

Introduction

Jan Wasiewicz

“The land of the spirits” is the description of the contemporary territory of the Congo in known written records, Egyptian hieroglyphs carved into the tomb of the guide of an expedition to the Central African interior. The term was first used two and a half millennia BC in reference to what is now a huge country, the second largest in Africa, equal in size to Western Europe¹. We would like to take the readers of the current double issue of “Zeszyty Artystyczne” to this land, full of unimaginable beauty, matched by an equal share, if not more, of unimaginable and profound suffering. This journey was made possible by the exhibition *The Self-Portrait of the Congolese. Congolese Paintings 1960–1990*, held at the ZAMEK Culture Centre in Poznań between October 16 and December 19, 2021. The show presented one of the most interesting artistic and cultural phenomena in contemporary African art, namely popular Congolese painting collected by Professor Bogumił Jewsiewicki and donated by him to the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium. The exhibition was accompanied by a number of other events and activities, such as: (1) a series of prep workshops for students on storytelling, the creation of an anthropological diary, and the planning and implementation of participatory art workshops; (2) a webinar on Congolese history and memory in the context of the work of the Congolese painters presented during the exhibition; (3) an international conference entitled *Beyond Recognition: Autonomy, Memory, Visuality and Politics of Identity*; (4) a series of four participatory workshops in ZAMEK Culture Centre in Poznań. All these activities were possible thanks to the close cooperation of three Poznań-based institutions: The Adam Mickiewicz University Faculty of History, the Magdalena Abakanowicz University Faculty of Art Education and Curatorial Studies and the exhibition organiser: the ZAMEK Culture Centre.

Taking into account the modern and contemporary history not only of the Congo, but of the whole of sub-Saharan Africa, marked by brutal colonisation manifesting itself in the ruthless exploitation of people and the environment, both the place from which the paintings came to Poznań, i.e. the aforementioned Belgian museum, and the venue where they were shown to the Polish public, i.e. the former Imperial Castle built between

» 1 See David van Reybrouck, *Kongo. Opowieść o zrujnowanym kraju*, transl. J. Jędryas, Warszawa, Wydawnictwo W.A.B., 2016, p. 33.

1905 and 1910 as the residence of the last German emperor Wilhelm II, assume particular significance.

Exploited since the end of the 15th century mainly by the Portuguese, but also by Spaniards, Arabs, Dutch, French and the British, above all as a place for the acquisition of ivory, copper and, last but not least, slaves, the Congo in the second half of the 19th century became a Belgian colony in the wake of the Berlin Conference, the so-called Congo Conference (1884–1885). Actually, it was first formally a private property of King Leopold II of Belgium, who did not decide to cede the region to the Belgian state until 1908, partly as a result of criticism of his actions in the territory. For, although Leopold II boasted that he had supposedly put an end to the slave trade, in reality he had turned the country, ironically called the Congo Free State, into one big concentration camp where genocide on a massive scale had taken place. As with most mass killings, it is difficult to estimate the exact number of fatalities. According to various historians' estimates, between 5 and 10 million people died in the Congo due primarily to inhumane working conditions, mainly during the extraction of rubber, which became an extremely profitable raw material thanks to the invention of the bicycle and car tyre by John Boyd Dunlop in 1888. As Adam Hochschild, an American historian on the Congolese genocide, writes, "even if half of this figure were true, the Congo would be one of the largest killing fields in recent history"². However, the memory of these events, which, although they reverberated in the press at the time and stirred public opinion in Europe and the United States, and which have been making their way slowly and with difficulty into global consciousness in recent years, still remains negligible³. Equally negligible is the memory of the crimes committed between 1904 and 1907 in German South-West Africa (today's Namibia) by the troops of the German Empire. They tested on the Herero and Nama peoples revolting against German colonial expansion the solutions used more or less 40 years later during the Holocaust⁴.

That is why, as I wrote above, it is very much telling that the former German Imperial Castle houses images, painted and embroidered by Africans themselves, brought from the Belgian museum which originated from an exhibition designed to promote Leopold II's Free State of the Congo at

» 2 A. Hochschild, *Duch króla Leopolda. Opowieść o chciwości, terrorze i bohaterstwie w kolonialnej Afryce*, transl. P. Tarczyński, Warszawa, Świat Książki, 2012, p. 11.

» 3 On this subject two profound texts by A.W. Nowak, *Czy można filozofować po Kongu Belgijskim? Pułapki krytyków nowoczesności*, [in:] *W sprawie Agambena. Konteksty krytyki*, ed. Ł. Musiał, M. Ratajczak, K. Szadkowski and A. Żychliński, Poznań, Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2010, p. 181-205 and *Europejska nowoczesność i jej wyparte konstytuujące 'zewnętrze'*, "Nowa Krytyka. Czasopismo filozoficzne", no. 26-27 (2011), p. 261-289.

» 4 See C. Erichsen, *D. Olusoga, Zbrodnia kajzera*, transl. P. Tarczyński, Warszawa, Wielka Litera, 2012.

the 1897 World Exhibition in Brussels. It should also be emphasised that these images were created not on commission from European/Western collectors and institutions, but from local buyers (Professor Jewsiewicki discusses this in an interview in this issue). This is therefore, at least to some extent, the genuine voice of those who for hundreds of years had not only been denied a voice but had also been subjected to atrocities. Although the Poznań exhibition is only a small contribution to empowering those silenced in history and restoring the memory of the suffering caused by the colonial expansion of European empires, nevertheless, as a Chinese proverb goes, even the farthest journey begins with the first step. Thus, the show helps to build a new common home for the human and non-human family, in which no one who has suffered in this world will be forgotten.

