

Leopoldian Imperial Cartography: The Case of the Kouilou-Niari Basin prior to the Foundation of the Congo Free State

by

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KEYWORDS. — History of Cartography; History of Geography; Leopold II; Congo Free State; Kouilou-Niari.

SUMMARY. — This study focuses on Leopoldian imperial geography in times of tension prior to the establishment of the Congo Free State. The Geographical Conference of Brussels in 1876 resulted in exploration missions undertaken by the *AIA*, the *CEHC*, and the *AIC* in the Congo Basin and adjacent areas. This process was accompanied by land grabbing operations, which remained not without consequences. Geopolitical tensions with France and Portugal forced Leopold II to make choices. These were cartographically translated into maps that not only showed the spheres of influence but also reinforced the territorial claims. A new analysis of maps edited by Alphonse-Jules Wauters and published by the *Institut national de Géographie* sheds light on the specific case of the cartographic representation of the Kouilou-Niari Basin, where the claims made by Leopold's *AIC* had been disputed by France since 1883. The maps express, through their visual discourse, the entanglement of cartography with imperial agendas in the run-up to the Berlin Conference in 1884-1885.

Introduction

This paper deals with the interaction of geography, cartography and empire building during the reign of Leopold II (1835-1909), King of the Belgians (r. 1865-1909) and future Sovereign of the Congo Free State (r. 1885-1908), in the period preceding the Colonial Conference of Berlin, the final Act of which was accepted on 26 February 1885. Its purpose is to explore issues related to the question of how the Belgian geographical movement — a term used here to define in an encompassing way the eclectic set of people, publications, and projects associated with mid- and late-nineteenth-century geographical societies and comparable institutions (Vandersmissen, 2008, p. 23) — became fascinated by imperial projects. Moreover, the hypothesis is that an intensification in this regard has taken place from the 1880s onwards. As geopolitical tensions between the European powers were increasing, the nature of geography's involvement with Leopold II's actions changed. At a time when Leopold II's enterprise in Africa came under pressure, cartography was explicitly used as a means of underlining the King's territorial claims. One way to demonstrate and better understand this process of gradual entanglement is to analyse maps and documents related to the European pursuit of exploration, occupation and acquisition of the contested Kouilou-Niari Basin — located in what is today known as the Republic of the Congo, formerly known as Congo-Brazzaville — which allows us to link the monarch, on the one hand, and an institutional triangle consisting of the Brussels

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Institut national de Géographie, the *Société royale de Géographie d'Anvers*, and the *Société royale belge de Géographie*, on the other hand, to explicit forms of imperial cooperation, directly related to business that mattered in Berlin.

The Berlin Colonial Conference (1884-1885)

Before looking deeper into this case, one should take a glance at the Colonial Conference which, on the initiative of the German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck (1815-1898), took place in Berlin from 15 November 1884 to 26 February 1885. While excluding African leaders, the fourteen participating countries all had imperial affairs on their minds. They were involved in a competition for sovereignty rights and economic interests in Africa that could easily degenerate into a multinational military conflict. At the Conference agreements were made about the suppression of slave trade, and the freedom of navigation on the Niger and Congo Rivers, the freedom of trade along the latter (Korinman, 1986, de Gemeaux & Lorin, 2013). In essence, principles were accepted that further legitimized the imperial race (Kohen & Hébié, 2018, p. 82). Chapter 6, art. 34 of the final Act contains a declaration on the conditions to be fulfilled for new occupations in Africa and addresses the question of how imperial powers should inform each other in the future in a civil way about territorial conquest: “Any Power which henceforth takes possession of a tract of land on the coasts of the African continent outside of its present possessions, or which, being hitherto without such possessions, shall acquire them, as well as the power which assumes a Protectorate there, shall accompany the respective act with a notification thereof, addressed to the other Signatory Powers of the present Act, in order to enable them, if need be, to make good any claims of their own”. This is no less than a clear reference to the practices of both land grabbing and violence which were inherently linked to and became cornerstones of imperial competition in Africa (Gebeye, 2021, p. 50).

What matters is the Conference’s indirect outcome: the consecration of the territorial claims of the privately-managed *Association internationale du Congo* in the Congo River Basin which, during the Conference, transformed into the Congo Free State – an independent state ruled by a European sovereign, Leopold II. The road leading to the creation of this political construct was long and bumpy and much has been written about the political side of the affair by many a historian since Émile Banning published in 1885 his *La conférence africaine de Berlin et l'Association internationale du Congo* (Bruxelles: Librairie C. Muquardt). Regarding historiography related to Belgian and Leopoldian involvement, one should mention the work accomplished by François Bontinck, Jean Stengers, Jean-Luc Vellut, Guy Vanthemsche, and Pierre-Luc Plasman (Bontinck, 1969, 1971; Stengers, 1953, 1988, 1989; Vellut, 2017; Vanthemsche, 2012; Plasman, 2017). However, many things are left unsaid when it comes to Congo Free State’s relationship with the geographical sciences and cartography in Belgium. Only a few scholars pointed to this specific connection. Henri Nicolaï from the *Université libre de Bruxelles* wrote extensively about Leopoldian geographical imperialism, highlighting the role played by the journal *Le Mouvement Géographique*, which was initially published by the *Institut national de Géographie* (Nicolaï, 1988, 1993, 1994), a private initiative launched by the Polish immigrant editors Henry Merzbach (1837-1903) and Théodore Falk-Fabian (1845-1928). The periodical later fell into the hands of the *Compagnie du Congo pour le Commerce et l'Industrie*, a company headed by Albert Thys (1849-1915), a military officer and manager who had contributed to the design of the Leopoldian imperial framework in Africa from the very beginning. Nicolaï’s work has inspired a younger

generation in developing studies in the same vein (Brugaillère, 1993; Henry, 2008; Dupont, 2021). Roland Baetens published the first history of the Antwerp Geographical Society, evoking its focus on Congo (Baetens, 1976). The Antwerp society will soon be included in this story.

The Rise of Imperial Geography in Belgium in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century

It is useful to consider the state of geography in Belgium in the second half of the nineteenth century. Belgian “amateurs” of geography became connected to a wider movement that emerged all over the Western world. This movement was formed by a heterogeneous group of people and institutions sharing interest in a body of knowledge on the Earth which at the time was not yet promoted to the scientific status geography holds today. Scholars approached man’s relationship with the spatial environment from very different angles and, initially, without much sense of methodology. The 1850s saw the rise of economic geography. Belgium’s massive industrialization, with its effects on trade, transport and communication, inspired new ways of thinking about man and his material environment (Vandersmissen, 2010).

In 1871, Antwerp was the venue for the first international congress on geography. This meeting formed a core of people who aimed at systematically focusing on the study of the Earth in a Belgian context. Eclecticism prevailed, but economic geography became a dominant tendency. A new impetus came with the second international congress, held in Paris in 1875. The Belgian delegation experienced how geography became associated with colonization due to competition between the Western powers in Africa. Moreover, the Paris congress reinforced Leopold II’s personal interest in geographic themes. The diplomat Émile de Borchgrave (1837-1917) represented the King and gathered information useful to him. The year 1876 is seen as the start of Leopold II’s activities in Africa, a continent that caught the King’s attention quite late, as evidenced by two memoranda entitled “*Rêves*” and “*Afrique*”, dating from 26 August 1875 (Stengers, 1997). A year later, Leopold II organized the Geographical Conference of Brussels. Explorers and key players in the geographic movement of the time discussed the consequences of recent European exploration of the central parts of Africa while observing a map of the continent offered by Sir Rutherford Alcock (1809-1897), President of the British Royal Geographical Society, to the King. Over the next ten years, Leopold II used this movement emphatically as an instrument for establishing and materializing his own imperial agenda (Roeykens, 1956; Stengers, 1970; *Conférence de Géographie de 1876*, 1976; Vandersmissen, 2009).

