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PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE: Repatriation of African Art via Virtual Realities

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PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE
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ABSTRACT

Past, Present, Future is an immersive and interactive art installation that seeks to put displaced Congolese and African artwork - commonly displayed in world museums - into their original cultural context. The exhibit's immersive experience sheds light on the colonial exploitation of African peoples and their lifestyles: specifically the expropriation of lived African spiritual and artistic expressions. These artifacts - sometimes stolen outright, sometimes obtained through imbalanced terms of trade, and sometimes obtained by fair bargain - often appear in exhibits as disembodied objects devoid of explanation or reinterpreted through the conceptions of the exploiters. This phenomenon has historically supported the consciousness of colonialism and now of post- and neo-colonialism, maintaining its propagation through museums, schools, and other institutions worldwide.

The exhibition is composed of a virtual environment in addition to projection mapping. The visual, aural, and interactive elements engage with and challenge the viewer's culturally conditioned ways of thought regarding artwork "consumption." This thesis, building on the exhibition, examines the possibilities of employing evolving technology and coding toward the long-term task of "softly" repatriating displaced artifacts while starting a conversation about physical repatriation and providing a model that Congolese scholars and artists can use to preserve and reclaim their cultural heritage.

ABSTRACT FOR GENERAL AUDIENCE

Pieces of art from Congo and much of Africa are often perceived in the Western world as exotic objects to be looked at and photographed. To the Congolese people, those objects are an essential part of their ongoing life. It goes without saying that they are central to the collective spirit, sense of the world, cultural identity, and ancestral history. *Past, Present, Future* is an immersive art installation that takes displaced works from Congo and other settings in Africa and restores their living context through a Congolese artist's lens. This paper examines the process by which they were extracted from their home and found their way onto Western institutions, what they were and what was lost, and how through contemporary technology-integrated creative expression, they may be made whole for the enrichment of those from whom they came, their current hosts, and people everywhere.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to God, the creator of all things, to my father and my mother (though in spirit), who, with love and prolonged effort, have supported my academic endeavors with blood, sweat, and tears while praying at all moments to see my dreams come true. It is further dedicated to Rachel Weaver, without whose email to the Berea College Art Department the possibility of entering Virginia Tech and the Creative Technologies MFA program would have never crossed my mind.

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AR (Augmented Reality): "An enhanced version of reality created by the use of technology to overlay digital information on an image of something being viewed through a device (such as a smartphone camera). Also: the technology used to create augmented reality" (Merriam-Webster, 2023).

VR (Virtual Reality): "An artificial environment which is experienced through sensory stimuli (such as sights and sounds) provided by a computer and in which one's actions partially determine what happens in the environment. Also: the technology used to create or access a virtual reality" (Merriam-Webster, 2023).

xR (eXtended Reality or Cross Reality): XR is an umbrella term that rolls in VR, AR, and MR. In a nutshell, XR technology is any tech that takes your display and makes it more immersive or somehow interacts with your real-world surroundings (Gerencer, 2021).

MR (Mixed Reality): is a blend of two popular types of XR tech: VR and AR. To zero in on the terms, VR is immersion, such as when you use a smartphone screen in a headset to immerse yourself in gameplay fully. AR is augmentation, such as when you use an app to superimpose a digital tiger in your living room with your phone's display (Gerencer, 2021).

Photogrammetry: "as its name implies, is a three-dimensional coordinate measuring technique that uses photographs as the fundamental medium for metrology or measurement. The basic principle used in photogrammetry is triangulation. By taking photographs from at least two locations, so-called 'lines of sight' can be developed from each camera to point to the object" (Aber, Marzolff, and Ries 2010).

Projection-Mapping: "uses everyday video projectors, but instead of projecting on a flat screen (e.g., to display a PowerPoint), light is mapped onto any surface, turning common objects of any 3D shape into interactive displays. More formally, projection mapping is "the display of an image on a non-flat or non-white surface"" (PMC n.d.).

1. INTRODUCTION

Inception

While the saying has it that curiosity killed the cat, in my story, curiosity rescues it; the proverbial cat being me. I do not remember exactly why or how it began, but I recall asking questions beyond my age since I was about two. At nine years old, I asked my father why one of the Congolese national heroes, Patrice Emery Lumumba, had to die a gruesome death. My father replied he would tell me when I turned sixteen. A month before my sixteenth birthday, I reminded him, and he gave me documents about the story of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo) and the reason Lumumba was assassinated. A letter attributed to our colonial-era overlord, King Leopold II of Belgium, was among the papers.

Figure 1: ***Belgian King, Leopold II.*** https://www.thefamouspeople.com/profiles/images/leopold-ii-of-belgium-6.jpg.

Leopold was the sole ruler of the Congo Free State during his reign. In 1876, he founded the International Association for the Exploration and Civilization of Africa, a company which served to collect wealth from the Congo. “In 1878 he formed the Committee for Studies of the Upper Congo, with financing from an international group of bankers, following the British-American explorer Henry (later Sir Henry) Morton Stanley’s exploration of the Congo River in 1876–77. Leopold hoped to open the Congo River to deeper exploitation. Between 1879 and 1882, Stanley, under the auspices of the renamed

International Association of the Congo, established several trading and administrative stations along the Congo River, including Leopoldville (now Kinshasa), and negotiated treaties with local chiefs" (The Encyclopaedia Britannica 1998).

Although it is uncertain whether Leopold himself authored it, that letter is nonetheless a testament to the perspective of many Belgian colonists of the era. It reflects their commonplace attitudes toward Congolese people and their resources, along with the misuse of religion to enslave them. A few paragraphs of the letter (see Appendix 1) read: "The essential goal of your mission is not to teach the blacks to know God; they already know it from their ancestors. They pray and submit to Nzambe Mpunu, that I know, and also to Nzambi Mawezi. They know that killing, stealing, sleeping with someone else's wife, slandering, and insulting is wrong. Let's have the courage to admit it; you are not coming to teach them what they already know. Your role is essentially to ease the tasks of the administrators and industrialists. That is, you will interpret the gospel to best serve our interests in that part of the world. To do this, you will take care, among other things, to make sure our black savages lose interest in the riches with which their soil abounds to prevent them from taking an interest in them or fiercely competing with us, dreaming of one day removing us from this part of the world before we get rich."

As I grew into a teenager, I had just begun to accept my role as an artist and was learning ceramics and painting through extra-curricular activities at school, "College Bonsomi." However, this passage painted the picture of an undesirable future, one reminding me of the powerlessness of Congolese artists and artisans from the colonial past and neo-colonial present alike.

Figure 3: ***Teen Rodney Kimbangu,*** 2007. Cleaning a concrete mold of a statue he sculpted in high school.

Five years later, I got acquainted with a middle-aged Belgian Jesuit alumnus who wanted to visit me at home and buy my artwork. He was well off by then, frequently traveled to our country to lobby, and could have paid twice or thrice the price I asked, but he preferred to bargain in order to procure everything at a fifty percent discount. I needed money and wanted the ceramics to leave my storage, so I agreed to his deal.

However, as soon as he paid me, he added that one of my pieces, a 5-inch wide mask from my series *Owl Cat,* reminded him of the smallest mask he had seen at the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium. The cheapest mask in Belgium was then selling for a minimum of $100,000. Initially, this inspired me to imagine one day selling my work at much higher prices.

Figure 2: ***Owl Cat***, 2013.

He then continued, saying the mask he saw in Tervuren was one of many works of art from Congo that had been looted during the colonial era. My moment of euphoric hope at the possibility of one day raising my artistic value suddenly got confused by a sense of rising anger at being insulted and exploited by someone who could help but decided otherwise. I asked him what I could do to sell my art at galleries in Europe, but he changed the subject to avoid answering. I felt even more powerless, but this time, it was not a far-removed occurrence like Lumumba's assassination or the exploitation of my ancestors' artistic and spiritual expressions.

On another visit two years later (the last invitation I accepted to meet with him), this time at a restaurant by the Congo River, he nonchalantly mentioned how balkanizing the Democratic Republic of Congo and annexing North Kivu, South Kivu and Maniema, three of its eastern provinces with the countries Rwanda and Burundi would create the most powerful country in Africa. Comments and propositions of this sort struck too close to home; I felt a blow to my guts. Wielding nothing beyond a strong drive and imagination, I swore I would never respond to his invites anymore, and in time, do something about the power imbalance implicit in them. That was the inception of the present work, though it was not until two years ago that I was in the position to begin to undertake this challenge head-on.

Problem Statement

The exploitation of local artists and artisans, especially in developing countries, is not new and will probably not end anytime soon. However, in the contemporary era, that coupled with the misappropriation of cultural heritage is an entirely different story that needs to be addressed sooner rather than later. Colonialism and its modern derivatives have wreaked havoc in Africa for well over a century now. Despite the continent's nations long having achieved independence from the colonial powers, these new forms keep the power imbalance and its cultural harms alive and well.

Cultural appropriation is a recurring issue in colonial, post-colonial, and global power arrangements. It manifests in spheres that range from free trade to education to freedom of expression. Wealthy museums and their host societies enjoy the benefits from acquiring and trading in Congolese works without the Congolese people benefitting as well. Though repatriation discussions have begun in some places, the conversation around cultural exploitation is primarily led by and framed within boundaries set by well-established institutions.

Meanwhile, divorced from their own art history due to its dislocation and loss, many Congolese people are unaware of the importance of participating in discussions around their heritage and history. They do not know what is being changed about their lives and past, much as the continent's fate was decided during the 19th century Berlin Conference with Africans absent from the table.

The Berlin Conference held from November 1884 to February 1885 resulted in three primary outcomes that included: the recognition of Leopold's claimed territory (now DR Congo), the recognition of several existing territorial claims in Africa, and the establishment of a process for European countries to claim and annex more African territories (Getz).

Figure 4: ***The Berlin Conference***, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Berlin_Conference_1884.jpg.

Distracted by immediate circumstantial struggles for survival, most Congolese people are not in a position to fight for the sovereignty of their own cultural heritage. Additionally, lack of access to education or museums of their own to showcase their cultural heritage and history leaves Congolese with little to no knowledge of the issue at hand, and they may inadvertently find themselves participating in (or at least ignoring) the loss and distortion of their heritage. Most Congolese, like so many marginalized Africans overall, lack the means to travel to view their own national artifacts and learn about their stories. Most of these important artifacts are imprisoned in Western and now wealthy-nation museums, most particularly in collections in Belgium and other colonial nations.

Travel is expensive, and visas are often hard to obtain because many countries assume every African might become an illegal immigrant. Even if the Congolese populace could afford leisurely travel, leaving one's home country to see one's history as a story re-interpreted and whitewashed by our former colonial oppressors, and then only accessed for a fee can be a dehumanizing experience. Meanwhile, paternalistic tendencies in these museums argue that their collections represent "world history," a sentiment echoed by a British Museum spokesperson to Hyperallergic: "The British Museum exists to present a history of the world from 2 million years ago to the present day, it is a unique resource for the world. The strength of the collection is its breadth and depth, allowing an understanding of the cultures of the world and how they interconnect – whether through trade, conflict, migration or conquest" (Polonsky 2018). This statement can be read on multiple levels, from benign to consciously malign.

Suppose we live in a world where the Statue of Liberty is now in possession of Russia and the Eiffel Tower is owned and displayed in a Chinese museum. The Stonehenge site and the remains of Queen Elizabeth are now relocated to India, where an Indian private gallery charges the English to access their heritage. And let us say these artifacts are preserved in collections for, according to these institutions, "the entire world's benefit." Maybe their preservation will be just as helpful, if not more helpful, outside their countries of origin, as their histories are skewed to fit Russian, Chinese, and Indian narratives. I wonder how the compatriots of the countries mentioned above whose treasures are lost to them would react to these circumstances. I can imagine them furiously seeking war to reclaim their patrimonies. This level of outrage is what Congolese and other Africans might experience around the conversation of our missing national artifacts. My work attempts to externalize this internal conflict for its resolution in fuller understanding for people on all sides of our colonial history.

Purpose and significance

Generally, colonial art repatriation activists request that expropriated artifacts be directly returned to their countries of origin. Some go so far as to attempt to remove pieces from museums themselves (Willsher 2021). This has led to museums holding disputed artwork to find legal justification for keeping ownership while fining or jailing the activists who tried to take them back to their country.

