

Commemorating national cultures at Cameroon's Museum of Civilizations

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Of the 20 private museums recognized by the Cameroon government, the Museum of Civilizations, Dschang (Musée des Civilisations, MDC) stands out as a hub of national cultures, despite its poor visitation and low visibility. Conceived in 1996 and inaugurated in November 2010, MDC was located at the heart of Dschang town in the West Region of Cameroon (Central Africa). Its central theme is *man at the heart of his cultural identity for a dialogue of civilizations*. Today, MDC faces fierce challenges as it memorializes the cultures of the Fang-Beti-Bulu, Sudano-Sahelian, Grassfields and Sawa peoples of Cameroon. This paper revisits MDC among other things, as a melting pot of Cameroonian cultures and regional identities. Our central question is: “how, despite its multiple challenges, does MDC successfully memorialize Cameroon's four principal cultural areas?” While cultural representations remain central, concerns of identity, research and the teaching of museology have also been highlighted. A blend of qualitative research, iconography and ethnography, analyzed on the basis of content, chronology and participatory observation, provide the methodological grounds for our findings. The Museum of Civilizations not only commemorates the cultures and civilizations of Cameroon and the Central African sub-region in general, but also provides an ideal hub for culture tourism, education and research.

Keywords: Cameroon, Commemoration, cultures, museum, civilizations, Dschang.

Introduction

The creation of the *Centre Camerounais de l'Institut Français d'Afrique Noire* (IFAN) in 1944 marked the birth of Cameroon's museum institution. This led to the establishment of provincial museums in Bamenda, Douala, Fumban, Maroua, Bafoussam and Buea in the 1950s¹. In the post-independence years, this new institution not only valorized Cameroon's² material culture but also assumed roles that were hitherto unknown in much of the continent. While local museums were anchored on local cultures, those in urban centers and metropolis drew from the periphery to establish more or less melting pots for a na-

¹ Mbayu, 1994. P. 44.

² Cameroon is a central African state located just slightly to the north of the equator. This triangular-shaped country of some 475,440 square kilometers shares common borders with Nigeria, Chad, the Central African Republic, Congo, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, and a 402-kilometer coastline on the Atlantic Ocean. Cameroon presents four major geographic zones: the southern coastal lowlands, the western highlands, the central and southern plateaus, and the Chad basin in the far north. Climate is affected by altitude, distance from the sea, and the season.

tional culture. Although these early museums initially embraced collecting, conservation and exhibition as principal missions, their goals eventually expanded to cultural valorization, education, transmission and projecting the national identity. In its typical morphology, Cameroon's museum institutions present in two main categories: the state-owned (public) and the private (non-state) museums. Today, they have become instruments of political education, propaganda and even levers of socio-economic development³. On account of their local, regional and national characters, museums have the responsibility to portray the identities of the peoples and communities on whom they are anchored. Consequently, museums share local and national credentials to the rest of the world. In this endeavor, the Museum of Civilizations in Dschang (MDC) became a classical example of cultural valorization and symbol of the Cameroonian identity. As a hub of culture tourism and melting pot of local and regional cultures, MDC depicts the four cultural areas of the nation: the Sawa, Grassfields, Sudano-Sahel and Fang-Bulu-Beti.

The offers, challenges and perspectives of Cameroonian museums have been as diversified as their missions and audience expectations. As a melting pot of local, regional and national cultures, the Museum of Civilizations (MDC) no doubt faces similar challenges as it forges an ambitious strategic plan with the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), *La Route des Chefferies*. The way MDC federates the nation's sociological composition, cultural valorization and research receive critical attention in the present study. The paper also wonders why in spite of its national mission, scope and morphology, this national interface remains little known at national and international levels; wearies over the museum's inability to satisfactorily engage its research, cultural and museological components; and proposes a way forward. The paper answers three key questions: what motivated the establishment of the museum? How do its themes and permanent exhibition valorize the cultures of the national triangle? What are its major challenges and the way forward? The paper traces the creation history, vision and mission of the museum; examines its themes and cultural valorization through the permanent exhibition, and discusses major challenges as well as future prospects.

The qualitative nature of the present study, no doubt, summons a litany of sources, research instruments and theoretical framework. Yet the role of oral tradition and participatory observation have been crucial in developing our central contention that Cameroonian museums have, by their very ethnographic nature, been veritable tools of cultural valorization and education. With research instruments like questionnaires, question guides, focus groups, and participatory observation our key modes of data collection, oral tradition and available literature proved fluid. Meanwhile, the theories of modern and post-modern transformations were used to analyze our data.

1. Conceptualizing museum and cultural diversity

The multiplicity of cultural, linguistic, geographical and ethnic varieties and expressions that characterize the peaceful coexistence of peoples and communities within Cameroon's natural and human landscape accord with the notion of diversity. This concept also manifests in Cameroon through the cohabitation of over 250 ethno-linguistic groups delineated into four cultural areas: Sawa, Grassfields, Sudano-Sahel, and Fang-Beti-Bulu.

³ Mbayu, 1994. P.51.

Article 4 of UNESCO's Convention for the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions defines "cultural diversity" as the manifold ways in which the cultures of groups and societies find expression. These expressions are passed on within and among groups and societies. Article 4 further states that⁴:

Cultural diversity is made manifest not only through the varied ways in which the cultural heritage of humanity is expressed, augmented and transmitted but also through diverse modes of artistic creation, production, dissemination, distribution and enjoyment, whatever the means and technologies used.

