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Belgian archivists dealing with the challenges of decolonisation

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“The archives about the colonisation constitute a common cultural heritage that must be shared diligently. [...] [They] are just as much part of Belgian history as of Congolese, Rwandan and Burundian history”. These are the unequivocal words with which the State Archives reacted on their website to the publication of the expert report of the Special Parliamentary Commission tasked with investigating the Congo Free State and the Belgian colonial past¹. But how to hold such a strong ethical stance, how to move from theoretical considerations to action, knowing that the State Archives are bound to preserve, by the sole virtue of the Belgian law, a significant part of the archives related to the Belgian colonisation in Central Africa? How to build a common heritage in an institution that inherited working procedures from hundreds of years ago? How to hold this stance that requires very significant investments, while the institution is chronically underfunded and already holds huge collections spanning ten centuries of history (for a total of 380 linear kilometres of records)? Is it even legitimate and appropriate for archivists to intervene in the debate about Belgium’s colonial past, its history and memory.

As archivists in charge of the records about the colonisation held at the State Archives, our concern is to expound the challenges of everyday records management for archives inherited from the Belgian colonisation in Africa that are kept in Belgium. One of our tasks is to work out where these colonial records stand within the public debate. We shall propose a definition for the decolonisation of the processing of these archives and test it against the current reality of the Belgian context. Finally, in these times in which

¹ Reaction of the State Archives to the publication of the expert report of the Congo Commission, published on 9 December 2021. <https://arch.arch.be/index.php?l=fr&m=actualites&r=toutes-les-actualites&a=2021-12-09-reaction-des-archives-de-l-etat-suite-au-rapport-des-experts-de-la-commission-congo>. Chambre des Représentants de Belgique, *Commission spéciale chargée d'examiner l'État indépendant du Congo et le passé colonial de la Belgique au Congo, au Rwanda et au Burundi, ses conséquences et les suites qu'il convient d'y réserver. Rapport des experts*, Brussels, 26 October 2021.

each sector questions its relation to the colonial past, we shall try to retrace the position of the State Archives with regard to the colonial records.

In recent years, calls have multiplied for a revision of the toponym and statuary inherited from the colonial period. Many Belgian municipal councils have received favourably such demands and in some cases established new dialectics with regard to public space. The restitution of African heritage – a subject almost regularly brought up in all former metropolitan cities since independences were gained – is currently in the spotlight of Belgian media coverage. The *Résolution-Métis* (2018)², the regrets of the King of the Belgians regarding the colonial past of Belgium and its consequences (2020)³, the establishment of the Special Parliamentary Commission on Belgium's colonial past⁴ by the Chamber of Representatives (2020) or the tenor of the discourse of our sovereign and the members of the delegation during the recent royal journey to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (2022) testifies to the political will to openly tackle the issue of our colonial past. The position statements of Thomas Dermine, State Secretary in charge of Science Policy, and the adoption of the law of 3 July 2022 about the alienability of ill-gotten goods in the colonial context⁵ constitute further major advancements in the debate. The project "*Résolution-Métis*" and the works of the Special Parliamentary Commission on Belgium's colonial past, which largely rely on the exploitation of archives, show the strategic importance of archival documents in the decolonisation process⁶. However, the issue of colonial records is hardly ever the focus of attention, except for a few parliamentary questions.

Although they receive little media attention, archivists can provide unique insight, emerging from their field of competence, with regard to decoloni(al)isation⁷ of society. In the course of the years, they have acquired both theo-

² Resolution adopted by the Chamber of Representatives on 29 March 2018 relative to the segregation suffered by the Métis resulting from the Belgian colonisation in Africa.

³ Regrets expressed by King Philippe in an open letter to the President of the Democratic Republic of the Congo in June 2020: "I want to express my deepest regrets for these wounds of the past whose pain is reawakened today by the discrimination still present in our societies".

⁴ "Commission spéciale chargée d'examiner l'État indépendant du Congo et le passé colonial de la Belgique au Congo, au Rwanda et au Burundi, ses conséquences et les suites qu'il convient d'y réserver" (Special Parliamentary Commission tasked with investigating the Congo Free State and the Belgian colonial past in Congo, Rwanda and Burundi, the impact of this and the consequences that should be given to it). Initially and erroneously titled "Congo Commission".

⁵ Law of 3 July 2022 recognising the alienability of goods linked to the colonial past of the Belgian state and determining a legal framework for their restitution and return (*Belgian Official Gazette*, 28 September 2022).

⁶ The challenges it poses are outlined in *Chambre des Représentants de Belgique, Commission spéciale chargée d'examiner l'État indépendant du Congo et le passé colonial de la Belgique au Congo, au Rwanda et au Burundi, ses conséquences et les suites qu'il convient d'y réserver. Rapport des experts*, Brussels, 26 October 2021, p. 354-406.

⁷ The term "decolonialisation" is a neologism used every now and then in French (*décolonialisation*) by some authors to denote the efforts and initiatives undertaken to decolonise mind-sets, discourses and public spaces long time after the former colonies actually gained independence, i.e. after their "decolonisation", that is to say the slow process through which they became independent nations.

retical and practical proficiency: treatment of voluminous archives, participation in international work groups, but also – and perhaps most notably – assistance to researchers as the demand from society for access to sources increases. It is also important to note that in Belgium, the work of archivists is seriously hampered since decades by the problem of displaced archives⁸, caused by a change in sovereignty, an armed conflict or a process of independence. Preserving the archival heritage created as a result of the colonisation is both a major opportunity but also a great responsibility towards Belgian society, and towards Congolese, Rwandan and Burundian society. These archives encourage archivists to question their everyday practice.

The archival heritage originating from the Belgian colonisation in Africa

In Belgium, just as in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in Rwanda and in Burundi, archives are indispensable for writing history, for shaping a collective memory, for the proper functioning of the institutions, and for anyone who needs to assert rights. Yet today, most of this heritage is preserved in Belgium. Some of the archives were produced on the Belgian territory, others in the colony. Some of these records were later transferred by authority to Belgium, for good and for much less good reasons. Kilometres of archives produced by the colonial administration were thus brought from Central Africa to Brussels in 1960-1962, leaving a gap in history, commemorative culture and democracy⁹. Indeed, the successive waves of decolonisation came along with displacements of archives¹⁰ by many – if not all – colonial powers that were in a position of superiority at the time¹¹; today, the International Council on Archives encourages the restitution of this archival heritage to its place of origin¹².

⁸ D. LAUWERS, "From Belgium to The Hague via Berlin and Moscow: documenting war crimes and the quest for international justice, 1919-2019", *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 48, 2020, p. 216-236; P.-A. TALLIER, "Préservation, sauvetage, disparition, spoliations et destruction d'archives en Belgique au cours des deux guerres mondiales", *Archives et Bibliothèques de Belgique – Achief- en bibliotheekwezen in België*, vol. XCI-XCII, 2020-2021, p. 47-117.

