

# **Study Material on *Tintin in Tibet* by Herge**

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## **FROM THE BOULA MATIRI TO A FRIEND IN NEED: CRITIQUE IN TINTIN'S JOURNEY AS THE SAVIOUR OF THE OTHERS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The comic albums of Tintin have attracted the readers of all ages since its first publication as a comic strip. But the series is meant for the audience of all age groups and they have more to offer than some mere adventures in pictures. One popular side of Tintin is his playing the role of the saviour of the people or the nations he visits during his adventures. The present essay intends to shade some critical light on the framing of his character as the saviour of the Others – the depiction of the Others, the changing situations, changing perspectives, the different flavours in his role of a saviour. It follows the trail of his journey from being the Boula Matiri to a human being.

### **KEY WORDS**

Tintin, Saviour, Others, Comic Album, Orient, Human

The journey of Tintin began on 10<sup>th</sup> January, 1929. After nine decades, it is now one of the highest sold comic album series in the world. With the good natured but ill mouthed Captain Haddock, the naive but genius scientist Dr. Calculas and the funny pair of twins - the detectives Thompson and Thomson, the adventures of Tintin are bound to attract the readers of different age groups. The Adventures of Tintin is a series of 24 comic albums created by Belgian cartoonist George Remi. He wrote under the pen name Remi. Tintin starts his journey to the Soviet with his faithful dog Snowy (Milou in original French edition). After that the journey continued till 1983 with several ups and downs in Remi's life. From a comic strip The Adventure of Tintin evolved into a comic album series of 24 books. But it does not seem, merely, to be a cheap comic strip, if one can read between the lines. Throughout this journey the character of Tintin also undergoes several changes, and modulations. Remi's Tintin is not merely a journalist. He is sometimes a detective, sometimes a globetrotter, and sometimes an adventurer - but there is another side of him. In the land of the others he is a saviour - the "Boula Matiri". But even as the saviour the flavour of the character changes with the changing surrounding and circumstances and that involves Remi's different treatment of different nations and their natives.

The bon voyage of Tintin begins as a reporter for *Le Petit Vingtième*. In *Tintin in the Land of the Soviets* Remi specifically makes Tintin a representative of the reporter community. His duty is to see and make the intended readers see through his narratives and pictures. Obviously Remi was to use Tintin as a spokesperson of the newspaper on the Bolshevik issue. Remi makes it clear at the very beginning of *The Adventures of Tintin reporter of Le Petit Vingtième in The Land of The Soviets*,

“We have therefore sent TINTIN one of our top reporters, to Soviet Russia.  
Each week we shall be bringing you news of his many adventures.

N.B. The editor of “Le Petit XX<sup>E</sup>” guarantees that all photographs are absolutely authentic, taken by Tintin himself, aided by his faithful dog Snowy.” (Remi, p. 01) <sup>1</sup>

Thus throughout his adventures in Soviet Russia, Tintin is only concerned about revealing what is what about the communist Bolshevik revolution. He is only working as the ‘authentic’ eyes of his anti-left newspaper. But in the very next album *The Adventures of Tintin reporter of Le Petit Vingtième in The Congo* Tintin's role as a reporter meets a dexterous shift.

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<sup>1</sup> Remi Georges, *The Adventures of Tintin reporter for Le Petit Vingtième in The Land Of The Soviets*, London, Egmont, 2013

From the title it is evident that the main identity of Tintin is that of a reporter. But Tintin is shown to be a very famous reporter who is like a living legend to half the population of the world – even to the tribes of the Belgian Congo. The very first illustrations showing both Tintin and Snowy surrounded by their respective human and animal admirers make clear Remi's intention to present Tintin as a widely known and famous reporter. As Tintin lands in Congo the very first illustration shows us a father stating his son who has a copy of *Le Petit Vingtième* in his hand,

“See, Snowball, that is “Thysville”, and on that boat Master Tintin and Snowy. Tintin reporter from “Petit Vingtième”, like you know.” (Remi, p. 14)<sup>2</sup>

