



Report on the exhibition-workshop: Cameroon's cultural heritage in Germany: What is at stake for young students?



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Location: University of Dschang, Cameroon

***A conference on the project: DFG "Reverse History of Collections
from Cameroon in German Museums"***

Introduction

The workshop-exhibition, held at the University of Dschang (Campus A) from 9 to 10 January 2025, brought together experts and researchers to focus on a common challenge: informing young students, raising awareness and popularising knowledge about Cameroonian heritage objects in Germany. The event is part of the second phase of the DFG research project "Reverse History of Collections. Mapping Cameroon in German Museums" which intends to popularise the knowledge generated in the production phase of the book *L'Atlas de l'absence. Cameroon's cultural heritage in Germany*". Over two days, a panel discussion and a guided tour (Day 1) and an exhibition open to the public (Day 2) highlighted the current and future issues surrounding the extent of the Cameroonian cultural heritage taken away during the German colonial period from 1884 to 1920. The panellists explored the future of these collections through the prism of cultural restoration, restitution, conservation and intergenerational transmission, not forgetting the challenges of dealing with this heritage in exile. The richness of the contributions offered a subtle look at the historical, political and social aspects of the issue, as part of a dynamic of knowledge-sharing for a better appropriation of Cameroon's heritage. All the debates over the two days were skilfully led by the master of ceremonies, Professor Colbert AKIEUDJI, and the moderator, Dr Eugène Gabin NGUEFACK, whose leading roles helped to give rhythm and structure to the exchanges, thus facilitating the fluidity of the interventions and the cohesion of the discussions. The purpose of this report is to look briefly at some of the key aspects of this meeting, which was an opportunity to disseminate knowledge and exchange ideas with young students.

Day 1 :

A. Exhibition set-up,

Apart from the preparatory activities that took place in the office, the first major extra-mural activity was the setting up of the exhibition. This phase saw the mobilisation of the KAM 2 team and the help of the hand-railers. Begun in the afternoon of 08 January 2025, this operation took up the first half of 09 January, and was the first time that the university community was made aware of the imminence of the exhibition-workshop. This stage aroused a great deal of curiosity on campus on the part of teachers and students, with questions being asked and answered as the exhibition was set up. We also took advantage of this moment to start distributing awareness-raising leaflets, which also served as an invitation to the afternoon's round table. Despite difficulties in securing the cards to the tarpaulin, the complete set-up was finally completed at around 1 p.m., followed by preparations for the round-table discussion in the Joseph Fondjo auditorium. The photo below shows a moment of the exhibition set-up.



The maps have been laid out on the floor to give a clearer idea of the chronology of their display, for greater efficiency during the guided tour.

B. Introductory remarks and round table discussion on the theme: *Cameroon's cultural heritage in Germany: What are the challenges for young students?*



Introduced by Professor Colbert Akieudji, the round table was opened by Professor Albert Gouaffo, coordinator of the project at the University of Dschang. In his introductory remarks, he began by setting out the historical context of the extraction of Cameroonian objects for Germany. He recalled European colonisation, and more specifically German colonisation of Cameroon. Between 1884 and 1916, Cameroon lost most of its cultural property to the Germans. In his introduction, he also presented "The Atlas of Absence", a masterpiece which, based on the inventories of certain German museums (45 public museums), retraces the itinerary of Cameroonian assets from the colonial context, their capture process and their musealisation. This document is available online free of charge in PDF format. He went on to thank the DFG for funding the project, the team with whom he works, and the public for attending, wishing all the best for the future.



