

HISTORY MATTERS

Historical Scholarship and the Public Square: The Belgian Commission on Colonialism Through the Lens of Wiriyamu

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Abstract

This piece troubleshoots an array of epistemological, political, and practical difficulties involved in public studies of colonial atrocities. It explores the deficiencies of the Commission on Colonialism backed by the Belgian parliament between 2020–22, and suggests pathways for facilitating a fuller accounting of colonial wrongs. The argument leverages the author's experiences in investigating and publicizing the colonial massacre of Mozambican civilians in Wiriyamu in 1972, which culminated in a public apology from Portugal's prime minister in 2022.

Keywords: Central Africa; Democratic Republic of Congo; colonialism; violence; memory; historiography

It is difficult for historians to investigate colonial mass violence: the dead don't talk; survivors can, but their memorial shelf life is fragile, which leaves historians to reconstruct truth-telling with datapoints from, among other things, colonial archives. Epistemic colonialism, in other words, can define, protect, and perpetuate its narrative, by rinsing evidence, curating what they want historians to see; hiding the scope of what they did and to whom; under-recording or marginalizing the lived experience of the colonized; or worse, expunging inculpatory evidence of mass violence from the archives.¹

When challenged, epistemic colonialism has the power to assert its positionality with any or all these weapons of choice: denials, no it did not happen, it is all a myth; narratives of doubt, we do not believe it was as systemic as reported given the evidentiary lacuna; or exculpatory justifications, the civilizational good of our colonial actions far outweighed the resultant human misery. Rarely do such narratives affirming colonialism die willingly in the face of historiography from below, unless the latter is used to either litigate as in the case of the Mau Mau in Kenya or contest publicly as in the recent case of the Wiriyamu massacre, which helped yield a two-headed contrition, an admission

¹By epistemic colonialism I mean knowledge affirming the virtues of coloniality as an experience from above. See, V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Tim Livsey, "Open Secrets: The British 'Migrated Archives', Colonial History, and Postcolonial History," *History Workshop Journal* 93, no. 1 (2022): 95–116.

of guilt and an apology from the Portuguese state.² When contrition such as these occur, we know history matters!

Historians of colonial mass violence in not so many words, contribute significantly to academic scholarship, often within the specialized field of colonial studies. Equipped with substantial evidence some engage actively in public discussions to challenge epistemic colonialism, advocate for wider public access to colonial archives, and secure additional funding to support transparency in colonial history — all with the hope of furthering humanistic values and enlarging the public space for raising questions of historical injustice and creating opportunities for redress.

The professional life of a historian, especially within academia, is guided by rigorous, evidence-based methodologies often rooted in Cartesian principles. While these standards ensure a commitment to factual accuracy and disciplined argumentation, they can sometimes become obscure and even confrontational. In contrast, historical knowledge in the public sphere operates on a vastly different set of dynamics, driven by a spectrum of advocacies where passion, partisanship, compromise, interest alignment, and negotiated solutions vie for influence and ultimately shape outcomes.

My research on the Portuguese massacre of Mozambicans at Wiriyamu — and the subsequent apology by the Portuguese prime minister — highlighted the complex interplay between these worlds. It also revealed potential strategies for bridging the gap between historical inquiry and public redress. It is with this experience in mind that I approached the “History Matters” articles on the Congo in *The Journal of African History* 64, no. 3 (2023).³ Here, I reflect on how our work on Wiriyamu contrasts with the Belgian Commission’s efforts and suggest some alternative approaches in research and public engagement that historians might employ to enhance such endeavors.

