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Ambivalence towards Empire in *King Solomon's Mines*

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Abstract

Children's Literature of the Nineteenth Century was often used to promote imperialist or nationalist ideas, as is evident in H. Rider Haggard's novel *King Solomon's Mines*. This paper examines Haggard's personal convictions and their manifestation in his narrative with regards to colonialism and imperialism in Africa. It deals with the image of the superstitious, ignorant savages contrasted with the effects of imperialism on the noble savages.

What began as an extension of influence into Africa soon developed into a full-fledged territorial acquisition, known as the Scramble for Africa. Many European nations participated in this illicit greed for power, land and money. As a major imperial power, Britain obtained several large holdings, one of which was in southern Africa. This territory became populated by the British who interacted with the Native people. The British attempted to subdue the indigenous people in order to gain complete control of the territory and extend

their power. In order to do this, the English established their own governmental system, laws and technology. They also brought guns, whiskey and other agents that could destroy traditional African life. As much as imperialism may have equipped Africa for interaction with the western world, it also resulted in the degeneration of African tribal society. This history has been well documented in nineteenth-century literature. H. Rider Haggard, a children's writer of the time, writes of British imperialism in South Africa. In his novel, *King Solomon's Mines*, his attitude towards imperialism fluctuates between promotion of the colonialist ideology and preservation of African traditional society.

Born in 1865, Haggard was raised in England (Butts viii). He became a colonial administrator in Africa, spending four years in Foreign Service (Cameron 14). During this time, his attitude towards imperialism was shaped by the various people he met and worked with. He travelled often and witnessed Native ceremonies and talked to British politicians (Butts viii). As a representative of the British government, Haggard was an imperialist. When he began writing novels, however, his ambivalence towards imperialism became apparent. Paula Lyle Cameron writes that "all of Haggard's work suggests ambivalent feelings, especially towards empire" (10). On the one hand, Haggard used his writing to promote the imperialist ideology, but he also "often expresse[d] criticism of imperialist administration" (Cameron 10).

This is clearly evident in Haggard's novel *King Solomon's Mines* where the indigenous peoples are viewed as the "others" who are ignorant of European customs and cannot handle any alcohol. While Quartermain, Captain Good and Sir Henry Curtis prepare for the excursion to locate Curtis' brother who has been lost while searching for the elusive King Solomon's diamond mines, Quartermain relates that a group of Kafirs drank some champagne and immediately started "rolling about in the bottom of the boat, calling out that the good liquor was *tagati* (bewitched)" (Haggard 34). When Quartermain and his company retain the services of a few Natives, this inability to tolerate alcohol is seen in Ventvogel who "had one failing, so common with his race, drink" (Haggard 45). Haggard uses these Native characters to show how different they are from Englishmen, reinforcing their image as the "other".

The Natives are also depicted as superstitious people, ignorant of European technology. Quartermain entrusts his extra luggage to an old man before they embark in the desert. This man is described as an "old thief . . . a savage whose greedy eyes I could see gloating over [the weapons]" (Haggard 69). In order to inhibit the Native from stealing anything, Quartermain exploits his superstition. He warns the man that if he touched the rifles, they would fire. The Kafir experiments and in doing so, kills one of his oxen. He responds by calling the guns "live devils" (Haggard 70). Quartermain warns the man that when they come back and if they find anything missing, they "would kill him and all his people by witchcraft . . . and haunt him and turn his cattle mad and his milk sour till life was a weariness, and make the devils in the guns come out

and talk to him in a way he would not like" (Haggard 70). Clearly, the old Kafir is being mocked by the Europeans who only use his superstition to further their own goals: reclaiming all their goods when they return.

Likewise, when the group is travelling through the desert, the Native servants "cast themselves upon the ground and howled out that it was the devil" when they stumbled onto the sleeping herd of quagga (Haggard 75). The Europeans are cast in a favourable light by responding rationally to the surprise instead of ascribing the incident to supernatural elements. The Europeans are always portrayed as knowledgeable, capable men who can assess the situation and respond accordingly, whereas the Natives are superstitious, easily frightened and irrational.

This is further evidenced in the initial encounter with the Kukuana tribe. The Kukuanas are also superstitious, saying to Quartermain, Good, Curtis and Umbopa, "I see that ye are spirits" (Haggard 114). When the Kukuanas see Good and his half shaven face, his lack of trousers and moveable teeth, they are frightened and one man "threw himself down on the grass and gave vent to a prolonged howl of terror" (Haggard 114). The Europeans show their guns to the Natives, and since the Kukuanas have no knowledge of guns, they think the newcomers and their guns are wizards. Again, Quartermain exploits this superstitious misconception. He warns the Natives that if they try to trick them, they will commission Good and his strange attire to avenge and destroy them (Haggard 118).

