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A POETICS OF SILENCE AND COLONIAL DISCOURSE:
REPURPOSING AFRICAN FOLKLORE IN IMPERIAL RUSSIA

Introduction

In her re-evaluation of the significance of “colonial folkloristics” in relation to folklore studies and the history of knowledge, Sadhana Naithani has emphasised that

Colonialism generated a phase in folklore scholarship which transcended national boundaries at the level of collection and dissemination of the materials. Folklore collected in different colonies was published in Britain, and from there it traveled in many directions. Colonial folklore scholarship was *transnational* from the initial to the final stage. (Naithani 2010: 7)

While departing from the example of the British empire and its colonial folklore collections from Africa and India, Naithani has demonstrated the applicability of her framework to other scenarios by virtue of the global nature of “colonial folkloristics” itself, which “should be accepted as the term that takes the transnational identity of the phenomena into consideration, and can be applicable across the epistemic and empirical boundaries between the colonizer and the colonized” (Naithani 2010: 4). More recently, scholars have also characterised the production of knowledge in colonial folkloric collections

as both *transactional* and *international*. Transactional insofar as these texts form part of an international, intercultural exchange between the West and colony [...]. This activity is simultaneously international because these intercultural transactions between natives, colonial collectors and European readers circulate through *global* networks.

[...] Given these intercultural matrices of assembly, dissemination and interpretation, the production of knowledge and meaning from, and within, colonial folk texts must be considered both ecumenical and collaborative. (Sidhu 2023: 66)

Building on the transnational dimension of colonial folklore and its circulation through global networks, this article intends to contribute to the discussion about colonial discourse as promoted, among other outlets, through collections of traditions gathered from colonised peoples. To this end, it takes into consideration two case studies that connect three major entities intertwined in a single global network responsible for creating and repurposing colonial knowledge: Africa, European colonial empires (namely British and German), and the Russian empire. Thus, it enables us to shed some light on the dissemination of colonial discourse and practices to countries outside the scope of the scramble for Africa, highlighting their colonial compliance and connections (cf. Lüthi, Falk, Purtschert 2016). In doing so, it will also reveal how meanings were constantly (re)negotiated by the countries that produced such knowledge; indeed,

the transnational approach seeks to account, simultaneously, for two equally important parallel processes on which language and culture as phenomena depend – the ongoing complex and diverse construction of ‘the national’ through particular forms of boundary-making that goes on around language and cultures, and the continuous parallel processes of crossing and transgressing, relativizing or reconfiguring, breaching or transcending the boundaries thus constructed. (Byford, Doak, Hutchings 2020: 6)

The analysis will depart from the last place of codification of a selection of folktales from Africa, i.e. imperial Russia, where such knowledge, created orally by various African peoples, then written down and translated by European colonial agents, ultimately arrived in (Russian) translation. This reverse journey highlights the opacity of these cultural products in relation to their original African sources while demonstrating their alignment with the various theoretical implications of colonial folklore.

African Folklore in the Russian Empire: Dmitrij Koropčevskij and Nikolaj Kun

In 1874 the publishing house of Vasilij Demakov¹ issued a book entitled *Basni i skazki dikich narodov* (Fables and Tales of Savage Peoples), which was presented as a translation from English and lacked the formal indication of an author. The subtitles, however, immediately clarified the “savage peoples” whose folktales were being translated, i.e. “Hottentots” (“Animal Epics and Legends of the Hottentots”) and “Zulus” (“Children’s Tales and Oral Traditions of the Zulus”). If the sources were then specified as *Reynard the Fox in South Africa* by Wilhelm Bleek (1864) and *Nursery Tales, Traditions and Histories of the Zulus* by Henry Callaway (1868), the translator and author of the preface remained more elusive, simply signing with the initials “D.K.”. He was, in fact, quite a renowned figure in populist and intellectual circles at the time: Dmitrij Koropčevskij (1842-1903), a writer and ethnographer who studied at the Faculty of Physics and Mathematics at Moscow University, and later devoted himself to popularising ethnographic knowledge through various publications, even teaching ethnography and anthropogeography at Saint Petersburg University. In addition to other, more theoretical pursuits, Koropčevskij was particularly active in disseminating knowledge about Africa and in translating European colonial literature, to which he also contributed original works.² His interest in the ethnography of this continent was matched by similar – albeit less

¹ Vasilij Demakov was the owner of a typography in Saint Petersburg, where he also founded a printing school at the Imperial Technical Society. Among the many volumes printed in his workshop was the journal *Severnyj vestnik* (The Northern Herald), which was popular among the populist movement and later among decadent writers.

