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The Multiple Lives of Objects: Museum, Memory, and Modernity in the Cameroon Grassfields

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The Multiple Lives of Objects:
Museum, Memory, and Modernity in the Cameroon Grassfields

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Art History

by

Erica Perlmutter Jones

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Multiple Lives of Objects:
Museum, Memory, and Modernity in the Cameroon Grassfields

By

Erica Perlmutter Jones

Doctor of Philosophy in Art History
University of California, Los Angeles, 2014

Professor Steven D. Nelson, Chair

The Grassfields region of Cameroon is home to many museums. In a region that is known for its prolific, well studied, vibrant arts and cultures, museums have been a part of the cultural landscape for nearly one hundred years. This dissertation seeks to address questions about constructing heritage and how that heritage transforms objects, is understood by different communities, and is used by people in power through the lens of four recently constructed museums in the region: the Mankon Museum, Baham Museum, Babungo Museum, and Bafut Palace Museum. First, this dissertation will address how these museums are used to construct heritage and, keeping in mind that heritage is the utilization of the past for the needs of the present, specific examples will be examined to understand how heritage fulfills the agendas of those involved in the funding, organization, and ownership of the museums. An understanding of how the museums are utilized with regard to heritage leads into a discussion of how the
museums are consequently perceived by a variety of constituencies. With an emphasis on local visitors, this dissertation attempts to delve into the range of perceptions expressed by Cameroonian residents of the regions where museums exist, and some of the driving factors behind these opinions. As the act of utilizing cultural objects to create heritage narratives has a clear impact on the way that locals view their own material culture, this dissertation also examines the effects that this process has on the objects themselves. Finally, as institutions that have the ability to mold heritage and history, impacting the ways in which locals understand their own culture and the way that objects take on entirely new roles in the museum, Grassfields palaces have come to understand that museums have great potential to act as arbiters of change. Consequently, this dissertation also addresses the ways in which museums are being used towards political ends in the region; sometimes they function as tools to further the political aspirations of local kingdoms, at other times they become weapons in regional power struggles. Museums in the Grassfields are powerful objects in and of themselves – they have the ability to shape history and influence local politics. By examining their places within their local communities we can start to garner a better understanding of the place of monarchy, modernity, and memory in the lives of local Grassfields populations.
The dissertation of Erica Perlmutter Jones is approved.

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University of California, Los Angeles

2014
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>xii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: New Heritage for an Old Palace</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: The Museum and Its Communities: Local and Non-Local Responses</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: A Lending Museum: The Movement of Objects and the Impact of the Museum Space</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: Relating Power: Grassfields Politics and the Institution of the Museum</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epilogue: A Final Perspective Based on a Failed Museum</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figures</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

Figures follow page 146.

Map 1: Cameroon Grassfields

Figure 1: Royal Beaded Dance Headdress (*ma komngang*), Mankon Museum

Figure 2: Mask of Terror (*nko*'), Mankon

Figure 3: Beaded royal headdress with leopard crest (*atua afungo*), Mankon Museum

Figure 4: Beaded male mask (*atua ngang*), Mankon Museum

Figure 5: Baham Museum, 2012

Figure 6: Bamum Sultan’s Palace, Foumban, 2011

Figure 7: Bafut Palace Museum, 2011

Figure 8: German Colonial Administration Building (*schloss*), Buea

Figure 9: Bafut Palace Museum, display of objects from the period of conflict between Bafut and German colonial forces

Figure 10: Drum, Baham, carved by Kouam *mafeu* Tchuendem and Kouam *meukam* Tabiegaing, carved between 1935 and 1954

Figure 11: Mbong Masquerade, Bafut, 2012

Figure 12: Mbong Masquerade, Bafut, 2012

Figure 13: Mbong Masquerade, Bafut, 2012

Figure 14: Anthropomorphic Wooden Mask (*atua akamø*), Mankon Museum, 2012

Figure 15: Hairy Dance Costume (*münang*), Mankon Museum, 2012

Figure 16: Valentine Ndoh trying on the *münang* and *atua akamø* in the Mankon Museum, 2012

Figure 17: Suit of Armor (*ako ’søfo*), Mankon Museum

Figure 18: Commemorative statue of King Sangge II, Babungo, 2012
Figure 19: Statue of King Sake II, Babungo, 2012
Figure 20: Seated statue of King Sake II, Babungo, 2012
Figure 21: Commemorative statue throne of a retainer (wenyi ntoh), Babungo, 2012
Figure 22: Commemorative statue of a royal guardian (ndifuan tambu), Babungo, 2012
Figure 23: Commemorative statue throne of a royal guardian (ndifuan tambu), Babungo, 2012
Figure 24: Commemorative statue of a royal guardian (ndifuan tambu), Babungo, 2012
Figure 25: Fon Ndofoa Zofua III at the 2012 nikai, Babungo
Figure 26: Royal Elephant Tusk Trumpet (visau nsee), Babungo
Figure 27: Royal Elephant Tusk Trumpet (visau nsee), Babungo
Figure 28: Royal Stool (Keneh), Babungo
Figure 29: Royal Beaded Stool with Animal Motif (Keneh), Babungo
Figure 30: Royal Beaded Calabash with Cat Motif (finteng-fintoh), Babungo
Figure 31: Members of the ngoumba carrying objects during the nikai festival, Babungo, 2013
Figure 32: Members of the ngoumba carrying objects during the nikai festival, Babungo, 2012
Figure 33: Fon Ndofoa Zofua III of Babungo, 2012
Figure 34: Sub-chief Ba Bajon Bihai III, seated in his Maryland living room.
Figure 35: Babungo Palace Throne Room, 2012
Figure 36: Babungo Palace Throne Room, 2012
Figure 37: Nchusa, Muokang Palace, Babungo, 2013
Figure 38: Tomb of Mange, Muokang Palace, Babungo, 2013
Figure 39: Muokang Palace Museum, display of stools, 2013
Figure 40: Muokang Palace Museum, display of local materials, 2013
Figure 41: Muokang Palace Museum, seating area, 2013
Figure 42: Muokang Palace Museum, one of Ba’s thrones, 2013
Figure 43: Muokang Palace Museum, one of Ba’s thrones, 2013
Figure 44: Muokang Palace Museum, display of hunting, musical, and other daily objects, 2013
Figure 45: Muokang Palace Museum of Vengo Heritage, statue of Sangai, 2013
Figure 46: Muokang Palace Museum of Vengo Heritage, statue of Fuangeh, 2013
Figure 47: Muokang Palace Museum of Vengo Heritage, statue of Mange, 2013
Figure 48: Bamenda Provincial Museum, 1959, photographer unknown, image from the archives of the Ministry of Arts and Culture
Figure 49: Objects from the Bamenda Provincial Museum currently stored at the Ministry of Arts and Culture in Up Station, Bamenda, 2013
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“The Multiple Live of Objects: Museums and Ritual Art in the Cameroon

Introduction

At the 1884-5 Berlin Conference the major European powers of the period carved the continent of Africa into a patchwork of colonies. In this process what is now the country of Cameroon was given to the German Empire. As the Germans moved inland, opening up their colony for trade and exploration, they came across a region where the forested plains gave way to grassy plateaus that came to be known as the Grassfields.\(^1\) Today, the Grassfields comprise the West and Northwest Regions of the Republic of Cameroon (map 1), and they are home to a large number of kingdoms and cultural groups. After the First World War, Cameroon was partitioned and divided between France and England, and the West and Northwest Regions became parts of French and British Cameroon respectively. While there are dozens of dialects spoken in the region, the lingua franca of the Western Region is French, while people from the Northwest speak English or Pidgin English.\(^2\)

As many scholars have pointed out,\(^3\) there are two tendencies when discussing the Grassfields: to essentialize the cultures and speak of them as one homogenous block, or conversely, to starkly delineate the lines between the larger cultural groups. Both impulses have material support and refutation. It is true that there is a great deal of shared culture amongst the Grassfields peoples, as evidenced by the similarities in governance, economy, technology, and

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\(^2\) Cameroonian pidgin English began as a trade language during the 15\(^{th}\) century. While the majority of the words and structure are drawn from English, influences from Portuguese, German, and French can be found, as well as numerous influences from local dialects.

social structure. At the same time, it is important to recognize the unique qualities of the different cultural groups and kingdoms in the region. Among the similarities that unite these many kingdoms, small and large, is an historical and still vibrant tradition of artistic production. The Grassfields have been one of the best-known artistic regions in Africa since the time of first contact with German explorers, and the voracious collection practices of these colonial travelers were easily met by the prodigious artistic production in the region.

The Grassfields is both divided and unified by its defining characteristics. The Anglophone-Francophone border that internally partitions Cameroon runs directly through the Grassfields region, and the population of the region is split into multiple distinct cultural groups. Languages and cultures exist within the region as a quilt of small monarchies that constitute fiercely held differences between groups of people. While each of the cultural and linguistic groups claim a distinct individuality, these cultures are actually unified by a resemblance to one another in terms of religious ideology, weapons, traditional political systems, architecture, and a dedication to the arts that has been fostered by years of contact among them. While homes throughout the Grassfields are replete with art objects of simple elegance such as carved stools, cooking utensils, and musical instruments, the Grassfields are known throughout Cameroon for the lavish masks, beaded thrones, metalwork, and extravagant garb typically found in the palaces of the region. While there is a relatively large number of palace collections of traditional and royal arts in the region, there are also a few small museums that display a rich cultural heritage to local and foreign visitors alike.

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5 Ibid.13.
Museums have long existed in the Grassfields. The Musée des Arts et Traditions Bamoums and the Foumban Palace Museum opened in the 1920s, while the Bamenda Provincial Museum opened in the late 1950s. However, I would argue that museums existed in the Grassfields long before German explorers first made contact with Grassfields cultures in the form of palace displays. Art historian Polly Roberts has also noted the prevalence of indigenous forms of display in Africa stating:

Besides mounting commercial and noncommercial art displays in markets, mosques, and palace and national museums, people construct tombs, shrines, and altars in indoor and outdoor spaces that include village compounds, yards, house exteriors, sacred groves, and crossroads. Most “exhibitions” in Africa are staged in the spaces of everyday existence, of which they are often a part.

As such, while the display of art objects was nothing new, the contribution made by the Foumban Museum and other colonial museum endeavors came in the form of access to palace objects for non-royals, a distancing of objects from the people who use them, and a new language of value surrounding art, culture, and heritage. Since the construction of the first museum in the Grassfields in the 1920s, kingdoms throughout the region have been constantly building, opening, and renovating them. In spite of being home to a thriving museum culture for nearly a century, little research exists on this topic. Anthropologist Alice Euretta Horner wrote a chapter in her 1990 dissertation regarding museums in the Anglophone region, and anthropologist Michael Rowlands has published two articles that briefly discuss the Mankon

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Museum. The one exception to this dearth of information is the case of the Foumban Museum, which has been researched, documented, and published by art historian Christraud Geary in a way that is unparalleled in the scholarship on this region. In this dissertation, I will focus on four less studied 21st century museums in the Grassfields: the Mankon Museum, Babungo Museum, Baham Museum and the Bafut Royal Museum.

**The COE Investment in Living Museums**

While the various kingdoms in the Grassfields have independently invested in their museums, the Centro Oreintamento Educativo (COE) has played a pivotal role in the development of several of these museums. COE is a non-governmental organization based in Barzio, Italy that seeks to support the arts and culture in developing nations around the world. They have projects in nine countries and across four continents around the world. Don Francesco Pedretti, an ordained priest, founded COE on December 16th, 1959. The organization began as an association of Christians focused on education, but by the 1970s the foundation began to shift towards social development projects. By the 1980s its current focus on culture and heritage development had coalesced. Don Francesco visited Cameroon in November of 1969 and COE has been active in the country ever since, organizing over a dozen projects in the fields of education, social development, health, arts and culture, and rural development. COE’s involvement in Cameroon has not gone unnoticed by the Cameroonian government. In 1999, COE signed an agreement of cooperation with the Republic of Cameroon, ensuring that the NGO would continue to sponsor projects in the country. To promote the arts in Cameroon, in 1980 COE opened the Institute for Artistic Training in Mbalmayo, a town in the Central Region of

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Cameroon, and shortly before Don Francesco’s death in 1999, architect and COE project coordinator, Bianca Triaca, approached him to discuss a project to build five museums in the Grassfields region.¹⁰

Three individuals drove the COE museum project, with Triaca serving as project manager. Art historian Jean-Paul Notué was the scientific director, who was tasked with training the curators, overseeing their fieldwork, and editing the museum catalogues. Antonio Piva, an architect, UNESCO collaborator, and museography lecturer at the Faculty of Architecture in the Politecnico of Milan, designed the installations in the museums.¹¹ According to the website for the museum project, the Grassfields region was selected as a focus because it is an area “where the heritage is the richest and where the dangers of dispersion and decline of the objects of art are therefore more numerous.”¹²

Having narrowed the search to the Grassfields region for this reason, Notué chose the five kingdoms from a field of nearly two hundred to participate in the museum project. These include: Mankon, Babungo, Baham, Bandjoun, and Bamendjinda. He selected them based upon four criteria: “the presence of a significant heritage; the willingness of the traditional authorities to allow the study and social enjoyment of the objects belonging to the heritage of their communities; the degree of the desire and wishes of the place to have a modern and suitable museum; the commitment of the traditional authorities to put an appropriate building at the disposal of the project and on schedule.”¹³ If the kingdoms were able to fulfill the criteria, COE

¹³ Notué and Triaca, Mankon: Art, Heritage and Culture from the Mankon Kingdom. 15.
would help each of them bring to fruition a “living museum.” Curators in the COE museums described this as a museum that both displays the cultural heritage of the kingdom while also allowing for objects to be loaned to the community so they can continue to fulfill their ritual functions. The mandate to lend objects was crucial to the organizers, and Triaca emphasizes this in her introduction to the museum catalogues, stating:

The museum preserves these objects but does not imprison them or uproot them from the context in which they continue to live. Each time that tradition requires their presence on the ceremonial or ritual occasion of the community, they leave the museum and perform their function of communication and transmission of cultural, religious, magic and political values necessary for the social cohesion of which they are the expression, and then return to the palace assuring their preservation.¹⁴

Given this policy, the benefits seem as if they would have clearly outweighed any reservations the kingdoms had with the criteria laid out by COE. Yet the selection criteria were more complicated than they may at first appear, and they generated several impediments for the completion of the projects.

The first criterion, the presence of a significant heritage, is the simplest of the four since there are many kingdoms in the region that have heritages worthy of a palace museum. However, there are three other criteria to meet. Bali and Oku are two excellent examples of well-known art producing kingdoms that would have greatly benefited from the construction of a museum, and yet they were not selected. The second criterion requires the cooperation of traditional authorities, which is somewhat more complicated, and each kingdom handled this differently. Depending upon the relationship of the Fon, the local term for king, to the traditional councils in

¹⁴ Triaca, "A cultural heritage preservation project for development in Cameroon: the four museums of Babungo, Baham, Bandjoun and Mankon."
their kingdom, it is entirely possible that the Fon could simply mandate cooperation. Despite such authority, in each kingdom I studied people indicated that there were objects that the traditional councils were able to hold back from the museum. Sometimes it was seen as too important an item, and at other times items were viewed as impractical to store in a museum due to the high frequency of their use. Some objects were seen as too powerful to be in a museum, meaning that the objects may contain secret knowledge or have been imbued with powerful traditional medicine. Given this power sharing between the Fon and the councils, the participation of the traditional council was integral to the completion of each project.

The third criterion, citing the desire of the place to have a modern museum, could just as easily question the desire of the palace to have a modern museum. This too was not straightforward in every case. While there seemed to be no objections to museums in Mankon and Baham, I was told conflicting stories about the Fon of Babungo’s desire to have one. While in the end he fully supported the project, there were murmurings that originally he was not interested in having a museum because he did not wish for everyone to know what art objects were in his possession. He preferred the secrecy that the palace treasure room afforded him, and of course such concerns are not entirely unfounded. Thieves could easily use the museum catalogues as shopping guides, making these buildings prime targets for theft. These fears came to reality in Baham where robbers took two masks and a large piece of traditional dyed ndop cloth in what appeared to be a very targeted robbery. In the end, local pride in being selected and what it could do for the future of the kingdom outweighed any and all objections to the museum project in every kingdom.

The last criterion was certainly the most difficult of the four since changing minds is easy, but finding money to build a museum is incredibly difficult. The kingdoms solved this
problem differently, with some getting money from outside sources, one repurposed an existing building to house the museum, and all turned to the support of the local community to gather materials and labor. However, the experience in Bamendjinda shows how challenging these projects were in reality. While they provided four curators who were fully trained by COE, the kingdom did not provide a building for the museum and the project failed to move forward to completion.\textsuperscript{15}

Once the kingdoms had been selected, four young people from each kingdom were chosen to undergo a two-year curatorial training program. During the first year, the twenty students lived in Mbalmayo and attended classes led by several experts, including Cameroonian professors from the University of Yaoundé I, members of the Ministry of Culture, and Italian experts at COE’s Institute for Artistic Training. The coursework followed the International Council of Museums (ICOM) recommendations, covering several core subjects: 1) art, culture and heritage; 2) museums, collections, theories and museological technique; 3) museum architecture, museographic techniques, conservation, and restoration; 4) cultural activities, IT and audiovisual techniques.\textsuperscript{16} During the second year of training the curators returned to their kingdoms to do field work on specific topics related to local traditions and artistic practices. At the end of the second year each curator wrote a chapter summarizing what they found, and these were eventually included in the catalogue for the museum. Upon completion of the project, the palaces in Babungo, Bandjoun, Mankon, and Baham all had one-room museums in their palace compounds, each with objects displayed on raised platforms and large wall plaques with information on the specific objects. Each museum also published a book of essays about the

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\textsuperscript{15} Bamendjinda has subsequently completed a museum with outside funding and it is included in the Route des Chefferies in the Western Region.

\textsuperscript{16} C.O.E., "The Project".
kingdom’s religion, history, and arts, complete with a photo catalogue of all objects in the permanent collection. My research focuses on three of these COE museums, plus one that was not COE-supported.

Babungo Museum

Babungo is a kingdom located in the Anglophone Northwest Region of Cameroon, home to 20,000 – 30,000 people. This kingdom has a rich artistic heritage and is regionally known for its historic iron works production, as well as its modern beadwork and carved wooden sculptures. Babungo has also recently become known for its sculptor kings, since carvings by the current Fon and the previous two Fons are housed in the palace and museum.

All of the COE museums were built with support from their local communities, and some also managed to find outside funding to support their museum projects. Babungo had been working on building a museum since early 2000, and had applied for a small grant from the US embassy in Yaoundé. As a part of the grant application, they had to outline what materials they would need, the labor the project would require, an architectural plan, and costs for each element. This grant application was successful and the US embassy gave the Babungo palace 5.5 million XAF (nearly 11,500 US Dollars) for the building project. Consequently, Babungo was already on their way to building a museum when COE arrived soliciting applications from kingdoms interested in opening a museum. Babungo had already taken care of what proved to be the most difficult parameter for participation in the COE project.

Baham Museum

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18 Personal communication, Ndong Tumentua Mathias, 5/28/12.
Baham is a Bamiléké chiefdom, known locally as a chefferie, located in the Francophone Western Region of the Grassfields. Population estimates range from 35,000 to 60,000 people. Baham has historically been a principal producer of wood sculpture, beadwork, and dyed ndop cloth, a cloth worn in traditional ceremonies that is dyed with indigo to depict enigmatic and meaningful symbols.\textsuperscript{19} Very little research has been done in Baham, since researchers have favored some of the larger Bamiléké chefferies of the region. Consequently, the construction of the museum and its accompanying text represents some of the most detailed research done to date on the culture, history, and traditions of Baham.

The museum in Baham is housed in a large, two-story building adjacent to the palace. According to the curators, no museum project had been discussed in Baham prior to the arrival of COE, and so Baham had no existing museum building to use. In order to fulfill the COE requirement that the kingdom provide the project with a museum structure, the Baham Fon used eminent domain to confiscate a banquet hall that had been under construction since 1985 and repurposed it for the museum.\textsuperscript{20} When the museum opened unofficially in 2003 the building was largely completed, but the exterior was still undecorated and for the next ten years they continued to improve the exterior.

\textit{Mankon Museum}

The kingdom of Mankon is located on the outskirts of Bamenda, the largest city in the Anglophone Northwest Region. The Mankon kingdom claims a population of 50,000 to 70,000\textsuperscript{21} and many Mankon people live either in Bamenda or in Mankon Town, adjacent to Bamenda. Mankon does not claim to specialize in any particular Grassfields art mediums or

\textsuperscript{19} Jean-Paul Notué and Bianca Triaca, \textit{Baham: Arts, Mémoire et Pouvoir dans le Royaume de Baham} (Milan: 5 Continents Editions, 2006). 19.
\textsuperscript{20} Personal communication, Albert Fomkong, 1/12/12.
\textsuperscript{21} Notué and Triaca, \textit{Mankon: Art, Heritage and Culture from the Mankon Kingdom}. 20.
genres, and so the collection of the Mankon Museum represents the typical holdings of a Grassfields kingdom. The collection displays the full range of art produced regionally with objects related to kingship, religious practices, and daily life.

The Mankon Museum is housed in a two-storied structure located at the entrance to the palace. Unlike the museums in Babungo and Baham, the construction of this building was a direct result of the COE museum project and it was built with labor and materials provided by the palace and the community. The museum is located on the top floor of the building, while the first floor is now abandoned, after having previously served as a library, exhibition spaces, and storage rooms. According to the current curator, the community did not want the museum to be on the palace grounds because of its inaccessibility to tourists, but Triaca insisted that it be located there as a means of bringing employment to the village.22 Regardless of whether the COE museums were built specifically to house a museum collection, or they were made to serve one or many other functions, it is important to note that all of them were built recently and it has been their primary function to serve as museums since completion.

The Bafut Palace Museums

Bafut is a large kingdom in the Northwest Region that is widely regarded as one of the most powerful kingdoms in the region. Local population is estimated at around 120,000 inhabitants, making this one of the largest kingdoms in the region and the largest kingdom included in this study.23 Much like Mankon, Bafut is not well known for one particular style or medium of art production, and so the museum collection focuses primarily on historical objects related to past Fons and key events of the last century.

22 Personal communication, Vincent Nshey 10/20/11.
The museum in Bafut was not built with help from COE and it has a slightly different history in that it is both older and came about more independently from its funding source. The current museum in Bafut is a reinstallation of the existing palace collection, and it opened in 2006 with funding from the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ).\textsuperscript{24} When Fon Abumbi II came to the throne in 1968 at the age of 15, he inherited a great deal of art that was housed in private palace storehouses. As a young man he noticed that hundreds of tourists would visit his father’s palace, and this tourism flourished throughout the beginning of his reign. Motivated by the increasing number of tourists and a desire to preserve the cultural objects that were being housed in the achum, the traditional storage house at the center of the palace, he organized a display of art and artifacts in a couple of rooms in the palace to create a greater attraction. The Fon was forthcoming in speaking with me about his reasons for creating this initial museum. Given the conditions of the objects and the mode of storing them, if he did not move the objects, they would be destroyed by insects and the elements within the next ten to twenty years. Secondly, it is very expensive to maintain a household of many wives and many more children, and he saw the financial potential in opening a museum. The Fon described his original, two-room display as crowded and unprofessional. Interestingly, much like the COE museums of today, the original Bafut museum was a living museum, with historical, unused objects and cultural, functional objects intermingled. Members of the secret societies took objects from the museum from time to time so that they could be used in ceremonies. According to the Fon, many tourists remarked that the museum should be much larger and better organized,

\textsuperscript{24} The GTZ was one of the three predecessors of Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ).
and on the advice of the council of elders the Fon decided to use the old guesthouse. It had been built by the previous Fon in the 1940s and modeled on the German *schloss* in Buea, and there was widespread agreement that it was an ideal space for the museum.

Once the Fon had decided to create a new museum on the grounds of the palace, he told me that he went directly to the ambassadors of Cameroon’s two previous colonial masters. As the Fon tells the story, the German ambassador and his wife were visiting Bafut and the ambassador’s wife was very impressed with the arts and culture of Bafut. The Fon stated that the wife insisted that the ambassador take up the museum project and, it is because of her enthusiasm that the Germans became such strong supporters of the new museum. Marliese Leonhardt, the wife of a GTZ director, worked with the Bafut palace to design and organize the museum. Additional funding was secured from the British embassy, which provided 15,000,000 XAF (around 31,000 USD) in funds to repair the roof of the guest house/museum, while the remainder of the funding came from GTZ for the organization, training, lighting, and various repairs to the structure of the building.

Ms. Leonhardt constructed a tour of the palace and museum; she trained queens, princes, and curators to give this tour to any visitor. The tour begins in the outer courtyard of the palace where the guide highlights objects and sites that have varying degrees of contemporary use and historical significance. This establishes an understanding of a kingdom that has a long history.

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25 The guesthouse has long been a rest stop for visitors and researchers in Bafut. Gerald Durrell lived in the guesthouse during his 1947 expedition to Bafut and his time there is recounted in his book, *The Bafut Beagles*.

26 Personal communication, Fon Abumbi II, 11/2/11.

27 Whether it was the ambassador or a high ranking member of GTZ who met with the Fon is not entirely clear, because the funding for the project, as well as the source for training the docents, was from GTZ and the individual leading the project was the wife of a GTZ director named Marliese Leonhardt.

28 Personal communication, Divine Fuh, 12/8/11.
maintains its traditional culture, and has encouraged modernization at the same time. This is highlighted by the juxtaposition of a set of rocks that were historically used for sacrificing humans during traditional ceremonies, directly across from two wooden posts that are still replaced every single year at the annual festival to represent men and women, and the renewed fecundity of the land.

The tour then moves into the museum, which is well situated on a hill above the palace, giving the visitor the ability to view the entire palace compound from above. The museum is a mixture of display styles with rooms dedicated to historical events, thematic groupings, in-situ installations for important historical individuals, and a room of photographs that documents early contact between Bafut and the Germans. The tour weaves through the two sets of the queens’ quarters, moving deeper into the palace, and culminates in front of the Fon’s home, which includes the _achum_, the sacred storeroom in the palace. The Fon’s home was built during the period of German colonialism, as were a majority of the Queen’s quarters, and in 2006 the Bafut palace was added to the list of tentative UNESCO World Heritage Sites. As a result, it is now eligible to receive financial assistance from the World Monuments Fund, which, according to the Fon, has donated 100 million XAF (around 206,000 USD) to aid in repairs to the German tile roofs of the queens’ quarters. It is only when reaching the end of the tour does one notice that the _achum_ is the first and only building in a purely Bafut style in the Fon’s palace and that all other buildings bear the mark of the German influence in Cameroon. During a visit to the Bafut museum and palace a visitor is likely to see school children running around, queens cooking in the courtyards, and notables attending meetings with the Fon, all of which conveys a sense of the everyday as people live their lives and go about their business in the palace, but also a sense that this is still a vibrant and functioning palace.
While the public museum was being built, the Fon was also constructing another museum in the palace. This second museum, a *private* museum according to the curator, and a *special* museum according to the Fon, is located on the palace grounds and was made to house objects that were not safe to have on public display. The Fon emphasized that he preferred the term *special* to *private* when referring to this museum because both belong to the public. The second museum is *special* because it has restricted access. However special it may be, this museum is open to any foreigners who ask to see it because the objects are not dangerous to them. This museum has no clear organization, no labels or display design, and it is essentially a storeroom opened at times to non-locals. While the objects are not dangerous *per se*, they are important objects that would be diminished by making them readily available to the public.\(^{29}\)

Regarding access to these objects, the Fon said, “the pastor should be seen in his pastor’s dress only on Sunday,” much like how the objects in the special museum should only be seen when it is their appropriate time to be used in public.\(^{30}\)

**Chapter Layout**

Chapter One examines the complexities of constructing heritage in Grassfields museums. The main focus will be on how heritage is constructed, who benefits from these heritage narratives, and what agendas various parties are promoting. A primary function of these institutions is to construct a version of heritage that suits the agendas of the controlling body or individual. The kingdoms of the Grassfields use palace and community museums to put forth a version of local heritage that advances concepts such as a strong centralized kingdom, a devotion to traditional beliefs still vibrant at the turn of the 20\(^{th}\) century, and the assertion that these kingdoms have artistic traditions worthy of recognition on a world stage. The palaces certainly

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\(^{29}\) Personal communication, Divine Fuh, 12/8/11.

