

JOS VAN BEURDEN

# INCONVENIENT

COLONIAL COLLECTIONS AND RESTITUTION IN THE NETHERLANDS AND BELGIUM

# HERITAGE



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*To all the men and women who created them*

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# PREFACE

Slowly but surely we are realising that we are not finished with colonialism. Increasingly, we are confronted with the ways in which centuries of European expansion continue to distort the world. Think, for example, of the history of slavery, inequality or racism. This book is about another important aspect of colonialism: the great heritage migration, the relocation of countless cultural and historical treasures. Colonisers took not only the land, what grew on it and everything that was below the ground, but also the cultural possessions of the colonised. Many of these were taken without the knowledge of the people in the colonial regions, or against their will. Everything – from great treasures, gleaming armoury and ritual power sculptures to simple utilitarian objects – was shipped from afar to museums and private collections in the Global North. Additionally, miles of (often strategic) archives, as well as numerous ancestral skeletons and other body-parts, dug from graves, prisons, hospitals and other places, were moved to these collections.

It was almost always a one-way street: the uninvited ruler robbing his new subjects. The period of European colonialism represents a peak period in the history of art robbery, its consequences still visible and tangible today, both in the northern and southern hemispheres. Depots in the north overflow with the remains of ancestors whom it is no longer possible to identify, and archives of the colonial administration and of local leaders that are still being disputed. Countries, peoples and communities in the Global South are missing what is dear to them.

This book is about how the Netherlands and Belgium deal with colonial collections that were acquired in a dubious manner. Both countries

are looking for new ways to do this, the biggest surprise coming with the decision of the Belgian federal government, in June 2021, to declare objects in the AfricaMuseum in Tervuren which we can be certain were looted to be the property of the Democratic Republic of Congo (hereafter, DR Congo). Belgium and DR Congo will start an investigation into tens of thousands of other objects that also may have been looted and might likewise become property of DR Congo. In early 2021, the Dutch government caused a stir with a new policy vision: colonial collections that were acquired illegally return to their country of origin if that country so requests.

In the former colonies of both countries too, things are in motion. DR Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Indonesia, Suriname and the Caribbean islands each deal with the restitution issue in their own way and at their own pace. Since their independence, they have strived to regain some of their lost treasures. They have developed their own heritage policy, strengthened their museums and investigated the value of this new openness in countries like the Netherlands and Belgium, and with some modest results. In 2021, Nigeria and Germany agreed that Benin objects – looted in 1897 by British soldiers and presently displayed in German museums – would be returned. Several museums in Great Britain also announced their willingness to let go their Benin objects.

In this process, moral and historical considerations have become more important than strictly legal ones to the question of to whom an object belongs to. Some governments and museums in the Western world – Europe, North America and Australia – increasingly feel that they are no longer the rightful owners of objects that were brought back from distant regions in the past and want to discuss this with their counterparts in these former colonies. In private museums and the collections of individuals, however, this is less apparent.

## TWO COUNTRIES IN ONE BOOK

Since the early 1990s, I have been studying the protection of and threats to the cultural heritage of the South, and for more than ten years, I have focused on heritage that was moved away in the colonial past. Frequent travels in Asia, Africa and Europe have provided contacts that have deepened my insights. I am Dutch but have known Belgium's major ethnographic museums for a long time and worked closely with curators and academics in both countries. Admittedly, there are significant

differences between their colonial pasts. One operated mainly in Africa and to a lesser extent in Asia; the other in Africa, Asia and America. The Netherlands waged major wars in Asia; Belgium fought many small-scale conflicts in Central Africa. The Netherlands was a world player for a long time, but had already passed its colonial peak when Belgium had yet to spread its colonial wings. It did so only after 1830, when it had shaken off the Dutch yoke and left the kingdom.

Most academics and heritage professionals in the two countries know little about what is happening on the other side of the border. They follow the developments in France, Germany and Great Britain more closely than those of their small neighbouring country. As a result, they miss a lot. For me, comparison is not about establishing a hierarchy and concluding that one country is doing better than another; no, comparing is about enriching. By viewing developments and events in one country alongside similar events in another, we gain a clearer perspective on the progress in the decolonisation of colonial collections in each country.

This book shows the part played by both countries during a peak period of art robbery. What did colonial officials, soldiers, entrepreneurs, bringers of the Word, scientists and adventurers all take with them? What did the loss mean to the people who saw their cultural possessions disappear and how does it affect their descendants? Was it looting in all cases? And how do Belgium and the Netherlands go about giving it back? Are there any successful examples? Yes, there are. Have requests been rejected? Yes, this has also happened. In answering these questions, I look at and listen to both sides – the Global South and the Global North – as much as possible.

*Inconvenient Heritage: Colonial Collections and Restitution in the Netherlands and Belgium* makes clear what the two countries and their former colonies are doing to undo the injustice of art robbery, and places this topic in a broader European and global context. Although from the outside, this work may look different in Belgium and the Netherlands, the two countries are largely walking the same bumpy road and at a similar speed. Some commentators say they are moving at a snail's pace, while others say they are gaining momentum.

## IN SEARCH OF A FRAMEWORK

One of the difficult parts of this book was to come up with a framework to see if real progress was being made in the restitution dossier. It is

undeniable that the southern and northern hemispheres are in conflict over this period of art robbery. But how do you know if that conflict is really coming any closer to a resolution? What is striking is that many countries and peoples in the southern hemisphere are still suffering as a result of the violations of trust during the period of colonialism. They struggle with the inequality in their relationship with European countries. Distrust and inequality are ingrained. In their view, few people in Europe see historical injustice or feel how cultural losses affect people in former colonies.

Trust, equality and justice form the framework for testing whether these injustices are, slowly but surely, being reversed. Or perhaps we might put it better: to what extent is distrust being diminished, inequality being reduced and the distribution of objects being done in a way that ensures some of the injustice of the colonial period is undone?

The Netherlands, Belgium and other former colonisers seem to be working to undo some of these historical injustices. Whether this is a turning point we will only know in years to come. For the present, this work is more words, advice and policy documents than deeds. We would never again take valuables from the palaces of defeated monarchs, from temples or from ancestral altars, we now say explicitly. But have the former colonies seen much return? Do they trust that it will return and that they will have control over their own past?

## ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

Writing is deleting, scraping and polishing. What remain are the stories of people, communities, museums and governments from the southern and northern hemispheres about a centuries-old episode in our common history.

This research started with an effort to map how all those hundreds of thousands of items from colonial areas came to be in our two countries. In a few cases, we know this fairly precisely, but in most we do not. Immediately after their independence, former colonies started asking for the return of their cultural heritage. This did yield some results, but half a century later and in the light of what we now know, these results are dubious. In recent years, some ancestral remains, colonial collections and colonial archives have been returned, and this research reconstructs how this was done in specific cases. The book also surveys the collections from colonial areas of missionary institutions and private individuals and

examines how they fit into the current restitution debate. This research also led me to posit a rarely made comparison with other categories of looted art.

To be clear: this book does not argue that everything that was ever taken should be returned to former colonial possessions. That would be an oversimplification of a difficult problem. It is about restoring damaged relationships and, in some cases, embarking on a more equal relationship.

Since 2009, I have focused my research on colonial collections and their restitution. The introductory Part I, 'A decisive phase in an old debate?', explains why. It shows which items came to the Netherlands and Belgium in the colonial period and the pain and anger over their loss in the countries where they were created and used. It pays attention to how more and more museums now struggle with this and how they are increasingly researching the origins of their collections, including the hundreds of thousands of ancestral remains from colonial territories.

Considerably more than half a century ago, the newly independent countries of Indonesia and DR Congo negotiated the return of some pieces. This is the topic of Part II, 'Thrifty restitution in the 1970s.' How did Indonesia and DR Congo enter into the negotiations and how did the Netherlands and Belgium try to shape arrangements to their liking? What did they return and what would they not? What motivated the two former colonisers to return objects? This section also investigates how the Netherlands and Belgium dealt with their other former colonies – Suriname, the Caribbean islands, Rwanda and Burundi.

In Part III, the book moves on to the twenty-first century and reviews some 'Recent restitutions' (or plans for them). It begins with a high-profile transfer: the repatriation of a tattooed Māori head to New Zealand. This section then discusses the issue of trying to hold onto and having to let go of colonial archives that are crucial to both parties is discussed and gives comments about how we might offer collections that are superfluous here *en masse* to former colonies. Finally, it discusses the dialogue between European museums and Nigeria about an iconic spoil of war, the Benin objects. Can this dialogue become a model for the return of other looted objects from the same former colony that have been dispersed all over Europe?

Up until this point, the book has mainly discussed collections in public institutions. Part IV, 'Private collections – Less visible, but not less important', pays attention to collections and pieces that were once



brought back by missionaries. The fact that we often know little about them does not mean that they are any less significant weight than public collections. Do missionary institutions also deal with returns? And what about dealers and private individuals who have precious pieces from colonial regions? Do these collections include dubiously acquired objects, and how do we find out? Do the best-known private owners of the Netherlands and Belgium – the Royal houses – also own colonial collections, and are they open to return?

Europeans not only played a leading role in art theft from far away colonies in the southern hemisphere; they also did so during two other periods in history: the robbery from the oldest inhabitants of Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, the United States and Canada, and the Nazi art thefts of the Second World War. What claimants of looted art from those distant colonies can learn from plaintiffs in cases of looted art from these other two historical moments is the first issue addressed in Part v, 'Towards a New Ethics'. In the concluding chapter, the book looks at the core issue of return: it should break down distrust and restore trust, reduce inequality and, as much as possible, undo the injustice of colonial looted art. Return is a way of healing.

Please, join me on my journey. I hope you will enjoy it.

*Jos van Beurden*

JANUARY 2022

# PART I

## A DECISIVE PHASE IN AN OLD DEBATE?

A few events have provided the impetus for my research on the cultural heritage in countries where it is under threat: an encounter with a museum director in West Africa, the discovery of valuable objects from Southeast Asia in the port of Rotterdam and the return of a precious cross to Ethiopia from Belgium. Initially, I focused on the contemporary illicit trade in art and antiquities. As more measures were taken to curb this, I shifted my focus to the past – to the mass disappearance of cultural heritage during the period of European colonialism, which did not concern many people in Europe at that time.

In recent years, however, the discussion about collections from colonial contexts has intensified. There is something fishy about the colonial collections of many museums and private individuals in the Netherlands and Belgium. The fact that they are slowly considering the option of return may be seen from their exhibitions and in the intensification of the research on their collections. The question is whether they are capable of actually talking about returns on an equal footing with their counterparts in the former colonies – for example, with regard to a captured nail statue from DR Congo in the AfricaMuseum in Tervuren, an old cannon from Sri Lanka in the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam or four special statues of Hindu gods from Indonesia in Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden. There is a desire in these former colonies to get them back.

Besides objects, there are hundreds of thousands of remains of ancestors from colonial areas. These form a separate category. Most were taken without the consent of relatives and served to ‘prove the superiority’ of the white race. We now find racism even intolerable. The Tropenmuseum

Amsterdam and other museums and institutions have wanted to get rid of this type of collection for some time. In Belgium, a commission has been set up to make an inventory of all the collections the country has and whether and how they can be repatriated.

# 1. CHOOSING COLONIAL COLLECTIONS

In the early 1970s, I hitchhiked with my then partner through Eastern Europe to Ankara, Turkey. From there, we travelled by bus and train through Iran and Pakistan, spent six months in India and finally ended up in Bangladesh. On behalf of a local development organisation, we made a village study about the power relations between poor and rich farmers and between women and men. We learned the Bengali language, went looking for an average (and thus isolated) village and lived in a hut for a year. At the time there was a serious famine in the country, which made the task quite difficult.

On the day we arrived in the village, we were asked to explain the purpose of our stay. The field around the mosque in the middle of the village was full and I remember that we said in our best Bengali that we considered ourselves students and asked the villagers who of them wanted to become our teachers. They were not used to that question, but the answer, it turned out, was several people. Two widows, a farm labourer, his mother, all illiterate, and a teacher became our main guides. It was a special experience, working together as equals as much as possible and appealing to each other's strengths. I learned to look at reality through the eyes of our teachers. This has helped me throughout my life.

During the whole trip through Europe and Asia to Bangladesh, I had enjoyed visiting churches, mosques, Hindu temples, palaces and monuments, but I had never thought about something like art robbery. Well, I had a little, when I saw chunks of marble from the Taj Mahal in India for sale in a shop near the monument. The shopkeeper had had them chopped off – even as the monument was prominently on UNESCO's

World Heritage list. How was that possible! However, I did not yet realise that those chunks were part of an age-old problem.

### CRUCIAL MEETING IN BAMAKO

It lasted until 1991, that I started to see this problem. I was a journalist at that time and I interviewed director Samuel Sidibé of the pleasant Musée national de Mali in Bamako. He told me that archaeological and ethnographic objects had disappeared *en masse* during the period of colonialism and that this heritage drainage had continued after independence in 1960. Most of his country's ancient heritage was therefore in Europe and North America. In the city of Djenné on the Niger River, I saw with my own eyes the uprooted burial and dwelling mounds from which explorers and robbers had extracted old earthenware grave goods and utensils. It is an image I will never forget. Sidibé said something that stayed with me: the cause of this great loss lies 'as much with us in Mali as with the dealers, collectors and museums in the northern hemisphere'. So he was not only pointing to the rich colonial powers, but also to his own countrymen's part in looting and smuggling. Therefore, he thought, the solution had to come from both sides. He had a role to play, and from then on, I did, too. As a result of that meeting, art robbery from vulnerable countries became an important theme for me. Each journey brought new experiences and insights.

### FOUND AT CUSTOMS IN THE PORT OF ROTTERDAM

For a greater understanding of the problem I did not have to travel to Africa. The Netherlands and Belgium had enough to offer. Millions of containers pass through the port of Rotterdam every year. Customs officers have to decide which to let pass and which to check. In early October 1995, a container arrived from Bangkok with some wooden boxes destined for a Dutch art dealer. According to the loading papers, they contained 'antiquities' for which an export permit had been given. But customs officer Paul de Bruin did not trust it. We knew each other from a previous case, in which a trader had tried to smuggle parts of an old royal crockery from Ghana. Those were eventually returned to Ghana. While De Bruin had a nose for illegal art dealing in the Netherlands, I knew something about how it was organised in the South. When he opened the boxes and saw what was inside, he immediately called the Cultural Heritage Inspectorate, who sent an expert on Southeast Asian antiqui-



*Celestial nymph from the Angkor region, Cambodia, found in a container from Bangkok in Rotterdam. © Paul de Bruin, Rotterdam customs.*

ties. She found that they contained very precious material: two ancient sandstone celestial nymphs from the Angkor region in Cambodia and thirteen antique Buddha heads from the Ayutthaya region in Thailand. The temple complexes of both Angkor and Ayutthaya were already on the World Heritage List at that time. Using, modern drilling equipment, the robbers had made narrow, deep holes every two centimetres in the top of the two nymphs. They had done so to pull them off the temple wall intact. Considering the damage to the lower parts of the long ears of the Buddha heads, these must have been ripped from the torsos off with ropes.

The art dealer, who told me that he had been visiting Southeast Asia for thirteen years and regularly exhibited at the TEFAF art fair in Maastricht, maintained that he had bought them in an accredited antiquities shop in Bangkok and produced purchase receipts and an export certificate. But De Bruin suspected that the papers had been forged, which

happened more often. The Dutch law at the time stipulated that he must prove the dealer was lying, and that was hard.

The following days were marked by feverish communications with the authorities in Cambodia and Thailand, as customs could only hold the cargo if those countries reclaimed it. That was not easy, because in Thailand some high government officials had interests in art smuggling themselves, while among the contacts in Cambodia there was a language and logistical problem. Officials there scarcely spoke French or English, and telephones and fax machines did not work, with the country still recovering from the nightmare of Pol Pot's violent regime. Eventually, both countries sent a request for restitution to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in The Hague. In the meantime, I had published the find in the Dutch daily *Algemeen Dagblad*. Other media took over the report. Josephine Verspaget, a member of the Dutch Lower House, asked questions about it. The combination of publicity and parliamentary questions cre-

*For a long time, statues have been disappearing en masse from vulnerable countries such as Congo. The picture shows tourist art. © Jos van Beurden*



ated a mood: you don't take objects from places on the World Heritage List. The end of the matter was that the dealer gave up the entire shipment and it all went back to Southeast Asia.

## A MAGIC CROSS AT BRUSSELS AIRPORT

For the third event, I take you to the majestic mountains of northern Ethiopia. In the city of Lalibela one finds eleven rock churches. Carved out by craftsmen in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. I have been visiting this UNESCO World Heritage site regularly since the late 1980s and each time I am moved by the countless barefoot believers who rhythmically move, sing and pray, while asking for forgiveness, hope, a pregnancy or good health. Although the churches are a top attraction for foreign tourists, local believers always outnumber them by far. In August 2021, the shrines were in the news briefly after Tigrayan fighters had taken over the city from government troops. So far, both sides have respected the religious complex and no damage has been reported.

In late 1997, I went there to find out more about a theft that had been front-page news in the country. I was helped by a retired judge, a local deacon of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and a taxi driver. On 9 March 1997, around midnight, the residents were abruptly awoken by the sound of a ringing bell, confused voices and gunshots. One of Ethiopia's most precious possessions, the 60-centimetre-long *Afro Ayigeba* Lalibela Cross, reputed to possess healing power, had disappeared. Two nightwatchmen had been on duty; one had fallen ill, while his colleague, sheltering from the rain, had fallen asleep.

The Ethiopian police made several arrests, but had to release the suspects again. After a few weeks, one of them, a priest, came to the police station and admitted that he and a local hotel owner were the culprits. The hotel owner's daughter had been ill for a long time, and he had begged the priest many times to come and bless the girl with the cross. Finally, the priest had given in and used the absence of the guards to obtain the cross. He went to the hotel owner's house and performed the blessing ceremony, but after the ceremony and some strong drinks he had fallen asleep; when he woke up, the cross had disappeared.

Two years later, in June 1999, the police arrested some antiquity dealers in Dessie and Addis Ababa, 250 miles further south. A dealer in the capital had kept the cross hidden all this time and, thinking that all turmoil around its disappearance had faded away, sold it to a Belgian



collector for USD 25,000. An international courier was set to ship it to Brussels. Ethiopia's ambassador, Peter Gabriel Robleh, informed the Belgian authorities and, thanks to another alert customs officer at Zaventem airport who did not trust the term 'handicrafts from Ethiopia' on the loading papers, the cross was intercepted. 'But customs had to let the cross go, because they could not prove the bad faith of the Belgian buyer', Robleh told me at the time. It was the same problem as in Rotterdam. If Belgium and Ethiopia had acceded to the international treaties on the subject, customs could have made it more difficult for the buyer and asked him to prove his good faith. In that case he would have been in trouble, because he had been in Ethiopia regularly and must have been aware of the importance of the Lalibela Cross.

The outcome was both bitter and celebratory. Ethiopia had no choice but to request the collector give up the cross in exchange for the purchase price. He was free, while the antiquity dealers and the priest were sentenced to multi-year prison terms. Later in 1999, ambassador Robleh flew with the cross back to Ethiopia. Crowds cheered and prayed upon arrival in the capital and, after that, in Lalibela. According to Alain Hanssen, first secretary of the embassy of Belgium in Ethiopia, the return was 'un moment de grand émotion'. 'The cross is a part of all of us', said museum director Ahmed Zakaria in Addis Ababa.

Situations like this made it clear that customs and police needed stronger legislation to make life difficult for art smugglers. At the time, they had to prove that someone had broken the rules. What was needed was legislation that forced a dealer or collector to prove that he had traded fairly. A remedy for this already existed: the 1970 UNESCO Convention, officially the 'Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property'. But the Netherlands, Belgium and other former colonisers had always refused to adopt it, afraid that former colonies would use it to claim vanished colonial heritage. This fear was unfounded, because the convention has no retroactive effect and would mean nothing for claims on objects that had disappeared before 1970.

Given the seriousness of the ongoing illegal trade, it was high time that the Netherlands, Belgium and other European countries joined the convention. Another reason this was necessary was that art smugglers who considered the controls in Rotterdam or at Schiphol and Zaventem airports too strict might go to more lenient ports.

## A STRONG EUROPEAN NETWORK

If art smugglers allow their wares to enter other countries, then the people in European countries who oppose their illegal trade should also widen their radius of action. I discussed this idea with various museum curators and in 2001 it led to the establishment of the Leiden Network for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage. This was an informal group of a few dozen people: academics, heritage professionals, police officers, customs officers, investigative journalists and members of parliament from eight Western European countries. The names of the network members were not released. Some of them were among the top professionals in their field. Everyone participated in a personal capacity and was able to speak reasonably freely. The network had a dual purpose: its official purpose was to get the 1970 UNESCO Convention accepted in each of those eight countries, but its second purpose was to help curb illegal trade. We met once a year. On Saturday at noon, everyone would be present, and on Sunday by 1 p.m. everyone would have left again. In between, we had regular contact and exchanged tips and contacts. The agreement was that all exchanges would remain confidential. I can assure you that on a number of occasions, the contact between the enforcement agencies and other network members has helped to trace contraband and smugglers.

Thanks to good contacts in the cultural sector, politics and the media, members of the network also played a role in both Belgium and the Netherlands becoming signatories to the 1970 UNESCO Convention in 2009. They were among the last to do so, as many other European countries had already acceded to it (Italy in 1978, Portugal and Spain in 1986, France in 1997, Great Britain in 2002, Denmark and Sweden in 2003, Germany in 2007). The two countries adjusted their legislation accordingly and from now on everyone who acquires a valuable object must first check whether it has been stolen or smuggled. For customs and police, it was a boon. With the new legislation, the dealer who imported the celestial nymphs and Buddha heads, for example, would have had to prove that he had done enough to find out whether he was allowed to take them out of the country with him. Given his years of experience in Asia and the fact that the special value of this type of statues was widely known in art trade circles, no judge would have believed his story. Of course, such a treaty is still a long way off, and there are still plenty of loopholes, but still...

When all the countries represented by participants of the Leiden Network had signed the convention, the meetings stopped. One goal had been achieved. The informal exchanges among a number of group members continue right up to the present day.

## COLONIAL COLLECTIONS IN THE COLD

In the meantime, more and more questionable acquisitions dating from long before 1970 began to surface. Many museums turned out to have extensive numbers of objects that had been taken from colonial areas by inappropriate methods. However, former colonies had no access to an authority such as the UNESCO Convention through which to claim their lost pieces, and European countries hardly took a step in their direction. Nevertheless, the question of whether all those colonial treasures could just stay in Europe began to be asked.

Slowly but surely, therefore, I shifted the focus of my research from the ongoing illicit trade to the disappearance of countless religious, cultural and historical treasures during the five centuries of colonialism. What should be done about this? What was needed to reverse this injustice?

*The Dutch colonial army took a lot of loot from the Indonesian archipelago. The most famous was captured in 1894, when the prince of Mataram on the island of Lombok was defeated. Part of the loot has been returned to Indonesia; other parts are in Museum Volkenkunde and, as this picture shows, in the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. © Jos van Beurden*



**De 'Lombokschat'**  
Indonesië, vóór 1894  
goud, zilver, edelstenen

In 1894 veroverden Nederlandse troepen het vorstelijk paleis op het Indonesische eiland Lombok. Nederland

**The 'Lombok Treasure'**  
Indonesia, before 1894  
gold, silver, precious stones

In 1894 Dutch troops captured the royal palace on the Indonesian island of Lombok. The native inhabitants had

What restitutions of looted art from colonial territories had been made? Which requests had been rejected?

At the end of 2016 I obtained my PhD on the subject at the Free University of Amsterdam and six months later *Treasures in Trusted Hands: Negotiating the Future of Colonial Cultural Objects* was published. That book, which examines the massive flow of colonial collections from the southern to the northern hemisphere, helped put the issue of colonial collections on the agenda. At its launch, seven museum directors from five European countries discussed it. Most of them acknowledged having problematic collections, and some were already making concrete adjustments.

## 2. THE GREAT HERITAGE MIGRATION

**A**t 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-guan* – 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 Prajñāparāmīta, 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 Bouffieux's input was more decisive. Lusinga's great-grandson from Lubumbashi, Thierry Lusinga Ng'ombe, told Bouffieux 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' (Bouffieux, '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* (PPOCE), 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.



### 3.

## MUSEUMS IN MOTION

I was eighteen years old when I visited an ethnographic museum for the first time. I felt uncomfortable, a little intimidated, walking between showcases full of old statues and other objects and hardly understanding what I saw. Metre-long pirogues – were they really used or were they works of art? Masks that looked threatening or disapproving. Small statues which I could only imagine represented jolly, fat people. Spears and shields, these I could understand. And sometimes a grave sculpture struck a chord with me – it was the clay, the old wood or stone from which they had emerged, or the still-tangible hands that had kneaded, carved or hewn them. Mostly they frightened me. Would the people for whom they had once been made have been afraid of them too? Who had made them, and what for? According to the captions, they had served to honour local gods and spirits or had been used at the birth, death or illness of a family member. And in hunting and war.

Since then, and certainly in recent years, I have visited quite a few museums in Europe, from St. Petersburg to Porto. The big difference, compared with that first acquaintance, has been that I felt more confident with what I saw, the captions were more extensive and I let them sink in better. Did they say how an object was acquired, how it got here and what the original owners' views on it were? Many museums – and this was new – no longer shied away from confronting the visitor with the inconvenient history of the objects and endeavoured to link them up with current developments in society. In what follows, I take you to a few of them: in Amsterdam, Vienna, Gothenburg and Antwerp.



*A korwar (ancestral statue) from Papua next to a coffin with an embryo from Suriname. The latter had once been a showpiece but was now an inconvenient possession. Exhibition Unexpected Encounters, Tropenmuseum Amsterdam (A-6491, A-6371d). © Jos van Beurden*

## IN SEARCH OF A NEW ROLE

Four years before the exhibition on German colonialism in Berlin, I visited *Unexpected Encounters – Hidden Stories from the Museum's Own Collection* in the Tropenmuseum Amsterdam. That was in 2012. The curators wanted to show how this museum has 'thought, researched, collected and represented' during its roughly 150 years of existence. To do this, they juxtaposed pairs of objects from different cultures and times and looked for the connection between them. There was also a 'museum issues' section. There, I saw an embryo from Suriname next to a *korwar* (ancestral statue) from Papua with a skull in it. The embryo had been an icon of the museum for years and was called 'Indian on strong water'. The unexpected encounter raised the issue of the possession of ancestral remains. The embryo had become an 'inconvenient possession' and was therefore stored in a closed box. A little further on, I saw an old mask from Angola next to the head of an Oba, as the ruler of the kingdom of Benin in Nigeria is called. That head was temporarily back in Amsterdam. In 1947, it had been moved from the Tropenmuseum to Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden, which was going to devote more attention to Africa. The museum issue, the unexpected encounter, turned out to be about the collaboration between two museums in the Netherlands that were to merge into the National Museum of World Cultures in 2014. Surprised, I wondered whether the question of whether the Benin statue should return to Nigeria was not more pressing.

The large Weltmuseum in Vienna is housed in a classical building on Heldenplatz (Heroes' Square), close to other major museums in the capital. It embodies the splendour of imperial times. In contrast, the exhibition *Ein Koloniales Ding – A Colonial Thing* at the end of 2019 was notable for its austerity. The curators presented twenty objects, each in an identical display case, and for each one, the visitor could learn about three perspectives: that of the collector, usually a European from the nineteenth century; that of a representative of the community of origin; and that of curator Claudia Augustat. It was a daring exhibition. In one showcase the object was absent: outsiders were not allowed to 'witness the magic ceremony' in which it was used, the German-Australian collector Richard Schomburgk reported in 1879, 'because otherwise it would lose its power'. Augustat's message was clear: take into account the feelings of communities of origin. In another display case there was a replica court dwarf from the kingdom of Benin, for sale in the museum

shop, and she asked whether visitors thought the shop should pay reproduction rights for it to the royal house of Benin in Nigeria. 'Offering these replicas for sale causes outrage among members of the Nigerian community in Vienna'.

Unlike these institutions in Amsterdam and Vienna, the World Museum in Gothenburg is housed in a modern building that in no way reminds visitors of Sweden's colonial past. Taking an equally modern approach, it brings together the city's colonial collections and the cultural expressions of migrants who have settled there since the 1990s, and involves them in its exhibition policy. When I came here in 2017, the permanent exhibition *Crossroads* as 'places of euphoria and tragedy' had just opened. On video screens, residents along the border between Mexico and the United States, between Brazil and Paraguay and on Cyprus explain why they get along or not. In another corner, there are ladders that African migrants made from strips of jeans to climb over the wall at Ceuta, the Spanish enclave in Morocco, and remnants of the boat they used to reach the coast. In between are objects from colonial regions, including old Inca objects. Attention is paid to the concept of *pachakuti*, which stands for a radical change that threatens or promotes the survival of the planet. For the Incas, the arrival of Europeans in the sixteenth century was such a change. For us now in Europe, it is the threat of environmental degradation.

And then there is the MAS, another museum with a beautiful, modern jacket. October 2020 marked one hundred years since the city of Antwerp had acquired its first Congo collection. As a contribution to the social debate on the colonial past, the museum organised the exhibition *100 x Congo – A Century of Congolese Art in Antwerp*. It showed how the hundred objects were acquired, what they meant and still mean to the people of Congo and to Congolese and others in Antwerp, and where their future lies. What gave the exhibition an extra charge was that it offered more than the title suggested. Beyond showing dubiously acquired objects, it was about relationships. The exhibition was the result of a collaboration between a Belgian curator and a Congolese-Belgian curator of images, Els De Palmaer and Nadia Nsayi. In the multimedia project *In Many Hands*, Belgian and Congolese artists and filmmakers have twenty-five people – Congolese from Kinshasa, Congolese from Antwerp and Flemings from Antwerp – talk about the Congo collection in the port city. Their love for it and their involvement with it and

emotions about its disappearance are palpable. In 2021, *100 x Congo* was chosen as ‘international exhibition of the year’ at the British Museums and Heritage Awards. The jury found the exhibition topical, courageous, brilliantly made and of great importance.

The art temples in Amsterdam, Vienna, Gothenburg and Antwerp are, like many other museums, searching for a meaningful role in the twenty-first century. If they bring objects’ hidden stories to the surface, their possession of these objects may clash with the views of today. Close cooperation between museums in the northern and southern hemispheres can be difficult or sometimes painful, but – which is at least as important – it can also be enriching, because it demands an understanding of the other’s point of view when looking at artefacts. Some people from the Global South, for example, might consider it not a good idea to put just any object on display. Or it may be the case that an object is beautiful, but the story of its acquisition takes away your admiration. Or we might consider that, while a river or a tree are living beings for one person, they are just water and wood to another.

## AMPUTATED BIOGRAPHIES

Exhibition policy is one way of discovering how a museum comes to terms with the colonial past. Another is to find out what kind of provenance research it is doing and what happens to the results. Provenance research is a key duty of every museum. It shows the lifecycle of an object, its biography. This has always been of interest to museums, dealers and private individuals. A biography can increase the museological or financial value of an object. The minimum it contains is information about the current and last owners: a catalogue or caption in the museum will thus state ‘From the collection of...’, ‘Acquired from...’ or ‘Described in...’, followed by the names of the private individual, dealer or museum that previously owned the object or the catalogues, books and articles in which it is described and the museums where it was previously displayed.

Most research into the provenance of ethnographic objects from colonial areas is more complicated, costly and time-consuming than provenance research into art objects, and can require extra competences. In ethnographic research, ‘histories, objects, people and events’ intersect, and researchers must ‘re-examine’ the documentation of past possessors, and the past values on which they based their collections, with ‘a practice of healthy scepticism.’ It is often less ‘finding an answer’ and more

‘clarifying the questions’, emphasises Henrietta Lidchi, Chief curator of the National Museum of World Cultures (quoted in Johnson and Veys, *Provenance #1*, 2020, p. 6). Those who content themselves with the names of the last owners and do not find out who the makers and first owners were, and under what circumstances objects were acquired, produce amputated biographies. One readily finds these in older catalogues and books.

Recent research projects, reports and catalogues show a shift in the content of provenance research, and this shift is perhaps the most remarkable feature of the current discussion. For this type of research to be complete, information from two countries must be sought: archives and other sources here in Europe, but also oral and other informal sources in the community of origin, even if it requires looking for a needle in a haystack.

Susan Legêne, former head curator of the Tropenmuseum and now historian at the Free University of Amsterdam, has been arguing for separate research for colonial objects since the 1990s. One of her arguments comes from the story of Saïdjah and Adinda in *Max Havelaar*, a classic novel by the nineteenth-century Dutch author Multatuli. In 1830 King William I had introduced the Culture System in the Dutch East Indies, forcing families to plant one fifth of their fields with predetermined products. The profits were meant to fill the gap left by the uprising in Belgium and the loss of income from the Belgian textile and mining industries. While the system was very lucrative for the Netherlands, it had a disastrous effect on many families in the colony. Legêne wrote to me: ‘Saïdjah’s father lost his buffalo and fell into poverty; he ended up selling his kris or *pusaka*, the important family heirloom that was supposed to protect the family. A kris for a new buffalo, and he might have to sell that buffalo again. Countless krisses can be found in our museums and private collections as “anonymous collectors” items’ – that is, separated from this kind of family history. The documentation often mentions the (colonial) collector, but rarely to whom the kris belongs, let alone why he gave it away. Writes Legêne: ‘We started to distinguish krisses according to a typology based on shape, style characteristics and age. The story of Saïdjah and Adinda establishes a link between the countless krisses in Dutch museums and the Cultural System, which drove many farmers into dire poverty.’ This piece of history is also part of the biography of such a family, but it is rarely discussed.



Observations such as those of Legêne and other provenance experts force us to look differently at objects such as krisses. If more of the history behind them becomes known, and it becomes clear how their migration to Europe was determined by unequal power relations, is it then still enjoyable to look at them? But what can a family do with old krisses, if the parent or grandparent who once acquired them is dead and there is not the faintest idea as to which family, village or plantation they came from?

Other experts I asked about their experience with provenance research emphasise that much of it is based on written sources kept in Europe: official sources such as reports of the colonial administration and diaries and letters from the colonial elite. But now, they are looking more and more for oral histories, documents and other sources from the communities of origin, too.

## A GIFT FROM CONGO

Thanks to some conversations in DR Congo, Maarten Couttenier ('EO.o.o.7943', 2018) discovered how requests for Belgium to return an old power Kitumba statue have been ignored up to three times. In 2016, he travelled to Boma in Congo with a photograph of the object. Archival records at the AfricaMuseum showed that the statue had been received as a 'gift' from a Belgian rubber and ivory trader in 1912. It quickly became a central piece and was often lent to other European and American museums, such as the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo, the Netherlands, in 1960. When Couttenier showed the picture in Boma, chief Baku Kapita Alphonse and other bystanders became visibly emotional. 'This important statue was once the property of Chief Ne Kuko. It belongs to us. Can it come back? We can then reactivate it, quench its thirst and feed it kola nuts', Couttenier told me. What this reveals is that the statue, after its return, would no longer be an object. The community would restore its agency. In this way, a lost object can once again become a subject.

According to Couttenier, the people of Boma still remember how their ancestors had to deal with the violence of various European

*One formal request and two serious indications that people from Boma wanted to see Kitumba statue return have remained unanswered. This might change with Belgium's new restitution policy. © AfricaMuseum, Tervuren (EO.o.o.7943)*



countries from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards. During a confrontation of Belgian soldiers with local chiefs in 1878, Alexandre Delcommune managed to seize the spiked statue of Chief Ne Kuko. Couttenier reports: 'Due to a severe drought, local chiefs had started to collect tolls on through trade routes. They used the toll proceeds to buy food. Delcommune considered this Congolese initiative unacceptable. In his memoirs, *Vingt années de vie africaine*, he describes an attack on eight of Boma's nine chiefs. Almost all of their villages were burned to the ground. The villagers had to leave in a hurry and left much behind, including the nail statue.', quotes Couttenier Delcommune.

Delcommune already knew of the statue and was keen to have it. According to his notes, it was 'more important than a human hostage': it was a 'war fetish' that he could use against thieves. Couttenier continues: 'When he had confiscated it, Chief Ne Kuko immediately asked for it back, but Delcommune was implacable. After many wanderings, it ended up in Tervuren. In the 1960s, President Mobutu again asked for it to be returned. This time the request came from the top of Congolese politics, but Belgium arranged for it to remain in Tervuren. So in 2016, it was sought for the third time, this time by the descendants of Chief Ne Kuko. But the statue still stands, hungry and thirsty as it is, in a display case with us'.

I myself saw the power statue at the end of 2018 in the newly reopened museum in Tervuren. To my surprise, it was just standing there looking beautiful and there was hardly any mention of its significance, let alone its violent history and the three restitution requests. If the new Belgian restitution policy is implemented, DR Congo's ownership of the object will be recognised. In 2021, it was moved to a new position and became one of the first statues the visitor passes by, presented as an example of loot. Or is it on its way to the exit?

The knowledge that Chief Alphonse and this community brought to this study was different in nature to much of the information found in northern museum archives. The new perspective from Boma included oral and local history, information about the importance of the sculpture to that community in the present, and the desire of Chief Ne Kuko's descendants to give the sculpture a new life upon its return. The latter may be difficult for many people in Europe to understand, but it is very important for the people of DR Congo. The indications from the DR

Congo expressed in 1878 and 1916, together with the request of around 1960 and the information gathered to date also are part of the biography of the object.

