

# FOREIGN IMPORT<sup>1</sup>

Whom to invite to this "family" reunion that will take place in a house that attended the birth of Belgium (of which the encased cup at the center of the table was a witness<sup>2</sup>)?

Despite its small domain, the "family" is broad and complex, with far-reaching ramifications, multiple alliances and misalliances. As siblings do not always get along well, it is sometimes a problem to sit everyone around the table.

Yet it began with a beautiful mixed marriage<sup>3</sup>.

In its happy debut, the family enjoyed entertaining, especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It gladly welcomed relatives or distant cousins. But little by little, if it continued to invite cousins from everywhere, they were often requested to go through the basement before getting a place in the sun<sup>4</sup>.

So, the family is multilingual<sup>5</sup>.

The family also likes to travel. It visits its French and Dutch cousins, who visit in return.

It emigrates to the Americas and Australia...

But above all, it ventures into the unknown regions of Central Africa. There will certainly be something to get from there! Indeed, the head of the family is known for its voracious, even ferocious, appetite<sup>6</sup>.

The feast served in this mismatched tableware<sup>7</sup> comes from its "hunting grounds"<sup>8</sup>:

As appetizer, minced ivory with red rubber<sup>9</sup>

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As a main course

Waterzooï of diamond, gold, tin, copper, silver, uranium and coltan<sup>10</sup>

Accompanied by cotton and palm oil

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Shards of cocoa beans for dessert

Tea & coffee as you wish

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<sup>1</sup> When I turned over the cups, plates and saucers gathered here – collected mostly in Brussels – I realized that they represented a good sample, albeit very incomplete, of Belgium's diversity.

<sup>2</sup> On September 26, 1830, Prince Frederick of the Netherlands, who commanded the Dutch troops, took refuge in the Eenens mansion. He would only drink some tea prepared by his aide and served in this famous cup.

<sup>3</sup> The first king of Belgium, Leopold I, was German and had married the French princess, Louise d'Orleans, daughter of the French king Louis-Philippe I.

<sup>4</sup> Belgium – the world's 2nd industrial power until 1910 – hired a huge number of foreign workers to come to work in the mines and the steel industry, as the local labor force was insufficient.

<sup>5</sup> For example, in coalmines, if the technical terms were borrowed from Walloon and Picard, gradually one could also hear Italian and Polish after the 1st World War, plus Spanish, Greek, Portuguese, Moroccan, Turkish and Tunisian after 2nd World War.

<sup>6</sup> In 1885, King Leopold II took over a vast territory, which later became Congo.

<sup>7</sup> Belgium had an impressive number of earth-ware makers, which, in addition to superb dishes, produced cement tiles with various patterns that can still be found in many Belgian homes.

<sup>8</sup> Territory of the Belgian Congo + the attachment of Rwanda and Burundi to Belgian Congo in 1925. In 1926, the mining of copper, cobalt and diamonds starts. In 1955, the mines are Belgium's second source of customs revenue.

<sup>9</sup> Rubber is naturally white. The extreme violence exerted on the Congolese population to force it to collect the material in inhumane conditions produced the phrase "red rubber". This will be denounced by many reports, leading the king to hand over the governance of Congo to Belgium in 1908.

<sup>10</sup> In 1960, the "family" reluctantly surrenders its "hunting grounds" at the time of Congo's independence.

Most of the uranium used to make the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki had been given to the Americans by Belgium, and came from the Shinkolobwe mine. Uranium and coltan (notably used in our electronic devices and of which 80% of the world resources are to be found in Congo) are highly coveted. They are trafficked and source of serious conflicts on the borders of Congo, Rwanda and nearby states. Local people are the 1st victims and most mines, officially closed since 1979, are illegally exploited in unimaginable conditions.