

King as a throne: The symbolism of Afo-a-Kom in Kom artistry

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Abstract

The subject of mystery and royal symbolism as incarnated in sacred objects among African peoples has never attracted as much curiosity as did the emblematic throne-statue, *Afo-a-Kom*, of the Kom kingdom in the Cameroon Grasslands. Crafted in the royal workshops of Laikom (1860s) and reminiscent of its patron, Foyin Yu (1865-1912), the antiquity became the subject of a highly mediatized Western campaign shrouded in controversy. Was *Afo-a-Kom* a prototype of African *primitive art* whose sole norm was wholesome superstition and witchery as painted by the West, or was it a noble standard of royalty and the intestines of a state as upheld by its kinsmen? Whisked off to the US in 1966 but restituted in 1973, *Afo-a-Kom* became the symbol, par excellence, of an organized rape of African art masterminded by Western collectors. This paper examines the role of *Afo-a-Kom* as a sacred object in kom culture and artistry, discusses its special traits, functions and significance, and assesses controversies surrounding the antiquity. In this endeavor, three questions beg for answers: What was the place of *Afo-a-Kom* and sacred art in Kom society? What were its peculiarities, functions and symbolisms? How far have controversies surrounding the antique subsided? Hinged on the *theory of functional conservation* (AO Konare, 1995) and the *conservation debate* (VB Ngitir, 2014), the study blends qualitative data and oral tradition, analyzed on the basis of content, iconography and chronology. From the study *Afo-a-Kom* emerges as soul of the Kom people, yet controversy persists on its alleged mystical manifestations both in the US and back home.

Key words: *King, throne, symbolism, Afo-A-kom, Kom*

INTRODUCTION

From the 1960s the debate on the restitution of colonially acquired antiquities from Africa started boiling in Paris and Berlin, but in other quarters of the world it was yet to start. The silence in the United Kingdom and the United States was indeed baffling given the quantum of African antiques and sacred objects lodged by museums and galleries in their metropolis. By this time virtually every Cameroon Grassfields palace collection worth the name had lost objects to these western facilities. Despite their varied, convergent and sometimes divergent positions regarding transfers of material heritage from rural communities to urban centers and metropolis, both Western and local authors agree 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 animating illicit traffic between Africa and the overseas the most. Whether internally or externally displaced, the objects involved generally conformed to this typology. Most of them were produced from wood and other precious material supports (metal, beads, animal pelts, ivory and other animal parts).¹ While some threaded silently, making huge money for their holders, others of high profile artistic, religious or cultural value, were the subject of multiple leases, exhibitions, controversies and media campaigns. This was the case of the emblematic throne-statue *Afo-a-Kom*, crafted in the 1860s by the sculptor-king, Foyu Yuh, in the Kom kingdom of Cameroon. Like many others, this antiquity became the victim of a well organized crime, theft and illicit traffic. In August 1966, it was smuggled from its sacred shrine at Ifim (Laikom - Cameroon) and spirited to the United States of America. Fortunately, after highly mediatized controversies surrounding its acquisition, provenance and above all, its alleged mystical powers, the antique was restituted to its Cameroonian originators in 1973.

This paper situates the role and significance of *Afo-a-Kom* as an emblematic and sacred object both in Kom traditional setting as well as its external, and notably, western worldview. It addresses three major concerns: first, the place of this sacred object in Kom traditional belief systems, practices and usages; second, its peculiarities, functions and symbolisms; and third, the controversies surrounding the object and potentials as revealed by aggressive media campaigns that animated the western press in 1973 and thereafter.

1. Contextual and Conceptual basis of Kom and African Sacred Art

1.1 Geo-political and sociocultural context

The kingdom of kom, home of the emblematic life-size commemorative throne-statue, *Afo-a-kom*, stands on a plateau over 6000 feet high, on the north-western edge of the

¹ 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.

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Cameroon Grasslands. It is located some 50 miles from Bamenda, the regional capital. Its population of about 125,000 inhabitants is spread over the Boyo administrative division, 3 subdivisions (Fundong, Belo, and Njinikom), 3,000 square miles and 43 villages (UK Essays, 2018:1). It is bounded to the north by Bum, to the south by Bambui to the west by Wum and to the east by Nso and Oku. The Kom cover 75% of Boyo Division. While the administrative headquarters is Fundong, the seat of traditional institutions is Laikom. Together with the neighboring kingdoms of Nso, Ndop, Bafut and Bum, kom is part of the so-called Bamenda-Tikar tribal groups (PN Nkwi, 1976:24).

The kingdom is governed by a Fon (*Foyn* or King) who heads traditional government. He is also the secular and spiritual leader of the kingdom. As head of the Kom traditional institutions, he is assisted by the *kwifoyn* regulatory customary society. In these tasks, they are assisted by a pool of diviners, priests, seers, and many cult practitioners that helps in the traditional administration. Oral tradition which is the principal source of Kom early history links them with the so-called Tikar² of the central Grassfields who migrated from the Upper Mbam River and its tributaries (Adamawa – North Cameroon). The Kom people traditionally speak *Itanghikom*, (Kom language) and efforts are ongoing to codify the language (Nkwi, 1996). Though practicing matrilineal succession, culture and society remain dominantly male oriented and currently under the reign of Foyn Ndzi II (since 2017).

