

VI.

Cooperation Projects on Cameroonian Collections  
Experiences and Perspectives

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## Entangled Objects, Entangled Histories

A Collaborative Provenance Research  
on a Heterogeneous Colonial-Era Collection

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# Entangled Objects, Entangled Histories

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Karin Guggeis, Ngome Elvis Nkome and Joseph B. Ebune

### Abstract

In recent years, provenance research on collections from colonial contexts in European museums has gained much attention from academia, the media and in the public sphere. This kind of provenance research refers to entangled objects, but also entangled histories. Multiperspectivity is therefore a precondition, as this paper will demonstrate with the case of a project on the collection of a colonial officer in Cameroon that is now housed at *Museum Fünf Kontinente* in Munich. The core of the project is an intense collaboration, focused around oral history traditions, with scholars in Cameroon as well as with the assumed descendants from local source communities of the cultural assets to explore their counterbalanced colonial histories as a pre-condition to gaining the required multiple perspectives.

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*Objets enchevêtrés, histoires enchevêtrées – Une recherche de provenance collaborative sur une collection hétérogène de l'époque coloniale (Résumé)*

*Ces dernières années, la recherche de provenance sur les collections issues de contextes coloniaux dans les musées européens a suscité beaucoup d'intérêt dans le milieu scientifique, les médias et la sphère publique. Ce type de recherche de provenance fait référence à des objets enchevêtrés, mais aussi à des histoires enchevêtrées. C'est pourquoi la multiperspectivité est une condition préalable, comme le démontrera le document à l'aide d'un projet portant sur la collection d'un officier colonial au Cameroun, aujourd'hui conservée au Museum Fünf Kontinente de Munich. Le cœur du projet est l'intense collaboration avec des spécialistes au Cameroun ainsi qu'avec les descendants supposés des communautés locales à l'origine des biens culturels et de leurs histoires coloniales contrastées comme condition préalable pour obtenir la perspective multiple requise.*

## **The Need for Multiperspectivity<sup>1</sup>**

*Until the lion tells the story, the hunter will always be the hero.*

This popular West African proverb has been the guideline for our provenance research project on a collection from the colonial era housed at the *Museum Fünf Kontinente* in Munich, Germany.

If a story is told by the hunter only, the lion will always be the hunted, the victim. For the story of the lion, often missing, might be quite a different one. Moreover, the story told only by the hunter has not only an immense impact on external perception but above all on the self-esteem of both hunter and lion. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, an internationally acclaimed Nigerian writer, highlighted these issues in her famous speech, "The Danger of a Single Story":

*The single story creates stereotypes. [...] They make one story become the only story. [...] Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories could also be used to empower, and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people. But stories can also repair that broken dignity.<sup>2</sup>*

Polyphony and, above all, multiperspectivity are therefore at the core of provenance research on collections from colonial contexts aiming at unraveling the untold side of the entanglement of objects and the entanglement of histories. The perspective of the colonising powers has to be counterbalanced by the then-colonised.

The provenance research project on a collection originating from the early German colonial expansion in Cameroon, titled *The 'Blue Rider Post' and the Max von Stetten Collection (1893–1896) from Cameroon in the Museum Fünf Kontinente Munich*, will highlight some crucial aspects of research on entangled objects and histories. The aim is to reconstruct specific situations and locations in which the assets were acquired as well as the entangled history of Germany and Cameroon in this early phase of German colonial expansion, using Max von Stetten as an illustrative example. The core of this proactively designed project is an intensive collaboration with academic partners in Cameroon, alongside members of the communities of origin of the more than 200 cultural assets, as a pre-condition for multiperspectivity.<sup>3</sup> The oral traditions of these communities were regarded as an important means to counterbalance the written sources.

