

Viewpoint

The Africa Museum of Tervuren, Belgium: The Reopening of ‘The Last Colonial Museum in the World’, Issues on Decolonization and Repatriation

Abstract

The Africa Museum in Tervuren, Brussels, reopened its doors after a closure of five years. What precisely is on view in the refurbished museum? And how do the choices made by the museum relate to wider discussions in anthropology and museology on decolonization and repatriation? In Belgium, it seems, working towards cooperation between all parties involved is far from finished.

Key words: Europe; Africa; Art



After being closed for renovation for a period of five years, the Royal Museum for Central Africa, or the Africa Museum, in Tervuren, Brussels, reopened its doors on Saturday, 8 December 2018. It houses one of the biggest collections of material culture and arts from Belgium's former colony, first known as the Kongo Free State (1885-1908), then as the Belgian Kongo (1908-1960), and now as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).¹

The museum, often dubbed ‘the last colonial museum in the world’, did not just close for renovation. It also promised a ‘decolonization’ after the stagnation of its racist image, which persisted for over a hundred years since it opened in 1910. At the official opening, Guido Gryseels, the museum director, welcomed the invited guests, highlighting the fact that the refurbished museum was finished in time for the reopening. After Gryseels’ festive speech,

the floor was given to Billy Kalonji, chair of the Comraf (Comité de Concertation Musée Royal de L'Afrique Centrale - Associations Africaines; the Advisory Board for the Africa Museum, the African Associations). As a voice for the African communities in and out of Africa and the (Belgian) diaspora, Kalonji repeated Ghandi's words, which he had used repeatedly in the media over the previous year: 'that which is done for us but without us, is in fact done against us'. It was his subtle reference to the fact that in the last year of preparations for the reopening, the negotiations between the museum and the Comraf largely failed and were disrupted, ending in silence between both parties. The overall atmosphere at the opening, however, was one of excitement and reconciliation.

Outside, activists were protesting. They were wearing t-shirts stating 'Not my Africa Museum', and some of them had their hands painted red, symbolizing the blood that was shed in the Belgian Kongo. Some of the activists made it into the museum easily, as they had received an official invitation for the opening. This illustrates the open-mindedness of the museum; inside, they knew very well who was opposed to the reopening, yet they did not fail to invite these 'voices'. This made for unexpected moments, for example, when one of the curators and one of the activists were having a friendly chat in an exhibition hall. And why not? It's a small world of academics, curators, and activists that interpret issues of decolonization and repatriation for mainstream media and the public, and their opinions do not always differ greatly. On the other hand, I do not want to diminish or silence the more angry voices, which no longer wish to collaborate with the museum, or, from the other side, the rare advocate of African Art with a capital A, who still believes that working with African communities is unnecessary. However, this, too, is not a black-and-white history of Afrodescendants 'against' white defenders of the museum: among the activists were several white Belgians, while high-ranking personnel of African descent have been working inside the museum for a long time. Does this mean that the promised 'decolonization' is finally taking shape? Will a 'true' decolonization finally appear?

