

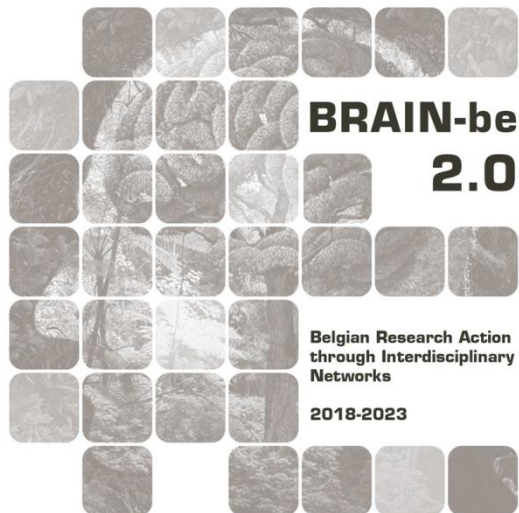
AFRISURGE

Transformative Heritage: politics, peacebuilding and digital restitution of cultural heritage in contemporary Northeast DR Congo

Vicky Van Bockhaven, Kristof Titeca and Hein Vanhee

with contributions from
Baudouin Mena Sebu, Félix Fufulafu Zaniwe and Inge Brinkman

Pillar 2: Heritage science



NETWORK PROJECT

AFRISURGE

Transformative Heritage: politics, peacebuilding and digital restitution of cultural heritage in contemporary Northeast DR Congo

Contract - B2/191/P2/AFRISURGE

FINAL REPORT

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ABSTRACT

Context

AFRISURGE investigated the transformative potential of cultural heritage from Northeast DR Congo held in Belgian federal museum collections. The project was situated at the intersection of debates on customary authority, governance and conflict; provenance research and restitution of colonial collections; and socially responsible, co-creative and locally anchored heritage work. Focusing mainly on Haut-Uélé and neighbouring regions, the project combined research on political and ritual authority with digital restitution, heritage education and applied museology.

Objectives

The project pursued two interconnected objectives. First, it aimed to produce new knowledge on customary authority, legitimacy, governance and conflict in Northeast DR Congo from a *longue durée* perspective. Second, it explored how colonial museum collections, photographs and related documentation could be reconnected with Congolese academic institutions, schools and communities through digital access, educational use and community-based heritage initiatives. Over the course of the project, these objectives evolved from an initial focus on digital database access toward a broader model combining provenance research, offline access, heritage education, local infrastructure and capacity building.

Conclusions

AFRISURGE showed that customary authority remains a central but contested dimension of governance, land relations, conflict mediation and conservation in DR Congo. It also demonstrated that provenance research and digital restitution can become meaningful only when collection data are contextualised, locally accessible and activated through education, training and institutional partnerships. The project supported two doctoral research trajectories, contributed to the enrichment of RMCA collection data, developed digital and offline tools for heritage access, and helped establish heritage education activities and infrastructures in Haut-Uélé. Its main recommendations concern historically informed engagement with customary authorities, sustained investment in provenance research and digital restitution, conflict-sensitive heritage education, local capacity building, and clearer coordination arrangements in complex interdisciplinary networks.

Keywords

customary authority; digital restitution; provenance research; heritage education; Northeast DR Congo.

1. INTRODUCTION

AFRISURGE, *Transformative Heritage: politics, peacebuilding and digital restitution of cultural heritage in contemporary Northeast DR Congo*, was a BRAIN-be 2.0 network project funded by the Belgian Science Policy Office under contract B2/191/P2/AFRISURGE. Coordinated by the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA), in partnership with Ghent University, the University of Antwerp and the Université de l'Uélé in Isiro, Democratic Republic of Congo, the project investigated the transformative potential of cultural heritage from Northeast Congo held in Belgian federal museum collections, both as a source for scholarly research and as a resource for reconnection, education, community engagement and peacebuilding.

The project was situated at the intersection of several contemporary debates: the role of customary authority in governance and conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo; the provenance, interpretation and possible restitution of colonial museum collections; and the development of more socially responsible, co-creative and locally anchored forms of heritage work. From the outset, AFRISURGE linked historical, anthropological, political and museological research with practical experimentation in digital and visual restitution. The project started from the premise that museum collections are not only historical sources preserved in European institutions, but can also become resources for communities of origin when they are made accessible, interpreted and activated in collaboration with local partners.

Geographically, AFRISURGE focused on Northeast DR Congo, particularly Haut-Uélé and neighbouring regions. This area has long been marked by limited state presence, changing forms of customary authority, political instability, armed conflict, missionary and colonial intervention, and the historical extraction of cultural objects, photographs and archival knowledge. These conditions made the region especially relevant for a project that sought to understand the historical depth and contemporary relevance of customary institutions, while also exploring how heritage from colonial collections might be reconnected with communities, schools, universities and local authorities.

The research design combined two closely connected lines of inquiry. The first examined customary authority, ritual power, legitimacy and governance from a *longue durée* perspective, with particular attention to the role of chiefs and other customary institutions in rural, urban, conflict-affected and conservation contexts. The second focused on provenance research, digital restitution, heritage education and the possible use of museum collections as resources for local knowledge production, social cohesion and community-based initiatives. In the original project proposal, these two dimensions were explicitly conceived as intertwined: the study of customary authority and ritual objects was linked to the broader question of how heritage collections might contribute to scholarly understanding, community engagement and peacebuilding in Northeast Congo.

The project unfolded in a period marked by significant practical and institutional challenges. Its first phase was strongly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which delayed recruitment, fieldwork and the selection of the doctoral researcher linked to UniUele. Subsequent implementation was also shaped by logistical constraints, insecurity, limited infrastructure and connectivity in Northeast

Congo, health-related interruptions, and the practical complexity of developing digital restitution and museological applications in a low-resource environment. These circumstances required adjustments in timing, methods and implementation strategy.

Despite these challenges, AFRISURGE developed as both a research project and an experimental platform for heritage-based collaboration. Fieldwork and consultations with Congolese stakeholders showed that access to digital data alone was not sufficient. Local partners and interlocutors repeatedly emphasised the importance of education, offline access, training, pedagogical materials and spaces where people could learn about and discuss cultural history and heritage. As a result, the project increasingly combined database development with offline access tools, school-based heritage education, co-created pedagogical materials, and small-scale heritage infrastructures such as a heritage hub, museum corners and mobile museum kits.

AFRISURGE produced scientific results on customary authority, governance, conflict and conservation; contributed to provenance research and digital access to RMCA collections; supported two doctoral research trajectories; and tested practical forms of heritage education and co-creative museology in collaboration with Congolese academic, educational and community partners. The project's results speak to academic debates on customary authority, statehood, restitution and decolonising museum practice, but also to policy discussions concerning cultural heritage, development cooperation, education, citizenship and peacebuilding.

The following report presents the integrated results of the AFRISURGE network. It first situates the project in relation to the state of the art and its original and evolving objectives. It then describes the methodologies used, before presenting the main scientific results and recommendations. Subsequent sections discuss dissemination, valorisation, publications and acknowledgements.

2. STATE OF THE ART AND OBJECTIVES

2.1 Customary authority, governance and conflict in Northeast DR Congo

AFRISURGE was developed in response to important gaps in the study of customary authority, governance and conflict in Northeast DR Congo. While customary chiefs have long played a central role in local governance, land management, conflict mediation and the representation of communities, their historical depth and contemporary political significance remain insufficiently understood. International aid, peacebuilding and development interventions in Central Africa often rely on customary leaders as intermediaries, but they frequently do so on the basis of simplified assumptions about "traditional" authority. Such approaches risk reproducing functionalist or colonial-era understandings of local leadership, in which chiefs are treated as fixed, singular and self-evident authorities rather than as actors embedded in complex social, political, ritual and historical networks.

The project therefore started from the need to historicise and contextualise customary authority. In Northeast Congo, customary institutions have been shaped by precolonial political formations, colonial administrative interventions, missionary activity, postcolonial state policies, armed conflict,

population displacement, conservation regimes, mining economies and changing relationships between rural and urban centres. The region is especially relevant because it has been marked by weak or intermittent state presence, recurrent insecurity and strong local forms of social and political organisation. These conditions have made customary authorities both resilient and contested actors in everyday governance.

AFRISURGE also sought to move beyond a narrow focus on chiefs as formal office holders. The original project proposal stressed that customary authority cannot be fully understood if it is reduced to chieftaincy alone. Ritual specialists, lineage structures, esoteric institutions, healing practices, metaphysical beliefs, material objects and locally recognised forms of moral and spiritual legitimacy all contribute to the ways in which authority is constituted and contested. The project therefore aimed to broaden the analytical frame from customary authority as an administrative institution to customary authority as a historically layered field of practices, symbols, claims, relationships and negotiations.

Within this broader framework, the University of Antwerp research strand examined customary authority in several interrelated contexts: rural governance in Haut-Uélé, urban and peri-urban governance in Kinshasa, succession disputes and armed violence in North Kivu, and conservation politics around Garamba National Park. These research lines made it possible to analyse customary authority not as a static survival from the past, but as a flexible and contested form of authority that continues to shape governance, conflict, land relations, conservation and political representation.

2.2 Colonial collections, provenance and digital restitution

A second point of departure for AFRISURGE was the growing debate on colonial collections, provenance research and restitution. In Belgium and elsewhere in Europe, museums holding collections acquired during the colonial period have increasingly been called upon to clarify the origins of these collections, to address unequal histories of acquisition, and to develop more inclusive and responsible relationships with communities of origin. In this context, provenance research is not only a matter of reconstructing object histories. It also creates the conditions for renewed access, dialogue and possible forms of restitution, whether material, digital, visual, educational or collaborative.

The project focused on cultural heritage from Northeast Congo held at the Royal Museum for Central Africa. These collections include objects, photographs and archival information historically linked to local institutions, political authority, ritual practices, social life and colonial intervention. They are therefore valuable not only for museum documentation, but also for historical, anthropological and political research. In the AFRISURGE design, museum collections were treated as sources that could help researchers and communities reconsider the historical role of customary authority, ritual power and cultural knowledge in the region.

