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Managing, Using and Researching Objects
in Collections

Conservation of African Cultural Heritage

A Comparative Study between Cameroon and Germany

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Abstract

The conservation of cultural heritage is a concern common to all peoples. But the techniques differ from one space to another depending on the environment, customs, traditions and context. This paper is a comparative study of the conservation of African cultural heritage in a European and an African country – Germany and Cameroon. Here, I will relate the techniques of conservation of cultural heritage according to the model of German museums and those practiced by the Cameroonian peoples before and after independence. I also address the significance of cultural goods commonly called “objects” for the peoples who produced them and those who keep them in Western museums. This analysis will lead on to the role played by the community museums of traditional chiefdoms in heritage conservation. Finally, I will also look at the daily use of these heritage items conserved in community museums for ceremonies and rituals within the community, and the denaturing of these items by the uninitiated (collectors, art galleries, etc.) or the international museum institutions that conserve them. This comparative study will not only refocus the global vision on issues of conservation of African cultural heritage, but also show the important role of these assets for the communities that produced them as well as the negative impact of their loss for the community.

Conservation du patrimoine culturel africain. Une étude comparative entre le Cameroun et l'Allemagne (Résumé)

La conservation du patrimoine culturel est une préoccupation commune à tous les peuples. Mais les techniques diffèrent d'un espace à l'autre, en fonction de l'environnement, des coutumes et traditions et du contexte. Ce document est une étude comparative sur la conservation du patrimoine culturel africain en Europe (Allemagne) et en Afrique (Cameroun). Je décrirai les techniques de conservation du patrimoine culturel selon le modèle des musées allemands et celles pratiquées par les peuples camerounais avant et après l'indépendance. J'aimerais également présenter la place des biens culturels, communément appelés «objets», pour les peuples qui les ont produits et ceux qui les ont conservés dans les musées occidentaux. Cette analyse permettra d'identifier le rôle joué par les musées communautaires des chefferies traditionnelles dans la conservation du patrimoine. Je parlerai ensuite de l'utilisation quotidienne de ces biens patrimoniaux conservés dans des musées communautaires pour des cérémonies et des rituels au sein de la communauté et de leur dénaturation. Cette étude comparative permettra non seulement de recentrer la vision globale sur les questions de conservation du patrimoine culturel africain, mais aussi de montrer la place importante de ces biens pour les communautés qui les ont produits ainsi que les conséquences négatives de leur perte pour la communauté.

Understanding African Cultural Heritage

The conservation of cultural heritage is a concern common to all peoples. However, techniques differ from one region to another depending on the environment, customs, traditions and context. Over time, the concern to preserve heritage has become globalised, and UNESCO has made this its focus. In the 1972 Convention, the actors involved put forward the five principles of heritage conservation, abbreviated as the five “Cs”, namely: the conservation of these properties, the credibility of the information transmitted, the development of capacities for safeguarding them, communication around them, and the enhancement of communities by involving them in the work of safeguarding and promoting this heritage.¹

The work I am doing is a comparative study between the conservation techniques of African cultural heritage in Europe (Germany) and in Africa

(Cameroon). I present the relationship between the modes and means of conservation of cultural heritage according to the model of German museums and those practiced by the Cameroonian people before and after independence. This work also addresses the significance of cultural goods commonly called “objects”, “art objects” or “ethnographic objects” according to the views² of the people who produced them and/or those who preserve them in museums.

This analysis highlights the important role played by the community museums of the traditional chieftaincies of West Cameroon in the day-to-day conservation of this heritage and the challenges they face through the constraints of exhibiting a living heritage. It is a question of showing the patrimonialisation of these “objects” through their daily uses as well as the role they play in the perpetuation of certain rites, thanks to the continuity of their use, thus ensuring the sociological equilibrium of the producing peoples. This comparative study will not only refocus on the issues around the conservation of African cultural heritage, but also show the importance of these goods for the communities that produced them and the negative impact of their loss for the community.

