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I- HISTOIRE

CAMEROON MUSEUMS AS HUBS OF SPIRITUAL ART

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Abstract

The so-called spirituality and/or sacredness of some objects in African museums have for decades constituted immense challenges for museographers and exhibition staff on account of the diametrically opposed positions held by Western and African schools of thought regarding this category of art. To date, they remain subjects of concern in countless Western and African museums where information on their provenance, religiosity and mysticism remains obscure. In Cameroon where some museum exhibitions remain restricted to a select few, where community museums continue to be referred to as *living collections*, and where the hiring of objects for exhibitions remains abominable, the notion of *spiritual art* is indeed problematic. This is due to their so-called sacred nature and the African perception of such objects as religious vessels rather than gallery art. This paper captures the typically religious nature of African art in general and some of Cameroon's museum exhibits in particular. It laments over the challenges of exhibiting traditional art for public viewing, and charts the way forward for the exhibition of the so-called spiritual art. It traces the typology of Cameroon's museum collections, identifies their spiritual nature, examines the challenges of exhibiting such spiritual art, and proposes more adapted exhibition methods for such objects. In this endeavor, it answers four questions: How are Cameroon's museum collections classified? What is the nature of their spirituality? What challenges confront the exhibition of such art in Cameroon museums? And how should exhibitions of such sacred objects be? A blend of qualitative data, oral tradition and participatory observation, analyzed on the basis of the African museographic model, Grassfields symbolism and case *Tikar* studies provided grounds for our conclusions. A proper exhibition of spiritual art in Cameroon museums must summon and harmonize elements of ICOM and African museographic techniques.

Keywords: Cameroon, museums, hubs, art, spirituality.

Abstract

La prétendue spiritualité et/ou sacralité de certains objets dans les musées africains a constitué pendant des décennies un immense défi pour les muséographes et le personnel d'exposition en raison des positions diamétralement opposées des écoles de pensée occidentales et africaines concernant cette catégorie d'art. À ce jour, ils restent des sujets de préoccupation dans d'innombrables musées occidentaux et africains où les informations sur leur provenance, leur religiosité et leur mysticisme restent obscures. Au Cameroun où certaines expositions muséales restent réservées à quelques privilégiés, où les musées communautaires continuent d'être qualifiés de collections vivantes, et où la location d'objets pour des expositions reste abominable, la notion d'art spirituel est en effet problématique. Cela est dû à leur soi-disant nature sacrée et à la perception africaine de ces objets comme des vases religieux plutôt que comme des objets d'art pour les galeries. Cet article décrit la nature typiquement religieuse de l'art africain en général et de certaines expositions de musées camerounais en particulier. Il déplore les défis que représente l'exposition de l'art traditionnel pour le public, et discute de la voie à suivre pour l'exposition de l'art dit spirituel. Il retrace la typologie des collections des

musées camerounais, identifie leur nature spirituelle, examine les défis de l'exposition de cet art spirituel, et propose des méthodes d'exposition plus adaptées pour ces objets. Dans cette optique, elle répond à quatre questions : Comment sont classées les collections des musées camerounais ? Quelle est la nature de leur spiritualité ? Quels sont les enjeux de l'exposition de cet art dans les musées camerounais ? Et comment devraient être les expositions de ces objets sacrés ? Un mélange de données qualitatives, de tradition orale et d'observation participative, analysées sur la base du modèle muséographique africain, du symbolisme de Grassfields et des études de cas Tikar ont permis de fonder nos conclusions. Une exposition appropriée de l'art spirituel dans les musées camerounais doit convoquer et harmoniser des éléments de l'ICOM et des techniques muséographiques africaines.

Mots-clés : Cameroun, musées, carrefours, art, spiritualité.

Introduction

The exhibition of African artifacts classified as spiritual in museums and galleries has been a subject of profound interest and controversy among art historians, heritage experts, anthropologists of art and museum professionals. Such art has religion as its primary driving force.¹ Though some these objects share certain qualities of Western art, African and particularly Cameroonian sacred objects were originally produced for religious purposes. In the context of African traditional customs, there was more to a carving than its form, style and aesthetic beauty. They were known to have content, spiritual meaning and significance for its users. Masks and figurines for instance were believed to be habitations of ancestral spirits. Masks, stools and other royal paraphernalia were used for the enthronement of kings, installation of lineage heads, and initiation into some cults. They were also capital in the decoration of great achievers and for mortuary rites. “Some masks and masquerades provided answers to ancient mythical puzzles and their presence in everyday life represented mythological spirits known to protect local communities from evil doers and wizards”. They were believed to protect the persons wearing them; used “to capture restless spirits of the living dead which could not be arrested at the moment of their death; and gave material expression in visible and tangible form, to superhuman beings and entities (J. M. Essomba, 1982, p.23, 42-45).”

Some objects (iron gongs, peace plants and so on) were symbols of secret societies and were only displayed occasionally to the public. Some were symbols of war and peace.² Other art forms could not be collected for museums on account of their mystical powers. These items “were religious adornments believed to prepare and fortify the wearer and dancers from dangerous forces” (J. M. Essomba, 1982, p. 23, 42-45). Others still, like camwood containers, cowry shells, gongs, prayer tablets and wine pots found in palace museums of the Cameroon Grassfields were used in religious sacrifices. They therefore enabled the Fon or his representative to appease the gods for any wrongdoing, to appeal for good harvests, to request

¹Religion here refers to all the means (prayers, sacrifices, offerings, rituals, ceremonies, etc.) by which man communicates with, or seeks the help of supernatural beings and entities. Grassfields art forms with such attributes included items such as masks, calabashes decorated with ritual adornments, sacred royal bags, ancestral statues, prayer tablets, sorcery accessories, human figurines, animal skins, snail and cowry shells and ornamental wooden containers. Spiritual art also included “ritual items such as live fowls, goats, animal blood, palm oil, salt, kola nuts, camwood, herbs, incense, water, soil, clay pots, knives, spears and many others”.

increased fertility, to pray for the rains, to applaud victory in wars or to dispel misfortunes and other bad omens.³

1. Problem statement, research questions and objectives

The exhibition of artifacts classified as spiritual has been a subject of profound interest and controversy among art historians, anthropologists of art and museum practitioners especially regarding cult objects of African provenance. This is partly explained by their sacred nature and equally by African perceptions of traditional objects as religious vessels rather than aesthetic art. It is on this premise that the long-standing *Conservation Debate* pitching African and Western schools of thought hinges. This paper captures the typically religious nature of African art in general and some of Cameroon's museum exhibits in particular, laments over the challenges of exhibiting sacred traditional art for public viewing, and wonders over the way forward.

Our study therefore sets out to trace the typology of Cameroon's museum collections, to identify their spiritual nature, to examine the challenges of exhibiting such spiritual art, and to propose more adapted exhibitions for such objects. In this endeavor, four questions beg for answers: How are Cameroon's museum collections classified? What is the nature of their spirituality? What challenges confront the exhibition of such art in Cameroon museums? And how best can such sacred objects be exhibited?