⁹ A distinction was made, for the most part, between administration archives and sovereignty archives. As for the reasons with regard to politics, diplomacy or cultural heritage that have led the Belgian authorities to decide to move the sovereignty archives to Belgium and to leave the administration archives on site (only to later depart from this principle), see: M. VAN EECKENRODE, "Ouvrir les archives coloniales", P.-A. TALLIER, M. VAN EECKENRODE and P. VAN SCHUYLENBERGH (dir.), *Belgique, Congo, Rwanda et Burundi: Guide des sources de l'histoire de la colonisation (19^e-20^e siècle). Vers un patrimoine mieux partagé!*, vol. 1, Turnhout, 2021, p. 25-47.

¹⁰ J. LOWRY (dir.), *Displaced archives*, London, 2017.

¹¹ J. LOWRY, *Disputed Archival Claims: An International Survey 2018/2019. Report to the International Council of Archives*, Paris, 2020.

¹² International Council on Archives, *The View of the archival Community on settling disputed archival Claims. Position Paper adopted by the Executive Committee of the International Council on Archives. Guangzhou, 10-13 April 1995.*

The history of many countries in Asia, Africa, Central America and Oceania, mainly of the 19th and 20th century, can hardly be written without exploiting the archives preserved in Europe (archives of policymakers, colonial administrations in the metropole, displaced archives etc.). In Central Africa, scarce infrastructure and training, difficult weather conditions, conflicts or civil war often had disastrous consequences for archives left behind by the colonisers, to the extent that today, the archival colonial heritage of this region of the world is mostly preserved in the metropole of the former colonisers. The Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda and Burundi are no exception¹³. The archives about the history of colonisation preserved in Belgium, as we know today, account for not less than twenty-one linear kilometres of records held by nearly 80 different institutions. This huge volume is composed of records from the colonial administration, but also of archives from businesses, religious missions, associations, research and education facilities, and policymakers for example. In addition, there are the archives preserved abroad: in Congo, Rwanda and Burundi of course, but also in France, the United States and the Vatican¹⁴.

Over half a century after a wave of independence swept through the continent, one can only determine that large parts of the archival heritage about the colonisation are still unexplored. This is indeed a chronic problem afflicting the archives sector in general, but it is perhaps more stressing in the case of colonial archives, because of their media exposure or, as we shall see later, due to their history. This lack of knowledge is the root of many misunderstandings both about the nature of the colonial archives and about their accessibility and preservation: the “Belgian” colonial archives are supposedly hidden or destroyed, in particular those about the Congo Free State¹⁵; the colonial archives are supposedly all preserved at the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren (MRAC – Africa Museum); the colonial archives are supposedly kept secret, in a locked cabinet and jealously guarded by an archivist with a frowny expression; it supposedly only takes a couple of days of work to have complete knowledge of the colonial archives and fully elucidate the past. These are indeed persistent clichés. They are in fact the expression of a real “culture of neglect”¹⁶ to which the colonial archives were subject in the course of time (in Belgium and more broadly in Europe), as the experts of the “Special Parliamentary Commission on

¹³ For the situation in Rwanda, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, see B. PIRET, “Regards sur les archives relatives à la colonisation belge conservées hors de Belgique”, P.-A. TALLIER, M. VAN EECKENRODE and P. VAN SCHUYLENBERGH (dir.), *Belgique, Congo, Rwanda et Burundi: Guide des sources de l’histoire de la colonisation (19^e-20^e siècle). Vers un patrimoine mieux partagé!*, vol. 1, Turnhout, 2021, p. 71-76.

¹⁴ B. PIRET, “Regards sur les archives”, p. 71-86.

¹⁵ Regarding these issues, see G. VANTHEMSCHE, “Préface”, P.-A. TALLIER, M. VAN EECKENRODE and P. VAN SCHUYLENBERGH (dir.), *Belgique, Congo, Rwanda et Burundi: Guide des sources de l’histoire de la colonisation (19^e-20^e siècle). Vers un patrimoine mieux partagé!*, vol. 1, Turnhout, 2021, p. 9-14.

¹⁶ V. HIRIBAREN, “Hiding the Colonial Past? A Comparison of European Archival Policies”, J. LOWRY (dir.) *Displaced Archives*, London, 2017, p. 83. According to this author, in Belgium the colonial archives are rather subject to a “culture of neglect” than a “culture of secrecy”.

Belgium's colonial past" point out in their report¹⁷. Lack of interest, lack of vision and spirit of initiative, lack of means and will, lack of transparency, among politicians, administrations, archivists and researchers: an explosive cocktail indeed. How is it conceivable that sixty years after the wave of independences, there is still no finding aid for some major archival fonds? How can it be that records dating over 50, 75 or even 100 years ago are still not declassified and not accessible to the public?

Decoloni(al)ising (through) archives?

Decolonisation movements are slow developments of which the big waves of independences witnessed in Asia in the 1940s and in Africa around the 1960s are only the culmination. The birth of new sovereign nations is the result of a long transformation process of colonial societies. But declarations of independence are no guarantee for a successful decolonisation, neither in political nor in economic or social terms. After half a century, one cannot but notice that this process is still ongoing. It is not only about decolonising a geographical area, as was the common conviction in the middle of the 20th century. Everything that makes up society is indeed decolonised: education¹⁸, language, mind-sets, relationships to others, art, public space... both on the formerly colonised territory and in the coloniser's metropole.

The issue of decolonisation – or rather decolonialisation – feeds debates, draws media attention and is today ostensibly picked up by politicians. For some, the need to tackle the issue head-on is self-evident. Others however deny the rationale. While the need to work towards a more inclusive society is rather widely agreed upon, the fact that history encumbers our ability to live together in harmony is less well accepted. The sole use of the term "decoloni(al)isation" can already lead to rising tensions in an auditorium, or even make an exchange of views impossible. This is due, on the one hand, to the fact that we address sensitive issues of identity and memory here, both national and personal. On the other hand, the term (whose meaning ranges from a rejection of modernity to a call for co-construction) is too polysemic in order to be understood by everyone in the same way and to have a consensus about it. Also, no two societies, with their respective needs, expectations and histories, are alike. An old metropole that became a place of ethnic and cultural diversity; the capital of a sovereign state born out of a decolonisation movement; a community in which people with European lineage and with native ancestry learn to live together; etc. Decolonisation

¹⁷ Chambre des Représentants de Belgique, *Commission spéciale chargée d'examiner l'État indépendant du Congo et le passé colonial de la Belgique au Congo, au Rwanda et au Burundi, ses conséquences et les suites qu'il convient d'y réserver. Rapport des experts*, Brussels, 26 October 2021, p. 356, 365-366.