Consequently, the concept includes both people living together in changing social, political and geographical contexts and also the products resulting from variant economical processes most of which are already international⁵. Though in Africa diversity is most common among peoples of common ancestry, the concept in its broadest sense includes individuals and groups from other regions and nationalities, sharing and cohabiting in spite of their different linguistic, gastronomical and cultural expressions. By ratifying the 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, Cameroon committed itself to promoting this spirit of multiple cultures living together, tolerating and coexisting with one another despite the differences emanating from the 250 ethnicities. It was with this notion of *all in one* that MDC chose to represent the Cameroonian nation on its permanent exhibition. Expounding on the role of museums in cultural and heritage tourism for sustainable economies in Developing Countries⁶, identifies two main types of cultural heritage: the non-physical (intangible) and the physical (tangible). Among the physical, Kamani points to monuments, archaeological sites, movable heritage collections, historic urban areas, vernacular heritage, and cultural landscapes. Among the non-physical forms of cultural heritage, the author identifies signs and symbols passed on by oral transmission, artistic and literary forms of expression, languages, ways of life, myths, beliefs and rituals, value systems, traditional knowledge, and know-how. While Cameroon's diversity of these properties is well represented on the MDC missions and exhibitions, the non-physical are yet to be represented.

2. Genesis and outlook of the Museum of civilizations (MDC)

2.1. Foundation, vision and missions of the MDC

The Museum of Civilizations (MDC) is the fruit of long negotiations and international cooperation between the cities of Nantes (France) and Dschang (Cameroon). It was conceived in 1996 by Etienne Sonkeng, then Mayor of Dschang, Paschal Teufack (businessman), and Sylvain Djache (architect and town planner), subjected to thorough feasibility studies in 1997, and finally opened to the public on November 20, 2010⁷. As the name suggests, it is a museum of civilizations embracing the prehistory, histories, cultures and ethnography of the peoples who once lived as one long before European imperialism and colonization (led by Germany, France, Britain, Spain and Portugal) had them split into western-style states. Local communities of these states therefore shared common lan-

⁴ UNESCO, 2005.

⁵ Karadeniz & Onur, 2015. P.127.

⁶ Perera, 2013. P. 1–7.

⁷ Djache Nzefa Sylvain (ed.), 2012. P.6.

guages, dressing patterns, menus, belief systems, cultural practices — indeed, all what was tangible and intangible heritage.

The vision and missions of MDC came to include:

- stimulating development by creating awareness and engaging communities in innovative action; to set an example of adapting to change, encouraging debate, promoting reconciliation and supporting diversity and sustainability;
- promoting tourism by bringing together all the tourist offers accommodation and hotels, activities and leisure, events and festivities; developing close collaboration with other Egyptian and international institutions;
- and introducing a new kind of museum with an integrated approach to cultural heritage⁸.

By reincarnating the one time composite cultures, identities and traditions that existed centuries back, MDC reinvigorates the dream contention that the best model is *back to the roots*. Consequently, the museum federates not only the regional and community cultures of Cameroon but also, the heritage of those peoples that once lived and shared as one, whom it epitomizes. In terms of national outlook and cultural representation, MDC is second only to the National Museum of Cameroon located in Yaounde — conceived, designed and deployed with a collective and inclusive paradigm.

Its mission is to pay tribute to Cameroon's cultural wealth as displayed on the permanent exhibition according to the four cultural zones of the nation and beyond. In this mission, MDC invites all to discover the origins of the Cameroonian people and their diversity. The MDC was conceived as a space for interpretation, enhancing a vivid and graphic reading of Cameroon's history, man in his political, socio-cultural and economic environment and above all, the composition and functioning of the different civilizations the developed in the national territory. It is a museum of Cameroon history and cultures. It offers every visitor an opportunity to peruse its historical evolution before delving into principal cultural areas, namely the Sawa, Sudano-Sahel, Grassfields and Fang-Beti.

2.2. Location

Located between the Equatorial forest and the Grassland savanna of Central Africa, between the Douala white sand beach and black sands of the west, and between rolling mountains and water-falls, Cameroon is yet to become the ideal tourist destination, yet it is already an invitation to visit. The West Region hosts not only the Bamileke but also some of the rich civilizations of Black Africa⁹. At the heart of its hills covered with banana plantations, tea fields and palm trees stands the town of Dschang in the administrative division of Menoua. At an altitude of 1380 meters above sea level, Dschang enjoys a fresh and humid climate clearly defined by its location on latitude 5° 26' 42 99" North and longitude 10° 3' 17 10" East (Dschang Tourism Office). The town of Dschang itself is situated some 1400 meters above sea level on the south-easterly slopes of the Bamboutos Mountains. The museum itself is situated on the banks of the Dschang Municipal Lake, just besides the Franco-Cameroonian Alliance, on the axial road leading to Bafoussam¹⁰.

⁸ Djache Nzefa Sylvain (ed.), 2012. P.8.

⁹ Minkoò, 2015. P.22.

¹⁰ Ibid. P.24.

