

**Safeguarding Sacred Cultural Heritage in Kom Fondom of Bamenda
Grassfields Since 1865: Stakes, Challenges and Influence.**

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ABSTRACT

The inhabitants of Bamenda Grassfields knew how to carefully use their hands to make ends meet. Gifted in handicraft, they have used the geography and its features as their springboard. Through inspiration or learnt skills, outstanding crafts were produced either to preserve vital information or as a business. With limited knowledge of this craft's importance, the advent of Christianity led to some of these dignified objects being idolized, creating conditions favorable to their commercialization across borders or as gifts in exchange for gunpowder and other imported goods. The heavy benefits derived from the commercialisation of these crafts opened expansive windows for theft, looting, and trafficking, leading to the devaluation of some sacred artefacts. The desire of the United Nations and the yearning of some non-governmental organisations for the conscientious and intentional safeguarding of cultural heritage have not gone unheeded by researchers, especially Historians. These intentional moves, which embodied restitution and restoration, have prompted an avalanche of researchers worldwide to question functionalism and the quiddity (authenticity) of these crafts, as envisaged by their safeguarding. In the Bamenda Grassfields, particularly in Kom Fondom, despite several notable attempts by researchers and the government to address restitution, the demand to safeguard this sacred tangible heritage has not yet reached a satisfactory level. In an effort to bridge this gap left by previous researchers, we utilised both primary and secondary data sources. Throughout the research, it has been observed that the timid moves towards safeguarding Kom's Sacred tangible heritage have been motivated by limited knowledge of its importance and a lack of curators, among other factors.

Keywords: Kom Fondom, Sacred, Tangible Heritage, and Safeguard.

INTRODUCTION

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The appreciation of African arts in the West and East has had significant impacts not only on the development of modern arts but also on how African arts have been and are presented in Western museums. Although these magnificent designs were exported out of Africa since the 15th century, they gained momentum and awareness during the colonial period. Most European and American museums were filled with African artefacts, and artefacts made in Nigeria, Ghana, Burkina Faso, and Egypt, which were once regarded as unusual, became admired for their spiritual and artistic qualities (C. Clarke, 2006:41).

The growth of African arts in many museums worldwide has sparked scholarly debates, drawing the attention of tourists and adventurers to African craftworks (stools, bags, and masks). The ongoing admiration and appreciation of these arts have led to their commercialisation and the circulation of African objects in the international art markets, as trading in arts becomes a profitable business, encouraging illegal practices such as trafficking, looting, and theft (C B. Steiner 1994: 16). Furthermore, considering that some people relied on arts and crafts for their livelihood, the looting of arts involves traditional crafts that were and are believed to possess mystical powers, such as the Afo-akom of Kom Fondom (Rowlands & Warnier, 1993: 520).

Nevertheless, post-independence Africa focused solely on political, social, and economic instability and challenges. The most striking aspect of instability in the continent of Africa was in the field of cultural heritage. The political, social, and economic infighting witnessed in the preceding decades of independence had a significant impact on the carving industries. Due to ongoing armed conflicts and the dangers associated with them, governments worldwide, through their respective ministries and departments, have made considerable efforts to conserve and promote their heritage within their territories. Various non-governmental

and international organizations have joined in these efforts to recognize and preserve these heritages across the globe for posterity (Ibidem).

In Cameroon, sacred cultural heritage has gained scholarly interest and debates, coupled with widespread expression, production, and exhibition, especially among the Grassfield kingdoms and Fondoms such as Bamum, Bamileke, Bali, Nso, Bambui, and Kom, which is our primary concern (S B Pius, 1984; D F Tangem; E T Moffor, 2020). This material culture, which has become part of our cultural heritage, holds historical, scientific, political, religious, or cultural significance and is important to groups, communities, countries, institutions, organizations, or individuals (E. O. Omayio; I. Sreedeviel).

