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Repairing Cultural and Museum Cooperation between Cameroon and Europe

Abstract: How can we recreate conditions for a relationship based on reciprocity and mutuality between Europe and Africa? How do we repair this relationship? Beginning with these questions, this contribution analyses museum and cultural cooperation between Cameroon and Europe from the 1960s to the present day. Building on Kwame Nkrumah's and Ade Ajayi's concepts of decolonization and "Reparation" (with a capital R) on the one hand, and Aimé Césaire's and Philipp Schorch and Noelle Kahanu's concepts of cooperation on the other, the chapter interrogates legal and institutional mechanisms of this cultural cooperation such as the formal agreements on which it is based, as well as participating institutions and their impact in Cameroon today. By addressing museums as one of the many legacies of (post)colonial relations between Cameroon and Europe, the chapter aims to contribute to the debate on the future of the colonial legacy in Cameroon.¹

Keywords: grassroot, Aimé Césaire, Cameroon, development, museum, bilateral and multilateral cooperation, musealisation/demusealisation, decolonization, Reparation, Jean-Marc Ela

The ultimate ethnocentrism is one in which recognition of the other is based solely upon the similarity to self (Ravenhill 1986, 34).

1 Introduction

It is almost impossible to talk about museums in Europe and Africa today without bringing up the issue of restitution and reparation. Under the pressure of activists, postcolonial critics and researchers in publications such as the special issue of *Cahiers d'Études africaines* no 173–174 edited by Bogumil Jewsiewicki in 2004, and especially more recently in 2018, after the Sarr and Savoy report, the museum

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has turned into a theatre of heated discussions on restitution and reparation. The opening of the Humboldt Forum² in Berlin illustrates this strikingly. However, as Bénédicte Savoy has pointed out, this debate is not novel, because almost every conversation we are having today about the restitution of looted cultural objects to Africa took place 40 years ago (Savoy 2021, 195). Addressing the failure of restitution in the 1970s, she reveals that museums lied to prevent the return of colonial objects to Africa. And over many years, laws in European countries have declared most of these objects public property, thus making restitution very difficult today (Sarr and Savoy 2018).

This situation has left some African claimants sceptical about Reparation³ and despairing of any hope that it might take place, viewing it as re-colonializing Africa (Ajayi 2004; Bayena and Monteh 2021). This position is fuelled by the rhetoric of refusal⁴ held by European museums and governments that characterises the current debate where reason and the will to make humanity together are not shared. Considering all this, Ade Ajayi wrote in 2004 that it should not be expected, however, that convincing arguments for Reparation will be sufficient to persuade people to accept or make amendments. There is, he writes, an old adage that it is almost as difficult to wake the dead as it is to wake someone who is pretending to be asleep. No one is harder to convince than someone who has decided in advance not to succumb to the logic of an argument (Ajayi 2004, par. 1). Another African intellectual to explicitly talk about this aspect of Reparation is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. In her opening speech at the Humboldt Forum in 2021, she said, “And so it seems to me that what we are fundamentally grappling with in this space, in all of these questions about the Humboldt Forum, is power, unequal power, how we

² The renovation and opening of the Prussian palace in 2021 were preceded by numbers of critical voices who decried it for perpetuating colonial hegemony over other non-European cultures (see for example *AfricAvenir International e.V.* 2017).

³ The term “Reparation” in the singular and with a capital R as conceptualised by Ade Ajayi will be used in this essay to refer to both reparation and restitution. According to Ajayi (2004), who coined the term in the context of slavery, Reparation is about redressing the harm done, not about assigning blame, seeking revenge or claiming financial compensation. It is about restoring justice. However, this analysis will be less concerned with reparation for the wrongs of slavery than focus on postcolonial wrongs.

⁴ I refer to the silence of governments (Savoy and Sarr 2018) and the classical arguments against the restitution of colonial looted artefacts: that the objects have long been part of European culture, European cultural heritage and cultural consciousness (a view that obscures the colonial past and argument about the irreversibility of history); preservation of the collections and conservation of the objects according to the highest scientific standards; the fear of a domino effect after some restitutions; circulation of knowledge and expositions in a globalised world (von Oswald 2018; Savoy 2021). This includes endless planning and talking with urge financial support (Adichie 2021).

navigate unequal power relations” (Adichie 2021, 8:49–9:03). At the same time, many intellectuals regard restitution as an opportunity for Europe to repair and reinvent its relationship with Africa (Mbembe 2018). Against this background, a question arises: how can reparation be made a means of true justice and reconciliation rather than an instrument for geopolitical and strategic power interests, so that it once again enables equal footing in the negotiations between Europe and Africa? How can we recreate the conditions for a relationship based on reciprocity and mutuality (Mbembe 2018) between Europe and Africa? If states have until now been the important main actors of Reparation, how can negotiations be possible in this context?

Rather than providing a definitive and complete answer to these questions, in this contribution I will analyse cultural and especially museum cooperation between Cameroon and Europe in the context of restitution and reparation from a postcolonial perspective. Focusing on media (print and audio-visual media) and scientific writings after the independence of Cameroon in the 1960s to the present, it seeks more specifically to understand the cultural and museum cooperation between the two parties, the conditions under which “negotiations”⁵ on Reparation are likely to be conducted, and how they are likely to contribute to repair this relation. In this regard, I consider that reparation also means decolonization in the sense of Kwame Nkrumah and Ade Ajayi. The latter, drawing on Kwame Nkrumah’s thoughts, defines decolonisation as the action of erasing the psychological and other effects of the colonial regime (economic exploitation, underdevelopment etc.). These psychological sequelae include a loss of self-respect, confidence and cultural sensitivity (Ajayi 2004, par. 7). On this basis, the study does not consider collaboration or cooperation, as it was developed and spread in the 1960s, as a relationship between the “rich” states of the North and the “poor” states of the South, with the aim of compensating economic, technical and technological backwardness of the latter by the former (Mpegna 2014, 42). Contrarily, it refers to a conception developed by Aimé Césaire at the same time: he defined collaboration as a “rendez-vous du donner et du recevoir” (Césaire quoted in Senghor 1983, 1). Or as Schorch and Kahanu (2015, 112) explain, a “dialogue which does not involve a gestural accommodation of the subaltern part for its eventual assimilation within the dominant whole, but refers to a conscious, methodological co-production and co-interpretation [. . .]”. From the outset, this study on cooperation appears to be a subject of international law. However, it does not pretend to replace the work of a jurist, an economist or a political scientist, but it invites the

