Studies in Social Sciences and Humanities
Vol. 182

(RE)MAKING COLLECTIONS:
ORIGINS, TRAJECTORIES, & RECONNECTIONS

Sarah Van Beurden, Didier Gondola & Agnès Lacaille (eds)

AFRICA museum

takingcare

(RE)MAKING COLLECTIONS

ORIGINS, TRAJECTORIES & RECONNECTIONS

AFRICA museum

Co-funded by the
Creative Europe Programme
of the European Union

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission.
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This work from the series 'Studies in Social Sciences and Humanities' has been peer-reviewed.
This monolingual version contains the original English texts as well as English translations of the French texts found in the original September 2023 dual-language version of this book. It is distributed online only and is free of charge.

Editorial management: Isabelle Gérard (RMCA)
Translation and revisions: Tadzio Koelb; Emily Divinagracia (RMCA)
Original layout: Yves Doumont. **Online version**: Mieke Dumortier (RMCA)
Cover: Catheris Mondombo, *Restitution*, series 'Notre histoire', 2021.
198 X 212 cm. © C. Mondombo. Layout: Fabienne Richard (Quadrato).

ISBN: 978-9-4934-1421-1
Legal deposit: D/2024/0254/59

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3080 Tervuren (Belgium)
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Preface

'Knowledge is the light in man. It is the heritage of everything that the ancestors were able to know about and whose seeds they have transmitted, just as the Baobab tree is potentially contained in its own seed.'

Tierno Bokar

The book you now hold is the product of the ongoing debate surrounding the restitution of African cultural works, but also of long-term thinking.

It is no coincidence that civil society is challenging museums about the hows and whys of museum objects from other cultures. With the passage of time, we are taking a more objective and empathetic look at our history, particularly that of peoples outside Europe who bore the full brunt of colonisation. The imposition of colonial authority by force and the unequal relationship between Africa and Europe at that time were not neutral in nature. They had profound effects on us all, Africans and Europeans alike, and continue to influence our thinking and behaviour to this day. Our museums are both protagonists and mirrors.

Our responsibility as the AfricaMuseum is to understand this reality and to fulfil our societal mission. European debates have tended to focus on objects – and returning objects can indeed be a vehicle for reparation and reconciliation. But we must not gloss over the whys and wherefores behind our collections. When members of the Congo Free State's Force publique took objects by force, they did so with a view to weakening their opponents and imposing the power of the colonial state. Missionaries of various religions waged a battle to control the hearts and minds of Africans at the expense of their traditional religion and culture. The theft of objects was part of a wider policy to impose political, economic, cultural, and even spiritual domination.

Today we seek to understand this process better, and we cannot do so unilaterally. This provenance research must be carried out in close cooperation with scientists and the peoples of Africa. I am delighted that this book will contribute to this process. Such collaboration is at the heart of AfricaMuseum's mission. Knowing the origins of cultural objects and natural specimens in the collections strengthens us all, Africans and Europeans alike. It increases the legitimacy of museums working on world cultures by finally creating an equal partnership between the continents. It helps Africans to reclaim their culture and spirituality. As Tierno Bokar rightly wrote, '[k]nowledge is the light in man'.

In conclusion, I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to all the authors, and particularly to the excellent team at the Royal Museum for Central

Africa, who have contributed to the success of this publication, and of course to the European Union, which is funding this initiative as part of the 'Taking Care' project. I also wish to acknowledge my predecessor, Guido Gryseels, who took the decision to publish this scientific work.

Bart Ouvry
Director General
AfricaMuseum

Foreword

Provenance research, often associated with the issue of restitution, is an essential duty for any self-respecting museum institution. These institutions have a duty to do their utmost to fill any gaps in the information concerning their holdings, whether they are on display or not. This duty is even more acute in the case of a museum whose origins are entirely linked to the colonial past.

As part of the European 'Taking Care' project (https://takingcareproject.eu/), which began in September 2019, one of the tasks of the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) in Tervuren was to organise an experimental exhibition. 'Taking Care' brings together 13 so-called ethnographic museums in Europe to work towards their decolonisation against the backdrop of a world in a climate crisis. One of the key words in this process is the inclusive approach in which we stop talking about the other, acting for the other without the other. The experimental exhibition was therefore designed as a 'provenance' trail, which was inaugurated on 6 July 2021. This trail is integrated into the permanent exhibition, highlighting several objects and providing visitors with valuable information based on additional research into their origins and how they came to reside in the museum. In fact, this initiative has acted as a launch pad for much wider provenance research within the institution.

This and other experiences have nevertheless demonstrated that an inclusive approach is one thing on paper or in lofty speeches, but putting it into practice is quite another. It seems to be working rather well in the arts. Experts are now frequently called upon to provide artistic responses to places steeped in colonial history. This is not always easy or feasible in other fields, however. Taking provenance research as an example, at a time when voices in civil society were calling for greater transparency about the origins of the RMCA's collections, the announcement of a plan for a provenance trail was quickly perceived as a strategy to draw attention away from debates about restitution. Calls for contributions had very little impact on Belgium's Afrodescendant communities. It must be said that collaboration between the RMCA and members of these communities interested in the issue of so-called ethnographic museums has not been the easiest. Reactions range from Afrodescendants' feeling that they are being excluded from the actions undertaken (or integrated too late into the process) and their impression of being exploited, despite initiatives to provide remuneration specifically for these partners. What's more, while free solicitation can be interpreted as exploiting others for their expertise, remuneration can raise suspicions that people's consciences are being bought or even instrumentalised. This dilemma is certainly proof that the idea of African and Afrodescendant communities taking ownership of the museum is still far from being a reality. When working with the institution, especially

at its request, these communities do not feel that they are contributing to their own museum, or even working directly to promote their own cultures, but rather that they are helping a Belgian museum dedicated to their cultures.

We need to learn from this to improve the situation. Far from political speeches where everything seems to be accomplished with a magic wand, a huge amount of work remains to be done to raise awareness among all those involved of the need for everyone, absolutely everyone, to work together to research the provenance of collections in European museums with a colonial history.

This book contributes to the process by presenting a collection of articles by experts from a variety of backgrounds, including from the countries where the museum's objects originate. This will enable us to measure the progress made, share the challenges encountered, and look to the future with an informed eye.

Jacky Maniacky
Researcher
Royal Museum for Central Africa

The provenance, politics, and possession of African objects: an introduction

Sarah Van Beurden, Didier Gondola, and Agnès Lacaille

'Almost nothing displayed in museums was made to be seen in them.'
(Vogel 2004: 191)

This volume was created with the aim of documenting the expanding research on the history of colonial collecting. A result of long-standing African demands for restitution as well as recent African diaspora activism, the origin of colonial collections has come under renewed scrutiny, and provenance research is seen by many as an avenue for resolving the questions raised. In July of 2022, the Belgian government approved a law for the restitution of former colonial collections. In addition, the government also provided the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA, also known as the AfricaMuseum) in Tervuren with a sizable budget for research on the provenance of its collections. As these two initiatives demonstrate, provenance research and the potential restitution of these collections are thus seen as inextricably connected. Should this be the case, however? Can it answer the questions raised by restitution debates? If not, then how should we deal with these questions instead? Academic research is perhaps not the only possible outlet to effectively address the questions regarding the creation of colonial museum collections, as several chapters in this volume suggest.

This introduction will explore the contours of recent advances in provenance studies, their possibilities and limitations, and their potential effects on museology. Intertwined with this more general overview is a brief history of the RMCA and its collections, as well as a discussion of recent Belgian and Congolese initiatives with regard to restitution. In the main body of the book, the reader will find case studies focused on particular objects, initiatives or collections, as well as broader reflections from curators, academics and artists alike on the practices of collecting and representing.

Provenance research: old and new

In a broad sense, the provenance of a museum object (or collection) refers to its history: its place and community of origin and original use, as well as its 'life'; how and where it circulated. Museums long interpreted this narrowly and focused on the circulation of objects and collections in the Global North: who donated them, what collectors had owned the piece, and what publications and exhibitions the objects appeared in. The origin of the objects was often addressed in general terms: what culture the object came from, and

at times what use it originally had. Only recently has the interpretation of provenance research widened, and the focus is now shifting towards historical information about how the object was created and used, and especially how it was removed from its African setting: by whom and, crucially, by what means. This shift in approach to provenance research is what we aim to document in this volume. Why did it occur? We also explore the implications of this new approach. How can it inform our understanding of colonial history at large? What does it tell us about the afterlives of colonialism in the museum today, and what are the ramifications of this long-term impact on an institutional but also societal level?

Colonial power relations were central to the creation of collections, but coloniality is also central to the subsequent lives of these objects as market commodities and museum objects, as scientific specimens, curiosities, art, and heritage. As Igor Kopytoff wrote in the 1980s, in a world of commodities 'an eventful biography of a thing becomes the story of the various singularizations of it, of classifications and reclassifications in an uncertain world of categories whose importance shifts' (Kopytoff 1986: 90). In the case of objects in colonial collections, these singularizations as well as the re-collectivisation of these objects as part of collections in the Global North were rendered possible by the silences around the collection process, which enabled and became productive of new meanings, new identities, and (frequently financial) values for these objects.

The commercial art market, the museum, and the personal collection all played important roles in the ways these objects were approached, often in conjunction (Leurquin 1988; Van Schuylenbergh 1995; Corbey 2000). The appropriation and circulation of objects from other cultures and communities is not exclusive to European colonialism but the overwhelming scale on which this occurred is, as are the ways in which they became part of colonial governmental logics.[1] The objects became regarded as objects of curiosity and trophies representative of the 'exoticism' of a 'far-away place,' objects of science that might reveal information about African societies, a financially valuable commodity to be traded, the artistic heritage of past African cultures, the symbol of the collector's cultural capital, and the heritage of humankind. More recently, these objects and collections have also gained visibility as contested property because their presence in the Global North is a testimony to colonial violence. The history of these changing – and often overlapping – assigned identities tells a broader story about colonialism, in which these objects and human remains[2] became proxies for ideas about the colonised 'others', but also about the colonising 'self'. The fact that these objects and collections are currently heavily debated as contested property

1. See for example the appropriation of Luba cultural elements: Nooter 1992: 79-89; Nooter Roberts & Robert 1996: 17-48 & 221-245. The scale of removal continued in the postcolonial period. On collecting and governmental logics: Bennett *et al.* 2017: 9-49.
2. The use of this terminology has been challenged; see Busselen 2022: 6. The Congolese government has recently favoured the use of '*restes des corps humains*' (remains of human bodies).

tells us something about the evolution of debates about colonialism at large. The long-term consequences of the latter in terms of present inequalities and racism are increasingly the subject of analysis, both academically and in societal terms.

When considering the history of colonial collections, the words 'collecting,' 'gathering,' or 'obtaining' are deceptively innocuous. In reality, they cover a wide range of practices, many of which were violent[3] and still perceived as such to this day.

The 'Tervuren' Museum and the colonial history of its collections

The focus of this volume of essays is on collections from central Africa, associated with Belgian colonialism. The bulk of the objects, collections, projects, and archives discussed in this book are connected to the RMCA,[4] the history of which – including the constitution of its collections – Maarten Couttenier (2005; 2010) has already covered for the museum's centenary.[5] Finding its origin in the Colonial Exhibition of 1897, this institution and the collections it preserves are – rightly – emblematic of the Belgian colonial past. Like the colonisation of the Congo, the museum was undertaken by Leopold II, who considered it a necessary part of his propaganda in Belgium and which, combining both commercial opportunities and scientific developments, also created a monumental showcase with international influence (Couttenier 2011: 210-211; Wynants 1997; Luwel 1967; 1960: 30-49; 1959: 209-212).

Manufacturing the collection: Congo Free State and the Belgian Congo

The king's orders to establish collections first for the 1897 exposition, and later for the Congo Museum created in 1898 have been discussed repeatedly (Jadot 1950: 32-42 & 1959: 110-131; Salmon 1992: 179 -201). These brought together the specimens and Congolese objects which were gradually assembled in different places, mainly in Brussels (Écuries du Palais royal, the museum, the Halle Gate, etc.), with others brought back and held by the earliest agents of the Association internationale africaine, the Association internationale du Congo, and the Congo Free State or CFS (de Haulleville 1958-1959: XXIV-XXX; Luwel 1958: 13-16; Van Schuylenbergh 2020: 130).

It is not easy today to trace the progressive composition or the provenance of the different (groups of) *ethnographic* objects that make up the collections of this first phase of the institution's history from among the museum's 130,000 cultural anthropology objects. The methodology developed by Hein Vanhee (in this book) nevertheless allows them to be fully integrated into

3. On collecting, see Wastiau 2017.
4. Other Belgian institutions are working on the same issues, for example the Antwerp museum's 'KIOSK' project: https://mas.be/en/herkomstonderzoek-congocollectie
5. An institutional publication entitled *A Living Natural and Cultural Heritage* (Dujardin & Vanhee 2007) also exists.

his analysis of the collections acquired before the First World War and also confirms, specifies, and delineates an important part of a provenance directly linked to the violent context of conquest and territorial occupation. The same is true of objects of Congolese origin which continued to be amassed in parallel, initially at the Halle Gate museum and later the Royal Museums of Art and History, particularly those belonging to the first governor general of the CFS, Camille Janssens (1837-1926). After Congo and the museum were acquired by Belgium in 1908, these objects were transferred to Tervuren in 1912.

The Congo Museum continued to expand its collections by organising large 'scientific' missions: that of the former Force publique officer Armand Hutereau to Haut-Uele in 1911-1913, which brought back nearly 8,000 objects (Van Bockhaven and Yip, in this book) and that of Joseph Maes between 1913 and 1914, which acquired more than 1,200 pieces. As early as this first period, exploratory missions for the massive expansion of collections were the result of international competition with other Western institutions, such as the Museum of Natural History in New York (Schildkrout & Keim 2008). Missionaries participated in this undertaking by selling[6] or donating[7] collections they had formed in the context of both naturalist and ethnographic research (Van Schuylenbergh 2021). After the First World War, collections from Rwanda and Burundi,[8] territories placed under Belgian administration, reinforced the Belgian institute's Central African focus and its claim to colonial territorial expertise.

Even the most modest object, assuming it was accompanied by minimal documentation, caught the museum's interest. This hegemonic aspiration was reinforced by the Belgian museum's leading role as a research institute and the multidisciplinary nature of its organisation into different sections (1910): Ethnography, Natural Sciences, Economics, Photographic Documentation and Outreach, Moral and Political Sciences. In addition, during the 1920s and 1930s, after the Leopoldian regime had suffered years of criticism, and in a European context favourable to nationalism, a heroic narrative of the colonisation of the Congo emerged. The determination to construct a national history/memory favourable to colonial propaganda served as both a driving force and as an argument for increasing the collections of the Moral, Political and Historical Sciences Section[9] (Couttenier 2010b). If Frans Cornet (after 1926) acted on this section's behalf to acquire the archives and historical 'souvenirs' of the pioneers of the conquest of the Congo, the many objects they collected were also sought after by the museum's ethnographers.

6. While the Belgian government was in exile in Le Havre, the Belgian Colonial Office was in London. In June 1917 the Ministry of Colonies bought a collection there of Congolese ritual and cultural objects exhibited by Scheut Missionaries during an event on colonial photography.
7. Letters sent by Father Leo Bittremieux in the 1930s.
8. By way of illustration: just over 3,500 objects from Rwanda and Burundi can be found in the Cultural Anthropology collections today (out of almost 130,000 items) as well as 6,745 records out of 50,000 in the Archaeological collections.
9. A section that has now become the History and Politics service, whose 'historical collections' (HO) include more than 21,000 records.

The colonial origin of collections was valued and privileged, including for the acquisitions of ethnographic objects: museum curators considered it a guarantee of authenticity and their hierarchical and ministerial overseers found it a decisive argument for granting their approval and, where appropriate, a budget.

Museum employees, and in particular Joseph Maes (1882-1960), curator of ethnographic collections, systematically used this argument to encourage acquisitions. The names of military personnel, administrators, and other officials were carefully noted to emphasise the value of the objects acquired. But this effort, which met short-term acquisition needs, did not always guarantee the long-term archiving of such data, some of which has been lost. This is generally the case for museum archives[10] that are part of the scientific services of the Museum (Morren, this volume). This was particularly so for acquisitions from the Antwerp dealer Henri Pareyn (in 1911 and between 1914 and 1919), for example. The end of an era and the disappearance of a generation of collectors was also marked by the rise of a 'secondary' trade in Congolese objects (specialist dealers and an increasing number of private collectors), of which Henri Pareyn was a precursor in Belgium.[11] These intermediaries complicated access to objects' provenance by blurring the history of their transmission, while their marketing activities made the acquisition of these objects challenging. For example, at the posthumous Pareyn auction of 1928 the museum was able to acquire only two objects (thanks to private patrons), as prices had exploded, a demonstration of international competition for objects on the metropolitan market.

By the end of the 1920s, initiatives were taken both within the colony and by Belgium's Ministry of Colonies to combat the export of cultural goods (and their commercialisation in the private sector).[12] Naturally this did not apply to the museum; indeed, its director, Henri Schouteden (1881-1972), was particularly active in working with its supervisory body to encourage expansion of its historical, zoological, and ethnographic collections. Throughout his tenure as director (1927-1946), he took advantage of every circumstance (chance discoveries, natural disasters, political or legal events) to enrich the museum – for example, the practice of seizing objects used as 'exhibits' in court cases, which were eventually transferred from Congolese courts to the museum in Tervuren (Van Bockhaven, in this volume).[13]

10. It is not possible to quantify the museum's archives, which are highly fragmented and not completely inventoried, but an estimate would put them at around 3 linear km, of which 1,500 m are currently managed by the Collections Management service (T. Morren, personal communication).

11. This is also true of the scale of his activities: an analysis of the RMCA's and Antwerp's MAS-Museum aan de Stroom's files and collections shows the stock of (dealers such as) Pareyn was renewed very quickly following each transaction, which could include more than 2,000 objects.

12. Governor Engels submitted a proposal to this effect to the Council of Government in Leopoldville on 15 July 1928.

13. CFS legislation provided for the auction of seized goods; it was gradually amended under the Belgian rule of Congo so that objects of ethnographic interest were earmarked for the Tervuren museum.

Aside from this opportunism and the lobbying that underpinned it, scientific missions also continued to be organised, such as that of the archaeologist Maurits Bequaert (1892-1973) between 1938 and 1939. Responsible for the museum's Prehistory section (1937), he organised a prospecting trip to the colony, mainly to Kasaï, with logistical support from the Forminière company. In addition to substantial palaeolithic material (De Maret 1990: 120), Bequaert also acquired a hundred or so ethnographic pieces, including pottery, for the museum. A second mission by the archaeologist took place mainly in Bas-Congo and Kwango between 1950 and 1952 (Nikis & Smith, in this book). Bequaert considerably enlarged the museum's collections (Couttenier 2012); by the time he retired in 1957 the museum's archaeological collections had grown from 30,000 to 75,000 objects (Nenquin 1960) (the collections hold a total of 88,704 individual inventory numbers today).

Manufacturing the collection: The post-war and post-colonial periods

The sheer number of objects (across all disciplines) acquired in the Belgian colonies, mainly for the benefit of Belgium or other Western states, eventually led to concrete – although haphazardly applied – measures being taken to curb the export of Congolese heritage.[14] But for the museum, it was the Second World War that really marked a slowdown in acquisitions: trade with the Congo was interrupted and imports of colonial goods to Belgium[15] came to a virtual halt (Couttenier 2010b). Aside from this historical episode, our current knowledge of the museum collection does not point to any real break in acquisition practices in the post-war period – a particularly disturbing observation when it concerns the continuation of the institution's acquisitions for the former Physical Anthropology collections[16] (Busselen, this volume).

Schouteden's successor in 1947, Director F.M. Olbrechts (1899-1958), remained just as active in enriching the collections. The creation of the Friends of the Museum in 1951 gave him freedom of initiative, including financial autonomy, particularly when it came to acquisitions.[17] While curator Albert Maesen carried out an ethnographic mission to the Congo between July 1953 and September 1955, collecting more than 8,400 items, Olbrechts wanted to develop a local base for the museum, made up of 'correspondents' in the colony itself. To this end, the journal *Congo-Tervuren* (financed by the

14. For example with the creation of the Musée de la Vie Indigène in Léopoldville, the creation of the Commission pour la Protection des Arts et métiers indigènes by the Ministry of Colonies in Brussels in 1935, and the publication in 1939 of a decree 'aimed at protecting evidence of indigenous culture'.

15. Because of the war many goods were exported from the Congo to Allied countries, the USA and the United Kingdom, where the Belgian government-in-exile received consignments, including acquired objects.

16. Around 600 items were recorded in this collection (AA) through 1960. It was transferred in 1962.

17. For more on Olbrechts, see Petridis 2001.

Friends of the Museum) was launched in 1955. Intended to act as a direct link between the institution and its readership in the Congo, the magazine raised awareness and invited readers to help/participate, particularly through documented 'acquisitions'.

Congo's independence in June 1960 cut the museum off from this source and provoked a major identity crisis that required a redefinition of the institution and its collections.[18] Numerous purchases were made on the Belgian market, in good part to change the focus of the collections on the now former colonies. A planned exchange of objects among Belgian institutions was also intended to redefine the roles of federal museums conserving non-European heritage. Between 1967 and 1979, the Tervuren museum came to acquire all the African collections of the Royal Museums of Arts and History, as well as Oceanic and Amerindian objects (almost 10,000 items). Large collections continued to be acquired from private individuals through donations, purchases, or bequests, such as the bequest made by the former Brussels merchant and collector Jeanne Walschot between 1977 and 1980, which includes almost 3,000 objects.[19] Through the end of the 1990s, the museum's mission policy remained very dynamic, with the aim of acquiring items from across Africa (e.g., North Africa, East Africa, Côte d'Ivoire, and Southern Africa) and the rest of the world (e.g., Brazil). Within the Ethnography Section, acquisition was then still considered one of the curator's main tasks, with the aim of increasing the museum's collections, at times significantly (Bouttiaux, in this book).

The earliest critical analysis of the history and provenance of the collec-tions date back to this period. It was at the heart of the *ExItCongoMuseum* exhibition by Boris Wastiau and guest curator Toma Muteba Luntumbue in 2000 (Wastiau 2000b; Bisschop in this volume).[20] For the first time, acquisitions' colonial origins were publicly highlighted, relegating the question of their scientific nature to the background – a veritable epistemological break in the perception and reception of the museum's collections, especially since the exhibition and its catalogue were accompanied by a symposium on the violence that came with the colonial constitution of the collections. Toma Muteba Luntumbue's contribution also brought the museum's naturalist collections[21] into the discussion, an unusual approach that remains underexplored. Yet these collections are part of the same historical, political, and ideological contexts (Pouillard and Van Schuylenbergh, in this volume).

18. Nearly 64% of the Tervuren museum's Cultural Anthropology collections (130,000 items: ethnographic objects and musical instruments) were acquired before the independence of Congo, the country from which most of the objects originate.
19. Often assembled in the first half of the twentieth century, these collections are fully part of the Belgian-Congolese/Rwandan/Burundian colonial context.
20. P. Van Schuylenbergh notes that a more attentive and critical look at collectors and the paths objects followed, and hence at the 'biography of the collections' 'corresponded to the revitalisation of temporary exhibitions by new researchers who have infused them with critical narratives grounded in Subaltern and Post-Colonial Studies' (Van Schuylenbergh 2021: 258).
21. The estimated figures are given by Pouillard in the introduction to her text (in this book).

The scale and diversity of heritage objects show just how important[22] it is for the museum to undertake a global analysis of their origins, even if now, as in the past, it is most often cultural collections that are at the heart of critical historical re-readings of the status of collections of colonial origin in the West.

On provenance and restitution

Although debates about the restitution of African heritage have been prominently present in the media in recent years, these conversations and demands are by no means new. Demands for the return of objects sometimes happened at the moment of removal, or in the immediate aftermath of looting. Systematic demands for the return of African museum objects emerged in the era of decolonisation in the mid-twentieth century. The latter had a profound impact on the role of heritage in global relations overall. International protocols for the protection of cultural property proved (and continue to be) deeply inadequate to deal with the fate of objects removed during colonial rule, however.[23]

In the case of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC, known as Zaire from 1971 to 1997), the first demands for the return of the collections from Belgium date back to the years before independence (as do the demands for the return of archives).[24] At the time, media reports likened the importance of the collections as cultural resources for a new independent nation to the economic riches the mines represented. Although these demands never made it to the discussions of the Roundtable held to prepare independence, they did not disappear either and reemerged as political demands during the reign of Mobutu, first in 1967 and again in 1973, when the Zairian president spoke, at the UN and elsewhere, about the 'systematic pillage' of African heritage as symbolic of European colonialism. While this pressure led to a Zairian-Belgian collaboration in the founding of a Zairian national museum institute (Institut des Musées nationaux du Zaïre, IMNZ), only when Zaire several years later distanced itself from the use of the word 'restitution,' and accepted the Belgian preference for the word 'gift,' did 114 objects return from Belgium.[25] Although described as a gift, the legal property title was in fact never transferred to Zaire.

The resurgence of the restitution debate in recent years casts the matter more fully in the context of reparations, pointing not only to the colonial

22. Other collections not represented in this book are also important to mention, since they have potential both as objects and tools for provenance research. They include the Geology department's map library of over 20,000 documents; the Wood Biology service's xylarium and its 82,000 samples, and the various photographic collections totalling over 250,000 documents (although this number may include duplicates).

23. The Hague Convention and protocol of 1954, the *Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict* gave shape to the idea that cultural property ought to be protected from wartime destruction and maintained in its culture of origin (Vrdoljak 2006).

24. This overview is based on Van Beurden 2015: 143-164; Mumbembele 2019: 459-472 & Wastiau 2000b. On archives, see Piret 2015: 22-23.

25. For an overview of the objects, see Wastiau 2000b.

looting of objects themselves, but also to the damage the disappearance of objects and the overall impact colonialism had on customary and artistic cultures in Central Africa.

Current debates

Why and how has our understanding of provenance research changed? Debates around provenance research and colonial collections are more than academic exercises. In several European countries, these conversations also take place in the political and societal arena, with myriad initiatives for the formulation of guidelines and even laws intended to frame the management, research, and restitution of colonial collections.

A couple of elements drive this recent resurgence of the debate around collections of non-western objects in Global North museums, many of which are related to generational change and the increasing distance from the colonial period. There is of course the history of long-standing demands for restitution from indigenous communities and the Global South, which have consistently drawn attention to the problematic origin histories of colonial collections. But in recent years African diaspora activists have placed the subject back on the agenda.[26] This intersected with a growing academic interest in the ways colonial pasts live on today.[27] The expansion of the Smithsonian Institution in the USA with both the National Museum for the American Indian and the National Museum of African American History and Culture is a testament to the shifting museum landscape. The (not always successful) reinstallation or reinvention of numerous ethnographic collections in Europe also plays a role. In Germany, the closure of the Ethnologisches Museum in Dahlem, and the integration of its collections into the newly constructed Humboldt Forum in central Berlin, was criticized heavily for its building (a reconstruction of a Prussian palace) as well as its conceptualization as museum and cultural center that combines African, Asian and American collections with temporary exhibitions. It also became a focal point for debates about Germany's colonial past (von Oswald 2022 : 59-61). More than a decade beforehand, a similar move took place in France, when the collections of the former Musée de l'Homme were incorporated into the new Quai Branly museum.[28] In Belgium, the renovation and reopening of the AfricaMuseum in Tervuren drew large crowds of visitors as well as critics.[29] In general terms, these institutions come under fire for failing to deliver a real overhaul of their approaches to exhibition and a true

26. See for example: 'Musées coloniaux et restitution des trésors africains', Dossier spécial, Bamko-Cran, https://www.bamko.org/post-colonial

27. On this scholarship, see for example von Oswald & Tinius 2020. A good account of such debates can be found in Deliss 2020.

28. On Musée du Quai Branly, see for example Price 2007. A good overview of the academic debates about museum decolonisation can be found on the 'Boas blog' DCNtR: https://boasblogs.org/dcntr/

29. See for example DeBlock 2019: 272-281; Hersak 2020: 80-91; Van Bockhaven 2019: 1082-1087.

recognition of their own role in shaping and maintaining colonial paradigms of knowledge, possession and display.

Aside from museological critiques, these debates about colonial collections also caused a flurry of reports, projects, and guidelines that tried to address the management and potential return of colonial collections. The International Council of Museums (ICOM) Code of Ethics mentions the importance of provenance research and due diligence on the part of museums when it comes to acquisitions. ICOM provides also a 'checklist' on the ethics of cultural property ownership for museums, but its approach is minimalist.[30] The 2018 French report *Restituer le Patrimoine africain : vers une nouvelle éthique relationelle* by Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, commissioned by French president Emmanuel Macron, is perhaps the most well-known of the recent initiatives. It focuses explicitly on restitution and discusses provenance research in that context. Especially notable is how its authors advocate for a shift in the burden of proof in provenance research: they argued that for objects obtained as spoils of war, by military personnel, colonial administrators, and scientific expeditions, restitution should be required if requested.[31] Of course, this position assumes that some basic knowledge about the origin of collection objects is available in the first place, which is sometimes not the case.

More recently, Macron commissioned the 2023 report *Patrimoine partagé : universalité, restitutions et circulation des œuvres d'art. Vers une législation et une doctrine françaises sur les « critères de restituabilité » pour les biens culturels* by former Louvre director Jean-Luc Martinez. The report proposes concrete suggestions for procedures for restitution, limiting the possibilities raised the Sarr-Savoy report. Objects whose acquisition is considered illegal as well as those considered to be obtained in an illegitimate way (such as a sale under pressure, for example) are considered potentially eligible for restitution. References to the universal value of some of the objects, and the status of some as 'shared' heritage, both long-standing arguments against restitution, are reinserted back into the discussion in this report however.[32]

In 2018 the German Museum Association (Deutscher Museumsbund) created the *Guidelines for German Museums. Care of Collections from Colonial Contexts* with practical guidance for museums in possession of such collections.[33] The guidelines emphasize the need for (the new kind of) provenance research, as well as for a broader online access to collections and their

30. Provenance research is an integral part of a museum's mission as defined in the International Council of Museums (ICOM) *Code of Ethics*: 'The full history and ownership of an item from the time of its discovery or creation to the present day, through which authenticity and ownership are determined' (ICOM, 2017: 49).

31. France's National Assembly has recently voted to return 26 objects to Benin and 1 to Senegal, although other recommendations of the report have not been followed up yet (Sansom 2020).

32. The Martinez report is available online: https://www.culture.gouv.fr/fr/Espace-documentation/Rapports/Remise-du-rapport-Patrimoine-partage-universalite-restitutions-et-circulation-des-aeuvres-d-art-de-Jean-Luc-Martinez

33. Deutscher Museumsbund 2018. The document was revised in 2019 in response to public feedback.

accompanying information. They also highlight the need for collaborations with the communities of origin of the objects. In 2022, the Dutch 'Gonçalves Committee' (Advisory Committee on the National Policy for Colonial Collections) recommended the recognition and rectification of the removal of objects during the colonial era, including the unconditional return of objects when requested. Its recommendations however have yet to be adopted by the Dutch government.[34]

While the above examples are government-related or institutional initiatives, in other countries the lack of such initiatives led to reports from a variety of pressure groups. For example, in the UK the diaspora initiative AFFORD (African Foundation for Development) released the report *Return of the Icons: Key issues and recommendations around the restitution of stolen African artefacts* in 2020, based upon community consultation.[35] In Belgium, an independent group of museum professionals and scholars published *Guidelines for the Management and Restitution of Colonial Collections* in 2021, which addressed all colonial collections, and not merely African heritage.[36]

The various European initiatives discussed above do not all align entirely on whether or not a colonial context automatically presents a problematic provenance, and hence what can be understood as wrongfully obtained. The German guidelines differ here from the Sarr and Savoy's French report, for example. Its authors describe the need for extra scrutiny and sensitivity in the case of colonial provenance and argue it is problematic to deny that communities of origin had any agency, even in those contexts.[37] Others, like the French Sarr-Savoy report, point to the structural violence that colonialism represented as fundamentally important. Following this line of reasoning, circumstances of injustice outweigh individual actions. As a result, the burden of proof about acquisition was squarely placed on museums in France: if legal acquisition could not be proven for an object, it should be eligible for restitution. The aforementioned recent French report by Jean-Luc Martinez, however, moves away from this with a series of proposed criteria of returnability, and a key role for provenance research in determining whether and how these have been met.

In the DRC, Belgium's primary interlocutor about restitution, a number of events and forums for reflection and debate on restitution have developed over the past years. The conference 'Les musées en convers(at)ion. Perspectives congolaises sur la restitution des biens culturels et la transformation des pratiques muséales en Afrique', organized in October 2018 in Kinshasa by the German Goethe Institute and the Lubumbashi-based Centre d'art Waza led to a growing interest on the part of contemporary Congolese artists in the subject. Subsequent conferences and workshops have involved

34. 'Koloniale Collecties en Erkenning van Onrecht: Advies over de omgang met koloniale collecties' (Nederlandse Raad voor Cultuur 2020).
35. African Foundation for Development 2020.
36. Available online: restitutionbelgium.be (published in June 2021).
37. On African agency and museum collections, see several of the case studies in Kingdon 2019.

the National Institute for Museums in Congo, the universities in Kinshasa and Lubumbashi, as well as other national and international partners. The Congolese government has appointed a point person for the restitution dossier at the Ministry of Culture and is in the process of appointing an ad hoc committee. In February of 2021, at the 34th summit of the heads of state of the African Union (AU), its then-chair, the Congolese president Tshisekedi declared restitution of African art to be among the action points for the AU, although it is unclear what this will mean concretely.

On the African continent the focus has been more on improvements in museum infrastructure, as well as projects that blend the creative with the scientific (more on these in the section on new museologies below), rather than policy-making. Museum infrastructure is expanding with, among others, the Musée des Civilisations noires in Dakar and the new National Museum in Kinshasa. Private initiatives, such as the Fondation Zinsou in Benin and the former Sindika Dokolo Foundation based in Angola, have also played increasingly important roles in advocacy around restitution and the expansion and exhibition of art on the continent itself. Other collaborative projects such as the Benin Dialogue Group (a multilateral initiative that brings together European museums with partners in Nigeria as well as the Benin Royal Court) and the International Inventories Programme (a research and database project with artistic and curatorial components that investigates Kenyan objects held in cultural institutions across the globe, based in Kenya, Germany and France), focus on the rendering visible and traceable of particular collections across the globe.[38] These initiatives all share a belief in the importance of provenance research, although they vary in the role they accord it, and how they view it in relation to restitution procedures. From seeing it as a prerequisite (regardless of where the burden of proof might lie) to the return of objects, to disconnecting procedures for return of objects from provenance research, there is a shared belief that a new kind of provenance research is needed as a collaborative undertaking with a renewed methodology. In order to be meaningful, such knowledge has to be co-created by institutions and scholars in the Global North and in the Global South. Yet most of the guidelines and reports are the product of European-based initiatives, involving relatively limited engagement with African diaspora communities and partners on the African continent. The same problem is emerging in the realm of funding accorded to provenance research: much, if not all, is budgeted to and controlled by the European museums where collections reside, thus reinforcing existing inequalities and locating the creation of new knowledge in/by the Global North. As of yet, there have been few physical returns. Exceptions are for example the 26 looted objects from Abomey (Dahomey Kingdom) and the so-called El Hadj Oumar

38. Benin Dialogue Group, press statement for meeting, Benin City, Nigeria, 5-7 July 2019, available online: https://smart.smb.museum/media/news/69069/Press_Statement__Benin_Dialogue_Group_2019.pdf
https://www.inventoriesprogramme.org/concept-paper

Tal saber returned by France, and Germany's recent agreement to return 512 Benin bronzes to Nigeria. Individual institutions such as the Horniman museum and the National Museum of African Art, part of the Smithsonian Institution, have both returned Benin Kingdom objects as well.[39]

Official Belgian initiatives

In response to the debates in both the academic community and civil society,[40] the Belgian government – through Thomas Dermine, its State Secretary for Economic Recovery and Strategic Investments, in charge of Science Policy – embarked on two linked initiatives in 2021. A new law for restitution was introduced, which was anchored in the dissociation of/distinction between the transfer of an object's ownership ('restitution') and its material transfer ('return'). The identification of property that may or may not be subject to restitution and return is to be based on a historical scientific study and assessment (provenance research), which allows the classification of acquisitions into three categories:

- Illegitimate acquisition (subject to restitution);
- Legitimate acquisition (not eligible for restitution);
- Indeterminate acquisition (potentially subject to restitution).

Based on this classification, it then becomes possible to transfer goods between the state's public and private holdings, rendering objects held in federal collections alienable and, consequently, making restitution to former colonies possible.[41] This approach, essentially based on determining the legitimacy of acquisitions, can be seen as hedging possibilities from the outset, not only because of the sheer size of the collections concerned, but also because of the incomplete and often limited nature of the relevant sources. Some interpret this as a delaying tactic to circumvent any possible deadline or a restorative (and thus potentially inevitable) outcome.[42] While the lack of sources is certainly a major obstacle to achieving credible results, the two main obstacles to provenance research remain the time and cost involved.[43]

39. This does not include examples of the return of human remains and objects to Native communities in the USA, for example, where returns have been more common because of the NAGPRA (Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act) agreement of 1990. For a broader history of returns, see Van Beurden 2021b: 118-166.

40. In Belgium, this debate intensified during the 'Congo. Passé colonial' parliamentary committee set up in July 2020, one month after the Black Lives Matter demonstration that brought together more than 10,000 people in Brussels on 7 June 2020 (Goddeeris 2020). A chapter of the Congo committee's report highlights the context of historical injustices in which Congolese cultural heritage objects were acquired during the colonial period (Van Beurden 2021b).

41. See De Boeck 2022, and Katia Dewulf, adviser to State Secretary Thomas Dermine: 'Property that has been determined, after a provenance study and scientific opinion, to have been acquired illegitimately may be restituted, with legal ownership being transferred immediately. This does not automatically apply to its physical return, which must be specifically requested', quoted by Vassy 2023.

42. See B. Niangi Batulukisi and A.W. Mpoma (this volume).

43. The objects, archives, and documentation relating to one and the same original collection have often been 'dispersed' across several collections at an institutional, national, or even international scale.

At the same time as the legislation was being drafted,[44] the Belgian government gave the RMCA a scientific mission to research the provenance of its collections, making available in early 2022 a budget of 2.3 million euros spread over four years. Seizing the opportunity presented by the government's announcement, which was made at the museum,[45] museum director Guido Gryseels, in a gesture of transparency and openness about the origins of the institution's collections, presented Congolese Prime Minister Jean-Michel Sama Lukonde a brief inventory of all cultural anthropology objects from DRC and Central Africa in the museum's collections.[46] The highly politicised context reveals, however, the secondary role played by the scientific leadership of the museum, which serves above all as a symbolic frame of reference for ministerial and/or government communication.

The RMCA is nevertheless now responsible for drafting a project to plan and implement the scientific research programme concerning the provenance of its collections, which are covered by the future law. Based on both the Belgian government budget allocated over four years and the corpus of the inventory submitted to the Congolese minister, the first step was to put the inventory online so that the members of the Institut des Musées nationaux du Congo (IMNC) – considered from the outset to be the RMCA's main partner – could identify the priorities for joint provenance research.

The synchronised timetable for the two Belgian initiatives has led people to conflate the law with the scientific research project. The latter is not engaged in a process of (preparation for) restitution; instead, it shares data (both existing and to be co-created) concerning the collections. This situation is indicative of the limited space given to the Congolese agenda on this issue. For what is the point of Congolese government, institutions, and players investing time and energy in researching the provenance of collections in Belgium[47] if not for their (eventual) restitution? For partners who are often careful to talk about heritage 'reconstitution' rather than 'restitution',[48] is (working towards) establishing the legitimate provenance or otherwise of collections the best way to commit to a common approach? This ambivalence can also be seen in the choice in June 2022 by the King's Cabinet (on the

44. A first version of the bill was debated in the Chamber of Representatives in April 2022. On 3 July 2022, the Belgian government approved a final text entitled 'Law recognising the alienability of goods linked to the colonial past of the Belgian State and determining a legal framework for their restitution and return'. This text was ratified by the King and published in the *Moniteur Belge* on 23 September 2022, taking effect on that date.

45. By Prime Minister Alexander De Croo and State Secretary Thomas Dermine, 17 February 2022.

46. The inventory includes almost 84,000 objects, acquired both before and after 1960; a database can be consulted at this link: https://proche.africamuseum.be/.

47. The vast corpus considered by Henry Bundjoko in his article also suggests that the question of the (problematic?) provenance of collections can also be raised by Congolese museum professionals.

48. 'La Reconstitution des Archives et du Patrimoine culturel congolais' forum held at IMNC Kinshasa, 25-29 June 2020; 'La reconstitution des biens culturels et la Renaissance africaine' conference, Kinshasa, December 2021.

eve of the Belgian government's approval of the law) of a Suku mask to be loaned indefinitely to the MNDRC. While this event is akin to a 'restitution' (Mumbembele Sanger, this volume), the *kakuungu* mask does not fill a gap in Congolese national collections,[49] nor was it selected because of the contentious nature of its acquisition – on the contrary.[50]

In fact, although provenance research remains an essential and fundamental element in the legal framework created by the Belgian law, the law specifies that ratification of a treaty between states (in this case Belgium and the DRC) will be needed to truly define the entire procedure for any restitution.[51] This treaty will therefore be decisive both for the application of the law and the manner of its implementation, and could possibly challenge the categories of acquisition as defined by Belgium ('legitimate', 'illegitimate', and 'indeterminate'). Thus illegitimacy could (for example) be extended to the entire colonial context, which would help to modify, if not minimise, the role of provenance research. The finalisation of a bilateral treaty of this kind is therefore crucial to initiating a genuine dialogue on this subject.[52] Because despite good intentions, the law as well as scientific provenance research are confronted with the difficulties of their implementation in a polarized two-state context in which Belgium's actions seem to have reduced its partner's leeway from the outset.

The provenance research project on the RMCA's collections, entitled 'PROvenance Research on the Ethnographic Collection – Herkomstonderzoek op de Ethografische collectie (PROCHE)',[53] has thus been undertaken in and adds to this uncertain inter-state context. The duty to carry out in-depth and critical research into the history of the appropriation of collections, some of which the RMCA has held for over a century, is of course dependent on the establishment of a collaborative approach involving a range of researchers and institutional players from the collections' country of origin.[54] This condition – which cannot be guided by a Belgian agenda[55] –

49. For example Yaka masks, a type identified by Placide Mumbembele as missing from the IMNC collection before his scientific residency at the RMCA in July 2021. https://www.africamuseum.be/fr/get_involved/scientist-in-residence/placide-mumbembele-sanger

50. This mask was acquired by curator Albert Maesen during a mission to the Congo and packed in box 117 of the shipment sent from Kikwit to Belgium on 19 April 1954. The information recorded by Maesen in his field notebooks is minimal and does not allow us to deduce the exact context of the transactions. The archives, however, mention that this mask, sculpted by Nkoy, was acquired directly from the sculptor in the village of Pungu-Luala for the sum of 400 francs.

51. https://www.africamuseum.be/fr/about_us/restitution

52. Since the law was adopted, Belgium has sent a draft bilateral treaty to the Democratic Republic of the Congo for negotiation (the draft deals in particular with the establishment of a joint scientific commission, the method of referral to the commission, and the procedure for examining restitution dossiers).

53. https://www.africamuseum.be/en/discover/project_proche

54. The 'PROCHE' project also includes a component aimed at establishing and maintaining a scientific network of expertise in the DRC around provenance research. In concrete terms, this involves funding three doctoral research projects and internships for IMNC professionals.

55. In this case, the recent 'Décret n° 23/06 du 20 février 2023 portant création, organisation et fonctionnement d'une commission nationale chargée du rapatriement des biens culturels,

must be met to encourage a diversified co-production of knowledge about them, of which provenance is certainly only one aspect.

Possibilities and limitations

As its best, provenance research can restore critical context to objects, provide bottom-up perspectives on their history, and encourage methodological innovation. But it also has its limitations when it comes to uncovering the full lives of objects and collections. In its current practice, it too often solely relies on colonial archives. These include those held at museums but also encompass missionary archives, or the archives of colonial governments, for example. Archives in general, and especially colonial archives, are not neutral sources of information. They were largely created by and in service of the colonial project and primarily document events of relevance from that perspective. Their archival status embeds them in the ideologies and social realities of the colonial system (Stoler 2002). In addition, archival records that can tell us about the exact moment of the 'collecting' of an object or human remains – at least from the perspective of many of the questions raised in this volume – are sparse, in large part because such objects and remains were not considered worth documenting. And as mentioned above, objects bought from art dealers or donated to the museum were also often separated from any contextual information about their provenance. The process of singularization and transformation of these objects into market commodities and art was facilitated by the shedding of such context, which became replaced by their 'pedigree', a history of their ownership by illustrious collectors and art dealers, and references to them in bibliographies and exhibition catalogues. It was elements like these that constructed their 'authenticity;' that were evidence of their importance and that of their collector.

Although the positivist notion that archives can speak a 'truth' about the singular 'moment' of the 'collection' of an object can be largely discarded, there are a number of ways to counteract the dominance of the colonial perspective. One is by reading colonially-produced archives with a clear awareness of the power relations and knowledge structures that shaped these archives – in other words, by recognizing them as sites of power. Alternatively, such records can also be read for their silences and for the African voices they invertedly reveal (Gordon 2018; Stoler 2009). A second way to extract new information from colonial archives relies on innovative methods inspired by the digital humanities. Through the creation and overlay of databases with objects' information, the mapping of networks and the visualization of large quantities of data, new levels of information can be extracted. Collection surveys constructed through these methods applied to German colonial collections, for instance, reveal 'commonalities and differences in the collections' structures with regard to the time frames of their arrival and

des archives et des restes des corps humains soustraits du patrimoine culturel congolais' (DRC 2023) is only a first step.

circumstances surrounding their acquisition[…] [and] […]the relationships between the composition of the holdings and the particularities of German rule in each colony' (Grimme 2020: 55). Likewise, mapping out the biographical backgrounds of donors can render visible colonial structures in space and time, and allows us to 'work out connections between the establishment and extension of collections and colonial structures'(*ibid.*: 60). As Vanhee's contribution to this volume amply demonstrates, these approaches serve as excellent points of departure for mapping out more in-depth research and allow for new questions to emerge.

Nonetheless, a particularly important avenue for remedying the over-reliance on colonial archives is broadening the range of sources used in provenance research. As several chapters in this book powerfully demonstrate, oral histories and memories of communities of origin are crucial elements in a renewed approach to provenance research. Although central to the practice of African history for decades, these sources have not been systematically integrated into provenance research (yet). More than a necessary broadening of the range of sources we acquire information from, they also compel us to re-evaluate which questions should be asked. Oral testimonies and cultures are often more deeply expressive of local and popular ontologies than archival sources and require a recognition of the different modalities of memory (collective, private, public, etc.) and an understanding of the dynamics which allow these various modalities of memory to gain social recognition and expression. Thus, they also require us to adapt the kind of questions we ask, as well as too positivist understandings of evidence and the 'smoking gun' moment of removal. Instead, we should adopt a broad approach and allow circumstantial evidence to play a role.

These observations, as well as the discussion of 'PROCHE' (see above) beg the bigger question of the role of countries and communities of origin in the agenda setting, development, and execution of provenance research and the crucial importance of collaborative co-creation of knowledge. While innovative methods such as participatory creative actions (see Yip, this volume) carry promise, collaborations need to be radically different in order not to perpetuate and reinforce existing inequalities in terms of research infrastructures and knowledge creation (Weber-Sinn & Ivanov 2020: 75). In order for more co-creation of knowledge around provenance to occur, it is also important that collection inventories (complete with photos and historical information) be rendered accessible on-line and as downloadable files (Van Bockhaven, this volume; Basu 2021).

Some of the other challenges posed by provenance research are also related to the long-term impact of colonial knowledge structures as they are expressed in museum classifications, as well as ideas about authorship, ownership and origin, resulting in a 'tension between strategic essentialism and deconstruction' (Weber-Sinn & Ivanov 2020: 75). 'Communities of origin' are generally understood to be the communities that produced and/or originally used the objects. These communities do not always align with countries or 'nations of origin' since they can be sub-national groups, or indigenous or diasporic

communities. All potentially with transregional entanglements. Nor do contemporary ideas about identity properly take cultural change over time into account. Provenance research hence runs the risk of reinforcing essentialist notions about identity and belonging. Not only ideas about identity are susceptible to the continued impact of colonial knowledge. As Strother's contribution to this volume powerfully demonstrates, so are contemporary perceptions about objects as heritage, which superseded the ephemerality of objects among some communities. All in all, we have to be careful that provenance research does not become yet another seemingly neutral but in fact deeply colonial professional procedure, in line with previous practices such as conservation, preservation and classification. As a 2022 report of a Dutch pilot project on the provenance of objects from colonial collections shows, this type of research is the most effective when it moves away from being a 'genealogical exercise' concerned with 'linear transmission' and instead deploys a stronger consideration of 'structural implicated-ness' (Lidchi & Brinkgrave 2022: 71).

Even with the best of efforts, time, and ample funding, it will not be possible to recover the provenance of all objects, which begs the question: what if we cannot know? Silent objects are perhaps the true heart of colonial collections. They reflect the silences in colonial archives, and the violence of erasure and neglect. In past approaches to provenance – focused on the lives of these objects in the Global North – these silences have generated new identities and epistemes, creating space for new narratives, classifications, and appropriations in which the politics of knowledge and value were deeply intertwined. It would be damaging if this lack of information about origin reinforced current patterns of possession.

All in all, the possibilities as well as the limitations of provenance research demonstrate two important things. First, that the practice of provenance research is undergoing a much-needed and innovative overhaul that at its best will develop new methodologies for research. Much relevant and revelatory information will arise from such research. Second, sufficient limitations exist in the practice that it is advisable not to make potential evidence from such research a precondition for restitution procedures. Taking silent objects into full account also has implications for the formulation of just restitution policies, since they cannot be formulated exclusively based on provenance research.

On provenance research and new museologies

Research on provenance and practices of restitution are deeply intertwined with the need to decolonise museum practices world-wide, and inevitably affect the ways new museologies are imagined and implemented, both in a practical and in an intellectual sense. Not only because museums in the Global North are urged to share more information about their collections, render them more accessibility, and return them, but also because all these changes potentially have an effect on their exhibitionary and curation politics. How is

the provenance of collections addressed in displays? In a more profound sense, the current debates also pose challenges to the very core of the mission of museums, and their ties to colonial worldviews and paradigms of knowledge. These developments are still taking shape, but it is possible to consider the processes as they are unfolding at the moment. Overall, current developments in museology – both in the Global North and in the Global South – point to the need to change who is involved in the heritage sectors overall, and how.[56]

Can museums be spaces of redress and reparation for the colonial past (Rassool 2021)?[57] Wayne Modest, head of the Centre for the Research of Material Culture and Director of the National Museum of World Cultures in the Netherlands, argues that museums face a 'double bind of critique and recognition'. While they have 'entangled relations with the colonial past – of extraction and violence, of appropriation and misrepresentation,' they also loom large as 'powerful sites for thinking through colonial entailments in the present' (Modest 2019). But what does a decolonial museum look like, and is there a role for the new provenance research in such an institution? In an immediate sense, displays could reflect more historical information about collections, as well as indicate where silences exist, and why. The debate on the restitution of collections can be an avenue to discuss the violent histories of these collections, the role of the museum as an imperial agent, and the global inequalities that undergird the knowledge developed upon the basis of these collections.[58] For example, a multi-museum EU-funded project like 'TAKING CARE: Ethnographic and World Cultures Museums as Spaces of Care' (see also Foreword by J. Maniacky, this volume) addresses some of the questions about the role of museums in the context of environmental and climate change. This approach no longer sees museums as repositories of heritage but as places of social experimentation with room for multiple ways of knowing and co-creation, in which a decolonial future is a sustainable future. Another recent example of a project in which museal spaces were part of a re-activation of transnational connections undergirding colonial collections was *[Re:]Entanglements: Colonial Collections in Decolonial Times,* part of the later project 'Museum Affordances', led by Paul Basu. At its core, the project was concerned with finding ways to re-engage with a colonial archive and collection from the perspective of the present and through an engagement with the west African communities where the collection originated.[59]

56. See for example Phillips 2003: 155-170; Golding & Modest 2013.
57. https://www.britishartstudies.ac.uk/issues/issue-index/issue-19/death-writing-in-the-colonial-museums.
58. Some recent examples of where this is applied: *Raubkunst? Provenienzforschung zu den Sammlungen des MK&G* at the Museum for Art and Trade in Hamburg (2018-), the *Vermissen/I Miss You* exhibition at the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum in Cologne (2022-2023), both of which examine the troubled provenance of the museums' Benin Bronzes. *Onze Koloniale Erfenis*, the new permanent exhibition at the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam also addresses these issues, but places them in a broader context of colonial afterlives.
59. See https://re-entanglements.net and Basu 2015: 337-363.

On the African continent itself, South African initiatives in the heritage sector have played a trailblazing role in terms of community curation, for example.[60] Chipangura and Mataga, in their book on museums in Zimbabwe, describe intense efforts at co-curatorship and equitable collaboration with communities previously marginalized by institutions like the museum. In other words, the prioritizing of people and communities over an object-centered approach (Chipangura and Mataga 2021). Experimentation with collaborative practices occurred in the DRC as well, notably in the 2000 *Ukumbusho* exhibition at the National Museum of Lubumbashi (MNL) (Sizaire, 2001).[61] The result of an oral history project with both Congolese and international partners, the exhibition gave space to memory and oral history within the museum, highlighting the social history of the mining city and bringing a different category of objects (objects of use, family photos, etc.) to the museum. The Centre d'art Waza of Lubumbashi built on this trend with further projects. *Waza Chumba Wazi* ('Imagine the empty room'), for example, organized in collaboration with Vansa (Visual Arts Network of South Africa), used a house in the city's historic mineworker district as exhibition space to explore the fraught relation between community members and Gécamines, Congo's largest mining company (Middernacht 2017: 162-165). *Disolo*, in collaboration with the Wits Art Museum, focused on the issue of colonial collections held in Africa (specifically the Burton collections of Luba objects that are kept at the Wits Museum, and the collections of the MNL). The exhibition emphasized conversations with 'elders,' and simple sitting with objects in order to honor living knowledge, but also included artistic interventions aimed at reinventing collections and objects. These initiatives highlight not only the need for equitable access and collaboration, but also for dynamic and evolving displays in museums.[62]

When in 1997 James Clifford wrote about the museum as a contact zone, he envisioned it as a place for different cultures to interact. Although the value of exchange and interaction stands, the model of the museum has a contact zone has since come under fire, in part because of the location of many of these museums in the Global North, thus privileging those audiences as the beneficiates of interaction and collaboration. The current wave of provenance research could serve as basis for a corrective movement of what Robin Boast has called the 'neoliberal museum' (Boast 2011: 56-70). Creating more and new knowledge around collections and objects and communicating his knowledge to the museum-going public is one way of activating these museums as sites of (ex)change. The debates themselves also serve as important places for changing narratives about the past. Larissa Forster recently wrote about the effect of the debate about human remains in Germany on decolonising language

60. The most well-known example is likely the District Six Museum. See the initiatives described in Witz, Minkley, & Rassool 2017. It should be noted that these practices have been pioneered in colonial settler societies such as Canada and Australia. See for example Hutchinson 2013.
61. For a thorough analysis of this exhibition, see Middernacht 2018.
62. Models of participatory curation in itself are not new; see Sansi 2020.

around those objects/subjects, for example (Förster 2016; 2023: 60-61). And it is certainly the case that words matter (Modest & Lelijveld 2018) when neutral language covers a reality of – often violent – practices. Rendering these, and the historical mechanisms that sustained and perpetuate them visible, is of central importance to any effort to develop new, decolonial museologies.

In this volume: themes and contributions

This book surveys the current state of provenance research pertaining to the Central African collections of the RMCA as well as some related collections and objects, and provides insights into ongoing debates, issues, and directions of research. Inevitably, there are some lacunae in the content of the book whose chapters focus heavily – although not exclusively – on the Cultural Anthropology collections of the museum. Objects from Rwanda and Burundi (which make up about 3%[63] of the collection of the RMCA) are not covered.[64] In large part omissions such as these reflect the current state of the field. Areas such as geological, palaeontologic, and plant collections largely remain under the radar of provenance studies at the moment. However, their absence in this volume should not be understood as an indication of their lack of interest. On the contrary, the origins, management, and restitution of such collections will likely be the subject of debate in upcoming years, pushing provenance research towards new questions about the development of natural history, and ownership and use of genetic information.[65]

While composing this volume, the editors (all based at institutions in the Global North) struggled to achieve a balance between authors from the Global North and those in the Global South. The imbalance in academic funding and collection access between Belgium and Congo in particular, in itself a legacy of the same colonial project that gave rise to these collections, impacts knowledge production today.

Starting with sources and methods, the first part of this collective work therefore sets out to examine 'objects' and the heritage they constitute in their polysemic dimension, to retrace their contested trajectories, without dismissing the burning issues raised by restitutions. The very notion of

63. This is calculated using data from TMS, which lists just over 2,300 objects (including musical instruments) from Rwanda and around 1,200 from Burundi. It does not therefore include archaeological collections (for which the percentage could be estimated at more than 10%) or other disciplines present at the museum.

64. In terms of discussions of the return of colonial archives however, the discussions with Rwanda are much ahead of any others. Upon the request of Rwandan authorities, a multi-year project was initiated for the digital repatriation of archives relating to the colonial era in Rwanda. These include archives held at the Belgian State Archives, the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Tervuren museum. Project financing comes from Belgian development aid, the RMCA, and Rwanda. A digital repatriation to the Rwandan Mining, Petroleum and Gas Board of certain geological and mining archives kept at the RMCA was completed in 2020. For more, see Mathys *et al.* 2021 and Van Beurden 2021b: 387 and 528-529. On colonial archives and demands for restitution, see Piret 2015: 419-431.

