

VII.

## Hidden Objects – Sensitive and Restricted Objects in Museum Collections

Issues Surrounding their Storage, Access, Consultations,  
and Potential Repatriation

---

## Exhibiting Restricted Objects in Museums

Ruptures, Dilemmas and Challenges around Restitution  
to West Cameroon

## Hidden Objects – Sensitive and Restricted Objects in Museum Collections

Issues Surrounding their Storage, Access, Consultations, and Potential Repatriation

---

# Exhibiting Restricted Objects in Museums

Ruptures, Dilemmas and Challenges around Restitution to West Cameroon

Victor Bayena Ngitir

### Abstract

The stratification of most African societies and the primacy of the *invisible over the visible* gave rise to what people of West Cameroon, the area formerly referred to as "Grassfields", call *restricted* objects. Known for their attributes as *power objects*, access to them is marked by *restrictions* and taboos. In West Cameroon, traditional objects are known to be born, to live and to die; to have symbolic content and spiritual meanings. On account of their spiritual functions and their recreation through regular sanctification, their alienation and eventual appropriation have created multiple ruptures both at home and abroad. Cameroon's restitution crusade reached its apogee in the 1970s but has ever since remained missing in literature. Hinged on the theory of *functional conservation*, this paper examines the dangers of their alienation, obstacles to their public exhibition and prospects for their restitution.

Victor Bayena Ngitir, Exhibiting Restricted Objects in Museums. Ruptures, Dilemmas and Challenges around Restitution to West Cameroon, in: Provenance Research on Collections from Colonial Contexts. Principles, Approaches, Challenges, hrsg. von C. Andratschke et al., Heidelberg: arthistoricum.net-ART-Books, 2023 (Veröffentlichungen des Netzwerks Provenienzforschung in Niedersachsen, Band 5), S. 382–391. <https://doi.org/10.11588/arthistoricum.1270.c18920>

*Exposer des objets restreints des Grasslands dans les musées : ruptures, dilemmes et défis de la restitution (Résumé)*

*La stratification de la plupart des sociétés africaines et la primauté de l'invisible sur le visible ont donné naissance à ce que les populations des Grasslands camerounais appellent des objets restreints. Connus pour leurs attributs d'objets de pouvoir, leur accès est caractérisé par des restrictions et des tabous. Dans les Grasslands, on dit que les objets traditionnels naissent, vivent et meurent ; qu'ils ont un contenu symbolique et des significations spirituelles. En raison de leurs fonctions spirituelles et de leur récréation par une sanctification régulière, leur aliénation et leur éventuelle appropriation ont créé de nombreuses ruptures, aussi bien à l'intérieur qu'à l'extérieur du pays. La croisade de restitution du Cameroun a atteint son paroxysme dans les années 1970, mais est restée depuis lors absente de la littérature. S'appuyant sur la théorie de la conservation fonctionnelle, cette étude se penche sur les risques de leur aliénation, les obstacles à leur exposition publique et les perspectives de restitution.*

## Introduction

The notion of restricted cultural and religious objects is common practice across Sub-Saharan Africa, where they are variously described as “sacred”, “secret” or “power” objects. In the area formerly referred to as the “Grassfields” of Cameroon<sup>1</sup> where these objects have for centuries been central in the articulation of traditional religion, political power and social control, they have always been associated with varying degrees of restrictions and taboos, especially regarding their production, acquisition, access, exposure, transfer, use, handling, preservation, conservation and restoration. Generally, their functions range from routine religious ceremonies to occasional mystical performances. Unfortunately, many uninformed western authors describe both these objects and their functions as fetish and primitive. This study focuses on the Tikar and Ngemba kingdoms of the Bamenda area, but its data, analyses and conclusions are applicable to Sub-Saharan Africa. In these communities, the mere public discussion around power objects is considered sacrilegious and a profanation of the sacred. The present discourse is thus situated within the on-going *conservation debate* rooted in colonial antecedents and the numerous African calls for restitution. Our common goal is to trace

existing links, identifying objects with their originators, documenting Africa's material heritage lodged in western museums, and finally to establish new trajectories for cultural exchange, information sharing and restitution. It interrogates the ruptures and dilemmas resulting from the alienation and exhibition of *restricted objects* as well as prospects for their restitution.

