

Language and the Portrayal of Black People from the Colonization  
of the Congo to Modern Day With Supplemental History

*CW: Racial and Religious Violence, Violence Against Children*

History 315

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This paper will be focused on **how the portrayal of Congolese natives in the beginnings of colonization continues to affect the world's portrayal of black people.** It will draw from a variety of resources, including US military think tanks, African revolutionaries, and primary sources from the colonization of Africa. First, we will give a background of the Congo region from a non-colonizer source (*The Destruction of Black Society*), then we will approach the early colonizer's point of view. Here we will note specific vernacular used in describing black people and the atrocities committed. Finally, we will come to more modern-day colonizers and voices and compare how the modern-day portrayals echo their ancestors. One final note before jumping in, this paper will be using the term "Congolese" to describe the native people of the area. This is not due to disregard for the varied social groups and tribes of the area, rather in an effort to somewhat simplify the paper. Early central Africa had a multitude of tribes cycling through the area, all with different cultural quirks and politics.

To start, we will be examining just a few of those cultures at the very beginning of the colonization of central Africa, just to emphasize how much these people were *not* savages. The societal structure was based on the idea that "A good life was defined as benefiting one's community, while a bad life was defined as exhibiting selfishness."<sup>4</sup> That is not to say that their society was perfect because there is no such thing. However, their growth and problems were dealt with in an incredibly humanistic manner that we could take many notes from to this day. There were still disagreements and battles and tribes that did not understand each other's small differences. A key difference in Africa during this period that distinguishes this conflict from say, early European conflict, is the fact that at its core all Africans had similar views on how the world was created and what/who was divine. <sup>10</sup>

Around 1659-1680, however, central Africans found themselves decades into conflict, surrounded on all sides by other hostile tribes and colonizers. The author speculates this is due to the lush, beautiful, and giving land on which central Africa is centered upon. Fatalism begins to emerge as a common mindset among the general population, and many give up on resisting. After all, organized farming (and therefore society) began in Africa in 5000 B.C.E. Not everyone gave up, however. Some decided peace was not a realistic option, and began to steal guns and canons to have a fighting chance to protect their own. Still, others stayed, buckled down, and survived based on cooperation. This group of people was known as the Bushoongs. A central and highly organized group of 18 different tribes of Congolese people that built a society based on equity. This group had a full, functioning government with representatives from each tribe taking care of different governmental duties. Duties such as infrastructure, border defense, a national linguist, a treasury, a province representative from each tribe, tax collection, and an oral historian.<sup>10</sup> For historical context, around this time Massachusets banned Christmas (aka Yule) because it allowed the lower class to ‘Beg Rowdily’ (read: Figgy Pudding Yuletide carol) and drink and eat in the streets. Which one seems more savage to the reader, banning of a celebration of each other and making it through the winter, or systemic and effective government ruled by the people?<sup>6</sup>

Enter the Europeans. Like cats drawn to wet food, Colonizers can smell political instability from half the world over. The Bushoongs find themselves surrounded during a time of political infighting with trade posts and missionary bases looking to “enlighten” them. The Portuguese offer *ever so kindly* to take care of those sowing discord and malcontent and sell them into slavery. The Bushoongs oblige. It is important to note here that African slaves and European slaves had *vastly* different lives. In Africa, if you were a slave you were still a member

of the community. You would be integrated into the family who bought you, you could own land, hold political positions and eventually work your way out of slavery. As we all know, that is not how European slaves were treated by any means. This is an explanation, not an excuse for the selling of people into slavery and the Congolese as a whole quickly found out how European slaves were treated. This is how such a sophisticated and humanistic government could so simply sell someone into a life of servitude.

Now to enter the meat and potatoes of the paper. To begin with the colonizer's perspective, we are starting with the missionary points of view. In particular, Reverend John Murphy and Cardinal Charles Lavigerie. These missionaries carried out one of the more insidious parts of imperialism, cultural 'cleansing.' I.e. stripping the native Congolese of their culture, religion, and ways of life with shame, force, and religious guilt. These two are just a slice of the 'civilizing' mission in the Congo. Even while one is protestant and the other catholic, they are united in their disdain. Rev. Murphy called the inhabitants "Wretched slaves" who were "everywhere unfriendly". This man was heralded by the rest of the world as saint-like due to his civilizing mission and 'care' he took with the natives, and this is how he referred to the people he was supposedly helping. On the catholic side of things, Islamophobia was blossoming. Cardinal Lavigerie says the following.

