

# The Diaries of Barthélémy Boganda, Priest and Politician in French Equatorial Africa (1910–1959)

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**Abstract:** This article presents an analysis of the diaries of Barthélémy Boganda, priest and later politician in French Equatorial Africa. So far unknown, these diaries, stored in the archives of the French Spiritans, shed light on earlier stages of Boganda's life, on which fewer sources are available. The article first discusses the broad historical background of colonialism in French Equatorial Africa and the significance of Barthélémy Boganda as an historical figure, also comparing him with other leaders of Africa's decolonization struggles. It then analyses the nature of his diaries and their different entries and argues that it is through this source material that one can better understand the complexity of his person and the historical depth of his attitudes, thoughts and action.

**Résumé:** Cet article présente une analyse des journaux de Barthélémy Boganda, prêtre et puis homme politique de l'Afrique Équatoriale Française. Inutilisés jusqu'à présent, ces journaux intimes conservés dans les archives des spiritains français éclairent les premiers stades de la vie de Boganda sur lesquels nous

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disposons de moins de sources. L'article examine d'abord le vaste contexte historique du colonialisme en Afrique Équatoriale Française et l'importance de Barthélémy Boganda comme figure historique en le comparant également avec d'autres dirigeants des luttes pour la décolonisation de l'Afrique. Il analyse ensuite la nature des journaux intimes de Boganda ainsi que leurs différentes entrées et suggère qu'à travers ce genre de sources, il est possible de mieux comprendre la complexité de sa personne et la profondeur historique de ses attitudes, pensées et actions.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Barthélémy Boganda, a nationalist politician from “Afrique Equatoriale Française” (AEF) in the 1950s, is poorly known in the English-language literature on Africa. In so far as he is mentioned, it is usually because of his Pan-Africanist ambitions (the building of a “United States of Latin Africa”). This project, however, quickly came to naught and, set against the trials and tribulations of Boganda's life and work, is a minor aspect of his historical significance. To some extent, his relative obscurity is the consequence of the colonial-linguistic division that still obtains in African studies. Historical figures from Francophone countries tend to receive much less attention in the Anglophone literature and vice versa. Thus, there has been some biographical research on Boganda in French, but this has hardly impacted in terms of familiarity with Boganda as an historical personage. This has partly to do with the hagiographic character of these biographical contributions, especially those by Central Africans.<sup>2</sup> But Boganda's obscurity is still surprising since he himself was a prolific writer of speeches and articles – texts that have been assembled

<sup>1</sup> This paper is an off-shoot of research for a contextualized biography provisionally entitled “The Sorcerer-Activist: Barthélémy Boganda and Political Life in French Equatorial Africa, 1910–1959.” I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for commenting on an earlier draft of this paper, besides Meike de Goede, Lotje de Vries, Harry Leyten, and Jan-Bart Gewald, who provided valuable comments and suggestions for improvement.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example: Benoît Basile Siango, *Barthélémy Boganda: Premier Prêtre Oubanguien. Fondateur de la République Centrafricaine* (Pierrefitte-sur-Seine: Bajag-Meri, 2004); Jeannot Christophe Gouga III, *Barthélémy Boganda: Sa pensée et son combat politique* (Yaoundé: Presses de l'UCAC, 2013). Even the small biography by Pierre Kalck (a colonial administrator who knew Boganda), while the best to date, was written from a perspective that occasionally lacked critical distance: *Barthélémy Boganda 1910–1959: Elu de Dieu et des Centrafricains* (Saint-Maur: Sépia, 1995). The Central African press regularly issues hagiographic pieces.

and analysed in the context of the study of ideas,<sup>3</sup> rather than as building stones for genuinely biographical research.<sup>4</sup>

These writings pertain for the most to the 1950s, when Boganda had become a public figure. There is a relative dearth of sources on the earlier stages of his life. However, there is a unique primary source, in this respect, in the general archives of the Spiritans or Holy Ghost Fathers (one of the more active missionary orders in French Equatorial Africa) that helps shed light on the earlier stages of Boganda's life (the 1920s to 1940s).<sup>5</sup> It can assist in mapping the development of his thinking and understanding the sheer historical depth of his political views, besides putting his later behavior and actions in better perspective. In fact, this article suggests that without reference to this source material, much of Boganda as an historical figure may elude us. An analysis of Barthélémy Boganda, the 1950s politician, also requires a focus on his earlier life, without necessarily arguing a linear process in the development of his thought and actions.

The source in question consists of two personal diaries kept by Boganda between the late 1920s and mid-1940s. They were misfiled in an archival series containing the correspondence between Michèle Jourdain, Boganda's later wife and widow, and Father Frison, a Spiritan priest, during the 1980s. The series is described as holding two hundred of their letters, which are deemed to have "little bearing on B. Boganda."<sup>6</sup> While this is true, Jourdain

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Dominique Pénel, who worked as a teacher in the Central African Republic, has reproduced numerous of these texts. Some of these have been published (Jean-Dominique Pénel, *Barthélémy Boganda. Ecrits et discours, 1946–1951: la lutte décisive* [Paris: Harmattan, 1995]), but most are only accessible in the archives of the Spiritans. See: Archives Générales Spiritaines, Chevilly-Larue, 5J1.5b2,3,4/108550, Jean-Dominique Pénel, *B. Boganda. Ecrits et discours*, volumes 1–3 (1947–1954, 1955–1957, 1958–1959). Also see: Jean-Dominique Pénel, "La pensée socio-économique de Boganda," *Actes du premier séminaire sur la pensée de Boganda* (Bangui: 1981); Jean-Dominique Pénel, *Barthélémy Boganda, Antoine Darlan, Jane Vialle: Trois représentants Oubangiens du deuxième collège 1946–1952* (Bangui: Université de Bangui, 1985); Jean-Dominique Pénel, "Situation des recherches sur Barthélémy Boganda," (unpublished study, accessible at Archives Générales Spiritaines, Chevilly-Larue, SF-241.13/113536); Jean-Dominique Pénel, "Les représentants Oubangiens à la Ligue contre le Racisme (LICA), 1947–1959 (R. Maran, B. Boganda, J. Vialle, H. Rivierez): textes présentés le 21 janvier 1987 à la Faculté des Lettres de l'Université de Bangui." ((unpublished study, accessible at Archives Générales Spiritaines, Chevilly-Larue, SF-258/113491).

<sup>4</sup> Which would require an analysis of Boganda's person and actions, besides his political thought.

<sup>5</sup> These archives are located in Chevilly-Larue in the southern suburbs of Paris. Records can be electronically accessed at <http://www.spiritains.org/qui/archives/archives.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> Archives Générales Spiritaines, Chevilly-Larue, SF-242.1/113539, *Peu de rapport avec B. Boganda*.

must also have sent Frison the diaries, which she obviously inherited upon her husband's death in 1959 and which would later end up in Frison's archived papers, simply inserted in between Jourdain's letters to her confidant. As far as I know, scholars have been unaware of their existence.<sup>7</sup>

This article outlines the nature and contents of the two diaries and the significance they hold in the study of Boganda. The following sections sketch the broader historical setting of colonialism in French Equatorial Africa and the significance of Boganda as an historical figure. This is followed by an analysis of the nature and content of the diary entries and some concluding reflections on the importance of the diaries in the study of Boganda's biography.

## Historical Background

Barthélémy Boganda was one of the more extraordinary personages that marked the political ferment of Africa's decolonization. The first African of the colony of Oubangui-Chari (after independence the Central African Republic) to be ordained a Catholic priest (1938),<sup>8</sup> his life trajectory constituted a symbol of the brutality of colonial rule, the opportunities of self-emancipation afforded by missionary education, and the struggle for a political dispensation more just to African interests. Boganda was born around 1910 in the rainforest region of the Lobaye River, then part of the French colony "Moyen Congo" (Congo-Brazzaville) and torn apart by concessionary rule: the destruction of local polities had been followed by an understaffed duopoly of government and company administrators – the latter in the employ of what would become the "Compagnie Forestière de la Haute Sangha-Oubangui" (CFSO), which as other concession companies had an exclusive right to exploit the region's natural resources.<sup>9</sup> Faced by low population levels and poor infrastructure its men resorted to violence to control the local communities, forced them into portage and coerced them in furnishing produce (especially rubber) with which to pay for the administration and enrich the company books. The outrages by which these practices were marked led to the dispersal of villages and break-up of local societies, with populations fleeing before the encroaching Europeans and their African underlings. Precolonial commercial networks were dislocated, while changes in local ecologies brought disease. Tsetse soon ravaged

<sup>7</sup> Jean-Dominique Pénel knew them but apparently did not see their relevance to his research.

<sup>8</sup> See for one of the more detailed descriptions of the ceremony: Archives Générales Spiritaines, Chevilly-Larue, 5J2.3a,b/108572, Journal de la Mission Notre-Dame de Bangui, 27–28 March 1938.

