

Visions of Africa in Polish Children's Book Illustrations from 1945 to 1989

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This text discusses illustrations that presented various visions of Africa and were published in subsequent editions of the novel *W pustyni i w puszczy* (In Desert and Wilderness) and in a selection of other children's books. It also seeks to address the following questions: How did Polish illustrators depict Africa in illustrations for children? What issues and subjects interested them most? To what extent was colonial discourse legible in their portrayals of African people and cultures? What formal means and stylistic approaches did the artists use to create their visions? How faithfully did the illustrators adhere to the literary texts in their compositions? And how did they reconcile their individual styles with the achievements of contemporary art and the influence of African art, which served as an inspiration for many of them?

Keywords: illustration, Africa, Polish book illustration, children's visual culture, Polish School of Illustration.

Between 1955 and 1970, Polish post-war book illustration underwent significant development, raising its overall quality and gaining international recognition. Polish illustrators won prestigious awards in international competitions, and illustrating children's books became a Polish specialty. By the late the 1950s, the term "Polish School of Illustration" had been coined to describe a sizeable group of artists whose work was distinctive in style and of outstanding artistic merit.¹ At the time, Polish illustrated children's books were a mass medium and thus served as an excellent tool not only for imparting knowledge about the world to young readers but also for shaping their artistic taste and sensitivity. Illustrations, whose main function was to explicate and give concrete form to the world evoked by literary works, often constituted the young reader's first encounter with art. Illustrations introduced children to the world of fiction, deepened the emotions evoked by the narrative, and helped to shape their imagination of both their immediate surroundings and distant, exotic lands—places they could experience almost exclusively through books and magazines. State-owned publishing houses which published children's literature offered a wide selection of adventure books, fairy tales, and folktales from various, often distant parts of the world, with Africa standing out as one of the most captivating of these locations.² Henryk Sienkiewicz's *W pustyni i w puszczy* (In Desert and Wilderness) was by far the most popular children's book in Poland. The novel was first published in 1912, and between 1949 and 1969, it appeared in six editions, each featuring a different set of illustrations. Other books about Africa followed, illustrated by members of the renowned "Polish School of Illustration," such as Józef Czerwiński, Janusz Towpik, Teresa Wilbik, Józef Wilkoń, Zdzisław Witwicki, and Ignacy Witz. These books were published between 1945 and 1989, with a notable concentration during the 1960s. Undoubtedly, the surge of interest in the African continent among Polish

- 1 See Anita Wincencjusz-Patyna, *Stacja ilustracja. Polska ilustracja książkowa 1950–1980. Artystyczne kreacje i realizacje* [Station Illustration. Polish Book Illustration 1950–1980. Artistic Creations and Realisations] (Wrocław: Akademia Sztuk Pięknych im. Eugeniusza Gepperta we Wrocławiu, 2008), 466–67; and eadem, "Między słowem a obrazem – kiedy rysunek staje się ilustracją" [Between Word and Image—When Drawing Becomes Illustration], *Dyskurs. Pismo Naukowo-Artystyczne ASP we Wrocławiu*, no. 16 (2013): 238.
- 2 It must be emphasised that Africa-themed books were part of a broader segment of children's literature addressing non-European cultures. Books on Africa are analysed as a distinct subcategory for the purposes of this study.

state-owned children's book publishers during the 1960s was fuelled by the international policies of the Polish state towards African nations and by the sympathies of the Eastern Bloc countries towards African revolutionary movements and their ambition to liberate those countries from colonial rule.³ A turning point in the establishment of diplomatic relations with African countries came in 1960, when seventeen nations proclaimed independence from France, Great Britain, Belgium, and Italy. The ensuing, mutually beneficial and gradually intensifying political and economic cooperation—referred to as “Polish-African friendship”—also gave rise to broadly defined cultural exchanges.⁴ There is no doubt that important political events reflected on the policies of Polish publishing houses, as evidenced by the boom in Africa-related children's books published in Poland during the 1960s.

This text will discuss illustrations that presented various visions of Africa, published in subsequent editions of the novel *W pustyni i w puszczy* and in a selection of other children's books. It will also seek to answer the following questions: How did Polish illustrators portray Africa in children's book illustrations? What themes and subjects interested them most? To what extent was colonial discourse legible in their representations of African people and culture? What formal means and stylistic approaches did they

- 3 The People's Republic of Poland closely followed the Soviet Union's policy toward African countries, which aimed to expand Soviet influence across decolonised Africa by integrating the newly independent countries into the Soviet bloc. See Jacek Knopek and Aneta Ratke-Majewska, “Polityka Polski wobec państw Afryki Subsaharyjskiej w świetle planu pracy departamentu MSZ na 1969 rok” [Poland's Policy Toward the Countries of Sub-Saharan Africa in Light of the 1969 Work Plan of the Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs], *Studia Polonijne*, no. 35 (2014): 177.
- 4 See Jacek Knopek, “Afryka Subsaharyjska w polityce zagranicznej PRL” [Sub-Saharan Africa in the Foreign Policy of the People's Republic of Poland], *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość*, no. 1 (2023): 26–48. The author provides an extensive bibliography on the political relations of the People's Republic of Poland with African countries. On the growing interest in Africa among researchers (historians, archaeologists, ethnographers) during the 1960s, see Antoni Grzybkowski, “Rozwój zainteresowań Afryką w Polsce oraz polskie ośrodki Badań afrykanistycznych” [Development of Interest in Africa in Poland and Polish Centres for Africanist Research], *Przegląd Socjologiczny*, no. 19 (1965): 10–32. Between 1961 and 1964, a Polish archaeological expedition conducted excavations in the town of Faras in northern Sudan, uncovering Christian-period Nubian wall paintings. These works were transported to Poland and presented to the public in 1972 at the National Museum in Warsaw. See Bożena Mierzejewska, Aleksandra Sulikowska-Gąska, and Tomasz Górecki, eds., *Galeria Faras im. Profesora Kazimierza Michałowskiego* [The Professor Kazimierz Michałowski Faras Gallery] (Warszawa: Muzeum Narodowe, 2014).

