Finns in the Congo

Opportunities and Colonial Experiences in a Foreign Empire

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Shedding light on the participation of actors from small states in colonial projects in the extra-European world, this article tracks two rather ordinary Finns living increasingly, and perhaps surprisingly, colonial lives far away from home in what to them was a foreign empire: the Belgian Congo of the early twentieth century. Saga Roos, a bourgeois woman traveling to join her husband, and Akseli Leppänen, an engineer and riverboat mechanic, show how mobile Europeans from the margins of Europe and from a middle-class socio-economic background took and navigated opportunities in the world of empires. Roos and Leppänen, belonging to the educated classes, were people on the move who went to the Congo to pursue leisure and work. They never intended to stay for good or to become settlers, but instead acted as mobile transmitters of knowledge, impacted by and disseminating exoticist and racialised discourses concerning 'Africa' and 'Africans' that circulated far and wide in colonial settings. Although they came from a country that had no formal colonies in Africa, Roos and Leppänen attest that Finns were not outsiders, or even distant or critical observers of colonial rule. Rather, they accepted and actively took part in the co-production of colonial rule and racial order. They show how actors from small states contributed to and co-created the extra-European colonial world, revealing a pan-European colonial project of shared mindsets and experiences.

Published by Royal Netherlands Historical Society | KNHG

DOI: 10.51769/bmgn-lchr.20006 | www.bmgn-lchr.nl | e-ISSN 2211-2898 | print ISSN 0165-0505

Dit artikel belicht de deelname van actoren uit kleine staten aan koloniale projecten in de niet-Europese wereld en volgt twee Finnen die in toenemende mate ver van huis een koloniaal leven leidden in een voor hen vreemd wereldrijk: het Belgisch-Congo van het begin van de twintigste eeuw. Saga Roos, een vrouw uit de burgerij, en Akseli Leppänen, een ingenieur en monteur op een rivierboot, laten zien hoe mobiele Europeanen uit de middenklasse, en afkomstig uit de Europese periferie, kansen grepen en benutten in de koloniale wereld. Roos en Leppänen waren twee hoger opgeleide mensen die veel reisden en naar Congo vertrokken om te werken en zich te ontspannen. Ze waren nooit van plan om voorgoed te blijven of zich daar te vestigen, maar traden in plaats daarvan op als mobiele kennisoverdragers, die beïnvloed waren door wijdverbreide exotiserende en geracialiseerde vertogen over 'Afrika' en 'Afrikanen' en deze zelf ook verder verspreidden. Hoewel ze afkomstig waren uit een land dat zelf geen formele koloniën in Afrika had, laten de casussen van Roos en Leppänen zien dat Finnen geen buitenstaanders, en ook geen afstandelijke of kritische waarnemers, van het koloniale bewind waren. Integendeel, zij accepteerden het koloniale bewind en de raciale orde en namen actief deel aan de coproductie ervan. Deze casussen laten zien hoe actoren uit kleine staten hebben bijgedragen aan en mede vorm hebben gegeven aan de niet-Europese koloniale wereld, waarmee een pan-Europees koloniaal project van gedeelde denkwijzen en ervaringen wordt blootgelegd.

Introduction

'At last all was set and the luggage packed into air and ant safe tin coffins. These could not weigh more than 35 kilos as that is as much a black needs to carry atop of his curly hair.'[1] These are the words of Saga Roos (née Gester, 1906-1999), a newlywed Finnish author en route to the Belgian Congo in 1933, where she was to join her husband, who worked as a riverboat captain. She was making her way from Turku in Finland, via Antwerp, where the ship's departure drew big crowds and passengers from all corners of Europe. As Roos noted in her memoirs, beside the Belgians there were Italians, French, Russians, Portuguese, and people of many other nationalities making their way to Africa. Some were returning to the Congo from a vacation, while others, like her, ventured there for the first time. The latter looked 'pale', 'timid', and 'frightened', as if uncertain of what awaited them. 'My knowledge of this dark, mysterious land was trivial', Roos remarked. She expected it to be extremely hot as 'in a sauna' that was 'running out of

1 Original: 'Viimein kuitenkin kaikki oli kaikki kunnossa ja tavarat pakatuina ilma- ja muurahaistiiviisiin peltiarkkuihin. Ne eivät saaneet painaa 35 kiloa enempää, sillä suurempaa kuormaa ei mustan tarvitse kiharaisen päänsä päällä kantaa.' Saga Roos, *Sadun ja Seikkailun Kongo: Elämyksiä päiväntasaajan paratiisissa* (WSOY 1949) 6-7. All translations from Finnish to English are the author's. The author wishes to thank the Kone Foundation for its support.

air'. Bewildered and timid, she added how it all 'felt like plunging head first into emptiness'.[2]

Roos's description of the departure from Antwerp suggests the pan-European characteristics of the Belgian Congo as a colonial project, offering opportunities to people from different corners of Europe, including its margins, such as Finland. The Belgian Congo, as this special issue attests, was a practical 'project Europe'. Not only was the cast pan-European, but, as Roos's remarks hint, exoticist and racialised knowledge of a potentially 'perilous' and 'dark' Africa seems to have been shared. Indeed, Roos and other Finns were impacted by discourses concerning Africa and Africans that circulated far and wide in colonial settings, which they also disseminated themselves.[3] Rather than questioning these notions, Roos voiced them frequently and spread them in her memoirs, *Sadun ja Seikkailun Kongo* (Congo of Fairy Tales and Adventure, 1949). Her book was aimed at a broad Finnish readership and was published by a big commercial publishing house, WSOY, in both official languages of Finland: Finnish and Swedish. Roos and her memoirs demonstrate how Finns were not outsiders to colonial operations of race and knowledge, but rather active participants and co-producers in the prevailing pan-European notions of a dark and perilous Africa, as well as eager consumers and readers of colonial knowledge.

This article follows two mobile Finns – the bourgeois traveller Saga Roos and the riverboat mechanic and engineer Akseli Leppänen (1879-1938, Figure 1) – demonstrating how mobile Europeans from the margins of Europe such as Finland and from a middle-class socio-economic background took and navigated opportunities in the world of empires. Shedding light on the participation of actors from small states in colonial projects in the extra-European world, this article tracks these two rather ordinary Finns living increasingly, and perhaps surprisingly, colonial lives far away from home in what to them was a foreign empire: the early-twentieth-century Belgian Congo. The Finns discussed here accepted the prevalent racial order, including everyday violence, and actively took part in the co-production of colonial knowledge, including the stereotypical and exotic imageries that were part of it. It showcases the ways in which colonial histories of the Congo extended to a marginal Nordic country through opportunities, mobility, and shared mindsets and sentiments. If possessing the Congo, as scholars have suggested, allowed Belgium the pretensions of being *la plus grande Belgique*, being part of this colonial project in turn allowed Finns to feel that they also belonged to a grander, shared European venture.[4]

2 Roos, *Sadun ja Seikkailun Kongo*, 5, 7-8.

3 On colonial knowledge and racialised views of Africa by Finns and other Nordics, see John L. Hennessey and Janne Lahti (eds.), 'Nordics in Motion: Transimperial Spaces and Global Experiences of Nordic Colonialism', special issue of *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 51:3 (2023) 409-420. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2023.2205699.

