

***ALIENATING GRASSFIELDS CULTURAL OBJECTS TO WESTERN
MUSEUMS: WHO CARES?***

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Abstract

One of the recurrent phenomena that have plundered Africa's rural communities for centuries has been the ferrying of cultural heritage from village treasures and palaces towards museums in the cities and metropolis. Despite their standard definition as permanent, non-profit institutions at the service of man and society, museums of today have become enterprises and transit points for the trafficking of material heritage from local communities to urban galleries and even overseas museums through covert and overt means. Born from the ashes of colonialism in the 1930s, Cameroon's museum institution displays a typology of private and public museums littered on both sides of the linguistic and cultural divide. Based on collection policies that mattered only to British and French collectors, art agents systematically plundered palaces and community collections through looting, extortion and illicit traffic to feed metropolitan galleries and museums far off in Europe and America. By the 1980s, thousands of artefacts, masterpieces and antiquities - masks, thrones, royal paraphernalia and even worship objects – had been whisked off, throwing Alpha Oumar Konare's *theory of functional conservation* overboard. This paper traces the genesis and motivation for this traffic, examines the typology and functions of artefacts ferried out, and finally, proposes a plan to reverse the trend. Three key questions beg for answers: why the huge appetite for local cultural objects in cities and overseas? What are the categories and functions of the displaced objects? How can this outflow be stopped? A blend of oral tradition and qualitative data analyzed on a chronological-cum-thematic-cum content basis reveals among other things that local agents played the go-between, facilitating illicit art deals; that masterpieces, worship items and antiquities continue to be the most solicited by overseas museums; and finally that a holistic African master-plan is required to reverse the trend.

Keywords: *rural, heritage, traffic, museums, conservation*

Introduction

One of the monumental phenomena witnessed by Africa in the last two centuries has been the ever-growing traffic, desecration and commoditization of cultural objects from the continent's countrysides to Western metropolis. It all started after 1800 when European explorers and traders were soon joined by missionaries and colonial officials to open up the hinterland to trade, subjugate stubborn inland kingdoms and consolidate colonial administrations. In Cameroon and most of Africa, the colonial relationship allowed the Portuguese, Belgian, German, British, and French agents to amass vast spoils of artefacts

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and antiquities for exhibition at home museums.¹ According to BLACK (2000: 11) cited by C. BAPTISTA (2011), museums served to legitimate Britain's power at home and across the globe. "It grew implicit with British imperialism, housing the spoils of colonization and guarding the growing perimeter of the British Empire. Therefore, the link between museums and modernity is inextricable." This resulted in the ransacking and looting of entire palace treasures and the loss of countless masterpieces.²

In the 1890s, Dr. Zintgraff took off from Bali (North-West Cameroon), razing palaces, subjugating kingdoms and emptying them of antiquities. Like Gustav Conrau in Bangwa kingdom (South-West Cameroon), Zintgraff frequently travelled home with several consignments of masterpieces, "some of them gifts." Similarly, German officers ransacked Grassfields palaces, carting away masterpieces and other valuables. These heritage transfers reached alarming proportions in the 1940s and 1950s and centered on the traffic of antiquities (VB NGITIR, 2014).

Matters worsened after 1960 when state legislations and international conventions placed stern restrictions on the acquisition, ownership and transfer of antiquities within and across nations (1954, 1970 UNESCO conventions). Despite these restrictions, the traffic persists. Hundreds and thousands of antiquities were looted, plundered or stolen from palaces in the Cameroon Grassfields, Benin, Mali, Senegal, Namibia, Egypt, Ghana and more before setting them ablaze. The story of Cameroon's material heritage relocated to metropolitan museums would be incomplete without the *Afo-A-kom* affair of 1966. This throne figure was central in a special pair of three throne statues representing the producer (FoynYuh), his mother and his wife respectively in the Kom kingdom of Cameroon. Discovered in the Dartmouth College gallery, it was only restituted in 1973 after intense diplomatic negotiations between Cameroon and the US government (N. TAMARA, 1973). The demand for African antiquities at the international market reached climax in the 1960s and 1970s with thousands of masterpieces lost to art dealers who ferried them

¹C. Baptista, "Empire and cultural appropriation. African artefacts and the birth of museums", *Empire Building and Modernity*, Lisbon, University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies (ULICES), Organização Adelaide Meira Serras (Ed.), pp. 9-20.