Digital restitution was initially conceived as a practical response to demands for reconnection with heritage held in Europe. Rather than assuming that restitution could only mean the physical return of objects, AFRISURGE explored how digitised object records, photographs, provenance information

and contextual material could be made accessible to Congolese academic institutions and communities. The original project proposal framed digital and visual restitution as a way to make colonial collections available again as resources for research, education, dialogue and community engagement.

During the project, this objective required technical, methodological and institutional development. Museum datasets had to be improved, structured and prepared for use beyond the holding institution. At the same time, the project had to consider how digital access could become meaningful in contexts where internet access, electricity and digital infrastructure are limited. The digital restitution component therefore evolved into a broader effort to connect provenance research, database development, local access, educational use and long-term sustainability.

2.3 Heritage education, community engagement and peacebuilding

A third objective of AFRISURGE concerned the possible role of heritage in community engagement, education and peacebuilding. The project was based on the hypothesis that reconnecting communities with cultural heritage held in museum collections might contribute to local knowledge, self-esteem, historical awareness and social cohesion. However, the project also recognised from the outset that heritage is not automatically unifying or reparative. Cultural objects, historical narratives and claims to ancestry or customary legitimacy can also be politically sensitive, contested or divisive.

Fieldwork confirmed the need for a cautious and locally grounded approach. Interlocutors in Northeast Congo expressed strong interest in reconnecting with cultural heritage, but they did not always prioritise physical restitution in the same way as European debates often assume. Many stakeholders emphasised the need for education, access to information, school materials, cultural centres, museum-like spaces and tools that could help young people learn about local history and heritage. On the basis of fieldwork and stakeholder consultations, the project identified three major domains of action: heritage education, digital and offline access, and the development of small-scale museum-like activities in local communities.

This shift was particularly important for the doctoral research of Félix Fufulafu Zaniwe. His work examined how heritage education could be developed in schools in Haut-Uélé, and how photographs and object data from RMCA collections could be used in pedagogical activities. His research involved interviews, focus group discussions, collaboration with teachers and school authorities, and co-creation of educational practices in primary schools. The aim was to understand how heritage education could help pupils and their wider social networks reflect on culture and history in positive but critical ways, while remaining attentive to local sensitivities, religious concerns, political tensions and the need to promote social cohesion rather than division.

Over time, the project's approach to digital restitution became increasingly applied. Digital access was no longer considered sufficient in itself. It needed to be activated through teaching, workshops, pedagogical materials, trained local actors and infrastructure adapted to local conditions. This led to the development of offline access solutions, heritage education activities, a university-based heritage hub, school-based museum corners and mobile museum kits.

2.4 Objectives and their evolution during the project

The original AFRISURGE objectives can be summarised around two interconnected ambitions. The first was to produce new scholarly knowledge on customary authority, ritual power, governance and conflict in Northeast DR Congo. The second was to explore how colonial museum collections from the region could be reconnected with Congolese institutions and communities through digital restitution, research collaboration, heritage education and community-oriented applications. These objectives were deliberately interdisciplinary: they brought together political science, anthropology, history, provenance research, collection management, digital humanities, museology and development-oriented reflection.

Several specific objectives followed from this general framework. The project aimed to conduct collection and provenance research on RMCA holdings from Northeast Congo; to develop digital access to selected collections and photographs; to support doctoral research on customary authority and heritage restitution; to use object and photograph collections as resources in fieldwork; to engage Congolese universities, schools, customary authorities and community actors; and to contribute to academic, museum and policy debates on restitution, peacebuilding and heritage. The proposal also anticipated concrete deliverables such as doctoral theses, publications, a special issue or edited volume, digital collection access for African partner institutions, visual restitution initiatives and research-based teaching.

During implementation, these objectives were not abandoned, but refined and reoriented in response to research findings and practical constraints. The COVID-19 pandemic delayed the start of fieldwork and recruitment and required an initial extension of the project timeline. Later phases were affected by logistical and security constraints in Northeast Congo, health-related interruptions, difficulties linked to digital infrastructure, and the time required to develop locally relevant applications. These circumstances pushed the project to become more adaptive in its planning and more attentive to the practical conditions under which digital restitution could actually function.

One of the most significant evolutions concerned the move from digital restitution as database access toward digital restitution as locally activated heritage work. Early work focused on preparing datasets, testing software and developing a digital platform. Fieldwork then showed that access had to be embedded in education, offline tools, local training and physical spaces where heritage could be discussed and used. As a result, the project increasingly invested in co-created educational materials, school-based activities, offline consultation and local infrastructure.

A second evolution concerned the relationship between the different research strands. The original project already linked customary authority, ritual power, museum collections and peacebuilding. During the project, these connections became more concrete. Research on customary authority showed how legitimacy, land, conflict and governance remain deeply entangled with historical institutions and local moral worlds. At the same time, research on heritage education showed that colonial collections can become resources for discussing history, identity, citizenship and coexistence, provided that they are used through careful and locally negotiated methods.

The objectives of AFRISURGE therefore evolved from a broad research and digital restitution agenda into a more integrated model combining scholarly research, digital infrastructure, applied museology, education and local capacity building. This evolution reflects one of the main lessons of the project: restitution, whether digital or material, cannot be reduced to the transfer of objects or data. It requires sustained collaboration, contextual knowledge, technical adaptation, educational mediation and long-term institutional anchoring.

3. METHODOLOGY

AFRISURGE combined historical, anthropological, political, museological and digital humanities methods. This interdisciplinary design reflected the project's two interconnected ambitions: to produce new knowledge on customary authority, governance and conflict in Northeast DR Congo, and to explore how cultural heritage from Belgian federal museum collections could be reconnected with Congolese institutions and communities through digital, educational and co-creative applications.

The project relied on several mutually reinforcing methods: collection and provenance research, archival research, qualitative fieldwork, object- and photograph-based interviews, digital database development, co-creative workshops, heritage education experiments, and adaptive project coordination. These methods were not implemented as separate work packages in isolation from one another. Rather, they developed in interaction: collection research informed fieldwork; fieldwork informed digital and educational applications; and feedback from Congolese partners helped reshape the project's approach to restitution, access and local use.

3.1 Collection and provenance research

Collection and provenance research formed one of the methodological foundations of the project. AFRISURGE focused on cultural heritage from Northeast Congo held at the Royal Museum for Central Africa, including ethnographic objects, photographs and related archival documentation. These collections were studied both as historical sources and as possible resources for digital restitution, heritage education and community engagement.

A major component of the work concerned the documentation and enrichment of records relating to collections from the Armand Hutereau expedition. This material was particularly important because it combines objects, fieldwork photographs and contextual information that can be linked to specific localities, populations, chiefdoms and historical actors in Northeast Congo. During the project, provenance data were improved by adding or correcting information on state posts, populations, chiefdoms, names of chiefs, collecting contexts and related photographs. A dataset of 7,911 objects and 811 fieldwork photographs was improved for integration into the project database, with particular attention to the places and authorities from whom objects had been collected.

This work continued in subsequent years. Additional records were prepared and migrated, and the database came to include thousands of improved records with more detailed provenance

information. This collection research was not limited to descriptive documentation. It was also designed to make the material usable in Congo, especially by enabling users to search for objects and photographs connected to particular places, communities or historical authorities.

In addition to the Hutereau material, the project included broader collection-level provenance research at the RMCA. This work examined the wider history and development of the museum's ethnographic collections, including the regional distribution of object provenances, changes over time, and the profiles of collectors active in Congo before the First World War. This broader research helped situate the Northeast Congo material within the larger history of colonial collecting and the formation of the RMCA collections.

Collection research therefore served several methodological purposes. It improved the quality of museum documentation, provided historical evidence for scholarly analysis, created material for fieldwork and interviews, and laid the basis for digital and educational forms of restitution.

3.2 Archival research

Archival research complemented the study of museum collections. The project proposal had foreseen the use of colonial and postcolonial archives to reconstruct the historical formation of customary institutions, succession disputes, local governance arrangements and colonial collecting practices.

Archival research was carried out in Belgium and in Congo. Belgian archival work focused on colonial administrative records, museum archives and documentation related to the provenance and interpretation of collections. These sources were used to enrich database records, contextualise objects and photographs, and support broader historical research into the ways in which colonial authorities documented, classified and intervened in customary institutions.

In Congo, archival research was conducted in regional, territorial and chieftaincy archives, particularly in Haut-Uélé. Baudouin Mena Sebu consulted historical records in Isiro, Faradje and chieftaincy offices in order to examine the long-term role of customary authorities in colonial and postcolonial state administration. This archival work was particularly important for his analysis of customary authorities and state administration.

The University of Antwerp research strand also extended archival work beyond Belgium and Congo. For the work on Garamba National Park, archival research included material held in Nairobi by former park managers, whose personal archive contains documents from the colonial period to the recent past. This enabled a *longue durée* reconstruction of conservation governance, customary authority and local negotiations around the park.

Archival research was thus used not only to reconstruct past events, but also to understand how categories of authority, legitimacy, territory and custom were produced, contested and transformed over time.

3.3 Qualitative fieldwork and interviews

Qualitative fieldwork was central to AFRISURGE. The project relied on semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, participatory observation, workshops and informal conversations with a wide range of actors. These included customary authorities, members of chieftaincy offices, civil society representatives, teachers, pupils, school directors, parents, religious leaders, government officials, political actors, NGO representatives, university staff, cultural actors, traditional practitioners and community members.

Fieldwork was carried out in several phases and by different members of the network. Vicky Van Bockhaven conducted fieldwork in Northeast Congo in 2021 and 2022 to present and discuss the digital restitution plan, introduce the developing database, consult stakeholders on the meaning of reconnecting with colonial collections, and organise workshops at UNIKIS, UniUele and teacher training institutions. The digital restitution plan was presented at universities, teacher training institutes, to chiefs in Haut-Uélé and to the Provincial Ministry of Culture, while consultations were held on local interests in reconnecting with colonial collections. Vicky Van Bockhaven played a central role in developing the heritage and digital restitution strand, particularly through fieldwork, stakeholder consultation, co-creative museology and collaboration with Félix Fufulafu Zaniwe's doctoral research on heritage education.

