2.
THE GREAT HERITAGE MIGRATION

At the end of 2016, rain and strong wind made for bleak weather in Berlin. When, at the boulevard Unter den Linden, I unexpectedly saw banners pointing to an exhibition on German colonialism, my curiosity was immediately sparked. I was not the only one. Upon entering the monumental Deutsches Historisches Museum, I found it was crowded and it was noticeable that many visitors lingered at information boards, illustrations and objects. The exhibition designers had created a separate section for objects with 'problematic origins'. There was looted art from Namibia and other German colonial regions, which I had heard about before. What I saw on an old black and white TV set was new: a film fragment from *Starke Freunde im fernen Osten* (Strong friends in the Far East), from the East German studio DEFA, about the 1955 visit of Otto Grotewohl, East Germany's first Prime Minister, to the People's Republic of China.

China had never been completely colonised, but it had suffered greatly from the expansion of the European colonial powers. From around 1850, they had been occupying Chinese port cities and imposing unequal trade treaties on the country. The Chinese leaders and people were not keen on the European traders, collectors and missionaries, and regularly revolted. One well-known uprising was that of the anti-Western secret society *Yi-he-quan* – the Righteous and Harmonious Fists, known in the West as the Boxers – who led a rebellion between 1899 and 1901. However, fighting with bare fists, lances and knives, the 50,000 to 100,000 rebels were no match for the better-armed soldiers of the Eight-Nation Alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary, France, Italy, Japan, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States. When the uprising was put down, the Western

armies plundered on an unprecedented scale. Some of the loot was given to the leaders of their countries, while individual soldiers and other Westerners also took their shot. Among the items that ended up in the possession of the German Kaiser Wilhelm II were battle flags and parts of a Yongle encyclopaedia from the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644).

In order to strengthen his ties with China, Grotewohl carried ten battle flags and the encyclopaedia volumes. They had been 'looted by German imperialists', he told his Chinese host, Premier Zhou Enlai, and he was now returning them. Germany had captured 190 flags at the time. Grotewohl could only return ten because 180 had been destroyed by fire after Allied bombing raids on Berlin in 1945. 'During the colonial era, many objects were stolen', Grotewohl says in the film clip, continuing, 'we don't want to have anything to do with that any more. There should be no stolen objects in our museums'. To which Zhou Enlai replies: 'The day everything comes back is not far off.' The handover took place in a full stadium and when a smiling Zhou Enlai started waving one of the flags, the audience applauded loudly. It was a unique gesture for the time. But what is the situation like now, almost seventy years later?

This film clip might be dismissed as red propaganda, which of course it was, but the exhibition makers also used it to show the perspective of colonised peoples. And that was relatively new.

THE PAIN OF LOSS

It was not just 1900 that was traumatic for China. So was 1860. Between 7 and 9 October that year, as the Second Opium War (1856–1860) was ending, British and French soldiers had plundered the Yuanmingyuan Summer Palace in Beijing, where the Qing government was based, and taken away countless treasures or, if they could not carry them or get them off the walls, had broken or smashed them. Villagers from the vicinity of the capital had also looted, albeit mostly smaller pieces. Estimated totals ranged from one million to one and a half million items, including treasures that symbolised the power of China's rulers. The first auction took place near the palace on 10 October. When the loot was shipped to Europe, many pieces were auctioned there. In 1861 and 1862, seventeen auctions took place in London and eleven in Paris (Howald, 'The Power of Provenance', 2019, pp. 260–265). The country still experiences such losses as humiliating and some of this loot is at the top of the list of objects China wants back (Liu, *Repatriating China's Cultural Objects*, 2016, p. 20).

China is not exceptional in this regard. In appropriating religious and ceremonial objects from distant colonial possessions, Europeans were seldom concerned about what this meant for local sovereigns and peoples. That these losses mattered for local leaders and inhabitants right from the start can be seen, for example, in sixteenth-century chronicles of the Aztecs in present-day Mexico. Upon the arrival of Hernán Cortés and his men in 1519, Emperor Motecuhzoma and his nobles did what they always did: show hospitality and do as their guests asked. When Cortés asked questions about the state treasury, the emperor took him to the treasury building. As soon as they were inside, the Spaniards handcuffed Motecuhzoma and took out everything that glittered and shone. In a letter to Emperor Charles v, Cortés described the captured banners, woven from the feathers of birds of paradise, gold and silver objects and precious stones. From the banners his men tore the jade stones, gold and silver. The Aztecs looked on, bewildered and bereft (Zantwijk, *Azteekse kronieken*, 1992, pp. 98–99). The most beautiful objects went to Europe. The precious metal that remained was melted down to make gold and silver ingots.

