6.
CONGO, BELGIUM AND LEOPOLD'S TROUBLESOME LEGACY

On 7 January 1876, an impatient, ambitious monarch walked around the palace of Laeken, as historian Thomas Pakenham (*The Scramble for Africa*, 1991, pp. 11–12) writes. One of the great desires of the man who had become King of Belgium in 1865 was a large, profitable colony, something like the Dutch East Indies but without the expensive and time-consuming wars against local rebellious rulers. As a prince, Leopold had sought a colony in the Middle East, China, Borneo and India, but in vain.

At breakfast on that January morning, as he did every morning, the king received *The Times* from London. A line at the bottom of page 6 caught his attention. On a journey of many years through Central Africa, the British lieutenant Verney Lovett Cameron had made extraordinary discoveries, but he was too ill to come and tell people about them in Europe. Fortunately, he had given the *Times* correspondent access to his notes and four days later the newspaper ran a three-column piece headlined 'African Exploration': Cameron had discovered an 'unspeakable richness' of coal, gold, copper, iron and silver, especially in the Katanga and Kasai regions. According to the reporter, a smart investor could recoup his money within three years.

That is what the king had been waiting for. Did Africa, perhaps, offer a chance to fulfil his wish for a colony of his own? Britain, France and Portugal controlled seaports and coastal areas there, but the interior… For the time being, he kept his lips sealed, even with collaborators in his palace. He sought contact with the experienced explorer Henri Morton Stanley – famous for his greeting 'Doctor Livingstone, I presume?' upon

tracking down the long-lost missionary – and commissioned him to map Central Africa on his behalf.

At the Berlin Conference, too, Leopold kept silent about the hidden wealth in the Congo region. Apparently, other heads of government had attached less importance to Cameron's discovery. The king did launch a plan for a 'noble crusade against slavery' in the area. Arab and local traders were still earning handsomely from this activity and this had to stop. Moreover, it was time to civilise the population. He, Leopold, was prepared to take on the leadership of this crusade. By remaining silent about his business intentions, he appeased the British, who felt that, through David Livingstone's work, Central Africa belonged more to Great Britain than to any other European country. The support for a civilising mission, gained in Berlin, was enough for Leopold.

MANY SMALL WARS

A state that coincided with the present DR Congo did not exist at that time. There was the huge Congo Basin where Pygmy peoples had lived for centuries, and later Bantus and a few other groups. There were principalities. That of the Kongo Empire, which came into being around 1400, was the most developed. Old maps show that, at its greatest extent, this empire and its vassal states stretched across the present-day DR Congo and parts of Angola and Congo-Brazzaville. It had a central authority, levied taxes, maintained ties with Portugal and the Republic of the United Netherlands, and profited from slavery and the trade in ivory, copper work and pottery.

When the power of the Kongo Empire started to diminish in the mid-nineteenth century, it became easy prey for Leopold. From the end of the 1870s (i.e. before his European colleagues had even agreed), the monarch had soldiers in Central Africa. With their modern weapons, waging countless small-scale wars, they gained control of the Congo Basin. This made Leopold II the owner – in the eyes of the indigenous population, the occupier or thief – of an area of more than 900,000 square miles, more than seventy-five times the size of Belgium and bigger than the land area of the Dutch East Indies.

The entrepreneur-king regarded the land, the people who lived on it and everything that grew on or was found in the soil as his property. Initially, he profited most from the ivory trade and, when the automobile industry emerged, from growing rubber. While extracting rubber, countless Congolese perished due to exhaustion, disease, malnutrition

or punishment. Anyone who did not hand in a sufficient quantity, or did so too late, ran the risk of severe flooding, family hostage-taking and even mutilation or death. The Netherlands did not lag behind: from 1883, rubber cultivation in the archipelago took off, with atrocities similar to those in Congo (Breman, *Kolonialisme en racisme*, 2021, pp. 172–173).