65. See for example Nadim, Mohr & Loewe 2015: 348-366; Das & Lowe 2018: 4-14.

'acquisition' – the fruit of a transactional relationship between the place of origin of the items and the museum, established through the intermediary of numerous players – must now be re-evaluated in the light of present challenges. The new provenance research advocated by Hein Vanhee sees 'acquisition' no longer as a uniform transaction, but one whose modes of procurement vary from a simple transfer to acts of violence, particularly since a large part of the RMCA's inventory comes from 'acquisitions' linked to colonial conquest. In the absence of precise methods, Vanhee advocates an approach combining archival research with the creation of digital databases to enable objects to be inventoried in context, rather than in isolation. In addition, oral sources remain essential when it comes, for example, to old Physical Anthropology collections. Having already successfully applied this method to establish how workers at the Union minière du Haut-Katanga (UMHK) were recruited and where they came from, Donatien Dibwe dia Mwembu is now working on several cases, notably those involving the Tippo Tip necklace and Msiri's decapitated head, to cross-reference oral sources with archival documents to obtain what he calls a 'shared version'. As far as ritual objects are concerned, Dibwe dia Mwembu does not gloss over oral sources' limitations, showing, for example, how difficult it can be to obtain information about the provenance of objects in communities that have become Christian and therefore refuse to comment on 'diabolical' objects. This combination or cross-referencing of archives and oral sources also makes possible Lies Busselen's original research as part of 'Human Remains Origin(s) Multidisciplinary Evaluation (HOME)', a multi-disciplinary project whose fieldwork took place in Feshi, the capital of Kwango province, where in the 1940s tombs were systematically excavated to fuel physical anthropology and eugenics projects in post-war Europe. Archives, however, are still essential to any genuine provenance study, not least because, unlike private collectors, museums are unique in the need to catalogue and record each new acquisition in the 'general entry register'. The digitisation of the RMCA's register is the subject of Tom Morren's chapter. Here again, the notion of 'sharing' and 'common heritage' is, with the help of digitisation, making whole sections of archives available to researchers (whatever their affiliation or country), opening new avenues for provenance research, and marking out the long road still to be travelled to achieve fair restitution.

The second part of the book brings together a series of case studies, focusing on the trajectories of objects, their materiality, and their use in creating images and epistemological devices. Recounting the extraction of objects and human remains ('*dépouilles*' in French)[66] from their places of origin – strictly speaking, provenance research – is not enough either to understand colonial looting or to tackle the thorny issue of restitution. We still need to look at the paths these objects have taken and the amount of meaning that has been

66. See the reference cited in note 5: in the sub-section 'Words matter' (p. 6) of the text by Busselen (2022), the author presents different opinions from project participants favouring the use of this terminology in French.

invested in them, often incongruously. This is what Vicky Van Bockhaven sets out to do through the cultural biography of a work whose fascination in Belgium stems from its creation for the museum around 1911 and the deliberate intention to preserve an element of mystery and enigmatic power. The sculpture depicts an *anioto* (leopard man) wearing a replica of the costume, hood, and claws worn by the *anioto* in north-eastern Congo's Bali clans during initiation ceremonies. Museologised then ethnologised, the object becomes a kind of surrogate for a wild Congo, a trope for the unspeakable irrationality and primitiveness of the Black man. This spread from the museum to other genres, notably the comic strip *Tintin in the Congo*. Sometimes, checking the itinerary of a collector against the biography of certain objects, as Patricia Van Schuylenbergh does in the case of Sven Molin – a Swedish non-commissioned officer recruited as an agent of the Congo Free State, and the zoological specimens and ethnographic objects he acquired in the Congo on behalf of the RMCA – exposes extractive violence as a macabre project that collectors undertook at all costs, often in violation of local practices, in order to add to the museum's collections. The same issues emerge even for objects generally defined as insignificant and considered to be the poor relations of museum collections, such as ceramics, which Nicolas Nikis and Alexandre Livingstone Smith examine in detail. Collectors did not hesitate to violate chiefs' tombs to remove objects, even including European earthenware and pottery, for the RMCA's collections. Anne-Marie Bouttiaux, who acquired objects on the museum's behalf in West Africa between 1993 and 2002, bears witness in her striking text to the enduring nature of the 'unequal balance of power' in collecting. When she carried out anthropological research into Guro masks in Côte d'Ivoire, the insidious temptation to acquire and thus breach a certain professional code of ethics made her regret 'having to put together collections for a museum'.

This tension between research and collection, as well as between the permanence and ephemerality of ritual works, lies at the heart of Zoë Strother's contribution on Pende masks. Her chapter inaugurates the third part of this book, while at the same time heralding the final section which concerns restitution. Through objects' biographies, their materiality (material used), their usefulness, and their ephemerality (assigned lifespan), Strother adopts an approach that no longer emphasises the object as such, but highlights its life-arc, at the end of which an autotomy, designed to promote permanence and continuity, is established. The mask, at the end of its life, is de-ritualised and discarded (sometimes burnt) to release the latent creative energy of a new generation of artists. This ephemerality is also found in the world of naturalist collections studied by Violette Pouillard, from a 'past life', interrupted by bouts of bulimic gorging (the RMCA alone houses several million diverse specimens), through to a 'life-after-death'. Drawing on recent biopolitical theories that equate fauna with a colonial subject – animals have also been colonised (Aderinto 2022; Garland 2008: 51-74) – Pouillard shows how destructive extraction and conservation helped to establish colonial (bio)power. The other pole of this ephemeral/perennial binary is discussed by Henry

Bundjoko Banyata in his evocation of Leele drums. In addition to their ritual use, these drums function as archives, recording taxonomic and ethological data, and so require semiotic processes to reveal their hidden science.

The chapters in the final part of the volume illustrate the complexity of the issues surrounding restitution. The case of musical instruments, examined by Adilia Yip, demonstrates the limits of restitution. The return of an object that has been looted or acquired through dubious practices does not fully restore the dimension of the object to its environment. In contrast to Strother's analysis, which shows how the ephemerality of ritual objects enables the continuity of artistic tradition, we find ourselves in a curious paradox here, where objects return from museums with financial value but devoid of cultural resonance. There has been an irreversible loss of the culture, know-how, and memory that could have allowed these objects to reintegrate smoothly into their environment and regain their agency. To breathe new life into these objects, which have been museologised in the West for over a century, and restore the associated memories that have been lost, Yip advocates restitution accompanied and activated by the artistic participation (*participatory creative action*) of local and diasporic players.[67] Already, upstream, the residency of these artists through hosting initiatives launched by the RMCA and other museums, is bringing these instruments (in particular Azande xylophones) back to life through public concerts and musical syntheses combining modern technology and traditional sounds, generating the processes of co-creativity suggested earlier in this introduction. Vicky Van Bockhaven, like the populations concerned, wonders about the agency of these objects. Do they still speak? she asks. We are not talking about musical instruments here, but of ritual masks and statues – instruments invested with another kind of power. The question of whether these statues still speak echoes Yip's own concerns. While the objects are still present, their interlocutors – the active agents who animate them and give them meaning and power – have disappeared. Added to this is the fact that the communities of origin that are supposed to welcome them now see them as objects with evil attributes.

The dispossession of these objects, a veritable *epistemicide*, is also based on an unequal exchange disguised as a barter: by evangelising the local populations in exchange for their ritual objects, which are confiscated by branding them as anathema, they are alienated from their ontology and their cultural heritage. The statues still speak, you might say, but they no longer speak the same language, nor in the same way nor to the same people. This is why the AFRISURGE network proposed by Van Bockhaven seems the ideal framework for bridging the gap between the collections of the RMCA and the communities of Haut-Uele province, and for reconnecting them as a prelude to physical restitution and, beyond that, reparations. Placide Mumbembele

67. Yip's approach recalls Dorine Kondo's analyses. Recognising that a single gesture, a single initiative cannot erase centuries of violence and brutality, this American anthropologist promotes acts of 'reparative creativity' through a multitude of performative productions to redress structural violence and inequalities (Kondo 2018).

Sanger, anthropologist and former Director General of the Institut des Musées nationaux du Congo, closes this final section with an emblematic example of 'restitution'. His account begins with a review of the fits and starts that characterised the issue of restitutions between the Congo and Belgium, before dwelling on an act of restitution that is as symbolic as it is legal and political: the 'return' of the *kakuungu* mask, received with pomp and circumstance by President Tshisekedi from King Philippe on 8 June 2022. But beyond the debates over the legal framework for this 'return' and the authenticity of the object, Mumbembele Sanger, who witnessed the event firsthand, is more interested in how it was received by the source community, thus coming full circle.

This original research is complemented by interviews with artists, specialists, and activists. Alisson Bisschop invites Boris Wastiau and Toma Muteba Luntumbue to reflect with the benefit of hindsight on the exhibition *ExItCongoMuseum*, *Un siècle d'art avec ou sans papiers* which, more than two decades ago, established the first steps of a potential decolonisation of the RMCA. Barly Baruti, undoubtedly the most renowned of Congolese cartoonists, talks to Didier Gondola about his vision of a 'shared history' between Belgium and the Congo, which, although rooted in violence, can be reborn in the light of the challenges of restituting ancient heritage and circulating contemporary works. The two Kinshasa artists interviewed by Sarah Van Beurden, Géraldine Tobe and Jeanpy Kabongo employ two healing projects, 'Esprit des ancêtres' and 'Handicap mental', to advocate a reconnection between art and spirituality, idiosyncratic being and collective imagination, in a perspective that is both holistic and therapeutic.

The book's conclusion and postface provide an opportunity for Congolese expert Niangi Batulukisi and activist curator Anne Wetsi Mpoma to offer their perspectives on the thorny issues addressed in the book. While Batulukisi stresses the need to involve the source communities in the quest for restitution, Mpoma places the struggle of the 'experts' of the diaspora – a struggle often ignored – at the heart of the movements that have put restitution on the agenda. The two authors agree, however, in their insistence that provenance research must neither interfere with nor determine restitution. Nor should it lead to a nomenclature that, in essence, pits ill-gotten objects against legitimate objects, as is the case with the Belgian legislation on restitution drawn up on the initiative of Secretary of State Thomas Dermine.

Ultimately, the complexity of these issues relates to the very mutability of our object of study, as suggested by the title of this introduction. The non-European objects found in museums, as well as those that provide private collections with their value, are not only possessed by but also in turn possess a host of audiences, from collectors to source communities, curators and museum visitors, not to mention political leaders. This is why the contributions gathered here oscillate between an approach that privileges the object and one that prioritises the stakeholders in these questions of provenance and restitution. There is a need to move away from the reflex that places the human at the centre of interactions with and between objects, as advocated by

the proponents of the 'Actor-Network Theory (ANT)' and 'Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO)' movements who have taken over from the structuralists and the postmodern school of thought by accelerating what is known as the object turn (Appadurai 1986; Latour & Weibels 2005; Miller 2013; Harman 2018). In other words, objects possess agency, they speak for themselves and among themselves, through a network of signifiers that are free from human intervention. Far from being animated by human action, it is instead the object which, through its hypnotic power (derived as much from its aesthetic and financial value as from its immaterial virtues) influences human behaviour and reduces human subjectivity to an object in itself.[68] Putting humans (particularly source communities) back at the heart of the debate, as several contributors have done, does not deny the power of the object but, on the contrary, demonstrates the influence it exerts on the existence of human societies.

Acknowledgements

The co-editors of this book would like to thank Guido Gryseels for initiating this publication project, as well as all the anonymous reviewers who contributed to its content.

The RMCA's Collections Management service, in particular An Cardoen, Agata Dierickx, Tom Morren, Eline Van Heymbeck, and Anne Welschen, responded to our requests for iconographic documents and (quantified) data, as did Alexander Vral of the Prehistory service and Hans Beeckman and Didier Van den Spiegel of the Biology Department.

Many external and internal colleagues also provided support in various ways: our warmest thanks go to Elisabeth Seyerl (Humboldt Forum), Katia Dewulf, Christine Bluard (for her work on the G. Tobe and B. Baruti interviews), Friederike Kratky (for her recreation of the illustrations in the text by H. Bundjoko), and the entire 'PROCHE' project team.

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I.

SOURCES AND METHODS

Collecting Congo before World War I: the spoils of violent conquest

Hein Vanhee[1]

Thanks to the activism of African Diaspora associations in Belgium and some remarkable investigative journalism, a lot of attention has been paid in recent public debates to the provenance of the collections of the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA).[2] In the museum itself, research into provenance has been going on since the very beginning. For long this was limited to questions about where, by whom, how and why specific objects were made and used.[3] In recent decades, however, provenance research has broadened its attention to the circumstances in which objects left their context of production and use in Africa. While Africans occasionally took active roles in these processes, this contribution focuses on European collecting practices.[4] Were most transactions free and fair or did they take place under duress? Provenance research in this sense is still underdeveloped at the RMCA today.

I will start by making an analysis of the state of provenance research at the RMCA that probes the objects' context of 'collecting' – a term which 'carries a deceptive innocence that can obfuscate a variety of ways of obtaining material' (Van Beurden 2015: 30). I will argue in favour of a new strategy and approach, one that pulls information from the available primary sources and applies digital humanities methods to clean up, enrich and analyse the data.[5]

Provenance research at the RMCA

The absence of a tradition of provenance research that focuses on the objects' context of collecting has had far-reaching consequences for the RMCA. At a basic level, until at least 2010, the institution could not indicate precisely how many 'ethnographic objects' it had. While the number is today reliably

1. Royal Museum for Central Africa.
2. Most outspoken among African Diaspora associations in Belgium has been Bamko. See: '*Dossier Musées coloniaux*,' https://www.bamko.org/post-colonial (consulted on 1 May 2022). Michel Bouffioux has had a series of articles on looted art at the RMCA in the Belgian edition of *Paris Match* between 2018 and 2020. See: https://www.michelbouffioux.be/2019/12/les-fantomes-du-musee-de-tervuren.html (consulted 1 May 2022).
3. In some, mostly archaeological, studies, this is called provenience. The history of postcolonial museum collections, however, remains most often discussed as provenance.
4. I have investigated a case where Africans voluntarily gave up objects by taking them to a Catholic mission station (Vanhee 2000).
5. This research builds on M. Couttenier's seminal early history of the Tervuren museum, titled *Congo tentoongesteld* (2005), and S. Van Beurden's *Authentically African* (2015), on the historical entanglement of the Tervuren and Kinshasa museums.

determined at around 120,000 for the 'ethnographic objects', published estimates in the 1990s and 2000s overestimated this figure by 200% and 150% respectively (Verswijver 1995; Dujardin & Vanhee 2007).[6] It is still not possible today to ascertain with precision in the institutional collections database how many objects there are from Africa (as opposed to America or Oceania) or from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), let alone how many were donated or sold to the museum, or how many were acquired by force. Four factors explain this situation.

Firstly, for over a century, provenance research at the RMCA focused essentially on two variables: the place or region where objects came from and the 'ethnic group' that made and used them. In the early colonial period, when the dominant narrative was aimed at describing supposedly lower stages of human civilisation (evolutionism), a description of these in broad terms was considered sufficient. From 1910, a more precise recording of geographical and ethnic origin was desired, when the study of the spread of customs and techniques (diffusionism) became the dominant paradigm (Couttenier 2005: 253-257). In addition to origins, materials, techniques, use and purpose, an interest in individual artists emerged from the 1930s onwards (Van Beurden 2015: 44-46).

Secondly, primary sources for provenance research are scarce. For large parts of the collection, we know little or nothing about the collectors and their methods. This is true for the more than 8,500 objects of the 'Old Collection' (acquired before 1910), the more than 2,600 objects bought from art dealer Henri Pareyn (1911, 1914), or the more than 1,500 objects donated by the Compagnie du Kasaï (1905, 1910, 1913), for example.

Thirdly, there is no tradition of conducting provenance research with Congolese students and scholars, despite promising avenues for this.[7] Knowledge of cultural heritage typologies, historical identities and regional topography is usually best developed and preserved in the countries of origin of museum collections. This is not different for Congolese heritage. In addition, many events in the colonial period, including the removal of objects, have left their marks on people's individual and collective memories. The discipline of African history has sufficiently demonstrated that such reminiscences can be studied critically (Vansina 1985; Tonkin 1992). Hence, the most promising direction for new provenance research is undoubtedly the development of a programme of jointly undertaken research in Congo.

Finally, a fourth factor is the lack of an effective provenance research tool at the RMCA. Today, the collections database is incomplete, including for

6. The roughly 9,100 musical instruments are today a separate collection. Whenever I refer to the colonial 'ethnographic objects' collection, they are included.

7. M. Couttenier has done fieldwork in Congo together with S. Baloji, researching the Lemaire expedition (1898-1900) (Couttenier & Baloji 2014). L. Busselen and P. Mumbembele have done research in Congo on the provenance of human remains in Belgian collections, as part of the HOME project (see L. Busselen, this volume). V. Van Bockhaven and F. Fufulafu have done fieldwork in northeast Congo researching collections from the Hutereau expedition (1911-1913), as part of the AFRISURGE project.

objects for which relevant metadata can be found in the acquisition files.[8] The adherence to a proprietary software for the management of the database considerably increases this obstacle. The software offers limited possibilities for visualising, cleaning up and batch editing of the data. As additions and corrections must be done object by object, this is tedious work.

A digital humanities approach to provenance research

I started exploring alternative ways to move forward with provenance research in the context of my contributions to the AFRISURGE project.[9] L. Förster has warned that 'provenance research must not be reduced to merely attaching interesting anecdotes to select objects or groups of objects' but rather 'systematically inquire about the making and unmaking of museum collections' (Förster 2016: 51-52). In what follows, I explain a three-step method I devised to indeed shift the attention from individual items to series of objects.[10]

The first step involved creating a new dataset by extracting the metadata for all objects from the institution's database and arranging them in a flat table (worksheet). I could then use various tools to detect and eliminate inconsistencies: places located in the wrong districts, districts located in the wrong countries, anomalies in chronology, ethnic terms in multiple spellings, etc. In making editorial decisions, I relied on my knowledge of the collections and of Congolese history and geography. In addition, I often consulted primary and secondary sources.[11]

The second step was to list all sequences of inventory numbers assigned to all acquisitions of more than one object, from the early years to the late 1940s.[12] For each sequence, I noted the collector's name, date of birth and death, and the acquisition file number.[13] This information was drawn from

8. In 2022, a new provenance research project was launched, which will aim, among other things, to remedy this problem. See: https://www.belspo.be/belspo/IMPULS/project_nl.stm

9. AFRISURGE is a collaborative project of the RMCA, Ghent University, University of Antwerp, and University of Uele (DRC). It aims to realize, among other things, a 'digital restitution' of cultural heritage in ways that accommodate contemporary critiques of 'digital colonialism'. See: https://www.africamuseum.be/en/research/discover/projects/prj_detail?prjid=717

10. I should specify here that I am a historian and not a data scientist. Over the years, I have acquired some intermediate-level skills to develop and edit large worksheets, mostly using MS Excel and OpenRefine.

11. A new overview of the archives kept at the RMCA was recently drawn up by archivist T. Morren (2022).

12. In 1949, the numbering system changed, which would require a different set of calculations from those described below. Some objects collected before WWI may not have been registered until after 1949, which is why, when discussing collector profiles, I qualify the percentages as 'at least'.

13. Part of this was a collaborative effort during my time as head of the division of Collection Management (2006-2012). My special thanks go to N. Dewolf. I carried out an extensive quality check on my own data input and that of others.

the acquisition registers and the acquisition files.[14] An example of such a sequence is '39884-39893,' corresponding to ten consecutive numbers assigned to objects whose acquisition histories share some important elements. Acquisition file #1103 tells us that they were 'collected' by military commander F. Festraets during the suppression of the Basongo-Meno revolt. The historiography tells us that this took place in 1931 (Vellut 2017: 180). I noted more than 1,500 such sequences and then converted them to a new worksheet where each row contained one object and where the shared sequence metadata were stored in appropriate columns.

In a third and final step, I merged the two worksheets, based on the inventory numbers, keeping track of the primary sources of the data in the various columns. I concluded the operation where possible with further clean-up tasks, data correction, and data enrichment. I also conducted extensive manual checks, consulting both archives and secondary sources. The result is a new inventory that is more complete and consistent, in particular with respect to the metadata that are important for provenance research.

Geography and chronology

Looking at the new inventory and the top level of geographical provenance, we see that 95% of the objects come from the African continent, the rest being from the Americas (3%) and Oceania (2%). Within Africa, we see that 80% of the objects originate from Central Africa, 9% from Western Africa, and 8% from Eastern Africa.[15] Smaller subsets are from Northern (1%) and Southern Africa (1%). For 1% of the African collection, the subcontinent cannot (yet) be determined.

Pursuing my analysis at country level, the share not (yet) identified is larger and amounts to 15%. Given that much 'collecting' took place in (later) border regions and was not documented with precision, some objects may never be unambiguously assigned to one single country. What does emerge clearly is that the DRC counts for at least 64%, or more than 78,000 objects in absolute numbers. Rwanda and Ethiopia each account for 2%, a dozen other countries for 1%. I have built up my 'country' column in the new inventory from older country data and from data identifying the region or location of origin of objects, or the related 'ethnic group' (e.g., for values such as 'Kasaï,' 'Basankusu,' 'Kuba,' etc., I have written 'DR Congo' in the country column).[16]

In addition to geography, I studied chronology, raising the number of objects

14. The acquisition registers are large format notebooks in which new acquisitions were inscribed in a one-line-one-object fashion. The acquisition files are folders containing letters, notes, and object lists related to one acquisition.

15. The divisions are those of the United Nations Geoscheme for Africa, with the exception that I use the term 'Central Africa' instead of 'Middle Africa.' See: https://unstats.un.org/unsd/methodology/m49 (consulted 1 May 2022).

16. As a secondary source to match ethnic names and countries, where that is unambiguously possible, I have used the 'List of Peoples' of the bibliographic database of the RMCA's Human Sciences Documentation Centre. See: http://societies.africamuseum.be/en/tp_ethnie

with a known registration date to 97%. By examining acquisition files and collector biographies, I came to the conclusion that over 40,000 objects were collected in Congo before the start of the First World War. This corresponds to at least 60% of all objects from DRC registered before the end of 1960.

Collectors

My main goal in developing a new collections inventory, however, was to get a better overview of collectors and collecting practices. When we take an object-centred approach, identifying the collector is often impossible. Even where names, dates, and places were recorded, we seldom find a description of the moment when objects changed hands and started their journey to the museum. There are some notable exceptions of well-documented cases of violent 'collecting' that have been published in the past decades.[17] As a result, the names of A. Delcommune, E. Storms, and O. Michaux are now irrevocably associated with the term 'looted art.'

Figure 1. Yombe *nkisi* collected during the suppression of a revolt by Commander V. Simon in 1892.
(EO.1967.63.241, RMCA collection; photo J.-M. Vandyck, CC BY 4.0.)

17. See Wastiau (2004) and Roberts (2013) on E. Storms, Ceyssens (2011) on O. Michaux, and Couttenier (2018) on A. Delcommune. In addition, there is the work of Michel Bouffioux (2018-2020), mentioned earlier.

The practice of confiscating objects in situations of conflict was more widespread than the recent focus on some well-known figures may suggest. Countless cases await further examination, like the small Yombe power figure taken by Force publique Commander V. Simon in 1892, during the violent submission of Yombe chiefs.[18] The object entered the RMCA collection through an exchange with the Royal Museums of Art and History (RMAH) in 1967.[19] Exceptionally, the object still had an old label attached to it, which allows us to identify it as early colonial loot (fig. 1). The acquisition files contain more references to violent collecting. A throwing knife that entered the collection in 1906, for example, was collected 'during the revolt in the ABIR [concession].' The object had served to 'render the people invisible during their attacks against Europeans.'[20] Elsewhere we see African soldiers of the Force publique involved in collecting and documenting objects. A small statue sold to the museum in 1902 was identified as 'a Bakongo fetish or amulet […] based on the first impression of several soldiers.'[21] Hostile relations between early collectors and Congolese often prevented any serious recording of information. About a series of objects 'collected' by military officer Rao in the Ubangi district, a note explained that the object names in the local language could not be recorded 'given the state of hostility of the Babanga people.'[22]

While we could go on for a while describing violent contexts of collecting, the question inevitably arises how representative these are, how significant in terms of the overall history of the RMCA's collections? Given the absence of primary sources for so many objects, the question seems impossible to answer in a strict and verifiable sense.

There is a way, however, to get one step closer to a more engaging historiography of the RMCA collections. Where possible, I have used the new inventory to assign profiles to the various people involved in collecting. For now, I have limited this profiling to those who collected in Congo before World War I. Although this delineation is primarily for pragmatic reasons – the time-consuming research of collector biographies has brought me this far – it is not without historical significance. Many collectors returned just before or during the war, and some did not survive. The war also brought a temporary halt to the influx of objects. The result of this profiling adds little precision at the level of individual objects, but it does contribute to our understanding of the historical development of the RMCA collection. In Germany, a similar effort was undertaken for collections at the Linden Museum in Stuttgart, with results that are interesting to compare (Grimme 2020: 55-59).[23]

18. On the events see Jenssen-Tusch (1902) and A. Vibeke Knudsen (2003). On V. Simon, see Coosemans (1952).
19. RMCA archives, DA.3.588. This is object EO.1967.63.241.
20. RMCA archives, DE 378.
21. RMCA archives, DE 218. This is object EO.0.0.144-1.
22. RMCA archives, DE 189.
23. 'Discomforting heritage: objects from colonial contexts in anthropological museums' (2016-2018) was a collaborative project between the Linden Museum Stuttgart and the University

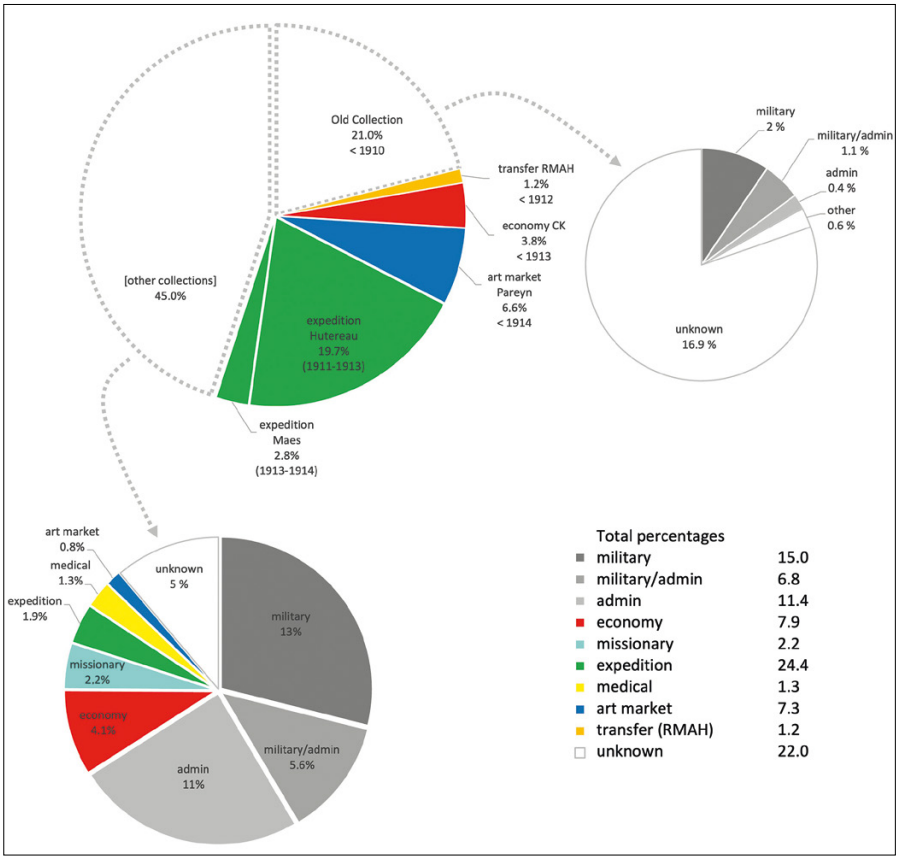

Figure 2. Pie charts indicating the profiles of collectors in Congo. All percentages relate to the number of objects collected in Congo before World War I (40,466 objects). (Charts made by author.)

The pie charts in Figure 2 present the result of this profiling in relation to some of the major parts of the collection. More than half of the over 40,000 objects collected in Congo before WWI were part of either one major acquisition or they had belonged to the so-called 'Old Collection'. These larger subsets, with approximate dates, are indicated by the largest pie on the upper left. A first large chunk, clockwise from the top, corresponds to the Old Collection. This is more than 8,500 objects registered before 1910, of which many had belonged to the Congo Free State and occasionally been on display before the creation of the museum in 1898. Couttenier (2005: 197-198) has demonstrated how these objects were originally classified according to a

of Tübingen. Grimme's 2020 study makes a comparison between collections from Namibia, Cameroon, and the Bismarck Archipelago.

grid consisting of twelve geographical regions and twelve thematic groups. Objects were identified with numbers like 'Eq.IX.344,' with 'Eq.' referring to the Équateur region, and 'IX' to the thematic group 'Warfare.' J. Maes started a new classification in 1910, the *Répertoire général* (RG), in which each object was given a single number. The Old Collection was renumbered, and the example above eventually became 'R.G. 55 2/1' (fig. 3).[24]

For only 15% of the Old Collection do we have names of collectors. The smaller pie on the upper right reveals that these were overwhelmingly people with military careers. In the absence of collection dates, I have put military officers who later took administrative duties in a category 'military/admin.' State officials not connected to the Force publique are in 'admin', and a small residual category has two doctors, a missionary, a trader, and an early art collector. Most of the objects have no known collector. The historiography tells us, however, that the Congo Free State was run mostly by military men (Couttenier 2005: 168). If we look at the kinds of objects collected, about one fifth are weapons, while the largest category consists of household items. It seems more than likely that the proportion of military men among the *known* collectors, 60 to 75%, equally applies to the rest of the Old Collection.

Figure 3. Shield collected by Lieutenant René Dubreucq (1869–1914) in the Équateur region of the Congo Free State. The object was part of the Old Collection. On the right is the old inventory card.
(EO.0.0.55-1, RMCA collection; photos J. Van de Vyver, CC BY 4.0.)

24. The process of renumbering took several decades. In the early 2000s, numbers like 'R.G. 55 2/1' were further adapted to 'EO.0.0.55-1' to make inventory numbers unique throughout the RMCA (fig. 3).

The next subset, clockwise, was much smaller and consisted of a transfer of objects from the Cinquantenaire Museum to the Museum of the Belgian Congo in 1912. For only a few objects, with acquisition dates between 1891 and 1902, do we have information on collectors. We know, for example, that some items were 'collected' by the military officer G. Gustin, who also donated to the Tervuren museum directly. The origin of the most impressive object of this transfer became known only ten years later, when the former commercial agent A. Delcommune (1922: 104) narrated in his memoirs how he had captured a large *nkisi* statue during a brief toll war in 1878 between the chiefs of Boma and the European trading houses.

The following subcollection corresponds to three consecutive donations made by the Compagnie du Kasaï (CK), a rubber company established in 1902 and long controlled by Leopold II. The objects arrived in 1905, 1910 and 1913, the last donation being the most important with more than 1,400 objects. The CK hoped to polish up its image with its support for the Tervuren museum. None of the acquisition files contains information about the original collectors and their collecting practices.[25] The historiography of the CK's rule over Kasaï, however, is clear enough to know that it would be absurd to believe that the CK's collections came about through free and fair transactions. The CK's activities were characterized by a degrading oppression of the Congolese population with the aim of maximizing rubber extraction and profits (Vansina 2010: 86-116; Vellut 2017: 172; Zana Etambala 2020: 41-47).

Next are some important purchases from the Antwerp-based collector and dealer in Congolese art and artifacts named Henri Pareyn. From 1903 onwards, Pareyn had been roaming the quays of the Scheldt River whenever a Congo-ship docked, to help men on leave from the colony get some extra pocket money in exchange for their exotic souvenirs. Through selective deals with colonials, he developed an eye for what was rare, old, or had aesthetic value. The Museum of the Belgian Congo bought about 80 objects in 1911, and a much larger collection of over 2,500 items in 1914 (Wastiau 2000; Couttenier 2005: 262-263; De Palmenaer 2020: 73-74). Today, Pareyn is celebrated as the founder of important museum collections, but his correspondence is mostly silent on the identity of the original collectors.[26]

The following chunk represents the over 7,900 objects collected by Joseph Armand Hutereau in the Uele region of Northeast Congo during an ethnographic collecting mission that took place from 1911 to 1913. Hutereau was a captain in the Force publique and had fought rebellions and commanded

25. RMCA archives, DE 42 (1905), DE 116 (1910), and DE 357 (1913). DE 42 contains the printed catalogue *La Compagnie du Kasaï à l'Exposition coloniale de Tervueren* (1910), 'sold to the benefit of colonial works.'

26. RMCA archives, DE 200 (1911) and DE 378 (1914). After Pareyn passed away in 1928, his collection was auctioned. A large part was bought by Sir H. Wellcome and these objects were transferred to UCLA's Fowler Museum in 1964 (De Palmenaer 2020: 75-76). Somewhat surprisingly, the 1928 catalogue mentions for some objects 'Collection Ct. Lemaire 1897.' Thanks to Carlee Forbes for drawing my attention to this.

several posts and military camps in the Uele region between 1897 and 1903. He was notorious among the local population, and this had an unmistakable impact on his 'collecting' mission. In some cases, it appears that he bought items from chiefs with whom he had been at war before (Vandenbergen 2019: 120). Hutereau collected in a hurry and in large quantities, without taking much time to record contextual information. He corresponded with colonial agents stationed in the areas he was soon going to search, and items were often requested from and handed over by local communities even before he arrived (Couttenier 2005: 272). In Tervuren, Hutereau's objects flooded the storage rooms, but because of the war, their registration did not begin until 1917.

Hutereau had not yet fully returned when another ethnographic collecting mission was underway, this time led not by a military man but by an ethnologist and museum curator named Joseph Maes. Maes' expedition started in May 1913 and focused on the river basins of Lukenie, Kasaï and Sankuru. In 10 months, Maes visited 120 villages and dispatched more than 1,200 objects. Unlike his predecessors, he was selective and mostly sought to complete the Tervuren collections. He carefully wrote down geographic locations but relatively little about the social context of the objects. Maes also often called on the help of colonial agents (Couttenier 2005: 278-284).

From the Old Collection clockwise down to the collecting mission of Maes, the upper left pie in Figure 2 represents more than 55% of the objects collected in Congo before WWI. For the remaining objects, I continued the profiling of collectors, each time tracing the individuals associated with the moment the objects began their journey to the museum. I consulted biographical information contained in the museum's acquisition files and in the Belgian Colonial Biography, besides other sources. The categories I have chosen are abstract generalizations, and as such questionable. Their (limited) usefulness lies in the fact that I have tried to be as consistent as possible while looking up and classifying several hundred individuals. The results are displayed in the bottom pie of Figure 2.

The largest category consists of military men who were on active duty when they collected objects. They represent 13%. I have labelled 6% of the objects as 'military/admin,' when they were collected by individuals whose career paths took them from a military to a more administrative occupation, and where the sources do not allow us to see where on that path the objects were collected. State actors who took on administrative roles and were not involved in the Force publique I have stamped as 'admin.' They are 11%. I have grouped commercial agents, logistical experts, engineers, plantation overseers, agronomists, and the like under 'economy,' making up 4%. 'Missionaries' represented a mere 2 % and occupy a place less important than they usually get in the narrative. Similarly low percentages were calculated for the profiles 'expedition,' to refer to those who were involved in smaller scientific explorations, for 'medical,' to categorize doctors and a veterinarian, and for 'art market,' to group some prominent society figures who assembled collections to show their worldliness and sophistication. A residual 'unknown'

category of 5 % corresponds to anonymous donations or collectors I have not (yet) been able to identify.

Conclusions

Provenance research today urges us to move away from an often-dead-end object-centred approach to an examination of series of objects bound by common acquisition histories. Through an application of digital humanities methods, I have prepared an improved inventory of the collections, marking an important step forward in our understanding of the relative size of the collection by continent, subcontinent, and country. This led to the observation that at least 60% of the Congolese objects registered during the colonial period were collected before the First World War. I then analysed who the collectors were and grouped them into broad categories that I related in part to some important acquisitions.

This research generates new insights into the relative importance of collecting in contexts of violence or political domination for the historical development of the RMCA's early collections from Congo. It brings us a step closer to answering questions that are central to the broader societal debate about the future destiny of colonial collections. While this study does not make an unambiguous distinction between what should and should not be considered 'looted' or 'illegitimately' obtained, it does rule out the recently resurfaced hypothesis that no more than 'one percent' of the objects would have been obtained through violence and oppression.[27] In Belgium, the myth of a peaceful conquest of Congo by the troops of Leopold II, who freed the people from slavery and initiated an era of progress, was upheld during much of the twentieth century (Vellut 1984: 671-672; Vanthemsche 2012: 70-72). Possibly one of the most persistent extensions of this myth is the idea that the RMCA's collections came about predominantly through fraternal exchanges and honest transactions.

At least 15% of the objects collected before WWI are documented to have been taken by military men on active duty, and at least 11% by administrative staff who similarly stood in a position of fundamental inequality vis-à-vis the Congolese. These numbers represent a bottom line. The historiography of the Congo Free State and the early years of the Belgian Congo allows us to reasonably assume that a significant part of the Old Collection, the Cinquantenaire transfer, the CK donation, the Pareyn purchase, the Hutereau and Maes expeditions, up to and including the objects collected by engineers, doctors, and high-society figures, were originally acquired by force or under pressure. Given the similarities in the nature of colonial rule by European

27. The idea was repeatedly voiced in the press in 2021 under newspaper headings such as '*Dermine geeft Congolese roofkunst terug*' (Dermine returns Congolese looted art) (*De Standaard*, 19/06/2021), 'Belgium leads in systematically returning stolen art' (*Brussels Times*, 7/07/2021), or '*Tout n'est pas spolié au musée de Tervuren!*' (Not everything is stolen at the Tervuren museum) (*L'Écho*, 21/11/2021).

powers throughout Africa, there is no reason to believe that among collectors in Congo the proportion of military staff should be lower than what was observed, for example, for the Linden Museum collections from Namibia (46% military) and Cameroon (41%) (Grimme 2020: 57-58). While this research does not confirm the suspicion of decolonial activists that at the RMCA everything was stolen, we cannot but arrive at the humbling conclusion that their assessment is undoubtedly closer to historical reality than what the more official discourse presents to us today.

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The role of oral sources in researching the provenance of cultural objects

Donatien Dibwe dia Mwembu[1]

Introduction

The restitution of cultural property has caused much ink and saliva to flow. At the 17 February 2022 summit in Brussels[2] between the leaders of the African Union and those of the European Union, the Belgian Prime Minister, Alexander De Croo, gave the Prime Minister of the DRC, Jean-Michel Sama Lukonde Kyenge, a 'complete inventory' of 84,000 ethnographic and organological objects (sculptures, masks, tools, musical instruments, etc.) of Congolese origin that the RMCA had amassed since 1885. The thorny problem facing us today is therefore that of documenting, if not defining, the circumstances of these cultural goods' acquisition and the identification of their places of origin, more particularly of the communities that own said cultural goods.

Oral sources, the subject of this study, contain collective memories, the life stories of informants, oral testimonies concerning events they experienced, interviews, rumours, etc. The use of one or another type of oral source depends on the objectives that researchers have set for themselves.

What do I mean by 'memories'? I start with Bogumil Jewsiewicki's definition: 'Memory, based on forgetting, selects and simplifies facts, it distorts, evolves, constructs and deconstructs itself, allows itself to be influenced, projects the past into the present and consequently works with anachronism' (Jewsiewicki 2005). But I use memory in the sense of remembering what history doesn't tell us, of giving one's point of view, of completing by remembering the aspect omitted, neglected, or forgotten by the written word – in short, of bringing additional information, of providing more details to better apprehend the situation at a given moment in history.

In this study, I shall use a few examples to show not only what oral sources contribute, but also their limitations in the search for the provenance of cultural objects and human remains. In other words, I'd like to answer the question of how, in this quest for origins, they complement written and archival sources.

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2. The sixth European Union-African Union summit, held in Brussels on 17-18 February 2022.

1. Researching the provenance of cultural objects and human remains

First I would like to say that I used the life stories and oral testimonies of informants in developing a social history of workers at the Union minière du Haut-Katanga (Dibwe dia Mwembu 2001). These oral sources allowed me, for example, to distribute the workers by their region of origin, to know the method of recruitment (forced or voluntary) and the means by which they were transported (by foot, by train, or by plane for Rwandans and Burundians) to the mining towns of industrial Haut-Katanga. These oral testimonies tell a different story from the archival documents, which express the point of view of the coloniser.

I also think that, in the context of researching the provenance of cultural objects, looted or not, the use of oral sources is very useful. Of course, it is tedious and expensive work. Nevertheless, the stories constitute an interesting and rich source of information for researchers seeking the origin of cultural goods. Oral sources can be compared with written sources and make it possible to correct, complete, and question the declarations of the alleged owners of works of art kept in public or private museums, and, finally, to fill in the void left when the place of origin is not recorded.

In this context, I share the opinion of Léon Verbeek, who notes that life stories 'provide the explanation of certain facts and behaviours that written history does not provide' (Verbeek 1999: 167). As Jan Vansina writes:

> 'Oral history always adds some elements of information to known history, it is almost always livelier than the written word and at the very least it nuances the interpretation of known written or oral documentation, sometimes even allowing a whole new interpretation' (Vansina 2008:18-19).

I believe that where collective memory is alive and marked by the functions of certain cultural objects, research into their provenance in the local community can lead to satisfactory results. Here are some examples.

1.1. The matter of the seven Wamba Mbuti skeletons[3]

The provenance of seven skeletons belonging to Mbuti people (formerly called 'pygmies') from the Wamba region in the northeast of the DRC is well known, as is the identity of their collector, Doctor Boris Adé of the University of Geneva. Regarding the circumstances in which these skeletons were acquired, Doctor Adé declared having exhumed seven pygmies' bodies of with the authorisation of the members of their respective clans. But investigations carried out by Christophe Goumand, scientific assistant at the anthropology unit at the University of Geneva, showed that the exhumation of the seven bodies had not been authorised by the leaders of the Mbuti tribe.[4]

3. They are on deposit at the Anthropology Unit of the University of Geneva.
4. Read 'Les sept squelettes pygmées de l'Ituri' (UNIGE 2020: 30-34).

A research project, called 'Retour des fantômes' ('Return of the Ghosts'), was initiated under the aegis of the Centre d'art Waza in Lubumbashi, its partners from the city of Kinshasa, and those from Europe, in Geneva, in collaboration with the University of Lubumbashi.[5] A fact-finding mission (Mulumbwa Luna 2022), consisting of representatives of these different institutions, visited the province of Haut-Uele, in the territory of Wamba, from 23 January to 8 February 2022, to gather information on the circumstances surrounding the acquisition of the seven bodies in Wamba by Doctor Adé, a Swiss doctor who worked at the Wamba hospital on behalf of the Belgian colonial administration in the 1950s. Investigators visited Bedegao, Bagoya, Maboma, Medjedje, and Kasongo: places the skeletons were said to have originated. They collected oral testimonies from villagers concerning the bodies Doctor Adé had exhumed and taken to Switzerland, the historical sites where these skeletons came from, and their thoughts on the prospect of restitution. It appears from the information collected that, among other things, pygmy communities were not consulted regarding the exhumation of the seven bodies. One of the grandsons of Doctor Adé's cook revealed that his grandfather had been responsible for excarnating the bodies and then coating the skeletons with a preservative. The idea of returning the human remains of these pygmies was not well received, but opinions diverged: a small segment of the population want to accept the bones and organise funeral rites for their burial. They would then like to erect a memorial in their memory. On the other hand, other people think that, according to their customs, burial is only done once, not twice. The return of these skeletons to their original environments risks causing serious disputes in the community. Indeed, according to their beliefs, the presence of these 'ghosts' could cast a hex on inhabitants. It would therefore be better to build public services such as hospitals, modern schools, etc., in the villages in their memory than repatriate their remains.

1.2. The issue of the 'Tippu Tip necklace'

The 'Tippu Tip necklace', worn by one of the wives of the Songye chief Kamanda ya Kaumbu, is another illustrative example. The following quote sets out the version expressed in the RMCA archives:

> 'Registered in the museum's historical collections in 1959, the necklace had already been in the institution for almost 10 years. Indeed, in 1949, Mr. Dandoudis Spiros, a Greek resident of the Belgian colony passing through the metropolis, offered the necklace for sale and deposited it in the office of the director of the Tervuren Museum, F.M. Olbrechts (1899-1958).
> The information then recorded by the latter indicates that Mr. Dandoudis

5.The Centre d'art Waza's partners, who were part of the delegation, are playwright Éva Marie Bertschy and musician Elia Rediger, both Swiss. These Europeans were joined by Kinshasa-based Congolese Michael Disanka and Christiana Tabaro and Olivier Mulumbwa Luna from the University of Lubumbashi.

> Spiros would have received the object from a Belgian mechanic, perhaps from Combelga (a Belgian-Congolese commercial company created in 1918 in Kabinda to work cotton from the Lusambo region).
> This mechanic is said to have been the owner of the necklace (from the 1930s to the 1940s) in Kabinda, where he himself purchased it (perhaps in the early 1930s) from Chief Yakaumbu Kamanda Lumpungu (1890-1936)' (Lacaille 2022).

Between 1993 and 2002, I collected a great deal of oral testimony in Kabinda and Lubumbashi concerning the Songye chief Kamanda ya Kaumbu, hanged by the colonial administration in 1936 (Dibwe dia Mwembu 2007). To these statements, it is necessary to add those that I collected at the end of the investigation carried out, at the request of Agnès Lacaille of the RMCA, in the capital of the province of Lomami, from notables and the current Chief Kamanda, grandson of the first Chief Kamanda, concerning the 'Tippu Tip necklace'. These oral sources offer plenty of information, some of which has been corroborated by certain archival documents from Kabinda District. According to these accounts, after the hanging of the great Songye chief Kamanda ya Kaumbu, the colonial administration committed terrible acts of destruction with the intention of erasing part of Songye collective memory in general, and the traces of this chief in particular. The colonial administration destroyed his residence and used the bricks to build a maternity ward in Kabinda, and auctioned his car and some of his more precious possessions, including the sword of honour given to him by Prince Leopold, the future King Leopold III, during his 1925 visit to Kabinda, etc. (Dibwe dia Mwembu 2007). It is in this context that the necklace he inherited from his father, Lumpungu Kaumbu, and worn by one of his wives, Mfute, came to be in the RMCA in Tervuren. The testimonies of Songye notables, including a short video of the current Songye chief Kamanda (Lacaille 2022), indicate that the Songye chief Kamanda ya Kaumbu never sold the necklace he had in fact given to his favourite wife, Mfute.

2. Combining oral sources and archival documents to understand the circumstances in which certain cultural objects were acquired

Oral surveys, supported by archival documents, can contribute to understanding the local contexts of certain cultural properties insofar as the source (local) population knows these objects' histories and community functions. Here are three examples.

2.1. Chief Nkolomonyi's power figure

Chief Nkolomonyi is now understood to have been a Songye from the village of Eyimeno, near the village of Basubukie, in the chiefdom of Tshofa, Lubao Territory, in Lomami Province. He was a companion of the great Tetela chief

Ngongo Lutete until the latter's arrest and death on Kabondo hill. He established himself as chief not only among the Songye but also among the Tetela. This is why the Belgian colonisers called him (erroneously?) 'chief of the Basonga Meno of the Batetela region' (Dibwe dia Mwembu 2020a).

A ritual practitioner, warrior, and eventually customary chief in the Songye region, especially in the chiefdom of Tshofa, Nkolomonyi owned many slaves over whom he had the power of life or death. He owed his reputation in part to his power figure. The latter played several roles: protecting him during war, revealing the enemy's position, making rain fall during hostilities to reduce his troops' visibility, preventing the enemy from seeing, transforming Nkolomonyi into a bird so he could reach his destination quickly or allow him to escape an opponent, hypnotise him, and catch him easily, etc. (Dibwe dia Mwembu 2020b).

Relations between Nkolomonyi and colonisers were not harmonious, and he resisted the occupation of his region by the militarist Congo Free State (CFS) regime, as illustrated by the abuses and forced labour it imposed on his people.

The death of 17 people allegedly by his hand (MAS collection, AE 1940 0001.0047. AE.4014) was the opportunity to sentence him to death the colonial power had long awaited. Ransacking the property of a slain great chief was common practice among the colonisers. The cases of Lusinga, chief of the Tabwa, in 1884, of M'Siri, king of Garenganze, in 1891, etc., are examples of this. The case of Chief Nkolomonyi of the Songye (1903) is therefore not isolated. It is in this context that the disappearance after his death of some of his possessions, in particular his protective power figure – which today occupies a showcase at Antwerp's Museum aan de Stroom in Belgium – has been condemned.

The power figure was brought to Belgium by Paul Louis Osterrieth, a German merchant who worked on the Sukudi Lubao plantations in the territory of Lubao. After his death in 1939, his family bequeathed Chief Nkolomonyi's power figure to the museum. Oral sources, i.e., collective memory, can help define the circumstances in which Paul Louis Osterrieth came to possess such cultural objects as this power figure (Dibwe dia Mwembu 2020a).[6]

2.2. *Chief Kamanda ya Kaumbu's sword of honour*

As Chief Lumpungu Kaumbu was getting very old, the colonial administration saw fit to choose his successor from among his children. Ngongo Lumpungu, the heir according to custom, was dismissed since he was considered by the

6. While preliminary research on Chief Nkolomonyi was carried out as part of the *100 x Congo* exhibition and catalogue (2020), I am currently involved in a more in-depth provenance-research project initiated by MAS, 'La collection congolaise du MAS, recherche de provenance dans une perspective belgo-congolaise', with the support of the Flemish government.

colonial administration to be 'a brute with dangerous impulses'. He was therefore relegated to the province of Équateur. The colonial authority chose Kamanda, for his youth, as the future heir of Chief Lumupungu. He was enrolled in the school for the children of customary chiefs to be introduced to European management methods for administrative entities and thus meet the eligibility criteria for the function of customary authority. At the start of his reign, Kamanda impressed his superiors: tax collection, contribution to the recruitment of labour for industrial Haut-Katanga, etc. It is in this context that, while passing through Kabinda in 1925, Prince Leopold offered him a sword of honour for his dedication to the colonial cause. But, over time, Chief Kamanda's behaviour became a thorn in the side of the colonial administrative apparatus: he was a nuisance. He wanted to write a letter to the king of the Belgians demanding independence for his 'country', Busongye. It was necessary to put an end to this behaviour before it contaminated other traditional leaders. The alleged double assassination for which he was hanged, of Kapinga wa Tshiyamba, a mixed-race woman, and her daughter, was only a pretext to get rid of him. The straw that broke the camel's back.

After he was hanged in 1936, his family and notables condemned the confiscation of some of his property. It was in this context that a rumour began to circulate throughout the Songye region about the disappearance of his sword of honour: the colonial administration had seized this sword as well as other objects belonging to him. Oral investigations, supported by archival documents or other written documents, could help to locate this sword or at least give an idea of its trajectory after Chief Kamanda's death.

2.3. Chief M'Siri's head

I use the word 'rumour' to mean inaccurate or exaggerated information which must be verified either to invalidate it or convert it into proven fact.

Rumours concerning the whereabouts of M'Siri's head have long circulated. Originally from Unyamwezi in Tanganyika, more precisely from southern Usumbwa, M'Siri was born to the Basabaga clan in 1824. He arrived in the region of Chief Mpande of the Sanga in Katanga around 1850 in search of ivory and slaves. On the death of Chief Mpande, his host, he subjugated the Sanga and expanded his kingdom, called Garenganze, making Bunkeya the capital in around 1880.

Despite pressure from the Belgians, M'Siri refused to submit to the authority of the King of the Belgians and allow Captain Bodson to plant the CFS flag on his territory. He was considered an obstacle to be eliminated since his refusal risked compromising the occupation of the territory by CFS agents for the benefit of Cecil Rhodes, who was working on behalf of England. He was thus assassinated by Captain Bodson on 20 December 1891. Bodson was in turn killed by one of the sons of Chief M'Siri present at the time of his father's death (Couttenier 2018).

After his assassination, M'Siri's body was decapitated. His head was to be taken to Europe, like that of Chief Lusinga of the Tabwa, seven years earlier,

in 1884. Two versions are circulating. According to the first, official, account by the Yeke royal family, it was taken to Belgium; according to the second, recounted outside the royal family and unofficial, it was abandoned by the porters of the Stairs expedition on Kashengeneke hill near Pweto, in what is now northern Haut-Katanga Province, while being transported to Europe. Oral surveys could be carried out first among the Yeke to collect these different versions, then in the Pweto area, among the populations living near Kashengeneke hill. It would then be possible to cross-reference and contextualise them, using written documents, particularly those from archives, to reach a shared version. The latter's contribution is important to the extent that they could refute or confirm one or the other version. But we must not lose sight of the fact that they do not always tell the truth. They express Europeans' point of view of.

3. The limits of oral sources

It should be noted that it is difficult to define the provenance of all ordinary (meaning owned by a family or individual) cultural and religious objects. Most of the looted pieces were acquired during the CFS era, a period of conquest and militaristic administration. Several punitive expeditions were carried out against Congolese leaders, fiercely opposed to European penetration and colonisation, or against those who disobeyed CFS administration. It is in this context that many of the cultural objects belonging to 'rebel' leaders were either destroyed or taken by, among others, military leaders. Sometimes oral sources are silent about them for various reasons. First, these pieces are old and belong to lost generations. Their descendants have never seen them and know nothing about their existence, their functions within the community, and their movement over time. This category of people cannot be useful in researching their provenance. There have also been many changes within many local communities since that time. As Christianity spread, converted populations abandoned cultural practices which they now consider diabolical and therefore incompatible with their Christian faith. In this context, it would be difficult to claim to know the circumstances in which were acquired the cultural objects subject to so much debate today.

Given the political issues of yesterday (the colonial period) and today (the post-independence period), informants sometimes say what pleases the current political regime instead of the facts as they happened concerning the conditions acquisition of a cultural object. Some informant statements, even those contained in archival documents, may have been fabricated or, at best, obtained under duress. We then start to see contradictions between the different informants around a cultural object. 'It is important to emphasise in this context that colonial archives – and archives in general – are not neutral institutions, in which events and processes are simply recorded and preserved, but that they produce, reproduce and/or actively obscure conceptions, ideas, categories and social realities' (Matthys & Van Beurden 2021: 358). It is nevertheless important to note that oral testimonies collected from the

population professionally and according to a considered methodology can be transcribed or preserved in the form of recordings (on a tape recorder), etc. In this case, they thus constitute oral archives and fill, in the same way as oral sources, the gaps found in written works.

By way of a conclusion

Archival documents give the colonisers' points of view. This leaves gaps that can only be filled by oral surveys. Muteba Kabemba Nsuya (1976: 143) notes that 'the views of Europeans [...] are often unfair or incomplete, and sometimes misinterpret the behaviour and reactions of Africans'. When researching the provenance of cultural objects, oral sources act as a kind of counter-expertise, confirming not only the provenance of the cultural object, but also the circumstances under which it was acquired. Sometimes they supplement or correct archival documents or written records. They are indispensable in provenance research. But they do have their limits.

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More than just paper… A possible role for the archives of the Royal Museum for Central Africa in provenance research and restitution policy

Tom Morren[1]

In the summer of 2021, the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) opened a new provenance trail through its exhibition in response to the growing international debate about the presence of African heritage in European and North American museums. It was accompanied by the publication of a series of articles about the origins of 'iconic' and 'characteristic' collection items which are on display in the exhibition rooms (RMCA 2021a). A year later, during King Philippe's visit to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a rare *kakuungu* mask was offered by the museum to the National Museum in Kinshasa as a symbolic gesture (Hodge 2022). Such visible initiatives are part and parcel of the former colonial museum's metamorphosis to a more modern entity, in which a special role is reserved for provenance research and restitution policy. In this article, we will discuss the role of RMCA's archives in the RMCA's path towards decolonisation.

1. Rethinking provenance and restitution

The importance of an open-minded dialogue between a people or country and the institutions holding their cultural artefacts has long been recognised in documents like the UNESCO 1970 Convention (UNESCO 1970) and in the International Council of Museum's *Code of Ethics* (ICOM 2004). The discussions following the Ouagadougou speech of President Emmanuel Macron (2017) and the subsequent report of Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy in November 2018 (Sarr & Savoy 2018) fuelled the debate over the presence of the cultural heritage of former colonies in the museums of former western colonial powers. There were high expectations for the reopening of the renovated AfricaMuseum a month later, but criticism followed soon (Mathys *et al.* 2019). The museum needed more than a single make-over; the realization grew that it was just a first step in a long and ongoing learning process in rethinking attitudes towards its collections.

In short time, the RMCA issued a statement on restitution policy (RMCA 2020), opened the provenance trail (RMCA 2021a), published provenance articles (RMCA 2021a), approved new provenance research programmes

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in collaboration with African partners (see below) and cooperated with the return of an important mask as a 'long-term loan'. This 'loan' status is a reminder of the legal and political boundaries met by the museum's policy. Public opinion however has urged Belgian lawmakers to play their part. Politicians in the federal parliament are defining the conditions for restitution demands and physical return of 'colonial collections' conserved in Belgian federal institutions (Projet de loi 2022). Likewise, the Belgian Federal parliament will have to decide whether they will follow the recommendations about reconciliation made by the group of experts attached to the *Congo Commission* (Mathys, Van Beurden *et al.* 2021).

In recent years, many new scientific publications on provenance research methodologies and related legal questions saw light, often inspiring one another. For example, the recently published Dutch study *Pilot Project Provenance Research on Objects of the Colonial Era* (PPROCE, March 2022) has created its own original methodology based on the experiences of a team of Dutch and Indonesian historians studying objects from the colonies in Dutch museums, drawing inspiration from other studies including German articles on art stolen by the Nazi regime and the AfricaMuseum's Provenance publications (PPROCE 2022: 18-55). According to PPROCE and the experts of the Congo Commission, we should see these new engagements in the light of 'a broader movement, aimed at restorative justice and transitional justice, aimed at moral but sometimes also material reparations for flagrant historical injustice towards various social groups' (PPROCE 2022: 11; Mathys, Van Beurden *et al.* 2021: 462-475).

