

# The Secret Art of the Bambui Royal Treasury, Western Grassfields, Cameroon

BY  
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## Introduction

The cultural security officers, *Bechin-toh*, of the Bambui Kingdom initiated the author into one of the most secret regulatory societies in the kingdom and Cameroon Grassfields, *kwifor*, in 2004. The initiation came at a time when I was undertaking fieldwork for my PhD, and therefore gave me rights and privileges that have shaped and continue to shape my research on Cameroon and African art. For instance, my admission into *kwifor* gave me the following rights and privileges: access to virtually all the sacred and secret royal objects in the royal treasury or traditional palace museum and in the homes of notables; access into the *kwifor* storage facilities in the *kwifor* compound, not only in Bambui but also in other kingdoms; the right to participate in all rituals associated with secrecy across the kingdom; the right to advise the *fon* or king and key members of his cabinet on artistic and cultural heritage affairs; and lastly, I was appointed to oversee the implementation of the ongoing Bambui Museum and Ecotourism Project.

Yet, despite the above rights and privileges, I was cautioned never to reveal certain things which I saw or heard in the *kwifor* compound to non-initiates.<sup>1</sup> This sounded more like a paradox since “enlightenment values place a premium on illumination, on full disclosure, and on open access to knowledge and truth.”<sup>2</sup> In fact, I was awestricken and murmured to myself, how I was going to write up the research findings without revealing some of the crucial information which I gathered from the initiation ritual. The episode was further compounded by the fact that I am a native of Bambui and know the value and taboos associated with revealing secret information. However, this was, and still, is not uncommon in the study of African art. As Mary Nooter convincingly describes in her 1993 exhibition *Secrecy: African Art that Conceals and Reveals*, “outsiders are not necessarily supposed to know everything about African art.”<sup>3</sup> Moreover, even individuals within a given culture are often unfamiliar with the “many levels of esoteric knowledge embedded within a work of art or the context of which it is a part”.<sup>4</sup>

To illustrate the contrast between Western notions of available knowledge and African concepts of hidden knowledge, Nooter’s secrecy exhibition emphasized situations in which African art objects that are highly cherished in the West were

not intended for public viewing in their original contexts.<sup>5</sup> To highlight this, the secrecy exhibition and the catalogue that accompanied it, was interspersed with many examples of objects that in their original contexts in Africa were purposely displayed in shadow, partially buried in the ground, perceived only when swathed in cloth or shielded from human view entirely.<sup>6</sup>

In this chapter, I will present some of the motivations for the continuous existence of secret objects in the Bambui Palace collection with the aim of filling some of the gaps in the literature on the region's traditional palace museums. Barth once noted that "the value of knowledge is enhanced by veiling it and sharing with as few as possible," not by broadcasting it, to which we might add, that the value of certain pieces of Bambui art are greatly enhanced through concealment rather than revelation.<sup>7</sup>

To unpack this, the chapter will first, highlight the significance of the royal treasury and secrecy surrounding some of its art. It will further discuss one of three key motivations for secrecy in Bambui art. The last section, the conclusion, will summarize the discussion.

### **Significance of sacred and secret art**

Traditional elite and elders of the kingdoms of the western Grassfields, including Bambui, are noted for their obsession with tradition, and especially the religious aspect of it. Their interest in traditional religious practices has led Jean-Pierre Warnier to associate their authority with "containment" of substances or what he calls the "containment of the king's body or le Roi-Pot."<sup>8</sup> Following Warnier's notion of containment, kings in the Grassfields are seen as representing not only themselves, but also the interest of the palace and kingdom, including, again the preservation of its treasures.<sup>9</sup> The opening up of most of the traditional art institutions, and above all, the creation of modern museums in some palaces of the region, largely seen as a threat to the survival of the royal treasury has made it indispensable for titled men and elders to cherish and hold onto the sacred and secret art of the kingdom in the hope of living up to the expectations of their people and ancestors.

More recently, the growth and popularity of secular art, especially art decorated with foreign aesthetics have increased significantly to such an extent that contemporary art and institutions have outnumbered sacred and secret art institutions across the region and Bambui.<sup>10</sup> It is for this reason that in the Grassfields context dominated by the politics of obsession with tradition and interest in appeasing ancestors through the performance of traditional religious practices, and thereby, gaining prestige, that the preservation of sacred and secret art, has become so popular among titled men and elders of the Bambui Kingdom.