## Conceptualising the Realm of Restricted Objects

The appropriate context for appreciating the fate of Cameroon's lost heritage and especially power objects appropriated by western colonial agents must consider the indelible scars left by Curt von Pavel (1851–1933), Eugen Zintgraff (1858–1898), Gustav Conrau (died 1899) and other German officials in the period of German colonial rule.<sup>2</sup> This era was marked by the ruthless extortion of Cameroon's material and spiritual culture. Matters worsened with the illicit trafficking of antiquities that ran through the colonial period to the 1980s and persisted despite the adoption of UNESCO conventions protecting cultural heritage and repeated calls for restitution.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the restricted realm is one of supernatural powers, beings and ancestral spirits. It represents an intersection and intercession between the living and the living-dead. It is marked by tangible and intangible actors, vessels and objects with transcendent powers; with distinct living and spiritual forces; meant for initiated members and, consequently, potentially dangerous to non-members.<sup>4</sup>

## Research Problem, Questions and Objectives

For centuries, numerous taboos have surrounded the viewing, handling and access to power objects of this region. This category of community art, which western authors have generally labeled as fetish, primitive or uncivilised, consists of objects used in religious ceremonies, *juju* displays, enthronement rites and mystical performances. Until today, information on these objects has remained obscure and scholarly debates surrounding them are rife. This is more problematic when such objects are illegally ferried away from the

continent. What they are, or how they should be handled, exhibited, manipulated, conserved, documented, transmitted or narrated are central to this study. This chapter also examines the ruptures associated with such transfers, laments over their fate on alien territories and in inappropriate contexts, and wonders why they remain incarcerated in the west. It contextualises the local notion of restricted objects and their perception in and out of Africa, identifies the reasons for and methods of their alienation and appropriation, and analyses the dynamics and problems around their return. It answers four fundamental questions: What are restricted objects, how are they viewed in Cameroon and why did some of them find their way into western museums? Finally: What dilemmas and challenges surround their restitution?

## Alienation in Western Museums

Empirical research and Darwinian theories reveal not only that Africa is the second largest continent after Asia but also that it is the cradle of humanity, home to the world's first human civilization and the great antiquities of the Nile valley.<sup>5</sup> J. O Vogel submits that, during the scramble for Africa, British and French antiquarians excavated finds equivalent to prehistoric materials unearthed in Europe a century earlier.<sup>6</sup> They included ancient artifacts from Senegal, stone axes from Ghana and ceramics from Senegal, Mali, Niger, Ghana and Cameroon. Then came the monumental shipments to Europe after 1800, when explorers, traders, missionaries and colonial officials opened up the hinterland to trade, subjugating "stubborn" inland kingdoms and consolidating colonial administrations. In Cameroon and most of Sub-Saharan Africa, the colonial sojourn saw Portuguese, Belgian, German, British and French colonial agents amass huge spoils of artefacts and antiquities for exhibition in home museums.<sup>7</sup> In the 1890s, Eugen Zintgraff was active in Bali (North-West Cameroon), razing palaces, subjugating kingdoms and emptying them of antiquities. Like Gustav Conrau in Bangwa Kingdom (South-West Cameroon), Zintgraff frequently travelled home with several shipments of masterpieces, some of them "induced gifts."<sup>8</sup> Similarly, other German officers also ransacked palaces of West Cameroon, carting away masterpieces and diverse valuables. These heritage transfers reached alarming proportions between the 1940s and 1980s and centered on the trafficking of antiquities.<sup>9</sup>

Marie Cornu and Marc-André Renold affirm that the displacement of cultural property took the form of trafficking, plunder, appropriation and trade between dealers during colonial occupation.”<sup>10</sup> Francois Rivière and Folarin Shyllon submit that “theft, destruction, looting and smuggling of cultural property continue to distort our collective memory and peoples’ identities despite the constant efforts of the international community.”<sup>11</sup> The high prices that antiquities brought on the international art market also seduced traffickers and plunderers to exploit local peoples in Africa.<sup>12</sup> Illicit trade in cultural property grew in magnitude, rivalling the drug or diamond trades. By the 1980s it was second only to narcotics, at horrific disadvantage to Indigenous African peoples.<sup>13</sup>

