

The visual, the accidental and the actual in the historiography of the fort of Shinkakasa, Democratic Republic of Congo, 1891- 1909

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Piecing together the fort of Shinkakasa

Boma, the capital of the Congo Free State (*État Indépendant du Congo* or, from now on, EIC), was nothing like Georges Moulaert, a 25-year-old lieutenant who had joined the EIC's *Force Publique* in 1902, had expected. The town he described in his memoirs, published in 1948 was a mosquito-ridden swamp crossed by earthen embankments which were lined by rickety wooden trading posts of Italian, Portuguese and – to Moulaert's surprise – even African fortune seekers.¹ Despite Moulaert's intentions "to objectively describe the reality he had witnessed", his lively cityscape reflected more of his own feelings than he accounted for.² For example, Moulaert's emphasis on the ricketiness of the 'wooden shacks' was probably directly related to his disdain towards the motley crew of coloured traders that inhabited them, just like the general lack of hygiene and infrastructure was probably inspired by his condescending view of the *Bomatraciens* with their "small bureaucratic mentality".³

Personal recollections, such as Moulaert's, are often key sources in the historiography of early colonial Congo. After all, with the archive of the EIC systematically destroyed by king Leopold II prior to the takeover by Belgium, they are often the only textual sources of the period that remain.⁴ Despite their high historical value, we have to be extremely critical when using these memoirs as a historical source. Although historians of Congo (and Africa in general) go to great lengths to read such writings 'against their grain' in an attempt to 'let the subaltern speak', the texts upon which many histories are based, remain colonial through and

through. As the many publications on the colonial archive suggest, historians are still struggling to find the adequate sources to complement this all too one-sided male, white (spatial) imaginary with other, subjugated, histories.⁵ The recent ‘visual turn’ towards colonial photography in the historiography of Africa can be understood as part of this attempt. Although these photographs are carefully constructed to convey a colonial message of success and modernity back home, they are more prone to contemporary reinterpretation. Or, as the visual historian Elizabeth Edwards phrases it, photographs are one of the means to “the gradual opening of spaces for ‘indigenous counter-narratives’, fragmenting the authoritative and monolithic power of ‘The Archive’”.⁶

Often, passages of memoirs nevertheless found their way into the historiography of Congo through a less critical prism. Moulaert’s recollections of the construction of the fort of Shinkakasa – he was sent to Congo to supervise its building site – is a case in point. As the first concrete construction site in the Belgian Congo (and probably one of the first in the whole of sub-Saharan Africa), a critical rereading of the fort’s construction phase could contest the narrative of export that all too often defines the little scholarly work on the history of construction in the non-West.⁷ Despite the destruction of the EIC archives, three ‘critical prisms’ through which we can reassess the construction of the fort of Shinkakasa, still exist.

The first is an extensive number of construction site pictures kept in the photographic collection of the Royal Museum of Central Africa (RMCA). Even though the intention of these photographs is obviously to showcase the success and advancement of the building site back home, a close reading from today’s point of view, allows us to reinterpret these images against the intended messages (conveyed by the original captions). Since these photographs, alongside Moulaert’s description, constitute the most important source for this paper, we decided to structure the text around five diptychs of photographs, allowing us to assess the friction within and between the different sources. The second is a set of miscellaneous archival documents that accidentally survived the Belgian king’s attempt to erase the history of his EIC; duplicates of official government files that were kept in personal archives, military correspondence and plans from the *Force Publique* archive or reworked original plans and technical documents that were used by the Belgian Congo’s Public Works Department.⁸ The challenge of piecing together all these bits and pieces into a coherent story, proved too difficult when contradictions in plans, descriptions and photographs, even prevented us from delineating the outline of the fort with certainty.⁹ As a result, we have to emphasize that the

aim of this visual essay is rather to raise questions than to present a conclusive paper on the construction of fort Shinkakasa. The third 'prism', which to some extent could bring an end to these diverging realities, is the building itself. To this day, the fort is standing on the banks of the Congo river and would surely contain a treasury of information to a construction historian. Unfortunately, as we experienced during a field trip to Congo in 2017, the access to military and penitentiary buildings in Congo is extremely difficult. Fort Shinkakasa, in 1960 converted into a feared prison for political prisoners, will surely remain off-limits in the current political climate of the DRC.¹⁰

“I want the biggest [gun] of them all!”¹¹
On Leopold II’s military ambitions in the EIC



Figure 1. “View of the river, taken from Shinkakasa.” 1896. Photo: De Roy. RMCA.