\(^{30}\) Personal communication, Fon Abumbi II, 11/2/11.
have such an agenda, but so do the curators and the donor NGOs that seek to influence how heritage is constructed and how culture is portrayed through these institutions. While palaces use museums to produce heritage narratives that promulgate their version of history, individuals use small museums to make statements about themselves and the culture of display in the region.

Chapter Two focuses on how the Grassfields museums are widely perceived, given that every year these museums host a wide range of visitors, from international tourists to locals. Visitors find something different in the museum and approach the experience in unique ways based upon their educational and cultural backgrounds, as well as the depth of their local knowledge. In their attempt to cater to this wide range of viewing populations these museums are deeply shaped by the diversity of visitors, and so it is apparent that their content, modes and styles of display, and locations are all impacted by a desire to resonate with this array of viewers.

This chapter emphasizes the diversity of perspectives on the functions, messages, and mandates of the museums from multiple perspectives. The first group to be addressed is the tourist visitor who is largely concerned with issues of authenticity and international preconceptions about heritage. An examination of urban Cameroonian and Cameroonian diaspora visitors to the rural museums will look at the museums through the frame of cosmopolitan appeal. For these populations the museums constitute useful tools for educating children who have grown up outside of the kingdom, reconnecting with their heritage, and as a way of entertaining guests to the kingdom.

A majority of the chapter will be spent engaging in the local responses since individuals from the kingdoms have a vastly different experience in the museum space than any other visiting population. They are members of the living culture that is on display in the museum, and their perceptions of the museums are wound up in their current concerns about modernity,
monarchy, and history. The museums become a blank slate upon which members of the local population see their concerns about their lives – past, present, and future – exemplified through the institution and all it represents to them and about them.

Chapter Three looks at the museum objects themselves with a focus on the movement of objects to and from the institution. As objects are moved from their traditional homes in private compounds, secret society houses, and the palace to the museum sphere, they are transformed. In the museum, these objects take on a range of new meanings and functions. They begin to act as objects that represent heritage and culture broadly, they are reference points for certain historical events, and they become inextricably linked with the owners who donated them to the museum. Yet in a choice that makes the COE museums unique, there is a system in place that allows many of these objects to leave the museum from time to time in order to fulfill their traditional functions. Many of the objects that leave the museum must be blessed in order to re-activate them and make them appropriate for a ritual setting. As museum objects are loaned and returned, they move in and out of a state of ritual being. This means that the objects take on different meanings depending upon their setting, and they embody a certain set of significances and functions outside the museum and others inside the museum. Of course none of these meanings are static. I will also examine the impact of donors on the objects they have loaned to the museum, focusing on the place of the individual in a museum that is creating a narrative of collective heritage.

Chapter Four will emphasize the ways in which these museums have become political tools in their kingdoms. As widely accepted purveyors of truth, museums have the potential to be incredibly useful tools for political institutions. In fact, it is nearly impossible to divorce museums from politics. This chapter has a dedicated focus on the kingdom of Babungo and the
two museums that lie within the kingdom, and it will address how two museums in the kingdom are invoked to local and national political ends by powerful political structures. These two museums are only the latest tools in a political battle between the two most powerful men in the kingdom, a battle that has ebbed and flowed over the last century. I will examine how the narratives produced by both institutions are being utilized in this local conflict, as well as how they are packaged for national and international parties to attract development funding.
Chapter 1
New Heritage for an Old Palace

“The palace is a museum.” People throughout the Grassfields told me this time and time again. Museums have existed in Grassfields palaces for nearly one hundred years, and yet never has this statement been truer than at this current moment in Grassfields history. The palace is the center of religious and political life in the kingdom, and much like Jerusalem in the Judeo-Christian tradition, it is considered as the center of the kingdom. The palace was the epicenter of all forms of kingdom-wide governance in the pre-colonial era, but as Rowlands and Anthropologist Jean-Pierre Warnier have commented, “the post-colonial State [in Cameroon] has inherited from its colonial predecessor a situation where the power of “traditional chiefs” is undermined by the central authorities.”31 The contemporary political climate emphasizes the power of regional administrators and courts, and so the only powers that the Grassfields palaces retain are in the forum of traditional life. The importance of the palace is emphasized through the language of cultural patrimony, including the lineage of the Fons. While the palace was historically the center of kingdom-wide politics, it is now the center of local heritage. In truth, the palace has always been a site where tradition is created, reified, and disseminated. Today this practice is taking place to a large extent in palace museums.

This chapter will use examples from palace museums in Mankon, Bafut, Babungo, and Baham to examine how Grassfields palaces are using museums to construct narratives of heritage that serve the agendas of the people in power. Mary Nooter Roberts and anthropologist Allen Roberts have found in their research that people “are concerned with their past… they continually reconfigure nationalist and local histories to meet emerging needs of political

The same can be said of Grassfields cultures where the current heritage narratives emphasize certain elements of the past in order to serve the needs of powerful people and institutions in the present. In short, the heritage narratives constructed in Grassfields palace museums are being used for simple ends: they are there to promote the power, wealth, and prestige of those who created them.

The larger Grassfields monarchies are deeply entrenched in ownership of land and local businesses, and many of the Fons, princes, and princesses have direct ties to the ruling party of the government, the Cameroon People’s Democratic Movement (CPDM). I met very few people who felt that the monarchies should be eliminated, and only a few people expressed the sentiment that the country already had a system of governance and the redundancy of the Grassfields kingdoms should be done away with. It is commonly felt that the Fon should remain the ruler of his people, in the sense that he is the arbiter of traditional life. As such, few people really question the right of the monarchy to control the museums and the cultural resources of the kingdom. The palace historically held onto many of the kingdom’s cultural resources in order to use them for the benefit of the kingdom as a whole. Grassfields rulers have always used art objects as indicators of prestige, but traditional arts were also used to bring fertility to the land, appease malicious ancestors, protect their people in war, or heal the people in times of sickness. In the museum today this functionality is limited mostly to conveying heritage and prestige, but while some of these older functions are losing relevance, new roles are emerging. Shining a light on these contemporary shifts are Grassfields palace museums that represent a desire to preserve cultural heritage, attract economic development, bolster the local power of the king and the regional power of the kingdom, and disseminate knowledge about local traditions. While the

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role of these museums evolves, it should also be noted that the meanings of the objects housed within the museum are shifting.\textsuperscript{33}

\textit{Heritage}

Each one of the Grassfields palace museums was constructed with a range of goals meant to enrich the culture and people of the kingdoms, with the most widely stated motivation for constructing a museum being the preservation and display of heritage. The concept of heritage and the means of displaying it took different forms in the museums given that each one privileged different elements of their heritage. For some it was a heritage of fine art production, while others illustrated a heritage of local political dominance, and still others focused on the heritage and complexities of local traditional politics. One over-arching commonality in all of these museums is that heritage, as it is conceived in the space of the museum, always points to power – the power of traditional culture and the power of the palace.

Heritage is something that is produced; it is a powerful concept that is constructed in the present using memory, history, and imagination in the service of those crafting the narrative. Heritage is a notoriously broad term and as archaeologist Rodney Harrison has noted, “it might be used to describe anything from the solid – such as buildings, monuments and memorials, to the ethereal – songs, festivals and languages.”\textsuperscript{34} The haziness of the definition has been seen by

\textsuperscript{33} Art historian Steven Nelson has noted a similar phenomenon in the construction of the Mousgoum Cultural and Tourist Center in Pouss. Steven Nelson, \textit{From Cameroon to Paris: Mousgoum Architecture in and out of Africa} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). Chapter 4.

some to make the concept of heritage conveniently ambiguous,\textsuperscript{35} and debates about the relationship of heritage to memory, nostalgia, history, science, politics, art, and architecture have raged since the 1980s. What is undisputed is that heritage is constructed, as opposed to being a simple truth or fact.\textsuperscript{36} Historian Eric Hobsbawm has noted that tradition, much like heritage, is constructed when a suitable past is selected, formalized, ritualized, and then repeated until it is accepted.\textsuperscript{37} Michael Rowlands has argued that the construction of heritage creates a bond between the pain of the past and hope for the future. He argues that agencies like UNESCO use the concept of heritage in order to create an official past that is then taken up by museums and placed on display.\textsuperscript{38} The setting of the museum impacts the way that the viewer sees and understands the objects and concepts that are displayed, which provides the “official” heritage with a patina of legitimacy from inclusion in the museum space.\textsuperscript{39} It is through the specificity and economy of display that the museum appears to encapsulate the totality of a culture,\textsuperscript{40} leaving no room for dissent from the narrative proposed by the museum installation. In each of


\textsuperscript{36} Appadurai’s argument about the five dimensions of global cultural flows as “perspectival” constructs also articulates how a concept like heritage is a discursive construction. Arjun Appadurai, \textit{Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996). 33.


the Grassfields museums I studied, the palaces used these inherent elements of museum display to their benefit, crafting an official kingdom heritage that emphasizes the centrality of the palace in traditional life and the continued importance of traditional culture in modern life that appears unassailable given the encapsulating nature of the museum space.

Thinking of heritage as a means of preservation and exploitation serves to illuminate how palace museums in the Grassfields construct heritage. Preservation, or the salvage-paradigm, has long been associated with the construction of heritage. According to performance studies scholar Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, heritage may appear old and yet in reality it is entirely concerned with contemporary needs.41 Anthropologist Virginia Dominguez has also written on this topic and notes that concepts such as tradition and heritage are frequently viewed as existing in opposition to modernity, with modernity viewed as flexible and evolving and heritage viewed as immutable and static. Yet when heritage and tradition are viewed as invented concepts, it becomes clear that they are more emblematic of modernity than the histories they are perceived to represent.42 Articulating heritage is actually a discourse driven by the present, and discussions of preservation and reclamation entail a privileging of present needs.43

While moving objects to museums means that they will be preserved, it also means that as long as these objects remain in the museum they will always be at the palace’s disposal as

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41 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage. 7.
indicators of heritage, while if allowed to remain in storerooms, they could easily be lost, stolen or destroyed. By placing these historical objects in the museum, they will always be available to serve present needs, whatever those changing needs may be. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues that the rhetoric of salvaging the past for the sake of heritage indicates that the tradition being saved has begun a descent into cultural obsolescence. Therefore we can state that objects meant to create a narrative of heritage are, by definition, no longer useful to identity production in the same way as originally intended. I will show that this is not necessarily the case when examining the Grassfields palace museums.

**Heritage in a Living Museum**

To construct a visual narrative of their heritage, it was necessary that the Grassfields museums re-contextualize courtly objects. The objects on view in the museums were taken from palace storerooms of the Fons or private homes where they had been used in family or clan rituals and were moved to a museum context where they became characterized as pieces of a common heritage. While it is undeniable that many of the traditional objects housed in the palaces of local Fons have lost the importance or potency that they held prior to the colonial period, or even at the point of independence, many of them continue to be used today in some iteration close to their previous intent and are still considered to be efficacious. In fact, many of these artistic traditions continue today in a vibrant fashion, and, as curator and scholar Lorenz Homberger points out, while there is an impressive number of publications concerning Grassfields arts and traditions, there is still a great deal that is unknown because the secret knowledge remains guarded to this day. Consequently, while these objects are being moved to the museum to be preserved for the sake of maintaining heritage, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s

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assertions about commensurate cultural obsolescence are not necessarily true in these cases; instead, objects in many Grassfields museums manage to represent heritage and still remain functional, traditional objects at the same time, retaining secret knowledge and holding special powers.

Evidence of the retained functionality and importance of the museum objects is twofold: first, certain objects may be removed from the museum in order to fulfill their traditional functions related to cultural and religious practices, and second, curators who are members of secret societies are prohibited from touching certain objects on display because there are still taboos against initiated people coming into contact with specific types of objects. Many of the objects in the museum that were originally housed in the palace, what Geary calls “things of the palace,” are meant to be seen, and yet when they were housed in the palace, they could only be seen infrequently in prescribed settings. This type of secrecy was important to the functionality of the objects as noted by Roberts; in such cases “secrecy operates in complex, subtle ways, being a key strategy in much secular and ritual experience.” Moreover, as kingly objects, they should not be touched. In the COE museums visitors are allowed to touch most objects, though

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46 These are palace objects that are associated with the king, rather than any of the lineage groups or secret societies they may house art objects in the palace. Geary, Things of the Palace: A Catalogue of the Bamun Palace Museum in Foumban (Cameroon). xv.
47 This is not uncommon in Africa, as noted in Mary Nooter Roberts, "Secrecy: African Art that Conceals and Reveals," African Arts 26, no. 1 (1993). 56. See also, Henry Drewal, "Art and the Perception of Women in Yoruba Culture," Cahiers D'Etudes Africaines 68, no. 15 (1977). Susan Vogel has also questioned the incongruities of viewing art objects in the museum and then attempting how the same objects are perceived within their own original cultural setting in her book: Susan M. Vogel, Baule: African Art Western Eyes (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997).
49 Rowlands points out that these should not be touched because as kingly objects, they are considered to be an extension of the Fon’s body, and the Fon’s body is never touched. Michael Rowlands, "Of Substances, Palace, and Museums: The visible and the invisible in the constitution of Cameroon," Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (2011). S32.
it is not encouraged. As multiple curators explained, visitors do not need to fear touching the objects because in most cases, whatever powers they previously contained in a ritual setting are no longer present in the context of the museum. The true indication of movement towards obsolescence for many objects is that museum visitors may touch them, while the prohibition against touching certain museum objects is an indication of their state as functional objects, which are not obsolete.

Objects in Grassfields museums embody many different qualities at the same time. For some objects, obsolescence, meaning that they are no longer considered blessed or ritual objects, may be a transient state of being. Some objects appear obsolete as visitors may touch them while in the museum sphere, only to be made functional again; in some cases the objects are re-blessed and in other cases the objects are made functional again by the act of removing them from the museum. Given that people who have varying levels of understanding and attachment to the objects visit these museums, the objects have the capacity to be many things to many people and they may be obsolete to some and living to others. Similarly, objects have transient meanings – some objects may indicate the hegemonic rule of one line of kings to one viewer while reminding another viewer of histories of dissent within the kingdom. As Rowlands has pointed out, objects are invested with meaning through use, ownership, an association with historical events, and personal memories, giving objects the ability to be deeply personal to one viewer and entirely meaningless to another. This means that while the museum as an institution may promote one narrative of the kingdom’s heritage, the individual objects have the ability to speak to a multitude of heritages, histories, and memories.

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The continued use of some of the objects housed in the museums raises questions about how the local communities view and value their own cultural practices in conjunction with the role of the museum. As anthropologist Annie Coombes has argued, the accessibility of objects in the static, public environment of the museum asserts a set meaning for the object through labels and cataloguing, one that can be located within a global dialogue, and alters and codifies the perception of these performative objects. As the meanings of museum objects become fixed, it is easier to situate them within a global perspective on art and within the canon of African and world art. This process limits the ability of objects to change and remain relevant as the traditional culture changes with the times, but recasting these objects as pieces of heritage solidifies the way they are understood, and the museum increases their value since communities gain status through the recognition of their culture, architecture, and traditional practices.

In fact, the museum and its collection have been transmuted into a type of functional object. As literary scholar Susan Stewart argues, “the collection presents a hermetic world: to have a representative collection is to have both the minimum and the complete number of elements necessary for an autonomous world – a world which is both full and singular, which has banished repetition and achieved authority.” She points out that the objects in the museum are severed from their original context and take on the meaning given to them by the organizers and the modes display. Given their setting and correlation with one another, the objects are

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52 Rowlands and de Jong, "Reconsidering Heritage and Memory." 15.
now understood not by their individual meanings, but by their associations with that which surrounds them. Museums can be seen as a single unity, as prestige items in their own right, since it does not necessarily matter what is inside them – the suggestion of a collection on display is sufficient to impart importance to the institution of the museum. It is this perception of importance that is used to satisfy the desires of many communities involved in its planning, construction, and day-to-day operation.

A Heritage Agenda

Many structures, compounds, and rooms were described to me as being museums. For example, to the Fon of Bafut, “the whole palace structure is a museum.” On the opposite end of the spectrum from palaces are small, privately owned museums. Some of these “museums” are locked rooms filled with objects in private homes, while others are open to the public daily. Some include objects for sale while others are strictly collections for display. Every entity described as a museum had one thing in common, namely, they all contained objects or structures that are considered to be antiquities. This one unifying factor of all the spaces termed museums had nothing to do with their programs, function, or message, focusing only on the age of what they displayed. However, there is one other commonality across these Grassfields museums: the way these museums serve the agendas of those who run them. Those agendas are all linked by a desire to enrich those in control of the display, and yet each museum advances its own agenda, and their owners through subtle differences in focus and interest.

Grassfields museums that are open to the public are typically located outside of urban centers. Bamenda and Bafoussam are the third and fourth largest cities in Cameroon and yet neither has a museum dedicated to their regional artistic production, and instead museums are located in palaces and villages throughout the countryside. The kingdoms of Bafut, Mankon,
Babungo, Oku, Bandjoun, Bamendjou, and Baham, to name only a few, all have museums in their palace compounds. In addition, small museums run by individuals, such as the Heritage Tourist Museum in Bafut and Simon Atanga’s International Museum and Library in Akum, are located along major roadways in the region. While twenty years ago most major cities in the country would have boasted a state-run museum displaying the art and culture of the region, funding for these museums has largely disappeared and most have closed; today only private individuals or traditional political bodies have the funds to maintain museums for the public, effectively privatizing the display of Grassfields heritage.

**Palace Museums**

The most significant museums in the Grassfields are the palace museums because they act as the primary tourist sites in the region. In the case of the museums in Bafut, Baham, Mankon, and Babungo, all of these museums are integrated into the larger palace compounds, which could be considered natural, historical, and cultural sites all at the same time. Most of these palaces have existed in one form or another for hundreds of years and they all contain a sacred forest that either borders or surrounds portions of the palace compound. Most of them house queens along with numerous princes and princesses in the main palace compound, and they are highly active sites of contemporary cultural activity for secret societies and other traditional political organizations. While the museums located in these multifaceted sites clearly exist as their own entities, the lines between the museum and the palace complex are blurred. At all of these museums, with the exception of Baham, tours of the palace and museum are interwoven as though one is not complete without the other. In palaces like those of Bafut, Mankon, and Babungo, an alliance exists between the museum and the palace such that each lends credibility, authenticity, and gravitas to other. The historical nature of the palace lends
authenticity to the museum, while the authoritative voice of the museum lends credibility to the claims of the palace.

These museums have existed in various states for quite some time and yet there has been a recent push to renovate and modernize the existing museums, motivated by an interest in raising them to international standards and catering to their well-traveled tourist audience. In the case of the museums in Baham, Babungo, and Mankon an Italian NGO, COE, provided the necessary resources for completing a museum project titled, “formation, protection of the artistic and cultural heritage and development in Cameroon.”

The Bafut Palace Museum was largely funded by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ). The question arises with so many people and entities shaping the mission and message of the museum, what are the agendas of the controlling parties? What are they seeking to achieve for themselves and for people in the region? In fact, while the ability to define the heritage narrative is always central, one can find various agendas at work.

**Agenda: Past in the Service of the Present**

When objects are reframed in terms of heritage, it is inevitable that certain memories and traditions are privileged over others. As sociologist Stuart Hall noted, when traditions, and in this case traditional objects, are valued simply for their role as ritual objects, they become essentialized and their meaning is fixed in an idealized past. In the Grassfields the idealized past manifests itself as a preference for objects that reference the practices of the early colonial period around the turn of the 20th century when the palaces were at the apex of their power. Shortly after this moment the British and French colonial governments began to ban many of the...

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festivals and colonial administrators took over the governing of the people, while the Christian churches in the region began advocating for the abandonment of many indigenous practices. Given this history of loss, Christraud Geary has noted that post-independence ritual practices were largely reconstructions of the festivals prior to the period of French and British rule before World War I.  

Another significant development during the colonial period is that authorities determined they could manage the local population more efficiently by simplifying traditional power structures and investing increased power in the Fons. Hobsbawm has noted when large-scale cultural shifts occur, this increasingly results in the invention of tradition. He states that “we should expect [the invention of tradition] to occur more frequently when a rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys the social patterns for which “old” traditions had been designed, producing new ones to which they were not applicable, or when such old traditions and their institutions, carriers and promulgators no longer prove sufficiently adaptable and flexible, or are otherwise eliminated.” As such, the turn of the 20th century was a significant moment in the history of these kingdoms as they shaped the way that kingship and tradition exist today. Traditional practices that are today viewed as key elements of Grassfields heritage began to wane, as Fons began to find themselves increasingly powerful in the traditional sphere by becoming the individuals representing their kingdoms to colonial administrations.

The heritage narratives produced through the objects housed in the Baham, Babungo, Mankon, and Bafut palace museums are complex interplays of myth and memory intended to reclaim a past when the monarchies were at the height of their power. It could be said that

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58 Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions." 4-5.
Memory and heritage emerge from a reflective nostalgia and produces a sense of the past that gives their present identity authenticity. In combating this perceived loss of cultural patrimony, the curators of the museums have inscribed their objects with new conceptions of past traditions that actively serve those in the present. Historian Greg Dening sees this type of practice wherever histories are related, and he states that:

Histories, transformations of the past into expressions, clothe, constitute, are a present social reality. Histories always have this double entendre. They refer to a past in making a present. The knowledge of the past that re-presents the past in story or account makes the structures of the present – such as class or identity – in the expressing.

In the case of the Grassfields museums, history is told as an attempt to undermine the hegemonic historical narrative of colonialism and embrace a strategic essentialism that benefits the current rulers by painting them as long standing pillars of strength.

The term heritage is frequently used in the Grassfields, as people refer to the museums as displaying their heritage and speak of how important it is to preserve their heritage and learn about their heritage. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has pointed out, “while it looks old, heritage is actually something new.” In the museum, objects that belonged to their forefathers represent heritage and locals are convinced that their heritage is something to be equated with history. In my research in the Grassfields I found time and again that heritage is actually a

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59 Dominguez takes this even further claiming that heritage “and not just specific heritages – could then be seen as an invention itself invented by societies intent on finding legitimacy through history.” Dominguez, "The Marketing of Heritage." 550.
reflection of contemporary culture and the museums have played a critical part in the political nature of how heritage is perceived. The indigenous rejection of the idea that heritage may be modern speaks to the power of the museum space since the static setting of the museum codifies, reifies, and historicizes culture. Many of the individuals who referred to the museum pieces and heritage and history also attended festivals where those same pieces were being used. What does this mean for the future of these objects and cultures? Perhaps the longer that they are kept in the museum, the stronger the association with history and in a vicious cycle, leading to the obsolescence of objects that were not so before they were labeled as heritage items. As such, it appears that it is not only the location of the museum that codifies these objects, or excises them from their traditional function, but also the categorizing of objects as pieces of heritage. It is unimportant to many that the objects are still used, it is the characterization of the museums as places where heritage is preserved that makes the museum and the objects within appear to be representative of the past.

While the functionality of ritual objects may change after being labeled as heritage items, they still function as prestige items. These objects previously derived power from their functional purpose and their association with the body of the Fon, or perhaps as spoils of war or indicators of alliances with other kingdoms. It is more complicated today as these objects remain prestige items for these reasons, there is also power in these objects as indicators of heritage. Heritage items in a museum attain a new level of power and prestige through the ability to draw tourists and make anything labeled as heritage inherently more valuable.

**Agenda: Creating a Canon**

According to the Babungo curators, selecting objects for the museum involved a discussion among Notué, Triaca, and representatives from each kingdom, and while the stated
goal of each museum may be to provide an “itinerary of the collective memory,” there is much more to the selection process than simply conveying collective memory. Many agendas are at play. According to curators, Notué was driving the decision-making process for choosing objects for the museum and was influenced by his interest in the canon of Grassfields art. Curators from Babungo and Baham both expressed that Notué was interested in finding the most important works of art in the palace collections, and he placed great emphasis on antiquity, authenticity, and aesthetic quality.

In 1997 Notué and anthropologist Louis Perrois published *Rois et Sculpteurs de l’Ouest Cameroun: La Panthère et La Mygale*, a comprehensive look at the arts of the Grassfields kingdoms that was compiled after years of research in numerous palace collections in the region. The research for the book clearly constituted much of the groundwork for the COE museums, and Notué and Perrois emphasize certain themes that clearly influenced Notué’s museum project with COE. They began the book by broadly discussing the arts of the Grassfields and their ability to embody the cultural, social and religious histories of a people. They then focus specifically on the unique nature of sculptural arts as a type of language, a visual history in a place that has only recently moved away from oral history. The collections of all of the COE museums that Notué curated appear to be influenced by the interests that he articulates in the book: each museum tells a narrative of how these heritage objects express cultural, religious, and social collective histories of their kingdoms. However, far from being a fragmented narrative, the objects are deployed to invent cohesive narratives of history and heritage. All of the museums

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63 Notué and Triaca, *Mankon: Art, Heritage and Culture from the Mankon Kingdom*. This quote is from the last page of the un-paginated foreword written by Bianca Triaca, dated May 31st, 2005 that is included in all four of the catalogues.

have objects made in a range of materials, but there is a clear emphasis on woodcarvings. Furthermore, the reference to “Kings and Sculptors” in the title indicates that the curators were interested primarily in royal art in keeping with the trend of art historical inquiry about the region. All of the COE museums show a noted preference for palace art and a majority of each collection comes from the palace storerooms. The Babungo Museum objects are all from the palace with one exception, while Baham and Mankon have somewhat more balanced displays, since they draw from the wider community as well.

