

# EO.O.O.7943

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By examining one 'ethnographic' object kept at the Royal Museum for Central Africa, this article discusses three consecutive demands for restitution of EO.O.O.7943, in 1878, in the 1960s-1970s, and in 2016. Neither informal nor official demands resulted in the actual return of the object to Congo. Instead, it featured in major exhibitions in Belgium, the Netherlands and the United States. While the Tervuren museum 'donated' other objects to local Congolese museums in the 1970s and 1980s, Congolese voices by now seem powerless, and debate is almost inexistent in Belgium. So what can museums and communities do? I argue that both provenance research and local expertise can provide rich and useful contemporary insights on objects and people, as well as on acquisition and exhibition history. Such objects and insights may be integrated in exhibitions Europe and Africa, with all its uplifting and darker consequences. What is more valuable: owning an object or the encounter?

Door te kijken naar één 'etnografisch' object, bewaard in het Koninklijk Museum voor Midden-Afrika, bespreekt dit artikel drie opeenvolgende vragen naar restitutie van EO.O.O.7943, in 1878, de jaren 1960-1970 en in 2016. Informele, noch officiële vragen hebben echter geresulteerd in de terugkeer van het object naar Congo. Het werd daarentegen wel getoond op grote tentoonstellingen in België, Nederland en de Verenigde Staten. Het museum in Tervuren 'schonk' wel degelijk andere objecten aan lokale Congolese musea in de jaren 1970 en 1980, maar vandaag lijken Congolese stemmen machteloos en het debat is bijna onbestaande in België. Dus wat kunnen museums en gemeenschappen doen? Mijn inziens kunnen oorsprongsonderzoek en lokale expertise rijke en bruikbare hedendaagse inzichten opleveren over objecten en mensen, en de geschiedenis van verzamelen en tentoonstellen. Objecten en inzichten die kunnen worden geïntegreerd in tentoonstellingen in Europa en Afrika met al zijn verheffende en meer duistere gevolgen. Wat is waardevoller: een object bezitten of de ontmoeting?



Figures 1 and 2: Baku Kapita Alphonse and Madelaine Tsimba Phambu in Boma, photographs by the author, 2016.

During a too short visit to Boma (DR Congo) in 2016, I discussed the establishment of colonial rule in the region with local chiefs and experts in the context of a research project at the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA). Much information was exchanged on the nine kings of Boma and the arrival of European colonisers in the 1870s and 1880s.<sup>1</sup> However, presenting a picture of a statue ‘collected’ by the Belgian trader Alexandre Delcommune in 1878 and now kept at the RMCA inspired an emotional discussion that soon turned to the restitution of colonial collections. According to Chief Baku Kapita Alphonse (Figure 1), the powers of the *kitumba* (statue) could be revived after restitution, and the object could thus be reused. He explained that the statue can talk, although only inaugurated chiefs are able to communicate with the *kitumba*. They feed it kola nuts every morning and evening. In addition to human traits, greater powers are attributed to the *kitumba*: it offers protection from bullets during warfare, for example, and has powers to turn a murderer deaf, as Chief Madelaine Tsimba Phambu explained (Figure 2). Even within Boma, however, the presence of different agendas inevitably complicates matters. Near the former residence of the Governor General of the Congo Free State (CFS) and impressive baobab trees, other individuals who viewed the photograph stated that they also could use the object depicted. While plans exist to install a local museum in the former CFS headquarters, funding is lacking for the renovations needed in this historic building. Moreover, other Congolese museums in the making might offer additional competition. In Kinshasa a new national museum has been constructed with support from the Korean Agency of International Cooperation to replace the current one on Mont Ngaliema, which stores thousands of objects in unfavourable conditions and has limited exhibition space.

Based on the object in the RMCA collection examined here, this article discusses local expertise and current restitution demands and deals with complex issues concerning ‘acquisitions’ by violence and the establishment of colonial rule. The ‘historicization of the collections’ also concerns the exhibition history of EO.O.O.7943 eventually included in the ‘ethnographic’ collection in Tervuren.<sup>2</sup> Finally, the text will show that the aforementioned ‘informal’ demands for restitution in 2016, in fact repeated earlier demands in the 1870s, made shortly after the ‘acquisition’ and again in the 1960s and 1970s by Mobutu Sese Seko in the context of his *recours à l’authenticité* [recourse to authenticity]. Despite the lack of debate on restitution in Belgium today, local demands have been made and continue. Although the three demands figured

1 I wish to thank Chief Baku Kapita Alphonse, Clément-Valère Tsasa Bula, Chief Madelaine Tsimba Phambu, Robert Leblanc, Sébastien Matingu Lufwa and Fils Tabale Bundu for showing me around in Boma and sharing their knowledge with me.

