

“Cultural Progress in the Congo” (1884)

Abstract

The Berlin Conference of 1884–85 marked the climax of the European competition for territory in Africa. The “scramble for Africa” had led to conflict among European powers, particularly between the British and French in West Africa, the Portuguese and British in East Africa, and the French and Belgians (under King Leopold II) in the Congo. Such rivalry impelled Bismarck in late 1884 to convene a meeting of European powers in Berlin. Britain, France, Germany, Portugal, and King Leopold II negotiated their claims to African territory, which were then formalized and mapped. Long before 1884, the representatives of Europe’s colonial powers had been using the rhetoric of a “civilizing mission” to legitimate their African claims.

In this cartoon, the satirical journal *Kladderadatsch* mocks the “civilizing mission” argument by suggesting that colonial subjects were not capable of being “civilized” at all. The cartoon both draws on and reproduces the trope of the *Hosenneger* (the “pants-wearing Negro”)—a colonial subject who aspires to be civilized but, because of fundamental inferiority, can only fall short. The subject’s inability to understand European fashions was a central feature of this trope. In this cartoon, we see a representative range of everyday German habits transplanted into the Congo: hilarity ensues when the Africans try to imitate Europeans. A gentleman (middle right), wearing top hat and ridiculous striped trousers, presents a cactus to the object of his affection; she wears women’s petticoats and walks her crocodile on a leash. Three half-naked men at top right, rather than playing classical instruments or singing in harmony, clash cymbals and bang on drums in what appears to be a riotous performance. There is a hint of criticism of colonizing practices in the cigars and alcohol being exported to the Africans (at top left), as well as a hint of colonial anxiety in the advertising column (bottom right): with an absurd election cry (“Don’t vote for carnivores” – “Wählt keinen Carnivoren”), the column presents the possibility of up-ended hierarchies wherein a so-called *Völkerschau* brings twenty-five Berlin workers (Rixdorfers) for Africans to ogle, and the *Salons de Calau* advertises that it employs white waiters. The figures are caricatured in ways that presume and present racial inferiority, thereby reinforcing notions of absolute difference between colonizer and colonized that were still in flux at this time. In this sense, the group of Africans reading *Kladderadatsch*, in which this cartoon appeared, are symbolically important: their grotesque features and lack of clothing highlight just how far removed they are from Germans reading the same publication.

Source