5 Every restitution effected till now seems to go through (diplomatic) negotiations most often with joint declarations as in case with Nigeria and Germany or France and Senegal and Benin.

latter as well as the actors of cooperation between Cameroon and Europe to reflect more deeply on their longstanding relationships by rethinking the premises of their cultural relations. In the same way, this contribution is also a plea for some Cameroonian and African political actors to re-tune their interest not only in Reparation but also in the cultural domain as most of their partners do. This contribution first analyses the legal and institutional mechanisms of the cultural relationship between Cameroon and its European partners. It then examines Cameroonian museums as a result of the relationship between Cameroon and Europe.

2 Agreements on Cultural Cooperation and the Need for Revisions

Since laws and treaties are the basis of state relations and states are the main interlocutors of Reparation, it is worth looking at the cultural cooperation agreements between Cameroon and Europe to understand the conditions and factors that may prevent the two parties from repairing their relationship. When dealing with cultural cooperation between Cameroon and Europe, or its “traditional partners” according to the expression used in Yaoundé, we primarily see the former colonial power, France, with which Cameroon has been having a “privileged”⁶ relationship, sometimes close and friendly, sometimes cold and tense, for over 60 years. This section focuses on two moments in these relations: the signing of a series of cooperation accords in 1960 and their revision in 1974. The aim is to review the legal and institutional framework of cooperation between Cameroon and its partners in the cultural sector and the impact this may have on Reparation.

2.1 The 1960 Cultural Convention

In the aftermath of independence, between June 1960 and July 1963, the French government concluded nearly thirty cultural agreements with the 13 new African republics and Republic of Madagascar, known as “Accords de coopération Culturelle” (1960). In the case of Cameroon, however, a “Convention Culturelle” and subsidiary

⁶ Already present in the 1960s, the controversial term “accord” is also used to characterise “how the EU is well ahead of Cameroon’s partners, given the volume of exchange, without forgetting French, British, German, Dutch, and Spanish. . . cooperation on the bilateral side” (Presidency of the Republic of Cameroon).

agreements were signed in 1960. These agreements cover socio-cultural sectors, namely education, scientific research, language and cultural activities and information (broadcasting and press). For the young African states, these agreements and conventions were vital to affirm their sovereignty and cultural autonomy, and to mark the egalitarian and reciprocal nature of cultural exchanges, as expressly formulated in the preambles to the documents. But this was not in fact the case: as France shouldered most of the responsibility, the symmetry only existed on paper.

As Guy Feuer (1963, 901) argues, the main purpose of this series of agreements is above all to organise French assistance to the young independent states. This assistance was both technical and financial. In return, French authorities were obviously granted important prerogatives (“privileges”) intended to enable them to perform their obligations as effectively as possible, while protecting their own interests. This situation is reflected in the agreements by practical provisions. Most importantly, the preamble to the 1960 Franco-Cameroonian Cultural Convention emphasized that French is the official language of Cameroon as in other former French colonies. This was justified by the claim that the French language, in contrast to the multitude of local dialects in Cameroon, should serve as an instrument of development and national unity. The convention on cooperation in the field of scientific and technical research stipulates that the various levels of education in the African states should be coordinated with French education. Other European languages were introduced gradually because of Cameroon’s colonial past with Great Britain and Germany, following a 1963 cultural convention. On October 1, 1961, with the decision of Western Cameroon, until then under British rule, to join the Republic of Cameroon, English became one of the two official languages. At the same time German was reintroduced into the Cameroonian educational system as a direct consequence of the *Élysée Treaty* signed a few months earlier, in January 1963, for “la réconciliation du peuple allemand et du peuple français, mettant fin à une rivalité séculaire” (de Gaulle and Adenauer 2012 [1963], 22). Spanish, Latin, etc. were introduced automatically with the application of the French educational system in Cameroon (Fogang Toyem, 2016). By so doing, this language policy continues to hinder and even threaten the existence of Cameroonian culture, as Bahoken and Atangana (1976, 14) write: “not only is language the instrument in and through which the spirit of the community is forged, but it is also one of its specific manifestations.”

In order to perform its mission and implement its cultural foreign policy, the French government used a number of structures in its former colonies, but museum did not play a significant role here. The term “museum” remained in shadow. The French foreign policy in Cameroon focused mainly on language, education and culture. Belmond Mpegna’s study on French institutions in Cameroon from the 1960s to 2000 sheds light on the political dimension of the founding of French

cultural institutions in Cameroon. The Centre culturel François Villon in Yaoundé and Centre culturel Blaise Cendrars in Douala were established in 1962.⁷ They aimed to promote and disseminate French culture on the one hand and, on the other, to prevent Cameroon from falling under the political and cultural influence of the English-speaking world through the Anglophone part of Cameroon (British Cameroon) and to compete with the British Council (Mpegna 2014, 55). Four Franco-Cameroonian alliances were also opened in the regions with low penetration of French, notably in ex-British Cameroon, in Buea and Bamenda, and in Ngaoundéré and Garoua. Their mission was to extend the French language throughout Cameroon. In the education sector, the French Inspectorate of Education and the French Foundation for Higher Education were responsible for running and overseeing education in Cameroon. The research and technical institutions include the Office de recherche scientifique et technique d'outre-mer (ORSTOM), the Institut de recherches agronomiques tropicales (IRAT) based in Dschang and Guétalé and the Institut Pasteur. This French cultural policy was financed by the Fonds d'Aide et de la Coopération (FAC), a special fund created in 1959 to help Africans fight against underdevelopment. According to Mpegna (2014, 231), the “collaboration” was merely unilateral. Despite the reciprocity clauses in Article 4 of the Cultural Convention, Cameroon had no institutions in France or in other partner countries. Educational institutions were a monopoly of the Metropole. Other accompanying accords guarantee France either a monopoly or quasi-monopoly on higher education or at least a priority on the choice of staff members not directly involved in higher education (Mpegna 2014; Feuer 1963).

