first word

Is Repatriation Inevitable?

by Allen F. Roberts

Debates about repatriation of human remains and significant cultural materials to their communities of origin, including objects deemed “art” following culturally determined assessments, have raged for many years. One need only consider how the “madness” of returning the famed fifth-century BCE “Elgin Marbles,” as they are known in the UK after the man who purloined them from the Acropolis in the early nineteenth century, is debated as an issue of contemporary politics in Britain, as has been the case for generations (Trend 2018). Yet there seems a sudden acceleration of such conversations with regard to sub-Saharan holdings (e.g., Scher 2018).

Perhaps most notable has been French President Emmanuel Macron’s November 2017 declaration at the University of Ouagadougou that within the next five years, “conditions should be met for a return of African patrimony to Africa.” This position was found “surprising to many” in France, Le Monde reported. In March 2018, President Macron named Bénédicte Savoy, an historian of French arts, and Felwine Sarr, a Senegalese economist, novelist, and theorist of Afrofuturism, to produce a plan to this effect before the end of 2018. Such news was well received in former French colonies like the Republic of Bénin, where calls have long been made for return of French colonies like the Republic of Bénin, where calls have long been made for return of significant cultural materials to their communities of origin.

Equally well-heralded initiatives are underway concerning loot from the Punitive Expedition of 1897 to what is now southwestern Nigeria, including the famed Benin Bronzes held at the British Museum and other institutions across Europe and the Americas. In an interview with The Guardian, Africanist art historian John Picton captures the conundrum:

The moral case is indisputable. Those antiquities were lifted from Benin City and you can argue that they ought to go back. On the other hand, the rival story is that it is part of world history and you do not want to take away African antiquity from somewhere like the museums in Paris or London because that leaves Africa without its proper record of antiquity … presumably with regard to inclusion in encyclopedic histories composed for largely non-African audiences. “Concerns about security were … foremost in the minds of European institutions,” Picton continues, and “there has to be a recognition perhaps that things are on long-term loan from Nigeria” (Quinn 2017).

First, a beheading. The event occurred on December 4, 1884, and has been artificated ever since through competing Congolese and Belgian histories attuned to particular audiences and political goals (A.F. Roberts 2013). Two protagonists engaged in a deadly pas-de-deux driven by immense ambition, as each man violently strove to establish hegemony along the southwestern shores of Lake Tanganika in what is now the DRC: Lusinga lwa Ng’ombe, deemed a “sanguinary potentate” by the British explorer Joseph Thomson after visiting the chief in 1879 because of Lusinga’s ruthless slaving for the east African trade; and Emil Storms, belligerent commander of the fourth International African Association expedition and founder of an outpost at Mpala near Lusinga’s redoubt. The IAAs overt mandate was to promote scientific knowledge.
while helping to suppress slavery. Lusinga and Storms were bound for confrontation, and Lusinga lost his head.

Storms did develop IAA scientific aims, and as he scheduled, mapped, traded, and collected, he broached Belgian colonization of time, place, value, and Nature itself. He also initiated changes in social organization still perceptible in the mid-1970s at Mpala. Yet despite its lofty public goals, the IAA was for the front for the imperialist maneuvering of Léopold II, King of the Belgians. Storms had a covert directive to strike off westward from Mpala to join Henry Morton Stanley coming up the Congo River from the Atlantic coast. Together they would inscribe a “White Line across the Dark Continent,” as a contemporary tract had it (Anon. 1883), and in so doing, they would substantiate Léopold’s audacious—and successful—claim at the much-anticipated Berlin Conference of 1885 that the Congo should become his personal property.

Had the IAA plan been realized, Storms could have expected to share some portion of the enormous celebrity accrued to Stanley. As it was, the seasoned Stanley proved so swiftly successful that Storms’s further services were deemed unnecessary, and he was summoned back to Belgium and into disgruntled animosity. Twists and turns continued as Storms returned to Europe, however. He bore Lusinga’s skull in his luggage and presented it to the eminent physical anthropologist Émile Housé, who made it the subject of a sinister treatise in protoeugenics applicable to Africans as well as to his own Flemish countryman—Housé being a Walloon (see A.F. Roberts [2013: 143–56], Couttenier [2014], and Arndt [2013] on the heated regional politics of Flemish-speaking Flanders and French-speaking Walonia).

