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Introducing the exotic to the Czechs: The traveller E.St. Vráz and his imagery of non-European regions*

The man who went under the pseudonym and the initials E.St. Vráz (ca. 1860–1932) – his real name remains unknown – gained renown in the Czech Lands[1] at the turn of the nineteenth century because of his travels in Africa, South America and South-Eastern Asia. He became an influential and authoritative author of books and a lecturer on non-European regions. The collections he brought remain among the most highlighted exhibits in the Czech National Museum. Vráz's activities promoted and were reactions to the development of diverse discourses and strategies of self-fashioning (adjusted to the nationalist competition within and without the Austro-Hungarian monarchy and to the long-term self-notion of marginality felt by the inhabitants of Central Europe), but also of the colonialist and racist discourses legitimising the expansion of European powers to other continents. Given the great popularity Vráz enjoyed in his lifetime, and his enduring fame, many of the stereotypes he cultivated and motives he established in

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1 The term "Czech Lands" refers to the regions of Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia, historically ruled by the kings of Bohemia. After 1526, these regions were inserted into the Habsburg Empire (the Austro-Hungarian monarchy of the nineteenth century); in 1918 they became parts of the Czechoslovak Republic, together with Slovakia and Ruthenia. The phrase "Czech Lands" did not exist historically; it is a product of present-day efforts to grasp the territorial, social, and cultural integrity of the whole region. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the words "Czech" and "Bohemian" were often used as synonyms in English-language texts, and their meaning oscillated between the territorial and ethnic sense. Yet at present, the word "Bohemian" is closely tied to the one respective region of Bohemia, while "Czech" denotes linguistic, national and state affiliation (Dickins 2011).

his presentations of the non-European Other remain present in Czech discourses even today. Since thus far research on European representations of non-European regions has predominantly dealt with the western perspectives, this chapter aims to complicate this picture by focusing on the experiences and writings of a man who viewed these regions from a particular Central-European perspective.

The mysterious Czech traveller and his audience

In the final decades of the nineteenth century, the Czech Lands were undergoing dramatic changes, economic, political, social and cultural. The processes of modernisation, industrialisation and urbanisation affected a greater part of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy and Europe at large. Of equal consequence was the nationalist competition that spread continuously into all social strata. The national revival of the Czech-speaking majority clashed with the requirements of the Habsburg administration (that is, preponderantly German-language administration) and with the German-speakers that inhabited the Czech Lands since the Middle Ages. This political competition led to unprecedented cultural growth, production of Czech books, journals, theatre plays and other forms of entertainment, and the establishment of representative museum collections which aimed at presenting the richness and uniqueness of the national history and the beauty of Czech nature. But the effort to study and praise the motherland also engendered the need to insert domestic issues into proper context and to provide information about the world beyond the immediate horizons. This coincided with increased public demand for the strange and the extraordinary, for the "exotic" – that is, for radically different, repulsive yet glamorous lands and peoples (Schmidt 2015). While some travel accounts had been translated from foreign languages, there was hunger for original works in the Czech language, by authors who professed their allegiance to the Czech nation.

Precisely at this moment the Czech journals and daily newspapers started to publish articles, letters and reports of a traveller in Africa who signed his works "E.St. Vráz". The author admitted that this was a pseudonym; that he was born and raised abroad, but remained a faithful Czech (Kořenský 1892a, 9, quoting Vráz's letter from Venezuela, dated July 28, 1891). In the next decades, he stayed true to this initial statement and throughout his life never gave away his real identity. Even letters to his close friends were signed only with the initials E.St. In official forms (such as visa applications or his marriage certificate) the first names he gave varied, but mostly conformed to the initials: Emrajev Stanislav, Emil Stanislav, Emanuel Stanislav. Finally, for his travel books, the author opted

for a quasi-Spanish version Enrique Stanko. All this mysteriousness, of course, gave rise to numerous speculations (Todorovová 2006, 5–8). Yet for the present text, the "truth" about Vráz's origin is inconsequential. What is important is his consistent professing of Czech identity and the willingness of the preponderant majority of Czech public to accept him as "ours", as someone "born in foreign lands, yet always remaining a faithful and devoted son of his mother country, which he loves so fervently" (*Amerikán Národní kalendář* [The American National Calendar] 1911, 242).

While interacting with the Czech community at a distance, the material proof Vráz gave to support the claim that he indeed stayed in the yet unexplored parts of western Africa between 1880 and 1888 were his photographs and the numerous natural historical and ethnographical specimens he sold to traders in Germany, France and Austria-Hungary. To demonstrate that he was indeed a "true Czech", he donated many such objects to Czech museums. Already in 1887, the director of the Czech Museum Antonín Frič (1832–1913) mentioned "numerous precious natural specimens, sent as a gift by a faithful Czech, Mr. Vráz, from the Golden Coast of Africa" (Frič 1887, 28). The shipments of specimens, as well as the sending of articles and photographs for Czech journals, continued even after Vráz relocated to South America in 1888. He pursued an exploratory journey across Venezuela and northern Brazil to Peru, along the Orinoco, Rio Negro and Amazon rivers and then crossing the Andes. In summer 1894 Vráz finally made his appearance in Prague. In spite of continuing to conceal his identity, he was instantaneously accepted by the patriotic Czech society, not least because of his command of the Czech language. "Vráz speaks Czech, his mother tongue, fluently, flawlessly and casually", praised the anonymous article in the daily *Národní listy* [National Newspaper] (1894a, 3).

