

When Archives Speak Back: Sexual Violence in the #Congo Free State

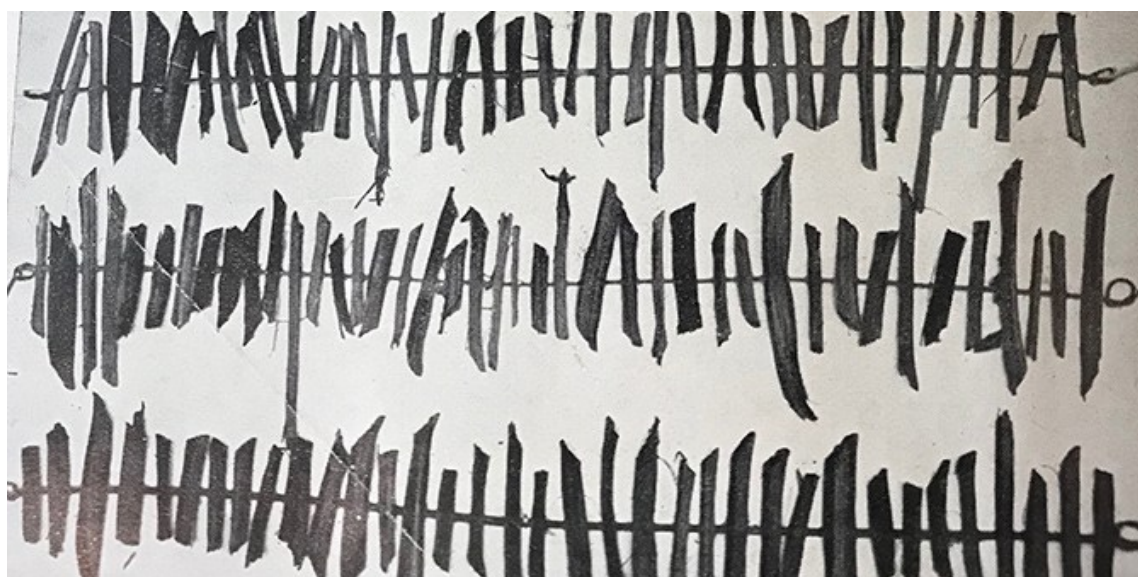
As apologists for colonialism gain prominence, Charlotte Mertens reports how the Congolese voices resting in the Africa archives of Brussels reveal the use of rape, sexual exploitation and torture as punishment, extortion and a display of colonial power.

When talking about colonialism, its power structures and durabilities, it matters who speaks. When people in privileged positions speak out in favour of colonialism, this cannot be ignored. Much has been written on colonialism's racialisation, its impunity and inhumanity, its dismantling of indigenous structures, its violence and suffering (including by [Ami V Shah](#) and [Swati Parashar](#)). Often obscured is the everyday sexual violence and terror that characterises the colonial encounter.

It is no coincidence that African voices who speak of sexual violence and rape committed during colonial times are hard to find. Knowledge 'stored' in archives is always contested as state archives echo and mediate the anxieties and uncertainties of colonial governance and bureaucracy. Yet, some voices can still be located in dusty archives of the *metropole*. Scattered across the African Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Belgium are the voices of Congolese people and their experiences of brutal violence at the hands of colonial officials and sentries during King Leopold II's rubber regime in the Congo Free State (1885-1908).

Based on missionaries' reports and extensive campaigning by the Congo Reform Association (CRA), one of the first and largest human rights movements of the early 20th century, a Commission of inquiry (1904-1905) came into being to investigate the specific charges of atrocities and abuses alleged to be prevalent in the Congo Free State. This Commission collected bare statements of facts, recorded by eyewitnesses. Of the 370 testimonies by colonial officials, missionaries and indigenous people, 20 came from women (3 from missionaries' wives). Their statements reveal what has been silenced by official historiography; namely, sexual and non-sexual terror as innate to colonial power.