However, interest in preserving the sacred and secret art of the Grassfields is not restricted to the Bambui Kingdom. It cuts across the Cameroon Grassfields. As Jean Paul Notue and Triaca Bianca have noted in the case of Mankon and Babungo museums, they could not display certain pieces of the sacred and secret art in the newly created museums without the approval of the cultural security officers of these kingdoms.<sup>11</sup> As they point out in the catalogue that was published to accompany the Mankon exhibition:

We could neither keep nor publish photographs of the pieces against the wishes of those who produced them, especially if this is in conflict with their usual customs. Certain sacred and secret objects were, therefore, not collected or displayed.<sup>12</sup>

One notable explanation for the above is the fear that the sacred and secret art of Mankon, and by extension, Bambui will be secularized and ancestors offended. Moreover, displaying some sacred or secret pieces of art could have serious repercussions on those who have taken the oath of secrecy as well as those who have not been initiated into the secret societies that own the objects.<sup>13</sup> For instance, people might die or develop illnesses that cannot be diagnosed. The outcome of not collecting or displaying the sacred and secret art of Bambui is abundant benevolence from the ancestors and deities of the kingdom.

Considerable literature exists on the art of the Cameroon Grassfields, but little about the motivations for the division into sacred and secret art as an aspect that embodies the desire of titled men and elders to assert their status and identity, and more importantly, to make Bambui voice heard in the wider Grassfields community. Worth noting here, is that, most Bambui titled men and elders associate sacred and secret art with ancestral worship, and tend to exalt and not display it as a means of ensuring that the dead find a proper place in the realm of the ancestors. In fact, if titled men and elders in the Bambui Kingdom show interest in not exhibiting or displaying secret art, it is because they are descendants of a culture that is obsessed with tradition and secret items, and that tend to value these qualities as prerequisites for titles, authority and power in their communities. Displaying certain pieces of sacred and secret art in public as is the case with secular art is tantamount to undermining the same authority and power that they are meant to preserve. This, however, contrasts sharply with the underlying principle of the Western art world where the fundamental assumption is that art is a public phenomenon. As Morphy notes in the case of Western museums and galleries, their goal is to give their collections the widest possible public exposure; their reputation, quite possibly even their livelihood, depends on disseminating knowledge of the objects they possess.<sup>14</sup> In the West, the value of a painting, Morphy goes on, depends on its fame, and on how many people know it.<sup>15</sup> In the Cameroon Grassfields, and Bambui in particular, the value of a sacred/secret statue or mask is likely to depend on how few people know it.

Moreover, Bambui culture also encourages the promotion and preservation of sacred and secret art because it is one notable means of bridging the gap between the ancestors and their living kin-groups. As a matter of fact, sacred and secret art such as the title cup, for example, gains its power from the breath of dead elders stored in the same cup which they have breathed and spoken over for generation after generation.<sup>16</sup> Ownership of an ancestral drinking cup empowers titled men and elders, making them to be seen as intermediaries between the ancestors and their living kin-groups. With the means of communication with the ancestors under control, through the ancestral cup that is now used in pouring libation to the ancestors, sacred and secret art can rightly be represented as a means through which titled men and elders can achieve what Igor Kopytoff calls “benevolence.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, ensuring that, they, and their communities are rewarded rather than punished by the ancestors for not propitiating them using sacred and secret objects. This is also one of the reasons why Grassfields, and by extension, Bambui titled men and elders consider ownership and preservation of sacred and secret objects important, because it enhances their social status both in the kingdom and region. Failure to seclude secret art, however, is believed to harm or destroy than enhance the social status of elites and elders.<sup>18</sup>