Shortly after his arrival, Vráz started to deliver lectures in various cities in the Czech Lands, which received high acclaim. In 1895 he set out for Asia – by way of Japan to Borneo and New Guinea, and then through Singapore, Siam (that is, present day Thailand), and China back to the USA. Again he collected extensively and made photographs. In 1897 Vráz married the daughter of a wealthy Czech-American, the Chicago publisher August Geringer, and set out with her for a more "touristy" journey to Mexico and other parts of Spanish America. In 1900–1901, he returned to China, documenting photographically the aftermath of the "Boxer uprising" in Beijing, and returning via Korea and Vladivostok, by Trans-Siberian Railway to Europe and further back to Chicago. It was also in 1900 that the first in a series of his travelogues was published in Prague – on his South American journey – and was once again received very enthusiastically (Vráz 1900) (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Cover of Vráz's volume on equinoctial America, published in Czech in 1900. It explicitly juxtaposes the dominant figure of the European traveller, clad in white, with the crouching dark-skinned, naked native non-European. Private collection of Markéta Křížová.

In the subsequent decade, Vráz switched his residence several times between Chicago and Prague, making his living mostly by lecturing, both in the Czech Lands and in the USA (where his listeners were Czech emigrants), as well as by publishing more books (Vráz 1901; 1904; 1910a; 1910b). He still travelled extensively, but rather to gather new photographs for his lectures and the planned massive multi-volume educational opus on peoples and cultures of the world, which he never finished. He also became intensely involved in Czech nationalist activism in the USA, in 1911 assuming the position of the head of the American branch of the Czech National Council, tasked with promoting cooperation among Czech expatriates and working towards the preservation of national culture and spirit. With the end of the First World War, which also brought about the disintegra-

tion of Austria-Hungary and the founding of Czechoslovakia, Vráz permanently resettled to Prague. After his death, his daughter published his biography, allegedly based on his diaries, letters and other private documents (Vrázová 1937). She deposited a part of the family documentation in the Archive of the Náprstek Museum, where it is still kept. Vrázová also instigated re-editions of her father's books in the late 1930s and 1940s, reworked in the style of adventure novels (Vráz 1938; 1941; 1948 etc.).

The books were doubtlessly an important medium through which Vráz imparted the imagery of the non-European alterity to his contemporaries. However, his lectures were probably even more important. Altogether he delivered more than 1,000 of these over his lifetime. It is rather difficult to reconstruct their contents, as Vráz spoke from memory (this is often mentioned in the newspaper coverings of the lectures, e.g. *Tábor* [Tabor] 1895, 1). Extant material includes newspaper reports which contain quotes or summaries of Vráz's presentations, as well as two transcripts from shorthand notes, one of a lecture on China and one general overview of "how people live and dress, from the lands of eternal ice to the searing equinoctial lands". Both these documents are dated 1904, and are kept in the Vráz files in the Náprstek Museum.[2] As will be shown in the analysis below, these two transcribed lectures are congruous with Vráz's published texts in terms of the principal arguments and narrative strategies (such as the application of Manichean oppositions to denote differences between Europeans and the Others).

Significantly, the lectures were delivered authoritatively, without the possibility for the visitors to ask questions. This we know from the detailed newspaper summaries, which followed the programme of the evening and offered synopses of the speeches of dignitaries delivered before the lectures, as well as Vráz's presentations. They also described the most attractive photographs and the acknowledgments and goodbyes made by the representatives of the organising committees. Yet none of these summaries ever mention a question from the audience. The transmission of information and images was exclusively in the hands of the presenter; in a way, the lectures were less like live interactions than theatrical performances or public book readings, albeit delivered from memory. Such a manner of imparting information was, of course, typical for the nineteenth and early twentieth century, be it at schools, museums, congresses or in popular education

2 The two handwritten lecture notes were to be used by lecturers who delivered them in Vráz's absence, in accompaniment with Vráz's glass slides, to raise money for his further travels. They are kept in the Archive of the Náprstek Museum (hereafter ANpM), fund ar. Vráz, 8–1 and 8–2. The notes indicate that more than 100 pictures were projected during each lecture.

and entertainment. The audiences were generally expected to listen and observe in silence, and subject themselves to the authority of the experts. Naturally, this unequal relationship of knowledge also implied unequal distribution of power between the lecturer/author and the audience/readership.[3]

Vráz's travel itineraries and the way he reported on them copied many representational strategies of European travellers of the nineteenth century in general. He undoubtedly watched the non-European regions and their inhabitants with "imperial eyes" (Pratt 1992). But his acts and his opinions cannot be understood without being contextualised within the very specific processes going on in the Czech Lands at the end of the nineteenth and in the early twentieth century. National identity was important, indeed central, to Vráz. He consistently presented his travels only in the Czech language and to the Czech-speaking public, in the Czech Lands, elsewhere in Austria-Hungary and in the USA and Latin America. He christened the canoe on which he travelled up the Amazon *Praga*, after the Czech capital (Vráz 1900, 84–85), and carried with him a Czech flag. He also proposed that the yet unexplored mountain range in the interior of New Guinea bear the name of the nineteenth-century Czech composer Bedřich Smetana (1824–1884) (Vráz 1898a, 234); but the toponym never made its way into official maps (Fig. 2).