use to create their visions? How closely did their compositions adhere to the literary works? And how did they reconcile their individual style with the achievements of contemporary art and the influence of African art, which served as a source of inspiration for many of them?⁵ The article will discuss illustrations created by Polish graphic designers for books about Africa written by Polish authors, as well as for selected foreign publications translated into Polish, for which Polish artists produced original illustration series.

The Golden Years of Polish Book Illustration: A Synthesis

After World War II, Poland—along with other Central and East European countries—found itself within the Soviet Union's sphere of influence, a fact that had significant implications for the development of culture. The doctrine of socialist realism, officially introduced in Poland in 1949, dominated Polish literature, architecture, and the arts for several years, substantially limiting the freedom of artistic expression.⁶ These constraints

- 5 Few studies in Poland have addressed the representation of non-European countries in children's books. Existing research has focused on illustrations for Henryk Sienkiewicz's ever-popular adventure novel *W pustyni i w puszczy* [In Desert and Wilderness], examining the relationship between text and image, the illustrators' stylistic choices, the types and placement of illustrations in the text, and the degree to which they adhere to or deviate from the narrative. See Jadwiga Ruszała, "W krainie egzotyki i przygody. O «W pustyni i w puszczy» Henryka Sienkiewicza" [In the Land of the Exotic and of the Adventure. On *In Desert and Wilderness* by Henryk Sienkiewicz] (Ślupsk: Wyższa Szkoła Pedagogiczna, 1995); Wojciech Birek, "Staś i Nel w obrazkach. Ilustrowane i komiksowe edycje *W pustyni i w puszczy*" [Staś and Nel in Pictures. Illustrated and Comic Book Editions of *In Desert and Wilderness*], in *Wokół "W pustyni i w puszczy". W stulecie pierwszego wydania powieści* [Around *In Desert and Wilderness*. On the Centenary of the First Edition of the Novel], ed. Jerzy Axer and Tadeusz Bujnicki (Kraków: Universitas, 2012); Paulina Zięciak, "Rzetelność czy baśniowość. Ilustracje do «W pustyni i w puszczy» Henryka Sienkiewicza" [Fact or Fable. Illustrations for Henryk Sienkiewicz's *In Desert and Wilderness*], *ArtPapier*, no. 309 (2016). This article expands the scope of previous research by introducing new examples and examining how illustrators represented African cultures, flora, and fauna in other Africa-themed children's books published between 1945 and 1989. It considers how these artists combined their own expressive styles with motifs drawn from African culture and its rich iconography. It is also worth noting that scholarly interest in children's book illustrations extended beyond African culture, as evidenced in Elżbieta Zarych's article. See Elżbieta Zarych, "Leśmianowski orient w typografii i ilustracji Ali Baby i czterdziestu zbójców" [The Orient of Leśmian in the Typography and Illustrations of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves], *Sztuka Edycji*, no. 1 (2020).
- 6 See Katarzyna Śliwińska, *Socrealizm w PRL i NRD* [Socialist Realism in the People's Republic of Poland and the German Democratic Republic] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2006).

affected not only painting, sculpture, and printmaking but also graphic design, including book illustration, which the authorities used as a tool to propagate socialist ideas among the youngest recipients.⁷ It is worth noting, however, that political decision-makers sometimes allowed artists to deviate from the mandated realism, particularly in case of illustrations for children.⁸ A breakthrough came in 1956 with the so-called “Polish thaw” and the ensuing political reforms initiated within the Polish United Workers’ Party, aimed at de-Stalinising and democratising the communist system.⁹ This partial liberalisation of the system had a broad impact on culture. Following years of imposed socialist realism, Polish art experienced both internal renewal and external exposure, which led to the saturation of the visual arts with new formal and stylistic ideas. This opening was especially visible among the generation of young artists who were seeking new formulas of expression.¹⁰ This group included book graphic designers, whose work was influenced by contemporary trends in Western art—particularly in painting and printmaking.¹¹ As critics of the time observed:

Graphic designers are not afraid to introduce their full creative arsenal to the pages of books—they speak the language of 20th-century art and use its means. In the illustrations we encounter examples of colourism, realism, surrealism, grotesque, historical pastiche, abstraction. Everything that happens in contemporary art [...] permeates the books.¹²

The vibrant revival of the art of illustration in Poland during the 1950s and 1960s was therefore an expression of both the artistic ambition of illustrators and the courage of publishers to adopt solutions found in contemporary art. This was pointed out by Danuta Wróblewska, a Polish art

7 Wincencjusz-Patyna, *Stacja*, 34.

8 Ibid., p. 34.

9 See Jerzy Kochanowski, *Rewolucja między październikowa. Polska 1956–1957* [The Inter-October Revolution. Poland 1956–1957] (Warszawa: Znak, 2017).