My work attempts to address the issue of institutional refusal to cooperate with legitimate repatriation efforts while filling gaps in knowledge and artistic practice by employing emerging technologies to digitize artifacts and "softly" return them to the communities they come from in the form of virtual experiences. The need to carry out this work exists because until the consciousness of the average Congolese is raised, whatever efforts are made by Western institutions towards repatriation will only be superficial or will be dictated by the terms of the museums and institutions themselves. They will subsequently maintain a power-based advantage over the cultures whose exploitation they enable.

In addition to bringing average Africans into broader conversations on our complex and beautiful national and local heritages, my work is meant to be a model that can be replicated, improved, and utilized for new forms of artistic expression. It can also promote difficult conversations with host institutions that remain blind to these issues, and to build further means to preserve disappearing cultures and keep their heritage intact.

Questions, Hypothesis, and Scope

Our cultural identities, as expressed through art, help define us all as people, societies, and civilizations. In defining themselves and moving ahead, the Congolese people will need to address the disruption that colonialism visited on us. This includes but not limited to, beginning critical conversations around concepts of repatriation of symbols of value that have been taken from us and appropriate reparations to repair the damage done.

It dawned on me that I could undertake some efforts to introduce these topics to the Congolese artist community by discussing looted and otherwise displaced Congolese treasures while bringing back our understanding of who we were and who we are. How might I engage them through accessible technology? Who has the right to ownership of displaced artifacts? I am attempting to answer these questions while amplifying my artistic practice rather than relying on activism or hacktivism, which people often get tired of quickly and can end with more harm done than good.

I hypothesize that if every Congolese knows about this technology and can be introduced to the conversations around lost Congolese masterworks, the institutions holding them, their misappropriation, and the exploitation they represent, then the Congolese people will be in a better position to act to reclaim what belongs to them. Then, the urgency I feel for art repatriation might become commonplace. Then the conversation can shift to how it will take place, and proceed softly while DR Congo matures as a country, an economy, and an artistic destination of choice.

I assert that Congolese people, in general, deserve a place in this conversation and, likewise, must begin making their voices heard in numbers to drive any form of

meaningful change. Because I am Congolese and have a vested personal interest in my country's visual culture, I initially focused on Congolese art at the beginning of my work. However, my project has since grown to include artifacts from other African countries based on the broad legacy of colonial-era expropriation and the reality that I have limited access to colonial-era Congolese artifacts.

Therefore, for the remainder of this document, I will align the plight of Congolese artifacts with those of other colonial African nations side by side. This in no way represents an invitation to lump the cultural diversity of Africa all together and treat it as a single block. The peoples of the huge African continent are as varied as the world in general, and Africa itself is vast. For perspective, "If you combine the USA, China, India, Europe, and Japan – they all fit into the continent of Africa. The US can fit comfortably no less than three times. The UK can fit into Africa over 120 times" (Short-Fact 2020).

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Decontextualization

Alfred Gell's essay *Vogel's Net: Traps as Artworks and Artworks as Traps* targets Arthur Danto's essay in which the latter argues a Zande net exhibited by Susan Vogel is not artwork, an argument that Gell (1996) vehemently opposes in his essay. Danto seeks to retain for exhibit sculptural masterpieces from Africa that 20th-century modernists obsess about while he rejects Vogel's Net. Susan Vogel, a scholar focusing on African Art and founder of the Africa Center, formerly the Museum of African Art, exhibited the Zande net as contemporary art.

Figure 5: Mariana Castillo Deball, ***Replica of a Zande hunting net*** (New York: the Center of African Art, 1988), https://www.artsy.net/artwork/mariana-castillo-deball-vogels-net. Photo by Andy Keate.

Vogel exhibited this hunting net as artwork because she maintains that it expresses complex ideas and intentions concerning the relationship between human beings and animals. The net presents a model of the hunter and his awareness of the world of the prey animal. It traps the animal, much like art traps the viewer who is drawn to it. A work of art is the result of deliberate decisions made during its creation, and so is the hunter's net. The artist sometimes puts themself in the viewer's shoes; the hunter puts himself in the animal's mind to think like it and design a net that will trap it. For context, the Zande tribe, also called the Azande, is located in the northeastern region of DR Congo, extending into the adjacent Central African Republic and South Sudan. A detail of why three countries is explained in Appendix 3.

In many ways, the points Vogel makes are effective. However, while elevating the hunting net to the level of artwork, she removes the essence of the net from its original life context. I believe this is problematic because of how likely similar de-contextualized lines of thought can end up benefitting people and institutions with the greater power - in this case, any wealthy institution of art or knowledge - at the expense of those with lesser power. If an animal trap, a practical object, can be equated with artwork, nothing would stop someone from extending the argument to say that a work of art can also be seen as simply an object. Thus reduced, the work loses social value and may be subject to exploitation.

I argue that the same practice has been carried out throughout the colonial era. By picking, choosing, and arguing certain points on African works, Danto offers a testament to how, through the legacy of colonial thought, modern people and institutions continue to view African Art from a perspective that retains implicit contempt for subjugated peoples and their cultures.

I propose that in its modern form, post-colonial decontextualization keeps alive habits of thought and organization that supported conquerors at the expense of those they conquered – in this case, the peoples and cultures the artifacts legitimately belong to. When unchecked or casually picked up by a privileged culture, the process this mode of thinking promotes can quickly degrade to turn sacred, culturally embedded works into desecrated pop-culture memes that erase the true history of a civilization because the meme makers and their consumers do not hold or make an effort to gain understanding and respect for a culture different from their own.

Objects of Meaning and Cultural Identity

African masks and other artifacts hold significance beyond their aesthetic appeal, as they form an integral part of ceremonial attire rather than being mere representations of people or animals, as many museum-goers assume. Their purpose lies in facilitating communication between individuals and between the physical and the spirit realm, where spirits may be ancestral beings or natural entities. The ceremonies include but are not limited to rites of passage, funerals, initiation to secret societies, celebration, communication with the spirit world, etc. Usually, the ceremonies involve music and drumming, but not all sound produced is the same; it carries different vibrational or musical signatures. Some sounds are for healing, others for summoning or supplicating spirits, and others are celebratory.

In particular, when a person wears a mask, they effectively assume the identity of the spirit embodied by that specific mask. Consequently, the mask wearer's identity takes a back seat as they become absorbed by the spirit's identity; they are in a trance, channeling a natural entity or an ancestor. These masks also function as educational tools within rituals meant to teach individuals about social roles, self-discipline, conflict resolution, etc. Mask-making is often practiced by professional carvers, who usually pass on their knowledge from generation to generation (Afrikanza 2020). In the Kongo Kingdom, for example, these specialists were often regarded as respected members of society, akin to scribes in ancient Egypt or Mesopotamia.

As the Congolese caught on to the duplicity of Belgian colonial agents, their art-making branched off into symbols of bodily and spiritual resistance and were claimed to be used as war-fetishes and for spiritual protection. The letter (see Appendix 1) reveals, "They must be discouraged and detached from anything that could give them the courage to confront us. I am thinking, particularly of their numerous war fetiches, which they claim

not to abandon." Appendix 2 expands on the meaning of the word fetiche, as it must not be confused with fetish in any way whatsoever.

Hierarchy of Senses

The human body parses life and reality through its phenomenological senses that we today commonly consider to include: hearing, smell, sight, touch, and taste. Depending on culture, those senses have been ranked into orders of importance which tend to be arbitrary. In *Museums As Sensescapes*, Classen and Howe (2020) discuss the significance of touch in seventeenth and eighteenth-century European collections, contrasting this with the dominance sight occupies in modern museums. The authors examine Western culture's past association of "lower" races with "lower" senses, highlighting parallel links between museum display practices and imperialism.

Classes and Howe delve into the complex sensory experiences of indigenous artifacts within their original cultures. These artifacts, originating from "exotic" lands, provided Europeans with a means to safely encounter and connect with "other worlds." Educated Europeans of the Enlightenment, considering themselves rational, civilized, and superior among global populations, collected and catalogued these artifacts, a cultural practice which served to reinforce their perceived elite status. They emphasized the civilized "noble" sense, sight, because it suited the modern Western sensibility of art appreciation while relegating the rest of our senses to "base" proximity senses. Anna Jameson's remark is a testament to the disdain elite Europeans held towards the senses they categorized as lower: "We can all remember the public days at the Grosvenor Gallery and Bridgewater House, we can all remember the loiterers and loungers … people who, instead of moving among the wonders and beauties with reverence and gratitude, strutted about as if they had a right to be there; talking, flirting; touching the ornaments – and even the pictures!" (cited by Hermann 1972:126).

While associating senses with different cultures, Europeans came up with the following hierarchy of the senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. Moreover, they associated each sense with race: the eye-man to the European, the ear-man to the Asian, the nose-man to the Native American, the tongue-man to the original Australian, and the skin-man to the African.

By ranking senses and people in this particular order, it becomes justifiable to subjugate the lower senses and the people attached to those senses. This hierarchy is problematic to say the least; in the present discussion, it is especially so because African artifacts were never intended to be seen only. In reducing them to sight-specific objects, their meaning is lost. The museum's focus on visual understanding, far from “elevating” these works for the modern audience, perverts their purpose and context. In so doing, it degrades the Congo culture that created them.

Broader Context

It would be pretentious to think that I am the first or only person to think of restoring objects of art that were removed from my homeland during periods of foreign rule, or to explore new technologies toward that purpose. I know of three people who preceded my work, and their contribution to the broader discussion contributed to the grounding of my artistic research. Among these people are Emery Mwazulu Diyabanza, Nora al-Badri, and Jan Nikolai Nelles.

Emery Mwazulu Diyabanza is a Congolese political activist born in Kinshasa but living in France and Togo. Between 2020 and 2021, twice in France and once in the Netherlands, he filmed himself attempting to remove artifacts appropriated from DR Congo during the colonial era. He was stopped, brought to court, and never imprisoned, but was fined and punished with probations and suspensions for trying to remove the

objects (Willsher 2021). His concern with the fate of Congolese artifacts and the concepts of cultural justice he acted on closely echo mine, even though our methods of bringing it about differ.

Perhaps the two individuals whose methods most closely relate to my technological focus are Nora al-Badri and Jan Nikolai Nelles, two Egyptian artists living in Germany. Referred to as sneaky scanners, their claim to fame is the 2015 "Nefertiti Hack," an artistic intervention that entailed secretly scanning the bust of Nefertiti from *Neues Museum* in Berlin, where even photographs were forbidden. Upon successfully scanning the object, they released the data during a hacker's conference in Europe under the public domain, which resulted in thousands of downloads and re-interpretations from people around the internet world. They were promptly sued by the museum for intellectual property theft (Dell 2017) — to me, ironically so.

In obvious ways, my present work relates to that of both Emery Diyabanza and Al-Badri and Nelles. However, by adding my artist's sensibility and technical skills to a virtual endeavor, my approach allows for a more emotional way to connect with African objects of art while giving the viewer – whether they be still trapped in a colonial mindset or be a disenfranchised African – the opportunity to reflect on the object in the privacy of their own space and mind. This approach, which justly demands the support of host museums, provides a remote viewing experience for Africans in Africa that constitutes a large step towards physical repatriation.

3. ARTWORK

Creative Context

Throughout my two years in the Creative Technologies program, I have worked on several projects directed towards providing me a launching pad and inspiration for this thesis project. Five of them are specifically worth mentioning.

3D animation

As a child I always asked myself, “What would happen if I did not have to fly anywhere but could instead use my house as a spaceship?” I could go anywhere I wanted without packing my bags or staying in a hotel; I would be in my flying house floating somewhere and come down to clean the flying pod and replenish my food and water!

During my first semester here, knowing I would create a museum, I went to work on modeling and animating a spacecraft in an environment to satisfy my childhood imagination, while preparing for what other things would come with building a museum

Figure 6: ***Avatar***, 2021. Render.

Figure 7: ***Spaceship***, 2021. Interior.

in virtual reality. I designed and modeled a human, a flying ship containing a cockpit, two bedrooms, two bathrooms, a living room, and a kitchen.