Of monuments and the dead

The Berlin Conference of 1884–85 granted the Belgian King two million square kilometers of territory to rule, one third the size of the United States, the so-called Congo Free State. The country added two territories to its portfolio in 1916, Ruanda-Urundi. Belgian rule lasted for seventy-seven years. For the first 8,395 days, Belgium had no direct oversight of the Congo landmass; its king did. Leopold II viewed the Congo as “a slice of this magnificent African cake.”⁴ He was its sole proprietor, answerable to none: “My rights to the Congo are not for sharing; they are the fruits of my labours and my expenditures.”⁵

²Caroline Elkins, *Britain’s Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya* (London: Bodley Head, 2014); Ian Johnston, “50 years on, UK agrees to compensate Kenyans tortured during colonial rule,” *NBC News*, 6 June 2013, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/50-years-uk-agrees-compensate-kenyans-tortured-during-colonial-rule-flna6c10221417>, accessed 9 Sep. 2024; Mustafah Dhada, *The Portuguese Massacre of Wiriyamu in Colonial Mozambique, 1964–2013*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2015); Mustafah Dhada, *The Wiriyamu Massacre: An Oral History, 1960–1974* (London: Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2020); Jane Flanagan, “Portugal apologizes for Mozambique killings 50 years after Times exposé,” *The Times*, 4 Sep. 2022, <https://www.thetimes.com/article/portugal-apologises-for-mozambique-killings-50-years-after-times-expose-5ngnkpp2v>, accessed 7 Sep. 2024.

³Gillian Mathys and Sarah Van Beurden, “History by Commission? The Belgian Colonial Past and the Limits of History in the Public Eye,” *The Journal of African History* 64, no. 3 (2023): 334–43, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853723000683>; Donatien Dibwe dia Mwembu, “Les sources orales à la conquête du passé colonial,” *The Journal of African History* 64, no. 3 (2023): 344–50, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853723000592>.

⁴Leopold II à Solvyns, 17 Nov. 1877, in Pierre van Zuylen, *Léchiquier congolais, ou le secret du Roi* (Bruxelles: Charles Dessart, 1959), 43.

⁵Martin Ewans, *European Atrocity, African Catastrophe: Leopold II, the Congo Free State and Its Aftermath* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 224.

The Congo helped Leopold II become Belgium's builder king.⁶ Aided by public relations firms, a rich network of scholars, economists, Force Publique mercenaries, American supporters, odious notes, government-backed interest free loans, British banks, private sector lending, debentures, bonds, securities, propaganda, and deceptive advertising, Leopold II constructed a wall of silence around the "Congo Free State."⁷ Jean Stengers argues he carried out the project with a huge debt to exploit its riches, which Adam Hochschild estimated to be worth a billion dollars in 1998.⁸ Today that figure would stand at 1.9 billion dollars, were we to accept unequivocally Hochschild's figures.⁹

Leopold II used part of the proceeds to leave behind monuments to rival Paris and London; and a royal trust for members of his family to enjoy as future kings and princes.¹⁰ Notable among the monuments were the world's fifth largest church, the Basilica of the Sacred Heart, a castle, a hippodrome, a railway station, avenues, chateaus, country estates, several in the French Riviera, forests and agricultural land developments, galleries, greenhouses, parks, pavilions, promenades, and the African Museum at Tervuren, which at one point displayed 267 Congolese as exhibits in a "human zoo."¹¹

As a builder king, Leopold II proved deadly for the people of the Congo.¹² Sources estimate between one to fifteen million souls perished in a span of twenty-three years — and the debate over the numbers continues unabated to this day.¹³ Taking the very conservative estimate of a million dead would suggest five souls perished every hour during Leopold's reign as Brussels' butcher king.¹⁴ In 1908, following pressure from the progressive elements in the Belgian parliament, Leopold II "sold his interests" — namely bonds and debentures, which the state bought for 215.5 million francs.¹⁵ Before the handover, Hochschild and one other source cite, he had inculpatory evidence destroyed of his activities in the Congo — a difficult matter to prove without an incriminating paper trail. "I will give

⁶Jean Stengers, "King Leopold's Imperialism," in *Studies in the Theory of Imperialism*, eds. Roger Owen and Robert B. Sutcliffe (London: Longman, 1975), 248–76; Jean Stengers, "La genèse d'une pensée coloniale: Léopold II et le modèle hollandaise," *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 90 (1977): 46–71, reprinted in Jean Stengers, *Congo: Mythes et réalités, 100 ans d'histoire* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Ducolot, 1989), 9–40.

