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Abstract

The Royal Museum of Central Africa (RMCA) in Brussels was considered the “last colonial museum of the world” due to its unchanged scenography for more than fifty years after the decolonization of Belgium’s ex-colonies in Central Africa in the 1960’s. The museum reopened its doors in January 2018 presenting a supposed new “decolonial” philosophy. I argue that the new museum could not develop a decolonial philosophy due to a lack of self-reflexivity on the museum epistemic and ontological foundations in the curation practices and discourses. The museum did not reflect on its eurocentric vision of knowledge and did not critically investigate its paradoxical existence as an ex-colonial museum living in a postcolonial world. Through the discourse analysis of the statements of the museum’s curators, I show that the self-investigation work of the RMCA was prevented by three elements. First, the multidisciplinary of the museum permitted an adaptive discourse around its function which created more confusion than clarity. Second, the use of a scientific rhetoric legitimized the curators’ discourse upon the role of the museum which allowed them not to specify further the role of the museum. Third, the curators developed a depoliticized discourse of being a “world museum” that neutralized the ideological struggles around the museum. Those elements allowed the curators to recycle old discourses around the function of the museum and depoliticize the role of the RMCA. Ultimately, it allowed the curators not to do their critical work and prevented the RMCA from delivering a proper decolonial philosophy.

Keywords: Royal Museum of Central Africa (RMCA); Tervuren Museum; ex-colonial museums in Europe; repatriation; Belgium and restitution

Abstrakt

Aufgrund seiner unveränderten Szenografie seit über fünfzig Jahren nach der Entkolonialisierung der Belgiens Ex-Kolonien in Zentralafrika in den 1960er Jahren, galt das Royal Museum of Central Africa (RMCA) als das „letzte Kolonialmuseum der Welt“. Das Museum wurde im Januar 2018 wiedereröffnet und präsentiert eine vermeintliche neue „dekoloniale“ Philosophie. Ich behaupte, dass das neue Museum aufgrund mangelnder Selbstreflexion der epistemischen und ontologischen Grundlagen des Museums in den Kurationspraktiken und -diskursen keine dekoloniale Philosophie entwickeln konnte. Das Museum reflektierte seine eurozentrische Vision des Wissens nicht und stellt keine kritische Untersuchung seiner paradoxen Existenz als exkoloniales Museum fest, das in einer postkolonialen Welt lebt. Durch die Diskursanalyse der Aussagen der Museumskuratoren zeige ich, dass die Selbstuntersuchungsarbeit des RMCA durch drei Elemente verhindert wurde. Erstens ermöglichte die Multidisziplinarität des Museums einen adaptiven Diskurs über seine Funktion, der mehr Verwirrung als Klarheit verursachte. Zweitens legitimierte die Verwendung einer wissenschaftlichen Rhetorik den Diskurs der Kuratoren über die Rolle des Museums, was ihnen ermöglichte, diese Rolle nicht weiter zu spezifizieren. Drittens entwickelten die Kuratoren einen entpolitisierten Diskurs, ein „Weltmuseum“ zu sein, der die ideologischen Kämpfe um das Museum neutralisierte. Diese Elemente ermöglichten den Kuratoren, alte Diskurse über die Funktion des Museums zu recyceln und die Rolle des RMCA zu entpolitisieren. Letztendlich erlaubten diese Elemente den Kuratoren, ihre kritische Arbeit nicht zu verrichten, und hinderte die RMCA daran, eine angemessene dekoloniale Philosophie zu liefern.

Schlüsselwörter: Königliches Museum für Zentralafrika (RMCA); Tervuren Museum; Ex-Kolonialmuseen in Europa; Repatriierung; Belgien und Rückerstattung

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Annex 1: Timeline

1885 - 1908 :	Leopold II colonized and ruled over the “Congo Free State”.
1897 :	Creation of the museum by Leopold II as the colonial section of the Brussels World Fair of 1897. The museum holds a propagandist, commercial and “scientific” function.
1898:	The exposition turns into a permanent exhibition and becomes the “Museum of Congo”.
1908:	The “Congo Free State” is handed over to Belgium and takes the name of “Belgian Congo”. The museum thus becomes the “Museum of Belgian Congo”.
1909:	King Leopold II dies.
1921:	The League of Nations passes Belgium the mandate over Rwanda and Burundi, previously pertaining to the protectorate of German East Africa.
1952:	The museum takes the name of the “Royal Museum of the Belgian Congo”.
1960:	Independence of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The museum takes the name of the “Royal Museum of Central Africa”. The museum puts an end to its propagandist function to emphasize its scientific mission.
1970’s:	Clear rupture with the “colonial sciences”. Emphasis of the collections for their aesthetic and scientific importance in art history, anthropology and the natural sciences.
1980 - 90’s:	Emergence of postcolonial studies. Rediscovery of Belgium’s colonial past through several works in the 90’s and early 2000’s.
2003:	The first renovation plan for the museum is presented.
2014:	Renovation works started.
January 2018:	Reopening of the RMCA.

1. Introduction

1.1. Problem-situation. Ex-colonial museums in continental Europe.

For twenty to thirty years we have observed the increasing questioning of the function and existence of ex-colonial museums in many European capitals. Robert Aldrich in his article (2009) on the evolution of colonial museums in Western Europe explained how the fury of questioning the existence of those museums resurged very strongly at the beginning of the 2000's with French president Jacques Chirac ordering the closing down of the "Musée des Arts Africains et Océaniens" (MAAO) in 2003. The museum assembled an enormous collection of "primitive"¹ art pieces stolen from the ex-colonies². France reopened the scene for a large reconsideration of the social and political responsibilities of its museums. Other reflections followed in England on the reason of being of the then called "Imperial Institute", then transformed into the "Commonwealth Institute", along with the Victoria and Albert Museum promoting arts "crafts" and "exotic" Indian culture. The same process of questioning reached the Netherlands, with the "Dutch Colonial Institute" in Amsterdam, today transformed into the Royal Tropical Institute displaying all the artifacts brought from their invasive conquest of the East Indies. And finally it reached Belgium with its age-old colonial institution, the Royal Museum of Central Africa (RMCA), that had been built by King Leopold II in 1898 to exhibit the greatness of "his empire". Belgium had not engaged with this question before, as the museum's permanent exhibitions had not been touched since the decolonization period of its ex-colonies. Until the beginning of the 2000's were renovations for the museum finally started to be discussed.

All those institutions were set up between 1880 and 1930 after lucrative colonial exhibitions on the different imperialist enterprises. For example, the Royal Museum of Central Africa (RMCA) was founded by King Leopold II in 1897 ensuing the temporary exhibition of the Colonial Section of the Brussels World Fair. In 1898, the temporary exhibition was transformed into a permanent "Musée du Congo" (Museum of Congo). King Leopold II ordered the construction of a neoclassical style "Africa Palace" in the Tervuren park to welcome the permanent exhibition. The exhibition worked as a showcase for the "Congo Free State" that Leopold II had just created and over which he promulgated himself "King Sovereign"³. The exhibition's functions were propagandist as well as commercial: it was intended to disclose to the Belgian public the immense economic opportunities in the newly colonized country and educate them on the benefits of colonization and the wonders of this newly discovered "exotic" culture. How could one not mention the very racist displays of the reconstructed Congolese villages, with real Congolese villagers on location, intended to reveal "fascinating" sceneries

¹ "Primitive" was used as racist descriptive in the times of the colonial sciences in order to depict colonized peoples as inferior.

² Robert Aldrich, "Colonial museums in a postcolonial Europe," *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal* 2, no. 2 (July 2009): 146. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17528630902981118>.

³ Guido Gryseels et al., "Integrating the Past: Transformation and Renovation of the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium," *European Review* 13, no. 4 (2005): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798705000852>.

for the white public to see⁴. The museum's building, still in place today, was constructed with the money earned in resource extraction businesses in the colonies, while the permanent exhibition of the museum emerged from the World Fair presentation.

Those Western museums all emerged from state-led or private-led impulses for creating grandiose buildings for the national colonial propaganda, in a mission to teach the people about the colonial expansion, to demonstrate the Empire's greatness, and to participate in the recollection of the most "exotic" arts and "artifacts" of those "primitive" faraway peoples. Those institutions have arrogated different functions, such as education, entertainment, aesthetics as well as political and scientific functions⁵. But with the advent of decolonization as from the 1950's, those museums had to change their colonial discourse which had become inappropriate.

Throughout the second half of the 20th century, West European museums attempted to redefine their philosophy successively in the 1960's, 1970's and 1980's according to the social, political and cultural context of the time⁶. In the 1960's, the museums cancelled their colonial political and propagandist function and changed their philosophy towards a scientific initiative without having to physically change the exhibitions⁷. In the 1970's, some changes were carried over by the museums in Western Europe to temper and/or suppress the explicit colonial references⁸. Most institutions wanted to bury their imperial past, putting aside the common grounds of the imperialist ideology and sometimes purposefully obliterating the imperial heritage and overlooking its inheritance. Most of them observed an attempt to change their colonial gaze, passing from a demonstration of the European dominion on the uncivilized "other", towards an aesthetic or scientific function. As the ex-colonial museums' propagandist role faded away, emphasis was now put on the museums' mission of "guardianship" of a "great universal heritage". Their approach passed from a clear-cut political function towards a major emphasis of their scientific mission. However, this was only a shift in the discourse of the museums, as most of the scenography remained the same and the controversial collections remained in the permanent exhibitions. It was only in the 1980's-1990's that some actual renovations were undertaken in the exhibition styles and the overall physical presentations of the collections⁹.

The clear rupture observed in the 1960's and 1970's with the colonial ideology was done through a change in the discourse around their scientific mission. Indeed the initial "scientific" role that those museums held in the first part of their history was no more appropriate. Their "scientific" function originated in the old "colonial sciences" which institutionalized pseudoscientific beliefs of biological differences between distinct human "races"¹⁰. Through the use of different disciplines such as phrenology, craniometry or physiognomy, this "scientific" racism settled the concept of "human race" as a justification and evidence of the

⁴ David, Van Reybrouck, *Congo: Une Histoire* (Arles: Actes Sud Littérature, 2012), 84.

⁵ Robert Aldrich, "Colonial museums in a postcolonial Europe," 138.

⁶ Ibid., 139, 152.

⁷ Ibid., 143.

⁸ Ibid., 143-145.

⁹ Ibid., 143.

¹⁰ Gustav Jahoda, "Intra-European Racism in Nineteenth-Century Anthropology", *History and Anthropology* 20, no. 1 (Feb 2009): 37-56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02757200802654258>.

“white race” supremacy¹¹. Those pseudosciences that were at the origin of anthropology, legitimized a perverted curiosity of the hegemonic white eyes upon this new exotic “otherness”. And museums were the place to display such “exotism” for the world to see.

Therefore, since the decolonisation process, the academic world and the ex-colonial institutions had to be in a clear rupture with those ancient “colonial sciences”. Particularly ex-colonial museums who needed to depart from the ideological tenets of colonialism still very much anchored in the museology and philosophy of the institutions. Aldrich explains that they changed their discourse by finding new missions for their institutions but that they failed to do so in the physical museology, as “much of the décor stayed in place”¹². Most of the accoutrement and materials exhibited remained intact. In the 1980’s and 1990’s, new political contexts in Europe made the topic of colonialism resurface the mediatic scene and academic realm. Decolonial and postcolonial voices resurged on the international scene, due to the investment of old colonisers along with a militant youth coming from different migration flows, and a new academic and public curiosity for orientalism and exoticism that spurred a “cultural turn” in history and academic research, says Aldrich¹³. Slowly a general acknowledgment of a multi-cultural society became the norm in Western Europe as the recognition of the ex-imperial ties that had engendered different migration flows and cultural changes became more generally accepted¹⁴. Ensued a new debate on colonialism and on the profound traumas it had left in the targeted groups in the diasporas and ex-colonies.

Thus museum professionals started to engage radical change as they faced strong criticisms on the issue of representation of colonial history and on the context of the extraction of the artifacts. The ex-colonial museums saw themselves as if they were “haunted by the ghosts of their pasts”¹⁵. Consequently, the museum curators tried to renew the exhibition styles of the assemblages or revamp their institutions. They had to change their approach and question their way of representing the past as the many decolonial voices became much more present and the debate on restitution was emerging in continental Europe. Both in France and Britain, colonial museums were respectively transformed with the opening of the Quai Branly museum in 2006, or closed down with for instance the closing of the Institute of Commonwealth in 2015. But in the case of the Netherlands and Belgium, the Royal Tropical Institute and the RMCA remained open to the public with the intentions of new projects, new presentation perspectives and new outlooks. The case of Belgium is particular. The Royal Museum of Central Africa (RMCA) located near the capital city of Brussels, (also commonly called the “Tervuren Museum” due to its location in a suburb of the Belgian capital), kept much of its normal activities after the Second World War even until after the independence of the Republic Democratic of Congo (DRC) in 1960. The RMCA undertook after the independence of the Sub-Saharan country to recenter its function into a scientific and aesthetic one. It did so by promoting the importance of its conservation effort in the natural sciences, and by promoting the importance of its

¹¹ Ibid., 40.

¹² Robert Aldrich, “Colonial museums in a postcolonial Europe,” 145.

¹³ Ibid., 153.

¹⁴ Ibid., 153.

¹⁵ Ibid., 138.

collections in the domain of art history and anthropology. The institution also attempted to enlarge its field of study to Central Africa, the Americas and Oceania.

What is particular about the RMCA's situation is that the museum had kept most of its setting unchanged, without a touch of change since the decolonization period in the 1960's. With still very much obvious colonial traces in the edifice's original architecture, current décor and showrooms. The fact that the permanent exhibition was kept intact as it was in the 1960's led the museum to have this image of being "the last colonial museum in the world", as admitted by Bruno Verbergt, the Museum's operational director of the public oriented services¹⁶. The museum finally underwent a massive transformation in 2013, only to reopen its doors to the public five years later in January 2018. A first renovation proposal was submitted in 2003 which was approved by the Belgian Federal Council of Ministers in 2006¹⁷. The main ambition of the transformation was to "present a contemporary and decolonised vision of Africa in a building which had been designed as a colonial museum" according to the institution's presentation on its newly refurbished website¹⁸. However, since the reopening of the institution, many voices were raised on the unsatisfying critical work done in the museum's scenography and discursive approach. The museum received strong backlashes regarding the objective announced behind the renovation work to finally decolonize the museum.

1.2. Thesis statement

The reasons behind the current debate on the reopening of the RMCA and its announced "decolonization" is the context in which I will start my investigation. Following this, I intend to look at the new philosophy of the Royal Museum of Central Africa (RMCA) after its recent reopening in January 2018 and I will analyze critically the museum's renewed discourse. Indeed, after the museum reopened its doors, it presented itself as a "center of research" on Central Africa, displaying a philosophy that answers the postcolonial critiques at times but without ever fully addressing the criticisms around the museum's role and without fully engaging in the debate around the repatriation of the artefacts. The discourse presented the different disciplines in which the museum has been involved as an advantage for the curation, and a scientific rhetoric is used to present the institution as a modern, multicultural museum that attempts to bridge together divergent cultures in a well-intended and peaceful way. I argue that the new museum could not develop a decolonial philosophy due to a lack of self-reflexivity on the museum epistemic and ontological foundations in the curation practices and discourses. The museum did not reflect on its eurocentric vision of knowledge and did not critically investigated its paradoxical existence as an ex-colonial museum living in a postcolonial world. Through the discourse analysis of the statements of the museum's curators, I show that the self-investigation work of the RMCA was prevented by the curation's recycling of discourse. I argue that such discourse-recycling was made possible by two elements.

¹⁶ Cédric Vallet. "Musée de Tervuren: Décolonisation impossible?" *Médor*, December 10, 2018. <https://medor.coop/fr/articles/reportage-musee-tervuren-Congo-MRAC-colonialisme/>.

¹⁷ "The Renovation of the AfricaMuseum," Africa Museum, accessed June 17, 2020, <https://www.africamuseum.be/en/discover/renovation>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Firstly, the multidisciplinary of the museum permitted an adaptive discourse around its function which created more confusion than clarity upon the museum's role. I will show that the adaptive curatorship's discourse brought more confusion than clarity to address the postcolonial critiques of the twenty-first century and deliver a clear vision for the museum's new identity. The curators of the museum claimed that the RMCA was benefiting from the fact that it was involved in numerous disciplines since its inception. Indeed the museum was implicated in numerous domains (political, commercial, scientific, aesthetic, education) as well as numerous scientific disciplines; cultural anthropology (ethnography, sociology, linguistics, ethnomusicology, archeology), history (art history, prehistory) and biology (geology, zoology). The curation presented this original multidisciplinary function of the museum as an advantage for the RMCA's transformation as it would elevate it to the status of "world center of research on Central Africa" after its reopening. Instead I demonstrate that this multidisciplinary was not an advantage for the curation and the way they handled the renovation of the RMCA. The wide diversity of functions of the RMCA permitted the curators to adjust the scientific and political role of the museum to the times and choose among its many activities, through a discourse recycling of the previous functions. Through this discourse recycling, the curators could simply reuse the old scientific aesthetic functions and not engage in a radical epistemic and ontological change. While attempting to accommodate the discourse to the new socio-political paradigms of the new millenium, the curators were disoriented by the new challenges set by the postcolonial critiques. Therefore I argue that reusing the old scientific and aesthetic functions prevented them to think through the new role of the museum for its reopening.

Secondly, the use of a scientific rhetoric legitimized the changing and confused curators' discourse upon the role of the museum. The curation announced an extension of the original dual function of "Museum and Research Institute" with a new third function of "Center of Information Dissemination about Africa". This last new function stands for the investment of the curation in new publications services, and stands for the main definition of a museum, that is to work for the public. Through the use of a tautological definition, using a modern language in the terms "Research Center" and "Center of Information Dissemination" to reuse the old scientific role, the new approach to the museum's identity delivers a confused vision of the RMCA's function. Therefore I argue that the discourse recycling of the scientific mission of the RMCA permitted the museum not to think through its identity and engage a self-reflection on its epistemic and ontological foundations renewal. The museum used the language of scientificity and modernity, by simply reusing its old discourse around its scientific mission, in more appropriate terms for the postcolonial modernity. Initially the museum was a "scientific" institution in the sense of the underlying racist and supremacist ideologies of the colonial sciences of the times. Whereas now the museum has returned to a description of its function as a principally scientific one in the sense of a leading "Research Center and Centre of Information Dissemination on Central Africa". The label "scientific institution" was first used to legitimize the activities of colonial museums, then it was recycled to legitimize its confused discourse on its function. The way the old narrative around the RMCA's scientific function has been reused is a proof that the museum recycled old discursive patterns without needing to further specify the actual position of the museum. In clear, the curation's adaptive discourse upon the museum's identity was permitted by its multidisciplinary and legitimized by scientificity,

which allowed the museum not to develop a strong and engaging radical epistemic and ontological change.

Ultimately, I will show that along this confusing multidisciplinary and the use of a legitimizing scientific language, the RMCA inscribed its identity in the same line as the “universal museums” through the use of a “world museum” discourse. The RMCA integrated the argument of universality purported by most Western museums opposed to repatriation. Large art history or “civilisation” museums, or big national museums in Europe and North America created in their argument line a divide between the local and the global, between the individual and the universal, in order to elevate the status of their institutions to the ones of “universal museums” not affected by nationalist claims. The RMCA’s curation integrated this distinction and reused this depoliticized discourse to elevate its institution’s status to the one of a “world museum” and not engage in the restitution debate. The RMCA’s discourse of being a “world museum” permitted the museum to neutralize the ideological troubles around its identity and depoliticize its stances in the debate on repatriation. This was seen in the attitude of the RMCA’s curation towards the resurgence of the debate around restitution when the museum was called out for its dubious past and the controversial extraction methods of its collections. The museum, through its legitimization discourse of being an “scientific institution” and through elevating its status towards a world reference museum implicated in various disciplines, could afford not to take a position in the debate around restitution.

1.3. Methodology

Through an analysis of the RMCA’s discourse and new museology, I will demonstrate that the Museum’s discursive approach to its identity and function is confused, too neutral and depoliticized.

In the first chapter, I will demonstrate that the museum has not mobilized a strong homogenous rhetoric around its colonial past and neocolonial present. I will compare the museum’s old narrative with its new discourse - a supposedly new “decolonial perspective” - as presented after the reopening of the museum, and engage in a critical discursive analysis of both narratives. Regarding the method used, I look at three types of evidence; (1) academic works analyzing the curatorial approach of the Tervuren Museum before its reopening; (2) discourse of the current director of the museum Guido Gryseels and the Head of Publication and Head of Museology, Gabrielle Landry and Koeki Claessens, in their presentation of the renovation project in an article published in 2005 for the *European Review*; (3) the presentation of the philosophy of the museum on the newly refurbished RMCA website.

I will expose the epistemological and ontological problems of the new discursive approach of the museum. Firstly, the non-reflexivity in the museum’s eurocentric discourse shows that the democratisation process was undertaken solely in the management of the museum (inclusivity practices) and that no real change took place in the control and decision-making sphere. The authority on what truly counts and who gets to decide is still in the hands of the same persons. Secondly, as no real reflection was undertaken on the racist origins of the museum in the discourse of Gryseels et al., the fundamental paradox of existing as an ex-colonial museum in a postcolonial world could not be resolved.

Then through the diachronic analysis of the discourse around the functions of the museum, I will show how this multidisciplinaryity was a disadvantage for the museum's transformation as it created more confusion for the vision of the museum's identity. The wide diversity of functions of the RMCA permitted the curators to adjust the scientific and political role of the museum to the times and choose among its many activities. I will demonstrate that the curators recycled the aesthetic and scientific functions of the museum to the contemporaneous times. Secondly, I take as an example how the museum recycled its discourse around its scientific mission, legitimizing the function of the museum throughout the years. I will show that the discourse recycling of the scientific mission of the RMCA permitted the museum not to think through its identity and engage a self-reflection on its epistemic and ontological foundations renewal. All together this confused discourse legitimized by a scientific mission, prevented the curation to engage its self-reflection work to further specify the function of the museum and impeded the decolonizing of its identity

In the second chapter, I look closer at the physical transformation of the museum. I will demonstrate that because the RMCA has not provided a strong decolonizing methodology, the museum could not debunk the neocolonial vision still very present in the museum's exhibitions and scenography.

In the third chapter, I analyze the new “decolonized philosophy” of the RMCA in regard to the larger controversial debate on the restitution of the cultural goods. My focus is specifically looking at the repatriation of museum objects extracted during the European colonization in Central Africa. With the resurgence of the debate around restitution, institutions are more exposed to being called out for their slips and fails, especially ex-colonial museums who have to engage in the conversation. Through the exposition of the different stakes, I will present the different arguments, pro and contra, in the debate on restitution and how the RMCA integrated the argument of “universality” as presented in the 2003 *Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums*¹⁹. The defenders of a supposed global and “universal” culture created a division between the local and the global in the questions of knowledge production and ownership of cultural artefacts in order to depoliticize their position and not address the repatriation claims. I will show that the RMCA placed itself as pertaining in the same vein as the “universal museums” and this way the curatorship could neutralize the political stakes around the museum's function, and legitimize its holding of the cultural artefacts. I argue that the RMCA, through the adoption of a “world museum” discourse based on the model of the universal museum, and through showing its support for the 2003 Declaration, could depoliticize its role and its discourse as an ex-colonial museum and not fully engage in the debate around restitution. The RMCA's curation reproduced the same depoliticized discourse of universality, which prevented the museum from engaging a decolonization of its philosophy and its museography.

In the third and last chapter, I will analyze the new Restitution Policy issued by the RMCA in January 2020, to show that the new philosophy of the RMCA is based on a discourse of

¹⁹ Cleveland Museum of Art, *Declaration on the importance and value of Universal Museum*, (Cleveland, Cleveland Museum of Art Press Releases, 2003), <https://archive.org/details/cmapr4492>.

benevolent cooperation and cross-cultural understanding, but not so much on exchange. The museum instigates a new image of openness for the museum, but the concrete steps to work towards a physical restitution are not entrenched in reality. The efforts led to create a new philosophy are not applied in reality as the concrete actions do not live up to the discourse of openness and cross-cultural interchange.

2. First chapter: The Tervuren Museum's philosophy before and after its reopening

2.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I intend to look at two things. First, I will examine the evolution of the philosophy of the “Tervuren Museum” (the RMCA) since the decolonization of the DRC until its more recent years just before the 2018 reopening. I will consider this evolution in regard to a larger context of progression of the European perception of colonialism. Second, I will compare the museum’s old narrative with its new discourse - a supposedly new “decolonial perspective” - as presented after the reopening of the museum, and engage in a critical discursive analysis of both narratives. Regarding the method used, I look at three types of evidence; (1) academic works analyzing the curatorial approach of the Tervuren Museum before its reopening; (2) discourse of the current director of the museum Guido Gryseels and the Head of Publication and Head of Museology, Gabrielle Landry and Koeki Claessens, in their presentation of the renovation project in an article published in 2005 for the *European Review*; (3) the presentation of the RMCA’s new philosophy on the its refurbished RMCA website.

2.2. An evolving perception of colonialism

There are several reasons for the fact that the Tervuren museum engaged much less, if not at all, with discussions on the representation of the colonial past, as opposed to other European museums. Among several explanations is the political atmosphere in Belgium in the second part of the 20th century, which accepted a generalised omerta on Belgian colonial past and an established fidelity among the general public to the Royal Monarchy and its history²⁰. The most important reason is that the museum could actually push the decolonial question away for most of the second half of the 20th century by repeatedly transforming the discourse surrounding its function. The institution first buried its imperialist ideology and held the scientific mission as its principal reason for existence. No more self-interrogation was necessary as the colonial history was just the context in which the objects were collected. Therefore, the museography did not need any transformation as the objects were supposedly presented in a “neutral” manner for the scientific purposes of conservation²¹. However, the institution’s self-reflection on its supposedly “neutral” gaze was clearly non-existent, and the consideration on the subjectivity of the institution’s vision came only later. Another reason is that the colonial question was being discussed more actively in other nations in Europe such as in England, France, Germany, or The Netherlands, permitting the occultation of the controversial situation in the country, which

²⁰ Véronique Bragard, ““Indépendance!”: The Belgo-Congolese Dispute in the Tervuren Museum,” *Human Architecture* IX, no. 4 (2004): 93-104.

²¹ Aurélie Roger, “D’une mémoire coloniale à une mémoire du colonial. La reconversion chaotique du Musée Royal de l’Afrique Centrale, ancien musée du Congo Belge,” *Cadernos de Estudos Africanos* 9, no.10 (2006): 3, <https://doi.org/10.4000/cea.1207>.

resulted in the colonial question being left quasi untouched in Belgium until the last part of the 20th century.