¹⁸ On this issue, see the report published upon initiative of the Belgian universities: *Les universités belges et leur gestion du passé colonial. Rapport du « Groupe de travail interuniversitaire passé colonial »*, CREF-VLIR, August 2020 – September 2021.

work shall not take the same form in Brussels, Kinshasa, Algiers, Saigon, Minneapolis or Canberra. It is indeed a long, complex and polymorph task. So what exactly is the decolonisation of archives, more specifically of archives originating from the context of colonisation? Colonial archives, or archives about the history of colonisation, are part of the legacy of colonisation. They were both instrument and evidence of colonisation. Today, they ought to be considered as both tools and objects of decolonisation. *Decolonising through archives* takes place, for instance, when they are used to write educational books, to help a colonial Métis comprehend his or her origins, to provide answers to the questions of the representatives sitting on the "Congo Commission", to retrace the path of a museum piece, all of which is possible for everyone, be they researchers, journalists, politicians or simple citizens. Archivists for their part, *decolonise archives*¹⁹, or more precisely decolonise the *processing* and the *management* of archives, every time they critically evaluate their missions (contact with the public, acquisition policy, appraisal/selection of records, description, valorisation etc.), the procedures they put in place, and the decision-making processes of the archive institution. Three main focus points should retain the archivist's attention: accessibility, sharing, concertation.

ACCESSIBILITY

The starting point of every procedure of decolonising archives is the identification and description of the records. This enables everyone who is interested in the records to exactly know which archival fonds and collections are preserved and what they contain. This is of course a self-evident and core mission for every archivist, but also an objective not so easily attainable. It took the State Archives over ten years of hard work in collaboration with the Royal Museum for Central Africa (Africa Museum) to draft the *Guide des sources relatives à l'histoire de la colonisation*²⁰ (Guide to the sources about the history of colonisation). This meta-tool is freely available online and lists all colonial archives kept on the territory of Belgium that have been identified thus far, regardless of whether they're inventoried. The project was initially aimed at facilitating the research for African researchers who were being trained at the Africa Museum at the time.

Knowing which records exist, which finding aids to consult and which services to contact is a significant step towards a better understanding of our colonial past. But much inventorying work on these archives still remains to be done, also at the State Archives. Because as astounding as it may seem, over half a century after the wave of independences, for many archival

¹⁹ See definitions proposed by M. KARABINOS, "Decolonisation in Dutch Archives", *BMGN. Low Countries historical review*, vol. 134, 2019 (2), p. 138. SOCIETY OF AMERICAN ARCHIVISTS, *Protocols for Native American Archival Materials*, 2018. M. VAN EECKENRODE, "Ouvrir les archives coloniales", p. 45-46.

²⁰ Pierre-Alain Tallier, Marie Van Eeckenrode and Patricia Van Schuylenbergh (dir.), *Belgique, Congo, Rwanda et Burundi*.

fonds there is no finding aid yet, or at least not one that could qualify as such. We are indeed faced with a challenging long-term work that requires the deployment of so much human resources that it unfortunately exceeds the capabilities of custodial institutions. Another consideration is to enable widespread and free access to the finding aids while making sure they can be exploited without further assistance from archive services, or at least without the need for a visit to a reading room.

In order to draft a finding aid, the archivist must familiarise with the records, get to know the archive producer and the procedures put in place, the nature of its activities and the specific vocabulary developed in this context. With regard to colonial archives, the archivist ought to take sufficient detachment when it comes to the writing of the descriptions in order to avoid reproducing the colonial logic that is at the basis of the records: no unnecessary use of violent or paternalistic vocabulary of the colonial administration, enabling the historiography of the populations subject to the colonial regime etc. This, in short, is what is generally considered as decolonising archives. These are certainly important considerations and it is a very demanding exercise, but it is not fundamentally different from how document series about women, vulnerable populations or minorities are treated.

The work of the archivist, whether we like it or not, significantly affects the work of the researchers, both professionals and amateurs. Those consulting the archives about the colonisation must thus be fitted with research tools that enable them to have a first route into these records free from the "colonial perspective" reflected in them. It is not possible, however, to rid the file or photograph descriptions of all the colonial vocabulary and concepts proper to these types of regimes, as we want to avoid to impede the accessibility to information. Finally, inexperienced researchers or readers will still have to be assisted in order to have a good understanding of the consulted files and to simultaneously enable access to a well-stocked library. Unfortunately, the trimmed budgets allocated to archive centres do not allow for the provision of such services. However, the archivist is responsible for the quality of tools and advice provided, but not for the processing of the information collected in the preserved archives.

In order to make the archival heritage about colonisation accessible for research, one must also address other challenges that are not specifically related to these archives. The declassification of records is one of them. The management of classified records that can be found in large numbers in some archival fonds produced by the former colonial administrations highlights some often forgotten but very essential aspects of the profession of archivist. The efforts undertaken by archivists in the course of the life cycle of a document (supervising, collecting, inventorying, conserving etc.) all converge towards the apex that is accessing the document for research. In other words, the objective of every archivist who works for the preservation of archival heritage is to ensure that the records in his or her custody are accessed by the largest possible number of people. This issue is all the

more sensitive in the context of public records (that is to say the records produced by the public sector) as the archivist must ensure the publicity of the administration. Nevertheless, the archivist must abide by complex rules and regulations, and is subject to the good will of administrations that set their own timetable with regard to declassification.

Archivists must guarantee that what needs to be made public is indeed accessible to the largest possible number of people, while at the same time making sure that all relevant legislations are observed, by temporarily keeping undisclosed those records that cannot yet be disclosed (information that put the security of the state at risk or personal data of living people). However, extending temporary measures beyond the range of what is reasonable amounts to bad governance. How to effectively protect classified information of strategic importance (for example related to the fight against terrorism) if this is buried among a bulk of other documents that contain no sensitive information? It seems inconceivable to us that over 60 years after the wave of independences, some records produced during the colonial period are still classified (apart from exceptional cases, for example to protect a source). Where lie the origins of this symptom?

