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Master's degree in

Human Rights and Multi-level Governance

Decolonizing heritage: Belgium's cultural diplomacy through museum decolonization and restitution of cultural artifacts

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"The legacies of European colonialism are immeasurably deep, far-reaching and ever-mutating, and so decolonial work and resistance must take on different forms, methods and evolve accordingly." Sumaya Kassim, "The Museum Will Not Be Decolonised"

"The colonial is not merely a question of continuity or rupture, of influence or appropriation, but a presence that is all-saturating, overflowing, ever-present, persistent and fundamental to the experience of contemporary life." Elizabeth Edwards, "Addressing colonial narratives in Museums"

"Rather than simply signalling a linear, diplomatic transfer of power from colonial to postcolonial status, decolonization equally constitutes a complex dialectical intersection of competing views and claims over colonial pasts, transitional presents, and inchoate futures." Christopher J. Lee, "Between a Moment and an Era"

Critical reflection of the author:

As I was delving into my study of decolonization, I became very aware of the intricacies linked to my position as a white person trying to engage with this discourse. After reading about white appropriation of the decolonial discourse, I attempted to "decolonize" my study of decolonization. I did so by studying works for authors coming from the Global South, mostly emerging from lived post-colonial contexts. My aim in this endeavor was to gain a perspective as diverse as possible in my study of decolonization, and as just as possible. Of course, this endeavor remained limited, and for this reason, it is possible that my work was subject to some lingering colonial influences. I view self-reflection as an important aspect of my academic work, and I have tried to continually reassess my work to minimize unwanted colonial perspectives. The study of decolonization processes has been an immense learning process, from which I have benefitted greatly, and which I strongly encourage others to delve into, hoping that this work could serve as a basis therefor.

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List of abbreviations

DRC: Democratic Republic of the Congo

EU: European Union

ICD: Institute for Cultural Diplomacy

ICPRCP: UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to its Countries of Origins or its Restitution in case of Cultural Appropriation

IMNZ: Institute of National Museums of Zaire

RMCA: Royal Museum for Central Africa

TJ: Transitional Justice

UN: United Nations

UNESCO: United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNIDROIT: International Institute for the Unification of Private Law

Introduction

This thesis explores the intersection of cultural diplomacy, decolonization of arts and museums and restitution of cultural artifacts in a post-colonial context, focusing on Belgium's cultural diplomacy with its ex-colonies, the decolonization of its Royal Museum for Central Africa (hereinafter: RMCA), and restitution of cultural artifacts with the Congo. The aim is to uncover the links between the different concepts and determine whether the decolonization of museums and processes of restitution are manifestations of cultural diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy, serving as the theoretical framework, provides a lens through which to analyze the evolving dynamics between former colonizers and their former colonies. Moreover, this work adopts a case study methodology to examine the specificities of Belgium's engagement with decolonization in the realm of arts and museums, including returns of colonial objects. The research question guiding this study is thus the following: *How does the process of decolonization in the arts and museums, coupled with the restitution of cultural artifacts to former colonies, function as a mode of cultural diplomacy in Belgium?*

In the objective of providing a comprehensive response to this complex question, this work is divided into two parts and five chapters. The first part sets out the conceptual basis of the three key concepts of the thesis, namely cultural diplomacy, decolonization, and restitution. The first chapter studies the theoretical framework of cultural diplomacy, by delving into the theoretical underpinnings, historical evolution, and contemporary importance of cultural diplomacy, providing a solid basis for the subsequent analyses. The following chapter focuses on decolonization and provides a summary of the meaning of the concept, its historical evolution, and its relation to culture and art. Forming a comparative ground for the analysis of the case study of Belgium, this chapter gives a set of examples of decolonial museums that clarify the contemporary practical application of decolonization in a museal context. The third chapter, in turn, focuses on processes of restitution of cultural artifacts between former colonial powers and ex-colonies, and delves into the history of looting, as well as returns, its legal framework, and provides case studies. These two chapters uncover the dynamics surrounding these critical concepts and enable the drawing of intermediary conclusions regarding their linkages with cultural diplomacy. Thereafter, the second part of the thesis turns its focus towards Belgium, and its relations with its former colonies focusing on the Congo, and uses the insights gained from the theoretical study and comparative analysis in the first part. Chapter four provides an in-depth analysis of Belgium's current stance on the decolonization of arts and museums, focusing on the Royal Museum for Central Africa, as well as the restitution of cultural artifacts with the Congo. This section not only examines historical developments but also engages in a profound study of the decolonization of the RMCA in order to determine the specificities of Belgium's post-colonial cultural diplomacy. In the final chapter, the research question is answered, and findings from the

case study are summarized. The thesis concludes by providing a comprehensive understanding of the role of decolonization of arts and museums and restitution processes in Belgium's post-colonial cultural diplomacy, offering insights that contribute to the broader discourse on the intersection of culture, diplomacy, and historical reconciliation.

Methodology

This master's thesis uses a qualitative approach in its research, more specifically *a case study methodology*. The objective in this use is to investigate and understand the conceptual links and relations between cultural diplomacy, decolonization of museums, and return of cultural artifacts. This method allows for a determined focus into a specific case study and allows to discern the pertinence of its contextual factors, in this case relating to the case of Belgium. The case study method enables a comprehensive analysis and offers relevant insights into the complexities of answering the research question through a detailed examination of various data sources such as academic articles, governmental and intergovernmental reports, legal documents, and visits to museums. Moreover, this methodology allows for an extensive study of the case of Belgium and the Congo, aiming to uncover the contextual factors that shape and influence the phenomenon in focus, whilst also putting into comparison the case study with similar cases, thereby minimizing the potential limitations regarding generalization.

Geographical and temporal scope

The primary focus of this master's thesis is the intersection of cultural diplomacy, decolonization, and artifact restitution within the context of Belgium and the Congo. The broader geographical context encompasses European colonial activities in Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas. Moreover, some attention is dedicated to decolonization movement arising from indigenous groups in North America. The temporal scope of the study spans the 17th to the 20th centuries, highlighting the peak of European colonialism.

Specifically, attention is dedicated to the period of Belgian colonialism, which included territories in the Congo, Rwanda and Burundi, though the primary focus remains on the Congo region. This colonial period commenced with the formal territorial acquisition by King Leopold II during the late 19th century and continued until the independence of Congo in 1960. The study also extends into the subsequent decades, exploring post-colonial dynamics and efforts toward artifact restitution in the wake of decolonization.

Part I: Conceptual frameworks

Chapter 1: Cultural diplomacy

The first chapter of this thesis aims to study the theoretical underpinnings of cultural diplomacy, a key concept for the present work. It starts off by explaining the role of culture in politics and its relevance in contemporary international relations, then goes on to define the concept. A succinct history of cultural diplomacy, as well as some examples throughout history, are then provided. A special focus on cultural diplomacy in the colonial period is included, as this work deals with post-colonial policies. Finally, this chapter examines the administrative and political organization of Belgium's cultural diplomacy framework, as well as the role of UNESCO in international cultural policy.

1.1. Culture and politics

"Today, more than ever, culture has a vital role to play in international relations".[1]

Before defining cultural diplomacy, it is relevant to ask – and try to answer - the following question: why does culture matter in politics? According to some scholars, contemporary political, social and economic factors have led to a resurgence in in the pertinence of culture.[2] Certain changes, financial and technological, have acted as a catalyst for cultural production and new geopolitical circumstances have revealed new trends in cultural diplomacy. Political leaders and governments have realized the value of the field of culture and the arts and the great influence it can hold on to the political scene.[3] Culture has an intrinsic relational value: it has a *connective value*, which enables and enhances relationships between states, and allows people to understand and share similarities and differences, as it is primarily built on identity. Indeed, characteristics which are cultural, but also religious, or ethnic, contribute to defining a "sense of self and community"[4], and thus create opportunities for worldwide connections. Notwithstanding this great potential, the role of culture in international relations is still often downplayed and thought of as inferior to legal and policy exchanges or military relations.[5] However, culture is inherently linked to both of these. Indeed, contemporary international political issues, such as conflicts of influence or power, often have a cultural dimension. Countries or regions that enter into territorial disputes not only try to gain physical territory,

[1] Bound, Kirsten, et al. "Cultural diplomacy." (2007).
[2] Zamorano, Mariano Martín. "Reframing cultural diplomacy: the instrumentalization of culture under the soft power theory." *Culture Unbound* 8.2 (2016): 165-186.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Bound, Kirsten, et al. "Cultural diplomacy." (2007).
[5] Ibid.

however they also try to exert and impose their cultural hegemony in a given territory.[6] Using the example of the war in Ukraine (2022-ongoing), we can see a clear dispute in terms of influence and see that the Russian Federation wants to extend and impose its culture in Ukraine, suppressing the growing European influence. Hence, the war in Ukraine is also a conflict of culture.[7] However, this thesis does not deal with a contemporary armed conflict, but with the history of colonialism. By the same token, colonialism was not just about gaining territory and economic resources, but it was an ideology of extending one's culture abroad through beliefs of superiority not only of race, but of culture.[8] Moreover, it entailed certain cultural exchanges between the colonizer and the colonized, exchanges under unequal power structures, the consequences of which persist today, and which this thesis tries to address.

1.2. Defining cultural diplomacy

Cultural diplomacy is a polysemous concept, which has been defined in more or less extensive ways in the literature. However, some commonalities can be extracted in the definitions, which are helpful in gaining an understanding of the concept. Firstly, cultural diplomacy entails a mobilization of cultural resources such as ideas, values, traditions, art, languages, customs, etc. aimed at objectives of foreign policy goals to promote mutual understanding and acceptance, such as socio-cultural cooperations.[9] Moreover, cultural diplomacy can also have domestic goals, such national identity building and national interest promotion, and can help change the narrative of one country's cultural representation abroad. It is an "expression of national identity directed at an international public".[10] Furthermore, "cultural diplomacy is first and foremost about bridging differences and facilitating mutual understanding", but it is also "telling another story about a country".[11] Secondly, it is often understood that cultural diplomacy is a part of general public diplomacy, and fits into Joseph Nye's definition of "soft power" as opposed to "hard power". Nye defines soft power as "the ability to persuade through culture, values and ideas, as opposed to "hard power", which conquers or coerces

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[6] Carbó-Catalan, Elisabet, and Diana Roig Sanz, eds. *Culture as Soft Power: Bridging Cultural Relations, Intellectual Cooperation, and Cultural Diplomacy*. Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG, 2022.
[7] Ibid..
[8] Kennedy, Dane Keith. *Decolonization: A very short introduction*. Vol. 472. Oxford University Press, 2016; Betts, Raymond F. "Decolonization a brief history of the word." *Beyond empire and nation*. Brill, 2012. 23-37.
[9] Clarke, David. "Cultural diplomacy." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies* (2020); *Institute for Cultural Diplomacy*, www.culturaldiplomacy.org/index.php?en_culturaldiplomacy. Accessed 10 Nov. 2023; Mark, Simon. *A greater role for cultural diplomacy*. Vol. 1. Clingendael: Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 2009.
[10] Clarke, David. "Cultural diplomacy." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies* (2020)
[11] Cooper, Andrew F., Jorge Heine, and Ramesh Thakur, eds. *The Oxford handbook of modern diplomacy*. OUP Oxford, 2013.

through military might"[12]. It is thus a capability to achieve goals through attraction based on culture, political values and foreign policies, instead of compulsion or pressure.[13] Additionally, according to the Institute for Cultural Diplomacy (ICD), this practice can be exercised not only by governmental entities but also by companies or civil society organizations for example.[14] Interestingly, Nye also states that the most of a country's soft power is exerted by civil society, and not the public administration.[15] Notwithstanding, disagreements regarding the constitutive elements of cultural diplomacy contribute to the lack of consensus on a definition.[16] Evidently, this fits into a broader debate on what constitutes culture. Generally speaking, culture is defined as encompassing beliefs, customs, traditions, language, and social behaviors within a society or a social group. It also includes artifacts, architecture, music, shared norms, values, rituals and symbols.[17] However, the definition of culture one adopts inevitably influences the conception of cultural diplomacy. For example, if culture is defined as encompassing not only tangible artifacts but also intangible aspects such as social practices, then cultural diplomacy may encompass a broader range of activities and objectives. By the same token, some researchers have divided the concept of cultural diplomacy into narrower concepts such as arts diplomacy, language diplomacy, or exchange diplomacy.[18] Finally, from a decolonial perspective, cultural diplomacy can be seen as a tool that perpetuates colonial power dynamics if not approached critically. Decolonial scholars argue that cultural diplomacy must involve a process of dismantling colonial structures and power imbalances, promoting the voices and agency of historically marginalized groups, and fostering genuine mutual understanding and respect among cultures.[19] Therefore, a decolonial definition of cultural diplomacy emphasizes the need to challenge Eurocentric narratives and practices, centring instead on indigenous knowledge, perspectives, and cultural practices.[20] This thesis therefore adopts a decolonial approach to its study of cultural diplomacy.

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[12] Nye, Joseph S. "Soft power." *Foreign policy* 80 (1990): 153-171.
[13] Ibid.
[14] *Institute for Cultural Diplomacy*, www.culturaldiplomacy.org/index.php?en_culturaldiplomacy. Accessed 10 Nov. 2023.
[15] Nye, Joseph. "Soft power and higher education." *Forum for the future of higher education (Archives)*. 2005.
[16] Clarke, David. "Cultural diplomacy." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies* (2020)
[17] Culture | English Meaning - Cambridge Dictionary, dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/culture. Accessed 15 Feb. 2024; "Culture Definition & Meaning." Merriam-Webster, Merriam-Webster, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture. Accessed 15 Feb. 2024.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Lähdesmäki, Tuuli, and Viktorija LA Čeginskas. "Conceptualisation of heritage diplomacy in scholarship." *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 28, no.5 (2022): 635-650.
[20] Ibid.

1.3. History of cultural diplomacy

Cultural diplomacy has existed for centuries, albeit under different forms and names.[21] Since then, different peoples have explored the benefit of diplomatic exchanges between cultures, with an evolution of various cultural resources and the concept ever developing.[22] Rulers and leaders have experienced and understood the benefits of cultural exchanges in their relations, as a way to assert power and build trust between each other.[23] The broadness inherent to the concept, as well as the fact that both public and private persons can exert it, logically leads to the conclusion that this concept is widespread, and perhaps has been so for a long time. According to the ICD, "explorers, travelers, traders, teachers, and artists can all be considered living examples of early 'cultural diplomats'" and "any person who interacts with different cultures facilitates a form of cultural exchange".[24] The ICD also states that cultural exchanges and interactions have historically served to develop and ameliorate relations between different peoples. It also cites the creation of trade routes as an early example of cultural diplomacy, since it allowed new exchanges between peoples, including cultural ones.[25] Along with the creation of the nation-state system also came an important development, and an increase in cultural relations between states. At the onset of the early modern period, culture played an important role in the relations between sovereigns, for example though theatrical performances in high courts, that aimed at demonstrating the abundance of resources of a sovereign.[26] In the 19th century, it further developed beyond mere communication between heads of state to targeting the general public. This period is also marked by the creation of national policies aimed at narrating national identity on the international scene, hence closer to the definition we know today. Moreover, and highly pertinent for this thesis, cultural diplomacy played an important role in the colonial context, particularly in the relations between the different empires.[27] During the 20th century, particularly during the Cold War – which is often cited as an important period regarding cultural diplomacy – it became more of an "ideological competition".[28] More recently, in the context of neoliberal markets and

[21] Bound, Kirsten, et al. "Cultural diplomacy." (2007).
[22] Clarke, David. "Cultural diplomacy." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies* (2020); *Institute for Cultural Diplomacy*, www.culturaldiplomacy.org/index.php?en_culturaldiplomacy. Accessed 10 Nov. 2023.
[23] Bound, Kirsten, et al. "Cultural diplomacy." (2007).
[24] *Institute for Cultural Diplomacy*, www.culturaldiplomacy.org/index.php?en_culturaldiplomacy. Accessed 10 Nov. 2023.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Clarke, David. "Cultural diplomacy." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies* (2020); *Institute for Cultural Diplomacy*, www.culturaldiplomacy.org/index.php?en_culturaldiplomacy. Accessed 10 Nov. 2023.
[27] Zamorano, Mariano Martín. "Reframing cultural diplomacy: the instrumentalization of culture under the soft power theory." *Culture Unbound* 8.2 (2016): 165-186.
[28] Grincheva, Natalia. "The past and future of cultural diplomacy." *International Journal of Cultural Policy* (2023): 1-20.

growing globalization, the concept has adopted a more economic component. Nonetheless, nations continue to diversify their operationalization of the concept and a plethora of strategies have been developed to enhance cultural relations between states. Other examples of more recent cultural diplomacy include relations between post-colonial states in the Global South.[29]

1.4. Cultural diplomacy in action: examples

The ICD provides a useful list of "historical acts" of cultural diplomacy dating from the second world war onwards.[30] These actions, publications or events have served as an impetus for international cooperation and development. Interestingly, a number of the examples cited in the list date from the Cold War, which, as previously mentioned, constitutes an important period for the development of the concept of cultural diplomacy. For example, the "Amerika" magazine is cited, which was an American publication in Russian language during the Cold War, which, by avoiding Soviet censorship aimed to offer an American narrative on the West. Moreover, another publication cited on the list is Steinbeck's "a Russian Journal", his account of life in the Soviet Union, after having travelled through it. By the same token, another example cited is the American National exhibition in Moscow, which aimed at exposing American culture in the Soviet Union. Music is also listed as an important media, including music festivals, or the US Jazz Ambassador's in the 1950s and 1960s, and the creation of the Eurovision contest post-WW2. Along the same lines, there is Vedran Smailović's concerts during the Balkan wars, often in incongruous locations, such as ruined buildings or funerals. Some songs themselves have also been defined as cultural diplomacy, such as "Back in the USSR" by the Beatles, or Sixto Rodriguez's "Cold Fact" which the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa adopted, or "Ein bisschen frieden", a German song promoting world peace, which won the Eurovision in 1982. Sports events, such as the All-Africa games created in 1967, or the "Dancing to connect" event, are also included in the list. Furthermore, other diplomatic actions are educational exchanges such as the creation of the Fullbright program in 1946, or the Erasmus exchange program, created in 1987. Institutes aimed at cultural exchanges such as the many Chinese Confucius institute worldwide are also cited as a prime example of the use of soft power inherent to cultural diplomacy.[31] This lengthy list – examples are omitted – sheds light on the broadness of the concept and the far-reaching range of arts

[29] Clarke, David. "Cultural diplomacy." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies* (2020); *Institute for Cultural Diplomacy*, www.culturaldiplomacy.org/index.php?en_culturaldiplomacy. Accessed 10 Nov. 2023.
[30] "Academy for Cultural Diplomacy." *Institute for Cultural Diplomacy*, www.culturaldiplomacy.org/academy/index.php?en_historical-acts-of-cd. Accessed 17 Nov. 2023.
[31] Ibid.

and events it entails: from books and music to governmental or civil society initiatives and large events, it further demonstrates that cultural diplomacy is not just limited to public governments or administration, but that in fact, anyone is capable of exerting cultural diplomacy. This facet of the concept makes it particularly pertinent in contemporary international relations by enlarging the scope of actors who can enter into diplomatic relations.

1.5. Cultural diplomacy and colonialism

As this thesis focuses on decolonization of arts and museums in relation to cultural diplomacy, it is particularly relevant to examine the link between cultural diplomacy and colonialism. How was cultural diplomacy exerted in colonial times? And what remains of the cultural relations between those states? As mentioned in the historical account of cultural diplomacy, the 19th century represents an important period for the development of cultural diplomacy. It is marked by the democratization of culture, which become a more widely available phenomenon, and states deliberately started to target a wide audience in order to decide on their nation's discursive representation abroad. Towards the end of the 19th century, the colonialist endeavors of the so-called "European Great Powers" intensified.[32] Along with these expansionist territorial and economic movements came a will to export something else: culture. This led to the creation of cultural organizations and associations whose aim was the promotion of national culture overseas. But these efforts of exporting cultural influence were not merely aimed at the promotion of national culture in the colonies, but also had a competitive objective: that of proving the superiority of culture and influence between the different imperial powers, hence a search for international recognition.[33] This development of cultural diplomacy arose in a specific geopolitical context, one of a European run for influence and land: "Among governing elites, a view of international relations as characterized by a struggle for power prevailed". The organizations created in this context had different aims, including the exportation of language, an idea which was specific to the France at the time, with the Alliance Française, an organization whose mission was to spread the French language in the colonies in North Africa and in the Middle East. Other examples include the Italian Dante Alighieri Society, or the German Allgemeiner Deutscher Schulverein zur Erhaltung des Deutschtums im Auslande, whose aim were to maintain Italian and German culture, as well as language, for the settler colonialists. This was of particular importance for those two nations, whose colonial expansion and hence influence was smaller

[32] Clarke, David. "Cultural diplomacy." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies* (2020).
[33] Zamorano, Mariano Martín. "Reframing cultural diplomacy: the instrumentalization of culture under the soft power theory." *Culture Unbound* 8.2 (2016): 165-186; Grincheva, Natalia. "The past and future of cultural diplomacy." *International Journal of Cultural Policy* (2023): 1-20.

compared to other imperial powers, such as Great Britain. Another aspect to this drive for power was that to be at the forefront of progress, given the "civilizing" aims of colonialism. This colonial cultural diplomacy lasted until the beginning of WW1.[34] Furthermore, it is pertinent to have a look at post-colonial cultural diplomacy, or how it is now exerted as a form of liberation from the colonial influence by many ex-colonies in the Global South: "Culture, languages, heritages, and traditions are a powerful resource to articulate and promote national identity, combat colonialism, develop regional alliances or build peace in conflicting areas".[35]

1.6. Belgium's cultural diplomacy

This thesis focuses on Belgium's post-colonial cultural diplomacy and how the concept of decolonization fits therein. It is therefore useful to determine which Belgian entities are in charge of cultural policy, and who exerts cultural diplomacy. Belgium is a federal state, in which the law and policy-making competencies are divided between the federal government, the regions, and the linguistic communities. Culture is a competence of the communities. In the Francophone community, it is under the auspices of the Ministry of the Wallonia Brussels Federation (FWB), specifically the cultural administration. On the Flemish side, the government and parliament of the region and Flemish community are merged, and it is the Flemish chancellery and foreign office that are tasked with the cultural competencies.[36] Moreover, on the francophone side, there is Wallonia Brussels International (WBI), an agency which is specialized in the international policy as well as the representation of Wallonia and Brussels abroad, including through cultural means.[37] This agency is thus tasked with cultural diplomacy for the francophone side. On the francophone side, no specific statement regarding cultural diplomacy was found. However, the website of the cultural administration of the Ministry of the FWB has a dedicated section to cultural international relations, specifying the tasks and mission of WBI. Moreover, it explains the existence of structures of promotion of cultural activities abroad, a form of cultural diplomacy. It also mentions the FWB's cultural administration's role in bilateral and multilateral relations.[38] On the Flemish side, a more specific statement related to cultural diplomacy was found, which states that "the cultural dimension in its international relations is of great importance to Flanders". It describes the

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[34] Zamorano, Mariano Martín. "Reframing cultural diplomacy: the instrumentalization of culture under the soft power theory." *Culture Unbound* 8, no. 2 (2016): 165-186.
[35] Grincheva, Natalia. "The past and future of cultural diplomacy." *International Journal of Cultural Policy* (2023): 1-20.
[36] "Pouvoirs Publics." *Pouvoirs Publics | Belgium.Be*, www.belgium.be/fr/la_belgique/pouvoirs_publics. Accessed 17 Nov. 2023.
[37] "A Propos de Wallonie-Bruxelles International." *Bienvenue Sur Wallonie-Bruxelles International (WBI)*, www.wbi.be/fr/page/propos-wallonie-bruxelles-international. Accessed 17 Nov. 2023.
[38] "Relations Internationales." *Relations Internationales - Portail de La Culture En Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles*, www.culture.be/services/relations-internationales/. Accessed 17 Nov. 2023.

objectives of Flemish cultural diplomacy, which include "supporting the cultural sector and creative industries in their international ambitions where useful, enhancing the international visibility of Flanders through the arts and heritage sectors, and fostering mutual understanding and trust in the relations with foreign countries". The Flemish statement further refers to the connective value of culture and acknowledges its importance in contemporary international relations.[39]

1.7. UNESCO

UNESCO is the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, which "contributes to peace and security by promoting international cooperation in education, sciences, culture, communication and information". Moreover, UNESCO concentrates on participative knowledge sharing in order to foster mutual understanding between states.[40] The UNESCO constitution says: "since war begin in the minds of men and women, it is in the minds of men and women that the defenses of peace must be constructed".[41] This quote can be directly related to the topic of culture and politics, as understood in 1.1., as it highlights the intellectual and cultural components that may spark war, rather than mere factual happenings. Indeed, the organization is based on the belief that peace necessitates more than political, legal, economic and military agreements, but also need intellectual and cultural knowledge sharing. With regards to cultural diplomacy, UNESCO plays a key role on the international scene and the organization could be described as a mediator for international cultural diplomacy, providing a forum for its development. It has a chair for cultural policy and cultural diplomacy and a cultural diplomacy platform.[42] Moreover, various documents can be found in which UNESCO clarifies its vision for cultural diplomacy, and the significance of the concept in current international relations. "Cultural diplomacy is harnessed by countries to promote their cultural distinctiveness, thus enhancing the world's cultural diversity while paving the way to cooperation and dialogue".[43] A focus on cooperation, mutual understanding, and dialogue, and the importance of culture therein can be extracted from the various documents. UNESCO furthermore highlights the potential of cultural

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[39] "Culture." *Departement Kanselarij En Buitenlandse Zaken*, www.fdfa.be/en/culture-science/culture. Accessed 17 Nov. 2023.
[40] "UNESCO in Brief." *UNESCO.Org*, www.unesco.org/en/brief. Accessed 17 Nov. 2023.
[41] Ibid.
[42] "Policy Monitoring Platform." *Cultural Diplomacy Platform (CDP) and Cultural Relations Platform (CRP)*, en.unesco.org/creativity/policy-monitoring-platform. Accessed 17 Nov. 2023; "UNESCO Chair on Cultural Policy and Cultural Diplomacy." *UNESCO.Org*, www.unesco.org/en/unitwin/unesco-chair-cultural-policy-and-cultural-diplomacy. Accessed 17 Nov. 2023.
[43] "Cutting Edge: From Standing out to Reaching out: Cultural Diplomacy for Sustainable Development." *UNESCO.Org*, www.unesco.org/en/articles/cutting-edge-standing-out-reaching-out-cultural-diplomacy-sustainable-development. Accessed 10 Nov. 2023.

diplomacy in international relations as a catalyst to solve crucial contemporary problems, citing the climate crisis as an example.

