

Survey: The shared archival heritage of the Force Publique: identifying the military career files of African soldiers in Colonial Congo (EAP1613)

Introduction

The idea for this pilot project originated from intensive talks and collaborative working sessions between the State Archives of Belgium (SAB), the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB), the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) and the Institut National des Archives du Congo (INACO), within the framework of DIGICOLJUST-2. DIGICOLJUST-2 is a research program funded by the Belgian Science Policy Office (BELSPO) devoted to enlarging our knowledge of colonial military justice in Congo. In March 2022, the DIGICOLJUST-promotors, Professor Lauro (ULB) and Professor Henriët (VUB) travelled to the Congolese capital to hand over digitized copies of the court records of the military tribunal of Léopoldville. During their visit of INACO, they were shown an extensive collection of personal files relating to soldiers of the Force Publique. Intrigued by the unique nature of these records, researchers of this bi-national partnership began to wonder about the content and scope of the collection, considering how it might offer complementary insights to the courts-martial archives held in Brussels for studying colonial violence by and within the Force Publique.

The present EAP1613-project was thus established to examine how this collection of military career files relates to the broader body of archives produced by the Force Publique. It seeks to elucidate the connections between various archival collections of and related to the colonial army in Congo, and to explore what they reveal about this “shared” archival heritage between Belgium and Congo. EAP 1613 envisioned three concrete objectives. First, it sought to identify all individual files in this collection. Second, it aimed to repackage the collection in order to ensure its preservation for the future. Third, it intends to investigate how this collection can contribute to ongoing research on colonial violence, the role of Congolese intermediaries and the social history of the Force Publique during Congo's colonial period. Before presenting the concrete results of this collaborative project, we must address two essential questions at the start of this survey: What was the Force Publique, and what does its archival legacy look like?

1. The Force Publique, the archival production of a colonial Army

To answer the first question, we must return to the end of the 19th century. Shortly after the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, which significantly bolstered Belgian King Leopold II's territorial claims in Central Africa, the Force Publique originated as a multi-ethnic militia led by European mercenaries in support of an economy of plunder (e.g. Red Rubber). During the Congo Free State era, this colonial army functioned as a tool of terror, overseeing a wide range of administrative activities—from construction works to the administration of justice. Following the political take-over of the colony by the Belgian parliament in 1908, the Force Publique increasingly focused on its policing and military duties. In the aftermath of the First World War, it was also tasked with

maintaining order in Ruanda-Urundi, which Belgium was mandated to administer by the League of Nations in 1922. Despite a formal division within the Force Publique—between the *Troupes Campées*, responsible for defending the colony's external borders, and the *Troupes en Service Territorial*, responsible for upholding internal order—the colonial army remained entangled in power struggles between civilian and military authorities throughout the entire colonial period.

Beyond its murderous role in the reign of terror and conquest under Leopold II, the Force Publique was also amongst the first institutional entities of colonial rule established in Central Africa. As a bureaucratic apparatus, it generated a vast volume of documents to support its operations. The Force Publique functioned as a multi-headed archival creator. Although a significant portion of its administrative output have perished, it is worth considering some of the known and preserved archival fonds produced by, or related to, the colonial army.

As a public institution, the Force Publique generated a wide range of archival records. The army administration operated at different levels. At the most immediate operational level, individual units —regiments or even battalions—documented their activities. At the central level, the colonial bureaucracy encompassed both services in Léopoldville (e.g., a military security service, *Surêté*, under the General Staff of the Force Publique) and in Brussels (e.g., the *Conseiller Militaire*, a directorate within the Ministry of Colonies responsible for overseeing the Force Publique). In addition, local civil authorities supervised the policing tasks of the *Troupes en Service Territorial*, even though they were not formally part of the military hierarchy. The same is true for the archives of the courts-martial, which, though fully produced by the colonial justice system, dealt solely with cases involving Force Publique personnel and operations. These layered structures highlight the importance of provenance research when analysing colonial military archives. Contrary to common scholarly assumptions, the Force Publique archive of the *Conseiller Militaire* is not, strictly speaking, an archive produced by the colonial army itself, but rather an archival collection created by the ministerial advisor in Brussels.

Retrieving these various archival fonds is further complicated by the multitude of repositories in which they are now dispersed. Of particular importance in this regard are the archival transfers that occurred on the eve of independence in both Congo (1959–1960) and Ruanda-Urundi (1961–1962). In this period, Belgian authorities undertook efforts to “evacuate” a substantial portion of the archives produced by their colonial administrations in Africa. This led several large archival collections, such as *RWA*, *BUR*, and *GG*, to eventually end up in the cellars of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Brussels. However, the archives of the Force Publique followed a different trajectory. According to Jean-Luc Vellut, already during the colonial period, most military archives were consolidated in a central depot of the Force Publique in Léopoldville/Kinshasa once they no longer held immediate administrative value¹. The majority of these

¹ Jean-Luc Vellut, *Guide de l'étudiant en histoire du Zaïre* (Kinshasa: Éditions du Mont Noir, 1974), pp 108-111.

records likely remained in Kinshasa after independence. This also applies to the archives of the Force Publique's Human Resources/Personnel Department, which—unlike most colonial services in both the colony and the metropole—managed its own personnel administration.

