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Rapport de la conférence : Le Patrimoine culturel camerounais en Allemagne



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General theme: “Cameroonian cultural heritage in Germany: Sharing knowledge for (trans)national cultural rehabilitation”

Project director : DFG “Reverse History of Collections from Cameroon in German Museums”

Introduction

The international conference held at the University of Yaoundé I from 3 to 5 October 2024 brought together experts, researchers, political actors and representatives of traditional communities around a common issue: the transnational cultural rehabilitation of Cameroonian heritage objects present in Germany. This meeting, which is part of the activities of the second phase of the DFG research project, "Reverse History of Collections. Mapping Cameroon in German Museums ", aimed to popularize the knowledge generated in the production phase of the book "Atlas of Absence. Cameroonian Cultural Heritage in Germany". Over three days, debates, guided tours and communications highlighted the extent of Cameroonian cultural heritage taken away during the German colonial period from 1884 to 1920, and questioned the future of these collections through the prism of cultural restitution, cooperation or circulation, without forgetting the challenges linked to these prospects for treating this heritage in exile. The wealth of interventions offered a panoramic view of the historical, political and social aspects of the issue, part of a dynamic of sharing knowledge for a better appropriation of Cameroonian heritage. All the debates over the three days were brilliantly orchestrated by the master of ceremonies, Professor Colbert AKIEUDJI, whose leading role helped to pace and structure the exchanges, thus facilitating the fluidity of the interventions and the cohesion of the discussions. Each day brought its share of reflections and in-depth discussions on the legal mechanisms, the techniques for valorizing and preserving this heritage in the event of its return, the actors and actresses to be mobilized, etc. This report aims to briefly review the salient aspects that marked this meeting for the popularization of knowledge and exchanges on this heritage that has been absent for more than a century from the communities that produced it.

Day 1, theme I

A. Solemn opening, inaugural lesson, introduction to the *Atlas of Absence - Cameroonian cultural heritage in Germany*

From the first day, October 3, the conference opened with a series of official speeches that placed this meeting in its international and national context, recalling the importance of this event in the processes of restitution of heritage in general, and of Cameroonian cultural heritage in particular. Initially scheduled to begin at 8:30 a.m., the opening ceremony began at 9:30 a.m. First of all, there were the introductory remarks by Prof. Albert GOUAFFO, head of the DFG Project for the Cameroonian side. After the usual pleasantries, he clarified the

context in which the reflection was born in 2019, which finally led to the project in 2021, then its evolution until the publication of the results in the book *Atlas der Abwesenheit. Kameruns Kulturerbe in Deutschland* (2023). This project has thus entered its second phase, which is that of the disclosure of the results obtained during the first phase, the idea being to bring this knowledge to communities, researchers, journalists, members of civil society, political and diplomatic figures, cultural and non-governmental organizations, etc. in order to break the long chain of amnesia that has so far characterized the transfer of this Cameroonian heritage during the colonial period. To do this, it was necessary to produce a complete French version of the book, namely *L' Atlas de l'Absence. Le patrimoine culturel du Cameroun en Allemagne* (2024). While waiting for a complete English version, an automatic version in English already allows the English-speaking public to access the results of the project and to fill the information gap. In his opening remarks, Prof. Albert GOUAFFO stressed the need for Reverse Provenance, a research effort aimed at tracing the path of Cameroonian cultural property relocated to Germany during colonization, in order to better understand their acquisition and lay the foundations for possible restitution or cooperation.

He highlighted the arguments often put forward by European museums to preserve these objects, such as Africa's alleged inability to preserve them, and advocated for a reversal of the burden of proof, requiring holding institutions to justify their ownership of the cultural property held. The project explores solutions to overcome the legal, cultural and logistical challenges related to the repatriation of this heritage. Professor GOUAFFO also highlighted the importance of cooperation between Cameroon and Germany for a new relational ethic and effective restitution, hoping that this conference can lay solid foundations for restitution negotiations that benefit the communities of origin and the country holding the property. He ended his remarks with thanks on his own behalf, on behalf of his colleague, Professor Bénédicte SAVOY who was unable to attend, as well as on behalf of the entire team to the many participants who came from all over the world to take part in the conference.

