

**Cultural goods in Germany and their coloniality :  
The view of Cameroonian civil society**

To present our point of view on this subject, we will approach it from the angle of the activities carried out in Cameroon in the last half of 2024. Zenu Network is a member of the Technical Commission in charge of legal affairs of the Interministerial Committee in charge of the repatriation of cultural goods illegally exported during colonisation.

**Participation in the Interministerial Committee on Cameroonian cultural property looted during colonisation**

Since 2023, Cameroon has had an Interministerial Committee responsible for the repatriation of cultural property illegally exported during colonisation. During the 3<sup>rd</sup> meeting of the members of this Interministerial Committee held on 1<sup>st</sup> November 2024, the draft national strategy was amended, the Technical Commissions created by the Minister and their respective members were presented, and the action plans of the 8 Technical Commissions were approved. There are 3 volumes of the national strategy document, the first addresses the issue in a general way, the second is specific to Cameroonian cultural property in Germany and the last is made up of the action plans together with the timetables and budgets of the 8 technical commissions. The commissions are as follows:

1. The Commission for the Collection of Cultural Property, whose mission is to *"carry out all operations necessary for the departure and arrival in Cameroon of cultural property from each cultural area that has been illegally exported abroad"*.
2. The Commission for the reconstitution of routes of provenance and contexts of acquisition, whose mission is *"to carry out all investigations necessary for the identification and location of cultural objects from each cultural area illegally exported abroad"*.
3. The Commission for the identification of various categories of museums and the monitoring of the repatriation of their cultural property, whose mission is *"to carry out all the operations necessary for the modernisation and/or construction of the museums that are to receive the returned cultural property"*.
4. The Diplomacy and Negotiations Commission is responsible for *"conducting all diplomatic procedures and negotiations with the governments and other public and private institutions of foreign countries holding Cameroonian cultural heritage assets"*.
5. The Legal Affairs Commission, whose remit is to *"ensure compliance with the laws and regulations governing the repatriation of Cameroonian cultural heritage illegally exported abroad"*.
6. The Commission for the Organisation of the Reception Ceremony for Cultural Objects is responsible for *"carrying out all the operations required for the solemn organisation of the reception of cultural objects illegally exported abroad"*.
7. The Finance and Logistics Committee, which is *"responsible for budgetary and material issues"*.
8. The Communication Commission *"coordinates and monitors all communication activities relating to the repatriation of cultural goods illegally exported abroad"*.

The creation of these Technical Commissions and their operationalisation is a major step forward for the Cameroonian government in this area. The Chairman of each commission convenes the sessions. Session reports are sent to the Interministerial Committee, on which seven ministries and the Prime Minister's Office are represented. This committee meets at least twice a year. However, when examining the action plans of the Technical Commissions, there are overlaps in their missions that can lead to conflicts of competence. In terms of membership, the same people sometimes sit on several commissions. This can be an advantage, because of the informal communication, but if

meetings are held simultaneously, the work can be slowed down. As far as operations are concerned, information is not exchanged between the commissions directly, but through the meetings of the Interministerial Committee (held every six months), at which each commission presents its report. The terms of reference of the technical commissions cover all concerns relating to the restitution of illegally exported cultural property. A consensual, transparent, less top-down, less centralised and more accountable approach could lead to better management of this restitution.

Cameroon has a National Council of Traditional Leaders. Two technical commissions include representatives of this body. The Council must be able to meet the challenge of bringing together all the traditional authorities in a social context that is currently fragmented along political and ethnic lines. There are several requests for the restitution of Cameroonian artefacts, initiated by communities, village elites, the diaspora and certain independent researchers. Through its national strategy, the Cameroonian government is demonstrating its political will to organise and manage this process. However, this position is not accepted by all parties. Some communities are afraid of the prevailing corruption and do not want to be held to ransom or blackmailed by civil servants. Others are simply afraid of having their cultural property confiscated for presentation at national level without their consent. On the other hand, there are communities who feel that the government should explain its strategy better and involve the other players more so as to rally all the communities behind common objectives.

According to the national strategy, "restitution to Cameroon is a matter between the two States". The government has already made it clear that it is opposed to "German institutions negotiating directly with the claimant communities" without going through the Interministerial Committee, an institution set up by the Presidency of the Republic.

Apart from the Commission for the identification of various categories of museums and monitoring the repatriation of their cultural property, all the technical commissions have at least one representative from civil society. This is a topical issue, and a strong involvement of civil society would support the government's efforts in terms of community relations, the reconstruction of itineraries and history, communication, mobilisation of stakeholders and funds, de-traumatisation, and so on.

### **Relations with communities and chiefdoms**

*Zenü Network* and *Esperanza Cade* recently launched a survey among traditional chiefs to find out their views on the repatriation of cultural goods from Germany. The response from the chiefs was not as enthusiastic as we had hoped. Those who did express an interest were willing to contribute to the discussions and take part in activities to find a better way of organising the return of objects to Cameroon. The interest of these chiefs and their communities in this restitution process is a fact. The way to handle it and the responsibilities have not yet been clarified for the majority. The same chiefs dispose of communal spaces that could be dedicated to displaying these artefacts. For them, these artefacts should be part of the educational process for young Cameroonians. Human remains are a major concern. Several traditional chiefs would like to organise the funerals of monarchs murdered during colonisation.

