

FROM THE CONGO FREE STATE TO A BIOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY LAB IN BRUSSELS TO THE UNIVERSITY OF LUBUMBASHI: A HISTORY OF THE TRANSLOCATION OF FOURTEEN ANCESTRAL REMAINS

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Abstract

This article explores the collaboration between two universities—one Belgian and one Congolese—that culminated in an agreement for the restitution of a colonial collection of ancestral remains. It recounts the various stages leading up to and following the agreement within both institutions. We, members of the two universities involved in the process, examine the process behind this decision, its impact on raising awareness of the Belgian university's colonial past, and its influence on the partnership between the two universities. Additionally, we discuss the future possibilities that may arise from the physical repatriation of these ancestral remains

Introduction

In June 2018, an article by journalist Michel Bouffoux in the Belgian edition of the magazine *Paris-Match* revealed the presence, in the biological anthropology laboratory of the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB), of ancestral remains appropriated under dubious circumstances during the first decades of Belgian colonization of Congo, which officially started in 1885 (BOUFFIOUX 2018). In August 2020, the rectors of ULB and the University of Lubumbashi (UNILU), Professors Yvon Englert and Gilbert Kishiba Fitula, signed an agreement by which ULB ceded to UNILU “all rights of any kind it has or may have over these human remains.” In this article, members of both universities who participated in the process recount the different phases and anticipate the steps that will follow their physical repatriation.

This agreement on the restitution of ancestral remains comes at a time when Belgium's colonial history is being strongly questioned¹⁷. While Belgian colonialism attracted little public attention between independence in 1960 and the late 1990s, the publication of the book “King Leopold's Ghost” (HOCHSCHILD 1998), as well as the parliamentary commission on the assassination of Patrice Lumumba in 2001¹⁸, revived public interest. In the following decades, as in other former colonizing countries, decolonial movements strengthened or emerged in Belgium and were increasingly successful in highlighting Belgium's problematic colonial past (STANARD 2019). In addition, a broader reflection about colonial collections of human remains was going on at the global level (JENKINS 2010). French President Emmanuel Macron's decision to embark on a process of restitution of cultural property looted during colonialism has reignited debates about restitution issues, including of human remains (SARR & SAVOY 2018).

Within the collection of physical anthropology kept at the ULB, it was estimated that ten human skulls come from territories located in the present-day Democratic Republic of Congo. Four other skulls could also have this origin. In his article, the journalist Michel Bouffoux, who consulted previous research on the topic (COUTTENIER 2005), mentions several cases, such as “two slaves sacrificed by decapitation” in the Congo, then bought by a Belgian soldier, or the corpse of a worker found near the construction site of the Matadi-Léopoldville railroad, whose skull was removed and taken away by Belgian colonialists.

The public revelation of the presence of these ancestral remains at the ULB triggered strong reactions within the university and among the public. For instance, an open letter signed by Western and African academics and decolonial activists, published in one of the main French-speaking Belgian dailies, called for the restitution of colonial collections of cultural goods and ancestral remains kept in Belgian institutions (COLLECTIVE OF SIGNATORIES 2018).

17. Belgians colonized the Congo. From 1885 to 1908, it was under the rule of King Leopold II as a private initiative. From 1908 to 1960, the Belgian state took over. After WWI, Belgium also received a mandate from the Society of Nations to administer Rwanda and Burundi, which lasted until 1962.

18. Following the publication of Ludo De Witte's (2000) book “L'assassinat de Lumumba” [The assassination of Lumumba], a parliamentary commission of inquiry was created to determine the exact circumstances of Patrice Lumumba's assassination and the possible involvement of Belgian politicians in it. It concluded that some members of the Belgian government at the time were morally responsible.

