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MASTER THESIS

MEMORIES OF CONGO: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION OF HOW MY GRANDPARENTS' GENERATION IN MY BELGIAN FAMILY NEGOTIATE COLONIAL MEMORIES USING PHOTO-ELICITATION

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Abstract

This thesis studies the memories and meaning-making of six elderly on the paternal side of my family, with a focus on how they narrate and make sense of their relationships with their Congolese domestic helpers and in extension with other Congolese, and how this leads to a negotiation of collective memories of Belgium's colonial past in Congo. This is done using oral history and photo-elicitation interviews, with grounded theory methods and critical discourse analysis to analyse the interviews and Richard Chalfen's framework for analysing family photographs. The literature study discusses Belgian colonial history in Congo, individual and collective memory narratives, the politics of memory, collective memory's identity function and collective guilt, the role of photography in negotiating colonial memory, Marianne Hirsch' 'familial gaze' and Sandrine Colard's theory of the promotion of a "Belgian-Congolese" family in Belgian colonial photography. The findings address the inclusion and position of black domestic helpers in the Belgian family photographs, how photographs were used to argue for amiable relationships beyond the photograph, and how looking at family photographs led to discussing and revealing colonial discourses in Belgian society. By the intragenerational disagreements within one family, it becomes clear how complex the views of Belgians on our colonial past are and how more subjective, qualitative research adds value to this discussion. Lastly, open conversations without immediate defensive reactions is encouraged to continue the negotiation despite controversy, with the help of photographs or other tools.

Key-words:

Colonial Belgian Congo, memory, collective guilt, photo-elicitation, oral history, family photographs, Belgian colonial photography

Dutch abstract:

Deze thesis bestudeert de herinneringen en betekenisgeving van zes ouderen aan de vaderlijke kant van mijn familie, met een focus op hoe zij hun relaties met hun Congolese huishoudhulpen en hun relaties met andere Congolezen vertellen en betekenis geven, en hoe dit leidt tot een overleg over collectieve herinneringen van het Belgische koloniale verleden in Congo. Dit wordt gedaan door middel van mondelinge geschiedenis methoden en foto-elicitation interviews, met grounded theory methoden en kritische discoursanalyse om de interviews te analyseren en Richard Chalfen's methodologisch kader voor het analyseren van familiefoto's. De literatuurstudie behandelt de Belgische koloniale geschiedenis in Congo, de vertelling van individuele en collectieve herinneringen, herinneringspolitiek, de identiteitsfunctie van collectieve herinneringen en collectieve schuld, de rol van fotografie bij overleg over het koloniale geheugen, Marianne Hirsch' 'familial gaze' en Sandrine Colard's theorie van de promotie van een "Belgisch-Congolese" familie in de Belgische koloniale fotografie. De bevindingen bespreken de inclusie en positie van zwarte huishoudhulpen in de Belgische familiefoto's, hoe foto's werden gebruikt om aangename relaties buiten grenzen van de foto's te beargumenteren, en hoe het kijken naar familiefoto's leidde tot het bespreken en onthullen van koloniale discoursen in de Belgische samenleving. Door de intragenerationele onenigheden binnen één familie wordt duidelijk hoe complex de opvattingen van Belgen over ons koloniale verleden zijn en hoe subjectiever, kwalitatief onderzoek waarde toevoegt aan deze discussie. Ten slotte worden open conversaties zonder onmiddellijke defensieve reacties aangemoedigd om ondanks controversie de discussie voort te zetten, met behulp van foto's of andere hulpmiddelen.

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1. Introduction

“The black people actually didn’t belong ...and yet they did a little.”

“They belonged a little to the family.”

(personal communication, trans. & ed. by author, March 8, 2021)

My great-grandfather was a colonial and worked in Congo for the Colonial Belgian government from 1924 until 1955. My grandfather and his siblings spent a part of their youth in Colonial Belgian Congo. From what I picked up from conversations over the years, these years of their lives are remembered fondly. However, I, as a grandchild and part of a younger generation, have always felt sceptical about this. Therefore, I have decided to dedicate my thesis to reaching a deeper understanding of my family’s memories of their past in Colonial Belgian Congo in relation to the various collective memories of the Belgian colonial past in Belgian society. More specifically, I am looking for the ways in which they negotiate their memories and views, and how they deal with the discourse (as they perceive it) surrounding the topic in the current Belgian society. The purpose of this thesis is not to look for ‘truth’ or the ‘right’ way to remember the past, but to learn more about how these family members think, feel and talk about this period in their life, about Belgian colonialism, and about what it means to them today in our current society. While I am not aiming to address all narratives, I will use critical discourse analysis and postcolonial theory to address certain views. In this thesis, I study the memories and meaning-making of six elderly on the paternal side of my family. More specifically, I focus on how they narrate and make sense of their relationships with their Congolese domestic helpers and in extension with other Congolese, and how this leads to a negotiation of collective memories of Belgium’s colonial past in Congo.

With the recent upsurge in public attention for our colonial past, I find it important as a Belgian citizen to participate in the discussion and to assess my role in it. Licata and Volpato (2010) noted that colonial pasts are “one of the main sources of racism, xenophobia, and intolerance towards Africans, Asians and indigenous peoples” (p. 5) and added that

The way this violent past is collectively remembered today is therefore a crucial factor for understanding contemporary instances of intergroup conflict, prejudice, stigmatization, and racism. Conversely, collective memories of the colonial times could also be instrumental in promoting intergroup reconciliation, mutual respect, and mutual recognition in and between contemporary societies. (p.5)

As a white Belgian with colonist ancestors, I feel the responsibility to start with myself, to learn more about my colonial family history and how it relates to our present. This micro-level approach is important since individuals’ reactions to their nation’s or family’s colonial past “influence their attitudes and behaviour toward the formerly colonized and their descendants” (Bonnot, Krauth-Gruber, Drozda-Senkowska, & Lopes, 2016, p. 532). Interview-based research of Belgian ex-colonials’ memories and views are not new. However, it has not been done with an approach as personal to the researcher as in this thesis, interviewing family members using photo-elicitation with family photos. By doing this, I want to highlight the importance of personal involvement in the societal conversation and the role that individuals and smaller social groups (like families, neighbourhoods or other communities) play in future discussion and action besides the official discourse and actions in society as whole. I hope that this research will motivate people to address their own past or that of their family or community. I aim to encourage people to have open discussions where they can honestly share their memories and views but where they are also open to other perspectives and to broaden and maybe even change their own.

This thesis will start with a literature study for the historical, theoretical and methodological background. The historical background consists of a short history of Belgian colonialism in Congo and the evolution of how Belgians have collectively dealt with, negotiated and viewed this legacy. The theoretical background studies the workings of individual and collective memory, the study of family memory narratives through oral history interviews, the role of the politics of memory and collective memory's identity function in negotiating memories, and lastly, strategies for dealing with collective guilt resulting from a colonial past. The methodological section explains the role of family photographs in this negotiation of colonial memory. The benefits and use of photo-elicitation for the interviews for this thesis are laid out, followed by a framework for the visual analysis of the family photographs used and some theories of family photography and Belgian colonial photography for the critical discourse analysis. In the theoretical and methodological sections, the specifics of the interviews and analyses for this thesis are mentioned as well. Next, the discussion section considers the main findings relevant for this thesis. First, I will look at the inclusion of the domestic helpers and their position in the photographs and in the family, and how this is negotiated by my family members. This leads to a questioning and discussion of their relationships with the Congolese in as well as beyond the photographs. Finally, the interviews, and therefore also this discussion section, evolved from making meaning of family photos to a consideration of colonial discourse used to make sense of a personal and a collective colonial past. Throughout the discussion section, postcolonial theories (including the previously mentioned theories from the background knowledge) are used for the critical discourse analysis. To conclude, I end this thesis with a short summary of the main findings while reflecting on the subjectivity of this research and on the importance of continued conversation despite controversy.

