

Echoes of Empire

How Western media recycle colonial myths about Africa

By André-Michel Essoungou





JOURNALISM RELIES ON AN ILLUSION OF OBJECTIVE TRUTH.

“Stories are never neutral. They are shaped by the people who tell them, by the institutions that publish them, and by the assumptions that lie quietly beneath both.”

What is seen, what is ignored, what is emphasized, and what is left unsaid slowly constructs the narrative through which the world understands itself.

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- ☒ Naked warriors
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Binyavanga Wainaina diagnosed the pathology in fiction.

In 2005, the Kenyan writer published “How to Write About Africa,” a satirical guide to the tropes of Western publishing.

- Treat Africa as if it were one country.
- Characters should be flat, simple people with spears and short tempers.
- End with a Western protagonist learning a profound lesson.

Wainaina held up a mirror to a narrative sickness. But this sickness is even more dangerous in the supposedly objective world of modern journalism.

Two devastating wars in the 1990s. Two entirely different playbooks.

The Bosnian War



Covered by Western media
as a complex, but
comprehensible human tragedy.

The Second Congo War



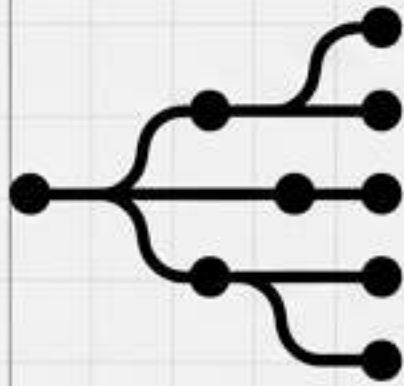
The deadliest conflict of our
generation (5 million dead).
Covered by Western media as a
sudden, inexplicable catastrophe.

The Bosnian playbook framed a tragedy of history.



Actors:

Clearly defined nations and peoples. Leaders like Milošević were profiled as calculating, rational political figures pursuing clear ideologies.



Causes:

Journalists acted as historians, tracing the unraveling of the Yugoslav federation and modern political failure.



Stakes:

Framed as a universal problem. A test of Western moral resolve, the credibility of NATO, and a stain on the conscience of the world.

The Congo playbook framed a catastrophe of nature.



Actors:

Vague and anonymized. Factions and “tribes” replacing nations. Leaders portrayed as incompetent despots. African voices are entirely silenced.



Causes:

Mystified by broad brushes of incomprehensibility. The war was presented as something that simply is—a chronic condition of the continent.



Stakes:

Purely humanitarian. A distant crisis of suffering to be pitied and managed by NGOs, disconnected from its political source.

The vocabulary of a natural disaster.

Why describe a war fought with tanks and strategic ambition using the language of geology and meteorology?

“The Congo erupted, again.”

— The Economist, August 1998

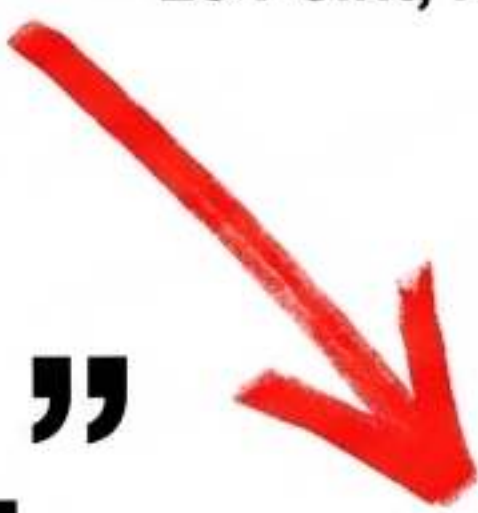
A “descent into hell.”

— Le Point, November 1998

A “deluge of blood.”

A “treacherous mire.”

A “bloody-go-round.”



These are not words used to describe a chess match. They are words used to describe a plague.

The journalistic lens crops out political reality.