This pilot project—part of a broader research initiative on the social history of the colonial army—aims to examine the relationships between various archival collections. By tracing the connections and analysing the combined content of the military court archives and the personnel files held at INACO, we seek to deepen our understanding of how African soldiers were both victims and agents of colonial violence, discipline, and coercion.

2. INACO

Before delving into an analysis of the contents of the aforementioned collection of personnel files from the Force Publique, it is important to briefly introduce the institution currently responsible for their preservation. INACO—the *Institut National des Archives du Congo*—serves, like any national archives, as the official body responsible for conserving the public (and private) records of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. INACO defines its mission as follows: to collect, preserve, classify, process, and make accessible the public and private archives that constitute the living memory of the nation. The institute presents itself as the central reference point for the preservation, promotion, and transmission of Congolese documentary heritage.²

Today, INACO functions as a public institution with legal personality, governed by a board of directors and general management under the leadership of Professor Aimé Mandé Kasongo. While INACO enjoys financial and administrative autonomy, it is one of the thirteen cultural-scientific institutions under the supervision of the Ministry for Culture, Arts and Heritage. Prior to the enactment of Decree No. 15-022 of 9 December 2015—which granted INACO its current structure and name—the National Archives of Congo underwent several institutional transformations, reflecting the country's broader administrative evolution. Over time, the archives experienced multiple name changes. Law no. 78-013 of 11 July 1978, which established ARNACO (*Archives Nationales du Congo*, as it was then known), constituted the first Congolese legal framework for archival preservation. As had been the case in Belgium since 1955, this law stipulated, among other provisions, that all Congolese public institutions were required to transfer records older than 30 years to the national archives. Eleven years later, Ordonnances No. 89-027 and 89-028 renamed ARNACO to ARNAZA (Archives Nationales du Zaïre) and introduced the formal training of archivists as an explicit responsibility of the institution.

INACO thus only acquired its current structure and mandate relatively recently. Nevertheless, the Democratic Republic of the Congo's archival conservation policy continues to bear the imprint of its colonial legacy. One striking example is INACO's current headquarters. As early as 1958, the colonial administration designated the site

² Institut National des Archives du Congo. *Qui sommes-nous ?*, see <https://inaco.cd/qui-sommes-nous>

and building at 42 Avenue de la Justice in Gombe/Kinshasa as a central archival repository. Prior to that, the building had served as the printing office of the General Government in Léopoldville. This institutional continuity is reminiscent of the pre-history of the Joseph Cuvelier Depot of the Belgian State Archives in Brussels, where the archives of the former Ministry of Colonies—including military court records—are now housed. That building, too, originally functioned as a paper and printing factory before being converted into an archival repository by the Belgian government in the 1980s.³

Secondly, the Belgian model of “national” archives—comprising a central repository supplemented by regional repositories in each province—was retained in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Given the vast geographical size of the DRC, this decentralized system is arguably even more pertinent to effective archival management in Congo than it was in the former metropole. Today, INACO supervises local archival branches in nearly all provinces, with the exception of a few more recently established provinces, such as Tshuapa.

Third, of course, a significant portion of the collections conserved by INACO dates back to the colonial era. As mentioned above, shortly after independence. Belgium attempted to repatriate a lot of ‘its’ colonial archives. While approximately six kilometres of these displaced archives ultimately arrived in Brussels, it is estimated that more than twenty kilometres of archival material remained in place. This is evident from the contemporary collection housed at INACO’s central repository in Kinshasa. In the attic of this depot, around thirty archival fonds from the colonial period can be found, accounting for roughly half of the entire collection. What remains of this colonial archival legacy in the other INACO repositories is less well known. During our mission, archivist Albert Matemboni shared what he had heard regarding the colonial archives once held at the provincial repository in Katanga—the second most important depot during Belgian rule. According to this oral tradition, part of these archives were reportedly transferred in 1959 via the Benguela railway to Lobito in Angola for subsequent shipment to Brussels. However, these files never arrived in the Belgian capital and appear to have disappeared. Whether or not this account is accurate, the fate of the (non-colonial) archives that remained in Katanga is equally troubling. In 1983, state agents cleared the Katanga (then Shaba) provincial repository, and the archives held there have been lost ever since.⁴

3. The collection of military personnel files

Despite the many disappearances, dispersions and unclarities surrounding the colonial archives of the Belgian Congo, one fact was clear at the outset of this project: INACO

³ Antoine Lumenganeso Kiobe, *Congo: guide des archives nationales* (Kinshasa: CEDI, 2001), pp 5-38.

