

VI.

Cooperation Projects on Cameroonian Collections
Experiences and Perspectives

Re-engaging with an
Ethnographic Collection from
Colonial Cameroon through
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Isabella Bozsa and Rachel Mariembe

Abstract

In this chapter, Isabella Bozsa and Rachel Mariembe present their approach of re-engaging with the Cameroonian section of the ethnographic collection at the Municipal Museum of Brunswick, in particular with the objects that Kurt Strümpell handed over to the museum between 1902 and 1905. The aim of the collaborative provenance research they carried out at the museum was the co-production of knowledge on an equal basis. The involvement of Strümpell in colonial wars raises the question of colonial looting. Bozsa and Mariembe also address the lack of information in the museum's documentation of the objects' provenance and function as well as significance. By establishing contact with the descendants from the communities of origin, they ask whether historical relationships can be re-animated and, finally, what should happen to the collection in the future. Besides considering the challenges of the pandemic, they reflect on the potential and limits of collaborative research for decolonial approaches in museum practices and provenance research.

Renouer avec une collection ethnographique du Cameroun colonial à travers une recherche de provenance collaborative (Résumé)

Dans ce chapitre, Isabella Bozsa et Rachel Mariembe présentent leur approche du ré-engagement de la collection camerounaise issue du contexte colonial, notamment celle donnée au musée par l'officier colonial Kurt Strümpell entre 1902 et 1905. L'implication de Strümpell dans les guerres coloniales soulève la question du butin colonial. Bozsa et Mariembe ont mené une recherche collaborative sur la collection ethnographique du Musée Municipal de Brunswick. L'objectif est la coproduction de savoir sur une base égalitaire. Le manque d'informations dans la documentation du musée sur la provenance, la fonction ainsi que la symbolique des objets, est questionné également. Ainsi, en établissant un contact avec les descendants des communautés d'origine, la démarche vise à réanimer les relations historiques et voir ce qui devrait arriver à la collection à l'avenir. Outre les défis de la pandémie de COVID-19, les auteures réfléchissent au potentiel et aux limites de la recherche collaborative pour les approches décoloniales dans les pratiques muséales et la recherche de provenance.

Introduction

The issue of provenance research and restitution of African art as well as of ethnographic objects held in Western museums is of general concern. It is relevant to various parts of African and European societies, including states, local communities, museum staff and researchers working in the field of human and social sciences. As a museologist and curator from Cameroon (Rachel Mariembe) and a provenance researcher in Germany (Isabella Bozsa), we propose in this chapter a participatory and collaborative research approach to Cameroonian collections in German museums that seeks to re-evaluate their inventory, documentation, and historical context of appropriation during the German colonial period. Museum inventories and related archive material on the collections kept in Western museums form an instructive starting point for provenance research. In-depth scientific research is required to determine the objects' exact origins, their local names and contextualised meanings. Moreover, oral history and questions about the value of objects in the collections for today's societies in Cameroon have to be taken into account. These require research in Cameroon itself. To this end, we argue that ethnographic collections from colonial contexts provide potential for

multiple forms of re-engagement with them through collaborative provenance research. This chapter is based on such work, carried out with a collection from Cameroon at the Municipal Museum of Brunswick (*Städtisches Museum Braunschweig*)¹ as part of the PAESE (Provenance Research in Non-European Collections and Ethnography in Lower Saxony) project. Our focus is a poorly documented collection from a region of Cameroon referred to in colonial times and sometimes still today “Grassfields”, an area of today’s West, a part of South-West and North-West administrative region of Cameroon. The objects were displaced from Cameroon to Germany by a German colonial officer called Kurt Strümpell (1872–1947) and handed over to the Municipal Museum of Brunswick between 1902 and 1905. No further details around the circumstances of the objects’ appropriation are available; nor does the documentation of the collection provide perspectives of communities of origin and experts from Cameroon. Therefore, collaborative and comparative research is required on the provenance, local names, and the significance of the collected items. In the following we will explore this issue and describe how we came to consider this approach.