2. Colonial history, memory and photography

2.1. Belgian colonialism in Congo and how Belgians historically forgot, remembered and negotiated this past

Belgium's colonial history in Congo started with the Berlin Conference in 1885 where Congo Free State (CFS) was created and the European powers granted Belgian King Leopold II the rule over the Congolese territory. From then on, until 1908, the CFS became his private property (Colard, 2016, p. 4; Licata & Klein, 2010, p. 47). The Belgian parliament and people rejected these international agreements and the king's political pursuits. Therefore Leopold II's autocracy in Congo had to be separated from his monarchy in Belgium, with no connection between the two states besides the king himself (Ceuppens, 2003, p. XII; Ewans, 2003, p. 168). During this period many Congolese were dispossessed of their land and forced into cheap labour. They had to hand over ivory and rubber as 'taxes'. Due to a great increase in the global demand for rubber in 1896, Leopold II's CFS government started leasing regions to companies, allowing them monopoly over these regions which were consequently administratively abandoned. The companies were free to collect rubber by any means, exploiting Congo in association with Leopold II (Colard, 2016, pp. 5–8; Ewans, 2003, p. 168). Ewans (2003, p. 174) calls this the Leopoldian era, marked by exploitation and human rights violations. Colard (2016, pp. 8–9) mentions amongst other things looting, imprisonments, sexual violence, massacres, executions and mutilations, but also harsh labour demands, and consequential illness, food shortage and dropping birth rates. Strict secrecy about what happened in Congo was imposed and prevailed in Belgium. However, at the start of the 20th century, these atrocities were exposed by British outsiders and condemned internationally. Many Belgians' reaction at first was to accuse these British of jealousy and wanting to exploit Congo themselves, though there were a few who expressed criticism. Nonetheless, Leopold II had to hand over the colony to the Belgian government in 1908,

after ordering his own investigation which had damning results and caused the sentiment in Belgium to turn against him (Ewans, 2003, pp. 169–170; Licata & Klein, 2010, p. 47).

Since then it became Belgian Congo, a proper Belgian colony under the Belgian government, until its independence in 1960 (Licata & Klein, 2010, p. 47). Ewans (2003, p. 174) calls this the Belgian era. Leopold II destroyed most records of CFS and kept the rest closed for most of the 20th century. What ensued was a case of ‘social amnesia’, where Belgian society collectively forgot this dark past and distanced themselves from it. For example, in Belgian education there was no critical word on the topic. Instead, it was focussed on the idea of civilisation (Cohen, 1995, p. 13; Ewans, 2003, p. 170). The Belgian plan for the economic and social development of Belgian Congo in 1949 was created in reaction to the post-war anti-colonialism. This humanistic (but paternalistic and unequal) policy meant the improvement of infrastructures like electricity and transportation, and the development of medical infrastructures, education, industry and agriculture. However, human rights violations continued and economic exploitation persisted during the Belgian era. Nonetheless, the Belgian authorities tried to promote the idea of a Belgian-Congolese community instead of the colonisation it really was. Moreover, the policy did not include any preparation for a Congolese independence, which eventually hastily took place in 1960 due to growing political unrest (Colard, 2016, pp. 16–18; Ewans, 2003, pp. 171–172). Ewans (2003, p. 174) calls the post-colonial era from 1965 to 1997 the Mobutu era where the human rights violations and exploitation were this time brought about amongst Congolese themselves while the former colonial power turned a blind eye with its own economic interests in mind. Since then the country, now called the Democratic Republic of Congo, has known political instability, corruption, war and poverty (BBC, 2021; Snow, 2013).

For a long time after the Congolese independence another period of social amnesia regarding Belgium’s dark colonial past took over. Until American journalist Adam Hochschild rekindled the controversy with the publishing of his book ‘King Leopold’s Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism on Colonial Africa’ in 1998 (Ewans, 2003, pp. 176–177; Licata & Klein, 2010, p. 47). Since then, Belgium has struggled with properly addressing and dealing with its colonial past. It remains a controversial and sensitive topic to this day. In 2010, Licata and Klein (pp. 46–47) noted two different views on Belgium’s colonial past in Congo. One is a paternalistic narrative of development and civilisation by the Belgians to the advantage of the Congolese, while the other pictures systematic human rights violations and atrocities for the benefit of an exploitative king and nation. In their quantitative empirical studies they found that the two different representations of colonialism could be related to different generations for French-speaking Belgians (with ‘generation’ here referring to the sequence of grandparents, parents and children (Reulecke, 2008, p. 119)). The results showed that the children generally saw colonialism in a negative light, while their grandparents mainly focussed on the positive narrative, and their parents took on an intermediary position (Licata & Klein, 2010, pp. 49–51). It is important not to neglect the collective memories of colonialism among ethnic Congolese living in Belgium. Research in 2018 (Figueiredo, Oldenhove, & Licata, p. 9) found that they held some positive but mostly negative memories of the colonisation by Belgium. The negative memories mostly entailed human rights violations against the Congolese people and exploitation of the Congolese labour force and natural resources, while the positive memories included contributions to the educational and health systems, and to the infrastructure and economy. Their negative memories of the colonial past are related to perceiving more negative present-day consequences of colonialism for the Congolese (such as cultural losses, neo-colonialism and the current situation in Congo) and more positive consequences for Belgians (such as an important political position internationally and lasting economic benefits). However, the generational differences in views are similar to the ones Licata and Klein found among French-speaking Belgians, with the older generation sharing more positive views while the younger generation has more

negative views and the intermediate generation's views are more ambivalent (Figueiredo et al., 2018, p. 10). Since 2018, gradual official recognition of Belgium's historical responsibilities in its colonial past is fact. In August 2020 a parliamentary commission (called the 'Congo Commission' by the media) was created to research and create a report on Belgium's colonial past in Congo, Rwanda and Burundi and the impact, in order to advise the Chamber of Representatives on future actions regarding recognition, reconciliation and addressing the racism that is still present in Belgian society. Their report was published online and shared with the Belgian parliament in October 2021 (Etambala et al., 2021, pp. 10–11). It is clear that Belgium has historically taken a bumpy road to deal with its dark colonial past. The next section will have a closer look at the negotiation of painful colonial memory.

2.2. Negotiation of painful colonial memory

Licata and Klein (2005) explain the aforementioned different views on Belgium's colonial past by referring to collective memory, which they define as "a set of shared representations of the past based on group members' common identity" (p. 243). However, these representations and their related views can vary between members of the same group (Figueiredo et al., 2018, p. 3). Still, individual and collective memory are inseparable. Collective memory connects individual memories and offers a frame within which they can be remembered and understood. Conversely, individual memories can shed light on collective memories and their meanings. The latter is a method used in autoethnography, where personal accounts of the researcher are studied to lead to a better understanding of the broader society (Booth, 2008, p. 300; Halbwachs, 1992, as cited in Abrams, 2010, pp. 95-96; Sparkes, 2002, as cited in Roberts, 2012, p. 95). A person's memory is not only compiled of one's own experiences, background, perspective, knowledge and emotions, but also other people's recounts, experiences, viewpoints, photographs etc. Memory is created and recalled within society, which includes amongst others family and community contexts, the nation, current public representations, etc. Each person belongs to various groups, communities or social systems which each have their own history and culture, and codes and norms to determine what is significant and meaningful for their particular group and what isn't. The past acquires different meanings in memories depending on these different frameworks. Memory is thus multilayered, and sometimes people have to mediate contradictions between collective memories from different groups they're a part of (Abrams, 2010, p. 96; Apfelbaum, 2010, pp. 82–86; Fortunati & Lamberti, 2008, p. 128; Halbwachs, 1992, pp. 37–53; Olick, 2008, pp. 155–156). According to Licata and Klein (2010, pp. 47–48), the aforementioned different views on Belgian colonialism in Congo reflect two different collective memories of this period. Since the grandparents were born before or during the independence, they grew up with a pro-colonial social framework. Their grandchildren grew up with a social framework where colonialism became controversial and viewed negatively. Palmberger (2016, p. 9) agrees that youth is a formative time, however she argues that this doesn't mean interpretations of the past remain the same. She adds that an individual's 'life situation' at the time of both the (direct or indirect) witnessing and the remembering influence memory.

