

THE OKU PALACE MUSEUM'S JOURNEY TOWARDS MODERN CONSERVATION

Victor BAYENA NGITIR (PhD)

University of Douala

vsbeyngitir80@yahoo.com

Telephone: (+237) 680 635 727

Résumé

Le cheminement du musée royal d'Oku vers la conservation moderne

La transformation des collections de la chefferie d'Oku en musée ethnographique en 2008 représentait le sommet d'efforts du roi (ehfon) Sentieb II dans son but de remplacer les pratiques archaïques par les techniques modernes de conservation. Situé sur la partie orientale du département de Bui, (au nord-ouest Cameroun), le musée se retrouve à 2,400m d'altitude, avec des températures 12° C-40° C et l'humidité relative 70-80%. Le royaume d'Oku partage sa frontière nord avec celui de Nkor, au nord-est avec Djottin, au sud avec Babungo et la plaine de Ndop, à l'est c'est le royaume Nso et à l'ouest on retrouve celui de Kom (H-J Koloss, 2000 :17). Beni d'une riche biodiversité, le peuple Oku a comme première religion, la sculpture en bois qu'il aurait pratiqué pendant les siècles. Patronnés par la royauté, marqués par la diversité et embellit par un symbolisme particulier, les collections d'Oku représentent 15 rois ayant marqué son l'histoire du 18^e au 20^e siècle (VB Ngitir, 2014 :14). Malheureusement et a cause des facteurs de détérioration, naturels et humains, ces collections ont perdu d'innombrables pièces maitresses. Le musée proprement dit raconte l'histoire de son peuple, interprète quelques vestiges de sa riche culture et invite les amoureux de l'art à découvrir la destination Oku. Cette étude retrace les origines du musée royal d'Oku, présente la typologie de ses collections et revoit l'évolution de ses techniques de conservation. Elle est largement axée sur la tradition orale et les données qualitatives.

Mots clés : *oku, musée, cheminement, conservation, moderne*

Abstract

The transformation of the Oku palace collections into an ethnographic museum in 2008 was the climax of systematic efforts by ehfon (king) Sentieb II to shun destructive traditional practices and embrace modern conservation. Located on the

eastern fringes of Bui Division, (North-West Cameroon), the museum stands over 2.400 meters above sea level, where extreme temperatures stand at 12^o C - 40^o C and relative humidity at 70 – 80%. To the north Oku borders on Nkor, to the north-east on Djottin, to the south on Babungo and the Ndop plain, to the east on Nso and to the west on Kom (H-J Koloss, 2000:17). Blessed with a rich biodiversity, Oku's first religion is wood carving. Patronized by royalty, marked by diversity and embellished by a peculiar symbolism, the Oku collections are the product of 15 kings who reigned between the 18th and 20th centuries (VB Ngitir, 2014:14). Unfortunately, due to natural and human factors of deterioration, the collections lost countless masterpieces and the situation worsened overtime. The museum captures the history of its people, interprets specimens of its rich material culture and invites lovers of art to visit destination Oku. The present paper traces the origins of the Oku palace museum, discusses the typology of its collections, and examines the evolution of its conservation techniques. Its central question is: how have the Oku palace collections evolved from traditional to modern conservation? It draws tremendously from oral tradition and qualitative data.

Key words: *oku, museum, journey, modern, conservation*

Introduction

Of the numerous ethno-linguistic groups that occupied the Bamenda Western Highlands of Cameroon in the mid-19th century, the Tikar were the most predominant. This group included entities like the Nso', Kom, Bum, and Oku, who originated from the Adamawa in North Cameroon (Ngitir, 2014:22). One hallmark of Tikar¹ culture was and has remained the production, ritual use and preservation of spectacular sculptural art, thrones, stools, pottery products and royal paraphernalia. By the turn of the 20th century, thousands of these masterpieces were lodged in special palace collections. Otherwise called *things of the palace*, certain artifacts were indispensable for the spiritual and physical stability of the community and some played intercessory roles between the *living* and *living dead* (Knopfli, 2002:45). This must however, be understood against the background where art was considered *a coded language*, with sacred

¹The notion of Tikar was formulated and popularized by the British colonial administration in the Southern Cameroons in the 1920s, in reference to “those populations of the east and central Bamenda Grassfields whose dynasties claimed an origin from the region of the Upper Mbam River and its tributaries”.

items playing vital transcendental roles in the realm of traditional religion (Koloss, 2000). In these circumstances, there was nothing *like art for art sake* since every object was said to have *a spiritual content and a symbolic meaning*.