In Belgium, the issue of declassification of colonial archives has evolved in the right direction in the past years, although a lot remains to be done. In 2017, the FPS Foreign Affairs, legal successor of the Ministry of Colonies, took care to decolonise the colonial archives classified by this ministry. Not all issues were resolved however. In many archival fonds from the Ministry of Colonies, large numbers of records still remain to be declassified that were produced by foreign services (France, United Kingdom, United States etc.) or by Belgian services not inclined to launch automatic declassification procedures²¹. What declassification means for democracy, in terms of records management, was expounded in detail to political leaders in the course of the last years. The return to tighter security policies after terrorist attacks in several European countries and as a response to the excesses of fast-spreading information on social networks has been putting a strain on dialogue. But on 11 September 2022, a law introducing general rules for the declassification of classified material was finally adopted²². It establishes declassification terms for the different levels of security classification, that is to say 20 years for “confidential” records, 30 years for “secret” records and 50 years for “top secret” records. There is of course the possibility to

²¹ Quite logically, a record can only be declassified by the service that ensures its classification. Nothing objectionable so far. But in 1998, the Belgian lawmakers did not foresee any declassification term in the law on the classification of records and security clearances. Even worse, the corresponding executive decree implemented the provisions of law with retroactive effect... P.-A. TALLIER and D. LAUWERS, “La publicité nuit gravement au secret. Retour sur la proposition de loi visant à fixer les règles générales de déclassification pour les pièces classifiées”, *Info AAFB. Lettre d’information de l’Association des Archivistes francophones de Belgique ASBL*, no. 26, April 2020, p. 23-26. Since then, a legal framework was eventually set up with regard to mandatory declassification.

²² Law of 11 September 2022, Law introducing general rules for the declassification of classified records (*Belgian Official Gazette*, 29 September 2022). See also: P.-A. TALLIER, *Déclassification obligatoire des archives classifiées: de la fiction à la réalité!*, www.arch.be, published 29/11/2022.

extend the initial classification period when absolutely necessary. The final and irrevocable declassification term is set to 100 years after the record was created. Past this period, the record is automatically considered as declassified. The reluctance to set a shorter final term (for example 60 or 70 years as proposed several times by the State Archives and the Association of French-speaking Archivists of Belgium) is a serious reverse, as the enacted term does not allow for full access to the archives related to the colonial period. We will thus have to wait until 2062 before being able to access the entirety of the records, unless particular declassification measures are taken in the meantime.

The issue of accessibility is one of the keystones for decolonising archives. This of course is of importance for researchers and other citizens, who want to access colonial archives that are sometimes preserved thousands of kilometres from where they live. But the stakes are also high for states, which provide access to these records through their archive services and on the basis of their respective legislation. The publicity of the administration and the oversight that citizens can exercise by accessing public records are cornerstones of democracy. Choosing to provide access to archive documents or not (by applying particular legislation on privacy, on the publicity of the administration or on classification for instance), and under which conditions, is a sovereign competence that was often denied to states that were born out of the decolonisation movement and whose archival heritage is preserved outside of its territory²³.

SHARING

Colonial archives are what we call today a “common cultural heritage” (not merely a “shared cultural heritage” or ‘to be shared’), regardless of whether they were produced in the metropole or in the colony and whether they were displaced or not. This concept has found its way into numerous international conventions and invites us to consider cultural heritage objects in their relationship with people²⁴. Archival heritage can be considered as common when the community from which it originates was dissolved and has given rise to several states, different entities: as the result of a war, the splitting of a country, or the independence of a formerly colonised territory²⁵. In this sense, the archives that stem from the Belgian colonisation in

²³ M. VAN EECKENRODE, “Ouvrir les archives coloniales”, p. 41-42.

²⁴ On the theory of ‘commons’, in whose context we consider archives, see for example: F. COMINELLI, M. CORNU and J.-L. TORNATORE, “Patrimoine et commun(s)”, *In Situ. Au regard des sciences sociales*, 2021, published online on 18 March 2021. M. CORNU, F. ORSI and J. ROCHFELD (dir.), *Dictionnaire des biens communs*, Paris, PUF, 2017 (collection “Quadrige”), which already includes some forms of archival heritage in the definition of “commons”.

²⁵ INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL ON ARCHIVES, “Reference Dossier on Archival Claims. Proceedings of the twenty-ninth, thirtieth and thirty first International Conference of the Round Table on Archives”, *JANUS*, special edition, 1998, p. 232 and D. COX, “The law and politics of compromise”, in LOWRY J. (dir.), *Displaced archives*, London, 2017, p. 204.

Africa are a common cultural heritage of Belgium, Burundi, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Managing and preserving this type of cultural heritage is a challenge. *A fortiori* when the configuration of the archival fonds, the distribution of responsibilities and repositories are themselves the heritage of a certain era in which the different stakeholders were not on equal footing. In its Code of Ethics²⁶, the International Council on Archives has been calling upon archivists for a long time now to cooperate in the repatriation of displaced archives to their provenance. This is indeed a deeply political decision that is being discussed across the globe since decades, but to which solutions are rarely found. The ICA thus recommends that colonial archives are to be considered as *shared heritage*²⁷, or let us say more frankly *to be shared*. The different stakeholders are invited to discuss the management of colonial archives that concern them, but rather with regard to access than to repository.

Already today, digital technologies indeed offer many solutions that enable better access to archival fonds. Based on this principle, archivists and the policies supporting them, ought to elaborate appropriate solutions adapted to each archival collection that also cater to the needs of the communities concerned. The digitisation of records does not solve the sensitive issue of the preservation of the originals however. It even poses a series of specific challenges, the first of which is the digital divide that may exist among different regions of the world. Making entire archival holdings available online, even in a concerted and joint manner, does not necessarily solve the problem of access to archives if one of the partners has no appropriate infrastructure for the institutions or citizens.

CONCERTATION

In order to share cultural heritage, to decolonise archival heritage stemming from the colonisation, one essential ingredient must not be missing: concertation. We prefer this term rather than the often-used “dialogue”; on the one hand because it implies a more pronounced political and decisional dimension, and on the other hand because there is no ‘concertation of the deaf’. Without concertation there is no sharing of responsibilities, no common strategic choice, no pooling of expertise and competences. Getting round the table is indeed indispensable to solve issues of diplomatic, political, scientific or technical nature. But concertation is often missing. Even down to the level of informal contacts, matters are complicated due to distance,

²⁶ INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL ON ARCHIVES, *Code of Ethics*, 1996, article 2.

²⁷ N. SIGURÖSSON, “Partager le patrimoine archivistique”, *Flash. Nouvelles de l’ICA*, Sept. 2018, no. 38 p. 15-16; F. CHATERERA-ZAMBUKO, “Se tourner du passé vers l’avenir: pour une conclusion à la question des archives déplacées”, *Flash. Nouvelles de l’ICA*, October 2020, no. 40 p. 7; M. BANTON, “Shared archival heritage: an exploration of problems and solutions. Report of the EGSAH panel at the Yaounde Conference”, *Comma*, 2019/1 (2020), p. 19-20.

multiple diplomatic issues, disparities with regard to equipment and expertise, cultural differences such as the approaches to time or hierarchy etc.

As to the colonial archives preserved in Belgium, the situation is further complicated by the fact that most of the archival fonds concern the political, economic, social or cultural history of four different countries and their respective citizens. Sharing the archives about the Belgian colonisation in Africa thus requires concertation between four sovereign nations. In Belgium, any sharing of cultural heritage on a large scale requires not only a political decision and sufficient funding, but also the mobilisation of a number of institutions: FPS Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, FPS Justice, as well as the Belgian State Security Service, Defence, Science Policy Office, and not to forget the archival community, mainly the State Archives. What a spectacular alignment of planets that would be...

