

Science in the Name of Jesus: Human Remains Collection by Swedish Missionaries Karl Edvard Laman and Selma Laman in the Two Congo-states in the Early Twentieth Century

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Introduction

One day we passed by a cranium, that was lying on the road. I took it up and put it in a bag on the wagon. The carriers were shocked when they saw this, and if they could, they would have chosen to have it thrown far away. In the evening there was a sense of unease in the camp, and nobody wanted to carry anything like that. At dark I wrapped it and put it in a suitcase, so the carriers would not know where it was. I forgot to find out if they had nightmares that night, as they anticipated with fear.

(Karl Edvard Laman, *Missionsförbundet*, 1916, p. 54, my translation).

Karl Edvard Laman (1867-1944) and his wife, Selma Laman (1862-1936), are among the most influential of the Mission Covenant Church of Sweden (MCCS) missionaries to the two Congo states.¹ The first time they travelled to then Belgian Congo was in 1891, and in 1919, they returned to Sweden for good. Not only were they involved in mission work, but they also gathered a vast collection of ethnographic objects, which they brought to Sweden. Other Swedish missionaries also removed ethnographic objects from the two Congo states, but the Lamans' collection is the most comprehensive; it consists of more than two thousand pieces.

¹ There were both Catholic and Protestant missionaries from various European countries, as well as from the US, that established themselves in various parts of the two Congo-states during the second half of the 19th century. For a thorough account of the various mission societies and their activities in then French and Belgian Congo, see Sundkler and Steed 2000.

Laman additionally shaped Congolese scholarship, compiling a dictionary in the local language, *kikongo*, and he further influenced ethnographic research.²

Twelve human skulls are included in the Laman collection.³ The journal entry quoted at this essay's beginning provides one of the few records of the circumstances surrounding the Lamans' appropriation of human remains. In this article, I explore why the Lamans collected these, asking: Did they, and the local populace, make a distinction between human body relics and the other ethnographic objects that were gathered? How did the collecting coexist with missionary work? In addition, I question the ways in which their missionary values coexisted with other ideas popular at the time, such as evolutionism, social Darwinism, and racial biology.

Of crucial import to understanding the processes of collecting is the power dynamic that the colonial order enabled. As demonstrated below, the Congolese people, the Lamans met, related to these objects and to the missionaries in various ways. There were broad disparities regarding how the Congolese adapted to the presence of foreign missionaries. There were those that actively resisted them and, there were those that associated with them through the mission stations, schools, and hospitals and so formed strong relationships with them. Both the Lamans describe, in letters and diaries, individuals they met, and record how these individuals related to the missionaries and to their message.

A Passion for Science and Mission Work

‘A blessed day. Hallelujah! Was today separated for mission work’.

(From Laman's diary of 29 June 1890)⁴

Karl Edvard Laman was born on 18 March 1867 in Norrbärke, in the middle of Sweden. As a child, he had a great interest in natural science and while the young Laman worked as a gardener in the Stockholm area, he longed to become a missionary. In his writing he describes

² Many researchers have been inspired by the work of Karl Edvard Laman, among them Anita Jacobsson-Widding, Professor Emerita at the Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology at Uppsala University.

³ The craniums are today to be found at the Ethnographic Museum in Stockholm, collections 1919: 1 and 3001: 19 in the General Catalogue.

⁴ Held at the National Archives of Sweden, my translation.

his calling, 'The Lord has called me to become a missionary'.⁵ Between 1888-90 Laman attended the mission school, where future pastors and missionaries who had a vocation to work for the Mission Covenant Church of Sweden studied.

At the mission school two volumes of *Illustrerad missionshistoria* by the mission director Erik Jakob Ekman were on the curriculum. In the books, Ekman describes the necessity and the urgency for missionaries to reach the 'unsaved peoples' before Jesus' Second Coming. The dissemination of the Christian message was seen as an aspect of the expansion of civilization. These beliefs coincided with evolutionary ideas at the time, namely that societies developed through stages; European and western societies had reached the apex of the 'evolutionary ladder', where 'primitive' societies, African societies for instance, had many rungs yet to ascend. Different primitive societies visited during the 18th and 19th centuries were viewed as relics from a time long past and it was thought that western societies had once ascended from that same low level.⁶ As mentioned, it seems as if these notions about the 'evolutionary ladder' to some extent worked together with the missionary ideas: apart from eternal salvation, Christianity would also bring prosperity, civilization and happiness. These thoughts legitimated the missionary enterprise that acquired strength during the last decades of the 19th century.

