

A REFLECTION PAPER ON THE VISIT TO THE AFRICA MUSEUM, TERVUREN,
BELGIUM

The Africa Museum is officially known as the Royal Museum for Central Africa. It is a research, ethnographic, and natural history museum located in Tervuren, near Brussels. The museum serves as a repository of information and resources on Africa, particularly Central Africa and the Republic of Congo, from a historical, presentism, and international perspective. With its huge and remarkable historical collections, the museum is a perfect site for visitors to learn about the natural and cultural richness of Central Africans in general and the Congolese people in particular. Its arts and permanent exhibitions cover in-depth contemporary themes including colonial history and independence, landscapes and biodiversity, education, sustainable development, rituals and ceremonies, languages and music, and mineral resources. It also aspires to be a vibrant forum for cross-cultural interactions while serving as a space of memory and reflection. Some Congolese artists also express their opinions about the collections in their varied installations and works of art in the museum.

The museum was established in 1897 at the International Exposition in Brussels. The museum was constructed at the request of King Leopold II, a Dutch King of the Belgians, so that Congo Free State, a Belgian colony, could be displayed at the international exposition. By that time, the Berlin Conference of 1884, which took place during the era of European colonial expansion, imperialism, and trade in Africa, had acknowledged the Congo Free State. The Berlin Conference was the “Scramble for Africa” which had taken place at the behest of King Leopold II. King Leopold II wanted the people in Belgium and around the globe to know about his efforts to civilize the world and the economic prospects present in his colony of Congo. As a result, it led to the temporal construction of a colonial display exhibition for the world’s exposition at his royal estate in Tervuren. The exhibition featured the Congolese terrain and scenery, including its forests and trees, wildlife, and export goods, as well as its ethnographic artifacts, such as shells, sculptures, fabrics, stones, and metals.

In 1989, The Museum of the Congo was created officially as a result of the popularity and success of the exhibition. A new museum was constructed at the museum’s current location, and more collections were added to the exhibitions to fit the museum’s expanding collection of

exhibits. It was formally inaugurated by King Albert I, the heir apparent to the late King Leopold II, and given the name Museum of the Belgian Congo in 1910. In 1952, the museum was again renamed the Royal Museum of the Belgian Congo. Following the independence of Congo from Belgium in 1960, the museum was given its present name, the Royal Museum for Central Africa. After Congo gained its independence, the museum, which was initially built as a colonial institution, began to concentrate more on ethnohistorical, anthropological, and scientific studies with its research and interest areas extending to the Congo River Basin, and Sub-Saharan Africa in an effort to bring together all of Africa.

The trip to the African Museum was part of our “Master Colloquium” and our open-ended discussions and debates on topics on colonialism, racism, and restitution. This was a startling, distinctive, and fascinating experience because, unlike Britain and France, Belgium has historically not been viewed by many African perspectives or academia as a colonial aggressor. This is because Belgium’s colonial era was relatively brief. The British and French empires, which had the greatest and broadest effects on the continent, are frequently brought up in discussions of colonialism and imperialism in Africa. Thanks to this trip, I had the chance to widen and deepen my understanding of the many colonial undertakings. For me, it was enlightening for my worldview as well as who I am as an African.

Nevertheless, just like the British Museum, Humboldt Forum, and other western state museums, the Royal Museum for Central Africa’s collections are assembled by Europeans. As a result, western ideologies frequently construct African identities and these concepts become the standard for the continent’s people. This has made it difficult and contentious to tell the story of the colonial past from an African perspective. In my opinion, this is unethical because the western thinkers who provide the knowledge for these institutions do so with an eye toward imperialism and financial benefits. If not, why would the British be hesitant to return the Benin Bronzes to the people of Nigeria? Why would there be so much African art in European museums? Should I agree with Gayatri Spivak that it is because the subaltern cannot speak? Knowledge is never produced in a vacuum and always reflects the interests of those who create it. Without collaborating or working with people from the continent, how might one study Africa?

While Europe expanded its colonial empire, the majority of these collections on display in museums were forcibly removed from Africa. Colonizers took away these objects for their aesthetic qualities without regard for their cultural and customary meaning. King Leopold II may

have sought to demonstrate his dominance and superiority over Congo Free State based on racial tendencies, but I firmly believe that he was unaware of the cultural and spiritual value of some of the artifacts from Congo that he had in his collection. Even today, I firmly believe that some of the museum's handlers do not know the value of many objects on display. African materiality and spirituality were lost as a result of the removal of these priceless objects, which makes the work of art extremely complicated and raises concerns about these western museums.