⁴ Pierre-Alain Tallier e.a., *Belgique, Congo, Rwanda et Burundi : Guide Des Sources de l’histoire de La Colonisation (19e-20e Siècle)* (Brepols, 2021), pp 73-75.

in Kinshasa held a collection estimated at approximately 11,000 personnel files of individual African soldiers from the Force Publique. In 2001, professor Antoine Lumenganeso Kiobe, then head conservator of the Congolese National Archives, published a research guide to provide insight into the various collections housed at the Kinshasa repository. He identified these records as an archive of the “Force Publique. 35 linear meters. These are the administrative files of members of the Force Publique”⁵. However, Lumenganeso classified this collection as part of the administrative archives produced by the postcolonial public administration after 1960.

This immediately raises an intriguing questions regarding the provenance of these records. While the description attributes the personnel files to the Force Publique, it is important to note that this colonial army was formally dissolved shortly after Congolese independence. A decree of 8 July 1960 marked the creation of the Congolese National Armed Forces (*Armée Nationale Congolaise*, ANC). The central objective of the EAP1613 project was therefore to investigate who created these personnel files, when they were produced, and for what purposes they were intended.

3.1. Work method

So, how did we proceed? In October 2024, a Congolese delegation led by Professor Kasongo visited Belgium to strengthen the institutional partnership between the State archives and INACO. The visit provided an opportunity for the renewed leadership of both institutions to meet in person and to discuss the material and structural challenges related to archival preservation in both Belgium and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. During the working sessions held over the course of this week-long visit, we laid the foundation for a joint mission to Kinshasa, scheduled for 9–13 December, aimed at identifying the military personnel files housed at INACO. We began by assessing the place of this collection within the broader landscape of colonial archives and the archival heritage shared between our two institutions. We then outlined the specific objectives of the mission and determined how best to allocate the EAP budget to meet them effectively. Building on our experience with the identification and digitisation of military court archives during the DIGICOLJUST-2 project—and encouraged by our Congolese partners’ confirmation that preliminary finding aids for the collection were readily available—we developed a pragmatic action plan based on the most likely scenarios. In concrete terms, we agreed to work with a joint team of Belgian and Congolese archivists to identify, reclassify, and repackage the military personnel files.

Once the December mission commenced, the Belgian delegation was warmly received by the leadership of INACO at its central repository in Kinshasa. We began with a joint meeting to present our project plans to INACO’s board of directors and to discuss the implementation of the financial arrangements made during the October meetings. It was in this latter area that we encountered an unexpected complication. As previously agreed between the two institutions, approximately thirty percent of the

⁵ Lumenganeso, 2001, p 71.

EAP budget had been allocated to cover the fees of ten Congolese archivists participating in the week-long mission. Unfortunately, since the EAP funds had been transferred to the Belgian State Archives, and given that the State Archives—as a government institution—cannot legally pay salaries to third parties, it became necessary to draft a formal agreement between the two institutions to enable the transfer of funds. This administrative step took longer than anticipated, and the agreement was not signed until the end of January 2025. Although the issue was eventually resolved, it created a degree of stress and uncertainty for both parties during the mission. The energy required to maintain mutual trust and manage expectations during this period could undoubtedly have been better spent on the project itself. Nevertheless, the experience offered a valuable lesson for future collaborations.

Another unforeseen challenge during the mission week concerned the logistics. The shipping of the 400 acid-free archival boxes (360x105x255), intended for the repackaging of the military personnel files, encountered several complications. Although the pallet—weighing 184 kilograms—had arrived at Ndjili Airport in Kinshasa on the Friday prior to the Belgian delegation’s arrival, transporting it from the airport to the INACO repository proved difficult. Only after a whole day of negotiations at Ndjili, the project lead succeeded in reaching an agreement with a local distributor (*Mubikano Express Sarlu*) to transport the archival boxes from the Congolese customs office to INACO. Due to severe flooding and traffic congestion, the materials only arrived at the repository on the penultimate day of the mission. Nonetheless, by the end of the week, the team had successfully reconditioned 26% of the entire collection.

Despite this minor setbacks, we could start our operations in the afternoon of the first day of the project. The Belgian researchers quickly found dynamic and sharp-witted counterparts in the lead archivists of INACO’s conservation department—Albert Kulinde, Néré Masua, and Hervé Lumenganeso. Together, we refined our collaborative working method by focusing on three key elements. First, we assessed the physical size of the collection in order to set an ambitious yet realistic goal for the week in terms of identification (10%). Second, we examined the pre-existing access tool to the collection, the so-called “répertoires Anciens Combattants”, to consider how it relates to the actual order of the collection. Third, we conducted a random sampling of fifty files to gain a preliminary understanding of the collection’s content and to identify the types of documents typically contained in an individual military personnel file.

This preparatory exercise allowed us to develop a simple yet effective listing template designed to capture the most essential metadata for understanding the collection as a whole, while ensuring the unique identification of each file. In the days that followed, the research team worked in pairs—each consisting of one Belgian and one Congolese archivist—sharing a laptop to describe each personnel file using four descriptive metadata categories: original file number, matriculation number, full name, and date of creation. At the end of each day, the individual Excel spreadsheets were collected on a USB drive and integrated into a general “catalogue”.



