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Working Paper

Restitution or Cooperation? Competing Visions of Post-Colonial Cultural Development in Africa

Global Cooperation Research Papers, No. 12

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Suggested Citation: van Beurden, Sarah (2015) : Restitution or Cooperation? Competing Visions of Post-Colonial Cultural Development in Africa, Global Cooperation Research Papers, No. 12, University of Duisburg-Essen, Käte Hamburger Kolleg / Centre for Global Cooperation Research (KHK/GCR21), Duisburg, <https://doi.org/10.14282/2198-0411-GCRP-12>

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Sarah Van Beurden

**Restitution or
Cooperation?
Competing Visions of
Post-Colonial Cultural
Development in Africa**

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Printed by UDZ, Duisburg

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ISSN: 2198-1949 (Print)

ISSN: 2198-0411 (Online)

DOI: 10.14282/2198-0411-GCRP-12

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Abstract

This paper provides a critical and historical perspective on the use of the language of 'development cooperation' in characterizations of post-colonial relations between the West and Africa. Using the example of debates over cultural and economic restitution between Congo and its former colonizer Belgium, this paper narrates the historical process by which the post-colonial relations between the two countries became defined as 'development cooperation', and the implications of that process. The paper shows that since its political independence in 1960 until the late 1980s, the language in which Congo/Zaire described its 'cooperation' with its former Belgian colonizer was one that emphasised restitution, while Belgium insisted on a language of 'development cooperation' (ontwikkelingssamenwerking). The paper argues that the prevalence of the use of the development cooperation language today not only obscures the historical process behind its ascent; it also masks inequalities that are deeply characteristic of the post-colonial relations between the two countries.

Keywords

Development, cooperation, restitution, Africa, museums

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Restitution or Cooperation? Competing Visions of Post-Colonial Cultural Development in Africa*

Sarah Van Beurden

Introduction

Between 1977 and 1982, the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA, also known as Tervuren) sent a total of 1,042 museum objects of Congolese origin to the Institute for National Museums in Zaire (IMNZ).¹ Belgium cast this return as a gift to its former colony that took place in the context of an extended program of cultural cooperation between the two countries and was driven by Belgium's politics of 'development cooperation' (ontwikkelingssamenwerking). Over the years, this description of the transfer has remained the dominant register within which these events are discussed.

As I will argue in this paper, this version of the events, and the cooperation language in which it is couched, obscure a different register of terms that were used to describe the demands placed upon the post-colonial cooperation by Congo (renamed Zaire in 1971). From its political independence in 1960 until the late 1980s, the language in which the former colony described this 'cooperation' was one of restitution. The prevalence of the use of the cooperation language today obscures not only the historical process behind its ascent; it also masks inequalities that are deeply characteristic of the post-colonial relations between the two countries. Using the example of the debates over cultural restitution, this paper

* This paper was presented as part of the Brown Bag Series at the Centre for Global Cooperation Research at the University of Duisburg-Essen. I thank the audience for their insightful comments and feedback, and Volker Heins and Steven Pierce for their thoughtful suggestions. Research and writing for this paper were supported by the History Department at the University of Pennsylvania, the School of Arts and Humanities at the Ohio State University, the Institute for Historical Studies at the University of Texas in Austin and the Centre for Global Cooperation Research at the University of Duisburg-Essen. Parts of this paper previously appeared as sections of the article 'The Art of (Re)Possession: Heritage and the Cultural Politics of Congo's Decolonisation' in the *Journal of African History* 56 (1) (March 2015): 143–64. They are reprinted here with permission.

¹ The RMCA opened its doors in 1910. It was created upon the initiative of Belgian king Leopold II after a successful colonial exhibition. Originally known as the Museum of the Belgian Congo, it was renamed the Royal Museum for Central Africa after Congo's independence in 1960. It is often referred to as 'Tervuren' after the Belgian suburb where it is located.

will demonstrate the historical process by which the post-colonial relations became defined as 'cooperation', and the implications of that process.²

The 'development' concept has been understood in a wide variety of ways. Broadly speaking, it encompasses an aspiration to participation in what is seen as universal progress. James Ferguson has pointed out that like 'civilization' in the nineteenth century, it is 'the name not only for a value, but also for a dominant problematic or interpretive grid through which the impoverished regions of the world are known to us' (Ferguson 1994: xiii). In the context of Africa more specifically, it is associated with post-war modernization policies of colonial governments, appropriated by post-colonial governments which pursued the creation of national economies through policies and projects such as the reform of agricultural economies, industrialization and the expansion of infrastructure (Cooper 2002: 91).³ Although generally associated with economics, cultural policies played a role in development thinking that has been understudied (Ardouin 1997). The creation of newly independent African countries as sovereign nation-states implied the need not only for national economies but also for national cultures. In other words, the 'modernization' of cultural identity, or of the relationship between citizens and their culture, fit in with a development agenda.

Museums, which are at the heart of the cultural politics in this paper, are well-known tools for the construction of citizenship. Following Foucault's work on the relationship between power and knowledge, scholars have turned to analyzing the ways in which the reordering of things inside the museum aimed to provide a model for life outside its walls. Tony Bennett, in his work on the origin of museums, argues that they were instrumental in the civic self-fashioning of newly enfranchised citizens in the Europe of the late nineteenth century. The act of visiting the museum was in itself a ritual of modern citizenship. (Bennett 1995) The art museum, in particular, was the public location where the 'rituals of remembrance', aimed at celebrating a glorious past, were completed. (Duncan 1995)⁴ If we combine these insights about museums with the project of decolonization, we arrive at what Dipesh Chakrabarty has termed 'pedagogical' decolonization politics, in which the 'very performance of politics reenacted civilizational or cultural hierarchies' and the state perceived the urgent need to educate its population as citizens (Chakrabarty 2010: 46, 53).

This type of decolonization politics saw the West as a model for development, although it had failed to deliver this modernization during colonial rule. While an (uncritical) emphasis on modernization remained part of the politics of decolonization, opinions on how to achieve that development diverged. This paper argues that while Congolese (and later Zairian) authorities believed a restitution of

² For an account of how this history alters our understanding of the history of Congo's decolonization, see: Van Beurden 2015.