4 Elizabeth Buettner, 'Europe and its entangled colonial pasts: Europeanizing the "imperial turn"', in: Britta Timm Knudsen (ed.),

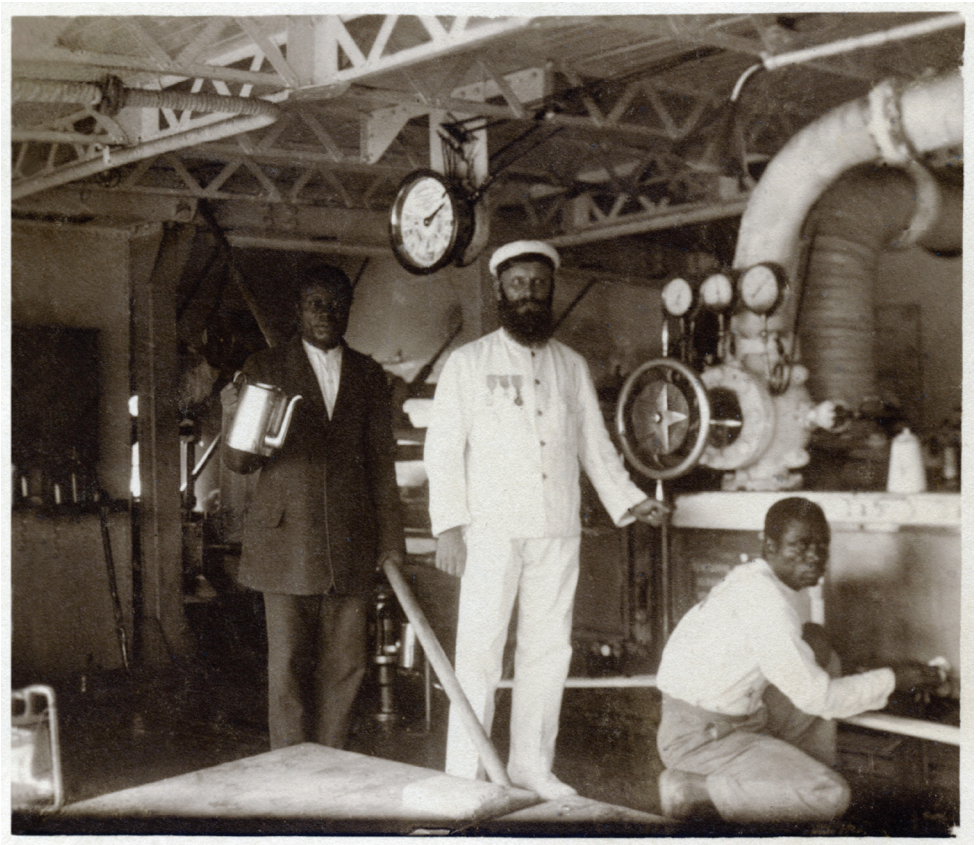

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Figure 1. Akseli Leppänen [centre] and his crewmen – whose names are unknown – in the riverboat engine room, the Belgian Congo, 1913-1931. AFR_0030, Akseli Leppänen Collection, Finnish Migration Institute Archives, CC BY 4.0. https://finna.fi/Record/siirtolaisuusinstituutti.340_m122?sid=4764840269.

As the other contributions to this special issue demonstrate, Europeans from multiple countries – including Luxembourg and the Netherlands – found opportunities in the 'colonial Congo'.[5] It has been estimated that as many as 1,000 up to 2,000 Nordics – Danes, Finns, Norwegians, and Swedes – took part in the colonisation of the Congo as army officers, mercenaries, sailors, engineers, travellers, and missionaries. Around 200 of these were Finns.[6] Most were educated and relatively young men, such as Leppänen, who was in his mid-thirties when arriving in the Congo. They went looking for work and adventure, for opportunities in times when there seemed precariously few in their home country. Others, such as Roos, went because of a mixture of family obligations and opportunities for leisure travel. The famed author Joseph Conrad, who wrote the mythical and critical description of the colonial mentality in *The Heart of Darkness* (1899), already mentioned the presence of Nordics in the Congo in 1890.[7] Yet their roles and impact have frequently been overlooked in the histories of colonialism in Belgian Africa, partly because these countries did not have a formal empire of their own on the continent. More recently, we notice a growing scholarship on Nordic peoples in the Congo.[8] Discussing Danes, Norwegians or Swedes, these

Decolonizing Colonial Heritage: New Agendas, Actors and Practices in and beyond Europe (Routledge 2023) 25-43. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003100102; Kris Manjapra, *Colonialism in Global Perspective* (Cambridge University Press 2020); Idesbald Goddeeris, 'Postcolonial Belgium: The Memory of the Congo', *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 17:3 (2015) 434-451. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2014.998253.

5 Gijs Dreijer, 'Dutch Entrepreneurs in the Congo: Navigating "Belgian" Imperialism in the Congo Free State and Belgian Congo (1870s-1920s)', *BMGN – LCHR* 140:4 (2025). DOI: https://doi.org/10.51769/bmgn-lchr.19951; Kevin Goergen, 'Negotiating Assimilation: Luxembourgers in the Congo Basin During the Interwar Period (1918-1939)', *BMGN – LCHR* 140:4 (2025). DOI: https://doi.org/10.51769/bmgnlchr.20005; Idesbald Goddeeris, Amandine Lauro, and Guy Vanthemsche (eds.), *Koloniaal Congo. Een geschiedenis in vragen* (Polis/Pelckmans 2020).

6 Jouko Aaltonen and Seppo Sivonen, *Kongon Akseli: Suomalaiset ja skandinaavit kolonialismin rakentajina* (Into 2022) 22.

7 Gene M. Moore, 'How Real are the Fictional Europeans in Joseph Conrad's Africa?', *Culture.pl*. https://culture.pl/en/article/how-real-are-the-fictional-europeans-in-joseph-conrads-africa. Accessed 6 August 2025.

8 On Nordics in colonial Congo, see Diana M. Natermann, 'To Maintain or Adjust? On the Whiteness of Swedish Men in the Congo Free State (1884-1914)', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 51:3 (2023) 464-486. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2023.2205746; Peter Tygesen, *Kongospår: Norden i Kongo – Kongo i Norden* (Projektet Kongospår 2005); Espen Wæhle, 'Scandinavian Agents and Entrepreneurs in the Scramble for Ethnographica During Colonial Expansion in the Congo', in: Kirsten Alsaker Kjerland and Bjørn Enge Bertelsen (eds.), *Navigating Colonial Orders: Norwegian Entrepreneurship in Africa and Oceania*, 1st ed., (Berghahn Books 2015) 339-367. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1515/9781782385400-018; Peter Forsgren, 'I den europeiska civilisationens tjänst: Svenska kolonisationsberättelser från mellankrigstidens Afrika', *Historisk Tidskrift* 140:3 (2020) 444-475. See also H. Jenssen-Tusch, *Skandinaver*

works have shied away from looking at Finns, however, about whom very little scholarship exists, even in Finnish.[9] This article shows a case of Finns in motion in the world of empires. Following the scholarship by Raita Merivirta and myself on British East Africa, it shows how Nordics accepted and shared the racial order in colonial Africa, and how they witnessed and participated in its construction and maintenance.[10]

The scant research on the topic is rather symptomatic of how Finnish experiences in all of colonial Africa remain largely hidden not only within broader histories of European colonialism in Africa but also in the national Finnish history that has traditionally been reluctant to recognise and elaborate on the colonial involvement of Finns. As historian Bernhard Schär has pointed out, European countries such as Switzerland or Poland did not transform into the modern nations they are today through exchanges and experiences with their own extra-European empires. Yet the paths to nationhood of these smaller countries, often politically and economically at the margins of Europe, were significantly impacted by the world of empires around them, and they became part of the processes of colonialism through 'involvements in colonies which, from their perspectives, belonged to "foreign" European powers'.[11] It was in these foreign empires that Finns also fashioned opportunities and identities, being particularly active in the

I Congo: svenske, norske og danske mænds og kvinders virksomhed i den uafhængige Congostat (Gyldendalske Bokhanded 1902-1905).

9 Aaltonen and Sivonen, *Kongon Akseli* offers a good introduction to Finns in the Congo, while not focusing on linking the Finns to pan-European colonial projects, opportunities or shared mindsets. On Finns in the southern Katanga mining region, see Timo Särkkä, 'Kolonialismin toiseus ja kamera: C. T. Erikssonin valokuvat ja Katangan kuparikenttien suomalaiset "pioneerit" 1901-1906', *Historiallinen aikakauskirja* 118:4 (2020) 521-533. DOI: https://doi.org/10.54331/haik.140762.