⁷Arwen P. Mohun, *American Imperialist: Cruelty and Consequence in The Scramble For Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023); Dean Clay, "'David vs Goliath': The Congo Free State Propaganda War, 1890–1909," *The International History Review* 43, no. 3 (2020): 457–74; Steven Press, *Rogue Empires: Contracts and Conmen in Europe's Scramble for Africa* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

⁸Jean Stengers, "King Leopold's Congo, 1886–1908," in *The Cambridge History of Africa*, vol. 6 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 315–58; Robert Harms, "The End of Red Rubber: A Reassessment," *The Journal of African History* 16, no. 1 (1975): 73–88; Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 235.

⁹CPI Inflation Calculator, <https://www.officialdata.org/us/inflation/1998?amount=1000000000>, accessed 22 Feb. 2024.

¹⁰Matthew G. Stanard, "King Leopold's Bust: A Story of Monuments, Culture, and Memory in Colonial Europe," *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 12, no. 2 (2011).

¹¹Pascal Blanchard and Maarten Couttenier, "Les zoos humains en Belgique" in *Zoos humains: L'invention du sauvage*, ed. Pascal Blanchard (Liège: Centre d'Action Laïque de la Province de Liège, 2016), 35–44.

¹²Stengers, *Congo*; and Peter Bate, dir., "White King, Red Rubber, Black Death," film, *BBC Two* (2003).

¹³See, Edmund D. Morel, *E. D. Morel's History of the Congo Reform Movement*, eds. William Roger Louis and Jean Stengers (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 252–57; Peter Forbath, *The River Congo: The Discovery, Exploration, and Exploitation of the World's Most Dramatic River* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 123; Jan Vansina, *Being Colonized: The Kuba Experience in Rural Congo, 1880–1960* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), 127–49; Aldwin Roes, "Towards a History of Mass Violence in the Etat Indépendant du Congo, 1885–1908," *South African Historical Journal* 62, no. 4 (2010): 12; Tim Stanley, "Belgium's Heart of Darkness," *History Today* 62, no. 10 (2012); Guy Vanthemsche, *Belgium and the Congo, 1885–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 25; Idesbald Goddeeris, Amandine Lauro, and Guy Vanthemsche, eds., *Le Congo colonial: une histoire en questions* (Brussels: Polis, 2020), 107–17.

¹⁴Georgina Rannard and Eve Webster, "Leopold II: Belgium 'wakes up' to its bloody colonial past," *BBC*, 12 June 2020, <https://bbc.com/news/world-europe-53017188>; and Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo: From Leopold to Kabila: A People's History* (London: Zed Books, 2002). See also, the Alice Seeley Harris Archive's collection of images on the Congo in *Antislavery Usable Past*, website, <http://antislavery.ac.uk/solr-search?q=Congo&facet=collection%3A%22Alice+Seeley+Harris+Archive%22>, accessed 22 Feb. 2024.

¹⁵Kim Oosterlinck, Joseph Blocher, and Mitu Gulati, "Why Did Belgium Pay Leopold's Bonds," *Law and Contemporary Problems* 83, no.2 (2020): 49–70.

them my Congo,” he intimated to an advisor, Gustave Stinglhamber, “but they have no right to know what I did there.”¹⁶

However, using indicative sources we could drill down an approximate cost of Belgian colonialism in the Congo, by tapping data from central and regional archives and libraries, municipal government records, historical societies and heritage organizations, architectural and engineering records, property records, real estate listings, appraisers, and preservationists; and in this way narrow down the variance in the death toll.¹⁷ We could at a pinch calculate the attendant reparations too, by using the formula, one among many: (Leopold’s expatriated profits, if any ÷ approximate numbers killed) + ((revenue generated by public monuments since their construction – maintenance costs and depreciation, if any) ÷ approximate numbers killed) + (royal trust funds ÷ approximate numbers killed) + (endowments, gifts, miscellaneous disbursements ÷ approximate numbers killed) = reparations per capita.