The emphasis on woodcarving is not surprising given the long history of Western interest in African figurative sculpture, as well as the relationship between art collector and Cameroon scholar Pierre Harter and Notué who consulted each other and spoke to many of the same informants. Notué stated, “for the choice of the pieces and illustrations, we also had to consider both the aesthetic quality of the artifacts and the emotional force that they can arouse in the public as well as the role of socio-cultural indicators that they played – or continue to play – in [that] society.” Harter’s seminal 1966 work, *Arts anciens du Cameroun*, focuses largely on carved objects including statues, stools, ceremonial bowls, and masks, along with some examples of ceramics, ivory carvings, beadwork, and sculpted metalwork. Even more limited are his references to weaving and architecture. This focus can be found in Perrois and Notué’s book and the COE museum collections, with Perrois and Notué’s book attempting to highlight the finest examples of artistic trends that remain in the palaces today combined with objects that they found to be of better “aesthetic quality” in the palace collections. It is not surprising that a majority of the examples from Perrois and Notué’s book ended up in the COE museums less than a decade later. Of the four examples of Mankon objects in Perrois and Notué’s book, the ma

65 Ibid. 18.
komngang headress (fig. 1), nko’ mask (fig. 2), atua afungø headress (fig. 3), and atua ngang mask (fig. 4) end up being included in the museum, and the nko’ mask was the only exception. Furthermore, these three-featured objects are among the few that have been selected to have their own plates in the catalogue. While the museum collections are a display of compelling objects that tell of the collective heritage of the kingdom, the items selected also reflect the personal preferences of the curator and his views on quality and authenticity. The preference for sculpture and prestige items is likely the effect of aesthetic preferences going back to the time of the Germans, and through works like those of Harter, Notué, missionary and art collector Paul Gebauer, and art historian Tamara Northern, they have become codified as the canonical works of the Grassfields region. The emphasis on objects that fit neatly into the canon of Grassfields arts allows each of these museums an easy entry point into the international art world since the collections conform to pre-existing notions of noteworthy Grassfields art.

**Agenda: Local Identity in Peril**

By the time of its independence in 1960, Cameroon had been ruled by three colonial powers. The Germans were the first to colonize Cameroon, but lost the territory at the outset of World War I. When the Germans left, the country was divided between the French and the British with the regions known today as Northwest and Southwest becoming part of British Cameroon, and the remaining regions becoming French Cameroon. One year after independence, Anglophone Cameroon voted to re-unify with Francophone Cameroon. As sociologist Piet Konings and anthropologist Francis B. Nyamnjoh have noted, “successive Francophone-dominated post-colonial regimes have attempted to deconstruct Anglophone identity by encouraging existing divisions with the Anglophone elite and stimulating new ethno-
regional identities that appear to transcend the Anglophone-Francophone divide." On the other hand, the Paul Biya government has sought during its thirty-two year incumbency to trivialize the Anglophone-Francophone divide by emphasizing a common German colonial history for all of Cameroon, and a conscious effort has been made by the government to repress Anglophone advancement in politics and enterprise.\(^6^8\)

Repressing Anglophone advancement has resulted in what Piet Konings and Francis B. Nyamnjoh have called a “feeling of communal disadvantage” amongst Anglophones, as emphasized by the common sentiment that they are currently living under a new type of colonial rule by the Francophone government.\(^6^9\) The tensions between Anglophone and Francophone Cameroon are not mentioned explicitly in the Anglophone Grassfields museums, but it is hard to imagine this key part of the regional identity is not, in some way, motivating the spread of museum culture. In the Anglophone region the stakes are high for these museums, as they want in no way to trivialize their history and their heritage, which is fundamentally an Anglophone identity. Furthermore, attempts to bolster tourism and bring economic advancement to the Anglophone region should not be seen as an a-political act, given that an underlying goal is to advance the Anglophone identity.

In the Grassfields museums there is always an undercurrent of cultures and kingdoms crying out to be recognized for their superior worth. Each kingdom is looking to appear unique in a national, cultural landscape that tends to homogenize them. Since the 1980s when Paul Biya became President, the national government has attempted to foster a sense of national unity.


\(^{6^8}\) Ibid. 109, 133.

\(^{6^9}\) Ibid. 140.
directly aimed at diminishing what the state views as ethnic factionalism.\textsuperscript{70} As a result of this state approach to culture, Grassfields museums are looking to stand out in a singular fashion and claim a tradition as their own, promoting arts productions and elements of history that will elevate them regionally and nationally. In a country where the government is actively attempting to quash industry in the region, any advancement, however small it may be, is an act against policies of the centralized Francophone-run government.

\textit{Heritage Construction and the Importance of Place}

For each of these Grassfields palace museums the physical location of the museum and the form of the museum space play a key role in the making of heritage. Museums like the Heritage Tourist Museum in Bafut and the International Museum and Library at Akum are not located in palaces, and instead they are privately owned institutions directed at tourists and make no claims of representing any specific population and advancing only the interests of the owners. In contrast, the community museums or palace museums are located in the public section of the palace compound. For some communities, location in the palace connotes authenticity and legitimacy, while for others it connotes ownership and control of cultural heritage. The location is an incredibly important factor in how these museums are viewed by different populations, given that some of these museum spaces are newly built and other

buildings had historical functions that cannot be divorced from the current functioning of these spaces.

Palaces stand apart from their communities, and the nature of the space permeates everything that is housed and practiced therein. Overwhelmingly, locals view the palace space as sacred to some degree, and certainly as a place that one does not visit without a reason. Many people expressed the sentiment that one does not simply visit the palace, but rather it is a place that one enters with a distinct purpose by invitation and frequently with a gift for the Fon. This means by extension that one does not casually visit the museum in the palace since the two are seen as inextricably linked. As constituting part of the palace compound, the argument can be made that the museum itself is a part of the body of the Fon. In Jean-Pierre Warnier’s seminal work on the construction of kingship, based upon his decades of work in the kingdom of Mankon, he notes that the palace can be viewed as an “avatar of the king’s body.” He points out that people will speak of wives and children of the “palace” or bringing gifts to the “palace,” when in each case the speaker is using the term “palace” to reference the Fon. Furthermore, objects included in all Grassfields museums such as drinking horns, thrones, and leopard pelts, are viewed as extensions of the Fon’s body and “share in its radiating aura.” In this way, both the museum space and the objects within can be locally conceived as part of the body of the Fon, and therefore something that may not be approached without proper respect.

Reaffirming the sanctity of the palace space, the makers of these palace museums have turned the location of the museum itself into what historian Pierre Nora has called lieux de

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72 Ibid. 185.
73 Ibid. 186-7.
nombre, sites that embody a schism whereby they have come to embody the past itself. This is a tactic that has long been used by states and local populations for creating a common sense of history and a future that binds the population. The museum locations were very carefully chosen as historical, socially significant sites. All of the museums are associated with the palace, a location that is considered the heart of traditional social life in all kingdoms. The COE museums promote a reading of the objects that excises from the site both the colonial history of oppression and the recent histories of modernization. As anthropologist Beverly Butler points out, modernity “becomes increasingly preoccupied by a ‘memory crisis’…[and] lieux de mémoire fill cultural-historical landscapes as markers of a ‘loss of origins’”. In the museum sites the past has been reshaped to suit the current needs of the community and fill the loss with a heritage that constructs a shared past and future for the culture. In the COE museums, it is past that is epitomized by creating an image of a people who all share a common link to the same palace.

As a part of understanding these sites as lieux de mémoire, it is important to consider what these physical structures were used for prior to becoming museums. In Mankon and Babungo the museums were built for the specific function of being a museum, and yet these new buildings sit on locations that are full of meaning for the kingdoms since both are well within the grounds of the palace. As such, while the buildings themselves may not come with previous connotation, the site transmits a great deal of meaning. Each of the COE museum structures is

74 Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire." 7.
76 Notué and Triaca, Baham: Arts, Mémoire et Pouvoir dans le Royaume de Baham. 10.
noteworthy as well, since they mirror the architecture of the palaces themselves. As art historian Mark DeLancey has pointed out, the architectural designs of these Grassfields palaces are frequently laden with historical references and significance. There are clear, formal parallels in the low, ranch-style houses of the Fons of Bafut and Babungo. It is possible that the Babungo palace was designed this way in order to emulate the architectural style of the home of the powerful, Bafut Fon who was well liked by the colonial authorities. The Baham Museum (fig. 5) is a grand, two-story building that mirrors the architectural style of the modern palace in Baham, and it is reasonable to assume that this palace design was in some ways influenced by the widely known Bamum Sultan’s palace in Foumban (fig. 6). The act of designing museum structures to mirror the existing architecture of the palace integrates the museum into the palace complex and confers sanctity to the museum by mere visual association and location, but the museums also gain the historical references to regional and foreign power in the existing palace architecture.

At Baham and Bafut the kingdoms repurposed existing buildings to house the museums. The Fon in Baham claimed eminent domain and appropriated a massive structure directly adjacent to his palace that was being built by titleholders and other notables from the kingdom to use as a banquet hall and event space. According to one of the Baham curators, the building had been under construction since 1987 and its development was slow until given over to the museum project. While this does not have a great impact on how most Baham citizens view the museum, it has sparked a movement within the notable class who funded this building to raise money in order to build a new museum. As one curator commented, the notables who built this structure were unhappy that it was taken from them, and so they are lobbying to build a new, “better” museum, more fitting to the purpose of housing a museum collection than the existing

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78 Mark Dike DeLancey, "King Njoya' Palaces and German Style Architecture in Cameroon," in 16th ACASA Triennial Symposium on African Art (Brooklyn Museum, 2014).
building. While their rhetoric makes it appear that they are mostly interested in what will best serve the museum, the curator thinks it is much more likely that all they want is the return of their banquet hall. As such, the title-holding community of the kingdom is certainly influenced by the history of this building in their approach to the museum.

The museum in Bafut (fig. 7) is also housed in a repurposed building, but it is far more complex as a *lieu de mémoire*. In Mankon, Baham, and Babungo the museum buildings were all built within the palace compound after independence with locals designing and building them. The Bafut Palace Museum is housed in a colonial-era building on the grounds of the palace that was constructed in the 1940s during the reign of the previous Fon. The building was modeled after two well-known buildings, the German administrative building in Buea known as the *schloss*\(^{79}\) (fig. 8) and the Bamum Sultan’s palace in Foumban. It should also be noted that the function of the building housing the Bafut Palace Museum has long been associated with Europeans and visiting foreigners since it is most famous as the house where naturalist Gerald Durrell lived while collecting zoographic specimens in Bafut during his 1947 research trip. Given this history, the Bafut Palace Museum building embodies a very different history than the other museum buildings since it epitomizes the colonial era. In truth, the entire palace of Bafut contains strong references to the period of German colonial rule in so much as the Germans constructed the Fon’s house and the queen’s quarters. The way in which the Bafut Palace Museum functions as a *lieu de mémoire* is quite different from that of the COE museums in that the colonial history is rewritten rather than being excised from the site. The funding of GTZ has enabled the history of the site to become one of cooperation in addition to a reminder of

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\(^{79}\) The *schloss* in Buea was built during the German colonial period as a residence for the German governor. It was built to look like a German castle, and as such, was given the name, *schloss*, which translates as castle, manor home, or palace.
colonization. For example, one room in the museum references the battle between German colonial forces and the Bafut people that occurred in 1901 at the beginning of German colonial rule (fig. 9). The room contains German guns, Bafut spears, and a gramophone given to the Bafut Fon as a sign of friendship after the Germans deftly defeated the Bafut forces. This is the only reference to a history of conflict between the Bafut kingdom and the Germans; the installations generally reflect peaceful relations between the Bafut kingdom and Germany with numerous examples of German gifts to the kingdom and a room with German and Cameroonian flags hanging across from one another. Understandably, both parties in this project of cooperation clearly saw the benefits of re-scripting history, as the Germans could minimize some of the atrocities of their colonial experiences and the palace of Bafut gained the funding to renovate a prominent structure and install a well-regarded museum.

**Agenda: Personal Advancement through Private Museums**

The Grassfields is home to many private museums in addition to public palace museums, and they constitute various types of institutions. The Tourist Heritage Museum in Bafut is essentially a room filled with objects from the Grassfields, from Cameroon, and from the African continent, creating a museum that is somewhere between a collector’s cabinet of wonders and an art gallery. The collection is very impressive and has a wide range of objects, including fine stools, *batcham* masks, architectural elements, and mundane objects like the equivalent of a historical Grassfields matchbook. The owner pointed out that if he did not save these types of things, they would be lost forever, and while he may want to preserve the history of his people, he is certainly motivated by profit as well as all of the objects that are for sale.

When asked how he acquired the royal objects in his collection, the owner responded that when he heard of a Fon who needed money to repave a road or build a school, he would offer to
buy palace objects in order to fund the project. The owner/curator claims to sell a great many objects to collectors, and he made a point of saying that he can easily get signed documents from the Ministry of Culture allowing for the legal export of the objects in his collection. He also acts as a broker who manages private deals between Fons and collectors. Since Fons are selling off palace goods in this manner, it is no surprise that some of them are wary of constructing museums where the palace art would be visible to the public. The Tourist Heritage Museum is emblematic of the way in which locals are looking to capitalize on the heritage museum trend in the local palaces. While Fons are gaining prestige through their museums and the display of heritage, individuals are looking to do the same by displaying and selling heritage pieces.

Peter Atanga’s International Museum and Library in Akum is a private collection housed in a building next to his home. Mr. Atanga and his daughter run the museum alone, without outside funds or support of any kind. It was during the colonial period, in 1948, that Mr. Atanga started to collect stamps. He was inspired by a British stamp collector, whom he witnessed offer one hundred pounds for one stamp. The stamp collection was the beginning of the museum, which grew to include a wide range of Grassfields art. His museum is organized thematically with each room and case representing differing classifications of objects – one room is dedicated to musical instruments and weapons, another to statues and masks. Nothing is labeled. Mr. Atanga is in his 90s and he gives tours to every visitor so he can explain how he has organized the museum. His museum is conceived as a place devoted to the display of objects for touristic and educational purposes, including a small library, and even though he is not active in the local art scene today Alice Horner noted that in December 1985 a portion of his collection was included in “Cameroon Traditional Agro-Pastoral Life,” a show organized by the Ministry of
Information and Culture. As Horner points out in her dissertation, through his participation in this show, Mr. Atanga became known locally as a staunch patron of the arts.80

Another type of private museum I encountered in the Grassfields was the private collection housed in the homes of wealthy or important individuals – as exemplified by Mr. Tazung, a former Bamenda city council president who has a room in his home that he and his wife refer to as their “museum”. This room is typically locked and is full of apparent antiquities from the Grassfields. The pieces are stacked, sometimes ten deep, leaning against the wall. The Tazungs have plans to find a way to display the objects publicly, perhaps in connection with the school that they own, but currently the space they call a museum is accessible only to family and friends invited to enter the room. In this case, while they are calling the space a museum, it in no way conforms to the preconceived notions that are generally held about such institutions since it is not open to the public, nor is it catalogued, organized, or laid out in any discernable display. More than anything, the Tazung’s museum indicates their status in the community both financially and culturally, and having such a collection indicates that they are proud of their Grassfields heritage and wealthy enough to afford to collect their local art.

The prevalence of museums in the Grassfields may be a result of the history of art display in the region. Geary, Rowlands, and Fowler have all pointed out that displaying art is not a new concept in the Grassfields since Fons, quarter heads, notables, and other powerful individuals have long used display as a means of showing power and wealth. Upon the arrival of the Germans, British, and French, the specific concept of the museum was introduced to the region and the term quickly took on a meaning regionally, which became associated with political and

financial status. The first museum in the region opened nearly one hundred years ago and the second one opened shortly thereafter. Maintaining a monopoly over art production and possessing lavish storerooms filled with art have long been one of the ways that palaces have traditionally shown their power and prestige, and the museum has become a similar indicator. Art production became available to a wider population as Fons relaxed rules regarding who could own art objects, and commoners gained access to important indicators of wealth and prestige. The same can be said for museums, since any individual with the requisite money or influence can own one, and this ownership of a “museum” does not indicate anything about a mission or mandate, but rather it is a term that means legitimacy for kings and wealth and standing in society for individuals. It appears that today the elements of prestige and power associated with traditional arts are equally associated with the concept of the museum. As such, any collection of art is, by definition, a museum because it is a sign of power and wealth, just as collections of traditional objects were in pre-colonial times.

**Conclusion**

Alice Horner’s 1990 dissertation on culture, arts, and museums in the Grassfields devotes a chapter to four museums in and around the Bamenda area, which include the Provincial Museum in Bamenda, Simon Achu’s Museum, Peter Atanga’s Museum and the Palace Museum at Big Babanki. The first two museums no longer exist, while the other two have been swept aside by the glossy, modern museums in Babungo, Baham, Bafut, and Mankon, and they barely manage to draw any tourists today. Horner asked in 1990, “what does a primarily rural Province with a land area of 18,000 square kilometers and an estimated population of one million need with four museums?”\(^81\) My focus is on the Grassfields region more generally, and one could ask

\(^81\) Ibid. 237.
why a primarily rural region with a land area of a little over 31,000 square kilometers and an estimated population of more than 3.5 million people needs over one dozen museums, not to mention private collections? Answers are quickly found when looking at the ways in which the Grassfields museums are used to shape tradition, bolster the power of the palace, impart prestige upon Fons and other leaders, bring tourist dollars to rural settings, preserve historic art objects, and provide kingdoms with a way to promote unique identities. Given the plethora of ways that Grassfields monarchies can benefit from building museums, it seems likely that an expanding museum culture in the Grassfields is only just beginning.

The museums in Bafut, Babungo, Baham, and Mankon represent some of the next steps in this long history of the prevalence of museums in the region. Anthropologist Roy Wagner has noted, “a great invention is ‘reinvented’ many times and in many circumstances as it is taught, learned, used, and improved, often in combination with other inventions.”82 From the period of pre-European contact when goods acquired through trade and warfare were displayed in local palaces, up to the current era with the brand new museums of today’s Grassfields, the means of display have been reinvented continually as new influences have been absorbed by local populations. The motivation behind building a museum is an old one: for the most part, these museums indicate an increasing interest on the local level to produce tourist friendly museums where the palace can control the narrative. A museum gives the kingdom the ability to articulate its history however it wishes, the opportunity to take in funds to support their palaces, and the chance to bring local, and in some cases, international distinction to the territory.

Chapter 2

The Museum and Its Communities: Local and Non-Local Responses

Every year the museums in the Grassfields host a wide range of visitors including international tourists, expats living in Cameroon, members of the diaspora who return home for a visit, students, academic researchers, school groups, church groups, and Cameroonianians interested in art and culture. These visitors perceive the museum in different ways based upon their education, cultural background, local knowledge, and perspective on local politics. Furthermore, some of these groups impact the way that others view the museum space, as best seen in how the increasing number of visiting tourists produces a range of responses in the local perceptions of the museums. All of these groups play a role in shaping the content, physical form, and location of museums. This chapter will explore the range of populations that visit these museums, focusing on the ways in which different groups understand them and how each one has an impact on them.

The Grassfields museums consciously set out to serve the needs and expectations of local and non-local populations in different ways. Exegesis obtained through extensive interviews conducted during my field research and comments left in museum guest books revealed the following trends. Tourists visiting the museum look for authenticity and an opportunity to experience something new, unexpected, and distinctly foreign from what they know. The urban Grassfields populations and members of the Grassfields diaspora visit these museums with an expectation of entertainment. It is a distinctly cosmopolitan behavior for urban Grassfields populations to engage in leisure activities such as visiting the museum in the village or near the palace to experience a sense of nostalgia for both urban and diaspora populations. A rural population living in closer proximity to the palace and museums, such as the Baham, Bafut,
Mankon, and Babungo museums, will play out their current concerns about modernity, monarchy, and history in the museum. This group’s perceptions of museums is rooted in issues that are deeply personal, such as inclusion and exclusion, ownership of culture and cultural objects, agency of the local population to shape their own heritage, and the right of the palace to benefit economically from the kingdom’s cultural heritage.

**The Non-local Visitor: Tourists, Urban Visitors, and Members of the Diaspora**

The Grassfields region of Cameroon is considered the greatest tourist attraction in the country for viewing traditional arts and practices. The Bradt guide to Cameroon characterizes the region as “crammed with cultural distractions and is rich in fascinating ancient chiefdoms.”

The ring road in the Northwest region is billed as a route that will take tourists to an incredible number of vibrant kingdoms, small and large, while passing by spectacular vistas and natural attractions. A route des chefferies in the West Region directs tourists to smaller chefferies with museums in the Bamiléké region. Travel guides will admonish visitors not to miss the palace, museum, and market in Foumban, the Bamum capital. Museums, nature preserves, cultural festivals, and a vibrant art market all contribute to the notion of the Grassfields as a tourist destination offering a variety of sights unparalleled in other parts of the country.

Among the most highly regarded and visited of these tourist attractions in the Grassfields are the palace museums. A little more than half of the recorded visitors to the museums in Babungo, Bafut, Mankon, and Baham every year are visitors from outside of Cameroon, and they come from nearly every continent. It is hard to say how many people visit these museums since the visitors’ logs are woefully incomplete and they do not attempt to reflect any type of group tours to the museums. Curators from the Baham Museum estimated that they host

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between one to two thousand visitors each year, while tour guides at the Bafut Palace Museum estimated that they could have as many as ten thousand visitors in a year.

**Tourists and the Fulfillment of Desire**

The tourist experience in the Grassfields museums capitalizes on the visitors’ existing hopes and expectations for their visit, which allows them to find precisely what they desired or imagined. Geographer Dean MacCannell contends that “tourism today occupies the gap between primitive and modern, routinely placing modernized and primitive peoples in direct face-to-face interaction.”84 It is precisely this type of interaction that occurs frequently when tourists visit museums on the grounds of the active and functioning palace compounds. It is not uncommon to find members of traditional councils wearing an array of brightly colored hats, some with red feathers, entering the palace to meet with the Fon. Visitors may come across wives of the Fon preparing *achu* or other quintessentially Grassfields dishes in their small kitchens over wood burning stoves, and it is this type of experience that art historian Steven Nelson explored in the Mousgoum village of Pouss. He underscores that

The ways in which travel and exploration, going away and coming home allow the Westerner to enter that place where the boundaries between the real and the imaginary, culture and nature, and interiority and anteriority can crumble, expose how the Mousgoum and their teleuk in particular and Africa more generally were a blank canvas, a tabula rasa, that, in its virginal state, laid out before the traveler, enabled the projection of personal fantasy and desire, which constitute an integral part of the travel experience.85

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The same can be said of the traveler’s experience in the Grassfields museums since visitors see in the objects, setting, guides, and surrounding local daily activity a rendition of their desires and expectations of the palace, culture, and arts of the kingdom. The museums present a self-fulfilling prophecy for the visitor since they are looking for points of commonality, the unknown, and authenticity, and this is precisely what they find.

All four of these museums create neatly packaged narratives that emphasize global cultural concerns that allow tourists a point of entry for a sense of commonality. Historian Nikolas Glover has noted, as many have also established, that “the narrative of a common past is simply the single most effective and obvious way to legitimate the shape of a common present and future.” As the world has gotten smaller with the ease of long distance travel and global media, history is used in tourism to explore universal historical themes such as progress, humanity, morality, and a sense of unity for the future. All four of the museums treated here address these universal themes as ways of organizing the world through religion, politics, matters of state, and the production of art. The museums relate themes that can be understood in nearly any context, but they emphasize what makes their local perspectives unique and noteworthy. On one level this provides visitors a point of entry to the local heritage, but it is important to also look at those displays as a way that local kingdoms recast themselves for their own benefit. Literary scholar Stephen Greenblatt has noted that individuals and cultures have a remarkable ability to assimilate and recast foreign modes of representation. It is true that Grassfields museums focus on the period around the turn of the 20th century as a means of providing grounds for commonality or highlighting the unique and different, read as exotic, elements of their culture.

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to tourists. At the same time, local kingdoms and communities are also reinventing their own histories in these museums in ways that make them useful in a contemporary setting. Herein lies the important, overarching commonality amongst local, national, and international groups that visit the museum, namely, that they see in the museum whatever they are looking for according to their self-interest.

An interest in discovering a strikingly different culture is borne out in the comments left by visitors to the museums at Bafut, Baham, and Babungo. A festivalized depiction of history is put on display in each of these museums highlighting the unique qualities of the ritual practices of each kingdom. One Dutch visitor to the Baham museum was struck by the “really dark African art.” This comment, which uses orientalist terminology hits at the heart of what a majority of the tourists are attempting to convey in their comments. The many “most interesting” and “very impressed” comments are similarly trying to say that they are impressed and interested in the display of art that is quite different from what they find in their home countries. These visitors are finding the cultural differences that they seek in the museum, as epitomized by the comments left by a Canadian visitor to the Bafut museum who wrote, “great summary of an unknown people to Northern Americans, which reveals the richness of Africa and its people.” This Canadian visitor was most impressed by the experience of seeing something that was entirely new to him, something so foreign that most people from his home would have never heard of this, and what is more, he views this experience as representative of the artistic production of the entire continent.

MacCannell has argued that the modern people have reached a point where we are now so entirely divorced from reality that the primary aim of travel and tourism is to seek out the

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Many scholars have acknowledged that the concept of authenticity is influenced by western taste and universally seated in the past, specifically a time thought to be freer of outside influences. Indicators of authenticity come in many forms for the modern traveler, including on-site information given by a tour guide or signage, or off-site purveyors of information such as previous knowledge about the culture, site, or governing bodies that assert themselves as arbiters of authenticity. Antonio Piva’s exhibition design employs Western expectations about local authenticity, with local materials used in abundance, bamboo benches selected to display museum objects, reminding any visitor to the Grassfields of the omnipresent vendor stalls displaying objects for sale. As anthropologist Ivan Bargna has pointed out, this is done with the clear intention of creating a visual that is immediately recognizable as local to the Grassfields, and at the same time it means that objects of sacred and historical import are being displayed in the same way that one would lay out all of the tomatoes and carrots that a vendor has for sale that day. The use of local materials in the display connotes the western ideal of authenticity for a foreign visitor and while the bamboo bed is an omnipresent display tool in the region, it is a contemporary trend to display art objects on bamboo beds in this type of setting.

Another primary way that the Grassfields museums exploit the concept of authenticity is through their tour guides. In Baham for example, a French visitor noted how curator Jean

Bernard brought to life a unique, genuine moment for him with his authenticity. This comment is far from surprising as another one of the curators of the Baham Museum, Albert Fomkang, tells visitors of the secret societies to which he belongs and how his initiation into those societies influences what museum objects he may touch and when he may touch them. In this scenario, it is not only the on-site elements of labels and other written information highlighting the functionality and antiquity of objects that conveys authenticity to visitors, but also the persona of the tour guide who emphasizes local knowledge and participation in traditional practices, and essentially becomes a part of the museum installation. Nowhere are the tour guides more a part of the museum installation than in Bafut and Babungo, where the museums use them to promote the idea of authenticity in the museum since nearly all of the tour guides are members of the palace, being either queens or princes. The Bafut museum has very limited signage, relying instead on the seemingly unimpeachable sources used to convey the information to the tourist. Some visitors to Bafut mentioned the queens specifically in their comments, such as, “thank you dear queen, for an excellent visit” and “very nice and excellent tour by queen.” While most comments in the Bafut visitors log do not mention the royal guides by name, a preponderance of comments about the quality of the tour and the excellence of the tour guides surpasses the frequency with which this type of comment is seen in the other museums’ visitor’s logs. While it is possible that visitors are simply more impressed with the quality of the tour at Bafut, it also seems likely that the perceived authenticity of the royal guides makes the difference.

UNESCO stresses the importance of preserving heritage, history, and the arts, and this view has likely had some impact on many visitors to the Grassfields museums since their

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95 Comment from the Bafut Palace Museum visitor’s book, dated June 29, 2011.
comments often praise for the museum for simply existing and preserving the heritage of the
kingdom. In Bafut for example, one visitor commented, “very interesting, excellent that
everything is well preserved,”97 and in Babungo a tourist remarked, “very impressed with the
cultural value and its preservation.”98 Visitors to these museums seem to view the art on display
as examples of historical practices and traditions that would cease to exist if the museums were
not there to protect them. With such an emphasis on preservation and history, something
elemental is lost upon the tourist, primarily that many of the works on display are representative
of living traditions, and that the objects are still used from time to time. The space of the
museum makes it difficult for many tourists to see past their own preconceptions and to
understand that these museums operate differently for local individuals. Glover has argued that
when there is a tension between global and local groups in the way that history is told, there is
equally a tension between local and other local groups in the telling of a similar history.99 In the
museum space, this tension goes even further. There is not only a tension between the way
history is told, but there is a difference in the way that history is understood as being past, or
living on into the present.