Today, the stories of Leopold's mini-wars and the rubber economy fill us with disgust. The violence was 'murderous, systematic and structural, because the white murderers were not punished', writes Congolese-Belgian historian Mathieu Zana Etambala of KU Leuven (*Veroverd, bezet, gekoloniseerd*, 2020, pp. 71–72). Slavery was abolished, but it was replaced by forced labour. Even missionaries were initially more concerned with employing Congolese in the rubber economy than with converting them. The Belgians treated the Congolese like 'animals', in the summary of Nadia Nsayi (*Dochter van de dekolonisatie*, 2020, p. 20). This political scientist was, as we saw, image curator of the exhibition *100 x Congo* in the MAS.

COLLECTING UNDER LEOPOLD II

From the very beginning, Leopold's Belgians, as well as, for example, Finnish and Norwegian drivers of Congo boats or Dutch trade agents, collected objects, preferably those with religious or cultural value. They may not have been as shiny as the gold and silver brought from South America or the Dutch East Indies, but for the communities of origin they were valuable weapons, ancestral statues, animal skins, horns and carved tusks. The name of one collector lives on in Central Africa, where he is notorious: Lieutenant Emile Storms (1846–1918). In Belgium, a street in Florennes is named after him and he has a statue in Ixelles. The Mayor of Ixelles wants to get rid of it.

Storms was in the service of the International Association for the Exploration and Civilisation of Central Africa (AIA), founded in Brussels in 1876 and with chapters in every European country. The Chairman of AIA-Belgium was King Leopold II. Starting in 1877, the Belgian section organised five expeditions to Central Africa, officially to set up scientific research posts there, but in reality to build a belt of checkpoints across the continent.

The fourth expedition was led by Storms. He was given one hundred soldiers, one hundred porters and means of exchange such as textiles, copper wire and pearls. His actions led to several minor wars. In exchange for his protection, he forced local chiefs to sign an *Acte de Soumission*, a

One of the rooms of the AfricaMuseum in Tervuren. © AfricaMuseum, Tervuren

submission certificate, and to pay taxes. Storms's legacy included six of these. The certificate was comparable with the *Korte Verklaring* (Short Declaration), which Governor-General J.B. van Heutsz (1851–1924) introduced in the Dutch East Indies and which obliged sovereigns of autonomous regions to submit to the colonial authorities.

There was one local leader who refused to submit: Lusinga lwa Ng'ombe. Like Storms, he was keen to expand his territories, and he was the first ruler in the region to have firearms at his disposal. On 4 December 1884, after several confrontations, Storms's men managed to kill Lusinga and fifty of his soldiers, with only one casualty on the Belgian side. Couttenier (*Congo tentoongesteld*, 2005, p. 76) discovered the following in Storms' diary: 'The first rifle shot that went off was aimed at Lusinga, who fell down mortally wounded. He said he was dying, but as the last word passed his lips, his head was cut off and carried round on a lance while the attack on the village continued'. After the burning of Lusinga's village, three more villages went up in flames. Storms con-

tinues: 'Around noon there was nothing left of all Lusinga's power but four spots of ash'. He justified his action by depicting his opponent as a slave trader and a menace to the population. Storms took the skulls of Lusinga and two other defeated leaders, as well as ancestral statues and other objects, to his home in Belgium and displayed them there. After his death, his widow parted with them. The skulls eventually ended up in the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences, the ancestor statues and the rest of his collection in the museum in Tervuren.

Storms's colleagues applied similar violence and also appropriated weapons, ancestral statues and skulls. From them, King Leopold II borrowed objects, minerals, stones and stuffed animals for the World Exhibition of 1897. The monarch accommodated the colonial part of the exhibition in the so-called Africa Palace in Tervuren, near Brussels. After the exhibition, he built up his own collection. In 1902 he already owned 8,000 Congo pieces; two years later it was 10,000. At a stroke he became the owner of the most important Congo collection in the world. Later, it was to be housed in the AfricaMuseum, built close to the Africa Palace.

DID COLLECTING CHANGE AFTER LEOPOLD II?

Leopold's approach of ruthless exploitation increasingly came in for criticism, on both the domestic and the international scene. This led the Belgian state to take over Leopold's Congo Free State in 1908. Henceforth it was called Belgian Congo. Did things go any better after this?

