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# Leopard-men of the Congo in literature and popular imagination

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The Anyoto leopard-men, a society from eastern Congo, operated between approximately 1890 and 1935. Until now the history of the leopard-men has inspired representations of Central Africa as a barbaric and disorderly place, and the idea that a secret association of men attacked innocent people and ate their limbs remains dominant in western culture. Since the early 20th century this image has been rather faithfully perpetuated in colonial ethnography and official reports and in popular representations of Africa. The Anyoto costumes in the collection of the Royal Museum for Central Africa have in particular inspired leopard-men iconography in western sources until today. There are certain striking similarities between western fictional literature on the Anyoto society and the factual sources, such as eyewitness reports from colonists and missionaries. Both share the historically rooted and culturally-specific representation of people from outside their own areas. In Europe there has been a long tradition of representing heathens and non-Europeans as being half man, half beast and behaving like animals, including eating their own species. Such cultural predispositions have stood in the way of understanding the real purposes of this society. Anyoto men's activities were a way of maintaining local power relations, performing indigenous justice in secret and circumventing colonial government control. **Key words:** Anyoto, colonialism, representation, resistance.

## Introduction

Leopard-men societies existed in several parts of Africa.<sup>1</sup> The Anyoto society operated in the eastern Congo where they attacked and murdered people, leaving traces, which gave the impression that leopards attacked their victims. "Anyoto" was the local term for this society. Different authors mention that the word derives from the word "nyoto" which means "to scratch" without specifying whether the language of origin is Swahili or Kibali. So far no linguistic proof has been found in either language to confirm this. In several European sources at the time the term "leopard men" (French: *hommes-léopard*, German: *Leopardenmenschen*, Dutch: *luipaardmannen*) was generally used together with the term "Anyoto" (or Anyota; Aniot, Aniota) to designate this society in the east of the Congo. Both terms are used interchangeably until today by westerners and Congolese. It seems that from its origin the term "leopard men" in European sources was meant to be descriptive and did not necessarily have more negative connotations than "Anyoto." Both terms will be used in this article.

The Anyoto society consisted of different chapters, which were generally controlled by village chiefs. In this article I generally write about the Anyoto society in singular as the different chapters, which at times were rivals, seemed to be inter-linked in a larger network. It was particularly active in the 1920s and 1930s. In the colonial archives in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belgium, most of the documentation and reports on this society are classified under the heading *Sectes et Associations Subversives* (Sects and Subversive Organizations). Official investigations led to the execution of members but the colonial authorities never managed to come to grips with this society before its stopped operations in the 1930s. The colonial authorities' prosecutions and these executions probably caused the Anyoto to end their activities.

Ever since the first reports on the society's activities, leopard-men have played a prominent role in European and American popular literature and representations of Africa. Through the images of the leopard-men, the Congo and Africa were represented as barbaric, uncivilized places, characterised by cannibalism and brutal murders. These stereotypes have stood in the way of understanding the real purposes of this society. In recent years, particularly in Belgium, the continued use of leopard-men in images of Africa has caused polemical reactions among academics and Congolese concerned with the representation of Africa. The leopard-men images contribute to stereotypical and racist representations, with the violent aspects of past African societies being overemphasized in a similar way as contemporary war and violence in Africa is overemphasized. Such stereotypes suggest that there is a historical and cultural predestination for war and violence in Africa.

In Belgium the best-known example of the representation of leopard-men is the comic *Tintin au Congo* (*Tintin in the Congo*) by Hergé, first published in serialised form in 1931 and later adapted and renamed *Tintin en Afrique* (*Tintin in Africa*). Leopard-men are the adversaries of the comic's hero Tintin. Critiques of the representation in this comic are not really taken seriously by many in public opinion and are sometimes ridiculed on public discussion fora.<sup>2</sup>

A representation of leopard-men, which is not generally known, is the sculpture group in one of the large exhibition halls of the Royal Museum of Central Africa, Tervuren, commissioned by the Belgium Ministry of Colonies from artist Paul Wisaert and acquired by the museum in 1913. The costume originally worn by the leopard-man figure on the photograph is part of the ethnographic collection and was acquired between 1890 and 1908 by Commander Charles Delhaise of the *Force Publique*. The original costume is now replaced by a replica. In 2003 the museum hosted an exhibition of the work of the Congolese painter Chéri Samba. A painting called *Musée Royal de l'Afrique centrale. Réorganisation* (Royal Museum for Central Africa. Reorganisation), especially produced for this exhibition represented Congolese people removing the sculpture group from the museum. Recently the painting was displayed next to the sculpture. In 2003 the label documenting the sculpture group was