When I entered the rituals and ceremonies section of the museum, I noticed a fertility and childbirth idol. I am certain that this idol represented a deity because there was a picture next to the idol that showed the idol hanging above and women kneeling beneath it, possibly, praying to the idol to offer them a womb so they might become pregnant. These women were also kneeling barefooted. As an African, I view and relate to these objects in a very different way than a white observer would. According to my African cultural beliefs and customs, I am not obliged to touch or handle this idol. A western observer who is unaware of the idol's ethnological, religious, and cultural importance will undoubtedly consider it as just a simple object. Although the observer may not understand the significance of kneeling and wearing bare feet in front of a "simple object", doing so is meant to express reverence for the idol or deity. In Ghana, anytime people enter a shrine, they must take off their shoes. Depending on the shrine and the deity, they may also be requested to take off their garments and given a red or white cloth to cover themselves with.

The Afropea section also sparked my interest. It made me think of the various ideologies and movements that have been developed to empower black people owing to racial inclinations and their marginalization, such as Afrocentrism, Afrotopia, and Afrofuturism. Racism and prejudice against Sub-Saharan Africans who immigrated to Belgium following the colonial era have been severe. They represent two percent of Belgium's population, of which forty percent are of Congolese ancestry. Despite having a significant impact on Belgian society, they have frequently been left out of societal discussions. Afropea was developed in close collaboration with individuals from Sub-Saharan Africa. Additionally, a portal has been created to enable visitors, particularly Africans, to suggest modifications and contribute documents, testimonials, films, and images to advance knowledge. This was the most welcoming and cordial item I read for the day. I'm happy that the museum is making efforts to minimize "epistemic violence" by collaborating and engaging with individuals from the African continent.

Further, while exploring the museum, I could feel both the Africanness in myself and the surroundings. Interestingly, nearly all of the exhibited collections have connections to my everyday routines and Ghana's cultural heritage, historical riches, and artistic creations. It demonstrates that many African nations have a great deal in common when it comes to their cultural legacies, despite Ghana being in West Africa and Congo being in Central Africa. Looking at the many exhibits in the museum, one could sense the diversity on the continent. There were on display the tropical forests and the different tree species. In some parts of Africa, including Central Africa and Ghana, there are certain extremely large tree species, such that even if ten individuals joined their hands to create a circle, that circle wouldn't cover the entire circumference of the tree. Certain situations also require that rituals are performed before a tree is cut down. Charcoal, the end product of burning wood, was displayed at the museum. Charcoal is almost used in all African countries for cooking. In Ghana, some people prefer it for cooking to an electric stove because of its medical value.

The wildlife is not only typical of Central Africa but also of Southern Africa. I felt at home witnessing a representation of these creatures because I have been to the Kruger National Park in South Africa, one of Africa's biggest and most plentiful wildlife safari locations, and also a lover of animal expeditions. Being from Elmina, a coastal town in Ghana, the fishery portion spoke to me on a personal level. I had the chance to identify some of the species that I had seen and others I had previously only heard about. The Paga crocodile dam in Northern Ghana sprang to mind from the crocodile room, as I saw how Congolese nature was collected and conserved. This crocodile dam in Paga is a popular tourist destination and is revered by the many residents who think the crocodiles harbour the spirits of the dead from the villages. Only when the caretaker completes certain rites and feeds each crocodile with a full fowl could the crocodiles be called out of the dam. When the crocodiles appear on land, they lie down calmly so that visitors can touch them and occasionally sit on them. The lack of crocodile attacks on tourists throughout the years is remarkable and speaks volumes about the spirituality of the people of Northern Ghana and Africa as a whole.

The mineral cabinet speaks of Central Africa's and all of Africa's great mineral wealth and abundance. The United Nations Environment Programme estimates that roughly thirty percent of the world's mineral reserves, twelve percent of the world's oil, and eight percent of the world's natural gas reserves are located in Africa. For many African nations, mineral exploration

and production are major components of the economy and remain important drivers of economic growth. Mineral exports are a major source of foreign revenue for these African nations; hence they are heavily dependent on them.

The gallery of languages and music showcased the incredible and varied regional songs and dialects. Africa is home to over one-third of the world's languages and has over two thousand different languages. The population of Africa provides evidence of the diversity of its languages. Astonishingly, there are around one million native speakers of at least seventy-five distinct languages in Africa. The primary way to understand the continent is through oral tradition. In terms of African music, many countries share similar beats and sounds. Afrobeat is the most populous on the continent. I could dance to the music that was played at the gallery because fast-paced, lively rhythmic drum beats are a big part of African music.

