

# **The Belgian Base at Kigoma's Rail-head (1920s–1930s). Territorial Ambivalence in an Inland Indian Ocean Port<sup>1</sup>**

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## **RESÜMEE**

Das Stadtgebiet um Kigoma dient seit der Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts als Drehscheibe zwischen der Region um den Tanganjikasee und dem Indischen Ozean. Obwohl es seither insgesamt an globaler Bedeutung verloren hat, bewirkten die von den Deutschen gebaute Eisenbahn zwischen Dar es Salaam und Kigoma und der belgische Konzessionshafen am Kopfbahnhof Kigomas in den Jahren bis 1930 einen kurzzeitigen Aufschwung. Kigoma als mit dem Indischen Ozean verbundener Inlandshafen stellte die kürzeste Verbindung zwischen der mineralreichen Region Katanga und dem Weltmarkt dar. Im Rahmen eines belgisch-britischen Abkommens nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg wurde diese Verbindung unter belgische Führung gestellt. Dieser Artikel argumentiert, dass der kurzlebige Erfolg von Kigoma um 1930 durch Pragmatismus ermöglicht wurde. Statt auf formalen Rechten zu beharren, haben alle Beteiligten vor Ort einen reibungslosen Betrieb des Hafens bevorzugt. Sobald das Ausmaß der belgischen extraterritorialen Rechte und die Eingrenzungen der britischen Souveränität aber klar wurden, verlor der Hafen wieder an globaler Bedeutung.

In the historical comedy *Black Adder the Third*, Blackadder asks his servant Baldrick if he has any idea what irony is. Baldrick answers: “Yeah! It’s like goldy and bronzy, only it’s made of iron.” Irony and history go together well, as in the case of the *Eisenbahn* (literally iron road) constructed by the German colonial government in order to connect Dar es

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2<sup>nd</sup> International AEGIS Thematic Conference on Africa and the Indian Ocean, Lisbon, 9 April 2015. I thank the Centre for Area Studies at Leipzig University for supporting my research on the urban history of Kigoma-Ujiji, and I thank Katja Naumann, Forrest Kilimnik, and the participants at the Lisbon conference for comments on earlier versions of this paper.

Salaam with Kigoma on Lake Tanganyika, and hence with eastern Congo. The railway reached Kigoma on 1 February 1914. On Tuesday, 30 June 1914, the line was handed over from the construction company to the railway company.<sup>2</sup> On the previous Sunday, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne had been shot in Sarajevo. The subsequent whims of history would inhibit the Germans from using their brand-new railway for what it was meant for: transporting riches from Congo to the Indian Ocean.<sup>3</sup>

The First World War was soon exported to the European colonies in Africa. From the Belgian Congo, which had become a Belgian colony less than six years before the war started, troops under Belgian command invaded German East Africa in 1916 and the town of Kigoma fell in Belgian hands on 28 July of that year. What is now known as the Kigoma urban area has been the main hub connecting the lands and people around Lake Tanganyika with the Indian Ocean and the world economy since around the mid-nineteenth century. First centred in the historical town of Ujiji and linked to Bagamoyo via the central caravan route,<sup>4</sup> later centred in the Bay of Kigoma and linked with Dar es Salaam via the central railway line, the Kigoma urban area as a whole remained the infrastructural pivot for traffic to and from East-Central Africa until this day. This role as hub for the region explains why the Germans chose this place as railhead for their iron road to the riches of the Congo. However, this regional and historical importance does not mean that the global commercial and strategic importance of the region continued unabatedly. Long-distance trade activities had seen ups and downs in the nineteenth century and the same is true for the period under scrutiny in this paper. A new boom in the economic and commercial domain was short-lived but nevertheless undeniable for almost a decade that lasted from the mid-1920s until the Great Depression. By then, however, Kigoma was no longer under Belgian control, but, remarkably, its port still was.

In 1921 the Belgians handed over the area under military occupation, including the town of Kigoma, to the British, but they were granted privileges and a concession in Kigoma's port. This was part of the deal to have the Belgians evacuate the territory they had occupied during the war. This deal, further including a Belgian port in Dar es Salaam on the Indian Ocean shores and a privileged use of the central railway, gave the Belgian Congo and the new Belgian mandate territories of Ruanda-Urundi an all-Belgian outlet to the Indian Ocean. Legally, this Anglo-Belgian agreement is quite straightforward; granting the Belgians some privileges and concessions on the Tanganyika Territory, which had become a British mandate territory in the aftermath of the war. However, the implementation on the ground opened a window of opportunities for all parties involved. This led to

2 Bodleian Library of Commonwealth and African Studies at Rhodes House, Oxford (RHO), MSS. Afr. s. 900 (1), History of Central Railway by C. Gillman.

3 Chrétien, Jean-Pierre, "Le «désenclavement» de la région des Grands Lacs dans les projets économiques allemands au début du XXe siècle", in: Département d'histoire de l'Université du Burundi (eds.), *Histoire sociale de l'Afrique de l'Est (XIXe-XXe siècle): actes du colloque de Bujumbura (17-24 octobre 1989)*, Paris 1991, p. 342-343.

4 For more information on the nineteenth-century history of the area, see: Norman R. Bennett, *Arab Versus European: Diplomacy and War in Nineteenth-Century East Central Africa*, New York 1986, and Beverly B. Brown, *Ujiji: The History of a Lakeside Town*, Boston University 1973 (PhD Thesis).

a short-lived boom of the Kigoma-Dar es Salaam connection in the late 1920s and early 1930s. One could expect Kigoma to be the minor one of the two ports, funnelling goods to and from the proper Indian Ocean port at Dar es Salaam, but in fact it was the other way around with Kigoma being the place where the formalities, transactions, logistics, shipping, and handling were primarily taken care of, hence being the actual command centre of the Belgian bases (also referred to as Belbases).

In this paper, the focus is on the heydays of Kigoma's role as an inland Indian Ocean port in the 1920s and early 1930s. The success was made possible by both stretching and not insisting too much on the legal rights of the Belgians in the port of Kigoma, which de facto meant that on the one hand all port activities took place in the Belgian-run port, and on the other hand the Belgians did not make use of prerogatives which would have required a distinction between Belgian and British port activities. Thus, not only could the agreement as such be seen as an exception to a territorial order in the narrow sense, but also locally, within the port of Kigoma, the spatial organization and the operation of the port was kept ambivalent.

