

Maye Ma Leka – Reframing Congolese-Swedish Colonial Entanglements

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ABSTRACT

This article will discuss an artistic research project exploring a repressed part of Swedish colonial history by unboxing and unfolding a hidden trove of photographs and films amassed by Swedish Missionaries in the Congo. The transdisciplinary and transnational research project explores how material traces of Swedish colonial history can support contemporary discourses, processes, and practices of recovery from the colonial period's devaluation of indigenous knowledge systems. By developing a participatory practice based on artistic research methods, the project contributes new perspectives on critical re-examinations and future knowledge in artistic research.

Introduction

The history of colonialism has been one of the erasure and displacement of the material and immaterial culture of populations and cultures. Colonial activities involved not only the forcible control of people and resources, but an imposition of a colonial logic and culture - a process leading to the collapse, displacement, disappearance and death of indigenous knowledge and heritage (de Sousa Santos, 2016). Much of the patrimony from the time of colonial activities now sits in the hands of the colonizer, with not only material artefacts, but the resources and capability to recount their meanings (Snickare, 2011). Holtdorf and Högberg (2021) have defined heritage as traditions that are saved for the good of the coming generations - but when the heritage in question is transnational and the product of colonial activities the connections to the community, and therefore its capacity to aid self-determination, knowledge production, and as the conference theme suggests, *re-imagining*, has been ruptured. In addition, a prevailing narrative of colonial innocence has allowed Sweden to distance itself from colonial history, claiming a neutral position as an objective observer (Fur, 2016). This distancing means transnational heritages held in Sweden are at increased risk of neglect and decay - according to Bruncevic “some transnational

heritage is systematically silenced, neglected, and its communities potentially disposed of by not being seen” (2022, p. 2).

This research is concerned with an attempt to engage differently - to use decolonial arts practice to explore both the future making potential of the historical materials for Congolese communities, and to unfold a countering of the narrative of Swedish colonial innocence. This on-going and long-term project has taken a collaborative, transdisciplinary, transnational, and intercultural approach involving artists, researchers and community members from Congo and Sweden, in working with the materials of a dispersed archive of images, film reels, and objects, collected and created by Swedish missionaries in the Congo between 1890-1930. We have worked together to find means to present, collaboratively re-interpret, and re-frame the materials in the Congo and Sweden, and particularly in the villages where the materials originated. Such collaborative working implies a diversity of knowledge making practices and abilities, and the work has been grounded in feminist perspectives on polyvocality to account for the productive differences of re-interpreting and re-framing together. We discuss this combination as a counter-archival practice where it resists fixed, hegemonic, and definitive or singular meaning-making in archival practice. This presents