Rather than reinforcing the spectacle of black suffering, the examples found in the archives emphasise both the banality of brutal sexual and non-sexual violence and the cruel intimacy inherent to colonialism. The colonial regime, based on power, coercion and submission, required direct, intimate contact with its subjects to maintain a bond of subjection.



Picture by Rev John Weeks 'Native tally of the killed and wounded'. It shows pieces of plantain stalk threaded on a string, each stalk representing a life taken. The large pieces symbolised the chiefs and ordinary men who had been killed, the shorter ones represented the murdered women and children. Copyright LSE Archives.

For example, Matuli of Ikoko testifies how her father was tied to a tree and shot by sentries. Her father's corpse was given to the sentries' boys who ate him. Matuli, aged 15, and her mother were made prisoners. In prison, both her mother's hands were cut off while she was still alive and, two days later, she was decapitated. The colonial practice of detaching hands and feet when the rubber quota was not reached was very common, however, it was also part of instilling a culture of terror among the local population. This system of terror was highly gendered. Both Ikewa (a girl of 10 years old) and the woman Boketu recount how they were pawned to a white man until a debt had been paid off. The kidnapping (also referred to as *rapt*) of women, especially the beautiful ones, is a recurring theme in the archives. At least two women (Jema and Bonyonoto) complained about how they were taken from their homes and made mistress to the white man or a sentry. Even more vivid in the testimonies were the depictions of grotesque sexual violence. Mingo narrates how sentries made her lift her dress and put hot clay into her sexual parts while she was making bricks.

The exploitation of rubber was assured by State officials and through a network of African auxiliaries (also known as sentries, sentinels or *capitas*), who were put into a certain area or village by the State or one of the concession companies. Their task was to supervise the work of the natives in the forest, mainly in rubber production. Due to a system of incentives and quotas (the more rubber produced, the higher the commission), violence was rewarded and the black sentries were responsible for much of the atrocities. It is however beyond dispute that this violence was part of the white colonial state. Some white state agents officially expressed their dissent with such violent practices, yet they also committed violence, gave instructions, watched, laughed and condoned. For example, Mongondo's testimony confirms Mingo's story, and adds: "The white man Longwango was present. He saw it all and he laughed."

Even though the testimonies provide distinct examples of sexual torture and rape, Belgium's state-managed historiography on the colony is marked by sexual amnesia. However, rape, sexual exploitation and torture of native women and men were often used as a punishment or as extortion, particularly during the rubber regime, but also more broadly as a display of brutal colonial power. As Achille Mbembe has [argued](#), violence in the colony is non-existent unless there is a sense of proximity and being in contact. Sexual violence was therefore not limited to the territories where rubber was grown and harvested and it was certainly not limited to King Leopold's colonial domain.

Read together, these testimonies provide a desolating account of pain, suffering and terror (as I [explain further](#)). Crucially, they illustrate that brutality and intimacy were basic to colonialism itself. Dormant in the archive but reactivated and brought in relation to the present, they firebomb arguments that make the case for colonialism.

In the reading room of the Belgian Africa archives, visitors are greeted by King Leopold II's painting. The cruel irony of his presence is symbolic of how Belgium (and other former empires) fails to acknowledge its violent colonial past. Yet, it is also a stark reminder of the deliberate and political strategy of 'forgetting' colonialism. The baskets filled with decaying hands and feet have long gone. What remains are the testimonies and memories that expose the unbearable cruelty of the dehumanising system of colonialism. These scream for recognition at times when former imperial powers stubbornly obscure their violent past and its persistence into the present. This inability to make the violence committed by white people visible means that colonial violence endures with relentless impunity.

Read more in the paper, [Sexual Violence in the Congo Free State: Archival traces and Present Reconfigurations](#)

Dr Charlotte Mertens ([@Charlomertens](#)) is a researcher at the University of Melbourne. Her research focuses on sexual violence in conflict settings, particularly in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. As part of a Harry Frank Guggenheim research grant, she is undertaking archival research to uncover records on the employment of rape and sexual torture by Belgian colonial officials and their sentries in the Congo Free State. Contact her via email: mertensc@unimelb.edu.au

The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog, the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa or the London School of Economics and Political Science.