Research Aims

This chapter is dual in scope (scientific and practical), and aims to study the collection described above with the following objectives. One goal is to clarify the objects’ origin more specifically. As the museum’s documentation contains mostly the German colonial names of places or population groups, we try to associate them with the current names of these places. During the past 120 years, the significance and functions of objects have changed depending on different contexts. This necessitates reflecting on these changes. Beyond this, information on their use and perception might have been lost, either in the museum’s documentation due to a Eurocentric or colonial bias that excludes or silences local knowledge, or on the part of communities of origin, where colonialism caused cultural ruptures. Inspired by the idea of “museums as contact zones”², we aim at (re)-connecting Cameroonians with their heritage through these objects. We inquire as to whether old relationships between the collections from the German colonial period and descendants of the communities of origin might be re-kindled as well as how new relations between academics, museum workers or students can be established through ethnographic

objects as mediums. These (re)-connecting processes can reveal new meanings and perceptions of the past, and may serve the development of new visions for the futures of collections. The following quote of the anthropologist Paul Basu reflects our understanding of ethnographic collections and their potentials:

In the case of ethnographic museums, even as objects were extracted from their local contexts and recirculated via networks of collectors and collecting institutions, the relationships between these things and the people from whom they were sourced, though transformed, were also preserved, creating the possibility, perhaps a century or more later, for these relationships to be reanimated, for objects to be repatriated and for museums to become 'contact zones' in which competing claims (and ontologies) might be negotiated.³

Beside the anthropological view, the historical context of the collection is also an important angle in provenance research. By studying the museum's documentation, military reports in German archives, and publications from the German colonial era, we can learn more about this historical context. Beyond the European perspectives that are represented by the documents in the German archives, we are interested in Cameroonian positions on the colonial past and the displacement of the objects. In addition, oral history studies can give insights into memories of local communities, which are not represented in written sources in Germany.

The guiding principles of our collaboration are knowledge sharing and the respect of interests of all parties.⁴ Considering postcolonial discourses, it is necessary for academics and concerned persons in Cameroon to gain access to and information about the collections from Cameroon in German museums, ideally also participating in the documentation of the collections to discuss their origins, functions, and symbolism.

Collaborative Research in Cameroon within PAESE: The Historical Context

Our collaborative research started in December 2019, when Bianca Baumann, former research fellow at the State Museum of Hanover,⁵ did field research in West Cameroon as part of the PAESE project. Together with Paule-Clisthène Dassi Koudjou,⁶ at that time curator of the community museum in

Batoufam, who had earlier benefited from a research stay in Germany within PAESE, she had visited the Institute of Fine Arts in Nkongsamba/University of Douala, Cameroon. In a meeting with Rachel Mariembe, the colleagues discussed how to conduct in-depth research on the provenance of Cameroonian objects in the museums in Lower Saxony that were participating in PAESE and how to involve the students of Heritage and Museum Studies. Afterwards, Bianca Baumann, Isabella Bozsa, Rachel Mariembe, and Annette Angoua Nguea, director of the institute, held several video calls to discuss concrete steps. As an outcome of our meetings, we organised an international workshop in March 2020. The topics were planned to align with the training programme in Heritage and Museum Studies as well as the objectives of the PAESE research interests, and were structured as detailed below.

In the first part of our workshop on “Provenance research and contested heritage from colonial contexts” we discussed different methodologies of provenance research around collections from colonial contexts and the documentation of the collections at the State Museum of Hanover and the Municipal Museum of Brunswick.⁷ In the first part, Bianca Baumann and Isabella Bozsa presented the two German museums with their systems and practices of collection management, conservation, and documentation. They also shared knowledge about the ethnographic collections from Cameroon. All participants then discussed selected examples of archival materials relating to appropriation circumstances, such as museum records and publications, or reports from the colonial period. Our meeting ended with a lively debate on approaches to postcolonial provenance research and restitution.

In the second part, we tried a little experiment and produced video statements with the students. They described and interpreted items from the collections in Brunswick and Hanover, and shared their opinions on restitution and how to conduct provenance research. The discussion at the workshop revealed that most students favoured restitution and addressed related questions, such as where to return the objects – to a museum or a kingdom? They also suggested the construction of new museums, like community museums. Furthermore, they proposed programmes of knowledge-sharing and capacity-building. It was suggested that local conservation practices be acknowledged and equally supported in African-European projects. An example of a possible outcome towards the decolonisation of museum classification came to light through the re-interpretation of objects beyond the colonial framing. For example, one object was classified in the museum as a “bowl from Bali”. In contrast, the student reflecting on it described it more thoroughly its

use by the community in rituals signifying solidarity and living together in peace. In the course of the discussion, the students voiced different opinions on how to go about provenance research, with the consultation of notables, titleholders, and artists at the places of origin being suggested as key methods. Later on, we published four video statements from the students on the PAESE website in order to transfer some of the perspectives into the public debate.⁸ They will also be displayed in an upcoming exhibition at the museum in Brunswick.