2.3. Creation history of MDC

The materialization of the project for the creation of the museum took a number of stages as listed below¹¹:

- **1996:** Consultations among local elites and initiators of the project. These included Etienne Sonkeng, Mayor of Dschang town, Pascal Teufack, hotel operator, and Sylvain Djache Nzefack, architect and town planner of the AUGEA Group;
- **1998:** Signing of a cooperation and twinning accord between the towns of Dschang (in Cameroon) and Nantes (in France);
- **1999:** A mission by Jean-Marc Ayrault, Deputy Mayor of Nantes to Cameroon accompanied by Sylvain Djache Nzefack to validate the project; This mission further consolidated the friendship and cooperation pact between the two cities;
- **2004:** Launch of the concept of *Route des Chefferies*, a program for the safeguard and valorization of the cultural heritage lodged at MDC, the Garden of Civilizations and partnering heritage collections at certain palaces;
- **2006:** Signature of the Charter of La *Route des Chefferies* by some 20 traditional chiefs of the west region to respect the said charter;
- **2007:** Laying the foundation stone of MDC in the presence of the chiefs, Prefect of the Menoua, Deputy Mayor of Nantes, representative of the Mayor of Loire. Start of work: mounting of the scientific and cultural project of the museum, etc.;
- **2008:** Acquisition of funding from the European Union for *Route des Chefferies*;
- **2010:** Establishment of an Interim Management Committee for the museum;
- **November 14, 2010** witnessed the election of the executive bureau of the Association of Friends of MDC, charged with managing the museum. President: Mafo Jeannette Nguoghia, presided by H. E. Jean Nkuete;
- **November 20, 2010:** Official opening of the MDC.

2.4. Typology of the collections

2.4.1. Collections

The MDC has no collections of its own. Objects on exhibition come from chiefdoms, local community palace collections, institutions and private individuals who have chosen to place them on deposit to enhance their proper preservation, valorize Cameroonian cultures or simply donated. The majority belong to or are associated with Grassfields community collections and palaces of Bafoussam, Bamendjida, Baham, Bandjoun, Bangoulap, Bangwa, Bagam, Bapa, Fonsa Touala, Baleng, Bawok, Bafut, Baleveng, Bamougoum, Batie, Bansoa, Balessing, Bandrefam, Foto, Bandja, Nkwen, Mankon, Batoufam, Bandoumga, Akum, Bana, bazou, Bamendjo, Fotsong-Wetcheng, Bamendjou, Fongo-Tongo, Foreke-Dschang, the Sultanate of Fumban, Bafou, Mbatu, Bamendankwe, Fotomena, Bafounda, Fondjomekwet, and more¹². The rest are models, copies or panels reminiscent of collections in other cultural areas. The objects remain their property because, they are *living objects* which are periodically, taken out, *activated*, used in religious rites and cer-

¹¹ Djache Nzefa Sylvain (ed.), 2012. P.4–5.

¹² Djache Nzefa Sylvain (ed.), 2012. P.182–185.

emonies, then *deactivated* and returned to the museum¹³. Copies of some objects have however, been made in agreement with the donors, should they be of documentary value or open for public viewing. The museum invites and regularly receives visitors from all parts of the world who discover the origins of the Cameroonian people and the diversity of the country's four major cultural areas, through their histories, artistic productions, architecture and political and social organization.

For representations of Cameroon's Iron Age and archeology, wall panels and photographs are the main collections. The same applies to representations of the pre-colonial and colonial history of Cameroon. Regarding representations of the Fang-Beti-Buli culture area, it is a blend of wall panels and objects like the *mvvet* (indigenous guitar), musical instruments and sculpted human figurines. For the Sawa cultural area, the dominant wall panels depict essentially objects related to the water culture of the coastal peoples, and especially the annual *ngondo festival*. Examples are the racing and ritual canoes, ceremonial baskets, and ritual raffia whisks. For the Sudano-Sahel cultural area, the MDC collections are dominated by three categories, namely musical instruments, architecture and clothing. Collections from the grassfields communities are generally objects related to daily life but above all, ancestral worship and cosmogony of the Bamileke people. These include the model Bamileke palace entrance, clay pots, a ritual calabash, typical kitchen items of a Bamileke woman, an iron double gong, a royal audience gallery, kougang mystical masquerades, and more.

2.4.2. Reserves

Initially, MDC's second phase included the construction of a storage area. However, work has stopped due to financial, technical and logistical concerns. These in turn were linked to the handing over of the museum's management to the Dschang municipality (upon the expiry of the partnership agreement with their French partners). There is a kind of provisional storage area, which is already saturated and not open even to researchers, but nowadays the collections of objects are growing as the policy of acquisition and management of these collections is gradually changing. It is hoped that sooner than later, these issues are sought out either from local resources or in association with new partners.

2.4.3. Others

Though the museum's collections are generally owned by local communities, some objects and visual materials (maps, photographs, wall panels, models, installations, and more), belong to the museum. These include the models, photographs and panels dedicated to exhibitions of the Iron Age in Cameroon, her pre-colonial history, the trans-Atlantic slave trade, her colonial history, Christian missionaries in Cameroon and the four principal cultural zones (as indicated above). The installations and scenography, as can also be seen alongside the exhibitions, are simple. Produced essentially from local material (wood, bamboo, and twine) and assembled through a blend of indigenous and contemporary techniques, the back-drops generally prefer colors that capture the cultures of localities represented (red, grey, blue, black and white).

¹³ For more on Grassfields living collections and museums, see, Ngitir, 2017.