In the metropole of the former colonisers, there is a high risk that the views of managers of cultural heritage originating from the colonisation are biased about the desires and needs of their partners. Some former colonised states have struggled or are still battling for the physical restitution of archives that were displaced before they gained independence. Algeria, for instance, which was considered until 1962 as integral part of the French territory, has been demanding officially and for decades now the restitution of the archives that were displaced before its accession to independence²⁸. Another example are the former Kenyan fighters who claim compensations from the British government for the torture they have suffered during the Mau Mau "rebellion" (1952-1960), and whose claims led to the discovery and description of archival fonds previously unknown to the public back in 2011²⁹. A number of associations, intellectuals, influential members of the diaspora, and cultural actors also publicly state their priorities. However, by no means can the most visible battles and the priorities of the most audible actors be transposed to the entirety of states that emerged from the decolonisation.

Among the three states formerly under Belgian rule, so far only one has filed a request officially and through the diplomatic channels for the sharing of archives related to the colonisation. Indeed, for a couple of years now Rwanda has been conducting an active policy aimed at the reconstitution of its documentary heritage, which got lost among others during the genocide it suffered in 1994. In 2018, Rwanda invited Belgium to a symposium held in Kigali in order to discuss a *professional collaboration on external ways to repatriate Rwanda's documentary heritage retained in German and Belgian*

²⁸ F. SOUFI, "Les archives algériennes en 1962: héritage et spoliation", *Insaniyat. Revue algérienne d'anthropologie et de sciences sociales*, 2014, no. 65-66, p. 211-237.

²⁹ D. ANDERSON, "Guilty secrets: deceit, denial, and the discovery of Kenya's 'Migrated Archive'", *History Workshop Journal*, 80, Autumn 2015, p. 142-160. D. ANDERSON, "Mau Mau in the High Court and the 'Lost' British Empire Archives: Colonial Conspiracy or Bureaucratic Bungle?", *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. 39, no. 5, December 2011, p. 699-716.

*Institutions*³⁰. This was the beginning of the digital sharing project Rwanda-Archives, initially scheduled to run for two years by the Belgian Development Cooperation, and led by the State Archives, the Royal Museum for Central Africa and the FPS Foreign Affairs and Development Cooperation, in cooperation with the *Rwanda Archives and Library Services Authority* (RALSA). A Rwandan delegation travelled to Belgium in the summer of 2019 to meet Belgian archivists and visit the main repositories where the archives about the mandate period are preserved. A list of the existing archival fonds was handed over to them.

Work is currently being carried out at the Africa Museum (MRAC/KMMA) and at the State Archives to meet the demands of Rwanda. Unfortunately, two years have passed between the effective start of the project (and the entry into service of the Belgian and Rwandan personnel engaged for the project) and the moment when the Rwandan experts were able to submit the list of top priority archival fonds to be scanned to the Belgian archivists. During these two years, the Belgian team digitised the fonds of their own choice. The timetable for the transfer of the Africa Archives from FPS Foreign Affairs to the State Archives was rescheduled accordingly: The archival fonds about Rwanda were urgently decontaminated³¹ by State Archivists and are currently being (re)inventoried. But many things still remain in the dark today. Once the fonds are digitised by archivists, which files will actually be shared? These archival fonds contain classified documents and personal data about Belgian and Rwandan citizens, but also about Burundian and Congolese citizens. Also, how will these files be shared? By a simple transfer of scans and metadata, or by setting up a common digital platform? Diplomatic negotiations have not yet taken place. So issues are addressed as they arise, which does not facilitate the field work. The fact that Belgium responded positively to the request for the sharing of archival heritage brought forward by Rwanda is undeniably a major advance: concertation between the partners however is still at a basic level.

The Congolese cultural heritage sector recently also mobilised its forces. Many participants attended the “National Forum on the reconstitution of Congolese archives and cultural heritage – 60 years on”³² for 5 days (25-29 June 2020). Furthermore, the *Journées de l’Histoire* were held on 29 October 2021 in Kinshasa upon initiative of the NGO Coopération Éducation Culture (CEC) and Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB), with the aim of “re-thinking the

³⁰ L. A. BERNARDO Y GARCIA and P.-A. TALLIER, “Un patrimoine (numérique) commun: partage bilatéral des archives coloniales publiques belges relatives au Rwanda”, *La Gazette des archives*, no. 256: “La Francophonie des archives. Expertise, coopération, partage”, 2019-4, p. 217-229.

³¹ With regard to the problem of contamination by mould of parts of the Africa Archives, see the proceedings of the debates in the session of the “Congo Commission” of 19 October 2020, during which a delegation of State Archivists, but also the director of the Service of Historical Archives of the FPS Foreign Affairs were heard. The proceedings shall be published on the website of the Chamber of Representatives.

³² « Forum national sur la reconstitution des archives et du patrimoine culturel Congolais – 60 ans après » <https://congoprofond.net/le-forum-national-sur-la-reconstitution-des-archives-et-du-patrimoine-culturel-congolais-ouvert-a-kinshasa/> (website accessed on 8 November 2021).

teaching of the history of the African continent and the Democratic Republic of the Congo". Amandine Lauro, professor at Université libre de Bruxelles, and Benoît Henriët, professor at Vrije Universiteit Brussel, presented the BRAIN research project DIGICOLJUST that they are leading in collaboration with the State Archives. The exchange of views that followed with Jean-Bedel Iyoka, one of the directors of the Institut national des archives du Congo (INACO), suggest that there is a possibility for a "crossover" sharing of cultural heritage: on the one hand the digitisation of the archives of the military jurisdictions of Congo Free State (1885-1908) and Belgian Congo (1908-1960) kept at the State Archives (in Brussels) and on the other hand the digitisation of the files on soldiers of the *Force publique* kept by the INACO (in Kinshasa)³³. These kinds of initiatives with a limited scope do not require a political decision and are of key importance. They allow for those involved to get in touch, to raise awareness for unknown or lesser known heritage collections, and in the long term to serve as case studies for a larger operation.

WHAT ABOUT RESTITUTION?

