

## Socio-political Preoccupation in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Nkemngong Nkengasong's *God Was African*.

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### Abstract

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This paper explores the concept of socio-political preoccupation in Joseph Conrad's 1902 novel *Heart of Darkness* and Nkemngong Nkengasong's 2014 novel *God Was African* to project the Scramble for Africa as the root cause of the social and political wrongs these writers denounce. The objective is to demonstrate that although Conrad is European and Nkengasong is African, both converge on the critique and denunciation of colonialism and its nihilistic effects in general and in the Congo and Cameroon in particular. Using the concepts of biography, history and culture of the literary theory New Historicism, the study demonstrates that Conrad and Nkengasong are both victims of colonialism and thus their Eurocentric and Afrocentric critique is born of their real life experiences. Colonialism is nihilistic as it strips man from his inherent dignity as a free and responsible being. This paper is therefore significant in that it projects these authors' vision for truth, restraint, respect for the dignity of others, and that differences in colour, race, culture or sex should be celebrated and not used by others as a tool for manipulation, exploitation and oppression. Literature thus portrays the writer as the voice of conscience.

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**Keywords:** socio-political, Scramble for Africa, nihilism, Congo, Cameroon, Conrad, Nkengasong

### 1. Introduction

The Scramble for Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> century impacted the life of the African people in the social, political, economic, moral and religious domains. Robinson (2015) describes this scramble as Europe's original sin. Exploitation and domination which prompted the scramble, violated the dignity of the human person. This dignity is to be respected in all circumstances because human beings possess an intrinsic worth superior to that of material objects and contingent situations. Writers who lived or witnessed the hypocrisy and barbarism of the scramble, projected it in their fictional works. Joseph Conrad and Nkemngong Nkengasong amongst other writers, project their views and impressions about colonialism in the 1902 *Heart of Darkness* and 2014 *God Was African* respectively. The purpose of this study is to identify why the two authors explore the theme of colonialism in their works, to show how they project its various manifestations and consequences and to evaluate what they achieve by glaringly exposing the inhumane effects of colonialism. The paper demonstrates that Conrad and Nkengasong converge in their critique and denunciation of imperialist ideology and its devastating effects through their exploration of the themes of injustice, slavery, hypocrisy, greed and the prejudice against Africa (Congo and Cameroon) although they were born a century apart. Both writers are obsessed with truth and that is why they denounce what is wrong in the society by exposing the nihilism or evil inherent in colonialism. Conrad declared in his famous "Preface" to *The Nigger of the Narcissus* that he believed that an artist's major concern should be to reveal the truth (Conrad, 1999, p. iii). Nkengasong on his part in an interview with Teke (2013), states categorically that: "...my entire life has been in search of and the expression of truth. In expressing the truth, I get into trouble with the forces of impropriety that govern the society (p.3).

It is obvious that coming from different countries and continents, there would be differences in spite of shared values by both writers. Conrad is a Polish born British citizen of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (1857) while Nkengasong is a Cameroonian born in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (1959). *Heart of Darkness* is a colonial novel while *God Was African* is postcolonial. Conrad exposes the cruelty of European colonisation in the Congo while Nkengasong focuses on its effects in Cameroon and how it has resulted to what is known as the Anglophone Problem. Nkengasong uses a blend of English, broken English, pidgin English and his native language *Nweh* to convey his message.

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Conrad's Eurocentric critique of colonialism in Africa is born of his experience as a victim of the partition of his country Poland while Nkengasong's Afrocentric perspective is that of a victim of colonialism in his own country Cameroon.

The discussion focuses on the biographical and historical background of the authors and their novels, a brief summary of these novels, the socio-political effects of the scramble for Africa, stereotype and prejudice.

## 2. Literature Review

Despite the virtual industry of criticism which has sprung up around *Heart of Darkness* since its publication, none has focused on a comparative analysis of this novel with that of Nkemngong Nkengasong. This review will focus on critical works on their exploration of colonialism and its effects. Nkengasong's novel echoes among other themes, the Anglophone problem which is one of the consequences of the Scramble for Africa. In a structured interview with Nkengasong about his works, Teke (2013) quotes him as saying that:

*The Anglophone Problem is not a myth. It is real, very real. The Anglophone Cameroonian lives the reality of a dark fate, of a colonial misfortune whereby two peoples of opposing postcolonial experiences were brought together to form a nation, giving room for one colony to colonize another. The reality of the problem is accentuated in the marginalization, assimilation, dictatorship and dubious democratic practices which have in many ways obliterated the minority Anglophone colonial heritage and hindered Anglophone Cameroonians from having control over themselves and their destiny since the minority British Southern Cameroons joined the majority French La République du Cameroun in 1961 to constitute a nation (p.4).*