1.8. Applying cultural diplomacy

As has been demonstrated through this chapter, cultural diplomacy is a concept that has existed for many centuries – in different shapes or forms - during which rulers and laymen have reaped the benefits of the manifestation of culture as an exchange currency. Moreover, zooming in on the colonial period studied in this thesis, the extent to which culture was used both as a means and an end in colonization missions sheds light on the extent to which culture, and hence cultural diplomacy, is still embedded in the colonial developments that have shaped our contemporary societies. Moving on to the study of decolonization history and its current relevance in the next chapter, we will determine what role decolonization plays in relation to cultural diplomacy and whether symbolic acts such as decolonization of museums, often exerted in a broader aim of reconciliation with a nation's colonial past, are manifestations of cultural diplomacy. In order to facilitate the application of the concept of cultural diplomacy, the following identified criteria will be used:

Whether an act, entailing **the mobilization of cultural resources** such as ideas, values, traditions, art, languages, customs, etc., which has the capability to achieve goals through attraction based on culture, is exerted **by a public or private entity**, and **aimed at a foreign entity**, for one of the following ends:

- **Foreign policy goals,** for example to promote mutual understanding and acceptance, and/or
- **Domestic goals**, such national identity building and national interest promotion abroad

Chapter 2: Decolonization

The second chapter of this thesis sets the ground for the analysis of the concept of decolonization in Belgium's cultural diplomacy. After having attained a broad overview of the practice of cultural diplomacy, this chapter wants to define decolonization, as well as correlated concepts such as decoloniality and post-colonialism, in order to obtain full conceptual clarity. The chapter will have a particular focus on decolonization of arts and museums, as the thesis focuses on decolonization of arts and museums, and the RMCA.

2.1. Conceptual clarification

2.1.1. Colonialism/colonization

Before delving into the definition of decolonization, a short summary of concepts preceding its existence must be given. Decolonization evidently arises from the term "colonization" and suggests a reversal of the term. Colonization is a concept widely defined in the literature as an action, process, or practice of settling and exerting control or domination in a foreign country.[44] In his essay "Decolonization", Collins provides a useful conception of different terms linked to colonization. Based on his analysis of the literature, he explains the distinction between:

- Empire: "a political and economic structure"
- Imperialism: "the practice of creating such structures, as well as ideological and cultural justifications for them"
- Colonization: "the actual settlement"
- Colonialism: "advocating and supporting such settlement"

In turn, he defines decolonization as a concept that aims at putting an end to all those former processes.[45]

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[44] *Colonization Definition | Cambridge English Dictionary*, dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/colonization. Accessed 24 Nov. 2023; Colonization *Noun*, www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/english/colonization. Accessed 24 Nov. 2023; Kohn, Margaret, and Kavita Reddy. "Colonialism." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, 17 Jan. 2023, plato.stanford.edu/entries/colonialism/; Blakemore, Erin. "Colonialism Facts and Information." *Culture*, National Geographic, 19 Oct. 2023, www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/colonialism.

[45] Collins, Michael. "Decolonization." *The encyclopedia of empire* (2016): 1-15.

2.1.2. Decolonization

Decolonization as defined in the literature has a dual meaning. The first one is the process of independence of a former colony, including the withdrawal of the colonizer from that state.[46] This act, the achievement of nation-statehood, is also referred to as "flag independence.[47] It has been defined as a "binary activity", and a "calculated process of military engagement and diplomatic negotiation between the two contending parties: colonial and anticolonial".[48] However, mainstream definitions of decolonization have been criticized, for example by the scholar Dane Kennedy, who underscores that terms utilized such as "withdrawal" imply clean, smooth, peaceful and consensual transactions, which were far from the actual operation of processes of decolonization.[49] On the other hand, the second meaning, which shall be used in this thesis, concerns the elimination of the effects of colonization which are present in contemporary systems, structures, institutions and relationships.[50] It is the critique of "political, economic, social and cultural legacies of the post-colonial world".[51] It also has an epistemological component, and begs the question of "why knowledge is what is", or how some of our knowledge is culturally constructed.[52] This second meaning of decolonization is sometimes also defined by the term *decoloniality*. This concept was first coined by Anibal Quijano, who defined it as "a proposition of thought, analysis, sensing, making, doing, feeling, and being that is actional, praxistical, and continuing".[53] It has also been defined as a "long-standing political and epistemological movement aimed at the liberation of (ex) colonized peoples from global coloniality but also *a way of thinking, knowing, doing*".[54] It is

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[46] *Decolonization Noun - Definition, Pictures, Pronunciation and Usage ...*, www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/american_english/decolonization. Accessed 10 Nov. 2023; "Decolonization." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., 27 Oct. 2023, www.britannica.com/topic/decolonization; "What Is Decolonization? What Is Indigenization?" *Centre for Teaching and Learning*, www.queensu.ca/ctl/resources/decolonizing-and-indigenizing/what-decolonization-what-indigenization. Accessed 10 Nov. 2023; "Decolonising the Library: What Is Decolonisation?" *Library & Cultural Services at University of Essex*, library.essex.ac.uk/edi/whatisdecolonisation. Accessed 10 Nov. 2023.

[47] Collins, Michael. "Decolonization." *The encyclopedia of empire* (2016): 1-15.

[48] Betts, Raymond F. "Decolonization a brief history of the word." *Beyond empire and nation*. Brill, 2012. 23-37.

[49] Kennedy, Dane Keith. *Decolonization: A very short introduction*. Vol. 472. Oxford University Press, 2016.

[50] *Decolonization Noun - Definition, Pictures, Pronunciation and Usage ...*, www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/american_english/decolonization. Accessed 10 Nov. 2023; "Decolonising the Library: What Is Decolonisation?" *Library & Cultural Services at University of Essex*, library.essex.ac.uk/edi/whatisdecolonisation. Accessed 10 Nov. 2023.

[51] Collins, Michael. "Decolonization." *The encyclopedia of empire* (2016): 1-15.

[52] "Decolonising the Library: What Is Decolonisation?" *Library & Cultural Services at University of Essex*, library.essex.ac.uk/edi/whatisdecolonisation. Accessed 10 Nov. 2023.

[53] "Subject Guides: Antiracist Praxis: Decoloniality." *Decoloniality - Antiracist Praxis - Subject Guides at American University*, subjectguides.library.american.edu/c.php?g=1025915&p=7715527. Accessed 10 Nov. 2023.

[54] Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Sabelo J. "Decoloniality as the future of Africa." *History Compass* 13, no. 10 (2015): 485-496.

thus clear that decolonization in its second sense, or *decoloniality,* has a strong epistemological component which however needs to be translated into action to obtain its objectives.

2.1.3. Post-colonialism

Post-colonialism, like decolonization, has a dual meaning. The first one refers to the historical period that directly follows the one of decolonization, namely the period shortly after a state has achieved independence from the colonizing power. The second meaning is closer to the second meaning of decolonization, as it entails a re-thinking of the history of colonialism and how it currently impacts structures of power in society.[55] According to Collins, it is "a philosophical critique emphasizing the intellectual and cultural legacies of the empire".[56] In turn, post-colonial theory has been defined in different ways; as an academic theory which focuses on the analysis of literature produced in former colonies,[57] as a "body of thought", dealing with the cultural, economic, political and social heritage of the colonial era,[58] or, as Mishra defines it, as "the critical underside of colonialism".[59] It is thus clear that post-colonial theory can take various shapes and forms, but rests on one crucial assumption: that the only way to understand our contemporary society is to study it in the historical framework of imperialism and colonialism.[60] Furthermore, the meanings of post-colonialism and post-colonial theory are often merged, and post-colonialism has also been described as a literary phenomenon, namely that of African and Asian post-colonial literature, taking a common root in the criticism of colonialism.[61] To sum up, post-colonialism concerns itself with the study of the contemporary epistemological and cultural consequences of the imperial era.

2.2. History of decolonization

Before engaging in the study of decolonizing arts and culture, it is pertinent to look at the processes of decolonization throughout history (decolonization in its first sense) that preceded

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[55] "Postcolonialism." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., 27 Oct. 2023, www.britannica.com/topic/postcolonialism; *An Introduction to Post-Colonialism, Post-Colonial Theory and - Art History*, art.washington.edu/sites/art/files/documents/about/an_introduction_to_post-colonialism_post-colonial_theory_and_post-colonial_literature.pdf. Accessed 24 Nov. 2023.
[56] Collins, Michael. "Decolonization." *The encyclopedia of empire* (2016): 1-15.
[57] *An Introduction to Post-Colonialism, Post-Colonial Theory and - Art History*, art.washington.edu/sites/art/files/documents/about/an_introduction_to_post-colonialism_post-colonial_theory_and_post-colonial_literature.pdf. Accessed 24 Nov. 2023.
[58] "Postcolonial Theory." www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780190221911/obo-9780190221911-0069.xml. Accessed 24 Nov. 2023.
[59] Mishra, Vijay. "Postcolonial theory." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*. 2020.
[60] "Postcolonial Theory." www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780190221911/obo-9780190221911-0069.xml. Accessed 24 Nov. 2023.
[61] Betts, Raymond F. "Decolonization a brief history of the word." *Beyond empire and nation*. Brill, 2012. 23-37.

efforts of decoloniality in different spheres. The term "decolonization" appears to have been coined by a French journalist in the 19th century, in the context of France's occupation of Algeria.[62] However, it is not until 1960 that the term became widely used. The process of decolonization does not belong to a particular era, and dates back to the ancient world, although the focus is often placed on the period following the two world wars, more specifically on the second half of the 20th century in the context of decolonization from the European empires.[63] Nonetheless, what differentiates earlier acts of decolonization, for example from the modern periods such as the American Revolution, or the dissolution of the Ottoman, Russia or Austro-Hungarian empires, from those that the occurred in the second half of the 20th century, is that the latter period achieved the elimination of the global legitimacy of the empire as an idea and as a political entity.[64] This ideological momentum already started after WW1, when a new term started to spread in international discourse: "national self-determination". Pursuant to this, more efforts towards decolonization started to grow, but remained limited. WW2 and the ensuing independence of many nation-states then acted as a stronger catalyst to the process of decolonization, and the degree of rapidity to which it advanced seemed to impress all. "Decolonization of the European overseas empires came late and was rapidly concluded".[65] As the two main colonial empires of the time, Great Britain and France were weakened, a wave of resistance among colonized countries grew evermore. Changes did not only occur in the colonies however, and the very idea of colonization, of the empire and its purpose, started to be questioned in the metropoles (i.e., the central territory of the colonizing power) as well.[66] Additionally, these changes are reflected in the institution of the United Nations, which was created in 1945 with originally 51 members. In 1965, membership had grown to 117 members, including a wide array of states that had been created through decolonization processes, and none of which were present at the creation of the organization: these states are "the product of a historic shift from a world of colonial empires to a world of nation-states".[67] The concepts of "nationhood" and "national self-determination", which were particularly used within the organization of the UN, became significant and influential concepts that characterizes the development of these phenomena in the 20th century. These ideas became almost universally accepted and adopted, and denote values like democracy, popular participation, sovereignty, and modernization. The UN General Assembly announced that the decade of the 1990s was the "international decade for

[62] Kennedy, Dane Keith. *Decolonization: A very short introduction*. Vol. 472. Oxford University Press, 2016.
[63] Collins, Michael. "Decolonization." *The encyclopedia of empire* (2016): 1-15.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Kennedy, Dane Keith. *Decolonization: A very short introduction*. Vol. 472. Oxford University Press, 2016.

the eradication of colonialism".[68] Notwithstanding these steps towards achieving global decolonization, the idea and ambition of the empire did not die out. Kennedy notes that different kinds of empires remain influential in a myriad of ways, albeit doing so within the international system of nation-states, based on national sovereignty and territorial integrity.[69]

2.3. Decolonization of culture

Colonization was not only a territorial, economic or political endeavor, but also a cultural one, which had as its aim the exportation of European "imperial" culture to the colonies, with a "civilizing" mission at its heart.[70] During the colonial era, imperial efforts aimed at erasing indigenous culture were far-reaching, disregarding the necessary unifying power inherent to culture.[71] Resultantly, in the post-colonial era, the necessity of restoring native culture arose, accompanied by a sense of loss of after decades, sometimes centuries, of colonialism. These widespread consequences of cultural colonialism transpire in post-colonial literature. In this regard, Raymond Betts stated that "cleaning up and reorganizing the cultural mass – and mess – left behind by the retreating empires is the business of postcolonialism."[72] For example, Poka Laenui writes: "Colonization and decolonization are social processes even more than they are political processes. Governance over people changes only after the people themselves have sufficiently changed".[73] By the same token, Ngugi, a Kenyan novelist, published in 1986 a book titled "Decolonizing the mind", deemed very provocative at the time. Therein, he argued that not only the territory, and economic resources had to be decolonized, but also the culture, and that it was necessary to free one's mind from colonial culture. He wrote "the biggest weapon wielded and actually unleashed by imperialism against that collective defiance is the cultural bomb". He argued that the "cultural bomb" was destructive and "annihilated a people's culture through the imposition of the colonial power's cultural system".[74] Ngugi made a particular focus on language as an important factor of cultural colonialism, as explained in section 1.5. regarding cultural diplomacy and colonialism. He argued that, in the post-colonial era, it was crucial to restore native languages, in lieu of continuing to use the language of the colonizer, a "culturally alienating" language.[75] Renato

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[69] Kennedy, Dane Keith. *Decolonization: A very short introduction*. Vol. 472. Oxford University Press, 2016.
[70] Mtuze, P. T. "Towards Decolonizing African Culture." *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 3, no. 2 (1994): 9-9.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Betts, Raymond F. "Decolonization a brief history of the word." *Beyond empire and nation*. Brill, 2012. 23-37.
[73] Laenui, Poka. "Processes of decolonization." *Reclaiming Indigenous voice and vision* (2000): 150-160.
[74] Wa Thiong'o, Ngugi. "Decolonising the mind." *Diogenes* 46, no. 184 (1998): 101-104.
[75] Ibid.

Constantino, a Filippino historian and political scientist, wrote this paragraph in his essays on cultural decolonization (1978) regarding the restoration of native culture in the post-colonial era:

> "We see our present with as little understanding as we view our past because aspects of the past which could illuminate the present have been concealed from us. This concealment has been affected by a systematic process of miseducation characterized by a thoroughgoing inculcation of colonial values and attitudes – a process which could not have been so effective had we not been denied access to the truth and become a people without a sense of history. We accept the present as given, bereft of our past, we have no appreciation of its meaningful interrelation with the present."[76]

Along the same lines, Frantz Fanon, the renowned Martinican anti-colonialist wrote in "The Wretched of the Earth" (1961):

> "Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it. This work of devaluing pre-colonial history takes on a dialectical significance today."[77]

Or further still, Amilcar Cabral stated (1970): "if imperialist domination has the vital need to practice cultural oppression, national liberation is necessarily an act of culture".[78] Yet another highly influential post-colonial author is Edward Said, whose quintessential book "Orientalism" (1978) advanced the argument that decolonization, if it remained solely political and did not spillover into the cultural field, was incomplete. Not only did the colonizers impose ways of doing and they imposed ways of thinking, and a certain vision of the world. Hence, power was exercised through discourse, words, concepts. Moreover, Said argued that a crucial part of the empire's colonization powers was that of *creating knowledge about the colonized*.[79] Knowledge and discourse about the colonized were oppressive, discriminatory and, unfortunately, internalized by the native people.[80] Therefore, decolonization also needs to apply to the self-representation of peoples in former colonies, who should "decolonize their minds", as captured by Ngugi.

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[76] Constantino, Renato. *Neocolonial identity and counter-consciousness: Essays on cultural decolonization*. Routledge, 2017.
[77] Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove, 1963.
[78] Cabral, Amílcar. *National Liberation and Culture.* Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader. Columbia University Press, 2005.
[79] Said, Edward W. Orientalism. Penguin Classics, 2003.
[80] Wenzel, Jennifer. "Decolonization." *A companion to critical and cultural theory* (2017): 449-464.

2.4. Decolonization of arts and museums

"Museums are dangerous places because they control the storytelling." - Moana Jackson

Decolonization of culture is still ongoing, and this thesis has chosen to focus on a particular facet thereof: the decolonization of arts and museums, which form an important part of what we nowadays consider "culture". Furthermore, the analysis of Belgium's post-colonial cultural diplomacy will focus on the RMCA, a museum which has undergone a decolonization process. As can be extracted the previous analysis, the need for decoloniality in arts and museums stems from the way in which colonization operated beyond mere political and economic domination, by suppressing certain aspects of native identity and systems of knowledge.[81] Furthermore, Ariese & Wroblewska argue that colonialism is "thoroughly entangled with the institution of the museum". Many museum collections or even buildings themselves are legacies from the colonial age and concepts inherent to colonialism, such as exploitation of people and resources, or that of teaching, civilizing, and educating native populations or lower classes are reflected in the very institution of the museum.[82] Museums always have been and remain an *educational* space that have a function of teaching history and culture, through exhibiting and explaining artworks and culture artifacts, and can thereby contribute to identity shaping. Furthermore, museums are often given a certain authority to the extent that they have the power the define knowledge and contextualize certain historical facts.[83] Therefore, not only so-called "colonial museums", but all museums are concerned with decolonization. Art historian James Cuno says, "museums are used to tell the story of a nation's past and confirm its present importance".[84] A quintessential feature of this process concerns the restitution of artworks looted from the colonies. Indeed, it was common practice for colonizers to appropriate the cultural possessions of the colonized, alongside their land and economic production.[85] In the words of Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith: "Colonialism is not a finished business" and part of this colonial aftermath translates into a continuous lack of scontrol of former colonies over their economic and artistic resources.[86]

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[81] Ariese, Csilla, and Magdalena Wróblewska. *Practicing decoloniality in museums: A guide with global examples*. Amsterdam University Press, 2022.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Huff, Leah. "Museum Decolonization: Moving Away from Narratives Told by the Oppressors." *School of Marine and Environmental Affairs*, smea.uw.edu/currents/museum-decolonization-moving-away-from-narratives-told-by-the-oppressors/#:~:text=In%20order%20to%20decolonize%20museums,stories%20on%20their%20own%20terms. Accessed 7 Dec. 2023.
[84] Cuno, James. *Museums matter: In praise of the encyclopedic museum*. University of Chicago Press, 2011.
[85] Van Beurden, Jos. *Inconvenient Heritage: Colonial Collections and Restitution in the Netherlands and Belgium*. Amsterdam University Press, 2022.
[86] Van Beurden, Jos. "Decolonisation and Colonial Collections: An Unresolved Conflict." *BMGN: Low Countries Historical Review* 133, no. 2 (2018).

As such, "decolonization remains ongoing": an important part of decolonizing museums relates to the restitution of art and cultural artifacts emanating from former colonies. According to Jos van Beurden, "the period of European colonialism represents a peak period in the history of art robbery" and "its consequences are still visible and tangible today, both in the southern and northern hemisphere".[87] Nowadays, the idea of restitution is becoming an ever more important policy topic in the context of growing efforts aimed at decolonization. This issue is dealt with in more detail in the following chapter. However, decolonization of museums is not limited to restitution of objects, which represents only a small portion of the work that needs to be done, according to Ariese & Wroblewska.[88] They argue that the practice of decoloniality is "a process and a mode of thought that goes deeper into untangling the present-day colonial hooks from the museum". In their extensive work regarding decoloniality in museums, they divide the practice of decoloniality in six detailed indicators, exemplifying their operationalization through case studies. The six indicators are the following:

- *Creating visibility:* "The decision to make things visible or invisible in museums is always related to power". This indicator refers to the original organization of museums and the private collections from which they arose. The very creation of the institution of the museum had as its objective the democratization of arts and culture and aimed at offering broader access to historical teachings through culture. Nevertheless, the creation of museums was often embedded in a colonial message and exhibited objects that had been plundered from all around the world, although taken out of context, their history was often explained from a Western point of view. Moreover, museums were a tool often used during colonization itself, to impose the colonizer's system of knowledge, and to create a certain hierarchy among the colonized, framing who had access to Western knowledge as superior. Thus, the very history of the institution of the museum needs to be decolonized. This includes changing what is visible in the museum, both in terms of the artworks exhibited and the narrative surrounding them. This process could be a first step in reversing the institution of the museum from an institution of education and power to a more participative and inclusive one. "Creating visibility" should also include giving voices to minorities whose legacies are exhibited in the museum and giving them the opportunity to decide if and how to exhibit those objects. Practices to create visibility can include the creation a new institution whose specific aim is the remembrance of

[87] Van Beurden, Jos. *Inconvenient Heritage: Colonial Collections and Restitution in the Netherlands and Belgium*. Amsterdam University Press, 2022.
[88] Ariese, Csilla, and Magdalena Wróblewska. *Practicing decoloniality in museums: A guide with global examples*. Amsterdam University Press, 2022.

the colonial past. Moreover, it can also include change in an existing colonial institution, through a permanent exhibition, decolonial guided tours, a change in the explanations regarding the artworks, or publishing a book.

- *Increasing inclusivity:* This indicator relates specifically to opening up and expanding the range of visitors and active participators in the museum institution. As previously explained, museums were at their onset created as elitist institutions, whose access was reserved to few intellectuals or wealthy men. Since the 19th century however, museums have continuously widened their access to wider sections of the public. Furthermore, Ariese & Wroblewska argue that museum access is limited by practical issues such as limited opening times, entry fees, and certain "social norms" inherent to the museum visit. Nevertheless, since the 1970s, activist action has pushed for change in the museal sphere. The argument is that museums should not only be open to all, but all should be able to tell their story in a museum. There is a growing opinion which argues that true representation must be achieved in museums, by sparking more discussion therein, and allowing people to narrate their own history, especially that of minorities or historically oppressed groups. One way to do so is by increasing inclusivity and diversity in museum and non-museum staff, i.e., to increase the variety of inputs that go into the creation and curation of exhibits. However, there is some resistance on the part of museums, which have been anchored in centuries of colonial history. How to achieve this change? For example, if the issue is a low number of visitors in the museum, the answer to this could be to lower the entry fees or changing the façade to a more inclusive one. Another example aimed at inclusivity is to hire people in the organization of an exhibition whose very subject they are. For example, if the exhibition is about indigenous groups, those groups should be involved in creating and curating the exhibit. Finally, another way to achieve inclusivity is to create a space for discussion within the museum/exhibit. This can be achieved through seminars, workshops, discussions groups, or a dedicated space where visitors can write their comments at the end of the exhibit.

- *Decentering:* This indicator tries to achieve a normative shift in the way museums operate. As most societal institutions, museums function based on a set of seemingly pre-determined norms, some of which date back from colonialism. Therefore, in order to achieve decolonization, the prevailing norms must be questioned, and museum staff/directors/curators must take a step back in order to distance themselves from the assumptions under which they operate: they must *decenter* the museum. Ariese & Wroblewska argue that this process is uncomfortable, destabilizing, and even painful. Not only does it require museum staff to engage in self-questioning, it

also demands them to allow external members to the museum community to contribute to a new mode of operation for museums, from which they have so far been excluded. How does decentering then take place? First, the museum team must identify what they want to decenter and how to best get there. They must let go of all of their pre-conceived ideas, and once again, accept external input. Decentering's goal is to ultimately break the expectations of the public. It can translate into changing the order of an exhibition, the narrative, certain words, etc. Language is particularly important in the process of decentering as it often unveils a perspective on historical events and contribute to how the story is told. All of these transform practices widely accepted in the field since centuries, and often encountering resistance. Some museal habits have been so widely used that alternatives seem unthinkable to museum docents. However, those changes are necessary in order to improve representation and participation, and ultimately decolonize museums.

- *Championing empathy:* Through this indicator, Ariese & Wroblewska unveil the potential that museums have as empathetic institutions and highlight the need for empathy in our contemporary societies. They argue that empathy and compassion between people can help us solve societal problems and global crises such as climate change or pandemics. Whilst empathy is primarily achieved individually, museums could well have a role to play. Historically, and referring back to the previous paragraph, museums do not tend to display emotion within their exhibitions. However, norms are changing, and more and more emotive exhibitions are taking place. Moreover, museums are increasingly leaving space for creation and discussion, allowing visitors to reflect on how they are feeling within the exhibit. In this way, museums can serve to spark empathy in their visitors, by organizing exhibitions that have as their purpose to discuss emotions or by leaving space in other exhibitions for one to reflect or discuss their feelings. One way to create a more emotive display is through individual storytelling, for example, instead of historicizing a particular period of time in a general manner, it is explained through a personal story, which can be accompanied by pictures or letters. This helps visitors to relate more to the story and resultantly sparks more feelings within them. A second way to spark emotion is to enable connection between visitors, for example, through an interactive display. A third way relates to the theme of the exhibition. As previously mentioned, museums are institutions of knowledge, whose authority is rarely questioned. As such, they have the power to challenges certain narratives (i.e., decentering) and denounce certain societal issues such as racism or sexism. Nonetheless, for museums to truly champion empathy, they must also do so internally. This translates into

diversity and equal staff, more specifically equal hiring, fair pay, diverse representation, and adequate human resources policies. Ariese & Wroblewska point to the potential illegitimacy and incoherency of having exhibits that aim at respect and equality, whilst not respecting those same values in the management of the institution.