Memories are fragmented bits that are given meaning by connecting them in narratives (Roberts, 2012, pp. 97–98). The narrative structuring of events in mnemonic practices happens from their perception on. Similar to Hall's (1973, p. 4) encoding-decoding model, people select and convert what they perceive, combined with previous knowledge, into meaningful constructions which can be memorized and communicated. This is influenced by emotion, interest and other factors, inevitably leading to the partiality of memory. From then on, whenever these memories are triggered, their fragments are then constantly rearranged and shaped in social interaction, and again combined with previous knowledge, depending on the context and aim (Abrams, 2010, pp. 82–84; Straub, 2008, p. 221). Family memories are passed on between generations and are each time re-evaluated, re-

contextualised and re-constructed by younger generations (Palmberger, 2016, p. 8). It is remembered by descendants who feel the duty to remember and pass on the memories of their ancestors which happened before their birth, often for the construction of a self-image and identity through the people to which one feels connected (Fodor, 2020, pp. 1–27). During the interviews for this research, memories were collaboratively (re)created and (re)interpreted between the interviewer and the interviewees, and between interviewees (present or not). All six respondents of this thesis were aged between 80 and 88. Two respondents are my grandparents. The others were recommended by family members noting that they would have a lot to say about their lives in Congo. Because of the Second World War and later for their studies, Gustaaf and his older brother, Fons (who made the family chronicles used for this research and who has passed away), spent most of their youth in Belgium with extended family while their parents and siblings lived in Congo. Beatrijs, Jef and Jeanne grew up in Congo. Jeanne and Gustaaf were interviewed respectively with their partners, Korneel and Maria, and Beatrijs and Jef were interviewed together. All respondent names in this thesis are pseudonyms. The six interviews took place in the respondents' homes, for around an hour to two hours each, and were subsequently transcribed. The analyses were based on grounded theory methods, where theory is created inductively and iteratively from empirical data while still being attentive to existing theoretical frameworks and concepts. To identify the key themes and patterns in the respondents' narratives, after a first reading of the interview transcripts, I used MAXQDA and mindmapping for open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Mortelmans, 2018, pp. 399–404). Here, oral history was central. It studies the past as it is remembered in personal interactions and thus its later reception, (re)construction, use and impact (Assmann, 1997, p. 9; Tamm, 2013, pp. 463–464). The central research interests are what, how and why people remember and how they narrate these memories. The point is thus not to obtain factual information, but to study people's meaning-making (Abrams, 2010, pp. 1–81). Oral history has the potential to reveal how memory changes over time, shaped by outside influences, and consequently teaches us about collective memory. "The way a respondent 'borrows' ideas, motifs, sayings and whole 'memories' about the past from their family, community or wider culture reveals much about the collective memory of neighbourhoods, groups and nations" (Abrams, 2010, p. 23).

Certain strategies of narration, often culturally learned in socialisation, are used to produce meaningful memories which are intersubjectively accepted and often conforming to sociocultural standards (Schmidt, 2008, p. 193; Straub, 2008, p. 222). The politics of memory determine what narratives of memories are considered legitimate in a society. Memories are not neutral or objective, they are sites of struggle where the meanings of the past are always under discussion (Abrams, 2010, p. 80; Fortunati & Lamberti, 2008, pp. 129–130). Remembering is thus also related to power and happens selectively, guided by particular interests, motives, moral values and emotions (Apfelbaum, 2010, p. 89; Schmidt, 2008, p. 197). In his concept of mnemonic hegemony, Molden (2016, pp. 126–127) relates collective memory to Gramsci's concept of hegemony. Hegemony is a kind of power where a dominant group succeeds in imposing their views (which usually serve their interests) on the dominated groups as common sense and as universal values, consequently delegitimising alternative views. Important here is the consensus between the dominant and the dominated groups. This is achieved by affecting society and culture on every level and by concealing the contingency of history and the present. However, there is always room for counter-hegemony which resists the hegemonic power and influences processes of negotiation (Cere, 2016, pp. 126–127; Molden, 2016, pp. 126–127). In mnemonic hegemony, certain memories are prioritised over others depending on the current power relations in a certain society. Memory doesn't just consist of facts, events and experiences of the past which are stored and recalled. It is an active process of meaning-making which is shaped by its political, social, cultural and historical context (Abrams, 2010, pp. 78–79;

Molden, 2016, p. 128; Portelli, 1991, p. 52). Analogous to counter-hegemony, counter-memory is the result of people remembering against the hegemonic memories. Though it is important to realise that hegemonic memory and counter-memory are not simple homogenous dichotomies. Dominant hegemonic or counter-hegemonic memories are never the only ones and might not even reflect the most popular experiences and memories of the silent majority. In the politics of memory, members of a group negotiate within their group and also with other groups to validate their memories in relation to the present interests of the group (Molden, 2016, pp. 125–140).

Collective memory's identity function is another factor which influences the negotiation of memory (Licata & Klein, 2010, p. 48). Individuals or groups define their identity through the construction of memory. Through memory, they make sense of how they see themselves as part of a social group, of how they relate to others' experiences and viewpoints, of who they were in the past, of who they have become in the present, and of who they wish to become in the future. Therefore, memories of the past are constantly reconstructed depending on contemporary needs and objectives (to maintain a positive self-image in the present) and with future aspirations in mind (Abrams, 2010, pp. 79–82; Apfelbaum, 2010, p. 91; Baumeister & Hastings, 1997, p. 277; Fodor, 2020, pp. 26–31; Olick, 2008, pp. 155–156; Palmberger, 2016, pp. 9–13; Roberts, 2012, pp. 96–97; Stoler & Strassler, 2006, p. 288). Following Social Identity Theory, when memories of a collective's dark past threaten a positive social identity, group members may distance themselves from the collective or they may shape their remembering and meaning-making to defend their social identity (Bonnot et al., 2016, p. 538; Figueiredo et al., 2018, p. 10; Tajfel & Turner, 1986, pp. 7-24; Licata & Volpato, 2010, pp. 6–7). Collective guilt is an emotion that members of a social group (the ingroup) which harmed or harms members of another social group (the outgroup) might feel when they are reminded or accused of these wrongdoings (Wohl, Branscombe, & Klar, 2006, p. 1). It is not necessary for an individual of the ingroup to have been involved themselves in the harming to feel collective guilt. The impact of mistreatments like colonisation, slavery, genocide, torture can be felt for generations after. By sharing membership of the same social group, present-day members of the ingroup may feel guilt by association (Doosje et al., 1998, as cited in Wohl et al., 2006, pp. 3–4). Though usually individuals may feel less connected to and responsible for a distant past, when a person's family has been involved in the colonial past they may feel more so. When they believe their family had been involved in a positive way they are more likely to experience emotions like pride, while they are more inclined to feel emotions like shame when they believe their family took part in a negative way. Family involvement may also lead to more defensive reactions in order to protect the positive image of their social identity (Bonnot et al., 2016, pp. 537–538; Zebel et al., 2007, pp. 82–83). Though, regardless of family connection, since reminders of wrongdoings negatively affect the image and collective identity of the ingroup, members of the ingroup will often use strategies to legitimize their group's damaging actions in an attempt to maintain a positive group image and alleviate feelings of guilt. Some of these strategies are: avoiding identifying as a member of the ingroup; 'forgetting', silencing, minimising or denying the wrongdoings; perceiving members of the outgroup as subhuman or inferior; focusing on the harm experienced by the outgroup rather than the harmful behaviour of the ingroup; blaming the outgroup for the harm they experienced or considering them deserving of it; blaming a few deviant ingroup members for the wrongdoings to limit damage to the image of the group as a whole; using ideology to justify wrongdoings as serving noble purposes for the ingroup or outgroup (Branscombe & Miron, 2004, pp. 318–321; Wohl et al., 2006, pp. 4–5 & 13). The feeling of collective guilt in Belgium for the colonisation of Congo has been avoided for many years by subsequent and repeated 'forgetting', 'rediscovering', and justifying of the harm done. These attempts to keep a positive group image eventually fail when attention is brought back to previously justified actions and when these are delegitimised (Wohl et al., 2006, pp. 27–28). Licata and Klein

