

## From Stalemate to Progress: Navigating the Restitution Maze in Belgium and DR Congo

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**Abstract :** In the realm of cultural heritage, few issues loom larger than the ongoing battle for restitution faced by European and African museums. In Belgium, this contentious process was set in motion by two pivotal events. Firstly, the resounding revelations of the French report on restitution, which boldly declared that 'over 90% of African cultural heritage resides outside of Africa. Secondly, the seismic impact of the Black Lives Matter movement following the tragic death of George Floyd. These two events unleashed a wave of outrage among Afro-descendants, who viewed the possession of colonial collections as an enduring symbol of colonial dominance and a stark validation of the systemic racism deeply ingrained within Belgian society. The instrumentalization of cultural property as a means of wielding political power is by no means a novel concept. Its roots can be traced back to the constructed justifications that emerged in the 1950s, during which the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren played a pivotal role as the self-proclaimed 'guardian of Congolese cultural heritage'. This legacy of legitimizing colonial presence permeates the fabric of Belgium's museum reform policies and the structural management of museums in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Employing a dialectical approach, I embark on an exploration of the intricate historical interplay between the Royal Museum for Central Africa and the Institute of National Museums of Congo. From this vantage point, I delve into the arduous struggles faced by museums in both the DRC and Belgium as they grapple with the complex and contentious issue of cultural heritage restitution. Central to these struggles is the profound quest for meaning and (re)definition of museums, particularly for Congolese and Afro-descendant communities whose identities and narratives have long been marginalized and suppressed. As the narrative unfolds, I shed light on the prospects for cooperation that have emerged from my extensive fieldwork. Within the interplay of historical entanglements, struggles for restitution, and the search for a more inclusive and equitable museum landscape, glimmers of hope emerge. Collaborative efforts and potential avenues for mutual understanding between Belgium and the DRC begin to take shape, offering a beacon of possibility amidst the often tumultuous discourse surrounding cultural heritage.

**Keywords :** restitution, museum struggles, Belgium, DR Congo

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