10 Danuta Wróblewska, *Polska grafika współczesna. Grafika warsztatowa, plakat, grafika książkowa, grafika prasowa* [Polish Contemporary Graphic Art. Graphic Art, Posters, Book Illustrations, Press Illustrations] (Warszawa: Interpress, 1988), 14.

11 Danuta Wróblewska, “Polska ilustracja książkowa” [Polish Book Illustration], *Przegląd Księgarski i Wydawniczy*, no. 12 (1968): 1.

12 Wróblewska, *Polska grafika współczesna*, 22.

critic with a keen interest in graphic art. Commenting on the 1962 *Exhibition of Books and Illustrations*, organised by the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions “Zachęta” as part of the celebrations of the fifteenth anniversary of the People’s Republic of Poland, she wrote:

Polish book illustration is a flower growing on extremely fertile and well-tended ground. The excellent level of our graphic arts and its expansiveness in recent years, the high concentration of talent in the graphic studios of publishing houses, the care of the latter for the external design of their publications, and finally the social wave of ardent [...] reception of books, is no trivial combination of favourable circumstances. There is a constant flow of invention and graphic talent, novelty and artistic experiment that find their reflections—our illustration ferments, is debated, much is happening and provokes attention.¹³

The development of Polish illustration would not have been possible without the patronage of the state, which played an active role in shaping publishing activities. This phenomenon was aptly described by Elżbieta Skierkowska in terms reflective of the period:

Intensified publishing activity in the People’s Republic of Poland is connected with the pursuit of beauty and attractiveness in book design. The campaign to promote culture calls for an affordable yet beautifully published book, and there are new and vast opportunities for the development of book graphics and illustrations. Over the past twenty years, achievements in this field have exceeded all our predictions from the years following the rebirth of the Polish State.¹⁴

This intense publishing activity was carried out through government-dependent, centralised stated-owned publishing houses, which operated under the control of censorship. Among these were Czytelnik, Iskry, Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza, Biuro Wydawnicze “Ruch,” Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, and Nasza Księgarnia, specialising in children’s literature. It was at Nasza Księgarnia that the largest number of books about Africa aimed at young readers were published.

13 Danuta Wróblewska, “Książka i ilustracja” [Book and Illustration], *Projekt*, no. 3 (1962): 2.

14 Elżbieta Skierkowska, *Współczesna ilustracja książki* [Contemporary Book Illustration] (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1969), 8.

Illustrations for Henryk Sienkiewicz's novel *W pustyni i w puszczy*

W pustyni i w puszczy by Henryk Sienkiewicz was the first Polish adventure book for children with a strong African theme, and it dominated this literary genre in Poland for many years. The story is set in various countries along the east coast of Africa and follows the adventures of Stanisław Tarkowski, the son of a Polish engineer working on the construction and maintenance of the Suez Canal, and Nel Rawlinson, the daughter of an English director of the same company. Both children are abducted by the Mahdists (supporters of the Mahdist uprising) and forced to journey across Africa. Their route takes them through Egypt and Sudan, ending in present-day Kenya. The exotic settings and engaging storytelling ensured the novel's enduring popularity among readers and made it a primary source of knowledge about Africa for many Polish children. It is worth noting that despite its popularity, the novel was not immune to criticism—particularly during the era of socialist realism, when Sienkiewicz's work was attacked for what critics described as “misunderstanding of [...] the bid for independence by the African peoples and the author's evident appreciation of colonialism.”¹⁶

The story's exotic settings and vivid narrative inspired publishers to produce numerous illustrated editions of the work, each reflecting the evolving reception of the novel. The diversity of illustrative approaches in the subsequent editions reflected the various ways in which the text stimulated the artists' imagination. The first edition featured realistic compositions by Piotr Stachiewicz.¹⁷ Two subsequent series of illustrations by Adam Styka and Kamil Mackiewicz, published in the 1920s, also followed a realistic convention.¹⁸ In 1943, *W pustyni i w puszczy* was published with decorative illustrations by Stefan Norblin, inspired by the aesthetics of the Young

15 See Jadwiga Ruszała, *W krainie egzotyki i przygody. O “W pustyni i w puszczy” Henryka Sienkiewicza* [In the Land of the Exotic and of the Adventure. On *In Desert and Wilderness* by Henryk Sienkiewicz] (Ślupsk: Wyższa Szkoła Pedagogiczna, 1995), 43–46.

16 Ibid, p. 35.

17 Henryk Sienkiewicz, *W pustyni i w puszczy* (Warszawa: Gebethner i Wolff, 1912).

18 Henryk Sienkiewicz, *Poušti a pralesem* [In Desert and Wilderness] (Praha: Nakladatelé Kvasnička a Hampl, 1928); only the Czech edition was found. See also Henryk Sienkiewicz, *W pustyni i w puszczy* (Lwów: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1929).

Poland movement.¹⁹ During the era of the Polish People's Republic—particularly in the second half of the 1950s and during the 1960s—there was a marked increase in the number of illustrated editions of the novel. As many as six editions appeared during this time, illustrated by five graphic designers: Jan Marcin Szancer (1949, with a new series of illustrations in 1954), Marek Rudnicki (1956), Jerzy Srokowski (1959), Szymon Kobyliński (1963), and Janusz Towpik (1969). Some of these editions, such as those illustrated by Srokowski and Kobyliński, were reprinted multiple times.

