Lucian Scherman Lecture, Museum Fünf Kontinente
Munich, 08.05.2025

Similarities and differences. An interim assessment of the debate on the looting and restitution of Cameroonian cultural property in Germany

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Introduction

The reappraisal of two world wars and their consequences, the reappraisal of Nazi rule and the Holocaust have long pushed the reappraisal of the colonial past into the background in Germany. There are other reasons for this: On the one hand, compared to its neighbours France, England and Holland, Germany downplayed its colonial past in Africa, which after all only lasted thirty years. The disappointment caused by the brutal loss of its overseas territories after the First World War[1] led the Germans to regard this chapter of their history as an accident that should be forgotten very quickly.

In the context of the East-West conflict of the 1970s, historians of the former German Democratic Republic tried without much success to put the topic on the agenda.[2] Even the West German intellectuals and writers of the 1968 student revolt, such as Uwe Timm[3] or Ernst Magnus Enzensberger, were only able to take up and publicly discuss the topic of German colonialism for a short time. Only post-colonial criticism, the African diaspora and German civil society[4] , but above all the gigantic "Humboldt Forum" project, which aimed to turn the Prussian king's palace into an exhibition space for ethnographic collections from the Berlin Ethnological Museum, sparked public discussions about the repercussions of colonialism on Germany.

It is also worth mentioning the French president's speech[5] at the University of Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso in 2017, in which he announced that he would temporarily or permanently return Africa's illegally acquired cultural assets within five years. The report he ordered and published by art historian Bénédicte Savoy and philosopher Felwine Sarr confirmed the French president's wish: 90% of African cultural assets are located outside Africa.[6]

1 Cf. Heinrich Schnee: Die koloniale Schuldlüge, Munich 1924.
2 Ulrich van der Heyden: Die Afrika-Geschichtsschreibung in der ehemaligen DDR: Versuch einer kritischen Aufarbeitung, in: Africa Spectrum, Vol. 27, No. 2 (1992), 207-211.
3 Uwe Timm: Morenga, Munich 2020, 7th ed.; Gabriele Dürbeck / Axel Dunker (eds.): Postkoloniale Germanistik, Bielefeld 2014.
4 Berlin Postkolonial e.V.; Platform "No Humboldt 21. Decolonial objections to the Humboldt Forum", Berlin n.d.
5 Élysée: Discours d'Emmanuel Macron à l'université de Ouagadougou. Publié le 28 novembre 2017. https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2017/11/28/discours-demmanuel-macron-a-luniversite-de-ouagadougou.
6 Felwine Sarr, Bénédicte Savoy : Giving back. On the restitution of African cultural assets, Berlin 2019.

On the other hand, the situation in Cameroon is no different. The lack of knowledge about the German colonial period has led to nostalgia. Added to this is the language barrier, which leads Cameroonian historians to look for French or English translations or to make do with oral sources about this period. The consequence of this is that we are dealing with partial or one-sided historiographies, depending on whether the historian comes from the Anglophone or Francophone part of the country.

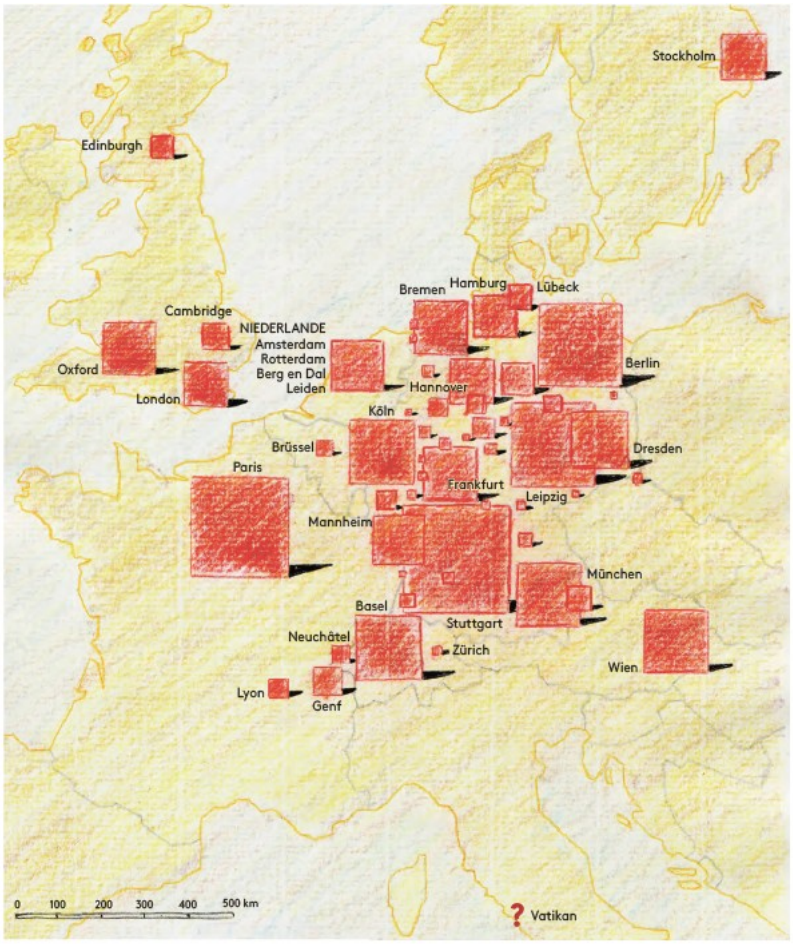
Apart from the 26 cultural objects that were handed over to the state of Benin by France in 2022 and the 20 Benin Bronzes that Germany officially brought back to Nigeria, eight years after the Sarr-Savoy report there is a relative standstill. Even the findings of our book *Atlas of Absence*[7], which was published in June 2023 and presents the results of transdisciplinary basic research, namely that two thirds of Cameroonian cultural objects in 45 public museums in Germany originate from violent contexts and are therefore problematic, have not accelerated the restitution process.