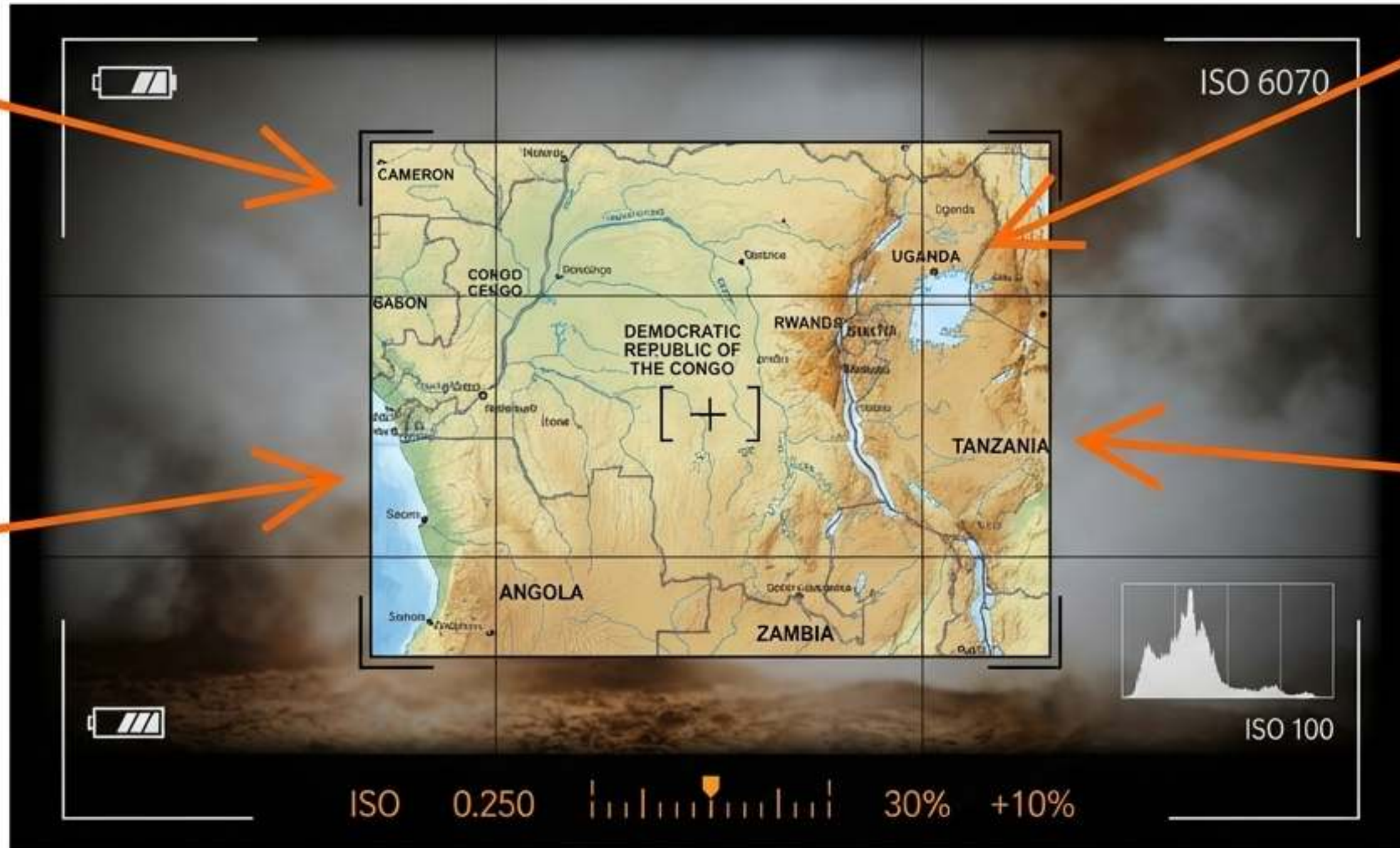
Framing a war as a natural disaster determines what is in focus and what is left entirely out of the picture.