The speeches phase continued with the speech of the representative of the Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany to Cameroon, Mr. Knut ZUCHAN, Deputy Head of Mission of the Embassy. In a courteous tone and respectful of the issues of the restitution question, Mr. ZUCHAN delivered the Ambassador's point of view on the Conference. Generally speaking, the German Embassy in Cameroon is willing to support restitution requests with a view to self-reconstitution. However, this should be done in a spirit of

cooperation and exchange and not conflict. These words sounded like a transition for the speech of the Dean of the Faculty of Letters of the University of Yaoundé I.

Acting on behalf of the institution, the Dean began by thanking the organizers of the conference for the initiative, but also for choosing the University of Yaoundé I and the Faculty she is responsible for. She then stressed the need for a new impetus for cultural and political cooperation in order to allow for harmonious reflection on the challenges raised today by the issue of the restitution of heritage assets from colonial contexts, which are called upon to serve as new bridges between the different actors. It was following this conciliatory note that the Dean solemnly declared the opening of the conference proceedings.

This second phase was introduced by Professor Emeritus David SIMO, who was responsible for the inaugural lecture.

In his presentation, Professor SIMO revisited the critical issues of restitution, particularly the question of the feasibility of the process. He highlighted the logistical and political challenges that need to be addressed, such as identifying the objects concerned and establishing legal and ethical procedures for their return. He also highlighted the long-term benefits of restitution, not only for Cameroon, but also for Germany, in order to restore a shared memory and engage in a reconciliatory dialogue. Without making any secret of his thinking, Professor SIMO stressed that the attitude of different communities on the return of property once removed or on the repatriation of ancestors is far from homogeneous, which requires multiple choices of means and strategies.

This first part of the conference ended with a guided tour of an exhibition of maps representing the routes of Cameroonian cultural assets in Germany. This was led by Dr. Richard TSOANG FOSSI. The latter traced the complex history of the translocations of these objects, from their collection on Cameroonian soil during the colonial period from 1884 to their conservation in German museums. He highlighted the lack of involvement of local communities in the management and conservation of these objects, which remain unknown to the general public, leading to a double cultural "absence", first on Cameroonian soil, then vis-à-vis the Cameroonian diaspora and the German public.

B. Panel 1: *The Atlas of Absence – Cameroon’s Cultural Heritage in Germany*

The first panel of the day allowed us to get to the heart of the matter with communications focused on the trajectory of Cameroonian heritage objects exiled in Germany. The objective of this first panel was to trace the itinerary of Cameroonian cultural

objects transferred to Germany during the colonial period. The speakers focused on highlighting the consequences of this absence on the national heritage and opening the debate on the issues of restitution. The session was moderated by Professor HEUMEN, Director of the National Museum in Yaoundé.

Professor Albert GOUAFFO presented an in-depth analysis of how Cameroonian cultural objects contributed to the formation of anthropological and ethnographic knowledge in Europe, particularly in Germany. He stressed that these objects, acquired in often coercive contexts, served as the foundations for studies on African societies but that, without restitution, this knowledge remains fundamentally incomplete and biased. He thus advocated for a return of the objects to their original contexts, where they can fully express their cultural and historical significance, and contribute to a fairer and more balanced reinterpretation of the knowledge produced in Europe on Africa.

Dr. Brice DOUANLA TSANGUE and Ms. Yrine MATCHINDA analyzed the risks of poorly planned restitution, emphasizing that it could lead to cultural ruptures and loss of meaning for the communities of origin. They advocated for a collaborative and progressive approach, involving not only governments, but also local communities, the true custodians of these assets. According to them, a successful restitution must include awareness-raising and knowledge-transmission initiatives so that these objects regain their full spiritual and cultural value in their places of origin.

After laying the historical and contextual foundations of Cameroonian cultural heritage, the conference continued with a reflection on the contemporary socio-political dynamics of restitution, where local and international actors intersected in the preservation of this collective memory.