There is a striking synchronism here, because in the same year Leopold II organized the Geographical Conference, the geographical societies of Brussels and Antwerp were launched. Their presidents, both generals in the Belgian army, Jean-Baptiste Liagre (1815-1891) in Brussels and Henri Emmanuel Wauwermans (1825-1902) in Antwerp, maintained good relations with the Court and were important for the merger of forces. Leopold II’s impulse was a catalyst. At the societies’ meetings the discourse of economic expansionism was popular. Echoing the humanist slogans of the Conference, the societies mobilized support for exploratory missions which, despite their scientific programme, had political and economic goals. They established relations with the King’s organizations active in Africa: the *Association internationale africaine (AIA)*, the *Comité d’Études du Haut-Congo (CEHC)*, and the *Association internationale du Congo (AIC)*. The societies contributed to the application of the “hero paradigm”: a framework of fixed descriptions, attributions, rituals, and ceremonies aimed at giving the African enter-

prise, the explorers and, by extension, Leopold II a place in a heroic tradition. The societies followed the line of internationalism and free trade as advocated by Leopold II, but simultaneously attacked anyone who was threatening Leopold II's project. Finally, knowledge was disseminated among the Belgian elites who received detailed descriptions of the areas traversed by the explorers through lectures and maps published by the societies (Vandersmissen, 2014).

Cartography as an Ally in an Imperial Race against Time: The Case of the “Kouilou-Niari” Basin

On the ground, in Africa, things did not go as planned. With the explorer-journalist Henry Morton Stanley (1841-1904), Leopold II had caught a big fish in 1878. He landed on the royal payroll and had to give new impetus to a difficult undertaking, tackling the efforts of mainly French and, to a minor extent, Portuguese competitors in the Lower Congo region. Especially Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza (1852-1905) had caused a reverse of chances. After having explored, for France, the Ogooué region, he had reached the Congo River in 1880 and signed formal treaties with Illoy Loubath Imumba I (?-1892), the Makoko (or King) of the Teke people of Mbé, and with other chiefs in the area, allowing French settlements on the right bank. This gave the French government not just a pretext for claiming the northern side of the Congo River, but also strong “official” documents, which it ratified in 1882, much to the horror of Leopold II and, it must be said, to many others outside France (Stengers, 1976, 1994).

Several decisions and tumultuous actions followed, the results of which are powerfully depicted in a map bearing the title *Le Congo depuis l'équateur jusqu'à l'océan et la vallée du Niadi-Kwilu* (fig. 1). The map illustrates, better than any other document, the important fact that the geographical movement in Belgium entered a combative phase, taking the side of Leopold II in a real power struggle. The map was added to the *Bulletin* of the Antwerp Geographical Society for the years 1883-1884. Its title highlights a twofold geographical focus. First, there is the cartographic representation of the lower reaches of the Congo River. But it is the second focus that is of interest to this investigation. The map pays particular attention to the valley of a river called Kouilou in the coastal region of what is today the Republic of the Congo but which upstream from the Sounda Gorge takes the name Niari, Niadi being an alternative name used in the nineteenth century. The first focus requires no explanation, the second does.

It is important to dwell on some details. First, something about the publisher. This was not the Antwerp Society but the *Institut national de Géographie*, founded in Brussels in 1882. Its name is confusing. One might suspect that it was a government agency. However, it was a public limited company, as already mentioned set up by Merzbach with the support of the King and a circle of Belgian financiers close to the Court with the intention of bringing together geographical information and publishing it commercially (Vandersmissen, 2009; Dupont, 2021). The *Institut* became a competitor to the *Institut cartographique militaire*, which worked with public funds. The geographical societies did not have direct institutional ties to this publishing house, but it is nevertheless noted that members of the societies were among the first shareholders. The *Institut* had produced the map using information provided between January and July 1883 by explorers employed by the *AIC*, as indicated in the cartouche of the map. It is stressed that the data were gathered “à la boussole de poche”, a clarification by which the *Institut* covered itself against possible imperfections. The elevations are depicted in shades of brown, the waterways with lines in blue, varying in thickness. The user of the map discovers the names of rivers and places and of peoples living

in the area. Two texts provide information about Stanley's exploration of *Lac Léopold II* (now Lake Mai-Ndombe) and of *Lac Mohumba* (now Lake Tumba). However, the most striking feature is the twenty-seven thick red dots with corresponding place names, also in red, and printed in larger capitals than the other place names. There is no legend here to clarify how the places marked in red differ from the others. But it is clear to everyone that one sees powerful representations of all stations founded by the organizations active in the region on behalf of Leopold II. Sixteen are situated on the banks of the Congo River. But what is more important for this investigation is the prominent place given on the map to stations situated north of the Congo River and in the Kouilou-Niari region — eleven in total, some with prominent names that explicitly refer to the Belgian monarch or his associates (fig. 2): *Stéphanie-ville* (named after Leopold II's daughter Princess Stéphanie, 1864-1945), *Philippe-ville* (after his brother Prince Philippe, 1837-1905), *Baudouin-ville* (after his cousin Prince Baudouin, 1869-1891), *Rudolfstadt* (after his Austrian son-in-law Archduke Rudolph, 1858-1889), *Stanley-Niadi* (after Henry Morton Stanley) — a powerful example of how geographic name giving can be used to enforce territorial claims.



Fig. 1. — *Le Congo depuis l'équateur jusqu'à l'océan et la vallée du Niadi-Kwilu*. Brussels, Institut national de Géographie, November 1883, published in *Bulletin de la Société royale de Géographie d'Anvers*, 8 (1883-1884). Antwerp, Hendrik Conscience Heritage Library, A 16560 © EHC.



Fig. 2. — Representations of stations founded by the organizations active in the Kouilou-Niari Basin on behalf of Leopold II. Detail of the map at fig. 1. Antwerp, Hendrik Conscience Heritage Library, A 16560 © EHC.

To what extent did this map reflect the situation on the ground? The stations did exist, but their size was insignificant. None of them predated the year 1882. They were all the result of a hasty land grab operation, inspired by France's activities nearby and by Portugal's claim on the Congo mouth, which threatened to cut off Leopold's stations on the Congo River from direct contact with Europe. The neat presentation on the map hides a tiring, dangerous, frustrating, and violent race against time for the explorers engaged in the operation, but also, for the local populations living in the Kouilou-Niari region, a series of confrontations, manipulations, and robberies they had never experienced before.

The Stanley papers preserved at the Archives of the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren contain letters Stanley received from the King and his Brussels entourage in which direct orders were given to shield the flanks of the area Stanley had crossed in Lower Congo from Portuguese claims. A letter dated 6 December 1882 clearly shows the nervousness in Brussels. Leopold's aide-de-camp, Colonel Maximilien Strauch (1829-1911), was very concerned about the imminent recognition by England of Portugal's claim to the Congo estuary, which became more pertinent after the French ratification of the already mentioned agreement on 21 November of that year. The instruction is clear: "to take possession of the best strategic positions not yet occupied" [1]*. And the foundation of a station at the mouth of the Kouilou River is such a position. A letter sent from Brussels on 6 January 1883 is even more clear. Stanley was instructed "to make every effort in order to win over to our views some powerful chiefs" [2].

The operations on the ground were commanded by the English officer John Grant Elliott (1837-?) who first worked as an agent for the *CEHC* and the *AIC* (Heyse, 1948). The instructions he received from Stanley were all about pushing north from Vivi, opening routes to the Upper Congo region, and concluding treaties with local peoples in which sovereignty rights

* Numbers in brackets [] refer to the notes, pp. 191-192.

were obtained in exchange for gifts, the consequences of which were hardly, if ever, explained in substance. Grant Elliott was assisted by a few Europeans who worked on behalf of Leopold's organizations. When one goes through their biographies — most of them have a note in the *Belgian Colonial Biography* published by the *Institut royal colonial belge*, later known as the Royal Academy for Overseas Sciences — one notices that the content of their work and the way in which they carried out the assignments are barely discussed or problemized. Their names are nevertheless well known. Liévin Van de Velde (1850-1888), who has his monument in Ghent's *Citadelpark*, headed for the mouth of the Kouilou River and secured it for Leopold II by founding Rudolfstadt before the arrival of a French ship, which was obliged to retreat to Loango. He also founded Baudouinville on the Kouilou (Coosemans, 1952). John Grant Elliott himself reached in a short time the Niari region and left marks of his presence by founding "stations" where he left some of his men to command and negotiate with local communities. Edmond Hanssens (1843-1884) founded Philippeville and soon succeeded in establishing a line of communication with the region of Léopoldville, which was essential for justifying the unity of the operations and the territorial claims (Engels, 1948). All these men — Grant Elliott, Van de Velde, Hanssens, but also Alexandre Legat (1860-1898), Édouard Destrain (1854-1890), Jean-Pierre Husson (1854-1923), Victor Harou (1851-1923), Frédéric Orban (1857-1883), Arthur Hodister (1847-1892) — have been integrated into historiography under the hero paradigm, in which courage and self-sacrifice were linked to Leopold's programme for "civilization" and "progress". Liévin Van de Velde boasted in 1886 in a paper published by the Brussels Geographical Society that "not a single shot had been fired, not a drop of blood had been spilled for this important conquest" [3].

