

# **The Congolese colonial heritage**

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## **Historical Review**

On June 7, the Democratic Republic of Congo had a six-day royal visit by King Philippe of Belgium and his wife Mathilde. This visit on the background of colonial tensions is significant for the memory insofar as it is the visit of the sovereign who enjoys the fortune plundered in Congo and who currently reigns on the throne formerly occupied by King Leopold II.

As a reminder, King Leopold II is the Belgian king who in 1885 appropriated the Congo, a territory about eighty times larger than his kingdom, at the end of the famous Berlin conference during which the Western powers of the time had met to share the African lands and make them into colonies.

History does not remember King Leopold II particularly fondly, except that he made the Congolese lands his private property and undertook a violent exploitation characterized not only by severed hands and mass killings but also by the plundering of resources and domination.

Between 1885 and 1908, history credits him with nearly ten million indigenous people massacred, thousands of hands cut off and numerous villages burned. A cruel colonial system of exploitation instituted in order to extract the precious resources, notably rubber and Ivory, that Belgian industry needed to run.

## **Social impact of colonization**

The various authors who have written about Belgian colonial history describe in a general way how the Belgian colonial machinery was mobilized in order to take advantage of the resources present on the vast Congolese lands and how in a particular way this machine of plunder served the Belgian economy as a whole.

On the question of savage exploitation, Éric Toussaint (2020), in his article on "Les crimes de la Belgique coloniale au Congo. Devoir de mémoire", notes over five years, the increasing figures that can describe the curve of rubber exploitation that begins in 1893 and links it to the needs in tires of the nascent automobile industry and the

development of the bicycle. In 1895, a harvest of 33,000 kilos of rubber, in 1896 a harvest of 50,000 kilos, 278,000 kilos in 1897 and 508,000 kilos in 1898.

He also underlines how these harvests had brought colossal profits to the private companies created by Leopold II, and in which he was the majority shareholder.

Reports on the colonial expeditions already indicated at the time, the enrichment of the companies involved in the Congo business, such as the Walloon iron and steel industry, the large Antwerp rubber companies, ABIR and Antwerp, the port of Antwerp where all the raw materials coming from the Congo were traded, had allowed its ascent to rank among the top three ports in the world.

The economic health displayed by the companies involved in the colonial enterprise because of their access to cheap raw materials is reminiscent of the recent history of the Congolese mines of cobalt, copper, etc. On the one hand, these mines enrich the hi-tech companies and contribute to the happiness of consumers of computers, telephones and electric vehicles. On the other hand, the mining companies exploit women and children with miserable wages, degrade the environment and leave the Congolese people in poverty through corrupt contracts.

Although Leopold II had set up a propaganda machine run by Belgian Catholic missionaries repeating the rhetoric of the king's visionary genius, some voices, both political and from civil society, had risen to denounce the perfidy of the Leopold regime. Some illustrious names were mentioned, such as Georges Lorand and Emile Vandervelde, members of the liberal and socialist parties, and the Jesuit Arthur Vermeersch, a theologian and moralist who published a book entitled "The Destinies of the Belgian Congo" in which he denounced the conventions for the acquisition of indigenous lands. The writer like Joseph Conrad in his famous novel "Heart of Darkness" (1899) in which he made a series of poignant testimonies that he witnessed, regarding the fate of the natives.

In 1908, following the international pressure, the Belgian government took the control of the colony from the king and set as a new objective, to make the Congo a model colony. The result is well known. The new master did not differ at all from the king "Rubber First" as he had announced. The system of forced labor did not stop. Instead, after the king's death in 1909, his successors made him a cult figure and a heroic status of "Great King" was attributed to him. Ballads were even written to his glory, extolling his civilizing and philanthropic work, a Belgian parliamentary commission noted in October 2021.

In June of the year 2020, the Belgian sovereign Philippe, had already recognized in a letter the fiasco of the colonial project, thus distinguishing himself from his predecessors. Moreover, during his visit to the Congo, two years after this recognition, he reiterated it in a solemn speech without establishing the responsibilities.