The cultural heritage of the Grassfield Fondoms, with a focus on the Kom Fondom, is represented in material and immaterial objects, as well as in sites littered with them. Before colonization, they were spiritually linked to these objects (stools, masks, lintels) and sites (lakes, caves, streams, waterfalls, and forests), but in recent years, the advent of Christianity and other green-collar jobs has had a derogatory effect on the arts and crafts¹. Wooden objects and instruments, which were believed to be invested with mystical powers because of their importance, were kept in holy places as an honor or to commemorate the departure of a hero or a notable, and also for traditional authorities (V.B Ngitir). It could take the form of strong animals such as buffalo (symbolizing strength and determination), spider (supernatural wisdom), leopard, lion, which was, at one point, attributed to mysticism because of the hidden nature of its description, significance and its beliefs towards these objects, while many other craftworks were used as house utensils and decoration before the arrival of modern containers (P. N. Nkwi and J. P. Wannier, 1982: 15).

Moreover, carved images were discovered across the Grassfields Fondom, created by individuals or artisans inspired by intuition, who

¹ A property or thing that is perceptible by touch, such as Buildings, picture, sculpture, applied art, calligraphic works, and other items of great historical or artistic value to our nation.

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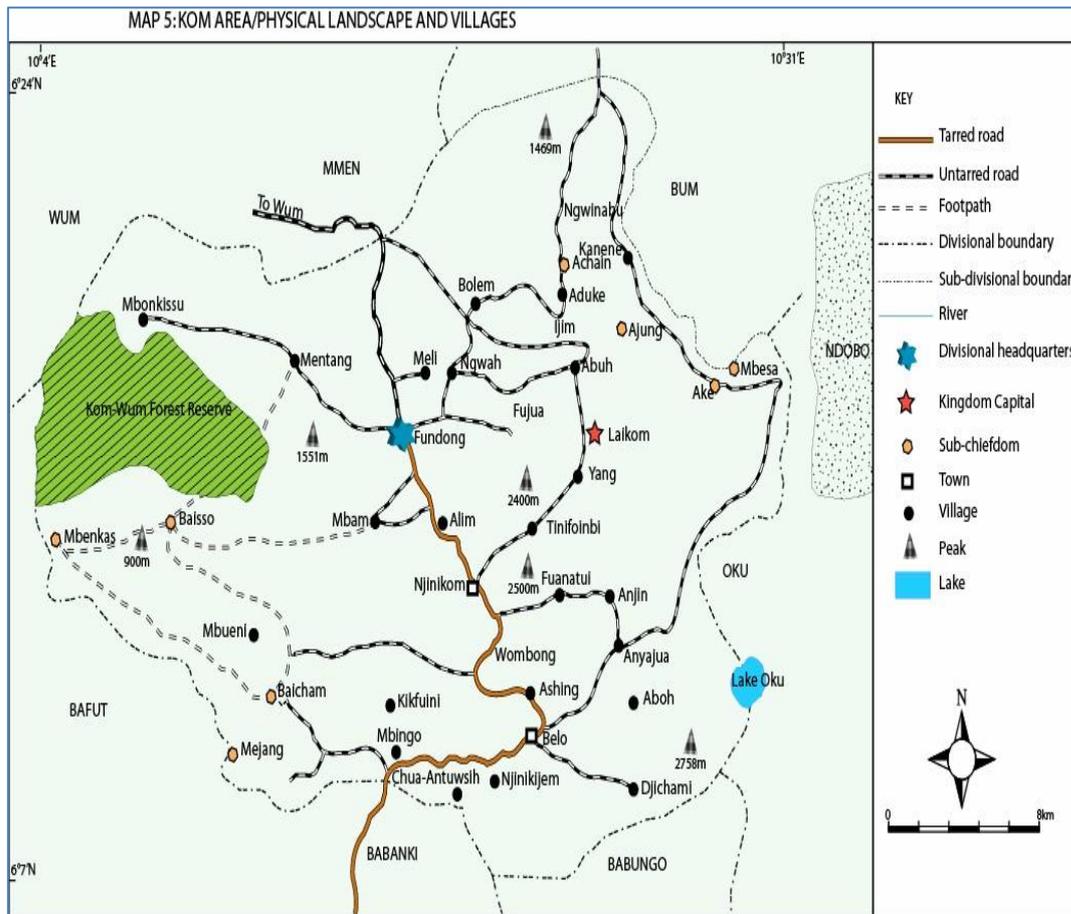
viewed these artworks as a means of preserving vital information or ensuring survival. These individuals were believed to possess exceptional thought processes, which were sometimes attributed to mysticism because of the obscure nature of their descriptions, the objects' significance, and their beliefs concerning these objects. Meanwhile, many other crafts were utilized as household utensils and decorations before the advent of modern technology. Additionally, a comprehensive Kom history demonstrates that they placed greater importance on sites such as streams, forests, waterfalls, lakes, mountains, and valleys, which were regarded as abodes of supernatural beings or the spirit world (S Terry Childs, 1989:339). These sites were forbidden to people fetching water with modern containers like buckets, except with a calabash, which was believed to facilitate communication with the gods. Furthermore, people were not permitted access late in the evening, as it was generally thought that the gods departed for visits and meetings during this time, necessitating a calm and serene atmosphere (M. M. Mfonden 2004:35-27, Gam Godfrey, 87 years, interviewed on 23/02/2024 at Fundong).