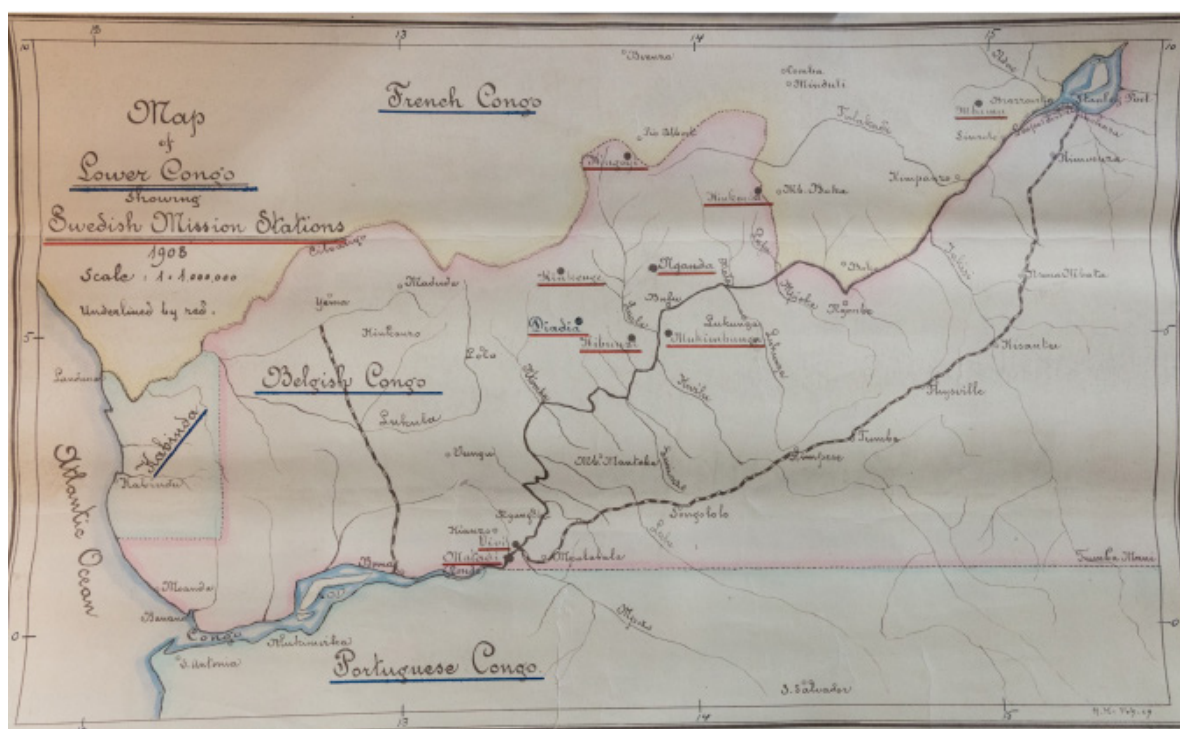


Figure 1. Map of Svenska Missionskyrkan’s missionary fields in Congo 1908. Photo: Anna Ekman

challenges for artistic and archival practices that are backward facing - who gets to participate in making sense of the shared but unequal accounts of the colonial past? The simple question that comes from this work is not 'what was left behind', but what can we do with it now?

Background

The second half of the 19th century was a period of emergence for many popular movements in Sweden, and in the evangelical upsurge that swept across the country Svenska Missionsförbundet (The Swedish Missionary Covenant Church) was one of the new societies that emerged. From the beginning, one of the stated aims of the new church was missions, and any congregation member could receive the calling, regardless of which social class they belonged to. The church, officially founded in 1878, started sending missionaries to the Congo in the 1880s, at first in collaboration with the British Livingstone Inland Mission. By 1911 about 100 Swedish missionaries had been sent to the Lower Congo and areas just north of the border in French Congo (Larsson, 2016).

The emergence of the camera is closely linked to colonialism and Christian missions, where the camera was used to order and construct the world (Landau, 2002; Schneider, 2018). Inspired by their British counterparts, Svenska Missionsförbundet sent out camera equipment to the mission fields, and selected images were turned into lantern plate lectures. Two of the early missionary photographers also used 35-mm film cameras, creating short films that could be used for encouraging a Swedish audience to donate funds for the missionary endeavor (Järdegar, 2020).

The missionaries also collected ethnographic materials. Mabiza Zidilu, the current *chief de groupment* (head) of Kingoyi, one of the villages where the Swedish missionaries were active, explained that parishioners were obliged to hand over any traditional religious or spiritual object to the missionaries as part of the baptism ceremony. These objects then formed the backbone of the missionaries' object collection. Zidulu speaks of how, during colonial times, it was near impossible to find paid work without a certificate of baptism (Järdegar, personal communication, 09-27-2021). We therefore question the idea that collections amassed by



Figure 2. Svenska Missionsförbundet's Touring Museum.
Photo: Unknown photographer; archive of Svenska Missionskyrkan

missionaries are inherently less ethically problematic than colonial collections taken by soldiers, for example. In a conversation with Järdegar & Tsimba, Professor Joseph Ibongo, former director of Museums of the Congo contended that:

I think it is the missionaries we should hold responsible. The missionaries should stand trial. Because they came to evangelise, and it was they who declared our objects fetishes, worthless objects that they burned. But they were clever. They took the best artefacts, put them in their luggage and took them with them. (Järdegar, C & Tsimba, F, personal communication, 20-04-2022)

The materials collected were presented by missionaries on home leave, touring schools, libraries, churches and city halls in Sweden up until the sixties. For many Swedish people, this constituted a first encounter with the African continent, and in this way the images have had a profound influence on how Africa has been imagined in

