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Research report

Bringing comfort and convenience to the colonial table: Delhaize Frères & Cie's Colonial Department in the 1920s and 1930s

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the role of convenient shopping in establishing a sense of comfort for Europeans in a colonial environment. So far, there has been little investigation into how Belgian retailers tried to gain a firm foothold in the Congo, how they presented themselves and promoted their wares. This paper examines the activities of the colonial department of Delhaize Frères & Cie 'Le Lion', Belgium's first and largest food multiple. It examines how this large grocery chain tried to establish itself in the Congo, what motivations it had to extend its business to the colony, what audience it wished to reach, what products and services it had to offer and what sales and marketing strategies were used. It appears that convenient shopping was one of the key selling points Delhaize's advertising, while also characterising its products as indispensable for Europeans' comfort, moral respectability and homely warmth in a so-called primitive, backward environment.

Introduction

In 1908, Belgium took over the Congo Free State from its owner, king Leopold II. Since that year, Belgians became increasingly involved, both physically and ideologically, in the colony (Stanard, 2011, p. 6). Small and big companies were established, large infrastructure works started, the Catholic Church built hospitals, churches and schools, while a Belgian administration was put up. All this led to a growing presence of Belgians in the Congo, from 3610 in 1920 to 17,700 in 1930 and 24,000 in 1947 (Vanthemsche, 2012, p. 279) and the development of a colonial culture in Belgium (Stanard, 2011, pp. 6–8; p. 15). This colonisation was accompanied by ardent ideological campaigns in Belgium, which appeared, among others, in the way the Congo was presented at Universal and Colonial Exhibitions throughout the world. At these events, Belgium not only attempted to erase the controversies surrounding Leopold II, but also to create a cult in which the former owner of the Congo was portrayed as a visionary man. As Stanard (2011, pp. 49–50) puts it; "that is how Belgians discounted the violence of Leopold II's rule in the Congo and re-created themselves as benevolent and righteous rulers in central Africa." Colonial propaganda was characterised by the presentation of 'our colony', as a collective project in which each Belgian citizen partook. The Belgian population could be rightfully proud of their country and of the civilisation and prosperity they had brought to Central Africa (Stanard, 2011, p. 15; pp. 47–88; Verschaffel, 2009). Both the civilising mission and glorification of the Belgian monarchy were tied to the economic importance of the Congo for Belgian industry and commerce. The State constantly emphasised the possibilities the colony had to offer both as a supplier of natural resources and as an enormous potential outlet, aspiring to intertwine Belgian and colonial economies (Burke, 2012, p. 471; Guldentops, 2009). With the onset of the economic depression in the 1930s the attempts by the Belgian government to further colonial production and import of raw materials and the export to the Congo of national finished products intensified. Not only was the Congo identified as crucial to the restoration of Belgian prosperity, the Ministry of Colonies also desired to nationalise colonial import and export to exclude non-Belgian influence as much as possible (Stanard 2012, pp. 77–82). This discourse efficiently contrasted Belgian civilisation with colonial 'backwardness', discarding the significance of indigenous economy and the already existing links to global economic networks (Burke, 2012, p. 471; Stanard 2012, p. 88).

One of the sectors that were depicted as providing ample opportunity for ambitious businessmen was the retail sector, and food retailing in particular. By the 1920s the Congo could depend on a more or less regular distribution network that tended towards price convergence throughout the country. However, the trading posts of which this network comprised could not be compared to modern European distribution systems. These posts often combined various activities, simultaneously serving as shop, customs and government headquarters, with retailing being only one of their activities (and, allegedly, failing to provide regular supply). Moreover, because of the large number of intermediaries, huge distances and difficult road conditions, price differences between the Congo and Belgium

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and within the colony were often very pronounced (Buelens, 2007). This left room for improvement, and a number of Belgian food manufacturers and retailers decided to try their luck in the Congo.

The financial-economic history of the Belgian colony and the companies who were active there has been thoroughly addressed by Buelens (2007). His study comprises a network analysis of Belgian–Congolese companies, financial groups, holdings and trusts and identifies the main protagonists and their interconnections. However, how these Belgian organisations tried to gain a firm foothold in the Congo, how they presented themselves and promoted their wares has yet to be investigated. As for most colonial societies, the merchants, retailing and material culture of the Congo before 1960 remain an underexplored area of study (Burke, 2012, p. 471).

This article endeavours to begin this work by analysing the activities of the colonial department of Delhaize Frères & Cie 'Le Lion'. It examines how this large grocery chain, with its dense network of shops scattered all over Belgium and neighbouring Luxemburg, established itself in the Congo, what motivations it had to extend its business to the colony, what audience it wished to reach, what products and services it had to offer and what sales and marketing strategies it used, the latter with particular attention to convenient shopping and convenience foods. Delhaize's self-representation inevitably reflected, propagated and reinforced social values, norms and sensibilities, which can lend insight into the company's views and aspirations, but also into broader societal tendencies, like political agendas, or the importance and appeal of convenience shopping and convenience food. Moreover, this paper provides additional information about how products and ingredients from the colony, local population and culture were portrayed and perceived, as opposed to the fatherland and its food production. It also considers questions regarding food preservation and food safety, and can lend insight into the adoption or rejection of certain aspects of modernity and technological innovation.

