

## **SUMMARY PROJECT 'CONGOCONNECT'**

This research project entailed an interdisciplinary approach to contextualise and valorise federal ethnographic collections from Northeast Congo at the Royal Museum for Central Africa [RMCA] in innovating ways. The project consisted of a partnership between Ghent University, Department of African Languages (Koen Stroeken and Inge Brinkman), KASK Royal Academy of Fine Arts (Chokri Ben Chikha), and the RMCA (Maarten Couttenier).

### **Context**

The Northeast of Congo has been an important geographic, cultural and political crossroad in the history of Africa. Despite recurrent political turmoil in postcolonial and contemporary history, in which foreign conflict researchers showed sporadic interest to development agents, many blind spots and prejudices persisted in the scientific knowledge of this region. The RMCA collections, consisting of ethnographic objects, photographs, films and archives are rich and unique sources of a region undergoing major changes throughout an intense history of contacts (slave trade, colonial conquest, postcolonial conflicts). The military commander Armand Hutereau (1911-13) assembled a large collection, including a.o. 8000 ethnographic objects, during one of the largest scientific expedition in the history of the Belgian Congo. This expedition competed with other major expeditions from the American Museum of Natural History (1909-15) and from the Ethnology Museum in Berlin (1907-8). The Hutereau collection and several smaller colonial collections represented a unique yet underexplored part of the **colonial scientific and cultural heritage of north-east Congo**.

### **Objectives**

The core of the project's interdisciplinary approach consisted in the integrative study of, **firstly**, the history of research and collecting practices in the museum as part of colonial knowledge production and, **secondly**, the cultural history of north-east with a focus on the formation of political institutions and resistance. A better understanding of the role of objects in the creation of colonial knowledge allows us to use them critically as sources for the reconstruction of local history. **Thirdly**, the arts of theatre and documentary were explored to investigate Congolese social memories in historiography against the background of the colonial encounter. Through these mediums, local people's different and complex modalities of memory (oral tradition, dance, song, ritual,...) were captured and included as part of scientific knowledge and providing counter-narratives to scholarly perspectives. It was a crucial scholarly and moral principle that communities from which heritage derives, called "source communities", should be involved in the reconstruction and representation of their own history. In this respect, this project contributed to co-creation in the valorisation of collections in scholarship and artistic practice. This resulted in the following specific projects:

#### **1) Revisiting Rebellion: collective therapies in the political history of Northeast-Congo and South Sudan (ca. 1850-today) (UGent, Vicky Van Bockhaven)**

This pillar contributed to revisiting the institutional and political history of northeast Congo and adjacent regions, by filling in blind spots and countering colonial bias, in order to better understand dynamics in contemporary local governance and armed conflict. The focus is on "collective therapies", from 1890 until today, such as *nebeli*, *mani* and *yakan*. Initiates of these societies gain access to ritual-medicinal substances and charms which provide protection and healing against a variety of social and spiritual ills (Janzen, 1992; Evans-Pritchard, 1937). The ritual authority that arose from collective therapies influenced the development of political systems because their ritual specialists could consolidate, or contest and usurp the authority of customary chiefs or colonial authorities. While collective therapies inspired anti-colonial rebellions, both the British and Belgian colonial governments exaggerated their anti-colonial character, which obscured their role in history (Johnson,

1991; Hunt, 2015). The reconstructions of cases based on archival, collection and field research helped correct historical biases and blind spots and recognise African agency in history. Better knowledge of these historical institutions also contributes to a better understanding of contemporary political developments. Postcolonial movements such as the Simba and MaiMai rebels share important features with collective therapies: the logic of healing, wherein charms are used in protective and aggressive ways, aims to cleanse society from bad leadership and restore moral order. Contemporary studies of conflict and politics often ignore such metaphysical aspects.

Results are: a special issue on customary authority for the *Journal of Eastern African Studies* (Verweijen and Van Bockhaven, 2020), a book manuscript *Revisiting Rebellion: collective therapies in the political history of Northeast-Congo and South Sudan (ca. 1850-today)*. The London School of Economics' s Public Authority blog points out: *How colonial understandings of customary authority skew policy interventions*. The policy-prescriptive blog warns scholars, policy-makers and NGO-employees for repeating historical biases that may compromise their activities. An article (*Journal of African History*) and educational app inform a scholarly and large public about leopard men history and colonial stereotypes.