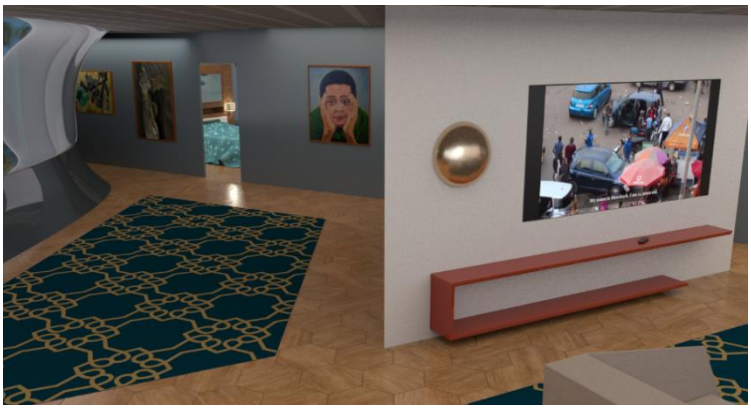


Figure 8: ***Spaceship***, 2021. Interior top view.

Figure 9: ***Spaceship***, 2021. Bottom view.

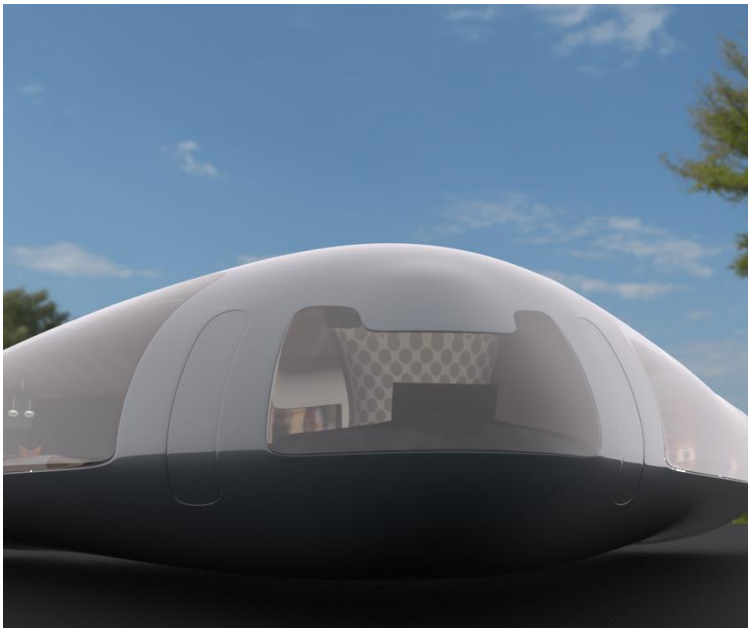


Figure 10: ***Spaceship***, 2021. Exterior front view.

Photogrammetry

Photogrammetry is a technique to create three-dimensional (3D) models or measurements of objects or environments using a series of photographs. During this process, the computer analyzes objects' geometry, shape, and texture to reconstruct their 3D representation. This task often takes many other forms, ranging from video capture to scanning an object using high-resolution scanners, to taking multiple photos of the artifact; they all end up in software that processes the visual data thus collected to generate a mesh and a texture. I intended to employ a technique that offered good results and was accessible to any Congolese artist to use, and opted to photograph each frame for the photogrammetry software to work with.

Figure 11: ***Past, Present, Future - Photogrammetry***, 2022. First thirteen artifacts from Miller's family collection and last two artifacts from Peat Szilagy's collection.

Over the course of three semesters I scanned fifteen objects. My scanning standards were high because I wanted water-tight models of anything I processed. This meant calculating data of the artwork in multiple chunks, as many as five or as few as two, depending on complexity in order to combine all the chunks for complete digital replicas. Of the fifteen, eight turned out as I expected: water-tight; four could have been water-tight if I could combined their chunks without too much fuss; and three had too much hair, textile, or feathers for the photogrammetry software to easily calculate data. They were all promptly saved and marked for future challenges.

Unity

Before embarking on another independent project with Unreal Engine, I took a class in Unity to get started with thinking like a game developer. I learned how to manipulate objects in a 3D game environment, create environments, materials, and interactions, and worked on more than twelve small projects. Among the many projects, one was

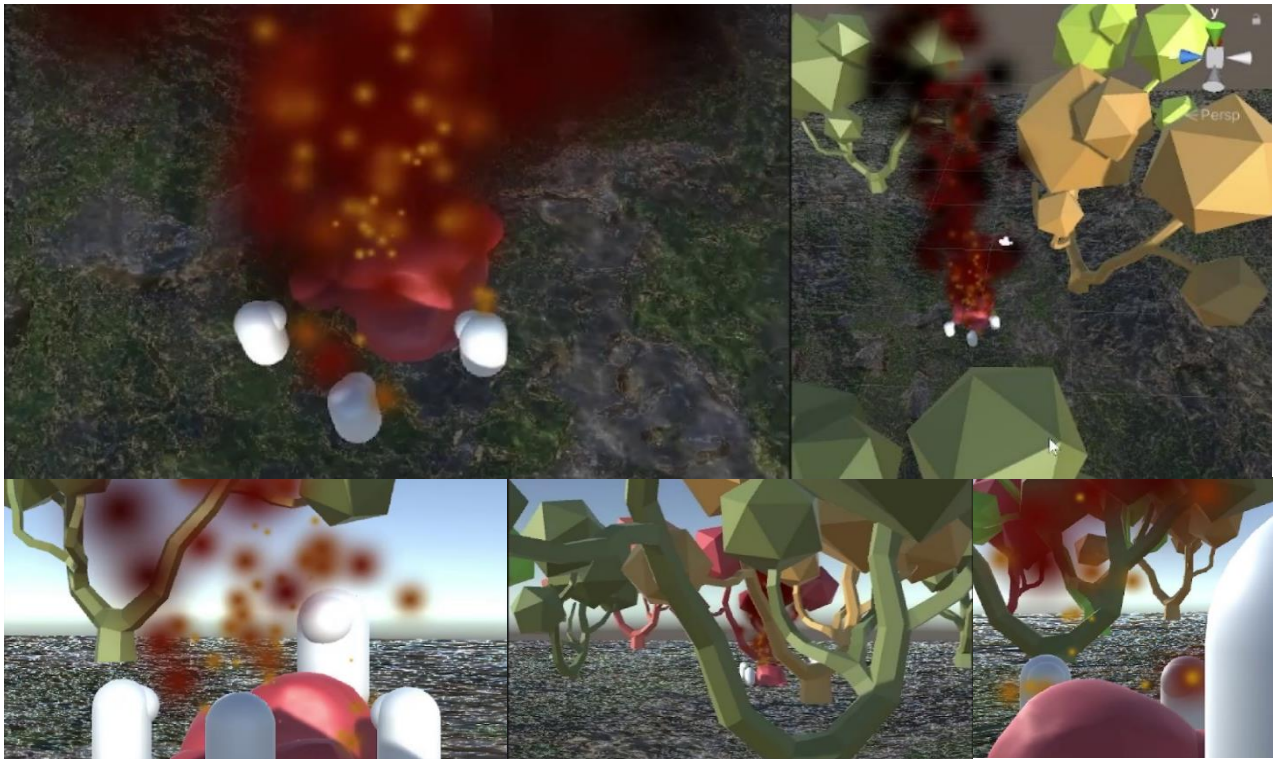


Figure 12: ***Storytelling***, 2022. Screenshots.

particularly tailored towards my end goal: a storytelling project that happens in a sufficiently complex scene.

I chose to include particles, decent lighting, geometric trees, capsule characters, material for the environment, and camera cuts. By the end of this project I had acquired enough knowledge of the basics of game development, and was ready to jump into and move any transferrable skills to Unreal Engine.

Augmented Reality

The intent of this project was to discover a way to make artifacts phone-ready so that when Congolese artists who do not have means to use VR but want to view Congolese artifacts, they can easily use their phones for access. This task was complex and often frustrating: it relies on available technology that still needs a few more evolutionary steps before it will be stable across platforms and easy to develop.

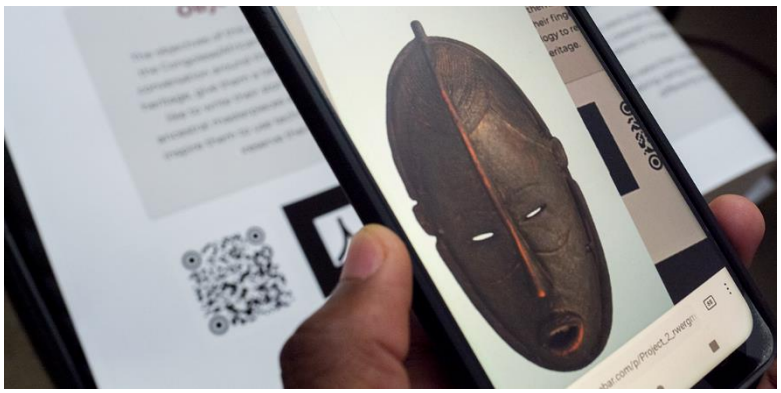


Figure 13: ***Augmented Reality***, 2022. View of Augmented QR Code on a phone.

I worked in two stages. During the first I used a third-party web application called myWebAR. The result with this app was stunning, but it was an expensive option and I did not sense it was going to be a good idea to scan contentious artifacts just to upload them onto a third-party app that carries the potential to start the cultural subjugation process all over again, this time on the cloud, where things tend to be harder to control and monitor. Moreover, the app required scanning a QR code once to get a link to a page, and once again to augment the object. The technical dance involved in the process, while

seemingly easy to perform for a single artifact, quickly became tedious when the number of artifacts to scan increased to as many as three objects.

After this test I had to find an alternative, so I began writing my own codes using HTML5, CSS3, JavaScript, and a JavaScript framework called AR.js. Having codes on a server that I could control and writing them myself was creatively liberating; I could simultaneously augment as many objects as possible, as long as the markers were visible to the camera. The best feature is that the viewer only needed one link to scan anything. This process emerged as the best, but the technology requires writing way too much code, and the result is currently unstable. This project at present seems like a failure, but it may be a blessing in disguise, though I do not yet clearly see how. It provided a good detour that planted seeds for what route my current work might take as new developments evolve with AR.

Unreal Engine

The plan for my thesis presentation show was to work in Unreal Engine because its lighting capabilities, access to assets online, and the visual programming language called Blueprint all appealed to my artistic sensibilities and technical abilities. I worked on two projects to get started with the engine. One project was an exercise in creating a landscape, while the other relied heavily on the work of Diébédo Francis Kéré. Francis Kéré, a Burkinabé-German architect, is renowned for pioneering architectural creations emphasizing sustainability and

Figure 14: ***Landscape***, 2022.

collaboration. In a groundbreaking achievement, Kéré made history when he became the first African to be awarded the prestigious Pritzker Architecture Prize in 2022.

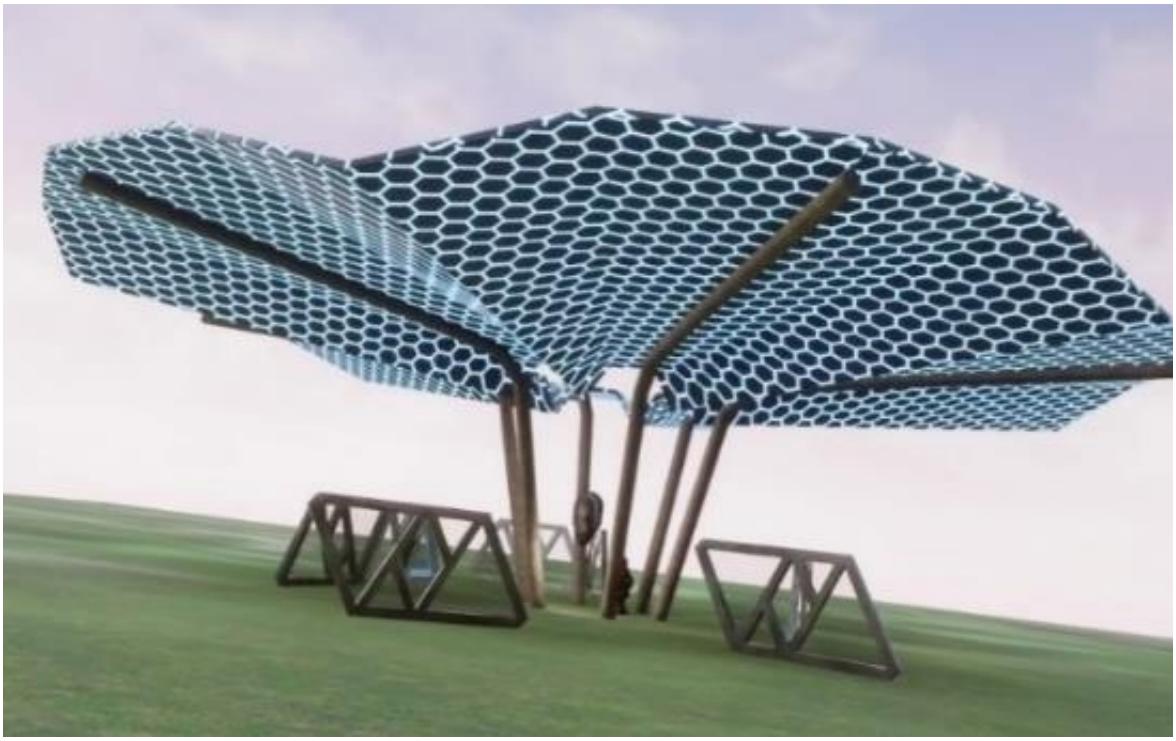


Figure 15: ***En Plain Air Museum***, 2022.