Many questions arose: Why is the Cameroon government afraid of the communities? What is the number and quality of the objects from our chiefdoms? These objects are currently in museums and are generating money. Are we going to talk about this money too? Why were the Germans so cruel? What are the results of the exchanges between the German and Cameroonian governments? How is restitution going in other countries that were colonised by Germany?

### **Traditional chiefs from the West visit Germany**

At the end of October 2024, Princess Espérance Fezeu led a delegation of traditional chiefs to Germany, anxious to see Cameroonian artefacts displayed in public museums. It should be noted that information is circulating more and more about the restitution and is arousing the interest of these monarchs. They all want to know the number and type of objects from their chieftaincies that are on display. These visits are also an opportunity for the diaspora to discuss the issues surrounding the restitution. Independent elites and researchers have sometimes initiated actions to demand restitution, without really involving the traditional chiefs or the government.

### **Opening of the "Kamerun Staat" exhibition on 29 October 2024**

*doual'art centre d'art contemporain*, the Musée National du Cameroun, the Goethe-Institut in Cameroon and the Museum am Rothenbaum (MARKK) in Hamburg have opened the exhibition "Once upon a time, the birth of the Staat Kamerun, 1884-1914". This exhibition is currently in Cameroon: at the Musée National in Yaoundé until 28 February 2025, it will continue in Buea and then Douala. The launch was attended by German Minister of State Katja Keul and a number of ambassadors to Cameroon. There was a huge turnout on the first day, bringing together officials and major players in the field of art and culture in Cameroon. There is currently a call for contributions for a national symposium to be held from 19 to 21 February 2025. The *doual'art* structure has a cultural centre that will host the exhibition in its final phase.

This exhibition contains around ten artefacts from Germany and Switzerland, on loan from the following museums:

- MARKK (Museum am Rothenbaum), Hamburg
- Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, Hamburg
- Linden Museum, Stuttgart
- Weltkulturenmuseum, Frankfurt a.M.
- Museum der Kulturen Basel, Switzerland

The objects on loan from German museums were supplemented by around twenty objects, photographs and artefacts from Cameroonian museums and sites.

This exhibition has two major merits, the first being to have initiated the recognition of Cameroonian heroes who fought for their country, some of whom even paid with their lives, like Rudolf Duala Manga Bell, a well-known figure in Germany. Every family in Cameroon has its own history and a list of those killed during colonisation. Opening a window to all those who fought for the country is an act of reconciliation that can unite people around a common goal. The second merit is that it targets young people - secondary school pupils, students and young adults - and engages them, because it is they who will have to manage this process in the future.

We did not understand why the artefacts from the German museums were "loaned" and the criteria used to select the works to be loaned. This fact is an indicator of the scale of the problem. Who decided on the loan? And why? What are the roles and responsibilities involved? Will the loan process provide answers to the questions raised by the restitution? What is the Cameroonian government saying about the loans?

On another level, we have not seen other Cameroonian civil society organisations get involved in this project. The current exhibition, with all its activities, is a first, and it will certainly serve as a useful case study for the participation of civil society in this restitution process. Civil society organisations working on the theme, were associated without really being involved. For example, *Zenü Network* is a partner of *doual'art* and works with young people in schools. The exhibition's primary target is "secondary school pupils and students, young adults", but we have not been able to together develop a strategy to ensure that schoolchildren benefit from this exhibition. We also need to think about young people in Germany for similar processes.

The cases of Namibia and Tanzania are of great interest to us. It would be useful to put civil society organisations in these countries in touch with each other in order to strengthen learning and the exchange of experience.

### **Conference at the University of Yaoundé 1 on the Atlas of Absence**

From 3 to 5 October 2024, experts, researchers, political players, civil society organisations and representatives of traditional communities met to discuss the theme "Cameroon's cultural heritage in Germany: sharing knowledge for (trans)national cultural rehabilitation".

At the opening of the conference, the representative of the German embassy, Mr Knut Zuchan, Deputy Head of Mission at the embassy, reiterated their willingness to support the restitution process in "a spirit of cooperation and exchange, not conflict". The Dean of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Yaoundé opened the conference by stressing the importance of "cultural and political cooperation" in facilitating the restitution of cultural property still abroad. The many presentations that followed, including one by Professor Albert Gouaffo (organiser of the conference), showed that "Cameroonian cultural objects have contributed to the formation of anthropological and ethnographic knowledge in Europe, particularly in Germany", and the importance of their restitution.

The question of decoloniality is still open and deserves to be addressed with the results of this research or through other projects. Presentations at the conference focused on the "amnesia" of German society and the "ignorance" of Cameroonian society. The role of international conventions in ensuring restitution that respects the values and rights of victims was also raised. There are still many unanswered questions, and unfortunately the anti-French sentiment, reinforced by the events of the AES, does not allow this decoloniality to be addressed without being overwhelmed by emotions.

