

Authentically African

*Arts and the Transnational Politics of
Congolese Culture*



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INTRODUCTION

Congolese History and the Politics of Culture

IN OCTOBER of 1973, donning his trademark leopard-skin hat, Zairian leader Mobutu Sese Seko appeared before the UN in New York and in a booming voice deplored the “systematic pillage” of his country’s valuable cultural heritage by Western powers. Just as he had led a campaign to nationalize the recently independent country’s mineral resources, Mobutu imagined Zaire’s cultural heritage as a resource to be protected and “nationalized” in its own right. His demand for the restitution of “authentic” and valuable museum objects laid bare not only the cultural, but also the economic and political value of art objects to the Mobutu regime.

How did these specific objects and collections become defined as cultural and national heritage for Zaire? The answers to these questions do not lie only in changing ideas about the nature and value of African art. We may also find them in the construction of cultural authenticity and heritage as well as in the institutional and organizational politics of the cultural economies of both colonial and postcolonial Congo.

Authentically African traces a transnational process of cultural reinvention from the colonial into the postcolonial era and demonstrates its role in the construction first of Congo’s and later of Zaire’s cultural and political economies.¹ In pursuing this project I have identified a common set of strategies that legitimate political power through the stewardship of cultural heritage. Collectively I will refer to these as *cultural guardianship*. I argue that cultural guardianship, particularly in the late colonial era, became a justification for Belgium’s colonial presence in Congo, a development that had an impact on ideas about

political legitimacy far beyond the colonial era. We may trace the development of this theory of cultural guardianship through the definition, representation, collection, and possession of Congolese art and ethnographic material. Visible also in debates over cultural restitution and the creation of a postcolonial museum institute in Zaire, it complicates our understanding of the extensive process of decolonization. More broadly, the book analyzes the reinvention of traditional cultures as national heritage, as well as world heritage, in order to explore the cultural politics of the Mobutu regime and its claim on cultural guardianship in the construction of hegemony—nationally, but also internationally.

As Benedict Anderson has theorized, the creation of national identities required both forgetting and remembering; and in the creation of collections, the direction of research agendas, and the construction of displays, museums do quite a lot of both.² As this book shows, museums were a primary battleground for different and competing epistemic discourses regarding authenticity, and they were active participants in the decolonization process and the formation of the postcolonial nation of Zaire. Their collections were sites of debate over the nature of the colonial past and the definition of the postcolonial future as well as important pawns in the struggle over cultural guardianship. In this book, I use museums, the people connected to them, the politics that surround them, and the messages they shaped, as a “prism upon the field of cultural production,” as well as on the broader field of cultural politics.³ They are simultaneously symbolic representations of the state and microcosms that are at times the location of contradiction and contestation. They are an avenue through which we can explore the construction of ideas about cultural authenticity, as well as the political life of these ideas. Two museums in particular will be central to the history in this book. The first is the former Museum of the Belgian Congo, now named the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA), but often called “Tervuren,” after its location in a Brussels suburb.⁴ The second is the Institute of National Museums in Congo, founded between 1969 and 1971 through a collaboration between the RMCA and the presidential office in Zaire.

This book is not “merely” about culture but, more broadly, about power. I concur with Fernando Coronil’s observation that “power today cannot be analyzed exclusively within the boundaries of the nation-state.”⁵ It is in a broader, transnational context that we need to analyze

the construction, the circulation, and the affirmation of ideas about both cultural heritage and national identity—first, because of the transnational circulation of the objects, and second, because of the international nature of the creation of knowledge about these objects.⁶ Transnational history is often understood as the study of movements, people, ideas, and processes that bypass or envelope the nation-state, but I believe it can also be very effective in informing the study of the very nation-state it is so often assumed to circumvent.⁷ Particularly in the case of a newly independent African state, legitimation happened not merely among its own population but also in the arena of international politics and transnational organizations. In the case of the Mobutu regime, I would argue that the manipulation of perceptions of Zaire in a global public sphere became more important than their national construction.

But it is also at this point that the weaknesses of past treatments of transnationalism become clear.⁸ All too often, the West still plays the role of center, while the rest of the world is relegated to the periphery of transnational processes and histories. The account of Zaire's postcolonial cultural and museum politics in this book offers a recalibration of transnational approaches by placing Africa in the center, and not at the periphery, of the analysis.

