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# Museum International



**THE STAKES OF THE COLLECTION IN  
THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

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# | Collection and Context in a Cameroonian Village

by Steven Nelson

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In 1971, Paul Gebauer published the following recollection about his 1931 visit to Foumban, the capital of the Bamum kingdom: ‘The art of the Bamum has received wide publicity ever since the Germans encountered Sultan Njoya around the turn of the century. This most enlightened ruler had a private museum in his [Foumban] palace, where yet another museum stood at the highest point of the [Bamum] capital’s avenue of craft shops. The best of Bamum arts and crafts were displayed there for the benefit of both apprentices and visitors.’<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the most stunning thing about this passage is the revelation that by this time there existed two museums in this Cameroonian town. Why, in 1931, would Foumban sport not one, but two museums? How did it come to have a museum that, according to Gebauer’s recollection, was not a royal affair, but rather a public place, one catering to artist apprentices and visitors? What does this reveal about the importance of the collection and the museum in this particular place?

Discussions concerning the practices of collecting with respect to non-Western objects usually focus on the removal of items from their

places of origin to become art, artefacts or relics in Western collections (or homes). Rarely, outside the actions of colonial administrators, does the literature on collections – by both Africans and non-Africans alike – concentrate on the formation and political importance of collections on the continent itself. Most often, when one reads about museums in Africa, the concentration is on their relationship to a supposedly authentic heritage, their relevance as centres of activity for local communities, or the benefits of development on the continent. Such foci miss a critical opportunity to understand the complicated nature of collection practices, particularly those of Africans, on the African continent. Today, the collections of African museums, like their Western counterparts, very self-consciously aid in the active construction of heritage, a construction that always revises notions of the past according to present concerns and desires. These collections also announce that an individual, a group, a community or a modern nation-state indeed possesses a viable ‘culture’ that the viewer can understand through the world created by the collection itself.

While there are countless museums around the world (including Africa) that proffer collections that move the viewer towards an exotic and exoticized past, and while there are countless museums around the world (again including Africa) that point to the agency and status of their collectors, this discussion does not offer a comprehensive survey of collection practices in Africa. Along such lines, it goes without saying that there are as many variations on this theme on the African continent as there are in the West or anywhere else. This discussion, rather, centres on

Foumban, located in the Cameroon Grasslands, as a case-study that allows for a consideration of the complex nature of the collection and needs served by it in a colonial and post-colonial African setting.

Both of the museums mentioned by Gebauer still function in Foumban. The first, the Palace Museum, occupies the second floor of the Bamum palace, built by the renowned King Njoya between 1917 and 1922. The second, the Museum of Bamum Arts and Traditions, founded by Mosé Yéyab in the 1920s, remains at the top of Foumban’s Avenue of artisans and their shops.<sup>2</sup> Although the Palace Museum dwarfs its cousin in holdings and space, the two museums provide a provocative glimpse into the act of collecting and its ideological importance in the Bamum kingdom during French colonization. Along with King Njoya’s own text, entitled *Histoire et coutumes des Bamum* (History and Customs of the Bamum), as well as contemporary art in Foumban, they too give insight into the very construction of Bamum heritage.

King Njoya’s rule, which spanned the years from about 1886 to 1933, marked both the apex and nadir of the Bamum kingdom. While the king was the inventor of a script and, as patron and innovator, the greatest influence on the kingdom’s royal arts and architecture, perhaps his greatest talent rested in his ability to protect his kingdom during decades marked by attempts by outsiders to conquer him. As the very young ruler of a weak kingdom, Njoya beseeched neighbouring Fulbe rulers to assist him in putting down an 1894 revolt led by Gbetnkom Kdombu, a retainer of Njoya’s mother Njapundunke. In appreciation, the king and his mother gave gifts to the Fulbe, and the



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6. Bamum Royal Palace. Foumban, Cameroon, built by King Njoya, 1917–22.

king, along with his entourage, subsequently converted to Islam.<sup>3</sup>

Njoya's use of others to preserve his kingdom and legitimate his rule would be a successful strategy for the next twenty or so years. When the Germans arrived in 1902, instead of active resistance, Njoya chose to become their allies, and in his *Histoire* he credits himself with preserving the Bamum race. He writes:

One day the whites appeared in the country. The Bamum told themselves, 'Let us wage war against them'. 'No!', said Njoya, 'because I saw in a dream that the whites mean no evil against the Bamum. If the Bamum wage war against them, then that will be

the end of their race, and my own. There will only remain a few surviving Bamum; this would not be good.' He, Njoya, snatched the arrows, assegais, and guns from their hands. The Bamum obeyed, they were not opposed to the arrival of the whites. He, Njoya, helped the Bamum and they remained in peace.<sup>4</sup>

Under the Germans, the Bamum kingdom thrived. Njoya enjoyed a mostly positive relationship with the German colonial leaders. Although they did not allow him absolute rule over his dominion, they rarely interfered with the Bamum state. Alongside the Germans' somewhat *laissez-faire* attitude towards Njoya, the ruler and the Germans staged a joint military expedition



7. Museum of Bamum Arts and Traditions, Foumban, Cameroon.

against the neighbouring Nso kingdom, which murdered Njoya's father, King Nsangu, in battle. The Nso king kept Nsangu's head as a spoil of war. Upon defeating the Nso, a condition of the peace treaty written by the Germans was the return of Nsangu's head to the Bamum. The return of Nsangu's head, as Christraud Geary notes, legitimized Njoya's reign. In these and other events under German rule, Njoya used the Germans to his advantage; under them, Njoya's kingdom was no longer subject to threats from its Grasslands neighbours.<sup>5</sup> For the most part, as far as the Germans were concerned, they perceived these actions, as well as Njoya's granting of royal art objects to German leaders and collectors, the ruler's reproductions of German military uniforms, and his innovations in commerce and governance as friendly gestures, as acts of friendship and emulation.<sup>6</sup>

For Geary, most important about this phase of Njoya's reign, which lasted until 1915, are the beginnings of a non-Bamum clientele for Bamum art objects. She rightly understands this

moment as marking the beginning of an enormous shift in the meaning of Bamum art from royal object to work of art that occurs as a result of Njoya's religious shifts as well as the changing colonial situation in the Cameroon Grasslands.<sup>7</sup>

Fleeing the British during the First World War, the Germans left Foumban and the Bamum kingdom in 1915. While the British briefly occupied the Bamum kingdom, it was the arrival of the French in Foumban in 1916 that marked the beginning of the end for King Njoya. Unlike the Germans, who saw Njoya as an enlightened ruler, the French saw the king as one of the worst examples of an African despot.<sup>8</sup> While the king and the French administrators enjoyed reasonable relations in the first couple of years of French colonization, with the arrival of Lieutenant Prestat in 1919 as chief of the Foumban subdivision, Njoya's situation deteriorated quite rapidly. As Claude Tardits details, soon after his arrival, Prestat began to attack the very structure of Njoya's monarchy on the grounds of servitude and polygamy.<sup>9</sup> Prestat writes: 'Bamum country belongs in its entirety to the sultan and to around 1,200 of his notables... Nowhere else do we have such an example of servitude imposed on a people; the lesser of the notables have 100 wives, the sultan for his part has more than 1,200.'<sup>10</sup>

Soon after his arrival in Foumban, Prestat hired Mosé Yéyab, a distant relative of Njoya, who did not support the throne, as his interpreter and as an intermediary between the Bamum and the French. Yéyab, who was sent to a mission school in 1906, became both an excellent student and a devout Christian. Eventually he translated certain

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biblical texts from German into Bamum; he later became a teacher at the school. According to Tardits, when the palace embraced Islam with the Germans' departure, Yéyab remained staunchly Christian. As a result, he was forced to leave the palace, which, in part, gave birth to his opposition to the palace. Yéyab left Foumban for Douala where he learned French. Subsequently he joined the French administration.<sup>11</sup> Upon his return to Foumban and his employ with Prestat, he would work to aid the French in undermining Njoya's power, and, in the process, increasing his own.