Cropped out: Actors.

Militaries and strategists are replaced by "innumerable local militias."

Cropped out: Causes.

The intricate alliances and struggle for vast mineral wealth are erased by "ancient hatreds."

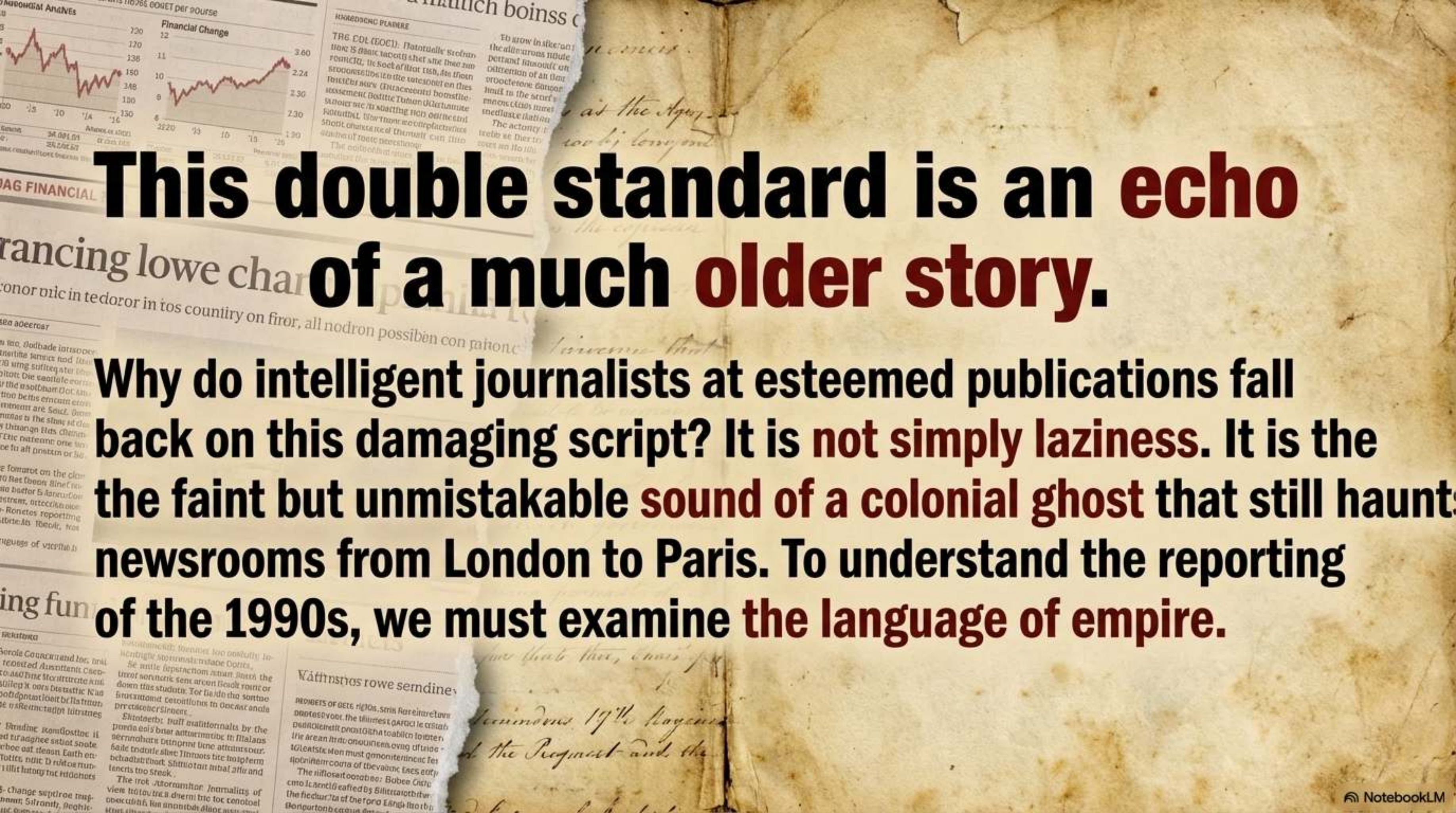


Cropped out: Actors.