² The term Tikar or Ndobo as applied to the Bamenda Grassfields tribes 'implies, rather, a claim to the legitimacy of political institutions and to their ultimate derivation from a legendary center which sanctioned their adoption' These so-called tikar tribes of the Grassfields claimed to have come from Tikari, Ndobo, Kimi or Rifum. Most of them established themselves in the Bamenda Grassfields as early as the 18th century and they are characterized by sacred kingship, princes' fraternities, distinction between royals, commoners and slaves in early days, close regulatory societies [kwifoyn, nggumba, ngwerong, kwefo'] and similar political Hawkesworth (1926) records that the Tikar came from around Bornu in North Cameroon in a place that bears his name today.² One principal feature that distinguished kom from other Bamenda-Tikar groups was their practice of matrilineal succession unlike others that were patrilineal.

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Laikom in 1966 and its subsequent restitution in 1973. It examines the role of *Afo-a-Kom* as a sacred object in Kom culture and artistry, discusses its special traits, functions and significance, and finally assesses controversies surrounding the antiquity. Hinged on the theory of functional conservation it interrogates the appropriation of African art by the west, revisits the dilemma of restitution and repositions the debate over the *mysterious* or *not-so-mysterious* status of *Afo-a-kom*. Practically speaking, *Afo-a-Kom* was central in an ensemble of six conjoined life-size statues comprising a royal figure holding a baton in front of the chest, standing behind the throne and supported by buffalo heads (see figure 2 below). The male figure depicts the royal family and portrait of Foyun Yuh I (1865-1912), the queen mother, a royal wife, a child and two court attendants.

1.2 Conceptualizing African sacred art and representations

For several millennia, religious practices, local customs and objects have been used in cults, rituals and sacred ceremonies. These ceremonial and ritualistic objects established and sustained relations between the living and the living dead (H. Knopfli, 1998). On account of their often strange roles and potentials, these sacred objects have generally been classified as transcendent, supernatural, and sometimes as fetish or profane (Anver Shakarov, 2015). Occasionally, they were used to compel actors of sacred realm to intercede for the living.³

Sacred art thus encompasses multiple artistic creations, grounded on the notion of *sacred* which is complex with multiple meanings. Hence, despite the preponderant role of religion, religious art (not to be confused with church art) occupies only a small proportion of sacred art (VB Ngitir, 2014). Yet African art is peculiar on account of its stylized realism, dynamic form, elaborate details, geometric figures, youthful appearance and its symbolism (Sadigh, 2015). Susan M. Vogel, (1986:44) affirms that this art is further enriched by five aesthetic elements: its zoomorphism and anthropomorphism, its luminosity, self-composure, youthfulness and clarity of form, complexity of composition, balance and symmetry and smoothness of finish. The subject of African sacred art has

³ In this practice, many African cultures emphasize the importance of ancestors as intermediaries between the living, deities and the supreme creator. Consequently, sacred art served as the medium and point of contact with these spirits of ancestors. In Africa sacred art has for centuries been used variously to depict these deities and even the supreme creator God especially for its functional purposes.

indeed been articulated by a plethora of art historians, collectors and researchers with major concerns being their typology, related icons and symbols, religious costumes and vestments, instruments of worship and ceremonies, amulets, talismans and more.

Regarding typologies, Africans generally allude to the continent's prehistoric rock art, classical sculptures such as those of Nok, Esie, Nomoli, Sherbro, Ife, Yoruba, Sao, Zimbabwe, Igbo Upkwu, Nupe and more, dominated by wooden sculptures). Regarding the sacred art of the African kingdoms, emphasis has generally been on Benin bronze works, Grassfields sculptures and life-size statues, Dahomean and Ashanti brass and silver wares, palace splendor, Kuba and Luba metal working, basketry and weaving, secret societies and mask art in most of sub-Saharan Africa (S Vogel, 1985:23); religious art, prestige royal paraphernalia, musical instruments.⁴ An attempt to classify these ceremonial objects according to form and functions invariably involves summoning, mediating and expelling devices (drums, gongs, cymbals, bells, flutes, etc.). They generally convey purpose in worship, draw the attention of the deities, establish a connection with transcendent realms, and exorcise evil forces (ibidem). Sound devices which also double as summoning tools are played either alone, as part of prayers or as litanies. Vogel (1986:22) adds that lighting devices generally signify a sacred or spiritual presence, an offering, prayer, intercession, or purification. They are often viewed as sacred or even of divine origin, if not directly identified with the deity, as in Ngumba societies of Cameroon and the oracles among the Igbo, Benin and Ife. They include torch-lights, sacred oil, candles, fire, lamps), smoke devices. Protective devices serve as protection against evil or demonic spirits. They include bells, incense and other smoke devices (Ngitir, 2014). Like *Afo-a-Kom*, which incarnated Kom royalty and sacredness, such representational objects and figures well as divine powers, depict the supreme God, deities, kings or other royal dignitaries in material form. Statues with human or animal figures are the most explicit of the objects representing the divine order and/or powers from realms beyond. The most iconic image of the king among the Kom has for long been *Afo-a-kom*. While other communities valued anthropomorphic forms others preferred the

⁴To these must be added the sacred places for the use of ceremonial and ritualistic objects. Susan Vogel (1986) affirms that these settings vary with religions and functions. They include natural sites, sacred trees, caves, mountains, lakes and more – most of them delimited by enclosures and equipped with lighting objects like candles and traditional sources of fire.

