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

DURATION
15/12/2019 - 15/03/2024

BUDGET
851.314 €

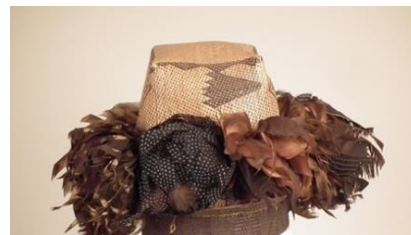
PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Context

This research project finds its *raison d'être* in two important empirical observations made by researchers during field work in Northeast DR Congo. First, there has been a marked resurgence of customary authority in local governance, characterized by an important ritual dimension and a particular discourse on legitimacy. Second, local perceptions of the region's ongoing social, economic and political crisis often include the idea that there is a causal link between the historical loss of ritual objects and ancestral knowledge, and the current poor state of society. This loss is ascribed to colonial collecting and to emergency displacements caused by war.



[1] Chef Constant Ngbatanadu, chief of the chiefdom Wando. Dungu, Haut-Uele, DR Congo. Still from a video recorded interview by V. Van Bockhaven, November 2017. By permission of V. Van Bockhaven.



[2] Plaited hat with bunches of feathers. Bambili, Bas-Uele, DR Congo [Boa/Babua]. Early 20th century. Vegetal fibre, feathers, pigment. Field collected by A. Hutereau, 1912. Collection RMCA Tervuren, EO.0.0.11712.

Both phenomena are poorly understood, if not deliberately ignored. International aid and peacebuilding agencies rely on customary leaders to implement their programs in local communities, but they often do so in ways that are reminiscent of colonial era policies of indirect rule. A common bias is the rigid focus on chiefs as singular authorities, while other customary agents and the negotiations between them are disregarded. Another bias is the often deliberate neglect of ritual powers, on account of their 'irrationality' as perceived by Western observers.

The project focuses on Northeast DR Congo, which borders on South Sudan and northwestern Uganda. Scholarly knowledge of the region has remained underdeveloped since independence, when foreign interests declined and successive violent conflicts struck the area. The region has suffered severe isolation in recent decades, which has attracted poachers, artisanal miners, foreign armed actors and refugees. In such situation a multitude of actors are competing for local political power and legitimacy.



[3] Iron currency to pay the bride wealth. Poko, Bas-Uele, DR Congo [Azande]. Early 20th century. Field collected by A. Hutereau, 1912. Collection RMCA Tervuren, EO.0.0.6970.



[4] Display of bride wealth. Uele region, DR Congo. Photograph by J. Kirschner, 1917. Collection RMCA Tervuren, EP.0.0.14484.

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Objectives

This project aspires to a scientific revision of contemporary African political cultures, adopting a non-Eurocentric and interdisciplinary approach. Beyond making new in-depth knowledge available to aid and peacebuilding organisations, it seeks to have a direct impact on the well-being of the communities being studied through the method of digital restitution of cultural heritage. The underlying premise is that knowledge of one's cultural history constitutes a cultural capital that is a source of self-esteem and contributes to societal commitment and cohesion.

The project is built on a cross-pollination of three complementary strands of research. The first is a political and development science investigation of the resurgence of customary authorities in contemporary DR Congo. This will take seriously the full spectrum of local expressions on the matter, to acquire a better understanding of the region's historically-rooted political culture and its underlying cultural logic. The second consists of research on ritual objects and their provenance, to shed new light on customary authority and to prepare for digital restitutions. The third component will explore the transformative potential of efforts to reconnect historically dispossessed 'source communities' with their material cultural heritage. The digital restitution will be guided by object provenance research, by an assessment of existing digital infrastructures in the region, and by a thorough consultation with (local) stakeholders to determine what is desirable and feasible.

Methodology

The project will rely on various methods including the critical study of archives and of museum object collections in Belgium and DR Congo. Ethnographic methods will be pursued in the field to carry out repeated in-depth interviews. Object photographs from museum collections will be used as mnemonic devices, as these have proven to help people discuss difficult subjects and reveal local ontologies. Also recollections existing in stories, ritual, dance performances and songs will be taken into account. All the informants' wishes regarding the protection of data and identities will be respected.

Results

This project will deliver 2 PhD dissertations, one edited volume, and at least 8 articles in scholarly journals or edited volumes. The edited volume will explore the idea and practice of 'transformative heritage' and aim to be a landmark for related disciplines for many years to come. Project members will engage with colleagues during research meetings and conferences. Research results will also be disseminated to non-academic audiences, via policy briefs, press releases and shorter communications via social media. In DR Congo, at least two partner institutions will obtain a digital collection database, and at least three communities will benefit from a digital restitution project, whose form and content will be determined through consultation.

Impact

The project seeks to have both a scholarly and a societal impact. It will produce new scholarship on the often neglected region of Northeast DR Congo and identify significant continuities in the production and reproduction of customary authorities. These will be analysed as an integral part of the region's political culture. The project also wishes to develop a model for the future treatment in Belgium of demands for a digital or material restitution of African cultural heritage. This model draws on advanced object provenance research and on consultation with multiple stakeholders, paying close attention also to the receiving end of the restitution.

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