Vráz repeatedly stated that, besides the exploration of the unknown parts of the world, his principal motivation for travel was the promotion of the Czech nation. This assertion was recounted by those who commented on him and his travels. One article in a popular almanac stated: "Our traveller E.St. Vráz undertakes journeys to faraway places, for the greater glory and honour of the Czech nation" (*Kalendář slezský* [Silesian Calendar] 1899, 94). Certainly one of the objectives of European travel narratives of the nineteenth century was to constitute and legitimise the centre via depiction of faraway regions (Lindsay 2016, 30). This was even more important for the Czechs, who were at the time struggling for their own position, entitlement and legitimacy at the outer fringes of "Europe proper". They nurtured what the literary scholar Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek (1999) called the notion of "in-between peripherality" – that is, the anxiety of incomplete belonging into "Europe" and not ranking high enough to merit the status of a "European race" with a particular civilisational status. These anxieties for themselves and for the oppressed and marginalised Czech nation were often voiced by Czech commentators of the day, including Vráz himself, who stated:

3 The whole notion of "expert" was the product of late nineteenth-century positivism, the cult of scientist and of the objective fact (see Burke 2016, 8–10).

I love my nation, for being so small, I admire that it resists, that it fights against those in superior numbers, surrounded by enemies from all sides, for maintaining its originality (*Slavie* [Slavia] 1910, quoting from Vráz's lecture).

Fig. 2. Vráz and his companions on the trip to the interior of New Guinea. One of them holds a flag with the Czech lion, the symbol of statehood of the historical Kingdom of Bohemia, and a net for collecting insects – the symbols of the two purposes of Vráz's trips, the advancement of science and the promotion of the Czech nation. ANpM, fund Ethnographic Photo-Collection, no. AO I 766.

Vráz was not the first Czech traveller who ventured to "worlds afar" (as was the title of one of his books) and enjoyed popularity upon return. That title belongs to Emil Holub (1847–1902), who made two journeys into the interior of South Africa between the 1870s and 1880s, and subsequently published two travelogues and organised two opulent exhibitions in Prague and Vienna. Holub's imprint on popular memory, made all the more durable because of his gifts to Czech museums, was and still remains considerable (Křížová 2024). But Holub has been profiled as a specialist in South Africa and its specific problems. Other travellers of the period between the 1880s and 1900s usually gave few public presentations, and otherwise shared their knowledge only with their friends and family. Vráz, in contrast, presented himself as a global traveller. The sheer number of regions he visited gave him – in his own eyes as well as in those of others – the entitlement to pronounce judgements not only on natural history and the life and culture of non-Europeans, but also on the inhabitants of Europe. In the two decades be-

tween 1890 and 1910, he literally held a monopoly on mediating the non-European worlds to the Czech public. Thus, he acquired and maintained – even many decades after his death – the fame of being *the* Czech traveller, the embodiment of courageousness, scientific inquisitiveness, but at the same time of the rational spirit of the European Enlightenment merged with the specific positive traits of Czech character, whatever these may have been for the respective persons who repeated such affirmations.

"What a strange custom"

Vráz styled himself as a "researcher in the fields of natural and geographical sciences" (*Lidové noviny* [Popular Newspaper] 1904, 4) even though he probably never acquired any formal education. He even mentioned his ministrations to the sick, treatments of "skin diseases, syphilis, tuberculosis, but also other diseases that the professors at medical faculties have never dreamed of" (Vráz 1891, 20(7), 78–79). What is more, to his Czech readers and listeners Vráz posed as a martyr of science, who endured hunger, cold, exposure and illnesses, and risked his life for the sole purpose of the "unveiling of new truths and secrets of nature" (Kořenský 1892b, 86). His books were perceived as based not just on personal experience, but on rigorous observation of man who "has proven that truth is sacred to him. […] His charming narratives are thus not just belletrist sketches, but represent a rich reservoir and treasury of exact knowledge" (*Duch času* [Spirit of the time] 1899, 319). Being viewed as the representative of the latest developments in Western knowledge and its attendant technological achievements gave credibility to Vráz's narratives. This was even more important because his personal history remained shrouded in mystery. While his books and lectures were about travels to particular locations undertaken at the given time, Vráz insisted that precisely because of his scientific mindset he was competent to generalise, to correct opinions born out of prejudices or lack of exact information, and then repeated by armchair travellers and scientists. All this was, of course, nothing new in the travel literature of the late nineteenth century. As its expansion coincided with the increase of tourism, many travel writers accentuated their distance from those following the "beaten track" outlined by travel guides, and emphasised the exploratory nature of their own journeys. At the same time, European science was one of the most important legitimisations of the supposed superiority of the "white race", which claimed to understand the earth, nature, its laws and taxonomies. Yet Vráz explicitly announced that his scientific perspective was also Czech, that he had a "Slavic eye" (Vráz 1900, 3). This was precisely what supposedly made his observations unique

and valuable. Vráz's fervent Czech nationalism was also the central theme in his biography written by his daughter (Vrázová 1937).