The section on rituals and ceremonies emphasizes the significant events in a person's life, such as marriages and funerals. Rituals in Africa convey moral principles, support social cohesion, and serve as psychological treatment. These rituals offer life purpose, aid in coping with life's challenges, and express human connectedness with the universe through action. The artifacts on display at the museum provide visitors with a glimpse of the objects that were used in Congo in the past and those that are still in use today. I watched a video of a marriage ceremony in which the groom was asked to identify his spouse while the bride was covered. If the groom makes a mistake, he must pay a fine until he succeeds in identifying his bride. The Akan tribe in Ghana practices similar marriage ceremonies. This proves that these customs and traditions are similar and widespread across the continent.

The memorial gallery of the museum serves as a space for reflection and memory. Freddy Tsimba, a Congolese artist, honours the memory of numerous, unnamed, and invisible Congolese victims of colonization via his creations displayed in the gallery. Oftentimes, the muted histories of these marginalized victims are deemed not special in memorializing. What I observed is that the museum created the gallery to actively incorporate postcolonial viewpoints and ideas as well as to establish a practice that encourages an open, and continuous process of remembrance and recollection. I am pleased with the museum's decision to lift the veil of darkness on these afflicted Congolese individuals through the lens of one of their own, as opposed to a white artist who might have been biased in recounting these victims.

Through my never-ending investigation, I discovered that the eight sculptures we spotted on the museum's wall while we were walking back to catch our bus were also created by Freddy Tsimba. They captivated me, and I was curious to learn more. I learned that Tsimba made them as a memorial to Congolese refugees and those who had suffered from recent and historical violence. However, I couldn't understand why they have been situated far away from the main museum. Is it a temporal or permanent exhibition? Why is there no inscription on them? Why are the sculptures headless? Why are their hands raised? This information and questions wouldn't have come up without my curiosity to know more. The meanings of the sculptures and their locations are not indicated by any signs or labels. They are simple to ignore without realizing their importance or even noticing them. The sculptures shouldn't be left so hazy if they are intended to be memorized.

The highlight of the day for me was the statement concerning the heritage in the museum which read, "*The collections that the AfricaMuseum preserves and curates are the legal property of the Belgian federal state, but the moral property of the countries of origin. The museum adopts an open and constructive attitude in the debate on the restitution of cultural and natural heritage, and works together with the museums in the relevant countries*". I find this statement to be problematic, confusing, and hypocritical. How do we reconcile the objects' legal ownership in one jurisdiction with its concurrent moral ownership in another? If you have my priceless and precious assets, which I have been asking you to have for all these years, how can you possibly cooperate and work with me? This only attests to European racism and the haughtiness of colossal power that can only be understood within the framework of imperialist ideas. It thus makes the museum's argument for restitution appears to be empty rhetoric in light of this.

The museum has also opened up the possibility for a modern and digital Africa, thanks to the development of AfricaTube, which I thought was really great. AfricaTube is a platform that has been developed by young Africans with an emphasis on modern-day digital Africa. Digital transformation has recently emerged as a significant undertaking for the entire world. Modern technologies such as 3D technology provide numerous opportunities for preserving cultural heritage and leaving a legacy for future generations. For many of these western museums, digitizing cultural heritage should be the ideal course of action since it enables stakeholders to discuss restituting objects to their original owners while maintaining digital representations of

those objects in their collections. This would give indigenous communities in Africa an alternative means of staying in touch with their history and heritage.

Restitution should be demonstrated in practice rather than merely in words. Why has restitution not been made promptly, and why is it taking western museums so long to decolonize their museums? Why are we not seeing any action when every debate about restitution that exists today already occurred years ago? Do western officials fear that returning objects to their rightful owners would cause a “radical emptying” of their museums? There are numerous questions, but few definitive answers that have been left up to everyone’s interpretation. I am aware that these objects offer educational, aesthetic, financial, and entertainment value for these museums. In addition, there have been claims of provenance research to identify ownership, security and maintenance concerns, and the fear of museums turning into “stripteases”. These are valid claims, but I believe that objects should be returned out of respect for morals, as part of restorative justice, and as a reflection of fundamental property laws.

At the entry point of the main museum is the inscription “everything passes, except the past”. This reminds us to work together and be committed to keeping the past alive in our shared history. In addition to being a research facility, the Africa Museum strives to illuminate the complexities of colonial histories and it is an important venue where people can be inspired by the past and potential of Central Africa and Africa in general. It is a hub for dialogue, diversity, and a variety of viewpoints where people of all backgrounds may interact and exchange ideas. Thanks to the BCDSS, this was a fun-filled, informative, and memorable excursion.

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Sources

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