

## Bones in Auction—A History of Creating, Acquiring, and Selling Human Relics \* , \* \*

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On December 13 and 14 2022, the Vanderkindere auction house in Brussels organized a seemingly insignificant sale entitled "Art et Antiquités". Presented on this auction, lot no. 405 (Figure 1) provoked strong reactions for the following reason: the lot was composed of two skulls and one fragment of a skull brought back in the 1890s from the Congo by Namur physician Dr. Louis Laurent.

However, from November 29, a controversy launched by various associations began to swell on social networks concerning these skulls<sup>1</sup>. The issue was taken up by the press and certain politicians afterward<sup>2</sup>, leading the auction house to withdraw the skulls from the sale and present the following apology message:

*Vanderkindere sincerely apologizes for having offered for auction a lot including three human skulls linked to the Belgian colonial past, which are therefore imperatively withdrawn from the sale. We in no way condone the suffering and humiliation suffered by the people who were victims of these colonial acts. We once again offer our deepest regrets to anyone who has been hurt and offended by the sale of this lot* (Mergen and Dendooven 2022) [translation].

Later, the management of the auction house specified that it had acquired these skulls from the owner and was ready to return them to the requesting African countries.

This case raises several questions, including that of knowing, to begin with, whether or not these skulls are part of colonial crimes, as has been said in particular by activists and then politicians who have opportunistically taken up the subject.

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\* As this article is related to a topical matter, we consider it is useful to specify that our analysis of the case is based on our appreciation of the file until the date of Friday 19 December 2022, when this article was sent.

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1 The first article on this issue was published in *Paris-Match* (Bouffioux 2022).

2 See for example the remarks of Rajae Maouane, co-chairperson of the party Ecolo (Belgium Greens), on this issues: "It is to me unconceivable that the trade of human remains is legal today in Belgium. Remains, including those of the persons killed during the colonial period, have the right to absolute respect. One does not sell corpses. This must change" (Defossé and Maouane 2022) [translation].

Figure 1. Lot no. 405 on the auction of "Art and Antiquities".  
Source: © Hôtel de ventes Vanderkindere



In the case of one of the three skulls (the one without a lower jawbone and adorned with a non-precious jewel), the means through which it was acquired is quite explicit thanks to the handwritten inscription made by Dr. Laurent: "Skull of the Arab chief Muiné Mohara killed by Sergeant Cassart in Augoï (Katanga) on January 9, 1893". [translation].

It is clearly a war acquisition related to the anti-slavery military campaign that has been well documented by historians.

Indeed, on January 9, 1893, Sergeant Florent Cassart (who earned his stripes of second lieutenant after his feat of arms), accompanied by 27 soldiers of the Force Publique and about fifty men led by a Kusu chief named Ngongo Lutete<sup>3</sup> who had joined the camp of the Belgians, confronted Mohara's forces. The latter, who had been previously wounded in the leg in the morning, was killed and his troops defeated (Marechal 1992, 126-127).

Another officer of the Force Publique, Sydney Hinde, mentions in his memoirs the case of Mohara's head: "In the evening one of our soldiers<sup>4</sup> came in, bringing with him Mohara's head, and a note from de Wouters saying that they had fought the Arab's main body, which they had defeated, and had killed Mohara, whose head he was sending for identification" (Hinde 1897, 144-145).

While, on the one hand, the beheading of Mohara's corpse seems to fulfill a military purpose, i.e. the identification of a slaughtered enemy leader, it is different with the

3 Like Mohara, Ngongo Lutete was a famous leader involved in the slave trade. He was even the right-hand man of the dreaded Tippo-Tip. It shows how this anti-slavery campaign was not shy to accommodate "unnatural" alliances to achieve its ends.