From later in the sixteenth century, a letter has been preserved, signed by the Quechua nobleman Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala. (The Quechua are a people in present-day Peru.) The epistle, dating from around 1565, runs to almost 1,200 pages, including 400 drawings, and is full of early anti-colonial criticism. Guamán Poma wrote to King Philip III of Spain about how the conquistadors and missionaries treated the inhabitants of the Andes: land grabbing, forced labour, preying on precious metals and prohibiting traditional religion. According to him, these practices had destroyed the Inca empire and its rich traditions. Guamán Poma, who was himself a Roman Catholic, defended the traditional religion of the Incas. Although it is uncertain whether his writing ever reached the Spanish monarch, it has remained an authoritative document concerning respect for the life and customs of the Incas and criticism of the Spanish conquest.

The disappearance of important collections and pieces from long-ago colonial times still provokes a great deal of emotion – loss, pain, anger, and, on return, joy. On seeing the Africa collection in the new ethnological Musée du quai Branly in Paris in 2006, Mali's culture minister Aminata Traoré said, 'Vous nous manquez terriblement' (We miss you

A look at the AfricaMuseum's depot in Tervuren. © AfricaMuseum, Tervuren

terribly) (Traoré, *Nos œuvres d'art*, 2006). Indonesia visibly rejoiced in 1975 at the return of an old and extremely precious statue, the Prajñaparamita, and again in 2020 when it recovered the kris of its national hero, Prince Diponegoro. The seriousness and weight of such returns is clearly seen among delegations from the Māori or Aboriginal peoples who have come to collect ancestral remains from museums in Europe in recent years. According to researcher Emiline Smith of Glasgow University, the emotion extends to people of all walks of life: 'When I was talking to an older man in the Raja Ampat Islands in Papua, he asked me what I did for a living. "I am a criminologist," I said, "specialising in the antiquities and wildlife trade in Asia." He nodded understandingly and added: "So, like the skulls and objects that have been taken from us." The man mentioned carvings, musical instruments and religious objects. He stressed how he would appreciate it if "everything came back". That would mean that "I and the community would feel whole again"', as Smith told me.

That pain, loss and anger live on in China, Mali, Mexico, Peru, Papua and many other places.

MASSIVE FLOW

The AfricaMuseum in Tervuren has vast underground storage facilities. When I walked through there in the 1990s, I could not believe my eyes: huge stocks of masks, shields, spears and other objects, most of them – coming to around 80,000 items – from DR Congo. It did not stop there. How had they got here? There were far too many to ever exhibit. Less than 10 per cent will ever surface. Researchers can also manage with less. What very hungry caterpillars had thought of this? And this was only a part of what had come to Belgium from the old colony. Other museums, as well as many private individuals in the country, are also richly endowed. Museums in Germany, France, Great Britain, Hungary, Croatia, the Netherlands, Norway, the United States, Sweden and Switzerland also have extensive Congo collections.

The same is true for the number of objects from the Dutch East Indies. Countless of them have come our way. The National Museum of World Cultures alone has 120,000 of them. The Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, the military Museum Bronbeek in Arnhem and many other museums also possess large numbers, and when the relatively small Museum Nusantara in Delft closed its doors in 2013, it had to find a new home for thousands of objects from the archipelago. Colonial collections from Indonesia can

be found in many other countries in Europe and North America. There are so many that Indonesia has let it be known several times that, even if the Netherlands wanted to return them all, it would not want all the colonial collections back – it would saddle itself with a huge problem, as it simply has no room for them. Implicitly, this former colony exposes Europe's greed.

It is not easy to discern general patterns in this massive stream of objects, ancestral remains and archives. Europe's expansion into new continents and the subsequent collection of cultural, historical, religious and utilitarian objects started at different times. In Latin America it was around 1500, in Asia, around 1600. The real breakthrough in Africa came after the Berlin Conference (1884–1885), when European powers divided the continent among themselves. Spain and Portugal had already lost much of their influence, while Belgium and Germany had yet to become colonial powers.

COLLECTING BOOM

However, in general, two periods can be distinguished in the way most European colonisers collected: the beginning of the colonisation and the later period, after the consolidation of their power. In the Dutch Republic, this first period coincided with the existence of the Dutch East India Company (hereafter, VOC, 1602–1798) and the Dutch West India Company (hereafter, WIC, 1621–1792). Upon arrival in a colonial area, entrepreneurs, sailors and others who sailed with them sought specimens of flora and fauna and crops such as spices, coffee, indigo and cane sugar. They needed them to survive over there or to make a profit back here. Later, they started taking war trophies, 'exotica', and ancestral remains with them. In those days it was mainly for their own use or pleasure, as we know for instance from Jan Albert Sichterman (1692–1764), VOC administrator in Bengal. He owned a villa in the city of Groningen where he displayed his collection. Others who came back to the Republic sold items to private individuals, for there were no museums in those days. Well-known collectors included physician Bernardus Paludanus (1550–1633) and Nicolaes Witsen (1641–1717), mayor of Amsterdam and VOC administrator.

