

# CAHN

## Congo-Arab Heritage in Historical Narratives

### DURATION

15/12/2020 – 15/03/2025

### BUDGET

820 826 €

### PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Changing perspectives on historical narratives offer the context for the CAHN project that specifically looks into the colonial narrative in museum galleries and informal history teaching regarding the period of the Congo-Arab War (1892-1894). The war between the colonial troops of King Leopold II and the coastal merchants ended the Swahili-Arab hegemony in the eastern Congo and became embedded in the narrative of the anti-slavery campaign as well as in the legitimization of the Congo Free State. Objects, taken as war trophies, found their way from family heirlooms to the Royal Museum of Central Africa (RMCA) and the War Heritage Institute (WHI), and also became tools of colonial propaganda. However, the Arab presence had a lasting impact on the populations in the region, where Swahili is today the common language, and where coastal dress and the practice of Islam are well established but questions on the context and whereabouts of this legacy remain unanswered. It is precisely this legacy, which includes the connection between the source communities and the objects that will be explored in order to construct a multi-vocal perspective on Congo-Arab history and heritage.

Because of colonial research traditions, which considered Swahili-Arab culture as foreign in the Congo, no intensive research has been carried out on these Arabo-Swahili objects in Belgium. As a multidisciplinary team we propose to re-engage with these collections in a threefold approach, (1) investigating their provenance from a transnational perspective, (2) their biographies, and (3) enabling dialogue between the source communities in the DRC and Tanzania, the Congolese diaspora, the research community and civil society.

Both RMCA and WHI operate in national protected memorial galleries that represent colonial narratives. At the RMCA hardly any of the so far 1094 identified objects and photographs of the Congo-Arab collections are on display whereas at the WHI all 690 items are on display and are therefore urgently in need of conservational measures corresponding to current standards. Collaborative provenance and object biography research will be conducted on a selection of objects from the WHI and the RMCA including analysis of primary and secondary sources, comparative analysis of physical stylistic traits of the object itself, through collaborations in the DRC, Tanzania and with the diaspora. The focus is on a group of objects that have the potential to inform on different interactions and cross-cultural borrowings between the populations of the Upper Congo basin and the Swahili-Arab, with particular emphasis on African agency.

In order to introduce the resulting historical narratives into society – our aim is to encourage a more nuanced historical understanding and critical historical consciousness by challenging the stereotypical dualism between the 'bad' Swahili-Arab slave traders and the 'good' Belgian colonizers - we will establish a collaboration between scholars in educational science for teaching programs, artistic interpretations and public oriented events such as exhibitions.

For the educational research we will apply already proven methods especially since we are dealing with objects from museum institutions that need to be contextualized in order to convey and ultimately share their historical importance with the public. Empirical research with regard to (effective) historical and post-colonial teaching and learning processes in museums is very scarce and hence is novel and innovative, both in a Belgian and in an international perspective. Prospective and experienced history teachers and museum educators/guides are involved in a performance task based expert/novice study aimed at mapping how they represent this specific past and foster among audiences their historical thinking about it, as well as an intervention study, to measure the effects of a multiple day workshop involving postcolonial and historical thinking in education training.

As the project also includes working with personal data, ethic aspects are a major concern and we will only work with people participating on a voluntary basis, with informed consent, we will pseudonymize all data in the analysis phase and guarantee that no data sets are made public nor disseminated.



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Gender issues are considered important at the level of participants, as criteria in analysis and for content in the choice of objects.

Outcomes and results of the project are multiple: scientific papers on provenance research, object biographies, on informal history teaching and learning as well as a PhD in educational science, an online (history museum) education course and didactical tools concerning the topic of Congo-Arab heritage, contextualized display within the confines of protected colonial memorial settings of two Federal Scientific Institutes, online access to an updated database on Congo-Arab heritage and other formats according to the specific demands and facilities of the diverse stakeholders.



Fig. 1. View on the display of the Arab Campaign in the 19th century History Room at the Royal Museum of the Army and Military History, War Heritage Institute, 2013. L. Vandeweghe © WHI



Fig. 2. Monument from the colonial period, commemorating the Arab Campaign, between Kasongo and Kasongo Rive on the Lualaba River, DRC 2019 © N. Arazi



Fig. 3. Portrait of the late Makungu Mpia Salumu Vermon, Kasango, 2019 © N. Arazi

## CONTACT INFORMATION

### Coordinator

Els Elisabeth Cornelissen  
Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA)  
Heritage Studies  
[els.cornelissen@africamuseum.be](mailto:els.cornelissen@africamuseum.be)

### Partners

Pierre Lierneux  
War Heritage Institute (WHI)  
[pierre.lierneux@warheritage.be](mailto:pierre.lierneux@warheritage.be)

Karel Van Nieuwenhuyse  
KU Leuven  
History, Faculty of Arts  
[karel.vannieuwenhuyse@kuleuven.be](mailto:karel.vannieuwenhuyse@kuleuven.be)