The team of the EAP1613 project (December 2024) standing from left to right: Victor Musaba, Bibiche Bitota, Dr. Aurélie Bouvart, Daudet Tuba, Marceline Kiena Buton, Professor Lauro, Directeur Kulinde, Dr. Reinout Vander Hulst, Directeur H. Lumenganeso, Tama Tama, Directeur Tshamuena. Under from left to right : Bruno Kambala, Directeur Masua, Freddy Mwambi and Professor Henriët (missing).

3.2 The 3LL fonds: reflections and bundles

The project enabled us to make several concrete observations regarding the physical scope and configuration of the collection. In total, we identified approximately 11.335 individual personnel files. These were organised into 382 *liasses* (bundles or folders), stored across seven open shelving units, each containing five levels. Following reconditioning, the collection measured approximately 45 linear metres—closely aligning with the initial estimate of 35 to 40 metres. Notably, all bundles and files were labelled with the collection code "3LL". Although the exact meaning of this designation remains uncertain, our experience with Belgo-Congolese colonial archives suggests that it likely refers to the final military administrative unit responsible for these records before their transfer to the INACO repository.

By the end of the mission week in December, 3.512 files had been described and entered into the general catalogue—representing over 30% of the entire collection. However, caution is warranted when stating the total figure of 11.335 files. While the files are generally numbered in a sequential manner, we observed several inconsistencies. For example, at least two unique reference codes appear to have been assigned to more than one file (e.g., 3LL91/2433 and 3LL321/9263), and a

numbering gap exists between 3LL82/2200 and 3LL83/2205. It remains unclear whether these discrepancies reflect missing files or unused numerical identifiers. Additionally, some individuals—such as Limoni Joseph (3LL270/7620 and 3LL311/8930)—appear to have two separate files. Further investigation is necessary to determine whether this reflects an original administrative logic or a subsequent record-keeping error.

While these irregularities initially proved frustrating obstacles to the swift identification of the personnel files, they offered us an opportunity to reflect on the collection as a whole and our approach to it. We, for instance, immediately encountered the limitations of the “répertoires Anciens Combattants” created at the Congolese National Archives. While these handwritten finding aids offered similar access to the single files of the collection as our listing efforts (the captured metadata were, in fact, not that different), the team quickly noticed a large number of errors in orthography regarding name and matriculation numbers. Moreover, these *répertoires* consisted of separate and scattered entries to single bundles. While they thus gave some indication about the files making up these clustered bundles, they did not provide much information about the collection as a whole.

Early on in the mission, we therefore realized that we should first focus on the identification and reconditioning of the files in their current order, before considering a sensible reclassification. The lack of a prior tool providing an overview did, however, not prevent us from making two observations about the composition of the collection at the bundle level. First, it seems that the bundles followed an internal ranking logic based on the files’ creation date. Most of the bundles we analysed contained files on soldiers who entered the Force Publique in the same year. Sometimes, a secondary alphabetic order, within this year-based logic appeared in the structure of these bundles. Yet, and this is our second observation, both ranking logics disappeared at the end of each bundle. It seems as if the last files had always been randomly incorporated into a bundle. The same unintelligibility applies to the collection as a whole. If we examine it from the first to the last bundle, there is no chronological or alphabetical order to be discerned. While 3LL1 strictly contains files of soldiers recruited in 1950, bundle 3LL150 mainly assembles files of soldiers who started their military career in the 1920s and 1930s. Both bundles show no alphabetical consistency, whereas files of soldiers whose surnames begin with the same letter often form clusters within these bundles. Of course, the collection and bundles might abide by other classification logics, based on the soldier’s unit, rank, ethnicity, place of birth or place of military duty for instance, but since we did not capture these data categories in our listing efforts, this remains a matter for further investigation.

This brings us to another aspect of our work method that instigated reflection: the choices and demarcations of data categories used to describe an archival collection are not neutral. This immediately became clear as we started identifying the military files in Belgo-Congolese duo’s. The intention to capture the “date” of the military files, for instance, immediately caused confusion. In fact, these files contained

numerous documents with dates on them. Moreover, since these were personal files, it was difficult to determine which biographical dates were important for understanding the collection and which were not. While a Belgian archivist suggested that the date of birth might have held administrative significance for the original archival creator—the Force Publique—Congolesse archivists challenged this, noting from experience that the colonial administration often recorded the birth dates of African subjects inconsistently or not at all.

Ultimately, in accordance with international cataloguing standards, the team sought a uniform “creation date”- category and agreed to use the date of a soldier’s entry into service as the defining temporal marker, reasoning that a military file could not exist prior to enlistment. However, this choice had limitations: it led us to overlook the end date of the files, a potentially valuable element for understanding the internal logic and order of the collection.