In the same interview with Teke, Nkengasong explains that Postcolonial criticism has highlighted one of the cruellest agendas of colonization: that is, the breaking down of originally large influential African nations and patching them up with other unsolicited fragments. That is why many African nation-states are today agglomerations or patched up fragments of opposing ethnic, cultural and spiritual entities, the reason for the raging conflict on the African continent. "The Anglophone Problem derives from this kind of schema which was put in place to weaken influential African nations" (p.4). Awasom (2020) in line with Nkengasong's views, posits that by steadily destroying the Anglophone state through multiple dubious mechanisms, Anglophones fell prey to Francophone colonization, militarization, marginalization and assimilation (p.264). Dasi (2019) thinks that leadership in most post-independence African states is faced with indescribable crisis that anchors on bad governance. Vices such as occultism, embezzlement, corruption, and general misappropriation and mismanagement of public funds, economically empowered those in high government positions, while collective interest was disregarded (p.6). Doh (1993) testifies to the subjugation and marginalisation of Anglophones in Cameroon by asserting that: "The Anglophone Cameroonian, earlier colonised by the white man is once again a victim of 'colonisation' but this time, his coloniser is his former partner with whom he served, and were together tormented and exploited by the colonialists" (p.78). Nganshi (2020) in a comparative analysis of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and Nkengasong's *God Was African*, demonstrates the impact of the Roman Catholic religion in the life and works of these writers and their society. Mbangchia (2018), in a review on *God Was Africa* identifies the Western view of Africa, Africa's view of the West, identity and globalization amongst others, as motifs.

With regards to criticism on Conrad and his novel, a more poignant criticism is that of the distinguished Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe who in a 1974 lecture criticised Conrad in "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" for his racist stereotypes towards the African continent and people of Africa. Achebe declared that Conrad was a 'bloody racist' (p.252). The Africans are dehumanized and degraded, seen as grotesques or as a howling mob. They are denied speech, or are granted speech only to condemn themselves out of their own mouths. We see "Africa as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor... as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril" (p.253).

Nsaidzedze (2019) reads *Heart of Darkness* as a clash between British colonization and Belgian colonialism amongst other imperialisms (the Romans, the French, the Danes, the Germans, the Dutch, the Swedes and the Russians). Using New Historicism, the paper hypothesizes that while Mr. Kurtz symbolizes money-grubbing Belgian colonial master in the Congo and in *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow represents the high-minded British colonialists in the Congo, Africa, and India and in the world (p.91). Azam (2019) opines that *Heart of Darkness* provides instances which are racist and biased against the Africans (p.116). Song-cun (2017) posits that in *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad reveals the enslavement of human beings by their own desire and external forces, and shows some solutions to free oneself from this enslavement, such as detachment from desire and external forces and compassion for others' suffering (p.116).

### 3. Methodology

The concepts of biography, culture and history of the literary theory New Historicism are used in this study. New Historicism is a critical approach based on the parallel reading of literary and non-literary texts, usually of the same historical period.

New Historicism is a label to describe the studies carried out in the early 1980s by a handful of scholars, mostly in Renaissance studies. New Historicism is a literary approach or theory which examines the biographical, textual and historical facts (political, economic, social, cultural, and scientific) influencing a literary work.

New Historicism emerged in response to formalist criticism known as New Criticism and Russian Formalism, which focuses on the form of the literary text and separates literary criticism from the study of sources, biography, social and historical contexts, politics and other extrinsic matters, and which argues that there are specific formal characteristics making literature distinct from other kinds of writing. It focuses on the contexts of all kinds in which a work of art is produced. Instead of dealing with a text in isolation from its historical context, New Historicists attend primarily to “the historical and cultural conditions of its production, its meanings, its effects, and also of its later critical interpretations and evaluations” (Abrams, 1999). The biography of Joseph Conrad and Nkemngong Nkengasong, the texts *Heart of Darkness* and *God Was African* and the historical, cultural and political realities which produced these texts are taken into consideration in the analysis of this study.

### 4. Discussion

#### Biographical and Historical Background to Heart of Darkness and God Was African

The New Historicist assumptions that there is always an interaction between a text and history and that in the interpretation of a literary text, the author's life is important to define the relationship between the text and the author's biography marks the starting point of this section. Consequently, it is appropriate to give a summary of the lives of Conrad and Nkengasong.

Watt (1981) writes that Joseph Conrad was born Jozef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski in Podolia, a province of the Polish Ukraine in 1857. Poland had been a Roman Catholic kingdom since 1024, but was invaded, partitioned, and repartitioned throughout the late eighteenth-century by Russia, Prussia, and Austria. At the time of Conrad's birth, Poland was one-third of its size before being divided between the three great powers; despite the efforts of nationalists such as Tadeusz Kosciuszko, who led an unsuccessful uprising in 1795, Poland was controlled by other nations and struggled for independence. When Conrad was born, Russia effectively controlled Poland (p.3).

Conrad's childhood was largely affected by his homeland's struggle for independence. His father, Apollo Korzeniowski despised the Russian oppression of his native land. At the time of Conrad's birth, Apollo's land had been seized by the Russian government because of his participation in past uprisings. He and one of Conrad's maternal uncles, Stefan Bobrowski, helped plan an uprising against Russian rule in 1863. The notion of the strong oppressing the weak - and the weak powerless to revolt- surfaces in *Heart of Darkness*, where the White traders wantonly murder the Congolese in pursuit of riches and power.

By the time Conrad was twelve, both of his parents had died of tuberculosis. He spent the rest of his youth under the care of his uncle Tadeusz in Switzerland. Conrad then went to France to become a merchant seaman. He eventually continued on to England, where he found greater success and ultimately became a British citizen in 1886. In 1890, Conrad took a job piloting a boat in the Congo for a Belgian company, much like the character Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*. After a few short months of declining health, Conrad returned to England, where he spent several weeks hospitalized, recovering from his African excursion. During this time, Conrad concentrated his efforts on writing. After the publication of *Almayer's Folly*, Conrad began producing a number of books in rapid succession, which include *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* (1897), *Lord Jim* (1900), *Nostramo* (1904) among others. He died of a heart attack on August 3, 1924 and was buried in Canterbury cemetery.