Figure 16 Diébédo Francis Kéré, ***Serpentine Pavilion at Night***, 2017, https://www.kerearchitecture.com/work/design/serpentine-pavilion, Photo by Iwan Baan.

The work

Past, Present, Future comprises a multi-layered installation with two main components, a VR section central to the whole experience and a projection mapping segment featuring an enlarged mask. The exhibition took placed in the Cube. “The Cube is a highly adaptable space for research and experimentation in big data exploration, immersive environments, intimate performances, audio and visual installations, and experiential investigations of all types. This facility is shared between ICAT and the Moss Arts Center at Virginia Tech” (ICAT). Upon entering the space, the viewer is immersed in a dark environment while immediately surrounded by a soothing, magical, yet distinctively African soundscape reminiscent of the particular mornings I remember during cooler times of the year in special locations of DR Congo. The slightly dizzying floor projection over the virtual reality area invites the viewer to engage.

Soundscape

The soundscape of *Past, Present, Future* is the result of a careful and deliberate aural design based on repurposed sound recordings of Kinshasa from a film I produced in the past, a combination of additional sounds from a sound library I have access to, and a low frequency 174 Hz sound that plays through the bass system. The Cube has 5 layers of high-density loudspeaker array (HDLA). This soundscape was designed to match that arrangement. Each layer comprises a combination of sounds from creatures that can be found at heights approximating the projections of the sound in the Cube. For example, water, fish, and crickets were mapped in the same layer; certain birds were mapped with shorter trees and bush sounds, while other birds were mapped with taller trees. The top layer of speakers, pointing down at the viewer, contained subtle sound effects that make this soundscape utterly different from any soundscape one will ever find anywhere in Africa or in the world when you are out in nature or inside a museum.

Virtual Reality

Virtual Reality requires physical equipment to display virtual content. The content of the VR environment I created is a dream I am sharing with the world. Within this dream, the physical space housing the virtual experience is a 10-foot diameter, 7-foot-tall cylindrical structure covered with black velvety curtains. The structure has three trusses that hang three 10-foot curved electrical pipes connected to create a circle. Within the cylinder is located a computer running the game assets and a C-stand loosened at the top to allow for effortless movement of the cables tethering the VR headsets.

The decision to place the VR exhibit at the center of the room with a cylindrical structure in the middle stem from my exhibition design, the locomotion of the viewer when entering the virtual world, and the practicality of moving around tethered to a system that displays the virtual world. I wanted to seamlessly match motion within the VR world with that in the real world. Moreover, instead of setting up the computer village in a corner and creating non-concentric circles that easily cause issues when they overlap, I chose to collapse the centers of each circle for a smoother experience for both the viewer and myself.

Dreaming requires one to fall asleep; a viewer entering my dream is no exception. To place them into a dream-like state without literally putting them to sleep, I created a dizzying yet colorful iridescent set of floor projections rotating in opposite directions to prepare their minds for an even more colorful world in VR while the sound in the space is working on their emotions before they see anything.

The VR piece features what would look like a magical and imaginary African landscape with grass, a body of water, rocks, cliffs, and trees. There is also a modern-looking mushroom-shaped tower, an architectural structure with hollowed-out stone walls

situated in the middle of the landscape. Three scanned Congo artifacts are housed in alcoves along the structure. The tower, rather than an enclosed, separate building of Western museum design which one enters to view displayed pieces, is instead an open-air gallery where you walk around to see the objects it features. It is 47 feet tall and 74 feet wide. The outdoor design distinguishes it from the museum of today by bringing the artifacts closer to their original context, an intangible concept that can be uncovered or recreated to some extent but can never truly be replicated.

Figure 17: ***Past, Present, Future - VR***, 2023. View from mushroom (left), and view from lake (right).

The impossibility of fully recontextualizing the objects is multi-layered. The artifacts originated in specific geographical areas, belonged to someone or a people, contained histories, and served purposes including but not limited to being symbols of beauty, fertility, initiation to adulthood, spiritual contracts, and an unimaginably diverse and expansive range of other possibilities. To me, the most profound aspect of the context surrounding these masterpieces ultimately resides in the connections they created between the people they were meant to serve and for whom they held meaning. Unfortunately, we cannot go back in time to return the objects to the individuals to whom they once belonged.

So many African artifacts are spiritually and culturally loaded. This spiritual concept, in particular, seems to make the modern Western mind extremely uncomfortable. Unfortunately, the refusal to accept this central cultural element makes it such that the Western viewer unknowingly perpetuates the colonial decontextualization of the objects. They become diminished to craft forms. It does not matter whether or not a work of art once or still carries an actual spiritual charge attached to it. It matters that the person who made or used it had a mindset and belief around that spiritual load; that belief is as real to them as any material, cultural or religious belief of a museum-goer in any colonial countries.

For better or worse, science has not discovered everything under the sun, far from it. Dismissing the metaphysical nature of artifacts would be as distasteful as having a Congolese tell Americans to stop using their system of measurements, going to church, synagogue, or mosque, or believing in evolution. I endeavored to recreate the mysterious and spiritual presence contained in these artifacts, so I added glowing particles around the mushroom stem top. In addition to the impossible material of the gills and cap, a mushroom tower like this does not exist and might never exist in the outer world. Its elements bridge the intangible spiritual and cultural meanings embedded in the objects it showcases while grounding the viewer into the physical world where they can be seen and enjoyed - or envied, stolen, looted, and finally brought home.

Growing up in DR Congo, there was a common understanding that people's fates were decided under trees. Serious decisions were made under trees, tribal debates were hosted under trees, and visible and invisible reunions were held under the shades of large or old trees. Borrowing from this observation of my own heritage, this virtual outdoor experience is reminiscent of that tradition. A literalist might ask, "Why not just place the artifacts under a tree?" To that dodgy question, I'd say, if Africans could make

important decisions under a tree in the past, and my work is *Past, Present, Future,* what would be more important than offering a metaphorical tree that can be used today and, in the future, for making decisions over a displaced heritage!

The mushroom gives the impression of a tree, a shrine, a temple, a church, or a transformed version of a museum without being any of the above. While it sounds confusing to encompass the abovementioned elements, the point of the structure is to not choose one thing to get stuck to but rather be the in the middle of, inside of, and around everything, just like mushrooms, and for that very reason, no matter what a naysayer might argue, I would never make this a literal tree. The latter would end the conversation and remain in the past, while reducing my voice to that of a copyist.

This mushroom speaks to the versatility fungi bring to our table. They are, to some reckoning, the oldest living creatures on the earth; they make life here possible. To quote and paraphrase Sheldrake (2020), "Fungi not only help create soil, but they also send out networks of tubes that enmesh roots and link plants together in the 'Wood Wide Web.' Fungi also drive many long-standing sources of human fascination: from yeasts that cause bread to rise and orchestrate the fermentation of sugar into alcohol; to psychedelic fungi that may enlarge the possible; to the mold that produces penicillin and revolutionizes modern medicine. We can partner with fungi to heal the damage we've done to the planet." I wholeheartedly echo his position. Mushrooms are neither plants nor animals; they are something else, which is the sense in which I display my mushroom tower.

African cultures and architectures heavily borrow from nature through living symbiotically with it. To Africans, humankind is not outside of nature but a part of it. That understanding and acceptance of being attached to the natural world inspired their architecture, spirituality and ways of life rather than the technologies that attempt to

dominate nature. Mushrooms, much like the subtleties of the context lost with museumed artifacts, are easy to miss in the shadowy undergrowth, and the choice of a

Figure 18: ***Past, Present, Future - VR***, 2023. View from ferns.

giant mushroom testifies to our connection by offering the opportunity to ponder under a metaphorical yet magical tree that would be missed inside a conventional structure.

The scene is a perpetual sunrise, and yes, it is sunrise because the bird calls of the "bush pigeon" I added to the soundscape only occur at the crack of dawn, never at dusk. Typically, the viewer of VR spends no more than 30 minutes in VR experiences. In my environment, the sun never moves but remains locked in time on purpose. The forever sunrise symbolizes my hope for the Congolese people to wake up to their heritage and reclaim what belongs to them.

With VR, I strive for total immersion into this world of recontextualized artifacts. However, that makes it prohibitive because the average Congolese could not easily access the devices of VR technology, and even if they did, nothing guarantees they would have a space large enough to replicate the size of the world I have created or the unique experience in the Cube. One could argue that I am removing the underprivileged from

Figure 19: ***Past, Present, Future - VR***, 2023. Sunrise view.

the conversation, and they would be correct, but only to a degree. Technology tends to become cheaper and cheaper as new discoveries are made. With this understanding I envision a point, not far off, when even the poorest communities of today will have access to versions of VR, much as most people today can access a TV set or a computer. The prohibition, if one would argue that case, is only temporary.

Re-interpreting and re-imagining the context of Congolese artwork in VR is a proactive step in telling my history that bypasses reliance on lingering narratives that would diminish the truth of harsh realities that led to their museum presence. Re-interpretation allows me to gesture back in time to reclaim the pieces I should have inherited directly from inside my culture. Instead, I deal with broken leftovers of a life recovered outside its African home. I bring the past to the present by scanning the objects and creating a possible future for displaced artifacts, re-starting an uncomfortable but practical conversation about their repatriation, this time in the land of VR, while, I hope, awakening people trapped in outmoded mindsets.

Projection-Mapping

Projection mapping requires at least one projector and a projection screen on which images are projected. In the Cube, that experience can be enhanced tenfold. For my work, this section features a mask that resembles the one I scanned but has a few aspects modified: it has undergone a series of transformations for the projection to work without altering the essence of the mask. Its profile has been flattened or squashed to receive the projection on the majority of its surface because, with the original proportions, it could not be fully depicted without the need for a second projector.

I went through the difficult operation of projecting onto the mask because this not only allowed me to magnify the mask while still having it look like the real mask instead of a screen, but also opened the possibility for interactions that would otherwise appear gimmicky. The mask speaks, and its voice is directional: it can only be heard from specific areas inside the space through the help of a holosonic speaker. The story is heard only on being triggered by the viewer passing a trigger point in the space. The mask itself is made of foam, to keep it lightweight, plastered, and painted white, to reflect as much light as possible. It measures 18.625 inches in width, 30.75 inches in height, and 3.5 inches in depth. It is framed on a 23-inch wide x 35.25-inch tall black wooden frame, and both are suspended on wires at eye level; the frame symbolizes the constraint most African artifacts find within modern venues.

I magnified the mask to communicate the importance it held for its community, though it might also be read as a deity figure. Congolese pieces are usually treated as commodities; even when displayed in museums, the violence behind their often violent appropriation has been glossed over. Thus, their presentation is skin deep, perhaps to avoid upsetting the sensibilities of the visitors. I personally do not fear upsetting participants because the proper context of the artifacts is the point of my exhibit and

will always supersede a desire to preserve soothing feel-good narratives. Thus, I gave the mask a story in the form of a dream, although the story is quite generic.

In its story rhythm, this tale shares key points common to many Congolese artifacts found in the West. The story involves Christianity or violence or both depending on whether Christianity succeeded in achieving the goals of the colonizers or not. Usually, these were the elements involved in the enslavement process: a priest or missionary labels the objects "the work of Satan," and coerces tribal chiefs into throwing their sacred objects away for him to later retrieve. When the Congolese caught on to the dupery, they began refusing to throw their artifacts away, leading a colonial agent to apply force against villagers to comply with the missionary's orders.