How do archives fit in this story about provenance, restitution and moral reparation for historical injustice? In general, archives related to the colonial period or 'colonial archives' (Van Eeckenrode 2021: 25-26) are considered to play a key role in the reconstruction of memory and collective conscience, but they equally support restitution demands (Sarr & Savoy 2018: 35-36). Access to these sources of a shared past is firmly acknowledged as necessary by the experts advising the Congo Commission, which makes numerous recommendations on accessibility for the Belgian institutions holding these archives. For various financial, practical and legal reasons, these institutions experience difficulties in meeting the ever-growing expectations of researchers and public opinion (Mathys, Van Beurden *et al.* 2021: 347-397, 409-411). In the next paragraph, we will explain the challenges presented by the variety of archives to be found within the RMCA.

2. The RMCA archives and provenance research

This article does not seek to give a detailed account of the museum's institutional history, which can be read elsewhere (Leloup 2007: 21-50; RMCA *Annual Reports* 2007-2020). We must however stress two points. Since 1898, the museum has always operated under the supervision of various higher political and administrative authorities which strongly influenced the ruling ideology of the institution and determined the financial resources available to

it. In its quality as a federal scientific institution today, it is governed by federal laws and royal decrees, and is not associated with the Dutch, French or German linguistic communities, unlike most other scientific and heritage institutions.

Secondly, the museum has been and still is characterised by a strong degree of decentralization. There is for instance no central Collection management service: responsibility for animal specimens, minerals, ethnographic and archaeological objects, photographs, and historical documentation is attributed to the different scientific services which are organized in three departments (Biology, Earth Sciences, Cultural Anthropology & History). At the turn of the 21st century, new professionals in conservation, registration, and digitization joined the scientific teams, which in some cases resulted in the creation of separate scientific support services, like the Archives and Collection Management Service (ACM) within the Cultural Anthropology Department (RMCA *Annual Reports* 2007-2020).

Archives are to be found in every administrative or scientific unit of the RMCA. They result from the services' day-to-day activities, or they entered the service as a collection item (gift, purchase, etc.) of mostly private agents, institutions, or companies. In this article, we define the RMCA archives as the totality of documents in the possession of the museum. We will refer to the institutional archival production as 'museum archives', while those archives that were acquired for scientific purposes will be referred to as 'private archives' or 'archival collections'.

2.1. Challenges presented by museum archives

When talking about institutional archives, archivists or record managers usually make a distinction between those documents that are actively used within an administration, often referred to as 'dynamic archives' or records, and those that have lost their direct administrative purpose but possess a scientific, cultural or historical importance, mostly referred to as the 'old' or 'historical' archives. In a perfect world, record managers or archivists follow the documents' life cycle from desk to repository and can guarantee direct access to the contextualized information in concordance with regulations on the protection of personal or sensitive data.

The museum archives are public archives of a federal institution, and therefore subject to the Law on Archives of 24 June 1955 (amended on 6 May 2009) (*Belgisch Staatsblad* 2009). The 'active' use of museum archives in ongoing registration and research necessitates their presence on site, although the law stipulates that archives older than 30 years should be transferred to the State Archives. In his audit of the museum archives in 2007, however, state archivist Geert Leloup touched on the absence of a general archival policy (Leloup 2007: 51-54). His overview, in which he identified the most valuable archival series (i.e. documents or files resulting from the same activity and sharing similar formal characteristics), was a first attempt to tackle the fragmented archival policy, but it needs a follow-up plan to fulfil the quality standards of the State Archives and the digital era (*Belgisch Staatsblad* 2010).

The oldest archives suffer most from the non-existence of any instructions regarding their conservation, and are to a greater or lesser extent threatened by the perils of dispersion, neglect, and uncontrolled destruction. We make a clear distinction between the archives of the central services (board, human resources, accountancy, etc.) and those of the decentralized scientific services. The former were handled under three different thematic classification systems between 1898 and 1990. Despite the inherent flaws of the systems and some lost files, those archives have always known a continuous structure. Comparable systems were not applied in the scientific services where documents and files were kept in a way that best served research. As research topics and staff changed, papers lost their administrative or scientific purpose, and skills and resources to invest time in their care were often lacking (Leloup 2007: 51-54).

Today, the historical archives of most scientific services are stocked in different offices, closets, or cellars, and are only accessible with the help of a service staff member. The handling of the old archives of the central services was entrusted to ACM. Small portions of the archives are registered with Leloup's study as a source of inspiration and published in the database archives.africamuseum.be, but serious catching-up is needed. Our hope is for the database to be used by scientific services to register their archives.

To stop backlog growth, a general archival policy should also look at the present record management attitudes of creation (which action needs a record?), registration (which metadata are needed?), selection (what records will we keep for the future?), and conservation (how are we going to keep records accessible?). This has become more urgent since the digitization of the work process has created new technical aspects in managing archives for future use (digital formats, integrity, safety) (Boudrez 2008).

2.2. Museum archives and provenance research

The accessibility challenges posed by the museum archives influence the outcome of any provenance research as these archival series offer insight into the acquisition process of objects, specimens, and documentation. From the beginning, the RMCA board and scientific services created documents and assembled data about new collection entries in files and registers. They are used on a daily basis for basic collection registration in the RMCA's multiple databases and were among the first type of files to be digitised by ACM (fig. 1). Before any online publication of these documents could take place, legal issues surrounding General Data Protection Regulation (privacy of persons mentioned in documents) must be resolved.

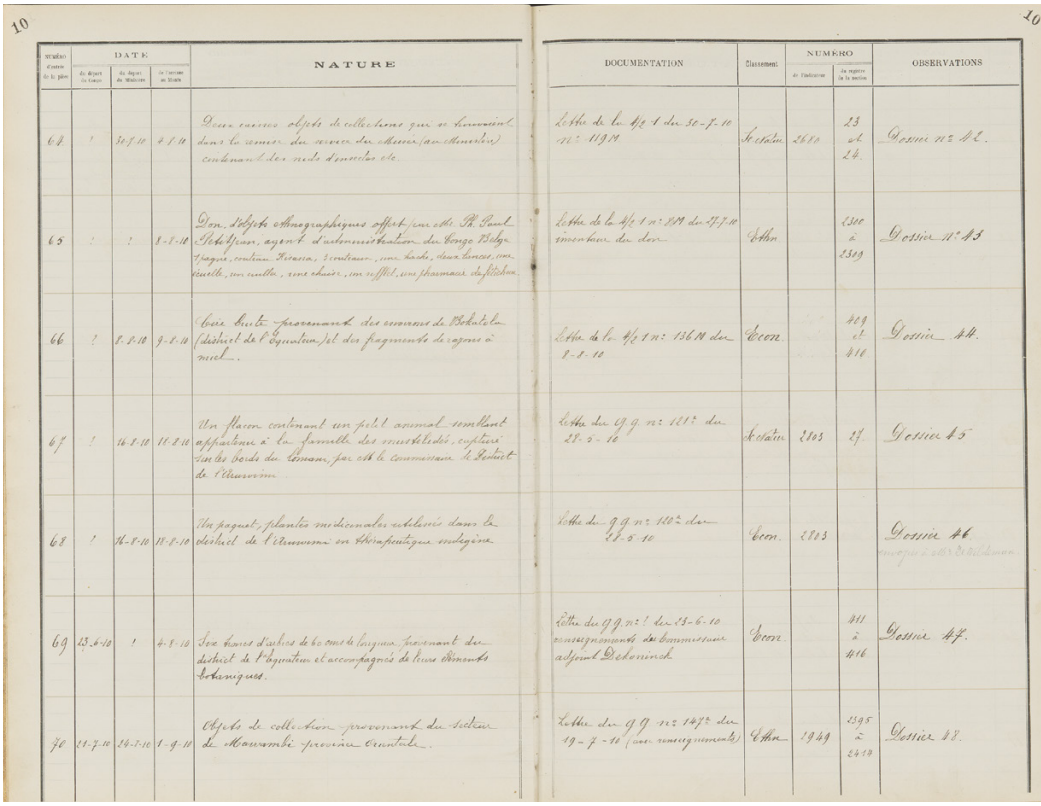


Figure 1. A fragment from the central register of new acquisitions (*Registre général d'entrée*). A staff member of the direction registers the new entries and refers to the scientific section which receives the collection items.
(AA.0-RGE.1, RMCA archives, archives of the Management Board and Support services; © RMCA.)

Acquisition files and registers often serve as the starting point of new international provenance and restitution projects involving the RMCA collections. Archival research on acquisition files of ritual power objects from North-East Congo (i.a. Armand Hutereau collection) looked at how their (digital) reintegration in these societies could contribute to peacebuilding (AFRISURGE 2020). In the same way, the files of the former Physical Anthropology service served as a foundation for the Human Remains Origin(s) Multidisciplinary Evaluation: project (HOME 2019).

Information about the collections also ended up in other archival series like scientific field mission files, the correspondence between the director and the heads of the scientific services, annual reports, or even bookkeeping files. The archives of the scientific services contain traces of a scientist's knowledge or expertise on certain collections. Some departments produced thousands of object cards with basic provenance information and comments of the scientists. The vast ethnographic collection assembled by staff member Albert Maesen (including the kakuunga mask) cannot be interpreted

without consulting his mission notebooks (fig. 2), while the Max Poll files in the biology department contains valuable information about the 'iconic' mounted elephant (RMCA 2021d).

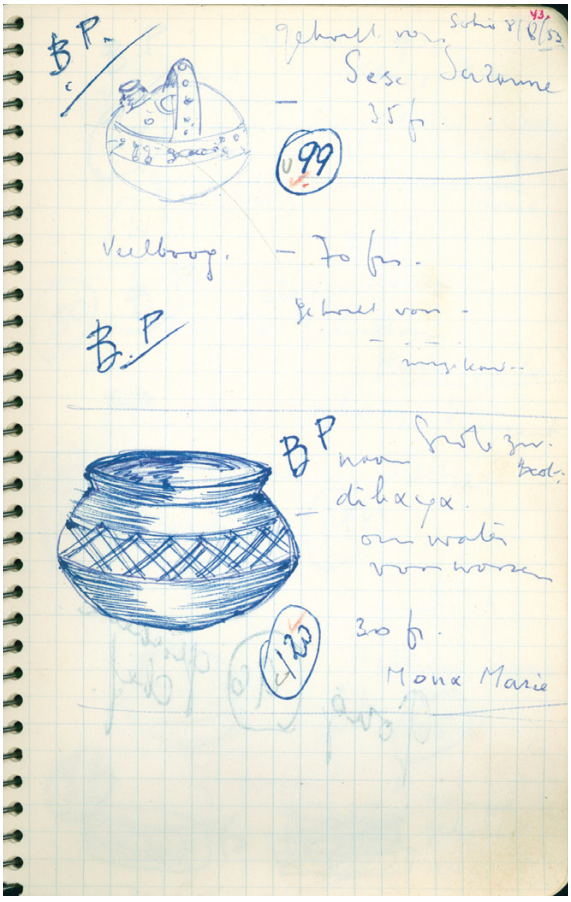
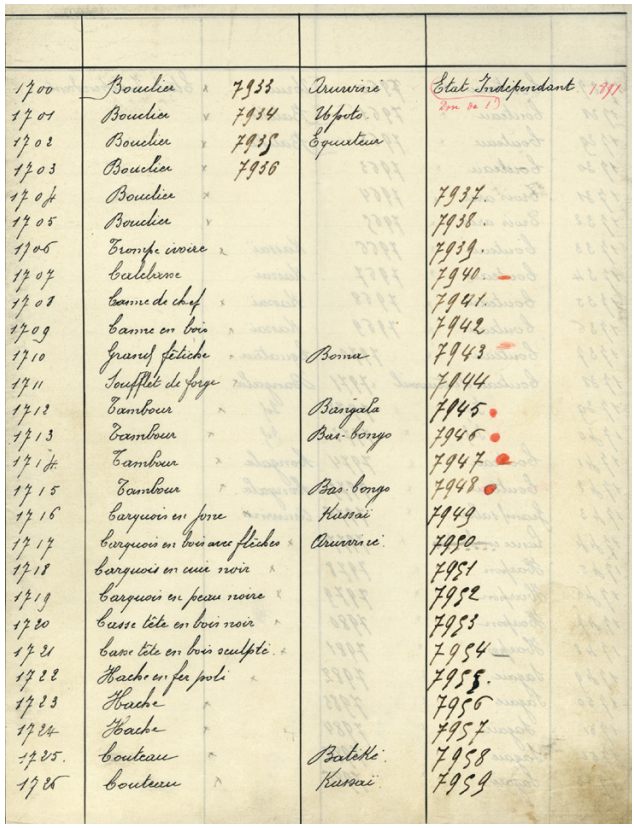


Figure 2. Drawings and notes from Albert Maesen's notebook during his scientific mission from 1953 to 1955. This is a fragment from the first of a total of sixty notebooks.
(DA.1.1, RMCA archives, archives of the Heritage Studies service; © RMCA.)

The quality of the museum's collection registration process often ranged from very abundant provenance data to hardly any. Other institutional archives or private papers prove to be equivalent and complementary sources for the RMCA's collections. The provenance of the Nkisi Nkonde statue which entered the museum as a gift of the Royal Museum of Art and History (RMAH) in 1912 (fig. 3) could only be traced using a combination of the written memoirs of Alexandre Delcommune and the RMAH archives (Couttenier 2018).



1700	Bouclier	7933	Arruwimi	Etat Indépendant 1911
1701	Bouclier	7934	Uboto	Don de M.
1702	Bouclier	7935	Equateur	
1703	Bouclier	7936		
1704	Bouclier			7937.
1705	Bouclier			7938.
1706	Trompe ivoire			7939.
1707	Cuillerne			7940.
1708	Canne de chef			7941.
1709	Canne en bois			7942
1710	Grand fétiche		Boma	7943
1711	Soufflet de forge			7944
1712	Tambour		Bangala	7945
1713	Tambour		Bas-congo	7946
1714	Tambour			7947
1715	Tambour		Bas Congo	7948
1716	Carquois en fer		Kassai	7949
1717	Carquois en bois avec flèches		Arruwimi	7950
1718	Carquois en cuir noir			7951
1719	Carquois en peau noire			7952
1720	Casse tête en bois noir			7953
1721	Casse tête en bois sculpté			7954
1722	Hache en fer poli			7955
1723	Hache			7956
1724	Hache			7957
1725	Couteau		Bateke	7958
1726	Couteau		Kassai	7959

Figure 3. The acquisition file documenting the gift of the Nkisi Nkonde (number 7943) by the Royal Museum of Art & History in 1912 did not even mention the name of Delcommune or the statue.
(DA.2.277, RMCA archives, archives of the Heritage Studies service; © RMCA.)

In order to retrieve the whereabouts of those sources, the State Archives and RMCA published a guide for archives relating to the former Belgian colonies of DRC, Rwanda, and Burundi (*Belgique, Congo, Rwanda et Burundi. Guide des sources de l'histoire de la colonisation*). Many departments and institutions connected to the colonial governments played an intermediary role in the acquisition process and have therefore often complementary archives (Tallier, Van Eeckenrode & Van Schuylenbergh 2021: 926, 940-954). A significant part of collection-related private archives mentioned in the guide are in Tervuren.

2.3. RMCA's private archives and provenance research

Every scientific service assembled papers of private persons and companies to document their collections. The private archival collections of two sections enjoy more attention than others. Since 1898, the Earth Sciences department services have been actively lobbying geologists and mining companies to obtain

geological data records (Chartry *et al.* 1998: 220-221), partly catalogued in the DRC Mining database (www.drcmining.org). From 1910, the History service acquired a considerable volume of archives from important colonial personalities, companies, and private institutions. Propaganda purposes played a prominent role in the initial gathering of the papers but more scientific criteria gradually carved out space (Morren 2022: 82-89). The corresponding finding aids are accessible online (archives.africamuseum.be). Other services have not openly promoted their collections of acquired archives yet.

RMCA's archival collections have served as a primary source for historical studies covering a wide variety of topics. When studying these archives as collection items, some general remarks about their provenance are also warranted. For instance, contrary to good archival practice, the museum seldom acquired the full documentation of a person or institution, but only the portion with clear links to the former colonies. In the 1930s, for instance, Émile Storms' widow donated documents related to her husband's colonial career, which only covers 8 of his 71 years of life. The acquisition of a person's archives was in numerous cases accompanied by other gifts. The museum also received from Mme Storms her husband's personal colonial attributes (uniform, firearm, compass), Tabwa power objects, and the skulls of three African chiefs. Storms' journals serve as a connector that provides provenance information for these items that were split up amongst the different scientific services of the RMCA (RMCA 2021c).

Another remarkable feature about the RMCA's private archives is that they do not incorporate many archives from African actors or institutions. This is actually true for many Belgian institutions whose private 'colonial' collections are mentioned in *Belgique, Congo, Rwanda et Burundi. Guide des sources de l'histoire de la colonisation (19^{e}-20^{e} siècle)*. The need to include African voices in the museum's archival collections was never raised as an issue; sources deriving from Europeans were prioritized (Couttenier 2013). This is not to say that the African voice is completely absent from the archives, but one hears it through a European filter. This shortcoming has renewed attention on the urgency of finding African sources before they disappear (Van Eeckenrode 2021: 35-36). The collection of accounts from oral tradition such as the Tabwa narration of the Storms raid (Roberts 2013) should likewise improve the quality of historical provenance research.

A final remark: qualifying these archives as 'private' obscures the fact that a significant part of the archives is composed of documents produced in the course of exercising a public function. Archives like those of Governor-General Félix Fuchs contain plenty of unofficial correspondence and preparatory notes for official communication, and could arguably be considered part of the public domain (Piret 2011). Others, like the Frantz Cornet archives, are the result of purposefully harvesting public archives in local administrations in Congo (Luwel 1960). Cornet's mission in the late 1940s revealed the painful absence of any legal framework for conserving (the unity of) public archives in Congo (and in Belgium), which only changed after 1955 (Piret 2015). This discussion between the private or public nature of archives appears highly technical and arbitrary but will nevertheless emerge in the debate over the possible restitution of colonial archives.

3. RMCA archives and restitution

The possible impact of the RMCA archives in provenance research will be determined by their general accessibility. African researchers in particular encounter numerous practical problems in consulting the sources of their history that are kept in Belgium (mobility, visa, clearance, etc.), mirroring the inequality between Africans and Belgians that characterised the colonial era (Mathys, Van Beurden *et al.*: 392-393). Likewise, governments of former colonies have problems accessing those archives produced by the local administration of their territory (the 'archives de gestion'). As mentioned, those archives are often hidden in private archives such as Fuchs's. This injustice is used as an argument for restitution, but transferring the archives would merely shift the direction of the inaccessibility problem (Van Eeckenrode 2021: 37-39).

The core of any solution should embrace the deeper understanding that those public and private archives were born in an European-African context and hold memories important to both communities. The archives of Josué Henry de la Lindi , a military man stationed in East Congo during the first World War, cover a history shared by the DRC, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, Uganda, Belgium, Germany and the United Kingdom (Thuriaux-Hennebert 1964). Which country deserves its possession the most? The idea of archives as 'shared heritage' could prove a stable foundation for involved parties to sit around the table and start talking about improving the current situation (Van Eeckenrode 2021: 39-41).

The guide for archives relating to the Belgian colonies of DRC, Rwanda, and Burundi is the result of such a conversation, as it addresses the questions raised by Belgian and African researchers for more transparency concerning colonial archives in Belgium. It is hoped that the project can be more permanent in nature, and be updated regularly and expanded with contributions from African institutions.

One step further is the ongoing project to digitize public and private colonial archives related to Rwanda, after a demand from the Rwandan government for better access (DGD 2019). Digital reproduction makes it possible to reach more people and opens the prospect of a symbolic physical return of archives to Africa. More importantly, by sharing the documents, Rwanda becomes an equal partner in determining the right to provide access to the shared archives. It entrusts them with the huge responsibility of protecting sensitive information about Rwandan, Burundian, Congolese or Belgian citizens that figure in those archives. This can only happen in an atmosphere of trust in which any prejudices (paternalism, suspicion, etc.) and legal impediments (declassification, GDPR) have been cleared (Van Eeckenrode 2021: 41-44).

This shift in mentality demands courage and persistence from all parties, despite bitter experiences from past collaborations and mutual political tensions. The RMCA archives harbour the shared heritage of so many shareholders, and archivists are often subjected to scepticism from those in a non-privileged position of access. This criticism often finds its way in highly

publicized events like the auction of an important journal related to the violent 'acquisition history' of a famous Luba Mask (Bouffioux 2019; RMCA 2021b) or even in outright conspiracy theories (Viewpoints 2019). Understanding the history of these frustrations, and recognizing the underlying injustices, should encourage us in finding new ways of improving access to the archives and, more importantly, engage in sincere conversations with our African colleagues.

Conclusion

The museum continues to walk on its chosen path of decolonisation, and we have demonstrated how the archives could play a role in it. As the archives within the RMCA contain traces of the collecting practices of the institution, they present excellent sources for provenance research on museum collections and can support future restitution claims. But their significance goes deeper as they contain the memories of shared histories between former colonial powers and their colonies. As a former colonial institution, the museum should thus engage itself in a decolonizing world by supporting efficient and widespread access to its archives, databases, and in-house expertise.

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Unearthing the past: ancestral traces in Feshi

Lies Busselen[1]

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The aim of this chapter is to critically examine the context in which Congolese bodies were disinterred under the orders of Belgian colonial agent Ferdinand Van de Ginste (1912-1947) after the Second World War between 1945 and 1946 in today's provinces of Kwango and Kwilu. Provenance studies of this text were carried out as part of the 'HOME' (Human Remains Origin(s) Multidisciplinary Evaluation) project. Based on research using archives and oral histories, we attempt to trace the process in which targeted communities became scientific objects. Oral testimonies show how the past and present are inextricably linked through memory. Taking this social (memorial) dimension into account is essential in provenance analyses to truly understand the 'dehumanising' nature of museum collections of human remains.

'HOME' was a Belgian federal scientific project which ran from December 2019 through December 2022. The Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) collaborated with six other partners: three institutions in Brussels (the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences, the Institut national de Criminalistique et de Criminologie, and the Royal Museums of Art and History) and three universities (the Université libre de Bruxelles, the Université de Saint-Louis, and the University of Montreal). The aim of the project was to generate a complete inventory of public collections of human remains in Belgium and to examine different avenues for repatriation.

Introduction

On 30 August 1947, the Congo Museum in Tervuren received a shipment of 229 human remains, including 185 skulls, from Léopoldville (present-day Kinshasa). The skulls had been sent by the provincial commissioner Firmin Peigneux (1904-1968) following the death of colonial agent Van de Ginste

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in July 1947.[2] Van de Ginste's 'collection' represents approximately 45% of the anatomical anthropology collections (AA), long housed at the Congo Museum (now the Royal Museum for Central Africa) before being transferred in 1964 to the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences (AR 1965: 6428). The inventory of the AA's collections was specifically produced between November 1897 and 1960 by the Congo Museum. The compiling and identification of these collections constitute the 'HOME' project's main objectives (AfricaMuseum 2021a and b).[3]

The general register of the RMCA's AA collections lists 518 human remains. But some of these records include several human remains, including bones, skulls, casts of faces and busts. According to the descriptions in the AA collections register, there is an approximate total of 622 human remains.[4]

These collections cannot be reduced to numbers. They represent first and foremost the ancestors of people who sometimes still live in the erstwhile district (today province) of Kwango. Although not all human remains can be identified with a person, family, or community, the categories and classifications applied to them and their preservation are, according to Tiffany Jenkins and many other researchers, dehumanising (Jenkins 2014: 104; Rassool 2015: 664; Mataga *et al.* 2022: 11). Tal Adler, artist and researcher at the Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage (CARMAH) at Humboldt University in Berlin, describes a private visit to the repositories of the Natural History Museum in Vienna: 'Seeing these two individuals placed within thousands more in the same cabinet in rows upon rows, dehumanized, was a cognitive dissonance and a very emotional experience'(Hannouch 2020: 124).

Nor do numbers and classifications tell us the exact number and identity of human skulls and bones that have been acquired in the name of physical anthropology. But these figures nevertheless reveal the fierce competition between ethnographic museums in the trade in human remains from still-living communities (Legassick & Rassool 2000: 1-3). The Van de Ginste collection is an example of this.

2. Letter 'Études anthropométriques Bapende et Basuku par feu Mr. Van de Ginste, F.' from Firmin Peigneux to Floribert Duchesne, 12 July 1947 (RBINS Archives, AA 45).
3. As part of 'HOME', detailed inventories of collections of human remains in federal scientific establishments were undertaken, the original inventory of the Congo Museum was transcribed and digitised over several months in 2020 and 2021, along with the Anatomical Anthropology (AA) files, which contain notes on the desecration of these remains.
4. Register of Anatomical Anthropology (RMCA Archives, Archeology and Prehistory section, 1897-1960, D.A.10.11).

Figure 1. Portrait of Willy Lusasi by Esopa Kandu Lusasi, Feshi, 25 April 2022. (Photo and © Esopa Kandu Lusasi.)

Waia Waia

It is 6:37 a.m. on 10 March 2022 in Feshi. Willy Lusasi (born 1963) is waiting for us at the front door of Sister Eugénie's, where we are staying. For our visit, he removed all the brush from around the grave of the colonial agent Van de Ginste. Willy is the son of a farmer who worked on a state farm in the 1940s and 1950s in Feshi, in the former Kwango District. He greets us with a song about Van de Ginste, territorial administrator of Feshi from 1945 to his death on 4 March 1947:

> 'Waia Waia will go up (come) tomorrow, whoever has not paid the tax (lack of tax) will be arrested (incarcerated)
>
> Waia Waia will go up (come) tomorrow, he who has not ploughed his field (lack of field) will be arrested (incarcerated)
>
> Waia Waia will come down (come) tomorrow, whoever has not paid tax (lack of tax) will be arrested (incarcerated)
>
> Waia Waia will go up (come) tomorrow, whoever has not paid the tax will be arrested (incarcerated)

> Waia Waia will come down (come) tomorrow, he who has not ploughed his field (lack of field) will be arrested (incarcerated)
>
> Waia Waia will go up (come) tomorrow, whoever has not paid the tax will be arrested (incarcerated).'

This song was performed to prepare the population for the arrival of Waia Waia, the local nickname given to Van de Ginste. This nickname designated a person who is often on the road (pers. comm. Muhika Liwanda Augustin, 9 March 2022, Feshi). In his study on power relations through the local language, Osumaka Likaka refers to the nickname 'Wai Wai' as a probable replica of 'Waia Waia'. These nicknames were critical expressions of the failures of the colonial system and induced forms of resistance against it. Each nickname locally illustrated the denunciation of a generalised injustice (Likaka 2009: 95).

According to Robert E. Smith, a Congo high school teacher from 1964 to 1993 who was researching the history of the Belgian Congo at the time, oral sources told him in the 1980s that Van de Ginste had been a notorious colonial agent, nicknamed 'Wei Wei' or 'Wai Wai' by the local population. Smith interviewed Kituba-speaking Congolese in the Due and Kwilu areas of Bulungu Territory in 1966 and 1976, and in the Bindungi area of Masi-Manimba Territory in 1981 and 1986 (Smith 2005: 182; pers. comm. Robert E. Smith, 4 January 2021). Bruno Kombo Kembo (1924), his former clerk, confirmed this nickname, which referred to Van de Ginste's strength and authoritarian approach to ensuring rubber production. If the population did not harvest enough rubber, but also when he was drinking in the afternoon, Van de Ginste used the chicotte without hesitation (pers. comm. Bruno Kombo Kembo, 8 March 2022, Feshi). In Masi-Manimba, Mukidi Audon (1933) told us that Van de Ginste often travelled between Masi-Manimba and Feshi because he was close to Léon Van Caeneghem, director of the Plantation du Kwango oil factory, built in 1930 in Masi-Manimba (AR 1951: 7302; Buelens 2007: 462), who had a notoriously bad reputation.

Van de Ginste's infamy among the population was well known in the region (pers. comm. Zushi Patty, 8 December 2022). The song was used, for example, to warn the population of his arrival. In each village where Waia Waia collected taxes, people were informed one or two weeks in advance (pers. comm. Willy Lusasa, 10 March 2022, Feshi): this gave them time to harvest and transfer agricultural products in the *paysannats*, created in 1921 (Gunst 2012: 45).

Figure 2. Photo of the Van de Ginste family house, Feshi, 10 March 2022. (Photo Lies Busselen © RMCA.)

Ferdinandus-Arthur Van de Ginste,[5] known as Fernand or Ferdinand, graduated in 1934 in commercial and economic studies from the Hogeschool Gent and in social and political sciences at the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB). In 1935, he entered the 6th line regiment of the Belgian army, where he obtained the rank of sergeant. Fascinated by biometrics, he was hired as a statistician in the Ghent forensic medicine laboratory of Professor Frédéric Thomas[6] (1906-1986), where practical training cantered on new methods for identifying crime victims. For three years Van de Ginste learned of conservation, autopsy, statistical research, and biometric investigation techniques (Cotmans 2015). Currently, this laboratory is in the Royal Academy of Fine Arts (or KASK in Dutch) building in Ghent.

Once he completed his training in Lingala at the colonial school and a month after his marriage to the accountant Elza Cortier, he left for the Belgian Congo on 17 June 1938 on the *Anversville* (*De Gentenaar* 1938: 6).

5. Personal file Ferdinandus Van de Ginste (ARA Archives AGR2, SPA, fonds Métropole, no. 9302).
6. Frédéric Thomas personal file (UGent Archives, 294).

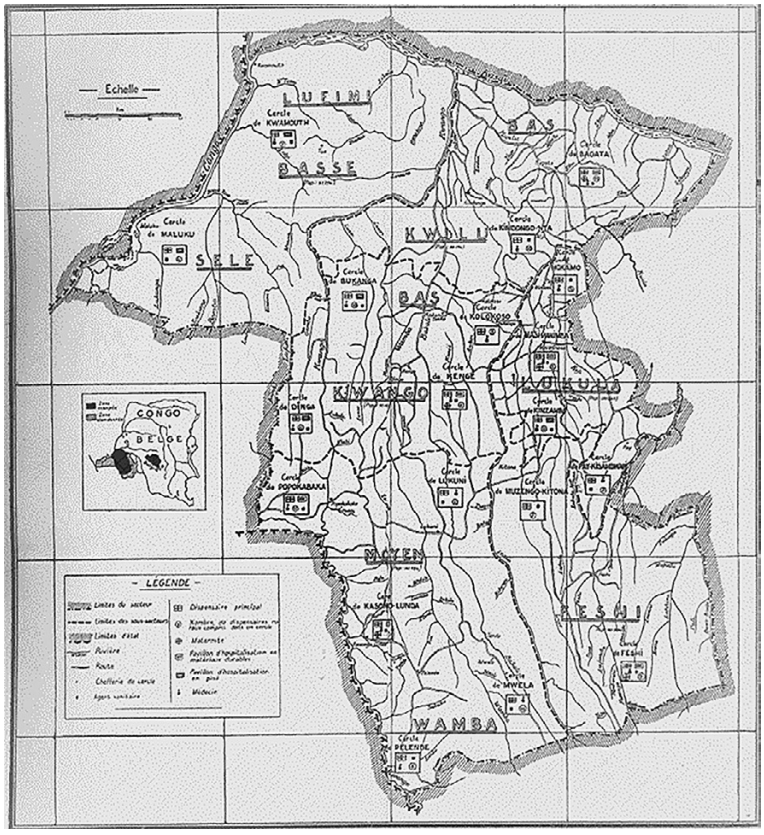

Figure 3. FOREAMI map of the former Kwango district.
(Extracted from De Brauwère 1938: 3; rights reserved.)

Van de Ginste was first hired as a regional officer as adjutant in the Force Publique in Lukala in the Masi-Manimba sector. After his military tour, he asked the Colonial Administration for leave without pay from 8 June 1940 to 20 December 1940. On 24 January 1941, Van de Ginste arrived in Feshi (communal administration: Feshi guestbook). At this time, he was still on leave for 'health reasons'.[7] On 1 July 1944, he was appointed to the rank of deputy territorial administrator first class by the Colonial Ministry. In January 1947, he became territorial administrator. Three months later, he committed suicide on 4 March 1947.[8] The circumstances of his suicide remain ambiguous. According to the official report, Kabamfu Kihani, Van de Ginste's wife, was the only witness that day, 4 March 1947. She lived with the territorial agent and their three children Jacques (1940), Jacqueline (1942), and Jeanine

7. Personal file Ferdinandus-Arthur Van de Ginste (ARA Archives, AGR2, SPA, fonds Métropole, no. 9302).
8. 'Rapport sur le suicide de l'administrateur territorial Van de Ginste F.', 15 April 1947 (*Ibid.*).

(1944) in Feshi and was known as his intermediary with the population. When Van de Ginste committed suicide, Kabamfu was pregnant with their fourth child, Jeannette Kihani Van de Ginste, born in 1947 (pers. comm. Jeanette Kihani Van de Ginste, 28 January 2022, Kinshasa). Kabamfu was also the daughter of the customary chief of the Ngongo community, Nfumu Kihani David from the Kimeso village in the Masi-Manimba sector, 130 km from Feshi. In addition to royal elegance, she had an ability to apply political strategies across different communities (pers. comm. Mukidi Audon, 12 March 2022, Masi-Manimba).

Papa Kembo, Willy Lusasi, and Augustin Muhaki have stated that Van de Ginste committed suicide because of a letter from Europe declaring the possible death of his father and/or other members of his family in the Second World War (pers. comms. in Feshi with Bruno Kembo Kombo, 8 March 2022, Willy Lusasy, 10 March 2022, and Muhika Liwanda Augustin, 9 March 2022). But Van de Ginste's personal correspondence reveals that his family was safe and alive. Furthermore, he wanted to continue research on the collection he had 'acquired'. He had registered for a doctoral course in colonial sciences at ULB.[9] Thus, on 15 February 1947 – fewer than twenty days before his suicide – he wrote in a letter to his sister that he was looking for accommodations near the university.[10]

Desecrated tombs

There is a vast literature on the desecration of graves in the context of creating anatomical and anthropological collections in universities and museums in European metropolises. The violation of graves and the trade in corpses for medical purposes (dissection in anatomy classes) were commonplace in Europe in the 19th century. This was a widespread pseudo-scientific practice coordinated in many cases by soldiers and colonial officials in the former colonies (Macdonald 2011: 28; Simpson 1996: 176). Van de Ginste was not the first Belgian to violate cemeteries in Congo in the name of science. He was preceded in the 1890s by a professor of natural sciences from Liège, Demeuze (Couttenier 2005: 112). In September 1945, more than fifty years after the Demeuze exhumations, Van de Ginste explained by letter to the interim director of the Belgian Congo Museum, Floribert Duchesne, that he wanted to organise the excavation of tombs.[11] At the end of the Second World War, however, violating graves in the name of physical anthropology was an extremely problematic, if not entirely discredited, practice due to the growth internationally of an anti-racist attitude and the real decline of scientific racism. Statements by UNESCO denouncing the

9. Letter 'Collection 200 crânes basuku' from F. Van de Ginste to Floribert Duchesne, 25 September 1946 (African Archives, AIMO (1580), 9053).
10. Personal letter from F. Van de Ginste to Marie Van de Ginste, 15 February 1947 (personal family archives).
11. Letter 'Collection 200 crânes basuku', *op. cit.*

existence of 'races', inspired by a generation of Boasian anthropological thought in the 1950s, created a tipping point in the international community (Ferguson *et al.* 2011: 121; Kyllingstad 2014: 218; Berg & Ta'ala 2014: 6). Racial thinking nevertheless persisted (Caspari 2003: 74). Just after the Second World War, the Anthropological Research Centre and the Anthropology Museum of the ULB were created under the direction of Professor François Twiesselmann (1910-1999), who in 1948 had borrowed and examined some skulls from the Van de Ginste collection.[12] The fact that the latter had been admitted as a doctoral student at the ULB in 1947 to carry out more in-depth research on these skulls suggests that a growing interest in anthropometry and eugenics had emerged in Brussels in the post-war years (Louryan 2010: 50).

Figure 4. Portrait of clerk Papa Brunog Kembo Kombo, Feshi, 12 March 2022. (Photo Lies Busselen © RMCA.)

The context surrounding the surveys and exhumations coordinated by Van de Ginste was described both in 1948 in a report by Maurits Bequaert (1892-1973), curator at the Tervuren museum,[13] and in 2022 by former clerk Bruno Kembo Kombo in Feshi. They assert Van de Ginste had the skulls dug up from the ground for money. Jesuit priest François Lamal, a relation of Van de Ginste's, who lived at the Kingungi mission in

12. Personal file of François Twiesselmann (ULB Archives, 1P 891A).
13. Maurits Leopold Marie Bequaert, a bilingual engineer with training in ornithology, worked for the colonial government from 1921 to 1934 and for the Belgian Congo Museum from 1936 (Van Noten 1989).

Kimbongo, 35 km from Feshi, having visited the museum on 2 February 1948, testified that he had paid money to 'whosoever brought a skull, whether of man, woman, or child'.[14] The excavation of graves took place in the Bwangongo, Bukatsona, Masengu, and Menikongo subdivisions at the end of the Second World War in 1945. In addition, Lamal explained that there was no common cemetery for the population, only isolated graves. Official cemeteries recorded the names of those buried.[15] Human remains were exhumed later between 1945 and 1946 near Feshi in the Basuku region, in the Kitoma group in the former Kwango district (pers. comm., Bruno Kembo Kombo, 12 March 2022).

(Legal) legitimacy

Bruno Kembo Kombo relates in detail that he himself was commissioned by Van de Ginste to have old and traditional cemeteries excavated by prisoners for 2.5 francs per skull. Skulls whose scalp and hair had not yet decomposed had to be reburied. Money was collected from the cash box in each area where people were exhumed. The clerk was then responsible for paying the village chief. The skulls were probably dug up in the Kibolo, Bindungi, and Masi-Manimba sectors. The population did not understand the purpose of these expeditions, but allowed themselves to be 'lulled' by the idea that these skulls were 'bigger and more important' than those of other communities in the region (pers. comm. Bruno Kembo Kombo, 12 March 2022 , Feshi).

Relying on article 19 of the decree of 16 August 1939, Van de Ginste on 24 October 1945 requested authorisation from Governor General Pierre Ryckmans (1891-1959) to carry out excavations around the Basuku communities in the territory of Feshi (*Bulletin officiel du Congo belge* 1939: 658-662). If he received authorisation, he would donate his collection to the Tervuren museum and publish his results in a Belgian journal.[16] On 13 December 1945, he obtained authorisation from Deputy Governor General Paul-Charles Ermens (1884-1957) to exhume skulls in the Kwango region.[17] He was warned that it was necessary to proceed with caution to avoid angering the 'native' population. Responding to this concern for discretion, Van de Ginste searched for places in deserted villages where there was no longer any ancestral worship. By 25 September 1946, he had already collected 147 skulls, but his goal was to reach a total of 200 pieces by the beginning of 1947.[18] At that time, Duchesne, director of the

14. Report 'Visite de François Lamal' by Maurits Bequaert, 2 February 1948 (RBINS Archives, AA 45).
15. *Ibid.*
16. Letter 'Fouilles en territoire de Feshi' from Ferdinand Van de Ginste to Pierre Ryckmans, 24 October 1945 (African Archives, AIMO (1580) 9053).
17. *Ibid.*
18. Letter 'Études anthropologiques A.T. Van de Ginste' from Paul Ermens to Pierre Ryckmans,

Tervuren museum, and minister Robert Godding (1883-1953) believed in the scientific importance of these collections.[19] On 28 July 1955, Van de Ginste's widow even demanded the return of her husband's collection following an offer to purchase it by Frédéric Thomas, a professor to whom Van de Ginste had been an assistant in his practical courses in forensic medicine at Ghent University.[20] That such practices could have taken place with the authorisation of the Belgian colonial administration at the very beginning of the post-war period raises questions. Indeed, at the same period, the Dutch physical anthropologist Hendrik Bijlmer (1890-1959) had deliberately stopped his cranial measurements in Indonesia in 1945, particularly due to the growing resistance of the colonial administration (Sysling 2015: 153). Since the interwar period, Norway had also reacted against the politicisation of racial studies. Nazism bred increasing distrust of the scientific claims for anthropometry (Kyllingstad 2014).

The 'pure race' paradigm after 1945

On leave without pay between 1941 and 1944, Van de Ginste developed an interest in the region's various so-called 'racial' groups. He set a goal of collecting at least 200 skulls for anthropometric research. The correlation between Wormian bones and the frontal suture was his main inspiration for studying ossicular chains between the occipital and parietal bones among the Basuku.[21] He was mainly inspired by the study *Contribution à l'étude du métopisme* (1935) by the archaeologist Jean Collette (1901-1936),[22] but he was also influenced by the British doctor and ethnologist Charles Gabriel Seligman (1973-1940) to describe the morphology of the Basuku and Bapende (1946). Van de Ginste had surely read *The Races of Africa*, published in 1930, which in 1938 was one of the most radical applications of race theory to the African population, in which the conquerors in Africa were described as superior to African 'races' and glorified for having brought civilisation. Seligman was a promoter of scientific racism. He adopted the classical Hamitic schema which theorised different racial categories based on moral characteristics. He disagreed with the political racism of the Nazi regime (Barkan 1992: 31) and had developed Hamitic theory, notably the idea that African populations – the so-called 'Negroid races' – were irrigated with 'Hamitic blood', superior to 'pure' 'Negroid races', by focusing on linguistic and societal differences. The Hamitic hypothesis was discredited, but its application was nevertheless

13 December 1945 (African Archives, AIMO (1580) 9053).
19. 'Letter from Floribert Duchesne to Robbert Godding', 18 March 1947 (RMCA Archives, D2).
20. 'Note from Maurits Bequart', 28 July 1955 (RBINS Archives, AA 45).
21. Letter 'Fouilles en territoire de Feshi', *op. cit.*
22. Jean Colette was an archaeologist and curator at the Belgian Congo Museum in the Anthropology and Prehistory section (1935). During his career, he gradually adopted evolutionary ideas (Couttenier 2012).

very popular in the years following the Second World War (Tarikhu Farrar 2020: 105) – precisely when Van de Ginste launched his project. Convinced of the possibility of the disappearance of the Basuku, he ruled out the 'pure race' hypothesis.[23] A very problematic expression in the post-war context of the 1940s. 'Purity' was understood as the static status of a race or population in relation to a characteristic trait or gene. The notion was supported by the idea of achieving so-called 'purity' through the isolation of a people (Lipphardt 2012: 74). In fact, this paradigm had already lost its legitimacy in the United States with the defence of diffusionism by Boas at the beginning of the 20th century, but in Western Europe, anti-humanist ideas had regained ground with the rise of Nazism (Barkan 1992: 280-281; Zimmerman 2001: 146; Kyllingstad 2014: 109). The question of whether Van de Ginste was aware of the anti-humanist character of his practices or whether he was blindly guided by outdated concepts remains partly unanswered. He examined the vermiform bone in the shape of an elongated triangle to compare it to the Inca bone, known as the 'supraoccipital or interparietal bone' in physical anthropology (Saunders & Albanese 2006: 292). Based on his measurements of the nasal and head indices of the 'natives', he attempted to classify the Basuku. With this in mind, he asked if he could examine the skulls in Tervuren, as he did not have enough material in Feshi.[24] These racial classifications were fundamental for the museum: knowing the ethnic origin of the skulls was essential in order to better understand power relations, according to Bequaert.[25]

Epilogue

F. Van de Ginste's pseudo-scientific maneuvers have left both scientific and social traces. Lamal still loaned skulls with help from Professor Twiesselmann in 1948. He continued to work on a statistical study which referred to Van de Ginste's study and pursued the same objectives as those of the doctorate envisaged by the latter. Its publication in 1949 established an incontestable link between the so-called 'extra' or Inca bone of the Basuku and a certain degree of intelligence (Lamal 1949: 11).

Two years after the independence of the Congo, Khoi Duong-dinh, a doctoral student in medicine at the University of Liège, became interested in the collected skulls, at that time housed in Tervuren (1962: 5-6). Most recently, physical anthropologist and professor Isabelle Ribot examined these collections in 2003. Her objective was to place the craniometric diversity of two sub-Saharan African populations in historical perspective (2003: 25).

During our conversations in Feshi, it was suggested that Van de Ginste's study of Basuku skulls was considered an honour. In fact, according to the city historian, the Basuku are much more intelligent than other communities

23. Letter 'Collection 200 crânes basuku', *op. cit.*
24. *Ibid.*
25. Report 'Visite de François Lamal' by Maurits Bequaert, *op. cit.*

in the provinces of Kwango and Kwilu (pers. comm. Augustin Liwanda Muhika, 9 March 2022, Feshi).

Both the social repercussions and the scientific consideration of these collections show the importance of collaborative, social research to better understand the provenance of human remains, as well as the routes and networks which allowed the movements of these so-called collections. Provenance research should not be purely results-driven, creating new classifications through updated inventories. For some, there is no need to ask whether their ancestors can be buried in their soil; for others, Van de Ginste's collection is proof of the absolute essentialist characteristics of the Basuku. This research could constitute a shared process which contributes to the decolonisation of different collective memories.

Lastly, inspired by a discussion entitled 'Necography: Death-Writing in the Colonial Museum' published in the journal *British Art Studies*, we believe it is important to grant a real mandate to our African, and, in this case, specifically our Congolese colleagues. Congolese-Belgian networks and museum landscapes in Belgium and the DRC offer the possibility of giving provenance research a mobilising and transformative role in deconstructing the imperialist genealogy of colonial collections of human remains (Hicks 2021).

Acknowledgements

We thank the coordinators of the 'HOME' project for their help. We also thank Maarten Couttenier, Els Cornelissen, and Jacky Maniacky (RMCA) for research inspiration and encouragement throughout the process.

Many people helped us try to highlight the dehumanisation caused by the acquisition of human remains from the current provinces of Kwango and Kwilu. We thank Agnès Keyzer Van de Ginste Kihani, who is the granddaughter of the eponymous territorial agent, for her close collaboration. We also thank Willy Lusasi, a worker in Feshi, and sociologist Pochel Kinzabi who helped us with translations from Kisuku to French, Bruno Kombo Kembo, Van de Ginste's former clerk, and the historian Augustin Muhika Liwanda, for their valuable contributions. Finally, we thank Professor Bruno Lapika, the honourable Fabien Boko Matondo, Emmanuel Kukabana, Fiston Buka Boté, Sister Eugénie, and many others for their support and advice during our fieldwork in Feshi.

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ExItCongoMuseum: a pioneering attempt to decolonise Tervuren. Boris Wastiau and Toma Muteba Luntumbue in conversation

Alisson Bisschop[1]

Exit the (colonial) Congo museum

From 24 November 2000 to 24 June 2001, the *ExItCongoMuseum: Un siècle d'art avec ou sans papiers* exhibition took place at the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) in Tervuren (Wastiau 2000b; Luntumbue & Poinas 2000). It took as its starting point a selection of 'masterpieces' from Central Africa which were part of the *Trésors cachés du Musée de Tervuren* exhibition (Verswijver *et al.* 1995), which returned to the RMCA after a tour in the United States, Canada, and Europe.[2] The curatorship and management of the project were entrusted to Boris Wastiau, then curator in the Ethnography section,[3] who gave it an unprecedented critical orientation. Indeed, Wastiau offered a new interpretation of these masterpieces, focusing on the provenance and the social and cultural life of the objects (Appadurai 1986), while denouncing exoticism and the myth of primitivism (Price 1989) surrounding the art of the African continent. Thus, not only did the exhibition break with the aesthetic and contemplative presentation traditionally required, but also with Western-centrism and the 'allochronic' discourse (Fabian 1983) on the cultural heritage of Africa. ExItCongoMuseum was also pioneering because of its interest in questions of provenance, the circumstances of acquisition, and the artists producing objects, emphasising both the need for historical contextualisation of ethnographic collections and the phenomena of translocation (Savoy et al. 2023) and museification.

Boris Wastiau also took the initiative, unusual for the time, of energising the museology of the institution through the integration of contemporary art by inviting visual artist and art historian Toma Muteba Luntumbue

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1. Recipient of a doctoral scholarship in Art History at the University of Liège (2019-2023). This text comes from the author's doctoral research devoted to the Belgian-Congolese (de)colonial question in the field of contemporary art in Belgium (under the direction of Professor Julie Bawin).

2. This was a major traveling exhibition on a selection of 'masterpieces' from Central Africa from the RMCA collections. It was initially shown in 1995 in Tervuren then, between 1996 and 1999, in nine other museum institutions in Canada (in Hull), in the United States (in Washington, Fort Worth, San Francisco, New York, Saint Louis, and Chicago) and in Europe (in Düsseldorf and Barcelona).

3. Now the Heritage Studies service.

as guest curator (Bawin 2018). The 'artist as curator' (Bawin 2014; Jeffery 2015) then decided to invite a selection of visual artists[4] responsible for investing the spaces – physical and ideological – of the Tervuren museum, thus questioning the legitimacy, history, and the visual regime of this place of memory, in particular the colonial ideology which underlies it. This collaborative and participatory model (Golding & Modest 2013) with contemporary artists was then taken up on multiple occasions by the institution, whether during residencies, temporary exhibitions, or in the museum's newly renovated permanent exhibition. The critical exercise undertaken by Boris Wastiau, Toma Muteba Luntumbue, and all the invited artists therefore attempted to thwart what Barbara Saunders described as the hegemonic 'Congo-Vision' conveyed for more than a century by the RMCA (Saunders 2006). It was therefore a first attempt to decolonise the institution avant la lettre, transforming the 'Musée Glouton' (Wastiau 2002) in Tervuren into a 'contact zone' (Clifford 1997) and place of exchange. This text presents the memory of this emblematic project through the eyes of the two curators of the exhibition, who agreed to revisit this unique experience.[5]

1. 'An exercise in decolonising the museum': Boris Wastiau's view

Alisson Bisschop [AB]: When you were asked to present a selection of the museum's 'masterpieces', you immediately set out to deconstruct the supposedly scientific origins of the ethnographic collections, while questioning the institution's museological practices. ethnographic collections, while calling into question the institution's museological practices. Why did you opt for this approach, and how did *ExItCongoMuseum* come about?

Boris Wastiau [BW]: When I was hired as curator in the Ethnography section in 1996, I was quickly struck by the gap between what the museum was showing through its African collections and the reality in the field, in relation to my own experiences in Africa. At the time, the museum was already coming under increasing criticism from visitors and scholars alike. For my part, as a trained anthropologist, I had done extensive fieldwork, particularly in Zambia, studying various aspects of the culture of our contemporaries. I had also frequently visited the Great Lakes region and travelled in North and West Africa. So I became interested in how to present these objects, most of which were from another era, in a more

4. The contemporary section of the *ExItCongoMuseum* exhibition presented the works of Philip Aguirre y Otegui, Edith Dekyndt, David Hammons, Audry Liseron-Monfils, Toma Muteba Luntumbue, Johan Muyle, Barthélémy Toguo, and Luc Tuymans.

5. I warmly thank Boris Wastiau and Toma Muteba Luntumbue for the time they each devoted to my questions. The extracts transcribed in this text come, on the one hand, from a videoconference interview by the author with Boris Wastiau on 30 May 2022 and, on the other hand, from a written correspondence of the author with Toma Muteba Luntumbue, 29 June 2022.

contemporary way, and at the same time I began to pay more attention to the history of the collections. At the same time, at the end of the 1990s, the RMCA, in collaboration with the then Institut des Musées nationaux du Zaïre (IMNZ), was planning a major programme to inventory the objects in the collection. The Tervuren Museum explained to me the procedure for 'returning' objects that had already been used in the past, dating back to the 1970s, between Belgium and Zaire. The then director, Dirk Thys van den Audenaerde, asked me to write about this transfer of objects and I realised that there were still many myths about it. Although Belgium had indeed undertaken to send two hundred and fifty masterpieces from the Tervuren Museum to Zaire to strengthen the collections of the IMNZ, and although it proudly claimed to have done so, this was not the case. Not only had the original list of selected works of very high quality been completely abandoned, but the objects had also been systematically replaced by others, the latter of completely mediocre quality. The one exception was a royal *ndop* Kuba figure. What's more, the texts and notices accompanying the return of the objects were full of tricks, falsifications and errors. I was therefore surprised that all the talk at the time about not getting involved in restitution issues was based on the myth of a Belgian contribution that had never been made. Worse still, the collection items sent to Zaire had not been properly restituted, i.e. their legal ownership had not been changed.

On the way, the director also asked me to organise an exhibition in Tervuren in connection with the museum's one hundred and twenty-five masterpieces, which had just returned from an international tour of the United States, Canada and Europe. I immediately said that I was not in favour of this type or concept of exhibition, as it was no longer relevant, but I was told in a rather authoritarian way that it was non-negotiable. So I got to work, although I did propose the idea of a new scenography and a new essay to accompany the exhibition. *The ExItCongoMuseum* project was born.

AB: What were your sources of inspiration (theoretical or practical) for designing *ExItCongoMuseum*?

BW: In particular, I borrowed the idea of the 'social life' of things from the volume edited by Arjun Appadurai, at a time when we were beginning to talk more and more about this notion of the biography of objects. There was also the approach of the Dutch museologist Mary Bouquet. In terms of the exhibitions themselves, I was personally inspired by the museology of Anthony Shelton. In fact, it was very much in line with the critical museology that was also to be found in Switzerland, in the ethnological museums at that time. Then there was James Clifford and this idea of the museum as a 'contact zone', a platform and a place of exchange. I was particularly interested in how the appropriation, translation and museification of objects, their naturalisation in the museum system, completely changes their meaning. It was also about showing how the owners of the

objects could impose any meaning and any use on them. This was the first direction that the *ExItCongoMuseum* exhibition took.

The second direction was again in contrast to the museum collections held at the IMNZ, which had a real anthropological background. These collections had been collected as part of missions documented by fairly large scientific teams, usually professional teams of anthropologists, linguists and ethnographers. In Tervuren, on the other hand, it seemed to me that the overwhelming majority of these masterpieces were not actually constitutive of scientific collections, but rather came from the mission activities of missionaries, merchants, judges and a whole range of other people. I also wanted to show that for each type of collector, the object had a different meaning – whether it was an object of art, a trade item, a sign of 'fetishism', and so on. In the end, they formed a collection, but not a 'scientific collection'. We took all these objects out of the 'colonial juice' from which they came. This was the starting point for the proposal of the *ExItCongoMuseum*.

AB: Your essay on the 'social life' of the museum's masterpieces (Wastiau 2000b) was published the same year as your report on the transfer of ethnographic objects between the RMCA and the IMNZ (Wastiau 2000a). Were the questions of provenance and restitution already linked in your research at the time?

BW: Yes, they were. Although the issue of restitution is more pressing today, especially in the public sphere, it is by no means new. In museums, the first questions about restitution were asked even before the independence of certain countries. In Belgium, on the other hand, there was a certain silence. For a long time there was a reluctance to address the subject. In the vocabulary of the 1970s, one spoke of Belgium's 'contribution' to the Congo, but certainly not of 'restitution'. I was also struck by the discrepancy between the nature of the Tervuren museum's collection, which was not very scientific, and the counter-intuitive message that the RMCA had been sending for years. At the time, a large poster at the entrance stated that all objects and samples in the museum had been legally acquired, mostly for scientific research. As a curator of the museum, I could not accept such a statement, which was completely false, and so I looked for a way to express my disagreement, especially to my colleagues and visitors to the museum.

AB: The objective was therefore to question the history of the collections, but also the history of their presentation by the museum...

BW: The experience of being the curator in charge of the exhibition was a discovery for me. When I realised that I was in the largest 'African' museum in the world – and there would never be another as large – I found it fascinating that history was so disconnected, if not completely absent. At the same time, there was an enthusiasm among a younger generation of researchers who felt that these collections were no longer connected

to reality because they were housed in an anachronistic museum. The *ExItCongoMuseum* was an important moment. However, it took place in a context in which the trends and stakes of public opinion were very different from today.

AB: In your opinion, it's important not to separate the natural sciences from the humanities. Why?

BW: This reflection came later, when I continued my career in Geneva and continued to work on colonial issues. A further step was taken when the question of decolonising museums became more explicit. Because while the *ExItCongoMuseum* was certainly an exercise in 'decolonising the museum', we weren't talking in those terms at the time. In Geneva, I felt it was important to return to what I had not done in Tervuren, which was to deconstruct both the discipline and the notion of ethnography itself. I had tried to show that the collections in Tervuren were not ethnographic and that they had not been assembled in a scientific context, but I had not really questioned ethnographic practice as a colonial practice. It became much clearer to me that this process of robbery in what was called ethnography was in fact the 'icing on the cake' of a much broader colonial process, which was the appropriation of so-called natural resources and the exploitation of populations. After all, no one went to Africa to collect masks and build collections, with the possible exception of a few dealers. This was obviously no objective of a colonization project. We also need to pay more attention today to the origins and colonial use of 'natural history collections'. They have enormous potential for deconstructing the colonial legacy, an opportunity that the renovated museum has clearly failed to seize.

AB: What do you think of the increasingly frequent inclusion of contemporary art in ethnographic museums? *ExItCongoMuseum* was a pioneering example in the case of the RMCA. What has changed since then?

BW: In Tervuren, in 2000, it was the first time we'd had an artist curate an exhibition. For me, it was part of the process of sharing the curating and opening up a perspective, so that you don't have a single vision. I wanted to work with someone who could look at these Congolese objects in a way that complemented my own. Nowadays, the free combination of all forms of creation – traditional, industrial, artistic or otherwise – and the interaction with people – artists, craftspeople, etc. – is what interests me in exhibitions – whose work is relevant to the theme of the exhibition. theme of the exhibition. From this point of view, Toma Muteba Luntumbue's approach was an eye-opener for me, because it was he who really showed me a way forward that I would never have thought of.