After the VOC and WIC went bankrupt, the Republic took over the administration of the colonial possessions. It began to meddle in collecting activities, which were carried out on a larger scale. With a view to nation-building, museums were established in European countries. Often, they wanted as many 'exotic' objects as possible and competed fiercely with each other, calling in the help of colonial officials and mil-

itary personnel, businessmen, religious people, commercial agents and adventurers. Some issued instructions as to what they were after, specifying the names of regions and peoples. This led to an explosion in the taking of objects without consent or compensation.

It did not take long before the depots of the museums were overflowing: 'If anything else is added to the pile, things will start rotting no preservative will stop it.' Here, I quote the words of the director of Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden in 1895, recorded in a book by that museum about its own history. According to him, the storage space was becoming a 'rubbish heap' (Staal and De Rijk, *IN side OUT ON site IN*, 2003, pp. 34–35). His museum was no exception in Europe.

As Belgium was a relatively late coloniser, the two collecting periods more or less overlapped. The first period began in the mid-1870s. King Leopold ordered his men in the Congo Basin to collect objects from every people they subjugated. Fanatical collectors, such as the military men Emile Storms (1846–1918) and Oscar Michaux (1860–1918), and Alexandre Delcommune (1855–1922) who traded in ivory and rubber, amassed trophies and ancestral statues, often on the sly or after fights with local sovereigns. The ruler needed such pieces in Europe as proof of his power in Central Africa. After 1908, when King Leopold II transferred his Congo Free State to the Belgian state, this systematic, large-scale collecting continued.

OBJECTS ON DEMAND

Can one assert that all these acquisitions were looted? Or were there also objects in the piles that originated from, say, fair trade? Were there perhaps gifts among them? People offer different answers to these questions. Some emphasise the violent nature of colonialism and believe that almost everything that was moved here from colonial areas is tainted, improperly acquired and therefore looted. But this is going too far. Looking at the methods of acquisition, there is a whole spectrum of what might be considered acceptable or condemnable.

What were acceptable methods of acquiring objects? It is known that enterprising families on the coasts of West Africa, island groups in the Pacific and other colonies soon understood that people aboard European ships were interested in their statues, masks, shields and other objects – sometimes even skulls. The families were willing to exchange pieces that were superfluous to them, and they were happy to make new ones. Every

LEFT: *Afro-Portuguese table ornament. The armed horsemen on it are Portuguese. Ivory, Edo/Bini, kingdom of Benin (Nigeria), ca. 1520, donation Margriet Olbrechts-Maurissens, 1974. © Collectie Stad Antwerpen – MAS, picture by Michel Wuyts and Bart Huysman (AE.1974.0025.0001)* RIGHT: *Bini-Portuguese three-part saltshaker (lid missing), ivory, Bini-Portuguese, Nigeria/Benin City, sixteenth century, acquired in 1901. © National Museum of World Cultures Collection (RV-1323-1)*

community had skilled craftsmen. Sometimes they made exchanges on their own initiative: they built up a stock and stored it away for when Europeans came to visit.

On some occasions, craftsmen were commissioned. An example of this is provided by two pieces that are less than 100 miles apart but have rarely been exhibited together: one in the MAS in Antwerp and one in Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden. The MAS describes its piece as a sixteenth-century Afro-Portuguese ivory table vessel for pepper and salt, Museum Volkenkunde speaks of a saltcellar. According to Els De Palmenaer, Africa curator in Antwerp, it 'testifies to the barter and

the initially favourable diplomatic relations between Portugal and the kingdom of Benin' (Palmenaer, *100 x Congo*, 2020, p. 16). Craftsmen in the kingdom of Benin in Nigeria had carved it to the taste of their Portuguese patrons. The Leiden museum mentions explicitly that the Beninese do not use this sort of objects themselves. The same applies to much Chinese porcelain. That too was made for the European market. Some plates and bowls even have Christian saints painted with Chinese features. Generally, the craftsmen were paid in cash or with iron tools and other European products. Often, this enterprise went well, and colonial authorities kept an eye on things.

LOOT

When it comes to condemnable acquisitions, one thinks first of spoils of war. During and after violent confrontations battle flags, ceremonial weapons, royal badges of honour and other trophies have been taken. There are plenty of examples: palace loot from Beijing (1860, 1900), Asante gold jewellery, weapons, fabrics and masks taken by British soldiers (1874), King Béhanzin's treasures, which were confiscated by French soldiers (1892), Benin objects captured by British soldiers (1897) and numerous relics from Tibet reappropriated by British army members (1903–1904).