Although some valuable studies of treaties in Congo had already been undertaken in a fragmented way by some historians (Stengers, 1969; Vangroenweghe, 1980; Vellut, 1985), Christine Denuit-Somerhausen was in 1988 the first to study the practice of concluding treaties in Congo in a systematic and almost comprehensive way, pointing to the acceleration in the process around 1883. Based on careful comparison of treaties preserved mainly at the archives of the former Belgian Ministry of the Colonies, housed at the Foreign Affairs Archives in Brussels, she identified different types of contracts as well as their drafters and the areas they covered. In terms of content, she established that the treaties had evolved and that different or new emphases had been placed depending on the political situation at the time. Of importance to our research is her discovery that around November 1882 a new phase started in which the treaties explicitly began to include the transfer of sovereignty rights from local rulers to Leopoldian organizations such as the *CEHC* and the *AIC* (Denuit-Somerhausen, 1988).

Unfortunately, no attention was paid to the Kouilou-Niari region in this study. This omission is understandable because only treaties with a direct relationship with areas that were ultimately included in the Congo Free State were retained, which is not the case for Kouilou-Niari. However, thanks to digitization and online publication, we have been able to identify a very extensive, never-before-studied collection of original treaties directly related to the Leopoldian land-grabbing operations in the Kouilou-Niari valley, as they are all produced by agents of the *CEHC* and the *AIC*. At present these precious and revealing documents are preserved at the French *Archives nationales d'Outre-Mer*, located in Aix-en-Provence. It concerns two hundred and eighty-nine treaties concluded between 11 February 1883 and 26 September 1884 during campaigns of negotiating with and exerting pressure on local leaders, male and female. The rawness of the practices cannot be ignored. The articles stipulate that the local rulers involved

“make over and give up full property” of their territories to the *CEHC* and the *AIC*. These leaders signed mainly with a simple mark in the form of a cross. The persons who gave their agreement by signing with a cross were all indicated by a title, almost always king, queen, or prince, in such a way that their sovereignty was emphasized and could therefore not be questioned because there was no higher party who could revoke the renunciation of “the sole and exclusive right of control” of the land and of the navigation on the river(s). The treaties were written in French or in English, not in local languages. In exchange for the transfer of territorial rights, the local chiefs rarely received money, usually rolls of textile or spirits, especially gin. The agreements were very precise in terms of land delimitation, with clear geographic markers [4].

From the many treaties that share the same content we present here below, as an example, the one concluded on 5 August 1884 by Édouard Destrain on behalf of the *AIC* with queen Bongo, described as “sovereign chief” of “Chindoundah Country”, at the capital “M’Ganda Moukiti” (fig. 3). The relinquishment of full ownership of the territories in favour of the *AIC* was final because Art. 1 clearly stated that queen Bongo accepted the engagement on behalf of herself “and in the name of her heirs or successors” [5]. As if the *AIC* agents wanted absolute certainty about the future, even the queen’s successor had to sign the treaty with the same mark in the form of a cross. The ceded areas were precisely indicated, not only with a geographical description but also with the addition of the names of the respective rulers to the north, west, south, and east of the areas in question. Separate treaties were concluded with each of these rulers, creating a chain of adjacent territories, all of which henceforth fell under the authority of the *AIC* controlled by Leopold II. An important nuance here is that sovereignty rights were not equivalent to property rights. Art. 4 stipulated that “The *Association internationale du Congo* expressly agree [*sic*] to leave to the King [*sic*] and natives established on the aforesaid territories the property and free use of the lands which they are actually cultivating” [6]. It will be noted that no explicit statement is made about the ownership of land not yet cultivated.

Not all claims were laid down in treaties. Business agreements in the form of contracts also played a role. An important principle, as would later become clear in Berlin, was that powers which laid claim to territory in the interior of Africa had a starting point on the coast. Therefore, Leopold’s men in the field had already looked for means to achieve this in the areas situated north of the Congo estuary. The files preserved at Aix-en-Provence also include an agreement (*contrat*) on the acquisition of the Kouilou estuary dating from 11 February 1883. It concerns an agreement (fig. 4a,b) made by Liévin Van de Velde with Manuel Gonçalves Saboga (?-?), a Portuguese citizen and *gérant en chef de la factorerie portugaise* in Loango, who renounced the possession of a bamboo dwelling house situated at the mouth of the Kouilou River, left bank, and of all land he owned up to the Dutch settlement further on, in exchange for a sum of 30 £ sterling [7]. Once again, explicit commitments for the future were embedded in the contract: the Portuguese agent had to promise never to make any reclaims regarding the land and the house in the future. Moreover, none of the neighbours were allowed to make a claim. This is also relevant considering the discussions for which Leopold II and his men were apparently already preparing. The rights were ceded directly to the *Comité de l’Expédition internationale*, which is noted with the address of its registered office: Brederodestraat number 7, Brussels – i.e. the *AIC* offices in the backyard of the Royal Palace [8]. In such a way the *CEHC* and *AIC* people involved constituted the province of *Kouilou-Niadi*, which was divided into four districts and became directly connected to the other territories under Leopoldian control.