2 B. Wastiau, ‘The Legacy of Collecting: Colonial Collecting in the Belgian Congo and the Duty of Unveiling Provenance,’ in: P. Hamilton, J. B. Gardner (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Public History* (Oxford 2017) 473.





Figure 3: EO.o.o.7943, collection RMCA Tervuren;  
photo Plusj, RMCA Tervuren ©.

in different colonial and postcolonial settings, came from different actors (the original owner, his descendants, and the president of Zaire) and served specific purposes, all three have little or no power to reach the Tervuren museum, due to complex practical and political circumstances. We will return to this later.

Despite the limitations, I am convinced that collaboration may be conducive – within all its limits – to encounters in and outside the museum as a ‘contact zone’; spaces that need to be humanized ‘by giving it stories and faces,’ as Philipp Schorch has suggested.<sup>3</sup> After all, as Nicolas Thomas recently noted, dialogue and ‘a new traffic in information and images’ have already led to a positive ‘sea change’ of ‘fundamental importance.’<sup>4</sup> Proactive museums can ‘engage’ with local communities, following a ‘real shift in logic,’ as worded by Bryony Onciul, resulting in both coproduction and ‘good work,’ as well as strive and struggle, which, in the end, is also a form of dialogue awaiting resolution.<sup>5</sup>

Since the RMCA closed for renovation in 2013, EO.O.O.7943 has been placed in storage, pending the first temporary exhibition after the reopening in December 2018. In the meantime, researchers may consult The Museum System for data on this *fétiche*: weight, dimensions and materials. Information on the collection process, however, is minimal and confusing: Alexandre Delcommune is named as ‘field collector’ in Tshikuku before the end of 1878, but the object is also labelled as a 1912 ‘gift’ from the Royal Museums of Art and History (RMAH). Removed from its original context, the statue remains silent and offers no further explanation. Its isolation seems to be symbolised by the neutral background of its ‘official’ coloured picture, which is the depiction I presented in Boma in 2016 (Figure 3). While some stated that the history of the *nkondi* was unknown since its arrival in Belgium – assuming that it had a more quiet life ‘between depot and showcases’ of the RMCA – the frequently overlooked memoirs of Delcommune (published posthumously in 1922) provide more information on the ‘curious adventure’ of this object.<sup>6</sup> Provenance research and analysis of the remarkable *Vingt années de vie africaine* make clear that the term ‘field collector’ is inappropriate. First, it negates any African agency. Second, the object was not simply ‘collected’ in the ‘field’ but was acquired as a result of violent conflicts in and around Boma and the establishment of colonialism.

3 J. Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge 1997) 192. P. Schorch, ‘Humanizing Contact Zones,’ in: O. Guntarik (ed.), *Narratives of Community. Museums and Ethnicity* (Edinburgh 2010) 263. M. Couttenier, ‘The Museum as Rift Zone. The Construction and Representation of ‘East’ and ‘Central’ Africa in the (Belgian) Congo Museum and the Royal Museum for Central Africa,’ *History in Africa*, forthcoming.

4 N. Thomas, *The Return of Curiosity: What Museums Are Good for in the 21st Century* (London 2016) 33.

5 B. Onciul, ‘Introduction,’ in: B. Onciul, M. L. Stefano, S. Hawke (eds.), *Engaging Heritage – Engaging Communities* (Woodbridge 2017) 1.

6 N. J. Snoep, ‘Les Minkisi du Congo et la drôle d’aventure du nkondi “Delcommune,”’ in: *Recettes des dieux Esthétique du fétiche* (Paris 2009) 44–45.

Alexandre Delcommune arrived in Boma in 1875 and headed the local Daumas-Béraud et C<sup>ie</sup> factory. Trading rubber and ivory entailed establishing stable contacts with local authorities but also resulted in conflict. In the 1870s Portuguese warships suppressed local resistance by burning villages and firing shells. When a local chief gave orders to burn three unexploded projectiles, seen as ‘fetishes of the white people,’ hundreds were injured or killed.<sup>7</sup> A more personal conflict with the *mambouc* Jouca-Pava resulted in the death of a ‘healer’ [*guerisseur*] and the destruction of his ‘war fetish,’ both shot by Delcommune. Eventually, after the military surrender, Delcommune married Jouca-Pava’s eleven or twelve year-old daughter.