The best documented capture by the Netherlands took place in 1894. Dutch and Indonesian writers mostly agree on the course of events. Colonial troops fought for months against the ruler of Mataram on the island of Lombok. It was hand-to-hand combat, in which even women and children participated, and resulted in huge carnage. In some families there were twenty or thirty dead. Afterwards, according to the Dutch Ewald Vanvugt (*Schatten van Lombok*, 1994, p. 44) and the Indonesian Wahyu Ernawati of the Museum Nasional of Indonesia ('The Lombok Treasure', 2005, p. 154), colonial troops razed the prince's palace to the ground and, in addition to destroying or burning his furniture, mirrors and other ornaments, they took 230 kg of gold and 7,000 kg of silver objects, including golden crowns, rings set with rubies, brilliants and sapphires, the gilded and silvered anklets, as well as centuries-old manuscripts. Many were transported to the Netherlands, where the objects ended up in museums, and damaged coins were melted down into blocks in the Rijksmunt in Utrecht.

The Dutch also obtained trophies and other loot during the Java War (1825–1830), military operations in Bali and Lombok (1840–1908), the Aceh Wars (1873) and other violent clashes.

Ornaments from the Lombok treasure captured in 1894, Indonesia). © National Museum of World Cultures Collection (RV-4905-75, RV-2364-300, RV-2364-0-15)

From the 1870s, when King Leopold II began to establish his authority in the Congo Basin, many wars were waged. At that time too, countless trophies and other loot were brought in. Such objects ended up in private collections and in museums, especially in that in Tervuren.

There is no unanimity among museums in the Netherlands and Belgium as to the extent of looted art in their collections. There are some indications, but these mainly show what the collections looked like around 1900. According to historian Maarten Couttenier of the AfricaMuseum, 3,000 of the 7,500 objects the museum owned at the time were 'war-related' – almost 40 per cent (*Congo tentoongesteld*, 2005, p. 198). This is far more than the 883 objects that Thomas Dermine, the Federal State Sec-

Did local rulers voluntarily hand these lances over to Governor-General J.C. Baud or was it done under pressure? Rijksmuseum Amsterdam (NG-BR-554). © Jos van Beurden

retary for Science Policy, admitted in June 2021 were acquired by theft, force or as spoils of war. In the case of the Museum Volkenkunde, Ger van Wengen ('Indonesian collections', 2002, p. 100) calculated that of the 36,000 objects from Indonesia owned by the museum around 1900, between 2,500 and 3,000 were the result of military operations – that is, 7 to 8 per cent.

Some staff members claim that their museum has relatively little looted art. Four to five per cent perhaps, estimated the former head of collections at Museum Volkenkunde, Pieter ter Keurs, in the Leiden student magazine *Mare* of 21 March 2019. It was a percentage that did not worry him, he added. I have a problem with that. The museum's Indonesia collection contains 120,000 items. Four or five per cent of that amounts to around 5,000 looted pieces. What does that mean to the descendants of those from whom those pieces were once taken? Ter Keurs is not the only one who is unconcerned and I wonder on what these employees base their claim that the quantity of loot in museum collections is not all that bad? Are they perhaps calculating for themselves (less looted art = less of a headache = less to be returned)? Many museums have hardly any idea whether they have war booty in their collections. Only a few have carried out serious search (Raad voor Cultuur, *Advies*, 2020, p. 39). In

this respect, the National Museum of World Cultures has, for instance, a completed study on the provenance of its Benin collection.

ENFORCED DONATIONS

Other condemnable methods of acquisition include smuggling, confiscation by missionaries and certain donations. Yes, donations – for example, those made by local sovereigns and dignitaries to colonial administrators and soldiers in the Dutch East Indies. Every time I enter the Netherlands Overseas hall of the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, a rack with thirteen lances draws my attention. According to the caption, most were 'a gift from Javanese royalty' to Governor-General J.C. Baud. After the extremely bloody Java War, this highest-ranking colonial official had made an inspection tour of the island to see if everything was peaceful. Along the route, local princes had given him a lance 'as a token of their (enforced) loyalty to the Dutch government', the captions adds. Officially, therefore, a lance was a gift, but one that had been 'enforced'. Apparently, the museum also wonders whether these really were voluntary gifts. Or was the status of the lances somewhere between a gift made against the donor's will and a trophy for the victor?

Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden also contains such donations. These include krisses from Bali, which came into Dutch hands in the second half of the nineteenth century. Some were clearly war booty, others donated by local rulers. According to curator Francine Brinkgreve ('Balinese Rulers', 2005, p. 122), the latter indicate the 'friendly relations' that existed at the time between coloniser and colonised. But how friendly and free can relations be in a situation of almost permanent violence and structural inequality?