According to curator Huguette van Geluwe of the AfricaMuseum in a UNESCO magazine ('Belgium's contribution', 1979), they certainly did. Van Geluwe and Lucien Cahen, director of the museum from 1958 to 1977, were closely involved with the Belgian Congo. According to both of them, the collection practice of the museum was far removed from the bad practices of Leopold's time. According to Cahen, before 1908, there had been 'extortion, plundering or theft', as Van Geluwe wrote, but after that, the museum had no longer accepted objects acquired by improper means. All had come through regular channels. This continued to be the official line for decades.

Is this perhaps disputable? There are certainly arguments that justify a division between the practices before and after 1908. King Leopold was an uninvited guest in Central Africa. He wanted to roll out his economic policy quickly. Because this was catastrophic for the Africans and the arrival of the Belgians aroused much resistance, many often dirty wars were

This soapstone grave statue (ntadi) was a showpiece at the 100 x Congo exhibition in the MAS. Kongo peoples. Northern Angola/DR Congo. Late nineteenth to early twentieth century. It was purchased from Henri Pareyn in 1920. This Antwerp dealer had bought it from Europeans who were returning from the Congo. © Collectie Stad Antwerpen – MAS, picture by Michel Wuyts and Bart Huysman (AE.0169)

waged in his name. By the time he left in 1908, his conquering work was as good as finished and room was made for other forms of government, and thus also for collecting. New rules were established for this. But at the same time, especially during the earlier decades, the administrative structure and culture remained largely intact and the everyday exercise of power by colonial employees, businessmen and missionaries hardly changed.

Several researchers think it plausible that collecting was accompanied by violence after 1908 too. Boris Wastiau ('The Legacy of Collecting', 2017) searched 1,200 object files in the museum in Tervuren. He found little about how individual objects were acquired but discovered that the indication 'found' or 'bought' on an object's system card did not guarantee it had been fairly appropriated. This type of object belongs in the large grey area between dubiously and honestly acquired objects. According to Wastiau, it is impossible to determine the 'level of coercion' at present, but the extremely unbalanced nature of colonial relations – the educated whites in uniform, cassock or expensive dress

and with an automobile or motorised boat, versus the illiterate, poorer locals – makes the likelihood of coercion 'very probable'.

According to Congo expert Jan Raymaekers ('Het Museum voor Kunst en Folklore van Luluaburg', 2013, pp. 251, 255), dubious collecting continued right up to the end of Belgium's presence in the region. He mentions Robert Verly, who worked in the Museum for Art and Folklore in Luluaburg (now Kananga) in the province of Kasai from 1957 to 1960. Verly encouraged local craftsmen to continue making authentic sculptures, but at the same time he himself looked for old pieces for the museum. In 1959, he made one of his most beautiful purchases: a wooden *kifwebe*, a ceremonial mask of the Songye with many characteristic stripes. According to his own notes, Verly had 'discussed it for four and a half hours' and paid the asking price right away, because the sale hurt the villagers 'too much. And they feared too much the reprisal of the *ancêtres* [ancestors] to discuss it. I paid, went to my car, heard the women crying in their huts and left at full speed.'

When asked, Director Guido Gryseels of the museum in Tervuren also thinks 'that you can no longer defend that division'. Also, with regard to the period after 1908, there are 'more and more reservations' and collections were often 'acquired in a situation of unequal power relations'. Provenance research is therefore very important and provides 'an ever greater insight into what came in legally and what came in blatantly violating all kinds of rules'.

The other part of Verly's work, encouraging local craftsmen to make traditional sculptures, did indicate that some Belgians were beginning to respect local artisans and cultures more. This began even before the Second World War. A group of Belgians living in Congo organised themselves as the Association des Amis de l'Art Indigène (Association of Friends of the Indigenous Art) and opened Congo's first museum in 1937, the Musée de la Vie Indigène (Museum of Indigenous Life) in Léopoldville (now Kinshasa). Museums also sprang up in other cities. Most received more European than Congolese visitors.