Responding to renewed global and internal pressure to confront Belgium’s African past, the Belgian parliament set up a Special Parliamentary Commission on Colonialism in 2020, the third of its kind.¹⁸

Back at home, the Democratic Republic of the Congo was about to commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of its independence. Belgium’s reigning monarch pre-empted the commission’s formative mandate. It is unclear if this move was intended to support or undermine the commission’s presaged work. He sent a letter to Félix Tshisekedi, president of the Congo, acknowledging his country’s violent past in Africa:

During the time of the Congo Free State [1885–1908], acts of violence and brutality were committed that weigh still on our collective memory. The colonial period that followed also caused suffering and humiliations. I would like to express my deepest regrets for the wounds of the past, the pain of today, which is rekindled by the discrimination all too present in our society.”¹⁹

The Belgian response to the letter was mixed. The present king’s younger brother could not see how Leopold II could be held responsible for the atrocities given that he had not set foot in the Congo. Others viewed it as a courageous act, historically significant for the country’s postcolonial future. Calvin Soiresse Njall, member of both the parliament of the francophone community in Belgium and the Brussels parliament, however, urged caution. Whatever the king had said in his letter to his alleged friend the president of the Congo, his view was firmly on the side of the commission. “The parliamentary work is necessary to establish the facts. It is after the establishment of the facts that we can talk about apologies or reparation.”²⁰

¹⁶Lee Gillette, “The House That Leopold Built,” *Transition* 131 (2021): 51–75.

¹⁷Hugues Legros and Curtis A. Keim, “Guide to African Archives in Belgium,” *History in Africa* 23 (1996): 401–9; Pierre.-Alain Tallier, Marie Van Eeckenrode, and Patricia Van Schuylenbergh, eds., *Belgique, Congo, Rwanda et Burundi: Guide des sources de l’histoire de la colonisation (19e-20e siècle): Vers un patrimoine mieux partagé!*, 2 vols. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021). For an economic treatment of this subject see, Guy Vanthemsche, *Belgium, and the Congo, 1885–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

¹⁸The first commission, “The Congo Commission,” was set by Leopold II in 1904, in response to international outcry against atrocities of labor engaged in rubber extraction. See, *The Congo: A Report of the Commission of Inquiry Appointed by the Congo Free State Government*, (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1906). The second, “The Lumumba Commission,” was established in 2000. It lasted for two years, during which its members studied Belgium’s role in assassinating Patrice Lumumba, the first prime minister of independent Congo.

¹⁹Jennifer Rankin and Jason Burke, “Belgian king expresses ‘deepest regrets’ for brutal colonial rule,” *The Guardian*, 30 June 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/30/belgian-king-philippe-expresses-profound-regrets-for-brutal-colonial-rule>, Last modified 13 Apr. 2023.

²⁰*Ibid.*

History on demand

The commission enlisted an advisory panel of ten experts, mostly Belgium-based: five historians, two specialists in transnational justice, two representatives of the African diaspora, and a former chairperson of the Burundian truth commission.²¹ They were asked to address ten object specific issues, and report their findings to the Belgian parliament — whose members sat poised to add their voice to the king's or terminate the inquiry with an official statement in the form of a report.²²

Part One of the report introduces the historical context, methodology, content, and structure: it discusses the four premises the authors used to guide their historical narrative; outlines the approach they took to collect data; and traces current debates on colonialism, violence, and violent colonialism. After this brief introduction, five authors of the report review nine specific aspects of Belgian colonialism. Relying on extensive secondary and synthetic literature, their texts discuss colonialism and colonial brutality, placing this discourse in the context of Belgian history in the Congo up to 1959. Elikia M'Bokolo's narrative here stands out, as a historical treatment of Belgian record in Africa as a lived experience. M'Bokolo's text draws on evidence and analysis in deeply felt oral historical methods.²³ An exhaustive discussion then follows on several topics: labor and capital in the colony, the administration of the Belgian Congo, the roots of colonial political identity, sexuality and gender, cultural imperialism, and the culture of knowledge dissemination. Part One ends with a reflection on colonialism and its purpose as a narrative for paternalistic governance.

