

The Poisonwood Bible



NOTES

Historical



- **The Roundtable Conference**

- Held Feb. 20 1960 in Brussels
- Chiefs, head of unions and party leaders from Congo
- Date for complete independence of the Congo decided and set
- Patrice Lumumba instrumental in getting date set for soon rather than decades in future
- He said, “The doors of the Congo are wide open to all men of good will wishing to help us. On the other hand, we shall not tolerate any person or power with imperialistic aims. We prefer liberty with poverty to wealth with tyranny.”
- In *The Poisonwood Bible*, the Underdowns deliver the news of this meeting in Book Two

Historical



- Independence Day

- June 30, 1960 from Belgium
- Festivities included speeches from new president of Congo, Joseph Kasa-Vubu, and from king of Belgium, Baudouin 1
- Lumumba was not scheduled to speak but he did anyway following in inauguration as Prime Minister
- Speech was a diatribe against Belgium's imperialist, immoral and greedy rule
- Well-received by Congolese, but criticized by Western leaders
- In *The Poisonwood Bible*, Leah and Nathan travel to Leopoldville to witness this history in the making

Historical

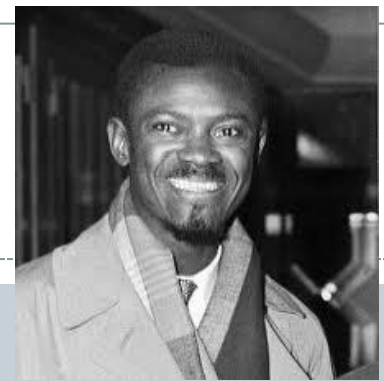


- **Katanga's Secession**

- Declared its independence on July 11 1960
- One of the most developed areas in the Congo, containing rich mineral resources like diamonds, copper, cobalt and zinc
- This was an economic blow to the Congo
- In *The Poisonwood Bible*, Leah hears about the secession from Anatole who delivers the news to Nathan in order to impress upon him how dangerous things have become



Historical



- **Patrice Lumumba**

- First Prime Minister of the Congo, elected May 1960
- Dream was a fully independent Congo free from Western influence
- In power for 10 weeks of extreme political unrest
- Sought foreign aid to subdue violence in Congo
- Concerned that UN forces not enough, asked the Soviet Union for help
- This attracted the attention of the US
- Sept. 14 1960 – a government coup led by Joseph Mobutu (who was backed by Western countries) led to Lumumba's arrest
- Jan. 17 1961 killed in captivity, executed by a firing squad of either Belgium officers or Katanga authorities
- No American directly involved in death, but the CIA had been involved in Mobutu's rise to power and had concocted at least one plot to assassinate Lumumba, which was never put into action
- In *The Poisonwood Bible*, Lumumba is more than just a historical figure. Anatole highly respects him and agrees with his political goals and ideals
- By end of book, Orleanna, Leah and Adah have developed the utmost respect for him and his goals for the Congo

Historical



- **Joseph Mobutu**

- Instrumental in murdering Lumumba
- Nov. 25 1965, started another coup to get rid of President Kasa-Vubu
- Remained absolute dictator until his overthrow in 1996
- Responsible for the authenticity campaign that renamed the country The Republic of Zaire and renamed many of its cities and landmarks
- Africans ordered to change any names that reflected colonial influence – Ironic?
- At time of his death, his personal fortune was nearly 4 billion dollars

Historical



- **The Church Committee**

- AKA – The United States Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities
- Formed in 1975 partly in response to the Watergate Scandal when it became clear that illegal activities had been perpetrated by the CIA, FBI and executive branch
- Published 14 reports documenting attempts of FBI and CIA to assassinate foreign leaders



Biblical Allusions



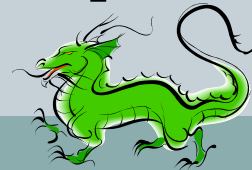
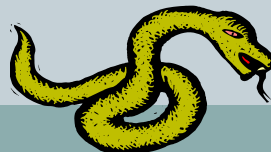
- **Nathan** – prophet in Old Testament best known for rebuking King David for his affair with Bathsheba
- **Rachel and Leah** – in Book of Genesis, two sisters who were wives of Jacob. Leah known for being blessed by God with fertility and Rachel cursed with barrenness. Rachel also known for her beauty, while Leah is favored by God for inner beauty
- **Ruth** – Book of Ruth, a figure of loyalty and friendship, refuses to abandon her mother-in-law
- **Adah** – in Bible there are 2 Adahs which are both relatively obscure. Significance?
- **Methuselah** – Biblical figure whose name is synonymous with old age, living 969 years. Not a major character, mentioned only in one chapter.



Biblical allusion – title of books



- Book One – Genesis (beginnings)
- Book Two – Revelation (predicts the Apocalypse and restoration of God’s kingdom on earth) – In *The Poisonwood Bible*, Belgium withdraws its rule from the Congo , a tumultuous and changing political event
- Book Three – Judges (tells story of Israel’s continuing cycle of sin and repentance) – In the *Poisonwood Bible*, the book begins with a quote in which an angel scolds the children of Israel for their faithlessness and worshipping false gods (compare to Nathan and Leah)
- Book Four – Bel and the Dragon (book from the Apocrypha involving Daniel who proved the idol Bel as false, killed a dragon and survived the lion’s den unharmed). In *The Poisonwood Bible*, the book is called “Bel and the Serpent.” Symbolic of?



Biblical allusion – title of books



- Book Five – Exodus (story of Israelites escape from Egypt, then outlines the law set down by God, Moses is hero of Exodus). Compares to?
- Book Six – The Song of the Three Children (an apocryphal passage excluded from most Protestant bibles, a song of praise for three young men who walk in midst of fire unharmed). Compare this allusion to trial by fire to The Poisonwood Bible, also the reference to “three children” and the idea of deliverance (from?)



Biblical Allusion – title of the novel



- “Bangala means something precious and dear. But the way he pronounces it, it means the poisonwood tree. Praise the Lord, hallelujah, my friends! For Jesus will make you itch like nobody’s business.”
- This is indicative of an important and pervasive theme throughout the book, **the theme of the power and beauty of language**
 - Nzolo – dearly beloved, a white grub or little potatoes
 - Benduka – crooked walker or “the sleek bird that dipped in and out of the banks with crazy ungrace that took your breath.”
 - “Mother May I?”

