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## Dialogues between Theory and Practice

Approaches and Case Studies of Postcolonial Provenance Research

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## What is it about?

Attempts to Interpret the Biography of a Portrait Figure  
from the West Region of Cameroon

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Attempts to Interpret the Biography of a Portrait Figure from the West Region of Cameroon

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## Abstract

What is the aim of a provenance research on objects from colonial contexts, what can it achieve and what does it have to provide? How can the study be conducted so that it produces results that are relevant to museum practice, historiography and the societies of origin? How can it possibly withstand the tension of expectations? Using the example of a portrait figure that a Hanoverian colonial officer gave to the institution that was to become today's *Lower Saxony State Museum*, it will be shown to what extent combined methods allow a complex picture of interpretations around the figure's biography to emerge. To assemble diverse narratives and interpretations of the object and its changing ownership, as well as to be able to frame and evaluate contemporary questions about its whereabouts and handling, both anthropological and historiographic methods are applied. With the help of approaches of both disciplines historical conditions and social practices are reconstructed as well as contemporary attitudes and interests with regards to the object's past and future were revealed. The diversity of interpretations of the object's appropriation and corresponding conclusions that can be drawn for contemporary practice demonstrate the complexity of a provenance research on objects from colonial contexts and raise the question of what it is ultimately about.

*De quoi s'agit-il ? Tentatives d'interprétation de la Biographie d'une statue de la région ouest du Cameroun (Résumé)*

*Quel est le but d'une recherche de provenance sur des objets issus du contexte colonial, que représente-t-elle et que doit-elle apporter ? Comment l'étude peut-elle être menée afin de livrer des résultats pertinents pour la pratique muséale, l'historiographie et les sociétés d'origine ? Comment peut-elle résister à la tension des attentes ? À partir de l'exemple d'une statue qu'un officier colonial hanovrien a offert à l'institution qui allait devenir l'actuel Musée National de Hanovre, nous allons découvrir dans quelle mesure les méthodes combinées permettent de dresser un tableau complexe d'interprétations autour de la biographie de cette statue. Des méthodes ethnologiques et historiographiques sont employées pour réunir divers discours et interprétations de l'objet et de son changement de propriétaire, ainsi que pour pouvoir définir et évaluer les questions contemporaines relatives à sa localisation et à sa conservation. Grâce aux approches des deux disciplines, les conditions historiques et les pratiques sociales ont été reconstituées et les attitudes et intérêts contemporains vis-à-vis du passé et de l'avenir de l'objet sont révélés. La diversité des interprétations de l'appropriation de l'objet et les conclusions qui en découlent pour la pratique contemporaine témoignent de la complexité d'une recherche de provenance sur des objets issus de contextes coloniaux et soulèvent la question de sa finalité.*

This paper presents my attempts to interpret the biography of a portrait figure from the West Region of Cameroon and the questions that came up during my research.<sup>1</sup> One of the essential questions, I would say, still is, what is the essence and the aim of provenance research on objects from colonial contexts? In recent years, the topic has been increasingly discussed in Germany, research structures have been created and numerous projects have been launched to deal with historically sensitive collections.<sup>2</sup> But what questions do we need to raise and answer so that the research is not solely self-referential, that it does not only serve the interests of the museums as a justification for their collections, or remain nothing but another form of knowledge production for European museums? As Geertz urges, the task of anthropology “is not to answer our deepest questions, but to make available to us answers that others [...] have given, and thus to include them in the consultable record of what man has said”.<sup>3</sup> I often asked myself, what are the interests of the “societies of origin”<sup>4</sup> regarding objects from colonial contexts? What questions are crucial for them and what kind of research is needed so as not to launch yet another paternalistic project, a new kind of “salvage anthropology”.