³ For more on the post-colonial 'development' project in Africa, see: Ferguson 1994 and 1999. On the relation between colonial and post-colonial definitions of development, see Cooper and Packard 1997 and Cooper 2004.

⁴ For one of the early explorations of the relationship between museums and nations, see Chapter 10: 'Census, Map, Museum', in Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (Anderson 1991).

resources (usually economic, but in this case also cultural) to the newly independent countries was a prerequisite for development, the former colonizer used a different register to describe this post-colonial relationship, one in which 'development cooperation' was central to the former colony's ability to develop and modernize.

Setting the agenda: independence and ownership disputes

Like many other colonial systems, the Belgian rule of Congo was organized around systems of extraction. Initially, Congo was the private colony of King Leopold II of Belgium, who reigned over it from 1886 until 1908 through a system of concessionary companies, directed at exploiting the colony's economic resources. International protests against abuses in this system – most famously those occurring in rubber exploitation – led the Belgian state to take over the colony in 1908. Gradually the nature of the colonial state in Congo extended beyond the economic exploitation of the Leopoldian era: an agenda of economic, social, and cultural modernization drove the expansion of a colonial administration and infrastructure, particularly after World War II. Nonetheless, the exploitation of the country's economic potential – particularly its mining resources such as copper, zinc, diamonds, gold, and later, uranium – remained a priority.

Congo's road to independence was short, and its aftermath was marked by violence and international intervention. Many Belgians were rudely awakened by the anti-colonial protests that broke out in Leopoldville in 1959. They came as a shock to a colonial regime that had prided itself on being immune to the unrest spreading through other colonies in Africa. Political independence quickly followed, on 30 June 1960. The subsequent Congo Crisis, marked by Belgian and international intervention in the newly independent country and by the murder of Patrice Lumumba, the country's first democratically elected prime minister, attracted worldwide attention.

To understand the need for 'cultural cooperation' between Belgium and Congo, we must go back to the moment of Congolese independence, and consider the terms on which it was negotiated. These terms (or rather, the lack of them) formed the basis for much of the interaction between the two countries in the decades that followed. When Congo became independent on June 30, 1960, it was unclear what that would mean for the country. A first Belgian-Congolese roundtable (January-February 1960) discussed the political structure of the newly independent state, while a second, held a mere month before independence, addressed the economic separation of the two countries. This was a delicate subject for the Belgian state, which had substantial holdings in several colonial companies. With Congolese independence, it was considered only natural by Congolese politicians that these holdings would be transferred to the Congolese state. This nationalization would make the newly independent republic a large stockholder in various Belgian companies in Congo, a plan far less appealing to Belgium. The failure to negotiate the transfer of these holdings at the economic independence roundtable resulted in demands for their restitution by the newly independent Congolese government. These disputes, referred to as the *contentieux*, dragged

out for several decades⁵ (Sabakinu 1994; Peemans 1980; Buelens 2007: 332; Zimmer 1988).

Kept off the table entirely during the roundtable by Belgium were the claims made by Congo on its cultural heritage – specifically, the collections of the Museum of the Belgian Congo near Brussels.⁶ In April 1960, only months before Congo's official independence, *Notre Kongo* (Our Congo), the periodical of the Association of the BaKongo (a leading political party in Congo), questioned Belgian ownership of the collections of the Royal Museum for Belgian Congo. If Congo was becoming an independent nation, did it not have the natural right to possess its own national heritage? Were the objects in the museum's collections not a resource of the country, just like its mineral wealth? In short, restitution of economic and cultural resources to the national patrimony was needed in order for Congo to achieve the same level of sovereignty as western countries had.

The general attitude of the Belgians at these roundtable conferences was a good indicator of how they envisioned the future relationship between the two countries. The Congolese delegates, somewhat naively, approached the roundtable discussions about the colony's economy with the expectation of being presented with a list of assets and companies that would now be transferred to the independent state. In reality, the conference amounted to little more than the creation of an inventory of the colony's economic assets and the professed desire of the Belgian government to cooperate with Congo on the resolution of the disputed assets. (Sabakinu 1994: 38) Preparatory meetings reveal the Belgian desire to remain in a position of power, since 'economic and financial aid should be asked by [Congo], rather than offered by Belgium' (Willame 1994: 42–3).

Despite the Belgian government's attempts to keep the Congolese demands for cultural restitution out of the independence negotiations, they became part of the *contentieux*, an interesting indication of both Belgium and Congo's awareness of Congolese traditional art as a resource with economic and cultural value. Media coverage of the Congolese claims on the museum's collections circulated in both Belgium and Congo and caused a stir at the museum in Tervuren.⁷ Internal documents reveal that the government was well aware of the 'legal base of these demands' and strategized in advance of the roundtables to keep the matter out of the discussions. The Belgians realized, however, that the issue would come up eventually and that it would be crucial that they control the negotiations in order to avoid not only the depletion of what was now considered to be Belgian patrimony (i.e. the Tervuren museum) but also to make sure the debate would not evolve into a trial on the legitimacy of Belgian colonialism.

⁵ The Belgian state likely dragged its feet deliberately so the former colonial enterprises could restructure and rearrange their finances by, for example, moving their main seats to Belgium, effectively removing the capital from the soon to be Congolese enterprises (Foutry and Neckers 1986).

⁶ Initially, these demands were for all of the collections, including those of the natural sciences. As the debates progressed, the Congolese focused in on the art objects. These claims were made both in the media and through political channels.

⁷ The first appeared in *Notre Kongo*, in late March, repeated on April 3, 1960, and December 10, 1960. *Le Drapeau Rouge*, the newspaper of the Belgian Communist Party, picked it up in its March 26, 1960 edition, as did the journal *Pourquoi Pas?* on April 1, 1960.

Lucien Cahen, director of the Tervuren museum, constructed a defense of his institution's possessions by pointing out the universal scientific value of the collections as they existed; by arguing for the legality of the museum's past acquisitions; by questioning Congo's focus on the museum's collections instead of private collections of Congolese art abroad; and by casting doubt on the newly independent country's ability to ensure the safety of valuable collections of art.⁸ In creating an image of an immature state unable to protect the heritage still in place – so unable to properly value heritage – Cahen affirmed Tervuren's role as a custodian of Congolese art.

