“THE GOOD SWEDE”

Symbols and Narrative in Swedish Public Aid to the Democratic Republic of Congo

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Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology
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Vendela Runold
Thesis Supervisor: Ulrika Trovalla
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1. Introduction

1.1. The Good Swede?

Marlow, the main character in Joseph Conrad’s famous novella *Heart of Darkness* from 1899, recounts how he travelled along the River, deep into the brutal, mysterious darkness in what is perceived to be Congo. In one scene of the novella, Marlow gives a sea biscuit to a dying native man, a biscuit he has gotten from a Swedish captain on a steamer, who Marlow calls “my good Swede” (2006:13).

This notion of the “good Swede” has been a persisting cultural symbol in Sweden’s relation to Congo throughout history, and is in part still visible within today’s public aid to the Democratic Republic of Congo. Therefore, I will in this thesis, examine this notion and other key symbols and narratives found in cultural expressions of the Swedish public aid culture.

1.2. Purpose and Delimitations

The cultural connotations of “Congo” are strong in the Swedish and Western mindset. From Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and it’s “the horror, the horror” which forever is etched into the mindset of many readers, to today’s media outlets where Congo and the Democratic Republic of Congo tend to be most notorious for so called “conflict minerals” and being “the rape capital of the world” (United Nations 2010), a phrase coined by Margot Wallström in 2010, then Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict to the United Nations, and currently Sweden’s minister for foreign affairs. Sweden started giving aid to DRC in 1994, after the genocide in the neighboring country Rwanda, which forced many to flee into DRC (Sida 2007:1). Today, DRC is one of the countries that Sweden gives the most aid to, 6th most in 2015 and 2014, and 4th most in 2013 (Openaid.se). ¹ In 2015, a new strategy for the development cooperation with DRC for the time period 2015-2019 commenced, with an estimated budget of 1250 million SEK (Utrikesdepartementet 2015a:1).

In this strategy, it is mentioned that one of the motives for Swedish development cooperation with DRC, is that Sweden has a “long history” of it in the country (Utrikesdepartementet 2015:4), a statement that I will show is recurring at numerous places in documents from actors involved in the Swedish public aid.

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¹ The sum for the total aid to DRC was in 2015 435 million SEK, in 2014 443 million SEK and in 2013 535 million SEK (Openaid.se).
The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the symbols and systems of symbols used in material from public aid actors, such as strategy documents, rapports, instructive texts etc. concerning the Democratic Republic of Congo, and to examine how these symbols are part of forming narratives around the aid.

Through contextual historical understanding of Swedish aid identity and Sweden’s relation to Congo, I look to identify which the most prominent symbols within the material are. What do they say about the Swedish public aid culture and its relationship to DRC? And how are they important in the forming of dominant narratives within material about public aid culture?

Although the material I have chosen to analyze is recently written and produced, I argue that an historical perspective is vital for understanding how and why it is constituted in the way it is. David Nilsson states, while writing about Sweden-Norway’s presence at the Berlin conference 1884-85 and its impact on today, that we must continue to interpret and re-interpret history, as the historical processes and narratives continues to form how the present is perceived, influence moral systems and beliefs as well as give tools to understanding the development of them (2013:7-8). Synchronic perspectives on aid undermine the importance of history as a defining factor of social and political change, and as Liisa Malkki notes; the dehistoricization universalism in aid reduces those who receive aid from actors in a historically given context, to mere victims (1996:378).

For the material in question, I have chosen to focus on two actors within the Swedish public aid: the Ministry for Foreign Affairs (Utrikesdepartementet) which decides on direction and strategies, and Sida (Swedish International Development Agency), the government agency that manages the vast majority of the aid. By choosing these two, I am omitting the Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA), a government agency concerned with peace and security issues, and the reasons for it is that FBA only recently, in the 2015-2019 strategy was included as an actor within the aid, and the sum FBA has at its disposal, 25 million SEK, is very small compare to the one of Sida, 1225 million SEK over the period (Utrikesdepartementet 2015a).

When deciding on which documents and texts to include in the material, I have chosen to analyze only those published by either the Ministry for Foreign Affairs or Sida, and picked those that focus on the Democratic Republic of Congo and that can be found online. Since the
purpose of this study is to analyze symbols and narratives within the official expressions of aid culture, I have chosen material that is publicly accessible and fairly easy to find.

1.3. Material and Method

Like I said in the previous part, I have chosen to focus exclusively on material published by two actors of public aid: the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, under the Swedish Government Offices (Regeringskansliet), and Sida. Thereby, eliminating debate articles and the like written by representatives of these actors, if they are not published on either of their websites. One article is however included in my material, written by the minister of foreign affairs, Margot Wallström and published both in the newspaper Metro in February 2015, and on the website of the Swedish Government Offices. There is also one interview with the Swedish Ambassador in Kinshasa, Annika Ben David, published at the site of the Swedish Embassy in Kinshasa, which also is a part of the Swedish Government Offices under the Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

The government, of which the Ministry for Foreign Affairs is a part, decides upon the overarching goal for the aid, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs is the one that publishes the strategies for the development cooperation, of which I have included the one for 2009-2012 and for 2015-2019, as well as the input values from 2013 stated by the Ministry to Sida for their preparation of a result strategy for DRC.

For the material from Sida, I have examined both their website, which can be presumed to be written to be available for everyone who is interested or curious about Swedish aid, and documents that are less casual in nature; yearly strategy rapports of the development cooperation with DRC between 2010-2014 and the Humanitarian Crisis Analyses from 2015 and 2016, in which the humanitarian situation in DRC is presented together with a response plan for how the humanitarian aid should be allocated for the year.