In Germany, provenance research on ethnographic collections often focuses on the question of the constitution of colonial relations and how contact and exchange took place. Is the reconstruction of the actual appropriation processes just as relevant for the descendants of the previous owners or is it necessary to find and follow new paths? The spectrum of possibilities of an object's appropriation and its present-day evaluation is large. The question is, however, whether the specific contact situations and appropriation modalities of most objects can be reconstructed at all and who ultimately decides on the legitimacy of the appropriation. My approach focuses on how provenance research on objects from colonial contexts can be conducted to deliver results that are relevant for museum practice, a historiography as well as for the societies of origin.

## Methodological Approach

I have taken a historiographical and anthropological approach to provenance research. To reconstruct the historical circumstances, various archival sources have been analysed such as documents of the German colonial administration, historical journals, travel literature and documents of the museum archives. However, these sources exclusively reflect the viewpoint of the colonisers. I have counteracted this problem by including diverse perspectives from Cameroon. Hence, I have conducted interviews with kings, notables, princes, museum experts, curators, scholars, students and the elder population to capture present-day evaluations and interpretations of the objects, the colonial past in general and the appropriation circumstances in particular as well as to find out their views on how to deal with objects from colonial contexts in European museums.

Collaboration with Cameroonian experts both in Cameroon and in Germany offered further access to research. By including individual views from the regions of origin, the ethnocentric and one-dimensional narrative of colonial history could be broken up and local knowledge was included in the analysis. Participant observation in Cameroon allowed a multifactorial insight into the meaning of material culture in Cameroon today and its social significance. However, the starting point of my investigation of colonial interactions was the object itself, its biography, social contexts, and relational settings.

## Portrait Figure

One of the central objects of my research is a wooden figure from the West Region of Cameroon that is currently held at the Lower Saxony State Museum (Figure 1).



Figure 1 | Portrait Figure, Cameroon, Bakoven, held at Lower Saxony State Museum in Hanover, Ethnographic Collection © Lower Saxony State Museum Hanover (Photo: Kerstin Schmidt)

All Cameroonian experts and cooperation partners I have talked to, confirmed during the work with the collection, that this was a royal portrait figure that would clearly represent a king of West Cameroon. It is common practice for kings in the region to have a portrait figure made upon their accession to the throne. Such sculptures illustrate the history of the kingdom and continuity in politics, society and culture.

It is one of the few objects for which background information was provided by Wilko von Frese (1882–1915), a lieutenant of the German colonial forces who was based in Dschang. He sent the statue to the museum in 1910 and stated the figure was a “[g]ift of a chief, probably the portrait of his father”<sup>5</sup>. Likewise, “Bakowen”<sup>6</sup> was noted as the exact place of origin. No other object that von Frese gave to the museum in Hanover had such detailed information about its provenance. But to what extent does this seem credible? Would a king give such a portrait of his father as a gift?

Portrait figures are usually kept with those of their predecessors in a specifically designated house or room in the palace, often referred to as the “royal treasury”.<sup>7</sup> The figures are regarded as evidence of the claim to the throne and are prestige objects that serve as cultural, but also religious symbols of authority. The king is responsible for preserving, conserving as well as protecting the material heritage of the kingdom and is not allowed to sell them or make them personal property as they belong to the community. However, he is allowed to pass them on as gifts or use them in diplomatic negotiations.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, since the king acts as a link to the ancestors, the portrait figures are believed to move equally between the human and spiritual realms. With each enthronement, the new king builds a bridge to his ancestors. The ancestral figures are thus understood as the material embodiment of the ancestors and their spirit respectively.<sup>9</sup>

Taking these functions and ascriptions of meaning of the figure into account, it seems questionable that such a representation of a dignitary should have been passed on voluntarily, as transmitted by von Frese in the archives of the Lower Saxony State Museum. Such a portrait figure is considered inalienable as it is part of the cultural heritage of a kingdom, as all experts confirmed. It is not meant to ever leave it. According to Nicholas Thomas<sup>10</sup> and Igor Kopytoff,<sup>11</sup> inalienable things are only passed on in emergencies or exceptional situations and often must be kept secret. Was such a situation present in this case?

