Research Article
The Survival of Community Museums in Cameroon

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Abstract: The dilemma of what museums are and what they ought to be in African settings, has continued to sustain scholarly debate for over two decades. Animated by African and western schools of thought, this debate centers on three main questions: do African collections actually qualify as museums? Are western-style museums suitable for Africa? Can Africans actually sustain museums on the western model? It is on the sidelines of this debate and attempts to provide responses that hinge concerns of survival for these museums. In Cameroon where the museum institution is fairly young, questions continue to linger as to whether her over thirty collections actually qualify as museums. Ever since the establishment of the nation’s earliest museums in the 1920s, these institutions have indeed survived in precarious owing to a litany of obstacles. In these circumstances, public access has thinned rapidly, outreach and clientele satisfaction have remained elusive and the primary missions of preservation and conservation are shadows of their mission statements. Created after the year 2000, the community museums of Babungo, Oku, Bafut, Mankon, Bandjoun, Batoufam and Baham bear testimony to this. The present paper examines the nature and categorization of Cameroon museums, identifies major threats to their survival, examines reasons for their resilience, and proposes a plan for their sustenance. In this endeavor, four questions beg for answers: what is the typology of Cameroon museums? Why has their survival been precarious? What factors account for their resilience this far? And what can be the way forward? A methodology based on oral tradition, qualitative research and sample surveys, analyzed on the basis of content and chronology provided grounds for our findings. Cameroon’s museums are dominantly historical and ethnographic. They are essentially public, private, missionary and community museums. Their major challenges have centered on natural and human factors. The elaboration and scrupulous respect for collections management policies and the ICOM code of ethics (2007) remain crucial for their survival and sustenance.

Keywords: Survival, community museums, preservation, conservation

INTRODUCTION
Cameroonian museums generally, and community museums particularly, have for decades been confronted by a multiplicity of challenges, some on account of their conservative attachment to cultural practices and others due to untenable clientele desires. In Bafut, Babungo and Mankon, like in Oku, Nso, Kom and elsewhere, human and natural factors have been largely responsible for their retarded development and modernization. The result has been the silent, but progressive disappearance of the region’s tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Successive visits to these museums in the last two decades revealed that their principal constraints were theft, climatic factors and poor conservation techniques. While many objects and masterpieces were devoured by the destructive forces of nature, other collections have failed to satisfy their audiences due to financial, material deficiencies, theft, and the influence of modernism. These challenges have left their performance and survival at the mercy of chance, speculative and bail out schemes. Despite the efforts of local communities, successive governments and international partners, the attainment of their set goals has remained elusive. Despite hopes for their revival, doubts continue to persist on their ability to achieve set goals and foster their programs. Though all actors wish to find solutions to these survival challenges, deep down, there is doubt as to the will and ability to change. To many museum promoters are engaged in some rearguard effort doomed to fail (AO Konare, 1995:5). To say the least, most Cameroonian youths do not know where the museums are found; do not know what happens there; and are ignorant of modalities for visiting them. Many of these museums contain objects that bear little relevance to the living cultures of the local communities. Others still have never been documented, catalogued or inventoried. It thus becomes extremely difficult to use objects that are no longer part and parcel of the community culture to enhance cultural awareness. Something that does not interest people will never move them. This has variously been attributed to the largely external factors that influenced their transformation from collections to museums. These included the role of educated elites, the diaspora and concerns of research and tourism. Despite their
high-sounding mission statements, few community museums were actually set up to valorize local cultures. The central question this paper answers is: why have Cameroon’s community museums only survived in extreme precarity and how have they managed all along?

**CONCEPTUALIZING COMMUNITY MUSEUMS**

**Research Problem, Questions And Objectives**

For over three decades Cameroon museums have been bugged by numerous challenges that have left their performance and survival at the mercy of chance, ad-hoc solutions and bail out schemes. This study therefore hinges on the three-fold neglect of museums by local elites, state services and the civil society. It laments over their perennial material, financial and technical constraints. It finally captures their failure to meet stated goals and mission statements. Despite the efforts of local communities, successive governments and international partners, their attainment of set goals has remained elusive.

The study answers four questions: What is the typology of Cameroon museums? Why their survival has been so precarious? What factors account for their resilience this far? How can their long term sustenance be ensured? In this endeavor, our paper describes the nature and categorization of Cameroon museums, identifies threats to their survival, examines reasons for their continued survival despite the odds, and finally proposes a plan for their sustenance.