It was from the position of a (European and Czech) scholar that Vráz assessed the non-Europeans he encountered, or even those he did not meet, pronouncing judgements about their backwardness or their relative advancement. Yet in order to attract readers for his books, and paying audiences for his lectures, he tried to make his narratives attractive. This meant putting to the fore not the common, but the extraordinary, the exotic, the repulsive; to generate curiosity, excitement and adventure, besides serving objective, concise summaries of facts, quantified and inserted into taxonomies. To combine the two approaches, Vráz often used the rhetorical figure of dichotomous oppositions: refinement against barbarism, civilisation against untamed nature, the old against the modern, poverty against riches, and order against chaos. Such dichotomies, apparently based on scientific observation, also allowed for the accentuation of strange, absurd and bizarre aspects of non-European cultures. Even those cultural features or monuments that deserved admiration were described through the lens of their divergence from European norms. The words "what a strange custom" appear repeatedly, both in his books and in the two transcribed lectures. Dichotomies could be used to distinguish clearly between European and non-European peoples or landscapes, or could be sought within the non-European cultures described, presenting (in line with the role of the detached scholar) both the bright and the dark. This strategy was outlined explicitly in the opening of Vráz's volume on China, in which he stated:

> I love China. I admire classical China, a colossus in every respect. In the Chinese people, I honour the outstanding virtues of men cultivated by a thousand-years-old culture that germinated out of the thoughts of great scholars. I hate China. The slaves chained to the outdated relics, the perverted disciples of the great masters, the people to whom the most valuable rules of moral thinkers are nought but empty clichés. The completely selfish, cruel, idiotic, silliest superstition, thoroughly degenerated, who could love it? (Vráz 1904, 2).

The quote clearly indicates that Vráz viewed the non-European through the optics of the European, through the ideology of culture and progress.

The words "I love classical China" are of great consequence. Vráz repeatedly indulged in nostalgic depictions of great non-European civilisations of the past, the grandeurs of long-abandoned palaces, the solid social systems, the fascinating

cultures, juxtaposing them with the decay he witnessed on his travels. Thus, during his journey across equinoctial America he was disappointed by the abandoned ruins of Atahualpa's palace in Cajamarca. Instead of walking around the desolate shacks spread around the old stone walls, he went home to read about the Inca history, to

> imagine vividly all the past beauty, all the arts, as well as the admirable family and state arrangements of the glorious and happy nation of the past. [...] Not to destroy the illusion, I did not look out of the window, not even when I heard from the outside the oaths and laments of drunken Indians, strayed on their way from the tavern (Vráz 1900, 857–858).

This clear distinguishing between the noble past and the degenerate present dissociated the European traveller from the local inhabitants, but at the same time presented him as someone who could appreciate the true cultural splendours of history (Fig. 3).

As a principal sign of the degeneracy of his times, Vráz repeatedly stressed the mixing of traditional and European culture. In some cases (Japan especially, using the then-common trope of the "yellow peril") he warned against combining traditional culture with European technical knowledge. As will be shown, Vráz openly promoted the spreading of European culture especially among the "savages". Yet at the same time he dismissed the amalgamation of local and European traditions as "contamination". While he openly admired the audacity and inquisitiveness of the first Spanish explorers and conquistadors and also, as cited above, voiced some admiration for the great pre-Colombian cultures, he made clear his repulsion towards "mestizos", calling them a "degenerated breed" (Vráz 1898b, 705). He was also greatly dissatisfied with the fact that the advance of European colonisation meant that the natives became aware of the value of money, and thus increased the prices they asked for their merchandise.

While praising some customs of the Chinese or the Japanese of the past, of the Incas and the Mayas, and standing in awe before the palaces and sanctuaries they had built, Vráz did not conceal his sense of superiority over the "savages" of western Africa, of Amazonia or New Guinea. He did not follow the trope of the idealisation of "noble savage". Instead, in his dichotomous descriptions he accentuated the filth, the lust, the stupidity of those he encountered on his travels. On the subject of South American natives he wrote:

> Guahib is almost a prototype of savage in the true sense of the word, brutal, dirty in body and soul and gluttonous as an animal. Who despises our ethics, our – it is true, artificially developed – sense of shame, those pieces of deceit in which we cover the various filth of human life, and who appeals to the return to the lifestyle of the so called natural people (and there are many such eccentrics), he would soon be cured by a short stay among the Guahibo savages (Vráz 1900, 262).

Fig. 3. Richly dressed Japanese woman, Vráz's photograph of 1900. The woman embodies a different type of Other, that of a "vanishing civilisation of the East". ANpM, fund Collection of Historical Photographs, no. 204.410.

In these descriptions, he sometimes used comparison with Czech realities – e.g. mentioning the traditional Czech cuisine alongside the menu he was served in the Amazon, which consisted of "monkeys, iguanas and toads" (Kořenský 1892c, 1, quoting Vráz's undated letter from Venezuela). He also contrasted the destitute

state of native villages with the beauty of the tropical nature; he constantly complained of native servants, their stupidity, unreliability, and treacherous nature, their greed and lack of diligence. All this served to provide his readers and listeners with "objective", scientifically founded proof of the advanced cultural status they and their country possessed (Fig. 4).