### **Exhibiting Taboo and Desecrating Sacred Objects: The Need to Understand Life-Cycles**

As mentioned earlier, an appropriate understanding of taboo objects from West Cameroon requires living with local communities, understanding the nature of sacred objects, access to them and, above all, their functions. These objects range from special motif stools, masks, costumes and containers to ancestral statues/statuettes, prayer tablets, royal paraphernalia and more. Regularly activated and deactivated as the need arose, they were used in religious ceremonies, warfare and magico-religious performances. They were born; they lived and died. Their birth comprised the processes leading to a final product. This included ritual tree-felling, its associated incantations, sculpting, religious hymns, fasting, nudity, sexual abstinence and prayers. Before use, they were consecrated in special religious rites. Their lifespan comprised the entire length and breadth of the object’s functional existence during which it was regularly activated, used and deactivated thereafter. The death of such an object referred to the time it ceased to perform the functions for which it was produced, either on account of its displacement from the original habitat, or disconnection from its ancestral roots. And this is the fate of sacred objects moved to western museums.

## Ruptures and Western Appropriation: Objects at Home, Art Abroad

The subject of identifying and interpreting African Indigenous works has crystallised into western and African schools of thought. African Indigenous objects differed markedly from the crafts and collections that found their way into museums in many ways. Unfortunately, recent connotations based on western paradigms perceive objects relocated to western museums as “art” in the European or American sense. They become art by transposition following the shift in paradigm. From cultural, institutional, ceremonial or religious objects, they became art for tourism, research and exhibition. Consequently, their incarceration in western museums desecrates them entirely.

## New Modes of Acquisition and Preservation: Strange Displays and Treatment

The dislocation of these objects overseas in colonial and post-colonial periods also represented a rupture from legitimate and Indigenous methods of acquiring objects to alien and somewhat illegitimate modes. Traditionally, these objects originated from local workshops, palace and lineage treasures, legal purchase, bequests, diplomatic gifts and donations. From these sources, community collections were supplied with masterpieces and crafts. European colonial agents, traders and missionaries, on the other hand, acquired objects through force, induced gifts, fake treaties, vandalism, theft, looting, outright seizures and illicit trafficking. This way, African collections were progressively moved from Indigenous treasure contexts to western museums and galleries. What distinguishes between African and western displays lies essentially in the methodologies, techniques, perceptions and protocols via which they are processed. Art conservation, preservation and restoration, for instance, would follow traditional Indigenous techniques.

The *Conservation Debate*<sup>14</sup> centres on where and how power objects should best be preserved. On this axial question, the “West” generally believes that the panacea for proper preservation lies overseas, where sophisticated logistics are available for the diagnosis, treatment, storage, exhibition and restoration of these objects. This is diametrically opposed by the African School and the theory of *functional conservation*.<sup>15</sup> This theory holds that once a traditional object is displaced from its natural habitat it ceases to perform the functions for which it was produced, and consequently is no longer conserved.

## Dilemmas and Challenges of Restitution

The issue of cultural return has remained a hot potato at international conferences, arousing passions and emotive language, often because it is connected with the restitution of cherished masterpieces and the sensitive notion of identity. Afolasade Adewumi affirms that

*most of the collections and objects of noble significance to Africans lie outside the continent and UNESCO has tirelessly worked with international bodies to ensure the return of priceless objects signifying the identity of a people back to them. Despite all their efforts, these objects still haven't moved from where they are to where they originally belong.*<sup>16</sup>

Although the contemporary story of restitution is fairly recent, the alienation and appropriation of Cameroon's cultural objects is centuries old. It reached its apogee in the colonial era when German, British and French agents made huge fortunes from art-grabbing. Northern Tamara makes allusion to five Kom throne figures whisked off to Germany in 1902.<sup>17</sup> One of them found its way into the Museum of Ethnology (then *Museum für Völkerkunde*; nowadays *Weltkulturen Museum*) in Frankfurt am Main in 1904. Two other pairs have been in German museums since the early years of this century. A third was smuggled from the *Laikom* Palace in 1966 and remained in a New York collection until its restitution in 1973. Similarly, the Nso ancestral statue, *Ngonnso*, a piece of prestigious headgear (*ntara'*), royal calabash gourds (*bomsi*) and other valuables were spirited away from the Nso palace in 1906 and later found their way into the Royal Ethnographic Museum (*Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde*) in Berlin.<sup>18</sup> Two *makomngang* (ritual) masks also disappeared from the Mankon Palace in similar circumstances. In Bafut, sacred sculptural representations of their god and goddess (*mamforti*) disappeared from the palace during the German-Bafut war (1901–1910). Once in these strange locations, they ceased to be *objects* in the African sense and became “art”.

