

Absence of Objects from the Western Grassfields of Cameroon: An Opinion

As repatriation debates, especially with regard to African and Cameroon art currently being held in Western museums, take center stage in discussions between the social actors involved, opinions are needed to understand whether or not the absence of these objects has an impact on the source community. While the absence of some objects (such as *Afoakom* - from 1966-1973) often creates a gap causing some local communities to hunt and have them returned, the gap for some pieces has rarely become permanent. Soon or over time, the object is replaced and tradition continues as if nothing had happened.

For instance, the disappearance of the Kom pair of figures attached to stools, from the Kom Kingdom in 1905 caused distress but the figures were replaced by King Yuh and members of his workshop. The replacements, which are referred to derogatorily as "copies" are now used for traditional religious rituals in the Kom Kingdom - ensuring continuity of the Kom tradition. Ironically, these so-called "copies" are not recognized by Western museums since they believe the "original" and, by extension, authentic Kom figures (such as those at the Berlin Ethnological Museum), are with them.

Similarly, so-called original Kom pieces scattered in Western museums are also not recognized as authentic by local communities because they are not in their original setting and were not meant to be displayed in foreign museums. Accordingly, the scramble for the return of Kom figures from the West seems to rest on the legality, or the means through which German colonial officer Caspar Hans zu Putlitz acquired them, rather than in their authenticity or usefulness in the local context. Authentic Kom figures, as understood in Kom, are in Kom rather than in the West.

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