## SRI LANKAN EXPERT VERSUS DUTCH MUSEUM DIRECTOR

The next case, that of a cannon from Sri Lanka housed in the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, differs from the previous one because the southern counterparts are not local witnesses or politicians but heritage professionals and researchers. In 1975, Peter H.D.H. de Silva, a nestor in the Sri Lankan restitution debate and Director of the National Museums, visited countless museums, libraries and other institutions in Europe and North America. His aim was to inventory Sri Lankan objects of historical and cultural value abroad. He catalogued 5,000 of them, often noting one or two details per object. With over 3,000 objects, Great Britain topped the list of foreign holders by far. He had found some three hundred objects in the Netherlands and a few in Belgium.

Based on this catalogue, Sri Lanka submitted a *Statement [...] Concerning the Restitution of Significant Cultural Objects from Sri Lanka* to the First Session of UNESCO's Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to its Countries of Origin or its Restitution in case of Illicit Appropriation (ICPRCP) in May 1980. The claimed objects were in Great Britain, Germany, Switzerland, France, Austria, the United States, the Netherlands and Belgium. It was not a mega-sized claim but a modest selection from the catalogue. A particularly eagerly sought item was an almost 1.5 metre high gilt bronze statue of the female deity Tārā, from the eighth or ninth century. In 1830 Sir Robert Brownrigg had offered it to the British Museum in London, where it still is. Belgium and the Netherlands were also asked to return a modest number of objects. In 1983 the ICPRCP rejected Sri Lanka's request, as the South Asian country had not submitted evidence that bilateral negotiations had remained unsuccessful (Savoy, *Afrikas Kampf*, 2021, 146–150).

I want to talk about one of the claimed objects, and especially about the way the research on it is organised. In September 2017, the acquisition of ceremonial cannon of the King of Kandy surfaced again, when the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam started a pilot project for provenance research on ten colonial objects, of which the cannon was one. The object

## OBJECTS CLAIMED BY SRI LANKA FROM THE NETHERLANDS AND BELGIUM

*Royal Museum of Art and History, Brussels:* knife with a handle encrusted with precious stones; ivory handle from the fan of a Buddhist monk. De Silva noted the following: 'These are definitely from Sri Lanka and Sri Lanka does not have anything resembling these objects. These again would have been removed during colonial occupation The Museum's records will provide detailed information about their acquisition.'

*Tropenmuseum Amsterdam:* Royal proclamation in Sinhalese about an appointment; cloth letter case with red seal; gold-plated shell; letter on palm leaf in Sinhalese prohibiting the illegal trade in coffee, chilli, limes and eggs. De Silva noted about the two manuscripts: 'They deal with an aspect of the Dutch administration and trade in Sri Lanka. No such material is available in Sri Lanka.'

*Leiden University Library:* letter from the Chiefs of the Palace of Kandy concerning a dispute with the VOC over the cinnamon trade; palm leaf with fragments in Sinhalese from St Mark's gospel. De Silva: 'It is a royal letter sent by the Chiefs of the Palace, Kandy [...] significant for both its literary and historical value'.

*Museum Volkenkunde, Leiden:* prayer bowl; ivory mortar with pestle; ivory fragment from throne decoration. In a letter dated 21 August 1980 to the Dutch Ministry of Culture, director Pieter Pott advised against granting the request because the three objects had not been 'taken out of the island during the Dutch occupation of the island'. In a later publication, the museum stated that the mortar and pestle had been made in South India for Sri Lanka. Two of the objects have always remained in the storeroom. Only the mortar with pestle is known to have once been exhibited.

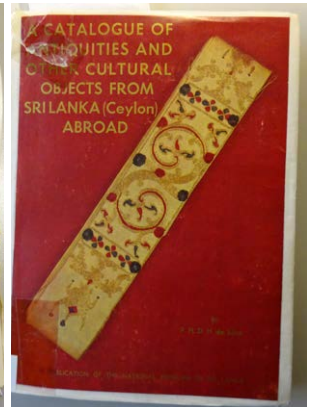
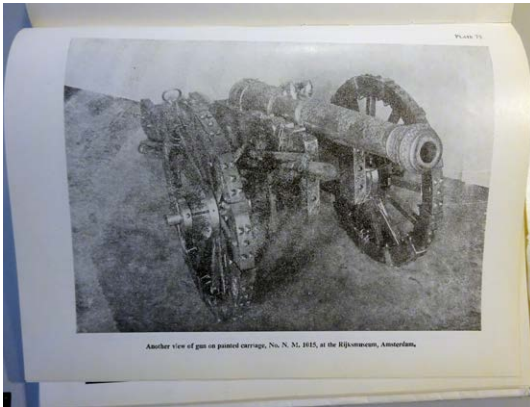
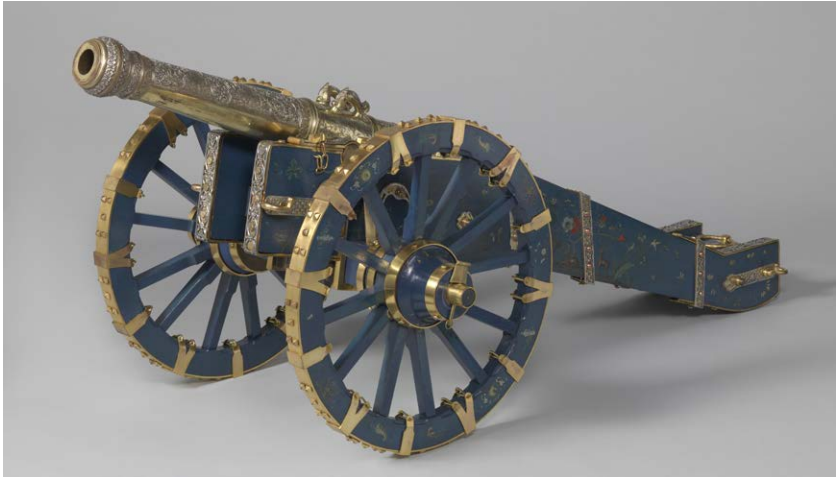
*Rijksmuseum Amsterdam:* several ceremonial stab weapons; two watercolours; ceremonial cannon captured by VOC soldiers from King Kirti Sri Rajasinha in 1765. One of the wa-

tercolours shows the conclusion of a treaty in 1766, in which the King of Kandy transferred sovereignty over the coast and cinnamon fields to the *voc*. De Silva wrote of the cannon, 'Plundered from the Palace of the King of Kandy'.

was described in detail in a recent book on Sri Lanka written by a museum curator (Wagenaar, *Cinnamon and Elephants*, 2016, pp. 120–123) but he does not mention the Sri Lankan request from 1980.

The two-wheeled cannon is blue in colour and decorated with the royal symbols of a sun, a crescent moon and the Sinhalese lion. In a battle over cinnamon supplies in 1765, *voc* soldiers took it from King Kirti Sri Rajasinha and the Dutch Governor in Colombo presented it to Stadtholder William v. It ended up in the Royal Cabinet of Curiosities and was moved from there to the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam in 1875. I have often stood looking at the cannon; while examining it in May 2017 for Dutch tv programme *EenVandaag* they wanted to know whether the cannon should be returned or not. My answer was 'Yes,' because it was clearly war booty and Sri Lanka had thus already indicated in 1980 that it wanted it back. Several Western governments and their museums had argued that the objects had been acquired in a legal manner, unrelated to colonial looting, or that they were not essential to Sri Lanka's cultural heritage.

According to director Taco Dibbits, the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam's pilot project is an 'exploration by the museum's own curators' intended to 'gain more insight into the practice of this type of provenance research and what this might mean for the policy to be formulated'. In 2019, after two years of the pilot project proceeding mostly in-house, a museum delegation visited Sri Lanka. Although the museum had created the impression in the Dutch media on the launch of the project that the research could result in a return, once in Colombo the delegation let it be known that they had come to talk about research and not about restitution. In reply, Dibbits writes that he understands the disappointment in Sri Lanka about this, but also stated: 'The Rijksmuseum does not decide on restitution, because the State of the Netherlands is the owner of the collection. It can, however, conduct provenance research, which requires good collaboration with the countries of origin. On this basis,



*The cannon of the King of Kandy, captured by the Netherlands in 1765. © Rijksmuseum Amsterdam (NM 1015). Cover of P. de Silva's catalogue and a page from it showing the cannon of Kandy. © Jos van Beurden*

their perspectives on and research into the objects can be expressed in an equal manner.'

But it is precisely the issue of equality that is causing concern in Sri Lanka. Naazima Kamardeen from the University of Colombo, who is involved in the research, is afraid that it will become an 'exercise without equivalence'. At first, the Rijksmuseum representative had told them that they wanted to learn more about 'the origin of the cannon from Kandy, its importance and the future of this object'. Kamardeen writes: 'They asked our opinion on how exactly the object should be returned. So the tone was that the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam was negotiating to

give back the object, and that the representative was looking for ways to facilitate this. I believed this, because it was already established that the cannon belonged to Sri Lanka and was considered stolen cultural property.’

In subsequent meetings, she discovered that the museum delegation was also seeking material that could undermine Sri Lanka’s legal right to the cannon. ‘It was suggested that the cannon might have been manufactured in Europe. Then I realised that there was no real trust on either side. I became suspicious, because perhaps I had unwittingly supported the achievement of their goals by leading them to all the research materials they wanted to find. It turned out to be another kind of looting – the plundering of information under a misrepresentation.’

According to Kamardeen, this example indicates ‘that there is no real equality in the proposed relationship between the parties’. She would advise the museum to be more honest about what they can and cannot do, and ‘not to lure researchers into a project by misrepresenting their true motives’. Dibbits understands the reaction: ‘The museum understands the critical attitude and the distrust of Western museums and other institutions that in the past have been uncooperative with provenance questions and restitution requests from countries of origin.’ But he is confident about the final result: ‘The research into the cannon will be continued and deepened within this cooperation with Sri Lankan researchers. The provenance report that emerges from it will be made accessible to everyone and may provide building blocks for the Minister’s consideration of a restitution decision.’ The report is expected in the spring of 2022. In addition to the cannon, the report will also discuss other Sri Lankan objects in the museum.

I am not as confident about the final outcome. I wonder whether, in the eyes of a former colony, the way a big and powerful institution like the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam does provenance research looks like a way of delaying decisions about returns. As was already established in the 1970s, the cannon of the King of Kandy is a fairly clear-cut case of war booty. Several Rijksmuseum staff members openly admit this. This method of making a provenance report takes several years. Experts in Sri Lanka wonder whether they should invest their time in this. The country has more objects in Western institutions that it wants back, and provenance research on these is also needed. The Rijksmuseum’s pilot project entered a new phase in 2019, when it started collaboration

in the PPROCE with the NIOD Institute and the National Museum of World Cultures to develop a better method for provenance research. Since then, according to the museum, the collaboration ‘has gone very well and yielded several results’.

That the desire to get the cannon back is more widely supported in Sri Lanka, is apparent from a documentary by Eric Dijkstra aired by the Dutch TV station BNN/Vara on 16 April 2021. Asked what he thought about the issue, retired navy admiral Lakshman Illangakoon answered: ‘I am angry that it should be in the Netherlands for so long. When they realised it was not good to keep it there, they should have returned it.’

## THE LARGE GREY AREA

Objects such as the Congolese nail statue and Sri Lankan cannon can be identified as war booty. Others we can be more certain were acquired fairly – just think of the table ornaments from the kingdom of Benin in Nigeria in the MAS and Museum Volkenkunde. Between these two extremes, there are masses of objects about which it is unknown how they ever left their country of origin. The AfricaMuseum wants to find out how 35,000 objects left DR Congo in the colonial days. In which cases did this occur in a controversial way? Regarding a showpiece from the Africa collection in the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam, the power statue or Nkisi Nkondi from the Congo region in Angola on the cover of this book, curator Paul Faber (Wereldmuseum, *Africa 010*, 2016, p. 15) wonders which chief in the Congo region would ever voluntarily hand over such a statue to a white trader. Was there improper pressure or violence involved? He does not know, and perhaps we will never find out. What is to be done, then, if the country of origin wants it back?

According to provenance researcher Mirjam Shatanawi (‘Colonial Collections’, 2019, p. 4), the way in which private owners donated or sold their objects to museums is ‘seldom [...] documented in museum records’ as it was ‘not considered significant at the time’. The National Museum of World Cultures possesses 47,500 objects from Java, coming from no fewer than ‘4,000 donors and sellers’. Most were simply bought, for example at markets, or were commissioned pieces, ‘but there are no purchase receipts in the documentation’. Often, even less is known; a card with an object simply states that it once came from ‘Central Africa’ or ‘New Guinea’. If even dates, names of regions or villages are missing, where does the provenance researcher start? In

such cases, cooperation with experts and communities from the areas of origin can be enriching.

This large grey area also includes objects in relation to which the suppliers have covered up the fact that they were once handed over involuntarily. They did not want to be suspected of pressure, violence or sneaking in. They used euphemisms such as 'found', 'purchased' or 'abandoned', when the reality had been different. What did a father like Saïdjah in *Max Havelaar* do when he was faced with the choice of either giving up his kris or starving to death? What did a father do when he was in danger of losing his job or was told that his son was no longer welcome at the mission school unless he gave up his religious objects? For a long time, museums and private individuals have contented themselves with this kind of euphemism. What we do not know, does not hurt us.

That collections became filled with objects without background documentation was also due to the divide and the lack of trust that existed between coloniser and colonised, between a European collector and the local people from whom they wanted to obtain objects. Someone like Frans M. Olbrechts was fully aware of this. In 1947, he became director of the AfricaMuseum in Tervuren. His new position enabled him to promote the anthropology and study of African art. Earlier, in the 1930s, he had made collecting trips through West-Africa on behalf of the city of Antwerp. In Europe, Olbrechts was known for his respect for and interest in the people of West Africa. He paid for objects they handed over to him and described them in detail. He was critical of colleagues who inappropriately asked villagers about 'the spiritual lives' of objects. But Olbrechts realised that in the eyes of the Africans, he too belonged to the side of the oppressor. Almost every European was 'distrusted' and someone to be 'feared'. There was hardly any real contact and therefore, he frankly admitted, he was seldom sure whether information was correct or not. The same applied to the information about how the intermediary who offered the objects had come by them. Often, he wanted to sell them quickly and then get away (Veirman, 'Olbrechts and the Expeditions', 2001, p. 241).

## THE ART OF LETTING GO

Widening provenance research is like performing overdue maintenance. It requires re-reading sources that have already been studied and tapping new ones. It fills gaps in our knowledge, as shown by the example of



the Congolese nail statue. But at what stage should researchers bring in counterparts from the country of origin and who are these counterparts? At the conference *Beyond Collecting: New Ethics for Museums in Transition*, organised by the Goethe Institut, the National Museum of Tanzania and others in Dar es Salaam on 5 and 6 March 2020, provenance research on remains of ancestors was linked to repatriation and the involvement of governments and communities of origin. 'All one-sided research on ancestors in European and Western anthropological collections not serving their return should be stopped', was concluded and 'provenance research must be done in close cooperation with the ancestors' countries and communities'.

Should those governments and communities also have a bigger say about objects? Should that input be already being sought at the stage when objects are selected for study? Immediately afterwards? Or only from the moment a Western heritage institution gets stuck? And what about objects whose place or people of origin is unknown? Whom can you address then? Underlying these questions is another, more political one. Kamardeen points it out: who decides which collections get priority in provenance research? Can it also be institutions and experts from former colonies? At the moment, this rarely happens.

Smaller heritage institutions in Belgium and the Netherlands, such as missionary and municipal museums, see the desirability of provenance research but also dread it. Some are not even aware of the presence of colonial collections. Others fear unpleasant discoveries and an increasingly vocal outside world. Missionary museums have to take into account ageing staff and dwindling budgets. They mainly depend upon volunteers, only a few of whom have the requisite expertise. I was also told that openness about possible disputed pieces in the collection can feel like airing their dirty laundry and betraying deceased predecessors.

Provenance research can, in case of a return-intention, provide an extra push, an emotional one. If owners here really get to grips with how certain objects once came to their collections, and make use of this knowledge from there, it will be easier to let go of them. Doing research together with communities of origin and on an equal footing helps us to have a more open discussion about where these objects are best suited. We may still let them go with a tear, but we can live with the loss.

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Although some institutions and researchers have been doing thorough provenance research for decades, we are only just beginning. According to a survey by the Dutch Council for Culture for its October 2020 advice for the handling of colonial collections, only one in ten museums with colonial collections has ‘a good overview’ of what it possesses. One third has not yet made an overview. The others are somewhere in between. In Belgium, some museums and universities started researching colonial human remains in 2019. The AfricaMuseum has set in motion a provenance research program in cooperation with the National Museum of DR Congo. Some smaller museums, such as Ghent University Museum, research their collections. But for most heritage institutions, provenance research in the broader sense of the word has yet to get off the ground.

Looking at our two countries, and also other countries in Europe, there seem to be good intentions to carry out provenance research. It does provide new insights, but there could be greater focus. Effective forms of collaboration are on the way but are still rare. How do you arrange a fair balance of power between the owning institution and the country, museum or community with the indigenous knowledge about an object? What can a country or community of origin do, if the possessor of a much-wanted object spreads the provenance research over such a long period of time that it looks like a delaying tactic? And with whom does a well-meaning possessor collaborate, if the origin really is unknown?

This kind of research is such a heavy burden that one might ask whether a slimmed-down provenance investigation would suffice for objects that everyone clearly believes to be looted. This would at least create space for equally urgent research into other objects with amputated biographies and would speed up the decolonisation of Western museum collections. But with this thought, I hear in the distance a spontaneous opera choir of northern museum employees singing *non fare, andato è andato* (don’t do it, gone is gone). Their fear? If you make a mistake and give it back to the wrong persons, will they ever be able to return it to its rightful owner?

## 4. THE 'SANS-PAPIERS' OF COLONIALISM

Since 1986, I have been a regular visitor to Ethiopia. In Addis Ababa, I always drop in at the National Museum to say hello to Lucy. Lucy is old – 3.2 million years of age. She got her name when members of the Ethiopian–Western team who found her skeleton in a dried-up lake in the north-east of the country listened that night to ‘Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds’ by the Beatles. It sounds romantic, but as is often the case with these kinds of discoveries, the Western researchers took most of the credit for the find and the local contribution remained somewhat obscured. But without their Ethiopian colleagues and local Afar guides, they would never have reached that desert and would never have found her. The Ethiopians lovingly gave her another name: Dinkenes, meaning ‘beauty’. Perhaps we have difficulty pronouncing this pet name, but with a little practice it catches on quickly. Dinkenes has always stayed close to where she was found – near her own ground. What was found of her skeleton lies open and exposed on a soft surface under bulletproof glass.

When I ponder the many dead and their body parts that were taken away from colonial areas without permission, which often merely languish in depots, Dinkenes often comes to my mind. Of course, there are big differences. Dinkenes was not a human being but a humanin. She lived millions of years ago. Nobody misses her personally. The colonial dead and their body parts, on the other hand, were humans and relatively recent. There are plenty of communities who suffer the loss of ancestors. But unlike Dinkenes, most of these dead will never be named, nor will it be known where they came from. While Ethiopia and the world enjoy and respect Dinkenes, many of the ‘sans-papiers’ of colonialism,

ancestors without names or travel documents, are no longer welcome at institutions in European countries. They want to get divest themselves of them in a decent way.

Europeans in the colonial period appropriated skeletons, skulls, pelvises, bones, foetuses, feet, hands and other body parts. Most of the time, they did so without the consent of the next of kin – as war trophies or for scientific purposes. Often, they collected them themselves; sometimes they bought them from local traders, from a shop window or back room. If required, these traders would take Europeans to suitable places to find skulls. In the most gruesome cases, they were prepared to kill people to deliver their skulls.

That this racist attitude led to excesses was proven by the young biologist Herman Bernelot Moens (1875–1938) from Maastricht in the south of the Netherlands. Early in the twentieth century, he conceived the plan to cross ‘a “lower” race of people with a species of great apes’ by inseminating human sperm into female chimpanzees and gorillas in the Congo region, as the anthropologist Raymond Corbey relates (*Wildness and Civilisation*, 1989, pp. 75–77). Considering the state of scientific research at the time – a prominent German and French scientist supported his initiative – Corbey argued that the plan ‘was not such a bad idea’. When the biologist went in search of funds, the Church press and public opinion rejected his plan. Only the Dutch Royal family supported it. In a letter to Queen Wilhelmina of 1907, he emphasised ‘the importance of science and mankind and for the honour of the Netherlands’, and that it was only a preliminary study rather than an actual hybridisation. Bernelot Moens received a few hundred guilders from ‘Queen Wilhelmina, her husband, Prince Hendrik, and her mother, Princess Emma’. It was too little to carry out the plan (Zanderink and Frankenhuis, *Oog in oog*, forthcoming).

If governments of former colonies are interested in ancestral remains, it is mostly identifiable, preferably famous ancestors. The repatriation of their remains can strengthen the identity of the country. In 2009, Ghana managed to reclaim the head of anti-colonial hero Badu Bonsu from the Netherlands. In 2014, after years of pressure, Vanuatu recovered from France the skull of rebel leader Grand Chief Atai, murdered in 1878. DR Congo wants the skull of Lusinga Iwa Ng’ombem and the tooth of Patrice Lumumba back from Belgium. Tanzania is after the skull – now in Germany – of Chief Songea Mbano, who was, together with some sixty other anticolonial fighters, executed by German colonial troops in

1906. Namibia deviates from this line. In order to ease the pain of the genocide at the beginning of the twentieth century, it wants the skulls of unknown Nama and Herero back from Germany. Sometimes, communities of origin set greater store by the repatriation of their ancestors than their governments do. It helps them to reconcile the past.

## SILENT OBSERVERS

Curator Maria Patricia Ordoñez of the Museo de Arte Precolombino in Quito, Ecuador, also studied ancestors, albeit very old ones. A few years back, during a grand tour of Europe, Ordoñez (described in *Unbundled*, 2019) looked at how museums in Europe deal with mummies from the Andes. Looking back, she writes to me: ‘Confronted with fully loaded depots, mummies fill me with wonder. They force me to think about mortality, rituals and transcendence and to step outside my own cultural framework. Their histories are full of imbalance. These mummies therefore deserve extra care. They are witnesses to the past and silent observers of how the world deals with them now.’

In each of the seventeen European museums she visited, ‘the respect that curators paid as interest for the preservation of these ancient bodies was different. Certainly, the mummies touched them all, and for that I am grateful, the temperature was strictly controlled everywhere, but the manner of preservation was sometimes disturbing.’ Most mummies were in crates or boxes. These were checked from time to time. ‘Some lay in a twisted posture or were completely naked, stripped of the textile in which they had once been wrapped. Sometimes there were strange objects in the same box or crate, which then forced themselves on the people inside’.

In the Museum of Art and History in Brussels she examined six mummies – some had remains of tissue attached to them – and one head. The museum had acquired half of them from a Belgian dealer in 1833. They arrived in one box and according to the inventory they came from the interior of Peru. Ordoñez found another document indicating that they came from the Araucania region, which is not in Peru but in Chile. According to her, this confusion indicates that the Belgian dealer had not bought them directly ‘from the grave’. The other three came from the Belgian vice-consul in Valparaiso, Chile, in 1846. ‘With one of them, it was the mummy of a child, there were ten earthenware jars.’

Ordoñez spent most of her days in Europe at Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden. There she saw young curators diligently setting up a storage

room for six ancient Andean bodies and two heads. 'I rarely see such respect, not even in Ecuador'. In her country, some collections are not used at all; others are used for tourism. She found the contrast as welcome as it was sobering. 'It was the first museum outside Latin America where I saw mummies touching the intestines of caretakers. So these dead people are not only silent observers, watching us, but they also cause those who really look into them to waver between fear and empathy.'

Museum Volkenkunde had bought the six mummies and two heads from a dealer in Amsterdam in 1974. According to the documentation provided, an Argentine archaeologist had taken them from a grave on the border between Peru and Chile around 1910. They also included fifty-nine grave finds. Based on research, the museum concluded that they came from not one but several graves, including one in Argentina. Since 1992, the museum no longer exhibits the mummies. Ordoñez notes: 'The glass showcases in which they were stored did not guarantee their adequate preservation. Moreover, the unpleasant odour they gave off bothered the curators and visitors.'

Despite the unclear origin – if museums want to return these Andean mummies, where do they knock on the door: in Peru, Chile or Argentina? – Ordoñez could not let go of the repatriation issue during her European grand tour. 'Of course I am thinking about repatriation. If a museum in Europe no longer studies them, does not take good care of them and does not exhibit them, why do they not go back? Museums with mummies that are highly symbolic for their communities of origin or countries of origin should actively engage in that discussion. That will also help them to appreciate mummies more.' But for Ordoñez, 'repatriation is not the only outcome'.

## FASCINATION WITH THE OTHER

Ordoñez's observations on mummies tell us a lot about the relatively recent ancestral remains that Europeans took with them from colonial areas. Their removals are the result of the power imbalance between north and south, of brutal grave robbery and the help of local archaeologists and traders. Much of the information about their origin is missing or incomplete. Such body parts are exhibited less and less, because their descendants object to it. Western museums and their visitors also find it more and more difficult to deal with them. But why were they so fascinating in the first place?

Fascination about ‘the other’ initially arose from curiosity. At the beginning of Europe’s colonial expansion, seafarers and sailors took such remains with them. As with objects, they did so sparingly. Historian Fenneke Sysling of Leiden University (*De onmeetbare mens*, 2015, p. 28) has found the oldest known example of someone in our countries taking away part of a dead person. In 1624, VOC physician and preacher Justus Heurnius (1587–ca. 1652) sent a skull from Java to his brother Otho (1577–1652), anatomist in Leiden. Unfortunately, Otho’s conclusions are not known. We do know – but this was one and a half centuries later – what conclusion Petrus Camper (1722–1789) came to. He was one of the many scholars in Europe making taxonomies of different peoples in an encyclopaedic way. According to the Museum of the University of Groningen, which owns part of his collection, Camper’s study of Khoisan skulls in South Africa and Madagascan inhabitants did not lead to the kind of racial hierarchy that emerged in the nineteenth century. Apart from minimal differences in pigment and physiognomy, Africans and Europeans were, according to him, alike.

## BETTER DO IT SECRETLY

In the mid-nineteenth century, physical anthropology emerged as a scientific discipline and a rather closed-minded racial theory emerged. Physical anthropologists believed they could demonstrate, using new instruments for measuring skulls, the superiority of the European race. First, they mapped differences between peoples living close together, for example between Pygmies and Bantu in the Congo Basin or between Papuans, Sumatrans and Javanese in the Indonesian archipelago. Then they compared them with population groups in Europe and elsewhere in the world.

Friedrich Voltz, a German naturalist, went on an expedition to Suriname in 1852, by order of the Dutch government, to investigate whether the country was suitable as a ‘settlement place for German emigrants’. He excelled in researching rocks, plants and whatever he could find in the soil. Most of his collection is now in Naturalis Biodiversity Center (henceforward, Naturalis) in Leiden, the largest natural history museum in the Netherlands. He also came across skeletons and sent body parts from Warau Indians in two crates to the Ministry of Colonies in The Hague. According to his biographer Salomon Kroonenberg (*De man van de berg*, 2020, p. 190), he had ‘secretly dug them up’. Currently, nobody knows the whereabouts of either the crates or the objects that

Voltz had sent.

Because scientists and students who could not travel to the colonies also wanted to study the differences between races, the demand for body parts increased exponentially. Physical anthropologists, sailors, colonial officials and soldiers, traders and diplomats supplied them and sometimes earned a lot of money in the process. In 1884, writes Sysling (*De onmeetbare mens*, 2015, pp. 32–33), curator Lindor Serrurier of Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden asked the colonial administration in Ambon if, ‘on the occasion of rushes, murder, grave openings or the like, any heads or skulls [...] came into your possession’ (no means was too crazy, apparently), they might send them to him. A colleague of Serrurier advised to encourage European collectors of human remains to visit hospitals in harbours and ‘take measurements of corpses of natives of both sexes and all ages’. In the Dutch East Indies, instructions circulated on how to strip a corpse of its soft tissues so that an intact skeleton could be sent. If the local population objected to this grave-dressing or corpse examination, the advice was not to stop it but to do it more covertly.

Couttenier (*‘Fysieke Antropologie’*, 2009) describes how, at the beginning of the last century, Belgian researchers took away the skeletons of Congolese workers who had died as a result of forced labour in rubber cultivation or who were lying dead by the side of the road. In their diaries, they wrote, for example, ‘cadaver decomposing beside the path’ or ‘skeleton two metres from the road’.

To achieve their universal ambitions, museums wanted not only remains of dead people from their own colonial backyards, but also from other areas. Thus, Andean mummies and tattooed Māori heads from New Zealand became objects of desire throughout Europe. Skull collectors in the Dutch East Indies had buyers as far away as North America. The Royal Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences (hereafter, Batavian Society), founded in 1778 in the colony, donated sixty skulls from various population groups to a research institute in Vienna in 1858. Among the more than five hundred sets of human remains that the AfricaMuseum in Tervuren collected, there are also remains from Angola, Gabon, Libya, Colombia and Oceania and some of unknown origin.

Some museums continued to collect ‘in an encyclopaedic way’ and amass exhaustive collections for a very long time. According to former curator David van Duuren, the Tropenmuseum Amsterdam received skulls – mostly confiscated from head-hunters – other human re-



mains, measuring equipment, plaster casts of heads and photographic material from that area until New Guinea was handed over to Indonesia in 1962.

## ZOO OF HUMANS

Before the first ancestral remains came to Belgium and the Netherlands, living people from newly conquered places had appeared in the streets of Antwerp, Amsterdam and other cities. Some, like a prince from Congo, had come of their own accord to do political or commercial business. Others had been contracted by the entertainment business or by painters such as Rembrandt van Rijn who used them as models. Still others had been abducted. Art historian Jan van der Waals ('Exotic Curiosities', 1992, p. 164) mentions how Johan Maurits, the Prince of Orange who governed the Dutch colony of Brazil from 1637 to 1644, had six native Brazilians perform martial dances at a feast he had organised on his return to The Hague. It caused quite considerable consternation. The Hague clergymen were outraged, not only because the feast was on a Sunday but also because the six were hardly wearing any clothes.

From the end of the nineteenth century onwards, people from the South Pacific, Asia, Africa and northern Lapland were increasingly shown in public. This happened at world exhibitions and in circuses and zoos and continued well into the twentieth century. Members of communities that were then seen as 'natural peoples' functioned not only as objects for viewing but also as proof of the superiority of the white race and white civilisation.

At the 1883 International Colonial and Export Trade Exhibition in Amsterdam, the people on show came from the Dutch East Indies and Suriname. One of them, a thirteen-year-old boy from Suriname, was placed in the middle of the Museumplein. Surrounded by a few earthenware jars and a stool, he had to demonstrate his skills on the hand drum. Wooden fences kept dozens of bystanders at a distance. His name is recorded: Johannes Kojo. A photo of him was on display at the 2017 exhibition *Afterlives of Slavery* at the Tropenmuseum.

At the colonial exhibitions in Antwerp in 1885 and 1894 and the one in Tervuren in 1897, there were hundreds of Congolese. They lived in imitation villages. Some of them became seriously ill. The makers of the exhibition *100 x Congo* in the MAS are racking their brains for a place to commemorate seven Congolese who died of disease at the 1894 World's



*Johannes Kojo from Suriname drumming on the Museumplein in Amsterdam (1883). © Rijksmuseum Amsterdam (RP-F 1994 12)*

Fair. They were between 17 and 25 years old. Only their first names are still known. They were buried in a mass grave, together with countless 'less wealthy' Antwerp citizens.

Sometimes the viewing objects resisted their role. Herero and Nama from South West Africa (now Namibia) thwarted the intentions of the organisers of the 1896 Berlin colonial exhibition. According to BBC journalist David Olusoga and historian Casper Erichsen (*The Kaiser's Holocaust*, 2010, p. 94), they refused to put on the 'primitive' clothes that the organisers had laid out for them. They were only prepared to perform in the European costumes and with the modern rifles they had been taught to use at home. To the surprise and confusion of the spectators, some Africans spoke German or Afrikaans and carried a Bible. It did not fit in with the image they had of the colonised.

Not every European swallowed the idea of human zoos so readily, as proven by three students of the Haarlem Business School who visited the Hagenbeck Zoo in Hamburg in 1914 (Stockman, *Jouw Helena*, 2021, pp. 9–10). To their dismay they saw how some Nubian men and women were locked up in a cage. The men had to drum, while the women had to sit still in front of a fake hut. According to the students, the animals

in the zoo on their little islands surrounded by deep gullies had more freedom of movement than the Nubians.

One of the last human zoos was at the Brussels Expo in 1958, and again it featured Congolese, as Flemish television showed in a broadcast on 17 April 2018. The Congolese pavilion had 'a few huts, a small lake and some pirogues, manned by, yes, "natives"'. The Belgian government had also allowed several hundred Congolese to come as guests, that is, as viewers. They were educated people, future leaders; this trip allowed them to get to know a 'civilised' European country. When white children threw bananas at the Congolese in the pavilion, the people in the zoo stopped. They had the support of their Congolese compatriots, who also made it clear that they found the fake village an embarrassing spectacle. Coming from all corners of the colony, most of them did not know each other. Because they could talk about politics more freely in Brussels than in Congo and because leaders from other African countries were present at the Expo, their anti-colonial feelings grew and for them, Expo 58 became a turning point in their struggle for independence.

Late in 2021, the AfricaMuseum opened the exhibition *Human Zoo. The age of colonial exhibitions* about the forgotten history of the human zoos. It is a travelling exhibition that was first presented in 2012 in the Musée du quai Branly in Paris and is on display in the AfricaMuseum in the context of the colonial exhibition of 1897. A text by Africanus Horton, a writer in the then Crown Colony Sierra Leone, particularly touched me: 'When will there be a happy time when modern anthropologists and philosophers [...] will stop devising studies whose only purpose is to denigrate oppressed races?' He wrote these words in 1868!

## A U-TURN IN RACIAL THEORIES

In 1958, a turnaround in thinking about racial theories and ancestral remains from colonial areas was already looming. The wave of declarations of independence in Asia and Africa may have played a role in this, but to an even greater extent, so did the realisation in Europe of the impact of the racist Nazi regime. The systematic extermination of Jews and other groups caused so much pain and disgust that support for research into racial differences crumbled.

Already in 1951, a breakthrough had come. After robust discussions, UNESCO member states declared that the concept of 'race' used until then was unscientific. Humanity was one, there was one human race,

homo sapiens, and we had common ancestors. They did not deny that differences existed between people, but these were subordinate to the larger reality of one race. Hereby the UN organisation undermined the analyses of traditional physical anthropologists. In the decades that followed, similar statements followed. Yet physical anthropology did not disappear. It is still important in archaeology, biology, cultural anthropology and medicine, as well as in technical and forensic investigation.

## A MUSEUM'S HEADACHE FILE

After 1951, nothing changed immediately in the practice of heritage institutions and research institutes dealing with ancestral remains. Sometimes collections moved from one institution to another. In 1964, the museum in Tervuren transferred its human remains to the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences in Brussels and, a few years later, the Tropenmuseum sent its collection of remains on long-term loan to Museum Vrolik of the Medical Faculty of the University of Amsterdam. But as they never left the boxes and disappeared into storage, the Tropenmuseum, somewhat frustrated, decided in 2002 to take them back and commence research into their origins.

That was easier said than done. David van Duuren, who had once studied physical anthropology and who, as he puts it, 'grew up with the UNESCO Declaration of 1951', was put in charge. Van Duuren remembers many skulls from Surabaya on Java: 'That was a port city and therefore a melting pot in any case, and it became even more so because of the many building activities. The construction workers came from everywhere and nowhere. If someone fell from a scaffold and was dead, the doctor determining his death did not know his name, let alone where he came from. The doctor prepared the skull for transport to the Netherlands, but it passed through so many hands that DNA research became very difficult.'

Often only the place of origin was noted: 'Skull, New Guinea'. But since New Guinea 'was enormous and had countless peoples, such a note was of little use. Bones could be a real problem.' Van Duuren (*Physical Anthropology*, 2010, p. 42) remembers collection number 2296-I, which included 610 whole bones and bone fragments. Collection number 2296-570 included 655 bones. The Tropenmuseum is still struggling with many ancestral remains. It would like to repatriate them, but this is hardly ever successful. Only two series of 'skeleton parts' and a collection of bones on loan were returned to the Suriname Museum in Paramaribo in 2009.

In the years to come, heritage institutions will continue to examine their collections of ancestral remains and return some of them. In the Netherlands, the National Museum of World Cultures (of which, as mentioned, the Tropenmuseum is part) and the Vrije Universiteit are leading the large *Pressing Matter* research project. They will be working closely with communities and experts from countries of origin. One of its earliest activities is the cooperation between Utrecht University Museum and Pusaka Nias Museum – Nias is an island close to Sumatra. Both museums will study plaster casts of faces from the colonial era, so-called Nias masks. In Belgium, four federal museums and three universities have been working together since 2019 as part of the *Human Remains Origin(s) Multidisciplinary Evaluation* (HOME) project on new policies for colonial human remains, which takes into account the wishes expressed by descendants in Congo.