**Contextualizing Cameroon’s Community Museums**

The relevance of museums in Africa has for some time become a subject of profound controversy owing partly to its ever evolving dynamics and rationale on the one hand and partly owing to imperceptible worldviews and interpretations. In the meantime, the tussle over museums as African inventions or Western innovations remains rife, animated by Western and African schools of thought. Consequently, both as a science and a practice, museums invariably embrace technical concepts as museology and museography. Though sometimes used interchangeably, consensus treats them as complements, the former being museum science and the latter as museum practice (Ngitir, 2014). Defined as permanent non-profit institutions, museums are expected to guarantee public access and perform functions of preservation, conservation, education, communication, research, exhibition, outreach and enjoyment (Mbaya, 1994). This ICOM definition more or less alienates adepts of the African school which perceives local collections and community museums as discrete precincts reserved for initiates and only open to the public occasionally. Contrary to common belief, museums are both very ancient and very recent (VB Ngitir, 2017). They were very ancient given their traceability to the Greek *museum*, seat of the muses (and temple in Greek mythology). The Greek philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras (5th Century BC) referred to those early museums as “havens” for scholarly research and intellectual “discourse” with books and objects as material supports. The Greek perception of museums as libraries and research institutes (reminiscent of Pharaoh Ptolemy’s library at Alexandria, Egypt C. 280 BC) thus differed from modern museums. Though traceable to Greek times, museums are quintessentially a modern invention summed up in three moves. First, they emerged as cabinets of curiosities dating back to the Renaissance (15th-16th centuries) which perceived the world as organized by God and humanity. This perception presented museums as a “macrocosm=God and world transcribed as nature”, as well as a “microcosm=mankind and art transcribed as culture”. Second, museums seek to name the world and possess it by naming objects and understanding their positions in the order of things (source).

Till date, the concept and practice of museum hinge on the works of Medieval and Modern man, the former perceiving art as a way of liaising with God’s creation and the latter perceiving art as an autonomous experience. Drawing from the above abstractions, one is tempted to ask, *what is Africa’s place in the museum world? What is the place of African art in modern museums? What is African museography?* Defined as a skill with an aesthetic result, art embraces creative disciplines such as drawing, painting, printmaking, computer, media, sculpture, architecture, crafts, theatre, literature, archives, dance, the visual arts and a host of others (VB Ngitir, 2014). Yet the origins of art have remained a subject of intense debate among the Western and African schools of thought. While the West championed by R. Gwinn (1991, 1992), H. Sasson, and V.B. Chindong (2008) traces art and art collecting to the Hittites and Assyrians before its later spread to classical civilizations of Europe and Asia – the Chinese, Indian, Sumerian, Cretan, Babylonian and Persian, the African school stands diametrically opposed. The African school, championed by Phyllis and P. O’meara (1975), J. M. Essomba (1982), E. Mveng, (1980) W. Bascom, (1973) G. Connah (2001) and others dismisses the Hittite theory and argues that it all started with the African Stone Age between 1,000,000 and 500,000 B.C. Exploring the functions of African and Western art reveals an even wider dichotomy. While African art was and remains largely religious, cultural and utilitarian, Western art is aesthetic and encyclopedic. These discrepancies are further highlighted and fed by the dangers arising from the transplantation of Western museographic practices on Africa. In colonial style, they imposed western Museological planning, design, exhibition, interpretation, conservation, education, logistics and management on Africa (Ngitir, 2016). The confrontation of diametrically opposed perceptions of art, naturally pitched them under an impending explosion. The application of Western paradigms on
African collections and museums inevitably invited clashes over the planning, design, exhibition, conservation, restoration, and management of African artifacts and antiquities. African art, embellished by its unique stylization, diversity, discretion, functions, iconography, and symbolism were incompatible with such alien paradigms. This museographic dichotomy centers on five articulations whose bottom line was the colonization of African art through the imposition of an alien museography. These articulations included five brutal changes: a change of connotation from sacred religious objects to Western-style aesthetic art; a structural transformation of royal treasures and community collections into museums; a change from indigenous to Western conservation methods; a change from legitimate to illegitimate modes of acquisition; and a change from purely religious to aesthetic functions (Ngitir, 2016, 2017). The progressive museumization of Africa’s royal collections inextricably embraced alien values and devalued African religious objects. At best, the situation moved from devaluation through commoditization to desecration. Notwithstanding such sacralizes, the dream of many colonial and post-colonial local communities was to see their collections recognized as museums. Of course, exigencies of successive colonial administrations, economic squeezes, and the colonial taxation systems were responsible. Until recent times, this was the status quo. In view of these tendencies, Africa’s apparently unstoppable crusade for the transformation of art collections into museums must unmistakably be accompanied by a decolonization of alien perceptions, uprooting Western museographic paradigms and introducing an African museography.

