

THE TRUTH ABOUT CONGO FREE STATE

THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE
ARTICLES

BY
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CONGO FREE STATE
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By Frederick Starr
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King Leopold II of the Belgians

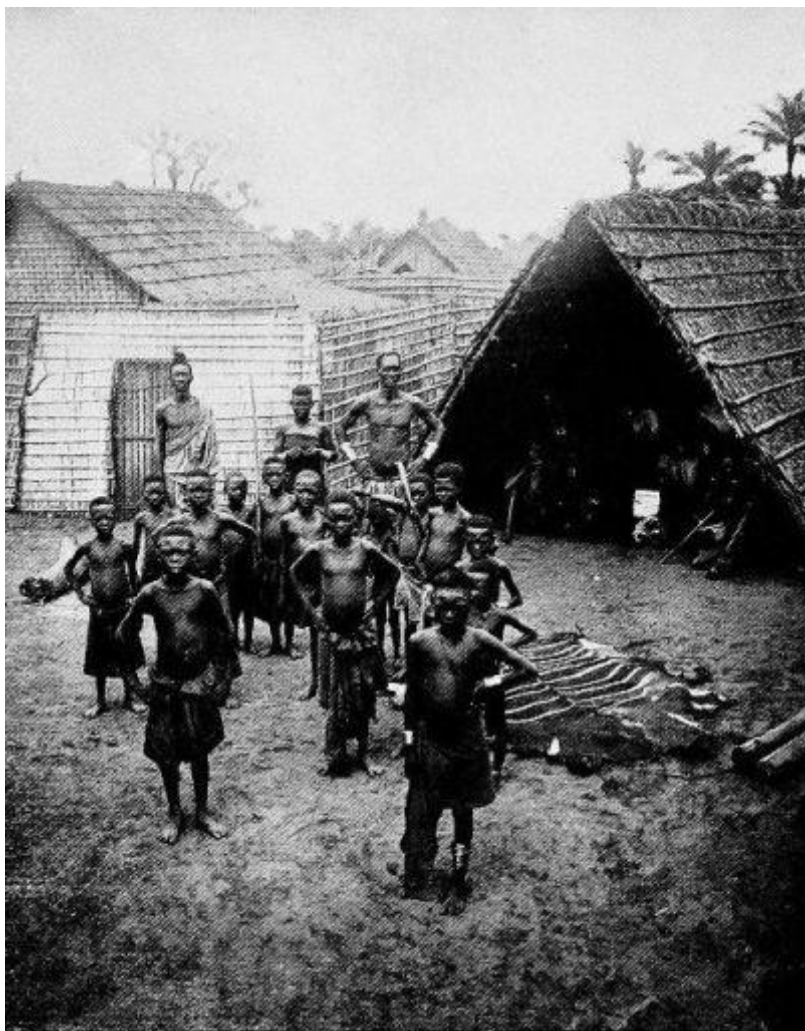
PREFACE

WHEN I returned to America, I had decided to express no opinion upon the public and political questions of the Congo Free State. Having found conditions there quite different from what I had expected, it was impossible for me to state my actual impressions without danger of antagonizing or offending some whom I valued as friends. Hence, on landing at New York, I refused to say anything upon those matters to several reporters who interviewed me. A little later, the *Chicago Tribune* asked me to write upon these subjects, urging the importance of the whole matter to our nation, and leaving me entire freedom in viewpoint and mode of treatment. In response to its request, I prepared a series of articles, which appeared in successive issues from January 20 to February 3, 1907.

The articles were received with general interest, and many asked that they should be reprinted in book form. I felt that they were of momentary interest only, and as I have much other Congo matter for books and pamphlets—more directly in the line of my professional work—I was inclined not to reprint them. But I soon found myself the subject of bitter attack. Malicious and untrue statements were made regarding me and my motives. I have concluded, therefore, that it is best that my articles should be accessible to all who are interested. What I wrote, I am ready to defend. I am not ready to be judged from misquotations, or condemned for what I never wrote. Hence this book.

I am not personally responsible for the title—*The Truth about the Congo*. Although I believe all my statements are true, I should not have selected that title for my articles. No man can say all that is true on any subject, and I do not arrogate to myself a monopoly in truth-telling, either about the Congo or any other topic. But after my announcement under that heading, I decided to let it stand. I preferred some less assertive title, but I am content. So I use the same title for this book. The headlines of the articles, however, I have suppressed. They were not of my preparation and did not adequately suggest the matter or the treatment. The articles are reprinted with no changes except corrections in spelling, punctuation, or mistaken words.