(2010, pp. 52–53) identify four strategies Belgians use to deal with collective guilt from their nation's colonial past. The first three are avoidance strategies where they employ certain ideas to mitigate the moral implications of their nation's past colonialism. These ideas are: the benevolence of Belgian colonials, the idea that the past cannot be judged by contemporary moral standards, and that the colonials are not representative for all Belgian people. I would add to the latter the argument that not all colonials were the same, similar to the findings of a qualitative study where descendants of German Nazis accepted the Nazis' negative image in the German collective memory but exempted their family from it by creating a family memory where the behaviour of their ancestors is portrayed as benevolent (Welzer et al., 2015, as cited in Krogsgaard, 2017, p. 370). Lastly, the fourth strategy is to acknowledge past immoral behaviour, to accept the feeling of collective guilt, and to consequently seek reparation of harm done to the Congolese. However, according to Bruckner (2010, as cited in Licata & Klein, 2010, p. 54), this is another strategy used by European nations with colonial pasts to redeem and sustain a positive self-image. Here, the collective memories of a negative colonial past serve as an antithesis of the identity nations and people wish to construct today. Their positive image is created by distancing themselves from these past wrongdoings and presenting these as incompatible with their present-day identity (Licata & Klein, 2010, p. 55).

In summary, there exist many different individual and collective memories of the same past in society. These memories and their narratives are continuously negotiated in social interaction and influenced by the politics of memory. Memories of a dark colonial past threaten a person or group's positive social identity. Therefore, several strategies are used to negotiate these memories. Through oral history and grounded theory methods, the interviews for this thesis are studied to find the what, how and why of my family's memories of our colonial past. Next, I will discuss the role of family photographs in such negotiation of colonial memory.

2.3. The role of family photographs in the negotiation of colonial memory

Family memories are mediated either through direct retelling between two generations or through indirect ways, for example through the mnemonic practices and products of an intermediate generation (Fivush, 2008, p. 52; Fodor, 2020, pp. 1–27). Mnemonic practices include reminiscence and recall, but also denial, acknowledgement, excuse, regret, renunciation, etc. Mnemonic products include among others chronicles, images and photographs (Marcel & Mucchielli, 2008, p. 145; Olick, 2008, pp. 156–158). They are viewed, dealt with and understood through individual and collective memories. Simultaneously, personal and collective identities are constructed and negotiated through photographs and related mnemonic practices. Photographs don't simply contain and carry meaning and knowledge, but offer semiotic signs that can be used for interpretation and evaluation, to create meaning within their context, or even to alter memories. Sometimes photographs lead to creating new memories, especially when they challenge previous memories. The memories triggered by family photography may be influenced by cues and suggestions of different family members. It is possible that family members' memories connected to their photographs differ from each other which may lead to negotiation (Roberts, 2012, pp. 92–103; Ruchatz, 2008, p. 373; Schmidt, 2008, p. 199). As Julia Hirsch (1981) wrote: "Family photographs themselves do not change, only the stories we tell about them do" (p.5).

For this research, six photo-elicitation interviews were conducted. In photo-elicitation, photos are used as visual stimuli to trigger memories and verbal responses about both what's visible in the photos and the deeper meanings that the respondents give to those photos. This is meant to reveal the respondents' values, beliefs, attitudes, and cultural and social understandings (Banks & Zeitlyn, 2015, p. 86; Pauwels, 2015, p. 118; J. Prosser & Schwartz, 1998, p. 124; Suchar, 1989, p. 177). As Collier and Collier (1986) wrote, "Only human response can open the camera's eye to meaningful use

in research” (p.5). Furthermore, using photographs enhances interviews by offering an opening to discuss difficult topics without being too direct and confrontational to the respondent. The respondent is made to feel like an expert exploring the images with the interviewer and explaining things that were already captured in the image, rather than as if they’re being interrogated. Visual stimuli also retain the respondents’ interest in the interview and can help recalling memories (Collier & Collier, 1986, pp. 105–107; Pauwels, 2015, pp. 119–120). These benefits of using photographs in interviews show their importance in facilitating the discussion and negotiation of painful or controversial memories, like those of a colonial past. The three initial explorative interviews were open-ended focus group conversations and discussions with the sole prompt being my request to bring photos from their lives in Congo and a short explanation of the interests of my thesis. During these first meetings I was lent three photo albums and a USB with digitalized photographs from their lives in Congo dating between 1924 and 1955. The purpose of these first conversations was to get familiar with the visual material, with the family history from this era, and the stories and meaning makings of these elderly, and to make an informed selection of their photos for further interviewing. The 115 photos selected from these albums and from a photographic chronicle compiled by Fons were used both as visual data for analysis and as photographic prompts to elicit verbal data in this second round of interviews. Besides the photographs, quotes from the written family chronicle by Fons and paraphrases from the previous interviews were also used as stimuli. These follow up semi-structured photo-elicitation interviews took place four to five months after the first explorative conversations.

The visual analysis of the photographs was based on similar methods as the interview analysis, first identifying themes by content analysis followed by a semiotic analysis with the help of Chalfen’s (1998, pp. 190–208) framework, where each photo is individually analysed to then be connected and related to the other photographs and to the interviews, revealing certain patterns (Albers & James, 1988, pp. 146–150; Caton & Santos, 2008, p. 16; Collier & Collier, 1986, p. 170). Richard Chalfen (1998, pp. 190–208) categorized elements of the communication process of photographs into five ‘image communication events’ and five ‘image communication components’. The five communication events are: (1) planning, which entails all social and technical decisions regarding the production of the photograph; (2) ‘on camera shooting’ are the actions that relate to the shaping of the subject or object in front of the camera; (3) ‘behind camera shooting’ is what happens behind the camera, for example when, where, how, why and by who the camera is used; (4) the editing includes any transformation, collection, arrangement and/or rearrangement of the photographs; and lastly, (5) the exhibition of the photographs is their showing or not showing to people other than the photographer and editor. The five image communication components are: (1) the participants, which includes the people who take or are involved in the photograph, who are pictured by them, and who look at them; (2) the topics, which refers to the image content (according to the different participants) and also what is left out of the photo for the viewer to possibly fill in. Photographs depend both on what the photographer and keeper want to show and on what the viewer wants to see (Collier & Collier, 1986, p. 9; J. Hirsch, 1981, p. 81). (3) The setting concerns when and where the communication events take place, and when and where these are considered appropriate. Like Gillian Rose (2010) says, “different things are done with photographs, in different places” (p.12). (4) The message form is about the materiality of the photograph, and how the other components and the communication events relate to this. Lastly, (5) the code component refers to the composition, conventions, routines, habits, etc. related to the communication events that result in a certain look or style of the photo or photo collection. Family and colonial photographs are particular kinds of images which involve particular social practices and show their subjects in particular, selective ways, according to Gillian Rose (2010, pp. 11, 15 & 20) usually idyllically represented and perpetuating

social power relations and the dominant discourses regarding race, class, gender, etc. It is clear that it is not just the content and meaning of a photograph that is important to consider, but also what is done with them, where, how and by whom, and what emerges from this (Bal, 2003, p. 9; Rose, 2010, pp. 14 & 21). As Appadurai (1986) wrote, “things have no meaning apart from those that human transactions, attributions, and motivations endow them with” (p.5).