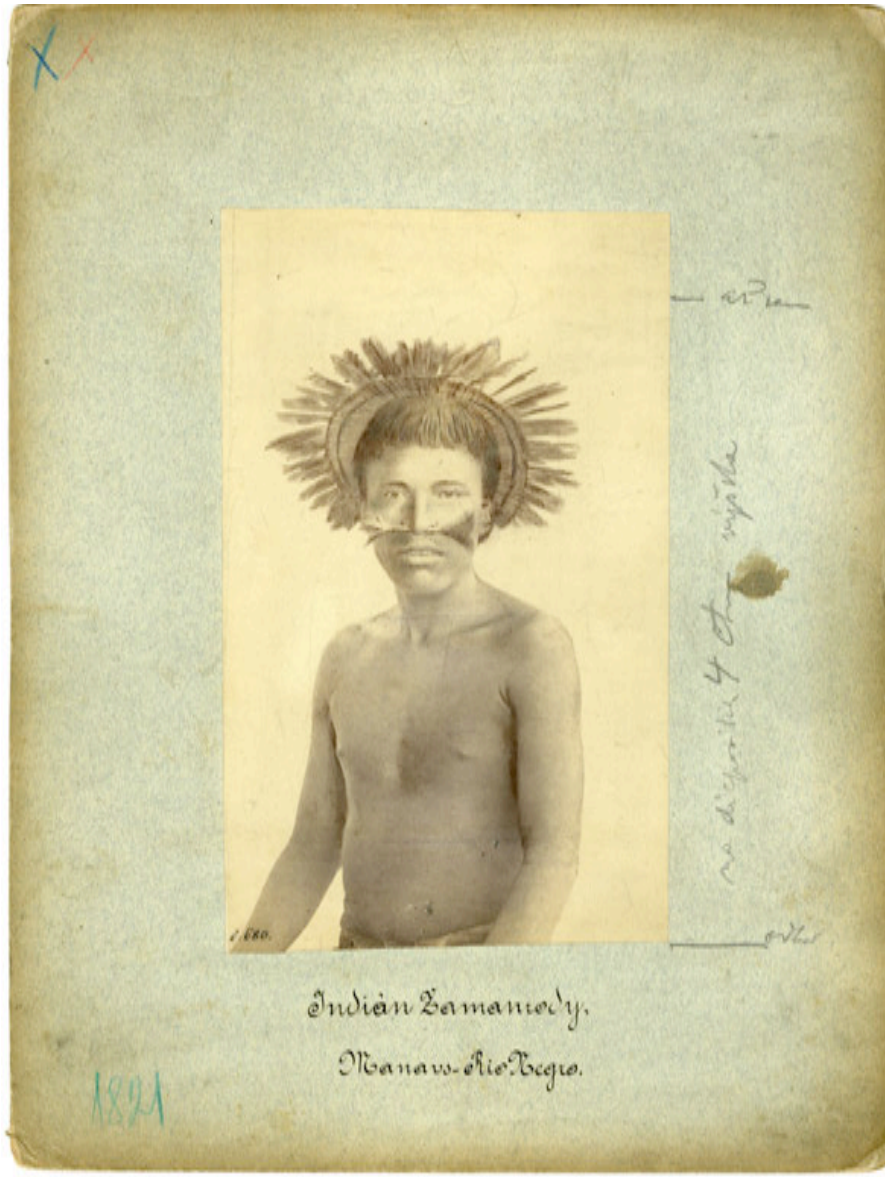

Fig. 4. Portrait of native from the Orinoco basin, embodying "savagery" through his nakedness and nose plug. ANpM, fund Collection of Historical Photographs, no. 204.173.

Pronouncing himself an heir of European Enlightenment, Vráz often voiced sharp criticism of "obscurantism" and religious "superstition". While visiting one of the temples in Beijing, he felt "repugnance" at seeing the statues of the traditional Chinese deities, "horrendous creations of Chinese idol worshippers" (Vráz 1904, 293). He considered his own ability to identify "superstitions" and mock them to be the most important characteristics distinguishing him, an educated European, from the non-Europeans. Likewise, he commented disfavourably on the inability of the native people to understand the intellectual purposes of his travels, such as collecting natural specimens. Overall, Vráz drew upon the vocabulary and reasoning of developmentalism. He concluded that even though nature in the tropics spared no effort in the development of plants, butterflies and birds, "the man remained on a lower stage" (*Národní listy* 1894b, 3, quoting from Vráz's lecture). The tropes of "blood" and "race" were omnipresent in his texts, explaining numerous cultural traits – such as "lies and deceit" – as "inborn" to Arabs, Moors and Berbers (Vráz 1895, 140).

Last but not least, Vráz paid great attention to "Eves of the tropics", authoritatively expressing his opinions on their "beauty" and "ugliness", again implicitly and explicitly comparing them to European standards. He was convinced that in South America

> you would search in vain for the beauty of Indians or even Negresses, so acclaimed in the works by easily seduced travellers. There are some tribes where a woman, if barely past childhood, does not lack a certain harmony of form and pleasantness of face, but these are extremely rare (Vráz 1910b, 75).