<sup>9</sup> Mineral resources excepted. Cathérine Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Le Congo au Temps des Grandes Compagnies Concessionnaires, 1898–1930* (Paris: Mouton, 1972), *passim*.

whole regions, followed by the outbreak of smallpox, measles, dysentery, and, later, the Spanish flu. Famine struck, and in the forty years after 1880 populations in French Equatorial Africa were decimated.<sup>10</sup> The extent to which society in the Lobaye region, in particular, disintegrated can be gauged from the numerous orphans that by the 1910s–1920s were roaming the forest. This phenomenon became so prevalent that the colonial administration felt forced to establish some infrastructure to shelter abandoned children.<sup>11</sup>

### Boganda's Historical Significance

It was in the context of this humanitarian crisis, vividly described in the literary work of René Maran and André Gide,<sup>12</sup> that Barthélémy Boganda arrived on the historical stage. His parents died before he had reached the age of ten. His father, a man called Swalakpé, was an affluent resident of the village of Bobangui, possessing several palm plantations and having numerous wives; Boganda's mother was Swalakpé's third spouse.<sup>13</sup> The village of Bobangui is known to have suffered considerably under the brutalities of colonial rule,<sup>14</sup> and it appears that Swalakpé became one of its victims, perishing in the course of a punitive campaign. This occurred early after the birth of Boganda, who is said not to have known his father. His mother died a little later (but before 1915). Most have asserted that she was murdered by a CFSO militia man for not having collected sufficient quantities of rubber. The young Boganda was then given a guardian, who, however, was recruited in the French colonial army and died at Verdun.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Le Congo au Temps des Grandes Compagnies Concessionnaires*, 515; Jan Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests: Towards a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 239–244.

<sup>11</sup> Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, GGAEF, d/4(2)/30, Colonie du Moyen-Congo: circonscription de la Lobaye, rapport trimestriel, Ecoles (September 1921).

<sup>12</sup> René Maran, *Batouala: Véritable roman nègre* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1921) which focused broadly on Oubangui-Chari. It caused a scandal and won the Prix Goncourt 1921. André Gide's *Voyage au Congo: Carnets de route* (Paris: Gallimard, 1927) focused amongst other regions on the Lobaye, which he traversed partly to verify Maran's allegations.

<sup>13</sup> A rare source claims the fifth. See the Central African paper, *L'Espérance* 2, 1–15 December 1997 (Archives Générales Spiritaines, Chevilly-Larue, SF-241.15/113538).

<sup>14</sup> Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Le Congo au Temps des Grandes Compagnies Concessionnaires*, 184; Marcel Homet, *Congo: Terre de souffrances* (Paris: Mouton, 1934), 27–28.

<sup>15</sup> Alternatively, he would have been put first in the care of his eldest sister. Siango, *Barthélémy Boganda*, 37. The above is based on Kalck, *Barthélémy Boganda*, 19, and Péné, *Barthélémy Boganda*, 19–20.

In 1920, while still in the care of his family, the boy was struck by a new calamity. He contracted smallpox, and somewhere in June that year his elder half-brother was ordered to bring him to one of his uncles.<sup>16</sup> On their way they ran into a colonial patrol and the terrified brother fled into the forest – from bitter experience people had learnt to run whenever encountering Europeans.<sup>17</sup> Covered by the markers of smallpox, the ten-year-old was left to confront the patrol on his own.<sup>18</sup> In the men's presence the young boy, of Ngbaka extraction, muttered the word "Gboganda." There is some confusion as to its meaning, but most likely it meant something like "I am (from) elsewhere," in the sense of my home is not here.<sup>19</sup> Probably the boy just wanted to explain that he was lost, with the patrol thinking that he was mentioning his name – which, rendered in its simplified European form as "Boganda," was to stick with him for the rest of his life. The patrol's head, the "chef de circonscription" Lieutenant Mayer,<sup>20</sup> had him brought to the orphanage in the nearby town of Mbaïki, which had been established in May 1917.<sup>21</sup>

It was here that Boganda was met by Father Herriau, a Spiritan missionary who in October 1920 was touring the Lobaye region. As elsewhere, missionaries especially focused on children in their drive to evangelize the populace, as these were still less affected by the doctrines of precolonial religion and the metaphysics underlying local culture. The young were thus potentially more receptive to the Gospel. Herriau was struck by

<sup>16</sup> Kalck, *Barthélémy Boganda*, 19; Pénel, *Barthélémy Boganda*, 19–20.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example: Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, GGAEF, d/4(2)/30, Colonie du Moyen-Congo: circonscription de la Lobaye, rapport trimestriel, situation politique (September 1921).

<sup>18</sup> See the French Wikipedia entry on Boganda (accessed 24 June 2015), based on an interview with the son of Boganda's fleeing brother: David Gbanga, "L'interview du général Sylvestre Xavier Yangongo," Grands événements radiophoniques, Radio Centrafrique, 28 March 2008 (no longer accessible). Unfortunately, I could not trace the author(s) of the Wikipedia entry.

<sup>19</sup> An alternative explanation by Barthélémy Yangongo borders on the fantastic. See on the name issue *LEspérance* 2, 1–15 December 1997, notably the view of Boganda's nephew, Sylvestre Xavier Yangongo. This was followed by Kalck, *Barthélémy Boganda*, 19, and Ghislain de Banville, "Barthélémy Boganda: Sa jeunesse, sa formation et son ministère (1910–1946)," (unpublished paper, probably 1990, Archives Générales Spiritaines, Chevilly-Larue, SF–241.14/113537).

<sup>20</sup> He was touring the Yaka area – just north of Bobangui – between 14 and 19 June 1920. Possibly, it was then that Boganda was picked up. Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, GGAEF, d/4(2)/27, Colonie du Moyen-Congo: circonscription de la Lobaye, rapport mensuel (2<sup>ème</sup> trimestre 1920).

<sup>21</sup> Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, GGAEF, d/4(2)/29, Colonie du Moyen-Congo: Rapport d'ensemble pour l'année 1921, Ecoles; Circonscription de la Lobaye; rapport trimestriel, Ecoles (September 1921).

Boganda's attentive look and decided to take him to the mission station of "Saint Jean Baptiste" in Bétou, a town further south on the Oubangui River. The mission, which included a school, had been founded ten years earlier,<sup>22</sup> and it was here that Boganda's education began. He learnt to read and write in Lingala – a process that some say only took a couple of months<sup>23</sup> and which, if true, foreshadowed his rapid rise through the ranks of mission-run schools. In 1921, many of the Bétou orphans were returned to the Lobaye (tsetse ravaged the Bétou region), and in December the young Boganda was brought to the Spiritans' main mission centre of "Saint Paul des Rapides" in Bangui,<sup>24</sup> the capital of Oubangui-Chari. Here he received his baptism under the name Barthélémy in late 1922. Instruction at Saint Paul included, amongst other things, French and the catechism, besides agricultural work (together with the missionaries) necessary for the upkeep of the station. Already by mid-1924 the boy had completed his primary schooling, and, having made clear to Mgr. Calloc'h, the head of the colony's Catholic Church, that he wished to study for the priesthood, he was sent in November to the Belgian Congo to attend the "petit séminaire" of the Jesuits in Lemfu, north of the border with Angola.<sup>25</sup> Studies there included Latin, French, mathematics, history, and philosophy; all in all, it would take six years to complete.<sup>26</sup> But it appears that Boganda (and others who were not from the Belgian Congo) felt uncomfortable with the instruction at Lemfu, so that by 1928–1929 he must have decided to continue his education elsewhere.<sup>27</sup> First he attempted to gain admittance to a religious

<sup>22</sup> Archives Générales Spiritaines, Chevilly-Larue, SF–241.8/113531, Cahiers de rapports annuels Bétou 1911–1921; Archives Générales Spiritaines, Chevilly-Larue, SF–241.8/113531, Extraits du Journal de Communauté de la Mission Saint Jean Baptiste de Mbétou 1910–1922.

<sup>23</sup> French Wikipedia entry on Boganda (accessed 24 June 2015).

<sup>24</sup> Its (pre-)history is described in Archives Générales Spiritaines, Chevilly-Larue, SF–243.9/113556.

<sup>25</sup> See for the history of the Jesuits' Congolese mission: René Butaye, *Les jalons d'une évangélisation: Mission de Lemfu 1898–1919. Œuvre posthume* (Kinshasa: Editions Loyola, 1993). For the "petit séminaire" (1922), see: Pierre Charles, *Le séminaire de Lemfu* (Louvain: Xavériana, 1924) and the archives in Kinshasa-Gombe de la Province d'Afrique Centrale de la Compagnie de Jésus, series "Lemfu," 22423.

<sup>26</sup> E-mail Jan Evers, archivist of the Province d'Afrique Centrale de la Compagnie de Jésus, Kinshasa, to author, 19 August 2015, and interview with Jan Evers, Kinshasa-Gombe, 6 October 2015.