COLLECTING EXPEDITIONS AND MISSIONARY COLLECTING

Then there are objects that scientists and collectors acquired on expeditions. Some expeditions occurred at the request of governments or museums, others were the initiatives of explorers or entrepreneurs. The latter often had good connections with the large museums in Europe and provided them with, for example, mummies from the Andes or large quantities of ethnographic material from island groups in the Pacific Ocean. Ship captains, traders and members of expeditions ensured a steady supply of objects; they also dealt with European countries that did not have their own colonial possessions. Sometimes they exchanged

them for European goods, sometimes they committed gross atrocities or used tricks to get them. In West and Central Africa, traders and collectors could get in each other's way. Some played museums in Europe off against each other and negotiated high prices. Agents of the Nieuwe Afrikaansche Handelsvennootschap (New African Trade Company) in Rotterdam, founded in 1880, made good money collecting objects from nearby factories and plantations for palm oil, palm kernels and rubber in the Congo and Liberia.

Historian Joost Willink discovered how, at the end of the nineteenth century, one of these trading agents took objects from the huts of villagers in DR Congo who had escaped violence. Because they were authentic and used, the agent could negotiate a higher price. Whether the displaced villagers had given their consent was not his concern (Willink, *Bewogen verzamelgeschiedenis*, 2006, p. 204).

The collections of missionary institutions are a story of their own. Looking with horror at the religion of the Aztecs, Mayas, Incas and other peoples of South America, the fanatical Roman Catholic Spaniards destroyed impressive temples and built churches on the ruins. Countless religious objects, mummies and codices disappeared in the fires. They melted down gold and silver statues of gods, while transporting what they considered to be the best ones to Europe. In Asia and Africa, Christianisation rarely took place differently. The result was large-scale destruction of objects – a centuries-long iconoclasm – and shipment of hundreds of thousands of objects to Europe. Wole Soyinka, Nigerian Nobel Prize winner for Literature in 1986, can hardly forgive the Europeans for ruining African spiritual life (Soyinka, *Burden of Memory*, 1999, p. 52).

Also among the objects shipped were crucifixes and statues of Jesus's mother Mary, made by local craftsmen, which ended up on the mantelpiece of a family member in Belgium or the Netherlands. More authentic objects came to museums and the depots of religious institutions. Another portion was transferred to ethnographic museums. There, they take up shelf after shelf, space after space, and often no one knows any more who made them, where they came from, what they were used for and how they got here. Only the lucky ones endure a second-hand life in a display case in the hall. Most lie in the darkness of the depots waiting for… Yes, waiting for what?

GRADUAL TURNAROUND

Because of the massive and often enforced migration of cultural heritage to Europe, it was inevitable that former colonies would ask for its return after gaining their independence. Upon its formal independence in 1949, Indonesia put this question on the agenda of its negotiations with the Netherlands. And even before Congo became independent in 1960, Congolese leaders were asking for their heritage to be returned. But, coming so soon after their separation, relations between former colonies and former colonisers were too fraught to come to fruitful negotiations.

That improved somewhat in the decades that followed. During the Cold War, the Netherlands and Indonesia and Belgium and DR Congo were in the same camp. Some newly independent countries managed to persuade their former colonisers to sign a restitution agreement. As will be explained later, Belgium and the Netherlands did so, but showed little generosity. This was an extremely slow, creeping decolonisation of colonial collections. In Germany, attempts to start a discussion about restitution were slowed down by several parties, as Savoy proves throughout her book *Afrikas Kampf* (2021). The same was the case in Great Britain. It was only at the end of the last century that moves started to be made.

How this change was brought about requires an explanation. The end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 loosened the ties between former colonies and former colonisers that had been in the same Cold War camps. Budgets for international cooperation decreased. The new countries wanted to be more self-sufficient, less dependent on former colonisers. In their desire to regain their objects, they received a push from an unexpected quarter: from Eastern Europe. There, after 1989, families began demanding back the land, houses, factories and works of art that had been taken from them during the Communist era. This in turn inspired Jewish and other families to claim their works of art, which had been looted by the Nazis. This news likewise made its way to leaders of former colonies.