10 Raita Merivirta, 'Nordic Settler Identities in Colonial Kenya: Class, Nationality and Race in Bror and Karen Blixen's Transimperial Lives', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 51:3 (2023) 487-509. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2023.2205695; Janne Lahti, 'Nordic Connectors: The Gallen-Kallela Family and Colonial Lives in East Africa and New Mexico', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 51:3 (2023) 510-533. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2023.2205694.

11 Bernhard C. Schär, 'Switzerland, Borneo and the Dutch Indies: Towards a New Imperial History of Europe, c.1770-1850', *Past & Present* 257:1 (2022) 135. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtab045. See also Barbara Lüthi, Francesca Falk, and Patricia Purtschert (eds.), 'Colonialism without Colonies: Examining Blank Spaces in Colonial Studies', special issue of *National Identities* 18:1 (2016). DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/14608944.2016.1107178; Bernhard C. Schär and Mikko Toivanen (eds.), *Integration and Collaborative Imperialism in Modern Europe: At the Margins of Empire, 1800-1950* (Bloomsbury 2025); Ruramisai Charumbira, 'Becoming Imperial: A Swiss Woman's Shifting Identity in British Southern Africa', in: Patricia Purtschert and Harald Fischer-Tiné (eds.), *Colonial Switzerland: Rethinking Colonialism from the Margins* (Palgrave 2015) 157-178.

British realm of southern Africa (mostly as miners), in the German colony of Southwest Africa (mostly as missionaries), and in the Belgian Congo.[12]

Most Finns who went to the Congo never left much of a paper trail, but Leppänen's diaries and Roos's published memoir allow us to examine their experiences and views. This article relies heavily on Leppänen's surviving, unpublished diaries spanning 1915 to 1921 which represent the most expansive personal account of any Finn in the colonial Congo. Leppänen writes about his daily life, encounters, feelings, and views on the world around him, often sparsely, sometimes in more detail. Unfortunately, his diaries from 1921 onwards have not been preserved.[13] The second main primary source for this article is Roos's memoir, published in 1949, a decade and a half after her journey to the Congo. In her book, Roos caters to the expectations of her readers, writing of exotic encounters and lands, and constantly depicting herself as a civilised European against this colonial world, its landscapes and peoples. While Roos wrote of colourful personal experiences, so did Leppänen, albeit in a different medium, in a less adventurous tone, and for different, more private, purposes. While the former addressed the public's appetite for African thrills and the exotic, the latter recorded his daily life for his own use, to make sense of the colonial world he lived in. Roos in turn made sense of it to the reading public, as was common among published travel writers in colonial contexts.[14]

While the documents Leppänen and Roos left behind vary in purpose, and arguably provide different but also complementary windows into the colonial experiences of Finns in the Congo, their actual experiences have plenty in common. Both pay attention to similar subjects, whether wildlife, local Africans or the European community. Both were transients in the Congo, people on the move. They never planned on settling, but they went, stayed, and left, as practically all Finns did. Belonging to the educated classes, Roos and Leppänen acted as mobile transmitters of knowledge, impacted by, sharing, and disseminating the exoticist and racialised discourses that circulated in colonial settings.

12 While there exists no general study of Finns in colonial Africa, there is a recent study on the Finnish missionaries in German Southwest Africa. See Leila Koivunen and Raita Merivirta (eds.), *Colonial Aspects of Finnish-Namibian Relations, 1870-1990: Cultural Change, Endurance and Resistance* (SKS 2024). DOI: https://doi.org/10.21435/sfh.28.

13 Akseli Leppänen's preserved diaries are housed at the Finnish Migration Institute in Turku, inv. nr. 1986_10_päiväkirja_001 until _004, and available online at https://www.finna.fi/Collection/siirtolaisuusinstituutti.340/CollectionList?lng=en-gb. Accessed 8 August 2025.

14 The classic work on colonial travel writing remains Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (Routledge 1992). On European travel in Africa, see also Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism* (Routledge 1991); Chery McEwan, *Gender, Geography and Empire: Victorian Women Travellers in Africa* (Routledge 2000).

As transimperial history has looked at the movements and entanglements of peoples in what to them were foreign empires, it has increasingly stressed the joint nature of colonial projects that draw on multiple European places and nationalities. Scholars have sought to bring about deeper and more systematic understandings of the nature of cooperation, competition and connectivity among peoples in and between empires, to stress opportunity and entanglements across national lines while challenging siloed fields of inquiry that would look at the history of a colony in isolation.[15] It has thus blurred the lines between the internal and the external, and has problematised the ostensibly national character of individual empires and colonies such as the Congo.[16] Roos and Leppänen were part of these processes, contributing to what historians Christoph Kamissek and Jonas Kreienbaum have called the 'imperial cloud', a globally shared reservoir of knowledge, practices, and norms that was not bound to a single empire and was produced mostly by white people moving about in the colonial world. Similarly, their experiences and knowledge circulation can be interpreted through Valentin-Yves Mudimbe's notion of a 'colonial library', which refers to the body of texts and epistemological order which construct Africa as a symbol of otherness and inferiority. Roos and Leppänen accepted and shared exotic notions and a racial colonial mindset towards Africans that set white Europeans apart from the local environment, using their privileged positions to gain access, move freely across borders, and judge their surroundings.[17]

The Belgian Congo needed outsiders, as not enough qualified workers could be recruited from Belgium alone, offering opportunities to Europeans

15 Daniel Hedinger and Nadin Heé, 'Transimperial History – Connectivity, Cooperation and Competition', *Journal of Modern European History* 16:4 (2018) 429-433. DOI: https://doi.org/10.17104/1611-8944-2018-4-429; Nadin Heé, 'Transimperial Opportunities? Transcending the Nation in Imperial Formations,' *Comparativ* 31:5-6 (2021) 631-639. DOI: https://doi.org/10.26014/j.comp.2021.05-06.07; Kristin L. Hoganson and Jay Sexton (eds.), *Crossing Empires: Taking U.S. History into Transimperial Terrain* (Duke University Press 2020). DOI: https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478007432; Janne Lahti (eds.), *German and United States Colonialism in a Connected World: Entangled Empires* (Palgrave 2021). DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-53206-2.

16 Jonas Anderson, 'Richard D. Mohun and the Congo: American Transimperial Careering in Colonial Africa', *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 25:1 (2024) 1-22. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/cch.2024.a928063; Ulrike Lindner, 'Colonialism as a European Project in Africa before 1914? British and German Concepts of Colonial Rule in Sub-Saharan Africa', *Comparativ* 19:1 (2009) 88-106.

17 Christoph Kamissek and Jonas Kreienbaum, 'An Imperial Cloud? Conceptualising Interimperial Connections and Transimperial Knowledge', *Journal of Modern European History* 14:2 (2016) 164-182. DOI: https://doi.org/10.17104/1611-8944-2016-2-164; Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, 'Colonial Library', in: Valentin-Yves Mudimbe and Kasereka Kavwahirehi (eds.), *Encyclopedia of African Religions and Philosophy* (Springer 2021) 131-133. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-2068-5_82.

who never intended to settle in the colonies.[18] As historian Mikko Toivanen writes, empires 'made regular and extensive use of both manpower and expertise sourced from outside the national boundaries of each imperial hegemon'.[19] The Congo provided opportunities on its riverboats and in its missions and military to Luxembourgers, Dutch, Greeks, Portuguese, and Nordics. As Roos observed while boarding her ship in Antwerp, in the 1930s the Congo acted as a magnet for people from across Europe.

Discussing how Finns blended in and experienced this colonial setting adds to the burgeoning literature on European minorities present in the Congo. This article asks how looking at Finns not only expands the cast of global Belgian Africa but blurs distinctions between national, imperial, and colonial histories to better comprehend the legacies of Western colonialism in the modern world, demonstrating how colonial ventures were shared, pan-European projects. It also shows how these opportunities in the world of empires were connected to imperial intimacies and careers. Roos was in the Congo in 1933-1934 for family reasons, to marry a riverboat captain, while Leppänen in turn was a bachelor machinist and engineer who built a career working on the Congo River on and off between 1913 and 1931.