<sup>27</sup> Kalck (*Barthélémy Boganda*, 43) suggested that Boganda was troubled by the stern regime. While he did not give sources for this and it may have been based on a later conversation with Boganda, it does not accord with a later appreciative comment by Boganda about the Jesuits (author's conversation with Father René Charrier, Chevilly-Larue, 18 March 2015). More probably, dissatisfaction stemmed from the predominant place of Kikongo as language of instruction, as well as the



school in France with the help of the missionary who had baptized him. This failed for lack of funds, and he then continued his secondary schooling at the Spiritans' "petit séminaire" in Brazzaville, concluding his final year in Bangui where he received tutoring from Calloc'h's successor, Mgr. Grandin. He must have made a great impression as Grandin decided to enrol Boganda in the "grand séminaire" of Saint Laurent, Mvolyé, Yaoundé, in Cameroon (1931). He was the first African of Oubangui-Chari to enter this institution of higher education.<sup>28</sup> Run by Benedictines, it taught the broad range of subjects necessary to enter the priesthood including history, Latin, philosophy, and the subject holding pride of place – theology. Saint Laurent provided first-rate, excellent education.<sup>29</sup>

There are, of course, numerous examples of young Africans who were thus "saved" from the violence of early colonial rule, sheltered, and provided with the means for self-advancement and upward social mobility. Youths who managed to gain admittance to the world of European or American missionary ventures could radically improve their life prospects – irrespective of the colonial power ruling the territory. The life trajectories of such different historical figures as Kwame Nkrumah, Sol Plaatje, the missionary "Wunderkind" Harry Nkumbula of Zambia<sup>30</sup> or (closer to the world of Boganda) André Matsoua and Fulbert Youlou from Moyen Congo,<sup>31</sup> to name but a few, all bear remarkable similarities, whatever the religious denominations involved or the idiosyncracies in subsequent careers.

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cultural differences between seminarists from Brazzaville (and elsewhere) and the rural world of Lemfu seminarists. Archives Générales Spiritaines, Chevilly-Larue, 3J3.1b3/107813, Mgr. Verwimp, Kisantu, to ?, Brazzaville (19 July 1931); e-mails Jan Evers, Kinshasa, to author (2 June 2016). See on Kikongo in instruction various documents in the archives of the Province d'Afrique Centrale de la Compagnie de Jésus, Kinshasa, series "Lemfu," 22423, and on discipline at Lemfu, Charles, *Séminaire de Lemfu*, 13–14.

<sup>28</sup> At the time Lobaye was still part of Moyen Congo. In 1933 it was attached to Oubangui-Chari.

<sup>29</sup> Kalck, *Barthélémy Boganda*, 40–45. On Saint Laurent, see: Jean-Paul Messina, "La relève missionnaire: les missionnaires du Saint-Esprit," in: Jean-Paul Messina and Jaap van Slageren (eds.), *Histoire du christianisme au Cameroun: Des origines à nos jours: Approche eucuménique* (Paris: Karthala, 2005), 157–161.

<sup>30</sup> Giacomo Macola, *Liberal Nationalism in Central Africa: A Biography of Harry Mwaanga Nkumbula* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 11. Biographies of Nkrumah are numerous. For Plaatje, see: Brian Willan, *Sol Plaatje: South African Nationalist, 1876–1932* (London: Heinemann, 1984).

<sup>31</sup> Samuel Decalo, Virginia Thompson and Richard Adloff, *Historical Dictionary of Congo* (Lanham MD/London: Scarecrow Press, 1996) provides useful entries on Matsoua and Youlou.



Yet, the case of Barthélémy Boganda is particularly striking for a number of reasons. The dramatic – if not traumatic – aspects of his childhood and entrance onto the historical stage, while not unique for the early colonial era nevertheless catch the historian’s eye, especially because of Boganda’s subsequent meteoric rise to political greatness. The year after he left the “grand séminaire” of Saint Laurent he entered the priesthood in a splendid ceremony at Bangui’s cathedral attended by members of the European community, the Catholic clergy and numerous Africans (1938).<sup>32</sup> He then proceeded to teach at the new “petit séminaire” of “Saint Marcel” in Bangui and from 1941 to 1946 lived in the Grimari (Bambari) region, in the centre of Oubangui-Chari, to teach and evangelize among the local Banda people. While highly energetic in his work, Boganda’s comportment was also marked by toughness and severity – to seminary pupils and the local populace –, on occasion bordering on violence when angered by a refusal to break with cultural norms he deemed abhorrent (especially polygamy or the use of “fetishes”) or by resistance to his proselytizing and associated strategies (such as girls’ school enrolment).<sup>33</sup> In addition, he felt frustrated by the means with which the Church expected him to accomplish this work – insufficient according to him –,<sup>34</sup> and by the mid-1940s there were signs of anger about the racial condescension with which he was treated by Europeans – settlers, administrators, but also certain

<sup>32</sup> For an eyewitness account, see: Archives Générales Spiritaines, Chevilly-Larue, SF-241.14/113537, *Les missions catholiques* (1938), 438–440.

<sup>33</sup> He would sometimes beat people and on one occasion he would have shot a cartridge filled with salt at a chief. Archives Générales Spiritaines, Chevilly-Larue, 5J1.3a8/108522, Mgr. Grandin, Bangui, to Mgr. Le Hunsec, Paris (3 April 1947). See for more detailed accusations of violent behavior: Archives Nationales d’Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, AffPol/2253–2254, *Rapport du Gouverneur de la France d’Outre-Mer: Chef du Territoire de l’Oubangui-Chari sur les agissements du Député B. Boganda et éléments de réponse au mémorandum présenté par ce parlementaire à l’Assemblée Nationale le 23 janvier 1951* (28 March 1951); Archives Nationales d’Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, AffPol/2253–2254, *Note sur les activités de M. Boganda* (not dated but circa 1950–1951). As some of these accusations stem from his enemies or are tied to the rising political competition of the post-war years, one has to be cautious in interpretation. However, in view of their persistence and the ferocity of Boganda’s agitation in the 1950s it is likely that they carry an element of truth.

<sup>34</sup> Whether true or not, many African priests were to complain about this. Perceptions on the “wealth” of white missionaries or on wealth as inherent to the priesthood may have played a role. E-mail Harry Leyten to author (13 December 2015).

fellow missionaries.<sup>35</sup> He also got involved in altercations with the local colonial administrator.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, it has always seemed that, by this time, a turning-point occurred in Boganda's life, as until then his tutors had dubbed him a diligent and obedient novice.<sup>37</sup> In 1946 he was suddenly transferred to Bangassou, a mission station further south-east. The disagreements over his missionary work appeared to be at the root of this, but the trigger was the fact that Boganda had fathered a child in the Bakala region – a scandal (at any rate for his white colleagues if not most Africans)<sup>38</sup> that was spreading and thus hushed up while conveniently used by his enemies.<sup>39</sup> However, Mgr. Grandin still had confidence in his former pupil<sup>40</sup> and decided to help Boganda stand for election to the French National Assembly in Paris (some Oubanguians had already made clear that they favored his candidature). In the shifting political context of the post-war era the missionaries wished to defend the interests of the Church and their schools, as well as limit the inroads made by their Protestant rivals. With the rising tide of anti-colonial agitation and the growing strength of leftist groups in the metropole and colonies alike, Grandin felt that Boganda, as the Spiritan-tutored priest, was precisely the man who could perform that task.<sup>41</sup>

In the end he was to be proved right in this, though not without a consummation of a rupture between the two sides. On 10 November

<sup>35</sup> One of his superiors, Albert Hemme, was an irascible character known to frequent settler circles, which were marked by racist attitudes. Archives Générales Spiritaines, Chevilly-Larue, 5J1.2b9/108513, *Réflexions du Père Joseph Bouchaud à propos de la lettre de l'abbé Boganda*, en date du 31 janvier 1947, à Mgr. Le Hunsec, alors supérieur général, Paris (5 May 1965). See on Boganda's financial means for example: Archives Générales Spiritaines, Chevilly-Larue, SF-241.14/113537, Boganda, Bambari, à Mgr. Grandin, Bangui (16 June and 27 July 1942). See on racism Boganda, Bambari, à Frère Jean (17 July 1942); (texts also in: Pénel, *Barthélémy Boganda*, 87–91).

<sup>36</sup> Archives Générales Spiritaines, Chevilly-Larue, SF-241.14/113537, entries in *Journal de Grimari* (more complete than in Pénel, *Barthélémy Boganda*, 91–94).

<sup>37</sup> Kalck, *Barthélémy Boganda*, 46, and Boganda's and others' correspondence in the 1930s in: Pénel, *Barthélémy Boganda*.

<sup>38</sup> I owe this interpretation to Harry Leyten, e-mail to author (13 December 2015).

<sup>39</sup> Archives Générales Spiritaines, Chevilly-Larue, 5J2.2 a & b, *Journal de Communauté de Saint Joseph, Bambari* (25 May 1946); Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, 1 AffPol/2253, *Rapport sur la mission d'inspection effectuée en Oubangui-Chari, Brazzaville* (20 March 1951). The child's name was Alphonsine. Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, 1 AffPol/2253, *Rapport du Gouverneur de la France d'Outre-Mer* (28 March 1951).

<sup>40</sup> Grandin, Bangui, to Le Hunsec, Paris (3 April 1947).

<sup>41</sup> Archives Générales Spiritaines, Chevilly-Larue, 5J1.3a7/108521, Grandin's correspondence with Le Hunsec.