A COUNTRY WITH MANY HISTORIES

Central to this book is the circulation of objects, and their appropriation and reinvention, often for political purposes. The appropriation of the material cultures and objects from other cultures was not a process exclusive to Western collecting and display however, nor was it unique to the colonial and postcolonial eras. Although it is impossible to do the topic full justice here, this section serves as a short introduction to the diversity of cultures and histories in the Congo basin, while also drawing attention to the genealogies of what later becomes defined as Congolese art through a number of examples.⁹

Most of the Central African societies the Belgians encountered during their conquest in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did not live in isolation. Trade routes crisscrossed the Congo basin and were engines of cultural exchange and change, connecting to the Indian Ocean world in the East and the Atlantic Ocean world in the West. Central African contact with Europeans started with the arrival of the Portuguese on the Atlantic coast in 1483. The trade that initially drove this contact was in the form of ivory and other goods,

although soon the transatlantic slave trade dominated. The contact effected great cultural changes, both locally and globally. Initially driven by the desire of the Kongo king for a spiritual and political transformation that would strengthen his position of power (locally as well as in the realm of Christian kings), Kongo cultures incorporated elements of Portuguese Christianity into Kongo cosmology and political economy, a “tradition of renewal” that started in the Kongo kingdom of the fifteenth century but continued in the many smaller kingdoms, polities, and communities in the region until the nineteenth century.¹⁰ This cultural evolution became embedded in the material and artistic cultures of the region. Objects that served as markers of political power, such as swords, were both inspired by European examples and embedded within local cosmologies through the use of iron and the presence of the cross, for example.¹¹ The latter was a common theme in Kongo Christian art because of its dual origins: as the Christian cross, but also as the Kongo cross (or the corresponding diamond), a symbol of the cycle of life and representative of regeneration. It occurred not only in explicitly Christian Kongo art such as crucifixes, but also in healing objects, textiles, and pottery, among other things.¹²

Joseph Miller has suggested that western Central Africans had “an unquenchable thirst for foreign imports,” which stimulated and reflected their integration into a global, Atlantic economy.¹³ Imports included textiles, weapons, alcohol, and glass products such as beads and mirrors. Much of the wealth to buy these things was inextricably tied to the slave trade. That same slave trade was also the foundation for the global impact of Kongo (and other African) cultures, as they lived on and were reinvented in the diaspora.¹⁴ It also signaled the beginning of European collecting of African-made objects. A market emerged in ivory objects, such as spoons, salt cellars, and decorated horns, made specifically for Europeans. Objects used within Kongo cultures, however, also started making their way to European collections. Regarded as “curios” and representatives of a world considered profoundly different from the European one, they set the stage for a centuries-long European process of representation and reinvention of African cultures and societies through objects.¹⁵

While immediate contact with Europeans was limited to the coastal regions, the impact of this contact reverberated far inside the continent, most conspicuously in the form of ever-expanding slave raids, but also in the new material things and foodstuffs traded along well-established

trading routes that had stimulated change and exchange in the region for centuries. By 1300 these routes already carried iron, copper, and salt, in return for beads and cowrie shells, linking equatorial Africa to southeastern Africa and eventually to the Indian Ocean world.¹⁶ The Atlantic trade added various textiles, weapons, alcohol, and New World foods such as maize and manioc.

This growing economic sphere created and fed upon political and cultural change. The expansion of two of the most important polities of the area, the Luba and, later, Lunda spheres of influence, were tied to the exchanges that took place along these routes.¹⁷ Objects, particularly those with a certain prestige, often embodied this “cosmopolitanism” and served the political economy of the power structures in the region. For example, the spread and use of royal Luba insignia, such as carved staffs, stools, ceremonial axes, and bowl figures, demonstrated not only the expansion of Luba power but also the appeal of the objects that physically represented this power. During the height of Luba power (ca. 1700–1860, sometimes referred to as the “age of kings”) neighboring peoples (or “client polities”) readily adapted these insignia as a sign of their incorporation into the Luba “empire,” sometimes receiving them as a form of payment, sometimes copying or emulating them, or commissioning them from Luba artists. Their popularity illustrates the close association that existed between their possession and political legitimacy. Mary Nooter Roberts has demonstrated that these objects’ power rested on their invocation of the interconnection between rulership and cosmology, effectively tying their possessors to supernatural realms of sovereignty.¹⁸ Their popularity did not necessarily imply however, that they were on display for all to see. On the contrary, secrecy and limited access enhanced their value.

The eastern edges of the Atlantic world touched the western edge of the Indian Ocean world in what today is eastern Congo. By the nineteenth century, the impact of the Atlantic slave trade and the European presence on the western Central African coast were felt throughout the northern reaches of the Congo basin and as far east as the edge of today’s Katanga region.¹⁹ At the same time, communities in the eastern part of the Congo river basin were drawn into connections with Swahili ivory and slave traders from coastal East Africa and the Indian Ocean world. The trade with East Africa mirrored the Atlantic trade in its influence on political, cultural, and economic structures in the region, bringing for example the Swahili language as well as Islam to the region.²⁰

By the time the Belgian king Leopold II set his sights on the area, the Kongo kingdom had long since fragmented and Luba, as well as Lunda, political influence had started to wane. The political landscape that explorers and colonial agents encountered in the east included polities established by Swahili-Arabs or East Africans like Tippu Tip and Msiri. The latter, in particular, straddled both the east- and westward trading routes, allowing Portuguese traders to raid for slaves and ivory in southeastern Congo, while also maintaining ties to the East African coastal economies.²¹