Kigoma's long tradition of connecting worlds, its infrastructural connectivity, and the institutional peculiarities of the "Belgian" port, which is at the heart of this article, make the town a fine example of what Matthias Middell and Katja Naumann described as portals of globalization, namely "places that have been centres of world trade or global communication, have served as entrance points for cultural transfer, and where institutions and practices for dealing with global connectedness have been developed."<sup>5</sup> This paper in particular focuses on the institutional and informal construction of the lake port of Kigoma as a Belgian Indian Ocean port on British territory. The story starts with the Belgian occupation during and immediately after the First World War, followed by privileged presence guaranteed by a British-Belgian treaty, and reaching a decisive turning point in the early 1930s. Primarily highlighting the interwar period, I reveal how territorial ambiguity and improvised pragmatism defied the lines of sovereignty and territoriality in the colonial period, both on the local and the international level. As such, this paper can be seen as an exercise in colonial history after the spatial turn.

### **First World War: Settling European Scores (1914–1921)**

During the First World War, troops under Belgian command conquered parts of German East Africa as far east as Morogoro, less than 200 km from the Indian Ocean coast. However, only in the westernmost part of the colony, including Kigoma and its port, did they install an occupation government, leaving the rest of the territory to the British.<sup>6</sup> By the end of the war, though, it became clear that the Belgians would not be allowed

5 Matthias Middell, and Katja Naumann, "Global history and the spatial turn: from the impact of area studies to the study of critical junctures of globalization", in: *Journal of Global History*, 5 (March 2010) 1, pp. 162–163.

6 Hew Strachan, *The First World War in Africa*, Oxford 2004.

to maintain their control in the area. As a matter of fact, the northwestern part of the former German East Africa had never been Belgium's first priority; they had hoped to use these territories as diplomatic currency in order to obtain land close to the mouth of the Congo or to loosen the free trade obligations placed on the Belgian Congo.<sup>7</sup> In the end, however, the Paris Peace Conference would result in Belgium getting the mandate over Rwanda and Burundi, as well as a perpetual lease, for one Belgian franc per year, of the port sites in Dar es Salaam and Kigoma, allowing Belgian transit to and from the Belgian Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi, free of dues, fees, deposits, or guarantees of any description. In one way or another, the port of Kigoma would stay under Belgian management for almost 80 years, despite British rule and Tanzanian independence.<sup>8</sup>

The extraterritorial Belgian privileges in the British mandate territory of Tanganyika that was about to be founded were the result of an often neglected chapter of the 1919 Paris peace negotiations, which dealt with the parts of German East Africa the Belgian-led troops had conquered and still occupied at the time. The Belgian-Congolese troops had already given up Tabora but still occupied the western part of the former German East Africa, from Karema in the south to the Ugandan border in the north, including 250 km of the railway, and still having access to Lake Victoria. Against this background, the Belgian and British negotiators, Pierre Orts and Lord Alfred Milner, started their negotiations. They both had a strictly territorial agenda. The outcome of their negotiations also fitted nicely within the legal framework of imperial territoriality. The British got the whole of Lake Victoria and almost all of Lake Tanganyika's eastern shore, including the railhead at Kigoma. Belgium got the mandate over Rwanda and Burundi, two semi-autonomous districts in the northwest of the former colony.<sup>9</sup> Territorially the Belgians got just over five per cent of German East Africa's total surface, but demographically this represented over 40 per cent of the population.<sup>10</sup> Up until this point, Orts and Milner practised business as usual, carving up the colonial cake amongst European colonizers, thereby respecting the power relations between them.

The devil, however, is in the details. The compromise Orts and Milner struck about Kigoma and Belgian access to the Indian Ocean met both the territorial strategic desires of the British and the economic strategic desires of the Belgians. Roughly speaking, the Belgians relinquished the land, but could do what they wanted on – from then on – British territory. This led to a port of Kigoma – as well as a section of the port of Dar es

7 Afrikaans Archief, Brussel (AAB), Affaires Étrangères (AE/II), 3289 (1854), Accords Milner-Orts.

8 Guido Fallenthey, *Belbases in Tanzania*, [http://www.fallenthey.be/EN/Guido\\_Belbases.html](http://www.fallenthey.be/EN/Guido_Belbases.html) (accessed 18 January 2016).

9 O. Lauwers, "Hommage à Pierre Orts (3 novembre 1872–12 juin 1958)"; in: Koninklijke Academie voor Koloniale Wetenschappen – Mededelingen der Zittingen (Nieuwe Reeks), IV (1958) 4, pp. 913–916; W. Ganshof van der Meersch, "Orts (Pierre-Charles-Auguste-Raphaël)", in: *Biographie Belge d'Outre-Mer*, Vol. VII-A, 1973, pp. 367–368; Bonaventure Bandira, "Les négociations belgo-britanniques au sujet des concessions belges à Dar-es-Salaam et Kigoma", in: *Histoire sociale de l'Afrique de l'Est...*, p. 364–367.

10 Chrétien, "Le « désenclavement » ...", p. 352.

Salaam – that was nominally British but Belgian in its operations. The outcome was an extraterritorial Belgian Indian Ocean port more than 1000 km from that ocean.<sup>11</sup>

The Orts-Milner Agreement was an agreement of principle, which was signed on 30 May 1919 and accepted by the Paris Peace Conference. The most important part of the agreement was undoubtedly the Belgian mandate over Ruanda-Urundi, which became part of the 1923 mandate agreements of the League of Nations. In the context of this research, however, we are more interested in the deal on Belgian traffic through East Africa, including concessions in Kigoma and Dar es Salaam. This part of the agreement was turned into the Convention between Great Britain and Belgium with a View to Facilitate Belgian Traffic through the Territories of East Africa on 15 March 1921.<sup>12</sup> The convention consists of a preamble and 12 articles.<sup>13</sup> In the preamble, the contracting parties declare that the convention, which gives effect to the agreement of principle mentioned above, is an outcome of the joint efforts in Africa during the First World War and is meant to give access to the sea to portions of the Belgian Congo as well as to the mandate territories of Ruanda-Urundi.

The central article of the convention was Article 2, which specified the underlying principle of freedom of transit to and from the Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi across East Africa. Additionally, it stated that there shall be no distinction with how British persons, mail, goods, ships, railway carriages, and trucks were to be treated. Traffic to and from the Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi was exempt from all customs duty or other similar duties, except for a charge of 25 cents per parcel. However, if the transit passed through the Belgian concession ports of Kigoma and Dar es Salaam, even this 25 cents charge was not due.