2. Conceptualizing african spiritual art

In traditional African culture, art, whether verbal or non-verbal, is functional. Sculptures, songs, dance, myths, incantations, etc are oftentimes expressions of African beliefs and practices. They are also artistic portrayals of traditional African religion. Most African cultures believe that ancestors and spirits act as intermediaries between the human community, deities and the Almighty. Consequently, some art objects such as masks, wooden and clay figures play intercessory roles between man and the world beyond. Most African traditional art forms have a religious dimension – translated by metaphysical, spiritual, historical, moral and cultural themes (VB Ngitir, 2014). They are centers of power, linking man's beliefs, his essence and existence to the metaphysical world. In the expression of such themes, prominence is given to rituals, worship and the offering of sacrifices to deities and ancestral spirits. The latter are said to be intermediaries between the Supreme Being (God) and humans. Such intermediaries are usually symbolically represented by figures, masks, totems and other worship objects. According to B. O. J. Omatseye, and K. E. Osewiyi, (2010, p.530) citing Arthur and Rowe (2001) and alluding to the Akan culture, "cultural symbols are used to portray the people's

³ Ibidem. R. Olaniyan, adds that apart from sculpted objects, these rituals often demanded live fowls, goats or rams (sheep), palm wine, palm oil, kola nuts, camwood, peace plants, water, herbs, blood, incense, gunpowder and so forth. These sacrifices and rituals were performed at special shrines. Some of these sites royal cemeteries, migratory rest points or heritage sites. While visiting Europeans saw these objects and ritual items as fetish art, their Grassfields users considered them representations and stimuli for religious and cosmological performances, some with transcendental meanings.³ In the royal museums of Mankon, Babungo, Bafut, Bali, Kom, and Oku were flooded with artistic creations for occasional worship and rituals. Their production was subjected to a code that clearly defined their forms, provenance, artistic styles and spiritual meanings.³ They transmitted messages that ranged from fertility and royal power to highly mystical and spiritual themes. The difficulty of expressing themes linking religion to societal issues and the challenges associated with the public display of spiritual art pushed Cameroonian artists to the use of symbols as art icons (J.P Notue and B. Triaca (2005) and this is the crux of the present study which holds the thesis that the spirituality of some collections in Cameroonian museums is an immense affront to their sanctity. Their public display exposes them to non-initiates, spiritually devalues them, and to an extent, commoditizes them. On the sidelines of the ongoing *conservation debate*, the theory of *functional conservation* appears to be the most rational and practical guide for safeguarding and exhibiting spiritual art in Cameroon museums.

beliefs about God, their attitude towards God and His Creation...” They represent him as Omnipotent and Omnipresent”.

Corroborating this, A. O. Azeez (2010, p.29) affirms that essentially, the place of African art is at funerals, initiations and festivals displayed in different ways. Whatever the form, its principal religious functions include rituals, ancestral veneration, the worship of deities and rites of passage.⁴ The use of masks in initiations for instance, makes the ceremony an event for the society and the individual. In some societies, masks are used to mark the passage of boys from childhood to adulthood and at circumcision. In such cultures, the typology of masks identifies among others, funerary and commemorative masks, fertility masks, secret societies, law enforcement masks, life-saving masks and witch hunting masks. Though works of art in Cameroon generally cover woodcarving, black-smiting, bronze casting, knitting, hand woven textile and others, wooden sculpture is the most prestigious and spiritual. First, it calls for initiation through elaborate religious rites and it is mandatory that the carver hails from a wood carving family so that it will be easier to start the art early in life. The most coveted works of spiritual art in the museum collections of Batoufam, Babungo, Oku, Bafut, Foto, Oku, Kedjom-keku and others of the Cameroon Grassfields are thrones, male and female human figures, twin figures, fertility objects, royal paraphernalia and masks used for masquerades and shrines (VB Ngitir, 2014). In recognition of these values and typology, we hinge our study on two paradigms: *reciprocal reinforcement between art and religion and conceptual art as an African legacy*.

2.1. Reciprocal reinforcement between art and religion

A key potential of spiritual art has indeed been its ability to liaise objects with religion. Musing further about these parallels between religion and art, Paul W. Pruyser (1976) describes their bond as “essentially arresting, powerful, and transcendent to the features of ordinary life, majestically imposing their respective presences, insistently proclaiming their respective truth or precepts.” Pruyser further asserts,

Both offer glimpses of the eternal and the infinite. Both strike us as awesome in their manner of confronting us, blissful in the momentary happiness they produce, tantalizing in demanding our recognition, assent, or belief. Any art object and any act of religion storms at us with the primordial question: "Do you believe in us?", "Do you believe in art?", "Do you believe in religion?"

Though these lines no doubt establish the relevance of art and religion and one's capacity to be attuned to them, further comparisons by the likes of Kierkegaard (1845) and Freud, (1930, p.114) rather highlight contradictions and incompatibilities between the two based on rank, importance, *ontic* status, survival value, utility, or mental and spiritual growth. Kierkegaard for instance sees dialectical tensions between the aesthetic, ethical, and religious attitudes, and the corresponding aspects of reality these present, leading him to map them out as three distinct *Stages on life's way* and requiring a *leap* from one to the other. Thus, the relations between religion and art are, despite their parallels, not always mutually reinforcing, or even friendly. They may be competitive, demanding from the novice in either a forced choice. Pruyser (2010, p.3). Such competitive relations between art and religion are instances of what Freud called the

⁴ Religion is differentiated from philosophy in that it operates by faith or on the basis of faith and intuition and not by reason. Religion is an aspect of human behavior and culture. It permeates every society. It has diverse manifestations in every human society. Religion addresses human behavior and gives meaning to human-culture and institution. Religion denotes among other things the belief in the existence of supernatural ruling powers, the creator and controller of the universe who has given to man a spiritual nature, which continues to exist after the death of the body.

"narcissism of minor differences". In the category of such fake associations, allusion is made to crafts, art of imagination, illusion and satisfaction. Consequently, to these authors, associations between the two are more apparent than real. However, the contrary holds true from the African perspective where every object is said to have a *content and symbolic meaning* and where there is nothing like *art for art's sake* (VB Ngitir, 2014).