²According to Ankermann, quoted by C. Christraud (1984:5) between the 1890s and 1950s, German and later British colonial agents, traders, missionaries, researchers and administrations crisscrossed the region in what progressively became a systematic transfer of Grassfields masterpieces and cherished art to their museums in Leipzig, Berlin, Hamburg and London.

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to British, German and American museums/galleries (VB NGITIR, 2017). This paper traces the genesis and motivation for the ever-growing traffic of material heritage from rural communities to the cities and abroad; examines the typology and significance of artefacts carted away; and finally, proposes a plan to reverse the trend. In this endeavour, the study proposes answers to the question: *why the frantic traffic of objects from Africa's rural communities to urban centres and overseas and how can this trend be halted.*

1. Conceptualizing African Museums

The notions of museums as social institutions on the one hand, and sacred palace treasures as auxiliaries of African traditional governance have for some time been subjects of profound controversy. This owes partly to ever-evolving dynamics and the rationale of museums and the imperceptible worldviews regarding palace collections today. In the meantime, the tussle over museums as African inventions or Western innovations remains rife, animated by Western and African schools of thought. Consequently, both as a science and a practice, museum work invariably embrace technical concepts as museology and museography, whose lyrics are alien to Africa. Though sometimes used interchangeably, consensus considers them complementary, the former being museum science and the latter as museum practice (NGITIR, 2014).

The International Council of Museum's (ICOM) definition of museums as permanent non-profit institutions at the service of man and society for the preservation of tangible and intangible heritage for education, research and enjoyment (K. MBAYU, 1994) alienates adepts of the African school who perceive local collections and community museums as discrete places reserved for initiates. Yet, contrary to common knowledge, museums are both very ancient and very recent (NGITIR, 2016). They are very ancient given their traceability to the Greek *mouseion*, *seat of the muses*. The Greek philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras (5th Century BC) referred to those early museums as "havens" for scholarly research and intellectual "discourse" with books and objects as material supports. The Greek perception of museums as libraries and research institutes (reminiscent of Pharaoh Ptolemy's library at Alexandria, Egypt C. 280 BC) thus differed from modern museums. Though traceable to Greek times, museums are quintessentially a modern invention summed up in three moves. First, they emerged as cabinets of curiosities dating back to the Renaissance (15th-16th centuries) which perceived the world

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as organized by God and humanity.³ Second, museums seek to label the world and possess it by naming objects and understanding their positions in the order of things. Till date, the concept and practice of “museums” hinges on the works of Medieval and Modern man, the former perceiving art as a way of liaising with God’s creation and the latter perceiving art as an autonomous experience. Drawing from the above abstractions, one wonders, *what is Africa’s place in the museum world?* While African art was and remains largely religious, cultural and utilitarian, Western art is aesthetic and encyclopedic.

2. Problem, Questions and Objectives

The International Day of Museums (18th May) is commemorated annually by almost all African states, under homologated themes of reflection. On this day the civil society, mass media, government institutions, private initiatives and museum promoters organize round tables and workshops to chat stakes and prospects for the museum industry. For over thirty years, this day has witnessed the affiliation of over 50 African states - a tacit recognition of ICOM’s noble effort of globalizing the museum mission. A major feature of this process has been the rapid exchange and movement of ideas, resources and persons across localities, towns and continents. Similarly, museums continue to share and transfer collections from rural to urban and metropolitan locations, with tremendous consequences for both source regions and destinations. Due to the tremendous injustices and imbalances associated with these transfers, it becomes imperative for museums to adopt new roles in the context of a *win-win* globalization. Rural communities no longer wish to be object dispensers in favour of cities. The question that emerges is: can ICOM put in place mechanisms that offset the current status-quo where Europe and America are major beneficiaries?

Tons of artefacts, especially antiquities, have been carted away from African country sides and collections to urban centres and metropolitan museums, most of them across the Atlantic. Many indeed continue to ask *what future for African antiquities?* This predicament provokes an avalanche of questions centered on the ownership, provenance and functions of these objects, their protection, preservation and restoration, their state of

³ This perception presented museums as a “macrocosm=God and world transcribed as nature”, as well as a “microcosm=mankind and art transcribed as culture”

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conservation and above all their symbolisms both at source and destination. A.O. Konare's theory of functional conservation affirms: "there is nothing like conserving heritage if this is done out of its functional context" (B.M KONATE, 1995). An object taken out of its natural environment ceases to perform the functions for which it was produced; consequently it deteriorates both physically and in significance. On the sidelines of this debate, other questions come begging for answers: Why the huge appetite for African antiques? How can the displaced objects be classified? Of what nature is the traffic? What role do these items play at their host institutions? Who benefits from this business? How can this trend be reversed? Our study thus explores the origins and motivations for object transfers; analyses the typology and functions of artefacts ferried out; and examines prospects for halting these movements.