Cultural heritage can be defined as tangible or intangible assets of certain artistic and/or historical importance that belong either to a private entity (person, company, association, etc.) or to a public entity (municipality, department, region, country, etc.).³

Heritage is therefore understood as all goods received from parents or ancestors.⁴ It is a treasure, a wealth passed on to the younger generation by the parents. We are all called upon to preserve it in order to pass it on to future generations. Unfortunately, these heritages can sometimes be controversial; some of them are the objects of covetousness and spoliation, while others have been destroyed by wars and armed conflicts of all kinds for centuries. Preservation and safeguarding actions are therefore implemented by states and governments. As far as Cameroon is concerned, the laws of 1991 and 2013 as well as the different conventions ratified by the country help in the conservation and preservation of the national heritage.⁵

The notion of African cultural heritage is complex because it is understood and defined according to the place in which it is found. For the producer peoples it is understood as “the very essence of community life because from early childhood the young person is educated in values through the reading of signs and symbols on objects”.⁶ Initially considered inferior to Western art, movable heritage was progressively considered objects of curiosity,⁷ then as primitive art, and today as ethnographic objects.

Contact with other peoples has greatly influenced our understanding and conservation techniques. Numerous missions to explore the African continent were undertaken during the colonial and post-colonial periods by European countries, mostly for purposes of conquest and discovery. These missions led to the controversial removal of a large quantity of African treasures and cultural goods that were taken to the European metropolises, and Cameroon was not spared. Most of these goods were and are royal, cultural and ritual objects of great importance for the physical and spiritual stability of communities.

Research into the origins of these objects shows the complexity and blurring of the documents concerning the modes of acquisition between their villages or communities of origin and the museum institutions that conserve them today. The words of Mr Picard, curator of the Natural History Museum in La Rochelle, illustrate this well: "We do not know the circumstances in which Petit-Renaud acquired this mask, nor the other pieces. The natives were hostile to the whites. He was attacked by the blacks. He also organised them".⁸ In order to give value to "their objects", the collector put what he liked on the note or the transport slip. These heritages, which are today mostly kept in Western museums, are the pride of the institutions that hold them, to the detriment of the producing communities.

Western Understanding and Conservation of African Cultural Heritage

Originally regarded as objects of curiosity, African heritage objects and goods were presented by collectors as trophies of conquest from colonised territories. They were displayed in private homes and were the objects of covetousness for many. It was an advantage or privilege for collectors to own them. Their stylistics and forms differed from classical Western art, the latter mostly taking the form of paintings and stone sculptures. This so-called "exotic art", because of its new stylistics and forms, attracted a great deal of attention, first from explorers, then from colonists and officials of the colonial administration and also from antiques dealers. They were first exhibited in cabinets of curiosity, then in the great art galleries and on the Western marketplace. Their value was established on the basis of the stories told by the collectors, which often distorted the true history of the objects and increased their market value.

Today, these heritage items are kept in museums as part of permanent and temporary exhibitions. Here, the objects are taken in the true sense of the word, they are *elements* that no longer has a life of their own. They have been taken out of their contexts of manufacture and use. Through the Fourmies documentation by the collector or the sales registers, it may or may not be possible to retrace the more or less true “history” of an object and to identify the community that produced it as well as its function. But its value is more related to the beauty, the lines, the shape of the object, the style of sculpture, the creator. The aim of Western collectors and museum is to take care of the material element while forgetting the spiritual and functional side of object. The objects are preserved in the strictest manner, the museums are placed under alarms and video surveillance, the objects are placed under glass, in showcases, constantly cleaned and treated on a daily basis, and are called a “collection”. They all have an inventory number, are registered in databases and are the objects of study and research for scientists. Those not on display are kept in well-organised and structured storerooms and are surrounded by teams of curators, managers, restorers and others to ensure their safety and longevity.

Africa’s Understanding and Conservation of its Cultural Heritage

Long considered as objects of worship, the African cultural heritage is considered by Africans on several dimensions: material, customary and spiritual. It represents the link between the different forces of nature, humans and their environment.

Here, the object or property belongs to a people or population and has value only in terms of the symbolism and reason for which it was made. It is also seen as any being with a soul that is born, lives and dies. It is a god, a source of inspiration, it helps to protect, increases the fertility and nutrition of the earth, or serves to purify and repel evil spells. In the daily lives of couples, it is used for fertility rituals for both humans and animals. It helps to develop knowledge and understanding of life. It also allows the reading and prediction of the future.

