



Nordic Countries and the Congo Colonization by Raïs Neza Boneza¹

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“The West is morally and spiritually indefensible.”
French poet Aimée Césaire

While in the West, and particularly in France, debates are centered on the positive role of colonization, trophies stolen from native people around the world are exhibited in Western museums.

I am particularly struck by the November 2005 funded project *The Congo and the Nordic countries*, a joint project involving the ethnographic museums in Oslo and Stockholm, the National Museum in Copenhagen, the Finnish National Museum and the Swedish Traveling Exhibitions. The Nordic countries have dispossessed a rich collection of about 40,000 artifacts from the Congo, most of which have never been exhibited until recently. There are amulets, powerful sculptures, bundles of spears, artistic masks and musical instruments that were kept in storages for decades. It is stupefying that the Nordic countries have decided to exhibit “their” trophies, taken brutally from the people of the Congo without concern or any consultation with the Democratic Republic of Congo. In this presentation, I will attempt to reveal the process used by the Nordic countries, but also by Europe at large, to dispossess the Congolese and Africans of their cultural heritage by proudly taking their artifacts hostage in their museums.

It is not by pure hazard that our world has experienced a *rapport de force* that has driven people to subjugate one another. It is known that colonization was motivated by several factors such as territory and economical factors *entre autre*, both casqued under an aggressive Christian missionarism. For more than five hundred years, melanized (coloured) populations around the world and particularly in Africa were not considered as being part of humanity. Montesquieu – considered one of the central figures of the “Age of Enlightenment” of the 1700s – a period which emphasized the power of human reason, science and

respect for humanity – once said: “We can’t come to believe that God, who is wise, may have anointed a soul in a black body.” (in the *Spirits of Laws*, 1748).

The colonial repression and the psychological motive behind colonization can only be defined as white supremacy, better known as racism (at least in regard to the non-white world). Neely Fuller explained in 1969 that racism is not merely a pattern of individual or institutional practices; it is a universally operating system of white supremacy and domination in which the majority of the world’s white people participate (both consciously and unconsciously). The deeper motivation behind European expansionism was confirmed early by Pope Nicholas V in 1454 who gave a decree spiritually, morally and lawfully legalizing the enslavement of millions of Africans. Later, in 1792, Denmark would be the first Western country to abolish slavery.

Nordic Struggles and Colonial Tendencies

Ipsa facto, history is a perpetual remodelling of peoples’ consciousness. Much has been written and said about colonization, in this case of Africa by Europe as a whole, but not specifically about the role of the Nordic countries. The role of the Nordic countries in the expansion of colonization in Africa has mostly been overshadowed by the ambiguous modern or contemporary political alignment of the Nordic countries. From 1397-1521, a dominant power was formed under the union of Denmark-Norway-Sweden, which preceded the establishment of Lutheranism as state religion in the region. The succession of unrests such as the Nordic Seven Years’ War, the War of Kalmar or the Thirty Years’ War between the period from 1563-1660 led to the Treaty of Copenhagen that would establish new frontiers between Denmark, Sweden and Norway. It is not until 1905 that Norway won its total independence from Sweden after Denmark had handed it over to Sweden in 1814. Then again, despite the neutrality agreement between the Nordic countries with the outbreak of the First World War, Norway capitulated to Nazism with the support of the *Nasjonal Samling* (National Union) party led by Vidkun Quisling.

However, it is a known fact that the “Normenn” were assiduous sailors who explored and settled in areas in the North Atlantic, beginning in the 10th century. While this settlement process did not have the lasting effects that later settlements and conquests would have, it can be seen as a prelude to wide-scale European settlement in the Americas. Normenn were considered both a warrior and farming society from the region now known as Scandinavia (the Nordic region). They were also seafaring explorers, who sailed beyond their homelands to not only

raid, but also build settlements in other parts of the world. The Danish Vikings went south towards Germany, France (Normandy), England, Spain and into regions on the North-Western Mediterranean coast. Swedish Vikings went to Eastern Europe, while the Norwegians sailed to Greenland and North America (Labrador, Canada). Their exploratory prowess is praised in the *Norse Saga*. Considering their sailing skills, it is obvious that they did participate in exploratory expeditions to Africa, but also in the slave trade, which was using ships as a means of transportation in order to bring negroes to plantations in the Americas.

En Route to the Congo

Western private interests in Africa increased, the involvement of their governments multiplied. A systematic European conquest of Africa started as early as the 15th century (1482) with Diego Cao. A Portuguese adventurer under the contract of King Léopold II of Belgium, Cao reached the mouth of the River Congo. The occupation of tropical Africa occurred in the second half of the century. Europeans penetrated the land, exterminated many people and subjugated many kingdoms. From 1880-1905, the Conference of Berlin, organized by Prince Otto Edward Leopold von Bismarck, partitioned most of Africa among European powers. The Scandinavian countries were represented by the Union of Denmark-Norway-Sweden.