## KING BADU BONSU II

Generally speaking, the transfer of ancestral remains receives less publicity than that of objects. Sometimes this is understandable, for example when hundreds of thousands of bones have served for years as research material in education, but upon the termination of this function, have remained unattended for years and then had to make way for something else. The less identifiable they are, the harder it is to find a government of a former colony that is willing to accept them. Sometimes the lack of publicity is less understandable. The recent plan by the Free University of Brussels to transfer skulls to the University of Lubumbashi in Congo only came to light after journalist Bouffieux had written about it.

However, there is often publicity when the skull of a well-known person is involved, or when a delegation from the source community comes to collect ancestral remains with some ceremony. This was the case in 2009 with the transfer of the head of an African prince. For decades, it had been floating in a jar full of formol in a depot of Leiden University Medical Centre (LUMC). Five years earlier, writer Arthur Japin had visited the LUMC to do research on the Ghanaian Ashanti princes Kwasi Boachi and Kwame Poku, about whom he wrote the novel *The Two Hearts of Kwasi Boachi*. There he found a friend of Kwasi's father, the Ahanta king Badu Bonsu. But while Major General Jan Verveer had given the little princes 'as a present' to the Dutch king in 1837, King Badu

Bonsu had a very different fate. For it was his head that was floating around and when Japin looked the king in the eye, he thought: 'I see a human being. And he does not belong here.'

From that moment on, he could not get Badu Bonsu's head out of his own head. In 2008, Japin was invited to a state banquet in honour of President John Kufuor of Ghana. The writer managed to raise the issue with Queen Beatrix and President Kufuor. Shortly thereafter, the Ghanaian ambassador asked for repatriation. It was already known then that the Ahanta people wanted it back. In their view, a person only goes to the afterlife when his body is buried in its entirety.

Who was this Ahanta king and how had his head come to the Netherlands? The story concerned colonial interests and economic changes in western Africa. In the first half of the nineteenth century, local sovereigns and wholesalers, as well as colonial powers, increasingly switched from slave trading to agriculture and agricultural exports. The Netherlands also started to recruit African soldiers to be deployed in the Dutch East Indies. Africans were able to withstand the climate and the colonial administration needed them to break the local resistance.

Princes in the area that is now Ghana had to determine their position in relation to the Republic. The Republic liked to play them off against each other. When King Badu Bonsu suspected that the Dutch were forging close links with the king of the Ashanti and some other neighbouring rulers, he adopted an oppositional, militant stance. This led to violent confrontations, during one of which his soldiers killed two Dutch envoys. King Badu Bonsu hung their heads on his throne as a trophy. A first colonial counter-attack was disastrous for the Netherlands and its rapidly deployed African recruits. But in a new attack in 1838, Major General Verveer succeeded in arresting the Ahanta king. In the ensuing trial, Badu Bonsu was sentenced to the noose. Immediately after his death, a Dutch surgeon removed his head from his torso and sent it to the University of Leiden for scientific research.

One hundred and seventy-one years later, on 23 July 2009, ten Ahanta dignitaries made their appearance at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in The Hague for the handover ceremony. Minister Maxime Verhagen said that it marked the end of an 'unfortunate and shameful' episode in the relationship between the two countries. The Ghanaian leaders, as a tribute to their ancestors, sprinkled the Minister's carpet with Dutch gin. In doing so, they built on the gin custom that fleet captain Michiel

de Ruyter had introduced into West Africa in the seventeenth century. Then they returned with the head to Ghana. It found its final resting place there in 2012.

## WANTED: A MEMORIAL PLACE

Because in the case of most of the ancestral remains it is not known which colonial region or village they came from, let alone to whom they belonged, the question arises: how do you respect the memory of these anonymous dead people and their body parts? Once they were living people, lovers, parents, children, unborn lives. Now they are wandering souls. But their descendants still feel the loss. Even people whose names we no longer know are not without rights. They have, as Hannah Arendt (*The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 1968, pp. 296, 297) so astutely put it, ‘the right to have rights’ and ‘the right to belong to something’.

Very occasionally, these anonymous dead are given their own *lieu de mémoire* or place of memory, a notion coined by French historian Pierre Nora. The Māori in New Zealand and the Aboriginal peoples in Australia have created sacred spaces for them. But most former colonies lack such a place of remembrance, or perhaps we should say, such places – one per population group or sometimes even per community. In European countries, there are also no places to bury and commemorate dead bodies and body parts from colonial regions.

That there is a need for such places demonstrated the MAS in relation to the seven Congolese youths who had died during a colonial exhibition. Susan Legêne once suggested placing a monument in an Amsterdam cemetery to commemorate the unknowns whose remains were used, without consent, for the science of physical anthropology. But the idea was put on hold because such a decision could not be made unilaterally and a cemetery in the Netherlands probably had too many Christian connotations, while most skulls and bones in the Tropenmuseum, where she worked at the time, came from the Indonesian archipelago and therefore most probably belonged to Muslims and followers of indigenous religions.

Something must be done, and one thing is clear: a memorial of this kind is best shaped in close consultation with communities of origin.

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For many, the history of the mass transportation of ancestral remains is even more disconcerting than that of religious, cultural and historical objects. Those dead ancestors have been part of a racial hierarchy which still troubles us today.

More and more museums and other institutions in Belgium and the Netherlands respect the fact that it is not they, but communities of origin who have the right to tell the story of these ancestors and to preserve their remains. For the time being, however, the remains of former leaders and heroes whose 'papers' are known are being preserved. For the 'sans-papiers' of colonialism, things look bleaker. Where are they welcome? They are unwanted aliens and pay the price for the ruthless construction of the European feeling of superiority in the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth.



# PART II

## THRIFTY RETURNS IN THE 1970S

**A**s in many other European countries, in the Netherlands and Belgium it was entrepreneurs who initiated the colonial expansion. In the Republic of the Seven United Provinces, wealthy businessmen joined forces in the *voc* and the *wic*. They traded, started plantations or founded industrial enterprises. Over the years, the *voc* and *wic* acquired more than forty colonial possessions in Asia, Africa and North and South America. They were colonies, trading posts and forts. Many of the powers given to the companies by the Republic were similar to those of a state. At the end of the eighteenth century, the Republic assumed control of all *voc* and *wic* possessions. With the exception of the Dutch East Indies, Suriname and the Caribbean islands, they were exchanged, sold or taken away from the Dutch in the following years.

In Belgium, a king was the entrepreneur and engine behind the expansion. Through skilful manoeuvring at the Berlin Conference (1884–1885), Leopold II gained control of a large area around the Congo River in Central Africa. He founded the Congo Free State (1885–1908) and became its ruling authority. Thereafter, the Belgian state took over the king's private property and the Belgian Congo came into being. After the German defeat in 1918, the German colonies of Rwanda and Burundi were added to Belgium's mandate. Two centuries before, in 1722, Habsburg Austria had set up the Ostend Company to compete with the *voc* in China and Bengal. For a short time, the Company trumped the *voc* in the tea trade in China, but in 1731 the company was officially disbanded.

Following their independence, the new countries wanted part of the cultural heritage taken during the colonial period to be returned. In 1949, the Netherlands and Indonesia started negotiations on this. It was not until a quarter of a century later, in 1975, that they agreed on *Joint Recommendations by the Dutch and Indonesian Team of Experts, Concerning Cultural Cooperation in the Area of Museums and Archives, Including the Transfer of Objects* (hereafter, *Joint Recommendations*). A copy of the document is in the National Archive in The Hague. After Congo's independence in 1960, Belgium and Congo discussed restitution and, after ten years, reached an agreement. Unfortunately, the document in which this was laid down has still not been found.

The two largest former colonies dominate the discussion on restitution. The smaller ones, Burundi, Rwanda, Suriname and the Caribbean islands, are often left out in the cold. This is not justified. Over the years, Suriname and the Caribbean have recovered collections of pre-Columbian shards and colonial archives. Between Burundi and Belgium, there is no form of conversation, but Rwanda is talking intensively with Belgium about sharing colonial archives and returning objects.

Amid the current developments in the restitution debate, the negotiations with Indonesia and Congo in the years 1960–1980 seem far away. Belgium and the Netherlands only made sparse returns at the time. How did the talks proceed so soon after almost four centuries of colonialism and Indonesia's extremely bloody struggle for independence, and after the exploitation and often humiliating and racist treatment of the Congolese? What wishes did the former colonies express and how did the former colonisers respond? What was finally agreed and were those agreements honoured?

## 5. INDONESIA, THE NETHERLANDS AND DIPONEGORO'S KRIS

**O**f the many major wars waged by the Netherlands in the Indonesian archipelago, the Java War (1825–1830) claimed the largest number of victims: an estimated 200,000 dead on the Javanese side, most of them from starvation and exhaustion, and 8,000 European and 7,000 soldiers from the archipelago on the Dutch side. After the defeat of the Javanese aristocracy and farmers, King William I was able to introduce the Culture System of forced production of export crops. This became, as mentioned, a disaster for the peasants.

Besides large-scale confrontations, there were countless smaller ones. There was always 'one somewhere and often in several places at once' (Hagen, *Koloniale Oorlogen in Indonesië*, 2018). The violence could be indescribable. Particularly notorious were the actions of Jan Pieterszoon Coen's men on the Banda Islands in 1621. Of the 15,000 inhabitants, the Dutch murdered, expelled or enslaved 14,000. Then and later, here and elsewhere, colonial soldiers regularly misbehaved. Sometimes they continued to shoot at rebels and villagers even though the battle was over and their superiors had told them to stand down. Or they looted bodies of the dead, even though this was forbidden. In wars on Bali and the island of Lombok, regional rulers chose the *puputan* ritual, in which the defeated ruler and his entire retinue, including children, would either fight to the death or else die by suicide or kill each other in front of the approaching enemy.

These wars also produced heroes and Prince Diponegoro (1785–1855) was a very great one. He was a hero during the Java War, but later also for Soekarno and Mohammad Hatta, who proclaimed Indonesian in-



LEFT: *Diponegoro*, lithograph by C.C.A. Last, 1835, after an original pencil drawing by A.J. Bik, 1830. © National Museum of World Cultures Collection (TM 1574 32) RIGHT: *Statue of Prince Diponegoro on the square of the National Monument in Jakarta*. © Jos van Beurden

dependence in 1945. And he still is. Many cities have a street named after him, there is a Diponegoro University and a museum and at the national monument in Jakarta there is a huge statue. It goes without saying that Indonesia cherishes every memory of him and wants to possess everything that was his, including what is still in the Netherlands.

## A FIND

At the end of the Java War, Dutch general Hendrik de Kock invited Prince Diponegoro for peace talks at the residence in Magelang, Central Java. Upon arrival, the two did not talk: De Kock had him handcuffed and shortly afterwards sent into exile to Makassar on the far away island of Sulawesi. At the time, De Kock's performance horrified in Java, while it evoked pride and nationalistic feelings among many Dutch people, but not with everyone. After a visit to Diponegoro in his place of exile, Prince Hendrik (1820–1879) wrote to his father, later King William II, how warmly the exile had received him, and called the way the Netherlands had dealt with the rebel leader a 'blot' and a breach of trust with

Javanese rulers. 'No Head will ever want to have anything to do with us again' (quoted in Wassing-Visser, *Koninklijke Geschenken*, 1995, p. 71). When he returned home, he was told not to air this opinion in public.

As with all prominent men in the colony, Diponegoro owned several krisses (stabbing weapon). The kris in Dutch possession was a most important sign of his status. In 1975, Indonesia had asked for objects related to its national heroes and the Netherlands had promised to look for them. Diponegoro's weapon was a very important one. But it was as if it had fallen off the radar and might never be found again. Until, on 4 March 2020, a press release from the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science arrived out of the blue: the kris had been handed over to Indonesia. The weapon arrived in Jakarta on 5 March. Both the research into it and its departure from the Netherlands had taken place in relative silence.

Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden had discovered the weapon – it had been in its own depot. In the press release we see a picture of three happy people: Culture Minister Ingrid van Engelshoven, Indonesian ambassador I Gusti Agung Wesaka Puja and museum director Stijn Schoonderwoerd. In front of them is the smooth, gold-leafed sheath, with the kris inside it. On 10 March 2020, the Dutch royal couple and Indonesia's President Joko Widodo and his wife showed the lost relic in public: corrugated blade and golden snake head, flowers and leaves. Everyone was happy, and the media in Indonesia delighted. The precious weapon was shown at a special exhibit in the Museum Nasional in October 2020.

All that time, Diponegoro's kris was suspected to be in the Netherlands, but no one could confirm it. There was not even anyone who knew what the kris looked like. In a lecture in 1997, Susan Legêne talked about the 'game of disappearance and appearance', wondering whether that 'not-knowing' was a 'not-wanting-to-know' that reflected our unwillingness to look back at that violent war and the manner of the colonial administration's arrest of Diponegoro in 1830.

One sentence in the press release of 4 March 2020 stuck with me: the motive for the transfer was given as 'compliance with international agreements'. It referred to the *Joint Recommendations* of 1975. Back then, the two countries had agreed on new cultural relations and the return of some objects, archives and prehistoric remains. Why did it take forty-five years for this agreement to be honoured?

## ARDUOUS NEGOTIATIONS

From 1942 to 1945, Japanese troops occupied the Indonesian archipelago. Immediately after their departure, Indonesia declared independence. Four years later, during a Round Table Conference of 1949, the Netherlands resigned itself to this. Traumatizing atrocities committed by most parties involved (i.e. both Dutch and Indonesian) between 1945 and 1949 left the two countries diametrically opposed. This was made worse by expensive conditions attached to the transfer of sovereignty, which forced the new state to transfer astronomical amounts of money to compensate for the losses which the Netherlands had suffered. As a result, the colonial relationship remained largely financially and economically intact and the contribution to the post-war reconstruction was comparable to the Marshall Plan aid received by the Netherlands (Hoek and Van de Kleij, 'Hoe Nederland profiteerde', 2020). Indonesia stopped the 'reparations' in 1956. DR Congo would also find that its relationship with Belgium changed little after independence in 1960.

In a subcommittee of the Round Table Conference, the two countries discussed the return of colonial collections. They drafted a cultural paragraph, including Article 19 on the 'exchange' of disputed objects.

*The transfer of the kris of Diponegoro at the embassy of Indonesia in The Hague. It is now in Indonesia's Museum Nasional but not yet on display, as more research is needed. © Collection National Museum of World Cultures*



By using the term ‘exchange’, the Netherlands ensured that return was not a one-way street and that it could also request return of objects, in particular VOC archives. The term indicates a desire for reciprocity and a denial of the one-sidedness of the flow of objects that typified Europe’s colonialism. However, the cultural paragraph, and thus Article 19, remained a dead letter.

Although the subject of return did not disappear from the agenda, thorny issues hampered any progress. To Indonesia’s anger the Netherlands still ruled over New Guinea. In 1957 Indonesia nationalised all Dutch companies in a single day and on 5 December Dutch people were asked to leave the country. It took until 1962 before the conflict over New Guinea was resolved. To the frustration of many Papuans, their area did not become independent, but the Netherlands ceded it to Indonesia. The way in which Jakarta dealt with the rights of the Papuans after 1962 caused irritation in the Netherlands. The irritation increased when General Suharto seized power in a bloody *Kudeta* (coup d’état) in 1965 and hundreds of thousands of people suspected of communist sympathies were killed or imprisoned. Indonesia in turn opposed the presidency of former coloniser the Netherlands over the IGGI (Intergovernmental Group for Indonesia) aid consortium in 1967. It was irritated by the finger-wagging about human rights violations and by anti-Indonesian protests by Moluccans that took place in The Hague at the time. But the two countries could not ignore each other. They not only shared a past but also, as they were in the same Cold War camp, a present.

## SECRET MISSION

It was not until 7 July 1968 that the two countries concluded a Cultural Agreement. It was not, however, about the return of colonial objects, but about exchange and cooperation in the area of archives. Objects would be discussed later. The agreement did bring about a thaw in the relationship. Diplomatic exchanges increased and the Netherlands gave financial support to several cultural programmes in Indonesia. The negotiations for the agreement appear to have been a practice run for the 1975 return negotiations.

When, around 1970, President Suharto insisted on the return of manuscripts that had disappeared to the Netherlands during the Lombok expedition (1894) and Aceh wars (1873–1914), Ambassador Hugo Scheltema in Jakarta suggested returning the fourteenth-century palm leaf manu-

script Nagarakertagama from the library of Leiden University. According to the authorities in Jakarta, the manuscript proved that the archipelago was already united in the pre-colonial period, including the rebellious Papua and East Timor, once colonised by Portugal. The Netherlands supported this and during a state visit in 1973, Queen Juliana handed over the palm manuscript. It is still in the Arsip Nasional in Jakarta. To this day, the fight for self-determination continues in the present province of Papua, while East Timor became an independent state in 2002.

In preparation for the return negotiations, three board members of the Historical Buildings Foundation in Jakarta visited the Netherlands in 1974. The municipality of Amsterdam had invited them, the Ministry of the Interior was aware of their coming, but the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was kept in the dark. In a short time, the delegation visited over twenty institutions, spoke to dozens of staff members, copied hundreds of documents and photographed countless objects. The three left the Netherlands with a list of thousands of objects, including those they attributed to Diponegoro.

Some people wonder whether such a list really does exist, as it has still not been found. There is, however, ample indirect evidence of its existence. In a report to the Dutch government on the negotiations in November 1975, Pieter Pott of Museum Volkenkunde noted that the Indonesian delegation had claimed 'that they have lists of many thousands of objects from Indonesia in Dutch museums'. Rob Hotke, director-general of Cultural Affairs at the Ministry of Culture, Recreation and Social Work, reported on the 1975 negotiations that Indonesia initially stated that 'all objects present in the Netherlands from the former Dutch East Indies should return to their country of origin'. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, obviously irritated because it had not been informed of the visit, was concerned about the length of the list and prepared a report on Dutch acquisitions, in which the ministry admitted that some prominent Dutchmen had indeed taken Javanese antiquities from the Buddhist Borobudur or the Hindu-Javanese temple complex Prambanan and still had them at home. These findings would play a role in the agreements made in 1975.

Long lists of lost heritage were also composed by other former colonies. Sri Lanka has already been mentioned; China, Iraq and Ethiopia have carried out similar investigations (Savoy, *Afrikas Kampf*, 2021, pp. 146–147).



## JOINT RECOMMENDATIONS

In the decision to begin official negotiations, the Foreign Ministers of both Indonesia and the Netherlands, Adam Malik and Max van der Stoel, played important roles. During one of their meetings, Malik handed over a memorandum in which Indonesia said it needed objects in order to train young people in museums and archives and fill the gaps left by what the Dutch had taken. Van der Stoel informed Prime Minister Joop den Uyl in late 1974 that restitution was a hot potato in Jakarta and that a solution had to be found quickly, if relations with Indonesia were not to deteriorate again.

At the time, Malik argued to the Dutch daily *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant* that Indonesia wanted everything back, but he did not expect this to happen immediately. In an interview in the same newspaper (8 November 1974), a spokesman for the Indonesian embassy in The Hague claimed four large Hindu god statues that were in the Museum Volkenkunde: 'They are the property of the world and there is no objection if copies are made', he said, 'but the originals belong in Indonesia'. When the newspaper asked the museum for photographs of the four, it refused to provide them, even when the government urged it to do so. In protest, the newspaper left the space intended for the photograph empty.

In early 1975, the Netherlands agreed to an Indonesian proposal that each appoint a team of experts to draw up recommendations for new cultural relations and the return of objects and archives. The teams met in Jakarta in November 1975. In his opening speech, the leader of the Indonesian team, Director-General Ida Bagus Mantra for Culture at the Ministry of Education and Culture, thanked the Netherlands for several recent returns and for its cooperation in the archival field. He emphasised that his country needed many objects currently present in the Netherlands to strengthen its national identity and to supplement its often meagre museum collections. Not everything would have to be returned, because Indonesian objects should also be on display abroad, but the unique specimens, which were a 'source of national pride', certainly should. Subsequently, the Indonesian team presented the aforementioned long list.

Through Director-General Rob Hotke of the Ministry of Culture, Recreation and Social Work, the Netherlands indicated it was prepared to return pieces, though not too many, advocating a 'distribution of cultural objects throughout the world'. Here, the Netherlands joined forces with Belgium and other former colonisers. None of them would allow their

former colonies to submit extensive claims. Each would limit itself to ‘recommendations regarding specific objects or categories’. The Dutch team proposed a much shorter list, but the Indonesian team stuck to its own.

In negotiations that threaten to become stymied, sometimes something unexpected happens that makes it possible to continue. This was the case here. During a courtesy call on Indonesian Minister Sjarif Thayeb of Education and Culture, the minister said that he had no desire to get ‘everything’ back, ‘because he didn’t know where to put it’. He did so ‘to the annoyance of some and the surprise of all’, a Dutch team member noted. Indonesian team members were shocked. The Dutch smiled smugly, as the Indonesian minister had just created space for their proposal.

### THE HOMECOMING OF ‘ASIA’S *MONA LISA*’

After more than a quarter of a century of negotiations, thanks to Minister Thayeb’s intervention the way was open for *Joint Recommendations*. The governments of both countries quickly converted the recommendations into an international agreement. And that was the agreement to which the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science’s press release about the transfer of Diponegoro’s kris, on 4 March 2020, referred.

The Netherlands would transfer objects that were directly related to persons or events of great historical and cultural importance for Indonesia. The Netherlands was to hand over the statue of the deity of supreme wisdom, Prajñāparamita, and parts of the Lombok treasure captured in 1894. The Dutch government promised, within the limits of its powers, to help establish contacts with private owners of, for example, Buddha heads from the Borobudur temple complex. The Netherlands would cooperate in the transfer of objects belonging to national heroes such as Diponegoro that it was thought were kept in Museum Bronbeek in Arnhem. And experts from both countries would investigate who owned the prehistoric Dubois collection, including the Java man – now in Naturalis, Leiden.

The Netherlands made four restitutions. The first was the painting *The Capture of Pangeran Diponegoro* by the Indonesian painter Raden Syarif Bustaman Saleh (1811–1880). We will come across Raden Saleh more often. The canvas came from the private collection of the Dutch Royal family and was lent by them to Museum Bronbeek. In addition, half of the items from the Lombok treasure that were still in Museum Volkenkunde and the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, in total 243 pieces, were returned, and later a red saddle with stirrups, bridle, parasol and spear,



*Director Pieter Pott at the farewell of the Prajñāparamita in 1978. © National Museum of World Cultures Collection (RV – 12420-2)*

which had belonged to Diponegoro. He had surrendered these when he was arrested in 1830. These came also from Museum Bronbeek. His kris was not among the items. And the icing on the cake: the thirteenth-century stone Buddhist Prajñāparamita statue, which was in Museum Volkenkunde. It had disappeared from East Java at the beginning of the nineteenth century. To the delight of the Indonesian government and many Javanese, it was handed over in 1978, on the bicentenary of the Nasional Museum of Indonesia. Because of its beauty, it has been called ‘the *Mona Lisa* of Asia’. In order not to be left completely empty-handed, Director Pieter Pott of Museum Volkenkunde had four plaster casts made of it before the departure. His employees called them, with some irony, ‘the tears of Pott’. They are still in the depot.

## THE SEARCH FOR THE STABBING WEAPON

With the *Joint Recommendations* at hand, the Netherlands had to search seriously for objects attributed to national heroes such as Diponegoro. Very occasionally his stabbing weapon turned up in documents of the Dutch embassy in Jakarta. In 1983, ambassador Lodewijk van Gorkom assured The Hague in a coded telegram that the dagger was in the Rijks-

museum Amsterdam. The Netherlands had to ‘consider a transfer of the kris to Indonesia’, because that country had more interest in it than the Netherlands. The Rijksmuseum was a serious possibility because of its large collection of colonial highlights. Nothing was done with Van Gorkom’s message. In 1985, his successor, Frans van Dongen, suggested to Foreign Affairs Minister Hans van den Broek and Director Pott (whom he had known since his student days) that they should use the celebration of forty years of Indonesian independence for ‘a grand gesture’ and the return of the kris. Later, in 2011, he told me: ‘It would have been a symbolic meaning for the whole of Indonesia and a special meaning for the president’. Pott replied that a return was undesirable. Van Dongen says, ‘From my correspondence with Pott I know for sure that the kris was in the museum in Leiden at that time.’

Van Dongen’s notion did not come out of the blue; he was right and wrong at the same time. Shortly before his contact with Pott, the Leiden director thought he had traced the kris. He had found a clue in the archives of the former Royal Cabinet of Curiosities. Sultan Hamengku Buwono V of Yogyakarta was said to have given it to Dutch colonel J.B. Cleerens at the end of the Java War. This would mean that the kris had not been war booty but a gift. But Pott’s conclusion did not stand for long. We now know that the stabbing weapon Pott had in mind was a different one.

In preparation for a state visit of Queen Beatrix and Prince Claus to Indonesia in 1995, officials of the Foreign Ministry in The Hague were looking for gifts. They asked Willem van Gulik, former director of Museum Volkenkunde, for advice. Van Gulik suggested giving Her Majesty Diponegoro’s kris from the museum. Apparently, he thought it was there. His successor, Steven Engelsman, ordered curator Pieter ter Keurs to look for it. He reported that the weapon was not in the museum. Ter Keurs says: ‘We really could not find it. Moreover, I thought that a national collection was not something that royalty could just shop around for, but as a simple curator I could not say that openly.’ Engelsman reported to Van Gulik that he ‘could not help’. Despite repeated requests, Van Gulik has never commented on this.

## LITTLE COOPERATION

Around 1997, Susan Legêne delved into the archives to find out what important colonial objects added to the history of the Netherlands as a colonial power. Among them were the krisses of Diponegoro and other

rulers. Legêne notes: ‘Krissees are family heirlooms. They represent a lot of emotion. You could see that in Saïdjah’s father in *Max Havelaar*, the man who had to sell his buffalo and his kris because of poverty.’

Legêne obtained extensive information ‘about the captured clothes and weapons of the Sultan of Palembang’, who had resisted Dutch expansion in Sumatra around 1821, and ‘also about some state krissees that Javanese sultans had offered as diplomatic gifts to King William I’. In Legêne’s view, they were involuntarily relinquished ‘curiosities’ and politely accepted ‘valuables’ with which the colonial administration ‘carefully maintained the balance between the image of domination and the suggestion of autonomy’.

But the archival trail to Diponegoro’s kris came to a dead end. She therefore wanted to closely examine the collection. ‘But in those years’, Legêne explains, ‘Museum Volkenkunde was constantly rebuilding. Nobody could do anything with the few characteristics of the kris I had; the staff could help, they said, if I gave them an inventory number. But there was a lot of confusion about that. On top of that, security only allowed short visits to the treasury where the museum kept its precious treasures. You had to know exactly what you wanted to see, so as an outsider you couldn’t really do any object research.’ Its whereabouts remained shrouded in mystery.

## TURNING POINT 2017

In 2011, and again in 2015, I made enquiries at the Leiden Museum and always received the answer: No, the kris is not here. This made me doubt whether it would ever be found. Anything could have happened. Insects could have eaten away the labels or moisture could have made them unreadable. Registration numbers could have been mixed up, so that the kris would have had a different number in the museum registration. That happened quite often. It could have been stolen. That also happened. In the 1960s, the Leiden museum had to deal with the theft of several Balinese krissees – war booty from the palace of the prince of Klungkung in Bali, which was largely destroyed in 1908. They were never recovered. No one could rule out the possibility that a staff member with access to the treasury had taken them.

In 2017, the National Museum of World Cultures (*Research Report*, 2020, p. 3) decided to complete the research on the kris once and for all. Why then? It had to do with the ‘renewed attention for it in the

media and in science' and with the museum's 'growing responsibility' for provenance research on disputed objects in its collection. The museum brought in researchers to take a fresh look at the objects and maintained close contact with the Indonesian embassy in The Hague.

After the completion of the provenance research at the end of 2019, it had an Indonesia expert from outside the Netherlands evaluate the results, the sources used and the methodology. She reported that there was 'unfortunately still a piece of the puzzle missing', especially regarding how Colonel Cleerens had acquired the kris, but confirmed the researchers' conclusion that the kris with registration number RV-360-8084 was the weapon that had belonged to Prince Diponegoro. Indonesia then sent two experts. They came to the same conclusion. With this, the museum felt it had a sufficiently strong case for the final step: convincing the Minister of Education, Culture and Science that the Dutch state had to transfer the ownership to Indonesia. And she readily agreed.

What I miss in the research report is any attention paid to the occasional appearance of the kris after 1975. For it is these moments that make clear how not-knowing, disinterest, self-interest and obstruction postponed the fulfilment of the international agreement on the kris for decades.

As mentioned, the kris went straight to Indonesia. But even then, kris experts in the country, reports the April 2020 Indonesian magazine *Tempo*, are not convinced that the transferred stabbing weapon was really the one handed over by Diponegoro to Colonel Cleerens. The National Museum of World Cultures immediately announced that it stands by its conclusion. Director General Hilmar Farid for Culture of Indonesia's Ministry of Education and Culture supports this.

While the story of the kris is important for the Netherlands, it is largely unknown in Belgium. One of the motivations for covering two countries in one book was that colleagues are scarcely aware of important restitution movements in the other country. When, after the return of the kris, I asked some contacts in Belgium if they knew about it, they remained vague and mumbled in their emails: heard about it somewhere, but don't really know. Conversely, a Dutch journalist was not going to pay attention to the exhibition *100 x Congo* in Antwerp, as 'it is more something for Belgium'.

## WHERE DOES THE JAVA MAN BELONG?

There are other agreements from 1975 that the Netherlands has not fulfilled. One is about a rein of Diponegoro's horse in Museum Bronbeek,

reports historian Mark Loderichs ('The Prince on the Horseback', 2016). The museum, which because of its military-colonial background has war booty in its collection, is investigating the rein together with Museum Nasional in Jakarta and some Indonesia experts and it looks like it will be returned. Another unfulfilled deal is the commitment to help contact Dutch collectors with important objects, such as Buddha heads from the Borobudur. In the 1970s, the government admitted that these were there, but has done nothing further to date.

The Netherlands has also never helped to find out which of the two countries is entitled to the prehistoric Java man. Three pieces are involved that may be a million years old: a skull cap, a molar and a thighbone. The discovery is attributed to the Dutch physician and palaeontologist Eugène Dubois (1858–1940). The skull cap is the first specimen of the early humanoid *Homo erectus* ever found. Dubois unearthed it in 1891. They are among the Naturalis's top exhibits. On the fifth floor, they have been given their own room where the captions visible to every visitor explain the natural history side of fossils, and not their disputed background.

This emphasis on natural history elements characterises many narratives about natural history collections. In a joint piece, Caroline Drieënhuizen of Open University and Fenneke Sysling ('Java Man', 2021), state the same: 'The view that natural history objects are only bearers of neutral, biological significance has been called into question only recently.' They argue that Naturalis's approach is out of date: 'Dubois was fascinated by fossils and he deliberately left for the Dutch East Indies to do research there.' But he was not the one who did the heavy fieldwork: 'That was done by local forced labourers made available to him by the colonial authorities. Dubois did not appreciate them much. He found them unreliable and often lazy. To his dismay, they sometimes even ran away.'

Dubois also made eager use of existing local knowledge when determining excavation sites: 'Twenty-five years earlier, Raden Saleh, primarily known as a painter, had excavated fossils on Java and published about them. He probably did this on the instructions of Prince Adipati Ario Tjondronegoro. There were also legends about giants whose remains could still be found in the landscape. This ensured that Dubois knew where his chances of success were greatest.'

After his departure from the colony in 1895, Dubois kept the fossils at home for years without doing much with them. In the 1930s, the Geological Survey in Batavia and institutions in the Netherlands fought over



*The fossils of the prehistoric Java man. © Naturalis Biodiversity Center, Leiden*

them, but no solution was found as to where the fossils belonged. Later, Dubois reluctantly gave them up and they ended up in Naturalis. After independence, Indonesia asked for the Java man again. Sysling and Drieënhuizen note: ‘The country needed the Java man because it supported the idea that Java, and thus the new nation state Indonesia, was the cradle of mankind. But the request was received with disdain by Dutch officials: they called it an “unsympathetic” and “provocative” request.’

Willem Vervoort, director of Naturalis from 1972 to 1982, made a distinction between natural history and ethnographic objects. As Sysling and Drieënhuizen point out, ‘The skull was of the first kind and, according to him, had universal, scientific value. As far as he and the Dutch government were concerned, it could therefore remain in Leiden. That the Java man, just like the Prajñāparamita statue and the Diponegoro kris, had an important cultural and symbolic value for Indonesia was less relevant to him.’ According to Sysling and Drieënhuizen, ‘the discussion about decolonisation of such objects, including their possible return, is still in its infancy in all respects.’ Very slowly, Naturalis’s research is going



beyond strict natural history paths and including the colonial past. The study of collections of minerals is no longer only about minerals but also about the profitable colonial mining industry. The new knowledge trickles down into some publications. But, as I am told, they don't shout it from the rooftops.

In 2011, Indonesia Museum Sangiran – *The Homeland of Java Man* – opened its doors. It is cutting edge modern, has a good collection and is located in an area on Java where many prehistoric fossils were found. Since 1996, the discovery area has been on UNESCO's World Heritage List.

## A RICH MUSEUM IN JAKARTA

The Museum Nasional of Indonesia is housed in a classical building. In the courtyard, a large number of statues from old temple complexes can be seen. Inside, on the top floor of a new extension, the Prajñaparamita statue, the gold pieces with jewellery from the Lombok treasure and a number of objects attributed to Diponegoro transferred by the Netherlands are on display. All are behind thick glass. Museum Nasional owns 140,000 Indonesian objects, the National Museum of World Cultures in the Netherlands 172,778 (Shatanawi, 'Colonial Collections', 2019, p. 3). For some in the Netherlands, the rich collection in Jakarta raises a question. Museum Nasional is a continuation of the museum of the Batavian Society. It had already received the Society's large collection when it was transferred in 1949. The question is: Why does the Netherlands have to return objects to Indonesia?

This question was also raised at the 1949 Round Table Conference. At that time, the Dutch Minister for Union Affairs and Overseas Territories had a clear answer: 'The transfer of the objects in the Museum of the Batavian Society in Batavia' would 'suffice for the most part'. According to him, the only thing that still had to be done was 'to return the few objects in Dutch museums of which it has been established that they have been captured'. So, in his view, apart from war booty, nothing needed to be returned.

The founding of the Batavian Society at the end of the VOC period was part of a trend of learned societies emerging in the Republic and the rest of Europe. It studied flora, fauna and material cultures. Members – well-to-do, mostly Dutch people in the colony – arranged for the supply of objects, both from the archipelago and from other VOC bases in Asia.

Soon the Society began building a museum to house all its acquisitions. There it decided which objects would remain in its museum in Batavia and which would go to heritage institutions in the Netherlands.

The name of one of the Society's members can still be found in Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden. This is Nicolaus Engelhard, Governor of Java's north-eastern corner, who found five large statues of gods in and around the overgrown Singasari temple complex in 1803. He took them with him and kept them in his garden, but handed them over to the Society after complaints about this. The Society shipped them to the Netherlands and in 1903 they came to Museum Volkenkunde. According to Director Pott, four of the five – the Hindu gods Ganesha, Durga, Nandishwara and Mahakala, which had come from the same temple – formed a unique unit and were among the finest Java had to offer. The fifth statue, that of Prajñāparamita, was also a masterpiece. During the negotiations in 1975, when Indonesia asked for those five statues, the Netherlands stipulated that it would hand over only the Prajñāparamita. The other four are still in Leiden. Can we still agree with the government's response in 1949 that, apart from war booty, nothing had to be returned, because the Netherlands had left enough behind? An obvious

*Sculptures and fragments in Museum Nasional of Indonesia, Jakarta. © Jos van Beurden*



argument against is that Indonesia has many more museums, and their collections are considerably more modest than that of Museum Nasional. Dutch heritage specialist Wim Manuhutu – who is of Moluccan descent – digs deeper and offers a clear opinion: ‘Indonesia has clearly asked for those four statues. It needs them for further nation-building. So why is the Netherlands making such a fuss about it? The depots in Leiden have enough other pieces. He would like the Southeast-Asian country ‘to take more of a lead in its cooperation with the National Museum of World Cultures. But fortunately, a new generation is rising in the Indonesian cultural sector. I notice when I am there that they are in favour of it. Legally speaking, those statues may belong to the State of the Netherlands, but ethically speaking Indonesia should have control over them.’

This is almost in line with the position of the Dutch cabinet in the *Policy Vision Collections from a Colonial Context* of January 2021 (which still needs parliamentary approval). It opts for the possibility of returning objects that were lost involuntarily or taken away without consent and objects that are of greater cultural, religious or historical importance to the former colony than to the former coloniser. If Indonesia indicates that the four statues are important to the nation, a formal request for restitution stands a good chance.

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Anyone comparing the atmosphere between Indonesia and the Netherlands in the mid-1970s with that of today sees a serious difference. The Netherlands is prepared to take a more critical view of its own colonial past and to decolonise museum collections. Indonesia has developed a clearer vision and policy of its own in that half a century. At the same time, the policies of the two countries do not necessarily run parallel. Moreover, the Netherlands’ ties with Indonesia have loosened, as it is increasingly focusing on its East Asian neighbours.

