



A SHORT HISTORY OF THE ROYAL BELGIAN OVERSEAS UNION

By José Clément

The first association of former civil servants in Africa, the Royal African Circle, was created on 7 December 1889, chaired by General Albert Thys, the well-known founder of the Bas-Congo railway linking Matadi to Leopoldville. The two aims of this Circle were: to maintain among its members a feeling of patriotism, and to create a centre for the exchange of ideas, documentation and for leisure. Regular meetings were held at 5 Place Royale, in the Taverne du Globe. In 1939, at its fiftieth anniversary the Circle counted 651 members.

The most important of these associations, the Royal Belgian Colonial Union, was founded in Brussels on the 1st of June 1912, to amalgamate various groups of veterans from the Congo Free State already existing in various parts of the country, as well as those created subsequently.

The Royal Belgian Colonial Union was founded, with the generous support of H.M. King Albert I who, in the first place, personally granted an important subsidy to the new organization, then with the help of powerful commercial companies and, finally, with the official participation of the Government of that time. The Minister of State Auguste Beernaert, one of the staunchest supporters of King Leopold II, included in the 1912 budget an extraordinary credit in favour of the new association giving it ownership of the building located at 34 rue de Stassart. Among the founders, apart from Auguste Beernaert, there were also Jules Renkin, Minister for the Colonies, the Minister of Justice de Landsheere, Deputy Louis Franck, who later became Minister for the Colonies from 1918 to 1924 and Deputy Frans Van Cauwelaert. The governing body of the Royal Belgian Colonial Union, was first chaired by Auguste Beernaert, and after his death, by Gérard Cooreman, President of the House of Representatives.

The Association had several aims : firstly, to further propaganda in favour of colonial services, secondly to organise conferences, create an information bureau, thirdly to establish an African library, and lastly to organise preparatory courses for those wanting to specialise in colonial affairs and for whose benefit no training programme existed.

As a federation of colonial associations it concentrated their various actions and provided them with premises to carry out their activities. On 18 December 1912, the Royal African Circle also left the Place Royale and established itself at the rue de Stassart.

Whereas in 1912 only eleven associations participated in the foundation of the Royal Colonial Union, its membership had grown to 52 by the time it celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary, in 1937. Results were positive. The Union had held 2 782 conferences, it had created a library of more than 7.000 books, of which many were unique remnants of lost collections or old editions which were out of print and its colonial preparatory courses were attended by 4 264 students among whom 88 % were colonial land surveyors.

The groups federated by the Royal Colonial Union were subdivided into four categories:

1° Humanitarian organizations such as, the Colonial Mutual Assistance, the Congo Red Cross, the League for the Protection of African Children, the Congolese Social Assistance, the Colonial Green Cross, the Colonial Villa of Watermael, the Villa Royale Marie-Henriette in Spa.

2° Associations of mutual interests bringing together the Pioneers Association, the Veterans and former Civil Servants of Africa, the Union of Colonial Wives, the Royal Circle of former Officers of African Campaigns, the Association of Colonial Writers and Artists, the Fraternity of Colonial Troops, the Association of Belgian Colonial Interests, the Colonial Section of the Chamber of Commerce of Brussels; the Association of Colonial Press, the Association of Settlers, Commercial and Colonial Agents....

3° Associations of propaganda and study such as the League of Congolese Memory, the Permanent Committee of the National Colonial Congress; the Circle of Colonial Students of the Free University of Brussels, Colonial Conferences of Belgium, the Franco-Belgian Committee on Colonial Studies; the Belgian Company for Studies and Expansion of Liège.

4° The local associations in Antwerpen, Aalst, Arlon, Brugge, Gent, Geraardsbergen, Charleroi/Thuin, Châtelet/Châtelineau, Liège, Louvain; Luxembourg; la Louvière, Mons, Namur, Oostende, Spa and Verviers.

On 26 October 1928, a new important association was created in Brussels: the Colonial Veterans, founded by General-Chevalier de la Lindi, hero of the Anti-Slavery Campaign. Placed under the patronage of H.R.H. the King, it received its flag, on behalf of the Sovereign, from Mr Arnold, General Administrator of the Colonies.

The new association gathered together the local clubs of veterans from the Congo Free State which had been set up at the turn of the century in Antwerpen; Arlon, Charleroi, Gent, Scherpenheuvel, Hal, Liège, Mons, Namur, Verviers, Luxembourg, Paris, Nice Copenhagen, Oslo and Stockholm. A number of Scandinavian military had enrolled in the "Forces publiques" of the new Congolese State.

The first issue of the Bulletin of Colonial Veterans was printed at the beginning of November 1929. This monthly publication, broadly illustrated and well documented, was highly rated, as were the well-known "Illustration Congolaise" from 1920 to 1940, and the excellent "Revue Colonial Belge" from 1945 to 1960. From 1945, this bulletin of colonial veterans continued to be issued, at first under the title of "Revue Congolaise Illustrée", and later, from 1962 to 1967, as the "Revue Belgo-Congolaise Illustrée".

In 1978, the Association of Colonial Veterans changed names and became known as the Royal Association of Former Civil Servants of the Belgian Congo and the Rwanda Urundi, and their bulletin, issued every three months, carried the title of "Congorudi" which it has kept to this day.

On the other hand, the Royal Belgian Colonial Union, became known at the beginning of the sixties as the Royal Belgian Union for the Congo and Overseas Countries. Fifteen years later, it dropped the word Congo and became known, to this day, as the Royal Belgian Union for Overseas Countries, or UROME. At present, it groups some thirty regional, sector-based or specific associations.

The regional groups are located in Arlon, Brussels, Charleroi/Thuin, Hasselt, Liège, Luxembourg, Mons, Namur, Oostende, Sint Niklaas, Spa and Verviers.

The sector-based associations include :

- ◆ Former civil servants in AFAC (Association des Fonctionnaires et Agents du Congo)
- ◆ Members of the private sector gathered together under the GDSOM (Groupement de Défense Sociale d’Outre-Mer)
- ◆ Former officers in CRAOCA (Cercle Royal des Anciens Officiers des Campagnes d’Afrique)
- ◆ Members of colonial fraternities in URFRACOL (Union Royale des Fraternelles Coloniales)
- ◆ Veterans and friends of the Force publique in AMI-FP-VRIEND (Association des Anciens et Amis de la Force Publique)
- ◆ Former cadets of Luluabourg in AMACIEL (Amicale des Anciens Cadets du Centre d’Instruction pour Européens de Luluabourg)
- ◆ Former students of university institutes of Overseas territories in INUTOM
- ◆ Former association of beneficiaries of the Colonial Transport Office (OTRACO)
- ◆ Former self-employed workers in ABIA (Association Belges des Indépendants en Afrique)
- ◆ Members of the military technical Cooperation in CTM (Cercle de la Coopération Technique Militaire)
- ◆ Congolese living in Belgium in the URCB (Union Royale Congolaise de Belgique)

The specific associations are :

- ◆ Afrika Getuigenissen
- ◆ Mémoires du Congo
- ◆ Congorudi
- ◆ Les Bomatraciens et les Amis du Bas-fleuve
- ◆ Les Nduku na Congo
- ◆ Niambo