- *Improving transparency*: This indicator has many facets, which all hold great importance in the decolonization process of museums. An important facet of increasing transparency in museums relates to the determination and publicity of the provenance of the collections. It is a fact that a great amount of art collections in the Western world, specifically that of anthropological and ethnological museums have been looted during the colonial era. According to the Sarr-Savoy report, commissioned by Emmanuel Macron, and published in 2020, Western museums hold 90% of all sub-Saharan African cultural heritage artifacts. Therefore, it is necessary to create systematic scientific studies dedicated to provenance, but also to publicly indicate this information in the museum. Ariese & Wroblewska argue that not only the provenance of the artworks must be exposed in the exhibitions, but the context in which they were acquired should be made clear. Thus, some colonial history should be provided accordingly. Another way to organize all of this information, rather than displaying it in the museum, is through online database. This would render the information widely and easily accessible to all, thereby enhancing transparency. Evidently, the results of investigations of provenance are likely to give rise to restitution issues. Another correlated issue is that of *authorship*: if a work of art has been taken from a foreign country and stolen from its author, who should have the privilege of contextualizing it, or of explaining its meaning? According to Ariese & Wroblewska, authors of artworks or their descendants should have the right to do so. Indeed, if Western museums continue to keep the monopoly of dissemination of knowledge regarding artworks, especially foreign, a certain form of colonialism will remain inherent to the institution of the museum. Finally, transparency should also spillover in the internal management of the museum, and hiring policies, HR practices, management, and sources of funding should all be made publicly available.

- *Embracing vulnerability:* The indicator of vulnerability can be correlated to that of empathy. It entails rendering museum institutions once again more human and more relational, to the contrary of their usual stiff and authoritative nature. Vulnerability is a different emotion and skill to that of empathy however and relates to a willingness or acceptance of being exposed to certain things which may challenge you physically or emotionally. Once again, this process demands self-reflection on the part of

museum staff and requires them to allow external persons to challenge their norms and processes in order to achieve change in their operationalization. In this regard, strategies that can be put into place include the establishment of dialogues and cooperation with external actors, and accepting criticism that arises therefrom. Specifically, a voice should be given to minority communities that may give a different narrative to certain themes exhibited in the museum and spark an uncomfortable discussion on its appropriate presentation. However, it is not sufficient for these discussions to merely take place, but they have to be translated into tangible changes that become visible in the museum space. "By listening to other (dissenting) voices and changing practices, museums can turn into instruments of social justice". Moreover, Ariese & Wroblewska emphasize that vulnerability entails more than just entering into uncomfortable discussions with external actors. It also requires a willingness to be constantly exposed to the eventuality of harm or attack and an openness to this idea. "Vulnerability is the capacity to imagine, feel, and see without excluding". This value should be adopted by both museum staff and visitors who can then keep in mind the need for openness throughout their work or visit, and channel it into a productive reflection or dialogue on otherness. Vulnerability is an exercise of listening and receptivity, and thus entails an important change in procedure on the part of museums who are authoritative and historically imperial knowledge dissemination institutions. Museum staff should not only be open to vulnerability themselves but attempt to render their visitors vulnerable. This can be done through the organization of events or exhibitions with particularly touching themes such as conflict, slavery, or climate catastrophes. Particularly, if the theme is exemplified through personal stories, it becomes relatable to visitors and faces them with uncomfortable realities, and necessary discussions.[89]

2.5. Examples of decolonial museums

The following section provides a set of examples of museums all around the world which have engaged in decolonization processes, to a lesser or further extent. This section provides for a pertinent comparative basis from which assess the extent to which the RMCA has undergone a decolonization process, which is examined further below in the analysis.

[89] Ariese, Csilla, and Magdalena Wróblewska. *Practicing decoloniality in museums: A guide with global examples*. Amsterdam University Press, 2022.

2.5.1 The Museum of Us in San Diego, US

The museum of Us in San Diego, originally the Museum of Man, is an anthropological museum created in the early 20th century.[90] It provides for an interesting case study for the present work, due to its extensive decolonization work, and the lessons that can therefrom be drawn. The first important thing to note is that the museum is located in Balboa Park, an "unceded territory and ancestral homeland" of the Kumeyaay Nation, the indigenous group to whom this land belongs to. On their website, the mUSeum, as they also call themselves, recognizes that this territory belongs to the Kameyaay Nation, and expresses gratitude to them. The museum further recognizes, in their historical account, that in its first century of existence, issues of colonization inherent to its existence, its building, and its collections, were completely disregarded: the museum presented a classical "western European academic display".[91] However, the mUSeum started in 2012 its decolonial journey to arrive to its present objective: "Inspiring human connections by exploring the human experience". The museum now acknowledges that even "the building's façade represents a complex history and has colonization etched into its skin".[92] In August 2020, the museum adopted a new name: the Museum of Us, which "reflects the Museum's commitment to equity, anti-racism and decolonization". Since 2012, the museum has made extensive modifications to its institutions in terms of structure, policy, practices, and culture in order to reverse colonialist patterns and construct a relationship of trust with the Kumeyaay Nation. The institution seeks accountability for its colonial past, for the way in which it has participated in the act of colonization, whether intentionally or unintentionally, and its perpetuation through legacies still present in the cultural world.[93] In order to achieve this objective, the museum asks for guidance from members of the communities of color, of indigenous groups and of Black communities. The museum now wants to participate to the decolonization effort by being a framework for dialogue and education. In their decolonizing initiatives, the museum emphasizes the importance of the principles of accountability, reconciliation, and truthfulness. The following decolonizing practices, all taken from "Decolonizing practices" by Amy Lonetree, are used by the museum:

- *Truth telling and accountability:* this indicator entails the public recognition and acknowledgment that most of the objects and pieces of art present in the museum are the result of colonizing missions.

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[90] "Home." *Museum of Us*, museumofus.org/. Accessed 24 Nov. 2023.
[91] "History." *Museum of Us*, museumofus.org/history. Accessed 24 Nov. 2023.
[92] "Colonial Legacy: The Museum's Facade - Google Arts & Culture." *Google*, Google, artsandculture.google.com/u/1/story/OwVB4cUKV7q4Kw?hl=en. Accessed 24 Nov. 2023.
[93] "History." *Museum of Us*, museumofus.org/history. Accessed 24 Nov. 2023.

- *Rethinking ownership:* this indicator concerns the origin of human remains exhibited in the museum and requires the consent of the communities from which the remains arise from. This indicator must be achieved in collaboration with the indigenous communities.
- *Organizational culture shift supported by systems and policy:* this indicator focuses on indigenous knowledge and how it can better be used and applied in the museum context. This translates into its use in modifying the museum's practices, culture and organizational model.
- *Indigenous representation:* this indicator refers to museum staff and aims at diversification at all decision-making level, in order to obtain Black, Indigenous, and people of color (POC) representation in each one of these levels.[94]

Figure 1: The Museum of Us, San Diego, is located in Balboa Park, on ancestral indigenous land (Source: Balboa Park)

2.5.2. National Museum of African American History & Culture, US

The National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) provides another interesting example from the United States, although for different reasons than the previous case study. The NMAAHC, part of the Smithsonian institution, opened in 2016 in Washington D.C. It is a museum entirely dedicated to African American history and culture, which was established through an Act of Congress in 2003.[95] The museum targets all individuals who are interested in African American history and for the first time in such an institution, American history is

[94] "Decolonizing Initiatives." *Museum of Us*, museumofus.org/decolonizing-initiatives. Accessed 24 Nov. 2023.
[95] "About the Museum." *National Museum of African American History and Culture*, 10 Feb. 2022, nmaahc.si.edu/about/about-museum.

taught and experience exclusively through an African American lens. Its objective is to give a correlative historical narrative to the mainstream museal discourse, by challenging it from a different perspective: that of a group who has experienced history differently.[96] The NMAACH not only focuses on telling and teaching African American history but focuses on *experiencing* it. It does so through the creation of interactive exhibitions, the display of personal stories, and the use of American values to explain their role in African American history and create a shared historical experience. It also places great value on discussion, cooperation and collaboration, by inviting external actors to contribute to the museum and its narrative, thereby sparking discussion between different stakeholders.[97] How does the NMAACH then fit into the decolonial efforts? As previously explained, decoloniality does not only apply to colonial museums, but to all museums. Thus, whilst the NMAACH does not have a colonial history, nor does it focus on the history of colonialism in its exhibitions, it can be argued that it is a decolonial museum in itself, from the onset of its creation. Using the conceptual areas developed by Ariese & Wroblewska, we can see that the NMAACH has achieved to a far-reaching extent to champion empathy within its visitors. The exhibition galleries of the museum, specifically the historical ones which focus on slavery, conflicts, civil rights movements, and segregation, are made in way to be emotionally charged and spark reflection amongst its visitors. Furthermore, the exhibitions include personal stories accompanied by original objects, to which the visitors can relate based on their personal history, and which thus creates more emotional reaction to the historical accounts present in the museum. After the historical galleries, a "contemplative court" can be found, namely a specific space dedicated to self-reflection for visitors. The very design of the room aims at producing feelings and allowing for contemplation: it is a space for crying, screaming, or sitting in silence. The museum thus creates empathy within its structure, design, exhibitions, and narratives.[98]

[96] Gardullo, Paul, and Lonnie G. Bunch III. "Making a way out of no way: The national museum of African American History and Culture." *History Workshop Journal*. Vol. 84. Oxford University Press, 2017.
[97] Ariese, Csilla, and Magdalena Wróblewska. *Practicing decoloniality in museums: A guide with global examples*. Amsterdam University Press, 2022.
[98] Ibid.

Figure 2: The contemplation court (Source: Jason Flakes)

2.5.3. International Slavery Museum, UK

The International Slavery Museum opened on the 23rd of August 2007 in Liverpool. Both its date and location are meaningful since the 23rd of August is the International Day for the Memory of the Slave Trade and its Abolition, and 2007 constituted the bicentenary since the slave trade was abolished in the United Kingdom, then the British Empire.[99] The choice of the city of Liverpool as a location is equally meaningful due to the historical role that the city has played as an important point for the slave trade during the 18th and 19th centuries, building much of its richness on cotton trade based on colonial slave work. The International Slavery Museum did not arise out of a vacuum, but is the continuation of the Merseyside Maritime Museum, located along its side on the docks of Liverpool, which had a dedicated gallery to slavery. This gallery quickly gained international recognition and sparked the idea to turn it into a museum.[100] The aim of this museum is not only to tell the story of colonialism and slavery, but to increase visibility, as conceptualized by Ariese & Wroblewska, on the history of the slave trade in the colonial era, but also on contemporary slavery. The topics addressed by the museum are thus incredibly large: from British colonialism to racial discrimination and justice, with a focus on identity matters, development in Africa, social justice and contemporary slavery such as forced marriage, forced labor and human trafficking. The museum describes itself as a "campaigning museum that actively engages with contemporary human rights issues", that "addresses ignorance and challenges intolerance, by building partnerships with museums, communities, and organizations that share their vision".

[99] "About the International Slavery Museum." *National Museums Liverpool*, www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/international-slavery-museum/about. Accessed 7 Dec. 2023.
[100] Ibid.

Therefore, beyond its success in increasing visibility, the museum also shows vulnerability in its willingness to open up to external actors to the museum and allow the narration to be made by communities who descend from slavery. The aim of the museum is to set up discussion frameworks with an incredible variety of stakeholders, and if necessary, hold uncomfortable discussions on past and present slavery, and their contemporary consequences in society.[101]

Figure 3: The International Slavery Museum in Liverpool (Source: History Reclaimed)

2.5.4. The Wereld Museum, Netherlands

The Wereld Museum, also known as the TropenMuseum, is situated in Amsterdam and is a historical institution with colonial antecedents. Established in 1864 under the appellation "Koloniaal Museum", its primary objective was the promotion of colonialism, manifesting through the presentation and exposition of the gains derived from colonial endeavours and trade. It was renamed TropenMuseum in 1945 - when Indonesia obtained its independence from the Netherlands - and started to take an interest in exhibiting artworks from other "tropical" states located in South America, Africa and Asia. Subsequently, the museum continued to expand its educational and ethnological purpose by addressing social issues in its exhibitions. Prior to 2015, the museum refrained from introspective examinations or critical assessments of its own historical trajectory and the broader phenomenon of colonialism. Then, an activist group named "Decolonize the museum" launched a group action to denounce the colonial narrative still present in the museum. The group condemned the lack of diversified perspective on the artifacts present in the museum and underlined the lack of appropriate historical contextualization of the artworks, including a truthful and accurate account of Dutch colonialism. In 2016, the Wereld Museum hosted a

[101] Ariese, Csilla, and Magdalena Wróblewska. *Practicing decoloniality in museums: A guide with global examples*. Amsterdam University Press, 2022.

conference with the theme “Decolonizing the Museum”. This led to a change in the wall inscriptions that contextualized the artworks, by placing them in the violent colonial context in which they took place and clarifying their provenance which sometimes meant admitting that some of the artworks had been looted during the colonial time.[102] These textual inscriptions were temporary; however, the museum now has implemented a permanent exhibition titled “Our Colonial Inheritance”. On their website, the museum now states that: “Colonialism is not a thing of the past. It has shaped the world: our physical, mental, and personal world. Colonialism lives on to this day.” The exhibition’s objective is to sensibilize the public to the Dutch colonial history and how that translates into contemporary inequalities. Through, this exhibition the TropenMuseum tries to increase visibility, but also to be vulnerable by changing its perspective. As previously mentioned, the museum was originally a colonial museum aimed at exhibiting the riches of the colonies, and through this exhibition it now aims to reverse this very narrative by shedding light on the terrible acts inherent to colonialism, undergirding that these consequences are still visible today. Along those lines, the museum wants to clarify the links between colonialism, racism, inequality, and exclusion. Beyond educating, the museum wants to evoke feelings amongst its guests and help them find “hope to contribute to a more just world themselves”.[103]

Figure 4: The Wereld Museum, in Amsterdam, exhibits cultural artifacts from all around the world (Source: Wereld Museum)

[102] Ariese, Csilla, and Magdalena Wróblewska. *Practicing decoloniality in museums: A guide with global examples*. Amsterdam University Press, 2022.
[103] “Our Colonial Inheritance.” *Wereldmuseum Amsterdam*, amsterdam.wereldmuseum.nl/en/whats-on/exhibitions/our-colonial-inheritance. Accessed 7 Dec. 2023.

2.6. Criticism of the decolonization theory

Notwithstanding the extensive potential of the decolonization theory in empowering minorities, addressing historical injustices, and promoting a different approach to cultural theory, the concept is not without its critics. For example, scholar Ijeoma Nnodim Opara argues that "the decolonization movement itself needs to be decolonized" and wonders if "decolonization is even possible, especially if the same tools and systems of colonization are employed in attempts to decolonize?".[104] Firstly, she points to confusion inherent to the concept by unveiling that it is often conflated with general efforts towards social justice, such as DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion). Instead, she underlines the role that decolonization ought to have, namely that of giving a voice and a platform for the stories of the colonized. As such, she denounces the lack of self-reflection on the part of (usually white) scholars who engage in decolonization study with internalized and systemic approaches that perpetuate a colonial logic. Moreover, she points to the omittance to refer and defer to scholars of the Global South, and how, resultantly, the academic endeavor aimed at decolonization becomes essentially a neo-colonial process. She mentions paramount authors such as Aime Cesaire, Frantz Fanon, George Sefa Dei, Chizoba Imoka, Ngugi Wa Thiong'O, Amilcar Cabral, Es'kia Mphahlele that ought to be included and form the basis of any study of decolonization.[105] By the same token, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, an Indigenous Australian scholar, argues that some versions of decolonization can be based on a Western-centric understanding of what constitutes knowledge and can marginalize indigenous perspectives.[106] Similarly, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, whose work has already been mentioned previously, highlights in her book "Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples", that the theory of decolonization is often used in an all-encompassing way, aiming at broader objectives such as addressing current racial inequalities, without really delving into the history of colonialism and thus is unable to challenge its current forms. Much like Ijeoma Nnodim Opara, she also criticizes the lack of voice given to indigenous scholars and frames decolonization as a theory too often co-opted by Western scholars, thereby perpetrating Euro-centric views.[107] Ariese & Wroblewska, whose work has been extensively studied in this thesis, denounce another problematic aspect of decolonization: that of

[104] Nnodim Opara, Ijeoma. "It's Time to Decolonize the Decolonization Movement." *Speaking of Medicine and Health*, 30 Nov. 2023, speakingofmedicine.plos.org/2021/07/29/its-time-to-decolonize-the-decolonization-movement/.
[105] Ibid.
[106] Moreton-Robinson, Aileen. *The white possessive: Property, power, and indigenous sovereignty*. U of Minnesota Press, 2015.
[107] Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2022.

tokenization. They argue that racial or indigenous tokenization within museum staff is problematic as it often perpetuates superficial diversity without addressing underlying power structures or promoting genuine inclusion. It often fails to give a proper voice to minorities such as indigenous groups, black people or POC, who may feel that their presence is only justified to put on a pretty façade for the museum, that of the decolonial museum with a diverse staff.[108]

2.7. Intermediary conclusion on the decolonization of museums as a form of cultural diplomacy

Applying the criteria set out in the previous chapter leads to the following conclusion regarding decolonization of museums as a form of cultural diplomacy. At first sight, the link between the decolonization of museums and cultural diplomacy is not obvious, but after a thorough study of the concepts, this work argues that the relation is important. Firstly, the decolonization of museums inevitably entails the mobilization of cultural resources, such as artworks and other artifacts (particularly in anthropological and ethnological museums). As has been demonstrated, a great amount of Western museums' collections is made out of art coming from the Global South, which often has been looted during colonialism. Furthermore, it has also been demonstrated that current processes of decolonization go beyond the restitution of looted cultural artifacts and entail a re-contextualization of the exhibition of cultural artifacts, through a plethora of policies aimed at re-birthing new forms of museums, free of colonial legacies. This utopic goal is far from being attained, however, Ariese & Wroblewska's indicators give an idea of the direction in which this endeavor might – and should – go. Moreover, the examples of decolonial museums given in the chapter are useful in unveiling practical case studies that have succeeded to a lesser or further extent in their decolonization mission. Secondly, decolonization of museums is a task usually undertaken by a mix of private and public institutions, i.e., by museums themselves and/or governmental entities issuing public policies thereto related. Thirdly, regarding the aim of the decolonization of museums, it can be debated whether this endeavor entails a foreign policy goal. As studied in the first chapter, cultural diplomacy is not merely a foreign policy instrument which functions through direct cultural exchanges (for example, setting up a cultural center abroad), but can also function through a mix of domestic and foreign policy goals, which aims at changing the narrative surrounding a country abroad. This thesis argues that the

[108] Ariese, Csilla, and Magdalena Wróblewska. *Practicing decoloniality in museums: A guide with global examples*. Amsterdam University Press, 2022.

decolonization of museums precisely falls into this category. The decolonization of museums is first and foremost a symbolic act, which has as its objective to change the national understanding and memory of its colonial past. This goal is for domestic purposes, which entail goals of education of new generations, and encourages a different discourse surrounding colonial past, or aims at reconciliation with the diaspora from former colonies. But it also has a foreign policy component, as it also sends a clear message abroad, to former colonies. The narrative differs depending on the extent to which a museum has undergone a process of decolonization and the goals can range from restitution of looted artworks to that of completely deconstructing the framing the Western Museum as an institution of superiority, and instead of being open to dialogue and inclusion. The overall objective is to create a new chapter in cultural relations between former colonizers and colonies, by re-framing the discourse regarding colonial past, and its present consequences.

Chapter 3: Restitution of cultural artifacts

> *"Africa needs not only apology and forgiveness, but that these priceless African cultural treasures - artworks, icons, relics - be returned to their rightful owners.... The African art that has found its way into the galleries of former European colonial powers and the homes of the rich in North America, Europe, and elsewhere has deep cultural significance. These works form an integral part of defining our identity and personality as family, as African family. We talk to them. They talk to us. We touch them at certain moments of our lives, from birth through life to death. It is through them that the living spirits of our people, of our history, of our culture interact and interface with us. They are not there, hence the void in our minds and in our hearts. We continue to cry for them to come back home, to complete that cultural, spiritual space."* Theo-Ben Gurirab

The third chapter of this thesis focuses on a specific aspect of decolonizing art and museums, namely the question of restitution of cultural artifacts looted during the colonial period. This topic has already been touched upon in the previous chapter regarding decolonization of art and museums, which explained the extent to which artworks were largely taken from colonized peoples by the colonizers, who brought them back to the metropoles where they were kept first within private collections, and later on within museums. Some museum collections, such as the Wereld Museum studied in the previous chapter, or the RMCA which will be studied in the next one, were based on artifacts looted from the colonies, and had as their objectives to "exhibit the riches of colonialism", and thereby serve as a form of propaganda to justify the colonial missions. The present chapter aims at uncovering the historical endeavor of art theft during colonial times, and its consequences today. Contemporary diplomatic relations between former colonizers and their colonies often have to deal with the question of restitution of those artworks, which form part of contemporary decolonization process. Moreover, this chapter sets out the legal framework governing restitution of cultural artifacts between countries and determine the role of UNESCO in this process. The question of restitution as a process of transitional justice will also be explored, and a comparative analysis of restitution processes from former colonial powers will then be provided.

3.1.Conceptual clarifications

The academic field of research regarding decolonization, cultural heritage, restitutions, and returns is one of complex terminology. In this chapter, the choice has been made to use the terms cultural artifacts, looting, returns and restitutions.

3.1.1. Cultural artifacts

A cultural artifact is an object, item, tool, or ornament made by a human, often within the context of a particular cultural group, thereby relating to the specific society to which they belong, exemplifying its cultural customs and traditional art.[109] The choice to use the term "cultural artifact" in the present work stems from the nature of the objects subject to return in the present study. Indeed, the question of restitution does not merely relate to artworks, such as painting or sculptures, but also includes everyday objects such as tools or clothing, and human remains.

3.1.2. Looting

Looting refers to the act of unlawfully taking or plundering valuable items, often in the context of war, conflict, natural disasters, riots or other civil unrest. It involves the unauthorized and often illicit seizure of cultural objects, historical treasures, or any other goods from museums, archaeological sites, or private collections.[110] Examples of periods of time marked by heightened art looting are the French Revolutionary Wars, WW2, Native Americans in the US and South America, the Balkan wars and colonialism.[111]

3.1.3. Return and Restitution

There is a lack of uniformity in how terms like "restitution", "repatriation", "restoration", "recovery", and "return" are used and applied.[112] On the one hand, the word **return** is often used in the academic literature, as well as by states undergoing negotiations, due to its inherent neutrality. It is usually used when the removal of an item did not arise in illegal circumstances. [113] On the other hand, **restitution** is the act of returning or restoring something either lost or stolen to its rightful owner. The

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[109] *Cultural Artefact Definition and Meaning | Collins English Dictionary*, www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/cultural-artefact. Accessed 18 Dec. 2023; "Cultural Artifact." *DBpedia*, dbpedia.org/page/Cultural_artifact. Accessed 18 Dec. 2023.

[110] *Looting | English Meaning - Cambridge Dictionary*, dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/looting. Accessed 18 Dec. 2023; *Looting Definition and Meaning | Collins English Dictionary*, www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/looting. Accessed 18 Dec. 2023; "Loot Definition & Meaning." *Merriam-Webster*, Merriam-Webster, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/loot. Accessed 18 Dec. 2023.

[111] Gaudenzi, Bianca, and Astrid Swenson. "Looted art and restitution in the twentieth century–Towards a global perspective." *Journal of Contemporary History* 52.3 (2017): 491-518; Lindsay, Ivan. *The history of loot and stolen art: From antiquity until the present day*. Andrews UK Limited, 2014.

[112] Lubina, Katja. "Contested cultural property." *Katja Lubina, Maastricht* (2009).

[113] Van Beurden, Jos. *Treasures in trusted hands: negotiating the future of colonial cultural objects*. Sidestone Press, 2017; Lubina, Katja. "Contested cultural property." *Katja Lubina, Maastricht* (2009).

word is brimmed with notions of restorative justice and correction of wrongs. Moreover, in public international law, restitution constitutes the remedy to an internationally wrongful act, which has created liability for reparations. Restitution is thus the only term that entails legal consequences with its use.[114] By the same token, the UN ICPRCP has in its report made the distinction between restitution and return, which has subsequently been adopted in all UNESCO resolutions: namely that of "restitution" as arising in case of illegal theft of object and "return" in case there has been no illegal behavior.[115]

3.2. Historical account

Chronologically, it is hard to say when the phenomenon of art looting linked to European colonialism started. The colonial expansion of European powers occurred at various points in time and the violence exerted in the colonies varied in intensity but was widespread and almost always ideological. This translated into cultural violence, including the plundering of cultural artifacts. Initially, during missionary activities, the destruction of objects was privileged over confiscation thereof. However, collecting began shortly thereafter in Europe and led to an intensification of the violent and coercive plundering of cultural resources in the colonies in the aim of bringing back the objects to the metropoles.[116] The looting included a wide-ranging array of cultural objects including extensive archives, valuable treasures, human remains, collections of armory, sculptures, and utilitarian objects.[117] Evidently, no legal protection of indigenous cultural heritage was in place at the time. Despite the de facto relations that European states entertained with the colonies, there was no legal recognition that would allow them to be protected by international law. Nonetheless, moral outrage regarding plundering and colonization in general gradually began to grow in Europe.[118] In the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, during the height of European colonialism, the flow of cultural objects arriving in Europe increased. The acquisition of these artifacts remained continuously violent and the increased collecting in Europe involved significant danger to indigenous cultural heritage. The inherent violence obscured their histories and biographies, some of which remained lost forever.

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[114] Lubina, Katja. "Contested cultural property." *Katja Lubina, Maastricht* (2009).
[115] Ibid.
[116] Van Beurden, Jos. *Treasures in trusted hands: negotiating the future of colonial cultural objects*. Sidestone Press, 2017
[117] Vrdoljak, Ana Filipa. *International law, museums and the return of cultural objects*. Cambridge University Press, 2006.
[118] Van Beurden, Jos. *Treasures in trusted hands: negotiating the future of colonial cultural objects*. Sidestone Press, 2017.