In the following pages, I will argue that Delhaize seconded the State's vision of consumer goods as "an instrument of empire" (Burke, 2012, p. 470). The colony was presented as a collective project of civilisation to which Belgian consumers and colonials could contribute through consumption. However, even though the Ministry of Colonies stressed the enormous potential of the Congo as new markets for manufactured goods, Delhaize's advertising campaigns never directly addressed the indigenous population, focusing solely on colonials and their family members in the motherland. This is consistent with what according to Burke (2012, p. 471) occurred in many of Europe's new colonial territories, where the development of local consumption was severely thwarted by active state policies to ensure sufficient supplies of labour at low wages.

Moreover, I will argue that the discourse and iconography used by Delhaize to promote its colonial department and parcels resonated with interwar middle class discourse and social elite's and civil society organisations' initiatives to promote middle class values like thrift, hygiene, convenience, and functionality and conventional views on respectability. The initiatives originated in the middle of the 19th century but gained in number and influence during the 1920s and 1930s, when interest groups and social organisations acquired increasing political weight. Housing, housekeeping and the breadwinner-homemaker ideal were central themes to this civilisation campaign, which originated partly in fear of social unrest and moral degeneration. In this paper, I will demonstrate how Delhaize's advertising framed the comfort and convenience offered by the company's service and products within middle class views on respectability.

Sources and methodology

The results presented in this paper are based on the analysis of a variety of iconographical sources documenting and illustrating Delhaize's activities in and views on the Congo from 1926 until the end of the 1930s, the majority of which are kept in the Delhaize Group archives. Additional iconographical material was found in the Royal Archives and in the iconographical collection of Dexia Bank. The images analysed in this paper include photographs of Delhaize's participation in colonial and universal exhibitions, some of which were also reproduced in advertising brochures, newspaper ads and internal reports. In addition, the Delhaize Group archives contain photographs of visits by company representatives to the Congo, showing not only various stages in the distribution process in the colony, but also how they were supposedly accommodated. The company also produced advertising images promoting its colonial service and parcels. All of these images lend insight into the nature of the products and services Delhaize wished to offer and for what audience, how the retailer motivated and marketed his colonial activities, but also into the company's views and aspirations. The latter can be linked to broader societal tendencies and ideologies by analysing how they reflected, spread and reinforced certain values, norms and sensibilities.

The information collected from the visual sources was compared to and complemented with the data supplied by written and printed archival sources, namely internal reports, publicity material, company brochures and official accounts of Delhaize's participation in colonial and world exhibitions. Delhaize's colonial activities took off around the middle of the 1920s. However, since its colonial department was only established in 1928, most written and iconographical documents date from the late 1920s and the 1930s.

The images were analysed using a qualitative approach, combining an iconographic[1] and a social semiotic analysis.[2] Iconography focuses on denotation, connotation and the iconological symbolism of the individual elements within a visual representation (Panofsky, 1972). Social semiotics, on the other hand, is primarily concerned with the spatial relationships between those individual elements and the way in which these generate meaning. Rooted in principles of semiotics, semiology and critical discourse analysis, social semiotics examines signifiers and how they are used to create meaning. However, its conception of the sign differs from that of semiology. Therefore, social semioticians prefer to use the term *semiotic resource*. The term encompasses all actions, utterances, structures, styles and objects we use to communicate. The potential of semiotic resources is constrained by the manners in which they were applied in the past and of which are familiar to the user and by his specific needs and intentions (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 9). These needs and intentions depend on the subjectivity of the user, but are also greatly determined by social and historical context. Social semioticians consider all semiosis as social action embedded in larger economic and cultural practices and power relations, which are normative systems expressing and reinforcing the ideological discourses and attitudes of the dominant social group(s) (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, pp. 12–13; van Leeuwen, 2005, pp. 47–57). Therefore, the historical and local context, colonial propaganda, the board of directors' ideology and societal and technological evolutions would have had a visible impact on the semiotic resources that were used in Delhaize's advertising.

[1] For a more detailed account of this approach, see Panofsky (1972). *Studies in iconology: Humanistic themes in the art of the renaissance*, New York.

[2] For a more detailed overview of this approach, see Hodge and Kress (1988). *Social semiotics*, Cambridge; Kress and van Leeuwen (1996). *Reading images. The grammar of visual design*, London; Kress and van Leeuwen (2001). *Multimodal Discourse: The modes and media of contemporary communication*, London.