I have, as a supportive tool for understanding of the aid, also studied statistical data published by Sida and the government at the website Openaid.se, a public informational service/database providing facts, numbers and statistics of development and humanitarian aid payments from public actors in Sweden. It gives access to figures on which sectors, organizations and activities the public aid ends up in.

These texts of which my material consists, can naturally be understood to be targeted towards different groups. For example the texts on Sida’s website are fairly short and written
in an accessible style, so that everyone who is interested can read and understand them, while the Humanitarian Crisis Analyses are filled with professional acronyms of different organs of the United Nations and names on rebel groups. As we later will see, the differences can in some ways be helpful in the analysis of the narratives.

The method I have used to analyze the material, consisted of the examination of the texts, looking for words, phrasings and phenomenon that recur within several of the texts, as well as how the texts are told. Then I have both compared between them, and applied the historical context in which they are written, to understand their meaning.

1.4. Establishing Terminology

1.4.1. Theory – Symbols and Narratives
To analyze the texts mentioned above, I have used a set of terms forged together into one theory, where “symbol” and “narrative” are the key words. The theory and appurtenant terminology, is in part drawn from the symbolic and interpretative anthropology made influential by Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner and others. In some ways the theoretic discipline of symbolic and interpretative anthropology may seem a bit outdated, with it this year being 43 years since the release of Geertz’ classical *Interpretation of Culture* and 45 years since Sherry Ortner presented her paper on “key symbols”. Nevertheless, I strongly believe that interpretative and symbolic anthropology still can provide important explanatory tools, especially moving to the analysis of text-based data. I am also weaving together the symbolic/interpretative framework from Geertz, Edward Bruner and Sherry Ortner with Omar Lizardo’s recently published writing on the power of symbols, and Jerome Bruner’s psychological take on narrative, which contributes to making it a more coherent and updated framework. Coincidentally, and slightly confusingly, two of the theorists whose theories I use, share the same last name, Bruner. I therefore refer to them with both last name and initial letter, E. Bruner and J. Bruner.

However, I start with a few words on the texts the data material consists of, which I refer to as expressions of culture, in line with E. Bruner (1986a). He writes, in reference to the philosopher Dilthey, that we can begin to understand human experience through the interpretation of different expressions, such as texts, representations and performances (1986a:5), and therefore the study of the texts from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Sida can be considered a mode of interpretation of the public aid culture.
With the expressions of culture explained, I proceed to the concept of symbols.

At the heart of this thesis is the notion of symbols as important to the conception of meaning.

I define symbols in accordance with Geertz description of them as “tangible formulations of notion” (1973:91), but unlike Geertz, I agree with Lizardo who states that cultural symbols do not have intrinsic meaning per se, nor are “abstractions from experience” (Geertz 1973:91), but that the power of cultural symbols is that they serve as a way for people to cognitively construct meaning (2016:202). The symbols manifested in the expressions of aid culture can therefore be seen as access-points to the creation of semantic meaning, not that the meaning is embedded in the symbols themselves.

All symbols do not, however, have the same importance within a culture. This notion has been present in anthropology ever since the publication of Benedict’s *Patterns of Culture* in 1934, according to Ortner (1972: 1338), even though the definition of them as “symbols” arose in the 60s. Ortner calls them “key symbols”, a label I aim to use, instead of, for example, Turner’s “dominating symbols” (Turner 1967:31).

The key symbols that I identify within the expressions of culture, work together in the creation of narratives of DRC, of Sweden as an aid giver and of Sweden in relation to DRC.

Narratives, J. Bruner defines, are “versions of reality whose acceptability is governed by convention and ‘narrative necessity’ rather than empirical verification and logical requiredness” (J. Bruner 1991:4-5). This definition of narratives as being built upon cultural conventions and the purpose of the medium in which the narratives are created is relevant when studying the narratives of the Swedish public aid. They are not just reproductions of neutral and non-disputable facts; they are constructed to fit a purpose or a cultural setting. Narratives, E. Bruner acknowledges, not only provide cultural meaning, but are also structures of power (1986b:144).

In a culture, such as that of Swedish public aid, there most definitely exist a multitude of different narratives, which is the reason why I throughout this study write “narratives” in plural. However, I do focus on dominant narratives within the expressions of culture, and through the analysis of these, we get perspectives on what is perceived as most important in the official expressions of public aid culture.
Earlier in this text, I have mentioned the epithet “aid culture”, without defining the term, and now when we have clarified both symbol and key symbols, narratives and expression of culture, I can finally establish the characteristics of it. I have chosen to identify culture in line with Geertz and Lizardo, as a, more or less, coherent set of symbols and meanings that function together (Geertz 1973:144, Lizardo 2016:199). Therefore, the aid culture refers in this setting to the system of symbols found running through the expressions of culture, with the narratives as overarching definers of power.

Geertz wrote that culture can be seen as a collection of texts, which the anthropologist tries to read over the shoulder of the proper owners of the culture (1973:452). While this was a figure of speech, I use it as a tool for understanding how the theoretic framework works together with the empirical material: through the analysis of the expressions of culture, one can begin to grasp the key symbols and systems of symbols existing within them. With the help of the symbols, it is possible to discern the narratives of the material, and thereby a sense for the constitution of the public aid culture.

1.4.2. Practice – Distinctions and Names

I use in this thesis the word “aid” as a synonym for the Swedish word bistånd, meaning assistance, as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs translates it that way. “Aid” is the overarching name for the two categories that Swedish public aid, both in general and to specific countries like DRC, is divided into: “humanitarian aid” and “development cooperation”. The difference between the two is sometimes blurred, or differ from text to text, but generally Sida explains the difference between the two like this:

“The goal of humanitarian aid is to save lives, relieve distress and maintain the dignity of people who have been affected by catastrophes. Bigger supportive interventions are planned one year at a time, but in case of a sudden catastrophe, disbursement can be made within 24 hours.