Paul Wissaert, *L'homme-léopard*, Commissioned by the Ministry of Colonies for the RMCA, 1913, Sofam © A.371, collection RMCA Tervuren; photographer unknown.

amended to stress the significance of leopard-men societies as a reaction against colonial oppression. In the wake of postcolonial and subaltern studies there has been a tendency to place the onus for the activities of such societies on colonialism and to shed a somewhat milder light on the violent reactions of colonized people.

### **Interpretation of the sources**

What strikes me when reading some of the western fictional literature on Anyoto societies are the quite obvious similarities to the reports of colonists and missionaries who, at different places and times, were confronted directly or indirectly with members or victims of the Anyoto society. These similarities can be attributed to their being rooted in western (American or European) narrative traditions and sharing historically rooted and culturally specific representations and stereotypes of others in general, and of Africa in particular. In the course of this article I will point out particular similarities and divergences between the fictional and factual writings on the Anyoto.



Chéri Samba, Musée Royal de l'Afrique centrale. *Réorganisation*, oil on canvas, 104 x 134 cm, 2002, RMCA Tervuren © A.3865, collection RMCA Tervuren; photo J.-M. Vandyck, RMCA Tervuren ©

### *Factual sources*

Factual sources are dated mostly between the 1920s and 1950s, during which time the Anyoto society was much discussed in articles in colonial and missionary journals and ethnographic writings, in unpublished official reports and in the popular press. The majority of the articles were written between 1920 and 1936.

The Swedish researcher Birger Lindskog (1954: 179) wrote a comparative study of reports on leopard-men societies throughout Africa in the 1950s, highlighting the little variation among such reports. This he attributed to the stereotyping of the understanding of the leopard-men societies among westerners, to the extent that it is hard to distinguish elements derived from eyewitness reports and those from the questioning of the accused and their victims on the one hand, and elements of colonial imagination on the other. The authors do not always quote their sources and they constantly take over aspects from each other's stories. Furthermore, one can assume that much of what is written is influenced by hearsay or oral stories circulating about the society. These reports blended into a consensus, filtered through the lenses of their authors. The territorial agent Bouccin, whom I will refer to later, is one of the few

colonial administrators who really did a thorough investigation and interrogated one of the main Anyoto chiefs known as Mbako, about their practices.

In general, these sources on the Anyoto reveal a quest to understand, unmask and dismantle a society that seems to remain untouchable despite large-scale official investigations and continued public execution of its members. Some authors are personally confronted by the society through their work and involved themselves in official investigations (see for example Absil 1934, Bouccin 1935, Libois 1936, Christen 1937). Others who do not deal with the society directly nevertheless feel concerned and in their reports they make strategic suggestions about how to destroy it (see for example Jadot 1928, Vindevoghel 1930, Moeller 1936). While there is a general consensus of ideas on the society in colonial ethnography and official reports, their authors' hypotheses as to the origin, organisation and purposes of the Anyoto are often contradictory. This adds up to the elusive and mysterious impression that the Anyoto leaves on western observers, a mystery that is used by some authors, especially journalists, to captivate their readers.

### *Fictional literature*

The fictional sources are not intrinsically linked to the time-span during which the society existed. The leopard-men theme has started leading its own life, disconnected from its historical context, in fictional literature and contemporary popular cultural phenomena like toys and Internet games. In fact, there are not that many examples of leopard-men representations in fictional literature, but they have certainly had a significant impact on popular representations of Africa until today.

In this article, I will focus particularly on the novel *Tarzan and the Leopard Man* by Edgar Rice Burroughs, the author of the Tarzan series. This novel is the most important predecessor of leopard-men stories and popular representations worldwide. *Tarzan and the Leopard Men* was also published in 1935 around the time that one of the most important trials against Anyoto chiefs was being carried out in the Congo. The fact that Tarzan stories were very popular and translated into many languages must have had an impact on the dissemination of the Anyoto theme in literature. In 1946 the film *Tarzan and the Leopard Woman* appeared, also based on this story.