To then better understand and explain the patterns or relationships in and between the photographs and interviews, and their underlying meanings, I used critical discourse analysis (Albers & James, 1988, p. 150; Caton & Santos, 2008, p. 16; Collier & Collier, 1986, p. 194). Family photographs, their readings and how they influence our memory are never neutral. Although they seem to simply depict reality, photographs often perpetuate hidden ideologies reproduced by both the photographer and the viewer. These influence what is shown and what is seen. Most decisions are not made to ensure historical accuracy, but rather serve some kind of meaning-making, and are affected by social contexts and practices (J. Hirsch, 1981, pp. 10–13; M. Hirsch, 1997, pp. 7–8, 1999, p. xvi; Rose, 2010, p. 41). Family photographs may often not show the realities of family life but it does show what a family wishes it to be like (M. Hirsch, 1997, p. 8). When choosing how to take the family photographs, which ones to keep and how to interpret them, the participants in the photograph’s communication process are influenced by aesthetic and social conventions of family photographs (J. Hirsch, 1981, p. 12). Marianne Hirsch (1997, pp. 7–8 & 11 & 214) calls this ‘the familial gaze’, which often upholds the hegemonic ideology of the family, namely the idyllic image of a happy family unit free of conflict. For example by symbolizing ‘togetherness’ through spatial proximity of family members in the photograph (Rose, 2010, p. 41). Family albums tend to include only the images which tell a story that family members agree on with a possible public reading in mind. Photographs that do not fit these stories and that the family members consider as ‘unrepresentative’ or ‘bad’, tend to be left out. A more critical analysis of these photo albums which considers what is omitted, may disturb these informal agreements (M. Hirsch, 1997, p. 107). Another way to analyse the familial gaze in family photographs, is by not only looking at how the self is represented but also how otherness is represented. The familial gaze is culturally and historically contingent, and is influenced by contemporary issues of race, class, gender, nationality, etc. One way of dealing with diversity in family photographs, is by creating the fantasy of sameness and by fabricating a sense of familiarity. Unintentionally, this can expose the ideologies when a ‘deeper’ reading takes place and the contexts are taken into account (M. Hirsch, 1997, pp. 47–107). Similarly, colonial images (in this thesis meaning photos produced in the colony during colonial times) can also be used as valid sources for historical and anthropological research (providing both information about the colonizer and the colonized, and the photographer and the photographed) as long as they are contextualized within their colonial context and their limitations are taken into account (Geary, 1988, as cited in Colard, 2016, p. 20).

Colard (2016, pp. 2–213) found that in the case of Colonial Belgian Congo the use of colonial photography was not only a divisive tool but it was also used by both colonizers and colonized to create proximity between themselves. Photography played a crucial role in the international humanitarian campaign against the mistreatment of the Congolese during the Leopoldian era, illustrating a clear division between Belgians and Congolese. In reaction, during the Belgian era, photography was used for rapprochement. It needed to promote the idea of a “Belgian-Congolese family” (Colard, 2016, p. 27) and to picture Colonial Belgian Congo as a model colony which was likened to its metropole and where the Congolese were treated as a part of the colonial society. This was meant to ease interracial tensions and to assure Belgium’s domination over Congo. Not only Belgians, but also Congolese willingly participated in this photographic family iconography. The portrayal of a “family-like closeness” (Colard, 2016, p. 213) made the colonial photography more

agreeable to the urban Congolese according to Colard. Still, she does not accuse the Congolese of being complicit in their own subjugation. She disclaims denial or neglect of the power imbalance in Colonial Belgian Congo. The image that was promoted did not align with the reality where Belgians and Congolese were segregated. It did, however, make colonial photography seem less oppressive and thus less calling for counteraction (Colard, 2016, pp. 25–213). Still, researchers should avoid reducing the relationship between photographer and photographed in a colonial context to oppressive colonizer gaze and oppressed colonized subject. They should consider photographs, performances or creative interventions by colonized peoples (for example as means for resistance, but not always) and that not all photographs of colonies by European people directly and purposely served to create racial stereotypes or as tools of colonial oppression marking colonized peoples as inferior (Behdad & Gartlan, 2013, pp. 3–4; Geary, 1988, as cited in Colard, 2016, p. 20; Hight & Sampson, 2002, pp. 1–2). However, all colonial photography participated in the imperial project, regardless of whether it clearly shows ideological signs and intentions or not (Ryan, 1997, as cited in Hight & Sampson, 2002, p. 11).

This thesis researches how six elderly from the same family negotiate the memories of their family and their country's colonial pasts among themselves, in relation to dominant memories in larger society, and with the interviewer who is also their descendant trying to make sense of this part of family history. Family photographs were used to facilitate the discussion of a colonial past, while also being studied as a mnemonic product used in the negotiation of memories of this past. The aim was to find the memories and meanings made, how they are made, and how they are communicated using family photographs; but also the negotiation of meanings and conflicting viewpoints and their relation to the social contexts (Rose, 2016, pp. 206–209). The following is a discussion of some of my findings from these interviews.

3. Negotiating our colonial family photographs

3.1. Inclusion and position in the photograph and in the family

From the very first interview, photo 1 became a main interest in this research. Even before this interview had officially started, my respondents themselves addressed it spontaneously and it was immediately clear that this had become a controversial photograph. In 2020 a museum concerned with heritage organised an exhibition for the occasion of the 60th birthday of the Congolese independence. Their goal was to create awareness on the presence, role and impact of Limburg people in Congo and Congolese people in Limburg. Just like other former colonists and their children, my family was contacted to share photos and stories, which they did. From these photos, one family photo (photo 1) was deemed by a museum staff member as “interesting because it shows how much the lives of Belgians and Congolese converged, yet a certain divide always remained” (personal communication, trans. by author, September 2, 2020). In this photo, you see my great-grandparents posing seated on a bench outside on the porch of their fourth home in then Elisabethville, between 1953 and 1955, together with seven of their nine children. Behind the family is a window, and behind that window we can see a figure standing in the less well-lit interior of the home. This is Samuel, the family's ‘boy’ at the time. A ‘boy’ in Colonial Belgian Congo was usually an adult Congolese man who served a Belgian family in their home as a domestic helper doing chores like washing, cooking, and taking care of the Belgian children. The term ‘boy’ illustrates the paternalistic attitudes of Belgian colonials (Verschraegen, 2017, p. 107). My respondents mentioned a few times that their parents taught them to call the domestic helpers by their names out of respect rather than ‘boy’. However, this is the word which they used to refer to the phenomenon in general and which I will therefore use in this discussion as well.



Photo 1: incomplete family photo taken between 1953 and 1955 on the porch outside in Elisabethville with the 'boy' standing at the back behind a window. Source: scanned from the photographic chronicle by Fons.

Samuel is standing behind the family as if joining the group photo but separated by a wall and a window. One could interpret the boy's positioning relative to the family and the difference in lighting as signs of distance between him and the family despite being included in the picture. The quote the museum staff planned to use to support the image in the exhibition stated "With the whole family in the photo / Only our shadow has the same colour" (personal communication, trans. by author, September 2, 2020). This resulted in disapproving feedback from the family. Firstly, they didn't agree since the family was not complete in this photograph. The two eldest sons spent their early childhood living with extended family in Belgium separated from their parents and siblings in Congo due to World War II. After the war, they were again separated for their studies. This separation of the family is still a sensitive topic. Most interesting for this thesis, however, is how they argued that the way the museum intended to use this photo was not representative of their relationship with their 'boy'.