Unfortunately, on account of their fragile material supports, poor storage, unconventional handling, bio-chemical, climatic and human factors, a bulk of what constituted the *golden age of Grassfields art* was lost - lost to frequent palace fire accidents, deterioration, degradation, looting and illicit traffic (N. Tamara, 1973). The transition from the pre-colonial to the colonial and post-colonial periods was thus a gloomy one for Tikar palace collections. By the mid-1970s, the Nso, Kom, Bum, Bafut, Babungo and Oku collections had become mere shadows of their glorious past. To pre-empt further losses, promote tourism and generate income, some of these collections were transformed into ethnographic museums by the year 2010. The Babungo royal museum was established in 2002, Mankon in 2003, Bafut in 2003 and Oku in 2008 (Ngitir, 2014:18).

Upon transformation, the Oku Museum counted over 800 artifacts with metal, wood, beads, clay, bamboo, leather, feather, cotton, animal skin, wool and ivory being principal material supports. Philip Ngajong and David Ndifon, both curators of the Oku collection and retainers of the *kenifon* society, revealed that before now, the antiques were stored in palace chambers, royal treasures and reserves of secret societies, often under precarious conditions. Other *power objects* were kept in the custody of trusted palace dignitaries, cult heads and customary societies that owned and used them. The present paper addresses the genesis of the Oku Museum collections, examines their nature and classification, discusses their conservation techniques, and proposes improved conservation practices.

1. Problem statement, research questions and objectives

Like other *Tikar* collections of the Bamenda Grassfields, challenges of conservation had bugged Oku palace collections for centuries on account of the harsh climatic conditions, high altitude, high relative humidity, poor storage and unprofessional handling. Consequently, the countless masterpieces that flooded Oku palace chambers and secret lodges C. 1900 trickled down to a few thousands by the year 2000.

Traditional techniques that sustained the collections seemed to have hit the rocks. Deterioration and decomposition became the order of the day as the collections lay at the mercy of pests, rodents and fungi infestations. The ultimate solution was either to blend traditional and modern methods of conservation or to completely rupture with the past. The decision to blend led to the transformation of some collections into a museum in 2008. The present paper traces the origins of the Oku palace museum, discusses the typology of its collections, examines the evolution of its conservation techniques, and proposes better conservation practices. A blend of qualitative data and oral tradition analyzed on thematic-cum-content basis provided grounds for our conclusions. In this endeavor we seek answers to four key questions: Who was at the genesis of the Oku collections? Why were some of the collections transformed into a museum? How could the museum collections be classified? What conservation techniques were applied on the collections?

2– Genesis of and peculiarities of the collections

The origins of the Oku kingdom and its legendary collections have been subjects of profound debate among authors and elites of the Bamenda Grassfields. Narrations, according to which the Oku dynasty was a princely off-shoot of the Nso royal family, have therefore come under increasing review especially among the Oku elite. H. Koloss (2000:31:44) traces the genesis of the kingdom to the communion (alliance) of three migrant lineages: *ntul*, *mbulum* and *mbele* in the 18th century. Thereafter, decision-making fell on seven lineages that have sustained the kingdom to date with a king list of fifteen. Each of the 15 kings contributed to the royal collection by adding to the stock of artifacts. By 1900, Oku boasted of one of the largest collections in the Bamenda Grassfields,² second only to that of Babungo. Fon Ewuh for

²The term Grassfields on the other hand is a German designation for the vast savanna that covered the north western part of their protectorate in Kamerun after 1884. It referred to the hinterland that was characterized by high altitude and grassy nature. It was an important political and economic zone in British colonial Cameroons. As part of the British Southern Cameroons, E. Ngeongong, (2007) locates it "at the point where the long West African coastline turns sharply south, running down to the Congo and Cape." It lies east of Greenwich, approximately between longitudes 5°3'- 8°5' and latitudes 9°5', 11°0' north of the equator. The Bamenda Grassfields cover the former administrative divisions of Bamenda, Wum and Nkambe (Chilver and Kaberry, 1967). The region is coterminous with the present North-West Region which replaced the defunct North-West Province in 1996.

instance formed the palace executive council, *kebei* while Fon Yancho introduced masked dance (*juju*) societies and blacksmithing in Oku (Sentieh II, 12/07/18). He also crowned the first lineage heads (*afaay*) and took part in the slave trade. Fon Keming Mbang, his successor introduced the *beng* masquerade and founded the cemetery for queen-mothers. Fon NgumTayeh on his part added *fenji*, another masquerade to the litany of royal masked dances. Fon NgumYuteh was prominent for encouraging and uniting Oku traditional healers who greatly contributed to the development of Oku art in general and the royal collection in particular (Koloss, 2000:42).

