het Uitzonderlijke Leven van Alfons Vermeulen, Nederlands Handelsagent in de Onafhankelijke Congostaat, Belgisch-Congo en Frans-Congo tussen 1899 en 1931*. These memoirs were edited by Van den Hoek, who also provided numerous of the annotations (some were written by Vansina, shortly before his death in 2017).

## **Haphazard recollections, photos and postcards**

Vermeulen penned his reminiscences in haphazard manner. He was not a professional author. Consequently, they are uneven in length, contain repetitions and frequently degenerate into long asides, but they are also full of anecdotes on events or incidents witnessed by the factory agent himself. During his stay in the region he also took numerous photographs and collected artefacts and colonial postcards picturing Africans, which ended up in his personal archives. Many of these photographs have now been included in the memoirs providing for a richly illustrated tome. They are not always placed logically – there is also no index of illustrations.

## **Factory agent in the Congos**

Alfons Vermeulen went to the Congo for the first time in 1899, first to be employed at the NAHV's head office in Brazzaville, the capital of French Congo on the right bank of the mighty stream. This was run by Anton Greshoff, the determined company chief in the region. But Greshoff found Vermeulen too coarse for headquarters and sent him off to a remote factory post where his practical, all-round abilities could flourish and his uncouth deportment cause little harm (at any rate among the few Europeans there). Indeed, the picture that emerges from the memoirs is that of a daredevil, swanking white, posing for photographs with his arms on the hips, someone who was not scared to assume a position of authority that Europeans could typically provide for themselves in the colonial situation, however misguided such claim and their views of the local African world.

Vermeulen was sent to a factory in Ibanche (Ibaanc), in Kasai, famed for the Belgian Congo's first-rate, so-called 'red' rubber. He stayed there until ca. 1903 and after leave in Europe, returned to Africa to become a factory manager for another company in the Lobaye region, in the French Congo, until 1907. After an interlude in the Netherlands he returned to Africa in 1912-1913 to work at an NAHV factory at Lodja in the Sankuru district in northern Kasai and, from 1919 until 1931 at the company's post in Coquilhatville (present-day Mbandaka), on the Congo River, in Equateur province. Then he retired, definitively, to Europe. In the course of his travels he regularly came at NAHV headquarters in Brazzaville – the memoirs contain a photograph of the company cemetery at 'Pointe Hollandaise'. Vermeulen deemed it 'een pracht oord om er voor eeuwig te rusten' ('a beautiful place to rest forever') and provides us a vivid description of the burial of an NAHV agent (also see my blog '[Spirits and Love under the Mango Trees: Dutch-Congolese Heritage at a Cemetery in Brazzaville](#)').

## **The NAHV, free trade and the concessionary regime**

The NAHV assumed an important position in the trade that took place in the Congos, expanding its factories across the wider region, despite the fact that it had no colonial government protecting its investments. This became a growing problem under the monopolistic drive of King Leopold, which forced the company to move its headquarters to the French side of the Congo River where it was left more free by the colonial power. But with the rising protectionism its operations in Ibanche were taken over in 1902 by a concession company – the ‘Compagnie du Kasai’, in whose employ Vermeulen then came –, while on the French side the NAHV would establish its own concession vehicle to take part in the rapacious hunt for rubber.

The barter trade in which the company had first engaged took place under conditions relatively free from constraints for Europeans and Africans alike, and in this way all manner of European merchandise was swapped for natural resources as palm oil and ivory with help of African intermediaries. But with the rise of concession regimes in Leopold’s Free State and, later, the French colonies, trade became constrained through price fixing and force of arms – literally. This degenerated in plunder and extortion accompanied by atrocities with which local populations were pressed to deliver inflated quotas of rubber as a substitute for paying tax to the state. The European manufactures sold in return were overpriced while the sums paid for African produce, if any, derisory. Africans had few inducements to co-operate while concession factories were often run by the mediocres and misfits of European society, whose ‘capitas’ – their African underlings – had to make sure that the population delivered its quotas of produce. It is not clear how far the NAHV became part of this violent political economy – it was itself not a concession outfit – but where it worked through other companies (as later in the French Congo) it did become involved, indirectly, in violent exploitation.