A closer look at the post-war illustrations by Polish graphic artists for Sienkiewicz's novel reveals that all the above-mentioned artists remained faithful to the text of the novel, with their primary aim being to concretise the objects presented in the literary work and to explicate its content through visual interpretation.²⁰ Despite sharing this common function, the illustration series differed significantly—not only in their selection of scenes but also in the level of compositional detail, the manner in which the depicted world was constructed, stylistic approach, the size of the illustrations (ranging from full-page to half-page or partial page), and the techniques employed. As interpreters of the text, the illustrators selected which elements of the world presented in the novel to concretise in their artistic vision, generating a rich variety of narrative and descriptive images that directly referenced the text.²¹ Each illustrator decided whether to emphasise the key protagonists of the story—their appearance and emotional states—or to focus instead on depictions of African nature as the central theme of their compositions. Notably, certain scenes from the novel proved particularly popular among illustrators. These included the escape through the desert, Staś's (the diminutive of the Polish name Stanisław, the

19 See Wojciech Birek, "Staś i Nel w obrazkach. Ilustrowane i komiksowe edycje *W pustyni i w puszczy*" [Staś and Nel in Pictures. Illustrated and Comic Book Editions of *In Desert and Wilderness*], in *Wokół "W pustyni i w puszczy". W stulecie pierwodruku powieści* [Around *In Desert and Wilderness*. On the Centenary of the First Edition of the Novel], ed. Jerzy Axer and Tadeusz Bujnicki (Kraków: Universitas, 2012), 521–22.

20 Seweryna Wysłouch, *Literatura a sztuki wizualne* [Literature and Visual Arts] (Warszawa: PWN, 1994), 100.

21 Wojciech Birek discusses the division of direct illustrations into narrative and descriptive types. According to him, a narrative illustration is a graphic, dynamic representation of an event, presented either as a single moment or as a sequence. A descriptive illustration, by contrast, depicts a landscape or of a repetitive situation. See Birek, "Staś," 520.

novel's protagonist) elephant ride into the village ruled by M'Rua, and Nel playing with the elephant. Such recurring motifs and content patterns serve as "proof of a specific reading of the work, of its fusion with visual fantasies which shape the visual side of its existence in the reader's mind."²²

Meticulous attention to detail was characteristic of the realistic and richly detailed illustrations by Jan Marcin Szancer, Marek Rudnicki, and Szymon Kobyliński.²³ Szancer's and Rudnicki's series are notably similar, partly because of their shared medium of ink and pen. In their sketch-like compositions, bearing the hallmarks of their individual styles, both artists focused on recreating the scenery that formed the backdrop for the narrative, rather than emphasising the protagonists or their emotions. Their depictions of individual scenes suggest that the artists were either active participants in the events or distant observers. While both series devote considerable attention to depicting the diverse African landscapes (the savannah and the jungle) along with the region's rich flora, they did not avoid simplifications and schematisations, particularly in their renderings of African plant life. The depictions of the tribal peoples from the African Great Lakes region were similarly schematic; both artists ignored characteristic features of their appearance, instead showing half-naked figures from a distant perspective. In contrast, their approach to depicting North African peoples was different. Although the silhouettes of Arab characters were simplified and facial features were hardly discernible, the artists carefully rendered characteristic elements of their attire, such as the keffiyeh and abaya.

The work of Szymon Kobyliński stands out as a unique and exceptional interpretation of Sienkiewicz's novel. The artist created a series of one hundred and nineteen compositions executed in the style of nineteenth-century "meticulous, pedantic wood engravings,"²⁴ characterized by their near-photographic accuracy. Kobyliński explained his stylistic choice by stating: "This helped me to accomplish two tasks simultaneously: to

22 Ruszała, *W krainie*, 190.

23 Henryk Sienkiewicz, *W pustyni i w puszczy* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1954); idem, *W pustyni i w puszczy* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1956); idem, *W pustyni i w puszczy* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1963).

24 Szymon Kobyliński, "Do Czytelnika – od Ilustratora" [To the Reader—From the Illustrator], in Henryk Sienkiewicz, *W pustyni i w puszczy* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1985), 5.



1. Szymon Kobyliński, illustration for *W pustyni i w puszczy* by Henryk Sienkiewicz (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1985)

Szymon Kobyliński, Henryko Sienkiewiczza *Dykumose ir giriose* iliustracija (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1985)

convey a detailed image of the African trail and to evoke the ‘taste of the era’ when everything was approached with utmost seriousness.”²⁵ His realistic pen-and-ink illustrations abound in detail, particularly in the meticulous depiction of African settlements, flora and fauna, and people, including precise physiognomic features of some of the characters, characteristic costumes, and weaponry. Notably, despite his awareness of various inaccuracies in the novel’s description of tribal peoples—such as Sienkiewicz’s claim that Bahima women wore “peleles in their bottom lips, which were round plates [...] as big as tea cup saucers”—the illustrator chose to remain faithful to the text of the novel²⁶ [Fig. 1]. Unlike the imaginative and visionary journeys across Africa portrayed in Szancer’s and Rudnicki’s compositions, Kobyliński’s illustrations, stylised as nineteenth-century wood engravings, serve as a form of documentation intended to reflect as authentically as possible “the image

25 Kobyliński, “Do Czytelnika,” 5.

26 In the afterword to *Dodatkowe zagadki Kalego* [Additional Riddles of Kali], Kobyliński described his illustration process, which was preceded by extensive research. His intention was to depict African peoples, their customs, and their culture in his artistic compositions as faithfully as possible.