Personally, I'm not convinced about the contemporary artworks on display in Tervuren today. They are not at the centre of the presentation of the historical tour and they seem to be completely anecdotal on the side of the natural sciences – even though there is a real potential there. I think

we could, on the one hand, reconstruct the colonial museum as it existed, strengthening the heritage aspect and introducing a critical apparatus that would enable visitors to understand the underlying ideology. Then, on the other hand, we have to completely break out of this disciplinary compartmentalisation, with contemporary issues and cross-disciplinary approaches, working in a completely different way with contemporary artists in the broadest sense – visual artists – and, as Toma Muteba Luntumbue made clear over twenty years ago, working with a diversity of artists for what they have to contribute to the discussion, not because of their common Africanity.

AB: If you had to do an exhibition like *ExItCongoMuseum* again, would you do it differently today?

BW: The idea, which obviously wasn't taken up later, was that we had to break down the museum itself, the museum process and this compartmentalisation of disciplinary fields, hence the pun in the very title of the exhibition. If an *ExItCongoMuseum* had to be rebuilt today, it would fully integrate the resources of the natural sciences and the historical collections in order to develop a more critical approach. In other words, it would explain to visitors that the Congo was not colonised to build up these ethnographic or natural history collections, but to exploit its so-called 'natural' resources. We therefore need to look at the extractivist logic and all the violence behind the collections, starting with the natural science collections. These can reveal the extent of intensified extractivism, the degradation of ecosystems, and the impact on the very populations enslaved to carry it out. Naturalist collections are perhaps the best placed to reveal the quest for prestige and power, and even to show the true megalomania at the heart of the colonial project: suffice to think about the largest and most majestic elephant of Congo, long sought after and then killed and stuffed for exhibition purposes. This megalomaniacal aspect could also be a thread in the museum's narrative. Finally, a new *ExItCongoMuseum* should put the Congo back at the geographical centre of a cultural and multipolar Africa, from an international perspective: a genuine historical reconstruction where the ins and outs are not limited to Belgium and the Congo, but open up on the international stage. Finally, I would redo an *ExItCongoMuseum* by giving more means and decision-making power to the artists, whose critical eye and methods engage and confront visitors in a constantly renewed way to rethink the collections.

2. 'An exhibition without models': Toma Muteba Luntumbue's view

AB: When Boris Wastiau approached you as an artist and curator for the *ExItCongoMuseum* exhibition at the RMCA, you immediately chose to invite other visual artists, but also to take over the permanent spaces of

the museum, a first in Tervuren. What motivated your decision and which rooms of the museum were occupied by contemporary works of art?

Toma Muteba Luntumbue [TML]: Initially, my participation was to be a continuation of the exhibition, in a temporary space located in the attic. The main part, organised by Boris Wastiau, was the subject of a reflexive scenography innovative for the museum at the time. It was a question of bringing about both a rupture and a continuity. I was asked to imagine an original presentation of twenty-five objects Boris Wastiau selected from the collection. The space seemed too cramped to me and I found the idea of presenting contemporary works and 'ethnographic' objects preposterous. The tightness of the budget forced me to create a 'shock scenography', and the idea of intervening in the galleries took hold. A person from the museum advised me to speak directly with the technical director of the institution, from whose naïveté we benefited greatly. Through a series of arrangements and oblique negotiations, I was permitted to extend the exhibition into the permanent collection rooms. I presented this overflow to the director and the head of the Anthropology department as a desire to energise the journey and promote the museum's collections. The choice of rooms was made based on their symbolic and thematic meaning. Intervening in the interstices or voids left over the years by successive scenographic devices has proven to be the most effective strategy for disrupting the narrative of colonial scenography. I extended the exhibition tour almost to all the useful parts of the museum. The rotunda, the architectural heart of the building, housed a work by the Belgian artist Johan Muyle titled *L'Impossibilité de régner*, in relation to a major political event in Belgium, the refusal by King Baudouin to countersign the law on the decriminalisation of abortion in 1990. This work evoked the immobility of the museum and its resistance to change.

AB: Certain works were exhibited among the natural history collections, and these were also related to 'extractivist' and colonial practices. What were the effects of these confrontations?

TML: A performance by the artist Audry Liseron-Monfils during the opening, in a room presenting the agricultural economy, addressed certain current issues in a prescient manner. The artist entered an old display case containing plant samples. His performance dealt with cash crops (palm nuts, cotton, rubber, tobacco, cocoa, sugar cane, etc.) favoured to the detriment of biodiversity and local Congolese production. The predatory economy and forced labour were also presented in another room, through the work *Chasing the Blue Train* by David Hammons. This installation conjured the deportation of black slaves and their exploitation as a raw material for the American economy. This powerful metaphor was evoked by the blue train crossing a pile of black coal, identified with the black male body. In a corner of the economics room, we had placed three paintings by the Belgian painter Luc Tuymans

referring unambiguously to Nazi crimes. The paintings, painted from archive images, showed curtains whose fabric was made from the hair of deportees murdered in the gas chambers, a gold tooth torn from the jaw of a corpse, a lampshade made from human skin. These works, with their innocent appearance, were chosen in discussion with the artist, with whom I shared an anger at the narrative devices which glorified the 'colonial adventure', obscuring colonial crimes against humanity and nature.

AB: Were you, at the time of *ExItCongoMuseum*, interested in questions of provenance and restitution? And what is your current view on these questions?

TML: To my knowledge, at the museum, only Boris Wastiau was concerned with this subject and had devoted a work to it. The subtitle of the exhibition, 'Un siècle d'art avec ou sans papier' problematised the supposed anonymity of 'tribal' art, while casting a very critical light on the social life of objects, their physical and ideological movement, their change of status. The part of the exhibition placed under my responsibility was interested in the framework itself, that is to say the devices of display, to the ideological meaning of the museum showcase: my concern was the overall visual regime. Currently, we are at the start of a project investigating the meaning and definitive belonging of objects that must shed a 'tribal arts' aura inherited from a century of Western colonial museology. We must also have the courage to consider that restitution, despite the real structural difficulties, should no longer constitute a problem, but open a period of reflection and experimentation to build emancipatory principles at the service of local audiences. I remain pessimistic regarding the supervision of Western museum institutions. How do we avoid exporting the methods of the Western cultural entertainment industry?

AB: What is your view of the near-systematic invitation of contemporary artists to so-called 'ethnographic' museums today?

TML: The continuing invitation of contemporary artists testifies to the neutralisation or flexibility of the spaces of this type of institution. I measure the time that has passed since *ExItCongoMuseum*. We always run the risk of conformity or cosmetic intervention. For the artist, there is the real risk of fascination/hallucination when faced with the archaic power of the museum's rhetorical means. A trip through the reserves can plunge you into a state of astonishment which risks enlisting you in the ideological war machine that is the museum. Museums increasingly function as basic platforms with the same characteristics onto which it is possible to graft minor elements of variation. A bit like the industry does with automobiles that use the same engine under a different body. Contemporary artists intervene as agents whose function would be to bring singularity to the museum, to create something

new or transgressive at a lower cost, according to the logic of cultural marketing.

AB: What is your opinion on the selection of contemporary works in the permanent exhibition in Tervuren?

TML: I do not currently see any work likely to undermine the narrative device of the museum's permanent collection, the purpose of which seems to be to create or maintain a form of confusion.

AB: If you had to do an exhibition in the same vein as *ExItCongoMuseum*, would you do it differently today? What would be your 'ideal' exhibition in a museum like the one in Tervuren?

TML: In its two parts, *ExItCongoMuseum* was an exhibition without a model. It took its uniqueness from the way it was cobbled together at the time. The lack of resources contributed to the discovery of new possibilities. For Boris Wastiau and myself, it was our first experience as exhibition curators. *ExItCongoMuseum* was the result of our meeting and collaboration with another group of people motivated by a desire for change, who discovered themselves while working, by trying to modify the operating methods of a colonial museum resistant to any evolution.

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II.

TRAJECTORIES AND INTERSECTIONS

Figure 1. Paul Wissaert, *The Leopard-man of Stanley Falls*, 1915.
Plaster figure, decorated with ethnographic objects.
(HO.0.1.371, RMCA collection; photo F. Dubus, 1953; rights reserved for the artwork.)

Leopard-men objects: on the materiality of colonial oppression

Vicky Van Bockhaven[1]

This contribution seeks to stimulate critical reflection on how objects, particularly in the museum, impact our view of the world around us. Recently, there has been a surge in provenance research sparked by a tendency in European culture politics to renegotiate relationships with formerly colonised countries. To put it sharply, objects have thus regained importance as political capital, in the framework of promises for restitution. In 2022, the Belgian government granted 2.2 million EUR to the RMCA to carry out a large-scale provenance research project. At the onset the political purpose was to verify whether 40 % of the RMCA collections, for which the origin is unknown, were potentially looted and qualify for restitution. This political incentive, to prioritise provenance research, represents a significant break with earlier decades, wherein colonial collections were frowned upon as biased instruments of colonisation, and were a much lower priority in research. This example demonstrates that colonial collections can swiftly take on new, potentially politicised, meanings. Intersecting with this, this contribution reiterates that, if looting may be a very direct and undeniable expression of colonial violence, the latter remains instilled in collections in deeper, intricate, and symbolic ways which, if not explicated, still affects people today. The case explored is that of leopard-men, a type of ritually-empowered militia, which operated in Northeast Congolese societies between ca. 1890 and 1940. Although the precise origins and collection methods of the RMCA leopard-men objects are unknown, the 'cultural biography' of these types of objects, or their most likely trajectories (Kopytoff 1986), is entwined with a variegated set of repressive tactics. These entail direct physical interactions in the framework of colonial policing activities entailing trespassing, seizure and exposure of objects, yet also occur on an indirect and ideational level, which is harder to expose.

The Belgian colonial government portrayed leopard-men as irrational, animal-like killers, eclipsing their complex role in colonial society, and legitimising their repression as anti-colonial secret societies. Ethnographic objects played an important role in this as proof, both in leopard-men trials and in the museum. Besides series of leopard-men costumes and claws, the RMCA holds an infamous, racist *Leopard-Man* or *Anioto* statue (fig. 1) dressed with leopard-men objects and inspired by a staged photograph sent to the museum

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in 1911 (fig. 2). The statue's main figure is clad in a bark-cloth tunic and hood – replaced by replicas in the 1980s –, iron claws, and wooden sticks to make leopard paw impressions in the soil, and threatens to attack an innocent sleeping victim at his feet. Investigations of leopard-men objects and archives of trials demonstrate that the costumes and claws were not used for the killings, yet they are foregrounded as killers' costumes in colonial representations to portray leopard-men in a certain way, with the Tervuren sculpture as prototype. The cultural biography of these types of objects demonstrates very clearly the exceptional persuasiveness ethnographic objects hold as proof of life in the colony.

Figure 2. *Anioto* ready to attack, mise-en-scène.
(AP.0.1.6554, RMCA collection; photo Charles Delhaise, 1913.)

Despite postcolonial scholarship which unmasked colonial collections as biased sources for the study of Congolese societies, their persuasive quality as proof still persists until today, particularly in a museum context. Although leopard-men iconography has been increasingly criticised for its racist character since the late 1980s, the first amendments in the display only occurred around the year 2000 (Halen 1988; Mbiye 1993). First Chéri Samba's painting titled *Réorganisation* (fig. 3) was commissioned and displayed next to the statue. It represents a tug of war between museum personnel and Congolese trying to remove the sculpture from the museum. Samba's painting represents an act of iconoclasm on a colonial icon. The painting scrutinises the colonial appropriation of the leopard-men representation for the purpose of colonial propaganda, whilst showing Congolese who reclaim ownership of their history. When the museum reopened in 2018 after a large-scale renovation, the leopard-man statue had been taken from its pedestal, and repositioned in a sculpture graveyard, containing statues from which the

museum distances itself. A blown-up version of the Congolese artist Chéri Samba's painting was used at the entrance of the new permanent display to symbolise a new beginning, which was advertised in press releases. However, there is a disjunction between the display and how leopard-men truly operated which remains unexplained, so that the colonial violence underlying the statue remains hidden in plain sight. If the museum does not make crystal clear the ideological use of the objects as proof, visitors may still be persuaded by the ethnographic objects to 'believe' something like leopard-men once existed as portrayed. The statue easily invites comparison with recent media representations from East Congo as a conflict zone.

The following section elaborates on the theoretical consideration of ethnographic objects as persuasive scientific proof, thereby serving as the basis for enduring symbolic violence. Thereafter the repression of leopard-men in the colonial context of indirect rule is discussed. Subsequently, the cultural biography of leopard-men objects in trials and in the museum context is laid bare. In the final section, attention is drawn to ideological uses of objects-as-proof in current decolonisation and restitution efforts, giving way to new, potentially political uses.

Figure 3. Chéri Samba, *Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale. Réorganisation*, 2002. Oil on canvas, 104x134 cm.
(HO.0.1.3865; RMCA collection; photo J.-M. Vandyck © RMCA; Courtesy Galerie Magnin-A, Paris, for the artwork.)

Translations of the captions (top to bottom):
'This sculpture is still ours, it has made us who we are today' (from Lingala).
'It is indeed sad but…' (from French).
'and actually the museum needs to be completely reorganised' (from Dutch).

Unpacking the leopard-men problem theoretically: objects as proof or objectified phantasy

Postcolonial anthropological theory challenged Western ideas of objects as the opposite of humans, inert and mute. This particularly applied to objects categorised and used as scientific proof, including ethnographic objects (Appadurai 1986: 4; Latour & Porter 2010). Alfred Gell (1992) methodologically considered particular kinds of objects, including art works and sacred objects, as human-like, possessing agency, to explain how they impact people. When people start hypothesizing about such objects, the process of cognitive deciphering also solicits the senses and a bodily form of knowing. The limits encountered in knowing the object may lead to a feeling of wonder or awe, or 'enchantment'. Leopard-men objects, both as evidence in police investigations, and as scientific proof in colonial ethnography and in the museum, provoke such a process of enchantment. Anthropologists such as Nicholas Thomas (1991) and Michael O'Hanlon (1999) have focused on enchantment related to ethnographic objects associated with violence on the part of the colonised, such as 'cannibal forks' or 'man catchers'. Through the process of hypothesizing on these objects, they become objectified phantasy, and an enigmatic, enchanted experience is activated. In this process, the objects are granted a salience they never had in reality. As such they can be instrumentalised to portray the colonised in a certain way. Moreover, these enigmatic objects regularly reappear in colonial fiction, notably in crime or adventure stories, as objects of enquiry. Thomas (2003: 80) noted: 'It could be suggested that, in this literature, material culture has a dangerous potentiality that it has never acquired in social theory'. In such cultural expressions, indirectly violent messages are intricately interwoven in the story, more difficult to eradicate, and impact spectators unconsciously. I want to focus on the 'dangerous potentiality' of objects as enigmatic proof, which is a key to understanding how leopard-men objects have been dealt with in the past yet also in recent times in the museum.

Social theory has moved on since and critical awareness of how people are impacted by and instrumentalise their material environment is common. Still, how the RMCA has dealt with the leopard-man statue in recent times, or how European governments go about their restitution policies, demonstrates that such critical awareness still cannot be taken for granted. The dangerous potentiality of objects can linger or be revitalised in conjunction with new factors. Having worked as a researcher in the RMCA around 2000, I am convinced that different factors collided to inhibit more profound research of the leopard-men display at that time. In the 1990s postcolonial paradigm, Africanist historians broadly favoured a positive take on African histories and shunned challenging topics such as leopard-men for fear of reinforcing stereotypes, which is known as the Trevor-Roper trap (Fuglestad 1992). The awareness that colonial collections had been propaganda instruments turned them into biased sources for research, and in Belgian museums and academia collection research became a low priority. Moreover, around 2000, the

RMCA was under heavy international scrutiny as a few popular publications excavated the violent exploits of Leopold II in Congo.[2] This strongly impacted public awareness in Belgium, sparking outrage and unease. The RMCA was under pressure to deal with this history yet followed the general tendency in museology and Africanist historiography, sticking with positive messages about Africa and discussing colonial violence too distantly and neutrally. If Fowles (2016) wrote in 2016 that objects had become the ideal subject, allowing historians and anthropologists to avoid writing about non-western people, this was not the case in Belgium. This particular Belgian context explains why, between 2000 and 2018, fairly little attention was devoted to the study of difficult collections, i.e. looted collections or collections embodying racist ideas such as leopard-men objects. During this time the statue was often used to illustrate press articles about the museum's violent history, keeping its enigmatic quality alive. The RMCA continued to capitalise on the leopard-man statue's enigmatic quality, particularly during its renovation, whilst remaining unaware of the dangerous potentiality of the ethnographic elements as proof. In what follows, I will use the cultural biography of leopard-men objects during the colonial era to focus on the colonial violence embodied in these objects-as-proof. There are two key institutions which have played a special role in the consideration of leopard-men objects as proof, respectively in the colony and in the metropole, notably the legal court and the museum. Although the court and the museum have different goals, they are part of the same colonial power system, and partly operated on the same grounds, notably the scientific regard for material evidence.

Indirect rule and colonial ethnography as context

The most foundational colonial violence was constituted in the colonial representation of leopard-men as irrationally violent and anti-colonial secret societies, eclipsing the fact that colonialism itself was the main cause for the killings getting out of hand. The basis was the policy of indirect rule: local institutions were evaluated for their suitability to be co-opted as the basic foundation of the colonial system. Colonial ethnography became a means of evaluating Congolese institutions as suitable or not, which also tied in with a moral characterisation of 'good' or ' bad'. The lines between colonial governmentality and science were thus blurred, and colonial ethnography became embroiled with repression. Institutions that lacked a centralised, chief-like form of leadership and that were based on initiations and esoteric knowledge were easily branded as potentially harmful and anti-colonial secret societies as they were difficult to control. In the region concerned, the collective boys' initiation *mambela* was the basis for an acephalous, segmentary sociopolitical organisation connecting chains of villages among Bali and Ndaka populations. The boys' initiation leaders who operated on the village level

2. This was particularly due to Adam Hochschild's (1998) bestseller *King Leopold's Ghost* and Peter Bate's (2003) documentary *White King, Red Rubber, Black Death.*

commanded small groups of leopard-men. The following summary on *anioto* and its relationship with *mambela* reflects earlier research based on colonial ethnographies and leopard-men's testimonies at the trials (Van Bockhaven 2018, 2020).[3]

Mambela, as a boys' initiation, was fundamentally concerned with social regeneration, preparing boys to become men, and restoring the balance with the spiritual world. *Mambela* was aimed at safeguarding the community and its 'wealth-in-people', a concept used in African studies denoting a connection between good leadership and collective wellbeing. Therefore *mambela*, and similar boys' initiation societies in the region were organised at moments of crisis, when collective healing was required. This also tied in with protecting the community by means of leopard-men militias. The organisation of an *anioto* expedition was decided at the *mambela* council, consisting of the *tata ka mambela*, the leader of the initiation, and the *ishumu*, the customary guardians of the village lineages. The *ishumu*, in their role as village or family judges, ritual specialists and masters of war and peace, played a crucial role in the summoning of *anioto* whenever it was deemed necessary. While the position of *anioto* was hereditary, the *ishumu* selected the most courageous and compliant *mambela* initiates to obtain an additional initiation as *anioto*. The *ishumu* selected candidates on the condition they possessed the '*bolosi*', the supernatural predisposition which is identified as an organ in the body, to become *anioto*.[4] Originally *mambela* leaders thus used *anioto* to safeguard their control over people, lands and natural resources such as iron mines, hunting territories and tributes. Leopard-men were sent to kill among one's own population for not respecting authority or among rivalling groups as a discouragement. The *anioto*'s *bolosi* (their hereditary supernatural disposition to kill) and their role as a '*dawa*' (remedy or medicine) reflect their service to the collective good. The leopard symbolises the ambiguous nature of efficacious leadership which also requires the use of violence and occult powers: powerful people are believed to control or shift into leopards (Vansina 1990: 104). *Anioto* are the *ishumu*'s leopards attacking those who threaten the village's wellbeing. Leopard-men initiations and services are also exchanged between villages, sometimes leading to joint actions, as part of a broader system of *mambela* alliances.

Colonial interference in local power structures, creating chiefdoms where none had existed before, increasingly created turmoil as of 1917. Various colonial-era leopard-men cases demonstrate that while the *mambela* leaders were losing their grip over society, the new, government-appointed chiefs also used leopard-men militias: they needed to keep control over the population while having to fulfil their (unpopular) duties for the colonial

3. RMCA AIMO Bouccin (1934), *Anioto et Mambela*. Province de Stanleyville dossier 5, EA.0.0.203.RMCA, AIMO, Brandt, De Leest, Bouccin, Tihon, Libois, and Bourghelle, 'Différentes études sur le *Mambela*' (1933).

4. Belgian Foreign Office, Africa Archives, JUST GG 3043 (5574), public hearing, Wamba, 19 June 1934.

government, such as collecting taxes and recruiting labour forces. Leopard-men killings were a fruitful covert strategy to act out rivalries, whilst evading colonial control, when the colonial government forbade internecine warfare. Although anti-colonial motives played a role at times, leopard-men cannot be essentialised as anti-colonial. The competition between different types of leaders by means of leopard-men in the context of indirect rule challenges this portrayal. In fact indirect rule itself appears as the major reason for the proliferation of cyclical, retaliatory leopard-men violence in the 1920s and 1930s.

Motives for leopard-men killings often centred on control over lands and people, and more particularly wealth-in-people. Leopard-men killings occurred when there was no compensation for loss of such wealth, e.g. for runaway wives whose bride price was not returned, for people ending up in prison, or for people dying in another village. Leopard-men vengeance resulted in taking arbitrary lives from the village or lineage deemed responsible for one's losses. While the colonial government considered such motives as petty, they reveal that colonialism thoroughly disturbed local judicial customs and did not guarantee reparations for loss of human wealth. When, in the framework of leopard-men repression in the 1930s, the colonial government forced *mambela* leaders to perform the esoteric initiation rites in public, a new witch-finding institution – *lengula* – spread very quickly among the population (Saerens 1947). This and other evidence suggests that indirect rule in particular strongly disturbed local socio-political tissue and caused existential fear.

Police investigations and trials

When the leopard-man statue was conceived in the museum in Belgium between 1911 and 1915, not much was known about leopard-men in the colony. Colonial administrators working in the region even did not believe people's reports on leopard-men killings and dismissed them as leopard attacks. When, in 1916-1917, the number of killings became too numerous to ignore, the first larger-scale investigations started. The representation of leopard-men as subversive and irrational sects, wherein leopard-men objects acquired a crucial role, gained ground in the 1920s, when indirect rule was implemented more vigorously. The increased colonial vigilance for leopard-men led to a first trial in 1920, during which several people were hanged, and which was covered in colonial journals.

During the trial of 1920, the accused, consisting of the leader Abopia and his leopard men gang, refused to reveal information about their motives and modus operandi, bound as they were by their vow of secrecy. This led colonial investigators to fill in the gaps with culturally reasonable plots and stereotypes. The investigators clearly struggled with the question whether or not leopard-men acted with presence of mind and could be held accountable. They had problems deciding whether leopard-men were acting out a religious delusion as werewolf-like cannibal shapeshifters, or carried out the

commands given to them rationally and consciously, which corresponded most with the leopard-men's own declarations. The discovery of a costume as part of an accused's personal effects was interpreted in favour of the religious delusion hypothesis, although it clashed with the accused's testimonies, who denied they wore the costumes and used the claws as weapons for killing. In the aftermath of the trial, colonial investigators, who had problems in getting leopard-men convicted, started to focus more on the objects as evidence.[5] In 1923 a decree was issued 'to suppress superstitious trials and barbaric practices' which facilitated the seizure of ritual objects as circumstantial evidence of people's involvement in forbidden ritual activities and reinforced the focus on objects in the following decade (Moeller 1936).

Although we do not know the precise origins of objects in the RMCA collections, at least a part of them must have been seized in the context of police investigations and trials between 1919 and 1936. In the trials of the 1930s, it becomes very clear that colonial investigators continued to insist on the presumed use of the costumes and claws, even when the accused clearly denied this and insisted they killed with knives. Most probably, the *ishumu* were the keepers of a costume and of a claw of an *anioto* gang. While the *ishumu* wore the costume to perform preparatory rituals preceding the expeditions, one claw was usually shared by the gang to inflict mutilations on a body after the victim had been killed with a knife. After the expedition the claw was returned to the *ishumu* or another keeper.[6] The costumes in the RMCA collection bear traces of sweat of different persons, yet not of blood which confirms a ritual use. Claws never occurred in pairs, as the Tervuren statue suggests, and many of the claws in the RMCA collection were not suitable for killing (Van Bockhaven 2013).[7] Despite the details arising from the trials, with evidence mounting in the 1930s, the statue's iconography and the stereotype of the shapeshifting delusion produced during the first trial in 1920 remain dominant in the colonial representation.

Dangerous potentiality in the museum and colonial culture

At a distance from the colony, the museum display and the published colonial accounts worked well together in foregrounding the colonial stereotype of leopard-men as animal-like irrational killers. As explained, the Tervuren statue was inspired and dressed with a set of objects which military commander Charles Delhaise sent to the museum in 1911, together with a staged photograph (figs. 1 and 2). At the time, Joseph Maes, the museum's curator of ethnography, gave instructions to the sculptor Paul Wissaert on behalf of the Ministry of Colonies. The staged photograph did not yet reflect the

5. BFO, AA, GG 4769 (S. 4851), Jugement du Tribunal d'appel, 24 August 1920
6. BFO AA, JUST GG 3042 (5529), (Mbako case) public hearing, Stanleyville, 11 April 1933; public hearings, Tribunal Uele, Wamba, 11 to 15 July 1933. JUST GG 3043 (5574), public hearing, Wamba, 19 June 1934.
7. For an elaborate discussion of the collection research, I refer to my doctoral thesis.

detailed information revealed by leopard-men in the 1930 trials, but rather popular rumours of non-initiated commoners who described leopard-men as shapeshifters who could leap from tree tops and attack people like leopards. Between 1911 and 1913, the museum received two similar costumes, yet without the claws or leopard paw stamp. The colonial administrator who collected them identified them as monkey hunting costumes from an adjacent region. Curator Joseph Maes however refused to accept this documentation and stuck to identifying them as leopard-men costumes in the museum records. Maes (1924), who had access to information of the 1920 trial which revealed that costume and claws were not used for the killings, ignored this in his later publications. It demonstrates how this museum curator favoured the stereotyped representations, as did contemporary colonial administrators and missionaries in their publications.

Secondary sources published between 1920 and 1936 reflected this process of stereotyping. As the Swedish sociologist Lindskog (1954: 181) noted in the 1950s, these centred on the description of the presumed modus operandi and focused on the objects. The descriptions fit the statue's iconography. In both secondary reports and fictional texts, leopard-men accounts turn into a specific version of the civilising myth wherein the white colonial – or missionary – hero suppresses the evil werewolf-like leopard-men, and saves the good Africans. This is the case in the famous *Tintin au Congo* (*Tintin in the Congo*) comic by Hergé wherein the journalist Tintin exposes his opponent by literally unmasking the latter's side-kick, an unintelligent leopard-man (Van Bockhaven 2013). Several scholars have highlighted the importance of a culturally logical structure of a story for rhetorical purposes, and of rumour as sensational detail, to let readers buy into colonial accounts (Stoler 2010). In leopard-men accounts, the objects fulfil a role comparable to rumour as specific and lively details making the accounts more compelling. This overlaps with Thomas and O'Hanlon's references to the colonial ethnographic object as an enigma in the curator's process of hypothesizing and in crime literatures (and related television genres). One can argue that the ethnographic object plays a much more powerful role than rumour, especially when a museum is involved in the production of a colonial representation, where such objects have the very special aura of scientific proof. In the museum, the object represents a tangible trace that directly connects the spectator with the imagined scene, which adds to its dangerous potentiality. Although there is an overlap between museum displays and texts, the mimetic strategy embodied in the museum display arguably has a greater impact, which merits better awareness.

Leopard-men history could be used in better ways in museum education to make explicit the physical and symbolic colonial violence underlying the representation. A more dignifying portrayal of leopard-men could start with a more profound engagement with the messages in Chéri Samba's painting which are multi-layered, rejecting the racist representation yet also showcasing the agency of the Congolese who want to claim control of the statue

and its underlying history. In response, it is important to point out the different layers of colonial violence embodied in the statue, foregrounding Congolese agency and how it was denied existence. It started with colonial interference in local socio-political systems, pitting local power brokers against each other, which led to the proliferation of leopard-men killings. Additionally, the criminalisation of *mambela* and *anioto* and the false representation of how leopard-men operated, foregrounding the objects as proof, dehumanised leopard-men as irrationally violent killers. Paying particular attention to the ideological instrumentalisation of the objects is not only important for the decolonisation of the past but also for the decolonisation and reparation process in the present and future. At the start of this text I called for critical reflection on the current boom in provenance research as part of a political agenda wherein, to put it bluntly, ethnographic objects have once again become political capital, particularly on the European end. Stimulating broader awareness of political uses of objects as proof is more broadly relevant in current post-factual times, wherein what constitutes scientific proof to whom has become a source of polarisation, particularly on the internet. It can be predicted that a positivist-materialist turn is on its way, revaluing material evidence, yet also counting with its proclivity to become objectified phantasy. Museums have an important and double role to play therein as centres of expertise for collection-based knowledge production and as educational institutions.

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Sven Molin and his acquisitions: a story of intertwined biographies

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New research perspectives seek to question the origin and history of multidisciplinary collections assembled in Western museums to better understand the colonial narratives associated with them and, consequently, deconstruct them (Daugeron & Le Goff 2014; Kohler 2006; 2007; Bondaz *et al.* 2016; Juhé-Beaulaton & Leblan 2018; Das & Lowe 2018; Kirchberger & Bennett 2020; Zerbini 2021). Indeed, the object or specimen revisited through relevant documentation on (archives, databases, photographs, illustrations) retraces the modalities of institutional practices in terms of acquisition; it also tells unique stories which are so many 'biographies' intertwined with geographically and mentally dissociated universes. Tracing the cross-history of acquisitions and those who made them makes it possible to connect or compare what is at stake between the areas of sampling and museographic practices, between local knowledge, considered above all 'empirical', and the scientific knowledge claimed by 'modernity'. The violent process of extraction of cultural objects and natural specimens and their immoderate accumulation constitutes one of the essential features of the history of colonialism as it is often reflected in the museum space.

The historical archives of the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) confirm this ambition. Since its creation in 1898, it has sought to bring together various collections which illustrate all areas of colonial knowledge under construction and represent all the regions over which the control of colonial power extended (Van Schuylenbergh 2021a). Indeed, a year after the Brussels-Tervuren International Exhibition (1897), which showed the first acquisitions brought back by a handful of soldiers and agents of the Congo Free State, the Congo Museum launched appeals to stimulate acquisition of zoological, botanical, and geological objects and specimens, accompanied, as far as possible, by all types of information (writings, drawings, photographs) to make it possible to demonstrate the 'scientific value' of these acts. For colonisers, contributing to the enrichment of knowledge nourishes the pride of participating in the formation of unique collections, to the glory of the nation and to the detriment of large competing foreign museums. For some of them, this activity offers them a welcome pretext to amass, in

1. History and Politics service, RMCA.

addition to authorised shipments intended for the museum, a few personal acquisitions, a practice nevertheless prohibited by the internal regulations of the state. Likewise, the museum's demand for zoological specimens stimulates 'sport' hunting of live targets transformed into trophies, in addition to the slaughter of game to feed the staff of state outposts or the use of firearms to impress and repress local populations (Van Schuylenbergh 2020). Hunting, preparing on site, and sending animal remains to Tervuren aimed to fill in fragmentary zoological data which did not allow systematic and comparative studies to develop a colonial zoology worthy of the name. Large mammals and birds, especially, were missing. From 1910, a network of museum collectors was consolidated, supported by the new Directorate General of Agriculture of the Ministry of Colonies and by the general government in Congo (Van Schuylenbergh 2018; 2021b).[2] The elephant, of which the museum did not yet have an adult specimen of any species, was one of the first mammals urgently desired: a complete skin, and, failing that, the ears, the tusks, and the skull, with photography if possible of the whole animal.[3] It is in this context that we meet Sven Molin (1879-?), a former non-commissioned officer in the Swedish army, originally from Nosaby, a town near Christiana, who signed up as an agent of the Congo Free State in 1905. A great hunting enthusiast, his name is especially associated with the arrival at the museum in 1914 of skulls, tusks, and specimens with 'abnormal' morphology of a species then under-represented in Europe and, since 2020, critically endangered:[4] the forest elephant (*Loxodonta cyclotis*). He also acquired a significant number of utilitarian, war, and prestige objects, purchased or confiscated from the populations under his control, as well as several series of photographs taken during his various tours in the Congo. An immersion in Molin's colonial career, associated with the archival information that it was possible to gather,[5] makes it possible to shed light on the key stages of the extraction process leading from the field to Tervuren, and to propose a scenario which illustrates the relationships maintained between this acquiring agent, the colonial authorities, and the Belgian scientists of the museum (Van Schuylenbergh 2017; 2020). This contribution therefore retraces, in a continuous narrative, the biography of the collector and the biography of his acquisitions, reconstituting the chronology of the practices of acquisition, their causalities, and their consequences.

2. The request for state employees to acquire items for the museum was published in an order issued by the general government in Leopoldville to the colony's civil servants and agents (gouvernement local, DG Industrie et Commerce, no. 211380, Boma, 09/12/1911).
3. RMCA, DA. 81, Schouteden au directeur, Tervuren, 14 March 1912 (or 1911?). The only elephant remains in the museum are those of a young female, displayed in the public rooms and not used for scientific research.
4. The species is on the Red List of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (https://www.iucnredlist.org/fr/species/181007989/204404464).
5. See bibliography.

Initial impulses

In March 1913, the museum received from the Congo administration a small collection of knives, bows, and arrows acquired in 1912 by Sven Molin, who was then serving his third term as post chief in Inongo, then in Bongo (Lake Léopold II district). This was likely in response to the call from the general government to enrich the museum with new pieces. A few months later, two meetings motivated Molin to collect more actively and voluntarily. The first was with a lieutenant of the Force Publique, Guillaume Franssen, who volunteered to search for and bring back to Belgium the remains of an elephant of a still unknown 'aquatic' species which might have been observed, but without certainty, in the marshy region of Lake Léopold II (Schouteden 1914). Franssen and Molin were photographed[6] together behind the remains of the first elephant killed on 25 July 1913 in M'Paa (Bongo) by a team of hunters made up of Corporal Makao and soldiers Bolangila and Bombo, proof that Molin participated in one way or another in this hunt or that he had helped Franssen to prepare the remains for the museum, where the species was determined to be *Elephas africanus fransseni* (now *Loxodonta cyclotis* Schouteden 1914) (Van Schuylenbergh 2018). In July 1913, Molin's meeting with Joseph Maes, head of the ethnographic section, on a scientific mission for the museum in the inter-Lukenie-Kasaï-Sankuru area, and Philippe Tits, his guide for the natural science collections, was even more decisive. Arriving in Inongo to acquire equipment for preparing zoological specimens and repair their cameras, Maes and Tits learn of Franssen's recent 'discovery' of the pygmy elephant (read: forest elephant) and went to the Bongo region hoping to repeat this feat. They enlisted the services of Molin for around twenty days, while taking the opportunity to make numerous observations and acquire objects from the Baboma populations. Thanks to Molin's initiative, Maes bought them the skull of a single-tusked elephant (*Loxodonta africana*) and that of a dwarf elephant, while another was killed by the mission (fig. 1). In gratitude, Maes requested the Minister of Colonies to reward Molin for 'the numerous services he rendered and the dedication he lavished without reservation on the ethnographic mission';[7] the one-tusked elephant was registered at the museum in January 1914 as a gift from Molin.

6. This photograph is number AP.0.0.21387 in the RMCA collections.
7. RMCA, HA.02.0040, Dossier 59, Mission Maes: J. Maes, 'Rapport sur les travaux de la mission ethnographique du 20 juillet au 30 septembre [1913]', p. 7.

Figure 1. Molin, Tits, and Maes (left to right) after elephant hunting in the village of M'Paa (Bongo, 1913).
(AP.0.0.14173, RMCA collection; photo J. Maes, 1913, CC BY 4.0.)

Missions for the museum

After spending a fourth term in the Ekwayolo territory where, as territorial administrator, he encountered resistance from the local people, Molin returned to Belgium in mid-1920, where he awaited the ministerial decree that would authorise him to continue his career in the Congo. He promised Edmond Leplae, director of agriculture, and Maes that he would collect objects and zoological specimens and take photographs. Appointed to the post of Moma (Équateur district), his duties (administering populations resistant to state authority, collecting taxes, recording political and economic information on the region)[8] prevented him from working for the museum. At the end of his term in 1923, Molin asked the governor general for permission to spend his leave in the Congo in order to acquire 'finds'[9] for Tervuren and, above all, to take photographs. This request, which was considered 'unusual' because it raised a 'special case not provided for in the statute for civil servants and of agents',[10] was

8. AE, Dossier Molin (12927), 'État des notes semestrielles par le commissaire de district, Boende,' 12 March 1923.
9. AE, Molin dossier, 'Molin au gouverneur de la province de l'Équateur, Boyongo (Moma)', 29 July 1923.
10. AE, Molin dossier, 'Commissaire général ff de l'Équateur au gouverneur général, Coquilhatville', 20 August 1923.

finally authorised by special decision and accompanied by the granting of an administrative hunting permit, valid for the whole colony, allowing him to kill not only the animals included in the ordinary hunting permit, but also two specimens of 'reserved'[11] species. In Tervuren, Maes supported Molin's request with the Minister of Colonies because the Moma region was 'virtually unknown' ethnographically; as the museum had no visual evidence,[12] he sent twenty dozen photographic plates and the necessary equipment for development and printing. The costs of the two collecting expeditions undertaken by Molin (5 March-4 May 1924) were borne by the institution – a condition issued by the general government: they included the costs of transporting the acquisitions by land and by water as well as the daily salary for around fifteen paddlers and 10 to 38 porters, depending on the locations of engagement.[13] Six boxes weighing several hundred kilos arrived in Antwerp via Sonatra in three separate batches, after having remained, some of them, stranded in Kinshasa due to transport difficulties occurring throughout Congo. Molin, for his part, carried small fragile objects and around forty photographic plates in his personal luggage. The inventories Molin drew up of these pieces were very detailed and contain information on the provenance of the ethnographic objects: local name, tribe, locality, use. He also recommended that Maes exercise the greatest caution when unpacking weapons, because 'the tribes from which they come always coat them with poison'.[14] It is interesting to note that the inventory specified the amounts paid to residents for each of the objects acquired. These vary greatly depending on their type: between one and eight francs for utilitarian objects (hunting instruments including bells and spears, drum, chef's chair, dishes, mortars, women's clothing, raffia, ivory horns, raw iron, looms, musical instruments), between 20 and 50 francs for some prestigious goods (iron bell used by traditional chiefs, raw iron from the furnace, djonga spear, and 'elembe' hairstyle),[15] a sign that the monetary demands of the local communities were equal to the compensation for what the loss of these objects represented for them. On the other hand, poisoned arrows and everything that Molin considered to be fetishes, material proof of witchcraft and sects were seized without compensation,[16] proof of his intolerance and his anxiety for any form of

11. At the time, the 'reserved' species were those that were 'protected' (elephant, rhinoceros, certain antelopes) and could only be hunted in with a special permit ('Décret sur la chasse et la pêche du 26 avril 1910', *Bulletin officiel du Congo belge* 1910: 638-652).
12. RMCA, AA-1-I, Dossier Molin (543), 'Lettre de J. Maes au directeur, Tervuren', 4 June 1923.
13. RMCA, AA-1-I, Dossier Molin (543), 'État des frais de transport au profit du Musée du Congo belge', Moma, 23 March 1924 and Mondombe, 25 May 1924.
14. RMCA, AA-1-I, Molin file (543), 'Molin à Maes, Bruxelles', 15 July 1924.
15. RMCA, Ethnography, 'Envois Molin' (DA.2.434).
16. *Ibid.* Molin describes these collections as follows: objects from the 'Lifangangala' sect, seized from the Kole fetishist Botumola and having belonged to the great fetishist Isusa (Boyela tribe, Kole subtribe), a wooden fetish, emblem of the 'Osumaka-Idua' sect (Bambole

expression that could lead to insubordination. Likewise, the inventory of zoological specimens (elephants, hippos, buffaloes), specifying their vernacular names and the natural environment and the conditions in which the species were slaughtered by Molin or local hunters, is not accompanied by any fees, with the exception of building a case to contain an elephant skull and five bottles of whiskey purchased for 150 francs in order to preserve reptiles in alcohol.

Back in Belgium, Molin tried in vain to convince Henri Schouteden, curator of the museum's zoological collections, to participate in a scientific mission planned between 1924 and 1926 in the north and east of the colony, because, he wrote to Maes , 'I would really like to be useful to the Museum, now that I have enough experience to be able to equip myself properly and you can be sure that there are still things to be collected there'.[17] Maes believed that 'the importance and interest of these collections are beyond discussion […] when all the collections collected by Mr. Molin have reached us the Museum will have a remarkable and wonderfully documented ensemble'.[18] Maes places particular emphasis on large wicker shields and especially some specimens decorated with sculpted figures that Molin promised to acquire during his next term. This promise to be 'useful to the museum' is accompanied by a request for support from the director in his Belgian naturalisation process, obtaining an administrative hunting permit and facilities for importing hunting equipment, specimen conservation products, and photographic plates. From Brussels, he then went to Sweden in September 1924, where he sold several Mongo and Kuba ethnographic objects which are now at the Malmö Museer.[19]

At the end of 1924, assigned to administer the territory of Boyela (Équateur Province), Molin continued to offer elephant remains in which the museum showed scientific interest but without any official arrangement, despite strong encouragement from Schouteden to continue these activities 'knowing his passion for collections and given the very beautiful gifts he gave us internally'.[20] On the basis of photographs testifying to its capture, the museum gave the green light to receive two elephant skulls, because it did not have any specimen from this region: a large elephant (*Loxodonta africana*) discovered in Itoko with a single, very long tusk and two molars in each jaw (fig. 2) and the skull of a beautiful elephant called

tribe, Gombe-Lolo and Gombe-Yeyango subtribes), a pack of poisoned 'makula' arrows (Djonga and Boyela tribes, Yosila clan) and 73 poisoned 'lokate' or 'losanga' arrows, coated with 'lolenga' poison, from N'Doliki, Epomi, Lolengo and Bofami trees, the juice of which is mixed (Djonga tribe, Iteli and Itana clans), used for hunting and warfare.

17. RMCA, AA-1-I, Dossier Molin (543), 'Molin à Maes, Bruxelles', 5 September 1924.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Thanks to Agnès Lacaille for passing this information on to me (http://carlotta.malmo.se/ carlotta-mmus/web/object/76425/REFERENCES/284).

20. RMCA, AA-1-I, Dossier Molin (543), 'Schouteden au ministre des Colonies, Tervuren', 29 April 1926.

'*namba*' among the Bosaka-Kombe or '*djoku*' (*Loxodonta cyclotis*?) among the Kongo and killed by Molin in Itoko, on the Lomela, for an estimated value of 15,000 francs.[21] It also brought together other ethnographic objects from the territory of Bankustshu, received by the museum on 22 August 1927: *goowa* war shields, hunting arrows, bows, elephant spears, wooden sabers, knives, fabrics (fig. 3).

Figure 2. Skull of an elephant with an abnormal head and a single tusk. (AP.0.0.26297, RMCA collection; photo S. Molin, 1927.)

21. RMCA, AA.1-D-a (1912-1928), 'Molin au commissaire de district de l'Équateur, Itoko', 31 December 1925.

Figure 3. Basakakombe wicker shield received on 22 August 1927.
(EO.0.0.29506, RMCA collection; photo J. Van de Vyver, CC BY 4.0.)

At the end of his sixth term, Molin requested a second three-month leave between January and April 1928 to make acquisitions for the museum, and sent to Tervuren two large crates containing five elephant skulls (*Loxodonta cyclotis*), four buffaloes, one leopard, and the remains and skulls of colobuses, as well as several objects acquired from the Boyela in Moma (woman's axe, notable woman's chair, chief Akili's favourite fly swatter, copper rings, spear-heads , musical instruments) and the Nkole (M'Bolo?) in the south-east of the territory (bows, arrows, ankle rings, bracelets, knives),[22] which, with some exceptions, were generally acquired for sums lower than (sometimes half) their local values. These shipments, registered with the museum in August and September 1928, were supplemented by another series of photographs at the end of November.

This period saw Molin suffering. He asked to be placed in the service of the agriculture department, where he wished to put his 'arrangements for hunting and breeding' to use for the benefit of the elephant domestication station in Uele or in a 'reserve park'[23] he had heard about. The adminis-

22. RMCA, AA.1.A.1928.11, 'Inventaire Molin pour le musée'.
23. By 'reserve park', Molin meant the 'parc national Albert' recently created in North Kivu and whose official name he clearly did not know.

tration issued a categorical refusal given his advanced age (49 years) and his lack of higher scientific training. Accompanied by his wife, Solange Tonneau, he then began a seventh and final term in the province of Équateur where he took photographs and seemed to want to continue searching for ethnographic objects as long as their purchase could be authorised by the colonial administration and paid for by the museum, which no longer seems to have been the case. Having retired permanently from the state on 7 February 1931, he aspired to settle in the region, after which he disappeared from the record.

Staged images

Along with his zoological and ethnographic collections, Sven Molin seems to have taken more than 400 scientific photographs intended to provide visual testimony of populations encountered, objects acquired, and specimens killed. These contextual images aimed above all to identify the places and methods of extraction of specimens and objects and, consequently, to offer proof of their authenticity, to the extent that their acquisition was possible, in large part, through financing by the museum with the aim of completing its collections of photographic documentation.

Several series of photographs, dated over several periods between 1910 and 1929, are registered with the museum, some sent in batches with his acquisitions, others assembled through unknown channels, and still others added after the fact by Maes, who had them in his possession. Despite the lack of information on the precise context of their creation, some general observations can be made. While the earliest photos (1910-1913) mainly show Molin displaying trophies from hunting for food, leisure, or to limit predators, they are accompanied, starting in 1913, by captions giving the killed specimens' local names and information linked to the place of acquisition, as he did for the animal specimens he acquires. This approach emphasising scientific information came about after his meeting with Maes. Furthermore, by comparing the two men's photos, it is disturbing to note similarities, even identical groups and individuals, but also others which respond to each other, complement each other, or which present an identical context from different angles. Since Molin entrusted old photographic plates to Maes for his ethnography section[24] and the latter himself took photos in regions where Molin travelled, it is more than probable that these two sets of images were conflated and that some of them, ascribed to Molin, were taken by Maes.[25]

24. Maes had this series registered with the museum in 1935; it takes the form of photos pasted onto old cards with contextual information.

25. In particular the photos showing the Mosengere chiefs and their retinue (A.P.0.0.14159 for Maes and A.P.0.0.21301 for Molin). Further comparative research should make it possible to clarify this finding and to rectify the information contained in the museum databases, if necessary.

Still, as of 1918, his subjects diversified. In the Lake Léopold II district (Bondo), a series, registered under the old numbers RG 21217-26328, focused on physical deformities caused by diseases (leprosy, syphilis, elephantiasis) while others represented customary chiefs or soldiers and their families. They were accompanied by contextual information (locations, groups or subgroups represented, names of local authorities, uses of objects and their local name), just as in Molin's inventories of acquisitions sent to the museum. Furthermore, several candid photographs, taken notably when he lived in Ekwayolo (1917-1920) and during his last term (1929-1931) with his wife – whose furtive presence we can infer but is otherwise not recorded – instead illustrate moments of his daily life. Other photos were sent in 1924 and 1928 as part of Molin's collecting missions for the museum and mainly illustrate his hunting trophies (elephant skulls); some of these photos were also included in his letter to the colonial authorities as tangible evidence for a possible acquisition by the museum. A final series produced or acquired in 1929-1930 illustrates notables, morphological types, adornments, and dances of several groups and subgroups (Bankutsu, Boole, Boyela, etc.) in the regions he visited (Itoke, Moma, Lomela).

In these scientifically inclined series, supposedly free of all traces of subjectivity and therefore of discriminatory judgments, there are nevertheless disturbing, even shocking, photos which reveal the biases, the prejudices, and the illusions that the coloniser Molin entertained concerning certain human and animal populations (Edward 2002; Hartmann *et al.* 1998; Landau & Kaspin 2002). The visual display of human bodies disfigured by disease, of undressed women taken from suggestive erotic angles, of animal trophies presented in sordid settings, reveal his most intimate thoughts. Through these photos appear mental constructions which invalidate his photographs as unique scientific documents and show the intrinsic ambivalences which are at the basis of the collections Molin created. Doing 'science' is accompanied by virile demonstrations which consist of putting, in the formation of its collections and its photographs, slaughtered animals and their remains (skulls) and personalities stripped of their objects, adornments, and insignia of power (figs. 4 and 5) on the same footing. In both cases, where both suffer destruction and disappearances fuelled by a quest to accumulate, the reign of morbidity prevails over the living, and voyeurism rubs shoulders with the obscene.

Molin's journey and his heterogeneous acquisitions present a case study, the aim of which is to make visible the process by which the colonised territory is treated as a series of extractable sites which are prospected, stripped, and represented with the aim of translocation, accumulation, and scientific production, to the detriment of material expressions of singular cultures and rare and endangered specimens. More precisely, it shows the prevalence of chance encounters and relationships formed over time between Molin and museum scientists to encourage or, on the contrary, hinder the creation of transdisciplinary collections. Nevertheless, this journey also points to grey

Figure 4. Elephant skulls known locally as *bonenge* (*Loxodonta cyclotis*).
(AP.0.0.35868, RMCA collection; photo by S. Molin, n.d. [1928].)

Figure 5. Insignia and jewels of Itiko, a Djonga chief who died before the arrival of Europeans in the Moma territory (Ecuador).
(AP.0.0.22680, RMCA collection; photo by S. Molin, 1923.)

areas: Molin's zeal for acquisition, the rigor and precision of his data for science, respond just as much to the practice of activities which motivated him personally (hunting) and gave him reasons to live a life without too many constraints in the Congo, but not devoid of power over its human and other-than-human inhabitants.

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Collecting ceramics in colonial times: Maurits Bequaert's 1950-1952 fieldwork in Kongo-Central

Nicolas Nikis & Alexandre Livingstone Smith[1]

Introduction

Omnipresent in daily life, recent and archaeological ceramics offer valuable information about lifestyles, but also make it possible to formulate hypotheses regarding the history or the socio-economic and cultural framework of the individuals and groups who produced them (Gosselain 2018). Although their status is diverse in their source communities, they are largely seen as common objects, mass-produced and intended for daily use. The provenance of African ceramics kept in European collections has therefore rarely been perceived as problematic.

The little research on the subject (e.g. Okwunodu Ogbechie 2019; Plankensteiner 2019) shows that only emblematic cases such as the looting of some terracottas (e.g. Panella 2015) – a category of object generally falling more within the domain of sculpture on the art market – or the confiscation of ritual pottery during colonisation (Thompson 2019) have been the subject of more in-depth studies. The place of ceramics, and even more so of everyday pottery, therefore remains largely neglected in the current debate on the status of African collections in the Western world. The ubiquitous nature of ceramic production and the frequent absence of precise information about the object's history upon entry into collections complicate research into the conditions of acquisition. This category of object also suffers from the fact that attention is mainly focused on emblematic object categories, the importance of which is based on Western criteria (Okwunodu Ogbechie 2019). The make-up of these collections, mainly in a colonial context, is however not exempt from relations of domination between the coloniser and local populations.

Public collections such as those of the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) offer interesting case studies in this regard thanks to their associated archives. When they are sufficiently complete, they allow us to study the diversity of uses and journeys taken by objects. The provenance of the RMCA ceramic collections has been little studied (but see Volper 2016) for

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the various abovementioned reasons, but also because they have in general been the subject of little research to date. Whether in archaeology or ethnography, collectors have rarely worked on these objects (but see Nenquin 1963; Maes 1937). It was only with the growing number of studies of ceramics from the African continent beginning in the 1980s (Gosselain & Livingstone Smith 2013) that these collections gained attention as comparison collections for recent fieldwork which, although well-documented, are generally very localised from a geographical point of view (see in particular Kaumba Mazanga 2018). Paradoxically, the oldest publication devoted to ethnographic ceramics from Central Africa remains the most detailed published to date (Coart & de Haulleville 1907).

Mostly assembled during the colonial period, the RMCA collections house around 4,500 so-called 'ethnographic' vessels and almost 10,000 records relating to archaeological ceramics.[2] Contributors' profiles are diverse and there are around 300 constituents for the ethnographic collections and around 80 for the archaeological collections. Half of the ethnographic vessels and more than 80% of the archaeology records were collected by scientists, however, mainly during official missions for the museum in the first half of the 20th century. Among these, Maurits Bequaert is particularly interesting, especially due to his career and the extent of his contribution to human sciences collections.

Maurits Bequaert and the acquisition of ceramics

Maurits Leopold Maria Bequaert (1892-1973) was a public works engineer in the Belgian Congo for around ten years. He resumed his archaeology studies at UGent in 1934 after being placed on leave by the colonial administration. He obtained his master's degree in Art History and Archaeology in 1936 and was almost immediately hired as an attaché at the Museum of the Belgian Congo, where he was in charge of the Prehistory section. He essentially focused on the study of the colony's lithic industries and carried out two scientific missions on behalf of the museum to Congo in the company of his wife, Jeanne Bequaert-Schotte, between 1938 and 1939 and between 1950 and 1952 (Van Noten 1989: 38-39). One of the main objectives of these missions was to bring back study material for the Prehistory section (Cornelissen & Livingstone Smith 2015: 11). The spouses thus increased the archaeological collections by nearly 22,800 records. Although these were essentially lithic pieces, the archaeological ceramics collections were considerably enriched, with around 5,100 records added to the existing 300, or more than half of the current collections. Added to this were some European pottery transmitted to the History section, 72 ethnographic potteries – which places Bequaert

2. It should be noted that while in the case of ethnographic vessels a number generally corresponds to a pot, in archaeology, an inventory number may correspond to a sherd, a whole vessel, or even a series of sherds. It is therefore very difficult to estimate the number of vessels that are stored, as these collections remain largely unstudied.

among the ten largest contributors – but also several hundred objects such as masks, mats, and nets. They also contributed to the enrichment of entomological, geological, and even ornithological collections (Cornelissen & Livingstone Smith 2015: 12).

Bequaert's work – and archaeology in Congo in general during the colonial period – is part of what has been called 'colonialist archaeology'[3] (Trigger 1984; de Maret 1990): Bequaert and his peers mainly focused their attention on prehistory, whose remains, mainly lithic, were studied in connection with the rest of the world. Europe remained the point of reference, particularly concerning nomenclature. The most recent periods, called the 'Iron Age' until contact with Europeans, were neglected (Connah 2013; de Maret 1990). The archaeology of recent periods was therefore not of primary interest to Bequaert.

Focusing on the modes of acquisition of these collections nonetheless makes it possible to illustrate the then-prevailing conceptions regarding categories of objects and periods still considered secondary in the decade before independence. The focal point here will be the ceramics collected by Maurits Bequaert and Jeanne Bequaert-Schotte in what is now Kongo-Central (Bas-Congo) during their 1950-1952 fieldwork (fig. 1).

Funded by the Institut de la recherche scientifique en Afrique centrale (IRSAC),[4] the mission took place between September 1950 and December 1952 (Bequaert 1952b). Initially planned to cover a large part of the Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi, it was ultimately limited to Bas-Congo, Léopoldville, and Kwango (Bequaert 1952b; 1949). The objectives were essentially linked to prehistory. Among the 46 research questions formulated in the grant application to the IRSAC, only six were related to non-prehistoric topics and the latter are mainly linked to the European presence or influence before colonization (de Maret 1990: 124; Bequaert 1949).

3. Colonialist archaeology is practised by colonisers in colonised territories. It is characterised by evolutionist and racist conceptions of history, according to which the colonised populations have changed little since prehistoric times. This conception served to legitimise the colonial project, and the study of the recent past, largely associated with ethnology, was neglected by archaeologists. Research focused mainly on prehistory, which cultures were considered ancestral to both the areas studied and Europe (Trigger 1984: 362-363).

4. The IRSAC was founded in 1947 to fund scientific research in Central Africa in all disciplines to contribute to the development of the Congo (now the DRC), Rwanda, and Burundi (Rubbers & Poncelet 2015).

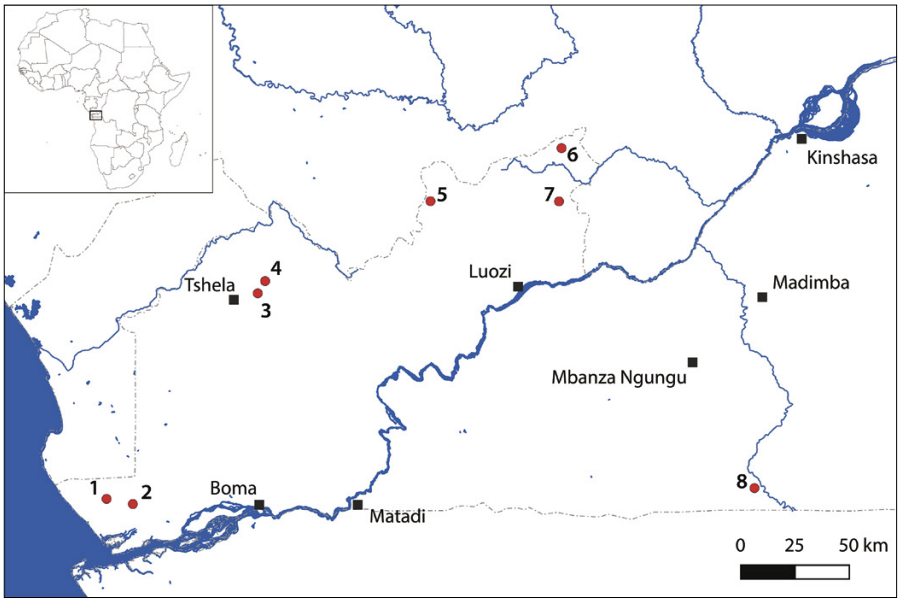


Figure 1. Administrative centres (chefs-lieux) of the main territories visited during the 1950-1952 mission to Kongo-Central and location of sites mentioned in the text. 1. Matamba Ngoyo; 2. Makamba Makanzi; 3. Kitsana; 4. Maduda; 5. Mokaka (Mukaka); 6. Misenga; 7. Seke Banza, and 8. Ngongo Mbata. (Map Nicolas Nikis, RMCA, CC BY 4.0.)