His descriptions of women were often overtly sexualised, dwelling on naked breasts and "strange" marriage customs. His repeated descriptions of brutal treatment of women, reduced to "beasts of burden" and "slaves" by their husbands (*Tábor* 1895, 1, quoting from Vráz's lecture), however, served as yet another proof of the advancement of the European/Czech society. Even his narratives about China and Japan contained numerous allusions to the unequal position of women that to Vráz embodied the inherently backward cultural status of these societies, not to mention the detailed descriptions of the "odalisques" of Istanbul (Fig. 5).[4]

4 See the transcribed lecture on "how people live and dress" (ANpM, fund ar. Vráz, box 8–1, f. 21).

Fig. 5. Married woman and young maiden from the Hopi nation, of the Southwest of North America, with their distinct hairstyles, depicted in Vráz's stereoscopic photographs from 1900 (that is, photographs that created an illusion of a three-dimensional picture when viewed through a special apparatus). These pictures were a response to the demand for photographs of "exotic types", especially females, observable on the European and North American market. ANpM, fund Ethnographic Photo-Collection, no. Am II 527.

It is difficult to ascertain to what extent Vráz's opinions, which were undoubtedly shaped by literature even before he embarked upon his journeys, changed after each prolonged stay in a particular region, and to what degree he only filled preconceived notions with new detail. It is equally difficult to state whether he was unable to rise beyond the European intellectual framework, or simply followed it because it was comprehensible to those who bought his books and paid to listen to his lectures.[5] He boasted of speaking "more or less fluently in about 10 languages, some of them un-Christian" (Kořenský 1892a, 9, quoting Vráz's letter from Venezuela, dated July 28, 1891). Yet what he reproduced from his dealing with the natives was mostly the white traveller giving orders instead of learning from the locals. His objectives were reaching certain geographical coordinates,

5 Here, I divert from the opinion of Iveta Nakládalová (2021, 4), whose analysis of Vráz's writings on China states that he "did not remain untouched and untransformed by what he saw and what he experienced"; in another text on Vráz in South-Eastern Asia, Nakládalová concludes that he often questioned European values and the progress presumably inherent in western culture, and "despite his Eurocentric position", he was still receptive towards otherness (Nakládalová 2024, 157). Yet Nakládalová only relied on Vráz's declarations of his own objectivity, and of his willingness to understand the Other. When taken as a whole, and combined with the reports on his lectures, Vráz's texts reveal both his ethnocentrism and his lack of understanding for the complexities of non-European cultures.

capturing a rare species of fish or butterfly, photographing a typical hut or canoe. Central to his outlook was the tenet of the colonial ideology – non-Europeans lagging behind European civilisation due to their intrinsically static nature, that is, because they lacked the ability to change and progress on their own. The greatest "primitiveness" Vráz found in Africa, the land of human sacrifices and expansive Islam. Exceptionally harsh were the statements he made in a lecture about Morocco, presented at the meeting of the Czech Geographical Society (and later printed in its proceedings). The entire text is a manifesto against what he considered to be religious fanaticism. Thus, concluded Vráz, "I wish that also this stronghold of dark Islam would become, as other states of northern Africa, under European dominion" (Vráz 1895, 142). The phrase "dark continent" in relation to Africa appeared consistently in Vráz's writings. It was also chosen by the editors of the volume published posthumously (Vráz 1941).

Textual (both literary and oral) testimonies aside, Vráz also imparted on his contemporaries the visual imagery of the Other. He started to practice photography in 1885, during his stay in western Africa, and had been taking a photographic camera along on every subsequent journey, publishing the pictures as illustrations in his books. Projection of photographs (often hand-coloured) from glass slides constituted an important accompaniment to his lectures, turning them into true multimedia spectacles and making them extremely attractive to the audience.[6] Photography was considered an important European invention, one of the many proofs of superiority over the non-European "savages". Vráz himself was well aware of the fact that the objectivity of photographs was illusory, as it was precisely the choice of the traveller what to capture and from which angle, and what to make public. He even admitted that

> (T)o make photographs of Eastern lands is easy and many things look more beautiful than in reality, from a short distance, when you see how these beauties are crumbling, decaying, with plenty of filth and stink. Yet on the other hand many things […] in natural colours, in the light and bright of the tropical sun intoxicate us – and the photograph leaves us cool (*Amerikán* [The American] 1897, 5, quoting Vráz's letter from Bangkok).

6 On the nineteenth-century travel lectures as spectacles see Wright (2020, 179). The Náprstek Museum holds an extensive collection of Vráz's glass slides (almost 8,000 in number). They were donated to the museum in 1948 by Vráz's daughter Vlasta Vrázová. Some of these photographs are unique, the first ones taken in a given region (Todorovová 2016).

