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Resistance’, Performing Heritage’, ‘The Tourist’s Gaze’, ‘Imagining Africa in the West’, ‘Managing Sacred Sites’, and many others. The conference keynote speaker was Abdul Sheriff of the Zanzibar Museums and Archives. The conference ended with a plenary session which included final reflections by Innocent Pikarayi, Peter Ucko, Lyn Schumaker and Terence Ranger.

The conference was organized by the Zambian National Heritage Conservation Commission and National Museums Board, the British Institute in Eastern Africa, and the Journal of Southern African Studies. It was generously funded by the above mentioned organizations and the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the African Studies Association (UK) and Public Archaeology. Conference organizers were Paul Lane (BIEA), JoAnn McGregor (JSAS) and Lyn Schumaker (JSAS). Selected papers are being published in special issues of Public Archaeology and the Journal of Southern African Studies (in 2006).

PHYSICAL ANTHROPOLOGY, COLONIAL ETHNOGRAPHY AND THE MUSEUM OF TERVUREN: A HISTORY OF BELGIAN ANTHROPOLOGY (1882-1925)
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The history of anthropology in Belgium has received relatively little scholarly attention.1 Yet, Belgium’s anthropological museum at Tervuren played a crucial and contested role in the history and colonization of Africa. This short essay, based on my doctoral dissertation, explores the ways in which Belgian anthropology reflected European ambivalence about modernity and industrialization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Informed by the theory of social memory and the product of original archival research, my work explores how the Congo served both in celebrations of Western progress and as a foil for the European search for a preindustrial past.2

The Rise of Belgian Anthropology

The anthropological tradition in Belgium began with the study of physical anthropology at the Société d’Anthropologie de Bruxelles founded in 1882. Highly influenced by the French tradition, Belgian physical anthropologists debated criteria of race classification as they attempted to construct a racialized history of their own nation. They contested various versions of Belgian racial hierarchies, comparing the Flemish in the nation’s north and the Walloons in the south by measuring physical characteristics such as brain volume, eye color, and skull form. When Belgium took possession of the Congo, this debate was exported to Africa. But physical anthropological methods failed to produce clear distinctions between Congolese racial groups, and physical anthropology increasingly appeared mired in acrimonious, irresolvable debate. As a result, anthropologists turned increasingly to ethnography, and most particularly to the study of Congolese material culture, to understand the history and evolutionary meaning of their new colony.

The study of anthropology in Belgian accompanied the colonizing project and its display in the metropole. Congolese material culture was collected for a series of exhibitions in the 1880s and 1890s, culminating with the world exhibition of Tervuren in 1897. Leopold II ordered the creation of the Colonial Palace for the exhibition, and in 1898, the Palace became Belgium’s first anthropological museum. The establishment of the museum
proved an enormous impetus to the growth of Belgian anthropology and the study of Congolese material culture. The museum sponsored expeditions to the colony for the collection of anthropological materials, published the reports of those expeditions, and provided a space for the study, classification and display of material culture. In 1910, the museum moved into a new building created for the Brussels-Tervuren world’s fair that allowed the expansion of its ethnographic collection under the leadership of geographer Joseph Maes.

Social Memory
The intellectual and material content of Belgian anthropology was marked by a profound ambivalence about modernity. On the one hand, the museum in Tervuren was a celebration of Western progress that was embodied in industrialization and technological advancement. Belgian anthropologists only collected objects that they believed to have been produced by persons untainted by European contact; they rejected material culture that bore traces of innovation. Once in Tervuren, these objects were subjected to Western notions of order and classification—by region in the late nineteenth century, and by theme in the first decades of the twentieth. Ordered at various times by evolutionist and diffusionist principles, the museum’s tidy representations of African culture emphasised the technical advance of the West. Furthermore, systems of classification erased all evidence of the disorder, violence, and political and economic upheaval created by colonization. Thus, Tervuren curators created a primitive “Congo” that only existed in the imagination of the colonizer. The museum functioned to celebrate Western culture and justify the Belgian “mission civilisatrice”.

The Belgian anthropological project can also be seen as a reflection of a European sense of historical dislocation caused by industrialization, however. By emphasizing the primitiveness of Africa and comparing it to the modern West, Maes and his predecessors created an image of Africa modelled on their imagined unspoiled European past. The museum, as a shrine for the pre-modern, offered a solid point of reference in this Belgian crisis of social memory. By travelling through space, scientists also moved back in time, conflating the “primitive” Congolese with their own European ancestors. The process of dislocation and cultural fragmentation created by industrialization was accompanied by the museological creation of a linear narrative of human history at once nostalgic and celebratory.

Conclusion
The museum at Tervuren continues to be an important place where Belgium and its history are remembered. It is now a site for critical evaluation of Belgium’s colonial past. At a recent exhibition, “ExitCongoMuseum,” curators invited visitors to reflect critically on the museum’s history by exploring the voyage of Congolese ethnographic objects to Belgium and questioning the museum as a modernistic project. The exhibition stirred controversy, as former museum staff members reacted to its message with shock. Indeed, the exhibition received attention in the nation’s parliament. The meaning of the “primitive Congo” has been opened to contest as curators, the public, and the government debate the future of the museum and reevaluate the meaning of Belgium’s colonial past.
To date, only a few articles have been published on the history of physical anthropology in Belgium. Cf. Wils, ‘Tussen metafysica en antropometrie’. Beyers, ‘Rasdenken tussen geneeskunde en natuurwetenschap’. Morelli, ‘Emile Houzé en de studie van de Belgische schedels’.

To order a copy of this dissertation, visit www.bworx.be/couttenier.

Wastiau, EXITCONGOMUSEUM. Luntumbue, ‘EXITCONGOMUSEUM’.

RECENT DISSERTATIONS