**Nature and principal traits**

With slight variations from one cultural zone to another, local customs throughout the southern portion of Cameroon dictated the need to produce, collect and preserve cultural objects in museums and community collections. From a typically African and Cameroon perspective, community museums and collections were marked by unique traits according to their origins, form, content, and functions. Regarding their origins, the Bamum, Mankon, Bafut, Benemjida, Bamendjou collections have common genesis. Like others in the southern half of the country, they generally originated from ancient primeval, ancestral and migratory sites variously named as Tibati, Kimni, Ndobo, Rimfum or Bankim in North Cameroon and the SAO where an early civilization had emerged around Lake Chad C.5th century AD (Eyongetah and Brian, 2004). Notwithstanding, these collections were subjects of intense exogenous influences, diffusion and stylistic transformation during their early migrations between the 5th and 18th centuries. Concerning their form, museum collections were marked by unique styles and iconography. Objects in these royal collections were unique by their stylistic patterns and spectacular iconographic representations. The outcome has come to be called the “Grassfields style” or “Bamenda-Tikar style” (Northern Tamara, 1973). Regarding stylization, Grassfields art was marked by its pronounced realistic sculptural details such as the female hairdo, caps, body scarification and the headdress. These indicated status on stylized figures. **Consistency and respect for clientele** tastes have also become 20th century artistic trademarks. Though tied to the need for originality, Grassfields artists generally sought to satisfy the stylistic tastes and limitations of their clientele. Grassfields collections were also marked by diversity. Despite the largely traditional and religious background, Grassfields collections were produced and interpreted in various stylistic genres which differed from one region or society to another. There was hardly any uniformity. Hence there were always unique traits about Kom and Kedjom life-size statues, Oku masks, Babungo stools, Babessi and Bamessing clay pots, Metta fiber bags, etc.

Regarding content, community collections were generally dominated by wooden sculptures (Ngitir, 2014). This primacy of wood as the dominant material support could partially be explained by its elastic functional potentials – first, it could be molded into a wide variety of forms (masks, statues, figurines, vessels, utensils, etc.); second, it was readily available to early dynasties; third, its tools were readily produced by skilled iron blacksmiths; and finally, the availability of skilled craftsmen, great sculptor kings. Other genres however, included calabashes work, smithing, basketry, pottery, bead work, weaving, dyeing, embroidery, etc. Regarding art producers and personnel involved, art collection was an entirely male dominated sector. Except for ordinary pottery, weaving, simple beading, and embroidery, Museum collections have remained a male dominated sector. Women for instance are strictly barred from prestigious and sacred trades like wood carving, sculpture, smithing. It was also marked by royal patronage. In Grassfields kingdoms with centralized governments art was closely regimented by kings, local customs and customary societies. Numerous items were only reserved for the king, used in royal ceremonies or bore royal iconographies; others were only produced by royal carvers and regulatory societies and sanctified for royal use in the sacred forest. Regarding their functions and value, the collections of the Cameroon museums had religion as the dominant driving force. The original and dominating motive for the production and use of Cameroon’s traditional art has remained religion. Until recently, there was nothing as art for art sake as every object was intended to have content and symbolic meaning. They have been labeled living museums since many of their objects are religious, customary, and/or mystical, they are potentially dangerous. They are occasionally taken out to the sacred forest, activated and used in various rites, then deactivated and returned to the museum. Such
museums are non-interactive because the touching or photographing of objects could be dangerous to the visitor. Finally, Grassfields museum objects were and remain unique by their symbolism. These objects were never produced for their own sake, nor were they intended for viewing in museums and showrooms. Their producers used art as a visual language to depict practical life situations, and to represent cosmic and mystical relationships between the living and the living dead. Cameroon museum collections served vast categories of people and symbolized the complex relations and activities of their local communities. In its complex role, art became a vector of both simple and complex messages (Ngitir, 2014), some involving the supernatural. Fertility, war, wisdom, long life, danger, peace, the power of procreation, the mystical power of the gods, royal authority and majesty were commonly symbolized themes. Plants, animals, birds, human figurines and inanimate representations were among the frequently used symbolic motif. Another principal function of Grassfields museums is traditional safeguard. Traditional conservation, preservation and restoration techniques were used to safeguard, the objects from danger, prevent deterioration and to repair damaged items. Discretion has also been identified as a principal trait (Ngitir 2016). Certain ‘dangerous’ objects could not be exhibited in museums and were only seen in public once or twice a year; highly mystical objects were only seen by initiated cult members; when a new chief was presented to the public; when the community chief personally presided over special rituals; or at festivities, cultural ceremonies and mask displays.