Part Two of the report names twelve repositories critical to fill the lacuna in Belgian colonial history; and gives a page of sources useful to investigate further the body of the literature in the field, broadly defined. As a result, Part Three, on corrective measures for social and distributive justice, appears disconnected with the rest of the report. It accentuates ever further the divide between texts on history from above, which speak of colonial actions on the dead, and M'Bokolo's text, which speaks for the dead.

In their pieces on the commission and its report in this journal, Sarah Van Beurden and Gillian Mathys, as participants, and Donatien Dibwe Dia Mwembu, as a Congo-based scholar, reflected on the opportunities and challenges they and the commission faced.

The road to contrition

The demise of the Special Parliamentary Commission on Colonialism of 2020 compels us to think of innovative ways to move forward. I realize that we are in speculative territory, but the case of Wiriyaumu may well prove instructive here. By failing to secure a parliamentary apology, the commission diminished too the chances for a future government-backed truth and reconciliation commission, which would have given Belgian folk and Congolese civil society another try at truth-telling in a judgement-free setting. This legislative demise, therefore, points us to seriously consider creating an independent truth and reconciliation commission with the truth bit residing in the walls of the academy, led by Belgian and Congolese oral, local, and colonial historians, and the reconciliation part spearheaded by lawyers and activists experienced in public advocacy.

²¹Representatives of the five categories, respectively: Elikia M'Bokolo, Zana Mathieu Etambala, Gillian Mathys, Pierre-Luc Plasman, and Sarah Van Beurden; Valérie Rosoux and Martien Schotsmans; Anne Wetsi Mpoma and Laure Uwase; and the late Bishop Jean-Louis Nahimana. See Sarah Van Beurden and Gillian Mathys, "A Technology of (Post)Colonial Rule? The Belgian Congo Commission (2020–2022) in Historical Perspective," *Revue d'histoire Contemporaine De l'Afrique* 5 (2023): 3. For more details, see Mathys and Van Beurden, "History by Commission?," and Dibwe dia Mwembu, "Les sources orales."

²²Gillian Mathys, Sarah Van Beurden, Elikia M'Bokolo, Mathieu Zana Etambala, Pierre-Luc Plasman, and Laure Uwase, *Commission spéciale chargée d'examiner l'État indépendant du Congo et le passé colonial de la Belgique au Congo, au Rwanda et au Burundi, ses conséquences et les suites qu'il convient d'y réserver: Rapport des experts* (Bruxelles: Chambre des Représentants de Belgique, 2021), <https://www.dekamer.be/FLWB/PDF/55/1462/55K1462002.pdf>.

²³Elikia M'Bokolo, "Brutalisation et brutalités coloniales: la formation de la société congolaise dans l'État indépendant du Congo et au Congo Belge," in Mathys et al., *Commission spéciale*, 41–64.

That said, the proposal faces significant challenges. The scale of the Congo tragedy is monumental. It dwarfs the death toll in Wiri Yamu: 385 named individuals died in Wiri Yamu in 3 days, 128 deaths a day, compared to the conservative estimate of a million casualties in the Congo over a period of 47 years, which amounts to 35 deaths a day.²⁴ While Wiri Yamu was a short deadly burst on steroids, the Congo deaths were decidedly Braudelian in scope, agonizingly slow, and the attendant trauma lingered to afflict survivors and their progeny.