Selma Laman was born Selma Carlson on 29 July 1862 to a family of farmers in Östra Harg, in Sweden's south.⁷ Already as a child, she had a strong calling to become a missionary, and after working as a maid at various homes in Stockholm, in 1890 *Bibelkvinnohemmet*, the institution for teaching female missionaries, the 'mission brides', accepted her as a student. Unlike Karl Edvard, Selma did not have an interest in science, however, like her husband she came to be actively involved in the travelling and in the collecting of artefacts.

⁵ *Ansgarius* 1914, 23, my translation.

⁶ Thomas Malm, 'Apornas förnuftiga "cousiner"'. Om Carl von Linnés och Charles Darwins betydelse för de antropologiska forskningstraditionerna' in Christer Lindberg (ed), *Antropologiska porträtt 2*, Lunds Universitet, Sociologiska institutionen, 1997, 50.

⁷ Bertil Söderberg, *Karl Edvard Laman. Missionär – språkforskare – etnograf*, Stockholm: Svenska Missionsförbundet, 1985, 46.

In order to understand the Lamans' collecting, it is important to realise that the Mission Covenant Church of Sweden (MCCS) supported these activities. Among the leadership of the MCCS there was a strong belief in the necessity for future pastors and missionaries to obtain a sound academic education in theology, languages, and other subjects, such as geography and the history of religion. This attitude towards academic studies differs to that of the Pentecostal movement at the time, which considered academic studies unnecessary and even harmful to mission work. As the MCCS supported education and viewed science as useful, and non-threatening, it made it easier for the Lamans and others like them, to gather and classify objects – taxonomy being an important component of science at the time. However, scientific ideas did not motivate most missionaries. Many experienced a strong vocation and recognized evangelization, education and health care as central components of mission work.

Mission Work in then Belgian and French Congo: Evangelization and Collecting

The Lamans lived five distinct periods as missionaries, these were interspersed by a few years at home in Sweden. They also undertook several extended journeys within the two Congo states. Between May and August of 1911 they went on a longer trek to then French Congo and in 1915 Karl Edvard Laman accompanied missionary Josef Ekstam, and seventeen bearers, on a one month long trip also to French Congo.⁸ From March to November of 1918, Karl Edvard and Selma Laman again travelled to French Congo; this expedition would be their last one before they retired to Sweden.⁹ The reason for these journeys was to scout for locations for new mission stations, but they also offered valuable opportunities for recording words for the *kikongo* dictionary – Laman contributed significantly to the study of the *kikongo* language in compiling his dictionary – and for collecting objects.

Mission stations were characterised by three institutions: the school, the hospital and the church. The activities of the stations revolved around these; and, through them, the missionaries interacted with the local populace. Laman's primary duties were to manage the

⁸ Söderberg, *Karl Edvard Laman. Missionär – språkforskare – etnograf*, 1985, 139-143.

⁹ Söderberg, *Karl Edvard Laman. Missionär – språkforskare – etnograf*, 1985, 149-152.

work at the stations, edit a monthly newspaper and educate the local evangelists.¹⁰ Selma Laman was involved with teaching at the school, and with caring for women and children at the hospital.¹¹ In his diary, Laman recounts life at the mission stations, the missionaries who worked there, the sicknesses they treated, the hopes that he had for the mission work, and the journeys that he made.

