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Resistance in the Congo Free State: 1885-1908

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Introduction

In historical discourse of African colonialism the agency of those most affected is often ignored. This study looks at the Congo Free State, an area which encompasses the entire Congo River basin and the modern Democratic Republic of Congo, and analyses two prominent forms of resistance, rebellion and population flight. For this purpose I needed areas within the Congo that provided me with accessible written records and oral accounts. The Kasai region in the eastern Congo is researched because there is substantial written testimony from several prominent missionaries and reports from state and company agents. Moreover, other researchers have collected these sources in easily accessible volumes. Accounts from the Congo River basin, in particular those of the Mongos, are also examined for comparative purposes.

By exploring methods of resistance, this study attempts to provide the African experience with a renewed relevance. Resistance can encompass any number of cultural practices and actions - including music, art, oral traditions, language, etc. The resistance looked at in this paper are population changes, primarily through migration, and rebellion. These two were chosen because they best represent the adaptations and agency various peoples underwent when faced with colonial oppression. This paper begins with the background and origin of the Congo Free State to provide a context for resistance. A thorough examination of the State's brutalities is developed for an understanding of how societies reacted and adapted to these changes. The next parts deal with primary evidence of various revolts and migration movements in the Kasai and Congo Basin. There is ample evidence from oral traditions, missionaries, and state officials to analyze the context surrounding these types of resistance. Finally, a conclusion that examines the compiled evidences and places it in a modern historiographical context.

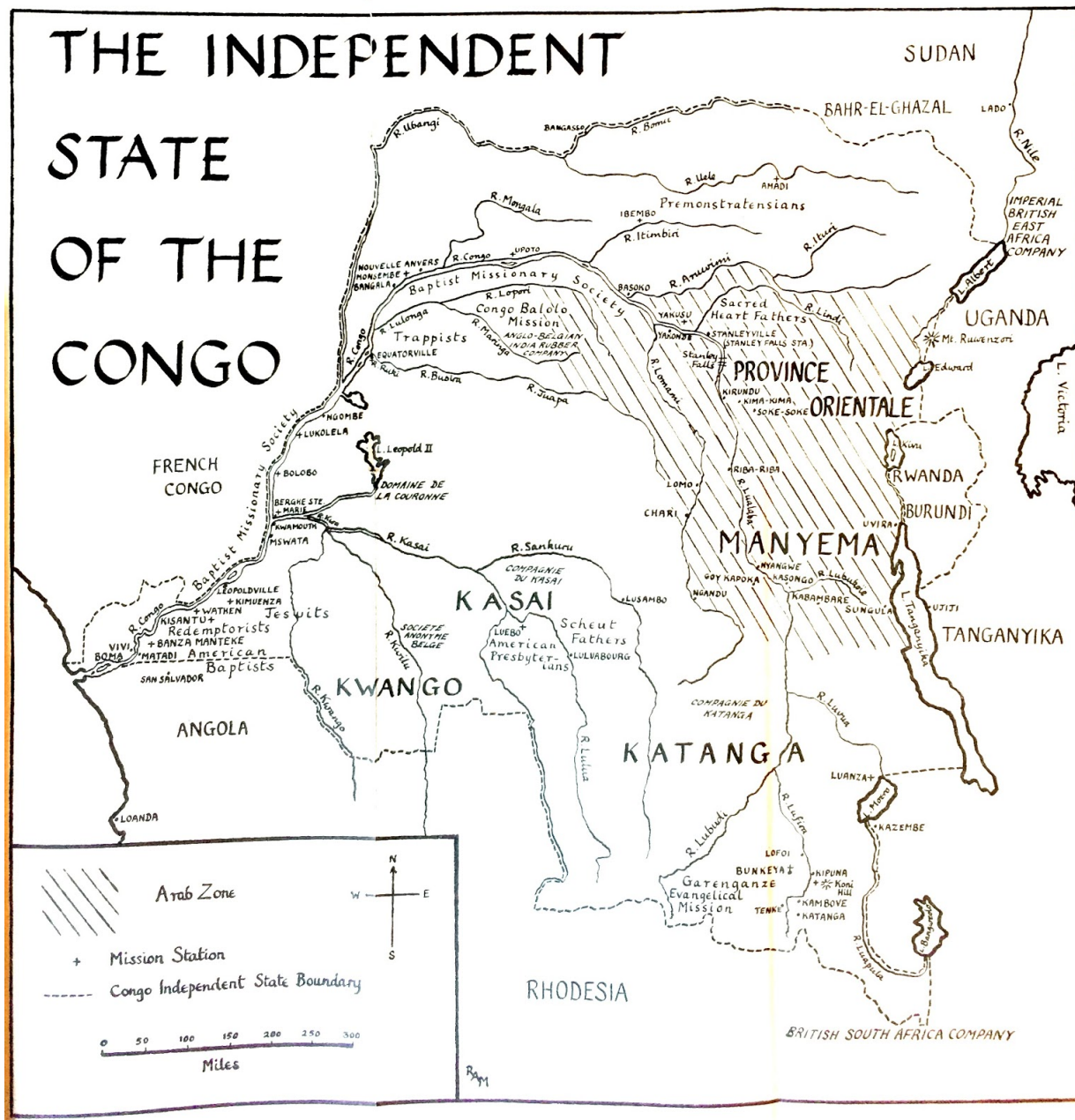
This paper attempts a more nuanced approach towards reaction, adaptation, and resistance. For those who lived under the harshest injustices and subsequently forgotten by history, this is what they deserve. Resistance measures involved in population flight and rebellion prove that colonial brutalities did not go unchecked and elicited a powerful, significant response.