2.2. Conceptual art, an African legacy

The proliferation of art movements the world over in the 20th century, commonly referred to as "*isms*" of art (formalism, surrealism, expressionism, cubism, impressionism, realism abstractionism and others), resulted from changing tastes for art consumption and systematic questioning of the status quo for the purpose of innovating the repertoire of art in general (O. Q. Essel & E. Acquah, 2016). Despite attempts by the Western artists to appropriate conceptual art as a European invention due to the scholarly deficit in many parts of the world, this art had been in active practice for centuries in African art long before it was seemingly revived in Western art in the 20th century. This art was not originally named *conceptual art* by its African originators. To the African, the art was a lived experience that manifested in their everyday art. It was both a performing and visual art. Due to the huge scholarly deficit on the conceptual art of Africa, some early Western critics began not only to write on African art but also to appropriate its origins and aesthetic value. In their studies, emphasis was placed on Western influence on African art and kept silent on how African arts gave birth to 20th century Western art. They limited the study of African art to its symbolic nature, everyday functionality, magico-religious and socio-political dimensions, thereby giving it a grotesque and mundane perceptual imagery. Consequently, it was tagged as *primitive art*. But ironically, this art inspired the 20th century art movements. The likes of Pablo Picasso, Henry Moore and other Western artists have publicly registered their allegiance to the ingenuity of African arts. The arbitrary use of colors, conceptual ideas and abstraction that appeared in Western art turned out to be confirmed legacies of African art. Conceptual art takes its roots from Africa and therefore does not qualify as *emerging art* as was wrongly perceived by the West. The adoration and idolization of Marcel Duchamp as the father of conceptual art is also contestable since the art was many centuries old in Africa before he began to practice it in the West. Duchamp's attempt at dematerialization of art and conceptual exploration was in practice in African art a long time before he surfaced.⁵

3. Towards classifying cameroon's museum collections

Despite the conception and establishment of virtual museums in the West and a few African countries, collections were and still constitute the basic substratum on which museums hinge. Indeed they are the *raison d'être* for museums, be they public or private for without collections, the museum's triple mission of preservation, conservation and transmission would be meaningless. Museums therefore require elaborate and pragmatic acquisitions programs that clearly spell out their collections policies. Such policies clearly spell out the sort of artifacts, documents and archives they set out to acquire, methods and channels of acquisition, the budgets for such programs, the personnel in charge, a precise schedules and periodicity. The

⁵ In sum, African art reflects the culture of a people and since culture and religion are two inseparable ways of life, we can then say that religion influences African art and it is for this reason that will make indigenous or traditional art to remain spiritual art. African culture was interwoven with Africa religion. Art is therefore a mediating factor within both religion and culture in Africa – hence its spirituality. The predominant bearing of rituals on art in the African milieu becomes even more glaring with the appreciation of the fact that both art and religion are considered twins of the same transcendental offshoot. For most Africans, visible forms of art were but a mirror of the unutterable myth of earth and heaven reflecting on each other. If art expresses reality in images and religion expresses ultimate reality in symbols, then art expresses religious symbol in artistic images. Art and Religion could therefore be designated not only as spiritual but ritualistic art.

typology of Cameroon's museum collections is a function of their status (public or private, missionary or community), their central themes and sub-themes. A classification of these collections therefore calls for pre-established criteria and scope. Their main sources have been gifts and bequests, purchase, archeological digs and exchange (loan).⁶

Regarding the classification of Cameroon's museum collections, UNESCO prescribes three principal criteria, namely the *categorization* method which uses very general descriptions (material, immaterial, movable, immovable, natural...), the *enumeration* method which employs object-specific descriptions to define objects earmarked for protection- common in Anglo-Saxon communities; and the *classification* method: uses object-specific descriptions to define heritage earmarked for protection by an administrative act - common in Francophone countries. Other anthropological canons for such classifications include the *emic* and *etic*. The *Emic Perception* refers to value judgments and classifications based on community perceptions, local customs and practices while the *Etic perception* is designed for heritage value judgments and classifications emanating from the researcher/ inventory agent. On the basis of these considerations as well as research convenience, Cameroon's museum collections have been regrouped into three main categories: public museums, private museums, community museums and missionary museums.

3.1. Public museum collections

Defined as museums conceived, owned, funded and run by the state, Cameroon's public museums were established between the 1950s and 70s in the principal towns of Yaounde, Bamenda, Buea, Bafoussam, Douala, Maroua and Mokolo. Unfortunately, while the National Museum in Yaounde (NMY) staggers on, the others have either become mere shadows of the past or have simply faced out. Code-named Provincial Museums (with the exception of the NMY), these museums essentially collected, preserved, and interpreted artifacts related to the ethnographic histories, artistic ingenuity and cultures of the cultural areas to which they were attached. Some collections were also associated with political events, emblematic figures and socio-political milestones that marked their provinces, towns and localities. The Bamenda Provincial Museum (created in 1959) for instance preserved the rich culture of the then North-west Province. Its collections were classified into twelve (12) categories, namely architectural specimens, clothing accessories, weapons, dance kits and instruments, ethnological specimens, furniture, sculptural specimens, utensils, zoological specimens, geological specimens, and archeological finds. The Douala Provincial Museum (created in 1952) on its part ran a collection of over 2000 objects but never carried out an inventory. Consequently, its collections were organized into rooms corresponding to regions and themes. They included the Bamum, North Cameroon, Bamileke and forest zone rooms. Collections of the Bamum room were further categorized into wooden items, human and animal motif stools, wooden bowls, commemorative statues, pipe-stems, low-relief plaques, house posts, masks, leather objects, ceremonial sheaths, calabashes and more.

The north Cameroon room displayed objects regrouped under hunting and fishing equipment, weapons (barbed and un-barbed metal spears, daggers, knives, shields, helmets,

⁶ Bequests refer to property formally willed to a museum by a deceased person; purchases refer to acquisitions by buying from dealers or other reliable public and private sources. Field expeditions constitute a typical mode of acquisition especially natural history, archeology and anthropology and this takes the form of field trips and/or expeditions. Archeological excavations often fall under the purview of field expeditions and are potentially beneficial to museums. Museums of art, ethnography, history or civilizations can also acquire collections through field expeditions. Collections may also be acquired through exchange or loans involving two or more museum institutions. This may be necessitated by specific exhibitions or requirements of a museum's collection policy. Loans enhance the acquisition of objects on a temporary basis for purposes of exhibitions, research or study.

arrows, etc.), leather and straw items, musical instruments, military and dance costumes, amulets and talismans, smiting tools, utensils, assorted clay objects, wooden beds, stools and more. The forest zone room displayed art from the *Fang-Beti-Bulu* cultural area. These included long wooden drums, stools, wooden human figures, musical instruments basketry, masquerade costumes, etc. The Bamileke room displayed a wide array of Grassfields art such as wooden objects (statues, masks, thrones, stools, drums, smoking pipes, door frames, etc.), beaded calabashes, bangles, horse-tails, fiber items, regal ceremonial vestments, metallic objects, sheaths, den guns and photographs.

The Douala museum classified collections under themes such as pre-history, protection, transport, first contact with Europeans and more. The pre-history galleries displayed essentially archeological finds such as stone tools, hand axes, ceramics, clay figurines, pipes, European currencies, bronze bracelets, iron spears and knives, etc. Under the theme of protection featured traditionally woven cotton cloth, raffia caps, lower body wears (*cache sexe*) of Matakam and Toupouri women, a straw hat and bracelets. Under transport were displayed model canoes, raffia items, brooms, baskets and more – all representations of the *Sawa* culture and water spirits. Under contact with Europe, one could find objects, written documents and photographs commemorating the Portuguese, Dutch, German, British and French presence in Cameroon. The Buea Provincial Museum (created in 1975) had collections that can be conveniently classed as antiquities and modern crafts. The antiquities included further sub groupings such as household utensils hunting and fishing equipment, dog bells, den guns, dance kits, ritual objects, statues, waist beads, etc. Under modern crafts were the following objects produced by contemporary artists: clay pots, wood carvings, (human and animal figures, stools, drums, plaques, masks, utensils), straw hats, paintings, geological and archeological specimens. Its general inventor presented 22 clothing items, 15 furniture, 5 geological specimens, 13 musical instruments, 53 sculptures, 163 household utensils, 21 weapons, 26 pottery items, 9 zoological specimens and 3 paintings.