Sweden. (Granqvist, 2001). In contrast, not much historical materials remain in the Congo, as the Europeans controlled the visual technologies, and the climate and political turbulence eradicated much of what otherwise might have remained. In addition, as Ibongo so clearly stated, Congolese were taught their culture and objects had neither value nor meaning, which rendered the indigenous oral memory fragile. Within the collections of The Ethnographic Museum in Stockholm and the Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg around a quarter, or approximately 10,000 objects were acquired from the Congo Free State (1885–1908), the majority originating in the Manyanga district where the missionaries from Svenska Missionskyrkan were active. The Niombo funerary figure on permanent display in the children's exhibit *Tillsammans* (Together) at the Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg is probably the most well-known object today. The figure was made by master Niombo maker Makosa of Kingoyi, one of the most well-known Niombo makers that we now know of. This large-scale Niombo was exhibited



Figure 3. Niombo by Makosa in permanent exhibit *Together* at the Museum of World Cultures, Göteborg.
Photo: C. Järdegar

at the Metropolitan Museum of New York both in 2007-2008 and at the National Gallery of Art in Washington in 1981. Missionary photographer Josef Öhrneman filmed Makosa putting his finishing touches on another Niombo funerary figure in 1926, before depicting the funerary procession bringing the figure to its grave just outside the village, the only time this tradition was filmed before becoming eradicated.

These material remains contain the capacity today to work as a catalyst for a multitude of counter histories. If history and history writing can be said to be intrinsically linked to the editing process - we, by returning to the full glass plate negatives, the unedited film rushes, and the original handwritten notebook in Kikongo - attempt to undo as much as of the editing processes and institutional framing taking place in Sweden over the past century, as possible.

Methodology

As Harrison argues, preservation of archival materials is simultaneously of the past, in the present, and for the future (2020). Using a postcolonial framework (Mignolo, 2009a; de Sousa Santos, 2016; Augustinho, 2019) we conceive of both history and future making as a participatory practice (Gilliland & McKemmish, 2014) centered around the active participation of communities that have been historically wronged. This effort is guided by values of participation, feminist polyvocality, and an orientation to the future making possibility of materials borrowing from design practice.

Design as a practice is concerned with how the world *could* be, and practice of re-interpreting the socio-materiality of now to imagine and make possible futures. Acknowledging the power of this future making potential, many have asked for greater participation - through modes of participatory design, participatory action research, and embedded research. Participatory design has been conceptualized as a radical combination of the political and practical processes for engaging communities in shaping the issues that matter to them - whether that is technology design in labor movements (Ehn, 1988; Bødker et al., 1987), civic design in local governance (Björgvinsson et al., 2012; Manuel et al., 2017), or in socially-engaged arts practices emphasizing the emancipatory power of self-representation and voice (Heitlinger et al., 2019; Clarke and Lewis, 2016). In this work we

explore what it means to work collaboratively and transnationally with a community-led curation of a colonial-era archive.

As Astrid Erll suggests “the medium is the memory” (Erll, 2011a, p. 115). Yet this medium is not neutrally taken up, as Holtorf argues: “The preservationist paradigm of heritage and the contemporary heritage discourse can best be understood as firmly situated in a specific historical and cultural context of European (and by extension global) civilization of the past few centuries” (2020, p. 153). There is widespread recognition of the power of archival processes (Bowker & Star, 2000) and a recent recognition of the need to work against the dominance of Euro-centric narratives in archival studies. As Snickare suggests, the politics of the medium is not in cataloguing alone, but also curatorship:

it means that display can be a powerful rhetorical tool by which one perspective, one way of viewing the world, is emphasised at the expense of another. The person, or institution, that stages and controls the display thus holds a position of power. In the history of colonialism this power has, until very recently, been almost exclusively in the hands of the coloniser. (2011, p. 129)

At the same time, meaning making in visual media such as photography and film is notoriously unstable, creating rich possibilities for decolonial re-interpretations using what Elisabeth Edwards call photography’s “potentially infinite recodability” (2009, p. 4). Hanin Hannouch, referencing the work of Linda Steers (2008) on surrealist re-appropriation, discusses how two distinct instances



Figure 4. Glass-plate negative collection of Svenska Missionsförbundet. Etnografiska Museet Stockholm.
Photo: C. Järdegar

of appropriation frame and reframe colonial visual materials. The first level is the institutional framing taking place where the materials are housed or archived, and the second level of framing/reframing occurs within artistic practices that question the institutional setting and instead introduce alternative counter narratives (Hannouch, 2020).