With Western imperialism came not only territorial conquest and economic exploitation, but also a top-down process of cultural interpretation and reinvention in which the extraction of material cultures, and particularly “art” objects by Europeans, played an important role. This extraction took place during the exploration and conquest of the Congo region in the latter half of the nineteenth century, was institutionalized during the Congo Free State (1885–1908), and expanded under Belgian colonial rule (1908–1960). Chapter 1 will investigate how the desire to control through collection, description, and classification gave shape to the collection of the Museum of the Belgian Congo, and how the latter represented and reinvented Congo for a Belgian audience. The book will then explore the implications and consequences of these representations and reinventions for the Congolese, particularly during the late colonial and postcolonial eras.

The process of the colonial conquest, and later the implementation of colonial rule in Central Africa, profoundly influenced the way in which the “precolonial” has been shaped as a historical category. For example, the belief in the existence of a historical “Luba empire,” reflected “a fundamental misunderstanding of African political economy” based upon a literal interpretation of myths of kingship (which were themselves a tool for the promotion of political power) combined with “a prevailing sense that kingdoms *must* have existed.”²² A similar process has shaped views of the past of the Kuba of the Kasai region. Impressed by their artistic abilities and the perceived political centralization around the figure of the Kuba king, early visitors as well as later colonial administrators were convinced of the Kuba’s superiority with regard to their neighbors. This reputation contributed to the Kuba king’s survival in a system of indirect rule—although it certainly did not protect the Kuba from brutal exploitation during the colonial regime.²³

Any admiration by missionaries, colonial administrators or travelers was usually projected upon the past of these societies, and ethnographic and descriptive accounts of cultural traditions were permeated with narratives of decline that underwrote the colonial logic of cultural guardianship. This decline was often attributed to either the impact of the East African slave trade in the Congo basin (which aligned with the Leopoldian justification of colonialism as an antislavery measure) or to the impact of Western modernity (or rather, the inability of Africans to deal with it in the “right” way and hence their need for colonial guidance). Any romanticized impressions of precolonial kingdoms and empires were thus rendered politically harmless and led at most to proposals for indirect rule.²⁴

Instead of a perspective on the past that recognized long-term processes of cultural change and regional, transcontinental, and global connections, the precolonial African past became a category that locked Africans into an ahistorical and “authentic” past.²⁵ While this process created “authentic cultural traditions” as a defining category for the identity (and identification) of Congolese cultures, it simultaneously closed that category off to contemporary Congolese people by viewing the present through the prism of cultural decline—inventing a present, as much as a past.²⁶ This view legitimized “collecting” by Europeans, as the “salvaging” and safeguarding of Congolese cultures.

V. Y. Mudimbe has located the invention of a static and prehistoric tradition in the “*episteme* of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,” and Johannes Fabian has also implicated more recent anthropological discourses and practices in the construction of “the other” as a “temporal, historical, and political act.”²⁷ This book will demonstrate the late colonial and postcolonial life of these constructions, as well as their continued political relevance.²⁸ In particular, this book investigates the historical construction of the categories of “art” and “authenticity” and demonstrates their use as political tools, both within and outside the museum, first in the context of Belgian colonial rule and later in the context of the postcolonial Mobutist state.

MUSEUMS AND AFRICA, MUSEUMS IN AFRICA

The movement and possession of ethnographic and art objects and collections are historically part of larger political, cultural, and economic projects. A large and growing body of scholarship has demonstrated the connection between the creation of museum collections of

non-Western objects, the development of anthropology, and European colonialism.²⁹ We know far less, however, about the creation, development, and politics of museums on the African continent, particularly their postcolonial existence.

The museum landscape in Africa today bears the clear imprint of colonialism. A large majority of the museum institutions on the continent were founded during the colonial era. In French West Africa, the Institut Français d'Afrique Noire (IFAN), based in Dakar and founded in 1936, stood at the head of a system of satellite museums and scientific institutions across the region.³⁰ Many of the museums in former French West Africa today are the survivors of this institutional colonialism. Although the process was less centralized, most of the museums in the former British empire in Africa also have colonial histories. A number of small museums were created at elite schools before World War II, but a wave of "proto-national" museum openings followed between 1948 and 1959, not as a result of a centralized cultural policy, but because of the converging interests of local colonial organizations and administrators with those of African elites.³¹ The case of the Belgian Congo more closely resembles the process in British West Africa. Despite lobbying for a centralized colonial "*politique esthétique*" (a "politics of aesthetics") after World War II, the network of small museums in Congo was the result of initiatives by local colonials, who often came into conflict with the central authority of the Museum of the Belgian Congo near Brussels.