Consequently, one of the aims of my first research in Cameroon in November 2019 was to find “Bakowen”, to trace the figure’s history and seek

what is remembered of the German colonial past. The purpose was to identify undocumented contexts and perspectives of the descendants of the former owners. Together with Paule-Clisthène Dassi Koudjou, the PAESE cooperation partner and at that time museum director of the Batoufam Palace Museum, and Patrick Momo, who acted as intermediary and translator, we found Bakoven. In the conversation with H.M. Tchientcheu Kameni Gabriel, the King of Bakoven, he told us that the Germans initially recognised the kingdom, marked the borders between the kingdoms, but were strict and ruthless. Bakoven had been a large, influential kingdom, and both his grandfather and father had maintained good relations with the Germans.<sup>12</sup>

When I showed him a photo of the portrait figure, he said it was the statue of the former King of Bakoven. When asked how it might have fallen into the hands of Wilko von Frese, he replied:

*At first, when the Germans came, they were very strict because they wanted to stay. But as they stayed in the region, they started to be kind with the population and had a good relation with them and the chefferie, so that the Chief would give statues as gifts to the Germans [...] for the good relationship.*<sup>13</sup>

This statement did indeed come as a surprise. Despite the confirmation of the gift of the figure, the King of Bakoven expressed his expectations: He would welcome its return, as well as the construction of a museum or financial support.

During my next research stay in Cameroon, a further, now announced conversation took place in which the Notables of Bakoven also took part. In both conversations, the good relations between the Germans and the people of Bakoven were emphasised again and again. Although the gift was always confirmed, the conditions of a gift were attached to it. The grandparents had created a bond between Bakoven and Germany and this had to be maintained. A fulfilment of the alliances thus established was expected and extended to the museum – which after Sahlins would be defined as a generalised reciprocity:<sup>14</sup> They mentioned that for example infrastructure should be built. My background certainly influenced the request, as German constructions such as roads and bridges are renowned by many in Cameroon for their supposed sturdiness. Though, my influence was considerably overestimated.

## Historical Context of the Object Appropriation

Wilko von Frese stayed in Cameroon between 1908 and 1910. During this time, he was involved in what the German colonisers called the “pacification of the Nkam-Nun region” – the area where Bakoven is located. This region was little known to the German colonial administration until 1907, as it was a mountainous territory that was difficult to access and considered dangerous. The intention was to build transport routes to be able to exploit natural resources of the so-called Hinterland, but the passage was not considered safe. This area was declared a restricted zone in October 1907 because the population was considered “not subdued” and Governor Theodor Seitz (1863–1949) started a military operation in October 1909.<sup>15</sup>

If one places the appropriation of the object in this context, it would be obvious that the figure was seized. The report of the expedition shows that punitive payments were made, and that the region was “cleansed of the enemy”.<sup>16</sup> The taking of objects or even contact with the population in Bakoven was not documented. The suspicion of an unethical removal of the figure has been supported by the lieutenant’s biography and the colonial archive but this is contradicted by the statements of the dignitaries in Bakoven itself.

In this region which is today called the Haut-Nkam, the colonial administration was first established during von Frese’s time. The area consisted of numerous autonomous, centralised micro-states, which had their own borders, identities and founding histories.<sup>17</sup> The situation thus proved to be extremely complex: the Germans had to establish relations with each kingdom and the strategies of how the different groups confronted the colonial power were correspondingly diverse: Some practised direct resistance, others used passive forms of resistance and, for example, were not present when the Germans came. The King of Bana in contrast cooperated with the Germans, even before the military operation and the kingdom became an important base for them.<sup>18</sup> After the operation had ended a military post was established here, where Wilko von Frese was stationed for a short time.<sup>19</sup> This implies that the figure was not necessarily appropriated during the military operation but perhaps during Frese’s later deployment as Bana is not far from Bakoven.

Therefore, the assessment of the object’s appropriation, based on the colonial archive, is only partially successful as there are too many missing links that leave room for interpretation. A link to the military action may be possible but is not inevitable. The question remains as to who ultimately receives the interpretative sovereignty over the appropriation of the object and to what extent this is decisive for dealing with the object in the future.