No man more desires the happiness and progress of the Congo natives than do I. I know them pretty well. I am their friend; they are my friends. I shall be glad if what I here present makes them and their cause better known to thoughtful and sympathetic men and women, Mere emotion, however violent, will not help them. Stubborn refusal to recognize and encourage reforms, which have been seriously undertaken for their betterment, will only harm them.



CHIEF NDOMBE WITH FAMILY GROUP, IN HIS TOWN.

I.

January 20, 1907.

MY own interest in the Congo Free State began at the St. Louis exposition. As is well known, that exposition made a special feature of groups of representatives of tribes from various parts of the world. These natives dressed in native dress, lived in native houses, and so far as possible reproduced an accurate picture of the daily life to which they were accustomed in their homes.

Among the groups there brought together was one of Congo natives. This group was commonly known as the pygmy group, though but four out of the nine members composing it made claims to be such. The group was brought by Mr. S. P. Verner, at one time missionary to the Congo, who was engaged by the exposition to make a special journey into central Africa to procure it. Four members of the group were Batua, the others were large blacks representing the Bakuba and Baluba.

The idea of visiting Africa was one which I had never seriously entertained, but in the study of these Congolese it seemed to me that there were interesting questions the solution of which would well repay a visit. The consequence was, that I determined to visit the Congo Free State—and specifically that part of the state from which these natives had been brought.

About this time I received considerable literature from the Congo Reform Association at Boston, the reading of which had its influence in deciding me to undertake the expedition.

After reading this literature I started for the Congo, fully prepared to see all kinds of horrors. I supposed that mutilations, cruelties, and atrocities of the most frightful kinds would everywhere present themselves. I expected to find a people everywhere suffering, mourning, and in unhappiness.

My errand, however, was not that of a searcher after all these dreadful things, but purely that of a student of human races, with definite questions for investigation.

I may say that my opportunities for forming an opinion of conditions in the Congo have been exceptional. Mine was no hasty journey, but a tarry in the country extending over more than one year.

While my original plan was to spend the greater portion of my time in the district ruled by the Bakuba chief, Ndombe, with but a short period in other parts of the state, I had decided before reaching the mouth of the Congo to more evenly distribute my time, and to see far more of the Congo proper than I at first intended. As a consequence, I went first into the Kasai district, where I spent four months, after which, returning to Leopoldville, I went up the main river to the head of navigation, and even beyond, to Ponthierville, the terminus of the newly built line of railroad. We also went up the Aruwimi, to the famous Yambuya camp, where the navigation of that river is interrupted by cataracts.

I have, therefore, seen not only the lower Congo, which has been so frequently visited in recent years, but traveled thousands of miles upon the great river and two of its most important tributaries.

In this extended journey I came into constant contact with representatives of the three groups of white men who live in the Congo Free State—state officials, missionaries, and traders. I had repeated conversations with them all, and have heard opinions upon the Congo State from these diverse points of view.

My position with reference to Congo matters is peculiar, doubly so. I may even say it is unique. My journey was made at my own expense; I was not the representative of any institution, society, or body. I was without instructions, and my observations were untrammelled by any demands or conditions from outside.

While I am under many and weighty obligations to scores of state officials, missionaries, and traders, I am not prevented from speaking my mind in regard to any and every matter. Both to the missionaries, state officials, and traders I paid board and lodging at every stopping point—with the single exception of one American mission station—a fact which leaves me freedom. While the state facilitated my visit and my work in many ways, I was not, at any time, in relations with it of such a kind as to interfere with free observations or free expression. I made this entirely clear on my first visit to the state authorities at Brussels, and it was understood by them that I should speak freely and frankly of everything which I should see. On their part, the state authorities expressed the liveliest satisfaction that an independent American traveler should visit the Congo Free State, and said that they did not wish anything concealed or attenuated, as they felt sure that such a visit as mine could only do them good.