Oku's earliest tangible collections were therefore, predominantly cult objects, masks, musical instruments, sculpted thrones and stools. The intangible elements on their part included institutions of traditional government such as the *kebei*, traditional music, rituals and initiation rites which were accompanied by special insignia and paraphernalia. One of such emblems reserved for Oku lineage and family heads was the *ndong-ikfoe*, a symbolic title cup made from buffalo horn, *nyamngale* (Ntaimah, 04/05/10). Its role as title insignia dates back to Fon Yancho who installed the first lineage heads in Oku (Mukong, 1989:15). As a symbol of authority and unity, it was handed down from one lineage head (*faay*) to his successor as the link between the *living* and the *living dead*.

The new *faay* then ascended the ancestral stool and presided over family reunions, rites and traditional marriage using *ndong-ikfoe*. On the importance of such sculpted stools, Turnbull cited by Mukong (1989) writes: *in such a stool dwelt the spirit of the founding ancestor to whom all the living owed their existence. His descendant, the living ruler of the people might occupy the throne.*

On the whole, Oku art was marked by five major traits, namely, its stylization, consistency, diversity, discretion, a dominant wood sector, royal patronage, the primacy of religion and its symbolism. Its stylization was marked by realistic sculptural details such as insignia of rank for the nobility, female hairdo, body scarification, caps, beads and the headdress (Ngitir, 2014). Yet it yielded to a certain consistency, diversity and respect for clientele. That is why, though tied to originality, artists sought to satisfy the stylistic tastes of their clientele (Koloss, 2000:22). Despite the existence of multiple supports and genres like calabashes, metal work, basketry, bead work, weaving,

dyeing, embroidery and leather work, Oku collections were dominated by the wood carving sector (J. Keming 10/07/18). Sculpture was generally the work of men with wood as the principal medium (Fon Sentieh II 10/07/18).³ Royal patronage also regulated Oku traditional art just as it did for traditional medicine, smiting and hunting. It was the king's art, destined to enhance his rulership and status. Stools, swords, staffs, scepters, state umbrellas, royal drums, crowns and other regalia constituted royal paraphernalia and royal monopolies. To this must be added the role of traditional religion, which pervaded every aspect of life. It regimented and dominated Oku art in every respect as this was the original motivation traditional works (Ngitir, 2018:44).⁴ Oku art was also marked by its discretion and stratification. Certain 'dangerous' objects were to be seen in public only once or twice a year; highly mystical items were only used by members of special cults, when a new fon was ready for presentation to the public; while others only appeared when the fon personally presided over certain rituals. Finally, Oku art was unique by its symbolism. Works were hardly produced for their own sake, nor were they originally intended for public viewing. It served as a visual language depicting practical life situations. It represented cosmic and mystical relationships between the physical and spiritual worlds (Northern 1984:49-57)

3. State of the collections

3.1 Nature and Typology

The Oku ethnographic museum has a triple mission: showcasing the kingdom's rich material and immaterial cultural heritage, valorizing the masterpieces as sources of knowledge and transmission, and finally, conserving, safeguarding and exhibiting antiquities of the ancestry for purposes of tourism, research and entertainment. Its typology was reminiscent of Tikar heritage, depicting the kingdom's rich biodiversity, integral culture and a people strongly glued to its traditional religion, culture and socio-political institutions. It presents Oku as a pre-colonial

³ Except perhaps for household utensils, their work was generally commissioned by customers, the fon or customary societies. A special workshop for royal carvers was set up to produce items for religious and palace use.

⁴ Examples included votive figures which adorned shrines, ancestral figures, reliquary figures and charm figures, initiation stools, divination accessories, dance kits, musical instruments, and other ritual paraphernalia. Masks were the most spectacular forms of Oku sculpture though they were not meant to be viewed simply as art.

smiting center. This is evident from the proliferation of works from organic and metallic supports. They depicted a diversity of forms, functions and nature. Regarding their forms, one quickly identifies calabashes, statues, stools, thrones, costumes, utensils, caps and beads; in terms of functions, they are utilitarian, ceremonial, prestige, religious, animation and warrior items; and by their nature, they include the simple, power-packed, sacred, spiritual and mystical objects. The current permanent exhibition classifies the objects first, according to function and then according to material support. As of December 2020, their main themes included mysticism, archaeology, traditional medicine, history, royal genealogy, commemoration, musical instruments and accessories, thrones and stools, royal containers, masks and medicinal plants.