Nkemngong Nkengasong was born John Ngosong Nkemngong Nkengasong in 1959 in the village of Lewoh in Lebaleme Division of the semi-Bantu ethnic group called Bangwa in the South West Region of Cameroon. He attended primary school in Lewoh in Lebaleme, then he later attended Seat of Wisdom College, Fontem and the University of Yaounde 1 where he obtained a Bachelor's degree, Master's degree and a PhD in English literary studies. He is a Cameroonian playwright, novelist, poet and scholar. He is currently Professor of Literature and Cultural Studies in the University of Yaounde 1, the chair of the department of Curriculum and Evaluation, in the same University and the Dean of the Faculty of Arts, University of Buea in the South West Region of Cameroon.

Apart from his creative works, he has published extensively on African *Literature* and Culture, British and Postcolonial Literatures and Cameroonian Pidgin. Besides teaching and research, he is a creative writer who has published fictional works including *God Was African* (2014), *Across the Mongolo* (2004), *The widow's Might* (2006), *Achakasara* (2011) and several short stories; plays including *Black Caps and Red Feathers*, *the Call of Blood*, *Ancestral Earth*, *A madding Generation*, *Njogobi Festival*; and a collection of poems titled *Letters to Marion and the Coming generations*.

He is the former president of the Anglophone Cameroon Writers' Association (ACWA) and the Vice President of the Union of Cameroonian Writers. On the international scene he has been a Fulbright scholar at New York University, guest author in Corpus Christi College, University of Oxford, participant at the International Writing Program, University of Iowa, USA, a panelist in the Chicago Humanities Festival, guest speaker in the National University of Singapore, amongst others (Qtd in Nganshi 2020).

### **The Congo and Cameroon**

The Democratic Republic of the Congo also known as Congo-Kinshasa is a country in Central Africa. It was formerly called Zaire (1971–1997). It is, by area, the largest country in sub-Saharan Africa, the second-largest in all of Africa (after Algeria), and the 11th-largest in the world. With a population of over 101 million, the Democratic Republic of the Congo is the most-populous Francophone country in the world, as well as the fourth-most populous in Africa, and the 15th-most-populous country in the world. Since 2015, the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo has been the scene of an ongoing military conflict in Kivu. In the 1870s, just before the onset of the Scramble for Africa, European exploration of the Congo Basin was carried out, firstly by Henry Morton Stanley under the sponsorship of Leopold II of Belgium. Leopold formally acquired rights to the Congo territory at the Berlin Conference in 1885 and declared the land his private property, naming it the Congo Free State. During the Free State, his colonial military unit, the *Force Publique*, forced the local population to produce rubber. From 1885 to 1908, millions of the Congolese people died as a consequence of disease and exploitation. In 1908, Leopold, despite his initial reluctance, ceded the so-called Free State to Belgium, thus it became known as the Belgian Congo. Congo achieved independence from Belgium on 30 June 1960 under the name Republic of the Congo.

Cameroon officially the Republic of Cameroon, is a country in Central Africa. It is bordered by Nigeria to the west and north; Chad to the northeast; the Central African Republic to the east; and Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and the Republic of the Congo to the south. Cameroon's coastline lies on the Bight of Biafra, part of the Gulf of Guinea and the Atlantic Ocean. Although Cameroon is not an ECOWAS member state, it is geographically and historically in West Africa with the Southern Cameroons which now form her North West and South West Regions having a strong West African history. However, since 2017, elements within the *South West* and *North West* regions have since declared an independent (yet internationally unrecognized) state called Ambazonia (Kučera 2017). The country is sometimes identified as West Africa and other times as Central Africa due to its strategic position at the crossroads between West and Central Africa. Cameroon is home to over 250 native languages spoken by nearly 25 million people (Kouega 2007). Portuguese explorers reached the coast in the 15th century and named the area *Rio dos Camarões* (*Shrimp River*), which became *Cameroon* in English. Fulani soldiers founded the Adamawa Emirate in the north in the 19th century, and various ethnic groups of the West and Northwest established powerful chiefdoms and fiefdoms. Cameroon became a German colony in 1884 known as Kamerun.

After World War I, the territory was divided between France and the United Kingdom as League of Nations mandates. The Union des Populations du Cameroun (UPC) political party advocated independence, but was outlawed by France in the 1950s, leading to the Bamileke War fought between French and UPC militant forces until early 1971. In 1960, the French-administered part of Cameroon became independent as the Republic of Cameroun under President Ahmadou Ahidjo. The southern part of British Cameroons federated with it in 1961 to form the Federal Republic of Cameroon. The federation was abandoned in 1972. The country was renamed the United Republic of Cameroon in 1972 and the Republic of Cameroon in 1984.

The Cameroonian situation has experienced different forms of colonial administration from a German territory to a UN trusteeship territory under France and Britain. These colonial governing styles, which were fraught with oppression, suppression and discrimination, were copied by the local administrators at the dawn of the country's independence (first from the French on January 01, 1960, and second from the British on October 01, 1961). Fru (2000) explains that Cameroon's administrative experience under Britain was one of indirect rule, whereby traditional political institutions were maintained but adapted to the interests and directives of the British administration. France, on her part, ruled its portion of the country through assimilation, a policy which sought to create French citizens out of the local Cameroonian population.