3. The Museum building

3.1. Location and nature

The structure hosting the MDC is symbolically powerful and located on the lush gardens of the Dschang municipal lake. Its contemporary architecture, designed by Sylvain Djache Nzefa comprises a parking lot for over 200 vehicles as well as a complex of Boukarous hosting 30 craftsmen and their exhibitions (Figure 1). It enables visitors to discover the coded messages, information and symbols of the Grassfields region. These symbols also represent the objectives and roles of the museum building: to educate, preserve, transmit and innovate. The main building covers an area of 1,200 m² with an interior set for permanent and temporary exhibition spaces, conference and audiovisual rooms as well as units for maintenance and restoration of collections. It also offers spaces for a pedestrian walk, children's games, a restaurant, arts and crafts shopping, beach volleyball and kayaking. Other activities include a variety of educational activities (fun and manual workshops, guided tours, etc.) for secondary school and university students. These activities are specially designed to help school children understand the themes explored on the exhibition.



*Fig. 1. Museum of Civilizations, Dschang (MDC).
The copyright holder of the photos — Victor Bayena Ngitir*

3.2. Aesthetics and symbolism

Presented in imposing blue, white and ochre, the architectural concept and physical appearance of MDC is multi-functional and multi-symbolic: endowed with history, knowledge, intelligence and coded iconographies reminiscent of the Grassfields cultural area where it is located. These symbols are a dialogue of the living precepts as well as anthropomorphic and zoomorphic representations — the old, wise man, the spider, leopard

as well as other royal and totemic depictions. The spider (*ngam* in Grassfields jargon) for instance, which appears as the central architectural element of the museum building, is a symbol of knowledge and multiple functions. Here, it is used as an element of rhythm. The façade is treated as a mask: with an invitation to allow visitors decipher its underlying meaning¹⁴. On typical Grassfields sculptures, the spider often takes the form of a small single or double circle, with four crossed legs rather than eight, which makes it possible to compose on certain mask headdresses or certain engravings of libation horns, a sort of diamond- or square-meshed net. Other royal animals common in Grassfields artistic representation and highly depicted on the exhibitions include the lion, python, leopard, buffalo and elephant.

These symbols enable man to approach knowledge, intelligence, his society, his cosmology and his cosmogony from a distant, yet transcendent perception. They symbolize wealth and the untamed forces of nature. Their societal importance also stems from the economic and heritage values of their vital parts — ivory, whisks and teeth for the elephant, pelts and whiskers for the lion and leopard, and horns for the buffalo. The MDC building therefore blends a corpus of symbols, duality, ancestors, humans and animals. Its concrete facade is clad in a grainy plaster of varying hues, drawing messages and blending symbols into moldings that speak for themselves.

4. Main themes and permanent exhibition at MDC

The central theme of MDC is *man at the heart of his cultural identity for a dialogue of civilizations*. This theme is further broken down by the scenography and permanent exhibition of the museum into eight sub-themes. These sub-themes are as presented in Table below:

Sub-themes of the MDC permanent exhibition

S/N	Section/Gallery	Exhibition Sub-theme
1	Gallery 1	History and foundation of the Cameroonian nation
2	Gallery 2	Traces of early human occupation of Cameroon
3	Gallery 3	Triple colonization of Cameroon
4	Gallery 4	Independence process: From mandate to trusteeship
5	Gallery 5	Cultures of the south: Peoples of the forest (fang-Beti-Bulu)
6	Gallery 6	Water cultures of the littoral: Sawa peoples
7	Gallery 7	Cultures of North Cameroon: Sudanno-Sahelian peoples
8	Gallery 8	Cultures of West Cameroon: Grassfields peoples

Source: Djache Nzefa Sylvain (ed.), 2012. P.12–214.

¹⁴ Ngitir, 2014. P.114. This author and work affirm that in the Negro-African culture, masks are habitations of ancestral spirits that speak; its wearer is possessed by that mask. Here, the wearer is the Museum and represents the knowledge and wisdom lodged therein.

The eight principal galleries that constitute the permanent exhibition of the MDC are materialized in a variety of scenographies: wall panels, original objects, archaeological finds, architectural designs, art forms and other tangible depictions.

4.1. Exhibition Gallery 1

Gallery 1 which is materialized by 4 wall panels depicts the prehistoric, historical and archaeological foundations of Cameroonian. This gallery is embellished by the works of archaeologists and Professors Martin Elouga, Richard Oslisy, Joseph Marie Essomba, Christophe Mbida and Raymond N. Assombang. In a chromatic ambiance of colors — red, ocre and brown, this gallery is consecrated to the prehistory, archaeology and little known history of the territory before the arrival of European colonial masters. Prominent here are relics of the Sao Civilizations which developed around Lake Chad basin, wall engravings, stone and rock art, wall cave dwellings and tomb inscriptions. According to Minko'O¹⁵, these archaeological depictions revealed the millennium-old human occupation of the territory. As little or nothing had been documented on the territory, archaeological vestiges were the only source for the reconstruction of Cameroon's historical past¹⁶. It was only after 1960 that archaeology as a scientific discipline and a profession took root in Cameroon. The archaeological excavations and early findings equally revealed three principal archaeological segments in Cameroon at the time — the north



Fig. 2. Exhibition Gallery 1

¹⁵ Minko'o, 2015. P. 116.

¹⁶ Essomba, 2012b. P. 12.

region marked by the very interesting civilizations of the Sao-Kotoko-Fali and others of the early Stone Age in the grassfields region and the south. The vestiges of the northern region as depicted on panels of the gallery included the ancient engravings of Bidzar that were later studied by J.P and A. Lebeuf, J. G. Gauthier, M. Delneuf, N. David, A. Maliac, and A. Holl. The Grassfields region later became the melting pot of Bantu migrations and expansion for over half of the continent's inhabitants. Here, in depth research was later carried out by a Belgian team led by P. de Maret, R. Asombang and J.P. Warnier. For the south, where archaeological research was yet to begin, emphasis was limited to Bantu migrations and sedentarization efforts in line with the transitions and cultures of the early Stone Age, the Neolithic and the Iron Age. Archaeological research on the south basin was carried out by P. de Maret, J. M. Essomba, M. Elouga, C. Mbida, R. Oslisly, and M. Eggert (Figure 2).