While some measures were taken to protect indigenous cultural heritage, these often served the interests of the empire and museums in the metropolis rather than the indigenous population. Civil society critics existed during this period who voiced concerns about colonialism and certain acquisitions of cultural objects. In the second half of the 20th century, the European empires started to decline and the calls for self-determination linked to decolonization increased. This period, still ongoing today, "shows both continuity and discontinuity", which is mirrored is the collecting practices thereto linked. In this era, educated groups in the colonies started to advocate for the restitution of cultural objects, and missionaries, among others, began to reevaluate their perspectives on collecting indigenous artifacts. Despite gaining independence, many new states continued to grapple with a sustained depletion of cultural and historical treasures, now led by different actors such as traders and collectors.[119] Van Beurden calls the mass looting of cultural artifacts during the colonial era: "The Great Heritage Migration". This name is brimmed with the importance of the matter, and sheds light to the extent to which heritage (and some would argue culture) was taken away from a people, in order to serve another, who was then dominating it.[120] As explained, colonizers were not shy in their complete plundering of resources in their colonies and the ensuing appropriation of anything of value to them placed on their land. Sarah Van Beurden characterizes this mass plundering as a "scramble for art", which greatly contribute d to the development of anthropological and ethnological museums in Europe. She further makes an interesting argument regarding "contested colonial guardianship", where she undergirds the inherent contradiction of the process of art theft by colonial powers. Colonizers often operated under a discursive narrative of "civilizing" and thus modernizing the colonies, however, when it came to their art, it was deemed necessary to protect it from "modernity's destructive effects". As such, the depiction was that of the colonized people being unable to deal with the effects of modernity (which, contrastingly the colonizers claimed to have brought) and thus to protect their heritage therefrom.[121] Indeed, a paternalistic attitude in colonial rule was often adopted, and colonial rules often considered themselves as the most apt to protect the native peoples, including their cultural heritage.[122] This understanding is reflected in the text of 1885 Berlin conference – when the European

[119] Van Beurden, Jos. *Treasures in trusted hands: negotiating the future of colonial cultural objects*. Sidestone Press, 2017.
[120] Van Beurden, Jos. *Inconvenient Heritage: Colonial Collections and Restitution in the Netherlands and Belgium*. Amsterdam University Press, 2022.
[121] Van Beurden, Sarah. "The art of (re) possession: heritage and the cultural politics of Congo's decolonization." *The Journal of African History* 56, no. 1 (2015): 143-164.
[122] Cassan, Clara. "Should They Stay or Should They Go? African Cultural Goods in France's Public Domain, between Inalienability, Transfers, and Circulations." *Fordham Intell. Prop. Media & Ent. LJ* 31 (2020): 1248.

powers came to an agreement regarding their territorial claims in Africa - which states as follows: "*The signatory powers exercising sovereign rights or authority in African territories will continue to watch over the preservation of the native populations and to supervise the improvement of the conditions of their moral and material well-being*".[123]

3.3. Contemporary debate

Since the decolonization of many former European colonies in the second half of the 20th century, the question of restitution has become an increasingly important topic in diplomatic relations between former colonizer and colonized states.[124] Many countries, especially those that were once colonized, are advocating for the return of cultural treasures that were acquired during colonial periods through coercion, theft, or questionable circumstances.[125] The debate raises questions about ethical practices, historical injustices, and the need to rectify colonial-era imbalances. Institutions and nations holding these artifacts are faced with the challenge of reconciling their historical collections with the calls for repatriation.[126] The discussion surrounding the restitution of cultural artifacts to former colonies persists as a sensitive and often avoided topic in some countries, stemming from historical discomfort or fears of potential legal and diplomatic repercussions.[127] Nonetheless, in the last decades, European societies are undergoing an unprecedented examination of their colonial histories, and its consequences in contemporary times. The discourse has been catalysed by movements such as Black Lives Matter (BLM), which has intensified discussions on identity and race, cultural appropriation, and representation in politics and art.[128] The fact that an elite group of privileged European museums has the dominance and exclusive interpretation over ethnological and anthropological artifacts (90 to 95% of African cultural heritage could be located in European and North American institutions) is facing widespread criticism in this context of these intense discussions surrounding colonialism and race.[129]

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[123] General Act of the Berlin Conference on West Africa, 26 February 1885.
[124] McAuliffe, Padraig. "Complicity or Decolonization? Restitution of Heritage from 'Global'Ethnographic Museums." (2021): 678-689.
[125] Van Beurden, Jos. *Inconvenient Heritage: Colonial Collections and Restitution in the Netherlands and Belgium*. Amsterdam University Press, 2022.
[126] McAuliffe, Padraig. "Complicity or Decolonization? Restitution of Heritage from 'Global'Ethnographic Museums." (2021): 678-689.
[127] Van Beurden, Jos. *Inconvenient Heritage: Colonial Collections and Restitution in the Netherlands and Belgium*. Amsterdam University Press, 2022.
[128] McAuliffe, Padraig. "Complicity or Decolonization? Restitution of Heritage from 'Global'Ethnographic Museums." (2021): 678-689.
[129] Sarr, Felwine, and Bénédicte Savoy. *Rapport sur la restitution du patrimoine culturel africain: Vers une nouvelle éthique relationnelle*. Felwine Sarr, Bénédicte Savoy, 2018.

3.4. Nazi-looted art and post-war restitution: an inspiration for colonial returns?

A historical, political, and legal account regarding restitution of cultural artifacts would not be complete if it did not include the debate and legislation concerning Nazi-looted art. The discussion regarding Nazi-looted art has led to important development regarding artifact restitution, which spillover into that of colonial returns. Approximately one third to one fourth of Europe's art is estimated to have been plundered by the Nazis during the second world war, who made it an official policy, beyond "regular" war pillage. This systematic approach led to the enactment of laws that allowed the Nazis to confiscate the art of Jews. Since then, much of the artifacts looted by the Nazi's remain missing, and only half of them have been returned to their rightful owners. In the last decades, international governments have taken increased political and legal action to remedy this historical injustice.[130] However, an undue focus on Nazi plundering and artwork returns is often exerted, which obscure the greater global history of art looting.[131] Gaudenzi and Swenson make the argument that it is time to overcome the "overwhelming focus" on Nazi-looted art, and move beyond its geographical and historical constraints in order to get a bigger picture of the issue of art looting. They further point to an undue "romanticizing" of the issue, namely through movies and books, which usually depict Western resistance heroes against Nazi barbarians, and which "sensationalizes the uniqueness of the issue", without placing in in contrast to other historical instances regarding art plundering. Interestingly, before 1935, European states excluded looting from post-war restitutions in order to protect their own colonial interests, and within Europe, restitution was undertaken only between states, not including private parties, which would have de facto excluded a good number of Holocaust survivors. However, the focus on Nazi-looted art has given rise to a number of politico-legal developments, which can be useful as a source of inspiration to deal with post-colonial returns.[132] While no legally binding instruments have been adopted dealing specifically with Nazi-looted art, a number of soft law instruments have been adopted which deal with disputes regarding Nazi-looted art.[133] Those are the following*: The 1998 Washington principles on Nazi-confiscated art, the 1999 Resolution Nr. 1205 concerning Looted Jewish Cultural Property from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the 2000*

[130] Graefe, Emily A. "The Conflicting Obligations of Museums Possessing Nazi-Looted Art." *BCL Rev.* 51 (2010): 473.
[131] Gaudenzi, Bianca, and Astrid Swenson. "Looted art and restitution in the twentieth century–Towards a global perspective." *Journal of Contemporary History* 52, no. 3 (2017): 491-518.
[132] Ibid.
[133] Van Beurden, Jos. *Treasures in trusted hands: negotiating the future of colonial cultural objects*. Sidestone Press, 2017.

Vilnius Principles, and the 2009 Terezin Declaration on Holocaust Era Assets and Related Issues. These instruments have mostly had an influence on pushing the issue of Nazi-looted art on the international political agenda. Jos van Beurden argues for a certain parallel or "translation", which could be made between the 1998 Washington Principles and the issue of contested colonial objects. The first similitude is that many colonial artifacts are held in private collections or have been donated to museums by private owners, in both instances in which provenance information is lacking. Moreover, van Beurden argues that, even though the Washington Principles are not binding, they have significantly strengthened the position of the claimant by shifting the burden of proof on the current possessor. However, such a policy would be hard to envisage for colonial contested objects, which, even though they lack provenance information, were acquired by Western governments who will be reluctant to adopt principles which may work against their favor. Furthermore, van Beurden undergirds the following divergences between the cases of Nazi-looted art and colonial cultural artifacts. Firstly, their timeline differs: the Nazi plundering took place during a very defined and rather short period of time, while plundering during European colonial spans over several centuries and is much harder to determine. Secondly, the specific scope of the objects looted during WW2 is much narrower than those looted in the colonial time, which can include human remains for example. Thirdly, it is much easier to identify the rightful owners (i.e., the former owners of their descendants) for Nazi-looted art, who moreover usually have access to lawyers specialized in the matter. Instead, it is much more arduous to identify to whom an object coming from a former colony belongs, as its tracing is more difficult to obtain, and may date back to other centuries. Nonetheless, van Beurden sustains that the Washington principles may be the best base to draft a legal (soft or hard) instrument related to contested colonial artifacts because "both categories represent acts of historical injustice and that principled reasons to omit options for colonial cultural objects that exist for Nazi-looted art are hard to find".[134]

3.5. The UN and UNESCO

It is important to underscore the role of the UN and UNESCO in the international restitution debate, which have provided useful platforms for debate and developments on the matter. In the midst of decolonization movements in the 1960s and 1970s, several former colonies started to advance claims and demands for the restitution of cultural artifacts had been looted during colonial rule. In particular, the Congo (called

[134] Van Beurden, Jos. *Treasures in trusted hands: negotiating the future of colonial cultural objects*. Sidestone Press, 2017.

Zaire at the time) and its president Mobutu Sese Seko, were at the forefront of these demands on the international scene, highlighting the extent to which Congolese cultural heritage had disappeared during Belgian colonialism. In 1973, Zaire submitted a request at the UN General Assembly and a Resolution (Resolution 3187 on the Restitution of Work of Art to Countries Victims of Expropriation) was resultingly adopted that same year. Resolution 3187 was unequivocal in its endeavor and recognized the special obligations of former colonial powers to restitute looted artifacts. In 1975, Resolution 3391 was adopted which intensified the calls for repatriation. However, the subsequent resolutions were much milder in their approach and as relations between former colonizers and their respective colonies improved, the calls for restitution diminished. Instead, the international cultural agenda started to focus on theft and illicit trafficking of cultural objects in a wider sense, thereby abandoning the focus on contested colonial object.[135] This shift of focus can be observed in the legal instruments adopted during those decades, such as the 1970 UNESCO Convention and the 1995 UNIDROIT Convention. Furthermore in 1976, UNESCO set up a special committee that aimed at investigating colonial restitutions. This committee's mandate and functioning is explained further below.

3.6. Legal framework

This section gives an overview of the existing legislation regarding restitution of cultural artifacts relevant to colonial returns. It will be demonstrated that the existing legislation in public international law is largely inapplicable or inadequate for the restitution of colonial cultural artifacts, which explains why returns are still mostly dealt with on a case-by-case basis during bilateral negotiations.

3.6.1. The 1935 Treaty of Washington

Although some attempts to draft an international convention regarding cultural objects were made by the International Museums Office and the League of Nations in the 1930s, they remained largely unsuccessful. The first binding treaty was adopted in 1935 in Washington and is titled: "the Treaty on the Protection of Movable of Historic Value". Its scope regulates the illicit trade and looting of cultural objects between North American and Central/Southern America. It has as its objective the protection of cultural artifacts from specific time periods such as the colonial era, by making their entry into North America dependent on a

[135] Lubina, Katja. "Contested cultural property." *Katja Lubina, Maastricht* (2009).

license proving an acquisition in good faith of the owner. In case of illegal theft and entry, the objects must be returned to the country of origin. Moreover, it grants the claimant the option to start a civil court procedure. The Treaty of Washington was a groundbreaking instrument for its time and was the first to introduce a practical enforcement mechanism concerning looted cultural artifacts. Up to this day, not other legal convention has gone as far as to make the legality of entry of an object dependent on a valid export license. However, the Treaty of Washington remains limited in its material as well as geographical scope, which only covers the Americas.[136]

3.6.2. The 1970 UNESCO Convention

The 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property is an international legal framework aimed at encouraging state parties to implement measures that forbid and deter the illegal trade of cultural property. It arose out of the preparatory works undertaken by the League of Nations in the 1930s, which failed to result in a treaty or convention before the organization was dissolved. During the 1960s, renewed calls for a binding international framework for the protection of cultural property were made, and some resolutions to that effect were published. [137] Finally, the convention came into force in 1972, and lists specific actions that should be undertaken in order to combat, prohibit, and prevent illegal trafficking of cultural artifacts.[138] It originally included in its proposal a requirement similar to the Washington Treaty, namely that of making the import of cultural goods dependent on a valid export license, but the requirement was ultimately abandoned.[139] The aim of the convention is to "fundamentally safeguard the identity of peoples and promote peaceful societies whereby the spirit of solidarity will be strengthened".[140] However, the convention does not provide for any legal remedy concerning looted colonial objects, as it does not have any retroactive application.[141] During its drafting, China and some other states tried to include a retroactivity clause, to which former colonizing

[136] Lubina, Katja. "Contested cultural property." *Katja Lubina, Maastricht* (2009).
[137] Ibid.
[138] UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, 14 November 1970.
[139] Lubina, Katja. "Contested cultural property." *Katja Lubina, Maastricht* (2009).
[140] UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, 14 November 1970.
[141] Ibid.

power opposed themselves. The convention, in its article 15 however, provides the solution to adopt bilateral agreements for cultural objects looted prior to the entry into force of the convention, which could provide a potential solution for the return of cultural objects removed during colonialism. Many bilateral agreements have been adopted since the entry into force of the 1970 convention, however none include the return of cultural artifacts looted during colonial rule. Moreover, the convention is not directly applicable and require transposing into national law.[142] Many "art market countries" have been reluctant to adopt the convention since its publishing, and it is not before the 1980s/1990s that countries such as the USA, Japan, France or the UK became party to it. One of the underlying reasons for not adhering to the convention stems from a desire to protect national private law, and good faith acquisition. As such, UNESCO commissioned a convention to UNIDROIT, the International Institute for the Unification of Private Law.[143]

3.6.3. The 1995 UNIDROIT Convention

The 1995 UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects is the private law version of the 1970 Convention. Drawn up by UNIDROIT, an intergovernmental organization aiming at harmonizing private international law, at the request of UNESCO, the convention establishes a set of private law rules regarding the international trade of art, the objective of which is to complement the 1970 Convention. Its aim is to harmonize national property laws in order attain the objective of return of stolen or illegal acquired cultural good. It solves issues such as time limitations in claims and good faith acquisition. Nonetheless, the 1995 Convention still does not provide a specific framework for the restitution of colonial artifacts, except that it also includes a provision on bilateral agreements which can also cover situations between former colonizers and colonies. Furthermore, another article states that the fact that a provision on retroactivity has not been included in the convention does not exclude the option of retroactivity, which is a positive evolution compared to the 1970 convention. [144] However, the success of these provisions is still contingent on the good will of former colonial powers to accede to the convention and

[142] Van Beurden, Jos. *Treasures in trusted hands: negotiating the future of colonial cultural objects*. Sidestone Press, 2017.
[143] Lubina, Katja. "Contested cultural property." *Katja Lubina, Maastricht* (2009).
[144] Van Beurden, Jos. *Treasures in trusted hands: negotiating the future of colonial cultural objects*. Sidestone Press, 2017.

conclude bilateral agreements. Most of the typical art market nations are so far not party to the convention, fearing an undue interference in their domestic private law. Nonetheless, the provisions of the UNIDROIT Convention are self-executive, meaning that they do not necessitate any transposition into nationality law.[145]

3.7. Mediation committees

3.7.1. The ICPRCP

In 1978, the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to its Countries of Origins or its Restitution in case of Cultural Appropriation (the ICPRCP or the "return and restitution" intergovernmental committee) was created, in order to examine the issue of lost or stolen cultural heritage during foreign or colonial occupation, or illicit trafficking prior to 1970, when the UNESCO Convention entered into force. The creation of this committee arose due to a lack of existing international mechanisms in place dedicated to this issue, which could facilitate bilateral negotiations between countries for questions of restitutions and returns, and push them in that direction.[146] Moreover, the committee has, played a role in a linguistic shift, through its report, from the UN's prior use of "restitution" to a dual system involving both "restitution" and "return", dependent on the alleged illegality of the original taking under international law, as explained above.[147] The committee thus has the restitution of cultural artifacts looted during colonial rule as one of their core tasks, and its material scope is limited to "any cultural property which has a fundamental significance from the point of view of the spiritual values and cultural heritage of the people".[148] However, the results of the committee have been limited so far, and critics have voiced their concerns regarding its effectiveness. It is rare that former colonies actually use the ICPRCP as a forum for their restitution claims, and therefore cases of colonial returns have been replaced by more contemporary claims against illicit traffic of artworks.[149]

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[145] Lubina, Katja. "Contested cultural property." *Katja Lubina, Maastricht* (2009), Van Beurden, Jos. *Treasures in trusted hands: negotiating the future of colonial cultural objects*. Sidestone Press, 2017.
[146] Van Beurden, Jos. *Treasures in trusted hands: negotiating the future of colonial cultural objects*. Sidestone Press, 2017.
[147] Lubina, Katja. "Contested cultural property." *Katja Lubina, Maastricht* (2009)
[148] Statutes of the Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to its Countries of Origin or its Restitution in case of Illicit Appropriation, 2005.
[149] Van Beurden, Jos. *Treasures in trusted hands: negotiating the future of colonial cultural objects*. Sidestone Press, 2017.

Moreover, the ICPRCP is an advisory body, which cannot impose legally binding resolutions on the parties.[150] Here are some examples of cases mediated by the ICPRCP (successful or not):

- *The Parthenon Marbles or Elgin Marbles:*

  The case of the Parthenon Marbles is one of the most high-profile cases that the ICPRCP has taken on so far. It concerns a historical dispute between Greece and the UK over marbles of the Parthenon, which over time has become a symbol for disputes over the return of cultural artifacts looted during colonialism. The Marbles are also called Elgin Marbles after Lord Elgin, the British Ambassador who extracted the objects from Athens during the early 19th century, which he claimed to have done legally. Greece continuously issues demands for the return of the Elgin Marbles, underscoring their importance for the country's cultural heritage, and their desire for it to be exhibited with the rest of the related statues situated in Athens. However, it is the British Museum in London which currently houses the Parthenon Marbles, and the argument on the part of the UK is that the museum is a better fit for the protection of the marbles, and a better venue for a wider public access. The dispute has been pending before the ICPRCP for several years, while Greece continues to advocate for the return of the marbles.[151]

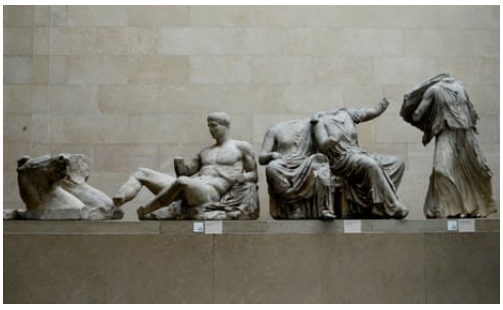

Figure 5: The Parthenon Marbles in the British Museum (Source: Dylan Martinez - Reuters)

[150] Lubina, Katja. "Contested cultural property." *Katja Lubina, Maastricht* (2009)
[151] "Greece Drops Option of Legal Action in British Museum Parthenon Marbles Row." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 13 May 2015, www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/may/13/greece-drops-option-legal-action-british-museum-parthenon-marbles-row; "Friday Briefing: The Latest Twist in the 200-Year Dispute over the Parthenon Marbles." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 6 Jan. 2023, www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/06/first-edition-parthenon-marbles-british-museum; Lubina, Katja. "Contested cultural property." *Katja Lubina, Maastricht* (2009), Van Beurden, Jos. *Treasures in trusted hands: negotiating the future of colonial cultural objects*. Sidestone Press, 2017.

- *The Boğazköy sphinx:*

  The Boğazköy Sphinx dispute, which took place between Turkey and Germany, arose in 1986, when Turkey demanded the return of the sphinx, then housed in the collection of the Staatliches Museum Vorderasiatische Abteilung, in Berlin (former German Democratic Republic). The ICPRCP played an important role in solving the dispute and recommended in 2010 to Germany to hand over the sphinx, which was finally given back to the Turkish authorities in 2011, thereby transferring the property title of the statue.[152]

- *The Kneeling Khmer attendants:*

  In this dispute between Cambodia and the US, the ICRPCP played an important role as well, as it initiated informal discussions between the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MoMa), located in New York, and the Cambodian authorities. The statues of the Kneeling Khmer attendants had originally been plundered during the Cambodian civil war in the 1970s and were later donated as gifts. However, after successful negotiations mediated by the ICPRCP, the statues were given back in 2013.[153]

- *The Khurvin treasure:*

  This dispute concerns an artifact from the Khruvin Necropolis in Iran, which were allegedly smuggled by the widow of the Shah's physician around 1965. The objects were smuggled to Belgium through diplomatic channels. The ICRPRC was prepared to give advice on the situation and start informal negotiations, however the case was already pending before a Belgian court. In 2014, the Court of Appeal in Liège issued a ruling giving back the objects to Iran, which have since then been transported to Tehran.[154]

3.7.2. The ICOM-WIPO cultural heritage mediation

The International Council of Museum (ICOM) and the Arbitration and Mediation center of the World Intellectual Property Organization have collaborated in order to create an Art and Culture Heritage Mediation. Its array of work is wider than

[152] Van Beurden, Jos. *Treasures in trusted hands: negotiating the future of colonial cultural objects*. Sidestone Press, 2017.
[153] Ibid.
[154] Ibid.

that of the ICPRCP and also includes copyright, traditional knowledge and cultural expressions, and loans. Not only government, but also private parties can apply for mediation. However, this mediation platform has not been used extensively for cases of colonial returns. In one case however, it did cooperate on the matter with the ICPRCP, namely that of the return of a Makonde mask to the National Museum of Tanzania from the Barbier-Müller Museum in Geneva, one of the seventeen cultural objects which had been stolen in 1984 from the National Museum of Tanzania.[155]

3.8. Return of human remains

One of the peculiarities concerning contested colonial artifacts consists of its wide array of contested objects. While the aforementioned legal instruments often have a delineated material scope, they do not always include the specific instance of human remains, which as will be described, were increasingly taken away by colonizers for different purposes. As such, this specific category deserves a study of its own. The collection of human remains did not arise during the colonial era, and dates back to early centuries AC. However, the study and collection thereof increased particularly during colonial times due to the development of the field of anthropology. As such, indigenous groups' skeletons and bone structures were taken back to the metropoles for the purpose of scientific study. This development occurred when the anthropological field itself was immersed in colonial thinking, and physical anthropology had as a core premise the fact that race was a key determinant of behavior for humans. Therefore, diverse human remains were examined to be then compared and contrasted, and finally exhibited in the museums. Following the Second World War, due to global evolutions on the concept of race, physical anthropology was completely discarded. Nonetheless, human remains still had scientific relevance: for example, in the fields of anthropobiology, medicine, or archeology.[156] Thereafter, in the context of the post-colonial debates that arose in the aftermath of WW2, and the first discussions regarding indigenous rights, the debate surrounding the return of human remains started, first on an intra-national level, then on an international one. The efforts to remedy the situations and to repatriate human remains varied in scope, such as laws, public policies, or tasking specific institutions to deal with the matter. In

[155] "WIPO – World Intellectual Property Organization." *International Council of Museums*, 10 July 2018, icom.museum/en/partner/wipo-world-intellectual-property-organization/; "WIPO and ICOM to Collaborate in Cultural Heritage and Museum Areas." *WIPO*, www.wipo.int/pressroom/en/articles/2011/article_0015.html. Accessed 18 Dec. 2023; Van Beurden, Jos. *Treasures in trusted hands: negotiating the future of colonial cultural objects*. Sidestone Press, 2017.
[156] Lubina, Katja. "Contested cultural property." *Katja Lubina, Maastricht* (2009)

this regard, the instrument which has been deemed the most comprehensive and successful in this endeavor is the 1990 NAGPRA (Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act), a binding US legal act which allows native American peoples to send in demands to a federal agency in order to obtain previously looted human remains. On an international level, no hard law instrument exists. However, article 12 of the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People states the following right for indigenous groups to: "maintain, protect, and have access in privacy to their religious and cultural sites; the right to the use and control of their ceremonial objects; and the right to the repatriation of their human remains". With regards to the return of human remains obtained during European colonialism, many are still kept and exhibited in European museums. Indeed, no similar binding legal framework such as NAGPRA exists in Europe and the returns have occurred on a case-by-case basis, with some resistance on the part of many European anthropological museums. [157] As has been mentioned above, the debate surrounding restitution has evolved in the recent decades, and more returns, including that of human remains, could be expected.

3.9. Comparative analysis

Before delving into the case study analysis of Belgium, this chapter provides some examples of cases of restitution between former European imperial powers and their colonies, for comparative purposes.

