

Anticolonial Poetics in Tadeusz Dębicki's Reportage: *Moienzi Nzadi. U wrót Konga*

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In 1927, Tadeusz Dębicki, a twenty-five-year-old Pole living in Antwerp, joined the crew of the cargo ship *Mateb* as an officer. The ship would embark on a month-long journey to Africa. Its route followed the *Moienzi Nzadi* named in the book's title: "the river that draws its source from all other rivers" [MN, 35]¹ in the Belgian colony of the Congo. Dębicki recorded his observations of landscapes that were a far cry from their European counterparts and commented on the brutal labors of the ship's black crew. These notes were published one year later in a collection of reportage. The resulting text can be singled out for its author's unambiguously anticolonial attitude. He conveys these views articulately and without caveats, as Olga Stanisławska has previously noted.² These beliefs also leave their imprint on the poetics of the text, a matter that we will look into here.

The piece of reportage discussed here was published in 1928 and is the direct product of the interwar climate, when interest in other cultures and faraway regions suddenly surged. This drove a tourism boom in the newly independent Poland,³ and opened up a new need for literary travel accounts. These reports (often published in newspapers, memoirs and reportage collections) described Polish regions as well as remote destinations on the global map. Textual expeditions to lands commonly perceived as exotic became increasingly popular. When compared to the texts by authors like Ferdynand Ossendowski, Adam Paszkowicz, Jerzy Chmielewski and Władysław Szafar, the contrast offered by Dębicki and his anticolonial position becomes acutely visible (and conversely, these writers provide a good context for Dębicki's views). The unambiguously anticolonial stance taken in *Moienzi Nzadi* did not exactly conform to critics' tastes. In one of the many reviews of the book that came out at the time, a critic remarks that "the only moderately pejorative feature of this curious book is its frequently repeated (perhaps to excess) expressions of remorse for the victims of European civilization and culture, for this is how the author describes the African Negro."⁴ This comment confirms that any critique of the colonial system was a novelty at the time of *Moienzi Nzadi*'s publication, and that public opinion was not fully prepared for Dębicki's work.

¹ T. Dębicki, *Moienzi Nzadi. U wrót Konga*, introduction: O. Stanisławska, second edition, Warsaw 2016. All citations from this text will be marked with the abbreviation "MN" followed by the page number.

² O. Stanisławska, *Marynarz antykolonialista*, in: T. Dębicki, op. cit., p. 5.

³ See: M. Lewan, *Zarys dziejów turystyki w Polsce*, Krakow 2004, pp. 47-64.

⁴ W. M., *Dębicki Tadeusz. "Moienzi Nzadi. U wrót Konga" [review]*, „Wiadomości Geograficzne” 1930, issue 1, p. 10.

This sailor-journalist's journey down the Congo River conjures vivid associations with Joseph Conrad's masterpiece *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad's novel is even referenced explicitly in *Moienzi Nzadi*. Describing Antwerp, where the ship was docked before leaving for Africa, the author alludes to the "city of *white sepulchers*." [MN, 14] Korzeniowski (Conrad's Polish surname) uses this evangelical allegory in *Heart of Darkness*, most likely in reference to Brussels (as Dębicki seems to have presumed as well): "in a very few hours I arrived in a city that has always made me think of a whited sepulchre."⁵ In *Moienzi Nzadi*, however, the "whited sepulcher" seems to stand for Europe as a whole. This image suggests that European countries conceal the actual motives of their "civilizing" missions behind a façade of pretty aphorisms on progress and the propagation of civilization. In this way, Antwerp earns the status of a synecdoche of sorts for the Old Continent, becoming a reference point for the young officer's impressions of Africa.