4.2. Exhibition Gallery 2

Gallery 2 materialized by 10 wall panels, depicts the first traces of human occupation of the Cameroon territory from the Paleolithic to the Neolithic and across to the Sao Civilization in North Cameroon. These traces included polished and unpolished stone tools like choppers, chopping tools, bi-faces and picks. This and further evidence confirmed that early occupants inhabited temporary shelters and survived on food gathering and hunting. Vestiges of such habitations as displayed on this gallery included remnants of shaped stone and roofing thatches on abandoned ruins. More Paleolithic vestiges (3,000,000–5,500 BC) were found at four principal sites¹⁷.



Fig. 3. Exhibition Gallery 2

¹⁷ Essomba, 2012c. P.15.

The Iron Age (3,000/2,500–400 BC) on its part was marked by social and cultural manifestations, notably the birth and practice of metallurgy. Traces of the Iron Age as displayed in this gallery of MDC include remnants of iron smelting, pieces of iron objects, ruins of smithies, and kitchen fireside hearths¹⁸. Gallery 2 also depicts relics of the Sao Civilization — marked by traditional pottery and burnt earth practices. This civilization which existed during the second Millennium AD was characterized by the massive production of funerary jars, urns, figurative art, pavement art, and more from North Cameroon across Lake Chad¹⁹ (Figure 3).

4.3. Exhibition Gallery 3

Gallery 3 is devoted to the triple colonization of Cameroon. It begins with the Trans-Atlantic and Trans-Saharan slave trade in Cameroon and the First World War on the territory. These are followed by the German protectorate as well as the British and the French colonial administrations. These milestones particularly immortalize the discovery of Fernando Po in 1472; Portuguese explorations of the coast of Cameroon (1473); the 18th century slave activities involving various European powers along the Cameroon coast; British penetration into the interior (1823); the establishment of Joseph Merrick the Jamaican missionaries at Bimbia (1845); Dutch punitive expeditions forcing local chiefs, (Akwa and Bell) to pay commercial debts (1945); the signature of slave trade abolition

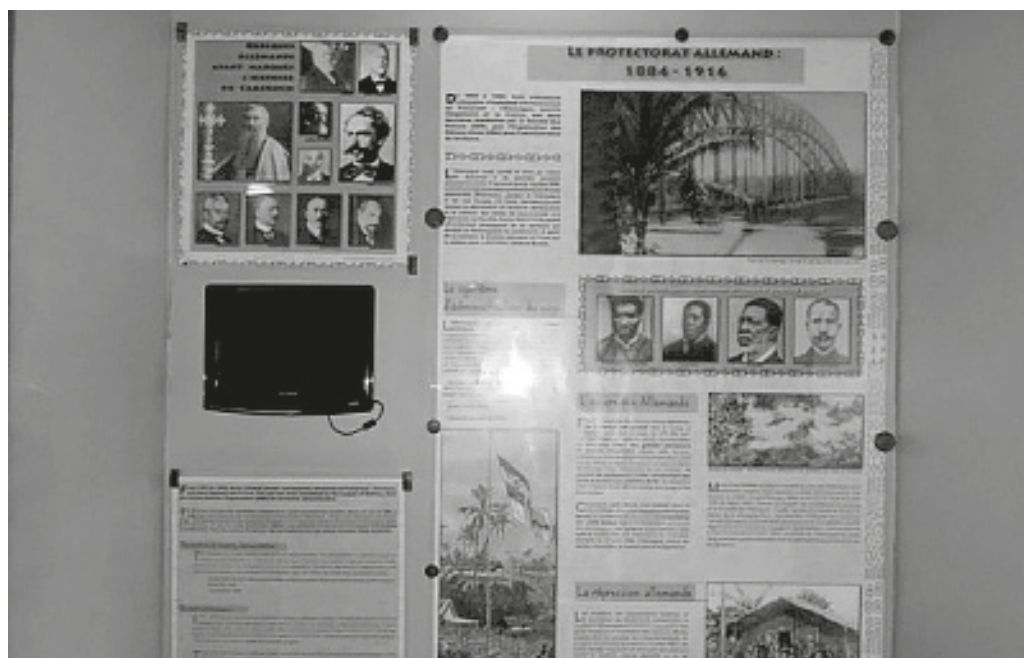


Fig. 4. Exhibition Gallery 3. Photographs of key nationalists

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid. P. 19.

treaties between British agents and Duala chiefs; Cameroon as a German protectorate and more. In a more or less exquisite photo exhibition, Essomba²⁰ displays images of the German colonial administrative apparatus, the German governors in Cameroon, and prominent traditional chiefs. This is followed by a display of vital administrative infrastructure in German Cameroon, economic structures and eventually, the First World War in Cameroon. This gallery closes with the contemporary history of Cameroon from the French and British Mandates to their trusteeships and birth of the new and independent Cameroon in 1961. These, J.M. Essomba²¹ depicts through photographs of key nationalists, political figures, missionaries, and some important events up to the Second World War (Figure 4).