This was until the emergence of many extensive works in the 1990's and early 2000's that shed a new light on King Leopold's reign and its imperialist conquest in the "Belgian Congo". It led the Belgian public and the international scene to rediscover Belgium's controversial colonial past. This context changed the perception of colonialism in Belgium and abroad and forced the museum to question its position and change its amnesic attitude towards the national colonial history and its own. Yaël Simpson Fletcher explains in his article²² how the new postcolonial perspectives of the last quarter of the 20th century permitted to restore the atrocities executed under King Leopold's reign in the Belgian Congo and reestablished Belgium's ties with its ex-colonies, along with its violent involvement during the decolonization process. Fletcher cites for example Adam Hochschild's historical book *King Leopold II Ghosts: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (1998) that retraced the atrocities committed in the Zaïre (the name of the country at the time) under Leopold's reign. Or Ludo De Witte's historical monograph *The Assassination of Lumumba* (2001) in which he reconstructs in depth the case for Belgium's remorseful involvement in the political events of decolonization along with the U.S. implication, the U.N. impassivity, and African collaboration²³.

Furthermore, Peter Bates's documentary for BBC 4 *White king, red rubber, black death* describes in details the establishment of such cruel exploitation strategies for resource extraction²⁴. Both Bate's documentary and Hochschild's book draw extensively from the study work of several Belgian and Congolese anthropologists and historians, such as Jules Marchal, Daniel Van-Groenweghe and Elikia M'Bokolo²⁵. Their work had stimulated vivid discussions since the 1980s, however they had been voluntarily left unaddressed by the Belgian political and academic realms of the time²⁶.

Along this line, the heavy ties that linked Belgium and the Democratic Republic of Congo together resurfaced in the 90's with several widely covered cases of international affairs. In addition to the rediscovery of the atrocities of King Leopold's reign, the Tutsi genocide broke in Rwanda in 1994. Along with that, the surge of the "Lumumba affair" and the demonstration of the participation of Belgium in those events made the colonial question a new topic of discussion in the country, which propelled the Tervuren museum among other targets in the center of the medias' attention.

²² Yaël Simpson Fletcher, "'History Will One Day Have Its Say': New Perspectives on Colonial and Postcolonial Congo," *Radical History Review* 84, (2002): 195–207, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-2002-84-195>.

²³ Ibid., 201.

²⁴ Peter Bate, "*White king, red rubber, black death*," BBC 4, 2003, YouTube Video, 1:30:00, <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/253982>.

²⁵ Vicky Van Bockhaven, "Decolonising the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Belgium's Second Museum Age," *Antiquity* 93, no. 370 (2019): 1084, <https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2019.83>.

²⁶ Ibid.

2.3. Before the reopening: An evolving philosophy with a fixed museography

In this evolving conception of colonialism and the Belgian colonisation, the philosophy of the museum changed according to the social and political context of the time. Originally, the museum was intended by King Leopold II for the “national education” of Belgians to legitimize the colonial enterprise and demonstrate the benefits of the “mission civilisatrice” on the subjected African peoples. The colonial propaganda was anchored in an anthropological and humanitarian argument according to which, by seizing the country, the Belgians’ main ambitions were to pacify the country by “freeing” it from Arab slavery and elevate it to a “civilized nation”²⁷.

After the 1960’s, once the colonial discourse was no longer appropriate, the museum reconsidered itself prominently as a scientific institution with the responsibility of informing and showing the Belgian nation the “great wonders” of “Africa” and conserving the cultural heritage it had forcibly collected in Central Africa. As already mentioned, no self-examination was necessary on the institution’s position as colonialism was just the context in which all the artifacts were deducted²⁸. The museum changed its political function to a scientific and aesthetic one and could avoid questioning its position any further.

In the 1970’s, the museum wished to present a clear rupture with its previous political role to move towards an anthropological vision with an emphasis on the significance of its collections for the domain of visual anthropology and ethnographic research for the “exploration of values, achievements and challenges of the indigenous cultures of those previously colonised”²⁹. Such philosophy illustrates the museum’s search for recognition of its collection’s anthropological worth, which is indeed significant as the museum holds one of the most extensive and well-known ethnographic collection on Central Africa. But in the case of the RMCA, that anthropological ambition still originates from a biased desire to put on display intriguing foreign cultures in an alienating manner to satisfy a perverted curiosity. We see that the racist roots of anthropology emanating from a fascination for the “other” is still very present.

Aurélié Roger who has dedicated her postgraduate degree thesis and a big part of her academic work on the practices of colonial mythology in Belgium and the Tervuren museum itself, analyzed the unchanged museography of the museum in the beginning of the 2000’s before its renovation. She explains in her article *D’une mémoire coloniale à une mémoire du colonial. La reconversion chaotique du Musée Royal de l’Afrique Centrale, ancien musée du Congo Belge* (2006) that the “fixed museography” in the unchanged presentation of the collections before the renovation had a discourse still very much anchored in the legitimization of colonization. The immutability in the presentation of the exhibition rooms, testified of a non-reflexive colonial vision of Africa, says Roger³⁰. She enounces for example that the figure of the Arab slaver (in the plaster group and in different other showcases) and the figure of the wild ignorant

²⁷ Aurélié Roger, “D’une mémoire coloniale à une mémoire du colonial. La reconversion chaotique du Musée Royal de l’Afrique Centrale, ancien musée du Congo Belge,” *Cadernos de Estudos Africanos* 9, no.10 (2006): 2, <https://doi.org/10.4000/cea.1207>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Robert Aldrich, “Colonial museums,” 145.

³⁰ Aurélié Roger, “D’une mémoire coloniale à une mémoire du colonial,” 1.

African (different groups of sculptures in the ethnographic rooms) can be seen several times throughout the exhibition, conveying the age-old idea of savagery to depict the Congolese people³¹. Numerous sculptures and statues were depicting Africans as uncivilized people, as for example the more or less famous statues of the “leopard-men”. The “leopard-men” iconography emerged out of the colonial mythology around the Anyoto people, an ethnic group from Eastern Congo, constructing an imaginary of barbaric and cannibalistic people organizing clandestine raid attacks on local people and eating them³². Additionally, a commemorative plaque for the 1500 “lost Belgian soldiers in Congo” was also a disturbing colonial relic, as it was obscuring the estimated 10 millions deaths in the genocide in Congo between 1885 and 1908 which are not mentioned anywhere in the scenography. Or the fact that the figure of the King Leopold as this “benevolent leader” in charge of “civilizing” the Congo was represented around 45 times throughout the museum³³.

The RMCA, in spite of all the efforts to tone down its colonial origins, has inevitably been made in charge of bearing the responsibility of the “colonial memory” claims Roger³⁴. In her analysis of the philosophical reconfiguration of the RMCA in the 1980s-1990s, Roger showed that the museum’s perpetuation of its colonial physical and discursive configurations resulted in the museum bearing an undeniable responsibility in the constitution of the fundamental “social frameworks of memory” on the Belgian colonial period³⁵. The museum came to play a commemorative role for the remembrance of the Belgian colonisation in Central Africa. This is because it came to be one of the only traces left of the colonial period in Belgium, in addition with the fact that no actions were taken in the Belgian political sphere to discuss the colonial past. Consequently, the museum was made responsible for that commemorative role. Therefore the function of the museum oscillated between an anthropological one interested in the ethnography of Central African societies and a place of remembrance of colonialism. The museum came to bear the function of a “lieu de mémoire” as Pierre Nora has conceptualised it in his eponym work (1984-1992)³⁶. Roger explains that the discourse of the RMCA before its physical renovation in 2013 was focused on the reconciliation of memories. The museum tried to bring together different memories of the colonial era, between the Belgian public and Belgium’s African diasporas, the different national and cosmopolitan decolonial collectives and networks, and the memories of the ex-colonizers and ex-colonized.

But the diversity of memories that were at play in the colonial remembrance between the European and the African continent are much more disparate than the ones the museum was trying to address. Roger restates the importance of “the grey memories” describing those very different memories that are not totally “black” or “white”³⁷. Those are emerging from the

³¹ Ibid., 3.

³² Vicky Van Bockhaven, “Leopard-men of the Congo in literature and popular imagination,” *Tydskrif Vir Letterkunde* 46, no. 1 (2009): 79, <https://doi.org/10.4314/tv1.v46i1.29841>.

³³ Louise Vanderkelen, “La salle coloniale de l’Africa Museum, une vision antibelge ?,” *La Libre*, December 11, 2018. <https://www.lalibre.be/debats/ripostes/la-salle-coloniale-de-l-africa-museum-une-vision-antibelge-5c0e9a36cd70e3d2f72c5775>

³⁴ Christine Deslaurier, et al., “Mémoires grises. Pratiques politiques du passé colonial entre Europe et Afrique,” *Politique africaine*, 102(2), (2006): 5, <https://doi.org/10.3917/polaf.102.0005>.

³⁵ Aurélie Roger, “D’une mémoire coloniale à une mémoire du colonial,” 1.

³⁶ Pierre Nora, *Les lieux de mémoire*, Paris, France: Gallimard, 1984-1992.

³⁷ Christine Deslaurier, et al., “Mémoires grises,” 15.

“crossroads of the memorial charges” in a postcolonial transfer between Africa and Europe, and are the “result of a mix at different doses of, but never the juxtaposition of the “white” and “black memories”³⁸. Those are the activities of memories situated between the official public memories held by the state or academicians, and the memories of old colonized/colonizers. Those are the memories of different groups such as collectives, the diasporas, the diverse associations, the discussion forums, the diverse neighborhoods, all with their own ambitions and in a more or less free manner to express themselves. This resurgence of individual or collective memories should also be regarded in the larger context of global considerations of the memory of the colonial past, with the creation of many diverse cosmopolitan and transnational networks of decolonial memories. The philosophy of the museum attempted to reunite this plurality of commemorative discourses and practices in an appeased union that looks towards a common peaceful future. But clearly, in regard to the many points of contention and criticisms expressed on the museum before its transformation, the memories the museum wants to tie together are not ready to reunify. It is the complexity of these postcolonial identities that made the museum fail to meet the expectations of all the different groups. And one could easily see the impossibility of diffusing yet such a memory as Belgium has not even opened the discussion for public apologies to the Rwandan, Burundi and Congolese populations it colonized. Therefore, it was time for the museum to reconsider its mission and work with the decolonizing paradigms of the social and multicultural context of the 2000’s.

2.4. Engaging with the transformation

The museum exhibitions had not been touched during the 1970’s, but in the 1980’s finally the wind started turning. With the advent of new consciousnesses arising on colonialism and neocolonialism, new anti-colonial revendications were made and the RMCA was called into question. In the beginning of the 2000’s, the museum could no longer deny its colonial history and had to engage in the conversation. After the exhibition “Exit Congo Museum” in 2000-2001 which gave the first impulse for a potential reconceptualization of the museum, changes to the permanent exhibition were proposed but a decolonial approach was still unthinkable and not even mentioned. Negotiations were about dusting the actual exhibition off or at best about modernizing the exhibit³⁹. Finally plans were discussed among the directors and the scientists (museologist, anthropologists, historians, biologist, geologist). The novelty was the hiring of a consultant group of six art experts and academicians originally issued from the African diasporas in Belgium. The COMRAF, the Concertation Committee between the RMCA and the African Associations, was supposed to work as an advisory group. But the cooperation between both this group and the research and public services teams did not work as intended as many times the COMRAF was just consulted after decisions were already made⁴⁰. Van Bockhaven explains that this falls under an often announced objective of democratisation of the decision powers, but that the museum’s enormous ambitions for inclusivity were not actually met with

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Cédric Vallet, “Musée de Tervuren: Décolonisation impossible?” *Médor*, December 10, 2018, <https://medor.coop/fr/articles/reportage-musee-tervuren-Congo-MRAC-colonialisme/>.

⁴⁰ Vicky Van Bockhaven, “Decolonising the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Belgium’s Second Museum Age,” *Antiquity* 93, no. 370 (2019): 1085, <https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2019.83>.

a profound change in the power structures, ending up with a token political correctness instead of a real mobilization⁴¹. The discussions between all parties involved did not go smoothly considering that they all had divergent visions for the role of the museum. The COMRAF supported that the museum should represent the contemporaneous African diasporas and the Afro-descendants and explicitly engage with the colonial history of the museum and its objects. While Belgian nationalists and some curators of the museum thought that the museum should bear testimony to the universal cultural and scientific heritage that the museum had conserved after the years.

After many tensions and divergence of opinions, the new project came to life. The museum had closed for renovations during five years and just reopened its doors in December 2018, with a final colossal budget of around 72,5€ millions⁴². But the newly reconverted museum did not meet the expectations of any of the groups. Interviews conducted by Louise Vandekelen right after the reopening with one of the manager of the COMRAF Mona Mpembele, show that for many anthropologists and members of the diasporas the perpetuation of the colonial gaze is still visible in the scenography and very much anchored in the philosophy of the museum⁴³. Whereas on the other end of the spectrum some Belgian nationalist members of the Royal Belgian Union for Countries Overseas perceive an “anticolonial” and “anti-Belgian” perspective in a sort of “Belgium-bashing” intention⁴⁴. Even the UN issued a statement in February 2019 arguing that the RMCA’s approach to its colonial past was unsatisfying when mentioning the violations committed during the colonial period praising that Belgium should make public apologies for its colonial past⁴⁵.

2.5. The new philosophy of the museum

Guido Gryseels, the actual director of the museum, with Gabrielle Landry and Koeki Claessens, both respectively Head of publication and Head of Museology at the museum, co-wrote in 2005 an article in the *European Review Journal* where they exposed the intentions for the renovation of the museum⁴⁶. They explained a little about the history of the museum, what were its initial propagandist and “scientific” functions, and demonstrated further what they envisioned for the future of the museum. Already in the early pages of the article where they are presenting the contentious and quite obnoxious colonial origins of the museum, one could notice the lack of self-criticism expressed and the fact that the controversy around the figure of Leopold II is kept

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Guy Duplat, “L’histoire du Musée de Tervuren en 13 dates clés,” *La Libre*, December 5, 2018, <https://www.lalibre.be/culture/arts/l-histoire-du-musee-de-tervuren-en-13-dates-cles-5c078ebecd70e3d2f714a2b1>.

⁴³ Louise Vandekelen, “La salle coloniale de l’Africa Museum,” 1-3.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 4-5.

⁴⁵ James Crisp, “UN tells Belgium to apologise for its colonial past in Congo,” *The Telegraph*, Feb 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/02/12/un-tells-belgium-apologise-colonial-past-congo>.

⁴⁶ Guido Gryseels, et al., “Integrating the Past: Transformation and Renovation of the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium,” *European Review* 13, no. 4 (2005): 637–647. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798705000852>.

silent⁴⁷. This lack of fundamental self-reflexivity, found throughout the whole article, is reflective of the new philosophy of the museum.

All through the article Gryseels et al. explain the project intended for the renovation but seem a bit out of touch with the real stakes of the critique addressed to the museum before its reopening. At first glance, what emerges from the article is the ambition to convert the museum into a modernized institution and adapt it to the expectations of the present-day socio-political and cultural context. We see that the curators are aware of the postcolonial epistemic paradigms of the new millennium, as the curatorship exposes its will to adapt the RMCA's museology to the ethical guidelines decreed by the modern museum studies. Those are a new field of study that emerged in the late 20th century that voiced a "representational critique" which challenged the position of the museum in selecting objects, "shaping discourse and creating and legitimizing truth"⁴⁸. More particularly, the museum studies resulted in new academic conceptions of the participating role of museums in "regimes of power" and the status quo⁴⁹.

Also, a worldwide re-adjustment of global power relationships with emerging influences in the Global South⁵⁰ encouraged a greater consciousness of indigenous voices at the international level. The curation of the RMCA is more attentive to those ideological tenets of the 2000's era, with an exposed desire to work on inclusivity practices of the African diasporas for example. Or as well their will to anchor the museum's discourse and curatorial approach in the line of this culture of the Western "universal museums" with the ambition to become a "world research center on Africa". A language typical of the modernity discourse around development and progress is used, with terms such as "modern" and "dynamic" used repeatedly. Their ambitions to work on multidisciplinary in their research and more inclusiveness in the management process pertain to the same vein as this modernization discourse. With examples such as the aspirations to reach greater dialogue between the institution and the African diasporas and African associations in Belgium⁵¹. Or also the intent to contribute "to the sustainable development of 'Africa'" through awareness-raising programs such as financing young African researchers or developing scientific partnerships and capacity-building trainings on conservation and management of natural and cultural heritage⁵².

An attitude of complacency and a tone of pride, auto-congratulation almost, is used in the project presentation. The great importance of the museum's role as holding one of the greatest collections of Central African ethnographic objects, as well as the collaborative work with several African institutions, is restated numerous times in the presentation. The prestigious character of the institution is emphasised with a goal to achieve an international reputation and transform the museum "to become *the* institution of reference [...] of Africa, and Central Africa

⁴⁷ Guido Gryseels, et al., "Integrating the Past", 637.

⁴⁸ Joshua M. Gorman, "Universalism and the new museology," 151.

⁴⁹ Sharon Macdonald, *A companion to museum studies*, (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 3.

⁵⁰ Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *Multipolar Globalization: emerging economies and development*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018).

⁵¹ Guido Gryseels, et al., "Integrating the Past", 643.

⁵² Ibid., 640.

in particular”⁵³. The goal is to transform the museum into a research center and a world reference institution for Africa and Central Africa. We see this praising tone in the presentation in the part exposing the institutional vision for the transformation:

“Through its educational and cultural activities and through its exhibitions, the museum also encourages the interest of the public at large in the natural and cultural diversity of Africa, its people, its societies, and its environments. It was clear that this unique combination of disciplines, expertise, collections and partnerships would be maintained and accentuated in the vision for the future, giving the RMCA the potential to become *the* institution of reference for past and present societies and natural environments of Africa, and Central Africa in particular. The historic dual function of museum and research institute would thus be extended to a triple function, which aims at optimal relevancy: Museum, Research Institute, and Centre of Information Dissemination about Africa”⁵⁴.

The curation wants to spread knowledge on “Africa” through the display of its different collections and its research activities. We see that the museum presents its involvement in different disciplines as an advantage for the expertise of the museum and this way would elevate its status to the one of a worldly renowned museum. The sense of pride can be felt in this congratulation of the work of the curatorship driven by a meticulous management of the multifocus interest of the museum throughout the years. An overall tone of sufficiency and self-importance is used to describe the vision for the renewal of the RMCA’s identity.

After the presentation of the new mission, the technical and practical transformation in the building space’s management and the museum’s activities were announced. A first amending of the public services was presented. The goal is to increase the publication of the research results of the institution. And also augment the collaboration between the different departments of the museum between the public services department, the management services, the natural sciences department and the historical and cultural anthropology departments⁵⁵. The curators also announced that a digitalization plan of all its collections would be set up to create a virtual museum online and thus steering the access to the museums’ ethnographic content. They explain that indeed a little bit less than 1% of the total collection of the museum is on display in the permanent exhibition, while the rest is kept in reserves⁵⁶. A more general project of re-branding the museum was also proposed, including a new logo, a new brochure and a newly refurbished website for the museum. The goal of this refreshed and modernized website is “to serve as a clearinghouse of information on the museum as a whole and on Central Africa in general”⁵⁷.

⁵³ Guido Gryseels, et al., “Integrating the Past”, 640 (emphasis in original).

⁵⁴ Ibid., (emphasis in original).

⁵⁵ “Mission, ethics and organization,” AfricaMuseum, accessed June 17, 2020, https://www.africamuseum.be/fr/about_us/mission_organisation.

⁵⁶ Guido Gryseels, et al., “Integrating the Past”, 641.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 642.

2.5.1. Epistemological and ontological contradictions

Now, for the purpose of analyzing the discourse of Gryseels et al., I will focus on the central points that are presented in the article for the new philosophy of the museum and expose the different points of contention. I will also take as primary source the final presentation of the philosophy of the museum on the official website of the RMCA⁵⁸.

In the words of Gryseels et al. in their article as well as on the modernized website, the intentions for the curatorship are to transform the museum into a “modern and dynamic research institution”, combining the labels of “Museum, Research Institute, and Centre of Information Dissemination about Africa”⁵⁹. The newly refurbished website replicates *verbatim* this description of the museum that was explained by Gryseels et al. in their article in the section “Mission, ethics and organization”. It is explained that the aim is to work towards the inclusivity of the African diasporas and Afro-descendants and to move “towards dialogue and transparency”⁶⁰.

The first pitfall in the renewed discourse of the curatorship is that it falls deeply into the epistemological trap of eurocentrism. The legitimacy of the whole renewal enterprise of the RMCA is not questioned. The production of such knowledge on “Africa” from this Eurocentric, ex-colonial point of view appears as an evidence in the curators’ discourse. What eurocentrism does is that the RMCA, as a Western institution, can assume its existence as the one of a universal authority that can decide what type of knowledge is produced on Central Africa. Whereas Central Africa does not have the same influence and power of knowledge dissemination. This is what eurocentric frameworks induce. No question is asked as to why such a research center on “Africa” is not in the hands of African researchers or why it exists outside the African continent. To illustrate this point, if we use the same logic but reversed, it would be unthinkable to have any other authority than Europe itself producing knowledge on Europe or creating a “Museum of Europe” in the same way that the RMCA is doing it for representing the whole African continent.

The pitfalls of eurocentrism are very visible in the whole renovation discourse of the RMCA. For example it is very present in the intention of the RMCA to work on inclusivity. When the voices of the communities represented started to take more space denouncing the loopholes in the stands of the museum, the museum started to reflect upon its own Western-centric positions. To address the problem of misrepresentation of the source communities, one of the objectives of the museum is to work on integrating those communities in the gestion of certain departments of the museum. Gryseels et al. mention: “the RMCA needs to become a forum for dialogue, a place of contact between peoples and cultures [in] order to provide a means for African communities to voice themselves”⁶¹. However this trend of democratisation in power management has the main flaw of providing a façade of political correctness, where under this manifest interest for source communities, lies the possibility to retain the greatest part of

⁵⁸ “Mission, Ethics and Organisation,” Africa Museum, Accessed June 17, 2020, https://www.africamuseum.be/en/about_us/mission_organisation.

⁵⁹ Guido Gryseels, et al., “Integrating the Past”, 637.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 643.

authority⁶². The power of action and decision-making on what truly counts and who gets to decide is still in the hands of the same persons. Inclusivity still allows not to yield any real power in the decisional process in the museum curation. As I have shown in point 2.4., this was the case in the lack of transparency and a real willingness of implicating the African subgroups was already very present in the association process with the COMRAF for the renovation project⁶³.

Inclusivity is also problematic at a more fundamental level. It is problematic that the museum wants to include the people it aims to represent, as those same minorities are claiming their right to represent themselves. The museum's aim at more inclusive practices could be questioned as: if the museum had implemented an egalitarian relationship at its core functioning on different levels, inclusivity would not be needed. That inclusivity appears as a solution is a consequence of the eurocentric view. It can only appear as a solution to the entity that puts itself at the center, and that sees the fact of including other communities in its management process as a "just" action.

Another element that Gryseels et al. expose in the article that testifies of the non-reflexivity of the curatorial approach, is the acceptance and non-questioning of the racist roots of the museum's first *raison d'être*. In this extract Gryseels explains how the museum emerged from the 1987 World Fair;

"The effect of this exhibition, which displayed the most investment-attracting export products surrounded by an array of ethnographic objects and animals prepared by taxidermists, in addition to the reconstituted Congolese villages, with real Congolese villagers on site, in the surrounding park area, was that scientific interest in the region was greatly aroused. It was thus that the dual function of the museum was born: an exhibition and research institute, one of the many legacies that have remained until today"⁶⁴.

No self-criticism is emitted on the racist character of the first roles of the museum centered on its "scientific" mission, which was actually rooted in the colonial sciences, and its "ethnographic" exhibitions, an alienating curiosity that spurred the birth of the discipline of anthropology. Here Gryseels et al. associate the display of the reconstructed Congolese villages in Tervuren with nothing more than a certain "scientific curiosity" for the region. This discourse is not reflecting on the inherent racist origin of this fascination, which is very telling of a non-consideration of the violent enterprise from which the museum emerged. This initial "scientific" mission of the museum is received simply as it is, as the unproblematic legacy of the museum today. In this extract it is almost as if Gryseels et al. are implying that nothing had changed between the "scientific" mission of the beginnings of the museum and its current scientific

⁶² Vicky Van Bockhaven, "Decolonising the Royal Museum," 1085.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Guido Gryseels, et al., "Integrating the Past", 637.

mission. We can easily understand why such negligence only reactivates the violence of the colonial memory for the Afro-descendant and the African diasporas.

Thus we see that there were two main problems in the discourse of the curatorship. The first problem is epistemological due to the museum's non-reflexive discourse on its eurocentric position. The second is a core problem at the ontological level, on how to resolve the paradox of escaping eurocentrism as an ex-colonial museum. How can an institution built in the roots of colonial history overcome the flaws of its physically and discursively anchored colonial past? How can an ex-colonial museum exist as a post-colonial institution? The whole enterprise of revamping an ex-colonial museum in a non Western-centric perspective is a philosophical, moral and ethical problem still not resolved to this day for the RMCA. As the ontological contradiction is being worked on through inclusivity practices, other ex-colonial institutions had to come up with practical solutions to play the role of immediate makeshift to address their main flaws such as repatriating some artifacts to the source communities or creating copies of the artifacts. Nevertheless, to resolve such paradox, it will demand from institutions such as the RMCA, first and foremost, an acute self-investigation and self-revision of its own Western-centric stances in order to eventually achieve some partial and satisfying epistemological and practical solutions.

2.5.2. The functions of the Tervuren Museum

At this point, it is a primary importance to analyze the evolving discourse of the curators on the functions of the museum. The transformation of the museum and its multifaceted functions was to revolve around three general axioms. They are all comprised in one sentence that was presented by Gryseels et al. in the 2005 article as a "mission statement"⁶⁵. The introductory phrase is also used until today to describe the role of the museum on the official website of the RMCA in its page "Mission, ethics and organisation":

"The Royal Museum for Central Africa must aspire to be a world centre of research and knowledge dissemination on past and present societies and natural environments of Africa, and in particular Central Africa, to foster – among the public at large and the scientific community – understanding of and interest in this area and, through partnerships, to contribute substantially to its sustainable development. Thus the core endeavours of this Africa-oriented institution consist of acquiring and managing collections, conducting scientific research, implementing the results of this research, disseminating knowledge, and mounting selected exhibitions of its collections"⁶⁶.