This novel and others of its kind are adventure stories in which the Anyoto society is the evil adversary of the protagonist. In it the warrior Orlando finds Tarzan, who is suffering from amnesia, and his monkey N'kima in the forest and believes Tarzan to be his guardian spirit. Because of a conflict in Orlando's village community, Orlando and Tarzan are confronted by the leopard-men, an evil sect worshipping a speaking leopard and practising cannibalism.

In a parallel storyline, American ivory hunter, Old Timer, meets the young girl Kali Bwana (Jessy Jerome) looking for her brother who had gone missing in the jungle. The girl is seized by the leopard-men and forced to serve as their high priest-



ess. Later she is abducted by one of the leopard-men to become his wife. When this man hides her in a "Pygmy" village she risks being eaten by the local population. Old Timer manages to rescue her with the help of Tarzan.

Another novel of this kind is *La Griffe du Léopard* (The claw of the leopard) by André Villers published in 1950.<sup>3</sup> This novel won the Victor Rossel prize in 1950, which is one of the bigger literary prizes in Belgium. The story is based on autobiographic details of the author, who had been a journalist working in the Congo. A journalist goes to the Congo to write a story about the Anyoto society. He meets a girl who is looking for her missing father who has been declared dead, probably abducted by the Anyoto. The girl joins forces with the journalist and he has to protect her during their subsequent trip.

The stories by Burroughs and Villers (and also the *Tintin* comic) remain quite closely linked to the original Anyoto context as an eastern Congolese colonial society. More generally, popular cultural expressions involving leopard-men do not always have a direct link with Africa even though the leopard man figure, representing evil, remains at least vaguely associated with Africa. This is the case, for example in the novel *Black Alibi* (1942) by Cornell Woolrich on which the film *The Leopard Man* (1943) by Jacques Tourneur was based. Even though no mention is made of Africa in this novel, there is a continuous reference to the colour "black". In this story, situated in Nevada, USA, the leopard-man is a serial killer. He is described as "something black" and he is associated with the vengeance of an Indian (non-white) population for a past wrong. This is a similar theme to that in Burroughs's novel.

### *A comparison of the factual and fictional writings*

I will discuss the following stereotypes, namely the white male crusade against a society that represents evil, the wildness and animal-like nature of Africans and the nature of African religious experience. There appear to be similarities in factual and fictional writings on the stereotypical perceptions of Africans and their culture. However, there are also some differences: the sexual lives of Africans seem to be almost absent from missionary and colonist's reports, but "the promiscuity of the African" features prominently as a theme in the fictional literature I have investigated.

#### *The white male crusade against a society that represents evil*

Like the fictional stories, the reports of colonisers and missionaries are essentially stories in which the author is trying to contribute to the elimination of the Anyoto society. Through investigation and ethnographic study, colonial administrators try to find out how the society works and what can be done about it. In an article in *L'Illustration Congolaise* in 1936, the District Commissioner of Stanleyville, Libois states that the authorities have harmed the society greatly by enforcing a public celebration of the ceremonies of the *mambela*, a secret society restricted to men, to which the

Anyoto was linked. In this way the secrets of the society were revealed to women and children. District Commissioner Absil at Irumu writes in an administrative note in October 1934 that there are several possible ways to eliminate the Anyoto. Firstly, he suggests a peaceful way by trying to settle all the local disputes, but also envisages military repression. At times a certain frustration can be noticed in the personal reports, as fighting the Anyoto was not an obvious task. More generally, their own accomplishments are accentuated and also exaggerated. This includes accounts by missionaries who describe how, before executions took place, the condemned were initiated into the Christian faith and baptized in prison. As shown in the following quote, authors narrate in the third person to represent the category of people for whom they stand. Father Joseph Christen (1936: 29–30) from the *Prêtres du Sacré-Coeur, Stanleyville*, writes about “the missionary” – this seems to make self-glorification somewhat more modest and acceptable:

More than once appears in front of us, modest and discreet, the silhouette of the missionary: [...] it is most of all the image of the messenger of God who appears at the right moment to bereave Satan of a prey he already considered his, for the remission of sins and reconciliation, to make of the leopard-men the most gentle and harmless lambs, of these murderers newborn people. These wolves, suddenly turned into lambs, have received the Missionary with the greatest joy, happy to enjoy the consolations of his sacred service [...] After having desired and called out for baptism with all their heart.<sup>4</sup>

Much like in the fictional stories, the missionaries and colonials represent themselves more or less heroically. The more gruesome their enemy, the greater were their own accomplishments. In many cases, the men serving in the colony came from ordinary backgrounds, and it would seem that they deliberately used their presence in the colony to increase their social status back in Belgium, by portraying themselves as civilizing heroes. Much like acquiring ethnographic objects as trophies, committing one's adventures to writing was a way of highlighting one's colonial career.

#### *The wildness and animal-like nature of Africans*

The Anyoto society is taken to be an example of the “wildness” of the population that uses violence without a valid and clear cause. Cannibalism is taken to be an expression of this wildness. Fictional literature, in particular, stresses the irrationality and viciousness of the leopard society. In the Tarzan novel the agendas of the Anyoto men include petty motives of personal greed. Even though there are elements in the writings of missionaries and colonists pointing to a certain understanding of the power-relations that the Anyoto embodied, it was never really acknowledged by anyone that these were acts of political emancipation and empowerment with reference to the colonial society. With regard to the motives of murder, a lot of attention focuses on

revenge, personal rivalries and the regaining of power without specific goals. Local chiefs were by definition vicious and evil and chasing their own rewards.

In Europe there has been a long tradition of representing "heathens" and non-Europeans as liminal beings that cross the border between humanity and bestiality. Several publications have shown how deformed humans and animals serve to represent evil or pagans in the arts and literature of medieval European Christianity and folk religion (see Gregg 1997, Mason 1990 and Salisbury 1994). The best example of this is the devil, which is represented with hooves and horns. In the Middle Ages Jews and Muslims were depicted with dogs' heads and pigs' noses. They were also sometimes accused of eating their own species, like certain animals do. In old European literary sources, evil, animal-like beings are often defeated by male heroes or Christian elements, which bring us back to the first point, the white male crusade against evil. Even though these tales have lost their religious meaning, they have remained quite popular, for example in thriller stories.

Racist representations of non-Europeans, non-Christians and non-white Americans as animal-like beings have unfortunately survived until today. Even if these representations have changed over time and the comparison to animals may have become less obvious, people from other cultures have continuously been represented as less civilized (or human) in both behaviour and physical features. To demonstrate the animal-like nature of such people has been a key element in the evolutionist discourse, more particularly in physical anthropology and in related colonial discourses. Based on certain physical features people were classified in races of which one was one step ahead in evolution than the other. Colonial propaganda used the science of the time to legitimize the colonial projects. (For a historical overview of physical anthropology in Belgium, see Couttenier [2005].)

In negative representations or stereotyping, aspects of anti-social behaviour are attributed to one's adversaries, whether this is based on reality or not. In European traditions animal-like characteristics such as wildness, violence and cannibalism are viewed as expressions of irrationality and insanity which oppose and threaten the societal order normally maintained through mechanisms like social and self-control and certain taboos (e.g. on incest, bestial and extra-marital sexual relations, arbitrary violence and random killing, consumption of human flesh).

In the fictional writings all of these anti-social aspects are ascribed to the Anyoto and their accomplices. They behave like animals, are promiscuous and unpredictable, eat human flesh, smell badly, get drunk to the point of passing out and so on. In reality the Anyoto men were a threat to the colonial societal order and they could not be controlled.

Reports that the Anyoto sometimes imitated leopard attacks, and the existence of their costumes, played on the European imagination. Reports often mention the Anyoto killing innocent victims without any apparent reason. The cannibalistic aspect



also receives a great deal of attention in the reports, even if it does not generally seem correct. Bouccin (1935: 258) mentions that limbs or organs were cut off (or cut out) and were sometimes eaten. He adds that this is proven, despite the repeated denial of the Anyoto accused, and Bouccin does not reveal the source of his certainty. In other sources it is written that amputated limbs, which were not found, were eaten.