This article first locates Finns in the colonial world in general and in the Congo in particular by discussing the very recent 'colonial turn' in Finnish historiography and highlighting the new strand of studies that has begun to situate Finns in histories of colonialism. Next it examines how the two Finns experienced the land through and via the Congo River, before looking at how they interacted with local peoples and viewed the racial moorings and violence in the colony. Finally, we look at how they conceived the broader Finnish and white community, all along making sense of their own place and role in the colonial Congo.

Locating Finns in the colonial world and the Congo

While scholars have not written much about Finns in the Congo, this in turn is part of a much broader absence of colonial histories in the national Finnish narrative. For some time now, scholars in Finland, and Nordic countries more

18 For empires of opportunities, see Moritz von Brescius, *German Science in the Age of Empire: Enterprise, Opportunity and the Schlagintweit Brothers* (Cambridge University Press 2019). DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108579568; David Blackbourn, *Germany in the World: A Global History, 1500-2000* (Liveright 2023); Stephen Conway, *Britannia's Auxiliaries: Continental Europeans and the British Empire, 1740-1800* (Oxford University Press 2017).

19 Mikko Toivanen, 'A Nordic Colonial Career Across Borders: Hjalmar Björling in the Dutch East Indies and China', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 51:3 (2023) 422. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2023.2205697.

broadly, have questioned how histories of colonialism have been omitted from the main national narratives, and how there exists a lingering public and academic belief that colonialism does not fit Nordic histories. Amnesia and denial are often paired with notions of exceptionalism. According to these beliefs, Finns remained detached from colonial networks of labour mobility, travel and leisure, and the accompanying production and exchange of knowledge. Instead, the national meta-narrative emphasises the innocence of a small, yet sturdy nation overcoming foreign-imposed (mainly Russian) hardships through perseverance, hard work, inner cohesion, and *sisu* (grit). For a long time, the scholarly consensus supported this vision. Leaving aside Sámi studies, Finnish historians consciously rejected colonial connotations in the national historiography. Recently, a growing number of scholars have, however, questioned these premises and begun a process of discovering colonialism as part of the national history of Finland.[20]

The scholarship on Nordic colonialism actually seems to be booming at the moment.[21] This 'colonial turn' is also apparent in Finnish historiography, as historians Leila Koivunen and Anna Rastas have suggested. New studies seek to make sense of how Finns 'also produced and circulated colonial knowledge and constructed racial hierarchies' and 'how some individual Finns were caught up in colonial conflicts or actively sought out employment in colonial contexts'.[22] This article follows and deepens this literature. Scholars are, for example, looking into how Finns actively colonised their

20 See a more detailed discussion in Janne Lahti and Rinna Kullaa, 'Kolonialismin monikasvoisuus ja sen ymmärtäminen Suomen kontekstissa', *Historiallinen Aikakauskirja* 118:4 (2020) 420-426. DOI: https://doi.org/10.54331/haik.140754; Janne Lahti and Rani-Henrik Andersson, 'Finns and the Settler Colonial Worlds of North America', in: Rani-Henrik Andersson and Janne Lahti (eds.), *Finnish Settler Colonialism in North America* (Helsinki University Press 2022) 1-20. DOI: https://doi.org/10.33134/AHEAD-2-1; Suvi Keskinen, 'Intra-Nordic Differences, Colonial/Racial Histories, and National Narratives: Rewriting Finnish History', *Scandinavian Studies* 91:1-2 (2019) 163-181. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5406/scanstud.91.1-2.0163; Pernille Ipsen and Gunlög Fur, 'Introduction', *Itinerario: Journal of Imperial and Global Interactions* 33:2 (2009) 7-16. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0165115300003065; Magdalena Naum and Jonas M. Nordin, 'Introduction: Situating Scandinavian Colonialism', in: idem (eds.), *Scandinavian Colonialism and the Rise of Modernity: Small Time Agents in a Global Arena* (Springer 2013) 3-16. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-6202-6_1.

21 See Rinna Kullaa and Janne Lahti (eds.), 'Kolonialismi ja Suomi', special issue of *Historiallinen Aikakauskirja* 118:4 (2020); Gunlög Fur and John L. Hennessey (eds.), 'Svensk kolonialism', special issue of *Historisk Tidskrift*, 140:3 (2020); Johan Höglund and Linda Andersson Burnett (eds.), 'Nordic Colonialisms', special issue of *Scandinavian Studies* 91:1-2 (2019). DOI: https://doi.org/10.5406/scanstud.91.1-2.0001.

22 Raita Merivirta, Leila Koivunen, and Timo Särkkä, 'Finns in the Colonial World', in: idem (eds.), *Finnish Colonial Encounters: From Anti-Imperialism to Cultural Colonialism and Complicity* (Palgrave 2021) 2. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-80610-1; See also Leila Koivunen and Anna Rastas, 'Suomalaisen historiantutkimuksen uusi käänne? – Kolonialismikeskustelujen kotouttaminen

own Arctic North and found opportunities in the empires around the world.[23] As settlers, Finns took part in the projects of other colonial empires, from southern Africa to Argentina, and from Australia to Minnesota, Oregon, and other reaches of North America.[24] They also joined various empires as workers and travellers, participating in the co-production of colonial ideology, knowledge, and rule. They did this across Africa, from German Southwest Africa and South Africa to British East Africa.[25] This is where the colonial Congo comes in.

In the Congo, sizeable groups of Europeans of different nationalities worked as missionaries, soldiers, and labourers. Most Finns worked on the riverboats, the first of them recruited as early as during the 1890s. Belgian employers actively advertised in Finnish newspapers and labour agencies.[26] In 1913, Akseli Leppänen answered the call. Originating from Hämeenkyrö, close to the industrial hub of Tampere, Leppänen was in his mid-thirties and an educated man, eventually an engineer. When reaching the Congo, he had already worked in Finland in a paper mill, as a filer, and as a stoker on an inland lake boat. Interestingly, he was well acquainted with the colonial literature on the Congo, such as the works of Henry Morton Stanley and Joseph Conrad. His diary indicates that, before heading off, he had read many books on Africa and the Congo, borrowed from his hometown library. Thus, he was familiar with the general racialised tropes of Africa and Africans, which shaped his personal experiences and vice versa.[27]

Leppänen's motivation was to secure a job when times were hard in Finland, and he found one as a machinist on a riverboat. He took cargo

Suomea koskevaan tutkimukseen', *Historiallinen Aikakauskirja* 118:4 (2020) 427-437. DOI: https://doi.org/10.54331/haik.140755.

23 On Finnish-Sámi histories and colonial encounters, see Sanna Valkonen, Aile Aikio, Saara Alakorva, and Sigga-Maria Magga (eds.), *The Sámi World* (Routledge 2022). DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003025511; Laura Junka-Aikio, Jukka Nyyssönen, and Veli-Pekka Lehtola (eds.), *Sámi Research in Transition: Knowledge, Politics and Social Change* (Routledge 2022). DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003090830; Rinna Kullaa, Janne Lahti, and Sami Lakomäki (eds.), *Kolonialismi Suomen rajaseuduilla* (Gaudeamus 2022).

24 Andersson and Lahti, *Finnish Settler Colonialism*; Aleksi Huhta, 'Fragile Connections: Finnish Settlers and U.S. Power in Cuba, c. 1904-1959', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 51:3 (2023) 534-554. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2023.2205692; Timo Särkkä, 'The "Pioneer Men": Making of Finnish Settler Identity in Southern Africa Pre-1914', in: Merivirta, Koivunen, and Särkkä, *Finnish Colonial Encounters*, 303-330. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-80610-1_12.