4.4. Exhibition Gallery 4

Gallery 4 focuses on the independence process, from the mandate and trusteeship periods to the two regimes of Presidents Ahmadu Ahidjo and Paul Biya respectively. The march towards independence is also vividly depicted through images of both sad and glorious moments leading to independence and reunification; photos of key actors of the independence process on both the Anglophone and Francophone sides of the national divide; independence day parades (Figure 5); Cameroon under President Ahmadu Ahidjo (1959–1982); and the birth of the New Deal regime under president Paul Biya



Fig. 5. Exhibition Gallery 4

²⁰ Essomba, 2012a. P. 29.

²¹ Essomba, 2012a. P. 29.

(1982-present). This display of Cameroon's contemporary history by Ngon²² concludes with a cartographic evolution of Cameroon through four maps. The first of these maps traces the international frontiers of Cameroon as inherited from colonial masters. It depicts the boundaries of the then, West Cameroon, East Cameroon and the United Republic of Cameroon; the second map focuses on administrative and geographical aspects of the territory. The third map focuses on Cameroon as a secular state with the cohabitation of various religious confessions — Catholic, Muslims, chieftaincy institutions and others; the fourth map depicts the four cultural areas of Cameroon: Sawa, Sudano-Sahel, Fang-Beti-Bulu and the Grassfields. This gallery ends with annotated photographs of great figures that marked the history of the Cameroonian nation from 1845 to 1960²³. They span across missionaries, prominent local chiefs, German colonial governors in Cameroon, French and British colonial officials from the mandate to trusteeship periods, as well as men of science.

4.5. Exhibition Galleries 5–8

Gallery 5 is dedicated to the cultures of the south: peoples of the forest. The Fang-Beti-Bulu cultural area covers the cultures of the Center, South and east regions of Cameroon. Gallery 6 focuses on the Sawa cultures as practiced by the peoples of the Littoral (coast) and South-West regions of Cameroon. Gallery 7 on its own displays the cultures of the Sudano-Sahelian peoples who are found in the three northern regions (Adamawa, North, and Far North). Finally, Gallery 8 focuses on the Grassfields cultures, covering the peoples of the West and North-West regions of Cameroon. It is worth noting that while these groupings of cultural areas stems from anthropological considerations, they are constantly subjected to criticism as some peoples with common ancestral and historical links have been arbitrarily placed under different administrative regions or divisions.

5. The MDC: Melting pot of Cameroonian cultures

Aptly described as Cameroon in miniature, the Dschang Museum of Civilizations (MDC) graphically demonstrates and immortalizes the archaeological, cultural, and political peculiarities of Cameroon through its missions and exhibitions.

5.1. Sawa cultural zone: Ngondo cultures and water spirits

The Sawa cultural area roughly corresponds to the Littoral and South-West regions of Cameroon. These regions and particularly their capitals, Douala and Buea played significant roles in the making of Cameroon. Buea, the capital of the South-West is situated at the foot of Mount Cameroon and was once the capital of German Kamerun (1884–1916). Douala and Limbe sea-ports which are the maritime gateways into the country are located in this area. Cameroon got its name from the R. Wouri in Douala. The coastline from Rio del Rey to Campo was instrumental in the slave trade from the

²² Ngon, 2012. P. 51–59.

²³ Ibid. P. 51–60.



Fig. 6. Pictures from the exhibition

16th to the 18th century²⁴. The site of Bimbria plays witness to this. The populations are coastal and tropical forest peoples and constitute 12% of the national total. The major tribal groups include the Duala, Bakweri, Bakoko, and Batanga who embrace the Sawa culture²⁵.

The history, traditions and cosmogony of the Sawa can be deciphered from their rich material culture (masks, boats, dress code, art collections, game reserves, cuisine...) and intangible culture (religious rites, music, theatre, dance, Ngondo festival...). Today, Douala which is the epicenter of the Sawa culture is also the economic capital of Cameroon. With a population of over 2 million inhabitants, the great regional metropolis is the unrivalled home of the legendary makossa music and numerous legendary artists like Manu Dibango, Nelle Eyoum, Mouelle Guillaume, Eboa Lotin, Ben Decca, Grace Decca, Petit Pays and more²⁶. Finally, every dry season, the Douala ceremonial grounds situated on the banks of the River Wouri, play host to the great Ngondo festival which is the greatest get-together of the Sawa people in communion with their history and ancestors.

In Sawa society, authority is materialized through the power that the king incarnates through certain material transcendent objects and cults established by the clan. This in turn hinges on Sawa religion which articulates around a central figure, Nyambe, unique god, trinity and supreme power. This religion is based on a belief in the existence of two worlds: one that is earthly temporal and mortal, *dikoba* which is reminiscent of water; and the other which is spiritual, permanent and immortal, *dikola* which is reminiscent of the heavens. The two worlds are said to be safeguarded by fons, ancestors and intercessors at the service of Nyambe²⁷ (Figure 6).

5.2. Sahel cultural zone: Sao cultures

This region comprises the Adamawa, North and Extreme North regions. It is marked by grassy Savannah, a high plateau and arid plains. It stretches from the Adamawa plateau through the Mandara Mountains, the Benue and Diamare plains, to Lake Chad. It is

²⁴ Asombang, 2016. P.24.

²⁵ Ngitir, 2022. P.42.

²⁶ Ngitir, 2022. P.42.

²⁷ Djache Nzefa Sylvain (ed.), 2012. P.11.