Storms also brought home bootie seized from Lusinga, including the compelling ancestral figure mentioned above. Unpublished photos taken in 1929 as the Widow Storms prepared to donate her husband’s African collections to the Royal Museum show the sculpture standing before an over-mantle mirror that reflected phantasmagorical displays in the Storms’s drawing room, through which the aging general invented an “Africa” to suit his triumphant recollections (see A.F. Roberts 2013: 157–73, Volper 2012, Wastiau 2005.)

What might have become of Lusinga’s skull and sculpture had they remained in the Congo? His cranium would have been venerated following a complex funerary process. If his kinsmen had followed what they may have understood Luba procedures to be, the skull would have been detached from the corpse and buried in the bed of a momentarily diverted stream, along with the skull of the deceased chief’s predecessor. Such an enchanting of remains suggested continuity of leadership by an incipient dynasty.

As for the ancestral figure, in the late 1800s, Lusinga and a few of his kinsmen seeking to exploit the explosive potentialities of the east African ivory-and-slave trade adapted symbols of self-aggrandizement in emulation of the fabled Luba kingdom so influential throughout southern Congo and adjacent lands (Reeve 1981; cf. Heusch 1982). In becoming increasingly “Luba-ized” (Verhulsen 1936) in this way, Lusinga embellished and invented traditions to establish continuity with a suitable historic past (Vansina 1996). Among his strategists, Lusinga commissioned a large wooden figure to embody his matrilineage that would serve as an active life force to which he might look to protect and promote his interests.

One can assume that Lusinga expected to keep his ancestral figure in perpetuity, to be inherited and cherished by his successors, and that such permanence would have been of great value unto itself. As Annette Weiner (1985: 210) suggested with regard to conceptually similar material culture among Maori people of New Zealand,

The primary value of inalienability, . . . is expressed through the power these objects have to define who one is in an historical sense. The object acts as a vehicle for bringing past time into the present, so that the histories of ancestors, titles, and mythological events become an intimate part of a person’s present identity.

In commissioning and then carefully preserving the sculpture, Lusinga must have hoped to create and/or elaborate upon a

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from whom Storms’s men seized them. The property regime very different from what the ancestral figure to be war trophies, via a "visible knot which ties not "respond aesthetically. Instead, s/he would have perceived "the visible knot which ties"

To the Widow Storms and her family and friends, that is, rather than to the Congolese people who had possessed or used the objects. The ongoing "social lives" of the things seem to have left any such possibilities far behind.

Since 1930, when Storms’s collection was given to what is now the RMCA, Lusinga’s skull and ancestral figure have served further enunciationary functions as signs of "primitivism" underscoring the justifications and purposes of Belgian “civilization” (see Saunders 2005). While the Lusinga sculpture resided in a foreign vitrine, a bust of Emile Storms was to be seen at the Royal Museum in 2010, scowling in marmoreal pallor at Herbert Ward’s larger-than-life sculpture Defiance (1909), depicting an angry African striding forth below the plinth bearing the bust. Through such odd encounters, one can assume that Storms and Lusinga have whispered to each other through the many years since their epic encounter in 1884, for they do have a great deal in common despite ongoing narratives about them.

**OTHER IMAGINARIES**

In contrast to Lusinga’s and Storms’s portrayals of hubris is a contemporary work by the Congolese artist Aimé Mpane called Congo: Shadow of the Shadow (2005) that was featured in LACMA’s Shaping Power exhibition (Fig. 2). Composed of nearly 5,000 matchsticks, the fragility of a muscular man is as poignant as his pensive stance, gazing upon a tombstone cross inscribed “Congo… 1885.” Lit from behind, the figure’s even larger shadow seems to mirror the gaze from an afterlife. What suffering Congolese have known since the Berlin Conference of that year, when the Congo Free State was conferred upon Leopold II as his very own piece of “this magnificent African cake,” as the king famously quipped (see Cornelis 1991)!