Table 1: Classifying the museum collections according to material support	
Material Support	Specimens on Exhibition or at the Reserve
Wood	Masks, statues, figurines, vessels, pots, jamba, li containers ;
Metal	Ceremonial knives, adzes, staffs, spear heads, g etc.
Beads/Cowries	Beaded caps, royal cloth, stools, statues, neck-bangles, etc.
Clay/soil	Wine pots, smoking pipes, vessels, utensils, build etc.
Raffia Fiber/leaves	Bags, mask supports, twines, hide-aways, etc.
Bamboo	Cupboards, shelves, stools, baskets, injunction p etc.
Leather/skin	Mystical bags, mask supports, amulets, footrests, etc.
Textile/cloth	Masquerades, amulets, costumes, mask supports, etc.
Feather	Head dresses, masquerades, costumes, adornm etc.
Hair/ Cotton/ wo	Ritual figures, masks, vestments, adornments, etc.
Stone	Ancient grinding stones, tombstones, fire ancestral stones, etc
Leaves	Masks, caps, sorcery accessories, etc.

Snail shells	Masquerades, herb containers, etc.
Bone/Teeth	Prayer tablets, amulets, bangles, neck-beads, bracelets, etc.
Calabashes	Wine gourds & containers, utensils, dishes, decorated & adorned calabashes, cult calabashes, etc.
Ivory	Tusk trumpets, bangles, neck beads, etc.

Source: Archives of Hericare-Cameroon, July 2018.

The table above presents the Oku art collections as dominated by wooden sculptures followed by metals and beaded objects. They are dominantly made from perishable organic matter - wood, bamboo, cotton, leaves, feathers, metal, beads, twines, cowry and snail shells, human hair and calabashes.

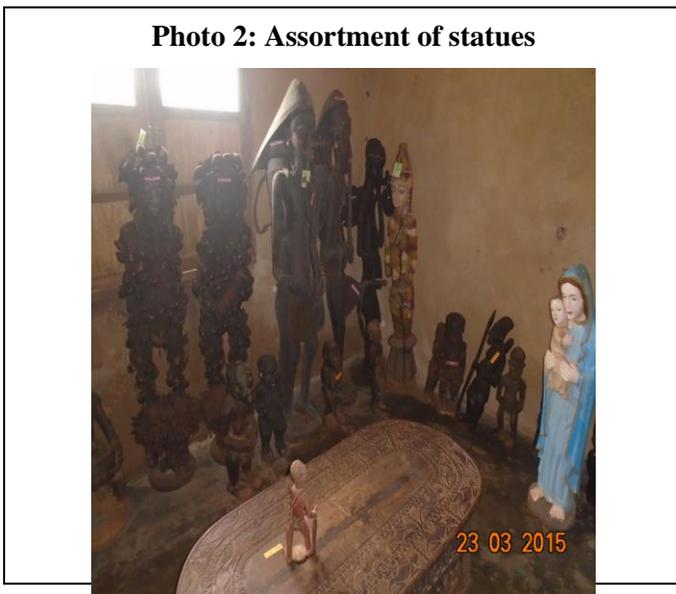
Photo 1: “Bchukibuk”, Royal audience gallery, December 2009



Photo by VB Ngitir,
April 2009

External audience gallery of Oku palace, facing the middle palace plaza meant for open-air displays & public addresses. Visible are some symbols of royal power – thrones, human figures, footrests, a royal backdrop, as well as human and animal motifs.

A classification of these collections according to function reveals a predominance of items related to enthronement, warfare, containers, utensils, prestige, worship, entertainment, farming, hunting and royalty. Objects with religious/mystical functions include ancestral figures, masquerades, adorned calabashes, mystical bags, sorcery items, royal beds, worship and figures, Finally, items with commemorative functions include thrones, caps, utensils, knives, vestments, beaded chains, bangles, beaded ceremonial sheaths and machetes, male and female figures, ancestral figures, life-size statues, human head motif stools, etc.



3.2 Management and Functioning

Despite its ambitious administrative structure providing for a *board of trustees*, a director, an administrative manager, a receptionist in charge of the coffee and craft shops, a caretaker in charge of exhibitions and the reserve, 5 museum curators in charge of visitation and sites, a gardener in charge of the museum herbarium and a security guard, the state of the museum collections has been far from rosy. To this date, and on account of the numerous obstacles besetting the museum, only two

personnel currently man the facility (the fon and a curator). Like the Babungo, Bafut, Mankon and Baham palace museums, that of Oku under its founder Fon Sintieh II, functioned more like a sole proprietor enterprise. Bugged by a litany of problems, the facility was basically run by the fon and a single curator, David Ndifon. The later served as receptionist, conservator, guide and mediator while the fon doubled as custodian and manager. Located between sacred institutions of the *knifon* society and the palace proper, the museum enjoys natural and spiritual security. It opens to the public every working day (Mondays to Fridays) and exceptionally when solicited on week-ends and during special palace events. Its key challenges include the lack of competent staff, poor handling and storage, inappropriate exhibition stands, no wall panels, incomplete documentation and cataloguing, irregular power supply, no internet connectivity, high relative humidity, mold and outright decomposition. To these must be added the ravaging effects insect pests like (termites, white ants and beetles), no office material, no website, no chemicals and expertise for preventive treatment and decontamination and until recently, the absence of a reserve. Other aspects requiring urgent attention include registration and visitor records, the absence of a museum policy document, a dehumidifier and financial autonomy. These management and logistical concerns require immediate attention.