3.9.1. The Benin Bronzes (The UK, Germany, and more)

The Benin Bronzes are a collection of over 3000 artifacts, which contrarily to their name, are not only made out of bronze, but of a vast collection of objects such as sculptures, ivory masks, and figurines, which were looted during the British colonial rule in Nigeria (which was then part of the Kingdom of Benin). The plundering of the Benin Bronzes dates back to 1897 and is related to a colonial conflict during which a revengeful looting of several hundreds of artifacts was undertaken by British troops, and which were subsequently brought back to the UK, where they were placed on loan to the British Museum. Since then, they have been dispersed in European and North American museums. Since the 1960s, increased calls for returns – both from within and outside Nigeria – have been heard. The Benin Bronzes have become a symbol for many Nigerians, and other peoples from former colonies, of the difficult memory of colonialism

[157] Van Beurden, Jos. *Treasures in trusted hands: negotiating the future of colonial cultural objects*. Sidestone Press, 2017.

and its contemporary consequences on ex-colonies, such as a still scarce cultural heritage therein. The issue became particularly polemical in 1977, in the run-up to an arts festival in Lagos which used an ivory mask (part of the Benin Bronzes) as its symbol. There exist four copies of the mask, including one at the British Museum. Demands for restitution or loan were made before the start of the festival, which were all refused. The British Museum is the institution which holds most of the collection of Benin Bronzes, however other institutions such as Berlin's Ethnological Museums, MoMa, the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris, the Art Institute in Chicago, and many more. In its position as the majority holder of the Bronzes, the British Museum has been targeted by many activist groups for their return, demands which have however, fallen on deaf ears. Until today, just one institution has promised to return a Benin Bronze artifact from their collection, namely the University of Aberdeen in Scotland. [158] However, other institutions and even governments have indicated their intention to return their Benin Bronzes, such as Berlin's Ethnological Museum, and the French governments, after the publication of the Sarr-Savoy report, which is explored in the next paragraph.

Figure 6: An Edo ivory mask, dating from the 16th century and part of the collection of the Benin Bronzes, is currently held by the British Museum (Source: Art news)

[158] Wood, Paul. "Display, restitution and world art history: the case of the 'Benin Bronzes'." Visual Culture in Britain 13.1 (2012): 115-137 ; Kiwara-Wilson, Salome. "Restituting colonial plunder: The case for the Benin bronzes and ivories." DePaul J. Art Tech. & Intell. Prop. L 23 (2012): 375.

3.9.2. France

France provides a very interesting example in the study of restitution of cultural artifacts, due to recent developments which can serve as an example for Belgium, namely the commissioning and publishing of the **Sarr-Savoy report**. In 2017, the French president Emmanuel Macron expressed his intention to tackle the issue of restitution of cultural artifacts to former colonies in Africa and commissioned the drafting of a report on this topic to two historians and academics; Bénédicte Savoy and Felwine Sarr, who have given their name to the report. The report was published almost a year after, in November 2018, containing three chapters: 1) To restitute, 2) Restitutions and collections, and 3) Accompanying returns.[159] This publication was accompanied by a public statement on the part of Emmanuel Macron in which he affirmed that he would honor the request of Nigeria for 26 of their Benin Bronzes which are currently present in France. Nonetheless, the publication of the report has created a mass of opposing opinions and criticism from other former colonial powers in Europe, as well as from French politicians, who fear their museums will be emptied. However, that is far from conceivable at the moment. First, because the report proposes more moderate solutions and balanced redistributions of the artworks, and second, because the reports is not legally binding. This, combined with the lack of applicability of the 1970 UNESCO Convention can hardly result in a binding obligation for France to "empty their museums". Nonetheless, Emmanuel Macron's strong commitments in his discourse with regards to restitution could indicate his intention to amend the French legislation in order to facilitate returns to former colonies. Contrastingly, in the art world, a paternalistic attitude has been adopted by most museum directors, who fear the artworks would not be adeptly protected in African museums, thereby perpetuating the "protection" stance adopted during the colonial era.[160]

3.9.3. The Netherlands

The case of the Netherlands is also interesting to compare in order to determine the potential similarities and differences with the case of Belgium, and potentially extract policy recommendations therefrom. The enterprise of Dutch colonialism,

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[159] Sarr, Felwine, and Bénédicte Savoy. *Rapport sur la restitution du patrimoine culturel africain: Vers une nouvelle éthique relationnelle*. Felwine Sarr, Bénédicte Savoy, 2018.
[160] Cassan, Clara. "The Sarr-Savoy Report & Restituting Colonial Artifacts." *Center for Art Law*, 30 May 2023, itsartlaw.org/2019/01/31/the-sarr-savoy-report-restituting-colonial-artifacts/#:~:text=The%20Sarr%2DSavoy%20Report%20On,and%20(3)%20Accompanying%20Returns.

an endeavor which spanned from the 17th to the 20th centuries, was characterized by a widespread expansion across many regions of the world and important trade achievements. Dutch colonies included Indonesia, Suriname, Sri Lanka, South Africa, and other territories.[161] The focus on the restitution debate for the Netherlands mostly concerns Indonesia and Sri Lanka. However, and contrastingly to what we will study in the case of Belgium, the Netherlands already had successful agreements of restitution in the 1970s. Indeed, in 1975 the Netherlands and Indonesia came to an agreement regarding restitution of cultural artifacts looted during the colonial period. During the negotiations, the Netherlands adopted a complacent approach, deeming it a better guardian for Indonesia's cultural heritage. As such, an emphasis was placed on expanding museum infrastructure in Indonesia rather than on returns.[162] However, the resurgence of the current debate surrounding restitution has sparked a new wave of return from the Netherlands to their former colonies in the recent years. In 2020, an advisory committee report that recommended the government "unconditionally" return unlawfully acquired cultural artifacts upon request from their countries of origin and in 2022, the Netherlands set up a committee in charge of processing claims of restitution arising from former colonies (another committee was already set up in 2001 concerning Nazi-looted art).[163] Finally, in the summer of 2023, almost 500 objects which had been housed at the Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden, were handed over to public officials of former colonies in a public ceremony.[164] These efforts form part of a broader global momentum in decolonization and restitution efforts, which have given rise to restitution intentions and actual actions of transfers in France, Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium. Many parallels with Belgium can be drawn, such as the negotiations during the 1970s and the recent developments, all of which will be explored below.

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[161] Scott, Cynthia. *Cultural Diplomacy and the Heritage of Empire: Negotiating Post-Colonial Returns*. Routledge, 2019.
[162] Van Beurden, Jos. *Treasures in trusted hands: negotiating the future of colonial cultural objects*. Sidestone Press, 2017.
[163] Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap. "Colonial Collections to Be Returned to Indonesia and Sri Lanka." *News Item | Government.Nl*, Ministerie van Algemene Zaken, 5 July 2023, www.government.nl/latest/news/2023/07/06/colonial-collections-to-be-returned-to-indonesia-and-sri-lanka.
[164] Westerman, Ashley. "The Dutch Are Returning Looted Artifacts to Indonesia and Sri Lanka. Does It Matter?" *NPR*, NPR, 11 July 2023, www.npr.org/2023/07/11/1186912682/the-dutch-are-returning-looted-artifacts-to-indonesia-and-sri-lanka-does-it-matt#:~:text=Netherlands%20returns%20artifacts%20to%20Indonesia%20and%20Sri%20Lanka%20Two%20Dutch,weapons%20and%20hundreds%20of%20artworks.

Figure 7: Cultural artifacts being handed back to Indonesian officials in a public ceremony in Leiden (Source: Aleksandar Furtula – AP)

3.10. Transitional justice

After this comprehensive analysis of the history of colonial returns and its contemporary relevance, it is pertinent to determine how this process fits into the concept of transitional justice. Whilst transitional justice is not the chosen theoretical framework for the present work, it can nonetheless be useful to determine to what extent processes of restitution serve in the post-colonial reconciliation processes. Transitional justice (hereinafter: TJ) consists of a set of processes and mechanisms which have at their objective the reconciliation, the "coming to terms", or the response to human rights abuses in a society, especially in societies transitioning from a conflict to peace situation. TJ can take the form of judicial reforms, public policies, truth commissions, reparations for victims, preventive measures, constitutional reforms, cultural initiatives, or education reforms. In broad terms, TJ wants to address the legacies of conflict, abuses, and repression, and aims at attaining justice, accountability and reconciliation.[165] Several authors make a link between transitional justice and post-colonial reconciliation mechanisms, such as restitution processes. For instance, Franziska Boehme argues that the field of transitional justice is an interesting lens through which to observe two processes of post-colonial reconciliation: public apologies and processes of restitution. She contends that both of these acts aim at reconciliation in a society, specifically with its past and present history, and aims at reconstructing its identity. As such, both acts are processes of TJ, each with its own legal, political and social challenges, and aim at ameliorating discussions on the

[165] "What Is Transitional Justice?" *International Center for Transitional Justice*, www.ictj.org/what-transitionaljustice#:~:text=Transitional%20justice%20refers%20to%20how,transitional%20justice%20is%20about%20victims. Accessed 18 Dec. 2023; *OHCHR: Transitional Justice and Human Rights | Ohchr*, www.ohchr.org/en/transitional-justice. Accessed 18 Dec. 2023; "Transitional Justice." *JusticeInfo.Net*, 2 May 2023, www.justiceinfo.net/en/transitional-justice.

colonial past and its present societal consequences.[166] Moreover, although not explicitly mentioning transitional justice, Sousa et al. conceptualizes cultural returns as "a duty of memory", which aims at "promoting the repair of the damage caused by colonialism". An interesting parallel brings us back to the issue of Nazi-looted art, since Sousa et al. used the term "duty of memory" as a core concept, a wording which comes from the title of Primo Levi's book: "The Duty of Memory". Evidently, Levi focuses on the Holocaust in his book and gives an account of his life as a Jew imprisoned by the Nazis in the aim of making his readers remember, and never forget the horrors of the Holocaust. Drawing on this example, Sousa et al. argue that a similar thinking should be applied to colonialism and the violence it involved and highlight the importance of a societal ethical responsibility of remembrance. Specifically, they apply this duty to cultural restitution, by undergirding the fact that this process is important as it recognizes past violence and inequalities linked to colonialism, such as the far-reaching loss of cultural heritage in former colonies.[167] Therefore, reaching the end of the analysis of processes of restitutions of cultural heritage, and having established the potential of processes of restitution as transitional justice mechanisms, it is important to underscore the important symbolic role that restitution processes can play as an effort of reconciliation in post-colonial societies dealing with their past, and that they can function as a duty of memory in order to achieve more peaceful future societies.

3.11. Intermediary conclusion on the restitution of colonial artifacts as a form of cultural diplomacy

This intermediary conclusion, similar to that of decolonization aims at answering one of the core inquires of this thesis: Are processes of restitution a form of cultural diplomacy? The present thesis, aligning with the majority of scholarly literature on the matter, argues that yes, processes of restitution are a manifestation of cultural diplomacy. Firstly, and evidently, processes of restitution entail the mobilization of cultural resources, which are symbolically given back from former colonial powers to their former colonies. Secondly, these acts of restitution are exerted by public powers, and are usually high scale affairs involving ceremonial acts between heads of states. Thirdly, the goal of these processes is more evidently a goal of foreign policy. Although much like the decolonization of museums, processes of restitutions also aim at national reconciliation with its colonial past, and a change in its current discursive construction, its objective can mostly be

[166] Boehme, Franziska. "Normative Expectations and the Colonial Past: Apologies and Art Restitution to Former Colonies in France and Germany." *Global Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (2022): ksac053.
[167] Sousa, Vítor de, Sheila Khan, and Pedro Schacht Pereira. "Cultural Restitution As a Duty of Memory." *Comunicação e sociedade* 41 (2022): 11-22.

qualified as a foreign policy goal, which also aims at reconciliation with the colonial past, by further improving relations with former colonies, and most importantly, entails an acknowledgement of past injustices and wrongs. As has been explained in the beginning of the chapter, a great number of artifacts were violently plundered during colonialism. Nonetheless, the artworks have remained in Western museums for decades or centuries, calls of restitutions falling on deaf ears for many years, until the end of the 20th century, with limited successful restitution claims. The current debate regarding decolonization, which has been spurred by movements such as Black Live Matters, and which have been carried forward by new forms of communication technologies, have further pushed the issue on the international agenda, making it an important policy issue in contemporary diplomatic relations between former colonial powers and their colonies. These processes aim at improving mutual understanding and acceptance, and much like processes of decolonization in museums, it is brimmed with objectives of reconciliation and transitional justice. It acknowledges a past wrong, and vows for its remedy. As such, by mobilizing artworks to aim at foreign policy goals, such as the improvement of relations with former colonies, former imperial powers are exerting cultural diplomacy through process of restitution of cultural artifacts.

Part II: The case of Belgium

Chapter 4: Belgium's decolonization of museums and cultural restitutions as forms of cultural diplomacy

4.1. A brief history of Belgian colonialism

During the colonial period, Belgium exerted control over a number of territories. Most notably, Belgium gained control of the Congo, first as a personal belonging of the Belgian King Léopold II in 1885, before becoming the Belgian Congo in 1908 until independence in 1960. Although, Belgian colonization of the Congo is often prevalent in accounts of Belgian colonialism, due to the fact that it was the largest and most economically fruitful possession of Belgium, Belgium also exercised control in Ruanda-Urundi (current Rwanda and Burundi) from 1922 to 1962, and smaller concessions elsewhere.[168] This thesis has chosen to focus on the Congo, building on the academic literature existing regarding decolonization and restitution processes between Belgium and the Congo (nowadays the Democratic Republic of the Congo or DRC). The colonization of the Congo by Belgium traces its roots to the personal ambitions of King Léopold II rather than a formal national endeavor. This ambition, who was very much inspired by the Dutch model in East Indies, was shaped by a global colonial "scramble" in Africa and elsewhere in the world. There was a generalized rivalry between European nations aiming to acquire African colonies and invest in their resources to enrich themselves. As such, Léopold II wanted to establish Belgium as a colonial power on the international scene and to base the national economy on the riches of a colony. His particular interest in the Congo stemmed from the natural resources of the land, more specifically the rubber plantations. In 1885, the Berlin Conference, an international conference created by European powers to negotiate and formalize territorial claims in Africa took place. During the Conference, Léopold II put forth and argued for the formal recognition of the Congo, not as a Belgian colony, but as his personal property. [169] The king mainly framed his desire to acquire the Congo as filled with intentions to civilize the area, and to "crusade against slavery", keeping silent on his business intentions.[170] The conference was concluded and the Congo was recognized as a personal property to the King, which would henceforth be named the Congo Free State. Although the territory was firstly established as a trade-free area, it became quickly the site of widespread exploitation of resources, specifically of rubber.[171] The exploitative methods of

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[168] "Belgian Colonial Empire." www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Belgian_colonial_empire. Accessed 2 Jan. 2024.
[169] Stengers, Jean. *Congo: Mythes et Réalités.* Racine, 2005.
[170] Van Beurden, Jos. *Inconvenient Heritage: Colonial Collections and Restitution in the Netherlands and Belgium*. Amsterdam University Press, 2022.
[171] Ala'i, Padideh. "Leopold & (and) Morel: A Story of Free Trade and Native Rights in the Congo Free State." *Stud. Transnat'l Legal Pol'y* 37 (2005): 33.

labor to collect rubber were brutal, and human rights abuses thereto related were abundant. Thereafter, the humanitarian conditions and forced labor issues came to light and led to international pressure and criticism.[172]

Therefore in 1908, the Belgian government took over the administration of the Congo Free State, renaming it the Belgian Congo. The transition wanted to address the human rights abuses, but the exploitation of resources, particularly rubber and mineral, on the Congolese territory continued. Furthermore, the very reason behind the transition to a Belgian governmental mandate, namely the brutal working conditions, did not drastically improve. Forced labor remained pervasive and were often accompanied by harsh working conditions. The exploitative labor system in the Belgian Congo resulted in countless killed and wounded workers. Driven by economic interests, the colonial administration imposed stringent rubber production quotas on the Congolese population, who was forced to collect rubber, often in challenging and dangerous conditions.[173] Furthermore, colonialism in the Congo had other aims than that of exploitation. Missionary activities were started in an attempt to Europeanize and Christianize the Congo. Generally speaking, the impact of colonialism in the Congo was far-reaching and disruptive for the traditional Congolese society, which experienced a loss of culture and tradition during the colonial time.[174] Moreover, as the Congo was a Belgian colony during the two world wars, it was called on to support the Allies during both wars, specifically through their resources, such as rubber and mineral, which were very important for the war industries.[175]

After World War II, within the post-war international context, there was a large movement in colonies worldwide towards decolonization and self-determination, a movement to which the Congo was no exception, as it started advocating for its independence accordingly. This changing international climate had a big impact on individual self-determination movements, as well as the post-war democratic ideals that circulated and that were instilled into African soldiers who fought in WW2. Moreover, the creation of the United Nations in 1945, an international organization aimed at worldwide peace, and which established the right to self-determination in its charter, acted as a catalyst for these movements.[176] In the post-war period, political movements advocating for independence emerged in the Belgian Congo, and important figures such as Patrice

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[172] Tunamsifu, Shirambere Philippe. "The Colonial Legacy and Transitional Justice in the Democratic Republic of the Congo." *African Journal on Conflict Resolution* 22.2 (2022): 85-110.
[173] Seibert, Julia. "More continuity than change? New forms of unfree labor in the Belgian Congo, 1908-1930." *Humanitarian Intervention and Changing Labor Relations*. Brill, 2011. 369-386.
[174] Tödt, Daniel. *The Lumumba Generation: African Bourgeoisie and Colonial Distinction in the Belgian Congo*. De Gruyter, 2021.
[175] Vellut, J. "Memory of Congo." (2005); Vellut, Jean-Luc. Congo: *Ambitions et désenchatements: 1880-1960*. Karthala, 2021.
[176] O'Sullivan, Christopher. "The United Nations, Decolonization, and Self-Determination in Cold War Sub-Saharan Africa, 1960-1994." *Journal of Third World Studies* 22.2 (2005): 103-120.Collins, Michael. "Decolonization." *The encyclopedia of empire* (2016): 1-15.

Lumumba, Joseph Kasa-Vubu, and Antoine Gizenga played key roles in mobilizing support for the nationalist cause.[177] Authorities in Belgium resisted the independence movements, fearing a loss of control over the colony, and subsequently of its economic production therein. Negotiations took place in Brussels in 1958, in order to discuss future relations between Belgium and the Congo, and eventually set a date for the independence of the Congo. Finally on the 30th of June 1960, the Congo declared independence with Patrice Lumumba as the first prime minister, and Joseph Kasa-Vubu as the president. Nevertheless, the political circumstances in the newly independent nation-state remained complicated, for example, due to independence of the Katanga province. Another significant post-independence history fact is that of the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, in 1961. This assassination took place in a broader Cold War context, during which Lumumba's government faced challenges and external pressures from both Western and Soviet bloc countries. Lumumba was tortured and executed by a firing squad in 1961, after being taken by military troops under the supervision of colonel Joseph Mobutu. This assassination sparked an international outcry, and both the UN and Belgium were criticized, the UN for its failure to protect Lumumba, and Belgium for its contribution to political unrest in the newly independent Congo. The memory of Lumumba's assassination remains vivid in the DRC, as this event had a deep impact on the political landscape of the country, contributing to continued unrest for decades to come. The death of Lumumba lives on as a symbol of independence challenges in Africa and claims for self-determination in a global context of Cold War rivalries.[178] To conclude, even after its independence, the DRC has faced many challenges of political, economic of military nature, aggravated by dispute over the abundant natural resources present on its territory.

4.2. Looting of cultural artifacts during Belgian colonialism in the Congo

The beginning of Belgian colonial rule in the Congo, under the ownership of King Léopold II, marked the start of the collection of cultural artifacts. The objects mainly held cultural or religious values, and included statues, weapons or animal skins and horns. In 1876, the International Association for the Exploration and Civilization of Central Africa was created and was chaired by Léopold II himself. As of 1977, five expeditions were organized in Central Africa in the aim of scientific research. One of the expeditions was led by Lieutenant Emile Storms. While the official aim of the expeditions was that of scientific research, they actually had as their objective the setting up of checkpoints in Central Africa, and leaders that were sent to that effect, including Storms, were equipped with soldiers and weapons. The expedition of Storms caused numerous conflicts, during which he looted the skulls of defeated leaders, such as Congolese chief Lusinga, and other objects of value he could find. Moreover, the leaders of the other expeditions used

[177] Young, Crawford. *Politics in Congo: decolonization and independence*. Vol. 2313. Princeton University Press, 2015.
[178] De Witte, Ludo. *The assassination of Lumumba*. Verso, 2002.

similar brutal methods of collecting and brought home ancestral statues and other borrowed objects. At the occasion of the World Exhibition of 1897, King Lépold II further collected objects of value in the Congo, which he subsequently kept for his own benefit (the King owned 10 000 Congolese artifacts by 1904). Lépold II's collection was later moved to the Africa Museum in Tervuren, Belgium. After the Congo changed to Belgian administration in 1908 and no longer was under Léopold II's rule, collecting methods changed. According to Lucien Cahen, who acted as director to the Africa Museum from 1958 to 1977, after the Congo became Belgian, the museum stopped accepting looted artifacts. The accuracy of this statement is debated. On the one hand, as Jos van Beurden points out, it is likely that there were differences in collecting before and after 1908. King Léopold II's acquisition of Congo, and the ensuing occupation by Belgian officials, was initially resisted by the Congo and led to the waging of many small wars, during which looting was abundant. After 1908, with the change of colonial government, less brutal methods of governance were established, and new rules regarding collecting were also put into place. Nonetheless, the administrative structure and methods of the colonial rulers did not change to a far-reaching extent, and the forced labor system remained largely in place. For this reason, some researchers think it is likely that looting persisted, and that violence in collecting remained after 1908. For example, Raymaekers states that questionable collecting methods persisted until Congo's independence in 1960. Furthermore, Boris Wastiau says that it is impossible to determine exactly how coercive the methods were, but the probability of it is high, given the highly unequal colonial relations.[179]

As outlined in previous parts, a considerable quantity of cultural artifacts pillaged during the colonial era found their way into museums across the European continent. The exhibition of those artifacts often had ethnological or anthropological aims and played a role as "scientific objects", which furthermore shed light on the "civilizing" missions of European colonialists, a concept which has been previously explained. The loss of cultural heritage resulted in a far-reaching decline in traditional arts, oppressed by colonial cultural ideas. Moreover, native people, the Congolese in the case of Belgium, were seen as "unable to deal with modernity" and hence their traditional culture and artifacts had to be protected, a role which colonial rulers took upon themselves, for example by placing artifacts in museums on the European continent. In 1898, King Léopold II created the "Museum of the Congo" (later called the Royal Museum for Central Africa or Africa Museum nowadays) in Tervuren, close to Brussels. Similarly, as other museums created in European colonial powers, the museum's aim was to promote colonialism, and to exhibit its riches.[180] The narrative surrounding its collections – mainly consisting of objects,

[179] Van Beurden, Jos. *Inconvenient Heritage: Colonial Collections and Restitution in the Netherlands and Belgium*. Amsterdam University Press, 2022.
[180] Van Beurden, Sarah. "The art of (re) possession: heritage and the cultural politics of Congo's decolonization." *The Journal of African History* 56, no. 1 (2015): 143-164.

stuffed animals, and even a human zoo made of Congolese native people – was that of Belgium being a civilizing power in Congo.[181] The history and renovation of the museum are explored further below.

Figure 8: The Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren (Source: Africa Museum)

4.3. Post-colonial cultural relations

Already in the 1950s, a new room dedicated to Congolese art was created in the RMCA, which had as its objective to highlight the importance of this traditional art and its need for protection. During the same decade, calls for restitution started coming from the Congo, along with prevention for illegal art trade, in order to retain control over Congolese art heritage. In the 1950s, a few ethnographic museums already existed in the Congo, which however, had been mostly created by colonial authorities. Thereafter, Congolese people started to emit the desire to create their own museums, which were deemed as institutional frameworks in which their art would be safe from looting.[182] This decade was also marked by strong movements for Congolese self-determination, which ultimately resulted in Congo's independence in 1960. As independence drew close, Congolese interest in establishing museums expanded to include a will for the return of Congolese art collections held in the Africa Museum in Tervuren. In the politically challenging environment of the Belgian Congo, cultural politics emerged as a means for the colonial subjects to shape strategies of self-representation. Initiatives to establish locally controlled museums and discontent with the Tervuren museum's possession marked the growing political significance of traditional arts as cultural heritage, a significance that would intensify during negotiations for independence.The Africa museum's collections became important elements in the decolonization process, both because of their economic value but also as a symbol of African cultural heritage.

[181] Pearcy, Mark. "“In One Direction Only”-Exploring the Impact of Imperialism between Belgium and the Democratic Republic of the Congo." *Oregon Journal of the Social Studies* (2019): 130.
[182] Van Beurden, Sarah. "The art of (re) possession: heritage and the cultural politics of Congo's decolonization." *The Journal of African History* 56, no. 1 (2015): 143-164.

