Kaden Franklin

The Bar of Public Sentiment

The colonial activity perpetrated by Belgium upon the Congolese people under the authority of the Congo Free State is a collection of unthinkable atrocities. Until quite recently it was never formally recognized by the Belgian government, but the unique cultural linguistics of the Congo allow for collective memory to perpetuate throughout their language to this day.

One on the first people to try and shed light on the situation was George Washington Williams. An African American lawyer and minister who traveled to the Congo Free State in the years preceding 1890. And then published a letter addressed to King Leopold, in which he exposes the deplorable conditions in the Congo Free State. He continues on to request the Berlin Conference to hold Leopold responsible “All the crimes perpetrated in the Congo have been done in your name, and you must answer at the bar of Public Sentiment“ [[1]](#footnote-1). He goes on to plead to the Belgian public to hold their ruler accountable, the letter is eventually brought up in parliament but very little is done for many years.

Plenty of historical records exist from the wealthy, literate, colonials. However there is a lack of written records from native sources. This document among many others make up Michael A. Rutz’ *King Leopold’s Congo and the “Scramble for Africa”.* Of the twenty-six source documents in Rutz’ text, only four of them include accounts of native experiences. Granted the book covers over 100 years of Congolese history and is primarily political accounts after 1906. One such exceptional account on Congolese history is Osumaka Liakaka’s Naming Colonialism, History and Collective Memory in the Congo, 1870 – 1960. The text has a focus for the naming conventions used by Congolese natives. Likaka makes this clear throughout the text and even includes a list of some 270 names given to various colonial officials, traders, and missionaries by natives. [[2]](#footnote-2) Sentiment Analysis, also sometimes referred to as opinion mining, uses machine learning and natural language processing to receive numeric sentiment scores from text. Performing sentiment analysis on the set of names in Liakaka’s book, it was clear that the result would be nowhere near significant[[3]](#footnote-3). There were situations where the program correctly classified the sentiment, however it failed to give a score for most inputs. Many of these names also represent collective, ‘meta’ names given to many people, or to represent the stereotypes of colonials. Many such names that had convoluted sentiment were interpreted incorrectly. ‘*Mundele Kikufi*’ the Kikongo syntagm for ‘*short white man*’[[4]](#footnote-4) was translated to ‘*following the dead*’. The Democratic Republic of Congo has over 200 languages spoken by its citizens, so naturally many of these names appear from different regions of the country.

The complexity of the language speaks as a testament to the distance between the Congolese and Belgians. Even by some of the most modern methods, their language cannot accurately be interpreted automatically. Though it may never be recognized fully by the perpetrators of the atrocities, if any such bar of public sentiment exists, it lies only in the memory and language in the of that of the Congo.

1. Michael A. Rutz, *King Leopold’s Congo and the “Scramble for Africa”* (Hackett Publishing Company, 2018), 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Osumaka Likaka, *Naming Colonialism,* 163. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Kaden Franklin, Sentiment Analyzer (2022), <https://github.com/KadenFranklin/sentiment_analyzer/blob/main/Sentiment%20Analyzer.ipynb>,

   <https://github.com/KadenFranklin/sentiment_analyzer/blob/main/Sample%20of%20names%20%26%20scores.csv> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Osumaka Likaka, *Naming Colonialism,* 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)