3.3 The Exhibition

Collections of the Oku palace museum are exhibited in 13 rooms, a reserve, a reception, a craft shop, a coffee and honey shop and a herbarium (See Table 2 below).

ROOM	ROOM TITLE	DESCRIPTION OF EXHIBITION	NO. OF OBJECTS
Room 1	Mystical Juju costumes	Representations of magico-religious jujus	15
Room 2	Jujus of <i>Ngele</i> Society	Jujus of Royal descent-owned by princes	07

Room 3	Jujus of <i>Samba</i> Society	Samples of <i>manjong juju</i>	08
Room 4	Jujus of <i>Kwifon</i> Society	Jujus of the supreme regulatory society – owned by retainers	10
Room 5	Royal <i>Kikum</i> Jujus	Animation jujus owned by young princes	07
Room 6	Herbal Home	A classic representation of an Oku herbal home	57
Room 7	<i>Kwifon</i> Implements	Mystical musical implements of <i>kwifon</i> society	09
Room 8	The Royal Court	Representations of the 15 <i>fons</i> that have reigned in Oku displayed with their royal paraphernalia	137
Room 9	Statues	A collection of assorted statues – ancestral and commemorative	34
Room 10	Head-wears, <i>Mfub</i> & Cups	A collection of some caps, <i>Mfub</i> items and traditional cups used in Oku	47
Room 11	Stools and thrones	A collection of stools and thrones	70
Room 12	Containers	A display of all kinds of traditional containers	41
Room 13	Masks	A collection of an assortment of masks – both the zoomorphic and anthropomorphic	70
Room 14	Reserve	Divided into 3 units: -A storage chamber (for objects) -A treatment unit -A documentation unit	800
TOTAL			1, 300

Source: Archives of Hericare- Cameroon, May 2018.

As already mentioned, the museum exhibition extends to a number of tourist facilities and sites closely affiliated to it. They include a coffee and honey shop where Oku coffee and honey from the Kilum forest are served to visitors; a craft shop for the display and sale of copies (replicas) of museum objects and crafts; and a herbarium where some rare medicinal plants typically used in Oku healing homes are on exhibition.⁵

4. Necessity for proper conservation

4.1. *Perilous storage conditions*

Before their transformation into a royal museum, the Oku collections relied exclusively on indigenous storage and treatment techniques. Despite the merits of some traditional practices, both storage and handling conditions left much to be desired, resulting in colossal losses. The preservation and conservation of artifacts and antiquities were the responsibility of family and lineage heads, chief priests of palace shrines, notables and trusted retainers. Shrines were not just archaeological sites but were equally seats of ancestor veneration. Consequently, inner chambers and secret lodges were equipped with special guilds for physicians, diviners, smiths, carvers, carpenters, musicians, soothsayers, weavers and masquerades at the service of the fon and allied institutions - *kwifon*, *ngele* and *msub*. They were responsible for the production, sanctification, preservation, conservation and restoration of ritual items like camwood, medicinal powders and mystical portions. They also produced sacred items like double gongs, royal furniture, sacred vessels, prayer tablets, masks, juju costumes, headgears, insignia of rank power objects amulets and accessories. Unfortunately, storage conditions in these chambers and treasures, though perhaps the most affordable at the time, were to say the least, perilous. While the bulk of the objects were either littered on dusty floors or piled on bamboo shelves, others were either stripped on ceiling ropes or spread on bamboo ceilings. Others still, were entrusted to cult heads, trusted palace dignitaries and some customary societies.

⁵ The presence of the herbarium underscores the reputation as the hub of traditional medicine in Cameroon and beyond. Most of the crafts offered by the souvenir shop are representations of Oku's rich biodiversity and especially the *panamants turaco*, a rare bird species found only at the Kilum forest. The palace itself, the *lumetu* shrine and the mystical Lake Oku, fondly called *maves* constitute other touristic sites directly affiliated to the museum.

Their poor storage exposed *these things of the palace* to various natural and human factors of deterioration, degradation and loss.

4.2 Deterioration, degradation and loss

A number of natural and human factors accounted for the heavy losses suffered by the collections. Prominent among the natural factors were the fragility of wood species, climatic fluctuations, pest attacks and the ravaging work of micro-organisms. These agents systematically destroyed both their structural composition and aesthetic presentations. The most vulnerable objects were those made from organic supports like wood, cotton, feathers, fiber, reed, bone, calabash tubes and bamboo.