2. Szymon Kobyliński, illustration for *W pustyni i w puszczy* by Henryk Sienkiewicz (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1985)

Szymon Kobyliński, Henryko Sienkiewicziaus *Dykumose ir giriose* iliustracija (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1985)

of the African journey and the mood of the time in which it was to be taking place.”²⁷ Kobyliński’s illustrations adhered closely to the text of the novel, and in doing so, they sometimes emphasised a certain European sense of superiority over African cultures and peoples. At other times, they relied on stereotypical images—for example, of Arabs, who are frequently depicted as hostile to newcomers (this hostility is often conveyed through facial expressions and in the dynamic postures of figures captured in the illustrations). Clear examples include the moment when the two European children enter a Bahima village atop an elephant, with villagers bowing and presenting gifts to the little girl, and the scene where the white children encounter the hostile local population in Omdurman [Fig. 2].

At the opposite end of the spectrum from Kobyliński’s series are Janusz Towpik’s synthetic and economical ink illustrations.²⁸ Towpik’s

²⁷ Kobyliński, “Do Czytelnika,” 6.

²⁸ Henryk Sienkiewicz, *W pustyni i w puszczy* (Warszawa: Nasza Księgarnia, 1969).

compositions rely heavily on the contrast of black and white, created through thin lines and expressive ink washes.²⁹ Similarly to Rudnicki and Szancer, Towpik presents his scenes as if observing the events described in the novel from a distance. However, this is the sole point of similarity among the three series. While Towpik's drawings depict figural scenes inspired by the content of the work, they have nothing in common with the realistic conventions employed by Szancer and Rudnicki. By employing synthetic and allusive imagery, Towpik rejects traditional descriptiveness and literalism. Although this approach reduces figures to generalised outlines, it does not impoverish the content of the illustration. Despite significant compositional simplifications, readers can still identify fragments of the storyline through simplified landscapes, flora and fauna—elements that particularly appealed to the artist—characteristic of the particular region of Africa, and through character costumes and interactions. Interestingly, although Towpik's series drew from modern art traditions, it is plausible that his choice to illustrate Sienkiewicz's novel with simplified, generalised metaphor-like drawings was also inspired by African rock paintings, especially in his depictions of tribal peoples. This influence becomes evident in the scene of the main characters entering an African village on the back of an elephant [Figs. 3, 4].

Jerzy Srokowski approached Sienkiewicz's novel in an entirely different manner compared to the previously mentioned illustrators. He adorned the novel with fifteen full-page, colourful watercolour illustrations, complemented by several dozen smaller, simplified ink compositions placed at the beginning of each chapter to create a decorative frame for the initial letters.³⁰ These smaller compositions were both descriptive and concise, offering simplified depictions of African landscapes and key events discussed in each chapter of the book. In contrast, Srokowski's full-page colour compositions, which bore the unmistakable hallmarks of his characteristic style, recognizable, for example, from his illustrations for Janusz Korczak's children's book *Król Maciuś Pierwszy* (King Matt the First), focused on the

29 Jacek Friedrich, "Janusz Towpik jako ilustrator" [Janusz Towpik as an Illustrator], in *Janusz Towpik (1934–1981)*, ed. Barbara Towpik-Roszkiewicz (Poznań: Barbara Towpik-Roszkiewicz, 2011), 49.

30 Henryk Sienkiewicz, *W pustyni i w puszczy* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1959).

31 Birek, "Staś," 523.



3. Janusz Towpik, illustration for *W pustyni i w puszczy* by Henryk Sienkiewicz, 1969, ink on paper, Barbara Towpik-Roszkiewicz Collection

Janusz Towpik, Henryko Sienkiewicziaus *Dykumose ir giriose* iliustracija, 1969, pop., rašalas, Barbaros Towpik-Roszkiewicz rinkinys



4. Janusz Towpik, illustration for *W pustyni i w puszczy* by Henryk Sienkiewicz, 1969, ink on paper, Barbara Towpik-Roszkiewicz Collection

Janusz Towpik, Henryko Sienkiewicziaus *Dykumose ir giriose* iliustracija, 1969, pop., rašalas, Barbaros Towpik-Roszkiewicz rinkinys

main protagonists, both human and animal. The surrounding landscapes and background elements of the composition were treated more schematically and generally, directing the viewer's attention to the figures. He carefully elaborated on details of the protagonists' costumes, weapons, jewellery, and the appearance of tribal masks. Wojciech Birek aptly described the artist's full-page compositions and the unique artistic solutions and inspirations they embodied as follows:

The illustrations [by Srokowski, P.K.], most of which depict the key scenes of the novel, are characterised by a clear subjectivity of the representation: the characters of Staś and Nel are fragile and ethereal, contrasted with the monumentalised, hyperbolised, threatening or majestic surroundings: the wild animals, in particular, seem to overwhelm the children lost in the wilderness with their enormity. On the other hand, the scenes which take place in the background—contrasting with the very close, often fragmentary depiction of the characters in the foreground—are characterised by graphic simplification, sometimes resembling cave drawings from Palaeolithic caves: this is how herds of animals grazing on the savannah are depicted, or groups of Negro warriors in the final part of the novel.³²