Most of the materials we have worked with have not been archived before, rather they have been stored outside of the archival systems of classification and categorization - less a colonial archive and more a pile of left-over colonial debris - but perhaps the fact that the materials have escaped colonial categorization is a good thing? Today we can approach this pile with eyes and minds less bound by previous frames and instead have an opportunity to reframe the materials based on decolonial ideas and counter-archival practices. Our conception of a counter-archival practice draws from the Foucauldian terms counter-history and counter-memory (Medina, 2011). Philosopher José Medina defines counter-histories as centered on experiences and memories that have previously been unheard or unintegrated into official accounts, and counter-memories as consisting of people who remember “against the grain” (2011, p. 12). We define a counter-archive, then, by its reviving and including of concealed experiences and repressed knowledge and memories, and in this vein set out to transform the colonial pile left by the Swedish missionaries into a counter-archive.

Collaborate reframing and remaking

The current project grew out of the collaborative art project *Les Archives Suédoises*, started by Järdegar in 2016 together with Swedish artist Anna Ekman. The work began with a temporary loan of about 200 glass-plate negatives from Svenska Missionskyrkan, then in the process of disbanding their archive at Tegnégatan in Stockholm. We digitized the glass-plates and reworked a selection of images through cutting, cropping and enlarging into new installations shown alongside fragments of sculptures and drawings by Freddy Tsimba. The artworks were exhibited in both the Congo and Sweden and we also organized a small repatriation exhibition with photographic prints in the village Kingoyi, in the Manyanga district. *Les Archives Suédoises* was a project focused on new artworks, but the small repatriation we undertook in Kingoyi, coupled with the intense interest in the unaltered source materials at the exhibition

in Kinshasa, showed the need to develop a bigger artistic research project focused on how to return a substantial body of original material to the Congo in a way that would be accessible, sustainable and encourage active engagement. Freddy Tsimba has a strong personal connection to the materials. Both his parents are Kikongo, from the village Isangila, situated close to the Swedish missionary stations in Vivi and Matadi. His late father received his schooling during the 1930s at the station in Kibunzi, where he remained working as a local evangelist for some years before leaving the church. Both Tsimba’s mother and grandmother hold memories of Swedish missionaries, and Tsimba himself grew up hearing these stories. The materials thus evoke his personal history and material and cultural heritage—rendering their re-emergence and recontextualization in the Congo of great importance for him. Philosopher, Achille Mbembe, defines archival practice as:

Following tracks, putting together scraps and debris, and reassembling remains, is to be implicated in a ritual which results in the resuscitation of life, in bringing the dead back to life by reintegrating them in the cycle of time in such a way that they find, in a text, in an artefact or in a monument, a place to inhabit, from where they may continue to express themselves (Mbembe, 2002, p. 25)

We undertook the collection and digitization phase in Sweden using a digital camera, photogrammetry software and cast-making materials to create records and traces of materials held both in institutional archives and in the homes of children of missionaries. We also digitized 25 unedited reels of 35-mm films stored at the Swedish Film Archive, containing rare materials filmed between 1915 - 1931 by missionaries Johan Hammar and Josef Öhrneman. Unfortunately, our funds only stretched



Figure 5. The Congo reels in the Swedish Film Archive, Rotebro. Photo: C. Järdegar

as far as a low-quality digitization – we are still trying to raise the necessary funds for a complete 4K digitization of the materials.

The first public viewing event was held in Matonge, Quartier III in Kinshasa, in December 2020, using a portable 3D printed torch projector and custom-made slides in wooden frames. Attendants were a combination of students from the National Institute of the Arts, and local people from the neighborhood, situated within the *Cité*, or popular district, of Kinshasa. The images, now circular, were projected directly onto a wall, and it soon became apparent that the slide projector - although simple to use even during the frequent power cuts, lacked the detailed resolution or possibility to enlarge the images that the audience wanted to see. The participants were interested in details; the stitches used to turn papyrus leaves into house walls, the patterns being inscribed on ceramic pots, the expressions on photographed people's faces. They repeatedly stood up, approached the projected image, and touched it. The participants kept up lively discussions throughout, talking of their surprise when seeing the important role of women in the economic life of the villages at the beginning of the 20th century, discussing how the children seen looked well-fed and healthy, in contradiction to the stories usually told of the miseries of rural life before colonization and the subsequent modern period. This turned to a discussion around the connection to language, and the fact that today most children in Kinshasa do their schooling in French - what does this do for the connection to one's past and traditions?

