

AFRISURGE

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

Contract B2/191/P2/AFRISURGE

Summary

Context

AFRISURGE, *Transformative Heritage: politics, peacebuilding and digital restitution of cultural heritage in contemporary Northeast DR Congo*, investigated cultural heritage from Northeast Congo held in Belgian federal museum collections. The project connected three debates: customary authority, governance and conflict in DR Congo; provenance research and restitution of colonial collections; and socially responsible, co-creative heritage work.

The project focused mainly on Haut-Uélé and neighbouring regions, an area marked by limited state presence, changing customary authority, armed conflict, conservation regimes, colonial intervention and the historical extraction of objects, photographs and archival knowledge. AFRISURGE approached museum collections both as historical sources and as resources for research, education, community engagement and peacebuilding when made accessible with local partners.

Objectives

AFRISURGE pursued two main objectives. First, it produced new knowledge on customary authority, legitimacy, governance and conflict in Northeast DR Congo from a longue durée perspective. It examined customary authority not as a fixed “traditional” institution, but as a historically layered and contested field of social, political, ritual and moral relations.

Second, the project explored how colonial museum collections from Northeast Congo could be reconnected with Congolese institutions and communities through digital restitution, provenance research, heritage education and community-based initiatives. During the project, this objective evolved from digital database access toward a broader model combining provenance research, offline access, educational use, local infrastructure and capacity building. This shift responded to local feedback showing that digital access alone was not sufficient.

Methodology

AFRISURGE combined historical, anthropological, political, museological and digital humanities methods. Collection and provenance research at the Royal Museum for Central Africa focused on objects, photographs and archival documentation from Northeast Congo, especially material linked to the Armand Hutereau expedition. The project improved thousands of records by adding or correcting provenance, geographical, historical and contextual information.

Archival research was carried out in Belgium, DR Congo and, for one research strand, Nairobi. Qualitative fieldwork included interviews, focus groups, participatory observation, workshops and informal conversations with customary authorities, teachers, pupils, civil society representatives, state agents, conservation actors and local communities. Objects and photographs from RMCA collections were used as prompts for discussions on memory, authority, heritage, local history and reconnection.

The digital restitution component involved testing digital heritage tools, selecting CollectiveAccess, cleaning and migrating data, adding geographical data, and reflecting on rights and access. Because internet, electricity and equipment are limited in many parts of Haut-Uélé, the project increasingly focused on offline access and local networks. The heritage education component combined ethnographic research, pedagogical experimentation, co-creation with teachers and school-based activities.

Results

AFRISURGE produced results in three connected domains.

First, it generated new knowledge on customary authority, governance, legitimacy and conflict. Research in Haut-Uélé showed that customary authorities remain central actors in local governance, land management, conflict mediation and community representation. Their authority is based not only on state recognition, but also on historical depth, social recognition, territorial claims, lineage relations, ritual references and moral expectations. At the same time, customary authority is contested and negotiated between state administration, local expectations, political elites, economic pressures and internal legitimacy claims. Related research showed that customary authority also matters in urban governance, armed conflict and conservation politics.

Second, AFRISURGE contributed to provenance research and digital access to RMCA collections from Northeast Congo. The project improved documentation for thousands of objects and photographs and connected museum records to places, chiefdoms, collecting contexts and related visual material. This work showed that provenance research is not only an internal museum task or a legal question related to restitution, but also a condition for meaningful digital access, educational use and collaborative interpretation.

Third, AFRISURGE developed and tested forms of digital restitution, heritage education and applied museology. The project showed that digital restitution cannot be reduced to online publication of museum data. Digital heritage becomes meaningful only when collection data are contextualised, locally searchable, technically accessible and activated through education, training and institutional partnerships. The project therefore linked the database to offline access solutions and material tools such as solar-powered equipment, pedagogical materials, museum corners, mobile museum kits and a heritage education hub.

The heritage education component became one of the project's most concrete societal results. Through Félix Fufulafu Zaniwe's doctoral research and related activities, photographs and object records from RMCA collections were used in schools and teacher training contexts in Haut-Uélé. These activities stimulated curiosity, historical reflection, intergenerational dialogue and local cultural knowledge, while confirming that heritage work in fragile contexts must remain attentive to religious, political, ethnic and customary sensitivities.

AFRISURGE also supported 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. It also involved teachers, inspectors, university staff and cultural actors in training activities and contributed to local expertise in cultural heritage education and applied museology in Isiro.

Main conclusions and recommendations

AFRISURGE shows that customary authority remains a central but contested dimension of governance in DR Congo. Policies involving customary authorities should be based on detailed local knowledge rather than generic assumptions about "traditional leaders". Chiefs and other customary actors may play important roles in governance, land management, conflict mediation, conservation and community representation, but they operate within historically specific and sometimes contested fields of legitimacy.

The project also shows that provenance research and digital restitution should be understood as long-term collaborative processes. Federal museums and heritage institutions should continue to invest in high-quality documentation, digitisation and contextualisation of colonial collections. Such work should support physical restitution debates where relevant, but also enable digital access, educational use, collaborative interpretation and community engagement.

In low-connectivity contexts, digital restitution should not depend only on online platforms. Offline access, locally installed databases, solar-powered equipment, mobile kits, training and maintenance are essential if digital heritage tools are to be usable in schools, universities and community settings.

AFRISURGE further recommends recognising heritage education as a major pathway for reconnecting communities with collections held in European museums. Such education should be co-created with teachers, pupils, local authorities, customary actors, universities and teacher training institutions. It should remain attentive to cultural, religious and political sensitivities and support critical reflection, social cohesion and mutual understanding.

Finally, the project highlighted the importance of clear coordination and shared ownership in complex interdisciplinary networks. Projects combining academic research, doctoral supervision, digital infrastructure, fieldwork and community-based implementation require explicit and regularly updated agreements on roles, responsibilities, reporting procedures and shared ownership of objectives and deliverables.

Keywords

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