4 In the 1880s-1890s, the Force Publique was composed of soldiers from the Independent State of the Congo and "volunteers from the coast," i.e. men from other African regions such as the Zanzibarites, Haoussas, and Sierra-Leoneses (Flament 1958, 510). Officers were however Occidentals (mainly Belgians).

decarnation and the conservation of the skull thereafter which is similar rather to the transformation of a proof into a trophy, an action linked perhaps to satisfy revenge for the executions of Belgians committed at the instigation of Mohara (we will come back to this later). On the other hand, the cases of the complete skull and the skull fragment of lot no. 405 are completely different.

There is nothing written about the seizure of the "Cannibalistic Bangala"<sup>5</sup> skull with pointed incisors<sup>6</sup> that may be related to a conflict between its owner and the Europeans. We know however that Dr. Laurent did not hesitate to specify the issue in the case of Mohara's skull.

It is therefore hazardous to conclude that the skull was acquired in a context of colonial violence. There is, in legal terms, a presumption of innocence. It is quite possible that Dr. Laurent acquired this skull legally and relatively easily from populations that did not have, according to their own beliefs, a sacred Judeo-Christian conception of all human remains, especially if they were those of individuals of less importance such as slaves.

As the collector used the term cannibal, it is useful to specify that these practices, though sometimes amplified in colonial literature (Arzel 2020, 87), were attested in the 19th century in the Congolese North-West. Prisoners, in some cases, bore the brunt of this practice, although, in different groups, women were not allowed to eat this "talking meat" and could not be eaten either (Burssens 1958, 83, 109; Van Overbergh 1907, 117-118). Moreover, it is also attested that the executions/sacrifices of people might take place on the occasion of the funerals of important individuals. One can agree that the opportunity to acquire specimens specific to the anthropological interests of the time was facilitated in the Bangala district. Slaves' or prisoners' skulls from the Congo corresponded at the same time in Europe to other "little people" (condemned persons, bodies of indigents not claimed at the morgue) who may also provide craniological material without too much problem (see Volper 2021).

The case of the skull fragment is more explicit regarding its origin if we rely on what Dr. Laurent wrote directly on the bone. As regards the causes of the death of its owner, the skull seems to have been collected without any act of violence emanating from Europeans. It is indeed written: *"I detached this skull from the fig tree of death (tree of human sacrifices) in the village of Bombia on the Mongala river, on May 5, 1894. Its owner was obviously eaten."* [translation]

Here the question could arise as to whether this fragment is really related to a sacrifice (therefore an execution for ritual purposes) or a traditional war trophy. It is however

5 Bangala is a rather outdated and baseless ethnonym meant to designate at the beginning of the colonial period a group of cultures localized more or less along the Congo river (between Kinsangani and Mobeka) and a section of the Mongala, Giri, and Lulonga rivers. Dr. Laurent was in the "Bangala District" between January 1893 and October 1894. This district, as it was defined in 1895, englobed a much larger territory than the one to which the localization of the so-called Bangala populations was usually attributed.

6 The exact sentence inscribed on the "Musée du Congo" label is as follows: *Crâne de Bangala anthropophage. C'est, chez eux, la mode de se tailler les dents en pointe ("Skull of a cannibal Bangala. It's, for them, the fashion to carve their teeth like peaks").*

certain that along the Mongala in the second half of the 19th century, the failure to bury a body is an indication that the individual whose skeletal remains were exposed to the open air was not a free man or a dignitary<sup>7</sup>. Remains of an enemy, remains of a slave, remains of a marginal—what were they? The skull hanging from the tree was in any case not that of someone considered by the local populations with the same respect due to other categories of dead.

From our point of view, Dr. Laurent's description nevertheless finds some echoes with practices that were found further west among the Loki/Boloki (a group formerly related to the broad spectrum ethnonym "Bangala"). In 1890, John Weeks of the Baptist Missionary society, had thus observed among the Boloki of the Monsembe region that the skulls of killed enemies were kept by the victor who could place them as paving at the entrance to a house, as chair legs, or put them at the foot of a tree.