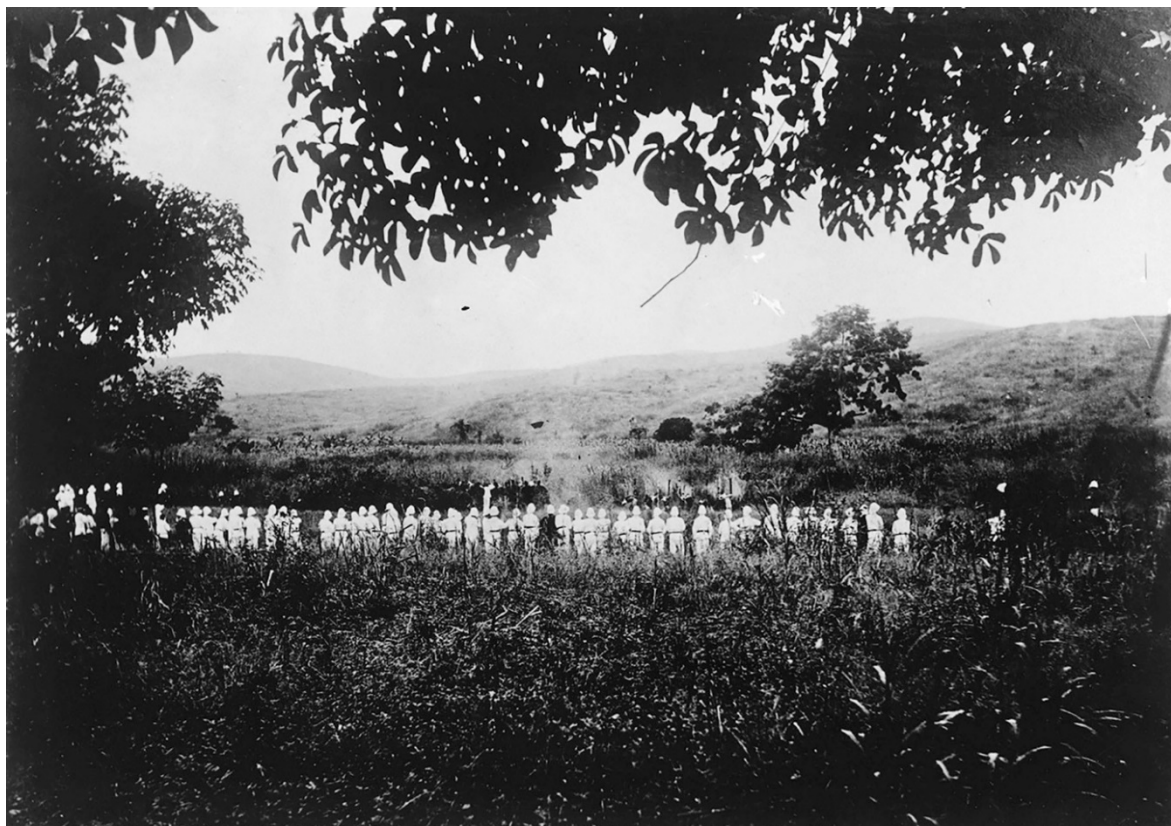


Figure 2. “Boma, 27 May 1900. Execution of 18 mutineers of fort Shinkakasa on the shooting range of Boma. On the foreground, the Whites of Boma, armed, overseeing the firing squad.” 1900. Photo: Habran and Van Iseghem. RMCA.