Further, it took a year and half to collect necrological, social, and event-specific data from a pool of 216 Wiri Yamu informants.²⁵ At this pace, it would take a single historian 6,849 years or 1,000 historians 7 years to collect similar data on all the one million dead in the Congo. This is clearly an unrealistic proposition to a problem that calls for ingenuity. One possible solution would be to adopt a two-tiered approach: one tier to cull casualty figures from oral and archival sources using a team of rapid response fact-checkers, and the other more selective and labor-intensive to focus on testimonial narratives illustrative of Belgian rule as a felt experience.

The Wiri Yamu study cost \$344,000 over 1995–2000. Fieldwork alone absorbed \$60,000. The remainder went to various sources: \$4,500 to underwrite medical copays for therapeutic debriefing sessions to treat associative post-traumatic stress disorder; \$55,000 for sabbatical leave payback; \$12,000 for research assistants, meta indexers, analogue to digital transfer service providers, and cloud storage; \$4500 for cartographic, audio, and video services; \$8000 for miscellaneous professional services, such as osseous pathology consultants and technical equipment; and \$200,000 for a five-year public relations campaign in Portugal. Add inflation figures to the original cost and the total tab today would be \$730,700, equivalent to a MacArthur grant of \$800,000.

These figures offer a general idea of resources needed for a commission of this kind. All other factors notwithstanding, a conservative estimate drawn from the Wiri Yamu study would suggest \$3,383 per in-depth interview (US\$730,700 ÷ 216 interviewees), less if confined to necrology, which could lower the figure to \$1,898 per rapid response data collection (US\$730,700 ÷ 385 dead). Clearly, the project of this magnitude would prove cost prohibitive without funding from large institutional donors such as the European Research Council and similar outfits in Belgium with a strong EURAXESS presence.²⁶

Subject to government backing, additional sources of revenue for the long haul could come from levying a new VAT-RT (value added truth and reconciliation tax) on ticket and merchandise sales from revenue generating institutions built by Leopold II with monies from the Congo. By way of illustration, here are two candidates to consider: the Basilica of the Sacred Heart (Koekelberg), which charges US\$8.90 dollars entrance fee to the observation deck per person and has a souvenir shop selling religious artifacts, postcards, and other souvenirs; and the Royal Museum for Central Africa framed by a 506 acre park in Tervuren, which charges a \$14 fee per entrance and has a restaurant, The Bistro Tembo, and the AfricaShop that sells books, catalogues, souvenirs, textiles, and music related items.²⁷ Annual revenue from sale of these products and services at these two locations are difficult to get to estimate the cash flow for the project were the measures put in place.

The biggest chunk of money spent on Wiri Yamu was for taking the “the show on the road.” This aspect of the struggle proved to be the most distasteful for a dyed-in-the-wool historian of my ilk, but critical in helping shift the needle towards contrition, which I might add had other perhaps more significant factors influencing the outcome. The strategy had many moving parts, in other words. Briefly, it entailed lobbying government officials by approaching well-connected influencers

²⁴Dhada, *Portuguese Massacre of Wiri Yamu*, 190–95.

²⁵Dhada, *Wiri Yamu Massacre*, xxiii–xxix.

²⁶European Research Council, “Advanced Grant,” webpage, <https://erc.europa.eu/apply-grant/advanced-grant>, accessed 22 Sep. 2024; Euraxess: Researchers in Motion, “Belgium,” webpage, <https://www.euraxess.be>, accessed 22 Sep. 2024.

²⁷Basilica Koekelsberg, “Panorama: Discover a unique view of Brussels and its surroundings!” and “Shop,” websites, <https://www.basilicakoekelberg.be/panorama/?lang=en> and <https://www.basilicakoekelberg.be/shop/?lang=en>, accessed 22 Sep. 2024; Royal Museum of Central Africa, website, <https://www.africamuseum.be/en>, accessed 22 Sep. 2024.

in Coimbra, Lisbon, and Porto; networking with historians, social scientists, journalists, public intellectuals, and humanitarians, to help develop a five-year public information campaign on Wiriyamu and the Luso-African colonial wars.