3. The origins of African collections and museums

3.1 Primeval and ancestral origins

The origin of indigenous art collections and museums has been variously described as primeval, mythical and ancestral (NGITIR, 2014). Archeological research traces African collections centuries back and links them to ancient and primeval sites even far beyond the heritage sites of these ethnic polities. Similar findings reveal that African art production and collecting are old practices dating back to the Old Stone Age when stone implements, hatches, adzes and chipped sticks served primeval man of the time. Archaeological digs by the likes of Migeod F.W. (1962:71) and Jeffreys M.D.W. (1984:14), point to an ancient peopling of the Western Grassfields of Cameroon by "ancient stocks" as well as the production and use of "stone objects akin to the Upper Paleolithic". The Grassfields like the rest of Cameroon and the African continent probably "borrowed these implements and ancient techniques from the African cradle which archaeologists have located around East Africa" (NGITIR 2014:77).⁴

Moreover, very few African or Grassfields kingdoms (if any) originated on their present sites. Rather, myth and oral tradition point to some distant ancient ancestral homes, inhabited by some god-guided primeval ancestors, said to have founded the first ruling dynasties. Mythical narrations hold that "as a result of hardships, these pre-historic groups

⁴This buttresses the African position (now acknowledged the world over) that civilization and ancient skills of pottery, smithing, architecture and others actually had their genesis in Africa.

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were forced to quit their ancestral homelands and migrated to more convenient sites, sometimes dispersing in different directions”. From these mythical sites, basic implements, utensils, weapons, musical art, mystico-religious items and cultural objects were carried along. As migrations gave way to consolidated kingdoms, these objects formed the nucleus of early palace treasures and community collections in most of Africa.

3.2 From collections to museums

The transformation of African community collections into museums has for purposes of clarity been perceived under three distinct periods: 1920s - 50s, 1950s – 80s and 2000 – 2010. The 1920s - 50s were marked by the consolidation and consummation of colonial missions and administrations on the one hand and the maximization of colonial exploitation on the other. In this process, the continent’s rich material culture, artistry and intangible heritage were unveiled.⁵ Ian Fowler and D. ZEITLYN (1984) confirm that when the Germans arrived in the [Cameroon] Grassfields in the late nineteenth century they perceived it to be a distinct region because of its rich material culture, architecture and political forms. It is clear from early German written material and photographic records that the Germans were very much taken by the material culture of the region they called the *Grasland*. On this colonial interest, G. CHRISTRAUD, (1988: 85-6) presents astonishing accounts of German collecting activity at the beginning of this century when ‘booty’ was sent home in the form of masks, stools, thrones, *et cetera* in order to win a medal from the Kaiser.

In Cameroon, this *art-grabbing* era was marked by massive shipments to German museums in Berlin, Hannover, Braunschweig, Bavaria and Schleswig. At the same time, British and French agents scrambled for other slices of the African cake. While the British emptied the Bamenda collection which they had transformed into a provincial museum in the 1930s, the French concentrated in milking out the juice of Bamum material culture by establishing the *Musée des Arts et Traditions Bamouns* in East Cameroon (G. CHRISTRAUD, 1983). In French Cameroon, the establishment of museums started in the 1920s with the transformation of the Fumban royal collection into a museum.

⁵VB NGITIR, “Bamenda Grassfields Living Museums: A Colonial Heritage”, *Cameroon Journal of Studies in the Commonwealth*, Vol. 4, no. 1, 2017; ISSN 2411 1325, pp. 44 – 67.

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However, the practice only gained official expression in 1944 (K. Mbayu 1994:35) when a French colonial order created a public museum in the then *Centre Camerounais de l'Institut Français d'Afrique Noire* (IFAN), a French research institute based in Dakar, with a satellite research centre in Douala. These structures more than ever before masterminded both overt and covert transfers from the territory to French museums and galleries.