Laman describes the local population as being in great need of Christianity and civilization, but also as knowledgeable. Later, as he becomes familiar with them, he articulates respect for the complicated structures of the local languages and belief systems, noting: ‘the primitives are being underestimated far too much’.¹² In his work with the dictionary, as well as, in his collecting of artefacts, he developed a close cooperative relationship with the local population. In 1924 he stated this about the Congolese:

The mission and its friends must see them as equal brothers and in the same right to enjoy the spiritual and material development and blessing that God in his blessings have given each and every race in the great family of Man.¹³

The evolutionary theory, that societies went through different stages from primitive to civilized, was a notion that he partly agreed with. There are several examples in his writings where he states that he saw the black race as uncivilized and primitive and in need of being developed and educated by the more advanced white race. At the same time, he emphasized the value of the single human being, and stated the importance of treating each person individually and not as belonging to a specific group or race.¹⁴ As the Swedish ethnologist Lotten Gustafsson Reinius describes, the early missionaries noted differences between the races, while they at the same time imagined the soul to be independent and free; thus, personal salvation was possible for every individual.¹⁵

¹⁰ Söderberg, *Karl Edvard Laman. Missionär – språkforskare – etnograf*, 1985, 110.

¹¹ Söderberg, *Karl Edvard Laman. Missionär – språkforskare – etnograf*, 1985, 64.

¹² Karl Edvard Laman, *Där mörkret skingras*, Stockholm: Svenska Missions-Förbundets Förlag, 1924, 156.

¹³ Laman, *Där mörkret skingras*, 1924, 6-8, my translation.

¹⁴ Laman, *Där mörkret skingras*, 1924, 10.

¹⁵ Lotten Gustafsson Reinius, ‘Förfärliga och begärliga föremål: Om modernitetens materiella manifestationer på två utställningar’ i Anders Ekström, Solveig Jülich and Pelle Snickars (eds), *1897. Mediehistorier kring Stockholmsutställningen*, Preses Nams Riga, 2006, 104.

The collecting of artefacts was done at the request of the then curator at the Ethnographic museum in Stockholm, Erland Nordenskiöld. He asked missionaries to collect objects from the various mission fields and the missionaries gathered some ten thousand objects for the museum.¹⁶ Although the collecting was solicited, there is no doubt that Laman himself was compelled by a strong interest to find as many artefacts as possible. He was interested in understanding how the locals themselves perceived the objects and saw the journeys as perfect occasions to ‘listen to the carriers’ disputes, controversial observations, interpretations, [and] assumptions’.¹⁷ He had a strong interest in the local belief systems and studiously endeavoured to understand them.

The Collecting of Craniums

During their travels they came to a village called Matali (snakes). They stopped there to study the local language. The chief of the village was an old man. And he became a good friend of the Lamans. Mrs. Laman helped him with medicines. He had some craniums from ancestors that were used at the ancestral cult. Laman asked for a suitable skull to add to his collections. He looked around among the craniums and chose a skull that looked nice. Then the old chief said: ‘By my god, I can not give you that one, because it is my grandfather’s skull. But take this one. This one is good. But you must come by one evening and wrap it up in your coat and hide it so that no one can see it.’ Facial figures of wood, covered with brass and copper, were made for the baskets where the ancestral skulls were preserved. Karl Edvard bought several, his wife told.¹⁸

¹⁶ Söderberg, *Karl Edvard Laman. Missionär – språkforskare – etnograf*, 1985, 158-159. In connection with the passing away of Erland Nordenskiöld, Karl Edvard Laman expressed gratitude towards Nordenskiöld, in that he made it possible for missionaries to lecture at anthropological departments in Uppsala, Stockholm and Gothenburg, *Missionsförbundet* nr 50, 1932, 457.

¹⁷ Laman, *Där mörkret skingras*, 1924, 153.

¹⁸ Söderberg, *Karl Edvard Laman. Missionär – språkforskare – etnograf*, 1985, 154.

This description is from the journey to then French Congo in 1918 that the Lamans undertook. Given Laman was asked to collect the skull at night it is probable that the Congolese found the issue of the collection a sensitive one. At the same time, we see that the chief in this case did not mind giving Karl Edvard a cranium, possibly in exchange for money. From this, we can assume that individuals among the local population had different attitudes in relation to skulls and other human remains, and there were people that did not mind providing them to missionaries and to other representatives of the colonial powers.