What was known about these ancestral remains

Little or no information on provenance was available about this collection. Indeed, the university does not possess its inventory. Some skulls bear inscriptions concerning their provenance, the name of the person who took them, or of the person who then acquired them, but most do not bear any inscription and are not accompanied by any note. However, thanks to previous research (COUTTENIER 2005; GONISSEN 2011), we already knew that they were collected at the beginning of the colonization of Congo, at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. From the Berlin Conference in 1885 to 1908, the Congolese territory was under the authority of King Leopold II, who ruled the colony as a quasi-private property. It became a Belgian colony when the king ceded it to the Belgian state (GODDEERIS et al. 2020). In this context, these human skulls were taken by Belgians – so-called explorers, soldiers or members of the colonial administration of the Congo Free State - and ended up in physical anthropology collections in universities or museums. Following the work of Paul Broca, craniometric studies multiplied at this time. Throughout Europe, doctors and academics built up collections of human remains (COUTTENIER 2005). Doctor Emile Houzé, a physician, professor at the ULB and co-founder of the Anthropological Society of Brussels, seized the opportunity of colonization to enlarge his collection. At his death in 1921, he bequeathed it to the Anthropological Society of Brussels. Over the course of a century, the collection was moved several times and was used for various purposes (research, teaching). A part of this collection has been kept at the ULB since the 1930's, another part is kept at the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences. It was based on this partial information that the list of ten skulls (plus four) of probable Congolese origin was drawn up.

Actions undertaken at ULB

When Michel Bouffoux's article appeared in June 2018, a reflection about the colonial heritage of the university had already been initiated recently. Indeed, in April 2018, the presence of a medallion in honor of King Leopold II had been reported to the Vice-Rector in charge of gender equality and diversity policies at this university¹⁹. It is a wall medallion consisting of the King's effigy in metal on a marble plaque. This work was offered to the university in 1949 (as well as to the universities of Ghent, Leuven, and Liege) by the Colonial Veterans Association, on the 40th anniversary of the death of the sovereign. The link with colonialism was therefore explicit.

The Vice-Rector then engaged in an informal reflection about what the university should do with the medallion, along with two Belgian experts in colonial history. Shortly thereafter, in May 2018, the building where the medallion was located was occupied by students (50 years after May 1968). It was in this context that this medallion was detached from the wall where it was located and covered with graffiti critical of the colonial action of this king (see figure 1).

As a result, a think tank was set up by the Vice-Rector. It brought together academics and scientists specialized in colonial history and collective memory, biological anthropologists, as well as members of the circle of Afro-descendant students and decolonial activists. This group therefore dealt with two issues: the fate of the medallion in honor of Leopold II and that of the skulls of African origin appropriated in a colonial context.

In order to deepen the reflection, this think tank organized, in February 2019, an international colloquium entitled “De l'ombre à la lumière: Pour une politique de gestion des collections coloniales de restes humains dans les universités” [From Shadow to Light: Towards a Policy for the Management of Colonial Collections of Human Remains in Universities]²⁰ at the ULB. Specialists in colonial heritage and in physical anthropology collections, curators from museums in Europe and Africa, and representatives of decolonial associations were invited. This colloquium allowed the university to clarify its position concerning this colonial collection of ancestral remains. Thus, Rector Yvon Englert gave an unambiguous opening speech regarding his willingness to critically reflect on colonialism, the role that the university has played in the colonial context, the negative implications of this legacy in contemporary society, particularly racism, and the need to critically examine current research and teaching practices²¹. However, there were some relatively significant tensions around this conference: some of the representatives of decolonial movements who had been invited boycotted the colloquium, and then severely criticized it in

19. The first author of this article.

20. <http://www.ulb.ac.be/babelbox/ws/getfile.php5?filter=databox6-art-attach-1214.5c62ac09bb783.pdf>

21. <https://lusingatabwa.over-blog.com/2019/02/des-cranes-en-debat-a-l-universite-libre-de-bruxelles.html>

an open letter published a few days later in one of the country's leading weekly newspapers (COLLECTIVE OF SIGNATORIES 2019). They denounced the fact that the word "gestion" (managing) had been used instead of "restitution" in the title and that, according to them, the question of continuing racism had been avoided in this conference. Therefore, they did not wish to participate in a conference in which their presence would endorse institutional policies that perpetuate power inequalities, and they called for an integration of the history of human remains into the creation of decolonial knowledge at the university. Also, the exchanges between biological anthropologists or heads of museum institutions and members of decolonial movements were tense during the conference.