The ceramics acquired are divided into three categories, each presenting distinct acquisition conditions. The first consists of archaeological pieces from surveys and excavations carried out by the Bequaert-Schotte couple. In total, 238 sites were surveyed and 34 excavated. The research took full advantage of the Belgian Congo's administrative apparatus. The preferred contacts during the different stages were the representatives of the colonial administration, on whom the engagement of workers and the setting of wages depended. 'Indigenous authorities' were only consulted as a last resort and in the absence of colonial agents (Bequaert 1953: 2). The couple also seem to have had complete freedom over the choice of survey locations, without the inhabitants of the areas studied having a say on the matter (Bequaert 1952b: 10-11). Apart from the Misenga site, whose fragments of finely decorated pottery and copper objects attracted Bequaert's attention, all the other excavations were essentially intended to document the prehistory of Bas-Congo. Interest in collecting sherds seemed mainly linked to their potential for the relative dating of archaeological layers. Ceramics considered recent were linked to current groups, as Bequaert considered protohistory a branch of ethnography. Ancient pieces, for their part, could represent the final phases of prehistory and the transition to the metal ages in a European-centric chronological perspective (Bequaert 1952a).

Contemporary pottery is the second category of ceramics collected by the Bequaert-Schottes. It was used as comparative material to identify recent

productions in an archaeological context. During the 1950-1952 mission, all the pieces (EO.1952.65.1 and EO.1965.19.1-11, 13, 24-50) were purchased from potters and their names and the amount paid were recorded in the field notebooks.[5] This information was not copied into the acquisition files when they were transferred to the ethnographic collections in 1965,[6] which is symptomatic of the recurring process of anonymisation of African artisans when their work entered Western collections (Okwunodu Ogbechie 2019: 367; Price 2012: 91-100). Yet Jeanne Bequaert-Schotte and/or Maurits Bequaert seem to have developed an interest in these contemporary pieces, as suggested by the documentation and the draft article on ceramics in Congo in the Bequaert archives at the RMCA,[7] although no publication was ever released.

The special case of European ceramics

The last category holds a special place. These are European ceramics – Dutch or English earthenware, stoneware vessels, Portuguese pottery, etc. – but also glass bottles and local pottery collected from cemetery dating from the 19th century or early 20th century. These European objects were obtained through trade with European coastal factories during the 19th century and were placed as funerary ware on graves, generally those of chiefs or wealthy merchants (Volper 2013; Vanhee 2013). This type of material culture was far from Bequaert's primary concerns, but he had developed a personal interest in the history of the European presence in Central Africa. During his 1938-1939 mission, he participated in the excavations of the cemetery of the ancient church of Ngongo Mbata (17th-19th centuries), at the invitation of missionaries who were looking for the tomb of Joris Van Geel, a Capuchin killed in the 17th century. This research was his only publication on the archaeology of recent periods (Bequaert 1940). He was criticised at the time by the museum management for wasting his time with recent tombs when his mission was to work on prehistory (Cornelissen & Livingstone Smith 2015: 25; de Maret 1990: 121). He took care, from then on, to immediately include the question of burial sites in Bas-Congo with Christian artefacts in the research project of the 1950-1952 fieldwork (Bequaert 1949: 4).

The accuracy of the notes differed depending on the location. In the case of the cemeteries in Makamba Makansi (7 October 1950) and Matamba Ngoyo (9 October 1950), for example, the different manufacturers' marks present on the containers were carefully noted.[8] Local ceramics were generally given

5. For example, the words 'Gekocht te Ganda Sundi à [sic] Maria Ngombo een pot voor 20 f.' ('Purchase in Ganda Sundi a pot from Maria Ngombo for 20 fr'; free translation). Entry dated 11 January 1951 in 'Schrijfboek 4bis, Tshela Pandji – Tsumbi 1, 28-XII-1950/11-I-1951', Bas-Congo, 1951, M. Bequaert archives, RMCA.

6. 'Afdeling Praehistorie. Overgemaakt aan de afdeling volkenkunde', 30-3-1965, Tervuren. 'Afdeling Voorgeschiedenis' file, Aanwinstendossiers Etnografie, 2nd series, RMCA

7. 'Keramiek in Neder Congo, Opstel' file, n.l., n.d., RMCA, M. Bequaert archives, box M.B.

8. 'Reis IRSAC en Congo Museum, Boekje 1, 20-IX-1950', Bas-Congo, 1950, RMCA, M. Bequaert

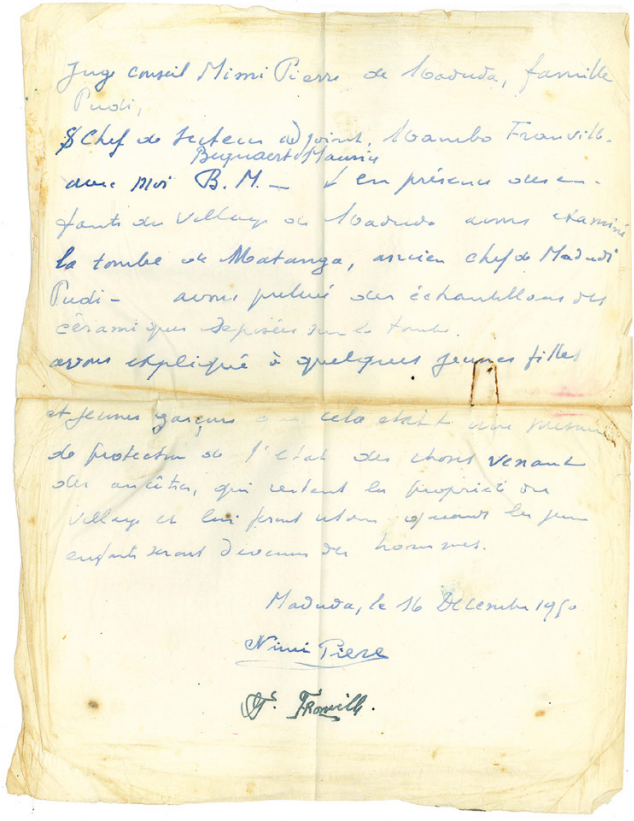
more cursory descriptions. Although the various cemetery visits did not systematically result in acquisitions, in most cases at least one piece of pottery was taken away. European and local ceramics were regularly taken together to form what Bequaert called 'ethnographic or archaeological pairs' (Bequaert 1951: 26), probably in order to have relative dating for local productions. In several cases, Bequaert took care to note in his field notebooks or in one of his quarterly reports the presence of representatives from the community or the family of the deceased, emphasising that they entrusted the objects to the state. We find this formulation in particular in Kitsana,[9] where Théophile Moandu, son of the late chief Fumu Kongo Pidi, was present and authorised the removal of a series of objects (PO 0.0.81012-81027 and HO.1953.17.1). This was also the case in Maduda, where numerous European and local ceramics (PO 0.0.80894-80929 and HO.1953.114.1-6) were taken from several tombs in the presence of the deputy sector chief Mambo Fronville and judge-counselor Mimi Pierre (Bequaert 1951: 15-16). A statement concerning the removal of ceramics (fig. 2) from the tomb of Chief Matanga, former chief of Madudi Pudi (?), however, suggests that the transfer of these objects was a more complex situation than might be suggested by Bequaert's report. In the 16 December 1950 statement (fig. 3), signed by Mambo Fronville and Mimi Pierre, slipped into the field notebook of the same period,[10] he mentions that some objects were taken from the grave of Chief Matanga in the village of Maduda, but that these remained the property of the village and would be returned once the children present had grown. The objects in question (PO 0.0.80916-80928) were added to the Belgian state's official collections with no mention of this agreement.

archives, box 1A; 'Reis IRSAC en Congo Museum, Boekje 2, 9-X-1950 tot 29', Bas Congo, 1950, RMCA, M. Bequaert archives, box 2E.

9. 'Boek 4, 28-XI-50/23-XII-50', Bas-Congo, 1950, p. 140, RMCA, M. Bequaert archives, box 1A.

10. 'Procès-verbal par Mimi Pierre', 16 December 1950, Maduda, Kongo Central, inserted in 'Boek 4, 28-XI-50/23-XII-50', Bas-Congo, 1950, RMCA, M. Bequaert archives, box 2E.

Figure 2. European ceramics collected from the tomb of Chief Matanga in Maduda, 19th century, Kongo-Central, Democratic Republic of the Congo.
(PO 0.0.80916-80918, 80920-80922, 80925-80928, collection RMCA ; photo N. Nikis, RMCA, CC BY 4.0.)



Jugement Mimi Pierre de Maduda, famille Pudi,
Chef de Territoire adjoint, Mbanza Franville.
Bequaert Maurits
avec moi B. M. — en présence des membres du Village de Maduda avons examiné la tombe de Matanga, ancien chef de Maduda Pudi — avons pris des échantillons des céramiques qui se trouvent sur la tombe.
avons expliqué à quelques jeunes filles et jeunes garçons que cela était une mesure de protection de l'état des choses venant des ancêtres, qui veulent la propriété du Village et leur font savoir qu'aucun de ces enfants seront devenus des hommes.

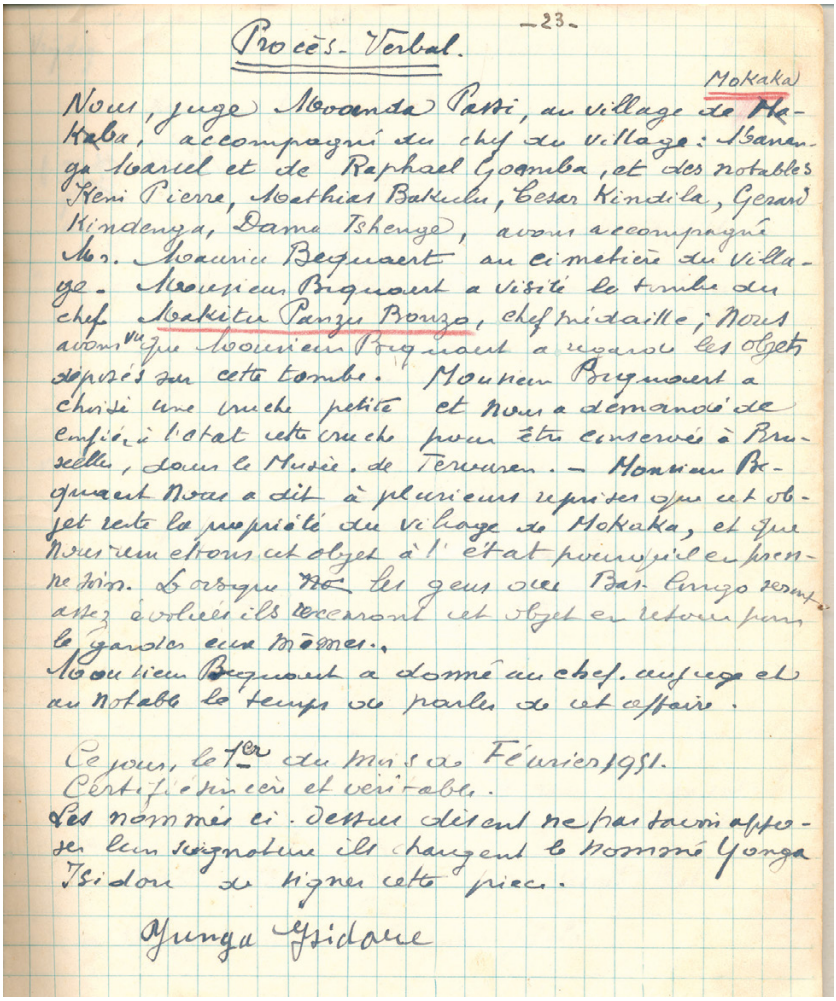
Maduda, le 16 Décembre 1950.

Mimi Pierre

Mbanza Franville.

Figure 3. 'Procès-verbal par Mimi Pierre', 16 December 1950, Maduda, Kongo Central, Boek 4, 28-XI-50/23-XII-50.
(RMCA, M. Bequaert archives, 2E.)

There is a similar statement dated 1 February 1951 (fig. 4) for the Mokaka village cemetery written directly in Bequaert's notebook.[11] Judge Moanda Passi, accompanied by village notables, reported on Bequaert's visit and the removal of a jug from the tomb of Makitu Panzu-Bonza for preservation at the Museum of the Belgian Congo. The village remained the owner of the object and 'when the people of Bas-Congo are sufficiently evolved [*sic*], they will have this object returned'. The object in question (PO 0.0.81011) was registered in the official collections of the RMCA with the mention 'gift v.h. plaatselijk hoofd',[12] however.


-23-

Procès-Verbal.

Mokaka

Nous, juge Moanda Passi, au village de Mokaka, accompagné du chef du village: Banenga Isaiel et de Raphael Goomba, et des notables Keni Pierre, Mathias Bakulu, Cesar Kindila, Gerard Kindenga, Dama Tshenge, avons accompagné Mr. Maurice Bequaert au cimetière du Village. Monsieur Bequaert a visité la tombe du chef Makitu Panzu Bonza, chef médaille; Nous avons vu que Monsieur Bequaert a regardé les objets déposés sur cette tombe. Monsieur Bequaert a choisi une cruche petite et nous a demandé de confier à l'état cette cruche pour être conservée à Bruxelles, dans le Musée de Tervuren. — Monsieur Bequaert nous a dit à plusieurs reprises que cet objet reste la propriété du village de Mokaka, et que nous remettons cet objet à l'état pour qu'il en prenne soin. Lorsque les gens des Bas-Congo seront assez évolués ils recevront cet objet en retour pour le garder eux mêmes.
Monsieur Bequaert a donné au chef, au juge et au notable le temps de parler de cet affaire.

Ce jour, le 1er du mois de Février 1951.
Certifié sincère et véritable.
Les nommés ci-dessus disent ne pas savoir apposer leur signature ils changent le nommé Yonga Isidore de signer cette pièce.

Yonga Isidore

Figure 4. 'Procès-verbal par Moanda Passi', 1 February 1951, Mokaka, Kongo-Central, Schrijfboek 6, Kikenge, 30-I/20-II-51. (RMCA, M. Bequaert archives, 1A.)

11. 'Schrijfboek 6, Kikenge, 30-I/20-II-51', Bas-Congo, 1951, RMCA, M. Bequaert archives, box 1A.
12. 'Registre d'acquisition n° 9, section de Préhistoire, Musée du Congo belge', RMCA, Prehistory and Archaeology section archives. This note means 'Gift of the local chief'.

Although Bequaert highlighted the involvement of the various stakeholders concerned during acquisitions, he did not tolerate any resistance, no matter how passive, to the conduct of his research. In a letter dated 30 April 1951, faced with the refusal of the village chief of Seke Banza to show him the cemetery of former leaders, he sought the assistance of a certain Wijmeersch, a representative of the territorial administrator of Luozi and head of the Kivunda sector. While Bequaert emphasised that '[his] instructions dictated respect for the feelings of those administered who come from a different culture', he protested that such an attitude delayed his research.[13] The conflict seems to have been resolved to his advantage, because a few days later, his field notebooks indicated a visit to the cemetery in question, where he did not take anything.[14]

Letters exchanged during this same mission indicate that he was aware of the concern of the colonial authorities to preserve heritage *in situ*.[15] It is nevertheless difficult to know to what extent Bequaert was sincere when writing these statements, but both the letter to Wijmeersch and the fact that they were not mentioned in the official registration of these objects in the collections suggest that these negotiations were to him simply a necessary constraint in the conduct of his research. Furthermore, a certain ambivalence in the heritage policy of the time may have served Bequaert in this specific case. For one, the decree of 16 August 1939 relating to the Protection of sites, monuments and productions of indigenous art would remain largely inoperative and would mainly serve to register colonial sites and monuments (Shaje a Tshiluila 2007; Van Beurden 2015: 65). Moreover, initiatives such as the Commission pour la Protection des Arts et Métiers indigènes au Congo belge (COPAMI) and the Amis de l'Art indigène (AAI) strove to preserve 'authentic' culture, whether through the exhibition of pieces in different museums of the colony or by the promotion of artisanal production considered 'traditional', that is to say not perverted by modernity (Van Beurden 2015: 61-99). Given the mission's goal of enriching the collections of the museum in Tervuren, the preservation of these European objects *in situ* would therefore not have been a real concern for Bequaert.

13.'Lettre de M. Bequaert Wijmeersch', Kivunda (Bas-Congo), 30 April 1951, RMCA, M. Bequaert archives, box 4A.
14. 'Boek 5, 12-I-1951-16-V-1951', Bas-Congo, 1951, RMCA, M. Bequaert archives, box 1A.
15. Discussions with various people reported by M. Bequaert ('Compte-rendu de M. Bequaert à propos des collectes du peintre Robert Verly envoyé à la direction du Musée du Congo belge', Léopoldville, 1 November 1951, file 549, RMCA, Prehistory and Archaeology service archives.
We would like to thank Agnès Lacaille for bringing these archives to our attention. We would also like to thank Els Cornelissen and Alexander Vral for their help and invaluable advice in consulting the archives and collections, and the reviewers for their comments on an initial version of this text.

Conclusion

These examples clearly illustrate the confrontation between colonial and local conceptions regarding the value of these objects. Bequaert considered these ceramics archaeological pieces like any other, capable of expanding the museum's collections and informing its research. His interest nevertheless varied depending on the category of object. Locally-made pottery was instrumental in his research, useful for relative dating of the long archaeological sequence, of which prehistory was the central point, but of little interest in itself. Conversely, we observe that European-made objects held a sort of historical and heritage attractiveness. Given the link maintained by the inhabitants with the ceramics collected from tombs, neither a commercial transaction, as in the case of contemporary productions, nor a unilateral approach typical of colonialist archaeology, as for the non-funerary archaeological sites in the area, was possible. He was therefore compelled to use other expedients to obtain the coveted pieces, but the result ultimately remained the same: the objects joined the collections in Belgium, following purely European priorities and conceptions, while the importance of these objects for local populations was minimised, if not obliterated.

More broadly, the effects of a Western-centric conception of these objects are also clear from the relative absence of debate on the origin of ceramic collections. In addition to the role of ceramics in daily life, the value with which they can be invested within the framework of social and ritual practices as illustrated by this case study underlines the importance of these objects for colonised societies. These elements therefore encourage us to fully integrate them into discussions around the place of colonial collections in museum institutions and private collections.

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'Lettre de M. Bequaert Wijmeersch', Kivunda (Bas-Congo), 30 April 1951, box 4A.
'Procès-verbal du 16 décembre 1950 par Mimi Pierre', Boek 4, 28-XI-50/23-XII-50, Bas-Congo, 1950, box 2E.
'Reis IRSAC en Congo Museum, Boekje 1, 20-IX-1950', Bas-Congo, 1950, box 1A.
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To take by violence or buy with a clear conscience: on ethnographic acquisitions

Anne-Marie Bouttiaux[1]

From 1993 to 2002, while pursuing anthropological research missions to West Africa,[2] I acquired objects on behalf of the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA), now called AfricaMuseum.[3]

Of the approximately 600 pieces I acquired, some gave rise to exhibitions; others were simply swallowed up in the belly of the museum, which remained eager to build reserves over the long term.[4] The fact that their official entry on the registers transformed them into part of the national heritage is not without irony, especially in the case of those from rural African environments, where they were often created for collective use or handling, and were not designed to enter museums. There is a fine line between this and the belief that it needn't take a war to constitute spoils – a line many institutions have crossed with varying degrees of good conscience, depending on the period in question, justifying the practice by the invaluable contribution of the scientific data accompanying the artefacts. It is therefore not surprising to note that many of these objects are today entangled in the difficulties surrounding restitution, a debate no longer led by scientific researchers but rather by the heads of state who employ them (Sarr & Savoy 2018: 70-71). We have the vague impression of having come full circle: in the era of colonial administrations, establishing such collections was a political requirement; this later transformed into a desire for scientific knowledge, only to become once again a currency used on the market of geopolitical ambition.

One could take offense at the hypocrisy, tinged with paternalism, of pleading for restitution to establishments that can care for these objects according to museum standards (Apoh & Melher 2019: 12; Stack 2019); it seems inappropriate to return pieces taken as spoils while dictating the rules for their conservation or exhibition.[5] In most cases property will be

1. Anthropologist and art historian (PhD), head of the RMCA Ethnography Division until 2014, emeritus researcher affiliated with the Department of Cultural Anthropology and History since 2015.

2. Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal.

3. On the paradoxes of this new name at a time when the museum is refocusing precisely on Central Africa, see Schellow & Seiderer 2020: 204.

4. The digestive metaphor alludes to the 'cannibal museum' (Gonseth *et al.* 2002) and the 'glutton museum' (Wastiau 2002). Expanding collections is nevertheless one of the rules laid down by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) for a museum to be worthy of its name; see: https://www.icomus.org/icom-define-methodology

5. The debate obviously also concerns the possible restitution of works held in collections

returned not to the dispossessed communities but to the governments of states whose borders were drawn by the West. Scientists, whether from Africa or elsewhere, have no control over this; at best they can be asked to share the knowledge gained from and about the objects.[6]

To return to the disturbing story of acquisitions made in the field, I will take the example of those I made among the Guro of the Zuenoula region[7] in central-western Côte d'Ivoire. They serve as an emblematic example of the difficulty, even the impossibility, of acquisitions free from ethical concerns (Bouttiaux 2007).

I was expected to acquire pieces while pursuing anthropological research on the function and organisation of mask societies.[8] This was one of the pitfalls: how was I to carry out anthropological investigations while seeking to purchase the objects of my study? There is a form of internal inconsistency in this question which did not escape my interlocutors, who wondered, at least at first, if I was not going to resell what I obtained at a substantial profit. Time alone was my ally in this perspective: deep and trusting friendships were established over the years. Convincing people that I was operating on behalf of a European museum while collaborating with that of Abidjan was not easy. The Guro with whom I worked were perfectly aware of the prices their religious objects could achieve on Western art markets. Fortunately, some of my intermediaries in the field had visited my professional environment in Belgium and reassured people who might otherwise have been suspicious.

Haunted by writings of colonial adventures and their related atrocities – in which the institution which sent me had played a major role – I tried to establish a course of action which would make my presence bearable. Among the rules that I had imposed on myself, the first was that I not belong to the nation which had formerly colonised the country in which I carried out my research – a completely personal choice that casts no judgement on Belgian colleagues who did otherwise. I then had to distance myself from the extortion that was often used in acquiring objects.[9] I also tried to avoid haggling and, above all, I got into the habit

and/or private institutions which could be repatriated according to standards different from those listed in the national heritage of the various European nations which had colonies. See also Lebovics 2021: 123-124.

6. The proceedings of the conference around the figure of the god Gou organised by Houénoudé and Murphy in Porto-Novo in 2016, shortly before Benin's official restitution request to France (July 2016), provide an accurate reflection of the areas of knowledge that researchers master and for which they can or ideally will be called upon. France returned 26 works from the royal treasures of Abomey to Benin on 10 November 2021.

7. Among the northern Guro, those whose villages are located to the north and east of the Bandama River.

8. On this theme and in this region, research took place between 1994 and 2009, but I no longer collected pieces there after 2002.

9. There is a plethora of publications on the subject, see among others Bondaz 2014: 29-30; Bouttiaux 2009: 285-289; Couttenier 2021; Hicks 2020; Leiris 1996 (1934); Ndiaye 2011: 33; Roberts 2013: 194-197; Schildkrout & Keim 1998; Seiderer 2014: 122-128; Wastiau 2017.

of paying for both the object and its replacement so as not to provoke the feeling of irreparable loss in the villages I visited. As far as the Guro were concerned, this turned out rather well: contrary to the principles which still often govern the value of ethnographic pieces on Western art markets (Clifford 1996: 222), new, freshly sculpted and brightly painted masks were highly appreciated (Bouttiaux 2016: 13) (fig. 1). There was therefore nothing disturbing in acquiring those older ones which had already been utilised or (assuming religious leaders authorised it) in photographing and filming them during their performances to contextualise their use and transform them into interesting documents for their future role in a museum.[10] It further facilitated the undertaking that the masks did not serve as an altar for spirits of nature or of ancestors; this important function was reserved for specific receptacles which collected blood and various organic materials from sacrifices intended to give masked apparitions their effectiveness. These objects, the *yo ban ta fè*,[11] could under no circumstances be purchased, as they were the true repositories of ritual power. The leaders of artists' associations – who supervised entertainment masks – and the dignitaries, lineage heads – who assumed this same responsibility for masks whose ritual attributions were more important – were my primary contacts. They oversaw my manoeuvres, and I could not infringe on their authority. They sometimes delegated intermediaries to supervise certain events, but their agreement had to precede each stage of the work. This guidance comforted me, but it also reassured the villagers who saw me operating in such delicate circumstances as, for example, following a mask with a camera during dance performances (fig. 2). In my requests to religious leaders, I was supported by a Guro colleague who guided me, advised me, instructed me, and filled linguistic gaps, as well as by several on-site collaborators, educated young people who had lived in urban centres and spoke French.[12] It might seem an ideal environment for making purchases without contravening customary standards or overly disrupting the internal dynamics of the families and localities that welcomed me; the objects obtained during these negotiations corresponded to the definition that we make today of pieces that can be kept because it has been established that 'a freely consented to

10. Obviously trying to prevent their creators, of whom they become in some way spokespersons, from undergoing any form of reification or essentialisation in the process (Appadurai 2017: 401-402, 407-408; 2020; 2021: 118-119). See also von Oswald 2020: 116.

11. 'The thing on which we sacrifice to the spirits', which is itself sacred, in constant transformation, and always unfinished (Bondaz 2019: 74-75; Coquet 1987: 115-117).

12. There were many who helped me on site, so I cannot name them all in this contribution. However, I must mention Djo bi Irié (the first to introduce me to the Guro villages of the Zuenoula region), Zoro bi Irié, and Patrice Goure Bi Ta. Zoro bi Irié, professor of agronomy at the University of Abobo Adjamé, deserves to be particularly mentioned for his unwavering commitment to me at each stage of my research. I must also evoke the memory of Sabu bi Boti de Tibeita (died 1 September 2021); a sculptor of great talent (Fischer *et al.* 1993), who helped me as much as he could, with integrity and without ever infringing local rules (figs. 1 and 3 to 5).

and documented transaction took place that was agreed upon and equitable' (Sarr & Savoy 2018: 53-54; see also Hicks 2020: 224-229). Seeing this as an optimal situation nevertheless discounts several elements leading to difficulties which were sometimes so distressing that I regretted being expected to make acquisitions for a museum in a religious context that was severely regimented by powers perceived as superhuman.

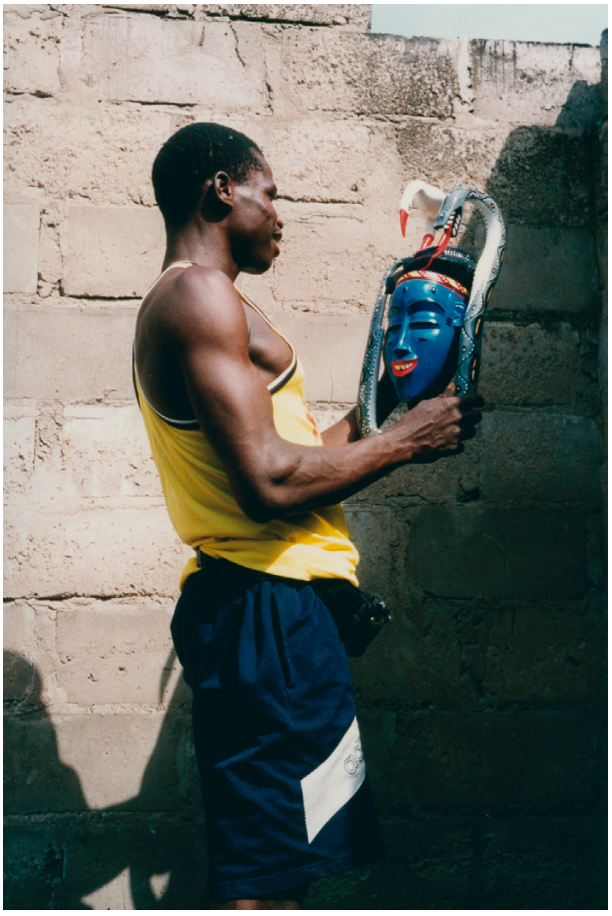

Figure 1. Samuel Zamble bi Lo, mask wearer from Tibeita, examines the *Gyela lu Zauli* mask that sculptor Sabu bi Boti has just completed. (Photo A.-M. Bouttiaux, 2001 © RMCA.)

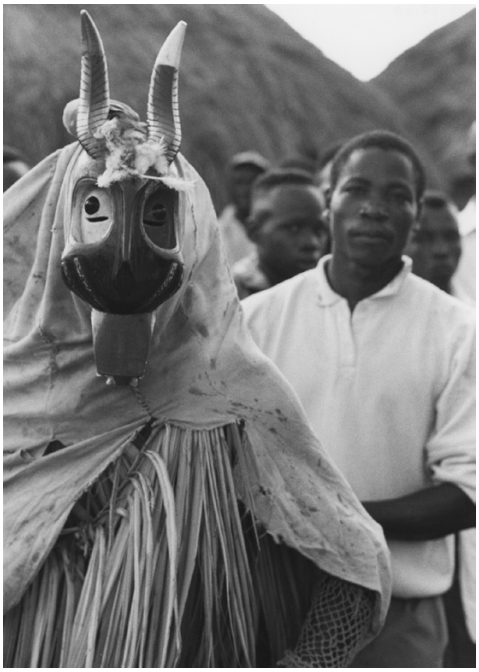

Figure 2. *Zauli* mask appearance in Pohizra in 1996.
(Photo A.-M. Bouttiaux © RMCA.)

The way in which actors,[13] engaged in ritual expressions, managed[14] potential transgressions was a disturbing but also, it must be said, interesting aspect of Guro society. Everything worked according to paradoxical principles. Witchcraft was a scourge that absolutely had to be fought, but to do so it was necessary to use the same means as the sorcerers: supernatural abilities which could only be unleashed by breaking prohibitions. As a result, powerful ritualists working for the good of their community (sometimes through masks, for which they were responsible) were 'forced' to perpetrate an unspeakable act, generally presented as a major crime, to surpass the sphere of normal individuals and benefit from extraordinary abilities (Bouttiaux 2006). They felt, to a certain extent, invulnerable and certainly presented themselves as such; they were perceived to have the ability to destroy, by supernatural means, anyone who got in their way.

13. Almost always men when it comes to playing with prohibitions and even more so when it comes to masks, which remain their preserve.
14. And probably still manage them: having not done any research in the region since 2009, I will not allow myself to make allegations about what is happening there today and I prefer to avoid the 'exotic' ease of the historical present (Bouttiaux 2012: 35; Peffer 2005: 72).

Their behaviour expressed this assurance: they were exempt from their own rules, while others had to follow them to the letter. This resulted in disturbingly reckless and boastful behaviour, often aggravated by the consumption of alcohol.[15]

To varying degrees, all the men involved in the creation and wearing of masks (or in the management and organisation of their ritual or public actions) enjoyed uncommon powers which they invariably highlighted. Before approaching them with the delicate question of acquiring objects, whether used in daily life or worship,[16] I had long conversations about their role in relation to these artefacts and about the possibilities of seeing them use the various instruments associated with their functions – possibly even to photograph or film them, if the conditions were not too complicated, costly, or dangerous.[17] Regardless, these negotiations to obtain information or objects related to masks always amounted, in one way or another, to an offense committed against supernatural forces[18] – first because I was a woman (and not even menopausal, so without the excuse of straddling two genders).[19] Indeed, women were not allowed to care for masks or ask questions about them; at most they could dance near those who were invited for entertainment, but as soon as it came to examples relating to a *yo ban ta fè* altar, it was preferable, even necessary, that they disappear from the public scene. This led me to write, not innocently, that among the Guro, women were the standard for measuring a mask's sacredness (Bouttiaux 2013: 122). Most of these protagonists were nevertheless aware of how much information I had already accumulated on practices associated with masks, especially from essays written, predominantly, by male anthropologists or art historians[20] who had easier access to information considered occult. Persuaded by this knowledge – previously transmitted and not the result of any transgression on their part – many sought to help me complete my understanding. The most important violation had not initially

15. Which notably repelled sorcerers who were always looking for admirable and admired victims, which intoxicated men were not (Bouttiaux 2000).

16. During the missions I carried out, I collected, for the Tervuren Museum, objects as diverse as musical instruments, mouse oracles for divination, seats, canes, clothing and mask costumes, statuettes and, of course, masks.

17. At the time of my research, breaking prohibitions no longer often resulted in the death of those who had committed them. However, it still happened regularly: death occurred from poisoning, in most cases, or from the insurmountable anguish of having committed an act highly reprehensible to society. In cases of minor infractions, there were opportunities for redemption, usually through the organization of sacrifices, offered to ancestors or angry spirits. Depending on the severity, these sacrifices ranged from chicken to cow, but the Guro used to say that if the fault required the price of an ox, there was probably no salvation possible.

18. The *yo*, namely the spirits, whether of ancestors or the entities of nature.

19. For the ambiguous status of postmenopausal women, no longer really considered belonging to the female gender, the essential specificity of which is the power of reproduction, see Grillo 2018.

20 For example, Fischer 2008; Fischer & Homberger 1985. However, some female anthropologists have also addressed the theme: Deluz 1965; Haxaire 2009.

been committed by family members or by men of their society, but by Western researchers who, in any case, were immune from local prohibitions: everyone was safe. In a context that was highly regulated by invisible forces that could be harmful and difficult to control, where any misfortune was interpreted as a contravention of the established religious order, it did not take much for my mask-related questions and transactions – in short, my very presence – to be blamed for my collaborators' every misfortune. We had solutions to this problem, but they were limited: my colleagues, friends, and assistants had fun proclaiming, 'When she arrives, the chickens get hot!' This meant everyone knew my work would lead to numerous offerings of poultry to compensate for flouted prohibitions. It remained a problem, even if I always provided the money necessary for the sacrifices to comfort (and incidentally feed) my interlocutors.[21] I will not go into detail about the difficult negotiations to acquire this or that object because the actors disagreed about selling it or disputed the price. I can only mention the night-time operation some of my collaborators undertook to fetch a mask, sold to me by the ritualist in charge, from where it lay in the sacred forest following its appearance in the village. I waited for them knowing they would give it to me in a bag so I would not look at it in their presence. When they returned, I saw some of them were shaking in terror; I realised any misfortune that might have occurred would have been blamed on me.

Obviously, in this distressing environment, there were suspicions: some believed that others had sold me prohibited pieces or divulged secret information.

There is also no doubt that my interest in masks (like that of the researchers who preceded me) stimulated production by certain talented sculptors who thus gained additional access to the art market (fig. 3). Comparable phenomena were observed by other anthropologists in their fields (O'Hanlon 2011: 147). In the case of the Guro, overly rapid social or professional success sometimes gave rise to rivalries and particularly brutal village repressions; accusations of witchcraft generally put an end to excessively flamboyant success stories (fig. 4).[22]

21. Since the sacrificial meat is prepared, cooked, and consumed on the spot by men (and indirectly by the spirits). The Guro never fail to point out that although this is a source of protein, it is unfortunately not as well prepared as when the women cook it in sauce.
22. On naming and promoting artists, see also von Oswald 2020: 120-122.

Figure 3. Sabu bi Boti from Tibeita carving a *Zamble* mask in Tibeita in 1999. (Photo A.-M. Bouttiaux © RMCA.)

Figure 4. Sabu bi Boti returning to Tibeita in 2009, after being banished from the village following an accusation of witchcraft. (Photo A.-M. Bouttiaux © RMCA.)

Only long, successive stays spread over a period of 15 years allowed me to understand the problematic effects of my presence.[23] As a result I made fewer and fewer acquisitions (fig. 5) until by the end I was buying nothing at all.

Figure 5. *Gyela lu Zauli* mask. Guro, Tibeita, Côte d'Ivoire.
Wood, paint. H. 8 cm, w. 18 cm.
Mask sculpted by Sabu bi Boti, from whom I bought it before it was put into circulation; it has therefore never been worn and was my final acquisition from the Guro.
(EO.2002.6.1, collection RMCA, mission A.-M. Bouttiaux, registered in 2002; photo J.-M. Vandyck, CC BY 4.0.)

While I was obviously not working in a context of colonial intimidation, the economic disparity between the people involved had recreated unequal power relations. These allowed me to obtain goods from interlocutors whose consent teetered between desire and resignation.

23. These effects sometimes appeared in my absence between two stays, as if my onsite activities continued to cause turmoil. I would never have been aware of them if I had carried out a single long mission.

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III.

PERSPECTIVES AND DIALOGUES

Negotiating ephemerality and permanence in the politics of restitution

Z.S. Strother[1]

In memory of Nguedia Gabembo, Zangela Matangua, Mashini Gitshiola.

In 1989, three sculptors in Nioka-Munene independently identified a mask in the collection of the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) as the work of Gabama a Gingungu, widely acclaimed as the most prominent Central Pende sculptor of the 20th century (fig. 1).

Figure 1. Fumu (The Chief) mask, carved by Gabama a Gingungu. Central Pende, DRC.
(EO.0.0.32128, RMCA collection; photo J.-M. Vandyck, CC BY 4.0.)

Remembering their maternal uncle (*lemba*), the founder of their atelier, brought smiles to their faces as they recounted stories about his passion for masquerading. I asked each individual if he would like to see the work returned to Nioka-Munene (Kwilu Province, Secteur Lozo, DRC). However,

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in each case, the sculptor shook his head. They were happy that the mask had been preserved but were dedicated to their own art and liked to believe that they had surpassed Gabama. Two suggested that they would really like to see a museum with THEIR works on the wall next to a label with THEIR names. Even though their local reputations rested on works carved for masked dancers, the white cube gallery lived in their imaginations as a goal... for their own sculptures.

The return of African cultural heritage from European and American collections to African nation states has been debated in political, moral, legal, and psychoanalytic terms.[2] It is important also to consider the aesthetic and religious dimensions of the issue – how would the return of works of art affect the practices of contemporary tradition-based artists and religious practitioners? Historically, in many Central African societies, an expectation exists that masks, statues, textiles, and buildings all 'die' (*kufua*), just as people do.[3] These works die for religious, political, and aesthetic reasons. They die sometimes because they have too much power to be tolerated for long periods. They die because prize works can become so emblematic of social and cultural identity that they become vulnerable at times of change or conflict. And sometimes they die, as Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe has observed, because collections can inhibit the creativity of future generations. This essay probes the complex biographies of works of art among self-identified Pende community members (DRC), the tension between ephemerality and permanence, and how expectations for an object's life history may be shifting in the wake of the ongoing debate about restitution.[4]

Ephemerality and creativity

Reflections on ephemerality in art history are often sparked by a certain puzzlement about the artist's choice of materials variously described as 'organic,' 'perishable,' 'unstable,' or 'fugitive.' Reflecting a bias since the

2. Mobutu, 1973, columns 18, 22; Okediji 1998; Sarr & Savoy 2018; Diawara 2020; Akpang forthcoming. Sarah Van Beurden kindly made available her copy of President Mobutu's speech.
3. E.L. Cameron and Z.S. Strother, 'Narrative,' for a proposed exhibition at the Museum for African Art, 'Art that Dies: Iconoclasm, Transformation and Renewal in African Art,' which asked what role duration plays in the experience of the visual arts (2005-2006).
4. This essay is based on 32 months of study with Pende chiefs, patrons, artists, and historians in (what is now) Kasaï and Kwilu provinces (1987-1989) followed by periodic visits, conversations, or emails with Pende patrons and artists since 2006. I thank my mentors for their guidance: *Kubalumona*, *luthondo*. I also thank the editors, peer reviewers, and Susan E. Gagliardi for their thoughtful engagement with the text. For in-depth studies on masks, see Strother 1998; 2020. On colonial arts, see Strother 1998: 229-263; 2016: 199-241.
In the text, 'Pende' refers to self-identified members of a community usually conceived to be founded through descent from a shared maternal ancestor and constituted through migration in the 17th century from central Angola to what is today southwest DRC. The time depth and currency of such an identity is open to debate given the investment of the colonial regime in mapping ethnicity. Nonetheless, whatever its origins, a Pende identity is actively invoked in many postcolonial settings.

Italian Renaissance if not earlier in favor of elite materials such as marble and metalwork, scholars feel a need to justify the decision to fashion works of art with a limited lifespan. And it is a choice. Although some argue in favor of environmental determinism, Fang and Kota-speaking peoples living in the dense forests of Gabon were able to preserve reliquary figures that were carved from hard wood by saturating the wood with palm oil and/or by sheathing them in copper, the patina of which renders the wood toxic to insects.[5] One of the reasons that the so-called 'Benin bronzes' have played such a leading role in the restitution debate since 2017 is not only the depth of documentation surrounding their theft and auction history but also their exceptional biographies. The Edo royal family safeguarded over a thousand metalworks for 300-400 years and this history can be easily integrated into a Eurocentric museographic narrative about the imperative of preserving physical heritage for future generations.

Beyond the choice of materials, as Allyson Purpura writes, 'the ephemeral amplifies the present by giving it a temporal frame' (Purpura 2009: 14). Ephemerality in modernism refers to the embrace of contemporaneity. Ephemerality in contemporary art is framed as a transgressive rejection of longevity and commodification in the art market. It is a sign of how threatening ephemerality is to the regime of permanence that these positions are riven by contradiction. In his role as art critic, Charles Baudelaire may have embraced 'the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent,' but he is adamant that it is the role of the artist to '*distil the eternal from the transitory*' (Baudelaire 1964 [1863]: 12-13; my emphasis). Contemporary artists such as Robert Smithson, Ana Mendieta, and Andy Goldsworthy may accept impermanence in their installations or performances but rely on photographs to ensure the duration of their works.

But how do African societies conceptualize ephemerality (Purpura & Kreamer 2009-2010)? The most piquant discussion of the issue concerns the Igbo of southern Nigeria. Herbert Cole (1969: 41) observed that Igbo arts value transience over permanence. In 1984, author Chinua Achebe explained with unmatched eloquence the importance of prioritizing the impulse to creativity over the resulting work of art:

> 'the very concept of collections would be antithetical to the Igbo artistic intention. Collections by their very nature will impose rigid, artistic attitudes and conventions on creativity which the Igbo sensibility goes out of its way to avoid […] When the product is preserved and venerated, the impulse to repeat the process is compromised. Therefore the Igbo choose to eliminate the product and retain the process so that every occasion and every generation will receive its own impulse and kinesis of creation' (Achebe 1989: 63-64).

5. LaGamma 2007: 107. Copper is a potent inorganic pesticide and fungicide. The construction industry will sometimes lay fine mesh screens of copper wire over wood surfaces to protect them from termites, a strategy not unlike the sheathing of Kota and Mahongwe reliquary figures with tightly-fitted copper strips and wire.

Achebe slyly reveals Westerners to be the true fetishists. Although many believe that art collections should inspire new generations of artists, Achebe worries that valuing objects over the creative process itself can actually discourage many young people who measure themselves against long dead masters such as Michelangelo.

Sylvester Ogbechie returned to this topic to indict African art history and museology 'in which the canonized physical cultural object carries a weight far above that of its value in indigenous societies' (Ogbechie 2005: 68). Whereas Achebe grounded aesthetics in religious cosmology, Ogbechie writes provocatively that ephemerality should be considered an integral part of a 'knowledge system' developed to equip individuals to expect and domesticate change. Igbo 'valued the idea that cultural practices and objects periodically become obsolete, and thus vanish from general use' (*ibid.*: 67). The goal was to provide 'tools […] to make sense of their world in its contemporary existence' (*ibid.*: 67-68).

The Igbo literature argues that creativity is important for human growth and survival and raises challenging questions about *how* art practices can mediate between the old and new (Achebe 1989: 65). African art history has been so successful in garnering respect for its field within Eurocentric norms that it has left many with the impression that all African works of art are sacred, that no one would ever wish to sell anything, and that if objects decayed it was only out of failure to control the environment. Today, in the context of debates about restitution, a concern with ephemerality can seem like a political strategy to evade acknowledgement of the structural inequities baked into the conditions of the translocation of great quantities of African cultural artifacts to Europe and the US. That is not my intention. Discussing ephemerality is a means to understand the history and the cultural conditions of translocation and to engage the heirs of the producers in respectful intercultural dialogue.

Community masks (*mbuya jia kifutshi*)

The 20th century history of Central Pende community masks is a dramatic instance showing that 'art is a means of taking control of one's own destiny,' as Bambi Ceuppens words it (2020). In this case, masquerading provided critical tools enabling its makers and audiences to negotiate more effectively deep structural inequality – psychologically, artistically, and economically. Most mask headpieces have a relatively short lifespan because they are carved from light wood to facilitate performance. They crack easily at which point they will be discarded by throwing them in the bush (often on a termite mount). The goal is not to destroy the work, or return it to the elements, but to *remove it from sight*. In the original ritual context (alive among Eastern Pende), masquerades honor the dead and it would hardly be reverential to display blemished or discolored sculptures. Selling the work constitutes an acceptable (and popular) form of disposal. Pende masks were circulating as commodities in 1904 – before effective colonial control was achieved at

the end of the 1910s.[6] The imposition of 'taxes' on the population under the threat of brutal reprisals made selling works of art attractive. Objects that would have been exposed to the elements previously were now sold, some before their owners would have wished, whether to pay taxes or to pay for life's necessaries. By the 1920s, the sale of works at the end of their life cycle was fully institutionalized.

Another consequence of the commodification of sculptures was the creation of a dual market.[7] The Central Pende are located on a major artery leading from Kikwit to the diamond center of Tshikapa. Whereas blacksmiths in the 1870s might have carved a maximum of 60 works in a lifetime, professional full-time sculptors (*misongi*) arose among Central Pende in the 1910s. Pioneers like Gabama (who had never wanted to be a blacksmith) seized this opportunity with relish and instituted a two tier payment system.[8] Masqueraders usually paid a chicken; foreigners paid cash. In order to drum up business, Gabama would send his nephews to the Loange River ferry to hawk face masks and encouraged them to invent names and dances to convince the foreigners passing through that they had stumbled onto something special. Again, because of their location near a major road, Pende artists received a good deal of support from the 'Friends of Native Art,' a Belgian organization that set up 'workshops' for motorists to stop and buy carvings. Today there are approximately 340 masks credibly attributed to Pende sculptors in the collection of the RMCA. At least one third show no visible traces of use.[9]

While selling to foreigners was important to making a living, Gabama's atelier gained fame locally by participating in the explosion of masquerade activity that occurred in the 1910s-1950s. Throughout the 20th century, a small number of masks closely aligned with the ritual purpose of the masquerade remained conservative in form, thereby creating a sense of 'tradition.' *Dozens* more were invented and danced for short periods throughout the colonial period. The kaleidoscope of new personae provided solace, laughter (fig. 2), catharsis, and stringent satire.

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6. In 1904, Leo Frobenius sold 728 objects from Central Africa to the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin to fund his first expedition to Africa (Koloss 1990: 21-22). These included a North-Central Pende Pota or Ginjinga facepiece (Museum für Völkerkunde III C 19538). The Pende evidence supports the conclusions of Schildkrout and Keim that '[Central] African objects were part of an international market economy from the earliest days of contact and that this market affected the production of objects at a very early date' (1998: 26). See also Schildkrout 1998.

7. What comes first, the chicken or the egg? I argue here that a philosophical and aesthetic embrace of ephemerality facilitated integration into a cash economy. Jordan Fenton argues the reverse, that masking in Calabar (Nigeria) is resilient and open to change precisely because it is 'steeped in economic transaction' (2022).

8. For more on Gabama, see Strother 1998: 79-99.

9. I thank Curator Julien Volper for these statistics (email, 9 December 2021). My own estimate for the number of masks never danced (based on close examination of the collection in 1986) was higher. I hasten to add that some outstanding works were never danced including the single most reproduced Pende sculpture, a Mbangu mask (EO.1959.15.18, RMCA collection).

Figure 2. Female mask with child figure, DRC. Although the female mask is an archetype, some Central Pende added a doll (here female), which represented the masked character's child. Such 'gimmicks' (*gadilo*) are appreciated for freshening the event even as they enjoy a limited life span. The photographer, Adrien Vanden Bossche, was director of the Musée de la Vie indigène from 1936-1952. (Photo courtesy of Charles Hénault, Marc Leo Felix, Archives of the Congo Basin Art History Research Center, Brussels.)

They showed what a chief *should be* (fig. 1), not what he had been turned into as a 'chief for the whites.' As Achebe noted about Igbo, 'new forms must stand ready to be called into being as often as new (threatening) forces appear on the scene' (Achebe 1989: 64). And they must change as conditions change.

During the time when masquerade was booming as a form of resistance to colonial oppression, sculptors had a lot of business and could innovate or invent new forms for their local audience while also responding to a growing colonial trade. Ambitious dancers traveled to get ideas to launch new masquerade characters and to bring back ideas for formal innovations. However, as the demand for masquerade began to decline after Independence, a new orientation emerged in the market in favor of conservative forms filling a small repertoire of what could be called classical works of art. Under this pressure, the continuing short life span for dancers' masks was not enough to ensure the steady creation of new forms. The steady production of the same thing has kept certain prototypes visible for too long.

There are some surprises in this history. Colonial clients were more willing to embrace contemporaneity than the art market that developed after Independence in 1960, which turned sculptors into automatons 'faking'

precolonial antiquities modelled on a small repertoire of what could be called classical forms. As a result, prices have fallen. For example, in 1906 a Dutch commercial agent reported that the Pende 'were famous for masks; the regular prices for which have been from one fathom of cloth for smaller ones to one piece for the larger and finer ones' (Schildkrout 1998: 184). In contrast, by 1989, a mask that was not skillfully and artificially aged to pass for a pre-colonial work of art by middlemen sold for an average price of 0.25 USD! The desire for the sculptors at Nioka-Munene to see their own works on museum walls (conceived as commercial galleries) have very real economic consequences.

Mukanda masks (*mbuya jia mukanda*)

The use of masks during Eastern Pende initiations demonstrates Achebe's insight that valuing process over product can serve as a strategy to ensure that 'every generation will receive its own impulse and kinesis of creation' (Achebe 1989: 64). The *mukanda* is or was many things including a men's fraternity, a puberty initiation, and a woods-and-crafts camp. Fundamentally, the *mukanda* turns boys into men. As an institution, it probably began in Central Angola in the 17th century and now continues in pockets from southern DRC to Zambia, one of the strongest being the Eastern Pende. During the 1930s, the Belgian colonial state required that boys' circumcision take place in birthing centers for reasons of health and safety. As a result, some felt that the *mukanda* had lost its raison d'être with the suppression of the central ritual marking the transformation of a boy into a man able to marry and father children. The Kwilu Pende abandoned the *mukanda* in the 1930s and the Central Pende in the 1950s. On the other hand, the Eastern Pende believed that the *mukanda* was a multi-faceted institution too valuable to lose. Instead, they made the performance of unmasking, which had always preceded the circumcision, into the central transformative ritual.

When a community agrees to host a *mukanda*, approximately every 10-15 years, the first thing that a chief must do is commission a series of masks. Most will hire a professional to carve the first couple of masks, one of which must be 'Ngolo,' a horned mask (usually black-and-white). During the opening ritual, the boys are obliged to run a gauntlet of men and masks armed with whips in order to tackle Ngolo and pull off his headpiece. Once the camp is launched, recent initiates and some of the fathers will carve as many other masks as needed.

At the end of the initiation, when the boys have mastered 85-125 songs and a corpus of dances, the camp counselors will gather the masquerading costumes and headpieces and throw them onto the roof of their sleeping cabin. Since at least the late 1980s, there is a sleight of hand. The boys will be told that their masks will be burned but in fact chunks of dry wood are slipped into burlap bags. As I witnessed in 1987 and 1988, the organizers choose a moonless night for the ceremony so that setting the cabin ablaze created a spectacular wall of fire. As the bags were tossed into the flames, the dry wood inside exploded into a shower of sparks.

Why burn the masks? Participants in several camps were unanimous on this point. The *mukanda* is a gift for the boys and each generation must receive an experience that is fresh and *individualized* for them. It would not be respectful to pass on to them sweaty, used materials. Today, the organizers almost always prefer to sell the masks to help defray costs but the important thing is that the next edition be born anew.

The Eastern Pende *mukanda* provides insights into a powerful and once widespread model of creativity, which is structured by cycles of presence and absence. When a new generation is launched, it may take several years for camps to crisscross a region. These camps currently last 6-10 weeks, during which period the initiates and community at large interact with the masks on a daily basis. These experiences can be emotionally fraught and create vivid memories. Although the masks may vanish from view for a period of ten or more years, there is a large community of men who have handled the works and who have carved them. Consequently, the requisite skill sets and knowledge of style, iconography, and historical change are deeply engrained. It is easily documented from the 1950s to the present that the Ngolo mask with its long horns, protruding white eyes, and black-and-white coloring has been reproduced with consistency but many more masks have been improvised, playing with the idea of the initiates as creatures of the savanna (fig. 3).

Figure 3. *Thengu ya lukumbi* mask carved by Ngoma Kandaku Mbuya for the *mukanda* of Chief Mukunzu. Ndjindji, DRC. The form of the mask is closely modeled on the canonical Ngolo, which is black-and-white. The radically different coloring creates new interest as does the unusual name, which means 'roan antelope with the sting of the *lukumbi* insect,' in other words, 'beware!'
(Photo and © Z.S. Strother, 1987.)

And it seems that each camp will create (or import from adjoining regions) something fresh and whimsical to celebrate the advent of a new generation (Strother & Nzomba 2020: 260, 263). In 2018, many camps experimented with raffia masks topped with fanciful shapes made from reflective cigarette wrappers. Ephemerality grants license to think anew.

Although the destruction (or sale) of the masks could be construed as a form of iconoclasm, everyone knows that the masks will reappear in the future in both familiar and surprising forms. The host community's intense engagement with the artistic practice ensures that the skills will be available even after a long hiatus. Ironically burning the works (or making them disappear from view) amplifies the significance of the event and, as Ogbechie writes, trains the boys to expect change and to master it.[10]

Power objects (*wanga)*

Power objects in Central Africa are containers of animate energy dedicated towards the accomplishment of a specific task. As such they raise issues unexplored in the Igbo literature. Masks historically belonged to communal chests but power objects have always been private property and that fact arouses anxiety about the intentions of the owner to amass power for potentially selfish or political ends. As was true for important Kongo *minkisi*, Pende power objects require the capture of a human spirit for a limited length of time 'to work' for the owner. The container by no means has to be sculpted and, when it is, the forms are highly individualized (which is not to say naturalistic). Relatively few have been identified as 'Pende' in the market because their forms are so varied as to make attributions difficult without reliable collection data. They live in the imaginations of audiences who hear of them but rarely see them. Up to the present, they are usually destroyed (put in harm's way on a termite mound) to release the spirit within to continue on its journey to the other world.

Public power objects once appeared on the ritual house (*kibulu)* of paramount chiefs. Ostensibly for the protection of the community, they belong to the chief and people worry that he will use them to consolidate political power. As a consequence, no maintenance is permitted once the house is constructed. The rationale for this prohibition is complex (Strother 2014-2015 : 141-143), but one of the motives is to make sure that the power objects displayed and those suspected within decay once the roof collapses and the works fall on the ground to become victim to the mighty termite.

10. There is an instructive parallel to the creative cycle of presence and absence in the *mukanda*. Every New Year's Day, elaborate floats covered by flowers and other ephemeral natural materials appear in a popular parade in Pasadena, California. Requiring many thousands of hours to assemble, these floats are nonetheless dismantled down to the chassis within a day of the parade. The event is broadcast and lavishly documented in photos but the brief lifespan of the floats and the embargo on the incorporation of permanent materials generates excitement about the freshness of each year's compositions.

In the 1940s, Kaseya Tambwe Makumbi from Kandolo-Mututua (Njila) created a new form of roof finial depicting a relatively naturalistic young mother cradling a child on her left. Likely inspired by Catholic statues of Mary holding the baby Jesus, Kaseya's appropriation took on new meanings rooted in complex local iconography (Strother 2015-2016: 141-143). The mother-and-child form established Kaseya as the most sought after sculptor for Eastern Pende paramount chiefs for over twenty-five years. His works attracted European as well as Pende tourists and enabled Kaseya (like Gabama) to draw students and to work successfully in a dual market. RMCA registered a fine example in 1950 (fig. 4).

Figure 4. A *kishikishi* (rooftop finial) carved by Kaseya Tambwe Makumbi. Registered in 1950. Donated by Father J. Vanhamme. H. 100 cm. (EO.1950.25.1, RMCA collection; photo J.-M. Vandyck © RMCA.)

In the mid-1950s, he was a favorite of *Agent territorial* Charles Souris, who opened a small museum in Kitangua (an administrative as well as Catholic center among Eastern Pende) and he consequently became a protégé of Robert Verly, who promoted his work in the Ateliers sociaux d'Art indigène du Sud-Kasaï and in a small museum opened in Tshikapa for the encouragement of 'native' art (1956-1959). A photo from ca. 1956 shows Kaseya (on the left) working in front of his roadside cabana (fig. 5.).

