

Bogumił Jewsiewicki / Wojciech Luchowski

Bogumił Jewsiewicki, an anthropologist and historian, researching issues related to history and memory. He worked in French-speaking Central Africa, where he researched social memory with a particular focus on its visual representations. Professor Emeritus at Laval University since 2011; 2009 – Honorary Doctorate from the University of Bucharest; 2007 – Marius Barbeau Medal from the Canadian Association of Ethnology and Folklore; 2006 - Winner of the Association of African Studies Award; 1990 – Killam Research Grant from the Canada Council for the Arts. Selected publications: *Les identités régionales en Afrique centrale: constructions et driver*, ed. Léonard N'Sanda Buleli. Paris, L'Harmattan, 2008; *Mami Wata: ma peinture urbaine au Congo* (ed.) Paris, Gallimard, 2003.

Wojciech Luchowski (b. 1976), art historian, curator, exhibition designer. An MA in Art History from Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań. His interests include social issues, contemporary art and ethnography. As of 2013 employed at the Zamek Culture Centre in Poznań, where he initially worked in the Interdisciplinary Project Division, and as of 2021 at pf Photography Gallery. Apart from work at the Zamek Culture Centre, he curates exhibitions in collaboration with institutions run by the state, local self-government and NGOs.

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About the exhibition
The Self-Portrait
of the Congolese.
Congolese Paintings
1960–1990¹ at ZAMEK
Culture Centre in Poznań,
16.10.–19.12.2021

Constructing the story²

To see ourselves as others see us is a most salutary gift. Hardly less important is the capacity to see others as they see themselves.

Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception*

One aspect of the demand for the equality of all people is to see others through their own eyes. The legacy of the past, an outlook distorted by stereotypes, superstition and ignorance, often also politically conditioned, does not apply when we come face to face with others. Demanding

» 1 Curator: Bogumił Jewsiewicki; cooperation, exhibition layout, production: Wojciech Luchowski; graphic design: Marcin Markowski; yarnbombing: Yarnbombing Collective Pikotki Crew; (Maj Birko, Anna Borzeskowska, Anna Maria Brandys, Karolina Gielda, Paulina Młynarczak, Zofia Ostrowska, Monika Simińska, Katarzyna "Michelle" Sobczak); organisation: ZAMEK Culture Centre Poznań; cooperation: The Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Faculty of History, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Studio of Creative Projects and Activities of Magdalena Abakanowicz University of the Arts in Poznań; ZAMEK Culture Centre 16.10.–19.12.2021.

» 2 The quotations in the text from literature on Africa and the Congo, selected by W. Luchowski and B. Jewsiewicki, were an integral part of the exhibition.

respect from them, we owe them the same respect in return. Recalling in the title the exhibition *The Self-Portrait of Poles*, held at the National Museum in Krakow in 1979, the authors of the Poznań show encouraged a view of the Congolese through their own eyes. Close to 90 paintings by Congolese painters from the collection of The Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren (Belgium) which make up the exhibit, were painted for the authors' own use for private homes. They may seem hardly 'exotic', but after all, big cities and their inhabitants lead similar lives all over the world today. At the same time, the self-portraits of the Congolese open up a culturally original world saturated with colours, resounding with voices of incessant conversation and music.

Dark human shapes could be made out in the distance, flitting indistinctly against the gloomy border of the forest, and near the river two bronze figures, leaning on tall spears, stood in the sunlight under fantastic headdresses of spotted skins, warlike and still in statuesque repose. And from right to left along the lighted shore moved a wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman.