Figure 20: ***Past, Present, Future – Projection Mapping***, 2023. Mask sharing the dream.

The Dream

Human!

I keep having this dream. People are dancing, singing, drumming, all around happy! I am on someone's face but surrounded by other masked faces; it's electric!

Then I am on a shelf and hear a missionary talking to the chiefs; he calls me the devil's work – I should be destroyed. Then I am thrown away alongside many objects: masks, headrests, figurines, ivory, you name it. At nightfall, the same missionary comes back with acolytes and boxes. They retrieve us from the dumping place.

Then I hear metal clinking, and then choo-choo, and then seabirds for days on end. Then I see new faces, and more faces, and even more faces. Those people say, hoo, Tshokwe, Africa, Congo. Then the dream ends – I wake up. But every time I awake, I am always on a wall, not on a face anymore. There is no crowd, no ceremony, no drumming, nothing. That electric energy in my dreams? Gone!

Featured Artifacts

Nkisi Nkondi - Power Figures

Across the board, these figurines were known by generic names such as Minkisi (singular: Nkisi) in Kikongo language or Mankishi (singular: Nkishi) in Songye. Consequently, they are attributed to the Kongo and the Songye people. However, even with that distinct identification of what they were, I could not tell if the ones on the right are Kongo or Songye. If they are Kongo, they could be Yombe or Nyanga.

Figure 21: ***Past, Present, Future - Photogrammetry***, 2022. Power figures scanned from Miller's family collection.

Nkisi Nkondi (in Kikongo) is often translated as the nail-studded figure or power figure in the museum, academic, and modern art world. Irrespective of their origins, Kongo or Songye, they not only represented humans, but also animals. The Yombe tribe, in addition to the human figurine, had a variant called Nkisi Nkondi Mbwa or Nkisi Kozo, a representation of a nail-studded dog. The Nkisi Nkondi refer to protective devices' connection with the worlds of the ancestors. The figures were activated by medicinal and magical concoctions that were placed in cavities within their bodies, usually the head or the abdomen. These substances were continually added to the sculptural vessel and comprised of extracts from plants, minerals, animal, and human origins (Rondeau 2022, 297).

Tshokwe, Pwo?

Figure 22: ***Past, Present, Future - Photogrammetry***, 2022. Mask scanned from Miller's family collection.

The mask in this exhibit is one that, after careful searching and cross-referencing, appears to be a Tshokwe mask in the series called "Mwana Pwo" or "Pwo." Mwana Pwo masks were used to represent the fecundity of women in the Tshokwe community and the crucial role that women played in that society. Even though Pwo represented a woman, masks belonged to the world of men. The wearers would imitate female dances and had to be very good at it. If their performance in imitating the female dances was not praiseworthy, it would be insulting, and they were chased from the village by women, often the initiates' mothers or sisters. As the "performers" masqueraded, their identities needed to be kept secret, or fines and severe sentences followed the one revealing an identity (Baeke 2018, 214).

(It is important to note that I am not entirely convinced this mask is a Pwo, and am still researching and cross-referencing. If new evidence indicates this mask is neither a Mwana Pwo nor a Tshokwe, I will make the correction).

Baule, Blolo?

Much like the other artifacts included in the installation, this figurine underwent a series of cross-referencing to uncover its origin. In contrast to the previous three, this one appears to come from two different cultures, Hemba, Atie, or Baule. At the moment, I tend to lean toward Baule because most of the features match the Baule. Much like with the Pwo, investigations are ongoing.

Figure 23: ***Past, Present, Future - Photogrammetry***, 2022. Figurine scanned from Miller's family collection.

4. METHODS AND METAPHORS

Methods

The process of creating this immersive experience started with collecting artifacts. Throughout, it required Congolese and other African art objects to work with. Through Professor Rachel Lin Weaver's help in contacting the Blacksburg-based Miller family and with the Miller family's generous cooperation, I gained access to a vast collection of artifacts. Ironically, the question of access underscores the importance of a broad conversation regarding Congolese people gaining any kind of access to their ancestral heritage.

Scanning the artifacts was technically challenging, and uncovering their origins was no easier. I heavily relied on Baeke and Rondeau's books to cross-reference features of the artifacts. Sometimes, matching was obvious; other times, it needed extra attention, which prompted me to use the Google image search tool. Additionally, Robert Miller had hunches about where the objects originated based on what the dealers told him when he acquired them; sometimes, his hunches were my starting points.

I chose which objects to work with based on a series of criteria: 1.) what the collector knew about them, 2.) what I was able to learn about those from DR Congo, and 3.) the nature of my encounters and subsequent relationship with the artifacts' collector. To Robert Miller, these objects are his babies; he has been collecting for a very long time, over three decades. They are pieces from around the world bought from dealers who travel across America selling them. This combination is a beautiful recipe for conflict and loss of access if not carefully handled. At first I followed Mr. Miller's willingness to let me borrow what he felt comfortable lending. Later, after enough trust was built between the Miller family and me, it reached a point where I could choose the objects I

needed or wanted. Additionally, I also used two Nigerian masks from Peat Szilagyi. Unfortunately, they could not be used because of the issue with combining their chunks during the scanning process.

Producing the present work required the use of multiple techniques and technologies. My contribution to knowledge was not inventing new technology but using what was already available in a particular sequence to create my art and model the digital repatriation of Congolese works of art, masterpieces or not. For each digitized artifact, I shot between 150 and 500 photos depending on the complexity and needs of each item. The images were then processed using photogrammetry software to create a 3D model and texture files. Because artifacts tend to be very large and the model topologies need adjusting, the resulting reproductions were then cleaned up and reduced in ZBrush, re-textured in Substance Painter, exported as smaller files which were then ready for use in an AR and VR experience, and then rendered in Stager.

Metaphors

The middle way

Life is full of dualities that generate division when not carefully considered and handled. I look at the past and future in the same way: as temporal elements that arguably exist but generate a fake duality that often begets imbalances in our understanding. The only way we may find balance in the past and future is through joining them to create an intersection where conceiving a vibrant and equitable present becomes possible.

The present is an instance we can never really grasp or even point to because as soon as we are aware of and point to it, it is already in the past. Although more intangible than its counterparts - past and future - the present is the middle, most straightforward yet challenging path to walk. Fortunately, it is all we have; we can somewhat control the

fleeting moment and choose what to do with it. “Yesterday is history. Tomorrow is a mystery. But today is a gift, that is why it is called ‘present’” (Kung Fu Panda 2008).

The Jewish Kabbala speaks of the Tree of Life with three pillars, but only the middle one, the middle way, goes from the very bottom to the very top of the Tree of Life (daily MOTIVATION 2022). *Past, Present, Future* intends to remind other Congolese artists and myself to walk that middle path, to use the present as a tool, and recognize that the past, particularly for postcolonial nations, is dirty laundry to sort out, clean, and iron.

I am moving into a future I anticipate will benefit Congolese artists rather than a future forced upon them, which, much like the traumatized past, is otherwise likely to be a traumatizing future that I want no part in creating. Based on Classen and Howe’s perspectives, it can be argued that I am looking at the Enlightenment Westerner, “the eye-man,” as our recent past, and the skin-man, the African, as our hopeful future. While the idea of labeling one demographic “the past” and another “the future” is something I would never put my name behind in daily life, in the decolonization and repatriation of my heritage, it makes sense to look at the models undertaken by the Colonial Powers as an absolute model of the past.

There but not there

At the end of the digitization process I was left with “the remnants” of the artifacts: the digital scans. Digital versions of anything in their core are simply zeros and ones; they are machine code and patterns. I argue they are also real because they are there in spirit. We usually don’t see spirit, nor does the Enlightenment’s rigid scientific framework for looking at life allow for serious recognition of spirit without labeling the proposition superstitious. With the digital reproduction of Congolese artifacts these objects are present in code and spirit but not physically present. Any uneasiness this generates is a

feature meant to put the viewer in the shoes of the Congolese tribes to whom the works once belonged. In their minds, and for the contemporary Congolese collective unconscious, the artifacts are the ever-so-fading, tenuous memories of what once was. If meeting a spirit constitutes a dream, then *Past, Present, Future* is the Congo memory elevated to the level of a vivid dream. Whether conscious of it or not, the viewer is daydreaming in my installation.

Wizardry

Most artifacts from DR Congo have distinctly spiritual alignments and purposes. In many cases, the unnamed artist carved or sculpted a sacred piece and passed it on to a wizard, priest, or witch to house a corresponding spirit to serve the purposes of a third party, a person who commissioned the piece or asked that the ritual around it be undertaken. Throughout the process, from fashioning to implementation, the object undergoes a series of strategic operations which include: selecting and harvesting material, selecting tools, carving/sculpting, polishing, integrating spiritual ceremonies into the process, and finally, the intended usage of the object. These objects' spiritual and ritual aspects are distant and mysterious to us today.

Similarly, looking at my process of digitizing and recontextualizing loaded but forcibly displaced artifacts, I see how my efforts resemble the wizard's. To the non-technologically inclined Congolese artist whom I intend my work to inspire, this can be perceived as wizardry: I take photos of a physical object, process them within a few software applications, and turn them into ghostly, floating entities that live within a virtual space where they can become autonomous through a set of programming commands. I wonder if the spirits represented or contained in these works could also be programmed entities or frequencies with their own programmatic rules only those Africans in the know can encode, read, or decode.

A crime scene

Attempting to be liberated from the talons of a predator is a violent undertaking, and more often than not, the prey rarely escapes unscathed. DR Congo is a crime scene, and its people and resources have been preyed upon by colonial and neo-colonial exploitation and hunger for power. No earlier than 60 years ago, DR Congo fought for its independence, tragically losing brilliant minds. The causes of those fights and struggles were none other than the desire to be free from colonialism. This living crime scene is Congolese lives, history, culture, and heritage today.

The looting and removal of Congolese and African masterpieces is only one facet of this crime scene, and the artifacts scattered around modern institutions, predominantly in the West, are the metaphorical and literal evidence of the destruction and dismemberment of Congolese and African heritage. My work in digitizing artifacts resembles that of a forensic scientist who would go to a crime scene, collect evidence, and bring it to the lab for close analysis. The difference between that scientist and I is that the crime scene usually is kept untouched and often protected, and the evidence to be collected is present at the crime scene. The crime scene my work investigates has had its evidence removed from the scene as if the perpetrators were trying to clean up after themselves over many decades. My arduous task is to get people to recognize the crime scene as such while I attempt to locate scattered evidence to contribute to solving the gigantic puzzle of a broken cultural heritage.

The evidence of the crimes I am searching for is often found in the museums of the West and private galleries that hold the artifacts hostage against their original owners. “The walls of the Tate, the Met, the Louvre, or MoMA may look perfectly well-hung, but the vast majority of art belonging to the world’s top art institutions (and in many countries, their taxpayers) is at any time hidden from public view in temperature-controlled,

darkened, and meticulously organized storage facilities" (Bradley 2022). When the museums proudly display their stolen artifacts, even after countless requests for repatriation, it is often for a fee. I have attempted to work with museums independently, but the endeavor has so far been fruitless. Luckily, a fellow colleague who worked with a museum holding hundreds of Congolese artifacts with clear provenance, who shall remain nameless for now, connected me with an official from the museum only to find myself ghosted after exchanging a few emails about my project. Whether this is a testament to a plot to keep these objects hostage from discovery and future repatriation or a fear of losing his livelihood is unclear.

On the bright side, however, as long as they can be found, local collectors tend to cooperate much more than museums, perhaps because they tend to have a cleaner conscience than museums. This is likely the case with the Miller family, to whom I will forever be grateful. Their collection is not a testament to the looting of the objects, far from it; instead, it became a testing ground for the model of virtual return I am building and a critical contributor to the conversation I intend to continue through my work.

5. REFLECTION

Overall, *Past, Present, Future* has allowed me to foresee the closure of loops I had opened years ago while allowing a different level of the artist in me to emerge. In *The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge*, Flexner (2017) explores the value of pure, curiosity-driven scientific research and the role it plays in advancing society. He argues that we can attain deeper levels of understanding and progress if only we value and significantly fund the curiosity-driven "pursuit of useless knowledge" in the humanities and sciences without immediate practical application or utility; if we do, the pursued knowledge will often lead to unexpected discoveries that benefit humanity in the long run. While developing the present work, I relied on soft skills that quickly go unnoticed with technology-based work: curiosity, keen observation, and the drive and desire to challenge myself while thinking about what more I can do and what more I can offer society.