Literature Review

Literature surrounding the Congo Free State from 1885 to 1908 is hampered from a lack of written African testimony and sparse oral accounts. Early histories rarely mentioned the abuses of Leopold's regime despite their being such a publicized humanitarian efforts during its existence. Published in 1962 Ruth Slade's *King Leopold's Congo: Aspects of the Development of Race Relations in the Congo Independent State* was one of the first books to turn a critical eye towards the relationship between agents and various tribes. Contemporaneously, Jan Vansina's extensive anthropological research in the Kasai region and the Kuba people in particular, focused primarily on their history and traditions. His recent *Being Colonized: The Kuba Experience in Rule Congo 1880-1960* concentrates on the Kuba experience under colonial oppression. The best sources concerning a comprehensive general history of the Congo region are the *Bibliographie historique du Zaïre à l'époque coloniale (1880-1960): travaux publiés en 1906-1996* and the *King Leopold's Congo* in the Cambridge History of Africa. In French, Belgian diplomat Jules Marchal has published a much cited four volume book set on the Congo Free State.¹

¹Jules Marchal, *L'état libre du Congo: paradis perdu : l'histoire du Congo 1876-1900 1-4*, (Borgloon, Belgique: Bellings, 1996).

Before turning the colony over to the Belgian government Leopold burnt many of the records. It was said the ovens burned for a week straight. More recent literature has used these archives and looked at King Leopold's crimes in a more critical fashion. Nelson's *Colonialism in the Congo Basin*, written in 1994, examines the Mongo people under Leopold rule. Published a few years later Adam Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost* continues this new trend and forwards an argument for the death of ten million caused by colonial policies. Focusing on colony conception and its atrocities, his book is more a study of humanitarian response than of Congolese life during that time. Few researchers have put Leopold's actions in a purely African context. Jan Vansina's work in Central Africa has been essential to all scholars with a focus on African agency. There has yet to be a comprehensive study of Congolese resistance during Leopold's reign of the Congo Free State.



Map of Congo Free State²

² Ruth M. Slade, *King Leopold's Congo; aspects of the development of race relations in the Congo Independent State*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1962). Attachment

Origins of the Colony

For a complete understanding of the context surrounding Kuba and Mongo resistance the origins of Leopold's Congo must be discussed. European exposure to the Congo region goes back to the fifteenth century. The Portuguese were the first white people to visit the Kongo kingdom and their king, Affonso I in 1491.³ Their interest lay primarily in the slave trade. Because of enslavers brought captives to them, the Portuguese had no desire to travel into the interior and the region remained unexplored by Europeans until the nineteenth century. It was the Congo River that would pique their interest and open the floodgates. Pouring over 1.4 million cubic feet of water into the ocean, it is the second largest river by volume in the world. In the languages spoken along its bank it is known as the Nzadi or Nzere which mean means "the river that swallows all rivers."⁴ The origin of this behemoth mystified explorers for centuries and exploration would change the fate of the Congolese people forever.

Henry Morten Stanley, the man made famous by finding the explorer Dr. Livingston, would make the first deep trek in search of the Congo River origin. Stanley was a brutal leader and throughout their journey the group experienced desertion, mutiny, disease, and death. When they did find the source, almost 999 days later in 1877, he turned from an explorer into a prospective buyer. Upon leaving he wrote, "A farewell to it...until some generous and opulent philanthropist shall permit me or some other to lead a force for the suppression of this stumbling block to commerce with Central Africa."⁵ The smokescreen of philanthropy would rear its ugly

³ Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's ghost: a story of greed, terror, and heroism in Colonial Africa* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 14.

⁴ Hochschild, *King Leopold's ghost*, 54.

⁵ Henry M. Stanley, *The exploration diaries of H.M. Stanley, now first published from the original manuscripts*. (New York: Vanguard Press, 1961), 40.

head throughout Leopold's exploitation of the Congo. Culturizing the 'savages' was a convenient justification for many colonists. Stanley's journey would make him a famous man throughout Europe and known to a certain powerful man.

King Leopold I had always been obsessed with securing a colony for Belgium. In his studies he fared poorly in most subjects and was uninterested in literature, art, or music. As he got older he devoted his time to researching other colonial powers and the methods they took in managing their colonies. His travels to Ceylon, India, Burma, and Egypt cemented opinion that his tiny country of Belgium needed overseas possessions to gain any presence on the world stage. He wrote, "...If instead of talking so much about neutrality Parliament looked after our commerce, Belgium would become one of the richest countries in the world."⁶ Leopold lust for a colony took many iterations, the Congo was not his first choice. He researched into buying Fiji, railways in Brazil, and had investments in the Suez canal.⁷ Eventually he turned his eye to one of the last uncolonized areas in the world - sub-Saharan Africa. Stanley's publicized journey into the basin would eventually bring him in contact with Leopold and, in 1878, onto his payroll.

