

エッセイ

*Heart of Darkness, Blood River and Japan*

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*When I first went to the Congo, I realized that a hundred years after Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness, nothing had changed. People were still being exploited, only now it was multinational corporations sucking up all the resources.*

—Marcus Bleasdale (photographer); *National Geographic*, October 2013

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In 2007, the Joseph Conrad Society of the UK held its 33rd annual conference in London, celebrating the 150th anniversary of the writer's birth. Having declared the opening of the conference, Professor Keith Carabine introduced Tim Butcher's *Blood River: A Journey to Africa's Broken Heart* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2007) to the audience, saying that it was best suited for understanding the historical, geographical and political backgrounds of *Heart of Darkness*. Tim Butcher, a journalist working for the Daily Telegraph, has been interested in the Congo history and *Heart of Darkness* since he was a child (4-5, 201, 259). Needless to say, I took the occasion to buy a copy of the book. I often read *Blood River* while I was in charge of translating *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad* (Ed. J.H. Stape. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

I am going to write what I thought about *Blood River*, and tell you what there is for us to do for the Congo.

*Heart of Darkness* deals with the Congo during European colonialism. The Belgians, under the rule of Leopold II, assumed control over the Congo. They exploited its resources and its inhabitants for material gains.

*Blood River* is a nice travelogue for Conrad's readers. It is basically a book of travels down the Congo River to the Atlantic Ocean. The book, however, contains various topics as well—the country's history, geography, folklore, customs and manners, and the way local people feel, think and act in daily life.

## 2

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) abounds in natural resources, benefitting all countries of the world. The eastern part of the DRC is said to have 80% of the estimated amount of coltan<sup>1</sup> in the world. Coltan is indispensable to the production of electronic devices such as mobile phones, personal computers, televisions, playstations and so forth. Gold, tin and tungsten are also rich in the east. The southern part of the DRC has cobalt, copper and uranium deposits. Cobalt is used in lithium-ion batteries which provide energy to mobile phones, digital cameras, pacemakers and EVs. The DRC supplies more than half of the world's cobalt. Most of the diamonds in the DRC come from the Kasai province in the west. It is estimated that over 30% of the global diamond reserves are located in the country. Everyone may imagine that with such mineral wealth, the country would be prospering and its people would be enjoying a stable life. The reality is, however, contrary to what one might imagine.

The DRC is lacking in administrative ability, and does not function properly as a state. Corruption is rampant everywhere whether in the public or private sectors. *The Asahi Shimbun*, a Japanese newspaper, reported seven years ago that over 80% of the whole population lives in extreme poverty at 1.9 dollars per day, and that poverty was driving children of ten or younger to dig coltan with their bare hands for a small sum of money.<sup>2</sup> In spite of the Pretoria peace treaty signed in 2002, the country is still in a state of conflict, violence and war, particularly in the east; a lot of armed rebels fight each other for control of mineral resources. UN peacemakers are trying to stabilize the country.

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In the 1870s Henry Morton Stanley (1841~1904) succeeded in mapping the Congo River. This brought about a dramatic change in 'Black Africa,' thereby making possible, trade activities through central Africa. Belgian King Leopold II (1835~1909; r. 1865~1909) believed that the Congo River would be the main artery for the Belgian great colony in the future. He planned to carry European goods up the river, and African raw materials downstream. Stirred up by Leopold's ambition, European powers began to scramble for African territories. Within about 25 years they divided the entire continent amongst themselves (1884~).

The year 1960 is referred to as the Year of Africa. Seventeen African nations won independence from their former colonial rulers. The Congo was one of them.

In 2004, forty-four years after the Congo's independence, Tim Butcher decided to go down the Congo River. He wished to follow in the footsteps of Henry Morton Stanley. Butcher managed to get through the most dangerous area in the east of the DRC, that is to say, Kalemie on Lake Tanganyika to Kisangani. Kisangani is the place Kurtz died, after going mad, in *Heart of Darkness*. Law and order is hard to maintain in this district, whose inhabitants are so poor that clashes often break out between the government army and Mai-Mai militia groups. The writer set off from Kalemie, riding pillion on a motorcycle. Two aid workers, a pygmy and a local black went with him by bike on the first 500 mile route. Butcher met and made friends with a lot of people, white or black.