C. Panel 2: *Crossed perspectives of socio-political actors and actresses*

The second session of the day gave the floor to socio-political actors and actresses, offering a perspective more anchored in local reality. This panel explored the roles and responsibilities of local and international cultural institutions in the conservation and restitution of Cameroonian heritage. It focused on the challenges encountered both in Cameroon and within the diaspora, particularly in Germany. This scientific interaction was opened by Mr. HEUMEN on the importance of local museums in the preservation and transmission of heritage. He advocated for better promotion of Cameroonian museum infrastructures in order to prepare for the return of heritage objects. As for the cultural advisor

at the Cameroonian embassy in Germany, Professor NSANGO DJIKAM, she returned to the place of the question of restitution in the Cameroonian diaspora in Germany and in Europe, while emphasizing the role of the embassy in stimulating reflections on questions of national interest abroad, but also on the support provided to the Cameroonian community in various aspects of life such as research and cultural cooperation.

In this vein, she mentioned campaigns led by Cameroonian groups, such as those for the return of the goddess Ngonso, and the Embassy's collaboration with German museums to raise awareness on the issue. The importance of cooperation between Cameroonian and German institutions to advance discussions on restitution was also highlighted. Furthermore, the creation of an Interministerial Committee in Cameroon in 2023 to address these issues remains partly a concerted initiative by the competent authorities in charge of the issue of Cameroonian heritage and the Embassy's services, thus highlighting the synergy work consisting of information exchanges and the implementation of strategies to address issues of national interest.

As for Sylvain MBOUM, president of King Mayesse Foundation representing the Mabi culture of Southern Cameroon, he returned bluntly to the history of the violent encounter between the Mabi people and the Germans in the years 1892/93. Due to the will of the German colonists to dominate, and the desire of the Mabi to maintain their autonomy, this encounter almost ended in genocide against the Mabi people who lost between 1887 and 1900 almost 75% of their population. The speaker described the devastating consequences of this human but also cultural "genocide": drastic decrease in the population, loss of territories, collapse of traditional institutions and cultural decline, particularly on the religious and linguistic levels. These traumas deeply marked the survivors, making them wary of any contact with the administration or the colonial authority. However, Mr. MBOUM highlights the current desire of the Mabi to rebuild themselves. Since the 1990s, efforts have been made to revitalize their culture and history, including through pilgrimages, the rehabilitation of chiefdoms, publications on the Mabi language and history, and the creation of an annual cultural festival. These initiatives aim to restore collective memory and obtain recognition of the wrongs suffered, as well as the restitution of stolen works and expatriated human remains.

Professor Hanse MBENG DANG's presentation focused on case studies illustrating the impacts of colonization on the Maka people. Through an illustrated analysis, he showed how colonization disrupted the ways of life and disrupted the cultural and social systems of this community. This presentation highlighted the lasting effects of colonial oppression,

calling for historical awareness and efforts to preserve the cultural memory of marginalized peoples like the Maka.

The issue of Cameroonian heritage in exile is also a question that artists are asking themselves, who, like Hervé YOUMBI, are wondering about the different possibilities of promoting not only this heritage in the event of a return, but also contemporary heritage, which is about to become an ancient heritage tomorrow. What do we do with these different heritages so that they are not sold off today or tomorrow? What will come back to tomorrow's generation, if today, by ourselves, we let the current heritage go? The artist also addressed the theme of the reappropriation of historical heritage from a decolonial perspective, arguing for a new reading of cultural heritage that integrates a critical and creative dimension. He explained how Cameroonian artists use art to revisit their history, reconstruct their identity and question persistent colonial influences. For Mr. YOUMBI, art is a powerful way to reinvent the past while opening dialogues on the future of Cameroonian culture.

Ms. EDJOA, Director of Heritage at the Ministry of Arts and Culture, and Secretary General of the Interministerial Committee for the Repatriation of Cultural Objects from Cameroon, discussed this institution as a crucial tool for the preservation of Cameroonian cultural heritage. She highlighted the strategic role of this body in coordinating actions aimed at identifying, recovering and preserving the country's cultural objects. Ms. EDJOA also detailed the joint efforts of several ministries and local or international organizations to counter threats to national heritage.

2. Day

Theme 2: The future of Cameroonian cultural heritage in Germany: towards a (trans)national approach to restitution

This second day, focused on future perspectives, began with a series of legal and historical contributions. The legal issues of restitution, often hidden in public discussions, were largely addressed in the third panel, which focused on the provisions of international law and its impact on the objectives of restitution, but also the need to call upon moral principles today widely shared by all countries to remove certain obstacles consisting of positive legal principles to the detriment of customary law that had until then governed African societies whose cultural property was plundered. Here, the role of archives in generating knowledge about the past and our heritage history was raised.

