

Summary of session 2: African Apocalypse

Alexandra Brown

African Apocalypse is an award-winning documentary-film that seeks to centre the voices and the lived experiences of those who were and continue to be harmed by the colonial atrocities that occurred in Niger, West Africa.

The documentary sought to unearth the shocking reality of Joseph Conrad's seminal work, 'Heart of Darkness.' African Apocalypse follows the trail of a 19th century French colonial military commander, Paul Voulet, who burned his way across Africa and massacred tens of thousands in the name of 'imperial domination'.

[African Apocalypse website](#)

The session was chaired by myself, Alexandra Brown (Philosophy, Ethics and Religious Studies teacher), and I had the privilege of being in conversation with the Pan-African activist, film maker writer, poet, actor and narrator and co-writer of the film, Femi Nylander.

This was a special session for many reasons, but most notably, because it was the second time Femi had generously given us his time and insight. In this sense, the session was very much a continuation, of a powerful, humbling and transformative conversation.

The session began with me wishing to centre Femi's holistic experience, so I asked him the following:

You commented in the documentary that you would journey across space and time. I was curious about the way in which doing so impacted your body. Throughout the film I noted the following:

- *When you were running, to catch up with the local elder, who was simultaneously acting as a guide, he met your eagerness to hear his utterances with the following, 'slow down young man'.*
- *Both of your initial guides Amina and Assan noted their surprise and pain at your 'lack of emotion' following everything you had learnt.*
- *When you had reached Voulet's grave you crouched down. Whilst I interpreted your body language to reflect, tiredness because of the heat and strenuous journey you had endured, and perhaps being overwhelmed by the enormity of the moment. You were told by Amina and Assan to 'stand, as you were not here to pay your respects'.*
- *Throughout your time you were communicating in French (a language that is not your own).*

In light of all of this, when were you able to excel and simply be, without scrutiny?

Following a moment of reflection, Femi shared with us that there was no distant moment. Upon his return to the UK, he was met with the Black Lives Matter protests (of which he helped to organise). Not long after this, he began the process of editing and translating much of the footage. Consequently, Femi described the exhale moment as ‘a very long process, that I cannot pinpoint.’

This insightful response, allowed for a greater appreciation of the physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual labour that activists such as Femi, go through, in order to fight for racial justice.

The conversation then saw us explore themes within contemporary discourse surrounding colonialism. Femi highlighted that often, when discussing the horrors and injustice of Britain’s colonial past, the rhetoric and language often includes the following:

“It happened ages ago, we need to move on” and “these were the actions of a misguided few.” Such actions would not be tolerated within today’s society.

Femi then provided a sobering reminder that racist ideologies and theories embedded in eugenics, were not the beliefs held by a select few, on the contrary, these ideas were normalised and were commonplace within academia. Femi then poignantly stated that such ideas were both ‘cradled and inculcated’ in the West. Wishing to tie this point, to an earlier statement he made in the film, I asked Femi to expand on what he meant by the following:

What traits do men like Voulet possess and deploy?

Femi responded:

Men like Voulet were not hidden, they were chosen and given high ranking positions because of their aggressive, violent and ruthless traits, as well as their megalomania and sadism. This is why he was chosen, why he could justify such beliefs and then feel that he could claim an ‘African identity’, and become an ‘African chief’, [as a way of avoiding his return to France to face the consequences for his insubordination]. These were not the actions of misguided nationalism.

Following Femi’s submission, a silence befell upon the attendees and I. This then saw many attendees’ express gratitude for putting such a painful reality into words, as well as creating a space to reflect on the horrors of Britain’s empire that often goes unspoken and thus uncritiqued. The importance of acknowledging the many facets of our ‘colonial inheritance’ became undeniable in that moment, which further led to a realisation that the mindset and actions of men like Voulet, are not as abstract and distant as some may like to think.

Wishing to embed Femi's findings into the primary school curriculum, an attendee asking how the film may be included within the curriculum, was met with the following responses:

When teaching lessons on electricity, you could include Niger as a case study and share with the students that 1 in 3 lightbulbs in France are powered by uranium from Niger that they receive tax free (whilst the majority of Niger is without electricity).

You could also share the wonderful work that many secondary schools in Niger are doing in their science lessons regarding solar panels, powering parts of their local areas.

When asked how this may also support the secondary school curriculum, some of the suggestions included the following:

Unlike the children that were interviewed, most British children cannot name any of the men who were assigned the position and roles who carried out actions in the name of the 'British empire's civilising mission.' We should ensure that we name them and provide wider context.

We should show this documentary (to age-appropriate years) and allow this to inform and generate discussions with the aim of implementing change within the classroom and wider school.

Another fruitful topic we explored was whether 'syncretism (Animism and Islam) was a source of contention within Niger'. There was a powerful scene in the documentary where a guide called 'Tenshi' approached a tree that had withstood the destruction to the land that France's conquest incurred. Before sharing information with Femi, Tenshi approached the tree, greeted Allah and Prophet Muhammad, greeted the 'angels, spirit and the bush' and then said the following:

Spirit, I bring you an important guest. He's come to visit you at the foot of this giant tree to obtain your blessing.

Whilst many would have found Femi's desire to engage and learn from a plain of knowledge that is not part of his ancestral roots/ personal practice, dependent on holding both the ancient and 'modern' religion in tandem as deeply powerful, for some this would be deemed as highly problematic.

Femi informed us that whilst syncretism, was commonly practiced, Animism was often frowned upon. He noted that when wishing to learn from the locals who practiced Animism, his security became visibly uncomfortable and were eager to move him on. They also expressed beliefs that Animism is 'haram' (forbidden). Femi attributed this with the colonial legacy of a puritanical interpretation of Islam, that holds great influence in many parts of the country, for a multitude of political reasons. Though Femi rightly reminded us that, there was an Islamic presence in Africa, prior to Arab colonial conquest.

In what could be described as an African diasporic exchange, I shared with Femi, that what seems apparent is that:

As grandchildren of empire and descendants of enslaved Africans, it feels like we never finish mourning. We mourn for and on behalf of our ancestors, ourselves and descendants, and then the cycle continues.

Femi in agreement, acknowledged the difficulty and labour that this work involves, and then gave words of encouragement and hope. He then gently reminded us that, irrespective of our physical embodiment, we should all endeavour to do everything within our power and means, to be the change we wish to see.

On behalf of the Race and Education film club, we wish to thank Femi again, for generously sharing himself with us, so that we might learn, grow and continue to work towards creating an anti-racist education system, and by extension world.