Figure 1 | Workshop at the Institute of Fine Arts at the University of Douala in Nkongsamba, March 2020 © The Authors and Bianca Baumann

Collaborative Provenance Research in Lower Saxony and Virtual Knowledge Exchange

Cooperation with researchers and museum experts from the countries of origin of the selected collections was an important part of the PAESE project and is the framing of our work. And so, in September 2019, cooperation partners from different countries⁹ were invited for a research stay to Lower Saxony to analyse and discuss the collections of the involved museums. As we both joined the project later, we did not take part in the entire exchange. Another joint study of the collections was planned for 2020, but the research visits of the PAESE partners from the countries of origin had to be postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We therefore began our exchange of knowledge about the objects online. We discussed some 220 objects from West Cameroon held at the museum in Brunswick. In several Zoom meetings, we discussed how to re-evaluate the colonial collection and the provenances of its objects systematically, deciding to examine them for traces of usage during Rachel Mariembe's planned research stay. This can help us to identify culturally sensitive objects. Furthermore, we decided to raise critical questions such as: Which objects were used in rituals? Which ones were royal and prestige objects and were inalienable at the time of collecting? Which objects have or had spiritual value? Besides this object-centred provenance approach, we also consider the historical context under German colonialism in Cameroon. In this sense and as a principle of our collaboration, we practice knowledge-sharing: As a curator and museologist from Cameroon, Rachel Mariembe shares her knowledge on the cultural meaning, social function, iconography, and use of objects. Isabella Bozsa, as a historical anthropology researcher from Germany, shares and translates historical records from the colonial era in the museum and other German archives relating to the objects and the context of their appropriation. Together, we critically examine the museum's documentation and epistemology, re-reading the museums' categorisations and adding new information to establish new narratives. Moreover, we keep our exchange open in order to go beyond questions of provenance research in a classical sense like chains of ownership. We ask what potential for new interpretations and relationships the objects inherit, and discuss what should happen with the objects in the future. In the following, two examples shed light on aspects of our virtual knowledge exchange so far.

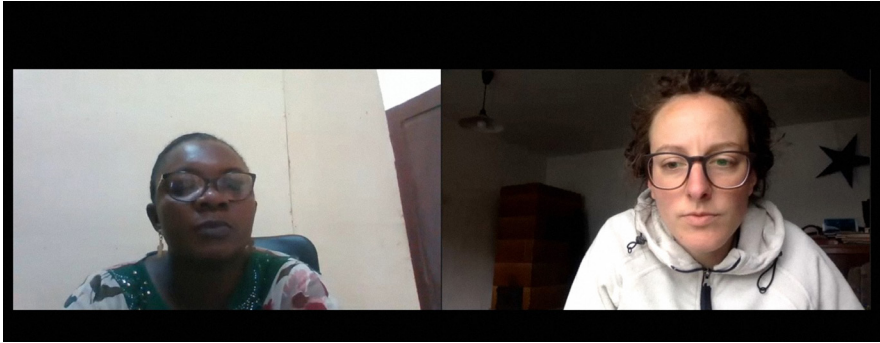


Figure 2 | Virtual collaborative provenance research on Zoom by Rachel Mariembe and Isabella Bozsa, March 2021 © The Authors

The first example is the identification and location of the place referred to by the museum's documentation as "Bamunkung", given as the name of the place of origin of five objects. The relevant note was written by Richard Andree (1835–1912), who acted as a voluntary conservator at the Municipal Museum of Brunswick from 1893 to 1903.¹⁰ According to the records, the objects were taken from "Bamunkung" and brought to Brunswick by Kurt Strümpell in 1902. The latter was then a military officer with the rank of a first lieutenant. As a member of the German colonial forces he was involved in colonial wars in parts of today's Northwest and West Cameroon that were supposed to consolidate German colonial rule.¹¹ Two journals from the colonial era feature reports on a military action led by Strümpell in March 1902.¹² They mention that the town of "Bamunkung" was invaded and looted by the colonial troops after the king refused to accept the German colonial administration.¹³ It is therefore likely that Strümpell took the five objects from their owners by force.