In addition, some European economies were weakening, while other countries that had suffered under colonialism were becoming more powerful global players. China and South Korea, which had both lost significant collections in the colonial period, began to pursue more vigorous cultural and restitution policies and to strengthen their museum infrastructure. Other countries began to operate more independently of Europe. Senegal, for example, built its Museum of Black Civilisations

(opened in 2018) thanks to a Chinese donation, and DR Congo received a new museum thanks to money from South Korea (opened in 2019). Countries like Nigeria and the Republic of Benin are turning to governments in Europe for new museums, where they want to exhibit returned objects. The governments of countries in East and Southeast Asia are encouraging the construction of regional museums. As in Africa, some museums develop independently of European influences. In 2014, at a meeting in Yogyakarta, I met representatives of smaller museums from Southeast Asia who, as free as possible of Western interference, are building their own collections and thus presenting their own view of their history and culture.

Crucial to this change is a shift in ethical thinking among many Western heritage institutions and professionals. Museums still have curators who see themselves more as 'hunters' who must expand and protect their 'prey', the collection, from the evil southern outside world, rather than as 'guardians' whose eyes are open to the society in which they operate and the interests of communities of origin. But these hunters now have new colleagues who have a new attitude and who often are people of colour. These curators make a case for the decolonisation of the collections. Due to increased mobility and the Internet revolution, cooperation between the Global South and North is more intensive, making it more visible collections in the North are abundantly available, while much less so in the South.

ROLE OF DIASPORA ORGANISATIONS

Some people consider countrymen with roots in the Global South to be post-war migrants. But their presence cannot be seen in isolation from a common colonial history, and thus it is not surprising that they become involved in the restitution debate (Sanghera, *Empireland*, 2021, p. 73). People with roots in Namibia and Tanzania, coming together in *Berlin Postkolonial*, are pushing for the repatriation of skulls from Germany. Early in 2019, French people of West African descent, organised in *Afrique Loire*, interrupted an auction in the city of Nantes to prevent the sale of twenty-seven pieces of war booty from the Republic of Benin. All objects have gone back to the West African country. Late in 2019, the *Legacy of Slavery Working Party* at Jesus College, Cambridge University became a force urging the return of a bronze Benin cockerel, acquired in 1905 by the father of a student, to Nigeria.

Such activities also take place in the Netherlands and Belgium. Sometimes the involvement of diaspora organisations is not very visible; sometimes it is accompanied by a lot of noise. The latter was the case on 10 September 2020, when Congolese Frenchman Mwazulu Diyabanza of the pan-African group *Yanka Nku* (*Unité, Dignité et Courage*) walked out of the Africa Museum in Berg en Dal near Nijmegen carrying a Congolese grave statue. According to him, it came from his own family's estate. Fellow activists livestreamed his arrest as he was taken away in a police van. Possibly a museum employee had shouted something like 'Stop, thief!', because the film showed the stylish, black-clad Mwazulu turn around, pointing and shouting, 'Vous êtes les voleurs!' ('You are the thieves!'). It also showed how a policeman took the statue away from him in a somewhat crude manner. Was the policeman perhaps unaware of its value? Would he have been more careful if it had been a Rubens or Rembrandt painting?

In an interview for the Dutch Radio-1 programme *Met het Oog op Morgen*, presenter Coen Verbraak asked me for an explanation of the robbery. Diyabanza was not talking about theft, I argued, it was a cry of despair. He wants 'the thieves' to hurry up and return their loot. It is as if he was telling the museums: you still don't realise what you've done, to whom all these objects actually belong and where they belong. Don't wait too long to give back what is ours. Meanwhile, a police judge has sentenced him and his helpers to a fine. Diyabanza had already 'collected' a sculpture in Paris and Marseille, visited the *100 x Congo* exhibition in the MAS in Antwerp with the Belgian magazine *MO**, and led demonstrations at the AfricaMuseum in Tervuren and the National Museum of Ethnography in Lisbon.

In the interview, the role of migrants from former colonies in the debate over these objects' return was discussed. Many more of them are critical of the great colonial heritage movement. They occupy a broad spectrum. The activist Diyabanza and his group are on one side of it. Where do other migrant organisations stand?

In Belgium there are 250,000 people with a Congolese, Rwandan or Burundian background. One of the organisations that promotes their interests is the Brussels-based *Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte contre les Discriminations*, a collective of colour- and gender-conscious activists and their associations, who are fighting for a decolonised society and conscience. They are fighting for the memory of DR Congo's first prime

minister, Patrice Lumumba, and for the return of the only thing that remains of this hero who was murdered and dissolved in acid: a tooth. The Belgian government is preparing for a transfer of the remaining tooth to Lumumba's daughter.

Another collective is *Bamko-Cran*, whose membership comprises mostly migrants from DR Congo. In 2018, in an open letter in Belgian newspapers, Bamko-Cran asked for the transfer of three hundred Congolese skulls from the Royal Museum of Natural Sciences and the Free University in Brussels. Little is known about how they got here. The archives have 'gone missing', the letter said. The owner of one skull is confirmed: it belongs to the powerful local leader Lusinga Iwa Ng'ombe, killed in combat in 1884. Someone once scratched his name into it.