² On the subject of Africa, he translated, for instance, Friedrich Hahn’s *Afrika* (Africa, Russian edition 1903), wrote a biography of David Livingstone (1891), as well as booklets devoted to describing black peoples to a Russian (primarily low-educated) audience, such as *Černye ljudi: Afrika* (Black Peoples: Africa, 1886) and *Arapy* (Arapy, 1898). At the same time, he also translated Darwin, Tylor and Lubbock, and even wrote fiction with the pseudonym “G. Taranskij”. Koropčevskij’s activity as a populariser of knowledge about Africa is discussed in more detail in Frison 2026.

numerous – scholarly efforts pertaining to Oceania, and by a parallel shortage of publications related to the ethnography of the Russian empire, despite the author's proximity to the populist movement. Indeed, the primary focus of his research agenda was the “primitive man”, and he deemed the African and Oceanian people to be the remnants of such a category, who were thus relevant for study. Perhaps the most momentous of his purported goals was to emphasise that classifying human diversity according to race (*rasa*) was fundamentally flawed due to the world population's shared history of racial mixing. Instead, he proposed adopting a cultural approach. Despite his apparent liberal stance and his efforts to promote monogenesis, the categorisation system he created could be conveniently superimposed on the racial one:

The black race has never independently attained high culture or education, i.e. significant scientific and artistic development; the yellow race has reached a high mental level but has stalled and is not progressing; the white race has created an even higher culture and is advancing more and more rapidly along this path. (Koropčevskij 1903: 2)³

Thus, while promoting an object of study that “was neither ethnicity (*narodnost*’), nor race, but people-*narod* as a biological-historical category and the key trope to the populist discourse” (Mogilner 2013: 90), as well as suggesting that any difference in cultural levels was not innate but was in fact the product of purely environmental factors (Koropčevskij 1903), he nevertheless perpetuated the notion of a hierarchical ladder in which the white man was at the top. Most importantly, black people could (and should) climb it, albeit under the influence of white people and at the cost of losing their ‘true’ identity – hence the urgency of studying still ‘primitive’ peoples prior to their inevitable disappearance.⁴

³ Translations from Russian are mine (*A.F.*).

⁴ In this regard, it is important to avoid the pitfall of attributing too much weight to Koropčevskij's ‘liberal’ side, i.e. his belief in the common origin of all humanity. In fact, he relied heavily on racial stereotypes and categories; for instance, he likened “Bushmen” to apes and described “Hottentots” as physically “degenerate types”. He was also preoccupied with skin colour – one of the ways he used to classify African

A second, hefty contribution to the dissemination of African folklore in Russia appeared some forty years later, in 1912. Entitled *Skazki afrikanskich narodov* (African Folktales) and published by Iosif Knebel', this lengthy volume was authored by a certain "N.A.K." and presented to readers as an original work, rather than as a translation. The elusive initials stood for Nikolaj Al'bertovič Kun (1877-1940), a pedagogue, historian, and writer who would become famous in Soviet times for his best-seller *Čto rasskazyvali drevnie greki i rimljane o svoich bogach i gerojach* (What the Ancient Greeks and Romans Said About their Gods and Heroes), reissued multiple times after its first publication in 1914.⁵ Of Russian, German and English (or Scottish) descent, Kun graduated from the Faculty of History and Philology of Moscow University in 1903, and started a career teaching Russian literature and history in Tver, having moved there following criticism of his involvement in student unrest. His close ties with workers and the lower strata of society, forged through educational activities in workers' circles, resulted in his exile during the 1905 Revolution – hence his relocation to Berlin. There, he collaborated with distinguished professors at the local university, including the Egyptologist Eduard Meyer, as well as prominent figures at the Berlin Ethnological Museum, such as the physician and ethnologist Karl von den Steinen. He returned to Tver in 1906, where he continued to contribute to the education sector by funding the opening of a school, and started to devote himself to translating and writing.

His book of African folktales is unique in his body of work, as it is the only one dedicated to such an 'exotic' subject in a career that focused primarily on Ancient Greece and Rome. Information on Kun is scarce, making it difficult to determine the motive behind the publication of such a volume.⁶ However, it is highly plausible that this

peoples (cf. Koropčevskij 1886). Similar risks have also been noticed with regard to coeval European scholars, including the 'liberal' Bleek (Bank 2000).

⁵ After Kun's death, the book circulated in a shortened version with a simplified title that had not been approved by him and, in some cases, even without the indication of his name as its author (Kun-Nemirovskaja 2003: 13).