The long search for the kris of Prince Diponegoro makes clear that institutions in the Netherlands have difficulty in tracing objects of this kind. The research only gained momentum when the National Museum of World Cultures felt outside pressure, opened up to the outside world and admitted external experts. Cooperation with countries of origin seems crucial in the research of disputed heritage.

## 6. CONGO, BELGIUM AND LEOPOLD'S TROUBLESOME LEGACY

**O**n 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 (Bremen, *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 Nsai (*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 Iwa 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 Mumbembe 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 parliamentary 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.

# 7.

## SURINAME, THE CARIBBEAN AND THE NETHERLANDS: MORE RETURNS ON THE WAY?

**M**any Dutch people with a Surinamese or Caribbean background are in the process of coping with the colonial past. Generally, they emphasise the effects of the slave trade rather than of the loss of cultural heritage. There has always been less wrangling over colonial collections between the Netherlands, Suriname and the Caribbean islands than between the Netherlands and Indonesia. Is that not remarkable? What do we know about the cultural and historical treasures that came to the Netherlands from these countries? Do these former colonies also have wishes for restitution? Certainly, some collections have already gone back. Thousands of pre-Columbian potsherds went back to Aruba with barely a word. The transfer of colonial archives to Suriname is well known in the archival world but hardly at all outside it. And for the return of an eighteenth-century ceremonial chair to Suriname, a special solution was found.

### THE DUTCH WEST INDIA COMPANY

Why is there more emphasis on the future of colonial collections from Asia than on those from South America? Both the wic and the voc operated across a vast area: the voc's territory stretched from the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa to the island of Dejima near Nagasaki in Japan, and that of the wic from West Africa to deep in South America. The two companies equalled each other in the use of violence and degree of exploitation. Both engaged in piracy and made money from the slave trade. Dutch and other European people working in these Dutch colonial possessions appropriated all sorts of cultural heritage.

In 1624 the wic took over the voc's trading posts and forts in West Africa. From there, in 1630, the Company wrested Brazil from the Portuguese crown. Prince Johan Maurits (1604–1679) ruled over the colony for a long time, but in 1654 the Portuguese retook the area. In 1634 the Company colonised Curaçao, and a few years later the Caribbean islands of Aruba, Sint Maarten, Saba, Sint Eustatius and Bonaire. The islands mainly served as military bases, for smuggling and for other trade between Europe and the West. In 1667, Surinam was taken from the British. It became the largest Dutch colony in the West-Indies. During the occupation, indigenous groups such as the Arowak, Akoerio, Trio and Wayana were seriously oppressed. Hundreds of thousands of enslaved Africans and contract labourers came over from the British East Indies, the Dutch East Indies and China to work on cotton, sugar and coffee plantations. Among the Afro-Surinamese were Creoles and Maroons. The former were enslaved people from West Africa. The latter fled the plantations and disappeared into the jungle.

## COLONIAL COLLECTIONS FROM WIC AREAS

There were major differences between the two companies. In the competitive struggle with other European states, the voc acquired several trade monopolies, while the wic failed to do likewise. Another difference was the colonial view of the cultural heritage of the peoples they subjugated. In the East Indies, the Dutch were deeply impressed by the court culture and the impressive Buddhist and Hindu temple complexes on Java and Bali. They took related objects with them to the Netherlands, and these were often the subject of return negotiations. They paid considerably less attention to other cultural expressions. The same also applied to their eye for regional and local cultures and customs in the West Indies.

This lack of attention to cultures other than those of the courts and major religions in the authorized heritage discourse, to use Laura-jane Smith's term, has often met with criticism. According to Mirjam Shatanawi ('Colonial Collections', 2019), European visitors to Indonesia had little regard for Islamic heritage, although Islam was the dominant religion there and Hinduism and Buddhism had far fewer adherents. Tular Sudarmadi (*Between Colonial Legacies and Grassroots Movements*, 2014) observes the same with regard to regional and local cultures in outlying areas, such as the island of Flores where he conducted research.

Shatanawi and Sudarmadi's claims also speak to the colonial view of the cultural heritage of peoples in the West Indies.

Nevertheless, large museums such as the National Museum of World Cultures, the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam and Museum Bronbeek, as well as some smaller ones, have substantial collections from former WIC areas. Many are linked with the plantation economy, the slave trade or the Afro-Surinamese *winti*-religion. There are drawings and paintings by Surinamese artists, wood carvings by Maroons, numerous objects by the Arowak people and objects from the Jodensavanne plantation where Sephardic Jews had settled in the seventeenth century. Masks and musical instruments came from the Caribbean. The dioramas or viewing boxes made by Gerrit Schouten (1779–1839), the Paramaribo-born son of a Surinamese mother and a Dutch father, showing daily life in Suriname in the early nineteenth century, are well-known.

## ARCHIVES FROM SURINAME: RETURNED AS AGREED

The transfer of colonial archives to Suriname seems to be a positive example of cooperation between a former colony and former coloniser. In 1916, the colonial administration in Paramaribo and the government in The Hague agreed to store archives from Suriname in a safe and dry place in the Netherlands. The colony had no suitable storage for them. Mice and insects had the time of their lives there, and the humid climate did the rest. In particular, land ownership documents, wills and contracts were not to be lost. The temporary transfer to the Netherlands continued even after Suriname's independence in 1975 and ceased only in 1977. The National Archive in The Hague thus managed 802 metres of archives from the former colony, covering the period 1662–1975.

In 'Repatriation of Surinamese Archives from the Netherlands' (forthcoming), Frans van Dijk, of the National Archive in The Hague, and Rita Tjien Fooh, director of the National Archive in Suriname, both of whom were heavily involved in the transfer, each wrote a retrospective from their own point of view. The 1916 agreement contained a surprising clause: the archives remained 'the property of the colony of Suriname' and would be returned as soon as the country had put its facilities in order. According to Tjien Fooh, it is 'still unclear until now' how that clause was inserted

*Restoration of records in the National Archives of the Netherlands and Suriname.* © National Archive, The Hague





so explicitly into the agreement. But for a long time no one referred to the clause until, in 2006, a Dutch magazine published an interview with the Surinamese Minister of the Interior, Maurits Hassankhan, and Tjien Fooh, in which they asked for the archives to be returned. Subsequently, a process was set in motion, and almost a century after the inclusion of the clause and thirty-five years after Surinamese independence, the time had come. At the opening in 2010 of the new building of the Suriname National Archive in Paramaribo, the Netherlands handed over the first 100 linear metres. This included exceptional material: registers (15,000 folios in total) of enslaved people and original documents about the abolition of slavery. The oldest documents dated from 1662 and came from the civil registries of the time: certificates of betrothal, marriages, legal separations, birth certificates and certificates of baptism. They also included death registers from the Jewish community and the Evangelical Brotherhood, also known as the Herrnhutters and still the largest Protestant denomination in Suriname.

The retrospectives of Van Dijk and Tjien Fooh reveal some differences. The implementation of the transfer has been successful, both authors conclude. Van Dijk sees ‘only winners’. He quotes the director of the National Archive in The Hague: ‘There is no archival project in the world which is comparable with this project’. Tjien Fooh speaks of a ‘huge success’ but also points out the inequality between the two main players. The National Archive of Suriname had ‘little influence [...] in the terms of condition and the timeframe’. The conditions concerned trained personnel, a modern archive law and decent archive buildings. As for the timeframe, Suriname had wanted the archives back much quicker than the Netherlands wanted to let them go. The Netherlands stipulated that it could digitise the archives before they were returned. After all, this offered Surinamese Dutch people the chance to see records about their families. They have been doing so regularly ever since. In January 2017, the last part of Suriname’s colonial memory went back.

## PRE-COLUMBIAN SHARDS BACK TO CURAÇAO AND ARUBA

Until about a thousand years ago, Curaçao and Aruba were mainly inhabited by fishermen and hunter-gatherers. Gradually, they switched to agriculture and settled in villages. Since the 1920s archaeologists have been looking for remnants of their settlements. According to researcher Claudia Kraan (*Archeologische Collecties*, 2010), they found thousands of

shards of urns and utensils in the soil. They took a large number of them to Museum Volkenkunde and the Tropenmuseum.

After negotiations in 1984 between the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and the Archaeological Anthropological Institute of the Netherlands Antilles (AAINA) in Willemstad, Curaçao, the shards and urns were returned. According to an email from Sijbrand de Rooij (5 February 2021), registrar of what comes in and goes out of the National Museum of World Cultures, the following year there was a sudden request from Aruba to ‘also send back archaeological material’. In total, 4,668 pre-Columbian potsherds were involved, but De Rooij is not sure whether the ‘original numbers are correct’. In Aruba, the National Archaeological and Anthropological Memory Management (NAAM) received their ‘still unopened crates’ in 2007 only. Apart from a catalogue note with the transport order to a ship’s agent, no document of the transfer can be found in the archives of Museum Volkenkunde. There were 61 shards left behind in Leiden. The Leiden museum was prepared to return them, but only upon an official request. Which never came.

## CURSE ON A MAROON CHAIR

From 1765 onwards, Protestant missionaries were active among Maroon communities in Suriname. They belonged to a community with differing names: the Evangelical Brotherhood (Unitas Fratrum), the Moravian Brethren, the Moravian Church, or the Herrnhutters. The religious community originated in Moravia in the present-day Czech Republic, was driven out at the beginning of the eighteenth century and found a new home in Herrnhut (literally: Care of the Lord) in the east of modern-day Germany. In Europe, they have branches in seven countries; in the Netherlands, their headquarters are in the castle Slot Zeist.

Herrnhut has a museum of objects that its missionaries took from Asia, Africa and North America, and from the Maroons in Suriname. The Maroon collection consists mostly of utensils for fishing, hunting, agriculture and household, bracelets, furniture, and so on. They are in good condition. The main reason to visit the museum in July 2021 is a Maroon chair (*Ethnographie und Herrnhuter Mission*, 2003, pp. 148–149). It has a prominent position in the set-up and is, according to the museum, comparable with the throne of a European monarch. Its decoration shows African, European and Maroon influences and on a step at the back a servant can stand to wave coolly to the headman.



*Maroon chair, Völkerkundig Museum Herrnhut (66422). © Jos van Beurden*

Cultural anthropologist Thomas Polimé, Dutchman of Maroon descent, knows how the chair left Suriname. He wrote to me: 'Traditionally, a *gaaman* (chief, also called *granman*) always adhered to the traditional Maroon faith. The first to deviate from this was Johannes King. He was baptised in 1861 in the Evangelical Brotherhood in Paramaribo. When he realised that he could not be a *gaaman* and a missionary at the same time, he chose the Bible and donated the ceremonial chair and other Maroon objects to a company in Paramaribo.' The company was run by one Brother Kersten of the Evangelical Brotherhood. In exchange, Kersten gave King a European chair with a rotating and tilting mechanism that he no longer needed. He sent everything to the museum in Herrnhut, where it has been on display since 1905. 'Some objects are sacred to Maroons', writes Polimé, 'but people in Herrnhut don't realise that enough.'

In Polimé's eyes, that chair shows what artistic things Maroons once made: 'So it actually belongs in Suriname.' At the same time, he realises 'that the chair would no longer be there if it had not been taken then'. Still, the Maroons want it back. The Stichting Jongeren Generatie Matawai (Foundation Youth Generation Matawai) in the Dutch city of Tilburg is helping them. They asked the museum in Herrnhut for an exact replica. The museum sent photos and technical data. Colours, parts,

they are all exactly the same. That replica and not the original chair is already in Suriname. But why did the original not go? Polimé explains: ‘There is a curse on it, the result of a crime in the past. And that curse has even been transferred to the replica sent back in 2006. The *gaaman* at the time fell ill when he sat on it, and died in 2008. The replica was then taken elsewhere.’ According to the museum in Herrnhut, the fact that no application for restitution had come from Suriname itself also played a role.

## NEW IMPULSE?

Suriname and the Caribbean islands shook off their colonial status much later than Indonesia. The discussion about colonial collections has not been as intense. It seems that, with the publication of the policy vision for dealing with collections from colonial contexts of the Dutch government, it has been given new impetus. An NOS online report of 11 October 2020 quotes Director of Culture Rosaline Daan of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science in Paramaribo: it is ‘of the utmost importance’ that looted items are returned and injustice is rectified; ‘whether it concerns religious objects or other historical objects, I hope they find their way back home’. But, she adds, she will only submit an application ‘when Suriname is ready to store the items professionally’.

The Suriname Museum would be happy with, for example, the eighteenth-century banjo that Dutch-Scottish officer John Gabriel Stedman brought back to the Netherlands and is now in the National Museum of World Cultures. According to the regional newspaper *De Gelderlander* on 29 October 2020, Marsha Mormon is interested in a diorama that is in Museum Het Valkhof. Mormon is heiress to the Kerkshoven coffee plantation that was divided among the enslaved after the abolition of slavery. The diorama was made by Gerrit Schouten. Mormon now runs a small museum in Suriname, together with her husband. The diorama shows the quarters where her enslaved grandparents once lived, and the planter’s house. Director Hedwig Saam of the Nijmegen museum wants to keep the diorama. ‘It is lawfully obtained’ and shows ‘a piece of shared, dark, history that needs to be told in Suriname as well as in the Netherlands’, she argues in *De Gelderlander*. This diorama is not a case of involuntary loss of possession. The question of where it is best displayed can become an interesting discussion.

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It is hard to draw general conclusions from the ways in which Belgium and the Netherlands and their former colonies have dealt with colonial collections, and their search for a more modern approach. Former Dutch colonies in the West Indies and, as will be shown in chapter 9, the former Belgian colonies Rwanda and Burundi are each involved in their own way, at their own pace and with their own priorities. One knows better what it wants than the other. For Belgium and the Netherlands and their museums, the challenge is to deal with this in a constructive manner.

# PART III

## RECENT RETURNS

Occasionally, reports emerge of objects, archives or ancestral remains being returned or of serious negotiations for their return. Are they testament to a substantially changed relationship between ex-colonisers and ex-colonies? Do they foster mutual trust? Do they mean that the two parties deal with each other on a more equal footing? This Part presents four examples that, together, give an impression of the current practice of restitution in the Netherlands and Belgium. They concern ancestral remains, archives, surplus collections and, currently the most discussed category, spoils of war.

A pioneering example dates from 2005. The Māori people of New Zealand wanted to repatriate tattooed heads of ancestors from Europe and North America. To this end, the Māori, the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa and the New Zealand government launched a campaign. At the beginning, in 2003, there were still five heads in museums in the Netherlands and Belgium. What is the situation with them now?

The Netherlands, Indonesia and Suriname had already agreed on the return of colonial archives. In many negotiations about archives, the question was: Who should have the originals? This chapter focuses on current negotiations between Rwanda and Belgium. Why is the question of whether the originals are in Brussels or in Kigali of little concern?

The third example is about the extensive transfer to Indonesia of a collection of items from Museum Nusantara in Delft, which closed in 2013. The municipality wanted to get rid of them quickly and allowed them to be returned to Indonesia. But behind the scenes, quite a few ob-

stacles emerged. Fifty years earlier, the Koloniale Hogeschool (Colonial College) in Antwerp had to dispose of its superfluous Congo collection. How had that worked?

Finally: Nigeria and Europe. At the beginning of 2021, there was a breakthrough in the talks between several museums in Europe and cultural authorities in Nigeria, which had been ongoing since 2010, on the future of the thousands of bronze, copper and ivory objects from the Benin Kingdom. The German government announced it would return Benin objects currently in public collections. Some museums in Great Britain with small Benin collections came out with similar statements. How did these talks proceed, and can they be a model for a Europe-wide approach to dealing with colonial looted art?

## 8. THE CAMPAIGN FOR MĀORI HEADS

**O**n 22 August 2002, Steven Engelsman, director of Museum Volkenkunde, gave a lecture about the museum of the twenty-first century in the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa in the capital Wellington. Present were Pat Stuart, director of the museum, and Arapata Hakiwai, her repatriation manager. After finishing, they asked Engelsman to come with them to a side room. There, in a tone as friendly as it was business-like, they told him that there was a Toi Moko, a tattooed Māori head, in the Leiden museum and that New Zealand did not think a Western public collection was the right place to keep it. They knew the inventory number, RMV 350-5763, and also that Museum Volkenkunde had acquired it in 1883 and retained possession of it ever since. Would it be possible to return it? The inventory number and year are in a letter of 16 September 2002 to the Leiden institution. For the New Zealanders, these heads were not museum objects but ‘the remains of ancestral figures who were entitled to maximum respect and discretion’.

When asked, Engelsman remembers his reaction to Stuart’s request well: ‘I immediately said that she knew more about it than I did and that we would work on it together.’ It turned out that the museum in New Zealand had known it in the early 1990s, when a curator from Leiden had told them about the head at a conference about Māori heritage overseas in Wellington. Stuart and Engelsman each agreed to start their own research and to compare the results afterwards.

Back in Leiden, this proved more difficult than expected. Engelsman recalls: ‘It was an entirely new kind of request, we had no precedent. How should our museum deal with this? Moreover, among the museum staff there was quite some resistance to the return of the art.’ In retrospect, in the whole process that followed, he found this ‘the most difficult’.



Some staff members thought that the New Zealand director had put their boss's back up against a wall. Engelsman did not feel that way: 'The request was indeed unexpected, but no, I did not feel insulted.' The staff members also felt that if the head was returned, they would no longer be able to do proper research, not even on comparable heads. They therefore wanted to keep it in the collection.

Another problem was that no documents about the Toi Moko could be found in the museum archives. At least, that was what the employee whom Engelsman had put on the research asserted. 'Unfortunately', he began his report, 'he could not find any information regarding the Toi Moko'. Museum Volkenkunde had received it from the Royal Cabinet of Curiosities in 1883. 'Given its numbering, it would have entered the cabinet around 1850. It cannot be determined whether it was a purchase or a gift [...]. The archive of the Royal Cabinet of Curiosities is so incomplete that an exact reconstruction is impossible.' Shortly afterwards, an independent researcher did find an archive document that answered the question as to whether it was a donation (no) or a purchase (yes). Had the museum worker not been meticulous? Can 'not being able to find' something be seen as an obstruction of an impending return? In this regard, Museum Volkenkunde was not the only institution where this kind of friction played a role.

## FAMILY MEMBERS IN THE SHOP WINDOW

As already shown, the history of the trade in ancestral remains is full of unpleasant stories. This certainly applies to the intercontinental trade in Māori heads. According to researchers in both Wellington and London, its history began with three British men: Captain James Cook, naval doctor William Monkhouse and botanist Joseph Banks. In 1768, their ship, the *Endeavour*, docked at New Zealand. There are no sources available to show exactly how he managed it, but Monkhouse was the first person to obtain a mummified Māori head. How Banks managed it is known thanks to the diary of this famous scholar and collector. He had already collected many plants and animals, but such a painted human head was new to him. When the *Endeavour* moored further on and an old man in a canoe came by, Banks seized his chance. From under a piece of cloth, the man pulled out the tattooed head of a young Māori. Banks picked up his musket and gestured that he wanted it. What did the canoeist want for it? The two finally agreed on the price: a few pairs

of pants flapping on a line on the deck, because the canoeist had never seen anything like them. That's how the exchange was settled.

Both Māori and Europeans played a leading role in the trade. Māori communities regularly went to war with each other, and the winners took the heads of slain enemies. How did they then mummify them? First, they removed the brains and eyes; then they put clay and fibres in the resulting cavities. Often, they cut back the lips, which made the teeth very visible. These are now proving to be useful, as traces of DAN can be used to identify a community of origin. Then they boiled and smoked the head and let it dry in the sun. A layer of oil preserved the skin and the tattooed patterns.

The British soon became eager buyers. For two heads they gave one musket. The Māori needed the weapons in their mutual wars. Some Māori did not take it too seriously. To meet the demand, they prepared heads of opponents they had enslaved. While still alive, they were tattooed, and once the wounds had healed they were killed and their heads cut from their bodies. Frederick Edward Maning (*Old New Zealand*, London, 1887, quoted in Gerritsen, *Historische verkenningen*, 2005, p. 213) experienced this practice around 1885: 'A while ago they even had to tattoo a slave, but the bastard ran off with tattoo and all [...]. What a bad trick. [...] Once a living Māori head with a nice tattoo was ordered and paid for in advance, it was always delivered honestly afterwards.'

While the colonial administrators promised to respect the rights of Māori communities to their lands, forests and fishing grounds, British newcomers – among them ex-convicts with a single ticket to New Zealand or Australia – showed less respect. They extorted land and other resources from the Māori. They were not interested in the backgrounds of the Māori and just wanted tattooed heads. The Māori, who were quickly becoming impoverished, had more and more difficulty with the behaviour of the newcomers. When two of them saw heads for sale in the window of a British settler's shop, wrote Reverend Richard Taylor in 1868 (as described in Aranui, 'Toi Moko in Toi Art', 2018), and recognised two members of their own Taupo clan, they went in and begged the dealer to give them back. But the man laughed at them. When the two men found out that the shopkeeper himself was involved in robbing the heads, they waited for him and killed him. And offered his head for sale.

The import of tattooed heads also aroused criticism in nineteenth-century Europe. Some physicians and collectors, who felt awkward about their possessions, handed over their heads and other body parts to mu-

seums or to the medical institution for which they worked. But in many more instances, Māori heads became a must-have item. Natural history and ethnographic museums everywhere wanted them. It was the same in Belgium and the Netherlands. At the start of the twentieth century, there were at least five in our countries, amongst others in the Royal Museum of Art and History in Brussels, Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden and Museum Vrolijk of the Amsterdam Medical Centre.

## STUMBLING BLOCKS

When that Leiden curator attended the conference in Wellington in the early 1990s, the Māori communities had long since distanced themselves from the former practices of their forefathers. Together with the Museum of New Zealand, they forged plans to bring skulls and grave finds home. They knew there were hundreds at institutions and individuals in New Zealand, Europe and North America. An additional aim was to help rehabilitate the image of the Māori, seen as poverty-stricken, illiterate, unemployed and often with criminal records. The campaign officially started in 2003; Director Stuart already announced it in her letter to Leiden of September 2002.

For Director Engelsman there was, besides the opposition among his employees, another stumbling block. The Māori head was the property of the Dutch state and for it to be returned he needed the permission of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (ocenw). Engelsman felt that he had to be well prepared if he was to fulfil Wellington's wish.

The way he proceeded led to unexpected consequences, both in the Netherlands and in New Zealand. What happened? During his consultation with officials of the Ministry of ocenw, Engelsman was asked to draw up an advisory document for the Minister. In order to substantiate the advice, he consulted his colleagues of the Tropenmuseum Amsterdam and the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam and the outcome of their consultation led to the proposal to submit the New Zealand request to the Ethics Committee, which ethnographic museums in the Netherlands had just set up and which was to check whether they had acquired their acquisitions correctly. Now the committee also had to rule on returns.

His letter of 29 January 2003 to the Ethics Committee echoed the internal opposition. Engelsman wrote that he preferred a 'long-term loan' of the Toi Moko, even though a 'transfer of ownership [...] is also possible', adding two non-negotiable conditions. Because the head was

part of the Dutch heritage, it should never be destroyed. And it had to remain accessible for scientific research. An employee of his museum could therefore ‘never be denied access’. Engelsman now says: ‘It came down to the fact that we were not yet ready to part with the head definitively’.

He had another question for the committee, a complicated one. He wanted to know whether a party with a direct interest in the head had the greatest right to it and, if so, whether the museum in Wellington was the appropriate address to which it should be transferred. Would it not make more sense to hand it over to the Māori community from which it originated? That question had been put by the Dutch ambassador in New Zealand, An de Bijll Nachenius, in a letter to him of 18 February 2003. She had spoken to a prominent Māori chief who felt that the museum in Wellington could not claim to be the ‘guardian’ of Māori remains: ‘We Māori are our own guardians’.

## TO WHOM DO YOU GIVE IT BACK?

The Ethics Committee of the ethnographic museums responded to Engelsman that a long-term loan was not appropriate. Ownership of the head should be transferred to its rightful owner in New Zealand. The museum should find out who that was. That question – to whom in a former colony should objects or human remains be returned? – is complex and will be raised in this book more often. The Ethics Committee advised him not to negotiate further until a clear answer from New Zealand had come.

Since the search by museum staff in the Leiden archives had yielded nothing, Ethics Committee member Susan Legêne dived into another part of the museum archive, which she found in the Provincial Archives in Haarlem: ‘Without too much effort’, she told me while showing copies of the relevant documents, ‘I found two lists of acquisitions on which the Māori head did indeed appear’. This raised the question of whether the museum researcher had searched properly, a question that also arose during the search for the kris of Diponegoro. On one list, the Māori head was at the top and on another, it was mentioned between a Chinese junk with a god in it and an Arab sundial. In both instances the same amount was mentioned: 75 guilders. It was collected around 1840 and had been bought by the museum in 1882.

While the three partners in the New Zealand campaign – Māori communities, Museum of New Zealand and government – were looking

for an answer, a high ranking official of the Ministry of ocnw sent an email favouring repatriation: ‘These human remains [are], more than books, documents and objects, probably the most pronounced witnesses [...] to the whole complex of settler colonialism: to discover, to know, to have, to love, to be intrigued by, to convert and change/develop or suppress.’ Each head of an ancestor has its own story and it is not only about the person it belonged to, but also about the road it took ‘to Europe (the Netherlands) and now back [...]. The return is a next step in this interaction.’ Both the Ethics Committee and the Ministerial Department went further in their thinking about repatriation than the Leiden Museum.

In the course of 2005, an answer came from New Zealand. The partners had agreed on a division of roles. Māori communities are the rightful claimants and receive heads and other remains. They help with finding out about the ancestor’s presumed family and designate the place where and with which rituals repatriated heads, bones and grave finds are given a resting place. The role of the museum in Wellington is to trace human remains and grave finds at home and abroad, do further provenance research – do the remains really come from New Zealand? – and to retrieve them. It maintains contact with seventy institutions outside New Zealand. The government in Wellington facilitates the process and pays the costs of transport. The repatriation itself is not paid for. From this answer, it was clear that a Māori delegation would come and collect the head.

## TRANSFER SEALED WITH A NOSE KISS

On 9 November 2005, James Te Puni, the new repatriation manager in Wellington and himself of Māori origin, and Director Engelsman from Leiden signed the handover agreement. Entirely in Māori style, the two gave each other a nose kiss: the forehead being the place of memory of the ancestors, with the breath of life coming through the nose. Museum Volkenkunde decided that from now on, the rights of communities of origin would weigh more heavily than the right to their own research on ancestral remains. It also decided to stop exhibiting such remains when an ancestral community considers it unethical to do so. The Māori do see it this way. That a return can strengthen the relationship became clear in 2010. In that year, some Māori came to the museum to assemble a *waka* (a traditional canoe). That the boat was not a gift but a long-term loan to the museum expresses the wish of the Māori to establish a long-term relationship. Every year, the Māori and the museum renew their contact.

Does this approach work for New Zealand? It seems to. Since 2003, many Toi Moko and other ancestral remains have been repatriated. By the end of 2020, the number stood at 180 repatriations from within the country and 420 from abroad. Many of these have been distributed among seventeen communities of origin. Where it is no longer possible to trace the exact origin of a head, the Māori have set up a sacred space for it in the national museum, a *wahi tapu*. There they lie in acid-free boxes covered with plastic packaging. Few people are allowed to see them. The Museum of New Zealand estimates that another 600 Toi Moko are in European and North American museums, medical and private collections.

In 2020, the museum in Wellington informed the Leiden museum that it had done everything to find out from which community the Toi Moko came, but had not succeeded. That could mean that the head had belonged to an enslaved person. The head now has a resting place in the *wahi tapu*, together with other heads that have remained anonymous.

## ANOTHER TOI MOKO REPATRIATED

Fourteen years later, the second transfer of a tattooed Māori head took place. This time, it was arranged much faster, within one year. Museum Vrolijk in Amsterdam owned one head and three Māori skeletons and

*On the occasion of the handover of the Māori head, Māori rowed the canoe specially made for Museum Volkenkunde. © National Museum of World Cultures Collection*



five skulls of ancestors from the Moriori community. The Moriori are related to the Māori and live on the Chatham Islands, more than 500 miles from Wellington. In 2018, curator Laurens de Rooy informed the museum in Wellington about these remains and the option of their repatriation. Unlike earlier in Leiden, there was no opposition to it within the museum. De Rooy told me: ‘We were a small team, nobody objected.’ Repatriation would indeed cause a break in the collection, ‘because we

*Serious faces and restrained emotion at the handover of a head and remains of Māori and Moriori ancestors by Museum Vrolik to a New Zealand delegation. © Hans van den Bogaard/Museum Vrolik, Amsterdam UMC*



would be taking something out of its historical context, but we also knew that in time they would go back anyway’.

What also made the transfer easier was that the remains were not the property of the Dutch state, but of the hospital. Its Board of Directors quickly consented to the transfer and there was an almost immediate positive response from Wellington. The fact that the remains were not repatriated right away gave the Amsterdam museum time for archival research. The museum had acquired the Toi Moko somewhere between 1850 and 1863, the skeletons and skulls in 1908. A New Zealand biologist had brought the latter from a burial site.

At the handover ceremony, it was clearly visible that the Māori and Moriori used it to show outsiders how they honour their ancestors. They had chosen a special day for it: 25 April 2019. Since 1916, New Zealand and Australia have commemorated all civilians who died in conflicts, wars and peacekeeping operations on this day. On 25 April 1915, thousands of soldiers from both countries set foot on the Gallipoli Peninsula to fight with other Allied troops against the Ottoman Turks. Nearly 3,000 New Zealanders lost their lives. By choosing this date, the New Zealand delegation in Amsterdam placed their sacrificed ancestors and the dead of Gallipoli in the same tradition of remembrance.

In his speech, New Zealand Museum delegation leader and repatriation manager Te Herekikie Herewini assured the listeners that the Moriori and Māori have never forgotten their ancestors: ‘We are still spiritually and culturally linked to them. When they arrive back on their own soil, they will be welcomed and embraced with tears.’

The remains were packed into nine boxes. Preceded by Te Herekikie Herewini and other delegation members, museum staff carried the boxes to the room for the ceremonial transfer. The New Zealanders placed a black cloth over the boxes and on top a colourful fabric they had brought with them. For many museum staff members, the ceremony was new. You can see from the photos how touched they were.

As with the Toi Moko from Leiden, the museum in Wellington has not been able to identify the community from which the head came. It now lies in the same sacred space as the head from Leiden. The skeletons and skulls have been returned to the Chatham Islands and buried there.

After Amsterdam, the Māori and Moriori delegation travelled on, continuing the repatriation campaign. From the Charité University Hospital in Berlin they collected 109 ancestral skulls. In Berlin, the



same seriousness and emotions prevailed as in Amsterdam and Leiden. In 2020, a Māori delegation visited Germany again, this time to bring home ancestors held by the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz and the Georg-August University in Göttingen.

### THREE MĀORI HEADS IN THE PROCESS OF REPATRIATION

There are still three Toi Moko in Belgium. The holder of one of them wants to remain anonymous and I have no information whatsoever about it. The Royal Museum of Art and History in Brussels has the other two. One of these was donated in 1833 by ‘an unknown inhabitant of Ter Loo’ in West Flanders, curator Nicolas Cauwe writes to me. Coming so soon after the Belgian Revolution, this donation may have been intended as a contribution to a Belgian national collection. The second one was bought by the museum in 1938 from Gustave Gilson, a professor in Leuven. During research in Fiji, he had acquired a large number of pieces, including this head. It is not known how it had ended up in Fiji. The Brussels museum does not know either from which Māori communities the two heads originate.

In September 2018, the museum of New Zealand submitted a formal request for the repatriation of the two heads. Asked what he thought about a repatriation, Cauwe answers that he has no objection to it, also ‘because the facilities in New Zealand are in good order’. But just as in the case of the Toi Moko in Leiden, the decision lies with the federal minister for science policy, and that is where the problem lies. In recent years, this post has been held by quite a few people. The minister who received the formal request in 2018 left it at that. But when I enquired in August 2020, something had changed. Minister David Clarinval felt that ‘the issue of Māori heads’ should be part of ‘a larger process of reflection’. He ideally wanted ‘a global response’ to the issue of colonial ancestral remains. The government had set up the HOME Working Group on Human Remains for this purpose in December 2019. It is due to issue its recommendations in 2022. Since October 2020, State Secretary Thomas Dermine has been in charge of the federal science policy. He endorsed the approach of his predecessor. In January 2022, the museum informed me that the repatriation process is underway. The date depends on the introduction of a generic restitution law and travel restrictions due to the Covid pandemic. The anonymous holder of the third Toi Moko has accepted that this

head will be repatriated together with the two heads in possession of the Brussels museum.

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What can we learn from these returns? Certainly, a concerted approach by representatives of communities of origin, a museum and a government gives added strength to an international repatriation campaign. It encourages institutions in the Global North to become more forthcoming. Leiden museum director Steven Engelsman presented the return of the Toi Moko as a sign of recognition of the suffering inflicted and a sincere attempt to 'erase as much as possible a blot of the past'. In this development, it is crucial that the Māori and Moriori communities have confidence that the repatriation campaign is really about them. In the physical transfer of human remains, recognition of blots can be equally important and have a healing effect.

Neighbouring Australia is also moving towards such an approach, with representatives of Aboriginal groups working with museums in the various federal states and their governments. The parties in New Zealand and Australia do not opt for a confrontational strategy with institutions in Europe and North America, but for dialogue. New Zealand and Australia insist on repatriation, but do not force it. No harsh words are spoken, although the sluggish handling of repatriation requests in the West could sometimes justify it.

## 9.

# FRUITFUL COOPERATION AROUND ARCHIVES

Something that is rarely made public is that after the independence of the colonies, archives formed during the colonial period were also the subject of negotiations. Former colonies wanted them, former colonisers would not let them go. In old documents and on old maps, colonial administrators had recorded what they could get their hands on in conquered regions, which is to say, everything that grew there and not in Europe, and therefore yielded money in Europe: spices, coffee, tea, rubber, and so on. Later, this was also extended to what was in the soil there and was lacking in Europe: minerals, oil, and the like. Former colonies shielded the exact location of deposits and fertile land from outsiders, and treated the rulers of the new countries as ‘outsiders’ as well. Nor did they want outsiders to see military and administrative reports on how they had imposed their will on the colonies and the people who lived there. And yet, apart from oral histories, archives were often the only witnesses to events.

That archives are ‘sites of power, knowledge and violence but also reimagination, redress and healing’ (Agostinho et al., ‘Archives that Matter’, 2019, p. 5), had already been realised in Europe in 1648. At that time, European states agreed in the Peace of Westphalia to keep their hands off each other’s archives in case of war or occupation. This agreement was subsequently expanded upon. An important aspect here is the extra rule drawn up for when a new state emerged from a country: in legal jargon, a successor state from a predecessor state. The successor state is then entitled to the records relating to its territory formed by the predecessor state.

While states in Europe honoured these agreements among themselves, they did not do so in their relations with their independent colonies. They rarely gave them access to the archives from the colonial period, even though knowledge of economic, administrative and military matters was crucial to the development of the new countries. They took archives with them or destroyed them. When King Leopold II realised in 1908 that he had to hand over his Congo Free State to the Belgian state, he ordered his collaborators to destroy all archives. It took them eight days to complete his task of ‘oblivion’.

The Belgian sovereign’s actions were not exceptional. Germany did it in Southwest Africa early in the twentieth century. After 1945 Great Britain disposed of its administrative and military archives in incinerators on a massive scale. France took strategic documents from Algeria, returned part of them later but kept documents about the colonial history itself. The two countries are still arguing about it. Shortly before the independence of its colonies in Africa, Belgium transferred crucial archives to Brussels. Those from Belgian Congo were on the agenda in the 1970s, but Belgium did not give in. They are now back on the wish list of the Congolese National Forum on the Reconstitution of Archives and Cultural Heritage.

Why do colonial archives not play a role in the public debate on restitution? Is it because colonial objects – golden crowns, statues of gods, masks – are more glittering, more charming, and appeal more to the imagination? Is it because they are more likely to touch the viewer’s heart? Are objects more necessary as tangible evidence of a pre-colonial past or the unity and identity of a young state? Or do objects seduce the viewer more easily than antique paper? An obvious difference, of course, is that colonial archives have been usually created by the coloniser, whereas objects belonged to the colonised.

In bilateral return negotiations between the Netherlands, Belgium and their former colonies, archives do play a role. We have already seen the example of archives from Suriname that were returned from 2010 onwards. In the 1960s and 1970s, Indonesia and the Netherlands made agreements about archives. Negotiations on this were smoother than those on objects, and the national archives of both countries have continued to work together ever since. In the 1970s, Belgium blocked all returns, as mentioned above. That is changing. Since 2018, Rwanda and Belgium have been discussing the return of archives. Their conversation

is different in tone due to the possibility of digital repatriation. Yet not every former colony is in favour of this form of return.

## ARCHIVING FRENZY

In the perception of the colonised, Europeans were always busy archiving. They made reports and notes on almost everything they did and observed, and they kept these. This led to rows and rows of archives. Due to this archiving urge the earliest records in the possession of former colonies are European rather than local. For example, the oldest record in Sri Lanka is a VOC document dating from 1638.

