



Picture: Natalia Kulka

Tervuren. The Belgian Mirror

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Abstract: The paper describes the history and the ideology of the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium, founded in 1898. The role of the museum and its exhibition is analysed in the context of Belgian history, taking into account the tensions between Flemings and Walloons as well as changes in the attitude towards Africa and Africans. The author proposes to divide the history of the evolution of the RMCA exhibition into four stages: from the colonial exhibition to the current reconstruction of the museum.

Keywords: Belgium; colonialism; museum; Congo; national identity; Africans history.

Introduction

Contrary to its name, for much of its history, the primary (though unrecorded in any official document) purpose of the Royal Museum of Central Africa in Tervuren was to build the Belgian national identity. It is not difficult to notice that the closure of the RMCA in 2013 and its planned renovation (by 2017) take place in the context of the progressive

disintegration of Belgium, which can definitively be recognised as the social and cultural disintegration, if not disintegration in the context of international law.

Recently, the Museum in Tervuren has become the subject of multiple analyses which allow for a critical interpretation of its exhibitions¹ as well as the research activity conducted by the Museum. Likewise, since the mid-1990s, the history of the Belgian colonisation of the Congo as well as the activities of the Belgian administration in the mandate areas (Rwanda and Burundi) has been subjected to discussion, which, on the one hand, allowed to debunk mythical narratives in the history of the Belgian colonisation of the Congo, on the other – to restore the memory of the Belgian genocide in the Congo and its victims. Adam Hochschild,² an American journalist, played the main role in this discussion by publishing *King Leopold's Ghost* in 1998 (Hochschild, 1998). This book exposes actions of the King and the Belgian colonisers in Africa. I believe that it would be impossible to rebuild the exhibition in Tervuren without this debate.

In this paper, I am following the trail laid by Jean Muteba Rahier, who in his article *Ghost of Leopold II* (it seems to be a deliberate concurrence with the title of Hochschild's book) of 2003, drew attention to the need for the history of the Museum in Tervuren to be placed in the context of the history of ethnic relations in Belgium – the country inhabited by Flemings and Walloons (Rahier, 2003). Since the creation of Belgium in 1830, the conflict between these two groups has been played out in multiple ways and has been the primary reference for the description of the social, political, economic and cultural reality in Belgium.

The Museum in Tervuren could serve as a hall of mirrors. In it, Flemings and Walloons looked on the Strangers³ through a Venetian mirror. When looking away, they saw in magnifying mirrors themselves and yet not exactly themselves but Belgians, the heroes of the colonial myth.

In this paper I will not refer broadly to the history of the Congo Free State and the policy of Leopold II, which have both already been discussed in other works.⁴ I look at the colonisation of Central Africa from the perspective of constructing the identity of Belgians. Firstly, I will attempt to synthesise the problems of the Flemings-Walloon relations and the creation of the Belgian nation, and then I will move on to explain successive instances of looking into the “Belgian mirror.”

1 See References.

2 The discussion about the responsibility of Belgium for actions in the Congo would not be possible if not for the accounts of eyewitnesses which were published at the beginning of the 20th century. The most important one was Edmund Dene Morel, a British journalist and social activist, who conducted an investigation into the situation in the Congo Free State and published his findings in a shocking book entitled *King Leopold's Rule in Africa* (Morel, 1904).

3 The term “Stranger” used in this paper denotes the inhabitants of Central Africa – the area governed or controlled by Belgium (i.e. the present-day Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda and Burundi).

4 Cf. the aforementioned *King Leopold's Rule in Africa* by E. D. Morel (1904), *King Leopold's Ghost* by A. Hochschild (1998) or *The King Incorporated* by N. Ascherson (1963).