When one reads the notes made by Laman, found in the general catalogue of the Ethnographic museum, it is striking how little he has written on the human bones he collected. As a comparison, he has made careful remarks regarding all other kinds of artefacts gathered; noting of each where it was located, how it was used, the meaning of the object in the local context, etc. The only information we find on the skulls is that seven of them were collected in Masdjo, in then French Congo, of which four came from the *Bapunu* people, one from the *Basangi*, and two came from the *Bakuta*. (One of these skulls shows evidence of rodent damage.) Another cranium, from a child, was collected in Sibiti, also in French Congo, and comes from the *Babongo* people. One skull was collected in French Congo's Kolo and comes from the *Babemba*; and two craniums come from the *Bakongo* and *Basundi* people respectively, and were collected in Bulu in then Belgian Congo. Furthermore, there is a skull that during 2009 was moved from the National Archives of Sweden to the Ethnographic museum, where the only note concerning it states that it comes from the *Bakuta* people. Of the total whole craniums the Lamans collected, as well as, the three skull fragments, and a jawbone, it is noteworthy that this information, as recorded by Laman, does not state where the skulls originally came from or how they had come to be where the Lamans found them. Further research is needed on this topic, as I merely reproduce in this paragraph the brief information provided by Laman himself.

Apart from the Lamans' notes, a caption next to one of the skulls remarks that the person in question 'died from madness',¹⁹ and next to another one a caption reads,

¹⁹ The General Catalogue of the Ethnographic Museum, collection 1919: 1: 1444.

‘smoked, used at the ancestral cult’.²⁰ A death from madness was considered to be a bad death, a form of punishment for ill deeds.²¹ One can also gather two skulls come from women, some of the skulls have marks that signify malnutrition, and one skull is tinged green, which indicates it could have come into contact with metal, possibly from lying in a basket of the type described in the quoted passage. Apart from this, no information is given of how old the skulls were at the time of collection, or from what persons they could have originated.²²

Even if Laman did not mention the skulls in his writings, there are several descriptions of the Lamans coming upon funerals and graves during their travels – perhaps some of the skulls come from such occasions. Söderberg describes while the *Bakuta* people usually bury their dead, chiefs are not interred, but instead the body is left hanging in a tree or lying in the woods until skeletonized. Then the bones are collected, a cleansing ceremony is performed, the human remains are put into baskets, so called *kobo* that are kept in the house and are believed to protect the inhabitants from dangers, and also to bring happiness. It is only the remains from prominent men that can be put into *kobos*, not remains from ordinary village inhabitants or from women.²³ The skull from a child that was placed into a *kobo* could, according to Söderberg, mean that the child had the same lineage as the chief. Söderberg also describes how baskets called *lukobi*, among the *Bakongo* people, contained remains from both prominent men and women. The *lukobi* was kept in the hut of the chief, close to where he rested his head at night.²⁴

The quote at the beginning of this section, does not state among which people the Lamans stayed in the village of Matali, however, we note from it that skulls were used in an ‘ancestral cult’²⁵, and that they were kept in baskets in the hut of the chief. Although there were variations in attitude among the Congolese peoples towards how they related to skulls (and to other human remains) there was generally a strong belief in the importance of good

²⁰ The General Catalogue of the Ethnographic Museum, collection 1919: 1: 159.

²¹ Karl Edvard Laman *The Kongo II*, Lagercrantz (ed.), Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1957, 85.

²² Thank you to osteologist Mats Pettersson for providing me with insights regarding these collections.

²³ Bertil Söderberg, ‘Ancestor Guardian Figures and Ancestral Baskets among the Bakuta’, *Ethnos* nos. 1-2, 1956, 109-110.

²⁴ Söderberg, ‘Ancestor Guardian Figures and Ancestral Baskets among the Bakuta’, 1956, 115. *Kobo* and *lukobi* are not identical objects, but are highlighted here in order to exemplify the keeping of human remains for various reasons by the Congolese peoples.

²⁵ ‘Ancestral cult’ is troubling not only in that the meaning ascribed to such a term varies, but also in that it contains connotations arising from earlier usage.

relations between the living and the dead, and a conviction that the ancestors influence the situation of the living. Therefore, it was crucial to satisfy the ancestors, in giving them sacrifices and honouring them;²⁶ and in decorating and caring for their graves. Sometimes skulls were put in the trees and bushes surrounding the burial site of a chief. They belonged to people who were killed in connection with a chief's death, so that he would not enter the afterlife alone.²⁷ Maybe the Lamans encountered such graves during their travels; this would explain where and how some of the skulls were collected.

