

Dangers of Eurocentrism and the Need to Indigenize African and Grassfields Histories

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The proliferation of museum collections in the Grassfields region of Cameroon over the past decade raises a number of questions about why and to what purpose these collections have been formed. On the one hand, the intervention of outside forces, that is European agencies, raises the concern of a neocolonial relationship. What prejudices and preconceptions do these European agencies invest in the project? This is of particular concern in considering the study of African art, a field largely formed in Western academia and auction houses. On the other hand, Grassfields populations have by no means remained impotent in the face of these outside forces, employing them for a variety of ulterior motives. Indeed, the types of objects collected and displayed tell a variety of stories about the kingdoms and populations of the Grassfields, challenging one's prior conceptions of what a museum is, what it does, and what belongs in it.

The conception of art collecting and museums in Grassfields Cameroon

The Grassfields: Home to many museums

The Grassfields, located in the highlands of west and northwest Cameroon, is home to many museums. In the Grassfields context, there was nothing like decorative art, for every art form was believed to have a content and meaning. Since the creation of the Fouban Palace Museum in 1922 and the Arts and Traditions Museum of Bamum in 1930, other kingdoms throughout the region have been constantly building, opening, and renovating museums.

Grassfields art was unique because of its symbolism. It served a wide variety of people and symbolized the complex relations and activities of their local communities. The artworks were, however, difficult to appreciate when torn out of their African contexts, stripped of their colorful costumes, and hung lifelessly on museum walls.

Grassfields museums are categorized as living museums

The heritage of the communities is protected and given its correct value in the place where it lives. The objects leave the museum whenever their ritual and symbolic role is required by tradition and then they are returned to the museum where their preservation is assured. Many of them are classified as ritual objects since they are said to have “content and meaning”; such antiquities and religious objects were never meant for public display nor could they be traded whatever the price. Yet, once transplanted to an alien culture and context, their status changed from “sacred objects” to “decorative art”; they became curiosities in public exhibits; they were exposed to indiscreet eyes, and sometimes, they were manipulated by women and even children. From the Grassfields and African viewpoint, this was and remains abominable.

Dangers of Eurocentrism

Different significations for some terms and concepts

Art and art collection. The Western view that holds that art is primarily aesthetic, utilitarian, and traceable to Europe sharply differs from the African school, which views traditional art as a religious necessity and rooted in African civilizations. In Africa, the objects we now refer to as “art” were not originally destined to be displayed in homes or museums for aesthetic contemplation in the way contemporary Western drawings and paintings are exhibited.

The concept of museum. Even the concept of “museum” around which our study centers has long been a subject of profound controversy and debate dominated by the American, European,

and international schools of thought. In the Grassfields the definition of palace collections and museums goes beyond the structures accommodating the *fon* (king) and his royal family. The question of sources in Grassfields historical work is crucial. Like other historians delving into Cameroon's historical past, we were confronted by a panoply of sources dominated by texts and other documents to the neglect of cultural sources. Iconographies and cultural sources had been recognized as vital tools and sources for carrying out historical research, but their degree of use had been very marginal in Grassfields.

Factors shaping scientific museology in sub-Saharan Africa

The current state of academic museology in Africa is determined more by imported forces than by endogenous African factors:

—museology transplanted into an Africa that possessed its own unexplored epistemologies and techniques

—systemic national factors

—museology of the nineteenth century transported to the colonies;
course content in museums studies in Africa

—the research environment, given the few opportunities for African scholars to interact with each other

Indigenization and integration of scientific museology

Creation of universities that respond directly to societal needs

Universities have emerged throughout the decolonization period, and those in the academic community must acknowledge that decolonization is not simply a part of history; we cannot proceed as if it had never happened. An integral part of changing the Eurocentric narrative in academia is to create universities that respond directly to societal needs. Mbembe calls for

“epistemic diversity,” which is “a process that does not necessarily abandon the notion of universal knowledge for humanity, but which embraces it via a horizontal strategy of openness to dialogue among many epistemic traditions.”¹ The idea offered by De Sousa Santos, that there are criteria for choosing knowledge-based solutions, is appealing: “Preference must be given to the forms of knowledge that guarantees the greatest level of participation to the social groups involved in its design, execution, and control and the benefits of the intervention.”² Indigenous voices bring identifiable elements to the academy with different streams of knowledge and need. Identity is re-formed in every generation.