#### *Stereotypes about African religious experience*

In western perceptions there are two dominant interpretations of the African religious experience related to the Anyoto society. Firstly, there is the idea that Africans worship animals, like leopards, seeing them as gods. This is clearly illustrated in the Tarzan story where the leopard god is a speaking leopard. Linked to this is the western interpretation of totemism, which is that the Anyoto members consider themselves to be descendants of the animal. The occurrence of animals as mythical ancestors is quite common in the creation of myths, not only in Africa but in other parts of the world as well. Western observers have taken this quite literally. In Central Africa the leopard is a symbol of chiefly and of occult powers, which I will elaborate on further. Secondly, the idea that leopard-men are basically men who believe they become leopards fits in with western imaginations of African religious experience. In missionary and colonist writings, Anyotism is regularly compared to the European notion of the werewolf where a man, in this case unintentionally, takes the shape of a wolf and kills people.

Father Joseph Christen (1936: 31) sums up both of these ideas:

One encounters sometimes in Africa, where the pathology is more dominant than elsewhere, curious cases of delirium where the patient imagines himself to have metamorphosed into one of the animals feared by the population. Tribes and families placed under the protection of the animal to which they imagine themselves to be blood-related, live in this belief that runs in a certain way through their veins and arteries.<sup>5</sup>

Finally there is the representation of the Anyoto as a sect. As mentioned earlier, most of the official reports on the society were classified under the heading of *Sectes* in the colonial archives. In the Tarzan story too the society is a sect, even though it is a completely fictitious organization, which bares no similarity to the real Anyoto at all. The leopard god has a hidden temple and so-called high-priestesses and priests are kept prisoners there.

#### *Promiscuity of the African in the fictional literature*

References to sexuality are practically completely absent in missionary and colonist's reports, whereas they are prominent in the fictional literature. In reality the white woman is completely absent, whereas in the fictional sources she plays a key role,

where she is the object of desire for both the white protagonist and African men. The white man protects her and starts falling in love with her. The love between them is repressed and the relationship is never consummated. The man has to protect her constantly from the sexual greed of the African adversaries. In the Tarzan story, drunken orgies are an essential part of ceremonies at the temple of the leopard god. Several of the Anyoto men make plans to abduct Kali Bwana and to take her as their wife. Such sexual promiscuity is seen as an important example of animal-like behaviour and loss of self-control. In the history of western morality the loss of self-control has been symbolized by an imaginary beast within the human being that breaks loose. A being such as a werewolf is a metaphor for the loss of self-control as the transformation into a werewolf takes place in moments of extreme emotional and sexual desire.<sup>6</sup> Sexual repression is also a very important, if not the most important, aspect of this self-control maintained by the white protagonist in these stories.

In the following quote from *Tarzan and the Leopard Men* by Edgar Rice Burroughs (1935: 166), African promiscuity is clearly juxtaposed to the virtuousness of the white couple:

The girl was standing very close to the white man. He could feel the warmth of her almost naked body. He trembled, and when he tried to speak his voice was husky with emotion. He wanted to seize her and crush her to him. He wanted to cover her soft, warm lips with kisses. What stayed him, he did not know. They were alone at the far extremity of the temple, the noises of the savage orgy in the main chamber of the building would have drowned any outcry that she might make; she was absolutely at his mercy, yet he did not touch her.

Whereas the sexual repression here is a reference to the maintenance of social order, it nevertheless retains an element of desire. The attraction between the protagonists is used to keep a certain tension in the story with the forbidden or restricted element of desire. In a parallel way the “ungraspability” and secrecy of the society makes up part of its attraction both in reality and in fiction.

### **History and meaning of the society**

With reference to the representation of leopard-men in fictional sources I would like to add that more sympathetic (or even idealistic) representations of leopard-men also exist. In two comics in the Flemish *Baekelandt* series, a sympathetic stance is taken towards leopard-men, even though it is in a different cultural and historical setting than the Belgian Congo. The hero of the comic is the leader of a gang of robbers and murderers that existed at the time of the Napoleonic wars in Europe. In the comic they are a gang of social outlaws who take the side of the leopard-men and fight with abolitionists against slavery in Great Britain. The leopard-men in the comic are an

anachronism, as the first reports of leopard-men from West Africa date from the middle of the 19th century, whereas the gang of Baekelandt truly existed around 1800. The Anyoto from east Africa have never been represented in such a favourable way.