To stress Cameroonians' perspectives on the entangled objects as well as the specific entangled colonial histories at that specific time, the project team included five project-funded researchers in Cameroon in addition to the German overall project manager, Karin Guggeis. The project manager for Cameroon, Albert Gouaffo, appointed Yrène Matchinda and Lucie Mbogni Nankeng for research concerning the relevant Francophone regions, and they were joined by two Anglophone historians, Joseph B. Ebune and Ngome Elvis Nkome, for field research in the specific Anglophone regions. As a consequence of its colonial history, Cameroon consists of Francophone and Anglophone regions. Since 2016, separatist groups in the Anglophone regions have been calling for an independent state and fighting government security forces. Hence, two research teams, one for the French-speaking zones of Cameroon and one for the English-speaking areas, were conceptualised as crucial.

Multiperspectival research indeed goes far beyond a single-stranded bilateral entanglement. Von Stetten's collection shows a great heterogeneity of (documented or presumed) communities of origin of the cultural assets, and hence a great variety and heterogeneity of local traditions and languages in these specific colonial histories. Therefore, beside the post at the focus of the project (see below), cultural assets with a high probability of violent acquisition context were prioritised.

In a nutshell, the most important preliminary work from the German side for collaborative research on entangled objects and histories encompassed the following tasks: Matching, supplementing and correcting information from different archival sources at the museum with the object database. This also involved replacing colonial terms and designations with current, post-colonial language. Professional photographs of the collection's items were made as a visual medium for the Cameroonian partners. Historical contextualisation using relevant written sources on Max von Stetten's colonial activities enabled probable contexts of origin and acquisition to be circled as likely. The information was shared with the Cameroonian scholars. Two examples are presented below, first with the most important aspects from the German perspective and then from the perspective of the Anglophone partners.

The most prominent item in the collection is a large post – a wooden block – with sculpted motifs on both sides. It is also called the “Blue Rider Post” because of its depiction in the *Der Blaue Reiter (The Blue Rider)* almanac (1912) by the artists Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc. Previous research from German scholars on its concrete origin and use only yielded conjectures, namely the Mbo or Lundu region in what was then called the “*Waldland*” (“woodlands”; today the South and Littoral regions), and its function as a ritual post. As only very few publications in the Global North focus on the so-called “*Waldland*”, this collaboration with partners in Cameroon offers a unique opportunity for concrete results.

But new research using the German sources also yielded new insights. The post was inventoried in the museum in January 1893.<sup>4</sup> The historical contextualisation revealed that Max von Stetten had passed through numerous abandoned villages in the area of the “*Waldland*” and the Banyang region on an expedition to the Baliburg station in autumn 1892.<sup>5</sup> In view of the presumed cultural significance of the wooden block, its probable context of acquisition is that it was taken from one of the abandoned villages and thus without the consent of the inhabitants.

The abandonment of villages had different reasons but indicates the migration of peoples and is further proof that the concept of “tribes” in a given area was a colonial fiction that had little in common with the actual realities of indigenous people's lives.

In the case of the five objects from the village of Buea,<sup>6</sup> merging information in the museum archives and colonial written sources on Max von Stetten's military activities revealed a high probability of a violent acquisition context. Von Stetten was part of two military “punitive expeditions” in 1891

and 1894 against Buea and its population, and each time in a leading position. In 1895, von Stetten sent two possibly ritual figures (Inventory Numbers 95-78 and 95-79) and three horns or flutes (Inventory Numbers 95-491 to 95-493) from Buea to the Munich museum.<sup>7</sup>

It is also important for the provenance of the blowhorns that horns were blown in Buea shortly before the attack of the German “Schutztruppe” in 1894.<sup>8</sup> Objects of this kind were used by the local Bakweri (also referred to as *Backwiris* in German colonial sources) in warlike contexts. It is therefore most likely that Max von Stetten took them as booty during the destruction of Buea in December 1894 or shortly afterwards. However, the example of the military actions against the Bakweri makes it clear that the German colonial power was by no means as powerful as often described and proclaimed. The deputy governor, von Schuckmann, described the battle of 1891 as a great success in his final assessment:

*As regards the result of the Buea punitive expedition, it is certain that it has instilled in the Backwiris respect for the power of the government. No punishment has ever been so thorough in the protectorate. [...] It will certainly be of good effect that this most powerful people are punished, their strongholds taken and their royal places incinerated.*<sup>9</sup>

By re-reading this source from a postcolonial perspective, other aspects can be emphasised, rendering the battle a disaster for the German colonial government. The Maxim rifle had failed, Commander Freiherr von Gravenreuth and three African soldiers of the troop were killed, and Max von Stetten was seriously wounded.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the renewed fight in 1894 shows clearly the continuation of the Bakweri resistance to the German colonial powers; their power was thus by no means broken.