Article 5 stipulated the perpetual lease of suitable sites in the ports of Kigoma and Dar es Salaam for an annual rent of 1 Belgian franc. Apart from compliance with British law and order, the Belgians were free to do as they consider suitable within the limits of these sites, and had the right to entrust the workings of the sites to concessionaires for durations of up to 25 years (Article 6).

Article 9 freed the Belgian sites from any interference from the British customs authorities for goods in transit to or from the Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi. Moreover, Belgian-sealed trucks or wagons on the Kigoma–Dar es Salaam railway were also exempt from all British customs formalities (Article 10). This meant that the Belgians could act independently from British interference as far as transit to and from Belgian colonial

11 William Roger Louis, *Ends of British Imperialism: The Scramble for Empire, Suez, and Decolonization* – Collected Essays, London/New York 2006, pp. 218–221. That the Belgians could do what they wanted within the concession was stated by Milner during the negotiations (AAB, AE/II, 2948 (717), *Lettre du Ministre des Colonies au Ministre des Affaires Étrangères*, 19 novembre 1930).

12 For the negotiations to turn the agreement of principle into a binding convention, see Bandira, “Les négociations belgo-britanniques...”

13 For the English version of the convention, see: The National Archives of the UK, Kew (TNA-UK), Colonial Office (CO), 691/121/8, *Belgian leased sites at Dar es Salaam and Kigoma*, 1932.

territories through the concession sites and using the central railway was concerned. The British merely had the right to be present at all times.

The convention was signed in London on 15 March 1921. One week later, the Belgians ended their occupation that had lasted for five years, and handed over the District of Kigoma to the governor of Tanganyika.<sup>14</sup> Upon return from Kigoma, the governor-general of the Belgian Congo wrote to the minister of colonies: “Les Anglais se rendent compte que Kigoma n’a d’intérêt que pour nous” (The English are aware that Kigoma is only of interest to us).<sup>15</sup> What he omitted, though, is that the Belgian interest in Kigoma was also limited only to the port and railway.

### **Territorial Ambivalence and Improvised Globalization in the Golden Decade of the Belgian Base**

Pierre Ryckmans, who would become the most influential governor-general and chief ideologist of Belgian colonialism in the decades to come,<sup>16</sup> stayed in Kigoma in 1918. Congolese troops returned from the military operation of Mahenge with meningitis, which led to a forced quarantine during which Ryckmans kept himself busy with investigations into the history of the region under German occupation. His focus was on Burundi, not on Kigoma.<sup>17</sup> Kigoma was a suitable place from where to look into areas of interest, but did not attract much attention itself. Similarly, it would become a pivotal place through which to connect areas of interest, but was not seen as a place of interest for its own sake – or put otherwise, its interest lay in its capacity to connect and dispatch, and it is precisely this attribute that became or remained Belgian. Although it did not lead to genuine Belgian interest in the local affairs and populations of Kigoma, the crucial function in linking eastern Congo with the Indian Ocean via the lake and the railway was soon recognized by this advocate of Belgian colonialism. In a letter to the minister of colonies in the summer of 1921, Ryckmans – by then resident and acting royal commissioner in Ruanda-Urundi, and in this capacity responsible for the administration of the Belgian bases in Kigoma and Dar es Salaam<sup>18</sup> – made a strong plea to make maximal use of the Belgian connection to the Indian Ocean via Kigoma, Dar es Salaam, and the central railway. He considered Kigoma and Dar es Salaam to be the most “Belgian” connection between Belgium and the Belgian Congo, second only to Matadi (“la plus belge de toutes sauf Matadi”).<sup>19</sup>

14 AAB, AE/II, 3288 (1850), Évacuation et remise des territoires aux Anglais.

15 AAB, AE/II, 2890 (200), Lettre du Gouverneur Général du Congo belge au Ministre des Colonies, 8 août 1921.

16 See: Pierre Ryckmans, *Dominer pour servir*, Bruxelles 1931.

17 Pierre Ryckmans, *Une page d'histoire coloniale: L'occupation allemande dans l'Urundi*, Bruxelles 1953, p. 3.

18 The management of the Belgian bases in Kigoma and Dar es Salaam had been given to the administration of Ruanda-Urundi and not the Belgian Congo (AAB, AE/II, 2948 (713), Lettre du Résident de l'Urundi au Ministre des Colonies, 29 août 1921).

19 Tanzania National Archives, Dar es Salaam (TanNA), Tanganyika Territory (TT), District Officer's Reports, Kigoma District, 1933, p. 17.

Against the background of the intended private concession over the Belgian bases in Kigoma and Dar es Salaam to be given to the Agence commerciale belge de l'Est Africain (ABEA), Ryckmans pleaded for a Belgian representation by accredited diplomats and customs officials in both towns.<sup>20</sup> The risk of blurring the distinction between official Belgian representation and private commercial interests would lead to several confrontations with the British authorities as well as with some private companies a decade later. It is likely, although never explicitly confirmed, that this explains why the Belgians hesitated an entire decade before they finally formalized the running of the Belbases. No sooner than 1930 were the Belbases given by concession to the ABEA, although de facto the ABEA in Dar es Salaam and the Compagnie des Chemins de Fer du Congo supérieur aux Grands Lacs africains (CFL) in Kigoma were already running the sites since the beginning of the 1920s. Paradoxically, the decade of improvisation would turn out to be the golden decade.

Ryckmans' letter to the minister of colonies was a visionary one, to which the minister responded mainly positively. It also was a letter of a colonial official who was sympathetic to the Belgian extraterritorial privileges in Kigoma, and who was willing to make use of them as a tool of global – or trans-imperial, trans-regional, and trans-national – connectedness. However, Ryckmans was not the sole Belgian voice expressing his opinion about the Belgian extraterritorial rights; several other Belgian voices were highly sceptical – not to mention the British, who would increasingly object to what they had agreed to.