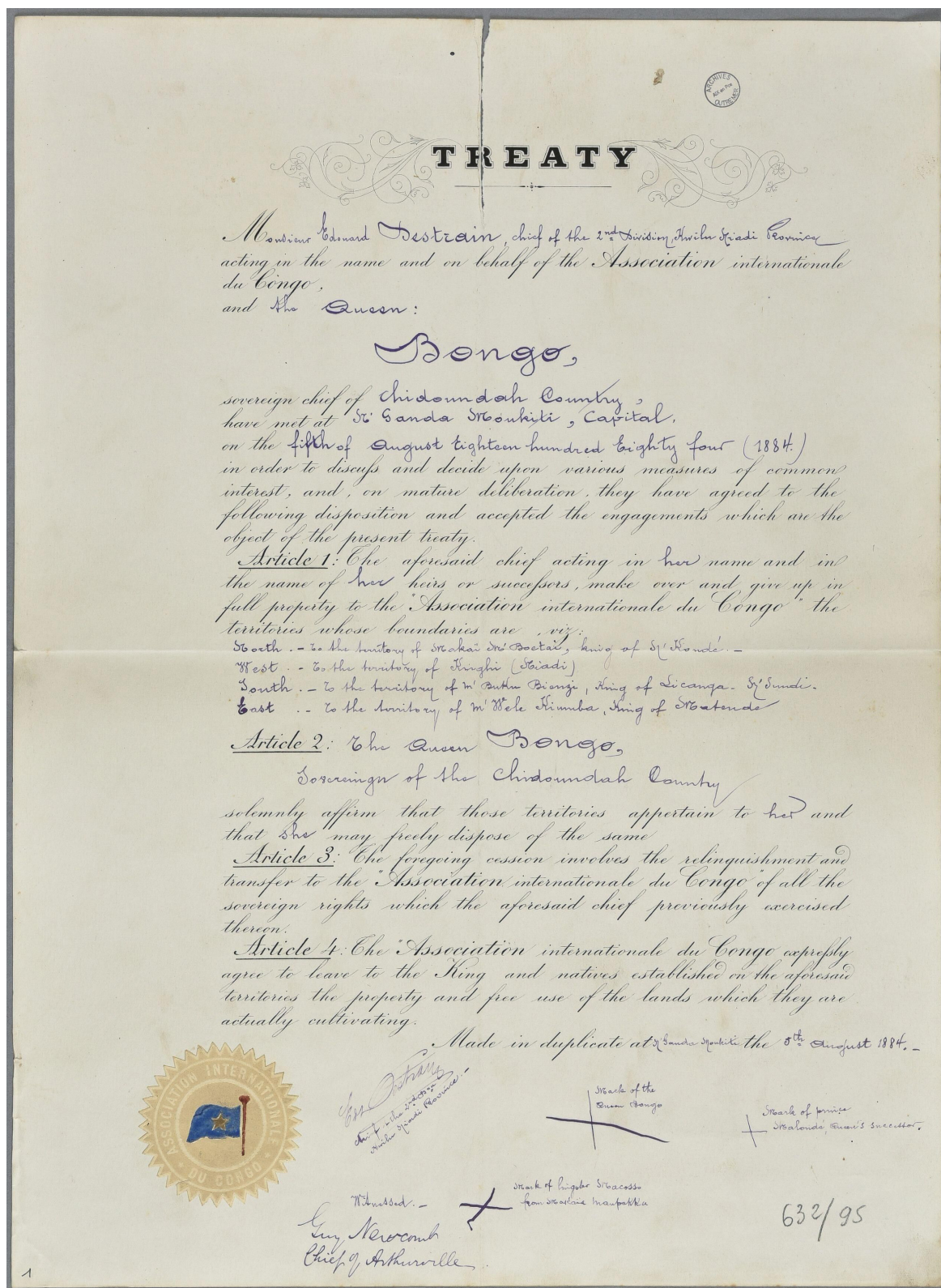


Fig. 3. — Treaty concluded by Édouard Destrain on behalf of the AIC with queen Bongo, 5 August 1884. Aix-en-Provence, Archives nationales d'Outre-Mer, 40 COL 632, treaty n° 95 © ANOM.

The Geographical “Triangle” in Full Force behind Leopold II

In Belgium, the *Institut national de Géographie* and the two geographical societies followed the evolution closely thanks to contacts with people in key positions at the *AIC*. The Antwerp Geographical Society, which included the map in its *Bulletin*, flooded its readers in 1883-1884 with a mass of information about the *AIC*'s progress in the field. At the same time, it praised the map that resulted from recent activities: “This map simply presents us with a new world. Where geographers used to leave nothing, are now hundreds of indications of all kinds. Fairly recent maps of Kiepert, Lange, Bastian etc. have aged incredibly, they look like old flintlock, placed next to a repeating Mauser rifle” — the comparison with firearms is probably coincidental but nevertheless significant [9]. The Antwerp Geographical Society argued that the *AIC* had acquired lands legally and that for de Brazza there was still enough ground left to expand French territories. The Society's conclusion sounds as if Leopold II was holding the pen: “Forward! And may God protect the valiant men who are creating a new world. What a joy that they will not be halted by small minds!” [10]. The Brussels Geographical Society published an extract of the map in the volume of its *Bulletin* and underlined it was “proof of the progress of the great work sponsored by our sovereign” [11].

The *Institut national de Géographie*, for its part, set up an expedition of its own which, it was said, would be purely scientific, and aimed at solving hydrographic problems. It was a small-scale mission headed by Dr Josef Chavanne (1846-1902), an Austrian who had already travelled in Central and North America, was praised for his meteorological knowledge, and had become the editor of the *Mitteilungen der Wiener Geographischen Gesellschaft* [12]. Nevertheless, it is striking that he was instructed to start his journey through the Niari region and then, on the border with the French sphere of influence, to continue and face the “unknown” [13].

In April 1884, the *Institut* launched its journal *Le Mouvement Géographique*. With regard to the political dispute about the status of the Lower Congo and the Kouilou-Niari, the tone had been set from the very first issue: “In the Lower Congo, the *Association* has been able to appreciate, on the occasion of recent unrest, the powerful prestige of its Flag. On the coast, north of Kouilou, the native chiefs have just spontaneously placed under its protectorate 370 kilometers of coastline. Portugal is forced to restrict its astonishing claims, to respect acquired rights and to admit as a border that of the *Association*, in Nokki” [14]. Editor-in-chief Alphonse-Jules Wauters (1845-1916) looked at the future with confidence, as the US Senate was ready to recognize the sovereignty rights of the *AIC*'s “free territories”, as he called them [15]. The same year the *Institut* published Chavanne's detailed map of the disputed region, the *Carte de l'Afrique équatoriale entre le Congo et l'Ogooué, dressée d'après l'état des dernières explorations*. Now many more place names appeared on the map of the vast Kouilou-Niari region, as well as other geographical details, such as tributaries of the Kouilou, with indications of their names (fig. 5a). Moreover, as the legend shows, the map presents the coloured itineraries of twelve explorers, among whom Van de Velde, Grant Elliott and Hanssens, plus de Brazza and others. Besides, the legend also shows map symbols for missionary stations and trading posts, thereby putting the Kouilou-Niari effort into a wider context (fig. 5b). It must be stressed that this map does not yet represent Chavanne's own itinerary. As the map is undated, our hypothesis is that it is a map drawn by Chavanne before his departure to Central Africa, synthesizing the geographical knowledge at hand in early 1884, including the one about the

Kouilou-Niari region, and published by the financier of his mission. The map was published before the signing of the final Act in Berlin as it still mentions stations owned by the *AIC* in the Kouilou-Niari region. Chavanne's cartographic work related to Central Africa certainly deserves more in-depth research, as some sketches and short articles published in *Le Mouvement Géographique* in 1885 demonstrate that he made detailed topographic surveys, mainly in the Lower Congo region. The *Institut national de Géographie* received copies of Chavanne's findings at the end of 1884 [16].



Fig. 5a. — Carte de l'Afrique équatoriale entre le Congo et l'Ogooué, dressée d'après l'état des dernières explorations à l'échelle de 1:2,000,000; par Dr. Joseph Chavanne. Brussels, Institut national de Géographie, 1884. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Société de Géographie, inv. n° SGE SG Y F-31 © BnF.