Despite the prioritisation of research on unlawful acquisition, other probable types of acquisition should not be neglected. For example, the lack of obvious traces of use of several items in the collection suggests that they had been newly made, even for the already existing European demand.<sup>11</sup> The generalised, premature judgement in the public sphere that colonial collections are automatically “looted art” and therefore immediately need to be returned most probably does not prove true in this case, where probable acquisition contexts range from booty to newly made assets for an early European market.



Figure 1 | Blowhorn from Buea, as documented in the archival sources of the museum. Max von Stetten Collection, Inv. No. 95-493 © *Museum Fünf Kontinente*, Munich (Photo: Marietta Weidner)



Figure 2 | Interview with Mr Miller Kingue, Bakweri notable, showing a similar blowhorn, Buea, 14 May 2020 © The Author (Photo: Ngome Elvis Nkome)

## Cameroonian Voices in Provenance Research on the Max von Stetten Collection

In this collaborative research project, the task of the academic team in Cameroon was to collect data in the archives as well as conduct intensive interviews with source communities in Anglophone Cameroon. Knowledgeable members in the relevant communities were singled out and interviewed without bias in terms of age, sex, religious or tribal background. In addition to interviews, we also visited the archives to obtain relevant data on the German military action and its implications for the victims in the colonial era. Available studies reveal that early German pacification in the interior of Cameroon was not void of resistance, which had an impact on the people.<sup>12</sup> The violence that characterised many communities as a result of the wars has given rise to varied interpretations as to whether or not the objects in von Stetten's collection were exclusively looted or perhaps donated. The veracity of the issue is so serious because the interpretations of our informants were as varied as the people themselves; finding reliable answers to such questions requires detailed research. However, some of the objects in von Stetten's collection may have been acquired in the abandoned or burnt villages.<sup>13</sup>

In this and subsequent military actions, von Stetten participated actively in the military violence. The Germans imposed punitive measures on the "conquered" people by demanding cattle, eggs, tusks and other items. This view is also upheld by some interviewees from the grassland communities of West Cameroon;<sup>14</sup> some of the objects in von Stetten's collection might have been war booties or looted artefacts of either Mankon or Nso Fondoms from the present-day Northwest Region of Cameroon.

The well-thought assertion that, until the lion tells his side of the story, the hunter will always be a winner, is in tandem with our claim in this paper that other perspectives are necessary. It is the right time to reconstruct the entangled histories and entangled objects using African voices of the source communities. The best way to do this is to explore the life histories and oral accounts of communities in Anglophone Cameroon where some of the priority objects are likely to have come from.

A. Nformi<sup>15</sup> provided lucid facts about some objects, including the post at the focus of the project (inventory number 93-13). He claimed that it was a royal doorpost, but it could also be found at the entrances of the sacred society called *ngiri*. From Nformi's analysis, it appears unclear how and by what means the object was carried away. However, the fact that such a



decorated post shows ritual, religious and zoomorphic motifs suggests that the object could not have been donated to the Germans as a gift; rather, that it was acquired in one of the burnt palaces or ritual sites in the Bamenda region during the period of colonial hostilities in Cameroon.

The same perspective is shared by E. Ndyudze,<sup>16</sup> who alluded to the fact that the object shows close resemblance with the wooden posts which can still be seen today on the door-frames of royal palaces in the grassland region of West Cameroon. It also seems that many of the informants from the Bamenda area made meaning out of the photograph of the “Blue Rider Post” that we showed them, but that their interpretation was limited because of the absence of the object in its physical state.