Despite their colonial roots, museum institutions in Africa were not rejected after independence. Their role as nation-building tools suited postcolonial agendas and was often recast in the context of "development" policies.³² However, it comes as no surprise that prominent postcolonial concerns included decolonizing these institutions, and seeking out or creating an African audience. Museum professionals struggled with identifying audiences, seeking out financing, and with the legacy of colonial structures of knowledge in their displays.³³ Regional and international organizations like UNESCO, WAMP (West African Museums Programme), AFRICOM (the International Council of African Museums), and ICOM (International Council of Museums) have all played an important role in the supporting the intellectual, institutional, and practical challenges of museum life in postcolonial Africa.³⁴

Scholarship on museums and their histories in sub-Saharan Africa has been shaped by the many practical concerns of museum professionals and generally lacks analytical depth.³⁵ When this scholarship

is concerned with the past, it is often—and understandably—with the goal of making a clear break with said past. As a result, there are lots of short explorations of the history of individual museums in sub-Saharan Africa, but no sustained efforts to place them in a broader context.³⁶ This also applies to the history of the museums in Congo, where the little scholarship that exists is concentrated on the museum in Lubumbashi.³⁷

An exception to this lack of critical literature is the cluster of publications of the past decade and a half focused on museums in South Africa. The political changes of the 1990s in South Africa, along with the existence of a significant network of heritage sites and museums, have created the conditions—and the urgent need—for critical investigations of the past, as well as a confrontation of the challenges the present holds.³⁸ The political role of public historical spaces like museums and heritage sites in the construction of national pasts and public memory in South Africa has been laid out, as well as the effort to decolonize these spaces.³⁹ This body of scholarship makes clear that museums in Africa have the potential for being relevant—although certainly not uncontested—participants in the public sphere. While authors challenge current museum institutions in South Africa to critically investigate their role in creating national pasts that supported the hegemony of the Apartheid regime, their scholarship also demonstrates a continued faith in the ability of heritage politics and museums to help effect social change via cultural identity formation.⁴⁰

While the South African example is partially a result of specific political circumstances, it is also a reflection of a larger shift in the landscape of museum studies. Western museum professionals have become increasingly concerned with the complicity of cultural institutions in colonial structures of knowledge and the legacy of these structures in the shaping of inequalities of today's globalizing world. They also seek to redeem the museum by making it into a tool for social transformation that reflects postcolonialism.⁴¹

The scholarship on South Africa also nicely demonstrates the place of museums in what Tony Bennett calls the “culture complex,” which comprises “a range of sites in which distinctive forms of expertise are deployed in “making culture” as a set of resources for acting on society.” These sites, which include libraries, museums, heritage sites, schools, and so on, but also a range of knowledge practices and disciplines (such as ethnography and art history), are aimed at bringing

about “calculated changes in conduct by transforming beliefs, customs, habits, perceptions, etc.” Most of these institutions and disciplines are connected to particular “rationalities of government.”⁴² In the case of South Africa, this was the Apartheid regime and its racial theories. In the case of the Belgian Congo, ideas about culture, formed in ethnographic and art historical practices and projected to a broader audience in the displays of Tervuren, underwrote and shaped colonial practices.

The work of Bruno Latour, who urged attention to the contexts in which culture is “made,” looms large in the theorizing of the culture complex. Working with a broad interpretation of the laboratory, which includes locations such as the archive, as well as collections, Latour allows us to theorize the museum as a “centre of calculation”—a setting in which new entities are made that are inserted into fields of knowledge.⁴³ *Authentically African* starts off by tracing how colonial structures of knowledge, developed in and around the museum, intersected with and shaped the nature of Belgian colonial policies, but it departs from Latour and Bennett in its insistence on the “messiness” of the implementation and practice of these bodies of governmental theory. In the political use of the reinvention of cultures we can read the multidimensional and often contradictory nature of historical processes. Neither the creation of knowledge nor the translation of culture “made” in the context of the museum into cultural and social policy are clear-cut processes, proven by both the struggles of the Belgian colonial regime in implementing cultural policies, as well as the limited effect of the Mobutu regime’s almost cynical use of the museum as a political nation-building tool.

The basis for the development of ethnographic scientific information about art and culture in the Museum of the Belgian Congo—its collection—was deeply unscientific in its own creation. The amount of objects acquired via scientific exploration was negligible in comparison with the donations from explorers, colonials, and missionaries and the acquisitions from art dealers and art collectors. The individual motivations to collect material and the knowledge that informed the decision-making process about the selection of objects varied tremendously. Their presence at Tervuren, however, fused this motley group of materials into a unit—“a” collection—and a basis for the creation of knowledge about the objects’ cultures of origin. By contrast, the practices that informed the creation of the collection of the IMNZ in Kinshasa were more systematic and involved far fewer people. It was in

the process of knowledge creation and distribution, however, that the latter faltered, hampered by political co-optation and economic realities. The “crowd-sourced” nature of the Tervuren collection worked to its advantage when it came to the public role of the latter, while very few Zairians felt a similar affinity with the museums in their country.