Extreme care was taken not to overexpose the public to the Wiriyamu massacre. Newspaper articles, opinion pieces, radio and television interviews, podcasts, social media posts on Facebook and list serves, academic articles, and seminars rigorously adhered to evidence-based narratives, and eschewed partisanship and polemics.²⁸ Responses to denialists focused on level-headed arguments buttressed by evidence. The aim of this concerted effort was to soften coloniality's gatekeepers. They were urged to consider declassifying materials on the colonial war, legislating procedures for handling public records, mandating retroactive collection of public documents in private hands, and setting up a transparency commission with legally enforceable powers to audit aberrant practices in declassification of archival holdings.

And it worked!

Portugal opened select archival materials on the massacre. None appeared tectonically significant to alter the core of the Wiriyamu story; in fact, they confirmed a serial cover-up. The crack in the dike widened when the Portuguese language monograph on Wiriyamu sent to the office of the presidency prompted the latter to seek a second opinion on the text from a high-ranking military officer, whose response affirmed the findings in the book, according to a confidential informant interviewed for this article. A new move followed when another defense ministry official asked for a text on Wiriyamu to be included in a curated volume on the Portuguese colonial wars. "Yes of course, I will be happy to write, but you do realize, I will be honest and robustly transparent, right?" He replied yes.²⁹ I then knew something momentous was afoot. The public pressure on the government continued unabated as did other factors that went into rescinding the officially sanctioned denial narrative. A few months later, the António Costa-led Lisbon government announced: yes, we did it, we did commit the horrible atrocity in Wiriyamu, killing innocent people, and we apologize for it or words to that effect.³⁰

Of course, a reconciliation strategy for the Congo will be more complex and the Wiriyamu template would only work with some tweaking. One reason reconciliation worked well in the Wiriyamu

²⁸Catarina Gomes, "Wiriyamu, a vida antes e durante o massacre," *Público*, 30 Nov. 2015, <https://www.publico.pt/2015/11/30/sociedade/noticia/wiriyamu-a-vida-antes-e-durante-o-massacre-1715828>; João Carlos, "'Vozes de Wiriyamu' lembra vítimas de massacre em Moçambique," *Deutsche Welle*, 17 Dec. 2018, <https://p.dw.com/p/3AFGQ>; Miguel Cardina, Bruno Sena Martins, and Sheila Khan, "A violência colonial no presente: pesquisas, testemunhos e perspectivas – Entrevista com Mustafah Dhada," *Estudos Ibero-Americanos* 45, no. 2 (2019): 64–76, <https://revistaseletronicas.pucrs.br/iberoamericana/article/view/33813/18032>; Mustafah Dhada, "Wiriyamu e a guerra colonial de Portugal," *Público*, 29 July 2021, <https://www.publico.pt/2021/07/29/politica/noticia/wiriyamu-guerra-colonial-portugal-1972159>; Mustafah Dhada, "O golpe falhado que levou ao assassinato de Amílcar Cabral," *Público*, 20 Jan. 2022, <https://www.publico.pt/2022/01/20/culturaipilon/ensaio/golpe-falhado-levou-assassinato-amilcar-cabral-1992501>; Paula Cardoso, "O massacre português de Wiriyamu: escrever para não esquecer," *Setenta e Quatro*, 21 Jan. 2022; António Rodrigues, "Mustafah Dhada: Ainda estamos prisioneiros do fascismo para acesso aos arquivos da guerra colonial," *Público*, 16 Dec. 2022, <https://www.publico.pt/2022/12/16/mundo/entrevista/mustafah-dhada-prisioneiros-fascismo-acesso-arquivos-guerra-colonial-2031693>; António Rodrigues, "O que se faz com o reconhecimento oficial de Wiriyamu 50 anos depois do massacre?" *Público*, 16 Dec. 2022, <https://www.publico.pt/2022/12/16/mundo/noticia/faz-reconhecimento-oficial-wiriyamu-50-anos-massacre-2031643>; Sandra Araújo, Ricardo Roque, Nuno Domingos, and Matheus Serva Pereira, "O Massacre de Wiriyamu 50 Anos Depois," Interview with Mustafah Dhada, *Impérios Research Group Podcast* (Instituto de Ciências Sociais da Universidade de Lisboa, ICS-ULisboa), no. 9 (16 Dec. 2022), <https://creators.spotify.com/pod/show/imperios/episodes/O-Massacre-de-Wiriyamu-50-Anos-Depois-e1sa1v0/a-a924rlv>; Mustafah Dhada, "Wiriyamu. As negações acabaram, as verdades não," *Público*, 18 Dec. 2022, <https://www.publico.pt/2022/12/18/mundo/opiniao/massacre-wiriyamu-2031472>.