In the 1924 annual report on customs in Kigoma, Georges Delaunoit, the head of the Belgian customs in Kigoma at the time, considered it to be a blatant mistake to concentrate Belgian customs in the port of Kigoma, which he understood as nothing more than a lease that every private party could also acquire, albeit most likely at a higher price than 1 Belgian franc per year. Moreover, in his opinion, the Belgian government faced substantial additional costs in their own bases, which were not applicable in ports like Beira, Port Elizabeth, or Cape Town.<sup>21</sup> Inadvertently, he expressed the British interpretation, which actually would prove to be wrong by the time the British openly proclaimed it, as we will see later. Nevertheless, at that time it was relevant that the head of the Belgian customs on Lake Tanganyika criticized the privileges for which he was locally in charge. In general, the Belgians struggled with their unusual privileges. If Delaunoit would have been right in his judgement that the Belgian leased sites were something any private company could get as well, then it would also have been clear and easy what to do with these sites: have them run as, and possible also by, a private company. However, the extraterritorial nature of the bases did not only mean that the Belgian ports of Kigoma and Dar es Salaam were outside of Belgian territory, but at least as much that British sovereignty was limited in these zones.<sup>22</sup> The Belgians could virtually do whatever they

20 AAB, AE/II, 2948 (713), Lettre du Résident de l'Urundi au Ministre des Colonies, 29 août 1921.

21 AAB, AE/II, 2890 (200), Douanes Kigoma – Rapport Annuel 1924; AAB, AE/II, 2948 (712), Annexe à la lettre du Commissaire Royal N° 1442/A/6 du 18 mai 1925, Avis et considérations.

22 Article 6 of the Anglo-Belgian Convention of 15 March 1921.

wanted within their premises, as Lord Milner already exclaimed during the 1919 negotiations.<sup>23</sup> This may sound like an appealing situation for the Belgians, but in fact it was not. The extraterritorial semi-sovereignty was as much unfamiliar terrain for them as it would have been for anyone else during the high days of national and imperial territoriality. Clearly, there were some commercial advantages in unlocking landlocked Ruanda-Urundi as well as eastern Congo via Lake Tanganyika, Kigoma, the central railway, and Dar es Salaam. With the infrastructure of 1920, this route took two months, in contrast to six months, when opting for the western trajectory through the Congo and via Boma or Matadi, as well as took three transloading operations less.<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, the coordination and administration of Belgium's East African trade were concentrated in Kigoma, which made this lakeside town rather than Dar es Salaam the main Indian Ocean port of the Belgian Congo. In 1924, for instance, 4.4 million Belgian francs in customs revenues were generated in Kigoma compared to 1.6 million Belgian francs in the second most important customs station on the lake, Albertville. Moreover, all traffic that was cleared in Albertville or Uvira still had to go through the Belbase in Kigoma.<sup>25</sup>

Having a closer look at the port activities during the 1920s, the exported goods being shipped through the Belgian concession consisted primarily of palm oil, hides, rice, and other local foodstuffs.<sup>26</sup> However, the annual report of Belgian customs at Kigoma in 1924 indicates that the export from Congo and Ruanda-Urundi of local foodstuffs as well as cow hides was in decline because of cattle plague and anti-famine measures. On the other hand, cottons were the most desired import: printed cotton like *kitenge* and *kanga* were in vogue in the urban, or so-called European, centres, whereas Japanese-made *merikani* and Indian *chadder* were in demand in the interior.<sup>27</sup> In the course of the 1920s, the product range diversified and increasingly included raw cotton shipped from the port of Uvira in the Kivu, coffee coming from the ports of Nyanza-Lac and Rumonge in Ruanda-Urundi, and especially copper from Katanga, shipped by lake from Albertville to Kigoma.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, with the arrival of the railway the trade in *dagaa* (dried small fish) would extend its range and become an important long-distance trade good from Kigoma.<sup>29</sup> However, this local produce was not part of the transit trade through the Belgian bases, and therefore did not appear in the Belgian customs statistics. The fact that not all trade in Kigoma was transit trade, would lead to problems in the exploitation of

23 TNA-UK, CO, 691/115/8, Lettre du Ministre des Affaires Étrangères (belge) à l'ambassadeur britannique, 31 décembre 1930.

24 AAB, RA/R-U, 0b (31), Tanganyika Territory, Annual Report 1919-1920, p. 13; Chrétien, "Le « désenclavement » ...", p. 342-343.

25 AAB, AE/II, 2890 (200), Douanes Kigoma – Rapport Annuel 1924.

26 AAB, AE/II, 2948 (713), Lettre du Résident de l'Urundi au Ministre des Colonies, 29 août 1921. Salt was another important export product from the Kigoma region and was loaded on the train directly at the salt pan of Uvinza, hence it did not pass through Kigoma and its Belgian base. See TanNA, TT, District Officer's Reports, Kigoma District 1931, p. 13.

27 AAB, AE/II, 2890 (200), Douanes Kigoma – Rapport Annuel 1924.

28 TanNA, TT, District Officer's Reports, Kigoma District 1927, p. 16.

29 RHO, MSS. Afr. s. 503, John Rooke Johnston, Kigoma District Handing Over Report, 1940, p. 96.



the Belgian port, to which I return later. This combination of regional and global trade had already been a feature of the market of nearby Ujiji in the nineteenth century.<sup>30</sup> Although the goods involved had – partly – changed, the twentieth-century port of Kigoma was also, or still, characterized by a stable stream of trade in local produce, accompanied by booming and eventually declining or collapsing long-distance trade passing through the strategically situated port.

Concerning copper, shedding some light on figures gives an idea of the significance of this trade through Kigoma. Based on statistics from Tanganyika Railways, 29,997 tonnes of copper in 1928/29 were shipped from the Congo through Kigoma, and after a dip in 1929/30 (18,538 tonnes), the copper traffic reached a peak of 30,844 tonnes in 1930/31.<sup>31</sup> For comparison, based on the Belgian customs' figures, in the year 1929 – all goods combined – a total of 32,200 tonnes was shipped through the Belgian base of Kigoma to Congo and Ruanda-Urundi, whereas 26,672 tonnes of export came from Ruanda-Urundi. Exports from the Congo, including copper, were not registered in Kigoma since these were declared in Albertville or Uvira.<sup>32</sup> It is clear from these figures, though, that the amount of exported copper roughly corresponded to all imports to the Congo and Ruanda-Urundi combined, or all exports from Ruanda-Urundi. Another telling figure was the earnings from traffic to and from the Congo, which represented 55 per cent of the total earnings of the entire central railway.<sup>33</sup>

The predominant copper-producing enterprise in the Belgian Congo, the Union Minière du Haut Katanga (UMHK), was founded in 1906, boomed in the 1920s, and reached a total production of 139,000 tonnes of copper in 1930.<sup>34</sup> Read in combination with the figures from Tanganyika Railways for 1930, this means that the Congolese copper export via the Kigoma connection was close to a quarter of the total production of the UMHK. Kigoma's future looked bright and that future was inextricably linked with the copper industry in Katanga. The fact that by the end of the 1920s the political control over of the Belgian base at Kigoma was moved from the administration of Ruanda-Urundi to the Province of Katanga, is a further indication of the growing importance of copper for the port of Kigoma.<sup>35</sup> Kigoma had evolved from a regional trade centre around Lake Tanganyika into a small gateway in the global copper trade.