The history of the NMY goes back to 1972-73 when the very first collections were put in place thanks to gifts from individuals, some traditional palaces and a collection mission launched throughout the nation by the then Ministry in charge of culture. Since creation, it remained fairly unknown until 2015 when it was reopened to the public. Its collections are estimated at some 6.000 objects representing the history of Cameroon as well as those of Congo Brazzaville and Egypt.⁷ The entire collection is displayed in many rooms of the two-storey building that lodges the museum. On the ground floor one finds three (3) exhibitions covering traditional musical instruments, historical images, Cameroon's architecture, and traditional costumes. On the second floor there are seven (7) exhibitions covering archives, photographic collections and the ethnographic museum of forest peoples. Other exhibitions cover subthemes such as maternity, state symbols, power and society, archeology, pottery and calabashes. Worth noting is the fact that the museum's permanent exhibition and entire collection cover the four cultural areas (zones) of Cameroon (*Sawa*, Grassfields, *Fang-Beti-Bulu* and *Sudano-Sahel*).

In sum, the classification of Cameroon's museum collections which is largely based on etic and UNESCO canons reveals that with the exception of the national Museum, the rest have either been transformed into some packing stores and abandoned to themselves or have simply

⁷ On creation, the museum was lodged by a small colonial building (the residence of the former German colonial officer Hans Dominik) situated behind the present Ministry of Finance, currently harboring the Regional Delegation of Arts and Culture for the center region. Administratively, the museum was placed under the aegis of Information and Culture (MINFOC), Directorate of Cultural Affairs, Service of Cultural Conservation. Its pioneer service head was Bernard-Patrick Ayuk. Before becoming the NMY in 1986 the building served as the Presidential palace of H.E Ahmadu Ahidjo. Since creation, it remained fairly unknown until 2015 when it was reopened to the public. Its collections are estimated at some 6.000 objects representing the history of Cameroon as well as those of Congo Brazzaville and Egypt.

faced out; secondly, 80% of these collections were/are crafts with wood as their dominant material support; thirdly, the collections of each provincial museum were anchored on local cultures of their dominant cultural area; and finally, they were essentially functionless objects either donated by individuals and some palaces or simply purchased from the craft market. Yet it must be admitted that many of the masterpieces that embellished these collections were spirited away by hungry workers, secret agents or even museum officials.

3.2. Private, missionary and community museums

This category can be defined as those Cameroonian museums conceived, owned, funded and managed either by private individuals or local communities with their local chiefs as major custodians. Though the earliest of these museums were born in the 1920s, the bulk of them saw the light of day in between the 1970s and 2010. These museums were particularly remarkable on account of their significant collections, the living nature of some and their high levels of public access. They included the Fumban royal museum created in 1922, the Alioune Diop museum (formerly the Museum of Negro Art) in Yaounde founded by Rev. Engelbert Mveng (1966), the International Museum and Library at Akum, Bamenda founded by Pa Peter Shinwin Atanga (around 1948), the Bandjoun Royal Museum (2005), the Babungo Royal Museum (2002), Mankon Royal Museum (2006) the Oku Palace Museum (2008), the Bangoua Queen Mother Museum in Yaounde (1980s), the Honorable Achidi Achu Museum in Bamenda, the Douala Maritime Museum founded by the Cameroon Shipping Council (1975), the Benedictine Museum at Mount Febe, Yaounde (*The small museum of Cameroon art*) founded by Benedictine monks in 1970 (K. Mbayu 1994:38-39). Regarding their collections, these museums collect and display ethnographic material, documents, antiquities, wooden, bronze and ivory sculptures, as well as specimens of traditional textile, terracotta utensils, basketry, beadwork, leather work, a few archeological finds, paintings and relief sculptures. Dominated by collections dated back to the reigns of kings Mbouombouo (1757-1814), Njoya Ibrahim (1889-1933) and El Hadj Seidou Njimoluh Njoya (1933-1992), the Fumban Royal Museum for instance, assembles, preserves and displays objects that capture the history and culture of the Bamum people, and particularly the milestones of the reigns of three most celebrated kings.⁸

Though hinged on slightly differing themes, the Batoufam, Foto, Dschang, Bandjoun, Babungo, Mankon Bafut and Oku royal museums generally address themes like royal antiquities, anthropomorphic masks, smoking pipes, wooden dishes and bowls, wine pots and containers, royal beaded calabashes, a royal wine container, musical instruments, royal stools, commemorative statues, statues and furniture, society and religion, myth, legend and history. In terms of classification, the principal categories included highly ritual and mystical objects associated with the king and other sacred cults. The second *etic* category of simple objects included musical instruments, traditional attire, weapons of war, and gifts from foreigners, traditional embroidery and smiting products. The third category of objects comprised unclassified objects such as farm tools, household utensils, smoking pipes, pottery products, colonial and missionary relics, plain stools and so on. Our *etic* classification criteria however, remain as varied as the various perceptions of Cameroon's museum art.

Generally speaking, by December 2008, these museums presented architectural elements, masks, statues, beaded objects, pieces of furniture, textiles, musical instruments, containers, war and hunting trophies, and other objects. They expressed the prestige and power of the kings

⁸ These include Mbouombouo the 11th king who was a celebrated conqueror whose military adventures significantly expanded the boundaries of the Bamum kingdom; Njoya Ibrahim was a great nation builder famous for his contributions to Bamum art and above all, the invention of the Bamum script; and El Hadj Seidou Njimoluh Njoya who founded modern Bamum (PA Ndumbi, 1979:11-12). This explains the presence three spectacular exhibition rooms dedicated respectively to each of them. For research convenience these collections have been grouped under three broad headings: regal prestige objects, war equipment and dance kits.

Cameroon museums as hubs of spiritual art

and regulatory societies. In sum, they were dominated by wood and a good number were antiquities. The Benedictine museum of Mount Febe was dominated by collections of the Abbia, there were Tikar, Bamum and Bamileke art specimens. They included fruit shells male and female human figurines, traditional games, and beauty objects. Codenamed museum of beauty, the museum valorizes rare masterpieces of Bamileke provenance, some made from wood and a good number from bronze. Its statuary is rich in diversity and two main techniques of production, namely wooden *sculpture* and metal work by the *lost-wax* method. The themes of mother and child which are very common in African art are indeed fascinating in the museum as depicted in maternity scenes of the arts of Congo Brazzaville, Benin, and Togolese art (J.M. Essomba, 1982). It capitalizes on the woman as an expression of beauty and mine of love. Royal patronage is also a typical characteristic of this collection as displayed in art of the Tikar, Bamileke and Bamum. Worth mentioning is the fact that oftentimes, objects from this collection and especially the statuary are used in exhibitions of the National Museum.