LOCATION AND JUSTIFICATION FOR THE CASE STUDY

Kom is one of the biggest ethnic groups (G W Nkwi: 16) of the Bamenda Grassfields present-day North West region of Cameroon, founded as early as the 18th century. While the administrative headquarters is Fundong, the seat of traditional institutions is Laikom. *Foyin* in the local palace, seen as a monarch, exercised a quasi-religious, customary, and political power within his area of jurisdiction, aided by the “kwifon,” who served as the executive arm within the *Fondom*. It's found between longitude 10°5 and 10°30 East of the Greenwich Meridian and latitudes 66° and 6°24 North of the Equator (Wanier and Nkwi 1982, Nkwi 2014). It covers 70% of the Boyo division, including its principal agglomerations, such as Fundong, Belo, and Njinikom (V.B Ngitir). It shares its eastern boundary with the kingdoms of Nso and Oku and the Southern with Kedjom Keku

(Big Babaki) and the Ndop Plain Bafut, the Western border with the North Bum and Mmen (PN Nkwi, 1976:24). However, in the course of our work, mention will be made wholly or partially to the neighboring villages because of their cultural affiliations (G. M. Looh, 2010:16).

FIGURE 1: The present map of Kom showing the physical landscape and villages



Source: adapted from ORSTOM village dictionary 1973, conceived by authors and drawn by Toh Augustine Ngam, 15 April 2019.

Cultural heritage and indigenous knowledge in Kom Fandom

The richness of Grassfields' cultural diversity has found expression in the widespread proliferation of artefacts. The Grassfields were, and remain, recognised for their dynamism in material culture, largely due to their geographical location. Kom is not exempt from this general understanding. Cultural heritage continues to be a living memory for the

people. Among these cultural heritages, especially Afo-akom, their resilient nature has garnered scholarly interest both nationally and internationally. However, there seems to be a lukewarm attitude in policy-making regarding their safeguarding and conservation. Indeed, poor conservation techniques have reduced the much-admired and appreciated Kom heritage to a very limited number.

A careful observation of the cultural heritage among the Kom Fandom raises concerns. The Kom's material heritage has been revered and respected for its rich cultural diversity, expressed through the creation of masks, stools, bags, kitchen utensils, ammunition, and other items. Unfortunately, these sacred, tangible items have been exposed to theft, scorn, and devaluation. Compounding this issue is that most of these artefacts are made from perishable wood, which cannot withstand the worsening impacts of climate change. Additionally, population growth has negatively affected sacred sites. The illegal trade in Kom royal artefacts and the limited interest from the local government are attributed to a lack of awareness of their economic and social importance (Kuh Boniface interviewed an 82-year-old farmer on 15 Feb. 2023).