Development cooperation is about supporting long-term poverty reduction and democracy processes. The interventions rely on strategies running over several years which are decided upon by the Swedish government” (Sida 2016d, author’s trans.).

Another term that should be brought up is “Congo”, as it is at the core of this thesis and can be perceived as ambiguous. Names can, after all, be symbolic in themselves, and therefore we do best in defining them. I do throughout the text alter between DRC/Democratic Republic of the Congo, Congo, and at some point, Zaire, something I do on purpose. Zaire is used for parts referring to the time between 1971 and 1997 when the state went under that name. I use the official title Democratic Republic of Congo, or the acronym DRC when talking about the
country in the present state. “Congo”, on the other hand, I have chosen to use when writing about the history before independence and at times while explicitly talking about Congo as an image in the culture of public aid, when it is reduced to a cultural concept.

2. Disposition

A few word might be in order to describe the disposition of the empirical material and finding. Following this part, the Background describes the historical context of the development on Swedish public aid, and of Sweden’s historical relation to Congo, as well as how the Swedish aid to DRC is designed today. Then comes the Empirical Material, divided into three parts; the first, recounting the development/humanitarian aid, then how DRC is described within the expressions of culture, and lastly how Sweden and Sweden’s contribution to the aid is portrayed. With this material, the analysis suggests five key symbols, which are investigated in the analysis, together with the historical context from the Background. In the last subheading of the analysis, I also describe how these key symbols and the context, work into dominants narratives. Finally, I round off the thesis with a conclusion, tying all these elements together.

3. Background

3.1. Developing Aid

In 1962, two years after Congo’s independence, the Swedish government under the Minister of State, Tage Erlander, ratifies the bill 1962:100, which decides that Sweden to a much larger extent will be giving international development and humanitarian aid at a public level, and in the same year the first public institution dealing with aid, Nämnden för Internationellt Bistånd, is founded. Sweden had been giving aid before this, through the missionaries and arranged through “popular movements”, folkrörelser (Dahl 2008:8), but with bill 1962:100, there was a presentation of guidelines and framework establishing what Swedish aid should aim to be and strive for (Wohlgemuth 2012:5), and within the new aid narratives, solidarity and moral obligation were the ground pillars.

Although the document is over 50 years old, there are opinions expressed in it which with contemporary eyes appear very modern in their tone. One of the most notable is concerning
the difficulty of stating social or political goals for the aid; “[i]t is not given that principles and social and political system to which we are affiliated are suitable and reachable for all development states” (1962:7 author’s translation). However, it was concluded that the giving of aid should function in the direction of “political democracy and social balancing” (1962:7), and economic development of these “underdeveloped country” should be a priority, both priorities even today. The overarching goal of Swedish aid has stayed relatively the same since then, which is to create better conditions for poor people around the world (Sida 2015b, Wohlgemuth 2012:6). However some parts have changed or evolved during time, like the focus on equality and women’s rights, and the environmental focus which both are fundamental in today’s Swedish aid.

An image of what Sweden perceives itself and its politics to be even today can be seen in bill 100; Sweden’s neutrality and lack of apparent colonial past is within the text argued to be something that gives credibility to Sweden from the “underdeveloped countries”, as well as the statement that there are no political agendas hidden within the will to give aid, in contrast to other states who at the time were involved in the Cold War (1962:6). The creation of the self-image of Swedish aid givers as less paternalistic, more respectful, in the meeting with the Other can be discerned even in this early document. The development of this image was in part possible because of the Swedish colonial encounter, or perceived lack thereof, (Eriksson Baaz 2001:164), which I will talk about later, and that still has implications for the construction of the aid narratives today.

While the notions of democracy, among others, are terms still used within the aid discourse, the term “solidarity” is no longer as prevalent when talking about aid as it used to be in Sweden (Dahl 2008:9). Instead, the focus has shifted towards “partnership” and “cooperation”, and in 1998 when the Swedish government presented Afrika in Change. Renewed Politics before the 21st Century (Afrika i förändring. En förnyad Afrikapolitik inför 2000-talet), the notion of “partnership” in the policy of aid to Africa was at the centre (Eriksson Baaz 2011:160). In relation to it, the terms “giver” and “receiver” when talking about aid were abandoned, and the idea was instead to create a sense of partnership between the giving and receiving ends of the aid.

The notion of partnership in aid redefined the Swedish aid discourse and policy making as a whole (Dahl 2008:8, Bruun Jensen & Winthereik 2012:88). A few distinctive examples of
cooperation being an important notion today, is its usage in the name of the Swedish aid agency, Sida: *Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency*, the development aid being called *development cooperation*, as we saw earlier, and that the *biståndsminister* (Minister of Aid) is referred to in English as Minister for Development Cooperation.

In 2003 the proposition “Politics for Global Development” (*Politik för global utveckling*) was unanimously voted through by the Swedish parliament, which determines that political decisions being made in Sweden should contribute to the creation of a more just and sustainable world (Utrikesdepartementet 2015c). Two years later, Sweden, along with 110 other countries, ratified the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, which was centered on the receiving countries’ feeling of ownership in the development aid, and donor responsibility and coordination, many things in line with the perspective on aid already established in Sweden (Dahl 2008:18).

So, looking at the collected picture of Swedish public aid and its history in this short rundown, we might start to distinguish some key features. Sweden as a neutral, fairly well-trusted and not so paternalistic aid-partner, with focus on democracy, equality and sustainability. This description, albeit more than just a bit simplified, is a start for the understanding of how the narratives of the Swedish public aid culture in relation to DRC are constructed, and when we now proceed to add the layer of the Swedish historic relation to Congo, this discerning of self-image within the aid will become clearer.