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

Over the last five decades, the critique of the European view of Africans is mostly voiced in the context of *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad (Józef Korzeniowski), a masterpiece of literature of the English language. This book, based on the experiences of the author's brief and unsuccessful sojourn in the Congo, has in recent decades exemplified the European colonial perception of Africans. The first reason for this is Conrad's literary genius. Even African writers who accuse him of racism emphasise the influence of his work on theirs. The second is the paradox of a man and writer highly critical of any imperialism, himself a victim of the tsarist colonisation of Poland and of British contempt for those who were not born there. Conrad stayed in the Congo only a few months, knew no local language, and was unprepared to navigate the river. He therefore must have been aware that without the knowledge and work of the local people, his ship would forever have remained aground. Yet in the story he presented a world seen through the eyes of a coloniser, in which the local people play the role of extras, are part of the decor. Obviously, Conrad was writing for white readership, convinced at the time of their own superiority and mission to civilise. He felt he was one of them, despite his personal experience of the tsarist colonisation of Poland. Conrad's literary genius did not protect the writer from cultural myopia.



Pic. 4.
Fragment of a chart from the exhibition, graphic design Marcin Markowski © CK ZAMEK

Africa, as well as Congo in the heart of the continent, do not occupy a significant place in Polish collective knowledge of the world. This is despite the fact that, as of Maurycy Beniowski's expedition to Madagascar (1773–1786), Poles have visited Africa, written about the people living there and photographed them, often gaining worldwide fame.

One of the world's most widely read Polish writers, Henryk Sienkiewicz, travelled through Africa and wrote about the continent. Many generations of young Poles learned about Africa by reading his novel *In Desert and Wilderness*, which has been filmed twice.

– “When the great master and the ‘bibi,’” he said, holding his arms akimbo, “live in the tree, Kali will not have to build big zarebas for the night and he can be idle every night.”

“Then you like to be idle?” Stas asked.

“Kali is a man, so Kali loves to be idle, as only women ought to work [...].

Among the blacks there are honest souls, though as a rule you cannot depend upon their gratitude; they are children who forget what happened the day before. [...]

– The great master kills men and lions. Yah! Yah! The great master crushes rocks. Yah! Yah! The elephant, himself, breaks trees and Kali can be idle and eat. Yah! Yah!

Henryk Sienkiewicz, *In Desert and Wilderness*, an adventure book for young people published in instalments in the years 1910–1911 in *Kurier Warszawski* daily, first edition (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Gebethner i Wolff, 1911), transl. from Polish by Max A. Drezmal, Boston 1917.

Nearly half a century after Sienkiewicz, Kazimierz Nowak, a resident of Poznań by choice, now a hero of a popular children's book, traversed the African continent on his bicycle.

– Uaaaaaa! – I screamed in terror as I stood eye to eye with the “cruel cannibal”. Ahead, in the middle of the path, a black figure appeared with a bone earring in his nose and a spear in his hand.

– Uaaaaaa! – shrieked the stranger at the sight of me.

Aha, that's the battle cry of a cannibal – I thought. I stood there as if I had been caught off guard. – Can't I move out of fear, or has he already hit me with a poisoned arrow? – I wondered.

I looked at the stranger and he stared at me with wide open eyes and... well, that seemed the most amazing thing about it all: “the cruel cannibal” looked just as terrified as I did!

– Are you Abasalampasu? – I asked quietly.

– And are you a white man? – asked the stranger quietly.

– I am Kazik, a traveller from Poland, I replied.

– I am the hunter of Abasalampasu – said the hunter. – I was frightened a lot at the sight of you, I had never met a white man before, and had heard a lot of scary stories about the white man.

– I was frightened too, I replied. – I had heard that the people of the Abasalampasu tribe are cannibals and that they shoot poisoned arrows from their bows....

The hunter started laughing out loud.

– Ha, ha, ha... And I have heard that every white man is a merciless kidnapper... And are you, Kazik... ha, ha, ha... are you a merciless kidnapper who kidnaps babies and turns them into his slaves?

– Of course I'm not a child kidnapper of any kind, I replied in surprise and after a moment also started laughing loudly.

Apparently we had both heard untrue stories and were unnecessarily afraid of each other. It turned out that neither I am a merciless child abductor, nor is the hunter a cruel cannibal.

Łukasz Wierzbicki, *Afryka Kazika (Kazik's Africa; Warszawa, Wydawnictwo BIS, 2008), p. 117-120.*

Between Joseph Conrad and Ryszard Kapuściński, many Poles would visit Congo and write about it. One of the most eminent photographers of Congo in the colonial era was Kazimierz Zagórski.