Military strategists are replaced by "innumerable local militias."

Cropped out: Stakes.

The global demand for coltan (essential for western tech) is hidden behind the narrative of a localized, tribal tragedy.



This double standard is an echo of a much older story.

Why do intelligent journalists at esteemed publications fall back on this damaging script? It is not simply laziness. It is the the faint but unmistakable sound of a colonial ghost that still haunts newsrooms from London to Paris. To understand the reporting of the 1990s, we must examine the language of empire.

The colonial playbook was the ideological software of empire.

In 1877, explorer Henry Morton Stanley emerged from a grueling journey across the Congo River. His accounts did more than fill a map; they filled the Western imagination.

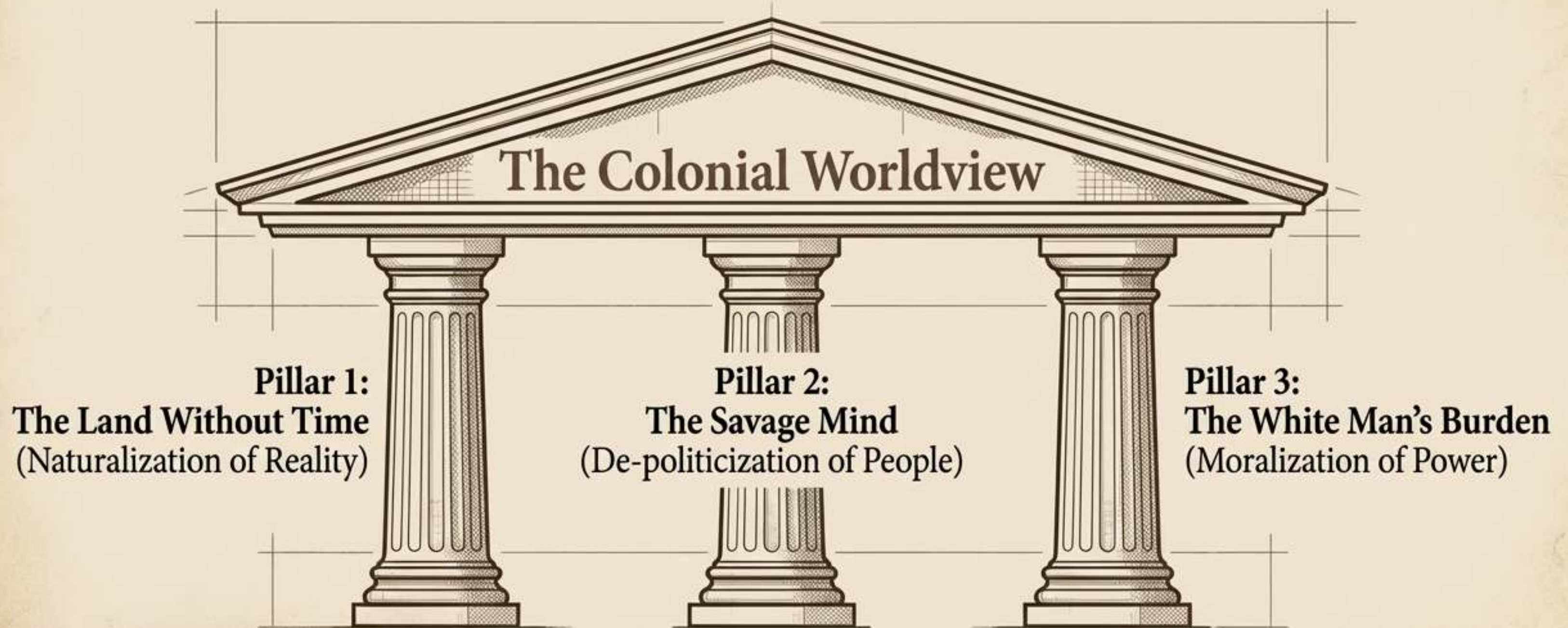
“For centuries Africa has been the dark continent... the one continent that has never been civilized.”