For Dębicki, Europe embodies two categories he perceives as uniformly negative: civilization and progress. His journey to remote Africa is therefore a kind of escape "from people, civilization, the cacophony of the cities, and the intrigues and prejudices of the old world." [MN, 39] The author seems to reiterate his anti-civilization convictions at every step, driving home the notion that unrestricted development is the very root of Europeans' ethical depravity. This position stems, of course, from Jean-Jacques Rousseau's conception of a return to nature, and was by no means unique to the interwar climate. We encounter the same sentiment, for instance, in Ludwika Ciechanowiecka's essays, *In the Heart of the Sahara (W sercu Sahary)*. Ciechanowiecka departed for Africa in order to "tear herself from Europe's icy embrace" and "free herself from the everyday drag."⁶ Yet the majority of Polish accounts from the "Dark Continent" have only praises to sing of the civilizing missions spearheaded by colonists. While a few journalists do seem aware of the indigenous peoples' aversions to the influx of Europeans due to the injustice and brutal violence they suffered, these journalists critique isolated blunders made by the missionaries without ever challenging the logic driving the enterprise as a whole. Ferdynand Ossendowski expressed admiration for the two thousand Frenchmen seeding progress among ten million black people. He writes: "these men are no mere colonists; they are spokesmen of grand ideas."⁷ The writer does note that these "spokesmen" resort to violence and coercion to carry out their missions, but he rationalizes these actions, framing them as the only effective method for getting through to the recalcitrant "Negroes."

Against this backdrop, Dębicki's contribution offers stark contrast. *Moienzi Nzadi* contains not a single attempt to justify the coldblooded brutality of the white man in Africa. For Dębicki, this "civilizing project" consisted of imposing duties while stripping the indigenous people of their rights wholesale. He also argues that the grand aphorisms of progress and humanitarianism broadcast by Europeans in reality served merely as a cover-up for the far-reaching exploitation of the colonized regions:

In the African colonies, what the white man calls "importing civilization," with perhaps a few slight exceptions, is pure exploitative robbery. Veiled in subterfuge, in the name of increasingly lofty ideas, they exploit and rob defenseless people that are stupefied by the scale of things they are seeing for the first time and terrorized by the "humanitarian" colonists. [MN, 87]

⁵ J. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, Dover Thrift Editions, New York, p. 7

⁶ L. Ciechanowiecka, *W sercu Sahary. Algier-Mzab-Tidikelt-Hoggar*, Warsaw 1933, p. 5.

⁷ F. Ossendowski, *Czarny czarownik. Relacja z wyprawy do Afryki 1926 r.*, Warsaw 1926, p. 59.

The white men's overarching objective was therefore to enrich themselves and expand their sphere of influence, yet these motives were masked by hypocritical expressions of concern for the colonized peoples. This becomes particularly clear in the sections of the text that describe the labors of black workers. Dębicki uses naturalist language to depict the arduous tasks that the workers kept up over several hours as they loaded and unloaded the ship's cargo. Dębicki draws attention to the weight of the goods, the young age of the African workers (some of whom were only teenagers), and the men's overworked and dire physical conditions. Their toils are depicted alongside those of the Europeans, who all seem exhausted by merely overseeing the work and giving orders. This contrast is accented by Dębicki's description of the meals laid out for different groups within the crew: while the white officers help themselves to an opulent dinner in a shaded cabin, the black workers receive four crackers apiece. As Dębicki highlights, "beating a Negro is forbidden," [MN, 118] but the white foremen pay this no heed, resorting to corporal punishment without the slightest reason. The young officer ironically remarks that the next achievement of the ever-ascending European continent ought to be a manual on how to beat colonized peoples.