## Gifts in West Cameroon

Gift exchange played an important role pre-colonially in the region: gifts offered the possibility to establish or reaffirm inter-ethnic alliances and political relations, to express loyalty to the ruler or served as welcome gestures. This practice was continued in the colonial period by several rulers in contact with Europeans.

Colonial gifts were remembered repeatedly by my conversation partners: In Bana for example, I talked to the king, two of the oldest notables and the barber of the royal dynasty, all of whom consistently emphasised the good relations with the Germans. When I asked one of the notables how the objects might have come to Germany, he stated that they were not taken by force, but given as gifts and as such they were not supposed to be returned, an answer I have received several times, especially by the elder population. However, the good relations between Germans and the people of the West Region is a narrative one encounters often. The German colonial period is overshadowed by the French and its long and brutal independence conflict to which the Notables of Bakoven also referred.

In the academic discourse in Cameroon, by contrast, the humanist paradigm is predominantly at the centre and restitutions are expected: colonialism is related to the hegemonic imbalance, the excessive violence and racist ideology that formed the basis of the colonial project. Exchange on eye-level is highly questioned and ethical as well as moral questions regarding the appropriation and displacement of objects are brought into focus. Thus, the colonial gift exchange is also strongly questioned and leaves room for interpretation as to how far gifts were given voluntarily.<sup>20</sup>

By stating that the King of Bakoven gave von Frese a gift from the heart, as the notables said, his agency was emphasised. He is presented as an equal partner who would have passed on his portrait, similar to the way the Germans distributed portraits of the Kaiser during the colonial period which, however, carried completely different meanings and implications. In Cameroon, gifts rather emphasised the social relations, whereas the Germans were more concerned with presenting equivalent counter-gifts that corresponded to the value of the original gift, as one can find out in the colonial archive.<sup>21</sup> The cultural relativity of a symbolic act comes to light in the colonial exchange of gifts. One and the same event is thus interpreted differently from different perspectives and divergent reactions are expected.

The dignitaries of Bakoven aimed to build on the solidarity they assumed, by emphasising the exchange of gifts as a sign of the good relationship. By

doing so, they intended to get help launching projects in the kingdom. Reclaiming the statue itself was not the focus. Rather, they left it up to the German side to decide what would be offered in return.

## Conclusion

It has been my intention to show that depending on a particular source or perspective, completely opposite conclusions can be drawn regarding an object's appropriation. The question is, what is ultimately crucial for future steps and engagements? A multi-perspective and multi-sited approach can help to weigh different possibilities of an appropriation. Plurality of perspectives and interpretations can help to conceive the subject in its complexity.

By combining anthropological and historiographical methods, it was possible to capture the historical context and depth as well as to embed and reflect on sources accordingly. What anthropology can contribute to, through a change of perspective and the inclusion of different knowledge systems, is to culturally situate and interpret modes of appropriation, to classify present perspectives and ascriptions of meaning as well as to find out about the questions and interests of the societies of origin.

In this case, it is not decisive whether the figure was forcibly removed or taken away with consent. In the end, there are expectations imposed on the museum in Hanover, as gifts are equally binding, and the relationship should be maintained today. Thus, the reactivation of the bond is at the centre of the demand. The museum object acquires a value as a link to the former ties. It is seen as an ethical duty of the museum to take responsibility and to negotiate solutions with the King of Bakoven as the dignitary claims a moral obligation to maintain the social relations.

In this regard, the example opens up the great potential that lies in provenance research on objects from colonial contexts in using the objects as a connection that brings the societies of the present place-of-repository and the former place-of-use into relation with each other and in renegotiating and re-evaluating the past and the future. Clifford's call for museums to function as contact zones, where "different cultural visions and community interests are negotiated", could finally be implemented.<sup>22</sup> It is above all today's generation of the societies of origin with whom discussions on dealing with the

objects must be initiated and with whom a consensus must be found. Hence, hearing their perspectives and attitudes on how to deal with these objects, what their wishes are and taking them seriously should, in my opinion, be a constitutive element of any provenance research on objects in ethnographic collections.