Yet another clash, this time with the nine chiefs in Boma, resulted in the ‘acquisition’ of EO.o.o.7943. According to Delcommune, the conflict was caused by the 1878 drought that caused trade to decline and thus income for local traders to diminish. When the nine Boma chiefs increased taxes on trading routes to offset their losses, they were regarded as ‘intolerable’ and as trying even ‘the calmest man’s patience,’ Delcommune explained.<sup>8</sup> The Boma kings disagreed and stated: ‘[I]f the whites were not satisfied, all they had to do, was to return to the place from where they came.’<sup>9</sup> The statement was seen as a ‘declaration of war,’ and plans soon followed ‘to teach the nine potentates an exemplary lesson.’<sup>10</sup> The attack was launched late 1878 around the time that the Comité d’Etudes du Haut-Congo was created (CEHC, 25 November 1878). Whether unintentionally or deliberately, Delcommune does not indicate the exact date, stating merely that shortly after three in the morning Ne Oro, Ne Kalado and Ne Kuko were attacked by Angelino da Motta Veiga, Otto Lindner and Delcommune, respectively. The latter was supported by 24 *Kroumans* or local slaves acquired from local chiefs and working for Europeans as mercenaries.<sup>11</sup> The next day five other Boma chiefs were attacked: Ne Tshanda, Ne Duculla, Kamaloanga, Ne Lutila and Ne Kuka. Only the village of Ne Chuva was spared, when the conquered chiefs asked for a cease fire. Ne Chuva (Portuguese for rain) received this name because he could bring rain, even in the dry season, thanks to a special *umbidika* statue.<sup>12</sup> The sudden, organized attack with armed mercenaries, a system that later on was also used by the Congo Free State and the *Force Publique*, may indicate to an early collaboration between Delcommune and the CEHC, an organisation that in theory was not allowed to take political actions. Henry M. Stanley, however,

7 A. Delcommune, *Vingt années de vie africaine. Récits de voyages, d’aventures et d’exploration au Congo belge, 1874-1893* (Brussels 1922) 41.

8 *Op. cit.*, 50.

9 *Op. cit.*, 93.

10 *Op. cit.*

11 Allegedly, Delcommune ignored why they were called *Kroumans*, but in fact Europeans used the

term to suggest that these were free men from Kru coast in Liberia. *Op. cit.*, 94. H. Vanhee and J. Vos, ‘Kongo in the Age of Empire,’ in: S. Cooksey, R. Poyner and H. Vanhee (eds.), *Kongo across the Waters* (Gainsville 2013) 82.

12 F. Bontinck, ‘Boma sous les Tshinus,’ *Zaire-Afrique* 135 (1979) 308.

later on admitted that ‘the so-called Geographical and Commercial societies were not intended solely to advance geographical knowledge, but also to further the political interests of their Governments.’<sup>13</sup>

On the first day of the attack, Delcommune quickly reached Kikuku, east of Boma. The original village has now disappeared and was moved uphill, due to the 1958 construction of the Bralima brewery, which continues to produce Primus and Turbo King. The ‘heavy [*nourrie*, literally ‘well fed’] fusillade’ in the middle of night must have come as a complete surprise to the residents and lasted only 15 minutes. Delcommune’s troops, armed with Schneiders and Winchesters, easily overpowered local soldiers. Moreover, Delcommune had ordered his men to set fire to the first houses they reached. In his memoirs, he explained that the fire had to ‘illuminate the scene and instil fear among those under siege.’ As a result, ‘the natives fled everywhere, while a radiant sun lighted the rather sinister scene.’<sup>14</sup> Kikuku residents undoubtedly awoke in panic and hastily fled, taking whatever they could with them. With Delcommune’s men at their heels, however, they were forced to leave things behind: ‘[...] my men found a big war fetish, probably taken with them during the first assault, but then undoubtedly tossed in the bush by its porters, when we were close on their heels. This fetish was one of the most reputed idols of the whole region.’<sup>15</sup> Delcommune already knew the statue and had even used the ‘God’ before to locate six men accused of theft. A nail was driven into the statue, and the *mananga* declared that all accomplices would die. Two days later, the thieves were apprehended. Renting the object was expensive, however, and required gifts of liquor to quench the ‘idol’s’ thirst. Once the *Kroumans* had transported the statue to his trading post, the power object could be used free of charge. Delcommune also attributed (super)human qualities to the object and regarded it as a ‘hostage,’ even ‘more important than a human hostage,’ ‘detained’ in a metal warehouse. The ‘war fetish’ was also used to guard his shops, which could now be left open, even at night.<sup>16</sup>