The second phase, 1950s – 80s was even more pliable for the navigation of art since African nationalists concentrated on independence struggles and political positioning, caring very little about art transfers. Obscure art deals were thus quickly sealed by German, British and French museum agents, often with the complicity of some hungry African middlemen and vulnerable palace guards. Matters were made worse by skyrocketing art market prices which placed African art among the *most cherished antiques*.

The third phase (2000 – 2010), as earlier mentioned, was motivated mainly by socio-economic, scientific and touristic concerns. These included the rise of so-called “enlightened” African kings who saw in museums, new sources of revenue especially, following the economic depression of the 1980s, caused partly by the sharp fall in coffee and cocoa prices. The crisis touched the very fabric of African chieftaincies – the royal family. Traditional chiefs could no longer sustain their large families from the coffee economy and turned to museums for survival. Other considerations that influenced the transformation of collections into museums between include research, education, “tourism-curiosity-leisure”, cultural valorization and political indoctrination (NGITIR, 2014).⁶

4. When objects become art: Justifying the gruesome

4.1 *Understanding African objects?*

The subject of African traditional art has indeed sustained scholarly attention in recent times through articles, colloquia and reviews. In their diversity, these works address the origins, management, conservation, symbolic meanings and international image of

⁶In Cameroon, the Babungo royal collection was transformed by Fon Ndofoa Zofoa III into a modern museum in 2002; the Bafut and Mankon collections in 2003; and the Oku collection in 2007. The Bali-Nyonga, Kom and Nso palace collections are yet to undergo such transformation.

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African antiquities. Yet, few worry about the losses frequently suffered by art producers, owners and local communities. Worst of all, many consider African objects simply as counterparts of Western art that is bided for, bought and sold in the art market. To the Western school, there has never been anything wrong buying, selling, transferring ownership or transmitting such items from one owner or location to another. Produced by local craftsmen and destined for cultural, religious or social purposes, African objects⁷ were owned and used by designated persons, families, traditional institutions, and/or royalty. Commoner stools (meant for children) for instance, are labeled as male or female; costumes as hyper-mystical, sacred (religious) or social; caps as social, male, female, warrior or royal. In their typically patriarchal and chauvinistic societies, both the objects and their users corresponded to clearly regimented hierarchies and stratifications. In some cases, special caps, cups, costumes, stools and beads were reserved for men and women of title, designated heroes, notables or royalty. Objects meant for such persons and functions were consecrated and sanctified occasionally. Special procedures regulated their use, storage, manipulation and disposal – some were solemnly buried when declared outdated and functionless. In these circumstances, there was nothing like *an object for its own sake* since every object was believed to have spiritual content and meaning. African objects were thus never destined for decoration or public viewing. However, in the procedural canons of their crafting, adornment or finishing, some of them appeared extremely beautiful and aesthetically appealing. African objects were never meant to be called or perceived as *art* in the Western sense. They were never meant to be commoditized or commercialized; never meant to be displaced from their local habitats; never meant to viewed, touched or owned by non-initiates, etc.

4.2 From objects to art: A misrepresentation

On the subject of objects as art, Africa has had no compromise and until contact with the external world, C. 15th century, the paradigm of *African objects for Africans* was sacrosanct. Unfortunately, this perception began to dilute as soon as trade, Christian missions, explorations, colonial and other interests drew Africa closer to Arabia, Europe and America. African objects progressively became art when their acquisition, storage, transfer, transmission, display and functions were alienated from their natural

⁷ Most of them were produced from local material supports – wood, fiber, bamboo, animal skins, hair, clay, bone, tusks and stone.

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environments, contexts and functions. Before these ruptures, the main sources of objects were local production, collection, gifts and war booty. But under external influence, objects were smuggled from local collections and palaces through extortion, vandalism, unfair deals, induced gifts and illicit traffic. Objects meant for religious and other sacred functions were either offered to colonial officials in exchange for exotic European items (wines, wristwatches, eye-glasses, fabrics, caps, etc.) or to pre-empt military repression. Objects offered to German colonial officials, traders and missionaries were not genuine but induced gifts as their new masters knew nothing of their contexts and use.