⁶ To my knowledge, no studies have been conducted on this book. Some of Kun's documents, including notes for his books, are currently held at the State Archive of

interest arose during the author's time in Berlin, where he would have encountered the work of colonial folklorists. Indeed, thanks to its tradition in linguistic studies and its growing colonial empire, Germany had quickly become one of the leading lights of colonial folkloristics, alongside Great Britain (Finnegan 2012: 34-36).⁷ Unlike Koropčevskij, Kun never published theoretical works that would help to interpret his views on African folklore or his stance on ethnicity and race; therefore, this book can only be understood based on what the author wrote in the paratexts. However, Kun did return to African myths and legends in the preface of *What the Ancient Greeks and Romans Said*, where he reflected on the origins of their myths by drawing parallels with present-day "primitive peoples" (*pervobytnye ljudi*), including "Bushmen", Native Americans, and Maori (Kun 1914: 3-23). By doing so, he effectively implied that the entire world population was subject to 'cultural growth' that occurred at different rates, enabling parallels to be drawn between ancient Greece, the cradle of European culture, and contemporary "primitive peoples". As will become clear, despite his strong interest in the history of mythology, his book on African folktales betrayed a clear ethnographic mould that did not translate into his subsequent work. Evidently, he deemed it unnecessary to delve into the ethnography of ancient Greece and Rome, as he considered them to be the bygone representatives of European civilisation, rather than true 'others'. Conversely, it was typical for colonial folklore collections to feature an apparatus describing the environment, the people, and their customs, which was intended to attract readers in the motherlands by virtue of a heightened sense of exoticism (Naithani 2010: 79).

Silencing Africans, Silencing Europeans

Tver and at Tver State University's library. My attempts to contact local librarians to clarify the exact holdings have, for now, been ignored.

⁷ This linguistic focus led to the establishment of university chairs in African languages (such as Bantu) in Hamburg and Berlin, before this occurred in Great Britain. Finnegan also draws attention to the high number of German colonial folklore collections, as well as to their quality.

Koropčevskij's and Kun's collections of African folklore were quite uncommon in imperial Russia, as Russian subjects clearly engaged less with the African continent than their British or German counterparts.⁸ Yet, they were at the same time inscribed in the developing catalogue of 'allogeneous' folkloristics from within the empire, i.e. collections of folklore from non-Slavic ethnic groups (*inorodcy*), created by scholars for a specialised audience and by disseminators of knowledge for the general public. Therefore, they were not an anomaly intended to titillate readers with their inherent exoticism, but rather they drew upon the interest in native cultures propelled by the emergence of ethnography, and shared the same conceptual language and framework.⁹ In this case, however, both publications were entirely based on European 'translations' of folkloric traditions from Africa, as neither Koropčevskij nor Kun had ever had any direct contact with it. Thus, in these two scenarios, African folklore arrived in Russia via a process of double mediation: the native voice was first mediated by European collectors for a (mostly) British and German audience – one that usually shared with the collectors the status of colonial mastery – and then mediated again for a Russian readership. As a result, a poetics of silence emerges, one that amplifies the "colonial method" of omitting relevant information about the original sources and transcription process (e.g. explicit

⁸ It should be taken into consideration, however, that Russians did also collect, transcribe and translate African oral folklore themselves. Nikolaj Gumilev, for instance, collected and translated "as faithfully as possible" twelve "Abyssinian songs" which, according to the poet, had not been published previously in "European languages". In his commentary, Gumilev stated that "The freshness of feeling, the unexpected twists of thought, and the authenticity of the statements make them valuable regardless of the exotic nature of their origin. Their primitivism is extremely instructive, along with European attempts of the same kind" (Gumilev 1988: 483). Cf. also the Amharic transcription and relative Russian translation of a catalogue of "Abyssinian spells" and "fortune-telling books" by the renowned Egyptologist Boris Turaev (Turaev 1906). Following Kun's publication, it was not until 1919 that a similar endeavour was carried out, by Vera Charuzina (Charuzina 1919).

⁹ For instance, collections of 'allogeneous' folklore (especially from the Caucasus or Siberia) not only appeared in specialised journals and ethnographic studies, but were also adapted for a wider audience and popularised (cf. Dorofeev 1897; Kharuzina 1897). The topic of collecting 'allogeneous' folklore in the Russian Empire remains under-researched and deserves further study, especially in its most popular forms.

references to colonial rule and its repercussions, resistance, place and time of recording, the natives' epistemological system; cf. Naithani 2010) and incorporates the European voice into the silence.¹⁰ Indeed, both publications are rather opaque and offer several levels of silence, encompassing African and European sources alike.