Two things are evidently implied here – that *Le Petit* is a widely spread newspaper and that Tintin is a reporter for the newspaper, therefore, the newspaper makes him famous by circulating his adventures, vaguely implying that Brand Tintin is a property of *Le Petit*. But another thing should not be overlooked. Mr. Tintin goes through a sudden metamorphosis to become Master Tintin. For the Belgians the Belgian Congo is a source of labour. And to the so called black people the white people are Masters. Another thing hits the eyes sharp – the similarity between the names ‘Snowy’ and ‘Snowball’. The former is a dog of the white Master and the later is an African tribal boy in Congo. Remi had been widely accused of encouraging racism through this album, for which he had regretted later.

Throughout this adventure Tintin meets several African ‘black’ tribes, their leaders, juju man and commoners. The ‘black’ people are projected as inferiors, uneducated or undereducated, barbaric, superstitious and the illustrations give impression of them almost that of the apes with their big eyes, dark skins and wide swallowed lips. Tintin becomes an ideal representative of the Master class. He never hesitates to be extravagant with natural resources. His silly mistakes can achieve him great feats like killing crocodiles or a herd of deer singlehandedly. He can kill animals as big as an elephant or a wild buffalo, can tame a lion or trick a leopard with a sponge. He can expose the juju man who used to take advantage of the superstitious minds of the tribal people, with the help of his camera, later being called the Tintin Machine. He can cure the malaria with a quinine dose and become the saviour, the Boula Matiri, the all powerful. The white Master with his European science and technology establishes his superiority over the ‘black’ people. But the most interesting thing is that the tribal people are never made aware of the technologies, they are taking it as magic and superpower of their saviour. When the Christian Missionary comes into the aid of Tintin, the propagandist view of *Le Petit* in support of the Christian invasion in the land of the ‘black’ pagan society gains mileage with Tintin taking the place of the

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<sup>2</sup> Remi Georges, *The Adventures of Tintin reporter for Le Petit Vingtième in The Congo*, Brussels, Casterman, 2003

messiah. Ironically when he returns to Belgium, the tribal people are sad and they are expecting him to return. Surely it reminds one of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, the saviour.

In the late 18th century, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) introduced the concept of the Other as a constituent part of self-consciousness. The concept of the Others requires the concept of the Self and vice-versa. From a mere philosophical arena, gradually, it became prevalent in the cultural perspective of the European imperial powers, which was even supported by fabrication of scientific racism. In Spivak's explanation, othering is a dialectical process because the colonizing Other is established at the same time as its colonized others are produced as subjects. The colonizing powers used this concept, which almost marked the social awareness of being European, to maintain an awareness of socio-economic and cultural subordination from the side of the subaltern natives. And this awareness is the key behind the transformation of Tintin from a mere reporter to the Boula Matiri. In Belgian Congo, he, a Belgian, represents the colonizing European and the 'black' natives are the colonised Others.

In this context, after this, mention needs to be made of Tintin's adventures in the Orient. The Orient is the East, traditionally comprising of anything that belongs to the Eastern world, in relation to Europe. In English, it is largely a metonym for the continent of Asia. One cannot avoid Edward Said while writing on the Orient. The representation of the Orient in the artistic and literary works of the European intellectuals works as a help to form the difference between Europe and its Others, observes Said. Said thinks, much like Spivak thinks later, that this disparity between the Orient and the Occident is crucial in forming of the concept of the European Culture, as well as in achieving the dominance of Europe over the Others. The same approach can be traced in Remi's works. Tintin's adventures in the Orient begins with his adventures in India.