Remarkably and important in this context, collecting was immediately followed by restitution demands in 1878. After the conflict, a ‘palaver’ was organized in Boma-Sundi. ‘Boma kings accepted all the whites demanded’: taxes were increased only slightly, but fines for breaking the new *mukanda* were doubled.<sup>17</sup> Suddenly, unannounced, Ne Kuko demanded the return of his statue. Delcommune refused, arguing that the object belonged to him as ‘booty.’ He agreed to discuss a ransom [*rachat*] at a more appropriate time. Ne Kuko reacted furiously, and Delcommune subsequently invited him ‘to come and get it,’ simultaneously advising him not to ‘tempt the adventure.’ The dispute

13 H. M. Stanley, *The Congo and the Founding of Its Free State: A Story of Work and Explorations* (London 1885) I, 56.

14 Delcommune, *Vingt années*, 96.

15 *Op. cit.*

16 *Op. cit.*, 98, 100.

17 *Op. cit.*, 101.





Figure 4: Robert Leblanc leads the way to the former 'chalet' of the Governor General, strategically situated on a hilltop overlooking Boma. Former sites of local power, marked by baobab trees, reflect traces of usurpation by colonial rule.



instigated conflict in local politics, as Ne Kuko accused Jouca-Pava (now the father-in-law of Delcommune) of obstructing restitution of the statue during the peace negotiations, despite the ‘large ransom’ [*riche rançon*] offered. The conflict ended in a second attack on Ne Kuko’s village, this time by Jouca-Pava. The latter burned the personal residence of Ne Kuko, who had to pay a considerable ‘war tribute.’ According to Delcommune, the war broke the prestige of Boma aristocracy and affirmed the authority of the Europeans.<sup>18</sup> After a short stay in Belgium, Delcommune soon returned to Boma, now officially serving the Association Internationale du Congo (AIC), as the CEHC was called after November 1879, and tried to arrange the official submission of all nine Boma kings, who, unable to write, signed treaties with an x.<sup>19</sup> After the Berlin Conference, Boma became the CFS capital and home of the Governor General (Figure 4).

When Delcommune returned to Belgium in 1883, he brought with him not only the child he had with Jouca-Pava’s daughter but also the statue of Ne Kuko, which he donated to the AIC. The object was initially exhibited in the Royal Museum of Weaponry, Antiquities and Ethnology at the Halle Gate in Brussels and in 1885 was transferred temporarily to Antwerp, to appear in the Congo exhibition of the World’s Fair and thus in colonial propaganda. In a replica of the sanatorium in Boma, created in 1884 by doctor Jean-Baptiste Allart, Ne Kuko’s ‘fetish’ deeply impressed visitors. According to one, the statue was easily recognisable by ‘a deep scar on his forehead, caused by the natives rubbing fingers there, always in the same place.’<sup>20</sup> After the Expo, Ne Kuko’s statue returned to the Halle Gate but due to lack of space was moved (together with other African objects in the Janssen collection) to the Royal Museums of Decorative and Industrial Arts (now the RMAH). Because exhibition rooms were also unavailable in the Cinquantenaire, and a new museum building was to be opened in Tervuren in 1910, chief curator Eugène Van Overloop was convinced that transfer would be an ‘intelligent and patriotic work.’<sup>21</sup> When former Governor General Camille Janssen discovered that ‘his’ objects were relocated, however, he reclaimed his collection. While some suggested to return to Janssen his ‘dirty Congolese things’ and to send the rest (including Ne Kuko’s power object) to Tervuren,<sup>22</sup> all African objects were moved to the Museum of the Belgian Congo in the end. Due to a mix-up with the larger Janssen collection, Ne Kuko’s statue was exhibited with a label incorrectly mentioning Janssen as the donor. Delcommune met again with Ne Kuko’s statue in Tervuren and noted the error: ‘Evidently, this honourable Governor is not there for no reason and it is fairly logic that they have attributed this donation to him, but the donor name is none the less inexact.’<sup>23</sup>

18 *Op. cit.*, 101-104.