I have said that my position was doubly peculiar. I was not only independent and untrammelled in observation and expression, but my personal attitude to the whole question of colonization and administration by a foreign power, of natives, is radical. Personally I dislike the effort to elevate, civilize, remake a people. I should prefer to leave the African as he was before white contact. It is my belief that there is no people so weak or so degraded as to be incapable of self-government. I believe that every people is happier and better with self-government, no matter how unlike our own form that government may be. I feel that no nation is good enough, or wise enough, or sufficiently advanced to undertake the elevation and civilization of a “lower” people. Still less do I approve the exploitation of a native population by outsiders for their own benefit. Nor do I feel that even the development of British trade warrants interference with native life, customs, laws, and lands. I know, however, that these views are unpopular and heretical.

In the series of articles, then, which I have been asked to prepare, I shall try to take the standpoint of the practical man, the business man, the man of affairs, the philanthropist, the missionary. All these agree that civilized folk have a perfect right to interfere with any native tribe too weak to resist their encroachment. They agree that it is perfectly right to trample under foot native customs, institutions, ideas—to change and modify, to introduce innovations, either to develop trade, to exploit a country, to elevate a race, or to save souls. I am forced, then, to look at Congo matters from the point of view of these eminently practical men.

Of course, I saw much to criticise. It is true that there are floggings, and chain-gangs, and prisons. I have seen them all repeatedly. But there are floggings, chain-gangs, and prisons in the United States. Mutilations are so rare that one must seek for them; and I had too much else to do. There is taxation—yes, heavy taxation—a matter which I shall discuss quite fully further on. And in connection with taxation there is forced labor, a matter which, of course, I disapprove, but it appears as just to all the groups of eminently practical men to whom I have referred. There are, no doubt, hostages in numbers, but I saw less than a dozen. And the whole matter of hostages is one which merits careful and candid discussion. And I know that in many a large district the population is much smaller than in former times. The causes of this diminution in numbers are many and various, and to them I shall return.

Flogging, chain-gang, prison, mutilation, heavy taxation, hostages, depopulation—all these I saw, but at no time and at no place were they so flagrant as to force themselves upon attention. And of frightful outrages, such as I had expected to meet everywhere, I may almost say there was nothing. It is, of course, but fair to state that I was not in the district of the A. B. I. R. I cannot believe, however, that conditions in that district are so appalling as the newspaper reports would indicate.

On the contrary, I found at many places a condition of the negro population far happier than I had dreamed it possible. The negro of the Congo—or Bantu, if you please—is a born trader. He is imitative to a degree. He is acquisitive, and charmed with novelties. He is bright and quick, remarkably intelligent. He readily acquires new languages, and it is no uncommon thing to find a Congo Bantu who can speak six or seven languages besides his own. In disposition variable and emotional, he quickly forgets his sorrow. I saw hundreds of natives who were working happily, living in good houses, dressing in good clothes of European stuff and pattern, and saving property. That this number will rapidly increase I have no doubt.

And now, on my return, after having many of my preconceived ideas completely shattered, and feeling on the whole that things in Congoland are not so bad, and that improvement is the order of the day, I am startled to find the greatest excitement. Pages of newspapers are filled with stories of atrocities, many of which never happened, some of which are ancient, and a part of which, recent in date, are true.

I find a fierce excitement about the Belgium lobby, vigorous resolutions presented in the senate, and the President of the United States outrunning his most urgent supporters and advisers, ready to take some drastic action to ameliorate the conditions of the suffering millions in the Congo Free State. The surprise is so much the greater, as my latest information regarding the American official attitude had been gained from the letter written by Secretary Root some months ago.

What can be the reason of such prodigious and sudden change?

What has happened in the Congo since April to produce the present state of mind? What is the motive underlying the bitter attacks upon Leopold and the Free State which he established? Is it truly humanitarian? Or are the laudable

impulses and praiseworthy sympathies of two great people being used for hidden and sinister ends of politics?

I do not claim infallibility. I do claim that my having spent a year in the Congo Free State, independently, should qualify me to express opinions on the conditions. I have heard both sides. I have traveled thousands of miles in Congo territory. I have visited natives of twenty-eight different tribes. No interference has been placed in my way. I have gone where I pleased, and when and how I pleased. No preparations have been made with reference to my visits. I believe no changes in practice have been produced by my presence.

In the series of articles before us it is my intention to present in detail what I have seen, and much of what I have heard, in the Congo Independent State. I may make errors, but I shall tell no intentional falsehoods. I shall criticise what deserves criticism. I shall praise what is praiseworthy. I trust that those who are interested in forming a true idea of Congo conditions may find something useful in my observations.