The connection between museums as “critical switchpoints across different networks . . . [which] . . . in ordering the materials they accumulated from diverse points of collection, produced new entities that they then relayed back out to the world as resources” and particular (authoritarian) rationalities of government becomes even more salient in the second part of this book, in which the Zairian government moves to create a museum with the explicit purpose of decolonizing the country’s cultural representation.⁴⁴ Can such a postcolonial application of the museum as a “technology of power” in central Africa be effective, however, given the deeply compromised nature of the museum as a colonial creation? In order to answer this question, I investigate whether and how the powerful categories of art and authenticity were constructed and used in the postcolonial Zairian context, and how they operated within the museum institute, as well as in the broader context of Zaire’s postcolonial cultural politics.

ARTIFACT/ART AND THE CREATION OF VALUE

The scramble for Africa was accompanied by a “scramble for African art,” as Enid Schildkrout and Curtis Keim have so succinctly put it.⁴⁵ Large numbers of ethnographic artifacts flowed into Europe, finding a home in several newly established museums and feeding the development of anthropology as a science. Taking the “concrete and palpable presence of a thing to attest to the reality which we have made it signify” was a fundamental aspect of Western imperialism.⁴⁶ Having started out as mere curios, these objects became artifacts of science, players in the construction of narratives about the “civilizing mission,” and eventually art and the embodiment of wealth—both financial and cultural.

This shift from artifact to art, chronicled in this book, was reflected in museums displays. The curatorial approaches to displays vacillated between what I describe as “aesthetic” and “ethnographic” (or “anthropological”) approaches. In an aesthetic approach the objects are presented as works of art, exemplified by their physical isolation and an emphasis on their formal qualities.⁴⁷ Ethnographic or anthropological

displays, on the other hand, use objects to teach museum visitors about a culture, so the objects are usually displayed in a way that attempts to tell the visitor something about the relationship between various objects, their function, and their use or symbolism. In reality, however, museum displays are rarely as clear-cut as these theoretical points of reference might lead us to believe: art displays are sometimes accompanied by photos of the objects in situ, for example, or ethnographic exhibitions might highlight the aesthetic qualities of objects.⁴⁸

The art/artifact binary is by no means stable. Museum objects are canvases upon which many values were projected: financial or economic, cultural, and political. These different interpretations and values are not necessarily stable, nor did they exist in isolation from one another. On the contrary, they function as “regimes of value.”⁴⁹ Throughout the book, I use “cultural value” to refer to the capacity of an object to represent “high culture” or “civilization.” Central to the cultural value of an object is its “authenticity,” in addition to its (Western) aesthetic value. These objects, whether they are interpreted as art objects (constructed as aesthetically appealing to the [Western] eye and consequently possessing a high “cultural value”) or as ethnographic artifacts (with less importance as representatives of “high” culture, yet relevant as the representatives of a society and as objects in the scientific study of a society), also have an economic or financial value—that is, a value as commodities that can be traded.⁵⁰

The twentieth century witnessed a progressive broadening of the category of African art. Aided by the primitivist modernists’ interest in African art, Central and West African sculptural objects in particular were increasingly collected and displayed as art objects.⁵¹ From the very first colonial exhibitions in Belgium, there were individual objects that were described as “art” rather than as ethnographic elements. A systematic scientific approach to these objects grew only slowly, however, and remained fragmented until Frans Olbrechts, who went on to become director of the Tervuren museum, developed a complete system of classification that canonized Congolese art and embedded it in the bodies of art historical and anthropological knowledge. The implementation of this classification in the displays at Tervuren in the 1950s—particularly in the form of a new art room—represented the culmination of this trend but was also symbolic of the increased attention accorded to culture among colonial organizations and in colonial policies. The cultural capital created through the institutionalization

of the reinvention of certain Congolese artifacts as art in Tervuren became fuel for both colonial and postcolonial constructions of political legitimacy. It was this ontological shift, and the epistemological changes that followed in its wake, that led to the reimagination of colonialism as a form of cultural guardianship motivated by the protection and preservation of native cultures, a political construction that reemerged in the cultural politics of the Mobutu regime.

THE INVENTION OF AUTHENTICITY AND THE CULTURAL LEGITIMATION OF THE COLONIAL STATE

A recurring topic in this book is the political nature of the invention and use of “cultural authenticity.” Its varying application to objects and people reveal how and why museum employees—but also government officials, politicians, and audiences at large—valued culture. As Sidney Kasfir explains, ideas about the authenticity of African art are based on a series of flawed assumptions about “traditional society” as precolonial, isolated, and homogenous, and about the artist as “bound by tradition” and “controlled by larger forces than himself.”⁵² By investigating the processes through which authenticity was constructed and how, along with the category of “art,” it was deployed, I seek to demonstrate the role of cultural (re)invention in the political projects of colonialism and postcolonialism.