The erection, from 1891 onwards, of a fortress at Shinkakasa, located within a stone's throw of Boma responded to the increasing concern of the EIC's government about the protection of the capital against competing territorial claims (notably by the Portuguese, who had expanded their influence in the region for centuries and occupied present-day Angola, just across the Congo river). Nevertheless, the choice for the installation of a permanent coastal battery was not undisputed. Much against the advice of his military counsellors about static fortifications being obsolete in an age and continent of gunboat diplomacy, Belgian king Leopold II took a resolute stand and turned away from the temporary fieldworks that had characterised the EIC's fortification efforts up to this point. Holding on to the same doctrine of positional warfare that had (supposedly) turned Belgium into an impregnable fortress in previous decades¹², Leopold declared that he wanted "the biggest [gun] of them all".¹³ Soon after the instalment of eight large-calibre Krupp guns on an elevated terrain dominating the Congo estuary, it became evident that the initial wedge-shaped fort design by German gun manufacturer Krupp had been based upon inadequate topographical data, as it was dominated by a number of elevations lying behind the fort (named 'Hill A' and 'B'). This fact resulted in the decision to convert the open brick battery into a closed concrete fort. To this purpose, the Belgian corps of engineers detached military engineers Emile Wangermée and Adolphe Mahieu (author of a number of the selected construction site pictures) to Shinkakasa. Wangermée had earned his stripes as the designer of fort Suarlée nearby Namur, while working under the internationally celebrated Henri Alexis Brialmont, doyen of the Belgian fortification programme. Still, the problematic and unresolvable situation of the hills A and B remained a constant threat to the security of the fort, to the degree that at one point, a relocation of the fort to the island of Mateba in the Congo river was not only considered, but also thoroughly studied.¹⁴ Fig. 1, an image taken atop the dreaded Hill A, pictures the building site of the fort (at the far right) in its global surroundings and at the same time emphasises its vulnerability; at the horizon lies the capital of Boma, separated from the Portuguese territories only by the Congo river and Shinkakasa's guns. The military obsolescence of the entire endeavour is illustrated by a draft letter from the Ministry of Colonies, in reply to a request by the Belgian Royal Military Academy to include Shinkakasa in its courses on military engineering.¹⁵ The reply states that the shortcomings of the fort are all too well-known and that it would be unwise to include Shinkakasa as an example. A handwritten note on the same letter, in a manner typical to be found in military archives, further suggests not to send the written letter, but instead to convey the message to the academy informally and discretely – just in case.

Quickly caught up by ballistic and political evolutions, the fort never really served its purpose, even though its ‘biggest guns’ were quite successful in producing the noise necessary to dissuade future unwanted visitors to drop anchor before Boma.¹⁶ In fact, the only significant military use of the fort was in the course of 1900: during the final stages of its construction, the fort was the scene of a particularly painful incident, when Leopold’s own *Force Publique* rebelled against working conditions on the construction site and turned the guns towards the capital (Fig. 2).

“We were soldiers; they turned us into slaves!”¹⁷
On the sociology of the building site



Figure 3. “Construction at Shinkakasa.” 1898. Photo: Mahieu. RMCA.



Figure 4. “Construction of the fort of Shinkakasa. Formwork of gallery I-II.” 1899. Photo: Mahieu. RMCA.

According to Moulaert's description of the building site, the somewhat 200 soldiers of the artillery company that manned the initial brick battery of Shinkakasa, were also responsible for its subsequent transformation into a closed concrete fort, decided upon in 1893. The morning schedule of the soldiers involved shooting practice, while at noon they were placed as construction labourers under guidance of two European artisans, the Italian bricklayer Torti and an unnamed Belgian carpenter.¹⁸ As such, the building site was incorporated in the paternalist discourse that justified colonialism (and the violence it entailed) as a civilising mission. Nevertheless, through a close reading of the photographic diptych (Figs 3 and 4) we can start to formulate a hypothesis about the complex composition of the construction site's labour force and of the hierarchies that existed between different African and European actors, beyond the simple black-and-white depiction by Moulaert.