Moreover, the increasing demands of African arts in the international trade markets have placed sacred tangibles, especially those of Grassfields, at the dangers of trafficking, theft and looting of royal treasuries (Nkwi, 2014: 51). This sacred tangible has achieved an inferior regard in the Kom Fandom, where most inhabitants were unconscious of its importance. In 1966, the Afo-akom, the god of Kom, was spirited from the Kwifon sanctuary, only to be discovered in New York in 1973. A seven-year odyssey left the Kom kingdom frustrated and hopeless, like the Israelites in the absence of Moses. Certainly, the leader of the Fandom seemed to have made the wrong decision or misbehaved, since the one who gave the directions was absent.

Unfortunately, the theft, looting, and trafficking of these royal treasuries were made possible because most of these artefacts were preserved under the care of individuals who lacked the capacity and resources to protect

them. A conscious step at both local and national levels through the creation of an enabling and convivial environment, which will favour assembling of these artefacts under the guidance of a trained curator and a museum manager who will keep the entire database.

It is worth noting that all the Grassfields artefacts, especially Kom Fondom, were produced using trees from forests that were not affected by chemical use in the tropics. Additionally, the growing population, timber exploitation, and exportation in the Bamenda Grassfields have negatively impacted the carving industry, endangering key tree species through logging. Furthermore, some of the trees used for carving are located in government-protected areas such as the Ijim Mountain Forest Reserve and the Kimbi Reserve in Kom. This has made exploitation very difficult for locals, making it essential to promote awareness of returning to indigenous preservation methods, especially since access to raw materials remains challenging.

The above paragraphs works in conjunction with the views and dreams of a German missionary in the western Grassfield; Hans Knopfli who called on all the youths of Cameroon to “regain interest in manual work, reawaken their enthusiasm for traditional arts and crafts and not depend solely on imported goods especially cheap plastic material which is difficult to dispose of without causing pollution, they should be patriotic enough to uphold and maintain positive aspects of their traditional culture”(H. Knopfli 2002:13).

In fact, the colonisation of Cameroon and its challenges adversely affected craftsmanship. The colonisation of Cameroon introduced religious dogmatism to soften Cameroonians’ minds and achieve its agenda of mandatory compliance. This was implemented through the establishment of primary education, which introduced young Cameroonians to white-collar jobs. Graduates from these schools were employed as teachers and preachers, and some were sent abroad on scholarships for further studies, thereby discouraging traditional crafts.

This new method of education differed from the informal learning in Kom, where artistic skills were mainly acquired at a young age. Children followed their uncles, family friends, or arts-and-crafts experts to learn blacksmithing, carving, weaving, sculpting, and many other trades.

It is essential to equally note that Europeans contributed to rendering some of these sectors unpopular by flooding the local markets with their objects, which were cheaper and attractive to the locals. Carved dishes, spoons, plates as well as talking drums gradually started witnessing a replacement (W. G. Nkwi). Even the weaving and pottery sector suffered from stiff competition from European. The few dignified and admired crafts have been abandoned to themselves.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To fully understand and explore the *raison d'être* of this paper, the dual theories of Functionalism and quiddity (authenticity) must be carefully examined.

The Theory of Functionalism

According to Malinowski, the founder of the theory of functionalism, culture exists to fulfill the basic biological, psychological, and social needs of the individual (R.H. Crap, 2002; D.F. Tangem, 2018:54). As a theoretical framework, functionalism aims to analyse culture and its representative properties by examining what it contributes and how it supports societal welfare. Since culture encompasses the overall adaptive strategies humans employ in their daily activities, its various properties are carefully selected, patterned, and redirected to achieve specific objectives. In contexts such as that of Kom, the design and creation of art objects, like the preservation of relics, serve a clear purpose as an auxiliary mechanism of social control. From an ontological perspective, members of a community adhere to specific belief systems and work to conserve and protect what defines them (Ibidem).