**Urban Cameroonians, Diaspora Populations, and the Consumption of Culture**

Urban Cameroonians and members of the Cameroonian diaspora have a markedly
different approach to the local museum complex than individuals who live in daily, close
proximity to the museums. This is influenced by factors such as education, access to wealth, an
acculturation to different types of leisure activities, and a level of cosmopolitanism. When these
urban and diaspora communities visit the museum, they do so in order to see something new,

99 Glover, "Co-produced Histories: Mapping the Uses and Narratives of History in the Tourist
Age." 116.
learn about their own heritage or that of other local groups, and a large part of the experience is recreational and not simply educational. As anthropologists Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge have pointed out in the Indian context, "the museum experience is part and parcel of learning to be cosmopolitan and ‘modern’…[and] the experience of visiting museums is always implicitly connected to the consumption of leisure and pleasure."\(^{100}\) This applies in the Grassfields context as well since urban visitors return to the village to consume historical knowledge as a form of leisure, while rural populations are influenced to visit the museum in an attempt to experience this cosmopolitan behavior. Michael Rowlands has noted the geographical difference in approaches to knowledge in a broad African context, stating:

The historical axis is twisted on a geographical scale to create the urban/rural divide with the village as repository of ancestral knowledge, craft, folk knowledge and tradition in tension with modernity identified with urban living and formal education as the fountain of rational expertise – primary health care, literacy, development and aid technologies. In other words, academic archaeology acquires authority due to its association with the signs of urban modernity, whilst an indigenous sense of past retains veracity due to its association with orality and tradition. The capacity to have a past, either historically or archaeologically constituted, comes with development and is symptomatic of progress.\(^{101}\) This is something that is acutely understood by the curators of Grassfields museums who have recognized a very clear difference between urban and local visitors. Mbowoh Lawrence, a


Babungo Museum curator, as well as the quarter chief of Fintang, has recognized that the majority of the people who visit the museum from his quarter “come from outside, out of the village, Bamenda, Douala, or even out of the country. Those who live in the village visit the museum too, but not many of them.” In his experience the key reason for the difference is that the people from his quarter who live outside of the village recognize that they can, “learn [their] village, [their] quarter history from the museum,” and they have been “sensitized” to the benefits of the museum.\textsuperscript{102}

Cosmopolitan visitors tend to visit the palace museums for a range of intertwined reasons. This is exemplified by the experiences of Aliu Umaru, a man from Bamenda who is of dual heritage; he maintains connections to the Mankon culture of his mother and the Bororo/Fulani culture of his father. Mr. Umaru lives a short distance from the Mankon Palace and has a personal connection to the palace as his mother was born there. He cites his familial connection as one of the reasons that he has taken out-of-town guests to visit the Mankon Museum, and he brings his guests with the hope of sharing a piece of his heritage and even showing off his culture and family history. Secondarily, he is looking for an enjoyable museum going experience that is similar to those of his childhood when his father took him to the regional museum in Bamenda. While the museum visit certainly allowed him to show his friend some elements of his culture, it was hardly the leisure activity that he remembered from his childhood given what he deemed as the deplorable condition of the Mankon Museum. Yet he continues to bring visitors to the museum when they are in Bamenda. This indicates the important role that these museums play as indicators of prestige for the kingdom’s elites, and also the influence of nostalgia.

\textsuperscript{102} Personal Communication, Mbowoh Lawrence, 1/23/12.
These elements of pride, nostalgia, and a desire to connect with one’s own culture are driving forces behind urban visitors’ excursions to the rural museums, but it should be understood that most urban individuals such as Mr. Umaru, who live and work in the city are not overly involved in any local political battles in the kingdom and so reading the displayed history and heritage is not an emotionally charged issue. Mr. Umaru is not critical of the heritage that they have on display at the museum, but he is critical of the quality of the display and the knowledge of the tour guide. When discussing the museum, Mr. Umaru is less interested in talking about the specific objects than in discussing the poor training of the curator and the embarrassing infestation of owls in the museum ceiling. He criticizes these as factors that impact his entertainment and enjoyment of the activity, and yet he continues to bring his guests to the museum because he enjoys showing them that his kingdom’s palace has a museum and this gives him a sense of pride for his background. He also enjoys the nostalgia he feels during each visit because the objects on display remind him of his childhood. It is not the specific objects that remind him of his childhood, but the milieu of traditional objects that remind him of attending traditional ceremonies and the time when his Bororo father allowed men from Mankon to plant a peace plant in his compound during the annual festival. Consequently, it is clear that some urban elites look to the Grassfields museums as an educational and entertaining experience, while also enjoying the feelings of pride and nostalgia that they see in their kingdom’s museum.

A unique urban group, with a limited relationship with museums is best described as non-elite urban transplants who have little or no experience with their kingdom of origin. I met one such museum visitor and the reaction he had to his experience at the museum was profound. This young man rarely visited the kingdom from which his family came and he would have never visited the kingdom’s museum had he not been with his cousin, a taxi driver who drove me out
to the museum. At that time, the man was an un-employed writer living in Bafoussam, but his family came from Baham. He knew little of his own heritage and his experience visiting the museum was overwhelming in that he learned things about himself that he never knew. Moreover, these things made great sense to him. In one instance, the curator told him that, in Baham tradition, the belly is the seat of the soul rather than the mind. The young man commented that it was as if he knew this already, without explicitly having ever been told it in his life, and yet he would have never learned about this, or fully understood it, had he not visited the museum that day. While most visitors to the museum comment in the visitor’s log on how pleased they are to have seen the history of the kingdom with comments such as, “it is very interesting how the Bafut people lived before,” this young man saw his present. He did not come to the museum to engage in the rituals of cosmopolitanism and he was not experiencing any form of nostalgia, but rather he was engaging with the museum in a way that few others do. He was as a member of the kingdom who learned more about himself and who left with an increased interest in his culture and heritage.

This Baham man had the exact experience in the museum that the COE project organizers were looking to promote, and yet somehow his experience goes beyond even what they had envisioned. The COE project envisioned the museums as preserving and promoting heritage, yet most visitors either already know about their own heritage or they are foreigners interested to learn about the local culture, but with no ability to take part in the continuation of cultural traditions. The young Baham man who visited the museum with me fell squarely in the middle of these two populations since he had little local knowledge yet was able to engage with the museum displays in a deeply personal way. While most populations that visit the museum find

what they are looking for in the museum display, be it nostalgia, the elusive authentic, or pride,
this young man had few pre-conceived notions of what he would see. He knew that the museum
displayed Baham culture, his culture. Who is to say whether he really always felt that something
as important as the soul was seated in the belly? The vehemence of his reaction to the curator is
an indication of the effect of the heritage narrative in the museum space, and it portrays the
power of the display in the museum as an unassailable version of Baham culture. For this man to
agree with the curator was to find a connection to a heritage that he knew little about. The young
man from Bafoussam saw in the heritage narrative something that most local visitors do not see,
and he saw it as representing his present rather than his past.

Members of the diaspora community, like any group having members with varied
backgrounds, display a range of approaches to the museums and yet one common factor in their
outlook is a nostalgic frame of reference. Susan Stewart has written about nostalgia as a
narrative process through which “the present is denied and the past takes on an authenticity of
being, an authenticity which, ironically, it can achieve only through narrative.”104 Members of
the diaspora returning home find this narrative poignantly related in the museum with a key
element being a longing for a constructed and idealized authentic past. Many individuals from
the diaspora return to the Grassfields during the winter, specifically December and January, and
since this is the season of festivals and weddings the kingdoms are celebrating their traditional
heritage and amplifying a sense of nostalgia.

Curators in the museums are well aware of the importance of nostalgia for diaspora
visitors and they cater to their search for a lost, authentic past. A family from Bayangan
relocated to Paris and returned to visit the museum in Baham, a neighboring kingdom to

104 Stewart, On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection. 23.
Bayangan. They were also motivated to visit Baham because they had a connection with the king and wanted to meet with him, and it should be noted that the palace in Bayangan has no museum. They were visiting Cameroon with their children and presumably wanted to show their children something of their heritage and to visit family. Among the objects that drew their keen interest was a drum (fig. 10) in the center of the Baham Museum that commemorates the story of Bayangan’s defeat of Baham and the ensuing enslavement of many Baham people.

In this case, the curator purposely focused his tour on what he believed would interest the Bayangan visitors, and he later told me that he made a point of emphasizing the drum because he was certain that they would want to see a proud moment of their own history. Parallels can be drawn between this drum, which is covered in an array of images, and such objects as Luba lukasa or Asante ntan drums. All of these objects inspire performative readings that may change with each telling. The drum, much like lukasa, “[does] not symbolize thought so much as stimulate and provoke it. [It affords] a multiplicity of meanings through [its] multireferential iconography.”

His focus on this specific moment in Bayangan history, and his motivation to tell the story from a pro-Bayangan perspective, means that the curator is creating a past that exists mainly in narrative. Referring again to Stewart, the curator crafts a narrative “hostile to history and its invisible origins, and yet longing for an impossibly pure context of lived experience at a place of origin, nostalgia wears a distinctly utopian face.”

In this experience of the museum members of the diaspora who are looking for something that is not there, and never was, they are looking to connect with a mythical history that they share with their kingdom.

106 Stewart, On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection. 23.
Local Visitors, Local Histories

Grassfields peoples are members of many communities. They are members of villages, quarters, kingdoms, regions, and a sovereign nation; they are Christians, Muslims, practitioners of traditional religions, and everything in-between; they are members of traditional political associations, professional organizations, religious organizations, kitchen njangis\(^{107}\) and youth njangis. Within each of these communities, individuals are taught how to be members of these groups, and since education is not compulsory in Cameroon, a vast majority of learning how to be a member of each community occurs outside of formal institutions for education. Appadurai and Breckenridge noted a similar situation in contemporary India, where “these are societies in which history and heritage are not yet parts of a bygone past that is institutionalized in history books and museums.”\(^{108}\) Societies such as these have a different relationship with local museums than societies with an institutionalized heritage set within the prescribed settings of museums, schools, and books. Where some visitors may view the museum experience with a sense of detached interest similar to the way we learn through the lens of our educational system, in the Grassfields, local individuals approach the museum as something that contains both their kingdom’s history and their living culture. The museum holds something that they experience in their daily lives and they understand in much greater nuance than can be conveyed in the museum space. Nowhere this felt more dramatically than in Bafut where, on an average day during the dry season, the distinctive sound of the kwifon double gong alerts people to the approach of masked dancers, letting them know that they should retreat indoors and close their

\(^{107}\) Njanger are organizations in which all of the participants pay a small amount of money and a different individual in the group is given the accumulated money each month. The money may be used to start a business, in honor of the birth of a new child, or to help alleviate the costs of a funeral, to name a few uses. The number of participants and the age and gender of the participants varies widely. Many people are involved in multiple njangis.

\(^{108}\) Appadurai and Breckenridge, "Museums are Good to Think: Heritage on View in India." 34.
windows so as not to see the passing procession. It is a constant reminder that traditional practices continue to flourish in the region.

The relationship between local communities and their museums is profoundly complicated in that it is a manifestation of larger political conflicts in the kingdom. As anthropologist Johan Pottier has noted, “inquiry into cultural hegemony must not be confined to the question of how constructs of ‘the Other’ result from power relations embedded in the colonial past, for intellectual hegemony exists not only between regions and cultures, but also within them.” ¹⁰⁹ The intellectual hegemony espoused by palaces and dominant traditional political bodies within local Grassfields cultures has the greatest influence on community perceptions of the museum. Community responses to museums parallel the broader question of who objects or ascribes to the cultural hegemony of the palace. Some members of these kingdoms are as likely to laud the museum as deride it as yet another way that the Fon enriches himself, and some, while seeing the benefit and appeal of museums, still approach them with ambivalence, uncertain of the role they can play in their lives, if any at all.

A Museum for the Community

There is a broad disconnect between how palace museums want to be seen as community museums and how they are perceived by the community as palace museums. In order to construct these museums, it was necessary that the curators re-contextualize the courtly objects in a new public setting. Monarchs in the Grassfields have always used public displays of art to show their wealth and power, but this was largely accomplished through grand building projects or the display of objects taken from enemies, while locally produced art objects were generally housed in palace storage rooms that were inaccessible to the majority of the population. The

objects on view in the museums today were taken from these palace storerooms and moved to
the museum space adjacent to the palace where they are re-presented as pieces of a preserved
common heritage.

When objects are reframed in terms of heritage, it is inevitable that certain memories and
traditions are privileged over others. As Stuart Hall noted, when traditions, and, in this case,
traditional objects, are valued simply for their role as ritual objects, they become essentialized
and their meaning is fixed in an idealized past.110 The idealized past in this case manifests itself
as a preference for objects that reference the practices of the early-colonial period around the
turn of the 20th century. Such a concept is clearly established at the Bafut museum where the
installations focus on the Fon from the period of first contact with the Germans beginning in
1889. Rooms in the museum are dedicated to showing how the Fon would have lived at that
time by displaying objects and photographs of the period. Emphasis on this time period is hardly
surprising as it represents the point in time when the kingdoms were at the height of their power.
After the German explorers first made contact with the kingdoms of the Grassfields, the Fons
experienced a succession of outside forces from colonial powers to the current national
government, which have appropriated their powers. In an attempt to bolster their current status,
Fons carefully chose to locate the museums at historical, socially significant sites, often on the
grounds of the historic palaces, promoting an explicit tie to the local traditional religion. The
museums are not only able to rewrite their colonial history – or ignore it altogether – but they
also largely whitewash recent histories of modernization, thereby situating the museums in an
imagined past.

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The heritage narrative produced through the objects housed in these four palace museums is a complex interplay of myth and memory. Most people in the Grassfields would claim that they are well versed in their history and heritage, which varies from family to family, quarter to quarter, and kingdom to kingdom. Consequently, any kingdom attempting to portray an official version of heritage through its museum curatorial decisions is adopting an inherently controversial position. Rowlands has noted that in the specific example of the museum at Mankon, the heritage presented in the museum affirms the central position of the palace and the king in the construction of Mankon identity, and this narrative excludes many alternative interpretations of the local history challenging the position of the ruler. This is seen even more pointedly in the museum at Babungo, which makes no mention of an ongoing, divisive contest for power in the kingdom that has dominated local politics for decades. It is hardly surprising that ruling parties use the museum to their benefit and eliminate any dissenting voices from the narrative, and Hall has highlighted this type of selective tradition, stating, “heritage inevitably reflects the governing assumptions of its time and context. It is always inflected by the power and authority of those who have colonized the past, whose versions of history matter.”

The approach taken in these museums, whereby memory and heritage effectively manifest as a pre-colonial nostalgia, produces a fictitious past that validates the current authority of the palace, and in each case the museum serves the needs and goals of those locally in power. It also allows the palace to create a narrative that purportedly provides a precedent for the present rights taken by the palace, giving the modern manifestation of Grassfields kingship the patina of historical authenticity.

112 Hall, "Whose Heritage? Un-settling 'The Heritage', Re-imagining the Post-Nation." 75.
Given the emphasis on the palace and continuation of tradition in the museums, the ambivalence of many in the Grassfields community is notable in a context where people profess a love and devotion to such topics. The individual response to the museum is influenced by some unique factors, such as proximity to the palace hierarchy, strength of ties to the village, and integration with urban culture. The default response that most people gave when asked about the museum was that they were overwhelmingly proud that their kingdom has a museum. As one curator succinctly said, “Officially everybody is for the museum…that is what they say in the political correct speech.” Whether people have visited the museum or not, whether they supported the construction of the museum or not, everyone will acknowledge that the museum is good for the kingdom and it is a great honor for their kingdom to be home to a museum. The museum is an indication of the greatness of their art and their Fon, and yet this is not the only point of view given voice in the community.

**Palace Loyalty and Voices of Dissent**

I found that many local people who visited the museum had some type of connection to the palace. Those with a connection to the palace and the dominant culture seem more interested in the museum. The reason for this is twofold. First, people with a connection to the palace are more likely to be in the palace when an opportunity may arise for them to visit the museum for free. They may be friends with the curator, or maybe meeting with the Fon, and request that he allow them to visit the museum while they are in the palace. Second, many people who have connections with the palace are more active in the traditional life of the kingdom and they generally have a stronger interest in the heritage of the kingdom. These individuals may also disagree with what they find in the museum because their families are more likely to have a long,

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113 Personal Communication, Albert Fomkong, 1/12/12.
potentially contentious, history with the palace, and so they have a vested interest in the story being told in the museum.

To promote the idea of a hegemonic palace structure that has existed for generations, the curators of the museums have crafted a new heritage narrative to inform the displayed objects, and as might be expected the labels and guided tours gloss over complex histories. No attempt is made to acknowledge that many of the traditions, formal elements of the objects, and practices that the works represent were taken from local powerful families over more than one hundred plus and co-opted into the palace religious system. By ignoring these complex histories and the role of non-royal families in the construction of local traditions, the museum displays quickly become contentious to members of the local community who are frustrated with the decision to remove them from the historical narrative.

One individual who sees distinct flaws in the Bafut Palace Museum’s narrative is Kennedy Fuh, whose family has lived in Bafut for hundreds of years. Visitors to the Bafut palace have the opportunity to request a performance of the mbong masquerade when they arrive (figs. 11-13). According to Bafut curator Divine Fuh (no relation to Kennedy Fuh), the mbong that is performed in the palace is traditionally used to bid farewell to the dead, and given the antiquity of the dance it is also used widely at cultural events and in performances for tourists to showcase an ancestral style of masquerading. The Bafut museum displays examples of complete mbong dance costumes and the tour guides characterize it as a palace masquerade. What is not explained is how this masquerade was taken from Kennedy’s family when they immigrated to the region many generations ago, and that Kennedy’s ancestors, with the family name Awambun, originally owned the mbong. As Kennedy tells the story, his ancestors moved from the Bali kingdom where there were chieftaincy fights, to Manka, a quarter near the Bafut palace. Awambun was
known for having very powerful masks, known locally as \textit{jujus}, that were much stronger than the \textit{jujus} owned by the Bafut palace. As such, the Bafut Fon conspired to seize the powerful \textit{mbong jujus} from Awambun. One evening, the Fon invited Awambun and his entire family to a celebration at the palace. While they were at the palace, the Fon sent his notables to take everything from the Awambun compound and transfer it to a new compound close to the palace before burning the Awambun compound to the ground.

When Kennedy’s forefather returned home to find his home burning, the Fon’s notables comforted him by telling him that nothing was lost, since it had all been transferred to a compound provided by the Fon of Bafut. Awambun fought the control of the Bafut Fon by attempting to move his family away from the palace quarter two more times, but each time his new compound was burned by notables and he was forced to return to the Bafut palace quarter. After acceding to the Fon’s will, Bafut notables seized the powerful \textit{mbong jujus} from the Awambuns and transferred them to the palace where the \textit{mbong} was absorbed into the palace \textit{juju} repertoire.

This history of the \textit{mbong}, which Kennedy estimated occurred five hundred years ago, has had repercussions that impact the traditional political structure today. In 2010 the Bafut Palace had seen many tragedies as three successive \textit{Mafors}, queen mothers, had died, and the palace was desperately searching for something to placate the spirits that were bringing tragedy to the palace. One theory was that Awambun was exacting revenge against the palace over past mistreatment, and so in order to placate Awambun, his descendants were given a position of prominence in the \textit{kwifon}, one of the most powerful regulatory societies in the kingdom. While attempts are being made to placate Awambun, the \textit{mbong} is still performed in the palace for tourists and for the first time in history, it was also danced at the annual festival in an attempt to make the annual festival more interesting for visitors. Even as the palace is attempting to right
this historic wrong, Kennedy pointed out that the practice of seizing masquerades continues to
this day and he asserts that it is widely known that if one brings a powerful jujù into Bafut, the
palace could take it.\footnote{Personal communication, Kennedy Fuh, 1/13/12.}

Locals like Kennedy approach the museum from two different perspectives, as a member
of a family with a long and storied history with the palace and also as a Bafut citizen. He
recognizes two important things about the museum, namely that it is a touristic site that needs a
masquerade, and as a palace museum there is no place for his family’s history in the installation.
As he said, “the museum talks the story of the palace, they cannot tell the story of any other
family.”\footnote{Personal communication, Kennedy Fuh, 1/13/12.} Kennedy is willing to view the museum as the palace wishes he would, but he also views it through the lens of his own family history with the palace. Kennedy embodies a unique
class of local museum visitors who come from a family of powerful notables with strong palace
ties, willing to support them despite having a long history known to differ from the version of
history presented in the museum. Rowlands has noted the same phenomenon in the Mankon
Museum, and he comments that clan histories remain a source of conflict in the kingdom, but
nonetheless it is still unlikely to find locals disagreeing with the museum’s narrative of the
kingdom’s history. Furthermore, locals who may still be embroiled with historical land disputes
with the Mankon Fon still donated objects to the museum.\footnote{Rowlands, "Of Substances, Palace, and Museums: The visible and the invisible in the constitution of Cameroon." S30.}

**Village Politics and Class Exclusion**

A much larger percentage of the population claims no such ties to the palace, and while
the museum may appear to them as a more straightforward depiction of their kingdom’s cultural
heritage, this group feels excluded and alienated from the museum. While I met quite a few
locals who had visited the museum over the course of my fieldwork, there were many more people who had never visited their museum and felt they never could do so. I spoke to both men and women from all four kingdoms who expressed this sentiment, but the issue was best summarized for me one afternoon at a Babungo women’s meeting which I attended to discuss the museum with women from Fintang and other quarters around the palace. Among the women present were wives of the former Fon, the mother of the museum curator, Protus, and members of the Babungo community. The composition of this group made it hard for the women with no palace connections to fully speak their minds for fear of repercussions from the palace. In spite of this, many of the women did speak about their pride in the museum, their desire to visit it, and their resignation that they were not able to do so. They shared a misapprehension that they were unable to visit the museum because they could not visit the palace without being invited by the Fon, and, in any case, they were unable to pay the entry fee.

There was an overwhelming sense that these Babungo women without palace connections felt excluded from the museum experience and one woman expressed that she believed she was only allowed to enter the museum with the expressed permission of the Fon, which would only be given during a grand occasion when many people could enter the museum. An unintentional element of gender discrimination can be found in this setting since women in Babungo are much less likely to be in the palace compound than men. Men have more cause to be in the palace compound when entering and exiting the sacred forest adjacent to the palace, while women are not allowed entry into the sacred forest. This drastically limits their opportunities to visit the museum at the invitation of the Fon.

Some of the Babungo women believed that they were actually being blocked from entering the museum, based on a common experience they had when going to the palace with a
women’s group visiting Babungo. When the visiting women’s group went to the museum, the Babungo women were asked to wait outside during the tour. While my research assistant claims that this occurred because the curator felt there would be too many people in the museum if they all entered at once; this was not sufficiently conveyed to the Babungo women and they left feeling that they were not welcome to view their own culture. There was a sense of ire from the group that they, like many in the kingdom, had donated time and resources, some gave money or materials, such as bamboo for the construction of the museum, and yet they were never invited to visit. Furthermore, they were unhappy that after helping to build the museum they would have to pay an entry fee to see what they had helped to build.

My discussion with the former chairman of the Babungo Traditional Council, Ndong Tumenta Mathias, who was chairman throughout the entire period from conception to construction of the Babungo Museum, helped me understand why many of these women feel this way about the museum. After receiving a grant from the American Embassy to build a museum, the palace found that the grant would be insufficient to complete the project and so they taxed the people to raise funds to finish the museum. Mr. Tumenta said that while every community has recalcitrant people who may not wish to participate, “people were eager to help, [and] 85-90%”\textsuperscript{117} contributed. Organizers of the museum project were well aware that people would not visit, and rationalized this by saying that “they already know what is in the museum”; and furthermore, acknowledging the reality that “the local population may go there, but they do not have the finances to support”\textsuperscript{118} a visit. A visit to the Babungo Museum could cost between 2,000 and 5,000 XFA (this is between $4-$10 USD in 2013) depending on whether the individual wished to visit the museum, the palace and museum, and whether they intended to

\textsuperscript{117} Personal Communication, Ndong Tumenta Mathias, 5/28/12.
\textsuperscript{118} Personal Communication, Ndong Tumenta Mathias, 5/28/12.
take photos. While COE may have expected the palaces to allow locals to visit the museum at no charge, the palace and curators clearly had no intention of doing this.

The museum in Babungo was always conceptualized as a tourist attraction, and Mr. Tumenta specifically asserted that “those who patronize the museum should be strangers.” Further, he explicitly confirmed what the women from the women’s meeting stated, namely, that they would never just visit the palace on a whim. He stated that the palace attendants do not allow just anyone in the palace and that the Babungo people “give a lot of respect to [their] Fon, [they] respect the palace, [they] fear the palace.” Most people acknowledged that housing the museum in the palace compound is a natural choice since the palace is the center of the culture, the first place that visitors stop, and a safe setting to guard the objects. Yet, as a place that carries such importance in the kingdom, locals are reluctant to go there and palace officials were counting on this. The sense of exclusion that the local women felt was intentional on the part of the palace. At the same time, palace organizers did not anticipate that discouraging local visitors would be a problem because the local people are not sensitized to museum culture. As Mr. Tumenta claimed, “It has never been our practice to go and see things we already know.”

He and others believed that the function of displaying community heritage is to draw outsiders to the kingdom rather than provide entertainment or education for the people of the kingdom. While the entry fee required of all visitors is a straightforward barrier to local people visiting the museum, the psychological barrier of the palace is far more potent. The women in Babungo did not necessarily view their exclusion from the museum as barring them from their traditional culture or their history, but rather the museum is emblematic of the ways in which the palace largely ignores the locals, taking from them at times and rarely reciprocating.

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119 Personal Communication, Ndong Tumenta Mathias, 5/28/12.
**Who is the museum living for?**

The palaces approach museums as institutions allowing them to create new memories of a common heritage while bringing income to the kingdom, but the locals struggle to find a purpose for the museum in their lives. This has led locals to question how the museum should be used, and one key point of contention is the practice of loaning objects for ritual use. While many locals feel unwelcome to visit the museum, many of them look to the museums’ lending practices as a way to engage with the institution.

It should be noted that there are people in every kingdom who have no interest in the museum. I met one woman in Baham who felt that the museum was a place for tourists and could not understand why locals would want to visit. More common were people who had strong opinions and openly questioned the way that the museum functioned. In a debate between two local Baham men, Jean Albert Sibofo and Emile Dhidfou Kenmonge, the two men disagreed on whether or not objects should be loaned. Mr. Kenmonge took the position that it was important to loan the objects to maintain their traditional functions and ensure that traditional practices were being performed correctly because the objects had been fully researched.\(^{120}\) Mr. Sibofo felt that once the objects were placed in the museum, they should remain there, as in the “Western world.”\(^{121}\)

These perspectives appear to be influenced by perceptions of history and modern culture. While there is little to no mention of colonialism or the church in any of the COE museums, these topics continued to be raised by local people when discussing them. Mr. Kenmonge’s stance emanates from his belief that when the church arrived in the kingdom in the 1800s, it

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\(^{120}\) Personal Communication, Kenmonge Emile Dhidfou, 1/13/12, translation by Albert Fomkong.