At this point it is necessary for us to know something of the Congo native himself. In Dark Africa—for northern Africa is and always has been a white man's country—there are three negro or negroid masses. There is little doubt that the original inhabitants of the continent were dwarf people, ancestors of the pygmies of the high Ituri forest, and the Batua of the upper Kasai.

To-day the pygmies are mere fragments, scattered and separated, but retaining with tenacity their ancient life. They are the same to-day as they were 5,000 years ago, when they were objects of interest to the old Egyptians. Little in stature, scrawny in form, with a face shrewd, cunning, and sly, the pygmy is a hunter. With his bows and poisoned arrows he kills the game of the forests and makes no pretense of doing aught in agriculture. He is universally feared by the large blacks in the neighborhood of whose towns he settles. He trades his game for agricultural products with his large neighbors.

In the Soudan and neighboring parts of western Africa live the true negroes, notable for their thick lips, projecting lower faces, and dark skin.

Throughout southern Africa we find a group of populations much lighter in color, and on the whole more attractive in appearance, than the true negro. These tribes, plainly related in language, are no doubt of one blood, and are called Bantu. The name is unfortunate, as the word bantu simply means “men” in that group of languages. Practically the whole of the Congo population are Bantu—there being almost no true negroes and but few pygmies in the area.

It would seem as if the Congo native should be so well known by this time that the current description of him in the text-books would be accurate; yet, at least in two respects, these stereotyped accounts are wrong. The Congo Bantu are not long-headed, and it is not true that they differ from the real negro in the absence of a characteristic and disagreeable odor. There are scores of Bantu tribes, each with its own language and minor peculiarities in appearance and life. It would be untrue to say that all smell badly, but I have often wished the writers of the books could be shut up a while in the same room with, for example, a group of Bobangi. It is certain that no type of African smells worse.

It would be, however, a mistake to think that the Bantu are dirty. Far from it. I have repeatedly observed my carriers, when we came to some brook in the forest, set their loads aside, strip themselves when necessary, and bathe in the fresh cool water. They are scrupulous in attention to their teeth, and use, often several times a day, a little stick of wood, somewhat larger than a lead-pencil, shredded at one end, to clean their teeth. The instrument, by the way, serves its purpose far better than our own toothbrushes.

According to his tribe, the Bantu may be short, medium, or tall. King Ndombe of the Bakuba measures six feet three in stature, and is well-built, though not heavy. Among the Bakuba, Baluba, Batetela, and Bakete, tall statures are

common. It is rare, however, that the Bantu present what we would call finely developed forms; their chest is often flat and sunken; their shoulders not well thrown backward; and the musculature of their back, their chest, arms, and legs, is poor. Of course, there are exceptions, and one sometimes sees magnificently developed specimens. In the lower Congo, where on the whole the men are shorter, they make excellent carriers. In the old caravan days the standard burden was sixty or seventy pounds, and a man would carry it without difficulty all the working day. The Kasai tribes are poor carriers and indifferent workers. The chopbox of sixty pounds weight, which the lower Congo man shoulders easily and carries without complaint, will be slung to a pole to be borne by two carriers among the Baluba.

In life the Bantu populations, so far as the Congo is concerned, present notable general uniformity. The general pattern is the same everywhere, though there are local and tribal differences of minor sort. Thus, almost every tribe has its own tribal marks cut into the flesh of face or body.

Similarly, the members of one tribe may be distinguished by their mode of dressing the hair. To a less degree, the form to which the teeth are chipped and broken mark tribal differences. It may almost be said that no two tribes in all the Congo build houses that are just alike, and almost every tribe has its characteristic mode of arranging the houses in a group. Thus, in one tribe the houses will be arranged in continuous lines, one on each side of a straight road; in another the houses may be grouped around the three sides of a square, the group belonging to a single chieftain and being succeeded in the village by other similar groups of buildings; in another the houses will be arranged in two curved lines, leaving the open space in the center of the village oval or elliptical. The chairs or stools of one tribe will differ in form and decoration from those of another; so will the wooden spoons, the stirring-sticks, the combs, the dress and ornaments.

The Congo natives for the most part still lead a tribal life. A chief is the head of a little community clustered about him. He may not be the chief of a whole village; for example, at Bomanih, on the Aruwimi, there are three chiefs. Each one has his own cluster of houses, and though the three clusters are arranged continuously in two, parallel, straight lines, every native of the village knows precisely where the domain of the individual chief ends or begins.