The question of Belgians

Belgium was created as a separate state in 1830, due to the revolt of the Catholic population in the south of the Netherlands against the power of Protestants from the north. Its independence was sanctioned by the European powers, which perceived Belgium as a buffer state – just another element of the European balance of power. The royal title given to enthroned Leopold I of the German dynasty of Saxe-Coburg – “King of the Belgians” – had a declarative character: ethnic and linguistic misunderstandings between the majority Dutch-speaking population and Francophones, holding the political and economic power, manifested themselves very soon.⁵ After the founding of the state, French – the language of the ruling elite, the military and the very influential Church – was established as the only official language. Therefore demanding the equality of Dutch became the first postulate of social and political movements representing the Flemish.

At the turn of the 20th century, it transpired that the narrative of the victorious revolution against the Netherlands in 1830 was not enough to unite the two groups when one of them felt wronged, abused and discriminated against by the other. In 1912, Jules Destrée wrote in a letter to Albert I, the King of the Belgians: “Sire, il n’y a pas de Belges” (“Sire, there are no Belgians”) (“Belgium may separate,” 1912).

The policy led by Leopold II, the predecessor of Albert I, should be viewed in this context. It had two dimensions which were symbolically meaningful. On the one hand, it was the colonisation policy, which meant the seizure of the Congo as the private property of the King, granted to him by the decision of the Berlin Conference of 1885. The efforts of Leopold II to obtain territories in Central Africa lasted many years. In 1904, one of the first witnesses of the Congolese genocide wrote:

“Dreams of colonial expansion had before that date been nursed by the Belgian monarch, who was careful, however, to assure the assembled explorers and scientists at Brussels [i.e. at the 1876 Brussels Geographic Conference – M. K.] of the absolute disinterestedness of his intentions” (Morel, 1904, p. 9).

In fact, the entire project of King Leopold II was presented as bringing civilisation to the “Dark Continent,” promoting freedom of trade and seafaring and the fight against the Arab slave trade.

Until 1908 the Congo remained the private property of the King. It was only after the Belgian State purchased it when the establishment of the colony, the Belgian Congo, was made possible. Irrespective of its status, from the very beginning of the exploration and industrial exploitation of this territory, it became a target for the influx of Belgians, both Flemings and Walloons, as civil servants, soldiers, industrialists and missionaries. Until 1960 Belgian history was closely connected with the history of the Congo. This was

⁵ The economic differences between these two parts of Belgium are worth noting. In the 19th century, Wallonia was one of the most industrialised and richest regions in Europe, whilst Flanders remained an agricultural and peasant region.

shown by a map on which a huge area of Central Africa and the area of Belgium, nearly 77 times smaller, were marked in a single colour. Both in private memory and the one reproduced in schools or on monuments and plaques in every Belgian village, “making Africa civilised” was presented as a heroic deed of “the poor little Belgium”⁶ and its brave citizens, who lost their lives in the fight against hostile nature. Despite the accounts and literary descriptions of crimes, mass deaths of the Congolese or the extermination of entire communities (as the aforementioned account of Morel of 1904, or *Heart of Darkness* by Conrad of 1902), Belgium and Belgians did not feel any guilt at all.

The second element of the symbolic politics of Leopold II became the architecture, designed to express the political ambitions of the monarch of Belgium as well as to contribute to the economic development of the country. The most monumental buildings from this era are: a huge triumphal Arch of the Fiftieth Anniversary, constructed with the museum complex in the eastern part of Brussels (now in the district which is home to the main institutions of the European Union) and the Basilica of the Sacred Heart, a votive offering for the 75th anniversary of gaining independence, located in the opposite part of the city (Ranieri, 1973). A tramline that leads to Tervuren, located near Brussels, begins not far from the Arch of the Fiftieth Anniversary.

It can be claimed that both dimensions of Leopold II’s symbolic politics are combined in the Museum in Tervuren. In yet another monumental building – the Museum-Mausoleum of the colonial effort of Belgians, there is a place for commemorating brave Europeans bringing culture and civilisation to hitherto unknown areas. Beside the Museum there is also the academy: the institutional upholder of the narration about Belgians and their Congolese epic.