In Fig. 3, an African soldier, dressed in the official uniform of the *Force Publique*, is overlooking the harsh manual work of the labourers in the ditch. Among the labourers, a European overseer seems closely involved in the effort, pausing only to pose for the photograph. The author of the photograph, the captain Mahieu, who was supervising the construction site, obviously remains out of the picture. The most striking presence in the photograph however, are the two African characters looking towards the scene from a small distance. Both of them are seemingly dressed in the latest European fashion; besides the straw hat, the man in the front wears a costume, a scarf, shoes and a walking stick, the other – probably female – figure wears a dress. In the second picture (Fig. 4), a group of Africans is posing on top of the wooden formwork of the fort. Although barefoot, all of them are dressed in a European style and stand in sharp contrast with the manual labourers. Two out of the three Europeans in the picture – who are all looking directly into the camera – are wearing a helmet, the one with the hammer in his hand however, wears a simple cap.

We will attempt to evaluate the exact role of these characters and to contextualize these photographs by confronting them to prior research on the social history of the region and to Moulaert's own description of the Shinkakasa uprising in an annex to his memoirs; at several takes contradictory to what he writes earlier about the fort's construction.¹⁹ First, we have to understand the difficulties the EIC was facing in the recruitment of labour. The Bas-Congo region, already strongly depopulated as a result from an epidemic of sleeping sickness²⁰, was further strained at the end of the 19th century by a mass migration of people fleeing from the state's forced recruitment. In particular the humiliating *service de portage*²¹ and the

murderous conditions that reigned on the construction site of the railway between Matadi and Léopoldville²², turned the state recruiters of the Public Works into one of the most feared proponents of Leopold's colonial empire. As such, the EIC had serious difficulties to raise the adequate workforce for Shinkakasa. A first remedy was to involve the soldiers of the *Force Publique* in the manual labour; both in a direct way by incorporating construction duties into the soldiers' daily schedule, and in an indirect way, by recruiting worker-soldiers on the army payroll. Far more than other colonial armies in Africa, the *Force Publique* relied on indigenous recruits, whose potential both as soldiers and workers was acknowledged by EIC officials.²³ A second solution was to call in the help of local chiefs in the (forced) recruitment of non-military workers in the surrounding villages. These chiefs were well compensated for their services to the state, with some of them even living in villas envied by low-ranked colonials.²⁴ The well-dressed figures (Fig. 4), might be part of this African 'high-society'. The building site's social stratification is even more complex when we take into account that soldiers were deliberately recruited from all over Congo, and that often a combination of official wives, concubines and children travelled along.²⁵

That such a complex society led to certain frictions is clear from the events during the 1900 uprising. The worker-soldiers – some were the instigators of riots elsewhere in the EIC, brought to Shinkakasa for rehabilitation – became increasingly dissatisfied with their social position compared to the actual soldiers of the *Force Publique*. When they were forced to prolong their term for another seven-year period, the situation became untenable and the worker-soldiers took over the fort. Among the wounded of the mutiny was the Spanish bricklayer Estevez, not mentioned by Moulaert in his memoirs up to this point. Probably, Estevez worked as a craftsman in Boma, and he might even have had his own African employees. This could explain the well-trained African carpenters in Fig. 5 and the presence of many non-military European craftsmen in several photographs. As such, Moulaert's omission from his memoirs of these low-ranking European labourers probably fits in the difficult position of the poor whites within a colonial context.²⁶