The power and authority of the chief has been greatly weakened by contact with the whites, but he still retains great influence. At least over the members of his own household, including, of course, his slaves, he had the power of life and death. In large affairs, interesting a considerable number of people, he usually acted on the advice and opinion of his fellows as expressed in a village or tribal palaver. The chief was, and still is, distinguished from the common people by his dress and ornaments. He is usually a man of wealth, and has a considerable number of people actually dependent upon him, subject to his orders, and a force upon which he can depend in case of war or trouble.

When I first entered the Congo my heart sank, for it seemed as if the native life was gone. In fact, in letters written from Matadi I doubted whether I had not come too late for aught of interest. My spirits began to revive, however, with the railroad journey from Matadi to Leopoldville. Groups of natives, with scanty dress and barbaric ornaments, replaced those who at Matadi and its neighborhood gathered at the station to see the train pass.

In my first walk from the mission house where I lodged at Leo, within three minutes' walk of the mission I found a little cluster of Bateke houses which, with its inhabitants, much delighted me.

Almost naked women, with abundance of beads and teeth hung at their necks as ornaments, with hair elaborately dressed and bodies smeared with red camwood powder,

squatted on the ground, were making native pottery in graceful forms.

In the shade in front of the door of one of the houses was a true barbarian, lord of the place. By rare good luck he spoke a little English, so that we were able to carry on a conversation. When I asked him who the women were, he replied that they were his wives. I think there were three of them, and it was my first introduction to African polygamy. Each of these women occupied a separate house. Each of them had a garden patch in which she worked. All of them contributed to the importance and support of their husband.

Polygamy, of course, prevails throughout Dark Africa. But do not misunderstand me. I do not use the word “dark” to characterize polygamy. It is a settled institution which seems to work quite well. Later on I saw the wives of Ndombe, thirty-four in number. Ndombe is a really important chief, but compared with some whom we met or of whom we heard in the Upper Congo, he was but scantily equipped. Sixty, seventy, a hundred, or hundreds of wives and female slaves, which count for much the same, are in possession of great chieftains. There is, of course, always one favorite or principal wife. When Ndombe used to come, as he frequently did, to my house to see the stereoscopic pictures, he frequently brought his favorite wife with him. She was a pretty creature—young and plump, graceful and modest. She wore good cloth and any quantity of beads and brass arm and leg rings.

In every case the women of a chief or rich man live in separate houses, each having her own. Until a man is married he is but little thought of. The greater the number of his wives, the more important he becomes. As each one cultivates a field and does other productive labor, it will be seen that the man with the most wives is the richest man.

The man has his own house, but visits and lives in the houses of his wives in turn. The child in Africa is rarely weaned before it is two or three years old, and during the

period of time when a child is unweaned the father has no marital relations with the woman. On the whole, there is less quarreling among the wives of a polygamic husband than one would expect. Bantu women, however, are often termagants, as women elsewhere, and at times the chief's house group is lively.

Domestic slavery still flourishes. The state, of course, has done much to end the actual slave trade for supplying white men and Arabs. It is, however, difficult to deal with the matter of domestic slavery, and in fact is scarcely worth the candle.

Every chief or man of any consequence has slaves. Calamba, my interpreter, at Ndombe, though a young fellow, probably not more than 25, had two. It is rare that the lot of the domestic slave is unhappy. It is usually women or children who are bought, and they are treated in all respects as if members of the family. Little is required of them in the way of work and service, and they must absolutely be provided for by the master, who is also frequently responsible before the public for their misdeeds. Formerly, of course, there was the possibility of being killed upon a festal occasion, the accession of the chief to increased power, or to grace his funeral. Within those districts where the state has a firm hold and strong influence this possibility is done away with, and the most serious disadvantage in being a slave is thus removed. Slaves may become rich men, and not infrequently themselves hold slaves.

Perhaps the most striking characteristic of the Bantu, as of the true negro, is his emotionality—one instant joyous, the next in tears. Vowing vengeance for an injury to-day, he is on the happiest terms with his injurer to-morrow. He laughs, sings, dances. Of all the introductions of the white man, perhaps the accordion is the favorite. Men use it, but women play it constantly. Most of them play one song piece only, and one may hear it from one end of the state to the other at every hour of the day and night. Of course, there are native

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