They were the most susceptible to decay, brittle, insect attacks, fungi infestations and rot once exposed to the open air. Oku's high relative humidity and the extremes of heat and cold resulted in repeated expansion and contraction which caused strains, warping and breakage. Matters were made worse by the extremely poor storage and handling methods. Retainers lacked not only appropriate handling techniques but equally the appropriate logistics. Until 2008, it was common to find objects piled in heaps in dark, smoky rooms and lodges of customary societies, on wet or dusty earth floors, on bamboo ceilings and shelves and sometimes at sacred groves, caves, sacred forests and other ritual sites. Given that some ceilings leaked during the rainy season, many of the objects showed signs of decay and fungi infestation. Beads began to fall from beaded objects whose cloth support began to rot. The *kibambo* funeral figure for instance, was by custom left to rot in a sacred grove. It was only replaced at the end of a reign. Some cult objects belonging to secret societies were stored for years out of light, for they were used only at night. When not kept on wooden ceilings and shelves, exposed to weevils and termites, they were hung on wall pins at the mercy of rodents (Ngitir, 2014:36-37).

These poor storage conditions provided ideal havens for various forms of deterioration and damage. Furthermore, access to certain palace objects and tomb huts was restricted to specific days, persons, seasons and rare occasions. Only qualified initiates were permitted to see, touch or repair them. The extinction of many durable wood species like *fangong*, *keghang*, figs, iroko, mahogany and iron wood, has also become a major concern in recent years, as thousands of artifacts have been

irretrievably lost, leaving no surviving models. Less durable species used for this purpose warped and easily cracked shortly after production. Others rapidly came under fungi attacks and soon rotted due to the high relative humidity.

In these circumstances, leather and animal pelts quickly bristled and hairs fell off. The effects of chemical and biological action were most noticeable on metals (knives, gongs, ceremonial machetes and spear-heads). Dampness and dust particles provoked chemical reactions which eventually corroded the already rusty metals. This was responsible for the perforations commonly found on double iron gongs, mugs and jars. Beetles and woodborers also left a heavy toll on Oku art especially, during periods with the lowest temperatures. These beetles laid their eggs in the cracks and deep crevices of wooden objects. The eggs later hatched into larvae which further burrowed into the wood. Their presence was most visible on bamboo and wooden items, life-size statues, jambs, lintels, carved pillars and house posts. The larvae later developed into beetles, which laid more eggs and the vicious cycle continued. We also noticed that ants, weevils and micro-organisms indiscriminately attacked all organic matter they came across for they had little to live on in the wet season. The Babungo, Bafut and Mankon museums suffered similar effects. Among the human factors that ravaged especially wood and bamboo objects we identified poor handling which exposed masks, beds, machetes, feather costumes, bamboo instruments, drums and animal skins to dampness, decay, corrosion and rust. Moreover, the cult houses were either poorly ventilated or not ventilated at all. Entire animal skins and feather costumes were consumed by insects and rodents while poorly thatched cult huts dripped with rain. Other causes of degradation included the lack of appropriate logistics, the absence of trained personnel, wear and tear from violent displays and fire accidents. This led to severe deterioration, discoloration and irretrievable loss.

4.3 Indigenous conservation techniques

Art conservation in Oku like in much of Africa is as old as art collecting. Like other incidental discoveries of Neolithic man, the invention of preventive and curative conservation measures started by trial and error, then quickly evolved into conscious traditional and scientific therapies (Holl, 2015). The necessity to protect

and safeguard collections from physical damage and to prolong their lifespan gave rise to a series of preventive and curative measures applicable in Oku and neighboring kingdoms. Preventive measures essentially safeguarded works from harmful physical agents while curative methods were intended to halt deterioration. The earliest known preventive methods in Oku were religious and consisted of restrictive customs and practices. These customs included taboos barring women, children and non-initiates from art workshops storage chambers and cult houses (Musa, 1988). As a rule, the fon's authorization was required for certain rare tree species to be cut. Notue (2006:38) affirms that even the felling of certain wood trees was "accompanied by religious rites, some involving sexual abstinence and food taboos". Philip Ngajong, an Oku royal carver confirms that without these rites the piece of wood could mystically return to the forest. These measures were intended to conserve the intrinsic value and cosmic power in the wood as well as prevent indiscriminate exploitation.⁶ The second preventive measure consisted of using of resistant (durable) wood species in carving. Corroborating this, Notue and Triaca, (2006:31), point to the *Ibukwin* tree, as the best wood for sculpture in the entire region.