The most external level involves the complete erasure of references to 'originals', and it is articulated differently by the two Russian authors. For his part, Kun avoids mentioning the European sources from which he translated and adapted the folktales altogether. In the absence of his working sheets, they can only be reconstructed retrospectively, which presents its own challenges. Based on the tales he selected for publication and how he organised the material, we can identify at least the following sources: apart from the already mentioned Bleek and Callaway (which he retranslated without acknowledging Koropčevskij's prior work and including material that the scholar did not translate), he would have consulted Christian Friedrich Schlenker (*A Collection of Temne Traditions, Fables and Proverbs*, 1861), Edward Steere (*Swahili Tales, as Told by Natives of Zanzibar*, 1870), George McCall Theal (*Kaffir Folk-Lore*, 1882), August Seidel (*Geschichten und Lieder der Afrikaner* [African Tales and Songs, 1896]), and, hypothetically given its close date of publication, John Roscoe (*The Baganda. An Account of their Native Customs and Beliefs*, 1911).¹¹ The German anthologies, offering readers a wider spectrum of tales than collections centred around a single ethnicity, must have been a significant source of inspiration, given the range of tales he offered to the Russian reader. However, his sources are not mentioned in the introduction, in which Kun elaborated on his understanding of African folklore, nor in the

¹⁰ In this regard, the scholar admits to "reading colonial texts like *haiku* poems – that is, with the awareness that something is said, not everything, and that that which is not said is actually as important as that which is said" (Naithani 2010: 28).

¹¹ It is possible, with regard to Swahili folklore, that Kun relied on two other sources, too: C. G. Büttner's *Anthologie aus der Suaheli-Litteratur* (Anthology of Swahili Literature, 1894), and C. Velten's *Märchen und Erzählungen der Suaheli* (Swahili Fairy Tales and Stories, 1898). Based on the Sudanese tales he included, he must have been familiar also with T. von Held's *Märchen und Sagen der Afrikanischen Neger* (Fairy Tale and Legends of the African Negroes, 1904).

ethnographic chapters in which he presented the highly exoticised custodians of such traditional knowledge. He also failed to acknowledge the authors of the copious drawings and photographs that adorn the book, providing captions, but no information on how, when, where and by whom these were made. His rendition, therefore, transforms the tales into a universal common heritage: the 'authors', whether African or European, are irrelevant insofar as myths belong to all of humanity. At the same time, a second repercussion that comes to the fore is that the only remaining voice, and therefore the only one that matters, is that of Kun himself. Ultimately, the authorial self and authoritative voice that readers must trust is that of a Russian author whose claim on the material he published is tenuous at best. Interestingly, rather than clarifying his role as a translator, he presented the collection of folktales as his own original contribution to the genre, effectively becoming the (sole) warden of African 'tradition'.

While Kun was asserting his authority over the published material, Koropčevskij did indeed recognise the contribution of European (colonial) collectors, as well as his role as a mere translator of other people's work. However, he chose not to mention the sources that Bleek and Callaway relied on when creating their collections, which they detailed to varying extents in their apparatuses. Bleek had made it clear that he had entrusted several missionaries in South Africa to provide him with local folklore and had even specified the name of the collector at the beginning of each tale; Callaway, on the other hand, had explained that he had transcribed and translated everything himself by listening to the natives, reflecting extensively upon this process:

A native is requested to tell a tale; and to tell it exactly as he would tell it to a child or a friend; and what he says is faithfully written down. We have thus placed before us the language as nearly as possible such as it is spoken by the natives in their intercourse with each other. And, further, what has been thus written can be read to the native who dictated it; corrections be made; explanations be obtained; doubtful points be submitted to other natives; and it can be subjected to any amount of analysis the writer may think fit to make.

[...] Very many different natives have taken part in the work. [...] It was clearly no part of the work of the collector to make any change in the language with a view of reducing it to one imagined standard of purity. (Callaway 1868: i)

Like many of his colleagues, Callaway was evidently preoccupied with the method behind his activities as a collector, dwelling on the question of authenticity (quickly resolved through the purported ‘faithfulness’ of the transcription and straightforward collaboration with natives), as well as language (which he transcribed using the Latin alphabet and offering notes on pronunciation). In another passage, he also remarked upon the usefulness of transcribing Zulu folklore in the Zulu language *for* the Zulu people, as it would be a valuable tool for (finally) teaching them to read – they would certainly be more captivated by their own tales than by the Bible (Callaway 1868: 1). It is not our intent to expose the intricacies and fallacies of colonial folklorists’ methods and theorisation, for which we refer to other studies (Naithani 2010; Wittenberg 2012; Naidu 2014; Sidhu 2023); what is relevant for our current research is the complete erasure of this kind of information from the Russian edition edited by Koropčevskij. This second level of silence thus affects those few glimpses of the native voice that were still present in Bleek’s and Callaway’s renditions: the very process of recording is completely overlooked, which, as we will see, affects how the question of authenticity is dealt with. Evidently, the focus is not on how Bleek and Callaway collected and transcribed African folklore, nor on the linguistic issues they inevitably encountered. While still punctuating the tales with the occasional footnote, overall Koropčevskij significantly reduced the explanatory notes that, especially in Callaway’s case, would clarify specific terms or provide contextual commentary useful to the reader. The result is a rather bare and abraded product, in which the European voice (as the African one) and process of appropriation are considerably mitigated. Indeed, the Russian reader would have no awareness either of the native voice or of Bleek’s and Callaway’s (colonial) activities.