1946 Boganda was elected ‘député’ (member of parliament) for Oubangui-Chari – a position he was to retain for the duration of his political career, twice getting re-elected (in 1951, in the face of administrative opposition, and in 1956). To this he would add, amongst other positions, a parliamentary seat for the Lobaye region in Oubangui’s Territorial Assembly (1952), the mayorship of Bangui (1956), the presidency of AEF’s “Grand Conseil” (1957), the vice-presidency of the “Ligue internationale contre le racisme et l’antisémitisme” (1951), and the prime ministership of the Central African Republic (in December 1958, when the country became an autonomous territory under French suzerainty). His electoral record remained unbroken until his untimely death in an air crash in March 1959, a year before independence.

All this provided Boganda with an aura of invincibility, something that was boosted further, in popular eyes, by his marriage to a white woman (Michèle Jourdain, his secretary at the French National Assembly);<sup>42</sup> the repeated failures by his French enemies to lift his parliamentary immunity for what was seen as his misconduct;<sup>43</sup> and his purposive efforts to express his political goals in (veiled) religious terms. He gave his political vehicle a seemingly spiritual name<sup>44</sup> and alluded deliberately to Equatorial Africans’ supernatural beliefs when arguing a return to peasant life and the importance of “the earth” (*séssé* – the ultimate fountain of all force or power)<sup>45</sup> or when playing with the rumored practising of anthropophagy by his forebears (likely to enhance the belief in his omnipotence).<sup>46</sup> This last ploy was at least to some extent instrumental, since his missionary upbringing had inculcated hostility to anthropophagic ritual. Steeped as he was in the Classics, Boganda also littered his writings, even his public speeches, with Latin phrases and expressions, whose common incomprehensibility could only reinforce the local belief in his command of extraordinary forces. He developed into a tremendous orator, who, as shown further below, was not averse to showing off his education to whites less endowed than him

<sup>42</sup> Ten days before his wife gave birth to their first child, Agnès. Pénel, *Barthélémy Boganda*, 59.

<sup>43</sup> Jean-Dominique Pénel, “Sept tentatives, entre 1949 et 1953, pour lever l’immunité parlementaire de B. Boganda, député du deuxième collège de l’Oubangui-Chari,” *Civilisations* 41 (1993), 443–458.

<sup>44</sup> Mouvement d’Evolution Sociale de l’Afrique Noire (founded in 1949).

<sup>45</sup> In Sango, the Central African *lingua franca*. See: Archives Générales Spiritaines, Chevilly-Larue, SF–241.15/113538, L’Oubangui autonome (February 1960, confidential report for administrators).

<sup>46</sup> French Wikipedia entry on Boganda; “Death of a Strongman,” *Time* (13 April 1959); Pierre Kalck, “Barthélémy Boganda (1910–1959): Tribun et visionnaire de l’Afrique centrale,” in: Charles-André Julien *et al.* (eds.), *Les Africains*, volume 3 (Paris: Jeune Afrique, 1977), 103–137.

(settlers and administrators alike). His cynicism vis-à-vis his opponents was virulent and biting – in this regard often exasperating the French.<sup>47</sup>

It is, indeed, difficult to think of another African politician at the time who was vocally so formidable as Barthélémy Boganda. Other “fathers of independence” hardly ever dared to adopt such an openly confrontational or antagonistic posture, at least not in the semi-permanent manner as did Boganda. Men like Djibo Bakary of Niger, or even Sékou Touré of Guinea, were more cautious operators in the continually shifting minefield of 1950s politics<sup>48</sup> – even if in the end they fell out completely with the French. Paradoxically, the fact that Boganda could behave rhetorically so brutal partly had to do with his determination that a decolonized Oubangui-Chari (besides other AEF territories) maintain its links with the French state, thereby preventing his enemies from dubbing him as anti-French and making himself vulnerable to attack. This makes Barthélémy Boganda, as compared with more well-known political figures such as Léopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal or Félix Houphouët-Boigny of Côte d’Ivoire, historically more complex and anomalous.

Grandin quickly regretted the political launch of his pupil. Having seen him as the representative of the missionary interest, he had thought that he could keep Boganda under control. He had advised the Spiritans in Paris to collect him upon arrival, house him, and put him in touch with Catholic politicians, so as to keep him away from left-wing circles.<sup>49</sup> Yet, the Spiritans failed to lodge him, and Boganda later expressed resentment about his reception while soon becoming disappointed in the support of French MPs in his efforts to ameliorate the lot of his constituents.<sup>50</sup> Within a couple of months his missionary superior in Bangui, embarrassed about the behavior of the sorcerer’s apprentice, went to the governor to talk about Boganda, lamenting that, “escaped from his cage (...) he [was] flying like an idiot.”<sup>51</sup>

<sup>47</sup> He did not shy away from presenting himself to the French as the son of a cannibal, thus exposing their pejorative views. Conversation with Father René Charrier (who heard Boganda speak in Nantes in 1946–1947), Chevilly-Larue (18 March 2015).

<sup>48</sup> Elizabeth Schmidt, “Anticolonial Nationalism in French West Africa: What Made Guinea Unique?,” *African Studies Review* 52–2 (2009), 1–34; Klaas van Walraven, *The Yearning for Relief: A History of the Sawaba Movement in Niger* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2013).

<sup>49</sup> Archives Générales Spiritaines, Chevilly-Larue, 5J1.3a7/108521, Grandin’s correspondence with Paris.

<sup>50</sup> See, for example: Archives Générales Spiritaines, Chevilly-Larue, SF–241.14/113537, Barthélémy Boganda to Georges Bidault, Paris (5 June 1950).

<sup>51</sup> Archives Générales Spiritaines, Chevilly-Larue, 5J1.3a7/108521, Grandin, Bangui, to Le Hunsec, Paris (3 April 1947) (“échappé de la cage [...] il vole comme un fou”).

But Boganda's vehemence had in large part to do with the unremitting repressiveness of colonial rule in Oubangui-Chari, in both political-racial and economic respects. For long, the shifts in metropolitan colonial policy, introduced after the Second World War, were ignored and resisted by local administrators, many of whom were of the old school and whose views were becoming fast untenable in the post-war context of Oubangui.<sup>52</sup> Also, as an outgrowth of its concessionary origins, the colony had a community of white settlers (French, Greek, Portuguese), whose racism provided a grim aspect to the territory's social climate. Well into the 1950s certain whites commonly called Africans disparaging names such as "macaques," while the colony's tranquility was still occasionally shattered by incidents of maltreatment – even murder – of blacks at the hands of white superiors; Boganda was to publicize these outrages and use them for political gain. As in other settler colonies, a color bar operated of which he himself, in spite of his celebrity status, became a victim more than once (in Bangui he was thrown out of a hotel in 1947 and, again, of a restaurant, one year later).<sup>53</sup> Despite the formal abolition of forced labor in France's colonies, the peasant population suffered continued exploitation. This manifested itself most notably by pressure to grow cotton, which French companies could buy up at fixed (low) prices and whose cultivation was responsible for many of the persistent outrages.

Boganda's political outlook on all this was at least partly affected by his missionary upbringing. As in the case of other Africans with a missionary education, this had instilled a belief that colonialism could be *reformed*. Thus, he launched a co-operative project, which aimed to ameliorate peasant incomes. While his politics was marked by a firm rejection of colonialism and oriented towards decolonization, it was not cast in an anti-French mould. In fact, he paid lip service to the purported ideals of French society and, as noted above, had no qualms about continuation of a firm link with the French state. This set Boganda's fierce political agitation apart amongst the leaders of Africa's decolonization struggles, also because he articulated an uncompromising anti-communism. He would frequently castigate colonial administrators – some of whom were members of the French socialist party – as "worthy sons of Stalin," accuse them of "anti-French" behavior and thus turn the tables on

<sup>52</sup> Both Oubangui's governor and the governor-general of AEF regularly had to instruct administrators on the new times, which demanded a change in behavior. See, for example: Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, AffPol/2254, Le Gouverneur Général de la France d'Outre-Mer, Haut-Commissaire de la République en Afrique Equatoriale Française, Brazzaville, to M. le Gouverneur. Chef du Territoire de l'Oubangui-Chari, Bangui (Analyse Rapports entre Européens et Africains) (29 May 1954).

<sup>53</sup> Kalck, *Barthélémy Boganda*, 113–116, 127; Pénel, *Barthélémy Boganda*, 52.

his enemies. In the Cold War context of the 1950s this added to his invulnerability.<sup>54</sup>

However, his relations with the colony's settlers were characterized by implacable hostility, especially during the first half of the 1950s, and his politicking struck at the heart of what colonialism was all about. Couching his views in a fundamental human rights perspective, he formulated the phrase *zo kwe zo* – “every human being is a person” –, a slogan that might seem self-evident but that had explosive force in a political system marked by racism, privilege and the memories of colonial terror:<sup>55</sup> such was its resonance among the territory's expanding electorate that it would end up in the Central African Republic's coat of arms. It was this perspective on decolonization – far more than his Pan-Africanist objective, in the late 1950s, to preserve AEF's federal structures – that constituted Boganda's unique contribution to Equatorial Africa's modern political era.