In the text, Dębicki harshly stigmatizes the white people's total lack of ethical right to consider themselves superior to the populations they construe as "primitive." He represents Europeans as a degenerate people who live in violation of the very virtues they preach. During his stay at the Matadi port, the sailor happens upon a local church where the congregation is reciting vespers. He notices that only the locals seem to be joining in prayer. Speaking in French, they pray for the welfare of all people, regardless of skin color. In the same passage, Dębicki points out "the white *mondela pembe* and white *mamis* go [...] drink *whisky and soda* at Hotel A.B.C." [MN, 97]

This contrasting juxtaposition of the lives of white and black people is one of Dębicki's chief strategies for building an image of the colonized Congo. These contrasts are often premised on extreme and even hyperbolic combinations of images, which imparts a grotesque aura to the anecdotes collected in the text. Describing a brawl between Belgian and American sailors, the author initially points out the eurocentrism and haughtiness exhibited by the Belgians (who even call the Portuguese "colored") and their barbaric harassment of one of the Americans when they cut off both of his ears. The journalist punctuates the event by quoting a sign over the door of a nearby hotel: "Entry denied to savages." Dębicki follows this with the ironic question, "And what am I to make now of the *savage* and the *civilized*?" [MN, 112] Dębicki also veers grotesque when he describes a monument in Antwerp.⁸ He sets up an analogy between the colonial situation and the Germans' occupation of Warsaw in 1915, reaching the following conclusions: "At least the Germans never thought of raising a monument in Berlin depicting Poles praying on their knees before a Prussian soldier. This monument's counterpart can be found, however, in Antwerp." [MN, 125] To convey the primitivism of the European colonists, he also offers a scene from the end of his journey and describes an officer spitting on the head of a black worker who is walking away.

There are many other pieces of journalism devoted to Africa that include accounts of morally degenerate white people. Ferdynand Ossendowski's *Slaves of the Sun* (*Niewolnicy słońca*)⁹ opens with

⁸ Dębicki is probably referring to the monument of Father de Deken built in Antwerp in 1914. De Deken was a missionary who worked in China, Tibet and the Congo. The monument depicts the priest with a second man kneeling before him. The monument remains standing today, although a few years ago, ew controversies provoked city authorities to install a plaque clarifying the historical context.

⁹ F. Ossendowski, *Niewolnicy słońca. Podróż przez zachodnią część Afryki podzwrotnikowej w 1925/26 r.*, Poznań 1927.

a chapter about a European man who takes an administrative post in North Guinea. After the death of his beloved wife (who couldn't weather life in the inclement climate), Richard gradually transforms into an "eternal colonist," giving in to frivolous vices and serially moving through black wives and lovers (for Ossendowski, this is the most base form of demoralization). The journalist speculates that the factors driving the white man's downfall lie outside of the man himself, in the adverse environmental conditions of Africa, and in the man's prolonged exposure to Guinea's indigenous people. For Ossendowski, these conditions all produced a sense of "moral torment" in the man. Tadeusz Dębicki, however, opts for another explanation. He argues that in Africa, Europeans find themselves suddenly able to behave however they please, since news of their behavior will never reach home. [MN, 86] What's more, he claims that man conducts himself in a "civilized" manner only out of fear of the repercussions that await him if he strays too far from accepted social norms. If he knows that his deeds will go unpunished, however, he quickly abandons the values he once preached.

Another aspect that distinguishes *Moienzi Nzadi* from other accounts of Africa from the period is the author's take on the stereotypes and myths circulating in interwar Europe about the inhabitants of the "Dark Continent." One such myth was the view that all goods produced by indigenous peoples were primitive and inferior to those made in the "civilized" world. In his text *Angola: Notes from a Journey through Africa (Angola. Notatki z podróży po Afryce)*, Jerzy Chmielewski, describes his visit to a village and observes its buildings:

Small huts modeled out of clay or slapped together from branches, roofs thatched with grass like heaps of hay. Nearby, a few farm buildings have been thrown together in the same primitive style. The granary stands on stilts and is painted with bright clay in zigzag patterns. A coop for hens and pigs is no different from a residential home. This is the Negro homestead!¹⁰

The author deliberately describes the residential home alongside buildings designed for animals in order to divulge his own attitude towards the people he observes. For Dębicki, on the other hand, simple buildings built from hay and reeds are built "skillfully" and meet all the needs of their tenants. He portrays the structures built by the colonists in an entirely different light. Passing through a port town, he remarks that the buildings are "crooked and clumsy, primarily with iron roofs and broad, shadowy verandas with flat awnings and mosquito netting in lieu of window-panes." [MN, 95] He also observes that the Europeans only use products of European origin. The old continent, which was purportedly to import civilization, in fact brought a haul of tawdry junk that clashes with the beauty of African nature.