The first objective announced is to become a museum of "African History" and "African Natural Sciences". Even though the specialization of the museum on Central Africa is

⁶⁵ Guido Gryseels, et al., "Integrating the Past", 640.

⁶⁶ "Mission, Ethics and Organisation," Africa Museum, Accessed June 17, 2020, https://www.africamuseum.be/en/about_us/mission_organisation.

recognized, the implicit ambition of the new philosophy of the museum as announced by its curators and is to become a “museum for and on Africa”⁶⁷. Guido Gryseels explicitly formulated it this way in an article he wrote for *ICOM News* magazine stating that “today, the RMCA plays the role of museum, research institute, and leading documentary resources center on Africa”⁶⁸. Gryseels et al. also specified it this way in the 2005 article in their description of the logo when stating that the curatorship was “looking to become a museum for and of Africa, [with] a logo that expressed a ‘mirroring’ of ‘Africa’”⁶⁹. In addition, the curation chose and use as a common label for the museum the abbreviation of “AfricaMuseum” and chose this general name for its official denomination on the website. Consequently, the RMCA is often referred as such by the media and the general public in Belgium. Hence we see that throughout the whole article and the RMCA website, the curatorship discourse is anchored in this simplistic, all-encompassing and homogenizing neocolonial discourse of the African continent. Through its denomination of “AfricaMuseum”, and by describing its mission to be an “African-oriented institution”, the museum is stuck in an essentializing reduction of the African continent’s gigantic diversity of cultures and ethnicities. The neocolonial gaze in this representation of “Africa” as an foreign entity forming a block, is still very much present. This homogenizing vision of the African continent is the direct heritage of European colonialism that was spurred by a eurocentric vision of the world. How could one represent an entire continent through a couple of subjective exhibitions, in an ancient colonial institution, that has only a close experience of three countries (namely the three ex-colonies of Belgium; the DRC, Burundi and Rwanda)? This disparity is felt even more due to the current inegalitarian relationship between the three countries and Belgium in terms of economic and political power.

The second objective announced is that the institution wants to become a center of “scientific research” and a center of “knowledge dissemination”. Gryseels et al. explain that they want the public to see the museum as more than “only an ethnographic museum or only a natural science museum” and that the curators intend to “rais[e] awareness about Africa amongst the public at large”⁷⁰. This label of “knowledge center” “study center”, “research institution” allows the museum’s activities to gain a certain legitimacy but does not actually specify any further what will be the museum’s study focus. Research in what domain? By whom? For whom?

Gryseels et al. further explain in the article how the fact that the museum kept its museography unchanged for most of the 20th century is an advantage. For the curators, the “multidisciplinary approach [...] based on collecting and cataloguing”⁷¹ in which the museum was born, was what made the specificity of the museum and still remains a cutting-edge asset for the museum today⁷². They explain that the fact that the scenographies could remain intact during the 20th century resulted in this interdisciplinarity being rediscovered and being made an advantage of in the 1970’s with the advent of the “new museology”⁷³. The new “museum studies” renewed

⁶⁷ Guido Gryseels, et al., “Integrating the Past”, 642.

⁶⁸ Guido Gryseels, “Assumer nos responsabilités actuelles,” *ICOM News*, no. 4 (2004): 8.

⁶⁹ Guido Gryseels, et al., “Integrating the Past”, 642.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., 639.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

the museal theory and practice, redefining the museal practice ethics to advocate for a more comprehensive and interdisciplinary approach of museology⁷⁴. Gryseels et al. explain that:

“Having remained relatively unchanged since the colonial period, the museum finds itself in a rather fortuitous position with respect to an integrated approach: what was multidisciplinary research [...] can be maintained and especially transformed into interdisciplinary research and this research can be translated in the exhibition spaces, potentially placing the museum – in a sense – at the cutting edge”⁷⁵.

Gryseels et al. in their explanations refer to the first impetus behind the museum’s creation: the accumulation of objects under the colonial regime that engendered the large diversity in the ethnographic collections of the RMCA. It caused the museum to develop a very large panel of disciplines to study and categorise the numerous items. Consequently, the RMCA had a multipurpose function since its beginning; the institution oscillated between a political, commercial, scientific, aesthetic and an educational function. Such multipurpose function has remained to this day, with the museum being the household of numerous disciplines in the domains of cultural anthropology (ethnography, sociology, linguistics, ethnomusicology, archeology), history (art history, prehistory) and biology (geology, zoology)⁷⁶. The curators now present this multifaceted function as serving a collaborative work between all disciplines. This way the museum would be at the forefront of its expertise in the different domains. The fact that the museum emerged from this multipolar initiative is seen by its curators as an advantage that has been maintained throughout the years whose potential can be exploited today. However, from the evolution of the discourse of the museum, we see that under this idea of multidisciplinary lies a confused mix of practices that created more obscurity than clarity in the museum’s new philosophy and new scenography.

This idea of the museum’s main asset of developing an interdisciplinary capacity is actually just the outcome of the historical evolution of modern Western museums. As a matter of fact, the supposedly “advantage of multidisciplinary” of the museum is just the natural consequence of the evolution of 18th century museum models. The modern Western museum emerged in 18th revolutionary France when museum practice was governed by a dual practice of object accumulation and object classifications⁷⁷. Hooper Greenhill explains in his book *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*⁷⁸ that the epistemological context of European museums since the Renaissance imposed object accumulation as the way to develop knowledge⁷⁹. The main function of a museum was thus to classify those different objects according to different criterias

⁷⁴ Joshua M. Gorman, “Universalism and the new museology: impacts on the ethics of authority and ownership,” *Museum Management and Curatorship* 26, no. 2 (2011): 150, DOI: 10.1080/09647775.2011.566714.

⁷⁵ Guido Gryseels, et al., “Integrating the Past”, 639.

⁷⁶ “Collections, archives, and libraries,” Africa Museum, Accessed August 17, 2020, https://www.africamuseum.be/en/research/collections_libraries; Guido Gryseels, “Assumer nos responsabilités actuelles,” *ICOM News*, no. 4 (2004): 8.

⁷⁷ Eilean Hooper Greenhill. *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*. (London: Routledge, 1992), 147-164.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 1-23.

in a general taxonomy⁸⁰. Hooper Greenhill in his attempt to define what is a museum and how it is related to the history of knowledge, bases his explanations on the theory of knowledge that Foucault developed in his book *The Order of Things* (1970). Foucault explains that firstly, in the 16th century, classifications were made according to the items' similarities and morphologies in a sort of "similitude system" based on "visible features"⁸¹. With examples such as collections in the natural sciences with assortments of human remains, animal and plant species, other biological anomalies, or objects that were given a religious or sacred meaning⁸². An illustrative example is the practice of the "cabinet of curiosities" that were assembling a series of very different material things in the perspective to give a general "picture of the world"⁸³. From a similitude and resemblance system we then passed onto a system based on visible difference.⁸⁴ The structure of knowledge came to be based on "classificatory tables" and discriminatory hierarchies in a general "taxonomy of natural things"⁸⁵. And finally, with the 18th century's new vision of the world, spurred by the Enlightenment rational humanism and scientific revolution, the classification schemes that we know today were developed. We arrived to an organization system based on an abstract structural link, relying the different objects through their functions⁸⁶.

With the Enlightenment ideals of encyclopedism and universality, the "way of knowing evolved" into a division of objects according to their "organic link" with the history of human beings, in order to draw their relationships with people or history⁸⁷. Items were now organized according to "organic structures [...], of internal relations between elements whose totality forms a function"⁸⁸. In the 17th and 18th century, object division was ordered by "comparing visible features", whereas in the 19th century the "visible features of things are justified by their functional role"⁸⁹. For example 19th century paintings exhibitions dedicated to the categorisation of art according to a functional similarity, started to create a certain "art history" between different schools of painters⁹⁰. In the late 18th-19th century, this epistemological context led to the apparition of the contemporary model of the public museum with classificatory systems based on analogy and succession, explains Hooper Greenhill⁹¹. New conservation practices and exhibition articulation as we know them today emerged at that time. The concept of temporary exhibition became common and the position of the curator of the museum working for a "passive" public was established⁹². A division was made between a

⁸⁰ Ibid., 16.

⁸¹ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, (London: Travistock Publications 1970) 217, quoted in Eilean Hooper Greenhill. *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, 16.

⁸² Eilean Hooper Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, 12-15.

⁸³ Ibid., 77-105.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 15.

⁸⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, (London: Travistock Publications 1970) 217, quoted in Eilean Hooper Greenhill. *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, 15.

⁸⁶ Eilean Hooper Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, 14.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 157.

⁸⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 218, quoted in Eilean Hooper Greenhill. *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, 17.

⁸⁹ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 228, quoted in Ibid.

⁹⁰ Eilean Hooper Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, 140.

⁹¹ Ibid., 143.

⁹² Ibid., 138-143.

“knowing” and a “learning” subject⁹³. The production of knowledge became private and in the control of a few behind the scenes of the museum (cataloguing, inventories, installations) while a larger mass was consuming passively the work of the curation⁹⁴.

The advent of the ethnographic museum in the 18th and 19th centuries, and the collecting practices under the colonial regime directly succeeded from those Enlightenment models of museum practices of collecting objects and classifying them. It culminated in a collecting race between European and American ethnographic museums in the 18th and 19th century to gather a maximum of objects from the colonies⁹⁵. From missionaries to military campaigns, “scientific” expeditions to the colonial settlers and administrators, colonial museums collected from very different sources a large range of very diverse objects. The first West-European colonial museums were created as the official showcase for those imperial collections gathered over decades. Those ethnographic collections were very broad in types, ranging from human remains, biological sediments, sacred objects, botanics, to taxidermy items such as animals⁹⁶. It is the result of the violent and extensive programs of extraction that the supply of the largely notorious ethnographic collections of contemporary Western museums was made. Along with the Enlightenment ideas of a modern museum’s role as collecting and classifying objects, it is the violent nature of the colonial project’s extraction of objects that had engendered the large panel of samples held in the current European collections. This is why collections today are interdisciplinary and so wide and diverse. The museums could make with different interests since their inception as the tradition of 19th century colonial museums was to collect every type of objects possible. Ultimately, the historical development of 18th century museum models and the epistemological context of the time are what constitute the multidisciplinary of ex-colonial museums. This multidisciplinary study of things was the historical function of the museum since the Renaissance and has remained until today.

This evolution in the way knowledge was perceived and produced, reflected in the evolution of museum practices in the West from the Renaissance until now, shows two things. Firstly, that multidisciplinary has been at the core of museums’ practices since their first models in the 16th century, as well as at the core of European ethnographic museums in the 18th-19th century since their very inception. And secondly, that this epistemic evolution reflected in the history of museums is particular to the West. The evolution in systems of knowledge in the museum was guided by a rationale governing the classification system which is socially constructed⁹⁷. The outcome was a certain epistemology, a way of knowing, a rationale linking the division of objects that is typically Western. Later on, during the 20th century, the apparition of the “universal museum” inheriting from the Enlightenment ideal of universality will transform museums into “totalising institutions” offering a holistic experience⁹⁸. We will see that this multidisciplinary of museums was then reclaimed by those Western institutions as a core

⁹³ Ibid., 146.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 146.

⁹⁵ “Origins of the collections,” AfricaMuseum, accessed August 20, 2020, https://www.africamuseum.be/en/discover/origin_collections.

⁹⁶ Walter Mignolo, “Museums in the Colonial Horizon of Modernity: Fred Wilson’s Mining the Museum (1992),” 71-73.

⁹⁷ Eilean Hooper Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, 143.

⁹⁸ Eilean Hooper Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, 156.

foundational element, legitimizing their “universal” character. I will expand on the integration of multidisciplinary as this foundational element of the renewed “universality” of large Western museums and explain its problematic character in Chapter three.

2.5.3. An adaptive discourse around the museum’s functions

Behind this use of the term of “multidisciplinary” in the curation’s discourse lies the wide range of museum’s practices that already existed since the inception of ethnographic museums. The contemporary multi-discipline practices of the RMCA are the direct legacy of those previous models of museology. However, the mix of practices which the museum was involved in, created more confusion than clarity in the curation’s evolving discourse on the RMCA’s function. Through the demonstration of the confused philosophy and museology of the newly refurbished RMCA, it will be evident that this interdisciplinarity presented by the curators was not an advantage for the renovation of the museum as they claim. The curatorship’s discourse got more confused in the handling of the several missions of the museum throughout the years. The museum had to deal with a very broad range of archives and objects, developing a large panel of practices evolving over time. Which created more disorientation in the evolving identity of the museum. I argue that the claimed multidisciplinary of the museum was actually a disservice to the development of a clear and fixed vision for the museum’s philosophy and museology. The RMCA’s multidisciplinary focus permitted the curatorship to develop an adaptive discourse on the museum’s identity and simply recycle its old functions.

With the evolution of the social and cultural paradigms during the second half of the 20th century, once European coloniality was not accepted anymore, colonial museums were in a problematic situation. The colonial museums were once elevated to the role of authority producing knowledge upon the colonial subject. But once this authority was not recognized anymore, the discourse on the function and the function of the museum had to be transformed. If we take a closer look at the evolution of the function of the RMCA, the museum was created as a multipurpose institution whose function was versatile. It emerged from a temporary exhibition to serve as a propagandist and commercial tool under King Leopold II. Then, the scientific and aesthetic role of the museum were emphasized when it passed under Belgium’s mandate in 1908. Then the function of the museum did not change much until today. Only the “scientific” function was modified as the sciences themselves were evolving. The suppression of the colonial and racist sciences changed completely the meaning of being a “scientific institution” in Western museology. The RMCA had to redefine its scientific mission in the 1970’s with its implication in three main domains (biology, anthropology, history) and in the 2000’s with the renovation of the museum. We observe that the scientific mission of the museum existed since the inception, and what actually changed since then is the discourse upon it.

Now let us analyze the evolution of the discourse of the RMCA. If we analyze how this function was handled throughout the years, we see that the museum adapted its discourse much more than the actual function did. From the decolonisation process until today, the museum’s discourse successively departed from different aspects of the previous identities, according to

what was appropriate to the socio-political and cultural context. The mission of the museum started from a propagandist, commercial, and “scientific” institution in the sense of the colonial sciences. To pass in the second half of the 20th century into a scientific institution with great expertise in the natural sciences, and an anthropological and art history museum with a real educational vision. It took a gradual turn since the 1960’s to finally arrive today to the museum’s multi-focus between all those disciplines, with the present-day discourse of the RMCA as “a world center of research”. I have illustrated this evolution of the RMCA’s function and discourse in the following chart:

TIMELINE	FUNCTION OF THE MUSEUM	DISCOURSE IN RUPTURE WITH:
1897 - 1960	Political - Propagandist - “Education” Commercial “Scientific” - colonial sciences	
1960’s	“Scientific” - colonial sciences Aesthetics	Political – Propagandist – “Education” Commercial
1970’s	Scientific - biology, cultural anthropology, history. Aesthetics Education	“Scientific” – colonial sciences
1980 - 1990’s	(No change)	
2003 - 2018	Scientific - “World center of research” Aesthetics Education	Political

We observe that the evolution of the function of the museum changed relatively little as the function remained almost the same, whereas the RMCA’s discourse on its function was adapted much more and recycled the old functions to update it to the current trend. This adaptive discourse permitted shifting the RMCA’s political positions and neutralized the ideological controversies around its existence and its role. The RMCA’s original colonial identity had to be transformed due to a growing pressure coming from the socio-cultural context. The curators changed the wrapping of the museum’s identity but the different disciplines in which the

museum was involved were there from the beginning. The collections studied and exhibited did not change much. When looking at the evolution of the function of the museum, the RMCA had to suppress its political function, but it mainly kept its scientific and aesthetic functions throughout the years. What was changing was the framing of such function. The function of the museum was relatively constant, however its discursive ideological framing not so much. Indeed, the curation's discourse was adapted through recycling both the scientific and the aesthetic functions over time. Both functions remained almost the same even though the ideological tenets of the scientific function had to be modified.

Such discourse recycling was allowed by the pluridisciplinary activities of the museum since its inception. The multipurpose function permitted the museum to depart from its polemical original function of a colonial museum, and then adjust its political stances to the societal context. I argue that it is this multidisciplinary that allowed the museum to choose among its diverse functions and adapt the discourse around the museum's role in accordance with the socio-cultural and political circumstances of the time. This original multidisciplinary of the museum was what caused the curatorship to not think through the museum's function, and not engage in the new postcolonial epistemic change that spurred in the 1980's. The adaptive discourse around the museum's identity permitted the curators to reuse the functions of the museums without specifying further what role the museum was to play in the postmodern and postcolonial world. Which consequently, left the museum's philosophy and scenography untouched until the beginning of the 2000's.

This non-reflexivity on the museum's identity caused by the multidisciplinary and the adaptive discourse, is also reflected in the museum's new decolonized philosophy today. Through the analysis of several extracts of the discourse expressed in the article of Gryseels et al., I will show that the multidirectional aspirations of the museum made things more confusing rather than enlightening a new strong and inclusive decolonial philosophy and museology. Due to the growing pressures of a globalizing world, the stances of the museum were unsettled at the turn of the new millennium and the curation could not determine the role of the museum in the postmodern and postcolonial world. Ultimately, this adaptive discourse on the function of the museum prevented the curation from engaging in the radical epistemological and ideological critical reflexion that the critiques demanded, as the curation's discourse just recycled the old functions.

Another element that prevented spurring a critical reflection, was the fact that the museum considered itself a "scientific institution". Because the museum had been active in several domains due to the historical conjuncture, the curators could emphasize certain disciplines at times to suit the socio-political and cultural context, and not think through their role. I argue that the curatorship's discourse could be legitimized with the cover of being a "scientific" and "research" institution. The museum reused its rhetoric of "scientificity" to substantiate its discourse on its identity and its mission. Through a diachronic analysis of the evolving discourse, we see that behind the use of those different labels "research", "study center" or "knowledge dissemination", lies the possibility for the institution to not think through and define precisely its function. It allows the curatorial discourse to be adapted according to the ideas of the times, to accommodate the function and make it comply with the subject discussed.

The museum's approach to its scientific role is the perfect example of how the curatorship recycled old discursive approaches upon the function of the museum over time, in order to rebrand them in an acceptable manner for the contemporaneity without thinking more the ideological and epistemic implication. So we see that behind the term "multidisciplinarity" lies a mix of different museum practices such as research, conservation, education, knowledge production, etc. which is legitimized by the purpose of "scientificity". Those practices are denominated under labels such as "research and study center" and "knowledge dissemination" giving the impression of a core purpose and sound *raison d'être*. When really it is allowing the discursive approach to circumvent any real fixation of their identity and allow the discourse upon those practices to be adjusted to the current times without changing its ideology. The final effect is the one of a discourse that is adaptive to the socio-historical circumstances of the times, using umbrella terms that reflect a confused vision behind a flawed legitimizing façade.

We can see this adaptive discourse in the curators' presentation of the RMCA renovation. The presentation of multidisciplinarity as an advantage and scientificity as a justification is evident in the way the curators are presenting the evolution of the institution's role. In this excerpt, we see Gryseels et al. describing the shift in function in the historical evolution of the museum as a lucky historical accident that could be maintained and developed as a main asset for the institution today. We find this discourse around multidisciplinarity presented as a new "modern" asset for the museum today because the museum has now become a "research institute" and a "center of information dissemination". Such use of a modernized language of scientificity is legitimizing a confused vision:

"Through its educational and cultural activities and through its exhibitions, the museum also encourages the interest of the public at large in the natural and cultural diversity of Africa, its people, its societies, and its environments. It was clear that this unique combination of disciplines, expertise, collections and partnerships would be maintained and accentuated in the vision for the future, giving the RMCA the potential to become *the* institution of reference for past and present societies and natural environments of Africa, and Central Africa in particular. The historic dual function of museum and research institute would thus be extended to a triple function, which aims at optimal relevancy: Museum, Research Institute, and Centre of Information Dissemination about Africa"⁹⁹.

The curators explain that with the renovation project they intended to extend "the historic dual function of museum and research institute [...] to a triple function, which aims at optimal relevancy: Museum, Research Institute, and Centre of Information Dissemination about Africa"¹⁰⁰. We also see in this excerpt the confusion in the curator's presentation of the new function. Behind the "triple function" lies a confused vision of the museum's identity. The two previous functions still remain more relevant than the added one as nothing new is brought by this new last appellation. Firstly, the term "museum" has many different meanings. The use of

⁹⁹ Guido Gryseels, et al., "Integrating the Past", 640.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

a tautological definition to specify the function of the institution is very telling of the confused vision for the RMCA's identity. To define a museum by saying its main function is to be a "museum" is completely devoid of any sort of meaning. It is typical of the reuse of old patterns that do not add any new significance in the discourse of the museum. In addition, the etiquette "museum" can signify many different activities and can be used as an overarching term for so many different functions (conservation, education, publication, memorial, etc). It can also be used for different types of museums (natural sciences, aesthetic, memorial etc), reflecting the wide diversity of roles that a museum can play. Supposedly, what could be implied here behind the term "museum", is the educational purpose of museums, or the mix of different activities in which the RMCA is engaging (education, conservation, funding and conducting academic research, publication of academic articles, etc.). But the curation has left that completely unclear.

Secondly, behind the modern term of "research institute" and "information dissemination" lies the engagement of the museum in various activities for developing knowledge. These range from fieldwork and collection research, publishing academic articles, setting up conference works and training courses, deblocking funds for scholarships, developing academic partnerships, to developing online databases. What is ultimately implied here behind those two terms are that the museum engages in scientific investigation and publication. The use of the language of "scientificity" in the labels "research institute" and "information dissemination" is permitting a certain looseness in the definition of the museum's function. Such use of language gives authority to the museum's activities and leaves the museum's discourse on its identity unclarified. This is symptomatic of the confused vision that the curatorship has for the museum's identity. The multidisciplinary of the museum's activities creates more confusion in the curatorship's discourse, and due to the legitimizing use of the language of scientificity, the RMCA could not deliver a sound discourse for the renewal of its philosophy in the renovation of the museum.

In this chapter, I have explained in the first place how the claimed multidisciplinary of the RMCA was the result of the history of ethnographic colonial museums. In the case of the RMCA, the claimed multidisciplinary was not an advantage as it permitted the museum to not precise further its role and play with the different disciplines to adapt its discourse, confusing the curatorship. Then I have shown how the label of "scientific institution" for the RMCA has been recycled and rebranded in the museum's discourse to legitimize the curation's discourse. Ultimately this play around with the museum's function created an adaptive discourse that permitted the museum to not develop a strong and engaging radical epistemological change. Which resulted in a confused vision for the museum's new philosophy. I will now demonstrate how the confusing multidisciplinary function of the RMCA found in the museum's philosophy was also a disadvantage for the museum's physical transformation and created more confusion in the scenography of the renovated RMCA.

3. Second Chapter: A museology reflecting a confused philosophy

3.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I build on the main criticisms and problems pointed out in the new scenographic presentation of the museum by the different academic works and media coverages written since the reopening of the museum. I will draw on those critical works to elaborate my own opinion on the new “decolonial” perspective of the RMCA. I follow the argument line of Vicky Van Bockhaven¹⁰¹ and I argue that the museum has not mobilized a strong homogenous discourse to approach its colonial past and neocolonial present, nor has it provided a strong decolonizing methodology to debunk the neocolonial representation still very present in the museum exhibitions. I recognize that the museum has attempted to engage in the discussions around inclusivity and also that the renovations work in the museum testify of the good intentions and of a certain will to start a discussion around the colonial history of Belgium and the museum. However, after closer examination, it is clear that the museum lacks in-depth self-reflection on its epistemological approach and its colonial history. I argue the RMCA’s approach to its new scenography is too neutral and depoliticized for it to be considered postcolonial.

3.2. A still very colonial museology with no methodology

Concerning the reorganization of the architectural space, Gryseels et al. explained in their article that the permanent exhibition would be given a new space arrangement with a division between different halls dedicated to varying disciplines¹⁰². The desire was to translate the museum’s multidisciplinary and present in the scenography a flowing connection between each field of study. For a figurative plan of the ground floor of the main building of the museum showing the diverse exhibition halls as they are set up now see *Figure 1*¹⁰³. On top of the exhibition spaces that were dedicated to the natural sciences and the ethnographic collections, we can notice the addition of a new “Afropea” hall for the self-representation of the actual African diasporas in Belgium, a “Colonial History and Independence” hall focusing on the history of the colonial administration in the Congo Free State, and a “Long History” hall focusing on archeology. The “Rituals and Ceremonies” hall would aim at making a more precise distinction between the different ethnicity backgrounds of the numerous ethnographic objects that were previously exposed in a disorderly manner, and would permit to explain the connection with their cultural and societal usage. And finally the apparition of an “Imagery” hall which would act as a studio where analysis of black activists and researchers show how colonial propaganda and filmography have “created a visual hierarchy by literally looking down on Africans”¹⁰⁴.

¹⁰¹ Vicky Van Bockhaven, “Decolonising the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Belgium’s Second Museum Age,” *Antiquity* 93, no. 370 (2019): 1082–1087, <https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2019.83>.

¹⁰² Guido Gryseels, et al., “Integrating the Past”, 642.

¹⁰³ Vicky Van Bockhaven, “Decolonising the Royal Museum,” 1083.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 1086.

