



The Exhibition “Bacongo” at the City Museum of Hasselt

Summary

FARO, the Flemish support service for cultural Heritage (Brussels) organises CPD-courses and training about methods and actual issues in the area of cultural heritage for fellow workers active in museums and archives in Brussels and Flanders. FARO also gives advice and support to heritage organisations to facilitate good practices. The working area actually does not include monuments (this is a matter of state) but FARO tries to collaborate on a regular base with different fields: heritage (monuments), wellbeing or education (formal & informal). The name FARO is derived from the EU FARO-convention 2005.

Because FARO is not a heritage site nor a museum or an archive, I chose a different approach. The Delphi course about Heritage Interpretation in Alden Biesen (B, February 2020) offered me the opportunity to reflect upon participation in Museums in Flanders and in what level. One of the museums in Flanders, The city Museum of Hasselt (about 70.000 inhabitants) is quite known for its participative approach. The activities and exhibitions that were developed over the last years in the museum are only stepping stones in a long term process towards a more community centered museum. Currently the museum is developing an exposition “Bacongo Limburg” on the occasion of the 60th birthday of the independence of Congo, the former Belgian colony. The exhibition wants to offer the perspective of “métisses” who moved to Belgium, the perspective of the colonists from this region that moved to Congo, related to a scientifically based historic context. This context will offer an interpretive framework. My goal in this pilot therefore is only (also due to corona) to act as a “critical friend” for the city museum, i.e. the exhibition “Bacongo” about a topical matter “colonization”. What I wanted to clarify (as an “active spectator”) is:

- How effective is this local exhibition as one step in the process towards a community centered museum?
- How is this participative approach related to the actual museum practice in Flanders?
- How can a museum in Flanders relate to interpretive planning and European values?

Context

Participation has become a key approach in recent cultural heritage policies. As a support service for the (cultural) heritage professional, FARO has to communicate about actual tendencies and methods in heritage interpretation for heritage professionals; and to support them in implementing these methods. Participation is a rather common practice in Flanders. Co-creation sounds wonderful but in practice it remains tackling. For museums it might reach the usual suspects more than the museum visitor in general.

In my opinion this is where the Delphi course about Heritage Interpretation in Alden Biesen (B, February 2020) can make a difference. The interpretive approach offers an opportunity to relate to European values. Of course the exhibition is about colonization (beyond Europe), but the European values are – in my opinion – quite universal values. Museum visitors might make a connection.





To set up the exhibition, the city museum in Hasselt made an appeal to private collectors, to former colonists and “métisses” that moved to Belgium (children with a Congolese mother and a ‘white’ father). They were invited to share objects, documents and stories concerning the colony of Congo (from 1908 to 1960, year of independence). The museum is interested in the objects and stories of “white people” in Congo and in Congolese men and women, or “métisses”, that arrived in the region of Limburg during the 20th Century until independence day. The content they donated was discussed and integrated in the exposition. It opens on October 10th, 2020.

The remembrance of the colony Congo (and other colonies) still is a major issue in Flanders & Belgium and in several countries worldwide: violence and abuse during the colonial period is connected to today’s racism, human rights or discrimination. Several communities are engaging in the history of colonization and exploitation on the one hand and want to learn about the roots of discrimination. On the other hand other citizens do have family members who went on a mission abroad to do well. The theme is quite controversial. Scientific research and stories from different viewpoints can help comprehension and empathy with “the other” in the exhibition in the city museum of Hasselt.

There still is a conflict concerning the statues of Leopold II that are damaged by agitated crowds of people who want to stand up against racism, inequality and discrimination. The museum itself did not engage in the issue of removing the statue of Leopold II in the city, to allow a more objective point of view. In Ghent (B) for example a statue of Leopold II that was damaged is removed out of public space to the museum storage. This is interesting because the Ghent Museum takes position. The Hasselt Museum wants to be more “objective” compared to Ghent, in favor of the current exhibition. For the moment it gives more room to discussion. In Hasselt the damaged statue was restored, in Ghent the public statue was - with the red paint as testimonial - removed to the city museum storage: an interesting difference in point of view and approach of two Belgian museum. These points of view are open for discussion.

This example, together with some other museums that operate in this manner, is in my opinion an interesting approach, simply participative, but co-creative?

Action Field

Target Groups

The development of the exhibition Bacongo Limburg is due to the 60th birthday of the independence of Congo, but the involvement of the target groups during the preparation made clear what the participants’ expectations were. The museum did not always fulfil these expectations but took the participants’ questions serious and dialogued with them. The fact that the participants were taken seriously was very much appreciated by them.

The collection days already took place in February 2020. People related to colonialists or to members of the population that lived in Congo during the colonization were reached through the press, their own associations, networks of researchers, etc. They were invited to the collector’s days and invited to let their documents and objects being digitized (photos, scans). Researchers and the museum professionals (staff of the city museum) identified the target group (ex-colonialists, relatives of the population of Congo that live now in Hasselt or Limburg). The staff and the guides of the city museum were trained to interpret the stories in a way that provokes dialogue with the ones ready to share their personal stories, following the “I Ask” method that was developed in the Jewish Museum Amsterdam and will be introduced in museums in Flanders / Belgium. FARO will communicate the method “I Ask” (November 2020) as one of many interactive methods.