- 1 This text is an extract from a chapter of my forthcoming dissertation thesis. It represents the state of research as of June 2021, when the PAESE conference was held. In the meantime, the discourse has evolved rapidly, terms have changed, and numerous new publications have emerged.
- 2 On the current debate on ethnographic collections and on "postcolonial provenance research" see, among others, Brandstetter, Anna-Maria; Hierholzer, Vera (2018) (Eds): *Nicht nur Raubkunst. Sensible Dinge in Museen und universitären Sammlungen*, Göttingen; Edenheiser, Iris; Förster, Larissa (2019) (Eds): *Museumsethnologie – Eine Einführung. Theorien – Debatten – Praktiken*, Berlin; Förster, Larissa (2016): "Sensible Sammlungen und koloniale Provenienzforschung in ethnologischen Museen. Debatten, Projekte, Perspektiven", in: Sabine Schulze; Silke Reuther (Eds): *Raubkunst? Silber aus ehemals jüdischem Besitz – wie gehen Museen damit um?*, Hamburg, pp. 42–45; Förster, Larissa (2017): "Aus aktuellem Anlass: Kommentar zur Debatte um das Humboldt Forum. Es geht um mehr als Raubkunst: Ethnologische Provenienzforschung zwischen Erstcheck und Sisyphusarbeit", on: Carmah, <http://www.carmah.berlin/reflections/ethnologische-provenienzforschung-zwischen-erstcheck-und/>, accessed 30 March 2023; Förster, Larissa; Edenheiser, Iris; Fründt, Sarah; Hartmann, Heike (2018) (Eds): *Provenienzforschung in ethnografischen Sammlungen der Kolonialzeit. Positionen in der aktuellen Debatte*, Berlin; Förster, Larissa; Edenheiser, Iris; Fründt, Sarah (2018): „Eine Tagung zu postkolonialer Provenienzforschung. Zur Einführung“, in: *Ibid.*, pp. 13–36; Oswald, Margareta; Rodatus, Verena (2017): "Decolonizing Research, Cosmo-optimistic Collaboration?", in: *Museum Worlds*, Vol. 5, no. 1; Weber-Sinn, Kristin; Ivanov, Paola (2020): "'Collaborative' provenance research – About the (im)possibility of smashing colonial frameworks", in: *Museum and Society*, Vol. 18, no. 1, pp. 66–81.
- 3 Geertz, Clifford (1973): *The Interpretation of Culture. Selected Essays*, New York, p. 30.
- 4 For a critical discussion of the term of "societies of origin" see Abiti, Nelson Adebo; Laely, Thomas (2021): "Towards a renewed concept of museum in Africa – and in Europe", on: *Zeitgeschichte online*, <https://zeitgeschichte-online.de/themen/towards-renewed-concept-museum-africa-and-europe>, accessed 13 March 2023; Förster, Larissa (2019): "Der Umgang mit der Kolonialzeit. Provenienz und Rückgabe", in: Edenheiser, Iris; Förster, Larissa (2019) (Eds): *Museumsethnologie – Eine Einführung. Theorien – Debatten – Praktiken*, Berlin, p. 83; Weber-Sinn; Ivanov, 2020, 'Collaborative' provenance research, p. 75.
- 5 Lower Saxony State Museum Hanover, Department of Ethnology, Archive, Notes on the collection from Wilko von Frese, undated, unsigned: „Geschenk eines Häuptlings, wohl Porträt seines Vaters“ (translation by the author).
- 6 Historical spelling of Bakoven.
- 7 Fubah Alubafi, Mathias (2016): "Museums in the palaces of the Cameroon Grassfields. Concerns about accessibility and sustainability". *Human Sciences Research Council (Policy Brief)*, pp. 2–3; Jones, Erica P. (2016): "A Lending Museum. The Movement of Objects and the Impact of the Museum Space in the Grassfields (Cameroon)", in: *African Arts*, Vol. 49, no. 2, p. 17.
- 8 Fouellefak Kana, Célestine Colette; Malabon, Darice (2017): "Sculpture et rites chez les Bamiléké du Cameroun. L'exemple des rites Nang ko'o et Nkang des chefferies Foto et Foréké-Dschang", in: Célestine Colette Fouellefak Kana und Ladislav Nzesé (Eds): *Patrimoine culturel africain. Matériau pour l'histoire, outil de développement*, Paris, p. 61 ; Galitzine-Loumpet, Alexandra (2016): "Reconsidering Patrimonialization in the Bamun Kingdom. Heritage, Image, and Politics from 1906 to the Present", in: *African Arts*, Vol. 49, no. 2, p. 69; Tanefo, Jean Marie Fô (2012): *La Chefferie traditionnelle. Hier, aujourd'hui et demain*. Collection „Retour à la source“, [s.l.], p. 39.
- 9 Fubah Alubafi, Mathias; Kaunda, Chammah J. (2019): "Embodied ancestors: Religious objects, moral actions and well-being in the Cameroon Western Grassfields", in: *HTS Theologies Studies / Theological Studies*, Vol. 75, no. 1, p. 1; Galitzine-Loumpet, 2016, *Reconsidering Patrimonialization*, p. 69; Geary, Christraud M. (1983): *Things of the palace. A catalogue of the Bamum Palace Museum*