* * *

All the issues related to contemporary Congolese painting, the creation of a collection of Congolese paintings assembled by the ethnologist, historian and Africanist Prof. Bogumił Jewsiewicki, one of the curators of the Poznań exhibition, their transfer to the Belgian museum and, finally, the organisation of the exhibition in Poznań, are dealt with in the first part of the issue, entitled “Congo in Poznań”, featuring the text of curators Prof. Jewsiewicki and Wojciech Luchowski (the latter curated the show on the part of Zamek), edited by students of AMU Faculty of History, and the interview of both of them with Prof. Izabela Skórzyńska from Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań.

The second part, “Congo in Cognition”, consists of articles by four authors: Izabela Skórzyńska, Magdalena Parnasow-Kujawa, Anna Topolska, and Agnieszka Chwieduk.

In her text “Conrad’s Congo. Colours of Congo” Izabela Skórzyńska attempted to interpret the tradition of translations and remediatization of one of the classic texts of world literature on Congo, Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, starting with the translation by Aniela Zagórska, through comic strips and graphic novel, to the most recent translation by Jacek Dukaj. As the author notes, her article is the result of an “artificial” yet instructive reading of Korzeniowski’s novella in terms of the semantics of black and white colours related to the human protagonists of the text in the context of and in preparation for viewing the exhibition under discussion. Skórzyńska’s analysis of colour semantics, preceded by a quantitative study, has above all the qualitative potential of indicating not how many white and black people inhabit the *Heart of Darkness*, but how they are shown there, what they do and what it means for us from the perspective of our time and our culture and the Congolese colonial experience.

The topics addressed by Skórzyńska are taken up and supplemented by Magdalena Parnasow-Kujawa in her article “Not Everything Can Be Organised”, where the author successfully answers the following questions: How to describe Congo, or in fact the African continent, from the perspective of colours? How to match them with the scale of hues, what is going to be their intensity and what typology to use to determine them? What to use to identify the typology: the stereotypical hues determined by our culture and education or the indications of Polish literature that describes the African world? Or perhaps we are to base the authenticity of colour and hue on the motifs of contemporary Congolese painting?

Slightly different is Anna Topolska’s “The Problem of Intercultural and Posttraumatic Visual Communication: *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita*”, a reflection on the work bridging photo-reportage and photography, i.e. the Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar’s *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* (1996), related to the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, Congo’s neighbour. In her text, the author grapples with the vital questions of decolonising the Western visuality, limitations of representations of traumatic experience and reality and power of the photographic image in a culture oversaturated with the visual. Topolska argues that the encounter with the gaze of the Other and the recovery of the subjectivity of the Other is a way in which an image may retain its agency in the process of intercultural and posttraumatic communication. According to Topolska, this is possible thanks to the capacity of photography to transcend cultural constraints via releasing instinct and emotion and due to the challenge posed by Jaar’s work to Western visual dominance and the demand of recognition and respect for the photographed woman, a genocide survivor.

The last article in the second part, “Some Comments on the Usefulness of the Field Diary: an Anthropological Perspective and Practice” by Agnieszka Chwieduk, links this part and the third one, titled “Congo in Action”. The author, one of the leaders of preparatory workshops for students taking part in the scholarly and artistic project “Congo: Memory – Image – Interpretation”, introduced the idea of a field diary as a tool for recording the knowledge acquired during empirical field studies. Chwieduk tries to go to the bottom of the importance of the diary as a document that attests not only to the reliability of field research, but also to the way in which the researcher conceptualises and intersubjectifies the performative effects of field research. In her view, their description in the diary requires an awareness of the layers of the text and the rules for orchestrating their components. The article closes with a compendium of practical suggestions on how the document can be constructed to best serve scholarly argumentation related to social research.

The third and last part devoted to the Congolese theme, “Congo in Action”, is placed at the end of this double issue of “Zeszyty Artystyczne”.

It is visual and verbal documentation of the abovementioned scientific and artistic project “Congo: Memory – Image – Interpretation”, edited by Malwina Jurczyk, Michalina Ławniczak and Krystian Łaput, history students of the Adam Mickiewicz University, under the supervision of Prof. Izabela Skórzyńska.

This participatory project had the character of research in action. Its outcomes, presented in this section, attest, as the editors write, to the social agency of this research manifested in the fruitful collaboration between academics, students, curators, teachers, schoolchildren, and senior citizens in terms of research, exhibition and art projects and education. The collaboration helped achieve the aim of this project, which was to provide a multifaceted experience of Congolese history and contemporaneity from the perspective of the Congolese. It is worth mentioning in conclusion that all descriptions and analyses of the activities carried out are supplemented by extensive visual documentation (photo journals).

The present issue of “Zeszyty Artystyczne” also includes two additional texts: Natalia Cieślak’s analysis of Iwona Demko’s work *Real Impossibility, or Improbable Archives*, realised in 2020, and an extensive fragment of Agnieszka Sukienniczak’s MA thesis, the winner of the 7th edition of the Prof. Alicja Kepińska Competition for the best theoretical MA thesis defended at UAP in 2020. Cieślak’s text insightfully shows how Demko’s work, using strategies of interference and fictionalisation as tools of feminist artistic practice, draws attention to the problem of the marginalisation of public memory about women’s activities. Sukienniczak takes a comprehensive look at the curatorial strategies of architectural exhibitions on the basis of selected exhibitions organised in the Polish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale of Architecture. ●

Jan Wasiewicz

📄 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3142-0756>

DOI: 10.48239/ISSN1232668241120125