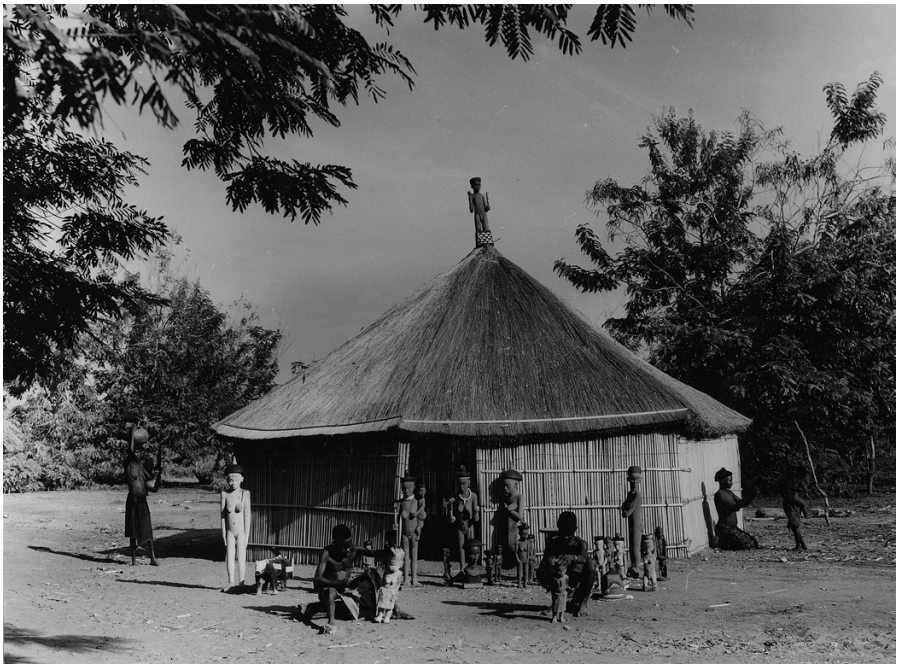

Figure 5. Kaseya Tambwe Makumbi (central left) displays his wares in front of a roadside cabana promoted by the Ateliers sociaux d'Art indigène du Sud-Kasaï organized by Robert Verly.
(EP.0.0.3002, RMCA collection; photo C. Lamote (Inforcongo), s.d., CC BY 4.0.)

In the back are two mother-and-child statues adapted to stand on small plinths. One has an elongated vulva such as one would never see on a mounted statue, presumably carved to enhance the erotic appeal to foreigners. There are a multitude of other sculptures, some reflecting indigenous prototypes and others not. Extraordinarily, Kaseya has mounted on the roof a unique male figure holding a carving adze, which Verly described as a 'sign for the studio.' The right to display anthropomorphic sculpture in any form was and is a prerogative strongly policed by paramount chiefs. One can only conclude that Kaseya was closely identified with the colonial state and therefore untouchable. Notwithstanding, he remained very popular locally and many eyewitnesses recounted vivid memories of his work *in situ*. In 1974, he received a commission for the Institut des Musées nationaux in Kinshasa (Van Beurden 2015: 138, fig. 4.1).

Congolese were not usually invited into colonial museums and few Pende have seen the collections in Kinshasa. Judging from my conversations with sculptors, Kaseya might well have appreciated the idea of his works being preserved… elsewhere. At home, once the sculptures left his hands to be mounted on a chief's house, they were presumed to be power objects, containing a protective human spirit to watch over the community by a nganga

(ritual specialist). Charged with spirit, such works are dangerous and, for this reason, most rural Pende have a horror of making anthropomorphic carvings long-lived. When asked why one should not make power objects out of stone, the regionally infamous nganga Kakoko protested, 'You don't want to make it eternal! When[Chief] Kombo dies, a new Kombo must make his own. Who would use the old figure? People are afraid to have all of those spirits around. [Who would want them] tied eternally?!' Another respected practitioner, Mukishi Loange 'Socrate,' explained that when the chief's architectural sculpture is in poor condition, or the chief dies, the spirit (*kivule*) is liberated. Its work is finished and it is free to go.[11]

Sylvester Ogbechie (2005: 68) warned that even when objects disappear, one must be careful before concluding that the knowledge system that supported them has vanished. When I began research in DRC, 1987-1989, there were plenty of chiefs' houses but not one displayed any of the architectural sculpture photographed *in situ* the 1950s-1960s. Many said that mounting a statue was too dangerous as it could provoke accusations of sorcery that might spiral out of control. However, with the fall of Mobutu, no one could enforce local hierarchies any longer. A great number of small chiefs purchased their 'independence' and insisted on having the ultimate insignia of rank – a statue on the roof (*kishikishi*) (fig. 6). The community was proud enough of their rise in status to support the chief's decision.

Figure 6. The *kishikishi* (rooftop finial) for the ritual house of Chief Mudinga (Kamusa Albert). Artist: Munganga Sh'a Libako. 1996. Nyanga, Democratic Republic of the Congo. (Photo and © Z.S. Strother, 2007.)

11. Interviews with Kakoko and Mukishi Loange, Ndjindji, DRC, 1987. Both men belonged to the Ndeke generation, initiated ca. 1931-1933.

It is interesting to analyze the finial commissioned by Chief Mudinga in 1996 after a hiatus of maybe twenty years in the mounting of kibulu sculpture in the region. The young sculptor Munganga Sh'a Libako carved his statue in the form of a young woman standing with an axe (*kuba*), a recurring motif documented regularly beginning in the early 1900s. The only hint of Kaseya's influence is in the modeling. The sculptor was counseled on a straight-forward and positive iconographical program. Mudinga's candidacy was disputed and, as the chief explained, the image underscores that he was properly invested because the figure carries the distinctive axe with rounded blade wielded during a test when a candidate must behead a ram with a single blow. On the other hand, the female image reminds the chief daily that he should serve as the 'mother of the clan.'[12] As Ogbechie foresaw, a living knowledge system can generate a recognizable iconographical program without a visual record because the ritual or cultural logic remains intact. As to the carving, it is possible that the international market kept alive certain skills as some men continue to produce anthropomorphic sculpture discreetly out of view of most passersby.

Although communities such as Mudinga's shared the chief's pride in his new status, they still took comfort in the rule barring maintenance so that the rooftop sculpture would have a defined lifespan of around a decade. If the chief wished to sell the work once it hit the ground – that was his business – so long as it vanished. Subsequently, having celebrated their ascension in rank, few communities have authorized the replacement of these sculptures once they fell. Although capable of flaring back to life, the *kishikishi* is a prototypical example of objects that 'die' because they have too much power to be tolerated indefinitely.[13]

Ephemerality under the regime of permanence

Under globalization, there has been relentless pressure for the peoples of the world to conform to the hegemonic regime of museological permanence. Even privileged American artists are not immune. The morals clause of the American Visual Artists Rights Act (1990) states that 'the preservation of the cultural property supersedes the individual wishes of the artist' (Hornbeck 2009: 57). Responding to criticism of cultural imperialism, UNESCO passed the 2003 'Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Heritage,'

12. Chief Mudinga (Kamusa Albert), pers. comm., Nyanga, DRC, 2007.

13. It is likely that most power objects have a limited life span. In Mali, Bamana Kɔmɔ masks are also power objects. Kassim Kone reports that people can become uneasy when there is a build-up of sacrificial blood on Kɔmɔ masks. 'The owner can decide: it's time for it to die.' Or, if he's ill, he may decide that no one in the family has the expertise to manage it safely. In that case, he may decide to place the headpiece in an abandoned beehive because no one will dare touch such a thing. Eventually, the energy in the object will dissipate and the termites will eat it with impunity and the rain will wash away any traces. Alternatively, the caretaker for the object may go out in a canoe and drop it into the water, apologizing, with a polite fib, 'I'll come back and get you.' He will do this to protect his family. Kassim Kone, pers. comm., 9 March 2021.

including performances of theater, music, rituals, etc. Many feared that the listing process would 'fossilize' dynamic cultural practices and in many cases it has. By focusing on the presence or absence of physical objects, the initiative has failed to address the temporal dimension of change although concern about this issue was expressed from the beginning (Nas 2002: 139-140). In one damning critique, Ferdinand de Jong accuses UNESCO policy of not being able to take the contemporaneity of Kankurang Masquerade (Senegal, The Gambia) seriously, instead casting it as 'a potential pharmakon to heal the wounds of postcolonial modernity. The operation is not forward-looking but focused on the restoration of selected values associated with an imaginary precolonial past' (2007: 175). De Jong articulates precisely the dangers of restitution initiatives that exchange one colonialist paradigm for another when they presume the desirability of unchanging objects and fail to consult with stake-holders outside the museum apparatus.

Ephemerality itself should not be construed as an unchanging cultural ideal located in 'an imaginary precolonial past.' Its power should be to force us into the present. I asked Chika Okeke-Agulu to what degree Achebe's argument that Igbo eschew private collections out of concern to nourish the 'kinesis of creation' might hold true today. He responded by describing multiple constituencies. 1) Igbo country is now full of churches, especially Pentecostal congregations and there are 'frequent orgies of burning objects' associated with so-called pagan practice. '*This is ongoing*. Of course, everyone has the right to change their religion.' 2) Nonetheless, there are still people with strong ties to Igbo religious and cultural practices, even if they don't care about restitution per se. Whenever members of Okeke-Agulu's home community needs to commission a new masquerade, they contact him and expect him to contribute. What Achebe described was informed by a theology of reincarnation. However, it is important to understand that Igbo associations are also fiercely competitive and this factor drives them to commission new works responding to contemporary tastes that surpass in quality or emotional impact preexisting works. 3) And yes, there is also a new class of middle-class culture whose members view museums as educational institutions. He mused on an Igbo cultural predisposition to savor contradiction: 'Old things need to be thrown away. But what do you do? They simultaneously value newness but accept that it's necessary to use the old to teach the new.'[14]

I share Okeke-Agulu's belief that a theology of reincarnation lies behind the predilection to give works of art a defined lifespan. Mukishi Loange said as much when he advised that a power object should be 'made in wood because man's life on earth is not eternal. It is not made in metal: how long will the owner live?'[15] Nonetheless, the constituencies that Okeke-Agulu enumerates for the arts today have their parallels in Pende circles: the *églises de reveil*; the communities invested in the *mukanda* or chiefly power; the middle-class

14. Speaker's emphasis. Chika Okeke-Agulu, pers. comm., 15 March 2021.
15. Mukishi Loange, pers. comm., Ndjindji, DRC, 1987.

active in the Pende Cultural Center in Kinshasa, probably the most important contemporary venue for masquerades. Other stakeholders include artists working in tradition-based arts, who crave recognition under their own names (fig. 7).

Figure 7. Mashini Gitshiola (1949-2017) did not live to see a museum in Nioka-Munene but he did take pleasure in seeing his own work reproduced in *Inventing Masks*.
(Photo and © M. Goertz, Nioka-Munene, DRC, 2006.)

A philosophical and aesthetic commitment to ephemerality facilitated a remarkably swift integration of sculpture into a cash economy in the Pende region.[16] The fact that this serendipitous relationship developed during an occupation that was often brutal, especially in the 1910s-1930s, does not license dismissal of the decisions made by Pende artists and patrons during that period, nor disregard for the wishes of their descendants. That said, a cultural appreciation of ephemerality must never be used to justify those 'very clear instances of acts of expropriation that injured the cultural memories of

16. Sculpted chairs comprise the one genre of 20th century art that raises questions for me in terms of coercion. They were commissioned by chiefs working closely with the colonial state in the 1920s-1930s. At least a couple of these chiefs were pressured into ceding them to administrators and others responded by keeping reserves on hand to use as gifts to curry favor with the state (Strother 2016: 207-219).

the people who owned them,' associated with conquest, civil war, and outright theft (Okeke-Agulu 2020). There will never be a unitary perspective on the arts in any living culture; however, engaging a polyphony of voices is necessary if the international dialogue on restitution is to achieve the goals of the 2005 Faro Convention in recognizing 'individual and human values at the heart of a broad and transversal concept of cultural heritage.'[17] To achieve reconciliation, it is best to begin by asking the open-ended question of 'what is important to you?' and to be willing to listen to the answer if it is 'my art today,' 'my life today.'

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The socio-environmental footprint of natural history collections: colonial conservation policies and animal extraction, Congo, circa 1900-1960

Violette Pouillard[1]

Museums with natural history collections often express the quality of their collections by indicating the number of specimens per taxonomic class, thus indirectly demonstrating the extent of the historical process of hoarding living organisms. Indeed, the animal collections from the Congo Free State (1885-1908) and Belgian Congo (1908-1960) eras at the Royal Museum for Central Africa (hereafter RMCA) alone include: several million insects; 41,079 non-insect invertebrates; 23,493 fish; 12,101 amphibians; 12,398 reptiles; 6,886 birds; and 16,267 mammals.[2] These figures represent only a small portion of the animals acquired in Congo during the colonial era, not least because a great many of these were deposited with either the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences or foreign institutions. The RMCA's collections also include many specimens acquired after the colonial era and/or taken from outside Congo for a total, according to the institution's website, of six million insects, hundreds of thousands of non-insect invertebrates, one million fishes, 300,000 spiders, 200,000 amphibians, 41,000 reptiles, 150,000 birds, and more than 135,000 mammals, including 10,500 primates.[3]

This numerical prodigality provokes both dizziness and detachment. The quantitative dryness is impenetrable: the higher the numbers, the more we struggle to relate them to reality, and the figures from the Latourian 'calculation centres' (museums and other places of classification, conservation, and study) say nothing about the capillarity of the acquisition networks or the impacts of their operations. By reducing "the afterlives of animals" (Alberti 2011) to numbers, inventories plunge the lives of individuals-turned-specimens into obscurity. We know that museums, like naturalist travelogues, fuel a decontextualisation which allows collections to be seen and read as only the extracted 'materials', inviting us to reproduce in part an imperial gaze – Mary-Louise Pratt's 'imperial eyes' –, a form of blindness that focuses on the acquisitive purposes of metropolitan centres, while neutralising the

1. CNRS (LARHRA, UMR 5190)/Ghent University.

2. Numbers corresponding to specimens encoded in the RMCA database. Insects are 'in the process of being encoded'. Correspondence with Didier Van den Spiegel, head of Biological Collections at the RMCA, whom we thank warmly, 31 March 2022.

3.https://www.africamuseum.be/fr/research/collections_libraries; https://www.africamuseum.be/en/research/collections_libraries/biology/collections (accessed on 31 March 2022).

colonial historicity of collections and disregarding the complex interactions necessary for collecting to occur in 'contact zones' (Pratt 2008). To remove these blinkers, specimens must be followed back in time, from the glass cages and casket-drawers to the previous lives interrupted by their capture. The different lives-after-death from all subsequent manipulations that increased this organic distance, so that specimens can be commensurable with a naturalistic reading of the world, must also be considered. Such exercises in restituting 'the social life of things' (Appadurai 1986) require writing connected histories and drawing on different scales, from the globalised history of the circulation of specimens and the regional history of acquisition sites, to a closer examination of naturalist missions as well as microhistorical approaches to and biographies of collectors, preparers, and specimens.[4] This history is still largely unwritten. This essay focuses on animal acquisitions in colonial Congo, acknowledging that approaching the complex intertwining of acquisitions seems easier with animals, which can be individualised for several taxa. The aim is to draw attention to a salient aspect of these collections, which has remained marginal in historiography: their socio-environmental effects.

While the political and social history of ethnographic collecting is playing an increasingly important role in academic accounts and societal debates, the question of acquiring animals has remained an afterthought,[5] reflecting not only an unconscious reproduction of the official and scientific colonial-era absolution of natural history collections, but also a disdain for the question of the colonisation of animals, which several recent works nevertheless place at the heart of colonial policies (see, in particular, Saha 2021). As a reflection of, and catalyst for, the avoidance of the question of the (post)colonial treatment of animals, several localised and synthetic accounts argue – without having examined the animal and environmental aspect of wildlife-protection policies – that (post)colonial protection policies contribute to 'simultaneously humanising wild animals and denigrating poachers' (Neumann 2004: 834) or that they 'value the protection of endangered species more than the well-being of local people' (Nygren 2013). In contrast to these (meta)narratives, this essay, which looks at where the constitution of natural history collections and the development of colonial wildlife-conservation policies intersect,[6] argues that the integration of animal and environmental dimensions into narratives is a necessary addition to understanding the social history of environmental management policies. This perspective challenges any simple and essentialist opposition pitting (post)colonial wildlife protection against rural populations.

4. On this last point, see, in particular, Nance 2015. On the historicisation of natural history collections – and collecting, particularly with regard to their role in the production of scientific knowledge, see Daugeron 2009; Juhé-Beaulaton & Leblan 2018.

5. See, however, albeit with limited historical depth, Marek Muller 2017 and Das & Lowe 2018.

6. In this text, we generally use the term 'conservation', as we believe this better describes the protection policies discussed than 'preservation'. On these questions of terminology, see Pouillard 2019.

Exclusions and extractions

Natural history acquisitions in Congo peaked concurrently with the deployment of an international and colonial legal arsenal of wildlife-protection measures, from the signing in London in 1900 of the Convention for the Preservation of Wild Animals, Birds, and Fish in Africa to its legal variations in the laws of the Congo Free State and later the Belgian Congo. Written under the seal of hunting expertise, this body of law articulates a utilitarian understanding of wildlife management, whereby the aim is not to prevent the violent appropriation of animals but to temper usage and prevent exploitation from obliterating itself through its own excesses (Gissibl 2016: 112-118, 243-253; Pouillard 2019[7]).

This legislative edifice primarily addresses the protection of species – in the form of lists conferring various protection statuses – and the protection of areas in the form of reserves of various statuses and, beginning in the inter-war period, national parks. In so doing, the legislation imposed several limits on pre-colonial land and use rights. At the same time, however, it authorised derogations issued at the discretion of the colonial authorities for so-called administrative purposes (for example, to supply workers in colonial companies and building sites with game meat) but also for scientific purposes (Nzabandora Ndi Mubanzi 2003; Van Schuylenbergh 2020). These latter exemptions, implemented through the granting of scientific permits, authorised the acquisition of protected specimens to supply colonial and natural history museums, colonial exhibitions, and zoo and laboratory cages. Metropolitan collections were also supplied by the routine acquisition of specimens that were not, or were less strictly, protected by law. Specimens were acquired or ordered by professional or amateur naturalists – soldiers, missionaries, agricultural settlers, or colonial administrators – who themselves often activated networks of Congolese collectors, resulting in a wide-ranging collective appropriation of Congo's fauna (Pouillard 2019[8]).

The acquisition of the most protected species, particularly those that were (almost) endemic to Congo or recent 'discoveries' that aroused international interest, such as okapis (1901) and eastern gorillas (1903),[9] sheds light on the nature of colonial protection policies as much as on the socio-environmental impact of acquisition. The colonial authorities, who issued exemptions, sought to curb private initiatives while hunters used the museums as a scientific justification to obtain permits (Van Schuylenbergh 2020: 156-158). But they also wanted to authorise the capture of animals which, on the one hand, fed an inventory that contributed to the economic exploitation and biopolitical control of the colony and, on the other hand, allowed natural history displays to serve as 'soft' propaganda in exhibitions, museums, and

7. On earlier naturalist acquisitions (second half of the 19th century) in Congo, see Van Schuylenbergh 2018: 128-145, 149-159; Arzel 2018.
8. For profiles of the collectors, see also Van Schuylenbergh 2020: 145-153.
9. In current terminology, as in the following entries.

zoos. Finally, political and diplomatic considerations weighed heavily in the granting of permits, as explained in 1919 by Edmond Leplae, the director of the division of agriculture at the Ministry of Colonies which was, not coincidentally, responsible for protection policies: while '[t]he campaign of Morel, Casement, and company has left deep scars in English circles', it was in the authorities' interest 'to encourage visits to our colony by English notables'. But it was important to avoid any excesses: while one could 'hope that, from this point of view, Lord Dewar, a wealthy philanthropist, would be able to see for himself that the Congo is being properly administered by the Belgians during one of his hunting expeditions, [...] is it necessary to authorise Lord Dewar to slaughter 25 adult male elephants to do so?'[10]

Protected animals, mammals especially, became pieces in a complex game designed to protect them sufficiently as a demonstration of efficient (environmental) governance while satisfying the thirst of the cosmopolitan aristocratic and hunting elites, as well as the naturalist appetites of Belgian and foreign institutions.

(Ordering the) collection of protected animals

While gorillas in eastern Congo seemed little hunted before colonisation, okapis were hunted in Ituri for their meat and skins, mainly using pit traps. While in the colonial era all activities to acquire the most-protected species were theoretically banned, colonial authorities nevertheless granted broad scientific authorisations. For mountain gorillas alone, a subspecies of the eastern gorillas confined to the region of the Virunga volcanoes, they allowed expeditions led by Prince William of Sweden, with the support of the Royal Museum in Stockholm, by hunter Alexander Barns, with the support of the British Museum, and by taxidermist Carl Akeley, with the support of the American Museum of Natural History in New York, to kill 23 individuals in 1920 and 1921. These acquisitions provoked strong criticism, with a letter published in *The Times* in 1924 denouncing 'the unholy alliance between museums and sportsmen'.[11] The authorities subsequently limited the number of permits issued for the acquisition of the most protected animals, in particular mountain gorillas, which were doubly protected with the establishment of the Albert National Park in 1925 (see below). Even during this period of increased restriction, however, an incomplete estimate concerning only the most protected species shows the authorities issued eight permits (against ten refusals) allowing the killing of all protected animals, nine permits for okapis (against six refusals), and ten permits for gorillas (against 14 refusals) between December 1925 and September 1936. In addition, the Museum of the Belgian Congo, which already mandated its

10. AA, AGRI 434, 53 bis Ch., Leplae, 'Note de la 8e au sujet du permis de chasse sollicité pour Lord Dewar', 30 May 1919 (quotes in French were translated by the author).
11. AA, AGRI 449, A. Gray, 'Hunted gorillas. Imminent risk of extinction', *The Times,* 10 June 1924, p. 13; Letter from the minister for colonies to Schouteden, 22 July 1924.

own collection missions, supported several permit applications especially as it received 'duplicate' and surplus specimens killed for the benefit of other institutions.[12] Some of these authorisations covered wide-ranging predatory activities, such as those issued annually to Brother Hutsebaut of the Buta mission in Province-Orientale, who in the inter-war period made extensive deliveries of dead and live animals, including many okapis, to the Museum of the Belgian Congo, Antwerp Zoo, and foreign institutions (Pouillard 2016: 584, 591-592).

The simultaneously developed network of spatial protection seems at first sight to have diverged from this hunting ethos in the case of the national parks, the most effective form of protection in Congo. The colonial authorities and the institutions responsible for park management – i.e., the Albert National Park institution (1929), succeeded in 1934 by the Institute of National Parks of Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi (hereafter referred to as the Institute), which integrated management of the Kagera (1934, Ruanda), Garamba (1938), and Upemba (1939) parks – developed a rhetoric of 'integral conservation' for the parks based on the removal of human influences within their borders. The Institute's policy resulted in the termination of land-use rights and the displacement of many Congolese rural communities from the parks. This privatisation of inalienable communal land and sacred ancestral sites led to an erosion of the economic independence and socio-political status of the excluded populations and thus to persistent conflicts (Nzabandora Ndi Mubanzi 2003). However, this intransigence does not mean that all activities were prohibited within the parks, which became places for scientific and, later, tourist activity (on which see De Bont 2021: 135-157). The Institute's scientific programme consisted mainly of a 'general inventory'[13] of the parks which persisted throughout the colonial era and was undiminished by the rise of scientific ecology. Scientific missions commissioned by the Institute collected geological samples as well as zoological and botanical specimens in the parks which were then sent to colonial and, to a much greater extent, metropolitan laboratories. The main beneficiaries were the Royal Belgian Museum of Natural History/Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences – directed until 1954 by Victor Van Straelen, who was also vice-president and then president of the Institute, from 1934 until the end of the colonial era – and the Museum of the Belgian Congo, whose former section head and later director (1927-1946), Henri Schouteden, was a member of the management committee of the Institute until the late 1930s. Acquisitions made in the parks also contributed 'to enriching the heritage of many foreign museums and private collections'.[14] They quickly reached an industrial scale. Among several examples, the 'materials' collected by the herpetologist Gaston-François de Witte in Upemba National Park from 1946 to 1949 included

12. AA, AGR I 434, 53 bis Ch., 'Demandes reçues au département des Colonies', n.d.
13. RMCA, HA.02.0009 (PV. Commission administrative, n° 1-58, 1929-1958), Institution Parc national Albert, Commission VII, 9/1/1932, p. 8.
14. IPNCB, 'Rapport annuel 1958', p. 11.

1,610 mammals, 5,297 birds, 9,915 reptiles, 83,628 amphibians, 8,861 fish, 455 arachnids and myriapods, 2,625 worms, molluscs, and crustaceans, and around a million insects.[15]

The socio-environmental effect of acquisition

The animal and environmental footprint of collecting extends well beyond the numbers in the collections. Only a selection of the collected specimens entered the collections. Moreover, captures, including those in national parks, were based on invasive devices such as trapping[16] or, in lake environments, dredging operations,[17] with consequences that went beyond the effects of specimen capture alone. Among the many and varied indirect effects of capture, the slaughter of gregarious mammals – for example, the selective slaughter of male silverback gorillas, prized in museums for their spectacular nature – caused upheavals in animal geography, demography, and sociability, with lasting local and regional effects (Pouillard 2015). The upheavals caused by the capture of animals in turn led to changes in acquisition policies. In the early 1950s, for example, colonial officials responsible for overseeing the capture of okapis for zoos recommended itinerant collecting to 'avoid over-exploiting a given region'.[18]

The acquisition of protected species and/or conducted in protected areas relied on much wider networks of appropriation than indicated by the lists of collectors and mission leaders to which colonial reports were often limited, masking the cardinal role of informers, collaborators, research assistants, specimen preparers, and other African intermediaries (Lawrance *et al.* 2006; Jacobs 2006; Van Schuylenbergh 2017; 2018: 172-175). These intermediaries provided collectors with information about animal distribution and behaviour, stalking techniques, and hunting technologies, and did much of the work of extracting and preparing the specimens. Their role reappeared indirectly in the sources when, for example, scientific reports on missions to the parks mentioned species' vernacular names or, suddenly, described 34 golden monkey skins 'of indigenous preparation [...] cut above the eyes' (Frechkop 1938: 31). Colonial collectors regularly delegated animal capture to Congolese locals by offering incentives, which would result in a large catch. For example, Hutsebaut and the brothers from the Buta mission bought animals through the intermediary of chiefs, whose socio-economic capital they built up, providing them in exchange with consumer goods and

15.RMCA archives, HA.02.0009 (PV Comité de direction 101-213, 1941-1950), IPNCB, Commission XLI, 17/12/1949, p. 4.
16. For example, RMCA, HA.02.0009 (PV Comité de direction 1-100, 1931-1941), IPNCB, CD 23/3/1935, p. 7, 27/7/1935, no. 236.
17. IPNCB, Commission XIII, 21/12/1935, p. 6.
18. AA, GG 9874, Offermann, 'Rapport de mission à la Station de la Chasse dans les Provinces Orientale et de l'Équateur', 29 October 1952.

services such as photography.[19] The missions carried out in the national parks relied on the mobilisation of a large staff of porters, cooks, camp builders, guides, hunters, botanical collectors, and preparers of mounted specimens. In 1954, an 'exploration' mission in the northern area of the Albert National Park mobilised no fewer than 121 non-European craftsmen and workers.[20]

These vast networks of voluntary and involuntary collaborators and workers tasked with trapping animals whose capture was generally prohibited by law, and in parks from which they were otherwise officially excluded, bear witness to the complexity of the redistribution and extension of wildlife uses during the colonial era. While protection policies were temperance policies, they also enabled and nurtured the development of new, particularly scientific, uses. On the hunting grounds, the use of extensive networks of harvesters and local workers for the purposes of acquisition rendered the legal framework meaningless, not only because of its intrinsic iniquity – acts of appropriation were not disallowed in themselves but rather based to who ordered or executed them – but also because of its material consequences: the proliferation of supposedly rare harvests effectively erased any prohibition. This ontological erosion of colonial protection measures betrayed the law's monopolistic aims in terms of wildlife appropriation.

Such colonial redistributions of wildlife uses indirectly helped to legitimise the persistence of outlawed uses, many of which slipped through the loose mesh of the colonial disciplinary net.[21] They also encouraged competition for access to resources and the development of new forms of wildlife capture, integrated into extended circuits of appropriation and consumption. Among many examples are the official okapi capture campaigns carried out between the wars by Belgian colonial authorities using the transcultural technology of pit traps. These were not subsequently filled in and so gave rise to 'unbridled and clandestine hunting by natives'.[22]

Natural history collections, the history of which is still in its infancy and often still hagiographic, embody the legalised colonial violence against animals which was legitimised by the political, administrative, and scientific authorities, including in the case of the species most protected by colonial and international law. While these appropriations are part of a wider process of monopolistic resource-extraction on behalf of colonising nations, they also reflect the need to 'complicate the dichotomy' in our understanding of colonial societies (Cooper 1994). They highlight the necessary role played in the extraction process by collaborators and intermediaries, many of whom reaped socio-economic benefits that helped to reinforce social disparities

19. AA, GG 12599, 'Leplae au gouverneur général', 30 August 1926; AA, AGRI 434, 53 bis Ch., 'Note pour le Ministre', 7 January 1929.
20. IPNCB, 'Rapport annuel 1954', p. 8, and executive committee reports.
21. On poaching, see Van Schuylenbergh 2009.
22. AA, GG 19339, de Medina, 'Groupe de Capture d'Okapis – Ebiani. Rapport mensuel', 28 February 1947, p. 7.

within Congolese societies. The inclusion in historical accounts of all those affected, human and non-human, is a valuable adjunct to understanding such social redistributions of wildlife uses, combined with the intensification of the hold exerted over animals. It also makes it possible to situate collections, which the scientific seal of approval insulates from the world's torments and criticisms – which nevertheless resurface, sometimes vividly, as the 1924 debates in *The Times* show – within the broad spectrum of extractive mechanisms that form one of the driving forces behind the apparatus of colonial (bio)power.

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'Commission XIII', 21/12/1935.
'Rapport annuel 1954'.
'Rapport annuel 1958'.

The graphic identification symbols of Leele drums

Henry Bundjoko Banyata[1]

Introduction

The Leele live mainly in the provinces of Kasai (Ilebo, Mweka, and Tshikapa territories),[2] Kwilu (Idiofa territory), and Mai-Ndombe (Oshwe territory), an area covering more than 15,000 km² between the Kasai and Loange rivers. Cornet *et al.* (1989: 241) state that 'a few villages have emerged on the right bank of the Kasai. Their neighbours are the Bakuba, while those to the west are more numerous: Bawongo, Babunda, Bapende, Bandjembe, Batshokwe, and Badinga'. M.L. Felix, who has attempted to locate precisely each of the peoples of the DRC, reports that the Leele 'are established between the Loange river to the west and the Kasai to the north, parallel 5°30' to the east, and the Tshikapa territory to the south' (Felix 1987: 74). The coordinates of this area are approximately as follows: 'latitude 4°15'-5°45' South, longitude 20°-21° East, altitude 350-700 metres' (*ibid*).

Having come from the south (Vansina 1954) or the west (Felix 1987), the Leele most likely arrived in their current territory in the 16th century.

It is to this geographical and cultural area, therefore, that the 'provenance' of Leele material production can first be traced.

> 'Shilele art, influenced by the Kuba, produced similar drums in which ornamentation in the form of crocodiles and human faces combine with the harmonious interplay of sculpted interlacing' (Wassing 1969: 167, free translation).

The Leele have developed authentic and original art different from that of their Wongo, Ndengese, and Kuba neighbours. Leele artistic items are considered objects of great value, not only artistically, but also because of their multiple functions, some which are sacred: cups, masks, statuary, and musical instruments. Among the latter, *ngom* membranophone drums (there are slit drums as well) are the only ones to bear graphic and ideographic signs referring to religious symbolism or mythology.

Regarding *ngom* drums, J. Cornet writes, 'The second typically Leele object is the high membrane drum. Even more than the cup, it is part of a ritual environment. It is part of village life. It can't be replaced without organising sacred ceremonies. Furthermore, the drummer undergoes an initiation that earns him privileges and forces him to respect certain prohibitions' (Cornet 1986: 249).

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1. Researcher at the IMNC and director of the Musée national de la République démocratique du Congo.

2. Tshikapa is now the capital of Kasai province.

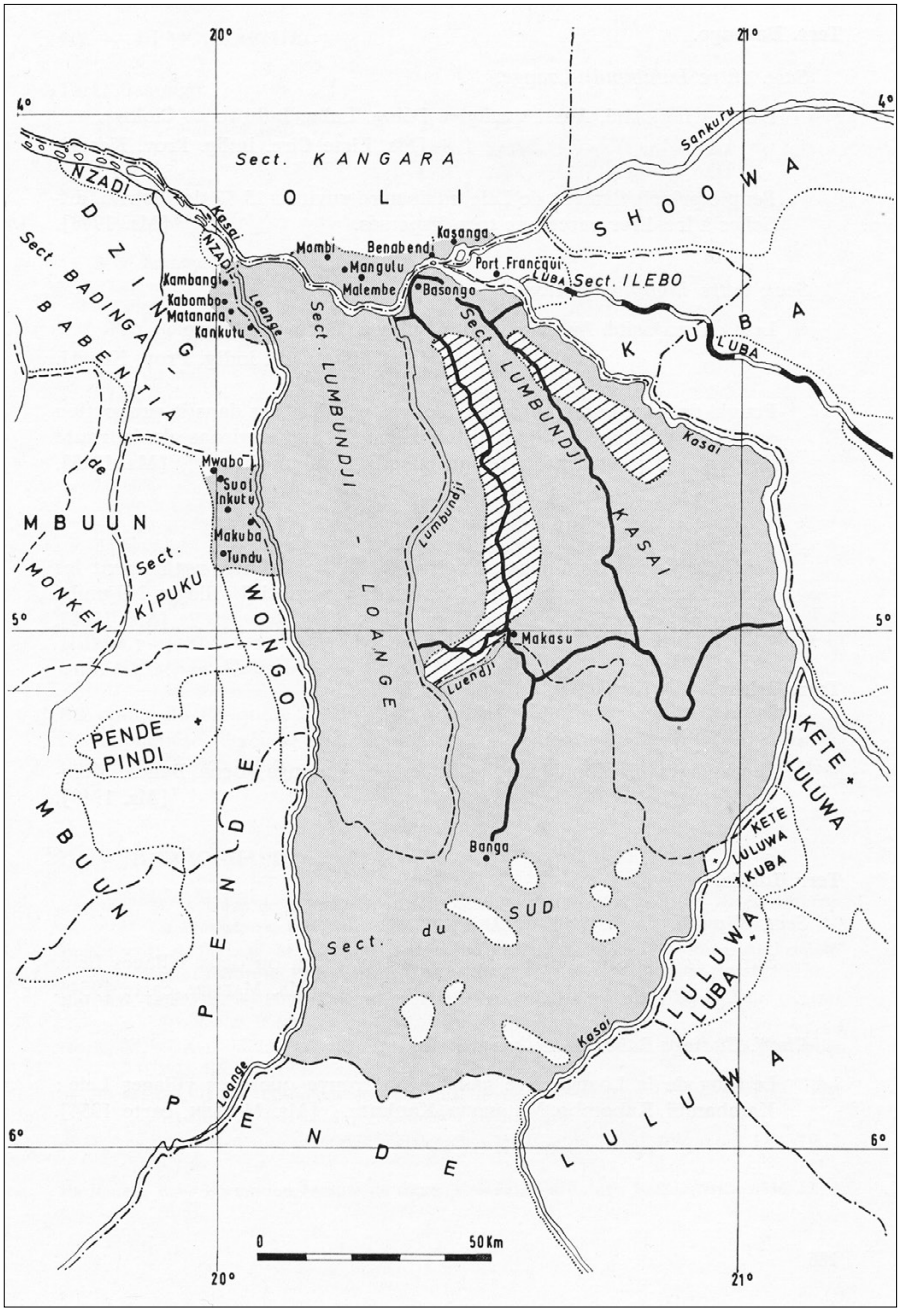


Figure 1. 'Leele' map.
(From Boone 1973 : 185.)

Carved from a hollowed-out tree trunk in the shape of a truncated cone 110 to 120 cm high and 25 to 30 cm in diameter, these drums are decorated with graphic symbols at the proximal and distal ends. These codified 'decorations' have meaning and significance and have become referential emblems linked, explicitly or implicitly, to a large clan group, a place of origin, a motto, specific messages, concrete facts of human existence, certain circumstances, and the history of the many facets of the Leele people.

A meticulous analysis of the fundamental elements that characterise Leele history raises questions about the possibility of defining the provenance of these instruments more precisely.

Theoretical and methodological approach

Leele drums have a distinctive visual and cultural quality thanks to the richness of their meaningful graphic symbols.

In this text, we draw on semiotic analysis (Benjamins 2003; Parkin 1991; Borella 1989; Martinet 1973; Vaillant 1999) and structural methodology: 'an approach that consists of constructing a Table of possible permutations among elements and taking this Table as the only real object of analysis to identify the rules of combination. The objective is the discovery of necessary relations' (Levi-Strauss 1949: 62, free translation).

Through a formal analysis of these drums, their decoration, and its specific meaning on this privileged medium, we can decipher certain episodes in Leele socio-political history and mythology. Through the study of the non-linguistic communication system conveyed by Leele art objects, the icons and symbols adorning them have emerged as signs that function as a metalanguage.

Corpus

Our reference corpus of study is that of the Leele drums preserved at the Institut des Musées nationaux du Congo (IMNC).

Since its creation in 1970, this institution built and enriched its collections. To do so, from 1971 to 1986 it organised scientific and ethnographic missions to the provinces of Bas-Congo, Bandundu, Kasai, Katanga, and Équateur, as well as to Province-Orientale and Kivu.

In the field, traditional works of art had to be collected directly from the local population, respecting both the customary/standard method of acquisition of the object concerned, specifically purchase or donation, and the consent of the village gerontocracy. As large Leele drums are sacred objects, their sale was the prerogative of an entire community. If a village owned several drums (often two or four), it could be decided to give one away. This, of course, risked undermining the effectiveness of the community's identity and ritual environment if the remaining drum or drums were lost or stolen.

The IMNC currently possesses at least 80 Leele drums, the majority of which were acquired between 1971 and 1980 during missions to various villages in three sectors in Leele country: Mapangu, Banga, and Basongo.

This large corpus and the ethnographic studies that accompanied its creation provide valuable sources of reference for investigating the 'provenance' of Leele drums from outside the IMNC collection.[3] The places where the drums were acquired have been carefully archived; the decorations are markers of the drums' origins that need to be deciphered.

Sources

To decipher the symbols on IMNC's drums we turned to oral sources, those traditionally transmitted, *inter alia*, during initiatory teachings, in addition to written sources, which are very rare indeed.[4] We also went back to interviews from the 2003 field survey[5] carried out as part of our study of the semiotic evolution of reptiles on Leele drums.[6]

These interviews clearly indicated that the drum symbolises the community's identity and religious and social unity: it represents an umbilical cord that links all the members of the village. In a gerontocratic society such as that of the Leele, the drum represents the power and effectiveness of the elders and is the emblem of their accumulated wisdom. It represents a magical refuge for all inhabitants, even if they are travelling or temporarily residing far from the village. It is also the symbol of the village land. If you steal it, you steal the village and its land. In short, the drum is the original soul of the village, the repository of the life of the people and the altar where ancestors and the spirits of nature reside.

3. A remark already made about Hemba statuary by Neyt and de Strycker (1975).
4.On this subject, see chapter 4 of the introduction to our doctoral thesis 'Critique des sources' (Bundjoko Banyata 2006).
5. Survey conducted in villages in the Mapangu sector such as Malongo-Kandjoko, Mikope, Ndjembe, Kabamba, Kasumba, Kenge, Ibowa, Kembe-Malongol, Makaso, etc.
6. Bundjoko Banyata 2004.

Figure 2. Leele drum with mask and two snakes (cobra, snake).
Village of Bashipanga, Basongo sector, Ilebo territory, Kasai province, DRC.
(73.170.15, IMNC collection; photo © IMNC.)

The semiotics of Leele drums

Looking at these instruments, we agree with Weinhold (1996: 20, free translation), who wrote that 'the combination of formal elements has a meaning, a symbolism. Its meaning can be read in the forms, arrangement, and rhythm. This is figurative thinking.'

Leele artists make their drums of wood and decorate them with anthropomorphic figures (woman, hand, head, foot), zoomorphic figures (crocodile, snake, lizard, monitor lizard, etc.), and complex geometric patterns (concentric circles, spirals, triangles, etc.). From this combination, we can decipher certain historical episodes and socio-political realities the artist has recorded. Taken together, these signs make the drum a veriTable compendium of culture and a summary of Leele cultural history.

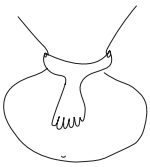
In an analysis of African art investigating the *meaning* of African objects in the isolation of Western photography and museums, Jean-Baptiste Obama (1963: 99) suggests: 'Let us ask for the deeper meaning, the familial, tribal, social, and political significance of the representations that adorn them like so many hieroglyphs. Let us ask about the snakes, lizards, or panthers, about the stylised tortoises, about the decorations of circles, lozenges, squares, dots, and lines that appear on these objects'. According to Obama, more than their aesthetic or utilitarian contribution, these ornamental symbols' social, political, and tribal significance is teaching about sacred life, myths, legends, and history. Art, culture, and history are thus revealed as the three inseparable

elements underlining the true facts of long-standing knowledge.

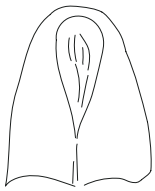
To establish these drums' links with culture and history, our work has therefore attempted to identify graphic symbols and decode the messages they spell out. To this end, we categorised them into figurative motifs, abstract motifs, and numerical symbols.

The figurative decorations in Table 1 have been linked to the villages and/or territories where they were acquired.

Table 1: Analysis of figurative decorations

Figurative motifs	Names	Symbols and meanings	Cultural, historical, and cosmogonic references
	*Ngatu* woman	Foundation: channel, mystery and power of life, original matrix.	Founder, wealth and prestige of the lineage, matrilineal system, creation of the kingdom, feminine power, mediator, motto of the Leele.
	*Ntshwe* head	Centre of wisdom and knowledge: man is head, sense of rationality and reality.	Elders are keepers of knowledge, model of traditions, collective identity, code of conduct.
	*Iyatshi* hand	Depths of being: depths of the heart, transmission of power, creativity, hand of love.	Origin of clans, know-how, arts, crafts, and techniques, practice of acquired knowledge, solidarity.
	*Ntshwe mwa* Nkand mask	Incarnation: spirit of nature, ancestor, tutelary spirit.	Transfiguration of Wóóto, the cultural hero, Mbenga, the first queen mother, adoption of the ethnonym, and Mpenya, the mythical mother of the Bacwa clan group.
	*Itambi* foot	Pillar: conquest, endurance, forging your own path.	Peregrination, conquest of space, and founding of a kingdom.
	*Nyath* buffalo mask	Spirit of the savannah: heritage and initiatory knowledge.	Legendary old man *Kanunanunana* who taught his ancestors the secrets of the trades, initiations, and way of life.

	*Ndjowu* snake	Regeneration: transmutation, permanence, fertility, protection.	Naja *Iyambu*: creation of the Tundu bakumu biyambu (naja king) dynasty. Multicoloured snake: population explosion; green snake: friendship and loyalty to tradition; two snakes: climate of understanding; snake and toad: conflicts between places of origin.
	*Nwodi* lizard	Organisational skills: insight, extrasensory perception, vigilance.	Control of territory, mastery of the savannah with its spirits and mysteries, occupation and organisation of a vast territory.
	*Kwende* crocodile	Spirit/king of the waters: combativeness, longevity, invulnerability.	Anvil test, creation of states, knowledge of the forge, succession to the throne of Wóóto, origin of drum decorations, introduction of *bukang* initiation.
	*Lubambi* monitor lizard	Heroism: formidable strength, elegance, severity, good omen.	Gerontocracy, ancestors' unfailing protection, techniques of war, principle of good governance.
	*Indjemble* agama	Vibrational connection: voice of the ancestors, communication with the invisible world.	Rites of passage, initiation into therapeutic knowledge, link between the living, the ancestors, the spirits, and the ecosystem.
	*Iyulu* turtle	Spirit of justice: universe, humility, complementarity, prudence.	Community land law, ontology, cosmogony, knowledge of fire and of palm oil.
	*Kala* crab	Rising to the challenge: rebirth, search for balance, self-confidence.	Pre-established norms, wisdom, ancestral know-how.

	*Tandriyotu* spider	Cohesion: common thread, transmission of knowledge.	Mastery and control of the environment, living together.
	*Ilonga* double bell	Sacred royalty: loyalty, natural order.	Sacred royalty, communication, mastery of metallurgy, loyalty and fidelity to the homeland, rituals and important events, royal court, jurisprudence.

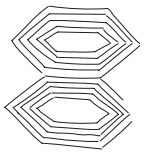
Source: Bundjoko Banyata 2006: 172; drawings by F. Kratky © RMCA, 2023.

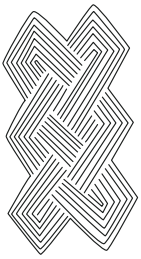
The motifs of the IMNC's nearly 80 drums come in a variety of forms distributed as follows: 25 show a woman's head (V[7]: Mbombe, Kenge, Makaso/Mapangu sector; Pongo Ikangu, Mbange Makondo/Banga sector, among others), 11 the head of a man (V: Iyamba, Yamba Yamba, Ngoyi/Mapangu sector; Pongo Bupendu, Nganying, among others), 15 a mask (V: Ibombo Lukodi/Basongo sector; Ibombo-a-Pelma/Mapangu sector; Kabolangomo/Banga sector; Ibombo-ra-kombe/Basongo sector, among others), 3 an *Agama* (V: Menatamo/Basongo sector; Ndjembe/Mapangu sector), 2 a monitor lizard (V: Bushongo, Mikope/Mapangu sector), 3 a mask and a snake (V: Malembe Kakese/Mapangu sector; Pongo/Basongo sector,), 3 a snake (V: Kembe Malongu, Ibowa, Lupekulu/Mapangu sector), 2 an image of a buffalo (V: Ndomayi Munene, Kele/sector Banga), 2 a mask and a turtle (V: Bwawu, Karanange/Mapangu sector), 2 a lizard (V: Ibombu Ngandjaba, Yenga Yenga/Mapangu sector), 1 a mask and a head (V: Kashoshu), 1 a hand (V: Kabamba/Mapangu sector), 1 a mask, a snake, and a foot (V: Kabwanyi/Basongo sector), 1 a turtle (V: Kashimba), 1 an image of a woman (V: Mbange Ibundul/Banga sector), 1 a crocodile, a mask, and a snake (V: Nyamadenu/Basongo sector), 1 two snakes and a mask (V: Bashipanga/Basongo sector), 1 a double bell (V: Hanga Iyol/Mapangu sector), 1 a spider (V: Mbondjale/Mapangu sector), 1 a crab (V: Mwabu/Mapangu sector).

The geometric decorations which generally cover the flat surfaces between sculpted figurative images are, above all, symbolic. They have nothing to do with '*horror vacui*', as has often been suggested, nor are they mere aesthetic additions; they express meanings (see Table 2).

7. V: village.

Table 2: Analysis of geometric designs

Abstract Motifs	Names (translations)	Symbols and meanings	Cultural, historical, and cosmogonic references
	Knot in the shape of an sideways eight, *Ngub*	Fullness, number 9: blossoming, depth of knowledge.	Conquest of space in 9 days, 9 pseudonyms of Wóóto, 9 children of Wóóto, 9 balls of kaolin and cowrie shells offered to the king of the waters.
	Curves in the form of a loop, *Iboolo*	Heroism, number 108: total perfection, illumination.	Bridge of 108 hippopotamuses, initiatory knowledge, technical expertise.
	Concentric circles (round carrying bead), *Kat*	Umbilical cord, number 7: unity through excellence, village configuration.	Lake/anvil test, gerontocracy, 7 age groups, political, social, economic, cultural, and religious issues.
	Interlocking chevrons, *Lwang*	Branch: honour, resistance, signal, victory.	Anvil test, weaving, involvement of the palm tree in life, matrilineal filiation.
	Concentric lozenges, *Pash a pash* (cowries)	Full cycle, number 4: sign of wealth, mastery of nature, cardinal points.	Branching off from the original nucleus, control of territory, 4 pillars of power.
	Sinusoidal lines, *Kumba kumba*	Undulation: the sinuous movement of a river, the sinuous crawl of a snake.	The rivers crossed during the voyage, a variegated liana with potable water that initiates drink during initiation rites.
	Concentric semicircles, *Mulona diku* or *Ngondu*	Rainbow: elements of air, water, fire, and earth, union of earth and sky.	Celestial configuration, salutary force of the ancestors, warning against a natural disaster. Rites, daily activities.

		Star constellations: period of daily activities.	Pleiades: seasons of the year. Orion's belt: favourable period for successful hunting. Stars (the wise and the foolish): favourable time for fireside storytelling and transmission of knowledge.
		Star constellations: timeline.	Venus (morning star): beginning of the day. Venus (evening star): appearance of the new moon, lunar rituals.

(Drawings by F. Kratky © RMCA, 2023.)

In Leele society, as elsewhere, numbers play an important role, and some in particular are keys, *secret ciphers* that enable contact with certain natural and supernatural forces or play a special role in the art of healing. Some numbers have symbolic value and meaning, the explanation for which is often buried in esoteric knowledge.

Table 3: Analysis of decorations with numbers

Numbers	**Symbolism**	**Motifs**	**Laws**	**Cultural, historical, and cosmogonic references**
1 *Moki, kotshi*	Base, foundation	Straight line, circle	Law of eternal return	Single origin (God, ancestor, origins).
3 *Hatu*	Pillar of efficiency	Triangle	Triad, trinity	Natural, spiritual, cultural, or material man.
5 *Ntanu*	Full life	Perpendiculars	Mystery of the living being	The 5 daughters of Wóóto, the 5 branches of the original nucleus, configuration of the village, crossroads.

7 *Hambual*	Knowledge of tradition, wisdom	Spiral or combination of lozenges	Hidden mystery of the universe	7 age groups, rites of passage, initiations, source of a river.
9 *Dibwa*	Fullness, clairvoyance, valour	Mathematical infinity: ∞	Law of complete evolution	Wóóto, his 9 conquests, his 9 children, and his 9 successors.
108 *Kam lunana*	Heroism, Miracle	Combination of mathematical infinites	Law of total perfection	Wóóto's heroic exploits, 108 hippopotamuses
2 *Peend*	Pair, couple, opposing symbols	2 parallel lines	Law of opposition	Twins, marriage, conflict, splitting.
4 *Neyi*	Vital breath	Square	4 elements: earth, fire, air, water, 4 cardinal points	4 sons of Wóóto, 4-day week, occupation of territory.

It is important to note that 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, and 108 are considered, used, or evoked as esoteric 'golden numbers' (they are the *key* to understanding several areas of everyday life) and sometimes associated with the laws of nature. On the other hand, the number 2 and its double 4 are natural or secular numbers that evoke evolution (in combination with odd numbers: 1 + 2 = 3; 3 + 2 = 5, etc.), transition, and balance of the natural forces of the universe, each extreme of which needs the other to define itself.

Provenance?

In the eyes of the Leele, the great drum is like a book, an archive; it is a medium on which are transcribed messages, historical facts, beliefs, ideologies, and long-standing knowledge. Every village has at least one great drum; important initiates and political authorities decide which figures and motifs should be carved on it. The images on the drum are codified by the masters of the initiation and political and religious authorities.

Only sculptors, initiates, and guardians of tradition can read them, deciphering the message by metaphor or metonymy. This relativises the possibility of using graphic analysis of Leele drums as a reference for *outsider* researchers seeking to identify and determine Leele drums' place of origin, whether they are now in the country or abroad.

To do so would require, for example, noting that a figurative symbol for a village drum is chosen in relation to a referential element such as a district, a common original village's motto, a historical fact: e.g., a crocodile (anvil

test; see box), a hand (failure of the test, power of control), a naja (occupation of the territory), a mask (transfiguration of Wóóto); a metaphorical symbol of the founding clan of the village, e.g. a lizard (vigilance), the green snake (friendship); a circumstance or lived experience, e.g. a woman (foundation, lineage, demography), a spider (mastery of nature), the *Agama* (communion with the ancestors); a principle or virtue, e.g. a turtle (truth-justice, generosity), etc.

> Among the Leele, certain drum images are inseparable from the myth of the anvil-in-the-lake test, which was used to decide between two rival candidates to succeed the cultural hero Wóóto as ruler of their current territory. Only the person whose anvil floated could succeed him. The motifs referring to this include the crocodile (water king), the naja (creation of a dynasty), spirals (lake, manifestation of the water king), interlocking chevrons (water palm), curves in the shape of a loop (bridge of 108 hippos), etc.

During several missions carried out in Leele country between 1975 and 2003 we deepened our knowledge of Leele material culture and their ritual and mythological universe. But we were helped in this by our Leele origin and our in-depth knowledge of the Lushideer language. Moreover, we spent our entire childhood and adolescence between our father's village of origin, our mother's village, and the Catholic mission of Mwembe, where our father worked. The men in our matriclan introduced us at a very young age, twelve, to the initiation course reserved for future *banganga*. Between 1969 and 1971, we were initiated into the *poko* rank of *bukanq*.

It is because of these experiences and the resulting expertise that we offer the following information about the drum currently held at the RMCA (fig. 3).

Figure 3. Leele *Ngom a mwaamb* drum bearing a mask (male mask surrounded by the number 9 – horizontal eight – and the Pleiades constellation), a crocodile (not seen in the photo) and geometric motifs. (MO.0.0.27728, collection RMCA; photo J. Van de Vyver, CC-BY 4.0.)

We can interpret this drum according to the initiatory knowledge of the *bukang*: 'After the ordeal of the anvil in the lake, Wóóto, the conqueror, crossed the rivers Kasaï, Lumbundji, and Loange in 9 days on 108 hippopotamuses to go to other skies. When he died, he was incarnated as a nature spirit, and later the Tundu aristocratic descendants branched off into 9 sub-groups.'

Using photographs of the object, oral sources encountered during our missions have brought to light possible names of the artist and/or the village of origin, notably Mbandjale or Makaso. The images on the large drums were in fact adopted by the villages for certain reasons: motto, specific message, circumstance of use, symbol of a lineage, etc. This gives them a privileged place as the centre of the relational expression of human life in the community, giving them a sacred meaning but also a vitality of their own, which is now threatened.

Societal changes

Leele social, political, and religious structure is highly complex. At the political level, two structures coexist, the kingdom and the village, and each is organised in its own way. In terms of socio-cultural organisation, three fundamental phenomena characterise Leele history. These are polyandry, *bukang* initiations (which produce excellent medical practitioners), and counter-sorcery movements. Drums play a predominant role across all these worlds in rituals, dances, funerals, the transmission of knowledge, and so on.

Even in the colonial era, despite the changes brought about by colonisation (Christianity, arts and crafts schools, modern tools), the Leele continued to carve large drums while retaining their original techniques, shapes, and functions. Their use is still regulated and anyone who deliberately destroys or steals them is severely punished or pays a fine.[8]

It is the excesses linked to Christianity and counter-witchcraft that have recently weakened Leele society and the drum's role within it.[9]

Between 1978 and 1980, following an evangelisation campaign organised by Catholic priests in the Idiofa diocese that degenerated into a counter-sorcery movement called '*mupele*' (the priest), drums were described as instruments of sorcery.

Since then, Leele drums have been desacralised and vandalised by priests, pastors, and officiants of such sects and philosophical movements as the Neo-Apostolic, Nzambe Malamu, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Kangotshi. More recently still, Leele artistic production, culture, and drumming have begun to suffer the effects of technological innovations and to lose their original meaning. The rural exodus saw Leele moving from villages to urban areas. Although they continued to use drums for cultural events, in the city the drums no longer fulfilled the socio-cultural functions of the past.

This study proves that any image-bearing object of material culture is an excellent source of multiple types of information. It opens the door to an understanding of the culture of the people who shaped it. But it also shows the difficulties that await researchers, scientific or otherwise, who now wish to interpret the images on great Leele drums, particularly those that have been in museum collections outside the Democratic Republic of the Congo for several decades.

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8. In the past, the punishment for stealing a drum was death, which could be replaced by the payment of double the value of a dowry. If a man from a neighbouring village came to destroy it, driven by anger or revenge, war would break out between the two villages. Reconciliation involved the payment of a double dowry, polyandry, and the replacement of the drum. If, during a war with a neighbouring village, one of the parties succeeded in taking the other's drum, the conflict between the two warring villages turned into an endless vendetta.

9. We refer here to the chapter in the last part of our thesis 'C. De l'indépendance à 1980: disparition progressive d'une culture ancienne', in particular the sub-section entitled 'Le culte anti-sorcier *mupele*, 1975–1980' (Bundjoko Banyata 2006).

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Living Roots

Didier Gondola[1] interviews Barly Baruti

> 'We, the trees. Our roots run all the way down to the heart of the earth, and we can feel the beat of her pulse. We inhale her breath. We taste her flesh [...]. We are the link between Man and his past, his present, and his unpredictable future' (Tadjo, V. 2021. *In the Company of Men*, New York: Other Press).

In this informal interview with Barly Baruti on 19 July 2022, I encountered a Congolese artist at the height of his art, expressing himself frankly on the burning question of provenance and restitution. First, a word about the artist, celebrated today in both Congo and Belgium as the greatest of Congolese cartoonists. Barly Baruti first distinguished himself with the album *La Vie est belle*, a colourful biography of the musician Papa Wemba. Several albums and graphic novels then followed, notably *Chaos Debout à Kinshasa* which takes the reader into the Kinshasa court of miracles at the time of the 'Rumble in the Jungle', the famous 30 October 1974 boxing match between Ali and Foreman. Today, Barly is dedicated to an ambitious project, Agri&Culture, in the agricultural estate of Seke-Banza in the central Kongo region, focussing on a complex dedicated to training budding young artists. The project is based on a vision of harmonious integral development inviting intersecting perspectives, Belgian and Congolese, revisiting both the colonial past and the little-known traditions of the Kongo peoples. This makes it easier to understand the conciliatory approach Barly adopts throughout this interview. Careful not to fall into what he considers anachronisms, misunderstandings, and clichés, Barly reconciles contemporary issues with memories of the past, traditional knowledge with modern innovations, and advocates a shared history, a history which he maintains 'did not begin with severed hands'. This is also the meaning of his gift to King Philippe, a highly symbolic drawing that he offered to the Belgian monarch during his first official trip to the Congo in June 2022. Yet when it comes to the rebirth of Congo's history, rooted in the sludge of colonisation, Barly leaves no room for doubt, insisting we 'not let the Belgians decolonise on our behalf'.