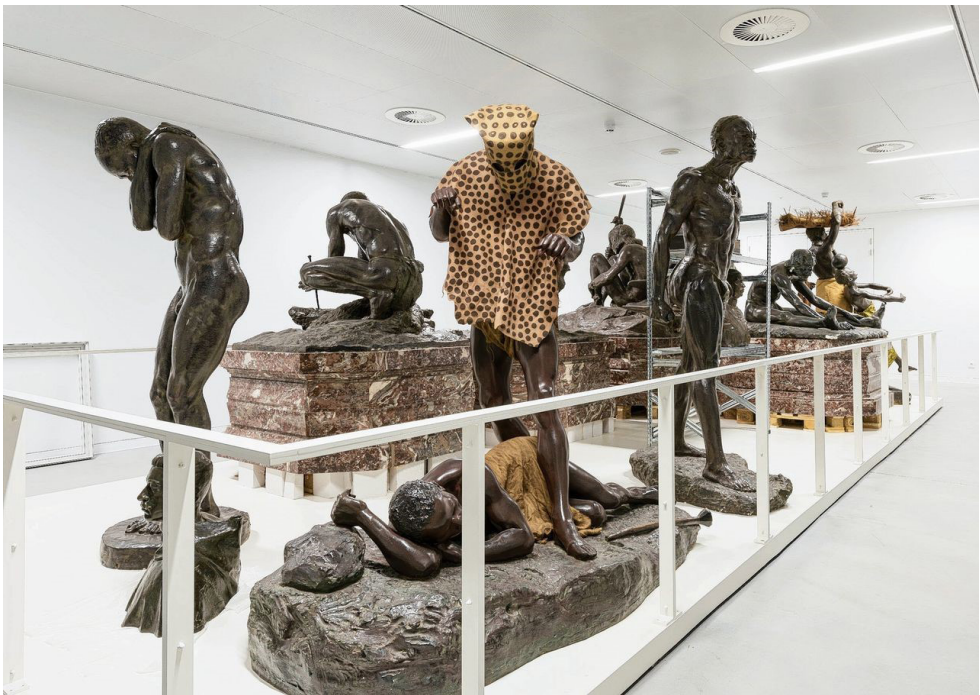


Illustration 1. The 'Leopard Man' (Les Aniota) and other heavily contested and disputed bronze sculptures, seen upon entry in the new museum: or the contextualization of the former museum's racist imagery (copyright Royal Museum for Central Africa-Tervuren, Jo Van De Vijver)

What is crucial in these discussions is that there is dialogue between the parties involved. And that is often lacking. Imagery and representation of non-European art—and, thus, also people—is inextricably linked with power differentials that are inherently embedded in these controlling processes. For the Africa Museum, it is important to investigate such possible pitfalls and opportunities, as 'the last colonial museum' or 'the last cabinet of curiosities' has reopened. What precisely has been done during the five-year closure? What can other institutions learn from this one?



Illustration 2. Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, Réorganisation (2002), Chéri Samba

Colonial Architecture

The renovation of the museum building is finished. It was executed by Stéphane Beel Architects and was paid for by the Federal Government, costing 75 million Euro. The entry to the museum is a new glass building, physically removed from the heavily contested and iconic historical museum building, which is classified as cultural heritage. The public now enters the main museum underground, via a long 'white gallery' corridor in which the first object is exhibited - a long canoe of the Lengola people of DRC. Still underground but upward towards the old museum building, we enter an exhibition space that reflects on collecting and collection history and, remarkably, via a narrow passageway, we see an annex where some of the previously most heavily contested and disputed bronze sculptures are presented. This space functions as some sort of cavern in the history of 'looking at The Other'.

The fact that the space is more or less hidden from view in a small annex works precisely as it should: the visitor is attracted to this narrow passageway that reveals glimpses of, for example, the infamous 'Leopard Man', also known as 'Les Aniota'. Such representations exemplify racist imagery and representation—of Congo as a place of aggression, murder,

witchcraft and irrational behavior—a place, clearly, that needed to be civilized. This is also how these sculptures are contextualized: with text, film, and also, in the case of the 'Leopard Man', with a painting by contemporary Congolese artist Chéri Samba, 'Musée de l'Afrique Centrale, Réorganisation'. Created in 2002, the painting openly criticizes the statue. In the painting, we see a group of Afrodescendants dragging the statue of a leopard man disguised in leopard skin attire and attacking a victim out of the museum, while a group of museum personnel attempts to drag the statue back into the museum. In the background, arms crossed, Guido Gryseels views the spectacle. In the back, also, the stuffed elephant, the other 'mascot' of the museum, is shown. The painting and the bronze statues are shown to visitors prior to entering the old museum building in order to create awareness of previous racist ways of looking at Africa.