In Cameroon, German, British and French agents made quite a fortune from art grabbing. N. TAMARA (1973) makes allusion to five Kom throne figures whisked off to Germany during this period. One of them found its way into the Museum *für Völkerkund*, Frankfurt in 1904. Two of such pairs have been in German Museums since the early years of this century. A third was smuggled out of the *Laikom* palace in 1966 (*Afo-A-kom*) and remained in a New York collection until its restitution in 1973. Yet the Kom experience was only the “tip of the iceberg.” The Nso ancestral statue of *Ngonnso*, a prestige headgear (*ntara*), royal calabash gourds (*bomsi*) and other valuables were spirited away from the Nso palace in 1906 and later found their way into a Berlin museum. Similarly, two *makomngang* (ritual) masks were reported missing from the Mankon palace in similar circumstances. In Bafut, it was the sculptural representations of their sacred god and goddess (*mamforti*) that vanished as the German-Bafut war progressed (1901-1910). Once in these strange locations, museums and galleries they ceased to be *objects* in the African sense and became art.

Reports from Cameroon’s Grassfields palaces speak of similar disappearances in the colonial and post-independence periods. Northern (1973) makes mention of the Cameroon Collection at the Field Museum, Chicago (assembled in the 1920s) and another gathered in the 1930s by a former American missionary, Dr. Paul Gebauer. The brilliant performance of Grassfields antiquities at the Festival of Negro Arts and Culture (FENAC) held in Senegal (1966) and the Festival of African Arts and Culture (FESTAC) held in Lagos (1977) bear testimony to the region’s growing artistic reputation. As early as 1906, these collections, along with other treasures from Cameroon and adjacent Nigeria were

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exhibited in the “Cameroon Gallery” of the Frankfurt Museum. Others found their way into European and American art galleries and have never returned.⁸

4.3 Why the huge Western appetite?

On account of the pre-eminence of empire as motive for art appropriation, museums represented important stakeholders in German, British, French, Belgian and Portuguese imperial identity. Empire here included the colonies and the collections they represented in exhibitions. For this reason, appropriation was legitimized and became a reference point of global power. On the legitimacy of art appropriation from the African colonies, the dynamics and philosophy of the colonial environment presuppose, justify and validate such repatriations (C. BAPTISTA, 2011). This justification hinges on four radical Western theories. The *theory of European cultural superiority* over African cultures has been advanced by ideologists of imperialism, to justify art appropriation. An adept, TAWADROS (1990: 30 – 31) affirms that “...itis in museums, namely, that this cultural superiority is most striking.”The notion of western culture as inherently progressive, sophisticated and above all, superior... remains firmly embedded in the cultural institutions of Western Europe - and their museums have as mission to propagate this. This is further buttressed by the *theory of preservation* which argues that for centuries, Western museums and expertise provided storage, security, cataloging, identification,

⁸Regarding internal movements, West and Central Africa seemed to top the chart and mostly taking the form of theft within museums. This was largely caused by the high prices fetched by antiquities at the international market. Ndumbi (1979:38) testifies that by 1972 theft had become a recurrent phenomenon in the Bamenda Provincial Museum (Cameroon, founded in 1936). Statistics and information obtained from Ndamukong its curator, revealed that in a 1973 twin clay pipes disappeared from the museum just as a group of visitors left the facility. According to the 1975 stock-taking, 8 objects were declared missing: 2 brass bracelets, 2 glass-bead neck-laces, 2 beaded statuettes and 2 other ivory statuettes. It has been difficult to ascribe definite dates to these incidents for most were discovered long after their disappearance. However, a few cases were documented. On August 13 1978, three head masks, six clay pipes (valued at 3.5 million francs CFA) were stolen from the museum. On November 11, 1978, thieves struck the museum again making away with a throne, a fly whisk and a clay pipe (valued at 3 million francs CFA). On December, 9, 1978, thieves once more came visiting, this time breaking in through a window. They took away a skin-covered masks valued at 500.000 francs CFA. At this rate one has reason to fear that we may soon talk of the Bamenda Museum in the past tense. To these should be added recent losses recorded in October 2013 when some 4000 – 6.000 objects were ferried from the Bamenda Provincial Museum to Yaounde allegedly on the high instructions of the then Minister of Arts and Culture (MINAC), Ama Tutu Muna for better preservation pending the construction of a befitting museum for the region. Hence the collections were carted to a “safe place” (B. Ngah, 2008). Unfortunately, till date the objects have neither returned nor has a befitting museum been erected for them. Even objects earlier borrowed for exhibition by the Ministry of Arts and Culture (MINAC), the National Museums and other state officials have hardly been returned to their local collections.

