ONE **SOLILOQUY, SEVERAL “GHOSTS”**

*Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo*

“The Kodak has been a sore calamity to us. The most powerful enemy that has confronted us, indeed. In the early years we had no trouble in getting the press to “expose” the tales of the mutilations as slanders, lies, inventions of busy-body American missionaries and exasperated foreigners who had found the “open door” of the Berlin-Congo charter closed against them when they innocently went out there to trade; and by the press’s help we got the Christian nations everywhere to turn an irritated and unbelieving ear to those tales and say hard things about the tellers of them. Yes, all things went
harmoniously and pleasantly in those good days, and I was looked up to as the benefactor of a down- 
trodden and friendless people. Then all of a sudden came the crash! That is to say, the incorruptible 
kodak – and all the harmony went to hell! The only witness I have encountered in my long experience 
that I couldn’t bribe” (1).

This long quotation, one of many others worthy of transcription, comes from Mark Twain’s well-known 
The Soliloquy of King Leopold. A defense of his authority in Congo, originally printed in 1905 and recently 
published in Portugal in a carefully edited version by Quetzal (2). This new edition provides an excellent 
introduction by António Araújo, who reconstructs with rigor and erudition the text’s pertinent historical, 
political and religious contexts, situating Twain’s fiction in time and space. The preface identifies the key 
moments of Leopold’s ‘rise and fall’ and untangles the European and international political dynamics 
which enabled them (3). Araújo’s discussion ranges from the imperial ambitions that motivated Leopold 
II from the beginning until the 20th century collapse of the Independent (or Free) State of the Congo 
(ISC), through to the material and human effects of the rubber cycle. He also addresses the centrality 
of humanitarianism, science and philanthropy to Leopold’s attempts to legitimize his personal project 
in the international arena.

The “incorruptible Kodak” belonged to Alice Harris, a missionary married to a secretary of the Anti-
Slavery Society, John Harris. The Harrises were important voices in campaigns to reform European 
colonial empires. Her “damn” Kodak profoundly changed the available evidence of iniquities practiced 
by the colonial administration in the ISC – or as the text puts it, in the “Congo Free Cemetery” or “Land 
of Tombs”. The camera transformed the visual documenting of what Kevin Grant has called “civilized 
savagery” (4). The burden of proof on a regime that tolerated or encouraged figures such as René de 
Permentier, the sadistic official of the Force Publique (the ISC police forces), or Leon Fiévez, who in 
four months of service accumulated the astounding record of killing 572 people, changed in register 
and scope. Sincere indignation ensued. The probing power of photography was widely exploited by all 
those who denounced the situation, and demonstrated what underpinned the Congolese business of 
the “king with ten million murders on his soul,” as Twain wrote (p.89)(5).

The book features prints some of Harris’ most important documentary photos, including an image – or 
rather, a composition – of nine pictures of people whose hands had been cut off (6). One of the most 
infamous photographs – of Nsala contemplating the severed hand and the foot of his small child –
gained worldwide circulation in Edmund Dene Morel’s book *King’s Leopold’s Rule in Africa* (1904). It also is also printed in *Solilóquio* (p. 80). John Harris wrote to Harry Grattan Guiness (in charge of the Congo Balolo Mission, to which the Harrises had been attached since 1896) about the photograph, saying: “The photograph is most telling, and as a slide [lantern slide, a slide for a ‘magic lantern’] will rouse any audience to an outburst of rage.” He added: “the expression on the father’s face, the horror of the by-standers, the mute appeal of the hand and foot will speak to the most skeptical” (7). Religious arguments, closely associated with reformist discourses, were most effective. As were calls to reform, rather than dissolve, the empire. Twain’s book only included a print, but it had the same powerful propagandistic effect. The reformist cause achieved its most disintegrating effect on Leopold’s Congo by bringing these records and images into the public sphere. This history helps illuminate the contemporary historiographical and artistic resonance of this past, including the intentional links that can be constructed between politics, identity, and art.

These images, and others, continue to crowd histories and memories of the colonization of the Congo. They pertain to a specific historical period. Nevertheless, the most discussed of them are sometimes taken to represent other periods – and sometimes even the whole colonial experience. This has its risks, of which I will highlight two. On the one hand, it obscures the pressing need better to understand Belgian colonization after the death of the king and when the colony was put under Belgian state (rather than Leopold’s personal) administration. Contrary to what you might think from the apparent certainties many books peddle, very little is known about the history of the ‘Belgian Congo’, which makes it very difficult to understand its present. On the other hand, an obsession with particular moments compress and obscure broader histories and eclipse the plural forms of symbolic and material violence that underpinned the colonialism of the petit pays that so bored the king. These include policies and politics about population, work and land. Other ‘ghosts’ succeeded King Leopold’s. We know (relatively) well the facts that caused the first ghost. It may be helpful to better understand the others.
(6) The same image, entitled “Some of the victims”, appears as frontispiece to Arthur Conan Doyle’s “The crime of the Congo”.

Translated by Alexandra Reza

*Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo* is a historian, researcher at the Center for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra and an associate researcher on the MEMOIRS project - Children of the Empire and European Post-Memories (ERC Consolidator Grant, nº 648624).