19 *Op. cit.*, 166-167. Bontinck, ‘Boma,’ 313-314.

20 A. Geelhand, ‘Le Congo à l’Exposition d’Anvers,’ *Bulletin de la Société Royale de Géographie d’Anvers*

11 (1885) 400.

21 RMAH archive, 10.458, Van Overloop to the Minister, 4 May 1909.

22 RMAH archive, 10.458, Ministry of Sciences and Arts to Van Overloop, 20 January 1910.

23 Delcommune, *Vingt années*, 104.

The classification of the RMAH 'gift' as number 7943 in the ethnographic collection, was not the end of its voyage as the object later featured at temporary exhibitions in Oslo (1956) and Rome (1959). Only two weeks after Congolese independence, the object appeared in 'Vorm en Kleur' at the Kröller-Müller museum in Otterlo. Later on, the object was selected, together with 199 others for the exhibition 'Art of the Congo' in Minneapolis, Baltimore, New York, Dallas, Milwaukee and Montreal (1967-1969). This travelling exposition inspired the second demand for restitution, this time by Mobutu who used the museum catalogues to question the legitimacy of the same museums. During his famous speech at the UN in New York in 1973, the president questioned the systematic pillage of Zaire and demanded the return of the 200 objects as part of his *recours à l'authenticité*. Obviously, the voice of Mobutu in New York sounded louder than the one of Ne Kuko in Boma-Sundi, but even the demands of the president of a postcolonial nation would remain rather powerless as will become clear.

Eventually, RMCA Director Lucien Cahen composed a list of objects to be 'donated' to Congo. He took care to avoid the term 'restitution,' because it linked Belgian colonialism to exploitation, whereas a 'gift' confirmed 'Belgium's self-image as a benevolent (former) coloniser.'<sup>24</sup> Forty objects from the 'Art of the Congo' exhibition, however, were soon replaced by 'equivalent objects.' In the end, all objects from the list were replaced, with one exception: the famous Kuba *ndop* statue returned in 1976. Despite Cahen's doubts concerning local conservation conditions and the dangers of illegal trade, 1,042 other objects were 'donated' to the Institut des Musées Nationaux du Zaïre (IMNZ) between 1976 and 1982. The vast majority came from the Institut pour la Recherche Scientifique en Afrique Centrale (IRSAC) and the Musée de la Vie Indigène (MVI), two institutes already based in the colony during colonisation. As Sarah Van Beurden explained, the objects of the IRSAC were of minor value and had been transferred to Belgium at the time of Congolese independence. Hence, they merely 'returned' to Congo and not provided as 'restitution.' The objects from the former MVI, a colonial museum in Léopoldville (now Kinshasa), had been transferred for the Expo 58 in Brussels and other European exhibitions. By the end of the tour, the MVI director considered the situation in Congo to be too unstable and deposited the objects at Tervuren. Since the MVI had become the property of Zaire in 1961, however, 'there is a legal argument to be made that these objects already belonged to Zaire.'<sup>25</sup> In the end, only 144 objects of minor importance were selected at Tervuren, causing great disappointment in Kinshasa.<sup>26</sup> As a result, the statue of Ne Kuko, after touring in the United States in the 1960s, was brought back to Tervuren and did not return to Congo.

24 S. Van Beurden, *Authentically African: Arts and the Transnational Politics of Congolese Culture* (Athens 2015) 118-124.

25 Van Beurden, *Authentically African*, 122.

26 *Op. cit.*, 123.

Demands for restitution and the Congolese independence were nonetheless major sources of upheaval in Tervuren. According to Huguette Van Geluwe, ethnography curator at Tervuren, the RMCA as a whole became 'the focus for claims sometimes of a very radical nature, from the new Congolese nation, which demanded that it be purely and simply transferred, together with its contents.'<sup>27</sup> Van Geluwe explained in an interview that following Congolese independence – that questioned the mere existence of a museum in the metropole – plans were made to appoint a Congolese director alongside the Belgian one in Tervuren. This idea was pre-empted by establishing the IMNZ in Kinshasa in 1970, with Cahen as director. Van Geluwe also explained that in response to decolonization and the restitution demands, the museum tried to shed its colonial 'curse', by changing its name to the Royal Museum for *Central Africa* and by including objects from Oceania, North Africa and the Americas in a 'world ethnography' exhibition in the 1970s.<sup>28</sup> The objects of 'cultures without writing' came from the RMAH and were obtained through exchanges providing Art Nouveau objects from the 1897 World Exhibition in Tervuren. Van Geluwe reported that the 'spectre of restitution' seriously curtailed the museum activities. New temporary exhibitions and publications were avoided, so as not to instigate new restitution demands.<sup>29</sup> Between 1969 and 1975, no temporary exhibitions were organized in the RMCA. Until 1995 RMCA expos did not focus on Congo but on Southern Africa, North Africa, East Africa, West Africa and even South America.