What is the problem? How can we explain Germany's relative unwillingness when it comes to restitution? The *Atlas* brings to light facts that are enormously important for restitution debates and take the wind out of the sails of museums and politicians. Where do Germany and Cameroon stand today with regard to the restitution of cultural property from the colonial era? Where are new ways of understanding necessary? Before answering these two questions, a review of the history of the translocation of Cameroonian cultural assets to Germany will be provided.

I On the history of the translocation of Cameroonian cultural assets to Germany (1884-1919)

More than 40,000 Cameroonian „objects" are currently kept in public museums in Germany. This is enormous compared to the entire African collections in one of the most important ethnological museums in the world, the Musée du Quai Branly Jacques Chirac in Paris. This museum contains a total of 69,000 inventory numbers for all countries South of the Sahara. In Germany, Cameroon's collections are spread across a large number of institutions in the federal states (see illustration).

7 Autor:innenkollektiv: Atlas of Absence. Cameroon's Cultural Heritage in Germany, Berlin 2023, hereafter cited as Atlas of Absence.



Number of objects from Cameroon in public museums in Europe. The size of the squares is proportional to the number of objects. It was not possible to determine the size of the Vatican collections. Source: Atlas of Absence, Fig. 5, p. 8)

In Stuttgart alone, the Linden Museum's Cameroon collection comprises more than 8,000 objects, in Berlin just over 5,000 and in Leipzig just as many, to name just three examples.[8]

No other country in the world has as many Cameroonian cultural belongings in public ownership as the Federal Republic of Germany. No other European country has such extensive public collections. The collections often surpass Cameroon's public collections in the capital Yaoundé, which, with around 6,000 objects, are the "typical" size of a national museum in a region formerly colonized by France.

The supposedly humanistic rescue discourse of the colonial rulers spread the idea that Africans would perish on contact with European civilization. The aim was therefore to "save" their material culture as quickly as possible. The museum directors, who acted as clients in this respect, drew up guidelines for the systematic extraction of the so-called ethnographica, as the people who travelled to or worked in the colonies were not specialists and needed guidance. Instructions for collections were drawn up and sent to the "collectors" on site, who were supposed to "collect" scientific material in order to fill the

8 Atlas of Absence, p. 9; p. 45.

museums that were being set up all over Germany. There was great competition between the museums to build high-quality collections.

In the history of German colonialism, a distinction is often made between three phases: an experimental phase, a peak phase and a scientific phase.[9] During these different phases, not only were natural resources massively exploited, but numerous cultural assets were also stolen from Cameroon. Using historical sources, unpublished correspondence, reports and diaries, we have shed light on the specific conditions of what German museums around 1900 referred to as the "acquisition" of Cameroonian objects in the aforementioned anthology published in 2023 with the evocative title "*Atlas of Absence*".