There is one policy we have not mentioned so far: restitution. There is a reason – it does not apply to archives stemming from the colonisation. Unlike the objects produced by the colonised populations (before or after their colonisation) that today form a cultural or religious heritage spread across the world, the colonial archives directly result from the colonisation. They belong just as much to the formerly colonised populations as to the former colonisers and their respective states. The argument of ill-gotten goods cannot be applied to archives under the pretext that they are also cultural heritage collections. Let us be reminded that archives – at least those of the public sector – are not only cultural heritage objects, but also part of democracy. Belgium does not have to *restitute* archives to Congo, neither does Congo have to *restitute* them to Belgium; it is a common cultural heritage. Nevertheless, the current distribution of the archives stemming from the Belgian colonisation is clearly to the advantage of Belgium, both in terms of quantity and quality. This state of affairs is largely due to the tutelage that the colonisers' administration had on its former colony in 1960-1962, when large quantities of records were transferred by air and sea to Brussels. The return of the archives, a political issue *par excellence*, must imperatively be put on the agenda if one of the partners asks for it. The digital sharing of this cultural heritage does not exempt in any case from doing so. Archivists unfortunately have no leverage here. But they can stay ready to step in, by providing the best possible tools and finding aids for these archives stemming from the colonisation.

³³ The BRAIN DIGICOLJUST 2 project is scheduled for July 2023 around the same partner institutions.

The idea of sharing cultural heritage is indeed not a concept designed to let the return of the originals to their provenance sink into oblivion. It allows for dialogue to be engaged or relaunched, and for stakeholders to consult, who would otherwise not have worked together if the sole issue of the restitution of archives had been on the agenda. It also significantly improves access to archives for the benefit of national and even international communities.

The Colonial Archives preserved at the State Archives

AN ISSUE ATTENDED TO VERY LATELY

The State Archives celebrated their 225th anniversary in 2021, but have shown much reserve in addressing the issue of the colonial archives until the 1960s. The Law on Archives of 1955³⁴, a late and incomplete piece of legislation, stipulates the mandatory transfer of all public records older than 100 years to the State Archives³⁵. But it exempts among others the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Colonies from the mandatory transfer and *de facto* confers a private status to the archives of the Royal Palace. Furthermore, this legal deposit neither applies to church archives and archives of religious orders, nor to the archives of businesses, as they are all private archives. So in theory and in practice the spearheads of the colonial powers escape from zealous state archivists-palaeographers. Our predecessors were furthermore mainly interested in archives of the Ancien Régime or, for those who were adventurous, the revolutionary archives. At the time, colonialism seemed quite remote, if not completely absent, from the preoccupations of the State Archives. But was this not often also the case at universities? In 1954 however, at the request of the *Commission d'Histoire du Congo*, archivist Arthur Cosemans took the bold move of establishing a list of archival fonds relevant for the colonial history (and what he called "pre-colonial history") preserved by the State Archives. He wrote: "Especially among the papers of statesmen preserved at the National Archives will historians find abundant colonial documentation"³⁶. It yielded only a poor harvest. Some of his descriptions concern single documents.

But the alarm was first sounded when independence loomed. What to do with the archives hastily displaced to Belgium? They were stored in the repositories of the State Archives for lack of space elsewhere, and would even begin to be inventoried while remaining under the responsibility of

³⁴ Law on Archives of 24 June 1955 (*Belgian Official Gazette*, 12 August 1955). Royal Decree about the execution of the Law on Archives of 24 June 1955 (*Belgian Official Gazette*, 20 December 1957).

³⁵ In 1955, that means the archives produced before 1855!

³⁶ A. COSEMANS, "Les Archives générales du Royaume au point de vue de la documentation historique coloniale", in *Bulletin de l'Institut royal colonial belge*, vol. XXV, 1954, p. 652-666.

the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, legal successor of the Ministry of Colonies³⁷. They would later be transferred to the premises of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, when the construction of its new building was finished³⁸.

In 2001, the Committee of Inquiry into the death of Patrice Lumumba caused a landslide. In its final report and the recommendations contained therein, the deficiencies in the management of archives related to the colonisation are pointed out³⁹. Later, the amendment of the law on archives in 2009 put an end to the derogation of the FPS Foreign Affairs and other departments with regard to the mandatory transfer of records to the State Archives. The *Africa Archives*⁴⁰ must therefore also be transferred to the State Archives. As this transfer concerns a very voluminous archive, a *memorandum of understanding* was signed between the FPS Foreign Affairs and the State Archives in 2014. This transfer is very much appreciated among the research community as it raises the possibility of an improvement of access conditions, albeit only due to the higher "leverage"⁴¹ that the State Archives can provide. A minority is still not convinced however, and raises the concern of a "new burial" of the *Africa Archives*⁴²: there is resistance to change, there is a concern that records might be temporarily unavailable or that the most interesting files are "cleansed" or even destroyed, that the *Africa Archives* get lost in the bulk of records and are less well treated than "national archives", etc. These are all legitimate concerns, given the history of the colonial archives in Belgium, but they reflect a lack of knowledge about the manner in which access to archives is handled at the State Archives and the policies governing it, and about the material state, the preservation and access conditions that are currently in place for the *Africa Archives*. A more transparent and proactive communication strategy may have helped to remove those concerns.

Indeed, as from the late 1980s, the State Archives have developed a policy for the collection and opening up for research of archives related to the

³⁷ B. PIRET, "Exhumer les vestiges de la colonisation. Les archives coloniales belges et leur histoire", *Comma*, 2015/1, p. 51-62.

³⁸ M. VAN ECKENRODE, *Inventaire des archives du Ministère des Colonies et successeurs en droit. Administration métropolitaine. Inspecteur général de l'hygiène et prédécesseurs en droit (1888-1966)*, Brussels, 2021, p. 28-29 (National Archives of Belgium 2. Inventories, I39).

³⁹ Chambre des Représentants, *Enquête parlementaire visant à déterminer les circonstances exactes de l'assassinat de Patrice Lumumba et l'implication éventuelle des responsables politiques belges dans celui-ci. Rapport fait au nom de la Commission d'enquête par Mm. Daniel Bacquelaine et Ferdy Willems et Mme Marie-Thérèse Coenen*, vol. 2, Bruxelles, 2011, DOC 50 0312/007, see p. 843-844 for recommendations.

⁴⁰ The *Africa Archives* are basically those of the Ministry of Colonies which are a combination of archives of the metropole administrations and of displaced archives.

⁴¹ "Une plus grande force de frappe": Expression regularly used by the head of the Service of Historical Archives, Alain Gérard. See among others his hearing before the "Congo Commission" on 31 January 2022.