Dębicki's attitude towards the women he meets in Africa is particularly interesting. He highlights their modesty and shyness. He compares the Europeans' vice of false morality to the African women who wear long dresses down to the ankles. [MN, 60] This portrait has little in common with the descriptions that dominate other travel writing from the period. In other texts, the black woman becomes somewhat of a symbol of licentiousness and sexual promiscuity. She is often portrayed in the nude, or perhaps performing an erotic dance, seducing the white man's gaze and giving herself up to him in exchange for cheap trifles (beads or fabric). We find no such descriptions in *Moienzi Nzadi*. Spinning a gloomy image of a "Dark Continent" that has been colonized in full, Dębicki uses sharp contrasts to juxtapose African and European women's ways of life:

¹⁰J. Chmielewski, *Angola. Notatki z podróży po Afryce*, introduction: J. Makarczyk, vol. 1, Warsaw 1929, p. 27.

[...] [the colonists — M.P.] will bring about a situation in which even the slight, black, warm *mami's*, built like brass statues with dreamlike profiles and firm breasts, even they will become false and refined, just like white women. And they will love only money, or perhaps even only love for money... [MN, 89]

The young journalist's technique for setting up contrasts somehow forces him to cultivate a binary vision of the world in which each attribute assigned to the people of Africa must be balanced out by its opposite counterpart among Europeans. At times, his idealization of one society (or degradation of another) is taken to such an extreme that Dębicki's prose veer hyperbolic and somewhat grotesque.

Another widespread stereotype of the interwar period was the bias that the people of Africa were irrational and unintelligent. In his book *Black Sorcerer (Czarny czarownik)*, cited above, Ferdynand Ossendowski writes that the black people he encountered in Guinea are "lazy" and "insensible," for they never think of the future and live only in the present.¹¹ Journalists also relate "amusing" tales of the African people's fear of machines imported from Europe such as the car or airplane. We find similar anecdotes in Dębicki's tales, although they evoke no feelings of superiority in the young officer. He merely relays the stories, without providing any commentary on the black workers' behavior. After sharing a second-hand anecdote about the indigenous people's lack of rationality (in the anecdote, they apparently pushed a cart weighed down with tree trunks instead of merely moving aside an obstacle in the road), [MN, 57] he immediately follows this with his own observations of his employees' work ethics. He notes their intelligence, cleverness, and skillful ability to adapt their work to their own aptitudes and physical strengths.

If we consider the text's optics of constant comparison between the African and European circumstances, the journalist does manage to subvert several stereotypical images linked to the people of the "Dark Continent," while reproducing and confirming others. This writing can certainly be associated with Rousseau's mythic archetype of the "noble savage." Rousseau depicts the savage as an entity uncorrupted by evil and intrinsically good. Another variation on this myth that clearly operates in *Moienzi Nzadi* is the portrayal of the indigenous people of Africa as "oversized children." Several times throughout the text, Dębicki recalls that the black people he lives among give off the impression of "kindhearted children," [MN, 43] and that they are "simple, naïve souls" [MN, 88] who "rejoice like children [...], laughing with their kind, giant eyes." [MN, 121] This image prevails throughout writing on Africa, and it usually serves to justify the "civilizing" missions (for surely a child needs the care of an adult). On the other hand, as Maciej Ząbek has noted, we also encounter this myth in abolitionist literature by authors who seem aware that they need to resort to new stereotypes to subvert the dominant ones, if only to be understood.¹² In Dębicki's case, we can hardly accuse him of the condescending impulse to take care of his black employees. He represents the African people as children in order to highlight a sense that they are naïve in their goodness, and that this prevents them from seeing the extensive evils the white colonists are perpetrating when they exploit them for hard labor and transport all that is of value back to Europe, destroying the landscape they leave behind.

