Early Colonial Scientific Expeditions, 1902-1915

Upon taking up the task of colonizing the Congo, King Leopold II forbade all Europeans except his agents and a few Belgian missionaries to enter the region. By about 1900, when Leopold’s forces had pacified a route to the northeast along the Uele River, missionaries and scientific expeditions began to enter the area. After 1902 the region was of scientific interest because of the discovery of the okapi, a reclusive mammal living in the Ituri forest. Not until after the Belgian takeover of the Congo in 1908, however, could private traders operate legally in the region.

In 1902, Leopold gave five French scientists permission to descend the river under the leadership of Viscount Robert du Bourg de Bozas. The published account of this French group mentions that in Niangara they encountered the “Mission Royant,” a Free State expedition looking for gold and copper, consisting of Captain Royant, two prospectors, a geologist, and a doctor (du Bourg de Bozas 1906, 408). Four years later, two private British adventurer/naturalists, G.B. Gosling (a zoologist) and Boyd Alexander (an ornithologist), went up the Uele while traveling from the Niger River to the Nile.

The accounts of the British and French expeditions mark a new era in writing on the Uele region because they include few comments on the Mangbetu or Azande. Alexander, who wrote the report of the British expedition, was a sportsman and amateur naturalist who focused almost entirely on animals and how they were collected. Even when entertained royally by Chief Okondo, he had only a few comments on the event: “the biggest town I have seen in the Welle [Uele] region. The huts are round and well-built, and the walls of many are decorated with patterns in black and white; they encircle a space which must be quite 300 yards across” (Alexander 1907, 282).

The report of the French mission offers little in the way of observation about local peoples, but by this time the style of writing about Africa had changed, with government administrative and military reports now being distinguished from both travelogues and scientific observations. Du Bourg de Bozas, the mission head and ethnographer, died on the Uele and left no observations. His comrades were occupied with his death and with local troubles while in the region, for the commander of the post at Niangara had recently been murdered by a local chief. Only in the epilogue does the anonymous author (probably M. Didier) take the liberty to make comments – on the Belgian administration.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, the Uele region became more accessible to European civilians. The worst abuses of the rubber and ivory taxes declined and martial law was lifted in many areas. Even before the transfer of the Congo from King Leopold to Belgium in 1908, two important scientific expeditions were given permission to do major work in the Uele region: a German expedition organized by Duke Adolf Friedrich von Mecklenburg (1907-9) and the American Museum of Natural History expedition led by Herbert Lang (1909-15). The German Central African Expedition included more than ten professionals sent by academic and scientific institutions to explore the Western Rift lake region. Jan Czekanowski, a Polish anthropologist who was sponsored by the Königlichen Museum für Volkerkunde in Berlin, was the only member to...
visit the Uele region. In 1924, Czekanowski published a large volume on the history and culture of the Mangbetu, Meje, forest Azande, Barambo, Bangba, Mamvu, Madi, Bua, Budu, Mangbele, and other Uele peoples. Czekanowski’s work, written for a professional, rather than a popular, audience, is typical of a new genre of writing that aimed at precise ethnographic description and scientific objectivity. In Forschungen im Nil-Kongo-Zwischengebiet he did not comment on the relative “progress” of the Mangbetu.

When Belgium acquired the Congo in 1908, governmental agencies recruited colonial officers to collect ethnographic information that would be of potential use to the administration. Armand Hutereau, a lieutenant in the Congo army, had begun research in the region under King Leopold and by 1909 had published the first systematic ethnographic work on the Mangbetu, Azande, and other peoples of the northeast, based on research done in 1907 (Hutereau 1909). As a result of this study, King Albert appointed Hutereau as the commander of a Belgian ethnographic expedition to the Uele and Ubangi regions (1911-13). The mission was plagued by a number of problems, but the ethnographic and historical work conducted by Hutereau himself resulted in a book that appeared posthumously, probably in 1922. He also took photographs, made wax-roll recordings of music, and collected objects for the Musee royal du Congo belge (now the Musee royal de l’Afrique centrale), which King Leopold had established outside Brussels in Tervuren. Hutereau’s ethnographic collection covers the entire Uele and Ubangi regions.

Hutereau’s published writing is evidence of the same shift in tone: it attempts to be purely descriptive and objective. Prejudices – such as certainty about precolonial Mangbetu cannibal feasts – do creep into his texts, but only rarely (e.g., [1922], 309). However, in the more personal introduction to his 1922 work, Hutereau states that precolonial struggles had brought the peoples of the Uele to abandon all scruples and all human sentiment. In his view, while the Azande were ascending to new political heights by furnishing chiefs to the colonizer to be installed over other peoples, the Mangbetu were left with a mere memory of their former glory ([1922], 12). In Hutereau’s view the “cruel experience” of the Nile trader caravans ([1922], 1-4) was corrected only when the Belgians brought progress in the form of peace, roads, settlement along roads and in urban centers, houses instead of huts, new food plants, cloth instead of barkcloth, and confidence that work would produce profit. Hutereau suggested that social change was already significant. He claimed that the population along the roads had undergone such progress by 1913 that one had to go to the “interior” to find “a few family groups who still lived as in the past.” And even in such remote corners of the region, Hutereau wrote, things had sufficiently changed that only by chance would a European observer discover the real past, one characterized by unspecified dark superstitions and practices. To Hutereau, the reason that only a few elders still engaged in such practices was because the Belgians executed those found guilty of them, and perhaps because humanitarian sentiments had newly entered into native souls ([1922], 5-6)