The Congolese term *nkisi* confirms that there were additional artefacts and beliefs, in addition to human remains, that the local population treated respectfully. According to Ragnar Widman's researches, *nkisi* refers to objects that function as an, 'abode for a protecting ancestor', and are furthermore the 'place where the supernatural²⁸ power is concentrated'. *Nkisi* is a concept that allows for a complex system of convictions that, in the words of scholar Wyatt MacGaffey, constitutes, 'local habitations and embodiments of personalities from the land of the dead, through which the powers of such spirits are made available to the living'.²⁹ The *nkisi* functioned as a container that, for instance, could hold medicines that gave the receptacle its force. The Lamans' collection included these kinds of medicines,³⁰ Through the *nkisi* a person comes, 'into contact with this power'.³¹ There are many taboos that operate in relation to *nkisi*. The objects were thought to be filled with power, and consequently were considered dangerous; most people were forbidden to touch them. For a long time western researchers and missionaries thought that the Congolese worshipped various objects *in themselves* – this was not the case. Instead these objects acted as intermediaries between the living and the dead.³²

To return to the question raised in the introduction concerning whether skulls differed in any sense from other collected objects, the answer is, there were other

²⁶ Ragnar Widman, *Trosföreställningar I Nedre Zaire från 1880-talet*, Falköping: Gummessons Tryckeri AB, 1979, 111.

²⁷ Widman, *Trosföreställningar I Nedre Zaire från 1880-talet*, 1979, 129-130.

²⁸ I would like to thank Sigbert Axelsson for clarifying discussions about the use of terms like 'ancestral cult' and 'supernatural'.

²⁹ Wyatt MacGaffey, *Kongo Political Culture*, Indiana University Press, 2000, 79.

³⁰ Mac Gaffey, *Kongo Political Culture*, 2000, 82-84.

³¹ Widman, *Trosföreställningar I Nedre Zaire från 1880-talet*, 1979, 151, my translation. See also Wyatt MacGaffey, *Art and Healing of the Bakongo*, Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1991.

³² Reinius Gustafsson, 'Förfärliga och begärliga föremål', 2006, 94-95.

ethnographic objects than skulls, such as the *nkisi*, that also were as respectfully regarded by the local population. This response does not make any claims for other resemblances between *nkisi* and human remains, but is included in order to clarify that in the perspective of the local population, the collecting of human remains was probably not always considered ‘worse’ than the collecting of other kinds of objects, such as the *nkisi*.

Back to Sweden

The exhibition of ethnographic objects that missionaries brought with them from the various ‘mission fields’ to Sweden was an important vehicle in the formation of images of other peoples and cultures during the 20th century. This was also the case with Congo. An exhibition took place in Stockholm in 1907, initiated by Erland Nordenskiöld, where some objects collected by the Lamans were put on display.³³ Another Stockholm exhibition was staged in 1919,³⁴ and during the 1920s an exhibition toured Sweden, and enabled members of MCCS to see the objects and gain insight into the mission work within the two Congo states.³⁵ For MCCS members, the various mission exhibitions, letters from missionaries (which were read to the congregations) and visits from missionaries themselves, enabled a picture of life in the Congo states to form. This contact with missionary work and ethnographic artefacts facilitated relationships between the MCCS and the Congo; relationships that remain strong at the national level of the MCCS and at the level of individual, local congregations. Not only did the exhibitions work to create an image of the Congolese, but also the exhibitions proved as important for shaping a self-image of missionaries as significant actors in spreading the Christian message to the heathens. As described by Gustafsson Reinius, the result of the exhibitions was to some extent to confirm oneself as ‘civilized’ and ‘saved’ in relation to the Congolese, ‘the uncivilized’ and ‘primitive’.³⁶ The exhibitions furthermore confirmed the importance of continuing with the collecting of money for the mission work.

³³ Söderberg, *Karl Edvard Laman. Missionär – språkforskare – etnograf*, 1985, 158.

³⁴ Söderberg, *Karl Edvard Laman. Missionär – språkforskare – etnograf*, 1985, 165.

³⁵ Reinius Gustafsson, ‘Förfärliga och begärliga föremål’, 2006, 89.

³⁶ Reinius Gustafsson, ‘Förfärliga och begärliga föremål’, 2006, 85.

