

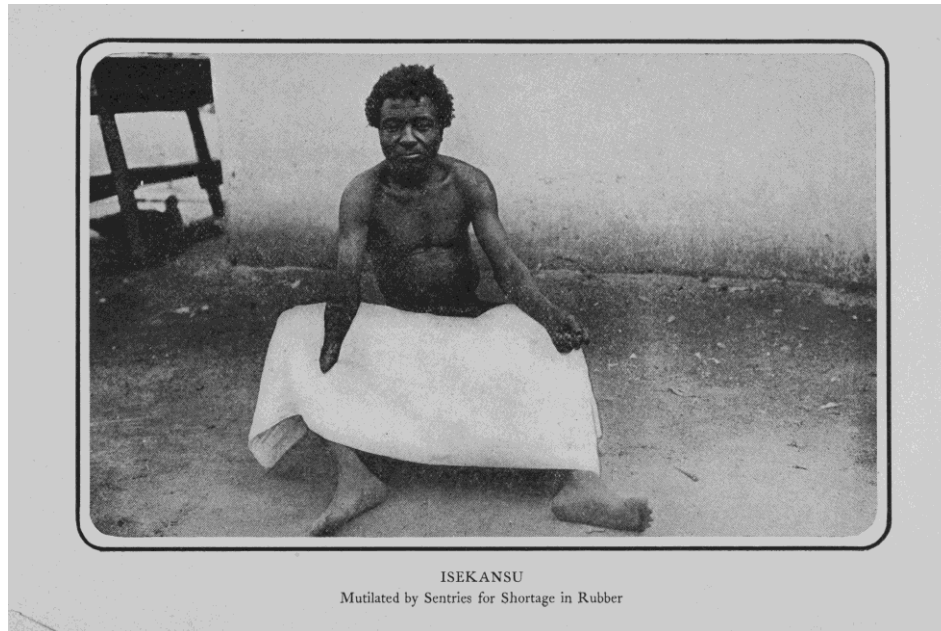
DECOLONISING BELGIUM, DECOLONISING BELGIAN MULTIPLE IDENTITIES

Research by Marina Gržinić and Jovita Pristovšek
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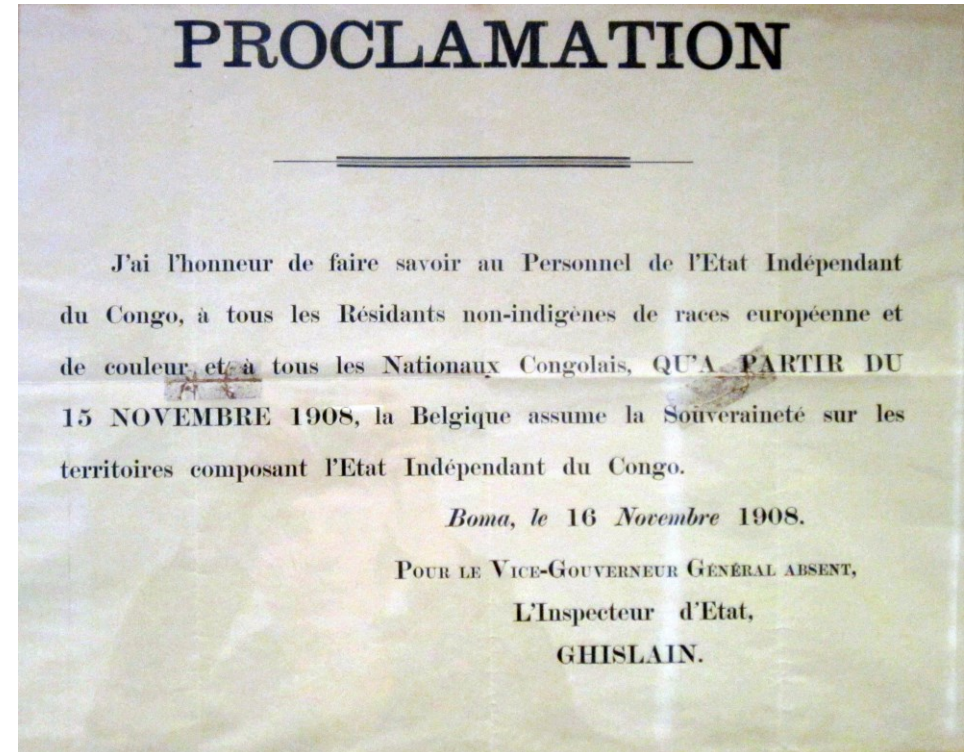
Based on the talk of Belgian-Congolese artist Pitcho Womba Konga on the occasion of the workshop “Memory/History: The Power of Decolonialization, Art and Interventions” (with Monique Mbeka Phoba, Laura Nsengiyumva, and Womba Konga aka Pitcho), filmed on 3 May 2018 at “leSpace,” Brussels. Access at: https://archiveofamnesia.akkbild.ac.at/?videos=womba-konga-pitcho&_sft_people=womba-konga-pitcho.