Nevertheless, Boganda became increasingly disillusioned despite his electoral successes. The colonial administration and private French interests ran his co-operative project into the ground, and some settler interests continued a virulent campaign against him marked by unremitting racist insult.<sup>56</sup> While this explains some of his vehemence, he was also to become markedly distrustful if not dictatorial and intolerant towards rival African politicians. The Catholic Church nevertheless did not fare too badly with the political launch of “its son” (its role in Boganda's rise underscores the important contribution of Christian missions in developing AEF's modern political leadership – in marked contrast to the situation in French West Africa). Just as Fulbert Youlou in Congo-Brazzaville, Boganda left the priesthood (or as the Church said, was evicted upon his marriage), but he was to remain a devout Catholic and magnanimous towards the missionary interest. He was a complex man cut short by a premature passing.

## The Diaries

As noted above, there is still a lack of proper biographical research on Boganda, especially with regard to his early life (the 1920s to 1940s), where we are faced with a dearth of primary sources.<sup>57</sup> The diaries in the Spiritan

<sup>54</sup> “dignes fils de Staline,” in: Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, AffPol/2253, B. Boganda, député de l'O.C. à M. le Chef de Région de la Lobaye, Bobangui (3 January 1950).

<sup>55</sup> “L'Oubangui-Chari autonome.”

<sup>56</sup> Settler campaigns against him were organized around newspapers such as *Climats* and *L'Étincelle de l'A.E.F.* He was also ridiculed in *Le Figaro* (31 January 1958 and 3 February 1958).

<sup>57</sup> Unsurprisingly, there are no contemporary written sources on Boganda *before* he was picked up in the Lobaye forest. Besides the few (hagiographic) biographies cited earlier, there are journal articles on aspects of Boganda's life. See: Philippe

archives, however, provide a more complete picture of this period. They also contain (incipient) signs of his political consciousness and awareness of racial issues, as well as of anger and – more tentatively – personal trauma. They show that Boganda's frustration and penchant for protest went back further in the past and were not things that manifested themselves only by the late 1940s when he broke with his missionary patrons.

The diaries are different in form. The oldest is bound and some 20 cm in height and 10 cm in width, the other and larger one is an unbound notebook (of the sort used in schools), with the pages loose. The covers of the bound one carry, on one side, the inscription or dedication "The Christian, the Theologian and the Priest" and on the other "The Decent Man."<sup>58</sup> The bound diary contains 47 written pages, with pagination starting at 58 (so pages are missing), and the unbound notebook is unpaginated. Both diaries contain two forms of handwriting, one schoolish and characterized by rounded letters, the other italic. The bound diary is mostly in the rounded hand, although it also contains some italic writing and even something that appear to be stenographic notes. The unbound diary is mostly in italic hand although it also has pages in the rounded script. The rounded hand is usually older than the italic writing. Dating is not difficult as a few pages contain years of writing – sometimes together with months or specific dates. Thus, the bound diary is older, with the oldest dated entry going back to 1928, the youngest 1933 (although it contains one page dated 2–8 August 1937 that Boganda intended for the retreat before his impending diaconate but never used). The oldest dated entry of the unbound notebook is November 1932, the most recent 10 July 1944.<sup>59</sup> This means

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Decraene, "Barthélémy Boganda ou du projet d'Etat unitaire centrafricain à celui d'Etats-Unis d'Afrique latine," *Relations Internationales* 34 (1983), 215–226; Côte Kinata, "Barthélémy Boganda et l'Eglise catholique en Oubangui-Chari," *Cahiers d'Études africaines* 191 (2008), 549–565; Pénel, "Sept tentatives." In addition, there are unpublished theses by Central Africans: A.C. Mazangue, "Les trois campagnes législatives de B. Boganda à l'assemblée nationale française, 1946, 1951, 1956," *Mémoire/maîtrise d'histoire*, Université de Bangui (Bangui, 1987); Antoine-Denis N'Dimina-Mougala, "Barthélémy Boganda ou l'émancipation politique de la République centrafricaine et le grand dessein géopolitique de l'Afrique centrale," *Thèse pour le doctorat/Sciences politiques*, Université de Nantes (Nantes, 1995); O.T. Ngapeoko, "Boganda et le Mesan [Mouvement d'Evolution Sociale de l'Afrique Noire] face aux autres partis politiques en Oubangui-Chari (1946–1959)," *Mémoire/maîtrise d'histoire*, Université de Bangui (Bangui, 2002); M.G. Nsakala, "Barthélemy Boganda, l'homme de l'Union aéfienné," *Thèse de doctorat*, Université de Paris VIII (Paris, 2002); Bernard Simiti, "La décolonisation de l'Afrique noire francophone, suivie du cas de l'Oubangui-Chari avec B. Boganda" (Bangui: Centre Universitaire de Recherche et de Documentation en Histoire et Archéologie Centrafricaine, Université de Bangui, 2005).

<sup>58</sup> "Le chrétien, le théologien et le Prêtre" and "L'Homme comme il faut."

<sup>59</sup> Which actually contains a draft letter. The second diary contains several drafts for Boganda's personal correspondence, mostly with fellow seminarists. See below.



that, for some time, both diaries were in use simultaneously and that Boganda actually traveled with them. The oldest entry may have been made in Lemfu at the “*petit séminaire*” of the Jesuits, although it is possible that he wrote it during a holiday in Bangui that year (1928) or when he subsequently entered the “*petit séminaire*” in Brazzaville. Other entries stem from his period at Saint Laurent in Cameroon and later – his difficult Grimari years. Identification that the rounded and italic handwriting are Boganda’s is easy. Occasionally, entries in either diary (although more frequently in the oldest bound one) are signed “B. Boganda,” “Boganda,” or just plainly with “B.B.”<sup>60</sup>

Barthélémy Boganda was therefore unquestionably the owner-author of the two diaries concerned. Perhaps the term “diary” is not the most appropriate, as they do not contain daily entries but various exercises, reflections (theological but also political-historical ones), prayers, draft letters, and highly personal and philosophical thoughts on (his) life. But as some of these are dated approximately or even carry precise dates, they provide a fascinating insight in the development of Boganda’s personality and thoughts, even some of his most inner ones – making these diaries a unique source for comprehending this historical figure not just as a priest or embryonic political activist but as a person in the fullest sense of that term. In the older diary many of the entries consist of theological reflections or exercises, as well as prayers. Thus, one undated entry is entitled “To develop a worthy priest in me is to form another Christ” and amongst other things looks forward to the “grand day” of his ordination. Citing some of Jesus’ sayings to the Apostles, he prays to the Lord for light and love so that he can become, one day, “another Christ.” The comparison between himself as a future priest and the Lord is a strong one but not unusual – one entry made at a retreat, probably in Yaoundé, in October 1932 bears the title “Jesus Christ seen in the life of the seminarist future priest,” demonstrating Boganda’s awareness of the long road ahead in becoming a fully educated member of the Catholic clergy, with all its attendant responsibilities.<sup>61</sup> Another (undated) entry, in which he promises that he will sacrifice

<sup>60</sup> The rounded hand can be identified as Boganda’s in two entries called “Prayer” and “Prayer to the Holy Virgin” (‘*Prière*’ and “*Prière à la Sainte Vierge*”) in the older diary, with as signature “B. Boganda.” The rounded script in the unbound diary can be identified (with the signature “B.B.”) in entries on the Apostles and the “*Matérielle Condition*” (‘*Condition matérielle*’). The italic hand can be identified with “B.B.” in some draft letters in the unbound notebook and is identical to the italics in the old diary. One sometimes finds both “Boganda” and “B.B.” on one and the same page (see entry on “Friendship” [“*Amitié*”] in the unbound notebook) as well as rounded and italic hands together (see entry on chastity in the old diary).

<sup>61</sup> “Former un digne prêtre en moi c’est former un autre Christ” and “Jésus Christ vu dans le séminariste futur prêtre.”

his life for Christ, the Church, and the Fatherland, consists of a prayer to Jesus and points to the depth of his religious feelings. There are also more theological reflections on the nature of Christ's life, ending in an explicit commitment to the evangelization of Oubangui; on obedience (of Jesus and, therefore, Boganda to his religious superiors and the commands of his priestly formation); on humility; on the patience of the Lord as a source of inspiration to Boganda himself; on the centrality of prayer and piety; and (painfully, perhaps, in view of what would transpire at a later stage of his life) on chastity, in which Boganda pledges to be extremely vigilant and guard his senses and, especially, his imagination – “a little pig that lies dormant.”<sup>62</sup>

Thus, some of the theological entries provide insight in Boganda's thoughts and inner feelings, while the entries in the two diaries taken together read as the evolution of his priestly education at its different stages: they refer to the wearing of the habit, the reception of the last minor orders and a retreat on the occasion of his subdiaconate. In addition, there are several entries, especially in the oldest diary, which betray very personal thoughts. This is clearly related to the nature of his formation. Part of the daily curriculum at seminaries was the personal investigation of one's conscience (considered as a way to strive for holiness),<sup>63</sup> and in Boganda's case the results of this partly ended up in his diaries. Thus, Jesus is the most frequently cited source of his inspiration. This is, of course, unsurprising in view of his Christian beliefs, but it could be argued that the life of Christ, the symbolism of his suffering and the Resurrection had a particular appeal for Boganda<sup>64</sup> – orphaned and forced to face the brutality of colonialism on his own but miraculously saved by missionary benevolence. Similarly, the oldest diary contains three prayers to the Holy Virgin – one even in rhyme, demonstrating Boganda's literary capacities. If Catholic liturgy would make Mary a natural choice for pious contemplation (a safe for non-libidinous sublimation of femininity),<sup>65</sup> it is also tempting to read something more personal in this, linked to Boganda's own history.