Still, the supposedly "objective" images of reality, more accurate than the written word, gave credibility to Vráz's claims that he had visited certain regions, and had described them truthfully. They complemented the emphasis on eye-witnessing as a criterion of truth, consistently present in Vráz's travel accounts and lectures. It was precisely the "exact" depictions of brutal executions and foot mutilation (many such photographs were included in Vráz's volume on China), of naked torsos of women from the Amazon or the painted faces of the Dajaks that confirmed their principal differences from civilised Europeans. This was also the opinion of the commentators of Vráz's lectures. "The world can be adjusted to the individual opinion of the traveller. But the pictures cannot. Everyone can judge for himself if the lecturer speaks the truth" (*Štítný* 1903, 1).[7]

Dreams of colonial greatness

His way of perceiving the "savages" also affected Vráz's attitudes to colonialism. There was some criticism, such as of the unnecessary violence he witnessed in China in 1900–1901, after the suppression of the "Boxer uprising". But in this case, as well as on other occasions, Vráz in fact turned the critique of colonial practices into nationalist argumentation, presenting the Germans as the most brutal looters in Beijing, while absolving the Russians (that is, fellow Slavs) and Austrian-Hungarian soldiers, some of them from the Czech Lands, of any complicity in these atrocities.

> The Prussians are worst remembered by the Chinese people. They struck the unarmed Chinese, kicked them, […] not sparing either sex or age. The Russian soldiers were fierce in the battle, but afterwards […] soft and meek. They did not hurt anyone. […] In China the Prussian is *Übermench* only in his boorishness.[8]

Overall, his view of the expansion of European civilisation, albeit forced, was positive. He spoke highly of the development of European trade and the spread of Christianity in China, especially because it improved the position of women (Vráz 1904, 370); and even more the European conquest of Africa that wiped out the superstitions, human sacrifices and slavery.

7 The journal bears the name of a Czech religious reformer from the fourteenth century.

8 Transcribed lecture *On China* (ANpM, fund ar. Vráz, 8–2, f. 27).

> Where the terrible and mass executions had been taking place now stands a school or a Christian temple. And in English schools the youth of the once, only 20 years ago, wild and blood-thirsty Africa, learns, in their own tongue and in English, the sciences and the humanity of the whites. Of course, the white man sometimes oppresses, conquers, rules without legitimation to peoples that could rule themselves and are almost as good as the white man, but elsewhere it is the task of the white man to correct the mistakes and become a good teacher and leader on the road to betterment (Vráz 1910a, 285).

Coinciding with the culmination of the colonial expansion of Western European powers into Africa and Asia, imageries that can be termed "colonial fantasies" arose throughout Europe. The term was coined by Susanne Zantop (1997), originally for the specific case of Germany before the newly unified state entered imperial and colonial competition, to denote the directly and indirectly formulated notions of civilisational superiority and the somewhat "natural" right to colonial dominance (strongly marked with nationalism) in the situation of inexistence of any real military, political and economic expansion to the overseas regions. Efforts to leave at least a symbolic footprint in spreading the European values and European civilisation overseas, and benefitting economically from the colonial expansion, were also undertaken in the Czech Lands.

The spread of such colonial fantasies was associated with the leading Czech representatives' aspirations to present their nation as equal to the "most developed" nations of Europe.[9] The colonial aspirations were not important *per se*, but only as tokens of "greatness"; Czech national activists drew from the colonial vocabulary in order to articulate their own national aspirations at home. This was also the reason why the scientific and exploratory angle of Vráz's travels was so accentuated. One of the commentators of Vráz's travels stated

> We do not have a colony, through which our countrymen would keep us interested in the far away words. [...] Therefore, we appreciate our valiant countrymen who on their own undertake strenuous journeys to the unknown lands, motivated by scientific endeavour, who do not become estranged even after many years (Bouše 1895, 183).

9 These were the words used in the debates in 1918, immediately after the foundation of Czechoslovakia, when some commentators expressed the idea that the new state should claim a share of the colonies confiscated from Germany, namely Togoland (present-day Togo) (see e.g., Bílý 1918, 1).

In fact, Vráz never ventured to completely unexplored regions. Still, his "primacy" in visiting certain places in Africa or New Guinea, which were only sparsely known even to the colonising powers at the time, or in collecting unique natural species (some of which were named after him[10]), was of great importance to his Czech contemporaries. Not being a sovereign nation, the Czechs had no chance to take part in the colonial endeavour, yet scientific colonisation was still possible. Not only was Vráz representing the whole of the Czech nation during his travels – he was, in fact, sponsored by this nation through individual donations and mass participation in the lectures.

Vráz's travels became, in a sense, public property. His lectures often took the form of public events, especially in small towns with scarce social life. They were advertised as not just educational, but – first and foremost – patriotic events. By attending Vráz's presentations in great numbers, Czech audiences proved their "advancement, education and national sense" (*Amerikán* 1895b, 15). Yet the lectures also provided funds for further travels, for collecting more objects, for making photographs of new locations. Thus, each person visiting the lecture or buying his book became a patron of the traveller, and was symbolically partaking of his exploits and discoveries. The feeling of the nation's collective participation in Vráz's exploratory journeys was further enhanced by the fact that he sent regular reports – in the form of personal letters – to be published by the newspapers, so that the public could read them.