Jef: And there you see Samuel standing behind the window ... And so he wanted to choose that to accentuate the segregation. We didn't find that correct.

Beatrijs: No

Jef: We say: our relationship with Samuel was very good. So what do you want to- from that, from that photo, segregation.

Beatrijs: because he stood behind the window.

...

Jef: Only proves that he liked to be there.

(personal communication, trans. & ed. by author, March 8, 2021)

To Beatrijs and Jef, his presence proved that he was allowed to join in the photo, that he liked being there, and even that he was considered part of the family.

Beatrijs: He was just curious and he wanted be included. That's how it is actually. It was never forbidden to him.

...

Jef: Samuel wanted to come with us back to Belgium. He was a member of the family really. They took a photo and then he saw that and came looking from behind the window, I think. (personal communication, trans. & ed. by author, July 30, 2021)

It is clear that the museum staff and my family members interpreted this photograph, and what it says about their relationship with the Congolese, very differently. By stating that Samuel's presence shows his inclusion in the family, my respondents appropriate the 'familial gaze' to create the fantasy of sameness and togetherness (M. Hirsch, 1997, pp. 47–107). Additionally, my respondents' narratives of having a family-like bond with their 'boys' fits within Colard's (2016) theory of the promotion of a "Belgian-Congolese family" (p.27) in Belgian colonial photography during the Belgian era in Congo. When a more critical reading questioned these narratives, my respondents used different arguments to legitimise social differentiation as well as sharing narratives of their good relationships with their 'boys' and other Congolese.



Photo 2: Six of the children posing in front of their house in Elisabethville for Beatrijs' Solemn Communion between 1951 and 1953, with the 'boy' standing behind them at the front door wearing an apron. Source: scanned from Gustaaf's photo album.



Photo 3: Six of the children posing in front of their house in Elisabethville for Beatrijs' Solemn Communion between 1951 and 1953, with the 'boy' this time standing closer behind them at the front door wearing an apron. Source: scanned from Gustaaf's photo album.

In photo 2 and 3 six of the children are standing outside in front of the doorstep of their third home in Elisabethville between 1951 and 1953. Samuel, the boy, is standing in the back of the photo in the door entrance, wearing an apron. In photo 2 the children are standing further away from the entrance, and thus further from Samuel, while they are standing closer in photo 3. It is unknown which photo was taken first. In the following interview segment, Jeanne makes similar arguments for these photographs as Beatrijs and Jef did with photo 1:

Jeanne: But he just came to look and he wasn't told to leave. He was allowed to join. He just came looking. He liked that.

Me: But now you say- because last time I received some answers like "ah yes, he is included because he was allowed to and that means he was part of the family."

Jeanne: Yes, I don't know that. I think it was coincidence. He just came looking.

Korneel: You don't have to look into it so deeply.

Jeanne: No

(personal communication, trans. & ed. by author, August 2, 2021)

With this interview segment already alluding to it, let's talk about some changes to their arguments of familiarity after some probing was done. The probe that I used was addressing how the boy was never included in group pictures with them the same way they were. He would not be positioned on the same spatial level as them and would usually wear working clothes instead of being dressed up like the family members. There are separate family photos of the 'boys' dressed up and posing with their own families. According to my respondents these were taken by my great-grandfather probably as a 'souvenir' to remember them and to give to the 'boys' as well. All respondents had at least some of those photos. Still, the inclusion of the 'boys' in group photos of our family is rare and there were no group photos where the 'boys' and/or their families were intentionally posing together with my family, positioned and dressed equally. Gustaaf and Maria responded by imagining how the boy

probably thought he didn't belong to the family and how he would've found it strange to be included equally in the photo. Gustaaf stated: "that wasn't the mentality back then. He himself would've found that very peculiar if he would've had to stand there with them." (personal communication, trans. & ed. by author, July 30, 2021). Beatrijs said the 'boys' were never really part of the family, but argued that maids in Belgium would also not be included in family pictures: "... it was like that here as well. Here, all girls who cleaned etc., do you think they were allowed in the photo with the family? Ah no." (personal communication, trans. & ed. by author, July 30, 2021). My respondents argued that the younger generations nowadays judge from a distance and don't empathise with the mentality of past times. The idea that the past cannot be judged by contemporary moral standards is a strategy also mentioned by Licata and Klein (2010, pp. 52–53) of Belgians dealing with collective guilt from their nation's colonial past. Though child labour and other poor labour conditions in Belgium at the time were definitely problematic as well in their own right, the validity of the comparison with Congolese labour under Belgian colonialism is objectionable for ignoring the essential roles of racism and colonial power imbalances. Moreover, the Congo Commission (Etambala et al., 2021, pp. 24–25) has shown how there were already moral objections and criticism against the colonial project at the time, both nationally (in Belgium and in Congo) and internationally. Lastly, while domestic helpers are indeed usually not included in Belgian family photographs of the past and present, it is unfortunate to use this argumentation only after first claiming that these photos are proof of a family-like relationship with the 'boys'. Despite admitting that the 'boys' were not really part of the family, Jef stated that "there was a serious bond, we cared about each other." (personal communication, trans. & ed. by author, July 30, 2021). In feedback to my thesis, Jeanne remarked rightfully how the photos used in these thesis are only of the period during which they lived in Elisabethville, where black and white people lived in separate neighbourhoods and interracial contact was rare. She stated that during their previous years in the villages, on the other hand, they lived more closely with the Congolese. However, the photos I was shown which included domestic helpers or other Congolese always pictured them in a serving position and never equally. These photos were also never used during the interviews to illustrate family-like relations. Though many anecdotes were told to illustrate amiable relationships between my family and the Congolese. Sadly, I am unable to delve deeper into these photographs within the limits of this thesis.

The following fragment of the first interview with Gustaaf and Maria summarizes the discussion above on the inclusion and position of the 'boys' in photo 1, and relates it to the topic of how much contact they were allowed to have with the boys and other Congolese.

Maria: They wanted to put that up big sized.

Gustaaf: Very big. And that way say that that boy wasn't allowed to be in that photo, outside, he had to stay inside. But that totally wasn't the case. He worked inside and came looking at what they were doing.

Maria: So it is about the attitude of the white people towards the black people. The black people actually didn't belong [short pause] and yet they did a little.

...

Maria: They belonged a little to the family.

Gustaaf: But we weren't to go talk to the boys though and the boys knew that as well, so.

Me: And that was because...?

...

Gustaaf: There you actually already see the differentiation between black and white. Yes, so those interactions with black people [shrugs shoulders and lets hands drop on table] that...

Me: But that wasn't allowed by your parents then?

Gustaaf: Yes... Oh it did occur. ... You did say something to them sometimes, but you weren't allowed to chat with them like that.

(personal communication, trans. & ed. by author, March 8, 2021)

3.2. Relations beyond the frame

There was some ambivalence within and between the different interviews relating to the nature of their contact with the boys, how much their parents allowed it and why. Gustaaf explained that they weren't allowed to have that much contact because their mother didn't want them to learn Lingala. This first reason for not being allowed to much interaction with Congolese was refuted by Jef. Jeanne even said they could speak Lingala. Moreover, Jef and Jeanne both refuted that their parents were against them having contact with their boys. Jeanne shared memories of them talking freely both to their boys and to other Congolese. Photos 4 and 5 were used by several respondents to show how they had a good relationship with the 'boys' and their families. In photo 4 a child of one of the 'boys' is standing between Beatrijs and her brother, Hendrik, who is holding the child's hand. Jeanne said that it didn't happen often that they played with the 'boys' children but that this photo shows that it was allowed. When Beatrijs and Jef also commented that they only sometimes (in exceptional occasions) played with this child, they added the explanation that black and white people shared a mutual fear of diseases and that there was a great cultural difference. Photo 5 shows Samuel standing in a doorway carrying Dirk, another brother, on his shoulder while the mother is standing in the room behind them. All three of them are smiling. Of this photo, Gustaaf said that it shows how they had a different attitude surrounding contact with their 'boys' compared to other colonist people. However, he remarked himself how the child is still small in this photo and how their mother is present. Many anecdotes were shared throughout the interviews to illustrate how they were good to their 'boys' and other Congolese people, and that they had good relationships with them. A thesis where children of ex-colonials were interviewed found that the urge to show that their 'boys' had a good life and that they had positive contact with Congolese was a common defence mechanism to prove how their family didn't participate in racism or exploitation. This could be in reaction to the focus on racism in the current public debate (Verschraegen, 2017, pp. 106–110). This is also in accordance with the strategy mentioned before, where people exempt their family from a negative collective memory by creating family memories where the behaviour of their ancestors is portrayed as benevolent (Welzer et al., 2015, as cited in Krogsgaard, 2017, p. 370).