As time wore on, the French would go further on the offensive, continuing to attack the king's polygamy, objecting to the system of slavery used on Bamum plantations, and banning the system of tribute paid during the Bamum *ngoun* festival. Combined with new positions created by the French in the kingdom – *chefs de région*, *chefs supérieurs* – this offensive successfully undermined both the economic and political power of the Bamum monarchy. By 1924, as Geary notes, Njoya was rarely in Foumban, instead spending his time on his plantation in the Bamum village of Mantum.<sup>12</sup>

Part of the story of Njoya's fall is a dramatic tale of colonialism, palace intrigue, and local rivalries exploited by the French. In their thirst for control, the French dismantled kingdoms, created new ones, and played a decades-long game of divide and rule. The Cameroon Grasslands were no exception. Within these intrigues, how the collection, and, by extension, the museum enters into the fray is key. Geary's detailed studies of the Palace Museum and the transformation of its objects, have opened the door for understanding

the construction of what we recognize as a museum culture in a specific African locale. By contrast, this discussion (following Susan Stewart's) considers the collection as an object in its own right, one that is self-consciously constructed in the service of myriad desires.<sup>13</sup>

While it is likely that the Bamum court had storehouses containing royal objects for centuries, the collection (as we might regard it) is a product of the intersection of the Bamum and colonial powers. Although Njoya was indeed the leading patron of the arts in Foumban (he also had control over the use of royal symbols), many royal lineages had their own storehouses of objects. This situation might have been the case for the royal lineage of Mosé Yéyab. Whether or not this is the case, Yéyab began to amass Bamum royal objects, giving rise to the first modern collection of Bamum art. Geary notes that by 1920 he had already installed this collection in a mud house. That collection would eventually form the Museum of Bamum Arts and Traditions.<sup>14</sup>

At this time, outside of its role in annual festivals of the kingdom, Bamum art, a tool for the upper social strata to distinguish themselves from commoners and slaves, had a power that was buttressed by its place in closed storage. As such, for Yéyab to establish and exhibit his collection was a radical move, an overt act of aggression that threatened to demystify the objects for a village that did not see such materials very often. In this process, the object, while changed, loses its individual importance, and in the collection, as Stewart reminds us, the *exact* function (her italics) of the object is less important than is the object's service to the collection as a whole.<sup>15</sup> In altering

the ideological frame in which viewers – including the king – might understand both Bamum art and the monarchy itself, Yéyab's collection is an ideological weapon that stands not as an aesthetic, but rather as a political object that attempts, by exposing royal art, to undermine the aura of the king and his dominion.

Moreover, the collection in the hands of Yéyab also points to the interpreter – and the colonizers – as collectors. As such, the collection, which by 1925 included not only objects but also disaffected artisans who once worked for the king, points to an overt attempt on Yéyab's part to garner personal gain and status with the colonial officials who supported him in this endeavour. Geary puts it quite succinctly:

While European observers have often seen Mosé Yéyab's collecting as an enlightened activity inspired by French concepts, it can also be interpreted as his strategy to manipulate the visual sphere following the example of the Bamum kings, and to exploit the power of objects in order to create for himself the conditions necessary for leadership within and outside the kingdom.<sup>16</sup>

Yéyab's collection is an ideological weapon, a self-aggrandizing one that through the assembled objects created a world that spoke of local rivalries between the distant relatives and of the collusion of a Bamum subject with the French.

However, Yéyab's collection was only the first, and Geary insists that one has to understand the formation of the Palace Museum in connection with this first collection. In that sense, by making a museum out of what is so commonly referred to as 'things of the palace', King Njoya sustains –

through the collection and museum – the bitter rivalry between Yéyab and himself. In responding to a collection with a collection, Njoya also changes the rules of engagement. His own ideological weapon points to himself as absolute monarch (it does not matter that this is no longer the case), and as a private space, it attempts to remystify, albeit differently, Bamum royal art, and, by extension, the Bamum monarchy.

In this new context, in this remystified world, the power of the new collection emanates, like objects in a storehouse, from the secrecy that shrouds the objects. Like Yéyab's collection, Njoya's collection speaks of its creator, of his poor relationship with the French and of his obsession to preserve his kingdom and, perhaps more importantly, his throne. The collections constitute a war of symbols, a war that is fuelled by French Imperialism.