A return and repatriation agreement

From this reflection stemmed the decision to engage in a process of restitution of these ancestral remains. However, as the colloquium had highlighted, there was no legal framework or institutional regulation to which the ULB could refer. There had been no precedent in Belgium. Moreover, no request for restitution had been made. The Rector of ULB then took the initiative to contact the Rector of UNILU, a privileged partner institution of ULB in the Democratic Republic of Congo. UNILU had already established a similar agreement with the University of Geneva concerning seven skeletons of Congolese "pygmy" people kept on their premises (VOS AND MONNET 2020).

UNILU enthusiastically welcomed the offer of the Rector of ULB. The Management Committee of UNILU, first, and then the University Council and its Senate, having been informed by the Rector, took note of it and encouraged the Rector to engage UNILU in this process, as it had done with the University of Geneva.

Initially, it was planned that a delegation from UNILU would visit the ULB to examine these ancestral remains and to see how they were preserved. However, this was not possible, because the ULB was preparing to change Rector and because of the confinement imposed by the COVID19 pandemic that further delayed this visit, which finally took place only in 2021, after the signature of the agreement (see below).

After consultation and numerous exchanges between the legal and international services of the two universities, and with the assistance of the law expert Marie-Sophie de Clippele from Université Saint-Louis Bruxelles, an agreement was concluded in August 2020, inspired by the above-mentioned restitution agreement between UNILU and the University of Geneva. Through this agreement, the ULB ceded all its rights to the ten human skulls. The introductory text of this agreement explicitly states that it was motivated by ethical concerns: "It gradually became apparent that the skulls conserved at the ULB could not escape the more global debate on the restitution of cultural property and ancestral remains taken from the lands of former colonies under the colonial regimes that were in power there at the time. It appeared that this debate was all the more necessary when it concerned ancestral remains whose treatment required a specific, dignified and respectful approach taking into account the historical conditions of their "appropriation". The ULB was thus confronted with a profound questioning of the legitimacy of the possession of ancestral remains by its departments, a questioning that became even more evident as its academic and scientific relations with Congolese universities and particularly with the UNILU, with which a privileged partnership was concluded in 2018, developed."

Since the signing of this agreement, these ancestral remains are the full property of UNILU. However, they will be kept at the ULB for a period of five years from the date of signature. This disposition will be tacitly renewed a maximum of three times for one year, unless one of the parties cancels it. This was done to allow the provenance research on them to continue at the ULB and to prepare for their return to the DRC. During this period, any new research on these ancestral remains will require the written consent of UNILU. Until they are repatriated to the DRC, the ULB will be responsible for their safe and respectful preservation, after which the cost of repatriation will be borne entirely by the ULB.

The agreement would be extended to the four additional skulls if research confirms their Congolese origin. ULB commits to communicate to UNILU the results of the research carried out on these ancestral remains. The agreement also encourages joint research between the two universities. It specifies that it does not prevent the examination of possible claims by legitimate third parties, i.e. the possible descendants of these persons or the source communities. Finally, through this agreement, the two universities recognize the inviolable nature of these ancestral remains and commit to respecting their integrity.