Professor Robert KANGUEU EKEUH, a public lawyer, thus exposed the contradictions between Cameroonian customary law and international law in terms of restitution. He explored the legal complexities surrounding the restitution of Cameroonian cultural property in Germany, by contrasting Cameroonian customary law, positive law, and international law, while calling upon the categories of wrongfulness and illegality, explaining how these concepts, although competing in theory, converge in the need to render justice. In this wake, he advocated for a return of the objects in order to repair the historical damage, while emphasizing the symbolic, memorial and identity value of these properties for Cameroonian communities.

As for Professor Emmanuel TCHUMTCHOUA, historian and specialist in international relations, he highlighted the harmful importance of colonial treaties in the confiscation of cultural property. He addressed the issue of the retention of African art objects by former colonial powers, after visiting Cameroonian belongings in a German missionary center in 2015. Following this visit, questions jostled in his mind about the conditions of transfer of cultural property to the West. It emerges that many of these conditions play in favor of the nullity of the transfers made, because they were done under force, constraint, fraud and deception.

The place of archives in the rewriting of the heritage history of peoples was highlighted by Dr. OLEMBE, Director of the National Archives. These archives, she recalled, are however not simply tools or sources, they already constitute in themselves a heritage, the restitution of which must be considered at the same time as that of cultural property.

The diversity of perspectives discussed during this third panel was extended in the afternoon of this day by once again bringing together researchers, art professionals and members of civil society.

Dr. Rachel MARIEMBE, Head of Department (acting) of Heritage and Museology at the Institute of Fine Arts of Nkongsamba, explored different methods of valorizing Cameroonian cultural heritage. She presented specific techniques, such as digital documentation, restoration and artistic promotion, to strengthen the visibility and preservation of local cultural objects. Her intervention emphasized the importance of innovation in the valorization of heritage, while integrating communities in this process.

Mrs. Julie LIKONDEM from the University of Düsseldorf addressed the sensitive and delicate issue of Cameroonian “human remains” preserved in German institutions. She

presented a provisional map of the human remains that she was able to collect during her research in German museums. She also highlighted the ethical, cultural and legal issues surrounding this problem, arguing for the return of ancestors to Cameroon. Mrs. LIKONDEM also raised the importance of diplomatic and academic discussions to raise awareness on this issue and lay the foundations for a repatriation that respects mortuary and funerary traditions. This last intervention aroused great interest and relaunched the debate on the restitution of entities with a strong emotional and symbolic charge.

Dr. Serges NOUKEU highlighted the extent of illicit trafficking of Cameroonian cultural objects, a worrying phenomenon that deprives the country of its heritage. As Deputy Director of Cultural Heritage at the Ministry of Arts and Culture, he outlined the challenges facing the authorities in the fight against this illegal trade, stressing the urgency of strengthening monitoring and international collaboration mechanisms. He also spoke of the need to raise awareness among local populations and work with international actors to protect this vulnerable heritage.

As for Mr. Flaubert DJATENG, Coordinator of Zenü Network, he began by presenting this civil society organization as a structure that, in collaboration with its partners, supports young people from Cameroon and Germany in a transnational dialogue around the restitution of African cultural heritage and shared colonial memories. By promoting social, civic and financial education programs, the organization seeks to strengthen the resilience of young people in the face of the aftermath of colonization. Since 2006, activities in 160 institutions in Cameroon have enabled young people to better understand their history and develop a sense of cultural pride. Through exchanges and artistic actions such as the exhibition "Staat Kamerun 1884-1914", the objective is to overcome the wounds of the past to initiate an intercultural understanding. The dissemination of the *Atlas of Absence* makes it possible to contextualize looted objects as living witnesses of Cameroonian culture, and this project aims to transform young people into key actors for social justice and identity formation.

Mrs. Sylvie NJOBATI, Director of Sysy House of Fame (now called Regartless), highlighted the essential role of youth in heritage and restitution issues. She encouraged the involvement of young people in the preservation of their cultural heritage, emphasizing their responsibility in the transmission and protection of cultural property. According to her, youth must be actively sensitized and trained to participate in restitution debates and initiatives, as they represent the generation that will perpetuate these cultural values in the future.