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zoomorphic. In ancient Egyptian and Indian art it was common to find such half-man and half-animal representations. Plant representations as well as water, fauna and forests have also been viewed in all civilization as sacred (ibid).

Ceremonial and ritual objects played and still play vital roles in virtually every world civilization (Vogel, 1986, p.14). They are integral parts of the functioning of countless kingdoms in sub-Saharan Africa. They regulate every aspect of life and symbolize powers often described as supernatural and transcendent. From a functional standpoint, such objects serve sacred and symbolic purposes. Their construction, forms, dimensions, and styles have from earliest times been codified according to local customs and traditions of every people. Good and powerful as they may be, these objects begin to lose their potential once uprooted from their natural habitats and cease to perform the functions for which they were produced. In this process, they generally survive only in a formal sense, devoid of any sacred power. This study hinges strongly on A.O. Konare's theory of *functional conservation* (1996). According to this theory, we can only talk of art conservation within an object's natural habitat. Objects taken out of their natural environments are disconnected from their natural substratum; they therefore cease to perform the religious functions for which they were produced; consequently, they are no longer conserved and have become functionless.

2. Problematic, Research Questions and Objectives

The challenges associated with the management of sacred objects and antiquities in and out of Africa have been a fundamental subject of interest and controversy among art historians, anthropologists of art and museum practitioners especially, regarding their provenance, religiosity, aesthetic parameters and above all, their so-called mystical powers. It is against this background that our study of *Afo-a-Kom* hinges on AO Konare's *theory of functional conservation* pitching African and Western schools of thought hinges over the right habitat for African sacred objects. This paper captures the typically religious nature of African art in general and the emblematic *Afo-a-Kom* in particular, laments over the challenges of unraveling its true nature, potentialities and symbolisms, and finally, addresses contentions associated with its authorship, provenance, licit or illicit acquisition, and finally, its so-called spiritual realm of power. In this endeavor we seek answers to three questions: what was the place of *Afo-a-Kom* and sacred art in Kom

society? What were its peculiarities, functions and symbolism? How far have controversies surrounding the antique been put to rest? To this end, this paper examines the role of *Afo-a-Kom* and sacred objects in kom, discusses the special traits, functions and significance of *Afo-a-Kom* and finally, presents a balance-sheet of the controversy over the throne-statue. A blend of qualitative data and oral tradition, analyzed on the basis of content, chronology and art aesthetics, provided grounds for our findings. Data collection used the survey and cross-cultural research designs after which scored interpretation was done on the spread-sheet model.

3. Kom Sacred Art and Beleaguered Western Appropriation

3.1 Kom sacred art

Despite slight nuances in local stylization and functions as uncovered in the kingdoms of Babungo, Bafut, Bali-Nyonga, Mankon and Oku, art producers of the Cameroon grasslands generally classified as sacred, objects with a direct bearing on the physical person, prestige and politico-religious functions of the king and sacred institutions of the land (VB Ngitir, 2020). These included among others, royal emblems, insignia of rank and paraphernalia. In this category were thrones, stools, sceptres, crowns, regalia, beads, bangles, elephant tusks, tiger pelts, headdresses, cups, ancestral statues, life-style figures and horns, some of them beaded or decorated with sacred adornments.

The Kom throne statues and the *Afo-a-Kom* were classical displays of royal supremacy and nobility.⁵ Its carver, FoynYuh I was believed to have transferred his unrivalled mystical powers into the statue. These coupled with the numerous sacrifices performed on it allegedly gave the statue overwhelming mysterious powers (Ngitir, 2014). With these powers he could bring peace, forecast and forestall misfortune, enhance childbirth and promote soil fertility. In short it embodied the Kom man's concept of life. According to Quinta N. Atah (2006: 20-23), "Kom art was not just art for art sake" but had serious implications for the religious life of the people. *Afo-a-Kom* was beaded, had a regal hair dress and a buffalo head as a support for the throne. Mbang was a phallic symbol

⁵The *Afo-a-Kom* is a wooden sculpture sacred to the Kom people, a tribal population of Cameroon. In 1966, it was stolen and subsequently sold to a New York art dealer. In 1973, the Cameroon Government was informed of the location of the *Afo-a-Kom* and immediately requested the possessor, the Furman Gallery, to return it. Eventually, the Gallery sold the *Afo-a-Kom* to a businessman, who returned it to the Kom people.

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signifying fertility that is strongly rooted in the people. *Afo-a-Kom* is viewed in Kom as Foyn Yuh's own effigy memorializing his reign and presenting him as ancestor for succeeding generations (ibidem). Five other figures completing the ensemble of sculptures around the central king have equally been credited to Foyn Yuh and his workshop. The ensemble according to Tamara Northern (1984:96) "symbolically recreates and commemorates primary values of the Kom universe. From its decor, and notably the beads, baton in cupped hands and the entire ensemble of attire, *Afo-a-Kom* depicts "the royal family as well as the system of titles and retainerdom with fertility as the central focus of the kingdom's sustenance."