Bamko-Cran's letter was effective. The Free University of Brussels and the University of Lubumbashi concluded an agreement on the return of ten, possibly fourteen, Congolese skulls. According to vice-rector Laurent Licata of the Brussels university, pressure from migrant organisations did play a part, but investigative journalist Michel Bouffioux's input was more decisive. Lusinga's great-grandson from Lubumbashi, Thierry Lusinga Ng'ombe, told Bouffioux that he has asked the federal government in Brussels for restitution. He wants 'a dignified burial of the historical figure on his own land, within his community' (Bouffioux, 'Crâne de Lusinga', 2018).

ORGANISATIONS IN THE NETHERLANDS

Organisations of countrymen with roots in former colonies are different in the Netherlands. There are over 350,000 people with roots in Suriname, 150,000 with ancestors in the Caribbean world and more than 350,000 with links with Indonesia. Among the latter are 50,000 people of Moluccan origin and 1,500 from Papua. Some have been here for several generations

Nancy Jouwe is a former director of the Papua Heritage Foundation PACE and second-generation Papuan: 'PACE wanted to collect artefacts from individuals and churches and send them back to Papua. In Abepura, near the capital Jayapura, there is a university museum. But they said: "Keep those pieces in the Netherlands, we are afraid that otherwise they will fall into the wrong hands"', she assured me. Jouwe mentions another reason to keep objects in the Netherlands: 'Many Papuans who fled to the Netherlands are physically separated from the land of their birth,

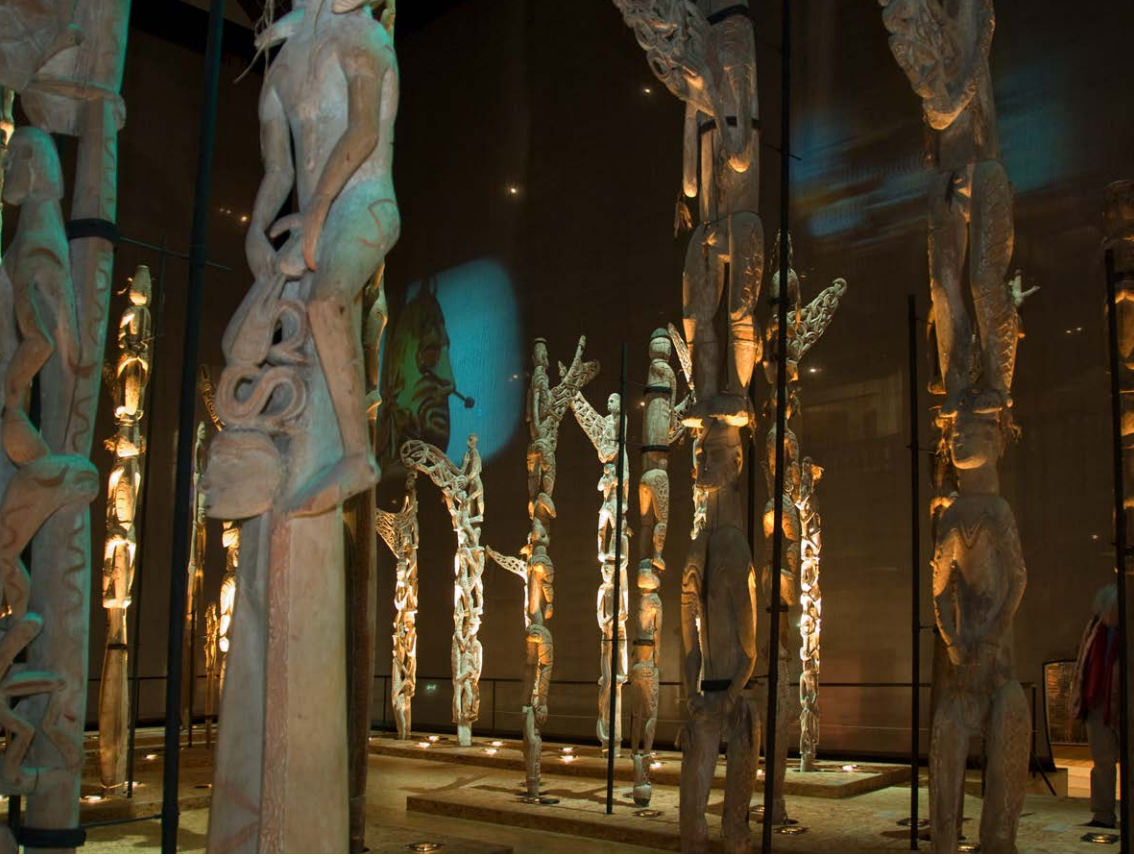
and the older generation also needs these objects to feel at home here and at the same time keep the bond with Papua alive.' At PACE, Papua Dutch people work together with white compatriots. 'Sometimes this was difficult. A white member of PACE's board, whose father had worked in Papua for a long time, thought that what the Netherlands did there was not colonialism, because the Netherlands only came to bring "good things"'. Jouwe considers such a view 'detached from reality'.