Northern alludes to the Cameroon Collection at the Field Museum, Chicago (1920s) and another gathered in the 1930s by an American-born ex-German missionary, Dr Paul Gebauer (1900–1977).<sup>19</sup> The brilliant performance of antiquities from West Cameroon at the Festival of Negro Arts and Culture (FENAC) in Senegal (1966) and the Festival of African Arts and Culture



(FESTAC) in Lagos (1977) bear testimony to the region's artistic prowess. As early as 1906, these collections, along with other treasures from Cameroon and adjacent Nigeria were exhibited at the "Cameroon Gallery" of the Frankfurt Museum.<sup>20</sup> Others found their way into European and American galleries and have never returned. Other western museums flooding with Cameroonian collections are in Germany (Munich, Stuttgart, Berlin, Hanover), the UK (London), France (Paris, Nantes), Belgium (Brussels) as well as in the US (New York and Washington, DC). Today, calls for their restitution are championed by descendants and lobbies from originator communities.

## Conclusion

This chapter finds comfort not in lopsided north-south arguments but on the *theory of functional conservation*. An object uprooted from its natural environment ceases to function in rituals and ceremonies. It loses its tangible and intangible value. This to the Africanist school is the worst form of deterioration and represents the *devaluation and violation of African art*. This study reveals that, despite impressive-sounding slogans and declarations by European politicians, professionals and museum promoters, moves towards restitution have remained cosmetic. More and more museums are opening in France, Germany and the US with Cameroonian objects dominating their collections. Second, in Cameroon, the realm of restricted objects is a world of its own, with fire-brand, religious items of mystical and transcendent nature. Most of them found their way into Western museums before, during and shortly after the colonial period through bogus trade deals, missionaries, hinterland explorations, extortion, looting, outright seizures, vandalism, and illicit trafficking. Alienated objects were eventually appropriated by host museums, transformed into Western-style art, were desecrated, commoditised, and today are faced with the dilemmas of legitimacy, documentation and restitution. Restitution must therefore involve identifying source regions and originators, distinguishing originals from replicas, placing Africans at the forefront, and sincere, earnest efforts and communication on the part of the European institutions. Exhibiting simple African objects through replicas, mosaic photos and virtual imaging is good practice, but power objects must not continue to be exhibited in any form if true reconciliation is the intention.