Fig. 7. Sao cultures. Pictures from the exhibition

inhabited by speakers of Afro-Asian and Nilo-Saharan languages who occupy about 35 % total national land and hold a population that is roughly 38 % of the national total. Born from the Sao civilization that developed around Lake Chad, the region was endowed with funeral urns, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic statuettes, pottery and bronze works. This region was the birth place of the ancient Kanem-Bornu Empire, which was Islamized in the 11th century and reached its summit in the 17th century under Idriss Alooma²⁸. The region has three distinct architectural patterns corresponding to the topographical configuration (Figure 7).

5.3. Grassfields cultural area

Located on the Western high plateau, the Grassfields are coterminous with the North-West and West Regions. It is a grassy plateau bordering on the tropical forest and the coast. Ethnological and archaeological research trace the early occupation of this area over 30,000 BC while linguistic research points to the Grassfields as the heritage home of the Bantu languages of Africa²⁹. Political systems are highly centralized and traditional rulers are variously called Fon, Batum, Kedong, and Sultan. Principal languages as stated by Ngitir³⁰ include *mungaka*, *lamnso*, *kom*, and *limbum*. Local cuisine is dominated by *achu*, *fufu* corn, *khoki*, *mbuh*, *meluh* and *kondre*. Dressing is typi-

²⁸ Asombang, 2016. P.17.

²⁹ Ibid. P.14.

³⁰ Ngitir, 2022.



Fig. 8. Grassfields cultural area

cally traditional from vestments to caps and cultural insignia of rank. Principal musical beats include the njang, bottle dance, *manganbeu* and *manjong*. Prominent cultural festivals include the *lela*, *nguon*, *ferngkyi*, *doua*, *medumba*, *samba*, *abinifor*, *fulengang*. Female regulatory societies include *ufarp*, *takumbeng*, *fumbeun*, *ndongunfumbui*, *anlu* while the male societies include *kwifon*, *ngwerong*, *ngomba*, *ndaun tsu*, *nfu*, *ukoum*. (Figure 8).

5.4. Fang-Beti-Bulu cultural area and the forest peoples

Definitions of the Fang (Pahouin) ethnic group vary considerably from author to author. The group extends well beyond Cameroon into Gabon, the Republic of Congo, and Equatorial Guinea. They are the result of migration from northeast of their present locations, perhaps under pressure from the Fulani jihads³¹. Among their cultural beliefs and practices, the Fang-Beti commune with ancestors through religious rites,



Fig. 9. Fang-Beti-Bulu cultural area and the forest peoples. Pictures from the exhibition

³¹ Asombang, 2016. P.23.

dance, music, numerous myths, legends and tales related to their ancient migration histories, a glorious artistry and more. Regarding art and traditional music, the Mvet was and remains the instrument *par excellence* that recounts, animates and transcends past, present and future. Skilled Mvet players are persons set apart, revered and venerated — often dressed in special costume: feather headdress, animal pelt backdrop, beaten tree bark skirt (Obom), cowry necklets and beads, wrist and foot rattles, bangles, etc. Accompanied by song he strikes the strings, reciting and enchanting some ancient tale, epic or myth. This stretches to the Mbam, Lom, Kadei, Boumba and Ngoko, Haut Nyong. Prominent dancers include the Bafia, Maka, Kozime, Eton xylophone orchestras, etc. Beti arts and crafts are also marked by numerous specialties³². See Figure 9.

6. Major challenges and perspectives

6.1. Major challenges

The key worries and challenges of MDC in the realization of its missions can be grouped into two: first, financial and material constraints; and secondly, the technical and operational concerns. From its opening in 2010 to 2015, the museum was managed and funded by the cooperation accord twining the Municipalities of Nantes in France and Dschang in Cameroon, an accord which placed Nantes in charge of technical and operational aspects while Dschang assumed responsibility over the personnel and human resources. Unfortunately, no sooner did this accord end in 2015, did signs of financial incapacity begin to surface. Not only did the Dschang municipality display a gross financial inability to assume the responsibilities formally held by Nantes, it began to lay off some personnel and to cut down salaries. The result over the years has been the loss of some competent staff through resignations and lay-offs. To this, must be added the lack of financial autonomy in the management of the museum as the Dschang municipality frequently interfered with the regular management of the institution. Material concerns relating to the lack of basic equipment and logistics have seriously hampered the functioning of the structure. To date, fragile collections are still to receive adequate preservation in the face of rapid deterioration due to lack of glass boxes. With Dschang's tropical climate, marked by high precipitation, fluctuating temperatures and relative humidity, the rates of degradation and deterioration have been pretty high both on the permanent exhibition as well as the reserve. Matters have been made worse by the absence of humidifiers and dehumidifiers.

Regarding the technical and operational concerns, very few of the museum's staff have received the requisite training for their jobs. No doubt, some handling mishaps and high rates of degradation have been blamed on some personnel. To these, must be added the absence of an aggressive strategic marketing plan to woo and engage its divers public. With the resultant poor visitation, the museum is yet to attain its target 1,000 visitors per annum. Consequently, its principal audience over the years has remained stagnant with researchers, university interns and young school goers. To mitigate the effects of these challenges, the museum liaises with the NGO, *La Route*

³² Ibid. P.25.

des Chefferies which is equipped with some of the skills, and logistics for preventive and curative treatment. The museum's website provides basic information and visibility not only for MDC, but also for several other museums affiliated to *La Route des Chefferies*.