Independence gained, the problem of unification was posed. The two Cameroons merged into a Federal Republic of Cameroon, then to a United Republic of Cameroon and finally to a reunification, which simply maintained the state as The Republic of Cameroon. This is echoed in *God Was African* where Kendem in condemnation of the negligence of the university hierarchy influenced by selfish political interests, states that:

“But later the politics of federalism, of unitarism, of republicanism and national integration completely enveloped its objectives” (p.5), that is, the objective of building a solid department of English as the lone one in a predominantly Francophone university in a country that claimed to be bilingual just in the name. This “national integration” is the disguised term for assimilation of the minority Anglophone population.

### **The Scramble for Africa**

The Scramble for Africa, also called the Partition of Africa or the Conquest of Africa, was the invasion, occupation, division, and colonisation of African territory by European powers during a short period known to historians as the New Imperialism (between 1881 and 1914). The 10 percent of Africa that was under formal European control in 1870 increased to almost 90 percent by 1914, with only Ethiopia (Abyssinia) and Liberia remaining independent. European motives included the desire to control valuable natural resources, rivalry and the quest for national prestige, and religious missionary zeal, although internal African politics also played a role.

The Berlin Conference of 1884, which regulated European colonisation and trade in Africa, is usually referred to as the starting point of the Scramble for Africa (Brantlinger1985). Consequent to the political and economic rivalries among the European empires in the last quarter of the 19th century, partitioning Africa was how the Europeans avoided going to war over it (Robinson,1965). In the later years of the 19th century, the European nations transitioned from "informal imperialism" that is, exercising military influence and economic dominance to direct rule bringing about colonial imperialism (Shillington, 2005).

These African territories were plagued by decades of abuse and exploitation on the part of their occupying nations. As European public opinion turned against the notion of imperialism, many of these territories were eventually allowed to form their own independent governments. Today, most African countries- including those who have broken free from colonial rule- are still defined by those boundaries set forth by the empires of Europe. The loss of resources and other damages inflicted upon Africa by colonial rule have been responsible for the continent's relatively slow economic development.

### **Brief Summary of Heart of Darkness and God Was African**

The main story of *Heart of Darkness* centered on a riverboat pilot and the protagonist named Marlow who signs on to work for a Belgian company making inroads into the Belgian Congo. In the novel, the capital Brussels is referred to as a whited sepulchre to highlight the hypocrisy behind colonialism. Once he reaches Africa, Marlow's piloting job transforms into a quest to locate a mysterious company employee named Kurtz who has outdone his fellow whites in the grab of ivory through intimidation and killing of the natives in their own country. Marlow's journey is a nightmarish trip through a land he does not understand, where his European cohorts operate without the influence of laws. The novel explores in depth topics ranging from imperialism, hypocrisy, oppression and power/class dichotomies to social problems such as ignorance, slavery and racism.

*God Was African* is about the protagonist, Kendem (real name Nkue-ndem), a university instructor, who returns to his native Lewoh countryside where he spent his childhood, to seek relief from the complexity of human civilisation after attending the Fulbright Institute in the United States. Instead, he is confronted with two seething issues: how to reveal to his sick and troubled mother the situation in which he finds his elder brother, the successor of Mbe Tanju-Ngong's household, who due to the economic hardship of his country fled like many others to the United States many years ago and the dispute over Fuo Beyano's funeral which is tearing the land apart, whether the deceased village chief, should be given a Christian burial or a traditional one. In a stream of consciousness, Kendem reflects on his experience in America where he is reminded of the white man's stereotype about Africa being a poor continent and fraught with war and strife and the inferiority of his people. He concludes that Africa's woes is a consequence of the scramble for Africa.

### **The Socio- political effects of the Scramble for Africa**

The focus here will be on the *raison d'être* of the scramble for Africa, what was done by the colonisers and the effects on the colonized and colonizer respectively. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* reflects his traumatic experiences in the Belgian Congo in 1890 while Nkengasong's *God Was African* reflects his experiences as an Anglophone and of the Anglophone problem in Cameroon where decolonization was defective.

The theme of colonialism is central in Conrad's work. Conrad (1958) stressed it himself in a letter to his publisher, William Blackwood: "The title I am thinking of is *The Heart of Darkness* but the narrative is not gloomy. The criminality of inefficiency and pure selfishness when tackling the civilizing work in Africa is a justifiable idea. The subject is of our time distinctly" (37).

In the novel, Marlow's employer- known only as the Company- operates with the approval of the Belgian rulers. The agents of the Company enslave and murder the native people of the Congo and seize control of any area they see fit. Imperialism is sometimes justified with the argument that civilized nations are morally obliged to look after "savage" nations and show them how to improve themselves. This idea is often referred to as the White Man's Burden, after Rudyard Kipling's poem of the same title.

Conrad had the first chance to go to Africa when he was in Brussels after leaving the Ukraine. The event which required his immediate presence in the Congo was to replace the Danish captain of the *Otago* who had been murdered by Africans during a trivial quarrel. In the novel Marlow says the quarrel was due to a "misunderstanding about some hens" (1764). The fact that the cause of death is trivial shows to what barbaric level the European had descended due to greed. In May 1891, Conrad left Brussels for Africa. One important point to note here is that Conrad at first believed the high-minded propaganda about bringing the benevolent light of civilization to the dark continent and that only after he had reached the Congo and seen the brutal exploitation of the resources and the people did he discover the disappointing reality. Conrad echoes it in his *Heart of Darkness* about the disparity between his idealized expectations and the disappointing reality of his first trip to Africa: "A great melancholy descended on me... the distasteful knowledge of the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration. What an end to the idealized realities of a boy's daydreams!" (p.1782).