Stanley's findings gave Leopold a rough description of the land he would soon exploit. His most significant discovery was no centralized power in the region and fragmented tribes. The Congo, in his mind, was now the easiest target. After these meetings the rhetoric from the king was carefully calculated to best serve his personal interests. He framed the Congo as an humanitarian endeavor to rid the region of Arab slave traders. Pandering to the anti-slave crowd would win him popular appeal and apparent moral justification for colonization. He even laid out

⁶ Hochschild, *King Leopold's ghost*, 36

⁷ Ibid, 38

a plan for tribes to have their kings live in Europe and work under himself. All of this, of course, were outright lies. In a speech given to Belgium missionaries he said:

“They know that to kill, to sleep with someone else's wife, to lie and to insult is bad. Have courage to admit it; you are not going to teach them what they know already. Your essential role is to facilitate the task of administrators and industrialists, which means you will go to interpret the gospel in the way it will be the best to protect your interests in that part of the world. For these things, you have to keep watch on disinterestedly our savages from the richness that is plenty [in their underground. To avoid that, they get interested in it, and make you murderous] competition and dream one day to overthrow you.”⁸

Clearly Leopold did not care for the sort of protheizing or moral teachings these missionaries normally conducted.. This coercion is indicative of the exploitation Leopold would reap in his personal colony. Eventually, every part of the state would be geared towards one goal: more rubber.

Leopold had to play a careful game. His humanitarian angle created two organizations: the International African Association and the International Association of the Congo. The purpose of these two were couched in altruistic rhetoric, with one byline reading, “...it has been formed with the noble aim of rendering lasting and disinterested services to the cause of progress.”⁹ His efforts to legitimize himself in the public eye worked, for the time being; but politically it would prove much more difficult. Leopold wanted to conquer the Congo quietly and ran into issues when attempting to legitimize his rights for the land. To quell interests from other powers he made several promises. The first was that the Congo would remain a free trade zone

⁸ Letter from King Leopold II of Belgium to Colonial Missionaries, Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, 1883, <http://www.fafich.ufmg.br/~luarnaut/Letter%20Leopold%20II%20to%20Colonial%20Missionaries.pdf>

⁹ Hochschild, *King Leopold's ghost*, 66

for travelers from all countries.¹⁰ This was an economic necessity for Leopold. He did not have the funds to construct the infrastructure that was needed for the ivory trade and rubber extraction. Foreign investment would provide what he lacked. His next consolidation was to France, a nation who had been following Britain's expansion from South Africa with discomfort and did not trust in Leopold to hold onto the territory Stanley had staked out. He provided them with the *droit de preference* or rights of first refusal.¹¹ Parlaying these negotiations with the British at the Berlin conference, of 1884 he secured recognition of his colony from not only them but Germany and several other countries.¹² Thus began Leopold's rule of the Congo.

Organization

The area was far too large for Leopold to manage feasibly. On lands he was unable to exploit economically he leased out to concessionary companies. In doing so they would concede half of their profits. Recruiting white Europeans proved difficult so the state and company agents turned towards the natives as the work force. One of the earliest exploitative labor policies was the portage system. Faced with rough terrain and impenetrable forests, transportation was extremely difficult and before the railroad was built in 1898 it required most of the labor in the Congo. The earliest use of porters was by Henry Morton Stanley who needed hundreds of carriers for his 600 tons of goods.¹³ As the area became more developed the number of porters increased

¹⁰ G. N. Sandersen, J. D. Fage, and Roland Oliver. . *The Cambridge history of Africa. From 1870 to 1905 Volume 6 Volume 6*, (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1985), 319.

¹¹ G. N. Sandersen, J. D. Fage, and Roland Oliver. *The Cambridge history of Africa*, 136

¹² Ibid, 138

¹³ William J. Samarin, *The Black man's burden : African colonial labor on the Congo and Ubangi rivers, 1880-1900* (Boulder : Westview Press, 1989), 119.

exponentially from 40,000 in 1892 to 2,730,533 in 1898.¹⁴ Recruitment efforts were a predecessor to those used for rubber extraction and a sign of what was to come. Competition between the Catholic missionaries, traders, and the state created especially harsh methods of impressment. The District Commissioner of the Congo Free State wrote that, "...if carriers were not available at the time appointed, the soldiers took a number of prisoners, usually women and children, in the refractory village. These were kept...until they were exchanged for the men who could be used as carriers."¹⁵ Resistance to the Europeans for their portage system is encapsulated in a song heard on the lower Congo in 1888:

O mother, how unfortunate we are!...
 The white man has made us work,
 We were so happy before the white arrived,
 We would like to kill the white man who has made us work
 But the whites have a more powerful fetish than ours,
 The white man is stronger than the black man,
 But the sun will kill the white man,
 But the moon will kill the white man
 But the sorcerer will kill the white man
 But the tiger will kill the white man
 But the crocodile will kill the white man
 But the elephant will kill the white man
 But the river will the white man.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid, 136

¹⁵ David Lagergren, *Mission and state in the Congo: a study of the relations between Protestant missions and the Congo Independent State authorities with special reference to the Equator District, 1885-1903*. (Lund: Gleerup, 1970), 110.

¹⁶ Léon, Dieu, *Dans la brousse congolaise: (les origines des Missions de Scheut au Congo)*, (Liège: Maréchal, 1946), 59-60.