The tangible and intangible dimensions associated with an African heritage property are never dissociated from each other. The production process

of a movable African cultural heritage property is almost always associated with a natural immovable space called a sacred place (like waterfalls, rocks, trees, etc.). This is done according to the charges that one wants it to carry and the event or ritual that is associated with it.

We can take the example of carved wooden statues or statuettes from the regions of Cameroon, which have made many collectors happy, representing kings and their first wives or queen mothers, highly prized and present in Western museums, and which are the symbol of power, a new life or a new era for a society, a community or a people. This is demonstrated by Pierre Harter when he says that "these sculptures are always made during the lifetime of those they are intended to portray, from the beginning of their reign, and usually within the first two years".⁹ The establishment of a new power among the so-called Fulani Grassfield, with the accession of a new monarch to the throne, was symbolically celebrated by the production of new carved statues or statuettes. Each new monarch had to have a statue or statuette carved of himself, and a second statue made of his first wife.¹⁰ These statues were always accompanied by other symbolic objects such as face masks or crests representing the new monarch's close associates. All these objects were and are used in the ceremony or ritual of the public enthronement of the king. Through them, the number of rulers in a kingdom could be determined simply by counting these statues or statuettes. In addition to these objects symbolising royalty, other objects were used on a daily basis for bringing fertility, blessing, purification, commemoration and other rituals in villages and communities. The preservation of each of these objects was and still is ensured by one or more custodians appointed for this purpose by the family, social group, community or village. As with the conservation of their heritage in the West with the establishment of museums, for centuries Africans have developed specific conservation spaces and put in place particular treatments for the perpetuation of their heritage.

These conservation structures or spaces differ from one environment to another depending on the size of the community. In a family, the head of the family has the heavy responsibility of looking after the heritage. In a community or grouping, heritage assets are kept in the centre of the village, at the chieftaincy, where a people's hut is built for this purpose. This hut is not only used for the conservation of property, but also for gatherings of the sons and daughters of the group or clan. It is important to note here that, just like humans or other living beings, objects or goods of the African and Cameroonian tangible cultural heritage have a life span, and when they reach their age

limit they die. They are then replaced by a second one that is similar to the previous one, produced under the same conditions, and receives the same symbolic charge as the first, thus enabling it to fulfil the same functions. This mode of transmission from one object to another allows for not only the transmission of power but also the perpetuation and conservation of the techniques of manufacture and production from generation to generation.

The Concept of the Museum and the Conservation of African Cultural Heritage in Africa

Since its General Assembly on 24 August 2022 in Prague, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) has been reflecting on a new and more inclusive definition for the institution of the museum. Thus, the museum is now defined as a permanent, profit-making institution at the service of society, dedicated to the research, collection, conservation, interpretation and exhibition of tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, it encourages diversity. Museums operate and communicate ethically and professionally, involving diverse communities. They offer their audiences diverse experiences of education, entertainment, reflection and knowledge-sharing.¹¹

This definition of a museum by ICOM clearly shows the functions of the museum, namely:

- The acquisition function, which is the mode and means by which the museum acquires collections. This is done by purchase, donation, bequest or loan.
- The conservation function, which can be considered the main function of a museum in order to pass on these assets from generation to generation. It must be done in agreement and partnership with the producing populations.
- The study or educational function, importantly allowing the documentation, study and understanding of cultures and civilisations thanks to the wealth of information provided by the collections.
- The exhibition function, which is the function of promotion, knowledge, discovery and sale of cultures and museum institutions.

Museums in their present form are the successors of the cabinets of curiosities set up by antique dealers and collectors since antiquity. They have evolved over time to become large museum institutions and have spread throughout the world.¹² In Africa, the end of colonisation and the proclamations of independence led to the creation of national museums in the new independent states as symbols of freedom, unity and the reconciliation of peoples. However, these museums are rarely visited by Africans because they are not part of the local culture and Africans do not recognise themselves in these institutions. In Cameroon, an alarming observation notes the very low numbers of Cameroonian visitors to museums in order to know “their history”.¹³ Rather, they are more frequented by students and researchers writing theses and dissertations. Although efforts are being made to sensitise the local and national community to the importance of museums, this alarming fact remains. The bulk of the visitors are Western nationals who are either tourists or working in the country. Based on this observation, the question arises which museum might hold relevance for Cameroonians. This question can be answered by the culture and ancient traditions or conservation methods put in place by the Indigenous peoples: the large people’s hut in the traditional chieftaincies of the so-called “Grassfields”, whose mission was not only to conserve heritage assets, but also to serve as a gathering place for the people.