In 2010, Belgium celebrated a double anniversary, of the establishment of the Congo Free State (in 1885) and the independence of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (1960; as the Republic of the Congo). On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Congo's independence, Pitcho initiated the project "Héritage," gathering 25 artists from Congolese diaspora in Belgium, to reflect on the Congolese heritage and the hybrid identity and music of the artist. The project was supported by The Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) in Tervuren (about 14 km from Brussels), Belgium, and Belgian Development Cooperation. It culminated in a concert at BOZAR (Centre for Fine Art, Brussels) and with the launch of a 15-track compilation CD. Image reproduced with permission of Pitcho Womba Konga.



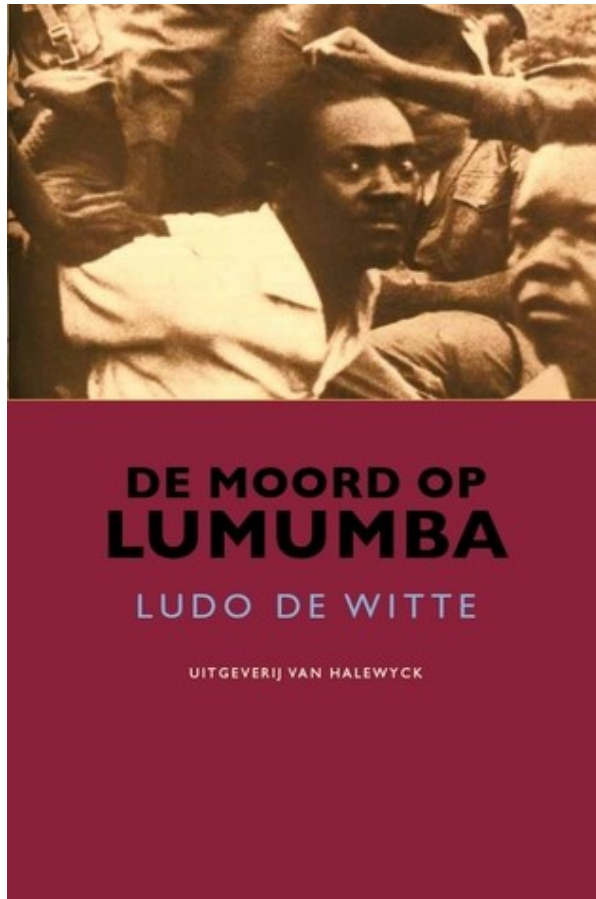
“Often when I see Belgians who lack the awareness of that part of their history, I get the feeling that they are ‘self-mutilated.’ That is to say, we who know both sides, we are more complete, we are more at ease than they are and, in a way, more Belgian than they are. Every time when people are deprived of a part of their history, they are ‘mutilated,’” said Monique Mbeka Phoba in the “Memory/History” workshop. The image depicts the victim of the rubber slave trade flourishing on the Congo around 1906. “Force publique,” private colonial army of King Leopold II of Belgium, killed tens of thousands of rebels against the colonial regime that compelled the Congo’s population into forced labour for gathering wild rubber; one of the notorious practices of the suppression was cutting off hands of (shot or living) rebels. Image from The New York Public Library Digital Collections.