It involved looting, extortion, trickery, corruption, but in some cases also purchases, although the circumstances of the transfers can be questioned. In this book, the focus is on various actors in the translocation. These are mostly the soldiers of the so-called Schutztruppe (the German colonial army), Christian missionaries, colonial officials, traders, so-called explorers, adventurers or colonial tourists, but also plantation owners.[10]

First and foremost, the omnipresence of members of the German colonial army (Schutztruppe) in the museums' acquisition registers is striking. From 1884 to 1915, 280 collections that arrived at the Ethnological Museum in Berlin came directly from the hands of colonial officers in the German colonies.[11]

In 1899, the Federal Council passed a law according to which all collections that had been confiscated during expeditions financed by the German Empire were to be deposited in the Berlin Museum as a central depository.[12]

With a historical total of 16,670 inventory numbers and a current total of 8,871, the Linden Museum in Stuttgart is home to by far the largest German collection of Cameroonian cultural assets. This museum lost half of its Cameroonian holdings during the Second World War. The Grassi Ethnological Museum in Leipzig is in second place and the Ethnological Museum in Berlin is in third place with a ratio of 7,432 to 5,190 inventory numbers.[13]

When the Germans arrived, the royal houses in Cameroon were not only the political, but also the spiritual and legal centre of the local communities. By systematically plundering such centres, the colonial conquerors therefore sought not only to destroy the power of Cameroonian rulers, but also to shake the communities' right to exist. The rulers of royal houses such as Baham, Bamena, Bangu and Bansoa in today's West Region of Cameroon are among these little-documented local actors whose

9 Rudolf Hafeneder: Deutsche Kolonialkartographie 1884-1919, Dissertation, University of Würzburg 2008.
10 Atlas of Absence, p. 76.
11 Atlas of Absence, p. 119; p. 77.
12 Yann Legall after Andrew Zimmerman. Cf. Yann Legall: "Only to be obtained by force". Military violence and museum collections. Atlas of Absence, pp.113-137; here p. 117.
13 Atlas of Absence, p. 46; p. 47.

looted cultural treasures are now on display at the Humboldt Forum in Berlin, for example. Precise illustrations in the *Atlas of Absence* show which communities of origin in Cameroon have lost the most cultural assets.[14] This information is mirrored by illustrations showing where the looted cultural assets are located in Germany today.[15]

In addition, men, women and children were the means of transportation used to bring these cultural objects to the coast, from where they were shipped to Germany.[16]

One question comes to mind when talking about the massive presence of Cameroonian cultural assets in Germany, which has now lasted for over a hundred years: What use do these objects have there? When and where were they taken into consideration? With what aims and what knowledge? The answer to these questions is disappointing: they played almost no role. A few objects were examined by artists in the 20th century, such as the throne of Sultan Njoya, which was taken away in 1908.

To date, there has hardly been any academic debate about them: no publications about the objects; only missing, disappearing, but at the same time the desire to hoard more. These are the consequences, hardly known to the public, of the fact that thousands of invisible objects of Cameroonian origin are stored in German depots. Viewed as a whole, the Cameroonian holdings in German institutions are characterized above all by their volume, their great age and the typological diversity of the collection objects. However, all of this remains invisible to the public in Germany, as it is kept hidden in the storage rooms in the basement of the museums.

For example, of the 5,135 objects of Cameroonian cultural heritage kept in the Ethnological Museum in Berlin, only a few hundred are on display. The others continue to slumber in the museum's depots and are doubly unused and invisible, both for the Germans and for the Cameroonians. In the museum guide of the Ethnological Museum in Berlin, the Cameroonian objects did not have a full place. In the cabinets and display cases, they served only as stand-ins for the groups of people they represented (the so-called "tribes"), their supposed abilities and special features. A scientific overview of the Cameroon collection of the Ethnological Museum in Berlin, such as the establishment of a database, is long overdue.

At the height of their popularity in the early 20th century, ethnological museums, especially in Germany, saw themselves as places of science. At the same time, this claim to scientificity around 1900 served as legitimation for the appropriation, transfer and museumization of entire cultural complexes from many parts of the world in Europe. The question arises: What was the scientific yield of the tens of thousands of statues, thrones, masks, drums, bells, reliquaries, building elements (house pillars), beds, vessels, spears, shields, clothing, dolls and textiles that were transferred from Cameroon to Berlin, Stuttgart, Leipzig, Hamburg, Cologne, etc. between 1884 and 1919? Detailed illustrations in

14 Atlas of Absence, p. 54.
15 Atlas of Absence, p. 55.
16 See Esaïe Djomo: From the carrier to the carried: The carrier system in (pre-)colonial and postcolonial Africa using the example of Cameroon, in: Sonja Malzner / Anne D. Peiter: Der Träger, Bielefeld 2018, pp. 229-248.

the *Atlas of Absence* shed light on the process of collecting cultural objects from Cameroon by the Ethnological Museum Berlin and the Linden Museum from 1884 to 1920.[17] The high point of the collections is the year 1900, when the cities of Stuttgart, Berlin and Leipzig engaged in a bitter competition.