A specific feature of the 1960–1963 conventions is the strong presence of the ideas of solidarity and association. Indeed, the emphasis on these ideas not only underlines the equality between the co-contracting parties, but more importantly highlights their “communauté d'esprit” and the practical intermingling of their institutions (Feuer 1963). These ideas are expressed in the names of the institutions, such as “Alliance Franco-Camerounaise”, or in the conventions by the frequent use of the term “en commun”. According to Guy de Lusignan (1970, 79), through these agreements and conventions, the French president de Gaulle aimed to gather all former French colonies into a Franco-African community in order to save what remained of colonisation. Therefore, the cultural conventions were merely a legal condition for maintaining the French language and culture in France's former

7 In 2012, the François Villon cultural centre in Yaoundé and the Blaise Cendrars cultural centre in Douala merged with the Service de Coopération et d'Action Culturelle of the French Embassy to become the Institut français du Cameroun (IFC).

African colonies, and for developing an intellectual and political elite in the French cultural tradition.

The importance of reviewing these first agreements and cultural conventions of the so-called independent Cameroon is obvious, because they form the basis of the current cultural relationship between Cameroon and France and Europe in general, and in some way contribute to the establishment of the highly contested network *Françafrique* (Deltombe et al. 2011). Although these accords do not explicitly address the museum component, we will see that they also prove to be crucial in defining the current cultural policy in Cameroon. However, it should be noted that the signing of these accords did not go smoothly. When they were concluded, many African states, including Senegal and Madagascar, and various independence movements expressed distrust, as they saw these agreements as colonial pact legitimating neo-colonialization. It was undoubtedly with the aim of defining a cultural policy anchored in African realities that African countries, including Cameroon, signed the *Pan African Cultural Manifesto* in 1969.⁸ The acts of contestation of these neo-colonial and unilateral accords multiplied and intensified until the revisions of 1974.

2.2 The new 1974 Agreements

In Cameroon, the leaders of The Union of the Peoples of Cameroon (UPC) who were fighting for “total and immediate independence” already suspected that France did not want to “liberate” Cameroon, just like the other nations in the French sphere of influence (Mouna Mboa 2016). The fight led to the genocide committed against Bamiléké and Bassa people that remains unresearched to this day.⁹ This critique,

⁸ This strong aspiration for sovereignty and autonomy clashes with other global projects. Few months after the adoption of the Manifesto, a Meeting of experts on problems of cultural policies in Africa (Dakar, 6–10 October 1969) was convened by UNESCO as part of the framework for preparing the Intergovernmental Conference on the Institutional, Administrative and Financial Aspects of Cultural Policies held in Venice in September 1970. The objective of the meeting was to identify and discuss problems confronted by African countries in the formulation and implementation of cultural policies (Máté Kovács 2009, 25–26).

⁹ Still debated by many experts, estimates of the death toll range from 100,000–400,000 people killed between 1959 and 1964. Cameroon attained independence amidst this genocide in 1960. This bloody repression lasted until 1971 and people are still very traumatized today and carrying the wound of it. Studies show this massacre paved the way for the cosy relations enjoyed between French political leaders and their African counterparts. In 2015, French President Hollande acknowledged colonial-era massacres in Cameroon, while critics called for an apology. See Deltombe et al. (2011) as well as Okello (2015).

although well expressed at the United Nations in the late 1950s, did not make the French leaders change their policy, as they loudly proclaimed that Cameroon's independence would be total. As indicated above, from 1960 to 1970, France enjoyed the exclusivity and primacy of Cameroon's foreign policy and was its main provider of socio-cultural and development aid. But after 1970, as Cameroon's leaders became aware of this deception, they decided to take Cameroonian cultural life out of its dependence on French cultural centres and Franco-Cameroonian alliances and worked on to diversifying their diplomatic partners.

This decision to place Cameroonian relations in the context of common international law led to what Belmond Mpegna (2014, 84–85) described as a period of recession (1970–1991) in the history of French-Cameroonian relations, during which the 1963 Conventions were amended. In the cultural sector, this period of recession was marked by a series of measures that included the withdrawal of Cameroon from the Francophone community, the refusal to participate in Francophone summits, the renegotiation of agreements and the signing of new cooperation accords. It is during this period that the Cameroonian authorities carried out a radical cultural revolution by strengthening the existing institutions and above all by establishing the National Council for Cultural Affairs in 1973. The latter was a standing advisory body responsible for shaping cultural policy.

Following the revisions of 21 February 1974, Cameroon gained a greater autonomy in the technical sectors, education, cultural activities and especially the orientations of cultural policy. France's influence diminished: technical assistance and aid for cultural activities disappeared in the 1980s, and French aid in the Cameroon cultural field decreased. However, this decrease was otherwise compensated by aid for structural adjustment (initiated by the Bretton Woods institutions in 1988), particularly in the form of loans through the French Development Agency. When the current president Paul Biya took office on 6 November 1982, he continued this recession or distancing policy towards France and the Breton wood institutions while intensifying the diversification of Cameroon partners as his predecessor Ahmadou Ahidjo initiated. This policy is expressed in his statements. During an official visit to the Federal Republic of Germany in 1986, he said about France: "le Cameroun n'est la chasse gardée de personne, ni d'aucune grande puissance" (Biya quoted in Moussa 2015). Several months later in 1987, he also declared that "le Cameroun n'ira pas au Fmi". But this lasted until 1991, when he was stopped dead in his tracks by two major world events. On the one hand, the economic crisis at the end of the 1980s forced him to open negotiations with the Breton Woods institutions for the setting up of drastic structural adjustment programmes. Before long, Cameroon had a huge debt to its donors. On the other hand, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Soviet bloc led to worldwide standardisation and the imposition of democracy at the Baule Conference. The resumption of Franco-Cameroonian

relations was therefore “unavoidable” (Mpegna 2014, 168). France appeared to Cameroon to be the only ally that could save it from the political and economic stagnation into which it had fallen. Cameroon therefore slowly joined organisations and groupings that had a French influence, either directly or indirectly. For example, Cameroon re-joined La Francophonie in November 1991. A new approach was adopted by Yaoundé. Paul Biya even told journalists on the steps of the Elysée Palace, after a meeting with the French president François Mitterrand: “Je ne crois pas démentir la pensée du président qui pense que je suis le meilleur élève” (Biya quoted in Moussa 2015). France once again became Cameroon’s leading bilateral donor. From the French side, the interest remains to oust the growing influence of the United States in the 1990s which openly supports the opposition party in Cameroon (Mpegna 2014).