Photo 4: when the daughter of one of the boys visited, Beatrijs and Hendrik would play with her. Source: Jeanne's USB.



Photo 5: Dirk on the shoulder of Samuel, the 'boy', with their mother in the back, all of them smiling. Source: scanned from Gustaaf's photo album.

However, Gustaaf added in his second interview that black and white people lived separately and that, perhaps, their parents wanted to protect them from learning 'uncivilized' manners:

Gustaaf: Our mom actually didn't want that [contact with Congolese].

Me: Your mom didn't want that, why?

Gustaaf: ... it's a whole different upbringing, another mentality also.

...

Me: and what do you mean with "different mentality"?

Gustaaf: That didn't exist there.

Me: What?

Maria: The white people there

Gustaaf: The white people like that with the black people was an entirely separate system. They also had a separate village, both of them.

Me: Ah, you mean the society had a different mentality?

Gustaaf: Yes

Me: And that's why your parents also didn't want you to mix with the Congolese?

Maria: Very likely also a little bit protecting.

Me: Protecting against what?

...

Gustaaf: Yes, you could sometimes see that, that women just peed behind a tree like that.

Yes, that's a whole different thing really.

Maria: Yes, they weren't civilized. [laughs]

Gustaaf: Yes but they also can't help that.

(personal communication, trans. & ed. by author, July 30, 2021)

From these arguments, a 'fear of going native' is apparent. This is a fear mostly of moral degeneracy to be avoided by not encouraging too close interactions with the natives who were considered 'uncivilized' (Echtner & Prasad, 2003, pp. 647–677). Beatrijs added another argument noting a difference in sexuality, which Jeanne in a later interview refuted, laughing perplexedly:

Jef: But it wasn't separated so that we wouldn't learn the language.

...

Beatrijs: Other reasons.

Maria: You also weren't allowed to play with the black people.

Jef: Was allowed.

Beatrijs: No, but that was also- you have to think, the black people for example also sexually matured faster and everything. Samuel also had that a little bit. He lurked once like that. Yes, when I was 14, yes, then I felt that. ... That [not allowing their white children to play with the black people] was for the safety of their children, of the household.

Jef: Yes, that was.

Beatrijs: They are different, yes. I mean, we were very different sexually, at that time definitely.

(personal communication, trans. & ed. by author, March 8, 2021)

These interview fragments reveal how hegemonic colonial discourse influenced the nature of my respondents' contact with their 'boys' as a child and how they are still used now as a strategy to validate it. The next section will discuss the hegemonic colonial discourse used to give meaning to their relations with the 'boys' and other Congolese.

3.3. Using colonial discourse to make sense

Statements like "another mentality", "they weren't civilized", "they are different", and "we were very different sexually" illustrate the othering of Congolese people versus Belgian people as a strategy to legitimize the differences and the nature of contact. This way of thinking can be explained by the concepts 'Orientalism' and 'the Western imaginary'. They are an example of how hegemony works by affecting society and culture on every level. Edward W. Said defined Orientalism as a Western institution for dealing with the Orient by creating and authorizing certain hegemonic discourse about it. It is based on an ontological and epistemological distinction between the West/Occident and the East/Orient, creating an imaginary mental construction of 'the Other'. The Occident uses Orientalism to define itself in opposition to and as superior to the Orient, and consequently to enable and justify Western imperial or colonial domination (Bahramitash, 2005, p. 224; Cere, 2016, pp. 131–132; Hight & Sampson, 2002, p. 2; Lee, 2005, p. 26; Said, 2003, pp. 1–3). The 'Western imaginary' divides a Western Self and a non-Western Other and tries to justify global power imbalances just like Orientalism, but encompasses all non-Western cultures (especially so called 'Third World' countries) more clearly rather than mostly the East (Caton & Santos, 2008, p. 8).

Ideas of civilization and primitivity were expressed by all my respondents, sometimes more latently and sometimes overtly, to justify colonisation and the segregation in the colony.

Beatrijs: It's very complicated actually. It's all not-, now they all say it so simplistically- It is way more complex than that. Most Belgians were there to do good actually, to civilise those people.

Jef: Yes but, yes, they were also there to live happily as well, so that means in rapport with- ... Civilisation is actually a pursuit of a better life. And if you see how dad still did research on cannibalism, that means that they also fought each other and cut off each other's hands, then you say "yes, we did bring something, brought improvement", like medically we brought a lot of improvement. ... Because I think that the wish of every human is to have a happy life. And a happy life requires a certain number of facets.

...

Beatrijs: They actually also have way more possibilities now. Now they can all study. It is for them-, for their self-development as a Congolese it is way-, have had a lot of benefits. They can study, they can-, they [short pause] yes, otherwise they would always in that small-

Jef: So where she puts question marks is then "that studying, is that actually necessary? Do we need to know more to be happy?" ... Are you in favour of leaving a people in their primitivity? Also let them perish?

(personal communication, trans. & ed. by author, March 8, 2021)

Here we see that the state of the Congolese before the Belgians arrived is called primitive and supposedly equals their suffering. The 'civilisation' of the Congolese by the Belgians is seen as an inherently good thing which would bring a happier life to Congolese who "were a victim of their ignorance", as stated by Jef (personal communication, trans. & ed. by author, July 30, 2021), and therefore needed to be educated. My respondents often emphasize positive achievements by the Belgian government, especially free education and healthcare. They use the ideas of the Belgian colonial's benevolence and noble purposes as strategies to deflect collective guilt. The Congo Commission report (Etambala et al., 2021, pp. 21–24) addresses the persistence of these views in its first chapters. Here, it is called the 'balance sheet approach', where the negatives of colonisation are weighed against the positives in an attempt to create 'nuance'. However, the commission debunks a lot of assumptions of this approach, which also came up in my interviews. For example, the assumption that violence would've also taken place without colonisation or that colonisers even reduced the violence that was already present. Or the emphasis on the construction of infrastructure and health care, while these were unequally distributed in the country and were mostly aimed at Belgian economic interests. Moreover, an accountant approach where the financial and economic costs and benefits are measured against each other is reductionist by ignoring direct and indirect cultural, social and psychological consequences.