### 3.2. “A Long Historical Relation” – Sweden and Congo

In the memorandum of input values for the design of the result propositions to Sida for Sweden’s international aid to DRC 2014-2018, the government through the Ministry for Foreign Affairs states that “DRC and Sweden have a long historical relationship in a number of areas, which means that Sweden has good possibilities to contribute to a positive development” (Utrikesdepartementet 2013:1 author’s trans.). This quote is multi-layered and thought-provoking; what is included in this “historic relationship”, and how far back?

Sweden may not have been what is considered a colonial power, not in line with England, France or as we speak of Congo, Belgium, but colonial patterns and symbols have still influenced and shaped Sweden (Mc Eachrane & Faye 2001:7, Nilsson 2013:5). The colonized areas of Sub-Saharan Africa were not without Swedish presence. Among them, Congo had a place of its own, and at the end of the 19th century, Swedes were the third most populous
group of Europeans in the area, after the Belgians and the Brits (Blomé 1999:7), and Swedes, along with Danes and to a lesser extent Norwegians, made Scandinavians the dominating group going as sailors along the Congo River (Granqvist 2001:111).

Missionaries is another category of Swedes that has been important for the history of Swedish presence in Congo. The first Swedish missionary, C. J. Engvall is sent out to Congo in 1881, and in the years after that, the Swedish Baptist Mission followed (Berg 1997:213). The environment was though on the missionaries, and of the 164 persons of the first missionaries, 57 died of tropical diseases and 27 were sent home for medical care (Berg 1997:214).

A few words on the Congo Free State might be in order to fully understand this era. King Leopold II of Belgium, wanting to join in on the imperialistic scramble for land and resources, got his claim for what he defined as “unclaimed” parts of Central Africa (Deibert 2013:13), authorized at the Berlin Conference in 1884. Thus an era of ruthless and brutal exploitation of natural and human resources in the quest for first rubber and ivory, which later on in history would alter to gold, natural gas and minerals. Keeping an area 76 times bigger than Belgium in check, forcing its inhabitants to work and provide the colonial power with resources, required a strong military force. The Force Publique, established in 1885, did just that. In Force Publique, the vast majority of the foot soldiers were Africans, while all the officers were white Europeans, some of them Swedish. Leopold had a fondness of Swedish officers, considering them dutiful, strong and suitable for the conditions in Congo (Nilsson 2013:26, Tell 2005:28, Granqvist 2001:111). The Swedish officers in Force Publique stood for many of the popular stories and travel tales being brought home to Sweden. The focus of these adventure filled recounts is the breaking of local resistance, more often than not with violence, mixed with a disgust for the Other and his habits (Granqvist 2001:113).

Missionaries, on the other hand, also wrote about their encounters with Congo. They mainly put emphasis on how the process of salvation better could be carried out, but did also speak up against the atrocities committed by the colonial powers in the Free State. For example E.V. Sjöblom wrote an article in a Swedish Baptist newspaper 1896 with the title Dark Painting from the Congo Free State (author’s translation) which stirred a lot of attention at the time, even outside of Sweden (Tell 2005:130). The rest of Swedish press did pick up on the same trail for a while, writing critically about King Leopold and the abuse of locals in the
exploitation of rubber. Still, as Granqvist writes, the symbol and concept of Congo were already established within the Swedish cultural consciousness, if such a thing can be thought to exist. Congo was already a symbol of imperviousness, savagery and bizarreness, which could be used as a contrast in the construction of the Swedish self-image as a European modern state (Granqvist 2001: 117). In 1908 after public pressure and diplomatic actions, Congo went from being Leopold’s own colony, to being a national colony of Belgium.

The stereotypical and racist images of Congo were carried in to the 20th century and through to the post World War era in Sweden via travelogues, stories (Heart of Darkness is published for the first time in Swedish in 1949), exhibitions and associations. And then, in 1960, comes Congo’s independence.

The decolonization happened quickly and tumultuously (van Reybrouck 2012:221), resulting in a UN intervention\(^2\), and between 1960 and 1964, over 6300 Swedish soldiers were at one point present in Congo (Granqvist 2001:120). Sweden and Swedes had a reputation of fairness etc. from the cultural image of Sweden as a forerunner in economic and socio-political matters, with a welfare system and a moral superiority compared to others. A notion that also was inveterate in the Swedish soldiers’ perception of their role in the intervention (Tullberg 2012:42). In addition, the very active foreign policy in Sweden was explicitly anti-colonial and humanitarian, putting the blame of the turmoil in Congo on the Belgians failure to prepare Congo for independence (Tullberg 2012:43).

Back in Sweden, criticism of the Swedish involvement in the UN intervention started appearing in the end of 1961, as media reported on the violence and chaos, and questioning the legal and moral rights of the intervention (Tullberg 2012:226), and by 1964 when the UN intervention ONUC was phased out, all of the Swedish troops had left Congo (Tullberg 2012:305).

The year after, in 1965, Joseph-Desiré Mobutu seizes the power through a military coup, and will for the following 32 years be the leader of the country. In 1971, Mobutu initiated the authenticité campaign, with the purpose of reconnecting with the pre-colonial identity combined with a national identity, and decided thereafter that the name of the country would

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\(^2\) The intervention went under the name ONUC, Opération des Nations Unies au Congo. The Secretary General of the UN, the Swedish Dag Hammarskjöld, was profoundly involved in the situation, and died in a plane crash when flying to meet the Katanga rebels’ leader Tshombe in Northern Rhodesia in 1961.
be changed to Zaire. In the years to come, Mobutu would run the Zaire economy completely through the ground with systematic corruption and hysterical spending, like the construction of his personal palace complex Gbadolite, combined with extreme infectiveness of state institutions and economic loss when the bottom prize for copper drastically sank in 1978 (Deibert 2013:33).