A third level of silence concerns Koropčevskij’s and Kun’s own process of choosing their sources, selecting the tales, translating them into Russian, and providing the resulting product with new paratexts.

Their introductions or prefaces conspicuously lack any information of this kind, even concealing significant linguistic issues that would inevitably have arisen, such as the rendering of African *realia*, in many cases swiftly replaced by common Russian words (like *korol'* [king]).¹² Of particular note is their failure to account for the selection criteria underpinning their anthologies. While Kun's reticence aligns with the refusal to acknowledge his sources, Koropčevskij's is all the more striking given that he translated only a fraction of the original texts. Neither of them, moreover, explained how they arranged the material (Koropčevskij appears to have followed the originals, particularly Bleek's, as they both categorised the tales according to the featured animals, whereas Kun adopted an ethnographic approach, classifying the tales according to the people to whom they were attributed). It is therefore unsurprising that the question of *their own accuracy* towards the European sources they were translating and adapting is never addressed. And, indeed, variations – even significant – occurred. If censorship was already a rather common feature of European translations of colonial folklore, which in its unabridged form was often considered unpalatable for refined society (especially for its propensity towards sexual and scatological content, cf. Wittenberg 2012), those texts that still maintained them for scholarly pursuits were definitely censored when they entered the Russian market. For example, the Temne people's *Legend of the Creation of the World and the First Humans* appeared in both Schlenker's and Seidel's collections – the former intended for a specialist audience, the latter for a wider readership. While Schlenker included a passage about women's supposedly stronger sexual desire, menstruation, and the sexual act between the first man and the first woman (Schlenker 1861: 19-20), Seidel glossed over it. Kun, who was familiar with both publications, chose to translate the less problematic version and omit the entire passage. This was partly a

¹² It should be noted that the interest in African languages demonstrated by European linguists between the late 19th and early 20th centuries was not derived from an appreciation or recognition of the literary merit of African folklore, but rather from the need to correctly understand the colonised people. Therefore, for all their 'faithfulness' and accuracy, European translations often "flattened" the native voice in the name of "scholarly utility" (Sidhu 2023: 86).

response to the need to comply with tsarist censorship and partly a result of the repurposing of African folktales for a specific children's audience.

Repurposing African Folklore

The originals from which Koropčevskij and Kun translated were the product, first and foremost, of scholarly efforts on the part of their authors. Bleek and Seidel were linguists, and McCall Theal was a historian. While Callaway, Schlenker, Roscoe, and Steere were men of the Church, they also demonstrated a significant interest in the languages of the African peoples they came into contact with, effectively acting as linguists themselves. This attitude is clearly reflected in their publications, which, although still readable by a wider audience, were primarily intended for a specialist readership of fellow folklorists and linguists. As their introductory chapters and prefaces often revealed, their interest in native languages, which frequently manifested as a reliance on parallel texts, was motivated by the practical necessity of administering the colonies more efficiently. Therefore, particular attention was paid to pronunciation and grammatical peculiarities, as these were considered the key to potentially understanding the natives' mindset.

On their part, Koropčevskij and Kun responded to very different needs, which inevitably impacted how they tailored their publications. The 'original' texts were first made available to an audience that, simply by being a constitutive part of the colonial centre, shared with the folklorists an inherent position of power. This specific colonial framework and language, carrying an imbalance of power, were not experienced first-hand by Russian readers, as African lands lay beyond the political control of the tsarist empire. In the new context, methodological reflections about African languages and the need to understand the 'African mind' *to administer the land better* suddenly became superfluous, as Koropčevskij and Kun found these tales relevant to their public for other reasons. Indeed, both publications shifted the focus from a linguistic to an ethnographic perspective in an effort to promote this relatively new discipline to a

wider audience, including not only specialists, but also readers with a well-rounded education and children.