One can also look at Njoya's collection, even though a result of his adversary's work, as a self-aggrandizing move, one important for his self-image as well as his image for the French. In his *Histoire*, Njoya is the centre of the Bamum kingdom, and in the world of that text, this particular king takes centre stage as diplomat, as warrior, as intellectual, as artist and as architect. For example, in his *Histoire*, Njoya takes credit for having built an extraordinary palace: 'The king of the Bamum, Njoya, has constructed a palace in Bamum country. This palace surpasses all of the houses of Cameroon. There is not in Cameroon a similar building; it is a building of forty-one rooms.'<sup>17</sup>

Although Njoya never addresses the collection *per se* in the *Histoire*, the collection is the



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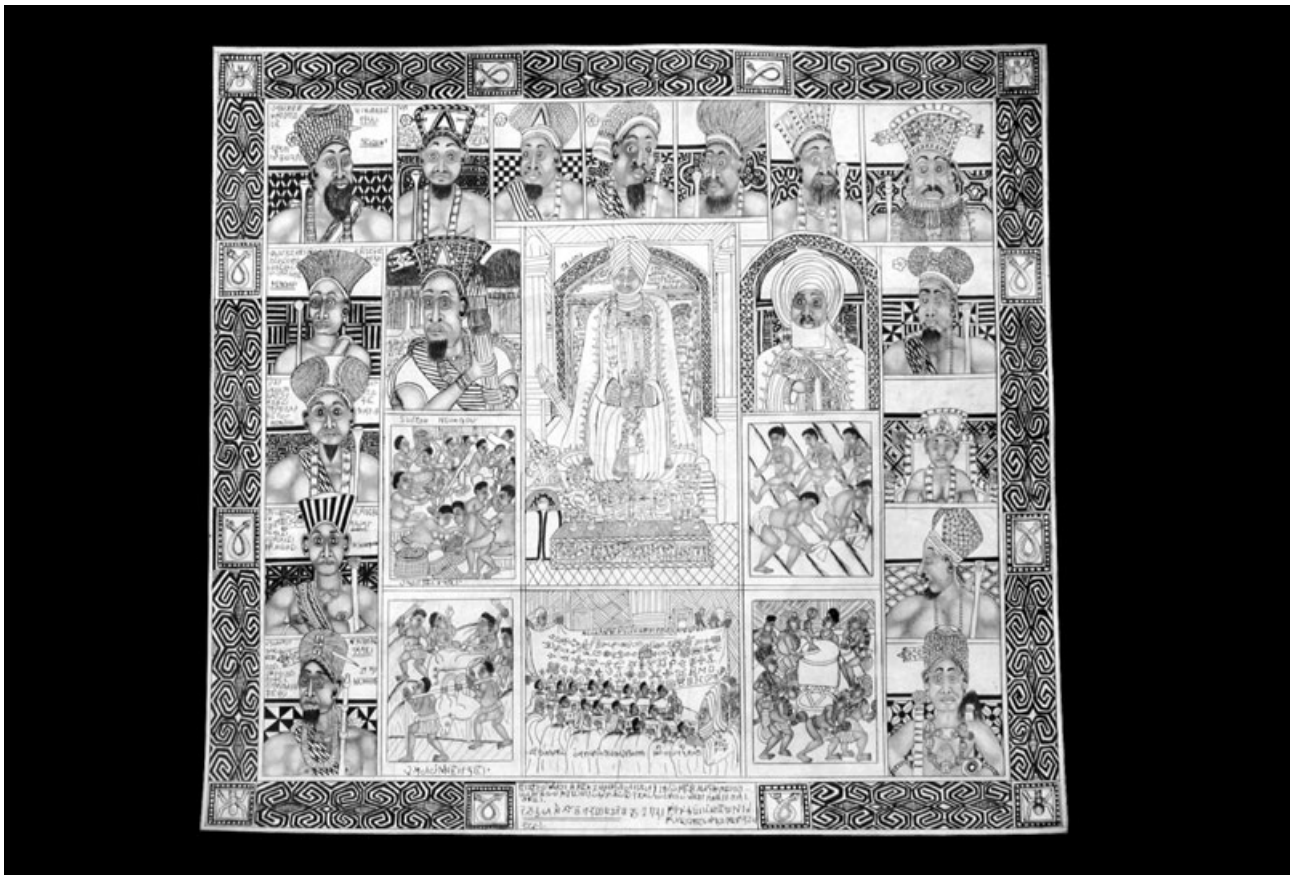
world of the king in the late 1920s, and in this sense, the collection is a visual analogy to the *Histoire*: it is a source of status and an articulation of the king's subjecthood and ability, albeit waning, to control the symbols that articulate Bamum royal concerns. In this context, too, the collection works, like the palace, as something that articulates the eclecticism and (in a private fashion) visual distinction of the king.