Determining the age of these sculptures must first consider Foyn Yuh's 47-year reign during which he may have been a carver. However, Kom elders were divided on the issue. Some claimed that he was intermittently an active carver while others say carving was his main activity at old age (VB Ngitir, 2014). Nonetheless, a combination of evidence reveals that the first decade of this century saw the origins of *Afo-a-Kom* and the rise of Yuh as its carver. Yet there lingers a divergent opinion confirmed by PN Nkwi (1976). It is based on Prince Francis Ngam, son of Foyn Yuh's successor (Fon Ngam, 1912-26). Prince Ngam believes that *Afo-a-Kom* and its two beaded female figures were carved under Foyn Tufoyn (5th Foyn of Kom, 1840-55) and then beaded by the then young princes Yuh and Ngam. Tamara Northern (1984:96) however dismisses this view for lack of corroborative documentation and evidence from German colonial files. As we look forward to the dating of this antiquity, it can only be speculated that the object was produced in the mid 19th century. Yet a principal trade mark of Kom sacred art especially that with political functions (scepters, thrones, gongs, statues and so forth) was its significant adornment with symbols and representations. These symbols were necessary for the exercise of power, to the extent that some objects were considered mediators in the Foyn's exercise of power.

They were embodiments of the ideology of royalty and the kingdom. They centered on the power and showed the grandeur of the Fon as well as the notables of *kwifoyn*: they exalted the Foyn's power and skills, displayed his prestige of royalty, and above all, symbolized his multiple attributes (N. Tamara, 1973: 38-71). The Fon was also associated with extensive supernatural powers said to be drawn from the royal totemic animals

depicted on his furniture. He was presented as the ultimate source of wellbeing, prosperity, peace and stability throughout the kingdom.

Figure 1: Mbang later baptized Afo-A-kom



Height: 62.5 inches

Source: National Geographic, 2013

3.2 External influence and traffic of Kom sacred art

N. Tamara (1973) reports that close contact between the Germans and the Kom started in 1902 when Von Pavel, then commander of the *Deutsche Scultztruppen* set foot in the kingdom. A male figure representing Foyin Yuh (1865-1912), the Kom king who submitted to German rule was immediately shipped to the *Museum fur Volkerkunde*, Frankfurt (Frankfurt Museum of World Cultures) in 1902. To Tamara, the famous Kom throne figures were the most targeted. Usually, they were produced in pairs, male and female. As sculptures “they consisted of two formally distinct elements: a throne or stool, joined to a male or female figure”. The dimensions of the stool were “functionally adapted for sitting while the life-size figures formed the vertical back” (Ngitir, 2021 b). Two of such pairs were smuggled off to German museums in 1904, together with the male figure of another pair. The female later found its way into Katherine White Reswick’s “Cameroon Collection” in Los Angeles in the 1960s (N. Tamara, 1973: 11-29).

The story of external influence on Cameroon art in general and Kom sacred heritage in particular would be incomplete without making allusion to the much-publicized theft in 1966 of *Afo-a-kom* and its restitution later in 1973. This throne figure was central in a

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special pair of three or four throne statues representing the producer (FoyñYuh), his mother and his wife, respectively. Originally known as “*Mbang* (meaning the male sexual organ and representing fertility), this throne figure was rebaptized *Afo-a-Kom* (meaning a “Kom thing”) only after its theft and discovery in the US” (Q. A. Ngumi, 2006). This statue which was smuggled out of the loosely guarded *Ifim* sacred sanctuary in Laikom during the reign of Foyñ Nsom Ngwe was said to have overwhelming mystical powers. Its disappearance from *Ifim* was said to have been “masterminded by a prince who doubled as palace retainer (*nchiNto*’) named Henry Yuh Ndi. He acted on the financial intuition of James Yibain, another prince and nephew of Fon Nsom” (ibid). The latter was equally said to have acted on the financial impulsion of one Bamum man, Ibrahim. The latter, a seasoned dealer in Grassfields antiquities, reportedly promised a down payment of \$10 if the theft succeeded (Ibidem).

Ngumi further states that Yibain’s earlier attempts to go through Pa Ngam Njam (another retainer) had been rejected on the ground that *mbang* was “the heart of Kom”. Hence, such an act was tantamount to an abomination. Yet, the theft and sale of *mbang* could be attributed to poverty among palace retainers and the introduction in 1909 of the modern taxation system in Kom. Caught in this doubly frustrating web of hardship, Ngumi affirms that most retainers who used to serve *kwifoyn* and guard the palace left for greener pastures in the coastal plantations. In the meantime, the New York art dealer, Aaron Furman, a specialist in primitive African art who allegedly bought the statue for about \$60.000, said “theft was not involved in his acquisition of *Afo-a-kom*”. He claimed to have bought it from an impeccable go-between “outside Africa who told him that it was offered for sale by a king”.