*Heart of Darkness*, in most respects, appears to be a remarkably faithful transcription of the historical situation. Marlow observes several dead porters along the trail (p.1764). Conrad himself went on several of the expeditions as he recorded in his diary and saw three African corpses, including "a skeleton tied up to a post, and a youth with a gunshot wound in the head". Marlow remarks that he saw the body of a middle-aged negro, with a bullet-hole in the forehead. The company created by a Belgian financier Albert Thys, the *Compagnie du Chemin de Fer du Congo*, was obliged to send recruiting expeditions farther and farther afield to find carriers. Finally, in order to cope with the shortage of labour needed for the railway, which was essential to King Leopold's planned economic exploitation of the country, Leopold's officials resorted to three solutions: "importing workers from other African colonies, putting the Congolese 'criminals' on chain-gangs, and at last using forced or slave labour" (Hawkins,p.98).

Meyers (1991) reveals that apart from his own experiences in the Congo, a British explorer called Casement whom "Conrad met on the Lower Congo had a profound impact on Conrad's attitude towards the Congo and on his fictional portrayal of his grim experience in Africa" (p.99). Casement reported in his *Congo Diary*, a long factual document, the atrocities committed upon what he called "the poor, the naked, the fugitive, the hunted, the tortured, the dying men and women of the Congo" (Casement in Singleton-Gates and Girodias p.96). The facts written in Casement's diary include such deeds of the white man as that Africans, bound with thongs that contracted in the rain and cut to the bone, had their swollen hands beaten with rifle butts until they fell off and that chained slaves were forced to drink the white man's defecations and that, hands and feet were chopped off for their rings, were lined up behind each other and shot with one cartridge and that wounded prisoners were eaten by maggots till they died and were then thrown to starving pyre-dogs or devoured by cannibal tribes. Casement's investigation stood as one of the great humanitarian achievements and helped to extinguish the cruel and exploitative colonialism in the Congo. The conditions described in Conrad's text such as the chained gangs, the grove of death, the payment in brass rods, the cannibalism and the human skulls on the fence posts are similar to the conditions described by Casement in his *Congo Diary*.

Marlow's description of the Africans wearing iron collars on their necks and with all of them "connected with a chain whose bights swung between them rhythmically clinging" shows that the blacks were cruelly treated as slaves in their own country. Nkengasong also makes reference to slavery in *God Was African* where Bombabili has a teasing exchange with Akanya. In a mixture of broken English and his local language *Nweh*, Bombabili asks Akanya if he knew who a slave was and goes on to say:

*You are only good to be took to the door of no return back in the coast where my grandfather said his father's junior brother was take to the coast and he never return back. They put chain on their neck and on their foot like swine and drag them to the coast. Many people die. When they die those people throw them in the big water they call sea as if they don belong to anywhere. Have you hear of the door to no return back? (p. 41- 42).*

This door of no return refers to the area in Bimbia where slaves were transported to the Western world. Bimbia which is in Limbe (formerly Victoria) in the South West Region of Cameroon, was the first place where white men, the Jamaican and English Baptist missionaries led by Rev. Alfred Saker set foot on the Cameroon shores in 1858, from Fernando Po. (Bimbia Slave Trade Village). No slave returned after passing through this door. Though in ruins, this door in the over a century old slave market is still there today and serves as one of the historical touristic sites in Cameroon.

In the novel, Marlow's starving crew are paid in brass rods instead of money or even food. Marlow states that "the theory was they were to buy their provisions with that currency in river-side villages". But the theory does not work and Marlow ironically says, "unless they swallowed the wire itself, or made loops of it to snare the fishes with, I don't see what good their extravagant salary could be to them" (p.1789). A similar scene can be found in Casement's report: "In most parts of the Upper Congo the recognized currency consists of lengths varying according to the district [...] Such as it is, clumsy and dirty, this is the principal form of currency known on the Upper Congo" (p.104).

The scene in which Marlow is horrified to see human skulls decorating Kurtz's fence, is similar to the scene in which Casement was shocked seeing the skulls "lying about in the grass surrounding the post, which is built on the site of several large towns, human bones, skulls and in some cases complete skeletons" (Casement, p.118). In Marlow's case, the scene is terrifying enough when he understands that the things on the posts are human skulls: "I had suddenly a nearer view, and its first result was to make me throw my head back as if before a blow... They would have been even more impressive, those heads on the stakes, if their faces had not been turned to the house" (p.1801).

During his Congo experience, Conrad had an encounter with a man Camille Delcommune in Kinshasa. Delcommune was the Société Belge's manager. Marlow's encounter with the manager in *Heart of Darkness* parallels Conrad's encounter with Delcommune. Marlow recounts in *Heart of Darkness*:

*My first interview with the manager was curious. He did not ask me to sit down after my twenty-mile walk that morning. He was commonplace in complexion, in feature, in manners, and in voice. He was of middle size and of ordinary build. His eyes, of the usual blue, were perhaps remarkably cold, and he certainly could make his glance fall on one as trenchant and heavy as an axe (p.1774).*