Slow evolution of an Africentric perspective in museological science

Africanization of museums poses all that is problematic in the reorientation of African museums modeled on the Western model. Alpha Omar Konaré advocates an absolute reform of the museum's design in Africa when he says, “the triple challenge of democratization, decentralization and integration: democratization through broad participation of the population in the orientation, management and animation of museums, museums having to speak the national languages.”³

Openness to contemporaneity and the postethnological museum

The museum must no longer be locked in the past; it must be opened to the urban landscape. To propose exhibitions of contemporary art is to allow the public to realize that its identity is not in the past, contrary to what most museums convey on the Continent. The colonial state enclosed museums in traditional and "authentic" Africa. As a result, Africans thought their future was behind them.

For her first catalog, *Object Atlas, Fieldwork in the Museum*, published in 2011, Clémentine Deliss, director of the Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt, asked Paul Rabinow to write the preface. He explains his concept of a "contemporary museum" free of the sequelae of colonial

thought. "The challenge," he writes, "is to transform a collection of separate units into a dynamic place of experimentation and reflection on our history, our future and our uncomfortable and uncertain connectivity."⁴ Stop tracking down "the other" to search for "us." Heal the sick museum by "remediation" that removes objects from their usual categories ("ethnic" and "tribal") to subject them to other contexts of interpretation, and by "exhibiting" that connects positively and values objects. It is this concept of museum, which she calls "postethnological," that Deliss is trying to achieve in Frankfurt.

Conclusion

The earliest collections in Grassfields, such as those in Foumban, were in fact founded by Grassfields leaders themselves as a means of preserving cultural artifacts and defining identities in the face of the imposition of colonial identities. Since then, many museums there have generally remained ossified in the past in still aiming to faithfully reproduce the content and research questions of interest to Western rather than to African communities. The limited capacity is not only in resources and a supportive environment, but more so in a lack of a critical mass of culturally informed and sensitive scholars who can adroitly advance an Africentric museology project. A principle we must allow ourselves to be guided by in curriculum change is that of inclusivity and diversity. When we talk about decolonization of museums, one of the most important things must be deconstruction. That is the moment in which now find ourselves. We look seriously at the ways in which theories, methodology, and practice are deeply implicated as a colonial form of knowledge. It must be a project of recognition of permission; one step in decolonization is allowing the conversation to happen. We can say that we are in the primary moment of decolonization since it can be spoken, because one of the main ways that decolonization operated was to continually deny its own presence, that it was not happening. That

is why a process of reconstruction is necessary. A process of reconstruction means developing new methods, new organizing principles, and a new politicized understanding of the way people live in or conceptualize the world and reactivating the dialogue based on external impulses to experiment and develop new interpretations of the objects. In a word, the motto must be, recognition-deconstruction and reconstruction of indigenous knowledge and worldview.

Notes

¹ Achille Mbembe, “Decolonizing the University: New Directions,” *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 15, no. 1 (2016): 29–45.

² Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2014).

³ Konaré Alpha Omar, “Discours d’ouverture,” in *Quel musée pour l’Afrique? Patrimoine en devenir*, proceedings of Encounters Conference, Bénin, Ghana, Togo, November 18–23, 1991 (Paris: International Council of Museums), 385–87.

⁴ Clémentine Deliss, ed., *Object Atlas: Fieldwork in the Museum*, ex. cat., Weltkulturen Museum (Bielefeld, Germany: Kerber Verlag, 2011).