

Decolonizing negotiation for the restitution of Congolese heritage acquired during Belgian colonization

Gracia Iwanzo Kasongo (Université Catholique de Louvain)

INTRODUCTION/CONTEXT OF STUDY

The question that has guided me throughout this analysis is : How do the actors perceive negotiation for restitution of colonial heritage?

-The question of restitution of Congolese cultural heritage is not a recent one, it arose in 1936 along with the debate on the establishment of a museum of indigenous life. The negotiation of restitution emerged in the Belgian-Congolese dispute during the economic round table while the DR Congo asked for the restitution of the goods in the Tervuren museum, which included most of the arts of the Congo.

-The first restitution occurred in form of a gift under Mobutu governance in 1976. The gesture has been excessively criticized because the objects were not of the best quality, moreover, the context of the restitution has been judged as propaganda of President Mobutu.

-Recently, the Secretary of State for Recovery and Strategic Investments, in charge of Science Policy proposed an approach that builds on the symbolic dimension of restitution. As a first step, he promised to restore legal ownership of illegally acquired property to the Congolese. He promised that a bilateral convention would be established to determine the fate of these objects, either through contracts of deposit, or through other digital means, or an eventual physical transfer.

METHODOLOGY

- The methodology of the present work is essentially qualitative and consisted in conducting interviews with the various key actors involved in the cultural restitution debate through an interview guide with open questions. This allowed the actors to express themselves with a certain freedom on the subject of restitution.
- The purpose was to include diverse actors involved in the debate of restitution for instance artists, human right defenders, activists and political actors.
- After various interviews, I transcribed the raw data into a table. Then I created the analysis space in a table grid.
- I used two analysis tools. I used content analysis to interpret the field data in order to understand the perception of the actor. Secondly, the dialectical approach allowed me to bring converging and diverging viewpoints into dialogue in order to comprehend the actors' narratives.



Yaka mask by [akhenatenator](#) is marked with [CC0 1.0](#)



"Female (pwo) mask" of [profzucker](#) is marked with [CC BY-NC-SA 2.0](#)

CONCLUSION

- Decolonizing negotiation for restitution means opening dialogue and being prepared to make significant concessions in order to reach a conclusive agreement.
- Decolonizing negotiation for restitution means introducing a dynamic cooperation that fosters creativity and initiative in order to allow young people to get involved in the chain of art protection and art conservation.
- Decolonizing negotiation for restitution of Congolese heritage means to move away from manichaeism in order to find inclusive solutions in a concerted and mutually respectful way.

What next?

Is the claim for restitution in the post-colonial context a negotiation of a rupture?

REFERENCES

- Sarr F, Savoy B (2018), Rapport sur la restitution du patrimoine culturel africain. Vers une nouvelle éthique relationnelle, France: Ministère de la culture.
- Beurden van, J (2017) Treasures in Trusted Hands: Negotiating the Future of Colonial Cultural Objects, Leiden: Sidestone Press.
- Lejeune C (1968), « Le Contentieux financier belgo-congolais », in *RBDI*, 2, pp. 535-564.
- Ribeiro Pinto A, Calafate Ribeiro M (2020) La restitution des oeuvres d'art : un pas décisive dans le processus de décolonisation, Paris : Editions Kimé.
- Van Beurden S, (2015), *Authentically African: Arts and the Transnational Politics of Congolese Culture*, Athens: Ohio University Press.
- Van Beurden, S. (2015). "Restitution or cooperation? Competing visions of post-colonial cultural development" in *Africa. Global Cooperation Research Papers*, 12, 1-25. doi:10.14282/2198-0411-GCRP-12.
- Ndaywel E Nziem (1998), *L'histoire générale du Congo: De l'héritage ancien à la République démocratique*, Louvain: Duculot.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The results of this research are summarized in three main points

- Firstly, I found out that there is a strong asymmetric power in negotiation for restitution of Congolese heritage that can bias negotiations. The Belgian approach of restitution is an advanced stage that breaks the deadlock on the issue of restitution. However, as the DRC intervenes after the fundamental criteria have been set, it becomes involved in a form of validation of decisions that have been taken by Belgium without a substantive discussion on the substance of the restitution criteria and the definition of legitimacy. To decolonize negotiation, DR Congo and Belgium need to renegotiate criteria of restitution.
- Secondly, there is a power/knowledge relationship that does not allow the DR Congo to access the data on the ground since all the objects are in Belgium. The DR Congo finds it difficult to present its proposal frameworks, as it does not know the scope of the object of negotiation. The Royal Museum for Central Africa grants short-stay scholarships to Congolese researchers, but this is not enough to achieve significant results.
- Thirdly, decolonization is not polarization. The responsibility needs to be shared, DR Congo need to invest itself in ongoing debate on restitution.