The creation of the Belgian Congo as well as the traumatic experiences of Belgians during the First World War did not stop the devolutionary tendencies. Despite the fact that the equality between the French and Dutch languages had progressed since 1898, in the early 1920s the two communities began to separate: in 1921 a flexible language boundary was established and in the 1930s language division was introduced in the military, education and justice.

It is impossible not to notice that the process accelerated after the decolonisation of the Congo in 1960. In 1962, the final language boundary was established and a conflict over the Catholic University of Leuven erupted five years later (Laporte, 1999). Mass demonstrations and demands for Batavianisation of the University led to separating the French-speaking part of Leuven and the creation of a new university in Louvain-la-Neuve. This conflict showed that religion ceased to play a significant role in building the Belgian identity. As a result, the language division was introduced in almost every area of life (including political parties and healthcare). In 1993–1995 the unitary state was changed into the federation, which did not prevent further crises and the threat of disintegration (as was the case in 2010–2012).

6 The term used by the British war propaganda during the First World War to emphasise the cruelty of the German attack on neutral Belgium.

It is also worth noting that the division of the state in accordance with the ethnic and linguistic principles made at the end of the 20th century coincided with the genocide in Rwanda. In 1931, the Belgian mandate authorities introduced identity documents forcing unambiguous ethnic identification and this is deemed to be one of the causes of the ethnic division of the Rwanda population into Hutu and Tutsi (Fassel, 2011; Nardone, 2010).

The Museum in Tervuren cannot be separated from Belgian history or analysed in isolation from the tensions that grew between the two ethnic groups. The official memories of the Congo and the mission carried out there by the Belgians was intended, in my opinion, to erase resentment between the Flemings and Walloons, who accused each other of discrimination and mistreatment. In the Museum in Tervuren, when I visited it in 2007, Belgium was still unified and Belgians were an indivisible nation. It was enough to go outside (the Museum is located in Flanders) to see that it was no longer the case.⁷

Evidently, the Museum was not the only exponent of the political myth of the Congo. It was supported by numerous veterans and royalists organisations (e.g. the Association for the Royal Dynasty and Cultural Heritage), literature and comics (e.g. Tintin). The Saturday flea market in Brussels serves as a review of memorabilia from the bygone colonial past: from postcards with portraits of Congolese types to lamps with shades supported by a sculpture of a naked African female. Nevertheless, the Museum in Tervuren is a symbolic place where a researcher can most easily grasp the game of gazes between the colonisers and the colonised.

Belgians observe the Strangers. Exhibition (1897)

The first presentation of the Congo Free State and the achievements of the local civilising mission of 1885 led by Leopold II took place during the World Exhibition in Brussels in 1897. Apart from the main part of the exhibition, located in Parc du Cinquante-naire/Jubelpark in Tervuren, there was a colonial exhibition organised, and the Museum's website reads that "it increased interest in **people and animals** [emphasis mine – M. K.] of Central Africa so much that Leopold II decided to use it to promote the Congo" ("Congomuseum – Royal Museum for Central Africa – Tervuren – Belgium," n.d.).

The Congo was an object of genuine national pride in this era (De Boeck, n.d.): the exhibition was intended to strengthen that pride in Belgians by showing the difference between them and the savage Strangers as well as the Strangers who had been affected by the enlightenment mission of Belgian missionaries.

The colony was presented in 1897 in a way that did not differ from that applied for colonial exhibitions in other metropolises. Natural and geological exhibits, as well as artefacts

⁷ In December 2006, in the context of the ongoing political crisis connected with BHV status, RTBF – the main Francophone TV aired the programme *Bye Bye Belgium*, which, while in fact staged, pretended to be a live broadcast of the declaration of independence by Flanders.

of material culture, were presented in the exhibition pavilions. By the park ponds there was a human zoo – a place where exhibition visitors could observe everyday life of the Strangers (Couttenier, 2005, pp. 154–159). This human zoo – as indicated by researchers – was a European phenomenon characteristic of the colonial era and appearing as a permanent element of world exhibitions since the Exhibition in Paris in 1889 (Bancel, Blanchard, Boëtsch, Deroo, & Lemaire, 2004). Anne Dreesbach writes about three elements necessary for the success of such an exhibition: firstly, referring to stereotypes so as to meet the audience's expectations; secondly, referring to the audience's experience (e.g. by showing the Strangers as families, which enabled comparing the familiar with the unknown); thirdly – each exhibition had to have some element attesting to its uniqueness (Dreesbach, 2012). The colonial exhibition in Tervuren was undoubtedly a success: it was visited by over one million people. This happened mainly due to the possibility of seeing the Stranger.