After a long trek, Marlow was evidently tired but the manager was apathetic. During his very first encounter, Conrad was rebuked by the impatient and irritated Delcommune for taking so long on his journey from Matadi and was informed that the *Florida*, which Conrad was supposed to command, had been damaged on the river and needed extensive repairs in Kinshasa. And then Delcommune, thinking that Conrad had to learn to navigate the swift and ever-changing river, assigned him to the *Roi des Belges*, whose young Danish captain Ludwig Koch had been ill. Conrad's attitude toward the colonial enterprise and the impressions of his bad experiences on him can be seen in one of his letters to Mme. Poradowska written two days after he returned from Stanley Falls. Conrad says in his letter dated September 26, 1890:

*My days here are dreary. There is no doubt about it. I decidedly regret having come here: indeed, I regret it bitterly. Everything here repels me. Men and things, but especially the men. And I repel them, too. From the manager in Africa –who has taken the trouble of telling a lot of people that he can't stand me, down to the lowest mechanic –they all have the gift of getting on my nerves ... The manager is a common ivory-dealer with sordid instincts who considers himself a trader when he is nothing but a kind of African shopkeeper. His name is Delcommune (Karl and Laurence, p.62-63).*

King Leopold's promise to bring civilization in the Congo turned out to be hypocritical, cruel, barbaric and inefficient. By 1902, 90 per cent of all the land in Africa was under European control with the Congo as King Leopold's personal property. Childs (2007) reports that in the Congo basin, ivory was so plentiful that it was used for doorposts in African homes, while Leopold wrote to Stanley saying "I am desirous to see you purchase all the ivory which is to be found on the Congo" (p.95). To achieve this, Stanley drew up contracts which would pledge land and labour, in exchange for a piece of cloth per month, from all the African chiefs he met. To cover up his real intentions and practices, Leopold set up the International Association of the Congo as an organization that could be thought similar to the benign and prestigious International African Association of crown princes and explorers, whose flag he even adopted in order to cloak the enterprise in persuasive symbolism. Conrad refers to this association sarcastically in *Heart of Darkness* as the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs (p.1795).

The first to speak against Leopold's regime and the treatment of Africans in the Congo was George Washington Williams who wrote an open letter to Leopold: "Instead of the natives of the Congo adopting the fostering care of your Majesty's Government, they everywhere complain that their land has been taken from them by force; that the government is cruel and arbitrary" (Childs, p. 96).

In 1974, the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe, with a history of struggle against colonial oppression behind him denounced *Heart of Darkness* as "offensive and totally deplorable" and its author as a "thoroughgoing racist." Achebe saw the novel as a gross expression of "the desire- the- need in Western psychology to set up Africa as a foil in Europe, a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be made manifest."

With reference to these cruelties, Maier- Katkin (2004) states that due to the devoted efforts of Edmund Dene Morel, the founder of the Congo Reform Association, journalistic accounts and Kodak photographs documenting human rights abuses, such as the cutting off the hands of children as punishments to their parents, were in wide circulation. Hands were also cut off the corpses of murdered men, women and children as evidence soldiers could show to their commanders to prove cartridges were not expended wastefully on shooting game (p.592). Conrad's work is especially powerful because he lived the experience. *Heart of Darkness* inspired the reformers who eventually ended Leopold's rule.

In a vehement reply to the journalist's assertion that Africa has chronic problems of poverty and civil strife, Kendem in *God was African*, states that Africa has never been poor and goes on to say the scramble for Africa is the cause of Africa's woes:

*Africa is a continent that was and is still endowed with the riches of the world...would there have been any need for the European scramble for Africa in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century if Africa had been poor? Would there have been need to partition Africa and segment it into exploitable units, and loot its rich resources with violence in the name of the "civilizing mission" if Africa had been poor? Would there have been any use storming the African continent to cart away millions upon millions of its potent sons and daughters and subjecting them to forced labor and inhuman treatment over the ages in the plantations and the factories of the world, to build those worlds under very callous conditions? (p.236- 237).*

Inhuman treatment of their victims is one of the trademarks of colonialists as evident in both *Heart of Darkness* and *God Was African*. Kendem goes on to enumerate the atrocities of the colonialists by stating that they are responsible for the civil strife in Africa by eliminating her heroes, philosophers and scientists through the very conspiracy of those who claimed to champion the civilizing mission (p.237). Kendem then asks incisive rhetorical questions to emphasise that the European colonialists were the cause of Africa's problems: "What happened to Ivory Coast? What happened in Togo? What had happened in the Central African Republic? What had Happened in Rwanda? Chad? Libya? Could anyone understand the fuel that ignited the Rwanda genocide?" (p.237). He then concludes with an allusion to the Lake Nyos disaster in the North West of Cameroon in which thousands of people and animals lost their lives in 1986 and exclaims: "Unfortunate Africa! It had become the testing ground for all kinds of *ojoro* to satisfy some dark animal instinct..." (p. 237).

The political agenda in Cameroon has become increasingly dominated by what is known as the Anglophone Problem, which poses a major challenge to the efforts of the post-colonial state to forge national unity and integration, and has led to the reintroduction of forceful arguments and actions in favour of 'federalism' or even 'secession' (Konings, 1997 p. 207). In an interview with Teke (2013), Nkengasong explains that the Anglophone Cameroonian lives the reality of a dark fate, of a colonial misfortune whereby two peoples of opposing postcolonial experiences were brought together to form a nation, giving room for one colony to colonize another. The reality of the problem is accentuated in the marginalization, assimilation, dictatorship and dubious democratic practices which have in many ways obliterated the minority Anglophone colonial heritage and hindered Anglophone Cameroonians from having control over themselves and their destiny since the minority British Southern Cameroons joined the majority French *La République du Cameroun* in 1961 to constitute a nation.