Balancing between renovation and innovation proves to be a more difficult exercise one floor up, within the historical building. Inside the stately old rooms, one marvels at the splendor of the now restored murals of 1910 that show idealized scenery of African landscapes; the historical maps of Central Africa, covering the high-ceilinged walls; and the beautiful garlands that frame the colossal wall paintings. The original museum, which was designed by architect Charles Girault, was built for the glorification of King Leopold II and his 'successful' colonization of the Kongo. It is a heritage that proves hard to excise. As Guido Gryseels has repeatedly stated in the press, Leopold II even had his initials engraved 45 times in the building. The museum building is classified and thus protected state property. Thus, Leopold's initials had to stay, as did the four shiny and golden statues in the rotunda (the former entry to the museum) that indisputably exalt the Belgian colonization of Kongo. These statues have titles such as 'Belgium Brings Civilization to Kongo' and 'Belgium Brings Justice to Kongo'. The names of 1,600 Belgian pioneer colonizers in the Kongo who died 'for the fatherland' engraved in one of the marble walls also had to remain untouched. It is out of this relative impossibility of 'decolonizing' this 'temple of colonization' that creative solutions were sought. The new entry to the old building is one such solution. Through a frame, a sort of 'window', on the first floor of the new building, one can see the old building, as in a picture frame, or as if it were a painting. This is the intent of the museum. Visitors look at the historical building as 'the first collection piece.' The building is a remnant, an artefact of a bygone era. The question is whether visitors will see it like that.

Moving from one exhibition hall to the next, one discovers the ethnography of Central Africa (highlighted in showcases by an abundance of masks and statues); then a hall focusing on oral tradition, language, and music; and then the natural resources, minerals and biodiversity. The latter are flanked by the public's favourites which now stand tall again, the stuffed animals: the elephant, the giraffe, the okapis, a mountain gorilla, lions, and so on. Also, as in the former incarnation of the museum, glass boxes showcase beautiful butterflies from Congo and, scattered throughout, jars stuffed with snakes and smaller rodents as well as animal embryos in formaldehyde. The oldest diorama inside the museum, containing stuffed crocodiles, is back in its former spot, central in the 'butterfly room'. Many other dioramas did not return.

What surfaces most while walking through the renewed museum is that there is no consistency between the exhibition halls. The 'Ethnography Hall', covering rituals and ceremonies, is, like several other galleries, stuffed with material culture and art, but contextualized with text, photo, and film, on life-size screens, with contemporary Congolese men and women testifying of contemporary issues surrounding life and death, as well as other topics. Similarly, the hall covering 'Oral Tradition, Language, and Music' presents objects related to the arts, such as musical instruments, as well as contemporary voices for context. Yet, a bit further on, where the arts as a theme are highlighted, the showcases are stuffed with 'high tribal art' lacking any further context. The only available information in this hall relates to 'materials and techniques' or 'the artist'. Nothing is mentioned about contemporary issues relating to these objects. This is an 'Art Hall' in the strictest sense of the word, in which the lack of context is made up for by 'the aura' of the 'artwork'. In such an outdated presentation, the 'tribal artwork' is there to please those unfamiliar with the culture, in a reply to tastes and desires.

A Museum Of And For African People?



Illustration 3. 'Belgium Brings Civilization to Kongo', original statue by Arsène Matton (copyright Royal Museum for Central Africa-Tervuren, Jo Van De Vijver)

It is remarkable that a museum dedicated to the African continent and its people reopens in 2018 and still showcases 'traditional' African Art in combination with stuffed animals such as lions and crocodiles. A new addition is the audiovisual material in some halls, such as film and video incorporating contemporary Congolese men and women explaining daily life, customs, and rituals; nevertheless, the emphasis is unmistakably on material culture and art. Housing one of the biggest collections worldwide of Central African Arts, it is not hard to stuff the museum once more with ritual objects from the region. But this strategy takes the focus away from what should really matter: providing a more nuanced image of the history of Africa, removing the museum's racist image, the discriminatory pedagogic project that it helped instill for over a century. For example, of the important work in Eastern Congo of Doctor Denis Mukwege, 2018 Nobel Peace Prize Winner, nothing is mentioned inside the museum, nor are any other important, hopeful stories. A tall, female robot serves to illustrate the corruption that is rampant in contemporary Congo. In Kinshasa today, this robot acts as a traffic controller at busy city intersections, as a way of fighting corruption among the police in Kinshasa, according to the short accompanying label.