“Forbidden entrance.”
On the local and the imported

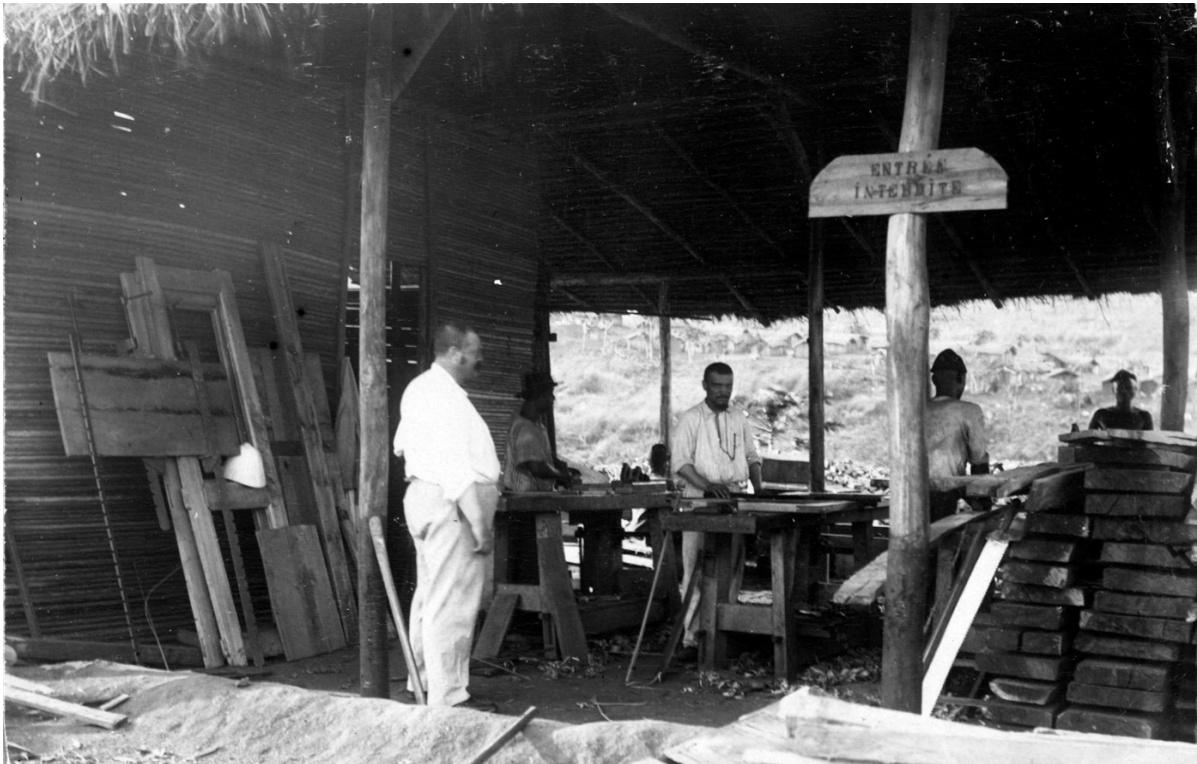


Figure 5. “Carpenter’s workshop at fort Shinkakasa.” [The sign reads: “Forbidden entrance”] Date unknown. Photo: Mahieu. RMCA.



Figure 6. “Constructions at Shinkakasa. Officers’ mess.” 1896. Photo: De Roy. RMCA.

Throughout the colonial period, the government holds a complex position towards local building industries and techniques; at once constantly downplaying them as being ‘non-durable’ yet surreptitiously having to rely on them in the absence of affordable or workable alternatives. In the conception of the fort of Shinkakasa, one can discern a similar disdain about local materials. Take, for example, the wood used in the fort. Both from photographs (Fig. 5) and from the day-to-day-tasks of the African carpenters, their ability to execute even the most difficult assignments with ease is evident (including the manufacturing of tool handles or the reparation of wheelbarrows).²⁷ Yet, notwithstanding the cost savings that the use of locally produced planks for the concrete’s formwork could have offered, all timber for shuttering was imported from Belgium and local wood as only used for scaffolding and temporary supports. A similar story can be told about the bricks, the cement and – early in the construction – even the rocks, which were all imported from Belgium, despite the production of local alternatives, which were well-known to the colonials.²⁸ Both the colonial disdain *vis-à-vis* these local building materials and the economy they would nevertheless entail for building in the colony, is literally reflected in the budget estimations of the fort’s construction, where only imported materials are taken into account.