The instruments of French-African and French-Cameroonian cooperation were readapted or created. For example, the Priority Solidarity Fund (FSP) replaced the FAC, Agence Française de Développement replaced the French Development Fund (CFD) in 1992, and the French National Research Institute for Sustainable Development replaced the ORSTOM (Mpegna 2014, 169). The dissemination of French language and culture was also to be achieved through audiovisual media, including Radio France International, TV5 and Canal France International. Today, 90% of the channels broadcast and offered to Cameroonians by satellite are French or Francophone. The domain of school and academic scholarship has experienced an exponential development (Mpegna 2014, 165–211).

This brief overview of the legal-institutional framework of cultural cooperation between Cameroon and its traditional partners, mainly France, has brought to light unilateral, asymmetric and damaging relations where the authorities in Yaoundé tend to adopt a policy of diversification in order to escape foreign powers influences. This political situation reminds us of what Albert Gouaffo (2011) said about Cameroonians remembering Germany to heal themselves from French or English colonial violence. Reparation would therefore consist in freeing oneself from this psychological and political confinement. The study of the 1963 and 1974 accords also reveals that the relationship between the donors and Cameroon was marked by a discourse of assistance, development and development aid. What are the implications of these agreements for Cameroon and its relations today?

2.3 Some Consequences of the Agreements in the Present

The effects and the legacy of the colonial and neo-colonial relationship are numerous and visible in Cameroon. The violence perpetrated in the colonial and present post-colonial periods affects Cameroon’s cultural sector and to some

extent the current debates on Reparation, which is not simply a cultural but a political and economic issue.

In general, Cameroon's cooperation with its partners, France in particular, has not been very satisfactory. Indeed, several studies describe the climate of this relationship as marked by mistrust, mutual incomprehension, opacity and non-transparency. The ex-post evaluation Final Report (2009) on the French cooperation instruments in Cameroon reveals that this situation is due to the divergent priorities of the two partners, the omnipresence and influence of the Western donors on Cameroon's strategic discourse and to the unconcern and negligence of the Cameroonian government. Similarly, the Paul Ango Ela Linear Report (2016) on cultural enterprises and creative industries in Cameroon observes that the government has abandoned its responsibilities to its partners and deplores the almost "non-existent" contribution of the government to the development and promotion of Cameroonian art and culture. A partial explanation of this can be found in the unequal and unilateral past agreements that have paved the way for French and foreign domination through their cultural cooperation institutions, leaving Cameroonian cultural and educational life in agony. As a result of this "surrealistic" situation (Mefe 2004, 20), artists and cultural actors only have to rely on the West as a "Messiah" to get funded. Tony Mefe (2004, 20) explains:

Les seules bibliothèques sérieuses sont celles des centres culturels étrangers. Il en va de même pour ce qui a trait aux arts du spectacle : salles de spectacles adaptées, matériel de sonorisation et d'éclairage professionnel, techniciens de spectacle etc. Impossible pour une compagnie artistique d'obtenir quoi que ce soit dans ce domaine sans passer par les Centres culturels français, les Alliances françaises et l'Institut Goethe.

This foreign dependence, coupled with the scarcity of local funding, creates frustration owing to the inability of bilateral and multilateral partners to respond favourably to all requests and the "artistic vagueness" in the choice of projects that receive funding. There is no denying that, as a Guinean proverb says, the hand that gives is always above the hand that receives. Many critics therefore argue that Cameroonians should look after their own interests fairly and respectfully rather than expecting or asking for favours or assistance, and this even in the process of reparation. As Ade Ajayi puts it: "Je pense que nous irons plus loin en exigeant que justice soit rendue plutôt qu'en négociant avec les nations industrialisées, c'est-à-dire en demandant des faveurs à des gens qui utilisent depuis longtemps la philanthropie pour servir leurs propres intérêts" (Ajayi 2004, par. 30).

The monopoly of Cameroon Western partners over institutions in the realms of culture, education and communication has crafted certain narratives about Cameroonians that are often unflattering, to say the least, and often demeaning. It has also led to a general amnesia of the past and the loss of cultural identity and

landmarks. This amnesia makes it difficult for researchers to trace the provenance of the many looted objects in the European museum, adding to the doubts and criticisms about the provenance research, which is seen as “empty promises” (Häntzschel quoted in Oswald 2018) to Africa, and as a tedious and endless task due to the number of objects to be examined and the amount of time devoted to each one of them (Kalibani 2020). After the departure of African focal objects during the colonial period, which contributed to the alienation and deculturation of subordinated populations and the breakdown of their psychological equilibrium (Savoy and Sarr 2018, 7), the neo-colonial relationships between post-independence Africa and Europe also pursue the same colonial objective (Ajayi 2004, par. 2). The Cameroonian educational system for example, which is modelled on the French system, as well the cultural sector and media dominated by Cameroon’s partners conditioned the development of an intellectual and political elite in the French cultural tradition (Mpegna 2014, 51). As a result, many Cameroonians in particular and Africans in general have adopted Western culture at the expense of their own culture. This could explain both the ignorance of the past and of these cultural objects (Gouaffo 2019), and consequently the way some Cameroonians and Africans mockingly reject their own cultural treasure as “strange” (Mataga 2018, 58) and the indifference of some African governments and the African Union (Kalibani 2020). So far, the Cameroon government has not taken a stand on this question of reparation. An important act of Reparation should thus be questioning our knowledge and stopping the policy of influence that has been causing trauma and wounds over the centuries and threatening culture by extension, not least because, as it is said, every culture is unique and any disappearance impoverishes all of humanity.