Table 1: Prototype etic classification of collections in Cameroon's community museums, December 2008

Support	Object Specimens	(%)
Wood	Head masks, statues, figurines, vessels,pots, jamba, utensils, lintels, etc.	59
Metal	Knives, guns, adzes, staffs, farm implements, machetes, spear heads, gongs, etc.	19.68
Beads/Cowries	Caps, royal cloth, stools, statues, neck-laces, bangles, etc.	9.84
Clay/soil	Wine pots, smoking pipes, vessels, containers , utensils, buildings, etc.	4.9
Raffia Fiber/ Palm leaves	Bags, mask supports, twines, hide-aways, etc.	0.98
Bamboo	Cupboards, shelves, baskets, cooking batons, injunction sticks, house poles, injunctions, etc.	4.9
Leather/skin	Mystical bags, mask supports, amulets, etc.	1.96
Textile/cloth	Masquerades, amulets, etc.	3.93
Feather	Headdresses, masquerades, adornments, etc.	2.95
Hair/ Cotton/ wool	Ritual figures, masks, vestments, adornments, amulettes, etc.	2.95
Stone	Ancient grinding stones, tombstones, fireside stones, ritual stones, adzes, figurines, etc.	0.98
Leaves	Masks, caps, etc.	0.49
Snail shells	Masquerades, herb containers, etc.	0.49
Bone/Teeth	Prayer tablets, amulets, bangles, neck-beads, etc.	0.49
Calabashes	Wine mugs & containers, utensils, dishes, cups, etc.	4.9
Ivory	Tusk trumpets, bangles, neck beads, etc.	0.19

Source: VB Ngitir (2014)

The above *etic* classification and inventory which reflect the current display in most of Cameroon's community museums is largely based on the nature, themes and functions of the objects. The museums were/are clearly dominated by wooden sculptures followed by iron works and beaded objects. They were mostly made from perishable organic substances and raw materials such as wood, bamboo, cotton (wool), leaves, feathers, metal (iron), beads, twines, cowry and snail shells, human hair, animal hides, ivory, bones, wax, stone, soil, clay and calabashes. Due to poor conservation and restoration methods these objects were left largely at the mercy of harsh weather elements and insects. Its curator also revealed to us that over 4000

objects not found in the museum, were either displayed in the royal court or conserved by the cult societies and royal chambers to which they belonged. Some of them were brought out only during the Fon's enthronement, annual cultural festivals or ritual ceremonies.

4. Spirituality of the museum collections

The potency of African art has for centuries established a close relationship between traditional objects, traditional religion and ancestral spirits. This liaison in turn confirms the adage that in Africa, there is nothing like *art for art's sake*, for, every traditional object is said to have *content and symbolic meaning*. N. Tamara (1984) adds that *every African sculpture is born, it lives and eventually dies*. Art to Africans is a form and vector of communication. It grows with culture and develops with human experience. Though decorative and other secular forms of art abound all over Africa, religious art was and remains the African genre, permeating and transcending all realms of society. And though art may be religious or secular by face value, it could also manifest inherent political, economic, domestic, cultural or social connotations in ceremony or ritual. The African mask for instance, is worn as part of a costume, but in ritual or ceremony, it symbolizes and incarnates the forces of politics, religion and more (Bohannon and Curtin, 1995, p.57). Most African masked displays are reincarnations of basic myths of creation – myths of societal power structures, myths of history and religion, myths of settlement patterns, etc. To ensure the efficacy of a myth there is need to sanctify some objects. In this process, the priest or king loans his human vitality to the mythical principles that are symbolized. Like saintly symbols in Christian churches, statuettes and figurines are not worshiped. They are used as symbols of forces, ideas, historical events or myths. These symbols are real in society and held as sacred; they stand for something important and holy. Giving living meaning to the myth through *intangible* and *tangible* art, is the most vivid way of making people recognize their dependence on them. Consequently, on account of their high genius, *homo* and superior species, *sapiens*, humans have the tendency to seek, comprehend, anticipate, communicate and even manipulate meanings of events, phenomena and entities around them. In extreme cases, they create meanings when nature doesn't. In this eternal mission of seeking meaning, man takes recourse to social systems, myths, religions and even art – hence its spirituality.

4.1. Spiritual meaning of art

Religious meaning⁹ is particularly apparent in art charged with supernatural significance and embodies the essence of human life and thought. Art's spiritual meaning is crucial even in societies where it does not serve as the nexus of supernatural belief. Japanese art for instance provides the classical means of conveying the profound truths of esoteric Buddhism; though San art (southern Africa) was largely secular, it was indispensable for the ritual healing dance where heat and focused attention combine with chanting and repetitive movements to bring some dancers spiritual energy, *num*, to the boiling point. Anderson & Sisters, (1990: 241) affirm that even in the Western tradition of pragmatic aesthetics, the efficacy of art rests upon the capacity to convey to the percipient, a message that is religious, ideal or essential in nature. In most of Africa, the original driving force of art had until recent times, been religion. Even in societies where the driving force was secular, their functional interpretations were incomplete without the spiritual connotations.

4.2. Sacramental attributes

Art may not convey only religious or cultural meaning, but several (combinations) of such meanings simultaneously. And when such messages reinforce each other, the effect is

⁹ In the present study, the notion of spirituality has been treated as equal to and synonymous with the religious.

particularly powerful and transcends normal modes of discourse. Gregory describes such communion as sacramental. The Phallic meaning of Sepik art is a good example. The wood, fiber, paint, shells, baptismal bags, prayer tablets amulets, hair and adornments that make up a mask, shrine object or juju house decorations are sacramental, while ardently being embodiments of spiritual beings. Specimens of these objects a graphically displayed both on permanent exhibitions as well as wall panels of the Babungo, Mankon and Bandjoun royal museums of west Cameroon. Just as in Catholic ritual where bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ, Sepik art objects convey a potent message. This is a fusion of sensuous medium with spiritual meaning to produce a meaning that is abstract. The Sepik spirits are powerful and intangible in form, yet in art, they become palpable, dynamic beings. While some meanings are overt, others are covert but art serves as a medium for their transmission (Anderson & Sisters, 1990).

4.2. Art and compelling action

Another dimension of art's spiritual meaning lies in its capacity to compel spirits to act. African traditional religion and customary practices make allusion to a multiplicity of ancestor-spirits, water spirits, and village hero spirits that are potentially very powerful beings, though their capacity to act depends on human intervention. Intensive worship empowers them, giving them the power to either benefit or harm their devotees; neglect on the other hand, weakens, deactivates and reduces them to insignificance. Hence, it is men who make their gods important. The praise given to Kalabari spirits thus took the form of art – song, drama, dance or sculpture, and Kalabari spirits are controlled by this art. The scenario is similar in Bafut where the *mamforti* figures represent the god and goddess of the Bafut people and a vital in atonement and protection rites (VB Ngitir, 2014). Hence, when a man acted arrogantly, they would ask, are you a spirit without a mask? Meaning, do you think we have nothing through which we can control you? Behind these figurative words, is a serious feeling that sculpture is a necessary instrument for controlling the spirits and that any spirit without a sculpture representing it, is dangerous since it cannot be adequately controlled (Horton, 1965, cited by Anderson and Sisters, (1990).