Despite his defense of Tervuren, Cahen used a dual strategy and suggested, as an alternative to restitution, a program of cultural collaboration:

a Belgian-Congolese cultural accord in the context of technical assistance [in which] the Royal Museum for Central Africa would assist with the creation of a large national museum in Leopoldville.... [But] the Royal Museum for Central Africa cannot be accountable for filling a national museum [in Congo] ... [although] ... in the context of exchange and in an atmosphere of understanding and mutual respect, the Royal Museum for Central Africa could exchange, and even gift, objects.⁹

For the purposes of this paper, the language in the quote is again important. While the Congolese were demanding restitution, Cahen reciprocated in a language that emphasized assistance, exchange, and mutual respect...in other words, a spirit of cooperation. The problem with this, of course, is that this language hints at an equal relationship, while in reality Belgium was holding most of the chips. Independence had not created the level playing field in which a relationship of mutual cooperation would be beneficial. Instead, Belgium held fast to the belief they were still the appropriate guardian of the collections at Tervuren.

The chaos that followed Congo's political independence, marked by a series of violent conflicts, delayed official negotiations about the *contentieux*, although a partial resolution emerged in 1965 whereby stock of former colonial companies was transferred to the new nation and an arrangement was reached about the colony's debt (Vantemsche 2008: 213; Foutry and Neckers 1986: 130). Congolese demands for cultural restitution remained unresolved, however, only to reemerge later.

⁸ Cahen (1912–1982) started in 1947 in the museum's Department of Geology and was named director in 1958. Before coming to the museum world, he worked in Congo as a geologist and served in the colony's army during World War II.

⁹ RMCA, Dept. of Culture and Society, IMNZ files, Lucien Cahen, 'Contentieux Mémorandum', n.d. [early 1960s], folder IMNZ-MRAC Apport. Underlining in original.

Development cooperation? The founding of the Institute of National Museums in Zaire

Popular myth in Congo has it that the creation of the museum institute came at the initiative of its president, Joseph-Désiré Mobutu, at the encouragement of Senegalese president and Pan-African icon Leopold Senghor. In reality, its creation was the product of post-colonial negotiations between Congo and Belgium about the *contentieux*.¹⁰ As this next section will demonstrate, Congo's demand for restitution led to an agreement between Belgium and Congo about the creation of a Museum Institute for the former colony. This initiative had several consequences. First, it dampened the more confrontational restitution language for a period. A crucial requirement for Belgium's 'cultural development cooperation' was Congo's disavowal of its claims on the ethnographic and art collections of the RMCA. In other words, the Belgian museum would engage with Congo only if the latter acknowledged Belgium's position as a legitimate guardian of the former colony's cultural heritage. Second, soon after the creation of the museum institute, it became clear that Zaire's interpretation of the project as a step in the direction of cultural restitution ran counter to Belgium's view of it as a cultural cooperation project that fit into their Third World development and aid strategies.

Mobutu rose to power with army support in 1965. As both the military and political leader, he centralized and consolidated power in the country. Belgium's initial enthusiasm for his reign was tempered once it became clear he planned on resurrecting the debate about the *contentieux*. Relations between the two countries fluctuated significantly, which the Belgians consistently blamed on Mobutu's 'unreliability'. While there is truth to the claim that Mobutu could be irascible, Belgium's discomfort also had to do with his effort to create a national economic and cultural space for Congo by pursuing the ownership of both economic and cultural resources in a renewed commitment to an extended process of decolonization, which went against the Belgian government's desire to see its relationship with the former colony cast as cooperation in the context of development aid.

Mobutu's tactics were confrontational. After unsatisfactory negotiations with Belgium in 1966 about the ownership of the Union Minière du Haut-Katanga, the most valuable economic resources in the country, Mobutu decided to nationalize the company. Founded during the era of Leopold II, it was the country's largest mining company, mining copper, cobalt, tin, zinc, and – most important – uranium.¹¹ Since the Union Minière was largely owned by a Belgian holding company, this takeover brought relations between the two countries to a screeching halt.

While pursuing economic restitution, the Zairian president also brought up the issue of cultural restitution again. The attention of the presidential office had been

¹⁰ Born Joseph-Désiré Mobutu, he later renamed himself Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu wa Za Banga. He first appeared on the political stage as a journalist and as Lumumba's personal aide. Appointed chief of staff, he led a successful coup during the Congo Crisis (and was involved in Lumumba's murder) but returned power to a civilian government. He led another coup in 1965, remaining in power until 1997.

¹¹ The Union Minière supplied the Manhattan Project with uranium during World War II.

drawn by the exhibition *Art of the Congo*, co-organized by the RMCA and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. Comprising pieces from Tervuren's collections, the exhibit toured prestigious American museums from 1967 to '69. It was seen as an illustration of Congo's lack of control over its heritage and its inability to represent itself.¹² Restitution now also became a symbol for cultural sovereignty.

Belgium, and particularly RMCA's director Cahen, responded by firmly re-locating the Congolese demands in the context of cooperation and development aid. Cahen wanted the term 'restitution' avoided at all cost because its use would imply an acknowledgment of the legitimacy of Congo's interpretation of colonialism as exploitation. If this condition could be met, he suggested he would be able to convince the Belgian government to donate to Congo the two hundred pieces that were part of the *Art of the Congo* exhibition.¹³

There were other requirements for the return of the objects. Congo had to have a museum in which to house them, and the Congolese government needed to develop and implement legislation against the exportation of traditional art from Congo. By making these demands, Cahen pointed out the deficiencies of Congo's cultural infrastructure while ascribing them to the post-colonial government instead of to the colonial past. This again undermined the idea of Congo as a legitimate, or 'adult', state, implying instead that it was in need of guidance and development. These demands also created the conditions for the Tervuren museum to step in and direct 'cooperation' with Congo.