On one occasion, the skulls collected by the Lamans were displayed; a photograph from 1928 at Ateneum in Stockholm shows ten skulls. Above the door there is a sign with Laman's name on it and next to the skulls a sign says that the objects come from French Congo. It is likely that the skulls pictured constitute most of the skulls described above. Other than that, there is no evidence that the skulls were displayed at other exhibitions. Nor did the Lamans seem to have a particularly strong interest in the skulls. On the contrary, as we have seen, the Lamans wrote very little of the skulls. Instead, the skulls were sent to archives and museums and researchers have not, until recently, paid them any attention. We can only speculate as to what visitors at the exhibition at Ateneum thought and felt when they saw the skulls lying there on top of one another. Were they just like any of the other objects displayed at the exhibition, or were the visitors shocked by what they saw? We do not know. Today some people react with dismay when they hear that missionaries collected human remains; maybe it is particularly unpleasant to hear that *missionaries* devoted time to such a thing. I ask how come these skulls have not been recognised until now? Why have authors and researchers interested in the work of Laman not attended to the question of human remains collection? The fact that the storage and display of human bones in the collections of western museums has not been recognised as an issue until recently, seems to be the main reason as to why the Lamans' collecting of skulls has not been acknowledged earlier.

Mission Work and Science

Interviews with Laman, and his own writings, contain repeated emphases that he is essentially a missionary, and that the research that he has carried out was in the service of the mission work. At the same time it is clear that it was important for him to be acknowledged as an authentic scientist, and he often called attention to missionaries' contributions to science. The recognition that he received within the language research field, was significant. For instance, he co-operated with the German professor Carl F. M. Meinhof (1857-1944) at the Psychological Institute in Berlin, and it was particularly Laman's recording of dialects in the two Congo states that gave him pre-eminence within language research.

Laman advocated that missionaries have sound scientific educations and was of the opinion that they are in a unique position to gather scientific material, since missionaries

often spent many years in one place and in this way gained the trust of the local population. In reference to the missionaries' unique position, he meant that by learning about the customs, religion and traditions of the local population, 'the missionary will be able to completely carry out his missionary deeds among the natives and pave the way for future missionaries'.³⁷ Science was not a goal in itself, but should serve the goal of the missionary societies, namely, to win souls for Jesus.

As already stated, it is not difficult to see that Laman was influenced by evolutionary ideas on the conditions of various societies and cultures. However, it is not clear how Karl Edvard related to the ideas of racial biology and phrenology current at the time, in which skulls were measured in order to classify whether a person was 'longheaded' or 'shortheaded', 'civilized' or 'primitive'. The size and form of the cranium were also thought to reveal intelligence and character.³⁸ Were the skulls the Lamans collected intended for such measurement? As we have already seen there is no evidence that they were used for such activities, and it is unlikely from the evidence, that the Lamans had those kinds of motives for collecting. Similarly, I have not found that the ideas of racial biology were taught at the mission school, although there were books in the school library that touched on the subject of racial biology. When looking at Laman's library, now held at the National Archives of Sweden, there are some books that reference racial biology. However, texts that refer to racial biology were not unusual at the time and that these were present in Laman's library does not inform a reader about Laman's thinking on the matter.

On one occasion Karl Edvard Laman expressed these views regarding the future of the 'black race', views that can be tied to ideas of racial biology:

The future of the race? Don't ask me to predict. But at least the Belgian colonial authorities are of the opinion that the blacks are their premier asset in inner Africa, that much is certain. The white man cannot handle the climate there, at least not when it comes to working there. The same opinion is coming strongly also among

³⁷ Laman, *Där mörkret skingras*, 1924, 150, my translation. While 'the missionary' is in most cases designated male in Laman's writings, he often mentioned the important work of female missionaries and expressed gratitude towards his wife's contributions in the collecting of artefacts.

³⁸ Malm, 'Apornas förnuftiga "cousiner"', 1997, 48.

the French colonial authorities. Furthermore, one hears that the French do not mind the idea of a mixed race that would combine white blood in the veins, with the resistance of the black race. Such an idea is maybe not that impossible. I believe that the mulattos are objects of slander. I have seen quite a lot of mixing between the races, and generally these people are not worse than anyone else. But of course I do not consider the mixing of races to be ideal. The races have their different tasks and areas, and the boundaries between them should most certainly be maintained. It is only the enmity that ought to be terminated.³⁹

In this statement, he expresses an essentialist view of race, where whites, blacks and mulattos are considered to have different characteristics; a point of view that was conventional at the time, but not something that everyone agreed upon.