As time passed, the Zairian state became more and more dysfunctional. And following the genocide in Rwanda 1994, millions of refugees fled into the country. By this time, Sweden starts to give aid to Zaire (2007:1). In 1997, Laurent-Desiré Kabila overthrows Mobutu, in what is referred to as the first Congo War, and ironically enough, renames the country Républic Démocratique du Congo at the same day as he outlaws all political parties (Deibert 2013:61).

Then follows a time of more severe unrest and conflict within DRC. I will not go in on the details of the second Congo War, but by late September 1999, the UN Security Council had understood the possibility of this developing into a continent-wide war, and the first peacekeeping operation in DRC since 1964, Mission de l’Organisation des Nations Unies en Républic de Congo, MONUC, is created.

In 2001, Kabila is killed by his personal guard, a former child soldier, and his son, Joseph Kabila, takes over without elections (Koddenbrock 2016:21-22). He is still in office, having won the elections of 2006 and 2011.

The human suffering of many Congolese is difficult to grasp. From 1996 to 2012, over five million people have died due to illnesses, starvation and other side effects of the conflicts in DRC (Stearns 2012:327), and while extremely dramatically formulated, Wallström’s rapport of the sexual violence in DRC was not unfounded (United Nations 2010).

Returning to the Swedish aid to DRC, there are a lot of numbers, figures and a great deal of different actors to wrap your head around in order to fully understand Sweden’s total aid to the Democratic Republic of the Congo. While the complete understanding of all numbers of Sweden’s aid to DRC is not the focus of this thesis, some key points are useful to better understand the narratives of aid: The Swedish public aid to DRC increased drastically in

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3 The name Zaire was drawn from the Portuguese distortion of the Kikongo word nzere, meaning “the river that swallows all river” (Deibert 2013:31).
2008, from 235 million SEK in 2007 to 450 million SEK the following year, and has thereafter been on a level between 535 MSEK (in 2013) and 435 MSEK (2015), with an exception of 2011 when Sweden made a debt forgiveness to DRC of a billion SEK (Openaid.se 2016b). The humanitarian aid to DRC has consistently made up a big part of the total aid to DRC, as can be seen in the graph below. Out of that, a considerable amount (61,2 MSEK of in total 208 MSEK in 2015) goes to DRC through the United Nations Multi-Partner Trust Fund, which works multilaterally and allocates funds from many donors to distribute them according to set country priorities (Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office 2016). To make the divide between purely humanitarian aid and the development aid easy to survey, the graph below tracks the two categories in the aid to DRC over the last 18 years.

Figure 1. Swedish public aid to DRC 1998-2015. Debt forgiveness in 2011 of 1 billion SEK excluded. Data from openaid.se
4. Empirical Material

4.1. Humanity in Development

As we can deduce from earlier, the notion of “development” is a key term both in Swedish and international aid, and the phenomenon of development has itself been the object of many more or less (often more) critical anthropological studies questioning the motives and consequences of it (Belshaw 1974, Escobar 1995, Ferguson 1990, Mosse 2004 etc.). Considering the case of Swedish aid, Dahl claims that the conception of development is closely connected to that of modernity in Sweden (Dahl 2008:8), which agrees with Eriksson Baaz’ statement that modernisation theories, the ideas of societies following a specific stairway to modernity and civilization, while not as prevalent today as in the past, still continue to shape the cultural understanding of the world in Sweden today (Eriksson Baaz 2001:169). With this in mind, it may not be so surprising that the development feature of the aid is taking up the vast majority of space within the texts, compared to the humanitarian aid, even though around half of the Swedish public aid to DRC has consisted of humanitarian aid from 2009 and onwards, and before that even more. An example can be found in the interview with Ambassador Ben David, where what she and the interviewer refers to as “Swedish aid” (svenskt bistånd), is the development aid focused on peace and reconciliation, democracy and human rights etc., while the humanitarian aid is mentioned as a separate part at the end (Sweden Abroad). This pattern is recurring in all of the expressions of culture concerning the general Swedish public aid to DRC, especially in the more accessible texts. There, Swedish public aid to DRC is often described in terms of development cooperation, and the humanitarian part of it is only briefly mentioned at the end (Sida 2016b, Utrikesdepartementet 2015b, Utrikesdepartementet 2013:6).

The distinction made by Sida with development cooperation vis-à-vis humanitarian aid also insinuates that there is a kind of friction between the two (Sida 2016d), where development cooperation, in contrast to humanitarian aid, is a combination of two terms with generally desirable connotations, judging from the cultural context.

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4 See the graph in part 3.2.
4.2. Describing DRC

When trying to identify the understanding of the Democratic Republic of the Congo within the collected expressions of culture from Sida and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, the headlines on the Sida webpage titled “The Development in the Democratic Republic of Congo” (Utvecklingen i Demokratiska Republiken Kongo) provide an illustrative example. On this page, Sida makes a recap of the situation and potential future in DRC, and after an introduction of the country, arranges the text under the headlines “Long-term conflict”, “Unequal society” and “Dependent on export” (Sida 2016e). These choices of words, albeit a bit dramatically formulated, encapsulate the understanding of DRC as a country within the written expressions of Swedish public aid culture, especially in the more accessible external communication, like the website, but also in the strategy documents and rapports. As we later will see, they also resonate in how Sweden and Swedish aid in relation to DRC are perceived to be.