Cahen returned to his earlier suggestion about cultural cooperation between the two countries in the context of a museum institute in Congo. Although framed as development aid, this kind of cooperation would benefit both parties. It would allow the Tervuren museum to play a role in the shaping of the cultural contours of the post-colonial nation of Congo. Furthermore, it would allow Tervuren's staff to do field research again. Since the advent of Congolese independence, the museum's scientific staff had not had ready access to the country, which in the long run could negatively affect Tervuren's reputation as a centre for the study of Congo.

In his communications with Mobutu, Cahen was careful to frame the museum project in terms of its benefits for the Republic of Congo by emphasizing that the museum would be unique in Africa and comparable to what Leopold II had created in Tervuren.¹⁴ But in his communications with the Belgian government, Cahen held back. He emphasized the need for care in choosing the terms to describe the possible transfer of objects as a 'long-term (or permanent) deposit, thus without an official transfer of the property title'.¹⁵

¹² The staff at Tervuren had been apprehensive about the idea of this international exhibition, worrying that it would again draw attention to the debate about the *contentieux* (Interview Van Geluwe 2010).

¹³ RMCA, Dept. of History and Politics, IMNZ files, Letter from Cahen to Powis, 12 December 1969, folder J. Powis de TenBossche, box 15-2-77.

¹⁴ RMCA, Dept. of History and Politics, IMNZ files, Letter from Lucian Cahen to President Mobutu, 10 October 1970, folder J. Powis de Ten Bossche, box 15-2-77.

¹⁵ RMCA, Dept. of History and Politics, IMNZ files, Letter from Cahen to Minister of National Education, 21 May 1970, folder J. Powis de TenBossche, box 15-2-77.

The Zaire of the early 1970's had revenues from the copper boom, which gave it the financial ability to spend on nation-building projects. A museum, unequalled on the continent of Africa and showcasing the famous (and valuable) 'traditional' art of the region, was exactly the kind of project the Mobutu regime was interested in.

The foundation for the museum agreement was laid in a 1968 agreement that structured Belgian-Congolese relations. The agreement of August 1968 integrated all existing and future 'technical and scientific' forms of collaboration and cooperation between the Belgian and Congolese state into a framework of development aid. Initially this covered a range of educational initiatives, but over the years it came to include financial support for the restructuring of the economic and agricultural sectors (Michel 2011: 167–8).

The agreement for the creation of the Institute of National Museums was signed on April 30, 1971.¹⁶ Officially, the Belgian contribution was limited to a five-year period of 'technical help' supplied by the experts of Tervuren, the planning of mutual field missions (during which the new museum institute would benefit from Tervuren's logistical aid), and internships for the institute's staff at Tervuren.¹⁷ In practice, however, the collaboration was very close, especially because Lucien Cahen, director of the Belgian museum, was also named general director of the museum institute in Kinshasa.¹⁸

The money provided by the Belgian state came via the Belgian Cooperation and Development Agency (*Agence de la Coopération et Développement*). They agreed to pay the wages of three Belgian 'technical advisers' who were stationed at the museums in Kinshasa and Lubumbashi. They, along with Cahen and a (Belgian) adjunct director hired by the Zairian government, were expected to prepare a group of young Zairian employees to take over their duties, create a research agenda, gather a collection (via collecting missions as well as buying from art dealers), and create an exhibition agenda.

The parties involved in the creation of the IMNZ had different motivations, and ultimately interpreted the agreement to create the IMNZ differently. The RMCA gained opportunities for field research. In addition, Cahen succeeded in (temporarily) avoiding the issue of real restitution. And whereas the negotiations began with the idea that a 'gift' of objects would be forthcoming, this clause did not make it to the final agreement, leaving the option of a gift up to the goodwill of Belgium – a valuable tool for Belgium in later negotiations. The agreement made Belgium look like a benevolent former colonial power, graciously willing to cooperate in the development of a struggling third world nation. The Mobutu regime, on the other hand, obtained from the Belgians the know-how and educational resources for the creation of a national museum, a project that, it was

¹⁶ Within months, the Institut des Musées Nationaux du Congo—IMNC was renamed the Institut des Musées Nationaux du Zaïre—IMNZ. In addition to creating the Institute in Kinshasa (which has storerooms and offices but no exhibition space), it incorporated a series of smaller regional museums and the museum in the country's second largest city, Lubumbashi.

¹⁷ IMNZ, *Rapport 1970-1971* (Kinshasa, 1972). The preliminary agreement, however had been in place since 1969.

¹⁸ Cahen would spend about three months per year at the IMNC, with an adjunct director residing permanently in Kinshasa.

hoped, would become a valuable tool for the promotion of nationhood. The presidential office in Zaire saw the agreement and the collaboration as a form of restitution. In their eyes, Belgium was repaying a debt it owed its former colony by helping it establish the infrastructure that would allow it to possess, display and study the country's heritage.

Nationalizing culture versus cultural cooperation

Quite soon, however, it became apparent to the Zairian government that their view of the IMNZ and its activities as a form of restitution was not reflected in its operations.

Accusations of neocolonialism were launched at the Belgian staff and at the museum of Tervuren. Although in the minority, the Belgian staff (along with visiting staff from Tervuren) had a monopoly on the collecting and research missions, and it appeared that many of the IMNZ's goals were secondary to Tervuren's research agenda.

We need to see the emergence of this critique in the broader context of Mobutist cultural politics and particularly the new ideology of *authenticité*. The cultural and political agenda of this new phase in cultural politics explicitly couched the issue of restitution in a broader struggle for cultural identity and revived the sharper language and more confrontational attitude that had characterized the immediate post-independence demands.