"...With Islam, that humanity is made up of two distinct races- one, that of believes, destined to command; the other, that of cursed, as they style them, destined to serve"<sup>4</sup>

While this was originally a public indictment against the 'Arab' slave traders and castes, it effectively instills feelings of Islamophobia within the already prejudiced catholic missionaries.

At this period in time, Islam was not the popular religion in Africa as it is today. However, words have power, especially the words of Cardinals. This was not the only way Cardinal Lavigerie spoke down on the inhabitants of Africa though, he called the people of the African Highlands “savage” and “incapable” of coping with outside threats. Remember this sentiment because it will show itself again.

Next, we come to the sources from those *non*-empathetic with the Congo Free State. People who disagreed with how King Leopold was handling things and spoke out against it. John Hobson, a vocal critic, socialist, and influencer of Lenin himself spoke of the region like this- “Whenever superior races settle on lands where lower races can be profitably used...” He then goes on to wax poetic about land use and imperialism in Africa. However, this small blurb shows us all we need to know about how he viewed the people of the land he was supposedly defending. Hobson was not the only one to disagree with the Congo Free State while still espousing the values that made it possible. Edmund Morel, a British journalist writing a slam piece on the Congo Free State falls just as easily into these trappings of racism he was bred into. He calls the people in secluded places that do not have many out-of-state commercial transactions “The most backward peoples” and specifically calls the Congolese “primitive.”<sup>4</sup> This point of view still sees light today, especially due to the extent to which capitalism has brainwashed a large part of the global population into believing that capital is more important in determining worth than the intrinsic value of human life.

Now, we find ourselves in the more disturbing section of this paper. Those who were empathetic to and supported the Congo Free State. To begin, Theophile Wahis. This ‘man’ was the Governor-General of CFS who killed and ordered the killing of huge swathes of people,

dismembered more (including children and pregnant mothers), burnt villages to the ground, and thought himself to be in the right in most everything he did in the pursuit of rubber. He spoke of the Congolese deserving the atrocities he committed against them, due to “insubordination” and justified his dismembering of the population due to it being a “custom that exists or has existed in every part of Africa.” Something to be noted is that he *specifically* put out orders to remove people of their hands if they were too slow in returning harvested rubber, or even just annoyed with them. Pictured above are two of such victims, a photo that is under the copyright of © Universal Images Group/Getty.



Next, we come to Henry Wellington Wack. Mr.

Wack was a fierce and *paid* supporter of the CFS and an American attorney for a pharmaceutical company.<sup>5</sup> Quite the amoral combination. Wack wrote of the Congolese that they had “Barbarous



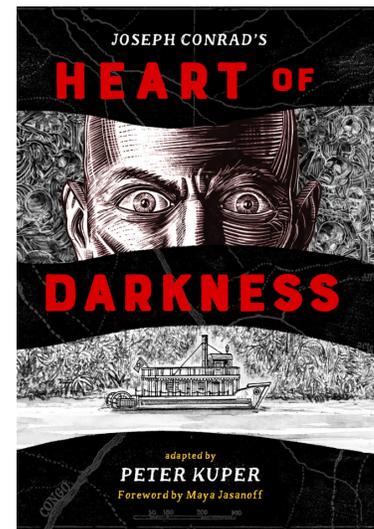
Nsala, of the district of Wala, looking at the severed hand and foot of his five-year-old daughter, Boali, a victim of the Anglo-Belgian India Rubber Company (A.B.I.R.) militia.

customs” and regularly participated in witch hunts.<sup>4</sup> Let’s bring some context to that last claim of witch hunts. When white people first came to Africa the natives did not know what they were. A common early theory was that they were the dead returning due to the pale complexion of the new and strange people.<sup>4</sup> However, once word

spread of how they treated those who helped and those who did not, a new name came into use. Ndoki- or witch. As previously mentioned, Africa had a pretty comprehensive view of religion. Something modern archeologists call ‘Animism’ but in reality, it is the belief that “the Creator or