He described a world of primordial chaos locked in an unchanging present. This wasn't just a travelogue—it was the rough draft of a script to justify the subjugation of a continent.



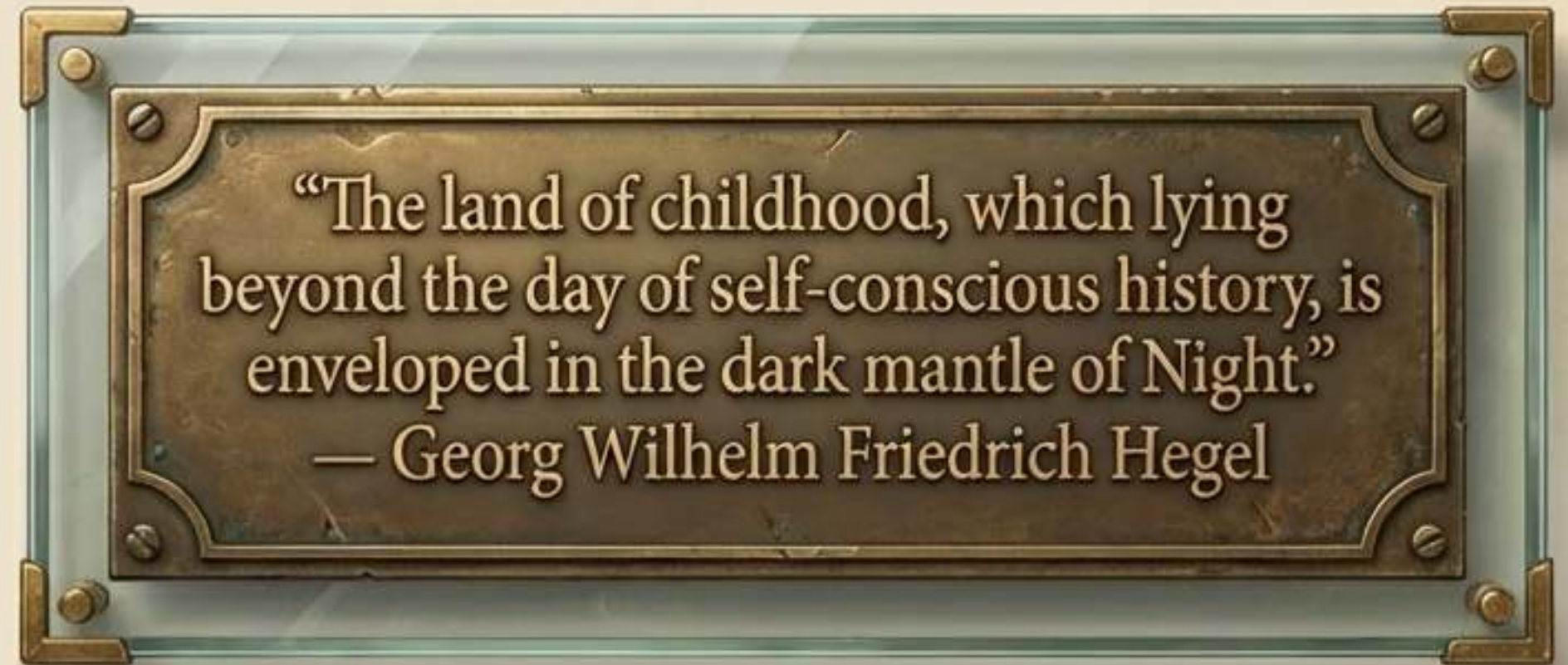
Three pillars constructed the colonial worldview.

An empire cannot be sustained by force alone. It requires a powerful narrative that portrays colonized people as valuable enough to possess, but inferior enough to require domination.