The pas-de-deux of Lusinga and Storms presaged well more than a century of turmoil still ongoing in the DRC, with the genocidal strife of last decades among its dire consequences.

Shadow of the Shadow was a deeply moving presence that gave further voice to historical sculptures displayed in Shaping Power, over and above their label copy. Like the Lusinga figure, these works still have much to say about what they once were and how and why they have become "treasures of the Royal Museum" (see Couttenier 2018). On the wall opposite the entrance to the Mpane installation, a small screen showed a video interview with Dr. Mutombo Nkulu-N’Sengha, professor of religious studies at California State University, Northridge. The Congolese scholar, himself of Luba heritage, spoke to the themes of the *Shaping Power* exhibition, but also to the we-are-still-here courage required to face harsh realities of present-day DRC.

How will the Lusinga figure and other important works in the collections of the Royal Museum be conveyed to viewers rather than mask mimeses such as that between Lusinga and Storms?

How may historical ambiguities like those that resulted from that epic day in 1884 be featured to mitigate colonial amnesia that, for so long now, has permitted Belgians to ignore aspects of their collective pasts that remain acutely uncomfortable? How may earlier Congolese voices, such as Lusinga’s and those of millions of others who fell in colonial conquest, not only be heard but inform Belgo-Congolese collaboration in humane futures foreseen by both?

Hopeful progress has begun. To cite but a few of many provocative activities:

- Shortly before the RMCA closed for renovation, the Congolese artist Sammy Baloji and the cultural activist Pierre Madekereza held residencies resulting in the exhibition *Congo Far West: Arts, Sciences & Collections.*

The purpose was to begin rethinking the museum as two arts activists reflected upon how Congolese people and circumstances have been presented to Belgian audiences at the RMCA since the late nineteenth century. In 2013, a portion of the exhibition was seen in Lubumbashi as a rare exchange of this sort, and although these particular achievements may not have contributed to discussions of material repatriation per se, seeking voices and artistic expression from “the other side” of the colonial dichotomy is—to some degree, anyway—a reparation of agency.

- During the night of January 10, 2018, members of an “anticolonial collective” wishing to “exorcise” (désenwouter) the “imperial city” of Brussels, removed a bust of Leopold II, King of the Belgians, from its pedestal in Brussels’ tony Duden Park. The gesture recognized that such monuments are “points of crystallization” of “contested memories” concerning colonial brutalities. Although the replacement bust was quickly removed when the “real” monument was found unharmed and restored, a photograph of the insurrectionary work, sculpted in mud and covered with birdseed, lives online (Fig. 3), as does the graffiti on the pedestal reading “Congo Free State & Congo Horrors’ Explanatory Text Necessary.”

- As a “hinge point” for “construction of an African consciousness in Belgium,” Lumumba Square was dedicated on June 30, 2018. The mayor of Brussels admitted that the location “is not grand, but we wanted a symbolic gateway” to Matonge, the city’s African quarter. Even so, as Laura Ilunga of Association
Change noted at the time, "little is said of colonization in our schools and Belgo-Congolese people feel bullied" by racial profiling and stop-and-search police tactics. The hope is that naming the square will be a step toward renegotiation of shared histories. That a conference called Lumumba and the Struggle Against Imperialism was convened by city officials seemed a good sign. Yet the mayor's prohibition of the participation of Ludo De Witte, author of the groundbreaking The Assassination of Lumumba (2001) and editor of the Royal Institute of Natural Sciences of Brussels and the Royal Museum for Central Africa. Dr. Pisani holds that she is prepared to repatriate Lusinga's skull and other human remains held by her museum should DNA testing affirm the consignee's kinship to the deceased person and the complete documentation of the cranium be realized. She added that legislative work must also be undertaken, for Belgium has never engaged in restitution of possessions of the state (Bouffioux 2018a: 75). For his part, Dr. Gryssels stressed that he and his staff "feel no sympathy for the shocking way certain collections were acquired through military actions and recourse to violence"; yet rather than repatriating objects, he is in favor of collaboration with African museums and long-term loans, "as long as conservation conditions are optimal" (Bouffioux 2018a: 75).