Three black villages inhabited by 65 “real” Congolese people playing out scenes from everyday life were built in the Museum in Tervuren. The differentiation of the villages was intended to show stages of human development: the first one was inhabited by Pygmies, representing the primitive savagery; the second one – by Bangala-speaking warriors, the main labour force of the royal colony (“L'exposition coloniale de 1897,” n.d.); the third one – a village of “civilized Congolese youth,” showing the results of the Belgian dedication to bringing a civilising mission – was organized by Father Van Impe, who ran a school for the Congolese in Gijzegem. The Priest himself opposed the remaining parts of human zoo as he claimed that

“[i]t would be good to show to Belgium that the Congolese can be civilized, that he can be grateful. Our [Congolese – J. R.] kids could sing the Brabançonne [the Belgian national anthem – J. R.], while playing mandolins, mandoles, and guitars when receiving the King” (Rahier, 2003, p. 64).

Observing the Strangers made it possible to constitute the spectators' own separate identity. In view of the definitive oppositions: civilisation versus savagery, divisions between them disappeared. Furthermore, regardless of any discord, they had to carry out a mission jointly. This was worded well by one visitor when describing the embroidered panels adorning one of the exhibition halls:

“Civilisation is opposed to Barbarism, Family to Polygamy, Religion to Fetishism, Freedom to Slavery. In each corner of the hall there are two paintings depicting the Congo's past and its future which is already happening and which will succeed thanks to the acts of the Belgians. It can be said that these works are a true illustration of the surprising results achieved in the decade of the Congolese venture action.”⁸

As we shall see, exactly the same vision was adopted by the authors of the exhibitions in the Museum of the Congo, which was created after the end of the colonial exhibition. Seven living exhibits died of hypothermia and pneumonia and were buried at the churchyard cemetery in Tervuren.

8 *Rapport général du Commissaire Général du Gouvernement, Bruxelles*, s.d. (quoted from: De Boeck, n.d., p. 14).

Belgians observe their magnitude. Museum (1898–2005)

The exhibition was the first step towards the establishment of the Museum in Tervuren. In 1903, in a conversation with Charles Girault, the architect of the building opened seven years later, Leopold II said:

“[w]e are building the Museum in the park and it will be worthy of accommodating all this beautiful collection and which, I trust, will effectively **contribute to the colonial education of my fellow citizens** [emphasis mine – M. K.]” (De Boeck, n.d.).

Along with changes in the political status of the Congo the Museum’s names were changed: the Museum of the Congo (1898–1910), the Museum of the Belgian Congo (1910–1952), the Royal Museum of the Belgian Congo (1952–1960) and, finally, the Royal Museum of Central Africa (since 1960). The Museum has become one of the richest museums of the colonial world, gathering 250,000 exhibits, 600,000 photographs and 600 films from before 1960. It was also the last surviving colonial museum which remained unchanged (Hasian & Wood, 2010, p. 130). In 2002, Guido Gryseels, its new director, referred to the Museum in Tervuren as a “relic” (Duplat, 2013).

Indeed, in 2007, when entering the Museum, one could have an impression of travelling in time. Murat Aydemir, one of the researchers of the Museum in Tervuren, wrote:

“[w]hile the animals, curiosas, busts, maps, snakes, and objects are all recognizable relics from a bygone era, the categories and classifications that inform the walking tour are far from relegated to the past. [...] [Tervuren] ends up representing colonialism as *present*, as both existent and contemporary [emphasis – M. A.]” (Aydemir, 2008, p. 78).