From this reflection came the idea of creating museums in Africa designed by Africans and for Africans. With this in mind, the *Pays de la Loire Cameroon Association*, under the aegis of the *Route des Chefferies* programme, has created a network of museums in the traditional chieftaincies of the West and North-West regions, fulfilling the ancient functions of the great hut, museums that are close to and at the service of the people.¹⁴ These new museums not only have the role of collecting, conserving, exhibiting and educating local and international populations, but are above all intended to be living spaces for the conservation and preservation of the cultural heritage of the community they house. The objects or subjects kept in these museums are ritual objects that continue to fulfil their original functions insofar as they leave the museums to be used in the rituals or ceremonies for which they were produced. To this end, all their symbolic charge is returned to them and they return to the museum at the end of the ceremony. This allows the visitor to see not only the object displayed in the museum, but also to contemplate it in the context of its use. This brings a plus in understanding, knowledge and above all is a great asset for its conservation.

The Loss of Cultural Heritage and its Impact on the Social Lives of Indigenous People

The West's desire for conquest and subjugation led to imperialism and colonisation. Both events contributed to the plundering of the cultural, natural, zoological and human heritage of the colonised peoples. Arriving in Africa through military missions and evangelisation of the so-called "savages" with the aim of civilising them, the African and Cameroonian peoples were dispossessed of their property through looting, massacres and deception. These acts were committed without concern for the impact and loss of these heritages on the plundered populations. During these missions, the "explorers" were ordered to "collect" as much property and as many treasures as possible and bring them back to the old continent. Items that could not be transported to the military, evangelical or coastal stations were simply destroyed by the missionaries.

The outbreak of the First World War in Europe and its extension to the colonies had a deeply negative impact on the African people. In Cameroon, a large part of the national cultural heritage was taken from the local communities and transferred to Germany between 1884 and 1916, during the period of the German protectorate. This is the case for the thrones of the Sultan Njoya and the Bamoum kings in western Cameroon, which are on display today in the Humboldt Forum in Berlin ("offered" to the emperor as a birthday present) or in the Rautenstrauch Joest Museum in Cologne;¹⁵ it is also the case for the Tangué (the prow of the royal pirogue), symbol of autonomy and power of King Lock Priso or Kum'a Mbape Bell, king of the Douala of Bonaberi, forcibly removed by Max Buchner (1846–1921) and the German colonial administration for disobedience and insubordination, today in the *Museum Fünf Kontinente*, Munich.¹⁶

After Germany's loss of Cameroon in 1916, there was an increase in the destruction of Cameroonian heritage stored at German bases. The objects could not be quickly transported to the shores and put on ships for Germany due to the loss of power over the local populations. The soldiers received strict orders from the metropolis to simply destroy the collections that could not be sent to Germany, thus preventing the Allied forces from benefiting from their achievements. The consequences were direct. Not only were some communities dispossessed of their property, but other communities were forced to destroy their own heritage objects for fear of violent repression from German colonial army from disobeying the order to destroy heritage.

The consequences of the loss of heritage assets and their impact on the lives of African populations were and are multiple:

- The loss of the custodians (guarantors, priests) who were for the most part massacred by the colonists. With them died the knowledge related to the use of the object
- the prohibition by the German colonial administration of certain rites (Abbia game, Nso ritual among the forest peoples)
- the “collection” of ritual objects that symbolised the power and identity of certain peoples
- the lack of knowledge of the existence of the stolen objects on the part of new generations of Africans and the lack of traces or information and of resource persons (some objects were taken more than 100 years ago, and some names of towns, villages and territories have changed with political developments)
- the outbreak of disasters (pertaining to health, food, environment, infertility) and tragedies (suspicious deaths by drowning, hanging, accident, fire, landslides, etc.) in some communities due to the loss of the object of protection.