In 1960, Patrice Lumumba had already recalled in his historical speech delivered on June 30, 1960, the day of the independence; the atrocities, the humiliations of the Belgian colonists. This speech will earn him two months later, a coup d'état and an atrocious death. Years later, tongues were loosened. The plot against Lumumba had been concocted by the American intelligence services and the Belgian government of the time in connivance with Mobutu, Lumumba's former private secretary, who later became President of the Republic after a coup d'état with the help of his Western allies. The reason put forward by Lumumba's executioners was to prevent the Congo and its resources from falling under Soviet influence.

### **Legitimate claims**

If the second half of the 20th century in Africa saw the wind of decolonization that led to independence, today a new wind is blowing on the African continent, this time against the forms of domination that are declined in a diverse manner, depending on the nature of the relations maintained between the former colonial powers and the formerly colonized countries.

The claims that fuel the debates on the continent are, among others, the fight against the current forms of imperialism known as neo-colonialism. This neo-colonialism includes, among other things, the implicit support given by Western powers to puppet regimes against their peoples, the plundering of resources, Western interference in the internal affairs of independent states, the ties of subordination maintained by the Western oligarchy, the condescending gaze of certain Western countries towards African countries, etc.

In the diaspora, in addition to the sovereignty claims of African states, questions of colonial heritage are also present in the debates. These questions mobilize the public around the themes of the recognition of colonial crimes, the restitution of stolen objects, the compensation of the victims of colonization and very often return to the discriminations of which that linked to the color of skin which characterizes the current civilization.

These claims have been the basis of numerous popular uprisings, protests, boycotts and attacks against places and monuments or against symbols associated with colonization and discrimination.

The debates that have arisen mainly in the Afro diaspora have led to a collective awareness to the point of not only making certain political decision-makers react but also of moving the most rigid lines.

Thus the case of George Floyd, an African-American man who died following a police stop in Minneapolis in the USA, provoked a wave of indignation followed by demonstrations that revealed to the world the nature of police brutality in a Western society that is divisive and where the color of the skin is sometimes perceived as a guarantee of guilt.

The protest movements that started in the United States also affected Europe, to the point of putting the questions of the colonial past back on the table in Belgium. And in the process, the colonial archives were revisited and led to the official recognition of Belgium's indirect involvement in the vast plot against the Congo followed by the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, the first Prime Minister of independent Congo. Lumumba's death was horrific, as he was tortured, cut into pieces and then dissolved in acid to erase all traces. As there is no such thing as a perfect crime, a Belgian gendarme who participated in this despicable assassination kept some of Lumumba's remains, notably his tooth as a trophy. It is this relic that was buried in a public ceremony worthy of the rank of national hero, organized last June 30 in Kinshasa at the memorial dedicated to Lumumba.

Lumumba's biological family in particular and the Congolese people as a whole can finally put an end to the long mourning that has been going on, until the culprits are identified. If at all, they will be identified one day.

### **The museum collaboration between Belgium and the DRC**

During his stay in Kinshasa, King Philippe symbolically initiated the beginning of the reinforcement of the scientific and museum collaboration between Belgium and the DRC. On this occasion, the Royal Museum for Central Africa returned to the National Museum of Congo in the presence of the Congolese authorities a giant mask called Kakuungu belonging to the Suku people formerly used during initiation rites and holding protective virtues.

According to the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) located in Tervuren near Brussels, it has a collection of nearly 128,000 objects, 85% of which come from the DRC. And only 1% of this collection comes from looting.

It remains to be seen whether the remaining 99% of the collection, acquired under colonial acquisition methods, can be considered as having been acquired in accordance with the law.

On the issue of restitution, international opinion and particularly that of the looted countries expect that the country like Germany, which holds a large quantity of fraudulently acquired works of art, will firmly commit itself to the process of restitution of these stolen objects, which for some peoples are not only sacred but constitute the soul of their culture.

For its part, some time ago France had announced aligned itself in the logic of restitution of the colonial heritage to their true owners. Some of the thousands of works of art from its collection stolen during colonization had been returned to Benin. The gesture is to be welcomed but still remains derisory compared to the enormous quantity of objects that are waiting to find their master.

The civil society engaged in the fight against the forms of discrimination inherent in human society is strongly mobilized in favor of the restitution of the colonial heritage insofar as they are perceived as a step forward towards a true reconciliation of memory and a way to prevent such crimes from happening again in the future.

→ This article is a compilation of official reports, press information, academic articles and the author's comments.

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