\(^{121}\) Personal Communication, Sibofo Jean Albert, 1/13/12, translation by Albert Fomkong.
demonized traditional culture and made a concerted effort to destroy traditional objects. He therefore sees the museum as an opportunity for objects to reclaim their historical meanings. Mr. Sibofo was far less interested in reclaiming what was lost as a result of the colonial period; his concern is preserving contemporary traditional culture through the continued use of the objects. He believes that permitting these objects to be functional in the traditional public sphere keeps these objects and traditions relevant without anyone setting foot in the museum. As people who have not visited the museum, their thoughts have less to do with the institution itself than reflecting questions about how to maintain and preserve their culture.

When talking to locals about their kingdom’s museum, there were times when the answers were focused on the history of the site and the building rather than the practices of the museum today. Bafut locals seemed to feel that the museum was meant for tourists primarily and it appears likely that the history of the museum building set the tone for the local views to which the museum should cater. The perspective of an outsider can sometimes influence the way that insiders see themselves, as witnessed in the way V.S. Naipaul recognizes the power of the outsider’s perspective in his book, A Bend in the River:

Small things can start us off in new ways of thinking, and I was started off by the postage stamps of our area. The British administration gave us beautiful stamps. These stamps depicted local scenes and local things; there was one called “Arab Dhow.” It was as though, in those stamps, a foreigner had said, “this is what is most striking about this place.” Without that stamp of the dhow I might have taken the dhows for granted. As it was, I learned to look at them. Whenever I saw them tied up at the waterfront I thought

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122 Personal Communication, Kenmonge Emile Dhidfou, 1/13/12, translation by Albert Fomkong.
of them as something peculiar to our region, quaint, something the foreigner would remark on.\textsuperscript{123}

After years of foreigners coming to the museum building in Bafut and seeing it as both important and beautiful, Bafut locals have been forced to see the building as more than just a rest house that was built by the late Fon. The museum in Bafut is housed in a colonial era structure that was built by the previous Fon in a German colonial style, and the current Fon, Abumbi II, claims that his father was inspired by the German schloss in Buea when he designed the building. Mark DeLancey has posited that the Sultans Palace in Foumban also likely inspired the Fon.\textsuperscript{124} Gerald Durell lived and worked in this building while he was doing his research in Bafut in 1947 on indigenous animal species in the Grassfields, and his book, \textit{The Bafut Beagles}, made Bafut a well-known kingdom outside of the Grassfields. The book is a point of pride for the kingdom to this day and there is even a place for a few hardbound copies of the book in the museum installation. This building later became a guesthouse used by tourists, and finally it became a museum, but the compounding of these many layers of meaning from the colonial era irrevocably ties the building to foreigners who have come to the kingdom. This lengthy history of association with foreigners, not to mention its notably European style of design certainly associates this structure with a function that caters to non-local populations. This is a connotation that has been maintained today, as a vast majority of the visitors to the museum are European tourists, and it helps explain why many in Bafut speak about the museum as a space meant for foreign tourists.

\textsuperscript{123} V.S. Naipaul, \textit{A Bend in the River} (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979).\textsuperscript{15}.
\textsuperscript{124} DeLancey, "King Njoya' Palaces and German Style Architecture in Cameroon."
A Local Ambivalence

While some people in the kingdoms were interested in discussing the maintenance and preservation of culture, others were much less engaged with the idea of the museum and cited a feeling of ambivalence about it. Some expressed disappointment that the museum did not contain anything illicit or dangerous to display, and there was also disappointment that people did not learn anything new during their visits. Perhaps more to the point though, is that the ambivalence expressed by many towards the museum stems largely from the fact that there is little place for it in their lives. By and large, individuals who expressed this opinion had visited the museum with a non-local visitor or on a special visit to the palace, and in all cases the individual never paid to visit the museum. In my entire year of fieldwork, I never encountered a local visitor to the museum who had paid an entry fee and most found the idea of paying as absurd, to the point where this suggestion sent the patrons of an entire bar in Baham into fits of laughter. One individual from Bafut commented that he would never pay to visit the museum because he had no desire to give any more money to the palace. He explained that he already pays the palace’s exorbitant taxes and tolerated it when members of the palace robbed his business, so he would not be willing to pay in order to view something that he felt should be held in public trust to everyone’s benefit. This man was not alone in this opinion and many of his friends felt the same about the museum and the palace. While I spoke to people from a range of age groups and backgrounds who felt similarly, younger people, who are more westernized and spend a great deal of time out of the village overwhelmingly tended to take umbrage at the way that the museum only benefits the palace. It is this younger population that is confronted with the most contradictory influences in their daily lives. They are on Facebook and frequently spend time traveling out of the village, and yet at the same time they participate in annual traditional
festivals, come to the aid of the king in times of need, and prefer to speak their local dialects whenever possible.

The ambivalence that many express about the museum stems from that fact that it serves no function in their lives. When discussing the museum with the wife of a local quarter head and her friend, they both had a vague sense of pride in the museum, but confessed that, “maybe the museum is something important in your place, but here it is nothing.”¹²⁵ They certainly want people to know about their village, and the quarter chief’s wife admitted that upon visiting the museum, “she feels that she has jumped into her culture and has come back with something more.”¹²⁶ Her friend pointed out that while the preservation of culture is all well and good, the real issue is that the museum does not generate any money. She is glad that the museum exists, but she would never allow her son to work at the museum because there is no future in such employment. When we spoke that particular afternoon, she understood that Mr. Fomkong, the curator, is well suited to the job because he is a learned man and yet that offers little for someone who is not equally well educated. The wife of the quarter head mentioned that it was necessary for her husband to donate objects to the museum because notables cannot continue to hide objects if they want their culture to live on, while her friend saw a more practical benefit in donating to the museum because objects in the museum are less likely to be stolen due to the presence of a night guard. These two women illustrate how everyone views the museum through the lens of their own lives, whether it be a family entrenched in the practice of traditional culture or one more concerned with stable employment and safety.

¹²⁵ Personal Communication, 1/12/12, translated from Baham dialect by Albert Fomkong.
¹²⁶ Personal Communication, 1/12/12, translated from Baham dialect by Albert Fomkong.
For everyone in the village, the trickle—if not a stream—of visitors who come directly to the palace, visit the museum and palace, and then leave is noticeable. Everyone I spoke with in the Northwest Region acknowledged that, at this point, the only people who benefit from the museums are members of the palace. Regardless of whether they felt pride in the museum or apathy towards the institution, they were quick to note that while it is their kingdom’s heritage on display, it is the king and his family who benefit financially, politically, and socially from the institution. There are many people in the kingdoms who are engaged in producing traditional arts today, since each kingdom has numerous dance societies, artists who carve and weave, and musicians who play traditional instruments. All of these activities are integral parts of the traditional artistic cultures of these kingdoms, and yet the palaces have entirely consumed the tourist trade by constructing the museums. The economics of museums and the tourist trade have a significant impact on local perceptions of museums and these perceptions also shed light on the ambivalence felt by many locals about their palace.

One way to understand views of museums by different social groups is through political scientist Jean-Francoise Bayart’s theory of the “politics of the belly.” Bayart’s theory is that there is a widespread system of accumulation of shared resources by the political and elite classes that enrich these classes while leaving little for the common citizen. The elites, in local parlance, chop, or eat the resources, essentially consuming all the resources that were intended to be shared. Political scientists view these shared resources as both social and financial in

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127 I should note that I am specifically referring to the Anglophone Northwest Region in order to exclude Baham where this was not the case.
nature, as exemplified by international development funds or resources allocated to members of the military, and in both of these examples the monies and goods are clearly meant to be used for the benefit of the broader society.\textsuperscript{129}

Bayart clarifies that everyone participates in striving to accumulate as much of the available spoils as possible, but not everyone can be equally successful at this.\textsuperscript{130} He makes the further point that the massive accumulation of wealth is not perceived as a negative attribute, since individuals capable of both accumulating and redistributing wealth are viewed as “men of honor.”\textsuperscript{131} The key word here is “redistribute” as it is not just the accumulation of wealth that makes one a big man, but how one uses said wealth. A prevalent complaint I heard is that wealth is not being redistributed.

As Cameroonians in the Grassfields are becoming increasingly sensitized to the monetary value of their traditional culture, it seems as though heritage, art, and culture are being considered as the classes of shared resources being eaten by the elites of the kingdom.\textsuperscript{132} It can not be denied that one goal of the museum building project was to monetize these art objects as a means of bringing income to the kingdom, and surely most development projects are aimed at bringing more than just knowledge to a community. This project found a way for the objects to generate revenue, without being sold. If the museums are intended to bring money into the

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{129} Ibid. 229.
\item \textsuperscript{130} Ibid. 235.
\item \textsuperscript{131} Ibid. 242.
\item \textsuperscript{132} According to a Bamenda brass caster, the Ministry of Culture aired a public service announcement in the mid to late-1980s telling people to discontinue the practice of selling objects to foreigners. The messages informed people that the objects they possessed were valuable, and it was for the benefit of the country to keep them rather than let them be sold overseas. This only highlighted the monetary value of Grassfields art items to a local population. Personal communication, Yinweh Musa Giembe, 2/26/13.
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palace and kingdom, then local perceptions of the museum institution can be understood as thinly veiled perceptions of how the palace is holding up its traditional mandate.

In the Muokang quarter of Babungo, where the quarter chief has a long-standing feud with the Fon, people perceive the primary function of the museum as simply enriching the Fon. As one individual commented, locals are not particularly welcome in the Babungo Museum because the Fon’s “own purpose for opening a structure like that is for money making.”\(^\text{133}\) It is clear that while most people acknowledge that the palace is eating this resource, their real complaint is that the money is used for the Fon’s personal benefit rather than being used to aid the palace in governing the kingdom. This is not actually an indictment of the museum itself, but rather a symptom of the overall frustration that many in the kingdom feel about their palace, and how those in power choose to distribute revenue.

**Conclusion**

A part of each community I studied had never heard of the museum and while they certainly knew where the palace was located, they did not know there was a place on the grounds where they could visit the art of the kingdom. The mandates of these museums state that they exist in order to help preserve and enrich these cultures, but the fact that these museums are really aimed at tourists makes one question for whom the culture is being preserved. I initially thought that the construction of these museums was emblematic of monarchies that are successfully upholding their cultural mandate, whereby the ruler is expected to bring resources into the kingdom, be they ritual objects from conquered people, NGO funding, or the tourism generated by museums. Michael Rowlands came to similar conclusions, viewing the museum as

\(^{133}\) Personal communication, Anonymous 3/10/13.
“another ‘foreign object’ that the Fon is an expert in appropriating.” Yet while the king is bringing these resources to the kingdom, the king is also the primary beneficiary and seems to see no need to distribute the proceeds of this resource in any way. Traditional Grassfields arts have historically been objects of status that provided protection and were functional in daily life. These once functional objects have become commodities for consumption by the palace. Ironically, while the art objects in these museums originally functioned in traditional society to the advantage of the community, it appears that by installing these objects in the museum sphere they have slipped into obsolescence and been marginalized to the people and exploited by the palace.

Over the course of my fieldwork I came to realize that it did not matter that the NGOs that had helped establish these museums wanted them to represent the community, or that each museum was intended to be free to the local public to create a sense of communal support, or that the museums were not explicitly named as palace museums. The location and content of the museums have overwhelmingly led the local people to view the museums as part and parcel of the palace culture, a culture that produces notable ambivalence from the local people.

The museums in the Grassfields display functional and historical objects from these kingdoms and they have also come to embody the many ways cultural heritage is approached by different populations. Tourists may view these museums and their objects as pieces of a universal heritage, seeing in the location of the museums, antiquity of the pieces, and persona of the guides an indication of a sought after authenticity. For locals the museum is something far more complicated. Local communities recast the function, accessibility, and value of the museums in a way that reflects their perspectives on contemporary kingdom politics, the utility

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of traditional culture, and an increasing tourist trade. In perceiving the museum, the locals see the institution more than the objects, and they care less about the Western concept of museums and more about how this specific institution is functioning in their specific kingdom. While the museums may not be a means by which the local population orients a sense of self, local perspectives of the museum are indicators of how local communities view status, their kingdoms, and what they see as the future direction of their culture.
Chapter 3

A Lending Museum: The Movement of Objects and the Impact of the Museum Space

Objects in Grassfields museums are multi-dimensional: they function as indicators of heritage; they have the ability to embody personal histories and memories; they represent the pride and prestige of the kingdom and its people, and the individual objects work as part of a larger whole to communicate reimagined narratives of kingdom, tradition, and history. Yet some of the objects in Grassfields museums gain added meaning outside of the museum space. All of the Grassfields museums organized by the Centro Oreintamento Educativeo (COE) loan objects to the public so that these items may fulfill their traditional ritual functions. As such, these so-called “living museums” function as storerooms, lenders, conservators, educators, and protectors and arbiters of culture and heritage. This policy means the museum objects will remain functional in ritual settings. The “traditional” meanings of these objects are retained through their continued functionality, but never again can this meaning be viewed as a singular, or necessarily primary, meaning. Jean-Paul Notué stresses that prior to their inclusion in the museum, the value of these works could have been “religious, social, political, mythical or economic, or more than one of these together,”\(^\text{135}\) and the act of moving these objects to the museum space makes them increasingly multifaceted.

In this chapter, I will examine various types of objects and their layered meanings from three museums: the Mankon Museum, Baham Museum, and Babungo Museum. The focus will be on the movement of objects to and from the museum sphere as works of art move to the museum as a result of donations and as they move back into the traditional sphere in the

kingdom due to the lending policies of the museums. Specific examples of works that are borrowed from the museum will be examined in detail, along with the connection between festivals and the museum, and the ways some objects retain personal histories when the influence of the object’s donor is still palpable in the museum. In each case, the ways in which objects are used and understood elucidates the complexity of the object, as well as the complex nature of the museum space itself.

**Mankon Museum: Procedure, Practice, and Reasons for Lending**

As “living museums,” all of the COE museums house objects that are more than historical artifacts of past traditions or representations of current traditions. They are works of art that are still used by members of the community today. Objects housed in these museums are used for royal burials, enthronements, annual festivals, traditional medicinal purposes, and marriages. The most consistent use of objects from the museums seems to be during annual festivals when objects considered quintessentially local are put on various forms of display. Sometimes they are worn, musical instruments are played, and in the cases of statues and other prestige objects, they are scattered through the festival space. As large, public displays, festivals connect the museum with narratives of collective heritage. Yet there are other loaned objects tied to more private ceremonies: a princely masquerade costume from Mankon; a medicinal basket from Baham, and funereal masks from Babungo, to name only a few. Such objects are borrowed predictably if infrequently, only when absolutely necessary.

The opportunity to borrow objects from the museum is not open to all members of the local community. As curators and donors explained, the only people who may borrow works from the museum are people who have a legitimate connection with the object. This generally means that borrowing is restricted to donors, the family members of donors, and members of the
palace. As a point of clarification, locals would not seek to borrow objects that did not come from their family, and if they did, they would only be able to borrow those objects if they could show a genuine need to use it and receive explicit permission from the original donor. In reality, the most frequent borrowers of museum objects are the palaces. This is to be expected given that the palaces are the largest donors to the museums and the local hubs of traditional practices.

There is a set protocol for borrowing objects from any of the COE museums. When individuals wish to borrow an object they speak with the curator. The borrower then signs out the object so that the museum may retain a record of the loan in case the object is lost. The curator removes the object from the exhibition space, and either the individual intending to use the object, or possibly a member of the palace, collects the item from the museum. In many instances, borrowed objects must be blessed before they can be used, but this is not always a necessity. Once they have finished using the object, the borrower will return the object directly to the curator who determines if repairs are required, and then returns it to its place in the museum display.

In theory, everything in the museum is available to be loaned, but realistically there are many items that would never be borrowed. Many objects in the museum are historical and no longer serve any ritual function. The traditions that allowed for their use have been lost and consequently there is no situation in which an individual would have a ritual need for the object. Each museum has medicine bags or statues necessary for clan or family rituals that are no longer used. At the same time, there are practical, non-ritual objects that would also be unlikely candidates to loan. Items such as traditional umbrellas or decorative food bowls would not be borrowed because no one in the community could justify using such museum objects. With this
type of historical, functional object, museum curators take the position that only a real need for an object warrants the risk of damage or loss that accompanies the process of loaning them out.

The following case studies trace two sets of objects from the Mankon Museum – one dance costume and a suit of armor worn by the Fon – as they move in and out of the museum sphere and examine how this process impacts them in terms of their status as ritual objects, prestige items, and museum pieces. Both exemplify situations that necessitate borrowing objects from the museum: all museums house certain singular objects that must be used for important ceremonies on a very irregular basis, and they also house objects that can act as back-ups when extra are needed for especially sizable performances. Of the two scenarios, it is far more common that objects are borrowed from the museum when the palace does not have enough examples on hand for a specific occasion. As such, on more than one occasion, people described museum objects as functional only in times of last resort. The palace will turn to the museum in cases where they needed extra stools, costumes, or other masquerade paraphernalia to perform a ceremony.

Curators at Mankon, Bafut, and Baham all related examples of times when they withdrew objects from the museum because the palace did not have a sufficient stock. For example, Mankon Museum curator Vincent Nshey noted a display of ankle rattles that had recently been loaned to members of the palace for a masquerade, and he stated the reason was simply that the palace did not have enough rattles to supply all of the dancers. As a result of situations like this, the museums are able to classify most of the objects as functional objects, though the realistic chances of use are slim. Many in the palace view the museum as similar to a storeroom; its stocks are there to supplement what exists in palace storerooms and no object is made
untouchable because of its place in the museum. The Mankon Museum, like all of the COE Grassfields museums, is at once museum, lender, and storeroom.

**Case Study: Borrowing the atu akamø and münang**

One important work in the Mankon Museum that has repeatedly been borrowed by members of the palace is a masquerade costume worn during performances of the atakügorü, a death celebration for princes. The costume consists of a wooden mask (atu akamø) that represents a male face and an ankle length tunic (münang) (figs. 14 and 15) that is adorned with rows of small locks of hair that cover the entire garment. The atakügorü masquerade takes place upon the death of a prince and is modeled after the nükwï masquerade that is performed during the death celebration for a Fon. The atu akamø is a lead mask in the performance, and the number of dancers varies depending upon the importance of the prince who has died. According to one young Mankon prince, Valentine Ndoh Ndefru, this costume is only needed in the case of an especially large funeral celebration, which is an infrequent occurrence. Typically younger princes wear this garment during the atakügorü because the dance that accompanies this costume is energetic. Mr. Ndoh, who had recently worn this costume in an atakügorü, commented that it does not require a lot of practice to dance with this mask. It is a mask for young men who have energy and want to dance the way they have seen their elders dance. It is difficult to comment more specifically on the history and modern practice of this masquerade given the dearth of research on this topic. As Jean-Pierre Warnier noted in his dissertation, many pre-colonial Mankon rituals have been lost. He comments that “access to those rituals that are still performed

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137 Personal communication, Valentine Ndoh Ndefru, 11/24/11.
is restricted, and it is difficult to collect the kind of precise data needed for the analysis of rituals.”

Mr. Ndoh explained in detail the specific process of borrowing the atu akamø and münang from the museum. When this costume is needed from the museum, either the person to wear the costume or a palace representative comes to collect the piece. He must sign the object out with the curator, noting who has taken it and when. The atu akamø is then taken into the palace to be “blessed.” Mr. Ndoh was vague regarding what occurred in the process of “blessing” an object, describing only the use of traditional medicines and words being spoken over the costume. He could not be more specific because he has never been present for the ceremony. However, he was adamant that the mask and costume could not be taken straight from the museum to any type of ritual setting; it is imperative that it first be blessed in the palace. After the conclusion of the masquerade, the mask and costume are returned to the museum, seemingly without any corresponding blessing to make it safe to place back in the museum. As Simon Angwafor from Mankon explained, it is like returning a library book, in that they check it in and assess the state in which you return it. If it is damaged, repairs are made at the palace’s expense, and it is then placed back in the exhibition space.

The power of ritual objects varies throughout the continent, but it is a constant in the Grassfields that ritual objects are imbued with a form of potency that, as Notué summarizes, gives objects the ability to “[capture] the forces of nature.”

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139 Notué and Triaca, Babungo: Treasures of the Sculptor Kings in Cameroon. 55.
them, the ability to communicate with the spiritual world and nature. This power makes these objects inherently dangerous. They should be treated with ritual respect and hidden away for public safety as long as they are considered to be in a state of being blessed. The *atu akamọ* would have been no exception to this.

Upon completion, the mask would have been treated with traditional medicine in order to permit the wearer access to the world of ancestors and spirits. Anthropologist Nicolas Argenti’s comments on masking in the kingdom of Oku can be applied generally to the Grassfields when he states that “masking is a source of power and danger” because it allows for “transformation and access to another world of ancestors and deities.” All masks undergo this initial process of activation with traditional medicines, and some masks, such as the *atu ngang* (fig. 4) in the Mankon Museum, even have medicines applied before every performance in order to protect the wearer and other dancers from evil spirits and witchcraft. It does not appear that *atu akamọ* historically received this type of treatment with every performance, as there is no mention of it in the Mankon Museum catalogue, nor by Mr. Ndoh. Yet this is no longer the case today because Mr. Ndoh has indicated that once objects enter the museum space in Mankon they are no longer considered to be blessed. Consequently they must undergo ritual treatment before each time they are used in a traditional setting.

The mutable potency of objects, being blessed or unblessed, cannot be exaggerated today.

When asking Mr. Ndoh if he felt that displaying the *atu akamọ* and *münang* in the museum in

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any way changed the way that he, as someone who wears this in a performance setting, thinks of the object, his answer was an unequivocal, “no.” Mr. Ndoh has worn masks that have been kept in palace storerooms and the *atu akamọ* on display in the museum. His experience performing the masks that have been housed in both places were the same. It does not matter that anyone coming into the museum, man or woman, could touch the mask. It does not matter that non-royals and non-locals could see the full costume. In his experience, these elements of museum display have no impact on the mask and the costume’s ability to be used as ritual objects. In his view, the primary distinction is in seeing or wearing the mask before or after it has been blessed in the palace. Once a museum object has been blessed, he gets a different feeling when he looks at it and a different feeling when he wears it. While Mr. Ndoh may not know what occurs when an object is blessed, it feels distinctly different to him to touch and wear the costume after it has been blessed, as though it has been imbued with something. This sanctity is not present when the object resides in the museum. In terms of its ritual status, it is inert in the museum space. This is made clear by the way that he treats the mask when it is in the museum. When I asked Mr. Ndoh to point out the costume, he went into the museum, pulled the *münang* off the mannequin and put it on as if putting on his shirt. He walked around wearing it for a minute, put on the *atu akamọ* to show me how the two pieces looked when worn together, and then took it off and replaced it on the mannequin (fig. 16). From his treatment of the objects, it was clear that there is a stark difference in the way that certain objects are treated in the museum and outside of it.

Another way of understanding this difference is how others react to him when he is wearing the full costume. Outside of the museum, viewers would act as though they did not know that he was in the costume, but in the museum this pretense was unnecessary. Wearing the mask and tunic in a masquerade setting gives Mr. Ndoh access to the spirit world, while in the
museum he is only wearing traditional performance garments. The difference between briefly trying on the costume in the museum versus dancing in it in a masquerade after it has been blessed can be attributed in part to the strong experiential or phenomenological elements of performance. However, for Mr. Ndoh this would not wholly explain the transformation. Blessing the costume deeply influences his experience of wearing and dancing in it.

Mr. Ndoh does not think of these pieces as museum items when he is wearing them, and there is no concern about damaging the pieces while he is wearing them during a masquerade. He approaches the museum as being no different from any storeroom in the palace. Borrowers are not urged to try to protect the objects when using them, and there are no consequences for damaging them. While it is important to have these objects on display in the museum to preserve the heritage of the kingdom, it is clearly acknowledged that it is more important that they are used properly when fulfilling traditional functions.

Museum objects are always heritage items. Beyond this, those pieces that are borrowed move in and out of being considered ritual objects. Parallels can be drawn between the transience of the ritual state of these objects and the changing status of commodities. Both Arjun Appadurai and anthropologist Igor Kopytoff have written on the biography of commodities and how the status of a commodity shifts over the course of its life.143 Appadurai has noted that, “things can move in and out of the commodity state, that such movements can be slow or fast, reversible or terminal, normative or deviant.”144 The same idea can be applied to the ritual life of many museum objects. Using the *atu akamọ* and *mūnang* as examples, as they move in an out of

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the museum, they transition back and forth between the status of ritual and non-ritual object. For Mr. Ndoh, it is almost like seeing an entirely different mask when it is viewed in the ritual context while it is moving and surrounded by music in the milieu of the performance. This stands in stark opposition to the status of the mask when it is returned to the museum. Mr. Ndoh remarked that when it is in the museum, it is only for exhibition.

The *atu akamọ* and *műnang* highlight an important insight into the nature of the museum space. Inside the museum, this costume is primarily a piece of heritage. This is highlighted by the fact that Mr. Ndoh allowed me to see him wearing an incomplete costume, without any ankle clackers, and more importantly, without anything to cover his face. In the museum, where it is no longer imbued with the necessary blessings to elevate it to ritual status, the mask’s role as an indicator of heritage and history becomes its primary function. In the museum it is a piece of heritage and while it is most certainly valuable, it is still only an art object and in the museum it lacks a connection with forces of nature. Members of the palace have the ability to transform this object into a ritual garment again through the use of traditional medicine. It is the space of the museum itself that makes objects no longer sacred, highlighting that the museum is in no way a sacred setting. This process of transition from unblessed to blessed and then back again does not have equal levels of complexity or proportionality. In order to be blessed, something must be done to the mask and garment, but for it to no longer be blessed, the act of returning it to the museum is sufficient. As a non-ritual space, the museum is able to have a potent effect on the objects that reside there. When museum pieces are blessed, they are powerful and only certain people may see and touch them. By dint of the public nature of the museum display, the museum space itself is able to remove the spiritual power from the object and replace it instead with a different type of power – an ability to communicate with a wider population about their heritage.
Case Study: The Fon’s Armor

The Mankon Museum houses a wide range of objects that have been borrowed over the past ten years. A majority of those objects are ritual items borrowed for use in traditional ceremonies, with the *atu akamo* and *münang* being prime examples. The museum also houses historical, prestige objects that do not technically serve a ritual purpose, but are used during the performance of ritual acts. These objects are not blessed, and yet their movement to and from the museum represents another way in which objects may become more multifaceted in the museum space. One such object in the Mankon Museum is a German suit of armor (fig. 17) worn by the Fon during public celebrations.