In the two centuries of its existence the VOC produced one hundred million pages of documents. Besides official documents, there were personal papers, diaries, letters and drawings of governors general, fleet officers, other Company personnel and their families. Three quarters of the VOC archives can no longer be found. It has perished, disappeared. The quarter that has been preserved is spread over the Arsip Nasional in Jakarta (2.5 kilometres of shelf space), the National Archive in The Hague (1.2 kilometres), archives in South Africa (450 metres), Sri Lanka (310 metres) and some other places. Less has been preserved of the WIC's archive. Most of what is still there is in the Netherlands.

Where documents on DR Congo, Rwanda and Burundi were not destroyed by King Leopold's order, they are in Belgium. The State Archives manage about 6 kilometres of shelf space of public and 3 kilometres of private archives, including those of missionaries, businessmen and scientists. In the cellars of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs there are 6 kilometres of colonial archives, which will gradually be transferred to the State Archives. The AfricaMuseum in Tervuren has the files of 280 companies and institutions with a history in Central Africa. In Belgium and the Netherlands, colonial archives can also be found in city, provincial and university libraries, museums, missionary organisations and private homes.

## INDONESIA: A PRAGMATIC APPROACH

At the 1949 Round Table Conference, the future of both archives and objects was put on the agenda. The first thing on which Indonesia and the Netherlands agreed was archives. In the Cultural Agreement of 1968, they agreed to cooperate intensively, microfilm archives and discuss an occasional return. Following on from this, and at the request of President



LEFT: *The originals of most colonial archives from Belgian Africa remain in Brussels; they are increasingly accessible in Africa via digitisation.* © Belgian State Archives; RIGHT: *VOC archives that were already in the Netherlands have remained in the Netherlands, while archives that were in Indonesia have remained there.* © National Archive, The Hague

Suharto, in 1973 the Netherlands transferred the ancient Nagarakertagama manuscript on the pre-colonial unity of the Indonesian archipelago. With regard to other documents and manuscripts Indonesia then accepted that, due to its own weak archival infrastructure, it was better off with microfilms.

In their negotiations, experts from both countries distinguished two groups of documents. One consisted of the so-called Yogya archives. In 1945, independence fighters had proclaimed Yogyakarta the capital of the Republic of Indonesia. Important documents of the Indonesian leaders were kept there, which the Dutch had managed to seize. The Netherlands, however, was unwilling to hand over these spoils of war, as they could contain information about Dutch cruelties committed during the post-war years. Following Indonesia's repeated requests for them, The Hague gave

in and the archives went back in the late 1960s. Before their return, the Netherlands photocopied them. Since then, they have been in the Arsip Nasional. The second and much larger group contained countless older documents from the VOC era and the period of the colonial administration thereafter. This included unique material which covered the entire archipelago or which contained regional information. Until around 1880, all documents were shipped to the Netherlands, but in that year the colony got its own archives institution, the Landsarchief, now Arsip Nasional.

In the *Joint Recommendations* of 1975, the Netherlands and Indonesia had laid down the principle that archives would go to the successor state. This meant that Indonesia was entitled to all archives from the period of Dutch and Japanese rule, including those that had been shipped to The Hague before 1880. But when it came to implementation, the two countries abandoned the principle and decided pragmatically that archives would become the property of the state on whose territory they were located at the time. The reason for this was the fragility of many records and the cost and effort of transporting them overseas. From then on, the Arsip Nasional and the National Archive in The Hague started to work together more closely, and many archives were microfilmed or, when technology had advanced, digitised.

## RWANDA: DIGITAL ACCESS ONLY

At the Berlin Conference, Rwanda and Burundi had been assigned to Germany. But in 1916, the German colonial administration had to withdraw and make way for Belgian soldiers. After the First World War, the League of Nations assigned both territories to Belgium. In 1962, Rwanda and Burundi became independent. On the eve of the handover, as in the case of DR Congo, crucial archives of the colonial administration were transferred to Brussels.

There has been no talk of anything since then between Burundi and Belgium. The country has been in the grip of unrest and violence for a long time. 'Informally, Burundian Belgians sometimes ask me about digitising the historical Burundi archives that we keep in our institution', answers AfricaMuseum Director Guido Gryseels my question about it, 'but there is no concrete request from the country itself'. The same applies to the 1,136 ethnographic objects from Burundi in the museum.

Rwanda and Belgium are, however, talking to each other. In Rwanda, a genocide took place in 1994 in which between half a million and

one million Tutsis and moderate Hutus were murdered. Since then, the country has been run by an autocratic Tutsi government. In a way, the situation has become more stable, although the aftermath of the massacre is still very keenly felt. After the appointment of Paul Kagame as president in 2000, the issue of the return of archives and artefacts really came to life. Given Rwanda's colonial past, the search for those lost pieces had to be carried out in two countries: Belgium and Germany. In 2006, the government put a cultural heritage policy down in writing. One of the steps in it was 'the return of archives and other cultural heritage objects in Europe and elsewhere in the world'. Rwanda would create conditions conducive to their management.

For years, little happened. Reports in German and international media at the end of 2016 caused a first ripple in Rwanda's heritage pond. Over one thousand Rwandan skulls had been discovered in Berlin. They had been collected at the beginning of the twentieth century. Rwanda took note but did nothing further with them. 'We did not know how to deal with that find', confided Director General Robert Masozera of Rwanda's museums to me at the end of 2018. The same was true of colonial archives and artefacts. 'Frankly, we didn't know which archives and objects were in the possession of which institutions in Europe', he added. The country had asked AfricaMuseum director Gryseels for the return of its heritage at a meeting on archives and collections in Kigali in March 2018. As far as the archives were concerned, this demand was not only addressed to the museum in Tervuren, which kept all geological documentation, but also to the State Archives, which kept everything on colonial administration. The Rwandan government set up a presidential commission to make an inventory of Rwandese cultural heritage abroad. When, at the end of 2018, it asked the AfricaMuseum for a list of objects, a printout was immediately produced: there were 2,300 of them. Rwanda and Belgium then set up a cooperation programme that will run until 2023 and is financed by Belgium.

What is striking about Rwanda's negotiations with the State Archives and the AfricaMuseum is that Rwanda is not keen on repatriating original archive documents. The country is content with digital repatriation. According to Director Karel Velle of the State Archives, this could hardly be otherwise. He mails me: 'The archive in question partly concerns the common history of two countries, Belgium and Rwanda, but also partly the history of Congo and Burundi'. So these files cover the whole of





*Digitisation of colonial archives is time-consuming. © AfricaMuseum in Tervuren*

Belgian Africa. If you start splitting them up, ‘information can get lost’. Moreover, ‘those two countries have to be consulted before it is released’. To enable the three countries and Belgium to view the files, digitisation is therefore ‘absolutely essential’.

The digitisation of documents in the State Archives was delayed due to the presence of mould and the need to replace the paper folders for the files. According to Velle, it is logical ‘that Belgium rather than the former colonies should take on this task’. Once Belgium and Rwanda agreed on this, the process gained momentum and in August 2019 a Rwandan delegation visited Brussels to prioritise the digitisation of the colonial archives.

It turned out there was still a bottleneck. Velle explains: ‘The Belgian authorities still need to declassify some of the documents before they can be made available to Rwanda. That requires a decision at federal level. It’s not about a certain type of documents. The classification was done randomly. Some officials classified a lot, and others a little.’

In the meantime, the AfricaMuseum has worked with a Rwandan expert to make all geological archives available digitally. The maps, survey reports and other data, although old, are still ‘of very great use’, Gryseels assures me. In addition, the museum has carried out fieldwork in Western Rwanda with Rwandan geologists to fill in gaps in the geological history and to update old maps.

As is the case between the Netherlands and Indonesia, talks between Belgium and Rwanda on the return of archives are progressing faster than those on objects. The long list of Rwandan objects handed over by the AfricaMuseum in 2018 includes baskets, metal and clay objects, wickerwork and other utensils, as well as some slit drums, for which Rwanda is famous. Rwanda has to decide which ones it wants back. Belgium is waiting for a specified return request.

Why did the transfer of colonial archives in the 1970s not succeed between Belgium and Congo whereas they are succeeding between Belgium and Rwanda? One reason is that the mining interests in Katanga, where Belgium played such a dirty game, were much bigger than the interests in Rwanda. Another is that we are now half a century further on, and Belgium looks at restitution issues differently. A third reason is that relatively small Rwanda is more stable and better organised than its big Congolese neighbour, or its equally small Burundian neighbour. Unlike DR Congo half a century ago, Rwanda does not invoke the law of the successor state and does not demand originals of archives. In the present age of digitisation, the situation is substantially different. Rwanda wants above all to take the information from the archives and use it for its development.

## DISCUSSION ABOUT DIGITAL RESTITUTION

While new digital possibilities may make the return or sharing of archives easier, this has less often been the case for colonial objects and ancestral remains.

In the late 1990s, some museums in the Global North discussed the possibility of making colonial objects accessible to communities of origin in a database, instead of returning them physically. Critics questioned whether this idea of digital return came from these communities or whether it was to avoid restitution. In many instances, that was the end of the discussion.

Sometimes, however, parties in the Global North and South opt for digital repatriation of objects. The *Afrisurge* project of the AfricaMuseum in Tervuren and the universities of Ghent in Belgium and Uele in the north-east of Congo is an example. The three partners decided in 2020 to collect indigenous knowledge of ritual objects in Tervuren, which can be studied digitally in Uele, and make their biographies more complete. Hein Vanhee of the AfricaMuseum hopes that this approach will promote peace: ‘The north-eastern region is plagued by conflicts. A restored connection with this colonial heritage can make historically rooted political traditions visible and thus become a catalyst for peace building’. Three communities in the area will benefit. Vanhee does not exclude the possibility that the project ultimately ‘paves the way for the actual restitution of objects’.

As far as ancestral remains are concerned, most communities of origin are against digital return. They do not want to see their ancestors in a

digital display window. The Māori and the Aboriginal peoples, as already mentioned, do not even want just anyone to have access to the sacred spaces where they themselves keep anonymous ancestral remains. Museums in Peru and other Latin American countries exhibit mummies, but the question is whether they consult with the communities of origin about where the dead bodies came from. Most mummies, however, are much older than those taken during the colonial period.

The digital return of colonial archives encounters fewer objections. Often archival institutions in the South appreciate that institutions in the Global North manage colonial archives and are now making them digitally accessible. In a project led by Radboud University in Nijmegen and Anton de Kom University in Paramaribo, Surinamese Dutch helped transcribe the registers of 80,000 people who were enslaved between 1830 and the abolition of slavery by the Dutch in 1863. These are now in the National Archive of Suriname. It offers Surinamese Dutch people the chance to research their family tree digitally and by means of their last name. Even in the case of old documents about a country's economic potential, access – think of Rwanda – can be more important than ownership.

Yet there are objections. These are partly of a practical nature. Digitising is slow and expensive. Documents have to be scanned, made accessible to the public and given a minimal explanation. In the National Archives in The Hague and the State Archives in Brussels, work has been going on for years and great strides are being made. Good equipment and internet connections in the countries of origin are also partly practical concerns. Citizens looking for family histories do not always have access to the same robust internet as government agencies wishing to consult digitised archives.

There may be ethical objections to digital repatriation. Archival scholars Charles Jeurgens and Michael Karabinos ('Paradoxes of Curating Colonial Memory', 2020, p. 201) wonder whether it really helps to decolonise colonial archives and redistribute power over them. Belgium, much more than Rwanda, will decide whether its share of documents on the African country can be declassified. The National Archive in The Hague got into a bit of a fix when it started digitising the colonial archives it was to hand over to Suriname. Some people in Suriname objected to it, because some documents contained personal information which should only be made available to the families concerned. On the

other hand, Surinamese Dutch people were in favour of digitisation. Another experience concerns religious proverbs and texts that were brought back during the colonial period. Some peoples do not want these to be digitised, as it profanes them.

This brings us to the question of what to do with archival documents of great cultural or (art) historical value. Think of the Nagarakertagama or the Aztec codices that were brought from South America and still remain in large European libraries. They are special and unique documents. To repatriate them only digitally and not physically, without the explicit consent of the country of origin, is problematic. Old power structures remain in place.

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Although Belgium and the Netherlands and their former colonies have made different choices in dealing with colonial archives, a good deal of pragmatism has prevailed in all approaches presented.

In the 1960s and 1970s, few former colonisers were willing to negotiate about colonial archives. The agreement between the Netherlands and Indonesia on the subject was exceptional. At the same time, the Dutch indulgence was the result of the principle of reciprocity applied by the Netherlands at the time. The Netherlands got something in return: it was allowed to keep archives it had lost if the principle of the successor state had been followed.

A substantial change in archival negotiations has come due to technological innovations. They offer a chance that things will still work out well between DR Congo and Belgium in the area of archives. It cannot be ruled out that Brussels and Kinshasa, and eventually Brussels and Bujumbura, will adopt the Belgian–Rwandan approach.

# 10.

## FAREWELL TO OVER 18,000 OBJECTS FROM THE MUSEUM NUSANTARA

**T**he Netherlands and Belgium both had training institutes to prepare civil servants for work in their colonies. For the Netherlands it was the Indische Instelling (Indian Institution) in Delft (1864–1901), for Belgium the Koloniale Hogeschool (Colonial College) in Antwerp (1920–1962), which from 1949 was renamed the University Institute for the Overseas Territories (UNIVOG). Both had collections from their colonies. There is little precise information about what happened to the modest collection of objects and books from the Antwerp institute after the independence of Belgium’s colonies. The institute closed down and the collection had to go. According to one expert, books went to the Royal Library in Brussels and objects to the AfricaMuseum in Tervuren. Another said that he had found some of the books at an antiquities dealer in Ghent. He feared that some of the objects ‘also ended up in living rooms or antique shops’. A third person confirmed the latter; according to him, there is no longer any trace of many objects. This probably happened with collections more often in the 1960s than we realise, and not only in Belgium.

Much more is known about the recent deaccessioning of over 18,000 objects from Museum Nusantara in Delft. After the closure of the Indische Instelling in 1901, the accompanying Museum Nusantara (*Nusantara* means ‘archipelago’) remained open. Former students, former inhabitants of the Dutch East Indies, their families and descendants loved visiting it. But on 1 January 2013, the museum closed its doors and a new destination for the collection had to be found. Erfgoed Delft, the heritage department of the Delft municipality, became responsible for

this. While the Antwerp collection remained largely within Belgium, the aim with the Nusantara collection was to return as many objects as possible to Indonesia. This was received positively in Indonesia. In *The Jakarta Post* of 19 October 2015, Director-General Kacung Marijan of Indonesia's Ministry of Education, Culture and Tourism praised it. The management of Museum Nasional of Indonesia was also in favour.

Erfgoed Delft brought in Museum Volkenkunde as an advisor. The Leiden museum already had experience with deaccessioning larger collections and had, in addition, good contacts in Indonesia. It was eager to participate, because in 2014 the Leiden institution would merge with Tropenmuseum Amsterdam and the Afrika Museum in Bergen Dal to form the National Museum of World Cultures, to which, in 2017, the Wereldmuseum in Rotterdam was added. This umbrella organisation would also have to deal with deaccessioning due to overlapping collections. Delft presented an opportunity to gain experience with this.

Early in 2018, Erfgoed Delft and Museum Volkenkunde asked me to write a retrospective on the process that was then almost completed. I thought that was brave of them, because less than a year earlier, in my lecture 'The Pain of Delft' at the symposium *Collections for the Future* in the National Military Museum in Soesterberg, close to Utrecht, I had expressed critical views about it. The gravity of the process had been underestimated and not enough provenance research had been done. From the averted eyes of some of those directly involved, I concluded that my words had come across badly. I accepted the assignment because it offered an opportunity to look into the museum's 'kitchen' at a vulnerable moment in its existence: a farewell to the complete collection.

## THE PAIN OF DELFT

In 2012, the municipality of Delft was in serious financial trouble and had to cut spending in all sectors, including culture. Museum Nusantara had lost some of its vitality and been unable to boost the number of visitors. In the summer of that year, the Mayor and Aldermen decided to discontinue the subsidy as of 1 January 2013. It was a slap in the face for staff, donors and lenders of objects, and for families with a history in the archipelago. In their eyes, a closely related decision was even worse: the collection could be returned to the country of origin, and preferably to smaller museums there. At that time, the decision to make such an extensive return to the country of origin was new in the Dutch muse-

um world. Until then, museums wishing to deaccession collections had mainly offered them to other museums in the Netherlands.

Chairman Marchinus Hofkamp of the association *Tribale Kunst en Cultuur* (Tribal Art and Culture), with many members in Delft, wrote in the association's magazine that they found it 'shocking and outrageous' that the decision to close and repatriate was taken without any 'public (national) discussion' (*Tribale Kunst*, December 2015, p. 3). According to the association, the intended return amounted to 'simply dumping the collection to Indonesia' – just as the Royal Tropical Institute, also in 2013, 'stupidly dumped' 400,000 books and 20,000 periodicals from its library, which it could not get rid of at institutions in the Netherlands, in Alexandria in Egypt. According to curators in Delft and Leiden, there was no question of 'dumping'. They knew that smaller museums in Indonesia were in need of additions to their collections. That did not stop the opponents of closure and return from going so far as to forge a plan for a new Nusantara museum. This dream was to go up in smoke.

In addition to the over 18,000 objects, there were some 16,000 photographs and other visual materials and 8,000 books. Most of them came from or were related to the Indonesian archipelago, while a smaller part had come from other colonial areas. Also part of the collection were objects that the Netherlands had used at colonial world fairs around 1900. The Delft municipality informed the museum that the entire collection had to be disposed of within one year, as it could not afford to store it any longer.

Just like the collection of the *Koloniale Hogeschool* in Antwerp, the collection in Delft was not of the highest quality, even though there were pieces with a special story or aesthetic value: like the old Buginese kris from Sulawesi, which Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, as leader of an economic mission, was to give to Indonesian President Joko Widodo at the end of 2016. Or a Balinese palanquin that was acquired by the first Dutch Protestant missionary on Bali. When I asked whether any of the objects might have a problematic provenance – war booty, confiscation, contraband? – the curators involved replied that they did not think so. In 2018, that answer was no longer really satisfactory, but they said there was no time for deeper provenance research because of the rush and the large number of objects.

## TIME AND MANPOWER REQUIRED

Deaccessioning the collection within one year soon proved to be a pipe dream, especially because Erfgoed Delft wanted the entire process to be transparent and to comply with the rules of the Dutch Heritage Act and Museum Association. And that had consequences. The Heritage Act prescribes that a museum that intends to dispose of an object must first determine whether it should be retained for the Netherlands Collection, the institution that ensures that objects and documents of cultural, historical and social importance to the Netherlands are housed or safeguarded in own museums, libraries and archives. The application of that rule meant that some objects might not be transferred to Indonesia.

The Museum Association has a guideline stipulating that a museum that wants to dispose of an object first asks the other five hundred member museums in the Netherlands about their interest. Erfgoed Delft did not want to ignore this. Two museums that in previous years did ignore the guideline had experienced problems: in 2011 Museum Gouda auctioned the painting *The Schoolboys* by Marlène Dumas without first offering it to other museums. To the anger of the artist and the Dutch museum world, her canvas disappeared from a public institution in the Netherlands to a private collection in Asia in exchange for almost a million euros. In the same year, the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam wanted to sell its Africa collection in order to supplement its shortage with the tens of millions of euros that it hoped to get for it. Other ethnographic museums in the Netherlands were adamantly opposed. Africans felt aggrieved. Instead of returning objects with an unclear or dubious origin to Africa, they were now being used for debt rescheduling at a Dutch institution. The owner of the collection, the municipality of Rotterdam, ultimately did not give permission for the sale.

In order to be able to circumvent the guideline in a transparent way, Erfgoed Delft officially asked the Museum Association for exemption. It received this in 2015. The wish to be able to give as many objects as possible to Indonesia and the fact that the Netherlands already had an extensive Indonesia collection, which could make it difficult to place all objects with museums in the country, were the deciding factors.

The first major step then was the evacuation of the Delft museum building and the transfer of the full collection to an art storage company. This operation took more than four weeks. After that, the registration of all objects began. Erfgoed Delft made three employees available, the art storage company four. The latter took the objects from the rack one



by one and unpacked them. The museum staff took photos and recorded the inventory number. Then they were packed up again and put back in their place. It was thought that this work would be completed within a year. It took more than one and a half years.

## INDONESIA'S HAPPINESS

The next step would require more thought and take longer. Because before a single object could go to Indonesia, it had to be decided which objects could not be disposed of. There were three groups in the Netherlands that could claim objects. First of all, the city of Delft. It selected objects that were closely linked to its history. Delft was once a small chamber of the VOC, with a representative on the board of the Company. Four hundred and fifty-nine objects went to the Delft Collection and are now in Museum Prinsenhof.

A second group consisted of donors and lenders. Erfgoed Delft offered to give back the objects they had once given up. This was prompted in part by the fact that a number of them were strongly opposed to their objects going to Indonesia, afraid if they went that they would not be kept properly. Some donors and lenders proved difficult or impossible to trace, after which appeals were placed in the Government Gazette and regional newspapers. In the end, this produced a list of approximately five hundred objects. These were not available for Indonesia either.

The third group was the most troublesome: the Dutch State, guarding the Netherlands Collection. Three expert staff members from Delft and Leiden spent 230 days on it. 'It was a matter of weighing things up and weighing again, discussing them, bringing in external expertise, and remaining conscientious and consistent', one of them told me. How did they determine whether an object was 'worthy of protection'? Of course, it had to be rare. Objects with special documentation, such as the Balinese palanquin, were not allowed to leave the country either. Beforehand, the three experts estimated that one in ten objects would be worthy of protection, so far less than two thousand. It turned out to be 3,194. They are now in the depositories of the National Museum of World Cultures.

Opponents of return naturally felt that many more items should have been preserved for the Netherlands Collection. Archaeologist and Indonesia expert Hedi Hinzler of Leiden University thought that all older objects were still indispensable for education and research in the Netherlands, they should 'not disappear'. Moreover, she thought the description



*Objects from the Nusantara collection were placed in an art storage facility.*  
© Erfgoed Delft

of many objects incorrect or incomplete – it had to be improved first. She was also afraid of the increasing Islamic extremism in Indonesia, as a result of which ‘many objects are “forbidden”, are banned and may no longer be made or used’. Staff members of Erfgoed Delft and Museum Volkenkunde held several discussions with Hinzler and other opponents, but the two sides could not reach an understanding. For Hinzler and likeminded people this was a painful experience.

With 459 objects for the Delft Collection, 500 for donors and lenders and 3,194 for the Netherlands Collection, there was enough left over for Indonesia, one might think. On the Indonesian side, the cultural authorities announced that they were preparing for the arrival of thousands of objects. They could be stored in a new depot to be built near Museum Nasional in Jakarta. The Dutch condition that Indonesia would pay for the transport was a bit of a shock, as art transport is very pricey, but Indonesia would get something for it. In October 2015, the two sides concluded an agreement verbally, hands were shaken, photos taken. Everyone seemed relieved that a new home had been found for the collection.

One month later, an Indonesian delegation visited the storage facilities to see the collection again. Some members of the delegation had their doubts about the generous Dutch offer. Did their country really

need all those objects? And why did Indonesia have to pay for storage, insurance and transport, when the Netherlands had taken all the objects and now wanted to get rid of them? Did not the Netherlands have to take care that they were returned? But the train went on and Erfgoed Delft, partly at the Indonesian request, summarised all agreements in a Memorandum of Understanding and sent it to Jakarta for signature.

## **MORE PAIN IN DELFT**

And then there was silence. No reaction came from Indonesia, let alone a signature. What could be the matter? In early 2016, the Director General of Culture Marijan was succeeded by Hilmar Farid. This critical historian, who had been active in the pro-democracy movement in his country, was possibly less willing to please the Dutch and more eager to develop Indonesia's own cultural policy. He did not need all those objects from Delft that had come together by chance and, speaking to the Indonesian press agency Antara, even used the word 'junk' for some of it. What he was interested in were objects that were needed in his country and that they could select themselves. At the end of March 2016, Farid informed Erfgoed Delft that he was turning down the offer from the Netherlands. No explanation was given.

Delft and Leiden were in trouble. It was a verbal agreement, but surely that counts as an agreement too! With the rejection, the plan for a quick return fell through the water, while the cost of storage kept rising – and this to the dismay of the municipality. Had Erfgoed Delft and the National Museum of World Cultures clung too much to the typically Dutch notion that 'a deal is a deal'? Had they not paid enough attention to Indonesian sensitivities and cultural differences between the two countries? Why did Indonesia pull out?

In an interview, heritage specialist Manuhutu, who is familiar with both countries, argues that it is obvious 'that it went wrong because Indonesia was not allowed to select objects themselves'. Rather, it had been all or nothing, the remaining collection had to leave quickly and Jakarta had to pay for all the transport costs. Meanwhile, the Delft municipality, donors and lenders and the Collection of the Netherlands had first been allowed to select the best pieces. 'So perhaps the Indonesians thought: if you get to choose and we don't, you better keep it.'

Erfgoed Delft could start again from scratch. It placed all available objects on the so-called Deaccessioning Database of the Museum As-

sociation, enabling member museums to select objects. Dutch museums showed massive interest and selected many objects. When, after this, many items still remained, the National Museum of World Cultures activated its network and informed museums in Europe and Asia about the possibility of receiving objects free of charge. A few of them showed interest.

It made Erfgoed Delft dizzy when this step, too, had to be taken back again. Despite the Indonesian refusal, the talks with Jakarta had continued informally, and suddenly the Ministry in Jakarta said it was interested in a limited number of objects, no more than 1,500. The condition was that they could make the selection and decide if and when the Museum Nasional would forward them to regional museums in Indonesia. Erfgoed Delft was forced to interrupt all contacts with museums in the Netherlands, Europe

*Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte presents a Buginese kris to Indonesian President Joko Widodo in late 2016. © Dutch Embassy Jakarta*



and Asia. A delegation came from Jakarta. Contrary to expectations in Delft, the delegation selected not only Indonesian pieces, but also VOC coins and colonial furniture and clothing, which fitted in with the growing interest in the Dutch side of the colonial past in Indonesia.

## THE ASIA CULTURAL CENTER IN SOUTH KOREA BECOMES THE LARGEST RECIPIENT

After this it was possible to quickly move on with the remaining objects. Of the eight receiving museums in the Netherlands, Museum Bronbeek in Arnhem and the Poppenspe(e)lmuseum in Vorchten received the most objects, followed by Museon in The Hague and CODA in Apeldoorn. The institution that was allocated almost half of Museum Nusantara's Indonesia collection – 7,744 objects – was in Asia: the Asia Cultural Center (ACC) in Gwangju, South Korea. It has the ambition of becoming a universal museum for Asia. Once the list of museums and objects was finalised, the great exodus could begin. The last institution to ship its acquisitions, in December 2019, was Museum Nasional of Indonesia. All in all, seven years had passed since the closure of Museum Nusantara.

Museon in The Hague immediately set up a display case to show the new acquisitions. A selection of those from the Sarawak Museum in Kuching, Malaysia, was shown at the special exhibition *Treasures from Nusantara*.

## A NEW SOUND

Erfgoed Delft and the National Museum of World Cultures had managed just in time to keep all objects of the Nusantara collection within the public domain and not have to take anything to auction houses, where they would easily have fallen out of the radar. The wish for a large-scale return to Indonesia was only partly realised, but the episode provided insight into how to deal with former colonies in the twenty-first century.

At the Zoom seminar *The Politics of Restitution*, organised by the Centre of South East Asian Studies at the School for Oriental and African Studies in London on 20 May 2021, Director General Farid and I looked back to the deaccessioning of the Nusantara collection. Our assessments coincided. Farid had been familiar with it during his time as a student in the Netherlands – ‘I even worked in Museum Nusantara’. One aspect

## RECIPIENTS OF ITEMS FROM THE COLLECTION OF MUSEUM NUSANTARA DELFT

*Delft Collection*: 459. Some are on display in Museum Prinsenhof Delft.

*Collection Netherlands*: 3,194. Lodged in NMVW depot.

*Collection Indonesia*: 1,501. Shipped to Jakarta in December 2019 and stored there.

*Donors and lenders of Museum Nusantara*: ca. 500.

## MUSEUMS IN THE NETHERLANDS

*Museon, The Hague*: 434. A small portion was immediately exhibited to the public.

*Museum Bronbeek, Arnhem*: 2,651. Seeks sufficient storage space.

*National Museum of Antiquities, Leiden*: 23. Coptic fabrics from Egypt; these will be exhibited later.

*Poppenspe(e)lmuseum, Vorchten*: 1,413. Seeks sufficient storage space.

*Maritime Museum Rotterdam*: 0. Its decision not to accept the objects it had selected caused irritation in Delft.

*CODA, Apeldoorn*: 346. Jewellery from Indonesia in storage.

*Amsterdam Pipe Museum, Amsterdam*: 62. Pipes and attributes in storage.

*Bevrijdingsmuseum Zeeland, Nieuwdorp*: 45. Objects from Indonesia during the Second World War.

*Leiden University Library, Leiden*: 16. Mainly palm leaf manuscripts.

*Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, Amsterdam*: 8. In storage.

## MUSEUMS IN EUROPE

*Weltmuseum, Vienna*: 79. Mostly batik cloth, in storage.

*National Museums of World Culture, Gothenburg (Sweden)*: 36. In storage.

## MUSEUMS IN ASIA

*Sarawak Museum, Kuching (Malaysia)*: 412. Objects from Borneo, a selection was immediately exhibited.

*Asian Civilisations Museum (Singapore)*: 151. In storage.

*Asia Cultural Center, Gwangju (South Korea)*: 7,744. Interested in all objects that were 'left over'; in storage.

that had surprised him was that the return was mostly about objects. 'Return is not simply about objects, for me it also is about knowledge production, about rewriting our history, about dealing with past injustices.' Moreover, it should not be the Netherlands, but the two countries together that 'determine which objects should be our focus' in common research efforts.

While Farid was critical about the process, for many in Delft and Leiden it had been emotional and fascinating. Everyone had to tiptoe, no one had wanted to miss it. Some of them saw the departure of objects for which they had lovingly cared for years. Letting go can be difficult. There was anger and disappointment among donors and loaners. But outside Delft there was also joy. Museums in the Netherlands, Europe and Asia had gained new collections in exchange for the costs of insurance and transport.

How different was the disposal of the collection of the Koloniale Hogeschool in Antwerp half a century earlier. The deaccessioning in Antwerp took place out of the limelight, was a bit messy and lacked direction. There is no unanimity about where the objects and the books have gone. The process in Delft was managed more tightly and with clearer goals. It was conducted with a certain degree of openness, although communication with the outside world started late. Perhaps the price of this more modern approach was that it provoked much and open resistance, which delayed the process.

In Delft, there seemed to be a generational difference between supporters and opponents of closure and return. The opponents saw themselves as better stewards than their counterparts in Indonesia. Those in favour thought it was time to return pieces to where they were once made. In Jakarta, a generational change within the Directorate General for Culture played a role. The new management made it very clear that it has its own cultural policy with its own priorities.

The fact that an institution in a European country wanted to return as many objects as possible to a country of origin was in itself a new trend. The fact that the same institution tried to decide that many objects were to be given to regional museums was a clear miscalculation. The Indonesian authorities cried 'Stop!', and first looked at how the offer from the Netherlands fitted in with their own cultural policy. This cultural clash is perhaps the most important lesson of the deaccessioning of the Nusantara collection.



*Two acquisitions shown at the special exhibition Treasures from Nusantara, Sarawak Museum, Kuching, Malaysia. © Hans van de Bunte/Sarawak Museum Collection*



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What was striking for me about the attitude of the Indonesian authorities was that they did not concern themselves with the question of how all these objects had ever been acquired – whether there was looted art in the collection, or whether pieces had perhaps been acquired unfairly. What mattered to them was which objects filled the gaps in their own collections. While looted art is at the centre of many return discussions in Europe, the dismantling of the Nusantara collection shows that things can be different in former colonies. Does this suggest that colonial looted art is sometimes more a problem of Europe, which is increasingly aware that thieves do not prosper?

Even in the few years between the decision of the Delft municipality to close Museum Nusantara (summer 2012) and the departure of the last items (end 2019), the spirit of the times has changed. One lesson is clear: sit down at an early stage with all parties involved, certainly those from the country of origin, put the problem you need to solve on the table and gauge what is essential to everyone. If the assignment for the deaccessioning were given now, it would almost certainly be carried out differently.

## 11.

# BENIN DIALOGUE GROUP: A MODEL FOR A EUROPEAN APPROACH?

The year 2021 saw a sudden breakthrough in the negotiations that had begun in 2010 over the thousands of heads and plaques made of bronze, copper, ivory and terracotta that British soldiers had taken from a burnt-down palace compound in Benin City in 1897 and which have since been dispersed around the world. Currently, the thousands of specimens have become emblematic in the return debate between Europe and Africa.

The gruesome history of the robbery still haunts many Nigerians in and around what was the Kingdom of Benin. They want their objects back. Nigeria is on track to build a museum that offers a safe place for returned Benin objects. The Federal Government, the Edo State Government and the traditional Kingdom of Benin located in Edo State are working out a joint approach to deal with the return offers from Europe.

In October 2021, the German government and the Nigerian National Commission for Museums and Monuments (hereafter, NCM) signed a Memorandum of Understanding with a timetable for the restitution of 1,153 Benin objects in German museums. The memorandum announces the transfer of ownership of the objects to Nigeria in the second quarter of 2022. At the end of that same month, Cambridge University and Aberdeen University unconditionally transferred a Benin object to Nigeria. Earlier in the year, the National Museum of World Cultures in the Netherlands had gone through its collection with a fine-tooth comb and discovered that almost two thirds of its 184 Benin objects can be directly traced back to the 1897 robbery.

With the first Benin object returned at the end of 2021, the prospects for returns are improving. What does the Benin dialogue entail and what is the rationale? Can other former colonies find a model in it for reclaiming from museums in European countries the spoils of war lost by their territories?

## A QUIET BENCH IN FRONT OF A RESTLESS DISPLAY CASE

Much has been written about the Parthenon Marbles in the British Museum and the Nefertiti bust in the Ägyptisches Museum in Berlin. The British Lord Elgin acquired the Marbles in 1806, and from the start their ownership has been disputed, in Great Britain itself and outside. There are tales of smuggling and fraud surrounding the acquisition of the Nefertiti bust by German archaeologist Ludwig Borchardt in 1912. The Benin objects belong on this list of highly admired and much wanted icons acquired under highly dubious circumstances.

From the moment they were looted, much has been written about them and Nigerians themselves have contributed several studies. In 1977, Ekpo Eyo published *Two Thousand Years of Nigerian Art*, in which he took the initiative in defining what his country's art treasures are. Recently, Folarin Shylon has published scientific articles on the subject and Peju Layiwola has edited *Benin 1897.com* (2010). For years, Kwame Opoku, a legal expert from Ghana, has been advocating the return of the Benin objects and criticising both European countries and Nigeria for their slow progress towards this goal. In Europe, Barbara Plankensteiner (ed., *Benin: Kings and Rituals*, 2007), Staffan Lundén (*Displaying Loot*, 2016), Bénédicte Savoy (*Afrikas Kampf um seine Kunst*, 2020), Dan Hicks (*The Brutish Museums*, 2020) and Philips Barnaby (*Loot*, 2021), among others, have done likewise.

Benin objects hardly need books on them to attract attention. For whoever has seen a head or a plaque from the Benin kingdom once will easily recognise it the next time. They bespeak the hands of masters, radiate power and beauty and make you wonder: Who were the people depicted here? According to Peju Layiwola, granddaughter of King Akenzua II and Princess Elizabeth Olowu, they were kings, queens, commanders, courtiers and soldiers. They form 'the archives of our souls'

*Benin objects in Museum Volkenkunde, Leiden. The caption reads, 'looted art'.*

© Collection National Museum of World Cultures



and ‘pages’ of the kingdom’s own history book, where written sources are lacking. The kingdom’s current inhabitants therefore certainly experience their disappearance not only as a ‘material loss’, but also as a ‘human loss’. For Nigerian lawyer Bankole Sodipo, who mediated between Nigerian stakeholders and two universities in Great Britain in the return of two Benin bronzes in October 2021, the objects are needed as they were ‘used to record events and history’, they were ‘cultural and spiritual’ (quoted in Adebola, ‘The Return of Looted Benin Bronzes’, 2021).

In late 2016, I sat on a bench in Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden with Folarin Shyllon, looking at some sixty looted Benin objects. The day before, I had got acquainted with this heritage law scholar from Ibadan, who was closely involved in the Benin dialogue (more about which later). At the Free University of Amsterdam, he sat on the committee to which I had to defend my thesis on the future of colonial cultural treasures. He was the first to ask a question. It was not about theories or concepts, as is often the case with such initial questions, but about what I would think if a major European museum like the Louvre in Paris or the British Museum were to set up an annexe in Nigeria for Benin objects that might return from abroad in the future.