Geary Christraud (1984: 12) adds:

Some pieces were probably never seen by outsiders whereas other objects, whose existence and storage location were well known, have long tempted art dealers, Africans as well as Europeans to get them on the international market via shady channels. The example of *Afo-a-kom*, a royal figure from Kom, is well remembered. It was one of the few pieces ever to be returned to the Grassfields after having been illegally taken out of the country. Other objects such as famous masks that disappeared from the treasure house of the fon of Bafut, remain missing. These sad developments have

recently led many chiefs to prohibit visitors from seeing the pieces in their treasure houses, even though outsiders had been admitted for many years previous.

From the above, one is tempted to agree that the integrity of Grassfields Fons was impeccable in guaranteeing the security of royal treasures. This may have been so in the past, but with the hot quest for money and material wealth in recent times, things have tremendously changed. In many cases, some Grassfields Fons are known to have served either as middlemen or to have out-rightly proposed object sales to visiting Western agents. However, as custodians of local customs and traditions, they stand as vanguard safeguards for community heritage entrusted to them.

Today, *Afo-a-Kom* represents not just in material form, the soul of a Kom nation but also its intangible manifestation in as an annual festival in Cameroon. Similar to the Ngondo festival of the Dualas, Leila of the Balis, Ngonso' of the Nso' and Nguon of the Bamum sultanate, the *Afo-a-Kom* festival which lasts two days, showcases Kom culture in all its fragrance and splendor.⁶

Figure 2: *Afo-a-Kom* festival, 2010



Source 1: Photo by Yuh Patrice Ngong

Kom sons and daughters from home and the diaspora come home for the special dance whose origins can only be traced to *mbang*, the statue throne-statue later baptized *Afo-a-Kom*– subject of the present study.

4. The Controversy over Afo-A-Kom

The subject of controversy has indeed become a trade mark over the authorship, mystical potentials, mode of acquisition by American collectors, legal, ethical and other issues

⁶According to Yuh Patrice Ngong, Afo Akom Cultural festival is a gathering by the Kom people each end of year in Laikom at the Fon's palace. This festival is lasted for two days with tradition activities and cultural dances of the kom people.

King as a throne: The symbolism of Afo-a-Kom in Kom artistry surrounding the transfer of a mere iroko sculpture from an unknown enclave in Cameroon to a five-star museum in the USA. In the highly mediatized debate and dilemma that unfolded between 1966 when the emblematic statue set foot on American soil and 1973 when it left for Cameroon, accusation and counter-accusation took center stage, animated by American and Kom versions of the same story.

4.1 On the genesis and growing interest over *Afo-A-kom*

The most spectacular human representation in Kom royal art was through life-sized statues. The tall traditional statue thrones of Laikom could be traced to late FonYuh (1865-1912) and his Kom carvers. The seat was often carried by a single animal figure (buffalo or antelope) or by animal heads. A life-sized figure (male or female) would then rise from the seat serving the Fon as a back-rest. A throne with both a male and female statue represented royal ancestors (Tamara Northern, 1973:12). According to Daniel W. Ewoi (D.W. Ewoi, 1980), Foyon Yuh “was a highly respected nation-builder who expanded and united his kingdom.” Being an artist himself, he is also said to have gathered many carvers around him rewarding them with food, livestock, masks, door posts, statues, houses and wives. They were known for producing the greatest masterpieces and statue thrones of their time. Northern further states that:

Afo-a-Kom itself was covered from head to foot with “opaque reddish-brown and dark-blue tubular glass beads, associated with Kom royalty. They were sewn onto the back cloth which covered the wooden figure. The face of the figure was covered with beaten sheet copper and the crown made of beads and cowry shells.

Foyon Yuh and his carvers are said to have produced an ensemble of four life-size figures. William Fagg quoted by Nkwi (1986) states that “two of these are in Berlin, one in Frankfurt, one in the collection of M. Charles Ratton. They were collected from the palace of the Fon of Bikom in 1904” ... “This example represented the great grandfather of the then reigning Fon”. “The face is plaited with copper and the hair is human hair (P. N. Nkwi, 1976).

It so happened that the sacred *Afo-A-kom* disappeared from the *kwifoyn* lodge at Laikom one night in August 1966 and remained lost for seven years. Soon after the theft, Fon Alo-ah passed away and his successor, Fon Nsom Ngwe was enthroned

using a substitute *Afo-a-Kom* carved by the artist Nguemo, from neighbouring Kedjom-keku. The name *Afo-a-Komin Itanghikom* literally means *a kom thing* (Ewoi, 1980). Despite the performance of the necessary enthronement rites, the Fon and his people did not actually accept the new *Afo-a-kom*.⁷ To them the missing sacred *Afo-a-Kom* represented the soul of the Kom cut off and taken away (N. Tamara, 1984). Fortunately, in 1973 the original *Afo-a-Kom* was discovered in Dartmouth College, USA where it was up for exhibition by Tamara Northern. After negotiations, through diplomatic channels, it was reinstated to Cameroon.⁸

Figure 3: Three figures of the *Afo-A-kom* ensemble, Laikom, 1974



Heights: 159 cm, 179 cm, 173 cm (*Afo-a-kom* left); Source: VB Ngitir (2014) “Bamenda Grassfields royal collections and museums,” p. 206.