II Debate on the restitution of Cameroonian cultural assets in Germany and Cameroon: a difficult dialogue?

The historical contact between Germany and the territory and country now recognized under international law as Cameroon has led to reciprocal influences that are only gradually being made visible today through post-colonial or decolonial criticism on both sides. On the Cameroonian side, the legacies include not only government buildings (courts, hospitals, schools), infrastructure such as bridges, rail networks, roads, cemeteries, fortifications such as forts, monuments (Bismarck Fountain in Buea), plantations, etc. On the German side, there are museums of all kinds. On the German side, there are museums of all kinds, but above all ethnological museums, street names and monuments (Bismarck monument in Hamburg) that celebrate colonial heroes, scientific institutes that owe their origins to colonialism, such as geographical, anthropological, natural science and ethnological institutes, to name but a few. Due to the amnesia that prevails on both sides, this dispositive of shared history is largely invisible or forgotten today.

The massive presence of Cameroonian cultural artefacts in German public museums draws particular attention to colonial continuity. What characterizes the debate on the massive presence of Cameroonian cultural assets in Germany and, consequently, their absence in Cameroon, are the controversial positions.

II-1 In Germany

The word restitution – when it is mentioned in Germany at various meetings, be it at the level of the museums with the directors or the collection curators (the scientific advisors) or outside the museums in the various scientific advisory boards – causes misunderstandings that can be described as intentional on the Cameroonian side.

The Germans understand restitution to mean the material return of objects/subjects to their original spaces. This immediately suggests that their warehouses are being emptied permanently and that the existence of the museum staff (from the director to the restorers to the security staff) is under threat.

The debate on the restitution of African cultural assets revolves around the inability of Africans to preserve them and to make use of the objects they have produced themselves. However, it has not been proven that the presence of African cultural objects in Europe has led to an appreciation of the genius and cultural wealth of Africa, but rather that it has strengthened Europe as a whole in its "knowledge

17 Atlas of Absence, p. 64; p. 65.

of peoples" and has mostly exoticized and dominated them. There is thus a paradox between the fascination that Cameroonian objects exerted on Germans and the presence of Cameroonians in Germany.

In Germany, the owners (the museums) of African cultural assets are always seen as innocent and charitable and the people from whom they were taken (the owners) as unwilling and even ungrateful. The objects are not always understood and interpreted by the curators. Their origin is generally very roughly determined, if not unknown. In this respect, the objects only begin to exist when they enter the museum, i.e. when they are recorded in the entry books.

The life of these objects before they were recorded is of lesser importance. Their origin and their functions in the museum structure in Germany do not play a role, as the project does not aim to use them for differentiated communication about the peoples and the regions and countries from which the objects originate. Since, in the opinion of the German institutions, they are part of the German cultural heritage, there is no need to carry out such research on the peoples depicted. It does not bother anyone in the museums to find blanket designations of origin for the objects such as "Cameroon", "Africa", "West Africa", etc.

Could it have been otherwise? Is the institution of the museum in Europe, or more precisely in Germany, not part of global or national supremacism from the outset? The establishment by the German Lost Art Foundation of a fund to research the provenance of cultural objects acquired in a colonial context is, however, a step forward in the research of cultural objects in German public museums. The silence on the German side since the return of the Cameroonian delegation from their visit to Stuttgart from January 14 to 16, 2024, which was described by the German press as a "German-Cameroonian dialogue" and which brought together eleven German museums under the leadership of the Linden Museum Stuttgart, speaks to the work that still needs to be done. This work requires preparation and prudence and not a rush, as the German side would like. For Cameroon, it is a question of working out its strategy and proposing to the Germans a roadmap for working on restitution and compensation in the spirit of a sincere and lasting dialogue.

II-2 In Cameroon

In view of these gaps and blockages already mentioned, which are moreover obvious, Cameroonians ask themselves the following questions when they think of their cultural objects that are absent from Cameroon and have been in Germany for over a century. The questions about restitution are as follows:

1- How can the Cameroonian side and the German side be brought up to the same level of information about their heritage preserved in Germany? What potential does this wealth of information have in terms of a kind of rewriting of their own cultural history and heritage?