Some individuals are worth noting here.

Georges Mbuyu, who works for the Pygmy human rights, tried his best to help Butcher get through villages inhabited by Mai-Mai rebels. He is described as a person who does not care about money and tries to do his job faithfully:

Georges felt as if he had not done his job; he had not talked us past the Mulolwa rebels; and he was reluctant to head home before he had earned his fee. It was an astonishing display of duty. (130)

Georges had behaved impeccably towards me. *He had been willing to risk his life for a stranger*, and there was genuine regret that we could not complete our journey together. (131; emphasis mine)

Butcher highlights the harsh realities of the Congo by his description of Benoit Bangana, who worked for Care International. For all the high training Benoit had received, it did not lead to a good job in the country:

*“I am an engineer by training, but there is no work in the Congo apart from with aid groups like Care International. Now the war has ended we can hope again for an improvement in our lives, but the improvement will only come if there is normality, and there will only be normality if you can, once again, travel safely across our country. (...)”* (99; emphasis mine)

On the way, Butcher saw many hauliers walking with a bicycle laden with goods. He introduces two men of this kind. One is a palm oil trader, the other selling grey-parrots.

*‘I carry eighty, maybe a hundred litres of oil. Maybe I can make ten or fifteen dollars profit when I get to Kalemie. So I spend my money there on things we do not have at home, like salt or lake-fish. When I get home, I will see my family for the first time in months and sell some of the salt for another ten or fifteen dollars profit.’* (136)

(...) there was even one with thirty or so African grey parrots in home-made cages. The haulier proudly said he was going to make the long and perilous journey from eastern Congo all the way to Zanzibar, more than 1,000 kilometres to the east, where he might get \$50 a bird from tourists. (137)

Both of them have energy and vitality in life, so much so, that they can overcome poverty. The distance does not matter as long as they can feed their families.

Their lifestyle is strikingly contrasted with our modern, civilized lifestyle. This suggests that we may be losing something precious before we are aware of it. However, the tendency on the part of the Congolese people to accept their situation without making some form of organized resistance may have allowed Arab slavers to exploit them in the past. In addition, this tendency may be linked somewhere with their lack of trust in their national government. Ordinary Congolese often repeat expressions like “the state is dying but not yet dead” or “the state is ever present but completely useless,” according to BBC News, 21 November 2011.

It seems that Mobutu’s misrule and corruption resulted in the people’s sentiment. It is a pity that the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the West had harmful effects upon the Congo’s “genuine” independence. A monstrous dictator like President Mobutu Sese Seko ruled the country for more than thirty years from 1965 to 1995.

#### 4

To wrap this up, here is some food for thought. Are we allowed to be indifferent to the sufferings of the Congo just because it is distant from Japan? Should we not tackle seriously its extreme poverty instead of being accustomed to the comforts and conveniences provided by various electronic devices? Conflicts over natural resources in the Congo today result from Belgium’s long-term colonial rule over the country. Western powers are also responsible for Congo’s crisis because there are some Western financiers who buy minerals illegally from the Congo’s armed forces and are exploiting millions of individuals for their resources.

The following quote from *Black River*, especially, is meant to ask you for discussions. I wonder why the Congolese have not accepted the idea of “progress” and “civilization” yet. Would it be possible to say that they are

‘barbarous’ as contrasted with ‘civilized’ Western people? And how do you feel about the sufferings happening in the Congo?

(...) what made it so horrible was the sense that I had discovered evidence of a modern world that had tried—but failed—to establish itself in the Congo. *It was a complete reversal of the normal pattern of human development.* A place where a railway track had once carried trainloads of goods and people had been reclaimed by virgin forest, where the noisy huffing of steam engines had long since lost out to the jungle’s looming silence.

It was one of the defining moments of my journey through the Congo. *I was travelling through a country with more past than future, a place where the hands of the clock spin not forwards, but backwards.* (248-249; emphasis mine)

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Coltan, a dull black metallic ore, is short for columbite-tantalite and industrially known as tantalite.
- <sup>2</sup> *The Asahi Shimbun*, 24 August 2016. According to the IMF, in 2012, more than 80% of Congolese people live on less than \$1.25 a day, defined as the threshold for extreme poverty.

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