Mapinda's drawing and the photographs taken by Kazimierz Zagórski come from the same period of the 1930s. Comparing them makes it possible to show exoticism from two different perspectives. Mapinda, in creating his drawing on paper, traditionally made on the outer surface of the walls of a hut, finds himself in the position of an observer (ethnographer/photographer) looking at the colonial world of the whites just as the whites look at his everyday reality. He captures on paper what is exotic in the world of the whites: the photographer taking a photograph (like Zagórski), a child being led by the hand by a woman, a couple eating a meal at a table where a bottle and a jug take centre stage, clothes unsuited to the climate, and straight hair. All this does not belong to the everyday world of the Congolese. For his part, Zagórski captures in his photographs what surprises the whites of his era: a child in a shawl on her mother's back, a young girl with bare breasts and rich jewellery, a man with a tattoo on his cheek, dancers or a group of men in masks (no one wore masks in this way). Some photographers select from reality what seems unusual from the point of view of his own culture. Sometimes he artificially stages this reality in order to 'remember', preserve and share with others the images that act as testimonies, 'specimens', which white people at the time call collectibles as well as scholarly activities.

By selecting and presenting just a few books on Africa, published over a period of a little more than a century, the authors of the exhibition wanted to stimulate reflection on the transformation of the view of authors of Polish origin on Africans. As we have already emphasised, Conrad's 'imperial eye' regards the Congolese as specimens, creatures towards whom the author of *Heart of Darkness* seems to feel no emotion. In contrast, Tadeusz Dębicki (1902–1952), two generations younger than him, sees them simply as people similar to himself and emphasises the equality dimension.

The nave filled with worshippers. Black people alone, mostly women in brightly coloured kerchiefs and rags. They kneel and sing some French church song. The whites have taught them the faith, which they themselves cannot care less about. [...] Black Bantu people are praying in the church for the wellbeing of all people, black and white, because all are equal. The sounds of tam-tams and the monotonous, melancholic chanting of the Black people drift in from the distance. Today is a holiday and the black Bantu are having a

party and dancing. [...] A little further on, some young girl, dressed only in a modest hip band and a few dozens clanking rings on her arms and legs, dances some original belly dance extremely gracefully, nimbly and flexibly. Her bare feet don't seem to touch the red earth, don't move even the smallest speck of dust.

Tadeusz Dębicki, *Moienzi Nzadi. U wrót Konga*
(*At the Gates of Congo*; Warszawa,
Wydawnictwo Gebethner i Wolff, 1928), p. 97.

Born one generation later, Ryszard Kapuściński (1932–2007), affected by the tragedy of his wartime experiences, when witnessing the processes of the birth of new states in Africa looks at Africans as citizens, actors of political events.

[...] Bar offers freedom. A white gumshoe won't come to the bar because you'll know a white guy a mile away. And you can talk about anything there. There are always a lot of words in a bar. The bar debates, argues and wisecracks. The bar will talk about everything; it will dither, droll and pursue the truth. Everyone will come here to put their two cents in.

Ryszard Kapuściński, *Czarne gwiazdy (Black Stars)*;
Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Czytelnik, 1963), p. 137.

Arguably, this is because Africa and its people are portrayed not as they really are or as they see themselves. Their image is still distorted via the filter of exoticism, resulting in 'savage' or 'naïve' characters. Focused on the pursuit of adventure or wrestling with the forces of nature, travelers' stories lose the true, subjective image of human beings. In fiction and reportage, Africans/Congolese are extras whose role is merely to highlight the courage of the author or protagonist. They participate in lives that are not their own, providing a pretext for other people's subjects and matters.

Hundreds if not thousands of years of human history preceded the arrival of Europeans. If there was already a heart of darkness, it lay in the ignorance with which white explorers perceived the area, rather than in the area itself. It happens that darkness, "is in the eye of the beholder".