As a result of the first viewing event, digitized materials were organized in a digital iPad app, *Maye Ma Leka* (Kikongo expression meaning Things that have passed). The app is an interactive directory holding both the images and the film clips sorted by location and media type. Using the app alongside a battery-driven projector and a selection of printed images enabled us to hold a series of public screenings, workshops, and print exhibitions. Public events were held in the source villages of Mukimbungu, Kibunzi, Kingoyi, Luozi and Vivi, and in different locations in the cities of Kinshasa and Matadi. In the source villages, we approached village chiefs for permission to hold outdoor screenings and workshops. We also received advice on where to find elders for the initial workshops – our experience was that once the work began, interested participants approached us, or we received further recommendations for possible participants to

approach. The villages are small and word spreads fast – this made publicizing the public evening screenings easy.

Contributor's stories and reflections were recorded in adjunction to the images and film clips in individual workshops, and in the evenings, contributors were invited to animate performative public screenings where all the villagers were welcomed. During the screening events, elders from within the communities were invited to present their choice of images and films and frame the community discussions.

One of the most striking examples of the colonial epistemicide, came during the screening of the newly digitized film clips depicting the Niombo funerary rites taking place in Kingoyi in 1926. Only two of the eldest members of the community, Papa Dollar Mvwezolo and Papa Muanda Esaie, had any knowledge of what the clips depicted. They described having witnessed these kinds of funerary rites as small children, and during the evening's public screening they were able to share their knowledge with the rest of the village. Many Swedish people have travelled to Kingoyi in the century since the film was created – but not once had images or film clips depicting this tradition been brought back according to the villagers. The young generation growing up in Kingoyi today have no knowledge of their material heritage and traditions – despite the enormous interest objects stemming from Kingoyi are receiving in the Global North. The children's pedagogical activity centered around the Niombo in the Swedish museum of World Culture takes on a whole new meaning from the perspective of the children of Kingoyi.

Curatorship across the media ecology

At the heart of the project's work has been an attempt to think about how the practices of making sense of and presenting the archival materials can be re-imagined. Doing so has been a resistance to the dominance of curatorial practices held most often by those on the side of the colonizers (Snickare, 2011). While a reasonable goal of decolonial arts practice might therefore be to put the materials back 'in the hands' of the colonized, we must acknowledge the multiple social and material ways in which the curatorship of those materials was already being decided and designed across the ecology of media. Some of these design decisions opened up for multiple re-imaginings, while others



Figure 6. Prototype testing, Matonge, Kinshasa, December 2020. Photo: C. Järde mar



Figure 7. Original caption: Village Yalla 11/1 1915. “The man is watching over this cassava pod with a hand stick to keep away the animals that are going to come and eat the pods. He is lying on a folding seat that can become like a bed. Many people in Manyanga called such seats Tayawa. It means ‘Speak, I listen; even when I’m in this position my ears are not asleep.’”

Commentary provided by Pol Tekasala Mawa during Maye ma leka workshop 6th of June 2022. Photo: Johan Hammar, from the private archive of the Hammar family.



Figure 8. Public screening in Kingoyi with live commentary by Papa Dollar Mvwezolo and Papa Muanda Esaie. Photo: C. Järde mar

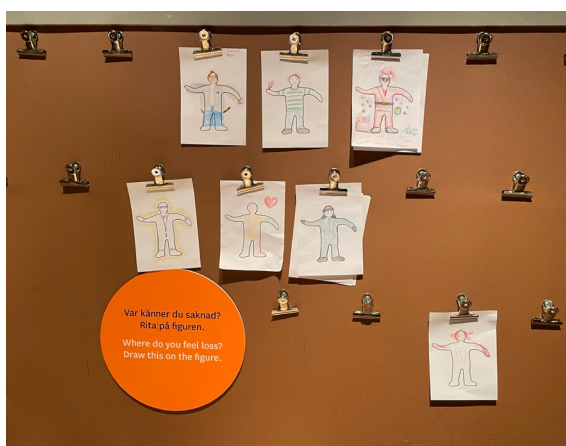


Figure 9. Children's activity board, Tillsammans exhibit, Museum of World Culture. Photo: C. Järdegar

either closed down re-imaginings or required more explicit work to re-position and reframe the materials.