During the negotiations for independence, the appropriation of economic resources took center stage, particularly focusing on the ownership of major colonial companies, such as the Union Minière du Haut Katanga. These discussions, known as "the contentieux", lasted over several decades. During the 1960s, the "contentieux" discussions systematically included claims for restitution of Congolese art housed in the Africa Museum. The claims ranged from ethnographic artifacts to entire collections, all of which represented Congolese identity and hence were to be brought back in the context of Congo's sovereignty. Light was shed on the illegal acquiring of the artworks, which stirred controversy at the museum in Tervuren. Despite avoiding discussions during roundtable negotiations, the Belgian government sought to control negotiations to protect what was considered Belgian patrimony and prevent a trial on the legitimacy of Belgian colonialism. The Africa Museum's response was to defend the scientific value and legal acquisitions of its collections. Lucien Cahen, the director of the museum at the time, questioned the Congolese ability to safeguard the art. Therefore, the claims on the Africa Museum's art collections were left unresolved and resurfaced during Mobutu's regime in the context of his cultural policies.[183]

Mobutu, who gained power after the assassination of Patrice Lumumba and the downfall of his government, sought economic and cultural sovereignty for the Congo, which he renamed Zaire. His regime nationalized the Union Minière du Haut Katanga, and thereafter, claims for restitutions of cultural artifacts held in Tervuren resurfaced, beginning a new phase of the "contentieux". One of the triggers to these renewed calls for restitution was a travelling exhibition, named "Art of the Congo", which was organized in collaboration between the Africa Museum and the Walker Art Center (US), and which exhibited artifacts housed in Tervuren around the world, in the objective of showing off the potential of Congolese art, and the important role of Belgium as its guardian. Mobutu strongly opposed the exhibition, viewing it as evidence of Congo's lack of control over its resources and a perpetuation of colonial structures. Belgium, more responsive to Congo's demands, strategically framed negotiations by avoiding the term "restitution" to deny legitimacy to Congo's interpretation of decolonization. Instead, Belgium proposed collaboration on a museum institute in Congo, emphasizing benefits for both countries. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, amid Zaire's economic prosperity, Mobutu envisioned the museum as a nation-building project showcasing Africa's unparalleled traditional art. In 1971, an agreement to establish the Institute of National Museums of Zaire (IMNZ) was signed. In the 1970s, Mobutu's regime in Zaire embraced the ideology of *authenticité*, making it the official state ideology in 1971. This cultural and political movement aimed at creating a new national identity rooted in the values and traditions of precolonial Congolese cultures. Mobutu's regime

[183] Van Beurden, Sarah. "The art of (re) possession: heritage and the cultural politics of Congo's decolonization." *The Journal of African History* 56, no. 1 (2015): 143-164.

used *authenticité* to strengthen its undemocratic political system and erase colonial history. The campaign for cultural authenticity led to renewed attention to cultural restitution, strategically relaunched by Mobutu during an international meeting of art critics. Mobutu portrayed colonialism as "systematic pillage" and positioned Zaire as a leader in the international battle for restitution. The competing interpretations of heritage, framed by cultural internationalism and nationalism, played out in forums like the UN, where Zaire argued for the return of its cultural heritage, emphasizing the consequences of colonial exploitation. Mobutu's passionate advocacy for the return of cultural artifacts looted during the colonial period led to the adoption UN Resolution 3187 in 1973.[184]

In the 1980s, criticism towards the Africa Museum started to grow not only internationally, but also domestically. On the international scene, the museum was seen as a temple celebrating past Belgian imperialism, in an inappropriate and outdated way, and calls for it to be renovated grew, both in Belgium and abroad. On the other hand, Belgians who had contributed to the colonizing efforts saw it as a celebration of the fruit of their labor, which had been their mission to civilize Congo, and wished to keep the museum as it was. Interestingly, several books and movies that came out during the 1990s or early 2000s played an important role in raising awareness about the colonial regime in the Belgian Congo. Such examples include Adam Hochschild's book titled *"King Leopold's ghost"* (1998), or Peter Bates' documentary "*White King, Red Rubber, Black Death*" (2003), both of which exposed the atrocities committed during Belgium's colonial rule, and rapidly gained great success. Moreover, this had the effect of sparking an important discussion in Belgium, namely that of addressing its colonial past, and how to do so; what we would now call decolonization in its second sense. However, this discourse was not fully welcomed in Belgium, which seemed to suffer from a what has been called a "collective amnesia", or rather an unwillingness to deal with its past, regarding the atrocities which occurred during the colonial rule.[185]

4.4. Formal restitution processes between Belgium and the Congo

Concerning formal processes of restitution between Belgium and the Congo, several phases can be identified. Leading up to Congo's independence, the issue of restitution of cultural artifacts to Congolese museums gained prevalence. However, the realization of those claims in practice was complicated by several factors: The museums in Kinshasa had little financial and infrastructural means, and Belgian officials, such as Lucien Cahen, continued to hold office in cultural positions

[184] Van Beurden, Sarah. "The art of (re) possession: heritage and the cultural politics of Congo's decolonization." *The Journal of African History* 56.1 (2015): 143-164.
[185] Van Bockhaven, Vicky. "Decolonising the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Belgium's Second Museum Age." *antiquity* 93, no. 370 (2019): 1082-1087.

in the Congo. As such, restitution claims fell on deaf ears. However, as explained in the previous paragraph, President Mobutu made a point of honour of his rule to restore Congolese cultural heritage, in a broader objective of renewing a common national cultural identity. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Lucien Cahen proposed a three-phase plan for the restitution of cultural objects to newly independent Zaire, to which both countries agreed. The first two phases involved collecting objects from various Congolese ethnic groups held in Belgium, resulting in tens of thousands of items stored in the Institute of National Museums of Zaire. The first phase yielded over a thousand objects, which were stored at the INMZ, and the second subsequent phase aimed at the acquisition of more specific objects to form a national Congolese collection for the national museums. The third phase faced challenges, partly due to President Mobutu's push for the "zairisation" of the country and the nationalization of companies. In the third, there were few significant returns of cultural objects from the Africa Museum, and the artifacts returned were not of the quality standards previously agreed upon. Most of the objects returned were artifacts loaned to Belgium by the Congo, for example for the Universal Exposition of 1958. The only authentic return consisted of 114 objects, including the wooden statue of a Kuba king, already mentioned in the previous section. However, Belgium selected these items and ignored the request for the return of two hundred high-quality pieces from a traveling exhibition. The director of the Tervuren museum, Lucien Cahen, wanted to preserve the Congolese artifacts as an entity in the Africa Museum and avoid spreading it in different places. The poor results of the third phase of the plan led Mobutu to push for the debate to gain traction on the international agenda, advocating for the return of artworks looted during the colonial era, which was explained in the previous section.[186] Nonetheless, no successful negotiations came out of this three-phase plan, and it only recently, as of 2020, that negotiations lead to clear-cut agreements.

4.5. Contemporary restitution debate

In June 2020, King Philippe of Belgium (Belgium's current head of state), took an important step in Belgo-Congolese relations by expressing "profound regrets" for Belgium's colonial past in the Congo, in a letter addressed to Félix Tshisekedi, president of the DRC. This date coincided with the 60th anniversary of Congolese independence. In this letter, he stated:

> "At the time of the independent state of Congo (when the African territory was the property of King Leopold II), acts of violence and cruelty were committed that still weigh heavily on our collective memory. The colonial period that followed (of the Belgian Congo, from 1908 to 1960) also caused suffering and humiliation. I would like to express

[186] Van Beurden, Jos. *Inconvenient Heritage: Colonial Collections and Restitution in the Netherlands and Belgium*. Amsterdam University Press, 2022.

my deepest regrets for these wounds of the past, whose pain is rekindled today by the discrimination that is still all too present in our societies."[187]

He further reiterated his commitment to tackle racism in Belgian society, a subject which has been propelled on the political agenda since the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement, causing a general questioning in Belgian society regarding the links between contemporary racism and the colonial past. Moreover, King Philippe reiterated his "regrets" for the colonial past during an official visit in the DRC, in the summer of 2022. Firstly, the delegation of Belgium undertook a visit to the National Museum in Kinshasa, where they made their first symbolic return in the form of a big African mask, which was previously held in the RMCA. This transfer was more symbolic than an actual transfer of property, as it was awaiting a Belgian restitution law to pass. Moreover, the King made a speech in which he focused again on the "regrets" concerning the colonial past, acknowledging that the colonial regime was based on "exploitation and domination". He went on to describe "an unequal relationship" that was "unjustifiable" and "marked by paternalism, discrimination and racism". Moreover, he stated Belgian colonial rule in the Congo "gave rise to exactions and humiliations".[188]

Figure 9: A Kakuungu mask was returned to Congo during an official Belgian visit to the DRC in 2022 (Source: RTBF)

In 2020, a parliamentary committee was set up to study the colonial past and its consequences, titled "Special parliamentary committee to examine the Congo Free State and Belgium's colonial

[187] n.a. "Pour La Première Fois, Le Roi Des Belges Exprime Ses 'Profonds Regrets' Pour Le Passé Colonial Au Congo." *Le Monde.Fr*, Le Monde, 30 June 2020, www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2020/06/30/pour-la-premiere-fois-le-roi-des-belges-exprime-ses-profonds-regrets-pour-le-passe-colonial-au-congo_6044663_3210.html (translation by the author).
[188] Noulet, Jean-François. "Discours Du Roi Philippe Au Congo : Des 'profonds Regrets' Pour Un 'Régime Colonial' Basé Sur 'l'exploitation' et 'Le Racisme.'" *RTBF*, RTBF.be, 8 June 2022, www.rtbf.be/article/discours-du-roi-philippe-au-congo-des-profonds-regrets-pour-un-regime-colonial-base-sur-lexploitation-et-le-racisme-11008434 (translation by the author).

past in the Congo, Rwanda and Burundi, its consequences and the appropriate follow-up". The committee's objectives were the following:

1) To shed light on the Congo Free State and on the colonial past of Belgium in the Congo, in Rwanda and in Burundi and draw lessons for the future;
2) To examine the role played by the Belgian state, the Belgian authorities and non-state actors in the broad sense within the framework of the Free Congo State and the Belgian Congo, Rwanda and Burundi;
3) To examine the economic impact of colonization on Belgium and the colonized countries as well as the people, companies and institutions that benefited from it;
4) To make recommendations on how to deal with the colonial past;
5) To promote reconciliation between Belgians of all origins and optimize relations between Belgians, on the one hand, and Congolese, Rwandans and Burundians, on the other;
6) To make recommendations to stimulate academic research on the colonial period and, finally, develop concrete proposals regarding the protection, openness and accessibility of archives relating to the colonial period[189]

The committee was made out of 17 members of parliaments, and invited a plethora of stakeholders, such as experts of decolonization, academics, or members of the Congolese diaspora in Belgium to share their input.[190] The proceedings of the committee, which included almost 300 hearings, a mission to the DRC, Rwanda and Burundi, and two expert reports, culminated in a final report, containing 128 recommendations, which covered several important areas, and which focused mostly on education and research. The proposed recommendations contained: the introduction of a day of commemoration, the creation of a knowledge center, a year devoted to reflection on the colonial past, the declassification of archives, a commemoration of Patrice Lumumba, the granting of study bursaries, the renaming of the Order of Leopold II, and the development of a national action plan against racism and work on folklore. The report was scheduled to be voted on in December 2021. However, the Belgian parliament was unable to agree on the contentious issue of presenting excuses to the former colonies, which resulted in an overall non-adoption of the entire report containing the recommendations. The Francophone Liberal party (MR) and the Flemish Christian-Democratic party (CD&V) left the parliamentary session, withholding the necessary quotas to agree on a vote. Le Soir, a Belgian newspaper

[189] Commission spéciale passé colonial. *Introduction et constat des experts*, 2022 (translation by the author).
[190] Chambre des Représentants. *Commission spéciale chargée d'examiner l'état indépendant du Congo et le passé colonial de la Belgique au Congo, au Rwanda et au Burundi, ses conséquences et les suites qu'il convient d'y réserver: Rapports des experts.* Doc 55 1462/001, 2021.

highlights that "this was quite a blow, after two and a half years of colossal work".[191] Here, it is important to make a distinction between King Philippe's *regrets*, which did not amount to formal *excuses*. In the proposed report drafter by the decolonization committee, one of the recommendations stated that "The Belgian Parliament apologizes to the Congolese, Rwandan and Burundian peoples for the colonial domination and exploitation, the violence and atrocities, the individual and collective violations of human rights during this period, and the racism and discrimination that accompanied them". It was furthermore clarified in the recommendation that presenting formal excuses does not entail any legal responsibility, and hence give rise to any duty to grant financial reparations. However, the Belgian parliamentarians were unable to agree on this contentious point, which had the effect of annulling the rest of the recommendations as well. Wouter de Vriendt, the Green MP who headed the decolonization committee concluded that: "Today, the minds are not ready. It will be up to others to decide".[192]

Nonetheless, this parliamentary effort aimed at decolonization had positive efforts on processes of cultural restitutions and a working group was set up specifically with regards to cultural institutions and the issues of returns. In June 2021, the Federal Secretary of State for science policy, Thomas Dermine, announced that Belgium would return any objects present in the RMCA that had been acquired by looting. In a press release, he stated that:

> "One of the resources exploited by the "colonial powers" was cultural heritage. Thousands of objects, including human remains, were either acquired in a situation of manifestly unequal exchange, or taken without consent from the Congo during the colonial period, i.e., the years of political domination of the Congo from 1885 to 1908 and from 1908 to 1960. This situation deprived the citizens of the former colony of access to their own history, their own culture, and the creativity and spirituality of their ancestors. Access to these objects is now de facto reserved for Westerners and the diaspora living in Europe."[193]

In February 2022, a Congolese delegation led by PM Sama Lukonde made a visit to the Africa Museum, in which the delegation explored a section of the provenance trail in the permanent exhibition, offering additional context on the displayed objects' origins. Moreover, Belgian PM Alexander De Croo and the Mr. Thomas Dermine presented PM Sama Lukonde with a

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[191] Declercq, Fanny. "Passé Colonial: La Belgique Manque UN Tournant de Son Histoire." *Le Soir*, Le Soir, 19 Dec. 2022, www.lesoir.be/484049/article/2022-12-19/passe-colonial-la-belgique-manque-un-tournant-de-son-histoire (translation by the author).

[192] Belga. *"Passé Colonial: Pas d'Accord Sur Des Excuses, La Commission Parlementaire Se Termine Par Un Échec."* Le Soir, Le Soir, 19 Dec. 2022, www.lesoir.be/483984/article/2022-12-19/passe-colonial-pas-daccord-sur-des-excuses-la-commission-parlementaire-se (translation by the author).

[193] "Restitution : La Proposition de Thomas Dermine." *Restitution : La Proposition de Thomas Dermine | Thomas Dermine*, dermine.belgium.be/fr/restitution-la-proposition-de-thomas-dermine. Accessed 15 Jan. 2024 (translation by the author).

comprehensive inventory of the 84 000 ethnographic objects from the DRC currently exhibited in Tervuren. This inventory represented an important step in cultural relations between Belgium and the DRC, aiming to ensure the collaborative implementation of Belgium's policy. The joint approach was formalized through a cooperation agreement, outlining terms and conditions for the restitution and return of objects from the colonial past.[194] Finally, in June 2022, a law "recognizing the alienable character of assets linked to the colonial past of the Belgian State and determining a legal framework for their restitution and return" was adopted in the Belgian parliament. The framework sets out a bilateral agreement on scientific and cultural cooperation, facilitated through a treaty between the Belgian State and the respective originating state. The main points of the law are the following:

1) Scope of application:
    - The law covers movable property owned by the Belgian State present in federal museum collections
    - Human remains and archives are explicitly excluded
    - Returnable assets must originate from the originating state's territory, acquired between the Act of the Berlin Conference and the Independence of the originating state
    - Assets must be the property of the Belgian state and belong to the federal scientific institutions
2) Principle of alienability*:* The law establishes that Belgian State property is generally inalienable, except under specific conditions outlined for the legal restitution and physical return to the originating state
3) Bilateral treaty:
    - Restitution and return require the execution of a treaty between the Belgian State and the originating state
    - A scientific examination may be initiated by either party to assess the illegitimate nature of the asset's acquisition, considering factors such as duress or violence
    - The Belgian government may decide to remove the returnable asset from the public domain following a scientific examination
    - Belgium has proposed a draft bilateral treaty to the DRC, suggesting the creation of a joint commission for scientific examinations

[194] "Remise de l'inventaire Des Objets de l'africamuseum Provenant de La République Démocratique Du Congo Au Premier Ministre Congolais, Jean-Michel Sama Lukonde Dans Le Cadre de La Politique de Restitution." *Remise de l'inventaire Des Objets de l'Africamuseum Provenant de La République Démocratique Du Congo Au Premier Ministre Congolais, Jean-Michel Sama Lukonde Dans Le Cadre de La Politique de Restitution. | Thomas Dermine*, 17 Feb. 2022, dermine.belgium.be/fr/remise-de-l%E2%80%99inventaire-des-objets-de-l%E2%80%99africamuseum-provenant-de-la-r%C3%A9publique-d%C3%A9mocratique-du-congo.

4) Distinction between the transfer of ownership and physical returns:
    - Restitution is dependent on a scientific examination and a recommendation by the Joint Scientific Commission
    - The restitution decision involves transferring ownership to the originating state
    - The physical return occurs at the explicit request of the originating state, with the bilateral treaty determining return conditions
    - During any delay in the physical return, the asset remains in the museum collection, maintaining protections and involving the State of origin in conservation, management, and valorization.
5) Transparency and Publication: Decisions regarding the restitution of property will be publicly published online to ensure transparency in the restitution and return process[195]

So far, 883 objects have been classified as having been looted during colonialism, but the provenance of several thousands of other artifacts has yet to be determined. In the DRC, President Félix Tshisekedi has expressed the desire for restitution of objects, acknowledging the importance of the claims but highlighting the limited capacity for reception of the artifacts: the DRC does not currently have the appropriate infrastructures to welcome all objects.[196]

4.6. Comparison with restitution processes in other former colonial states

In Chapter 3, the restitution processes of three European countries were shortly explored. Having examined more specifically issues of restitution in Belgium - the case study of the present thesis - it is pertinent to compare and contrast the restitution processes between the countries. Firstly, Belgium's restitution processes have a strong parallel with the Netherlands. Both countries seem to have followed similar phases in their restitution negotiations, with a first phase occurring in the 1970s, and a second more successful phase in the 2020s. Decolonization of museums have taken place in similar times, which have led to official ceremonies of restitution in both countries. Secondly, Belgium and France's parliamentary and academic work should be compared. As was explained, the results of Belgium's decolonization committee were poor, not because of the work exerted, but because of political contingencies which resulted in the non-adoption of the final report. In contrast, France's Sarr-Savoy report, co-written by two lead academics in the field of restitution processes provides a better example of a less political procedure which has led to a solid work, constituting an example for many countries undergoing a similar process. However,

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[195] Loi reconnaissant le caractère aliénable des biens liés au passé colonial de l'Etat belge et déterminant un cadre juridique pour leur restitution et leur retour, 3 July 2022 ; "Restitution." *Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale - Tervuren - Belgique*, www.africamuseum.be/fr/about_us/restitution#:~:text=%C3%80%20la%20suite%20d%27un,leur%20restitution%20et%20leur%20retour%20%C2%BB. Accessed 15 Jan. 2024.

[196] Van Beurden, Jos. *Inconvenient Heritage: Colonial Collections and Restitution in the Netherlands and Belgium*. Amsterdam University Press, 2022.

Belgium has gone a step further and adopted a legally binding framework for restitution, which has yet to be adopted in France. Finally, moving on to the United Kingdom, it is clear that Belgium lies a step, if not two, ahead. As demonstrated by the cases of the Parthenon Marbles and of the Benin Bronzes, the UK is reluctant to engage in restitution processes, showing an overall unwillingness to deal with certain issues linked to its colonial past.

4.7. Processes of restitution from Belgium to the DRC as forms of cultural diplomacy

As has been concluded at the end of chapter 3, there is little debate regarding the qualification of processes of restitution of looted cultural artifacts as cultural diplomacy, especially in a post-colonial context. Inevitably, processes of restitution of colonial objects entail the mobilization of cultural artifacts by public actors aimed at foreign policy goals. In the case of relations between Belgium and the DRC, it can be seen that a plethora of actions have been taken which have foreign policy goals. The speeches of King Philippe, expressing his regrets with regards to Belgium's colonial past, accompanied by the symbolic transfer of an African mask to a museum in Kinshasa is a prime example of cultural diplomacy. The creation of a parliamentary committee in itself, has more of a transitional justice aim, i.e., to reconcile Belgian society with its own past. Finally, the passing of the law on restitution, the inventories created, and the transfers that have already taken place are all examples of cultural diplomacy in action, as they entail the mobilization of cultural resources by public actors for foreign policy goals, namely, to improve the relations with former colonies and address historical wrongdoings.

4.8. The Royal Museum for Central Africa: "The last colonial museum" towards decoloniality

The creation, existence and evolution of the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) in Tervuren work as a mirror for the relations between Belgium and the Congo. As previously explained, the RMCA was created in 1898 by King Léopold II, some years after the formalization of his claim over the Congo. The aim behind this creation was to show to the public the benefits reaped by Belgian colonialism. The RMCA has been compared to a "temple", celebrating the success of Léopold II in his colonial endeavours. In 1897, the universal exhibition which took place in Brussels in the "Palais des Colonies" in Tervuren, marked the start of exhibiting Congolese artifacts, but also live Congolese people (human zoos).[197]

[197] Gryseels, Guido, Gabrielle Landry, and Koeki Claessens. "Integrating the past: Transformation and renovation of the Royal museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium." *European Review* 13, no. 4 (2005): 637-647.

Figure 10: Poster for the 1897 International Exposition in Tervuren (Source: Africa Museum)

The success of the exhibition was such that it was turned into a permanent collection, eventually leading to the creation of the RMCA, which opened its doors in 1910, one year after the death of Léopold II. In 1910, a royal decree was published, stating that the cultural artifacts all needed to be housed in the RMCA. The museum, as of then, had a dual role of a cultural institution and of a research institute, which it continues to have to this day. For many decades until Congolese independence in 1960, the museum was amongst the most popular cultural institutions visited by the Belgians.[198] However, after independence, the RMCA struggled to reinvent itself, and after the suppression of the Ministry of the Colonies, its funding was drastically reduced. Many officials previously working for the ministry or for other colonial research institutes went on to work at the museum. After independence, and in an international context of decolonization, the aim and reason behind the existence of the museum was harder to define. However, the colonial mission on which it was based, and the scientific objective of exhibiting artifacts concentrated in one geographic area did not change. The museum, as such, has been called an "ageing anachronism" and later, has been qualified as the last colonial museum in the world. Bambi Ceuppens, an anthropologist, states that "the RMCA is one of the only colonial museums that survived in its original form both as a museum and as a research institution in the human and natural sciences with a primary, albeit not exclusive focus on the colony that once inspired its existence". The interpretation of the artifacts present in the collection evolved over time, however, a clear distinction between the role of colonizers and colonized persisted, with the overwhelming narrative being that of Belgium's role as a civilizing power in the Congo. Ceuppens highlights the fact the colonial violence exerted by the Belgian colonial administration in the Congo was never mentioned in the permanent collection before 2006, and that the role of the RMCA in furthering colonial propaganda was not questioned before then. Although some authors have

[198] Ceuppens, Bambi. "From colonial subjects/objects to citizens: the royal museum for central Africa as contact-zone." *Advancing Museum Practices* (2014): 83-99.

compared the RMCA to a temple to the glory of Léopold II, Ceuppens also makes the analogy of a tomb for pre-colonial Congolese objects, which were taken away from their owners, to "protect" them. Many of the objects exhibited can be classified as ethnographic objects, and their presence in the museum was thus justified by scientific aims. However, alongside these objects could often be found statues, depicting Congolese people in their traditional clothing engaging in everyday tasks. These were often placed next to statues of European "civilized" persons, reinforcing a narrative of underdevelopment in Africa. Their original and traditional history was always muted, something that will be analyzed under a decolonial eye further below. Progressively, objects that showed the impact of colonialism in the Congo as a "civilizing" power were removed, and only ethnographic objects remained, further entrenching the "colonial amnesia" of Belgium, or perhaps an unwillingness to deal with past history in the second half of the 20th century.[199] In essence, the RMCA emerged as a complex institution, embodying conflicting narratives, selective representations, and a tendency to overlook the dynamic changes brought about by colonization and decolonization.

In the early 2000s, ideas of restoration and restitution started to be heard in the RMCA. In 2002, at the invitation of the RMCA, a renowned Congolese artist Chéri Samba created a painting titled "Réorganisation", depicting a struggle between Belgian employees of the Tervuren museum attempting to retain the sculpture of the infamous "Leopard Man", symbol of a local "savage", and Congolese individuals determined to remove it. The artwork unfolds under the gaze of the current museum director, Guido Gryseels, who remains impartial.

Figure 11: "Réorganisation", painting by Chéri Samba (source: Africa Museum)

[199] Ceuppens, Bambi. "From colonial subjects/objects to citizens: the royal museum for central Africa as contact-zone." *Advancing Museum Practices* (2014): 83-99.

Two years before, in 2000, a temporary exhibition titled “ExitCongoMuseum: A Century of Art with/without Papers” already pointed to the direction of renovation ideas, and a new reflection on the theme of the exhibits in the museum. This exhibition sought to highlight the inaugural journey of several tradition-based objects, deemed “treasures” of the RMCA, from the Congo to Tervuren. The emphasis was on underscoring the physical and cultural violence inherent in this transit. Later, in 2005, an exhibition titled “The Memory of the Congo: The Colonial Time” made polemic: it was the first instance in the RMCA’s history that the colonization of the Congo was addressed so publicly, and the exhibition, even though it generated some controversy amongst the political class, was a great success amongst the public. In 2006, following the exhibition, a new history room dedicated to Congolese history was set up. In 2010, Bambi Ceuppens directed the exhibition “Indépendance! Congolese Tell Stories of Fifty years of Independence”, the first exhibition in the museum that starts to tell Congolese history from a Congolese point of view. As such, most of the artifacts presented in the exhibition were recent artworks crafted by Congolese artists, and few came from the permanent collection of the RMCA . Finally in 2011, the exhibition “Congo Far West: Arts, Sciences and Collections” was made out of the works of two Congolese artists: Patrick Muderekeza and Sammy Baloji. All of these exhibitions are individual instances that show a new phase of self-reflection of the museum, and of Belgian society in general.[200] Guido Gryseels, Director General of the Africa Museum since 2001, along with Gabrielle Landry, and Koeki Classens, made the following statement in a co-written paper in 2005 preceding the renovation of the RMCA: “In any case, there are a few issues that are crystal clear, regardless of paradigms: the RMCA has to shed its colonial image, and closer ties with the African communities and diasporas have to be established to ensure relevance and balance in the work carried out on natural and cultural phenomena as well as historical Africa”. This statement underscores the development of the “self-reflection” of the museum and its staff, evolving with the times. The following mission statement is furthermore provided in the paper: “The Royal Museum for Central Africa must be a world center in research and knowledge dissemination on past and present societies and natural environment of Africa, and in particular Central Africa, to foster for the public at large and the scientific community a better understanding and interest in this area and, through partnerships, to substantially contribute to its sustainable development”. Here, the focus is much more on the scientific side of the institute and does not entail a clear reflection on decolonizing the museum.[201]

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[200] Ceuppens, Bambi. "From colonial subjects/objects to citizens: the royal museum for central Africa as contact-zone." *Advancing Museum Practices* (2014): 83-99.

[201] Gryseels, Guido, Gabrielle Landry, and Koeki Claessens. "Integrating the past: Transformation and renovation of the Royal museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium." *European Review* 13, no. 4 (2005): 637-647.