1. Johns Hopkins University. The author thanks Christine Bluard for editing this text.

Didier Gondola [DG]: Hello Barly! Thank you for this interview. We're working on a project to find and restitute artistic and religious works from Congo that are currently in ethnographic museums in Belgium, particularly in Tervuren. My first question, to get to the heart of the matter: do you recognise a connection with the artists whose creations were confiscated, confined, and museified in Tervuren?

Barly Baruti [BB]: First, I would like to thank you for this invitation. I feel honoured to be associated with these unsung heroes. I don't know if I can call them artists. They are history makers. Were they really artists? I am still trying to understand how they managed to craft these gems. These are not just works to be contemplated, but symbols and traditions to read, decipher, feel. The first thing to note is that information has been confiscated from us. Others misappropriated an inheritance that is rightfully ours. This dispossession has had terrible repercussions to this day.

DG: So, it's above all a question of sources and provenance, a dual project. It concerns not only restitution, but also provenance. Do you think that the acquisition of these artifacts during the colonial period – because most of the objects found in ethnographic museums were undoubtedly accumulated during the colonial period – was a corollary to the extraction of raw materials, or did it gesture at another rationale, other issues at stake perhaps? In other words, were we also colonised for our religious and cultural heritage?

BB: Given what I know, what I have read, I don't think there was premeditation. When they arrived, they came across art they called primitive, even naïve, a style that was unfamiliar to them. This gave rise to their apparent contempt, I imagine, because it did not at all meet their aesthetic criteria. But when they realised the value that people invested in these objects, they understood that getting their hands on these objects would weaken these people spiritually and blunt their resistance. They then took these objects from them by force or tricked them into giving them up. I am not a historian, but the influence of the Western church and missionaries is probably at the origin of all this. For the missionaries 'all these statues were satanic. Only the cross of Christ could save them.' Save them from what? We can't really say. I can imagine this kind of speech: 'So, we're going to rid of you of all that. We'll take them back and burn them.' And we find them in museums, etc. They succeeded in cutting people from their roots. I'm still trying to understand how these objects work. Over time, I learned that certain objects, masks, statuettes, amulets, and other instruments had to follow a strict ritual protocol. For example, tom-toms or percussion could only be played by initiates and used at very specific times and circumstances. But I don't know who the people were that we call 'artists', nor if they were trained, or by whom. Why do some things have a lot of value and others less?

Often questions clash in my head: were these works made to order? Where does this 'mystical power' come from? When I decide to work, for instance, I take my pencil and I start to draw what comes to mind. I don't think it was that easy in those days. There had to be other forces to achieve this kind of perfection. It's still a mystery to me, but I'll get there. I believe I will.

DG: One thing stands out from your remarks: acquisition through contempt. These objects were acquired to contrast them with what was happening in Europe. This aesthetic contempt generated the superiority complex which served as a catalyst for racism and white supremacy.

BB: Absolutely. I will go one step further by saying that seizing something that belongs to others, that they identify with, also destabilises them. Take the example of Mr. Boimbo who made off with King Baudouin's sword in June 1960. It's in the same vein. It is possible that he told himself back then: 'There, it's done! Now we have independence. What you gave us at the Palais de la Nation was just for show, a sham.' So, there is this whole aspect that must be considered. Why should we believe in certain beliefs and not others? Why ask others not to believe it?

DG: Let's talk about restitution now. How can this be best done when there are so many gaps, fits and starts? You spoke to us about unsettling the other by confiscating their objects of belief. We notice losses, amnesia, and even a sort of self-amputation. To this we must even add hostility, because some ritual objects would no longer be accepted by their community of origin. They can trigger hostility, particularly in communities that became Christian. How can they be restored in the context of all these issues?

BB: To unsettle the other is to take them out of their comfort zone and subjugate them more easily. That's how it happened. These objects have been declared evil. They were taken and we find them in Western countries where, supposedly, everything is fine. People pay to go see them in museums. That should at least wake our people up, make them aware that the world is not necessarily monolithic. It's not wrong to be attached to your culture. Knowing your identity and taking ownership of it has nothing to do with identitarian closure. We need to know our identity when the time comes to share knowledge with other cultures, meet them halfway for the purpose of sharing and receiving. This is our fight. You have to start at the beginning. It's knowing where the fire started: if you don't know who you are, we will tell you who you should be. Get rid of this, we will give you that. Change your beliefs. We'll bring you something else. Whether you like it or not, you must comply. Finally, we arrive at a compromise, even at compromising ourselves.

DG: You raised questions about restitution. You told me there might not be enough room in museums in Congo to accommodate these objects. Could you expand on that?

BB: I was invited to the reopening of the AfricaMuseum in Tervuren, and I was asked the same question there. I think that we need to sort things out first. For one, there is everything that has been plundered, sometimes through murder, sometimes even with the macabre goal of acquiring a collection of human remains. Then power objects were also confiscated. You might have heard about the 'Kamuina Nsapu affair' a few years ago. A sanctuary in Kasai was desecrated. And the first objects taken were the objects and symbols of power. So, attacks always go for the heart of the system. The last category is objects transferred or sold in good faith. What was pillaged at the time must be returned immediately, because according to certain customs we cannot mourn if we don't see the body. It is therefore important to immediately return everything that falls under this first category. We want the involvement of the state, but these human remains must not be returned to them, nor to a museum or institution. They must be returned to the true rights-holders and to the place from which they were stolen. Not by delivering them like a package in the mail. We must respect protocol and maintain the dignity required by these kinds of ceremonies. These things must be done with tact. For the second category, artifacts of power, these objects were stolen, torn from their recipients. Everything must be returned to its place. That's when we can attempt to resume the transfer of ancestral knowledge. Then there is the rest, the bulk of the cargo, so to speak. Many things were confiscated, but some were also given away. Despite this dark picture, we can still see the silver lining. I would like to talk here about the management and conservation of these (dispossessed) objects. Not for our benefit, let's be clear, but it allowed them to be preserved.

DG: For the benefit of the Belgians, then, you mean?

BB: That's right. They documented each object well, thus making it possible to trace its origin, its ownership, and its provenance. Sometimes the documentation is so thorough that we even find the manufacturing tutorial including the exact material, or even the circumstances in which something was created. This is a significant contribution that deserves to be highlighted. Now, how do we return all this? The task is not so easy. First, we must formally identify the recipients, who are today the heirs, the true heirs. This should be handled on a case-by-case basis. It will probably be complicated to prevent the misuse of certain returned artifacts for personal, lucrative purposes, this time by the Congolese themselves. Criticism is legitimate, but it is also necessary to provide ways forward. Could we not, on the political level, arrive at a precise agreement between the Belgian and Congolese governments, with the aim of achieving

collegial management of these artifacts? For now, while waiting for Congo to equip itself with infrastructure worthy of the name for receiving them, these assets can be identified and their sources located. Sincere cooperation would be ideal. Let us take the case of the building of the Institut des Musées nationaux du Congo that has just been erected in Kinshasa.

DG: Which is on Boulevard Triomphal, right?

BB: That's the one. A gift from the South Koreans. It's more symbolic than anything because on closer inspection, there are offices, endless corridors, but little space dedicated to the display, which is otherwise well arranged. There are statues and objects that are representative of Congo's enormous cultural heritage. The effort is commendable but insufficient given the needed reserves. I was told that only 30 to 40% of what we have in the country is exhibited in this museum.

DG: The same thing could also be said of Tervuren. Because what you see in Tervuren when you visit the galleries is only the tip of the iceberg. The reserves contain the majority of the collections.

BB: Absolutely. But with the difference that in Tervuren, not displaying everything was a choice. And in the vaults, things are hidden away but well preserved. These are not works piled up haphazardly owing to lack of space. No. I had the chance to visit the vaults. Some rooms are inaccessible to the public.

DG: In Tervuren or Congo?

BB: In Tervuren, here in Belgium. There is a desire not to show everything to the public. So, I will continue with my suggestions. I know there is a lot of tension today, especially among young people from the 'diaspora'. They are part of a new generation which does not understand the reluctance of the 'elders'. They are very hostile to this kind of arrangement. I understand them. But at the same time, we also have to ask them to do a little more research and not let passion prevail over reason and reflection. Despite this tension, I believe that we could already make some gestures of openness. Why not give free access to Tervuren to Congolese nationals? It's simple and symbolic. Having to pay knowing that this museum is full of your heritage, there is a hurtful irony there. I'm just suggesting it to open the discussion symbolically and see things from a less antagonistic perspective. Because today there are Belgians who do not approve of the way things happened. We're not the only ones outraged by this. For example, two weeks ago, the Tshokwe king, his majesty Mwene Mwa Chisenge, came to Tervuren precisely to talk about that, to say, you have a lot of Tshokwe masks. Let us involve these traditional leaders, let us listen to them.

DG: So, if I understand you correctly, you are in favour of restitution. But you would like first to better understand the origins, upstream, so as not to do things in a hurry downstream and imperil the conservation of these objects.

BB: Exactly.

DG: Right. I would like to have your opinion on something else. Some specialists say that African objects – not all, but some – were created to be temporary, to be ephemeral and not eternal. For example, some Pende masks were created to be ephemeral and after several uses, notably if they were damaged, put aside. Sometimes there is no hesitation about destroying these objects. They are sometimes burned. When we see such a trajectory and lifespan for these objects in the traditional place of production, doesn't that undermine some of the arguments in favour restitution?

BB: I don't really know how it happens, I'm not a scholar. I try to look at things on the ground. Surely temporary, even ephemeral, objects exist. We must first investigate the circumstances and specific purpose each object was made for before attempting to understand the procedure or process of its restitution. And if productions are ephemeral, we must then encourage traditional crafts to promote production. These artifacts, these tales and legends, accompany history and help ensure the sustainability of the transmission of our traditional values. Let's not stop these reflexes. For a century, however, these objects were 'hoarded' in cellars here in Europe and elsewhere. For a century the transmission of traditions and know-how was disrupted. So, they are everyday objects, their purpose is not decorative. Many people are aware of their market value. If we are not careful, these objects may come back here and be sold not to museums but to private collectors. Predators will not just be 'evil foreigners'. We will be our own predators. The 'guardians of the temple' must no longer be these 'ancestor spirits' lost in our imaginations. We have a noble duty to train the new generation and our offspring to become the 'new guardians of the temple' for a future that keeps reminding us of the imminence of a civilization war. Can't we start trying to bring back these powers, these royal duties that belong to our traditional leaders?

DG: Two last questions on the matter of provenance and restitution. You were talking about know-how, but there is a loss of capacity and knowledge in the use of returned objects. The example that comes to mind is that of old musical instruments, instruments no longer made in the places where they came from, and which can no longer be played because those skills have not been transferred. The transmission chain did not work, and you said it well, a century in the Tervuren vaults means a century where there was no transmission in the daily lives of communities. What should

be done? Should these musical instruments be placed in museums when they return to the Congo? What is the solution for these objects?

BB: There will always be a need for museums. These are places where relics are kept to show them to people and explain history. At the same time, that should not stop life. But by proceeding in this way, we hinder life. In other words, these traditions which normally flowed from the source, transmitted from father to son, from father to daughter, from mother to son, etc., have disappeared. Some people know the consequences of trying to stop a river. Nature always finds a way.

DG: Does this mean that these museums can be compared to tombs, cemeteries? Do you think Tervuren is a graveyard of Congolese cultural and religious objects? When you say 'life is hindered', maybe that means death has set in? Is a museum like Tervuren a cemetery of stolen objects?

BB: No, I would not make such a belligerent assertion. I did say that a museum must exist. But I am also saying that these objects were not made to stay in a museum forever. The initial educational vocation is not an obligation to take everything and put it in vaults so that we do not have access to it, so that it is no longer familiar, so that it no longer fulfils its intended purpose. Some objects could not be seen except by initiates. These objects have been deprived of their mystical dimension.

DG: This leads me to ask you the following question. You are very familiar with Tervuren. So today after the murder of Georges Floyd, we talk a lot about 'decolonial' and 'decolonising'. How can we decolonise a museum like Tervuren? You confided in me earlier that for three years Tervuren tried to get a makeover. Are you satisfied with this transformation of the museum, which is dressed differently, which wants to decolonise, to take off some of its Leopoldian trappings? Are you satisfied with this decolonial gesture by the museum or are there still other things to be done? And if so, tell me, how can we decolonise Tervuren?

BB: I don't know if the deliberations in Tervuren ever envisioned decolonisation. I only know that there were shocking things that we should see less. This does not mean that the museum has decolonised. They tried to give it a 'human dimension', moving away from clichés and other platitudes. Let's also be realistic: we must see things in the context of the past. But it was still time for a serious dusting off. 'Decolonising' was not something we talked about, but it grew with the murder of Floyd in the United States and all its repercussions. This brought to the surface certain 'aspirations' that had been brewing here and there. It's sad, but let's not just stay on the passionate side. That's why I ask for a deeper look. Here, we absolutely want to decolonise, in the street or elsewhere. If the Belgians, the descendants of Leopold II, continue to glorify him, we

must glorify our heroes. We are already not really at home here. We cannot fight for them to decolonise certain buried habits. I would rather say that we must fight to be respected. For us to be taken seriously, we must also install statues at home and highlight and celebrate our people. And when that happens, who will dare tell us, 'No, you cannot put the statue of such-or-such leader here. You can't put the statue of Ngaliema there.' Since the statues of Leopold II and others were removed in Congo, what has happened, what have we put in their place? Let's not let the Belgians decolonise on our behalf.

DG: The last time I spoke to you, Barly, you told me that Tervuren had dedicated an exhibition gallery, if I am not mistaken, to Congolese Rumba, called 'Rumba Corner'. Instead of photos, it contains drawings you produced. Does the installation and curation of contemporary works, such as your drawings for example, help a little to decolonise a museum which was originally, by nature and by definition, an ethnographic museum? Do you think that including artists such as yourself, Chéri Samba, and many other Congolese contemporary artists, in an ethnographic museum of the calibre of Tervuren, informs precisely this issue which we were talking about earlier, how to decolonise the museum?

BB: What you are saying here is close to the desired ideal and I really don't have anything to add. As for 'contributing to decolonisation', it is up to the public to decide. I am not the only Congolese artist in Tervuren, there is also the artist Aimé Mpane.

DG: Yes, Aimé Mpane, of course.

BB: Aimé Mpane created a colossal work: *Lusinga's skull*.

DG: In the Tervuren rotunda.

BB: *Lusinga's skull* is arresting, it's frightening, it's worth more than a thousand words. There was a temporary exhibition of work by our friend, the great artist Freddy Tsimba, which was a resounding success. *Mabele Eleki Lola (The earth, brighter than paradise)* was a superb exhibition: sculptures made of casings and shells, forks, machetes... and other recovered objects picked up off the street. It's intriguing. Each sculpture is a book in itself. That is edifying. It contributes to changing mindsets. I don't need to smear the statue of Leopold II red to make myself understood and heard.

DG: Let's end with a recent gesture on your part. During a visit to Congo by Belgian king Philippe, you solemnly offered him a work that is intriguing when examined. Since we are at the heart of the debate on restitutions, I was also surprised to see this artistic 'circulation' which can lead to confusion and be interpreted as going against the grain of what we are going

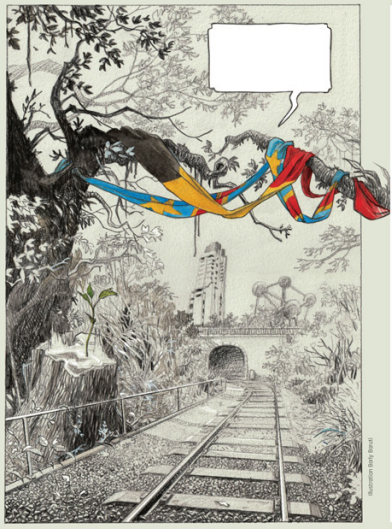
through at this moment, with the efforts and the fight to ensure that Congolese heritage returns to its places of origin. Have you been criticised for this gesture? What meaning do you give to this gesture and what message does this artwork convey? Was it intended as an exchange, since the king brought a *kakuungu* mask with him to be 'restituted' to Congo?

BB: I presented the king with this drawing in person, with the permission of the presidential couple. To answer your questions, I believe such a gesture should be appreciated for what it is. I am a Belgian-Congolese artist who refuses to stop the circulation of art in one direction or the other. This drawing encompasses the history of both countries because we have things in common. I even intertwined the flags of the two countries, flags that have similar colours. The drawing represents a tree felled at the trunk and a small shoot that renews the life of the tree. The tree is this common story, the story of these two peoples and their uncertain relations. It all culminated in this felling, this break, a sort of misunderstanding. But the tree cannot die because the roots are still alive.

DG: But can't we say that these roots have been corrupted, or are perhaps even rotten from the start, because of all the abuse, pillaging, and racism that presided over the colonial 'encounter'? Don't the trunk, development, and growth of the tree feed from spoiled roots? Let's not forget the severed hands!

BB: But this story didn't begin with the severed hands! At first there were explorations, encounters. It started on a healthy basis at first.

Un chemin.
Un chemin de fer qui, avec le fleuve, relie les différentes parties du territoire congolais, comme un écho du passé qui rappelle une histoire partagée dans toutes ses tonalités. Aujourd'hui il représente ce chemin commun que doivent prendre le Royaume de Belgique et la République Démocratique du Congo pour se diriger ensemble vers un avenir meilleur. Celui du développement dans le respect mutuel. Des tunnels, il y en aura. Avec un peu de volonté, on en verra toujours le bout. Des garde-fous aussi. Pour une harmonie concertée. De la broussaille au bord du chemin, à nous de l'entretenir. L'essentiel à retenir: «un arbre coupé se régénère tant que ses racines restent vivaces». Ces racines, c'est la longue histoire commune de nos deux peuples, symbolisée par nos deux drapeaux entremêlés dans un tourbillon des couleurs si analogues.



DG: Stanley's explorations resulted in violence. It's not for nothing that the populations of Bas-Congo gave him the nickname of 'Bula Matari' ('Breaker of rocks'), a name which ended up epitomising the Belgian state itself.

BB: There was some deception, I admit. The people thought that these newcomers would bring them positive things, even if the initial intention was to transform the Congo into a free-trade zone. But the populations only sought to live in peace, and hidden agendas revealed themselves as the tree grew. To return to the message of the drawing, the trunk is there with its roots. We cannot dig up the roots. If we dig them up, Congo no longer exists. To conclude on this gift to the king, I see no link with the restitution of ritual objects (because they were not works of art). Finally, in my work, I did not speak in the name of Congo, its people, or the state, but as an artist suggesting ways and means of escaping (post)colonial misunderstanding and giving new life to the relations between the two peoples.

IV.

RETURNS AND RECONNECTIONS

Restitution of the musical instrument collection through participatory creative action

Adilia Yip[1]

Introduction

The Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) has one of the world's largest Central African musical instruments collections to date.[2] However, due to lack of ethnographic data and evidence,[3] the restitution of musical instruments has received little public attention in mainstream discussions of restitution, nor been the focus of scientific research on provenance and acquisition. Nevertheless, musical instruments bear the intangible cultural heritage of the source communities. Like aesthetic and sacred objects, relics, and human remains, musical instruments were also reshaped and erased by colonisation, conquest, and socio-political forces. In this chapter, I would like to suggest alternative approaches and goals for the restitution of musical instruments. I suggest that restitution should not only focus on the legitimate ownership and the violence of theft, looting and pillaging, but also raise awareness of the discontinuity, fragmentation and erasure of customary music culture caused by the violence of colonisation and fragmentation of the customary political system. Through investigating the acquisition history and ethnography of the Azande *manza* xylophones of northern DRC, I will illustrate how restitution of musical objects – regardless of musical practice – does not help to reverse the loss of cultural heritage and memory. Restitution should be complemented by participatory artistic creation to revitalize lost

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2. The RMCA musical instrument collection includes 159 xylophones that were acquired across Central Africa – present-day Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and the Central African Republic – and six of them originated from Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, Burkina Faso, and Sudan. The first xylophone acquisition dates back to the 1890s and is mentioned in the museum catalogue published in 1902 (Anonymous). Later, military officer and ethnographer Armand Hutereau (1875-1914) brought to the museum a substantial number of instruments (642 objects), photos, sound recordings (254 recordings) and the first silent films of music and dance performances (80 film reels) collected during two expeditions in northern DRC in 1911-1913.

3. Claiming to be clear and adequate, Hutereau had documented the vernacular names and the original owners of the instruments; however, he left many confusions about the accurate origin/site of production and collection, as well as the initial process, terms and conditions of exchange, and date of acquisition. Similarly, the record of acquisition at the start of the Congo Free State period (1885-1908) was vague or absent.

traditional music cultures, carried out by both local and diaspora African communities of the present society.

1. The fading *manza* xylophone culture

In the early 20th century, *manza*[4] xylophones were owned and played by the chief and notable persons of the clan, and they were relatively rare compared to the popular *kpaningbwa* xylophones that were commonly played in social events (Boone 1936: 120). Representing the power and status of the customary chief, the *manza* was played in the performance of court music on the occasion of chiefly ceremonies such as enthronement and burial (Ciccarello 2014: 108). For instance, two *manza* xylophones in the collection (MO.0.0.14306 and MO.0.0.14308) were owned by the Zande chief Guga in the Bondo territory, Bas-Uele, in northern DRC, and made by the ancestor clan of Abandia, a sub-branch of the Azande people. They were collected by former military officer Armand Hutereau in 1911-12 (Maes 1934: 181-2) and were assigned the inventory numbers when they arrived the museum in 1913 (Boone 1936: 102). In his 1922 book *Histoire des peuplades de l'Uele et de l'Ubangi*, Hutereau claimed that the musical instruments and objects was acquired through fair trade, to wit: 'Heads of clans and families enamoured with decorum had traded their ancient musical instruments – from which they coaxed only noise – for instruments imported from Europe. They needed mounts or carts, and the boldest opted for the bicycle' (1922: 5, author's translation). According to the RMCA archives, between December 1912 to June 1913, several shipments of collected items including artefacts, musical instruments (xylophones, gongs, slit drums, membrane drums), phonographic cylinders, animals, and more were sent off from Bondo to Boma by train, then to Belgium on board the steamers 'Elisabethville' or 'Léopoldville' sailing the Boma-Antwerp shipping line.

The decline of *manza* xylophones was first mentioned in Giorgetti's autoethnography published in 1951. No longer symbols of authority and power, the *manza* had already become a rarity among the Azande, and he only observed the chiefs of Avungura still playing the instrument (Giorgetti 1951: 22). In his 1986 expedition, Frank Michiels witnessed the disappearing *manza* culture in Limba village, on Poko territory in the east Bas-Uele. Although his original intention was to learn about the *kpaningba*, Michiels was presented three *manzas* by the Limba musicians with the permission of the chief. Michiels saw only a few *manza* performances during that trip, and musicians presented the instruments in exchange for monetary and material benefits. He also recalled that the musical performance was poor and uninteresting compared to the

4. The term *manza* has multiple meanings in Central Africa. According to the anthology of Boone and the records of explorers of Belgian Congo, *manza* is the endogenous name of thirteen fixed-key xylophones of the RMCA collection, and among them, eleven instruments were acquired from the Azande people in northern Congo. The *manza* xylophone of Azande is also mentioned in the work of Evans-Pritchard (1963: 191). To clarify, *manza* also indicates an Ubangian language spoken by the Manja people in Central African Republic, and the ethnic group in CAR.

kpaningba xylophone[5] performances happening in the same village (online interview by author in 2021). The instruments stood idle in the backyard in poor condition; for instance, each instrument had a few missing or broken calabashes.[6] It appears that colonisation – including factors of Western acculturation by Christianity and modernisation – has accelerated the decline of *manza* and court music across Azande, and the functions and meanings of the *manza* xylophone have become redundant following the fall of its legitimate users, the customary chiefs (Yip 2021: 27-36). To establish and reinforce colonial power, the governments of the Congo Free State (CFS) and Belgian Congo sought to dismember and fragment customary chiefdoms and chiefs in Bas-Uele (Omasombo Tshonda 2014: 10, 162-163, 172). Hence, I argue that the number of court orchestras had therefore fallen sharply, and so had the number of *manzas* in Azande territory (Yip 2021: 27-28). Nevertheless, court music might have survived in some cultures and among the living chiefs, as the authority and cultural leadership of some chiefs were still recognized by the masses in defiance of the conrol of the colonial administration. Despite the suppression of resistance, the CFS had also maintained good relationships with particular chiefs depending on their strength of power in the area. Some chiefs were intended to act merely as convenient vehicles for European infiltration, and were placed under the direction and control of the district commissioners (Jackson 2003: 51-52, 54).

The decline of the *manza* xylophone leads us to reflect on the agency of the museum's music collection in the present decolonial era. While decolonizing a museum collection is generally seen – and required by the Belgian law – as returning the objects to the national museum in Congo, this is deemed an oversimplification in the context of a musical instrument collection. The observations regarding *manza* in Limba hint that the re-possession of a musical instrument may not necessarily have an impact on the source communities – the people whence the collections originate, and from whom the museums have collected the artefacts (Brown & Peers 2003: 1-2) – as performance practices and cultural meanings have declined and changed since colonization. A different approach to restitution is needed in this context. But with musical instruments stored in the ex-colonizer's museum collection rooms and the glass exhibition showcases for about a century, how can we re-situate them in the present, and reconfigure the history and memories that have been reshaped, erased, and fragmented? The participatory creative approach of inviting local and diaspora musicians to create with the museum collections, therefore, has become the means of reconstructing this fragmented cultural heritage and reconnecting people and objects, in which the instrument collections are no longer the mere objects of oblivion.

5. The *kpaningba* xylophone in Limba is made up of 11 to 12 wooden bars, loosely placed on a structure of two wooden trunks. The instrument was performed by multiple musicians. RMCA photos MP.0.0.5967 and MP.0.0.5958.
6. Calabashes are the resonators for amplifying the sound of the instruments.

Figure 1. A photo of Chief Senza and his brother Kanga at Bili playing the *manza* in 1911-1913.
(EP.0.0.14694, RMCA collection; photo A. Hutereau.)

2. Participatory creative action

The central purpose of participatory creative action is to invite local and diaspora African musicians and audiences to reconnect with the museum collections, and re-situate the objects within the current communities. Developed from participatory action research and applied ethnomusicology (Ryan & Robinson 1990; Impey 2002; Tan 2015), participatory creative action is considered a method of restitution for the musical instrument collection, and a manner of engaging and empowering source communities in the processes of creativity, fieldwork, analysis, artistic experimentation, and hypothesis for disappearing and disrupted musical practices. The approach enables us to configure 'a different same' for these captured objects, and restore to these objects and their source communities the meanings that once belonged to them, but have now been erased and reshaped irreversibly by a plurality of semantic, symbolic, and epistemological systems for more than a century (Njami 2018; 2019; Sarr & Savoy 2018: 30).

But it is not a way of letting bygones be bygones: it is more than crucial to try the crimes of theft, looting and pillaging of African objects. Nevertheless, restitution may be deemed superficial if its only aim is to restore legitimate ownership by relocating collections to museums of the homeland. This may only prolong the Western cultural construct of 'cabinets of curiosity' (Malick Ndiaye 2019: 1), in which cultural objects will once again be examined as 'the

other' kept inside glass boxes. Nor should we interfere with the homeland's decision to display returned objects for the purposes of national prosperity, heritage preservation and cultural education, but policymakers may have to consider how to prevent returned objects from being separated once again from the people (Njami 2019). The museums may also seek ways of collaboration with the community, so that they can take care of these instruments in the best way they can (Rosoff 2003: 75). People's pride and identity are fostered by the recognition and engagement of their heritage, as cultural objects aid the creation of lasting identities (Hilgert 2017), and artefacts play an important role in remembering and continuing the cultural past and practices, and in constructing and expressing cultural identities and spirituality (Nicks 2003: 23; Rosoff 2003: 74; Heersmink 2021). Moreover, according to social science research, the meanings of an object do not emanate from something intrinsic in the object, but from the way the object is viewed, approached, and used by the social actor (Lynch 2009). Hence, the meanings of the colonial collection in the present day can only be rediscovered by the original users, and how they respond and relate to the cultural objects. To right colonial crimes, participation and re-connectivity are considered complementary to the strategies of re-possession and relocation. Ex-colonizers might also do well to reconsider whether it is decolonial to focus on building museums and exhibitions in Africa to achieve economic goals. African communities may indeed benefit from these projects as they generate tourism income, but such projects are viewed as the exportation of Western museum legacy, and an extension of the colonial violence exerted on customary culture (Asquith 2020).

Furthermore, the question lies in what the ethnographic museums and the source communities can remake for/with/from these musical instruments. Participatory creative action can take the form of artist residency programmes or humanities research that invite collaborations with African musicians in the processes of research and creation with the museum collections – physical objects as well as intangible content such as sound recordings, videos and photography. Rather than displaying Eurocentric preconceptions and stereotypical views, the engagement of source communities, artistic individuals and groups can project a myriad of views, ideas and voices in exhibitions and presentations (Exell 2013:133-134). Museum collections become the collateral interactive zone of 're-centering' (Mbembe 2015) and 'story-ing' (Mackinlay 2016) for the source communities to create new dialogues and knowledge for their customary cultures.[7] By following their capacity and imagination, African musicians are given the agency to reimagine *places* for these objects in their communities. The approach will enable us to affirm the modes and practices of knowledge of the source communities that have been denied by the dominance of the Western modern/ colonial world-system (Spivak 1988; Mingolo 2000; Gurminder 2014).

7. https://boasblogs.org/dcntr/we-must-de-ethnographize-the-objects/

Hence, ethnographic museums should open the floor to musicians and artists of the source communities to resound, recreate and reunite with the collections. The RMCA artist-in-residence programme has been one of the breeding grounds for participatory creative action among ethnographic museums in Europe. The long list of visual artists and musicians hosted by the RMCA in the last decade includes Boule Mpanya, a songwriter, dancer, performer and arranger who used the residency to develop new sounds by drawing inspiration from the ancestral musical heritage of Central Africa. During his residency, he and his team made the very first DOSE album while exploring the musical instrument collection and researching in the music archives of RMCA. The museum also organized public performances for the musicians to present some of these brand-new creations.[8] Drummer-percussionist and studio musician Lenyema Okiteke designed the 'Rhythmic Traces' project by approaching the Luba sound recordings from the intersections of drumming, family memories, polyrhythm, and colonial past.[9]

In this case, museum music collections and practices are appropriated into common music genres like rumba,[10] jazz, electronic dance music, hip-hop and world music, in response to their target audiences and the international and local music markets. Another example is the Acholitronix movement led by Leo PaLayeng. Leo is a Ugandan electronic musician and producer who mixes sound samples of traditional Acholi chordophones and musical patterns with electronics. For example, he loops patterns of the *Adungu* harp or *Nanga Lyech* zither in his electronic dance music compositions, or adds other traditional techniques like ululations or *Bila*, a whistle often performed on stage. Gaining popularity among electronic dance music lovers and organizers, Leo has performed in international festivals, and his albums are published on mainstream online platforms and record labels. He is also invited by the academia in the USA and Europe to talk about his music and creative process. These showcases and publications mean that he succeeds in popularizing, preserving, and promoting Acholi traditional instruments to various international audiences through electronic dance music.[11]

While it invites African musicians to the centre of revitalizing the museum collections, participatory action is also meant for the 'shared authority' of exchange and dialogue between 'community' and 'scholarship', and takes us away from the dichotomy of an either/or relationship (Hutchison 2013: 147). As a Western-trained percussionist and music researcher, I have designed an electronic sound replica for the Azande *manza* xylophones of the RMCA collection to hypothesize the lost music techniques and movement patterns of

8. https://www.africamuseum.be/fr/see_do/agenda/dose_project/27.02.2022
9. https://www.africamuseum.be/en/get_involved/artists/lenyema_okiteke
10. As a musical genre developed in the early 20th century, Congolese rumba is recognized by UNESCO as intangible cultural heritage of the DRC. https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/congolese-rumba-01711
11. Presentation of Acholitronix from Uganda by Rémy Jadinon and Leo PaLayeng at 'Methods in Artistic Research Seminar,' ARIA, University of Antwerp, 23-24 March 2022.

the *manza* sound recordings collected by Hutereau in the early 20th century. Later, the replica will be brought to Kisangani in northern DRC for an artistic residency, during which I intend to collaborate with Azande xylophone musicians to hypothesize and reconstruct the music practice for the instruments. We can also observe the emotional effect of participatory projects through a documentary called 'Sounds of Home' by filmmaker Samuel Ishimwe, who trained in film school in Geneva. The film recorded the research and creative processes of Michael Makembe, a Rwandan musician and producer who collects the authentic sounds and compositions of his homeland. By collaborating with people living in remote regions, Makembe tracks down and records traditional singers and songs, and creates an audio 'museum' for indigenous music by mixing these recordings at his studio.

Conclusion

Through the Azande *manza* xylophone collection, I have demonstrated how colonization disrupted intangible cultural heritage and memory, and how instruments in the postcolonial era have lost their roles and meanings in the social and ceremonial events of the people. Restitution of musical instruments should involve the practice and re-imagination of the original users. The cultural meanings of artefacts are framed by how people use and interact with them. Separating the collections from their original places and performances might continue to erode their connections to the ongoing social, cultural, ecological and economic developments in the homeland. The *manza* has become the estranged cultural object of the customary chief where little knowledge and few memories prevail.

Hence, simply returning the physical objects to the homeland's museums for preservation and examination might not be the ideal solution. Restitution should consider various participatory creative approaches of reconnecting people with both object and practice. Apart from the tasks of correcting historical mistakes and transition of ownership, the main goals of restitution should concern returning to these objects and cultural practices their rightful meanings and roles in the present society, and their revitalization by their original users through current artistic creations.

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Est-ce que les statues parlent encore ? Hopes and visions from Northeast Congo regarding reconnection with heritage in colonial collections

Vicky Van Bockhaven[1]

'Do the statues still speak?' was a question that appeared regularly when I was inquiring about the interest among Northeast Congolese people in reconnecting with their heritage in distant colonial collections, notably in the RMCA, in a number of focus groups and workshops held in September 2021 and November 2022. The question reflects their concerns about the former colonisers and their museum, which had deprived them of metaphysical powers that once served the wellbeing of their community. It was repeatedly pointed out that these objects were taken away in an atmosphere wherein the colonial government imposed Christianity on the populations and instilled negative feelings about their culture in them, while their cultural objects gained great value on the international art market. The strong conviction that Belgium became richer and stronger at the expense of the Congolese, in part by appropriating the metaphysical powers related to the objects, signals a traumatic experience of colonisation. The question itself touches upon the central theme of the AFRISURGE project, fully titled 'Transformative Heritage: politics, peacebuilding, and digital reconnection in contemporary Northeast Congo'.[2]

AFRISURGE aims to test a dominant claim in international and development policies since the 1990s that culture and heritage are important sources of a people's sense of rootedness and wellbeing, particularly in developing and post-conflict contexts (Basu & Modest 2014). AFRISURGE adopts a broad, qualitative focus on culture and wellbeing, taking an integrated approach to investigating the relationships between the broader concept of custom (*coutume*), customary leadership and ritual material culture, in a region that underwent several political crises since independence. My goal in the project has been to start a 'dialogue' with diverse heritage community stakeholders in Northeast-Congo (Van Bockhaven 2020). This occurs in collaboration with a local partner university, the Université de l'Uele, to organise

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2. This took place in the framework of my Flemish Research Council senior postdoctoral fellowship and the like-named network project AFRISURGE building on previous research in the region. The BRAIN network project is a partnership between the RMCA, Ghent University, the University of Antwerp and the Université de l'Uele (Haut-Uele). For more info on the project see: http://www.belspo.be/belspo/brain2-be/projects/AFRISURGE_E.pdf

interviews, focus groups and workshops to verify what reconnecting with objects in colonial collections could bring about locally. A local university assistant is carrying out doctoral research on the project in this framework. While digital reconnection is the main form of reconnection between the population and its heritage in a remote collection, the project's concept of 'reconnection' retains an openness to the broadest array of engagements with museum collections both physically and at a distance, academically and spiritually. Reconnection can include researching this heritage and providing education about it, or applying this knowledge for specific purposes such as revitalising local cultural histories and practices or making a claim for material restitution. The project intersects with a broader momentum for decolonisation: societal and political debate in Europe on restitution and reparations for colonial rule have grown stronger in recent years, bringing about political action, whilst museums have become targets of decolonial and climate activism, pushing them to undertake socially responsible projects. Critics of current European decolonisation and restitution efforts nonetheless warn of complacent Eurocentrism, wherein European politicians and other elites appear as heroes while the countries and communities concerned are hardly involved (Laely & Mabiti 2018). This chapter deals with Northeastern Congolese viewpoints on reconnecting with heritage in colonial collections, which entail critiques of current Belgian restitution policies, and which reflect locally-felt needs. People expect mediation in resolving colonially-imprinted negative feelings and loss of one's culture and heritage, and suggest possible pathways of reparation that go beyond restitution.

Culture and wellbeing in Northeast DRC

The choice of Northeast Congo, particularly the province of Haut-Uele, was built on prior research by team members which revealed that local people regard 'custom' as an important resource for societal wellbeing. 'Custom' is an umbrella term for traditional culture and history, including both immaterial and material aspects. It is mostly mentioned in relation to the loss of customary authority and traditional knowledge, ritual objects and practices. In the centuries before colonisation, Congo's Northeast was culturally a very rich and important region in East-Central Africa. In the colonial era, flourishing court cultures and art industries still bore witness to this rich cultural history, and the region's material heritage found its way to the RMCA as well as to museums in New York and Berlin (Schildkrout & Keim 1990). Today, much of this wealth has disappeared from the country due not only to the colonial collecting frenzy, but also post-colonial political unrest such as the Simba rebellion in the 1960s and the Congo Wars of the 1990s. For decades, the region has been deprived of good roads and air traffic despite the presence of one of Africa's largest gold mines, Kibali Gold, which is like a city-state in itself. Today, northern Haut-Uele is still struggling with the presence of Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebels who still occasionally abduct people, and the influx of Mbororo climate refugees from the

Chief's son and university assistant Hermann Sadimoke brought a heritage object – an ivory beater for the production of bark-cloth – to a preliminary survey on reconnection with heritage in the collections of the RMCA at Université de l'Uele, Isiro, Haut-Uele, DRC, November 2021.
(Photo and © Vicky Van Bockhaven.)

CAR. The population sees the loss of custom – regarded as metaphysically and psychologically important for people's wellbeing – as an explanation for the country's state. In the meantime, while customary chiefs are contested, they are often still the first in line to provide security and legal mediation and jurisdiction to the people given the relative absence of the state. Customary chiefs and their ritual specialists are traditionally deemed responsible for the welfare and protection of the community, but they are also criticised for not respecting '*la coutume*' enough, and for being too involved in political and commercial activities (Titeca 2016; Mena Sebu, personal communication). The loss of '*la coutume*' also entails the loss of material culture, particularly ritual objects and their related power and knowledge. A few years back, one of the customary chiefs from the region responded emotionally when I showed him a photograph of a type of armlet, dating back to the early 20th century, in a collections catalogue. He had lost such an armlet when he fled LRA rebels around 2011. One of the regalia of his office, the armlet had been inherited from father to son and had been cared for as if it were a person with its own 'apartment' or shrine (Van Bockhaven 2020). Such emotional testimonies are a regular occurrence when people are faced with photographs of lost ritual objects and deceased ancestors. People do not generally have access to documentation such as a museum database. It is therefore very relevant that people have easy access to such information on their own terms, and that their views of reconnecting with and reviving such heritage, and how they see it as beneficial, should be explored more thoroughly.

Caring museology

The AFRISURGE project's reconnection approach builds on new trends in museum anthropology and critical museology wherein museums are making efforts to decentralise and engage in socially responsible action, in collaboration with the communities whose heritage they hold. The 1990s forever changed how museums were looked upon. Long perceived as politically inert cultural institutions with an objective voice, museums became targets of protest for their implication in political power networks, a situation that persists to this day (Robertson 2019). In response, former colonial museums rebranded themselves as contact zones, highlighting their collaborations with representatives of former colonies, but they were soon criticised for failing to truly share authority and for reiterating inequalities in a neo-colonial way (Boast 2011). The earliest and strongest criticism appeared in countries with a settler colonial history, such as Canada and New Zealand, and more slowly affected European museums, whose countries practiced remote colonialism.

Several strands intersect in the new decolonising museology: museums 'indigenise' and strive towards incorporating staff from heritage communities in important managerial, research and curatorial functions; museum functions are aligned with heritage communities' knowledge repertoires, actively going against colonial epistemicide; and museums invite decolonising protest and activism inside without appropriating it. This has changed museum protocols. The emphasis on scientific research and conservation is giving way to the heritage communities' needs for personal, ritual and emotional interactions, allowing people to be close to objects and to manipulate them for such purposes. Such changes, including the museum's openness to protest, have become crucial for working through colonial trauma. Two more specific foci are relevant to AFRISURGE reconnections. First, the broader trend of decentring the museum ties in with decentring it as an architectural structure and site, and distributing 'museum-like practice' in diverse settings – notably in heritage communities themselves – is particularly relevant for countries sharing a remote colonial history (Laely & Mabiti 2021; Thorner 2022). Second, focusing on the connection between museum collections and community wellbeing, the 'caring' turn in contemporary museology pushes museums to cultivate a more inclusive and socially responsible engagement with the communities whose heritage they foster, and with the world in general.

The European museum project 'Taking Care' understands 'caring' museology in the largest sense as 'exploring the connections between ethnographic collections and questions regarding the climate crisis and the Anthropocene, and in this context addresses issues related to the afterlives of colonialism.'[3] The New-Zealand-based curator Puawai Cairns of the Te Papa Tongarewa museum rethinks the museum's role based on the Maori kinship principle

3. 'Taking Care' is an EU-funded project led by the Weltmuseum Wien and involving all the major European ethnographic museums.

Workshop for university staff on reconnecting with cultural heritage at Université de l'Uele. Participants are looking at a preliminary exhibition made in collaboration with Félix Fufulafu and university assistants for the occasion. Isiro, Haut-Uele, DRC, September 2022. (Photo and © Vicky Van Bockhaven.)

of grandparents taking care of their progeny – that is, of the future – dubbed 'the Mokupuna clause', which also requires room for dissent and mourning (Cairns 2020).[4] Openness to communities and structural collaborations with them for the healing of colonial trauma and for addressing their contemporary societal challenges, such as climate change, turns museums into 'sites of translation between local needs and global agendas' (Robertson 2019; Thorner 2022).

A key question is what such a decentralised, caring museology could look like in Northeast DRC. A Congolese scholar visiting the RMCA reserves expressed how alienating it was for Congolese to see a Kuba mask supported by a cushion being driven around on a shock-proof trolley. The question 'are the statues still speaking?' reveals an emic perspective wherein 'caring' for the objects would rather be seen in relation to the objects needing to care for the community. This reveals a different cultural-historical knowledge repertoire and other ways of handling them, related to the fact they are seen as 'living'

4. Presentation by Puawai Cairns. Panel Caring Matters, Healing Materialities, 24/9/2020. Initiative in the framework of the 'Taking Care' project, organised by the Research Centre for Material Culture, Leiden.

objects which one might want to use for something other than 'museum' purposes. With this example in mind, the broader question is figuring out the shapes a caring museology could take in northeast Congo, where people experience being disconnected from such objects as part of a grave cultural loss. The first step would be for people to have access to documentation and for discussions to start on the importance of such objects to the communities. The following section focuses on methodologies in AFRISURGE.

Groundwork: the database as a tool

At the start of the project, Congolese people's access to data on their heritage in RMCA collections was very limited, even at universities. Therefore, in order to facilitate conversations on heritage, the AFRISURGE project's first goal was to bridge the gap between the collection and communities in the quickest and most cost-effective way. The Collection Management software used at the RMCA (TMS) and the Gazelle and Okapi interfaces are designed to be used by specialist researchers. The current location of these systems on the museum's intranet, accessible through a VPN connection, relies on payable licences and a strong internet connection. To facilitate reconnection, Hein Vanhee (RMCA, this volume) and I looked at different Open Access and adaptable CMS solutions such as Mukurtu and Collective Access. These are light, easy to use, and enable co-creation and sharing among community stakeholders who can add their own data, create galleries, and share content on their smartphones (for instance via WhatsApp, a widely used messaging application in DRC). However, digital reconnection alone is not ideal due to connectivity limits in Congo. It therefore has to be combined with other forms of reconnection, including physical reconnection and non-digital forms of knowledge sharing.

The purpose is for the database to provide regular access to data so that they can be used repeatedly for diverse activities in the heritage communities, such as education, research surveys, workshops, exhibition-making, etc. In view of this, it must be easy for people to look up batches of objects from a specific region, which requires improved provenance data. The RMCA collection from Northeast Congo, a large part of which was gathered on a scientific expedition by A. Hutereau (1911-1913), is exceptional in that the RMCA holds archives with specific provenance data for many of the objects. Improved provenance data enables us to make 'reassemblages', linking large object packages to field photos, chiefs' portraits, and geographic locations. The triangular relationships between objects, sites of origin and local intermediaries (notably chiefs) is thus restored and made explicit for 8,000 objects and nearly 800 photographs and recordings, which is quite exceptional in provenance research. With time, more data can be added from other museum collections from the same region.

The first goal is for Congolese university professors, researchers, teachers, students, and other community members to have access to and work with the database, use it for their own purposes, and add their own data. In November

2021, I organised an exploratory survey among academics, local politicians, students, teachers and customary chiefs to present the database project and collect input on their interest in reconnecting with the RMCA collection. The survey was conducted in Kisangani as well as in Isiro and Rungu in Haut-Uele province. In September 2022, the Collective Access Database was made available to researchers and community stakeholders at two Northeast Congolese universities, the partner institution Université de l'Uele and the Université de Kisangani, with which Ghent University has a cooperation agreement. Workshops were organised to gather more specific input for reconnection projects in Congolese society, based on the database but also taking non-digital forms of reconnection into account. Congolese perceptions and propositions resulting from these workshops are now assessed for further steps.

North-Congolese critiques and visions of reconnection: from metaphysics to pragmatic suggestions for reparation

I carried out my first survey in Northeast Congo two months after the Belgian government announced that one percent of the RMCA collections, corresponding to objects which are demonstrably looted, would be returned to DRC. A budget for provenance research for another 40% of the collection would be made available to the RMCA to verify whether these were looted or not (*L'Écho* 2021). Congolese press covered the ensuing visit of the Belgian delegation to Kinshasa in September 2022 to discuss plans with Congolese government representatives. Owing to these circumstances, discussions during my first survey in Northeast DRC quickly moved to the topic of material restitution and gave way to emotionally charged reactions. Although people generally believe that what is theirs should return, their responses also entailed fundamental critiques of the Belgian approach to restitution.

In addition to the question of whether the statues could still speak, Congolese interlocutors asked why Belgium wanted to return the objects now, when society had changed profoundly. Colonisation and related missionary practices have led many people to consider traditional objects as demonic today, a mindset which is challenging to reconcile with the idea of restitution. Interlocutors warned of returned objects becoming a source of disagreement, for example when part of the community considers the objects to be dangerous, or when discussions of the objects' rightful ownership are connected to 'balkanization' (ethnic divisions). Older generations who still have knowledge of these objects are also gradually disappearing. People distrust the fact that Belgium will only return pieces which have demonstrably been looted and question the sense of provenance research. As one person put it, 'Do you think that all those who looted objects wrote down where they took them?' Researchers familiar with provenance research do indeed know it is difficult to establish where and how objects were collected due to a lack of documentation. Moreover, interlocutors were disappointed by the prospect that objects would return to the Congolese government and the national

Workshop for customary chiefs on reconnecting with cultural heritage at Université de l'Uele, Isiro, Haut-Uele, DRC, September 2022. Left to right: Chef Roger Anga Gaga (chefferie Mayogo-Mabozo), Chef Amédée Kodruepa (chefferie Ndey), Chef Frédéric Atinengwe (chefferie Mangbetu). (Photo and © Vicky Van Bockhaven.)

museum in Kinshasa, as heritage communities deemed the rightful owners will not have access to them. Although the interlocutors' responses engaged critically with the prospect of restitution, their interests in reconnecting have a different focus. If Belgium is going to return collections, it was argued, it must also help Congolese restore the value of their culture and help them repair the damage suffered – an argument which touches upon the theme of reparations.

Colonial trauma related to instilled cultural inferiority and loss of metaphysical power is still severely underestimated in secular European perspectives. The communities' concerns, wherein economic and political crisis is framed in terms of a lingering imbalance with the metaphysical world, and for which colonisation is to blame, run the risk of not being taken seriously in negotiations with European politicians. However, Congolese expressions of loss in metaphysical terms go hand in hand with pragmatic suggestions which are feasible for former European colonising states desirous of making amends. In this respect, a caring museology could mean that collection-based research is focused on balanced dialogues with community stakeholders, wherein metaphysical and pragmatic ('secular') requirements are elicited. The focus groups and workshops dealing with reconnection therefore also zoomed in on identifying possible interventions. While some actions fall within the scope of

the AFRISURGE project, the input gathered can more broadly serve as a basis for policy prescriptions for reparations. The main points of action that emerged from the workshops can be summarised as follows.

The first one is education to revitalise the knowledge of culture and history using photographs and heritage objects as mnemonic devices. Interlocutors repeatedly expressed the desire to become familiar with the faces and lives of ancestors, to see what could be learnt from them. The most important target group is young people. In one chiefdom – whose heritage is in Tervuren and New York – people said 'Our young people do not know our culture and history. At school they learn about other people's cultures and histories.' Multiple methods, both offline and non-digital, are required to achieve this, for example by creating school books using photographs and information from the database. The AFRISURGE project will be particularly committed to education by working with local universities and training local heritage specialists to pursue awareness-building and to train upcoming generations in research, education, and public history projects. Félix Fufulafu, an assistant at UniUele and doctoral student on the project, will specifically work on an applied museology project on heritage education at primary school level in the next few years. Besides formal education, informal education is also regarded as an important channel and a responsibility of the whole society. Such education is regarded as a family matter: something which could take place between generations, and through visiting the villages of (grand) parents. Yet providing heritage education is also regarded as an aspect of good governance. Education is also deemed important for reviving arts and handicrafts, once the pride of chiefdoms in this area but which gradually disappeared in the postcolonial era due to the lack of roads and loss of tourism. Young people lost interest in learning these skills because there was no money to be made from them.

A second action point is the request for permanent electricity and both digital and offline infrastructure for access to the database and related applications. At the universities and schools visited, people complained about the lack of computers and internet access. At the chiefdom level, people pointed out that antennas enabling internet access are scarce in the interior of the country. Within the AFRISURGE project, the first goal is to make the database as widely available as possible and provide basic infrastructure at the partner institutions, via (among others) UGent's ICT4Development project, which makes equipment available for such purposes and provides logistic support and training. At the university, staff and students asked for IT courses to learn the database's structure and function. They also asked to be involved in the process of building the database, and to be hired to work on the database, arguing they were more knowledgeable than registrars at the RMCA regarding names of localities, population groups and chiefs.

Thirdly, the universities, chiefdoms, and provincial authorities all ask for their own museum or cultural centre where people can learn about and discuss their past. In the workshops, we focused more specifically on what a local museology could look like and what people would expect from it.

Further plans are then elaborated in AFRISURGE using this framework, e.g. creating such a meeting place, an exhibition, and so on. The content of the museum can consist of restituted objects, objects that remained in the community, or newly-produced objects that are made culturally safe – in other words, visitors would be protected from the object's ritual charge and its potentially harmful effects. For the latter reason it may be more useful to show photographs rather than the objects themselves. An important request was for the museum-like space to be focused on 'animating' the objects, treating them as 'living' heritage, unlike in Western museums. In connection with this, the performance of local music, oral traditions and cultural ballets were listed as resources 'to make objects speak' and also foster the revival of the arts and crafts industry. The museum must therefore work with guides, professors and researchers as well as local heritage specialists to host visitors and animate objects, and aim to provide special programmes for outreach activities involving schools and universities. There is also a strong desire at several levels to develop tourism around such museums and natural and cultural heritage sites, in connection with the revival of arts and crafts. Tourism is of particular concern to the provincial authorities for income generation.

We can conclude, based on the communities' input, that a caring museology consists of returning the agency of museum collections to the community, to

Reanimating cultural objects during a course of Medical Anthropology for medical students by Vicky Van Bockhaven, assisted by chef de travaux Paulus Ukondayanga Udilamfumu, at Université de l'Uele. One of the students, a traditional healer, presents his course work on traditional healing practices, Isiro, Haut-Uele, DRC, September 2022.
(Photo and © Vicky Van Bockhaven.)

make objects speak again. This should be done in ways that the broader community deems favourable, which help repair a feeling of cultural inferiority and loss, and which prevent harmful developments such as balkanisation. Caring reconnections are also particularly economic in nature, focused on the revival of tourism and the arts and crafts industries, and attracting both local and global visitors. Such interventions require basic infrastructure and investment in reviving the knowledge of one's culture and history, wherein both customary and academic experts have a role to play, and which can be passed on to younger generations through education.

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The return of a *kakuungu* mask to the Democratic Republic of the Congo: beyond the gesture

Placide Mumbembele Sanger[1]

'Welcome back to the DRC, *kakuungu* mask, land of its ancestors'.[2] These were the words on numerous posters placed along the metal fence of the Musée national de la République démocratique du Congo (MNRDC) to welcome the mask, which had been kept since colonial times in the reserves of the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA). Based on this context, we analyse the contours and significance of this return for the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Belgium. In addition, we examine the impact of the return of this cultural object on the Suku source community and the ways in which it has been received in Congolese society today, particularly among the actors involved in activities surrounding the mask's return. What role has the Suku mask played in the diplomatic rapprochement between Belgium and the Congo? What place will the mask occupy in its community of origin?

A tumultuous and dynamic context

The return of this *kakuungu* mask to the DRC is the result of several factors. In the aftermath of independence, relations between Belgium and Congo remained strained due to the various economic, financial, and cultural issues inherited from the colonial era. As early as 1960 Congolese political leaders led by Joseph Kasa-Vubu and Patrice Émery Lumumba called for the return of the Tervuren Museum collections as part of negotiations for independence. Faced with Belgium's refusal (so it could retain a monopoly on the management and study of these collections), Congolese intellectuals and politicians continued to demand their return as part of the debates surrounding Belgian-Congolese relations. It was not until 1970, however, that the idea of repatriating cultural property crystallised as a result of two events. First was the creation in 1970 of the Institut des Musées nationaux du Congo (IMNC), which was largely the result of the Tervuren management's desire to delay any return until Congo had representative collections and adequate conditions for their conservation and study.[3]

Then in 1973, during the 3rd Congress of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) at N'Sele and at the podium of the United Nations,

1. Professor of the history of museums in Congo, Université de Kinshasa.
2. 'Bon retour au masque *kakuungu* en RDC, terre de ses ancêtres.'
3. See Van Beurden 2015.

President Mobutu asked 'the rich powers which possess works of art of the poor countries to restore some of them so that we can teach our children and grandchildren the history of their country' (Mobutu Sese Seko 1975: 382). Following these two speeches, 892[4] objects were transferred by Belgium to Zaire between 1976 and 1982. While 'restitution' is a legal concept that implies reinstating to the rightful owner their rights, the Belgians prefer to speak of 'transfer', which avoids the question of reparation, and of 'donation', a concept that depends on the good faith of both parties or on dialogue between the museums concerned. It is in this context that the agreement between Belgium and Zaire concerned the contribution of ethnographic and art collections, among other things, from Belgium to Zaire[5] and not a real transfer of ownership to Zaire.

It should be noted, however, that while the demands of Congolese leaders in the 1960s were strictly culture-, heritage-, and identity-related, this was not the case after 1970. The demand for the restitution of property was then used by the authorities of the new Zairian state as a means of exerting pressure at a time of tension with the former colonial home country. Between 2016 and 2019, for example, there was a serious diplomatic crisis between Belgium and President Kabila following the latter's refusal to organise general elections in 2016. Kabila took advantage of the reopening of the RMCA in 2018 – after a five-year renovation – and used the pressure from the Congolese diaspora to settle scores with the Belgians. 'We are waiting for the work to be completed and for our own museum to open. [...] The request for restitution will obviously be on the table. [...] There will be an official request,' he said, alluding to the opening in Kinshasa of the MNRDC, built with Korean funds where Belgium failed to complete such a project during or after the colonial era. As a reminder, in 1945 and 1950, two projects for a Musée de la Vie et de la Géologie (Museum of Life and Geology) in Leopoldville were submitted to the Governor General by the Comité des Amis de l'Art indigène and rejected. As early as 1960, following a Congolese demand made on the sidelines of the Economic Round Table for the RMCA to be transferred outright, the museum director Lucien Cahen advocated the creation of a major national museum in Kinshasa as part of a Belgian-Zairian cultural agreement.[6]

In 2018, relations between Brussels and Kinshasa deteriorated following the disputed election of President Félix Tshisekedi. To ease the crisis, works of art were used as political bargaining chips. In November 2021 Thomas Dermine, the secretary of state for economic recovery and strategic investments, with responsibility for science policy, travelled with the Belgian minister for development cooperation, Meryame Kitir, to present the Belgian approach to the restitution of cultural property currently held at the AfricaMuseum in Tervuren to the Congolese. In a bid to distance himself from his predecessors,

4. Van Geluwe 1979: 37.
5. Van Geluwe 1979: 35.
6. *Ibid.*

and aware that the former colonial power remains a source of international legitimacy for Congolese political powers, President Tshisekedi promoted dialogue on the return of this heritage.

Unlike Mobutu, who spoke about works of art expropriated from the continent in a general manner, Félix Tshisekedi chose the podium at the African Union in Addis Ababa to deliver a speech in 2021 on the theme 'Arts, culture, and heritage: levers for building the Africa we want'. On that occasion, he also called for the restitution of African cultural property looted during colonisation. This crusade gave him greater legitimacy and made him as much a pan-Africanist as Mobutu. Unlike the Mobutu regime, which received the Tervuren *ndop* from Belgium's minister for foreign affairs and development cooperation, Renaat Van Elslande, in a restricted setting,[7] Félix-Antoine Tshisekedi adopted a completely different strategy. For almost two hours live on Congolese national radio and television, he solemnly oversaw the entire ceremony at which King Philippe presented the *kakuungu* mask.[8] After the two leaders and their wives had visited the Musée national, the star object was placed in one of the MNRDC's public exhibition rooms.