'POISONED GIFT'

In 1945, the cry of *Indië verloren, rampspoed geboren* (Dutch East Indies lost, disaster born) was heard in the Netherlands and everything was done to keep the colony. Without success, because Indonesia became the first Asian country to shake off the colonial yoke. In the 1950s, Belgium

thought it far too early to let go of its colony. It was not ready for that, and Belgium's commercial interests were too great. Belgium had long been discussing the famous *Thirty-Year Plan for the Political Emancipation of Belgian Africa*, which Jef Van Bilsen had published in 1955. Van Bilsen had started as a journalist in Congo and became Belgium's first State Secretary for Development Cooperation in the 1960s. According to him, Belgium had to use those thirty years to 'work out structures through which an autonomous Congo would find its place'. If Van Bilsen had had his way, the country would have become independent in 1990.

But independence came sooner than expected. In addition to the contacts established at Expo 58 between Congolese from very different areas of the colony, the call for independence was being heard in many other African countries. When Congolese members of the military gendarmerie Force Publique, set up under King Leopold II, revolted in 1959, when they started to plunder and murder and numerous Belgians left the country hastily, the matter was quickly settled and a date for independence set: 30 June 1960.

Before that, the two parties had to agree on a number of matters. During a second round-table conference, it became clear that Brussels was going to transfer the headquarters of the largest mining company, Union Minière du Haut Katanga, along with other Belgian companies, from Congo to Belgium. On the day before independence, the government in Brussels quickly placed them under Belgian law. Just as the Netherlands had duped Indonesia into enforcing astronomical reparations, Belgium undermined the economic basis of the future state via these measures. Congo would gain virtually no control over a crucial part of its assets, nor would it be able to collect certain taxes.

Because Union Minière was afraid of the progressive and anti-colonial forces that would assume power in Kinshasa after independence, the company channelled large amounts to the governor of Katanga province, Moïse Tshombe, who wanted to separate Katanga from the new country. This gave Union Minière free rein and Tshombe remained bound to Brussels's interests. The Belgian government was aware of this. Under the guise of protecting its own citizens, it sent troops to Congo who were also given the task of supporting Tshombe in his secession plans.

The secession of Katanga only came to an end in January 1963. After that, the government in Kinshasa tried to get a grip on the mining sector. When Union Minière raised the price of copper in 1965 without

consulting Kinshasa, the new leader, President Joseph-Désiré Mobutu (1930–1997), decided to nationalise the company. The decision caused a stir and Brussels did everything possible to reverse it. In the end, the Congolese government and the Belgian mining company reached a shaky compromise.

All in all, the independence of Belgian Congo in 1960 had mainly worked to the advantage of the coloniser. It has made Nadia Nsayi wonder whether this independence did not come as a 'poisoned gift' (*Dochter van de dekolonisatie*, 2020, p. 51).

RESTITUTION NEGOTIATIONS

After 1960, things went downhill for the still fairly new museums in DR Congo. Staff members did not get paid and sold objects from the collection to eager Europeans to survive, and sometimes also to enrich themselves. Raymaekers ('The Musée de la vie indigène in Léopoldville', 2016, p. 216) mentions how curator Van Geluwe in 1963 came across five of these objects at a collector's premises in Antwerp. The latter assured her that he had bought them directly from someone at the museum in Kinshasa. They still had pieces of museum labels on them and he could present a scribbled note in which the Congolese staff member concerned had written that they 'could do business'.

Yet restitution of cultural heritage occupied Congolese minds too. In 1955, the call for restitution was made in the *Manifeste de Conscience Africaine*, published by *évolués*, Europeanised Congolese with a certain education and the habit of eating with knives and forks and from European plates. In 1956, Congolese leaders on a visit to Belgium had raised the issue. A few months before independence, the magazine *Notre Congo* had raised the question of whether Congo was not the legal owner of the museum and collection in Tervuren. Congo had made Belgium rich. Belgium had taken collections without the consent of the Congolese and could thus build a museum in Tervuren. Some progressive Belgian magazines supported this argument.

What made itself felt strongly in the restitution negotiations was that Belgium had hardly trained any executives in Congo. In 1960, the new state had seventeen inhabitants with university degrees, the majority of them theologians and engineers, but no one who could administer a country, let alone set up a restitution policy. As with the army and police, Belgians continued to hold the top positions in the cultural sector.