The 1922 discovery of the Tutankhamun's tomb by Howard Carter and a spread of the myth of the curse of the pharaoh led Remi to work on *The Adventures of Tintin : Cigars of the Pharaoh*. The original book was published in black and white in 1934. In the book Tintin begins his journey from Europe and lands in Egypt to aid the eccentric Egyptologist, Sophocles Sarcophagus in his search for the tomb of Pharaoh Kih-Oskh. Tintin has already kept his news reporter's identity in his back pocket. He has evolved into a journalist come adventurer come detective. He not only looks at a problem but with all his efforts and aids also jumps into it to solve the issue. The search for the tomb lands him into the middle of an international opium scam led by the notorious Italian, Rastapopoulos from the Western front. His effort to unmask the opium mafias lands him in India, in the estate of the Maharaja of Gaipajama – a fictional place most probably in the state of Himachal Pradesh. And here in the land of the Orient, Tintin, the man from the Occident again becomes the saviour. By generations, the maharajas of Gaipajama are trying to fight the

opium mafias working actively in the estate. But the mafias are working right under their nose. Some Europeans involved in it are helped by the fakirs and local Indians to run this business. The present maharaja is apparently incompetent and it is Tintin who has to save the life of the maharaja and also that of his son when he is abducted.

During the 1930s the anti-British movement in India was in its height. India was not going to stand any European dominance anymore. The common people were on the roads and with weapons to fight the white skin rulers. But a large part of the local maharajas and zamindars in order to maintain their stronghold over the population were supporting the British rule. The British to maintain their own dominance over the land chose to dominate these native rulers by means of politics and power. In those days it was mandatory to keep a counsellor, a representative of the British Government, in every court of the maharajas. He was to give advises on every matter concerning the state. Obviously he was to work for the white rulers and as long as he was given his due 'respect' the maharaja was not to lose his crown and mutual respect as well. The details in support of this can be found in any authentic book on Indian history. However, protest was also coming from inside Europe. A considerable part of the European population took stand against colonisation. Therefore, Tintin, the brand, was deliberately used to show the incompetency of the Indian rulers to control their scantily clad subjects who are either superstitious worshippers of the holy cow or some metal or mud idol, or powerfully equipped with black magic and skills of hypnotism like the fakir who is placed as an aid to the international opium smugglers. In this context some interesting historical facts can be cited. The Encyclopaedia Britannica website and the British Library website articles on Sino-Indian opium trade confirm that at least till 1910 the opium trade in India directly had the involvement of the British Company their European allies.

“The Company grew opium in India. They were looking for something that the Chinese would accept instead of silver, to pay for the goods they bought at Canton. Opium was a valued medicine which could deaden pain, assist sleep and reduce stress. But it was also seriously addictive and millions Chinese became dependent on the drug.

Although opium smoking was a subject of fascinated horror for Europeans, the Company actually encouraged people to use the drug in China - sales of opium were extremely lucrative. As a result, millions of Chinese would die from opium addiction, and the very fabric of Chinese society was threatened.

After the Company's trade monopoly was abolished in 1834, smuggling of opium into China by European private traders intensified. The Chinese state was

deeply disturbed at this and threatened force. Britain was prepared to defend 'free trade' and, in 1840, they went to war. These 'Opium wars' led to a humiliating defeat of the Chinese and a trade treaty which ceded Hong Kong to the British.” (British Library)<sup>3</sup>

More can be found in The Encyclopaedia Britannica website article on the Sino-Indian opium trade.

“By 1906, however, the importance of opium in the West’s trade with China had declined, and the Qing government was able to begin to regulate the importation and consumption of the drug. In 1907 China signed the Ten Years’ Agreement with India, whereby China agreed to forbid native cultivation and consumption of opium on the understanding that the export of Indian opium would decline in proportion and cease completely in 10 years. The trade was thus almost completely stopped by 1917.” (Encyclopaedia Britannica)<sup>4</sup>