Liaison with the national museum

One fundamental element of auto-critique in local museum practice has been the attempt to close museum training institutions to those who possess the culture. Similarly, it is not possible to dissociate local from national museums for politically, there should be no such dichotomy between the two. This has been the unfortunate situation in Cameroon. What obtains as general practice has been that of museums with local and national aspects. They are not two distinct institutions. A successful network of local and national museums would therefore produce the best results. This unfortunately, is not the case in Cameroon as local, regional and national museums exist and operate like parallel institutions with very little of no liaison. Such liaison is vital but caution is needed in elaborating museum policies. We conserve objects not for their own sake but for mankind in relation to man and his society. If we pay more attention to objects than to man and society, then we shall conserve nothing. An object cannot be conserved outside man or his society. A national museum may well conserve nothing but functionless objects if there is no further reason why they should be retained in a local museum. The role of the national museum like the one in Yaoundé may well consists in being a home for objects when they cease to be in cultural use. Objects conserved the conventional way, European-style, can be kept in the national museum while those preserved and conserved traditionally should be exhibited in local museums. This not just because national museums have greater capacities and resources but also because they deal essentially with functionless objects that have outlived their relevance in local museums. The Yaounde National Museum may therefore be conceived as a melting pot where various regional and local cultures mix, where perhaps new identities and hybrid cultures would be created. Enormous efforts and resources would of course be required to create such hybrid communities. This way, local museums contribute to promoting cultural awareness in the country, while the national museum conserves objects that have lost their functions.

Consequently, local museums like those of Babungo, Oku, Bafut, Mankon, Bandjoun, Batoufam and Bambam are anchored on local cultures while national museums see things at the level of several cultures coexisting. Local museums thus play a variety of roles. They are repositories for objects, as well as educational and documentation centers open to research. They are not places where objects are simply piled up or accumulated but hubs that hold information and data bases about the local cultures that produced the objects. However, material circumstances and limited funds have often compelled Cameroon’s community museums to carefully define their functions and limit their scopes. Far from being small scale national museums, their key functions include fostering field research, promoting education but at the same time conserving objects. Yet it must be stressed that unfortunately, Cameroon’s community museums have for decades been tailored to serve a minority comprised of foreigners rather than the majority comprising local visitors, researchers and audiences.

Community museums and cultural conservation

One fundamental function of community museums has been the indigenization of collections management. This entails among other things the use of traditional techniques in the preservation, conservation and safeguard of museum holdings. Regarding the conservation of collections in community museums, the entire heritage (cultural, physical, artistic and natural) must be taken into account since it belongs to the community. OA Konare, (1995:7) states that no African object is completely devoid of meaning. A religious object cannot be perceived out of the religion or ceremonies with which it is associated. It is therefore vital to develop a global vision of the heritage since no object exists in isolation. The heritage must be taken in its totality. Good enough the persons concerned by the past and present heritage are the same people. Community museums must thus be situated and perceived within the context of the local culture. Conserving museum objects must therefore include the
preservation of the language that surrounds it. An object is conserved when its continued use is assured. In fact everything that remains in the hands of the people and is used by them is protected and preserved. Local customs and traditions ensure that such collections are preserved. What is not used has no life and consequently, is not conserved.

This is the crux of cultural and functional conservation for without this, we would never grasp the problems of community museums. However, our local museums must cease to operate without visions and this can only be addressed through museum policies which in turn must be coordinated at national level.

**TYPOLOGY OF CAMEROON MUSEUMS**

The transformation of African community collections into museums has for purposes of clarity been perceived under three distinct periods: 1920s - 50s, 1950s – 80s and 2000 – 2010. The first phase (1920s - 50s) was marked by the consolidation and consummation of colonial missions and administrations on the one hand and the maximization of colonial exploitation on the other. In this process, the continent’s rich material culture, artistry and intangible heritage were unveiled.\(^1\) Ian Fowler and D. Zeitlyn (1984) confirm that when the Germans arrived in the [Cameroon] Grassfields in the late 19\(^{th}\) century, they perceived it to be a distinct region because of its rich material culture, architecture and political forms. This is clear from early German written material and photographic records on the material culture of the region they called the *Grasland*. G. Christraud, (1988: 85-6) further presents astonishing accounts of German collecting activity at the beginning of this century when ‘booty’ was sent home in the form of masks, stools, thrones, *et cetera* in order to win a medal from the Kaiser.

The second phase, 1950s – 80s was even more pliable for the navigation of art since African nationalists concentrated on independence struggles and political positioning, caring very little about art transfers. Obscure art deals were thus quickly sealed by German, British and French museum agents, often with the complicity of some hungry African middlemen and vulnerable palace guards. Matters were made worse by skyrocketing art market prices which placed African art among the *most cherished antiques*. The third phase (2000 – 2010), as earlier mentioned, was motivated mainly by socio-economic, scientific and touristic concerns. These included the rise of so-called “enlightened” African kings who saw in museums, new

sources of revenue especially, following the economic depression of the 1980s, caused partly by the sharp fall in coffee and cocoa prices. The crisis touched the very fabric of African chiefdoms – the royal family. Traditional chiefs could no longer sustain their large families from the coffee economy and turned to museums for survival. Other considerations that influenced the transformation of collections into museums between 2000 and 2010 include research, education, “tourism-curiosity-leisure”, cultural valorization and political indoctrination (Ngitir, 2014).