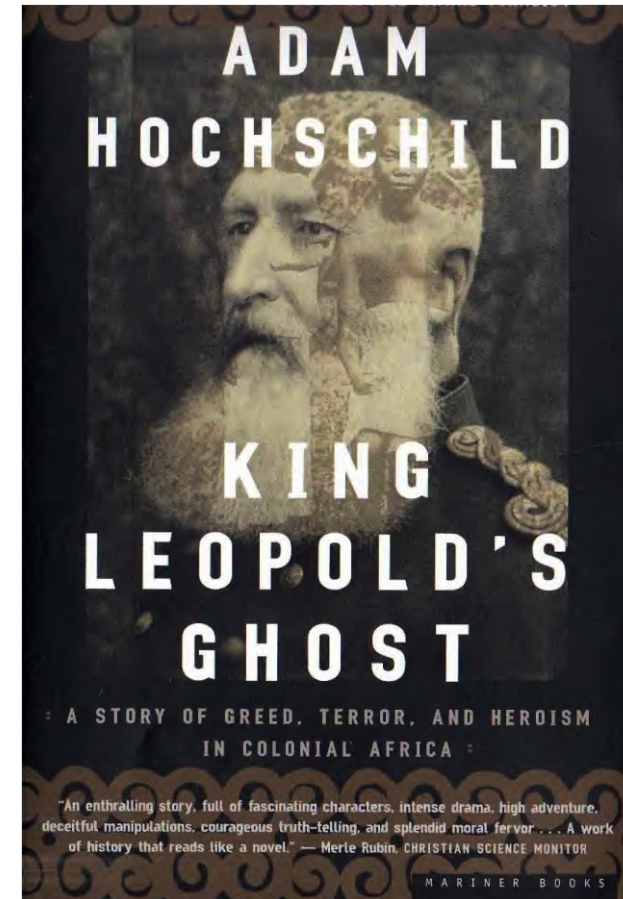
In 1908, the international pressure forced King Leopold II of Belgium to “get rid” of his private colony and he sold the Congo Free State to the Belgian state. As Joseph Blocher and G. Mitu Gulati argued in their article “Transferable Sovereignty” from 2019, this act was “a purchased transfer of sovereign control. For the first and possibly only time in history, a sovereign was paid to relinquish control of an oppressed region.” From 15 November 1908, Belgium assumed sovereignty over the newly named “Belgian Congo,” which remained a colony until 1960, when the Congo, after the fight, gained independence from Belgium. Image from Brigade Piron/Wikimedia Commons.



The end of World War II marked the beginning of the African continent's decolonization. Congo gained independence on 30 June 1960 with Patrice Lumumba as prime minister and Joseph Kasavubu as president. The Democratic Republic of the Congo fell into political upheaval and conflict almost immediately after the independence. The period is known as the Congo Crisis (1960–1965) consisting of a series of civil wars. Lumumba was assassinated on 17 January 1961. The crisis was also a proxy Cold War confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States. It ended with Joseph-Désiré Mobutu ruling the Congo (renamed Republic of Zaire in 1971) until his overthrow in 1997. The image depicts from left to right Mobutu, Joseph Iléo and Lumumba. Image from the National Archives of the Netherlands/Anefo, cat. ref. 2.24.01.09, inv. no. 911-9113.



It took 40 years for Belgium to finally start to examine its post-colonial role and its complicity in the Lumumba's murder. In September 1999, a Belgian sociologist Ludo De Witte published a book *The assassination of Lumumba* that sparked controversy by blaming Belgium to be responsible for Lumumba's overthrow and death. Following the Belgian Parliamentary commission of inquiry's report, Belgium officially apologised to Congo for the involvement of its officials in Lumumba's assassination.



In 1998, a year before De Witte's book was published, the American author Adam Hochschild with his *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa* brought the much too long forgotten genocidal plundering of the Congo by King Leopold II of Belgium onto the conscience of the West.



Hochschild's book inspired many, including Belgian-Congolese artist Pitcho Womba Konga aka Pitcho to write lyrics for his "Le bras en l'air, poing serré" (2003; Hand in the air, closed fist). Pitcho's music video (still) "Le bras en l'air, poing serré" from his album *Regarde Comment* (2003) was recorded at the foot of the equestrian statue of King Leopold II of Belgium near the Royal Palace in Brussels, Belgium. Image reproduced with permission of Pitcho Womba Konga.



Still from Pitcho's music video "Crise de Nègre" (2011; released on the eponymous album). In his works, Pitcho addresses the questions of the Blackness and its position in a Belgian context, since Belgium, as Pitcho says, prefers the folkloric aspects of Africa, rather than dealing with questions of Belgium's colonial past. Image reproduced with permission of Pitcho Womba Konga.