In Laman's thinking there were probably points of convergence between the mission teaching and scientific ideas, whereas, the collecting of objects was seen not only as important for classification of societies along the 'evolutionary ladder', but also for educating Swedes about the Congolese cultures. The conviction, held not only by the Lamans, but among missionaries and mission societies at the time, was (as stated above) that mission work would lead to the eternal salvation of the Congolese peoples, which in turn would result in the spread of civilization. In addition, it is important to note that Laman strongly criticized the activities of the colonial powers on the African continent, as well as, those of the slave traders. Together with missionaries from various countries, he also rebuked the ravaging French and Belgian colonial powers in the two Congo states, appealing against them in the name of 'justice, freedom and humanity'.⁴⁰ In short, to Laman, civilization was not always associated with colonialism, but it was intrinsically connected to salvation.

Skulls as Symbols of Redress?

How can we understand the collecting of human remains the Lamans undertook? The impression obtained when reading about them is ambiguous: at once, it seems, they had a

³⁹ *Svenska Morgonbladet*, 5 April 1933.

⁴⁰ Söderberg, *Karl Edvard Laman. Missionär – språkforskare – etnograf*, 1985, 113, my translation.

respectful, humble attitude towards the local population and their traditions, however, in Laman's writings and in his (and his wife's) actions towards the local Congolese there is also a clear expression of the dominant colonial ideology. Laman describes how he and his wife had a good reputation among the local population, that the locals did not mind talking to them and teaching them about their customs and traditions. He states that he was considered by some Congolese as 'one of their old chiefs that had resurrected and come to visit them'.⁴¹ He is careful to remark that he never did anything that was unacceptable to the local population:

During all my travels have I respected the feelings and thoughts of the natives in every way. I have not bought, looked at or touched anything without their full consent. Therefore, they have had a great confidence in me, so that they have told me everything and even let me look at, study and photograph relics and holy regalia.⁴²

It is probable that the skulls were included in what he terms 'relics' and 'holy regalia'. However, the opening of this essay describing Laman picking up a skull against the will of his carriers shows that he did not always respect 'the feelings and thoughts of the natives in every way'.

The collection of ethnographic artefacts, including human remains, was not unusual in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Many explorers, scientists, and missionaries, donated all kinds of objects to western institutions, including Swedish institutions. Artefact gathering was considered uncomplicated; in this way one contributed to science and participated in raising public awareness of different cultures and peoples. The Lamans acted in accordance with the prevailing ideals and values, convinced that they represented a Christian based civilization. How are ideas concerning 'the good society' expressed and enacted in 21st century aid and mission work? What scientific 'truths' are now taken for granted and remain unquestioned? How is the image of the Congolese constructed and contextualised? These are important concerns in consideration of present involvements in Congo and in other African countries.

⁴¹ Laman, *Där mörkret skingras*, 1924, 157, my translation.

⁴² Laman, *Där mörkret skingras*, 1924, 158, my translation.

The removal of human remains from their originating cultures took place within the enabling power structures of a past era. The discussion of repatriation of ethnographic objects, including human remains, is politically sensitive in the west, and can, in one sense, be seen as a redefinition of power positions, in which unequal relationships are interrogated. Alternatively, the discussion of repatriation risks becoming yet another expression of neo-colonialism, where the returning of objects is more about the west dictating the conditions for repatriation, thus reproducing a colonial attitude. It is of crucial importance that the process of repatriation is not generalized, but that every case is considered within its specific context and historical background.

Regarding the future of the human remains in the Lamans' collections, a dialogue between representatives from the MCCA and the 'partner-churches' – that is, with the Congolese churches Communauté Évangélique du Congo and the Evangelical Church of the Republic of Congo – has been initiated. There are not as yet any demands for the return of these skulls from the two Congo states. However, a dialogue regarding the collecting that missionaries undertook a century ago, may very well effect present relations, as well as, our understanding of history, which in turn may come to effect identity formation.

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