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valorization and restoration for the appropriated objects and on no account could they be returned. The *theory of salvation* on its part justifies appropriation on grounds that African monuments and artefacts were at advanced states of decay and neglect when they were removed from their original contexts. They were thus in dire need of rescue from disappearance. *The theory of transposition* rather justifies the removals as necessary for purposes of transposition into “inside museums...where they would be appreciated, valued and valorized.” C. BAPTISTA adds a *theory of empire* which states: “Victorian museums [thus] provided a broad and diversified insight of the empire, materialized in the exhibition of artefacts of different origins and of an apparently unquestioned sense of belonging.” Besides, Victorians, [like German and French aristocratic families] loved collecting. Therefore, the museum, both space and holdings fulfilled the viewer’s imagination and impressed the king. They were moved by the beauty and the exotic of the exhibited artefacts. That is why, at the time, a museum was considered a «cabinet of curiosities», where treasures of the nation were displayed. They represented the attitudes and perspectives of the dominant cultures of the nation and empire.

The motivation behind this attitude and consequently, their huge appetite for African antiques, also includes celebrating triumphs in war and collecting *art for the art* (PEARCE 1995). Justifying the removal of artefacts from Egypt,⁹ SAINT-MAUR(1835) quoted by Reid, invokes salvation from “the ever heightening mud of the Nile, and the savage ignorance of the Turks.” Hence the learned of Europe needed no other permission for their removal. To them belong all the monuments of antiquity, because they alone know how to appreciate them. Reid further affirms, “Antiquity is a garden that belongs by natural right to those who cultivate and harvest its fruits.”¹⁰ The creation and sustenance of many Western museums was therefore determined by their colonial relationship and the notion of *empire*.¹¹ Appropriation, was thus rooted in the general notion that the artefacts were left to neglect and lack of appreciation in their places of origin.¹²

⁹Saint-Maur (1835), a member of the *Comission Supérieure de Bâtiments à Vapeur*, of the shipbuilding industry

¹⁰Saint-Maur, 1835 *apud* Reid 2002: 1.

¹¹David Spurr, defines appropriation as a process sometimes used to describe the strategy by which the dominant imperial power incorporates as its own the territory or culture that it surveys or invades.

¹²Spurr 1993:28 *apud* Ashcroft 2000/2004:19

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5. Classification and functions

5.1. *Typology of alienated objects*

Despite their varied, convergent and sometimes divergent positions regarding transfers of material heritage from rural communities to urban centres and metropolis, both Western and local authors find common ground on the typology and functions of the masterpieces concerned. N. Tamara (1973), J.M. Essomba(1982), E. Mveng (1982) and P. O’Keefe (1999) for instance point to sacred objects (life-size statues, animal skins), religious items (masks, costumes, prayer tablets) and prestige objects (beaded stools, elephant tusks, thrones, caps, royal paraphernalia) as the objects most transacted from rural to urban centres and eventually overseas. Whether internally or externally displaced, most items involved in these movements during the colonial and post colonial periods, with a few exceptions (cited in 4.2 above), corresponded to this typology. Regarding material supports, most of them were produced from wood (statues, stools, masks), followed by metals (bronze, iron), beads (bangles and neck-laces) and animal parts (leopard teeth, ivory and tail whisks). Though these were understandably the most precious and cherished items, their supports (except for wood), were also the least perishable and vulnerable to decay and degradation. More so, the recent scientific advances in chemical treatment and art conservation did not exist then. Yet, concerns of the art market cannot be underestimated especially when assessed from the interests of previous Western visitors to African collections and museums. From those concerns, it is probable that the shipments were motivated by iconography and aesthetic appeal, research, tourism and human curiosity.