4.3. Spiritual artforms, symbols and iconographies in Cameroon museums

The most common art forms associated with African spiritual symbols and symbolism and particularly visible in Cameroon museums include sacred objects and royal paraphernalia, commemorative statues and statuettes, life-preserving art and traditional architecture. Sacred objects and royal paraphernalia would include royal emblems, insignia of rank and paraphernalia. In this category we find thrones, stools, sceptres, crowns, regalia, beads, bangles, elephant tusks, tiger pelts, headdresses, cups, ancestral statues and horns, some beaded or decorated. These are common in the Dschang museum of civilization, the Bafut, Mankon and Batoufam royal museums. Others include calabashes, amulets, charms, architectural elements (carved house posts, jambs and lintels) prestige objects, royal cloth, ritual antiquities and vessels. Generally speaking these were prestige, religious and ceremonial objects symbolizing royalty, majesty, supreme authority and ferocity. On these objects, craftsmen skilfully engrave various geometric, asymmetrical or symbolic motifs pregnant with spiritual meaning. Commonly depicted on royal furniture were royal animal motifs – the elephant, lion, buffalo, tiger and python.

Commemorative statues and statuettes also carry spiritual symbols and meanings. The representation and glorification of the king is particularly immortalized in African societies. In these kingdoms, artists use visual signs to skillfully represent the king's numerous political, social, religious and economic functions, attributes and qualities. The most common forms of

expression with spiritual meanings have been commemorative statues and monuments which are typical of the Babungo, kom, collections. They usually represent the king, his mother and one or more of his wives. The king's royal stature is often demonstrated by the posture depicted on an object: his head wear, a combination of bangles, belt, cross-band, spear in the left hand, sword or knife. The king is sometimes carved seated on his throne or stool, the latter bearing figurines or royal animal representations supporting the seat. The Kom throne statues and the *Afo-A-Kom* (Cameroon) are classical displays of royal supremacy and nobility with all their spiritual symbolism. Expounding on the spiritual values of *Afo-A-kom*, Quinta N. Atah (2007) states that *Kom* art was not just *art for art's sake* but had serious implications for the spiritual life of the kom. *Afo-A-kom* for instance was beaded, had a regal hair dress and a buffalo head as a support for the throne.

4.5. Life-preserving potentials

Ritual objects such as amulets, sacred vessels, masks and containers as found in both public and private museums of Cameroon, portrayed the king as a spiritual leader. They further reinforced his mystical potentials by enhancing his protective power. Such spiritual art also included carved, wooden and feather masks, calabashes decorated with ritual adornments, royal bags, ancestral statues, human figurines, royal insignia, masquerades, animal skins, ornamental wooden containers, and ritual items such as live fowls, goats palm oil, salt, kola nuts, camwood, herbs, water, soil, clay pots, knives and spears. The statuaries of the National Museum, Yaounde and the Benedictine museum at Mont-Febe, Yaounde have displayed rich collections of non-functional life-preserving figures made from wood and bronze. J.M. Essomba states that *there is more to a carving than its mere aesthetic beauty*. He holds that this was particularly true of sacred objects like thrones and masks. Each of them was known to have content, meaning and significance for its users. Masks and figurines for instance were believed to be habitations of ancestral spirits. Together with stools, they were used for the enthronement of kings, installation of lineage heads, initiation of great achievers and for mortuary rites. Some masks and masquerades provided answers to ancient mythical puzzles and their presence in everyday life represented mythological spirits known to protect the local community from evil doers and wizards. Such masks as exhibited at the Benedictine museum, Yaounde include a cowry-covered dance and initiation mask from Babanki (North-West, Cameroon), a human faced royal mask with hair adorned with cowries and ending by a kind of long plait (1890) still from Babanki, a ritual initiation mask from Babungo (1890), an initiation mask from Widikum (1860), and an animal-hide covered wooden mask used for worship from Essimbi (Essomba, 1982, p.79-85). They also protected the person wearing it. Masks and masquerades were used to capture restless spirits of the living dead which could not be caught at the moment of their death. In this context, the king, their chief owner and user, was a symbol of mediation between the "living" and the "living dead".

4.6. Traditional Architecture

The center of African art at community level was and remains the palace which was also the focal point of every kingdom. The first visible symbol of royalty and its physical, yet spiritual representation was is the palace, with magnificent buildings and traditional lodges. The palace is distinguishable by its huge structures with sculpted pillars supporting overhanging roofs. It holds an ensemble of jambs, lintels and sills framing the entrance on its frontage and interior doorways facing the open courtyards. In this architecture, an array of royal icons (human and animal motifs) is displayed ranging from realistic to austere schematized representations. They represent and sustain spiritual values and beliefs of kingship as they animate traditional society. These structures and functions as are reminiscent of the Sawa,

Grassfields, Fang-Beti and Sudano-Sahelian cultural zones, are vividly exhibited in the National Museum in Yaounde, the Dschang Museum of Civilizations, and the Bafut Royal Museum. Talking about community habitations, the Dschang museum (MDC) catalogue exhibits the prototype Pahuin hut with varieties of the male and female huts. This is followed by Fang-Beti-Bulu architectural sculptures and structures marked by three principal spaces: the religious, industrial and power spaces (Sylvain Djache, 2012: 88-91). Pre-colonial Sawa architecture as depicted in the Dschang museum was marked by the use of perishable vegetable elements such as thatch, raffia leaves, wooden poles, bamboo and later plank. These structures, especially the ancestral hut with its spiritual functions, underwent significant evolution during the colonial and post-colonial periods with the introduction of modern habitations. This is followed by the three architectural models of the Sudano-Sahel: The architecture of the plain, plateau and mountains (Djache, 2012, p.150-164). Yet the most spiritual of Cameroon's architectural models displayed by the Dschang museum are those of the Grassfields cultural area. Of these the most significant are palace structures with lodges of secret societies, cult groups, warrior and customary associations.

4.7. Other museum art forms with spiritual attributes

To the sacred, sacramental, compelling and life-preserving art with high spiritual potentials, must be added other mythical, transcendent and magico-religious objects found in the Foto, Bamendjou, Bamendjida, Oku, Babungo, Kom, Mankon and Bafut royal museums of Cameroon. In this respect, the common ancestry enjoyed by Grassfields polities generally and Tikar kingdoms particularly, play a tremendous role in the perception and interpretation of the region's ethnographic objects, especially those related to their migration histories and early cultural practices. In their migration process, certain mythical religious objects, musical instruments, farm tools, royal paraphernalia, prayer tablets and weapons were taken along for they were essential for their survival. These objects and their spiritual themes are vividly depicted in the Babungo, Bandjoun, Mankon and Baham community museums.¹⁰ Others include sacred outfits and vestments for worship, musical instruments, amulets and talismans, sacred sites, furniture and related objects, lighting objects, mediating and expelling devices, sound devices, lighting, smoke and protective devices, commemorative figures, plants and plant representations, inanimate objects, prayer tablets and related items, ritual vessels and purification objects, initiation, marriage and funerary kits, objects for sacrifices and sacred meals, objects for temple, state and private ceremonies, etc.