30 Philip Gooding, "Ujiji: Urban Frontier in the Era of Long-Distance Commerce, East and Central Africa, c.1830–1890", Presentation at The International Graduate Historical Studies Conference, Central Michigan University, 2013 (<https://soas.academia.edu/PhilipGooding> – accessed 18 January 2016).

31 RHO, MSS. Afr. s. 900 (1), Clement Gillman, Important Events in the History of the Railways.

32 AAB, AE/II, 2948 (717), Rapport par le Contrôleur Principal des douanes à Kigoma 1930, 30 janvier 1931.

33 RHO, MSS. Afr. s. 900 (1), Clement Gillman, Important Events in the History of the Railways.

34 Jan-Frederik Abbeloos, "Belgium's Expansionist History between 1870 and 1930: Imperialism and the Globalisation of Belgian Business", in: Mary N. Harris and Csaba Lévai (eds.), *Europe and its Empires*, Pisa 2008, p. 118; Bogumil Jewsiewicki (translated by Yvonne Brett and Andrew Roberts), "Belgian Africa", in: J.D. Fage and Roland Anthony Oliver (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Africa*, Volume 7, p. 482. For a deeper insight in the town of Lubumbashi in this period, see Boonen & Lagae in this issue.

35 AAB, AE/II, 2948 (717), Rapport par le Contrôleur Principal des douanes à Kigoma 1930, 30 janvier 1931; AAB, FRED (Direction de l'énergie, des travaux publics et des communications), 1180, Lettre de l'inspecteur des douanes au Gouverneur du Katanga, 30 janvier 1931.

In order to accommodate this booming trade the Belgians invested considerably in their port and supporting infrastructure. The leased site in 1921 had a lake frontage of 250 m and was 60 to 70 m deep, roughly the size of two football fields.<sup>36</sup> By the end of the decade, Kigoma was on the rise and this was reflected in Belgian investments in a new wharfage system, quays, a two-storey building comprising offices and warehouses, and five steam cranes, and a 25-tonne derrick between 1928 and 1930.<sup>37</sup> On top of that, Belgians built/opened a wireless telegraph station, a Belgian bank, a vice-consulate, as well as a central customs authority for Ruanda-Urundi and eastern Congo in Kigoma in the course of the 1920s. As early as 1928, which is only seven and a half years after the Belgian bases were established, the Belgians already requested an extension of their Kigoma site, primarily for safety reasons and more specifically to be able to store explosives and combustible goods. The British realized that from the point of view of railway traffic it was in their interest that the Belgians expand their use of the Kigoma-Dar es Salaam connection; however, they were reluctant to give the Belgians more or even the best parts of the harbour.<sup>38</sup> On the ground, however, pragmatism reigned and the British *de facto* operated their comparably small businesses through the Belgian site.

The depiction so far could give the false impression that the British were merely passive bystanders. In fact, they supported and became involved with the Belgian port activities through investments and entrepreneurship of their own. The fleet on the lake was primarily British, and the new slipway, constructed in 1929, did the maintenance of all ships, including the Belgian ones.<sup>39</sup> At the same time, the British-run railways were undoubtedly the crucial link in the entire connection from Congo to the Indian Ocean and back.

In addition to Belgians and British, it is important to stress the role of other international trade actors. Arab, Indian, and Swahili traders had already played a significant role in pre- and early colonial times, and were still numerous at the time of Belgian conquest in 1916.<sup>40</sup> By 1930, Indian traders, most of them from Gujarat or the region around Bombay, numbered up to 250 men, about half of them with families. There were 100 Arab traders in Kigoma in 1930, most of them Omani and about one-third of them with families. Greeks numbered around 20 in Kigoma in the late 1920s.<sup>41</sup> Indian and Arab traders primarily took care of the intricate connections with the surrounding region and its markets, and remained important for the commerce around Lake Tanganyika until long after the decline of the Belgian base set in in the early 1930s.<sup>42</sup>

36 TNA-UK, CO, 691/100/14, Request by Belgian Government for extension of concession of trade sites at Kigoma.

37 TanNA, Kigoma Provincial Book, Kigoma District, Vol. II; Fallenthey, *Belbases in Tanzania*...

38 TNA-UK, CO, 691/100/14, Request by Belgian Government for extension of concession of trade sites at Kigoma; TanNA, Native Affairs General – Tanganyika Secretariat (Sec.), (K.) Foreign Affairs, 12912, Vol. I, Belgian Concessions at Kigoma (1927–1936).

39 TanNA, Kigoma Provincial Book, Kigoma District, Vol. II.

40 AAB, RA/R-U, 0b (24), Rapport sur la situation économique du district d'Udjidi [1918].

41 TanNA, Kigoma Provincial Book, Kigoma District, Vol. II.

42 Geert Castryck, *Muslims in Usumbura (1897–1962): Sociale geschiedenis van de islamitische gemeenschappen van Usumbura in de koloniale tijd*, Universiteit Gent 2006 (PhD Thesis), pp. 163–182.

### The Formalization of the Concession Throws Spanner in the Works

At the height of the Belbases' success, the concession over the sites was given to the ABEA. A management agreement was signed on 11 December 1929; the contract was approved by the Belgian and the British government, and took effect on 31 January 1931.<sup>43</sup> At that time, however, nobody knew that the times of plenty were drawing to a close. Although the British welcomed the clarity of the new situation and the improved management that was expected from ABEA in comparison to the CFL,<sup>44</sup> the de facto privatization and formalization of the exploitation of the Belbases triggered disputes about customs procedures, delays in clearing and handling shipments, unequal competition between private companies, and the demarcation of the Belgian premises in Kigoma. The pragmatic or cooperative attitude of the 1920s was substituted for strict formalism in line with the letter of the 1921 convention. Only now did the British start to discover how much the convention actually entailed while also firmly discarding what was at odds with the convention. The British complaints resonated with the sceptic positions that had been proclaimed by some Belgians since the early 1920s. In the end, the height of Belgian operations in Kigoma would also be a decisive turning point, leading to a piecemeal Belgian withdrawal from Kigoma during the first half of the 1930s. By the end of 1931, the copper traffic through Kigoma drastically decreased. In comparison to the previous year, the amount had dropped from over 30,000 to 16,343 tonnes.<sup>45</sup> This was not only due to the Great Depression but also because newer, cheaper, and faster – in short, better – connections linking mineral-rich Katanga with the Atlantic ports of the Belgian Congo became available at about this time.<sup>46</sup> Likewise, Kigoma's Indian merchants, whose businesses had branches along the lake in Bujumbura and Rumonge, suffered a chain of bankruptcies in the first half of the 1930s<sup>47</sup> while local trade around the lake also suffered heavily due to a combination of economic crisis, locust, and drought.<sup>48</sup> Occurring together, an already raging global economic crisis was further exacerbated by the partial Belgian retreat from Kigoma. As had been the case in the second half of the nineteenth century in Ujiji,<sup>49</sup> the boom in long-distance trade in interwar Kigoma had

