

CONGOCONNECT

Connections/Collections: objects and power institutions in north-east Congo (1800-1960)

DURATION
15/12/2014 - 15/03/2019

BUDGET
752.275 €

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The north-east of the Congo, as a cultural bridge between Equatorial and Interlacustrine Africa, has been an important region in the history of Africa, geographically, culturally and politically. The collections from this region at the Royal Museum for Central Africa, consisting of ethnographic objects, photographs, films and archives are rich and unique material sources of a region undergoing major changes through an intense history of contacts (slave trade, colonial conquest, postcolonial conflicts). This network project intends to study the collections from the north-east of the Congo as sources in light of different disciplines and in an international perspective, in conjunction with other collections and archives.

Despite abundant interest in the contemporary history, focussed primarily on conflict research, the history of the pre-colonial and colonial era has remained poorly studied. A large collection from this region was assembled during an important scientific expedition for the RMCA in the history of the Belgian Congo by A. Hutereau (1911-1913). This expedition competed with other major expeditions from the American Museum of Natural History (1909-15) and from the Ethnology Museum in Berlin (1907-1908). The Hutereau collection and many smaller sets of objects collected throughout the colonial period (by C. Delhaise, J. Henry de la Lindi and other historical personalities) represent a unique part of both colonial scientific heritage and of the cultural heritage of north-east Congo.

The core of our interdisciplinary approach consists in studying in an integrative way, firstly, the history of research and collecting practices in the museum in light of colonial politics and, secondly, the cultural history of north-east Congo in relation to the different contact histories. The dialectic nature of encounters is what binds together these two facets of research. To understand the role of objects in the creation of colonial knowledge enables to assess them critically as sources and make better use of them for the reconstruction of indigenous history. Thirdly, it is taken as a crucial scholarly and moral principle that communities from which the heritage derives are to be acknowledged and involved in processes of reconstruction and representation of their own history.

INTERDISCIPLINARY NETWORK AND OBJECTIVES

The role of each of the partners is:

1. **To study the CULTURAL HISTORY of the north-east of the Congo and adjacent regions as a contact zone (1800-1960): the development of socio-political institutions and resistance**

[Coordinator Prof. Koen Stroeken, UGent, Centre for Studies of African Humanities (CESAH); Postdoctoral researcher: Dr. Vicky Van Bockhaven]

In **pre-colonial** times, the region attracted populations from different origins, who adapted to a multitude of ecological niches, resulting in a wide variety of inter-related socio-political institutions. Colonial studies of the cultural history favoured large-scale, centralised political realms such as the Mangbetu, Nande and Interlacustrine kingdoms. But the region was also home to many smaller-scale forms of socio-political organisations e.g. boys initiation complexes and healing associations (Vansina, 1990). Since the 1870s, the region came subsequently under the control of slave and ivory traders from Sudan and Zanzibar, and the Belgian colonizers. These contact histories gave further rise to cultural borrowing and innovation in socio-political organization and to more volatile movements responding to fundamental changes in society. The region notably was a breeding ground for new cults channeling resistance, inspired by poor living circumstances such as slavery, forced labour and starvation (Evans-Pritchard, 1937).



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Furthermore, the *simba* rebellion, the first major post-independence rebellion against the central government in the 1960s, had its roots in this region. A more integrative focus on socio-political institutions in terms of a network, taking into account resistance under foreign occupations in the pre-colonial and colonial era, is particularly meaningful for understanding political developments in the post-colonial era. Colonial collections and archives provide sufficient leads to reconstruct the history of institutions during the colonial era, and to hypothesize on their precedents in pre-colonial history.

2. To obtain insight into COLLECTING AND RESEARCH practices in the museum in relation to Belgian colonial politics and within a wider geo-political framework

[Coordinator Dr. Maarten Couttenier, RMCA, dept. colonial history; doctoral research: Hannelore Vandenbergen]

The high number of exploratory, military and scientific expeditions between 1880 and 1910 reflect diplomatic and economic interests of Western nations (e.g. H.M. Stanley). Belgium, Germany, France and Great Britain started prospecting here in competition for a slice of African land, leading to the military subjugation of the slave traders and the actual colonization. The purpose is to contextualise the creation of scientific knowledge about the colony as connected to a colonial ideology and a political agenda. Politicised abstractions were made of complex realities in the colony. Ethnographic objects constituted the "matter of fact" details entangled in this dialectical process, materialising understandings of the colonised. The role of objects in colonial discourse – as opposed to texts - has hardly been studied. Hence, attention is paid to the instrumentality of ethnographic objects in the creation of colonial knowledge.

3. To develop an understanding of CONGOLESE SOCIAL MEMORY in relation to the history of institutions and contacts

[Coordinator: Dr. Chokri Ben Chikha, KASK-School of Arts, Dept. of Film, Photography and Drama; doctoral research in arts: Jean-Michel Kibushi Ndjate Wooto]

Congolese social memories of the contact histories will be explored through the art of documentary film – as a methodology in the field of visual anthropology. Through this medium, incorporating elements of animation film and ritual drama, local people's different bodily, performative modalities of social memory (music, theatre, dance, song, ritual, ...) will be captured, voiced and reflected upon. The purpose is also to reconstitute visually colonial collections and use them as mnemonic devices in interactions with local people. By experimenting with mixed mediums, the purpose is to reconnect with Congolese agency of which colonial sources are largely devoid and critically juxtapose them to western colonial and scholarly perspectives.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND COMMUNITY OUTREACH

The principal outcomes of the project are: publications in the form of articles and a joint book manuscript, two PhD's, a documentary and an educational game to be used in the museum context. The purpose of the latter is to facilitate critical awareness on collecting and representational practices of African cultures in the context of colonization, promoting inter-cultural understanding. Furthermore, the database of the sub-collection studied (at the RMCA) will be updated in function of the research results. Research results will also be communicated via the collection database pages on the RMCA website.

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