Félix Fufulafu Zaniwe carried out fieldwork in Haut-Uélé from 2022 onwards. His research focused on how local communities, schools and educational actors engage with cultural objects and photographs from RMCA collections, and how heritage education could be developed in primary schools. In 2022, he conducted interviews and focus group discussions with customary authorities, civil society actors, NGOs, women's leaders, political actors, religious leaders, traditional practitioners, academics, teachers and education authorities. He later extended this work into schools, teacher training institutions and local communities, with particular attention to how object-based heritage education could promote social cohesion while avoiding local tensions.

Baudouin Mena Sebu conducted long-term qualitative fieldwork in Haut-Uélé, including in Faradje, Dungu, Watsa and surrounding chiefdoms. His fieldwork combined interviews with customary authorities, chieftaincy office members, civil society actors, religious representatives, local residents, state agents and mining actors. He also conducted participant observation in chieftaincy offices and attended chieftaincy courts in order to understand how customary authorities contribute to local governance and conflict resolution.

Kristof Titeca and collaborators conducted additional qualitative fieldwork on customary authority in Kinshasa, in relation to armed conflict and succession disputes, and around Garamba National Park. This fieldwork involved interviews in Northeast DRC, Kinshasa and Uganda, including with customary authorities, former rebel actors, conservation actors, diplomats, NGO representatives and other stakeholders. The purpose was to situate customary authority within broader political, conflict and conservation dynamics.

Across these fieldwork components, the project paid particular attention to the ethical and political sensitivity of the research. The original project proposal stressed the importance of informed consent, anonymity where needed, and careful handling of data in a fragile region where political opinions, customary disputes or claims about heritage may expose people to risk.

3.4 Object- and photograph-based research methods

One of the distinctive methodological features of AFRISURGE was the use of museum objects and photographs as research tools in the field. Rather than treating objects and images only as archival or museum records, the project used them as mnemonic devices and prompts for interviews, focus groups, teaching and community discussions.

The project proposal explicitly anticipated this method, arguing that copies of visual and digital repositories of ethnographic collections would be taken into the field and used in interviews to help interlocutors discuss institutions, practices, memories and local histories. In practice, photographs and object data from RMCA collections helped open conversations about customary authority, social memory, cultural knowledge, local history and the meaning of heritage loss.

Baudouin Mena Sebu used Hutereau photographs during field interviews in Haut-Uélé. These images helped generate discussions about the social and political history of the region and about the possibility of digital reconnection with objects and archives held in Belgium. Félix Fufulafu similarly used photographs and object data in schools and focus groups, where they served as tools for discussing local culture, history, identity, intergenerational transmission and heritage education.

This method was important because many of the topics addressed by the project — ritual objects, customary authority, colonial collecting, local memories of loss, and the relationship between heritage and wellbeing — are difficult to study through written sources alone. Object- and photograph-based methods enabled interlocutors to react to concrete materials, identify places or practices, challenge existing interpretations, and propose new uses for the collections in educational and community settings.

3.5 Digital humanities and database development

The digital restitution component required extensive technical work. The project did not simply export existing RMCA records. It evaluated appropriate tools, cleaned and structured data, migrated datasets, developed a database environment, prepared a public-facing interface, reflected on access rights and explored how the database could be used in Congo.

At an early stage, the project team studied existing digital restitution initiatives and tested possible software solutions. Particular attention was paid to Mukurtu CMS, an open-source content management system developed for community-based heritage projects, and to CollectiveAccess, another open-source platform for managing cultural heritage collections. A test installation of Mukurtu was created at the RMCA, including custom input screens for objects and photographs. However, batch import and editing of large datasets proved problematic. Because AFRISURGE needed to work with existing museum datasets and large numbers of records and images, Mukurtu

was not retained as the main project tool. CollectiveAccess was then tested and produced better results, especially for custom fields, input screens, batch imports and editing procedures.

The technical work included the preparation and migration of the Hutereau object and photograph datasets into the project database, the development and adaptation of import scripts, and collaboration with RMCA ICT colleagues on the development of a front-end. Subsequent work included data cleaning, translation of field titles, assessment of object photographs, addition of geographical data, preparation of contextual website texts, and reflection on rights, copyright and traditional knowledge protection systems.

A particularly important methodological development concerned geographical data. The project worked to add precise coordinates to collection records, using tools including QGIS. This allowed provenance information to be visualised and searched geographically, which was considered important for users in Congo wishing to relate objects and photographs to specific places, chiefdoms and communities.

Over time, the digital methodology also had to adapt to infrastructural realities in Northeast Congo. Internet access, electricity and equipment could not be taken for granted. As a result, the project increasingly focused on offline access and local networks. The final implementation strategy combined the database with solar-powered equipment, computers, projectors, printers, pedagogical materials and mobile kits, so that digital heritage could be used in schools, universities and community contexts even where connectivity was limited.

3.6 Co-creative workshops and applied museology

AFRISURGE used workshops as a method for consultation, co-creation, training and validation. Workshops were organised with academic partners, teachers, inspectors, cultural actors, customary authorities, students and community representatives. They served several purposes: introducing the database, gathering feedback on digital restitution, discussing the meanings and risks of heritage reconnection, developing educational uses for collections, and preparing local heritage infrastructures.

Workshops in 2021 and 2022 introduced the digital restitution plan and the project database to Congolese partners and stakeholders. In September 2022, several workshops were organised at UniUele, UNIKIS and ISP-Isiro with different groups of stakeholders, including academic, political, customary and community actors. These workshops helped the project identify key domains in which heritage reconnection was locally considered useful: education, offline access and museum-like spaces or activities.

In later phases, the workshop methodology became increasingly applied. The project shifted from consultation about digital restitution toward co-design of concrete educational and museological uses. The 2025 extension request describes the final mission as including a workshop in the Uganda–DRC border region, chosen because of access to electricity, internet and accommodation, and because Congolese participants could attend without visa requirements. The workshop was

designed to finalise co-created applications and prepare their installation in Isiro and partner schools.

This co-creative methodology was essential to the project's approach to socially responsible museology. Rather than designing heritage tools in Belgium and simply exporting them to Congo, AFRISURGE sought to develop uses of collections in dialogue with local stakeholders and in response to locally identified needs. This was particularly important because heritage in Northeast Congo can be sensitive. Objects and histories may evoke pride, identity and cultural continuity, but they may also be associated with spiritual danger, ethnic tension, political competition or memories of colonial violence.

3.7 Heritage education and school-based research

The heritage education component developed through Félix Fufulafu's doctoral research and through the wider applied museology strand of the project. Methodologically, this work combined ethnographic research, pedagogical experimentation, co-creation with teachers, and observation of classroom and school-based activities.

Félix worked with primary schools, teacher training institutions, education authorities, parents, customary authorities and community actors. His research examined how heritage education could be implemented in the context of national pedagogical reforms and how photographs and object records from RMCA collections could be used in model lessons, role play, exhibition-making and other interactive activities. He worked in three territories of Haut-Uélé and in Isiro, focusing on four primary schools, and engaged in participatory observation and co-creation by making available photographs from the RMCA collection, providing documentation and co-creating pedagogical activities.

This methodology paid close attention to consent, safety and local sensitivity. Because conflicts exist in some communities and because certain forms of heritage may be religiously or politically charged, the research avoided treating heritage education as a neutral or automatic good. Particular care was taken to ensure that lessons and activities were safe for children and acceptable to the communities involved. In some cases, this meant focusing on commonalities rather than differences, inviting different chiefs together, or selecting objects associated with subsistence, everyday life or conflict appeasement rather than objects considered ritually dangerous.

The final phase of the project extended this methodology into more durable educational infrastructure. The project supported the installation of a heritage education hub, school-based museum corners and mobile museum kits. Heritage education also became embedded in local teaching and institutional initiatives, including an "Introduction to Museology" course or seminar at ISP-Isiro, the Université de l'Uélé and ISTI, and the development of local structures for cultural heritage education. These developments indicate that heritage education became not only a fieldwork topic, but also a form of local capacity building and institutional anchoring.

3.8 Doctoral research and capacity building

Doctoral research was one of the core methodological and capacity-building instruments of AFRISURGE. The project directly supported two doctoral trajectories: Baudouin Mena Sebu at the University of Antwerp and Félix Fufulafu Zaniwe in the UGent/RMCA-UniUele framework.

Baudouin's doctoral research focused on customary authority in Haut-Uélé, examining the historical resilience, political roles, legitimacy and everyday governance practices of chiefs. His work combined literature review, archival research, long-term fieldwork, interviews and participant observation. It contributed directly to the project's research strand on customary authority, governance and conflict.

Félix's doctoral research focused on digital restitution, heritage education and the meaning of colonial museum collections for source communities in Northeast Congo. His work combined collection-based research at the RMCA, doctoral training in Belgium, fieldwork in Haut-Uélé, focus group discussions, school-based co-creation and applied museology. His research was central to the project's shift from digital access to heritage education and local infrastructure.

At the end of the AFRISURGE project, Baudouin Mena Sebu had written the majority of his PhD chapters and was expected to defend his dissertation in 2027. Félix Fufulafu Zaniwe had also prepared drafts of his PhD chapters, building on fieldwork, school-based heritage education activities and the development of local museological applications; the current objective is to complete the dissertation by the end of 2026.

The project also generated training and capacity building beyond the two doctoral trajectories. Teachers, inspectors, university staff and cultural actors were involved in workshops and training activities. The final implementation phase aimed to establish local capacities for the use, maintenance and pedagogical activation of the project's database and heritage tools.

Several AFRISURGE activities benefited from earlier and parallel expertise developed in related projects and research trajectories. In this report, these links are acknowledged where relevant, while the focus remains on doctoral trajectories, training activities and outputs directly connected to AFRISURGE.

3.9 Adaptive project coordination and implementation

AFRISURGE required adaptive coordination throughout its implementation. The project started during the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected recruitment, travel, fieldwork and the selection process for the doctoral researcher linked to UniUele. An early extension was therefore requested in November 2020 to preserve the feasibility of the doctoral trajectory and planned fieldwork.