David Van Reybrouck, *Congo: The Epic History of a People*

Inclusion in this collection of books *In Desert and Wilderness* by Henryk Sienkiewicz (1846–1916) and *Afryka Kazika* by Łukasz Wierzbicki (b. 1974) may be slightly surprising. They were written almost a century apart, even if the protagonist of the latter book, a memorable reporter and photographer Kazimierz Nowak (1897–1937), visited the continent only 40 years after Sienkiewicz. Apart from the subject of Africa, both books have one thing in common: the young age of the readership they target. This is crucial, as the images formed in youth are like the glasses through which we will view Africans as adults. To take them off, one must first realise that they are on one's nose.

In our daily encounters with others, each of us can find ourselves in Conrad's position. We look at another person with eyes covered by glasses inherited from the past, borrowed from someone else. However, we understandably require to be regarded through "The Self-Portrait of Poles".

This does not mean, however, that it is the only portrait and always the right one. Recognition of this portrait is essential for us to feel respected by others and to interact with them on an equal footing. Our view of others must therefore also take into account their own portrait.

When you look at the world from the angle of storytelling, first of all you have someone who sets it in motion, who gets people going with the rhythm; I call this person the drummer. Then there's the warrior, who moves forward and fights. But then there's the storyteller (story-spinner/narrator). Indeed, it is the latter who makes us who we are, who creates the story. The storyteller creates the memory that survivors must carry within them, for otherwise survival would be meaningless... Memory is necessary if survival is to be more than a matter of technique.

Chinua Achebe

This kind of storytelling, when we see the world through the eyes of an 'I' and listen to the world on its behalf, creates a bond with the narrator like no other and makes us put ourselves in his or her unique position.

Olga Tokarczuk, *The Tender Narrator*

The aim of the exhibition was to show Congolese men and women the way they see themselves. It is an attempt to see them from their own perspective. It is not an objective look, but exploring the exhibition makes it possible not only to reinterpret Conrad's or Kapuściński's books, to read *Kazik's Africa* by Łukasz Wierzbicki with children in a different way, but also to meet a Congolese or an African in a different way.

The phenomenon of popular Congolese painting consists in the fusion of two communicative systems, a structure of modern communication imposed by colonial culture with a structure based on ritualised performative actions and traditional oral exchanges. A fundamental feature of the latter structure is the absence of a narrative continuum going from a point in the past to the present.

Stories concerning a particular individual (which may be legendary) are told or presented in the present tense. They can be said to circulate in society. No matter whether they happened at another time or in another place, they are incorporated into the present because they have a potential, real impact on it. The mosaic of stories told or presented by specific people about other specific people creates a generalisation proposed and accepted over time as truth.

In the urban reality of the colonial system, there was no independent social space for the individual, such as the village square where dances, rituals and public discussions took place. In the new reality, the painted image became a substitute for this square. It offered a mobile version and a potentially unlimited number of copies of a specific event, creating a kind of symbolic framework for discussion, an exchange of stories and individual histories. Hanging in the living room of someone's home or in a bar, each painting became a virtual recreation of the space where the individual memory of many people and the collective social memory meet (and are confronted).

From a formal point of view, the painted image is like a post-photographic representation of a past event. In this sense, it becomes a vehicle of memory recalling what cannot be present because it happened at another time, in another place. Very often, text appears in the paintings which plays a role similar to that of comic strips; it introduces the 'spoken word'. But this way of using the word is closer to the narrative structure of the written word and the place of the word in colonial communication: a command/prohibition or a statement of truth by a teacher/priest in an institutional position of authority. The words written in the painting therefore do not reproduce the communicative structure of oral exchange; rather, they refer to communication in an urban colonial society in which the written word is the voice of authority.

Congolese urban painting is, from the point of view of its communicative structure, post-scriptural and post-photographic. The written word and photography give presence in the pictorial space to a new authority guaranteed by the former colonial institutions (state, church, company) and the 'truth' that this authority proclaims and imposes. Between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Congolese experienced the written word and photography as an authoritative form of creating 'truth',

constructing a new reality to which they are forced to submit and in which they must find their place to survive. The table as a symbol of colonial power is a case in point, as the colonial agent authoritatively inscribed and proclaimed on the table the 'new' identity of individuals, new responsibilities, penalties, rights, etc. Not only were these truths not subject to public discussion, but they were also immutable to societies in which an individual's identity, rights and duties evolve over time.