Though the “Hottentot” and “Zulu” tales translated by Koropčevskij could clearly be appreciated by a broad community, given the absence of specialist footnotes or detailed explanations that might have deterred less educated readers from buying the book, the introduction was meant to bridge the gap between readers familiar with European scholars such as Edward Tylor, and those that did not necessarily know about them or their theories on the origins of the human race. In this respect, Koropčevskij acted as a mediator of specialist knowledge, using such ‘simple’ and accessible material as tales to convey what was truly important to him: the idea of the common origins of humanity. Thus, in the preface he immediately emphasised the validity of “comparative methods and developmental theory in the study of human mental life in its various forms” and stressed the need to recognise “the fundamental unity of the human mind in all its forms, whether primitive or advanced”, in line with the views of Edward Tylor, Adolf Bastian, Max Müller, and Heimann Steinthal (*Basni i skazki* 1874: 3). By making this point, Koropčevskij was not only advocating for an understanding of the commonality of the world’s population, but also offering a key to interpret the tales he had translated as truly representative of the psychology of “Hottentots” and “Zulus”. In this way, his desire to demonstrate the unity of humankind paradoxically converged with the main “constant” of colonial folklore scholarship, i.e. “the belief that folklore reveals the mind of its carriers” which, as evidenced, was aimed at control and administrative purposes in the original context (Naithani 2010: 111). The centrality of the argument in favour of the unity of humankind is also evident in the unusual manner in which the question of authenticity is addressed. Thus, Koropčevskij distanced himself from Bleek’s argument that “Hottentot” tales were heavily influenced by – or even derived from – northern African traditions on the basis of grammatical similarities, highlighting instead the scarcity of reliable sources on this matter. Conversely, he took advantage of thematic and content similarities to reiterate the common origin of humanity:

In the absence of direct evidence of Hottentot tales being borrowed, we can safely assume that their apparent similarity to the Indo-European tales we know of is due to the fundamental similarities of the human mind. This phenomenon belongs to the same category as the similarities between Greek and New Zealand myths, and the explanations of certain aspects of natural life that are common to both the American savage and the European commoner. (*Basni i skazki* 1874: 8)

By taking this stance against Bleek's argument, Koropčevskij was, in effect, establishing himself as the most competent and up-to-date authority on the matter. At the same time, while reiterating the need to regard humanity as a single entity, he was perpetuating a stratigraphy of stereotypes on its inherent subdivisions, based on cultural level. Thus, dwelling on the less known "Zulus", he characterised them as "the strongest and most aggressive tribe [*plemja*] of the vast Kaffir people [*narod*]" and probably "interbred" with Polynesians (*Basni i skazki* 1874: 8, 9). Both "Zulus" and "Hottentots" were presented to the reader as the current remnants of primitive peoples, whose tales belonged to "the childhood period of history" and were therefore useful to anthropologists and comparative psychologists as fossils were to palaeontologists and biologists (3). In this regard, the final remarks appear particularly relevant, as they synthesised, in just a few lines, Koropčevskij's thought. Stressing his hope that a non-specialised readership would still find the tales interesting and not just "dry ethnographic material" like "fragments of arrows or scraps of savage clothing", the scholar created a clear juxtaposition between these naïve "savages", for whom "the animal world is not allegorical, but true and real" and whose imagination bears a "primordial simplicity", and his fellow Russians, i.e. the worldly adults. Indeed, he reminds them to go back to the time of their own childhood in order to truly appreciate these "elementary fictions" that carried an element of "absurdity" (9-10).

For his part, Kun, addressing a readership of children, reiterated the idea that "Negro tales" were key to comprehending the African mindset, and characterised them as "folk literature" (*narodnaja literatura*): "This folk literature reveals the sorrows and joys, labours and concerns of negroes; it shows us their worldview, character and

soul” (Kun 1912: 5). Indeed, while Kun was not particularly interested in demonstrating the commonality of humankind, his passion for myths and their development led him to find common ground between different peoples and ethnicities on the basis of storytelling: “There is not a single nation on earth that does not have its own folk art, its own folk literature, whose works are passed down from generation to generation by grandfathers and fathers to their grandchildren and sons” (3). This universality gave him enough reason to interpret the oral traditions of African peoples through categories he was accustomed to, defining them as fairy tales (*skazki*), chants (*pesni*), proverbs (*posloviy*), and riddles (*zagadki*). Thus, he inscribed them within the Russian classification system, which was part of the Western intellectual tradition, perpetuating the colonial “assumption that folklore everywhere will emerge in the categories identified in Europe” (Naithani 2010: 36) while ignoring the natives’ own aesthetic and scientific categories.¹³ He went so far as to present his young readers with an idealised and fabricated image of the natives’ performance, robbing them of agency and true meaning and confining them within a romanticised aesthetic: “Tired of hard labour and the constant, intense struggle for survival, on the threshold of his simple hut or by the fire during a break after hunting, the negro tells tales and myths, poses riddles, sings songs; he also accompanies his work with songs” (Kun 1912: 5). This Western lens through which interpret the material was also reflected in the second classification system he suggested, which was based on content or presumed thematic affinities. Thus, Kun distinguished between tales of “monsters, sorcerers, witches and cannibals” (effectively comparable to fairy tales), tales in which the protagonists were animals (fables), and tales based on everyday life, which fall into the category of Western folkloric tales from a distant past, preserving the memory of