The conflict and its repercussions are never fully explained at any time within the texts, but more talked around. Which, in some perspectives, is understandable. The conflict is extremely complex, leaving even those researching the DRC with questions (Freedman 2015:4), but this simplified portrayal we find in the texts are a part of the dominant narratives and helps construct the worthy receiver of the Swedish public aid through what Minn terms “essentialized categories”, but I call symbols (Minn 2007). Examples are “poor people”, “women” and “internally displaced persons”, and are legitimizing to why Sweden should give aid to DRC.

The beginning of the conflict is not mentioned often in the documents, but is traced back to 1994 and the genocide in Rwanda (Sida 2015a:1). Even if very little historic context for how the conflict started is given, it is in several places stated that Swedish aid should work against the “root causes of the problems” (Sida 2016b, Utrikesdepartementet 2015a, Utrikesdepartementet 2013). Which of course leads us to the question of what these causes are, if the Swedish public aid is supposed to work towards solving them. What we are lead to understand is that many are connected to the fact that DRC is a country rich in natural resources, and that land disputes, “conflict minerals” and “warlords” exploiting the “conflict minerals” play a vital part (Wallström 2015b), together with the involvement of neighboring states in national matters.
Especially the emblematic expressions “conflict mineral” and “warlord” are interesting, as their constitutions within the context and in DRC remain ambiguous but very strongly pejoratively connoted. The oblivion to historic context is also noticeable when it comes to the colonial and post-colonial perspective. It is only very briefly mentioned that DRC was a colonial construction, with its borders being made without taking notice of the different groups living there (Sida 2016b). It has, after all, only been 56 years since the independence, but when recapping the political development, the election of 2006 is mentioned as “first free elections in 40 years” (Sida 2016b), instead of more accurately, second free election ever, since it was a colony before 1960.

Women are, as previously stated, important in the construction of the general Swedish aid identity and its adoption of a “feminist stance on foreign policy” (Wallström 2015b), and in the case of the DRC, they most often appear in the form of a vulnerable group together with children needing protection or as victims of sexual and gender based violence. It has been pointed out that women and children are good subjects in the aid, as they appear to not carry political luggage, but as being mere victims, mothers, in need of help, and not as “dangerous aliens” (Malkki 1995:11). DRC is described as one of the least gender-equal countries in the world, and that the status of women and girls is very low (Utrikesdepartementet 2015a:4). This vulnerability is crystalized in the frequent focus on sexual and gender based violence. Sometimes it is even as graphically described as in 2014’s strategy rapport: “[a]rmed groups attack villages, kill ruthlessly and torture, mutilate and rape vulnerable women and girls” (Sida 2014, author’s trans.). In order to understand the context of sexual and gender based violence in DRC, a study was initiated by Sida and carried out by Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern, resulting in a publication in 2010. Among other insightful findings in the study, Eriksson Baaz and Stern argue that men’s and boys’ perception on and involvement in sexual and gender based violence is important to incorporate, as this violence also affects them (2010:43). Nonetheless, the acknowledging of inclusion of men and boys is not very visible within the texts even after this rapport. In the 2015-2019 strategy for development cooperation, which is visibly carefully written, men’s and boys’ inclusion is reduced to a saving clause in the end (Utrikesdepartementet 2015:7-8). Instead, the majority of the men in the texts lurk in the shadows; as soldiers, corrupt politicians, warlords, rebels.
Some of the men however, are included in the group “the poor”, symbolically mentioned secondly in the expression “poor women, men and children” (Utrikesdepartementet 2009:5). Which leads us to the last headline, “Dependent on export”. This reflects both the assumption that DRC is rich, as mentioned earlier, and the vulnerability of the common Congolese. What is insinuated in the written expressions of culture is the neediness of Congolese; being dependent on the mining of minerals, of aid and other foreign interventions. As when I earlier talked about the construction of a “worthy receiver” of aid, one may also consider Timmer’s argument that humanitarian actors must rely on the notion of a “needy subject”, deserving of the aid (Timmer 2010: 266). However, while I agree on that the Congolese are pictured as needing the aid, it is also noticeable in the texts, that Swedish public aid perceives itself as to having a kind of duty to participate, as a benevolent force who have a history of positive impact.

4.3 Building Democracy and Capacity

This positive power of presence in the Congo ascribed to Swedes, mentioned above, is very vocally noted in the texts, and is given as a reason for why Swedish aid is justified. If the nature of the connection is described, it includes solely missionaries, Dag Hammarskjöld and a positive portrayal of Swedish UN troops, if an explanation is given at all (Sweden Abroad, Utrikesdepartementet 2015b, Utrikesdepartementet 2013:1, Utrikesdepartementet 2009:2). Soldiers are never mentioned, even though they were influential in shaping the Swedish view on Congo for the first half of the 20th century, nor sailors, although Scandinavians dominated the traffic on the Congo River by the previous turn of the century. History, as we see, is symbolic, and cautiously constructed within the aid. However, there are other important symbols referring to what should be the aim of aid from Sweden. I have isolated three, which also are connected to the perception of DRC; Democracy, Equality, Capacity.

Democracy and democratic development are consistently mentioned as the premier goals of the aid (Sida 2016b, Utrikesdepartementet 2009:3, Utrikesdepartementet 2015a:1, Sida 2010 etc.), and are written about as the fundamental piece of what the aid should strive for in DRC. The idea that Sweden should aim towards establishing democracy has, as we have seen, been a focal point of the Swedish aid ever since the first bill on aid in 1962, and in both the strategies for the development aid that are part of my material, 2009-2012 and 2015-2019, democracy is the goal first mentioned (Utrikesdepartementet 2009:3, Utrikesdepartementet
Democratic governance is tightly connected to the notion of “peace” and a functioning legal system within most of the expressions, and in the 2015 strategy democracy is also mentioned in the same area as gender equality, also that an important feature of Swedish aid.