Fon Angwafo II received the suit of armor displayed in the Mankon Museum in 1902 as a gift from the German Kaiser Wilhelm II. The events that led to this gift began in December of 1890. The German explorer Eugene Zintgraff sent two messengers to inform the Fons of Mankon and Bafut that he would be arriving shortly to discuss ivory trade in the kingdoms, as the two kingdoms were known for having more high quality ivory than the surrounding kingdoms. To Zintgraff’s surprise, messengers from the Fon of Bali informed him that Fon Gualem of Mankon had killed his two emissaries.\(^\text{145}\) Zintgraff’s relations with Bafut were already tense at the time because Zintgraff claimed that he was owed recompense by the kingdom after he gave them lavish gifts. Zintgraff’s perspective was that the Bafut Fon had never repaid his kindness by leading him in the next stage of his journey, as he claimed he had been promised. As such, whereas prior to the arrival of Zintgraff, Bali and Bafut had been near to allying against the Fon of Mankon, Zintgraff’s incursion into the region resulted in Bafut and

Mankon joining forces against Zintgraff and Bali.\(^{146}\) These tensions came to a head during a battle on January 31\(^{st}\), 1891 known as the Battle of Mankon. Parts of Mankon were burned, four of Zintgraff’s German comrades died, and many men from Mankon and Bafut were killed or captured. According to Cameroon historian and ethnographer E.M. Chilver, although Zintgraff believed that the battle was a failure due to the loss of German lives, at the time, locals believed that he had won.\(^{147}\)

The second half of the story that led to Mankon receiving the suit of armor from the German Kaiser began ten years after the Battle of Mankon. The Mankon and Bafut people remained resistant to German interference, but in 1901 the German forces launched a punitive expedition under the leadership of von Pavel and Captain Glauning, crushing the Mankon-Bafut forces decisively.\(^{148}\) The Mankon and Bafut Fons called for peace and the two Fons were given gifts at the conclusion of the war. Among the gifts received by Fon Angwafo II of Mankon was the breastplate and Prussian garde cuirassier helmet, which was only worn by two elite Prussian cavalry units at the time.\(^{149}\) Chilver’s research argues that at the time the Fon of Mankon was viewed as having lost every battle against the Germans and accordingly, this armor was given as a sign of friendship after Mankon had been defeated, sustaining 218 casualties, 217 taken

\(^{146}\) Ibid. 25.
\(^{147}\) Ibid. 29.
\(^{149}\) Ngwa, "A suit of armour (ako'sofo)." 177.
prisoner, and 200 were given to the Germans for forced labor. In the face of such losses for the Mankon people and its palace it may be surprising to find that instead of representing a reminder of defeat, the armor is a prestige item today, treasured by the Fon, and viewed as an indication of close ties between the Germans and the Mankon people.

In both the museum and the palace, the German armor is viewed as an indicator of the Fon’s long-standing prestige, power, and ferocity in battle. When touring the museum the visitor is told a version of the Battle of Mankon that is much more aligned with Zintgraff’s impressions of the battle, focusing on the facts that many Germans were killed, the attackers were repelled, and regardless of local perceptions at the time, claiming that Mankon was victorious that day. It is this version of the battle that is widely held today, as indicated by the epilogue of Bole Butake’s 1994 play Zintgraff and the Battle of Mankon. She writes: “In the battle of Mankon, Bali losses were not more than six times ten men. Bafut and Mankon lost two thousand dead and more than one thousand taken captive. Yet in Bali the atmosphere was of defeat, while there was celebration in Bafut and Mankon because of the victory over Zintgraff’s countrymen.” It is clear from its inclusion in the museum that the Mankon curators thought this piece of armor to be incredibly important to the museum’s telling of Mankon history. When visiting the museum in Mankon, the German suit of armor is used to re-write history in two ways: it represents both the military strength of the Mankon people and also the close bond between the Mankon Fon and the German colonial administration.

151 Personal communication, Vincent Nsehy, 10/22/11.
153 For more on the topic of re-writing history, see Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire."
The breastplate and helmet are two of the most regularly loaned objects in the museum, as they have become important pieces of the Fon’s regalia. He wears them during important public festivals such as the annual dance and the nükwi, the death celebration for a Fon. While the armor is worn in ritual settings, it does not need to be blessed since it is not a ritual object, but rather an indicator of prestige. The Mankon Museum catalogue claims that Fon Angwafo II was given these items as a sign of his “pre-eminence as shown by his bravery and prowess in warfare, as well as his judicious rule, prestige, integrity, honesty, and fair dealings and his fear of God.” Unlike the atu akamø and münang, the Fon’s armor does not routinely shift in and out of a ritual state, but rather it consistently plays the role of a prestige object. As the only European object in the museum, it draws a great deal of attention and provides an opportunity to tell a story that highlights the strength of the Mankon people as victors in battle against the Germans. Outside of the museum it sustains this meaning as an indicator of Mankon’s valor and strength in warfare. The museum space seemingly has little to no impact on the object, as it was never intended to be hidden from public view. The museum does not quell any of its power or meaning, nor does it imbue it with added value. If anything, the museum simply allows this object to more effectively serve its primary function of disseminating a reimagined version of Mankon’s colonial history.

The Babungo Museum: Objects and Festivals

The Babungo nikai festival takes place in the Babungo palace courtyard over the course of three consecutive nkusee, the day of rest in the Grassfields’ traditional eight-day week, in the late winter/early spring. Touted as a peaceful festival with no traditional musket fire, the

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154 Ngwa, "A suit of armour (ako'sofo)." 177.
155 Ibid. 177.
156 Nkusee is colloquially known as “country Sunday.”
*nikai* coincides with the beginning of the farming season and is meant to bring fertility to the kingdom in all senses of the word. As one Babungo man related to me, notables “visit the shrine to appease the ancestors of the village and appeal for good harvest, peace, unity, and development.” The first day of the *nikai* is spent in private ceremonies in the sacred forest adjacent to the palace. The men’s regulatory society, the *ngoumba*, which is open to all non-royal males in the kingdom, presides over the sacrifices and necessary preparations for the next two days of the festival. The second *nkusee* sees men of the *ngoumba* from each quarter dancing in the courtyard of the palace. The second day’s festivities culminate with the Fon in a large mask completing a turn dancing around the courtyard. Finally, on the third day of the *nikai*, men of the *ngoumba* again dance in the courtyard, and this time the afternoon culminates with the king walking around the dance venue, and throwing blessed seeds to the crowd of Babungo people. The seeds will be the beginning of the next year’s blessed crops.

On the second and third days of the festival, the palace courtyard is well appointed. Figurative statues of former Fons and royal retainers ring the dance space, while carved drums are placed in the center of dance space. Elaborate thrones are set out for the visiting Fons who come to watch the festivities. Locals regularly describe the *nikai* as the festival that epitomizes Babungo culture. As such, every year many objects that are displayed, worn, carried, and played in the festival come from the museum, an institution intended to encapsulate Babungo culture and heritage. On the two public days of the festival organizers draw broadly from the museum inventory, utilizing its contents in many components of the festival.

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157 Personal communication, Tita Fuangwe Ndofekeh, 1/23/12.
158 The *ngoumba* are a male, regulatory society that any non-royal man in the kingdom may join. Boys are frequently initiated as soon as they are able to perform the traditional dance step of the *ngoumba* and children as young as two and three years old will participate in the annual festival.
During the 2012 *nikai*, of the eleven statues lining the courtyard, seven were pieces that are normally found in the museum. The seven statues consisted of one commemorative statue depicting Fon Sangge II (fig. 17), two statues depicting Fon Sake II (figs. 18 & 19), a statue throne of a retainer (*wenyui ntoh*) (fig. 20), and three statues of royal guardians (*ndifuan tambu*) (figs. 21, 22, & 23). These figures are lavish. They stand out as pieces of the finest quality and many of them are entirely covered in beads or cowry shells, an indication of palace wealth since the nineteenth century.\(^{159}\) Acting as markers of affluence is only one function of such statues. Art historian Alissa LaGamma has noted that such depictions allow ancestors to both witness and continue to take part in the traditions of their kingdoms.\(^{160}\) Regionally, effigies of Fons and their wives or mothers are held to embody and represent the specific depicted individual. Consequently, they are frequently displayed at death celebrations and festivals where they are representing the ancestors and also serving as indicators of the history of the current royal dynasty. Depictions of royal retainers and guardians sometimes served ritual functions related to protecting the kingdom, its sacred locations and objects, and its people, but this is not necessarily always the case.\(^{161}\) While these may be the stated function of effigy statues, there is some doubt that the depictions of Fons and retainers used in the *nikai* ever served this purpose.

Notué commented in the Babungo Museum catalogue that it is likely that the tradition of carving ancestor statues is not an old Babungo tradition. Curators of the Babungo Museum support this claim, noting that the earliest known examples of this practice come from the reign

The assertion of this practice’s relative youth was borne out by conversations that I had with local notables, and yet they clearly act as more than simple portraits. The practice’s recent introduction explains the local understanding of the tradition as something secular, religious, and only vaguely historical. In speaking with many notables from the kingdom, it became clear that these objects have historically served multiple purposes in the niki. In asking the notable Tita Fuangwe Ndofekeh if they had always brought the statues of the Fons and guardians out into the courtyard, “yes, they carry some out of the museum, out of the palace. That way we exhibit the tradition of the village, the cultural background of the village; because it is a selling dance.”¹⁶³ Clarifying “selling,” he claimed that one of the most important reasons for putting the statues in the courtyard is to increase the pomp of the ceremony so that tourists who come to visit will see the lavish nature of the festival, share this with others, and thereby attract others to the kingdom. The relatively recent adoption of this practice may have been motivated by a desire to appeal to foreign audiences by taking up a widely known regional artistic practice. At the same time, Tita Ndofekeh asserted that the locals attending the festival are pleased to see that ancestor statues are watching the proceedings and taking the blessings offered to them throughout the festival performance.¹⁶⁴

Babungo Museum curator Cyvil Nangwa Nsanyui’s research reveals different historical uses for these objects. For example, Mr. Nsanyui concluded that of the two statues depicting Fon Sake II, one of the statues (fig. 18) was made to be exhibited during the Sake II’s death celebrations as well as annual festivals, while the second statue (fig. 19) was stored in the palace.

¹⁶² Tamara Northern has hypothesized that this tradition in Babungo is even more modern that the curators claim, beginning as recently as the reign of Fon Zofoa II (r. 1955-1999). Tamara Northern, The Art of Cameroon (Washington, D.C.: S.I.T.E.S. -- Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, 1984). 35.
¹⁶³ Personal communication, Tita Fuangwe Ndofekeh, 1/23/12.
¹⁶⁴ Personal communication, Tita Fuangwe Ndofekeh, 1/23/12.
and only displayed in public during the enthronement of a new Fon. He found that the statues of royal guardians were displayed only at death celebrations, enthronements, and annual festivals. Prior to their inclusion in the museum they were housed in the tambu, a special room in the palace. As such, it appears that prior to their installation in the museum these statues served a range of functions from the regional, traditionally accepted role as witnesses to death and enthronement celebrations to decorative reminders of history and impressive examples of local artistic production during annual festivals attended by local and tourists alike. The museum catalogue concludes that in addition to other uses, a majority of the statues were always intended for display during the nikai, with the exception of one of the statues of Sake II.

While the lavish statues contribute to the affluent aura of the nikai ceremony, nothing is more impressive than the role of the Fon. On the third day of the nikai, the king is outfitted in a manner that displays the full weight of his power (fig. 24). Men of the ngoumba society surround him. One man holds a large umbrella over his head, while many others hold up two large ndop cloths on either side of the Fon. The Fon is followed by a trail of younger members of the ngoumba society holding various markers of the Fon’s power, all made to be used or displayed in festival settings. Nearly all of these objects are regularly housed in the museum. The selection of objects that are chosen to follow behind the Fon varies slightly from year to year. In the 2012 nikai the young men carried a woven basket, a stool decorated with cowry shells, a stool decorated in intricate beadwork, a beaded calabash, and a carved ivory tusk (figs. 165, 166).

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Four children carried beaded flywhisks, while the last child in the procession carried a second tusk. Both of the stools (figs. 27 & 28), the calabash (fig. 29) and both tusks are objects found in the museum 364 days out of the year. In the 2013 nikai the men following the Fon carried the same woven basket, the cowry shell decorated stool and the beaded stool, followed by two beaded calabashes, both tusks, a fly whisk, and a beaded statue (figs. 30 & 31). Of the nine objects that were carried behind the Fon in 2013, two-thirds were from the museum versus only half in 2012. This shift can be understood in a few ways. The Fon is looking to show items that indicate prestige and heritage, and the museum is increasingly perceived as the place where such items are housed. The museum has augmented the value of its items as indicators of heritage and prestige, making them better options each year for inclusion in the nikai. Another possibility is that the palace is attempting to make the nikai more appealing to tourists, and the inclusion of the museum objects adds a level of interest since prize objects can be seen in a ritual setting.

The nikai ceremony highlights the power and prestige of the Fon, and the array of objects carried behind him must evolve to represent his power in the most impressive way possible. The beaded calabashes have long been associated with the Fon on traditional festival days. One of them has been carried behind the Fon in this manner for many years, while the other was traditionally placed next to the Fon on ceremony days. The two stools, which were present in both the 2012 and 2013 nikai were made by Fon Sake II, the twenty-third Fon (r. 1927-1955), and they have been present in the nikai since his reign. The lavish use of beads and cowries on these two pieces are long-standing visual indicators of wealth. The most significant pieces are the two carved ivory tusks. Both of the ivory trumpets are carved with human and animal figures. Ndifua Ngow carved these trumpets in 2000 and they were made specifically for the
current Fon, Ndofoua Zofua III. Both are inscribed with his name. The imagery on the trumpets, specifically the depictions of spiders, underlines the power of the Fon. The material itself is a kingly indicator in that elephants are one of a handful of animals (including pythons, leopards, and lions) associated exclusively with the Fon.

The Fon wishes to convey his power to locals and foreigners alike. To visitors these items are museum quality pieces – finely beaded and expertly carved – marking the importance of the ceremony and its leader. These objects convey much more to locals. For example, the beaded calabashes represent the long-standing tradition of the Fon keeping a private, highly decorated drinking calabash close to him at traditional public ceremonies. The decorated stools were made by a former Fon and function as a reminder of the current leader’s royal heritage. Finally, the tusks are associated exclusively with Fon Ndofoua Zofua III in the eyes of the kingdom; they are a sign of his power not only because they were designed for him, but also due to the scarcity and high value of ivory in that elephants have not been seen in the region for decades.

The museum objects used in the festival are brought out and returned on the same day. Prior to their installation in the museum they were kept away from public view when not being used. They were housed in storerooms in the palace and shrines, where only a select few would be able to see them. In those spaces, these objects maintained their roles as works of traditional, religious heritage year round. While in the museum, the objects tend to represent the historical figures who made them, the individuals they are made to represent, historical events, or the traditional practices when they are used. In the museum they are not highlighted as objects from

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the *nikai* as much as serving as tools for telling a larger narrative, while during the *nikai* they are not seen as museum objects, but traditional Babungo works of art. In the performance space of the *nikai* they still play this role, but they also represent the ancestors in the space of contemporary ritual practice. Inclusion in the museum has made these objects increasingly multifaceted. The museum draws new and different elements out of these works, emphasizing the importance of the identity of the artist in many works and locating them within a larger narrative of heritage that would not have been considered as strongly prior to become an art object on display in the museum.

**Baham Museum: Ownership and recognition**

The previous two sections have focused on objects as they *leave* the museum, and this section will focus on the movement of objects *to* the museum. The previous two sections have explored the ways in which “things of the palace” take on increasing levels of meaning as they are loaned out from the museum space. This section will focus on the impact of the museum space on objects given by donors from the community, as well as how the long-term lending of personal and family objects to the museum makes them increasingly multifaceted. Objects donated to the museum by individuals are largely heritage objects, conveying a *mélange* of history, tradition, and memory. Some of them are functional objects, which fulfill a ritual function outside the museum. For locals they recall personal histories, and for tourists they represent an entire traditional culture of a people. At the museum in Babungo nearly every object is from the palace collection. In Mankon and Baham, many are from the palace, but members of the community also donated some of the objects. In all COE museums the objects donated by members of the community are recognized as such. Some of the objects may have been prestige
items before entering the museum, but they now all become prestige objects in the eyes of the donors and locals due to their placement in the museum.

**Kingdom Notables as Donors**

Many Baham notables have donated to their kingdom’s museum. No one has made as sizeable a contribution as Te’Mekam Tabiegaing, who has donated 33 objects to the Baham Museum. All of his donations were objects carved by his late father, *meukam* Tabiegaing, one of the greatest carvers in recent Baham history. *Meukam* Tabiegaing was born around the end of the nineteenth century and he was well known for his slit drums and carved architectural decorations, but he was incredibly prolific in many carving genres over his long career.\(^{168}\) There are musical instruments, doorframes, pillars, masks, drums, furniture, and statues in the museum that are all attributed to his hand. In the context of the museum, these object are intended to represent the history of traditional carving and various kingdom-wide traditional practices, but these objects also stand as testimony to the contributions of Mr. Tabiegaing and his father to the kingdom.

I asked Mr. Tabiegaing if he had ever borrowed objects from the museum. He remarked that he might borrow objects, but only rarely, and only in cases when he does not have a duplicate at home. Unlike Mr. Ndoh from Mankon, he treats the object differently now that it resides primarily in the museum. Individual donors view the movement of objects to the museum as elevating their status so significantly that they are more likely to stop using the objects to avoid endangering the status of the piece. Mr. Tabiegaing commented that he views the objects in the museum as being more prestigious. Just knowing that people from around the

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world have visited the museum and seen the work of art made by his father has made it more precious to him, and “it gathers more momentum in [his] mind.” Consequently, he is gentler with the objects now, taking better care of them on the increasingly rare occasions when he borrows them from the museum. Prior to their inclusion in the museum, these objects were simply viewed as family heirlooms made by his sculptor father. Now these are heritage objects belonging to the whole kingdom, and they represent one of the most notable carvers in the kingdom’s history. While some of the objects Mr. Tabiegain donated to the museum are still ritual items, it is clear that the primary function of these objects once placed in the museum is to laud the name of his father. Each time he removes one of these objects from the museum he is jeopardizing their safety and his family’s legacy.

As a donor to the museum, the presence of the donated objects has changed the entire nature of the museum for Mr. Tabiegain and his family. While most locals visit the museum and see the heritage of their kingdom, the Tabiegain family finds the experience to be far more personal since they experience the enduring impact of their grandfather’s work. As an elder member of the kingdom, Mr. Tabiegain lamented what people have been lamenting for generations, that the younger people of the kingdom are no longer interested in the traditions of their great grandparents. These younger generations have a tendency to look on the museum as an attraction, as a way to reconnect with their culture when they visit the kingdom during holidays. Mr. Tabiegain noted that his children are not particularly interested in the museum or their traditional culture, but his father’s place in the museum will always be a matter of pride for his family because it shows their importance in the kingdom. It inspires his family to always feel a sense of connection with their heritage.
The objects donated by Mr. Tabiegaing have many functions in the museum: they are indicators of Baham heritage; they are signs of Mr. Tabiegaing’s elevated status in the kingdom, and they will be prestige objects for Mr. Tabiegaing’s entire lineage, and an indicator of their contribution to the preservation of Baham’s traditions. As much as people in these kingdoms talk about the museum as a mark of honor and prestige for the kingdom as a whole, to this select group of individuals, the museum ceases to be about the kingdom, and through a select group of objects, becomes a deeply personal institution to them.

**Artist Donors**

Mr. Noubi Norbert, born in 1938, is one of the best-known living carvers in the kingdom of Baham. In the mid-1950s Baham experienced a bitter succession dispute as the French colonial administration tried to enthrone a Fon that was more sympathetic to their cause. Mr. Norbert fought alongside many Baham people against both the French and the local man they had installed as king. After losing this battle, he was forced to work for a local elite family that had allied itself with the French. This family sent him to study carving with a local artist, and he has been a carver working for this family for nearly 50 years. He also takes some outside commissions.

Mr. Norbert is well represented in the Baham Museum, with nine of his pieces on display. The family he worked for donated five and he donated four objects himself. His stated reasons for donating were twofold: first, he wished to be entered into history, and second, he wanted to participate in the museum project because he believed that the museum would situate Baham as one of the great kingdoms in the region. In order for the museum to be important, he

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169 For more on the Baham succession controversy, see Notué and Triaca, *Baham: Arts, Mémoire et Pouvoir dans le Royaume de Baham*, 32-36.
170 Personal communication, Noubi Norbert, 4/12/12.
believes that the objects must be cast as historical in nature in order to show a legacy of prominence in the region. He views the museum as a time capsule, and as the older generations die, the museum will be a reminder of how they lived. If the collection of the museum is unchanged it will ensure that his contribution will continue to be displayed in perpetuity, marking him as one of the last great carvers of Baham.

Mr. Norbert also has something else to gain from donating his objects to the museum that most donors do not, the possibility of financial gain. When Mr. Norbert donated his sculptures to the museum, he gained the possibility of increased income in two ways. The two living artists who donated to the Baham Museum were told that if the museum proved to be profitable, money would be set-aside for the artist donors after salaries had been paid to the curators. This offer was only made to the artist donors because they had greater financial need than notable donors. Furthermore, they experienced a direct loss of income by donating the objects rather than having the chance to sell the pieces. It is unfortunate that the museum does not make enough money to even pay curator salaries today, but the promise remains that one day Mr. Norbert might see some small financial gain from his donation. Secondly, Mr. Norbert donated works from his personal collection in the hope that he would become known through the publication of the catalogue, and collectors from near and abroad would commission works from him. This has also not happened as he had hoped, and now that his eyesight is failing he could not fulfill any commissions that he received. In this light, the works that Mr. Norbert donated to the museum can be viewed as more than heritage pieces, or objects that add to his personal and familial prestige, but they are also advertisements for his skills.
Conclusion

Objects in the Grassfields museums have shifting functions, but when they are situated in the museum space their primary role is to act as a public version of culture where each object is understood less as an individual work of art and more as part of a larger narrative. The culture, as put forth in these museums, is, in many ways, itself an object. Appadurai and Breckenridge noted that objects have always constituted “a negotiated settlement between longstanding cultural significations and more volatile group interests and objectives.” 171 These objects represent the heritage narrative of the most powerful people in the kingdom, from the Fon to notables and donors. When these objects are loaned out from the museum or loaned to the museum by individuals, their meanings become much more multifaceted. In Mankon, ritual objects that leave the museum in order to fulfill their traditional use engage in a compelling transition, from unblessed museum object to blessed ceremonial object. This transition speaks volumes about the nature of the museum space. In this case, not only is the museum a non-ritual space, a public space, but in most cases it also has the ability to drain any ritual power from the objects that are housed there. The relationship between the Babungo Museum and the performance of the nikai festival indicates the transformative impact of the museum on objects and traditional festivals in the region. Given the natural affinity between the cultural festival and the display of cultural heritage in the museum, the two are becoming more and more intertwined. As the museum is increasingly associated with prestige and heritage, museum objects are becoming an increasingly integral part of cultural heritage performances. While the museum may remove ritual power from objects in Mankon and the museum space empowers the festival space in Babungo, the Baham Museum adds monetary, cultural, and personal value to objects

171 Appadurai and Breckenridge, "Museums are Good to Think: Heritage on View in India." 35.
from local donors. In all three of these museums the movement of objects to and from the museum has a profound impact on how people view these objects differently based upon context and use. It speaks to the power of the museum as a space of transformation of secular and sacred, as a space of prestige and modernity, and as a public platform for local histories.
Chapter 4

Relating Power: Grassfields Politics and the Institution of the Museum

Museums are publically lauded for their ability to educate, inspire, and create, but perhaps less regularly discussed is their ability to be used like weapons. They provide the means for creating order and clarity in complex situations, and they have the ability rewrite history. Museums are constantly negotiating the construction of narratives that engage memory, history, and heritage in conjunction with the goals of their respective institutions. All three subjective concepts are revised and reinterpreted with the passage of time, and yet, in the space of the museum, they frequently have a patina of timeless fixity. Since independence, many museums on the African continent have worked to construct a sense of national or regional identity, often creating a shared heritage from the pieces of many disparate cultural groups. As nations use museums to assert political agendas and reshape regional histories, so too have smaller political bodies used museums to influence local, national, and international opinion in their favor.

In this chapter I will examine the ways in which two palace museums are being used as political tools on both the local and national level. Both of these museums are located in the kingdom of Babungo: the Babungo Museum, located in the main palace, and the Muokang Palace Museum of Vengo Heritage, located in the palace of a sub-chief known by the traditional title of Ba. These museums have been profoundly shaped by a long-standing feud between these two palaces. The local rulers and ruling organizations have recognized the incredible potential of the museum as an institution and an idea. While the objects inside the museum play a role in its political power, it is the institution itself that generates the most impact.

Examples of museums being used for political ends can be found around the globe and throughout history, as countries use museums to make public statements about their political
ideals. Art historian Carol Duncan has discussed this element of museum culture at length and offers many examples, including the Shah of Iran’s Museum of Contemporary Art in Tehran, which was intended to “complete the façade of modernity [the Shah] constructed for Western eyes.” Duncan also cites the transformation of the Louvre from the king’s private home and repository of the royal art collection, to a public museum and a potent symbol of the dramatic political shifts occurring in the country. Grassfields museums function similarly, as these institutions trumpet the modernity of these kingdoms and serve the political goals of those in power.

Museums can be used for many purposes. They can create a sense of national identity, promote the inculcation of certain versions of history, promote notions of cultural and societal inclusion based upon access to the museum space, and control the means of determining which elements of art and culture are “authentic.” The simple act of transmitting an object to the museum sphere can be viewed as a political act. Duncan has described Western examples of converting princely collections into state collections, and while the context is incredibly different, many of her observations apply very well to non-western contexts. She notes that objects that were originally amassed around a monarch or ruler as indicators of personal power become transformed in the museum space to represent “a new form of cultural-historical wealth.” The same can be said of prestige objects in Grassfields palaces, which originally spoke to the political power of the Fons, and have been transformed in the museum space to represent the palace’s view of the culture and history of the kingdom. Having control over the

173 Ibid. 93.
framing of the cultural-historical narrative makes the museum institution a powerful political tool. Throughout history, museums and art have been linked to politics and power. Today is no different in the Grassfields. Museums are inextricably linked to the public culture of the kingdom and so too are politics.

**Babungo: Two Palaces, Two Museums**

Babungo is home to two museums. The older of the two, the Babungo Museum, was built with aid from COE. Located in the royal palace, this museum is intended to preserve the cultural heritage of the Babungo people through the display of the palace’s royal arts. The Muokang Palace Museum of Vengo Heritage is the second museum, and it opened in 2013. Located in the Muokang quarter to the west of the palace, this museum is in the palace compound of *Ba*, who is a descendent of one of the founders of Babungo and is regarded as a powerful man in the kingdom. Among the *Ba’s* roles and entitlements, he is a quarter chief who installs the new Fon on his stool, and who rules in the Fon’s stead when he is indisposed or abroad. He is also the head of the *Tifwan*, the regulatory society, which means that it should be *Ba* rather than the Fon officiating at all of the annual sacrifices. Given *Ba’s* rights and responsibilities in the kingdom, he has historically been regarded as second in command after the Fon. *Ba’s* museum also displays the cultural heritage of the Babungo people, yet it is told from the unique perspective of the Muokang palace.

Christraud Geary’s work has shown that museums have existed in the Grassfields region for nearly a century, and it is not even a new phenomenon to have multiple museums in one kingdom. Geary and Steven Nelson’s writings on the two museums in Foumban – the Musée des Arts et Traditions Bamoums founded by Mosé Yéyab and the Foumban Palace Museum

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founded by Sultan Njoya – describe how Cameroonians in power used art during the colonial era to simultaneously appease colonial administrators and valorize their own cultural heritage. They used the display of art in these museums as a means of undermining the ideological and political stance of their challengers, while bolstering their own position with the colonial forces and local population.\(^\text{176}\) The Babungo museums similarly engage local and national political concerns, making a statement on the national level about the quality and dominance of the art culture of Babungo. They speak to an international audience about the ability of the kingdom to be modern while still preserving their version “traditional” culture. At the local level they play a role in a power struggle between two leaders by acting as public platforms for their respective versions of history.