Then came the Cameroon museum institution that was born from the ashes of colonial rule (1944) when a colonial order created the Centre Camerounais de l’Institut Francais d’Afrique Noire (IFAN), a French research institute based in Dakar, with a satellite research center in Douala. This was followed by the establishment of regional museums in Bamenda, Douala, Fumban, Maroua, Bafoussam, Mokolo and Buea (K Mbayu, 1994: 35-36). This concern became most articulate after independence in 1960 and reunification in 1961. In the English-speaking sector, the efforts of Dr. MDW Jeffreys (then colonial administrator of the Bamenda Province) crystallized in the creation of the Bamenda Provincial Museum in the 1930s and 1940s (VB Ngitir, 2014:45).

It functioned under the Nigerian Commission of Antiquities until 1961 when it was taken over by the Federated state of West Cameroon. Regarding private museums, a number of collections have been established by local communities, missionary bodies, foundations and private individuals which constitute the early stages of potentially great museums. Officially, the institution saddled with the conservation, inventory, classification, exhibition, interpretation and transmission of the nation’s material heritage was therefore the museum. This engagement has since been buttressed by a litany of legislations regulating the museum institution. These legislations among other things categorize Cameroon’s museums into the public, private and community (chiefdom) museums. Among the early public museums were regional museums. This colonial offshoot staggered precariously until 1962 when a decree created the Federal Linguistic and Cultural Center. Yaounde charged with research surveys for the acquisition and study of cultural property worth preserving in the museum. Subsequent decrees in 1972 and 1978 reorganized the ministries and services in charge of museums. In 1988, yet another presidential decree transformed the old presidential palace in Yaounde into the National Museum of Cameroon. Since 2016, the National Museum is administered by a Director under the supervision of a Board of Directors.

EXPLAINING A PRECARIOUS SURVIVAL

The survival of Cameroon museums has been variously described as controversial and precarious on account of the numerous challenges confronting the nation’s museum institution. This paper examines among others the challenges facing Cameroonian museums which have rendered their existence and survival precarious. These natural and human factors include financial and material constraints; dating, identification and classification difficulties; theft, plunder and illicit traffic in cultural objects; the dilemma of restituting illegally acquired objects;

2 In Cameroon, the Babungo royal collection was transformed by Fon Ndofou Zofoa III into a modern museum in 2002; the Bafut and Mankon collections in 2003; and the Oku collection in 2007. The Bali Nyonga, Kom and Nso palace collections are yet to undergo such transformation.

3 The story of the Provincial Museum in Mankon, Bamenda is one of the oldest in the history of Cameroon’s public museums. Its collection began in 1936 when MDW Jeffreys, then colonial administrator of the Bamenda Province of the British Southern Cameroon’s launched his scientific and anthropological research in Cameroon, leading to the collection of ethnomological and geologic specimens. His growing collection attracted the attention of the Nigerian Commission of Antiquities to assist the endeavor. With assistance from KC Murray, Bernard Fagg (members of the Commission) and the Gebauer couple (Paul and Clara Gebauer) a missionary couple with long years of committed service in Cameroon (1930s – 1960s), the museum took off as a public facility in 1959.

4 Other public museums founded in the 1950s were the Douala Museum (1952-53), the Mokolo Museum, (1954), the Bafoussam Museum (1954), the Museum of Bamum Arts and Traditions (1955), the Maroua Museum (1955), the Buea Museum (1972) and the Limbe Botanical/Zoological Gardens (existing since the German colonial period).

5 They include the Bamum Royal Museum in Fumban created in 1922, the Alioune Diop Museum (formerly Museum of Negro Art) in Yaounde founded by Rev. Engelbert Mveng founded in 1966, the International Museum and Library at Akum, Bamenda founded by Peter Shingwi Atanga (C. 1948), the Bandjoun Royal Museum (year), the Babungo Royal Museum (2006), the Bamu Royal Museum (2006), the Honourable Achidi Achu Museum in Bamenda (1980), the Bamah Royal Museum (year) the Douala Maritime Museum (1975), the Benedicte Museum, Yaounde founded by Benedictine monks (1970).