The Theory of Quiddity

The theory of Quiddity deals with the essence or inherent nature of a person or thing (C. McLintosh, 2001:354). This theory addresses the existence of objects and helps define what constitutes an entity. The theory of quiddity is the most used in the West, as plastic arts are prevalent. This assertion works in consonance with the ideology of cameroon born sociologist Achille Mbembe who stressed that “art has the potential to subsume and transcend the instant and to open horizons of the not yet” this implies that arts can be considered beautiful, if it is inherent, possesses functional value in practical ritual and sacral terms and has a harmonious relationship between the artist and his community (S. V. Von Annette, 2015:17). Proponents of this theory such as Viollet-le-Duc, focuses on the authentic state, the pristine state, that is, the state that the object should have even if it has never had it. According to Ruskin, (1819–1900) the pristine state of arts that can be considered real and incontestably true is the present state, a point of view also defended by Muñoz Viñas who defined the authentic state as the one that the object had when it was produced, according to Riegl’s theory (1858–1905), the authentic state is the state intended by the author.

Regrettably, the aforementioned explanations pose a threat in the field of contemporary art. Conservators or curators face the challenge of identifying an object's authentic state, as claimed by the author. In all cases, the concept of authenticity seems to focus mainly on architecture or traditional art, but contemporary art has brought us into new situations and challenges.

Regarding our research, the carefully selected theories are absolutely reliable and fit squarely within the Grassfields context, especially the Kom Fondom. These theories resonate with the aesthetic and artistic components of objects, making them tangible testimonies of a people. These twin theories, however, according to Paul Nkwi (P N Nkwi 2015:62),

suggest that art should be appreciated when used in rituals and ceremonies, in accordance with the customs of the community of origin.

IDENTIFICATION OF MATERIAL HERITAGE IN KOM FONDON

The pre-colonial Grassfield kingdoms were characterized by exceptional elements that linked them to nature and the supernatural or metaphysics. These elements, born from inspiration and creativity, were integral to their cultural heritage. Used as symbols of authority, for paying tributes, resolving conflicts, healing, cleansing rites, and appeasing gods either to secure promotion or to promote harvest, these were typical features of Grassfield Fondoms. Through incantations, libations, and enchantments, some sites were deemed sacred, and only a few crucial individuals were allowed or granted access to them. Moreover, those with special abilities to identify or produce these significant sites were given prominent titles in the palace, such as “chindo” (retainer) and diviner, and were held in high esteem within the community. The recognition of these elements as cultural heritage by UNESCO, along with current dynamics and scholarly interest, has added value by introducing new terms such as material culture (Afo-akom, bags, and royal stools). Although these material cultural heritage items have been given an inferior regard, their identification will be highlighted, and they will find their key and undisputable places in Kom culture and tradition as this section unfolds.

Craftwork and craft in Kom Fondom

In the Kom *Fondom* during their early settlements, photography was unknown. The only way to maintain archives through the preservation of people’s images was achieved with the help of carvers. Excellent and inspirational carvers and sculptors were born to produce aesthetic and artistic designs; the craft of entertainment was embedded in their palms. Ranging from flautists of various categories to iconic instruments imbued with the skills of societal history, drums of various uses and functions were produced daily: communication drums, religious drums for Christianity or palace use (W.G. Nkwi). These crafts are numerous in

Kom *Fondom* and do not carry the same weight. One of the most essential crafts is the “*Afo-akom*”

Afo-akom

The “*Afo-akom*” is a prominent Kom statue crafted in 1865 by the sculptor-king, FoyñYuh, in “*Aku a Mifi*” (spiritual forest), located at Laikom (V B. Ngitir, 59, Nsom, 2015: 19). This emblematic king statue is a symbol of continuity in Kom Fondom. It is alleged that any person who becomes Fon is shown once in his lifetime. 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 mediatised controversies surrounding its acquisition, provenance, and above all, its alleged mystical powers, the antique was restituted to its Cameroonian originators in 1973.