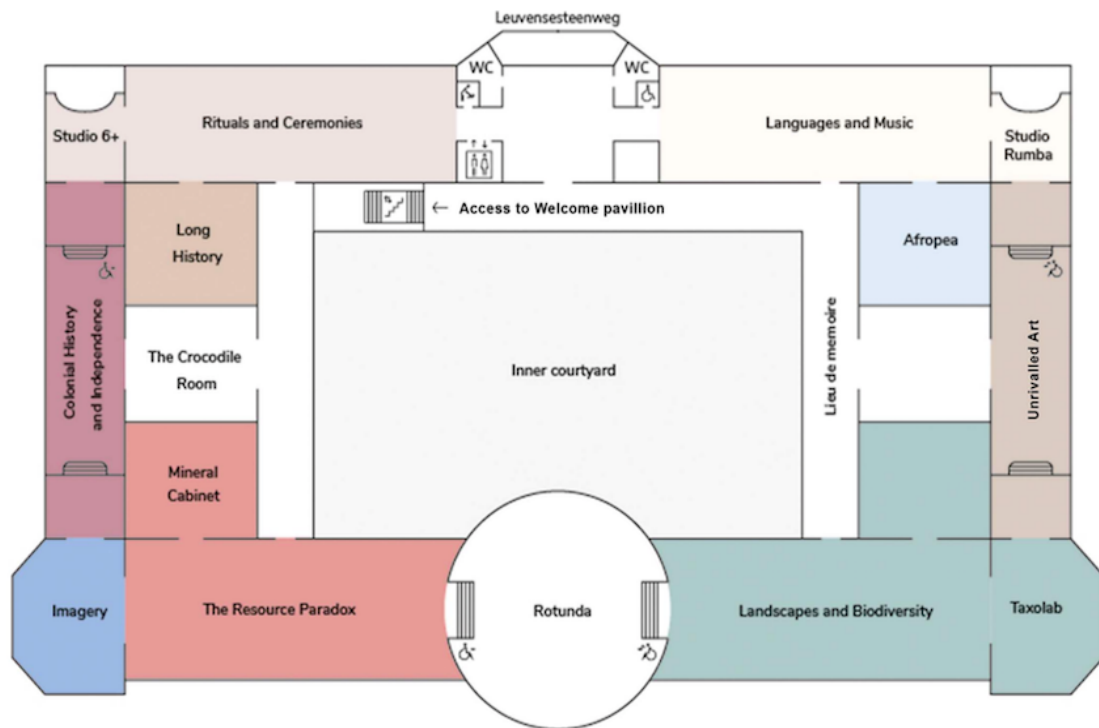


Figure 1. Ground floor of the main building of the museum

Also the qualification of the main building of the museum as a historical site registered on the List of Artistic Patrimony of Belgium by the Federal Buildings Agency¹⁰⁵ made it impossible to change anything to the original architecture. Therefore the project announced the construction of a brand new entrance building functioning as a “Welcome Pavilion”¹⁰⁶ to the historical building (see Fig.1). This way, the building’s “original architectural spirit [would] be respected and that, where possible, the building should be utilized to communicate about the colonial project”¹⁰⁷. This last intent was not met as only some part of the museology was used to teach the public on neocolonial representation and the building of the RMCA remained untouched.

The director Guido Gryseels is aware of the criticism the museum has received over the years, and seems to be of good intentions when it comes to work on inclusivity and decolonial deconstruction. But the results of the newly refurbished museum speak for themselves. The efforts to decolonize the museum are anything but sufficient. Among the most important transformations, we can cite the newly constructed “Welcome pavilion” that guides the public through a vast underground passageway that bridges the new construction of a modern building for the entry of the museum to the excavation of the ancient colonial building established by Leopold II. There, an introductory presentation of the collections takes place. A small room with no exterior light gathers all the controversial statues of a racist style, that used to convey

¹⁰⁵ “Tervuren AfricaMuseum”, Régie des Bâtiments, accessed July 12, 2020, <https://www.regiedesbatiments.be/fr/projects/africamuseum>.

¹⁰⁶ Vicky Van Bockhaven, “Decolonising the Royal Museum,” 1083.

¹⁰⁷ Guido Gryseels et al., “Integrating the Past”, 644.

the depiction of African peoples as “wild” and “uncivilized” people¹⁰⁸. The idea was to have a glimpse on the previous colonial reality that was also part of the museum’s history, and to emerge from this period towards the new refreshed perspective of the museum, displaying a more neutral and appeased vision for a cooperative future of all parties represented. But this repudiation is not explicitly explained, which is symptomatic of the whole museum’s position, explains Vicky Van Bockhaven¹⁰⁹.

Vicky Van Bockhaven is an anthropologist and art historian who worked as a curator of the museum between 2002 and 2007. She explains that the understated and inconsistent touches of critical self-examination in some parts of the museum reflect how the museum articulates its ideology¹¹⁰. The museum tries to engage with the different criticisms, but never fully confronts them upfront. It rather opts for putting on display certain narratives that might content certain critical opinions. Therefore we observe no “consistency in the scenography, with the tone of the narrative at times self-reflexive and critical, and at others, it digresses from the abuses of the colonial past” while some aspects of certain presentations of the museum can really be criticized from an ethical point of view¹¹¹. Throughout the whole exhibition, the lack of unity is blatant, with no well-defined position on the colonial heritage of the museum and the nation, or any provision of a clear-cut critical methodology for the public to deconstruct the neocolonial perspective. The general curatorial approach addresses tense issues obliquely when issues of racial and neocolonial representation need upfront mobilized conversation, says Van Bockhaven¹¹².

Therefore, from my own experience of the renewed exhibition of the Tervuren Museum that I visited in March 2018 two months after its reopening, I agree with Van Bockhaven’s statement that “too much is left unsaid”¹¹³. The constant neutrality in the museum discursive approach is biased, argues Van Bockhaven¹¹⁴. An example of the museum’s discursive ambiguous attitude is the wooden artwork of Congolese artist Aimé Mpané, a big wooden head in the shape of the African continent, that is presented in the middle of the rotunda next to the bright colonial golden statues in marble alcoves celebrating the colonial enterprise of the “benevolent” sovereign King Leopold II. The description under the artwork says that it is there to challenge the defamatory and racist imagery of the glorification of King Leopold “civilizing enterprise” of the Congolese people. However, it does not explicitly state how the artwork “confronts” the white supremacist ideology. The work of art is not enough of a clear statement as a standalone without any further clarification on what is the nature of the criticism and how it combats the racist features both present in the museum and our minds¹¹⁵.

¹⁰⁸ Vicky Van Bockhaven, “Decolonising the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Belgium’s Second Museum Age,” *Antiquity* 93, no. 370 (2019): 1083, <https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2019.83>.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 1082.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 1085.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 1082.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 1085.

¹¹⁵ Hugo DeBlock, “The Africa Museum of Tervuren, Belgium: The Reopening of ‘The Last Colonial Museum in the World’, Issues on Decolonization and Repatriation,” *Museum and Society* 17, no. 2 (2019): 276. <https://doi.org/10.29311/mas.v17i2.3066>.

From my experience of the museum, in many places in the exhibition rooms, the explanatory labels are too small and thus not very visible, leading the visitor who is not actively seeking information to easily bypass them. Moreover, they do not contain postcolonial methodological tools to debunk the neocolonial gaze. They are not going to the core of their explanation, staying at the surface of the problem. This is the case with the presentation of the racist statues or with the presentation of the ethnographic collections at the underground level. In the case of the racist statues, the labels only explain that those representations contributed to the racist imagery of African people until today, without explaining any further why such representations are inherently racist (see Figure 2 and 3). For example, the explanatory label could have explained which particular “deep-rooted prejudices and stereotypes” were vehiculated about African populations through those statues (see Figure 2). It would have been interesting to use those statues as educating tools, explicitly pointing to the idea of savagery and barbarism in the statues and setting them as examples for what is not acceptable to reproduce today (see Figure 2). In the case of the ethnographic collections, the curatorial approach mostly explains the methods used to collect the objects, describing the “collecting mania” that took place in the colonies with the advent of the first colonial museums¹¹⁶. They explain that most of the expeditors’ private collections ended in the museum and that also many colonial settlers were mandated to collect for the museum’s propaganda. After that, the growing interest for Congolese objects of the European and American museums increased the competition in the search and obtention of those ethnographic objects. The problem is that the explanations on the dubious methods of collecting are put next to the presentation of present-day ethnographic research carried on in Central Africa today and their resulting collections. This does not clearly separate in the physical space the questionable colonial extraction from the present-day anthropological research, thus creating confusion in the mind of the visitor.

¹¹⁶ Descriptive panels presenting the ethnographic collections at the underground level.

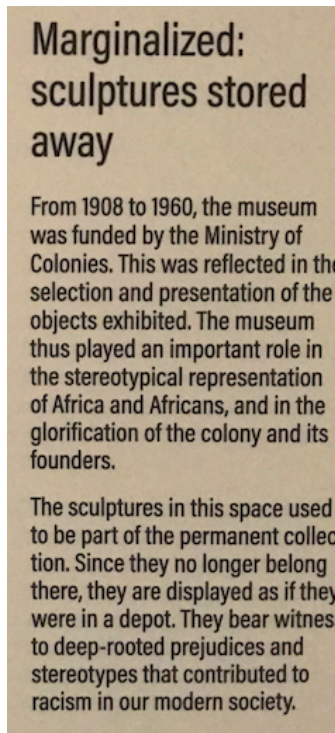


Figure 2. Explanatory label for the racist statues. Figure 3. Leopard-man statue¹¹⁷.

Another example that I drew from my visit in March 2018 is the new “Afropea Hall”. It is dedicated to the representation of the African diasporas of the 20th and 21st centuries. The room is supposedly a space in co-construction with African Diasporas and the public to present the actual knowledge on those diasporas, where visitors are invited to “share corrections and documentations”¹¹⁸. The museum encouraged the Afro-descendant audience to contribute with testimonies in the goal to establish the self-representation of the history of the diasporas. The room is supposedly playing the role of an “exhibition space, meeting place and documentation center”¹¹⁹. But the room is poorly articulated, with very old wooden display cases that do not convey the idea of a modern representation of African diasporas today, in clear contrast with the ancient African societies displayed in the rest of the museum. A modern representation of the Afro-descendants, African identities of the diasporas are missing out. So many different ethnicities could have been represented in an engaging way in the light of the richness of the dynamic hybrid and fluid identities found in the African diasporas in Belgium and abroad. Also, all the documentation is presented in an unclear timeline, whereas the different testimonies, archives and stories of Congolese testimonies and African contribution to the Museum could have done with an entire section dedicated to each theme. The overall impression is the one of a catch-all exhibition room whose design has been overlooked and skipped through without any real dedication. Which is disappointing to a lot of visitors’ expectations, as well as not fulfilling the museum’s objective of becoming a modern “world center” for today’s Central African diasporas in Belgium and elsewhere.

¹¹⁷ Both figures are my own pictures taken in March 2018, just after the reopening.

¹¹⁸ Those are the words used in the descriptive panel introducing the room.

¹¹⁹ *Idem.*

The above-mentioned examples strikingly illustrate the flaws of the new museology of the RMCA. Despite the efforts to shift the philosophy of the museum throughout time, it remains that the deeply rooted imaginary and ideology of western dominion and its cultural hegemony has left many traces. As Pieterse Nederveen explains it very right on point: “Eurocentrism isn’t just politically embedded but also epistemologically anchored. To unsettle grand narratives takes a lot more than criticism”¹²⁰. It will take more from the curators of the museum to decolonize than just some touches of self-criticism in its scenography and its philosophy. All in all, drawing from Van Bockhaven’s analysis of the new scenography and my own, we see that self-reflexivity and criticisms of colonialism are not completely lacking in the museum’s discursive approach. But as Van Bockhaven argues, they are arranged in a point by point manner and arranged in depoliticized memos¹²¹. The attempt at revamping the curatorial approach and the presentations with new research ambitions and auto-critic analysis are noteworthy but weak and inconsistent.

Drawing from the opinion of Van Bockhaven and my own experience and analysis of the newly refurbished museum, I showed that the museum is losing its focus in the name of multidisciplinary and that no real profound and homogenous engagement is done to answer the colonial question and the many criticisms the museum has received. Rather, the museum opted for a "point to point" political correctness. At times real efforts are being carried and results of self-reflexivity show. But there is no continuity or clear unity for the museum’s ideology and engagement with the sensitive points of (neo)colonial representation. Simply put, from the presentation provided on its website and the words of the director of the museum, the philosophy and the overall curatorial approach of the museum lacks a homogenous engagement and strong mobilization of means to achieve a decolonized museology.

¹²⁰ Jan Nederveen Pieterse, “Many Renaissances, Many Modernities?: Jack Goody, Renaissances: The One or the Many? (Cambridge University Press, 2010); The Eurasian Miracle (Polity Press, 2010),” *Theory, Culture & Society* 28, no. 3 (May 2011): 150, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276411399301>.

¹²¹ Vicky Van Bockhaven, “Decolonising the Royal Museum”, 1085.

4. Third Chapter: The Restitution Debate

4.1. Introduction

One could ask how an ex-colonial museum, such as the RMCA, can exist today in such a culturally globalized world and have the ambition to escape eurocentrism. Well as I demonstrated in the three previous chapters, the answer is; it does not. In a time where postcolonial and decolonial voices are taking more and more space, and where more pressure is put on the higher Western instances of power to deconstruct neocolonial practices, to integrate indigenous voices and to question its past and its own identity, finally the start of the new millennium seems to be more receptive¹²². Native and indigenous voices have always surged against the “Western models of museology” and against the Western showcasing and managing of their aboriginal cultural property and the Western-centric theoretical approach used¹²³. However, the perspectives of the source communities started to be more accepted in the moral, cultural and social complex of the second half of the 20th century, that is since the decolonization period. Consequently, in the last thirty to twenty years, anthropological and other large art and “civilization” museums in Europe and North America have had to revise their theories and practices upon their indigenous collections, and slowly started to integrate change in their curation and methodologies¹²⁴. As of very recently, eurocentrism and universalism found in museum curation are more systematically condemned, because they are not considered appropriate anymore for the ethical ambitions of the current era. We see this in the different examples of ex-colonial museums being unsettled and the debate around neocolonial museology and ethnographic objects collections who are being challenged more systematically. This is the result of five decades of academic research done in the fields of critical race theory and postcolonial theory. Those disciplines became more known of the general public and started to disrupt the establishment.

The controversial discussion around repatriation resurfaced in 2018 with French President Emmanuel Macron pronouncing a discourse in Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso) on November 28th approaching the polemic subject of the restitution of the African cultural patrimony. The French president stated:

“I cannot accept that a large part of the cultural heritage of several African countries is held in France. There are historical explanations to this, but there are no valid, sustainable and unconditional justifications. The African cultural heritage cannot solely be held in private collections and European museums. The African cultural patrimony should be showcased in Dakar, in Lagos, in Cotonou, it will be one of my priorities. Within five years, I want to establish the necessary

¹²² Carol E. Mayer, review of *Liberating Culture—Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Museums, Curation and Heritage Preservation* by Christina F. Kreps, *Museum Management and Curatorship* 20, no.1 (2005): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09647770501002001>.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

conditions for temporary or definitive restitutions of the African cultural heritage to Africa”¹²⁵.

Following his statement, President Emmanuel Macron ordered in March 2018 Bénédicte Savoy and Felwine Sarr to write a commission report to examine the situation of the African artefacts and to draw potential proposals for the restitution of African cultural heritage held in French collections¹²⁶. Felwine Sarr is a teacher of economics at the University Gaston-Berger in Senegal and a writer, and Bénédicte Savoy is an art historian teacher working at the Berlin Technical University¹²⁷. The whole report propounds the global enterprise of a definitive restitution of African cultural property held in French museums. They introduced their report with the argument advanced by Alain Godonou at the UNESCO forum on Memory and Universality¹²⁸ stating that up to 90-95% of the African cultural patrimony was held outside of the African continent itself¹²⁹. Godonou bases his argument on statistics on the number of items present in the different Western collections compared to the numbers of objects present in the African collections. He states that the inventories of the totality of the African countries' collections hardly surpass the 3000 to 5000 objects all together¹³⁰. He also specified that those objects were generally without great importance or significance¹³¹. The number of artefacts in Sub-Saharan African collections is terribly low compared to the weight of the European collections. Sarr and Savoy states that the British Museum holds roughly 69 000 objects from Sub-Saharan Africa in its collections, the Weltmuseum of Vienna around 37 000 objects, the Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale in Belgium has around 180 000, to the Future Humboldt Forum which holds around 75 000, and lastly to the Vatican Museums and the Musée du Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac that both hold around 70 000 objects¹³². The comparison between both continent's collections numbers is ridiculous. Sarr and Savoy accentuate their demands for a definitive restitution based on those numbers. The authors further emphasise this discrepancy stating that the “history of African collections is a European history that has indeed been a shared history”¹³³. Their whole report underlines that the history of the African objects in French collections and more globally those in European collections, is an asymmetric joint history based on Western domination, that should now return the favor to African peoples.

¹²⁵ Translation is my own from the French version of the discourse on the Elysée Palace official website. “Discours d’Emmanuel Macron à l’Université de Ouagadougou,” Elysée, accessed September 5th, 2020, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2017/11/28/discours-demmanuel-macron-a-luniversite-de-ouagadougou>.

¹²⁶ Audrey Peraldi, “Le Rapport Sarr-Savoy. A qui profitent les restitutions?,” *Kunst & Kontext*, no. 18 (July 2019): 58.

¹²⁷ Elysée, “Remise du Rapport Savoy/Sarr sur la restitution du patrimoine Africain,” November 23, 2018, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2018/11/23/remise-du-rapport-savoy-sarr-sur-la-restitution-du-patrimoine-africain>.

¹²⁸ Alain Godonou, “UNESCO forum on Memory and Universality,” (February 5, 2007), in: *Witness to History: A Compendium of Documents and Writings on the Return of Cultural Objects*, Ed. Lyndel V. Prott (Paris: UNESCO, 2009): 61.

¹²⁹ Felwine Sarr, and Bénédicte Savoy, “The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics,” (Paris: Ministry of Culture, November 2018):15. Accessed September 5, 2020, http://restitutionreport2018.com/sarr_savoy_en.pdf.

¹³⁰ Alain Godonou, “UNESCO forum on Memory and Universality,” 61.

¹³¹ Alain Godonou, “À propos de l’universalité et du retour des biens culturels”, in: *Réinventer les musées*. (Africultures, no. 70, May-June 2007): 114–117.

¹³² Sarr and Savoy, “The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage,” 15.

¹³³ Ibid.

As of the numbers exposed by Sarr and Savoy, we can easily understand why some African countries are asking for the repatriation of some of their cultural heritage. Most of their cultural heritage sit in private collections or in the collections of Western museums. Implying that most African people need to travel in order to discover their cultural patrimony. It hinders the possibility for young Africans to be conscious of their cultural heritage and be amazed by the “fabulous creativity of their source culture”¹³⁴. In addition to that, usually the African collections have to make with duplicates of their own artworks and artefacts, which are coarsely crafted and are for the most part in anything comparable to the original copies. This was the case with the copies of the thrones of the Dahomey Kings that were showcased in the Abomey Museum in Benin, the city where they are originally from, while the sumptuous originals were kept at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris¹³⁵. To illustrate this deficiency in access to African cultural heritage, the story goes that a Beninese Minister visiting the Quai Branly Museum was completely astonished to see for the first time how particularly refined and sophisticated the original copies of the Dahomey thrones were in comparison to the reproduction he had observed in his own country¹³⁶. Ultimately, we can easily understand why all those circumstances are feeding a feeling of injustice, spurred by a blatant and repetitive disparity in who gets the power to represent “others”. An inequitable relation between the West and the Rest where Western control is perpetuating the status quo.

In such a context, several official restitution claims have emerged throughout the second half of the 20th century for the recovery of artefacts that were clearly victims of theft or where the extraction method has been disputed by different countries. Possibly the most famous one comes from Greece and its official demand for the retrieval of the Parthenon Marbles. The negotiations to restore the marbles have a historical background that goes back way up in time, with diplomatic and mediatic agitations resurfacing numerous times. The artefacts are actually Classical Greek marble sculptures that were formerly part of the Parthenon temple in the Acropolis in Athens¹³⁷. They are marble architectural decorations of the classical style temple, gathering 15 metopes, 17 pedimental figures and a 75 meter frieze of the original West and East pediments¹³⁸. The artworks were withdrawn from the buildings of the Acropolis by Thomas Bruce 7th Lord Elgin who was the designated British ambassador of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the 18th century (1799-1803)¹³⁹. Lord Elgin removed the sculptures with the agreement of the Ottoman authorities as he feared for their protection and brought them back to England. A controversy around the acquisition of those friezes arose at the end of the 19th century. Voices were raised against Lord Elgin claiming that he had actually bribed the Turkish rulers, who had invaded the area and were supposedly the official rulers of the zone at

¹³⁴ Alain Godonou, “UNESCO forum on Memory and Universality,” 61.

¹³⁵ Jean-François Pollet, “Conserver ou Restituer les oeuvres d’art pillées en Afrique?,” *CNCD*, July 27, 2019, <https://www.cncd.be/Conserver-ou-restituer-les-oeuvres>.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ “Elgin Marbles.” In *Encyclopedia Britannica*, edited by Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Elgin-Marbles>.

¹³⁸ British Museum, “The Parthenon Sculptures,” accessed September 6, 2020, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story/objects-news/parthenon-sculptures>.

¹³⁹ “Elgin Marbles.” In *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

the time¹⁴⁰. The many written critics pointed to the dishonesty of Elgin and the illegitimacy of the Turkish powers over the marbles, who had no real interests in protecting those artworks¹⁴¹. Elgin sold the artefacts to the British government in 1816 who then donated them to the British Museum¹⁴².

The controversy around the extraction of the Parthenon sculptures resurfaced in the second part of the 20th century. Since Greece became independent in 1832, the Greek government requested several times the return of the Parthenon marbles, through public and private, written and oral demands and through different pleas¹⁴³. But Britain has remained impassive and unwilling to change its position while the British Museum reclaims its status of “museum of the world” insisting that the marbles should remain in their hands for educative purposes on the history of human civilisation¹⁴⁴. The real point of contention in this case is whether or not to qualify the removal of the marbles as theft or as a genuine acquirement. The most debated subject in the media is the merits of the acquisition of the Parthenon marbles. Britain does not recognize an illegitimate character to the extraction and Greece qualifies the action of Lord Elgin as illegal. However, no actual legal action has been launched by the Greek Ministry as they decided to use diplomatic tools instead. Greece’s main argument line is the reunification of the totality of the Parthenon marbles in Athens¹⁴⁵. The Acropolis Museum was even designed with a vacant place specially created for a future showcase of the marbles with the rest of Parthenon sculptures¹⁴⁶. The British Museum had originally offered a temporary loan to the Greek museum, but Greece said it could not accept such offer as it would have recognized British ownership over the marbles¹⁴⁷. Recently this year, Greek Prime Minister Mitsotakis revealed that he would be looking into the idea of a long-term loan by the British Museum in exchange of other important antiques never showcased in the Acropolis Museum¹⁴⁸. This would be right in time for Greece’s bicentennial independence anniversary¹⁴⁹. The Greek government has made such a similar proposal to France for one of its metope sitting in the Louvre. Surprisingly the French authorities responded with great enthusiasm and announced that they would examine its return in exchange of Greek antiques never put on display before¹⁵⁰. The

¹⁴⁰ Sophie Thomas, “Human Objects, Objects Rights,” *European Romantic Review* 27, no. 3 (2016): 320, <https://doi-org.uaccess.univie.ac.at/10.1080/10509585.2016.1163789>.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 322.

¹⁴² Ibid., 320.

¹⁴³ “The Plundered Past Of The Parthenon Sculptures: How The Greeks Can Get Back Their Marbles,” *News Network Archeology*, March 13, 2020, <https://archaeologynewsnetwork.blogspot.com/2020/05/the-plundered-past-of-parthenon.html>.

¹⁴⁴ British Museum, “The Parthenon Sculptures,” accessed September 6, 2020, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story/objects-news/parthenon-sculptures>.

¹⁴⁵ Jo Angouri et al., “Discourses of cultural heritage in times of crisis: The Case of the Parthenon Marbles,” *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 21, no. 2 (2007): 212.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ “Greece refuses British offer of Parthenon marbles loan,” CBC, June 12, 2009, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/entertainment/greece-refuses-british-offer-of-parthenon-marbles-loan-1.823686>.

¹⁴⁸ British Committee for the Reunification of the Parthenon Marbles, “Greece’s Parthenon Marbles loan request from France and UK for 2021 celebrations,” (n.d.), <https://www.parthenonuk.com/latest-news/462-greece-s-parthenon-marbles-loan-request-from-france-and-uk-for-2021-celebrations>.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Helena Smith, “Greece offers sculpture swap in bid for Parthenon marbles,” *The Guardian*, August 31, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2019/aug/31/greece-sculpture-swap-athens-partheon-elgin-marbles-boris>

British Museum still has not released an official comment to address the proposal¹⁵¹. Meetings between Greece and Britain have also happened under the supervision of the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee, without any success as the British panel of representatives successively hindered the cooperation for substantial and effective exchanges on the matter¹⁵². The international diplomatic and mediatic discussion around the repatriation of the marbles has been going on for several decades now, with no concluding solution found so far for both parties.

Another emblematic restitution case are the Benin Bronzes that have been reclaimed by Nigeria to the British Museum since the 1970's¹⁵³. The Benin Bronzes are originally from the Kingdom of Benin, which now has its location in the actual Southern region of Nigeria. The Bronzes are in fact different types of sculptures, plaques and other ornamental crafts from the ancient Benin royal palace that were looted in the punitive expedition carried by the British army in 1897¹⁵⁴. The most notable item are the 900 brass plaques originating in the 16th and 17th centuries that were previously attached to the palace's columns¹⁵⁵. The items were the object of donations and transfers through different auctions and official purchases, and this way ended up in many European and Western public and private collections¹⁵⁶. They can be found in many of the West's museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Humboldt Forum in Berlin, the Weltmuseum in Vienna or the British Museum¹⁵⁷. There is an estimate that up to 3000 objects are scattered around the world, maybe even more¹⁵⁸. Amid the Benin bronzes present in the English collections, two items that were previously retained in a private collection have been restored to Nigeria¹⁵⁹. Along those concluding efforts, a transnational consortium has emerged to steer cooperation between different European museums and Nigerian authorities. Along with Nigeria, Germany, the United Kingdom, Austria, the Netherlands and Sweden created in 2007 the Benin Dialogue Group (BDG) that work for the establishment of a royal museum that would showcase permanently at least 300 Benin Bronzes in Benin city in Nigeria¹⁶⁰. The enterprise seem to be coming to light with the BDG's conclusions after a meeting in July 2019 in Cambridge that tends towards long-term loans¹⁶¹. The idea would be that the loans last in total three years, and that when those expire other Benin bronzes could take their place¹⁶². And in this way the new museum would be the "rotating

johnson?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other&fbclid=IwAR2dIKrwIPQaRDuHx_JjR3sszjcN80tgL1XFuAt05TiflWkFyAq7NbjJnU.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² "The Plundered Past Of The Parthenon Sculptures."

¹⁵³ "What are the Benin Bronzes and where are they now?," *Art Collections Ethics*, March 5, 2020, <https://www.artcollectionethics.org/global-repatriation/2020/3/5/what-are-the-benin-bronzes-and-where-are-they-now>.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Alex Marshall, "This art was looted 123 years ago. Will it ever be returned?," *New York Times*, January 23, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/23/arts/design/benin-bronzes.html>.

¹⁵⁶ "What are the Benin Bronzes."

¹⁵⁷ Alex Marshall, "This art was looted 123 years ago."

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ "What are the Benin Bronzes"

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid.

display of the kingdom's art"¹⁶³. The BDG will meet again in 2021 in Hamburg to concretize the terms of the new Benin Royal Museum creation by 2023¹⁶⁴.