Later phases required further adjustments. Logistical constraints in Northeast Congo, limited connectivity, insecurity, health-related interruptions, customs delays, and the complexity of developing digital and museological applications in low-resource settings all affected the timing and organisation of the work. A further extension request in January 2025 summarised these constraints

and argued that additional time was needed to complete doctoral work, community outreach, digital restitution and museological applications.

The project also required institutional adjustments within the network. In 2023, a budget transfer from RMCA to Ghent University was requested to allow the UGent project promoter to hold a 20% position at Ghent University alongside an 80% postdoctoral position at RMCA, thereby ensuring continuity in doctoral supervision and UGent-related project tasks after the end of her FWO mandate. In March 2024, the distribution of day-to-day project coordination was adjusted: Hein Vanhee remained formal project coordinator and RMCA promoter, while Vicky Van Bockhaven took over daily organisation, planning and coordination of the remaining project activities, particularly in relation to the heritage, digital restitution and fieldwork-related components.

These adjustments were part of the project's adaptive implementation and point to a broader lesson for the management of complex interdisciplinary networks. Heritage projects that combine research, digital infrastructure, doctoral supervision, fieldwork and local implementation require clear coordination arrangements, shared documentation, regular internal communication and flexibility in response to changing circumstances. This lesson is further addressed in the recommendations section.

4. SCIENTIFIC RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

AFRISURGE produced scientific results in three closely connected domains. First, it generated new knowledge on customary authority, governance, legitimacy and conflict in Northeast DR Congo and related Congolese contexts. Second, it advanced provenance research and digital access to RMCA collections from Northeast Congo. Third, it developed and tested forms of digital restitution, heritage education and applied museology in collaboration with Congolese academic, educational and community partners.

These results should not be understood as separate partner outputs, but as contributions to a shared research question: how can historical knowledge, museum collections and local forms of authority be reconnected in ways that are scientifically meaningful, socially responsible and relevant for communities and policy makers?

4.1 Customary authority in Haut-Uélé: resilience, legitimacy and negotiated governance

One of the central scientific results of AFRISURGE concerns the historical depth and contemporary resilience of customary authority in Haut-Uélé. This research strand was developed primarily through the doctoral research of Baudouin Mena Sebu, supervised at the University of Antwerp, and through related research by Kristof Titeca and collaborators.

The research showed that customary authorities remain central actors in local governance in Haut-Uélé. Their authority cannot be explained solely by formal recognition by the state. It is also rooted in older historical institutions, local social recognition, territorial claims, cultural memory, metaphysical legitimacy and the practical functions chiefs continue to perform in rural society.

Chiefs are involved in conflict mediation, land management, the representation of communities, relations with state agents and negotiations with other local power holders.

The project demonstrated that customary authority in Haut-Uélé is neither a static remnant of the precolonial or colonial past nor a purely invented administrative category. Rather, it is a historically adaptive field of authority. Colonial and postcolonial states reshaped chiefdoms, succession rules and administrative structures, but they did not erase local forms of legitimacy. Chiefs continued to operate within changing political frameworks, while drawing on older repertoires of authority, lineage, land, ritual, moral responsibility and community recognition.

This finding directly addresses one of the project's original objectives: to analyse customary authority in a *longue durée* perspective and to understand its contemporary resurgence in contexts of limited state presence. The project confirms that customary authority persists because it is able to adapt to political change, but also because state institutions remain unevenly present and because local populations continue to expect chiefs to act as representatives, protectors, mediators and custodians of community interests.

At the same time, the research shows that this authority is not uncontested. Chiefs' legitimacy can be strengthened when they are perceived as defending community interests or mediating conflict, but weakened when they are seen as too closely aligned with state authorities, political elites or private interests. Customary authority is therefore best understood as an arena of negotiation rather than as a fixed institution. Chiefs constantly navigate between state administration, local expectations, lineage claims, political competition and broader economic or security pressures.

A particularly important result is the demonstration that customary authority should not be reduced to the individual figure of the chief. Its functioning depends on wider networks of advisers, lineage groups, customary offices, ritual references, community expectations and local intermediaries. This confirms the project's broader analytical aim of moving beyond a narrow institutional reading of chieftaincy and towards a more relational and historically grounded understanding of authority.

These findings are relevant for governance, development and peacebuilding policies. Development and aid interventions often engage customary authorities as intermediaries, but they may do so without sufficient understanding of the local histories, legitimacy claims and contested social relationships that shape their role. AFRISURGE shows that customary authorities are important governance actors, but that their role must be analysed in context and in relation to wider networks of authority.

4.2 Customary authority in urban and peri-urban governance

A second research result concerns the continued relevance of customary authority in urban and peri-urban settings. While customary institutions are often associated with rural areas, AFRISURGE research on Kinshasa showed that customary authority also remains significant in zones of rapid urban expansion, especially where land, ancestry, local belonging and administrative authority intersect.

Kinshasa provides a revealing case because large parts of the city and its peripheries combine urban growth with older systems of land tenure and customary claims. Chiefs whose territories have been incorporated into the expanding city have often lost part of their direct control over land, yet they continue to play important roles in land allocation, dispute resolution, local representation and relations with political and administrative actors.

The research showed that land is a central arena in which different forms of legitimacy compete. State institutions invoke statutory law and administrative authority; customary chiefs invoke historical presence, ancestral land rights and moral authority; local residents and political actors mobilise their own claims to belonging, legality and access. Urban governance therefore emerges through negotiation between overlapping systems of authority rather than through the simple replacement of customary rule by state law.

This result contributes to debates on African urbanisation and governance. It shows that urban expansion does not necessarily make customary authority disappear. Instead, it creates new arenas in which customary, administrative, political and economic forms of power intersect. In peri-urban areas, customary authority may even become more politically and economically significant because land values increase and succession disputes become entangled with urban development.

The Kinshasa research also highlights how customary chiefs become embedded in electoral and party politics. Since the reintroduction of multiparty elections, chiefs have increasingly interacted with provincial institutions and political parties. Their legitimacy is therefore shaped not only by ancestry and territory, but also by contemporary political networks.

4.3 Customary authority, succession disputes and armed violence

A third major result concerns the relationship between customary authority, succession disputes and armed violence. AFRISURGE research on Bashu chiefdom in North Kivu showed that violence attributed to armed groups can be deeply entangled with local struggles over customary office, legitimacy and lineage competition.

The research focused on a region where chiefs and members of customary dynasties have been targeted in violent attacks, often attributed to the Allied Democratic Forces. While the ADF is an important armed actor with regional and transnational dimensions, AFRISURGE research shows that some violent incidents cannot be understood only through the lens of insurgency or jihadism. Local succession disputes, rival lineage claims, struggles over land and competition for authority may shape the conditions in which violence occurs and the ways in which it is interpreted.

This finding challenges monocausal explanations of violence in eastern Congo. Labelling violence as the work of an armed group may obscure local political dynamics. Conversely, local actors may use the presence or reputation of an armed group to frame, hide or amplify disputes over customary power. The result is a layered form of violence in which insurgency, local legitimacy, succession politics and state weakness intersect.

The research also confirms the importance of historical depth. Succession disputes are often rooted in colonial and postcolonial interventions into chieftaincy structures. Colonial administrators redefined customary hierarchies, privileged some lineages over others, and introduced new procedures for recognition. Postcolonial state authorities continued to intervene in succession conflicts through administrative decisions, commissions or political alliances. These interventions often failed to resolve underlying disputes and sometimes created new grievances.

For the broader AFRISURGE project, this research demonstrates that customary authority remains a central factor in conflict dynamics. Chiefs are not merely victims of violence or neutral mediators; customary institutions can be arenas in which conflict is produced, channelled, interpreted or mitigated.

4.4 Conservation, customary authority and Garamba National Park

A fourth research result concerns the role of customary authority in conservation governance, particularly around Garamba National Park. The park has long occupied a central place in the political and economic history of Haut-Uélé and is often perceived locally as a “state within a state”. Its administration has exercised authority over land, wildlife, access to resources and relations between local communities and conservation actors.

AFRISURGE research showed that conservation governance in and around Garamba cannot be understood solely as the implementation of environmental policy. It is also a field of negotiated authority in which park administrations, state institutions, international conservation organisations, local communities and customary chiefs make competing claims over territory, resources and legitimacy.

Customary chiefs play important roles as intermediaries between conservation authorities and surrounding communities. They may help negotiate access to land, hunting rights, development projects, compensation, security arrangements and responses to conflict. Their legitimacy derives from historical claims to territory and their ability to represent local communities, but this position can also be difficult. Chiefs must navigate between conservation regulations, state authority, community livelihoods and local resentment toward restrictions imposed by the park.

The research used the concept of a conservation social contract to analyse these dynamics. Conservation authority becomes more stable when local populations perceive reciprocal obligations: restrictions on access to land and wildlife may be accepted when they are accompanied by benefits, recognition, employment, infrastructure or meaningful participation. Chiefs can play a role in mediating this social contract, but their effectiveness depends on whether communities see them as legitimate representatives and whether conservation authorities take local expectations seriously.

This research contributes to broader debates on conservation, governance and conflict in frontier regions. It shows that conservation regimes are not external to local politics. They are embedded in histories of extraction, violence, land control, community displacement, development promises and

changing state presence. Customary authorities are central to these negotiations, but their role must be analysed critically rather than assumed.

4.5 Provenance research and RMCA collections from Northeast Congo

AFRISURGE made an important contribution to provenance research on RMCA collections from Northeast Congo. The project improved the documentation of thousands of objects and photographs, especially those linked to the Armand Hutereau expedition, and explored how collection records could be made meaningful for Congolese users.

The Hutereau collections are particularly important because they include objects and photographs connected to specific places, communities, state posts and chiefs. The project improved records by adding or correcting information on provenance, locations, chiefdoms, populations, collecting contexts and related visual material. The work first focused on a dataset of 7,911 objects and 811 fieldwork photographs, and later expanded to additional records and broader provenance information.

The scientific value of this work lies in its combination of museum documentation, historical research and digital access. Improved provenance data allow researchers to reconstruct collecting histories and local contexts more accurately. They also allow Congolese users to search for material connected to specific places or communities. Provenance research therefore becomes a bridge between scholarly research, museum accountability and community-oriented restitution.