In 1971, the Mobutu regime made the politics of *authenticité* the state's official ideology. Reorienting the country's cultural identity to 'authentic' indigenous African values, it intended to end the cultural alienation caused by the colonial experience. The goal of this new ideology was a veritable 'cultural revolution', in which a new national, authentic Zairian nation would be born out of the values and traditions of precolonial Zairian cultures. The most well-known practices associated with *authenticité* were the new rules aimed at promoting traditional cultures. For example, western dress was discouraged in favour of the *abacost* (a name derived from the French *à bas le costume*, 'down with the suit') for men and the *pagne* (wrapper) for women, and Christian names were abandoned in favour of Bantu names. Joseph-Désiré Mobutu himself became Mobutu Sese Seko Nkuku Ngbendu wa Za Banga. The concept of restitution now extended to the symbolic reclaiming of an entire heritage.¹⁹

The process of cultural decolonization that *authenticité* was designed to advance was similar to political and economic processes of decolonization aimed at the nationalization of the country's economic resources. The nationalization of the Union Minière had been followed by a 'Zairization' of foreign-owned businesses in

¹⁹ There is no good overview of the history of *authenticité*. Bob White has discussed the ideology in the context of state-sponsored musical and dance performances (Bob White 2008 and 2006). Short overviews are provided by Isidore Ndaywel è Nziem (1998: 706-26 and 2009: 534-43). See also W. N. Z. Mukulumanya (1982: 65-96) and Kevin C. Dunn (2003: 108-20). The literature generally fails to mention attempts to use Zaire's traditional arts in this discourse, despite Ken Adelman's recognition in 1975 of their role (Adelman 1975).

1973, driven by a desire to keep their profits in Zairian hands. Although the effects were disastrous and attempts were made to reverse some of these policies, they showed remarkable similarities to the process of cultural decolonization attempted with *authenticité*: the goal was the restitution of the country's resources, whether cultural or economic, to the nation, thereby reversing the effects of colonialism.²⁰

There are two ways in which the *authenticité* campaign is of particular interest for the subject at hand: first, it revived both the demands for cultural restitution and the broader rhetoric about restitution, and second, it led to a campaign of 'Zairization' of the IMNZ, which in turn clashed with the Belgian views on the museum institute as 'development cooperation.'

Mobutu strategically relaunched the debate about cultural restitution during an international meeting of art critics in Kinshasa. Addressing the opening session of the conference, Mobutu broached the subject of restitution in language directed at a larger, international battle in which Zaire was now taking the lead:

Our artistic patrimony has been subjected to systematic pillage. And we, who address you and attempt to reconstruct this rich patrimony, we are often reduced to powerlessness. As a consequence, the art objects, often unique, are located outside Africa. [This conference should] draw the world's attention [to this subject] so that the rich countries, who possess the artworks of the poor countries, can return part of them.²¹

More confrontational than before, Mobutu evoked an image of colonialism as 'systematic pillage.' With the international press present, he was not speaking merely to the art critics but addressing a wider audience consisting of former colonies and colonizers, thereby casting himself as an international leader of formerly colonized nations.

Both the campaign for cultural authenticity and its extension in the politics of Zairization underscored a process of increased centralization of political power in the hands of the Mobutu regime. The IMNZ, with its mixed Belgian-Zairian character, became subject to its own process of Zairization. There were some significant differences between the Zairization of the economy and that of the museum, however. For one, the IMNZ and its collections were already the property of the Zairian state. It was the leadership, the creation of knowledge, and the image of the museum as a Zairian institute, and not a Belgian-Zairian cooperative project, that were at stake.

The process of Zairization affected the IMNZ at both the institutional and the research level. The dominant role of the Belgians at the institute had become a source of irritation to the presidential office, and it wanted to see some of the young Zairian employees promoted. In addition, Belgians, and the museum of Tervuren, still dominated the production of knowledge about Zairian art and

²⁰ Zairization was followed by phases of 'Radicalization' and 'Retraction' in which some companies were returned to previous owners under certain conditions.

²¹ Address by Mobutu to opening session of 1973 AICA conference in Kinshasa, National Archives, Kinshasa, *Compte Rendu in Extenso n. 3- AICA Files MPR*.

cultures. The presidential office wanted the IMNZ to become the centre for such research, and was keen for Zairian students and scientists to take the lead there, too. The fear was that the IMNZ was being run as a branch of Tervuren instead of as a national Zairian institute. This fear was not entirely unfounded. For many at the Belgian museum, the IMNZ had been the gateway back to their site of field research.²² Cahen argued that these researchers were needed to train the students at the IMNZ.²³ But even by 1974 hardly any of the planned missions were led by Zairian assistants, leading the presidential office to complain that 'the expatriate researchers do not have to smother the Zairian assistants at every step. They have to be able to let them be ... they have to become the guides. This does not mean eliminating them, but reserving the role of technical assistance for them'.²⁴ Cahen replied that not including the expatriates in field missions would also be discrimination. 'I understand well that the mixed missions can appear to have an offensive character to some sensitive types, and that the program that has been presented is full of these [mixed missions]', Cahen wrote, 'but only considerations of efficiency and acquired experience have motivated the authors of the program'.²⁵ As a result of these conflicts, a new policy was created in 1974 that stipulated that every mission include at least one Zairian staff member and prohibited 'others' (wives, etc.) from participating.²⁶

A last issue in the debate about the Zairization of the IMNZ was the public face of the institute, particularly abroad. Around the time that the tensions over leadership and missions surfaced, the presidential office decided to send an exhibition to Paris. Tempers flared when the time came to select staff members to accompany the exhibition. Cahen recommended one of the Belgians staff members, a recommendation which was accepted only on the condition that two or three of the Zairian assistants be included and that the Belgian, 'out of respect for the authenticity, not make himself seen'²⁷.

The results of the attempted Zairization at the IMNZ were uneven. While Zairian assistants did get more opportunities to go out into the field to research and collect, it took until 1989 for one of them to rise to the position of director. The Belgians remained at the IMNZ until the early 1990s when they were forced out of the country during Mobutu's expulsion of all Belgians supplying 'development cooperation' (Michel 2011: 168). The *authenticité* campaign, as well as the Zairization efforts, resulted in a resurgence of a more confrontational language and attitude by the Zairian state when it came to its relationship with Belgium. Its

²² This included ethnographic, archeological, biological and geological research, among other fields of study.

²³ RMCA, Dept. of History and Politics, IMNZ files, Letter Cahen to Kama, November 8, 1974, Folder courrier reçu de l'IMNZ, box 28-II-77.

²⁴ RMCA, Dept. of History and Politics, IMNZ files, Letter Kama to Cahen, March 12, 1974, folder Mobutu, Bisengimana, Kama, box 15-2-77.

²⁵ RMCA, Dept. of History and Politics, IMNZ files, Letter Cahen to Kama, November 8, 1974, folder Mobutu, Bisengimana, Kama, box 15-2-77.