The Sarr and Savoy report was unique in its kind as it permitted reopening the door to discussions around ex-colonial ethnographic collections and the restitution of looted cultural heritage. However, several initiatives had been carried out in other European and non-European countries. A good practice of restitution of cultural artefacts has already been partaken by countries such as Germany, the United States, the UK, Canada, New Zealand or Australia¹⁶⁵. The former British settler colonies have been dealing with restitution practices linked with the "first" or native tribal peoples for many decades now, developing indigenous and customary restitution frameworks¹⁶⁶. The most visible cases are the ones involving the autochthon communities in North America and Australia who have been demanding some of their cultural artefacts back, mainly human remains or funeral and sacred items¹⁶⁷. The United States Congress passed in 1990 the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) which established a legal process for Native Americans to demand the return of human remains, sacred and funerary items and defined cultural artefacts held in federal museums¹⁶⁸. Australia also established a national legislation, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act passed in 1984, for the regimentation of the repatriation of cultural artefacts to its aboriginal populations¹⁶⁹. Both Australia and the United States have established frameworks that install the complete handover of ownership for the objects¹⁷⁰. Canada has been implementing restitution practices since the 1970's with its biggest museum in the country, the Canadian History Museum, starting to restore artefacts to first Nations communities¹⁷¹. The country implemented a national-scale repatriation policy in November 2018¹⁷², with in the last fifty years numerous successful examples of repatriations to different countries on a case-by case basis¹⁷³. The country set up a Truth and Reconciliation committee,

¹⁶³ Alex Marshall, "This art was looted 123 years ago."

¹⁶⁴ Catherine Hickley, "Nigeria plans museum for art looted from Benin," *The Art Newspaper*, October 22, 2018, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/nigeria-plans-museum-for-art-looted-from-benin>.

¹⁶⁵ Hugo DeBlock, "The Africa Museum of Tervuren, Belgium: The Reopening of 'The Last Colonial Museum in the World', Issues on Decolonization and Repatriation," *Museum and Society* 17, no. 2 (2019): 278. <https://doi.org/10.29311/mas.v17i2.3066>. See also Laura Peers and Alison Brown, *Museums and Source Communities*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

¹⁶⁶ Conal McCarthy et al., "Mana Taonga: Connecting Communities with New Zealand Museums through Ancestral Māori Culture," *Museum International* 65, no 1-4 (2013): 6. <https://doi.org/10.1111/muse.12028>.

¹⁶⁷ Neil George Westbrook Curtis, "Universal museums, museum objects and repatriation: The tangled stories of things," *Museum Management and Curatorship* 21, no. 2 (2006): 117.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 118.

¹⁶⁹ Liv Nilsson Stutz, "Claims to the Past. A Critical View of the Arguments Driving Repatriation of Cultural Heritage and Their Role in Contemporary Identity Politics," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 7, no. 2 (2013): 172, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2012.714243>.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 173.

¹⁷¹ Marie-Laure Josselin, "Restitution des oeuvres: le Canada, un exemple à suivre pour la France?," *rfi*, December 4, 2018, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/ameriques/20181204-restitution-oeuvres-le-canada-exemple-suivre-france>.

¹⁷² Gabrielle Paul, "Le rapatriement de biens autochtones ou comment garder sa culture vivante," *Radio-Canada*, December 1, 2018, <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/espaces-autochtones/1138862/rapatriement-art-autochtone-restitution-loi-parlement-culture>.

¹⁷³ Gouvernement of Canada, "Restitution de biens culturels," March 20, 2019, <https://www.canada.ca/fr/patrimoine-canadien/services/importation-biens-culturels/restitution.html>.

which created a Working Group for the creation of First Peoples Museums already in 1992¹⁷⁴. The concluding report of the working group propounded the foundation of fair partnerships between the First Peoples, mixed-race and inuits people and the Canadian museums, cultural restitution rights and the establishment of a specific funding source for the creation of cultural centers and aboriginal museums¹⁷⁵.

Germany had also been at the front of questions on restitution of cultural artefacts between European countries and their ex-colonies. Germany has had to deal with repatriation issues early on due to the historical development of World War II and the restitution of confiscated Jewish cultural property under the Nazi regime. The Western Allies restitution schemes for mass claims on nazi-looted Jewish cultural property were imposed upon Germany as part of the German reparation and restitution effort as soon as the Allied occupation was established¹⁷⁶. Those restitution legislations, mainly elaborated by British, American and French initiatives, stipulated that integral restitution of identifiable property should be carried on and compensation should be paid otherwise¹⁷⁷. Those restrictions policies were eventually implemented in German law¹⁷⁸, ensued the large scale restitution campaigns and the founding of international legal frameworks authenticated through international accords such as the 1998 Washington Declaration and the 2009 Terezin Declaration.¹⁷⁹

Apart from nazi-looted Jewish property, Germany had also been already repatriating cultural artifacts based on restitution claims from several different countries. An early repatriation claim of cultural artefacts held by Germany include the case of the renowned bust of the Nefertiti Queen reclaimed by Egypt in 1924¹⁸⁰. The bust was found in Egypt by German-led excavation enterprises that were regulated under a partage agreement between both countries¹⁸¹. However Egypt has claimed that its authorities were never been made aware of the bust's discovery, thus the artwork should have stayed in Egypt's hands¹⁸². Berlin stands by the legality of the partage system and contends to have played by the rules while Egypt denounces the use of deceptive means to extract the bust out of the country without Egyptian experts knowing about the discovery¹⁸³. To this day Egypt is trying to restore its artifact through numerous exhortations, while the bust is still displayed in the Neues Museum in Berlin¹⁸⁴. Another more recent case is the return in March 2019 of wooden sculptures to the Chugah indigenous community in Alaska.

¹⁷⁴ Gabrielle Paul, "Le rapatriement de biens autochtones."

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Dostal et al., "Between Individual Justice and Mass Claims Proceedings: Property Restitution for Victims of Nazi Persecution in Post- Reunification Germany," *German Law Journal* 15, no.6 (2014): 1038-39.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 1045-46.

¹⁷⁸ The German Federal Restitution Law ("Bundesrückerstattungsgesetz") was first adopted by the West German government in 1957. See Dostal et al., "Between Individual Justice," 1045.

¹⁷⁹ Bianca Gaudenzi and Astrid Swenson, "Looted Art and Restitution in the Twentieth Century – Towards a Global Perspective," *Journal of Contemporary History* 52, no. 3 (2017): 507.

¹⁸⁰ Bogdan Damian, "A Proposal for the Retention," 49.

¹⁸¹ Bogdan Damian, "A Proposal for the Retention," 47.

¹⁸² Ibid., 48.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 48.

¹⁸⁴ Ibrahim Ayyad, "Egypt renews demands to retrieve Nefertiti bust from Germany," *Al-Monitor*, October 2, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/10/egypt-germany-nefertiti-bust-claim-stolen-antiquities.html>.

The sculptures had been removed from a burial site and were held at the state-led Berlin Museum¹⁸⁵.

Regarding its relation with its ex-colonies in Africa, Germany has had to deal with repatriation issues as early as the end of the First World War and the Versailles Treaty, when the country was being dispossessed of its mandate over the colonies. (It is at this time that the territory of the Ruanda-Urundi was relegated to Belgium). Among the many clauses of the treaty was the repatriation of Sultan Mkwawa's skull extracted in the protectorate of German East Africa, present-day Tanzania, from the Wahehe people¹⁸⁶. The return was demanded by a British colonial administrator once the protectorate passed under British ruling to acknowledge the end of German colonial power and satisfy the Wahahe people through symbolic gesture. Indeed the return of the Sultan's skull was a strong identity attach for the Wahahe people as Mkwawa had been a figure of decolonization for the anti-colonial campaigns he had led in the 1890's against German colonisation¹⁸⁷. After many tergiversations and refusal on behalf of German authorities, the skull was finally returned in 1954¹⁸⁸.

Later on Germany had to deal in the 1990's with Namibia's newly independence celebration, opening the door for official reparations and restitutions claims on behalf of the Ovaherero and Nama peoples for the 1908-4 genocide¹⁸⁹. German representatives disdained addressing the repatriation claim, which escalated in a formal lawsuit filed in the United States in 2001 against the German Federal Government and three major companies that were implicated¹⁹⁰. The lawsuit did not come to a conclusion until this day, however the politics around reparations and restitutions started to be more accepted in the political sphere in Germany¹⁹¹. Which resulted in 2011 and 2014 in the repatriation of fifty-five skulls of severed heads from Namibian chiefs that had been violently extracted by German troops during the colonial era¹⁹².

Very recently, Germany came about with its own set of guidelines for restitution politics. In March 2019, one year after the publication of the Sarr and Savoy report, all 16 cultural ministers from the 16 German states met to decide jointly on the country's restitution policy for the looted artefacts during the colonisation period¹⁹³. Although the pact is not legally binding, the Ministers successfully came with the conclusion of a "joint declaration on the handling of

¹⁸⁵ Christopher N. Schuetze, "Berlin Museum Returns Artifacts to Indigeneous People of Alaska," *The New York Times*, May 18, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/16/arts/design/berlin-museum-artifacts-chugach-alaska.html>.

¹⁸⁶ Gaudenzi and Swenson, "Looted Art and Restitution in the Twentieth Century," 504.

¹⁸⁷ Damian Zane, "Why is a Tanzanian chief's skull in the Versailles Treaty?," *BBC*, June 28, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-48754953>.

¹⁸⁸ Gaudenzi and Swenson, "Looted Art and Restitution in the Twentieth Century," 504.

¹⁸⁹ Reinhart Kossler, *Namibia and Germany: Negotiating the Past*, (Windhoek: University of Namibia Press, 2015): 231-316.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 238-246.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 243.

¹⁹² Vilho Amukwaya Shigwedha, "The homecoming of Ovaherero and Nama skulls: overriding politics and injustices," *Human Remains and Violence* 4, no. 2 (2018): 68, <http://dx.doi.org/10.7227/HRV.4.2.5>

¹⁹³ Kate Brown, "In a Landmark Resolution, German Culture Ministers Pledge to Lay the Groundwork to Return Colonial-Era Artefacts," *Artnet news*, March 14, 2019, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/germany-declaration-on-restitution-1488250>.

colonial collections”.¹⁹⁴ However we see that the guidelines are a soft law tool that not every museum will comply with. For example, the state-run Humboldt Forum holding important archeological and ethnographic collections (including many artefacts extracted from the colonial era) who is supposedly opening at the end of this year, will not abide by those rules¹⁹⁵.

Macron’s initiative and its commissioning of the Sarr and Savoy report came about with new possibilities for the French ex-colonies. The report opened the path to a successful agreement led by President Emmanuel Macron himself to restitute 26 artefacts that were the object of an official restitution demand by the Beninese government¹⁹⁶. Those are statues, thrones, sculpted doors, reliquaries and *regalia* (symbolic royal attributes) that belonged to the Dahomey Kings that were looted by the French army in 1982 in King Béhanzin’s palace¹⁹⁷. The fact that the French government is yielding those items sends a strong symbolic message for the restitution of future objects between Europe and Africa. The Dahomey artefacts are not just any items of the collections, they belong to the national collections of the French nation, therefore requiring an amendment of the law in order to return them to Benin. As well as the fact that they are of a prestigious character and have a high economic value¹⁹⁸. At the time of writing, the agreement just received a first legal validation as the French National Assembly voted in favour of the draft law for the restitution of the Beninese objects in October 2020¹⁹⁹. The draft also encompassed the restitution to Senegal of a sabre and its sheath of high symbolic importance to the country’s history. The law amendment still needs to pass in front of the French Senate. This new keenness for repatriation is spurring high expectations and is signalling a will to cooperate among French politics. At the present time, the artefacts are programmed to be returned by 2021²⁰⁰.

Regarding the debate on cultural restitution between Europe and Africa, Macron’s initiative and the Sarr and Savoy report opened a “Pandora’s box”²⁰¹. Never such a voluntary initiative was led at a national scale by a European country. It incentivized other European and non-European countries to take the same lead for restitution claims. Germany followed the initiative with its own set of guidelines agreed upon in March 2019 to work towards the establishment of a legal baseline for restitution claims²⁰². The Netherlands followed the impetus spurred by

¹⁹⁴ Kate Brown, “In a Landmark Resolution.”

¹⁹⁵ Graham Bowley, “A New Museum Opens Old Wound in Germany,” *The New York Times*, October 12, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/12/arts/design/humboldt-forum-germany.html>

¹⁹⁶ Baqué Philippe, “Polémique sur la Restitution des objets d’art africains”, *Le Monde*, August, 2020, <https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2020/08/BAQUE/62067>.

¹⁹⁷ Sabine Gignoux, “Restitutions, le Bénin veut attendre son nouveau musée en 2021,” *La Croix*, July 5, 2019, par. 5. <https://www.la-croix.com/Culture/Restitutions-Benin-veut-attendre-nouveau-musee-2021-2019-07-05-1201033567>.

¹⁹⁸ Baqué Philippe, “Polémique sur la Restitution.”

¹⁹⁹ Eric Chaverou and Stanislas Vasak, “Restitutions d’oeuvres d’art au Bénin et au Sénégal: un premier vote unanime des députés,” *FranceCulture*, October 7, 2020, <https://www.franceculture.fr/droit-justice/restitutions-doeuvres-dart-au-benin-et-au-senegal-un-premier-vote-unanime-des-deputes>.

²⁰⁰ Sabine Gignoux, “Restitutions.”

²⁰¹ Nayeri Farah, “Return of African Artefacts Sets a Tricky Precedent for Europe’s Museums,” *New York Times*, Novembre 27, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/27/arts/design/macron-report-restitution-precedent.html>.

²⁰² Wissenschaftliche Dienste des Deutschen Bundestages, *Rückführung von Kulturgütern aus Kolonialgebieten: Rechtsgrundlagen für Ansprüche auf Restitution*, WD10-3000-023/18 (Deutscher Bundestag,

the German joint declaration when in March 2019 the National Museum of World Cultures proposed new guidelines for restoring items looted during the colonial Dutch regime. The museum delivered a set of principles and stated that it would proactively examine the museum's collections and identify the provenance of its objects, and not base their restitution policy on future case-by-case claims²⁰³. The museum delivered in its official restitution statement a set of criterias to determine which objects can have a restitution claim filed, and what process will the museum follow once the claim has been received. There are a couple of other successful examples of repatriation of cultural artefacts since the Sarr and Savoy report that we can cite. The UK National Army Museum's return to Ethiopia of two locks of hair extracted by an English soldier from the deceased Abyssinian Emperor in 1868²⁰⁴. The German Historical Museum restituted a 15th century Portuguese maritime stone cross to Namibia in May 2019²⁰⁵. More recently acquired artefacts are also being returned such as for example in April 2019, a Dutch civil servant announced the return of a 18th century ceremonial crown to Ethiopia. While the District Attorney's office in New York has been working on resolutions on cases of looting and illicit trafficking of cultural objects, the office resolved many cases for instance the return of a pair of stolen 12th century statues returned to India in September 2018, as well as gold sarcophagus from the Metropolitan Museum to Egypt in September 2019 that was stolen during the Egyptian Revolution in 2011²⁰⁶.

The Sarr-Savoy report is also what incentivized Belgium to reconsider its past on a national scale²⁰⁷. The Parliament has just approved in June 2020 a commission of experts to examine the colonial past of Belgium. The experts are supposed to be releasing their final report at the end of the year 2020. The commission will focus on several axioms, the most important being the implication of the Belgian state in the Congo Free State and the Belgian Congo and how much financial benefit was made. The goal is also to establish concrete propositions for the reconciliation between Belgium and the DRC, Rwanda, Burundi and the African diasporas living in Belgium and abroad²⁰⁸. A new spur for conciliation is spreading among Belgian

May 2018), 1-10, <https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/561162/d41c5c7c2312cbd82286e01677c187e8/WD-10-023-18-pdf-data.pdf>.

²⁰³ Museum van WereldCulturen, *Return of Cultural Objects: Principles and Process* Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen (Amsterdam: Museum van WereldCulturen, March 2019), <https://www.volkenkunde.nl/sites/default/files/201905/Claims%20for%20Return%20of%20Cultural%20Objects%20NMVW%20Principles%20and%20Process.pdf>; Christopher N. Schuetze, "Germany Sets Guidelines for Repatriating Colonial-Era Artefacts," *The New York Times*, March 15, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/15/arts/design/germany-museums-restitution.html>.

²⁰⁴ Alexander Herman, "One year after the Sarr-Savoy report, France has lost its momentum in the restitution debate," *The Art Newspaper*, November 12, 2019, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/comment/one-year-after-sarr-savoy-where-are-we-on-colonial-restitution>.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ District Attorney New York County, "Manhattan D.A.'s Office Returns Ancient Gold Coffin to Egypt," accessed September 25, 2019, <https://www.manhattanda.org/manhatta-das-office-returns-ancient-gold-coffin/>. See the News Press Releases of the District Attorney's Office website for further examples.

²⁰⁷ "Parliament approves commission on Belgium's colonial past," *The Brussels Times*, June 17, 2020, <https://www.brusselstimes.com/news/belgium-all-news/117289/parliament-approves-commission-on-belgiums-colonial-past/>.

²⁰⁸ Chambre des Représentants de Belgique, *Commission spéciale chargée d'examiner l'état indépendant du Congo (1885-1908) et le passé colonial de la Belgique au Congo (1908-1960), au Rwanda et au Burundi (1919-1962), ses conséquences et les suites qu'il convient d'y réserver*. DOC 55 1462/001 (Bruxelles, Chambre des Représentants de Belgique, July 2020), 3. <https://www.lachambre.be/FLWB/PDF/55/1462/55K1462001.pdf>.

politics, as the revision of the nation's colonial past seems to be more conceivable. The political sphere in Belgium seems to be more open regarding the question of the restitution of cultural artefacts as well as the question for the return of human remains still held in the country's collections. Very recently, the French university in the capital city, the Free University of Brussels (ULB) took matters in its own hands regarding the remaining Congolese skulls sitting in its collections, and decided to come to an agreement with the University of Lubumbashi (DRC) in October 2020²⁰⁹. The federal government decided to fund a working group to investigate the origins of the skulls (they are a couple of hundreds sitting in the university as well as in the Royal Institute for Natural Sciences in Belgium (IRSNB) and the Natural Science Museum) in December 2019 and will only publish their final statement in March 2022. The University decided not to wait and took its own initiatives to create a fruitful partnership with the Congolese university. Even though the physical return of the remains will not happen in the short-term, as the universities still need to decide the practical terms of the partnership, this is still a new turn for Belgium as the country has never considered before the controversial holding of human remains in its private and public collections. It is a first step in the good direction for the creation of a national policy on the restitution of human remains extracted during the colonial period.

4.2. Museums and Restitution

Liv Nilsson Stutz explains in her article how museums' and universities' collections, along with the academic disciplines of archeology and anthropology, have been the sites of a Western "monopolization" of discourses and representations about the past and identity. They were and still are embodiments of the West's monopoly over knowledge on the past and the identity of humanity, and they operated through the reproduction of a Eurocentric and modernist worldview²¹⁰. This "monopolization" process over the past, that Nilsson Stutz exposes, has been examined and thought by the postmodernist and the postcolonialist movements as pertaining to a system of ideological domination of the West upon "Others"²¹¹. Indeed, the control over the narratives of and the knowledge upon the past, such as the knowledge produced by the disciplines of archeology and anthropology, is an ideological tool that ultimately allows dominance. Academics and curators, among other actors, were the agents shaping historical narratives and subsequently, knowledge production. And universities and museums were the place for the production and reproduction of this "ideology of domination" as Nilsson Stutz puts it²¹².

²⁰⁹ Michel Bouffieux, "Décolonisation: L'Université Libre de Bruxelles va restituer des crânes aux Congolais," *ParisMatch*, October 15, 2020, <https://parismatch.be/actualites/societe/437106/decolonisation-luniversite-libre-de-bruxelles-va-restituer-des-cranes-aux-congolais>.

²¹⁰ Liv Nilsson Stutz, "Claims to the Past. A Critical View of the Arguments Driving Repatriation of Cultural Heritage and Their Role in Contemporary Identity Politics," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 7, no. 2 (2013): 172. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2012.714243>.

²¹¹ Liv Nilsson Stutz, "Claims to the Past," 172.

²¹² Ibid.

Walter Mignolo has explained this in terms of the significant role of museums and universities in the construction of “meaning” through a capitalist model of accumulation of knowledge²¹³. Both museums and universities acted as authorities that participated in the colonization of knowledge and beings²¹⁴. Mignolo affirmed the colonizing role of museums as “accumulating knowledge” in the modern and colonial world²¹⁵. For him, Western museums are an example of concomitance between the capitalist accumulation of money and the Western epistemic standard of knowledge accumulation²¹⁶. Western museums are vehicles for the propagation of this Western-centric vision of the world, a “Western cosmology” as Mignolo puts it, a vision that was constructed since the Renaissance upon the rediscovery of the Greek and Latin antique cultures²¹⁷. These two places are the sites where “the idea of Europe as western civilization was invented”²¹⁸. Mignolo explained that the two types of Western museums that emerged in the late 19th century were serving this epistemic and ideological domination of the West. Art museums, first, were acting as “consolidating the genealogy of European history”, and ethnographic and natural museums played the role of households of documentation on the cultures of “others”, says Mignolo²¹⁹.

Nilsson Stutz²²⁰ explains the role of museums and their collections through the use of archeology in a nationalist discourse serving specific political ends. Archeology, says Stutz, served the political agenda of colonialism and of modernity at the same time²²¹. She draws her work from the explanations of Bjørnar Olsen who has demonstrated how the important role of archeology in spreading and offering a material support to nationalism and colonialism during the 19th and 18th century was linked with modernity. Modernity, in Europe at that time, constituted two different “conflicting philosophical positions”, a first impetus towards rationality and progress, and a second nostalgic sentimentality for the past²²². Archeology is the epitome of both those two things as it is a scientific discipline examining the past says Stutz²²³. The author explains that the transformations brought about by modernity in most European nations during the 19th century, namely the breakdown of traditional folk culture of peasantry, the far-reaching social incertitude caused by agricultural land reforms, industrialization, urbanization and Transatlantic exodus, generated profound doubts and a profound identity confusion²²⁴. This heavy “sense of loss” engendered the impression that Europe was leaving

²¹³ Walter Mignolo, “Museums in the Colonial Horizon of Modernity: Fred Wilson’s Mining the Museum (1992),” in *Globalization and contemporary art*, ed. Jonathan Harris (Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons, 2011), 71.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 72.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 73.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 72.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 72.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 73.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 72.

²²⁰ Nilsson Stutz draws her explanation from the work of archeologist Bjørnar Olsen: “The end of history? Archaeology and the politics of identity in a globalized world,” In *Destruction and conservation of cultural property*, ed. R. Layton, P.G. Stone and J. Thomas, eds. (London: Routledge, 2001): 42-54.

²²¹ Liv Nilsson Stutz, “Claims to the Past,” 178.

²²² Ibid., 177.

²²³ Ibid., 177.

²²⁴ Ibid., 177.

behind something important that needed to be protected and recovered²²⁵. Therefore the need was felt to perpetuate that link with the past as a way for Europe to preserve its identity in the present”²²⁶. This anxiousness, along with the feeling that the lost identity needed to be recovered somehow, was at the origin of the restless collection of cultural material from rural and “unsophisticated” peoples in the nation-building project in Europe²²⁷. This eagerness to collect was then transposed to the collection of cultural heritage from “exotic” peoples in the colonial project²²⁸. Archeology was used in 19th century Europe to restore a certain link with the past in a period that was experiencing abrupt changes. Identities needed some materiality to develop a sense of shared commonality and archeology could provide just that. Material symbols were used for nationalist purposes, to establish continuity through time and legitimacy²²⁹.

Both archeology and anthropology were used for colonialist purposes seeking to establish the same effects of legitimacy, says Stutz²³⁰. The goal was to establish the validity of the superiority of the West, and also of its scientific foundation. Through the scrutinization of archeological artefacts of the colonized cultures and through their corresponding anthropological analysis, archeology and anthropology conferred the colonial project its legitimacy²³¹. Cultural heritage, says Nilsson Stutz, was put “at the service of the colonial political agenda”²³². She explains that archeologists, ethnographers, anatomists and other agents of the colonial/modern project, were taking part in a “salvage ethnography” and amassing different objects from communities that they needed to understand as inferior²³³.

Although both disciplines have been used in the nationalist agenda of nation-building in Europe and in the colonial enterprise in the 19th and early 20th century, Stutz specifies a crucial two-fold difference between the nationalist and the colonial context. Firstly, while the socio-political structures of nations in Europe were glorifying their own cultural patrimony in natural museums, such as the remains of their predecessors for instance, the cultural artefacts of the colonized were sent to different exhibition showrooms to be presented in natural history museums throughout Europe. Resulting in the holding of much of the African cultural heritage in European and North American museums today²³⁴. Europeans could remain the holders of their cultural heritage while the colonial looting dispossessed the colonized from their cultural material. Secondly, the hegemonic power of the West on the narrative of the past naturalized the “indigenous” as inferior, essentializing its culture, body, and exoticizing its existence with the intent to give more authority to the colonial enterprise²³⁵. Stutz advanced that it is such

²²⁵ Liv Nilsson Stutz, “Claims to the Past,” 177.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Ibid., 176.

²³⁰ Ibid., 177.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Ibid.

unjust treatment and practices that spurred the numerous indigeneous claims of repatriation of cultural heritage that arose since the end of the Cold War.

Those two specificities of the colonial project are the reason why repatriation claims are increasing today. Repatriation claims started to be inscribed in a historic movement of independence, says Nilsson Stutz²³⁶. Repatriation is seen as more than a simple passation of ownership, repatriation claims are a plea to the right to culture, repatriation is the request of indigeneous communities for the right to “define themselves, their history and their identity”²³⁷. But more than that, it is considered a plan of action for reconciliation and a means to reclaim sovereignty²³⁸. From the perspective of minorities, claims for the repatriation of lost cultural heritage has been identified with colonial liberation, and as a way for minorities to gain independence from the West. Stutz states that “the recent indigeneous claims to cultural heritage have become inscribed into a progressive history of emancipation”²³⁹. The debate upon repatriation is predominantly brandished by indigeneous voices today, because those communities have inherited from this post-colonial history of deliverance from the West. Cultural heritage becomes the site for reclaiming the right to narrate the past, to claim back sovereignty and to recuperate their right to self-determination²⁴⁰. Stutz says that political revendications to tell the past is a tool now employed in the construction of “postcolonial national identities”²⁴¹. Repatriation of cultural heritage is now perceived and used as a tool for constructing the postcolonial identities of the previously oppressed communities.