Red lights immediately started flashing in my head. Shyllon had already mentioned the idea in an article and I had a bad feeling about it. The word ‘recolonisation’ went through me, followed by ‘through museums with extremely high levels of colonial loot’. The British Museum is the largest owner of Benin objects in the world. In my view, his proposal would keep the relations between Africa and Europe unequal. And by doing so, did the professor not give his compatriots a failing grade? Admittedly, Nigeria had a bad name when it came to corruption, and museums suffered as well. There were enough stories circulating about lost objects and the involvement of museum staff. But such an annexe? I would rather leave it to the Nigerians themselves to manage returned Benin objects. So that was my answer in the university auditorium in 2016. Yet his question kept gnawing at me. Was Shyllon the reasonable one here and I the precise one? Was he, an African, giving me, a European, a lesson in pragmatism?

## IT IS ABOUT PEOPLE

As we left the museum in Leiden, Shyllon said another thing that stuck in my mind: ‘Stories about the great tragedy that befell the Bini – as the

inhabitants of the kingdom are called – in 1897 are almost always about objects. The deaths of untold numbers of people in it are rarely mentioned.’ For a moment I felt caught. Was I paying too much attention to looted objects in European museums and not enough to the people who had died during the robbery?

In Western history books, ‘1897’ is presented as a British punitive expedition against the Kingdom of Benin. It was of the same order as the British raid on the Ashanti kingdom in 1874, that of French soldiers on the king of Dahomey and that of Dutch army units in 1894 on the ruler of Mataram on Lombok. These rulers were defeated because they had refused to submit to the colonial authority. In Africa and Asia, people wondered and still wonder who should be ‘punished’. Was it not the uninvited guests from Europe? They do not speak of punitive expeditions but of mass murder, looting, the burning of the palace or of a war, in this case, a Beninese–British war.

Exactly how many people were killed in 1897 can no longer be ascertained. There are no written Beninese documents on this, but there are oral accounts. The British government and the press applauded the defeat of the African kingdom, but were largely silent about casualty figures and spoils of war. They only mentioned white casualties: five soldiers killed, more than twenty wounded and a few killed by disease. They also reported that several Beninese court officials had been put to death and that two of them had committed suicide when they had to appear before a military court, and that the Oba, the king, and some courtiers had been exiled.

What is now known is that the British army command had brought in 5,000 soldiers, porters and scouts from other colonial possessions in Africa. They were at the forefront of the fighting and they were the ones who died in greatest numbers. Estimates range from several hundred to several thousand. In addition, British soldiers set fire to the homes and food supplies of families they suspected of sheltering Beninese soldiers. As a result, countless more people starved to death. The British made the dead disappear into mass graves as quickly as possible – buried it, literally and figuratively. In turn, Benin’s military leaders had also deployed a large number of soldiers. They had also functioned as cannon fodder. We will never know their names, but we can assume that they were mostly simple Africans: soldiers, porters and impecunious citizens.

## PERPLEXING WANDERS

The basis for the looting of the Oba's palace was laid at the Berlin Conference, where European powers had discussed how they could strengthen their trading positions in Africa without fighting each other. Each of them was allocated territories and could make treaties with local rulers. When, in January 1897, a British delegation wanted to do just that with the Oba and the Oba was not immediately available and asked the delegation to come back later, an armed confrontation ensued in which the British consul general and some of his men were killed. London immediately sent in a large British–African army. In February of that year, it inflicted a crushing defeat on the Kingdom of Benin.

During the skirmishes, the palace buildings caught fire. When the flames were extinguished and the smoke had died down, the British soldiers discovered collapsed roofs and broken altars in the ashes on the ground, with strange-looking objects under and around them. Some were warped by heat, melted or almost completely disintegrated; others were still in good condition. The soldiers took as many as they could, and thus Benin objects began to wander across Europe and later North America. How many thousands we do not know, but we do know that some of them disappeared into the pockets of the participating British soldiers and that many trickled away to dealers. We also know that the British government immediately had a large number auctioned off to cover the costs of the military action.

Initially, the bronze, copper and ivory pieces had confused the Europeans. They apparently depicted heads of princes and queens, while the plaques showed courtiers, merchants and soldiers. But who had created them? They could not have been craftsmen of the Oba, it was thought, as they could only make primitive things. Were they perhaps the work of Egyptians with their ancient civilisations? Or had Portuguese, who had been sailing along the West African coast for centuries, helped? It was not long, however, before the Europeans admitted that the pieces bore the marks of Bini craftsmen.

And that led to a craze. From around 1900 onwards, Benin objects became must-haves, and they found their way into museums and private collections in Europe and North America via all sorts of circuitous routes. A large number ended up, for example, in the private collection of Augustus Pitt Rivers (1827–1900), a British officer and archaeologist, who eventually placed them in a museum named after him in Oxford

and in a private museum in Dorset. Felix von Luschan (1854–1924), an Austrian physician, anthropologist and explorer, acquired many for the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin. Thanks to generous donations by the Leipzig industrialist and collector Hans Meyer (1858–1929), I found them as far away as the Kunstkamera in St. Petersburg (which has 28 objects). Benin objects had become a business, and they still are. Antiquity dealers, auction houses and museums have made and are still making millions from them.

### DO THE BINI MISS THEIR OBJECTS?

The Kingdom of Benin still exists. It has a ceremonial position in the governing structure of Edo State in the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The Benin religion and court culture, according to Bini and other experts, are still very much alive. There are daily services and believers come to pray to their ancestors in the shrines, some combining their Bini faith with Christianity. The making of statues and commemorative plaques is also



*The Bini religion is still a living religion. Here we see the entrance to a shrine.*  
© Jacques de Rboter



still part of the Benin tradition. The Oba regularly commissions them. That the lost Benin objects are still being sung about is proven by the Nigerian poet Monday Midnite ('Lyrics of 1897', 2010, p. 11):

Bring back the treasures you stole from Benin  
Let the souls of my ancestors rest in peace  
Coz they're hanging, just sittin in limbo  
Hard for them to extricate and let it go

I appeal to the conscience of ordinary Brits  
Please take my plea to the palace of the queen

It was a crime against humanity  
It was a crime against purity  
It was a crime against positivity  
It was a crime against my people and me

You came in with no invitation  
What you did was an abomination  
Took advantage of every situation  
And destroyed my people's tradition.

The palace of the Oba consisted of several buildings, courtyards and galleries. Its roofs were supported by wooden pillars, from which hung bronze plaques recounting the history of the empire. Thanks to archaeological research, we also know that there were earthen walls around the buildings. They were not defensive structures, but marked out the territories of the various courtiers.

## THE RUN-UP TO THE BENIN DIALOGUE

In 2007, an impressive exhibition opened in the Museum für Völkerkunde (now the Weltmuseum) and the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna: *Benin – Kings and Rituals*. The three hundred Benin objects subsequently travelled to Berlin (where I saw the exhibition), Paris and Chicago. Benin's king, Omo N'Oba Erediauwa, provided a brief preface to the catalogue: it was his 'prayer that the people and government of Austria would show humanity and generosity' and 'give us back some of these objects'. He did not ask for all, but only some of the 167 Benin ob-

jects in the Vienna Museum. The Austrian answer was negative, because according to Austrian law they were inalienable. This answer aroused my interest in the Benin issue.

The Nigerians and the Benin court had been working for decades to recover Benin objects. In the past, they did so by (among other methods) buying them: thirty pieces between 1950 and 1972 from the British Museum. Now such a purchase would provoke protest. Surely you are not going to pay for objects that are stolen from you! Meanwhile, the large London museum refuses to return objects; at best, it is willing to lend them out.

From contact with curator Barbara Plankensteiner in 2014, I understood that the Weltmuseum in Vienna and the NCMM and the Benin court had begun talks in 2002 about the exhibition *Benin – Kings and Rituals*. She had been impressed by the ‘open and constructive’ attitude of the Nigerians. They were even willing to lend objects for the exhibition. At the same time, she discovered a few bottlenecks: the museum system in Nigeria was hierarchical, management personnel changed every few years, the security of collections proved to be a major problem, and people were ‘afraid of theft’.

Later, the parties agreed that at the opening of the exhibition the museum would offer representatives of the Benin court ‘a platform to convey a message from the Oba’. In those days, it took guts to let the one who had been robbed speak in the robber’s den. In his speech, Prince Gregory Akenzua, brother of the Oba, warned that the presence of the Benin delegation at the opening was ‘a royal gesture’ that ‘should not be confused with the Oba’s approval or legitimisation of the violent removal of the objects from his palace’. The Oba was concerned to ‘keep the restitution of this Benin cultural property in the world’s conscience’, as that removal had been a ‘rape of the colonised people’.

Austria’s rejection of the modest restitution request was supported in the same catalogue by the co-organising museums from Germany, France and the United States. They praised their own virtues in ‘bringing these works of art to much wider attention’; they were ‘now forever on the map of world art’. The rejection did not prevent some Nigerians and European curators from continuing their talks and eventually founding the Benin Dialogue Group.

At the end of 2010, this group officially met for the first time, under the name *New Cultures for Collaboration – Sharing of Collections and*

*Quests for Restitution: The Benin Case.* In other words: cooperation and restitution were on the agenda. There were representatives from the ethnographic museums in Vienna, Berlin, London and Stockholm, as well as from the Nigerian NCMM and the Benin court. Folarin Shyllon, who was in the Nigerian delegation, confides me to remember the day well: 'It was a cold December morning, then in Vienna. I remember how excited we were, convinced that the return of the Bini's priceless legacy was finally under discussion.'

The group met more often after that. They talked about Nigeria's capacity to deal properly with Benin objects and about the option of a legal (i.e. court-enforced) return. Nigeria soon dropped that option: too costly and too complicated. In 2016, the Director-General of the NCMM assured me in a letter that restitution was still 'an integral part of the dialogue'. In retrospect, that was wishful thinking. The European participants in the dialogue expressed their willingness to lend objects to Nigeria in rotation, but went no further.

## TENSIONS AMONG EUROPEAN DIALOGUE PARTNERS

In 2019, the dialogue group 'somersaulted', as Shyllon says, by abandoning the goal of restitution. The European participants no longer saw this as a 'task of the group' and would from now on, only discuss 'collaboration'. Since then, a plan for a new museum and research centre to be built in Benin City has dominated the agenda. The plan echoes Shyllon's difficult question during my PhD defence about an annexe to the British Museum or the Louvre in Nigeria. He was happy with it, too, because the museum will not be located in Lagos or the capital, Abuja, but in the middle of the Kingdom of Benin. He remained, however, horrified at the idea of having to borrow objects: 'The idea of lending parts of the legacy of the Benin kingdom to the Oba and the people of Benin is scandalous, to say the least. How can a recipient of stolen property claim ownership against the owners! It is neither fair nor equitable. It is sad.'

Ten European museums participated in recent meetings of the Benin Dialogue Group: four from Germany (Berlin, Hamburg, Leipzig, Stuttgart), three from Great Britain (London, Cambridge, Oxford) and one apiece from Sweden (Stockholm), Austria (Vienna) and the Netherlands (Leiden). Very gradually, they and their Nigerian counterparts have begun to trust each other more. And maybe the situation will not remain as sad as Shyllon feared. Director Laura van Broekhoven of the

Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, a participant in the dialogue (145 Benin objects), told me to have faith in the restitution negotiations taking place bilaterally: ‘Because we have removed restitution from the dialogue group’s agenda, museums in the group can agree bilaterally, depending on their individual situation, on when restitution can take place. As a result, the speed of such a restitution process is not hindered by national or local restrictions of specific museums’ (here, she means museums that are unwilling to return). Apparently, the dialogue group was an inappropriate forum for this goal.

The split seems to be paying off. In March 2021, Godwin Obaseki, governor of Edo state, in which the Kingdom of Benin is located, and Andreas Gorgen, Director General of Culture and Communication at the German Federal Foreign Office, declared that Germany will return 1,153 Benin objects. The National Museum of World Cultures in the Netherlands and several other participants in the dialogue group have also reached that point. It enables them to choose their own path. Germany will also contribute to the training of staff at the new museum in Benin City and to archaeological excavations. In these latter activities, the British Museum also participates. During the meeting of the group in the British Museum on 25 October 2021, the subject of return and restitution re-entered the discussions, albeit only at the level of sharing experiences.

## TENSIONS AMONG NIGERIAN DIALOGUE PARTNERS

The three Nigerian participants – the NCM on behalf of the federal government, the government of Edo State and the Benin court – quarrelled for several years over which of them should receive the returned objects and who should be in charge of the museum where returned objects would be kept. In 2014, the quarrel became public when a British private individual – Adrian Mark Walker, grandson of Captain Herbert Walker – wanted to return some objects. Captain Walker had taken part in the raid on the Benin Palace and pocketed some items, and his grandson Mark had inherited them. When the latter expressed his willingness to return the objects, the NCM was keen to accept them and then hand them over to the Benin court. But the court wanted to accept them itself, because it sees itself as the rightful owner. The court finally had its way and the Oba accepted the objects from Walker’s grandson Mark. At the ceremony, the NCM did not give *acte de présence*.

In 2021, the quarrel flared up again. There is agreement that the federal government is responsible for restitution claims, but no agreement about the museum where they will be placed. Intermediary Sodipo (quoted in Adebola, ‘The Return of Looted Benin Bronzes’, 2021) summarises the friction thus: ‘The Oba wants to build a museum, at the same time, the Edo state government also wants to build one. If the bronzes are kept outside the Oba’s palace, some remuneration could be offered to the Oba. We need to think carefully about this.’ On 9 July 2021, the Oba of Benin, Ewuare 11, had stated: ‘The looted artefacts [...] are the cultural heritage of the Benin Kingdom created by our ancestors and forefathers’ and not ‘of the state government or any private corporate entity’; they should be kept in the Benin Royal Museum, which is to be built on the palace premises. Herewith the Oba expressed his doubts about the Legacy Restoration Trust, which had been set up shortly before and in which the federal government and NCMM, the Edo State government and the Benin court are represented. The Trust is the counterpart of the European participants in the Benin Dialogue Group. On behalf of the Trust, Governor Obaseki invited the renowned Ghanaian-British architect David Adjaye to make a design for the museum, the Edo Museum of West African Art. But, argued the Oba, ‘the right and only legitimate destination [...] is under the aegis of the Benin Royal Museum.’ Peju Layiwola supported the Oba’s position on her website: ‘Can anyone with the knowledge of the colonial violence unleashed on Benin [...] contest ownership with His royal Majesty?’ In the online media portal *Modern Ghana* on 20 September 2021, Kwame Opoku expressed the same idea: ‘Benin artefacts belong to the Oba of Benin who is the traditional king of the Edo people, also known as Benin people.’ A week later, on 17 July 2021, federal Minister of Information and culture, Lai Mohammed, stated in the online newspaper *The Whistler for Conscience and Society* that, in line with operative conventions and laws, the federal government will take possession of the Benin objects expected from Germany. It does the same in relation to other categories of lost cultural heritage, such as Ife and Nok. Thereafter, it is the government’s responsibility to bring them to their destination.

On 27 October 2021, Jesus College, University of Cambridge returned a bronze Benin cockerel to a large delegation from Nigeria. It wanted to be the first institution to do so in Great Britain. The next day Aberdeen University followed suit. It had put a certain amount of pressure on its Nigerian counterparts to come to a division of roles. Neil Curtis, head

*The Benin bronze returned by the University of Aberdeen to Nigeria's NCMM in October 2021. © Aberdeen University*

of the university's Museums and Special Collections, told me that the museum had never joined the Dialogue Group, as 'their approach of encouraging loans did not meet our aim of returning ownership. The university's position has been that as the Nigerian parties making the proposal were in agreement about whom the title should be transferred to, the return was unconditional.' This approach was accepted by the Court of the Oba, and also Edo State government, with NCMM then passing the object to the Court of the Oba, with the intention that it will ultimately be displayed in a museum adjacent to the Oba's Palace'. As a result, 'the legal title was transferred from the university to the NCMM'. Although the Benin Court celebrated the homecoming of the two objects in mid-December 2021, the objects still remained in London, as Nigeria's High Commission wanted an official export permit from the British Government. Is this a way of forcing the British government to approve this return and undermining Britain's strict anti-restitution policy? The transfer of objects by Germany, planned for the second quarter of 2022, will follow a comparable route.

It is important to follow the discussion in Nigeria, as it might become exemplary for comparable situations in other former colonies, especially those that were non-existent as countries in pre-colonial times but were



created by European interventions. The arrangements with the two British universities and the federal government and museums of Germany are reminiscent of arrangements between parties in New Zealand and heritage institutions in the Global North about the repatriation of Māori heads. In this case, it was helpful when Māori communities, the national museum and government in New Zealand agreed upon the division of labour in the repatriation campaign. As to the European side, Aberdeen University's active approach of the Nigerian parties and its genuine willingness to return a Benin bronze head was also very helpful.

### **BENIN OBJECTS IN THE NETHERLANDS AND BELGIUM**

In the United Kingdom, forty-five museums have Benin objects in their collections; in Germany, they number twenty-five. The worldwide top ten comprises the British Museum (ca. 700, but according to some sources over 900), followed by the Humboldt Forum in Berlin (ca. 440); these are followed by museums and private collections in Great Britain, Germany, Austria, Scandinavia, the Netherlands, Russia and the United States. Through their perplexing wanderings, 186 Benin objects ended up in five museums in the Netherlands and two in Belgium. Three museums have only one each. The MAS in Antwerp has an Afro-Portuguese ivory decorative vessel, a commissioned piece. The AfricaMuseum acquired a carved ivory tusk in 1963. Museum de Fundatie in Zwolle has a copper plate of a catfish, acquired in 1937.

By far the largest owner of Benin objects is the National Museum of World Cultures. In March 2021, it published a provenance report about its Benin collection (Veys, ed., *Provenance #2*). A total of 184 objects are registered. Ten are nowhere to be found. Of the remaining 174, 18 are in the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam and owned by the municipality. The Dutch state owns the 13 Benin objects in the Afrika Museum in Berg en Dal, the 18 in the Tropenmuseum Amsterdam and the 125 in Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden. In December 1897, the year of the raid, Museum Volkenkunde was the first Dutch museum to purchase a Benin object. The Afrika Museum in Berg en Dal was the last to acquire one, in 2007; it was a gift.

The researchers have divided the 174 objects into four categories, based on their connection with the looting in 1897. Five objects – arm rings – have no connection whatsoever. In 46 other cases, it is unlikely that there is such a link. Nine objects cannot be confirmed as having such a link,

but probably do. And 114 Benin objects have a direct link to the British military campaign. If Nigeria so requests, the State of the Netherlands and the Rotterdam municipality will have to determine whether 123 objects return to Nigeria.

Although information is scarce, there is a trade in Benin objects in Belgium and the Netherlands. Every now and then one turns up at an auction house, on an auction website or with an antique dealer. Auction websites almost exclusively offer objects made after 1950 and meant for buyers in the northern hemisphere. Rarely do they have ancient Benin objects on sale. The largest known Dutch private collection ever auctioned belonged to Adolph Schwarz, who had made his fortune in the perfumes industry. In 1980, Sotheby's auction house brought eighteen bronze and copper objects and six ivory objects under the hammer. Sometimes a Benin object is offered at the TEFAF art fair in Maastricht. In 2014, the British gallery Entwistle came out with an ivory ring binder and a bronze plate, and in 2016 with a water vessel in the shape of a leopard.

## DOES A EUROPEAN APPROACH WORK?

Was colonialism a European phenomenon or the preserve of individual states in Europe? An argument in favour of the latter theory is that there was never a single European empire, as there was with the Ottomans or the Chinese. Moreover, European countries regularly fought each other in the colonies. The argument in favour of viewing colonialism as a European phenomenon is that European states had much in common: the widely felt need to conquer distant territories instead of fighting each other within Europe; the demarcation of each other's spheres of influence on a European level (as at the Berlin Conference); the unabashed use of violence, oppression and exploitation; the national pride and the strengthening of one's own identity that came from possessing colonies; the shared feeling of superiority towards the peoples they subjugated, that is, their 'civilising mission'.

The Benin Dialogue Group is the first example of a Europe-wide approach. By removing the issue of restitution from the agenda, the role of the dialogue has been curtailed. But the group may have helped put the issue on the agenda in Europe and create an atmosphere that facilitates restitution. The approach can serve as an example for other looted collections dispersed across several European countries: gold



objects from the Ashanti in Ghana, religious statues and masks from peoples in the Congo, mummies from South America, Māori heads from New Zealand, masks, shields and drums from the Asmat or bisj poles from Papua. It cannot be ruled out that a dialogue at a European or European–North American level could help former colonies to recover some of these objects.

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The practice of the last few decades makes clear that economically or politically powerful countries such as China and South Korea can table their demands when it comes to recovering colonial objects. Meanwhile, less powerful countries such as Egypt and Turkey have to look for other means and can, for instance, threaten to stop issuing archaeological permits to Europeans. And countries with the relatively weak status of Nigeria lack such political or economic leverage and have no choice but to exert moral pressure. Since 2010, the Benin court and the Nigerian cultural authorities have opted for this type of pressure, and they are finding more and more international support for it. They will need time to resolve the mutual friction about who is in charge of what.

The last point brings me to a second conclusion. I would favour a South–South consultation in which former colonies exchange ideas on how they deal with the question of ‘to whom to return’. The Karanga Aotearoa Repatriation Programme of New Zealand and the Legacy Restoration Trust in Nigeria can serve as inspiration.

Because of Nigeria’s relative powerlessness, some of its artists conclude: If we can’t get anything back, we have to be smart and creative. Peju Layiwola (*Benini1897.com*, 2010, p. xix) makes terracotta heads that resemble the old Benin heads, and tablets with inscriptions about the injustice of 1897. The new pages in the kingdom’s contemporary history denounce the past and commemorate the old statues ‘now imprisoned behind glass in foreign lands’. Her popular images are a ‘satirical reference to the suggestion of a virtual return of Benin objects’. In 2021, a group of young artists from Benin City offered to donate artworks to the British Museum as a way to encourage it to return the Benin objects – but so far, to no avail. The museum seems the hardest hurdle to overcome.

# PART IV

## PRIVATE COLLECTIONS – LESS VISIBLE, BUT NOT LESS IMPORTANT

Colonial objects are not only to be found in the large ethnographic, art and history museums or in municipal and university museums, but also in museums of Roman Catholic and Protestant missionary congregations. Although some missionaries criticised the rough side of colonialism, most carried out their civilising mission meticulously, and they destroyed and removed much cultural heritage. To house what they shipped to Europe they set up museums in their native countries, which have small collections and often also small numbers of visitors. Due to staff and financial problems, they can no longer take good care of their collections. Some of them have to close down. But where, in that case, should their collection go? Do they consider return an option?

Private owners of colonial collections are often descendants of colonial families, dealers or collectors. So are the royal houses of the Netherlands and Belgium. Private owners are usually reticent concerning information about their possessions and how they acquired them. Thus, few former colonies know of their existence. Thanks to occasional finds in auction catalogues and other sources, it is known that some of them have objects that are of great importance to their communities of origin.

## 12.

# MISSIONARY ORGANISATIONS AND SUPERFLUOUS COLLECTIONS

**D**iscussing the role of missionaries and their colonial collections requires navigating between being honest and avoiding hurt, between European ideals of Christianisation and civilisation and critical positions about destructive effects in the southern hemisphere. It is about the entanglement of the bringers of the Word with colonial administrators and entrepreneurs and about their relationship with the colonised. It is about the mass confiscation of religious objects and about the future of collections sent to Europe from afar.

Sarah van Beurden of Ohio State University wrote to me about the figurines, pots and bowls in her grandmother's house in Belgium. 'The dark living room in my grandparents' terraced house was maintained with care and pride by my grandmother. The typical Flemish "good front room", which was hardly ever used, was a display of my grandmother's curios. Between the Kempish headdresses, crystal vases and heavy carpets, the room was adorned with what I as a child described as "the African figurines". The figurines, pots and bowls always had a prominent place there because they were a way of honouring the uncle who had been a missionary in Congo. As a child I was intrigued by the other worlds they evoked.'

After her grandmother's death, she found a box under her bed 'with a dusty selection of the statues, several of which were broken. Despite the lack of space in the small apartment for the elderly, grandmother had kept them with her, which says something about the place they had in our family.' This is not unique to Flemish families. 'Our history is intimately linked to our country's colonial past, and the statuettes were the embodiment of that.'

Her story could also have taken place in the Netherlands, although I have to admit that there were no statuettes in our home. We did not have an uncle or aunt in Africa, but the mission did live in our house. When I was twelve, I wanted to become a missionary, preferably in Africa. One of my primary school teachers had told me about it. For the last fifteen minutes of the day, he would read from a book. Apparently, he found their descriptions of the work of European religious people moving and exciting, while for us the most diverting thing was whether we could catch him in tears. That happened frequently, and we had no idea what was behind it. But I was impressed by what he said about helping poor people.

After the age of fifteen, the religious side of my ideals disappeared; I converted to development work and became interested in the unequal relations in the world. I collected second-hand shirts for a priest in Tanganyika (now Tanzania) and later gave my first lecture on injustice at a global level. If I had been born half a century earlier into a similarly comfortable home, I would surely have joined the bringers of the Word in foreign lands and taken part in the iconoclasm.

Sarah van Beurden wondered what connection there might be between her childhood musings about those objects from the Congo and her adult life as a historian of Belgian colonialism and Central Africa: ‘What I know for sure is that they fed my awareness of the intimate connection between Belgium and the Congo, and my confusion about the deafening silences I later experienced about that same history as a student. There is certainly a connection between my professional interest in material culture and the figurines. Two of them are on my desk today. They are typical examples of artisanal production for outsiders, stripped of all aspects that the missionaries considered “heathen”. At the same time, I can see the patterns and design of the original cultures shining through. Such objects were regularly made by pupils at mission schools to be sold for the benefit of the missions. So they are also linked to forms of cultural colonisation and economic exploitation.’

## AFRICAN VOICES

From Africa, too, voices have been speaking up about the role of missions. According to the Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe (*Kritiek van de zwarte rede*, 2015, p. 142), missionaries aimed at erasing ‘every separate, distinct identity’ of Africans. Converts were to believe,

think, dream and feel like Europeans, with the result that they lost 'familiarity with their own person'. According to the late South African bishop Desmond Tutu, Africans not only lost their own religion, but also the basis of their existence. I remember him once saying: 'When the Protestant and Roman Catholic missionaries came to Africa, they had the Bible and we had the land. They said: Let's close our eyes and pray. When we opened them again, they had the land and we had the Bible.' The Nigerian Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka (*The Burden of Memory*, 1999, p. 52) puts it this way: 'The Euro-Christian conquistadors robbed and plundered ancient African civilisations, burned and destroyed precious wood carvings, arguing that they were manifestations of idolatry and Satanism [...]. A religion that separated humanity into the redeemed and the damned [...] can hardly be considered fundamentally compatible with the people to whom such a choice was imposed.'

Soyinka emphasises that Islam was also alien to Africans, and that it, too, opened great breaches in the living religions of his continent. Islam started this process, but Europe did it more thoroughly. That was not a compliment. The Kenyan thinker Ali Mazrui (*De Afrikanen*, 1988, p. 136) came to the same conclusion: 'Whereas north of the Sahara, Islam was spread by the sword, in the south Christianity was spread by means of the machine gun.'

## COLONIAL TRIANGLE

More and more publications are appearing that help us to form a nuanced picture of the role of missionaries during colonialism, their ideals and their involvement in the destruction of indigenous faiths. In the case of the oldest known missionary from our two countries, this painful mixture is immediately apparent. Pedro de Gante ('Peter of Ghent', 1480–1572), who came from a monastery in the Belgian city, worked for the Spanish conquistadors among the Aztecs. He had close ties with Emperor Charles v and was a member of Modern Devotion, a reform movement in the Roman Catholic Church. He was socially engaged, built hospitals and stood up for the Aztecs when the conquistadors treated them badly. But in the matter of religion, he was implacable. He found the Aztec religion reprehensible and wanted to put an end to their sacrificial rituals. He mastered the language of the Aztecs, designed a catechism in rebus characters and founded a school, where he detained hundreds of boys until they had truly renounced their old faith. This

included the destruction of their religious objects and temples. Only 'good' pupils were allowed to leave the school premises. On the ruins of a destroyed temple, he built a church with the debris.

Missionaries, like European scientists, had little need to worry about colonial boundaries. They could operate anywhere. In the Dutch East Indies, there were clergymen from Switzerland, Germany and Scandinavia, while the Seventh-Day Adventists sent missionaries from Australia and only later from the Netherlands. In Southern India, the Republic employed German missionaries. In Congo, Scandinavian missionaries and English Baptists were active. In Suriname, ministers from Germany and Norway arrived.

Father Peter's work brings us also to the cooperation between Church, capital and colonial administration. Administration and capital were interested in control and profit. The Church had the more 'elevated' function of bringing about Christianisation and civilisation and of facilitating the work of administration and capital. The Church had to teach the subjugated population to live with the oppression of colonial administrators and the exploitation by entrepreneurs. Although the churches provided a lot of education and health care, this was not only to help converts but also to make sure that they could read the instructions on machines and stay healthy. As we saw earlier, missionaries in Congo Free State were initially more concerned with recruiting local labour for businesses than with conversion.

The bringers of God's Word encountered all kinds of obstacles: climate, tropical diseases, hostility. Moreover, the competition between Protestant missionaries and Roman Catholic missionaries or among Roman Catholic congregations took up a lot of energy, especially if they started enticing away each other's converts. In the Indonesian archipelago, this situation led in 1854 to a decree that if an institution wanted to start working there, it first had to request permission from the colonial administration. For the same reason, the executive council of the Church in Rome decided which congregation could work where in a colony.

The more difficult the obstacles had been to overcome and the greater the numbers of confiscated idols and pagan children rescued from the darkness, the grander the reception the proud home front organised for returning clergy. Pastors, fathers and nuns returned with beautiful statuettes, jars and bowls for their homes. Sarah van Beurden's grandmother had been one of the many who had accepted them in gratitude.

## MISSION IN DUTCH COLONIES AND IN CONGO

In the seventeenth century, there was no state religion in the Republic. But the fact that Spain, the country's great enemy, was Roman Catholic drove many followers of Rome underground, a situation from which the Calvinists profited. This had a knock-on effect in the colonies. On their ships, VOC and WIC commanders only took Calvinist ministers with them. Until the end of the eighteenth century, they held the religious monopoly in the colonial possessions, an exception being the Herrnhutters in Suriname. They worked among the Maroons from 1735 onwards. By 1800 the situation had changed, and various denominations were allowed to operate in colonial possessions of the Netherlands.

In the Dutch colonial triangle, administrators and merchants made the rules and missionaries kept to them. VOC administrators prevented preachers from working in areas of the Indonesian archipelago where the Company wanted to conclude trade agreements with Muslim princes. In Sri Lanka (Ceylon) the Company forbade them to destroy temples in order to finish the job of the Portuguese, who had been driven out by the VOC. After all, that could damage their trading interests. Company officials had a say in the appointment of ministers and a Company employee sometimes monitored their sermons. If a minister spoke critically about the Company, he could be sent home at any time.

*Early twentieth-century plaster statuettes, intended to finance Jesuit missionary work. Ex Nijmegen Ethnographic Museum, Claverbond collection.  
© Eugène van Deutekom*



In Suriname, missionaries certainly confiscated ‘heathen’ images, wrote J. Wolbers in the 1860s (*Geschiedenis van Suriname*, 1861, p. 795), such as ‘idol objects’ and ‘idol temples’. According to the Surinamese-Dutch anthropologist Gloria Wekker, the Tilburg missionary Peerke Donders (1809–1887) was involved in this too. Donders has always been praised for his work among lepers. In 1982, the Roman Catholic Church even beatified him for this reason. But he fought tooth and nail ‘against *winti* practices among Creoles and Maroons’ and banned ‘the traditional African funeral song in the leper colony on Batavia’, as she wrote to me. For a long time, Jesuits had a hard time in Suriname. The colonial administration and plantation owners viewed them with suspicion. As Jesuits were critical of slavery, plantation owners chased them off their land, afraid that they would raise awareness among enslaved people and cause a revolt.

Even before King Leopold II took control of the Congo region, Swedish and British missionaries had been active there. After the Berlin Conference, the monarch offered Catholic counterparts every opportunity and the colonial triangle functioned as it did in areas of other colonial powers. Leopold asked the missionaries to Christianise the population and confiscate their ritual images. After 1908, numerous congregations worked in the Belgian Congo, including many missionaries from the Netherlands and other European countries. They all confiscated religious and other objects.

## LOCAL HELP

Newly arrived religious were assigned locations that, in the best case scenario, were close to a colonial administration post or enterprise, but in other cases were days away. There, the brand-new preachers had to devise their own approach. Often, as researchers Raymond Corbey and Karel Weener show (‘Collecting While Converting’, 2015), they first tried to win the hearts of community leaders, which might be with mirrors, beads, knives, farming tools or other presents from Europe. Some of these leaders felt that Christianity would bring them more prosperity and modernity than their own old religion. Or else they set up schools and converted their students to the Christian faith.

The next step was to put those leaders or students to work among the members of their communities. They had to work on the people so that they adopted the ‘true’ faith and renounced their ‘pagan’ objects. Some



local actors worked diligently and handed over piles of religious objects: bones, hair, pieces of stone or shell and other objects. What the Europeans could not handle disappeared in deep pits, on funeral pyres, in rivers or in the sea. The ones they viewed as the most beautiful were set aside for their own collection or to be shipped to Europe.

## RESISTANCE

In their diaries, Europeans reported the sometimes fierce resistance – much of it from women – against the destruction and confiscation of temples, altars, ancestral statues and other objects. As we saw, Delcommune mentioned it after confiscating Chief Ne Kuko's nail statue. John Williams of the London Missionary Society (*A Narrative of Missionary Enterprises*, 1838, p. 192 ff) noted how community leaders on a South Pacific island, when throwing their idols into the fire, had to 'defend themselves against the fury [...] of their own subjects'. Village women screamed and scratched themselves bloody. Local priestesses among the Maroons in Surinam raised 'a loud cry' (Wolbers, *Geschiedenis van Suriname*, 1861, p. 792) for the same. Village women on the island of Nias in Indonesia wondered uncertainly whether by burying their old statues in deep pits, the missionaries were also burying their souls and thereby bringing sickness and death (Weener, *Steinhart's biecht*, 2020, pp. 51–52). These examples undermine the frequently heard argument from opponents of decolonisation and restitution that proponents too easily judge events of a faraway past by today's standards. In that distant past there was resistance, too.

China is a clear example. The Dutchman Ferdinand Hamer left Belgium in 1865 with a group of Scheutists (Scheut was the name of their first home in Anderlecht) for Mongolia, then under control of China. He met a lot of resistance and was murdered during the Boxer Rebellion, along with some of his colleagues and hundreds of Christian-raised orphans (Derix, *Brengers van de Boodschap*, 2009, p. 313). The Scheutists in China sent home more objects that testified to their own persecution than pieces that had belonged to local 'heathens'. The Franciscans did not fare much better. 'Our China collection', writes Museum De Mindere in Sint Truiden in Belgium, 'is limited to objects (bloodstained garments, hair braids, helmets...) that belonged to the martyrs. We have no other objects from China.'

On one occasion, missionaries in China made up for lost time by participating 'excessively' in the plundering by Western soldiers after

the defeat of the Boxers. Famous or infamous – depending upon your view – was the Roman Catholic bishop of Beijing, Alphonse Favier. He made his church available as a storage place for ‘large quantities of precious objects that came either from the imperial city or from palaces of the imperial princes’ (Gabriele Anderl, ‘Artefacts from East Asia in Public Collections’, 2021, p. 240).

One can suspect that there often was local resistance to missionary activities, even though this was not recorded anywhere. Corbey and Weener provide several examples. What did inhabitants of North Sumatra do when they saw missionaries destroy their sacred groves in which their spirits lived? What did people in the Moluccas do when thirty-five ‘devil houses’ – probably viewed locally as ‘temples’ –, house altars and sacred sago groves were destroyed? There were so many that the destruction took four days. In a film clip from 1927, a German missionary dressed in white watches his converts pile up idols and set them on fire on the Mentawai Islands off the coast of Sumatra.

## MITIGATION

It is hard to accurately indicate when and why missionary institutions started to change their way of working. It must have been somewhere in the first half of the twentieth century but differed according to region and denomination. That many colonised people, despite everything, held on to their own beliefs and customs or combined these with the Christian religion, induced churches to adopt a more open attitude. Missionaries began to see the power of that local faith and the customs and objects that went with it. In their training, they were better equipped to deal with it. Historian Luc Vandeweyer (*‘De missionaris-etnograaf’*, 2010, p. 37) describes how Leo Bittremieux (1880–1946) extensively published on the Mayombe people in Congo. This Belgian missionary collected for the Catholic University of Leuven and the AfricaMuseum in Tervuren. The Flemish priest Petrus Vertenten (1884–1946) was fascinated by the Marind-anim on Papua and likewise published on them. The portraits he made of them are now in the Tropenmuseum Amsterdam; his archive is in the Radboud University in Nijmegen.

What also contributed to greater respect for African religions was the emergence of local Christian leaders. An example is Simon Kimbangu (1887–1951), founder of the Kimbanguite Church. Born in 1889 at the mouth of the Congo River and educated by British Baptists, he founded

his own denomination, incorporating elements from the Christian religion, and thus gave 'an African form to an imported faith', writes David Van Reybrouck (*Congo – Een geschiedenis*, 2010, p. 162). In this sense, he is reminiscent of the Maroon Johannes King, a convert of the Herrnhutters, who in addition to his missionary work asked for understanding for the traditions of his people. In his work, King used religious visions, Kimbangu included traditional methods of trance and incantation and the appeal of choral singing and music. Because Kimbangu predicted the end of colonialism and was quite popular, the colonial administration and the Church intervened. He was put in prison for the rest of his life. But out of sight was not out of mind for the Congolese, as one in ten Congolese still call themselves Kimbanguists.

## MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

Where have all those objects that missionaries brought here been kept? Some congregations opened exhibition rooms or museums and used them to teach youngsters with a religious vocation or to collect money from the faithful. Later, many collections began to be dispersed, ending up in private hands, the art trade or flea markets. They disappeared from view. In other cases, they went to ethnographic museums that were initially keen on them, for the bringers of the Word had often been in places where museum staff never went. Some larger museums developed exclusive ties with missionaries and sent them lists of objects they wanted.

The collection of the Afrika Museum in Bergen Dal, founded in 1954, is principally based on such lists (Hans, 'The Provenance of the Missionary Collection', 2020). Largely, this is because the museum also had good connections with traders. The AfricaMuseum in Tervuren received collections from the Jesuit and Scheutist fathers. The MAS in Antwerp was enriched by a collection from the friars of Our Lady of Lourdes. The Wereldmuseum Rotterdam received a great deal from the Protestant Nederlandsch Zendinggenootschap (Dutch Missionary Society), founded in the port city in 1797.

Many congregations and societies today are faced with a decline in newcomers and a reduced income. The closure of their museums becomes inevitable and their collections need a new home. This is easier said than done. The storerooms of ethnographic museums in Europe are full and the quality of missionary collections does not make them very attractive. Some institutions in the Global South are not interested

either; traditional Christians in these regions are not waiting for the return of pagan idols and have difficulty understanding their value for the cultural heritage of the former colony. And it can be hard to figure out the objects' place of origin.

Most religious institutions are not very forthcoming with information about plans for superfluous collections. They have barely trained people to keep their collection and documentation in order. Even if they are not against returning objects, they say they lack the international network to do so. Moreover, they prefer not to get involved in the decolonisation debate. That is why they often send surplus collections back to the headquarters of their congregation or to mission museums in the surrounding area. In 2012, for example, the collection of Afrika Centrum Cadier en Keer in Dutch Limburg, founded in 1959, ended up in the Mission Museum in the nearby village of Steyl. Other institutions gave pieces to art dealers or collectors for next to nothing. Pieces considered unimportant disappeared in the rubbish bin.

The papal mission museum Anima Mundi (Soul of the World) deserves special mention. For the *Pontifical Missionary Exposition* in 1925, missionaries working in the southern hemisphere and among indigenous peoples such as the Aborigines sent in some 100,000 objects. Of these, 40,000 were selected and exhibited in dozens of places in Vatican City. They attracted a million visitors. The Vatican never sent the 40,000 back, but used them as the basis for its own ethnological museum, which opened in 1927. According to the Anima Mundi website, the collection now comprises 80,000 objects. While this institution continues to flourish, the restitution debate seems to have somewhat passed it by. There is hardly any research on the acquisition history of the collection, nor does the museum use its network to help smaller mission museums find new uses for their surplus collections (Opoku, 'Vatican Owes Africa the Truth', 2015). Incidentally, the museum loans objects to likeminded institutions.

## LIMITED NUMBER OF RETURNS

Occasionally, someone takes a few objects in a suitcase to the country they once came from. As long as the scanner does not detect metal or sharp objects, customs officers make no argument about it. If those objects remain within the same missionary institution, it is seen less as a return and more as a new, meaningful use. Usually, only the donor



*The Karo Heritage Museum in Sumatra is happy with this bark book or laklak. © GUM – Ghent University Museum (EVUG\_ET 48\_2\_122)*

and the recipient know about it... with the occasional exception of an observant publication, such as *Outreach*, published in Jakarta. In its January 2015 issue, it reported some acquisitions in the Karo Heritage Museum in North Sumatra. They turned out to have once been in the possession of the Volkenkundig Museum, Nijmegen

and, after its closure in 2005, were moved to the University of Ghent. They included a special object, a lacquer book on tree bark with the Karo alphabet. Such informal returns are being made more often, by private persons, too, and remain away from the public eye.

Only a few missionary societies that have to deaccession a collection look for possibilities in the country of origin. For them, it is about more than a new, meaningful use. The Capuchin Fathers in Tilburg in the Netherlands wrote as early as 1979 that a time would come ‘when a population would become aware of its development [...] and then suddenly value objects from the past [...]. Should we [...] not return these objects, which were collected there when they were still available, but which have now almost completely disappeared [...] to this people, because they are expressions of their culture?’ (Met Kap en Koord, *Het missiemuseum van de Kapucijnen*, 1979, pp. 2–3). It was not until 2008 that some objects from their Borneo and Sumatra collection were actually returned. This succeeded thanks to cooperation with the Tropenmuseum Amsterdam.

The Augustinian fathers in Leuven-Heverlee in Belgium are another example. They sent objects from the Azande in Congo back to their confreres in Kinshasa. Provincial Father Paul De Wit wrote to me about this: ‘We think it is important that they pay attention to the preservation of their cultural patrimony. One of our interested fathers has been there to give the initial impetus to a small exhibition area. As far as I know, the objects are

still in good condition. Together with the objects, many of the anthropological books and articles have been donated to the brothers there.' De Wit mentions an extra motive: 'Many objects were donated by the local population to our fathers for free, because they did not want to sell them abroad (in those days mainly export to America and Europe). In loyalty to them, we thought it was fair to return these objects to their Congolese context.'

Missionary institutions with superfluous collections have little contact with the ethnographic museums in Belgium and the Netherlands. This appeared to be the case when I put the question to both parties. Isn't that a missed opportunity? Couldn't religious institutions call upon larger museums more often and couldn't these larger museums in turn be more actively engaged with the institutions?

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In most areas, missionaries were part of the colonial triangle of government, business and Church. They did not remain static, however, but went developed from radical 'anti-pagan' idolatry in their early period to greater openness to elements from indigenous religions and related objects in the later phase of colonialism.

A strict division between, on the one hand, perpetrators – missionaries and missionaries – and, on the other hand, victims – peoples who had to give up their own faith – does not always and hold true everywhere. Community leaders and students, who hoped that the missionaries would help them progress, actively collaborated in the destruction of the old faith. However, it would be wrong to put them on a par with the European religious working in their area. After all, they played the leading role in one of the biggest waves of iconoclasm in history.

In recent years, this word *iconoclasm* has been used to describe the deliberate destruction of precious buildings and objects by Muslim fanatics in the Arab world and West Africa. This is, in itself, justified; it is the kind of iconoclasm that is accompanied by fierce and large-scale eruptions. The iconoclasm by missionaries from colonial powers such as the Netherlands and Belgium consisted of a very large number of small eruptions, spread over a long period; it was a wave of violence that continues until today.

# 13.

## COLONIAL OBJECTS IN TRADE AND IN PRIVATE OWNERSHIP

**P**riate owners of collections from colonial areas and dealers can be found in all continents, and also in former colonies. Africa, Asia, Latin America and other places outside the traditional art market countries in Europe and North America have their own big collectors and dealers. This chapter focuses, however, on auction houses, dealers and private owners in the Netherlands and Belgium. They range from family members with a few colonial objects and hucksters in garages to chic dealers and the royal houses of the two countries. They often operate in silence. What they have ranges from tourist art to masterpieces. Masterpieces in trade and private ownership almost always remain out of sight. Do dealers and private owners ever return objects? Finding an answer to this question turns out to be more difficult than searching for information on the return of public museum collections.

### CONTACT WITH DEALERS

From the moment I started to investigate the illicit trade from the relatively poor Global South to the richer North in the early 1990s, I sought contact with dealers and collectors. I spoke to them at TEFAF and other art fairs, the Zavel in Brussels, the Spiegelkwartier in Amsterdam, in the port of Rotterdam, at Schiphol airport and other places, and to some in Northeast and West Africa and South and Southeast Asia. Critical questions about the origin of their merchandise were rarely appreciated, so I learned to wait until they broached the topic themselves and thus learnt they had smuggled in objects from Ghana, Nigeria, Cambodia, Thailand, Afghanistan or Italy. I then searched

for information with which to ascertain whether it was a tall tale or a true one.

My conversation in late 1995 in Rotterdam harbour with the Dutch antiques dealer, discussing the arrival of celestial nymphs from the Angkor region in Cambodia and Buddha heads from Ayutthaya in Thailand, was short and difficult, as he felt that customs did not believe him. A dealer in Antwerp was more generous with information. He explained how to make a fake Tang horse look old (by gluing a leg of a genuine old statue to it and only letting authenticators test the age of this leg). In Mali, a man showed how he faked old statues (by leaving newly made ones lying around for two years in all weathers). A British dealer and his Swiss colleague tried to win me over to their views in a penetrating (white wine-fuelled) way. They valued their own insights over those of museum experts, because ‘they knew how the art world really worked’. They disliked treaties, laws and regulations that restricted their trade and were sceptical about the ability of countries of origin to preserve objects. A few dealers displayed something from their private collections in their homes or in the backrooms of their businesses. Sometimes I felt a bit dizzy but did not dare ask how they had acquired it. I would throw out the bait, but they wouldn’t bite.

## EARLY SPOILS OF WAR AND GRAVE ROBBERY

From the end of the sixteenth century, stories have circulated about trading and exchanging special objects and manuscripts between private parties. The Republic was not ruled by a monarch, but by well-to-do families: powerful administrators, wealthy merchants, prominent physicians and others. They had colonial ‘exotica’ in their collections, though they were less than the paintings, sculptures, coins, manuscripts and miniatures by European artists.

One of the first major ‘exotica’ collectors was the Enkhuizen-based physician Bernardus Paludanus (1550–1633). Besides dried plants, stuffed animals and dried fish, he had weapons, clothing and decorative objects from colonial regions. How the seafarers and explorers who supplied them to him acquired them is unknown.

Thanks to an old pen-and-ink drawing, we know about some acquisitions made by the prominent Amsterdammer Nicolaes Witsen (1641–1717). The exhibition *Asia > Amsterdam – Luxury in the Golden Age* (October 2016–January 2017) in Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, showed a



picture of the Hindu god Ganesha: 'From 1716 [...] artist unknown [...] from the collection of Nicolaes Witsen', it said. The man owned many Asiatics – according to a contemporary, perhaps the most important collection in Northern Europe. His house was a 'museum' (literally, a temple of the muses) full of statues of gods, relics, miniatures, drawings, prints, jewellery, ceramics, maps and books. So said the catalogue of the 1992 exhibition *The World within Reach* in the Amsterdam Museum. The pen-and-ink drawing also hung there.

In 1691, while fighting a ruler of Malabar in southern India, VOC soldiers took sixteen Hindu statues from a temple. A few years earlier they had unearthed five other idols and a jar of silver coins near a fort in the same area. Witsen acquired them all. Although he had never been to Asia, he wanted to know a lot about it and published his knowledge. He had his publications decorated with drawings, such as the one of the Ganesha statue. They are kept in the library of the University of Amsterdam. The library also has a print of Witsen's most precious gem: an old Chinese mirror from a grave in Siberia. It was broken, because Witsen had dropped it once. After his death, everything was auctioned. A copy of the auction catalogue has survived, but all traces of the statues and the mirror have disappeared.

Witsen's Hindu statues were spoils of war; the mirror was grave robbery. Of course, not all objects from colonial areas were acquired in a dubious manner. Sometimes exotica were there for the taking, sometimes they were traded, but the number of 'conquests, raids and hijackings' that yielded 'all possible goods' from that early period should not be underestimated. (Noordegraaf and Wijzenbeek-Olthuis, 'De wereld ontsloten', 1992, p. 46)

## THE ROLE OF ELITE FAMILIES

Historian Liesbet Nys of the Catholic University of Leuven ('Private Property in the Museum Age', 2005) has conducted research on private colonial collections in Belgium after 1850. The first collectors of Congo pieces were aristocrats, members of the *haute bourgeoisie* and scientists and military personnel with ties to the colonial regime. They kept what they collected at home and, when King Leopold II appointed a central location for everything they collected, they also started donating objects to what would become the AfricaMuseum in Tervuren. Yet much remained in private hands – no one knows *how* much.

After 1920, a group of middle-class collectors emerged, alongside artists and others, some with and many without direct links to Belgian Congo. When independence was declared in 1960, some colonials returned with many pieces in their luggage. According to the Brussels expert and dealer Marc Leo Felix ('Kunst uit Mayombe', 2010, p. 65), these included little of value and were often 'indigenous art made by natives on the instructions of the missionaries'.

DR Congo was certainly not the only hunting ground for Belgian collectors. China was another. Although Belgium was not part of the eight-country alliance that defeated the Boxer Rebellion in 1900, it did do business with the Chinese government. Its representative in Peking, Maurice Joostens (1862–1910), 'saved' objects during the rebellion. In 1902, he donated two of them to Museum Plantin-Moretus in Antwerp – logs with Chinese texts. In 2016, historian Gert Huskens had already written about this 'rescue action' (see *Maurice Joosten*, 2016, p. 32). When, in June 2021, I asked the museum for further information (had the 'saving' perhaps been 'looting'?), it reported that it had begun 'internally reviewing' how to proceed with these objects with 'possibly contested provenance'.

Stadsmuseum Ghent (STAM) once received over 2,000 Chinese objects and coins from Adolphe Spruyt (1871–1956). Like the logs, they have amputated biographies. Early in the twentieth century, Spruyt worked as a doctor among Belgian and other foreign technicians in China who built the Pien-Lo railway in Ho-Nan province. Many pieces in his collection were from the nineteenth century but he also had older ones, and so far no research has been done into how he acquired them, STAM let me know. The book *A Belgian Passage to China (1870–1930)* (2020), about the construction of tram and railway lines, also pays attention to Spruyt's collection but not to its provenance.

Dutch diplomats and soldiers were also active in China, and some collected. One famous object is an antique vase, bought by Captain Haro baron van Hemert tot Dingshof after the Boxer Rebellion from 'Chinese who sold their art treasures out of necessity'. At an auction in 2008, this blue and white ornament fetched its descendants EUR 23 million (Mostert and Van Campen, *Silk Thread*, 2015, pp. 213, 217). The buyer? A Chinese collector.

Yet in the Netherlands, it is colonial elite families and their collections from the Dutch East Indies who attract most attention. Thanks

to a high-ranking post in the administration, the army or the companies, some were able to afford a large canal-side or country house and managed to acquire valuable pieces. According to researcher Caroline Drieënhuizen, whom I asked about this, these families ‘kept some of it themselves, as a reminder of their own life in the colony or that of their family. This means that there are still objects in the families’ homes: displayed on windowsills and highlighted in showcases, but sometimes also tucked away deep in old, dark ships’ chests or forgotten between old furniture in dusty attics.’

She also notes that private individuals donated objects to museums and that some of the objects ‘had clearly been acquired without the consent of the owners at the time. When villages and towns were taken by Dutch troops, the local population would sometimes offer the military objects as a gesture of reconciliation (how voluntary was that, by the way?), but more often than not the military would take objects as spoils of war without asking.’ An example was the noble officer Henri Quarles van Ufford (1822–1868), who appropriated a painting and some beautiful textiles from the ruined palace of Singaraja during the war against Bali in June 1848. In 1971, his family donated them to Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden.

In letters from yet another collector, Drieënhuizen discovered ‘that there was a lively trade in objects looted during the many acts of war in the Indonesian archipelago. At the 1878 World Fair in Paris, one of the “sugar lords” of the Van den Broek d’Obrenan family exhibited wooden figurines and textiles from Bali. They came from the destroyed palace of the Sultan of Buleleng in 1848: according to the story, they had been hanging around the Sultan’s bed. How the sugar lord in question got hold of them is (still) unclear.’

## TWO COLLECTORS’ ASSOCIATIONS

The fact that the Netherlands never had long-standing colonial possessions in Africa and almost no elite families had lived there is reflected in private Africa collections in the Netherlands. Several dealers I spoke to about Africana emphasised that Dutch collectors are frugal and do not want to spend much money on them. Most collectors avoid pieces with an extensive pedigree and lots of documentation, because they are considered more expensive.

This was confirmed at the exhibition *Van Verre Volken Thuis, Kunst in de Kamer* (At home with faraway peoples: Art in the room) (Octo-

ber 2008–January 2009) in the Afrika Museum in Berg en Dal. There, members of the Association of Friends of Ethnography (vve, founded in 1983) showed objects. There were dozens of items, but the standard of the objects was moderate. Perhaps the very first sentence in the catalogue, written by the museum’s director Ineke Eisenburger and vve chair Siebe Rossel, was typical: ‘The morning paper lies on an Ashanti stool, the television is crowned with statuettes, large iron coins adorn the windowsill and on the cupboard masks adorn the walls as if they were meant to be castles’ (in Rossel and Wentholt, *Tribal Treasures*, 2008, p. 9).

Such a sentence is hard to imagine in the circles of the much older association of Asiatics collectors in the Netherlands, the Koninklijke Vereniging van Vrienden van de Aziatische Kunst (Royal Association of Friends of Asian Art; hereafter, kvvak). The association, founded in 1918, attracted colonial officials and entrepreneurs in the Dutch East Indies at first, and later other people as well. Thanks to wealthy donors, the kvvak has been purchasing objects and building up its own collection since 1928. The approximately 1,850 objects of the collection, I learn from the association’s website, are explicitly not ‘ethnographic utensils’, but ‘works of art made for their own culture in the countries of origin’. So they are neither exported art nor utensils, but ‘unique works of art that are also regarded as being of the highest standard in Asia itself’. From 1952 onwards, the kvvak has been lending its collection to the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, where a selection can be seen in the Asian Pavilion.

## QUESTION MARKS OVER A BUDDHA’S HEAD

I want to dwell on one particular kvvak statue: the Buddha’s head, inventory number AK-MAK-239, which according to the museum website ‘probably comes from one of the 504 Buddha statues’ in the Borobudur temple complex on Java. Together with other Buddha heads from Borobudur present in the Netherlands, currently housed in the nearby Tropenmuseum among other places, it was on the wish list of objects that Indonesia had drawn up for the restitution negotiations with the Netherlands in 1975. In the *Joint Recommendations* of 1975, the Netherlands had promised to help find the current owners. Had smuggling actually taken place here? And what does a museum do when there is such a suspicion?



LEFT: *The heads of many Buddhas from the Borobudur temple complex have disappeared and only the torsos have been preserved.* © Jos van Beurden;  
RIGHT: *In 1975 Indonesia asked the Netherlands for help in returning Buddha heads from the Borobudur. This sculpture is in the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam and owned by the KVVAK.* © Rijksmuseum Amsterdam (AK-MAK-239)

Asked for more information about the origins of the eighth- or ninth-century Buddha's head, the KVVAK board says that the earliest knowledge about it dates back to the early 1920s. Back then it was in the possession of banker and music historian D.F. Scheurling. There is still a photograph of the statue on the chimney at his home in The Hague. He had probably bought it in the Netherlands. A year after his death in 1927, his son sold it to banker Willy van der Mandele. The latter then lent it to the KVVAK and in 1948 converted that loan into a gift. In 1972, the society gave the statue on long-term loan to the Rijksmuseum.

At the request of the KVVAK board, Rijksmuseum historian William Southworth looked into my information request. According to him, a Buddha's head was sometimes deliberately removed from the torso. Sometimes it had broken off by itself and had been lying on the ground somewhere and someone had taken it away. Because so many heads have disappeared and the accompanying torsos have been flattened by years of erosion, it is very hard to determine which torso such a head comes from. This had already been proven by an experiment in 1977. So much for the KVVAK's explanation.

Southworth added a list of consulted sources to his report. Strikingly enough, the list does not include the lecture delivered by art historian Jan Fontein at the KVVAK's New Year's meeting in 2005 ('De vroege jaren', 2005). Fontein worked for the KVVAK for a long time and later for the museum. Shortly after joining the association, he had told his audience in this speech, he had to 'go to the Vermeer & Co. bankers' office', the bank of KVVAK president Willy van der Mandele, to pick up 'a stone head' that Mr. and Mrs. Van der Mandele wanted to donate to the KVVAK. Van der Mandele had told him that he had recently received a visitor who had offered him the head for a remarkably low price. The visitor had claimed that he had bought it from someone who had gone bankrupt and, moreover, that 'the head was under a curse'.

Van der Mandele took the head home to surprise his wife, Alida van der Mandele-Vermeer, but she had reacted immediately and did not want it in her house under any circumstances. Fontein did not mention it, but perhaps her reaction had something to do with Alida's background – she had an Indonesian grandmother and might have been sensitive to such a curse. The head immediately went back into the boot of the car and the decision to donate it to the association was quickly made. When I submitted Fontein's text to Southworth, he disputed that Van der Mandele bought the statue from an anonymous seller. He writes that he is certain it was the son of D.F. Scheurling. He has no knowledge of a curse on the head.

It is striking that neither the KVVAK, nor Jan Fontein, nor the Rijksmuseum mentioned the wish Indonesia expressed in 1975 to recover the Borobudur Buddha head, let alone that the Netherlands has failed to honour the international agreement to search for it.

What makes this case even more charged is that the Rijksmuseum is not the owner of the Buddha's head; the KVVAK is. Private collectors and associations of friends sometimes have an influence on the policy of 'their' museum that is invisible to the outside world. Their importance is shown in a survey carried out for the Dutch Council for Culture (Raad voor Cultuur, *Advies over de omgang met koloniale collecties*, 2020, p. 132): three out of five museums with colonial collections depend to some degree on private collectors. Associations of friends, lenders and donors demonstrate a museum's support in society. They can help with the acquisition of new objects, and some members have ties to big funds and municipal or national politicians.

## THE FUTURE OF THE CHRISTOFFEL COLLECTION

The MAS in Antwerp also houses a private collection that raises questions. It was brought together by someone considered the ‘most highly decorated army officer’ in the Netherlands, but who in the Dutch East Indies was called a ‘bloodhound’: Hans Christoffel, a soldier of Swiss descent. According to former MAS researcher and co-curator of the display of the Christoffel collection, Willy Durinx (*‘De havik wordt een duif’*, 2019, p. 473), Christoffel joined the Royal Dutch East Indies Army in 1886 aged twenty. Soon he was put in charge of the notorious Tiger Unit, which tracked down anti-colonial fighters. During his work, he collected war flags – some still bearing traces of blood – swords, rifles, krisses and other trophies. He also appropriated objects from houses that villagers, in fear of his arrival, had abandoned.

Something rarely seen with colonial ex-soldiers happened in Christoffel’s case: after his return to Europe in 1909, the decorated bloodhound renounced his violent past. He burned his archive and his family could barely prevent him from throwing five battle flags from Aceh and the Batak region into the fire as well. In order to find peace, he gave his collection, then numbering twelve hundred objects on loan to the city of Antwerp, where he lived. In 1958, the city bought the entire collection. It has remained the owner ever since.

The municipal MAS, which manages the Christoffel collection on behalf of the city of Antwerp, knows that several objects were acquired in a disreputable manner. When weighing up the situation, it opts for ‘a cautious ethics’, not initiating restitution itself, but remaining open to ‘possible questions from partners in the areas of origin’. For some people, that does not go far enough. Researcher Paul Catteeuw wonders whether the museum could not think more proactively about returning those battle flags, as a sign of goodwill. All five flags are war booty. Can’t the museum just give them back, if the city of Antwerp agrees?

Catteeuw asks another question – the difficult question of, in the event of a return, to whom the flags should go. If Museum Nasional in Jakarta wants them, that might lead to irritation in Aceh and the Batak region. But, he wonders, do these regions have museums that can preserve such old and fragile pieces (Catteeuw, *‘Teruggave mogelijk?’*, 2019, p. 489)? Another question arises, perhaps an odd one: what would Hans Christopher think about restitution nowadays? Would the pigeon-turned-hawk like to talk to those involved in Indonesia? With the descendants of his victims?

*Battle flag, captured around 1900 in Indonesia, Christoffel collection. © Collectie Stad Antwerpen – MAS, picture by Michel Wuyts and Bart Huysman (AE.1996.0012.0001)*

## SUCCESSFUL RETURN BY A PRIVATE INDIVIDUAL

Erica Baud and Michel Baud are fifth-generation descendants of Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies Jean Chrétien Baud (1789–1859). In 2014, they decided it was time to part with some objects from their ancestor's collection, which were in Erica's attic. J.C. Baud was the administrator who had received lances from local princes during an inspection trip after the Java War in the early nineteenth century. These are now in Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.

The Bauds approached Harm Stevens, curator of history at the Rijksmuseum, to investigate the provenance and possible return of the lances. Stevens soon established that the most important object was a pilgrim's staff – 1.4 metres long, with silver fittings and a wrought-iron disc-shaped blade – which had once belonged to none other than Prince Diponegoro, the hero of the Java War. In 1834, another prince, once Diponegoro's fellow combatant but later a defector to the colonial administration, had turned the staff over to the Governor-General. His servant is said to have found it. So it was not 'loot', but a 'gift' from a defector, and this, as Stevens added, was from the final phase of the terrible Java War, 'when the colonial troops were on Diponegoro's heels' (*Bitter Spice*, 2015, p. 161).

At the opening of the exhibition *A Prince for All Seasons: Diponegoro in the Memory of*





*Nation, from Raden Saleh to the Present* in Jakarta, on 5 February 2015, Baud's descendants handed over the staff to the Indonesian authorities. It was a solemn moment. The images of an emotional Minister Anies Baswedan of Education and Culture touched viewers as much as the argument which motivated Michel Baud to make the transfer: 'As heirs of J.C. Baud, who played such an important role in what was then a Dutch colony in a very different historical era, we realised the importance of this find and the responsibility it gave us. We discussed its significance and the context in which it was given to our ancestor. The possibility soon arose of returning the staff to the Indonesian people. The decision was made and this exhibition seemed the most appropriate time to hand over the heirloom.' The Bauds simply felt that the staff belonged there rather than in a museum in the Netherlands, let alone in a private attic.

The argument of Baud's descendants is similar to that of Adrian Mark Walker, who brought Benin objects back to the Oba in 2014 and in 2019. His grandfather, Captain Herbert Walker, had pocketed them in 1897 – 'busy packing loot', he had noted in his diary (Hicks, *The Brutish Museums*, 2020, p. 142). In the weeks leading up to the 2014 handover, television stations and posters in the centre of Benin City and near the palace

*Director Intian Mardiana of Museum Nasional in Jakarta and Michel Baud and Erica Baud sign for the handing over of Prince Diponegoro's pilgrim's staff.* © Erasmus House, Jakarta



*Prince Diponegoro's pilgrim's staff, from the private collection of the descendants of Governor-General J.C. Baud. © Erasmus Huis, Jakarta*

had announced it. As a result, Walker's grandson Adrian Mark had felt even more 'that it was the right thing to do', Peju Layiwola recorded at the time.

The privately owned Buddha head from the Borobudur temple and Diponegoro's pilgrim's staff raise the question of whether there are other objects held by private individuals that may be of more value to the country of origin than to their current owners. Are the governments of Belgium and the Netherlands prepared to call on those owners to act?

### THE BELL OF THE JAFFNA FORT

Compared to London, Paris and Brussels, the art market in Amsterdam is modest in size. Yet the Spiegelkwartier is popular with lovers of art, antiquities and curiosities. At twenty-nine, Dickie Zebregs is perhaps the youngest art dealer there. In a conversation I have with him, he sees himself as 'standing between two generations: that of the old baby boomers and that of the Gen-Z youth, born between 1996 and 2015'. As a millennial, he feels called 'to educate people about contemporary and institutional racism and thus also about colonial (looted) art'. He does this through social media and other modern platforms: 'I am a dealer but I





*Should this bronze bell be in the old VOC fort at Jaffna in Sri Lanka or in the Netherlands? © Zebregs&Röell, Amsterdam, <https://www.zebregsroell.com/>*

also actively look for buyers in the countries where the objects come from.’ According to Zebregs, ‘in colonised countries there is a growing interest in this shared history’, and here he references the restoration of the Batavia fort in Indonesia and the fort in Jaffna in Sri Lanka. In his shop are colonial Dutch cabinets and other pieces that were made for Europeans.

An object that clearly comes from an old colony is a bell whose rim is engraved with the text: ‘JAFFNAPATNAM A° 1747 VOC’. The bell, which hangs from a metal stand over half a metre high, probably served to call people to work or as an alarm bell. Zebregs says it was ‘acquired at an auction in England. It is from the family estate of the Scottish Stewart family and originally came from the fort in Jaffna. 1747 must be the year it was cast in what was then Ceylon. It probably came into the possession of Captain James Stewart. He died in Colombo in 1843 and it is possible that his children took the bell with them to England.’

Is the bell Dutch or Sri Lankan heritage? There is something to be said for both arguments, says Zebregs. Nevertheless, he wants to do his utmost to get the bell back into the Jaffna fort. 'As a dealer, I am in a quandary. If a buyer comes here and pays full price, that's fine, but if someone from Sri Lanka buys it for Jaffna, they get a discount. And then I will bring it myself.' So far, however, no interested party from either Sri Lanka or the Netherlands has come forward.

## PAINTINGS FROM ROYAL PROPERTY

European royal courts have always been collectors of colonial collections, including spoils of war. The French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte took numerous cultural and historical objects with him from his campaigns in Egypt and Syria (1798–1801). After his defeat, he had to surrender some of them to Great Britain. The British royal family has countless objects that were taken after defeating opponents in China, Ethiopia, Ghana, the Kingdom of Benin in Nigeria or Tibet (Sanghera, *Empireland*, 2021, chapter 4). To date, the family has not complied with requests to return any of them.

The situation is somewhat different for the royal families in the Netherlands and Belgium. In the archives of the Belgian royal family, I was told by the State Archives of Belgium, hardly anything can be found about colonial collections from Central Africa. Given the collecting habits of King Leopold II, you might expect that, but his collection is in the museum in Tervuren. Prince Albert, who succeeded Leopold, was offered a mother-and-child sculpture during a Congo trip in 1909. The woodcarvers had done their best to make it conform to European taste and given it a wooden pedestal fitted with a glass bell jar (Felix, 'Kunst uit Mayombe', 2010, p. 63).

Stories about the Dutch royal family and colonial collections are abundant. Most are about receiving gifts, but only a few about giving back an object. They offer a mix of noble deeds and painful fuss and begin with a Javanese painting talent. Raden Syarif Bustaman Saleh arrived in the Netherlands in 1829 (Wassing-Visser, *Koninklijke Geschenken*, 1995, pp. 86–93; Ardiyansyah, 'Restitution and national Heritage', 2021, p. 164). Thanks to a grant from the Dutch crown and other royal courts in Europe, he studied and worked in the Netherlands and other European countries for several decades and became one of Indonesia's best-known painters. In gratitude for this scholarship, he gave away twelve large

paintings to the kings William I, II and III. They became part of the private collection of the Dutch royal family.

In 1970, Queen Juliana donated two of them to President Suharto during his state visit to the Netherlands: *Buffalo Hunting on Java* from the Huis ten Bosch castle, and *Fight with a Lion* from the Noordeinde Palace, both in The Hague. Suharto had asked for them, just as Queen Juliana had indicated that she would like to receive a golden evening bag from him and Prince Bernard a smoking set in Yogya silver. In 1977, the Queen donated another painting by Raden Saleh: the canvas *Capture of Diponegoro on 28 March 1830*. It was obviously important for Indonesia. It had hung in the Royal Palace in Amsterdam and in Museum Bronbeek.

One of the other canvases, *Life and Death – Fight between a Lion, a Lioness and a Buffalo*, was destroyed by fire when it was shown at the Colonial Exhibition in Paris in 1931. Over the years, several others were auctioned. The last time one was auctioned, in 2014, caused quite a stir. The 12 square metre canvas *Boschbrand* (Forest Fire) had been rolled up in the attic of Palace Het Loo in Apeldoorn for decades. In 2006, thanks to the detective work of art historian Marie-Odette Scalliet of Leiden University, it was discovered. The painting was badly damaged and took years to restore. In 2014, the royal family sold the canvas to the highest bidder, the National Gallery in Singapore, where it became a showpiece. According to the Rijksvoorlichtingsdienst (National Information Service), the royal house was free to sell this once-gifted canvas. But museums and the media in the Netherlands thought differently: it was part of our history with Indonesia and should therefore have stayed here. There was also interest in it in Indonesia, but the necessary amount could not be raised there.

This state of affairs raises the question of whether members of the royal house have a moral duty to decide otherwise. The donated works of art are legally part of their private property, no doubt. But in the event that they wish to dispose of one, should they perhaps think less about money and more about the public interest and foreign sensitivities? This question arose again in 2019, when Princess Christina had a drawing by Peter-Paul Rubens auctioned at Sotheby's in New York. Once again, there was a commotion and once again, Dutch museums missed out. This prompted the government to ask the Council for Culture for advice on how to better protect privately owned cultural goods.

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As in most other countries in the Global North, private owners of colonial collections in the Netherlands and Belgium come in all shapes and sizes. Most show little interest in the subject of restitution. At this point in time, countries of origin that want to receive something cannot expect too much from them. The self-interest of the owners and their (pre) judgements about the museum infrastructure of the source countries weigh heavily. The private lenders and donors of objects in Museum Nusantara offered an example. They, too, wanted nothing to do with returns.

The relationship between dealers and collectors on the one hand and museums on the other is complicated. The descendants of some collectors donated collections to museums, but often without documentation. This remained in the private archives or was lost. Provenance research, aimed at the possibility of restitution, then becomes difficult. Museums in Belgium and the Netherlands that depend heavily on collectors have an interest in keeping them on board. Asking difficult questions thus becomes difficult. Still, the restitution debate about colonial collections that is currently taking place in the museum world, the media and public debate does not leave the private art sector unaffected.

# PART V

## TOWARDS A NEW ETHICS

**A**t three major moments in the history of art robbery, Western and Southern Europe have had the leading roles. The first was in Europe's colonial territories, in the so-called 'distant' or 'imperial' colonies, that is, far-off territories in Latin America, Asia and Africa. This was the subject of the previous chapters. The second was in settler colonies in South Africa, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Settlers were Europeans who had left their continent for good and cut administrative ties with their mother country. They conquered territories, enslaved the peoples who had lived there since time immemorial and confiscated fertile and mineral-rich lands. As in the distant colonies, the newcomers in settler colonies appropriated cultural artefacts and ancestral remains on a large scale. Most are still in museums and private collections in North America, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand, but museums and private owners in Europe also possess many of them.

The third moment took place under the Nazi regime. You come across stories about it, for example, from the descendants of art dealer Jacques Goudstikker and collectors such as Franz Wilhelm Koenigs, Baron Mór Lipót Herzog or Maria Altmann, who all reclaimed looted works of art. Sometimes, this moment comes even closer to home, as it does in the story of a Jewish family who lived in my street. In the Second World War, the father and a son perished in Auschwitz. The mother and three other children survived. Their next of kin have been trying to get compensation for all the valuables that disappeared from their house.

For a long time, the three moments were viewed as separate events. Nowadays, they are more often linked. What they have in common is

that they are seen as moments of great historical injustice and that the redress for each of these moments and possible returns are increasingly seen as a moral obligation. Of course, there are major differences between the three, especially between the Nazi plunder on the one hand and looting from remote and settler colonies on the other, and there are differences in the means by which the restitution demands associated with each moment can be substantiated.

But it is worth finding out whether former colonies can benefit from the way in which descendants of minorities in settler colonies and victims of the Nazi regime deal with claims. Since looted art from distant and settler colonies has much in common, we will first examine how minority communities in settler colonies deal with it. What means are available to them and do they succeed in recovering objects and remains of ancestors? Then we will look at how victims of Nazi art theft fare.

Lastly, I will tell you about a round table. On the agenda is a disputed colonial object, and anyone who feels they have a stake in the object is invited to join in. The conversation turns to where this object is best at home. In order to give shape to the conversation, I have formulated guidelines that parties from the Global North and South around the table can use as a basis to see if they are really making progress. They emphasise trust, equality and justice, or rather, diminishing mistrust, reducing inequality and, to the best of one's ability, undoing injustice.



# 14. LESSONS FROM SETTLER COLONIES AND THE RESTITUTION OF NAZI-LOOTED ART

**F**rom around 1600, Europeans began to settle in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United States and South Africa. They encountered peoples who had lived there for a long time: Aboriginal peoples in Australia (ca. 45,000 years), First Nations in the United States (ca. 12,000 years), Khoisan in South Africa (ca. 2,000 years), Inuit in Canada (ca. 1,000 years) and Māori and Moriori in New Zealand (several centuries).

The way in which the newcomers dealt with these peoples fills us with revulsion today. In 1652, on behalf of the VOC, Jan van Riebeeck from the Dutch town of Culemborg founded a refreshment station for ships sailing between the Republic and Asia at Cape of Good Hope in South Africa. Soon families from the Republic settled there permanently. They chased the Khoisan from their ancestral lands and brought in forced labourers from the Indonesian archipelago and South Asia for heavy agricultural work and domestic work. With their arrival, many Khoisan died of disease and violence, and their numbers declined sharply.

Similar things happened in other settler colonies. The newcomers introduced rules and laws that served their own interests but were alien to the original population. The latter knew, for example, only communal and no individual property. And like their European fellows in the distant colonies, settler colonials presented their approach as part of a civilising mission.