The day ended with a visit to the National Museum of Cameroon in Yaoundé. This moment of remembrance allowed the discussions to be placed in a broader context, recalling the still visible traces of the colonial presence on Cameroonian soil.

At the end of a second day rich in legal exchanges, the conference opened the following day on the perspectives of traditional authorities, thus allowing the first guardians of our cultures, their Majesties, to reaffirm their expectations and share their aspirations around the restitution of ancestral property.

3. Day 3: Kings/Queens and the question of remembering their looted cultural property

The third and final day of the conference was devoted to the intervention of traditional authorities. But before that, the floor was given to Professor Raymond EBALÈ, who returned to the place of colonial history in South Cameroon and in this case in Sangmélina, as well as the role of collective memory in the reinvention of collective identity. The question of the collaboration of some traditional chiefs was raised, emphasizing the need to courageously rework this past in order to lay more solid foundations for the common future.

As for the panel of majesties, this moment, awaited by all, gave rise to very intense exchanges with the university public and representatives of the central services of various ministries. This day highlighted the importance of traditional authorities in the restitution process. The chiefs expressed the desire to see their heritage objects return not in display cases, but in their ceremonial and ritual context, thus emphasizing the spiritual and symbolic dimension of restitution.



Panel of Traditional Chiefs, 05.10.2024

The panel was moderated by SM Bruno MVONDO, President of the Network of Traditional Chiefs of Africa (ReCTrad).

1. Intervention by Fon ASABATON FONTEM NJIFUA, His Royal Majesty of Fontem (South West Region Cameroon)

In his presentation, the Fon of Fontem outlined the historical sufferings suffered by the Bangwa under German colonial rule, beginning with the attacks and devastation inflicted as early as 1898 by colonial troops. These attacks resulted in major human and cultural losses, as the Germans seized sacred objects that symbolized the spiritual and cultural identity of his people. The Fon expressed gratitude to the *Atlas of Absence* project, which highlights the heritage losses suffered by Cameroonian communities and works towards their restitution, linking them to a collective and painful history.

The Fon then shared his efforts over the past several years to obtain the return of sacred objects. He mentioned the discussions he has initiated with several museums in Germany, notably in Brunswick and Cologne, where a dialogue around restitution and recognition of colonial wrongs has been initiated. According to him, restitution is not limited to the physical return of objects, but constitutes a true restoration of the dignity, identity and spiritual heritage of the Bangwa. In conclusion, he encouraged institutions and authorities to integrate the *Atlas of Absence* into educational programs to strengthen the connection of younger generations with their ancestral heritage and history.

2. Intervention by the representative of SM El Hadj Mohammadou HARDI BARKINDO of Lamido of Tibati (Adamaoua Region-Cameroon)

Hon. Hamidou SARKI, representing the Lamido of Tibati and delivering the King's speech, opened his speech by calling for the concerted pursuit of discussions on the restitution of cultural property. He congratulated the conference organizers for their continued efforts in this process, and expressed the need for increased transparency in administrative and diplomatic exchanges with international partners, particularly with Germany. He stressed the importance of national archives in this process, recalling that they are essential to document and justify restitution claims. He advocated for the digitization of cultural property, which would facilitate their inventory and preservation for future generations.

The Lamido encouraged the international community to adopt legal measures to protect cultural heritage, based on existing international conventions. Finally, he proposed to extend cooperation between Cameroon and countries holding cultural property through medium or long-term loans, thus enabling affected communities to reconnect with their heritage. Transparency and cooperation are crucial to the success of the restitution process. The digitization of objects and the use of archives as tangible evidence are essential measures to ensure an orderly and documented restitution.

3. Communication from the representative of SM POUOKAM TEGUIA MAX II, King of Baham (West Region-Cameroon)

Mr. Albert FOMKONG, Curator of the Royal Museum of Baham, representing His Majesty POUOKAM TEGUIA MAX II the King of Baham and Guardian of Traditions, took the floor to express the expectations of the Baham people regarding the restitution of 52 objects identified in German museums. He detailed how these objects were looted during the German invasion in 1905, under the leadership of German officer Hans Glauning. He also spoke of the historical pain of the Baham community, whose sacred objects and symbols of sovereignty were looted, causing a deep trauma that is still present. The representative quantified the economic losses caused by the confiscation of these objects, estimating that each day of absence contributed to a considerable economic loss.

