

## The spring 2020 Geisteswissenschaften International Prize for an outstanding work in the humanities goes to ...

Daniel Tödt: *Elitenbildung und Dekolonisierung. Die Évolués in Belgisch-Kongo 1944-1960* (tr: Elite formation and decolonisation. The Évolués in the Belgian Congo 1944-1960), Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2018.

Daniel Tödt's book resists the longstanding trend of fixating on anti-colonial liberation struggles and colonial aggressors, choosing instead to focus on native Congolese elites who initially saw their prospective social emancipation, progress and development as lying within the colonial system, only to then become proponents of independence and members of the post-colonial government. The book focuses primarily on the évolués, a small, elite group of educated Africans who held subordinate positions in the Belgian Congo administration. These individuals were part of the colonial power's attempt to create an African elite in line with their own preferences. In spite of their "educational success", however, these "civilised" Africans continued to suffer discrimination at the hands of colonial powers. In fact, the colonial state never had any intention of actually fulfilling the expectations raised by their promises of progress, nor would they have even been capable of doing so had they tried. Frustrated, many of the évolués turned away from the colonial power, becoming supporters of nationalism and bearers of political responsibility in the post-colonial state. The first president of independent Congo, Patrice Lumumba, who was assassinated in 1961, was one of them.

Tödt makes use of state archives, written material published by the évolués themselves as well as oral-history interviews to develop a differentiated image of Congolese colonial society and its social structures. The author even integrates visual historical sources into his meticulous analysis, including the staging of a "flawless" African family in their living room – a depiction that begins in brilliant fashion by highlighting the countless accessoires associated with petty-bourgeois, small-town Francophone notables. With his pleasantly sober and elegant language, Tödt manages to create a highly interesting, nuanced and often vivid portrayal of African colonial society, all the while taking its protagonists seriously and giving them a strong voice. A translation of this book is urgently necessary, as there is no doubt it would make a substantial contribution to the field of German-language African studies and historical scholarship, especially in connection with international controversies over the history of decolonisation and post-colonial Africa. Tödt's book is a groundbreaking dissertation: expertly researched, finely crafted and an absolute pleasure to read!

The Jury



Auswärtiges Amt

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