However, it was not until later, in 2013, that the museum closed for 5 years in an effort to fully decolonize the museum, and to present its relation – past and present – to the DRC in a different way.[202] The museum reopened in December 2018, and the following statement can be found on their website explaining the renovation: "While the permanent exhibition was outdated and the infrastructure outdated, the main challenge of the renovation was to present a contemporary, **decolonized** vision of Africa in a building designed as a colonial museum."[203] Several elements are pertinent to observe from this statement: firstly, it frames the renovated museum as a **decolonial** institution, a classification which entails underlying policies and diverse framing of the artworks. Moreover, it is interesting to note that they have kept the original building which is, as they state, a colonial building, which impresses visitors by its grandeur and reminds them ultimately of the richness given by colonialism. In examining the decoloniality of the museum, it is relevant to understand the challenge constitutive of hosting a decolonial museum in a historical colonial building, and if or how they can be separated from another.[204] For example, the museum now has a dedicated room, a "graveyard", for artistic works that celebrate colonialism and perpetuate a denigrating discourse towards the Congolese people. The museum also has a dedicated space for the history of colonialism, aimed at putting in context the relations between Belgium and the DRC, and the existence of the museum.[205] The next section examines in detail the processes of decolonization that the museum has undergone.

4.9. Decoloniality in the Africa Museum

The RMCA, renamed the Africa Museum since its renovation in 2018, has undergone a far-reaching process of reorganization of the museum, and to a certain extent, of decolonization thereof. As such, this section examines the initiatives and policies that have been put into place to decolonize the museum and assesses to which extent they can be deemed decolonial. This analysis is based on the author's personal visits to the museum, an interview with Bart Ouvry, the director of the Africa Museum, information found on the website of the Africa Museum, and secondary sources such as academic literature.

The website of the Africa Museum is interactive and resourceful, and contains several sections dedicated to the renovation and decolonization of the museum, as well as to colonial

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[202] "Belgium's Africa Museum Reopens to Confront Its pro-Colonial Past." *France 24*, FRANCE 24, 10 Dec. 2018, www.france24.com/en/20181210-belgium-drc-africa-museum-rmca-artefact-colonial-past-return.

[203] *Royal Museum for Central Africa - Tervuren - Belgium*, www.africamuseum.be/en. Accessed 15 Jan. 2024.

[204] Ceuppens, Bambi. "From colonial subjects/objects to citizens: the royal museum for central Africa as contact-zone." *Advancing Museum Practices* (2014): 83-99 ; *Royal Museum for Central Africa - Tervuren - Belgium*, www.africamuseum.be/en. Accessed 15 Jan. 2024.

[205] Van Bockhaven, Vicky. "Decolonising the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Belgium's Second Museum Age." *antiquity* 93, no. 370 (2019): 1082-1087.

history. A small section is dedicated to the history of the museum, as well as one explaining the need for renovation of the museum, which is cited in the previous section. Another part contains the so-called "viewpoints of the museum", including the museum's position on colonization. The Africa Museum states that it "explicitly distances itself from colonialism, while it takes responsibility for the impact that its previous propaganda for colonialism has had on the multicultural society of today, and for the message of Western moral and intellectual superiority it has conveyed in the past". Moreover, it states the will of the museum to function as an interactive platform for debate and opinions on the colonial, historical, and current relationship between Belgium and Central Africa.[206] When asked about the decolonization process, Bart Ouvry, the director of the Africa Museum, has cited the will of his predecessor, Guido Gryseels to "profoundly change the museum", leading to this 5 year-long closure. He speaks of a general willingness to rethink, to change methods, and to renovate, as well as a necessary acceptance of the past from which we can learn.

The museum has been reorganized to welcome the visitors in a subterranean welcome area. To the right, a small room dedicated to racism can be found. This room is important because – straight off when entering the museum – the visitor is faced with contemporary societal issues linked to the heritage of Belgian colonialism. This room, which is very didactic, is there to spark an initial critical reflection on colonialism and racism prior to beginning the visit of the permanent collection. Moreover, through writings on the walls, the museum acknowledges the role that the museum has played in sharing colonial propaganda and promulgating racist stereotypes.

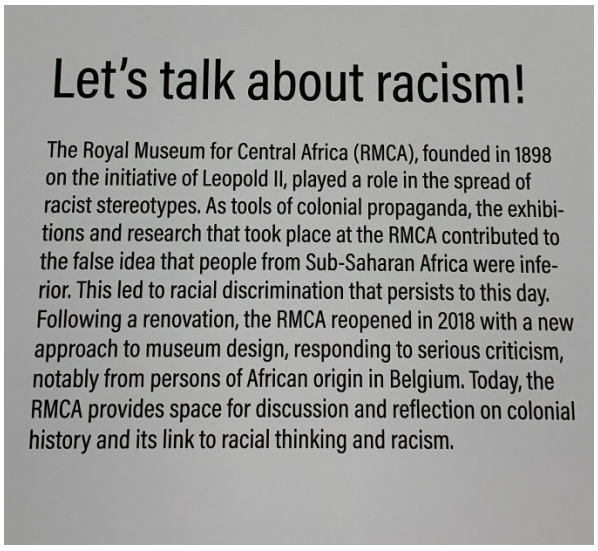

Figure 12: "Let's talk about racism" in the Africa Museum (Personal Picture)

[206] *Royal Museum for Central Africa - Tervuren - Belgium*, www.africamuseum.be/en. Accessed 15 Jan. 2024.

On the walls of this room are present 11 racist sentences as shown in figure 13, and on the floor are present newspaper titles relating racist incidents in the country. Additionally, on the side, a corner contains cards with the definitions of the following concepts: stereotypes, prejudice, colonialism, racism, discrimination, and racialization This space is meant to serve as an educational platform, fostering reflection and discussion on racism, particularly in connection to the museum's colonial history.[207]

Figure 13: The "racism" room in the Africa Museum (Personal Picture)

After this, a long corridor with an impressive canoe placed in the middle, and the statement "Everything passes, except the past" written in several languages on the wall, leads visitors into the entry of the permanent collections. This writing highlights once again a willingness to accept the past and to learn from it, i.e., to be transparent and responsible about the colonial role the museum has once played. Before entering the permanent collections, a small room is dedicated to provenance research. This room explains what provenance research is, how it functions in the Africa Museum, and more broadly in Belgium. The following writing on the wall defines provenance research:

> "Provenance research aims to obtain knowledge and information about the acquisition of an object or a collection. It is a means of finding out how and by what means the objects were acquired and ended up in the museum. However, the exact origin or owner of an object cannot always be determined. Provenance research aims to trace the history and

[207] RTBF, Belga. "L'africamuseum de Tervuren Inaugure Un Nouvel Espace Sur Le Racisme." *RTBF*, RTBF.be, 15 May 2023, www.rtbf.be/article/lafricamuseum-de-tervuren-inaugure-un-nouvel-espace-sur-le-racisme-11197209.

> cultural impact of objects but also the precise context in which they were obtained. For this purpose, the Africa Museum can make use of the valuable collection archives it has acquired over time. However, sometimes field research in the country of origin is needed. Our African partners are always closely involved and actively participate in our provenance research."

This short text explains the how and why of provenance research. It also mentions relations with African partners for this endeavor, one of the museum's key points in its decolonization process. In another wall writing, the link between the colonial period and provenance research is made. Moreover, a focus is made on the contemporary debate regarding decolonization and restitution, highlighting the specificities of Belgian policy, and the fact the Africa Museum's collections belong to the Federal State. On their website, the AfricaMuseum states that "the majority of the objects come from the DRC and were collected during the colonial period".[208] Moreover, in a section titled "How did the collections end up in Tervuren?", it is explained that, upon the creation of the museum, museum staff and Belgian public officials encouraged Belgians in the Congo towards collecting. Collecting took place through military campaigns, scientific expeditions, personal collecting of Belgians in the Congo, the start of the art trade, and donations. In a different section, it is stated that "the RMCA is not always the moral or legitimate owner of the collections held in Tervuren" and that part of the collections was acquired during the colonial period, in conditions that were violent, unfair, or with a power imbalance.[209] Statements regarding provenance research reflect a will for transparency in the museum's decolonization process, and to address problematics inherent to colonization which are still present in the museum today. This leads to the issue of restitution, which is dealt with in its own section below. Moreover, the museum's website includes a statement titled "Collecting today", where it is explains that objects currently collected are part of field trips made in collaboration with African institutions, such as museums or universities. Again, here we can observe a focus on partnership with African entities.

A new exhibition dedicated to provenance research, named "Re-Collections" has opened on the 19th of January 2024, demonstrating the importance given to this issue by the museum. [210] The opening statement for the exhibition is the following: "Almost nothing displayed in museums was made to be seen in them". This sentence is accompanied by a reminder of the far-reaching effects of colonial looting, which make up a large percentage of ethnographic artifacts present in the Africa Museum and other colonial museums. The exhibit, while focusing on the importance, functioning and different methods of provenance research, touches upon a series of other

[208] *Royal Museum for Central Africa - Tervuren - Belgium*, www.africamuseum.be/en. Accessed 15 Jan. 2024.
[209] Ibid.
[210] Ibid.

important issues. It explains colonial looting, its origins and methods, for examples. It also touches upon the issue of restitution with a detailed timeline on the issue. To sum up, this exhibit touches upon a series of highly pertinent topics linked to the process of decolonization, and as a result would have its place as a permanent room in the museum.

Continuing our journey through the museum, after the small room dedicated to provenance research, comes the permanent collection, containing the rooms listed below. Not all rooms are relevant for the purpose of the study of decolonization and the rooms studied are marked in bold:

- Rituals and Ceremonies
- Languages and Music
- **Afropea:** This room is dedicated to African migration movements to Belgium, focusing on the Congolese diaspora in Belgium. In this room can be found the history of the African diaspora in Belgium presented chronologically, as well as general and mostly personal accounts of lived experiences of migration and diaspora. Moreover, this room touches on difficult subjects such as children born during colonialism from a Belgian and Congolese parent, including stories of stolen children. The space also functions as a learning space, with its library section filled with books on racism, justice, and migration. This room, created during the renovation of the Africa Museum, succeeds in giving a voice to African migrants living in Belgium by giving a platform for their lived experiences.[211] It invites visitors to "suggest corrections and to share documents, photographs, and testimonials, so that we can further improve our knowledge". As such, this room succeeds in reversing the colonial narrative that is often inherent to museums, by "taking a step" back and acknowledging that the museum is not solely a knowledge-disseminating institution, but also a knowledge-learning institution.
- Robot
- Landscapes and Biodiversity
- The Rotunda
- The Resource Paradox
- **Imagery:** In this room, various colonial photographs and films are exhibited. The narrative of this room is to present audiovisual material that frames the Congo from a colonial point of view, in order to shed light on how this material has played a role in shaping a public perception of Centra Africa and its people, a point of view which

[211] *Royal Museum for Central Africa - Tervuren - Belgium*, www.africamuseum.be/en. Accessed 15 Jan. 2024.

has persisted after the colonial period. Moreover, African commentaries, images, literature, and artworks are presented to encourage visitors to contemplate alternative narratives and diverse representations of Central Africa.[212] The room is very didactic and contains some drawers where visitors can find images, drawing and newspapers from the colonial time. This room also succeeds in its decolonial endeavor by exhibiting colonial material, while taking a step back and allowing African voices to narrate it.

- Mineral Cabinet
- The Crocodile Room
- Long History
- **Colonial History and Independence:** This last room, much awaited after the process of decolonization, has been described as some critics as 'disappointing'.[213] This work sides with this criticism, and argues that too little focus is placed on this area. The overwhelming focus of the museum remains ethnographic and anthropological, one of its core aims, which was justified by a colonial endeavor. The beginning and end of the permanent collection touch upon themes which can be qualified as fitting to the decolonial mission of the museum and address certain aspects of colonialism and current societal issues in the Belgian society thereto linked, such as racism. However, the rest of the exhibition mostly focus on natural resources in the Central Africa. Regarding the last section on colonial history and independence, the topics highlighted in the room are numerous and include: the ivory trade, territorial administration, aspects of work and education in the colony, etc. However, this has the effect of avoiding a focus on the independence process, and particularly to resistance movements in the Congo. The multitude of themes addressed in this room conceals information about the lives of Congolese populations under colonialism and the resistance movements that ensued.[214] Therefore, it can be concluded that this room does not really succeed in providing a decolonial account of the independence process, by minimizing it through a mere small room, and by presenting it in a room brimmed with miscellaneous information about the colony.

Beyond changes in the permanent collections and the exhibition rooms, several activities and policies have been put into place by the museum. For example, guided tours and workshops have been put into place, both for adults and for children. Specifically, workshops focusing on colonial

[212] Van Bockhaven, Vicky. "Decolonising the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Belgium's Second Museum Age." *antiquity* 93, no. 370 (2019): 1082-1087.
[213] Ibid.
[214] Ibid.

history or decolonization are organized, aimed at school groups. Moreover, commemorative tours are organized in the park, for example on the theme of human zoos (which exhibited Congolese people during colonialism in Brussels). The museum has also teamed up with an association called "Bamko-Cran", an anti-racist and feminist organization, who offer decolonial guided tours. The tours aim at observing the museum and its colonial history with a decolonial eye and are followed by a debate.[215] All of these initiatives aim and succeed at involving the public and encouraging them to interact with its colonial history. These projects represent an important step in bridging the gap between colonial history and public knowledge, since a survey co-conducted by the University of Antwerp and the Africa Museum in 2020 have shown results that the Belgian general public knows very little about the colonial past of their country.[216]

Finally, the museum's website now also leads their visitors to a survey, in which they can give feedback on the decolonization process of the museum. In this survey, the visitor can choose how they view the museum, e.g., as decolonial, neo-colonial, or neutral. Furthermore, the visitors are invited to give feedback on each room and how it contributes to a decolonial vision and give suggestions for improvement. This is a pertinent initiative on the part of the museum and qualifies it not only as a knowledge-disseminating institution, but also as a learning institution. Additionally, in the interview, Bart Ouvry mentioned the fact that focus groups are currently being conducted in order to foster a participative debate on the future of the decolonization process.

4.10. Criticism to the renovation of the Africa Museum

Despite the renovation efforts, some scholars and experts sustain that the decolonization of the Africa Museum remains limited, and even insufficient. For example, in February 2019, a group of UN experts underlined the fact that the renovation process of the RMCA was insufficiently dealing with the colonial past, as it was not clearly highlighting the abuses inherent to the colonial era. Moreover, the expert group recommended that Belgium apologizes to the Congo for its colonial past. Vicky Van Bockhaven, in her exhibition review titled "Decolonizing the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Belgium's Second Museum Age", is quite critical of the renovation. She states that "there is little consistency in the scenography, with the tone of the narrative at times self-reflexive and critical, and at others, it digresses from the abuses of the colonial past. She blames the outcome on "a lack of unity within the museum", and "the management's indecisiveness to engage critically with colonial history". She explains that some rooms, such as the ones analyzed above like "Afropea" or "Imagery", have succeeded to some extent in self-reflection on the colonial past, while many like those regarding natural resources are presented

[215] *Royal Museum for Central Africa - Tervuren - Belgium*, www.africamuseum.be/en. Accessed 15 Jan. 2024.
[216] Ibid.

much like they were before renovation, and lack this self-reflection and relations to the colonial past. She points to a lack of proper contextualization of certain events, and of how so many ethnographic objects ended up in the museum. Moreover, she gives the example of the section explaining economic activities in the DRC, which omits the roots of certain activities in colonial economic exploitation.[217] Nonetheless, some of this criticism seems to have been taken into consideration. In terms of future trajectories, Bart Ouvry has mentioned increasing visibility about contemporary African issues, as well as improving/expanding the rooms on colonial history and natural resources.

4.11. Human remains in the Africa Museum

As explained in chapter 3 of this thesis, the collection of human remains, along with artworks and other cultural items, was common practice during the colonial period. The Africa Museum states on its website that human remains are still present in some Belgian private or public institutions, which mostly arrived during the colonial period. Accordingly, the Africa Museum has decided to create a project to study the background of these objects and inform the owners and policymakers of their origin. The RMCA started investigating into the origins of human remains already in the early 2000s, with inquiries raised during the 2001 "Exit Congo Museum" exhibition. A particular focus has been placed on the skull of the Congolese chief Lusinga, already mentioned in a previous section, who was killed by Lieutenant Emile Storms, and whose skull was subsequently brought back to Belgium. In the Africa Museum's renovated permanent exhibition of 2018, the Emile Storms and Lusinga narrative is presented, including a sculpture by Congolese artist Aimé Mpane depicting Lusinga's skull, installed in February 2020 within the museum's grand rotunda. The RMCA also addressed the sensitive topic of human remains in its 2011 exhibition "Uncensored: Vivid tales from behind the scenes". Public interest in human remains in collections has grown in Belgium, with discussions in the Senate starting in 2016. The State Secretary for Federal Science Policy proposed a working group in 2018 to study the legal framework for the restitution of human remains. Finally, a written request for the restitution of Lusinga's skull was made in 2019.[218]

[217] Van Bockhaven, Vicky. "Decolonising the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Belgium's Second Museum Age." *antiquity* 93, no. 70 (2019): 1082-1087.
[218] Ibid.

Figure 14: The sculpture by Aimé Mpane, representing Lusinga's skull (Source: Africa Museum)

4.12. Applying decolonial indicators

The aim of this section is to apply Ariese & Wroblewska's indicators studied in chapter 2 to the RMCA's decolonization process.[219] The aim is to see how "successful" the RMCA is in its decolonization endeavor, and thus tying back to the fact that decolonization is a form of cultural diplomacy, to determine how decolonial the cultural diplomacy of Belgium is.

1) **Creating visibility***:* This indicator is one of the most important ones in the process of decolonization and entails several acts:
    a. *Changing what is visible in the museum, both in terms of the artworks exhibited and the narrative surrounding them:* This indicator is partially fulfilled by the decolonization process of the Africa Museum. The museum has indeed partially changed its permanent collection, relegating to a so-called "graveyard" racist artworks or artifacts that celebrate colonization. Moreover, it has created new rooms, such as the ones analyzed above and which contribute to the decolonial vision of the museum (e.g., The racism room, Afropea, etc.), and finally, it has vowed and is legally bound to return certain cultural artifacts to the DRC, once the museum in Kinshasa is ready for reception. However, the core of the permanent collection of the museum remains identical and "colonial" as it is mostly made out of ethnographic artifacts coming from the DRC, some of which have been looted during colonialism. Nevertheless, a change in the narrative of the objects presented has occurred, and a great focus on transparency with regards to the provenance of the objects is now into place, for example with the stickers

[219] Ariese, Csilla, and Magdalena Wróblewska. *Practicing decoloniality in museums: A guide with global examples*. Amsterdam University Press, 2022.

as shown in Figure 16. Some stickers contain a QR code, which the visitor can scan to obtain more information about the provenance of an object.

Figure 15 (Personal Picture)

b. *Giving voices to minorities whose legacies are exhibited in the museum, and giving them the opportunity to decide, if and how to exhibit those objects:* Along the same lines, this indicator is partially fulfilled by the decolonization process of the Africa Museum. The museum has chosen to give a voice to minorities, for example through the Afropea room, and by continuously inviting members of the Congolese diaspora to contribute to what is exhibited in this room with their lived experiences. Moreover, through collaboration with the BAMKO association, the museum also succeeds in giving a voice to activists of color who want to give a different narrative – a decolonial narrative – to the exhibitions of the museum. Moreover, during the decolonization process, a committee made out of Afro descendants in Belgium was created to advise on the decolonization process, which is still present in the museum's decision-making today. Finally, the museum has adopted a Diversity Charter, as is explained below.

2) **Increasing inclusivity**: this indicator relates to increasing access to the museum. For example, by:

a. *Opening up and expanding the range of visitors and active participants in the museum institution (for example, opening times, entry fees, etc):* This indicator is partially fulfilled. The first thing to note with regards to access to the museum in the location of the museum, and the building itself. The Africa Museum lies in Tervuren, a small Flemish municipality right outside of Brussels. The reason for its location is due to the fact that the original building has been kept, which is a very grand building located in a large park. The location and building are not very accessible to the large public. Even though the museum is accessible by public transport, it is quite far from Brussels city center, often taking one hour by

public transport. Thus, it is not very visible, and is not a place that one stumbles upon, specifically not most members of the Congolese diaspora who live in Brussels. One has to plan and willingly go there. Moreover, the choice of keeping the original building can be off-putting for some, who does not which to visit a grand building which was designed to celebrate colonialism. In a podcast dedicated to the Africa Museum, Salomé Ysebaert, an Afro descendant employee of the museum states that she felt uneasy the first times when she entered the museum because of the size and grandeur of the building, and that the fact that she could feel the riches of the colonies and the colonial power inherent to it.[220] This statement describes well the feelings a visitor might get when entering the museum. The opening times are also rather restricted (10-17 during weekdays, and 10-18 during weekends). The regular adult fee amounts to 12 euros, which fit into the standard museum prices in Belgium. However, according to Bart Ouvry these obstacles have not hindered the museums from achieving good numbers of visitors, including Afro descendants. Moreover, a great access is provided for disabled persons, who have access to the museum for a reduced fee. Many adjustments have been put into place to enable visits for people with various disabilities. For example, far-reaching adjustments exist for persons with hearing loss, with impaired visions, and persons with autism, enabling them to have a comprehensive visit, tailored to their needs.[221] Therefore, while the museum has put into place adjustments for persons with disabilities, it remains not fully accessible due to the choice of location and building.

b. *Creating spaces for discussion in the museum (e.g. seminars, workshops, discussion groups, etc)*: This indicator is fulfilled to some extent. Spaces for discussion do exist in the museum, for example through the guided tours and workshops that have been put into places, but also the commemorative tours or the decolonial guided tours. However, those activities all exist on the side of a regular museum visit, and there is thus a lack of a systematic discussion space within a regular museum visit. While all the existing activities are useful for sparking discussion, they only represent a small percentage of participation compared to other visitors of the museum. It could thus be interesting to put into place a discussion space within the permanent exhibit, where one could leave

[220] "Let's talk about racism!", AfricaMuseum Podcast, Spotify, 16th May 2023, https://open.spotify.com/episode/0wYelMCOIiPA7ZK5FzvzyE?si=yV4G5hi7SWSWedDuJ7mDcQ
[221] *Royal Museum for Central Africa - Tervuren - Belgium*, www.africamuseum.be/en. Accessed 15 Jan. 2024.

virtual thoughts or comments with which other visitors could interact, for example.

c. *Increasing inclusivity and diversity in museum staff (fair hiring policies, fair pay, diverse representation, adequate HR policies):* Based on information found on the website of the museum, the RMCA subscribes to a Gender Equality Plan, and has developed a Diversity Charter. The following paragraphs of the Diversity Charter are particularly relevant to explain the RMCA's stance on diversity in their staff:

"The signatories of the Diversity Charter undertake to:

2. **Ensure that the diversity of Belgian society is reflected as much as possible in their workforce**, particularly in terms of its **cultural and ethnic diversity at all levels of qualification and hierarchy.**

3. Guarantee **equal opportunities at every stage of employees' careers and in the many areas of human resources management: recruitment, training, skills development and career development.**

4. Implement a **modern human resources policy in which everyone feels valued for their merits and has the opportunity to develop their skills throughout their career.** To promote an environment in which diversity is seen as a source of enrichment, innovation and creativity, and thus to the quality of services provided to citizens.

5. Implement a Diversity policy within their own organization, paying particular attention to **equality between men and women and equal opportunities for people with disabilities and people of foreign of foreign origin**, taking into account the specific nature of their organization, and always with a view to promoting Diversity.

6. Communicate their commitment to the implementation of an equal opportunities and diversity policy to their employees and inform them of the results of the actions taken.

7. Communicate with their stakeholders about their commitment to non-discrimination and diversity, and the diversity, as well as on its results. Include a

chapter in the **annual report** detailing our practices in this area and the results achieved."[222]

No report on the implementation of the diversity charter is available online. However, Bart Ouvry replied to some questions with regards to implementation and stated that the diversity numbers were good in public services and floor services, but still had to be improved for the scientific researchers in the museum. According to him, this necessitates a broader rethinking of inclusivity in the workplace, starting with universities.

3) **Decentering:** This indicator involves taking a "step back" from preconceived ideas that are at the basis of how a museum operates. It includes:
    a. *Self-questioning, i.e., for the staff to take a step back in order to distance themselves from the assumptions under which they operate*: This indicator is fulfilled, if not merely be the five-year long closure of the Africa Museum which had as its objective the total reorganization of the museum in order to update it to modern standards. While the extent of the decolonization of the Africa Museum can be debated, it cannot be denied that there has been a far-reaching reflection on the old modes of operating the museum, and that a step back has been taken, along with a willingness to learn and consult with others. The website of the museum, and the museum itself, are full of texts that explain the reflection behind the reorganization, and that change the context and the narrative surrounding the artworks. Moreover, the survey available on the website gives a role to the public in the decolonization process of the museum and gives visitors a medium through which they can influence this process. Through this survey, the museum shows a willingness to learn and to listen. This indicator is thus fulfilled.
    b. *Allowing external members of the community to contribute to a new mode of operation for museums:* This indicator is partially fulfilled. Firstly, during the renovation and decolonization process of the museum, a concertation committee named COMRAF made out of people of African descent was set up. COMRAF was consulted during all of the stages of the reorganization and brought to the museum management a different and just perspective, which pushed action and decision-making in another direction, and has helped shape a new mode of

[222] *Royal Museum for Central Africa - Tervuren - Belgium*, www.africamuseum.be/en. Accessed 15 Jan. 2024.

operation for the museum.[223] However, when asked, Bart Ouvry mentioned that cooperation with COMRAF and Afro descendants was sometimes difficult, particularly at the end of the renovation process. Nevertheless, he highlighted its importance and the need to for its continuation.

c. *Break the expectations of the public (e.g. changing the order of the exhibition, narrative, words, etc.):* This indicator is also partially fulfilled. Both the order and narrative of the permanent collections have been changed; however, the core of the permanent collection remains the same. Thus, the original expectations of the public might be broken while entering the permanent collection and seeing a new focus on issues such as racism and provenance research. However, these the extent of the change might be deceiving when they see that the core of the permanent collections has remained the same, and that a proper contextualization of some events is not always provided.