In New Zealand, this led British arrivals to trample on the Māori's rights to their own land and resources and to plunge them into poverty. In the United States, Europeans forced indigenous peoples to live in reserves, where they withered away. Under the slogan 'kill the Indian in the child', church and state in Canada snatched indigenous children

from their communities to give them a Christian education in boarding schools. Most of the native populations resisted but had no answer to the military superiority of the newcomers from Europe.

## AN OBJECT FROM 1613 DISAPPEARS

The Europeans took away massive amounts of ancestral remains, grave finds and other sacred objects from the oldest inhabitants. Most of these ended up in private collections and museums in the settler colonies themselves. Many also moved to Europe, as can be seen in museums here. As already mentioned, several museums in the Netherlands and Belgium acquired tattooed Māori heads. Two have Andean mummies and accompanying grave goods. Several have painted tree barks, masks, gourds, baskets, moccasins, caps, spears, shields, fishing tackle and water jugs from North America. Remains of Aboriginal people were found in Leiden. Objects from the Inuit were abundantly on display at the exhibition *Netsilik-Inuit from the North of Canada* (1991) in the former Etnographisch Museum in Antwerp and at the exhibition *Canadian Inuit Art* (2018) in Museum Volkenkunde. The Leiden museum showed clothing, drawings, weapons, jewellery, ceramics, photographs and utensils from private collections belonging to, among others, the Dutch Princess Margriet and her husband, Pieter van Vollenhoven.

Over the years, objects from settler colonies have also disappeared. A *wampum* from 1613 is one such example. Wampums are belts of white and purple beads with which the Iroquois, a confederation of several indigenous peoples in the United States and Canada, seal promises, agreements and treaties. The wampum in question is of great value, not only because of its age but also because of the role it played: the sealing of the Two Row Wampum Treaty between the Iroquois and Dutch settlers in New Amsterdam (now New York). In the treaty, the parties promised to leave each other alone and respect each other's territory and religion. Such a promise was special because it exempted the Iroquois from the European custom of granting a new territory to the occupiers and invalidating the property rights of the people who had long lived there.

Sometimes the wampum from 1613 turns up in an article that suggests that it is in the Netherlands. However, when I approach the authors concerned, in the Netherlands or in the United States, they have no concrete information. Gerrit-Jan Mer slam (*Vlieg*, e-story 64), who attended the celebrations for the four-hundredth anniversary of the treaty, writes to

me that the original belt ‘no longer exists, nor does the Netherlands have any written historical document that testifies to the treaty, but the existence of the treaty is confirmed in the hundreds of years of oral tradition of the Iroquois.’ There is ‘a replica: three rows of white beads embodying a triple obligation of “friendship, peace and forever”, separated by two purple rows of beads, one of which symbolises ‘a canoe’ of the Iroquois and the other ‘a sailing ship’ with Dutchmen ‘as equal partners’.

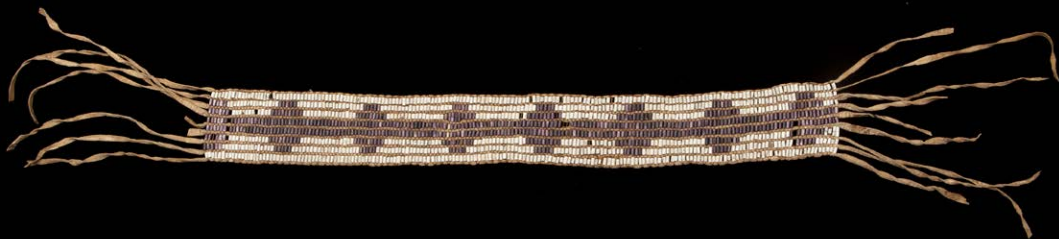
The Two Row Wampum Treaty still plays a role in American land ownership jurisprudence. The Iroquois leaders would like the wampum back; it will evoke the spirit of their earliest encounters with Europeans. If found in the Netherlands, there is no legal obligation to hand it over, but perhaps it is the kind of object that belongs more in the country of origin than here.

## A SPECIFIC APPROACH

There is a difference between the restitution wishes expressed by indigenous peoples and claims by distant former colonies. In the case of the former, the emphasis is on remains of ancestors, grave clothes and other goods. Ancestors only come to rest when their body parts are united and lie in their own soil. The Māori heads that were repatriated are an example. Governments in distant former colonies are often keener on objects that help to strengthen the unity and identity of their countries.

The latter is certainly true in Africa. DR Congo, Nigeria and many other African countries are still struggling with the borders that the European participants in the Berlin Conference drew. The European leaders sometimes divided one nation over several states or squeezed several nations into one state. In their efforts to strengthen the political identity of the country, African governments sometimes come up against the desires of peoples who were unwillingly brought together but are so different. For these governments, war trophies (weapons, battle flags) and the remains of national heroes are important. They must provide unity and commonality.

Over the years, indigenous peoples in former settler colonies have become better organised. Their restitution requests are more fruitful. In the United States, the black civil rights movement and mass resistance to the Vietnam War in the 1960s became an inspiration for them. It paid to have your voice heard. In 1990, the ground-breaking Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) was introduced. It requires federal agencies to inventory ancestral remains and cultural objects be-



ABOVE: *Example of a wampum belt, eighteenth century, North America.* © National Museum of World Cultures Collection (RV-364-1); RIGHT: *Wampum bag, exhibition First Americans – Tribute to Strength and Creativity.* © National Museum of World Cultures Collection (RV-720-2)

longing to First Nations that are in their possession. The number was estimated at 10 to 15 million pieces. The government offers assistance, even if the requests are made to foreign countries. In Canada, a similar development is taking place. Legislation has been improved. One Canadian province has a repatriation manual, drawn up in close cooperation with indigenous communities. In both North American countries much has been returned, according to Vanessa Tümsmeyer (*Repatriation of Sacred Indigenous Cultural Heritage and the Law*, 2020, pp. 29–30), but the balance of power is still often unequal and much remains to be done.

In Australia, Aboriginal peoples began to organise more strongly in the 1970s and 1980s. Initially, this involved the return of territory with ancestral graves, which had been taken from them for mining purposes.



Later, with the help of progressive curators, they asked museums for the return of remains and burial objects of ancestors. At the end of the last century, Māori and Moriori in New Zealand also began to take a stronger position. Developments in Australia and New Zealand give the impression that the law is increasingly in line with current attitudes and that a new phase is beginning in which three actors – government, national community, indigenous people – make a joint effort to return their rightful property to the indigenous peoples. In this phase, trust and respect for the rights and customs of the oldest inhabitants are central.

In South Africa, too, communities, museums and the government are joining forces. The Khoisan, who were the largest group in the area before Van Riebeeck's arrival, now make up only 1 per cent of the population and are divided among thirty-six communities. After apartheid was abolished in 1990, they received financial support from the government and practical assistance from Iziko Museums in Cape Town. These museums began by returning ancestral remains from their own collections to Khoisan communities. They then used their international connections to bring back such remains from Europe.

In the Netherlands and Belgium, too, it is noticeable that indigenous peoples are standing up for their rights more. In 2020, Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden organised the exhibition *First Americans – Tribute to Strength and Creativity*. Exhibition maker Henrietta Lidchi tells me: 'I had been working on this for years, and succeeded in making the exhibition together with a curator and some First Americans artists. They largely decided how their history, resilience and future would be portrayed. There were objects from Leiden depots, but they were chosen because they had something to do with their contemporary work or issues.'

The National Museum of World Cultures (of which, to reiterate, Museum Volkenkunde is a part) recently took an unusual step. It has made the Zuni people in New Mexico aware of some of the twin gods in its possession. 'They are known as the Ahayu'da, sculptures with ceremonial power and intended as health gods', says Lidchi. They are made during the winter solstice and carved by members of the deer or bear clan. They are then entrusted to priests who place them in shrines. The museum has alerted the Zuni to the procedures for reclaiming them. That means it actively encourages original owners of objects to file restitution claims. Once back in New Mexico, they will be left outside,

exposed to the elements and allowed to decay naturally. Lidchi says: 'Returning them means accepting that they are under the control of a sovereign people who will determine the most appropriate way to dispose of them. It is as it is, we as a museum think, because it is no longer up to us to decide.'

Since 2017, the AfricaMuseum in Tervuren has been consulting with the Nunavut Arctic College in northern Canada on the digitisation of the Inuit collection and its documentation in Tervuren. It is a modest beginning; the momentum has yet to build.

## UN DECLARATION IN SUPPORT OF INDIGENOUS CLAIMS

In 2007, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) was accepted. It is the result of a years-long struggle for recognition of the injustices done to indigenous peoples and offers support for restitution claims. The declaration starts with what seems to be a self-evident statement: indigenous peoples are entitled to all human

*In 2009, an Aboriginal delegation collected human remains at Leiden University Medical Centre. © Arno Masee*



rights and fundamental freedoms. Isn't everyone entitled to them? The reality is different. Indigenous peoples still face disadvantages. UNDRIP recognises their right to self-determination and to economic, social and cultural development. They have the right to preserve and revive their cultural traditions and customs. Article 12.2 stipulates that states shall seek to promote 'access to and/or repatriation of ceremonial objects and human remains' in their possession, using 'fair, transparent and effective mechanisms' developed 'in cooperation with the indigenous peoples concerned'.

A declaration like this is non-binding, so those who violate it cannot be taken to court. Yet it has received widespread support, including from the governments of former settler colonies. Critics, however, question its effectiveness. They say the declaration came as a bolt from the blue in most former settler colonies: most were already working to strengthen the rights of their indigenous inhabitants and UNDRIP would add little. But a 2017 report by the UN Human Rights Council called the declaration the most far-reaching and comprehensive tool available to indigenous peoples. One might argue that UNDRIP has not led to immediate concrete returns, but it has greatly strengthened the position of indigenous peoples in restitution claims.

Would the return of collections to former remote colonies be easier if Europe adopted a declaration like UNDRIP? By Europe, we mean likeminded countries like Belgium, France, Germany, Great Britain, the Netherlands, the Scandinavian countries and Switzerland. Such a declaration can increase former colonies' trust that former colonisers genuinely want to deal with their colonial collections in a new way. At present, mistrust keeps some former colonies from submitting restitution requests. Too often, they have knocked on Europe's door in vain.

## PRINCIPLES FOR CLAIMING NAZI ART

The demand for a UNDRIP-like declaration leads to another declaration that was established for another moment in art theft: the Nazi art looting. During the Nazi regime, millions of works of art, books, libraries, archives and other cultural treasures, most belonging to Jewish families and institutions, were confiscated. Much of it was burned at the stake, auctioned off, sold or squandered. The leaders of the regime confiscated numerous objects, and it also happened that neighbours took things from Jewish families who were forced to flee or deported and never

returned, or who did return but saw their requests for the restoration of their belongings rejected by the new inhabitants.

From the end of the Second World War onwards, specialised Allied units searched warehouses, museums and other places where the Nazis may have stored works of art. What they found was returned to the governments of the countries from which it had been stolen. These governments, in turn, lent the valuables to their museums and other institutions. This included the governments of the Netherlands and Belgium. This left the descendants of the rightful private owners and dealers empty-handed. After the war, the Netherlands had recovered more works of art than Belgium. This had to do with the size and composition of the Dutch Jewish population. The Netherlands had had a large Jewish community for centuries. In Belgium, many relatively poor Jewish immigrants had arrived in the 1920s. The Nazis had less to gain from them.

It was only in the second half of the 1990s that governments that had profited so much from these post-war returns began to realise that their owners' descendants had been seriously wronged. Art historian Rudi Ekkart, who led the investigation into Nazi looted art in the Netherlands and was the first chairman of the Restitutions Committee, and investigative journalist Geert Sels, who conducts similar research in Belgium, are both critical of their countries' restitution policies. The Ekkart Committee (Commissie-Ekkart, *Herkomst gezocht/Origins Unknown*, 2006, p. 28) called Dutch policy 'formalistic, bureaucratic, cold and often even heartless'; Sels ('Kunst voor das Reich', 2017) called that of Belgium 'lamentable' and 'heartless'.

In 1998, this awareness led governments in Europe and North America to adopt the Washington Conference Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art. These principles stimulate the Netherlands, Belgium and other signatories to actively seek public collections for looted works of art and to return them to their rightful owners. They ask for understanding for the fact that there were large gaps in the provenance of many pieces and that parties seek fair and just solutions, preferably outside the courtroom and using alternative means of conflict resolution.

Can the Washington Principles be made applicable to colonial collections? Some legal experts and historians, of whom I asked this question a few years ago, frowned at the idea. There would be resistance from Jewish organisations working for the restitution of Nazi art. You shouldn't compare apples to oranges, you cannot tar colonial looted art



and Nazi looted art with the same brush, they argued. I came up with even more counter-arguments myself. Nazi plunder had been part of an internationally recognised *genocide*. Colonialism was about *exploitation*, even if it regularly bordered on genocide – think of First Nations in North America, the peoples in Leopold’s Congo or Nama and Herero in Namibia. Nazi looting was more recent, within one continent, and lasted a relatively short time. Looting from colonial areas began a long time ago and continued well into the twentieth century. There is considerably more documentation on Nazi-looted artworks than on dubious colonial collections, which has implications for the evidence. The descendants of duped Jewish and other former owners are easier to trace, whereas with colonial looted art it is sometimes unclear to whom objects should be returned. One difference was rarely mentioned and apparently it touched a nerve: Nazi robbery had taken place in the Netherlands and Belgium themselves – they had been occupied and been victims of it. In the case of colonial art theft, the Netherlands and Belgium had been perpetrators.

### WHAT ABOUT CLAIMS FROM FORMER COLONIES?

The main argument in favour of creating something similar to the Washington Principles for looted objects from former colonies is that here, too, a great historical injustice has been committed. They have in common massive loss, pain, violence and the dehumanisation of the victims. In Africa, people have been making the link already for some time. Aimé Césaire (1913–2008), a poet from Martinique (*Discours sur le Colonialisme*, 1955), called fascism ‘the application of colonial procedures to white people’. David Olusoga and Casper Erichsen (*The Kaiser’s Holocaust*, 2010, p. 3) compare the idea behind and the methods used during the murder of millions of Jews and others in the Second World War with those of the Namibian genocide (1904–1908) – which left 80,000 Nama and Herero dead – and of the exhaustion and violence in other colonial areas. They speak of ‘colonial amnesia’ among those who do not want to see the parallels.

That amnesia is diminishing. The Dutch Council for Culture, in its advice on dealing with colonial collections of October 2020, mentions Nazi looted art, albeit briefly, and uses the term *involuntary loss of property* for colonial looting, a term that has been used in cases involving Nazi looted art. In 2018, in the exhibition *Collected. Bought. Looted*, museums in Frankfurt put Nazi looted art and colonial looted art under

the same magnifying glass. The NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies in Amsterdam and the Dutch Restitutions Committee addressed both moments of art robbery at an expert meeting in 2019.

Would former colonies benefit from a Europe-wide declaration of principles about their right to the return of involuntarily lost collections? Something similar to the Washington Principles or UNDRIP for indigenous claims? Until now, European countries have involved in undoing colonial injustice at the national level. For example, in 2017 President Emmanuel Macron announced, in Burkina Faso, a new French restitution policy for Africa. In 2019, Germany declared that it would actively seek out rightful owners of colonial collections, and in early 2021, that Benin objects would be returned to Nigeria. In the Netherlands the Minister of Culture declared in early 2021 that she would unconditionally return looted art and other dubious collections to former Dutch colonies. In 2021, the Belgian government announced a new policy, transferring the property of proven looted art to DR Congo.

But not one of those countries has taken the initiative for a Europe-wide approach. The Dutch minister is in favour of 'knowledge exchange' with other European former colonial powers and of 'museum co-operation', but does not go any further. We are waiting for a Europe-wide declaration that will strengthen the confidence of former colonies in a happier ending.

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Nazi loot, loot from old settler colonies and loot from distant former colonial possessions are three key moments in the history of art robbery and are comparable historical injustices. Their victims are therefore all equally entitled to reparations for this suffering. This general principle can be the impetus for the recognition of the suffering of colonised people and restitution of colonial collections. The experiences with the restitution of Nazi looted art and looted art from settler colonies show that widely accepted principles or a widely accepted declaration make it easier for victims to back up their demands. Victims of looting and other involuntary loss of property in former colonies would benefit from a generally recognised declaration of intent from former colonisers.

# 15. TRUST, EQUALITY AND JUSTICE

**A**nyone who has followed the debate on restitution of collections from colonial contexts since the Second World War will possibly discern few new insights in its current content. What is new is its weight. Over the past decade, decolonisation has gained a permanent place on the agenda of governments, museums, the academic world, the media and in the public eye. There is more openness, courage and curiosity about how objects, archives and ancestral remains once left their countries of origin and how that drainage still influences relations between the Global South and the Global North. Fellow countrymen with roots in the former colonies are speaking out more and often touch a nerve.

The starting point for this change is often said to have been President Macron's announcement of a new French restitution policy for Africa in 2017. He was indeed the first European head of state in recent history to have spoken out publicly and concretely on this politically sensitive issue. But one factor that prompted Macron's stance came from Africa: this was an official claim by the Republic of Benin in 2016 for the return of loot from a war against King Béhanzin of Dahomey in 1892. Thus, former colonies play at least as important a role in this change as their European counterparts.

Two remarks about the new French policy. One is that Macron was born in 1977 and is thus less burdened than his more aged predecessors by France's colonial past. Macron could argue more easily that his country was far too richly endowed and that African countries were severely underserved. The second is that he commissioned a French art historian, Bénédicte Savoy of the Technical University of Berlin, and a



*Africa and Europe work on restoring trust.* © Jos van Beurden

Senegalese economist, Felwine Sarr of the Gaston-Berger University in Senegal, to write an advisory document. Their *Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics* of November 2018 was ground-breaking and gave impetus to the debate both in Europe and in Africa. The two advisors had sharp words for how France had acquired its colonial collections and argued in favour of redress for the injustice done, emphasising France's duty to deliver it and Africa's right to have it. Macron then promised the Republic of Benin the return of twenty-six objects from 'the Treasure of Béhanzin' of 1892. Since this presidential decision, one object has been returned to Senegal, a farewell exhibition of the twenty-six objects in the Musée du quai Branly has been held and a return to Ivory Coast is in preparation.

This fierce and firm stance exuded the atmosphere of a true African-European co-production: the voice of the South was clearly heard in the solutions proposed by Savoy and Sarr. This offered both France and its former colonies in Africa a new foothold in the debate over demands for restitution. Other European countries also published reports on the restitution issue, but most of them lacked the character of a co-production. Where do Belgium and the Netherlands stand in this respect?

## TURNAROUND IN THE NETHERLANDS

In 2019, outgoing Dutch Culture Minister Van Engelshoven asked the Council for Culture for advice on dealing with colonial collections. It

set up a special committee that was given a year to gather information. When someone from the committee asked me for my views, I could not have imagined that the suggestions it eventually came up with would have so much in common with my own ideas. I had expected a more cautious attitude.

The advice was clear and straightforward. When submitting it to the minister, committee chair Lilian Gonçalves-Ho Kang You summed up its essence in nine words: 'What has been stolen will have to go back'. It could not be shorter. The chairman and most of the members were Dutch, but with strong roots in the former colonies, and therefore the voices of the former colonies resonate strongly within it.

In January 2021, a second surprise followed. Barring only a few points, the minister adopted the advice in her Policy Vision Collections from a Colonial Context. The original population of the colonial regions 'has been wronged by the taking possession of cultural goods against their will' and the cabinet wants to contribute 'to the restoration of this historical injustice' through restitution and cooperation. This injustice, the Council for Culture had concluded from its investigations, is visible in the colonial collections of at least fifty-five Dutch museums. Cultural goods that were captured in former Dutch colonies should be returned unconditionally, after thorough provenance investigation and if the country of origin requests it. Unconditionally, it said. This was new.

The minister followed the advisory committee's broad definition of the types of objects that are eligible for restitution. These include not only loot from major and minor wars, but also all 'involuntarily removed' objects from colonial areas or objects with 'special meaning' for the country of origin. Objects from former colonies of other European powers are also eligible for return, but these are conditionally honoured. These include the King of Kandy's cannon from Sri Lanka and Benin objects from Nigeria. Sri Lanka was once a Dutch colonial possession but became a British colony, before gaining its independence. Nigeria always fell under London's hegemony. When deciding whether an object should be returned, its importance to the Netherlands is weighed against that of the country of origin. The minister looks at the storage conditions and the accessibility of the objects once they are back in the country of origin. An 'independent assessment committee' will advise the minister on each application for restitution. Former colonies often think very differently about these conditions; they find the northern interference

with their storage capacities and advice on how to make objects accessible to their public and researchers patronising. Due to the stagnation after the March 2021 parliamentary elections in the formation of a new government, the new policy vision was still waiting for parliamentary approval at the start of 2022.

## SURPRISE FROM BELGIUM

Belgium had an even bigger surprise up its sleeve. For a long time, the country's complicated political structure – a federation with regions and communities that often all have a say in cultural matters – and the difficulty of forming governments seemed to block progress. Yet, all the while, things were happening. Back in 2018 – that is, well before the Dutch Council for Culture's advisory committee was appointed – the federal government set up a working group to develop criteria for possible restitution. But a few months after that announcement, the government fell and with it the working group. In March 2019, the Assembly of the French Community called for the return of 'bien mal acquis' (ill-gotten goods) – which included ancestral remains as well as objects. In April 2019, the parliament of the Brussels region followed with a similar suggestion.

In July 2020, the federal government entrusted a broadly constituted commission with the investigation into Belgium's colonial past. According to government document DOC 55 1462/001, the commission is to investigate the role and structural impact that 'the Belgian State, the Belgian authorities and non-state actors [such as, for example, the monarchy, the Church, the operators of colonial economies] have had on the Congo Free State and on Belgian Congo, Rwanda and Burundi'. Here, Belgium goes further than the Netherlands and other former colonisers by also examining the role of the royal family, the missionaries and the business community.

This research fitted in with the work of the Parliamentary Commission on the colonial past, accessibility of colonial archives and a restitution policy. The commission was a response to discussions about the statues of historical figures such as King Leopold II and Lieutenant Emile Storms and the actions of the Black Lives Matter movement, Bamko-Cran and activists such as Mwazulu Diyabanza. The return of archives to Rwanda, the offer made by the Free University of Brussels to return skulls to the University of Lubumbashi and the HOME project

on human remains likewise fit into this new atmosphere in which universities and museums also cooperate.

In the meantime, Restitution Belgium, an independent group of sixty, mostly white academics and museum professionals, had started to formulate principles for dealing with colonial collections. The group did this on its own initiative. In May 2021, it published *Ethical Principles for the Management and Restitution of Colonial Collections in Belgium*. It wants to broaden the restitution debate to include participants from the African diaspora and countries of origin and advocates more and better provenance research. Furthermore, it believes subnational groups and individual descendants in former colonies should have the right to reclaim objects.

Shortly afterwards, the federal government announced a far-reaching step: objects in the AfricaMuseum in Tervuren, which were proven to be looted art, were no longer public property of the Belgian state but of DR Congo. Changing the ownership relation is unique in the post-war restitution debate. Early in 2022, Belgium and DR Congo set up a bilateral committee to determine the fate of thousands of museum artefacts acquired by Belgium during the colonial era. Later in 2022, the first restitutions are planned to be made.

## **AGAIN: TO WHOM DO YOU GIVE IT BACK?**

Both the Belgian and Dutch authorities have solved the question of whom they return objects to by turning to the national authorities and the national museums in their former colonies as official interlocutors. In turn, the national institutions of countries as DR Congo, Rwanda, Indonesia and Suriname are claiming this role. Indonesia's Museum Nasional is 'the only place where pieces can be preserved and protected well enough', said Director Siswanto to the NOS news-site on 11 October 2020. In reaction to the Dutch policy vision, Indonesia's Ministry for Education and Culture has set up a restitution committee.

All of this is understandable, but will returns to national authorities always have a healing effect for the ethnic groups who once lost them or regional museums in these countries? They often possess indigenous knowledge about objects, are not rarely more attached to them and have a major interest in getting them back than any other stakeholder. Will there be a separation between provenance research and entitlement to the object's return? The Ne Kuko nail statue from DR Congo can serve

as an example. In the new policy of the federal government of Belgium, DR Congo will become its new owner. If it stays in the national museum in Kinshasa, the statue will remain a museum piece. Only if the national museum returns it to the community in Boma will the community turn it back into a subject, 'rehumanise' it, so that this statue regains its active role in the community. In the latter case, a return achieves its maximum effect: healing hurt feelings and undoing injustice. The same is valid for minorities in Suriname or old Royal Houses in Indonesia.

It is a sensitive and complicated issue. Whenever the subject of restitution comes up at public meetings, often someone will ask: To whom should the object go? Why not to a minority community, the head of an ethnic group, the family of a sultan or a museum in his region? With the two other moments in the history of art robbery that we have discussed here, the question is easier to answer: works of art looted from the Nazis and objects belonging to indigenous communities go to the descendants of their rightful owners.

Many countries in the Global South struggle with the question of the rightful owner. Should an object go to the descendants of the original owner? But what if two parties claim that inheritance or if national authorities consider those descendants insufficiently prepared to properly care for returned objects? Heritage specialists and policymakers from those countries talk about it informally, but perhaps an open South–South consultation on the subject is desirable. We can predict that if European countries translate their expressed willingness to return objects into action, the 'to whom' question will be the next hurdle to overcome.

The complexity of receiving involuntarily lost objects from distant colonies has to do with state formation and borders. Take the Benin objects. The Kingdom of Benin was a separate entity until it became part of Nigeria during British colonial rule. The kingdom claims to be the owner of the looted pieces, but the NCMW wants to receive returned objects. After years of bickering, they are slowly agreeing on a joint Legacy Restoration Trust – a new development in Africa – but even this has to paper over some cracks. Or take the diamond of the Sultan of Banjarmasin, captured in 1859, now in the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam and mentioned by the Dutch Council for Culture as an example of an item that is loot and thus should be returned unconditionally, if the Indonesian authorities so request. But relatives of the sultan have hinted that the diamond would be better off staying in the Netherlands until it



can return to the sultanate. Many objects looted from sultanates are still part of living cultures and would be used in ceremonies and rituals when returned. According to Professor Sri Margana from Yogyakarta, who sits on the new restitution committee, his country is increasingly facing this problem: 'We have to figure out how to deal with the original owners. It varies from case to case.'

## HOW DO WE KNOW IF WE ARE MAKING PROGRESS?

In a conversation we have, Wayne Modest, Director of Content for the National Museum of World Cultures, agrees about the hard-to-solve 'return to whom' question. 'I am not afraid of the difficult' – in other words, of restitutions. 'For us, restitution is not the hardest part of decolonising our collections'; rather, the hardest part is 'knowing that such a return will not be completed tomorrow but will be something of many years' breath, and that sometimes gives me stomach ache.' The governments of both the Netherlands and Belgium may have declared new intentions and policies, but all in all, only one item went back in the year in which new the policies were announced: the Diponegoro kris. Other countries in Europe do not fare much better.

The positive intentions in the North and meagre returns to the South raise the question, how do we know if we are on the right track and making progress that is beneficial for both sides? While governments and museums in the Global North pride themselves on their progressive positions, their counterparts in the Global South are more hesitant. They still feel at the mercy of northern institutions and how far they want to go. They still lack a legal basis for claims. As Naazima Kamardeen formulates it: 'Currently countries that lost cultural heritage have a right to submit a claim. It would be better, if countries that possess disputable heritage from others have a duty to return it.'

To bridge the gap between the two, I will formulate some points of attention that governments, museums and heritage professionals can keep in mind. For this, I have looked at some returns and not yet realised claims that have been discussed, such as the returns by the Netherlands and Belgium to Indonesia and the Congo in the 1970s, Sri Lanka's rejected claim in the 1980s, the repatriation of Māori heads and other ancestral remains, the deaccessioning of the Nusantara collection, the sharing of archives, and the expected return of Benin objects to Nigeria. Three focal points emerge: the first is working towards *equality* between

the possessor of a colonial collection and the dispossessed; a second is the sincere desire to *undo injustice* and give back; and the third? Wayne Modest immediately emphasises this as the most important: ‘*trust*’.

## UNLEARNING TO DISTRUST

When, in 1998, I once more visited Samuel Sidibé, the director of Mali’s National Museum, he said that his confidence that some of his country’s lost cultural heritage would ever return was no greater than when we first met in 1991. Since the mid-1980s, his country had improved its cultural heritage legislation and implemented programmes to raise public awareness of its importance. But this made little impression on European countries. Sidibé had approached the French government several times about returning colonial loot and always received a negative response. Sometimes the receipt of a request was not even confirmed. That was a quarter century ago, but it is still happening. Aimé Kantoussan, Research Director of the Black Civilisations Museum in Senegal, says: ‘It’s not complicated: our trust doesn’t increase as long as nothing is returned.’ Many years, I have heard the same from some Nigerians close to the Benin dialogue.

Kwame Opoku confirms that there is great distrust about Europe’s willingness to return pieces. He fulminates against the unwillingness and paternalism of owners of African heritage in Europe who impose conditions on how Africans should deal with treasures that are returned to them. ‘Of course we see that there is corruption in Africa and that there are few well-protected museums, but that does not diminish the validity of claims from Africa. Nor does it justify the Western refusal to return looted objects. Many objects, by the way, came from villages and not from museum showcases; they were never made for that’ (‘One Counter-Agenda from Africa’, 2010). And about the Benin objects, Opoku wrote: ‘Until the British raid they were kept safe in the Oba’s palace. Only then did insecurity set in and they were scattered all over Europe and North America. We recognise the need for better museums, but it is not up to the former colonials to decide what they should look like and what requirements they should meet. That is up to the governments of the countries they come from.’

In our conversation, Modest also points to this mistrust: ‘People from former colonies find it very difficult to trust museums in the North. They find them reliable in the management of objects, but not in human

relations.' He also mentions the one-sided nature of international institutions such as UNESCO, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and large international training institutes for the heritage sector: 'Most of them were once westernised and have not learned to ask themselves critical questions, and certainly not the kind of questions that are prevalent in the South.'

Argentine curator Adriana Muñoz of the World Museum in Gothenburg confides to me that she thinks the same: 'The mistrust of northern institutions and many of their professionals is now a huge obstacle to progress in the museum world.' She has a tip for northern museums and their staff: 'Do something to stop distrusting southern countries, institutions and heritage professionals. Stop secretly thinking "you can't do it".'

At the Ius Commune Conference at Maastricht University of November 2020, where I presented the focal points of trust, equality and justice, a European participant argued that the North should indeed distrust the South less, but by the same token, the South should also get moving and dare to trust certain institutions and professionals in the North. He had a point. To resolve a conflict, both parties must take steps. But in the case of the decolonisation of museum collections, former colonisers and their museums should be the first to make a gesture. They have seriously violated the trust of southern peoples in the past and should take action to restore it. Return one or two objects. Why are European participants in the Benin dialogue so hesitant? Why does the MAS, as was suggested, not take the first step and offer a battle flag from the Christoffel collection to Indonesia? Solid confidence-building measures would make clear their intentions and convince the southern party of northern sincerity.

## WORKING TOWARDS EQUALITY

A characteristic of colonialism was the unequal distribution of power. There was literally and figuratively no equality of arms. Europeans possessed better weapons and stronger resources; they justified their actions by the complete or partial dehumanisation of the colonised.

This structural inequality still has an effect, according to writers from the South. The Indian intellectual Pankaj Mishra describes how this structural inequality can lead to attacks and other outrages (Mishra, *Tijd van Woede*, 2017, p. 18). The North preaches the ideal of equality, but in reality, the great inequality between North and South has hard-

ly diminished. The Cameroonian thinker Achille Mbembe argues that colonialism had a threefold impact on the colonised: the break with the self, expropriation leading to submission and humiliation (Mbembe, *Kritiek van de Zwarte Rede*, 2015, pp. 117–118). Others emphasise the knock-on effect of this attitude on the part of the ruling white people. Gloria Wekker (*White Innocence*, 2018) argues that white Dutch people like to gloss over the racial discrimination and colonial violence perpetrated by their ancestors, while racism and xenophobia continue to exist in the Netherlands. The Rwandan–Belgian decolonisation expert Olivia Rutazibwa sees the same thing in her country. In the Belgian magazine *MO\** (‘Antiracistisch en dekoloniaal verzet’, 2020), she states that white supremacy can only die out if her white fellow countrymen see it as a white problem that they have to solve. She asks them to take responsibility in the decolonisation debate, but without immediately claiming the leading role.

Striving for equality is the second point of attention; it also plays a role in the current anti-racism debate. Laws and other mechanisms protect the interests of the possessors of cultural and historical objects better than those of the dispossessed. An example is the law on the inalienability of national heritage in European countries, a law that applies to colonial collections that are considered part of that heritage. Parties in the South are increasingly confronting their Northern counterparts with this.

Increasing equality means that there is work to be done on both sides. That this work is difficult and the information is often a little elusive, is clear from the examples of the deaccessioning of the Nusantara collection by Erfgoed Delft and the Rijksmuseum’s handling of their counterparts in Sri Lanka in the provenance research for the cannon of Kandy. Equivalence requires that if an institution in Europe wants to make plans for provenance research into a disputed object and the colonial area where it comes from is known, it first has a conversation with counterparts from that place and discusses with them their desires, needs and possibilities.

## UNDOING INJUSTICE

The fact that the disappearance of many objects from colonial regions is a historical injustice has been evident in academic circles for years. Museums had trouble dealing with it for a long time. Some heritage profes-

sionals saw it but did not dare to speak out. Now museum directors and curators and government authorities in Belgium and the Netherlands see the problem. But this recognition comes with an obligation. Show your willingness, the Council for Culture in the Netherlands suggested, to correct the historical mistakes that are still experienced in the Global South as injustice.

Greater justice is the third point of attention. But what exactly is justice? The Indian winner of the Nobel Prize for Economics in 1998, Amartya Sen, also struggled with it. For him, it is about the gap between rich and poor. His solution is to consciously not define justice but to focus on what he calls 'redressable injustice' (Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 2010, p. vii). According to Sen, a child usually knows by itself if it has been naughty and needs to make amends. Grown-ups should know that, too. Perhaps Sen's approach also works for the undoing of injustices in the colonial past. Restore what is possible.

Both Belgium and the Netherlands are on their way to restoring some of these past injustices. Reflecting further, two thoughts come to mind. The first is that the complete undoing of historical injustice in former colonies is impossible. Recognition is crucial. But as too much has been taken away and too little is known about the objects' backgrounds, choic-

*Joy at the arrival of objects. © Hans van de Bunte/Sarawak Museum Collection, Kuching, Malaysia*



es will have to be made about what goes back, and in these choices former colonies have just as much right to speak as the current owners. The second thought is that recognising and restoring are verbs. Museums and private owners must get to work – and some are already doing so. They must become active in searching their own collections and publicising it as much as possible, active in involving former colonial countries in planning and implementation. And they must actively support those former colonies at their request in strengthening their capacity to handle returned collections well, but this time in their own way.

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We have arrived at the end of this voyage of discovery. It began five hundred years ago when European powers went in search of new territories far beyond their continent. They imposed their will on the peoples living there and exploited them in many ways. They also did this by taking away, on a huge scale, their cultural heritage, remains of their ancestors and archives. In recent decades, we have begun to see this differently, both in the North and in the South. Thanks to a broadening and deepening of the social debate on decolonisation and racism, this process has accelerated in recent years.

In March 2020, King Willem-Alexander expressed his regret for the outbursts of violence by the Dutch side in response to Indonesian independence. His words referred to the four years that the Indonesian War of Independence lasted, and not to the four hundred years before that. In June 2020, King Philippe expressed his deepest regret about the Belgian actions in Congo.

Regret, apology, blame – they all play a role in the decolonisation debate. Regret and apology seem appropriate in view of the many acts of violence and their consequences. Guilt is more complicated. Should we feel guilty about the injustice done? A ‘yes’ to that question is not self-evident. The real guilty parties have been in the cemetery for a long time; they have turned to dust and can no longer be addressed, and between the cemetery and the world of the living is, in this case, a clear dividing line. Being weighed down by guilt makes facing up to the dark deeds of the past unattractive and easily stifles our curiosity and vigour.

I would like to offer Western museums and other owners of dubious colonial collections an antidote. If you really go for it, giving back is en-

riching and healing. Let go of what is not yours. Give communities of origin the right to determine and tell the story of all these objects. In this way, you work towards a clean slate and restore or improve a relationship. Do not let our ethnographic art temples turn into *sorry-museums*, a term used by the Belgian newspaper *De Standaard* of 3 December 2018 in reference to the reopening of the AfricaMuseum in Tervuren. New insights and changing ethics give us the responsibility to get started and do something – in other words, the *ability to respond*, in this case, by using new thinking to find an answer to problems caused in the past that are still present today. This includes expressing regret and offering apologies. Let us all sit down and make good use of that ability. It seems to be working already in some instances. The future will offer plenty more opportunities.

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Many ethnographic museums have regularly adapted their names to the spirit of the times. The AfricaMuseum in Tervuren, for example, was previously called Museum of Belgian Congo, Royal Museum of Belgian Congo and Royal Museum of Central Africa. Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden started in 1837 as Rijks Japansch Museum and was later called Ethnographic Museum, Rijksmuseum van Ethnographie, Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde and since 2005 Museum Volkenkunde. For the sake of convenience, this book uses the current name of a museum.

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