The images have been displayed in a number of different ways: print exhibitions, DIY projector, iPad display, outdoor projection, and installed within the urban landscape. These materialities influenced how people gathered, and consequently how we could think about curatorship and meaning-making. In some cases, such as the DIY projector, there was premade selection of what could be shown, but it could easily be remade and reordered, and multiple stories of the images were unfolded during their presentation. In contrast, with the design of the iPad application we struggled with the 'ambivalence' of the random algorithm to select images to show. Randomness implied there was no inherent meaning or value to one image above another. The fact that the application curated its only ontology of media types, an inventory, and we sought to extend them - where images were ordered in different categories such as photographs, film clips in collections according to the location we believe they were created - we already hand some authority over to the technical to make meaning of the materials. Yet, during the field work, some images and film clips were shifted around, according to the information we were given by the elders we had individual sessions with. Especially in the case of the film, the app used the names of the filmed clips as an ordering device, but the original negative rolls were completely disordered, so, in fact, we found this a less useful way to show the film reels. Instead, we made screening reels depending on the location where the screening was to happen. It became unclear whether a lack of initial curatorship, both



Figure 10. Maye ma leka workshop with Mama Nsinga Zola, Vivi 2022. Photo: C. Järdegar

technical and otherwise, might better have opened up the materials for re-imagining.

Such 'gaps' in the media ecology asked to be attended to. In the case of the film reels, the absence of sound, of a production, not appearing in the form of a film yet, gave space for the villagers to provide their own live commentary. Silences are there to be filled. We invited the village elders, who had already had a chance to look through the material, to provide commentary, and other participants asked questions, made sounds, clapped, and called out the unjust ways their ancestors were made to work, carry, and subjugate themselves to the Europeans. These moments of voicing perspectives are not easily 'captured' or incorporated into 'the' archive, though they none-the-less give it life and meaning. In this way, Congolese communities of today reappropriated the colonial visual archive, using them to revisit their past and begin to fill in the many gaps caused by the abrupt break with historical time during colonization. According to Tsimba, the films and images can point towards alternatives to the paths that western society brought Congo - paths that have proven complex to adapt to the local environment and society. It became clear that for the Congolese communities we encountered, film is the preferred medium, as films also open up celebratory spaces, where ancestors can be seen laughing, making jokes, showing vitality, strength and expertise as they went about their daily lives, countering the often-repeated story of the misery of village life before the arrival of the colonial powers.

We have attempted to appropriate and reframe the dispersed colonial archive of Swedish Missionaries, creating a series of encounters that each brought



Figure 11. Public screening in Kibunzi with live commentary by Chief Mabiza Zidilu.
Photo: C. Järdegar



Figure 12. School workshop during the exhibition *Sukali na mungwa* by Järdegar & Tsimba at the National Museum of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Photo: C. Järdegar

forth new sets of counter narratives. The process is not finished – we have yet to create the final iteration of the new counter-archive—an iteration that can be permanently housed in both the source villages and at the National Museum in Kinshasa.

Materials collected by the missionaries during the colonial period can still be found in use today. The photographs appear as unquestioned illustrations in historical and ethnographic books and articles, objects are displayed in ethnographic museums, and short clips from the moving image materials appear as part of ethnographic displays in museums. Investigating the material through intercultural artistic research is a way to undertake a crucial re-visioning and re-framing of this colonial material – both in terms of how we conceive of national history and contemporary society. Our diverse practices enable us to work from *within* the material remains of the missionary project, creating alternative strategies for how to relate to these kinds of materials today, materials that evoke both traumatic memories and complex histories, at the same time as pointing at new possibilities to revision and reform the future.

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