The Babungo Museum, like all COE museums, is intended to improve cultural awareness, preserve heritage, and attract tourists, and yet it also plays other roles in service to the palace. The heritage narrative of the museum is a story that has been crafted to act as a tool for the kingdom’s local and national political interests. Two particular narratives stand out that greatly benefit the palace, and the first is an emphasis on a long, uninterrupted line of Babungo Fons that dates back to the founder of the kingdom and fails to mention succession disputes or any other claims to traditional power. The second narrative is the emphasis placed on the history of Fons as artists. Both claims attempt to solidify recent developments in the kingdom’s history, thereby benefiting Fon Ndofoa Zofua III and the broader palace hierarchy. These narratives whitewash the history of conflict between the Fon and \(Ba\) and strengthen the Fon’s position in their conflict by emphasizing the importance of the royal art tradition in Babungo. The Fon stands to gain local prestige and financial power, as well as the ability to attract foreign

\[\text{\(^{176}\) Nelson, "Collection and Context in a Cameroonian Village." 27.}\]
development investors. As Babungo art becomes better known, the value of his vast art holdings in the palace increases. The palace is using the museum to make new traditions appear historic, specifically pre-contact with European influences, in order solidify the changes and further capitalize on them.

_A History of Conflict_

The displays in the Babungo Museum and Muokang Palace Museum have been shaped by the long-standing power struggle that continues today between the Fon, Ndofoa Zofua III (fig. 32), and a powerful sub-chief, Ba Bajon Bihai III (fig. 33), the chairmen of the two museums, respectively. Both of these figures use the museum space in order to create narratives of history, heritage, and tradition that substantiate their claims to power. To explain the current conflict between these figures and how it relates to the museum, it is first necessary to look at the origins of the dispute. Anthropologist Ian Fowler explains in exquisite detail the 19th-century origins of the modern day conflict between the Babungo Fon and _Ba_ in his article, “African Sacred Kings: Expectations and Performance in the Grassfields.” While I will not go into the same amount of detail as Fowler, I will outline the key moments in history that have led to this current political strife.

The roots of the current conflict can be traced back to the turbulent reign of Fon Nywifon, who ruled during the mid to late-nineteenth century, and who is remembered for ruling during a time of marked prosperity. However he is also remembered as the Fon who was kidnapped by raiders from Bali Kombat. In order to get their Fon back, the people of Babungo paid a large ransom, and while stories vary, before he was to be released, Nywifon escaped Bali Kombat either with the help of a Babungo guardian spirit, or alternatively with the help of one of

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the queens of Bali Kumbat. More important to the conflict at hand was that Nywifon died without leaving an heir to the throne, a “situation [that] bore the seeds of internal conflict and potential schism which, in the final quarter of the nineteenth century, rose to the surface in the form of a dynastic succession dispute.” Along with disruption in the line of succession, two other enormous shifts occurred in the power structure of Babungo. In the nineteenth century new metallurgical technology allowed for an increase in iron production that resulted in a newly affluent blacksmith class. Unfortunately, these blacksmiths had no legitimate recourse for gaining entry into the traditional modes of power. The hereditary lines of power were already set, and the blacksmiths were notably excluded from them. When Fon Nywifon died in 1875 without leaving an heir, the upheaval gave the blacksmiths an opportunity to gain access to the kingdom’s traditional modes of power by backing one of the likely candidates, Sangge, the son of one of the late Fon’s sisters. Ba did not back the same candidate as the blacksmiths, and Fowler describes how this led to an actual brawl in the palace that resulted in Ba being beaten and having his cap removed from his head, a breach of protocol for Ba whenever he is in public. The conflict between Ba and the blacksmiths left the kingdom divided, with the newly wealthy blacksmith class on one side and the hereditary, title-holding class on the other.

The other important political change during this period was the arrival of Europeans, most especially, the German explorer, Eugen Zintgraff. After an unsettling experience Zintgraff and his party were forced to flee the kingdom of Kom, and Sangge’s scouts sent word that the

178 Ibid. 255.
179 Ibid. 254.
German explorer had been sighted in the area. Sangge, strategizing on how he could capitalize on this occurrence, sent a blacksmith to slow Zintgraff’s progress so that Sangge could rush to meet Zintgraff to offer him shelter in Babungo. Sangge made it clear that he had no allegiance with Kom and that he would be happy to provide a feast to the hungry group. With this one act, Sangge made a powerful friend in Zintgraff, who later went on to describe Babungo as “not only the most beautiful of the places he had seen but also the most disciplined.”

Sangge had the wealthy blacksmiths and Zintgraff supporting him, but Ba and the other titleholders in the kingdom backed another candidate. However, at that point Ba made a political misstep that led all of the factions to align against him, resulting in the final enthronement of Sangge. In an attempt to enthrone the candidate that Ba—and it can be assumed the other titleholders—wished to see as the next Fon, Ba invited a regulatory group from the neighboring kingdom of Kom to attend the ceremony. It should be said that inviting regulatory groups from other kingdoms to bear witness to the installation of a candidate for Fon was not a rare practice. Nonetheless, with the kidnapping of Fon Nwyifon still fresh in their minds, the Babungo people were wary of other kingdoms, and Ba was viewed negatively for inviting members of a foreign kingdom into Babungo. Consequently, the blacksmiths and titleholders banded together to install Sangge as the new Fon. According to Fowler, Sangge and Ba claimed to reconcile, but tensions persisted throughout the reign of Sangge and continue today.

182 Ibid. 258.
Fowler notes that prior to Sangge’s succession, *Ba* was really the most powerful figure in the kingdom. In Fowler’s research he has found that, “In the public realm all was done in the name of the king,…[but] *Tifwan*, the regulatory association, was the locus of political authority and *Ba* at its head, held effective power in the kingdom.” Among *Ba*’s roles and entitlements, he installed the new king on his stool, ruled in the Fon’s stead when he was indisposed or abroad, could never be deposed from power, and committing adultery with one of *Ba*’s wives was punishable by death. Most importantly, *Ba* was the head of the *Tifwan*, the regulatory society, which meant that it was *Ba* who officiated at all of the annual sacrifices, rather than the Fon.

Seeking to solidify and increase their power at the expense of *Ba*’s influence in the kingdom, Sangge and his successors used the colonial power structure to undermine *Ba*’s rights and status. Colonial administrators were eager to do away with the system of regulatory associations in favor of a system reliant on a single individual to rule his people, presumably in ways beneficial to their administration. The Fons who succeeded Sangge took *Ba* titleholders to court over taxes and a range of crimes. *Ba* was sent to prison at times and the *Ba* titleholder was periodically forced to pay monies to the Fon. While this diminished his financial power, the real blow to *Ba*’s status came with the early colonial era introduction of a traditional council headed by the Fon. This led to an important power shift in the regulatory society. Historically *Ba* was the leader of the society and the Fon was a passive onlooker to society meetings and practices, but this change turned *Ba* into the titular head of the *Tifwan*, with the Fon exerting full control over the society.188

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186 Ibid. 260.
187 Ibid. 256.
188 Ibid. 262.
Currently the feud between the Fon and Ba is multifaceted. The Fon has accused Ba of supporting the Southern Cameroonian National Council (SCNC) an illegal separatist organization seeking independence for Anglophone Cameroon. Ba alleges that agents of the current Fon hid a semi-automatic weapon in his compound and then informed the police, resulting in his being briefly imprisoned and fined. According to individuals from the Muokang quarter, the conflict has purportedly devolved into the Fon issuing outright threats, such as a supposed text message that the Fon sent to Ba reading, “I will drink your blood.” As the feud escalated, Ba made the decision to relocate indefinitely to Silver Spring, Maryland and so any actions that he takes now are made from a distance through locals acting on his behalf. The regional Northwest administration has been unwilling to get involved in the conflict, and so now the Fon and Ba are using new means to try to capture or solidify power. Key tools in this battle are the two museums.

A museum located in the palace would not be expected to address this history of divisiveness. More than being understandable, it is to be expected. Along the walls of the Babungo Museum are a series of large plaques that explain the pieces found in the museum and give brief overviews of various themes related to religion, the arts, and history. Whenever Ba is mentioned, he is referred to as the “first assistant” to the Fon. Discussions of other organizations in the kingdom, including the tifwan, are explained in connection to the Fon and suggest that he is indispensable to the group because he selects its members or its existence is directly related to him, such as providing a nominal check to his power.

190 Personal communication, Lyzette Bihai, 2/8/13.
191 While many people told me about this text message, people were never able to show it to me, saying that Ba had forwarded it to them but they no longer had it citing problems with their phones.
A museum tour is not complete without a visit to the palace throne room where the image of the powerful Fon is further solidified. This throne room is a wonder-cabinet of objects (figs. 34 & 35), filled with a visually overwhelming number of masks, statues, thrones, and other paraphernalia. The Babungo throne room is presented to the visitor as an authentic Grassfields throne room, but it appears to be a contrived space where the viewer is intended to assume that this space is representative of the authentic, pre-colonial throne room. The viewer is able to get close to objects that are somewhat open to the elements and encrusted in a layer of dust. The room conveys a sense of abundance, uniqueness, and the exotic that was so common in the Enlightenment Kunst- und Wunderkammern.\textsuperscript{192} The throne room provides the perfect exoticized tableau of Grassfields culture. Curators and signage offer context for objects throughout the museum, but visitors are left to wander through the throne room with little to no explanation of what they are seeing. The lack of information offered has the effect of reinforcing everything that is claimed in the museum, namely that one is in the presence of a powerful Fon who controls the art and ritual life of the kingdom. Much as European Wunderkammern of the Enlightenment were intended to show the magnificence of the individual who constructed it,\textsuperscript{193} the visual abundance of objects in the Babungo palace does exactly that for the Fon.

After reading the text and hearing from tour guides of the museum and the palace, the visitor comes away with a clear image of kingship in Babungo, all of which is subtly and non-verbally reinforced in a few simple ways; dominant among them is the location of the museum, in the palace rather than in the central village market or on the main road, which sets the tone. It is through all of these factors, from where the museum is located to the way the role of the Fon is

\textsuperscript{193} Ibid. 45.
portrayed in the museum that the palace manages to further solidify the increasingly powerful role of the Fon that has evolved since the beginning of the colonial period. While the Fon has already wrested a great deal of power from Ba over the last century, he is using the museum to shore up his position publically and make it increasingly difficult for Ba to dispute the Fon’s claims to power.

**Babungo Museum and Palace: The Preeminent Artist Fon**

Ian Fowler has argued that in the modern nation state regional powers have constructed a place for themselves by using the Western conceptions of local, indigenous identity as “traditional identity,” which allows them to be modern while appearing traditional.194 This is something that the Fon of Mankon directly addresses with regard to his COE museum, stating, “The Mankon Museum is testimony to the fact that the best way of consolidating our traditions is to make them modern, and that our modernity only makes sense to the extent that it is firmly grounded in our traditions.”195 Approaching tradition and modernity in very much the same way, the Babungo Museum situates itself neatly within this structure of tradition in the modern state, and by placing it in the palace validates the palace’s claims of traditional dominance. The Babungo Museum does more than legitimate the power held by the man currently occupying the role of Fon in that it portrays the power of the Fon as traditional or historical. Similarly, the Fon presents his personal commitment to the arts as one in a long line of sculptor kings, and he claims the mantle of modernity through his support of the museum project. Both of these qualities make the Fon and the palace attractive beacons for international development projects.

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Part of the feud between the Fon and Ba has always been financial, and the high profile of the Babungo Museum has given the Fon prestige and access to capital that Ba cannot match.

Nearly every work in the museum comes from the palace and many are attributed to the Fon as the artist. In fact, with the exception of one mask, the provenance of all of the art is the palace of the Fon, and many works are attributed to the hand of the Fon. This overshadows the roles of most local artists, any form of trade or movement of goods, and the use of traditional arts by regulatory societies in the narrative of the museum. The prevailing narrative is of an elite art-producing kingdom known for high quality carving, where all things artistic and cultural emanate from the Fon and the palace. Notué comments on this in the introduction to the catalogue, stating “the works made by the sculptor kings of Babungo occupy most of the catalogue, but even when the monarchs did not sculpt themselves, they sometimes claimed the paternity of the works of power, as any creation in Babungo could only come from the Fon in person.” Yet the narrative of the sculptor kings, much as that of the strong, unimpeachable Fon, is a recent construct that has taken shape over the reigns of the past three Fons in order to strengthen the position of the kingdom regionally and provide the Fons with greater financial resources.

The depiction of Babungo as a kingdom of fine carvers with a long lineage of sculptor kings was made possible by the upheavals that occurred in the region at the time of first contact with Germans in 1889. It cannot be overstated how much Grassfields art and culture has shifted since the arrival of Germans to the region. A primary cause of these shifts was the basic lack of understanding of indigenous cultures by the Germans. The Germans who first arrived made assumptions about Grassfields culture and kingdoms based upon European conceptions of art and kingship that have had a lasting impact on the way that scholars have since approached the

196 Notué and Triaca, Babungo: Treasures of the Sculptor Kings in Cameroon. 19.
region. It is wholly unsurprising that the Germans were at a loss to fully comprehend the incredible complexity of Grassfields culture and instead saw something akin to European ideas about monarchical rule. Grassfields kingdoms were then, and are now, complex systems that have various seats of power. The Fons co-exist with regulatory societies of varying power and importance, princes’ associations, guilds, and royal retainers. British reports indicate that even into the late 1920s the colonial administration was at a loss to understand the traditional political structure that exerted power behind the stool of the Fon. One result of this lack of understanding of the complexities of traditional political structures is that the colonial administration and early explorers did not see the incredible range and diversity of cultural, economic, and political activity in the region.

Given this frame of reference, it is no surprise that early explorers also misunderstood what they were seeing when it came to Grassfields art production. Geary has examined the collection practices of Germans in Cameroon around the turn of the 20th century, and she has noted that these explorers were much less interested in researching art than in collecting it in great quantities. As German colonial-era explorers came to palaces looking for art to send home, palaces were happy to oblige the Germans by bringing in local and non-local carvers to supply the growing demand. As such, while the variety of art objects that Germans initially found in the Grassfields palaces were likely owned by a range of traditional bodies such as regulatory societies, quarter chiefs, and the Fon, and they were the result of generations of trade

199 For more information on German collecting practices in the Grassfields see: Geary 1988.
200 Fowler, "Tribal and Palatine Arts of the Cameroon Grassfields: Elements for a 'Traditional' Regional Identity." 70-1.
and warfare, the Fons recognized the demand for art objects and created new centers of production that fed into the assumptions of the Germans and also supplied their ravenous demands for more objects to send home. This trend benefited the palace’s finances and reputation, and it allowed the Babungo Museum to emphasize it as an important piece of its traditional culture.

While the palaces of kings were being stripped of their masks, carvings, architectural decorations, beadwork, and metalwork no one seemed to question where, specifically, these objects had come from, and simply accepted their origin as “Grassfields.” Yet to call all of these varieties of art “Grassfields art” is to miss the diversity and specificity of art production in the region and much of what the Germans sent home thinking it was from a single Grassfields kingdom, was almost certainly from a wide variety of surrounding kingdoms.201 Most kingdoms were locally known for particular forms of artistic production. Babungo was known for its metalwork, Babessi for ceramics, and Oku for woodcarving, to name only a few.202 Yet these centers of specific artistic production were largely whitewashed in the canon by the early collecting practices in the region, and so the objects of all types became associated with the palaces and are now widely considered to be palace arts.203 The Babungo palace used this generalizing trend to its benefit by taking the opportunity to adopt a new and more prestigious artistic specialty and refocusing the majority of artistic practice away from forges, which were not connected to the palace, to wood carving taking place in the palace itself. The Babungo Museum installations promote this recent shift to the level of historical truth.

201 Ibid. 73.
202 Ibid. 68.
203 Ibid. 69. Fowler also laments how art historians have gone on to refer to these arts as royal arts without question for generations.
The arts of the Grassfields are still widely thought of in broad and non-specific terms and regional specificity is frequently lost in the literature, but the museum in Babungo balks this trend by laying claim to a history of woodworking. Historically, the Babungo kingdom has been known for its great metalworking technology and artistry, predominantly iron working. In spite of this, the museum collection in the Babungo palace is branded as the “treasures of the sculptor kings in Cameroon.” Many of the works in the museum are attributed to past kings and the current king who claims to be a carver himself. In the 2006 catalogue to the museum collection Jean-Paul Notué notes, “the art of Babungo is doubly royal: on the one hand, it is made to reinforce the prestige of the Fon, royalty and the kingdom; on the other, it is royal like everything that is made or emerges from the very strength of the Fon, even by delegation, and this is particularly so for the major works.” However, the carving heritage that the museum and its catalogue highlight is not necessarily so old. The museum catalogue makes reference to unattributed wooden sculpture in the royal collection dating back to the seventeenth century and earlier, but there is no clear indication that these pieces were actually produced in Babungo. In Babungo today it is widely known that the Fon has a workshop of carvers from Oku, a kingdom historically known for its skilled wood carving, producing a wide range of wooden objects for the palace.

Furthermore, Ian Fowler has commented that over the course of his 30 years of fieldwork, he has seen the Fon bring in carvers from another kingdom to teach the princes how to carve; and frequently the Fon would simply put some finishing touches on the works in order to

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204 Notué and Triaca, Babungo: Treasures of the Sculptor Kings in Cameroon. 18.
205 Ibid. 42.
claim them as his own.\textsuperscript{206} It is assumed that he uses these carvings for a range of purposes, namely, as gifts, for ceremonial purposes, and to sell. Historically accurate or not, the Babungo Museum makes an interesting attempt to distinguish itself by moving against the tide of colonial era generalization and make a name for itself in a cultural and art historical context by emphasizing a particular cultural production for which it can and should be known.

It appears likely that the adoption of woodworking by the kingdom was a calculated move, likely during the reign of Sangge. Ownership of wooden sculpture is considered to be an absolutely essential indicator of privilege and power in the Grassfields for any Fon or individual of high status. For at least the last two hundred years, masks, figurative sculpture, and thrones have been the clearest visual indicators of powerful Fons, and as such, Grassfields leaders looking to trumpet their prosperity or legitimize their rule have brought woodworking traditions to their kingdoms in order to bolster their position.\textsuperscript{207} Christraud Geary, in her article on the Bali-Nyonga kingdom, provides an excellent example of this strategy. The Bali-Nyonga moved into the Grassfields in the nineteenth century, and in order to legitimate their rule they embraced woodworking among other things.\textsuperscript{208} As Geary points out, their ruler, Garega I, took up carving to strengthen his rule, as local carving skills and creativity were viewed as incredibly positive attributes in a leader.\textsuperscript{209} It is probable that the Fons of Babungo took up carving for precisely the same reasons.\textsuperscript{210}

\textsuperscript{206} Fowler, "Tribal and Palatine Arts of the Cameroon Grassfields: Elements for a 'Traditional' Regional Identity." 71.
\textsuperscript{208} Ibid. 18.
\textsuperscript{209} Ibid. 21-2.
\textsuperscript{210} This trend is wide spread throughout the Grassfields where Fon Yu of Kom, chief Ase Puonchu of Babanki-Tungo, and Fon Garega I of Bali-Nyonga were all known as accomplished carvers. Ibid. 22.
The museum plays an important role today in distinguishing the kingdom of Babungo as a high quality art production center in the Grassfields. While the Fon of Babungo is not considered among the most powerful Fons in the region, having a museum has distinguished him in a way that has clearly given him great access to power and development funds. The museum, paired with the annual festival, the *nikai*, where nearly every object in the museum is brought into the courtyard of the palace and used, has brought incredible prestige to the kingdom. During the 2012 annual festival, the minister of culture, Ama Tutu Muna, visited Babungo to return a valuable work of art to the Fon. During that same *nikai* the Fon opened a multimedia center located next to the museum that was funded by the government of the Netherlands. During the 2013 *nikai* the Fon inaugurated a mosque at the entrance to the palace that had been donated by the Turkish government. While Babungo has been holding the *nikai* annually for decades, it seems that the visibility derived from the museum has led to the increase in resources flowing in to the kingdom and the palace.

*Ba’s Response*

The Northwest government administration is reluctant to intervene to bring the Fon and *Ba* into better accord, since they recognize that this feud is a traditional matter rather than an administrative one. Consequently, the Fon and *Ba* have also begun to approach their feud in a new way. If the local government is reluctant to get involved, then the two parties are seeking power through control over the cultural heritage of the kingdom, which they are both going about through two intertwined paths. Firstly, there is ownership over the narrative of the founding of the kingdom, and secondly, there is control over tourists and the material culture of Babungo, and both of these goals can be pursued through the creation of museums.

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211 Nformi, "Babungo Traditional Authorities Clash".
Accordingly, the current *Ba* decided to establish his own museum in order to display cultural objects and tell the history of the political structure of the kingdom from another perspective. Where the Babungo Museum uses art to bolster the current position of the Fon, the Muokang Palace Museum of Vengo Heritage opened in 2013 advances the *Ba's* own narrative of Babungo heritage. Carol Duncan has observed that “what we see and do not see in the art museum – and on what terms and by whose authority we do or do not see it – is closely linked to larger questions about who constitutes the community and who defines its identity.” The narrative of the Babungo Museum indicates that, by the authority of the Fon, this museum lays out the heritage of all people of the kingdom. At the Muokang Palace Museum *Ba* gives himself the authority to share an alternative history of the kingdom and thereby reclaim some of the powers he has lost. For *Ba* to succeed in these goals it is imperative that the entire kingdom takes up his version of history. In order to block that possibility, the Fon treats the Babungo Museums as the official narrative. That being the case, in the eyes of the palace, one determining factor for being a member of the Babungo community is ascribing to the history, memory, and heritage that is displayed in the Babungo Museum, while this does not hold true for people in Muokang.

When I asked a group of men from *Ba*’s quarter if they felt that the Babungo Museum represented them, they were wary. They were clear that the museum does not represent their version of history, but they felt it should not be expected to do so because it is mainly a palace museum. They generally see no point arguing with the palace on this topic since in the past people affiliated with the Muokang palace have attempted to correct some of what they deem false in the Babungo Museum and their comments to the curator were ignored. They recognize

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that if they were to speak up and openly argue with the palace, it would be seen as a provocation that could escalate. While they may have different versions of history, this does not change the fact that the Fon is still their king and the objects displayed in the museum are irrefutably a part of their own history as well. As such, while people from Muokang are aware of the fact that their version of history is somewhat different from the rest of the kingdom, they do not see this as a barrier to inclusion in the Babungo community. For the most part, it is Ba, whose power is directly undermined who has the most to object to in the Babungo Museum.

It is unsurprising then that Ba has taken it upon himself to build his own museum. He insists that it is not meant to compete with the Babungo Museum, but will do precisely that. Ba’s museum is located in his palace in the quarter of Muokang. While it is currently being housed in an unused community hall within his palace compound, Ba intends in the near future to move the museum into a new building that will be connected to his newly constructed palace. This will put Ba’s museum in even closer proximity to two of the most important traditional landmarks in the kingdom, the oldest vernacular building in the Babungo kingdom, the nchusa, a bamboo and thatch meeting house and storehouse (fig. 36), as well as the tomb of Mange (fig. 37), mother to the first Fon and Ba of the Babungo kingdom—all indicators of Ba's longstanding political power in the kingdom.

The objects in the Muokang Palace Museum are displayed around the walls of the community hall located in Ba’s palace compound. The inaugural tour of the museum in 2013 began with a long row of stools for various titleholders (fig. 38), suggesting an incredibly complex system of hierarchy in the kingdom. The stools on display did not appear to be old and were not displayed as art per say, but rather as elements of material culture, less important for

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213 Personal communication, Anonymous 3/10/13.
their aesthetics than for their illustrative power. Dotted throughout the museum are examples of local products of the region, such as clay powder, slag from traditional modes of metal production, and beeswax (fig. 39). At the end of the line of stools is a reproduction of a room with a wooden throne, small bench, gourds for palm wine, etc., all meant to be an example of the type of setting where the Ba would sit and meet with people (fig. 40). To the left of this is the focal point of the museum, a raised dais with two ornamental thrones (figs. 41 & 42) that are characterized as “Ba’s thrones.” It is clear that these thrones are not from Babungo, and one of Ba’s wives indicated that they were purchased from a friend and chief from the Western Region. These are not traditional Babungo thrones and in fact one appears to be loosely based on the famous thrones of king Njoya. The tour continues with objects dedicated to hunting, music, and other pastimes of Babungo people (fig. 43). There is no mention of the Fon, and instead the narrative focuses on Ba and his traditional/historical role in the power hierarchy as well as Babungo daily life. In the Muokang Palace Museum the goal is not displaying high quality objects, providing names of artists, calling attention to objects still used for traditional festivals, or making statements about the purported authenticity, quality, rarity, or value of the objects. The real emphasis is on the narrative that these objects tell since the narrative serves the Ba.

The final wall of the Muokang Palace Museum is where Ba’s version of Babungo’s origin story is thoroughly explored. Along this wall is a series of statues said to represent the original group of immigrants who, in as early as the thirteenth century, came to Babungo and founded the current dynasty (figs. 44, 45, & 46). The curator takes the visitor down the line of figures, points out their place in the story, and ultimately to the founding of Babungo, according to the Muokang Palace.
The Babungo origin story varies widely from quarter to quarter. That being the case, there are certain elements that are consistent. I will focus on the Babungo origin stories that are told in the palace quarter and Muokang, since both are similar, but they emphasize different aspects. First, there is the origin story that you will hear in the palace quarter, Fintang, which was also historically the blacksmiths’ quarter. I turn here to the museum catalogue for the full palace version of the story, which follows.\(^{214}\) Due to wars in the Mbam valley, a group of emigrants moved south and these emigrants consisted of a man, Tifuan, a slave, Songho, three other followers, Nswi, Teh, and Ndiwah, and a family, the mother, Mange, and her four children, daughter Fanyi, and three sons, Fuanje, Ba, and Sangge. When they left their home of Ndobo they settled in Forghai near a waterfall. The group decided to move again and this time the god Ngesekwa gave them a black sheep and told them to follow the sheep until the sheep died. When it died, they were supposed to bury it and settle there. As they traveled, the oldest son, Fuanje, tired and decided to stop in a place called Mbenje. It should be noted that today his descendants are quarter-chiefs in Mbenje, heads of the counsel of seven, and they represent the ngouumba society, which is the most powerful regulatory society in the kingdom. Returning now to the story, the group continued to travel and the sheep ultimately died in Ngineh, where they settled with Tifuan identified as the king. Mange’s sons thought it unfair that an only child should be the king, and so the brothers tricked Tifuan into leaving home one day and while he was out, the brothers stole the leopard skin from Tifuan’s bed since it is the symbol of his power. When Tifuan returned to find his leopard skin gone, he went to the brothers and found Sangge sitting on the leopard’s skin surrounded by his brothers who had chosen him to be Fon. Sangge’s

\(^{214}\) Notué and Triaca, *Babungo: Treasures of the Sculptor Kings in Cameroon*. 21-24. This is a much abbreviated version of this story, and while the version in the catalogue is full of names and details, it is unlikely that most Babungo people would be able to recount the story in this amount of detail.
brother, *Ba*, decided to go off on his own and settled in another quarter, “and, as he was the eldest of Mange’s children who had got that far,”\(^{215}\) he took their mother with him. The palace version of the story concludes by stating that today *Ba* titleholders are considered the first assistant of the Fon.\(^ {216}\)

In a slightly different take on the story, there is the version told in the palace of the neighboring quarter of Muokang. It begins the same, with a group of Tikari people, fleeing war, following a goat, and coming to Mbenje. The oldest son decides to stop in Mbenje and build his home there, and at this point, the stories begin to diverge. According to members of the palace in Muokang, the group travels to Ngune – Lower Muokang where the goat dies and the group settles. Tifuan and Songho decide to go out and live in other quarters and start their own families. Sangge also decides to continue to travel, but to keep the family together and stop Sangge from leaving the area, *Ba* and Fuanje decide to name their youngest brother the Fon. It was their hope that by naming him Fon, he would settle down, become less wild, and stay with the family. While at the Muokang Palace Museum, the guides emphasize that the two brothers ruled together, with Sangge, the Fon, showing proper deference to his older brother, *Ba*. After some years Mange, who had gone to live in the palace with her youngest son, came to visit her second son *Ba*, and begged him to take her into his home. Sangge’s wives had treated her poorly, her legs were covered in chiggers and her daughters-in-law were unwilling to help her. So *Ba* took his mother in and his wives bathed her and treated her with the respect that she was due. Finally, as she was about to die, she told *Ba* that he was the true inheritor of her power. She commanded him to bury her in his compound so that everyone would know that she favored

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\(^{215}\) Ibid. 23-4.

him. He was then to wait three days before telling his brothers so there would be no way that they could take her body from his compound. *Ba* did as she asked and so his descendants lead the regulatory society and they are the only ones with the power to crown a new king.