My work draws from personal experience of a commonly felt pain by those disempowered by the aftermath and continuing violence of a colonial system designed to prey on the weak and conspire to continually weaken them. Living in times where there is a push to create more experts in one field and a desire to focus on fewer and fewer domains, I seek to go in the opposite direction and embrace being an adisciplinary artist and keep up my ability to use multiple mediums at the highest professional/expert level possible, because I believe a well-rounded specialist will be more valuable than one that focuses on only one thing in the near future – and with technology assisting artists today, being one kind of artist could be the death of a creative spirit.

I am a direct descendant of the people who lost their culture through colonization, and I argue that I am closer to that lost heritage and context than any Western scholar because I was born in it, observed it, and live the consequences of it daily rather than just thinking about it. However, no matter how close I am or can get to the lost heritage, I am still far removed from the missing knowledge and history, hence my quest to restore it with my artistic practice. This process has been, on the surface, exhausting, but deep down, very rewarding; it fed the hungry artistic engine that drives me. I am convinced that every human has some creative power in them, and mine feels dead whenever my creativity stalls. With this thesis, that power was alive and alert throughout the process and contributed to my creative imagination.

I have always been conflicted between being techy or fuzzy. I would even go so far as to say I have been torn between being an artist and an engineer – having a wild imagination, and being practically grounded. I came to this program expecting to reconcile my engineer's left brain with my artist's right brain. Much like needing two feet to balance and walk, I needed a balanced and proportional mixture of the two for my creative expression to manifest harmoniously and this artistic research offered me what I needed to reconcile both.

Use cases

Past, Present, Future has many use cases it can fit into, and the technology warrants an incredible array of possibilities to explore. Among the ones relevant to culture, identity, and heritage, I see the potential of archiving history, the pieces of material cultures, places, people, and artifacts to save their data in a decentralized repository. The saved data would, at best, together with the evolution of the collective unconscious and developments in positive artificial intelligence, reveal where this effort would be the most useful. At worse, it can be stored

for posterity and educational access. Knowledge is power, and whoever controls knowledge through history and media, unfortunately, controls the world. If knowledge is freely available, everyone gains access to control and autonomy. The lack of knowledge and accurate history of DR Congo has kept Congolese people enslaved and subordinated; by archiving history as it is happening, free from outside hegemonic interpretations, Congolese people will likely have the power to protect themselves from neo-colonial or re-colonization maneuvers.

Why worry about preserving culture during a time of "peace?" On one hand, culture and identity are communicated through stories; archiving these adds one tool to help with this effort. On the other hand, our species is technologically advanced enough to destroy itself but neither psychologically nor spiritually mature enough to balance our technological advancements with ethical wisdom. We still vibrate from the frequency of war and competition for control over others. Things can change from a peaceful lakeside scene to a war zone in hours or less. One sad case was the invasion of Iraq and the destruction of ancient sites in the Middle East. "The invasion didn't take a toll only on Iraq's movable artifacts; it also damaged the archeological sites from which such artifacts emerge," asserts Samuel (2018). I argue that the possibility offered by photogrammetry could have allowed Iraq to document and digitally preserve its now-devastated legacy sites, whose loss is not only felt by their people but by the entire world because they were not digitally duplicated and archived.

Problematic questions

My thesis ultimately involves leveling the playing field and graduating the repatriation conversations toward effortless, unprompted, and peaceful repatriation efforts. However, a few difficult questions remain unanswered from the predominantly Western institutions and the countries that retain these artifacts.

Caring for the artifacts

Museums argue that Congolese and other African nations are incapable of adequately caring for their artifacts due to a lack of infrastructure and resources to protect sensitive materials, and in some cases, they are correct and make a good point. However, this argument easily settles into an excuse for inaction. I would assert that the Congolese, having produced sought-after works of art in a much less technologically advanced past, is no demonstration of their incapacity but rather a display of knowledge that "advanced" sensibilities conveniently prefer to ignore.

Arguments around African nations' inability to care for precious objects are just as problematic as was the impulse to take them in the first place. They reflect the patronizing "we know better than you, and we can make decisions for you" attitude that first justified conquest, and rejects accountability for the pain and violence that attitude directly visited on its victims. Tangentially this included cultural theft at various levels and exploitation of the artistry of African peoples.

At the same time, some artifacts have already served their ritualistic social purpose and should complete their life cycle at the hands of the people they were connected to. If these people decide it is proper to destroy the once-sacred objects, who is to judge them for completing the cycle?

Suppose a museum claims an object must be protected and never destroyed. In that case, I would argue that this suggestion takes away the agency of the artifact's culture to benefit an audience that pays a fee to look at a foreign object toward which they have no relationship or understanding. The same could be said of someone wanting to take toxic residue from factories, charge people to look at it in a museum, and argue that

it must be protected at all costs. The decision to destroy or protect objects arguably rests on the country under the principle that all nations are as sovereign as powerful ones.

If museums were genuinely concerned about the objects rather than the loss of pride and profits accrued from the artifacts in their collections, they would have shown a keen interest in working with the affected cultures to figure out reasonable solutions. Among these, I anticipate profit sharing, scholarships, and serious collaboration with each nation-state would be a forward step that too few museums and nations seem to be thinking about and building conversations around.

Repatriate, now, later, or never?

For now, the conversation needs to engage the key stakeholders. The nations the works of art came from must join the conversation and begin to reverse continued direct or indirect looting taking place in the ongoing scramble for sellable African cultural resources. This effort will allow some time for the African countries to prepare for the artifacts' return. Policies must be implemented so that no powerful politician or lobbyist would reverse the decision to return objects that rightfully belong in their country of origin.

Nevertheless, I struggle with the idea of full repatriation with regard to the immediate future. Colonial destruction has led to a lack of collective cultural consciousness and commitment to the crucial importance of cultural artifacts in affected nations. Many Africans do not yet recognize the value of their history and heritage, and they should not expect help from the developed world in that regard.

The economic struggles of so many African people prohibit them from thinking about issues unrelated to their very survival. They are not privileged enough to worry about their cultural heritage in this way. Until these societies grow into an understanding of

their heritage and show a serious interest in their displaced heritage, I doubt the artifacts would not, through locals' willingness, find their way back to people and institutions with the money to re-obtain them. I would go so far as to say if Africa's art treasures got lost again with the full accord of Africans themselves, who would sell national artifacts to the highest bidder, what a disaster that would be!

The question remains: return the works or keep them under the custody of Western nations and institutions? I would argue they should stay in the West temporarily, only to generate revenue to be shared with African countries to fund institutions capable of caring for their artifacts in their home. But at the same time, the pieces should be held in readiness to be returned upon request. My work is critical to this conversation because Africans have an obligation to know their heritage. One way to make it work is by producing portable, digital bodies of work like *Past, Present, Future* to raise awareness in affected African populations and provide ways for them to join the conversations where their voices are desperately needed.

Do you want to empty our museums?

The Koh-i-Noor diamond looted from India during their colonial episode has been a point of contention, much like Congolese and other African pieces held in museums of the West and developed world. The former British Prime Minister David Cameron told the Indian TV channel NDTV in 2010: "If you say yes to one, you suddenly find the British Museum would be empty. I think I am afraid to say, to disappoint all your viewers, it is going to have to stay put" (BBC News 2010).

While working on this project and talking to people about it, one person echoed Cameron's sentiment: "That would empty our museums. And can we even know who they belonged to? Who should benefit from the reparations if the people who owned

them are dead?" Regarding the Berlin scanning case, Cosmowenman (2016) wrote: "In my opinion, it's highly unlikely that two independent scans of the bust would match so closely. It seems even less likely that a scan of a replica would be such a close match. I believe the model that the artists released was, in fact, derived from the Neues Museum's own scan." If Al-Badri and Nelles did not scan Nefertiti's Bust but instead acquired the high-resolution scan somehow, that would mean museums already have scans of their artifacts, which implies they can return the objects and will still have digital replicas of the artifacts. With that in mind, I do not see how the museums will be emptied. In the contrary, I see a potential for museum exchange programs worldwide, this time with Africans in the conversation.

6. NEXT STEPS

As the ideas and project developed for the thesis, I saw multiple ways I could approach the execution of the work, and my research revealed how deep this rabbit hole could go. I recognize that I have only scratched the surface of the intricacies of this subject matter. Everything started with small increments that eventually led to the realization of this installation, and the same approach must apply to the next steps of this project. In a sense, though I have successfully accomplished all I wanted at this stage, in light of iterative design and the evolution of any project, I see this work opening new avenues for future efforts and collaboration. The road to where the project will lead me appears very long, and I cannot clearly see how far it will take me. However, this thesis begins a journey where the following pathways could be my next logical steps.

Game

As the project developed, I thought about fully immersing the viewer into the experience, and the idea of gamifying the experience came to mind. The inspiration behind building a game from this project is to attract more people, particularly younger people that are well-versed in gaming. I envision it to be a game tailored to Congolese/Africans, though people from other continents would also benefit from playing the game and could learn about the diversity of artifacts and masterpiece artworks through the process. But right now, what that game might be remains nebulous, though I see gaming consumption in 2023 resembling video consumption in 2013.

Book

The more research I undertook, the more issues I saw. The more answers I found, the more questions were sparked. As I kept writing notes and ideas, in the back of my mind, my fear of writing a book instead of a thesis grew larger and larger, so I dialed a few things back to remain grounded in the reasonable confines of an MFA thesis. Nevertheless, as the future unfolds and I continue exploring different avenues for this project, I see the result of this work growing and incorporating more academic and artistic research to become a book.

Collaboration with Miller's Gallery

If it wasn't for the kindheartedness of Robert and Pippi Miller, my work would have been severely affected by the lack of nearby artifacts relevant to the project. From the beginning to the end, they supported my artistic research and practice, and I will be forever grateful for their contribution to my development as an artist. During a few of our conversations, I heard the Miller family mention their struggle to map the origin of the artifacts in their collection and a need for a digital gallery to reference the artifacts they have in photographic form. With the scanned objects ready to be handled artistically in any way possible, rendering professionally lit scenes for the Miller's gallery would not be a problem, and I foresee a potential collaboration.

Materiality in VR

In the past few months, I started assisting Professor Tucker with his project, *Senses Swirling*. While in Miami for an exhibit, I realized that in the future iterations of *Past, Present, Future*, I could utilize 3D printed versions of the objects and map them into a VR environment on a one-to-one scale to allow for a more immersive experience of the

artifacts. With materiality, they can see the artwork in VR, hear the sound in the space, and touch the artwork with their hands, all at the same time.

Chemistry of the objects

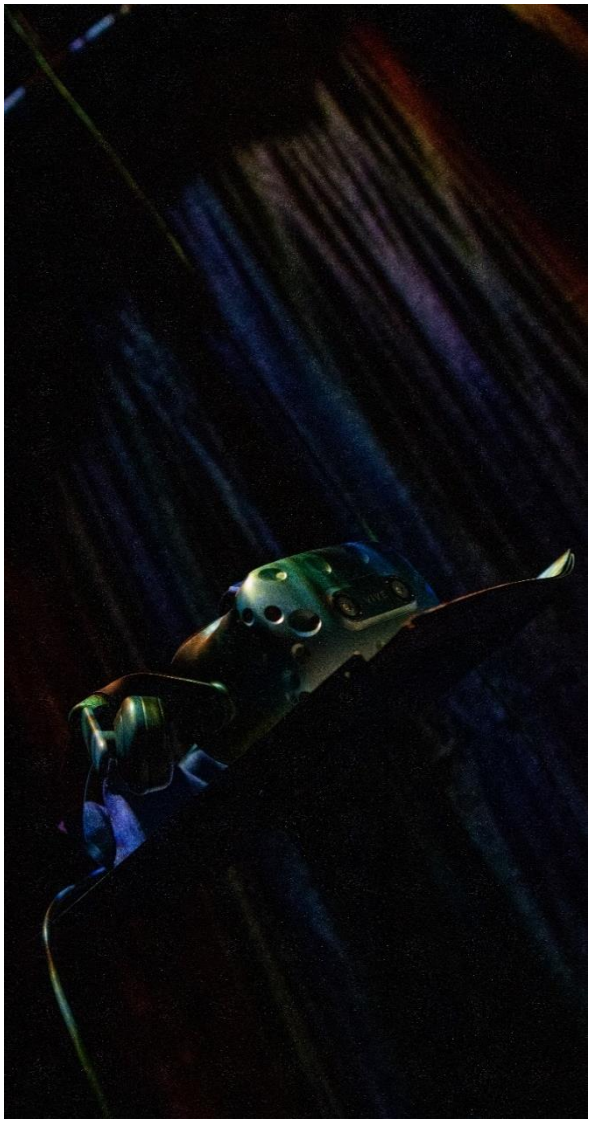
Artifacts are not only visual but have materiality to them. While on the surface, the viewer's focus is on texture, color, and the object's medium, there is often more to the artifact's production than what meets the eye. Congolese artifacts were made for cultural events, entertainment, and ceremonies.
They incorporated multiple materials inside and outside; to this day, not many people know what specific materials were used in the making of these masterpieces.