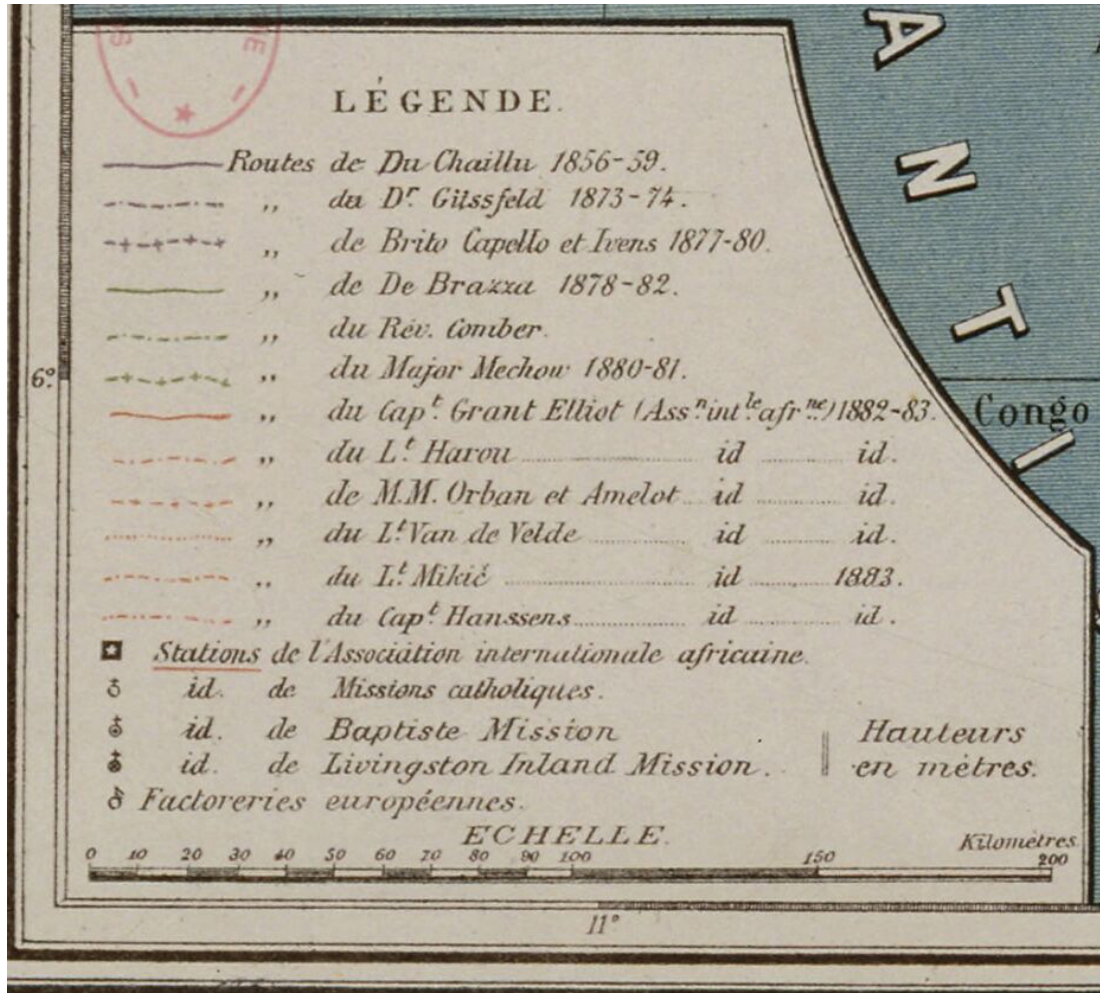


Fig. 5b. — Legend identifying the itineraries of twelve explorers in Chavanne's map. Detail of the map at fig. 5a. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Société de Géographie, inv. n° SGE SG Y F-31 © BnF.

In the first days of 1885, while negotiations in Berlin were going full speed ahead, the *Institut* presented the readers of *Le Mouvement Géographique* with the supplement entitled *Les Belges au Congo* (fig. 6a). The cover's visual discourse was easy to understand: a pristine African river landscape, above which a radiant five-pointed star shines, evoking the one on the flag of the AIA, and with an unmistakably nationalistic claim, supported by the ideal of civilization: Belgians, bringers of Light into a world where Darkness reigned. In this brochure, the Kouilou-Niari region came into the picture, with portraits of AIC agents who were presented as selfless “heroes”, committed to progress (fig. 6b). Once again it is striking how the somewhat disguised language surrounding the acquisition of sovereignty rights concealed the real practices on the ground. Nevertheless, it was clear to the editors that the dozens of treaties obtained through land grabbing and forced negotiation were key to the consolidation of the AIC as a territorial power on the African continent: “At the beginning of 1884, Captain Grant Elliott, appointed administrator of the province of Kouilou, added to this immense territory three times the size of Belgium, by contract with the native chiefs, the entire part of the coast which extends between the mouth of Kouilou, to the south, and the mouth of Setta-Camé, to the north, more than three hundred kilometers of coastline, where the agents of the *Association* were quick to fly the blue flag” [17].

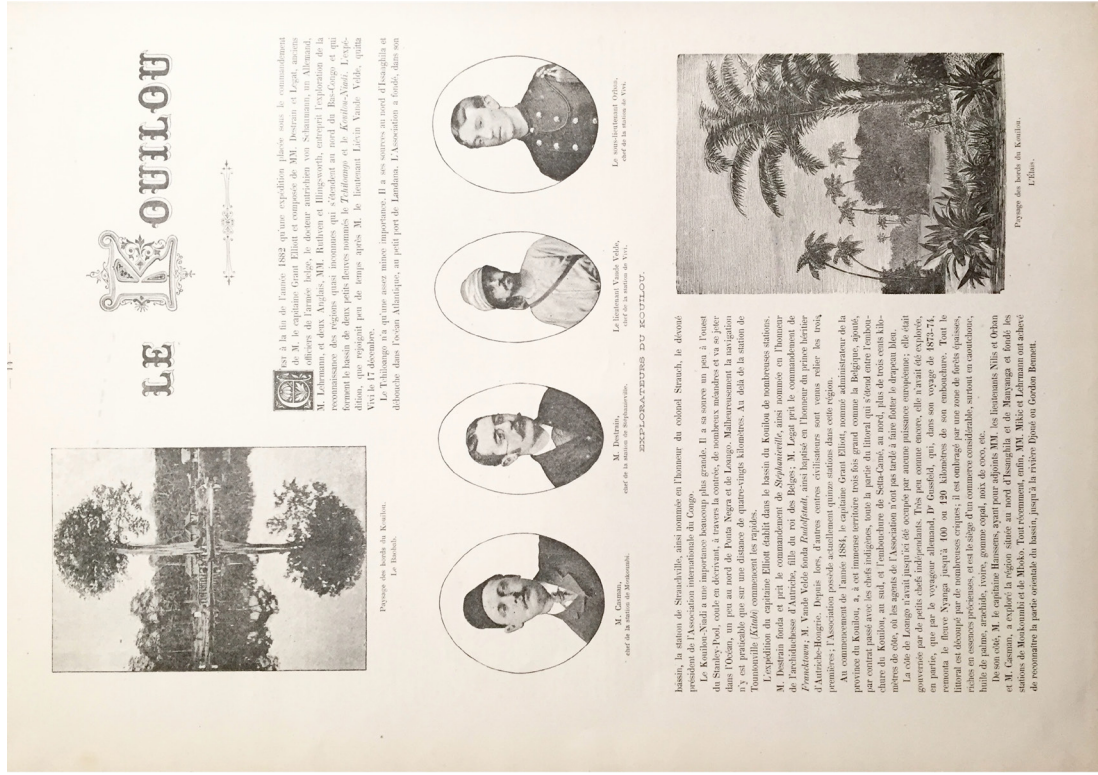
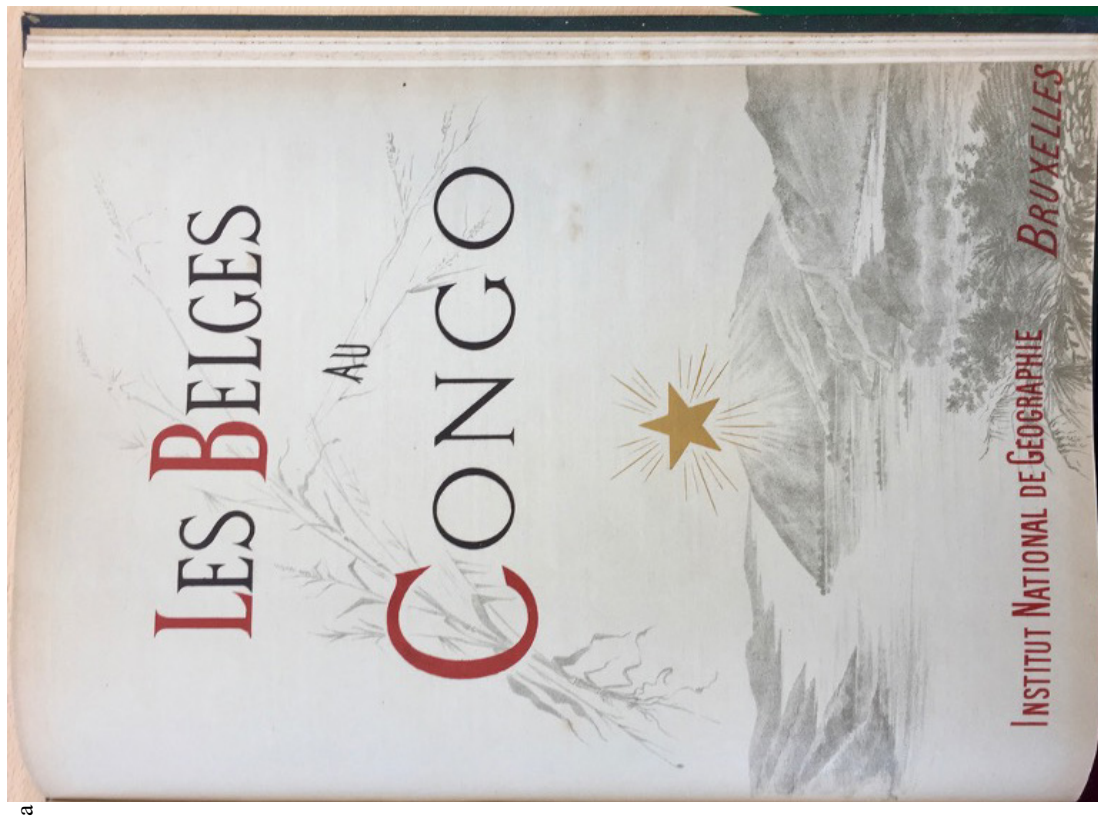


Fig. 6a,b. — *Les Belges au Congo*. Brussels, Institut national de Géographie, 1885. Left (a): cover; right (b): “Le Kouilou” with the portraits of Guillaume Casman, Édouard Destrain, Liévin Van de Velde, and Frédéric Orban. Private collection © J. Vandersmissen.