When Quartermain's group is in the Kukuana camp, they meet Gagool, who embodies superstition. She is an aged woman purported to have supernatural knowledge. She is mocked by the Europeans as a "wizened monkey-like figure creeping . . . on all fours [with a] most extraordinary and weird countenance" (Haggard 147). She prophesies and "terror seemed to seize upon the hearts of all who heard" (Haggard 148). She, however, also sees the European's technology as magic, showing that even the wisest among the Natives is ignorant of European technology.

This mockery of superstition is clinched by the scene of the eclipse of the sun. The Natives are allegedly closer to nature and yet even they are confused and frightened when a natural phenomenon occurs. They "stood petrified with fear, [throwing] themselves upon their knees, [groaning] with terror . . . [t]he sun is dying – the wizards have killed the sun" (Haggard 185-6). The Europeans thus show they do not even need western technology to manipulate the Native's superstitious fear. Throughout the novel, the European is constantly portrayed as rational, Christian and technologically advanced, whereas the native culture is steeped in superstition, fear and ignorance. This is mocked by the Europeans and Haggard uses these passages to demonstrate why he believes imperialism is necessary – for the enlightenment of the Natives. Critics have suggested that Haggard writes to distance the reader "from the colonized peoples and [in this way, helps] to reaffirm the

justice and necessity of British imperialism" (Gaidswana 1). The indigenous African people are portrayed negatively and in desperate need of a saving influence, such as the British imperial rule.

However, Haggard also portrays another view of Africans in his novel. He was "contradictory in his attitude towards . . . the Zulus" and was known to be "sympathetic to the plight of the Natives" (Cameron 10, Arnold 1). Interspersed among the imperialistic, negative images of African peoples are the anti-imperial, positive aspects of the same races. Umbopa, one of Quartermain's principal servants, later revealed as the king of the Kukuanas, is described as a "magnificent-looking man: I never saw a finer native" (Haggard 49). This stands in sharp contrast to earlier images of the savage native. When Umbopa speaks, Quartermain reflects that his "race is by no means devoid of poetic instinct and of intellectual power," quietly acknowledging his respect for the language and intellect of the Zulu people (Haggard 68).

Haggard forthrightly admires the Kukuana people when describing their army. Through Quartermain, he relates they are "the most magnificent set of men I have ever seen . . . [t]hey were all men of mature age, mostly veterans of about forty, and not one of them was under six feet in height . . . they stood like bronze statues" (Haggard 128). The most impressive division was the "famous regiment of Greys, the pride and glory of the Kukuana army . . . [who had] perfect discipline and steady and unchanging valour" (Haggard 220-2). Quartermain states they were an "impressive and imposing army [who] stood perfectly silent [with their] majestic forms [and] waving plumes" (Haggard 159). Quartermain cannot mask his respect for the people who maintain and create such a force. He realizes that this is not the creation of an imperialist nation or administration, but of the Native's own making. He knows that there are some aspects to Native people's culture that should be maintained. This is evident in the closing segment of the novel, where Umbopa, who now resides as king in Kukuana land, says he will allow no white men to enter his kingdom because he needs to protect Kukuana land. It is thus far unspoiled by the negative aspects of colonization and Umbopa is determined to retain this. He says,

[no] white man shall cross the mountains . . .
 I will see no traders with their guns and rum.
 My people shall fight with the spear, and
 drink water, like their forefathers before them.
 I will have no praying-men to put fear of
 death into men's hearts, to stir them up . . .
 and make a path for the white men who
 follow to run on (Haggard 306).

These "anti-imperialist statements serve to warn against any further incursions by the white man" and they are perhaps also a warning to readers that not all aspects of African tribal life need to be influenced and changed by European colonization (Cameron 10). In some instances, it would be best to

leave customs and peoples in peace, preserving African traditional ways of life.

Obviously, the two opposing imperialist views presented in the novel demonstrate Haggard's own ambivalence towards British imperialism in Africa. On the one hand, the indigenous people are ignorant and superstitious and need to be enlightened in European technology. However, Europeans are also not permitted to enter where they may potentially ruin an impressive culture. Colonization was necessary, but the colonizers must tread carefully in order to preserve some fundamental aspects of African traditional life.

About the Author

Jorina Vossebelt is a third year English major at the University of Lethbridge, hoping to graduate with a combined B.A / B.Ed. Her area of interest is British imperial fiction of the nineteenth century.

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