Today we talk about the bygone Museum of the past times but the Museum website still enables us to take a virtual stroll through the Museum before the renovation (“Virtual museum – Royal Museum for Central Africa – Tervuren – Belgium,” n.d.).

The educational programme of the Museum begins in the main hall, decorated with sculptures: “Belgium brings civilization to the Congo,” “Belgium brings prosperity to the Congo,” “Belgium brings security to the Congo.” Each of these sculptures is composed in a similar way, namely a clothed adult figure symbolising Belgium and a naked figure of a child or a child-resembling figure symbolising the Congo. The message contained in these presentations is clear: Belgium enables children of nature to enjoy the gifts of civilisation (Aydemir, 2008, p. 84; Rahier, 2003, p. 59). Other sculptures present “Slavery” (a figure of an African female coerced by an Arab slave trader) and “Fertile Africa.” The first impression serves the purpose of facilitating identity building: the power of the Belgian civilisation meets with unbridled savagery.

“the permanent exposition – writes Rahier – continues to say that a Belgian presence was/ is needed in the ‘heart of Africa’ in order both to stop the Arab slave traders who were/ are ‘decimating’ the helpless and victimized sub-Saharan African populations, and to bring

some 'civilization' to these populations who were/are still living in a state of 'savagery'" (Rahier, 2003, p. 62).

The exhibition layout in the halls reinforced this belief. Aydemir says about the great staging of the 19th-century colonialism era:

"the Africa that the museum contains and represents is, to a large extent, a Belgian production, a set designed, peopled with actors, and filled with storylines that were once directed with national interests in mind" (Aydemir, 2008, p. 77).

Just as in the case of the human zoo, the exhibition of 1897 portrayed Africans as part of their environment, habitat or tribe rather than individuals – in contrast to Belgian colonists, researchers, travellers and scientists presented in the exhibition. The arrangement of rooms was typical: first – the zoology room, then the archaeology room, followed by the ethnography room; characteristically, the exhibition compared archaeological and ethnographic objects (Aydemir, 2008, p. 92).

Present-day research shows that the way the ethnographic exhibition was constructed in the Museum in Tervuren was based on the scheme developed by the Brussels Anthropological Society which adopted measurements of skulls as a basis for the racial division of the Congolese. The collection at the Museum in Tervuren began with thirty-one Congolese skulls (Seiderer, 2012, p. 123).

The Strangers who were to be met by fellow citizens of Leopold II were at the border between nature and culture, in contrast to Belgians. Following Rahier's suggestions, it can be argued that perceiving the Strangers in this manner meant transposing the way in which the French-speaking bourgeoisie had perceived the Dutch-speaking population earlier on. The colonisation of the Congo dimmed the tensions between the ethnic groups in Belgium by temporarily invalidating the conflicts that erupted with a new force in the 1960s after losing the Congo (Rahier, 2003, p. 75).

When meeting the Strangers, the Belgians were able to see who they really were themselves (Rahier, 2003, p. 61). In the Congo they were neither Flemings nor Walloons, they were Belgians – subjects of Leopold II and his successors. Therefore, the Museum became a place of memory about all these Belgians who decided to take part in the colonisation of the Congo and thus became role models. Their full names were placed on numerous commemorative plaques in the building and the on-line archives of the Museum contain the accounts of these Belgians on their stay in Africa and their service for Belgium.⁹ This story about "the great Belgians" cultivated in the Museum contrasted markedly with the complete silence about the Congolese victims of the colonial exploitation.

Therefore, visiting the Museum in Tervuren in the early 21st century could evoke different feelings:

⁹ The archives are available in digital form on the Museum website, see: Van Schuylenbergh, 1997.

“[t]o adherents of philosophies of Humanism and the cultural moral superiority of Europe - in particular the Belgian colonizers of the Congo – the RMCA is a Temple to the glorification of Empire and the colonial project. To those who experienced the ruptures of this project – the colonized Congolese – and those whose material culture and skeletons are on display here, the museum resembles a Tomb...” (Morris, 2003, pp. ii-iii, quoted from: Hasian & Wood, 2010, p. 131).