Ne Kuko's statue was reintroduced in the permanent exhibition at Tervuren only in 2007 and was featured in temporary special exhibitions. However, catalogues offered little or no information on 'biographies of people and objects.'<sup>30</sup> Despite past complications there, Ne Kuko's statue was even shipped to the United States for the 'Kongo across the Waters' travelling exhibition.<sup>31</sup> In contrast to the United States, where the National Museum of the American Indian Act was enacted in 1989, no recent legal documents can frame restitution demands in Belgium. As a result, the 1970 UNESCO Convention still figures as the standard document.<sup>32</sup> The final text acknowledged that local 'cultural property' with scientific or artistic value had to be protected and advised setting up local museums, but the document

27 H. Van Geluwe, 'Belgium's Contribution to the Zairian Cultural Heritage,' *Museum* 31:1 (1979) 35.

28 Royal Decree, 23 August 1960.

29 Interview by M. Couttenier, 24 August 2009.

30 Thomas, *The Return of Curiosity*, 118. K. Heymer, 'Yombe/Vili,' in: *Afrikanische Skulptur. Die Erfindung der Figur* (Köln 1990) 183. Snoep, 'Les minkisi du Congo,' 45. A.-M. Bouttiaux et.al. (eds.), *Geo-graphics: A Map of Art Practices in Africa, Past and Present* (Brussels, 2010) 261.

31 H. Vanhee, 'Fearsome Agents of Law and Order,' in: S. Cooksey, R. Poynor and H. Vanhee (eds.), *Kongo across the Waters* (Gainesville 2013) 195.

32 J. Volper, 'Défendons nos musées!', *Le Figaro*, 6 September 2017. For a reaction see: C. Fromont and H. Vanhee, 'Restitution d'œuvres aux pays africains : "Défendons des musées ouverts au changement !"', *Le Monde*, 10 October 2017.



was not retroactive, meaning that all objects already collected before 1970 remained in place, that is in the metropole. As a result, the repeated Congolese demands for restitution of their *kitumba* remain silent in Europe, where EO.o.o.7943 remains thirsty, hungry and powerless.

Since Chris Marker and Alain Resnais's motion picture *Les statues meurent aussi* (1953), museums exhibiting mere fragments have repeatedly been compared to graveyards.<sup>33</sup> On several occasions, mute objects, documents and photographs have been presented to poorly informed visitors. Integrating provenance research and conflict in creative exhibitions in Europe and Africa, however, enables visitors to understand the complex, rich and sometimes restricted results of dialogue and encounters. The *Congo Far West* project in the RMCA with artists in residence Sammy Baloji and Patrick Mudekereza is one such creative approach to engaging with Congo and has led to exhibitions in Tervuren (2011) and Lubumbashi (2013). The project – within all its limits – showed that collaboration not always has to lead to changing ownership of objects but may include digital solutions and artistic approaches. Creating diptychs of historical and recent images has brought about interconnected microhistories that transcended factuality to focus on and question macro-historical issues, such as power, violence and imperialism.<sup>34</sup>

Instead of proclaiming oneself, as a scholar, as being 'in favour' or 'against' restitution, I have highlighted in this text above all the complexities of the debate; involving geopolitical issues, emotions and practical concerns (funding, buildings, legal matters, conservation). Provenance research on EO.o.o.7943, from its violent acquisition, through its rendition of exhibition history, to recent conversations about the *kitumba*, has shown that the restitution debate concerns mainly the formation of European and African identities still troubled by problematic colonial pasts. Hopefully, further discussions will enable objects to continue enrich human encounters.

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33 Thomas, *The Return of Curiosity*, 22.

34 Baloji, M. Couttenier, 'The Charles Lemaire Expedition Revisited. Sammy Baloji as a Portraitist

of Present Humans in Congo Far West,' *African Arts* 47:1 (2014) 68. See also: *Congo Far West* (Milano 2011).