The spectre of the colonial past still haunts even the present debate on Reparation, and forms of reparation have been instrumentalized for geopolitical and strategic power interests, thus hindering the reinvention of new dynamics based on equality between Europe and Africa. The programmed death of the educational and scientific field in Cameroon, as in some African countries, entitles some countries of the North to establish, maintain and boast themselves as the only true research centres. The few true research places in Cameroon are the international cooperation agencies that organise conferences, seminars, workshops, scholarship, projects, etc. Such organisations include the DAAD, the French Institute, the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, ICOM, UNESCO. Besides this, there are other factors relevant in the negotiations. Many researchers argue that the lack of transparency from European museums (Sarr and Savoy 2018, 58), the near centralisation of research on Reparation in Western countries, the inaccessibility of data to both the general African population and African researchers and

specialists (Kalibani 2020) and restrictive visa policies¹⁰ guarantee researchers in Europe a monopoly on research on African heritage in Europe despite the fact that they have less ability to understand the meaning of these objects in their cultural context (Kalibani 2020). Similarly, with regard to restitution, some negotiations and returns have been effected since the publication of the Sarr and Savoy Report (2018), especially in Senegal, Nigeria and Congo. The example of the return of 26 objects to Senegal garnered widespread media coverage and has been highly encouraging. However, the conditions leading up to this restitution have raised concerns. Once again, the negotiations were one-sided, thus raising questions about France's willingness to actually repair its relationship with Senegal. A documentary by Nora Philippe, published on ARTE in 2021, reveals this:

Leonie Simaga, Narrator : Dans leur indépendance, les États n'orchestrent pas les restitutions sans monnayages diplomatiques. Ces retours servent de lourds intérêts financiers, industriels et militaires. Pour un seul sabre revenu, la France négocie des centaines de millions d'armements et l'externalisation des mesures migratoires subsahariennes. Œuvrons-nous véritablement au service d'un avenir commun (01 :17 :18)?

Gabin Djimassé, Historian, Abomey : Seule la France peut nous dire : « Nous disposons de tel nombre d'objets venus de chez vous ». C'est le répertoire que le Qais Branly veut bien nous donner que nous connaissons. Une chose est claire, eux-mêmes ils ont parlé de plus de 3000 pièces. Malheureusement, ils ont choisi nous restituer 26 et ces 26 c'est encore eux qui les ont choisis (01 :19 :05–40).

In view of this context, some researchers prefer to remain suspicious, even dubious, because they consider restitution to be a trap or an opportunity in the hands of Western powers to pursue their geopolitical struggles. Similarly, Bayena and Monteh (2021, 38) note that

[. . .] the concept of restitution has created more problems for Africa and the Third World (victims of most stolen art) than it has solved. The numerous judicial procedures, expenses and international laws associated with the localization, identification and eventual restitution of stolen or illegally transferred antiquities look more like calculated devices designed to frustrate Africans and other plaintive nations.

Another consequence that is important to mention here is the link between reparation, development and democracy. Reflecting on these concepts historically, Bogumil Jewsiewicki observes that from the use of argumentation based on the notion of Reparation, the notion of development has rapidly replaced it over time

¹⁰ An example of this policy is the recent case of Schengen visa refusal in early 2022 to three Cameroonian academics who were to travel to Germany to participate in a workshop on the restitution of colonial objects at the Fünf Kontinente Museum in Munich (VAD 2022).

in North-South relations, so that in the relations between nations and communities, development and reparation refer to the same basic notions (Jewsiewicki 2004, par.1). Taking this further, Ajayi argues that the condition for achieving this economic development was political independence and democratic institutions (Ajayi 2004, par. 6). This thought is enshrined and operationalised in the above-mentioned accords. As a discourse of promoting greater dependence and underdevelopment for Africa emerges (Ajayi 2004, par.12), its effects have been the negation, devaluation and inferiorisation of African practices through Western hegemonic values. A development standard has been decided by Western partners and donors, which the new African governments have to strictly follow. In the same vein, the model of cultural policy institutionalised after the Second World War, and closely linked to the construction of the nation-state especially in Europe and Canada (Poirrier 2011, 13–14), was imposed on the newly independent states, including Cameroon. The main important aspects of this cultural policy are the “development of culture” and the “democratisation of culture” (Heumen Tchana 2014, 17). Under the accords of the 1960s and 1974, reform programmes and managers and technocrats training have been launched to guarantee legitimacy and good governance in Cameroon, conditioned by political measures that are sometimes difficult to take. Unfortunately, the aspirations of neither leaders nor the people are very rarely at the centre of concerns (Paul Ango Ela Report 2016; Ex post evaluation Final Report 2009). Many political and economic experts have observed that political independence has not led to the economic stability and democratic institutions of growth and social transformation that were expected. Rather, they have brought wars over the colonial legacy in Cameroon as it is the case for the so-called Anglophone Crisis.¹¹ One of the challenges for Cameroonians would consist of an internal reparation both for external and “internal colonisation” (Jewsiewicki 2004, Introduction) while addressing postcolonial and colonial legacies in order to reinvent oneself from a truly Cameroonian base, that is from the grassroot or as Jean-Marc Ela (1998) calls “le monde d’en-bas”.

11 The “Anglophone crisis” can be seen as a clash over two external (colonial) cultures, which shows how imperative it is to address colonial legacies in post-colonial Cameroon. The historian Verkijika G. Fanzo (2017) explains this conflict in *The Conversation*, an online newspaper, as follows: “Anglophones have long complained that their language and culture are marginalised. They feel their judicial, educational and local government systems should be protected. They want an end to annexation and assimilation and more respect from the government for their language and political philosophies. And if that doesn’t happen, they want a total separation and their own independent state.”

It has been shown above that the 1960 cultural convention was not de facto negotiated on equal footing and, thus, that it maintains inequality between European and particularly France and Cameroon, which led to its revision in 1974. Through a number of institutions, Cameroon's European partners have implemented a policy of influence, assimilation and cultural alienation. Such cultural action has harmful consequences on Cameroonians' lives, notably the obscuring of Cameroon's history, the forgetting of cultural objects, the loss of identity, poverty, trauma, genocide and wars. Hence the urgency and necessity for each party to wake up from its slumber and take responsibility for reinventing the dynamics of new equitable and mutual relationships. This requires, among other things, self-questioning, revision of existing accords and reflexions on the legacy of this violence, for instance in the museum.

