

February 2014

## Review of Vansina, Jan. *Being Colonized: The Kuba Experience in Rural Congo, 1880-1960*. Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2010, v + 342 pp.

Ogechi E. Anyanwu

Eastern Kentucky University, [ogechi.anyanwu@eku.edu](mailto:ogechi.anyanwu@eku.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://encompass.eku.edu/jora>

 Part of the [African Languages and Societies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Anyanwu, Ogechi E.. "Review of Vansina, Jan. *Being Colonized: The Kuba Experience in Rural Congo, 1880-1960*. Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2010, v + 342 pp.." *Journal of Retracing Africa*: Vol. 1, Issue 1 (2014): 49-51.  
<https://encompass.eku.edu/jora/vol1/iss1/6>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Encompass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Retracing Africa by an authorized editor of Encompass. For more information, please contact [Linda.Sizemore@eku.edu](mailto:Linda.Sizemore@eku.edu).

**Vansina, Jan. *Being Colonized: The Kuba Experience in Rural Congo, 1880-1960*. Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2010, v + 342 pp.**

Scholars are increasingly paying attention to the complex, diverse, and shared colonial experiences of various African peoples and societies. In *Being Colonized*, Jan Vansina retraces the colonial life of the Kuba people and argues that a focus on the people's "shared experiences bring[s] us closer than any other approach to a concrete understanding of what life was actually like in that colonial period" (328). As he shows in the book, the process by which the Congo became a Belgium colony was long; it followed decades of exploring Africa which saw King Leopold creating an international African association and sponsoring numerous expeditions to the central African region. The Congo was colonized shortly after the conclusion of the Berlin Conference on February 23, 1885. Governed initially by Belgium's absolute ruler, King Leopold II, and later taken over by the Belgian government following a media campaign against Leopold's atrocities that E.D. Morel championed, Congo grew "eighty times larger than its metropolis" (18). According to the author, this feat was achieved because Belgium "was the second biggest industrial power in Europe, a power equal to that of the United States" (18-19). *Being Colonized* is a comprehensive account of the people's engagement with the complex and dynamic colonial structures, exploring the mostly destructive social, political, and economic transformation resulting from Belgian colonial rule.

As the author reveals in the book, the relationship between European administrators, missionaries, traders, explorers, and the Kuba throughout the colonial period was unequal. It was a relationship that was "backed by force, but ultimately did not rest on force" (4). The author analyzes the social and economic devastation that followed the conquest of the kingdom by the Compagnie du Kasai, a concession company of the Congo Free State, the wealth and suffering that rubber brought to Belgian and Kuba respectively, the exploitative administrative tactics employed to exploit the people — driven, of course, by the mindless pursuit of profit and revenue by colonial officials. According to the author, "it was not the trading of rubber by itself that somehow brought destruction with it, but the combination of a commercial monopoly allied to a complete abdication of any oversight by the state" (85).

Vansina reveals in the book that both the 1910 decree on the indirect rule system of governance and the 1917 decree on compulsory labor considerably reshaped the history of colonial Kuba. Aided effectively by the Kuba, Belgian colonial officials "decided what kinds of crops over what acreage each adult male villager was compelled to grow," and, worst still was that the dehumanization, high deaths

rates, and punishments following non-compliance was such that “by the 1950s about one of every ten men spent time in jail each year and that most men had done so at one time or another” (215). Although the colonial authorities believed that the economic pressure visited upon the Kuba would result in “development,” the author preferred to use the word “exploitation” to characterize the reality of the Kuba colonial experience. “By the end of colonial rule practically,” the author insists, “no Kuba village was better off than when the era began. . . . Surely, had they known the word, the villagers would not have called this development but rather the contrary: underdevelopment” (243).

The uniqueness of this book derives from the author’s ability to weave interviews of elders, local news, gossip, and dreams in reconstructing the colonial experiences of the people. This bottom-up approach is largely missing in Eurocentric writings about African history. The author’s anticipated hopes for this book is well placed. According to him, if the book “manages to capture the imagination and the interests of most if its readers, and thereby raises greater understanding, awareness, and perhaps sympathy for the lives of Congolese then and now, it will not have been written nor read in vain” (331). Anyone who thoughtfully reads this book will agree that the author realized his hope.

No historical account will adequately put into words the brutalities with which European colonists treated Africans during the colonial rule. Congo’s mistreatment, both in the hands of the notorious King Leopold II and the Belgium government arguably raised European barbarism against innocent Africans to a frightening level. That the European colonial powers have not fully acknowledged or compensated for the crimes they committed against colonial subjects is inconceivable. Movements to seek redress for colonial injustices have continued, however. For instance, after many years of legal wrangling, the ruling of the United Kingdom’s High Court in 2012 permitted Kenyans to seek legal redress for colonial-era abuses. Britain opted to settle out of court in 2013, providing \$30.5 million in compensation to 5,200 victims. The British Foreign Secretary, William Hague, expressed regret over what he described as “abhorrent violations of human dignity” committed more than fifty years ago by his country.<sup>1</sup> This landmark case, I hope, will not only open a doorway to similar claims by millions of Africans who suffered unimaginable crimes in the hands of colonial officials but also open the minds of former colonial governments of the inevitability of acknowledging their past wrongs in the interest of justice which they so often promote. This is critical for, according to Paul Muite, a lawyer for the Mau Mau veterans, “If we are going

---

<sup>1</sup> James Reinl, “Kenyans Celebrate Mau Mau Compensation Win,” *Aljazeera*, June 7, 2013, accessed August 30, 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/06/201366133052307633.html>.

to end impunity around the globe, each nation, each person, must acknowledge their wrongdoing.”<sup>2</sup>

The author’s neglect to cite most of the primary sources he used in the book is not an ideal example of how historians should write. Further, although the author argues that the atrocities committed against the Kuba “are far from the whole story of colonial Congo” (58), his book clearly demonstrates that those atrocious crimes unquestionably remain at the core of any meaningful understanding of the country’s colonial and post-colonial economic, political, and social tragedies. That notwithstanding, this book serves as a reminder that colonial abuses, far from being exhausted, continue to be explored in different ways by historians. Suited for scholars, graduate students, and general readers eager to understand the enduring impact of colonial exploitative policies and practices on African societies, this book is highly sophisticated and intellectually stimulating; it is sure to make a great impression in the field of history and international relations.

Dr. Ogechi E. Anyanwu  
Associate Professor of History  
Eastern Kentucky University  
Richmond, KY.

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.