At the end of 2007, the exhibition *Bisj poles – A Forest of Magical Statues* opened in the large light hall of the Tropenmuseum. Jouwe had mixed feelings about it: 'The metres-high carved memorials to the Asmat dead evoked pride in me and other Papuans, because we saw how beautiful and impressive everyone thought our culture was, but also pain and embarrassment, because why did those poles get attention and the fate of the Papuans not? Why were they in the Netherlands at all? Asmat make bisj poles, leave them for a few months and then give them back to nature. There the spirits can rest again. Because of the museum set-up, they have changed their meaning. Give them back? Those bisj poles? Skulls and other human remains? Papua is almost twelve times as big as the Netherlands, I don't even know if it is known which region the skulls come from exactly. To whom do you give them back? And what does a museum here think, if the Asmat give them back to nature?'

Migrant organisations that are concerned with restitution differ in approaches. Those in the Netherlands have been campaigning for the cause for a long time; those in Brussels and Wallonia stand out because of their activism.

ADIEU *LA BELGIQUE À PAPA*, GOODBYE *VOC MENTALITY*

In recent years, there has been a breakthrough. In Belgium, the Federal Minister of Science Policy set up a working group at the end of 2019 to advise on how to deal with colonial human remains. In July 2020, the federal parliament decided to investigate Belgium's past in DR Congo, Rwanda and Burundi between 1855 and 1962, including the disappearance of cultural heritage. The arrival of a new federal government at the end of 2020 has reinforced these moves. The fact that most members of the government were born after 1960, the year of Congo's independence, may play a role in this. Their colonial baggage is lighter. The era of *La Belgique à papa* – the dominant idea of colonial nostalgia and colonial glory – is coming to an end.



Exhibition Bisj Poles – A Forest of Magic Statues, Tropenmuseum Amsterdam, 2007. © National Museum of World Cultures Collection

In the Netherlands, the government published a *Policy Vision on Collections from a Colonial Context* in January 2021. It opts for the unconditional return of looted art and other involuntarily surrendered objects to former Dutch colonies. The Netherlands should be prepared 'to restore this historical injustice, which is still experienced as an injustice today, wherever possible'. The government followed the advice of the Dutch Council for Culture. In 2019, the National Museum of World Cultures had already published guidelines on how objects can be claimed. Also in 2019, the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, the National Museum of World Cultures and NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies set up the *Pilot Project Provenance Research on Objects of the Colonial Era* (PPROCE), which will research a number of selected cases from Indonesia and Sri Lanka. In December 2020, the Free University of Amsterdam and the National Museum of World Cultures launched *Pressing Matter: Ownership, Value and the Question of Colonial Heritage in Museums*, a research project on colonial collections and ancestral remains.

There is undeniably something in motion. How far are these developments from the proud expression 'VOC mentality', which Jan Peter Balkenende used in 2006? When I asked the then Dutch Prime Minister whether he would still use that term today, he did not say 'no', but replied that his words had been misinterpreted at the time. They had not referred to Dutch colonialism but to 'economic resilience: looking across borders, facing the unknown, cooperating, sharing risks and profits', because that was necessary for 'a powerful reform policy'. According to Balkenende, a member of the Lower House had immediately and wrongly linked the expression to 'the Dutch history of slavery', but Balkenende 'firmly distanced himself' from this, wanting nothing to do with the slave trade.

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The developments in Belgium and the Netherlands now seem to be gaining some momentum, although only after a few years have passed will we know if anything has really changed in the way we deal with colonial collections. The time when most people in the Netherlands and Belgium could dwell on the violence of the German occupation (1940–1945) – when we were victims – but close their eyes to the violence of the colonial period – when we were perpetrators – is increasingly seen as past. More and more people want something to be done with the colonial collections of dubious origin that have come here *en masse*.

In most former colonies, the disappearance of these collections is still experienced as a historical injustice. They would like to have some of their objects back. Usually, these are pieces that are unique or important for their identity and history, or the remains of national and local heroes. It is virtually impossible that our museums will be emptied because of these new intentions – not only because their depots are overflowing but also because most governments of former colonies do not want 'everything' back. One difficult problem is that, under the present conditions, returned objects are always transferred to a state or its national museum. This can easily compromise the interests of minority groups, such as the Papuans.