25 See Merivirta, Koivunen, and Särkkä, 'Finns in the Colonial World'; Lahti, 'Nordic Connectors'; Koivunen and Merivirta, *Colonial Aspects*; Timo Särkkä, 'Imperialists Without an Empire? Finnish Settlers in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Rhodesia', *Journal of Migration History* 1:1 (2015) 75-99. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/23519924-00101005.

26 Mikko Uola, 'Suomalaismasinisteja Kongossa', *Siirtolaisuus-Migration* 3 (1979) 2-3.

27 Akseli Leppänen Diary, 5 November 1916, Finnish Migration Institute Archives, Turku, inv. nr. 1986_10_päiväkirja_003.

and people back and forth between Leopoldville and Stanleyville, while also working at the shipyard in Leopoldville, where he was involved in repairing and maintaining the boats. For Leppänen, staying in Finland, which was struggling under Russian rule and coveted independence, implied uncertainty of employment, potential poverty and limited career prospects, while the Congo largely stood for the opposite. While wages varied, they were consistently much better than at home. Empire in his case provided opportunities for a white, educated, single, professional man from the margins of Europe.

Besides salary, pension benefits in the Congo were also good. Under the rules in force until 1910, a full Congolese pension could be received after eleven years of service. Service was for three years at a time, followed by a year in the home country 'nursing health', as the period of leave was called. The employer also paid for travel to and from Europe. In 1910, for health reasons, the period of service was reduced to two years at a time, and the period of leave to half a year, and the worker could retire after ten years of service. Leppänen stayed in the Congo on and off until 1931.[28]

As we have seen, Saga Roos moved in her mid-twenties from Tampere to the Congo for a very different reason: to spend time with and get to know her husband. She came from a bourgeois background and was relatively well educated. Her husband, Klas Roos, a Finnish ship captain, worked on the Belgian ss Mongala, clearing and surveying the Congo River and its tributaries. Not many Finnish women had visited the Congo before her. She did not work or have any official position, but by joining her husband, she had an opportunity to experience the country and its peoples at first hand. For her, the opportunity brought by empire was of a different kind from that of Leppänen and most other Finns who worked on the riverboats. Still, Roos also experienced the country mainly through the Congo River, as did Leppänen.

Experiencing a colony through a river

The Congo River was the lifeline of the Belgian colony, for transporting goods, raw materials, and people. It was the way to penetrate inland areas, extract resources, and spread influence. The river was also at the heart of Roos and Leppänen's colonial experience. It was where they spent their working hours and leisure time. The land, the wildlife, and the people they encountered, whether local or non-local, were on and near the river. In their writings, they made the colonial Congo visible on and via the river. For Roos, the Congo stood for adventure and a journey into the exotic, and it was the setting for

28 Aaltonen and Sivonen, *Kongon Akseli*, 24-25; Uola, 'Suomalaismasinisteja Kongossa', 4.

her life as a newlywed. For Leppänen, the river meant work. He spent much of his time on the three different ships he served on: the *Hainaut*, the *Roi Albert* and the *August Doniol*. The rest of the time he lived in his house by the river in Leopoldville (Figure 2).

From her first riverboat trip onwards, Roos seemed mesmerised by the terrain, and satisfied with her decision to enter this 'emptiness', which proved far from empty. She felt awed by the abundance of it all: with the 'mysterious' jungle and lush vegetation, water, and life, 'nature exceeded all my expectations'.[29] Roos seems to fit rather well with the stereotypical image of white female travellers who ventured to what they saw as exotic, far-away colonial places in Africa.[30] These bourgeois travellers came for an awe-inspiring sensory experience of the exotic. But while Roos wrote about the punishing heat and the dangerous insects, she actually travelled in relative comfort and isolated from the environment. Journeying by boat to meet her husband, she mingled with other white bourgeois travellers and recounts how she enjoyed buffet meals. She was also well looked after by African servants. She did remark how the meals on the boat 'only consisted of three dishes: tomato fillet, ribs, and fresh pineapple for dessert'. The pineapple was also 'clumsily cut into thick pieces'.[31]

Writing about what would seem the most trivial of details in her memoirs seems peculiar. Published more than a decade after the trip for a broad readership in Finland, her memoir here effectively stresses the difference between bourgeois European expectations and African realities, and how this perceived difference was used as an othering mechanism. In comparison, Roos wrote that en route from Europe to the Congo she had the privilege of enjoying luxurious meals consisting of twelve courses. The meal on the Congo riverboat seems to have been emphasised for a purpose: it did not meet the standards Roos preferred. This in turn indicates that the Congo more broadly fell short of the 'civilised respectability' she was used to, indicating how Roos judged her surroundings as many European colonisers did, in comparison to their version of idealised white bourgeois standards. So, while Roos felt captivated by the chance to experience – to see, smell, touch, and hear – the tropics around her, she also made it very clear that this was not the kind of civilised place where she belonged. This becomes apparent also in the way her writing about this dinner episode continues. Roos remarked how an old gramophone with a horn 'kept the table music going with its shrill, squeaky sounds', which did not help make the event any more agreeable. Unfortunately, the boat was also 'steaming with mosquitos', and she wrote how she found herself in 'hell's outpost' while trying to eat dinner on the deck. She 'hit and scratched like a maniac'. Roos

29 Roos, *Sadun ja seikkailun Kongo*, 25.

30 See, for example, McEwan, *Gender, Geography and Empire*.

31 Roos, *Sadun ja Seikkailun Kongo*, 46-47.

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Figure 2. Riverboat *Capitaine Hanssens*, Belgian Congo 1913-1931. It was on and via riverboats such as this one that most Finns, including Saga Roos and Akseli Leppänen, experienced the Congo, its terrain and peoples. AFR_0127, Akseli Leppänen collection, Finnish Migration Institute Archives, CC BY 4.0. https://finna.fi/Record/siirtolaisuusinstituutti.m121?sid=4764840269.

was wearing a dress, thin silk stockings and French shoes, as was deemed appropriate for a European lady, but which proved less practical in the colonial environment (Figure 3). She eventually had to retreat to her cabin to escape the mosquitos.[32]

As has been demonstrated by Ann Laura Stoler and other scholars, European empires tried to reshape the global order to correspond to their 'Western' standards by importing their norms, values, and practices, and establishing these as the universal standards against which to view and judge the rest of the world. Colonial connotations infiltrated the most mundane and intimate domains in people's lives – such as meals, dress, and social situations – turning the social fabric of the everyday into dense transfer points of power and anxiety. For bourgeois travellers such as Roos, the Congo lacked what she had come to expect as comprising a respectable life. Instead, there was a gap between realities and expectations, as the meal plagued by cumbersome pineapples and insects suggests.[33]

The Congolese climate and nature were often represented as a barrier and a danger to Europeans, preventing them from entering the country and precluding them from enjoying their lives and social encounters to the fullest, as evidenced in Roos's writings above. At worst, nature in the colonies assumingly had the potential to send this rather fragile whiteness into an endless downward spiral. This is perhaps most famously epitomised in the writings of Joseph Conrad. In his treatise, the African coastline constituted a natural barrier, and the Congo River itself presented a passage to darkness, a land of cannibals and other horrors. The river and its surrounding jungle could allegedly corrupt the 'civilised' white people entering it, and this vision of potential peril captured the imagination of the colonisers and framed their descent towards darkness, where the Congo became viewed as an immense, engulfing and menacing space. It was popular to represent this hot and humid terrain as the heart of Africa, as the 'heart of darkness'.[34]

32 Roos, *Sadun ja Seikkailun Kongo*, 20, 49. On mosquitos, see also 102-103.

33 Scholarship on respectability in colonial situations is numerous. See, for example, Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (University of California Press 2002); Janne Lahti, *The American West and the World: Transnational and Comparative Perspectives* (Routledge 2019) 116-146. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315643212-7; Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton (eds.), *Bodies in Contact: Rethinking Colonial Encounters in World History* (Duke University Press 2005). DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11319cp.