5. Towards modern conservation

Regarding preventive conservation, efforts to modernize the state of Oku collections date back to the colonial and post-independence periods. However, their real impact took quite a while to be felt since the primary goal of early colonial endeavors was not in the interest of local communities but to ensure that collections were readied for shipment overseas. Consequently, for over three decades, thousands of artifacts were whisked off from Oku to German and British museums with no long-term conservation plan for home-based collections. Besides, it was neither in the German nor British interest to equip the Oku palace with permanent conservation facilities when European museums badly needed the antiques. Even when M.D.W. Jeffreyes, the British colonial administrator for the then Bamenda Province, began

⁶ Masks were generally an exclusive domain of men. Away from public display, wooden masks, costumes and other accessories were kept in special reserves, sometimes in caves or groves under strict custody and far from non-initiates. Stealing from any of the palace institutions or collections was and remains abomination in Oku.

collecting ethnological and geological specimens that eventually constituted the Bamenda Provincial Museum (1936), his intention, from every indication, was to set up a collection and transit point for onward shipments to Britain, not a permanent conservation center for the people of Oku.



Photo 3: Representation of herbal home, Oku Museum

Photo by VB Ngitir, January 2015

Little wonder, no indigenes were trained as professional conservators throughout the colonial period and the numerous thefts recorded by the museum during that period were blamed on British agents (Ndumbi, 1979:44). Consequently, only cosmetic treatment was administered to stabilize the collections in readiness for shipment (K Mbayu: 35-36). Throughout the colonial period, the Oku collections therefore relied exclusively on traditional conservation and treatment techniques. However, the establishment of the Bamum royal museum (1929) and other public museums in the 1950s motivated the innovations that were later embraced by many Grassfields collections. This was the beginning of a long journey towards blending modern and indigenous conservation. The establishment of the Oku Museum in 2008 thus marked the beginning of a new era in the conservation of the collections. First, some objects hitherto lodged in secret dark rooms, groves and cult chambers were deactivated and relocated to a new facility with better ventilation, storage and handling conditions. Second, insecticides, fungicides and other decontaminants were blended with

traditional therapies. Third, for the first time, retainers were taught the difference between storage in *knifon* chambers and storage in museum reserves. With the new facility, came more spacious displays, regular inspection and more public access. A permanent visitor schedule and a regular staff were put in place. These helped to detect early signs of deterioration and to determine appropriate remedial action. Fourth, lighting was improved with the installation of electricity. Furthermore, museum curators and keepers received capacity building at training workshops organized by the Ministry of Arts and Culture (MINAC) and the UNESCO representation in Cameroon. These encounters equipped the museum personnel to better address concerns high relative humidity, pest control and fungi infection. Though held back by the lack of means, new knowledge on preventive treatment, museum security and environmental controls were indispensable for tackling future challenges. In the absence of dehumidifiers, exhibition rooms were kept warm and dry by charcoal pots.

Concerning curative treatment, the predominance of wood as material support in Oku palace art has been variously appreciated as a plastic and visual asset on the one hand, and as a perpetual handicap on the other. Wood is organic, fragile and more vulnerable to agents of deterioration than metallic, synthetic and ceramic objects. The use of various chemical treatments has thus been recommended and used occasionally, when the means permit. Yet maximum care was required in their handling and the treatment of cracks, insect and fungal attacks. Thanks to modern insecticides and fungicides cockroaches, moths, termites, book lice, beetles and ants were occasionally neutralized. House mice which ate everything they come across were prevented from entering storage rooms. Doors and windows were tightly shut and all holes blocked as soon as they were detected. Rodents on their part were caught with traps and eliminated with rat poison. Excessive handling of objects was also discouraged and when necessary, it was done with care.⁷

⁷ It is however, worth mentioning the role of the Ministry of Arts and Culture (MINAC) and the German partners, the Soul of Africa Museum (SOAM), Hamburg. In recent times, notably in 2015 and 2018, MINAC made symbolic grants for the refurbishing and cataloguing of the collections. While the 2015 grant of 3.000.000FCFA was literally mismanaged, that of 2018 (2.000.000FCFA) gave the facility its first touch of preventive treatment, restructuring of the exhibition and cataloguing.

Conclusion

From 2008 till date, the Oku palace opted for and progressively established an ethnographic museum with a mission to collect, interpret, transmit and safeguard the kingdom's history and rich artistic heritage. In this endeavor, and despite laudable strides, many challenges of conservation have remained rife. The present study which hinges on the pilgrimage of the museum collections from traditional to modern conservation draws elaborately from our recent project (under MINAC) which identified and catalogued the holdings of those museum holdings. A blend of qualitative data and oral tradition greatly animated our analyses and contributed to the present findings. It reveals among other things that these collections originated from the dynastic founders of the kingdom and their successors; that many factors – historical, cultural, economic and even touristic accounted for the transformation of some collections into a museum; that the collections can be categorized under multiple typologies according to material supports, nature and functions, provenance, producers, form and style; that the conservation techniques applicable to the facility have evolved from indigenous, through the modern and then to a blend of both; and finally that the way forward towards valorizing the young museum should include addressing its principal challenges, acquiring more competent staff and keeping pace with the international code of ethics for museums.