⁴² See the article of 5 December 2014 published by RFI: "Archives coloniales: les chercheurs belges en émoi", <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/hebdo/20141205-belgique-archives-coloniales-chercheurs-petition-lettre-ouverte-charles-michel>. The article mentions the letter sent to the Belgian Prime Minister, Charles Michel, by a number of worried researchers, and the reaction of the State Archives. It also contains an interesting interview with Elikia Mbokolo, signatory of the petition.

colonisation. For instance, in collaboration with the Association for the Valorisation of Business Archives, the State Archives acquired and inventoried kilometres of top-tier business records. As examples we can mention the archives of *Union minière du Haut-Katanga*, of the *Finoutremer* group, of *Société générale* and of *Sibeka*, for which inventories are already available online⁴³. Another turning point occurred in the late 20th and early 21st century: archivists from the State Archives take part in missions to Africa within the framework of works carried out by the International Council on Archives and UNESCO⁴⁴. In Belgium, training modules for African researchers and archivists are set up by the Africa Museum (Royal Museum for Central Africa – MRAC/KMMA) with the support of the State Archives. Subsequent to that, the mobilisation of a team of researchers for the large-scale project of the “Guide to Colonial Archives” allows for some sort of emulation and provides increased visibility to the archives about the colonisation: the realisation of a virtual exhibition “Traces of a Colonial Past” (2010)⁴⁵, the recovery of many archival fonds, among which those of *INEAC* and the *Académie royale des Sciences d’Outre-mer* (2010), an exploration mission in Burundi (2011)⁴⁶, publication of a research guide (2012)⁴⁷, the organisation of an international colloquium (2013)⁴⁸, etc.

THE ACTIONS UNDERTAKEN BY THE STATE ARCHIVES WITH REGARD TO DECOLONISATION

Today, the team at the State Archives in charge of the archives inherited from the colonial period carries out its work, as much as possible, in a decolonialised perspective. No discrimination is made between readers who all receive equal treatment, be they professional researchers or amateurs, journalists or citizens, independent of their respective nationality. The inventories are published online for free (and the finding aids currently in the process of being drafted can be handed out upon request). Broadly speaking, significant work is currently being carried out in order to improve the accessibility of archives, in a spirit of transparency. In this context, we must mention the

⁴³ D. VAN OVERSTRAETEN (dir.), *Entreprises et Congo. Le destin d’un patrimoine archivistique exceptionnel. Ondernemingen en Congo. De levensloop van een uitzonderlijk archivalisch erfgoed* (Studia, 118), Brussels, 2009.

⁴⁴ Report on the situation with regard to archives in Central Africa (Burundi, Cameroon, Gabon, Rwanda) drafted by Gustaaf Janssens in November 1991 after a mission led on behalf of the ICA and UNESCO.

⁴⁵ <http://www.expocongo.be/>

⁴⁶ M. LEDUC-GRIMALDI, D. VAN HASSEL and P.-A. TALLIER, *Verslag zending Burundi (9/10/2011-17/10/2011)*, Brussels, 2011.

⁴⁷ L. CEÛPPENS and G. COPPIETERS, *Congo, Archives coloniales*, Brussels, 2012 (Research Guide, 36), available for free in French and Dutch on the website of the State Archives. This publication is today replaced by the *Guide to the sources about the history of colonisation*.

⁴⁸ P.-A. TALLIER and S. BOMPUKU EYENGA-CORNÉLIS, *Africa Europe Archives, Requirements? Collaborations? Plans? DR Congo, Rwanda, Burundi and Belgium: Proceedings of the International Colloquium organized by the State Archives in Belgium and the Royal Museum for Central Africa (15-17/12/ 2010)*, Brussels, 2012 (Studia 138).

publication of the *Guide des sources relatives à l'histoire de la colonisation* (Guide to the sources about the history of colonisation) in 2021⁴⁹ or the stepwise publication of new inventories for the *Africa Archives* since 2020. But there are also actions on a smaller scale, such as the online presentation of a handful of remarkable items from the archives of the Colonial Security Services, while the archival fonds as a whole is not yet transferred to the State Archives.

The transfer of the *Africa Archives*, five kilometres of which have so far been integrated in the collections of the State Archives, poses a considerable challenge. This undertaking is faced, in addition to a huge work of inventorying, repackaging and relocating, with problems related to decontamination, declassification, and – incidentally – with overcoming a pandemic. The archives that were displaced at the moment the countries gained independence require the most attention. This is not only due to their history or the fact that a significant part of them is infested with mould, but also because they consist of roughly 5 kilometres of “bulk” records. The successive displacements of collections, without prior identification and without proper packaging, has considerably intermingled the archival fonds to the point where major puzzle work is now required to reconstitute the series, in arduous working conditions (work at the fifth basement level, in a dusty and not very ergonomic environment partly contaminated by mould hazardous to the health of the agents). No finding aid currently enables us to precisely identify the agencies that produced these kilometres of files (information upon which every archival classification work is based)⁵⁰. This long-term work has begun with the reconstitution of the judicial archives⁵¹, while the FPS Foreign Affairs finally prepares to launch the decontamination operations for which it is responsible.

The transfer of the *Africa Archives* can be considered in itself as a major step in the process of decolonisation. They now benefit from the framework of a service to the public, which was unthinkable some fifteen years ago. The symbolic value of this transfer must also not be underestimated, at least in the eyes of Belgian archivists and researchers, as the *Africa Archives* leave the sphere of responsibility of the FPS Foreign Affairs that inherited parts of

⁴⁹ P.-A. Tallier, M. VAN ECKENRODE and P. VAN SCHUYLENBERGH (dir.), *Belgique, Congo, Rwanda et Burundi*.

⁵⁰ For the archives of the General Government for example, there is no finding aid either, but a list with the topics and dates contained in the records. This is a precious tool, but it does not enable us to identify the agency/institution that created the records (medical service, district court, cartography service etc.), which is an indispensable information for every historical research. The respective archive creators must be identified record by record, in order to reconstitute the archival fonds and draft inventories.

⁵¹ This difficult work has been ongoing since 2019 with regard to the judicial archives, carried out by Bérengère Piret, within the framework of the FED-tWIN SHARE project, a collaboration between the State Archives and Université Saint-Louis-Bruxelles. In 2020, the archives of the military jurisdictions were reconstituted by Ornella Rovetta and Tommy De Ganck, within the framework of the BRAIN DIGICOLJUST project, a partnership between ULB, VUB and the State Archives. The State Archives has itself financed and carried out the decontamination of the records.

the competences of the former Ministry of Colonies in 1962, including the management of its archives. The archives of the colonial administration are thus no longer preserved by their producer (or their legal successor), but by a scientific institution entirely dedicated to the management and preservation of archival heritage.

In addition to the practical work and the tools put at everyone's disposal, the archivists and researchers of the State Archives intend to weigh in on the theoretical considerations about how to treat colonial archives⁵². Indeed, they recently began awareness raising and vulgarisation work geared towards the political sphere, the scientific and archival community, and the large public, through the publication of articles and podcasts⁵³. The team was heard on several occasions by the "Congo Commission" in 2020 and 2022⁵⁴. In 2018, the State Archives were also charged by the government with studying the fate of Métis resulting from the colonisation and identifying the sources that document their respective paths of life⁵⁵. Research began in 2019 and currently mobilises a team of seven people who work in collaboration with the two archivists in charge of the transfer of the Africa Archives.