The methods of forced labor used in the portage system was similarly applied to the fledgling rubber market. Demand and prices for the sap skyrocketed in the 1890's, causing Leopold and the companies to shift their focus from ivory. Rubber was harvested by cutting into the *ladolphia vines* and collecting the dripping sap. Compared to cultivated rubber which comes from a tree, the vines found in Congo were sparsely located in dense forests. Workers were forced to go farther and farther from their village to satisfy officials needs. One example shows villagers paid under 10% of what officials sold it for. The Anglo-Belgian India Rubber and Exploration company spent 1.35 francs to harvest rubber and sold it for more than 10 franc per kilo.¹⁷ This enormous margin was achieved by brutalizing the forced labor. Leopold set up the Force Publique to enforce his and the companies quotas. Across the Congo he demanded mandatory conscription into its ranks. Belligerence brought about the same fate as poor rubber yields. Maximizing profits meant that officials could not buy rubber on the independent market because the price would be too high.¹⁸ Forced labor was then, to the Europeans, an economic necessity and for Africans, an end to sovereignty.

Exploring taxation in the Kasai aids in understanding the organizational structure of the Congo Free State. Located along the Kasai river in western Congo, the Kuba kingdom was the prominent force in the area were one of the last regimes to defy Leopold's agents. With a royal decree on Christmas Eve 1901, the Compaigne du Kasai was created from a conglomeration of fourteen companies in the area.¹⁹ Leopold found it easier to control and tax one company instead

¹⁷ Hochschild, *King Leopold's ghost*, 160

¹⁸ Samuel Henry Nelson, *Colonialism in the Congo basin, 1880-194*, (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1994), 92.

¹⁹ Jan Vansina, *Being colonized: the Kuba experience in rural Congo, 1880-1960*, (Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), 86.

of many. Half of the profits from their area were sent to the king. The territory was divided into fourteen sectors each controlled by a single chief who appointed managers and agents. Charged with garnishing their own wages from the merchandise, corruption was rampant. These agents were told to extract as much rubber from the land as they could. One strategy they employed was known as advanced payment. Goods were forced upon a village and then agents would return some weeks later to demand rubber in return. If it was not garnished immediately violent methods were used and the population was brutalized.

With an armed militia to back the companies' demands, officials looked for more creative ways to exploit the population. In 1899 the Compagnie du Kasai would buy copper crosses from Katanga (the mining sector of Leopold's territory) for a low rate. They would then pay villagers for their rubber by trading them these crosses. To obtain them back they would force a tax for about half the rate they had sold for.²⁰ Taxes became especially harsh for villagers because all commerce was conducted under the state's eye. A decree made rubber only sellable to state agents or companies.²¹ Their ability to conduct free trade was severely limited. Accounts from elsewhere in the Congo highlight widespread oppression. A Mongo tribesman said, "How wonderful they thought it was that the white man should want rubber, and be willing to pay for it. How they almost fought for the baskets in order to bring them in and obtain the offered riches...Now it is looked upon as the equivalent of death; they do not complain so much of want of payment, as that there is no rest from work, and no end to it except death."²² A 1903

²⁰ Vansina, *Being colonized: the Kuba experience*, 90

²¹ Nelson, *Colonialism in the Congo basin*, 89

²² E. D. Morel, *Red rubber: the story of the rubber slave trade flourishing on the Congo in the year of grace 1906*, (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969). 73 in Nelson, *Colonialism in the Congo basin*, 89

legislation made resistance, men and women, work forty hours a month, a limitation that was frequently exceeded.²³ With so much time devoted to the harvest of rubber there was little time for anything else. As the Mongo man said, it was hopeless. Resistance grew from a framework of violent oppression and restriction of freedoms.

Africans began to distrust all white people who they now met. William Morris, a prominent Presbyterian minister wrote, “The natives are cruelly treated, forced into labor and military service, and the most horrible atrocities are being committed in the collection of tributes and taxes. It is now utterly impossible for our Mission or any other Protestant mission...to buy any land on which to open up new missions.”²⁴ Why should they sell land to people that are brutalizing them? Without using force tribes had few means to resist encroachment onto their lands. Protestant missions did not partake in violent campaigns or manipulation like the state. Nevertheless groups had many reasons for refusing missions on their lands. Refusal became an early form of resistance.

State Crimes

One must look at the atrocities of the rubber collecting system to understand how their methods uprooted native society. Our focus now shifts towards a more generalized look at state and company brutality. This will show that rather than being a unique phenomenon, similar tactics were ubiquitous to the entire region. What worked on the Kuba in the Kasai often worked the same on the Mongo in the Congo Basin. These crimes placed communities in a difficult position. They were faced with abandoning their village and livelihood or engaging in armed resistance.

²³ Nelson, *Colonialism in the Congo basin*, 89

²⁴ William M. Morrison, *The Story of Our Congo Mission*, (1906).

Depopulation and revolt became a common form of resistance that empowered villagers. They had agency over their fate.

When one reads about the Leopold's Congo today, the description of atrocities is often accompanied by a picture of one handed children. It is shown for good reason. As one of the most brutal punishments these pictures encapsulate what Leopold's intentions truly were - for the Congo is colonization at its most barren, naked self. A man from around Stanley Pool said this to a Catholic missionary half a century later: "From all the bodies killed in the field, you had to cut off the hands. He [his captain] wanted to see the numbers of hands cut off by each soldier, who had to bring them in baskets..."²⁵ Commanders in the Force Publique (the state militia) did not trust recruited Africans with their bullets and if one was used, a hand was required in return. The hands they collected came from villagers who were murdered for refusing work. In dealing with disobedient workers Force Publique officials sometimes collected hands from the living. A paper quoting the missionary William Sheppard writes, "...if a tribe did not hand over the amount specified, so many young children were taken and their hands cut off."²⁶ Another missionary wrote that hands were cut off, "...while the poor heart beat strongly enough to shoot the blood from the cut arteries at a distance of a fully four feet."²⁷ The reports of this practice are widespread among missionaries and colonists alike. Brutalities like hand cutting disrupted the social fabric of society and forced many villages to abandon their homes. Normalizing themselves meant either adapting to these pressures or resisting.