Local Engagement and values

The Delphi-course in Alden Biesen, February 2020, was based upon values and meaning in a European perspective and how heritage can be related to these values. Core question is: can heritage contribute to really connect (local) communities instead of dividing them? We believe heritage is able to represent universal (not only European) values. They can connect people.

The city museum Hasselt has quite some experience involving local people. The universal values that seem to really matter to the target groups of ancient colonists and people from Congo that arrived here are not the same: they want to bring their own history into the open, relating to the historic framework of colonization and post-colonial history of Congo. The values that are today meaningful might be social justice, equality, sense of belonging. The level of participation here is not easy to define. Is it participation? Probably. Is it co-creation? Not likely. Let's evaluate the process in October.

The museum was not interested in interpreting the objects & documents brought by the participants from a scientific point of view. The museum staff was interested in the narratives of the persons that engaged in the exhibition and shared objects, documents and their personal stories.

They were listened to and their point of view is respected by the museum staff. They added some historic context to the different perspectives and present the points of view within an interpretive framework. The way in which it is presented has been a common decision-making process. The museum visitors are invited to create meaning that matters to themselves based upon the perspectives presented in the museum. Is a historic framework necessary? The museum is affirmative. Tens of thousands Belgians went to Congo in colonial period. Only a couple of persons moved from Congo to live in Belgium. This lack of balance might be straightened by a historic frame, or not? It's up to the visitor to decide.

Phenomena, themes, stories and values

Interpretive theme: Cf. supra: *"The universal values that seem to really matter to the target group of ancient colonists and people from Congo that arrived here are not necessarily the same: the colonists want to create more or less a perception of themselves as idealists. The persons who were born as children of a Congolese mother and a "white" father want to bring their own story into the open, relating to the historic framework of colonization and post-colonial history of Congo"*.

Phenomena: some phenomena bring important (new) stories: the documents and objects that are brought to the museum by the ex-colonialists and the métisses. The métisses were children of Congolese women and colonial white men. The children (so-called orphans) were transferred to Belgium (against their own will) and had to build up a new life with their foster parents. Other phenomena are objects / archival documents that give context to for the different stories.

Stories:

- the individual stories of the participants who brought new information to the city museum in Hasselt concerning their own families.





- The stories related to comparable people and situations in Congo and in Belgium that are presented in the exhibition.
- The stories, emotions and values that might be brought in by the visitors to the exhibition.

Values:

The exhibition in the local museum is aiming to create empathy with the different points of view presented. The arrangement of the phenomena and the stories, and the historic related framing aims to trigger positive values in the beholders' minds such as social justice, equality, sense of belonging, social recognition and self-respect. These are major elements for the city museum to be able to connect to museum visitors and their concerns. The museum must let go of her own points of view. Anyway, "universal values (the positive ones) in combination with truthfulness can help to build bridges, mutual understanding and - at best - reconciliation".

Media

The exhibition is one medium to interpret the heritage collected and presented on the subject of colonization.

The contributors themselves, the guides of the city museum, and the museum staff will interpret the exhibition from their own points of view. Interactive methods to guide visitors through the museum should be responsive to all kinds of points of view. Dialogue is a key goal, e.g. two guides are dialoguing with a visitor group to share their own standpoint with the group. The visitor is invited to construct his own insight on the issue based on the presentation and the points of view of the guides. The presentation / guides should give background information and try to provoke empathy with the stories through dialogue with the visitor.

The "Heritage app" developed by FARO and recently updated to link stories, historic and recent drawings, footage, ... to heritage objects. <https://www.heritageapp.be/>

Communication:

- The communication channels used by the city Museum Hasselt and the regional heritage: the exhibition.
- FARO-website (blog)

Final results

The exhibition opens October 2020. Let's evaluate the degree of participation and the effectiveness of the exhibition as a step in the process to become a true community centered museum. The result will be the feedback of museum visitors, local people who participated in this exhibition and/or whose stories are part of the exhibition.

The questions I wanted to get clarified aren't answered yet. My impression during the preparatory process are as follows.

Being a "critical friend" for the museum, the use of uncensored stories and objects brought to the museum is favourable to me. This means that different perspectives on historical (personal) events are accessible for the museum visitor. Some quotes of personal stories will be blown up on the museum wall to be eye catcher of points of views on colonial matters. The museum will integrate (parts of) the personal stories within a historical context (another perspective) based on research.





On the other hand the museum couldn't take the "first" colonial period (ca. 1875 – 1909) into account, because no personal stories reached them (no heirs contacted them). Besides that the period (1875 – 1909) is the most controversial because it is directly linked to king Leopold (e.g. the statues of king Leopold II that were demolished in Belgium).

Difficulties for me were the impact of corona (an effective co-creative process was not feasible in my opinion) and the goal of this pilot in relation to the development of a course about co-creation on a European level. Nevertheless the process was in fact very relevant to me.

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*The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.
Project code: 2018-1-DE02-KA204-005084*

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Attachment

More information and pictures on the project Bacongo Limburg in the city museum Hasselt: <https://www.bacongolimburg.be/>



Collections day (February 2020) to prepare the exhibition on the colonial topic Congo-Belgium. Locals are sharing their (family) memories and objects with the museum staff. Copyright: Hasselt, Het Stadsmus (the city museum).



The bicycle company Royal Nord Hasselt (B) and its atelier in Congo, about the 1950's. Copyright: archive Freddy Hufkens Hasselt.