We might also speculate on the motives driving Dębicki's views of the colonial conditions he observed in the Congo, given how extremely out of step they were with their time. It seems clear that

¹¹F. Ossendowski, *Czarny czarownik...* op. cit., p. 8.

¹²M. Ząbek, *Biali i Czarni. Postawy Polaków wobec Afryki i Afrykanów*, Warsaw 2007, p. 148.

Dębicki's views were influenced in part by his mode of travel and destination. Unlike other authors who tended to embark on their journeys primarily to write literature, Tadeusz Dębicki went to Africa to earn money. His work on the trade ship forced him to be in constant contact with the black workers and to observe how they went about their tasks. Dębicki demonstrates a remarkable level of engagement as well as interest, mobilizing his own form of participative observation. He tries to learn the indigenous people's language, speaks with them, and listens closely to the songs they sing. He writes:

Now, after a month of communicating with them, I can already recognize each one. I notice the absence of the curious Hotentot, who has two upper rows of teeth. I see that scrawny Jean with six toes on his left foot always comes first in the roll call. I can easily distinguish Sanda from Samba and I smile at the young Antoine, who greets me in a sonorous voice [...] [MN, 132]

Direct contact with the Other thus allows Dębicki to get to know them and ultimately, to access their subjectivity. The mode of travel also shaped the anticolonial position of another Polish writer from the interwar period. I am referring, of course, to Kazimierz Nowak, who wandered throughout Africa on a bicycle between 1931 and 1936.¹³

Dębicki's critical stance towards the colonial situation also stems from his anti-civilization views mentioned above. Dębicki has only disparaging assessments of civilization and progress, the products of European culture. Yet their point of origin is of course the very people who conceived these ideas. Perhaps this is why Dębicki concludes his text with a curious device. Just as the colonists judged the people of Africa on the basis of their skin color, so Tadeusz Dębicki makes the claim that white people living in Europe are "all evil people." [MN, 138] He does not even exclude himself from this generalization, since he is all too aware that for the African people, he will always represent the very people he critiques.

Moienzi Nzadi: At the Gates of the Congo is a remarkable piece of reportage in the context of Polish travelers' accounts from Africa from the interwar period. The young reporter, striving to convey absolutely everything he observed during his month-long journey in the fullest detail, mobilizes a poetic strategy that consists of two artistic devices. Firstly, he sets up sharp and often generalized or hyperbolic comparative pairs, pitching two distinct worlds against one another. These portraits often veer grotesque and have a strong effect on the reader. Secondly, he is an apt practitioner of irony, and uses this mode to convey the hypocrisy and duplicitous nature of the colonists. In his efforts to subvert certain prevalent stereotypes and myths associated with the "Dark Continent" and its people, he cannot help but preserve other ones, and is occasionally guilty of naïve idealization. All this being said, Dębicki's voice is remarkable for Polish literature of the period and seems to have been undeservedly forgotten. We can only hope that a new edition of the 1928 text might help cultivate the memory of the "anticolonial sailor."

¹³Natalia Grądzka writes more substantively on Kazimierz Nowak's specific mode of travel and his position on colonialism. See: N. Grądzka, *Wokół Kazimierza Nowaka. Od podróży po koloniach do postkolonizowania Polski*, "Panoptikum" 2009, issue 8(15), pp. 221-234.

KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT:

This article analyzes the reportage of Tadeusz Dębicki, titled *Moienzi Nzadi: At the Gates of the Congo* (1928) in terms of its anticolonial attitude. The article reviews the writer's methods for constructing a critique of the colonial system (through contrast and irony) and discusses its uniqueness against the backdrop of other Polish travel accounts from Africa written in the interwar period. The specific circumstances of Dębicki's journey are also described here, as well as the prevailing stereotypes associated with conditions in Africa, which the author either subverts or affirms.

a n t i c o l o n i a l i s m

s t e r e o t y p e

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