Universal God permeates all of His Creations, living and dead. Therefore, any object, animate or inanimate, may be sacred.”<sup>10</sup> The Bakuba, one of the groups from the region of the Congo, believed that the energy could be either evil or good and had the infamous and misinterpreted ‘Witch Doctors.’ The evil energy was expressed through witches, and witch doctors were there to help remove people from the path of evil. This is what those aforementioned witch hunts were. There was certainly punishment and even death for practicing ‘witchcraft’ within African society, however, the context as always illuminates the situation better.

We now find ourselves at King Leopold II. The tyrant himself. British revisionist history likes to paint this evildoer as a ‘Gentlemanly Capitalist’. He liked to consider himself a man who gained profit from other nations ‘the old-fashioned way’ to boost the image of his nation that he considered (with disgust) ‘grocers and lawyers.’ His perception of the Congolese people was much worse though. He considered them “Corrupt and Fallen peoples” and on par with animals in a zoo to be looked at and do tricks. He constantly infantilized them out of one side of the mouth and out the other called them savages and animals of destruction. Not much else could be found straight out of his mouth (or pen) much of anywhere, due to the fact that he burnt most of the incriminating evidence against him.<sup>7</sup> He left only behind generations of a mauled people and pay-offs to an American attorney to write nicely about him.<sup>5 9</sup>



It was not just individuals of the state and journalists enforcing the narrative of the African as a child-like savage beast that knows not of the real world. Media had quite an impact, in particular, *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad. This book, a favorite of educators, follows

the story of a man named Charles Marlow who recounts how he became a captain of an ivory trade steamboat on the Congo River. Major themes of the book include a descent into madness by the narrator and the idea that humanity at its core is a dark and snarling beast. Now, there is a *lot* to unpack in this book and many have done so already in a much more concise manner than I could ever do. One of such reviews is by Chief Chinua Achebe that I will be highlighting in this essay. This is because ìchíè-Achebe *is* an African (The chief of the Igbo tribe) and has much more authority writing on the subject than the author has. ìchíè-Achebe writes that Africa in the book serves as the ‘evil’ counterpart to the ‘good’ England, that it serves as an antithesis to all good and intelligent life. An entire continent, supposedly full of the depths of depravity and worst of humanity. Conrad’s writing of the natives reflects these ideas and the supposedly animalistic nature of African Natives. Below is one of many quotes from the book ìchíè-Achebe chooses to highlight, some liberty has been taken by the author to bold some of the more revealing phrases.

“... No they were not inhuman. Well, you know that was the worst of it -- this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. **They howled and leaped and spun and made horrid faces**, but what thrilled you, was just the thought of their humanity -- like yours -- the thought of **your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly.** Yes, it was ugly enough, but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you -- you so remote from the night of first ages -- could comprehend”<sup>2</sup>

This passage is one of the more tame portrayals of the Native Congolese. This next one is not so “kind” to a Congolese native working on the steamboat the narrator is aboard.

“He was an **improved specimen**; he could fire up a vertical boiler. He was there below me and, upon my word, to look at him was as edifying as **seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat walking on his hind legs**. A few months of training had done for that really fine chap... . He ought to have been clapping his hands and stamping his feet on the bank, instead of which he was hard at work, a thrall to **strange witchcraft**, full of improving knowledge.”<sup>2</sup>

A common argument made for these phrases is that they reflect the madness of the narrator, and are simply a way for the author to fully submerge the reader within this world of darkness. This author as well as Ichiè-Achebe call bullshit. This may not have been a strategic move, but it was a purposeful one in a widely read and acclaimed book that was one of the few glimpses into a world that the majority of the European and American population had never seen before. It certainly left an impact on the world that we *still* continue to see. When the author of this paper was discussing the writing of this paper with a local barista, all he knew of the Congo was *Heart of Darkness*.