Another glimpse of contemporary issues is in contemporary art additions. The problem of the 1,600 colonial Belgian names engraved in the marble wall, for example, has been creatively 'solved' by an artwork by Freddy Tshimba. On a window across from the engraved names, Tshimba now has the names of deceased Congolese men and women inscribed. That way, Gryseels explained in his opening speech, when the sun shines, the names of the Belgian colonialists are overshadowed by the names of the Congolese. It is a creative solution, if a questionable one. As one Afrodendant acquaintance commented while we were looking at the engraved names during the opening: 'but the sun never shines in Belgium'.

The most noticeable instance of contemporary art 'worked into' the colonial building is in the center of the rotunda, where artist Aimé Mpane has created a huge human head in the shape of Africa facing the shiny colonial golden statues that surround it. The label reads that it is positioned there precisely to 'confront' the derogatory and racist images around it. However, there is no explanation on this minuscule label of how exactly this 'African' head confronts the golden statues in the marble alcoves. Moreover, this artwork is not intrinsically strong enough to make that message clear without further explanation. What exactly is the criticism? *How* does this 'African' head resist the colonial sculptures next to it, in the alcoves and, by extension, in our heads?

Is the renewed museum, then, truly an art museum? Or a museum about the history of Central Africa? Or a museum about the colonization of Kongo? Or is it, rather, a museum about 'looking at The Other', in other words, a museum about Belgium and how white Belgians engage(d) with their former colony? Or is it a national history museum? One thing is clear: it certainly is not a museum of and for contemporary Congo, nor for Congolese people or African diaspora communities in Belgium.

Decolonization and Repatriation

After a closure of five years and a promise by the museum to 'decolonize', I see the cacophonous and inconsistent narrative as a missed opportunity for the museum to re-position itself and truly tackle its problematic history. The reopening is now mostly seen as a blueprint, a starting point for the long overdue rethinking of the institution's racist past, or its 'decolonization'. This partial and incomplete rethinking largely explains why members of the African diaspora in Belgium withdrew from the project in the year before the reopening. They seem to have lost their trust in the project. Indeed, this museum does not yet have a clear mission. How do its staff want to portray Africa? What image, or maybe better, what images, do its curators want to show? What do they want to teach audiences? Would an open confrontation between the now disparate exhibition halls provide the viewer with more perspectives regarding this complex matter? Are the many objects on view the silent witnesses of a bloodbath? These questions remain largely unanswered.

The objects do, however, tie in with the larger debates on property and ownership, as well as repatriation, a hot topic within contemporary anthropology and museology. Everywhere, the same question resurfaces: what to do with objects and human remains that were 'collected' in colonial contexts? In other words, what to do with war booty that was stolen in disruptive, violent ways? Other European nations provide models. Recently, a group of German experts drafted *Guidelines on Dealing with Collections from Colonial Contexts*. Human remains from several German museums have been repatriated to Namibia, Australia, and Hawaii. In France, President Macron ordered a study, executed by Felwine Sarr and Benedicte Savoy, entitled *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics*. Macron has also promised to return stolen art to Africa. A start has been made with the planned return of 26 thrones and statues of the former Kingdom of Dahomey, now the Republic of Benin. In Belgium, Foreign Affairs Minister Didier Reynders called the reopening of the Africa Museum in Tervuren an 'important moment' for cultural heritage from Africa, adding that 'physical repatriation is only one of the possibilities'. And, 'the process has to be an open one' (*De Standaard* 27/09/2018, my translation); however, Belgium has encountered obstacles which impact the decolonization of the museum in Tervuren.