This is why museums have been the principal target in the debate on the repatriation of the cultural goods extracted by Europeans during the colonization of Africa. Hooper Greenhill says that today museums have become “sites for active and visible ideological struggles”²⁴². The present-day ideological struggles confronting Western museums and their collections today are reflecting the crucial questions that are typical of the new millenium. With the resurgence of the postcolonial and the postmodernist theories since the 1980’s, global power relationships were put into question and claims for shared authority in the decisional powers were made. The emergence of the “new museology” in the late 1990’s did just that in the domain of museum curatorship. This new field of academic studies and museum discussions spurred a new diversification in the stakeholders’s profile in the curatorship²⁴³. It directed the discussions about museums on the topics of shared curation and shared ownership of cultural artefacts²⁴⁴. It established a new museum ethics that was questioning the old practices of collecting and the old models of ownership²⁴⁵.

²³⁶ Liv Nilsson Stutz, “Claims to the Past,” 172.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Ibid., 177.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 182.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 180.

²⁴² Eilean Hooper Greenhill. *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, 152.

²⁴³ Joshua M. Gorman, “Universalism and the new museology: impacts on the ethics of authority and ownership.” *Museum Management and Curatorship* 26, no. 2 (2011): 149.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09647775.2011.566714>.

²⁴⁴ Joshua M. Gorman, “Universalism and the new museology,” 150.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 151.

Postcolonialism stated the crucial need to decolonize culture, while the new museum studies inherited from this postcolonial legacy and stated the role of museums and other cultural sites in entrenching this decolonization process. Walter Mignolo reaffirmed the role of culture in the process of decoloniality and the potential of cultural sites for the reappropriation of one's postcolonial identity²⁴⁶. Mignolo argues for a decolonization of the museum both in the scholarship and in the museum exhibitions and collections²⁴⁷. Museums as important and visible cultural sites, with their material symbols, became in the last thirty-fourth years the sites of struggles for decolonization.

Moreover, we can understand the place of museums in the debate around restitution with their historical link to modernity. The postcolonial school of thought, along with the study of Orientalism, the Dependency school and the consequences of post-structuralist thinkers (Foucault, Derrida, Lacan) demonstrated that colonialism was the Janus face of modernity²⁴⁸. They exposed those two aspects as existing in interdependence, that they are both different facets of the same reality. The modernist project can not exist without colonial exploitation. They have shed light on the link between colonialism and modernity. Museums were the places for the exposure of both the modernist and the colonialist project. The project of modernity says Mignolo, as "this triumphal march of history toward a better future for humanity", influenced the conception of museums as the place for the accumulation of knowledge, in the same logic that the encyclopedia model²⁴⁹. Nevertheless, because museums emerged during the Renaissance period, they were inevitably connected to the logic of coloniality, says Mignolo, to "civilize the inhabitants of the planet that were still outside of history, the barbarians and primitives"²⁵⁰. Museums have thus embodied this dual reality, this interdependence between modernity and colonialism and still are today to the eyes of indigenous communities reclaiming their artefacts. This is why today museums are sites of ideological struggles. Repatriation is seen as a movement for emancipation because museums have embodied the modernist/colonial project and have been, or still are for some museums, the relics of this multifaceted project.

As our current world is guided by new post-colonial, post-industrial forces and a generally globalizing political context, a new questioning of the past takes place and museums and their collections as the first place of production on, and products of the past are being called out²⁵¹. Archeology and anthropology, like most academic disciplines, reflected the values of their times. Those disciplines, as well as the histories of museums are being critically re-inspected, and most importantly the "contemporary role [of museums] are being renegotiated" says Stutz²⁵². Coming from a previous posture of authority, museums and those scientific disciplines now have to yield components of their collections, but also their "monopoly to interpret the

²⁴⁶ Walter Mignolo, "Museums in the Colonial Horizon of Modernity," 71-85.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 72.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 76.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 73.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 73.

²⁵¹ Liv Nilsson Stutz, "Claims to the Past," 172.

²⁵² Ibid.

past”²⁵³. And the first indication of this changing global dynamics is the growing number of demands for repatriation of cultural artefacts. Stutz states that it is the signal of a “changed world order” where previously oppressed groups are now reclaiming a certain political influence notably through regaining authority over their cultural heritage and the remains of their predecessors²⁵⁴. She argues that, from the many examples of repatriation demands, most claims are inscribed in this collective discourse for the liberation of formerly colonized peoples, in a global enthusiasm for the self-definition of oppressed groups that have been destituted of their right to “write their own histories”²⁵⁵.

The incentive to demand the return of cultural heritage has become a global phenomenon²⁵⁶. It was indeed not the case before. Attempts of indigenous communities to repatriate human remains and cultural property in the 19th and 20th centuries were “disparate, isolated appeals to individual museums or the courts and the results were mixed” says Timothy McKeown²⁵⁷. Having spurred from the civil rights movements in the 1960’s and 1970’s in Australia and the United States, indigenous groups started in the 1980’s to augment the extent and the number of repatriation demands in those two countries as well as in Canada and New Zealand²⁵⁸. Minority groups increased their transnational associative work with other indigneous groups and professional organizations, which transformed their intentions into a global movement for repatriation. Since the end of the Cold War, their work was translated into the propagation of national and international legal and policy frameworks that allowed greater possibilities for other indigenous groups²⁵⁹. Eventually, repatriation claims started to burgeon in many different countries in the world, to the point of having a “global florescence” of repatriation demands in the twenty-first century²⁶⁰. This global phenomenon was also highlighted by the 2007 adoption of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples of the World by the United Nations General Assembly affirming the need for indigneous communities to access their ceremonial objects and the return of human remains²⁶¹.

Transnational restitution of artefacts is raising. From the many examples of repatriation agreements that exist today, we see that different types of cooperation were put into place. There are examples involving museums and nation-states, or also agreements between museums and indigenous communities. From the examples of the national legal framework established for the Native Americans in the United States and for the Native Aborigines of Australia, there are also agreements that have been established outside of legal frameworks between governments and indigenous groups. For instance, arrangements have been established for the management of cultural heritage between governments and the

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 171.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Timothy McKeown, “Indigenous repatriation: The rise of a global legal movement,” in *The Routledge Companion to Indigenous Repatriation*, ed. Cressida Fforde, C. Timothy McKeown, Honor Keeler (London: Routledge, 2020), 1-21.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 27-38.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 27-38.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 26.

²⁶¹ Ibid., 23.

representatives of the Sami peoples in Finland, Norway and Sweden, as well as for Jewish communities in Sweden, Spain and the United Kingdom²⁶². Greenland is a successful case as it has seen its demand for approximately 35 000 ethnographic and archeological Inuit artefacts that were held in the National Museum in Copenhagen²⁶³. Another successful example of collaboration between museum and minorities is the restitution of numerous *toi moko* (conserved Maori tattooed heads) from several museums all over the world to the Te Papa Tongarewa Museum in New Zealand²⁶⁴.

In most instances the process of finding an agreement usually does not take place in the context of legal international frameworks such as the case of Greenland and New Zealand. The most recent and extensive legislation concerning the management of ownership of cultural property is the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property. However, this convention is not retrospective therefore it does not cover the artefacts looted and issuing from theft under the colonial regimes. Instead, repatriations are modeled upon the mentorship delivered by ICOM, the International Council of Museums, which deposited a set of policy standards in their Code of Ethics for Museums in 2004. The main lines of the guidebook states that museums “should be prepared to initiate dialogue for the return of cultural property to a country or people of origin” and that the process should be done in “an impartial manner, based on scientific, professional and humanitarian principles as well as applicable local, national and international legislation”²⁶⁵.

4.3. Complex positions and nuanced realities

Regarding the repatriation claims targeted at Western museums and the restitution of African cultural heritage held in their collections, we see that most museums were reticent at first. Both well-founded and less well-founded arguments were used to counter the repatriation demands that they were receiving. The principal counter-argument claimed by the museums for retaining the cultural objects is technical. The large Western institutions refute the restitution demands by stating that the museums of the claiming nations are not sufficiently developed in order to retrieve permanently their cultural artifacts and conserve them appropriately. It is often stated

²⁶² Eeva-Kristiina Harlin, “Repatriation as knowledge sharing: returning the Sámi cultural heritage,” in *UTIMUT. Past heritage- future partnership. Discussions on repatriation in the 21st century*. ed. Mille Gabriel and Jens Dahl, (Copenhagen: IWGIA, Document No. 122, 2018), 192-200.

²⁶³ Bjarne Grønnow, and Einar Lund Jensen, “Utimut: repatriation and collaboration between Denmark and Greenland,” in *UTIMUT. Past heritage- future partnership. Discussions on repatriation in the 21st century*, ed. Mille Gabriel and Jens Dahl (Copenhagen: IWGIA, document No. 122), 180-191.

²⁶⁴ See Neil Curtis, “Thinking about the right home - repatriation and the University of Aberdeen,” in *UTIMUT. Past heritage- future partnership. Discussions on repatriation in the 21st century*, ed. Mille Gabriel and Jens Dahl (Copenhagen: IWGIA, Document No. 122, 2008) 44-54;
Te Herekiele Herewini, “The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa) and the repatriation of Kōiwi Tangata (Māori and Moriori skeletal remains) and Toi Moko (mummified Maori tattooed heads),” *International journal of cultural property*, no. 15 (2008): 405-406.

²⁶⁵ ICOM, *Code of Ethics for Museums*, re-titled and revised by the General Assembly of ICOM in Seoul, 8 October 2004, art. 6.2.

that the European and Western conservation efforts and infrastructures for the management of cultural objects are more qualitative and efficient, and that in general objects are more well looked after in European museums than in their corresponding museums in African countries for example. If we look at the example of the African heritage held in the Belgian and French museums, often claimed by those institutions is the generally accepted benefit of the African cultural heritage to remain in the hands of the Europeans. This paternalistic argument is reminiscent of the neocolonial argument line. This argument is spurred by a paternalistic and condescending vision of the African nations' capabilities to care for their own cultural heritage. This is the direct consequence of a eurocentric view of art and museology in general. This view implies that European and North American museums are investigated with a particular mission of "guardianship" of this heritage that is of "universal" relevance.

This argument finds a base also in some examples of restitution by Western museums to African museums that failed in their conservation mission, which opened the door to a general distrust of African institutions. We can cite the case of the RMCA giving back 114 artifacts to the Institute of National Museums of Zaïre under Mobutu's regime (actual Democratic Republic of Congo) between 1976 and 1982²⁶⁶. A large part of the objects disappeared after the fall of the Mobutu regime in the mid-1990's²⁶⁷. It is worth mentioning that this action is actually a case of repatriation that is unique in its kind, and unique in the number of objects transferred, for a passation that took place between Europe and Africa. However this example is now used as a reason not to transfer any other artefacts to African museums. We can also cite the quasi systematic looting of the museums of the "Institut français d'Afrique noire" (IFAN) inherited from the colonial period in the French ex-colonies²⁶⁸. Examples such as those are used as justifications for the generalized mistrust of Western institutions towards the conservation measures and infrastructures of African countries.

Nevertheless, this patronizing argument is not well-founded as there are plenty of museum success-stories along with the creation of new museums in different African countries. We can cite the brand new National Museum of the Democratic Republic of Congo (the "MNRDC" in French or the "Musée National de la République Démocratique du Congo) that was inaugurated in Kinshasa in November 2019²⁶⁹. The new museum was subsidised by South Korea for a total worth of 20 millions dollars and puts on display up to 400 works of art.²⁷⁰ Another example is the inauguration of the Black Civilisations Museum ("Musée des Civilisations Noires" in French under the short name "MCN") in Dakar, Senegal, in December 2018²⁷¹. The Museum architecture is quite simply splendid and has nothing to envy to the architectural standards of

²⁶⁶ Guido Gryseels, "Assuming Our Responsibilities in the Present," *ICOM News*, no. 1 (2004):8.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ Baqué Philippe, "Polémique sur la Restitution", par. 7.

²⁶⁹ "Democratic Republic of Congo to inaugurate national museum," *BBC News*, November 23, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-50528975>.

²⁷⁰ "Félix Tshisekedi lors de l'inauguration du grand musée national à Kinshasa : "Les Belges nous ont aidés à conserver notre patrimoine", *RTBF*, November 24, 2019. https://www.rtbf.be/info/monde/detail_felix-tshiseke-di-lors-de-l-inauguration-du-grand-musee-national-a-kinshasa-les-belges-nous-ont-aides-a-conserver-notre-patrimoine?id=10372831.

²⁷¹ "Le Sénégal inaugure un Musée des Civilisations noires à Dakar," *Le Monde*, December 5, 2018, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2018/12/05/le-senegal-inaugure-un-musee-des-civilisations-noires-a-dakar_5392879_3212.html.

Western museums. With a surface of 14 000m², the museum can hold up to 18 000 cultural artefacts²⁷². The project's construction and arrangement was financed by China for up to 30 millions euros²⁷³. The museum was established fifty years after the first president of the country Leopold Sédar Senghor presented this idea, and was envisioned as a “pan-african project” to highlight the contribution of Africa to the cultural and scientific heritage of the world²⁷⁴. We can also cite the construction of several brand new museums in Benin. Among them is the construction of a new museum in the historic site of Abomey in Cotonou that should open at the end of 2020, early 2021²⁷⁵. The goal is to welcome the 26 artefacts from the Dahomey Kings following the concluding legal agreement with France to repatriate those items²⁷⁶. This project is conducted with the cooperation and the financial support of France who will be giving 20 million euros to the construction of the museum as well as for the renovation of four of the Royal Palaces of the historic site of Abomey²⁷⁷. Another international Museum for the Memory of Slavery (MIME) should be inaugurated at the end of this year (2020) in Benin in the city of Ouidah with the financing of 14 millions euros received from the World Bank²⁷⁸. This museum is part of a more global enterprise of the Ministry of Tourism to steer the questions of memory, of the local and national history and of the “Beninese cultural exception” in the country²⁷⁹. As well as the museum, is the rehabilitation of the Portuguese Fort near the city of Ouidah, the symbolic slave route that is still in use today, the historical reconstruction of a slave ship, or the creation of a large touristic complex of 130 rooms with several “memory gardens” and a space of recueillement, and the construction of several vodou museums²⁸⁰. Those successful examples of museum enterprises in Sub-Saharan African countries are proofs of the continent's potential for museology and curation in general.

A second argument that is very often retorted in the debate around cultural repatriation is the question of the recipients. To whom should the cultural artefacts be returned to? In numerous cases it is difficult to define who are the real beneficiaries to whom the cultural artefacts should be returned to. The commonly accepted argument in the repatriation debate is the one calling for a certain “moral justice”, holding as a premise that the removal of the cultural object was morally illicit and wrongful²⁸¹. Thus, to indemnify victims of historic injustices, cultural repatriation is utilized as a way to counterbalance and redress past unfair treatments²⁸². However it is challenging to exercise this intuitive moral duty in concrete terms. The first

²⁷² Ibid.

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

²⁷⁵ “Patrimoine Africain: retour au Bénin de 28 objets appartenants aux anciens rois d'Abomey,” *jeuneAfrique*, January 18, 2020, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/883307/politique/restitution-du-patrimoine-africain-28-objets-des-anciens-rois-dabomey-rendus-au-benin/>.

²⁷⁶ Sabine Gignoux, “Restitutions.”

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

²⁷⁹ “Le Bénin restaure ses monuments pour sensibiliser à l'histoire de l'esclavage,” *VOA*, August 12, 2020, <https://www.voaafrique.com/a/le-b%C3%A9nin-restaure-ses-monuments-pour-sensibiliser-%C3%A0-l-histoire-de-l-esclavage/5540626.html>.

²⁸⁰ “Le Bénin restaure ses monuments”.

²⁸¹ Karin Edvardsson Björnberg, “Historic Injustices and the Moral Case for Cultural Repatriation,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, no. 18 (2014): 461, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24478633>.

²⁸² Ibid.

challenge is the obstacle of time: clear-cut and unequivocal application of cultural repatriation is not evident when injustices have been done a long time ago. Indeed it is difficult to exercise such “corrective justice” in practice when the person to whom the wrongdoing was done is deceased and when the only party present to pay reparations or repatriate the artefact are not the ones who have perpetrated the injustice²⁸³. In the case of family quests for the return of cultural property, items are usually returned to the descendants of the original victim but cases arise when the last generation of the family do not want to be implicated or it may be difficult to find their trace back²⁸⁴.

A second challenge is asserting the identity of the claimants. With the Holocaust claims models for the Nazi-looted artworks for example, the struggles were to establish clear definitions for heirs, survivors and victims²⁸⁵. The difficulty lied in establishing clear criterias to determine what truly was an “heir”. It was not uncommon to have remote relatives issuing the restitution application. If only genetics were considered, then claims filled by distant family members such as the family in-law were not taken into account. For example, in the case of the repatriation demand for Egon Schiele’s painting “Dead City III”, the file was delivered by the widows of the sons of the victim’s cousins, says O’Donnell²⁸⁶. The author states that “defining victimhood is tricky” as many issues of ethnic and group identity can arise²⁸⁷. In the case of Holocaust looted art, struggles arose between Jewish and non-Jewish claimants, as well as some struggles that emerged within Jewish groups. Intergenerational antagonisms appeared for instance when older generations retorqued that only those who suffered from the Holocaust could benefit from the different trusteeships’ and NGO’s financial support dedicated to victims of the Shoah²⁸⁸. There are also many cases where the artefacts do not have any heirs or they cannot be determined. In the case of “heirleiss” artwork looted under the Nazi regime, the Austrian National Fund was made responsible for those works of art that were held in public collections.²⁸⁹

In cases of international conflicts or genocide, the repatriation or reparations intended for the group harmed, may reveal to be much more problematic in practice. Very often the original population that suffered historic injustices are divided today into several different ethnic groups that may not recognize the other groups theirs and that run over numerous different countries. Different ethnic groups can be found in the present-day in several modern nations, such as for example the Yorubas ethnic group that are present in Nigeria and in Benin or the Senoufos present in Mali, Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso²⁹⁰. The difficulty is to determine who really is considered today as the recipients of those ancient artworks.

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Thérèse O’Donnell, “The Restitution of Holocaust Looted Art and Transitional Justice: The Perfect Storm or the Raft of the Medusa?,” *The European Journal of International Law* 22, no. 1 (2011): 53.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 76.

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 75.

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 74.

²⁹⁰ Audrey Peraldi, “Le Rapport Sarr-Savoy,” 64.

A third argument that is very often heard in the discussions around repatriation of items that are part of Western collections is the restraint it would impose on academic research. It is often assumed that the restitution of items from Western museums would be a “loss of research material”²⁹¹. Many researchers, academics, archeologists, biological anthropologists have emitted great concerns about the risks of losing access, most likely for good, to “those rare sources of the unwritten histories of the past”²⁹². And at the same time, returning artefacts would signify the end of Western monopoly over the interpretations of the past, and the West would become one of the valid bearers among many others of the authority and ownership over those objects. Nilsson Stutz states that the tense choice between “‘saving data’ and participating in a post-colonial archaeology or anthropology” continues to spread doubts on how to remedy this puzzle. If we return museums’ collections, it will not be possible to engage in a deconstruction of the supremacist and eurocentric debut of those disciplines, and continue the democratization process of science. However many researchers and academics, or museum curators recognize the unethical character of colonial plundering of the objects and therefore many scientists support indigenous repatriation claims as a means for the reconciliation of the different stakeholders²⁹³. Moreover, Stutz warns about the danger of the consequences of retaining the study material. She says restitution would force “permanent interpretations” of the data²⁹⁴. Science is observing continual change, and present understandings of those research materials are more likely to be edited in the future, as new methodologies and new expertise arise²⁹⁵. As new studies of the material would no longer be possible, the development of our knowledge on such culture would be stopped. Stutz states that the development would stop at the last study of the archaeological material, dictating a one-sided vision and impeaching new contradicting perspectives to arise²⁹⁶. It tends to “impose permanence on that particular interpretation” attached to the item returned, says the author²⁹⁷.

4.4. Internationalism and cosmopolitanism

From the different positions exposed above we see two different points of view that are prominent in the debate on the restitution of cultural artefacts. John Henry Merryman has conceptualized both positions under the label *cultural internationalism* and *cultural nationalism*²⁹⁸. *Cultural nationalism* maintains that objects should be in the hands of the people who created it and that it should be returned to the nation where the object was originally from. Objects are connected to their place of origin through their link with the nation’s history, people and identity²⁹⁹. *Cultural internationalism* reaffirms humankind’s interest in the past of

²⁹¹ Liv Nilsson Stutz, “Claims to the Past,” 171.

²⁹² Ibid., 175.

²⁹³ Ibid.

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ John Henry Merryman, “Two Ways of Thinking About Cultural Property,” *The American Journal of International Law* 80, no. 4 (Oct., 1986): 831-853.

²⁹⁹ Bogdan Damian, “A Proposal for the Retention of Historically Removed Artifacts Currently Held in Western Museums,” (PhD Thesis., University of California Davis, 2012), 14-15. <https://search-proquest-com.uaccess.univie.ac.at/docview/1022977440?pq-origsite=summon>.

humanity as well as the free circulation of objects to guarantee their access for scientific, cultural and educational purposes in a vision that asserts to be to the benefit of everyone³⁰⁰. This last view is contended by most Western museums who are opposed to repatriation.

John Henry Merryman has expanded more on the second position³⁰¹. Cultural property *internationalism* uses three principles as its core philosophical foundation: *preservation* as the protection of objects and context, *truth* as the knowledge that can be inferred from the study of objects and contexts, and *accessibility* as guaranteeing the possibility of scientific study and education of the public³⁰². Cultural property *internationalism* is an “object-oriented” rather than “nation-oriented” perspective, says Bogdan Damian³⁰³. *Cultural internationalism* defends as its main values multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism. It stipulates the importance of maintaining an openness to other cultures and educating the public on the diversity of human’s expression and customs.

Kwame Anthony Appiah in his article “*Whose culture is it?*” and in his 2006 monograph *Imperialism, Art and Restitution* wrote a fervent defense of *cultural internationalism* under a plea for cosmopolitanism³⁰⁴. He argued in favor of a cosmopolitan culture and warned against the danger of “local cultural patrimony”³⁰⁵. Appiah is advocating for a global history of human achievement and denounces a certain “parochialism”³⁰⁶. The author expounds that arts and artists are by essence cosmopolitan and that they cannot be restricted by national boundaries and reduced to national identities³⁰⁷. He proposes a vision of art as a mark of human achievement that can act as a bridge between different cultures. Therefore such human exploits should be shown to the public and access to cultural patrimony should not be restrained in the name of national identities. His main argument is the importance of the construction of knowledge and the highlighting role of museums in “mediating that knowledge” to the wide public, says Joshua M. Gorman about Appiah’s perspective³⁰⁸. In Appiah’s view, large contemporary museums would be entrusted with a “universal” responsibility in giving access to and diffusing such knowledge³⁰⁹. Appiah gives more importance to knowledge than to other forms of truth about cultural property³¹⁰. He presumes that cultural items pertain to a wider understanding of the world and that such universal comprehension should be prioritized over other “value systems”³¹¹. Appiah rejects the prospect of a shared ownership of cultural property

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 15.

³⁰¹ John Henry Merryman, *Imperialism, Art and Restitution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 15-37.

³⁰² Bogdan Damian, “A Proposal for the Retention,” 15.

³⁰³ Ibid., 15.

³⁰⁴ Appiah, Kwame Anthony. “Whose Culture Is It?.” *New York Review of Books* 53, no.2 (2006). <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2006/02/09/whose-culture-is-it/>; Appiah, Kwame Anthony. *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a world of strangers*. New York: Norton, 2006.

³⁰⁵ John Henry Merryman, *Imperialism, Art and Restitution*, 15-37.

³⁰⁶ Joshua M. Gorman, “Universalism and the new museology,” 153.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

³¹⁰ Ibid.

³¹¹ Ibid.

and does not contemplate indigenous claims to intellectual and physical ownership of cultural property as conscientious³¹².

This pretension to universality is actually a fourth argument that is very often used by large Western museums to argue for the retention of their collections. Behind this argument of cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism and internationalism lies a “universalist” assumption. Another author who has defended the “universality” of culture and the subsequent “universal” role of museums is James Cuno, the president and director of the Art Institute of Chicago in the United States.

James Cuno, in his book “Who Owns Antiquities?” (2011) supported Appiah’s philosophical stances and presented a defense of universal museums as having an international responsibility as public institutions allowing free and critical thinking³¹³. In his view, knowledge is produced behind closed doors in scientific and artistic institutions diffusing it to the larger “uninformed periphery”³¹⁴. In Cuno’s perspective, such organizations would exist above the separatism created by nationalisms and should not be affected by them³¹⁵. The author praised encyclopedic museums as providing an undeniable universal access to art everywhere in the world, and as rendering possible the knowledge of a certain “shared human history”³¹⁶. According to Cuno, encyclopedic museums highlight diversity and cosmopolitanism as they preserve the national treasures of the country they are located in as well as the natural and cultural wonders of the world³¹⁷.

For Cuno, nations are abstracted entities of geographical, linguistic and cultural cohesion that should not have an important influence on today’s vision of culture. Due to a global homogenization of culture, Cuno sets forth the argument that a new global and “universal” consciousness is arising, diffusing a transnational cosmopolitan culture, which is slowly replacing the nation-state as a cultural concept. Thus, universal museums are in his vision, bearing the necessary responsibility of providing a global context in their centralization of the achievements of human history in one place. Gorman in his article “*Universalism and the new museology: impacts on the ethics of authority and ownership*” has pointed out the contradiction of such rejection of nationalisms with the historical background of Western museums. Indeed Western museums had an active role in the creation of nationalism in Europe in the 19th - early 20th century as it has been demonstrated in a large part of the academic literature³¹⁸. In addition, Cuno does not acknowledge the function of museums in accomplishing the aspirations of the

³¹² Ibid.

³¹³ Ibid.

³¹⁴ Ibid., 154.

³¹⁵ David Carrier, review of *Museums Matter: In Praise of the Encyclopedic Museum ; Who Owns Antiquity: Museums and the Battle Over Our Ancient Heritage*, 2001-2008, by James Cuno, *Curator The museum Journal* 55, no. 4 (October 2012): 501. <https://doi-org.uaccess.univie.ac.at/10.1111/j.2151-6952.2012.00173.x>.

³¹⁶ Ibid.

