Come with me on a journey of discovery into the bowels of the University of Manchester's John Rylands Library on Deansgate! Armed with our AIU Centre roadmap of race relations insights, let's astonish ourselves amongst the wealth of treasures just lying there waiting to be discovered!

Feast your eyes on the image below. You, I and some intrepid Heritage Imaging adventurers are the first people to clap eyes on the contents of this amazing lantern slide for possibly eighty years or more... And you saw it here first – thanks to another of those incredibly kind archivists.
You don’t come across a Devil Man every day, do you? Especially one from South Africa, probably photographed in the 1920s or 1930s. What’s he doing in John Rylands Library? Well, there’s a tale. A story of commerce, Empire and the curiosity of the British, mixed with a pinch of prejudice, voyeurism and stereotypes all rolled into one.

But back to the beginning… Our Devil Man from Ladysmith was languishing deep in the catacombs of John Rylands Library along with countless other lantern slides accumulated in the first half of the last century by a section of the Manchester Geographical Society called the Victorians. Founded in 1884, the Society was one of the most important such groups outside London. Written records have been spruced up in the archive at the University’s Main Library off Oxford Road, but the massive slide collection lies uncatalogued down on Deansgate. That’s where I pulled out the Devil Man during an expedition with Heritage Imaging staff. And it’s there that they processed the slide into the image you see today.

1884… The height of the British Empire… The Scramble for Africa was beginning… Prominent Manchester individuals longed to gain better information about colonial commercial and missionary activities of the time, as well as to promote geography as a subject of study. In fact, at the launch of the Manchester Geographical Society, a lecture on Central Africa and the Congo basin was given by journalist and explorer Henry Morton Stanley (he of “Dr. Livingstone, I presume?” fame). In it he declared, “geographical knowledge clears the way for commercial enterprise… the beginnings of civilisation.” Members included MPs, manufacturers, merchants, educationalists and clergy. Need we say more?

Concerned with markets for products, growth of the Empire and the spread of Christian mission, over the years the Society collected lantern slides for educational purposes. Dozens and dozens of cases fill the shelves down in John Rylands. Here you can see the wooden one in which the Devil man was found, and another with more every-day origins…

The Victorians section was responsible for arranging public lectures, and the lantern slides were used as illustrations. Held around what is now the Greater Manchester area, the talks seem to have been popular with schools, churches, libraries, lads clubs and pensioner groups. In the ‘30s, some were even held in the Friends’ Meeting House on Mount Street in central Manchester for the edification of the unemployed.

Foreign topics were popular, and Africa appears to have fascinated everyone concerned. You can see from the surviving Lecture Request Cards below that by the 1950s slides were being superseded by film, but even in 1955 a Miss JM Shenton was agreeing to speak about “South Africa” to “Young People” at the Central Library in Stretford using slides. Records show that a Mr JA Edwards had also covered this subject at Stand Grammar School in Whitefield back on 22 October 1937…
22 October 1937. Could that have been an occasion for our Devil Man to spring to life? The slide was possibly produced around that time or earlier. Could Mr Edwards have been the photographer? We’ll never know, but what is certain is that at some point the Devil Man arrived in Manchester, was deposited in the Society’s collection, and entertained Mancunians for some time thereafter.

Take another look at our Devil Man. Look at the residents of Ladysmith gazing directly and proudly into the camera. Why were they of interest, and what did the visitor think was going on?

I have it on good authority that our Devil Man, wearing his leopard skin and regalia, was most probably a Mhondoro (spirit medium), or Nganga (person who identified and dealt with witches). In Southern African belief systems, the Mhondoro is of great significance, capable of being possessed by the spirits of dead chiefs and channelling their voices to provide guidance to the living. Ngangas, meanwhile, are crucial to treating the victims of witchcraft and punishing (or even ‘curing’) the witches themselves. In a society rooted in ancestor veneration and witchcraft, our Devil Man would have been a personage of note preparing for an important ceremony.

But what did the photographer think was happening? The misnomer ‘Devil Man’ (more usually ‘witch doctor’) hints at Christian origins. Missionaries misunderstood and scorned practitioners of local African religions, labelling them idolaters and devil worshipers. Officially denying the existence of witchcraft, just to be on the safe side they targeted Ngangas in particular, many of whom converted to Christianity. Our unidentified photographer would probably have been brought up imbibing missionary interpretations of ‘native’ life, and the image indicates a fascination with what came to be viewed stereotypically as the ‘exotic’ and (to Europeans) ‘grotesque’.

No doubt the image fascinated lecture goers back in sunny Manchester too. I know it’s fascinated me. Like the ‘Massacre of the Missionaries’ prints we’ve looked at before, this iconic presentation of native ‘savagery’ showcased indigenous peoples as ‘other’, ‘devilish’, ‘ignorant’, and in need of some of Stanley’s ‘civilisation’.

Not many years after this image was produced, racial apartheid in South Africa was officially codified to produce the repressive, cruel system millions around the world strove to eradicate. Could images like this, however innocently produced, have influenced the outlook of an uninformed British public, unwittingly preparing the ground in some quarters for justifying apartheid’s existence? The Centre holds numerous resources which might help us find out…

I’m grateful to the following for their input: the team at the Centre for Heritage Imaging & Collection Care (CHICC) based in the John Rylands Library for introducing me to the Manchester Geographical Society Lantern Slide Collection and producing the marvellous images; Stella Halkyard (Visual Collections and
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