“Indigenous” cultural authenticity became a useful concept in early colonial collecting of African material culture. In the process of removing material from its context, the projection of authenticity onto the objects served to legitimize the removal of an object as an act of salvaging. Crucial to the construction of cultural authenticity was the anxiety regarding “dying” traditional cultures that accompanied modernity’s changes. The belief in their impending disappearance—essentially their existence as a past—was a prerequisite for their authenticity.⁵³

The curators at the Museum of the Belgian Congo made the salvaging of authentic culture into a scientific undertaking, whereby the creation of expert knowledge and the development of a canon of Congolese art became key elements for the recognition of authenticity. The gradual emergence of a comprehensive system of classification accorded objects value and located authenticity, depending on how objects compared to, and fit in with, other objects in the collection. Becoming even further removed from their original context, authenticity and value were now also defined in the way objects were displayed.

The museum, and the art historical canon generated by scholars such as Frans Olbrechts, became authenticity-generating “machines,” constructed as worlds of reference and classification that trumped the cultural context of Congolese societies. They also promoted the subsequent constructions of “traditional” Congolese cultures, and their need for protection, to a broader audience.

Another context in which authenticity played a crucial role was the art market. African art dealers—quite often collectors themselves—contributed significantly to the projection of authenticity upon Congolese cultures. African art trader Henri Kamer described it as follows: “An authentic African piece is by definition a sculpture executed by an artist of a primitive tribe and destined for the use of this tribe in a ritual or functional way. Never lucrative.”⁵⁴ Art dealers and collectors often establish authenticity on the basis of the physical appearance of an object, looking for evidence of use in the patina, and by locating it in the classifications and canons constructed by scholars. Gradually the (Western) provenance—in the form of a genealogy of Western ownership—of an object became equally important in establishing value and authenticity, a trend also noticeable in the ways in which museums valued their collections. The growing importance of this kind of genealogy denied postcolonial Zairian collecting, like that of the IMNZ, access to a significant repository of authenticity, now located in the West. Through this process of identification, dealers and collectors constructed themselves as experts and connoisseurs, members of an elite with access to an exclusive knowledge—a knowledge that helped develop the canon as a scientific framework.⁵⁵ An object’s authenticity also increased its commercial value and, ultimately, its commodification—a process clearly demonstrated in the growing market for African art in Europe and the United States. European colonialism, its networks enabling the movement of these objects from (in this case) Africa to the West, formed a crucial part of the story.⁵⁶

The importance of cultural authenticity lies not merely in how it was defined but in the political implications of that definition. Parallel with the construction of an endangered Congolese cultural authenticity emerged the construction of the explorer, collector, museum director, and by extension the colonial state they represented, as the saviors and protectors of said Congolese culture. The political ramifications of these cultural constructions go beyond the museum and the art market: they legitimized colonial organizations and the colonial state

as creators of policies to save “traditional” Congolese cultures. Until World War II these were based upon an interpretation of colonialism as a “civilizing mission,” but by the postwar period, a broader interpretation of Belgian colonialism as “welfare colonialism” intersected with the maturation of a scientific discourse about Congolese art that emphasized the value of the latter as a resource—one that not only could generate financial value but that could also serve to reinvigorate Congolese cultures.

Of course, “the categories of the beautiful, the cultural and the authentic have changed and are changing,” as James Clifford points out.⁵⁷ The category of Congolese art (and “Primitive” art more broadly) evolved toward a canon and was framed increasingly with reference to objects in Western collections, while authenticity proved a malleable category that existed in the eye of the (Western) beholder. Not only did these categories evolve, they were also open to manipulation and co-optation. Christopher Steiner has illustrated how “authenticity” was captured by art traders in the Ivory Coast who reproduced the physical markers of “authentic” traditional art in order to create objects with significant market value.⁵⁸ The creation of “authentic” art objects for sale to a Western audience was not uncommon in Congo either. In some cases, the canon—in the shape of art books—helped shape the “authenticity” of “fake” pieces.⁵⁹

The constructed nature of categories such as “art” and “authenticity” illustrates how disparate categories of value projected upon traditional African art objects operate in concert with one another. An object’s economic value rises with its cultural value, but economic value can also create an aura of cultural value.⁶⁰ In their economic and cultural values resides another dimension as well, of course: the political. In their re-creation as art, and in their embodiment of authentic Congolese culture, Congolese objects became a resource to be protected and an element in the construction of colonial justifications for the presence of the Belgian colonial state as a cultural guardian of an “authentic” Congo.

The role accorded to material culture and art in the representation of cultural authenticity in the colonial era transformed the collections of the Museum of the Belgian Congo into subjects of political negotiation. Acquiring cultural guardianship—not only in terms of the possession of cultural heritage but also in terms of cultural practices—was understood as a way of acquiring authenticity, and hence legitimacy,

by the Mobutu regime. This book traces three of the avenues through which this process took place: the demand for cultural restitution in the process of decolonization; the creation of a museum institute in Zaire in order to generate a national repository of precolonial traditional culture; and the broader authenticity politics of the Mobutu regime.