³¹⁷ James Cuno, *Whose Muse? Art Museums and the Public Trust*, (Princeton and Harvard: Princeton University Press and Harvard University Art Museums, 2004) 140, quoted in Bogdan Damian, “A Proposal for the Retention of Historically Removed Artifacts Currently Held in Western Museums,” 19.

³¹⁸ Boswell, David, and Jessica Evans, *Representing the nation: A reader: Histories, heritage and museums*. (London: Routledge, 1999); Barkan, Elazar, and Ronald Bush, *Claiming the stones, naming the bones: Cultural property and the negotiation of national and ethnic identity* (Los Angeles: Getty, 2002).

colonial nation-state building at the same period. Western imperialism was mediated through presenting the Western expertise and command over the “natural and cultural worlds” says Gorman³¹⁹. The author argues that such practices of “retention and control” remain to this day in our modern nation state and postcolonial world³²⁰. Gorman castigates this universalist position as a “pathological internationalism” that is revealed in downward slides such as for instance the implication of some large great Western museums in the illicit trade of looted items³²¹.

Those internationalist positions are conservatives responses to the growing number of restitution demands by indigenous and minority communities. Gorman explains that it is the local claims to cultural property that came to problematize the idea of the museum in its Western conception³²². This precipitated defensive responses in Western curatorship and academia, professing an argument line that entrusted museums with an esteemed accountability of global relevance. The defenders of the “universal culture” such as Merryman, Appiah and Cuno, along with the 2003 *Declaration on the Importance and the Value of Universal Museums*, created a division between the local and the universalist in the questions of knowledge production and ownership of cultural artefacts. This divide was used as an argument line by Western museums to elevate the status of their museums allowing them not to conscientiously address repatriation claims. We will see in the next section how the argument of “universality” purported by Western museums, was also used by the RMCA as a way to avoid engaging in the restitution debate. The RMCA through the adoption of a “world museum” discourse based on the model of the universal museum, and through showing its support for the 2003 Declaration, could depoliticize its role as an ex-colonial museum and not fully engage in the debate around restitution. Through elevating its status to the one of “a world museum” and a “world center of research”, the RMCA could neutralize the political stakes around its function, and legitimize its holding of the cultural artefacts. The museum used the language of universality and modernity and scientificity to refrain from getting involved in the restitution debate.

4.5. Universal Museums

A large part of the debate around restitution is monopolized by Western museums to defend the retention of artefacts, through claiming the universality of the large contemporary museums such as the British Museums or the Louvre for example. If we look at the main arguments purported by the universalist museums and their advocates, large museal institutions, such as big national museums, museums of civilization, art museums, or natural history museums, in North America and Europe, are considered “universal” because of their presentation and diffusion of a “shared human heritage”³²³. Those large contemporaneous institutions would pertain to a “global culture” and would be in charge of preserving the “cultural heritage of humanity”. Those museums are labeled universal or encyclopedic because of the very large

³¹⁹ Joshua M. Gorman, “Universalism and the new museology,” 154.

³²⁰ Ibid.

³²¹ Ibid.

³²² Ibid., 149.

³²³ Bogdan Damian, “A Proposal for the Retention,” 19.

range of cultural and historical items in their possession. Sharon Waxman explains in her work on looted antiquities in Western museums, that universal museums usually claim to be organizations “dedicated to collecting and safeguarding a repository of artifacts from various cultures and time periods which are displayed together in order to encourage universal knowledge, broad understanding and appreciation of the historical connection between the world’s different civilizations”³²⁴. This presentation of the public character of museums has been stated by several museums, or also that their visitors are mostly coming from abroad to be considered universal. According to the director of the Louvre, Henri Loyrette, the Louvre is a universal museum because of its encyclopedic cultural properties coming from all over the world but also because of its very international audience³²⁵. In the same line, the British Museum is presented as a universal museum that has as its main mission to collect a very wide range of items, and whose collections belong to the public and not the nation’s state because it is a free-public entrance museum³²⁶. These museums reject the use of what they claim to be nationalist arguments in the debate around restitution and more generally in the collection and showcasing of cultural artefacts, because their exhibitions are meant to display the art and customs of very different cultures and present the diverse bonds between them³²⁷. Those are arguments frequently stated in the justification for the retention of cultural artefacts³²⁸.

We see that the RMCA’s discourse, through its aspiration to be a “world” center of research on “Africa”, is completely inscribed in the same argument line than the universalist position entrenched by the 2003 *Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums* and its signatories. The director Guido Gryseels has presented the RMCA’s support to the visions expressed in the 2003 Declaration in an article he delivered for the *ICOM News* magazine under the title “*Assuming Our Responsibilities in the Present*”³²⁹. The director Guido Gryseels stated the role that the museum was going to endorse after its renovation, as being a “research institute and a leading documentary resource on Africa”³³⁰. He also restated the role of the RMCA as a public institution therefore charged with an important role towards the education of the public and guaranteeing the availability of the material for research purposes³³¹. In this review, the different museums’ directors participating, including Guido Gryseels, stated their approval of the Declaration and presented the new practices for a “universal museology” that were being entrenched in their institutions³³².

Looking at the new RMCA’s discourse that I analyzed in the previous chapters, as well as the supporting statement of the museum’s curators towards the *Declaration on the Value and*

³²⁴ Sharon Waxman, *Loot. The Battle Over the Stolen Treasures of the Ancient World*. (New York: Times Books, Henry Holt and Company, 2008) 204, quoted in Bogdan Damian, “A Proposal for the Retention,” 18 footnote 63.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 120.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, 209.

³²⁷ Bogdan Damian, “A Proposal for the Retention,” 18 footnote 63.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*

³²⁹ Guido Gryseels, “Assumer nos responsabilités actuelles,” *ICOM News*, no. 4 (2004): 8.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*

³³¹ *Ibid.*

³³² Geoffrey Lewis, Peter-Klaus Schuster, George Abungu, Betsy Ennis, Neil MacGregor and Guido Gryseels, “Universal Museums,” *ICOM News*, no. 4 (2004): 3-11.

Importance of Universal Museum, we see that the RMCA has completely integrated this rhetoric of universality. The museum is presented as a “world museum” and the institution of reference for “Africa”, which embodies perfectly this aspiration of exhaustiveness that the universal museum purports. The RMCA in its discourse presents the large range of its collections’ objects as being in charge of a mission in the domain of academic and scientific research. The museum would be accountable for studying and showing to the world its precious and rare material research, providing it with a prestigious status and honorable obligations. The museum presents itself as the repository of human and cultural heritage of “Africa”. It does so through its holdings of large and extensive ethnographic collections, and its presentation as the household of “the most important museum collections on Central Africa in the world³³³. Neil Curtis has shown that this adoption of the universalist attitude by Western museums and the RMCA, places all authority on the museum and rejects repatriation completely³³⁴. Such position sustains itself through the Enlightenment ideal that despite cultural and national boundaries, the ambition to understand the diversity of the world can be realized and should be pursued³³⁵. Behind this façade of multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism, lies the possibility to “not fully engage” in the debate around repatriation, and to not think the role of the museum in regard to the postcolonial critiques of the twenty-first century, says Curtis³³⁶. The “universal museum” approach has the effect of neutralizing the political stakes of the voices raised against those that do not share the view of those cultural items as “museums objects”³³⁷. And it allows museums to negate the controversial political stances around their function. In the case of the RMCA, it permitted to depoliticize its role as an ex-colonial museum living in a postcolonial era.

The discourse used by encyclopedic museums is the same one that the RMCA is proclaiming since its reopening in 2018. In addition, the RMCA also borrowed the language typical of the discourse of modernity and progress. The portrayal by curators of their institutions as “universal museums”, as well as the language used in the 2003 Declaration, is pertaining to the Western discourse of modernity and progress. In the statement around the universality of museums, modernity is found in this ever evolving history of human progress, artistically and historically, as well as the shaping of this evolution as having an anchoring in the past. The diffusion of a Western vision of the past as this history of human progress and its claim as being scientific is the perfect embodiment of the modern project. The RMCA inherited from this modernist vision of the scientific role of museums and reused its different expressions. The rhetoric of modernity is articulated in the RMCA’s discourse in the use of the vocabulary of scientificity and multidisciplinary, as I showed in my analysis of the museum’s new discourse since its reopening. Both the use of a scientific language with a modernist vision are actually two complementary parts of the same reasoning. It is a dialectic of modernity/scientificity, where both are perspectives of the same reality as indeed the sciences were used and are used

³³³ Guido Gryseels, et al., “Integrating the Past: Transformation and Renovation of the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium,” *European Review* 13, no. 4 (2005): 637–647.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798705000852>.

³³⁴ Neil George Westbrook Curtis, “Universal museums, museum objects and repatriation: The tangled stories of things,” *Museum Management and Curatorship* 21, no. 2 (2006): 125.

³³⁵ Ibid.

³³⁶ Ibid.

³³⁷ Ibid.

to support the modernist vision of the world. To put it clearly, the RMCA used the rhetoric of modernity to legitimize its new flawed philosophy, along with its mobilization of a “world museum” discourse to not fully engage in the debate around repatriation. Modernity and Universality, two discourses that permitted the museum to not engage in the restitution debate and prevented the museum from endorsing a decolonization of its philosophy and its museography.

Both the use of modernity and universality, allowed the museum to maintain its position as an authority over the knowledge and the cultural material of “Other”. These rhetorics are used to legitimize Western ownership and control over cultural patrimony. They permit the rejection of local claims to cultural patrimony and depoliticize the position of the museum. Through the creation of a separation between the “global culture” and the “local vision of culture”, museums could avoid the political load of the restitution claims. And the rhetoric of scientificity was used to legitimize the retention of cultural patrimony of non-Western peoples. I will now analyze the arguments presented in the 2003 Declaration and look into more details the statements used in the universalist argument line and expose the point of contentions drawing from the analysis made by Neil George Westbrook.

4.6. The 2003 Declaration

In October 2002, the International Group of Organizers of Large-scale exhibitions met in Munich for the annual informal discussion. Also known as the “Bizot Group”, it is a congregation of 40 museums directors of the world’s major museums and galleries. The forum was set up specifically to address the challenge posed by the growing number of repatriation claims and to find a way to answer them, in particular the rising political character of the reunification movement for the Parthenon Marbles³³⁸. The forum decided to issue a response to the political tension put by the Greek government for the restitution of the sculptures from the British Museum. Instead of addressing solely the Parthenon case, the group took the decision to issue a discourse that highlighted “importance and value of universal museums”. The forum delivered an unanimous statement advocating the “the importance of the context which a great museum offers”³³⁹. The statement was published in 2003 as *The Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums*. The publication was diffused through the British Museum Press which made it one its most prominent advocate³⁴⁰. The signatories³⁴¹ of the Declaration made a plea for principles of “universality” and restated the importance of the status of their museums as “museums serve not just the citizens of one nation but the people of every nation”, says Neil MacGregor, the Director of the British museum³⁴².

In this Declaration, those museums were positioning themselves as universal “guardians” of the cultural treasures of humanity. The director of the British Museum, Neil Mac Gregor, stated concerning the achievement of the Declaration that “This declaration is an unprecedented statement of common value and purpose issued by the directors of some of the world’s leading museums and galleries. The diminishing of collections such as these would be a great loss to the world’s cultural heritage”³⁴³. We see in this statement the idea that those large museums are in charge of the preservation of a “universal” cultural heritage that could get impaired if its ownership title would come to change. It is this idea that Western museums are invested with a mission of “guardianship of a universal heritage”. This is the direct heritage of the imperialist and modernist aspirations of the 19th century Western museum, says Tom Flynn³⁴⁴. The Enlightenment is the historic source of our modern values of “free citizenship, social justice and rational inquiry”³⁴⁵. Which are constituting central functioning aspects of the Western museum as we know it today, through its presentation of an eminently didactic institution³⁴⁶. In the 19th century, those core elements came to define the Western values system. And most

³³⁸Tom Flynn, *The Universal Museum: a valid model for the 21st century?*, (unpublished book, 2010): 3, accessed September 12, 2020, <https://kingston.academia.edu/TomFlynn>.

³³⁹Martin Bailey, “We serve all cultures, say the big, global museums,” *The Art Newspaper*, January 11, 2013, <http://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/article.asp?idart=10675>.

³⁴⁰Tom Flynn, *The Universal Museum*,” 3.

³⁴¹The most notorious ones are The Art Institute of Chicago, Cleveland Museum of Art, J. P. Getty Museum, the Guggenheim Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Louvre, and a couple other museums in Europe, America and in Russia. For the exhaustive list of the signatories, see the Declaration in Appendix 1.

³⁴²Cleveland Museum of Art, *Declaration on the importance and value of Universal Museum*, (Cleveland, Cleveland Museum of Art Press Releases, 2003), <https://archive.org/details/cmapr4492>.

³⁴³British Museum, “Universal Museum,” London: British Museum, 2003, <http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/newsroom/current2003/universalmuseums.html>.

³⁴⁴Tom Flynn, *The Universal Museum*,” 29.

³⁴⁵Ibid.

³⁴⁶Ibid.

importantly, they started to be used to ground the scientific and industrial ambitions of the colonial European nation-states as “civilizing mission”³⁴⁷. European and North American museums integrated the values underpinning the colonial and imperialist project and came to consolidate a modern identity of “gatherers and custodians of the world’s material culture”³⁴⁸.

The universal responsibility that the European and Western museums ascribe to themselves is just the legacy of encyclopaedic museums and their 19th century imperialist ideology. As Tony Bennett has demonstrated in his work over the history of Western museums, the intention of “dominance over a totality” was a typical characteristic of international exhibitions during the 19th century³⁴⁹. The Enlightenment belief that portraying “the whole world under one roof” is possible, is actually found again in the new universalist position³⁵⁰. This new position assumes that universality is an achievable museological goal, and that claiming to such exhaustiveness in a post-colonial era is not problematic³⁵¹.

Flynn asks the question of how can such institutions, knowing their historical backgrounds, maintain this ambition to endeavor universality in a “postmodern and post-Enlightenment world” when this argument is used for claiming ownership and thus dominion over the world’s cultural material³⁵². Through the elevation of the cultural artefacts to the status of “universal cultural heritage”, Western curations conferred themselves the holding of their power and control over those objects, maintaining this ideology of dominance that originated in the colonial enterprise. Diffusing a discourse that the supposed holders and carers of those objects are the ones who have always been in their possession and who have had the power to conserve them. We can easily put into question the use of such an argument and its relevance for the new ethics set by the postcolonial world and the new museum studies in the twenty-first century. Indeed the Indigenous claims for repatriation did not wait for the advent of the new museum studies to put into question the pretension to universality purported by the Western museums.

Neil G. W. Curtis in his 2006 article *Universal museums, museum objects, and repatriation: The tangled stories of things*³⁵³ analyzed the arguments used in the 2003 *Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums* in the debate on the restitution of cultural artifacts. He describes further what the universalist approach endorsed by the Declaration actually is. The principal line of reasoning of the Declaration is that the large Western museal institutions and their very diverse collections, are “universal” because they offer a great context for those great treasures of humanity to be appreciated. They claim to offer a more “insightful perspective” on the special character of their cultural holdings than if they were exposed in a regional museum, with an attitude that claims to be “ideology-free” says Curtis³⁵⁴. He

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

³⁴⁸ Ibid.

³⁴⁹ Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, (London: Routledge, 1995): 66.

³⁵⁰ Ibid., 33.

³⁵¹ Ibid.

³⁵² Ibid., 39.

³⁵³ Neil George Westbrook Curtis, “Universal museums, museum objects and repatriation: The tangled stories of things,” *Museum Management and Curatorship* 21, no. 2 (2006): 117-127.

³⁵⁴ Ibid., 118.

denounces this approach as being essentialist and as asserting the dominance of Western thinking and epistemology. When the Declaration was published in 2003, the discussion around repatriation was led by the Greek Government's official restitution claim for the restitution of the Parthenon Marble. However the Declaration's signatories did not address the repatriation claims in themselves. They rather emphasized the significance of the "valuable context" that those museums offered for non-Western cultural objects. As they are considering themselves institutions of "universal" importance, those museums position themselves as the frame of reference for the knowledge produced on the objects held in their collections. In their view, those institutions offer the necessary conditions in which non-Western and Western cultural objects can gain their "maximal worth", and can ultimately be recognized and valued as "art" or "cultural treasures". This "objective" viewpoint that those museums pretend to deliver is typical of the discourse of universal museums, but most importantly it is typical of Western museum practices in general says Curtis³⁵⁵. For example, Western museums use classifications schemes typical of Western epistemology that uses a divide between disciplines, making the distinction between "natural sciences", "natural history" and "art"³⁵⁶. Those classifications are not very often being put into question, as they are taken for granted in most museums' curatorship and most museum discussions, perpetuating a dangerous "apparent neutrality" in the Western gaze³⁵⁷.

The idea of legacy is found extensively throughout the Declaration. Even though the word "heritage" only appears once, this idea of objects inherited from ancient generations is present in the whole document³⁵⁸. However Curtis is calling attention to the fact that the examples cited in the Declaration are not from Medieval Europe archeology or from 19th century ethnographic collections, but from Ancient Greece and "ancient civilizations"³⁵⁹. Those are examples significant to the history of the West itself. Classical Greek art is of great importance to the West because of its rediscovery in the Renaissance period in the 15th-16th centuries that re-stated the worth of the Greco-Roman world. The particular history of the West, with the re-introduction of Antique culture in the Renaissance period, resulted in the Classical Greek sculpture being put on a pedestal by modern Western culture. The heritage of classical antiquities grew in importance again with the Enlightenment ideas of universality until becoming a central feature of modern European distinctiveness³⁶⁰. But Greek classicism and the aesthetics of the Greco-Roman world is not of importance to everybody, says Curtis³⁶¹. Due to its appraisal by the West in the Enlightenment period, Antique cultures and aesthetics came to be viewed as the quintessence of "human culture".³⁶² It is through this view that Greek classicism came to be considered of great "significance to mankind as a whole" as the Declaration states³⁶³. But certain cultures, due to the contingency of what is considered

³⁵⁵ Ibid.

³⁵⁶ Ibid.

³⁵⁷ Ibid.

³⁵⁸ Ibid., 120.

³⁵⁹ Ibid.

³⁶⁰ Ibid., 121.

³⁶¹ Ibid.

³⁶² Ibid.

³⁶³ Cleveland Museum of Art, *Declaration on the importance and value of Universal Museum*, par. 3.

historically important, do not see Greek sculpture as eminently outstanding. Or perhaps only as the sign of the domination of Western culture³⁶⁴.

This is very telling of the dominant position of Western epistemology in museum curatorship. As Curtis clarified very rightfully, what Western museums emphasize in the Declaration is not the “context” of prestige and recognition that they can offer to cultural objects, but it is the historical context of Western museums itself³⁶⁵. What is being valued is the legacy of the long centuries of recognition of the worth and conservation of those objects in those institutions. It is “the centuries-long history of appreciation of Greek art” or the accumulation of oeuvres and impressive bodies of work over the decades and centuries in the different museums in Europe and America says Curtis³⁶⁶.

The Declaration was ratified by 19 large-scale museums in Europe and North America, with most museums being art museums. It encompasses a large part of the principal positions found in modern museological thought. The document is not a mere statement articulating arguments against repatriation, it argues for “a rationale for major cross-cultural collections and exhibitions in museums” explains Curtis³⁶⁷. Through the statements presented in the Declaration and the choice of vocabulary, the 2003 Declaration discloses the vision of its adherents upon cultural objects. The document reiterates several times the recognition of the worth of their objects as “art”. The emphasis on the aesthetic character of the objects is clear in the extensive use of the terms “artistic” and “aesthetic” to describe cultural objects in the Declaration³⁶⁸. The vocabulary chosen reinforces an aesthetic vision and indicates the importance given to the “visual approaches” in Western cultures says Curtis³⁶⁹. The artistic approach to cultural objects offers a very interesting insight on many levels, however it is a particular approach typical of the West says Curtis³⁷⁰. As Alfred Gell analyzed in his book *Art and agency: An anthropological theory*; “I think that the desire to see the art of other cultures aesthetically tells us more about our own ideology and its quasi-religious veneration of art objects as aesthetic talismans, than it does about these other cultures”³⁷¹. We observe a desire to approach other cultures’ objects through an artistic understanding, which is exemplary of the Western paradigm. Alternative conceptions of cultural objects exist in plenty with different indigenous approaches conceiving cultural items through a sacred or cosmological perspective for example. In his book, Gell explained how Western aesthetic theories are applied to all types of objects coming from different places in the world³⁷². However each culture has its specific aesthetics and the values used to analyze it should be contingent and not fixed. Western museums see themselves as providing a context in which non-Western art can be appreciated in the same line as Western art, meaning through the same aesthetic categorizations used in the

³⁶⁴ Neil George Westbrook Curtis, “Universal museums”, 121.

³⁶⁵ Ibid.

³⁶⁶ Cleveland Museum of Art, *Declaration on the importance and value of Universal Museum*, par. 3.

³⁶⁷ Ibid., 119.

³⁶⁸ Ibid., 120.

³⁶⁹ Ibid.

³⁷⁰ Ibid.

³⁷¹ Alfred Gell, *Art and agency: An anthropological theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 3.

³⁷² Ibid.

Western artistic approach³⁷³. Gell puts in perspective this vision purported in the *Declaration* stating the “impossibility of using “aesthetics” as a universal parameter of cultural description and comparison”³⁷⁴. Western museums, in placing themselves as the universal frame of reference for art-appreciation, are monopolizing the perspective for knowledge production in art and culture in general. Additionally, Curtis points out that the focus of the Declaration on art and aesthetics can be easily seen as a reaffirmation of colonial power. In the same way that anthropology and archeology have emerged from colonial enterprises, the Declaration’s statement can convey this idea of reaffirmation of Western domination³⁷⁵.

Moreover in the Declaration an “object-focused” vision is utilized, supporting a description of the extraction of objects that shows the complete disengaged attitude of the signatories towards the stakes of the restitution claims. Curtis identifies judiciously that great focus is given to the material character of the cultural objects, rather than their “non-material aspects” such as their symbolic and cultural aspect³⁷⁶. For example, we see that in the Declaration the primary function of the objects found in museums collections is their importance for the shared “universal cultural heritage”. Gorman explains that objects come to have a signification only in their juxtaposition to other objects³⁷⁷. Curtis explains that the objects only come to have meaning as the representative of a category of objects, they are “specimens” in a classification system³⁷⁸. We see this focus on the material and functional aspects of objects in the choice of vocabulary, with the denomination “objects”, or “archeological, artistic objects and ethnic objects” or such as “monumental artifacts”, “artifacts” or “sculpture”³⁷⁹. This choice of words is typical of the long-established Western way of seeing cultural artefacts as “objects” and “artworks”, emphasizing a primary function that is to be a part of an anthropological collection³⁸⁰. The artefact is stripped off of its symbolic, sacred or ethnico-social meaning to only represent an illustration of a museological “category”³⁸¹.

This object-focused perspective engenders a description of the extraction of the items that is completely detached from the moral and ethical stakes that entailed the colonial plundering and looting that permit forming the collections. Instead of focusing on the people or process that made the extraction possible, we focus on the objects by merely saying that they were “objects that were displaced long ago from their original source”³⁸². The manner in which the objects were acquired is described as an official and stable process, that is not implicated in political power dynamics. This is seen with references such as “acquired”, “installed”, “part of museums’ collections” or also “purchase”, “gift” or “partage”³⁸³. This choice of words conveys

³⁷³ Ibid.

³⁷⁴ Ibid.

³⁷⁵ Neil George Westbrook Curtis, “Universal museums”, 120.

³⁷⁶ Ibid.

³⁷⁷ Joshua M. Gorman, “Universalism and the new museology,” 152.

³⁷⁸ Neil George Westbrook Curtis, “Universal museums”, 123.

³⁷⁹ Ibid., 120.

³⁸⁰ Ibid., 123.

³⁸¹ Ibid.

³⁸² Cleveland Museum of Art, *Declaration on the importance and value of Universal Museum*, par. 2.

³⁸³ Neil George Westbrook Curtis, “Universal museums”, 120.

the idea of a peaceful, long-term evolution of circumstances in which Western museums played a benevolent role for the benefit of the objects.

We also see that the means of acquisitions are all referred to under this idea of “displacement” of objects. Even though numerous objects of those museum’s collections have been obtained through theft or war booty for example. Such a contentious conversation is being circumvented by the argument that previous procurement of objects should not be seen in the light of the values of today. It is stated in the Declaration that “objects acquired in earlier times must be viewed in the light of different sensitivities and values, reflective of that earlier era”³⁸⁴. This argument is used in the Declaration along a very disengaged definition of looting as “objects that were long ago displaced from their original source”³⁸⁵. While the first argument has some legal stances that can be discussed, as indeed colonial plundering was legal at the time and most legal frameworks existing today for trafficking and looting of cultural artefacts are not retrospective and therefore do not apply to the colonial injustices. However, the disregarding dismissal of the controversy around the extraction of the objects is an ill-advised sleight of hand.

Regarding the universal character and importance of Western museums, Neil MacGregor, the director of the British Museum, and Jonathan Williams, who works at the international relations office of the museum, have stated in a response³⁸⁶ to a critique of the Declaration³⁸⁷ that museums of the standing of the British Museum are “a universal resource for the citizens of the world”³⁸⁸. This discourse is also prominent in the Western museums declaration to be owing to a multicultural public. The 19th museums who signed the Declaration claim to be working for an “international public”³⁸⁹. However, we can easily ask the question who truly is this cosmopolitan public that those museums are claiming to work for? Curtis explains that behind the use of this appellation of “universal museum” engaged towards an “international” public, the word “universal” is actually confused with a certain Western elite culture³⁹⁰. Therefore, such access to the museums’ collections is actually limited to the people who can afford travelling to cosmopolitan cities, as well as those who live already near such an important city, leaving behind the majority of people.

Curtis expounds in his article that the three main perspectives found in the Declaration are manifest of the museums’ vision on the exchanges of cultural objects. With this emphasis on the aesthetic and artistic aspects, along with the attention given to the history of museums themselves, and the priority given to objects rather than their symbolic aspect to their original communities, all in all these considerations reflect the dual vision those museums have of their

³⁸⁴ Cleveland Museum of Art, *Declaration on the importance and value of Universal Museum*, par. 1.

³⁸⁵ Ibid., par. 2.

³⁸⁶ Neil MacGregor and James Williams, “The encyclopaedic museum: Enlightenment ideals, contemporary realities,” *Public Archaeology*, 4 (2005): 59.

³⁸⁷ Neil George Westbrook Curtis, “A continuous process of reinterpretation: The challenge of the universal and rational museum,” *Public Archaeology* 4 (2005): 50–56.

³⁸⁸ Neil MacGregor, “The encyclopaedic museum”, 59.