The figure is depicted with the highly valued attributes of full sexual and social maturity. Nkwi affirms that she carries a basket rattle as leader of the earth dance. Similarly, she displays the accoutrements of her status as a special woman. They include collars of glass beads, a necklace of carved leopard teeth, a beaded loin string, as well as ivory armlets and anklets. Nevertheless, the absence of the important iconographic indicator of twin mothers, the cowry shell, further indicates that the figure may rather have been a royal wife with outstanding abilities (diviner), rather than a twin mother (PN Nkwi, 1976).

⁷*Afo-a-Komis* a symbol of continuity, solidarity and social stability; it is a symbol of love, hospitality and generosity; it is a symbol of unity, diversity and tolerance; and of justice and sovereignty. The Fon of Kom can only see the statue once during his reign – this is during his coronation. After that he can no longer see the totem. It is considered as the embodiment of his powers. However, he can see it many times before he is made fon.

⁸Nkwi also revealed that the beads on *Afo-a-kom* were bought in Nigeria by Ngong Fidoh who was the Foyon's envoy on several occasions.

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4.2 On the controversy: Finished or unfinished business?**4.2.1 Controversy over its authorship**

Like the biblical baby whose birth sparked off sentiments love, hate and fear simultaneously, the popularity of *Afo-a-Kom* provoked a wave of doubt surrounding its authorship. While some writers and even Grassfielders held that though produced in Kom it could hardly be the work of Foyun Yuh, others insisted that he was a carver himself of stools, royal beds and other objects (Fon Quinter, 1995). Tamara Northern (1984:96) quotes Bobe Johnny Ngong as having said that he was entrusted with the mission of buying the beads for the figures and that after they were beaded, under Fon Yuh's supervision, they were displayed to the Kom people. Bobe Johnny added that the practice of displaying them at the annual dance became a custom after this time, in the reigns of subsequent Fons.

Figure 4: *Afo-a-Kom* besides its author and patron, Foyun Yuh



Source: Shanklin (1990), *The Odyssey of the Afo-A-Kom*

Yet in art as in administration, ownership and authorship were and have often been used synonymously. Others still claimed that it was either purchased from a neighbouring kingdom or was the work of a foreign carver based in Kom. Others claimed that the carver of this statue is unknown but it is speculated that *Afo-a-Kom* was carved by Nyangha, the second Foyun of the Kom. Whether produced by his carvers or by the king himself, the final product was dedicated to him and his reign. Moreover, as king of the Kom any masterpiece produced by his carvers, in his workshop or during his reign deserved his

patronage (VB Ngitir, 2014). Furthermore, the chances were high he produced it given the proliferation of sculptor-kings in the region in the 18th century. This was the case in Oku, Kedjom-keku, Kedjom-ketingo, Babungo and Bamessing. Local sources stated that the statue was produced c. 1865 by FonYuh, the 7th ruler of Kom.⁹

4.2.2 Controversy over its mystical powers

On the supposed mystical powers of *Afo-a-kom*, much ink has equally been spilt. Rumours were recorded in many journals that appeared in the US when the statue sojourned in that country. While some alleged that the statue kept saying *take me back to Kom*, others alluded to nightly incidents. On exhibition at Dartmouth College, the New York Times reported that all other objects displayed around the statue were found lying on the floor every morning while *Afo-a-Kom* stood firm and tall. In Kom itself, inhabitants still believe that the *Afo-a-Kom* possesses mystical powers and that shortly after it arrived in the US it began disturbing its new owners by destroying everything around it. Its new owner is said to have taken and thrown it into the sea but only to get back home and see the *Afo-a-Kom* on its original position. He took it to a New York art gallery where he sold it for about 15 million FCFA. Even at home, the absence of *Afo-a-Kom* raged havoc on the populations – streams allegedly dried up, harvests slumped, child-bearing shrank to trickles, and the oracles roared. In short, the gods were angry, if not dead. Even Sandra Blakeslee, former Times reporter living in western Africa: "there has been no peace in the kingdom since the statue was taken out." According to E. Shanklin (1990), the set of three statues has power because it was either carved by Foyn Yuh (reigned 1865-1912) himself or by a member of his workshop. Though our informants were not agreed on whoever carved them, they are products of the reign of the most powerful Kom Foyn and their power derived from his aegis and from the reverence for age. This is characteristic of Kom culture. Its power is also based on the legend that *Afo-a-Kom* was initiated into use with the sacrificial blood of seven slaves (Shanklin, 1990).