After signing the agreement

In Belgium

The agreement was signed in August 2020, in the midst of the significant mobilization of decolonial movements that followed the murder of George Floyd in the United States and the intensification of the Black Lives Matter movement. These mobilizations, which targeted symbols of Belgian colonialism such as statues of Leopold II, significantly energized the process of questioning Belgium's colonial past, as it did in other European countries. On June 30th, 2020, the anniversary of Congo's independence, the current King of the Belgians, Philip I, has expressed his "deepest regrets" for the "acts of violence" committed in the Congo during colonization. Also in June 2020, the Belgian parliament approved a bill on the restitution of cultural property illegitimately appropriated during colonization and currently owned by federal institutions²². This law opens the door to the restitution of cultural objects kept in Belgian federal collections. However, there is still no legal framework for the restitution of human remains (DE CLIPPELE 2023).

In August 2020, an inter-university working group on Belgian colonial heritage was created by the commissions of the rectors of Flemish and French-speaking universities. It gathers representatives of all the Belgian universities (Dutch and French-speaking). It issued a report in September 2021²³, recommending measures to decolonize Belgian universities (see GODDEERIS et al. 2022).

At the ULB

Following the signing of the agreement, the fourteen skulls were transferred to the "réserve précieuse", where valuable documents and objects are preserved, which denotes a change of status. They are no longer objects of scientific research preserved in a laboratory; they are now remains of human beings who rest in a place that respects their dignity, pending their physical repatriation to DRC.

In December 2021, the Rector of UNILU visited ULB with a delegation. On this occasion, a moment of remembrance was organized next to these 14 skulls (see figure 2). A minute of silence was then observed. Then, the Rector of the ULB, Professor Annemie Schaus and the Rector of UNILU, Professor Gilbert Kishiba Fitula, paid tribute to these fourteen persons. During this visit, the Rector of UNILU stated that he attaches great importance to this process of restitution and repatriation. He intends to continue this process of restitution until it is completed. Whenever possible, these ancestral remains will be returned to their communities of origin, and even to their families. They will then be buried according to the funeral traditions of each community.

At ULB, the issues related to the medallion in honor of King Leopold II and the colonial collection of ancestral remains - but also, of course, the mobilizations of decolonial movements within and outside the university - have stimulated reflection and initiatives related to the history of colonialism and its current repercussions. Thus, an analysis of the university's archives was carried out, leading to an inventory of resources available for further research; a contemporary history seminar was devoted to colonial memories; the interdisciplinary research project - history, sociology, anthropology - HERICOL²⁴ (colonial heritage) was created within the ULB; as well as the project "Décolonisons-nous!"²⁵ (Let's decolonize!). With the change of rectorship, a permanent "Colonial Heritage and Decolonization Steering Committee" was created and approved by the Academic Council of the university in 2021. It is chaired by the Vice-rector in charge of International Relations and is composed of representatives of the



Figure 1: Picture of the Leopold II medallion covered with graffiti

22. Loi du 3 juillet 2022 reconnaissant le caractère aliénable des biens liés au passé colonial de l'Etat belge et déterminant un cadre juridique pour leur restitution et leur retour : https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi/article_body.pl?language=fr&caller=summary&pub_date=22-09-28&numac=2022042012

23. http://www.cref.be/communication/20211027_Gestion_du_pass%C3%A9_colonial.pdf

24. <https://hericol.ulb.be/>

25. <https://www.ulb.be/fr/international/décolonisons-nous>

academic, scientific, student (including from the circle of Afro-descendent students), and administrative communities of the university, as well as a Congolese expert in cultural heritage from Kinshasa University.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo

In November 2019, on the occasion of the inauguration of the new National Museum in Kinshasa, President Félix Tshisekedi declared: “The treasures of the Congolese artistic heritage now on display at the Musée d’Afrique Centrale in Tervuren must eventually be returned to the Congo”. In November 2022, the DRC adopted a decree setting up a national commission to repatriate cultural property, archives and human remains removed from the country’s cultural heritage. However, this commission has not yet communicated its recommendations.