Srokowski's fairytale-like compositions, which sometimes resembled film stills, were not to everyone's taste. This is evidenced by the critical voices of Szymon Kobyliński, one of the previously mentioned illustrators of the novel, and Irena Słońska, a researcher of Polish illustration, both of whom considered Srokowski's artistic vision unsuitable for adventure³³ literature. Despite such critiques, Srokowski's expressive, multi-coloured, and highly distinctive compositions likely left the most lasting impression on child readers, shaping in their minds a fairytale-like image of Africa.

The Other Faces of Africa

While *W pustyni i w puszczy* undoubtedly remained the most prominent Polish children's book about Africa, it was by no means the only

32 Birek, "Staś," 523.

33 Szymon Kobyliński, "Utrafiony, czy nie?" [Hit or Miss?], *Nowe Książki*, no. 27 (1978): 14; Irena Słońska, *Psychologiczne problemy ilustracji dla dzieci* [Psychological Problems of Illustration for Children] (Warszawa: PWN, 1969), 168.

book on this subject. Growing interest in Africa—fuelled by various political and social factors—prompted two state-owned publishing houses, Nasza Księgarnia and “Ruch,” to release several newly illustrated books on African themes within a short period. Alongside these, new editions of Ewa Szelburg-Zarębina’s book *Mały Afrykańczyk* (The Little African Boy), first published in the early 1950s, were reissued by Nasza Księgarnia in 1961 and 1964.³⁴

The short story by Szelburg-Zarębina centres on a little African boy who, together with other children and their mothers, is forced to work on a carnation plantation guarded by a white caretaker. The illustrations for this book, created in 1952 by Maria Mackiewicz, follow a realistic style aligned with the doctrine of socialist realism prevalent at the time. These full-page, elaborate drawings dominate the book and depict African landscapes with rich flora and fauna, as well as the daily life of the inhabitants of a small tribal village. Mackiewicz’s compositions closely follow the text, meticulously recreating the appearance of the people, their homes, and their work during the carnation harvest. Zarębina’s work serves as a clear critique of the colonial exploitation of the African population, especially children. This critical approach is echoed in Mackiewicz’s illustrations, notably in the composition depicting a white caretaker raising a cane, poised to strike a child exhausted by hard work. The socially sensitive subject raised by Szelburg-Zarębina likely influenced the illustrator’s choice of photographic realism. Such a visual approach was necessary to faithfully represent the exploitation of the African population and the hardship inflicted on them by the white newcomers; formal experimentation risked distracting from the content of the book and distorting its message, thereby diminishing the book’s educational and propagandistic impact.

Józef Wilkoń employed entirely different artistic means and formal solutions in his illustrations for Mieczysława Buczkówna’s book *Osiółek Joko* (Joko the Little Donkey). The story follows the adventures of a little donkey travelling around the world, eventually reaching Africa.³⁵ In his water-colour and ink illustrations, the artist sought to merge his individual style

34 Ewa Szelburg-Zarębina, *Mały Afrykańczyk* [The Little African Boy] (Warszawa: Nasza Księgarnia, 1952).

35 Mieczysława Buczkówna, *Osiółek Joko* [Joko The Little Donkey] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1962).

with motifs borrowed from African art and its rich iconography. Although the series is dominated by painterly, fanciful visions that vividly portray the richness of African nature, two illustrations specifically depict tribal people and their social behaviour. The artist's treatment of human silhouettes reveals a clear inspiration from rock paintings, evident in the simplified and sometimes schematic depiction of half-naked figures engaged in dance. Notably, Wilkoń also incorporated visual strategies of caricature in developing these figures, deforming bodies and faces to create a grotesque appearance. His fascination with African iconography is also expressed through detailed depictions of costume elements, weapons, musical instruments, and ritual masks. However, these tribal art influences and the attempts to merge his own style with elements of African art did not carry over into the artist's second book, *Tu mieszka Murzynek* (Here Lives a Negro Boy), where the African atmosphere is conveyed solely through the iconographic layer of illustrations rendered in a pop-art style.³⁶

An attempt to combine her own style with African iconography and elements from tribal art was also made by Teresa Wilbik in her illustrations for Leonard Życki's 1964 book *Bajki matki Sirabili* (The Fairy Tales of Mother Sirabila).³⁷ The narrator of the stories by Życki, who himself travelled around Africa in the 1930s, is a Congolese woman who tells fantastic fairy tales to her children.³⁸ Wilbik's series consists of two groups of illustrations that follow the storyline. The first group consists of simplified ink compositions, sometimes resembling children's drawings, which schematically depict cityscapes and animal silhouettes—fish in particular. Some of these serve as ornamental elements and do not directly relate to the storyline. The second group comprises colour illustrations executed in mixed media, sometimes spanning two facing pages, which usually describe or narrate a specific fragment of the tale. Despite formal differences, in both series of illustrations Wilbik skilfully fuses her unique expressive language with typical African iconography, drawing inspiration from Bushmen cave paintings and Congolese Pende masks, which appear several times in