The plurality of interpretations on the part of the informants therefore makes it hard to draw early conclusions about the supposed owners of the object. All we can say for now is that the culture of arts and crafts is more significant in the Bamenda area of Cameroon than in other regions of the country; this is not to claim, however, that the object necessarily originated from there, as other arts and craft manufacturers and owners existed and still exist in other parts of Cameroon.

When investigating the blowing horns and small human-like figures from among possible source communities like the Bakweri, Ejagham, and Bafaw, we came across a very knowledgeable elderly respondent in Buea called Kingue Miller<sup>17</sup> who identified the horns and fortunately owns one of the sacred horns called *nzeva-nju* in his house. Other Bakweri interviewees identified these horns and explained their various uses or functions and that the Bakweri made use of the horns during the German–Bakweri wars between 1891 and 1894.<sup>18</sup> From the long list of our informants, we were satisfied with the rich responses of the people about their histories, which inform us that the people had a long history of using horns as communication tools especially by secret societies like the *male* and *nganye*.<sup>19</sup> However, the diversity of persons interviewed rendered interpretation complicated as many other forest groups claimed to have used similar horns.

Bakweri informants in Buea also recognised two figures (inventory numbers 95-78 and 95-79) which they called *ekumu'yawuka*.<sup>20</sup> According to them, the latter was a god of the village which watched over domestic animals and crops.<sup>21</sup> They also maintained that the object had other functions beyond protecting the community from evil spirits and wild animals.<sup>22</sup> Here again, we were confronted with contradictory opinions from our interviewees, who held different interpretations concerning the origins, uses and spirituality of the objects. The controversies are of course indispensable and unavoidable within this type of research

because of the lack of palpable evidence to substantiate our finding. One important limitation is caused by the complete absence of the physical objects for our informants to make their on-the-spot critical visual evaluation. In spite of the differences in interpretations due to certain limitations posed by the absence of the physical objects, the lack of archival clarification on the German colonial era, and the failing memories of our informants, we are, however, consoled by the fact that most of the consulted persons in Buea could actually identify these objects to the best of their knowledge. This research, as most of them expressed, thus opens another window for future collaborative research between the museum and the communities of origin and institutions in Cameroon.

## Conclusion

The central argument in this paper was to stress the importance of multiperspectivity for provenance research on collections from colonial contexts. It requires intense bilateral scholarly collaboration. Both written and oral sources contribute to the reconstruction of the entangled objects and the entangled histories between nowadays Germany and Cameroon.

Important steps for the provenance project concerning the collection of Max von Stetten at *Museum Fünf Kontinente* in Munich have been taken. Different places of origin and acquisition contexts were more specifically circumscribed by archival and other historical and ethnological sources. The search for members of communities of origin was sometimes challenging, as instead of the colonial fiction of static and precisely definable “tribes”, the migration of peoples due to different reasons often occurred and continues to occur. From a methodological point of view, the physical absence of the actual cultural goods in Cameroon was highlighted by diverse partners in the country. Photographs did not prove to be a sufficient substitute.

Diverse exchanges and conversations with scholars from countries of origin of the collection of Max von Stetten and with members of communities of origin of specific cultural assets have begun. One highlight of the research by the Anglophone scholars was the finding that not all cultural assets and not all traditions have vanished, as the case of the blowhorns demonstrates. But many questions remain open. The issue of how to deal with probably looted cultural assets now and in the future can only be negotiated jointly and thus cooperatively.