Equality is a priority in the Swedish aid, especially with the previously mentioned feminist foreign politics. And in the case of DRC, equality is of course closely connected to the focus on sexual and gender based violence and the preventive work that Swedish aid should participate in carrying out. I have already written about how women are over focused on and used in the texts, as a vulnerable group in need of empowering. This phenomenon is not an exclusively Swedish one, nor specific to the DRC. Instead, the focus on defenseless foreign women needing aid is frequent in Western perception of the Other, and Spivak laconically calls it “white men saving brown women from brown men” (1994:93).

The words “capacity” and “capacity building” are frequently occurring throughout the texts, both in popular and official communications. The way it is used leads us to two insights from the viewpoint of the aid:

1. That the government and Congolese people, in particular women, lack capacity.

2. That the Swedish development aid (and preferably the humanitarian aid as well) has capacity to contribute in building capacity in the Congolese society.

So then, what is capacity? Sometimes in the documents, it appears to be a synonym for “ability” (Sida 2016a), and “lack of capacity” is used in a variety of contexts for a variety of actors, describing the humanitarian context in general in the country, politicians, the government and the civil society, micro finance-actors and women in general. Combining this perception of Congolese lack of capacity with the focus on natural resources mentioned earlier, Koddenbrock, while conducting fieldwork among aid and intervention personnel in DRC, notes that Congo is perceived as having potential with its natural resources, but not when it comes to the social level and its people. This notion, he claims, has legitimizing properties for the peacekeepers and aid workers in their work in and for the Congo (2016:53), a pattern that can be discerned also in this case of Swedish public aid culture.
5. Analysis

5.1. The Order of Things

At this point, I have gone through and presented the most important content of the expressions of culture from Swedish public aid, and we may start to see the symbols and the structures they form, within the written expressions of culture. When isolating the key symbols, which in themselves can be argued to be consisting of minor symbols, these stand out: The dark, difficult conflict, where most men are dangerous predators. The importance of development cooperation. The vulnerable woman. The capacity-lacking Congolese. The good Swede.

These all work reinforcing for the narratives of power, justifying and legitimizing the reason and purpose for Swedish public aid, because they as cultural symbols provide access points to the creation of meaning of it. However, as symbols within a specific culture, they say more about the meaning making of the aid culture in itself, e.g. the perception of what Swedish aid is and should be, than about the extremely complex situation in DRC. And consequently, the same with the narratives; it is more about the story on how Swedish public aid is envisioned, than the aid in itself.

So, if symbols are so important, what happens when the symbols we perceive as important are non-applicable to a situation? Distress, according to Geertz. Humanity, he proclaims, is so dependent on symbols that the slightest indication that they may not be useful in coping with our experiences leaves us with severe anxiety (1973:99). While I do not perceive of symbols as being used for coping with experience, the anxiety following incongruent symbols is interesting and applicable in the case of development cooperation. As I have written before, cooperation is in itself important and symbolic for the Swedish aid, with its legacy of solidarity. And in this context, when it’s combined with “development”, the two words work as a unit in an attempt to swear the Swedish public aid free from colonial imagery of civilizing the Other, and instead that it is something carried out on mutual terms.

Humanitarian aid has for many years made up a more than a substantial amount of the Swedish public aid to DRC. Still, it’s consequently mentioned last, or consigned to a saving clause at the end, in situations when the entire Swedish aid to DRC is referred to. Why is this? I suggest that the reason is that development cooperation, in comparison to humanitarian aid, is a symbol more in line with what Swedish public aid has striven to be for a long time.
Modern, equal, non-hierarchal. Humanitarian aid, on the other hand, is symbolizing the other part of assistance, the part that cannot be interpreted as relying on mutual participation and equality. Partnership and solidarity are important concept and have influenced the Swedish public aid for a long time, which makes the notion of development cooperation more desirable than humanitarian aid.

Throughout the expressions of aid culture, this over-focus on some symbols at the expense of others is frequently recurring, as a way of ranking symbols in their importance within the narratives. It can be seen as development cooperation before humanitarian aid, women before men, democracy before fundamental physical wellbeing, and rape torture of women before the tens of thousands dying from cholera and the measles every year. The over-focus also means that some symbols are neglected or severely underreported, like humanitarian aid, or like men and boys in sexual and gender based violence. The latter because the symbol of the vulnerable women as a victim for sexual violence in DRC is so vital for the narratives that the possibility of men being affected by sexual and gender based violence is undermining for the Swedish aid narratives. Therefore, it is mentioned very last, even though Eriksson Baaz and Stern have shown that men’s and boys’ situation is important for succeeding in the work against sexual and gender based violence.

These undermentioned symbols stand in conflict with the system of symbols forging the narratives, both regarding the perception of the Democratic Republic of the Congo as a country and receiver of Swedish aid, and about Sweden as giver of aid and development partner.

Similarly, Sweden as entrenched in the colonial experience of DRC, apart for the missionaries, is not included in any of the expressions of culture. Instead, as I will discuss in the next part, history is modelled to fit the narratives.

5.2. The Continuous Engagement

In the essay *Ritual and Social Change: A Javanese Example* (1973), Geertz paints a picture of historic change to explain a current event, namely the disruption of a funeral, and how symbols and culture is affected by historic change and processes. At another place in the book, Geertz describes “culture” as “an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols” (1973:89). Symbols and narratives do not spring out of thin air, but form over a
longer period of time, and therefore, I have in this thesis tried to present an historical and contextual understanding of the Swedish public aid culture and Sweden’s relation to Congo, to grasp how and why some symbols persist within the culture and the narratives.