Human remains form a first obstacle. *De Standaard* newspaper published an open letter on 27 September, 2018, by Bamco-Cran, an African Diaspora Association in Brussels. In that letter, Bamco-Cran made public that many human remains remain in museum collections in Belgium. In reply and in support to the letter by Bamco-Cran, a group of academics and museum professionals called for a mutual dialogue and positive cooperation. In this letter, also published in *De Standaard*, the group pleaded for moral as well as historical arguments in relation to repatriation, highlighting that Congolese people today have no access to their cultural heritage. The president of Bamco-Cran, Mme. Mireille Tsheusi-Robert, repeated her powerful words in the press several times: 'no decolonization without restitution' (my translation from French; in continental Europe, the term 'restitution' is preferred over 'repatriation'). Her words resonate with current decolonization and repatriation debates and confront the Tervuren Museum as fixed in time - a museum solely of art objects, stuffed animals, and minerals.

Provenance Research

True decolonization—a popular word these days, for which we have yet to come up with an exact definition—starts with research about where things come from and how they were obtained. For most looted objects in museums, hardly any collection information is available on original index cards or in other documents. This is no surprise, if we think about how most things were dragged out, in huge quantities, first as 'curiosities', then as 'high art'. For these items, and

for others brought out before the fall of the European empires, not much context was needed. Objects were exchanged, traded, bought, or very often stolen. There are certainly objects in museums whose histories are more dubious than others. Today, provenance research offers an important tool for decolonizing such contested materials. Such research traces where an artefact comes from and how it was acquired; moreover, it prescribes transparency about these facts in accompanying text, film, and video. For most museums, it is impossible to suddenly provide correct provenance research for all their objects. Collections are simply too big, with information lacking for many pieces. Nevertheless, more case by case provenance research is needed.

In the Africa Museum in Tervuren, some curators and researchers are doing excellent provenance research, which suggests that the museum is critical of its own position. An instance where the museum's critical stance, or, rather, the critical stance of one of its curators, is made clear is in the hall on rituals and ceremonies, where one showcase is deliberately kept empty. The accompanying text panel reads that the funerary items that were meant to be displayed in the case are not shown in order to create awareness of the desecration of graves. It resembles strongly the instant at the Museum of Modern Art in New York where, for the infamous *Primitivism* exhibition of 1984, one case remained empty. As James Clifford (1988) reported, the case was left that way because contemporary Zuni people had protested the planned exhibition of one of their *war gods*, a loan from the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin, which was intended to illustrate its influence on Paul Klee's 1932 painting, *Mask of Fear*.

Yet the complexities that arise at the Tervuren museum as a result of the inconsistent critical self-reflection, the partial contextualization of objects and the frequent lack of visible provenance information are illustrated by a sculpture in the exhibition. Maarten Couttenier, an anthropologist working at the Tervuren museum, addressed the complexities of this sculpture's origins in an article on the history of this well-known *nkondi*, formerly referred to as a 'fetish' (2018). Its collector was Alexandre Delcommune, a Belgian officer of the Force Publique at the time of the Kongo Free State and a trader in rubber and ivory. He participated in a confrontation between Leopold's troops and local chiefs in 1878 in Kikuku, near Boma. After his men raged through the villages and set them on fire, chasing away the last remaining residents, Delcommune found the *nkondi* statue left in the bush. Knowing that this was one of the most important and powerful images for the area, he took it with him. To find this kind of detailed information, Couttenier had to delve into Delcommune's memoirs, which were published posthumously in 1922. Because of Couttenier's in-depth research, we also know that a descendant of the chief to whom the statue originally belonged, Baku Kapita Alphonse, who today lives in Boma, wants his property back. This kind of careful and prolonged study is a lot of work, but it is not impossible; it is a fine example of good provenance research, which reveals the colonial histories of objects and their continuing influence into the present.