Similarly, the Congolesse archivists expressed disappointment that the soldier’s place of birth—although consistently recorded in the files—was not included in our catalogue. While this biographical data is important for genealogical research, we collectively decided, after thorough discussion, to prioritize metadata that supports an understanding of the collection as an archival entity, rather than approaching it as a prime source for life-history research. For similar reasons, we excluded the “catégorie” annotations—short codes such as “M.50” (Milicien recruited in 1950) or “V.32” (Volunteer enlisted in 1932), which appear in almost all files. Although informative regarding individual military careers, we judged these annotations non-essential for understanding the structure and purpose of the collection as a whole. The cataloguing process was ultimately a balancing act between striving for completeness and maintaining efficiency, with the goal of describing a sufficient number of files to enable a substantiated interpretation of the collection in its entirety.

3.3 The 3LL fonds: content and history

So, what insights did our cataloguing effort yield about the collection? Most importantly, it challenged the earlier assumption that the collection constituted a single, uniform archival unit consisting of similar career files of Congolesse militaries. While some documents were indeed produced for managing military careers, the files that bound them together appear to have been assembled with a broader or altogether different purpose in mind. In total, we identified at least four distinct file typologies.

First, the vast majority of the files can be described as “Feuillet-Matricule-Contrôle” files. Although these files include a wide range of documents, their central component is a two-page cover sheet—the matriculation document—which records basic biographical information and key developments in a soldier’s career. This document was most likely created by the Force Publique’s recruiting service at the time of enlistment and subsequently updated as the soldier’s career progressed. Its central role in the file’s structure is underscored by the fact that it consistently bears the handwritten file number.

Second, a tiny minority of the files—most of which are located toward the end of the collection, such as the final file 3LL382/11335 on Antoine Enka—contain similar

types of documents as the first category, including identity certificates, administrative correspondence, and career records. However, they lack the central “Feuillet-Matricule-Contrôle” document. These appear to be documentation files, assembled to consolidate the most essential biographical and career information of a soldier in a single place.

Third, the collection also includes a number of allowance files, such as retirement pension files, disability pension files, invalidity pension files, and other capital allocation records. While these files occasionally contain a copy of the matriculation document, their structure is notably different. In their ideal form, they include a range of documents such as the soldier’s application, proof of identity, service record, confirmation letter, discharge certificate, medical report, pension calculation, and related materials.

Lastly, the collection holds veterans’ files. While the central document in these files resembles the matriculation file in terms of content—covering biographical information, military campaigns, injuries, promotions, decorations, family details, and so on—their physical appearance is markedly different. Although these files also appear to have been created during the colonial period, they exhibit a more modern design compared to the matriculation template, which remained largely unchanged throughout that colonial era. Similar to the allowance files, the veterans’ files contain significantly more financial and accounting documents, such as compensation records, social contributions, and invoices, than the other two file types.

In terms of provenance, the collection thus seems to have been compiled from documents originating from at least three different archival creators: the Force Publique’s personnel department, the Force Publique’s allowances services and the local union of Congolese veterans of Léopoldville (*Union locale des Anciens Combattants Congolaise de Léopoldville*). Naturally, the specific documents found in a personnel file vary significantly depending on the file type described above. Nevertheless, the collection as a whole encompasses a remarkably rich body of sources that offers insights into various socio-cultural aspects of Congolese military life under colonial rule. Certificates of (traditional) marriage, for example, can provide information about gender relations within military barracks; shooting logbooks and educational diplomas reveal the skills and competencies of African troops; and property inventories listing uniforms, weapons, and other equipment shed light on the material culture of the Force Publique. Occasionally, the files also contain records of soldiers’ military service in Ruanda-Urundi, illuminating the cross-border dimensions of armed governance within the Belgian colonial empire.

Our examination of the collection leads us to conclude that it most likely originated during the early years of President Mobutu’s rule, between 1965 and 1971. The diversity of file types and documents suggests that Mobutu’s administration assembled these series of records into personnel files to facilitate the payment of various financial allowances to former soldiers of the Force Publique and their families—likely as a means of securing military loyalty to his regime. Since many files bear handwritten classification marks dating up to 1970 (and, on rare occasions, contain explicit “ANC” documents), we are confident that they passed through one or

more postcolonial administrative bodies before the so-called Zairian Department of Veterans Affairs (Département des Anciens Combattants) eventually transferred them to INACO in 1981⁶.

4. Connecting the dots: the 3LL files and the court-martial records.

Finally, the main objective of the pilot project was to gain a better understanding of the relationship between the personnel files kept by INACO in Kinshasa and other historical collections of the Force Publique held by the State Archives of Belgium. In fact, research in both archival institutions has underscored the fact that the former colonial bureaucracy in Brussels was far less interested in the career files of African colonial subjects. The archival fonds of the “Conseiller Militaire”, for instance, contains only files regarding military personnel who fell under the “European” status or served in the Belgian Army.

