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2018: Caricature of Belgian debates on colonial era and repatriation



- (1) Pierre Kroll, September 25th, 2018, untitled, Belgium, © Pierre Kroll (reproduced with the kind permission of the author).



- (2) 2018, *Lusanga – 3D model* (view), Belgium, © Institut royal des sciences naturelles de Belgique, https://sketchfab.com/models/4f45a46e2f5f4b34b18fe874obdb81b2/embed?autospin=0.3&autostart=1&preload=1&transparent=1&ui_infos=0&ui_related=0 (accessed October 22nd, 2018)



- (3) AD 1200-1450, *Statuette de personnage masculin*, Musée du Cinquantenaire, Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, Belgium, © Musées royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, Brussels.

Material description:

Untitled press cartoon, by Pierre Kroll, September 25th, 2018. Private collection of the author, Belgium. 22 × 29,7 cm. Black felt tip on paper. Published in Belgian daily *Le Soir*, Wednesday, September 26th, 2018, p. 3 and available online: <https://plus.lesoir.be/180581/article/2018-09-26/le-kroll-du-jour-sur-les-objets-sacres-du-congo>

Translocated objects:

(1) Skull of Lusinga Iwa Ng'ombe (ca. 1840-1884), Lubanda (actual Tanzania), approx. 21 × 13 × 14 cm, collected by Émile Storms, Brussels, Institut Royal des Sciences naturelles de Belgique, n° 28296.

(2) Chimù offering figure, AD 12th-15th century, actual Peru, wood, paint remains and bitumen, 53,3 × 17 × 15 cm, collected by Henri Lavachery, Brussels, Musée du Cinquantenaire, Musées Royaux d'art et d'Histoire/Koninklijke Musea voor Kunst en Geschiedenis, n° AAM 05713.

Short summary:

2018 marks the year of the first public debates on human remains collected during the colonial (and proto-colonial) era and held in Belgian scientific institutions and museums. Here, we will examine a caricature of press cartoonist Pierre Kroll and its various references to the Belgian context, the skull of Lusinga in the Musée des Sciences naturelles (Museum of Natural Science) and the Chimù figure in the Musée royal d'Art et d'Histoire (Royal Museums of Art and History).

Commentary:

This caricature made by press cartoonist Pierre Kroll for the daily *Le Soir* on September 26, 2018, depicts the debates about the Belgian colonial past and the collected remains and artifacts that remain in the country's museums. Those discussions gained increasing importance in the Belgian public eye with the reopening of the Africa Museum (the new brand name of the Musée Royal de l'Afrique centrale, Tervuren) in December 2018 after a five-year renovation. The cartoon draws on a recent and specific case, concerning the skull of Lusinga Iwa Ng'ombe, a chief from the region of Lake Tanganyika killed in 1884, now preserved in storage at the Musée des Sciences naturelles in Brussels (Museum of Natural Sciences). The case of this skull (and hundreds of other human remains originating from the Belgian colonial era) came to broader public attention through several press articles published in 2018 by the journalist Michel Bouffioux. But this cartoon also reflects on broader questions, as it references another item that is part of Belgium's collective imagery: the Chimù statuette that plays a central role in the plot of the famous Belgian comic album, Tintin's *The Broken Ear*. With this caricature, Pierre Kroll perfectly illustrates how visual associations with translocated objects can reflect on public affairs.

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The cartoon represents a watchman, visibly upset, holding a feather duster and shouting at an Afro-descendant "Put that back where it came from immediately!" while the latter leaves the scene holding a skull that comes out of a broken vitrine, shouting back that "That is exactly what I intend to do" and adding that "It is my grand-father" implying that he will bring it back to Africa. The dialogue in French plays on the fact that the expression "*venir de quelque part* [as in the English where it came from]" can refer to a localised place where the object stood *right before* the action (as in the watchman's words) or to the place where something originated long before (as in the Afro-descendant's words). By building the comic effect on the ambiguous meaning of the expression, the cartoon perfectly represents the way the problematic of the repatriation of artefacts and remains stands in the press: where do they belong?

In this drawing that went along with a two-page section related to debates and articles about the repatriation of remains and artefacts, Pierre Kroll (*1958), a Belgian press cartoonist, referred to one of the main current cases in Belgium: the skull of Lusinga Iwa Ng'ombe which now lies in storage at the Musée des Sciences naturelles (Museum of Natural Sciences) in Brussels and was the subject of several articles by the journalist Michel Bouffioux. These articles denounced the practice of collecting

human remains during the rule of the proto-colonial Congo and under Léopold II's État Indépendant du Congo (Congo Free State; see Bouffieux 2018a, 2018b & 2018c).

At the end of the 1870s and early 1880s, Lusinga Iwa Ng'ombe (ca. 1840-1884), had established himself as a prosperous slave-trader in the region of Lake Tanganyika (east of actual Democratic Republic of Congo) where he was taking part in the Arabo-Swahili ivory and gun trade. In 1882, Émile Storms (1846-1918), a commissioned officer of the Belgian army, arrived in the region west of Lake Tanganyika on behalf of the (Leopoldian) Association internationale africaine (AIA, International African Association) and, the following year created a station at Mpala with the permission of its Sultan. In 1884, Storms allegedly found out that Lusinga intended to overthrow the Mpala Sultan and he finally raided the village of Lusinga with a hundred men, killed him and beheaded him. After the Berlin's Conference in 1885, Émile Storms came back to Belgium with his own collection of artefacts and human remains, including Lusinga's head. He never went back to Congo and died in 1918. In 1930, his widow donated much of his written archives to what is now the Africa Museum. The skull of Lusinga was finally donated to the museum in 1935 and ended up at the Institut Royal des Sciences naturelles de Belgique (Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences) in 1964. Today, a bust to the memoir of Storms still stands on the De Meeus Square in Brussels and until 2013, a vitrine of the Africa Museum was dedicated to him. The story of Lusinga and Émile Storms, but more discretely than before, also has a place in the current permanent exhibition.