## **Trade and coercion**

For a factory manager Vermeulen was well educated. His memoirs contain detailed descriptions of the NAHV’s posts, their operations and the tasks of the ‘gérants’ or managers – from training guards and caring for the sick to the straightforward buying and selling of produce and manufactures.

In the mounting chaos that the colonial occupation brought to the region enslaved people sought protection at colonial settlements or were bought from their masters and put to work for Europeans’ benefit – as Vermeulen did himself. Free people also flocked to settlements (administrative posts, mission stations, trade factories) for security reasons or in search of opportunities to trade. Vermeulen’s description of the NAHV’s operations at Ibanche largely fits the free barter trade that preceded the violent concession regimes, although the memoirs contain glimpses of incidents – Vansina already pointed out that the earlier free trade practices, involving the provision of credit, could easily lead to conflicts, especially in remote

areas. But he considered Vermeulen largely reliable as an inside witness of the workings of factories, and his testimonies are of particular interest because they add to the dry details of the accounts and figures dominating the papers of the NAHV (stored at the Netherlands National Archives).

### **African produce, European manufactures**

The company traded in palm oil and ivory (there are photos of Vermeulen and colleagues posing with elephant tusks) but later also in rubber and other resources, such as the copal (aromatic resin) that dominated part of Vermeulen's daily concerns. In return, he sold all manner of European manufactures, and he goes out of his way to emphasise that this did not involve the beads and mirrors of Europeans' imagination. The memoirs thus contain a nice picture of a colleague of Vermeulen behind the counter of the NAHV shop in Coquilhatville – we see tins, boxes, baskets and the paraphernalia of the colonial drugstore. There are also photos of rubber tappers arriving at trading stations; there is no way of knowing how voluntary their delivery was, but its larger context was marked by economic and military constraints. It would not have been necessary for the NAHV to dirty its hands.

### **Concessionaires in the French Congo**

This *did* happen in the case of the 'Compagnie des Caoutchoucs et Produits de la Lobaye' ('Société de la Lobaye' for short), to whom Vermeulen was lent by the NAHV in the period 1904-1907. As far as the trade of this company – an infamous concession outfit – is concerned, Vermeulen stresses that Africans were not forced to deliver rubber or purchase company goods and that factory agents were strictly forbidden to coerce the locals into trade. This is blatantly untrue. The seminal study by Cathérine Coquery-Vidrovitch (*Le Congo au temps des grandes compagnies concessionnaires, 1898-1930* [Paris, 1972]) remains unrivalled in its description of the predatory character of the companies in regions as the Lobaye and Mpoko, where armed guards in the employ of the concessionaire or the state forced the population to tap and deliver latex. Coercion other than by taxation involved the imposition of fines, corporal punishment, imprisonment and the taking of hostages (notably women and children).

In this context brutalities and atrocities became structural (I will come back to this below), and any company instructions to factory agents to remain on their best behaviour, as suggested by Vermeulen, amounted to a dead letter. Telling are his repetitive denials as to the lawlessness and rapacity of the company and its operations, which would not have amounted to 'een vrijgevochten bende' ('free-spirited mob').

## **White life at the factory**

The memoirs are beautiful for their description of life in and around factory posts. Vermeulen clearly had certain social abilities which he could use with the motley crowd that crossed his path. He regularly invited chiefs in the Sankuru district in Kasai for dinner – obviously to smooth the conditions for the factory’s trade though one wonders how conversations took place. Vermeulen was something of a bragger (at any rate in his reminiscences) but Vansina already pointed out that he had a poor grasp of African languages and must therefore have been fooled more than once or left in confusion.

In Ibanche he also met William Sheppard, the African American missionary who proselytised in the Congo Free State and denounced the rubber atrocities (the Compagnie du Kasai for which Vermeulen worked later sued the missionary). Vermeulen’s account of his conversations with Sheppard is painful for the lack of sensitivity shown towards the black missionary, who was clearly embarrassed by the Dutchman’s tactlessness (although in a moment of prescience Vermeulen predicts that it could take a thousand years before black people would be done with the memory of slavery’s humiliations).