This was where matters stood as of the March 2018 issue of Paris Match Belgique, but Michel Bouffioux was by no means finished. He launched a blog at www.lusingatabwa.com where he published his interviews with Pisani and Gryssels as well as contributions from Congolese and other African scholar/activists residing in Belgium. A rousing piece on the site by MRAX—the Movement against Racism, Antisemitism, and Xenophobia—is titled "In Belgium, the Murderer-Collector of Human Remains Is Glorified." The authors hold that Storms was not simply following orders as a military officer during his days in the Congo, but was motivated by racist ideology and convinced of white European superiority. Lusinga's skull is a "trophy of such crimes" for which Storms has never been condemned.

Belgian politicians offer statements on lusingatabwa.com, such as Deputy Benoît Hellings, who calls for the Belgian Secretary of State for Scientific Politics to repatriate Lusinga's skull. Leaders of six Belgian political parties unanimously support such a request and modifications to standing legislation necessary to permit the action and also call for federal investigation of colonial circumstances of which the Lusinga-Storms encounter is indicative. Christophe Marchand, a lawyer specializing in legal and international rights, wonders if Storms should be brought before a tribunal, albeit a century after his death, to end the impunity of colonial crimes. Calvin Soitesse Njall holds that Storms's actions be understood as crimes against humanity, even as he notes that such terms of reference have never been applied to African holocausts of slave-trading and colonial conquest. Scholar/activist Martin Vander Elst adds that such recognition should produce malaise at the RMCA as displays and renovations are completed.

Complementing such views, Brussels-based art historian Toma Muteba Luntumble asserts that "Belgians have been the victims of a 'mystification' about their colonial history of which young people are only just beginning to become aware." Among other calls to action, Luntumble exhorts his readers to engage in a "vast operation of dep baptizing street and place names" glorifying Belgian colonizers and, as has been happening of late with regard to monuments to Confederate heroes of the American South, colonial Belgian statues should be removed from public places. A national day for remembering victims of colonial violence should be convened annually. As for repatriation of "treasures" held at the RMCA such as the figure of Lusinga's heads, discussion about how African museums are ill prepared to receive and conserve repatriated works of art is paternalistic. "Restitution of Congolese cultural objects is inevitable," but "the task of physically liquidating the Tervuren Museum must await the next generation, for its petrified institutional model is ethically and politically incompatible with the twenty-first century," Luntumble concludes.

Where will these initiatives lead from the stopped-in-time snapshot presented in this First Word? Lusinga's descendants have yet to be consulted, and it is not certain what they would do were the skull and ancestral figure returned to them. Nor have practicalities of eventual repatriation been broached. Furthermore, horrific conflict is ongoing in northeastern DRC and the Kasai; given the scale of such catastrophe, why would restitution of Lusinga's remains and possessions matter? Perhaps, as with the June 2018 dedication of Lumumba Square in Brussels, small symbolic steps are needed before vast decolonization can be contemplated, let alone implemented. Or are small symbolic steps a means to avoid actual action?
Notes

The present paper was submitted on August 1, 2018, while the events under discussion are obviously ongoing. Like all my writing, this paper is dedicated to the memory of Mary "Polly" Nooter Roberts (1959–2018).

1 As according to these two scholars most assuredly are, and especially regarding Savoy’s pertinent studies of Napoleon looting, their understanding of African material arts is not evident (Le Mondre 2018).

2 Le Mondre (2018). Scher (2018) points out that holdings of French museums are considered inalienable property following 18th century precedent; so changes in legislation must be enacted before any such repatriations will be possible. Congolese art historian Toma Luntumbue (see Clette-Gakuba 2018) has noted that European museums would do well to look for guidance in the US Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 that addresses “cultural items including human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony” (https://www.nps.gov/nagpra/). On the complexities of object repatriation, see Nevadomsky 2018.