Ultimately, King Njoya lost the war of symbols. During the latter part of his reign he did away with the laws that dictated access to and use of royal symbols. He also lost his power. By the end of the 1920s, Njoya's power was a shadow of what it had been under the Germans. He was exiled to Yaoundé, the colonial capital, in 1931, and he died there in 1933. To completely demystify King Njoya, as well as Bamum kingship and court life more generally, the French administration, no doubt aided by Yéyab, displayed all the court's and secret societies' objects in a public exhibition. Geary suggests that this act, which she describes as 'traumatic', irrevocably changed the Bamum kingdom, and the public showing of these things, which likely included Njoya's private collection. It 'brought the traditional court life to an end,' Geary concludes.<sup>18</sup>

The stories of conflict, local rivalry, colonial oppression and interference that the collections still have the capacity to tell have become largely subsumed by history and cultural preservation. The Museum of Bamum Arts and Traditions features objects that detail the deeds of those who created objects for Bamum royalty. However, with the death of Yéyab in 1947 and the passing of his museum first to the French

administration, and then to the local government, Yéyab's symbols have morphed from an ideological tool in a culture oppressed by the French to a view into the Bamum past more generally. Along these lines, the heritage constructed here is not that of the common Bamum person, but rather that of a glorious, centuries-old kingdom, one that despite French colonization, is to a great extent intact today.

The Palace Museum, now installed much like art museums around the world, claims to nod to a grand narrative of Bamum history. However, like the statue of King Njoya that sits in front of the palace he built, like the historic and contemporary king lists that serve as one of the staples of Foumban's small tourist industry, like the books mostly published by members of the royal family, the Palace Museum's objects and large-scale photographs point to King Njoya's reign as the apex of Bamum history. There is also a very self-conscious sleight of hand in the collection, one that overtly announces the careful construction of the past in the Foumban palace. While the collection indeed points to Njoya's achievements and reign, the collection elides Bamum colonial history. Going through the museum, the viewer does not see its relationship to the other museum, the viewer does not see Njoya's fate at the hands of the French. Moreover, the viewer does not get a clear picture of the Bamum kingdom in the very complex and complicated twentieth century. The collection points to a king who seemingly enjoyed a long, successful reign, one that was unmarked by Yéyab, one that was undamaged by the French. In fact, in claiming the date of 1892 as the founding of the Palace Museum, Aboubakar Njiasse Njoya further ascribes agency to his relative, thus erasing



8. Bamum King List. Artist: Ismael Tita Mbohoh.

both the impact of colonization and the rivalry between Yéyab and King Njoya, two factors instrumental in the collection's formation.<sup>19</sup> As such, Mosé Yéyab may have won the battle, but, and this is a wonderful paradox, King Njoya won the war.

Along these lines, Njoya is a paramount part of contemporary Bamum identity, and like the king, contemporary Bamum people understand history as an active force that aids in the construction of the self. While the collections

really point to histories of those in the highest ranks of Bamum culture, the ability to see these objects (or to know that they can be seen) allows for all the culture's members to journey into the past, not as slaves but as royals. Like other cultural institutions that produce 'heritage', this trip backwards underscores the collection's role in the construction of identity or in a feeling of belonging not only for those who have made this world, but also for those who construct a community (or nation) of subjects who interact with it.

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