Thus, even after independence, Lucien Cahen remained director of the museum in Tervuren, and also of the museums in Congo, Rwanda and Burundi. Nine months in Belgium, and then three in Africa. Who was there to negotiate with whom about restitution?

The leaders of the new state, President Joseph Kasavubu and Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba, quickly came up with general restitution claims. These remained unanswered. In the years that followed, the issue recurred regularly. Once Mobutu was established as the strongman, he put the issue on the agenda, but hidden agendas and political complications strongly influenced discussions on it. While the Netherlands was mainly driven in its negotiations with Indonesia by the need to restore its tarnished image after the violent period of 1945–1949 and the issue of New Guinea, economic considerations dominated in Belgium. They were almost the same as they were at the outset of colonisation in the 1880s: possibilities for expansion and profits for Belgian mining companies. The possibility of restitution often served as a lubricant in securing these business interests. In addition, Cahen and his deputy, Van Geluwe, had the intention of keeping the Tervuren collection together and give away as little of it as possible. In this they resembled the Leiden director, Pott. They were also afraid that Congo could not take care of its own cultural heritage and would sell it off. Van Geluwe's visit to the Antwerp collector might have strengthened that view.

President Mobutu was not very keen on the Belgian paternalistic attitude. He was extremely indignant when he heard about Cahen and Van Geluwe's plan to organise an exhibition of two hundred Congolese masterpieces from Tervuren that would tour the United States. *Art of the Congo* (1967–1969) became a real crowd-puller. Because it had been done entirely without him, writes Sarah van Beurden (*Authentically African*, 2015, p. 105), Mobutu saw the exhibition as the 'ultimate illustration of Congo's lack of control over its own resources' and as the 'continuation of colonial structures of representation and possession in a post-colonial environment'. His country was not given a chance to showcase its own cultural heritage. Those two hundred masterpieces displayed in North America would later form the core of Congo's cultural claim.

THREE-PHASE PLAN

Thanks to intensive silent diplomacy, Cahen was able to present the new country's government with a plan for the heritage sector and the

restitution of objects in 1969. It became the basis for further negotiations. The plan consisted of three phases and was paid for by the Belgian state.

During the first two phases, Congolese museum staff travelled throughout the country to collect objects from as many ethnic groups as possible. The first phase yielded tens of thousands of objects. They were stored in the Institute of National Museums of Zaire in Kinshasa, which was set up in 1970 to function as a sort of counterpart to the museum in Tervuren. In the second phase, more specific objects were sought. These were to form the basis of a Congolese national collection. This also yielded many objects.

Little is known about how the Congolese viewed this approach at the time. When, some years back, I asked Placide Mumbembele about this, he was still head of the Anthropology Department at the University of Kinshasa; currently, he is the director of all museums in DR Congo. The approach had been 'humiliating' for his country, he said, 'Congo had to pick up pieces in the first two phases so that Belgium would not have to give a lot back in the third phase.'

That third phase was more turbulent than the other two. This was not only because Belgium had to give back, but also because of the more offensive stance Congo began to adopt. President Mobutu, whom many people remember as a self-enriching, cruel dictator, had another side to him: he surprised friends and foes with pleas for the cultural decolonisation of Africa and the right of the continent to its own cultures and heritage. In this way, he shifted the restitution debate from purely bilateral negotiations to discussions on an international level. He and Ekpo Eyo, director of museums in Nigeria, were the driving forces behind the restitution debate in Africa in the 1970s and 1980s.

In 1973, several years after the adoption of the Three-Phase Plan but before Belgium had returned a single object, Mobutu's plea resulted in Resolution 3187 [XXVIII] to the General Assembly of the United Nations on the 'prompt restitution' of works of art expropriated as a result of colonial or other occupation. In New York, Mobutu made a passionate plea for the return of 'the best and most unique works of art' that rich countries had taken with them during the colonial period, which 'made our countries not only economically but also culturally poor'. They were never paid for, yet their value was now so high 'that [countries of origin] lack[ed] the material means' to retrieve them. A majority of UN member states voted in favour of the resolution, but former colonisers, including

Belgium and the Netherlands, were afraid of having claims brought and therefore resolutely opposed it. In order to meet the Congolese leader halfway, the Belgian government promised to make serious efforts to secure the return of their heritage.