²⁵ E. Boelaert, "Ntange." *Aequatoria XV*, no. 2: pp. 58-60. Coquilhatville, Belgian Congo: 1952. 58-60, in Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, 57

²⁶ Howard McKnight Wilson, *The Lexington Presbytery Heritage* (Verona, Va.: McClure Press, 1971), 144

²⁷ E. D. Morel, *Red rubber: the story of the rubber slave trade which flourished on the Congo for twenty years, 1890-1910*. (Manchester [England]: National Labour Press, 1919), 47, in Hochschild, *King Leopold's ghost*, 191

Kidnappings also worked to disrupt this fabric. A British vice consul reports how the hostage system worked, “[the sentries] were to arrive in canoes at a village, the inhabitants of which invariably bolted on their arrival; the soldiers were then landed, and commenced looting, taking all chickens, grain, etc, out of the houses; after this they attacked the natives until able to seize their women, these women were kept as hostages until the Chief of the district brought in the required number of kilogrammes of rubber. The rubber having been brought, the women were sold back to their owners for a couple of goats apiece, and so he continued from village to village until the requisite amount of rubber had been collected.”²⁸ The hostage system placed a great deal of strain on villages. Collecting rubber could sometimes turn into an extended, week long process. With most of the men gone and many women kidnapped, only a few women remained to conduct the village responsibilities. Villages could not complete essential activities such as food collection or house building, circumstances which would lead to population flight. In the Kasai region, around the Sankura river, villages were virtually in ruin. A state agent remarked in 1907, “the village is falling to ruins like most others I saw on the way.”²⁹

William Sheppard, friend to many of the Kasai tribes, corroborates the agent’s writings: “But within these last three years how changed they are! Their farms are growing up in weeds and jungles, their king is practically a slave, their houses now are mostly only half-built single rooms and are much neglected. The streets of their towns are not clean and well swept as they once were. Even their children cry for bread. Why this change?...There are armed sentries of chartered trading companies who force the men and women to spend most of their days and

²⁸ Pulteney to FO, 15 Sept. 1899, FO 10/731, no. 5. in Hochschild, *King Leopold's ghost*, 161

²⁹ Vansina, *Being colonized: the Kuba experience*, 104

nights in the forests making rubber...”³⁰ One sees the disastrous effects of forced labor in disrupting tribal life. Evidence, from all sides is abound in the Kasai region. Wilfred Thesifer went on a three month visit to the Kasai and reported on the conditions there in 1907. In his report to the British Parliament he describes the same village conditions that Sheppard and the agent did. Furthermore, he assigns the reasons for such degradation on company abuses. It is clear that evidence is not coming from one or two bias sources but from multiple people who have varying connections to the Congo and Leopold. Resistance reacted to this disruption, providing agency to people under pressure.

Conquering the Kasai

For the Kasai region, their rubber attracted the most attention of the entire Congo. It was considered the best in the world and brought new companies to the region which were able to save the struggling local capital, Luebo. The king of the region was Kwet aMbweky who, at the time of the boom, was embroiled in a tense political situation with rivals to his throne. He saw what the white man was doing to other villages and subsequently refused missionaries access to certain lands. State agents responded to his insubordination by sending soldiers to extract ivory and rubber from villages on the Sankura river. Resistance was fierce. They were attacked and killed on January 9th 1895. In revenge, several villages along the Sankura were burned.³¹ This is one major example of collective resistance against extraction efforts by the state. The Kasai region would see many more.

³⁰ W.H. Sheppard, “From the Bakuba Company,” *The Kasai Herald*, 1 Jan, 1908 in Hochschild, *King Leopold’s ghost*, 261

³¹ Vansina, *Being colonized: the Kuba experience*, 67

King Kwet aMbweky died in the summer of 1896 and threw the region in chaos. His successor, Mishaape took the throne and as is custom, killed seven of his predecessor's son. One of the sons, Mishaamilyeng, escaped and went into hiding with the help of the Dr. Sheppard, one of the missionaries. This would be a contentious and dividing issue for the missionary-king relationship. Already weary of their religion, the new regime was much less cooperative with European companies wishing to harvest rubber and ivory in their land. State officials would not tolerate an uncooperative king and sent forces to force Mishaape's capitulation. The Kuba kingdom was conquered by three separate attacks in early July, 1900. King Kwet aMbweky once said, upon refusing to meet some of the first white traders to his kingdom, "I will not go there; these people who have chased us away from downstream by insulting us that we have bad skin, they are now provoking us into war...in tomorrow's world you [local slave traders] will deal in their market."³² Only a few years after his death did these words ring true.