4) **Championing empathy:** This indicator includes:

a. *Leaving space for creation and discussion, allowing visitors to reflect on how they are feeling within the exhibit*: This indicator is partially fulfilled. The only room which can be deemed as dedicated to reflection and discussion in the Africa Museum is the room dedicated to racism at the entrance of the museum. This room is very successful in sparking emotions and reflections through its didactic displays such as racist sentences written on the walls, newspaper titles on the floor, or definition of relevant concepts. Moreover, the activities put in place by the museums such as the guided tours, workshops, and decolonial tours are good examples of instances in which fruitful discussion can be created. However, the museum perhaps lacks a space dedicated to reflection and emotions at the end of the permanent exhibition, where one could sit and reflect for example, or leave comment and thoughts, or even interact with fellow visitors.

b. *Creating "emotive" exhibits (e.g., through individual storytelling or by enabling connections between visitors):* This indicator is mostly fulfilled by the Afropea room, which tells stories of migration and diaspora through individual accounts, which enable visitors to relate more and to feel more emotions. Personal objects that accompany these accounts furthermore enhance those emotions. The first room dedicated to racism, as well as the room on colonial propaganda. However, the rest of the permanent collection does not necessarily seek to spark emotions,

[223] *Royal Museum for Central Africa - Tervuren - Belgium*, www.africamuseum.be/en. Accessed 15 Jan. 2024.

apart from the "Rituals and Ceremonies" or "Languages and Music" rooms which include videos of individual stories related to the themed rooms.

5) **Improving transparency**: this indicator includes:
    a. *Determining and making public the provenance of the collections, as well as putting into context the way in which the artworks have been acquired:* As has already been pointed out, the Africa Museum places great emphasis on the issue of provenance of the collections. One of the first rooms of the permanent collections explains the issue of provenance research, as well as how it functions both in the museum, and in Belgium in general. Moreover, the acquisition of the artifacts is put into context, and the link with colonial looting is explained. More information on provenance can be found on their website, and a temporary exhibition dedicated to the issue has opened on the 19th of January 2024, which gives a thorough overview of the issue. Different artworks are also accompanied by a sticker marking its provenance with a QR code to be scanned for more information regarding provenance. This indicator is thus fulfilled.
    b. *Be transparent regarding the internal management of the museum:* This indicator is fulfilled, as a list of management and of staff can be found on the website of the Africa Museum, accompanied by their Gender Equality Plan and Diversity Charter.[224]

6) **Embracing vulnerability**: Vulnerability is the capacity to imagine, feel, and see without excluding and it relates to a willingness or acceptance of being exposed to certain things which may challenge you physically or emotionally. This entails:
    a. *Making museum institutions more human and more relational:* This indicator is partially fulfilled by all the activities put into place by the museum such as the workshops, guided visits and decolonial tours, all of which function as a platform for human relations and have the potential to spark discussions between visitors themselves, or with museum staff. However, as previously mentioned, this relational aspect is not present in a "regular" museum visit and should maybe be rendered permanent and systematic to a museum visit.
    b. *Another form of self-reflection and discussion with external actors, leading to actual change in the museum:* This part is partially fulfilled by the different partnerships that the museum has, for example with the BAMKO association, or

[224] *Royal Museum for Central Africa - Tervuren - Belgium*, www.africamuseum.be/en. Accessed 15 Jan. 2024.

COMRAF, who are given a voice to tell different accounts of the museum, and of what is inside of it, leading to actual change within it. Moreover, on the website of the museum, a long list of Belgian and African partners of the museum can be found from public to private organizations, including universities, think tanks or NGOs. However, no information on their involvement with actual decision-making in the museum could be found.

c. *An attempt to make your visitors vulnerable too*: This indicator partially fulfilled. It is mostly fulfilled by the racism room at the beginning of the exhibit, which may make visitors vulnerable to their own thoughts, or to the expressions that friends or family around them might have. The space exists to enable a reflection on racism in Belgian society and have the potential of making the visitors vulnerable by realizing their own hidden racist perceptions. Other rooms which can make visitors vulnerable or those regarding colonial propaganda or colonial history, which confronts Belgian visitors with a past they may not know or not want to address. It makes visitors vulnerable because they are forced to see the harsh realities of past policies stemming from their country.

To conclude, the Africa Museum has undergone a far-reaching reorganization process which qualifies as decolonization under the indicators of Ariese & Wroblewska. Applying these indicators to the decolonization process of the Africa Museum enables to better understand the success of the decolonization process, what has been done, and what remains to do. What arises from this analysis is that the decolonization process of the RMCA has been quite thorough and successful by changing the permanent collection's order and narrative. Looking at the indicators, it can be said that most of them are "partially fulfilled", which translates into an attempt to tackle decolonization in all areas, which however could be improved. The main takeaways of this analysis are the following: The Racism room, Afropea, colonial propaganda, and colonial history and independence room are the only rooms which can be assessed as having a purely "decolonial message" at their heart. While the decolonial message of these rooms is very clear, the rest of the permanent collections has remained more or less the same as prior to the closure of the museum. However, the narrative surrounding those collections has changed, and an appropriate contextualization, focusing on provenance, has been put into place. All of these factors are indicators of successful decolonization. Recommendations for improvement are made in Chapter 5.

4.13. Comparison with other decolonial institutions

In Chapter 2, four decolonial museums were studied. This section compares the decolonization process of the Africa Museum with those studied above, in order to obtain a better image of how successful the decolonization of the Africa Museum has been and what can be improved. Starting off with the Museum of Us in San Diego, some similarities can be found. Both museums have a complex colonial history, which they both have publicly acknowledged, and which they both make a point of honor in highlighting. However, the Museum of Us goes a step further by stating that the building's façade has "colonization etched into its skin". In the case of the Africa Museum, while the colonial heritage of the building is acknowledged, it is not questioned as much. However, both museums hold themselves accountable for their colonial pasts, the Museum of Us for its participation (intentional or unintentional) in colonial endeavors, and the Africa Museum by openly recognizing its past contribution to colonial propaganda. Additionally, the Museum of Us "asks for guidance" to communities such as indigenous groups, Black people, or People of Color. In this case again, it goes a step further than the consultation practices of the Africa Museum. Turning now to the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington D.C., more differences can be found between the NMAAHC and the Africa Museum. Firstly, the NMAACH to the contrary of the other institutions studied, is not an institution which is rooted in colonialism, and which was created in such a context. Instead, the NMAACH is a relatively new institution, which aims at narrating American history from a different point of view: that of African Americans. Nevertheless, the Africa Museum has much to learn from this museum as well, mostly in terms of *emotive exhibits*: the NMAACH is brimmed with interactive exhibitions and displays many personal stories, accompanied by original objects. The latter is a practice that the Africa Museum also engages in, through its Afropea room. However, what the Africa Museum lacks is a space for reflection, such as the "Contemplation Court" of the NMAACH, a space who very aim is to provoke feelings and champion empathy. Moving on to the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool, the museums can be contrasted in their success in increasing visibility about contemporary issues. The Liverpool Museum, beyond addressing historical issues relating to slavery, also focuses on issues of modern slavery and other correlated human rights abuses. This is perhaps something that the Africa Museum could improve, namely, to go beyond their room dedicated to racism, and to openly address more of the contemporary issues that Belgium faces, as a post-colonial society and/or contemporary African issues. Finally, the Wereld Museum in Amsterdam is the institution the most similar to the Africa Museum, from those studied. Both institutions have the same basis and originate from a similar mission: to exhibit the riches of the colonies as a form of colonial propaganda in Belgium and the Netherlands, respectively. Moreover, both museums evolved to exhibit ethnological items and to focus on natural resources of African land and other "exotic" countries. However, both museums

have evolved and placed into context the artworks which they still house by renovating their permanent exhibitions.

4.14. Decolonization of the RMCA as a form of cultural diplomacy and diaspora engagement

As has been previously concluded in this work, processes of decolonization of museums, especially if publicized, can be qualified as forms of cultural diplomacy, if they aim at foreign policy goals, or certain domestic goals. In the case of the Africa Museum in Tervuren, this thesis argues that the decolonization of the museum is both a form of cultural diplomacy, and a form of engagement with the diasporas (Congolese/Burundian/Rwandan) in Belgium.

When asked about the Africa Museum, the director of the museum, Bart Ouvry, confirmed its role in Belgium's cultural diplomacy. Specifically, Mr. Ouvry placed the emphasis on two concepts: communication and partnership. As a scientific institution, the museum places great importance on cooperation with African partners, for example in the realm of provenance research. Moreover, he highlighted the role of culture as a communication channel, serving to help the evolution of diplomatic relations. During the interview, a clear distinction was made between goals related to diplomacy/development cooperation, taking place through scientific partnership with African institutes/organizations, and goals related to diaspora engagement, performed during the decolonization process through consultation with COMRAF and current partnerships with associations such as BAMKO.

Beyond the primary focus of decolonizing a museum on addressing historical injustices, promoting inclusivity, and reinterpreting cultural narratives, decolonization can indeed have elements that align with diaspora engagement, particularly in cases where the decolonization process involves diaspora communities. The decolonization process of the RMCA, through the COMRAF, engaged members of the diasporas, whose cultural heritage is represented in the museum's collections. Moreover, the museum engages with the diaspora through the Afropea room, which relate their stories and to which they are invited to further contribute. The involvement of external associations in giving guided visits and workshops also aims at including the diaspora and giving them a voice to narrate a museum that was built out of their heritage. By the same token, processes of restitution, besides being a diplomatic procedure, acknowledge the importance of cultural heritage to diaspora groups. Inclusivity is a key aspect of both decolonization and cultural diplomacy. By attempting to reflect more inclusive narrative, the Africa Museum aims to contribute to a positive image and fosters cultural diplomacy, including with diaspora communities. While decolonization and cultural diplomacy may have distinct objectives, there can be an overlap when the process involves intentional engagement with

diaspora communities. The recognition of diverse cultural perspectives, acknowledgment of historical injustices, and collaborative efforts with diaspora groups contribute to a more comprehensive and respectful approach to cultural representation and diplomacy.

While it can be concluded from this analysis that the Africa Museum's aim in its decolonization processes is both one of cultural diplomacy and one of diaspora engagement, the success of its diaspora engagement policies can be debated. The goals and policies listed above are clear, however they do not always succeed in actually reversing lingering colonial narratives in the museum. In this context, it is interesting to use Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the "contact zone", defined as a space "where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermath as they are lived out in many parts of the world today".[225] Thus, the Africa Museum also needs to be analyzed as a place of conflict and of subversion, where the diaspora is often called to be consulted, but cannot not start the initiatives themselves. The Congolese diaspora has a complex relationship with the Africa Museum, and some view it as a colonial institution still, which still houses a good number of looted artifacts, and which is "beyond repair".[226] James Clifford emphasizes that neither "community experience" nor curatorial authority possesses an automatic entitlement to contextualize collections or shape narratives of contact histories. The resolution is inherently contingent and political, relying on mobilized power, negotiation, and representation tailored to specific audiences. Simply consulting diasporas is deemed insufficient, as museums maintaining control over collections and exhibition planning may be perceived as paternalistic by those historically excluded from and condescended to by museums.[227] To conclude, while the decolonization of the Africa Museum definitely represents a will of diaspora engagement, its implementation, and its adequacy, remain debated.

[225] Pratt, Mary Louise. "Arts of the contact zone." *Negotiating academic literacies*. Routledge, 2012. 171-185.
[226] Ceuppens, Bambi. "From colonial subjects/objects to citizens: the royal museum for central Africa as contact-zone." *Advancing Museum Practices* (2014): 83-99.
[227] Clifford, James. "Museums as contact zones." *Representing the nation: a reader: histories, heritage and museums* (1999): 435-457.

Chapter 5. Findings and conclusions

This thesis has studied the relationships between the concepts of cultural diplomacy, decolonization, and restitution of cultural artifacts, using Belgium as a case study to exemplify those interlinkages. In the first chapter, the concept of cultural diplomacy, serving as the theoretical framework for the present thesis, was studied in depth. The chapter highlights the importance of the role of culture in international affairs, and defines cultural diplomacy as:

> "Whether an act, entailing **the mobilization of cultural resources** such as ideas, values, traditions, art, languages, customs, etc., which has the capability to achieve goals through attraction based on culture, is exerted **by a public or private entity**, and **aimed at a foreign entity**, for one of the following ends:
>
> - **Foreign policy goals,** for example to promote mutual understanding and acceptance, and/or
> - **Domestic goals**, such national identity building and national interest promotion abroad"

Furthermore, delving into its history serves to understand the historical importance of the concept and the role it played during colonialism. Chapter 1 sheds light on the broadness of the concept and the actors which can exert it. The second chapter focuses on decolonization, and starts by clarifying concepts such as colonialism, colonization, decolonization, decoloniality and post-colonialism. A historical account of decolonization was provided, with a focus on the decolonization of culture. Specifically, the decolonization of arts was studied into depth, focusing on Ariese & Wroblewska's six indicators: creating visibility, increasing inclusivity, decentering, championing empathy, improving transparency, and embracing vulnerability. Thereafter, four examples of decolonial museums were given, as well as a criticism to the theory of decolonization. The study of decolonization of museums gave rise to the first finding of this thesis, concerning its manifestation as a form of cultural diplomacy:

Finding 1: The decolonization of museums is a form of cultural diplomacy

The first finding concluded that the process of decolonization of museums can indeed be considered as a form of cultural diplomacy. Firstly, the decolonization of museums inevitably involves the mobilization of cultural resources, in this case of artworks and other artifacts housed in museums. Secondly, processes of decolonization, which are exerted both by public and private entities, have both domestic and foreign policy goals. As explained in chapter 2, the decolonization of museums aims at addressing historical biases, colonial perspectives, and promote inclusivity within museums. Cultural diplomacy aims to build positive relationships

between nations or communities and decolonizing a museum can be seen as a proactive step in fostering positive relations by acknowledging and rectifying historical imbalances and injustices. Moreover, decolonization often involves collaborating with communities and experts to recontextualize exhibits and narratives. This collaborative process fosters cultural exchange and dialogue, key components of cultural diplomacy. Furthermore, a decolonized museum can contribute positively to a nation's reputation by showcasing a commitment to cultural diversity, inclusivity, and ethical practices.

Thereafter, the third chapter provides a thorough analysis of restitution processes of cultural artifacts. The chapter first defined the key notions of its study: looting, cultural artifacts, returns and restitutions. Thereafter, an overview of the historical account as well as the contemporary debate regarding restitution processes was provided. The issue of Nazi-looted art was also touched upon, and a comprehensive overview of the role of the UN, legal frameworks and mediation committee was given. Some case studies were provided, and the role of restitution processes as a transitional justice mechanism was explored. Finally, this study led to a second finding:

Finding 2: Restitution processes are a form of cultural diplomacy

The second finding concluded that processes of restitution of cultural artifacts can also be qualified as manifestations of colonial diplomacy. Firstly, these processes entail the physical mobilization of artworks which are returned to former colonies (in the case at hand). Those exchanges often take place during high profile and symbolic ceremonies, which represent a cultural and diplomatic exchange between heads of states, who are usually in charge of restitution issues. Secondly, restitution processes are brimmed with foreign policy goals such as improving relations with former colonies and acknowledging former injustice. While the restitution process also serves national reconciliation and discourse change, its primary objective is seen as a foreign policy goal.

Finally, the second part of this thesis focused on the case study of Belgium, as developed by the methodology, in order to gain a thorough understanding of post-colonial cultural diplomacy in a formerly colonizing country. Chapter four started off with an in-depth historical account of Belgian colonialism, zooming in on looting during colonial time, post-colonial cultural relations, and formal restitution processes between Belgium and the Congo. The aim was to enable the reader to obtain a good contextual understanding of Belgo-Congolese relations, before diving into the contemporary issues of restitution and decolonization. The examination of the case study led to the following findings:

Finding 3: Successful negotiations on restitution between Belgium and the DRC are recent and have led to a solid legislative framework on restitution adopted in June 2022

The fourth chapter studied in-depth restitution processes, or attempts thereto related, and concluded that no successful frameworks were agreed on prior to 2020. Belgium's effort towards reconciliation with its former colonial through cultural diplomacy did not arise out of a vacuum and was propelled by a global context of reflection on colonial legacies in our contemporary societies. This has led King Philippe to express his regrets for the colonial past, to symbolically give back cultural artifacts, to create a parliamentary committee dedicated to decolonization (with poor outcome, and finally to adopt a law a "recognizing the alienable character of assets linked to the colonial past of the Belgian State and determining a legal framework for their restitution and return" in 2022.

Finding 4: Belgium's restitution policy is comparatively good

Placing Belgium in comparison with the other case studies, Belgium's efforts at restitution are deemed comparatively good, especially compared with the UK, who is the most unwilling to engage in restitution negotiations. Additionally, while France has adopted a thorough and precise report on restitution processes, Belgium has gone further in its endeavor by adopting a legally binding framework. Finally, the Netherlands has undergone similar processes to that of Belgium, with phases of restitution negotiations in the 1970s and in the 2020s, leading to more successful returns in the latter phase.

Finding 5: The Africa Museum in Tervuren has undergone a process of decolonization

This thesis has explored in-depth the decolonial efforts of the Africa Museum, following its renovation in 2018, which has led to several conclusions. Firstly, a great focus is placed on provenance research within the museum, addressing how collections were acquired during the colonial period and emphasizing transparency. A dedicated space is reserved for the explanation of this issue prior to entering in the area where the permanent location is housed, and a temporary exhibition dedicated to the issue is currently taking place (January 2024). Secondly, new rooms have been added and old rooms have been re-narrated. The new rooms include the room dedicated to racism and the Afropea room for example. Other rooms have been tailored to a more decolonial message such as the one tackling the issue of colonial propaganda, or the one regarding colonial history and independence. This last room has however been criticized for lacking a proper focus on the independence process and containing too many various information. Thirdly, the museum stresses the importance of collaborating with African partners on restitution and decolonization processes. Finally, beyond the exhibits, the museum engages the public through guided tours,

workshops, and partnerships with anti-racist groups. These initiatives aim to bridge the knowledge gap about Belgium's colonial past among the general public.

Finding 6: The decolonization of the Africa Museum partially fulfills Ariese & Wroblewska's indicators

In the study of decolonization of the Africa Museum, the fulfilment of Ariese & Wroblewska's indicators were assessed. The conclusion therefrom arising is that of a partial fulfilment of the criteria, indicating that the museum is well advanced in its decolonization process, but that some work remains ahead. The museum has made positive improvements in changing narratives and introducing impactful rooms such as Afropea or the Racism Room, both of which align with the indicators of creating visibility and championing empathy. Moreover, the museum has committed to transparency and has made a point of honor in its focus on provenance research, thereby fulfilling the criteria of improving transparency. Regarding the decentering indicators, the establishment of the COMRAF concertation committee reflect a genuine effort to incorporate external perspectives. However, challenges remain and not all indicators are fulfilled. For example, the core of the permanent collections remains unchanged, and largely composed of ethnographic artifacts which have been looted during colonialism. This points to a partial fulfillment of the indicator regarding creating visibility. Regarding accessibility, a lesser fulfilment of the indicator is present. The location of the museum is inconvenient, and the opening times are restricted, which impacts inclusivity as well. The fact that the colonial building has been kept is also off-putting for some members of the diaspora, for example. Finally, the absence of a systematic discussion space within regular museum visits is noticeable. However, the museum succeeds in creating emotive exhibits, especially in rooms like Afropea and the "Racism Room", thereby fulfilling the requirement of embracing vulnerability. However, these emotive spaces are not consistently applied throughout the entire permanent collection, demonstrating a partial fulfillment of this indicator. Despite the challenge, a commitment to decolonization is observable in the practices of the Africa Museum. The success of the decolonization process is marked by positive aspects and fulfilment of certain indicators, particularly those related to transparency, external perspectives, and creating spaces for reflection. The museum's journey reflects a dynamic effort to address historical legacies, foster dialogue, and reshape its narrative, laying a foundation for a more inclusive and decolonized cultural institution.

Finding 7: The decolonization of the Africa Museum is good, but could be improved by taking inspiration from other decolonial museums

In chapter 4, the decolonization process of the Africa Museum was compared with four other institutions studied in chapter 2. A nuanced assessment emerges, with similarities and differences

that are notable. Firstly, both the Africa Museum and the Museum of Us in San Diego share a complex colonial past inherent to their institution, which they have both acknowledged. However, the Museum of Us goes one step further than the Africa Museum in its critical reflection of its past, namely by acknowledging that the building's façade has "colonization etched into its skin". Moreover, the Museum of Us actively seeks guidance from minorities, which goes further than the consultation practices of the Africa Museum. Secondly, the Africa Museum and the NMAAHC have more differences, for example due to the absence of a colonial legacy of the NMAAHC as an institution. The NMAAHC excels at putting into place emotive exhibits, featuring interactive displays and personal stories, which the Africa Museum although having some of these in place, could take further inspiration from. Moreover, the Africa Museum could take inspiration in the "Contemplation Court" of the NMAAHC by creating a space for reflection at the end of the permanent collection. Thirdly, comparing with the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool, the Africa Museum could increase the tackling of contemporary issues related to colonialism, for example, or other contemporary challenges in Belgian society. The racism room is already a prime example, but more rooms could be created covering those subjects. Finally, comparing with the Wereld Museum in Amsterdam, both institutions share origins rooted in colonialism. Their decolonization processes are mirrored in their mutual evolution and efforts to contextualize their artworks through renovations. To conclude, while the Africa Museum's decolonization is successful, it could take inspiration for improvement from other decolonial institutions around the world.

Finding 8: Decolonization in the Africa Museum is both a form of cultural diplomacy and a form of engagement with the diasporas in Belgium

In the conclusion of chapter 4, the decolonization process of the Africa Museum was qualified as both a form of cultural diplomacy and as a form of engagement with the African diaspora in Belgium. This binary focus has objectives of addressing injustices, creating more inclusivity, and contributing to a new narrative in the cultural sector. Examples of the museum's engagement with diaspora communities include collaborative engagement such as during the decolonization process with COMRAF, the creation of the Afropea room, and partnerships with external associations, contributing to a more comprehensive approach to cultural representation and diplomacy. Nevertheless, the concrete results of these diaspora engagement policies are controversial, due to a lack of engagement on the part of the diaspora in a museum that was once created to celebrate colonialism. Criticism includes lingering colonial narratives in the museums, and a lack of truly inclusive and participatory approaches in the museum's initiatives. Finally, the museum can be conceptualized as a "contact zone" as defined by Mary Louise Pratt, where "cultures meet, grapple, and sometimes clash" emphasizing the importance of navigating power

dynamics, negotiation, and representation for meaningful engagement with diaspora communities.

Recommendations regarding the decolonization process of the Africa Museum

- *Enhance structural changes:* One of the key findings arising from the analysis of the decolonization process of the Africa Museum was that of the core of the permanent collection remaining unchanged. Although progress is important in many aspects of the museum's evolution, perhaps further structural changes are needed in the permanent collection and its representation.
- *Improve accessibility:* In the analysis, accessibility to the museum was identified as a potential burden for inclusivity. To enhance accessibility, recommendations include reconsidering the museum's location or implementing additional measures to facilitate visits, such as extended opening hours and more inclusive pricing strategies. Another suggestion would be to perhaps open another center for the museum in the city center of Brussels, more accessible, which could focus on decolonization issues.
- *Amplify discussion spaces:* Although interactive activities have been put in place by the Africa Museum, those are not systematically present and included in a regular museum visit. As such, a recommendation would be to create a more systematic discussion space within the permanent exhibit. This could involve incorporating interactive elements, virtual forums, or designated areas for visitors to share thoughts and engage in meaningful dialogue during their museum visit.
- *Increase focus on contemporary issues:* Drawing a comparison with other museums, the recommendation is to expand the museum's engagement with contemporary issues. This involves going beyond the dedicated room on racism and openly addressing a broader range of contemporary issues faced by Belgium as a post-colonial society.
- *Continue and improve the engagement with the diaspora:* Recognizing the complex relationship between the museum and the diaspora, there is a recommendation for continuous and meaningful engagement. The analysis suggests that the museum often consults the diaspora but falls short in empowering them to initiate initiatives. The recommendation is to navigate power dynamics, address perceptions of paternalism, and foster a more collaborative and participatory approach.
- *Render the exhibit on provenance research permanent:* As explained in chapter 4, a new temporary exhibition titled "Re-Collections" was opened in January 2024. This exhibition touches upon important topics such as the means and methods of provenance research, explanation on colonial looting and its consequences, and a timeline of

restitution policies between Belgium and its former colonies. All of these topics ought to be included in a regular visit to the Africa Museum.

Recommendations for Belgium's post-colonial cultural diplomacy:

- *Enhance collaborative projects:* Belgium should increase the participation of diaspora communities in decision-making related to cultural areas, specifically related to the decolonization of arts and museum, as well as restitution processes. A recommendation would be to render decision-making processes more participative and inclusive in order to encourage diaspora engagement.
- *Expand educational efforts:* Belgium should focus more on the role of education in the decolonization-restitution debate. As explained previously, Belgians notably lack knowledge about their colonial history, partially because it remains largely unaddressed in schools. A recommendation would be to increase partnerships between the Africa Museum and schools, and to make colonial history a mandatory part of the curriculum.
- *Commit to continuous reflection:* Belgium should continue its reflection on the contemporary consequence s of colonialism in its society. Moreover, it should monitor regularly how this impacts its public institutions through periodical evaluations and participation forums.
- *Learn from global examples:* Belgium should learn from fellow countries undertaking processes of decolonization and restitution. For example, the Africa Museum could take inspiration from other decolonial institutions, as explained previously. Moreover, Belgium could set up collaborative projects with other countries related to provenance research in order to increase the availability of data.
- *Support museums in decolonization efforts:* Belgium should support financially museums that are actively engaged in decolonization processes, like the Africa Museum. It should encourage the museum to develop spaces for reflection, innovative exhibits, and collaborative projects can amplify diverse voices and narratives.

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