²⁶ RMCA, Dept. of History and Politics, IMNZ files, Letter from Cahen to Cornet, 14 June 1974, folder Planification des Missions, box 28-II-1977.

²⁷ RMCA, IMNZ files, Letter Kama to Cahen, November 29, 1974, folder Mobutu, Bisengimana, Kama, box 15-2-77.

attempts to highlight the continuing inequalities in terms of cultural representation, despite the collaboration that was taking place in the IMNZ, met with modest success. This emboldened the regime to fully exploit the international forum offered by the growing presence of global cooperation organizations.

Development cooperation and the international debate about cultural restitution

So far, I have considered mostly the bilateral relations between Zaire/Congo and Belgium and the struggle over the nature and definition of these post-colonial relations. These bilateral connections, however, were located in a broader, international context. Mobutu used this international sphere to his advantage, particularly the forum provided by the UN and its subsidiary UNESCO to contest the way in which post-colonial power relations were being shaped. By the 1970s, the worldwide protection of heritage ranked high on the agendas of these organizations. This was not undivided good news for 'developing' countries, however, as this history will demonstrate. In the long run, it facilitated the process whereby the discourse and practices of western governments became hegemonic, further enshrining their use of the development and cooperation vocabulary.

In the aftermath of World War II, heritage protection became an increasingly important part of political agendas, both nationally and internationally. The Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (commonly referred to as The Hague 1954) started the movement to legislate on the protection of cultural heritage as property. The 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, created in order to help nation-states protect the cultural heritage within their borders against illegal removal, emphasized that nations had a right to the possession of their cultural heritage. However welcome this new regulation was to newly independent countries, it contained an important caveat: the regulations were non-retroactive (Greenfield 1989: 259 and Vrdoljak 2008: 207). While recognizing the nation-state as the custodian of cultural heritage, the 1970 UNESCO convention did not directly allow for a discussion about restitution for colonial rule. Although these regulations and cooperative structure paid lip service to a new world order that included many former colonies as independent nation-states, it de facto maintained the inequalities of the older colonial world order by denying those countries the ability to address what was essentially a process of decolonization.

Despite these shortcomings, however, the international framework at least created an audience and a forum for discussion, which Mobutu used to challenge the limitations of the regulatory framework. The non-retroactive clause in particular was his target. In October 1973, he addressed the UN in New York. Zaire requested that cultural restitution be placed on the agenda for the 28th meeting of the UN General Assembly, arguing that 'these works represent the hand and heart of the forefathers ... it is natural and just to retribute to these underdeveloped countries their beacons of light, their authentic images of a

continued future'.²⁸ Zaire proposed a resolution that stipulated that 'the cultural heritage of a people conditions in the present and in the future the growth of their artistic values and general development' and used this language of nationalism and development to draw attention to the non-retroactive nature of UNESCO 1970 as a moral and political failure, underlining that this great transfer of art from poor to rich countries had often been a consequence of colonial occupation.²⁹ The proposed resolution was immediately backed by nine other African countries.

During the debate over the proposed resolution, European countries attempted to contest the language that indicated colonialism was solely responsible for scattering poor countries' cultural heritage while still advancing the idea that the cultural sector in so-called Third World countries was in need of development. The latter, they insisted, would counteract more important causes of traffic in cultural heritage, such as 'unscrupulous traffickers and the ignorance, complacency and even at times the collusion of native settlers who out of greed, avarice or naiveté contributed to the clandestine expropriation of artistic and cultural treasures that are truly irreplaceable'.³⁰

Despite the fact that Mobutu was able to flex his proverbial political muscle at the UN, the resolution passed was watered down and difficult to enforce internationally.³¹ This international maneuvering by Zaire had a clear impact on Zairian-Belgian relations, however, and was a clear challenge to Belgium's ability to characterize post-colonial relations in the cultural arena as 'development cooperation'. It reinserted the issue of restitution into the debate, and compelled the Belgians to re-engage with it.

Belgium now proceeded to put considerable pressure on the redefinition of any potential transfer of objects as a gift in the context of the country's development aid. Mere weeks after Mobutu's speech to the UN, Belgian minister of foreign affairs Renaat Van Elslande held a press conference in Kinshasa where he stressed the cooperative spirit of the existing agreement between the museums in Kinshasa and Tervuren as well as Belgium's financial development aid to the IMNZ. He also mentioned that 'it was envisioned that Belgium would transfer a certain number of pieces, meant to complete the collections created [in Kinshasa]' (Burnet 1973). Such a statement was a clear sign to the Mobutu regime, but also a public claim to the description of any future return of objects as a gift.

At Tervuren museum, this news was met with anxiety. By engaging with Zaire's renewed efforts on the topic, Van Elslande was allowing the Zairian government to shift attention away from the existing agreement. Now, any return of objects from Tervuren to Zaire would look like the result of pressure exerted by Zaire through

²⁸ RMCA, Dept. Of Culture and Society, IMNZ files, Ipoto, Mémoire explicatif, Distr. Générale, A/9199 (Nations Unies, 5 November 1973), 2–3, folder UN resolutie (UN resolution).

²⁹ RMCA, Dept. Of Culture and Society, IMNZ files, Projet de Résolution, Distr. Générale, A/9199 (Nations Unies, 5 November 1973), folder UN resolutie (UN resolution).

³⁰ RMCA, Dept. Of Culture and Society, IMNZ files, Panama Representative to the General Assembly, Provisional Verbatim Record of the 2206th Meeting of the 26th Assembly, 18 December 1973, folder UN resolutie (UN resolution).

³¹ The final draft was adopted by a vote of 113 to 0, with 17 abstentions. Unsurprisingly, most European countries abstained, as did the United States.

the UN and the media. Cahen also worried that if the agreement had to be renegotiated, Tervuren might be forced to give up more material.³²

Increasingly, the ability to define 'the true character of the Belgian gesture' became more important than the actual content of a transfer.³³ For Belgium, and particularly Tervuren, the ability to define the repatriation of objects as a 'gift' was a central motivation for offering objects from their collections. Calling it a restitution implied a different interpretation of the process whereby the objects were obtained, and therefore of the nature of the Belgian colonial regime, as well as the nature of the post-colonial relations between the two countries. Zaire's attempt to change the parameters of the debate about the possession of cultural heritage by way of the international community was an attempt to reengage with a process of decolonization, instead of complying with a view that characterized post-colonial relations as 'development cooperation' and promoted an image of Belgium as a benevolent provider of aid instead of a culprit responsible for the underdevelopment of a cultural infrastructure in its former colony.