To these mystical attributes, must be added the view of some local folks that *Afo-a-Kom* was responsible for the sudden death (in 1974) of Fon Nsom. According to them, Nsom died because he saw the *Afo-a-Kom* twice whereas a Fon is only supposed to see it once,

⁹ Interview with PN Nkwi, Kom notable, retainer and resource person, Bamenda, 2009

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at the time he is enthroned. I mentioned earlier that Nsom's predecessor, Fon Lo'oh, was also said to have died because the statue was stolen. The attitude of dread and beliefs in the malevolent powers of the statue also extend to other objects it came into contact with. Members of the royal household strongly believed that the statue had mysterious powers. The grey coffin-like box in which it was returned partook of this power. In the following words, Paul Nkwi, the Kom anthropologist, narrates what happened after that:

"The night of the return of the *Afo-a-Kom*, no one slept in the palace. As soon as they dozed off, they were awakened by something but no one knew what it was. The next morning, they discussed the matter and agreed that the thing to do was to bury the "coffin" in which the statue had made its return trip. Once the "coffin" was buried, everyone slept soundly."¹⁰

4.2.3 Controversy over its mode of acquisition

Regarding its mode of acquisition, controversy also rages as to whether the antiquity was legally acquired or illegally smuggled out of the Laikom sanctuary to the US. This has been the subject of on-going discussions on some ethical questions often involved in dealing with art objects either "plucked" from their source by *fair means* or spirited of by *foul means*. General opinion from Kom palace *habitués* reveals among other things that being a sacred object and soul of the people, such an antique could never have left its shrine legally. Corroborating this theft hypothesis, D. W. Ewoi (1998) affirms that the object was smuggled from its loosely guarded shrine under the cover of darkness, wrapped like a corpse in a straw mat and supplied to its waiting middleman (a Bamum trafficker identified as Ibrahim) who later sold it to American art dealers in August 1966. Furthermore, its itinerary out of Kom and Cameroon was unorthodox.¹¹ New publicity about the sculpture caused even a greater stir as fresh captions talked of an object *beyond money*. This signified that the antiquity was worth more than any amount of money. These surfaced when Thaddeus Nkuo (1973), first secretary at the Cameroon in Washington and himself a Kom, demanded its return, explaining that:

¹⁰ PN Nkwi, personal communication, 1985.

¹¹The itinerary from Fundong via Bambui to Ndop-Jakiri-Fumban-Douala-South Africa-Washington DC was clearly designed to avoid the Police-Gendarmerie check points in Bamenda, Bafoussam down to Douala. Only a illegally acquired items would prefer such a long distance over a far shorter one through Bamenda, Bafoussam and Nkongsamba. The Afo-a-Kom (literally, the Kom thing) was stolen from Ngumba House, Laikom, a village of the Kom Kingdom, a tribal population of approximately 30,000 people in the north part of Cameroon. The man who stole the statue sold it in a town in East Cameroon for \$100; then the Afo-a-Kom was exported and later sold to an American art dealer, which, in turn, sold it to the New York-based Furman Gallery.

"It is beyond money, beyond value. It is the heart of the Kom, what unifies the tribe, the spirit of the nation, what holds us together. It is not an object of art for sale, and could not be."

According to Fon Quinter and other Kom oral sources, the statue *Afo-a-Kom* was stolen and ferried to New York in 1966, was later discovered and returned to Kom seven years later after intense diplomatic maneuverings (E. Sumelong, 2015). Despite this apparent consistency of African and local sources, the American press was somehow contradictory.

According to the US Times Magazine of November 05, 1973 captioned *Lost Totem*, ...the statue was mysteriously spirited away by thieves using a highly organized system of logistics that included Land Rovers, trucks and airplanes. When he realized his loss, Law, the king (also called the Fon) of Kom was thought to be "psychologically killed" and soon died ...Last week this rather ungainly sculpture caused a flurry of diplomatic exchanges and created an uproar that stretched from the elegant salons of the New York's art world all the way back to Laikom, the capital of Kom for it seemed that the *Afo-a-kom* had been stolen in late 1966 from a storage hut near the royal palace and smuggled out of the kingdom.

The report further alluded to an exhibition catalogue titled "Royal Art of Cameroon," mounted at Dartmouth College. This caption reached Evan Schneider, a longtime Kom scholar and a member of the Peace Corps in Cameroon. Appearing on the cover of the catalogue, in full color, was the image of the lost *Afo-a-Kom*. It had been lent to Dartmouth by its new *owner*, Aaron Furman, a respected Manhattan dealer in primitive art, and it was reportedly on sale for \$60,000. Denying these accusations Furman's lawyer said that his client "bought the object in good faith from an established firm that had been trafficking African art for 20 years" (*The Times*, November 5, 1973).

The King's nephew, suspected of complicity in the disappearance of the statue, was ostracized, and, according to one account, nearly everyone in the country took to quarreling (Ibidem). The new Fon, Bobe-Meya, then had a new *Afo-a-Kom* carved and displayed, as is customary, with female figures representing his wife and mother. But the new sculpture was no substitute for the old because more and more upheavals were

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reported. As controversy raged on, two questions remained rife on every lip: was the *Afo-a-Kom* stolen or, was it sold by the King or someone in his family as the organizers of the Dartmouth exhibition claimed? This second theory was supported by the fact that smaller "sacred objects" had been sold off by past Fons of Kom in exchange for such commodities as roofing sheets and land rovers (Sumelong, 2015). Cameroon's Ambassador to the U.S., Francois-Xavier Tchoungui on his part validated the theft hypothesis, for, according to him, no chief could sell his own totem." Even as the equation over sale or theft persisted, ethical questions began to surface. Should even a legitimate owner sell an art object outside his own country if it is declared a national treasure, and can an art dealer legitimately buy it, in good faith, for mere cash? Of course, within the context of a changing world order marked by UNESCO conventions, this was and has remained unacceptable.