34 On Conrad and critiques of his work, see Maya Jasanoff, *The Dawn Watch: Joseph Conrad in a Global World* (Penguin 2017); Agata Szczeszak-Brewer (ed.), *Critical Approaches to Joseph Conrad* (University of South Carolina Press 2015). DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/book41087; On Europeans and the African environment, see William Beinart and Lotte Hughes, *Environment and Empire* (Oxford University Press 2007). DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199260317.001.0001; Jonathan Saha, *Colonising Animals: Interspecies Empire in Myanmar* (Cambridge University Press 2021).

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Figure 3. Saga Roos on the Congo River holding a pet monkey and dressed as expected of a 'civilised' European woman, 1933. Photographer unknown. Photo included in: Saga Roos, *Sadun ja Seikkailun Kongo*, adjacent to page 144.

While Roos was both fascinated by the wilderness and deemed it an alien environment for a lady like her, for Leppänen the river did not arouse any particular sensations or danger. His stance was a very practical one, filtered through the experience of his everyday work. The river was a place of labour, something he needed to cope with – the current, driftwood, and sandbars – and learn to move about. It resembled the ones in Finland that Leppänen had previously worked on, except that the Congo was bigger. The river was almost ever-present in Leppänen's diary, but often as a backdrop, a frame in which his everyday life took place, and on most days created the very practical parameters of that experience. The peoples and villages Leppänen saw were by the river. For him, the wilderness or the climate were never predominantly a threat, although he certainly realised the prevalence of perilous diseases that filled local cemeteries with fellow Finns and other Europeans. Leppänen had a habit of visiting these local cemeteries often, paying his respects to Nordics he had known personally.[35] It is interesting that when going for casual walks – and he went on many based on his diary markings – Leppänen never elaborated on how he dressed. Neither did he write about how to protect himself from the sun or the rain. It was as if he did not consider the environment a threat at all.

While Leppänen's take on the river and the climate was very pragmatic, he and Roos were both fascinated by the wildlife, crocodiles in particular. Often it seemed that the crocodiles lurking on the river banks proved far more interesting than the black co-workers on the same boat (for Leppänen) or the bourgeois travel companions (for Roos). Leppänen encountered his first crocodile on 13 April 1913 on his maiden voyage from Leopoldville up the river towards Stanleyville: 'In the morning I met a crocodile for the first time, lying on a river bench. A terrifying creature, but the blacks licked their lips because it was a delicacy to them'.[36] While Leppänen saw the river as the domain of crocodiles, and was clearly expecting to encounter a demonic human-eater, his real-life encounters did not live up to the preconceived notions of danger and horror.[37] Leppänen never mentioned in his diary actually seeing a crocodile eating an animal, let alone a human. He did, however, hear second-hand accounts of horror stories of crocodiles eating local people.[38]

Hunting for hippos and crocodiles was one of the few pastimes that the riverboat crew could enjoy during their voyages. Roos's husband tried to shoot one 'of the massive crocodiles' from the boat, but missed.[39] Leppänen in turn took a myriad of photographs of the huge animals being lifted, turned, and skinned in droves. He also took a pair of crocodile teeth as a souvenir. Yet

35 For example, Leppänen Diary, 4 April 1920.

36 Original: 'Aamulla tapasin krokotiilin ensi kerran rantapenkalla makaamassa. Kauhistuttava olento, mutta mustat nuolevat huuliaan sillä se on herkkua heille.' Leppänen Diary, 13 April 1913.

37 Ibidem, 8 September 1914.

38 Ibidem, 21 May 1915.

39 Roos, *Sadun ja seikkailun Kongo*, 114-115. On crocodiles, see also 56.

he was not a hunter himself, but more of an observer of nature, to whom the sounds of the jungle seemed wonderful and inspiring.[40]

Experiencing race

In the Congo, Leppänen and Roos engaged with people from a variety of backgrounds and with various habits. In their encounters, both became very aware of race, adjusting to the racial dynamics and hierarchies used to differentiate white Europeans from black Africans. They blended in among the other Europeans, adopting the prevalent racialised language and attitudes. Following Mudimbe's notion of a 'colonial library', being white in Congo signified superiority, and implied in the minds of white Europeans a master-servant, parent-child relationship with the Congolese.[41] It was a regime of looking down, othering and judging, of acting and performing. Being white meant acting in a particular way, as Roos had attempted to do with her riverboat meal described earlier. It meant setting oneself apart from Africans and building one's own sense of community and belonging as outsiders in the Congo.

In the early 1900s, some Finns tried to build a myth that they were somehow exceptional, different from other white colonisers in the Congo, especially the Belgians. They were obviously aware of the international outcry that King Leopold had faced for the white colonisers' wave of violence that had killed scores of Congolese. Finns (as well as many Belgians) wanted to distance themselves from that dark chapter and the repercussions for their reputation as civilised people.[42] These attempts to be seen as more benevolent were nicely captured by the Finnish author T. J. Korpela in his collection of fictional stories *Auringon mailla: Seikkailuja Tanganikan Rautateille ja Kongojoella* (In the Land of the Sun: Adventures on the Tanganyika railroads and on the Congo River) published in 1922, which was inspired by the experiences and stories of Finnish engineers in the Congo.[43] The book's protagonist is the engineer Santanen, an honest and fair-minded Finn, while Belgian colonial officers are described as bullies and degenerates, scorning and abusing the Africans. Santanen is presented as being fair to the child-like locals and therefore gets them to work without whipping them or resorting to any kind of violence.[44]

40 Aaltonen and Sivonen, *Kongon Akseli*, 59-61.

41 Mudimbe, 'Colonial Library'.

42 For discussion on the death toll in the Congo, see the following scholars, whose estimates differ widely: Jean-Paul Sanderson, *Démographie coloniale congolaise. Entre spéculation, idéologie et reconstruction historique* (Presses Universitaires de Louvain 2018); Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (Houghton Mifflin 1999); Jan Vansina, *Being Colonized: The Kuba Experience in Rural Congo, 1880-1960* (University of Wisconsin Press 2010).

43 T.J. Korpela, *Auringon mailla: Seikkailuja Tanganjikan rautateillä ja Kongojoella* (Gummerus 1922).

44 Aaltonen and Sivonen, *Kongon Akseli*, 122.

However, the notion that Finns would have been more understanding and less racist or violent towards the Congolese than the Belgians or any other white Europeans is not supported by a closer look at the sources, including those produced by Roos and Leppänen, and was perhaps more rhetorical than a reality. White Europeans often shared contemptuous and racist attitudes. As historian Diana Natermann asserts, many Swedes described the Congolese as only semi-human. Comparisons to animals, such as apes or dogs, abounded. Another common stereotype was to refer to Congolese as being child-like.[45] Similar racialised views could be found in books and stories from the time of Livingstone and Stanley's first journeys that were translated and readily available in Finland as well.

Apart from these racialised notions, violence was simply part of everyday life for Finns in the Congo. An anonymous Finnish visitor to the country published an overtly racist account of his journey in a 1915 labour union journal legitimising everyday violence against Congolese: 'And just ahead the middle deck is full of negroes smelling of disgusting grease […] If you want a path, you have to clear it with your fists'.[46] Also illustrating how they adapted to the prevalent white social norms, Finns reproduced well-known clichés, such as the alleged laziness of the Congolese. Leppänen, coming from a country with a Lutheran work ethic, could not or did not want to understand or value how the Congolese approached work. He had little tolerance and patience for what he saw as laziness. This perceived laziness also seemed to justify the use of violence for him. Witnessing violence by white Europeans against Congolese all around him, Leppänen quickly began to practise it himself. Leppänen even took up the infamous chicote whip, made from hippo or rhinoceros skin – a tool of discipline and terror commonly used by white people not only in the Congo but also in other European colonies in Africa. It was used, for example, against Leppänen's black shipmates, the black soldiers travelling on board, and allegedly 'troublesome' black women. The way Leppänen described these violent events in his diary testifies to the relative ordinariness of this violence for him. For example, his entry from 30 November 1913 reads: 'In the morning one of the sloths was spanked, and you could see how stubborn the negro is when he jumped over the cage into the water'. Leppänen added how 'three men jumped in after him, and the machine was stopped, the bastard galloped back on board, and chains were put around his neck like on a whinny horse'.[47] Another entry from Leppänen

45 Diana M. Natermann, *Pursuing Whiteness in the Colonies: Private Memories from the Congo Freestate and German East Africa (1884-1914)* (Waxmann 2018) 78-79. DOI: https://doi.org/10.31244/9783830986904.

