



Museums in the palaces of the Cameroon Grassfields: Concerns about accessibility and sustainability

Overview

Museums in Cameroon are important heritage sites whose impact is enhanced when they are situated in places open to the general public as opposed to palaces. In the Cameroon Grassfields, home of a number of tribal kingdoms and a rich heritage site, museums in traditional palaces are particularly restrictive through their location in the centre of the kingdom's traditional and sacred activities. First, not every part of the palace is open to the public. Second, the palace is associated with royalty, elites and titleholders. Finally, custody or curatorship of ceremonial and ritual art preserved in the royal treasury or traditional palace museum is in the hands of the regulatory society or *kwifor*, also known as a secret society across the Grassfields. These restrictions act as a deterrent to a full exploration of the services offered in the palace, including the newly constructed museums, since the majority of the population are neither elites nor titleholders. Hence there is a need to work towards establishing museums in community centres outside the traditional palace premises.

This policy brief argues for the construction of museums outside palaces in order to give visitors and the community an opportunity to fully explore museum collections and to facilitate sustainability of the museum for present and future generations. When museums are constructed in community centres, members of the community feel they have a stake in these heritage sites, not only as beneficiaries but also as initiators of the intervention. In this way they are empowered by ownership of their heritage.

The findings and recommendations presented here are based on a study of newly constructed museums in the palaces of Mankon, Babungo, Bandjoun and Baham, located in the Cameroon Grassfields. The aim of the study was to determine whether or not these museums are accessible to the public. Findings reveal that these museums are still largely seen as part of the sacred spaces of the palace; palace museums are not restriction-free sites; palace museums, like the royal treasury, continue to serve the interests of the king and his notables rather than the public; and palace museums are not accessible to the majority of the population.

Although this study was conducted in Cameroon, the findings reflect upon a trend that is applicable to African palace

museums at large. The findings and recommendations herein are therefore relevant in similar contexts elsewhere in Africa.

Background

The palace and the royal treasury, or the traditional palace museum

The palaces as well as the traditional elites and elders of the Cameroon Grassfields have long been criticised for their obsession with tradition, and especially the religious aspect of it (Argenti 1998; Geary 1981; Ndjio 2009). Their interest in traditional religious practices, including the curatorship of the kingdom's artistic collections, has led Jean-Pierre Warnier to associate their authority with 'containment' of substances, or what he calls the 'containment of the king's body' (*le Roi-Pot*) (1993: 308). Kings in the Grassfields are seen as representing not only themselves but also the interests of the palace and the kingdom, including the preservation of the kingdom's artistic treasures (Warnier 1993). Indeed, the kingdom's hierarchies are generally centralised in the palace, which is also the capital of the kingdom, and are divided into a tripartite system composed of the king; the *kwifor*, or regulatory society of commoners, including servants, advisors and a



judiciary body; and the society of royal eligibles (Argenti 1998). The regulatory society and the society of royal eligibles are divided into ranks according to a 'complex title system which confers unequal decision-making powers, as well as sartorial prerogatives on their occupants' (Argenti 1998: 753).

With formal power in the hands of traditional elites and royal eligibles, the majority of the population, which the king claims to serve, are rendered relatively powerless, especially in terms of traditional religious practices and access to their heritage. This is especially true with regard to the royal treasuries that house the treasures or collections of the kingdoms. Access to these chambers is restricted to members of the above hierarchies (Argenti 1998; Notue 2000; Notue & Triaca 2005, 2008). As a result, the majority of the population are ignorant of key aspects of their heritage and identity, as represented by the treasures. This restrictive practice seems to have extended to the newly created museums in the palaces of the region. It is for this reason that in the Grassfields context, dominated by the politics of obsession with hierarchies and exclusion, the newly constructed museums are still seen as representing the interests of the king and palace.

Emergence of museums in Grassfields palaces

Newly created museums emerged in some palaces of the Western Grassfields between 2001 and 2006 as replacements for the royal treasury (see Figure 1).

The initiative was launched and jointly implemented by an Italian NGO, Centro Orientamento Educativo (COE), the Cameroon government and representatives from the selected palaces. According to the coordinators of the project, Jean-Paul Notue and Bianca Triaca, the aim was to ensure that objects previously stored under unsatisfactory and exclusionary

conditions in the royal treasury were promoted and preserved without necessarily detaching them from their original context and environment (Notue & Triaca 2005, 2008).

This initiative was in line with government's policy of bringing palace collections to a wider audience through the creation of appropriate museums in palaces, thereby ensuring transmission of the history and culture of the kingdoms to the young. It was also intended to provide new employment possibilities for the youth of Cameroon (Notue & Triaca 2005).

In line with the above objectives, the opportunity to provide technical support and training for the creation of museums in the palaces of selected regions was advertised in 2001. The coordinators received an estimated 200 applications and selected four kingdoms – Mankon, Babungo, Bandjoun and Baham – to host museums in their palaces (Rowlands 2008). Other kingdoms, such as Bambui, that applied but were not selected have continued to lobby until the present day for funds

to construct their own palace museums (Fubah 2013). Yet, despite the popularity of this idea among kingdoms, museums in palaces compromise open access to the public, since palaces are still considered sacred places.

The study of newly created palace museums

In recognition of the fact that the aim of the museum project was to make the kingdom's collections accessible to all, a study to determine the attitudes of the Grassfields population towards the new museums was undertaken. This was in an attempt to guide the government and other kingdoms in the region that are in the process of working out details of similar museums in their palaces. The study focused on the question, 'Do we need museums in the palaces of the Grassfields?' A total of 35 interviews were conducted with museum officials, relevant government departments, and local and foreign visitors to the museums. The findings reveal that community centre museums rather than newly created palace museums are preferred in the Cameroon Grassfields.