<sup>62</sup> “un petit cochon qui sommeille.” All entries in the old, bound diary. The entry on chastity is followed, in different pens, by two other entries on the same subject – one describing women as the “cause of original sin” (“cause du péché originel”) and containing passionate prayers for deliverance from the flesh. Another entry contains notes on a lecture by Mgr. Grandin on chastity while yet another one, entitled the “Temptations of Jesus” (“Tentations de Jésus”), distinguishes between internal and external temptations, the former being unavoidable, the latter dependent on one's willpower.

<sup>63</sup> Interviews with Jan Evers, Kinshasa-Gombe (6 and 21 October 2015) (data modeled on the Jesuit-run seminary of Lemfu).

<sup>64</sup> Interview with Jan Evers, Kinshasa-Gombe (6 October 2015).

<sup>65</sup> I owe this interpretation to Harry Leyten, e-mail to author (13 December 2015).

Exceptionally, these entries are all signed and dated (1929, 1932, and 1933), which possibly is an indication of the importance the author attributed to them. Amongst other things they plead the protection of his family and relatives and the Virgin's help against his enemies, while one entry refers to Mary as "the most tender of mothers" and as Boganda's "Sovereign." In this "Consecration to Mary," he pleads:

Be my mother, my counsellor, my help (...) Give me back my innocence  
 (...) help me to overcome the infernal powers.<sup>66</sup>

In this prayer, which he wrote in Yaoundé on 11 October 1932 – a special day: the entry notes that it is the day he was allowed to put on the priestly habit – Boganda puts his entire religious education under her protection.<sup>67</sup>

Could it be that these prayers did not only represent a standard dedication to one of the holiest symbols of the Catholic faith, but that they also point to certain deeper feelings? Such as a longing for the mother figure? This may not be as speculative as it might seem. Thus, the old diary also contains an entry that is undated but written on the same page as a prayer of 1933 and composed in the form of a prayer to the Holy Agnes. "Agnes of Rome" was a virgin girl martyred under Emperor Diocletian for her Christian beliefs and chastity. Whether or not for this latter quality, Boganda must have felt some fascination for this Catholic saint, since much later he would name his first (legitimate) child after her.<sup>68</sup> In the prayer he argues that "[l]ike me you have passed through that valley of tears, like me you have been the target of the fury of hell and the world."<sup>69</sup>

If he pleads her assistance in serving the Lord with a pure heart and a chaste body, the parallel in terms of worldly agony that he and Agnes lived through is made particularly explicit. Indeed, the diary's entry is immediately followed by several pages of notes scribbled at the retreat for his subdiaconate – possibly four years later – in March 1937, where Boganda amongst other things defines the suffering in hell as "a little child wrested from the kisses, from the caresses of his mother."<sup>70</sup>

<sup>66</sup> "la plus tendre des mères," "ma Souveraine," "Consécration à Marie," and "Soyer ma mère, ma conseillère, mon aide (...) Rendez-moi mon innocence (...) aidez-moi à vaincre les puissances infernales."

<sup>67</sup> He always prayed to the Holy Virgin before any exam. See the unbound notebook, Boganda, Yaoundé, to "Paul," Bangui [probably Paul Ripert, a seminarist in Bangui: Pénel, *Barthélémy Boganda*, 76 n81] (21 April 1935).

<sup>68</sup> Boganda never formally acknowledged his first-born, Alphonsine, whom he had fathered in the Bakala region in the mid-1940s. See the Central African paper *La Tortue Déchainée* (29 April 1994).

<sup>69</sup> "Comme moi tu as passé dans cette vallée de larmes, comme moi tu as été en butte à la fureur des enfers et du monde."

<sup>70</sup> "1 petit enfant arraché aux baisers, aux caresses de sa mère."

It is thus tempting to read some of these prayers as an echo of a childhood tormented by the colonial terror in the Lobaye forest. In fact, Boganda more often expressed himself in emotional terms. Anger was not unknown to him, as becomes clear from an undated entry on “meekness” in the older diary in which he confesses that he is occasionally troubled by those who wound his self-love or that anger is sometimes seething within him.<sup>71</sup> Of course, this is natural for all human beings and hardly worthy of historical observation. Yet, just before penning the definition of “hell” in his diary Boganda explained in a letter to Father Fayet in Bangui (the priest who baptized him) that he had been suffering from “a serious depression” and that this had put all his correspondence on hold.<sup>72</sup> Perhaps even this cannot be considered exceptional as it could have been an occasional melancholy or dejection, and one can certainly not argue a direct link with Boganda’s fiercer comportment as manifested from the time of his Grimari years (1941–1946). Collective and individual histories never follow linear paths, while the notion of the traumatic childhood is something of a reductionist trope in biography that overlooks the importance of later turning-points. But the point here is that the diaries clearly show that, as a young man, Boganda was at times troubled by memories of the past and that he suffered perhaps from occasional bouts of instability. Part of this may lie in an obsessive ambition for individual and collective betterment, as exemplified in some of the correspondence pertaining to his years at Saint Laurent.<sup>73</sup>

Such insights in his emotional well-being aside, the older diary contains entries that depict the evolution of his personal philosophy. Two pages on “the complete man” consist of sixteen theses that betray an ambition to develop his personality; express an aspiration to self-control; rate intelligence as less important than character; and express a preference for the farmer over the insincere theologian – a harbinger of his later reverence for the Central African peasant world (and that Boganda would use as a ploy against some of the elite groups he hated). This is followed by four pages entitled “how to recognize a man:”<sup>74</sup> sixty-five theses that are not just philosophical but also point to psychological insight, sometimes with astonishingly practical application. They extol such qualities as optimism, altruism, loyalty, and generosity; they encourage man to be service-oriented

<sup>71</sup> “la douceur.”

<sup>72</sup> “un gros cafard.” Archives Générales Spiritaines, Chevilly-Larue, SF-241.14/113537, Boganda, Yaoundé, to Father Fayet, Bangui (8 January 1937) (text also in: Pénel, *Barthélémy Boganda*, 77–78).

<sup>73</sup> Archives Générales Spiritaines, Chevilly-Larue, SF-241.14/113537, Barthélémy Boganda, Yaoundé, to Mgr. Grandin, Bangui (30 December 1933) and Father Charles Schmid, Yaoundé, to Mgr. Grandin, Bangui (15 May 1934); Pénel, *Barthélémy Boganda*, 74.

<sup>74</sup> “l’homme complet” and “comment reconnaître un homme.”

and reject prejudice; and they counsel calm, also in the face of angry interlocutors (an entry in the younger notebook urges the love of one's enemies but also warns there are two kinds of them: those who praise and those who criticize – both of them equally dangerous). Finally, one of the sixty-five theses in the old diary urges a man to argue properly with his adversary, know to refuse with civility, and not let himself be intimidated – yet be able to yield. While by the time these reflections were penned down Boganda envisaged a career in the clergy for himself, with priestly self-sacrifice for the benefit of the community,<sup>75</sup> such attributes would, if mastered, be of great use in the world of politics.

The unbound notebook contains in this respect indications of racial awareness and political interest. An entry of November 1932 discusses Germany's demand for the return of its colonies including Cameroon. Although the entry reports the German arguments without comment, it shows that Boganda's view on the world was expanding (he had, however, also a personal interest in the issue, as he was by then living in Cameroon, now a French-run League of Nations mandate).<sup>76</sup> Similarly, the notebook has an entry (undated but certainly not younger than the 1930s) entitled "questions of color."<sup>77</sup> It cites the racist remarks about blacks in different historical epochs: a land owner in Congo explaining to his European employees that blacks are "big children;"<sup>78</sup> a disciplinary code of the French Antilles mentioning that missionary education is the sole advantage that slaves – "that miserable species" – reap from their subjugation; the governor of Martinique writing in 1766 that, while religion demands that one provides education to the negroes, this is politically unsound: it would turn them into "reasoning creatures," while the security of plantation owners demands that they be kept in "the most profound ignorance;" education is "a very dangerous instrument in the hands of priests" – one must "herd the negroes like animals."<sup>79</sup>

All this is mentioned without comment but with due reference to sources – a sign of a thorough education. The notes on the role of the clergy and that of education in social upliftment must have got to Boganda.

<sup>75</sup> See, for example, the entry entitled "Priest" ("Prêtre") in the unbound notebook.

<sup>76</sup> Moreover, in the treaty of Fez (1911) the French had ceded substantial parts of AEF adjoining Cameroon to the Germans. This included parts of the Lobaye region – at a time that Boganda had probably already been born. These regions were retaken in 1914.

<sup>77</sup> "Couleur (questions de)."