5.2 *Role of alienated objects*

To talk of *the role* of alienated objects is to insinuate that away from their homelands and ancestral sanctuaries, the said items retain some potential. From the African perspective, such items have ceased to perform the functions for which they were produced and consequently are classified as non-functional (functionless). However, their new hosts attribute and expect them to perform the new functions for which they were acquired. Such hosts: museums, galleries and showrooms, whose vocations centre on conservation, preservation and transmission for purposes of research, education and enjoyment care

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little or nothing about the original functions of the said objects which have now become art.¹³

Whether lucitly or illicitly acquired, many urban art dealers and museum promoters quickly exhibit, lease and dispose of certain items especially, those of doubtful origin and/or fragile material supports. In this manner, African masterpieces are prostituted, commoditized and commercialized from one gallery or museum to the other. In the process, they are exposed, viewed and manipulated by men, women and children of all ages and shades for money. The new concerns that animate their successive owners are profit-making, tourism, research, enjoyment and more rather than rituals and culture. This cultural alienation humiliates a continent which once hung on these masterpieces as a source of glory. This is often referred to as the *devaluation of African objects art*, and the destitution of a continent. In the hypocrisy that follows decades after, the same urban and metropolitan museums talk of restitution. The latter has become the subject of an on-going jigsaw called the *conservation debate* (NGITIR, 2014). This centres on the question as to whether objects earlier illicitly ferried from Africa to the West should be returned to their original owners or not.

6. Which way forward: the restitution stuff?

Though the earliest claims for restitution date a century back, the trend was only popularized in 1932 by SAINT-Maura member of the French *Commission Supérieur des Bâtiments à vapeur*, of the shipbuilding industry (C. BAPTISTA, 2011). This marked the beginning of arguments in favor of the devolution of artefacts and monuments to the countries of origin. Regarding African artefacts, the storm is far from over. Benin like, Cameroon, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Egypt, Ethiopia and dozens of other African and Asian states has demanded the restitution of national treasures ferried from

¹³ICOM for instance defines museums as permanent non-profit institutions at the service of society and its development, open to the public; to acquire, conserve and transmit the material and immaterial vestiges of peoples and their environment for purposes of study, education, and leisure. Their new missions include enriching collections; preservation from deterioration and degradation; fostering research and education; attracting public access; promoting knowledge, documentation, exhibitions and transmission (ICOM, 2006). These evidently Western functions begin to apply to African objects that find their way into urban and metropolitan museums.

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their territories between the 18th and 19th centuries and carted to Europe.¹⁴ Unfortunately, this move received little applause despite promises that more would follow. After all, France only returned 26 items, while Quai Branly alone houses over 70,000 African objects, according to *The New York Times* (November, 2018). Ten years earlier, she had returned the *Nyifuan* commemorative statue to Babungo (Cameroon). Similarly, Germany recently returned a looted 15th century stone cross to Namibia but still holds over a million African masterpieces in museums across Germany. Mexican customs officials thwarted an attempt to smuggle the ancient Yoruba sculpture into the country. The ancient sculpture was seized by customs officials at Mexico City Airport following an attempt to reportedly smuggle the artifact into the country.¹⁵ Yet, this case-by-case approach to restitution hardly seems likely to resolve the global equation. Responding to questions on the subject, Niama Safia Sandy, curator of Meditations Exhibit at the Pratt Manhattan Gallery says,

It should entail a full reckoning with and reconciliation of how the object made its way into a Western collection. Restitution should not just be about returning an object, but also supporting a discourse that acknowledges the role of colonization, power and the history of how it happened, while also building a system of equity such that global cultural heritage items can be shared by all humanity in a manner that does not prevent indigenous peoples of the world from having control over their cultural artefacts and assets (D. Durosomo, 2019).

Unfortunately, Sandy continues, “people will often gravitate toward unfairness because it is what they have always done rather than because it is right.” The curator laments over the irony in European institutions fighting to hold on to the very history it has claimed never existed.¹⁶ The lame argument on the absence of appropriate infrastructure has long been dismissed.¹⁷ Indeed frantic efforts are currently being made by governments of Mali,

¹⁴ Benin’s antiques are currently on display at Quai Branly Museum-Jacques Chirac in Paris which displays African indigenous art and cultures. After over a century of politicking, France’s President Emmanuel Macron in November (2019), oversaw the return to Benin of 26 artefacts stolen during France’s colonial administration over the territory.

¹⁵ In one of the latest developments around art repatriation is a stolen 18th century Ethiopian crown that was discovered decades ago in the Netherlands. It has been sent back home.

¹⁶ One excuse often advanced for the delay in returning items is that there isn’t an infrastructure or proper facility on the continent to house them.

¹⁷ There are many institutions all over Africa capable of preserving, and transmitting their significance. A few examples include the Nigerian National Museum, the National Museum of Mali, the National Museum of Dar-Es- Salaam (Tanzania), the Museum of Black Civilizations in (Dakar) and over a dozen museums in Morocco alone.

