

Foreword

Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) is a writer of daring, exploring wherever he listeth. The truth of human experience drew him on and he allowed himself to investigate man's darkness and the ragged boundaries of his own and others' sanity. A generation earlier his fellow Slav Feodor Dostoievski had been comparably daring. The Pole was a doctrinal sceptic, the Russian a struggling believer. Two thousand three hundred years before that, Sophocles and Euripides had likewise dared for the audiences of their tragedies.

Heart of Darkness is not for the lily-livered. That it is widely read and discussed in our own day is a mark of the confidence of the civilisation from which it has emerged, not its fragility. The same may be said of *Apocalypse Now*, the film which Francis Ford Coppola made in 1979 on the same theme and derived from Conrad's plot, albeit the scenario being Vietnam not equatorial Africa.

Novella and film alike paint a scene of imminent disintegration centred upon the plausible figure of Kurtz (so named in both narratives) who exemplifies the horrific polarity in man in solitary exercise of untrammelled will. What is "The horror! The horror!" on the dying lips in both dramas? Why, it is what Kurtz sees in himself. Dictators everywhere will have had an inkling of this dread abyss.

It occurs to me that the span of 52 years between the first publication (in 1902) of Conrad's novella and my own immersion into the rain-forested riverain territory of equatorial Africa where the story is set is a briefer span than the 56 years since I was first there. That region of the Congo-Ubangi basin and the Ogoúé basin of Gabon immediately to the north had changed less between, say, 1900 and mid-century in Belgian and French equatorial Africa than many would today suppose. In the early 1950s, for instance, I was presented with the current map

from the hand of a white colonial *Chef de Région* containing a significant blank space annotated *Territoire Inexploré*, where in matters of – well – the life and death of natives the writ ran for any white, fire-armed logger or intruder such as myself.

Conrad's Kurtz – he with a German name (meaning *short*), the pan-European with a mother half-English and a father half-French – wrote a thesis for the Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs: “*By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded.*” Marlow – Conrad's narrator and alter-ego – who was to be the skipper of the upper-Congo paddle-steamer servicing the ivory-collecting stations, wrote of himself as “something of an emissary of light, something of a lower sort of apostle”.

Such was the way things were. Within six weeks of my first entry into primal Africa I had set off from Dr Albert Schweitzer's bush-hospital on an Ogoué backwater to enter that “unexplored territory”, and a few days after this entry was attending upon a midnight ritual requiring the consumption of human body parts from an exhumed corpse of the very recently deceased to restore the fertility of the Bakalé tribesmen among whom I had found myself. Primal Africa *was* dark.

Mere months later, after a long sojourn with a tribe (the Bakonzo of Ruwenzori) whose mountain territory straddles the Congo's border with Uganda, I, aged 24, personally sowed the seed of a kingdom (Rwenzururu) and unwittingly launched a dynasty of rulers of what are today some 700,000 ethnic subjects, the legitimacy of both the dynasty and the kingdom receiving formal recognition half a century later.

In those seminal days there was no alternative, if not to the quasi-apostolic role, at least to the dominant one.

Reaching Kivu in eastern Congo half a century ago I was confronted by a bronze monument to Belgian intentions in lettering cast in indestructible relief quoting the personal owner of that vast territory, King Leopold II, and dedicated to the

pioneers of the place. It was dated 1885, exactly the time when the young Joseph Conrad was skippering his ramshackle steamer up the mighty Congo stream into the heart of darkness.

Ces expéditeurs, it declaimed, répondent à une idée éminemment civilisatrice et chrétienne: percer les ténèbres qui enveloppent encore cette partie du monde, en reconnaître les ressources qui paraissent immenses, en un mot, y verser les trésors de la civilisation, tel est le but de cette croisade moderne.

Kurtz himself could have drafted it.