Gift or restitution? The value of definitions

By the mid 1970s, the demand for cultural restitution had gathered a considerable history, one that was inextricably tied to the struggle between the former colony and colonizer to reach equilibrium in their post-colonial relations. Congo's (and later Zaire's) insistence on development via restitution versus Belgium's insistence on development via cooperation betrayed fundamentally different views on these relations.

By 1976, despite the extensive back-and-forth on the subject between Belgium and Zaire, no return of objects had taken place. As we've seen, the causes included strained relations between Belgium and Zaire, and Tervuren's hesitations (invoking the lack of a proper museum building in Kinshasa and the failure of the government to gain control over the illegal art trade), but underlying these was Belgium's reluctance to appear to concede to Zaire's characterization of their post-colonial relationship and of the injustices of the past. Belgium's public positioning on the matter, as well as its private communications with Zairian officials, made clear that an actual return of objects would have to be separated entirely from the rhetoric on restitution.

Between 1976 and 1982, however, four shipments of objects from the Tervuren museum to the museum institute in Kinshasa took place, containing a total of 1042 objects. What caused this change of heart on Belgium's part? And what can we learn from the timing and description, as well as the content of these shipments? The answers to these questions need to be seen within the broader context of Zairian-Belgian relations, which had fluctuated spectacularly over the years, a trend

³² RMCA, Dept. of Culture and Society IMNZ files, Cahen, 'Geschiedenis', folder IMNZ-MRAC Apport.

³³ RMCA, Dept. of Culture and Society, IMNZ files, Letter from Cahen to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 28 October 1974, folder lijsten, correspondence, et al. Apport (2).

that only intensified from the late 1970s onwards (Willame 1985: 1–69, Vantemsche 2007: 213–17).

As we saw at the beginning of this paper, the debate about the restitution of the *contentieux* dominated much of the 1960s and early 1970s. The Mobutu regime completed a number of nationalizations of the economic sector, ostensibly to combat the continuing domination of foreign (and particularly Belgian) interests. This started in 1966 with the nationalization of the Union Minière mining company, but continued with the Zairization of a much wider swathe of foreign-owned businesses in 1973 and '74. This Zairization movement also had an impact on the IMNZ, where a Zairization of the operations met with limited success. The nationalization movement caused not only significant political tensions between Belgium and Zaire; it also turned out to be a move disastrous to the Zairian economy. In an attempt to reverse some of the damage done, negotiations about compensation for foreign business owners and a 'return' of some of the assets followed.

While Zaire and Belgium were negotiating about compensation for Belgian business owners affected by the Zairization of the economy, the 'cooperation' agreement between the IMNZ and Tervuren that created the IMNZ was also set to expire. Given the lack of resources provided by the regime to the IMNZ, a continuation of cooperation with Tervuren was necessary for its survival (Van Beurden 2009: 244–306). Tervuren also had a stake in renewing the agreement. Although the Belgian museum was attempting to broaden its collections and research beyond the scope of the former colony, it was still heavily oriented toward Zaire. What stood between them, however, was still the matter of restitution.

In March 1976, Belgian foreign minister Renaat Van Elslande visited Kinshasa; the occasion was the signing of an agreement between the two countries that provided partial compensation for Belgian business owners who had suffered as a consequence of Zairization. As a symbolic token of Belgian goodwill towards Zaire, Van Elslande brought a *ndop*, a Kuba royal sculpture that had been in the possession of the Tervuren museum.³⁴ The statue, a relatively prestigious piece, had been part of the *Art of the Congo* exhibition that toured the United States in the mid-1960s; the very exhibition that reignited the demands for restitution by the Mobutu regime.

In response, Zaire made an important gesture that marked a significant departure from its previous position. During a UNESCO colloquium in Venice, Eugénie Nzembele Safiri, a young employee of the IMNZ, publicly sided with the Belgian interpretation of a transfer of objects: 'There has been [...] a "gentleman's agreement" on the subject of a gift of pieces of ethnographic art that will be complementary to the collections gathered by Zaire itself.'³⁵ This statement

³⁴ Only a limited number of *ndop* exist, but Tervuren possessed another (better) example of these statues so the Belgian sacrifice was limited. For more on the *ndop*, see: Vansina 1972 and Cornet 1982: 50-125.

³⁵ RMCA, Dept. of Culture and Society, IMNZ files, Position zairoise au colloque d'UNESCO à Venise, April 1976, folder 2, folder lijsten, correspondence, et al. Apport (2), box 'Restitutie RDC 70-80'.

endorsed the interpretation of the transfer as a 'gift' and 'support' for the IMNZ in the context of mutual cooperation, and backed away from the restitution language.

A total of four shipments from the RMCA to the IMNZ followed, spread across a time period of five years. The number of objects shipped to Zaire totalled 1042, but a close look at these objects reveals the limitations of the gesture. Only 114 were really Tervuren's property. Thirty-two of the objects had been the property of the colonial Museum of Indigenous Life (MVI) in Leopoldville, which had become the victim of the chaotic 1960s. Jean Vanden Bossche, director of that museum, had temporarily deposited them at Tervuren until the situation in Congo stabilized.³⁶ Since the MVI seems to have become the property of Congo, there is a legal argument to be made that these objects already belonged to Zaire.³⁷ Another 869 of the objects returned had been part of the collection of the Institute for Scientific Research in Central Africa (Institut de Recherche Scientifique en Afrique Centrale-IRSAC) and were sent to Tervuren around the time of independence.³⁸ Cahen was aware that these shipments 'pose[d] a diplomatic problem' rather than solving one, given Tervuren's reluctance to donate any objects from their own storerooms, but this was not enough of an incentive to do things differently.³⁹ It was not until 1981 that Tervuren sent 54 objects from its own storerooms.⁴⁰

For the employees of the IMNZ, the shipments were a great disappointment. The former collections of IRSAC had little value for a museum institute whose primary purpose was to create a collection on a par with prestigious Western museums, and the material from the former MVI was of varied quality (Interview Tshiluilu 2011 and Van Geluwe 2010). Far from being the restitution of Tervuren's collections demanded by Congo in the aftermath of independence, the true meaning of the transfers lay in their symbolic value. Mobutu's regime could still use the transfers as propaganda, affirming to the outside world Zaire's ability to stand up to the former colonial power and assert control over its own cultural heritage. Belgium, on the other hand, succeeded in removing the restitution language from the relations between the two countries.

