



Restitution policy of the Royal Museum for Central Africa

Approved by the Director's Advisory Committee on 31 January 2020

1. In the ongoing debate regarding the restitution of African cultural heritage, the RMCA takes an open and constructive position. It is an active participant in the dialogue with authorities and museum policy representatives, and with Belgians of African descent from the relevant countries. The RMCA acknowledges that it is not normal for such a large part of African cultural heritage to be found in the West, given that the countries of origin have moral ownership of such heritage. It also recognises that its collections were acquired in part during the colonial period in the context of a policy of legal inequality: people were forced or placed under pressure to abandon objects, and they were too weak to negotiate the price when they wished to sell objects. During the Congo Free State period, certain objects were obtained using methods that were then illegal in Belgium, such as looting, hostage-taking, or desecration. Dialogue with all the parties involved is crucial. To facilitate such dialogue, the RMCA is providing the inventory of its collections for consultation. It is making every effort to publish the inventory of all its ethnographic collections and archives online. Political decision-makers in Congo and Belgium plan to create a special working group for collections from Congo to tackle the issue, and the RMCA wishes to make a positive contribution to this endeavour.
2. From a legal standpoint, the collections of the RMCA are the inalienable property of the federal state and belong to federal heritage. Restitution can only be decided upon by the federal minister for Science Policy within a strict legal framework and would require approval by parliament. Long-term loans can be approved by the director-general of the RMCA.
3. Given that the method and circumstances are unclear with regard to the acquisition of part of the collections, the RMCA shall prioritise research on the provenance of its collections. African scientists will also participate in this effort through, among others, a new Scientist-in-Residence programme as well as a Visiting Scientist programme.
4. There is still significant cultural heritage present in Congo and Rwanda, and these countries wish to pursue a collaboration in reinforcing their capacities. The RMCA shall continue to invest in capacity-building for African museums in the areas of collection management and restoration, storage, digitisation of inventories and archives, and public-oriented activities. The RMCA has close partnerships with the Institut des musées nationaux du Congo (IMNC), the

Institute of National Museums of Rwanda (INMR), and the Musée des civilisations noires (MCN) in Dakar, Senegal. With these museums, the RMCA has a vast five-year collaboration programme for collection management and restoration, educational and public-oriented activities, the digitisation of inventories and archives, and joint and travelling exhibitions.

5. To allow faster and easier access to its collections, the RMCA will step up its efforts to digitise the archives, photos, and films in its possession so that these can be made available online, and digital copies thereof can be transferred to the relevant countries. A pilot project is ongoing with Rwanda. A travelling exhibition on speakers of Bantu languages is in preparation with the MCN and the CICIBA (Gabon).
6. The RMCA will advise the relevant minister on the possibility of returning physical objects, provided there is a formal petition from a recognised authority and following a detailed investigation on the manner in which the requested objects were acquired. Special attention shall be given to objects with significant symbolic value for the countries in question. To establish these priorities, the RMCA shall be open to contributions and questions from the diaspora, African academics, and local communities in the relevant countries. In the event of a formal and pertinent request for restitution, the director-general of the RMCA shall form a working group composed of internal and external scientific experts of the relevant collection, representatives of the RMCA scientific and public-oriented services, as well as relevant representatives from Africa and the African diaspora in Belgium. This working group shall then advise the federal minister for Science Policy on the specific question.
7. There is currently no legal framework for restitution in Belgium. In 2018, the federal minister for Science Policy announced the creation of a working group for this purpose, which was tasked to draft a framework with clear criteria for the possible restitution of collections and human remains. Priority was to be given to collections of great symbolic value or acquired through looting or theft, and to the return of human remains. In addition, special attention was to be given to collections that would complement those present in the countries concerned and render them more representative. As the federal government has been acting in a caretaker capacity since December 2018, the announcement did not lead to subsequent concrete measures.

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