The project also supported broader collection-level research at RMCA. This work examined the wider development of the ethnographic collections, the regional distribution of provenances, the evolution of collecting practices over time and the profiles of collectors active in Congo before the First World War. This broader analysis helped situate the Northeast Congo material within the larger history of colonial collecting and the formation of the RMCA's collections.

A key result is that provenance research cannot be reduced to identifying whether an object was violently taken, purchased, donated or collected under unclear circumstances. It also involves reconstructing the social worlds, local authorities, colonial encounters, classification practices and knowledge systems through which objects and photographs entered museum collections. In AFRISURGE, this work was directly connected to digital restitution and heritage education: improving provenance data was necessary because objects and photographs could only be meaningfully reconnected with communities if information about their origins, meanings and collecting contexts was as accurate and accessible as possible.

4.6 Digital restitution: from database access to locally usable infrastructure

AFRISURGE developed a digital heritage database as a central tool for digital restitution. This database was intended to make digitised collection records, photographs, provenance data and contextual information accessible to Congolese institutions and communities. Over time, however, the project showed that digital restitution cannot be equated with online access alone.

In the early phase, the project evaluated existing digital heritage tools and selected CollectiveAccess after testing alternatives. The database work required data cleaning, creation of custom fields, import procedures, migration of object and photograph records, work on a back-end and front-end, and collaboration with RMCA ICT services. Later work included translation of field titles, correction of records, assessment of photographs, development of contextual materials, and reflection on rights and access.

A central lesson was that digital restitution must be adapted to local technical conditions. Internet connectivity, electricity, hardware availability and maintenance capacity are limited in many parts of Haut-Uélé. A purely online database would therefore not be sufficient to reach schools, universities and communities. Fieldwork and consultations confirmed that digital materials needed to be available offline and embedded in local pedagogical and institutional settings.

The final project phase therefore focused on locally usable infrastructure: offline access, solar-powered computer kits, projectors, printers, pedagogical materials, a heritage education hub, school-based museum corners and mobile kits. At the end of the project, digital restitution was primarily organised through local and offline access arrangements, because of infrastructural constraints and the uncertain status of the public-facing website.

This evolution was central to the project's final understanding of digital restitution. Digital restitution is not simply a technical transfer. It requires translation, mediation, training, equipment, institutional anchoring, pedagogical use and long-term maintenance. Without these elements, digital heritage risks remaining inaccessible or underused.

4.7 Heritage education and applied museology in Haut-Uélé

AFRISURGE's heritage education component became one of its most concrete societal results. Building on fieldwork with communities, schools and educational actors, the project developed applied museological approaches that used RMCA collections as resources for teaching local history, culture and heritage.

Félix Fufulafu Zaniwe's doctoral research was central to this result. His work showed that communities in Haut-Uélé expressed a strong desire to reconnect with heritage, but that such reconnection had to be carefully mediated. Objects and photographs from colonial collections could generate pride, curiosity, historical reflection and intergenerational dialogue. At the same time, some objects were associated with spiritual danger, religious unease, political sensitivity or ethnic tension. Heritage education therefore required careful selection of materials, community consent and pedagogical attention to social cohesion.

In schools, photographs and object records were used to support lessons, model activities, exhibition-making, role play and discussions of local history. Félix worked with teachers, pupils, parents, school authorities, teacher training institutions, customary authorities and civil society actors. His fieldwork in Wamba, Dungu, Rungu and Isiro focused on four primary schools and involved the co-creation of pedagogical activities using photographs from the RMCA collection.

One important result is that heritage education was not treated as a simple transfer of knowledge from museum to school. It was developed as a co-creative and locally negotiated process. Teachers and community actors contributed to the selection and interpretation of materials. In some cases, chiefs were invited to schools to discuss the history of their chiefdoms. In other cases, emphasis was placed on objects related to subsistence, everyday life or conflict appeasement rather than on ritually sensitive objects.

The final phase of AFRISURGE transformed these educational experiments into more durable infrastructure. The project supported the establishment of heritage education spaces in Isiro, including a university-based heritage hub, a hub linked to ISP-Isiro, museum corners in partner schools and mobile kits for outreach to more remote locations. From 2025 onwards, Félix Fufulafu Zaniwe also taught an “Introduction to Museology” course or seminar at ISP-Isiro, the Université de l’Uélé and ISTI. The project also contributed to the emergence of local structures for cultural heritage education, including a local team of cultural heritage education experts in Isiro and plans for the creation in 2026 of a permanent Office for Cultural Heritage Education at the Université de l’Uélé.

These results show that applied museology can be meaningful outside conventional museum buildings. In Haut-Uélé, heritage education took shape through schools, teacher training institutions, university spaces, mobile equipment and community discussions. This approach is especially relevant in contexts where formal museum infrastructure is limited but where demand for cultural and historical knowledge is strong.

4.8 Capacity building and institutional anchoring

AFRISURGE contributed to capacity building at several levels. The most direct contribution was the support of two doctoral trajectories: Baudouin Mena Sebu’s research on customary authority at the University of Antwerp, and Félix Fufulafu Zaniwe’s research on digital restitution and heritage education in the UGent/RMCA-UniUele framework.

Both doctoral projects generated new empirical data, academic outputs and local expertise. Baudouin’s work strengthened research capacity on customary governance, conflict and historical authority in Haut-Uélé. Félix’ work strengthened local expertise in heritage education, applied museology and the use of museum collections in schools and higher education.

The project also involved capacity building for teachers, inspectors, university staff and cultural actors. Workshops and training activities introduced participants to the database, object and photograph collections, heritage education methods, and possible uses of cultural heritage in schools and communities. The final implementation phase aimed to make this capacity building more durable through physical infrastructure: heritage hubs, museum corners and mobile kits.

Institutional anchoring was particularly important at UniUele and ISP-Isiro. The project did not aim only to provide temporary access to digital materials, but to create local structures through which heritage education and digital access could continue after the project. The later development of

teaching activities, local expert structures and plans for a permanent office for cultural heritage education further strengthens this institutional anchoring.

Related projects and research trajectories created useful synergies around restitution, heritage and museum collaboration. The capacity-building results reported here focus on activities directly connected to AFRISURGE.

4.9 Policy relevance

AFRISURGE has relevance for several scientific and policy fields.

Scientifically, the project contributes to debates on customary authority, governance beyond the state, conflict, conservation, provenance research, digital restitution, decolonising museum practice and applied museology. Its interdisciplinary design showed that museum collections can serve as historical sources for political and anthropological research, while political research on authority and legitimacy can inform museum practice and restitution debates.

For Belgian federal museum policy, AFRISURGE offers an evidence-based contribution to discussions on restitution and decolonisation. The project shows that communities of origin may value physical restitution, but often also ask for access, education, documentation, infrastructure, training and locally usable heritage tools. This does not replace the question of physical restitution, but it broadens the range of possible responses and demonstrates the need for co-created approaches.

For development cooperation and peacebuilding, the project shows that heritage can matter in contexts of fragility, but only if it is handled carefully. Heritage may support citizenship, self-esteem, education and dialogue, but it can also touch on sensitive issues of ethnicity, land, authority, religion and conflict. Heritage-based interventions therefore require conflict-sensitive methods, local consultation and long-term partnerships.

For education policy in Haut-Uélé, AFRISURGE provides a practical example of how local history and cultural heritage can be integrated into teaching. It demonstrates the potential of object-based and photograph-based pedagogy, teacher training and local heritage spaces.

For governance and conservation policy, the project shows that customary authorities remain important actors, but that their role must be analysed historically and locally. Programmes involving chiefs should recognise their legitimacy and mediation roles, while also addressing accountability, contestation and the possibility that customary institutions may themselves be implicated in conflict.

4.10 Recommendations

Based on the scientific results and project experience described above, AFRISURGE formulates the following recommendations.

4.10.1 Customary authority and governance

Policies and interventions involving customary authorities should be based on detailed local knowledge rather than generic assumptions about “traditional leaders”. Chiefs and other customary actors remain important in rural governance, land management, conflict mediation, conservation and community representation, but they operate within historically specific and often contested fields of legitimacy.

The project therefore recommends greater recognition of the role of customary authorities in governance policies affecting rural areas, improved cooperation between state institutions and customary authorities, and support for mechanisms that promote transparency and accountability within customary governance systems. These recommendations are particularly relevant in regions where state presence is limited and where customary authorities continue to play practical roles in everyday governance.

At the same time, engagement with customary authorities should not be reduced to engagement with chiefs alone. Wider customary networks, lineage structures, advisers, ritual references, local intermediaries and community expectations must also be taken into account. In contexts of conflict or insecurity, attention should also be paid to the histories of succession disputes, land claims and legitimacy struggles that may shape local violence.

4.10.2 Digital restitution and museum policy

Digital restitution should be understood as more than the online publication of museum data. AFRISURGE shows that digital access can only become meaningful when it is connected to local needs, local infrastructure and local forms of use.

The project recommends that federal museums and heritage institutions continue to invest in high-quality provenance research, digitisation and contextualisation of colonial collections. Such work should support physical restitution debates where relevant, but it should also enable digital access, educational use, collaborative interpretation and community engagement.

In regions with limited connectivity, digital restitution should include offline access, locally installed databases, solar-powered equipment, mobile kits and training for local users. Digital tools should be designed with communities, universities, schools and cultural actors, rather than being developed only from the perspective of the holding institution.

4.10.3 Heritage education and applied museology

AFRISURGE recommends that heritage education be recognised as a major pathway for reconnecting communities with collections held in European museums. The project showed that communities in Haut-Uélé did not only ask for the return of objects, but also for access to knowledge, educational materials, local heritage spaces and tools that can help young people learn about local history and culture.

Heritage education should be co-created with teachers, pupils, parents, local authorities, customary actors, universities and teacher training institutions. It should also remain attentive to cultural, religious and political sensitivities. In fragile or conflict-affected contexts, heritage should not be treated as automatically unifying. Educational activities should be designed in ways that encourage critical reflection, social cohesion and mutual understanding, while avoiding the reinforcement of ethnic, religious or political divisions.

