

THE HISTORICAL COMPANION TO  
POSTCOLONIAL LITERATURES  
CONTINENTAL EUROPE  
AND ITS EMPIRES

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**A Historical Companion to Postcolonial  
Literatures – Continental Europe and  
its Empires**

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## Narratives of Empire: (Post)colonial Congo

What is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo is an immense country, comprising several hundred ethnic groups, and as many languages. It is a country famous for its traditional plastic arts, as well as for its oral traditions. Its modern culture, especially music, is also renowned.

The Congo today finds itself in a complex linguistic situation: in addition to French, the official language since independence, Tshiluba, Kikongo, Kiswahili and Lingala are widely-spoken national languages. Congolese languages, in fact, grew in influence during colonialism; for example, the continent's first African language radio station has been broadcasting from Leopoldville since 1948, although the project began in 1933. If literature has been written mainly in French, theatre and chanson have also developed in Lingala and Kiswahili; as for fiction writing in an African language, the main language used more recently is Tshiluba.

The Congo, which covers the valley of the Congo river, borders, in the East, the volcanic area of the Great Lakes and, in the South-East, the savannahs of southern Africa. Its borders were established at the end of the 1870s, the time of the founding of the Congo Free State by the journalist and explorer Stanley and the administrators sent on a private basis by Leopold II (also constitutional King of the Belgians). It was a complex period, characterised by exploration and problems in setting up enterprises, armed conflict against slavery and against rebel soldiers, missionary and political outreach.

The 'Belgian Congo' only officially came into existence in 1908 as a result of pressure from, amongst others, Great Britain. Human relations were characterised by a general racist paternalism, reinforced by the wish to select colonial personnel and to avoid 'poor whites'. Indirect rule, separating urban sectors from the 'native lands', went alongside a

favourable attitude to the indigenes in both administration and culture. The relative importance of basic education, especially when overseen by the missionaries (and conducted in African languages), the notable development of transport and industrial production infrastructure, but also of scientific literature in all fields, including ethnography and linguistics, all went hand in hand with a form of intellectual and symbolic entrapment. The régime was ill-equipped to adapt to the rapidly changing post-war world. Its legacy was a double memory of prosperity (in fact more fragile than it seemed) and iniquity, due to the slow and limited integration of the colonised peoples into the material benefits of the system, and into the exercise of responsibility.

With independence in 1960, the republic went through a great many troubles – rebellions, fragmentation, civil war – and finally the dictatorship of Colonel Mobutu, whose régime lasted until the late 1990s. During these years, the country changed its name to Zaire; its only political party preached a return to national ‘authenticity’. If on balance the first years after independence were not entirely negative, economic ‘Zairianisation’ turned out to be a fiasco. Overall, the ‘model colony’ of the 1950s, with its strong economic potential, had by the end of the twentieth century become a country drained, beholden to armed groups, a state of lawlessness denounced by the writer Bolya in *L’Afrique, le maillon faible* (2002). The number of intelligent young people and the amount of capital going abroad was considerable. The infrastructure was devastated, but not national feeling, nor the hope of a return to prosperity.

#### FROM CONRAD TO BOLYA: THE INTERNATIONALE OF CHAOS

If the colonial period was relatively short, Belgians were active in the Congo before 1908. There were, however, never enough volunteers: in the same way that he had had to source some of his capital from overseas, especially in Great Britain, the King had to rely mainly on the services of Italians and Scandinavians.

The degree of international intervention was further reinforced, in the period of the independent state, by two ideological or political factors. The humanitarian aspect, first of all, marked the debates on what was still a terra incognita that Europeans aimed to free from the Arab slave trade. The reality of this trade was denounced by Livingstone and many others. On the other hand, the generosity of those who vowed to fight it and who called it a new ‘crusade’ against ‘barbarity’, did not mean that the humanitarian question could not serve as a shield for a campaign aiming at territorial conquest and economic exploitation. The situation was more complex, however, than this preliminary analysis suggests. The Act of Berlin did not separate the ‘civilising’ objectives from the clauses relating to commercial freedom in the Congo: at the time the ‘Free State’ was seen as an open territory, where commerce would introduce progress, simultaneously showing what unfettered liberalism was supposedly capable of.

The establishment of the colonial system began with the funding of a minimum state apparatus and the setting up of customs charges and taxes: the royal coffers were not bottomless. Transport alone, with the construction of a titanic railway between Matadi and Kinshasa, on top of the human cost, demanded huge financial support. The risk of failure explains the Free State’s relaxed attitude in giving over markets to private companies without having, or creating, the means of controlling them. This plunder economy led to the violence of *Red Rubber*. The work of D. van Groenweghe (*Rood Rubber*, 1985) tells us precisely what to make of these exactions, which had already been the object of an independent enquiry commission in 1906.