For Nkengasong, the Anglophone problem is beyond the considerations of material and socio-economic and political development of the former Southern Cameroon and its people. It is a problem of coping with a mentality foreign to one's upbringing, especially a mentality fraught with lack of a vision for the society, with incompetence, souring corruption, disorder, inertia and a lot of other incongruity worsened by the fact that the Anglophone's opinion does not count no matter how much it can save the society (p.4). This lack of vision, corruption and disorder are echoed in *God Was African* where Kendem laments the dilapidated state of his office and the English department building at the university where he is instructor. The leaky roof that was promised to be repaired by the dean of the Faculty had never been repaired (p. 50). Kendem laments that: "There was evidence the furniture had never been replaced and the offices had never been renovated since that building was put up some forty years before" (p.50). This building was the lone vestige of Anglophone presence in a country

that claimed to be bilingual (50). Kendem regrets that one could have seen some order and a sense of purpose in the way the department was built but “the politics of federalism, of unitarism, of republicanism and national integration enveloped its objectives”(p.51). He laments about the sad fate of the country due to mismanagement and corruption.

The country was blessed “with nature’s generosity”(p.51) but with decades full of looting and plundering of the state’s treasury, the republic was crumbling and the future was bleak. Consequently, many of the young people were fleeing the country for greener pastures abroad. These youths refer to themselves as “bushfallers” (p.51). Kendem’s brother is one of these bushfallers as he had to flee to America when things became tough due to the triple tragedy (of the 1990s) with double salary reduction, devaluation of the currency and unemployment (p.52). The crowd of Cameroonians Kendem met at the U S embassy where he went to collect his visa for the Fulbright Institute, is proof of the hardship they were fleeing from: “I was shocked to find such a crowd...Was the whole country out that early morning knocking at the door of the US Embassy to be rescued from the rising floods of hardship?” (p.54). Bushfalling which is a result of hardship and unemployment, has its root cause in mismanagement, corruption and discrimination which in turn affects family harmony. Kendem’s mother is in agony as her eldest son who is the successor of her late husband went to America and has never returned. This affected the traditional offering of sacrifice which is usually performed by the successor: “Now that my father was dead my elder brother who was his successor was the right person to perform the ritual for the family” (p.246). The Nweh fiancée they had looked for him on his demand, kept waiting with her parents in vain. When Kendem finally meets him in the US after a long and laborious search, he is told he had been jailed twice and is so traumatised to talk about it.

Kendem equally sees himself as a victim of French colonization in his meeting with Frances, one of the pilgrims from France. She had quickly identified Tugu and Kendem as coming from French colonies. Kendem observed that Frances was “cautiously friendly and slightly intolerant (p.61). She assumes the acidic air of a typical colonialist. The wounds of colonialism have left an indelible mark on the colonized.

### **Stereotypes and Prejudice**

Under the guise of bringing progress and civilisation to Africa, Kurtz’ words on his pamphlet “Exterminate all the brutes”, is a call for genocide which shows that Europeans believed Africans were not human enough to live. Achebe (1988), states that Conrad saw and condemned the evil of imperial exploitation but was strangely unaware of the racism on which it sharpened its iron tooth (p.261). In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow makes many assumptions about the native people of the Congo. Throughout the novel, Marlow describes the native people of the Congo in ways that portray them as sub-human. At the first Company station, he sees black people moving about “like ants.” The men of a chain gang haverags around their waists “and the short ends behind waggled to and fro like tails;” these same men also have joints “like knots in rope.” The dying men he encounters at the station are nothing more than “black shapes” and “bundles of acute angles.” He often describes groups of natives by collectively referring to a specific body part: the whites of their eyeballs, the flaring of their nostrils, the whirling of their limbs. The natives who attack the steamboat near the Inner Station are seen only as “naked breasts, arms, legs, glaring eyes.” Although he clearly acknowledges that they are indeed human, he quickly notes that “that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman.” It takes a true man, he argues, to even admit to feeling a “remote kinship” with the natives. Viewing them as peers is simply not conceivable. This was a fairly common feeling in nineteenth-century Europe. In the words of philanthropist Albert Schweitzer, as quoted by Achebe: “The African is indeed my brother but my junior brother” (p.256).

Achebe comments that towards the end of the story Conrad lavishes a whole page quite unexpectedly on an African woman who has been a mistress to Mr. Kurtz in contrast to his European woman. The most significant difference is that the author bestows human expression to the European and then withholds it from the other. It is clearly not part of Conrad's purpose to confer language on the "rudimentary souls" of Africa. In place of speech they made "a violent babble of uncouth sounds." They "exchanged short grunting phrases" even among themselves. But most of the time they were too busy with their frenzy. There are two occasions in the book, however, when Conrad departs somewhat from his practice and confers speech, even English speech, on the savages. The first occurs when cannibalism gets the better of them: "Catch 'im," he snapped with a bloodshot widening of his eyes and a flash of sharp teeth -- "catch 'im. Give 'im to us." "To you, eh?" I asked; "what would you do with them? "Eat 'im!" he said curtly... The other occasion was the famous announcement: "Mistah Kurtz - - he dead." At first sight these instances might be mistaken for unexpected acts of generosity from Conrad. In reality they constitute some of his best assaults (p.254-255). This is racism.