At the UNILU

Although the decision to sign this restitution agreement with the ULB has been criticized by some activists of the Congolese diaspora in Belgium, the UNILU authorities see this commitment as a scientific one. Indeed, as scientific institutions, they believe that universities must set an example to African and European politicians who are slow to act. But the UNILU, aware of its limitations, cannot afford to take the place of the Congolese state. UNILU does not have the material means, let alone the competence, to carry out the repatriation of cultural objects or ancestral remains.

This restitution agreement seems to have fulfilled its role as an example. Indeed, this initiative seems to have inspired other initiatives at national level. Thus, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the issue of the restitution of cultural property has resurfaced in the scientific and artistic world. This testifies to the fact that the restitution of cultural property has a history in this country. It began with the discontent of the Congolese people who were aggrieved and frustrated by the theft or abduction of their cultural objects, in particular their protective fetishes, as indicated by the popular painting by the artist Matos K. entitled: “Give me back my ancestor”²⁶. Officially, several requests for the restitution of cultural property have been recorded since the colonial period until the regime of President Mobutu (VAN BEURDEN 2022).

UNILU has sent one of the authors of this article, Professor Donatien Dibwe dia Mwembu, to take part in various meetings organized in scientific circles about restitution. Thus, before this agreement, this historian had already participated in numerous meetings on the issue of restitution of cultural property and ancestral remains, both in the DRC and in Belgium, such as a workshop on the restitution of cultural property in Kinshasa in which the former director of the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA, Brussels), Guido Gryseels, also participated; meetings with the agents of the RMCA in Brussels; a RTBF (Belgian French-speaking television) program on the problem of the restitution of cultural property before the reopening of this museum in 2018; the forum “The restitution of colonial artistic heritage: Themes and debates” in 2019, in Brussels, or the symposium “Living mobility, imagining success. Congolese encounters” at the PianoFabriek in Brussels (DIBWE DIA MWEMBU 2019). Shortly before the signing of the agreement, in June 2020, UNILU sent him once again to Kinshasa where he took part in a national forum organized at the National Museum of Kinshasa, under the patronage of the President of the DRC, on “The reconstitution of archives and Congolese cultural heritage 60 years later.” After the signature of this restitution agreement, Professor Dibwe participated in the International Colloquium on the “Reconstitution of Cultural Property and African Renaissance”. The presence of UNILU at these different events devoted to the restitution of colonial collections of cultural goods and ancestral remains testifies to the growing recognition of its expertise in these matters.

In February 2023, the University of Lubumbashi organized an important international conference entitled “La Restitution du patrimoine culturel africain et le rapatriement des restes humains. Cas spécifiques de la Suisse et de la Belgique» [The restitution of African cultural heritage and the repatriation of human remains. Specific cases of Switzerland and Belgium], which further demonstrates the University’s commitment to promoting knowledge and international dialogue on restitution issues.

Joint projects

The dialogue between the ULB and UNILU on these ancestral remains and their restitution has led to the establishment of inter-university collaborations: historians from UNILU - Professors Donatien Dibwe and César Nkuku Khonde - contacted a social psychologist from the ULB, Professor Laurent Licata, and a

26. <http://www.congoartpop.unical.it/index.php/collezione/1944/?lang=fr>

historian from the University of Saint-Louis (now UCLouvain Saint-Louis Bruxelles), Professor Nathalie Tousignant, to prepare a research project proposal. This five-year project was selected for funding under a Belgian Development Research Project (ARES CCD). It started in November 2023. This project also involves the National Museum of Lubumbashi, the WAZA Cultural Center in Lubumbashi, the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Brussels (RMCA), and members of the Belgian Afro-descendant association AfropeanProject.

