

SUMMARY

Context: The Swahili and Arab populations inhabiting the East African littoral and its adjacent offshore islands constitute one of Africa's most significant civilizations. Their cosmopolitan urban culture is widely celebrated, with material culture that evidences enduring connectivity throughout the western Indian Ocean. Yet, their interactions with the interior regions of Central Africa remain comparatively underexplored, despite extensive trade networks that extended to and beyond the Great Lakes region. Dominant colonial-era historiographies have largely framed these communities within reductive paradigms, emphasizing their roles primarily in the ivory and slave trade. In response, Project CAHN endeavoured to articulate a multivocal and decolonial historiographical framework that critically re-examines Congo-Arab histories and material heritage, with particular emphasis on the collections acquired during the Congo Free State period up to around World War I, housed within the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) and the War Heritage Institute (WHI).

Objectives: As a multidisciplinary team from the RMCA, the KU Leuven and the WHI, we re-engaged with the collections in a fourfold approach through,

- Investigating provenance and object biographies from a transnational perspective,
- Designing and implementing innovative educational frameworks aimed at fostering critical engagement with Swahili-Arab histories and materialities,
- Conducting research and conservation of Swahili-Arab artifacts within the WHI collection, alongside their re-contextualization in the Historical Gallery, and
- Revising and updating collection inventories at the RMCA and WHI, and facilitating enhanced digital access

Conclusions: In relation to the research on provenance and object biographies, the integration of findings into the collections databases remains ongoing. As of 2024, the data that had already been processed were successfully incorporated into the educational intervention study.

Two principal categories of object translocation were identified, each corresponding to distinct historical and contextual frameworks. The first category comprises war trophies—objects acquired through military interventions and punitive expeditions. In the context of the CAHN, this primarily pertains to the so-called "Arab Campaign" (1892–1894). The second category encompasses colonial transactions, which occurred during the first decade of the Belgian Congo era. This grouping involves less clearly defined modes of acquisition but emphasizes the "collectors'" affiliation with the colonial system, which was deeply fraught by unequal power relations and structural violence. However, occurrences of voluntary exchanges and transactions cannot be excluded for the second group.

A particularly noteworthy outcome of this research has been the meaningful engagement with communities in countries of origin. These collaborative interactions have underscored the

critical role of provenance research as a preliminary, yet essential, step in processes concerning the potential restitution of cultural heritage objects currently held in the collections of the RMCA and the AfricaMuseum's partner institution, the WHI. This issue assumes particular urgency in the context of Maniema Province, a region within the Democratic Republic of the Congo that—unlike several other Congolese provinces—does not currently benefit from the presence of a national museum infrastructure. The absence of such institutions further highlights the ethical and practical imperatives of provenance research and its implications for heritage management and postcolonial accountability.

Over the duration of the project, ten presentations were delivered, and one article is currently in press for inclusion in a RMCA catalogue. Additionally, two further articles are in preparation and are scheduled for submission to international peer-reviewed journals by the end of July 2025.

A systematic literature review was conducted to explore teaching processes in the context of history museum education. Based on the analysis of 45 publications, this research resulted in a first scientific article published in an international peer-reviewed journal and informed the design of two empirical studies, as well as the subsequent design of a professional learning community (PLC). The educational component of the project aimed not only at scientific outcomes but also at societal and educational impact. Specifically, it contributed to the development of an online course for museum educators on designing effective teaching strategies to foster historical and postcolonial thinking. The development of the online course is still ongoing.

At the WHI, conservation treatments were undertaken by the institution's in-house conservators and technical staff, augmented by three external specialists—respectively in wood, paper, and leather/textiles—engaged on fixed-term contracts. All paper and wooden artefacts across the exhibition cases have been treated, as have the majority of metal objects and items containing textiles. Certain interventions nevertheless remain outstanding; for instance, the panoplies are scheduled for further treatment by textile conservator Peter De Groof. Although substantial progress has been made in reconfiguring the display cases, the project is not yet complete. Work on contextualizing the collections is ongoing and will include the installation of interpretative background panels within the cases and the integration of interactive touch-screens.

Keywords

Collections, Belgium, colonization, Congo-Arab, heritage, provenance research, educational approaches