Following the aim to find the descendants of previous owners or users, it is crucial to identify today's location that corresponds with the historical name. Phonetically, it is conceivable that "Bamunkung" was a misinterpretation of the places Bamougong or Bamougoum by the colonial officer. The German Federal Archives in Berlin house a map drawn by Strümpell of the route of the military expedition to "Bamunkung" and other places.¹⁴ The digital tool *Archivführer Kolonialzeit* (archival guide to the colonial era) allows us to layer historical colonial maps with their contemporary counterparts, and this



Figure 4 | Ceremonial pipe head from “Bamunkung”, Municipal Museum Brunswick, Inv. No. 1709-0062-00 © Municipal Museum Brunswick (Photo: Monika Heidemann)

procedure shows that “Bamunkung” was located in the area east of the present village of Bamendjinda. A linguistic analysis of the term “Bamunkung”, together with the iconography of the objects, suggests that the regions of Kougham or Bamendjing could also be likely. It is close to the border of the Bamoun kingdom. A future oral history study in both places should help verify this hypothesis and produce more evidence. An audience with the “*chef supérieur*”, who is responsible for the district and knows its population, could help to find persons who know the local history and could confirm whether the colonial name of the place seems familiar to them and whether they can recognise the objects through photographs.

Our second case exemplifies our attempts to find the descendants of previous owners or descendants of the communities of origin. Under the conditions of the pandemic, we conducted an online consultation on local knowledge in Cameroon.¹⁵ In a virtual remote interview with the king of Lenale Ndem, Fornjinju Alexandre Tatabong, we asked him what oral history had to say about the place of origin of some objects from the collection. As he was raised in Lebialem (subdivision of South-West Region), he knew about the area’s German colonial past, about the Bangwa-German wars, and the famous king Fontem Asunganyi (approx. 1870–1947). This example shows that such an approach can help add valuable information about the context of the German colonial period. In establishing contact with descendants or representatives of the communities, networks and cooperation partners from the countries of origin who act as intermediaries are crucial. This is especially the case in highly sensitive situations when conversation partners remember violent aspects of the colonial past or crimes committed by German forces. Postcolonial inequalities, such as around access to African collections in Europe and experiences of loss of cultural heritage, can also evoke suspicion towards a German researcher. In such situations, local cooperation partners can help to build trust.

Conclusion and Perspectives

Collaborative provenance research offers an opportunity towards decolonial approaches in knowledge production. Different forms of knowledge based on archival and oral sources can be combined. The exchange with researchers and museum experts from Cameroon, as well as oral history interviews with Cameroonian kings, notables and others can revive stories of the past that have not been transmitted in written colonial sources. Through knowledge-sharing between cooperation partners, mutuality can be achieved, balancing unequal access to collections and information and redefining postcolonial power relations. As further experiences of and discussions on museum cooperation have shown, research questions should not be set by one side – to date, typically by the European side – as this reduces one partner to a source, from which knowledge can be extracted. In order to avoid this pitfall of reducing cooperation to a one-sided consultancy level, it is important to keep space open for discussion, set up research questions together, and to negotiate and re-negotiate these.¹⁶ As in our workshop at Nkongsamba involving students, experimental practices can lead to new interpretations of objects from colonial contexts. Museums can thus become sites for encounters towards a decolonial collaboration by “passing the mic”, especially when it comes to the interpretation of objects.

Besides all the opportunities that collaborative provenance research and participative museum practices in “contact-zones” such as museums offer, we also need to consider its “dark underbelly”.¹⁷ To avoid reproducing unequal power relations or, at worst, legitimising them, the limits of collaborative projects have to be stated. Challenges are often pre-established in the structures of collaborative projects and follow postcolonial inequalities around aspects such as who has access to financial resources, who makes decisions, or who allocates funding based on which criteria. Funding structures have so far made the symmetrical funding of partners difficult. With new funding programmes, there is hope that structural inequalities will gradually decrease. On an individual level, structural inequalities demand emotional and intercultural skills of both parties.

Postcolonial power relations are also constituted through unequal access to research data or publication platforms. The PAESE project provides new spaces to publish research results with multiple authorships. On the PAESE

website, we published four of the video statements from the students of Nkongsamba, while the implemented database offers the opportunity to include knowledge of cooperation partners and provides access to non-European based researchers. Finally, collaborations often depend on personal relationships and are limited by external funding. We, as the authors, established our cooperation as a member of the Institute of Fine Arts in Nkongsamba and a research fellow at the Municipal Museum of Brunswick. To ensure that the cooperation does not end with the funding of PAESE, we hope to establish a long-term partnership between the museum and the institute. To this end, the transfer of our individual partnership to the institutions is desirable. Follow-up research on the Cameroonian collection in Brunswick that includes the students of Nkongsamba could be a joint endeavour.