The conference brought together traditional authorities from Cameroon's 4 cultural areas, giving them a wide-ranging panel to present their aspirations. They were unanimous in regretting the brutality of the "punitive expeditions" by the German troops and the trauma that followed, then "expressing their desire to see their heritage objects returned", while highlighting the spiritual and cultic nature of the stolen works. The symbols and values surrounding human remains in Germany were the subject of intense discussion, with a need to "honour the graves of ancestors and repatriate their remains". One of the representatives of the traditional chiefs, using a calculation system of his own, demanded that his chieftaincy alone be compensated to the tune of 2.95 billion CFA francs, or around 4.5 million euros. In our view, this is a secondary point, because polarising the discussion around the money will certainly distract from the real issue, which is that of "transitional and transnational justice"<sup>1</sup>.

The conference provided a forum for discussion and, above all, gave traditional chiefs an opportunity to express their views on the subject. Although the conference was held on the campus of the University of Yaoundé 1, Cameroon's oldest university, the students were not very visible. These conferences enable very useful exchanges, and our recommendation is that future conferences should involve the members of the Technical Commissions of the Interministerial Committee, with one strong recommendation: the members should read the *Atlas of Absence* beforehand.

### **The work of civil society and journalists on the history of Cameroon and cultural property**

Several civil society organisations are working on this issue in Cameroon, including *doual'art* with Princess Marilyn Douala Bell, the *AfricAvenir International Foundation* with Prince Kum'a Ndumbe III,

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<sup>1</sup> For the United Nations, transitional justice encompasses "the full range of diverse processes and mechanisms implemented by a society in an attempt to address massive abuses committed in the past, with a view to establishing responsibility, providing justice and enabling reconciliation". The four rights recognised to victims by transitional justice are: the right to the truth, the right to justice, the right to reparation and the guarantee of non-recurrence.

*ESPERANZA CADE* with Princess Espérance Fezeu, the *Route des Chefferies* programme with architect Sylvain Djache Nzefa, *Zenü Network* and many others. However, these initiatives are not coordinated, and the potential for synergy and complementarity has yet to be implemented. As far as journalists are concerned, the subject is covered erratically, according to the activities carried out and the invitations received from the organisers of these activities. Apart from the *Mutations* newspaper, which reports regularly on the subject, the Cameroonian media have yet to initiate any real coverage of the issues surrounding artefacts and their coloniality.

The subject of the return of artefacts is one that Cameroonian civil society and journalists have not really touched on. The fight against poverty, the improvement of living conditions, access to basic services such as health, education, nutrition, etc., the improvement of governance, elections and decentralisation are the subjects that generally mobilise civil society. The issue of the return of cultural belongings looted during colonisation is a new one for the vast majority. Information and training on the issues involved in returning property to the communities and the lessons of the colonial past are a priority to enable civil society and journalists to play their roles.

The question of financing restitution is crucial, and its perception is ambivalent in Cameroon. On the one hand, there are those who feel that the Germans should "pay, since they are the ones who killed and stole"; on the other, there are more numerous others who feel that this issue should be addressed constructively, bearing in mind that the objectives of restitution are to seek transitional and transnational justice. By integrating an economic dimension into the discussions and exchanges on restitution, there will certainly be ways of approaching its financing. Cameroonian civil society organisations need funding to play their role independently. The Cameroonian government is not yet ready to fund civil society. Civil society is perceived by officials as a competing entity, as opposition to the government system or as individuals who enrich themselves with cooperation money. This negative perception does not facilitate collaboration.

## **Conclusion**

The research work that led to the production of the *Atlas of Absence* has reinforced the previous work of other researchers, and the communication on this work means that today the theme is topical. It's an important subject, but at the same time a sensitive one, which is perhaps why the Cameroonian authorities are so cautious.

There are several dimensions to this subject: the history officially told on one hand and the history experienced by the people of Cameroon on the other. The archives have not yet been declassified, but the information they contain will complement what is shown in the exhibits. There is also the economic dimension, which served to justify colonisation and its atrocities, and the current debate surrounding the artefacts on display in museums. On the internet, looted belongings are sold, even human remains! As far as the legal dimension is concerned, UNESCO's research has shown how the colonising countries put in place laws to keep the heritage looted during colonisation. Germany has clearly shown its willingness to facilitate the process of repatriating belongings stolen during colonisation. However, this willingness is not manifested through favourable legal and budgetary provisions. The political dimension is also an angle of analysis that must be taken into account in terms of the influence of colonisation on relations between states. Unfortunately, the debate surrounding *Françafrique*, the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) and the role of France reinforces the feeling of revolt and emotionalises the analyses.

As far as young people are concerned, Germany and Cameroon have a historical past about which young people know little or nothing. We need to revisit this past in order to understand it and dissect it anew in order to deconstruct preconceived ideas and build a new relationship between Cameroon and Germany. Colonisation not only affected past generations, it also left its mark on contemporary social structures. Today, based on history, there are structural inequalities in relations between the two states, with major consequences for young people. These inequalities need to be addressed if

young Cameroonians and Germans are to become leaders in the processes of reparation, reconciliation and social innovation.

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