¹³ Indeed, as the scholar has noticed, “The oral narratives of the colonized were subject to complete change of identity in their international *avatar* in the English language. At an overall level they would be seen as reflecting the physical and mental world of their narrators, but their specific value and role in the societies of their existence would be dissociated from them just like the way the African categories of narratives would be obliterated under the system of understanding introduced by the collectors” (Naithani 2010: 96).

a way of life that has now been lost. In this regard, being “negroes” still “at a low stage of development”, their tales are seen as particularly useful not to shed light on a remote and mysterious past, but rather to learn about the present-day African people, caught between their supposedly a-historical way of life and the modernisation brought by the European colonisation of the continent. In Kun’s mind, these narrations – whose authenticity is never questioned, just as the mediation process that occurred between the unnamed African and European narrators – effectively transform themselves into a reliable source of ethnographic information:

Negro tales are very valuable material for anyone who wants to learn about the worldview, lifestyle, customs, and traditions of negroes, because even when telling tales about monstrous or supernatural creatures created by their imagination, negroes always paint a strikingly accurate picture of their lives, without embellishment. (Kun 1912: 4)

This is one of the ways employed by Kun to remind his young readers, throughout the book, of the substantial difference between them and the African peoples whose tales they are reading. Indeed, in Kun’s rendition, natives are completely devoid of any kind of agency, as, apart from the vague and stereotyped passages quoted above, the habits and customs surrounding the act of storytelling are never discussed in detail or even mentioned again. Consequently, the numerous tales that Kun offers to the Russian public become the property of an essentialised, super-individual entity. Thus, if humanity is recognised as a fundamental whole thanks to the common practice of myth-making, hierarchies are constantly reinforced from the outset: the introduction alone contains numerous remarks about “negroes” being naïve, lacking scientific knowledge and being cruel due to their savage status. At the same time, any suggestion that they possess reason and an inquisitive mind is offered as an almost surprised concession.

Exoticness and alterity are indeed the main features of Kun’s rendition of the tales, as these gradually lose their centrality amidst new paratexts. As has been noted, in the context of colonial folklore “the folk is not expected to be sanitized and made dearer to the

middle-class imagination. The colonized folk must appear extremely exotic, wild (not natural), generally cruel, superstitious, cunning (not intelligent) [...]. This image is meant to shock or amuse readers” (Naithani 2010: 112). This explains the tendency of colonial folklorists to provide vivid descriptions of the natives, lingering on physical traits or habits perceived as strange. Interestingly, although Kun erased the ‘original’ paratexts that already offered this kind of othering, he created his own by borrowing information and images from a variety of sources, making his book the ultimate (colonial) pastiche. In contrast to the classification systems he hinted at in the introduction (genre, content), he organised the entire book according to an ethnographic principle, grouping the tales by their ethnic origins.¹⁴ Each resulting sub-section of tales is thus prefaced by a thorough ethnographic treatise explaining to Russian children the habits, character, and physical features of the respective population. The information is offered in a dry style, proper to an ethnographic publication rather than a collection of folktales for a young audience, with a clear tendency towards generalisations and vagueness regarding sources (“*Travellers* who encountered the Hottentots in their former settlements speak highly of them, noting their good nature, hospitality, and honesty, although *they* say that the Hottentots are a sluggish and lazy people”, Kun 1912: 7-8). Rather than being depicted in a purely a-historical dimension, African peoples are placed in a present that endangers their authenticity, as Europeans are pictured creeping in, partly bringing civilisation, partly bringing pernicious habits like drinking, but always ‘contaminating’ these otherwise monolithic and unchanging cultures. However, it should be noted that the book largely glossed over and sanitised European violent colonial practices and abuse of natives, which was not entirely due to its intended young audience. For instance, there is no mention of the genocide of the Herero and Nama peoples at the hands of the Germans, not even in a manner suitable for children, despite it being a hot topic when Kun was preparing this publication.

¹⁴ Kun included folklore of “Hottentots” (Khoikhoi), “Ovangererosy” (Herero people), “Van’jamvezi” (Nyamwezi people), Baganda, Somali, Swahili, “Negroes from West Africa” and “Sudanese Negroes”.