Another step that still needs to be taken towards the decolonisation of archives is to decolonise the whole of the archival heritage preserved by the old lady that is the State Archives. This would be achieved, as we are pleased to underline, by an acquisition policy that is representative of all parts of society, by inclusive practices in the treatment of archives, and by improving

⁵² See first and foremost the introduction of the *Guide des sources de l'histoire de la colonisation* that places the colonial archives in their context and addresses the challenges they pose. Furthermore, in March 2021, a series of courses titled *Déboulonner les statues coloniales et après?* ("Removing colonial monuments, and then?") was held at the Royal Academy of Belgium by its Collège Belgique, organised by Bérengère Piret. One of the courses, specifically dedicated to the issue of colonial archives, shall be made available as podcast soon on the website of the Royal Academy: *Les dossiers de la colonie. Les archives de la colonisation belge, entre enjeux historiques et interrogations citoyennes* (B. PIRET and M. VAN EECKENRODE, 2 March 2021).

⁵³ See: B. PIRET and M. VAN EECKENRODE, "Les Archives de l'État, principal dépositaire des archives relatives à la colonisation", *Contemporanea*, 2021/1; B. PIRET and M. VAN EECKENRODE, "Un patrimoine (à mettre en) commun. Les enjeux de la gestion des archives produites dans le cadre de la colonisation", *Info AAFB*, no. 27, 2021, p. 35-39; Ch. CANDAELE, D. LAUWERS, B. PIRET and M. VAN EECKENRODE, "Van confiscatie naar dekolonisatie. De uitdagingen van de koloniale archieven", *Meta*, 2021/2; podcast cycle #Africarch, under the direction of Bérengère Piret, available online on the website of the State Archives (published online in 2021).

⁵⁴ The full transcript of the hearings will be available on the website of the Chamber of Representatives soon. See also "Les Archives de l'État et la Commission spéciale 'Congo': un bilan", published on the website of the State Archives on 18 May 2022. <https://www.arch.be/index.php?l=fr&m=actualites&r=toutes-les-actualites&a=2022-05-18-les-archives-de-l-etat-et-la-commission-speciale-congo-un-bilan>

⁵⁵ D. LAUWERS and Ch. CANDAELE, "Décoloniser les archiv(ist)es? De la nécessité d'une mise en commun des savoirs et de leurs moyens de production", *Revue Belge d'Histoire Contemporaine – Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis – Journal of Belgian History (RBHC-BTNG)*, LII, 2022-4, p. 115-124; D. LAUWERS, "(Re)construire des identités pour co-construire une histoire? Le projet « Résolution-Métis » au croisement d'enjeux individuels et collectifs", dans V. FILLIEUX, A. FRANÇOIS, M. VAN EECKENRODE and G. MATHIEU, *Un dossier pour se (re)construire? Archives et enjeux d'identités* (dir.), Louvain-la-Neuve, Presses de l'UCLouvain, p. 29-59.

our service to the public⁵⁶. Instead of patiently waiting until public archival fonds fall into the hands of archivists by law after the expiration of the legal terms, a proactive and targeted policy is led to acquire public and private archives that reflect societal issues. The collecting of records about the terrorist attacks of March 2016, about the COVID-19 pandemic, or about the recent floods that struck Wallonia in July 2021 are examples of this diversification in acquisitions and collecting modes. Being part of society, archivists more and more regularly weigh in on societal debates. Despite the chronic underfunding of the sector (both at federal level and in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation), they try to assume their responsibilities with regard to the preservation and collecting of our archival heritage. This commitment is crucial because it must guarantee, in full objectivity and for every researcher, the authenticity, integrity, reliability, readability and traceability of the records, but also a good comprehension of them by the largest possible number of users. The mission of archivists is no longer one that solely bears on the cultural heritage aspect. They must also work for everyday good governance and facilitate access to information. In other words, they must contribute to ensuring the rule of law and the good functioning of democracy.

Conclusions

The sense of renewal and the promising assessment that we had the pleasure to share with the readers should not hide the severe lack of means in the archival sector: lack of personnel, limited infrastructure, insufficient equipment, underfunding with drastic consequences. Neither can they let us forget the difficulties for African researchers to access the archives, and the challenges that archivists in Congo, Rwanda and Burundi are facing. Twenty years after the work of the Lumumba Commission, the archives about the colonisation are regularly in the spotlight and in the line of sight of politicians. An increasing number of scientific works rely on this exceptional archival heritage. However, this heritage does not seem to be of sufficient concern for basic structural investments to be realised. The will and motivation of the teams involved are constantly undermined by the lack of sufficient funding. We cannot decolonise the management of archives and work on our colonial past if adequate means are not provided. Furthermore, the public debate about archives is often quite sterile, because few people actually spend time and effort to delve into the issues that are specific to this particular subject matter.

⁵⁶ F. BOQUET and M. VAN EECKENRODE, "Archiver un lieu, documenter un geste. Les mémoriaux éphémères des attentats de Bruxelles", V. FILLIEUX and A. FRANÇOIS (dir.), *Archiver le temps présent. Les fabriques alternatives d'archives*, ed., Louvain-la-Neuve, 2020, p. 219-234 (Capsae, 1). P.-A. TALLIER, "La problématique de la protection des sources pour l'historien versus l'archiviste. Quels enjeux et quels bénéfices en matière de citoyenneté?", M. VAN EECKENRODE and S. LESSIRE (dir.), *Archives, citoyenneté et interculturelisme. Actes de la Journée internationale des Archives tenue à Namur le 8 Juin 2017*, Namur, 2020, p. 14-30.

Decolon(ial)ising the treatment of archives represents a manner of working, an attitude rather than an objective to be attained. On closer observation, the majority of the problems and points of attention raised in this paper also apply to most archival fonds, except that in the case of colonial archives, they have a particularly sensitive context. The issue of colonial archives in fact clearly reflects the evolution that the State Archives have undergone in the past decades. For example: the significant increase in the volume of our collections, the extension of target audiences and the assistance to citizens searching for documents which concern them, the interweaving of historical and commemorative issues, the preservation of documents that still have very strong primary value (and therefore may be used in the context of legal proceedings) etc. These are all consequences of the amendment of the law on archives passed in 2009 and the shortening of the term for the mandatory transfer of records to the State Archives to 30 years.

But endowing the treatment of archives with the seal of decolon(ial)isation is not a mere parade designed to lure target audiences and give oneself a clean conscience. This way of considering archival work brings its own challenges: concertation and sharing of cultural heritage. These two aspects of the decolonisation of archives are also poorly treated, in Belgium and abroad; as the present paper written by two Belgian archivists illustrates. We hope to be able, in a couple of years, to draw a review together with our Congolese, Rwandan and Burundian colleagues, that takes better into account the archives preserved in the formerly colonised territories and the actual needs of the communities that live there.