5. Challenges of exhibiting spiritual art

5.1. Internal Challenges

5.1.1. Absence of appropriate documentation

Concerns over dating and documentation have remained rife regarding community collections and museums, and this has been common for most of Sub-Saharan Africa generally, and Cameroon particularly. Be they Sawa or Grassfields, Sudano-Sahelian or Fang-Beti, traditional art collections have remained the reserve of cult heads and palace authorities who

¹⁰ Jeannine Auboyer, affirms that other objects of spiritual nature depicted in Cameroon museums include sacred outfits and vestments for worship, musical instruments, amulets and talismans, sacred sites, furniture and related objects, lighting objects, mediating and expelling devices, sound devices, lighting, smoke and protective devices, commemorative figures, plants and plant representations, inanimate objects, prayer tablets and related items, ritual vessels and purification objects, initiation, marriage and funerary kits, objects for sacrifices and sacred meals, objects for temple, state and private ceremonies, etc.

jealously monopolize and conceal information regarding spiritual and related objects in their capacities as guarantors and custodians of the collective memory. As these custodians aged out and passed on, the traditions were transmitted to those initiated to replace them. Unfortunately, the transmission of such traditional know-how and community secrets has for decades now, become another cause for concern as fewer and fewer youths stay home to embrace them and guarantee continuity. Consequently, many objects of the Babungo museum collections represent mythical animal and bird species that were long extinct and have never been identified. While some that have been ascribed ancestral status do not look old, others have been deliberately given dark patinas to make them look old. Numerous life-size statues representing Kings like Saingi I and Sake I do not look old and were produced centuries after their reigns. These, coupled with challenges of dating, the lack of inventories and updated catalogs, render documentation pretty difficult and rare. Anyone researching on these collections must therefore treat the information and dating associated with them with a pinch of salt.

5.1.2. Access constraints

Further to issues of dating and documentation, have been the perennial access constraints. It is no longer news that African traditional objects, known to have each a soul, a content and spiritual meaning were only meant for those who owned and used them in rituals in specific socio-cultural settings. Consequent upon their religious, magical and mystical attributes, these collections were subject to highly limited access. Limited to initiates and members of the cults that used them, many have never seen in public for years and decades. While some enthronement items - crowns, cross-bands, buffalo cups, and prayer tablets were only seen during the public presentation of a new king, others were only displayed during mysterious night-dance performances and masquerade displays. Access to them was pretty limited even within local communities and worse for public viewing or museum displays. They were meant for initiates and barred to indiscrete eyes. In an overview of accessibility challenges in palace museums of the Cameroon Grassfields, Mathias A. Fubah (2016) affirms that,

Museums in Cameroon are important heritage sites whose impact is enhanced when they are situated in places open to the general public as opposed to palaces. In the Cameroon Grassfields, home of a number of tribal kingdoms and a rich heritage site, museums in traditional palaces are particularly restrictive through their location in the centre of the kingdom's traditional and sacred activities. First, not every part of the palace is open to the public. Second, the palace is associated with royalty, elites and titleholders. Finally, custody or curatorship of ceremonial and ritual art preserved in the royal treasury or traditional palace museum is in the hands of the regulatory society or *kwifor*, also known as a secret society across the Grassfields. These restrictions act as a deterrent to a full exploration of the services offered in the palace, including the newly constructed museums, since the majority of the population is neither elites nor titleholders. Hence there is a need to work towards establishing museums in community centres outside the traditional palace premises.

From the advocacy above, the author posits that the construction of museums outside palaces guarantees greater and equal access both to visitors and local folks, enhances sustainability and improves community engagement in such projects. Though this submission sounds rational, it must be noted that African collections are subject to canons that differ markedly from those of Western museography. The tussle for an African museography rages on and African objects which are primarily religious, are not the same thing as Western art which is essentially aesthetic and encyclopedic. Above all, locating community museums within palace precincts situates them within the sacred security cordon and perimeter where they enjoy the invisible protection of mystical forces. Locating them outside palaces not only

exposes them to dangerous external forces but also provides ideal avenues for negotiated deals, theft and illicit traffic. Finally, new museological paradigms have emerged in recent times. The prescriptions enacted by UNESCO in its Convention for the Safeguard of the Intangible Heritage (2003) largely corroborate Alpha Oumar Konare's (1995) *theory of functional conservation*.¹¹ Consequently, both tangible and intangible elements are required to make a museum. Any one, without the other destroys the contemporary notion of museum. While the tangible summons the material collections, heritage sites and palace infrastructures, the intangible convokes the dance performances, rites, ceremonies, displays and other events that happen essentially within palace precincts. Palace museums are above all *living museums* which occasionally cede religious objects to the king and chief priests for use in religious rites, elaborate ceremonies, traditional dances and juju displays. They are later deactivated and discretely returned to the museum. While concerns of accessibility are pertinent, taking *palace museums out of palaces* endangers long-standing customs and challenges the new museological paradigms.

5.2. External dangers

As earlier stated, the exhibition of religious (spiritual) objects calls for meticulous scrutiny of all factors involved because the external dangers associated with such displays are overwhelming and disheartening. The history of Cameroon's art collections since 1850, it should be recalled, has been marked by colonial extortion, outright seizures, vandalism, theft and illicit traffic. One of the key lessons Africans must have learnt from this history and experience, is that the West has an insatiably huge appetite not only for Africa's minerals, cocoa and timber but also for her antiquities and sculptural masterpieces. With millions of such antiques already trapped in the museums of Hamburg, Frankfurt, Brunswick, Bavaria, Berlin, Paris, Bordeaux, New York, Washington DC, Brussels, etc. with no prospects for their restitution, the exhibition of more of the surviving collections must be the subject of serious reflection in high-profile conferences and colloquia attended first by African stakeholders only, and later, involving Western dealers and museum promoters. Even the hiring of collections for exhibition overseas has in recent times been jeopardized on several counts. First, as soon as objects from Cameroon or other Sub-Saharan countries land on European or American soil, replicas are rapidly produced by the receiving museums and prepared for eventual transfer to Africa, if need be. The originals hardly ever return. Second, while in Europe or America, these objects are *devalued, denaturated and commoditized*. They are transformed from religious (spiritual) art to aesthetic and encyclopedic art. Third, the collections are shipped from Africa almost for free when compared with the trillions of dollars made from them when transacted through 15-20 museums across Europe and America. One would rather say that this is part of the process of using Africa to develop the West. It is therefore, a rather sad but irrevocable position of this paper that the principal basis for Western demands for greater accessibility to, and exhibition of Africa's sacred (spiritual) art is and has always been to grab it. Once in their custody, all sorts of justifications for its appropriation are concocted and firm orders drafted by their governments for the enactment of so-called UNESCO conventions whose purposes include among others things to strangle Africa and milk it dry. The number of African sites on the World Heritage List is a clear indication of the place reserved for Africa in a neocolonialist world. The 1970 Convention on the means for combating illicit traffic of cultural objects and the UNIDROIT Convention (1995) for the restitution of stolen and illegally transferred cultural

¹¹ According to AO Konare, we cannot talk of conservation outside the natural habitat of the said heritage, because it ceases to perform the religious functions for which it was produced. Consequently, objects taken out of African community collections and ferried overseas are not conserved. They have been uprooted from their natural environments, rendered functionless and alienated from their original cultural settings.

objects, merely consolidate the position of Western museums hosting illegally acquired African artifacts and masterpieces by rendering their restitution a near impossibility.