In *Odyssey of the Afo-a-Kom*, E. Shanklin (1990) identifies four emergent audiences with different perceptions and attitudes towards *Afo-a-kom*: first, the Kom people, most of whom had never seen the statue before but now are very proud of the effervescence it created; the Cameroonians, who began making copies of *Afo-a-Kom* to sell to gullible Westerners soon after the object's return; Western connoisseurs of African art; and finally, readers of the New York Times, some of whom regard the statue as one of the finest examples of African statuary.

The Kom version is that after its removal from Laikom, their "stick of wood" caused quite a stir in a modern Western nation because it was so powerful, and that the Americans were so uncomfortable with the object that they undertook heroic measures to return it to Kom. This perception shows how cleverly the Kom people outwitted the Americans. The Kom also believe that they defeated the German colonial forces in the first decade of the twentieth century (Nkwi, 1976). The American version as told by Fred Ferretti begins in 1970, with a Peace Corps worker (Paul Gebauer), and his wife, who at the time of the theft and eventual restitution, were doing some work for the Bamenda Museum. They were told about the disappearance of the statue in 1966, and although a lot of people knew it was missing, no one seemed to know where it was, until they saw a catalog titled *Royal Art of Cameroon*, which featured the statue on the front cover. Ferretti himself became involved in the spring of 1973 when Sandra Blakeslee, former Times reporter, wrote to a

Times editor, Arthur Gelb, asking if Gelb was interested in a story she had been told about a sacred statue stolen from Laikom.

When the American and the Kom views of the *Afo-a-Kom's* odyssey are elucidated, it is clear that an opportunity for cross-cultural exchange was lost, that the consequences of the statue's loss and return are more far-reaching than have been imagined and that the effects were more subtle, than an account told from one side or the other. There are other aspects, too: Brasch and Schneider (1974:50) explored the role of the Western press in the return of the statue and suggested that, "It was a story that gave a hint of what the media could do at its journalistic best. It was consequently, a story that showed the media at its journalistic worst." The Kom side of the story also adds new information about the unethical behavior of Western art dealers. In America, the story of the *Afo-a-Kom's* odyssey has been told in several ways by different people. It was first told by Fred Ferretti, reporter for the New York Times (1974); then the object's return was chronicled by Sophy Burnham in *Esquire* (1975), and finally, by William Ellis in the *National Geographic* (1975). Later Ferretti published a book called *Afo-a-Kom*, in which he recounted the events surrounding the object's removal and return (E. Shanklin, 1990:95-96).

For some members of the Kom royal family *Afo-a-Kom* still represents all the Fons who have passed on and all the powers vested in the Fonship. Its ritual use in whatever context, as representative of a deceased Fons, suggests and confirms this interpretation. In some parts of the Grassfields, the dead body of the Fon is tied into a chair to serve the same purpose but Kom people find that idea aesthetically unappealing. Although Kom's professing Christians are only about 25% of the present population, the belief in the semi-divine nature of the Fon is losing steadily ground and fewer people would accept the notion that the Fon or the *Afo-a-Kom* (or both together) guarantee the nation's fertility and well-being, although some very old people assured me that it remains so.

Conclusion

The story of *Afo-a-Kom* has and can be told from several perspectives and doing so offers an instructive example of the ways "sacred" objects and their owners have been perceived in developed and developing nations. Prospects of North-South cultural cooperation were clearly misconstrued and mishandled because of Kom tradition and conservatism on the

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one hand and American exquisite arrogance on the other. What Americans regarded as primitive art was rather a powerful and sacred power-ridden art-object among the Kom. It is also apparent that in the past, the *Afo-a-Kom* had a limited audience (confined to Kom notables), but its theft, restitution and media campaign exposed it to wider audiences. No doubt in 1985 its participation in another US exhibition raised no concerns. There are a number of interesting differences between the American and Kom perceptions, reflecting both factual and cultural differences in interpretation. The American story centers on the object's removal from Laikom, its tortuous journey to America, and its triumphal return to its ancestral home. To this school of thought "sacred" art objects are more important to the people who make and revere them than to art dealers. Here the Americans are presented as responsible gentlemen who catered for such an important antiquity left to rot in an obscure African enclave. The Kom perception is that they outwitted the Americans just as they did to the Germans half a century ago. In an era when the traffic in antiquities was already regulated by international instruments the American arrogance as displayed over *Afo-a-Kom* was uncalled for. Its persistence only validated the thesis that UNESCO conventions (1954, 1999, 1970 and 1995) are mere window dressing intended to ensure that big fish swallow small fish. In addressing matters of restitution or determining whether the possessor exercised due diligence, the circumstances of the acquisition must be assessed, including the character of the parties, the price paid for the object, whether the possessor consulted any reasonably accessible register of stolen cultural objects, and any other relevant information/documentation which it could reasonably have obtained are crucial. This includes if the possessor consulted accessible agencies or took any other step that a reasonable person would have taken in the circumstances. This way, such controversies, as there are over *Afo-a-Kom*, would be laid to rest.

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