43 AAB, FRED, 1180, Organisation douanière Ruanda Urundi, 13 janvier 1931; AAB, AE/II, 2948 (717), Concessions belges à Dar es Salaam et à Kigoma; TNA-UK, CO, 691/109/10, Concessions to Belgian Government at Kigoma and Dar es Salaam, 1930; TanNA, Sec., (K) 19652, Traffic through Belgian leased sites at Dar es Salaam and Kigoma, Vol. I

44 TNA-UK, CO, 691/109/10, Concessions to Belgian Government at Kigoma and Dar es Salaam, 1930.

45 AAB, FRED, 1181 (9), Renseignements statistiques. Documentation, 1931.

46 Piet Clement, "Het bezoek van Koning Albert I aan Belgisch Congo, 1928: Tussen propaganda en realiteit", in: *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis*, 37 (2007) 1-2, pp. 178-183.

47 Castryck, Moslems in Usumbura, pp. 163-182.

48 TanNA, TT, District Officer's Reports, Kigoma District 1931, p. 14; TanNA, Kigoma Regional Office (523), M5/23, Food Shortage – Kigoma, Letter from District Commissioner Kigoma to Provincial Commissioner Tabora and Kigoma Provinces, 9 February 1932.

49 Brown, Ujiji...; Philip Gooding, "Ujiji c.1860–1890: The rise and decline of a Swahili Frontier Town", Presentation at the Indian Ocean World Centre, McGill University on 8 May 2014 (<https://soas.academia.edu/PhilipGooding> – accessed 18 January 2016).

been an ephemeral phenomenon. Kigoma fell back on its role as regional trade centre for the people living around the lake and the Belgian bases became the transit sites the British and some Belgians had wished them to be from the very beginning.

Interestingly, this decline is remarkably evident in the Belgian, British, and Tanganyikan archives. Whereas a wealth of files on the Belgian bases is available for the 1920s and early 1930s, the source base all but vanishes by the mid-1930s. Apart from some necessary revisions of old policy measures or contracts that had to be adapted to new uncertain circumstances,<sup>50</sup> a handful of references to tensions regarding the war effort in the early 1940s,<sup>51</sup> and the occasional Belgian representative in the Kigoma Township Authority,<sup>52</sup> the Belgians in Kigoma left hardly any traces in the archives between 1935 and 1950. Apart from the obvious continuation of the local administration of the urban area, Kigoma as such also virtually disappeared from the archives, which indicates that the town was no longer considered of interest by administrators in London, Brussels, or even Dar es Salaam. That lasted until the 1950s when some activity around the port of Kigoma could again be discerned, but it would never again reach the promising dynamics of 1930.<sup>53</sup> The turning point for Kigoma was 1930/31 and in the following pages we will have a look at the changes and disputes that took place then.

At the beginning of 1930 the Belgians requested the British government's formal approval in order to give the port sites in Kigoma and Dar es Salaam by concession to the ABEA. This coincided with, on the one hand, some British grudging when they understood that the Belgians could and did use their base in Kigoma as the *de facto* port of entry into the Congo and Ruanda-Urundi, and, on the other hand, the Belgian announcement that they were considering to further expand the customs activities at Kigoma, thereby turning the Belgian base into the *de jure* port of entry. Given the already existing British dissatisfaction, this only exacerbated the situation.<sup>54</sup> Practical, legal, and economic arguments came together in a discussion that would last until 1932, but by then the economic and commercial situation on local and global scales had become a profoundly different one.

Belgians had already been discussing the use – or uselessness – of their bases since the early 1920s, and by the end of the decade, at a time when the port of Kigoma grew spectacularly, some British also started reflecting how best to organize traffic and the limited space at the port of Kigoma. A couple of months before the Belgians gave their bases

50 TanNA, Western Province (Regional Office Tabora) (63), L.2/354, Kigoma Township Plots, Vol. II: 1937–1958; Fal-lenthey, *Belbases in Tanzania*...

51 TanNA, Sec., (K) 12912. Vol II: Belgian Concessions at Kigoma (1941); AAB, AE/II, 3289 (1857–1858), *Accords Mil-ner-Orts*.

52 TanNA, Sec., 19408, Kigoma Township Authority, Vol. II: 1941–1953.

53 TanNA, TT, District Officer's Reports, Kigoma District 1950, p. 5; 1953, p. 5; 1955, p. 6, 9.

54 AAB, AE/II, 2948 (717), *Concessions belges à Dar es Salaam et Kigoma*; AAB, FRED, 1180, *Lettre du Gouverneur Général du Congo belge au Ministre des Colonies*, 27 février 1931 (with three annexes); TNA-UK, CO, 691/109/10, *Concessions to Belgian Government at Kigoma and Dar es Salaam*, 1930; TNA-UK, CO, 691/115/8, *Letter from the Belgian Chief Comptroller of customs at Kigoma to the Head of customs of Tanganyika Territory at Dar es Salaam*, 27 December 1929.

by concession to the ABEA, the general manager of Tanganyika Railways had listed the problems and opportunities in Kigoma, albeit seen from his particular point of view. The port of Kigoma had become a bottleneck and was too small to absorb the rapidly increasing flows of goods. In his view, the most convenient solution would be that the Belgians use their base as a transit port only, in other words ship everything as quickly as possible across the lake or in the opposite direction to the coast – on his trains. In his opinion, the main cause of the delays in the Kigoma port was the inefficient if not incompetent operation of the port by the commercial company CFL in combination with allegedly time-consuming Belgian customs formalities, which made Kigoma into a port of entry into the Congo and Ruanda-Urundi instead of a mere transit site. He was convinced that the use as a transit site had always been the intended and still the only appropriate use of the Belgian port sites. Therefore, he called for the use of Kigoma's Belbase as a transit site only, an efficient management under – Belgian – government control, and a better physical organization of the harbour, with fences around the Belgian site.<sup>55</sup>