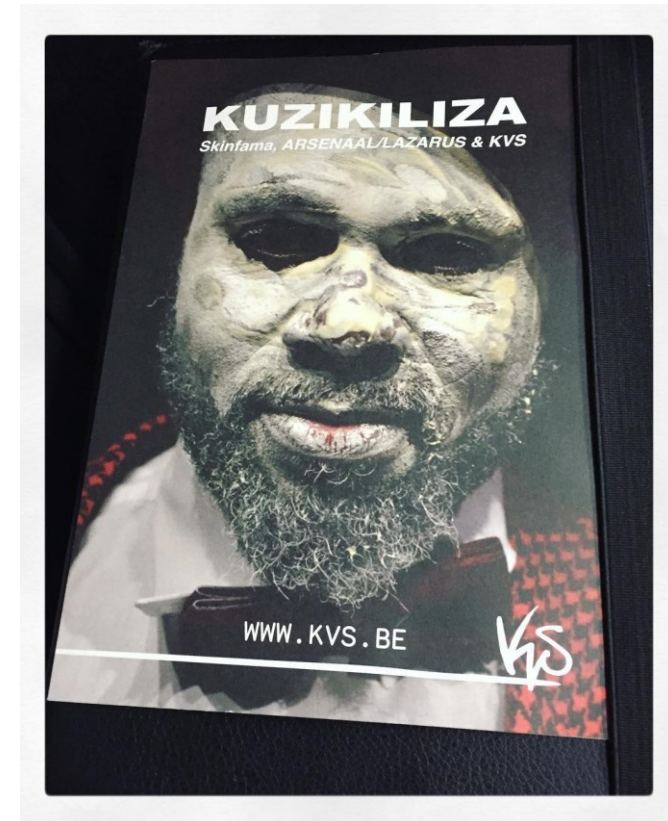
The Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) began as a project founded by King Leopold II of Belgium, but it was his successor King Albert I who inaugurated the museum on 30 April 1910. In December 2013, the museum closed for a five-year renovation. On 8 December 2018, it reopened its doors with a revised scenography of collections of items looted mostly from Belgium's two former colonies, Congo and Ruanda-Urundi (Rwanda and Burundi). Image by Daderot/Wikimedia Commons.



In 2015, Pitcho initiated a multidisciplinary festival “Congolisation” (Festival Afro-Diaspo-Arts Made in Belgium) as homage to Patrice Lumumba. The first edition of the “Congolisation” (Congo-Colonisation) was inaugurated on 17 January, the day marking the anniversary of Patrice Lumumba’s assassination (in 1961). The festival took place from 17 January to 17 February 2015 and was done in partnership with BOZAR (Centre for Fine Art, Brussels) in Brussels. Combining the words “Congo” and “colonisation,” the festival highlights the contribution of Congolese and African diaspora to the Belgian cultural landscape, allowing the diaspora to take possession of different cultural spaces in Belgium and to tell and confront their stories. Image reproduced with permission of Pitcho Womba Konga.



Pitcho's short film called *Les sexes faibles* (2016; The weaker sexes; still from the film) talks about violence between spouses, about the inability of men and women to just talk to solve problems, which leads us to violence, and about the fact that we are all, men and women, weak when faced with that violence. "That is why I don't say 'the weaker sex,'" says Pitcho, "but 'the weaker sexes.' And when the film was released, people told me, 'But, this has nothing to do with Congo.' Well, no, this has something to do with me as a human being, as a person. So, there, for me, it is an important element, and I think that we will be able to come out from that side... What I am looking for as an artist, and what I wish for all the artists of immigration stock, is the space to do different things; one time it can be a piece about their origin, another time it can be a piece about coffee, if that strikes their fancy, and some other time it can be something abstract. I think that when we get that space, we will have gained something very interesting." Image reproduced with permission of Pitcho Womba Konga.



Pitcho's theatre/performance play *Kuzikiliza* (2017) translates in Swahili as "to be heard." *Kuzikiliza* is a plurilingual and interdisciplinary performance that makes communication and its mechanisms to vacillate. In this play, Pitcho departs from Lumumba's speech at the ceremony of the Proclamation of the Congo's Independence on 30 June 1960. He exposes the actuality of Lumumba's speech today and questions how to reconcile past and present, while the process of decolonization is still fully underway. Image reproduced with permission of Pitcho Womba Konga.

Pitcho Womba Konga

The Belgian-Congolese artist Pitcho Womba Konga is a prolific writer, videographer and filmmaker, rap-musician and actor, active in Belgium and elsewhere. He initiated the multimedia festival “Congolisation” in 2015. In 2010, he developed the project “Héritage” with The Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) in Tervuren, Belgium, on the occasion of the celebration of the 50th anniversary of Congo’s independence. At the centre of many of his works stays the Congolese diaspora who, according to him, is one of the most tangible symbols of the relationship between the history of the Congo and Belgium.

Monique Mbeka Phoba

Monique Mbeka Phoba is a filmmaker born in Brussels, the daughter of a DRC diplomat. She visited the DRC during her school holidays, but established herself in Belgium. She studied at the Saint-Louis High Business School, and obtained a degree in International Business in Brussels. Her graduating thesis was on “Cooperation between the European and African audiovisual industries.” While being student, Monique Mbeka Phoba gave talks on African culture on a student radio called Radio-Campus and wrote articles in various newspapers in Brussels and Geneva, as *Tam-Tam*, *Negrissimo* and *Regards Noirs*. She made several documentaries; her first fiction film is titled *Sister Oyo*. This short film recounts the shaken vision of the world seen by a 10-year-old Congolese who attended a boarding school run by Belgian nuns in the 1950s during the colonial era.

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