To the brochure was added a *Croquis de l'Afrique centrale et du bassin du Congo tel qu'il a été délimité par la Conférence de Berlin* (fig. 7a).

This map was carefully drawn up by Alphonse-Jules Wauters based on the mass of data he had acquired through reports and correspondence of AIC agents and many other actors on the ground. The map apparently served no explicit political purpose: it was essentially a physical map that focused on the Congo and its many tributaries. It was a representation of the Congo River Basin as it could be determined according to the most recent state of research. However, the map cannot of course be separated from the negotiations in Berlin, where the Conference was nearing its conclusion, and where the boundaries of this Congo River Basin were indeed essential elements in a fierce debate about territorial claims. Hence, it was certainly not without political intentions that the Kouilou-Niari region was obviously included by Wauters within the zone of the Congo Basin indicated in yellow, even though this valley clearly did not belong to it, based on geographical arguments.

The readers could see the vastness of the unexplored areas, denoted by the term “*inexploré*”. But, what was more, the red dots on the map were not to be ignored. A legend now unequivocally identified them as stations of the AIC (fig. 7b). The yellow-coloured shape on this map is that of the Congo Basin, as per the map’s title. In addition, the last part of the legend indicates that the part shown in yellow represents the “free trade area”. This double designation is probably due to the fact that the Congo Basin represented as the catchment area of its river system (as far as then known) was initially (date of the map, 1 January 1885) the area intended to be declared for free trade (as confirmed in article 1, paragraph 1 of the final Act of the Berlin Conference) [18].

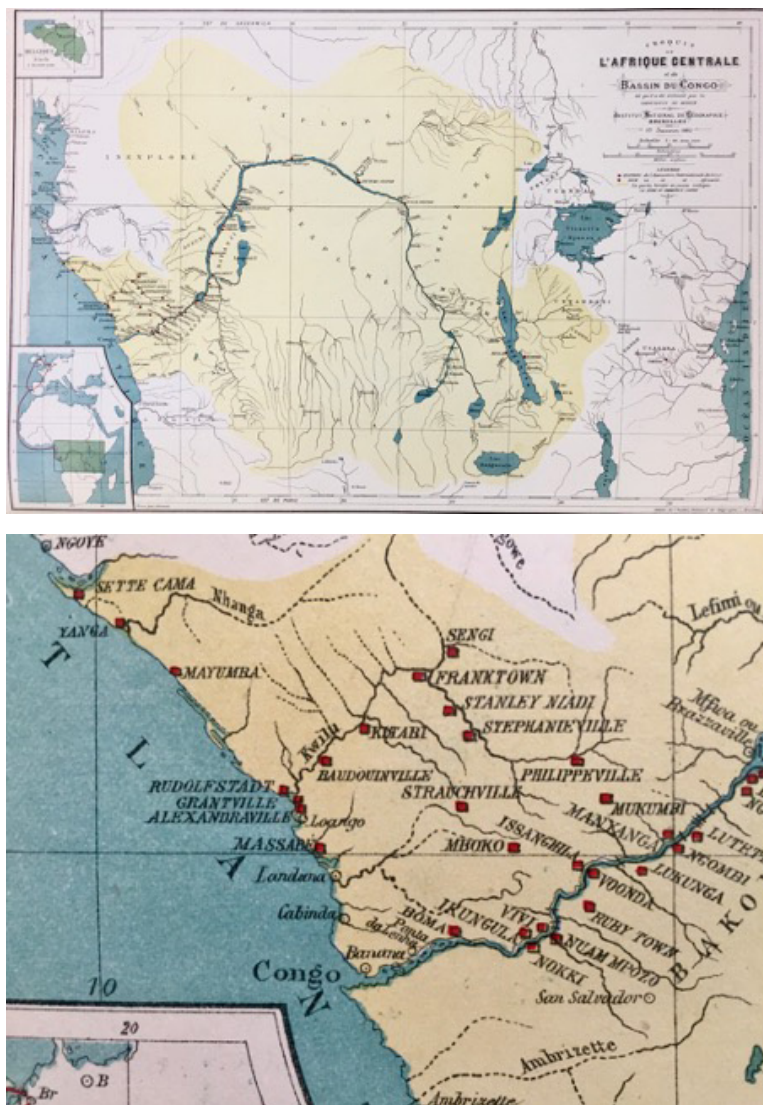


Fig. 7a,b. — *Croquis de l'Afrique centrale et du bassin du Congo tel qu'il a été délimité par la Conférence de Berlin*. Scale: 1:10,000,000. Brussels, Institut national de Géographie, 1 January 1885. Above (a): the map; below (b): detail with a representation of the AIC stations in the Kouilou-Niari region. Private collection © J. Vandersmissen.

Concluding Remarks: A Settlement Worth 300,000 Francs...

It was all to no avail. Leopold II had to accept that the Kouilou-Niari valley would pass into new hands. Berlin was not the only place where negotiations were held. The King and his associates fought on many fronts simultaneously. There was a direct dialogue with Paris. On 5 February 1885, a convention was signed between the French government and the *AIC*. The Kouilou-Niari province was ceded to France. Leopold gave in. It was an important concession, allowing him to make a step forward elsewhere. He thus secured his claim on the vast area lying beyond the left bank of the Congo River.

The Archives of the Royal Palace in Brussels preserve diplomatic letters about the agreement's implementation. France in no way wanted to present Portugal with a *fait accompli*. The *AIC* still had to settle its issues with that party separately. But the turning point had been taken. The Berlin negotiations about the final Act's phrasing soon came to fruition. Practical issues, such as the determination of borders between the French territories and the future Congo Free State, had to be settled by a special committee. Cartography once again played its role. Maximilien Strauch, on behalf of Leopold II, submitted a file to Paul de Borchgrave d'Altena (1827-1901), the King's negotiator in Paris, in relation to the agreements concluded with the French Minister of Foreign Affairs Charles de Freycinet (1828-1923). This file contained a map published by the *Institut national de Géographie* in November 1884 (fig. 8a), a copy of which can be found in the Archives of King Leopold II's Cabinet [19]. On that copy the borders of the future Congo Free State are drawn in a rough way. The red line passes through the zone with stations founded by the *AIC* (fig. 8b). There, the Kouilou-Niari valley and its stations are amputated from the Congo region.

As soon as the Berlin Conference was over, Adolphe-Jules Wauters published the first version of his *Carte politique de l'Afrique centrale* in *Le Mouvement Géographique* (fig. 9). Again, as was the case for most other maps discussed in this paper, apart from the first one, this map indicates longitude with reference to both the Paris *and* the Greenwich prime meridian. It represents the borders of the Portuguese, German, Spanish, British and Zanzibari possessions in Central Africa. Furthermore, the Congo Free State and the French possessions are represented in their most primitive states. It should be observed that the former *AIC* stations in now French Kouilou-Niari region became part of the "free trade area" as defined in Berlin. More border corrections would be made in the years ahead.

Leopold II got his money back. It involved administrative issues such as handing over the original treaties concluded by the *AIC*, seen as proof of the transfer of sovereignty rights. This is why the two hundred and eighty-nine treaties are at present at the French *Archives nationales d'Outre-Mer* in Aix-en-Provence. The King received an indemnity of three hundred thousand francs for the territories the *AIC* had to give up. He was not fully satisfied, believing that the expenses had been almost ten times higher. But the sum was considered acceptable, as he was now able to start new operations in "his" Congo Free State [20]. The *Institut national de Géographie* and the Geographical Societies of Antwerp and Brussels paid tribute to the King, with laudations and special publications. In the coming decades, their contributions to imperial geography and cartography would continue to grow.