One of the most striking examples is the case of the village of Bamendou in the West Cameroon region, which experienced all the misfortunes mentioned above as a result of the Touka (also: Tukah) mask being taken to France in 1957.¹⁷ For more than 50 years, the people endured the consequences of this loss, the first of which was the cessation of the practice of the *Ngim nu* (ritual of purification and general blessing of the people and the land), plunging the village into misfortune and misery. To find a remedy, the king and his people had to make several sacrifices in the hope of receiving the clemency of the gods and the ancestors for the deliverance of the people. After these rites, they undertook to make a copy of the mask (slightly different so as not to confuse them), reintroducing the practice of the *Ngim nu* ritual in the village and the return of peace. On 27 June 2022, following the great exhibition “On the Route of the Chieftaincies of Cameroon, from the Visible to the Invisible” organised by the Route of the Chieftaincies programme at the Quai Branly Jacques Chirac Museum in Paris, a great ceremony of meeting and transfer of power between the two masks was performed under the supervision of the King of Bamendou, the guardians of the tradition, and the teams of the Quai Branly Museum. This ceremony ended with an official request for restitution made by the king to the museum’s management.

To conclude, there is a need for real synergy in the work between the people who produce heritage and those who possess it in order to facilitate their studies, their knowledge, their understanding and above all their conservation, and to allow its transparent transmission to future generations for the advancement of the history of humanity.

- 1 UNESCO (1970): *Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property*; adopted by the General Conference at its sixteenth session, Paris, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000133378> World Heritage Convention 1972, accessed 31 March 2023.
- 2 Kasarhérou, Emmanuel et. al. (2021): Dialogue entre les cultures du quai Branly Jacques Chirac et le musée Théodore Monod d'art africain, in: *Patrimoines. Revue de l'institut Nationale du Patrimoine*, Vol. 16, pp. 19–25.
- 3 UNESCO, 1970, *Convention*.
- 4 Coombe, Rosemary (2017): Frontiers of Cultural Property in the Global South, in: Haidy Geismar, James Anderson (Eds): *The Routledge Companion to Cultural Property*. London, pp. 373–400.
- 5 See the regulations under https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/cameroun_loi91008_freorof.pdf; https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/cameroun_loipactl_2013_frorof.pdf, accessed 31 March 2023.
- 6 Remarks by His Majesty Nayang Toukam Innocent, King of the Batoufam in Cameroon, collected by Paule-Clisthène Dassi, then curator and manager of the Royal Museum of Batoufam, during an interview with him in 2020 at the Royal Palace of Batoufam.
- 7 In reference to the so-called “cabinets of curiosities”, the precursors of museums as we know them today.
- 8 Thery, Sylvie (1992): *Le Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle de La Rochelle et sa collection d'Art Africain*. Mémoire de maîtrise d'Ethnologie, Université de Bordeaux.
- 9 Harter, Pierre (1986): *Arts anciens du Cameroun*. Arts d'Afrique Noire, Arnouville.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 See ICOM (2022): *Museum Definition*, <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>, accessed 31 March 2023.
- 12 See, for example, Bennett, Tony (1995): *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*. London.
- 13 Mariembe, Rachel; Ngnigupaha, Uriel (2023): Musées communautaires et développement touristique au Cameroun. Une valorisation du territoire problématique, in: *Les Cahiers de Muséologie*, Vol. 3, pp. 53–76.
- 14 See <https://routedeschefferies.com/>, accessed 31 March 2023.
- 15 <https://www.filmkraft.de/fr/films/27/Mandu-Yenu/>, accessed 31 March 2023.
- 16 Heuermann, Barbara Johanna (2015): *Der schizophrene Schiffsschnabel: Biographie eines kolonialen Objektes und Diskurs um seine Rückforderung im postkolonialen München* (= Studien aus dem Münchner Institut für Ethnologie – Working papers in social and cultural anthropology 17), München; Splettstöber, Anne (2019): Umstrittene Sammlungen. Vom Umgang mit kolonialem Erbe aus Kamerun in ethnologischen Museen (= Göttinger Studien zu Cultural Property 15), Göttingen, pp. 185ff.;
- 17 See Royal Mask, Musée du Quai Branly, Paris, Inv. No. 73.1992.0.13, <https://www.quaibranly.fr/fr/explorer-les-collections/base/Work/action/show/notice/292093-masque-royal>; <https://www.facebook.com/routedeschefferies/videos/ngim-nu-2022-conf%C3%A9rence-sur-le-masque-tukah-%C3%A0-la-chefferie-bamendou/544901883980553/>, accessed 31 March 2023.