Applied museology can therefore take place outside conventional museum buildings. Schools, universities, teacher training institutes, mobile kits and community spaces can become meaningful sites for heritage work, provided that local actors are involved in the selection, interpretation and use of materials.

4.10.4 Capacity building and institutional anchoring

AFRISURGE recommends that future heritage and restitution projects treat capacity building as a central objective. Doctoral training, teacher training, local expert teams, institutional partnerships and technical training are necessary if digital and educational heritage initiatives are to continue beyond the project period.

The project experience shows the importance of anchoring heritage initiatives in local institutions such as universities, teacher training institutes and schools. Infrastructure such as heritage hubs, museum corners and mobile kits is most useful when combined with trained staff, teaching activities, maintenance arrangements and institutional responsibility.

Related research projects and follow-up initiatives can strengthen the sustainability of such work, but they should be clearly distinguished from the deliverables of a specific project. In reporting and evaluation, synergies with other projects should be acknowledged without conflating them with the results funded within the project itself.

4.10.5 Project coordination and shared ownership

In practice, the interdisciplinary and multi-institutional character of AFRISURGE made coordination more demanding than initially anticipated. The project combined academic research, doctoral supervision, digital infrastructure, fieldwork, community-based implementation, technical development, policy-oriented valorisation and administrative reporting. This complexity required continuous adjustment over the course of the project.

This experience points to the importance of establishing explicit, regularly updated and collectively endorsed arrangements concerning roles, responsibilities, reporting procedures and shared ownership of objectives and deliverables. Such arrangements are particularly important when different institutions, disciplines and types of output are involved, and when project results depend on the close integration of research, technical development and local implementation.

Future interdisciplinary network projects should therefore devote sufficient attention not only to scientific objectives and deliverables, but also to the practical mechanisms through which collaboration, communication and shared responsibility are maintained throughout the project.

5. DISSEMINATION AND VALORISATION

AFRISURGE invested in dissemination and valorisation at several levels: academic publications and conference presentations, doctoral training and teaching, policy engagement, public communication, community-based workshops, digital access, and the development of educational and museological tools in Haut-Uélé. Valorisation was understood not only as the dissemination of research findings after completion, but also as an integral part of the project methodology. Fieldwork, workshops, database development, heritage education and community engagement were all designed to generate knowledge while also returning and activating that knowledge in collaboration with Congolese partners.

5.1 Academic dissemination

The project results were disseminated through academic publications, conference presentations, invited lectures, workshops, guest lectures and public-facing activities. These outputs reflected the project's two main research strands: customary authority, governance and conflict on the one hand, and provenance research, digital restitution and heritage education on the other. A detailed overview of presentations, lectures, workshops and other dissemination activities is provided in Annex 1.

A major academic output was the preparation of a special issue of *Afrika Focus* on transformative heritage. This special issue brought together contributions from several project members and collaborators and provided a collective platform for presenting AFRISURGE results on digital restitution, heritage education, customary authority and governance.

The University of Antwerp research strand was disseminated through conference presentations and publications on customary authority, governance, violence and conservation. Baudouin Mena Sebu presented his research at academic events including the *Young Researchers Overseas Day* of the Royal Academy for Overseas Sciences and the European Conference on African Studies. Kristof Titeca and collaborators also presented and published research on customary chiefs in Kinshasa, the relationship between customary authority and armed violence, and the governance of Garamba National Park.

The heritage and restitution strand was disseminated through presentations, invited talks and workshops on digital restitution, decolonising museum practice, socially responsible museology and heritage education. These included presentations in Belgium, the United Kingdom, France and DR Congo, as well as contributions to workshops and study days on provenance research, restitution and museum collaboration.

AFRISURGE also organised and participated in scientific workshops that allowed for exchange with the follow-up committee and external experts. The project kick-off meeting and workshop in February 2021 included a guest lecture by Paul Basu on related digital heritage and restitution projects in Sierra Leone and Nigeria. A follow-up committee meeting at RMCA in December 2022 included presentations by Kristof Titeca, Baudouin Mena Sebu, Hein Vanhee, Vicky Van Bockhaven and Félix Fufulafu Zaniwe, and allowed project members to receive feedback on both doctoral projects and the digital restitution component. A further follow-up meeting was organised at the University of Antwerp in February 2024, with presentations and feedback on the doctoral research on customary authority.

5.2 Publications and research output

AFRISURGE resulted in a range of publications and publication projects, including peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, a special issue, a forthcoming book project and other outputs aimed at wider publics. The detailed list of publications is presented in Section 6.

The publications directly linked to the project cover several themes: digital restitution and reconnecting source communities with colonial collections; the social and political meanings of heritage in Northeast Congo; customary authority in rural and urban governance; succession disputes and armed violence; conservation and authority around Garamba National Park; and broader questions of colonial collecting and provenance.

The project also generated outputs aimed at wider audiences, including articles in cultural magazines and media coverage in DR Congo. These forms of dissemination helped make the project visible beyond academic circles and contributed to public debate on restitution, heritage and cultural reconnection.

Section 6 provides an overview of peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, forthcoming publications and other outputs produced or reported in the context of the AFRISURGE project.

5.3 Teaching, doctoral training and capacity building

Teaching and training were important forms of valorisation. The project directly supported two doctoral trajectories: Baudouin Mena Sebu's PhD research on customary authority at the University of Antwerp, and Félix Fufulafu Zaniwe's PhD research on digital restitution and heritage education in the UGent/RMCA-UniUele framework. Both doctoral projects contributed to the production of new empirical knowledge while also strengthening research capacity on heritage, governance and society in Congo.

At the University of Antwerp, project results were integrated into teaching on local governance, development and political authority. At Ghent University, AFRISURGE-related themes were integrated into courses in African Studies, including teaching on literature, media, the arts, ethnographic fieldwork and museum-related questions. AFRISURGE-related material was also used in teaching at Congolese partner institutions, including UniUele.

In Haut-Uélé, the project contributed to local training through workshops with teachers, inspectors, university staff and cultural actors. These activities focused on the use of digital heritage materials, the interpretation of objects and photographs, and the development of heritage education in schools and higher education. In the final phase of the project, this capacity building was extended through the installation of heritage education infrastructure and through the development of local expertise in applied museology.

From 2025 onwards, Félix Fufulafu Zaniwe taught an “Introduction to Museology” course or seminar at ISP-Isiro, the Université de l’Uélé and ISTI. This shows that the project’s heritage education component contributed to higher education and teacher training in Isiro, beyond the immediate fieldwork activities.

5.4 Policy engagement and support to decision making

AFRISURGE contributed to policy-relevant debates in Belgium, DR Congo and international development contexts. The project addressed issues that are directly relevant to federal museum policy, restitution debates, cultural heritage governance, development cooperation, education and peacebuilding.

In Belgium, AFRISURGE contributed to discussions on restitution and decolonising museum practice. Members of the AFRISURGE team were consulted as advisers and editors by the Group of Experts preparing the work of the Special Commission of the Federal Parliament on Belgium’s Colonial Past, and the project was cited in the Expert Report as an example of good practice. AFRISURGE team members also participated in the Restitution Belgium Workgroup, where the project contributed insights on the extent to which restitution is desired by source communities and what forms of reparation are locally considered meaningful.

In DR Congo, the project engaged with provincial and educational authorities, universities, teacher training institutions, customary authorities and local communities. The digital restitution and heritage education components were discussed with UniUele, UNIKIS, ISP-Isiro, the Provincial Ministry of Culture, school authorities and customary leaders. This engagement helped translate project results into practical tools for education, heritage awareness and local institutional development.

The project also had relevance for development and peacebuilding actors. Early in the project, the team explored collaboration with the Dutch NGO PAX, which was active in peacebuilding initiatives in Northeast Congo and interested in the possible role of cultural heritage in social cohesion and community engagement. Later reporting also noted contacts with PAX and with diplomatic actors in the Great Lakes region on issues connected to customary authority, restitution and governance.

The University of Antwerp strand generated policy-relevant insights into customary authority, conflict and governance, including contacts with diplomatic actors and policy stakeholders in DR Congo and Uganda. The project’s findings on customary authority are relevant for interventions in rural governance, land issues, conflict mediation, conservation and decentralisation.

5.5 Public communication and media outreach

AFRISURGE communicated its activities and findings to broader audiences through project announcements, press coverage, media interviews and public events. At the start of the project, announcements and press releases were prepared by the project partners and published by RMCA and the University of Antwerp. These communications aimed to make the project visible and to support the further development of the network.

In DR Congo, project activities generated media attention around digital restitution and heritage reconnection. Press coverage and media interviews accompanied several project activities, including workshops and fieldwork in Congo. These included coverage in *Le Potentiel*, interviews on the radio station of the Université de Kisangani, *Le Flambeau de l'Orient*, and other local television and radio interviews.

Public communication was not only aimed at presenting results, but also at supporting dialogue around restitution, museum collections and local heritage. The project sought to inform European audiences about how questions of heritage and restitution are understood in communities of origin, while also providing Congolese audiences with information about the museum, its collections and the possibilities and limits of digital access.

5.6 Community-based valorisation in Haut-Uélé

One of the most significant forms of societal valorisation took place through community-based activities in Haut-Uélé. These activities included workshops, focus group discussions, school-based heritage education, teacher training, the use of object and photograph data in local contexts, and the development of heritage education infrastructure.

Workshops in 2021 and 2022 introduced the digital restitution database to Congolese partners and stakeholders, including universities, teacher training institutions, customary authorities and provincial actors. These workshops made it possible to gather feedback on the meaning of reconnecting with colonial collections and helped identify education, offline access and museum-like spaces as priority areas for the project.

Félix Fufulafu Zaniwe's school-based research transformed this consultation into applied heritage education. In collaboration with teachers, pupils, school authorities, parents and customary authorities, photographs and object records from RMCA collections were used in model lessons, role play, exhibition-making and discussions of local history and cultural heritage. This approach aimed to make heritage education meaningful and locally acceptable while remaining attentive to political, religious and ethnic sensitivities.