Figure 1: Internal view of a section of the Mankon Museum, Mankon, Cameroon, April 2005. (Photo by MA Fubah)



Public perceptions of palace museums

This exploration of public perceptions of museums is framed by Andrea Witcomb's notion of museums and communities or 'new museology' (2003: 79). Following this perspective, museums should be established in community centres where greater focus is on the relation between the museum and communities rather than between the king and the museum, as is the case with the palace museums. The study findings suggest that the policies which guide the creation of museums in palaces do not take into account the complex nature of the palace, especially in terms of its relations with the community. For instance, the policy fails to recognise the fact that kings portray the collections of their kingdom – including the royal treasury and, by extension, the newly created museum – as a means of dramatising their importance and dignity in the face of their subjects; and, especially, a form of administration through which a certain political and social order is maintained at the expense of untitled men as well as youths and women (Fubah forthcoming; Ndjio 2009). In essence, this contradicts the purpose of the newly created museums, which are meant to serve the public. Moreover, the palace, being the seat of authority of the kingdom, is also largely considered the sacred and secret seat of all traditional activities. Because of this, people tend to associate most services and activities in the palace, including the newly created museum and its collection, with secrecy and, by extension, taboos. Accordingly,

instead of increasing as more people get to know about the museums, visitor numbers are dwindling.

Table 1 shows a systematic decline in visitor numbers to the four museums over a five-year period. This decline is occurring in spite of the fact that many traditional activities – such as annual dances, death celebrations, twin celebrations, periodic rituals to the ancestors and deities of the kingdom, as well as contemporary or secular rituals by community members – take place in these palaces, sometimes attracting a large population on a daily basis. This confirms the invisibility of the newly created palace museums, bolstered in part by the fact that many people still see them as part of the royal treasury, and therefore as spaces reserved for elites and elders.

Against this backdrop, museums in community centres outside the palaces are suggested as more inclusive and sustainable facilities for the promotion and preservation of the Grassfields artistic and cultural heritage. Museums in community centres need to be considered by policy-makers as a cross-cutting priority in all goals and targets related to heritage preservation. This would take forward the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) 1972 convention on cultural heritage preservation, as well as the Cameroon government and COE's initiative in promoting and preserving the artistic and cultural heritage of kingdoms through museums.

Community centre museums in the Cameroon Grassfields

One notable means through which contemporary society can address the issue of dominant views of the museum as a site of power relations or as an institution representing the interest of elites is to 'invoke and encourage new relations between museums and communities' (Witcomb 2003: 79). This notion is strongly echoed in the perceptions of the population of the Cameroon Grassfields in relation to their palace museums. Therefore, in advocating for community centre museums, the aim is to associate the notion of community with radical democracy and resistance to the dominant culture represented by the palace museums. In other words, the goal is to transform the museum, not only in terms of physical locale, but also in terms of its collections. For example, interest in contemporary aesthetics such as cow-horn drinking cups decorated with the facial image of renowned actor Bruce Lee has increased among youth across the Grassfields in recent years. The reason behind this is that young people and women want not only to contest the pre-eminent position of traditional elites in relation to certain royal objects (such as the drinking horn) and other objects of status and prestige, but also to challenge the elite's claims of exercising control over local people through what I would dare call 'Bruce Lee drinking-cup governmentality' (Fubah, forthcoming).

In line with the above, communities of the Cameroon Grassfields are understood as existing outside of the palace, and even in opposition to it (Witcomb 2003). Accordingly, museums established in community centres can challenge the hegemonic role of palace museums as institutions representing the king and elites (Witcomb 2003). Indeed, in constructing the museum in a restriction-free site such as a community

Table 1: Yearly estimates of visitors to modern palace museums

Museum	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	Total
Mankon	311	305	301	271	238	1 426
Babungo	111	109	102	98	92	512
Bandjoun	297	288	275	240	210	1 310
Baham	249	241	230	220	210	1 150

Source: Based on visitor records from government departments of tourism in North West/Western Regions, Cameroon

centre, a process of self-discovery and empowerment can take place in which the king and curator are mere facilitators rather than authorities.

Additional challenges

The study findings demonstrate that because of their restriction-free access, community centre museums are held in greater esteem than are newly created museums in traditional palaces. Yet the community centre museum concept may not be the final solution to the complex challenges associated with palace museums in the Cameroon Grassfields and elsewhere in Africa. As museologist Tony Bennet argues, 'The desire to achieve equal representation can only remain a desire for there will always be some group who will find itself unrepresented. As a consequence, museums will always be open to the charge of being unrepresentative and therefore undemocratic' (cited in Witcomb 2003: 80). However, the evidence clearly demonstrates that the advantages of a community centre museum far outweigh those of the palace museums.

Recommendations

- Public policy revisions should be effected that allow for museums to be relocated to or constructed in community centres because of their restriction-free access.
- The Cameroon legislature should revise its public policies in order for community centre museums to be constructed on communal land rather than on land owned by the king or elites. This will minimise the influence of kings, traditional elites and 'royal eligibles' on the facility.
- In building museums, there should be community consultations to ensure that the museums conform to communal principles and to encourage community participation and ownership of the facilities.

- Museums should adopt an inclusive approach by focusing on issues affecting the entire community, including commoners, women, the youth, elites and visitors.
- Museums in community centres should collect and display secular and entertainment arts rather than only sacred and secret art, as is the case with the palace museums.

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