3 Rethinking Museum and Cultural Cooperation between Cameroon and Europe

Immediately after independence in 1960 and 1961, establishing institutions for nation building was a priority. At the beginning, museums did not play a significant role. It was only in 1970 that the term "museum" was included in legislation. Yet since 2000, museums have multiplied. How can this increase be explained? In which environments is this proliferation taking place? And what are the implications of this expansion for Reparation?

3.1 Museums in Cameroon: Genesis and Evolution

Addressing the question of museums brings us back to the relationship between Cameroon and Europe and how to deal with the colonial history and legacy today – because the museum as an institution of collection and exhibition, education, scientific research and delectation (Ousman 2018, 14) was introduced in Cameroon, as in other African countries, in the contexts of colonial violence.

The case of the Bamoum Kingdom Museum illustrates this point. As Loumpet shows, in the 1920s, King Njoya, the monarch of the pre-colonial Bamoum kingdom, initiated an exceptional initiative to establish a museum. The initiative was a reaction to the strategy of destabilization and destruction of the socio-political organization and its symbols perpetrated by the French colonial administration that took over from Germany in 1916. It was meant that "the royal objects and symbols of secret societies should be exhibited in public, in order to demystify

them and empty them of their power of evocation and subjugation” (Loumpet 2018, 48). Alongside this initiative, the colonial administrations established other museums not for the native population, but mainly for the European colonial population. Of course, at that time, the local populations rarely visited them, not only because they were banned from such civilized milieu, but also because they saw the exhibitions of their masks and sculptures as “retrograde images of themselves” or “mockery or secularisation of their beliefs, which instilled fear and stigmatisation” (Loumpet 2018, 43). Later in 1944, the French created the Centre Camerounais de l’Institut Français d’Afrique Noire (IFAN), a French research institute based in Dakar, with a satellite research centre in Douala. This was followed by the establishment of regional museums in Bamenda, Douala, Fumban, Maroua, Bafoussam, Mokolo and Buea (Bayena and Monteh 2021, 32).

In post-independence Cameroon, the new government attempted to readapt the existing museums for its political purpose. Most of the colonial museums either disappeared completely or were transformed into national museums. Informed by the Western model, the young government quickly saw the museum as a medium and a place to promote national consciousness and contribute to national unity. Some intellectuals and politicians therefore strongly called for a “National Museum”. But the project would run into difficulties for three reasons. First, as Laurence-Anick Zerbini points out, the museum was used by the Europeans as an instrument of cultural alienation or propaganda tool to legitimate their presence in Africa while assigning it a new objective to educate the indigenous population (Zerbini 1991, 16–17), who were said to be illiterate. This European presence, especially from France, puts a greater strain on the new government which contrarily sees the building of a museum “as a form of self-congratulation for their regimes” (Loumpet 2018, 43). The second reason has to do with the type of museum to be built. The museum proponents were divided on the type of museum: a national museum or decentralised regional museums? This discussion was held among scholars and political authorities. On the one hand, proponents of a national museum proposed the creation of a dynamic national museum where all cultural objects of the national territory would be conserved. This vision of the museum, advocated mainly by Engelbert Mveng, is in line with the ideas of the designers of the Cameroonian national unity policy, promoted by President Ahmadou Ahidjo, which aims at the fusion of cultural identities (Ousman 2018, 17). On the other hand, backers of regional museums, notably Issac Paré, since 1963, defended the idea of conserving material culture in the regions where the collections are produced. He argued that local cultural diversities would be preserved by creating a national centre for monitoring and coordinating the various activities of local museums, which would play an educational role in the regions and create local tourist attractions (Paré 1964). The third reason, which is often poorly documented, is

related to those who question the *raison d'être* of museums in general. For these opponents, a national museum or regional museums were not absolutely necessary, but rather it was imperative to reflect on other forms of preservation and promotion of culture adapted to the socio-cultural context of Cameroon without copying the recommendations of the UN and European partners. Madelaine Ndobó, for example, drew the attention of her contemporaries:

Nous ne partageons pas simplement l'idée de vouloir massifier toutes les cultures autochtones dans un musée, fût-il national, car cela peut entraîner un « effacement catastrophique de l'épistème traditionnelle » et provoquer un effet contraire aux ambitions des pouvoirs politiques. Gardons-nous d'oublier que ce musée ne sera jamais « un musée de l'ONU », et qu'il pourrait par contre s'avérer comme « un lieu de lutte » des identités individuelles et collectives (Ndobó 1999, 807).

It should be noted that the project of “massifying” cultures in a museum, as Ndobó warns, also raises the issue of “collecting”¹² objects from populations and kingdoms, which could not only reproduce the violence perpetuated by the colonists during the collection missions, but also lead to institutional amnesia (Zerbini 1991, 15). After all, this group meant that the museum can neither exhibit nor represent all of Cameroon's cultural and ethnic diversity (more than 250 cultures) like the Western universal museums to which it refers. This vision is still held today in Africa. For example, George Okello Abungu argues that “in many circumstances, though, this is evident more in theory than in practice, since representing the entire world under one roof is an almost impossible feat – even for the so-called universal or encyclopaedic museums” (Abungu 2018, 26). Equally, this insight questions the Western conception of the museum which creates the absence of certain arts or crafts in museums since their interest is in material culture considering only the aesthetic value of the object as an art object. As Zerbini (1991, 16) writes, “L'Art est sauvé mais la Culture et l'Histoire, elles, sont perdues.” By so doing, the African museum becomes, as one of the most important museum critics Alpha Konaré writes, “rien d'autre qu'un mouvoir de biens culturels, un cimetière d'objets, un autre instrument d'aliénation Culturelle” (Konaré 1987 quoted in Zerbini 1991, 16).