A series of archives kept in Brussels relating to African soldiers are the court-martial archives, known as *Conseils de Guerre*. Since these archives were created within the functioning of the colonial justice system, they were transferred *en masse* to Belgium in the wake of Congolese independence (or at least that was the objective). In the course of the DIGICOLJUST-project, we identified and disclosed 19 archival series of military court records (12 ordinary military courts, 6 military courts of appeal and one court-martial *en campagne* during World War II). This accounts for at most 25% of the entire legal activity of military justice throughout the whole colonial era. Most of these archival collections stem from military courts that were active near the Congo River between 1908 and 1959.

In order to identify the overlap between these court archives and the 3LL collection, we performed Power Queries across three different Excel databases: the 3LL catalogue, containing 8.900 files at the time of writing the report; the DIGICOLJUST-1 database containing 5.136 files of ordinary and appeal court cases; and the Conseil de Guerre en campagne (CGeC)-database containing 430 court files of the Force Publique’s expeditionary corps during World War II.

⁶ Mabiala Mantuba-Ngoma Pamphile, *Les soldats de Bula Matari (1885-1960): histoire sociale de la Force publique du Congo Belge* (Kinshasa: Éditions Culturelles africaines, 2019), pp 4-5.

numéro d'ordre	TYPE JURIDICTION* / TYPE GERECHT*	SIEGE* / ZETEL*	NUMERO* / NUMMER*	NOM 1* / NAAM 1*	MATRICULE	NOM 2 / NAAM 2	MATRICULE
100	3016 Conseil de Guerre	Léopoldville	623	MBODO MAKWALA	13569/A	/	/
101	3017 Conseil de Guerre	Léopoldville	624	ILUNGA MASINI	13826/D	/	/
102	3018 Conseil de Guerre	Léopoldville	625	EWOKO	13325/A	/	/
103	3019 Conseil de Guerre	Léopoldville	626	KASONGO	9822/D	/	/
104	3020 Conseil de Guerre	Léopoldville	627	BAZOLA	17318/A	/	/
105	3021 Conseil de Guerre	Léopoldville	628	DEDIE	MH693	/	/
106	3022 Conseil de Guerre	Léopoldville	629	MOTINGIA	581/C	/	/
107	3023 Conseil de Guerre	Léopoldville	630	AKWATANA	4272/D	/	/
108	3024 Conseil de Guerre	Léopoldville	631	KANDJOMBI	14215/A	/	/
109	3025 Conseil de Guerre	Léopoldville	632	MONEKA	11173/A	/	/
110	3026 Conseil de Guerre	Léopoldville	633	MULAMBA	16101/A	/	/
111	3027 Conseil de Guerre	Léopoldville	634	ILOKO	16717/A	/	/
112	3028 Conseil de Guerre	Léopoldville	635	GENEVAZI-MUTEBA	19/26/18063/C	/	/
113	3029 Conseil de Guerre	Léopoldville	636	KIBONGO MOKE	3289/F	/	/
114	3030 Conseil de Guerre	Léopoldville	637	TAMBWE	10515/D	/	/
115	3031 Conseil de Guerre	Léopoldville	638	NIANGE	1697/F	/	/
116	3032 Conseil de Guerre	Léopoldville	639	METO	356/L	/	/
117	3033 Conseil de Guerre	Léopoldville	640	UTSHIDI OMBATA	17161/D	/	/
118	3034 Conseil de Guerre	Léopoldville	641	MASUMBA MASUKA	12209/D	/	/

Sample of the DIGICOLJUST-1 Database.

	RECHTZAAK N° / N° DU PROCES	SIEGE* / ZETEL*	NOM 1* / NAAM 1*	MATRICULE	NOM 2 / NAAM 2	MATRICULE
2						
48	TNE no. 46	CG du 1RI	Kundju Kalunga	2/13/12010D		
49	TNE no. 47	CG du 1RI	Yampania Mutombo	3295F		
50	TNE no.48	CG d'appel QG/TNE	Pilipili Apowanza	12933 C	Kibwana Mulenga	n°35103C 14658C
51	TNE no.49	CG d'appel QG/TNE	Esungu Simon	7492 C	Dehabo	n°14995 C
52	TNE no.50	CG d'appel QG/TNE	Biti Pilipili	10516 C	/	/
53	TNE no.51	CG du 5e Régiment	Aloda	11053 C	/	/
54	TNE no.52	CG du 5e Régiment	Lilongo	8035 D	/	/
55	TNE no.53	CG du 5e Régiment	Ramazani Isa	14754 C	/	/
56	TNE no.54	CG du 5e Régiment	Bandeaba	15999 C	/	/
57	TNE no.55	CG d'appel QG/TNE	Pieters Hendrick	/	/	/
58	TNE no.56	CG d'appel QG/TNE	Jacops Jean Baptiste	/	/	/
59	TNE no.57	CG du 5e Régiment	Andranye	2730 H	Ngurugba	n° 2747 H
60	TNE no.58	CG du 5e Régiment	Babalingala	10479/C/II/96	/	/
61	TNE no.59	3 du 6e Régiment (Vle F	Solangi Thomas	K.35 L.M.G.	/	/
62	TNE no.60	3 du 6e Régiment (Vle F	Lagilembo	12047/C	/	/
63	TNE no.61	3 du 6e Régiment (Vle F	Asini André	15021	/	/
64	TNE no.62	3 du 6e Régiment (Vle F	Ngoma Michel	15916	/	/
65	TNE no.63	3 du 6e Régiment (Vle F	Makunza	7555	/	/

Sample of the “en campagne”(CGeC)-Database.