The final phase of the project focused on making this community-based valorisation more durable. The project supported the creation of a heritage education hub at UniUele, a hub linked to ISP-Isiro, museum corners in partner schools, and mobile museum kits equipped with solar panels, batteries, computers, printers, projectors and pedagogical materials.

These activities show that valorisation in AFRISURGE was not limited to communicating research results. It involved the co-creation of tools, spaces and practices through which communities and institutions in Haut-Uélé could access, discuss and use heritage materials connected to their own histories.

5.7 Digital and material tools for valorisation

The project's digital restitution database was a central tool for valorisation. It was developed to provide access to digitised records, photographs, provenance data and contextual information from RMCA collections. The project tested and selected software, cleaned and migrated data, developed database structures, worked on a public interface and added geographical data to improve the local usability of collection records.

As the project progressed, the digital tool was increasingly connected to material and pedagogical infrastructure. This included computers, projectors, printers, solar panels, batteries, printed teaching materials, local hubs and mobile kits. The combination of digital and material tools responded to the practical conditions of Northeast Congo, where internet access and electricity cannot be assumed.

The project therefore developed a model in which digital restitution is not only a matter of access to data, but also of local activation. The same collection records and photographs could be used in university teaching, school lessons, workshops, local exhibitions, community discussions and mobile outreach activities. This flexible use of digital heritage materials is one of the important valorisation results of AFRISURGE.

5.8 Sustainability and follow-up

AFRISURGE generated several forms of sustainability and follow-up. At the local level, the heritage hub, school-based museum corners and mobile museum kits are intended to remain available beyond the formal end of the project. Their sustainability depends on local institutional anchoring, trained users, durable equipment and the continued pedagogical use of the database and related materials.

At UniUele and ISP-Isiro, the project contributed to the development of local expertise in cultural heritage education and applied museology. The teaching of museology by Félix Fufulafu Zaniwe, the emergence of a local team of cultural heritage education experts and plans for a permanent Office for Cultural Heritage Education at UniUele all point to the possibility of continued local ownership.

The project also generated follow-up at the level of research and institutional development in Belgium. AFRISURGE themes, methods, partnerships and expertise informed several follow-up grant applications and research initiatives, including proposals concerning socially responsible museology, decolonial heritage, oral literature and museology, more-than-human heritage, heritage in crisis-affected areas, cultural heritage databases and related museum collaborations with African partner institutions. These initiatives, developed within RMCA-UGent and broader research networks, are best understood as synergies and follow-up trajectories that build on expertise, tools and partnerships strengthened through AFRISURGE.

AFRISURGE also contributed to, and benefited from, a broader research environment around heritage, restitution, museum collaboration and local knowledge production. Related initiatives include earlier and ongoing projects such as CONGOCONNECT and CONGOLINES, which contributed to research and collaboration on Congolese heritage, oral literature and museum collections, as well as BOMACAPITALE, a network project funded by Belgian Development Cooperation and coordinated at RMCA, which applies related questions concerning history, heritage, digital access, co-creation and local development to Boma and Lower Congo. These initiatives are in part geographically and thematically distinct from AFRISURGE, but they help broaden and sustain the expertise, tools and partnerships developed through the project.

AFRISURGE's sustainability therefore lies not only in its immediate outputs, but also in the expertise, tools, partnerships and follow-up initiatives it helped generate. At the same time, the distinction between direct AFRISURGE deliverables and related synergies remains useful: the project created conditions for future work, while future work itself should be reported and evaluated under its own funding frameworks.

6. PUBLICATIONS

The publications listed below include peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, forthcoming publications and other outputs produced or reported in the context of the AFRISURGE project.

6.1 Peer-reviewed journal articles

Van Bockhaven, Vicky. 2022. 'Les Congolais obtiendront-ils la restitution qu'ils demandent? Suggestions du nord-est de la RDC par rapport à la politique de restitution belge prévue'. *Afrika Focus* 35 (1): 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1163/2031356X-35010011>

Van Bockhaven, Vicky. 2024. 'Augure (2023): A Film by Baloji and Augurism, an Exhibition Curated by Baloji and Elisa De Wyngaert'. *African Arts* 57 (4): 88–94. https://doi.org/10.1162/afar_r_00789

Cattelain, Laureline. 2025. 'Les restitutions numériques comme outil de réappropriation du patrimoine culturel: le projet AFRISURGE dans le nord-est de la République Démocratique du Congo'. *Afrika Focus* 38 (2): 249–276. <https://doi.org/10.1163/2031356x-20250202>

Van Bockhaven, Vicky. 2025. "'How to Make Statues Speak Again?': Centering Originating Communities in International Museum Collaborations'. *Afrika Focus* 38 (2): 277–305. <https://doi.org/10.1163/2031356x-20250203>

Fufulafu Zaniwe, Félix Amand, and Vicky Van Bockhaven. 2025. 'L'éducation au patrimoine co-créée en Haut-Uélé: chercher la réparation à base des collections coloniales du MRAC'. *Afrika Focus* 38 (2): 306–38. <https://doi.org/10.1163/2031356x-20250204>

Mena Sebu, Baudouin. 2025. "'A Tale of Two Chiefs": How Congolese Chiefs Use Custom, Ethnicity, Development, Law and the State to Overcome Imposed Structures'. *Afrika Focus* 38 (2): 370–395. <https://doi.org/10.1163/2031356x-20250206>

Titeca, Kristof, Jacques Mukena, and Albert Malukisa Nkuku. 2025. 'Chiefs in Kinshasa: Customary Chiefs and Their Role in Urban Governance in Kinshasa, DRC'. *Afrika Focus* 38 (2): 396–422.

<https://doi.org/10.1163/2031356x-20250207>

de la Plaga, Théophile, and Kristof Titeca. 2025. 'The Violent Politics of Customary Authority in Bashu: Dynasties, State Power and the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF)'. *Afrika Focus* 38 (2): 443–461.

<https://doi.org/10.1163/2031356x-20250209>

Van Bockhaven, Vicky, and Kristof Titeca. 2025. 'Editorial'. *Afrika Focus* 38 (2): 241–48.

<https://doi.org/10.1163/2031356x-20250201>

6.2 Book chapters and edited volumes

Van Bockhaven, Vicky. 2023. 'The AFRISURGE Project: Digital Reconnection and the Transformative Potential of Heritage'. In *ReMaking Collections: Origins, Trajectories, & Reconnections / La fabrique des collections: origines, trajectoires & reconnexion*, edited by Sarah Van Beurden, Ch. Didier Gondola, and Agnès Lacaille. Tervuren: Royal Museum for Central Africa.

Van Bockhaven, Vicky. 2023. 'Leopard Men Objects: On the Materiality of Colonial Oppression'. In *ReMaking Collections: Origins, Trajectories, & Reconnections / La fabrique des collections: origines, trajectoires & reconnexion*, edited by Sarah Van Beurden, Ch. Didier Gondola, and Agnès Lacaille. Tervuren: Royal Museum for Central Africa.

Vanhee, Hein. 2023. 'Collecting Congo before World War I: The Spoils of Violent Conquest'. In *ReMaking Collections: Origins, Trajectories, & Reconnections / La fabrique des collections: origines, trajectoires & reconnexion*, edited by Sarah Van Beurden, Ch. Didier Gondola, and Agnès Lacaille. Tervuren: Royal Museum for Central Africa.

Van Bockhaven, Vicky. 2025. 'How to Make Statues Speak Again? Originating Community's Views and Socially Responsible Museology in Northeast DR Congo'. In Amelia King, ed., *With Respect to Africa and Beyond. Reflections on Culture, Art and Heritage in Honour of John Mack*. Norwich: Sainsbury Research Unit, University of East Anglia.

6.3 Other publications and public-oriented outputs

Brinkman, Inge, Vicky Van Bockhaven, James Wachira, Milkessa Edae-Tufa, Sofie Dierckx, and Mercy Ashepet. 2024. 'Tree Entanglements-Calendar'. In *More-than-Human Freedom: Zine Conference 2024*, 21–36.

Mena Sebu, Baudouin. 2024. 'Afrikaanse monarchen: Traditie en transformatie in een geglobaliseerde wereld'. *REKTO:VERSO* 103: 37–39.

Titeca, Kristof, and Giovanni Salvaggio. 2026. *Beyond the Jihadist Label: Understanding the ADF's Multilayered Violence*. Egmont Institute Report.

6.4 Forthcoming, submitted or in preparation

Titeca, Kristof, Leonard Pongo, and A. Edmond. Forthcoming. *Garamba National Park: Negotiating Authority at the Edge of the State*. Eriskay Connection. Expected publication: August 2026.

Van Bockhaven, Vicky. Forthcoming. *Mystifying Leopard Men: A Symmetrical Anthropology of Ritually Empowered Militias in Belgian Congo*. Book proposal accepted by Cambridge University Press; manuscript in preparation.

Van Bockhaven, Vicky, and Félix Fufulafu Zaniwe. Forthcoming. 'Cultural Heritage, Wellbeing and Repair: Community Demands and Museum Frictions from an In-Between Position in Northeast DR Congo'. In Birgit Meyer and S. Adjei, eds., special issue on colonial collections and collaborative research, *Africa*.

Van Bockhaven, Vicky, and Félix Fufulafu Zaniwe. In preparation. *How to Make Objects Speak Again?* Documentary film based on AFRISURGE work on digital restitution, heritage education and community dialogues in Northeast DR Congo.

Kristof Titeca has two book projects in progress. One examines the interaction between customary authorities and the ADF rebel group, in collaboration with Giovanni Salvaggio. The second focuses on Garamba National Park and the conservation social contract, in collaboration with Fergus Simpson. These outputs are expected to further valorise the project's findings.

7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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At the Royal Museum for Central Africa, the project team wishes to thank the colleagues of the ICT service for their technical support in the development, testing and implementation of the digital restitution database and related tools. The team also thanks the colleagues of the Collection Management service for facilitating access to the collections and supporting the work with object records, photographs and documentation. The colleagues of the Culture and Society service are thanked for their support and hospitality during the stays of doctoral researcher Félix Fufulafu Zaniwe at the RMCA. The project team also gratefully acknowledges the central administrative services of the RMCA for their sustained administrative support throughout the project.