Like the written word, photography was also a kind of tool for the production of a new reality in colonial society. Its main purpose was the fabrication of a timeless and place-independent 'truth'. Photographs of flora and fauna and of people turned them into museum items; this had a more significant impact on shaping knowledge about them than their true reality.

In colonial reality, photographs of specific individuals cease to be 'portraits' of individuals because they are subject to manipulation in favour of representing specific ethnographic types. They become part of the fabrication of colonial knowledge about communities, in which the image of the individual is used to construct useful stereotypes and generalisations. Colonial ethnographic knowledge constructed in this way proclaimed that individuals from a given tribe were good or quite unsuitable for manual labour, military service, schooling, etc. Their behaviour, physical strength, learning abilities could be classified and attributed based on the friendliness and usefulness of a particular group, just as was the case with plants or animals in a given biological category. In other words, in the colonial situation, the written word and the photographic image imposed on specific people a world seemingly like their own, but in fact radically different from their daily reality. The totalitarian nature of the colonial system thus left no other option for the survival of individual identity than through adaptation and gradual assimilation of elements of the imposed system.

Urban painting makes it possible to trace the elaboration of processes of appropriation of colonial epistemology and formal means (considered modern) in the formation of a new social consciousness of being an individual whose identity is not distorted or transformed, creating a knowledge of the past independent of the individual's experience. At the same time, this painting provides a glimpse into a system of communication in which each painting is an actor in the social construction of knowledge about life, which allows one to experience two worlds - the one imposed by authority (the state) and the one in which society acts and functions. Ever since narrative became relevant to self-affirmation in the Western world, researchers have mainly focused on this particular mode of subjective affirmation. With this assumption, however, they began to form erroneous conclusions that individual identity was not represented at all

among African societies. Popular Congolese painting demonstrates that representations of the self are present in every culture, but in Africa they are simply not found in the places that most researchers explore.

To see the story, to hear the paintings

The Self-Portrait of the Congolese exhibition is a premiere of one of the most intriguing art and cultural phenomena of contemporary Congo. The exhibition, curated by ethnologist, historian and Africanist Prof. Bogumił Jewsiewicki, was the result of his many years of research. The exhibition addressed issues of identity and memory in the perspective of Africa's and Congo's colonial past. It showed the processes of appropriation of colonial epistemology and formal means in contemporary Congolese painting with a view to constructing an individual's own identity. It also raised issues related to the stereotypical perception of contemporary Africa³. ●

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» 3 As we have indicated, the event was a result of the long-standing cooperation between the ZAMEK Culture Centre in Poznań and the Faculty of History at Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, with which Prof. Bogumił Jewsiewicki has cooperated academically for many years. In 2016, the ZAMEK Culture Centre held an exhibition entitled *Congo-Haiti. Memory – Image – Identity*. It grouped a series of paintings, donated by Prof. Jewsiewicki to the AMU Faculty of History, created within the framework of a research project, financially supported by the Prince Claus Fund, carried out at the Department of Comparative Studies of Memory and History of Laval University in Quebec, headed by the professor, together with Dr Carlos Célius, who specialises in the history of Haitian painting. The 2005 workshop in Port-au-Prince (Haiti) gathered three Congolese and six Haitian painters. The aim of the workshop was to create an opportunity for collaboration and exchange in the same place and time for artists representing two different (post)colonial cultures yet sharing the same experience of Congolese and Haitian (post)colonial past. The public's great interest in the event and the strengthening of the collaboration prompted the ZAMEK Culture Centre to continue its work in the area of visual arts related to (post)colonial issues in terms of questions relating to memory, the past and identity. Thanks to the help of Professor Bogumił Jewsiewicki, it was possible to establish contacts with the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren (Belgium) (Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale) and to work on a unique exhibition presenting one of the most interesting and rare artistic and cultural phenomena in contemporary African art, Congolese painting'.