## **Kurtz**

Vermeulen is on more solid ground when describing the lives of white personnel at the remote posts of the NAHV. He frequently reminisces over the loneliness of factory agents, the anxieties they had about their isolation (he refers to ‘melancholy’ – the nineteenth-century term for depression) and the fear of the seemingly impenetrable jungle. In the chaos of colonialism’s early phase the state was remote and traders such as Vermeulen had to arrange for their own security. Consequently, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* is never far away – the memoirs even mention Kurtz – and the descriptions of whites and their habits, their drinking bouts and outbursts vividly illustrate what Johannes Fabian brilliantly depicted in *Out of Our Minds* (2000).

## **Consorts and concubines**

The period on which Fabian focused – the time of European exploration – was marked by close proximity between Africans and Europeans, and this also characterised much of Vermeulen’s life at the factories in Ibanche and Dukundja (i.e. Dougoundja, on the upper Bodingué, west of the Lobaye). The NAHV man was then a young bachelor and like most European men, associated with the African women whom local leaders provided as ‘concubines’ or household staff, amongst other things to cement the relations between the trading post and the local community. In the anarchic period of early colonial rule, when slavery was in its dying days, slave women and girls were also used to this purpose.

Vermeulen thus obtained a woman called Mulekedi whom he married, presumably according to local rite (and who therefore was not a ‘concubine’ in the African sense). Later he would begin sexual relations with a younger girl – a daughter or relation of Mulekedi – and took both women to his new posting in the Lobaye. He also ‘bought’ women for his personnel (probably confusing this with the practice of payment of bridewealth, but such language conformed to European prejudices and could shock his readers, which Vermeulen liked to do). As Vansina noted in his 2012 article, in his published novels he was defensive about the practice of African consorts – by the 1930s Europeans had ‘imported’ their own womenfolk and consolidated their control, also through urban segregation. Now, liaisons with African women were frowned upon, at least if this took place in the open.

### **The sensuality of memoirs**

The descriptions in the novels are sensual, pejorative and racist (if unintentionally so). But this is much more marked in the memoirs, which contain numerous descriptions of women, their bodies and their behaviour, as well as several near-sexual confessions as to Vermeulen’s interest. They breathe an obsession, and we should not discount the possibility that the factory agent fathered offspring in the Kasai or during his time in the French Congo. His fascination is made more explicit by the photographs which are included in the published memoirs and which stem from Vermeulen’s archive. As other whites, he collected postcards with the typically colonial representation of African women, portrayed in their loincloth and bare-breasted in order to appeal to the European sexual imagination (ignoring the fact that in African cultural contexts breasts are more a symbol of fertility than sexual attraction).

### **Photographing women**

But Vermeulen also took pictures himself and made the women in his entourage pose for him – from the front, with the hands on their hips, or in profile. Several had to stand with their arms around each other, in one case two women stood back to back, their arms entangled and breasts protruding (it may have been a postcard), while his first ‘wife’, Mulekedi, had to stand in a typically unnatural pose, with her hands in her neck to enhance her bosom. His younger concubine posed for Vermeulen later in life just in a traditional ‘cache-sexe’ when European garments had obviously long made their entry.

The photographs are painful to look at, and shocking from today’s perspective. As the historian we wonder especially what the women themselves, and the factory community, made of it all. If ideas about the noble savage are never far away, the memoirs show that colonialism was totalitarian in aspiration and wished to appropriate not just Africans’ material riches but also their bodies – notably of women.



## **Terror in the French colonies**

A large part of Vermeulen's recollections concern his time in the Lobaye, in the French Congo, although this involved a short period of his contracts in Africa (1904-1907). It is tempting to explain this by the fact that this region was then engulfed in insurrections against the terror of the concession regimes, which the French managed to put down with great difficulty. Focused on quick returns the concession outfits tried to get their hands on natural rubber as cheaply as possible, either with the help of the skeleton staff of the colonial administration or through their own armed guards.