The symbolism of such customs was aimed as much at humiliating the vanquished enemy as honoring the warrior prowess of the owner. Moreover, these skulls also had a role to play at funerals. John Weeks witnessed the burial of an important man who had killed seven enemies, the skulls of which had been placed for the occasion at the foot of a "wild fig tree" located near the house of the deceased. According to Weeks, the purpose of this practice was to ensure by some rituals that the souls of the deceased ones may serve the murderer in the afterlife (Weeks 1913, 105, 225, 323).

Actually, Dr. Laurent's acquisitions are far from being an isolated case of collection by opportunism. In 1885 Professor Houzé discussed in Brussels two skulls from the mouth of the Ruki river. These two skulls (one of a man and the other of a woman, both adults) had been bought by Officer Alphonse Vangele (Van Gele) in exchange for four brass wire sections and were stuck on stakes in front of a hut (Houzé 1885, 67). These testimonies that are bluntly reported here are shocking from a very European-centric point, as it does not take into consideration the relationship of local populations with these human remains. In fact, it matters here to do some ethnography. In this region of the Congo, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the death of a man of some importance was accompanied by ritual killings, as C. Coquilhat and A. Vangele were able to observe in large part on October 30 1883 on the occasion of the funeral of the chief "Soka Toungi" (Coquilhat 1888, 168-174).

It began with the decapitation of a slave by means of a theatrical procedure well worth the French "national razor," the burial of women who were to keep company with the deceased who had been strangled beforehand and, after the funeral, a mock battle where the role of the enemy was played by a woman who was also put to death by arms. Eventually, the beheading of a woman closed the whole thing. The two skulls that were brought back by Vangele are therefore, in all likelihood, those of the alpha and omega victims of a grandiose funeral. The hut in front of which they were hung was the house

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7 As burial is at issue here, it is not impossible that the so-called Bangala skull of a brown color was some time inhumated, as Gérald Quatrehomme, University Professor at the Institute of Forensic Anthropology (Université Côte d'Azur), mentioned to me in his email dated 19/12/2022: "The colorations of the bones vary a lot and essentially depend on post mortem conservation conditions. Decomposition products, such as inhumation for example, can cause bones to appear darkened. When a skull is found on the ground in the wild, it often has a greyish-white side (sun exposure), and a darkened side (soil contact)" [translation].

of the dead. As for the hut in front of which they were, it was the residence of the deceased. Let's be clear, it would have been quite impossible for Vangele to acquire without violence or pressure the skull of the buried leader. However, acquiring the skulls of the sacrificed slaves could be envisaged by negotiating for them against the value of brass wires<sup>8</sup>.

To go further in the reasoning, the acquisition made overnight does not constitute proof that the heads of the two sacrificed were sacred either. As we have seen with the use of enemy skulls among the Boloki, those collected along the Ruki river were simply part of a funeral ritual for a respectable person. Their acquisition was therefore not impossible but requested a minimum of tact and discretion.

The parenthesis on the "Vangele skulls" being closed, let's return to our three skulls from lot no. 405 to now address the case of their possible return to Africa.

First of all, we shall say that the auction house Vanderkindere did not infringe any law by offering these skulls. It is therefore surprising to hear that some individuals want to sue the auction house for concealing corpses.

This request for "restitution" is therefore based here exclusively on moral considerations about which we will not discuss at length. At most, we will say that, from an ethical point of view, some paradoxes can be pointed out, such as the absence of reactions when it comes to past sales of skulls of various origins in comparison with the scandal of the Vanderkindere auction<sup>9</sup>. In the same way, it would be also interesting to ask the following philosophical questions: Can a restitution campaign be focused on the basis of morality alone without judging all the acts which lead to the acquisition of these skulls? Can we judge and condemn as immoral the acquisition of a skull by a European, without even looking at the act of ritual and traditional killing which led to the creation of the said specimen<sup>10</sup>?

Be that as it may, the reason for which the lots were withdrawn and restituted by relying above all on a viral phenomenon that was relayed and amplified by social media before being taken up by the press is puzzling.

First, when lot no. 405 was discovered by the associations, it was two weeks before the sale of the skulls was actually planned. This constituted a period of time normally long enough to alert the competent authorities.