- in *Foumban (Cameroon)*, Wiesbaden; Notué, Jean-Paul (1993): *Batcham. Sculptures du Cameroun. Nouvelles perspectives anthropologiques: Musée d'Arts Africains, Océaniens, Amérindiens – Centre de la Vieille Charité*, Marseille, Paris, p. 84.
- 10 Thomas, Nicholas (1991): *Entangled Objects. Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific*, Cambridge.
  - 11 Kopytoff, Igor (1986): "The Cultural Biography of Things. Commoditization as Process", in: Appadurai, Arjun (Ed.): *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge, pp. 64–91.
  - 12 Interview H.M. Tientcheu Kameni Gabriel with Bianca Baumann, 20 November 2019, Bakoven/ Cameroon.
  - 13 Interview H.M. Tientcheu Kameni Gabriel with Bianca Baumann, 20 November 2019, Bakoven/ Cameroon, translated from the Fe'fe' by Patrick Momo.
  - 14 Sahlins, Marshall (1965): "On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange", in: Banton, Michael (Ed.): *Relevance of Models for Social Anthropology*, London, pp. 139–236.
  - 15 Hoffmann, Florian (2007): *Die kaiserliche Schutztruppe und ihr Offizierskorps*, Vol. 1 (Okkupation und Militärverwaltung in Kamerun, Etablierung und Institutionalisierung des kolonialen Gewaltmonopols 1891–1914, Göttingen, pp. 200–202
  - 16 Federal Archives (*Bundesarchiv*, BArch) Berlin, R 1001/4293, Rausch, final report, 19 February 1910, fol. 278–282.
  - 17 Galitzine-Loumpet, Alexandra (2009): "Displaced objects, objects in exile? Changing virtues of Cameroon objects in the West", in: Anderson, Jaynie (Ed.): *Crossing cultures. Conflict, migration and convergence*, Carlton, p. 621.
  - 18 BArch Berlin, R 1001/3354, Gnügge, report, 20 December 1908, fol. 53–54.
  - 19 BArch Berlin, R 1001/4293, Seitz, report, 24 March 1910, fol. 275–277.
  - 20 See amongst others Njoya, Idrissou (2017): "Die Geschichte der Abwesenheit des Mandú-yénú", in: Heller, Mareike (Ed): *No Humboldt 21! Dekoloniale Einwände gegen das Humboldt-Forum*, Berlin, pp. 64–71.
  - 21 BArch Berlin, R 1001/4102, File „Geschenke an Häuptlinge in Kamerun und in den Nachbarkolonien und Gegengeschenke“, May 1885–June 1911.
  - 22 Clifford, James (Ed.) (1997): *Routes. Travel and translation in the late twentieth century*, Cambridge, p. 8.