Although Engelbert Mveng's vision corresponds to Ahmadou Ahidjo's policy, because it strengthens national unity, it was only later in 1972, the date of the

¹² Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy recently argue that the vocabulary of “collecting” and of “harvesting” imply an undeniable cynicism. The term implies that art could be picked up, harvested, gathered, as if it had no legitimate owner, as if it could be reborn. However, the two authors remind us that the very principle of culture is “generated and regenerated by the transmission, reproduction, adaptation, study and transformation of knowledge, forms and objects within societies” (Sarr and Savoy 2018, 14).

unification of Cameroon, that it was adopted. Article 36 of Decree No. 72/425 of 28 August 1972 on the transfer of the Directorate of Cultural Affairs to the Ministry of Information and Culture, recognises the museum as a component of Cameroonian cultural heritage. But, as Ndobó (1999, 794) notes, this remains a declaration of intent. The government's decision to open the national museum only came in 1985. During this time, as many museum actors observed with disapproval, the state largely supported popular culture (Ndobó 1999; Ousman 2018). In doing so, building museums remained a private initiative. Between 1990 and 2000, there was an explosion of new community museums in the west of Cameroon, where each chiefdom opened its own museum, often in cooperation with European museums or non-governmental organisations (Loumpet 2018, 43).

3.2 From 2000 to Present: Musealisation

After 2000, a phenomenon of “musealisation” (Loumpet 2018) took place in Cameroon, as nearly 80% of the Cameroonian museums were established during this period (Heumen Tchana 2017, 418). The study by Mahamat Abba Ousman (2018) commissioned by the UNESCO's Multisectoral Regional Office for Central Africa presents a museum map of Cameroon made up of eight public museums under the exclusive competence of the Ministry of Arts and Culture and forty-eight private and community (chiefdom) museums. It should be recalled that this last category, mostly known as “cases patrimoniales” (Djache Nzefa et al. 2012, 35), is considered a recent Cameroonian peculiarity because they are transformation of Chiefdom collections into museums.¹³ This proliferation of museums is motivated, on the one hand, by socio-economic, educational and scientific considerations and, on the other, by tourism as well as global and political concerns.

Because of the economic depression of the 1980s caused partly by the sharp fall in coffee and cocoa prices, the loss of power and authority of the chiefdoms that globalisation marginalised through increasing economic decline (Bayena and Monteh 2021) and the desire to save the populations from acculturation, some Cameroonians and in particular the *Fon* (kings), see museums as new sources of

¹³ In several chiefdoms, palace or community museums, *cases patrimoniales* present thematic exhibitions. These are living museums within the chiefdoms, from which, for certain ceremonies and rituals, objects of high symbolic value are brought out, supporting the identity of the group or the chiefdom. They are occasionally taken out to the sacred forest, activated and used in various rites, then deactivated and returned to the museum. These museums are non-interactive because the touching or photographing of objects is considered to be potentially dangerous to the visitor (Djache Nzefa et al. 2012).

revenue and a way of accomplishing their role as a cultural guard to preserve their ancestral value and culture (Djache Nzefa 1994; Djache Nzefa et al. 2012). Within this context, numerous museum projects have been carried out, notably the Programme of the Road of Chiefdoms (Programme de la Route des Chefferies (PRDC)), initiated by the Cameroonian diaspora in France in cooperation with the cities of Nantes, Dschang and Région Pays de Loire. The aim of this program is to create a unique cultural and tourist centre nationwide in order to encourage populations to reappropriate their heritage while contributing to their economic and social development (Djache Nzefa et al. 2012). To meet this challenge, the PRDC operates largely thanks to international subsidies acquired through calls for projects which cover 60% of the total budget. In 2019, 14 cases patrimoniales have been established.

Another important factor to mention here is ideological-political. As mentioned above, the obsession of post-independence cultural policy-makers was with the construction of a national identity. The Western museum model had to fulfil this function. The intended or unintended contribution of Western bilateral, multilateral or intergovernmental partners has a great influence on Cameroon's cultural policies (Heumen Tchana 2014, 17). For example, with its philosophy of conserving African heritage and making museum an institution of research and education for the general population, UNESCO has a strong influence on national policies; the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) which set up a specific programme and a dedicated training centre to develop museums in Africa; and the European Union whose aim of cultural cooperation is to promote cultural identity and foster the individual creativity of ACP (African, Caribbean and Pacific) countries and establish the means for production and dissemination (Loumpet 2018, 45). Inspired or advised by its Western partners, Cameroonian actors have thus made the “democratisation of culture” and “culture and development” mainly advocated by UNESCO an important aspect of their cultural policy (Heumen Tchana 2014, 17). These conceptualisations have been concretised over the years through numerous sensitisations, research, training and education programmes. These programmes are accompanied by enormous financial, technical and advisory support for Cameroon's state and institutional partners in this musealisation process. Thus, many studies and programmes have been carried out to win and develop public loyalty (Heumen Tchana 2009) in order to reduce disparities between different sectors of the population (Mpegna 2014, 17), paradoxically with an institution that is essentially discriminatory and bourgeois. This raises the question: What kind of culture are we talking about? If we develop what already exists, how can the programmes not consider diverse Cameroonian cultural expressions? How does it sound when programmes aim at teaching people about their spiritual creations and democratising their own creations? For whom are these museums really created?

A last but not exhaustive reason behind this proliferation is the desire for global recognition or belonging to the global culture, because it is believed museums are “institutions of world-cultures” (Loumpet 2018). This frantic struggle for global recognition requires adaptation to a certain norm or standard that the Western partners have unilaterally established. According to Bayena and Monteh the progressive museumization of Africa’s royal collections inextricably embraced alien values and devalued African religious objects. “At best, the situation moved from devaluation through commoditization to desecration. Notwithstanding such sacrileges, the dream of many colonial and post-colonial local communities is to see their collections recognized as museums” (Bayena and Monteh 2021, 33). Still, this struggle for “global” recognition has had a rather minimal result as George Okello Abungu (2019, 64) deplors: “It is also clear that the ICOM museum definition, which provides guidance on what museums can or cannot be, has seen little change over the years, except for small additions such as ‘tangible and intangible heritage’, and has remained pretty static, despite the changing global environment and changing dynamics.” Drawing from the above abstractions, one is tempted to ask why other possibilities are not considered, for example, starting from the bottom up (Ela, 1998). Is collecting objects from the population to preserve in museums, albeit for research, economic and tourist purposes, and in the name of recognition and universality, not in itself a violence? How otherwise could the mistrust or resistance of the populations for whom these museums are intended be explained?