The scandal lasted a decade, during which the Western press made a lot of fuss over the Congo. This had important consequences in literature. Well-known writers, first of all,

became engaged in denunciations of the régime: before A. Conan Doyle's *Crime of the Congo* (1909), Mark Twain's satire *King Leopold's Soliloquy* (1905) began a tradition of anti-Leopoldian caricatures, which continued as far as *Het leven en de werken van Leopold II* (1970) by the Flemish writer Hugo Claus. But the work that has left the most lasting impression today is Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Of course, the anti-colonialism of this tale is counterbalanced by a racism that most notably Chinua Achebe has denounced. Conrad's work has become an iconic text which has been retold in contemporary African cultural history, for example in the context of child soldiers in Sierra Leone, and more generally, of course, as a universal parable of evil.

From Conrad to Graham Greene's *A Burnt-Out Case* (1960), V. S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* (1979), to Alberto Moravia (*La Donna Leopardo*, 1991), the referent of the 'primitive forest' has been used many times to figure savagery, dereliction, chaos, entropy, everything that is opposed to civilisation or threatens with regression. Other forms of literature have also played an important role here, whether they be comic strips like the *Tiger Joe* series from the 1950s, adventures for the young like *Les Démons des cataractes* (H. Vernes, Bob Morane collection, 1957), or even spy novels like *Panique au Zaïre* (G. de Villiers, SAS collection, 1978). In Belgian literature, beyond several Georges Simenon novels – especially *Le Coup de lune* (1933), where the action takes place in Gabon – it is really the novel *Kufa* (1955) by Henri Cornélus, as well as George Duncan's stories – *Blancs et noirs* (1949) – that are inspired in this way. This is what has been called critical exoticism, a simultaneously ideological and stylistic vision of a tragic scene whose issues are more metaphysical than realistic. The media's resurrection of this mythical discourse in the context of the crisis in Africa poses an obvious problem of an ethical nature, but also of a political one, since some photographs were taken on the basis of information that itself was deformed by the myth.

From the 1980s onwards a few Congolese writers attempted to join this tradition themselves in the context of 'new African writing'. Bolya Baenga, in *Cannibale* (1986), which opens with an epigraph taken from Conrad, or Pius Ngandu Nkashama, in *Le Pacte de sang* (1984), do not, however, limit themselves to illustrating a mythical figure of chaos: via literary means certainly far removed from documentary, they evoke the tragic lives of populations abandoned to neglect and despair. V. Y. Mudimbe's latest novel, *Shaba deux* (1989), probably his major work, simultaneously evokes the same Congo and the same universal tragedy, but by using a style of writing that is very different in its sobriety from that of the authors mentioned above.

The historical pessimism often symbolised by the 'shadow' figure is not limited to the modern era, however: a close reading of *Ngando* (1948) – a masterpiece and the first work of Congolese literature by Paul Lomami-Tshibamba – shows that this preoccupation was also present in the oral tradition. *Ngando* reveals itself as a colonial product in a passage where it praises colonisation; if the story denounces the régime's repressive side, it is even more critical of human impotence to guard against the forces of evil, which it sees as always ready to intervene.

#### THE ANTI-EXOTIC TRADITION

Colonial literature, in the proper sense, is principally defined in opposition to the exotic, whether this be the traveller's clichés or the critical exoticism mentioned above. The colonial vision, logically speaking, not only should not consider the colony as 'elsewhere', nor the colonised people as 'Other', but rather rests on a confidence in the human being's promethean ability to assure 'development' and 'progress'. Above all, this entails a

confidence in history. If the novel *Ngando* sidesteps the colonial logic of its time, it is less through the image of police suppressing the unemployed, than by the absence of this confidence.

The colonial corpus in part avoids the simplicity of the 'civilising' discourse because it is literature. It rather plays the role of a bad conscience for this discourse. Colonial fiction indeed lists the obstacles that the colonial enterprise as a whole encountered. In many cases, the confidence is maintained regardless; in others, more numerous as time goes on, doubt, even despair, eventually overcome it.