The Power Query function in Excel is an excellent tool for detecting data matches between different Excel files. Yet, since a query can only connect databases based on one similar column, we ran a total of 16 queries. First, between the 3LL catalogue and the DIGICOLJUST-1 database, we connected the following columns: “Name” (3LL) with “Name 1” (DIGICOLJUST-1), “Name” (3LL) with “Name 2”(DIGICOLJUST-1), “Matricule” (3LL) with “Matricule 1”(DIGICOLJUST-1) and “Matricule” (3LL) with “Matricule 2”(DIGICOLJUST-1). Subsequently, we repeated the operation in reverse—setting the DIGICOLJUST-1 database as the primary source—

since comparing approximately 10.000 rows of data was not without flaws, and some matches inexplicably failed to appear in certain queries.

Second, we carried out the same procedure for the 3LL catalogue and the CGeC database: “Name” (3LL) with “Name 1” (CGeC), “Name” (3LL) with “Name 2” (CGeC), “Matricule” (3LL) with “Matricule 1” (CGeC), and “Matricule” (3LL) with “Matricule 2” (CGeC), again performing both forward and reverse queries.

While this data analysis initially detected more than a thousand matches, we refined the procedure by filtering out all the “empty” matches. By this, we mean that we deleted all matches between data cells that were left blank (often because a name or matriculation number could not be found directly in the files). Especially in the “Name 2” and “Matricule 2” queries, this significantly cleaned the newly generated datasets, since most court cases involved only one defendant. In this way, the cleaned datasets yielded a total of 801 “likely” matches. “Likely” points at the fact that a juridical file and a personnel file had an identical match on one of the two parameters (name or matriculation number).

In order to ensure a “certain match” without needing to consult the physical files, we introduced a “two-step verification” procedure. Only if both the name and matriculation number were identical, we considered it a certain overlap confirming that both the personnel file in Kinshasa and the judicial record in Belgium revolved around the same individual. In this manner, we established that 84 court files exist for 69 personnel files, since some soldiers were involved in more than one court case.

While this approach might seem too rigorous, as it excludes highly probable matches due to deviations in the orthography of names or incomplete matriculation numbers (for instance, the likely match between the personnel file 3LL265/7456 on “Mukwabili” and court file n°736 of the *Conseil de Guerre de Boma* against “Mokwabili” was not retained, even though both descriptions mentioned the exact same matriculation number), it remains the only feasible method without manually reconsulting both archival collections 6,000 km apart. Moreover, while the matriculation number appears to be a fairly stable data category, we did come across cases in which this soldier’s identity marker changed. This, too, may have contributed to some underreporting of matches.

	File N°	Name/Prén	Matricul	Tabelle1.TYPE JURIDICTION	Tabelle1.SIEGE	Tabé	Tabelle1.N	Tabelle1.MATRICUL
79	3LL262/7341	MAKANGILA	5070/A	Conseil de Guerre	Stanleyville	213	MAKANGILA	12916/C
80	3LL34/908	LUAMBA	15772/A	Conseil de Guerre	Stanleyville	232	LUAMBA	14793/C
82	3LL11/303	DJIA	14553/A	Conseil de Guerre	Coquilhatville	770	DJIA	14553/A
83	3LL11/303	DJIA	14553/A	Conseil de Guerre	Coquilhatville	841	DJIA	14553/A
84	3LL11/303	DJIA	14553/A	Conseil de Guerre d'Appel	Coquilhatville	267	DJIA	14553/A

Example of one of the datasets generated through query-based extraction. A two-step verification protocol was used to ensure exact matches. In the case of the “Luamba” files, the occurrence of different matriculation numbers suggests that these records pertain to two distinct individuals sharing the same surname. Conversely, in the “Djia” files, identical matriculation numbers confirm that Djia was involved in three separate court cases.

Finally, combining both archival collections (the 3LL files and the military judicial records) enables us to obtain a broader picture of the disciplinary sanctions that

Congolese soldiers endured within the Force Publique. Together, they are an invaluable source for understanding the ambiguities of colonial violence and shed light on how these Congolese intermediaries became (or refused to become) perpetrators and victims of this violence. They provide insight into the possible escalation of violence within colonial military contexts by documenting the military discipline to which soldiers were subjected and how this colonial coercion, in turn, triggered Congolese responses. et, the 3LL files are also an extremely valuable addition to court-martial records for studying the reverse dynamics. In contrast to court files, the personnel files do not detail a momentary event, such as a breach of military law, a violent crime, or a conflict with colonial authority. Since the 3LL files include 'positive' evaluations, decorations, recommendations of territorial agents before recruitment, and other evidence used to demonstrate the 'submissive' character of the soldier in question; they sketch a multi-layered and fluid picture of colonized military personnel. In this way, they reveal how African soldiers navigated the asymmetrical power relations inherent in colonialism throughout their careers.