God knows, the colonial experience in equatorial Africa was wildly dual. It could intensify existing darkness; it could bring light... and that light was indeed the light of Christianity, of a god of love irresistible among people of ubiquitous sickness and capricious mortality, whose pantheon of spirits was commanded by the ever unassuageable Evil Eye.

In that equatorial belt of Africa of which I speak and Conrad sited the novella, those who brought darkness to darkness were the Belgians and the Germans. Notwithstanding any high-flown ideals of either King or Kaiser, it was the Germans who made it their policy among the restive Herero people of what today's map would call northern Namibia to be one of *vernichtung*, precisely matching the *cri de coeur noir* scrawled in Kurtz's hand below the final paragraph of his idealistic thesis, "Exterminate the brutes!" The Germans were to attempt much the same (with rope, machine-gun and starvation) in response to the *maji-maji* rebellion in their other equatorial territory of Tanganyika.

After the outrageous brutality permitted and perpetrated by Belgium's colonists in the Congo was exposed by Casement and others at the start of the last century, Brussels intervened with thin-spread, sullen administrative efficiency. I personally witnessed and endured it. France, Spain and Portugal effectively neglected the interior of their equatorial dependencies, which remained in primal darkness.

All this was in distinct contrast to the British regimes across the same belt: Zanzibar, Kenya, post-1919 Tanganyika, Nyasaland, the Rhodesias, and Uganda, which I also knew intimately. British authority erected no bronze plaques announcing any *idée éminemment civilisatrice et chrétienne*, yet either followed Christianity or swiftly introduced it and its whelps, namely medicine, communications, and a humane rule of law. In the 60 years to independence Kenya's native population multiplied sixfold; in France's Gabon it remained where it had stood in 1901.

The oscillation between darkness and light persists in equatorial Africa to our own day, getting on for half a century after the territories' abandonment to indigenous rule by the metropolitan powers. Coming upon the scene one day of inter-tribal slaughter in newly independent Congo, I personally buried 39 macheted and machine-gunned bodies (and saved as many lives). In various parts of that benighted country to this day you survive by the speed, circumspection and ruthlessness of your will to survive or to fulfil whatever brought you there.

Conrad wilfully obfuscates his plot to leave the reader guessing whether Kurtz ordered or merely assented to the erection of the severed heads upon their posts. Conrad likewise conducts us into Kurtz's ambivalence as to whether he truly meant to redeem the hand of his demure, virginal "Intended" as the reward of the rapacity and audacity of his ivory-gathering, or whether his personal sovereignty over a vast region of riverain equatorial, where he was half-worshipped as a god not only by the natives but certain of his compatriots, had become addictive.

As for myself, when I sowed the seed of today's Kingdom of Rwenzururu on Uganda's border with Congo-Kinshasa, the name I was accorded by the first and future King was *musabhule*, which in the lexicon of the then unwritten and untranslated language of these, my people, was chosen for the Gospel appellation *Saviour*.

As for Conrad, the magical, daring writer, he knew nothing about Africans. It would have astonished him to read the black Senegalese essayist and poet, Léopold Senghor, the prophet of *négritude*, who gloried in the Negro as “a being open to the senses: he that sees sensation before vision”. In the person of Marlow, Conrad passing upstream past native dancers admits to being “cut off from comprehension . . . secretly appalled as sane men must be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse . . . The worst of it – this suspicion of their not being inhuman . . . They howled and leaped and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just that thought of their humanity – like yours – and the thought of your remote kinship.”

Chinua Achebe of Nigeria has fixed that ridiculous one-way label *racist* on his fellow master-novelist; yet Conrad’s Marlow was responding as a writer to what met the eyes of a young north European of the landed gentry 125 years ago. (Has Achebe never seen Nigerian puppets of white colonial officers?) And *I* could complain that Conrad knew precious little about the rain-forest, about who (if anyone) lives in it, nor indeed about where ivory was best harvested. We are not here to judge Conrad, but lose ourselves in his world. He needed his equatorial Africa to be the heart of darkness to round the metaphor of a darkness primal in the heart of Man.

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