



## Congolese Clichés

Fred Roberts, London, 24/4/08

Victorian era clichés about Africa are all-too-often the mainstay for reporters and writers

*Always use the word 'Africa or 'Darkness' or 'Safari' in your title. Subtitles may include the words 'Zanzibar', 'Masai', 'Zulu', 'Zambezi', 'Congo', 'Nile', 'Big', 'Sky', 'Shadow', 'Drum', 'Sun' or 'Bygone'. Also useful are words such as 'Guerrillas', 'Timeless', 'Primordial' and 'Tribal'. Binyavanga Wainaina, How to Write About Africa (Granta 92)*

The going rate for a Congolese press pass is around \$500 a year. They should come rubber-stamped with a reminder to visiting journalists of Martin Amis's view that "all writing is a campaign against cliché".

I'm all for free speech, but I like to imagine that a rejuvenated Ministry of Tourism might one day go further, warning of hefty fines for gratuitous references to 'The Heart of Darkness'.

Good correspondents try to explain and not just describe the complex woes of 'troubled' countries such as the Congo. To do so in terms that recall Victorian ideas about darkness (savagery) and light (civilisation) seems amazingly retrogressive, dismissive and complacent.

Yet that's exactly what we see, again and again, in otherwise informative articles about Darfur ('My journey into Africa's heart of darkness, *Sydney Herald Sun*, 9 March), Rwanda, the Congo and now Zimbabwe and even South Africa ('Cast some light on heart of darkness', *Tribune Magazine*, 6 April).

It is the equivalent of evoking Dickens in every other article about contemporary Britain.

Tim Butcher, former Africa Correspondent of *The Daily Telegraph*, recently retraced Stanley's journey across the Congo. Fear is the leitmotif of the resulting book, *'Blood River, A Journey to Africa's Broken Heart'*. The opening paragraph of the prologue ends, "Outside was the Congo and I was terrified".

A recital of the dangers of "the most daunting, backward country on Earth" follows, thrillingly including psychotic killers, poisoned arrows and cannibalism.

Reviewers praised the author's bravery in

putting himself through such an ordeal for our entertainment. (In a puzzling turn of phrase, Nicolas Shakespeare declared the book "a rosary of unstinting horror".)

Rory MacLean, himself a travel writer, concluded that "there is little difference between the Congo seen by Stanley and by Butcher" and advised Guardian readers, "We can weep for this betrayed, failed land, but please don't go there."

It would be foolish to pretend that life in the Congo is all beer and skittles. Decades of conflict and criminal mismanagement continue to take their toll, as Marcus Bleasdale's photographs eloquently attest. But it's not all relentless misery, and a little corrective nuance wouldn't go amiss. Expatriates, at least, have it easy.

Kinshasa may lack cinemas, bookshops and decent cafes, but generally suffers less gun and street crime than London, never mind Lagos, Nairobi or Johannesburg. (Admittedly, there have been a couple of dramatic but short-lived bouts of looting and election violence.)

To undo a cliché, we need only think about it. Conrad's novel was informed by first-hand

experience of a ruthlessly exploitative system that killed millions of Congolese for profit.

If only Conrad had had more courage of a conviction he hints at: that European civilisation was built on the profits of truly savage inhumanity to man.

Because Conrad remained resolutely ambiguous, more interested in psychology than history, and probably a little racist like most of his contemporaries, what sticks in the mind - and the popular imagination - is the forbidding atmosphere which he so successfully conjured up, distorting the scenery by looking at it through fearful European eyes.

Perhaps as a result, delightful T-shirts are on sale at the US Embassy in Kinshasa emblazoned with the words 'I survived the Heart of Darkness.'



*Street Kids in a centre for street children in Kinshasa. Some facilities are available in exchange for light labour. These consist of very basic schooling, food and lodgings. There are some centres that have been criticised for being abusive to the children.*