This obsession with imported materials is all the more striking when we look closer at the images that are juxtaposed here. In both pictures, we can see how colonials were forced to use local building materials to construct the roofs over their heads, in sharp contrast with the fort, erected in the material of the future; concrete. In that respect, the narrative of the construction of the officers’ mess is particularly telling.²⁹ The mess was built in 1893 using bricks that were imported from Boom in Belgium. Its roof, brick vaulting topped with a layer of concrete, doubled its potential use as a small redoubt. From Fig. 6, we can see that by 1896, the mess was covered with an indigenous-style pitched roof. Why this roof was added remains unclear. Reports on serious leaks in the brick roof structure in 1910 however, lead us to think that a similar issue might have arisen in 1896 already. The eventual solution in 1910, to cover the whole roof with Ruberoid sheeting imported from Europe, confirms the distrust in local building techniques that were relied on earlier.

**“A vast workplace of concrete and excavation.”³⁰
On the manual, the mechanical and military efficiency**



Figure 7. “SS ‘Akassa’ unloading gravel at Shinkakasa.” Date unknown. Photo: Shanu. RMCA.

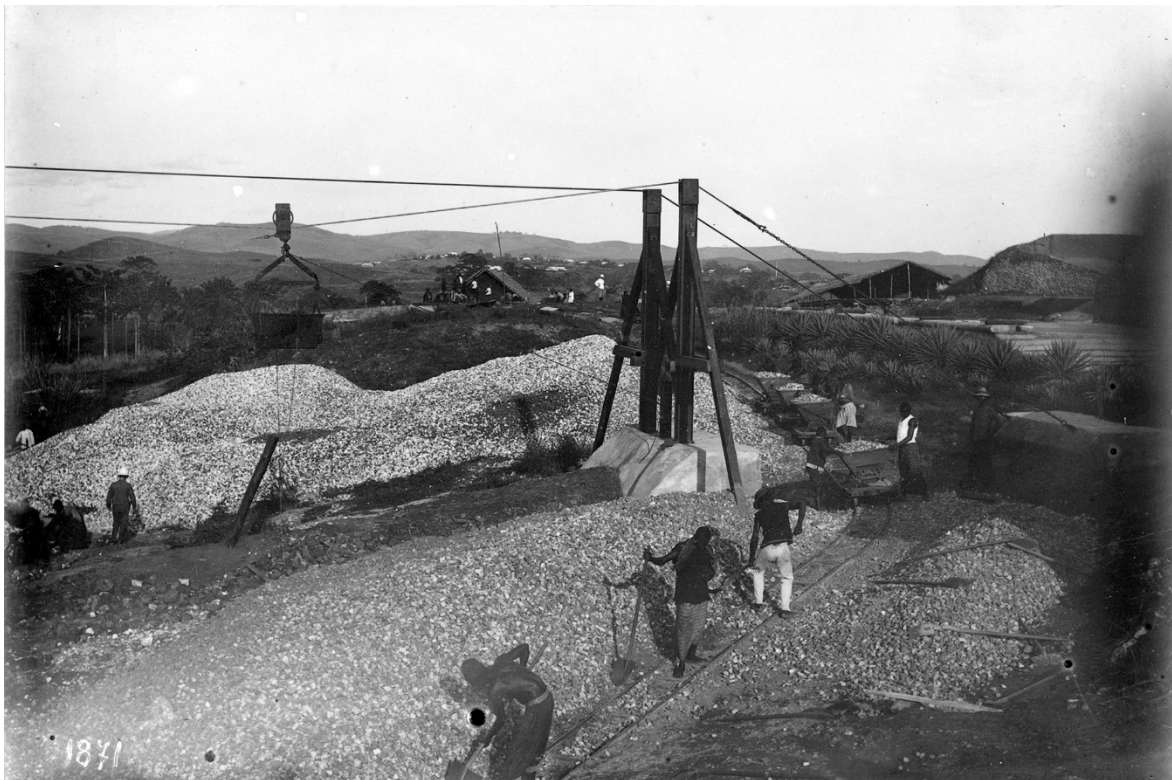


Figure 8. “C.O.F. Construction of fort Shinkakasa.” 1871. Photo: Schievers. RMCA.