The Baekelandt comic points to certain parallels between European and African "gangs". One could say that the authors of the comic perceived them as "social bandits". The concept of social banditry was introduced by the historian Eric Hobsbawm (1969) in the study of European social history. It has enabled historians to make distinctions within a larger category of bandits lumped together by the law. Social bandits are criminals according to the state or leading classes and, from the information in court records; a historian could not distinguish them from ordinary crooks. Social bandits are perhaps best known through romanticized stories and Hobsbawm has given these peasant heroes a place in history with Robin Hood as his most famous example. In the book *Banditry, Rebellion and Social Protest* edited by Donald Crummey (1986), the social banditry concept was adapted to study similar movements against the established colonial or state order in African history. Despite Africanists' critical attitudes towards the essentially Eurocentric concept it has proven very useful for acknowledging the existence of and studying the early local anti-colonial movement. These early movements generally occurred during the first decades of colonization between the 1890s and the 1920s and are different in character from later anti-colonial independence movements and post-independence rebellions. Early anti-colonial movements started as tentative efforts to fight colonial control, but the fight was still underground, not aimed directly at the colonial government, mainly because repression was feared. Contrary to later larger mass movements of a national character the early colonial movements are not really taken seriously by the colonial government. Even if these movements had any effect on the established order, they were downplayed as criminal, irrational and barbaric.<sup>7</sup>

In the case of the Anyoto society, the dehumanization and demonization of the leopard-men has, until recently, precluded their recognition as an anti-colonial movement. The European traditions of dehumanization or demonisation of non-Europeans have been an important strategy in the legitimization of Christian or political imperialism, slavery and colonization, especially since the Middle Ages.

Up to now studies of early colonial social banditry in Africa have been rather scarce. Even though the movements are very different, secret societies similar to the Anyoto existed throughout Africa and all of them indirectly opposed colonialism. In an article by Allen F. Roberts (1986) the lion-men of the Tabwa (on the western shore of Tanganyika lake) are shown as an example of social banditry. The lion-men cases are very similar to those of the leopard-men and Roberts makes numerous comparisons between them. Roberts does not agree with Hobsbawm, who does not consider the social bandit capable of criminal activities. Like the Anyoto society, lion-men opposed the colonial and missionary intruders but, as accomplices of local chiefs, they

also used murder and terror in the fight for authority and power among rival leaders. Roberts makes it clear that Tabwa lion-men were purveyors of violence and in some ways also heroic criminals. Their attacks could happen for very different reasons, some less heroic than others. Roberts (1986: 68) writes about the criminalization of lion-men in historical records in words that could apply equally to the Anyoto:

Reporting in missionary diaries, travelogues or other nineteenth-century sources is neither consistent nor disinterested. "Disorder" is often only a matter of perspective. Furthermore, as both Lindskog and Joset note, cases of leopard or lion-men attacks had particular explanations, including revenge, vendetta, ritual or "gangsterism". Close scrutiny of the Tabwa data, such as it is, suggests that all these are possible explanations. However, these do not obviate a general correlation between incidents and their historical contexts (lion-men attacks as a product of disorder); rather, particular case studies allow an understanding of the process or dynamics of the incidents. One can suggest, then, that there is an explanation of the instrumentality of lion-man murder, a kind of functionalist "bottom line" to all the various incidents.

The Anyoto society apparently first appeared in the eastern Congo region as a resistance movement against Swahili-speaking slave trading chiefs controlling the region in the 1890s. It peaked in the 1920s and 30s when colonial government control was increasingly establishing itself in the region. Political power-holders of the region commissioned assassinations, which were carried out by the Anyoto men. Local chiefs mainly used terror to maintain their own power relations and to perform indigenous justice in secret while circumventing colonial government control. Attacks were quite often directed towards people working for the colonists. Furthermore the Anyoto were also used for sorting out private animosities such as fights between men about their lovers and wives, or the revenge taken against a midwife in 1931 after a woman had died in childbirth. Adversaries were often hit through attacks on their loved ones, which explain why so many of the victims were the most innocent people such as children.