Revolt

*"We are tired of living under tyranny.
We cannot endure that our women and children are taken away
And dealt with by white savages.
We shall make war...
We know that we shall die, we want to die.
We want to die."³³
-Congolese fight song.*

Out of state and company oppression grew resistance. Unable to trade their rubber to anyone else, profit margins were huge for the company. In 1901 rubber was bought from the

³² Ibid, 71

³³ Hochschild, *King Leopold's ghost*, 172

Kuba at a rate of 2.7 francs and by 1904 the price was down to .24 per kilogram. Dividends to shareholders was almost 5 million francs in that same year.³⁴ Extraction methods were becoming harsher and quotas too high for villagers to meet. Overwhelming stressors began to have a cultural effect on the region. Tensions in villages caused a massive spike in witch accusations around the Ibanc region. Families and groups turned against one another. Facing pressure from all sides, some of the local tribes, the Bushong and Kete even turned towards the missionaries as a way to protect themselves from company demands. It was ill treatment of the royalty that became the tipping point.

After the death of Mishaape from smallpox King aPe, a relative of the Kwet aMbweky, came to power. He traveled to Luebo to settle tax issues with the commander, Captain Jacques-Paul-Felix De Cock. The Captain unexpectedly jailed the king, who was a few days late, until one hundred thousand cowries were paid. The missionary, Samuel Chester, recounts this incident: “On his inability to pay the fine imposed he was thrown into prison. Lukengu [aPe] was naturally enraged by this public disgrace inflicted on him in the presence of his people. Brooding over the matter on his return home, and urged on by his courtiers and medicine men he determined to show the foreigners that he was ‘no woman’ and, in a short time after, a revolt against the Congo Independent State was declared.”³⁵ With the rebellions that was already happening, such blatant disrespect for royalty was not tolerated. A revolt in the northeast town of Olenga would coincide with King aPe’s and provide inspiration for his people.

³⁴ Vansina, *Being colonized: the Kuba experience*, 87

³⁵ Samuel H. Chester to John Hay, Nashville, Tenn, 4 February 1905, Congo Mission General Files

Olonga was collapsing under the collective stress of the state and Compagnie du Kasai. Their medicine man, Ekpili kpiili, invented a charm called the Tongatonga which was supposed to save the people from rubber demands and protect them by deflecting Force Publique and militia bullets. A stipulation of the charm was the avoidance of European goods and foods. Propelled with this new protection, revolts spread across the region and eventually forced the local manager of the Compagnie du Kasai to flee. Villages no longer met their rubber quotas or traded for European goods. Regional outposts attacked several villages to quell the revolts and force their quotas. By late July 1904 officials were losing ground and the Tongatonga was spreading.³⁶

Farther south, King aPe did not want the charm in his kingdom. He viewed it as a threat to himself and his reign. His people viewed it much differently and many were initiated into the cult. Reports in the north of his kingdom, near the confluence of the Sankuru and Kasai, told of sentries fleeing and outposts being raided. The king changed his mind when a state agent from Luebo demanded fifty troops to serve a seven year stint in the army, no doubt to quell the rebellions in the north. In combination with his imprisonment and urged by his councilmen and people, King aPe no longer paid taxes or allowed for the recruitment of his subjects. A rebellion was in order.

The tribes were indiscriminate in their attacks. The Ibanche Mission Station doubled as a rubber factory. A.L wrote in a letter, "...I left Luebo at once with a few of our people in the hope that we might arrive in time to try and save the station. Traveling the remainder of the night, we arrived at Ibanj at ten o'clock the next morning. But oh, horrors! The fiends had done their work!

³⁶ Vansina, *Being colonized: the Kuba experience*, 94

The rubber factory and our beautiful station were in ashes, our goods scattered everywhere.”³⁷ Everything associated with Europeans was targeted. What the Tongatonga did more than anything was compel villagers into a combined rebellion. The supernatural powers associated with the charm, while having no place in reality, did serve to convince the different tribes that they could inflict significant losses on company outposts.

There were attacks all across the region. Stations from both side of the Kasai river attacked and even the capitol at Luebo was under siege for a time.³⁸ The Ibanche Mission, a rubber factory at Ekumbi and Bena Makima, and the villages outposts at Ngalikoko, Dituta, and Ina-Paul were targeted soon after.³⁹ Most attacks were repelled by state officials. Rebels did not possess guns and were at the mercy of Europe’s most recent innovation in warfare, most notably the Maxim gun. While striking a symbolic victory, the results of the rebellion were clear. As noted by Samuel Chester, “The sequel to this matter will, of course, be another raid with burning of villages and killing of many of the Bakuba people and, of course, the ultimate subjugation of the tribe.”⁴⁰ King Kwet aPe surrendered on February 7th 1905.

Elsewhere, revolts in the Congo basin were undertaken because of the same atrocities state and companies inflicted on the Kuba. The ABIR company reported revolts in Basankusu in 1897 and Lokolenge in 1900. Another company, the SAB, had major resistance in Busblock in 1904. Tribes were inflicting significant damage on state personal. 140 ABIR sentries were killed

³⁷ A.L. Edmiston, “Fall of Ibanj,” *The Kasai Herald* 5, January 1905, 4-5.

³⁸ Vansina, *Being colonized: the Kuba experience*, 96

³⁹ Benedetto, *Presbyterian Reformers in Central Africa*, 229

⁴⁰ Samuel H. Chester to John Hay, Nashville, Tenn, 4 February 1905, Congo Mission General Files

or wounded in the first half of 1905.⁴¹ A Force Publique officer reported: “I expect a general uprising...the motive is always the same, the natives are tired of the existing regime - transport work, rubber collection, furnishing [food] for whites and black...For three months I have been fighting, with ten days rest...Yet I cannot say I have subjugated the people. They prefer to fight or die...What can I do?”⁴² These revolts by the Mongo people highlighted the fact that revolts were not constrained to the Kasai region. Reacting to various pressures, violent resistance was widespread throughout the Congo.

