

Structural Implications of Missionary Work in the Congo: The Limitations of *The Poisonwood Bible* in its Critique of Colonization

Barbara Kingsolver's novel, *The Poisonwood Bible*, opens with the journey of an American missionary family into the Congo in 1959. As independence rapidly approaches for the country, the family grapples with daily life in the small village of Kilanga, rotating narrations amongst the mother and her four daughters. Kingsolver uses this narrative structure to critique links between missionary work and colonization by exploring the personal and spiritual growth of the five women in this isolated village. However, her novel overlooks key structural implications of missionary work. I compare *The Poisonwood Bible* to primary documents from missionaries to the Congo in the 20th century found in the *James Spencer Worth Papers* and *Henry T. Harris Papers* housed in the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Southern Historical Collection, the *Hall Family Papers* housed at Duke University's Rubenstein Library, and the *Catherine Parham Papers* and *Lorena Kelly Papers* housed at East Carolina University's Joyner Library. Through this analysis, I find that Barbara Kingsolver's characterization of the Price family stresses the development of personal spiritual beliefs in an isolated space, whereas primary sources from missionaries during the time period convey the inverse—personal beliefs are static while reflecting the views of a larger missionary network across the Congo. As a result, Barbara Kingsolver's intended critique of missionary work in the Congo in the mid to late 20th century falls short because the systemic impact of missionary work is largely absent: she is unable to fully convey the influence of missionary work on the political, social and cultural development of the Congo.