The famous cartoon *Tintin au Congo* (1931), not written by a colonial author, is the paragon of this confidence being maintained, both in history and in language. At the same time, it illustrates the paternalistic stereotypes that were dominant at the time: here is a racism that is expressed inside a group, in contrast to the exclusive racism that we find in Conrad. In literary fiction, this confidence is best represented by a novella written by the future Governor-General P. Ryckmans: *Barabara*, published belatedly in 1947. The story is set around the construction of a road in Burundi in the 1920s; the colonised people appear only marginally, but still have nothing in common with the caricatured version found in Hergé. Here we have the challenge presented by a long-term project, performed in a disinterested manner by a single man across the mountain, a man who is at the centre of this parable of 'the action of the energetic man in a new country'. The republishing of this story in the Congo in 1991 can be explained by the idealism of its values, and as such it becomes a paradoxical counter narrative to the corrupt Mobutu régime.

Colonial fiction, which begins in Dutch with *Ook een ideaal* (1896) by Pieter Danco, and in French with *Udinji* (1905) by C. A. Cudell, is not always straightforward colonialist: and becomes even less and less so with time. Thus, in the novel *L'Arrêt au carrefour* (1936), the painter Henri Kerels begins to doubt the values of Western society. In his novellas (*Apéritifs*, 1934), the magistrate Joseph-Marie Jadot shows a profound scepticism concerning the process of cultural integration. *Oproer in Congo* (1953) by G. Walschap, and a great novel like *Le Crépuscule des ancêtres* (1948), published in Leopoldville by René Tonnoir, are already African novels thanks to their essential interest in a Congolese society in rapid transition. In the age of independence, this preoccupation is even more pronounced in novels such as *La Termitière* (1960) by Daniel Gillès and *Matuli* by Joseph Esser (1960). After a period of relative obscurity, the colonial memory resurfaces in Belgium with works like those of Grégoire Pessaret and Michel Massoz. An exemplary novel, *L'Homme qui demanda du feu* (1978) by Ivan Reisdorff, is a sort of affective and political appraisal of the colonial enterprise and, finally, of its historical failure, understood in terms of the violence which broke out at the Great Lakes from the end of the 1950s. At once postcolonial (because of its date of publication, and definitely for its retrospective point of view) and colonial (because of the period discussed and by the foregrounding of an European administrator whose dream of becoming integrated in a new country fails to materialise), this novel demonstrates that easy labels are insufficient.

#### THE FIELD OF CONGOLESE LITERATURE

Approaching literature from a more material base provides a more solid perspective. The progressive formation of a literary field in the Congo can be observed from the end of the nineteenth century. It began with the printing of reviews and the establishment of a local-language theatre, on the initiative of missionaries. From the period between the wars, whilst a colonial literature essentially aimed at the Belgian market that was developing, we also see the activities of the 'amis de l'art indigène' develop in the Congo – which would

encourage the writing down of oral tradition – and those of the 'cercles d'évolués'. A pocket edition, the 'Bibliothèque de l'Étoile' went on to play an essential role in the spread of written material, including the first modern fiction written by a Congolese. Colonial cultural life would become much more structured after 1945, with the activities of associations such as l'Union Africaine des Arts et des Lettres, which had been exclusively European, slowly opening up to Congolese participation. Cultural reviews such as *Brousse* or *Jeune Afrique* provide evidence of this evolution. *La Voix du Congolais*, official newsletter of the évolués, whose editor-in-chief was the poet Bolamba, also played a key role.

However, in 1960 the Congo had only one university graduate, Thomas Kanza, author of essays and of an autobiographical novel: *Sans Rancune* (1965). But things changed rapidly: Lovanium University had been opened in 1954, Elisabethville University in 1956. Throughout the 1960s, young poets formed many different active circles, like Clémentine Faïk-Nzujî and her group La Pléiade. Les Éditions du Mont Noir, a little later, were to centre a remarkable editorial momentum around V. Y. Mudimbe. Political power tried not to be left behind, notably supporting *Belles-lettres*. Of course, this flowering was to be countered by the drift towards autocracy, which pushed a number of intellectuals either to join militant groups, or to go into exile.

The Congolese diaspora's big names – V. Y. Mudimbe, G. Ngal, P. Ngandu – should not, however, make us forget the writers who remained in the country, whose production was furthermore widely read, notably in schools. Zamenga is the most famous, prolific author of popular literature mostly distributed through the 'Saint-Paul' network. He is far from being the only one: before also fleeing into exile, authors such as Charles Djungu-Simba or Pie Tshibanda whose books unfortunately remained out of the public domain had a literary impact totally separate from that of the authors published in the west.

These material reasons, today, continue to limit not only access to books, but also to constrain the secondary and tertiary institutions responsible for teaching of and carrying out research in literature. Meanwhile, however, young authors in the Congo and abroad continue to emerge and deliver new books for the market, in all sectors of publishing.

Pierre Halen

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