Postcolonial controversies about cultural objects and ancestral remains have so far taken place mainly in the former colonizing countries. They are partly carried by members of the African diaspora, whereas the voices of Africans living in Africa have been less present in these debates and have been the subject of little research. The project borrows the metaphor of “heritage translocation” from Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy (2018). The word “translocation” designates, in genetic chemistry, an “exchange between chromosomes caused by breakage and repair”. Applied to the question of cultural heritage looted during colonialism, it evokes not only a change of place (of origin and exile), but it also allows us to think about the ruptures and traumas linked to the dispossession and absence of this heritage, as well as the mutations and transformations undergone by the displaced objects and the societies that lost them or welcomed them (DUDLEY 2020).

The project consists of three parts. The first deals with the history of the looting of Congolese cultural objects and ancestral remains during the colonial era, as well as the demands for restitution and the development of new cultural practices. The second will explore how source communities and local communities in Katanga represent these objects and ancestral remains, and what their attitudes and expectations are towards the restitution processes currently underway. Finally, the third component will explore the artistic and cultural practices that can facilitate a sense of ownership of these objects and ancestral remains by the current inhabitants of Lubumbashi.

What is currently known about these ancestral remains

The provenance and history of these fourteen skulls were the subjects of research within the framework of the project “HOME: Human remains Origin(s) Multidisciplinary Evaluation²⁷” (SEMAL et al. 2023; TILLEUX & CHAPMAN 2021). Jennifer Gonissen’s doctoral thesis was devoted to trace the trajectory of each of them as accurately as possible (GONISSEN, 2023). Trained in bioanthropology and osteology, Gonissen traced the provenance of these human remains from an analysis of the morphological characteristics of each skull, as well as the clues that can be found on them. Gonissen also attempted to cross-reference the morphological characteristics of these human remains with those of skulls that were the subject of scientific publications in the *Bulletin de la Société d’Anthropologie de Bruxelles* between 1882 and 1930²⁸. She attempted to developing comprehensive object biographies: retrace their conditions of appropriation and transport, their trajectory and their uses in Belgium until today.

Upon completion of her doctoral thesis, the ULB commissioned Gonissen to continue her analysis of the ancestral remains held at the ULB, and to complete the analysis of the fourteen skulls involved in the restitution agreement, as well as other skulls in the osteological collection. The results of her research were communicated in September 2024. She concludes that, among these fourteen skulls, only eight really originate from Congo, but that three other skulls, which were not mentioned in the restitution agreement, also probably do. Her research allowed her to identify the donators (or sellers) of these ancestral remains, as well as the ethnocultural or geographic origins of ten of these eleven skulls, showing that they came from different places



Figure 2. The rectors of UNILU and ULB and delegations paying tribute to the 14 deceased

27. <https://collections.naturalsciences.be/ssh-anthropology/home/project/executive-summary>

28. https://biblio.naturalsciences.be/associated_publications/anthropologica-prehistorica/bulletin-de-la-societe-d-anthropologie-de-bruxelles#b_start=0

scattered throughout the territory of the present-day DRC. However, she was unable to establish the individual identity of any of these ancestral remains.

Conclusions

The revelation of the presence of these human skulls in the ULB collections in 2018 initially caused a great deal of discomfort within the ULB. These ancestral remains are an “inconvenient heritage” (VAN BEURDEN 2022) of Belgium’s colonial history within the university itself. But it has initiated a process of reflection on the colonial past of this institution. This reflection has been developed through several initiatives, some of which are still ongoing. Above all, it has made it possible to intensify exchanges between ULB and UNILU, two universities that have been able to find a common solution in the absence of a legal framework at the state level. This rapprochement between the two universities is taking shape through research collaborations, notably concerning the issue of restitution.

At present, the process of repatriating these ancestral remains is not yet complete. Recent research into the history of each of these ancestral remains provided important information about their provenance, which will probably lead to a revision of the agreement. However, so far, it proved impossible to identify the persons.

The return of these ancestral remains to the Congo will not be the end of this story, but rather a step in a long and complex process. ULB and UNILU will need to prepare well for this. The two universities will continue to collaborate beyond the physical return of these ancestral remains.

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