6. The way forward

6.1. Innovative exhibitions

Prominent among proposed innovative techniques for exhibiting African spiritual art have been the use of virtual displays, mosaic photo displays, audio-visual testimonies and online exhibits. The principal innovation in these techniques is their non-interactivity and the absence of physical collections. Furthermore, the role of replicas could be capital in virtual exhibitions, photo collections and online displays. When associated with oral testimonies, video and audio recordings, information on such heritage could indeed be palatable to diverse audiences. Such exhibitions could therefore happen either in Africa or abroad, as the need arises.

6.2. Cultural events and festivals

Cultural events and festivals have also been acceptable to African communities whose customs prescribe that certain sacred objects be displayed for public viewing at certain times, periods and intervals. It must be noted that even on such occasions, the said objects are not to be touched, pointed at or photographed without permission. Evidence of their mystical potentials lies in the fact that unauthorized photographing of such objects in the past resulted either in a camera dysfunction or the absence of images on the photographed pages. With permission, such accessories are blessed to function normally.

6.3. Regular inventories and cataloging

Regular inventories and cataloguing of sacred collections constitute an important precondition for the exhibition of such heritage. This is crucial because in the past, such collections were never exposed publicly and information about their producers, functions, art forms, ages, production techniques, provenance, etc, was taboo. As many of such objects were only viewed at night by cult members who swore oaths of secrecy, very little was known about their artistic and/or scientific attributes. It is thus imperative that such objects be inventoried, documented and catalogued for any form of exhibitions to be contemplated.

6.4. Use of replicas

As earlier mentioned, the use of replicas in the exhibition of Africa's spiritual art could be a middle solution for soothing the rigid customs regulating the handling and use of such heritage. Though replicas are known to be identical with original objects in terms of physical form, morphology, iconography, symmetry or asymmetry, they are fundamentally different in status, material supports, authors, functions, contents and spiritual meanings. Generally, original objects are considered authentic while the replicas are crafts; secondly while the process of producing an original object is highly regulated by custom (sometimes involving total nudity of the artist, chanting of specific hymns and religious rites), replicas are simply produced like other handicraft; while African originals are active and functional, replicas are fundamentally functionless save for their aesthetic and encyclopedic attributes. Consequently, what Western museums need are not functional religious items but objects that valorize beauty, tourism, research and style. From this perspective, replicas and not originals are more adapted to Western needs.

6.5. *Change of mindsets*

The fifth approach to the question of exhibiting Africa's spiritual art lies in what we qualify as a *change of mindsets*, not cultures. Such changes could be based on two models: *inclusive enculturation*, and *restitution partnerships*. Inclusive enculturation consists in rendering those Western museum promoters, personnel and stakeholders who wish to work and deal directly with African sacred collections qualified to do so by initiating them into the secret lodges, cults and customary societies to which the objects belong. This would prepare, train and avail the personnel with the religious canons and decorum of African spiritual art. Those who agree to, and undergo this process, automatically become adoptive members of the said communities and societies. This would qualify them to see, touch, handle, and safeguard such collections. Their exhibitions shall however follow the options suggested in 6.1 above. The second model, code-named *restitution partnerships* consists of three dialectics: *restitution-documentation-partnerships*. Restitution of course involves the return of illegally acquired collections to their African owners. This would not only soothe the ever-mounting tensions between the African plaintive communities and the Western museums hosting their collections. Documentation refers to the identification, inventorying and cataloging of the returnee collections. This would make the objects more useful to the parties, visitors and other museum actors. In this process, advanced Western dating equipment and technology could prove useful. Partnership here shall be the fruit of befitting museums constructed in Africa (manned by both African and Western personnel), followed by the hiring of the said collections to desiring Western museums for exhibitions overseas following the models suggested in 6.1 above.

Restitution should entail a full reckoning with and reconciliation of how the object made its way into a Western collection. It should not just be about returning an object, but also supporting a discourse that acknowledges the role of colonization, power and the history of how it happened, while also building a system of equity such that global cultural heritage items can be shared by all humanity in a manner that does not prevent indigenous peoples of the world from having control over their cultural artefacts and assets (D. Durosomo, 2019). It is indeed lamentable to find European institutions clinging on to the very history it claimed never existed.¹² The lame argument on the absence of appropriate infrastructure has long been dismissed.¹³ Reid (2001:1) rightly laments: "It is indeed a matter of deep regret that the monuments should be ours, and the history should be ours, but that those who write books on the history of ancient Egypt should not be Egyptians..."¹⁴

Conclusion

The traditional art of Sub-Saharan African has been variously qualified by adepts of ethnocentrism as void of aesthetic norms, as primitive, and sometimes as fetish. These denigrations whether pre-colonial or recent, were misconceptions of what was and has simply been redefined as religious, sacred or spiritual art. In Cameroon, like most of Sub-Saharan Africa, the principal driving force behind the objects that eventually found their way into public and private museums was religion. On the basis of pre-stated objectives and research questions, our analysis of available data revealed four principal findings. First, Cameroonian museums present a typology of public and private collections which further subdivide into missionary,

¹² One excuse often advanced for the delay in returning items is that there isn't an infrastructure or proper facility on the continent to house them.

¹³ There are many institutions all over Africa capable of preserving, and transmitting their significance. A few examples include the Nigerian National Museum, the National Museum of Mali, the National Museum of Dar-Es-Salaam (Tanzania), the Museum of Black Civilizations in (Dakar) and over a dozen museums in Morocco alone.

¹⁴ Curiously, today, German, British and French researchers stream into Africa for information to help document the said items. The mess is complete when a Western exhibition attributes a Yoruba mask to Ethiopian tribesmen, or, as in another case, the history of a Cameroon Grassfields statue is narrated for a Namibian piece – after all, they are both African.

individual and community museums. Though the major material support (medium) for these collections was wood, followed by metal and clay, a functional classification identified them as museums of ethnographic, history and civilizations. Secondly, these collections were dominantly religious and consequently, spiritual especially, when analyzed on the basis of their functions in religious rites, sacramental attributes, ability to compel ancestral spirits to act, life-preserving potentials, their mysticism and transcendent attributes. Thirdly, that their exhibition both in Cameroonian and overseas museums has been fraught with controversy and challenges on account of the near absence of appropriate documentation, multiple access constraints and negative external influences. Finally, that for this category of African objects to be exhibited in museums, there is need for innovative exhibition techniques, the organization of frequent cultural events and festivals, regular inventories and cataloging, the use of replicas rather than original objects, and a change of mindsets by both the African and Cameroonian plaintive communities on the one hand, as well as the Western museum community on the other.

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