In *God Was African*, racism and prejudice are evident when Kendem explains how he had to be cautious about what he did or say as he knew that the rest of the varied group of pilgrims were observing him and his

fellow African: "I understood that the rest of the group was observing Tugu and me with curiosity hoping to find stereotypical evidences to feed their prejudices about people from our part of the world"(p.63). After introducing himself, the sour looks and the laugh from Lebanajjar only confirms the prejudice that Africa and Africans have nothing to offer although their abundant resources are exploited and stolen by the so called civilized people.

Kendem expresses disgust at the idea that stories about blacks or Africans are always about poverty or mystery. Dos Santos asked Kendem if there were roads in his country to which the latter comments: "I knew he wanted to hurt me so that he could draw conclusions about stereotypes" (p.92). Kendem then sarcastically replies that they don't have roads to ridicule the whiteman's false and ignorant belief that Africans walk and live on trees as evident in the following dialogue with Dos Santos:

"No", I said.

"How d'you move around?" asked Dos Santos.

"We skip from tree to tree until we reach our destinations.

'How d'you mean I can't understand you,' said Dos Santos.

"I mean, we skip from tree to tree. Bigger trees than these. And your country's ambassador is an excellent tree climber. A good skipper too. In fact he occupies one of the biggest trees in the capital city", I said (p.93).

Kendem ridicules him by declaring that even their white and civilized ambassador lives on a tree. This reveals that whites hide the truth from their own and thus most of them live on the illusion that Africans are savages who live and act like animals in the forest. Kendem then wonders if Dos Santos question was meant to ridicule him or out of ignorance. He concludes that it may have been by a saturation of civilized thinking that looked at other unfamiliar life patterns from the angle of detestable rigidness. He thinks if human civilisations began to see difference as a blessing from God and not anathema, "to see difference in skin color, sex, religion and cultures as the immutable design from God to endow the world the riches of beauty, peace would reign" (p.110). In a talk delivered by McDough, a Professor of Economics in New York University, he repeats the prejudice that Africa is poor and only a few people could afford to eat one good meal a day. Kendem strongly disagrees with him and asks the Professor if he had been to Africa and concludes that if Africa is poor the question should be why and this implies that colonial exploitation is the cause. Even if Africa were poor, anyone could be violating the rights of the poor by giving the issue so much articulation without providing concrete solutions to the problem. The western media projects terrifying images of Africa to entertain their audience. Any scientific investigation based on those reports could produce very devastating results. Kendem states that: "There were even talks about how big international NGOs grew rich by trading on poverty in Africa" (p.110).

In another conversation between Kendem and Kanadia, one of the pilgrims, about the publication of articles, the prejudice that Africans are good for nothing is highlighted:

"Ken, if I may ask. Apart from the books you brought to Para have you published any articles?"

"A few", I said.

"How many?" asked Kanadia

"Some eight articles," I said. She raised her head quickly and stared at me.

"In eight different journals?" she asked in a firm voice.

"In eight different journals," I said.

"Journals approved by the MLA?" she asked.

"Of course, yes," I said.

"Journals approved by the Modern Language Association of America?" she asked emphatically...

"Journals approved by the Modern Language Association of Africa," I said staring directly into her eyes.

"Is there any such thing?" she asked after a while (p.175).

Kendem's sarcastic reply is fitting in a situation of blatant prejudice which is a result of ignorance as the whites are not fed the truth by their fellow whites who have been to Africa. In a discussion on racial diversity in America, Eugenic White concludes that blacks are unclassified if it were to be looked at from the purity of the races (p.192). Kendem reponds with a question: "Don't you think that it is questionable today to say blacks are unclassified, about two centuries after the abolition of slavery and after racist mentalities have long been cleansed with more global concern for the respect of individual rights and liberties...?" (p.193). Kendem in a stream of consciousness declared he was grateful to the gods of his ancestors for making him black. He concludes that colour was an important project in God's design for the world, to create a harmony of different colours just like the rainbow. Consequently, the world should celebrate variety and not despise it (p.194). Kendem had a fair share of prejudice and racism as in another presentation this time by Brian Buff about the situation of blacks who lived in the Bronx he declared that they were poor, dirty and dangerous. As he spoke, Lebanajjar and Dos Santos made a number of gestures and inaudible comments directed at him (p.200). Brian Buff's assessment is biased and that's

why Kendem believes “there was more of feelings and emotions in the treatment of the topic than real scientific assessment of the issues” (p.201).

## 5. Conclusion

The objective of this paper was to demonstrate that although Conrad is European and Nkengasong is African and both were born a century apart, they converge on the critique and condemnation of the dehumanising effects of colonialism in the Congo and Cameroon. Conrad’s critique of colonialism in the Belgian Congo is from a Eurocentric perspective and thus his attitude is ambivalent as it is tinged with racist undertones. Nkengasong’s Afrocentric perspective is bitter and unequivocal. The study demonstrates that most of the woes of Africa today have their root in its colonial heritage. Conrad and Nkengasong’s vision is that of truth, restraint, respect for the dignity of others, and that differences in colour, race, culture or sex is a blessing and not anathema. Literature thus portrays the writer as the voice of conscience. The importance of truth upheld by both writers is echoed by Pope Francis in his recent encyclical (2020) on fraternity and social friendship in which he declares that: “Truth, in fact, is an inseparable companion of justice and mercy. All three together are essential to building peace; each, moreover, prevents the other from being altered... Truth should not lead to revenge, but rather to reconciliation and forgiveness” (p. 57).

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