46 Original: 'Ja juuri edessä keskikansi on iljettävälle rasvalle käryäviä neekereitä täynnä […] Jos tahtoo tietä, on se raivattava nyrkein'. Quote cited from Aaltonen and Sivonen, *Kongon Akseli*, 108.

47 Original: 'Aamulla annettiin yhtä laiskuria selkään ja siinä sai nähdä kuinka itsepintainen neekeri on, kun hyppäsi yli puurin veteen. Mutta kolme miestä hyppäsi perässä ja kone seisautettiin, "sälli" laahattiin laivaan sekä

almost a year later, from 11 November 1914, revealed the same casual attitude to the use of violence against the local population: 'Today there was a big negro trashing, almost the whole village got its ass kicked, and rightly so'.[48] On another occasion, Leppänen dryly noted that 'if the negro today gets beaten for no reason, he will do something tomorrow to justify it', thereby also justifying the colonists' own excessively violent behaviour.[49]

Clearly Leppänen adopted the same ways that other Europeans acted towards the Congolese, thus participating in the dehumanising Belgian colonial order that subjugated Africans for the sake of economic exploitation and to create and uphold racial hierarchies. He shows how Finns were never separate from the everyday violence that colonial rule rested on, but rather active players in a violent order. Adjusting to and accepting the racial order was one way in which Finns could affirm their belonging as rulers alongside, and in the eyes of, other Europeans. It affirmed their belonging to the pan-European white community, with the corresponding social and economic benefits such as employment and acceptance. As far as Leppänen and Roos show us, Finns were seldom if ever critical of the colonial rule and its foundational violence.

Roos's memoirs also reveal the presence of violence and how she seemed to accept it as a normal part of colonial rule and whiteness in the Congo. Her book contains remarks and stories depicting strained relationships between races, resulting in hatred, armed conflict, and burnt villages. In areas inhabited by the Dengese people, Roos noted how she felt that white people were disliked. She also reported how two years before her trip, two white tax collectors had been killed in the area, and reportedly eaten. The Belgian punitive expedition sent to these territories had been hit by a rain of poison arrows while it had been rasing Dengese villages to the ground. On her way to Boende, 'on the extreme edge of the civilised world', as Roos remarked, she wrote of encountering 'true savages':

> Soon the whole wild herd was beside our boat and the canoe was spun around. I think I had already seen one thing and another on this trip. But watching these negroes gave me the shivers. There were roughly built, muscular men with a softly beaten piece of bark on their hips. Their hair was stuffed into a black raffia bag, so it looked like they had a ragged felt hat on their heads. A long needle, from which hung a tassel decorated with a mermaid's shoe on the forehead, was stuck into it for decoration. It gave them a strange demonic outlook. They had plenty of weapons, and their whole appearance seemed to be cannibalistic.[50]

pantiin kettingit kaulaan niin kuin vikuralle hevoselle'. Leppänen Diary, 30 November 1913.

48 Original: 'Tänään on ollut suuret neekeripieksäjäiset, melkein koko kylä sai "perseelle", ja kyllä oli syytäkin'. Leppänen Diary, 10 November 1914. For references to violence, see also ibidem, 10 February 1915, 27 December 1919 and 1 January 1920.

49 Original: 'Jos neekeri tänään saa syyttä selkäänsä niin kyllä se huomenna tekee jonkin syyn'. Leppänen Diary, 10 February 1915.

50 Roos, *Sadun ja Seikkailun Kongo*, 142. Original: 'Pian koko villi lauma oli laivamme vieressä ja

As this quote suggests, Roos did not cast white Europeans as unlawful intruders, but rather saw the danger and inhospitality as stemming from the Congolese. Indeed, throughout her book she never questioned the racial order in the Congo or criticised the language and behaviour of Europeans there. For her, the main, or indeed the sole, purpose of Africans was to serve white people, and she took this for granted (Figure 4). The human value of the Congolese around her was based on their usefulness to her. She also adopted the common attitudes and vocabulary regarding the Congolese, such as referring to even an adult male servant as a 'boy'. This was, of course, a quite common way to address male house servants across colonial Africa, and shows how racial language crossed borders and empires.

At best, Roos described the Congolese as big, dumb children who should be treated paternally but with strict discipline. Open-mindedness, cordiality and childishness shone from their faces, she noted, while also believing that they seemed content to play their part. At worst, she compared them to animals. She remarked that there existed a fundamental gap, a difference in thinking and action that set the Africans apart from the Europeans. Like many of the latter, Roos had no reservations making broad, generalising claims such as that 'the soul life of the Negroes is one of the many unsolved mysteries of the world', and that their thought process seemed incomprehensible to supposedly civilised, rational people. 'They are children, but at the same time they are realists. That is why they must be treated harshly, but fairly', Roos noted. Seeing the Congolese as unruly children, she felt confident that 'they regard their white masters as high gods', adding that 'to retain their respect, one must always, even in the most dangerous situations, remain in control'. She also noted how she thought the Congolese had a natural tendency towards dishonesty, as 'a "boy" steals as much as he can from his masters'.[51]

In writings such as these, Roos reveals how thoroughly she had accepted and shared the prevailing dehumanising racial order and its accompanying violence in the Congo. Her views by and large echoed the notions held by many Europeans in the country, and in sub-Saharan Africa more broadly. This type of extreme violence and othering of non-white peoples represents a widespread, pan-Nordic and pan-European stance – a sense of superiority – towards non-white peoples all over the world that can

kanootti pyöräytettiin ympäri. Olin jo mielestäni nähnyt tällä matkalla yhtä ja toista. Mutta näitä neekereitä katsellessani minua puistatti. Siinä oli karkeatekoisia, lihaksikkaita miehiä, joilla oli pehmeäksi hakattu kaarnakaistele lanteillaan. Tukka oli tungettu mustaan raffiapussiin, joten näytti siltä kuin heillä olisi ollut lieritön huopahattu päässä. Pitkä neula, josta riippui otsalle näkinkengällä koristettu tupsu, oli pistetty siihen koristukseksi. Se antoi heille merkillisen demonisen näön. Heillä oli runsaasti aseita ja koko heidän olemuksensa vaikutti ihmissyöjämäiseltä.' See also p. 75 for another description by Roos of an imaginary African danger.

51 Roos, *Sadun ja Seikkailun Kongo*, 85-86. See also 53.

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Figure 4. Saga Roos being carried by four Congolese men whose names are unknown, 1933. Showing the kind of superiority Europeans felt towards the Congolese, the caption reads: 'a white woman is a queen in the Congo.' Photographer unknown. Photo included in Roos, *Sadun ja Seikkailun Kongo*, adjacent to page 144.

be found in the accounts of Roos and Leppänen, but also among the settlers on the colonial frontiers of the American West, in German Southwest Africa or in British India.[52]

Experiencing white community

'Had dinner at Järvinen's place. He recited some of his newest poems. And [we] had a general joyous time', Leppänen wrote.[53] Ordinary life also meant time off the boat, having a place to live, some leisure activities, and a community. For Leppänen, community in Leopoldville consisted of fellow Finns and other Nordic men, who visited each other and had dinners, as the above quote indicates. National identity seemed to matter a great deal in these experiences. In his diary, Leppänen often noted his thoughts of Finland, and paraphrased and commented on news from back home that he had learned from other Finns. He also wrote how he longed for Finnish cuisine, and especially Finnish Christmas customs and foods. He felt particularly joyous when hearing how Finland was freeing itself from Russian rule and was moving towards independence in 1917. He was clearly proud to be a Finn in Africa.[54]