- 1 The first part of this contribution was written by Karin Guggeis, the second by Ngome Elvis Nkome and Joseph Ebune, and the abstract and conclusion all together.
- 2 Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi (2021): "The Danger of a Single Story", on: TED, [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_ngozi\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story), accessed 02 April 2021.
- 3 One crucial precondition for a collaboration on eye-level with the scholars in Cameroon is their regular payment, which would have not been possible without the support of the German Lost Art Foundation. The Bavarian Ministry of Art and Science, under whose auspices the museum stands, also supported this project financially.
- 4 *Museum Fünf Kontinente*, Munich, collection of manuscripts and writings, object list (*Objektliste 1. Zugang von Stetten, Akt 1893, Schriftstücke 1892–1902*).
- 5 von Stetten, Max (1893): "Reise nach Baliburg und zurück", in: *Deutsches Kolonialblatt* 1893, pp. 33–36, here: pp. 33–34.
- 6 In this paper the common spelling used today, "Buea", is used, not the more common spelling "Buëa", mostly used in colonial sources.
- 7 *Museum Fünf Kontinente*, Munich, collection of manuscripts and writings, inventory book (*Eingangsbuch*) 1894–1902, 2 SMV 24: 26 and 49–50.
- 8 Dominik, Hans (1901): *Kamerun. Sechs Kriegs- und Friedensjahre in deutschen Tropen*. Berlin, p. 104.
- 9 Schuckmann, Bruno von (1892): "Bericht des stellvertretenden Kaiserlichen Gouverneurs in Kamerun vom 18. November 1891 betr. die Bestrafung von Buëa", in: *Deutsches Kolonialblatt* 1892, pp. 14–16, here: pp. 15–16; own translation Guggeis.
- 10 *Ibid.*, see also Stetten, Max von (1892): "Bericht des Premierlieutnants von Stetten über die Buea-Expedition vom 18. November 1891", in: *Deutsches Kolonialblatt* 1892, pp. 16–17.
- 11 Guggeis, Karin (2020): "Alles Raubkunst? Erste Ergebnisse zum Provenienzforschungsprojekt über Max von Stettens kolonialzeitliche Sammlung aus Kamerun im Museum Fünf Kontinente", in: *Journal Museum Fünf Kontinente*, Vol. 3, München, pp. 10–29, here pp. 16–22.
- 12 Edwin Ardener (1996): *Kingdom on Mount Cameroon. Studies in the History of the Cameroon Coast 1500–1970*, ed. Shirley Ardener, Oxford; Ngho, Victor Julius (1996): *History of Cameroon Since 1800*, Limbe; Ian Fowler and Verkijika G. Fanzo (2009): *Encounter, Transformation and Identity: People of the Western Cameroon Borderlands, 1891–2000*, Oxford; Fanzo, V. G. (1989): *Cameroon History for Schools and Colleges: The Colonial and Post-Colonial Periods Vol. 2*, London; Balz, Heinrich (1984): *Where the Faith Has to Live: Studies in Bakossi Society and Religion, Vol. 1: Living Together*, Berlin.
- 13 Ngho, 1996, *Cameroon*, pp. 34–40.
- 14 Ngome Elvis Nkome, interview with Wirba Aboubakar, secondary school teacher, Buea-Town, 6 August 2021.
- 15 Ngome Elvis Nkome, interview with Mr Augustine Nformi, Great-Soppo, Buea, 15 June 2021.
- 16 Ngome Elvis Nkome, interview with Mr Emmanuel Nyudze, Nso from the Bamenda region, Buea, 22 April 2021.
- 17 Ngome Elvis Nkome, interview with Mola Kingue Miller, Buea, 87 years old, Bakweri, 14 May 2020.
- 18 Ngome Elvis Nkome, interview with Luka Nganje, 74 years old, Bakweri, town crier, Buea, 15 August 2021.
- 19 Ngome Elvis Nkome, interview with Tonga Nganda, 67 years old, Bakweri, cultural promoter, Buea, 22 April 2021.
- 20 Ngome Elvis Nkome, interview with Evakise Dabaju, 54 years old, Bakweri, Bokwango village, farming, 13 March 2021.
- 21 Ngome Elvis Nkome, interview with Prince Remigius Endeley, 55 years old, Bakweri, cultural promoter and owner of a local museum in Buea, on 12 May and 11 June 2020.
- 22 *Ibid.*