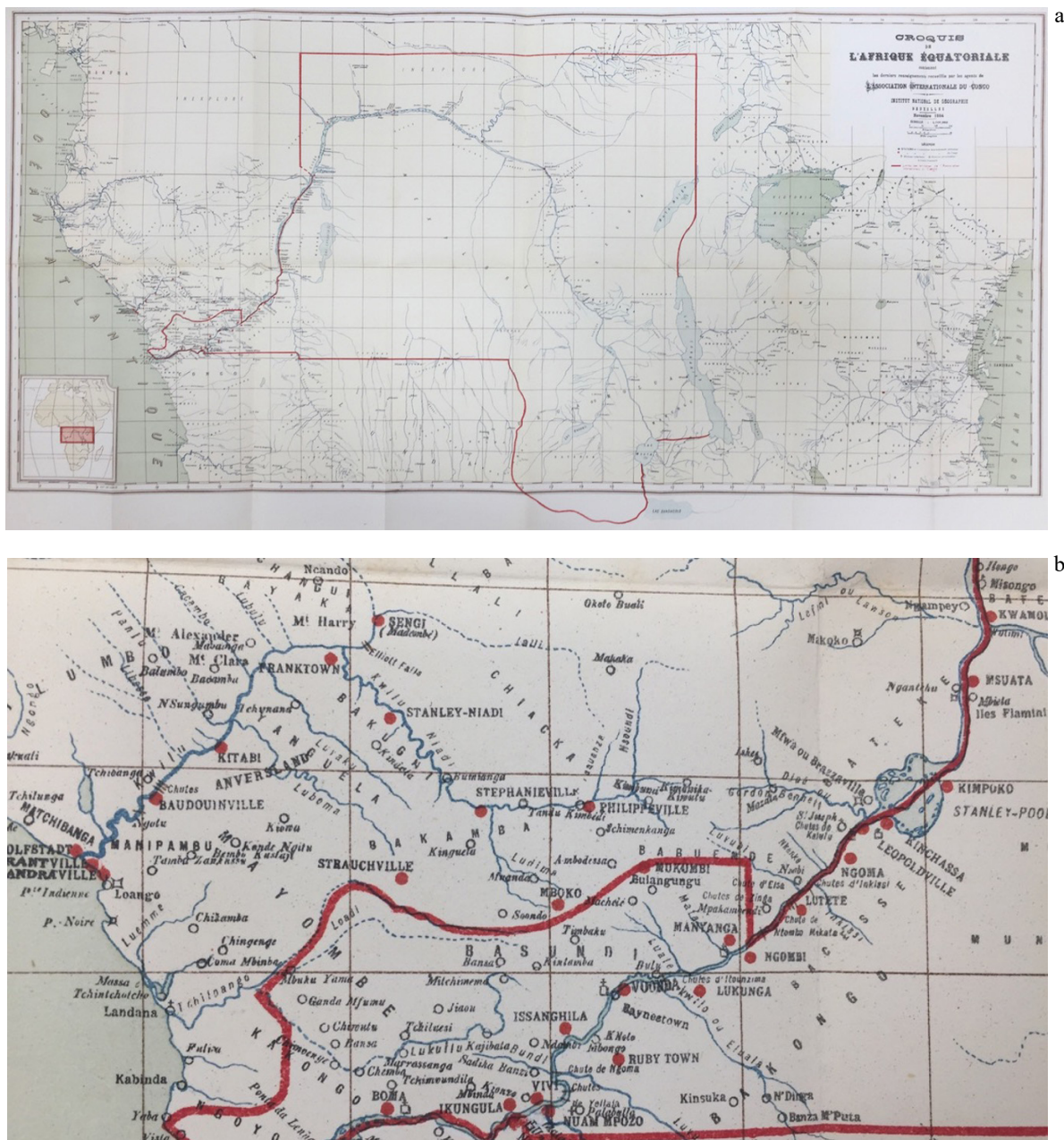


Fig. 8a,b. — Croquis de l'Afrique équatoriale contenant les derniers renseignements recueillis par les agents de l'Association internationale du Congo. Brussels, Institut national de Géographie, November 1884. Scale: 1:4,000,000. Brussels, Archives of the Royal Palace, Archives of the Cabinet of King Leopold II, inv. n° 260 © ARP. The red drawing of boundaries has been added at a later stage in the frame of negotiations with France. Above (a): the map; below (b): detail of the Kouilou-Niari valley © ARP.

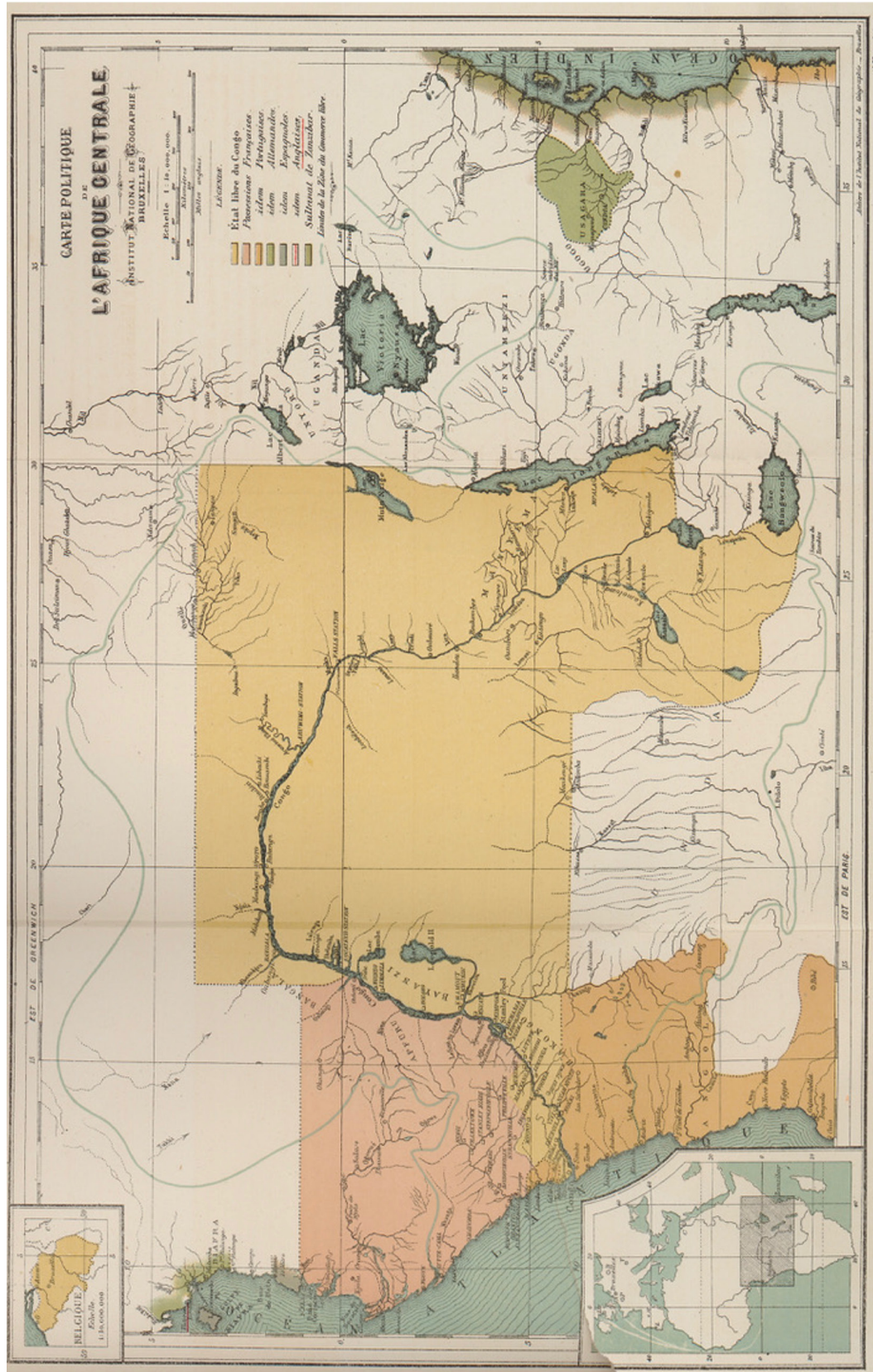


Fig. 9. — Carte politique de l'Afrique centrale. Scale: 1:10,000,000. Brussels, Institut national de Géographie, 1 March 1885. Private collection © J. Vandersmissen.