36 Marek Dubas, *Tu mieszka Murzynek* [Here Lives a Negro Boy] (Warszawa: Biuro Wydawnicze "Ruch," 1970).

37 Leonard Życki, *Bajki matki Sirabili* [The Fairy Tales of Mother Sirabila] (Warszawa: Biuro Wydawnicze "Ruch," 1964).

38 It is probably the Democratic Republic of Congo.



5, 6. Teresa Wilbik, illustrations for *Bajki matki Sirabili* [The Fairy Tales of Mother Sirabila] by Leonard Źycki (Warszawa: Biuro Wydawnicze "Ruch", 1964)

Teresa Wilbik, Leonardo Źyckiego *Mamytės Sirabilos pasakų iliustracijos* (Warszawa: Ruch, 1964)

the book. African rock painting inspired Wilbik to create simplified human silhouettes reduced to outlines filled with colour and to employ a vertical perspective. The artist's dialogue with tribal art is evident in the slightly more detailed treatment of ornaments on warriors' shields, musical instruments, and vessels, which stand in contrast to the schematically depicted human figures. Wilbik also incorporated contemporary artistic solutions

of the time, using simplified, schematic patches of colour devoid of chiaroscuro to depict plants—such as baobabs and palms—and animals. The fairy-tale nature of Życki's stories inspired the artist to blend elements of primitive art with contemporary art in her compositions [Figs. 5, 6].

In 1966, the “Ruch” state-owned publishing house released the book *Święty krokodyl* (The Holy Crocodile) by Waclaw Korabiewicz, a Polish reporter, medical doctor, traveller, and collector who lived in various African countries between 1943 and 1961, including Ethiopia, Northern Rhodesia, Mozambique, and Ghana. His reportages, published from the late 1950s through the 1960s, featured numerous photographs that served as valuable sources of knowledge about the countries he visited and an inspiration for artists, including illustrators of books about Africa. This influence is evident in the ornaments, costumes, and vessels that appear in Wilbik's compositions, as well as in specific motifs such as the ploughing scene depicted in *Bajki matki Sirabili*.³⁹ The short story *Święty krokodyl* is narrated by a crocodile and explores the complex relationships between animals and people living in Ghana.⁴⁰ Wilbik's series of colourful illustrations for this book employs formal solutions known from her earlier work for Życki's novel, combining her individual style with references to rock painting. Notably, the illustrations in *Święty krokodyl* show a stronger influence of Cubism, reflected in the depiction of the crocodile, fish, and buildings that form the background of several scenes [Figs. 7, 8].

It is also worth mentioning the third book on Africa illustrated by Teresa Wilbik, published in 1963. The work by Mieczysława Buczkówna, entitled *Toni* (Toni), tells the story of a young elephant on its first journey with the herd, during which it learns the essential skills needed to survive in the African forest, savannah, and steppe.⁴¹ Notably, in Wilbik's series of colour illustrations for *Toni*, it is mainly the iconography of African flora and fauna that conveys the theme of the book. In these simplified compositions, comprising often contrasting patches of colour and following the narrative of the work, the artist largely abandoned stylisation and the clear references

39 See Waclaw Korabiewicz, *Kwaheri* (Warszawa: Iskry, 1958), 64.

40 Waclaw Korabiewicz, *Święty krokodyl* [The Holy Crocodile] (Warszawa: Biuro Wydawnicze “Ruch,” 1966).

41 Mieczysława Buczkówna, *Toni* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1963).



7, 8. Teresa Wilbik, illustrations for *Święty krokodyl* [The Holy Crocodile] by Waław Korabiewicz (Warszawa: Biuro Wydawnicze "Ruch", 1966)

Teresa Wilbik, Waławo Korabiewicziaus *Šventojo krokodilo* iliustracijos (Warszawa: Ruch, 1966)

to African art that she masterfully employed in her later illustrations for Życki's and Korabiewicz's works.

Another example of an attempt to combine individual style with typical African iconography and rock painting motifs is found in Zdzisław Witwicki's illustrations for Gizela Vallera's book *Baśnie afrykańskie* (African Fairy Tales).⁴² The series consists of small, simplified, and somewhat schematic ink sketches placed at the beginning of each chapter, alongside eight

42 Gizela Vallery, *Baśnie afrykańskie* [African Fairy Tales], trans. Jadwiga Dackiewicz (Warszawa: Nasza Księgarnia, 1963).



9. Zdzisław Witwicki, illustration for *Baśnie afrykańskie* [African Fairy Tales] by Gizela Vallery (Warszawa: Nasza Księgarnia, 1963), www.witwicki-zdzislaw.com

Zdzisław Witwicki, Gizelos Vallery *Afrikos pasakų iliustracija* (Warszawa: Nasza Księgarnia, 1963)

extensive, colourful gouache compositions presented as separate inserts. All illustrations closely reference the book's content and to highlight narrative fragments selected by the illustrator. Witwicki's individual style, known from his other works, dominates the subtle references to primitive African art, expressed through the use of vertical perspective and the reduction of the human figure to its outline. In his compositions, the artist evokes the African atmosphere primarily through iconography—depicting plant and animal species characteristic of African nature and occasionally including residential buildings [Fig. 9].

