

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

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Introduction

- In *The Poisonwood Bible*, Barbara Kingsolver critiques the missionary role in pressing religion—and as a result colonization—onto the Congolese people (Douglas 136)
- Kingsolver’s argument is limited because it only suggests that there is a link between missionary work and colonization; it does not unpack how such a link came about.
- The connections between missionary societies and larger social and political tensions in the Congo are glossed over.

Archival Methods

- *James Spencer Worth Papers* and *Henry T. Harris Papers* housed in the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill’s Southern Historical Collection at Wilson Library.
- *The Hall Family Papers* housed at Duke University’s Rubenstein Library
- *The Catherine Parham Papers* and *Lorena Kelly Papers* housed at East Carolina University’s Joyner Library.

Thesis

The characterization of the Price family stresses the development of personal spiritual beliefs in an isolated space, whereas primary sources convey the inverse—personal beliefs are static while reflecting the views of a larger missionary network across the Congo. As a result, Kingsolver’s intended critique of missionary work falls short because the systemic impact of missionary work is largely absent.

Analysis and Findings

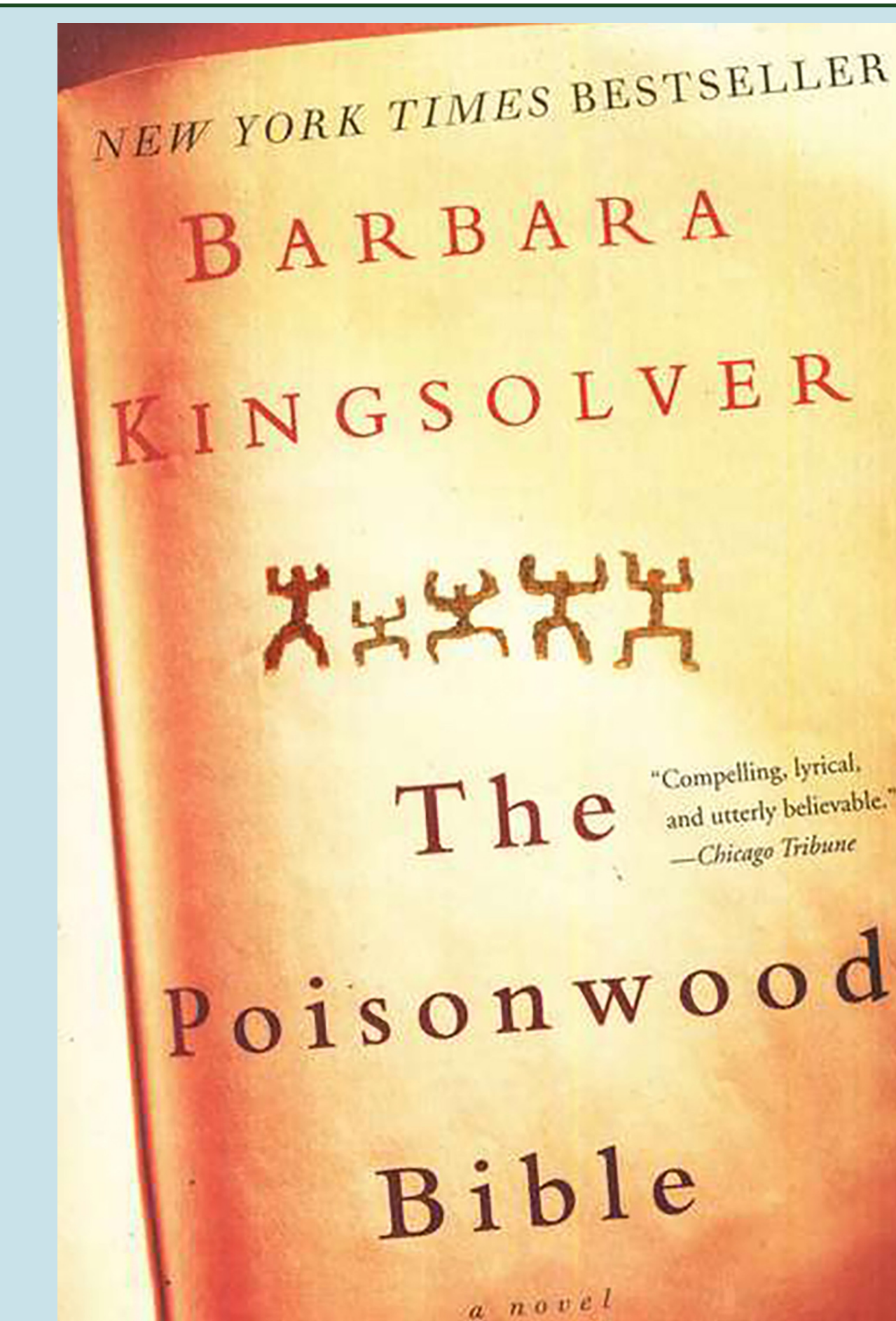
- Character development of Price family compared letters by missionaries emphasizing infallible nature of belief systems.
- Isolation of Price family compared to missionary systems.
- **Cultural Implications:** Price family learning to embrace Congolese culture juxtaposes missionary critique.
- **Social Implications:** School system as largely influential in converting natives to Christianity.
- **Political Implications:** Missionary systems shaping Congolese independence efforts.