6.2. Prospects for improved cultural valorization and visibility

On account of the observable lapses currently bugging down MDC, it goes without saying that financial, logistical, and administrative reforms are badly needed. Redressing the financial lapses of MDC stands primordial among its key concerns. This involves prioritizing matters of museum management within its Board of Trustees and the Dschang municipality, its sole funding body. On account of the difficulties presently crippling this authority, there is absolute need to explore for more partnerships and financial cooperation. This would not only boost the financial stand of the museum, but also help address some of the logistical issues and salary concerns of its personnel. Above all, there is need to grant the museum its deserved financial autonomy to avoid the frequent long waits for minor preoccupations to be resolved through a highly centralized bureaucracy and hierarchy. Secondly, there is need to represent both the tangible and intangible heritage of the nation. No doubt, MDC remains unrivalled among Cameroon's museum institutions both in terms of material collections and the vivid representations of the nation's four cultural and ethno-linguistic zones. Unfortunately, the intangible elements which should give full meaning to the tangible are yet to be integrated into the museum. The acquisition of appropriate logistics for audio-visual recordings, interpretations and testimonies would go a long way to improve and articulate the exhibitions. This was further prescribed by the UNESCO Convention of 2003 on the safeguard of the intangible cultural heritage. These of course call for a review of budgetary lines and to give culture the place it deserves.

Other concerns raised by the museum's personnel include professional training for unskilled workers and frequent recycling of older staff; and the need for partnerships with schools of and departments of museology in and out of Cameroon. To this must be added the need for more aggressive marketing strategies. Today, with the exigencies of competition and globalization, *non-profit* museums are as concerned with marketing as are their *for-profit* cousins. However, museum marketing is complicated for the following reasons: the non-profit nature of the 'business'; its non-financial objectives; the necessity to cater for multiple segments of the public (some of whom pay and others who do not); the necessity for collaboration as well as competition with competitors; and the need to foster identity as well as education, research and entertainment for visitors. Further, in the recent past museums regarded marketing with suspicion, some for fear that taxes may be imposed on them. However, today, the situation is different. Christina Lister defines marketing as "a social and managerial process by which individual paying and non-paying visitors obtain what they need through creating, offering and exchanging with others' products and services of value." Medium-size museums like MDC must understand that marketing museums through income-generation for purposes of meeting museum needs, paying its staff, acquiring and maintaining museum logistics... is not profit-making. Today, marketing research, marketing strategies and marketing plans have become common management activity and MDC must not be left behind.

Conclusion

The tale of MDC as a hub of Cameroon's cultural diversity is the story of multiple representations covering the nation's four cultural areas. Reminiscent of the National Museum in Yaounde (NMY), MDC federates cultural expressions from all ethno-linguistic communities regrouped under the four vast zones. Analyses of the data collected reveal a number of findings. First, unlike other ethnographic community museums of the Grassfields cultural area, whose collections are anchored on local cultures, MDC stands out with an exceptional national outlook and morphology. Conceived in 1996 and constructed between 1997 and 2009, MDC opened its doors to the public in November 2010. It embraces not only the prehistory, early occupation and archaeology of the nation, but also addresses milestones of Cameroon's triple colonization as well as its contemporary history. Its mission among others includes stimulating development by creating awareness and engaging communities in innovative action towards cultural valorization and tourism. Secondly, MDC plays advocacy for a national conscience by assembling collections that are representative of all four cultural areas into one vivid and elegant exhibition. This way, MDC poses as champion of national unity and integration, a melting pot of all local and regional cultures forming a single national culture. Thirdly, despite its litany of obstacles — financial, operational and technical, MDC forges a bright future by liaising with the National Museum and blending both conventional and traditional techniques of conservation and restoration.

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Музей цивилизаций в Камеруне: проблема сохранения и репрезентация национальных культур

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Создание в 1944 г. Камерунского центра Французского института Черной Африки ознаменовало собой рождение музейного дела в Камеруне. В 1950-х годах были созданы провинциальные музеи в Бамеде, Дуале, Фумбане, Маруа, Бафуссаме и Буза. Первоначально эти музеи видели основной своей задачей сохранение и экспонирование культурных ценностей, но в дальнейшем они расширили круг деятельности, включив в свои задачи образовательные проекты и формирование культурной национальной идентичности. Музейные учреждения Камеруна представлены в двух основных категориях: государственные (общественные) и частные (негосударственные) музеи. Музей цивилизаций Дшанг является одним из 20 частных музеев, признанных правительством Камеруна. Учреждение выделяется на фоне других и, несмотря на сравнительно небольшую известность, является центром сохранения национальных культур. Идея музея родилась в 1996 г., но открытие состоялось лишь в ноябре 2010 г. Музей цивилизаций Дшанг располагается в самом центре города Дшанг в западном регионе Камеруна (Центральная Африка). Его основной темой является человек и его культурная идентичность в диалоге цивилизаций. Сегодня организация сталкивается с серьезными проблемами, поскольку увековечивает память культур Фанг-Бети-Булу, Судано-Сахеля, Грассфилдов и народов Камеруна. В этой статье, среди прочего, музей рассматривается как плавильный котел камерунских культур и региональной идентичности. Главный вопрос: как, несмотря на многочисленные проблемы, удастся успешно сохранять память четырех основных культурных областей Камеруна? Хотя культурные репрезентации остаются центральными, особое внимание также уделяется и проблемам идентичности, и исследованиям, и преподаванию музеологии. Музей цивилизаций Дшанг не только увековечивает культуру и цивилизации Камеруна

и Центральноафриканского субрегиона в целом, но и является центром культурного туризма, образования и научных исследований.

Ключевые слова: Камерун, мемориал, культура, музей, цивилизация, Дшанг.

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