6 The 1978 decree for instance placed the small public museum in Yaounde under a Conservation Service consisting two bureaus: the museum bureau and the national cultural inventory bureau. The entire museum collection was then housed in the former residence of the Prime minister of east Cameroon till 1984, when it was again moved to the old Hans Dominik mansion, held by some accounts to be the oldest official building in the city of Yaounde).
the weaknesses of government policy; natural and human deterioration factors; poor conservation and restoration techniques; managerial deficiencies; the decline of the traditional industry; poverty, ignorance and the flaws in international legislation. Nevertheless, a proper appreciation of the above challenges is based on the premise that “the absence of basic needs triggered much of the loss so far recorded.”

Human factors and challenges

Top on the list of challenges have been financial and material problems. The collections have for the most been owned by poor local communities headed by community heads (chiefs) who themselves, barely survived on miserable state allowances. Very few of them had anything to spare after providing for their numerous wives and polygamous families. This coupled with the precarious states of conservation of their collections, called for financial, technical and material support. They badly needed and still need financial assistance, yet entry charges, government grants, donations and fund-raising have thinned and collections have depreciated. The problem of infrastructure has equally been acute for Cameroonian museums. While thousands of art objects decayed in dark palace chambers and lodges, very few specimens were displayed on the permanent exhibitions. The identification, dating and classification of objects have equally been crucial to most Cameroonian museums. As most of the collections had neither been inventoried nor documented, their dating and classification have been difficult and fraught with approximations. Jean-Paul Notue (2006) states for instance that in Babungo, many of the statues in the catalogue were produced a long time after the reigns of the kings and queens they represented. Even information about the ages, reigns and producers of some objects should be treated with some caution. Several pieces attributed to the sculptor-king Nyifuam for instance did not look old. To these must be added the massive loss of her treasures and masterpieces to Europe and America, China and other parts of the world. The role of Dr. Zintgraff in the 1890s and Gustav Conrau after 1900 is well documented by the likes of N. Tamara (1973), VB Ngitir (2014) and others. With the complicity of traders, explorers and missionaries, colonial agents and German military officers ransacked and looted entire palaces emptying them of countless masterpieces of entire palaces. Geary Christraud (1984) recalls that German early colonial records made allusion to an exotic traditional African art with Cameroon featuring prominently. In 19010 Ankermann remarked that German museums were flooded by “an apparently inexhaustible stream of new things from over there...These objects were representative of a rich culture marked by great originality: wooden sculptures, ceramics, sacred objects, beaded art and so on. While German museums were getting saturated with these antiquities, our knowledge of those artifacts remained limited.” The high international demand for antiquities and the worldwide attention given their trade somehow transformed African traditional art first into commodities. Today, “the number of collectors knocking at the doors of the international art market is unrivalled by any other enterprise” (P. O’keefe, 1999, pp.36-37), with Fumban as the center of souvenir art.

The story of the lost heritage of Cameroon’s lost heritage would be incomplete without the much publicized theft in 1966 of the throne statue Afo-A-kom and its restitution later in 1973. This throne figure was central in a special pair of three or four throne statues representing the producer (Foyin Yuh), his mother and his wife respectively. This statue which was smuggled out of the loosely guarded Ifim sacred sanctuary in Laikom during the reign of Foyin Nsom Ngwe allegedly had overwhelming mystical powers. Despite the lofty ideals contained in UNESCO, ICOM, and ICCROM conventions, their implementation has been discretionary. They are only suggestions code-named conventions and recommendations. Firstly, only ratifying nations are bound by them and their degree of enforcement is a matter for national legislation. Secondly there exists no international enforcement mechanism to ensure compliance with these

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7 This ties with the “Basic Needs Theory” of Abraham Maslow (1943) which explains that there are certain minimum requirements (physiological needs) that are essential for a descent standard of living. Failure to meet them predisposes human society to the risk of peril. These primary needs (food, shelter, health and clothing) must be catered for before secondary needs such as security, love, patriotism, esteem and others can be met.

8 Many Grassfields still had numerous wives and uncountable children. This made it pretty difficult to sustain family charges and still have the means to run a museum. The few who receive a monthly allowance find this too small.


10 Memories of the German show of force remain fresh in Nso, Wedikum, Mankon, Bafut and elsewhere.


12 Geary Christraud, Things of the Palace: A Catalogue of the Bamum Palace Museum in Fumban, pp.10-11. The author reveals that the first big loss in Fumban occurred when Njoya was exiled to Yaounde in 1931. Some of his loyal followers fled to the British Cameroons, taking along important objects such as the book containing the history of Bamum. They later returned with many of these items, but many had been missing. Others disappeared during Njoya’s absence since his replacement as ruler sold many pieces to the French.
conventions. Great nations like China and Russia are known to regularly flout decisions of powerful UN agencies and get away with it. Thirdly, the concept of restitution has created more problems for Africa and the Third World (victims of most stolen art) than it has solved. The numerous judicial procedures, expenses and international laws associated with the localization, identification and eventual restitution of stolen or illegally transferred antiquities look more like calculated devices designed to frustrate Africans and other plaintive nations.