FIGURE 1: PORTRAIT OF AFO AKOM OF KOM FONDOM



SOURCE: Researchers’ gallery snapped on 11/07/2024 in Belo.

Bags (“bonjuv”)

A bag is a receptacle, a flexible container made of cloth, paper, plastic, and fibre. The bag is a beneficial instrument in every community. The

traditional bags discussed in this research paper are made of raffia fibre, animal skin, and Ndop fabric (Exodus Tikere Moffor). In Kom Fandom, according to some informants, the importance of bags lies not in their nature or design but in their contents and where they came from. Bags are divided into categories and types, each with different connotations (Kuh Boniface). Bags in the Kom Fandom carry profound messages and significance, especially those with royal links. Some important dignitaries, elders, and notables in the Fandom could receive bags of varying sizes and components from the palace. Signs and wonders are hidden in these bags. Before they are given to an individual, their personality is weighed against societal importance and their ability to keep secrets and maintain self-control. These particular bags are directly by the Fon, and when an individual in question dies, the same bags with similar components or more are retained at the palace. In the Fandom, not many people are fortunate enough to keep this bag. Upon demise, after the verification of the content by essential dignitaries, it could be given back to the man's reputable son or any member of the family who abides by the laws. Throughout this research, the informant has kept the contents of these bags secret, attributing great importance and respect to them.

FIGURE 2: A TYPICAL SACRED BAG IN KOM



Source: Researchers' gallery photographed on 10/07/2024 in Belo.

Royal Stools:

Stools play an essential role in the Kom culture. Typically, the stool symbolises power and royalty. Kom chairs, headrests, and stools are

often very personal and used only by their owners. Many of these objects are portable, permitting people to carry their furniture with them, whether visiting a neighbor or travelling long distances. Because these items become closely identified with their owner, chairs, headrests, and other objects are often kept within a family for generations. Such Curved stools were usually associated with the soul of their owner, and are regarded as a person's most intimate and prized possession. The owner alone may sit on it throughout life, and after death, a person's stool is placed on an ancestral shrine (Seh Joseph, 67 years old, interviewed in Ntum on 10/07/2025). At the death of honoured individuals such as clan elders, priests, chiefs, or queen mothers, the spirit of the deceased is transferred into their personal stool, which embodies the spirit of its owner (Simon Nkwain, 86 years old, interviewed in Ntum on 10/07/2025). The stool is then placed in the family or royal shrine, along with stools from other important deceased family members. The stool, as a spiritually charged object and the repository of the owner's soul, helps maintain the deceased's participation in the community's social, political, and religious life (Jacob Ayeah, 56-year-old farmer, interviewed in Ntum on 10/07/2025).

A stool can mean different things and serve varied functions for people around the world, in general, and for Africans in particular. In the majority of Bamenda Grassfield societies, there are stools of different categories, ranging from the very simple to the most sacred. The simple stools have varied uses. The sacred ones vary in nature (shape, size, and colour); they are found in diverse places and perform different roles. These stools range from long, round ones to huge ones. They are produced and consecrated by diverse sacred societies under the supervision of the *kwifon*. Different stools are associated with different holy institutions. Stools are a symbol of power and authority, representations rooted in veneration.

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These are well-carved wooden stools with special signs representing royal images, such as chiefs, royal animals like lions, tigers, and elephants, or influential ancestors of the traditional society in question. These decorations have special meaning, especially in most Bamenda Grassfields polities (S N T Kaze, 2020: 85). The royal stool in most Bamenda Grassfields chiefdoms was believed to have all the blessings of the *Fons* who have ever sat on the same stool and ruled. According to some oral traditions of the Bamenda Grassfields chiefdoms, the stool empowers the chief to rule with wisdom and pass sound judgment (M.T. Aletum, 1985).