The colonial aspirations were also tied to the increasing wave of outmigration from the Czech Lands overseas, mostly to the United States, but also to other parts of the American continent. With the exception of a small number of political émigrés, the majority of those resettling overseas (temporarily or permanently) were motivated by economic opportunities. Representatives of Czech patriotic discourse lamented the loss of enterprising countrymen, but viewed their departure through the lens of Habsburg oppression. At the same time, they also tried to frame the overseas exodus as, *de facto*, Czech colonial expansion. As one of the commentators reiterated, "there is no nation of similar size that would have so many and so great colonies abroad as our nation" (*České noviny* [Czech news] 1895, 29). Such interpretation put the Czechs unequivocally on the side of "progress" and the most developed nations of the times, framing the Czech economic migration as the spread of European or Slavic culture to backward parts of the world (Dean 2014). Here lies the key for understanding the importance of

10 For example the South American butterfly (*Taygetis vrazi*) and stick insect (*Phasma vrazi*) (Kheil 1896, 229).

Vráz's lecturing activities among the Czech community, the "New Czechia", in the United States.[11] He was exhorting them on the need to maintain unity with the main body of the nation – while also alluding to the topos of the Czech "colony" on the American territory, presented almost as equal, for example, to the Spanish colonies on the continent.

> If we are to stay Czechs at all, we only can do it as an American branch of the main tree. [...] Our friend Vráz often quotes a deterrent example of the separatism of Cuban Spaniards – those people that do not want to hear anything about their old mother country, and therefore have become the worst abhorrence to it (*Slavie* 1912, 4, quoting from Vráz's lecture).

It was precisely the colonialist tint of his travelogues and lectures that made them so attractive to the local public and so firmly stuck in the popular memory of the Czech Lands. The Czechs both at home and abroad projected their own aspirations and fantasies, both individual and collective, onto the enigmatic figure of the "great Czech traveller and unequalled orator" (*Amerikán Národní kalendář* 1933, 203). Vráz had drawn for them a mental map of the world on which their motherland and they themselves held firm position, and translated the non-European cultural realities so as they would fit into the preconceived notions of Czech nationalism. This map was designed from a European perspective – the perspective of power with all its multiple historical, political, ideological, symbolic and even spiritual implications – and the Czechs were part of this power relationship. Vráz used discursive strategies that appealed to the preferences of his readers and his listeners, but also filled the mental map he was constructing for them with many particular motifs, based on concrete locations and his personal experiences. His descriptions of the stasis and ahistoricity of non-European peoples not only juxtaposed them with the dynamism and modernity of the West, but, more importantly, brought to the fore the dynamic transformations of the Czech nation in the previous decades. While commenting on the apathy and degeneration brought about by the cultural mixing overseas, Vráz indirectly praised his fellow Czechs for resisting such pressures to change.

11 "He calls our settlement New Czechia, as we, equally as him, for ideal or practical reasons have left our beloved motherland, [...] yet have not forgotten our origin" (Amerikán 1895a, 27, quoting from Vráz's lecture).

Conclusions: The illusions of imperial greatness continued

The contrast between the European "light" and the non-European "darkness" was even more accentuated in the posthumous re-editions of Vráz's books (Vráz 1938; 1941; 1948 etc.). In these publications his own photographs were supplemented by pictures made by Zdeněk Burian (1905–1981), a prominent illustrator of adventure books. Unlike his own photos, in which Vráz could only have posed in stiff self-portraits, Burian's illustrations brought him to the centre of dramatic events – paddling in rapids, hunting the wild beasts, fighting against fierce warriors armed with clubs and spears (Fig. 6). This was the image that Vráz had already aimed to create in his lectures and in his books and articles, the image of the European who, equipped with scientific knowledge and technical devices, possessed of a moral compass and courage, surpasses the natural obstacles and dangers set in his path by nature and by the natives; always taking charge, directing the work of those around him. The people he met contributed to the local atmosphere, but blended into the background against which the acts of the traveller – and the Czech flag and other national symbols he carried with him – came to the fore.

Fig. 6. Illustration by Zdeněk Burian from the book *Among the skull-hunters of Borneo*, published posthumously in 1948, shows Vráz engaged in a fierce battle against "wild" Dayaks. Private collection of Markéta Křížová.

In the introductory part of this chapter, I alluded to Mary Louise Pratt (1992) and the trope of "imperial" perspective, however absurd this might sound for the traveller from a Central European country that never possessed any real overseas colonies. Yet the colonial fantasies, born in the context of the nineteenth-century nationalist competitions, and nurtured in the subsequent decades by Vráz and his contemporaries, had taken firm root in the Czech public memory. This can be confirmed by referring to one of the later – and rather surprising – re-editions of Vráz's texts, at the publishing house of Czechoslovak anti-communist exiles, the Sixty-Eight Publishers in Toronto (the name of the publishing house alludes to the forced exile of intellectual elites from Czechoslovakia after the Soviets crushed the reform movement, the "Prague Spring", in August 1968). Supplemented with a foreword by Vlasta Vrázová, the edition follows the line of uncritical celebration of "explorers of the past century, who conquered for us the unknown worlds and brought us to the modern era through their discoveries, at the cost of unbelievable sacrifices" (Vráz 1983, 7). This edition symbolically tied together as "us" the Czech nationalists of the nineteenth century, the descendants of the economic migrants to North America, the new wave of political exiles and the democratic opposition at home, perpetuating all stereotypes about the Czech greatness projected against the dim background of the rest of the world. Struggling to validate their "Westerness", the Czechs in exile in the 1980s resorted to Vráz just as much as the Czech visitors of his lectures in New York, Chicago or Cleveland of the 1910s, who were looking for the confirmation of their status as one of the most developed nations of the world.

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