## **2) Social memories surrounding European expeditions and collection practices: Oral history, archives and material culture (Hutereau expedition and chief Maroka) (RMCA, Hannelore Vandenberg)**

This doctoral project studied the ethnographic collection assembled during the Hutereau expedition to the Uele and Ubangi regions. Approximately 8.000 objects were collected for the Museum for Belgian Congo in Tervuren and remained there until today, dispersed in several storages.

A brief archival encounter with the historical chief Maroka (1884-1927, Faradje, Haut-Uélé, DRC) during collection research at the RMCA – a seemingly insignificant detail in a large collection – had far-reaching consequences for both the project's methodology and research outcome. Exploring a “listening technique of nearness” (Hunt 2018, 2016, 2008) as a method in field research on oral traditions and performances about chief Maroka, by sharing field, object photos and records from the Hutereau expedition with informants, helped to reinvigorate diverse stories about the past and the present. These “relational assemblages” (Schorch 2017), an outcome of the PhD thesis, can be seen as a toolkit to try to listen to ethnographic objects' early colonial histories, the history of science and expeditions, present-days approaches as co-creations. The work thus contributes to museum anthropology research and to epistemology of critical and creative ethnographic writing.

The research resulted in a published book chapter (2019), a PhD thesis (forthcoming at the end of 2020, the beginning of 2021) and an article in the journal of Museum Anthropology.

## **3) The concept of magical realism in documentary and theatre as hybrid tools for capturing Congolese understandings of leopard-men history. (KASK, Jean-Michel Kibushi Ndjate Wooto)**

Finally, the project results in a PhD in the arts which, as artistic results, produced a theatre performance in DR Congo “Nkoyi Magie” and a documentary titled “Anioto, Leopard Men: Myths and Realities” (nearing completion in 2020). Researchers studying colony colonisation, and conflicting relationships between colonizer and colonized, are confronted with the fact that official documents were produced exclusively by the former to the detriment of the latter's point of view. The colonial portrayal of Leopard Men, mixing imagination with historical facts, is a literary and artistic archetype of how Belgian cultural appropriation works. It consists of a nebulous “historical reconstruction” mixed with a fantasy about an “enchanted Africa” associated with African savagery, juxtaposed to Western civilization.

The core of the artistic work is a theatrical adaptation of a historical trial of a group that committed murders in the “leopard” or Anioto style in the northeast of Belgian Congo in the 1930s, based on various artistic sources. The magico-religious worldview underlying the killings destabilized public order and confused established institutions, both indigenous and colonial. The artistic adaptation of the court case, using the mediums of theatre and hybrid documentary, takes “magical realism” as a lens to question diverse conceptions of “reality and “representation”. This involves a repositioning of the theme in a Congolese perspective, as part of an identity quest, and a revision of

colonial perspectives and realities, and related imaginations, that contribute to racism to this day. At the confluence of individual memory and collective history, the artist-researcher explores the importance of the imaginary or magical in the search for the real story. Where only the memory of the colonial archives was authoritative, theater and film allow their manipulation, their reappropriation and reinvention to fill in the blind spots and gaps in memory.

**Methodologies are mixed:** all partners combined archival, collection and field research in their respective work. The documentary and theatre production are based on “action research” in which the dialogue with the public, entailing an evaluation of the approach, is feeding into the artistic process. In field research object-centered ethnography was pursued by all partners using photographs as mnemonic devices in interviews and community-engaging initiatives such as exhibitions and film screenings. All partners thus contributed to reconnecting Congolese source communities with heritage preserved in European collections turning it into a resource for public history in DR Congo. The object-centered method demonstrated the potential of material and photographic heritage in applications in education and community building, and led to a new BRAIN-project AFRISURGE entailing a digital restitution component. Finally, an educational app was designed to be used in diverse contexts (soon available in Google app stores). It takes the shape of a quiz, wherein the user will go through a series of questions, leading to multiple choice answers which help the user learn more about leopard men history, going against the faulty colonial representation.

## Conclusions

The project made a significant contribution to the revision of the political history of Northeast Congo and adjacent regions and has a policy-making value for development aid and peacebuilding in the region. Secondly, the project is innovative **in that an artistic medium is used to express reality as experienced** by Congolese people, **but at the same time it can appeal to** a larger public. Thirdly, the project brings to light a historical anthropology of a major expedition in Belgian scientific history, unstudied to this day. Finally, the project makes **a major contribution to** the need for decolonisation and restitution of collections and knowledge which looms large in society today. All the partners took significant steps in alleviating such need by using methods that that reconnect heritage in European collections, and their histories, to the source communities.