Drawing upon military building expertise in the metropole, the construction of the fort relied on rather advanced site equipment; an astonishing, yet at the same time logical feat, considering the military engineering background of some the involved protagonists. A purpose-built pier (Fig. 7) allowed for the mooring of larger steamers (but also of small canoes, as Moulaert recalls) and a dredger capable of extracting sand from the river to mix into the concrete.³¹ From the pier, materials were dispatched to the artisans' workshops and to different parts of the building site through a network of manually operated narrow-gauge Decauville railroads. The construction site even disposed of an aerial cableway (Fig. 8), quite identical to an example used in the construction of the Malonne fort near Namur.³² As a whole, the advanced equipment of the building site at Shinkakasa expresses the military interest in construction efficiency, and some of the surviving photographs go to great lengths to establish this image. Even if its most renown proponent Frederick Winslow Taylor would not apply principles of scientific management on the organisation of the construction site before 1905, clearly building efficiency techniques had always captured the imagination of the military.³³

Yet, Figs 7 and 8, upon closer look, also hint towards the failure of such an efficiency-obsessed approach in the context of the colonial building site, and offer a more nuanced reading. One wonders, for instance, why the Decauville track in Fig. 7 is not used to unload and transport boulders from the steamer and why the builders of the fort feel the necessity to revert to head-carrying. In this context, archival materials such as the detailed monthly reports on the spending of man-hours, reveal a glimpse of the problems that needed to be tackled under the harsh working conditions at Shinkakasa, among them continuous repair jobs and maintenance of the narrow-gauge track, its wagons, wooden handles for tools and other construction site equipment.³⁴ Nevertheless, Fig. 7, credited to the intriguing figure of Herzekiah Andrew Shanu (a Nigeria-born entrepreneur, serviceman of the EIC and owner of a nearby small factory which was looted during the 1900 rebellion), was later included in a widely published series of postcards on the environment of Boma; pictures which significantly contributed to the constructed image of the colony in the metropole.³⁵ In a similar fashion, Fig. 8 shows the aerial cableway and the Decauville track in full operation, at the same time contrasting them with the piles of gravel, of which we know from other pictures in the RMCA archives and from the descriptions by Moulaert that it was, at least partly, created from the manual grinding of rocks that had been collected from the terrain or excavated from the main ditch of the fort and the ground levelling works.³⁶

“We talk on the phone to Boma.”³⁷
On the remote and the improvised



Figure 9. “Works at fort Shinkakasa.” Author and date unknown. RMCA.



Figure 10. “Pigeon loft in Shinkakasa.” 1899. Photo: Mahieu. RMCA.

As we have seen, the pier below the fort constituted the only connection between the building site at Shinkakasa, the capital and the metropole for quite some time. In his memoirs, Moulaert recalls that a road between Boma and Shinkakasa was built only in 1904. The stretch of roughly three kilometres of various terrain (covering swamps, rivers and rocky area) served as a test case to determine the overall costs of road construction for the EIC (in the end calculated on 7,000 francs per kilometre on average). This happened at a time when transport relied mainly on *service de portage* and experiments were underway to establish road and rail networks in the region, in an attempt to make the transport system less dependent on indigenous labour and terrain knowledge.³⁸ In addition, Moulaert proposed a standardised scheme for a bridge in timber frames and steel cables, capable of spanning between 15 and 20 metres.³⁹ Fig. 9 shows exactly this type of improvised bridge on the building site, crossing the main ditch of the fort and carrying the Decauville track and its man-powered wagons to accommodate the concrete casting of the main body of the work.