That being said, let's examine this drawing further. In the background, we can see a broken glass case where the skull was displayed but also a few masks hanging on the wall, part of a tusk, and in another exhibition room, two carved poles and a statuette. The watchman wears a peculiar uniform and kepi. When looking at this drawing, one can only feel a sense of *déjà-vu*. And, indeed, as a long-standing political cartoonist in Belgium and fine connoisseur of its comics history, Pierre Kroll couldn't resist adding elements that echo that comics' history, common popular imageries, and other debates on Belgian colonial past and its representation.

In this case Kroll's cartoon pays tribute to the first page of Hergé's Tintin episode *The Broken Ear*, which was published by a Belgian catholic weekly from 1935. On that page, the reader can see visitors examining artefacts in the Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire (Royal Museums of Art and History in Brussels) and a watchman cleaning the objects with a feather duster before figuring out that one of them disappeared. Among those objects, we can recognize several artefacts Kroll schematically represents in his drawing as masks, carved poles and a statuette, such as the "Arumbaya fetish" as Hergé refers to it—whose disappearance constitutes the plot of *The Broken Ear*.

This "Arumbaya fetish" is in fact a pre-Columbian Chimù statuette collected in 1934 in today's Peru by Henri Lavachery (1885-1972) who was an important figure for promoting the recognition of "tribal" art in Belgium in the 1930s before and after he entered the Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire (Royal Museums of Art and History). The Chimù was one of the most important states of pre-Columbian history and lasted from the 10th to the mid-15th century AD before it was conquered by the Incas. However, the importance of the Chimù culture in South America was not the reason for this peculiar figure becoming a cultural and symbolical highlight of the museum. Rather, it became a popular "modern icon" (Lhofficier and Lhofficier 2014: 63) through the works of Hergé and the fame of Tintin over generations. Today, Hergé's creation constitutes a key element of all retrospective exhibitions on his artistic work. It is interesting to note that we have almost no information of the exact provenance of the artefact and this lack of information around the artefact might be the main reason for the absence of any claim concerning its repatriation to South America.

But why evoke the Chimù statuette if no request was made for repatriating this archeological artefact to Peru? First, it reminds us that not all artefacts and human remains are subject to repatriation claims and repatriation. Nor are repatriation concerns a phenomenon that is specific to the present time. Actually, the Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale (Royal Museum of Central Africa) had for example already been subject to such claims in the wake of the decolonization of Congo during Mobutu Sese Seko's dictatorship (1965-1997). By relating to Hergé's comics, Pierre Kroll may also suggest that we need to challenge and confront our perceptions of the former Belgian colonial empire as these perceptions were also shaped by long standing images that run through popular culture—and, in this case, comics. Indeed, one could also think here about another album drawn by Hergé: *Tintin in Congo*, published for the first time in the youth supplement of *Le Vingtième Siècle*, a catholic weekly ruled by

the “*Pères blancs*” (White Fathers) who had a strong missionary presence in Belgian Congo and especially around the Great Lakes. Although Hergé partly rewrote this album and redrew much of it prior to its colored publication in 1946, it provoked heated debates after the Second World War, in the 1970s, and the 2000s, with regard to its racist depiction of African people. It is now considered as having only relevance in representing “the way Belgian Catholics imagined Africa in the years 1930s” (Lhofficier and Lhofficier 2014: 42) while the last legal action taken against its reprinting was rejected by a Belgian Court in 2012 (see Cesbron 2012 for an account). As researchers have shown, although Tintin is the most well-known case, many other popular comics were playing along with the colonial propaganda and fantasy (see Delisle 2008 for an example). Kroll’s caricature thus also emphasizes the need to address the contexts of those appropriations and the different ways in which those artefacts circulated in Belgium when translocated: they were geographically and physically moved but they also followed imaginary paths and institutional trajectories that deserve proper investigations.

The process of naming or renaming institutions can perform such trajectories by stimulating critical questioning or, on the contrary, by avoiding references to the past. For example, it is interesting to note that along with its reopening in December 2019, the Musée royal de l’Afrique centrale (Royal Museum of Central Africa) unveiled a new brand name to become the new Africa Museum in its public communication. If the institution presents this change as a way to match its enlarged focus on Africa—and not only the Congo, the former colony, and its surroundings, the Central Africa—one can notice that it still resumes its subject to a geographical notion while clearing its name from any reference to colonialism, be it Belgian colonialism, decolonization or any post-colonial situations and processes. The new, more neutral name, outweighs the museum’s claims that it addresses colonialism through different spaces in its exhibition halls. By gathering different figures from Léopold II and Belgian colonial era, but also from popular culture, Pierre Kroll’s caricature questions the deep-rooted perception we can have of these issues and echoes the tension evoked by the welcoming citation of the museum, engraved in silver letters in the underground entrance hall: “Everything passes, except the past.”

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