That itself is proof of the continued inaccuracies and racism in reporting on the currently fragile political environment of the Congo. This issue is not one of the past. However, one barista in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan is not exactly a worldwide cultural marker, so we now find ourselves investigating modern-day portrayals of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. To kick it off, we'll start with an article published in *Foreign Politics* magazine circa 2013. The article itself is attributed to someone named Anjan Sundaram, however, upon further investigation into the matter, it seems as if this person was only used as an apparatus to conduct an interview and take pictures. The article seems to actually be written by a white woman named Laura Heaton.

The fact it was attributed to Sundaram instead of Heaton may have something to do with manufacturing accountability and the false representation of black voices to gain some respectability. The article serves as a glimpse into the lives of the Congolese Rebel in 2013. It has disturbingly similar scenes to colonization, such as women being raped often and violence coming in waves to destroy towns already ravaged by centuries of colonialism and territorial conflict. It reads like a scare puff-piece and does not give much information other than how *terrible* it is there and not even what a rebel soldier carries, but what *she* carries as a reporter. This article was chosen specifically to see if it had any of the emotional complexities and national criticism of the similarly named *The Things They Carried*, a book about Vietnam soldiers and the emotional toll taken by being a pawn in an unjust war. It did not, it was essentially a “what’s in my purse” of Heaton herself.<sup>8</sup>

Next up, we have a war report on the Congo from the RAND Corporation from a collection titled *Overcoming Obstacles to Peace*. The RAND Corporation is a think tank sponsored by the US military to put information out about other countries that are approved by the military. (i.e. propaganda) This reading was an incredibly selective history of the Congo, going so far as citing the instability in the region stemming from the Cold War. Which... is a very weird way to say the centuries of colonization came to a head with a dictator during the period of the Cold War after the original president was assassinated. It additionally notes of the DRC being “A challenging place to nation-build” with low per-capita income and “easily extractable gems and ores.” It is very obvious from reading the chapter that the US is only interested in “Nation-building” insofar as using the resources on the land and minimizing anti-white sentiment. It is easy to tell this due to the nation builders listed; The EU, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the USA, and other ‘developed’ European countries. All

of these groups would greatly benefit from the environmental exploitation of previously mentioned gems and minerals. Additionally, the only sources it references are international organizations based in Europe and British organizations. There is virtually no African scholarship, much less Congo scholarship on the factors leading to the instability of the country cited or referenced. Even within the report, it states “The international nation-building strategy did not focus on Congolese culture and society.” How is one supposed to rebuild a nation without culture and society? It cannot be done, and the lack of interest in this only proves the true motives of the colonizers. The closest it gets to culture is considering missionaries and non-governmental organizations a “Bright spot in an otherwise bleak scene.”<sup>3</sup> That sort of rhetoric sounds all too familiar. Plus, as we know from written works by African Natives, those missionary jobs often do more harm than good.<sup>11 12</sup>

If you have reached this point in the paper or are in anyways aware of global politics it is probably no secret that the DRC is a bloody place right now. However, the problems that are *making* it so bloody are probably not as readily apparent. For understanding’s sake, before we move into the synthesis portion of this essay some space will be given to why things in the Congo have not settled yet and will not settle yet. Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja wrote “The past weighs heavily on the present of the Congo.” The DRC has been affected on both the individual and societal level by such a long term of violence by so many different forces that it has brought about an air of collective victimization. The issues are numerous and those working on fixing it either do not have the best interests in mind or are focused on the symptoms of the problem, not the root of it. The root being the continued colonization of Africa. The systems keeping it in place, however are the same ones trying to fix the issue.<sup>7</sup>

Onto the synthesis. In this final section, we will be investigating how past racist portrayals of black people have continued on to this day, and just changed its name and face. To begin with, we will be comparing *Heart of Darkness* and “The Things They Carried: The Congolese Rebel” Both of these are white outsiders writing about the conditions in the Congo, one through literary ‘realism’ and the other through a sad excuse for journalism. *Heart of Darkness* was not shy nor fake about the disdain for Congolese native peoples. There was no pretending that the author saw the people living there as anything other than “limbs or rolling eyes”<sup>1</sup> that lived within the... well, the titular heart of darkness. Conrad depicted Africa and the Congo in particular as a dark place, unseen by the light of progress or ‘God.’ He liked to use black women as archetypal temptresses and as a whole showed the Congo to be an ugly, overgrown, and wild place that no ‘civilized’ human could survive in while staying sane.

