

Vestiges of Oblivion - Sammy Baloji's Works on Skulls in European Museum Collections

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"Science, science, science
Everything is beautiful
Cranial measurements
Crowd my notebook pages
And I'm moving closer,
Close to how these numbers
Signify aspects of
National character"^[1]

In the last years, artist Sammy Baloji repeatedly worked on human remains located in some of the ethnographic museums in Europe. For one of his artistic works *Allers et retours* (2009), Baloji conducted photographic research dedicated to the skull of the murdered Congolese chief Lusinga, kept in the storerooms of the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences in Brussels. Following this, in 2010, he conceived a photographic series, *Untitled (Passages)*, which focuses on the 19th century skull collection of the former Musée Guimet in Lyon, France - the museum is currently being merged with the collection of the Natural History Museum to constitute the now-called Musée des Confluences. Both of his works are only allusive in regard to the dense historical and current entanglements, of which human remains located in European collections are only a part. They constitute the point of departure I chose for the reconstruction - however partial, of what anthropological collecting meant in the era of colonialism. Extending upon Baloji's own pursuit in piecing together some of the disconnected chains of knowledge, I researched further and opened new tracks for reconstructing the stories of these collections. In regard to *Allers et Retours*, Baloji built this work upon his collaboration with several researchers and museum actors, who, in the past years, have conducted extensive research on the skull of the Congolese chief Lusinga which I will expose here, while the work on the collection of the musée des Confluences constitutes the starting point for my own further inquiries.

Although the use of human remains as the material basis for the scientific demonstration of racial classifications seems to be a chapter of the past, vestiges of anthropometry, such as the studies on skulls and bones and the data generated from their measurements, still

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