Regarding the "Bangala skull", nobody was interested to notice the presence of a label with the inscription "Musée du Congo" on its forehead. It would have been rather important to inform in the first place the Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale (hereafter

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8 This means of payment may seem ridiculous if we do not take into account, here again, the fact that copper alloys traditionally had a real monetary exchange value in this region. This point is also underlined by E. Houzé (1885, 78).

9 Legal possibilities for purchasing human skulls are quite numerous in Europe, whether through auction houses or galleries. These may be so-called ethnographic specimens (such as Asmat trophy skulls) but also more "sober" medico-anthropological specimens sometimes designated as didactic skulls, study skulls or simply skulls. Their price is quite variable and can range from a few hundred to several thousands of euros. The works of forgers such as the macabre "voodoo fetishes" made in Africa with real human skulls offered for sale by certain galleries can be added as an ethnographic subcategory.

10 Of all the articles that have dealt with lot 405 of the Vanderkindere sale, only one, published by the weekly French news magazine *Marianne*, has addressed some of the apparent contradictions in the moral positions of the case (Geerts 2022).

MRAC, formerly Musée du Congo) and alert its staff that a skull possibly part of its collection was offered to auction, which, in that case, would have been illegal<sup>11</sup>. The museum would have been in measure to officially contact the auction house and ask them, as there was some doubt, to temporarily withdraw the specimen in order to conduct the necessary investigation. In the event the skull would have been attached to the collections of the museum, it would have not only been withdrawn permanently from the market, but it would also have benefitted from the government policy regarding the restitution of human remains held by the Federal Scientific Council.

At the same time, it would have been necessary to alert the government of Congo and possibly of Tanzania (we will see why later) via their embassies to the nature and holding of the sale and ask them whether they would have liked to withdraw or acquire the items. Not making it a priority to contact the embassies amounts to taking the law into one's own hands or acting in the interests of other people without asking their opinion.

Moreover, any step related to issues of restitution that are not legally based may also be problematic. Let's imagine briefly that once the skulls are withdrawn from the sale and promised to restitution, the concerned states might not want them<sup>12</sup> or perhaps multiple institutions might claim the same skull?

This scenario might particularly arise with the Mohara skull whose history is intimately related to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Tanzania.

Mohara (alias Mtagamoyo ben Sultani) died in what is today in the Democratic Republic of Congo but he was from the region of Dar-Es-Salam (in today's Tanzania), if we are to believe the Omani narrative of the *Juhaynat al-ahbar fi tarih Zinjibar* which reports the first Arab penetrations in the East part of the Congo (Luffin 2008, 433). While, it is also more precisely mentioned that he was born in Bagamayo around the 1820s, he spent his entire career in Congo-Kinshasa. From the 1870s, the man earned a solid reputation in Maniema. Master of Nyangwe, Mohara made his fortune in the ivory and slave trades, sending many people from the present-day DRC to the East African Coast.

His brutality was mentioned by Tippo-Tip, a fearsome lord, merchant and warlord who said of him that he was undoubtedly a brave man<sup>13</sup>, yet without any kind of consideration for human life (Stanley 1878, 119-120).

Recent fieldwork carried out by MRAC researcher Noémie Arazi in 2021 shows that the memory of the Arab presence is still vivid among certain populations of Maniema. In a documentary film resulting from this research<sup>14</sup>, Bertin Mukali, a man of Zula culture who

11 It would be necessary to determine whether the skull was intended for the museum in Tervuren and, thereafter, was never sent (therefore registered) or left the collections after being registered.

12 The auction house did not receive any letter from African embassies or ministries during the hype week of November 28 to December 2. It has not received any since, suggesting that said embassies have probably not been contacted beforehand.