The population was prevented from farming and forced to collect ever greater quantities of latex. Local economies became dislocated, and as people fled into the forest, concession agents unleashed a reign of terror to coerce the elusive harvesters. Villages were raided and burnt, residents tortured or taken hostage. As in *Heart of Darkness*, the European misfits ruling the concessions could let their sadism reign freely. Africans found not collecting rubber were shot on the spot, women raped (including by Europeans), foodstuffs confiscated. Spectacular executions were staged. By 1906 the Mpoko region, north of the Lobaye, counted 750 confirmed murders and another 1,500 likely ones.

Two years previously, at Bagandou the manager of the Société de la Lobaye – Vermeulen's employer – had the son of the chief of Bétou whipped to death for not providing porters, and in the same year the company agent in Mongoumba organised the kidnapping of dozens of women to force villagers to collect latex (the women were left to die in crammed cells). Savorgnan de Brazza himself confirmed the outrages in an investigative report (1905-1907; 2014). Inevitably, Africans rebelled, attacking factories, killing personnel, triggering years of punitive campaigns by the colonial administration's forces.

## **In the midst of hell**

The traumatic results were described by Vermeulen himself, curiously not so much in his memoirs as in his novel *De Ingang der Hel*: abandoned factory posts, villages reduced to ashes, plantations deserted, skulls and bones strewn in their midst, miserable and sullen villagers. The memoirs make clear he saw this at close hand. He describes the Bongué region, close to Bobangui, the village where Barthélémy Boganda (the subject of a biography I am currently writing) saw the light of day in 1912, while he also visited Mongoumba, where his superior was a former officer of the notorious 'Force Publique', the Belgian Congo's militia force. He found him a 'strict but humane' person (it is not clear whether this was the man guilty of the mass kidnapping of local women).

Vermeulen's memoirs note that Europeans called the region 'the entrance of hell' but it is obvious that they did not see that it was they themselves, and the encroaching colonial frontier, that had created it. The Dutchman considered agents such as himself 'knights of

peaceful penetration' ('chevaliers de la pénétration pacifique' – in his case it is tempting to read a sexual connotation), though at other places in his erratic, self-contradictory recollections he admitted to Europeans' nefarious role. But he did not recognise his own.

Perhaps life is like that. Plunged in its midst reality will appear confusing and the causative chain of events difficult to discern, especially for a practical man steeped in the mundane concerns of factory management. Moreover, Vermeulen was only there for a short time (admittedly when the Lobaye was in a terrible crisis), and his recollections have their flaws – he confuses the Mambéré River with the Mbaéré. His description of incidents shows that he had no idea what caused them and he explains them away as 'banditry', excesses of cannibals (on which more below) or the archetypal tribal animosities of colonial imagination.

### **Punitive expedition**

Nevertheless, Vermeulen *did* work for one of the companies that was guilty of murder and mayhem (he was appointed factory manager in Dougoundja), and he was thus culpable of the 'armed commerce' underlying the concessionaires' political economy, as Coquery-Vidrovitch put it. It is difficult to see how he could have maintained himself without it, in spite of his claims to the contrary, though he suggests that he was able to keep the peace at his post in the midst of the insurrection staged by Bérandjoko. This chief in the Ibenga valley, south of the Bodingué, successfully led the local population to rebel against the concessionaires and is ludicrously portrayed as a cannibal.

But the Dutch agent also led violent campaigns himself – at least once, if we believe his reminiscences. He suggests that he undertook this at the behest of a local group which would be at war with Yanguérés, whom Vermeulen dubs 'bandits', copying French stereotypes (a sub-group of Bandas who had earlier fled slave raids in the north-eastern savannas, they were hated for their perceived lack of docility). Of course, in the mounting chaos of colonial penetration it is possible that this conflict set different groups of Africans apart. But, in any case, the company man led a column of porters and soldiers – illustrating the confused duopoly of administration and concessionaires – and ordered them to engage the Yanguéré adversary. The outcome of such an encounter (firearms vs lances, bows and arrows) was a foregone conclusion and its destructiveness has been well described by Vansina in his seminal *Paths in the Rainforest*.