References

Argenti N. (2007), *The Intestines of the State: Youth, Violence and Belated Histories in the Cameroon Grassfields*, Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press.

Bofua, P. & Ndifor J. (2006), "Artists in Babungo", in *Babungo: treasures of the sculptor kings in Cameroon*: ch2, Notue, J.P. 5 Editions Publishers: Milan.

Chilver, E.M. & Kaberry M. (1995), *Traditional Bamenda: The Pre-colonial History and Ethnography of the Bamenda Grassfields*. Buea: Government Printers.

Christraud, G. (1983). *Things of the Palace: A Catalogue of the Bamum Palace Museum in Fumban*. Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GMB.

Djache N. S. (2012). *Les Civilisations du Cameroun: Histoire, Art, Architecture et Sociétés Traditionnelles*, Dschang: Editions de la Route des Chefferies.

Fowler, I. (1996), “The Oku iron industry in its regional setting: a descriptive account”, in *Nso and Its Neighbours: Readings in Social History*, Chem- Langhëë, B. and Fanso, V.G. (Eds), Amherst College. pp. 41-75.

Kanjo, M. D. (1988), *Nso Traditional Sculpture: An Interpretation of Motifs*. Oxford, OXFAM Printing Services.

Knopfli, H. (1998), *Sculpture and Symbolism: Crafts and Technologies: Some Traditional Craftsmen of the Western Grasslands of Cameroon: Part 2—Woodcarvers and Blacksmiths*. Limbe, Presbook Publication.

Knopfli, H. (2002), *Living in Style: Crafts and Technologies: Some Traditional Craftsmen and Women of the Western Grasslands of Cameroon*. Limbe, Presbyterian Printing Press.

Koloss H. J. (2000), *Worldview and Society in Oku (Cameroon)*, Berlin: Verlag Von Dietrich Reimer

Mbayu K.G. (1994), *Museums, Philosophy and Development in Cameroon*, New York, Syracuse University Electronic Publishing Center.

Mittler, G. and Ragans, R. (1999), *Understanding Art*, New York: Glencoe & McGraw-Hill.

Mukong, N. P. (1989), *Ndong-Ikfoe: A Symbol of Unity among the Oku People: A Philosophical Analysis*, B. A., Dissertation in Philosophy, STAMS - Bambui.

Victor Bayena Ngitir (2021), “The Survival of Community Museums in Cameroon”, in *Himalayan Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies (HJHCS)*, Vol-2, Issue - 2 (March-April, 2021), ISSN Print: 2709 – 362XISSN Online 2709 – 3638, Open access, Pages: 25-34.

Victor Bayena Ngitir (2021), “Restating security concerns of Cameroon’s community collections and museums”, in *Revue Della/Afrique*, VOL. 3 No 8 août 2021, ISBN 978-2-9537299-3-1, Directeur de Publication: Koffi Ganyo AGBEFLE, Editeur: EFUA, Editions: ACAREF, Lomé, Pages: 142-158.

Victor Bayena Ngitir (2017), “Bamenda Grassfields Living Museums: A Colonial Heritage” in *Cameroon Journal of Studies in the Commonwealth (CJCS)* Volume 4, No 1, 2017, ISSN 2411 1325, Edited by Kizitus Mpoche & Balasubramanyam Chandramohan, Online, London, pp. 44-67.

Victor Bayena Ngitir (2014), *Bamenda Grassfields Collections and Museums from Ancient Times to the Beginning of the 21st Century: The Symbolisms and Conservation of Palace Art*, Thesis, Department of History, University of Yaoundé I.

Nkwi, P.N. (1996), "A conservation dilemma over royal art in Cameroon", in *Plundering Africa's Past*, P.R. Schmidt and R.J. McIntosh, (Eds), Indiana University Press pp.99-109.

Notue, J.P. and Triaca, B. (2005), *Mankon: Arts, Heritage and Culture from the Mankon Kingdom*. Milan: COE, 5 Continents Editions.

Notue, J.P. and Triaca, B. (2006), *Babungo: Treasures of the Sculptor Kings in Cameroon Memory, Arts and Techniques: Catalogue of the Babungo Museum*.

Tamara, N. (1973), *Royal Art of Cameroon: The Art of the Bamenda – Tikar*. Dartmouth: Hopkins Center Art Galleries.

Tamara, N. (1984), *The Art of Cameroon*. Washington DC: Smithsonian.