The roundtable was chaired by Dr Nguefack Eugène Gabin (Moderator). To set the scene, he began by outlining the context and relevance of the meeting before introducing the speakers with biobibliographical notes on each of them. The floor was then given to Dr Tsogang Fossi, who spoke on the subject of **"Atlas of absence. Cameroonian cultural heritage in Germany: a history of violence"**. Using a Power Point presentation loaded with a number of objects, quotations and images, he gave an overview of the number of

Cameroonian objects, which currently stands at 40,000 and is held in 45 German public museums. In his presentation, he pointed out that the problem of spoliation of the objects referred to is an ethical problem, because the colonists wanted not only to deprive us of these objects, but also to destroy them systematically at times because they were unable to transport them to the metropolis. Most of this was achieved by violence, through massacres and burning during punitive expeditions. He also took the opportunity to draw attention to the decisive role played by museum directors in this project to expropriate Africa's cultural heritage. In conclusion, he pointed out that less than half of these objects are on display to visitors, yet Cameroon's museums are almost empty. So he wondered: why keep these objects at home if they haven't been able to display them to the public for over a century?

He was followed by Prof Saha Zacharie, whose talk focused on "**African heritage in disarray: historical issues and current challenges**". As a historian with a background in international relations, he structured his presentation around three main points, framed by an introduction and a conclusion. To begin with, he described the concept of heritage in disarray in the following terms: "Heritage in disarray is heritage that has been expropriated, illegitimately or illegally removed from its original context of meaning or significance, exiled, forced into exile, desacralised and now without a soul." The first part of his talk set out the context of production (telling the story of peoples through objects, everyday uses, etc.) and the functions (instrument of power, symbol of authority, regulation of social relations, etc.) of the heritage in dispute. The second revisited the context of expropriation (colonisation and the 'civilising mission', conquest/expeditions or military campaigns called 'pacification', exploitation, systematic plundering of natural and human resources, 'development', etc.) and deportation to Europe (seizure or confiscation as war booty, extortion through all kinds of ruses, 'donations', etc.). In the final part of his talk, he raised the memorial, historical, ideological, political, academic, scientific and intellectual, legal, technical and economic issues involved in repatriating Cameroon's cultural heritage.

For his part, Dr Tsangue gave a succinct presentation on the subject of "**Attitude of youth towards Cameroon cultural heritage in Germany: issues and consequences**". In his introductory remarks, he emphasised the central role played by the historical sciences in the process of identifying one's personal status, in the sense that a good number of intellectuals such as Prof. Gouaffo, Prof. Sacharie Saha and Dr. Tsogang, whom he quoted, have returned at length to the history of Cameroon and particularly German colonial history. He went on to show, simply and clearly, the relevance of the issue of restitution and the importance of young students in the restitution process. In his presentation, he explained why young people were not interested in the issue of Cameroonian cultural property in captivity in Germany, because, he said, they were simply ignorant. The deportation of the objects, their storage in German museums and the failure to communicate or teach people about their existence has created a "spiritual vacuum", given that most of these objects are "sacred" and carry meaning and imagination for the people who made them. He therefore took the opportunity to call on young people to emerge from perdition, to reawaken and practise the desire to belong somewhere, by valuing their status as Africans. He concluded his talk by mentioning the close relationship between culture, civilisation, moral life and ethics. Ethical and cultural values are central to every civilisation. Hence the interest of young students in the debates on the challenges facing Cameroon's cultural heritage in Germany.

Ms Habsatou Daneri in turn gave a talk on "**Youth, the keystone of decentralised cooperation for the restitution of Cameroon's cultural heritage**". She focused her talk on a complex framework in which international law, cultural dynamics and diplomacy are interwoven to reinvent our relationship with restitution issues. Her contribution opened with the imperative of historical justice. She then presented youth as the driving force behind cooperation and cultural diplomacy, in order to understand restitution as an opportunity to

rebuild identity, on the one hand, and decentralised cooperation for renewed diplomacy, on the other. She emphasised that the principle of reparation is enshrined in international law, framed by the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Prevention of Illicit Traffic in Cultural Property. In her view, it is not simply a matter of restitution, but rather of re-establishing a moral and cultural balance linked to historical justice. Looted goods are living witnesses to a system of values, a cosmology and a history that must be renewed. In conclusion, she stresses that the future of Cameroon's heritage, and more broadly that of our collective humanity, will depend on our ability to make young people the pillars of restitution that is not only material, but also moral and symbolic.