The problem of colonial memory in the Museum emerged because of Hochschild’s book, which undermined the Congo myth. Despite a wider criticism of the colonial project, the Museum in Tervuren endured as a monument to the lost Belgian Congo. In 1999, “a representative of the Museum admitted that changes of the exhibition were considered but [...] not because of the recently released shameful book” (Hasian & Wood, 2010, p. 131). The argument that “[d]ismantling the RMCA [...] would mean dismantling the only visible traces of the Belgian imperial past; and that must not happen” (Rahier, 2003, p. 79) was even mentioned during academic discussions.

Evidently, the Museum cannot be treated as the only place of cultivating the colonial past but rather as the most prominent place that resisted change the longest. It is impossible not to mention that the educational programme of the exhibition at the Museum in Tervuren and its silence about the Congolese coincided with what was presented in school books (the genius of Leopold II in obtaining the colony, fighting the Arab slave trade)¹⁰ (Rahier, 2003, p. 77). Furthermore, there was and still is an institution responsible for this way of shaping collective memory in Belgium.

The Royal Belgian Colonial Institute was established in 1928, it was then renamed as the Royal Academy of Colonial Sciences in 1954, and five years later as the Royal Academy of Overseas Sciences.¹¹ As mentioned above, in the 1960s the majority of institutions in Belgium were divided in accordance with the language principle. The Academy is an exception, being a Belgian institution, not a Walloon or a Flemish one. While the Museum in Tervuren systematised and visualised the memory about the Belgian empire and its heroes, the Academy dealt with creating the narrative of the history of Belgians in Africa.

Since 1960, as part of its publishing programmes, the Academy has published more than 100 works on the history and society of the Congo during the colonial era. Only one work concerned forced labour, which was the essence of the colonial policy.¹² The flagship publication of the Academy has been *Belgian Colonial Biography* (now *Belgian Overseas*

10 In 2006 a primary school book contained the following information: “[w]hen the Belgians arrived in the Congo, they found a population that was victim of bloody rivalries and slave trade. Belgian civil servants, missionaries, doctors, colonists and engineers civilized the black population step by step. They created modern cities, roads and railroads, harbours and airports, factories and mines, schools and hospitals. This work greatly improved the living conditions of the indigenous people” (Vanthemsche, 2006, p. 89).

11 The Academy website is available at URL address: <http://www.kaowarsom.be/en/index> [last access: 24 September 2015].

12 Adam Hochschild Conference materials *Conférence d'Adam Hochschild – les fantômes de Leopold II* (“CADTM – Conférence d'Adam Hochschild – les fantômes de Leopold II,” n.d.).

Biography), issued since 1948 – a dictionary presenting the Belgian pioneers of the Congo. The first volume of 1948 opened with “Homage to King Leopold II.” The Academics wrote:

“[h]e who should occupy the first place in the book devoted to the commemoration of the first artisans of our colonial work. Three traits dominate the glorious life of Leopold II when it comes to the colonies: political and diplomatic genius, nobility of feelings and selflessness” (“Biographie Coloniale Belge,” 1948, p. V).

In the introduction we read:

“Leopold II found his co-workers in all social classes. Thousands of Belgians followed their example. They brought there their courage, their perseverance, their entrepreneurial spirit, their money, their knowledge, their Christian mercy but most importantly, heroism of their lives. Thanks to them, thanks to the Belgian government, the Congo has become a land of progress that we know and admire today. Indeed, Belgium paid a high price for the place it holds in the middle of Africa” (“Biographie Coloniale Belge,” 1948, p. XXXIII).

The above paragraph without any particular changes could be the introduction to a guide to the exhibition at the palace in Tervuren.