- 1 The region labelled in colonial times and often still called the Cameroon Grassfields stretches from the expansive rainforests in the South and West of the national triangle to the upper reaches of the Mbam River in the Adamawa, North Cameroon. It comprises the highlands and grassy savannah sitting at approximately 1,000–3,000 m. above sea level, across the continent to the Indian Ocean.
- 2 Temgoua, Albert-Pascal (2014): *Le Cameroon a l'Epoque des Allemands, 1884–2016*, pp. 13–47.
- 3 See UNESCO (1954): *Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict*, Den Haag; *Convention concerning the Protection of the World's Natural and Cultural Patrimony*, 16<sup>th</sup> November, 1972; *Recommendations for the Protection of Movable Cultural Property*, 28<sup>th</sup> November, 1978; UNESCO (1995): *Convention on Stolen or Illicitly Exported Cultural Objects*, Rome; *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, Paris, October 17, 2003; Odendahl, Kerstin (2013): *Cultural Property Regulation and National and International Heritage Legislation: International Protection of Cultural Property*, Athens; Williams, Sharon A. (1978): *The International and National Protection of Movable Cultural Property: A Comparative Study*, New York.
- 4 Ngitir, Victor Bayena (2017): "Bamenda Grassfields Living Museums: A Colonial Heritage", in: *Cameroon Journal of Studies in the Commonwealth*, Vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 44–67, here p. 24. This work further states that non-initiated males who violate access or other restrictions may be saved by instant initiation. There are also few women's groups barred to men – *chong, takumbeng, fembien*.
- 5 Darwin, Charles C. R. (1871): *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*. London, Vol. 1/1, p. 42.
- 6 Vogel, Joseph O. (1997): *Encyclopedia of Pre-Colonial Africa*, London, p. 30.
- 7 Baptista, Cristina (2011): "Empire and Cultural Appropriation: African Artefacts and the Birth of Museums" in: Adelaide Meira Serras (Ed.): *Empire Building and Modernity*, Lisbon, pp. 9–20.
- 8 Paul N. Nkwi (1986): *Traditional Diplomacy: A Study of Inter-Chiefdom Relations in the Western Grassfields North West Province of Cameroon*, University of Yaoundé, Department of Sociology, p. 23.
- 9 Ngitir, Victor Bayena (2014): *Bamenda Grassfields Royal Collections and Museums from Ancient Times to the Beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Symbolisms and Conservation of Palace Art*. PhD thesis, University of Yaounde I.
- 10 Cornu, Marie; Renold, Marc-André Jean (2010): "New Developments in the Restitution of Cultural Property: Alternative Means of Dispute Resolution", in: *International Journal of Cultural Property*, Vol. 1, pp. 1–31.
- 11 The *UNESCO World Report Investing in Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Dialogue* (2009), attributes these displacements to, among other aspects, poverty, institutional weakness, poor understanding of the social and scientific value of cultural property, non-enforcement of the relevant regulatory mechanisms, and lack of clear-cut policies.
- 12 Shyllon, Folarin (1998): "One Hundred Years of Looting of Nigerian Art Treasures (1897–1996)" in: *Art, Antiquity and Law*, Vol. 3, no. 7, pp. 253–266. See also Drewal, Henry J. (1996): "Past as Prologues" in: Peter R. Schmidt, Roderick J. McIntosh (Eds), *Plundering Africa's Past*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, pp. 110–124.
- 13 Brent, Michel (1996): "A View inside the Illicit Trade in African Antiquities", in: P. R. Schmidt, R. J. McIntosh (Eds): *Plundering Africa's Past*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, pp. 63–78; Brodie, Neil; Renfrew, Colin (2005): "Looting and the World's Archaeological Heritage: The Inadequate Response" in: *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 6, no. 34, pp. 343–361; Campbell, Peter B. (2013): "The Illicit Antiquities Trade as a Transnational Criminal Network: Characterizing and Anticipating Trafficking of Cultural Heritage," in: *International Journal of Cultural Property*, Vol. 20, pp. 113–153; Borgstede, Gregory (2014): "Cultural Property, the Palermo Convention, and Transnational Organized Crime", in *International Journal of Cultural Property*, Vol. 21, no. 13, pp. 281–290; Charney, Noah; Denton Paul; Kleberg John, (2010): "Protecting Cultural Heritage from Art Theft," in: *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, (March 2012), Vol. 81, no. 3, pp.1–6.
- 14 Ngitir, 2017, *Bamenda Grassfields*, p. 44ff.
- 15 Konare, A. O. (1995): "The Creation and Survival of Local Museums", in: C.D. Ardouin, E. Arinze (Eds): *Museums and the Community in West Africa*, Washington, pp. 5–10.

- 16 Adewumi, A. Afolasade (2015): "The Achievement of Return and Restitution of Cultural Property in Africa: The Roles of International Bodies", in: *University of Ibadan Journal of Public and International Law (UIJPIL)*, Vol. 5/2, pp. 63–81.
- 17 Northern, Tamara (1973): *Royal Art of Cameroon*. Dartmouth, p. 5.
- 18 Ngitir, 2014, *Bamenda Grassfields*.
- 19 Northern, 1973, *Royal Art of Cameroon*, p. 14.
- 20 Ngitir, Victor Bayena (2021): "Alienating Grassfields Cultural Objects to Western Museums: Who Cares?" in: *Afo-A-Kom Journal of Culture, Performing & Visual Arts*, Vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 8–9.