CULTURAL HERITAGE AND THE POLITICS OF DECOLONIZATION

The Congolese struggle for independence and its immediate aftermath have the dubious honor of being one of the most famous moments in the African struggle for independence. From Lumumba's speech on independence day in June of 1960, in which he painted a picture of Belgian colonialism as one of abuse and exploitation, to the violence of the postindependence conflicts and secessions, the murder of Lumumba, and the involvement of the United Nations, the struggles around Congolese independence came to stand for the history of African decolonization at large. The contours of this well-known history have limited our understanding of the process of decolonization in Congo, however. Using the history of Congolese demands for postcolonial cultural restitution, this book investigates the process of decolonization as a "drama of competing visions" and proposes two major shifts in the approach to the history of Congo's decolonization: a thematic and periodization shift away from the history of the political and military events of the late 1950s and early 1960s, in favor of studying the debates over cultural sovereignty that took place from the late colonial era until the 1980s.⁶¹

The dominant construction of the category of decolonization emerged in the West in the face of anticolonial struggles and was organized around Western governmental frameworks, shaping not only the processes of decolonization but also the historical view of that process.⁶² Consequently, the scholarship emerging from the former colonizer as well as later nationalist histories define decolonization as a moment of rupture, in which new and sovereign nation-states were (or should have been) created.⁶³ Far too often, the moment of political independence is portrayed as the end of a process. This approach set up the "failed states" narrative which emerged in the 1990s and which condemned many of these "new" African states as weak, incoherent, and failing in comparison with their Western counterparts.

In the case of Congo, the scholarship is dominated by a focus on political and military events taking place between roughly 1955 and

1965.⁶⁴ The first Congo Crisis, associated with the Katangese Secession and the regional conflicts of the early 1960s, is generally described as part of the process of decolonization. This means that Mobutu's second coup in 1965 is often seen as the end of the era of decolonization and the beginning of the postcolonial state in Congo.⁶⁵ This book questions that periodization, argues that independence was more a beginning than an end for the process of decolonization, and advocates for an examination of the history of the Mobutist state through the lens of decolonization.⁶⁶

Since colonialism consisted of far more than political and economic dominance, so did African interpretations and expectations of decolonization. Often overlooked in the histories of decolonization in Africa are the ways in which cultural sovereignty was imagined and demanded. As this book argues, cultural guardianship came to play an important role in the justification for (late) colonialism, a point made clear in Belgium's defense of its possession of large museum collections of Congolese art and artifacts, even after Congo's political independence. As a consequence, Congolese expectations of independence were also shaped by the desire to reclaim the resources necessary to give shape to cultural sovereignty.

As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o writes, "To control a people's culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others."⁶⁷ An important part of this cultural identity relies on the past, which in the case of Congo was created as "authentic traditional culture" by the modernist imagination of Belgian colonial rule, a cultural category from which change and modernity itself were scrubbed. In the Belgian Congo, the preservation of this "tradition" was also conceived as part of the colonial project, particularly by the 1950s. This was implemented via initiatives for the protection and preservation of the production of "traditional" arts and crafts (the "present" past) in the colony, but also in the ownership and preservation of the collection of the Tervuren museum in Belgium. In this process, "traditional" cultures, and particularly the objects that had been recast as art, were reinvented as heritage.

A product of "ways of valuing the past that arose in Renaissance and Enlightenment Europe and [. . .] bolstered by nationalism and populism" as well as by Western obsession with identity (both collective and individual), heritage was projected upon non-Western cultures within the context of colonialism and shaped by colonial collecting and displaying practices.⁶⁸ This had practical consequences: in the European

context, the museum, as a place of preservation, had become an important tool in the “activation” of heritage into instruments of nation formation and solidification. Zoe Strother recently observed that if “heritage is culture conceived as property, it is also property obtained through legally determined rights of succession.”⁶⁹ As such, it should come as no surprise that the ownership of these collections became the subject of debate in the process of decolonization; after all, Belgian rhetoric about Congo was rife with references to the colony as its “maturing child.”

With the European nation-state as a model, the newly independent country sought to create itself as the guardian of its own cultural heritage. Possession of cultural heritage would enable the postcolonial state to construct a cultural legitimacy that underwrote its political legitimacy.⁷⁰ The historical role of cultural heritage in the African process of decolonization has received little attention to date: most studies of demands for restitution focus on more recent examples, the protection of the heritage of indigenous peoples in the west, or the development of international regulations.⁷¹ Recently, African art historians have carefully started exploring heritage as a reflexive, historical concept, open to African interpretations.⁷² As the embodiment of (imagined) identities and cultures, as well as their pasts, heritage ties the immaterial to the material, a (usable) past to a present, and “having culture” to the possession of cultural artifacts (or “cultural property”), often in the form of monuments, historical sites, landscapes, and museum collections.⁷³ In this book, I am concerned with how the reinvention of “traditional” art as national heritage was used as a political tool, and how preservation was imagined as a necessary road toward the creation of a new national heritage in the form of modern art.