Another way hegemony works, is by concealing the contingency of history and the present. Universal history theories place all of humankind in one teleological narrative of history on a continuum between a state of savage nature and (Western) civilized modernity. The notion of 'civilization' is then used to evaluate and order societies, and to differentiate between the Self and the Other (Bowden, 2021, pp. 162–167; Prasenjit, 2004, p. 1). In line with such theories, Jef asserts that without colonisation certain people would not have had contact with other civilisations resulting in them getting behind on the 'normal' evolution in the world:

Jef: Because you can also say that in principle colonising isn't good but if such a people wasn't colonised, wasn't brought into contact with another civilisation, then they would've evolved in their way and, I believe, even more behind on the normal evolution in the world.
(personal communication, trans. & ed. by author, July 30, 2021)

Many Westerners believe in a genealogy of the West where "ancient Greece begat Rome, Rome begat Christian Europe, Christian Europe begat the Renaissance, the Renaissance the Enlightenment, the Enlightenment political democracy and the industrial revolution" (Wolf, 1982, p. 5). Here, European history is pictured as a story of moral progression and success where the 'virtuous' successively win over the 'bad', and Western Europe is perceived as the front line of civilization. Therefore, in theories of universal history, the non-West shouldn't strive to further develop their own heritage (which are believed to represent earlier phases in the progress of humankind) but to Europeanise or Westernize in order to reach a state of civilization (Bowden, 2021, pp. 163–167; Iggers, 1982, p. 53). In the West, this 'civilisation' is generally seen as a good thing by definition. Since there is an implicit claim that only the civilized can know what it means to be civilized, the West has taken on the 'burden of civilisation', most notably in the form of the 'civilising missions' used as a justification for European imperialism from the 16th century on. The value and achievements of other societies are denied and considered stagnant, thus needing guidance from the west (Bowden, 2021, pp. 165–168; Pagden, 1988, p. 33; Prasenjit, 2004, p. 2). The next interview excerpt shows how Beatrijs uses the argument of the genealogy of the West, and how Maria, while noting how 'civilisation' is a problematic term, still shares a similar idea by saying 'we' are also still in the process of civilisation.

Maria: That's actually not entirely right either, "civilising others". We are not yet fully civilized ourselves.

Beatrijs: But we have been civilised by the Romans and all.

Maria: Yes yes, but we are still not civilised like it should be.

Jef: Yes, no, but it's all an evolution.

Beatrijs: [simultaneously] Ah of course not. That's all a process.

Bernard: That can still take long.

Beatrijs: Yes, that will never come, Maria, perfection.

(personal communication, trans. & ed. by author, March 8, 2021)

Jeanne and Korneel, on the other hand, questioned the meaning of 'civilisation':

Jeanne: But what is civilisation? We also think that. My father also said "then what is civilisation?" He found it a sign of real civilisation that they were already so far that they thought "There must be something. Now why does that man do that?" [referring to jurisdiction] Which they didn't think about yet here in Belgium. You were just convicted.

Korneel: But yes, the word 'civilisation' was assimilating. The black people had to become like us.

Jeanne: Yes, our culture was imposed.

(personal communication, trans. & ed. by author, August 2, 2021)

4. Conclusion

The interviews with my family members illustrate how looking at personal family photography can result in the negotiation of not only family memories but also of discourses in collective memory of Belgium's colonial past. While Licata and Klein (2010, pp. 50–51) found an intergenerational difference in their quantitative research where the younger generation in French-speaking Belgium

viewed the colonial past rather negatively while the older generation saw it more positively, there was an intragenerational disagreement within my family. It shows how controversial this past is not only within society at large or between generations, but also within the same generation and even within one family. Jeanne (who spent the most years in Congo out of the siblings) and her husband Korneel spoke rather negatively about colonialism in general, for example saying “colonising people is never good” (personal communication, trans. & ed. By author, August 2, 2021). Gustaaf (who spent most of his youth in Belgium) and his wife Maria expressed negative opinions about colonialism but at the same time said ambiguous things as well. Their siblings, Jef and Beatrijs, spoke more positively about colonialism and Leopold II, and focussed on perceived positive outcomes of Belgian colonialism. The views of Belgians on our colonial past are clearly more complex than a quantitative research can capture, especially when family histories and family identities are involved. This research was highly subjective due to the nature of memories (recreated intersubjectively and collaboratively between interviewer and interviewee (Abrams, 2010, p. 10)) and photography (which doesn’t simply carry meaning but is used to create meaning) and due to the positionality of the researcher (a white, Flemish, female, twentysomething, middle-class university student with anti-colonial views and biased towards decolonisation, who is interviewing her own family members). Though one might rightfully argue that interviewing my own family creates a high risk of bias, Apfelbaum (2010) wrote: “interpersonal proximity, in particular emotional proximity, is a necessary condition at the interpersonal level to make communication possible, to establish meaningful dialogue, one that helps subjects to process their experiences into living memory and facilitates the storage and retrieval, rather than the repression and forgetting, of their memories” (p. 88). Therefore, my subjective position served to enrich my findings. Moreover, this thesis didn’t aim to find ‘the truth’, one reality or one ‘correct’ way of remembering the Belgian Colonial past. The findings are particular for a few members of my family, thus not representative of the memories and views of my whole family or all Flemish or Belgian people. But they can help understand the differences in perspectives on Belgium’s colonial past within broader society. As Abrams (2010, pp. 16–22) suggests, the value of these personal accounts lie in their very subjectivity and in the linking of personal experiences with the broader sociocultural and historical context, the personal with the public, and the past with the present. I saw how my family tried to navigate their personal memories within current collective memories, through looking at family photographs and negotiating their meaning. When their initial narratives of a Congolese-Belgian family were questioned on the basis of composition, they resorted to using strategies named by Licata and Klein (2010, pp. 52–53) to deal with collective guilt. Conversations like these show how problematic hegemonic colonial discourse still persists, but also how they’re being negotiated and altered.

Jef made a remark saying “I think we react too quickly”, to which Beatrijs responded: “Because there was so much criticism.” Later in the same interview, Jef added “we have become suspicious.” (personal communication, trans. & ed. by author, July 30, 2021). It is clear that my respondents sense controversy surrounding the topic of Belgian colonialism. They seem to feel wary of how other people view them and respond or negotiate with this in mind. In her thesis, Verschraegen (2017, pp. 76 & 86) found how Flemish children of ex-colonials often feel like many narratives within broader society do not correspond to their experience of the colonial days. It is hard for them to hear of exposed wrongdoings and to receive criticism of a period that they consider as their happy childhood. Furthermore, many ex-colonials get the feeling that they are not accepted in society because of their past, that they don’t get the chance to share their memories and stories, and that they continuously need to defend themselves instead while everyone seems to already have decided their judgement anyway (Dembour, 2000, p. 204; Verschraegen, 2017, p. 39). During the writing of my thesis, I also experienced the controversiality surrounding the topic. When Marianne Hirsch writes about looking

at her family's photos, she speaks of herself being simultaneously looked at by her family (M. Hirsch, 1997, p. 9). While conducting my interviews and writing this thesis, I feel the same way. In my processing and writing of all the information I notice myself wanting to please both the rightfully critical views of Belgium's colonial past as well as all my family members with their different perspectives and memories. I contacted an organisation occupied with the decolonisation of a Flemish university, asking if they would be interested in providing feedback on my thesis. I wanted critical feedback from people outside my family who are educated on the topic of (de)colonisation and who could possibly make me aware of linguistic sensitivities during the writing of my thesis. They replied saying that they were willing to exchange thoughts, but also that they "understand that this is a personal project and that it is about your family and therefore sensitivities play a role, however if your thesis in any way justifies the colonisation or puts white fragility at the centre of attention (without criticism), we prefer not to cooperate" (personal communication, trans. by author, December 7, 2021). (In the end, after postponing the request for their feedback, I was not able to receive it in time for the thesis submission deadline. However, I will aim to receive their feedback before the thesis defence.) While I understand both my family members and the members of this organisation, immediate strong reactions may lead to avoidance of the topic, which stifles a conversation that is important to be had. It is important to keep addressing this past despite controversy, so we can continue to question and reassess the attitudes and actions of our society as a whole as well as our roles as individuals within smaller communities (like families or neighbourhoods) and within broader society. Photographs can help to open up and facilitate these sensitive conversations.

I suggest doing similar future research with more Belgian (both white and ethnically Congolese) and Congolese families to identify more patterns of negotiation. I want to encourage research on how to effectively navigate conversations on sensitive topics (more particularly our Belgian colonial past) both in personal and more public conversations, and how these can be facilitated in other ways besides using photographs.

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