Depopulation

Resistance undertook many forms, one of which was migration. Depopulation became one method of combating the demand for forced labor. This section will highlight a form of resistance which has been overlooked in some literature as a significant form of resistance. Population figures for the region are scarce and unreliable so for this reason primary accounts from officials, missionaries, and Congolese will be relied on. They paint a vivid picture of how forms of depopulation gave the Congolese agency in the face of oppression.

Migration became a necessity for tribes trying to avoid the harshest abuses. Unable to match the state’s firepower people often fled into the forest to face starvation, disease, and other tribes rather than what they had left behind. One of the earliest reports of migration was by a Swedish lieutenant in 1885 who in describing a raid said: “When we were approaching there was a terrible tumult in the village. The natives...were completely taken with surprise. We could see

⁴¹ Nelson, *Colonialism in the Congo basin*, 102

⁴² . D. Morel, *Red rubber: the story of the rubber slave trade flourishing on the Congo in the year of grace 1906*, (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969). 56 in Nelson, *Colonialism in the Congo basin*, 102

them gather what they could of their belongings and escape into the deep thick woods...’’⁴³ Four villages near the French border saw between 5,000 and 6,000 men relocate in 1894.⁴⁴ Other reports in the region revealed similar findings. A missionary found that between 1891 and 1896 the Irebu decreased from 3,500 to 250 and the Busindi from 1,000 to 150.⁴⁵ Migration only got worse with time and by 1909 one missionary reported that the reduction was disastrous. Another one noted, “the wholesale emigration of young men and women in the early nineties with the consequent loss of children to district.”⁴⁶ While exact figures remain difficult to find, the ones available show a significant loss of peoples in their region.

The Mongo people in the Congo Basin fled into the forests to avoid conscription and labor but then came into conflict with other tribes. Like all forms of resistance migration was not a panacea for their issues. The Nsamba clan escaped the ABIR but came into conflict with the Tshuape over food and resources. Lofumbwa Antoine was interviewed many years later about his village’s migration in the Congo Free State: “Before the demands of bokulu [Force Publique] we fled and abandoned the region of Impoko to live by the Ikelemba river. We were hunted by bokolulu and several men killed. Bokoulu left and returned. But at Ikelemba, the white ‘Ibkabaka’ [Free State official] arrived with other whites. Iakabakaba also demanded rubber...”⁴⁷

⁴³ Roger Canisius. *A Campaign Amongst Cannibals*. London: R.A. Everett & Co., 1903, 170 in Hochschild, *King Leopold’s ghost*, 229

⁴⁴ Samarin, *The Black Man’s Burden*, 77

⁴⁵ Ibid, 78

⁴⁶ W. Stapleton to Baynes, Yakusu, 10 Dec. 1904, Baptist Missionary Society, London. George Grenfell papers. in Samarin, *The Black Man’s Burden*, 78

⁴⁷ M, De Ryck, “La chasse chez les Lalia-Ngolu.” *Bulletin Agricole du Congo Belge* 23 (1929), 26.5, no. 1 in Nelson, *Colonialism in the Congo basin*, 103

Antoine's experience is typical of those that attempted migration to a different part of the Congo. Areas past Leopold's Pool did not see significant European presence until the late 1890's. Those that migrated further inland sometimes faced the same conditions they were escaping. Moreover, they often came into conflict with native peoples for resources, land, and food.

The Kasai region offers a rich pool of missionary writings reporting how flight came as a result of state and company abuses. Like elsewhere in the Congo, villages' depreciation became signs of flight. William Morrison writes about a case of desertion in the Kasai region: "I have seen a mission station which had near it at one time a large village of several thousand people. The village was entirely deserted. The same situation of affairs is being continually reported from various sections of the Congo state." He goes on to say, "Sometimes our schools and church services at Luebo have been broken up for weeks at a time, owing to the people having fled to the forests by [the] thousands in order to escape capture or other outrage at the hands of the government soldiers."⁴⁸ Reports of this nature highlight that flight was a common resistance tactic. Missionary writing by William Morrison refers to escape as a direct result of the abuses leveled upon the population. He writes, "All the people of the villages run away to the forest when they hear the State officers are coming. To-night, in the midst of the rainy season, within a radius of 75 miles of Luebo, I am sure it would be a low estimate to say that 40,000 people, men women, children with the sick, are sleeping in the forests without shelter."⁴⁹ Morrison describes an event that was frequent across the Kasai and rest of the Congo. Poor shelter in the forests

⁴⁸ William Morrison, "Treatment of the Native people by the Government of the Congo Independent State" (Address to the Boston Peace Congress, Boston, Mass, 3-7 October 1904) in Benedetto, *Presbyterian Reformers in Central Africa*, 209

⁴⁹ William Morrison, letter from Luebo, 15 Oct. 1899, in *The Missionary*, Feb 1900, 67 in Hochschild, *King Leopold's ghost*, 229

combined with the threat of disease and starvation was debilitating to many populations. Despite the risk, some took the option of escape over the certainty of company exploitation. Missionary accounts are evidence to the agency of Kasai populations.