3.3 From Musealisation to Demusealisation

The musealisation process is confronted with passive resistance from the communities they are dedicated to, what Germain Loumpet (2018) calls “demusealisation”. Despite the role of public sensitization by national and international bodies on the one hand and African diaspora elites on the other, the population continues to feel alienated from these programmes. Most often people have a different relationship with these museum objects because they are magicoreligious, customary, and/or mystical, but they also see these objects taken out of their socio-cultural context as bearing little relevance to the living cultures of their communities (Bayena and Monteh 2021). Furthermore, museum practices alter their social fabric by creating, on the one hand, an omnipresent “modern culture”, inherited from colonisation, which is the prerogative of the literate and widely disseminated by the mass media and the school system, and on the other hand, an “authentic culture, now called traditional or folk culture” (Zerbini 1991, 6), which is lived by a part of the Cameroonian people and is conveyed by the national languages. This is also the

result of the dispossession of the grassroots group by the elite group and the hyper-centralisation on the latter.

This critical view is also present in academic milieu where musealisation is seen as an expansion of Western culture and the folklorisation of Cameroonian cultures, and this current challenging museum situation as an inability of museums to integrate into Africa's modern culture. For example, Noël and Geromini draw attention to an obvious risk of folklorisation of chiefdoms to the detriment of their significance in Cameroonian society as well as the heritage preserved in these socio-political and cultural sites. The Programme Route de la Chefferie is also concerned about the infatuation of art dealers with chiefdoms as their popularity grows (PRDC 2011), while Hugues Heumen Tchana (2017b) draws attention to the dangers of Eurocentrism. He argues that the proliferation of museum collections raises a number of questions about the aims and purposes of these collections, and the intervention of external forces, namely European agencies, raises the concern of a neo-colonial relationship. He also points out that the current state of academic museology in Africa is determined more by imported forces than by endogenous African factors and advocates for the creation of African universities that explore Africa's own epistemologies and techniques and respond directly to societal needs. This musealisation is also worrying in that the number of museums has increased and, paradoxically, other forms of cultural expression have almost disappeared and other cultural sectors have closed down:

En moins de 15 ans, soit de 2003 à 2017, 28 musées ont été créés au Cameroun parmi lesquels 14 dans les Grassfields Cameroun paradoxalement, les autres secteurs qui était privilégiés ont fermé. Presque toutes les salles de cinéma ont fermé, pas de Palais de la Culture, les bibliothèques sont à la traîne, les dépôts d'archives sont poussiéreux à travers le Cameroun (Heumen Tchana 2017a, 418).

Recently, Thomas Laely et al. edited a collective book on museum cooperation between Africa and Europe. The book acknowledges "the paternalistic view of African museum institutions, embedded in the intercontinental museum cooperation approach presented" and calls for a "new paradigm" (Laely et al. 2018, 3). In Cameroon, however, the very existence of museums is being debated to the extent that their practices of collection, representation and preservation do not fit the Cameroonian socio-cultural context. Thus, the imperative need to reflect on the possibilities and dynamics by questioning this colonial heritage and to take up one of the great challenges by putting the "world from below" (Ela 1998) with its everyday practices, its new and existing innovations and with the corresponding socio-cultural tools and methods at the centre of the concerns.

4 Conclusion

This study has examined some factors that can contribute to repairing the relationship between Cameroon and Europe by specifically exploring museum cooperation in the context of reparation and restitution of looted objects and by focusing on the actors involved, namely the European and Cameroonian laws, museums and state actors. I have identified several factors that may prevent the two parties from repairing their relationship, namely the persistence of the colonial discourse, non-updated accords, non-transparency, inertia, one-sided negotiations when talking about restitution and instrumentalizations for geopolitical and strategic power interests. The unbridled quest for economic and material development objectives is causing the social structure to be altered and the chiefdoms, places of power, to be transformed into purely touristic sites. In the quest for development, many palaces and the art have been transformed into a purely commercial activity, of massive production to satisfy the market demand. This situation has led to a rupture between the economic, social, political and spiritual orders, which should be repaired.

Several proposals have been made so far to the Cameroonian side as well as to its partners. But the fact is that some of them are still “pretending to be asleep”. Far from making a string of proposals here, I would like to come back to two aspects: the partners must take courage to address their painful stories, and to ensure respectful relations above all, yet restitution and reparation, too, because restitutions as a result of two-sided negotiations are the condition for a common future. At present, the question of culture in Africa and in Cameroon in particular needs to be addressed on its own terms. If research has shown that the museum, whether ethnographic, popular arts and traditions, scientific or technical, is foreign to African culture, it is up to Cameroon to explore frankly, boldly and courageously the existence and contribution of museums and to open up other possibilities that correspond to the country’s culture. As Felwine Sarr exposes in *Afrotopia* (2016), it is a question of reconceptualising everything and inventing a new utopia by asking the fundamental question: What does it mean to live well and to live better? In view of the above, it seems to me that reparation is necessary on two levels: internally and externally. The first should be carried out among Cameroonians, i.e., by decolonising their knowledge and practices and deeply questioning their needs, in order to regain courage and confidence. This internal reparation also concerns the West-erns, who should question their position in the world and their capacity to inhabit the world with others. Then Cameroon and Europe could redefine new dynamics for their relations. And restitution and decolonialization appear to be important steps for reparation as Albert Gouaffo explains:

La décolonisation et la restitution des biens culturels volés par dans les musées européens sont liés. Après quatre siècles d'exploitation coloniale et de relation d'asymétrie postcoloniale, les Africains et les Européens sont arrivés à un point où des relations entièrement nouvelles doivent être entièrement renégocier. L'art africain présent aujourd'hui dans les musées européens en est l'occasion. Vivre dans la justice, la fraternité, l'humanité est-il réservé aux seuls pays du nord ? Les symboles de l'excellence sont-ils des idéaux universels de l'humanité ? Donc l'Afrique a besoin des relations avec ses partenaires qui la libèrent et non l'asservissent (Gouaffo 2021).

There is no doubt that embarking on this path of freedom and reparation is not easy, but courage, hope and wisdom seem to be essential on this route for the ultimate sake of our humanity.

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