The project team thanks the colleagues and services at Ghent University, the University of Antwerp and the Université de l'Uélé who contributed to the supervision of doctoral research, the

organisation of research stays, fieldwork, teaching, workshops, administrative procedures and institutional collaboration.

The team is particularly grateful to the Congolese academic, educational and community partners who contributed to the project in Haut-Uélé and beyond. The project team especially thanks Prof. Roger Gaise, AFRISURGE promoter for the Université de l'Uélé, and Prof. Christophe-Marie Mogha Ngamanapo, Rector of the Université de l'Uélé, for their institutional support. This also includes the Institut Supérieur Pédagogique of Isiro, partner schools, teachers, inspectors, school directors, pupils, parents, customary authorities, cultural actors, civil society representatives, religious actors, local authorities and all interlocutors who participated in interviews, focus groups, workshops and co-creative activities.

The project also thanks the provincial and national authorities in DR Congo who supported or participated in project activities, including representatives of the cultural and educational sectors, as well as local media actors who helped communicate project activities to wider publics.

The project team acknowledges the contributions of external collaborators and partner organisations who helped shape the project's reflections on restitution, heritage, governance and peacebuilding, including invited experts and organisations involved in related discussions on heritage, community engagement and peacebuilding.

In accordance with the BELSPO guidelines, the members of the follow-up committee are listed below. The project team thanks them for their participation in the meetings organised during the project and for the advice, questions and comments provided on those occasions.

Members of the AFRISURGE follow-up committee

Véronique Feys, Belgian Science Policy Office / BELSPO

Cherry Leonardi, Durham University

Henri Médard, Aix-Marseille Université

Allen Roberts, University of California, Los Angeles

Zoë Strother, Columbia University

Katrien Pype, KU Leuven

Inge Brinkman, Ghent University

Bambi Ceuppens, Royal Museum for Central Africa

Bart Deputter, Royal Museum for Central Africa

Anne Wetsi Mpoma, Nouveau Système Artistique / Bamko-Cran / Wetsi Art Gallery

Felicitas Becker, Ghent University

Marianne Moor, PAX

Gillian Mathys, Ghent University

Sarah Van Beurden, Ohio State University

Placide Mumbembele, Université de Kinshasa

Elke Selter, SOAS, University of London

Karen Büscher, Ghent University

The project team finally wishes to thank all participants in the project's interviews, workshops, teaching activities and community-based heritage initiatives. Their contributions, questions, critiques and expectations were essential to the development of AFRISURGE and to the project's understanding of what digital restitution, heritage education and collaborative research can mean in practice.

ANNEX 1 — OVERVIEW OF CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS, SEMINARS, WORKSHOPS, TEACHING ACTIVITIES AND PUBLIC DISSEMINATION ACTIVITIES

Van Bockhaven, Vicky. 2021. Workshops in DR Congo to present the AFRISURGE database and discuss reconnection with heritage in colonial collections with local publics and stakeholders. Four workshops organised in the context of the project's digital restitution component.

Van Bockhaven, Vicky. 24 May 2022. "Do the Statues Still Speak: Congolese Visions of Restitution and Reparation." Invited presentation at *African and Beyond: A Conference Celebrating John Mack's Contribution*, Sainsbury Research Unit, University of East Anglia.

Van Bockhaven, Vicky, Félix Fufulafu Zaniwe and AFRISURGE team members. September–October 2022. Workshops in DR Congo launching and discussing the project database and digital reconnection with colonial collections. Workshops were organised at UNIKIS, UniUele and the Institut Supérieur Pédagogique of Isiro with community, political, academic and customary stakeholders. The first workshop took place at UniUele, Isiro, on 15 September 2022 and introduced local collaborators to the object and photograph data of the Armand Hutereau expedition.

Van Bockhaven, Vicky. 15 September 2022. "Justice Traditionnelle dans la justice Transitionnelle." Invited presentation at a meeting organised by the United Nations Development Programme / PNUD with support from the Belgian Embassy in DR Congo, Isiro, Haut-Uélé.

Vanhee, Hein, and Félix Fufulafu Zaniwe. 17–18 October 2022. Poster: "Transformative Heritage: Politics, Peacebuilding and Digital Restitution of Cultural Heritage in Contemporary Northeast DR Congo." RMCA Science Days, Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren.

Vanhee, Hein. 17–18 October 2022. Poster: "Researching the Profiles of Object Collectors in Congo before World War I." RMCA Science Days, Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren.

Mena Sebu, Baudouin. 14 November 2022. "Customary Authorities and the Administration of Haut-Uélé Province: Local Governance at the Edge of the State." Presentation at CEGEMI. Online event.

AFRISURGE team. 1 December 2022. Presentations at the AFRISURGE follow-up committee meeting, Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren. Presentations were given by Kristof Titeca, Baudouin Mena Sebu, Hein Vanhee, Vicky Van Bockhaven and Félix Fufulafu Zaniwe, including presentations on the PhD projects of Baudouin Mena Sebu and Félix Fufulafu Zaniwe and on wider project themes such as digital restitution and the RMCA collections.

Mena Sebu, Baudouin. 12 December 2022. Poster: "Customary Authority and State Administration in Haut-Uélé: Between Inclusion and Exclusion." Young Researchers Overseas Day, Royal Academy for Overseas Sciences, Brussels.

Mena Sebu, Baudouin. 31 May–3 June 2023. "Exploring the Active Role of Chiefs During Conflict: A Case Study of Chieftaincy and Land Conflicts in Northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo." Presentation at the European Conference on African Studies, University of Cologne, Cologne.

Van Bockhaven, Vicky. May–June 2023. Fieldwork in DR Congo, Isiro and Kisangani, including workshops in view of developing a socially responsible applied museology based on the RMCA collections. These workshops focused on heritage reconnection, education, school manuals, cultural hubs and possible mobile museological applications.

Mena Sebu, Baudouin. 7–8 December 2023. “Customary Authorities and Gold Access in Northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo: Exploring Power Dynamics and Local Disputes.” Presentation at the Congo Research Network PhD Days, Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren.

Van Bockhaven, Vicky. December 2023. Contribution to the Congo Research Network PhD Days, Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, as supervisor of Diana Salakheddin and Baudouin Mena Sebu and as discussant of Lena Schiebinger.

Mena Sebu, Baudouin. 8 February 2024. “Customary Authorities and Congolese State Administration: A Marriage between Continuities and Ruptures.” Presentation of an ongoing PhD chapter at the AFRISURGE follow-up meeting, University of Antwerp.

Van Bockhaven, Vicky. March 2024. Workshop “More-than-Human Heritage in East-Central Africa and European Museums.” Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren. Co-organised with Cherry Leonardi, Durham University; funded by a Seedcorn Grant, Durham University.

Van Bockhaven, Vicky. May 2024. Invited talk on transformative heritage, peacebuilding and digital restitution at a public study day on provenance research, MAS/FARO, Antwerp.

Mena Sebu, Baudouin. 3 May 2024. “Chieftaincy and Governance in Faradje: How Customary Authorities (Re)Shape Governance in Rural Democratic Republic of Congo.” Guest lecture at the University of Antwerp.

Van Bockhaven, Vicky. June 2024. Invited seminar on leopard men and the deconstruction of colonial myths. Institut des Mondes Africains, Aix-en-Provence.

Van Bockhaven, Vicky, and Félix Fufulafu Zaniwe. August 2024. “Do the Statues Still Speak and How Can They Speak in Better Ways?” Presentation at the ASA-UK Conference, Oxford Brookes University, in the panel “Colonial Collections: New Research Collaborations as Generators of Critical Insights.”

Mena Sebu, Baudouin. 29–31 August 2024. “Traditional Cosmologies and Political Resilience in Northeastern DRC: Exploring the Metaphysical Power of Customary Authorities in Everyday Governance.” Presentation at the ASA-UK Conference, Oxford Brookes University.

Titeca, Kristof, with Fergus Simpson. 27 January 2025. “How Are Protected Areas Perceived over Time? Evidence from Three Protected Areas in the Democratic Republic of Congo.” Presentation at the Great Lakes of Africa Centre, University of Antwerp.

Mena Sebu, Baudouin. 16 May 2025. “Traditionele autoriteiten in Congo: een (post)koloniale constructie?” Guest lecture at the University of Antwerp.

Titeca, Kristof. 25–28 June 2025. “The ADF and Customary Authorities in the Democratic Republic of Congo.” Presentation at the European Conference on African Studies, Prague.

Van Bockhaven, Vicky, Félix Fufulafu Zaniwe and AFRISURGE collaborators. 26 October–1 November 2025. Co-creative design workshop in Arua, Uganda, with 23 Congolese participants, including teachers, inspectors, university staff and cultural actors. The workshop focused on concrete educational and civic uses of digitised collections and on the preparation of the final heritage education infrastructure in Isiro.

Van Bockhaven, Vicky, Félix Fufulafu Zaniwe and AFRISURGE collaborators. 7–26 November 2025. Implementation activities in Isiro, DR Congo, including the installation of heritage education infrastructure, museum corners and mobile kits in partner schools and at the Université de l’Uélé.

AFRISURGE team. 22 November 2025. Public inauguration of the heritage hub at the Université de l’Uélé, Isiro, with the participation of university authorities, educational and cultural actors, local media and political representatives.

Teaching and training activities integrated during the project period

Van Bockhaven, Vicky. During the project period. Integration of AFRISURGE-related themes into teaching at Ghent University, including the MA course “Literature, Media and the Arts” and the BA course “Ethnographic Fieldwork in Africa.”

Van Bockhaven, Vicky. During the project period. Annual medical anthropology teaching at the Université de l’Uélé, integrating heritage perspectives with health and society in DR Congo.

Titeca, Kristof. Since 2021. Integration of AFRISURGE findings on customary authorities and local governance into the course “Local Governance” at the University of Antwerp.

Fufulafu Zaniwe, Félix. From 2025 onwards. Teaching of the course/seminar “Introduction to Museology” at ISP-Isiro, the Université de l’Uélé and ISTI.