**Natural factors**

Prominent among the natural factors have been the perishability of most wood species, the effects of climatic fluctuations, insect attacks and the role of micro-organisms. These factors negatively affected, in varying degrees, the structural composition, and aesthetic presentation of wooden art. The problem of finding durable wood species became a global concern when thousands of artifacts deteriorated and were soon irretrievably lost. N. Tamura (1973, 1984) confirms that “as a result of heavy forest exploitation, farming, animal rearing, fuel wood cutting, house construction and wood carving, many wood species in the region have progressively disappeared”. The magnitude of this exhaustion and loss can be gauged from two angles: first by comparing the quantities of wood imported into the region for house construction in the 1920s and after the 1990s and secondly, by comparing “the number of artifacts whisked out of the region to Europe and the U.S in the periods 1930-1960 and 1961-present”. Philip Ngajong and Pa Anchang Ansama, curator of the Oku palace museum and prominent member of the Kom kwifon respectively, affirm that durable species like fangong, keghang, figs, iroko, mahogany and iron wood, usually reserved for the carving of thrones, royal beds and stools are virtually extinct. Matters have been made worse by Cameroon’s tropical location and its associated climatic fluctuations. Her high seasonal, monthly and daily ranges of rainfall, relative humidity and temperatures greatly contribute to object degradation and degradation. To these must be added the poor storage conditions and atmospheric pollution in some community collections found in sacred forests, shrines, caves and earth floors. Here they were exposed to the often high relative humidity contamination by particles which are offensive to objects” in museums, collections and storage chambers. This has been reported of collections in Babungo, Bafut, Bali, Mankon, Oua, Nso and Kom where the effects of light caused dyes to fade, weakened textiles and was responsible for discoloration and brittleness on paper.” Ultraviolet light left destructive effects on objects just as did dampness and dust particles which provoked chemical reactions that eventually corroded metals. Despite these devastating climatic factors, the chief enemies of wooden collections as observed by museum curators have remained insects (termites and woodborers especially) and fungi. Beetles laid their eggs in the cracks of objects. The eggs “later hatched into larvae which further tunneled into the wood.

**THE FORCE OF RESILIENCE**

Despite the damaging human and natural factors, Cameroon’s community museums have survived after all. This resilience can be explained by a daunting local spirit of solidarity and strong attachment to indigenous cultures, the role of ancestral and spiritual protection, public sensitization on the importance of the nation’s material culture, a sustained system of traditional apprenticeship and the role of surviving resource-persons and eye-witnesses. Despite the often divisive strands of diversity, Cameroon’s cultural diversity has indeed been a force rather than a liability. Despite her diverse geography of multiple relief patterns, three vegetation landscapes, three climatic zones and four cultural areas, Cameroonians remained true to her cultural values built on ancient kinship relations, beliefs and customary practices handed down from generation to generation. The people’s solidarity thus remained mysteriously steadfast, sustaining both present and future achievements – including her collections and museums. Cultural values based on language, religious rites, “divine kingship” and above all the mystical role of ancestors and the gods remained indelible messages transmitted by local art collections and later museums. Customary restrictions prescribed by local oracles thus served as “deterrents” to potential criminals despite the huge illegal transfers. All persons linked to the disappearance of sacred and occult art are known to have died shortly after their abominable acts. Something which does not interest people will never be able to move them nor would it last. Cameroon’s museum collections were and remain related to the culture of the people and so would not die. The conservation of an object would be short-lived unless accompanied by its original language, usage, handling and conservation (O. Konare, 1995:18-34). Her museum collections thus conformed to the principle of functional conservation which requires among other things that objects be conserved, used and sustained within their natural habitats.

To these factors of resilience must be added the role of public sensitization by national and international bodies on the one hand and African diaspora elites on the other. Despite the huge losses, the error was detected and stricter measures taken to safeguard the surviving patrimony – prominent among these measures have been the establishment and sustenance of community museums. This of course greatly impacted on the promotion of traditional system of apprenticeship based on the family unit for the transmission of skills. This system was also intimately tied to religion and patronized by kings, the nobility and experienced...
parent-artists. They were expert weavers, sculptors, blacksmiths, hunters and guardians of the arts charged with valorizing, conserving and transmitting traditional skills, art forms, decorations and symbolisms. In Babungo, Bali, Bafut, Mankon, Baham, Bandjoun, Batoufam and Otu, these guardians were charged with the transmission of the artistic traditions and community savoir-faire from generation to generation. This system kept these values alive and renewed them from within. Generally, skills were learned in the family or palace workshops where youths were initiated and given long training. This explains the sustained expertise of Bamum, Baleng, Bamendjou, Babungo, Babanki and Oku royal dynasties as sculptors, weavers, blacksmiths, potters and healers. To these should however, be added the selective adoption of some modern and effective techniques of conservation and restoration, new art production tools, the replacement of thatched houses with modern structures roofed with corrugated sheets (less vulnerable to fire accidents) and improved storage facilities. Sustained efforts are equally on-going for the restitution of illegally exported Cameroonian collections presently lodged in Western museums.