FIGURE 3: STOOL MEANT FOR TITLE HOLDERS IN KOM FONDOM



Source: picture from the researchers' gallery taken on 10/07/2025, photographed at Bobe Simon Nkwain's house.

**FIGURE 3: STOOL MEANT FOR QUARTERHEAD IN KOM FONDOM
QUARTER HEAD OF NTUM**



Source: photographed by Ngai Killian Ncham on 10/07/2025 in the carver's industry.

**SAFEGUARDING SACRED CULTURAL TANGIBLE HERITAGE IN THE
KOM FONDOM**

For centuries, the movement of African art and antiquities has been outward. Thousands of military, political, and religious conquerors, administrators, missionaries, and adventurers took home souvenirs of their African experiences. With increasing awareness of the unique nature of African antiquities in Europe and America, large-scale investments in African art began. In its contemporary form, this process continues, with African and European art and antique dealers, attracted by the high profit margins, buying and selling African antiquities despite well-publicised national laws against the export of these arts (C. B. Steiner, 1994).

Some missionaries, who on occasion encouraged Africans to burn their so-called pagan effigies as proof of genuine conversion, quietly collected the best examples and shipped them back home. As a result of these activities, piles of African cultural objects sit like jewels behind glass in European public and private Museums, often grouped with those of other so-called “primitive” societies. By this time, virtually every Cameroon Grassfields palace collection worth the name had lost objects to these western facilities (N. Tamara 1973).

The restitution of colonially acquired antiquities from Africa began gaining momentum in Paris and Berlin in the 1960s (V.B. Ngitir, 56). As African nations search for means to establish viable and authentic cultural identities, an increasing number of demands have been made on European Governments to return art objects, archives, and antiquities taken during the colonial era. These demands came as an attempt to turn back history, impose a history that stripped Africa of its culture to impose colonial subjugation (E. K. Agorsah, 1977:305).

Now, the situation regarding the flow is turning inward as African governments, traditional institutions, and leaders increasingly demand an equitable share in the heritage of the past with justifiable urgency. In

some other circles, however, talk of restitution has provoked a tortured outcry from a public that regards the treasures as their heritage, rightfully gained by former empires.

In some Grassfield Fondoms, such as Kom, the restitution and restoration of some of these objects have been realised (*Afo-Akom* 1972). The focus of this part will be to examine first the conservation methods (indigenous) and traditional regulatory mechanisms to safeguard these restituted arts, which have been faced with a defiant challenge, resulting from the failure to ensure authenticity and the pristine nature of these arts.

THE INDIGENOUS CONSERVATION OF TANGIBLE HERITAGE IN KOM FONDOM

After a careful and deliberate research of Kom's sacred tangible heritage, the researcher had no choice but to embark on conscious safeguarding through international cooperation, community engagement, education, research, and climate change mitigation.

Concerning international cooperation, the world has become a digital village, where human communication and interaction can be controlled and monitored.² UNESCO, ICOM, and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) have not allowed a single stone to remain untouched. The UNESCO protocol 2002 placed greater emphasis on the protection of sacred intangible heritage in the fast-changing world, plunged in the midst of almost unending political and social insecurity, placing Africa, especially Kom, once cherished arts at the mercy of destruction. The lopsided importance of these arts could be primarily attributed to the local inhabitants' limited knowledge of the significance of the very fabric of their existence. The limited knowledge on the part of the Kom inhabitants is the *raison d'être* of this masterpiece. This was because the production of dignified arts in Kom Fondom was almost fading out. Before the introduction of Western means of information, pictographic forms of

²Walter Gam Nkwi, *Communication in Africa: Talking Drums and Town Criers in Pre-colonial and Colonial Bamenda Grassfields, Cameroon*

communication had emerged among all Africans, even the educated class. Nevertheless, every dark cloud has a silver lining. Bobe Simon Nkwain of Kom Fandom still keeps his father's edifice, but lacks the potential for careful safeguarding.