³⁸⁹ Cleveland Museum of Art, *Declaration on the importance and value of Universal Museum*, par. 3.

³⁹⁰ Neil George Westbrook Curtis, “Universal museums”, 121.

collections³⁹¹. The museums indeed have an ambiguous vision of their cultural objects: they do not accept a vision of their collections as merchandise that can be acquired through monetary exchanges, as the emphasis on art demonstrated. However those institutions also depend on the legal basis conferred by property law to withstand the official restitution demands for objects in their collections³⁹². Cultural property is considered a property when it is for museums to retain those objects as theirs which is based on national property law, but when repatriation claims are made for that cultural heritage their national character is dismissed through restating the “universal” importance of the objects.

Lastly, Curtis further precise the origins of encyclopedism that the universalist position purports as its main aspiration. It is this idea that universal museums would act as households of the wholesale knowledge we accumulated to this day for all the countries of the planet. This pretension to exhaustivity and objectivity at the same time, is an unrealistic ideal that has its source in the 19th century conception of knowledge. Such assertion is actually based on the Enlightenment values of encyclopedism which have evolved until today towards a benevolent multiculturalism. The universalist statement postulates the idea that museums can achieve cross-cultural junctures where they do not exist³⁹³. This Enlightenment eurocentric ideal of universality is found for example in the positions of the British Museum Director who asserts that museums such as the British Museum embodies the all-encompassing encyclopaedic model, implying that there are no cultural limits and that comprehensiveness between cultures should always be pursued as a main goal³⁹⁴. And ultimately that when one, the West, is describing or presenting the culture of another, the Rest, there are no and there should not be any cultural restraints³⁹⁵. MacGregor et al. assert in their article “*The encyclopaedic museum: Enlightenment ideals, contemporary realities*”, that “we can all talk about, and to, one another across our cultural boundaries” and that new ways for dialogue can be found that will reveal how similar we are³⁹⁶. MacGregor et al. defend that the British Museum adapted that ideal throughout the centuries, and that today, faced with the restitution question, the Museum needs to find new means to reach such communication between cultures³⁹⁷. Behind the ambition for multiculturalism and universality, lies the belief that through discovering and reaffirming the ties that “unifies” the different parties a solution will be established³⁹⁸.

However, if those museums were truly universal we could question why such multiculturalism could not be realized in other museums, with a shared management of the cultural artefacts, or a joint-collaboration. As of now, from the statements of the signatories of the Declaration such reality is not yet possible because Western control is still leading the status quo. Also, if such universal culture existed truly, there should not be any reason why those universal collections could not be detained by other museums? Another contradiction that has been pointed out, is

³⁹¹ Ibid., 120.

³⁹² Ibid.

³⁹³ Ibid.

³⁹⁴ Neil MacGregor and James Williams, “The encyclopaedic museum,” 59.

³⁹⁵ Ibid.

³⁹⁶ Ibid.

³⁹⁷ Ibid.

³⁹⁸ Ibid.

that those museums that are labelled universal, are still keeping their national names³⁹⁹. The British Museum is not named the “Universal Museum of England” for example. The universal museums are part of the prestigious cultural prominence of the country, this is why their collections are usually classified. The pretension to universality cannot prevail when those collections and museums have such a historical background anchored in imperialism and power assertion, and when Western standards and institutions are perpetuated as the reference point for the whole “universe”. The Center cannot longer be considered the neutral and supposedly impartial representative of the Periphery.

This divide between the local and the global, between the Center and the Periphery cannot be brandished as an argument serving the establishment in such a postcolonial world. When the West becomes the global solely in the goal to retain its existing power, the new paradigms of the postcolonial and postmodern world problematize such Western belief in universality. Flynn states that if the model of the universal museum is to be continued, it must rethink itself “to account for its changing social function in a rapidly globalizing world”⁴⁰⁰. The author argues that the model of encyclopedic museum must give up its unachievable ambition towards universality and impossible obsession with encyclopedism⁴⁰¹. Which also won’t force a neglect of its primary educational function asserts the author⁴⁰². To the contrary, it will empower the museum with a new function: to utilize the transfer of cultural material to build global cohesion⁴⁰³.

Flynn states that the different examples of successful repatriations today demonstrate the contrary of the scaremonger discourse used by the museums’ directors. This discourse is used to alert us against the “floodgates opening”, if the museum answers positively to the repatriation claims, resulting in the dissolution of Western collections⁴⁰⁴. Present-day indications reveal that the opposite case-scenario is more likely to happen; propositions of voluntary return on a case-by-case basis will build closer collaboration, comprehension and interchange between museums and source communities, says Flynn⁴⁰⁵. The biggest question remains for the large contemporary Western museums that, as their biggest critics in the postcolonial world comes from not the curatorship or academia, but the public itself, whether the museums will succeed in addressing the current critical issues they are facing and regain in honourable and satisfying ways the trust of their core foundation, their audience.

³⁹⁹ Timothy McKeown, “Indigenous repatriation: The rise of a global legal movement,” 39.

⁴⁰⁰ Tom Flynn, *The Universal Museum*, 40.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid.

⁴⁰² Ibid.

⁴⁰³ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid.

5. Fourth Chapter: The RMCA's New Restitution Policy

After demonstrating the depoliticized character of the universalist position of Western museums, we see that the universalist museum needs to find ways to regenerate itself. There are more proofs of museum curation taking into account new alternative perspectives, more visionary and progressive says Flynn, beyond a scheme of mere encyclopaedic accumulation, ownership and defensiveness, but rather focusing on collaboration and exchange⁴⁰⁶. Curtis has presented two alternative curation attitudes to the universalist position. A first alternative approach is the “keeping in place” approach where objects remain in the museums’ collections but are divided into sub-groups that are each accessed and controlled by the representatives of that group⁴⁰⁷. This would be more optimal for museums which are close to their source communities, it will limit “museum visitors by policy and source community by geography”⁴⁰⁸. A second alternative approach presented by Curtis, is the “division into categories” approach, between human remains, cultural objects or items only to be managed by a designated group, where each categories is receiving a distinct treatment⁴⁰⁹. A last alternative would be to adopt a “case-by-case” approach that would allow a plurality of meanings for objects (and not just as museum object), and that would endorse restitution if the retention by the museum would generate too much offense says Curtis⁴¹⁰.

The last “case-by-case” approach is the one chosen by the RMCA as announced by Guido Gryseels in his article for the 2004 *ICOM News* magazine. The director states that “The RMCA estimates that restitution cases should be treated individually, following modalities adapted to the circumstances”⁴¹¹. The curators make the case for the ICOM *Code of Ethics* by endorsing its advised “partnership approach” with source communities and analogous non-Western museums⁴¹². The curators restate their ambition to work with Sub-Saharan African museums “that have lost an important part of their cultural patrimony”⁴¹³. Along the partnership building, they also invest into a capacity-building and digitalization strategy as practical means to answer the debate around restitution of their artefacts.

The RMCA has delivered a new statement in January 2020 concerning its restitution policy in which the three-folded approach already announced by Gryseels in 2004 is restated without much change (see Appendix II). The curation delivered new statements on the recognition of the unethical character of the acquisition of their collections as well as the recognition of the problematic character of the African cultural heritage’s situation being for the quasi totality in Western museums. The statement reiterates its intention of creating partnerships and announces it has developed cooperative programs with three museums in Central Africa such

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁷ Neil George Westbrook Curtis, “Universal museums”, 124.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid., 125.

⁴¹¹ Guido Gryseels, “Assumer nos responsabilités actuelles,” *ICOM News*, no. 4 (2004): 8.

⁴¹² ICOM, *Code of Ethics for Museums*, re-titled and revised by the General Assembly of ICOM in Seoul, 8 October 2004, art. 6.2.

⁴¹³ Guido Gryseels, “Assumer nos responsabilités actuelles,” *ICOM News*, no. 4 (2004): 8.

as; the Institute of National Museums in Rwanda (IMNR) in Rwanda, the National Institute of Museums in Congo (IMNC) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Museum of Black Civilizations (MCN) in Senegal. The museum announces that regarding its “case-by-case” approach to restitution, after a thorough research on the origins of the items, it requires a formal demand by a recognized authority to consider the repatriation of artefacts. Once the formal demand is submitted, the process announced is as follows: the RMCA will set up a working group formed by museum professionals and scientists, academics as well as representatives of the African diasporas in Belgium, that will then inform the federal Ministry of Scientific Politics on the specific case. Those new statements show that the curation has taken notice of the postcolonial critiques of the last thirty to forty years, and that it wants to diffuse an active attitude of collaboration and inter-cultural comprehension.

However, the museum blames the inaction of Belgian politics in the creation of a legal framework for restitution and announces that it will wait for a national political agreement before it will consider the repatriation of its artefacts. It also bases its restitution policy on future official claims. Belgium’s federal Ministry for Scientific Policy set up a working group in 2018 to establish a clear political protocol for an eventual restitution of museum objects that have a high symbolic value or that have been the victim of theft or looting, as well as human remains. As the federal government was working in current affairs with reduced staffs since December 2018, no following was given for that political agenda. In the meantime, statements are made for the launching of a “research provenance” program to elucidate the origins of its collections’ objects⁴¹⁴. This anticipative action based on the Dutch Wereldculturen Museum model, is the primary move to determine which objects are susceptible to be returned. While it is fair that the museum should not be the sole bearer of the responsibility of setting up legal actions for addressing the challenge of repatriation, as indeed the collections are the property of the State, it should also not wait for the Belgian government to take actions. Extra-legal actions can be entrenched by the museum while politics resolve their own interrogations in the legal domain. The provenance research is a very good and crucial first step in the good direction before any legal work on restitution can be undertaken. Legal as well as extra-legal initiatives should be undertaken to only then work hand in hand toward the establishment of a clear national framework for the ex-colonial collections held in Belgium.

All in all, the Restitution Policy of the RMCA is presenting an approach that does not take too many risks while diffusing an image of a curation open to the postcolonial challenges of the 21st century. In the light of the history of the museum since the colonisation period, the museum made gigantic progress. However, change was more imposed on the museum through increasing pressure coming from the evolving socio-political context rather than the institution really taking the lead of the debate. The new discourse of the museum instigates a new image of openness, but concrete long-term measures for the establishment of a clear restitution framework are not entrenched. The museum hinges too much upon the political realm to deliver a concrete procedure to launch any physical restitution. The efforts led in the revamping of the institution’s identity are not achieved thoroughly as the concrete actions do not live up to the discourse of openness and cross-cultural interchange. In conclusion, the new philosophy of the

⁴¹⁴ Africa Museum, *Restitution Policy*, January 31, 2020.

RMCA is based on a discourse of benevolent cooperation and cross-cultural understanding, but not so much on exchange.

6. Conclusion: Decolonization in museology

What does it mean to decolonize a museum? The word “decolonization” is used a lot these days, but we have yet to come up with a real definition, argued Hugo DeBlock⁴¹⁵. Especially in the domain of museum curatorship as it puts into perspective the role of the museum itself, the political dynamics behind the questions of postcolonial and decolonial representation, and the links intertwining museums and politics in general. I tried in this work with the example of the RMCA to give some substance material to think about what entails the process of decolonizing museology. However, the questions of representation and museum politics would demand further investigation, which is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, concerning the decolonization of an ex-colonial museum such as the RMCA, from my analysis, we see that a first step in the good direction is to decolonize the museological scholarship through integrating the advances and the learnings made by museum studies and postcolonial studies in museology. However, in light of those postcolonial and decolonial theories, the only fully decolonial museology for ex-colonial museums is the unconditional return of the stolen artefacts or the closing down of ex-colonial museums. The first alternative entails serious technical issues, the second alternative has been endorsed by France and England who have reopened new museums. In the case of Belgium, the second option could potentially help suppress the strong colonial reference embodied in the building, created under Leopold II with the financial gain made in the colonies. However, it would not resolve the legal problem, that is the building still pertains to the national patrimony of Belgium, which would require an amendment of the law. Although it is a feasible solution, it is not in the short-term. Therefore we see that what is more important is a primary decolonization of the curatorship and the scholarship around museology, to eventually aspire to a decolonial curation practice in the future. This entails real efforts of introspection from the curators and museums directors and self-reflection on the museum epistemic and ontological foundations.

In the case of the RMCA, I have shown that the museum failed to engage in a real critical introspection of its identity. The new museum could not develop a decolonial philosophy due to a lack of self-reflexivity on the museum epistemic and ontological foundations in the curation practices and discourses. The museum did not reflect on its eurocentric vision of knowledge and did not critically investigated its paradoxical existence as an ex-colonial museum living in a postcolonial world. Potential temporary solutions for the RMCA to decolonize its museal curation can be entrenched, such as offering a sound methodological guideline at the entrance of the museum visit, which would be repeated throughout the museum visit through educational tools in order for the public to revise the colonial past and see the whole museum critically. Such educating tools could include testimonies of the African diasporas’ perspectives upon the colonial artefacts, commentaries from academics in the African and Black Studies, offering seminars and interactive conferences reviewing the Belgian colonial period along with teaching about decolonial thinking to school classes, or organizing conferences and decolonized guided tours of the museum. Another path for the decolonial methodology would be to use the colonial artefacts as primary sources to critically debunk the colonial gaze, for example to use the museum’s building and statues as relics of the

⁴¹⁵ Hugo DeBlock, “The Africa Museum of Tervuren,” 277.

colonial past upon which critical reflections on colonialism and neocolonialism can be made. This would help bring the reflection towards the present-day, on how traces of the colonial period can still be found in today's society.

Nevertheless, those alternatives do not provide a solution on the long-term to the problem of existing as an ex-colonial museum in a postcolonial world and whether or not the RMCA should reconstitute its colonial artefacts. The solution to displace the artefacts into another museum does not answer the problem. Until the Global North agrees to yield some of its cultural and political influence and that the Global South will have gained more cultural and political recognition for its ability to detain the same cultural prestige in museum curatorship, some other short-term solutions for a more indigenized museology have been proposed. Some avenues were elaborated for ex-colonial museums to work on inclusivity and self-representation practices of the source communities. The solutions to indigenize curatorship go in the same direction as decoloniality in museum management. The literature on museology and the problem of how to deal with ethnographic collections has conceptualized a couple of main ways to work on inclusivity while the legal and political stances of the debate on repatriation is concluded. Jan Pieterse Nederveen draws in his work on multiculturalism and museums a couple of different options so far for a museum to include the source communities⁴¹⁶. It ranges from the recognition of diversity (pluralism), engaging in a discussion with the sources communities (dialogical approach), providing space for the sources communities to represent themselves (self-representation), moving toward a reflection of the fluidity of the cultural categorization (hybridity), and a real structural reflection on the power relationships in representation and yielding some decisional power (self-reflexivity)⁴¹⁷. This shows a second step which consists of engaging in a revision of the structural power relationships in museological representation.

Regarding the RMCA and its announced work on inclusivity, we see that the museum is oscillating between pluralism, a dialogical approach and a touch of self-representation at times. Self-representation is exemplified in some instances with the new Afropea room, the organization of exhibitions dedicated to African artists and a new "AfricaTube" online platform dedicated to the representation of young Africans⁴¹⁸. The RMCA curation recognizes postcolonial criticisms as expressed in the Restitution Policy, and acknowledges the voices of the African diaspora in Belgium with a certain will to integrate them in the curation. However, the museum does not go beyond the dialogical approach as it has not shown intentions to yield actual decisional power as we saw with the example of the weak consultation of the COMRAF. Some reflexive points are made on the online presentation of the museum as it provides several position statements on its website page "The viewpoints of the museum" on the question of the

⁴¹⁶ Jan Pieterse Nederveen, "Ethnicities and Global Multiculture : Pants for an Octopus," In *Ethnicities and global multicultural: Pants for an Octopus*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007):129-153.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., 141-143.

⁴¹⁸ The online page does not specify further whether it is aimed at representing the youth of countries in Central Africa or whether it targets the youth of the Afro-Belgian diasporas. However the AfricaTube project seems to have a lot of potential. AfricaMuseum, "AfricaTube," accessed October 25, 2020, <https://www.africamuseum.be/fr/discover/africatube>. The first temporary exhibition of the museum is dedicated to Congolese artist Freddy Tsimba: AfricaMuseum, "Mabele eleki lola!," accessed November 1, 2020, https://www.africamuseum.be/fr/visit/temporary_exhibition/expo_freddytsimba.

restitution along with how it reflects on its imperial past⁴¹⁹. However, the museum's efforts to work on its inclusivity practices are not going further than a recognition of pluralism and an intention to establish dialogue. The museum's intentions are going into the right direction although without ever providing a sound homogenized decolonial philosophy and delivering concrete measures for the potential restitution of colonial artefacts.

As Gorman has argued, Western museums could gain a lot of insight from indigenous frameworks of museum curatorship⁴²⁰. The potential for those institutions to learn from indigenous curations and alternative local ways of managing cultural artefacts is enormous⁴²¹. Universalists, through seeing the interaction with non-Western and indigenous communities as no more than mere repatriation claims sustaining nationalisms, lose the constructive possibility of "negotiating meaning and defining what constitutes knowledge and truth"⁴²². The insight gained from the new museum studies analyzing new indigenous practices of "preservation and interpretation of relevant contingent arts, culture and heritage" shows that Western museum could apply those insights in facilitating the inclusion of indigenous management of cultural heritage⁴²³. Looking at the different successes of indigenous curations, potential paths can be drawn from the couple of examples of museums in the world who have worked with source communities and have reached great successes in their inclusivity practices. The major part of those indigenous curation examples are from non-European cases of museums who have been working with source communities for a long time and engaged with repatriation of objects such as the US, Canada, Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand⁴²⁴. Or are drawing on significant examples of collaboration between museums and different private parties (previous owner or specific associations for example) for the conservation of certain specific objects⁴²⁵. The most notorious example of such successful indigenization of museum curation is the TePapa museum in Aotearoa/New Zealand that demonstrates of an effective shared authority in a "bi-cultural governance" scheme among the museum professionals⁴²⁶.

Flynn also explained that the numerous cases of cooperation for the repatriation of human remains should be used as examples. Those successful cases have demonstrated that the "hands-on experience" accumulated in exchange process caused museum directors and curators to now see repatriation demands as "collaborative frameworks" and as a way to "forge new creative relationships" with the source communities receiving back the remains from their ancestry⁴²⁷. Flynn says that those examples could spread a vision of restitution not as a "material loss but as a significant cultural gain"⁴²⁸. By transforming the Western universalist vision of

⁴¹⁹ "The viewpoints of the museum," Africa Museum, accessed June 17, 2020, https://www.africamuseum.be/en/discover/myths_taboos.

⁴²⁰ Joshua M. Gorman, "Universalism and the new museology," 149-162.

⁴²¹ Ibid., 158.

⁴²² Ibid.

⁴²³ Ibid.

⁴²⁴ See Laura Peers and Alison K. Brown, *Museums and Source Communities*, London: Routledge, 2005.

⁴²⁵ Hugo DeBlock, "The Africa Museum of Tervuren," 277.

⁴²⁶ Conal McCarthy, Eric Dorfman, Arapata Hakiwai and Āwhina Twomey, "Mana Taonga: Connecting Communities with New Zealand Museums through Ancestral Māori Culture," *Museum International* 65, no. 1-4 (2013): 11, <https://doi.org/10.1111/muse.12028>.

⁴²⁷ Tom Flynn, *The Universal Museum*, 32.

⁴²⁸ Ibid., 67.

repatriation demands into more than just mere political claims to sovereignty, and recognizing them as indigenous rights to cultural identity, museums will reflect on their own positions and invent new ways to see and manage cultural heritage. And most importantly museums will finally be able to see indigenous frameworks as new epistemological and curational possibilities⁴²⁹.

This way museums will be able to learn from the postcolonial studies' demonstration that universalism is exclusionary and harmful. And that the integration of indigenous frameworks will participate in the creation of a true multiculturalism, and not destroy it⁴³⁰. Samir Amin explained that, to overcome eurocentrism is not to fall back into cultural differences to embrace other cultural particularisms. But to establish universal values liberated from European particularism, to engender a "modernity critical of modernity"⁴³¹. Which in the case of ex-colonial Western museums aspiring to a decolonized perspective, implies first the development of a philosophy that is critical of its own eurocentrism and ethnocentrism, to then integrate the values of other cultural identities.

⁴²⁹ Joshua M. Gorman, "Universalism and the new museology," 158.

⁴³⁰ Samir Amin, "Modernity and Religious Interpretations," In *Eurocentrism* (New York: NYU Press, 1989): 11-23.

⁴³¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

Appendix 1.

Declaration on the importance and value of universal museums⁴³²

The international museum community shares the conviction that illegal traffic in archaeological, artistic, and ethnic objects must be firmly discouraged. We should, however, recognize that objects acquired in earlier times must be viewed in the light of different sensitivities and values, reflective of that earlier era. The objects and monumental works that were installed decades and even centuries ago in museums throughout Europe and America were acquired under conditions that are not comparable with current ones.

Over time, objects so acquired - whether by purchase, gift, or partage - have become part of the museums that have cared for them, and by extension part of the heritage of the nations which house them. Today we are especially sensitive to the subject of a work's original context, but we should not lose sight of the fact that museums too provide a valid and valuable context for objects that were long ago displaced from their original source.

The universal admiration for ancient civilizations would not be so deeply established today were it not for the influence exercised by the artifacts of these cultures, widely available to an international public in major museums. Indeed, the sculpture of classical Greece, to take but one example, is an excellent illustration of this point and of the importance of public collecting. The centuries-long history of appreciation of Greek art began in antiquity, was renewed in Renaissance Italy, and subsequently spread through the rest of Europe and to the Americas. Its accession into the collections of public museums throughout the world marked the significance of Greek sculpture for mankind as a whole and its enduring value for the contemporary world. Moreover, the distinctly Greek aesthetic of these works appears all the more strongly as the result of their being seen and studied in direct proximity to products of other great civilizations.

Calls to repatriate objects that have belonged to museum collections for many years have become an important issue for museums. Although each case has to be judged individually, we should acknowledge that museums serve not just the citizens of one nation but the people of every nation. Museums are agents in the development of culture, whose mission is to foster knowledge by a continuous process of reinterpretation. Each object contributes to that process. To narrow the focus of museums whose collections are diverse and multifaceted would therefore be a disservice to all visitors.

⁴³² Cleveland Museum of Art, *Declaration on the importance and value of Universal Museum*, (Cleveland, Cleveland Museum of Art Press Releases, 2003), <https://archive.org/details/cmapr4492>.

Signed by the Directors of:

The Art Institute of Chicago; Bavarian State Museum, Munich (Alte Pinakothek, Neue Pinakothek); State Museums, Berlin; Cleveland Museum of Art; J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Louvre Museum, Paris; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Opificio delle Pietre Dure, Florence; Philadelphia Museum of Art; Prado Museum, Madrid; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg; Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; The British Museum, London.

Appendix 2.

Restitution policy of the Royal Museum for Central Africa⁴³³

Approved by the Director's Advisory Committee on 31 January 2020

1. In the ongoing debate regarding the restitution of African cultural heritage, the RMCA takes an open and constructive position. It is an active participant in the dialogue with authorities and museum policy representatives, and with Belgians of African descent from the relevant countries. The RMCA acknowledges that it is not normal for such a large part of African cultural heritage to be found in the West, given that the countries of origin have moral ownership of such heritage. It also recognises that its collections were acquired in part during the colonial period in the context of a policy of legal inequality: people were forced or placed under pressure to abandon objects, and they were too weak to negotiate the price when they wished to sell objects. During the Congo Free State period, certain objects were obtained using methods that were then illegal in Belgium, such as looting, hostage-taking, or desecration. Dialogue with all the parties involved is crucial. To facilitate such dialogue, the RMCA is providing the inventory of its collections for consultation. It is making every effort to publish the inventory of all its ethnographic collections and archives online. Political decision-makers in Congo and Belgium plan to create a special working group for collections from Congo to tackle the issue, and the RMCA wishes to make a positive contribution to this endeavour.
2. From a legal standpoint, the collections of the RMCA are the inalienable property of the federal state and belong to federal heritage. Restitution can only be decided upon by the federal minister for Science Policy within a strict legal framework and would require approval by parliament. Long-term loans can be approved by the director-general of the RMCA.
3. Given that the method and circumstances are unclear with regard to the acquisition of part of the collections, the RMCA shall prioritise research on the provenance of its collections. African scientists will also participate in this effort through, among others, a new Scientist-in-Residence programme as well as a Visiting Scientist programme.
4. There is still significant cultural heritage present in Congo and Rwanda, and these countries wish to pursue a collaboration in reinforcing their capacities. The RMCA shall continue to invest in capacity-building for African museums in the areas of collection management and restoration, storage, digitisation of inventories and archives, and public-oriented activities. The RMCA has close partnerships with the Institut des musées nationaux du Congo (IMNC), the Institute of National Museums of Rwanda (INMR), and the Musée des civilisations noires (MCN) in Dakar, Senegal. With these museums, the RMCA has a vast five-year collaboration programme for collection management and restoration, educational and public-oriented activities, the digitisation of inventories and archives, and joint and travelling exhibitions.

⁴³³ Africa Museum, *Restitution Policy*, January 31, 2020.

5. To allow faster and easier access to its collections, the RMCA will step up its efforts to digitise the archives, photos, and films in its possession so that these can be made available online, and digital copies thereof can be transferred to the relevant countries. A pilot project is ongoing with Rwanda. A travelling exhibition on speakers of Bantu languages is in preparation with the MCN and the CICIBA (Gabon).
6. The RMCA will advise the relevant minister on the possibility of returning physical objects, provided there is a formal petition from a recognised authority and following a detailed investigation on the manner in which the requested objects were acquired. Special attention shall be given to objects with significant symbolic value for the countries in question. To establish these priorities, the RMCA shall be open to contributions and questions from the diaspora, African academics, and local communities in the relevant countries. In the event of a formal and pertinent request for restitution, the director-general of the RMCA shall form a working group composed of internal and external scientific experts of the relevant collection, representatives of the RMCA scientific and public-oriented services, as well as relevant representatives from Africa and the African diaspora in Belgium. This working group shall then advise the federal minister for Science Policy on the specific question.
7. There is currently no legal framework for restitution in Belgium. In 2018, the federal minister for Science Policy announced the creation of a working group for this purpose, which was tasked to draft a framework with clear criteria for the possible restitution of collections and human remains. Priority was to be given to collections of great symbolic value or acquired through looting or theft, and to the return of human remains. In addition, special attention was to be given to collections that would complement those present in the countries concerned and render them more representative. As the federal government has been acting in a caretaker capacity since December 2018, the announcement did not lead to subsequent concrete measures.

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