The Maharaja of Gaipajama tells Tintin that the opium smugglers force the peasants to grow poppies instead of food. But historical facts confirm that the peasants had to work under the supervision of either the British rulers or their aids and allies. The rebel commoners often sabotaged against the native zamindars that supported the British rulers. The character of the fakir was formed to represent those rebels in a very negative way, to convince the Europeans about the need for colonisation – to civilise the uncouth natives and help their rulers to do that. In *The Adventures of Tintin reporter of Le Petit Vingtième in The Congo* Tintin was a representative of the Masters in the land of the labours. He was there to execute his dominance over them with a touch of sympathy that makes the difference between a Master and an oppressor. In one hand he recklessly kills the animals on the other hand he breaks the superstitions with the help of science only to prove the white skin Masters to be superior in both power and wisdom and to support the racist thought that the uncouth black people of Congo were destined to serve the European masters. They will be benefitted by the small occasional open heartedness of the white Masters, as in the end of the album Tintin’s misadventure with the camera introduces them with the ‘Tintin Machine’. Otherwise in wild Congo amidst ferocious animals they are not going to have any better chance than the apes. It is the European community, for which they are seeing some tits bits of civilised world, thus making Tintin and his European community the Boula Matiris or the saviours for them. But the situation awaiting Tintin in India is very different. Here, Tintin is not the saviour of the commoners

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<sup>3</sup> *Opium and Expansion of Trade*, British Library, <http://www.bl.uk/learning/histcitizen/trading/story/trade/4tradingplaces.html>

<sup>4</sup> *Opium Trade : British and Chinese History*, Encyclopaedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/opium-trade>

but that of the Masters. A country where even the Masters are not safe, a white man singlehandedly fights the local rowdies helping the international opium scam. The black magic is not denied or confronted with science but accepted to form negative images of the commoners. Tintin is no more in hunting animals. He is using his skills to communicate with them and use them for his own cause, the same tricks the colonisers played with the natives here. The maharaja wants him to stay in his court for a few days more to regain the stability in his estate of Gaipajama. A very vague implication suggests – the Indians need the European to stay here in the land for their own development. Remi and his propagandist Le Petit use brand Tintin's image of the saviour here again with a more complicated political interest. From the Boula Matiri, Tintin turns into a respected counsellor and aid to the Master class, a “young friend” of the maharaja whom he addresses “Your Highness”.

In this context Tintin's response to the Islamic countries of the Middle East needs to be discussed. In *The Land of The Black Gold* and *The Red Sea Sharks* Tintin comes into the fictional Islamic state of Khemed, once tracing a petroleum scam and later to help his friend the Emir Mohammed Ben Kalish Ezab, whom he befriends with during his previous adventure, to regain his power. When Remi was working on these two books, he was working under Le Soir for Le Journal de Tintin. Tintin, here, is once again a saviour. The Emir in power is not so competent to fight back the petroleum mafias who want absolute control over the petroleum business. His son is kidnapped in order to make him succumb under the pressure and make a deal to provide them their requirements. Now it is the Westerner, Tintin, who has to become a saviour of the son of an Eastern Emir and stop the petroleum scam to save not only the economy of Khemed but also that of a larger part of the rest of the world who depend on the petroleum supply from the Middle East. In the second adventure he has to restore the Emir into power. The Emir's own men are incapable of that, while the Westerner made it happen. The commoners are shown as either irrelevant or in support of the petroleum scam. Most of those supporting the scam are shown as people involved in terrorist activities. Islam is another name for terrorism – this clichéd concept has its root in history as old as the Crusade. Therefore, Tintin, here, is not only the saviour of the Emir and his son but also that of the Christian Europe. Remi deliberately creates in his Tintin series the concept of the other Europeans. The others among the Europeans were those who were not the political allies to France and were projected as nations, sponsoring the crimes including the terrorism led by radical Islamic leaders from the Middle-East, to disrupt the socio-political and economical stability of the group of nations in which France was included. A first hand example is Rastapopoulos. Tintin ends up being a friend of the Emir. But the difference between them is evident from what the Emir says at the end of *The Land of Black Gold*,

“By Allah! How you Westerners complicate things!... We men of the East are far more expeditious!” (Remi, p. 61)<sup>5</sup>