However, while majority of titled men and elders in Bambui see sacred and secret art as different from secular art, most of which is displayed daily, some, are somewhat, skeptical, on grounds that the sacred and secular are very much the same, especially in the eyes of those who do not believe or practice the traditions of the kingdom. In a region where, believe in traditional religious practices are largely seen as impediments to transformation and development, many Bambui people feel promotion and preservation of secret art will “disconnect” rather than connect them to the contemporary world in which they rightly, belong. In fact, most of my informants argued that not displaying certain pieces of objects in the museum or public spaces on grounds that they are secret is not and will never help the Bambui Kingdom. Similarly, some, especially members of contemporary and youth associations residing in Bamenda (the provincial capital of the North West Region) shared this conviction, arguing that while titled men and elders are depriving their communities from accessing certain pieces of objects under the pretext that they are secret, similar objects from these communities are creating jobs in Western museums, and no one out there has ever been punished by the ancestors. To continue to store objects under very deplorable conditions inside the palace and not benefitting anything economically from them is deeply disturbing, observed an informant. Yet, in spite of these reservations, most of these “secret art taboos sceptics” are still concerned about the implications of not upholding one of the core values of their tradition, the seclusion of the secret arts of the kingdom from public view.

## Secret art and the Search for Ancestral Roots

This chapter is framed around the notion of sacred and secret objects as representatives of ancestors and deities in Africa and the Cameroon Grassfields, which emphasizes their non-display in public spaces.<sup>19</sup> Apparently, there is no place in the western Grassfields where the use of the sacred and secret art, is considered a means of negotiating relations to ancestors and the local community as is the case with most Bambui titled men and elder; no place where titled men and elders have made ownership of such items a symbol of prestige, power and authority, or even, what Scott cogently calls a “hidden transcript of resistance” against opponents of the secret; no place where such an object is associated with the politics of obsession with prestige items or is used as a means of asserting one’s social status as it has taken hold among Bambui titled men and elders.<sup>20</sup> No Grassfields scholar has undertaken an exhaustive study of the rationale behind the issue of ancestral presence in secret art as well as the use of these objects to search for roots and gain prestige in the community than Jean Pierre Warnier. For instance, in his study on the “King as a Container in the Cameroon Grassfields,” Warnier explains that:

The fon of Mankon takes palm wine from his secret buffalo horn drinking cup and sprays saliva/wine onto the people during the annual dry season festival. His drinking horn is an important vessel in this ritual gesture. And that for the neighbouring Meta, the hereditary buffalo-horn drinking cup of the lineage head is seen as a means of establishing continuity with the dead fathers of the patrilineage and drawing upon their mystical power in ritual contexts. The cup is made potent by uttering over it what the Meta call *njawm*, glossed by Dillon as ‘strong statement’, which is a speech, made aloud, by the owner of the drinking horn. The cup gains its power from the breath of the dead elders stored in the same cup which they have breathed and spoken over for generation after generation. The strong statement made over such a cup is so powerful that it effects what it says. When speaking over such a cup, a notable can only tell the truth. What must be stressed is that the notable is seen as a container of breath-and-speech, and the drinking horn as the receptacle of the accumulated breath-and-speech of the dead generations.<sup>21</sup>

The above extract elucidates the fact that ownership of a secret drinking cup and by extension, secret objects is one notable means of ensuring that there is continuity with both the ancestors and the descendants of the lineage head. It is a means of building from and extending the breathe and speech of the dead elders and titled men of one’s lineage, and by extension, the Bambui community. As a matter of fact, it is through the acquisition and use of secret objects that Bambui titled men and elders are considered men, since for many people from Bambui and the Grassfields, one is a man and by extension title holder only if he owns and uses secret objects with distinctive motifs in the same manner as his predecessors and ancestors did at their own time. This means that ownership of such an object allows the man the opportunity to also store the breathe and speech that will eventually be handed over to his successor upon his dead. In other words, a Bambui title holder’s position continues after him only if he leaves behind secret objects that will be used in

venerating him. In fact, his position survives and continues after him only if he upholds and passes intact the secrets associated with the title cup handed to him by his predecessor(s). In Bambui in particular and the Grassfields as a whole, people generally scorn title holders and elders who do not own such objects, and tend to address them as empty men, commoners or even women, in some cases. For instance, a Bambui elder once refused to serve the author palm wine in a plastic cup on grounds that it was not a man's drinking cup. I guess he was referring to a sacred cow horn drinking as is the case with most Bambui men. In a similar situation, one of my informants told me how he was insulted right in his own house by visitors who refused to pour palm wine into his cup because it was a glass rather than a secret cow horn drinking cup. One of the visitors angrily questioned him: "How can you call yourself a titled man when you do not have a secret drinking cup even in your own house?"<sup>22</sup> We can "pour this palm wine into everyone's glass in this house as long as they are visitors but not you because you are in your house and cannot tell us that you forgot your sacred drinking cup somewhere." The informant told me how he felt guilty after the incident but mustered courage and explained his situation to the visitors, and promised to buy such sacred cow horn drinking cup in future before he was allowed to drink from the glass—as the last chance.