3 As practitioners are, see the exchange between Julian Volper, a curator at Belgium’s Royal Museum for Central Africa, writing in Le Figaro (2017), and A.F. Roberts 2013. Shapeing Power was curated by Cécile Fromont and RMCA researcher Hein Vanney in Le Mondre (2017). Volper exhorts readers to “defend our museums” and asks Belgians who would empty them of their collections in compliance with African demands for repatriation. The “pernicious opportunism” of these latter players upon a “half-baked” sense “une pénible partialité) of what every European should feel about his history to avoid being accused of being racist or reactionary.” In a blistering retort, Fromont and Vanney find Volper’s position “polarizing” and instead call for “defense of museums open to change—dialogue, and cooperation.”

4 These are huge topics, with many protagonists in Africa and elsewhere striving to ameliorate such relations, such as the West African Museums Program’s valiant efforts in this regard (http://wamptonline.com/ EN/). The Gettysburg Address and the British Museum sponsor similar east African initiatives (http://www.gettys.edu/foundation/initiatives/past/africa/gegp.html). In southern Africa, the African Program in Museum and Heritage Studies at the University of the Western Cape is a leading resource base (https://www.uwc.ac.za/Faculties/ART/History/Pages/APMHS.aspx). On legal aspects of repatriation and protection of cultural heritage in postcolonial Africa, see Klemsmit; and for US government perspectives, https://ec.state.gov/ cultural-heritage-center-cultural-property-protection. 

5 Whether or not “colonial amnesia” is an appropriate understanding of complex politicohistorical relations between Belgians and Congo is debated. Calling upon the work of Bruxelles: le sociologue Ludo De Witte censuré. “ (2013). The Gettysburg Address and the British Museum sponsored similar east African initiatives (http://www.gettys.edu/foundation/initiatives/past/africa/gegp.html). In southern Africa, the African Program in Museum and Heritage Studies at the University of the Western Cape is a leading resource base (https://www.uwc.ac.za/Faculties/ART/History/Pages/APMHS.aspx). On legal aspects of repatriation and protection of cultural heritage in postcolonial Africa, see Klemsmit; and for US government perspectives, https://ec.state.gov/ cultural-heritage-center-cultural-property-protection. 

The insouciant project, to be published through Pierre Halen at the University of Lorraine in France. www.mukanda.univ-lorraine.fr managed by Professor Lobi-Kuna (2018) and to counter the “violent erasure” of hundreds of other Congolese skulls and skeletal sets remaining in Belgian public collections. While repatriation of Lusinga’s skull remains important because it is one of the few positively identified, Bouloufek asks that a far broader set of issues be considered.

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A. F. Roberts (2013: 225–29). On Herbert Ward’s sculptural depictions of “typical” sub-Saharan Africans on display for decades at the RMCA as well as at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of Natural History, see Arnoldi (2005, 2016), with pertinent bibliography.

As of this writing, Michel Bouffioux (2018b) continues his provocative reporting with reference to the “colonial plunder” of 1933 and hundreds of other Congolese skulls and skeletal sets remaining in Belgian public collections. While repatriation of Lusinga’s skull remains important because it is one of the few positively identified, Bouloufek asks that a far broader set of issues be considered.


As per collaborative arts activities by Balouf and Mudekereza, see Mudekereza (2013), and for further artistic activities based upon Congo For West, Baloji and Couttenier (2014). On similarly inspired work, see Ndakilo (2016) on film-based arts activism through the Yole/Africa Cultural Center of Goma, DRC.

As Buerden (2015), Wastiau (2017), Jewsiewicki (2018a, b), among others. On refabulation—that is, assigning new memories and myths to places as an act of post-colonial agency—see in Dakar, Senegal, see Roberts and Bouloufek (2008).

In a growing literature on civil strife in the DRC, Nzungula-Ntalaja (2002), Turner (2007), and Prunier (2011) remain valuable sources to begin inquiry; also see Canby (2018) for a poignant review of Daniel McCabe’s documentary This Is Congo. As of this writing, Michel Bouffioux (2018b) continues his provocative reporting with reference to the “colonial plunder” of 1933 and hundreds of other Congolese skulls and skeletal sets remaining in Belgian public collections. While repatriation of Lusinga’s skull remains important because it is one of the few positively identified, Bouloufek asks that a far broader set of issues be considered.


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