Visions of Africa, relying mainly on iconographic elements and only partially inspired by African artistic traditions, appear in two series by Józef Czerwiński for *Słoniątko* (The Elephant's Child) by Rudyard Kipling and *Rafiki* by Janina Korabiewicz, as well as in Janusz Towpik's illustrations for the collection of folk tales from Africa, Asia, and America *Śpiew kolibrów* (The Song of Hummingbirds) and Ignacy Witz's work for Claude Avelin's *Dziwne przygody małego Murzynka* (The Strange Adventures of a Negro



10. Janusz Towpik, illustration for *Śpiew kolibrów* [The Song of Hummingbirds] by Wanda Markowska and Anna Milska, 1968, gouache on paper, Barbara Towpik-Roszkiewicz Collection

Janusz Towpik, Wandos Markowskos ir Annos Milskos *Kolibrių giesmės* iliustracija, 1968, pop., guašas, Barbaros Towpik-Roszkiewicz rinkinys

Boy).⁴³ In Czerwiński's compositions, the African element is introduced through the fauna, which the artist depicts in a manner clearly marked by his own individual style. In some cases, such as in the Rafiki illustrations depicting animals grazing on the savannah, subtle references to rock paintings can be observed. Janusz Towpik's series of illustrations consists of small, simplified sketches at the beginning of each chapter, sometimes inspired by rock paintings, alongside colourful, full-page elaborate compositions, which feature iconographic motifs characteristic of the cultural origins of the fairy tales. The artist incorporated specific African motifs in his depictions of figures, costumes, jewellery, ornaments, and characteristic hairstyles. The latter motif, likely inspired by the hairstyles of women of the Mangbetu tribe, appear in the composition accompanying the fairy tale

43 Rudyard Kipling, *Słoniątko* [The Elephant's Child], trans. Maria Kreczowska (Warszawa: Nasza Księgarnia, 1959); Janina Korabiewicz, *Rafiki* (Warszawa: Biuro Wydawnicze "Ruch," 1971); Wanda Markowska, Anna Milska, *Śpiew kolibrów* [The Song of Hummingbirds] (Warszawa: Nasza Księgarnia, 1968); Claude Avelin, *Dziwne przygody małego Murzynka* [The Strange Adventures of a Negro Boy], trans. Katarzyna Witwicka (Warszawa: Nasza Księgarnia, 1961).

Watanga, Wakonga i Kalalami (Watanga, Wakonga and Kalalami) [Fig. 10]. In contrast, Ignacy Witz's detailed drawings for Aveline's work focused humorously on the inhabitants of the Senegalese countryside and their social behaviours. While there are faint traces of cave painting inspiration in the simplified silhouettes, this stylistic choice seems aimed at enhancing the comical effect of the figures. The visual strategies of caricature—such as deformation, contrast, and exaggeration—especially evident in the portrayal of profiles and the faces of African people, may suggest the illustrator's condescending attitude toward the Senegalese characters.

The examples of illustration series for books about Africa discussed in this article indicate that their creators, while generally faithful to the storyline of the work, created diverse visions of Africa through varied formal approaches, blending their individual styles with elements of African art and contemporary artistic trends. Despite this thematic, stylistic, and formal diversity, illustrators often relied on simplifications, schematisations and representations that were frequently far removed from reality. An exception to this was Szymon Kobyliński, who made an attempt to meticulously recreate the realities and interactions between African inhabitants and European newcomers at the end of the 19th century. Consequently, his compositions most strongly echoed the colonial discourse of the period. Regardless of the frequent simplifications and the schematisations, the presence of illustrations in books about Africa significantly shaped how these literary works were received and influenced readers' imaginations. The images and visions of Africa presented in these illustrations became memorable to young readers, constructing in their minds enduring ideas about Africa—its peoples, culture, and above all, its exotic nature, which captivated the illustrators most profoundly.

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Santrauka

Afrikos vizijos Lenkijos vaikiškų knygų iliustracijose 1945–1989 m.

Piotr Kułak

Reikšminiai žodžiai: iliustracija, Afrika, lenkų knygų iliustracijos, vaikų vizualinė kultūra, lenkų iliustracijos mokykla.

Šiame tekste aptariamos Afriką vaizduojančios iliustracijos, kurios buvo publikuotos keliuose Henryko Sienkiewicziaus romano *Dykumose ir giriose* (lenk. *W pustyni i w puszczy*) leidimuose ir kai kuriose kitose vaikų knygose. Bandoma atsakyti į klausimus: kaip lenkų iliustratoriai vaizdavo Afriką vaikams skirtose iliustracijose, kokios problemos ir temos juos labiausiai domino, ar kolonijinis diskursas buvo įžvelgiamas menininkų vizijose apie Afrikos žmones ir jų kultūrą, kokias formalias priemones ir stilius menininkai naudojo savo vizijoms perteikti, ar iliustratoriai savo kompozicijose likdavo ištikimi literatūros kūriniui ir kaip jie derino savo individualų kūrybos stilių su šiuolaikinio meno bei daugumai imponavusio Afrikos meno pasiekimais. Straipsnyje aptariamos iliustracijos, kurias sukūrė vadinamosios „lenkų iliustracijos mokyklos“ atstovai: Józefas Czerwiński, Jerzy Srokowski, Janas Marcinas Szanceris, Janusz Tompikas, Teresa Wilbik, Józefas Wilkońas, Zdzisławas Witwickis ir Ignacy Witzas.