It is only the final volume of the *Biography*, published in 2015, which explains that the previous volumes ignored inconvenient aspects of the Belgian colonisation of the Congo by clearing biographical notes of any controversy. The ninth volume, however, was published at the time when a debate about the colonial past was ongoing in Belgium, eventually forcing changes in the Museum in Tervuren.

The Strangers observe Belgians. Museum (2005–2013)

Until 2005 in the Royal Museum of Central Africa the people presented as subjects (individual persons) were the Belgians participating in the exploitation of the Congo. With the use of photographic documentation and artefacts of material culture the Congolese were assigned the role of exhibits that did not have their own history apart from the history as described by Belgians. The memory of the Congo was only the Belgian memory. The Strangers were in it at the intermediate stage between the Belgian civilisation and wildlife.

The process of changes to the exhibition at the Museum in Tervuren, which began in 2002, rearranges this perspective. The Strangers cease to be subjected to taxonomies and classifications as objects in the Museum collections, they become actors by entering history as persons. Exhibition visitors are no longer exposed to display cases with Congolese types classified into races by a researcher, but see individuals who have their own narration to present.

The result of work of a special committee operating at the Museum in 2002–2004 was the temporary exhibition entitled *Memory of the Congo: the colonial era* (February–

October 2005), presenting “alternative versions of colonial history” (Hasian & Wood, 2010, p. 137). Confronting the two stories: one presented in the main exhibition rooms – a heroic narrative of the Belgians, and another one presented in a single room – the story of the Congolese, was the greatest shock for visitors.

The most controversial part of the exhibition concerned genocide in the times of Leopold II. The exhibition catalogue emphasised that there was no academic basis for claims that the population of the Congo was halved. “The rule of the Congo by Leopold did not result in genocide; indeed, the organizers rhetorically ask how a small group of less than 400 Europeans could have committed a crime of such magnitude” (Gewald, 2006, p. 484).

Nevertheless, the exhibition showed the photos of mutilated victims; these were the same photos that were used in the campaign against the cruelties of Leopold II. They were images which challenged the myth that the Museum had guarded thus far, hence the publications contained the exhibition curators’ clarifications that “contrary and in spite of official directives, abuse had become widespread in the absence of control” (Hasian & Wood, 2010, p. 139). *Memory of the Congo* still tried to fall within the framework of a political myth: the good king of the Belgians bringing civilisation, prosperity and security (as the sculptures in the main hall proclaimed) and a few villains disturbing harmonious Belgian-Congolese relations and distorting the king’s idea. It has to be noted, however, that the Museum’s annual report for 2005 refers both to Hochschild’s book and quotes the term “forgotten holocaust” used in the book (Musée Royal de L’Afrique Centrale, 2006).

Independence! – the second temporary exhibition organised in 2010 on the 50th anniversary of the independence of the Congo was an attempt to go beyond the political myth of the Congo and recognize the Strangers. By presenting the history of violence in the Belgian-Congolese relations, it was in part a response to the criticism of the exhibition *Memory of the Congo*. Those who openly opposed the vision of Leopold II – the Strangers who had not been as “grateful” as Father Van Impe had them be a century before – gained their voice in this exhibition.

When assessing the exhibition of 2010, the reviewers highlighted two issues: a new approach of the Museum to history and memory, and the contrast between the temporary exhibition and the century-old permanent exhibition. Veronique Bragard commented on it as follows:

“[t]he Congolese people who, a century earlier, were displayed in Leopold II’s monumental gardens (which for some of them resulted in death), are eventually replacing the stuffed animals and pre-colonial artifacts the museum has been presenting for decades. One can only regret that the contrast between the content presented above and the room where it is held is not itself foregrounded within the framework of the exhibition” (Bragard, 2011, p. 103).