“While we were washing and swimming in the stream any old place, there were rules, it turns out: wash clothes downstream...Bathe in the middle. Draw water for drinking up above the village. In Kilanga these are matters of religious observance, they are baptism and communion” (Kingsolver 172)

Bibliography

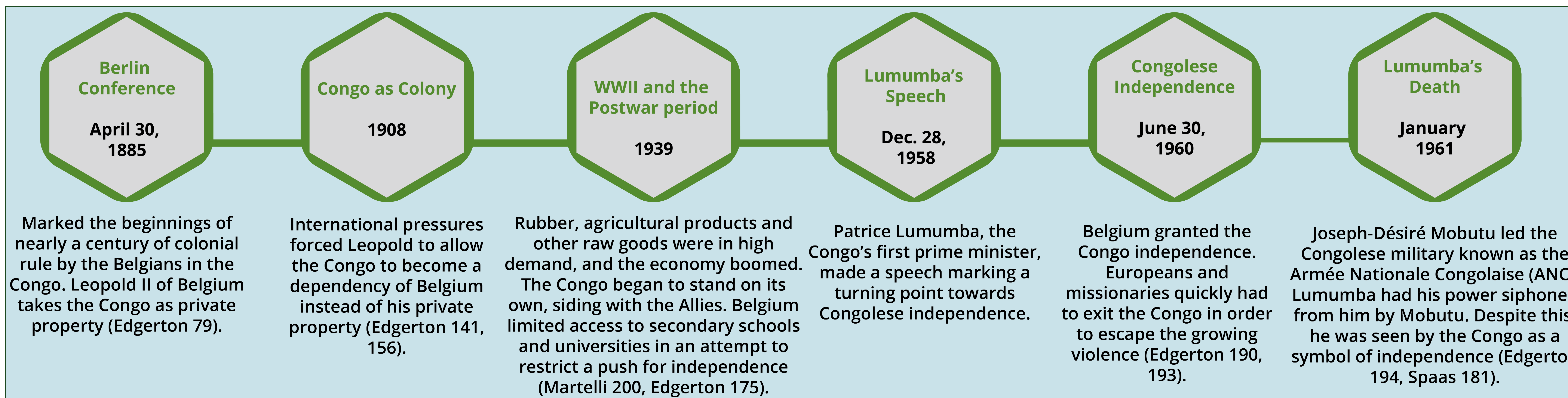
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Cover of Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible*



Conclusion and Future Research

- This analysis raises larger interdisciplinary questions concerning American literature and society as a whole—
- Is there a consistent pattern of fictional works glossing over structural issues such as racism, classism and sexism?
- Is there a relationship between books that address structural issues and book bans in schools?
- To what extent does the fictional portrayal of structural issues influence understandings of history and how those issues are still present in society today?
- This paper stresses the importance of *how* we remember history, not just that we *do* remember it.



For more information on my work, scan the QR code to visit the website I created as a reflection of my research process.