From (unacknowledged) authors of their own tales, in Kun's rendition African peoples thus become involuntary objects of study, at the mercy of the Russian eye. This shift is reinforced by the insertion of ethnographic drawings and photographs which aim to make Kun's descriptions more vivid for a young reader. Unusually for a book of tales, these are the only illustrations, which accentuates the shift in focus: the tales themselves, unillustrated, almost fall into the background, while the ethnographic component comes to the fore.¹⁵ The natives' voice (or rather, what remains of it) is not even central, having been replaced by Kun's authorial (and authoritative) self, perfectly capable of substituting for the natives in recounting their tales and, at the same time, of studying them as an ethnographic phenomenon in their own right. By taking on the roles of folklorist and ethnographer specialising in black Africa, Kun effectively reclaimed a place for Russians among the European colleagues he never mentioned. Strikingly, the European collections of colonial folklore he presumably consulted were devoid of illustrations, being centred instead on the linguistic component – appendices and apparatuses featured transcriptions of native languages in the Latin alphabet, glossaries and notes on pronunciation, but never illustrations.¹⁶ Evidently, he must have consulted other sources altogether, which makes reconstructing his working process even more complicated. While the vast majority of the drawings can be traced back to Friedrich Ratzel's *Volkerkunde* (The History of Mankind, 1885-1888) and Élisée Reclus' *L'Homme et la Terre* (Man and the Earth, 1905-1908), the origin of the numerous photographs remains overall unknown.¹⁷ However, their function seems clear: to

¹⁵ This particular iconography can also be found in collections of 'allogeneous' tales, although, in most cases, these also displayed drawings depicting the key moments of the tales themselves (Kharuzina 189?).

¹⁶ An exception is J. Roscoe's *The Baganda* (1911). However, given how close its publication date was to that of Kun's volume, it is uncertain whether the writer managed to examine it. In any case, Roscoe's illustrations did not feature in Kun's edition, which included different photographs of Baganda people.

¹⁷ It is difficult even to determine how Kun came to know about those whose origins are relatively easy to trace. For instance, a photograph of a group of Herero people (Kun 1912: 124) was included in a photographic album published in 1904 by G. Lande on the occasion of the Herero uprising, which resulted in the genocide of the

accentuate the exotic nature of the final product and the ‘savagery’ of the peoples whose habits he was detailing. Unlike Kun’s written remarks, the images showed no trace of European influence or modernisation, instead presenting a fresco of stillness and hinting at a-historical times. Their crude naturalism, moreover, contrasted with the front cover of the book, a colourful drawing certainly more fitting for a children’s book, stylising in a safe manner the perceived essence of Africa: idols, primitive vases and jewels, tribal masks, and spears [Fig. 1]. Instead, the grim pictures of semi-naked African children and menacing African warriors conveyed a sense of unease and danger, constantly distancing the young reader from the fictional world of folktales and grounding them in reality [Fig. 2]. Indeed, the entire publication was intended to convey the most exotic and savage, and sometimes dangerous, image of Africa, to which contributed the choice of omitting the folklore traditions of its northern regions, traditionally considered the most ‘civilised’.

Conclusion

As folklore traditions travelled from Africa to Europe and then on to Russia, global networks of shared colonial knowledge emerged. The adaptations of African colonial folklore in the Russian empire reveal a dual dynamic: on the one hand, a steady estrangement from the originals due to a poetics of silence affecting both the African and European voices, alongside a concurrent appropriation of authority by the Russian authors/translators. On the other hand, images and practices characteristic of a colonial situation were still preserved. Thus, one could cite the perpetuation of colonial tropes about African peoples; the disregard for the natives’ categories of thought; the opacity surrounding the transcription, translation and compilation of the collections; the condescending superiority towards natives; the avoidance of mentioning the most disturbing facts of colonialism (to the advantage of the Europeans’ image in Russia); and the general

Herero and Nama peoples. However, the same picture also circulated as a colonial postcard. It is impossible to clarify whether Kun was aware of the album, came into contact with the postcard or saw the photographs in other media, such as periodicals. For more on the Herero and Nama genocide, see Nielsen 2022.

inflation of exoticism. As they were perpetuating mechanisms of representation proper to colonial agents, Koropčevskij and Kun effectively took their place, establishing themselves as folklorists and ethnographers who were experts in Africa in their own right. Their distance from the African source material, however, could not have been more pronounced – a paradox that remained *de facto* irrelevant in the global dimension of colonial folkloristics, which “created intellectual and political loops of international cultural network[s] in which the oral expressive cultures of the erstwhile colonized peoples and their study [are] still trapped” (Naithani 2010: 122).

POST-PRINT

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African Folklore; Adaptation; Russian Empire; European Colonialism; Colonial Folkloristics; Dmitrij Koropčevskij; Nikolaj Kun

Bio

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