The history they have been taught so far in schools and universities has been a history written by the others, the victors of the colonial cause (Germany, France and England).

2- What do people in Cameroon today still remember from this period? To what extent can memories or oral culture complement archival and documentary sources about stolen goods and people?

3- What are the opportunities offered by Cameroon's heritage at the level of negotiating new relations with Germany?

4- What legal challenges arise from this massive presence in view of the unlawful circumstances of their translocation and their inclusion in Germany's cultural heritage? From the Cameroonian perspective, Germany holds their cultural property, but is not the legitimate owner.

5- How can the information available today be capitalized on to achieve a cultural renaissance in the country, as the Cameroonian government is striving for with its Interministerial Restitution Committee, for example?

6- What new opportunities does this open up for cultural professionals, whether in museums, the performing arts, visual artists, performers, etc.?

7- What about the human remains that were transported away under the same conditions as cultural objects and degraded to scientific study objects in the various anthropological laboratories?

8- How could such a mass export come about and to what extent does illegal trade still pose a threat to cultural heritage today? It should be noted that on the Cameroonian side, restitution is not simply a matter of returning cultural objects and the mortal remains of ancestors. It is about settling a comprehensive historical dispute in order to restore justice.

III Challenges for the future: Between helplessness and the need for action

How can controversies and misunderstandings in the historical images and memory cultures of Cameroon and Germany be avoided? We cannot have the same perception of the transcultural places of memory when it comes to the pain of the descendants of the victims and the sympathy and compassion of the descendants of the perpetrators. This multiperspectivity in colonial history must be recognized and acknowledged.

Both Germany and Cameroon have the political will to restitute and receive looted cultural property. Both governments want to deal with restitution bilaterally. However, there are conditions that must be met by both Germany and Cameroon.

Restitution should be embedded in a broad process of decolonization and restitution of cultural heritage in order to create a solid basis for a new ethic of relations between the former colonizing and colonized societies. Civil society groups in Cameroon note that the level of knowledge of the media about colonial facts in general and translocated cultural heritage in particular is quite low.[18] Special efforts are therefore required to inform and educate media representatives about the colonial legacy, a legacy that continues to have an impact today. Greater media awareness could support the lobbying work of civil society groups vis-à-vis governments.

Both the Cameroonian and German governments emphasize that they want to be the central players in the negotiations and a possible agreement on restitution. On the German side, political representatives at federal, state and municipal level appear to be prepared to take comprehensive measures in the restitution of colonial loot to Cameroon. As they are the "owners" of the public museums and collections, the German institutions will act as soon as the political decisions have been made. However, this will only happen once the national governments of Cameroon and Germany have agreed on the modalities of a bilateral strategy for restitution.

The following aspects are of great importance for the upcoming negotiation process between Cameroon and Germany:

1. Germany must find legal solutions by amending its legislation on cultural heritage. If Africans are to be given the opportunity to reconnect with their cultural heritage, restitution is inevitable. The construction of the spaces that will house the stolen cultural objects after restitution must be well discussed between the partners. The party that stole the items should also be prepared to make the effort to finance the return and temporary storage of the goods in the country of origin, i.e. Cameroon, before they are redistributed by the government to the respective communities. Not everything has to be returned because Cameroon as a state must have its culture in Germany, celebrating its presence in diplomacy with Germany. As in the case of the Bronzes from the Kingdom of Benin, some cultural objects may remain with the German holding institution. However, the owner must be the State of Cameroon, which represents the local communities abroad.

The new coalition government in Germany has announced its intention to deal with colonial legacies. However, there is no law or binding regulation for the collections from the colonial context. The distribution of responsibilities between the state actors at national level and their interaction with the other administrative levels of the federal system in Germany have also not been clarified.

2. It would be appropriate for Germany to create a central or contact point as a counterpart to the Cameroonian Interministerial Committee for the repatriation of both Cameroonian cultural assets and the remains of their ancestors. A law should be drawn up and enacted to re-humanize human remains before they are repatriated, i.e. to rehabilitate these

18 This is the opinion of the coordinator of Zenü Network, one of the leading NGOs in Cameroon.

"objects of research" as human beings by removing them from the boxes and re-individualizing them as human beings in normal coffins.

3. The financing of repatriation measures up to the societies of origin should be secured. Cultural assets and human remains were already transported in mere crates in the colonial context. People and objects must now be treated differently, i.e. with dignity.