In Leopoldville, many Finns lived in what they called Snake Hill, in barracks-style houses. Leppänen also moved there in 1916. On her arrival in Leopoldville, Roos stayed at the home of a Danish family for three days while awaiting transportation further inland on a riverboat. She described how European the home felt to her: a bathroom with walls covered in tiles, with a bathtub bricked to the wall, running water, and other fineries. The home was surrounded by 'a well-maintained garden, with orange and lemon trees'. Yet, while fans and mosquito nets were meant to keep out nature, she remarked that one would 'never see nice cultural [bourgeois, J.L.] homes with beautiful paintings, antique silverware or expensive carpets in the Congo'. Instead, the decorations consisted of rather coarse lion or leopard skins, hunting trophies, guns, and native artefacts (Figure 5).[55]

52 See, for example, Kim A. Wagner, *Amritsar 1919: An Empire of Fear and the Making of a Massacre* (Yale University Press 2019). DOI: https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300245462; Matthias Häussler, *The Herero Genocide: War, Emotion, and Extreme Violence in Colonial Namibia* (Berghahn Books 2021). DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2tsx91h; Janne Lahti, *Cultural Construction of Empire: The US Army in Arizona and New Mexico* (University of Nebraska Press 2012). DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1d9nrbv; Janne Lahti, 'Südwester Reiter: Fear, Belonging, and Settler Colonial Violence in Namibia', *Journal of Genocide Research* 24:4 (2022) 529-548. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2022.2078073; Adam A. Blackler, *An Imperial Homeland: Forging German Identity in Southwest Africa* (Penn State Press 2022). DOI: https://doi.org/10.1515/9780271093819.

53 Leppänen Diary, 25 April 1917.

54 See, for example, Akseli's remarks in Leppänen Diary, 6 May 1917 and 1 July 1920.

55 Roos, *Sadun ja Seikkailun Kongo*, 29-30.

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Figure 5. The house of Akseli Leppänen in Leopoldville. AFR_0048, Akseli Leppänen collection, Finnish Migration Institute Archives, CC BY 4.0. https://finna.fi/Record/siirtolaisuusinstituutti.340_m124?sid=4764840269.

For most Finnish men, playing cards or billiards and drinking constituted the most popular leisure activities. In one Leopoldville tavern annex shop there was a separate room where Finns met – the Finnish Club. However, as often happened in colonial situations where white Europeans tried to deter boredom and enjoy everyday life, as discussed by Jeffrey A. Auerbach, there was constant tension in their daily lives due to a gap between what they wanted to do and what they could do. As Lisa Hellman has pointed out, it is important to pay attention how everyday life functioned when domesticity abroad encountered difficulties in foreign empires.[56] For many Finns, monotonous life and easy access to alcohol proved a typical, yet disastrous combination, and alcoholism ran rampant. Leppänen described how he usually observed all of this from a distance and remained a regular churchgoer in the Congo, as he had already been in Finland. While he often avoided drinking, at Christmas in 1915 he made an exception. Wine and spirits flowed freely, people sang and danced, as Leppänen and others celebrated, trying to make a foreign land feel as homely as possible. Finns did not always drink by themselves, but were joined by other Nordics for festive occasions. Sitting on one Christmas table alongside Leppänen from Hämeenkyrö were men from Helsinki, Turku, Oulu, Loviisa, and Jämsä in Finland, and others from Stockholm, Sundsvall, and Gotland in Sweden, and also from St. Petersburg in Russia.[57]

These references in his diary show how much the Finnish – and by extension, the Nordic – community meant to Leppänen. But Christmas also revealed how miserable he felt in a foreign country. Often, at this special time of year, his thoughts drifted back home. 'It is Christmas Eve, and I live in memories back home', thinking of how his mother used to organise Christmases, he wrote on 24 December 1913, with clear longing and homesickness. He tried to make the best of it, noting how he attempted to 'carry Christmas in his heart', yet at times he did not feel much like celebrating. In 1917, Leppänen even ended the year with these sour remarks: 'with feelings of sadness here at the loneliness of Africa'.[58]

Conclusion

In their discussion of the transnational bourgeois and middle classes, A. Ricardo López and Barbara Weinstein noticed how racial categorisations and

56 Jeffrey A. Auerbach, *Imperial Boredom: Monotony and the British Empire* (Oxford University Press 2018) DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198827375.001.0001; Lisa Hellman, *This House is Not a Home: European Everyday Life in Canton and Macao, 1730-1830* (Brill 2019) 9. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004384545.

57 For the description of Christmas celebrations, see Aaltonen and Sivonen, *Kongon Akseli*, 118-119; Leppänen Diary, 24 and 25 December 1915; 25 December 1919.

58 Leppänen Diary, 24 December 1913 and 31 December 1917. See also 25 December 1913 and 24 and 25 December 1917 for Akseli's reflections

class performances were constituents of the colonial experience, as they were folded into and part of a co-produced global project.[59] Far from exceptional, the experiences of Akseli Leppänen and Saga Roos shed light on the Finnish involvement in this shared pan-European colonial project. Finns were not outsiders; nor were they more benevolent than other Europeans. In fact, as part of a broader phenomenon where actors from smaller European states sought and navigated the transimperial opportunities that emerged with the colonisation of the Congo, Finns were contributors to the colonial rule, its racialisation, and knowledge production.

Succeeding her return to Finland in 1934, Roos settled in Tenerife on the Canary Islands after her husband's death in 1954. Living alone, she continued writing books and took up painting.[60] Upon returning to Finland in 1931, Leppänen settled down with a full pension and married the sister of his childhood sweetheart. They purchased a farm in the village of Uskela in Hämeenkyrö, where he was from. But the foreign empire he had become so deeply entangled with still resonated in his life. Already in 1920, King Albert had awarded him the Gold Medal for loyal service. After his retirement, he was made a Knight in the Order of Leopold II. The following year, he was awarded the Colonial Commemorative Medal and the Belgian World War Commemorative Medal. Like all who served in the Congo, Leppänen also received the Congo Cross – for *travail et progrès* – for his work in the so-called advance of civilisation.

Labour demands and travel created opportunities for a broad range of European individuals to access foreign empires. This applied to the global colonial domains of the British, the French, and the Germans, but it also held true for those major colonies of smaller European nations, such as the Netherlands, 'that continuously demanded more European settlers, investments, colonial agents, scientists, and expertise than they could recruit on their own limited territories'.[61] The Belgian Congo also fitted this description. Finns in the Congo benefitted from and contributed to these transimperial circuits. The cases of both Roos and Leppänen show how imperial spaces were porous and connected, even for ordinary white people from the so-called margins of Europe, not only the elites.

on Christmas in what he felt was such a far-away, remote place.

59 A. Ricardo López and Barbara Weinstein (eds.), *The Making of the Middle Class: Toward a Transnational History* (Duke University Press 2012). DOI: https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822394815.

60 Saga Roos Obituary, *Helsingin Sanomat*, 25 November 1999. https://www.hs.fi/ihmisia/art-2000003844450.html. Accessed 9 August 2024.

61 Bernhard C. Schär, 'Introduction. The Dutch East Indies and Europe, ca. 1800-1930: An Empire of Demands and Opportunities,' *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 134:3 (2019) 16. DOI: https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.10738.

While Finns travelled and worked in a foreign empire, finding and carving out opportunities for a living and to experience African spaces at first hand, their particular colonial involvements proved to be small parts in much larger and longer interwoven pan-European colonial histories. Leppänen and Roos witnessed, advanced and enforced a regime that exploited the land and mutilated and destroyed numerous lives. They othered the Congolese, treating them at best as ignorant children, at worst as deserving subjects of destructive violence. They operated in an unfamiliar environment, awed by nature and wildlife, suspicious of and condescending towards local Africans, and mindful of how out of place they were in this locale distant from their own homeland and bourgeois European lifestyles.

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