### **Before the majesty of death**

Vermeulen admits that it was also an act of revenge for the casualties sustained by the concessionaires in the insurrection of Bérandjoko (an elusive rebel who would remain out of French hands until 1929). He says nothing about the number of men that his column mowed down, but after the act he silently overlooks the field of battle, dotted with the 'bodies of

bronzed men’, and feels miserable ‘before the majesty of death’. Reading the memoirs one wonders whether Vermeulen had nightmares later in life. His more immediate concern at the time was that he had to write a report about the campaign to his superiors in such a way that he was not taken to task. He notes how his French concessionary colleagues routinely covered up acts of violence, and Vermeulen himself argues that concession staff were bothered in their paper work by the colonial bureaucracy in Brazzaville on all sorts of details. He claims many of them feared running into the justice system.

### **Reality check**

Here a reality check is in place – and should have been included in the annotations. During the worst years of concession terror only very, very few whites (company personnel and administrators) ended up with prison terms or other sanctions. In fact, administrators, concessionaires and colonists alike were indignant about the very fact that atrocities were (sometimes) investigated, something that is reflected in the apologetic manner in which Vermeulen writes about the issue. Impunity was structural. Some whites defended murders by calling them ‘animalicide’ – the killing of animals (also see M. Petringa, *Brazzà: A Life for Africa* [Bloomington and Milton Keynes, 2006]).

Vermeulen usually goes out of his way to argue the common humanity of Europeans and Africans, which was somehow inevitable as he lived in the latter’s intimate proximity for so many years. But he, too, when referring to the earliest phase of occupation speaks of the necessity of ‘taming’ (though not killing) ‘animals’ and, even more painfully, argues that animal tamers can be nice people.

In any case, criminal prosecutions of atrocities usually got nowhere, breaking down on legal technicalities, with the whites involved released or repatriated on health grounds. Coquery-Vidrovitch has described how, as a consequence, abuses continued for several decades.

### **The cosmological imagination**

The crudity of Vermeulen’s views on the colonial enterprise is occasionally mixed with doubts and does not prevent some keen observations on other issues. The factory man had an interest in the religious practices of the people in his environment and he describes aspects of the spirit world in the Bodingué valley that bear a resemblance to what Arom and Thomas (*Le monde surnaturel des Ngbaka-Mabo* [1974]) wrote on the cosmology of the Ngbaka peoples in the Lobaye. The memoirs contain a photograph of funeral rites in an unidentified area, with the body of a woman who would have died of trypanosomiasis being prepared for burial. One could compare this with an interment ritual in Bobangui, Boganda’s native village, towards the end of the 1920s. This was witnessed by Marcel Homet, another concession agent, who gave a vivid description of it in his *Congo: Terre de souffrances* (Paris, 1934).

## **Fetishes**

Vermeulen describes the role of fetishes in Africans' belief systems in a way that betrays understanding of their revelatory character (fetishes are material objects believed to lodge forces that can be used for contact with the spirit world). He is not dismissive about this, in contrast to so many uncomprehending Europeans of his age. But as usual, the practical company man contradicts himself in other places, rejecting the violent procedures of poison ordeals, which he must have witnessed at close hand.

At such junctures he suddenly argues that Africa's misery and its lack of, what he sees as, 'progress', are caused by jealousy and the belief in what he dubs 'witchcraft' – that unhelpful European term. Like most whites he does not grasp the role of healing rituals (which indeed could be violent) in restoring communities' moral equilibrium. As Vansina noted, their suppression, by administrators and missionaries alike, was one of the worst aspects of the colonial order.

## **Racial attitudes**

The memoirs are formulated in the grossly racialised, and racist, discourse of the colonial age, and if this publication should reach a larger audience (as seems to be the editor's intention) this would necessitate very thorough annotation. Vermeulen generally sees the African world through the European prism then in vogue, but his decades-long proximity of Africans makes him realise what he has in common with them. The result is contradictory reflections in which, on the one hand, Europeans are chided for their dehumanising follies ('kermisdwaasheden') and, on the other, the reader is treated to highly pejorative and flatly racist perceptions of the people around him. Vermeulen enjoyed all the advantages of his position – he had himself proudly photographed in a litter. Yet, he also expresses his admiration for Africans, disputes notions of non-Western 'primitiveness' (partly inspired, it seems, by his witnessing the excesses of World War II) and expresses doubts about Africans' alleged 'laziness' – that typically colonial concept with roots in Europe's industrial revolution.