He thus demanded financial compensation of 2.95 billion CFA francs, which would be used to rebuild the Royal Baham Museum and create a training center for traditional crafts. The intervention ended with an appeal to Germany for rapid restitution and recognition of the harm done. Restitution is not only a question of returning objects, but also of moral and

economic reparation. Affected communities, such as the Baham people, expect financial compensation for the harm suffered and to rebuild their cultural heritage.

**4. Intervention by the representative of SM DJAMPOU TCHATCHOUANG
Anick Julio, King of Bangoua (West Region-Cameroon)**

The representative of His Majesty DJAMPOU TCHATCHOUANG Anick Julio, King of the Bangoua in the person of the Notable of the Royal Court, Dr. Jean Pierre TANKIO, began his speech by expressing his gratitude to the organizing committee and the participants for the excellence of the discussions during the three days of the conference. He particularly emphasized the importance of young people and students in this process of restitution of cultural heritage. His communication then focused on the central role of objects of worship in African societies. He recalled that these objects, today described as "art objects" in Western museums, are in reality sacred relics used to communicate with ancestors and the divine. Their spiritual importance goes far beyond simple aesthetics, as they support liturgy and religious rites.

The representative expressed concern about the return of these objects without the appropriate rites: He insisted that their restitution must be accompanied by specific ritual ceremonies to "purify" these objects that have been defiled by their movement and handling by profane hands. Without these rites, their return risks constituting a new spiritual "fault", which could have negative consequences for the communities. He also warned against commercializing the restitution process: In his view, the reparation of the wrongs caused by the dispossession must not be transformed into a mercantile operation. He advocated a symbolic payment, rather than a financial bargain, in order to respect the sacred nature of these objects. Finally, he proposed that Western States and institutions contribute to the rehabilitation of sacred places in Africa, not only by building museums for the public exhibition of the objects, but also by creating sanctuaries where these objects could regain their liturgical and mystical role. This collaboration would symbolize a true reparation and a return to spiritual order, respecting African traditions and beliefs.

**5. Intervention by His Majesty Bertrand EFFOUDOU III, Superior Chief of Atok
(Eastern Region - Cameroon)**

His Majesty EFFOUDOU III, Superior Chief of the Maka-Bebend first degree chiefdom of ATOK, retired Senior Civil Administrator, began his speech by addressing his greetings to the audience, expressing his gratitude for holding the conference and emphasizing

its importance for the preservation of Cameroonian cultural heritage. He also wished all teachers a happy holiday, recalling the nobility of their profession, which he compared to that of traditional chiefs.

Getting to the heart of the matter, he recounted the arrival of the Germans in the Maka village, called *Atok* (“a pool where one finds the good and the bad”). The Germans settled on these lands after sailing and landing on this shore, thus marking the beginning of their domination over the territory. The speaker described how the leader at the time, anticipating the cruelty of the invaders, chose to welcome the Germans wisely, preferring to negotiate to avoid unnecessary losses. This strategic choice avoided an immediate confrontation, but did not prevent the Germans from seizing the land and creating plantations, while imposing heavy taxes on the population.

He then recounted a poignant episode of resistance against a German tax collector. Using a ruse, the villagers stretched out a vine that caused the collector to fall, causing his accidental death. This event symbolized the Maka's silent resistance to the Germans, although reprisals could not take place due to the end of World War I and the flight of the colonial troops.

The speaker then expanded his remarks, explaining that the Maka, like other peoples of Eastern Cameroon, suffered German domination, with the loss of many lives and the dispossession of their lands and cultural objects.

In conclusion, he stressed the importance of ancestral memory: “A man who cuts himself off from his ancestors loses everything.” According to him, it is imperative to find and honor the graves of ancestors and repatriate their remains. He urged the government and universities to support restitution efforts, stressing the scale of the necessary reparations, which could amount to trillions of CFA francs.

6. Intervention of SM Rose Christelle EKOUMOU MINDJOULI II, Head of the Mabi group Pfiébouri of Kribi (Southern Region of Cameroon)

Her Majesty Rose Christelle EKOUMOU MINDJOULI II, Superior Chief of the Mabi group Pfiéburi, gave a poignant testimony on the consequences of German, then French, colonization on her people. She began by recalling the strategy of "divide and rule" used by the colonizers to weaken the Mabi, notably through massacres, summary executions, and a genocide that took place between 1893 and 1916. Colonial repression led to a total

disorganization of the social, cultural and territorial structures of the Mabi people, profoundly marking their history.