An important role in the world of heritage is reserved for international regulations and conventions, and for UNESCO in particular. International regulations for dealing with the return and protection of cultural property took shape in the aftermath of World War II. These regulations soon became problematic in the face of intensifying decolonization struggles around the world. In combination with the increased tendency to regard African museum collections in the West as heritage, the demands from newly independent or decolonizing countries for the return of what was now by definition their national heritage created considerable pressure on Western cultural institutions.

By the 1970s there was a veritable international conservation regime for the protection of national heritage rights. Walking a tightrope

between acknowledging the importance of national heritage and a commitment to preservation, the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property helped nation-states protect the cultural heritage within their borders against illegal removal but refrained from applying the regulations retroactively, sidestepping the matter of material removed during colonial occupations.⁷⁴

Decolonization may have pushed the reinvention of museum collections like the ones at Tervuren as national heritage, but a competing heritage discourse with universalizing tendencies also emerged. This cast the material as the world's or mankind's heritage.⁷⁵ Not unlike the reinvention of African artifacts as art, the invention of world heritage provided Western museums faced with restitution claims with arguments to keep their collections.⁷⁶ Usually, preservation claims trumped (and trump) restitution claims. Thus, the international conservation regime, although ostensibly concerned with restitution claims, often worked to the disadvantage of newly independent countries.

“RECOURS À L’AUTHENTICITÉ”: THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF THE MOBUTU REGIME

The campaign for the restitution of the collections of the Museum of the Belgian Congo cast the postcolonial Zairian state as the appropriate guardian for the country's cultural heritage. This fit in with a broader cultural campaign undertaken by the Mobutu regime. The “*Recours à l’authenticité*” (“recourse” or “resort” to authenticity) campaign, which reached its height in the early 1970s, was ostensibly aimed at a reinvigoration of Zairian culture, inspired by precolonial, “traditional” culture. It incorporated the antimodernism of colonial interpretations of Congolese traditional cultural authenticity into the construction of an African cultural modernity—in the guise of tradition. Composed of a wide range of initiatives—from the “Zairization” of people's names, to the renaming of the country, its river, and its cities, to the staging of elaborate cultural manifestations, and the creation of national ethnographic and art collections at the museum institute in Kinshasa—it was set up in opposition to the “inauthentic” nature of the colonial era. Paradoxically, this campaign for cultural authenticity relied heavily on the colonial construction of Congolese authenticity but couched the latter in anticolonial terms by promoting it as a part of a process of decolonization.

As the colonial history of the invention of Congolese cultural authenticity demonstrates, the concept had a political use: it legitimized intervention and “protection” by an authoritarian state. Yet despite its cynical application to legitimize an authoritarian postcolonial state, it also had an intellectual appeal that connected it to a pan-African tradition. It is in part this ambiguous nature of Mobutu’s authenticity politics that make it an interesting historical phenomenon.⁷⁷

While some of the broader traits of the authenticity campaign are explored in this book, the focus is on the way in which it shaped Congolese postcolonial museum politics and the ways in which the latter were a reflection of (often failed) attempts to decolonize the categories of art and cultural authenticity via collecting practices and the creation of displays and knowledge. This investigation reveals the internal tensions of the authenticity campaign: how its justifications of authoritarianism and the increasing emphasis on the figure of Mobutu as the political and cultural center of the nation eventually trumped the intellectual attraction of its cultural nationalism.

In the *Idea of Africa*, the Congolese philosopher and writer V. Y. Mudimbe characterized the Mobutist doctrines as “a discursive drama [that] claims to be the sign of a social reality” which instead muzzled reality.⁷⁸ The history of the Zairian Institute for National Museums and the Zairian demands for cultural restitution in this book confirm that “looking like a state,” which in this case meant projecting the appearance of cultural guardianship, ultimately was more important to the Mobutu regime than the creation of a real cultural infrastructure for the country’s citizens.⁷⁹ This is clear from the decline in funding and support for the IMNZ by the mid-1970s. Despite these circumstances, however, the museum institute did continue to function successfully as a representative of the Zairian state on an international level.

It is in the international dimension, in fact, that we have to look for the most effective political use of Zaire’s traditional arts and postcolonial museum politics—and of the authenticity politics in general. Buoyed by a booming market in traditional African art, the Zairian museum institute managed to, if not replace, at least match the Belgian Royal Museum for Central Africa as an organizer of international exhibitions in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The most important and effective of those took place in North America and promoted an image of the Zairian state—and by extension the Mobutu regime—as the representative and guardian of the country’s cultural heritage.