Undoubtedly, his envisaged reorganization would have served the needs and interests of the railway company. However, he overlooked the economic and commercial interests that were involved in the transshipment and clearing activities taking place in Kigoma. The formalities in Kigoma were not so much threatening the port activity but were the economic backbone of Kigoma's commercial sector. The primarily British, including Indian, enterprises of Kigoma depended heavily on activities in relation to handling, clearing, and forwarding in the Belgian port. It was in the British interest that more happened in Kigoma than only taking goods from train to ship and from ship to train. This shared interest between Belgian and British companies and authorities also explains why nobody had so far felt the need to fence off the Belgian port.

Ironically, the Belgians seemed to have overlooked the exact same issue, albeit from another angle. Not only if the port became a mere transit site, but also when the whole site came under the monopoly of one private company, the economic opportunities would drastically decrease. The management was expected to be more efficient through the ABEA concession, but at the same time the direct government control was reduced and distrust amongst commercial competitors complicated the handling and clearing activities of all companies other than ABEA. The Belgians had underestimated how the ABEA concession would create a monopoly situation at the expense of other firms in Kigoma. Two records in the colonial archives of the Belgian customs and foreign affairs, together with two notes in the British archives of the Colonial Office, give an insightful analysis of the conflict between Belgians and British that arose at the time the Belgians expressed their intention to give the Belbases by concession to ABEA and to concentrate their customs for entry into eastern Congo and Ruanda-Urundi in Kigoma.<sup>56</sup> In a letter from

55 TNA-UK, CO, 691/109/10, Letter from the General Manager of Tanganyika Railways to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Dar es Salaam, 24 October 1929.

56 AAB, AE/II, 2948 (717), Concessions belges à Dar es Salaam et Kigoma; AAB, FRED, 1180, Divers Kigoma, 1929–1958; TNA-UK, CO, 691/109/10, Note by Brigade-General Hammond to Under-Secretary of State Colonial Office, 31 March 1930; TNA-UK, CO, 691/115/8, Note by Under-Secretary of State Colonial Office, 2 May 1931.

the British Embassy in Brussels to the Belgian minister of foreign affairs, the British Foreign Office accused the Belgians of contravention of the Anglo-Belgian Convention of 15 March 1921.<sup>57</sup> According to the British, the Belgians were not entitled to levy customs duties on British soil. Since Kigoma was situated in British territory and entirely surrounded either by British territory or by British waters, performing Belgian customs formalities in the port of Kigoma was allegedly in breach of territorial sovereignty. Moreover, in their reading, Article 2 of the convention expressly forbid all “customs duty or other similar duties” as well as “any delays or unnecessary restrictions” for goods in transit across East Africa. The exemption of customs duties was, moreover, reiterated specifically for the port of Kigoma in Article 9 of the convention. The Belgian government disagreed and argued that the Orts-Milner Agreement was nothing more and nothing less than a limitation of the British sovereignty in the Belgian-leased sites in Kigoma and Dar es Salaam. The convention limited the British right to levy duties on goods in transit to and from Congo and Ruanda-Urundi, not the Belgian right to do so.<sup>58</sup>

Interestingly, the weaknesses of their own positions were discussed openly in the confidential correspondence on both sides, but not communicated to the other. Despite the initial strong accusation, the British soon understood that the Belgians were probably right. Rather than admitting this, they tried to reach the desired outcome based on practical and economic considerations instead of legal and political ones. The Belgians were quite confident that they were right, but were aware that the weakness in their position was that strictly speaking it only applied to goods in transit through, and not coming from or destined, to East Africa. They had no solution for regional trade around the lake or otherwise goods coming from or going to the British territories in East Africa. Throughout the 1920s, as long as Belgians and British had conducted business in a pragmatic way, convinced of their shared interests, this distinction had not been made, thereby avoiding complications for all parties involved. Once the formalist legal card was played, this completely changed. Clarity was detrimental to the successful operation of the inland Indian Ocean port at Kigoma.

Apart from the Belgian and British authorities, the third party were the private firms operating in and around Kigoma. For a number of reasons, they did not like the Belgian idea to concentrate customs in Kigoma, and they opposed the ABEA concession. They knew that legally there was nothing wrong with this concession per se; nevertheless, the combination with the envisaged obligatory customs formalities, which would have to take place within the ABEA-run Belbase, was indeed questionable. For more than two years, the British authorities continued to receive private complaints. They distrusted

57 AAB, AE/II, 2948 (717), Letter from the British Ambassador to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, 18 August 1930. Same letter in: TNA-UK, CO, 691/109/10, Concessions to Belgian Government at Kigoma and Dar es Salaam, 1930.

58 AAB, AE/II, 2948 (717), Lettre du Ministre des Colonies au Ministre des Affaires Étrangères, 19 novembre 1930; TNA-UK, CO, 691/109/10, Letter from Under-Secretary of State Foreign Office to Under-Secretary of State Colonial Office, 18 June 1930; TNA-UK, CO, 691/115/8, Concessions to Belgian Government at Kigoma and Dar es Salaam, 1931.