In Belgium, a number of events influenced the authorities' commitment to repatriating the *kakuungu* mask to the DRC. These included the reopening of the AfricaMuseum in 2018. This vast renovation project inaugurated a new 'decolonised' approach to the museum's collections, involving in part the voice of the Congolese diaspora in a kind of cathartic process. The murder of George Floyd, together with the impact of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in Belgium, also played a role in this same register of societal demands for the decolonisation of institutions. In the wake of BLM, statues of King Leopold II were vandalised in several towns across the country, often smeared with red paint to symbolise the blood spilt during colonisation.

The commemoration of 60 years of Congolese independence stirred up public opinion in Belgium, culminating in King Philippe of Belgium officially expressing 'his deepest regrets' for the 'violence, suffering, and humiliation' committed in the Belgian Congo. In his letter to President Félix Tshisekedi, the king of the Belgians admitted that 'acts of violence and cruelty were committed which still weigh heavily on our collective memory'. He also acknowledged that 'discrimination is still all too present in our societies'. This was a first for the Belgian monarchy, even if the king stopped short of apologising. At the same time, a special parliamentary committee was set up to look into Belgium's colonial past in Africa. After two years' work, however, it also refrained from apologising for the atrocities committed in

7. Mumbembele Sanger 2015.
8. In March 1976, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Development Cooperation, Renaat Van Elslande, personally travelled to Kinshasa to hand over a royal Kuba *ndop* statue to the Zairian authorities at a very small ceremony attended by the Zairian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Ngunza Karl-I-Bond, and Bisengimana Rwema, President Mobutu's Director of Cabinet.

Figure 1. Official presentation of the *kakuungu* mask by King Philippe to President F.A. Tshisekedi in the hall of the MNRDC, 8 June 2022. (Photo © P. Mumbembele Sanger.)

A complex lending process

History is repeating itself between Belgium and the DRC. To avoid the resurgence of old semantic demons of the 1970s (donation, return, restitution) and the potential obstacles posed by the inalienability of the public domain, the RMCA, holder of the *kakuungu* mask, opted for an open-ended loan as part of a museum collaboration with the IMNC. To overcome the difficulties posed by the absence of a legal framework governing restitution between the two countries, the two museums entered into a dialogue that led to the loan and return of this *kakuungu* to the DRC. While this gesture is broadly supported by the ICOM (International Council of Museums) code of ethics on the return of cultural property, it is nevertheless more political than cultural.

As a reminder, the classic loan procedure, which always begins with an application submitted by the borrowing institution (the IMNC, in this case) before any contract between beneficiary and lender, was not followed. Thus, despite the fact that the Congolese side, in particular the IMNC authorities, had been involved at the start of the discussions, the symbolic choice of this piece – which is not the only one of its kind in the IMNC's collections in Kinshasa – was relatively arbitrary and unilateral. As Cornu and Mallet-Poujol (2006) explain, a loan or deposit is the temporary provision of items belonging to a public collection to another institution for a short period of time. Chatelain (1993: 432) sees a deposit as long-term assistance (not

exceeding one year) granted by a richly endowed institution to another that is less so, and a loan as a means of facilitating the organisation of temporary exhibitions. But in this case, a *kakuungu* mask was borrowed by the IMNC for an indefinite period. We cannot fail to see in it a restitution that does not wish to speak its name.

Two examples illustrate this ambiguity: first, the case of the royal manuscripts looted in the 20th century by the French Navy in South Korea. Rather than returning them at Korea's request, France set up a near-infinite revolving loan arrangement between the two countries, thereby circumventing the definitive removal of the manuscripts from the national heritage without prior declassification.[9] The case of the Pushkin pistols serves as a second example. A gift from President Mitterrand to Gorbachev, they were in fact part of the collections of the Musée municipal d'Amboise, and caused a stir during a parliamentary question. The minister replied that the pistols were in fact on loan to the Hermitage Museum, an 'operation of a temporary and revisable nature' (Ferrari-Breeur 2013: 47). As Cornu and Mallet-Poujol (2006: 428) note, this permeability is found in museum contractual practice, as many deposits are made under the heading of 'loan contracts'. This is a misnomer, however, since the exhibition does not consist in the use of the object, but in its safekeeping (Mallet-Poujol 2006: 429). Once a deposit has been made, it tends to become permanent, since it is systematically renewed at the end of each five-year period and is taken as given in the eyes of the depositary.

Congolese reactions to the *kakuungu* loan

While the arrival of this *kakuungu* mask in the DRC generated genuine enthusiasm and buoyed national identity, it also gave rise to a variety of opinions among the Congolese population. For some, the prodigal son 's return to the fold was natural and could not be considered a loan. The Congolese therefore do not envisage the mask's 'return trip'[10] to Belgium, and see the official handover as restitution in the strict sense of the word. For others, King Philippe's gesture was a *mea culpa* for the expropriation of their cultural heritage during colonisation. It is in this context that an anecdote circulated at the time in Kinshasa, in which the Belgian royal court was threatened by the spirits of Congolese ancestors in captivity at the RMCA. To get rid of them, the King of the Belgians had to travel to the DRC in person to hand over to the political and traditional authorities a symbolic sample of the objects kept at the AfricaMuseum. This is the view held by traditional African religions and messianic movements such as the Églises des Noirs en Afrique, the Kimpa Vita movement, and Vuvamu.

9. Ferrari-Breeur 2013: 46-47.
10. We borrow the expression *'aller-retour'* (return ticket) from Boris Wastiau's 2000 book *Congo-Tervuren, aller-retour. Le transfert des pièces ethnographiques du Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale à l'Institut des Musées nationaux du Zaïre 1976-1982.*

The mask's authenticity was also questioned. After it was handed over to the Congolese authorities, several rumours circulated that the mask handed over by Belgium was a copy. A black-and-white image of another *kakuungu* dating from 1939 was shared on Facebook and Twitter, as was a video on YouTube, even though the two masks are different. The mask featured in the 1939 black-and-white image is registered under number EP.0.0.14597 in the RMCA's photographic archive collections. It was never part of the museum's collections. The mask on loan to the DRC comes directly from the RMCA collections under number EO.1953.74.4158 and was sculpted by the artist Nkoy from the village of Pungu Luala in the Feshi territory, then acquired by Dr. Albert Maesen in 1954. A highly respected researcher and connoisseur of Congolese art, Maesen was the sponsor of the doctoral thesis of the very first Congolese director-general of the IMNC, Professor Lema Gwete.

In a 22 June 2022 interview with France 24, Julien Volper, the curator of the ethnographic collections at Tervuren, explained that while the iconography of these *kakuungu*/*kazeba* masks (*kazeba* is considered the female counterpart of *kakuungu*) is relatively similar from one example to another, the styles are different and express the creative individuality of the sculptors. He adds: 'To say that this mask is a fake on the pretext that it does not resemble the one in the photo is to assume that there is only one *kakuungu* mask (the one in the photo). However, the *kakuungu*/*kazeba* corpus includes several dozen examples in public or private collections' (Volper 2022).

The Congolese authorities have also confirmed that the mask loaned by the RMCA is indeed authentic. Compared to the mask in the archive photo dating from 1939, the one loaned by Tervuren has bigger cheeks, thicker hair, and deeper-set eyes. For our part, we maintain that Belgium would have nothing to gain by offering the DRC a copy at the risk of creating a diplomatic crisis between the two countries.

While these debates over the authenticity of the *kakuungu* mask reflect 'Africa's long struggle for its art', to borrow Bénédicte Savoy's phrase,[11] they also signal to the various players involved in future negotiations the need to foster dialogue and inclusiveness with regard to the cultural heritage transferred to Belgium during the colonial era.

Kakuungu and its source community

The *kakuungu* mask the AfricaMuseum 'loaned' to the IMNC belongs to the Suku ethnic group. As Lamal explains (1965: 1), the Suku people occupy an area as large as three Belgian provinces and are located approximately between the Bakali and the Kwenge rivers. They extend over two provinces in the southwest of the DRC, namely Kwango and Kwilu. In the Feshi territory in Kwango province, they are present in the Ganaketi and Lobo sectors. In Kwilu, they can be found in the Bindungi and Kibolo sectors in Masi-Manimba territory.

11. This expression comes from the title of a book by B. Savoy (2023): *Le long combat de l'Afrique pour son art. Histoire d'une défaite postcoloniale.*

For the Suku community, Belgium's choice of the only mask to 'loan' to the DRC was not a matter of chance, but the result of a number of cumulative factors. First, recognition of Lamal and Van de Ginste's anthropometric studies of the Suku. In his monograph on the Suku dating from the colonial period, Lamal (1949: 13) had an interest in their somatic characteristics and their cephalic index, to satisfy of which he collected nearly 169 skulls from Buka, Tsona, and Bwangongo. According to him, at least 4 of the 167 skulls examined had an extra bone located between the parietal and the occipital bones. At least thirteen skulls were characterised by various smaller extra bones. This differentiates them from other ethnic groups.

A study by Ferdinand Van de Ginste created new physical hierarchies among the Suku. Nicknamed Waia-Waia by the people of Feshi because of his brutality,[12] this colonial administrator also collected human remains in the Kwango and carried out anthropometric studies on the Suku people (Van de Ginste 1944). Relying on Lamal's studies, he also recognised the presence of an extra bone among the hundred or so skulls he had collected and sent to the RMCA. He published the results of his study in the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* , where he compared the Suku people to the Incas. Suku intellectuals consider these two studies to be strong points of their recognition in relation to other ethnic groups. The extra bone therefore represents a source of local pride and identity. To this day, history teachers in Feshi continue to teach the extra bone as part of their curriculum. Local community radio stations also promote programmes on the extra bone and provide listeners with information on anthropometric studies in Suku history.

The second is the recognition of Suku culture by the Congolese government. The fact that a Suku mask appeared on a banknote in 1997 is seen by the Suku community as a factor prompting the DRC to request this mask. The Suku also have an intense cultural and artistic life. Their best-known masks are the *kakuungu* (male features) and the *kaseba* (female features). The *kakuungu* is used for public celebrations, as is the *mbawa*, even outside circumcisions. The masks worn during circumcision dances are the *hemba*, whose crest represents an antelope, an elephant, or a human figure.

Finally, our trip to Feshi in April 2022 with Lies Busselen, a researcher at the RMCA, was a significant factor. Two months before the arrival of the *kakuungu*, we had carried out a survey as part of the 'HOME' project (Human Remains Origin(s) Multidisciplinary Evaluation) into the context surrounding the acquisition of skulls sent to Tervuren by Van de Ginste. This trip was seen by the people of Feshi as a harbinger of the arrival of the *kakuungu*. And many wondered whether it was a coincidence that Belgium agreed to return the *kakuungu* mask only two months after the Van de Ginste investigation.

While the arrival of this *kakuungu* was noted in various ways by the Suku community, it also made it possible to mobilise its elite (deputies, senators,

12. See the chapter by Lies Busselen in this volume.

professors, ministers, civil servants, etc.) from the diaspora in Kinshasa and thus strengthen its cultural identity. Internal conflicts and divisions over leadership between the elite soon split the community into two camps, however: on one side, the supporters of Meni-Kongo Kitswaka Semeti; on the other, those of Kavabioko Fabrice, alias Zombie. While the *kakuungu* ceremony in the DRC appeared to be an opportunity for the Congolese political authorities to build national unity, however fleeting, it failed to resolve the succession disputes within the Suku royal court. As a result, the legitimacy of Kavabioko Fabrice's traditional power has been called into question by the descendants of Kitswaka Semeti, who do not recognise him in the genealogy of the Meni-Kongo.

Figure 2. President Tshisekedi with Meni-Kongo Kavabioko Fabrice, alias Zombie, after the Suku community welcomed the *kakuungu* mask to the MNRDC, 20 August 2022.
(Photo © P. Mumbembele Sanger.)

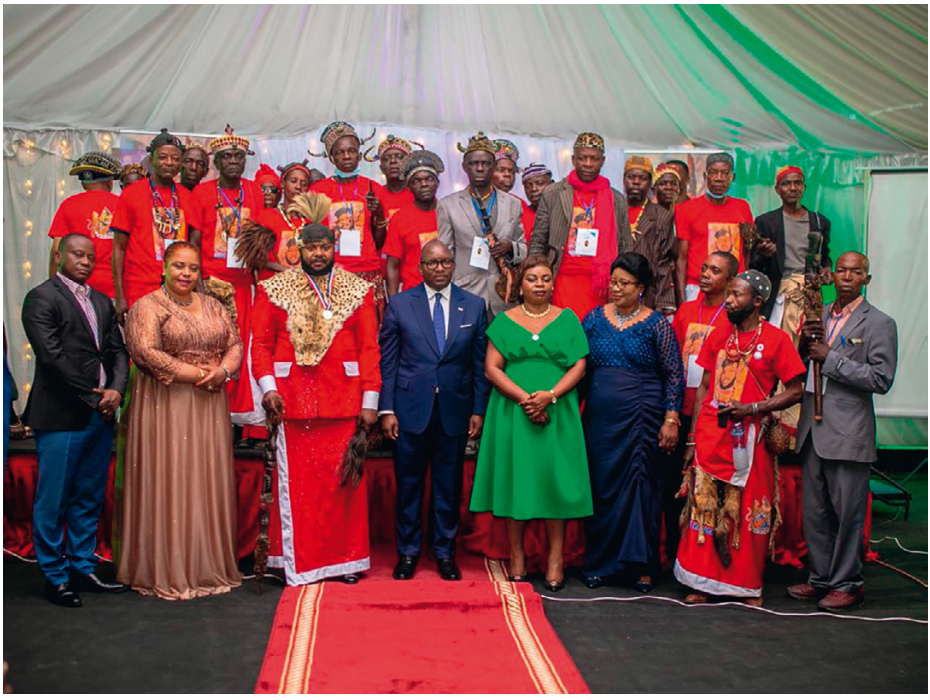

Figure 3. Meni-Kongo Kavabioko and members of his court next to Prime Minister Sama Lukonde and some members of the Congolese government at the *Grand Hôtel* in Kinshasa, after the Suku community welcomed the *kakuungu* mask to the MNRDC on 20 August 2022.
(Photo © P. Mumbembele Sanger.)

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have tried to show that the debate surrounding the 'restitution', 'transfer', 'exchange', 'loan', and 'return' of this *kakuungu* to the Democratic Republic of the Congo is at the centre of social, cultural, diplomatic, and political issues involving actors with divergent interests. As can be seen, the ceremony at which the mask was handed over to the MNRDC elevated President Tshisekedi to the rank of Congolese nationalist and thus gave him a certain cultural legitimacy he had previously lacked. It also enabled him to consolidate his diplomatic ties with Belgium. At this ceremony, for example, the two countries signed a memorandum of understanding on 'Support for the involvement of Congolese youth in the reconstitution, promotion, and conservation of Congolese cultural heritage' through their respective ministers, Christophe Lutundula Apala, Congolese minister of foreign affairs, and Meryame Kitir, Belgian minister for development cooperation and urban policy. These agreements further cemented relations between the two countries.

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Géraldine Tobe
(Photo and © Jeanpy Kabongo.)

Kalunga, the recent exhibition by G. Tobe at the Lever House, Brussels.
(Photo and © Jeanpy Kabongo.)

Ancestral reconnections

Sarah Van Beurden[1] in conversation
with Géraldine Tobe and Jeanpy Kabongo[2]

On July 7th 2022, I sat down with Kinois artists Géraldine Tobe (°1992) and Jeanpy Kabongo (°1993) at the site of Tobe's project 'Handicap Mental' at the University of Kinshasa's psychiatric ward for women. Our conversation revolved around the ways in which both artists relate to historical Congolese arts in their current work and projects, including 'Esprit des Ancêtres' (Ancestral Spirit) and 'Handicap Mental' (Mental Handicap). Both artists were trained at the Académie des Beaux Arts in Kinshasa about a decade ago. Already well-known for her signature style in which she uses smoke to create haunting and sometime grotesque figures on canvas, Tobe shaped the project 'Esprit des Ancêtres' in the aftermath of artist residencies at the Grassi Museum in 2018 and the Royal Museum for Central Africa in 2019. The project brings together African artists in an engagement with African objects located in European 'ethnographic' and 'world history' collections, thereby reviving and reinventing a collective imaginary around these objects that reconnects them to ancestral practices and spiritualities. The goal is not just an exhibition, but also a sustained conversation that can contribute to the development of a new collective imaginary and a restored spirituality. 'Handicap Mental' also aims to heal. Based at the women's psychiatric ward at the hospital of the University of Kinshasa, it organizes art workshops for psychiatric patients in order to activate the healing powers of art practice, nourishing spiritually and attempting to change how society views the mentally ill.

Tobe's analysis of society's ills as fundamentally related to a lack of connection to ancestral spirituality and a destructive influence of Christianity are at the basis of both projects. Both are also related to her personal experiences of family conflict, born out of a clash of spiritual beliefs, with a strictly Christian family on the one hand and a grandmother who, despite being Protestant also maintained ancestral Luba spiritual beliefs on the other hand. Accused, together with her mentally ill brother, of sorcery as a child, Tobe's life was marked by these clashing beliefs. While at first she sought to resolve them by training to become a member of a religious congregation, she has since turned to an artistic practice in which she externalizes these intimate and internal conflicts and links them to societal ills. Both 'Esprit des Ancêtres' and 'Handicap Mental' revolve around concepts of reconciliation, restoration, restitution and reconnection, in a physical as well as a spiritual sense.

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2. With thanks from the author to Christine Bluard (RMCA) for her editorial assistance.

What was the basis of the 'Esprit des ancêtres' project? What was the motivation behind it?

Géraldine Tobe [GT]: My grandmother used to tell me that art really used to serve society. Given what I'd learned from her, and because I'm an artist, I became more and more interested in the cultural, artistic aspect. In 2018, I was in residence at the Grassi Museum in Leipzig. It was the very first time I'd seen this heritage in real life. It opened new horizons for me and I started to design the 'Esprit des ancêtres' project. In 2019, when I arrived at the Tervuren museum, I knew exactly where I had to go. My requests were to have much more access to the storerooms. Because on a spiritual level, it's very symbolic. As an aside, I spent a good part of my life in a convent, and I know the importance of sacred statues. What my grandmother explained to me and what the Catholic Church told me were very similar, because she told me about artists who could give spirits a physical form. So, on a spiritual and emotional level, for me, visiting this heritage in the storerooms was crucial, very powerful. Access was not easy, as is often the case. I was allowed in only once. With all that I had in my mind, I wanted more regular access. Still, the fact that I had managed to get in once, spiritually and symbolically, was already a great achievement. This heritage is mute. And this kind of work, with artists, allows a form of language to be created.

I was also wondering about this storing of objects. Because it mutes. It's static, whereas outside, there's a whole generation – and not just me, but many others – who would like to read the history of their ancestors through this heritage, to learn and improve a lot of things. This encounter with heritage enabled me to create a series of works, around 12 or 13, if I remember correctly. During my residency, I was really thinking a lot about this question, so I felt something, a voice that spoke to me: 'Listen, Géraldine, this question about ancestral African spirituality, it's a question that doesn't concern just you, it also concerns a whole generation'. As we weren't born during the colonial period, we have the project of reappropriating this. I'd say we're hybrid children, we pick up on everything like that. And that's why I took the initiative of expanding the project.

If we take this a little further, we can also say that it's the manifestation of the invisible and the visible, so, in other words, it's about cohabitation. The 'Esprit des ancêtres' project is a project of resilience, first with myself, it's a project of reconciliation. We're not here to make demands, but rather to rebuild. We're in the process of rebuilding. It's a project that consists of reconnecting a whole generation of artists with the spirituality of their ancestors. And if we develop the idea of reconnecting, it's also a way for us to learn the know-how of our ancestors. My grandmother used to tell me that art was at the service of society. So we too want some of the art we make to serve society. That's how we came up with the idea of creating the Club des Ancêtres. The Club des Ancêtres would be like an initiation camp where we would invite teachers, memory-keepers, wise women, and traditional chiefs to talk to the children, because they are the

decision-makers of tomorrow. Another aspect of the project, which is still based on the know-how of our ancestors, is the creation of the 'Handicap mental' project. I mustn't forget that on the one hand my art, what I do as an artist, should also enable my society to know its own identity. So 'Esprit des ancêtres' is like a big tree and now there are branches like this that are knotted together. On the one hand, I see it as a sacred mission. We artists have that responsibility.

How can we restore and recreate the multiple voices of objects in museums?

Jeanpy Kabongo [JK]: We, the younger generation, are totally disconnected. We haven't been taught to internalise the values of these objects, these works. As a result, this work perhaps must be done in two ways, on the one hand with the works in the museum and on the other with local society. Because even if the Congolese people want to take ownership of our property, the mechanics of internalisation, the process, the initiation, as our elders called it, to take ownership of this property, is no longer there. Especially since our ancestors are already gone. And the teachings that could help reconnect us are gone. Now we need to see, how we can do this work? Perhaps go into the villages? Go to the people we work with, those we call memory-keepers, the teachers, all the elders who can give us ideas on how to bring these works to life in society. They can only find meaning, real meaning, if these works are found within society, not behind desks, not behind glass. It's beautiful, but it will never fulfil the same role.

There is the material aspect of the objects to be considered, and the aspect of being in the presence of the objects. But there's also the context that needs to be reconstituted around the objects. Can this reinforce the need for access to objects?

JK: Yes, access has a lot to do with it. I went to India six years ago to study film. While living in India, I came across a community that had a strong attachment first and foremost to the land – not the country, but the land, you know? – and then to their spirituality. So I discovered that it's possible to have nothing, but to love your land, to have a deep attachment to your land, and even more so to your spirituality. Every time I talked to my Indian brothers, they would always tell me something about themselves: 'this is part of our history', 'that's part of our beliefs', 'this is part of our past'. I didn't really care about my history or my country. And that's when I started to develop a desire to find out who my ancestors were. Where do we come from? What do we have? The crucial question that often came to mind was: what did my ancestors achieve? Because I rejected the line that says: 'African ancestors = slaves'. Isn't there something beyond that? Other stories that can nourish me? And when I got back to Kinshasa, I was lucky enough to bump into Géraldine and the quest took off from there. Everything she has had to accomplish provided answers I was looking for,

because through the work she does, I'm able to fill the void inside me. And when I started to learn a bit more about ancestral history, it opened my mind a bit and helped me to let go of certain clichés, for example. Because, by the way, India is also a really racist country, so this trip created a kind of hang-up for me. That's where the revolution started, the small revolution. Because I also wanted to speak well of my people, speak well of my history, but I didn't have enough material. When I started to find myself around people who had enough background, enough stories, I was nourished by that. When I worked on the Bakuba people, I discovered the intense richness that they have. I had everything I needed to revel in and speak proudly of this people. And I began to look more closely at their textiles. I was talking to a teacher who is Bakuba and I told him that I just wanted to understand what the Bakuba pattern meant. The conversation I had with him gave me even more insight into our history. He explained to me that the Bakuba people were very creative, because they worked and made things, not just to make them, but to make them well. They had the art of doing things well. A person could spend two months working on certain objects, just to get a magnificent result, you know? And the pattern was just the icing on the cake. So practice is just a small amount of it, compared to the knowledge they had. And if you want to understand the depth of their way of being, you have to immerse yourself in what they were doing. There were certain things that I couldn't understand in their depth. I could only remain on the surface, because the history we're taught can be summed up in a few words.

But when I had access to something, to an object, it changed everything! If we're going to educate society, these elements, these works, can be powerful testimonies to show today's society that if the ancestors did it, we can do it, too. And frankly, if Europe is looking to do work that could have a long-term impact, it should allow access to the collections instead of limiting it to themselves.

So the reconstitution of heritage, does that mean its recovery?

GT: As we said, it's a project of reconstruction and resilience. Artists aren't the only ones involved in this work. We also need art historians, because we need to work together, and that's how we're going to create something that will last over time. That's why we're taking the time we need today. We're working very patiently on this because I like to say that I see it as a mission. Implementing the 'Esprit des ancêtres' is a mission. I'm just someone whom the ancestors may have used to put something back on the table, that's all. This spirituality is something so strong, so powerful, that you must do it slowly and simply. I don't do it for the glory. Apparently, this kind of reconstitution has become fashionable, trendy. For my part, I've always had this spirituality in me. I remember when I was a child, my mother would ask me if I was really a child or an old person. I already had this spirituality. It translated in two ways: some people understood that it would lead me to something else; but for others I was a witch. For us, the

most important thing today is to do this work, the work of construction. Because tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow, we won't be here anymore.
JK: We want this work to be a landmark for future generations, just as our ancestors had to create work that today serves as a reference point, a benchmark for rewriting history.

Do collections and museums still have a role to play in this future? Is a physical return of collections part of this future?
JK: For a young Kinois, the priority is to make a living, rather than worrying about what the museum keeps. I wouldn't say that institutions should be excluded, but I would say that we need to see what their role would be. The museum should try to... I don't know... maybe it needs to change its name? Because keeping objects behind glass, to look pretty... it's mute.

GT: Personally, I'd rather not get ahead of myself. Today people talk about restitution. I'm not a politician, I'm just a citizen who is really involved in society. When we talk about 'restitution', for whose benefit is it? I don't think restitution is the first step, because if these objects are returned, they will still be in a museum. And where is the museum? It's in the city. What are people who live far away going to do? I'd say that perhaps we need to prepare the ground first. You must start with dialogue and awareness-raising. I experienced this in Benin when I went there for a residency. In Benin, when the voodoo festival approaches, the whole of society takes part. In the DRC, if you start doing that, you'll have all the pastors in Kinshasa against you! So I think we need to do some awareness-raising work first, before embarking on this stage.

What role do the 'Ancêtres' play in a project like 'Handicap Mental'?
JK: Ancestral society proposed solutions to problems. For illnesses such as mental illness, they had practices which were used to heal. And to this day, in some villages, these practices still exist. In a purely scientific, contemporary framework, we cannot impose ancient practices, because the context is not appropriate. But we can raise the issue and recall a way of doing things that was also referenced. We're making progress, but we also have to bear in mind that there are people who, before us, have already done this work, for example, using art. Eventually we'd also like to open other fields, to involve other practices, and it's these practices that we'd like to revitalize. How did our ancestors work with sick people? How did they help them to integrate into society?

Do you have an example in your artistic work where you can say that this work, this creation, or this piece of art is the result of reflection and the search for a connection with the ancestors?
JK: After training as a painter, I ended up going into photography, which was a personal choice. However, I felt that photography was a bit too digital for me. When you work with paint, you're used to touching the material.

I kind of missed that aspect in photography. I'm a bit of a control freak, I like to control what I do. So the idea of having my work printed by someone else... It sometimes bothered me a bit. So I started to think about how to present my work, with a practice that would be my own, and the idea that every time I looked at the work, it would speak to me. Because photography is so European, I can use it as a medium, but there are certain limits, certain forms of connection that risk distancing me from the work I'm producing. So, while I was doing my research, as I love Bakuba

Jeanpy Kabongo, *Madiba*.
(Photo and © Jeanpy Kabongo.)

textile, I said to myself: 'Why not make my prints on this textile? First, it could become a medium on which to print my own photos; second, using this textile gives me a continuity of work that I can project into the future.' Because when you have a tool and you use it, collective knowledge can help you develop it. If I, through my work, can print on Bakuba textile, working with the people who make it, together we can think about how to modernise it, how to give it back its past glory. That's where I work with a group of Bakuba women, who help me to weave the material. They do the embroidery and that's what I print my photos on. All in all, the result is a source of satisfaction for me, because I feel reconnected with my ancestors, with my own history, and what's more, I'm going to present a work that, even if I'm not there – a photo that will be shown somewhere – will speak of my history and the history of my ancestors.

GT: I can also answer your question about positive and concrete results. Today, there are other people who can talk about the 'Esprit des ancêtres'. For me, this is already a result that really touches me. At the same time,

since I've been involved in the 'Esprit des ancêtres' project, I've felt very calm inside myself, settled. It's also made me grow, I'm making constant progress in my art. I see this happening with women, too. This project helps me to be an example for women artists too. Someone said to me, 'But, Géraldine, it's usually men who do projects, and this is the first time we've seen a woman.' I replied: 'Yes, not a woman, but an old woman.' And why an old woman? Because back home, for example, among the Baluba and Bakuba, it was the woman who had the power. She was at the centre, and it was also the woman who served as the link between humans and the creator. So the woman is like a tree, a big tree that provides shade so that people can come and sit down.

Conclusion

Bibiane Niangi Batulukisi[1]

The analyses in this book make an essential contribution to the debate on the provenance of cultural objects removed from their African context, particularly those held by the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren. The data contained in this volume have a great deal to say about the immense amount of work already accomplished in this field. One thing is certain: these cultural objects left Africa in an unusual context that Anne-Marie Bouttiaux describes as one of 'unequal power relations'. In other words, however these objects were acquired, their removal from Africa to museums and collections in the West remains damaging from Africans' point of view. Adilia Yip underlines this position when she writes:

> 'I suggest that restitution should not only focus on the legitimate ownership and the violence of the theft, looting and pillaging, but also raise awareness of discontinuity, fragmentation and erasure of customary music culture caused by violence of colonialisation and fragmentation of the customary political system.'

The various analyses presented here demonstrate the result of a Eurocentric vision. It is quite clear that research into the provenance of African objects now held in Western museums is laudable in that it will help shed light on each object's history. It marks a decisive step forward in the study of traditional African art. But it also poses a problem of documentation, which Donatien Dibwe dia Mwembu, along with contributors such as Lies Busselen and Zoë Strother, proposes resolving through recourse to oral sources, which he believes contain collective memories, life stories, and accounts of events that the informants experienced. Field investigations into the provenance of the seven Wamba skeletons, the Tippo Tip necklace, the rumours surrounding the head of Chief M'Siri, and Chief Kamanda's sword of honour have shown that, despite their limitations, oral sources can counterbalance, and even supplement and correct, written documents. The use of these sources undoubtedly contributes to 'knowledge of the local contexts of these cultural objects insofar as the local population who own these objects are familiar with their history and their community functions'. Provenance research therefore lends legitimacy to an object's acquisition and, consequently, to its restitution, because it authenticates the object, places it in the context in which it was acquired, reveals how it was acquired (violence, gift, exchange, deception, looting, negotiated purchase, etc.), and traces the route it took,

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all the while taking into account the point of view of the communities and the personality of the collector. This research restores the object to its full context, to the total cycle of its circulation,[2] and gives it a kind of 'agency', as suggested in Arjun Appadurai's analysis.[3]

This focus on provenance becomes pointless when it is imposed as a prerequisite for the restitution of objects divorced from their *indigenous* (in the biological sense of the term) environment. On the African side, it raises questions and provokes a great deal of indignation among many researchers and activists. Felwine Sarr, co-author of the famous Sarr-Savoy report on the 'restitution of African cultural heritage', while calling for in-depth provenance research, denounces a one-sided approach that reinforces the view that the West is once again imposing its diktats. The rules of the game are once again imposed by the West, which continues to develop the salvific narrative and nomenclature associated with restitution despite having been at the origin of the looting. What's more, the objects to be returned will be selected according to conditions and criteria set by the West.

The awakening of African conscience concerning restitution is irreversible. Restitution is awaited throughout Africa; it must be immediate and without preconditions. The Africans concerned by this issue are demanding the pure and simple return of their cultural and religious property.[4] 'Taking back what is ours',[5] says Joseph Ibongo, former Director General of the Institut des Musées nationaux du Congo. 'Taken violently or purchased with a clear conscience,' echoes Bouttiaux, matters little to Africans who expect their heritage to be returned unconditionally. So, whatever the method of acquisition and collection, if the object is of interest to African societies, restitution must be on the agenda. The restitution of Africa's historical heritage, often produced by anonymous 'artists', does not, however, inhibit the circulation of contemporary art to Western museums, where, as Zoë Strother points out, some African artists find it advantageous to exhibit their works. In an interview with Didier Gondola, Congolese artist Barly Baruti makes the distinction between restitution (of heritage) and circulation (of contemporary

2. Sarah Van Beurden (2015: 11; 2021) provides a detailed analysis of the transformation of Congolese (?) objects from 'curios' to 'artifacts of science', a process of canonisation which, she explains, not only conferred (cultural and commercial) value on these objects, but also gave rise to anthropology.

3. Appadurai 1986; see also the update by Van Binsbergen & Geschiere 2005.

4. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, cultural works from Congo enriched the ethnographic museums of Belgium, Great Britain, Germany, and the United States by the thousands. Enid Schildkrout and Curtis A. Keim write that over a hundred thousand objects were 'removed' from Congo before the First World War. You need only turn to Suzanne Preston Blier's classic work (1997: 267-269, 'photographic credits') to appreciate the scale of the looting. From Berlin to Los Angeles via Geneva, Paris, London, New York, Chicago, etc., Western collections benefited greatly from this large-scale looting.

5. 'Belgium has appropriated more than 500,000 objects that belong to us,' says Ibongo, 'not including what's in private collections' (quoted in Dansoko Touré 2018). According to Sarah Van Beurden, this looting has been systematised and legitimised because these objects have been given a label of cultural authenticity, making Belgium look like the guardian and regent of Congolese heritage (Van Beurden 2015: 13; 2021).

art) and put his money where his mouth is by offering a drawing to the King of the Belgians when he made an official visit to Kinshasa.

If restitution is to be a success for Africans, exchanges between museum institutions in the West and those in Africa must be prioritised and intensified. It is imperative that Africans participate in all stages of any restitution programme, including the selection of the objects to be returned and the arrangements for their actual repatriation. It is equally important to strengthen the partnership in terms of training African partners.

Traditional African art – and research into its provenance, its functions in the societies and communities that produced it, its multiple lives, its registers of circulation, and its scale of values – can no longer be understood within an ectopic epistemological framework. In other words, restitution is only the prelude to, and the *sine qua non* of, a paradigm shift that will henceforth preside over the reunion of these objects not only with their places of *life* and *valency*, but also with their epistemological ecosystem. In this sense, restitution, when carried out outside Western hegemonic paradigms and *with* local communities, becomes an act that is no longer merely symbolic and corrective, but *total* and revolutionary. In the light of this restitutive revolution, new knowledge – generated *in situ* –, an innovative epistemology, and genuine heuristics can now interrogate these objects and reveal all their meanings. The search for provenance plays a part of this process. The history of African objects is the 'poor cousin' of art history and African studies. Pursuing and developing multidisciplinary projects would be an appropriate solution for many researchers. Investigating the rush to collect African art must be at the heart of this research.

The question of provenance and emerging new societal expectations inevitably lead to a new conception of museum work that takes certain historical and political aspects into account. As El Hadj Malick Ndiaye points out,[6] we are no longer in the days when the history of an object began only when it arrived on European soil. Given that restitution directly concerns museums in their role as mediators and guarantors of the durability of works and collective memory, I have always maintained during my many exchanges with collectors and researchers in Belgium that Africans should prepare to receive restored works. In other words, they must create reception conditions that are likely to secure and enhance the value of the objects to be returned. Echoing this conviction, Mabiala Mantuba-Ngoma also sounded the alarm, deploring the shortage of museums in a country that has 'produced cultural goods of inestimable variety [and] still does not have the museums it deserves.'[7]

This approach to restitution goes beyond simply recommending the creation of suitable infrastructures,[8] which recent institutions such as the MNRDC in Kinshasa and the Musée des civilisations noires in Dakar are

6. Ndiaye 2019: 1-6.
7. Mabiala Mantuba-Ngoma 1999: 445.
8. All the more so since surveys carried out in Kinshasa, Bamako, and Dakar left no doubt 'about the growing popular disinterest in art museums' (quoted in Tshikaya Kayembe Biaya 1999: 758).

finally putting into practice. Despite being essential tools in African-Western relations,[9] these infrastructures are insufficient in themselves to ensure the success of restitution projects and must comply with a cardinal requirement: that of putting Africans at the centre of restitution activities and helping to raise collective awareness of this topic. So what do we see today? The restitution of works has become a matter for museum professionals, a bitter fact that is hampering the restitution process. Unlike in some West African countries, in the DRC the communities of origin are sidelined in this process. Whereas in West Africa traditional audiences, particularly villages, are involved from the very conception of such large-scale cultural projects right through to their implementation, the DRC is struggling to mobilise grassroots involvement.

The people of West Africa have become true mediators for the museum,[10] whereas in Congo a similar cultural policy is lacking at precisely the moment when the restitution of cultural property is well under way. Mobilising such communities is as important as building new museums in Africa. All is not lost, however. The DRC, in collaboration with Belgium, would do well to set up such structures to support and mobilise communities and encourage training, scientific and cultural exchanges, and the unimpeded circulation of information.

Who will benefit from restitution? Those who are talking most about it today are museum staff, researchers, university lecturers, cultural heritage staff, and politicians. The restitution of artefacts is a concern that generates little interest among either traditional or urban communities. These populations show a certain indifference to restitution. The inconclusive response of the Wamba communities to the return of the seven Mbwiti skeletons is therefore understandable. Moreover, exhumation is perceived as sacrilege. What's more, in this culture, a body cannot be buried twice!

Why and how can community involvement be encouraged, to ensure the success of this restitution process? Are the communities of origin really interested in the return of ancient cultural and religious objects? We are all aware of the changes that have taken place in African cultures since colonisation and up to the present day. Essentially religious, many of these objects have disappeared both physically and from the imagination, having given way to Christian symbols. Western religion, as practised in our communities, has distracted Africans from their own interiority, their religious references, and therefore their traditions. As the two religions are incompatible on several levels (symbolic, liturgical, etc.), one of them had to disappear.

So today masks have followed the institution of *mukanda* and disappeared

9. Let us not forget the role played by Asian states in the construction of these museums, however.

10. An example of this is the creation of Mali's 'Cultural Bank', which, from 1993 onwards, decentralised the safeguarding of national heritage by involving local communities in museum, training, and micro-credit projects at village level; see Ndiaye 2007 and Yattara 2007.

from our communities;[11] the diviner still has an audience, but his methods and techniques have changed, and carved symbols are disappearing to make way for stones and nuts. Technological progress and globalisation are further Westernising our cultures. More accurately, they are contributing to the destruction of African cultures. And in the eyes of the new generation of Africans in particular, these objects belong to the occult, to black magic and witchcraft, as the Europeans, led by missionaries, caricatured them in the nineteenth century. What we are seeing here is a break between two types of society and the emergence of new 'pre-colonial' cultural identities. But sociological change is not confined to Africa: Europe is also experiencing changes in the individual's relationship with culture. In the West, however, every effort is being made to ensure that young people receive a dose of 'tradition' in their education so they can meet the new challenges to which institutions are trying to respond. In Africa, on the other hand, the current generation is totally disinterested in its own traditional culture. In the DRC, this lack of interest can be seen at all levels of the education system (primary, secondary, university, and postgraduate). There are no introductory heritage courses, and the teaching of the arts and the history of African art is virtually absent from educational programmes.

The absence of a cultural policy and the lack of awareness on the part of politicians, experts, parents, and teachers (at all levels) are to blame. During the seven years I have spent at the head of a higher education institute, I have condemned this fact and decried the cultural illiteracy prevalent in the population, particularly among students training to become secondary school teachers. An introduction to cultural heritage is more than necessary to alleviate the identity crisis from which Africa's youth suffers.

There can be no development without creativity. Today, Congo has been reduced to a consumer society of objects valued by the West and devalued through a production chain that often begins in China.[12] Little emphasis is placed on promoting human and cultural values. Mobilising society around the promotion of culture and the protection of heritage will help to arouse the curiosity of young Congolese and unleash their creativity, the key to all-round development. It will also help strengthen identity and links between communities.

We should also call for the reactivation, development, and/or creation of networks of local museums in the DRC (particularly the IMNC provincial museums, whose cause is now being championed by many Congolese cultural players).[13] These would offer invaluable support when returning objects held abroad. Since the teaching of arts and crafts remains the poor relation

11. The use and deployment of masks in this male initiation was widespread in Congo, particularly among the Bayaka, Basuku, and Bapende; see for example Strother & Nzomba Dugo Kakema 2020: 254-272 and Niangi Batulukisi 1999: 85-91.

12. Thus 'Made in China', which the people of Kinshasa have dubbed '*Guangzhou*' or '*bwa*' ('dog'), floods the Kinshasa market from the smallest, most ordinary object to furniture and large household appliances, all of which are often of very poor quality.

13. This is also the approach chosen by the IMNC experts as part of their participation in the 'PROCHE' project mentioned in the introduction to this book.

of the modern African school, local museums would be able to supplant such school training thanks to educational activities offered in these local museums in partnership with schools. These activities would integrate traditional culture in all its socio-cultural, moral, magico-religious, and economic aspects, with a view to integral development. I would like to add my voice to the discussion about whether to return the seven skeletons of the Mbuti people of Wamba in the north-east of the DRC. Returning these bones so funeral rituals can be held is not an essential issue, especially as the funerals have already taken place. Instead of, or rather in addition to, these rituals, the restitution must include impactful charitable works such as the construction of schools, hospitals, etc.

It will therefore be necessary to involve communities, especially young people – rightly known as 'agents of change'. Africa is looking to the West for support in strengthening their capacity to receive returned objects and in training programmes for heritage experts. By encouraging the creation of institutes in each region to train such experts, we will increase their capacity to popularise and mobilise local communities, and especially young people, about the fundamental values embodied in ancient objects, to encourage the conservation, management, and promotion of African heritage.

Introducing Africans to cultural and religious heritage should accompany this restitution process. All the obstacles and impediments to this process that researchers mention should not override the lack of heritage education, the lack of firm conviction, and the ignorance in communities of the importance of these objects from the past preserved in their countries of origin. We would stress that this ignorance has greatly hindered the restitution process. Such an initiative is urgently needed at a time when Africa is trying to rewrite its history and recover and reinvent its own identity. As Géraldine Tobe explains in an interview with Sarah Van Beurden, the cultural and religious objects produced by our ancestors must not only be well protected; they must also be understood, because they constitute an important material and cultural heritage that will be passed on to an entire generation that includes Tobe.[14] In order to safeguard and perpetuate this heritage, the introduction to knowledge of heritage in Africa should be based on studies and programmes carried out *in situ* in Africa and on programmes designed by museums in each African country. These studies should cover both natural and cultural sites. Cooperation between countries of origin and the museums, mainly European, involved in the restitution of objects should be stepped up as a matter of urgency, with a view to training staff capable of carrying out this task.

14. In 1998, UNESCO launched a commendable initiative along these lines with a 'World Heritage Education Kit' in 40 national languages, including Kiswahili, designed to encourage young people to become involved in the conservation of local and global cultural heritage.

Ultimately, the debate on the return of African objects[15] seems irreversible. Today, their presence in Western ethnographic museums adds to the list of abuses perpetrated by the colonial system, along with cultural assimilation, the predation of raw materials, the destruction of flora and fauna, the slave trade, and the *Code de l'indigénat*. To revive its collective memory and begin the process of cultural rehabilitation, Black Africa demands nothing less than reparations and restitution of its cultural and religious heritage.

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15. In this respect, the two chapters in this volume (by Pouillard and Van Schuylenbergh) on naturalist collections offer converging prospects for research and analysis.

Postface

Activism, scientific research, and the politics of (in)visibilisation and appropriation

Anne Wetsi Mpoma[1]

In the introduction of her work *Authentically African*, Sarah Van Beurden notes that the museum, as an institution, in '[t]he grouping of the displays on prehistory and physical anthropology, and their positioning as a bridge between the halls on nature and those on culture, framing the ethnographic and art displays, encouraged a racialised understanding of cultural difference.'[2] This analysis helped me deepen my understanding of the impact of colonialism on the emergence of a Belgian national identity[3] and refine my own analyses of the search for provenance. My point here is that research into the provenance of objects held by the museum should not replace a policy of reparation. And what it should do even less is attempt to silence the claims that gave rise to such a policy. Nor should this research should be limited to ethnography, to a search for the ethnic or geographic origins of the object. The search for provenance must be understood in a context of decolonisation and should therefore neither be depoliticised nor used outside a reparations process.

(Re)Making Collections|La Fabrique des collections describes the state of current research into the provenance of African heritage objects. Through its chapters, the question of the restitution of goods stolen by Belgium, as well as the power relations which underlie them, are subject to important analyses. It should be noted, however, that the search for provenance does not lead directly to the decolonisation of museum collections. As one example (from among so many), let us recall the scenography of the 'Colonial History' room in the Royal Museum of Central Africa's permanent exhibition. By implying the use of ankle shackles was limited to the precolonial period (and thus to a distant past), we encourage the visitor to deduce that the colonial era was free of such brutality. The search for provenance therefore exposes falsifications by not only museum staff, but collectors as well. Thus, in his personal notes, Maurits Bequaert records the following remark about a looted object: 'The village retains ownership and when its people have sufficiently evolved

1. Art historian, decolonial thinker, art gallery director, and author.
2. Van Beurden 2015; 2021: 21.
3. Two other works on the controversial origins of Art nouveau also informed my perspective of the thorny question of the cultural impact of colonisation: Silverman 2012: 175-195 and Clerbois 2023.

[*sic*], the object will be returned' (quoted in French by Nikis and Smith in this volume). This note was not included when the object was catalogued in the museum registers. The ownership of an object used during ritual ceremonies – an object of great symbolism for the communities from which it was taken – is therefore ascribed to whoever produced it. There is undoubtedly voluntary falsification in the context of objects' arrival in museum collections.

The years of renovation which preceded the reopening of the AfricaMuseum in December 2018 were conducive to a renegotiation of power relations between African diaspora associations and the RMCA which, despite having a 'new skin', remains 'undecolonisable' and continues to embody colonial power relations in a postcolonial and decolonial context. This moment of renegotiation was a major turning point for African diaspora activists in terms of identity redefinition. It is in this national context and in an international climate of widely diffused decolonial theories that decolonialist visits to neighbourhoods whose street names commemorate soldiers responsible for massacres increased, that statues were overturned or stained with red paint to recall the blood shed by the people represented, not to mention the campaigns calling for the restitution of looted African goods which were organised all over the world, in South Africa, in the Caribbean, in America, in Europe and, of course, in Belgium.

In our flat country, Afrodescendent activists launched the campaign for the restitution of looted goods. More specifically, it was launched by Bamko-CRAN asbl, an association chaired by Mireille-Tsheusi Robert, managed by Black women, and dedicated to defending the rights of Afrodescendent people in Belgium. A Belgian educator of Congolese origin, Robert first distinguished herself in her work with young people from the diaspora who were involved in urban gangs in Brussels in the early 2000s. After having participated in creating the non-profit organisation Collectif Mémoire coloniale et Luttes contre les Discriminations, she went on to found the Bamko collective, known as Bamko-CRAN since its association with the French CRAN. Thus, meetings, debates, position papers, interviews punctuated the reopening of the museum.[4] This included giving voice to experts from the diaspora who had been ill-treated during the consultation process leading to the creation of a new multivoiced permanent exhibition in the newly rebaptised AfricaMuseum. That process was a missed opportunity for the institution to radically transform the new permanent exhibition by listening to experts from the diaspora and Africa. Not only had these voices not been solicited upstream within the group of designated experts (only certain voices from the diaspora were chosen to participate in what would become the Group of Six, based on a selection by COMRAF, which comprised a

4. Example of a video created by Bamko on https://youtu.be/HADrIaoAubw. See also the articles (in French) by Anne Wetsi Mpoma: analyses on https://www.bamko.org/; 'Quand le temple dédié à la colonisation belge fait peau neuve' (https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/3d95e3_86cdb150e1844154bc756110001487f6.pdf) in the dossier 'Musées coloniaux et 'restitution' des trésors cachés' (https://www.bamko.org/post-colonial).

number of diaspora associations and the museum), but the institution's communications presented an experiential and risky collaboration as a successful structural partnership. In short, the declared desire for decolonisation was more a form of instrumentalisation than a real desire to set and meet goals.

I joined Bamko-CRAN alongside researcher Véronique Clette-Gakuba and activists Georgine Dibua Athapol and Laura Nsengiyumva in the exchanges and activities which raised public awareness of these issues. We were supported in this task by journalist Michel Bouffioux, who published important articles that alerted the public to the tragic history of the 'human remains' of Chief Lusinga and his companions in misfortune. When Bamko-CRAN first raised the issue in 2017, people just smiled politely. The association's appeals were finally heard, first by the Parliament of the Brussels-Capital Region (October 2018) and then, in 2021, by the federal parliamentary commission, popularly known as the 'Congo Commission', responsible for investigating the colonial past.

Let us remember that Congolese activism in Belgium goes back as far as the Congolese presence in the country. The first to have pleaded for better living conditions for Africans in Belgium was the Pan-Africanist Paul Panda Farnana, who several times addressed the Belgian Parliament on behalf of former Congolese soldiers living in Belgium. Similarly, requests for restitution began long before the reopening of the AfricaMuseum, during the colonial period, even as far back as the very moment at the end of the nineteenth century when certain objects were removed, brutally or otherwise, from their communities of origin (as several authors in this book point out).

This leads me to problematise the position of researchers who are looking into the provenance of non-European objects present in European museums. The current interest in provenance research must be set in the context of the history of postcolonial museums. Since the beginning of the African independence movement in 1960, these museums, anxious to preserve their survival, have organised brainstorming sessions and developed strategies that could continue to justify their existence. In the 1980s and 1990s, cultural institutions played the multiculturalism card and claimed to represent the cultures of people with an immigrant background in European countries. Today, we have moved into the decolonial era, completely depoliticised and decontextualised from the demands for reparation originally inherent in the decolonial movement. Activists must deal with institutions that do not hesitate to embrace progressive discourse and, in doing so, neutralise the actions of associations active in the field and at the origin of the development of thought and demands. Because a fundamental characteristic of capitalist society and its neoliberal philosophy, which applies equally to scientific research (and the RMCA is also a scientific research institute), lies in its ability to renew itself by attempting to co-opt any attempt to challenge the system.[5] This phenomenon of reappropriation is widely described by decolonial researchers,

5. Noël-Thomassaint 2019.

notably the Franco-Haitian Fania Noël-Thomassaint, co-founder of the Black Lives Matter movement in France. This process is also perfectly described by Sirman Bilge,[6] inspired by the work of Barbara Christian, a supporter of Black feminist critical theory. It is this whitewashing, this repossession in the name of science – in this case research into the provenance of African heritage objects present in Belgium – which strikes me. Insofar as diaspora associations have worked to bring these questions to the political agenda, the processes of restitution (and its ancillary, the search for provenance) cannot claim to be part of a decolonial approach without integrating experts from the diaspora alongside Congolese and Belgian experts. Furthermore, restitution must be unconditional. And the contribution of diaspora experts is precisely to push the proponents of science, including museologists, and politicians to decouple provenance research and restitution once and for all. How can one speak of legitimate provenance in colonial conditions? How can we categorise colonial 'objects' into 'ill-gotten gains' and 'legitimate goods', and therefore legislate on the restitution of some (and even then, only in the event of a request) and not of others?

Must we be reminded that the way in which the objects were removed from their environment of belonging was voluntarily erased and masked by the people responsible for 'collecting' them? Nevertheless, in 'good hands', provenance research can prove beneficial, without becoming an essential step, in considering objects' restitution or quite simply situating them historically. The legal framework established on 30 June 2022, which requires scientists to be able to formally prove the origin of an object before they can recommend the legitimacy of its restitution, becomes a diversion and an instrumentalisation of militant struggles. This instrumentalisation implies that politicians and certain scientists will be able to continue to pass the buck. And I do not share the opinion of those with a supposedly optimistic view of the situation, a view which claims that the legal framework has the merit of existing and thus constitutes a sign of progress. In law, the obligation of result or of means is unavoidable. It is therefore not simply a matter of the debtor asserting an attempt to achieve a result (reimbursement), it is also necessary that the result be obtained (reimbursement). The 'Congo Commission' ended in failure because it was allowed to. It was not subject to an obligation of result, which should have been its objective. In other circumstances deemed essential, the whole country has already found itself operating without a government. Parliament could have gone all the way with its alleged ambitions. If this is not the case, the various parties will be able to continue to instrumentalise militant struggles, while placing blame for the failure on the opposite and competing institution.

Instead, we have witnessed a scientific and institutional hijacking of these themes. Large-scale programs have been put in place without any planned

6. Binge 2015: 9-32.

consultation with the diaspora.[7] Projects concerning human 'remains' (HOME) and cultural property (PROCHE) continue to challenge restitution processes by placing them in a depoliticised context that practically erase the way in which these large-scale projects were thought out following demands from diaspora associations and after 15,000 people came together to invade the streets of Brussels in June 2020 to say that black lives matter. While the silence of scientists on this important theme, in collusion with politicians, is not surprising, it deserves to be underlined and it also reminds us of the extent to which all knowledge is situated. *(Re)Making Collections* is no exception to a certain form of invisibilisation of diaspora activists. Usually accustomed to the practice of citing their sources, scientists no longer seem to apply this rule rigorously when it comes to expressing the opinions of activists. There are nevertheless many written traces of their declarations: press articles, continuing education analyses, publications, and scientific articles such as that of Sarah Demart which precisely describes the work of Black women in the Afrodescendant associative milieu, taking the trouble of naming them individually.[8]

To come back to this book, I find that it has the advantage of both clarity and simplicity. It establishes the facts and provides a framework. The popularisation of the themes it discusses may yet awaken memories in a society where the forgetting of the colonial past prevails. One standout is the chapter by Violette Pouillard, which tackles the question of the social life of objects and the accumulation of living things, and the manner in which exhibitions within museums and zoos contribute to normalising a process of 'scientific' predation that has had unprecedented environmental and ecological consequences for Congolese populations. Their effects are still visible in the behaviour of certain populations today.

All of the texts on provenance research for African pieces present in Belgian museums provide valuable information that opens up perspectives concerning even seemingly innocuous artefacts, such as ceramics, which make undeniable the context of violence in which these objects were taken from their owners and put into a museum.

The disappearance of African actors linked to the acquisition of objects once they entered Western collections, such as the ceramics described above, should be compared with the anonymisation of African artists, creators of objects rarely named on museum placards (even when they are known?). And if, in the past, during the 1897 International Exhibition at the Colonial Palace, '[t]he Congolese were present outside in an "African village", while inside their presence was embodied by large sculptures depicting Africans made by European artists,'[9] it is clear that the voices of activists who actively

7. When we talk about including diaspora members, three *sine qua non* conditions must be met: first, ensure them the role of partner upstream, that is to say in the conceptualisation of the project; and second, provide a real budget. Finally, consultants must be allowed to work freely.
8. Demart 2022.
9. Van Beurden 2015; 2021.

worked for the decolonisation of the country are reproduced in an often caricatural way by Belgian scientists. This dichotomy thus still remains.

Among the information that supports Black activists' assertions (since it is customary for their statements to be subjected to scientific reading and approval before being taken seriously), I will also mention the still current practice of 'green washing' by companies wishing to improve their image. Hein Vanhee thus mentions the Compagnie du Kasaï, a rubber producer established in 1902 and controlled for a long time by Leopold II. We learn that it provided objects to the museum in 1905, 1910 and 1913. The presence of Umicore among the donors who have made possible the current 'Resource Paradox' room leads me to affirm that this practice of green washing is still very active. Or should we speak here of 'cultural washing'? Vanhee also tells us that at least 60% of the objects of the RMCA were acquired before the First World War, thus before the annexation of Rwanda and Burundi, but also in a context of violence. Describing the context of this time, the historian Dibwe Dia Mwembu notes that 'the ransacking of a great leader's property after his killing was the common practice among the colonisers'. He also presents oral testimonies to 'express the point of view of the Congolese', while noting that the colonial archives are not neutral and reflect only the viewpoint of Belgians. The disappearance of the Songye chief Nkolomonyi's fetish (1903), of Chief Kamanda's sword of honour, or of Chief Msiri's head has left traces in the living memory of the communities concerned which can usefully serve the search for memory of this shared past.

A.-M. Bouttiaux describes the notion of looting inherent in the principle of museum collecting which, in my opinion, makes any process of depoliticising provenance research problematic. She explains how, despite all her attempted precautions when acquiring ethnographic objects in Côte d'Ivoire, she was confronted with the 'difficulty or even impossibility of putting together ensembles that were free of any ethical problem'. In my opinion, this point should be repeated during discussions on restitution. Can we collect objects in an ethical way, whether in a colonial context or in a context of economic and cultural domination? As B. Wastiau reminds us in the interview conducted by Alisson Bisschop, the objective of colonisation is not to acquire for the development of ethnography or the natural sciences, but to exploit natural resources. Similarly, the current enthusiasm for provenance studies among European universities is certainly sometimes dictated by the surge of decolonisation, but it barely conceals the desire to justify maintaining museums and research. During its renovation, the AfricaMuseum could have chosen to include works offered by the artist-curator Toma Muteba Luntumbue during the *Congo Exit Museum* exhibition, in addition to the works of contemporary art that the team chose, but they didn't. Yet the performances and installations offered as part of this exhibition in 2010 had a significant impact on the decolonial issues of the exhibition.

In conclusion, the development of research into the provenance of African and non-European objects present in Western museums makes it possible to contextualise the arrival of these objects in collections and can thus provide additional moral arguments for their restitution. Several authors in this volume are also working on this task. However, the process of restitution should be considered within the framework of a general policy of reparations for colonialism and not constrained by the search for provenance to determine the legitimacy or otherwise of this process. In addition, an effort (with an obligation of result) should be made to integrate more diversity into the profiles of scientific researchers subsidised by universities and research institutes in the West.

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Provenance research on collections from the Global South in Europe is now unavoidable in the fields of museum studies and cultural policy, yet no scholarly work has scrutinized the collections of the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren (Belgium) as a whole. While the institution's history has been the subject of study, this book provides new frameworks for interpretation in light of current debates. Structured around two axes – the heritage field in historical and contemporary Belgian and Congolese contexts, and the more specific case of the Tervuren museum's collections –, this edited volume gives a broad overview, explores new trends, and presents the challenges facing museums today, with recent and unpublished research, interviews, and artistic contributions.

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AFRICA museum

Co-funded by the Creative Europe Programme of the European Union