13 Mohara's bravery was also recognized by the Belgian officers who fought him.

14 This short documentary film deals with the complexity of the past history of the presence of Arabized people in Maniema, not omitting in particular the role of Belgian propaganda during the colonial period or even the participation of Muslim elements in the Mulelist rebellion in the 1960s. The documentary also talks about present history and the rapprochement between Christians and Muslims in Maniema, as well as certain frictions that still exist. It should be noted that Bertin Bukali's words are excessively close to the description

was a former territorial administrator of Kasongo, evokes for instance the "Arab" presence in the second half of the 19th century:

*They came for their interests, they came for the human trade... once they obtained the slaves, they were able to transport the goods; and the slaves and the ivory were all merchandise... If an Arab saw a Muzula, the Muzula had to die, he had to become a slave or die automatically, and sometimes they were beheaded...in what is called the Bomas, the big enclosures, the Arabs' big concessions, each stake, each tree that one has planted to constitute the fence was capped by a Muzula's head. See that, how awful! All this was to create terror so that there is not a single person that can imitate the Bazula in their resistance against the Arabs. It was on Tippo-Tip's order, because Tippo-Tip sent on detachment his lieutenant Munie Mohara who was based in Nyangwe. He called him back to entrust him with the mission of exterminating the Zula resistance. (Arazi and Senga 2021) [translation] .*

Among the feats of arms bearing Mohara's mark, we can mention the murderous shooting at the Nyangwe market which took place on July 15 1871<sup>15</sup>. The goal of this act of rare violence was above all to make a show of strength and authority. It extended to the neighboring villages that were set on fire, bringing a large amount of corpses (several hundreds, it is said). According to David Livingstone<sup>16</sup>, who witnessed the scene, it was mainly to make people pay for the actions of a slave known as Manilla who believed himself to be a warlord, to remind people who had dealt with him who were the real masters of the region, and who were the only ones with whom it was advisable to establish an alliance (Livingstone 1874, 132-137).

Mohara was also directly implicated in the contract killings of Belgians.

Several of them were commercial agents of the newly created SCK (Syndicat Commercial du Katanga) whose director was Arthur Hodister.

Thus in May 1892, several of these agents were assassinated for questions related to commercial competition and also for not having respected Mohara's orders concerning the establishment of trading posts.

We can also retain the name of Alfred Noblesse who was captured in Riba-Riba, whipped and dismembered (Hinde 1897, 276), and that of Pierret who fell into a trap set in his factory in Lhomo, while he was receiving an offer of ivory from Arab-Swahili traders. As he bent down to examine the tusks, he was shot twice and then beheaded before his body was thrown into the forest (Chapaux 1894, 258-259).

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made by Assan Kabemba in one of his articles, in which he discusses in particular the so-called Muhafu war and the other Zula-Arabized conflicts that resulted from it (Kabemba 1979, 40-41).

15 Another "Arab sultan" known as Dugumbe/Dugumbi played in this matter a more murky role alongside Mohara.

16 The posthumous 1874 work quoted came to light through Horace Waller, who relied primarily on Livingstone's manuscript known as *The Unyanyembe Journal* which was delivered to Henry M. Stanley on March 14 1872 (Livingstone 1872). There are different published and unpublished versions of the Nyangwe massacre, as researcher Adrian Wisnicki showed a few years ago (2017). The most striking differences concern in particular the exact role played in this carnage by the Dugumbe and Mohara / Tagamio chiefs or even the hypothesis of a participation in the killing of former "Banyan slaves" in the service of Livingstone, of whom the latter was quite suspicious.

As for Hodister himself, he was also killed at Riba-Riba along with three other Belgians who accompanied him: J. B. Desmedt, J. Goedseels and Dr. J. Magery (Flament 1958, 213). The four men were beaten and beheaded before their heads were brought to Mohammed Ben Hammis (known as Mserera/M'sérera), Sultan of Riba-Riba and Mohara's vassal.

According to a 14-year old young black boy who witnessed the scene, the slaughtering of Hodister and his three companions appalled Mserera. The Arab version of the story tells that there would have been a mistake about the persons, the Hodister group having been taken for agents of the Independent State (Faure 1892, 308).