4. An official apology should be made to the descendants of the victims of colonial violence so that the process of recovery from the trauma can begin. The truth about colonial exploitation must be told. Only this can liberate the descendants of both the colonized and the colonizers. Only then can the process of forgiveness and reconciliation come about.

In Cameroon, the Interministerial Committee for the Repatriation of Illegally Stolen Cameroonian Cultural Property Abroad should be provided with sufficient financial resources. It is unacceptable that the costs of Cameroonian delegations travelling to Germany are borne by the Germans. It is a matter of pride and dignity. Since the Committee was founded in February 2023, little has been done apart from trips to Germany. Cameroonian youth, who should indeed be the beneficiaries of the restitution of Cameroonian cultural assets and human remains, are relatively uninformed. NGOs such as Zenü Network, AfricAvenir, Doual'Art and Experanza are doing their best to sensitize Cameroonian youth on the restitution of Cameroonian cultural properties, but their capacities remain limited. Since the royal houses were the most looted, it is important to work with them because many entities presently in Germany were taken away from them. They have little knowledge of this.

In Cameroon, there is a perception that Germany and German museums do not want to lay their cards on the table. The burden of proof should be reversed. German museums must be proactive and make contact with the societies of origin. Some are now doing this despite the obvious financial restrictions. Ten years ago, this was almost impossible.

In addition to restitution, Cameroonian youth want to know more about Germany and the Germans of the colonial era. How can it be, for example, that Germany took such brutal action against their ancestors? Our *Atlas of Absence* provides an initial basis in this respect. It is available online and in open access.

Cameroonian communities who were victims of looting, confiscation or abduction of their ancestors want to better understand the original motives for such "collections" and gain an insight into the extent of holdings in German museums. The undertaking is complex and requires various actors, as well as patience on both sides, both in Germany and in Cameroon. Cameroonian and German youth should be educated so that a change of perspective can take place in future relations.

Both sides are surprised, sometimes ashamed. Society and politics in Germany seem to be divided: should the communities of origin be given back what was taken from them under circumstances that

were often illegal, or at least unjust and inhumane at the time? In other words, should the cultural heritage of Cameroon be preserved for the benefit of German museums and their visitors – or "humanity", as some pathetically claim – and thus justify its presence?

On the Cameroonian side, it must be said, there is also the danger of the restitution debate being instrumentalized by politicians. Who is allowed to represent the dispossessed communities in negotiations with the Germans? Is the state legitimized to do so if we know from which royal houses the objects were stolen? At a national level, restitution also offers the opportunity to negotiate new relationships with the communities of origin, indeed to initiate a Cameroonian-Cameroonian dialogue. Are the heads of the communities still to be regarded as stooges of the central government, as the colonial powers defined their role at the time? Or should they be given local autonomy as partners of the central government? However, these are questions that go beyond the scope of this presentation.

Concluding remarks

It is difficult to take stock of the debate on the looting and restitution of Cameroonian cultural assets in Germany because new findings are shaping the restitution debate in both Germany and Cameroon. If about ten years ago we had to deal with a decidedly negative attitude on the part of German public institutions and museum directors, so that the art historian Bénédicte Savoy could speak of a post-colonial defeat[19] , the fronts have loosened with the publication of our *Atlas of Absence*. Both politics and civil society are of the opinion that in the context of the violence and injustice of the colonial situation, it is not easy to argue from a purely legal perspective.

Cameroon and Germany must move towards each other: The current standstill is unproductive and only breeds indifference. Both countries need a dialogue that does not exclude fundamental differences and does not avoid conflict, while respecting the other party to the dispute, without giving up their own positions for no reason. The prerequisite for such a dialogue, however, is that one acknowledges one's own weaknesses and failings. The current dialogue between Cameroon and Germany is reminiscent of a conversation between a deaf person and a visually impaired person. One is deaf because he is saturated and the other is blind because he only looks at himself. The Cameroonian government is afraid of the decoloniality that the restitution debate entails. On the Cameroonian side, amnesia has also served to maintain the colonial privileges of the elite.

On the German side, politicians have fenced in restitution debates in order to drag them out without practical action, in the hope of sweeping them under the carpet as they did in France in the 1960s and 1970s. This would settle the issue of restitution and reparations in all its forms. Hopefully, there will be a synergy between post-colonial academic research and civil society on both sides. The focus here is on the youth on both sides, who do not want to give up the fight for a fairer life and a more humane future. Thank you for your attention.

19 Bénédicte Savoy: Africa's Struggle for its Art: History of a Postcolonial Defeat, Munich 2021.