The continuous *va-et-vient* of personnel, materials and intelligence between the colony and the homeland, as well as the communications within the EIC's military tailored hierarchy itself, generated a considerable bulk of correspondence, which was subsequently organised according to military reporting principles and means of transmission.⁴⁰ A 1911 report of the *Comité d'Etudes pour l'examen de la défense du Bas-Congo* offers an overview and assessment of the different modes of military communication transmission at disposal.⁴¹ The report admits the impossibility to establish an intelligence network similar to the one existing in Belgium, and promotes simplicity and reliability as key requirements for communications with and within the colony. Much hope was placed in wireless telegraphy, which was being installed in the EIC at the moment; an endeavour to which both Moulaert and Wangermée contributed considerably. But, as the report of the *Comité d'Etudes* remarks, the technology was still in its infancy and subject to technical issues and interruptions caused by the climate, the vast distances and the topographical conditions. As it was, a first connection between Boma and Brussels would not be established before 1914.⁴² An overground fixed telephone line existed between Boma and Matadi; as well as a local telephone network connecting the fort's fire control station to the main guns and the advanced observation post on Hill A. During exercises, these fixed telephone lines proved unreliable in case of military events; the humidity and constant threat of overgrowing made the system sensitive to rust and short-circuiting.⁴³ The members of the *Comité d'Etudes* therefore reverted to the less technological solution of a pigeon postal service as primary means for reliable transmission in the event of

war. As it was, Shinkakasa disposed of a military pigeon loft (Fig. 10), strategically attached to the officers' mess. The report concluded that a network of pigeon postal services within a 100-kilometre radius around the capital "would be able to transmit messages, under all circumstances, to Boma, maintaining a 24-hour advantage to the enemy at least".⁴⁴

Together, both photographs demonstrate the failure of top-down military planning and engineering in the colonial context. Both in terms of building site logistics and everyday communication, the builders of Shinkakasa were forced to abandon cutting-edge technological solutions and textbook military procedures in favour of slower and low-tech answers, relying on a combination of improvisational skills and indigenous knowhow. As white officers needed to forget what they had learned in Belgian staff-college and were habituated to local fighting tactics, they were also required to become accustomed to local knowledge on a wide range of very diverse practical matters, of which building practice was just one.⁴⁵

More questions than answers?

The reading of Shinkakasa's construction photographs reveals a far more complex and layered social microcosm, that goes into the simplistic black-and-white hierarchy that is generally accepted in the context of the colonial building site. The juxtaposition of the photographs to Moulaert's description of the fort's construction and other archival fragments supports an alternative narrative, from which the one-directional knowledge transfer from white military personnel to the unskilled native labourer can start to be questioned at least.

At the same time the photographs affirm the difficulties encountered at a remote and ill-connected colonial construction site with respect to building logistics and transport of imported materials, both from the metropole to the colony as on the building site itself. Clearly, the failure of top-down military planning towards design and construction of the fort adds to the degree of improvisation. This self-reliance, can also be seen in the (albeit reluctant) adoption of local materials and building techniques. Although neglected in the fort's historiography, notably in Moulaert's own depictions, some of the juxtaposed pictures, when compared to the archival sources, reveal precisely this dependence on indigenous knowledge, contesting the feeble narrative of European 'modernity' transposed to the colony.

Even if such an alternative story, due to the diverse, dispersed, fragmented and accidental nature of its archival sources is necessarily interpretative, the case of Shinkakasa is instrumental in raising exactly those questions that are omitted from history. As a result, this visual essay is far from conclusive. More than providing definitive answers, it adds new questions towards building intricacies on the colonial construction site.

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- ⁴⁵ Gann, *The Rulers of Belgian Africa*, (Note 4) pp.53-54, pp.81-82.