She then addressed the issue of the cultural property of the Mabi people, listed among the 40,000 objects in Germany, explaining that these sacred objects were obviously not exported of their own free will, but looted in a context of war and resistance to the colonial invader. The looting dispossessed the Mabi of many ritual and cult objects, including sacred objects such as those linked to the "Bierry " cult and the Ngil brotherhood, as well as human remains.

Human remains have a special significance in the Mabi cosmology: The head, in particular, is seen as the seat of the soul and vital energy. The return of the heads of their ancestors, said Her Majesty, would allow them to be given a dignified burial, in accordance with their past bravery, and thus allow their spirits to rest in peace. On the subject of material goods, Her Majesty stressed the importance of their restitution not only to preserve collective memory, but also to revive the spiritual link between the objects and the community of origin. These objects, which bear witness to the glorious past of the Mabi people, must be exhibited and taught to future generations. She also mentioned the creation of the King Mayesse Foundation in 2016, dedicated to the preservation of Mabi cultural heritage, as well as the restoration of their dignity, tarnished by colonization. This foundation has received a clear mandate from the Mabi community to take the necessary steps to return cultural property.

Regarding expectations of the countries holding the looted property, Her Majesty MINDJOULI II requested, firstly, recognition of the seriousness of the crimes committed against the Mabi people, accompanied by official repentance, as has been done for other peoples in Africa and elsewhere. She also insisted on the need for the countries holding the property to collaborate with the Cameroonian State to organize the complete restitution of these properties. In addition, she pleaded for the profits accumulated by the exploitation of these properties for more than 130 years to be used to finance the construction of the infrastructure necessary for their conservation. In conclusion, Her Majesty expressed the will of the Mabi people to see a memorial and a museum of civilizations built on the site of Mayesse, where the tomb of their leader still stands today. She proposed to rehabilitate the sacred forest that once bordered the sacred Lomé Bourré River, making the place a center of pilgrimage, ritual, learning and cultural tourism.

7. Intervention of HRH Fon ANGWAFOR IV Fru Asaah of Mankon (North West Region Cameroon)

His Majesty began by expressing his gratitude for the warm welcome and recognition of his father's contributions to traditional administration in Cameroon. He recalled that Angwafo III was the first traditional chief to enter Parliament in 1963. Representing the rich cultural heritage of the Mankon people, he said he was honored to address the conference which focused on the restitution of Cameroonian collections held in German museums. The chief spoke of the devastating effects of colonialism, including Mankon's war against German explorer Dr. Eugen Zintgraff. This war, fought in three phases between 1890 and 1895 and 1902, led to the looting of Mankon artifacts and the destruction of the palace. In the third phase, the Germans burned down the palace and looted the cultural assets. A prince, Fomu Karam, sacrificed himself to save the king, but his body was never found. The leader pointed out that many stolen artifacts, symbols of Mankon heritage and identity, are now in German museums. He expressed hope that with research like the *Atlas of Absence*, a discussion about restitution can begin.

He called for meaningful dialogue, compensation for the burned palace, and the establishment of a transparent process that respects Mankon traditions. The return of these artifacts would not only restore Mankon heritage, but also redress historical injustices. His Majesty concluded by calling for future partnerships to foster cultural exchange and a better understanding of shared histories, emphasizing that restitution is also about restoring dignity and reaffirming cultural narratives.

8. Intervention of His Majesty EDING BATA Merveille, Traditional Chief of 3rd degree of Mbengue Canton Bakoko Adie -Edéa 1st (Littoral Region)

His Majesty Eding Batta Merveille, Prince of the Royal family NDOG BASSENBEN - ADIE, Traditional Chief of 3rd degree of Mbengue Canton Bakoko Adie-Edéa 1st, Assistant Lecturer in the Management Department of the FSEG of the University of Yaoundé II. The traditional chief began his speech by emphasizing the need to better understand the history of inter-tribal wars upon the arrival of the Germans, as well as the issues surrounding looted cultural property. He recalled that internal conflicts between kingdoms had weakened certain chiefdoms, thus allowing the colonizers to take advantage of them to impose themselves. He particularly referred to the war between the kingdom of Mako and that of Kindia, emphasizing that these pre-existing tensions had been exploited by the Germans to penetrate

and dominate the region. The speaker also mentioned that one of the greatest challenges lies in the confusion over the origin of certain cultural objects.

