



FILHOS DE IMPÉRIO E PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS  
CHILDREN OF EMPIRES AND EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES  
ENFANTS D'EMPIRES ET POSTMÉMOIRES EUROPÉENNES

Saturday, 26 January 2019



*¿Con cuántas piedras se hace una balsa?* | 2012 | [Rodrigo Oliveira](#) (courtesy of the artist)

## 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



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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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 –



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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 Guinness (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.



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- (1) Mark Twain, *King Leopold's Soliloquy: A Defense of His Congo Rule* (P.R. Warren Company, 1905), pp. 39-40.  
(2) Mark Twain, *O Solilóquio do Rei Leopoldo. Uma defesa da sua autoridade no Congo*. Translated by Salvato Telles de Menezes (Lisboa: Quetzal, 2018), pp. 104-105.  
(3) António Araújo, "Das trevas, coração: Mark Twain e o Congo do rei Leopoldo", pp. 9-57.  
(4) Kevin Grant, *A "Civilized Savagery": Britain and the New Slaveries in Africa, 1884-1926* (New York: Routledge, 2005), *maxime* pp. 39-78.  
(5) Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo, "As provas da 'civilização': fotografia, colonialismo e direitos humanos", in Filipa Vicente, ed., *O Império da visão. Fotografia no contexto colonial português* (Lisboa: Edições 70, 2014), pp. 387-398.  
(6) The same image, entitled "Some of the victims", appears as frontispiece to Arthur Conan Doyle's "The crime of the Congo".  
(7) Quotation from Harris in Kevin Grant, *A "Civilized Savagery"*, p. 40.
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**MEMOIRS** is funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (no. 648624) and is hosted at the Centre for Social Studies (CES), University of Coimbra.