Beyond the Mirrors. The renovation plan (since 2013)

The closure and the renovation of the “last colonial museum” means, primarily, changing its functions. The new Museum is to cease to be a hall of mirrors and instead will become a platform for meetings and a “place of memory, where Belgium’s colonial past will be addressed capably and openly. [...] a dynamic **platform for research, encounters and dialogue between visitors from different generations and cultures** [emphasis mine – M. K.]” (“Why renovate? – Royal Museum for Central Africa – Tervuren – Belgium,” n.d.). It is a vision quite different from the “colonial education of the fellow citizens” proposed by Leopold II. When the renovation began the Museum Director, Guido Gryssels, stressed that “museums are not supposed to be built on nostalgia” (Jedor, 2013). After a century of the Museum’s operation in an almost unchanged form “it is time to show a different image of Africa and its history, where everyone has their own separate truth” (Jedor, 2013).

The basic idea of the renovation is expressed in the refurbishment masterplan of the building as well as a new permanent exhibition. The renovators deem promoting the “modern vision of the African past and presenting it in the context of the building deprived of the colonial era” as the most important challenge.¹³

Firstly, the main entrance to the building will be moved from the hall decorated with the above-described sculptures of Belgium and Africa to a new pavilion separated by an underground corridor. The underground space will be used as an area for temporary exhibitions on present-day Africa.

Secondly, in addition to existing display cases, modern exhibitions with the use of new media will be presented. For example, an exhibition about the history of Central Africa is intended to show the “long history” of Africa which includes the pre-colonial period as well. When it comes to the history of the Congo Free State and the Belgian Congo, it is assumed that it will be presented in “an academic way” and not an ideological one as had been the case so far.

Thirdly, instead of a single tour route, as was the case previously, there will be four thematic paths dedicated to encounters with the people, history, mineral and natural resources, landscapes and biodiversity.

Finally, a separate section of the exhibition will be devoted to the history of the Museum, including the clarification of the context of its creation and previous activities, as well as the premise of a colonial museum.

The new Museum in Tervuren is no longer intended to serve as the mausoleum of the Belgian colonial project. Instead of embracing its hitherto glorified past, it is intended to

¹³ The exhibition details as provided by: Duplat, 2013 and the Museum website: “Master plan for the site – Royal Museum for Central Africa – Tervuren – Belgium,” n.d.

welcome the future, to be a museum of Africa, not Belgium, and to be a place for meeting the Strangers and not just gazing at them.

The change in the Museum Tervuren has been happening in a specific context. On the one hand, it was enabled by the discussion lasting from the end of the 20th century about the Belgian responsibility for the crimes committed during the colonial period, but also for the heritage of violence faced by present-day DRC, Rwanda and Burundi. Initially, this part of Belgian history was denied and attempts at stifling visions other than the official one, nurtured by the Museum and the Academy, were made (including with the use of legal measures). Gradually, however, the Museum, as exemplified by the exhibitions in 2005 and 2010–2011, departed from the one-sidedness of its message, allowing the Congolese people to speak. On the other hand, when the permanent exhibition was being closed, the political myth of the Congo, undermined by a growing number of researchers, stopped uniting the Belgians. It was difficult to present the greatness and heroism of Belgians since the majority of the population decided that Belgians did not exist. The heroic pioneer bringing civilisation to the “heart of Africa” was as much of a mystification as the common Belgian identity.

Translated by Katarzyna Matschi

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Tervuren, czyli belgijskie lustro

Abstrakt: Artykuł opisuje historię i ideologię powstałego w 1898 roku Królewskiego Muzeum Afryki Centralnej w Tervuren w Belgii. Znaczenie muzeum i jego wystawy jest analizowane w kontekście belgijskiej historii, z uwzględnieniem napięć pomiędzy zamieszkującymi Belgię Flamandami i Walonami, a także zmiany postaw wobec Afryki i jej mieszkańców. Autor proponuje podzielić ewolucję muzeum na cztery etapy: od wystawy kolonialnej po obecną przebudowę.

Wyrażenia kluczowe: Belgia; kolonializm; muzeum; Kongo; tożsamość narodowa; historia Afryki.



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Publisher: Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw

DOI: 10.11649/slh.2016.005

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The work has been prepared at author's own expense.

Competing interests: The author has declared he has no competing interests.