The informant's experience suggest that, in Bambui in particular, and the Grassfields as a whole, ownership of secret objects is one of the main criteria for evaluating the status of titled men and elders, since the local population prioritizes such an object as evidence that the man is now a titled holder, and by extension part of the secret societies of the kingdom, and is capable of rubbing shoulders with his colleagues and peers. Indeed, in Bambui, nothing reflects the status of a man more than his collection of secret art—that he displays and hides in designated and secret spaces. It is this practice that led Paul Gebauer to assert that a "Grassfields man's secret drinking cup and related items are always among the few items in his carry-all bag."<sup>23</sup> Secret objects such as the buffalo and cow horn drinking cups are also popular among titled men and elders because they are used not only for drinking palm wine, but also for drinking palm wine mixed with the blood of a sacrificial fowl or cock.<sup>24</sup> As Warnier notes, in the case of Mankon, the drinking cup was used by trade-friends in the past in passing formal alliances, by drinking from their cups, after saying aloud: "If I know something about you and fail to tell you or if I betray you, may this wine (or this blood) tell it to my stomach."<sup>25</sup> The idea behind such a statement is that the "wine from the cup stays in the person's stomach, and if he betrayed his friend, even years later, justice would be done by causing his "ignominious death with swollen feet or a swollen belly."<sup>26</sup> The popular belief in the Grassfields and Bambui in particular, is that alliances passed using secular objects, such as clay or glass drinking vessels can never be effective—which might also explain why the glass bottle that was originally held by one of the figures

on the Bamum throne was replaced with a traditionally stylized drinking horn decorated with pearls before the throne was sent to Berlin in 1908.<sup>27</sup>

## Concluding Remarks

This chapter has argued that the secret art of the Bambui Kingdom, unlike secular art cannot be exhibited or displayed in public for a number of reasons. First, secret art is an instrument in the local elites search for power and titles. To possess secret knowledge and by extension, secret art is a form of power, whose value depends largely on how well it is kept out of the sight of non-initiates or those who have not been empowered to be members of such a society.<sup>28</sup> Second, the secret art of Bambui is a means of negotiating relations to their ancestors and ancestral values. Successful negotiations or respect of the sacred and secret values of ancestral objects—by not displaying them in public, for example, is believed to bring benevolence. Similarly, neglect is believed to bring punishment. Indeed, the relations of African and Cameroon Grassfields ancestors to their living kinsmen is convincingly echoed by Kopytoff when he notes that:

African ancestors are vested with mystical powers and authority. They retain a functional role in the life of their living kinsmen; indeed, African kin-groups are often described as communities of both the living and the dead. The relation of the ancestors to their living kinsmen has been described as ambivalent, as both punitive and benevolent and sometimes even as capricious. In general, ancestral benevolence is assured through propitiation and sacrifice; neglect is believed to bring about punishment.<sup>29</sup>

Kopytoff's observation ties into the Bambui case, and highlights the importance of ancestral propitiation. But, propitiation is not just about libation—it is also about keeping ancestral, and by extension sacred and secret objects out of the sight of those who are not intermediaries between ancestors and their living kinsmen. Accordingly, the motivation on whether or not to display sacred and secret art is not only the choice of those who possess or curate such objects. Rather, it is determined by multiple factors, including the ambition to preserve titles and power, as well as the indispensable commitment to promote and preserve ancestral values. But more importantly, factors such as the obsession with prestige items and the desire to use sacred and secret items as a hidden transcript of resistance to change are contributory factors to the non-display of sacred and secret items which have, unfortunately, not been discussed here because of word limit.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> To respect the oath I took during my initiation in 2004, I have not included secret objects in this discussion. I have, however, included an image showing the external view of the secret royal chamber where the objects are stored.