He explained that some objects found in Germany, although attributed to a particular region, actually come from other areas, sometimes obtained through inter-regional exchanges before colonization. He therefore called for careful clarification of sources to avoid historical errors in the restitution of objects. In addition, he mentioned another important aspect: The destruction of the traditional sanctuary by the infiltration of a colonial agent, leading to the decimation of the last traditional priests. He stressed that Christianity had played a key role in the destruction of traditional culture and religious practices, thus accentuating the erasure of spiritual and social structures. The traditional leader insisted on the need to adopt reparation measures that include not only the return of looted objects but also a recognition of the moral and spiritual harm suffered by the peoples. He also advocated for the history of these events to be taught in schools from an early age, so that future generations would be aware of the struggles waged by their ancestors.

**9. Speech by Her Majesty Dr. Joséphine MANI MBENA, Traditional Chief
MELEN 7A**

Her Majesty began by asking a crucial question about how to redress past injustices while addressing current challenges. She recalled that while focusing on historical wrongs caused by colonizers such as the Germans and the French, it is essential not to lose sight of contemporary realities. She asserted that the exploitation and dispossession of cultural property continues today, albeit in more subtle forms. As examples, Her Majesty mentioned the fabrication of false documents to facilitate the illegal export of cultural objects, as well as the discovery of a museum in China dedicated to Cameroonian cultural objects, a fact that was recently revealed. She raised the question of whether Cameroon has the necessary tools to authenticate and protect its cultural property.

According to the Chief, vigilance is required for the future, and she insisted that the youth must be trained and equipped to lead this fight. Adults must pass on their knowledge to future generations, and she expressed her support for initiatives such as this conference, which contribute to this transmission. The history of Cameroon, she added, must be revised and taught, starting with families, then in schools, in order to make the hidden aspects of this history more accessible. Regarding reparations, the speaker stressed that the forms of reparation must be defined in a collegial manner. They should be varied, both moral and

material. She recalled that Cameroonian human and cultural objects have been exported, and that she has even seen an object as banal as a goat exhibited in a park in Berlin.

The closing ceremony of the conference was marked by a solemn presentation of certificates of participation, symbolizing the recognition of everyone's efforts and contributions. First, the traditional Chiefs, guarantors of cultural values, received their certificates, followed by the various speakers who enriched the discussions with their expertise, then the dedicated members of the organizing committee, whose work behind the scenes ensured the success of the event.

To conclude this day in a symbolic and spiritual manner, the traditional Chiefs proceeded with a final blessing, a significant act aimed at sealing the commitment of all to pursue the objectives of the conference. This moment of meditation and blessing reflects the deep link between traditional knowledge and the modern issues addressed during these days of reflection, reminding everyone of the importance of preserving and promoting cultural heritage.

General conclusion

The conference ended with a shared feeling: that of the urgency of restitution, but also of the complexity of the process. The discussions revealed that restitution must be thought of in a collaborative dynamic between governments, cultural institutions and local communities. While significant challenges remain, particularly on the legal and logistical levels, this conference made it possible to identify concrete avenues of action to accelerate the transnational cultural rehabilitation of Cameroonian heritage.

Thanks

The organizers would like to warmly thank all the speakers, participants and partners who contributed to the success of this event and made it possible to address such a delicate subject with seriousness, respect and commitment. Their thanks also go to the authorities of the University of Yaoundé I for its administrative and infrastructural support, the Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany for its ongoing involvement in issues of restitution of Cameroon's cultural property as well as ancestral relics, and to the DFG (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft), which made financially possible the holding of this work, but also the entire project of mapping Cameroonian cultural property in Germany.

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The rapporteurs:

Mrs. Absatou Danari (MA, University of Dschang)

Dr. Brice Douanla Tsangue (University of Dschang)

Dr. Richard Tsogang Fossi (TU-Berlin/University of Dschang)

Coordinator:

Prof. Dr. Albert Gouaffo (University of Dschang)