The virtual exchange between us has shown a need for much more research in Cameroon, complementary to that under way in museums and archives in Germany. Digital interviews are, in this respect, not a substitute but merely a temporary workaround. The biggest challenge for our cooperative work was the pandemic: From 2020 until the date of the PAESE conference it was only possible to continue our collaboration on a very limited virtual level. In the meantime, however, the pandemic situation in Germany is much improved, and the research stay of Rachel in Lower Saxony finally could take place in summer 2021.¹⁸ The outcomes of the collaborative research will be discussed and published elsewhere.



- 1 This text was written in 2021 and reflects the state of research at that time. Isabella Bozsa is currently working on her PhD thesis about the ethnographic collection from Cameroon at the Municipal Museum of Brunswick, where she elaborates on a cooperative approach towards postcolonial provenance research. The text includes some of the content of the presentation by Bianca Baumann and Isabella Bozsa „Cooperation as method“ at the African Studies Association in June 2021. Many thanks to Bianca Baumann for her approval and cooperation.
- 2 Clifford, James (1997): *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, p. 188.
- 3 Basu, Paul (2018): *The Inbetweenness of Things*, in: Paul Basu (Ed.): *The Inbetweenness of Things: Materializing Mediation and Movement between Worlds*, London, pp. 1–20, here p. 18.
- 4 As stated in, for example, Weber-Sinn; Ivanov, Paola (2020): *“Collaborative’ Provenance Research – About the (Im)possibility of Smashing Colonial Frameworks”*, in: *Museum & Society*, Vol. 18, no. 1, pp. 66–81, here p. 76; Laely, Thomas; Meyer, Marc; Schwere, Raphael (2018): *Rethinking Museum Cooperation*, in: Thomas Laely, Marc Meyer und Raphael Schwere (Eds): *Museum Cooperation between Africa and Europe: A New Field for Museum Studies*, Bielefeld, p. 4.
- 5 Today she is a researcher and lecturer at the Department for Anthropology and African Studies at the University of Mainz.
- 6 Currently she is leading the Conservation Department of the Museum Programme in Cameroon “Route des Chefferies”.
- 7 For further information, see also <https://www.postcolonial-provenance-research.com/workshop-contested-heritage/?lang=en>, accessed 15 March 2023.
- 8 <https://www.postcolonial-provenance-research.com/videostatements-contested-heritage/?lang=en>, accessed 15 March 2023.
- 9 Tommy Yaulin Buga from Papua New Guinea, Paule-Clisthène Dassi Koudjou and Albert Gouaffo from Cameroon, Werner Hillebrecht and Nzila Marina Libanda-Mubusisi from Namibia, and Flower Manase from Tanzania.
- 10 Haase, Evelin (1992): *Führer durch die Abteilung Völkerkunde*, Braunschweig (Arbeitsberichte, 62), p. 10.
- 11 Hoffmann, Florian (2007): *Okkupation und Militärverwaltung in Kamerun. Etablierung und Institutionalisierung des kolonialen Gewaltmonopols. Teil II: Die kaiserliche Schutztruppe und ihr Offizierskorps*. Göttingen, p. 187.
- 12 Förster, Brix (1903): *Strümpells Wanderungen im Balilande*, in: *Globus. Illustrierte Zeitschrift für Länder- und Völkerkunde*, Vol. 83, p. 260; Strümpell, Kurt (1903): *Expedition des Oberleutnants Strümpell*, in: *Deutsches Kolonialblatt*, Vol. 14, pp. 84–86.
- 13 Strümpell 1903, *Expedition*, p. 85.
- 14 Federal Archives Berlin, BArch R 1001/3351, *Abschrift des Berichts der Station Bamenda vom 30.03.1902*, p. 17.
- 15 Due to the pandemic, Isabella Bozsa conducted further virtual remote interviews on Zoom with researchers from the University of Maiduguri, an elder, and museum experts from Dikwa, Nigeria, in 2020 and 2021.
- 16 Laely, Thomas; Meyer, Marc; Mugume, Amon; Schwere, Raphael (2019): *“Towards Mutuality in International Museum Cooperation: Reflections on a Swiss-Ugandan Cooperative Museum Project”*, in: *Stedelijk Studies*, vol. 8, pp. 1–16, here p. 12.
- 17 Boast, Robin (2011): *“Neocolonial Collaboration: Museum as Contact Zone Revisited”*, in: *Museum Anthropology*, Vol. 34, no. 1, pp. 56–70, here p. 57.
- 18 Further research stays of Hervé Youmbi and Tevodai Mambai took place in September 2021.