Administrators investigating the murders were confronted with an unwillingness to cooperate from the local population. Family members of victims would give false statements or even deny that the Anyoto committed the murders. It was certainly the case that this terror had its effect on the population and that the stories circulating about the society engendered more fear and prevented local victims from collaborating with the official murder investigations. On the other hand the assassins were also supported by the community, which enables us to identify them as social bandits. Bouccin (1936) mentions for example that family members brought them food while they were in prison and Joset (1954: 5–6) specifies that the interrogated leopard-men did not show any sign of guilt.

Obviously, the perception of the Anyoto society depends strongly on the way you look at it. We must envision that colonization was a crisis for the local community, creating a war-like situation, which in many cases caused pre-existing rivalries to escalate. Probably the chiefs pulling the strings of the Anyoto did use terror to protect their own communities as well as their personal interests. To really understand the society it is important to take a "history from below" approach and accept its complexity.

The Anyoto society can be seen as an example of the empowerment of the oppressed, and among the oppressed populations there are also power relations at play. Clearly the secrecy and concealment contributed to the power of the Anyoto society and its leaders. The strength of the society must have lain at least partially in its mystical aspect in which the symbolism of the leopard certainly played its role. The meaning of the leopard symbolism within the Anyoto society has remained unclear due to a lack of available sources on this topic. More generally, the leopard was an important symbol of chiefly powers and witchcraft. In the traditional notion of chieftaincy throughout the Congo, the chief was not only supposed to take care of his community but he was also the possessor of occult powers which he could use to harm his enemies or those of his community. In the novel *Ngando* (1972) by the Congolese novelist Lomami Tchibamba, leopard-men are quite literally a metaphor for the opposition against colonialism with the protagonist and his community turning into leopards and killing all their white opponents.<sup>8</sup> The spotted skin of the leopard is symbolic of the journey between the village and the forest, between the world of people and the world of spirits. Leopard hides, teeth and claws were the sacred regalia of chiefs and these have remained so until more recent times. Mobutu Sese Seko used the symbolic reference to the leopard as a claim to traditional power. Particularly among Bali and Budu populations, in which most of the Anyoto activities originated, the leopard cap and the necklace with teeth were part of chiefly dress. The leopard imagery of the Anyoto must have had a strong psychological effect on the local people. In fact, one could say that for the local community the Anyoto murders were the occult or political powers of the chief at play.

The Anyoto society also had a psychological effect on the colonial establishment, which was unable to get a grip on the society despite its investigations and the strength with which it was fought. The secrecy surrounding the society and its ritual approach, imitating attacks of a leopard, played very much on the imagination of colonizers and missionaries and engendered awe. I do believe that the characteristics attributed to the Anyoto society in western oral and literary sources might have influenced its mode of operation and even contributed to its influence on the colonial society. This becomes much clearer when we look at their costumes.



## Role of costumes

Anyoto costumes in the collection of the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) lie at the basis of the iconography of leopard-men appearing in different kinds of western sources throughout time. These costumes consist of bark-cloth capes, iron claws with which the leopard-men supposedly scratched their victims and wooden sticks with which a leopard paw impression could be made in the soil. Except for a few rare pieces in other European ethnographic museums, these costumes are unique in the world. Reproductions of, and images based on, the Anyoto costumes of the RMCA have been used in the past to illustrate literature on other similar societies. The iconography also started leading its own life, disconnected from its historical context, in fictitious literature and contemporary popular cultural phenomena like toys, video games, etc. There is no doubt that these have played an important role in making the stories about the Anyoto society appear more truthful. The authenticity of the costumes has never until now been questioned and they have never been thoroughly investigated for traces of usage. When one takes a good look at them one wonders how a man can kill swiftly and unseen while wearing such a costume? Some sources suggest however, that the RMCA costumes, or at least some of them, were made especially to be given or sold to interested colonists. One man accused of Anyoto murders because he had claws in his possession declared that he intended to give them to a colonial administrator. The fact that most of the costumes in the RMCA collection have indeed been acquired this way suggests that this man could have spoken the truth. Museum conservators actively urged colonial administrators to collect and ask the populations for objects to add to the collection. Until now there has not been one piece from the collection in the RMCA that can be linked directly to a crime. Bouccin writes that these kinds of objects were found in the houses of Anyoto members or their families, but that they were not usually worn for the murders because they were not practical. Victims were usually killed simply with a knife. According to Bouccin's major informant, Mbako, the leopard claws were also used to imitate a leopard attack, while most Anyoto convicts denied the use of the leopard claw forks. Bouccin (1936c: 257) ascribes this denial to the fear of having to name the owner of the claws who usually was the commissioner of the murders. One of the costumes in the RMCA collection was brought to Adjoint supérieur a.i. Coclet in Basoko in 1912 by a man from the village of Yapandja and according to several local informants the costume was used for hunting monkeys. There is therefore, a need for detailed research on the costumes to find out whether they were really worn or not. Information with reference to costumes suggests that the ethnographic pieces in the museum might have been made to cater for the particular taste of colonial collectors and that in a very direct way they have affected the mythmaking on the part of westerners.