Last but not least, Prof Machikou spoke on the **social, political and historical responsibility of academics**. At the outset, she reassured the audience that this conversation about restitution could not be taken for granted, as it was too sensitive and controlled an issue. As she developed her thoughts, she insisted that these objects, jealously guarded by the Germans, raised the problem of the relationship between humans and non-humans, which should be re-examined by means of sociology and a consistent and appropriate approach. She went on to say that there are parts of our cultural identity that are linked to what was stolen from us. Particular importance was attached to making young students aware that this is a history that has been prevented by historical, political and epistemic constraints. As a result, we have not been aware of what has been taken from us, so there can be no heritage without transmission and conservation, she recalled. Furthermore, as a specialist in political science, she suggested the need to "repoliticise" the issue of cultural heritage; in other words, to link the issue of heritage management with political responsibilities. She also found it necessary to re-examine German diplomacy in Cameroon in order to understand how it is truly decolonial. At the end of her speech, she did not fail to salute and recognise that this work or struggle began with academics and should go beyond the universities to reach out more widely to young people as the heirs to the current battles.

This crucial moment in the event prompted many questions from the audience. During the discussion phase, the panellists took it in turns to respond to questions and suggestions from the audience, particularly on the issues involved in the genuine return of the objects. This phase also showed the attention and interest that young students had shown in the exhibition-workshop. Given the time constraints, the discussions had to be cut short to make way for a family photo and a guided tour of the exhibition.

C. The guided tour of the exhibition

After the round-table discussion and family photo, all the guests moved to the tent for the guided tour. After clarifying the tour itinerary (Dr Tsogang Fossi), participants readjusted their positions and the tour began.



This was the second highlight of the day on 09 January 2025. It was led by Dr Tsogang Fossi for almost 20 minutes. In this rectangular tent, around twenty maps had been set up, subtly retracing the history of the extraction of Cameroonian cultural goods right up to their conservation or relocation in Germany. More specifically, the maps revisited the extraction sites, the methods used, the players involved, the itineraries of the goods and the museums or institutions hosting them in Germany, all under the close scrutiny of the public. Between surprises and questions, the mainly student audience was able to form clear and illustrated opinions on Cameroonian cultural heritage in Germany. This phase marked the end of the first day's activities.

Day 2: Exhibition opens to the public

The day of 10 January 2025 was devoted solely to opening the exhibition to the public: presentation/information on Cameroonian cultural heritage in Germany and distribution of leaflets.



The activity was led by the KAM 2 team and the elements of the handrail solicited as part of the exhibition-workshop. In addition to the exhibition of maps, the presentation of the *Atlas of Absence* as the memory of Cameroon's cultural heritage was a key feature. Its impressive volume attracted a large number of people, who came and went, sometimes in delegations, one after the other. In addition, some visitors recorded their impressions in the visitors' book that was made available to them.

Conclusion

The exhibition-workshop ended on a note of satisfaction for the organisers, the panellists and the public. The discussions revealed that the question of Cameroonian cultural heritage in Germany is a matter for everyone. It needs to be thought through in a collaborative dynamic between governments, cultural institutions and local communities. This exhibition-workshop helped to identify concrete avenues for action and reflection to accelerate the cultural rehabilitation of Cameroon's heritage, with particular emphasis on the role to be played by young people. The most astounding fact was that young students, almost totally submerged by Western values, were until now quite unaware of the existence of this rich heritage taken from their ancestors and held captive in Germany.

Acknowledgements

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financially possible to hold this conference, as well as the entire project to map Cameroonian cultural property in Germany.

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Team KAM 2 in Dschang :

Dr. Brice Douanla Tsangue (University of Dschang)

Dr. Richard Tsogang Fossi (Technical University of Berlin)

Prof. Albert Gouaffo (University of Dschang)