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IRIS Graduate Student Summer Fieldwork Award 2020
Research Report

Research project

During the Second World War, Belgian Congo authorities conscripted a group of Congolese medical auxiliaries to provide medical support to British Allies in East Africa, Madagascar, Burma, and India. This mobilization generated a “unique situation” for these auxiliaries, which excerpted them out of the “conventional colonial” context within which they lived. Trained as auxiliaries, intermediaries, or “middle figures,” their role within the colonial medical apparatus was confined to the colonial state’s structures and boundaries. Therefore, crossing national borders and entering the war’s transnational landscape was unthinkable for these medical workers. Through archival research and oral sources, this research examines their transnational experience during the war, both in Africa and well beyond, crossing previously racial, ethnic, and social lines in the process. It sheds new light on how this new mobility reshaped medical auxiliaries’ complex identities and positionality in their society. Entering the war’s transnational landscape enabled these medical actors to actively participate in “globalization on the ground” as their medical knowledge, skills, experiences, and expertise actualized on the frontlines of the Second World War. In investigating their stories for the first time, my research shows how Africans became deeply implicated in these global processes and participated in what has been primarily understood as “western” wartime healthcare and military success.

With the support of the deferred 2020 IRIS Graduate Fieldwork Award, I was able to extend my stay in Congo, especially in Kinshasa, for an additional ten weeks this summer 2021. I was able to complete my archival research in the Congolese National Archive and Library, the Catholic archives of Maison Saint Ignace, the Archives of Veterans in the ministry of Defense, and the Central Library of the University of Kinshasa. These archives and libraries contain important documents related to medical auxiliaries in Belgian Congo, the Belgian Congo army, the FP, and many other documents on the history of Belgian Congo. I also continued collecting oral data from former Congolese health workers, their family members, and friends to unearth auxiliaries' personal experiences of the war efforts.

The IRIS Summer Fieldwork Award also assisted with travel and living expenses for my stay in Lower Congo, where I was able to conduct three more interviews and visit sites within which these medical actors acquired and produced medical knowledge. Mainly, I was able to see the School of Native Medical Assistant of Kisantu, where many of these medical actors studied and worked. This site constitutes the testimonies of various experiences of African medical personal in their process of producing medical knowledge. Moreover, the IRIS Summer Fieldwork Award helped me access the UK National Archives and other libraries in London. Through the help of research assistants, I have collected more materials related to the Belgian Congo's medical mobilization during the war.

Finally, beyond covering some of my research expenses, including local transportation, supplies, research equipment, and accommodation in Congo, the IRIS Summer Fieldwork Award has been an invaluable part of my dissertation research. Without this award, I would not have been able to bridge the gap between the official state, colonial narratives, and Congolese personal experiences. For that, I am extremely grateful.