In the same period, as an antidote to the indoctrination of the colonial period, Mobutu launched the campaign *Retour à l'authenticité* for the Zairisation of his country. His message was designed to reduce dependency on the West and strengthen Congo's unity. Congo was renamed Zaire, Léopoldville became Kinshasa, Elisabethville became Lubumbashi, and so on. The country got its own currency. European clothes were replaced by Zairean ones. The Institute of National Museums of Zaire was entrusted with the cultural side of the search for individuality.

Part of the Zairisation was Mobutu's announcement that he was going to take back the companies that had been transferred to Belgium and nationalise them. This caused an uproar in Brussels and Belgian leaders began to do everything in their power to thwart it. It led to the stoppage of the third phase, that of restitution. When Mobutu realised that he missed professional managers to run nationalised companies, he partly reversed the measure and talks about restitution of colonial collections could resume. As far as he was concerned, the two hundred objects of the travelling exhibition to the United States were central to the discussions. On 29 March 1976, this resulted in the transfer of one of them: the wooden statue of King Bope Kena of the Kuba people.

POOR OUTCOME

If we look more closely to the returns from this third phase, it quickly becomes apparent that they have left few holes in the Tervuren museum's depots. The few objects that the museum handed over did not turn out to be of the quality that both countries had discussed. Moreover, most of them came from collections that Belgium had borrowed from institutions in Belgian Africa.

In 1958, the Museum of Indigenous Life in Léopoldville/Kinshasa had loaned thirty-one objects from its collection to Belgium for Expo 58. Belgium had subsequently lent them again to museums in Germany and Austria and then held on to them because of the unstable situation in Congo. They were returned in 1977. So this was a loan collection and not a return. A later return comprised over one hundred objects that were part of a research collection belonging to the Institut de Recherche

Transfer of the wooden statue of King Bope Kena of the Kuba people from Belgium to Congo, 29 March 1976. © AfricaMuseum, Tervuren (HP.2011.76.1)

Scientifique de l'Afrique Centrale (IRSAC), which had departments in Congo and Rwanda. They were already in Belgium before Congo's independence. Here, too, it was a matter of returning borrowed material.

Also returned were six hundred objects from IRSAC-Rwanda. Again, these were loaned objects.

And then we come to the only genuine return. Along with the wooden statue of the Kuba king, the museum in Tervuren selected 114 objects. By making this selection, Belgium ignored the request for restitution of the two hundred high-quality pieces from the travelling exhibition. The loss of these top pieces would have put a dent in the 'unity of the collection', which director Cahen wanted to avoid at all costs.

It is to the credit of Boris Wastiau, curator in Tervuren until 2007, that we now know more about those 114 objects. With *Congo-Tervuren: Aller-Retour* (2000) Wastiau literally wrote the book on it. I got hold of a copy immediately but the purport of it only dawned on me much later. In telegraphic style – the author could not have been more explicit, he confided to me – he described the background of each object and its value. And at the end, he did not draw any conclusions that would rub the reader's nose in his painful discoveries.

The book offers a disconcerting picture of how a Western country had worked in its own interest, against the wishes of a former colony. The objects numbered 68 and 69, Wastiau writes, were 'tourist art'. Object number 99 was 'fake'. Three other objects had 'never been initiated', let alone used. Several objects had 'no documentation', or their use was unknown. Some had no cultural-historical value. In an email from Kinshasa, Placide Mumbembele confirmed these findings. Many of the 114 pieces were indeed of 'inferior quality', no more than 'utensils'. Belgium had played 'an unfair game'.