In addition, personnel files can sometimes provide insight into the operation of military justice in regions whose court-martial records were not preserved. For instance, the 3LL1/37 file on Jean Kuwa includes a judgment from the military court of Luluabourg, whose archives have most likely perished. On the other hand, our data analysis has underscored the uniqueness of the archives of the *Conseils de Guerre en Campagne* for studying Congolese history during World War II, since the queries established only eight certain matches with files in the 3LL collection.

Conclusion

In sum, at the time of writing this report, approximately 78.5% of the 3LL collection—amounting to 8.900 files across 293 bundles—had been identified and described in the general catalogue. In line with the objectives of the Endangered Archives Programme, the repackaging of the bundles into acid-free archival boxes has also ensured the long-term preservation of the collection for future generations. Despite internal restructuring within INACO's conservation department and the ongoing conflict in the eastern part of the country, the team has continued its descriptive work with notable diligence. With the exception of the most complex and fragile bundles, the pilot project has successfully covered the vast majority of the collection. This large-scale identification effort has significantly enhanced the overall understanding of the 3LL archival collection.

As explained above, contrary to previous assumptions, it is not a conventional personnel archive composed solely of military career files. Instead, the collection comprises at least four distinct file types: (1) matriculation files, (2) assembled documentation files, (3) allowance files and (4) veterans' files. While the diversity of these files suggests that they originated from multiple archival creators (mainly Force Publique services, but also a seemingly private veterans union), their compilation into one collection likely occurred between 1965 and 1971 under Mobutu's regime to facilitate the payment of allowances to former soldiers and secure their political loyalty. They have been conserved in the central repository of INACO since 1981.

The pilot project thus reminded us that we should be cautious about approaching colonial archives as unmediated sites of colonial technologies of rule and imperial bureaucracy. Most of these archives acted as dynamic heritage. While they passed through postcolonial institutions for their conservation, they were not left untouched. Colonial archives were reshuffled to serve new purposes. We should thus feel the “pulse” of an archive beyond its utility for the colonial state. Moreover, our combined analysis of the 3LL files and the court-martial records has illustrated that different archival collections can be used to counterbalance each other’s creation logic or “grain”. Personnel files provide a more prolonged image of military life under colonial rule, whereas court files offer a more detailed account of violent events.

Yet, the pilot project also proved valuable beyond yielding a better understanding of the 3LL collection. The inter-institutional dialogue of October 2024 and the mission of December 2024 significantly enhanced the collaboration between INACO and its Belgian partners. These gatherings especially strengthened the exchange of knowledge, practices, and (digital) collection management between INACO and the Belgian State Archives. Both institutions, henceforth, regard each other as key interlocutors concerning the archival sector in their respective countries. The improved joint guidance for researchers and citizens in Congo and Belgium regarding their archive queries ensures a more streamlined and less burdensome application process at both institutions.

Finally, we should also underscore the multitude of possibilities to continue this work in a major project. While a comprehensive digitisation initiative for the entire 3LL collection would first require full cataloguing and reclassification in accordance with ISAD(G) or RiC standards, more limited yet valuable initiatives could also be considered. One such option is the targeted digitisation of the “Feuillet-Matricule-Contrôle” documents. This approach would not necessitate a labour-intensive reordering of the collection, yet it would significantly enhance accessibility for genealogical research. It would also draw attention to the unique value of the 3LL collection. With the exception of judicial archives, the colonial state rarely produced person-centred files for African ‘subjects’. The colonised population was typically administered and recorded as collective social categories, not as individuals. In fact, the colonial administration of the Belgian Congo generally did not maintain civil status records for them. As such, digitising the matriculation documents would offer a modest but meaningful step toward redressing the imbalance in archival visibility between colonial actors, whose records were systematically produced and preserved, and colonised individuals, who were largely excluded from such documentation.

Furthermore, we also detected other highly valuable archival collections at INACO Kinshasa. The LL collection, for instance, seems to be a logical counterpart to the personnel files. While this collection, which seems to be created by the former headquarters of the Force Publique’s Territorial Service in Léopoldville, has already been treated and catalogued by Néré Masua and Romain Ledauphin, it still appears to contain substantial information regarding the internal management of disciplinary action within the Force Publique. Likewise, research into the INACO-collection containing files of the colonial *Service de Personnel d’Afrique*, probably the provincial

section in Léopoldville, can add to our understanding of this former human resources department as a whole.⁷

⁷ Marie Van Eeckenrode, *Les archives du Personnel d'Afrique, panoptique de la fonction publique coloniale*, série Jalon de recherche (Brussels : Archives générales du Royaume, Bruxelles, 2025).