Source: Photographed by Ngai Killian Ncham, the researcher in Bobe Simon Nkwain's parlour in Ntum on 10/07/2025.

Regrettably, according to Simon Nkwain, a notable figure, this adorned sculpture is in a state of disrepair due to the lack of appropriate measures to counter the effects of termite infestation (Simon Nkwain interview conducted on 03/02/2025 in Ntum, Belo subdivision). A researcher, Professor Paul Nkwi, expressed his feelings as follows: "I have had the occasion to visit and see for myself the deplorable state in which some of these precious pieces are conserved and used at different ritual events. Some of them have fallen into disuse, and others are easily disposed of by unscrupulous retainers to art collectors who are often aware of the priceless nature of these art pieces" (P N Nkwi, 2014:59).

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Regarding the conservation and restoration of sacred cultural heritage, a careful assessment of the numerous existing crafts in Kom Fondom shows that most have been preserved in consecrated places, with access limited to a few palace and royal family dignitaries (Gamsi Aloysius, 76 years, interviewed on 17/02/2024). The conservation of these craftworks in isolated locations contradicts the views of Professor Paul Nkwi, an anthropologist, who believes that "...an art piece gains value as it appears on public exhibitions" (Nkwi, 2014:57). Exhibition of crafts not only brings economic or social benefits. Once constantly exposed to sunlight, the chance of pests surviving drops below 2% (Chongsi Ephraim, 59 years, interviewed at Njinikom on 22 Feb 2024). A young, experienced carver also shares this opinion: Chiabi Ernest mentions that his artworks are often sun-dried to reduce the risk of pest attacks (Chiabi Ernest, interviewed on 16 Feb 2024 at Manjo).

Traditional or indigenous conservation techniques may be as old as humanity itself. It is a systematic way of managing social values that are significant to humans, having been experienced, tested, and accepted.

CONCLUSION

The search for cultural identity, a key feature of recent African history, deserves serious consideration. This is especially important as it is a vital component not only for nation-building but also as one of the most potent tools for present liberation movements and the ongoing fight against tribalism, nepotism, and mediocrity. There is also a compelling case, never to be dismissed by any opposing view, regarding the importance of conservation. It is hoped that, in time, the valid message of conserving Bamenda Grassfields cultural heritage will be understood by all. Then, Grassfielders as a whole will proudly say to themselves: "This is our true world."

Because this work was centered on the identification and safeguarding of sacred cultural heritage in Kom Fondom, the masterpiece conveys and

abhors important messages which could be understood only by the most elderly of the Kom Fondom today. Sadly, death is taking a toll on those alive now who understand these symbols. In a few decades, they would have passed away, taking their knowledge with them. Those who can do this interpretation are illiterate in Western education and can only do it in their natural setting. It is better not only for Kom Fondom but also for all people, especially those with an identifiable cultural history, to collect accurate information and records about their art and culture.

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**AFO-A-KOM: Journal of Culture, Performing and Visual Arts: Ngai Killian
Ncham & Ngam Confidence Chia**

Oral Sources

Oral interview

S/N	Name Informant	Of social status	age	date of interview	place of interview
01	Bobengamsi Aloysius	farmer	86	09/03/2023	Fundong
02	Chiabi Ernest	carver	66	16 Feb 2024	Manjo
03	Chongsi Ephraim	Farmer	59	22 Feb 2024	Njinikom
06	Jacob Ayeah	farmer	67	10/07/2025	Ntum
07	Kuh Boniface	farmer	82	10/06/2025	Manjo
05	Seh Joseph	farmer	86	10/07/2025	Ntum
04	Simon Nkwain	farmer	80	03/02/2023	Ntum, Belo sub