OVERVIEW OF HISTORICAL EVENTS

27 August 1876	Foundation of the <i>Société belge de Géographie</i> , Brussels
12-14 September 1876	Geographical Conference at the Royal Palace, Brussels – creation of the <i>Société internationale africaine (AIA)</i>
20 November 1876	Voting on the articles of association of the <i>Société de Géographie d'Anvers</i>
14 January 1877	First official meeting of the <i>Société de Géographie d'Anvers</i>
12 August 1877	H.M. Stanley arrives in Boma after descending the Congo River
25 November 1878	Creation of the <i>Comité d'Études du Haut-Congo (CEHC)</i> , Brussels
10 December 1878	H.M. Stanley signs a contract with the <i>CEHC</i> in view of the foundation of stations
17 November 1879	Creation of the <i>Association internationale du Congo (AIC)</i> , Brussels
October 1882	The <i>CEHC</i> decides to organize an expedition to the Niari
12 January 1883	The expedition to the Niari led by John Grant Elliott departs from Vivi with instructions given by H.M. Stanley
11 February 1883	Agreement concluded between Liévin Van de Velde and Manuel Gonçalves Saboga about the <i>AIC</i> 's possession of the estuary of the Kouilou River
15 November 1884	Start of the Berlin Colonial Conference
5 February 1884	Convention signed between the French government and the <i>AIC</i> – the Kouilou-Niari region is ceded to France
26 February 1885	End of the Berlin Colonial Conference – signature of the final Act

NOTES

- [1] Tervuren, Archives of the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Stanley papers, inv. n° 919, letter from Colonel Strauch to Henry Morton Stanley, Brussels, 6 December 1882.
- [2] Tervuren, Archives of the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Stanley papers, inv. n° 921, letter from Colonel Strauch to Henry Morton Stanley, Brussels, 6 January 1883.
- [3] L. Van de Velde, “La région du Bas-Congo et du Kwilou-Niadi: usages et coutumes des indigènes”, in *Bulletin de la Société Royale Belge de Géographie*, 10, 347-412 (1886); original quote in French, pp. 360-361: “Le drapeau bleu à l'étoile d'or flottait dans une vingtaine de villages importants et de nombreux traités plaçaient tout le bassin du fleuve sous la souveraineté de l'Association. Chose remarquable: aucun conflit ne s'était élevé avec les indigènes, pas un coup de fusil n'avait été tiré, pas une goutte de sang n'avait été répandue pour cette importante conquête”.
- [4] Aix-en-Provence, Archives nationales d'Outre-Mer, Ministère des Colonies-Traités (1687-1911), Afrique subsaharienne, Congo, Oubangui-Chari et Tchad (ancien Congo français), Province du Kwilu-Niadi (traités passés par la Belgique), 11 février 1883 – 26 septembre 1884.
- [5] Aix-en-Provence, Archives nationales d'Outre-Mer, 40 COL 632, treaty n° 95 concluded by Édouard Destrain on behalf of the *AIC* with queen Bongo, 5 August 1884.
- [6] *Ibidem*.
- [7] Aix-en-Provence, Archives nationales d'Outre-Mer, 40 COL 639/1, agreement concluded between Liévin Van de Velde and Manuel Gonçalves Saboga, “Kwilu-River”, 11 February 1883.
- [8] *Ibidem*.

- [9] “Le Congo”, in *Bulletin de la Société Royale de Géographie d’Anvers*, 8, 268-272 (1883-1884); original quote in French, p. 269: “cette carte nous présente tout simplement un monde nouveau. Là où jadis les géographes ne mettaient rien, se trouvent maintenant des centaines d’indications de toutes sortes. Les cartes assez récentes des Kiepert, des Lange, des Bastian etc. ont incroyablement vieilli. Elles font l’effet de vieux fusils à pierre, placés à côté d’un mauser à répétition”.
- [10] *Ibid.*; original quote in French, p. 272: “En avant! et que Dieu protège les hommes vaillants qui sont en train de créer un nouveau monde. Quel bonheur qu’ils ne se soient pas laissé arrêter par les petits esprits!”.
- [11] “Le Congo, depuis l’Équateur jusqu’à l’Océan et la vallée du Niadi-Kwilu”, in *Bulletin de la Société Royale Belge de Géographie*, 8, 105 (1884); original quote in French, p. 105: “preuve du progrès de la grande œuvre patronnée par notre souverain”.
- [12] “Chavanne Josef”, in *Österreichisches Biographisches Lexikon 1815-1950*, 1, 142 (1957).
- [13] “Notre carte de l’Afrique centrale”, in *Le Mouvement Géographique*, 1(2), 6 (1884).
- [14] “L’Association internationale africaine”, in *Le Mouvement Géographique*, 1(1), 3 (1884); original quote in French, p. 3: “Dans le bas Congo, l’Association a pu apprécier, à l’occasion de troubles récents, le puissant prestige de son Drapeau. Sur le littoral, au nord du Kilou, les chefs indigènes viennent de placer spontanément, sous son protectorat, 370 kilomètres de côtes. Le Portugal se voit contraint de restreindre ses étonnantes prétentions, de respecter les droits acquis et d’admettre pour frontière celle de l’Association, à Nokki”.
- [15] *Le Mouvement Géographique*, 1(1), 3.
- [16] *Le Mouvement Géographique*, 2(8), 30 (1885): “Le docteur Chavanne, qui, à la fin de l’année dernière, était revenu passer quelque temps en Europe, pour s’y remettre d’une splénologie qu’il avait contractée en Afrique, retourne au Congo. [...] Nous avons la satisfaction d’apprendre à nos lecteurs que le savant géographe continuera, comme par le passé, à tenir le *Mouvement géographique* au courant de ce qui se fait là-bas et à lui fournir des études sur les côtés les plus intéressants de la question africaine. À ce propos, disons ici que les quelques mois que le docteur a passés en Europe ont été consacrés au calcul de ses observations et à la confection d’une carte du bas Congo. Cette carte, dont l’épreuve corrigée est entre les mains de l’Institut national de géographie, est dressée à l’échelle de 1:200.000. Elle donne en détail toute la partie de la côte occidentale, qui s’étend entre Landana et Shark-Point, le cours du Congo depuis Banana jusqu’à Boma; puis, dans des cartouches: 1° à l’échelle de 1:100.000, le Congo entre Tchinsala et l’île Tchiongo, c’est-à-dire la partie si intéressante du cours du fleuve devant Boma depuis Fétiche-Roc jusqu’au-delà de l’île des Princes; 2° et 3° à l’échelle de 1:25.000, les plans de Banana et de Boma. Ce document, bien autrement complet et précis que la carte de l’amirauté anglaise et que n’importe quelle carte portugaise, sera mis en vente dans quelques semaines”.
- [17] *Les Belges au Congo* (Bruxelles, Institut national de Géographie, 1884); original quote in French: “Au commencement de l’année 1884, le capitaine Grant Elliott, nommé administrateur de la province de Kouilou, a, à cet immense territoire trois fois grand comme la Belgique, ajouté par contrat passé avec les chefs indigènes, toute la partie du littoral qui s’étend entre l’embouchure du Kouilou, au sud, et l’embouchure de Setta-Camé, au nord, plus de trois cents kilomètres de côtes, où les agents de l’Association n’ont pas tardé à faire flotter le drapeau bleu”.
- [18] E. Banning, *Le partage politique de l’Afrique d’après les transactions internationales les plus récentes (1885 à 1888)*. Bruxelles, Librairie européenne C. Muquardt, p. 161.
- [19] Brussels, Archives of the Royal Palace, Archives of the Cabinet of King Leopold II, inv. n° 260.
- [20] Brussels, Archives of the Royal Palace, archives relating to the external development of Belgium during the reign of Leopold II, inv. n° 137, titled: “Négociations avec le gouvernement français pour la reprise, par la France, des stations créées par l’AIC au Niadi-Kwilu (négociations Rouvier)”.

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