Pillar 1 removes Africa from the stream of human history.

Before bringing “progress” to a place, the colonizer must establish it has none of its own. Africa was framed as geography, not history.



The logic: If a place has no history, events there do not have political causes. A political uprising is simply an inexplicable outburst of primal energy. “As purposeless as the battles of wolves and bears” (Sir Harry Johnston, 1899).

Pillar 2 replaces political actors with “the savage mind.”

If the land is chaotic, the people must be too. The “savage” was a complex psychological profile designed to deny self-rule.



Irrational

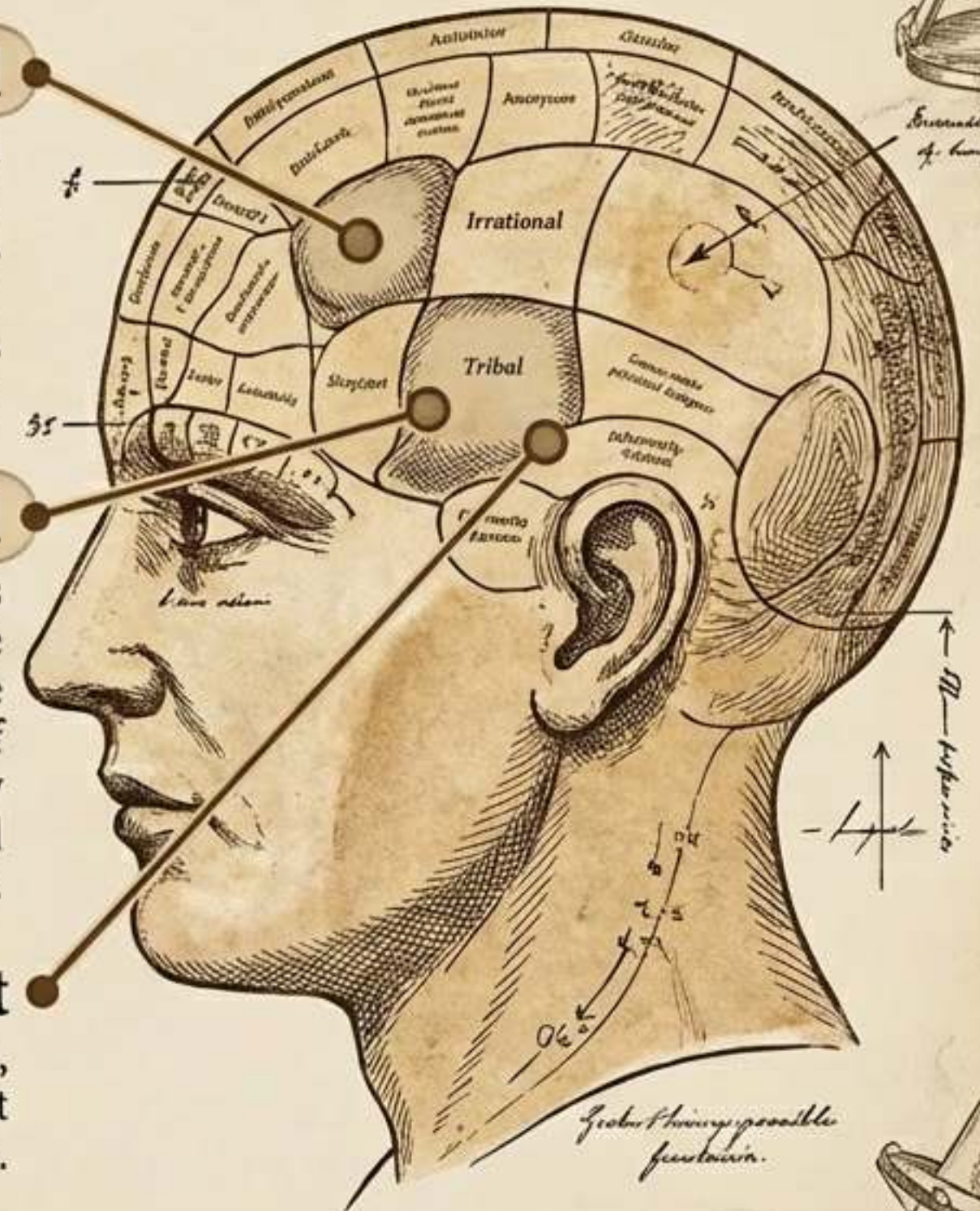
Governed by instinct and magic, not cause and effect. (Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's “pre-logical” mind). Therefore, grievances cannot be taken seriously.