In 1876, King Léopold II of Belgium established the International Congo Society, a private company for the exploration and colonization of the region. His principal agent for this task was Sir Henry M. Stanley. The Congo, as a private domain of the Belgian king, would experience a new era of exploitation and mistreatment of the Congolese population – mistreatments with the ironic support of churchmen. Nordic missionaries, members of the armed forces, seafarers and other adventurers were part of this bloody business affair.

At the end of 1905, after the independence of Norway from Sweden, the Congo began to attract the attention of many more people in the Nordic countries, where unemployment had reached its peak. Potentially one of the richest countries in the world considering its natural and mineral resources, the Congo offered at that time the necessary rubber to supply the explosive car industry.

We remember that under its abusive colonization by Belgium, the population of the Congo, then estimated to 20 million people, decreased to the half. It was during that period that Nordic missionaries, members of the armed forces, seafarers and other adventurers took part in the pillage of the country. It is estimated that as many as 1,500 Nordic citizens took part as accomplices in the

Congolese exploitation. In an article entitled “Norwegians and the colonization of the Congo”, Espen Wæhle from the National Museum of Denmark wrote: *“Nordic sailors made possible the colonization of the Congo. Up to 90% of those manning the ships (pilots, captains, mates, and engineers), harbors and shipyards were from Denmark, Norway, Finland and Sweden. Among the Nordic sailors two pioneers stand out: the Dane C.V.R. Schønberg & Dane/Norwegian J.A.C. Martini (Martini was born in Norway, his parents being Danish itinerant actors, throughout his career he some times claimed to be Norwegian and other times Danish). They signed up for the Congo already in 1886 and manned primitive riverboats on many colonial expeditions and first sailings. Their book from the first years was the second book written by Scandinavians on the Congo. More than 1200 objects collected by Schønberg & Martini are still in museum collections. Their strategy to sell the large collection was unusual. They started off by arranging commercial and well-publicized Congo exhibitions at ‘Tivoli’ in Christiania (Oslo) and ‘National’ in Copenhagen. They later managed to sell most of the artifacts at a very high price (in Oslo possibly the most expensive collection ever bought by the museum).”*

Today’s Symbolism for the Congo and Africa behind the 40,000 Artifacts Exposed in Nordic Countries

The 40,000 artifacts from the Congo constitute a veritable trophy of war considering the method used by Nordic nations to acquire them. The exhibition by the aforementioned Nordic museums rests upon a deeply dolorous paradox considering that the majority of Africans and other indigenous people, whose creativity is being celebrated, will never be allowed to set foot on those lands to see and venerate the memory of their ancestors.

The joint aesthetic project of the Nordic countries – portrayed wrongly and cynically as “When the Nordic countries went to the Congo, and the Congo came to the Nordic countries” or as a cultural dialogue lying behind the beauty of the artifacts – can only remind us of the humiliations and the suffering that we as Africans and Congolese have endured and continue to endure until today. The sculptures are of no use in these shameless museums when the West with its exploitative structure perpetuates its structural repression through its different types of aid, along with humanitarian and development agencies entangled with other organizations such as the IMF, NATO, the G8 and other such organizations.

The politely so-called “Western world” has changed and sophisticated its techniques of enslavement through imposing an abusive marketization, which leads to massive subjugation and de-humanization of people worldwide. Being

part of those structures, Nordic countries are not exempt to colonialism and the de-humanization of the world.

Hopefully, the Congolese artifacts exhibited will awaken the consciousness of the Nordic publics, along with other Europeans, Africans and the world at large, to comprehend the method used by the West to depose and subjugate Africa under the umbrella of different humanitarian or development projects. Nordic countries play a major role in development aid, having their tentacles of missionaries implanted throughout Africa.

In conclusion, we, in the Congo and in Africa at large, miss our ancestors' artifacts. Africa is continuously succumbing to oblivion due to a lack of references. After the gods of Christianity and Islam who have violently contested a place in our soul, we are now praising the god of monetarism. Impoverished and dispossessed, we miss our symbols and spirituality, exposed shamefully in the Nordic museums. May our art, our sculptures remind their capturers that they must be released; because freeing them is freeing Africa. In a near future to come, Congo should consider claiming these objects to fulfill the dream of the fallen hero Patrice Emery Lumumba, who earlier on demanded that Europeans return our legacies and cultural artifacts.

Note

1. Raïs Neza Boneza was born in the Democratic Republic of Congo, ex-Zaire. He resides in Norway, where he works as a peace researcher, activist and practitioner. He has written and published poetry and non-fiction books. His articles have been published worldwide. He lectures at the European Peace University in Vienna (EPU Statchlainings, Austria). He is an educator and assiduous speaker, teaching and giving lectures.