## Concluding remarks

Representing social resistance movements like the Anyoto simply as random violence or as a reaction against oppression denies an active role in history to those represented. At certain moments in time the Anyoto had a powerful grip on colonized society, both colonizers and colonized communities. To gain an idea of what the real purposes of the Anyoto society were, western sources need to be analysed and deconstructed further and sources representing the insider's view need to be considered. This article reflects a work in progress and much work remains to be done. To get an idea of the insider's point of view I will focus on both interviews with descendants and archival research. Accounts of members of the society and eyewitness reports are difficult to access, as penal files have to be 100 years old before they can be consulted. This is done to protect the people concerned, such as the relatives of the accused. However, is this concealment really in their interests? Or does the history of the Congo remain colonized in European bureaucratic institutions? In the end the Belgian ex-colonial government seems to have mastered the Anyoto by ensuring that primary sources representing emic perspectives on the society are concealed in the secrecy of its archives.

## Notes

- 1 The research presented here forms part of a larger Ph.D. project on the history and representation of the Anyoto leopard-men from the eastern Congo; it is undertaken at the Sainsbury Research Unit, University of East Anglia, under the supervision of Prof. John Mack. I wish to thank the SRU for the financial support and the Royal Museum for Central Africa for the research affiliation. I also want to thank Lynne Marsh (SRU) and Michael Lomax (Brussels) for revising my English.
- 2 On the website of the Flemish right-wing party *Vlaams Belang* for example, [www.vlaamsbelang.org](http://www.vlaamsbelang.org)
- 3 For an elaborate discussion of the leopard-man theme in Francophone colonial literature and popular fiction, see Halen (1993).
- 4 "Plus d'une fois surgit à nos yeux, estompée et discrète, la silhouette du missionnaire: [...] c'est surtout l'image du ministre de Dieu qui paraît au moment suprême pour arracher à Satan une proie qu'il croyait déjà la sienne, pour exercer le ministère du pardon et de la réconciliation, pour faire de ces hommes-léopards des agneaux doux et inoffensifs, de ces assassins des régénérés, [...] Ces loups soudain transformés en agneaux ont accueilli le Missionnaire avec la plus grande joie, heureux de bénéficier des consolations de son saint ministère [...] Après avoir désiré et appelé le baptême de tous leurs vœux." (Christen 1936: 29–30)
- 5 "On rencontre parfois en Afrique, où la pathologie sévit plus que partout ailleurs, des cas curieux de délire ou le malade s' imagine métamorphosé en quelqu'un des animaux redoutés par la population. Des tribus, des familles placées sous la protection de la bête au sang de laquelle elles s' imaginent apparentées vivent de cette croyance qui circule en quelque sorte dans leurs veines et leurs artères." (Christen 1936: 31)
- 6 For a historical overview of werewolves in western popular culture and science throughout time see Bourgault du Coudray (2006).
- 7 Late colonial and post-colonial rebellions were better organized and often led by political or intellectual elites. These forces were taken seriously by the western world. In a famous book *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (1985), J. C. Scott highlights several forms of passive resistance such as sabotage and false compliance which are hardly noticeable from historical records. Furthermore archives usually represent the point of view of the colonial regime and tend to be biased.
- 8 I would like to thank Susanne Gehrmann for pointing this out to me.

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