**Forging Ahead**

The way forward for the survival of Cameroonian museums hinges on a synergy of local, national and international stakeholders. Community leaders and traditional authorities as custodians of local collections should carry out inventories, prepare catalogues and establish computerized data bases on their collections for public information and documentation. Museums should equally be empowered and given autonomy in the financial management of their collections and programs. Local communities wishing to set up palace museums should among other things seek advice from existing ones, carry out thorough inventories of their holdings and put up permanent structures to accommodate them. In art conservation and restoration, priority should be given to preventive measures and environmental controls which are far cheaper than curative treatment. Given the present social climate in these facilities, governing bodies (boards of trustees) should improve the working and living conditions of their personnel (especially salary wise) to enable them resist unholy art deals. While making efforts to train their own personnel, palace authorities are called upon to regularly invite competent conservators from the National Museum, the Bamum Royal Museum and other institutions likely to possess such experts with the view to ensuring greater security of their collections.

To the Cameroon government and particularly her ministries in charge of culture and tourism, there is absolute need to pursue the on-going inventory of museums and art galleries. The status of the Cameroonian artist, especially local sculptors, painters, weavers, blacksmiths and embroiders, spelled out during the 1991 National Forum on Culture should be vigorously applied. Centers for the training of museum personnel need to be set up in every region (or at least a central one for a start) because the training of such personnel out of the country is very expensive. Regular conferences, training workshops and refresher courses should be organized to address problems of public, private and community museums at local and national levels. Furthermore, a national periodical entitled, “Museums Watch” for instance should be launched and run either by the Directorate of National Patrimony or the National Museum. A well-structured corps of museum professionals and researchers would also lay groundwork for the establishment of a National Order of Museographers.

To UNESCO, ICOM and other international partners, a review of certain international instruments is absolutely necessary for the survival of African museums. The 1970 UNESCO convention on the prevention of illicit traffic in cultural resources and the 1995 UNIDROIT convention on the return of illegally exported cultural resources for instance, should be revised with African realities taken into account. In their present form these conventions are designed to protect Western dealers and illicit collectors (whose weight is clearly behind the drafting of these junk legislations). They make matters extremely difficult for African and Third World communities who are the greatest victims of theft. Furthermore, and on account of the systemic corruption in Cameroon, international assistance should henceforth, be channeled directly to specific museums that seek and qualify for such support. New legislation on the prevention of illegal export should henceforth include the presentation of a centrally issued and verifiable export license endorsed by state authorities of the exporter. Such a license should sanction the purchase of objects. Secondly, clauses imposing the payment of compensation by parties requesting restitution to possessing parties in the event of restitution should either be reversed or simply cancelled.

**Conclusion**

The creation and survival of community museums in Cameroon has for decades been a source of worry on account of the diverse and somewhat controversial status of their collections. Treated as unstructured and unconventional holdings from the prism of the ICOM museum Code of Ethics, yet perceived as museums of the African model, Cameroonian museums have from colonial days been through multiple phases, challenges and paradigms. Hinged on local cultures, these museums represent the material culture of the Grassfields, Sawa, Fang-Beti-Bulu, and Sudano-Sahelian areas. It is therefore vital to reflect on traits of local cultures before elaborating a proper program for these museums most of which operate without collections policies. Analyses of data collected on the basis of pre-stated objectives reveal that Cameroon’s community museum generally fit within the category
of private museums which further subdivide into museums of history, ethnography and civilizations. Located essentially in community palaces, these museums assemble, interpret, transmit and exhibit objects that capture the history, migration itinerary and evolution of their dynasties. Secondly, these museums have for decades been beset by challenges centered on human and natural factors that result in huge losses from degradation and deterioration. Yet in spite of these hurdles, Cameroon’s community museums have displayed unprecedented resilience owing to strong community bonds and attachment to ancestral values. Thirdly, the way forward for these museums lies essentially on a synergy of efforts and reforms decked on local elites, government services, the civil society and external partners. Over and above these preoccupations, concerns of qualified staffing, upgrading the museum profession, sustained continuity, transparent and autonomous management call for urgent redress. That way, museums shall open up to traditional knowledge, knowledge of their history and people, notables and men of culture. The local museum cannot succeed just with the curator. As a community heritage, it invites and summons the concern of local, internal and external actors.

REFERENCES