Heaton’s source, like many modern-day depictions of Africa, is sneaky in its condemnation. That is, unless we know what to look for. The source tells of a Luvungi woman sneaking into the interpreter and reporter’s room to tell the interpreter of an incident of her being raped and the elders telling her not to speak about it publicly so she doesn’t get ostracized, as well as so when aid comes it gets distributed evenly. Upon hearing this the reporter immediately shoots it down as “Just one possibility.”<sup>8</sup> (Not out loud though, she stays quiet and pretends to be sleeping during this encounter) She also insinuates that the leader of the rebel army orchestrated the mass rape events, despite the only evidence given being an unattributed and undated UN report. This flippant disregard for the people she is supposed to be highlighting, as well as her focus on the violence and *only* the violence, is continuing a very dangerous precedent set by *Heart of Darkness*. It is telling readers that the Congo is a depraved den of rapists and liars who have no leadership. Sounds familiar, no?

Next, we will be comparing Cardinal Lavigerie's report on the Congo and the RAND corporation's report. Both of these sources are written by people who have something to gain in the Congo who need submission and force to do so. In the Cardinal's report, he likens the Congolese people to cattle<sup>4</sup> who are unable to fend for themselves against something so simple as bandits and outside forces who gained access to the firepower of the colonizers. He speaks of how an intervention is the only option and that his missionaries will bring force as a barrier to slavery to protect the poor downtrodden half-people of the Congo. (So that white Europeans may someday "live and prosper" there)<sup>4</sup> The RAND Corporation similar to the Heaton source buries its racism and is not nearly as outright as the Cardinal is. However, underneath all that military and government jargon lies the same sentiment. It marks outside missionary influence and European "aid" as the Congo's saving grace, due to the state's inability to "Nation Build" and says "The level of social development remains extremely low" which is government talk to say the region is savage and filled with savages. The RAND corporation proposes the best way through these issues is further involvement from the rest of the so-called developed world to help extract those "Easily extractable gems and minerals."<sup>3</sup>

Finally, onto the comparison of King Leopold's ideal Congo and TikTok. If we recall earlier in this paper, Leopold likened the Congolese people to zoo animals. His ideal version of the Congo was a place where he and his people could vacation and watch as the native people got brutalized and did their best to live their life.<sup>9</sup> Now, the usage of Black people's suffering) as entertainment is a tale as old as colonization and is still alive and well to this day. We may not have minstrel shows anymore, where the family can get together and have a couple of beers as a black person who may or may not be paid pennies a day is on stage being laughed at. However, what we do have is TikTok and reaction gifs of black people. Why are black people living their

lives so funny? What exactly about Wendy Williams, Shaquille O’Neil, and Beyonce make their facial expressions so ‘meme-able’ as opposed to other wildly famous celebrities? And why do so many vine compilations and popular TikToks just show black people being brutalized in street fights or doing things that are deeply human, like sitting on a porch stoop and singing or playing around with new technology, have comments underneath of non-black people saying things like “IM WHEEZING” or key-smashing?

It is these questions and more that I encourage the reader to deeply interrogate within themselves and others. Racism, as we are all aware, is alive and well in the world today. So many of us are raised within societies that systemically and repeatedly cram these images of black people being lesser than or being lynched in the street down our throats, and many of us swallow it without a second thought. It starts as soon as we are young enough to decipher clear images on TV, billboards, and books. The purpose of this essay was to bring to light the mechanics of just how long these smear-campaign efforts have been ongoing, and just how truly insidious they are. I encourage the reader to not just stop at this reading and dismiss the idea that they could have racism deeply programmed within them because it is an uncomfortable thought. Take a look at the sources referenced within this paper, read further into intersectionality and internalized white supremacy, because if we don’t do this work things are only going to get worse. Not just for the Congo, but at home as well. Thank *you* for taking the time to read this, and ask yourself at every turn- Who is profiting from this hate?

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