<sup>78</sup> Is there an awkward parallel here with the language used by missionaries vis-à-vis their flock?

<sup>79</sup> "des grands enfants," "cette malheureux espèce," "espèce de raisonneur" [?], "la plus profonde ignorance," "un moyen très dangereux entre les mains des prêtres," and "mener les nègres comme des bêtes."

While he may have realized how lucky he was, for such an intelligent student the observations in question must have been deeply painful. In her correspondence with Father Frison, Boganda's widow would later reminisce about her late husband as that "poor negro humiliated for too long."<sup>80</sup> Yet, a draft letter written by Boganda to a friend in 1935 and part of the unbound notebook reveals much of the ambiguity that his missionary education imparted to a man in his position. He describes how Congo (i.e. Oubangui-Chari) is not changing much, harboring "the same savages" without good morals or knowledge – although no longer anthropophagists –, adding that "the example of bad Europeans" leaves no other option than to focus reform efforts on the blacks.<sup>81</sup> His reference to the difference in mores between himself and other Oubanguians captures well the degree of alienation from his cultural origins brought on by seminary life. A missionary publication in 1938 reported on the discomfort Boganda felt when in the course of a holiday from his studies at Saint Laurent he stayed with family in the Mbaïki region but decided to return to Yaoundé precipitately.<sup>82</sup>

The above entries already show the importance that Boganda attributed to education, something that, upon his ordination, became a key part of his efforts to evangelise the people ("l'Évangile pour l'école, l'Évangile par l'école"): he would criticize his superiors that they privileged evangelization over teaching.<sup>83</sup> But while the draft of a letter in the notebook, which Boganda wrote to young seminarists in Bangui in 1935, points to the hope invested in them as the future elite of his people,<sup>84</sup> he always saw education and religion as closely intertwined – a pointer to the fundamental moral crisis that violent colonization had brought to the Equatorial region and that had engendered a search for a new cosmology to make sense of reality.<sup>85</sup> Boganda's letter to his friend Paul, cited above, thus questions whether education without religious instruction makes sense; it considers civilizing Congo without recourse to religion a chimera. Boganda conceived

<sup>80</sup> "un pauvre nègre trop longtemps humilié." Archives Générales Spiritaines, Chevilly-Larue, SF-242.1/113539, Michèle Jourdain to Father Frison (12 November 1989).

<sup>81</sup> "les mêmes sauvages" and "l'exemple des mauvais Européens." Boganda to "Paul" (21 April 1935). See note 67 above.

<sup>82</sup> Archives Générales Spiritaines, Chevilly-Larue, SF-241.14/113537, *Annales des Pères du Saint Esprit* (November 1938), 269. Although this would not prevent him from enjoying regular stays there by the time he had become a successful politician, in the late 1940s–early 1950s.

<sup>83</sup> Boganda, Bambari, to Mgr. Grandin, Bangui (21 December 1943) (text in: Péné, *Barthélémy Boganda*, 94–96).

<sup>84</sup> See the unbound notebook, Boganda, Yaoundé, to unidentified friends, Bangui (14 June 1935).

<sup>85</sup> Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests*, 245–248.

civilization as *Christian* civilization, containing that vital moral component without which education would merely turn out “cripples” or “monsters.”<sup>86</sup> The notebook in this respect also contains an undated entry (but probably from before the 1940s) on an incident involving a metropolitan judge, who suggested a link between rising crime in France and non-religious schools. Boganda observed that, regrettably, French anti-clericalism had also affected all those dispatched to the colonies, in so far as these had not opened their eyes to the Light.

Thus, it is clear that, by the late 1930s, Boganda had developed a critical view of Europeans – especially those outside the missionary world. It seems that his political outlook had by then not yet matured, but the notebook contains an entry showing that he was ready to take on Europeans with all the force at his disposal. As mentioned above, by the mid-1940s he became involved in altercations with a colonial officer. The background to this was administrative concern over the consequences of missionary interference in the customs of the Banda people – a community with a reputation for resistance to colonial rule and Christian proselytizing. The administrator in question, whose name ironically was “Dieu,” had sentenced a catechist who had constructed a chapel under Boganda’s responsibility to a three-month prison term. Boganda was outraged and in the mission logbook of Grimari promised himself to write to the official.<sup>87</sup>

While Pénel, in his collection of documents, says that this letter was never found,<sup>88</sup> the younger diary contains a draft (second?) letter to the administrator dated 10 July 1944. In it Boganda thanks him for the release of his catechist (Mr. Dieu may have acted on a first missive) but also reminds him of the content of the regulations on “bush chapels:” once a chapel had been established, the missionary involved must inform the local administration of its locality and the name of the catechist running it. This meant, Boganda pointed out, that there was no question of prior authorization (obviously, the administrator had acted under the “indigénat,” the abusive omnipotence provided under the system of administrative justice).<sup>89</sup> In any case, Boganda pursued, the sentence had been “unjust and unjustifiable” since the catechist had not contravened any AEF laws and would not have been able to construct the chapel if the local chief had not allowed this, at

<sup>86</sup> “boiteux” and “monstres.” Boganda to “Paul” (21 April 1935). See note 67 above.

<sup>87</sup> Archives Générales Spiritaines, Chevilly-Larue, SF-241.14/113537, Journal de Grimari 1936–1944 (entry for 30 June 1944).

<sup>88</sup> Pénel, *Barthélémy Boganda*, 94 n117.

<sup>89</sup> In fact, in a later defence of his action Dieu said that, while Boganda had the right to construct chapels, a cassava field had been cleared to this purpose. Archives Nationales d’Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, 1 AffPol/2253, L’administrateur en chef, Henri Joblon, inspecteur des Affaires Administratives, en mission, à M. Dieu, Chef du district de Bakala, pièce no. 12 (14 August 1947).



least tacitly.<sup>90</sup> He added that the chief's legal position was, therefore, a case of *volenti non fit iniuria*, the Roman law doctrine of voluntary assumption of risk.<sup>91</sup>

As if this were not enough Boganda continued that he wanted to know under what decree, then, the catechist had been sentenced; that he had himself built around twenty chapels in Bambari without ever informing the authorities; and that the interest that Dieu had always shown in the work of the mission could not have made him to expect such a reaction. He must have hated the official<sup>92</sup> – the Second World War had led to intensified agricultural exploitation and locals had leveled accusations at Dieu, an old school “bush administrator” who did not shy away from brutal treatments.<sup>93</sup> Thus, with all his argumentative power Boganda went on that sentencing a catechist for building a chapel, while “the fetishists” freely constructed for their “pagan divinities,” reminded him of the persecution of the days of the catacombs. It was tantamount to proscribing Catholicism, and Mr. Dieu had therefore better inform the general public so that people could leave the district. Since the local Catholics, according to the enraged priest, numbered 2,000 souls, it would leave the administrator's offices, his carpentry shop, the smithy – “even [his] kitchen” – deserted.<sup>94</sup>

It appears that Boganda was particularly angry because the administrator, in the disparaging manner of colonial Oubangui, had referred to him in derogatory terms. He took him to task for this in the same letter, challenging Mr. Dieu that he considered the reference to him as that “little Ngbaka from Bangui”<sup>95</sup> as a compliment and adding that he took pride in having worked himself up from a lower position in society than that enjoyed by others. And in an implicit reference to the administrator's attitudes, Boganda continued that one should not pride oneself on the nobility of race, for as Horace tells us, *qui genus suum laudat, alienum laudat* – he who

<sup>90</sup> Dieu later suggested the chief had opposed Boganda's action. See: Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, 1 AffPol/2253, L'administrateur en chef, Henri Joblon, inspecteur des Affaires Administratives, en mission, à M. Dieu, Chef du district de Bakala, pièce no. 12 (14 August 1947).

<sup>91</sup> To a willing person no injury is done. Boganda to Dieu, Grimari (10 July 1944) (“chapelles de brousse” and “injuste et injustifiable”).

<sup>92</sup> The letter first just began with “Monsieur le chef de subdivision.” Only later “chef de subdivision” was stricken through and replaced by “Monsieur Dieu” – with the salutation “cher” added in the margin.

<sup>93</sup> Administrative sources show he could be patronizing if not racist in his attitudes, especially towards “évolués.” Painfully, it seems he had warned Boganda over his relations with local women. See: Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, 1 AffPol/2253, L'administrateur en chef, Henri Joblon, inspecteur des Affaires Administratives, en mission, à M. Dieu, Chef du district de Bakala, pièce no. 12 (14 August 1947).

<sup>94</sup> “les fétichistes,” “divinités païens,” and “votre cuisine même.” Boganda to Dieu (10 July 1944).