Mohara himself, claimed later that Hodister's murder had been a mistake and that Hodister was his friend. This did not prevent the finding of objects looted from the massacred expedition in Mohara's encampment (Marechal 1992, 128).

The shadow of Mohara hovered also over the assassinations of other Belgians. We can mention the case of Isidore Michiels, an officer of the Force Publique. He was killed in Riba-Riba shortly after Noblesse, after having managed to hide for a fortnight.

We may eventually evoke two military hostages killed on the order of Sefu, master of Kasongo and son of the famous Tippo-Tip mentioned above, but at Mohara's request. In fact, Mohara asked Sefu to execute Lieutenant Joseph Lippens and Second Lieutenant Henri de Bruyne in Kasongo, in order to conclude a military alliance. Both of them were stabbed in their detention place and their hands were cut off to be sent to Mohara as proof of work done<sup>17</sup>. As for their heads, they were exposed with those of nine other Europeans on the palisades surrounding a locality located a short distance from Kasongo (Chapaux 1894, 296).

In light of this bloody biography, of which surprisingly nothing transpires in the press articles covering the scandal of the Vanderkindere sale<sup>18</sup>, we can seriously ask whether Tanzania, or, possibly the DRC, wants to recover the skull of the man who was one of the tyrants of Maniema. After all, the case of a sovereign country not necessarily desirous of recovering the remains of a historical personality with a sulfurous past which may even rekindle tensions between communities, is not as isolated as one would like to believe. To my knowledge, German or Austrian politicians are not in a hurry to forcefully claim the remains of Adolf Hitler held by the Russians and identified with certainty a few years ago. Similarly, neither the German government nor the family wanted to repatriate the body of Josef Mengele, the infamous "Todesengel", when it was exhumed and then formally identified by the Brazilian government in 1985.

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17 These post-mortem hand amputations are not an isolated case. Thus, on May 1, 1893, Captain-Commander Louis-Napoléon Chaltin wrote the following after taking Riba-Riba: *"In front of M'serera's house was a post from which hung two right hands that appeared to have belonged to white people (perhaps Michiels et Noblesse)"* (Chaltin 1893, 53) [translation].

18 From our point of view, the absence of these simple historical facts in the Belgian press can only be put in parallel with this sentence appearing at the very end of the book *Sociologie comparée du cannibalisme* by Georges Guille-Escuret (2010, 343-344): *The moralists who incite the offspring of the victims to demand an apology from the compatriots of the executioners do not suggest that similar regrets are expressed in the wake of slave traders from North and East Africa: colonized since, the Arabs and other Muslim societies have fallen on the side of the innocent* [translation].



To conclude this text, it matters also to take into account one last aspect of this case as it should be thought-provoking to any scholar.

It is legitimate to wonder whether the scandal around this sale, skillfully staged and complacently mediatized, could have some influence on the people, numerous in Belgium, who have inherited archives, objects or even human remains from the colonial period.

Some of these legacies from the past are at possible risk to remain buried *ad aeternam* or end up thrown away to "stay out of trouble." Suffice to read an open letter published in the Belgian newspaper *Le Vif* one day before the sale to get a mass of the threats, certainly more virtual than real, with which magistrates and politicians are summoned to follow through in order to satisfy militant associations, regardless the most basic rights: judicial procedures against the Vanderkindere auction house for concealing corpses and selling stolen goods<sup>19</sup>, disclosure of the name of the seller...

Yet, over a more or less long time, these kinds of intimidation/defamation might lead to dismissing or throwing on scrapheap material witnesses from the colonial time. Such a state of affairs would be dreadful to research, heritage... and even, ironically, to those who stand up for restitution policies.

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19 These are the ethnographic and historical objects from the collection of Dr Laurent which also appeared in the sale of December 14 about which the following is said in the open letter: "*the collection of doctor Louis Laurent from Namur put on sale this Wednesday December 14 includes a large batch of objects looted during colonial crimes perpetrated in the Congo which legally cannot be sold either*" (Collectif 2022). It's important to emphasize that, from the juridical point of view, the sale of the objects was completely legal.

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