Tribal

Complex political identities flattened into a primitive category. The “tribe” was the ultimate alibi—a bond of blood that demanded hostility and absolved the colonial administration of blame.

Inherently Violent

A state of constant, meaningless warfare that required external intervention.



Modern newsrooms still rely on the Conradian echo.

Joseph Conrad's 1902 novel *Heart of Darkness* stripped violence of its political context, presenting it as a moral malaria that infects the jungle itself.

Modern journalism uses this exact shortcut:

"War in the heart of Africa." — *The Economist*, August 1998

"In the heart of darkness." — *The Economist*, December 2000

By invoking Conrad, magazines tap into a century of pre-packaged cultural dread. It is a way of explaining the war without having to explain it at all.

Pillar 3 transmutes military domination into moral duty.

The first two pillars established the problem. The third provided the solution: the moral imperative of European intervention.



*Take up the White Man's burden—
Send forth the best ye breed—
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half-devil and half-child.*

— Rudyard Kipling, 1899

This alchemical trick erased the colonizer's violence. The West was not a predator; it was a weary parent managing an unruly child. The agent of order, reason, and peace.

These 19th-century pillars still hold up 21st-century headlines.

The colonial playbook is the ghost in the machine of modern journalism. It is a set of inherited assumptions and narrative shortcuts that continue to shape the way the West tells the story of Africa.

Let's look at how the old playbook was dusted off for the deadliest war of our time.



Political leaders are reduced to psychological caricatures.

Instead of analyzing regional power struggles, the press relied on character assassination, stripping leaders of legitimate agency.

“Turned out to be little more than an outsized village chief... with no vision and a deep distrust of competence.”
— *The Economist*, 2000

A “curious cocktail mixing inexperience and incompetence... demagoguery and cunning.” — *Le Point*, 1998

Annotation: The phrase “outsized village chief” is a masterpiece of colonial condescension. It signals a primitive man out of his depth in the modern world.

African agency is dismissed to make room for Western saviors.

Just as the colonial narrative positioned the European as the only source of order, the journalistic narrative framed Western intervention as the only viable solution.

On African Diplomacy



“Could this succeed? Alas, probably not... This is a region with deep-rooted rivalries, its political rulers notoriously tricky and obdurate.” (*The Economist*, 1998)

On Western Intervention



“Waiting to be rescued. On May 13th, France agreed in principle to send its soldiers to the rescue, after Mr Annan begged for a coalition of the willing to sort out the mess.” (*The Economist*, 2003)

The “natural disaster” frame has profound real-world consequences.

These frames are not passive descriptions of reality; they are active forces that shape it.

1. Encourages Political Inaction

If a war is chaotic nature, there is no political solution. It gives governments a free pass to send disaster relief instead of engaging in difficult peacemaking.

2. Validates Old Stereotypes

It creates public apathy by telling readers that Africa is a place apart, stuck in a primitive past, immune to the logic of modernity.

3. Robs People of Humanity

It transforms millions of citizens caught in a struggle for power into a faceless mass of suffering victims. It turns a nation into a landscape.

The stories we tell create the world we live in.

Well-meaning journalists often use these tools without understanding their history. But the script was written for them a hundred years before they were born. It is time to recognize the ghost in the machine. It is time to break the frame. It is time to finally wake up and demand a journalism that grants Africa its history, its politics, and its humanity.