The Muokang Palace Museum did not use objects to support the claims made by the guides, and instead they pointed to architectural elements of the palace and the scholarship of Ian Fowler. Visitors are invited to enter the *nchusa*, which is characterized as both a meeting place for *Ba* and his titleholders and a storehouse for ritual objects. The *nchusa* provides further support to *Ba*’s claims to power, in that such storerooms are generally only found in palaces of the Grassfields, with the Muokang *nchusa* being one of only three remaining in the region, making this an important visual reminder of the power that this palace once had. Leaving the *nchusa* the visitor is shown the outside of the tomb belonging to Mange and also a smaller tomb to the side of it for the goat that the brothers followed. The tomb of Mange, which stands in the center of the compound, acts as a testament to Mange’s support of her second son. *Ba*’s possession of this tomb gives him access to the most tangible link to the history of the founding of the kingdom, and it is decidedly not in the possession of the Fon. The guides point out small places where various offerings are made in the compound, a sacred forest that extends behind the palace, and they also point out that circumambulating Mange’s tomb is prohibited. It is clearly vexing to the Fon that *Ba*’s compound contains the tomb of the mother to the first Fon, as well as the oldest traditional structure in the kingdom. While in the village, I heard rumors that the Fon had threatened to burn the *nchusa* to the ground, and according to informants in the Muokang quarter, men have attempted to steal Mange’s skull from her tomb on the Fon’s behalf and have

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217 The other two structures are in Bafut and Mankon where they are called *achum.*
been thwarted every time.\textsuperscript{218} Historically, palaces construct shrines in order to worship the skulls of their ancestors,\textsuperscript{219} making offerings to the skulls as they were thought to embody the individual after death. These skulls are still thought to have agency and the ability to aid or create trouble for the living.\textsuperscript{220} As such, the palace’s inability to take the skull is a clear indication Mange wishes her skull to remain in Ba’s compound and another indicator of her devotion to Ba. When viewed as a unit, these structures substantiate the elements of the Muokang quarter’s version of the Babungo origin story and the tour guides’ claims that Ba once had more power than that of a simple quarter chief.

Ba’s version of the origin story is only one piece of evidence that he uses to try to regain his position in Babungo political society, and his other tool is the scholarship that has been produced about the political structure of Babungo. Ian Fowler has published extensively on the history of blacksmithing in the kingdom, the arts of the Grassfields region, and changes in the political structure of Babungo over the past 125 years. Along with the many academics who have read his work on the shifting political dynamics of Babungo, the current Ba and founder of the second museum in Babungo is a devoted student of this literature. As Fowler has sought to document and understand the history of the kingdom, leaders in Muokang have embraced his work as supportive of their efforts to influence the political structure of the kingdom. Ba explicitly cites Fowler’s article, “African Sacred Kings: Expectations and Performance in the Cameroon Grassfields,” as a major influence on how he approaches the Babungo political

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[218] Personal communication, Anonymous 3/10/13.
\item[220] Hermann Gufler, "Witchcraft Beliefs among the Yamba (Cameroon)," \textit{Anthropos} 94, no. 1/3. (1999). 191.
\end{enumerate}
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structure today. While Fowler’s work is clearly an influence on *Ba*, it should also be emphasized that *Ba* claims he was raised with this knowledge under his father’s tutelage. His father, the previous *Ba*, sent him to university to study public law with the hope of using his degree to advocate for peacefully returning the local political structure to where it was during pre-colonial times.

*Ba* uses Fowler’s scholarship somewhat selectively to enhance his own position, and as *Ba* commented in an email to me, he wishes to “restore the Babungo history as it was before the Germans distorted it, especially now that we are no more colonized.” Opening a museum allows *Ba* to outline his own version of history, which he argues was fundamentally corrupted by the German colonial administration. While Fowler cites the Germans as one force in the increased political authority of the Babungo Fons, he places most of the responsibility for that shift with the Fons. *Ba* has selected what is most useful to his cause from Fowler’s work, and his emphasis on German responsibility clearly overlooks the power of Fons. It is *Ba*’s aim that students, locals and outsiders will visit his museum and internalize his version of history and thereby create a population with a very different understanding of the political history than the Babungo palace is disseminating.

By creating a museum of his own in his palace, *Ba* is attempting to steal the Fon’s symbols of power much as his ancestors did with the leopard skin in the Babungo origin story. *Ba* has weakened the Fon’s position by building his own museum as he is no longer the only individual in the kingdom who can show himself to be modern, while still retaining traditional values. This is not the only time that *Ba* has attempted to co-opt the Fon’s symbols of power, as he has also fashioned an ornate throne room for himself in his home in Maryland. Informants

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221 Personal communication, Ba Bajon Bihai III, 7/19/13.
told me that when the Fon saw Ba’s Maryland throne room he was incensed that Ba was attempting to portray himself as a king. The museum seems to be a new avenue for the fight to claim and reclaim power between these two men in Babungo, but the tactics themselves are as old as the kingdom itself.

**Inventing Tradition and Creating Communities**

Both of the museums in Babungo function to create groups of insiders and outsiders in the two communities where they are situated. These museums are places where globalization enters the community, but they are also where the rites of passage, the largely phenomenological elements of citizenship in these communities, are laid out and codified. In telling their respective histories, each museum creates a systematized set of local knowledge, and by extension it also creates a population of insiders and outsiders. There are practical repercussions in being cast as outsiders in the larger community of kingdom and, in this case, the rites of passage are necessary to integrate local subjects into the kingdom have been withheld from the members of Muokang.

Muokang historically led the procession of all members of the *ngoumba* society into the dance space during the annual *nikai* festival. Today, Moukang does not take part in this festival at all, and members of the *Ba’s* retinue remain at his palace compound to guard it. While barring their participation in this annual rite of passage means that the people of Muokang are not considered equal with the other subjects of the kingdom, at the same time it promotes their own sense of locality as outsiders to the centralized palace community.

When classifying groups of people in the kingdom, both of the museums create the same group of outsiders. The Babungo Museum largely leaves *Ba* out of the historical record and by extension denies the proper elevated position due to the members of *Ba’s* quarter. Furthermore, over twenty of the objects on display in the Babungo Museum are used in the annual *nikai,*
which is an indication that the palace considers the festival from which Muokang is excluded to be the pre-eminent Babungo tradition and a primary marker of Babungo community involvement. The museum in the Muokang quarter posits the same group of outsiders, but their perspective is through a history of persecution and a desire to right the wrongs of history. Both of the museums underline their perspectives on history through their recounting of the origin story of Babungo. The Babungo Museum’s telling of the story focuses on the unanimous designation of the youngest brother as the powerful Fon, while Ba’s version emphasizes his important role in the kingdom as inheritor of his mother’s power, the namer of future Fons, and leader of the regulatory society.

With each of these stories, the Palace and the leaders in Muokang attempt to create local knowledge and through this, solidify local subjects and local neighborhoods. Ascribing to either story indicates to which locality a Babungo individual belongs. Yet for some in the Muokang quarter, one must also be willing to stand behind the locality and assert their defiant position as outsiders. As it was expressed to me, members of Muokang are tired of the persecution from the Babungo Palace and majority. They pay higher water prices, have reduced access to resources in the kingdom, and are largely ostracized from traditional institutions and traditional modes of power.

**Conclusion**

The Babungo Museum is effective in setting out a canon of Babungo art that can easily find a place within the larger canon of African art. The Muokang Palace Museum lacks such a collection but tells a story of the people of Babungo in a way that appears incontrovertible. Whereas the juxtaposition of the art in the throne room with the objects in the Babungo Museum highlights the precious quality and fine aesthetics of the museum objects, the comparison
between the narrative of the objects in the Muokang Palace Museum and the historic architectural structures creates a tangible heritage for the whole of the kingdom.

Since the Fon became the dominant authority in Babungo, he and the *Ba* have seen the value in promoting their respective versions of the Babungo kingdom origin story. The two museums are reflections of the ways that these two parties wish others to view the history and heritage of the kingdom. Both museums were shaped by the history of this struggle, and they have also become a part of the continuing feud. Both leaders recognize the power that exists in ownership over the narrative of the kingdom’s history, and both use that value to control tourist dollars, access to scholars, reporters, and NGOs that come to the region, all of which are accessed through the museum. The narrative of authoritative power that the Fon is perpetuating brings significant resources to his palace, with the recent opening of a multimedia center, a new mosque, and multiple visits from UNESCO representatives. Given the youth of *Ba*’s museum, he has yet to see if it will benefit his cause in any way, and for now he continues to offer free admission, tours to local schools, and promotion of his museum at local tourist attractions and hotels. Regardless of whether *Ba*’s museum makes it possible for him to regain some of his historical authority, both museums are breathing new life into this feud as they attract new audiences for the Fon and *Ba* to circulate their respective narratives.

Museums in the Grassfields function on multiple political levels in the region. They play a role in politics from the local level to an international level where they act as beacons for countries looking to invest development dollars in progressive kingdoms. These museums are maintaining the shifts in local political structures that were begun during the colonial period, and they provide the Fons with the means to continue augmenting their power through opportunities to insert their art into the growing canon of Grassfields art, codify their local histories and origin
stories in ways that are beneficial to the current rulers, and monopolize the cultural resources of the kingdom. While neither museum examined in this chapter is a particularly vibrant institution and they are not regularly visited or highly trafficked sites, they are potent symbols that are well understood by the community.

Museums in the Grassfields have, in many ways, assumed the role that the arts they house once played in the kingdom. Museums are indicators of trade, wealth, and power, and what they house indicates prestige for the kingdom. Both of these museums in Babungo signify financial and cultural power, and local community members do not need to enter the museums to know what they contain or what they say. These are tourist sites that display authentic works of art, but they are also buildings that connote prestige, much like the traditional storehouses found in many Grassfields kingdoms, and they indicate wealth and power in ways that arts always have in the Grassfields region.
Epilogue: A Final Perspective Based on a Failed Museum

In this dissertation I have examined the multilayered functionality of the four palace museums in Bafut, Babungo, Mankon, and Baham. I have focused on who benefits from them, who they represent, how they are used locally, how they are perceived by various populations, and how objects are transformed in the museum space. All of these topics demonstrate the power of museums and the many ways they can re-write histories and be read in diverse ways by myriad constituencies according to the vicissitudes of local-level politics. At the same time, cases can be made for the shortcomings of Grassfields palace museums. The location of the palace museums prevents locals from visiting, while the museum space promotes a simplified, hegemonic narrative of kingdom history, and the palaces are using the museums as weapons and sources of income rather than as tools to bring the kingdom together. Yet, when these palace museums are compared to another local museum, the defunct Bamenda Provincial Museum (fig. 47) that is in every way their opposite, the surprising functionality of the palace museums begins to emerge.

The Bamenda Provincial Museum came into existence and closed before the current museums in Baham, Babungo, Mankon, and Bafut were created, and today the collection resides in a storeroom in the Ministry of Arts and Culture. It stands as an important precursor and contrast to today’s Anglophone Grassfields museums, in part because the Bamenda Provincial Museum was situated in the center of Bamenda unlike the rural palace museums. The Bamenda Provincial Museum was a government-sponsored museum, its collection comprised objects from the entire Anglophone Grassfields, and it did not loan objects other than in cases when they were requested for state-sponsored cultural displays.
The idea of building a museum in the city of Bamenda, the most populous and accessible city in the art-producing region of the Anglophone Grassfields, began with a colonial administrator, M.D.W. Jeffreys. In 1936, Jeffreys made an initial donation of geological and ethnographic objects to the colonial administration in the hopes of starting a museum project.\(^{222}\) While this collection is now lost his idea gained acceptance and in 1959 Robert Dick-Read opened the Provincial Museum in the center of Bamenda at the behest of Bernard Fagg who was the Director of Antiquities for the Nigerian Government.\(^{223}\) The Provincial Museum was given prime placement in the middle section of the main thoroughfare of the city, Commercial Avenue.

Dick-Read built a collection in a matter of months, as he describes in his book *Sanamu: Adventures in Search of African Art*, since he was able to collect a majority of the objects from the local Fons. He did not want to strip bare the royal collections, but he proudly states that he negotiated tirelessly for the objects that he wanted in the collection.\(^{224}\) Much like the COE project managers, Dick-Read viewed his project as an effort to preserve the local heritage for future generations. However, Dick-Read was not an expert in the arts of the Grassfields region and one result of his lack of local knowledge were notable lacunae in the collection, such as works from the major carving centers of Oku, Kom and Nso. His installation was also a bizarre home interior that integrated works from a variety of kingdoms without the slightest attempt to show the differences between their cultures or artistic traditions.\(^ {225}\) The initial layout of the

\(^{223}\) Horner, "The Assumption of Tradition: Creating, Collecting, and Conserving Cultural Artifacts in the Cameroon Grassfields (West Africa)." 238.
\(^{225}\) Horner, "The Assumption of Tradition: Creating, Collecting, and Conserving Cultural Artifacts in the Cameroon Grassfields (West Africa)." 239.
museum resulted in a narrative of Grassfields art that was ahistorical, generalizing, and secularizing of the work.

After the tenure of Robert Dick-Read the museum continued to grow and change. Paul and Clara Gebauer, well-known missionaries who spent decades in the Northwest region of Cameroon, donated to the collection, and local Fons continued to sell objects to the museum. Peace Corp volunteers Craig and Merry Kinzelman took over the museum with the support of a local staff from 1971-1974. It was during the years that the Kinzelmans ran the museum that it finally became an institution that truly represented the artistic production of the Grassfields. The Kinzelmans catalogued the entire collection, something that had never been done, and they used funding from Cameroonian and American sources to expand the collection to include works from previously under-represented kingdoms and objects from everyday life. It was also at this time that Roy Sieber was hired to consult on the museum’s design and he created the thematically driven layout that remained until the museum closed. After the Kinzelmans left the museum was run exclusively by a local staff under the guidance of Mr. Francis Ndamukong.

In 1994 the Bamenda City Council decided to close the museum. One half of the Bamenda Provincial Museum was a library, and in the early 1990s the British Library Council came to Bamenda to do a three-day training in the library to help the librarians properly utilize the resources that they already had at hand. As a result of this training, the British Library Council decided to offer 10,000 books to the library to expand their collection, and the city council eagerly accepted the donation and informed the museum that they would have to close. In speaking with Mr. Tazung, the President of the City Council at the time of the museum’s closure in 1994, he claims that he polled people in Bamenda regarding whether they would rather

226 Personal communication, Craig Kinzelman 1/16/13.
have a museum or a library, and 80% said that they wanted a library. There is no record of such a poll, but it does seem likely that the people of Bamenda would have chosen a library over a museum. When you talk to people today who have grown up in Bamenda, they say they have never heard of the Bamenda Provincial. The museum was a place for tourists, researchers, and dignitaries, rather than the local population.

After the museum closed, the objects were packed into a room next to the library and left there for a decade, until 2004 when President Paul Biya came to visit Bamenda. Days before his arrival the Ministry of Arts and Culture was informed that the city needed that building for the president’s visit, and so they moved everything to their ministry building across the city. Ministry workers described a horribly chaotic two days in which objects were thrown into a truck and then just piled in a room (fig. 48). According to ministry workers, dozens of objects were stolen, lost, and damaged in the move. By the time that I visited the Ministry of Arts and Culture building another decade had nearly passed and at that point, they no longer had the key to the room where the objects were stored. Of course, it did not really matter because renovations had been undertaken in the interim that actually obstructed the keyhole.

The history of the failed Bamenda Provincial Museum serves as a contrast to the palace museums and highlights the ways in which today’s Grassfields museums are successfully functioning within the parameters of the local museum culture. During my research I spoke with many people who complained about the location of the palace museums, and many believed that the museums should be in a neutral location like Bamenda where people could visit freely. While this is a legitimate complaint, locating the museum in the local administrative center would necessitate that the museum represent more than just the single kingdom, and as a regional museum it would need to transcend ethnicity and promote a sense of regionalism. This regional
emphasis was an important factor in the failure of the Bamenda Provincial Museum. When the driving allegiance becomes regionalism the ties are simply not as strong as when people are invested in their museum because of ethnic or cultural ties. As much as people I interviewed feel that the palaces are chopping the kingdom’s resources, leading to an ambivalence about palace museums, this feeling becomes magnified with respect to the local government. While the placement and administration of palace museums produce certain problems for the community members, the connection with the palace locates the museums within an institution that is at the bedrock of the local culture, central to the understanding of self. Any museum tied to the impersonal and frequently derided national government will not resonate with people at any level.

Ethnic ties are another reason that the palace museums have the potential for long-term functionality. Government museums like the Bamenda Provincial Museum are dependent upon people in government taking an interest in them and continuing their funding, and as a result they are always in a precarious position for funding because people in power change. The Provincial Museum remained open as long as it did because it was rejuvenated in the 1970s by an influx of funding from Solomon Tandeg Muna, a powerful politician from the Northwest Region who was Vice-President at the time. During the 1970s and 1980s the government showed renewed interest in the arts by pouring money into building a national collection, and they ran radio programs intended to sensitize people to the importance of holding onto their art and preserving it. Muna viewed the Provincial Museum from a national perspective as opposed to an ethnic one, and he saw the importance for the Anglophone region to have a museum in one of their primary administrative centers. As Horner points out, while Muna was a strong advocate for the region, he was too well connected in the central government to ever be accused of promoting
regionalism. As such, he was able to help his region improve the museum without inciting controversy. The museum acted as marker of cultural importance for the minority Anglophones, and it also highlighted the role of Bamenda as a cosmopolitan center in the Grassfields. However, there is a big difference between politicians and bureaucrats in governments and Fons in their kingdoms. The transience of power and funding is not an issue with palace museums, and so with the Grassfields kingdoms the Fon and the people will always be invested in promoting their own culture. The museums are now a central part of that mission.

Each of the kingdoms I studied use their palace museum as a tool. Each Fon used the museum to undermine local claims to power, and some of these claims were sizeable, such as the conflict in Babungo, while others were smaller, such as Mankon’s erasure of linage conflicts in their heritage narrative. As a regional museum, the Bamenda Provincial Museum did not function as a weapon. Multiple cultures were represented in the single space and represented many communities rather than a single kingdom, and so the Provincial Museum took on a role as a mediator in cultural disputes and an enforcer of federal laws on cultural objects. It was a place to resolve conflict rather than promote specific interests and needs, and this is a far less compelling reason to exist.

The Provincial Museum records show that the region had very strict policies regarding the export of antiquities, and in fact, all visitors leaving Cameroon at that time were required to have certificates of non-antiquity for the art objects they wanted to take home with them. Employees at the Ministry of Arts and Culture should be issuing these documents, but today these employees have never heard of a certificate of non-antiquity. Many objects in the Provincial Museum’s collection were obtained when Peace Corps volunteers or researchers were

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leaving the country and stopped at the museum to have the curators certify that they were not removing anything of antiquity status from the country.

The museum was also integral in resolving local police issues that involved art objects. In one case, the Princes’ Takumbeng Society of Nso attempted to gain local power by creating a series of powerful fujus that gave them enough power to challenge the role of the local kwifon society. Kwifon are the local regulatory society, they are the kingmakers. The kwifon appealed to the government divisional officer who ruled that no society should be more powerful than the kwifon, and that allowing the Takumbeng society to keep these masks would tear the community apart. As a solution, the masks were confiscated, and given to the museum instead. The cards also indicate that something was being done to curtail the illegal trade in antiquities. Four cards indicate their source as the Fon of Bamessing, through the Divisional Officer of Bamenda. The story is that, in 1960, the Fon of Bamessing traded the four items to the American anthropologist, Mr. Diamond, as an exchange for his car. Mr. Diamond was stopped at the Nigerian border and the items were found, and confiscated from him. As a supplemental note, the card indicates that the incident resulted in the Fon of Bamessing’s dethronement by his people.

The failure of the Bamenda Provincial Museum highlights an important difference between government-run museums and palace museums, as well as the importance of the local community having a stake in the museum. The Provincial Museum only had politicians and academics with a stake in its success. While studying the archive at the Ministry of Arts and Culture I found the original card catalogue for the Bamenda Provincial Museum, and this card catalogue represents an incredible repository of information. It documents the range of art objects produced in the Northwest Region, and by the time the museum closed it had an impressive range of objects from across the region with detailed descriptions of who made it,
when, how it was used, and in what context it would have been used. The cards include comments from Roy Sieber, Igor Kopytoff, Paul Gebauer, and Jean-Pierre Warnier, some of the most important scholars to work in the Grassfields. This collection drew researchers from around the world, but they could not help the Bamenda Provincial Museum survive with no local support and changing political leadership.

The Grassfields palace museums inspire everyone from the palace residents to locals who feel that they have a stake in their museum. This is primarily accomplished because the museum allows the kingdom to retain ownership of its own culture. Many Fons sold and donated objects to the Bamenda Provincial Museum, effectively handing their cultural objects over to the government. The palace museums allow local objects to remain local and this is something that most in the kingdom feel strongly about maintaining. The COE museums also required local involvement to build the museum structures, and this clearly gives the local population a feeling of investment in their museums. Regardless of how many complaints I heard about the museums and palaces in the Grassfields, the discussions about local museums highlighted that people thought about them, took an interest in them, had opinions about them, and felt engaged enough in their local museum to have an opinion at all. Political conflicts exist at every level from the local to the national, and at the same time there are social bonds at each level. I suspect that for some time to come local bonds and local identity will trump national bonds in Cameroon. The local palace museum should have substantial longevity as a living museum in Cameroon.
Figures

Map 1: Cameroon Grassfields

Figure 1: Royal Beaded Dance Headdress (*ma komngang*), Mankon Museum

Figure 2: Mask of Terror (*nko*), Mankon

Figure 3: Beaded royal headdress with leopard crest (*atua afungo*), Mankon Museum

Figure 4: Beaded male mask (atua ngang), Mankon Museum

Figure 5: Baham Museum, 2012
Figure 6: Bamum Sultan’s Palace, Foumban, 2011
Figure 7: Bafut Palace Museum, 2011
Figure 8: German Colonial Administration Building (*schloss*), Buea

Source: http://www.riverblindness.eu/about-programme-onchocercoses/history-of-cameroon/
Figure 9: Bafut Palace Museum, display of objects from the period of conflict between Bafut and German colonial forces, 2013
Figure 10: Drum, Baham, carved by Kouam *mafeu* Tchuendem and Kouam *meukam* Tabiegaing, carved between 1935 and 1954

Figure 11: Mbong Masquerade, Bafut, 2012
Figure 12: Mbong Masquerade, Bafut, 2012
Figure 13: Mbong Masquerade, Bafut, 2012
Figure 14: Anthropomorphic Wooden Mask (*atua akamø*), Mankon Museum

Figure 15: Hairy Dance Costume (*mínang*), Mankon Museum, 2012
Figure 16: Valentine Ndoh trying on the münang and atua akamø in the Mankon Museum, 2012
Figure 17: Suit of Armor (*ako 'sofo*), Mankon Museum

Figure 18: Commemorative statue of King Sangge II, Babungo, 2012
Figure 19: Statue of King Sake II, Babungo, 2012
Figure 20: Seated statue of King Sake II, Babungo, 2012
Figure 21: Commemorative statue throne of a retainer (*wenyi ntoh*), Babungo, 2012
Figure 22: Commemorative statue of a royal guardian (*ndifuan tambu*), Babungo, 2012
Figure 23: Commemorative statue throne of a royal guardian (*ndifuan tambu*), Babungo, 2012
Figure 24: Commemorative statue of a royal guardian (*ndifuan tambu*), Babungo, 2012
Figure 25: Fon Ndofoa Zofua III at the 2012 *nikai*, Babungo
Figure 26: Royal Elephant Tusk Trumpet (*yisau nsee*), Babungo

Figure 27: Royal Elephant Tusk Trumpet (*yisau nsee*), Babungo

Figure 28: Royal Stool (Keneh), Babungo

Figure 29: Royal Beaded Stool with Animal Motif (Keneh), Babungo

Figure 30: Royal Beaded Calabash with Cat Motif (*finteng-fintoh*), Babungo

Figure 31: Members of the *ngoumba* carrying objects during the *nikai* festival, Babungo, 2013
Figure 32: Members of the *ngoumba* carrying objects during the *nikai* festival, Babungo, 2012
Figure 33: Fon Ndofoa Zofua III of Babungo, 2012
Figure 34: Sub-chief *Ba* Bajon Bihai III wearing traditional garb seated in his Maryland living room surrounded by both the American and Cameroonian flags as well as a vast array of beaded and carved objects, photograph sent to the author in personal electronic communication
Figure 35: Babungo Palace Throne Room, 2012
Figure 36: Babungo Palace Throne Room, 2012
Figure 37: Nchusa, Muokang Palace, Babungo, 2013
Figure 38: Tomb of Mange, Muokang Palace, Babungo, 2013
Figure 39: Muokang Palace Museum, display of stools, 2013
Figure 40: Muokang Palace Museum, display of local materials, 2013
Figure 41: Muokang Palace Museum, seating area, 2013
Figure 42: Muokang Palace Museum, one of Ba’s thrones, 2013
Figure 43: Muokang Palace Museum, one of Ba’s thrones, 2013
Figure 44: Muokang Palace Museum, display of hunting, musical, and other daily objects, 2013
Figure 45: Muokang Palace Museum of Vengo Heritage, statue of Sangai, 2013
Figure 46: Muokang Palace Museum of Vengo Heritage, statue of Fuangeh, 2013
Figure 47: Muokang Palace Museum of Vengo Heritage, statue of Mange, 2013
Figure 48: Bamenda Provincial Museum, 1959, photographer unknown, image from the archives of the Ministry of Arts and Culture
Figure 49: Objects from the Bamenda Provincial Museum currently stored at the Ministry of Arts and Culture in Up Station, Bamenda, 2013
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