## **Anthropophagy**

All the same, cannibals populate Vermeulen's recollections of the colonial age, vividly rendered by a drawing of a menu prepared by man-eaters – a poor-taste joke produced in the course of a European dinner party. Like other whites, the trading agent was convinced that African peoples practised cannibalism. The publication regrettably lacks annotation here.

This is not the place to go into the complex phenomenon of anthropophagy in detail but its study should at least take into account the following: sacrifice (not eating) of humans did take

place in sub-Saharan Africa, as it had on other continents; human flesh was never eaten for consumptive purposes; and *ritual* – and not the literal – eating of body parts occurred as the expression of the belief that the body is a receptacle of supernatural forces – ‘eating’ in African languages in this regard harbouring numerous metaphorical meanings.

In all other instances the belief in cannibalism represented an expression of the rising anxieties that Africans and Europeans had about each other as the colonial frontier moved forward: *both* thought that the other consumed humans, and as whites pushed further inland Africans were happy to encourage Europeans’ fear that this was true on their part, rumour being an inextricable part of the phenomenon – no one had seen cannibalism in practice but ‘knew’ some who had. In his memoirs Vermeulen admits never having been harassed by cannibals himself.

### **‘Bondjos’!**

Inter-cultural misunderstanding made this belief a certainty. Typical here is the portrayal of the ‘Bondjos’, who figure widely in Vermeulen’s memoirs and lack a much-needed annotation – there is even a photograph of so-called ‘Bondjo’ rubber collectors in the village of Bétou (they must be Monzombos or Bandjas).

Ironically, the ‘Bondjos’ never existed – they were a pure figment of the colonial imagination. William Samarin, the outstanding historian-linguist of the Oubangui region, in his 1984 study showed how the term, possibly denoting settlements on the banks of the Oubangui River, came into use by explorers for the communities on whom they depended for food and transport. With the colonial push northwards troubles naturally increased and the locals became the subject of racist stereotypes. These grew more extreme as the fear of whites for their own safety rose: southern ‘Bondjos’ were thus considered beautiful people while their northern brethren became bestial giants whose alleged cannibalism became the more hideous the further north they were located – reflecting the precarious hold that the French initially exercised over the Bangui area. With the consolidation of colonial rule the ‘Bondjos’ simply disappeared from the administrative record as officials felt more secure and began to get to know the peoples around them – no such ethnic identification exists today.

Missionaries, however, stuck to the racist construct of the heathen enemy, as it could legitimise their evangelical conquest, and our credulous Dutch trade agent swallowed it lock, stock and barrel (he cites missionary sources on the issue).

### **Concluding observations**

Vermeulen’s memoirs contain numerous factual details that are valuable for our knowledge of the factory trade in Equatorial Africa – notably in the Kasai, as Vansina already pointed out.

But they are often less reliable as regards the concessionary practices in the French colonies (Moyen Congo and Oubangui-Chari). Other than that, the factory agent is, what in African studies is called, ‘a witness despite himself’. His perceptions betray more about himself than the Africans in whose presence he lived. But this yields interesting insights in the nature of colonial intimacy.

These are, however, frequently disfigured by Vermeulen’s efforts to embellish his recollections with cliché images and sensational anecdotes, intermixed with quasi-philosophical reflections on ‘the African’. Much of this was developed when he was already in retirement – after World War II – and no doubt stimulated by the rising tide of anti-colonial sentiment (his reminiscences show he was by then increasingly out of touch with Dutch society). Alfons Vermeulen was a man of practice, whose worldview was built up through everyday routines and incidents. Later in life, his reflections degenerated into anti-intellectualism.

Van den Hoek, the editor, has done a good job in making this memoir available. However, as it stands the memoir seems ill-suited for a general-readers public. For this it would need a thorough introductory essay to contextualise, not least the grotesquely racialised discourse, but also the numerous factual flaws. Yet, as source material this publication will be useful to the professional historian. It is, moreover, an awkward testimony, painful and incongruous – just as real history.

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