²⁹Mustafah Dhada, *O Massacre Português de Wiriyamu, Moçambique 1972*, trans. Susana Sousa e Silva (Lisbon: Tinta da China, 2016); Mustafah Dhada, "Wiriyamu e a violência em massa na África portuguesa," in *O Crepúsculo do Império – Portugal e as Guerras de Descolonização*, eds. Pedro Aires Oliveira and João Vieira Borges (Lisboa: Bertrand Editora, forthcoming [2025]).

³⁰António Costa pede desculpa por massacre de Wiriyamu: 'Acto indesculpável que desonra a nossa História,' *Público*, 2 Sep. 2022, <https://www.publico.pt/2022/09/02/politica/noticia/primeiroministro-portugues-pede-desculpa-mocambique-massacre-wiriyamu-2019244>.

case was the privileging of social history of the victims and survivors over the anatomy of death.³¹ This approach vaccinated affirmative narratives against denialism, which proved too emaciated with defensible fact-backed arguments to stand up to the overwhelming culture of oral evidence. As a result, the world at large bore witness to a lived social experience first before witnessing on paper its disappearance. “In the scheme of things historical and existential, it is life that precedes death,” I wrote in my text on Wiriyamu.³² “The dead cannot argue with the past. Those left behind can by telling us first how the dead lived, loved, and laughed before sharing with us how they perished.”

A summative conclusion

A review of what transpired with the colonial commission on the political front, which resulted in greater public access to colonial archives, suggests Belgian coloniality may well be susceptible to change. What is needed now more than ever, is a strategy that goes beyond Dabwe dia Mwembu’s text: one that galvanizes Belgian and Congolese necrologists, and oral, cliometric, forensic, and social historians, to work in a well-funded alliance to data-mine for death tolls in colonial archives in Belgium; and triangulate these with memorial and colonial records in the Congo — as the Wiriyamu study did for Mozambique. It is then that Dabwe dia Mwembu’s proposed work would come alive with the dead as witnesses to colonial mass violence.

Such a two-pronged work will prove impregnable to bone-chilling narratives affirming the virtues of epistemic colonialism. Arguments against evidence tend to either weaken over time under social pluralism or lead to fascism; and if the culture of evidence from below demonstrates asymmetries not because of methodological deficiencies but because of evidentiary lacuna, then the proposed project here will triumph over the present status quo. The road to contrition is therefore eminently clear: it is towards truth seeking from below and truth telling from above. Remaining silent after the commission’s evident failure to change will only prolong the subaltern struggle for epistemic liberation from colonialism. For us as historians, the time to act is now.

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³¹Dhada, *Portuguese Massacre of Wiriyamu*, 139–57 and 159–72.

³²Mustafah Dhada, “Aphani Wense! Kill Them All: Portugal’s Final Reckoning of the Wiriyamu Massacre,” *Golz Lecture: In the Trenches of History: Writing, Researching and Struggling for Human Rights*, presented at Bowdoin College, 7 Sep. 2023, video recording available on YouTube, <https://youtu.be/ZPlQWFzjdok>.

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