In his next adventure *The Adventures of Tintin : The Blue Lotus*, after *The Cigars of The Pharaoh*, Tintin continues to follow the trail of the opium mafias in further East. This takes him to China to confront Mitsuhirato, a Japanese businessman based in Shanghai, who takes care of the opium racket in the East. In this adventure also Tintin becomes a saviour for the people of China. Not only he unfolds the opium racket running in and around Shanghai but also he saves China from a possible Japanese invasion by putting light on the reality behind blowing up a Chinese railway track. This also alludes to the historically famous Mukden Incident or Manchurian Incident in 1931. In China Tintin works hand in hand with the secret brotherhood named the Sons of the Dragon, who are devoted to combating the opium trade. He is there the saviour who is also a friend of the commoners who are making sacrifices for their country and who keeps sympathy for the political stand point of China in the international arena. Unlike the Indians the Chinese are depicted to be the believers of science, lovers of peace and patriots, much in contrast with the prevailing conceptions of the Chinese people during the time Remi was working on this album. This was a result of Remi’s better understanding of the situations in China from his friend Chang, the shade of whom can be seen in the orphan character by the same name, who is saved by Tintin from drowning in the river, during the course of his adventure. Chang later becomes a good friend of Tintin and once saves his life. The metamorphosis of Tintin, the saviour, is quite clear - from “Boula Matiri” to a “young friend” of “Your Highness”, sometimes to a Western friend of an Eastern Emir of the Middle East and at last to “Tintin”. Another possible reason could be that Le Petit was seeing a possible future ally of France and Belgium in China and a possible opponent in Japan.

Tintin’s journey in the Orient ends with his adventure in Tibet. *Tintin in Tibet* is the twentieth volume of The Adventures of Tintin. It was serialised weekly from September 1958 to November 1960. This is the only adventure of Tintin where he is not put against a villain – the only adventure of Tintin and Captain Haddock without any weapon. Two things, from the past, return in this book. One is India and another is Tintin’s friendship with the Chinese boy, Chang. While depicting India Remi cannot all together leave aside his Occidental attitude towards the Orient. Post-Independence India is still depicted as the country of the Cow-worshippers and frequented with insects and flies. But Remi mentions the airport and Air India suggesting considerable progress of the country in the Post-Independence era. Moreover this is the first time that during an adventure Tintin and the Captain had time for visiting the local marvels of art and architecture during their halt in Delhi Airport. Mentions are made of the Qutab Minar, the Red Fort and

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<sup>5</sup> Remi Georges, *The Land of The Black Gold*, London, Egmont, 2013



The Jama Masjid. Another great mention was that of Rajghat, the memorial to Mahatma Gandhi. It not only approves Mahatma Gandhi as an international political figure but also suggests the emergence of India as a powerful nation. The era of Maharajas is over and there is no need of Tintin the saviour anymore in the booming democracy.

Tintin lands in Nepal in search of his friend Chang, who is a victim of an air crash and is supposed dead. But Tintin's heart continues to tell him that Chang is alive and he is ready to risk his life for friendship. Tintin, the man with great heart from the West is a saviour again. But for the very first time his sole purpose is to save his friend. He has not landed accidentally in Tibet to solve any scam and become a saviour to the locals while solving his own problems. This time he comes with a sole purpose of saving his young friend. And throughout the album we find several characters risking their lives for saving their friends – the list include Captain Haddock, Tharkey, the Sherpa, Snowy and the Yeti too. There is no need of establishing the superiority over the Tibetans. Tintin conquers their heart. Remi not only respects in this book the aloofness of the Tibetans from the global affairs but puts them in the chair of saviours too. If Tintin is a saviour to his friend, Chang, so are the Tibetans to him. Thus in his last adventure in the Orient, Tintin, the saviour, becomes a human being. In the land of the Buddhism and the art of achieving Nirvana, the Boula Matiri transforms into a human being with a great heart. May be this is what Remi took as Tintin's Nirvana, the journey of a racist Master to the path of humanity. While he was working on this album, Remi was going through a mental breakdown. Possibly his own urge to get inner peace was reflected in Tintin's journey towards becoming a human being. Even the underlying flavour of humanism flows through Chang's final perception of the yeti,

“I tell you, Tintin, from the way he took care of me, I couldn't help wondering if, deep down, he hadn't a human soul. (Remi, p. 62)

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