This is not yet the end of the unmasking. Van Geluwe's previously mentioned article in a UNESCO magazine ('Belgium's Contribution', 1979) included five photographs of objects that Belgium had actually returned. She must have provided the photos herself. They are in Wastiau's book and it is embarrassing to read about them. One photo shows a ceremonial palm wine drinking cup 'with no real historical value', another a small ivory initiation mask that 'lacks the refined quality and patina' of such pieces and was probably fake. The same goes for an ivory breast amulet, which – very unusually – combined several stylistic categories. What Belgium did was nothing less than a sham – perhaps for a good cause in Belgian eyes, but with a bitter aftertaste for the former colony.

A NEW TONE

Belgium also deserves credit. In June 2020, King Philippe expressed his regret for the atrocities committed in Congo, the suffering and humiliations caused. The federal government is going to invest – it says so on page 23 of the General Policy Document of 4 November 2020 – in 'further research into Belgium's colonial past, the accessibility of colonial archives and the development of a policy for the restitution of works of art and human remains'. There will be a working group of all stakeholders, including 'representatives of the countries of origin of the works of art, representatives of Afro-descendants, representatives of the institutions involved'. This plan ties in with the work of the Parliamentary Commission on the Colonial Past, which had been appointed in June 2020. That commission will map out the role of three sensitive points: Belgian companies, the role of the mission and the restitution issue.

That the tone is decidedly different from that of the 1970s became clear in June 2021, when the Federal Secretary of State for Science Policy, Thomas Dermine, announced that the legal ownership of objects in the AfricaMuseum collection that had been acquired by theft, with violence or as spoils of war would be transferred to DR Congo. Belgium will keep them in custody as long as the government in Kinshasa does not want them back. For the time being, it has been established that 883 objects were unlawfully acquired; the fate of tens of thousands of others remains to be investigated. The new policy still needs parliamentarian approval. Moreover, the State Archives and the AfricaMuseum have published a source guide to the history of colonisation. It identifies and locates all available archives in Belgium related to DR Congo, Rwanda and Burundi.

There are also developments in DR Congo. President Félix Tshisekedi, sworn in on 24 January 2019, has raised the issue of restitution. He wants objects returned, but not yet. The claims are justified, but his country lacks the capacity to preserve them properly and other priorities take precedence. In November 2019, at the official opening of the Musée National in Kinshasa, built with South Korean support, the President thanked the Belgians for preserving Congolese heritage for years. When his country took over the presidency of the African Union from South Africa in February 2021, he repeated this position. His expression of gratitude in particular met with strong criticism from the Congolese diaspora in Belgium.

Statues like these used to be displayed in the main hall of the AfricaMuseum. They are still on display, but now occupy a more modest space. © AfricaMuseum, Tervuren

In June 2020, the first National Forum on the Reconstitution of the Archives and Cultural Heritage of DR Congo was held in Kinshasa. All thirty participants were Congolese. The key word was the difficult-to-translate concept of reconstitution, i.e. a renewed and well-considered definition and composition of one's own heritage. About five hundred ethnic groups live in the country, while the heritage of only sixty is known. That has to change. The participants in the National Forum want their country to compile a new national collection, more independently and without post-colonial ballast.

Restitution remains a part of reconstitution. The participants referred to ethnographic masterpieces, colonial archives and remains of ancestors that were acquired illegally. They have been borrowed without ever being returned or simply taken by missionaries, colonial administrators and soldiers, the Belgian business community and collectors. The Congolese see restitution as 'a joint recovery process' in the relationship with Bel-

gium and its museums. The Kinshasa Forum also wants to look at 'illegal acquisitions' in France, Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Italy, the United States and even countries in Asia.

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Just like between Indonesia and the Netherlands, the tone between DR Congo and Belgium is changing. It is still the small Belgium with its big AfricaMuseum versus the big Congo with its limited museum infrastructure; still, Congolese Belgians keep the cultural sector on edge.

The course of the restitution negotiations between Brussels and Kinshasa in the 1970s was tense and dominated by mistrust and hidden agendas. Unlike Indonesia, the government in Kinshasa lacked well-trained negotiators and connoisseurs of the new state's cultural heritage. This improved later on.

Although both former colonies received less than they had asked for, the Netherlands and Belgium considered themselves to have been generous. Compared to Great Britain, France, Germany and Spain, this was true. However, there is still the issue of missed international agreements, while wish lists from both former colonies remain unfulfilled.