<sup>95</sup> “petit Ngbaka de Bangui.” Boganda to Dieu (10 July 1944).

vaunts his race, lauds what belongs to others. If this proverb actually stemmed from Seneca<sup>96</sup> (the Stoic philosopher, the diaries show, that Boganda had also read),<sup>97</sup> the point had been made. For good measure, Boganda added that the Church was neither Ngbaka nor French or German, but universal. His priestly calling had only led him to serve the Church and France, and – he added cleverly – he had always recognized Mr. Dieu as the latter’s representative, to whom he had never failed to show respect. The administrator, verbally obliterated, apologized.<sup>98</sup>

### Concluding Observations

Equatorial Africa’s mission world had given birth to a formidable public personality. But the diaries expose a character that was not free from the pain of humiliation and a mixture of frustration and conceit. Indeed, by the time of his years in Grimari Boganda did not always practise on moderation what he preached. What triggered this cannot be answered with certainty, but it may have been a combination of practical difficulties in his mission work (lack of funds, resistance from missionaries and administrators, limited progress in proselytizing along with the inroads made by the Protestant competition); a sense of frustration about racial condescension towards him; and, quite possibly, anxiety over the violation of his priestly celibacy.<sup>99</sup> As the diaries suggest, however, some of the roots of this may lie in the more distant past, as shown by entries pointing to a certain (occasional) volatility, anger about the colonial world and problems with churchly regulations. Regrettably, in the mid-1940s the entries come to a halt, possibly because of the scandal surrounding his illegitimate child (mission logbooks preferred to leave this unmentioned as well),<sup>100</sup> while thereafter Boganda

<sup>96</sup> *Qui genus iactat suum aliena laudat*. Seneca, *Hercules Furens*, lines 340–341.

<sup>97</sup> See the entry in the oldest diary called “the complete man.”

<sup>98</sup> According to the Grimari logbook (note 87 above) (30 June 1944). This entry tells that he protested Boganda’s arguments, countering that the catechist had been detained for causing a disturbance. This shows that there was written correspondence between them and that there is a possibility that Boganda actually sent the second letter.

<sup>99</sup> It was in late 1949, when the rupture with the clergy had been consummated and he was living with his French parliamentary secretary, that he wrote his superiors a letter lambasting them and pointing out that celibacy had no origins in the bible but derived from rules by the early Church. Barthélémy Boganda, Paris, to Mgr. Cucherousset, Bangui (1 December 1949) (text in: Pénel, *Barthélémy Boganda*, 237–244).

<sup>100</sup> They merely report that “Abbé Boganda must go on holiday. Father Morandea goes immediately to Grimari to arrange his departure” (“L’abbé Boganda doit partir en vacances. Le P. Morandea va toute de suite à Grimari pour régler ce départ”). Archives Générales Spiritaines, Chevilly-Larue, 5J2.2 a & b, Journal de Communauté de Saint-Joseph. Personnel à la fin. Oubangui-Chari. Mission Saint Joseph de Bambari de 1910 à 1951; RCA.B.7/7A.

became engulfed in political campaigning, leaving him little time for putting his most inner thoughts to paper. The diaries do therefore not contain any (embryonic) ideas on the consequences that the Second World War carried for the French empire (such as the 1944 Brazzaville conference and the rise of de Gaulle).<sup>101</sup>

Still, besides the wealth of material that Boganda wrote from the time that his career as a public figure began,<sup>102</sup> the diaries stand out for their special qualities. First, they hold data for the earlier part of his life about which there are fewer primary documents available. They also provide a clear idea of the range and depth of Boganda's scholarly training and his literary influences. They are witness to his aptitude for Latin, with page after page filled with Latin phrases, mostly of a theological nature but also referring to the great Classic writers and philosophers – Horace and Seneca, but St. Augustine and Plato, too, find their place. The entries betray a thorough knowledge of the Bible, of course, with Boganda writing on its myths and stories. St. Luke is mentioned, as is St. John and the Book of Daniel with the last king of Babylon, Balthazar, threatened by Persia's King Darius, and the writing of *mane thecel phares* ("your days are numbered") foretelling the former's fall.<sup>103</sup> In addition, the diaries reveal some of the (Christian) authors by whom Boganda was influenced: Basil Maturin, an Irish Anglican turned Catholic, Joseph Schrijvers, a Belgian of the Redemptorist order, Germain Nouveau, a French symbolist poet, and René Bazin, a Catholic novelist. Moreover, as shown above, the diaries provide insight in the development of a personal philosophy, while also alluding to an incipient political and, especially, racial awareness.

Perhaps the most intriguing passages are those that hint at Boganda's emotional well-being. The diaries, after all, were never intended for other people's eyes and thus provide an unimpeded view into some of his most inner reflections.<sup>104</sup> This makes them different from what can be found in the vast collection of documents produced by Boganda himself – documents

<sup>101</sup> At the outbreak of war Boganda considered to enlist (he was not opposed to Oubanguians' military recruitment, which he hoped would boost post-war rights). But his superiors, faced with a shortage in personnel, dissuaded him, transferring him to the countryside. Besides the reticence of his superiors to take sides in the conflict between Gaullists and Vichy and the general disinterest of Oubanguians in this "white" feud this may explain why there is nothing in the diaries on the Second World War. Kalck, *Barthélémy Boganda*, 53–55.

<sup>102</sup> See note 3 above.

<sup>103</sup> Notes for the retreat of his subdiaconate.

<sup>104</sup> As a result of his premature passing, we do not know whether Boganda would ever have decided that his diaries be made public, although this seems unlikely in view of some of its personal content. Upon his death Michèle Jourdain burnt several volumes of breviaries, despite the protestations of her Spiritan confidant, Father Frison. Perhaps they contained personal notes as Jourdain justified her action by the wish to prevent her son-in-law from taking cognizance of things "unworthy" ("indigne"). Michèle Jourdain to Father Frison (13 November 1986).

that to greater or lesser extents were influenced by the tendencies of “self-fashioning” that characterize African life histories generally.<sup>105</sup> The diaries, thus, demonstrate something of Boganda’s personal psychology, but we cannot take it further than that. In view of his childhood days it is tempting to read evidence of trauma in some of the entries. But several observations are in place here. First of all, biographical research does not enable us to “read into” the head of the *persona*. To say anything about someone’s mental state would demand the most explicit statements on the part of the individual concerned and even then require careful interpretation. Boganda’s trajectory was, furthermore, not unique for the colonial era. Seeing an uninterrupted line of personal development between the years of his priestly training and the turbulence of his agitation in the 1950s bears the risk of a teleological perspective that glances over the relevance of later turning-points. Nevertheless, the diary entries point to a similarity in the broader socio-political context in which Boganda found himself – not least through the refractory problem of racism – and to parallels in his responses and, thus, to the sheer depth of some of his attitudes. In Barthélémy Boganda one can read the *longue durée* of colonial terror, yet also how this was politicized, and instrumentalized, in the last decade of colonial rule.

Moreover, the diaries also point to the fundamental ambiguity of missionary influence, leading in Boganda to a syncretism of Christian modernity and the rejection of old beliefs, which are caricatured yet at certain stages venerated (such as the rural universe). This was, of course, not unique. Jan Vansina has described how during the early days of colonial rule the young, especially, strove for an alliance of the old and the new, evaluating the Equatorial tradition by the criteria of a foreign Christian one and at the same time holding on to much of the older cognitive world view – thus turning into what he deemed “cultural schizophrenics.”<sup>106</sup>

The diaries also point to a contradiction in Boganda’s ideas and deportment. Missionary influence led him to retain faith that the colonial world could be reformed and metropolitan interests accommodated. Yet, as some of his correspondence shows, this was sometimes advanced with a ferocity that demanded total recognition of his view. This presaged some of his political vehemence during the 1950s (beyond the diaries’ span), when he responded to the failure of his co-operative project, the thwarting of reform proposals in the French National Assembly, and the slow change in behavior of administrators and settlers with hard-nosed audacity if not uncompromising intolerance.<sup>107</sup>

<sup>105</sup> See the article by Lisa Lindsay elsewhere in this volume.

<sup>106</sup> Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforest*, 245–247.

<sup>107</sup> And occasionally, a touch of rancour. When in 1947 instrumentalizing incidents of maltreatment, Boganda publicized war-time complaints against administrator Dieu, with whom he had clashed over his chapel project three years earlier. This led to an official investigation. Joblon to Dieu, pièce no. 12 (see note 89 above).

As the diaries were never meant for public consumption and therefore not intended as a justification of his thought or action, they may help – together with other primary sources –<sup>108</sup> to refine some of the hagiographic perspectives on his life. This, in turn, could assist in replacing the related nationalist narrative in the Central African Republic’s historiography with a more historicized analysis.<sup>109</sup> The diaries provide insight in the broad range of facets of Boganda’s life and the historical antecedents of his ideas and comportment as a later nationalist politician. More generally, since they were, so far, unknown in the study of his historical role, it is intriguing to think whether there could be other diaries, or kindred sources, of mission-educated Africans that could throw new light on their life and times. The fact that self-examination was part of seminary life and priestly education makes this an interesting possibility.

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<sup>108</sup> For example some of the administrative sources on his comportment in the Grimari region during the 1940s. See note 33 above.

<sup>109</sup> See for some perceptive remarks in this regard: Didier Bigo, *Pouvoir et obéissance en Centrafrique* (Paris: Karthala, 1988), 38–42; Andrea Ceriana Mayneri, *Sorcellerie et prophétisme en Centrafrique: L’imaginaire de la dépossesion en pays Banda* (Paris: Karthala, 2014), 40–44.

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