What I have found is that the symbol of Swedes as rule abiding, just and righteous in relation to Congo, is repeated and reinforced through history to today, where the notion of “good” is created within the historic context. From King Leopold’s favoring attitude, to the many missionaries and Conrad’s “good Swede”, to the thought of Swedes within the UN intervention in the 60s being “a good force”, and today’s aid perceived as not so paternalistic. This historically transmitted symbol system that are “Swedes in Congo”, I argue, has affected the way the Swedish aid culture is portrayed and perceived, which can be seen in the expressions. And since Sweden did not have any bigger colonies, nor any imperial ambitions that succeeded, the Swedish colonial past has during the latter half of the 20th century been swept under the rug, and this perception of a non-colonial past has been important in the development of the Swedish public aid culture.5

In the written expressions of culture, the historic ties between Sweden and DRC are used arbitrarily, only focusing on the longevity of Swedish aid-giving, missionaries, Dag Hammarskjöld and the positive aspects of Swedish UN interventions, and thereby ignoring the parts that are more problematic seen through today’s Swedish cultural lens. Like Swedes being a part of the colonial administration as sailors on the Congo River or officers and soldiers working for King Leopold; as authors of racist escapist books about Congo; or that the UN interventions not always have gone so smoothly and peacefully as hoped. These are all things that do not conform to the narratives built up within the written expression of public aid culture concerning DRC. In these dominant narratives, Sweden stands for symbols like equality, democracy and capacity, which appear in contrast to the symbols representing DRC; violence and oppression against women, the Failed State and lack of capacity. In particular the symbolic lack of capacity is frequently mentioned in the written expressions, both in the form of the Congolese people in general, and of the state apparatus. The Congolese are portrayed as exposed and left to be consumed by their own country; ravaged by warlords, armed groups,  

5 Even if studies published in the last couple of years have started bringing Sweden’s colonial past into the light (Fur 2013, Thomasson 2013 etc.).
corruption, violence, sickness and the forced mining of conflict minerals, in which the exploitation of resources only favors the self-destructing system.

These contrasting symbols of Sweden and Congo are dualistically connected, and work reinforcing for each other; they both equip the Swedish public aid to DRC with legitimacy and purpose in the narratives. Sweden, with its positive impact, and Congo, by being portrayed as urgently needing to be reformed.

5.3. The Passion to Discover Meaning

Now I have gone through the key symbols of the expressions of culture, and analyzed their role within the public aid culture, and in the meantime I have frequently talked about what can be said to be included or not included in the dominant narratives. Left, however, is a description of said narratives.

J. Bruner writes that the creation of a narrative is not for the sake of realism, to accurately portray the empirical world, but narrative “is the passion to discover meaning” (1990:271). In this way, the dominant narratives of the Swedish public aid culture cannot be said to neutrally inform of Swedish public aid in the DRC, even if that is what it wants to be perceived to be doing. Instead, when looking at the key symbols and Sweden-Congo relations in context, the dominant narratives focus on conveying some things. Primarily, why Sweden should give aid to the DRC, and in the light of that, portray DRC and by proxy, Sweden.

The narratives are portraying a DRC crumbling from conflict, violence, bad governance and exploitation, as encapsulated in the key symbols. In the pathologizing of Congolese in the culture, the narratives emphasises the Congolese exploitation of selves through conflict, raping warlords, the mining of conflict minerals, even the sexual and gender based violence, and the helpless incapacitated woman or man who have to endure it, which can be seen as replacing the Western colonial exploitation. Like Sweden was perceived to be anti-colonial and neutral, this contemporary exploitation provides a way of legitimizing the development and humanitarian aid, since the structure of today is perceived to be similar to the colonial, with some people profiting and many suffering. Sweden in these narratives, is mirrored to be everything that DRC is not, and portrayed as a positive force in all types of assistance to the DRC, reliably working for democracy, equality and other civic changes perceived as desirable. The “good Swede” is working in the background of the narratives at all times.
This Swedish identity repeats itself in the narratives of the Swedish culture of public aid to DRC today, as it has been through this cultural perception that Sweden has been identified throughout history in relation to Congo. The historic and moral settings have changed over time, going from colonialism, to independence, to “rape capital of the world”, but Sweden as a symbol for the moral high-ground, a good force, persists.

What I am trying to get across is not that Sida and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs per se make wrongful priorities in the forming of public aid to the Democratic Republic of Congo, but that considering the key symbols, and narratives the expressions of culture create, it should be reflected upon if the chosen focal areas represent what affected Congolese need and want, or what Swedish public aid perceives that the Congolese should need and want.

6. Conclusion

I will end this thesis with a few conclusions. The key symbols I have found in the expressions of culture are the dark, difficult conflict, where most men are dangerous predators; the importance of development cooperation; the vulnerable woman; the capacity-lacking Congolese; and the good Swede. They influence the dominant narratives, where Sweden is perceived as benevolent, knowledgeable and capacity-packed, against Democratic Republic of Congo and the Congolese which are either pathologized or lack capacity. These symbols, and others that are important within the Swedish public aid, like democracy, equality and development, are so important both for Swedish aid identity, and for the understanding of Sweden in relation to Congo, that symbols and phenomena conflicting this view are understated within the expressions of culture. One can say that more is revealed about which symbols of the Congolese situation and Congo in general, that resonate with the narratives that exist within the Swedish public aid culture, than about the DRC per se.

And as my final words, I would like to say that the purpose never has been to trivialize or relativize the horrendous deeds being carried out in parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo, nor to downplay the importance of raising important issues such as sexual and gender based violence, or lack of juridical system in the DRC, but rather to provide the discussion of Swedish public aid with some thoughtfulness regarding our own perception of what aid is, and should be, doing.
Sources