The only problem is that this *nkondi*-statue, labelled as EO.0.0.7943, is exhibited in the renewed 'Art Hall' of the museum, without all of this crucial information. It is exhibited as a masterpiece, which is a dubious term in itself, infused by the aura of monetary value surrounding the tribal art market. As such, this powerful object is exhibited merely for the enjoyment of our eyes and souls, to admire it in its grotesque, expressionistic beauty and power. We gain no knowledge of its painful history and the continuing conflict over its ownership.

Exhibited in the same hall is a famous Luba female figure attributed by Franz Olbrechts to 'The Master of Buli' and other iconic works of art. This old-fashioned way of looking at African art, parallel to the cluttered masses in the former cabinets of curiosity, ignores much of the research of Couttenier and others at the museum. This is another inconsistency that mars the institution's decolonization efforts.

If we zoom out internationally, it is very clear that the institution's efforts are limited and extremely cautious. In the USA, Canada, the UK, Australia, and Aotearoa New Zealand, museums have for decades worked with source communities whose historical objects they hold (Peers and Brown 2003). From these museums, human remains and objects have been restored to their original homes. Sometimes, communities propose creative solutions, such as the practice of 'propatriation', in which an old object in a museum, imbued with meaning and history, is replaced by a newly made one. The old object is then returned to the community. For example, several totem poles from the American Northwest Coast have been returned to the descendants of the original owners and communities, replaced by newly made totem poles in such museums



Illustration 4. EO.0.0.7943 (copyright Royal Museum for Central Africa-Tervuren, Plusj)

and culture are best kept in museums for consultation by future generations. However, this fact does not constitute permission for European institutions to do nothing. Many objects were stolen, and many people do want their material culture and art returned, not only because these objects are of monetary worth, but also because of their inherent cultural value. That is why we need dialogue and positive cooperation, as well as more provenance research. Staff who can set new models in place are already present at Tervuren. Next to Couttenier's important work, I think of Hein Vanhee, historian and curator at the museum, and specifically of his 2016 article in *African Arts*, 'On Shared Heritage and Its (False) Promises'. This kind of constructive research is essential to museum work. With the reopening, the Africa Museum in Tervuren, and more broadly, Belgium, has a chance to take action and thoroughly research its collection. Only then will it be able to transform its careful blueprint of a decolonized museum into a more ambitious and successful exercise.

Let me conclude with the strongest image I came across in these discussions - an ice-sculpture of Leopold II on horseback by artist, activist, and Ph.D. researcher Laura Nsengiyumva. It provides some necessary humor and emotion while at the same time a harsh critique. While he is standing there, Leopold melts in front of visitors' eyes. If negotiations between the Africa Museum and Nsengiyumva had not been aborted, this sculpture would have melted during the opening of the museum. Seen as too controversial and insulting to the royal family, however, it never made it to the opening. Instead, Leopold melted away during *Nuit Blanche*, an annual art festival held in Brussels, while he continues to be a prominent part of the historical narrative at the museum.

as the Peabody Museum at Harvard University (Moore 2010). In the USA, moreover, processes for requests for the repatriation of human remains and burial objects have been formalized since 1990, in NAGPRA, the Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act. The current Africa Museum suggests that Belgium has long been behind in these discussions, but the call for repatriation, or restitution, resonates here too, with members of the African diaspora and younger generations of Afrodescendants raising their voices.

Conclusion: Towards Action

The present incarnation of Tervuren reminds us of often expressed fears of losing colonial artefacts and histories. Yet, curators, dealers, and art collectors do not need to be afraid that 'their' museums and art galleries will be 'empty' any time soon. Not all Afrodescendants want to repossess their property. Some Afrodescendants and members of the African diaspora agree that the objects of their history



Illustration 5. PeoPL, by Laura Nsengiyumva (copyright De Standaard, Bea Borgers)

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Note

- ¹ Throughout this article, I will use the name of the nation appropriate to the time period being discussed.

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