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- <sup>2</sup> Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. "Secrets of Encounter." In *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* ed. B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 253.. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California, University of California Press, 1998.
- <sup>3</sup> Mary Nooter. "Introduction: The Aesthetics and Politics of Things Unseen." In *Secrecy: African Art that Conceals and Reveals* ed. M. Nooter, 20. New York: Museum for African Art, 1993.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid: 1993, 20.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid: 1993, 20.
- <sup>6</sup> Mary Nooter. "Exhibiting Episteme: African Art Exhibitions as Objects of Knowledge." In *Preserving the Cultural Heritage of Africa: Crisis or Renaissance?* K. Yoshida and J. Mack, 23-33. Muckleneuk, UNISA Press, 2008; See also Eugenia, Shanklin. "The Odyssey of the Afo-akom." *African Arts*, 23.4 (1990): 62-69+95-96 and Paul Nkwi. "A Conservation Dilemma over African Royal Art in Cameroon." In *Plundering Africa's Past* eds. P. Schmidt and R. McIntosh, 99-109. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996.
- <sup>7</sup> Simon Harrison. 1995. Anthropological Perspectives: On the Management of Knowledge. *Anthropology Today*, 11.5 (1995): 10-14.
- <sup>8</sup> Michael Rowlands. "Africa on Display: Curating Postcolonial Pasts in the Cameroon Grassfields." In *Postcolonial Archaeologies in Africa* ed. P. Schmidt *Postcolonial Archaeologies in Africa*, 149-162. School for Advance Social Research Press, Santa Fe, 2008.
- <sup>9</sup> Jean-Pierre Warnier. *The Pot-King: The Bodies and Technologies of Power*. Leiden, Brill, 2007.
- <sup>10</sup> Fubah, Mathias. "Contemporary Drinking Horns in the Western Grassfields, Cameroon." *Anthropologie: International Journal of Human Diversity and Evolution*, (2016).
- <sup>11</sup> Jean-Paul, Notue and Triaca, Bianca. *Mankon: Arts, Heritage and Culture from the Mankon Kingdom. Catalogue of the Mankon Museum*. 5 Continents, 2005.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid, 16.
- <sup>13</sup> Eugenia Shanklin 1990; Paul Nkwi 1996.
- <sup>14</sup> Howard, Morphy. *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991, 21.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid, 1991.
- <sup>16</sup> Jean-Pierre Warnier 1993; Mathias, Fubah. "The Changing Life of the Buffalo and Cow Horn and New Methods of Adaptation by Carvers and Patrons in the Grassfields, Cameroon." *African Studies*, 73.1 (2014): 41-57.
- <sup>17</sup> Igor, Kopytoff. "Ancestors as Elders in Africa." In *Perspectives on Africa: A Reader in Culture, History and Representation* eds. R. R. Grinker and C. B. Steiner, 412-418. Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1997.
- <sup>18</sup> Howard Morphy 1991.
- <sup>19</sup> Igor, Kopytoff. "Ancestors as Elders in Africa." 1997 and Mathias, Fubah. "Title Cups and Ancestral Presence." *Anthropos* 109.2 (2014): 633-639.
- <sup>20</sup> James, Scott. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985, 38.
- <sup>21</sup> Jean-Pierre Warnier, 1993, 311.
- <sup>22</sup> Angongang, Paul. Pers comm. April 2012.
- <sup>23</sup> Paul, Gebeaur. *Art of Cameroon*. New York: Portland Art Museum and Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1979, 215.
- <sup>24</sup> Jean-Pierre Warnier, 1993, 311.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid, 311.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid, 311.
- <sup>27</sup> For more on the Bamum throne, see Geary, Christraud. Bamum Thrones and Stools. *African Arts* 14.4 (1981): 32-43; 87-88.
- <sup>28</sup> Mary Nooter, 1993.
- <sup>29</sup> Igor, Kopytoff, 1997, 412.
- <sup>30</sup> I have, however, discussed these factors in a forthcoming paper, Mathias Fubah. "Contemporary Drinking Horns in the Western Grassfields, Cameroon." *Anthropologie: International Journal of Human Diversity and Evolution*, 2016.



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**Fig. 1.** External view of the entrance into the secret royal chamber in the Bambui Kingdom. The chamber is home to most of the kingdom's secret objects and access is restricted to those who have permission and power to view and use secret objects. Photo by Mathias Fubah. Bambui palace, 2012.