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Nigeria, Senegal, Cameroon, Ghana, Namibia and Egypt through huge investments and capacity building towards heritage protection – in preparation for restitution whenever this happens (R. SAMANGA, 2020). Restating the African position in 1974 at the UN General Assembly, Moboutou Sesse Seko though an African dictator, declared as ‘grave injustice to humanity’ the continued retention of these priceless works in museums, public offices and private collections all over the Western world. As if to legalize this position, Chika for Africa recalls that in 2004, 18 international museums signed a memorandum which read in part that *whether purchased or gift, the works acquired decades ago have become an essential part of the museums that cared for them and by extension part of the heritage of the nations that house them*. Unfortunately, this preservation theory seems to have been applied only to objects from Africa and Asia.¹⁸

The restitution debate is the last and most recent step in the controversy surrounding the legitimacy of Western appropriation. Former colonized or occupied countries at a global level demand to recover artefacts originally taken from them by the West. Cultural property is at stake and the debate is both legal and cultural, underlining arguments around the paradigms of neglect and preservation. Yet it could also be intellectual, religious or philosophical. These are not the only arguments in the equation. Furthermore, one doubts if the objects claimed today, are the same that were carted away decades or centuries ago. The lame argument that work has been done to catalogue, restore, research into and exhibit those artefacts must equally be quickly dismissed. Whoever the authorities were, that sanctioned such shipments, away from natural habitats of the said artefacts and without the consent of their users, they acted without Africa’s legitimacy. Such a mandate is further nullified by O.A. Konare’s *theory of functional conservation* which affirms African position that there can be no talk of conservation outside an object’s natural and functional habitat.¹⁹ Reid (2001:1) rightly laments: “It is indeed a matter of deep regret that the monuments should be ours, and the history should be ours, but that those who

¹⁸This is in stark contrast to the Jewish artworks and property stolen by the Nazis during the holocaust. In the latter case, efforts have been made to return every single traceable artwork belonging to the families of Jewish holocaust victims to their surviving families or to the Government of Israel.

¹⁹According to the novel writer Christian Jacq, who wrote extensively about Egypt, only 20 to 30% of what is under the sand of Egypt has been uncovered (Jacq 2000) – could this be neglect or exaggeration?

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write books on the history of ancient Egypt should not be Egyptians...” With the doors of the restitution debate still wide open, one would ask how future claims for the repatriation should be faced, what form they should take and how else Africans could deserve what is rightfully theirs. A Marshall Plan involving the massive training of Africans from the receiving communities in all museum professions; establishing appropriate museums in the said communities; progressive repatriation; and negotiating regular exchanges, partnerships, training programs and workshops could be a good start.

CONCLUSION

The migration of objects from Africa’s local communities to urban centres and overseas metropolis is a century-old phenomenon that extrapolates an already global dragon called cultural alienation. From mere cultural exchanges these movements evolved to a world market monster, fed, greased and set on motion by the West. In just a century, tons and millions of cherished masterpieces were spirited from African palace treasures, community collections and museums to urban centres, cities and overseas. There, the African object is transformed into Western art, commoditized and commercialized. Acquired through obscure means ranging from induced gifts, extortion, vandalism, looting and illicit traffic these objects were alienated from their natural environments, cut off from initial functions and consequently, could not be conserved. Whatever the justifications for such banditry – appropriation, legitimacy, salvation, historicity, cultural superiority or preservation – the objects are African and the mandate for their transfer must be African. Curiously, today, German, British and French researchers stream into Africa for information to help document the said items. The mess is complete when a Western exhibition attributes a Yoruba mask to Ethiopian tribesmen, or, as in another case, the history of a Cameroon Grassfields statue is narrated for a Namibian piece – after all, they are both African. From the photographed items to the “droplet” repatriated to Africa, the bottom-line has remained Western, which at best, talks of temporary repatriation on loan. Strange, a thief dictates the tune. Even worse, objects brandished for restitution are not the same items that were carted away a century (or decades) ago. They are copies and crafts given patinas corresponding to those of originals. What sounds more plausible is that genuine repatriation would betray the mission of the well trained European curators, render their well-equipped museums obsolete and their personnel

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jobless. The way forward can and must begin with a genuine and proven Western will to reconstitute.

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