Another tale of migration is told by British consul Roger Casement. He investigated labor conditions in the Kasai region of Congo in 1903 and 1904 at the behest of the British government. With names and places hidden, Casement interviews a group of refugees about how and why they fled their village. They tell how company officials came to the village demanding rubber and taxes. When they failed to deliver they were punished. “I asked first, why they fled their home and came to live in a strange far-off country among the *K, where they owned nothing...All, when this question was put, women as well, shouted out, ‘On account of the rubber tax levied by the government posts...’ The tortures are consistent with Force Publique practices elsewhere. “Many were shot, some had their ears cut off; others were tied up with ropes around their necks and bodies taken away...it was the white men who sent soldiers to punish us for not bringing in enough rubber.”⁵⁰ This village felt the brunt of the companies lust for rubber. Their resistance was that of migration. They say, “We are not warriors, and we do not want to fight. We only want to live in peace...” By characterizing active resistance as mainly violent rebellion, scholars lose out on the nuances of worker flight. Without an accessible source of laborers the company could not to harvest rubber for the profit margin they wanted. The Congolese wanted no more part in the substance. Casement tells of how some white men were good to them but they remained distrustful and still escaped. “These ones told them to stay in their homes and did

⁵⁰ Roger Casement, *Correspondence and Report from His Majesty's Consul at Boma Respecting the Administration of the Independent State of the Congo* (London: Harrison & Sons, 1904), 60-61 in Benedetto, *Presbyterian Reformers in Central Africa*, 180

not hunt and chase them as others had done, but after what they had suffered they did not trust anyone's word and they had fled from their country and were now going to stay here, far from their homes, in this country where there was no rubber."⁵¹ Casement's investigation is indicative of how refugees felt about returning to their village. They escaped to avoid abuses and return, for as long as Leopold ruled, was not an option.

Further statistics revolving around depopulation involve birth control. Statistics are scarce but there are accounts that show native populations reacted to pressures by not having children. This form of resistance was done for a variety of reasons, mostly relating to the allocation of resources. Food was scarce and company exploitation was straining local economies. Roger Casement wrote in an investigative trip, "...the remnant of the inhabitants are only now, in many cases, returning to their destroyed or abandoned villages...A lower percentage of births lessen the population...Women refuse to bear children, and take means to save themselves from motherhood. They give as the reason that if war should come to a woman 'big with child' or with a baby to carry, 'she' cannot well run away and hide from the soldiers."⁵² Birth control became a form of resistance that was adaptive to the circumstances they were in. Their adaptations came from the necessity to prevent starvation and further exploitation of their population. Agency was a result of stressors that forced adaptation to a changing environment.

⁵¹ Ibid

⁵² Hochschild, *King Leopold's ghost*, 232

Conclusion

Thanks to the work of countless missionaries and humanitarians like William Morrisson, Edmond Morel, William Sheppard, Roger Casement, and George Washington Williams the Congo was not ignored during Leopold's reign. Morel became a conduit for information he received from the frontlines and published it in his magazine the *West African Mail*. The atrocities slowly made their way back to European and American audiences where they met varying degrees of astonishment and disgust. Despite fifteen years of constant reporting by E.D. Morel, the colony ran for almost twenty three years until it was sold (for a handsome profit) to the Belgian government in November of 1908.

Today, the West is still enjoying the profits of colonization while ignoring the worst abuses of their regimes. The crimes of Leopold's crime were forgotten for much of the 20th century. Belgian schoolbooks had no mention of what truly happened in their colony until recently. Not until the renowned Congolese scholar Jules Marchal began investigating a story he found in Liberian newspaper was the truth remembered.⁵³ One wonders how such powerful, influential humanitarians and their writings could be forgotten? For Africans, the time is remembered through only a few oral traditions. The people's who endured such brutality have cemented it in their language. The Mongo refer to the age of rubber as *lokeli* or "overwhelming" and "to send someone to harvest rubber" is an idiom "to tyrannize."⁵⁴ Oral histories conducted in the Tsauapa region in 1982 reported legends about certain company agents and specific demands

⁵³ Hochschild, *King Leopold's ghost*, 298

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 300

on their people.⁵⁵ These memories remained for only a select few people. Elsewhere, Kuba oral histories about the time were not passed down. The rulers that benefitted did not wish for any official accounts to exist.⁵⁶ For many years visitors in Belgium walked through the Royal Museum for Central African Studies amazed at the countless artifacts from their old colony and oblivious to how they were acquired. It was not until the publicity of Adam Hochschild's book *King Leopold's Ghost* that an exhibition on the Congo Free State and its atrocities was set up in 2005. To this day repeated requests from the Congolese government for certain artifacts are ignored.

What does this loss of remembrance say for African agency? It removes them from their own history. This paper eschews this narrative to prove that people adapted, reacted, and most importantly, resisted, to European rule. Through depopulation and revolt African partook in their own agency. Cases detailing revolt are prevalent throughout the Congo. Missionaries, company reports, and visitors accounts discussed here all reported instances of insurrections which, faced with less firepower and fewer resources, ultimately failed. But success figures less in the historiography of Congolese agency than the reasons why they took place and the motivations behind them. Discussing the conditions and adaptations societies underwent brings them the their due agency. State atrocities were so widespread that peoples adapted, reacted, and resisted similarly across the Congo. The Congolese were not silent and their agency is remembered.

⁵⁵ Interviews with "MPaka" Mboyo, Village of Imbo and ekwalanga Isamenga, Baringa; June-August 1982 in Nelson, *Colonialism in the Congo basin*, 104

⁵⁶ Hochschild, *King Leopold's ghost*, 300

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