the semi-official status of their competitor, whom they could not avoid when trading through or handling in the Belgian bases. That the ABEA had secured the monopoly on certain activities in the port was one thing, but that for the sake of customs formalities other agents would have to disclose their invoices, hence business secrets, was inadmissible. What is more, when the effects of the Great Depression struck ever harder and made all business activities difficult, the private companies requested the same tariffs and exemptions as the traffic through the Belgian sites in order to circumvent them in a still profitable way. The British authorities were not willing to grant them services that would cost money to the government; nevertheless, the whole situation did lead to the perceived necessity to more clearly distinguish between and demarcate the Belgian and the British parts of the port, hence undoing the territorial ambiguity on the ground.<sup>59</sup> Yet, if customs procedures had to take place in the ABEA-run Belbase anyway, as was envisaged by the Belgian authorities, not much would be gained with a British “open” port. The catch-22 situation in Kigoma was the simultaneous decision to give the port by concession to ABEA and to concentrate customs in the port. The Belgians had hoped to save costs by concentrating all customs formalities for trade with eastern Congo and Ruanda-Urundi via Lake Tanganyika in one place. In the 1920s, a hybrid situation had existed, necessitating customs stations in the lake ports of Albertville, Uvira, and Kigoma while leaving ambiguities in Bujumbura, Nyanza-Lac, Rumonge, and Baraka. Until 1923, everything had taken place in a legal vacuum. From then onwards, imports into the Congo could be cleared in Kigoma, but this was not compulsory. Traders could freely decide whether they opted for Kigoma, Albertville, or Uvira, in other words, for clearing before or after crossing the lake. For exports from the Congo, Kigoma was not authorized as a customs station. One year later the same regulation also applied for Ruanda-Urundi, although *de facto* there was no operational customs office on the lake in Urundi that could have served as an alternative for Kigoma. In 1927, a new ordinance by the governor of Ruanda-Urundi stated that all customs clearing to and from Ruanda-Urundi via Lake Tanganyika must take place in Kigoma. This situation was both expensive and complicated. By the late 1920s, the Belgian customs authorities were investigating the centralization of their dealings for traffic via Lake Tanganyika in one place, and that place could only be Kigoma’s Belbase because that was the only place where one could reasonably expect that all goods to and from eastern Congo and Ruanda-Urundi would pass through. Not all were in favour of this solution though, because firstly the existing installation in Albertville would become obsolete, secondly the port of Kigoma was deemed too small – an argument also expressed by the British – and thirdly the Belgian expats living and working in Kigoma would benefit more to the British than to the Belgians. Moreover, on the one hand trade to and from British East Africa was excluded from the Belbase privileges, and on the other hand the Belgians were not allowed to operate

59 TNA-UK, CO, 691/121/8, Belgian leased sites at Dar es Salaam and Kigoma, 1932; TNA-UK, CO, 691/127/6, Belgian leased sites at Dar es Salaam and Kigoma, 1933.



outside of the Belbases. Therefore, to impose all customs formalities in Kigoma would require lenience from the British, which they were no longer willing to grant.

In the end, although the Belgians had international law on their side, customs have never been concentrated in Kigoma and on the contrary the Belgians declared on 25 August 1931 that the customs station in Kigoma would be closed completely in 1932.<sup>60</sup> The Banque du Congo Belge in Kigoma closed on 30 September 1934,<sup>61</sup> the wireless telegraph station was dismantled, and by early 1933 only four Belgians still resided in Kigoma. Meanwhile, the Belgian base was still there and was still handling most of the traffic going through Kigoma, but apart from that the Belgian presence in town seemed to have been reduced to the annual laying of a wreath on the Belgian cenotaph on 11 November.<sup>62</sup> The Belgian presence was reduced rapidly and drastically. The next time mention is made in archival sources of the Belgian base in Kigoma is when in 1937 the Belgian authorities put their warehouses at the disposal of the Tanganyika Railways Administration.<sup>63</sup> The days in which the Belgians lacked space in their concessions were far gone. The remaining, primarily Indian, business men in town renegotiated their ground tax obligations, indicating that the economic opportunities in Kigoma no longer allowed them to pay what had seemed reasonable in the late 1920s. The provincial commissioner of the Western Province agreed that there were no grounds to levy ground rents in Kigoma, which were twice as high as in Mwanza at Lake Victoria for instance, and stated: "It is quite obvious that the former prosperity as a railhead will never return to Kigoma."<sup>64</sup>

## Conclusion

Yet again, irony and history go together well. As soon as the extraterritorial half-sovereignty was formally acknowledged, it did not work any longer. Throughout the 1920s, although the Belgians had an extraordinary array of extraterritorial rights at their disposal, all parties involved in the port of Kigoma improvised pragmatically without bothering too much about the full extent of the Belgian legal prerogatives. A mishmash of customs regulations coexisted, port and railway premises were not clearly demarcated, and an informal openness allowed everyone everywhere to do all that was needed to make the port run smoothly. This mode of operation had turned the Indian Ocean port of Kigoma into a functioning Belgian enclave that was still perceived as British by the British. When the Belgians tried to formalize customs regulations and the exploitation of the port, the extraordinary scope of their extraterritorial rights was disclosed in principle, but instantly closed in practice.

60 AAB, AE/II, 2948 (717), Note – Dédouanement des marchandises à Kigoma: Rétroactes de la question; Ordonnance 25 août 1931, N°64/DOU.

61 TanNA, TT, District Officer's Reports, Kigoma District 1934, p. 20.

62 RHO, MSS, Afr. s. 503, John Rooke Johnston, Kigoma District – Handing Over Report, 1940.

63 TNA-UK, CO, 691/154/6, Tanganyika Railways use of Belgian leased sites at Dar es Salaam and Kigoma, 1937.

64 TanNA, 63, L.2/354, Minutes by the Governor, 22 March 1937.



There was one legal loophole – the exclusion of trade to and from East Africa from the Belgian extraterritorial rights – but in the end the economic and practical objections turned out to be the most decisive. Private firms objected against the ABEA concession and against the concentration of Belgian customs in Kigoma. On top of that the growth of the port and of traffic across the lake had made the informal approach of the 1920s untenable. Ironically, the world economic crisis would abruptly halt the unprecedented growth at the same time the Belgians were in vain trying to cope with it.

Despite the ultimate failure, I do claim that during this episode the Belgian base in Kigoma can be characterized as a portal of globalization. The territorial ambiguity during the 1920s had not only been one of Belgian extraterritorial presence in Kigoma but also of ambiguity in the operation of the port itself. The Belgian site had not been fenced off, which actually extended the territorial ambiguity into the port. Belgian and British as well as Indian, Greek, and other firms were active in the port, which made this inland Indian Ocean port a site of global integration both in its local operations and in its handling of material flows. And while the management was taken care of by the customs authorities, technical matters were dealt with by a railway company from the Congo, but without clear legal formalization of this division of labour.

The territorial ambivalence was effective as long as ambivalence was also allowed in the operation of the port itself, and there lies – even if only short-lived – the innovativeness in dealing with and thereby facilitating global interaction. Building on the historical tradition and infrastructure of Kigoma as a regional trade hub with intermittent phases of booming long-distance trade, the first decade of the Belgian Base in Kigoma offers a peculiar instance of how local pragmatism enabled an increase in global flows, by both extending and not fully exhausting what had been laid down in the Anglo-Belgian Convention of 1921.