The rhythm of the shipments matched the continued up and downs of the bilateral relation between the countries. The years between 1976 and 1981 were characterized by the Belgians' growing fatigue with the Mobutu regime's unreliability and manipulations. This caused a growing desire among many Belgian

³⁶ RMCA, Dept. of Culture and Society, IMNZ files, List of objects belonging to the Musée de la Vie Indigène, signed by Albert Maesen and Jean Vanden Bossche, 11 August 1960, folder *lijsten*, correspondence, et al. *Apport* (2), folder 2, box 'Restitutie RDC, 1970-'; and Letter Maesen to Alma Robinson, April 18, 1978, folder 'Contentieux+ Historique'.

³⁷ The legal status of the museum at the time of its closure in 1965 is unclear. Originally, it belonged to the colonial organization *Amis de l'Art Indigène*, which intended to pass it on to the colonial state. Although I have not been able to establish this with absolute certainty, it appears the museum passed into the hands of the Congolese state upon the departure of its director Jean Vanden Bossche in 1961.

³⁸ The IRSAC was a colonial Belgian research institute with branches in Zaire and Rwanda. Its research activities consisted mostly of linguistic and social anthropology.

³⁹ RMCA, Dept. of Culture and Society, IMNZ files, Letter from Cahen to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 14 February 1977, folder '1e Expedition', box 'Restitutie RDC 70-80'.

⁴⁰ For a complete annotated list of these 114 objects, see Wastiau 2000: 15-54.

politicians to create some distance between the countries and debunk rumours about Belgium's 'special interest' in Zaire. The Belgian government wanted to redefine its relationship with Zaire by emphasizing the developmental aid context in which they located their actions and wanted to recast Zaire as one among many African countries it was providing with development cooperation. Despite this attempt at 'diversification', however, it was difficult to deny the prominent place Zaire continued to occupy in Belgium's 'Africa politics'⁴¹ (Diaïte 1990).

Although the shipments stopped in 1981, the collaboration between the RMCA and the IMNZ lasted until 1990, when Belgium cut off all development programs in response to the Mobutu regime's violent suppression of student protests at the university in Lubumbashi. Mobutu reacted by expelling all 'technical advisers,' including the Belgians working at the IMNZ (Michel 2011: 167–8). Today, Tervuren claims that no transfer of titles of the objects ever took place, which means they can still legally claim ownership. As a consequence of unrest in Congo, objects from the IMNZ collection emerged on the international art market during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Among them were a number of the pieces from the transfers, so Tervuren has some legitimate concerns about the safety of the collections in Kinshasa. The Belgian museum attempted to recover some of the stolen pieces, but the efforts met with limited success (Interview Seeuws 2005).

Conclusion

The debates described in this paper are not simply about the return of objects from Tervuren to Zaire. More so, they are about the right to define the meaning of the transfers and the nature of the collaboration between the IMNZ and the RMCA, and between Belgium and Zaire more generally. Belgium triumphed in this debate, but only after some resistance. The initial demands from Congo were formulated in terms of restitution, but Tervuren and the Belgian government consistently and relentlessly directed the discussion away from the concept and language of restitution, towards a language of cooperation and aid.

The term restitution was inextricably bound up with a view of Belgian colonialism as a system of exploitation. Defining a transfer as 'gift' or 'support', on the other hand, affirmed Belgium's self-image as a benevolent (former) colonizer. Not only did Tervuren hold on to almost its entire collection; its involvement with the IMNZ lent it an air of moral superiority and generosity. Ultimately, Belgium's ability to define the transfer, its content, and its timing, made it more an act of domination than an exchange between equals. The use of language such as 'development cooperation', then, also reinforced an appearance of neutrality in a relationship that was plagued by historical inequalities. It would be erroneous to read this history as a mere demonstration of Belgian post-colonial dominance, however (Bayart 1993: 26). Despite Belgium's objections, the discourse on restitution was

⁴¹ The percentage of Belgium's foreign aid budget directed towards Zaire was 59% in 1977 and 48% in 1981 (versus 77% in 1972), see Willame 1985: 61.

politically powerful enough to survive for several decades, and even continued to exist within the framework of cultural development cooperation.

James Ferguson, in his discussion of development initiatives in Lesotho, has characterized the development complex as an anti-politics machine because of its tendency to depoliticize the institutional apparatus within which it works and make 'reinforcing and expanding the exercise of state power' appear a-political⁴² (Ferguson 1994: 255). In the case of Congo/Zaire, it seems to me that it was the language (and practice) of 'development cooperation', promoted by the former colonizer and by the international community, that performed the de-politicizing on an international level because it projected an a-historical neutrality upon the relationship between both countries.

When I spoke to Nzembele (the woman who in 1976 brought the message to UNESCO that Zaire would concur with Belgium's view on the restitution matter) in 2010 about the history of the restitution demands, she scoffed at the idea that a demand for restitution had been abandoned. 'We are still waiting', she announced defiantly (Interview Nzembele Safiri 2011). At the museum institute in central Kinshasa, you get the sense that most people feel that Belgium - and more particularly Tervuren - still owes the museum. This certainly puts into perspective the apparent renouncing of restitution demands by Zaire in 1976. Nonetheless, 'cooperation' and 'development cooperation' have become the dominant registers in which the post-colonial relations between Congo and Belgium are discussed.

⁴² This is not to say that the cultural politics of the Mobutu regime did not perform their own depoliticizing agenda, quite the contrary, *authenticité* served to obfuscate the increasingly authoritarian orientation of the regime.

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