

Violence along the Congo River in 1877

Instructions: In this activity, you will read two primary sources—one by an American journalist and adventurer and the other by an African chief—that describe a violent encounter in 1877 between the authors along part of the Congo River (present-day Zaire). Read the sources carefully. Using different colors, mark statements that are presented as facts and those that are opinion. Then answer the questions. Be prepared to share your answers with the class.

■ Source 1: Henry Morton Stanley

Henry Morton Stanley, a Welsh-born American journalist and adventurer, was instrumental in developing treaties to give King Leopold II of Belgium control of the Congo River region. In the account below, Stanley describes his experiences while travelling by canoe along the Congo River in 1877 with a number of companions.

About 8AM we came in view of a marketplace, near which there were scores of small canoes. The men at once rushed into them and advanced all round us. We refrained a long time, but finally, as they became emboldened by our stillness and began to launch their wooden spears, which they proceeded to do all together...we were obliged to reply to them with a few shots, which compelled them to scamper away ahead of us. Drums then awakened the whole country, and horns blew deafening blasts....

We came, about 10AM, to another market green. Here, too, warriors were ready, and again we had to recourse to our weapons. The little canoes with loud threats disappeared quickly down river: the land warriors rushed away into the woods....

At 2PM we emerged out of the shelter of the deeply wooded banks and came into a vast stream nearly 2,000 yards across at the mouth.... We pulled briskly over to gain the right bank when, looking upstream, we saw a sight that sent the blood tingling through every nerve and fiber of our bodies: a flotilla of gigantic canoes bearing down upon us, which both in size and numbers greatly exceeded anything we had seen hitherto!...

We had sufficient time to take a view of the mighty force bearing down on us and to count the number of the war vessels. There were 54 four of them! A monster canoe led the way with two rows of upstanding paddles, 40 men on a side, their bodies bending and swaying in unison as with a swelling barbarous chorus they drove her down toward us....

The crashing sound of large drums, a hundred blasts from ivory horns, and a thrilling chant from 2,000 human throats did not tend to soothe our nerves or to increase our confidence. However it was “neck or nothing.” We had no time to pray or to take sentimental looks at the savage world, or even to breathe a sad farewell to it....

As the foremost canoe came rushing down, its consorts on either side beating the water into foam and raising their jets of water with their sharp prows, I turned to take a last look at our people and said to them:

“Boys, be firm as iron; wait until you see the first spear and then take good aim. Don’t fire all at once. Keep aiming until you are sure of your man. Don’t think of running away, for only your guns can save you.”

The monster canoe aimed straight for my boat, as though it would run us down; but when within fifty yards off, it swerved aside and, when nearly opposite, the warriors above the manned prow let fly their spears and on either side there was a noise of rushing bodies. But every sound was soon lost

Name: _____

in the ripping, crackling musketry. For five minutes we were so absorbed in firing that we took no note of anything else; but at the end of that time we were made aware that the enemy was reforming about 200 yards above us.

Our blood was up now. It was a murderous world, and we felt for the first time that we hated the filthy, vulturous ghouls who inhabited it. We therefore lifted our anchors and pursued them upstream along the right bank until, rounding a point, we saw their villages. We made straight for the banks and continued the fight in the village streets with those who had landed, hunting them out into the woods, and there only sounded the retreat, having returned the daring cannibals the compliment of a visit.

* Adapted from Henry Stanley, *Through the Dark Continent*, Vol. II. (New York: Harper & Row, 1885).

■ Source 2: Chief Mojimba

Chief Mojimba, an African leader in the Congo River region, led the greeting party that met Stanley and his companions on the river. Mojimba told his story of the encounter with Stanley years later to a Catholic missionary, Father Joseph Fraessle. Fraessle published Mojimba's account decades later.

When we heard that the man with the white flesh was journeying down the Lualaba (Lualaba-Congo) we were open-mouthed with astonishment. We stood still. All night long the drums announced the strange news—a man with white flesh! That man, we said to ourselves, has a white skin. He must have got that from the river-kingdom. He will be one of our brothers who were drowned in the river. All life comes from the water, and in the water he has found life. Now is coming back to us, he is coming home....

We will prepare a feast, I ordered, we will go to meet our brother and escort him into the village with rejoicing! We donned our ceremonial garb. We assembled the great canoes. We listened for the gong which would announce our brother's presence on the Lualaba. Presently the cry was heard: He is approaching the Lohali! Now he enters the river! Halloh! We swept forward, my canoe leading, the others following, with songs of joy and with dancing, to meet the first white man our eyes had beheld, and to do him honor.

But as we drew near his canoes there were loud reports, bang! Bang! And fire-staves spat bits of iron at us. We were paralyzed with fright; our mouths hung wide open and we could not shut them. Things such as we had never seen, never heard of, never dreamed of—they were the work of evil spirits! Several of my men plunged into the water.... What for? Did they fly to safety? No—for others fell down also, in the canoes. Some screamed dreadfully, others were silent—they were dead, and blood flowed from little holes in their bodies. "War! that is war!" I yelled. "Go back!" The canoes sped back to our village with all the strength our spirits could impart to our arms.

That was no brother! That was the worst enemy our country had ever seen.

And still those bangs went on; the long staves spat fire, flying pieces of iron whistled around us, fell into the water with a hissing sound, and our brothers continued to fall. We fled into our village—they came after us. We fled into the forest and flung ourselves on the ground. When we returned that evening our eyes beheld fearful things: our brothers, dead, bleeding, our village plundered and burned, and the water full of dead bodies.

* Adapted from Heinrich Schiffers, *The Quest for Africa—Two Thousand Years of Exploration* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1957).

Source Analysis

Instructions: Now that you have read the two sources and marked statements that are fact or opinion, answer the set of questions below. Be prepared to share your answers with the class.

Questions

1. a. When and where did Stanley and Chief Mojimba's encounter take place?

b. When were these sources published and by whom?

Source 1:

Source 2:

2. List three facts that the sources agree on.

a.

b.

c.

3. What are two important pieces of information mentioned in one account and not the other?

Stanley's account:

a.

b.

Chief Mojimba's account:

a.

b.

Name: _____

4. How do Stanley and Chief Mojimba describe each other? Provide specific examples. What does this tell us about them?

5. How does each account describe the use of violence?

Stanley:

Chief Mojimba:

6. Is Stanley's account biased in any way? Explain.

7. Is Chief Mojimba's account biased in any way? Explain.

8. If a historian were studying early encounters between Africans and Europeans, what could they learn by studying these sources?