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African History

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A Review of King Leopold's Ghost

Adam Hochschild, the author of King Leopold's Ghost, reveals to the reader the character of King Leopold II and how he acquired the Congo. King Leopold II implemented the use of company rule in what he claimed was the "Congo Free State." Throughout the book, the author provides many accounts from individuals who examined the situation in the Congo. Most of these people found that the native's of Congo were being treated inhumanely, which can be attributed to the king's greed.

The colonial rule that took place throughout Africa, not only in the Congo, changed the traditional African practices and institutions. Adam Hochschild allows the reader to see that Africa already had established societies with some social and political structures. This in turn relates to the book Things Fall Apart in that Africa was not as underdeveloped as the Europeans claimed. The region of the Congo contained many diverse people, from forest-dwellers to those who lived in "sophisticated kingdoms" (Hochschild 72). Some of the traditional societies of the Congo were involved in the arts. "Baskets, mats, pottery....woodcarving" were some of the artworks that the people produced. However, the Europeans did not notice these artworks at first. It took them two decades before they even became aware of African artistry and ultimately it influenced many artists, including Picasso and Matisse (Hochschild 73). In The Life of Olaudah Equiano, the village of Essaka was also highly developed in the arts.

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On the other hand, the Europeans only saw the raw materials that were rooted in the African lands. Some of the valuable minerals that were found in Africa consisted of iron ore, copper, gold, rubber, and so much more. One of the main resources that King Leopold II sought in the Congo was rubber. In Ali Mazrui's videos it was stated that one use for rubber was to make tires. No matter the resource that was being extracted from the African lands, it somehow contributed to the Industrial Revolution. The colonial powers could now produce various items at a low cost; however, this led to the use of slaves. Cheap labor helped strengthen the economies of the European powers while it weakened the African institutions.

King Leopold II was a greedy man who sought only to make money. Therefore, he decided that he wanted his own land to colonize. To his disappointment, he learned that no countries were purchasable at this time. This left him with only one option, which was to colonize newly explored land. In 1876, King Leopold II hosted a geographical conference in Brussels (Hochschild 76). At the conference he expressed concerns for colonizing Africa. In his speech he talked about "curbing the slave trade, moral uplift, and the advancement of science" (Hochschild 42). This created his image as a philanthropist, although this was not his true intention as king. In fact, he never revealed his real intentions for occupying the Congo.

King Leopold II was very interested in obtaining a newly explored African region. Therefore, he employed the skills of Henry Morton Stanley. Stanley though had a tendency to exaggerate his stories, which I think many people knew this about him. Be that as it may, the king of Belgium still instructed Stanley to set up base near the mouth of the Congo River and to construct a road. He was also ordered to get chieftains in the

Congo basin region to sign treaties to give up their land. Many of these chiefs signed the treaties but the question of whether they understood what they were signing still remains. It is more than likely they did not completely comprehend what they were being presented. There were several reasons for this, such as the language barrier that existed between the Belgians and the chieftains. For example, “few had seen the written word before, and they were being asked to mark their X’s to documents in a foreign language” (Hochschild 72). A second reason was the idea that land ownership was inconceivable, as the people of Africa did not assign boundaries to land. Their society was agrarian based, in which they collectively shared the land. It might have been possible that the territory that was unoccupied when the Europeans arrived was exhausted after years of planting crops. Nevertheless, it was under these conditions that the chieftains signed the treaties, ultimately giving away their land and essentially their freedom. King Leopold II now had control of these lands and no other foreign power challenged this.

Many of the foreign powers though had their own reasons for not questioning King Leopold II. For one, “the United States of America recognized King Leopold II’s claim to the Congo” (Hochschild 81). In fact, some Americans in the south, such as Senator John Tyler Morgan of Alabama, wanted the growing black population to go back to Africa (Hochschild 79). France was also another ally of King Leopold II. To calm France’s anxiety, the king of Belgium promised them that if they were unable to control the land, then France could have first choice of the land. France was so certain that the railway the king planned to build would bankrupt him and the king would have to sell the land to them, which they thought was an exceptional deal (Hochschild 82).

Soon after Stanley had finished his work for King Leopold II, the Scramble for Africa began. The Berlin Conference, which began in November 1884, included the participation of only seven nations: Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, Italy, Portugal, and Spain. This conference was held to divide the African lands among these seven nations, even though no Africans were present at the conference. For King Leopold II though, the conference was a success as he had gained recognition of his power over the Congo, which he named the “Congo Free State.” Ali Mazrui even said the result of the Berlin Conference was that the colonial powers brought together groups of Africans that would have most likely remained separate and it also divided people that would have stayed together.

King Leopold II continued to trick people into thinking that he was fulfilling his duty as a philanthropist. Other nations thought he was lending help to the “poor” Africans when in turn he was exploiting them for his own profit. George Washington Williams was at first deceived by the Belgium king, as were most people. Once he sailed to Africa and saw the horrific scenes he began to write about the truth. He even wrote a letter to the king, which was entitled the *Open Letter*. This letter was then published in a pamphlet that was distributed through the United States and Europe. In this letter he conveys the harsh realities of Leopold’s Congo. Williams states that “Stanley and his white assistants had used a variety of tricks, such as fooling Africans into thinking that the white had supernatural powers, to get Congo chiefs to sign their land over to Leopold” (Hochschild 109). He also says that Leopold’s government is willing to condemn its prisoners for the slightest of offenses. Williams was not the only person to shed light on the situation in the Congo, although he may have been one of the first to advocate for better treatment of

African people. Others that followed in Williams' footsteps in publishing articles were Conrad, Morel, and Shepherd.

Morel, another writer like Williams, also tried to expose King Leopold II for the cruel man he was. He wrote about the torture that people endured from Leopold's rubber industries. However, the king was able to pay off various newspapers and in turn they constructed reviews that painted a better picture of the activity that was continuing in the Congo. King Leopold II had some impressive tactics to try and cover up his inhumanities that encompassed starvation, disease, exhaustion, murder, and so much more. The king also had to cover up the reality of African's hands being cut off for not meeting rubber quotas. It was only a matter of time before he would run out of excuses. Nevertheless, the missionaries and explorers who traveled to the Congo never stopped expressing their displeasing values of King Leopold II's ruling of the Congo state.

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King Leopold II died in December 1909 but his ghost lived on. King Albert I, the new ruler of Belgium inherited the inhumane atrocities of the Congo system. Instead of trying to improve the conditions in the Congo King Albert I imposed a head tax. Khapoya declared that there were "two reasons for introducing taxes in colonial Africa. One was to raise revenue to pay for the cost of running a government in the colonies and also for rudimentary services for small settler communities" (137). This continued what King Leopold II started, a project to raise money and not actually improve the lives of Africans. Depopulation, destruction of local economies, and dependency on European goods were some of the results that occurred due to colonialism in the Congo, as well as in all of Africa.

This book has reinforced many of the ideas that we have discussed in class that concern colonial rule. After reading King Leopold's Ghost, The Life of Olaudah Equiano, and Things Fall Apart, I feel that I am better informed on the history of Africa. This book, along with the others previously mentioned, has brought to my attention the inhumanities that were carried out in the Congo. I was very discontent with all the tragic accounts that I read. I also found it shocking to see how one man could continue with these cruelties for as long as he did. Therefore, I think it is important that all human beings to be informed of this time period in history, so that it does not repeat itself.

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Excellent analysis