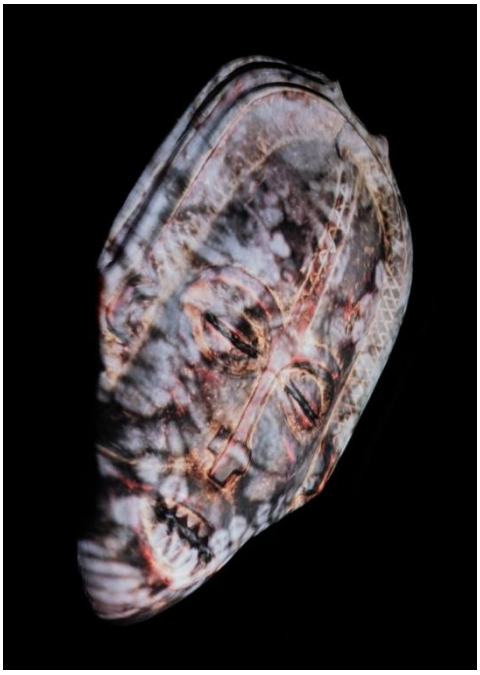
My work focuses on the visual, the auditory, the historical, and the political, but the chemical component has not been explored. However, to ensure a close to full representation and understanding of the artifacts, studying the chemical composition of each object would provide an added layer of completeness the project could benefit from. I can only imagine the secrets collaboration with a chemist would reveal about the artifacts.

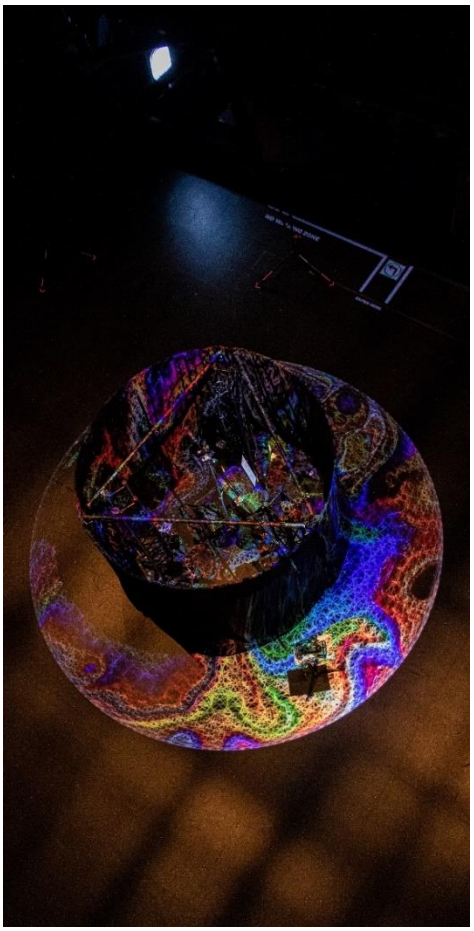
VR film

A year ago, I watched a VR film called The Key. The movie was about refugees fleeing Syria and going elsewhere but bringing their home keys in the hopes that when they return home, they can use their keys to enter their homes, provided they are still intact. Seeing this movie inspired me to think about ways the VR experience of this work could be turned into a VR film project, and I can see myself producing a VR film around displaced Congolese artifacts.

7. EXHIBITION PHOTOGRAPHS







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9. APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Letter/Speech attributed to King Leopold II

The copy of the letter that circulated in DR Congo, which I received from my father, has typos, some missing words, and artifacts that make it difficult, but not impossible, to make out the document's overall content. I read it multiple times and realized it was a copy of a copy, and the chain might be longer.

The people that copied it typed it with typos that were later included in the photocopy I have access to. However, I found a spoken version, though the recording contains words that are hard to hear on the digitized tape and are subsequently lost. One of these words is replaced by "…," and other terms are transcribed or copied based on the typos they carry. Another of these words is "Ternerine," which does not seem to be anything known and might even be Tervuren, where the Royal Museum for Central Africa is located.

It is reported that the letter, or speech transcript, came to light after a man named Moukouani Muikwani Bukoko, born in the Congo in 1915, bought a second-hand bible from a priest in 1935. The priest inadvertently left the document in the bible; that is how Bukoko found it (Ndille 2018, 53). Unfortunately, having two countries named Congo makes it challenging to tell which one Bukoko was a citizen of; Moukouani is written like Congolese from the Republic of Congo would write it, while Bukoko is written like Congolese from DR Congo would write it.

French version

“Révérends Pères, Pasteurs et chers compatriotes,

Soyez les bienvenus dans notre grande patrie du Congo Belge.

La tâche qui vous est confiée de remplir est très délicate et demande beaucoup de tact.

Prêtres et pasteurs, vous venez certes pour évangéliser. Mais cette évangélisation s’inspire de notre grand principe: “Avant tout, les intérêts de la metropole”.

Le but essentiel de votre mission n’est point d'apprendre noirs à connaître Dieu; ils le connaissent déjà depuis leurs ancêtres. Ils prient, et se soumettent à Nzambe Mpunu, je sache, et aussi à Nzambi Mawezi. Ils savent que tuer, voler, coucher avec la femme d’autrui, calomnier, insulter est mauvais. Ayons le courage de l’avouer, vous ne venez pas leur apprendre, ce qu’ils savent déjà.

Votre rôle est essentiellement de faciliter la tâche des administrateurs et des industriels. C'est-à-dire que vous interpréterez l’évangile de la façon qui sert le mieux aux intérêts, dans cette partie du monde. Pour ce faire, vous veillerez entre autres à désintéresser nos sauvages noirs, des richesses dont regorge de leur sous-sol, afin d’éviter qu’ils s’y intéressent, ou qu’ils nous fassent une concurrence meurtrière, rêvant un jour à nous déloger de cette partie, avant que nous ne nous enrichissions.

Votre connaissance de l’évangile vous permettra de trouver des textes qui recommandent et qui font aimer la pauvreté. Par exemple : “heureux les pauvres, car le royaume des cieux leur appartient.” “Il est plus difficile pour un riche d’entrer au ciel qu’à un chameau de passer par le trou d’une aiguille, etc”. Vous ferez donc tout, pour que les nègres aient peur de s’enrichir pour mieux mériter le ciel ; et soutenir petit à petit pour qu’ils ne se révoltent jamais un jour.

Les industriels et les administratifs seront obligés de se conformer à ce que je vous recommanderais, à vous, prêtres, pasteurs blancs, de temps en temps, pour vous faire craindre, de peur de courir à la violence (injurier, battre).

Il ne faudra pas que les nègres ripostent où se nourrissent de vengeance. Pour cela, vous leur enseignerez par tous les moyens, et vous insisterez pour qu'ils suivent l'exemple de tous les saints qui ont tendu les joues, qui ont pardonné les offenses, qui ont reçu les crachats et les insultes, sans tressaillir!

Il faudra les décourager et les détacher de tout ce qui pourrait leur donner le courage de nous affronter. Je songe ici spécialement à leurs nombreuses fétiches de guerre qu'ils prétendent ne point abandonner.

Votre action doit porter essentiellement sur les jeunes, afin qu'ils n'hésitent point de nous saluer. Quand le commandement du père est en contradiction avec celui des missionnaires, qui sont les pères spirituels de leurs âmes, vous insisterez particulièrement sur la soumission et l'obéissance même aveugle.

Cette vertu se pratique mieux quand il y'a absence de critique. Apprendre aux élèves à croire et non à raisonner.

Ce sont là, chers prêtres, pasteurs et compatriote, quelques-uns des principes que vous appliquerez sans faille. Vous en trouverez beaucoup d'autres dans les livres et textes qui vous seront remis à la fin de cette séance. Vous verrez donc ce que je recommanderai à vous, prêtres et pasteurs blancs.

- Évangéliser les noirs jusqu'à la moelle des os afin qu'ils ne se révoltent jamais contre les injustices que vous leur ferez subir.
- Faites leur réciter chaque jour "heureux ceux qui pleurent, car le royaume des cieux leur appartient."

- Convertissez les noirs au moyen des chicotes.

- Garder leurs femmes à la mission pendant neuf mois, afin qu'elles travaillent pour vous. Courtisez-les s'il le faut et exiger ensuite à ces convertis qu'ils offrent en signe de reconnaissance des bonnes viandes: poules, coqs et œufs, chaque fois que vous visitez leurs villages.

- Faites tout pour éviter que les noirs ne deviennent riches. Pour ce faire, chanter leur chaque jour qu'il est impossible à un homme riche d'entrer dans le royaume des cieux.

- Fait leur payer une taxe chaque semaine à la messe de dimanche. Détourner cet argent prétendument destiné aux pauvres, pour avoir des magasins importants là où vous êtes, paroisses, procures.

- Transformer vos missions, ainsi en des gros centres commerciaux florissants, et aider légèrement les pauvres pour encourager d'autres blancs à investir régulièrement.

- Demandez aux noirs de mourir de faim, et vous autres, vous mangerez cinq fois par jour; en plus, que vos ventres soient toujours pleins de bonnes choses, et que vos bouches exhalent partout l'odeur des oignons.

- Instituer pour eux un système de confession qui fera de vous de bons détecteurs, pour dénoncer tout noir qui a une prise de conscience, pour la revendication de l'indépendance nationale.

- Enseigner une doctrine que vous ne mettrez pas en pratique et peut-être s'ils vous demandent: "pourquoi vous comportez-vous contrairement à ce que vous prêchez?", répondez-leur: "vous les noirs, suivez ce que nous lisons et non ce que nous faisons." Et s'ils répliquent en disant qu'une foi sans œuvre est une foi

morte, fâchez-vous, en appliquant le fouet, et répondez-leur : “heureux ceux qui croient sans protester.”

- Dites-leur que les statuettes que vous gardez chez vous sont l’œuvre de Satan. Confisquez-les et allez remplir vos musées ainsi que ceux de Ternerine au Vatican.

- Faites oublier aux noirs leurs ancêtres, afin qu’ils adorent les vôtres, qui ne les écouteront jamais, par exemple les Saintes, la vierge Marie, Sainte Thérèse, Saint Martin.

- Faites-leur prier en les mettant à genoux comme des …, et obligez-leurs à réciter le chapelet dix fois ou plus.

- Ne présentez jamais une chaise à un noir qui vient vous voir.

- Ne l’invitez jamais! Donnez-lui tout au plus une cigarette.

- Ne l’invitez jamais à manger avec vous, même s’il l’égorge pour vous, une poule où un coq, chaque fois que vous arrivez chez lui.

Bref, lorsque vous aurez accompli tout cela, notre pays, la Belgique, sera très riche et c’est plus tard seulement, lorsque les noirs auront compris que nous essayons de les aider pour l’amour de Dieu, car on ne réveille pas un chat qui dort.

Je vous en remercie vivement.

Le roi des Belges, Léopold II” (TELEVUVAMU 2009).

English version (author's translation)

Reverend Fathers, Pastors, and dear compatriots,

Welcome to our great homeland of the Belgian Congo.

The task entrusted to you is very delicate and requires a lot of tact.

Priests and pastors, you unquestionably come to evangelize. But this evangelization is inspired by our great principle: "Above all, the interests of the metropolis."

The essential goal of your mission is not to teach the blacks to know God; they already know it from their ancestors. They pray and submit to Nzambe Mpunu, that I know, and also to Nzambi Mawezi. They know that killing, stealing, sleeping with someone else's wife, slandering, and insulting is wrong. Let's have the courage to admit it; you are not coming to teach them what they already know.

Your role is essentially to ease the tasks of the administrators and industrialists. That is, you will interpret the gospel to best serve our interests in that part of the world. To do this, you will take care, among other things, to make sure our black savages lose interest in the riches with which their soil abounds to prevent them from taking an interest in them or fiercely competing with us, dreaming of one day removing us from this part of the world before we get rich.

Your knowledge of the gospel will enable you to find texts that endorse and make them love poverty. For example: "Blessed are the poor, for the kingdom of heaven, belongs to them." "It is more difficult for a rich man to enter heaven than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, etc." You will therefore do everything to make the Negroes afraid of getting rich so they can better deserve the kingdom of heaven; and "manipulate" them little by little so that they never revolt one day.

The industrialists and the administrators will be obliged to conform to what I would recommend to you, priests, white pastors, from time to time, to make you afraid, for fear of resorting to violence (insulting, beating).

The negros must not retaliate or entertain revenge. For this, we would teach them by all means, and you will insist that they follow the example of all the saints who have turned their cheeks, forgiven trespasses, and received spitting and insults without flinching!

They must be discouraged and detached from anything that could give them the courage to confront us. I am thinking, particularly of their numerous war fetiches, which they claim not to abandon.

Your action must focus primarily on young people so they do not hesitate to greet us. When the command of the Father contradicts that of the missionaries, who are the spiritual fathers of their souls, you will particularly insist on submission and obedience, even blind obedience.

This “virtue” is best practiced when there is an absence of criticism. Teach students to believe, not to reason.

These, dear priests, pastors, and compatriots, are some of the principles you will apply without fail. You will find many others in the books and texts that will be given to you at the end of this session. You will see, therefore, what I recommend to you, priests and white pastors.

- Evangelize the blacks to the marrow of their bones so they never revolt against the injustices you inflict upon them.
- Have them recite, “Blessed are those who mourn, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them.”

- Convert the blacks using the whip.

- Keep their wives at the mission for nine months so that they can work for you. Court them if necessary and demand that these converts offer good meats as a sign of gratitude: hens, roosters, and eggs, each time you visit their villages.

- Do everything to prevent blacks from getting rich. To do this, sing to them every day that it is impossible for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.

- Make them pay a tax every week at Sunday mass. Divert this money supposedly intended for the poor, to have essential stores where you are, parishes, procures.

- Thus, transform your missions into large flourishing commercial centers and slightly assist the poor to encourage other whites to invest regularly.

- Ask the blacks to starve, and the rest of you will eat five times a day; moreover, that your bellies are always full of good things, and your mouths exhale everywhere the odor of onions.

- Establish for them a system of confession which will make you good detectors, to denounce all blacks who are awakening to the revendication of national independence.

- Teach a doctrine that you will not practice, and maybe if they ask you why you behave contrary to what you preach, answer them: “You black people, follow what we read and not what we do.” And if they retort by saying that faith without work is dead, get angry by applying the whip, and answer them: “Happy are those who believe without protesting.”

- Tell them that the figurines they keep in their homes are the work of Satan. Confiscate them and fill your museums and those of “Ternerin” in the Vatican.

- Make the blacks forget their ancestors so they adore yours, who will never listen to them, for example, the Saints, the Virgin Mary, Saint Thérèse, and Saint Martin.

- Make them pray by putting them on their knees like …, and oblige them to recite the rosary ten times or more.

- Never present a chair to a black person who comes to see you.

- Never invite him! Give him, at most, a cigarette.

- Never invite him to eat with you, even if he kills for you, a hen or a rooster, each time you arrive at his house.

In short, when you have accomplished all this, our country, Belgium, will be prosperous, and it is only later that the blacks will understand that we are trying to help them for the love of God because you do not wake up a sleeping cat.

Thank you very much.

The King of the Belgians, Leopold II.

Appendix 2: Understanding God and Spirituality in Kongo Cultures

When we talk about Africa, it is vital to understand how Africans understood God before the advent of the Europeans. Christianity was introduced to the Kongo people in the 16th century and officialized by Funsu Nzinga Mvemba, later renamed Alfonso I or King Afonso, after being baptized by the Portuguese and converted to Christianity. I would be negligent not to mention that Nzinga Mvemba was literate and could both read and write in Portuguese; additionally, he was not the only one literate in the Kingdom; there were others (Ross 2002).

The Kongo people were not savages, as many colonial modes of thinking and accounts tend to portray. Before that period, they had a different understanding of what God was, and religion was not really a thing nor an organized institution; there was just spirituality and connection to the spirit world: the realm of the ancestors and the divine. This understanding was later Christianized and changed into the common religious belief that the Congolese of today hold dear to their hearts. Ross (2002) indicates that missionary documents from the seventeenth century claimed that they had found a people who believed in a single god but did not know his name. That claim from the missionaries reads, at best, as an ignorant one that stemmed from a sense of superiority or poor ethnographic understanding. At worst, it represents an early attempt to erase Congolese spirituality and replace it with Catholicism, the form of Christianity the early missionaries first introduced, that was used for colonial purposes.

As a teenager, I listened to a few elders' accounts and engaged in conversations with my father and mother about these concepts. They consistently mentioned the most fundamental concept of Kongo spirituality, God and the spirits. This concept was carried through time across the board in the Congo by oral tradition. It was spoken with slightly

different wording: God is neither an animal nor a thing, God is neither male nor female, God is not a person, God is never created and could never be destroyed, God is not physical, God is a spirit, the almighty power. The Kongo called God "Nzambi'a Mpungu" or "Nzambi'a Mpungu Tulendo." Nzambi is God, and Tulendo is power; however, Mpungu depends on context. Coupled with Nzambi, it is positive power. On its own, Mpungu usually connotes a physical thing of nuisance, and always a bearer of negative energy.

The more I heard, the more I began to see a pattern of duality. Hayn (2022) explains it better than any missionary when he describes the Kongo cosmogram symbol archeologists have encountered in cave drawings throughout the region. The cosmogram symbolizes eternal life, the immortality of the soul, the interconnectedness of being, universal balance, divinity, spiritual awakening, and magical powers; it is based on the movement of the sun.

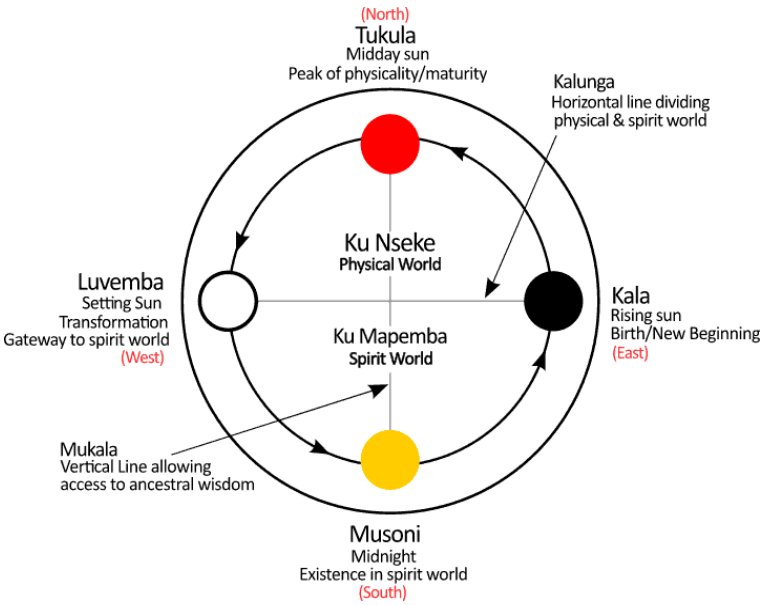

Figure 24: ***Kongo Cosmogram.*** https://www.outofstress.com/kongo-cosmogram-spiritual-meaning/.

As accounts from the oral tradition report, anyone who could tap into the "Mpungu" part of God had a choice: heal, cause nuisance, or kill. The person that tapped into the healing aspect of God, could hear God's voice, and used the power to heal, was called Ngunza, which was later Christianized into Nganga Nzambi (or wizard for lack of better translation). The one that tapped into the destructive facet of divine energy was called Nganga Nkisi for male or ma Ndoma for female, meaning dark magician or

sorcerer. There is also another called Nganga Buka; this one was the medicine man or woman many scholars mention today; they tended to hold nothing spiritual; they only mixed plants, leaves, bark, and roots to create remedies for ailments, which a Ngunza could do as well.

Fetiche, written fétiche (French for talisman, but many times wrongly translated as medicine by some scholars), is Nkisi. It connects to Nganga Nkisi, whose nefarious practice of spiritual power usually causes nuisance rather than healing. Nkisi Nkondi, though spiritually loaded, tended to carry a negative essence about them, although there was a time when the tribes used them only for protection and never for provocation.

Usually, when many terms like Nkisi Nkondi are translated within the museum contexts and academic texts of the West, a profound meaning is lost. Nkisi and Nkondi are polysemic, like many other words in Kikongo. The former means medicine (medication, medicament, drug, cure, etc.) but also fétiche (as mentioned above); that is why many Western scholars who dismiss the spiritual aspect of African life translate it only as medicine. The latter, Nkondi, means figurine and translates as a wooden, stone, or metallic work of art. Combined, the meaning becomes “figurine of nuisance, sorcery, or dark magic.”

Because the healing energy was perceived to be positive rather than negative, hardly ever would a Ngunza inflict or redirect pain onto someone else. If they did, it was usually to a Nganga Nkisi in an attempt to restore balance; but this practice was reported to happen only when there was a significant imbalance that required intervention. So, when the speech to the missionaries mentions war fetiche, it refers primarily to the Nkisi Nkondi being used as a defense mechanism, and for objects of nuisance.

The meaning and the duality of words among the Kongo tribes informs how the Kongo people and now the Congolese people live their lives and understand each other and their circumstances. This topic can entail an entire book series; however, for this thesis, I will keep this understanding simple, while more profound than what usually conveyed.

Appendix 3: Old States vs. Colonized States

When Africa was divided, European countries claimed territories; they divided families, clans, tribes, kingdoms, and empires. The separation created issues such that family members linked by blood were separated by a border that should not have been there. Though a bit nebulous and non-exhaustive, the illustration to the right shows how kingdoms of the past are part of multiple other countries today.

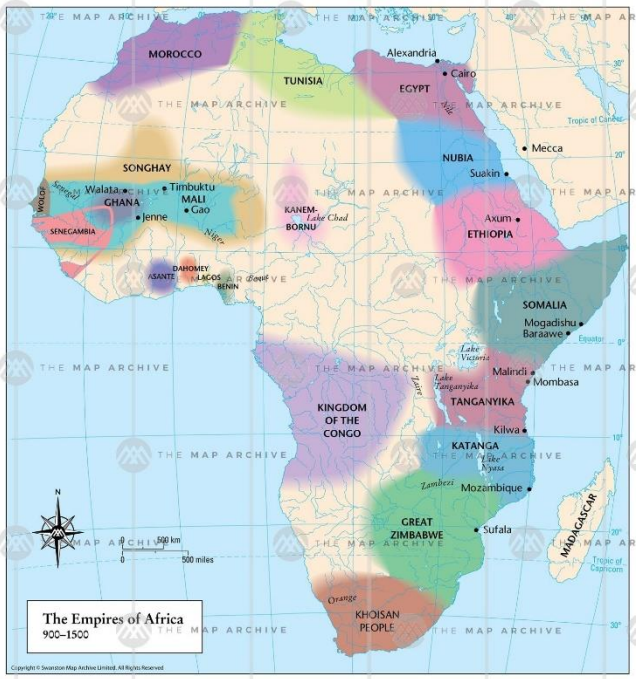

Figure 25: ***The Empires of Africa Map.*** https://quizizz.com/_media/quizzes/f00db380-3daa-462c-a3c4-8b17bce97bd1_900_900.

Some affected groups include but are not limited to the Kongo ethnic groups, also known as the Kongo Kingdom, spanning from Gabon to the Republic of Congo, to the Democratic Republic of Congo, and to Angola. The Tshokwe, also known as Kioko, Chokwe, Bajokwe, Chibokwe, Kibokwe, Ciokwe, Cokwe, or Badjok, are an ethnic group from the Lunda empire of DR Congo, Angola, and Zambia. The same rule applies to the Zande in DR Congo, Central African Republic, and South Sudan. Because of this, many ethnic groups can be claimed by multiple countries, which sometimes leads to confusion when people learn or read about them. The list above is non-exhaustive.