

## CAN AN ITALIAN MARITIME MUSEUM HELP REPATRIATE LOOTED CAMEROONIAN ARTEFACTS?

According to the *Journal du Cameroun*, an Italian Maritime Museum has declared its willingness and readiness to assist in repatriating looted Cameroonian cultural artefacts that are at present in Europe.

(1) This offer of assistance was made by the president of the Maritime Museum in Genoa, Italy, Professor Maria Paola Profumo, during a visit to Yaoundé and Doula. The professor also suggested that her museum could act as mediator between Cameroon and European museums that are holding Cameroonian archaeological and historical artefacts. (2)



### *Maritime Museum, Douala, Cameroon*

During a meeting with the Cameroonian Minister for Culture, Ama Tutu Muna and a visit to the Maritime Museum in Doula, Professor Profumo emphasized the possibility of assisting the Doula Museum. Maria Profumo would also ask the Museum of World Cultures in Genoa, *Museo delle Culture del Mondo*, what Cameroonian objects they are holding. (3)

The professor assumes she would be provided the required information but as we know, many museums, such as the British Museum, are not even prepared to let the public know how many Benin artefacts they now hold. They do not seem to recognize any duty to inform the public even though many museums are supported by public finance. Some of the museums may genuinely not know the exact number of African artefacts they have. Some artefacts have remained in the original boxes in which they were transported from Africa. We often read about Western museums suddenly discovering artefacts that have been in boxes in a corner for decades and nobody had previously paid them any attention.

The Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin, appears to be one of the very few major museums that are willing to provide information about the number of its African artefacts: *'today, the Africa collection of the Ethnologisches Museum embraces 75,000 objects: around 40,000 from West Africa (of which roughly 12,000 are from Cameroon, and 6000 from the Congo). around 20,000 are from East Africa, 5.000 are from South Africa, 5,000 from North East Africa, and 3,000 from North Africa. By far the largest segment of items is not on display, but is stored in the study collection.'*(4)

The offer of the Italian professor is obviously to be welcomed. As readers may know, there are hundreds of Cameroonian artefacts in Western museums. Can we really expect Western museums that have been deaf to African pleas for return of looted artefacts to react positively to the ideas and suggestions of the Italian professor? Can we hope that the Völkerkunde Museum in Munich, that has so far refused to return the Tangué, to agree to return to Professor Kum'a Ndumbe III and his people, the Bele Bele, Douala, the royal artefacts of his ancestors? Ndumbe's grandfather, Kum'a Mbape, Lock Piso, was the only Cameroonian king who refused to sign a German treaty of 12 July 1884, so-called treaty of protection that imposed colonial rule. A consequence of this refusal and resistance to colonialism was an attack by German forces that was preceded by the German consul Max Buchner, stealing the artefact from the residence. (5)

The Maritime Museum in Genoa is a respectable institution and its president is no doubt aware that the return of looted African artefacts is a very old and sensitive matter with the Western museums unashamedly insisting on their right to hold undoubtedly looted artefacts; she must also certainly be aware of the arrogant position of European museums as demonstrated at the recent meeting in Nigeria which issued the miserable and mendacious document entitled *Benin Plan of Action for Restitution*. (6)



*Tangué, bow of a ship, symbol of Kum'a Mbape, Cameroon, now in the Völkerkunde Museum, Munich, Germany.*

As far as we know, no Western museum has declared a general intention to return looted African artefacts despite constant and repeated demands by Africans for the return of their looted cultural artefacts that have been for several decades in Western detention. Indeed the presence of looted artefacts for decade in these museums has been used by major museums to form the basis of their justification for their claim to a right to hold looted artefacts. This has been amply demonstrated by the arrogant and imperialist *Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums*. (7)

Individual Westerners, revolted by the brutal methods of acquisition of African artefacts by colonialists and imperialists, and worried by their conscience, have from time to time, returned specific items. A most recent example is the return of two Benin artefacts by Dr. Mark Walker, a Briton, to the Oba of Benin. (8) Western museums and other public institutions remain impervious to pleas for restitution that are not backed by any sanctions apart from United Nations and UNESCO resolutions. (9) They seem unperturbed by the moral implications of their undoubtedly illegal and illegitimate positions and attitudes.

Where the Maritime Museum in Genoa could assist with respect to looted African artefacts in Europe, would be to address the issues relating to the role of various European navies in transporting looted/stolen African objects to Europe. It is obvious that many of the heavy African artefacts in the Western world could not have been brought to Europe without the active participation of the navies. For example, transportation of heavy Egyptian artefacts such as the Rosette Stone in the British Museum could only have been effected by national navies.



*Bust of Ramses II, weighing 7.25 tons, Egypt, now in the British Museum, London, United Kingdom.*

What role did the navies play in the various punitive expeditions to Africa? Research into this matter could clarify for us how looted items were transported by national navies and under what circumstances. Did these navies employ African or slave labour? The maritime museum with its resources could perhaps persuade a graduate student to do doctoral dissertation on "The Role of European Navies in the Acquisition and Transportation of Looted Artefacts from Africa". We know for sure that in the case of the so-called Benin *Punitive Expedition* a major role was played by the British navy. Indeed the whole

expedition was under the command of Rear-Admiral Harry Rawson, commanding the squadron at the Cape of Good Hope, who was appointed by the British Admiralty to lead an expedition to capture the Benin king, Oba Ovonramwen and destroy Benin City. That expedition looted thousands of Benin artefacts from the Palace of the Oba of Benin and burnt Benin City, killing many men, women and innocent children. (10)

Did the Belgian, Dutch, French, German, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish navies also play similar roles in the acquisition of looted African artefacts? The resort to massive violence in the encounter between Europeans and Africans will become clearer when we realize the major roles of navies in subjugating African peoples and stealing/looting their property including cultural artefacts that now decorate Western museums and other institutions. At the same time as the robbery of African wealth was going on, Europeans arrogantly continued to affirm that Africans had not produced any remarkable artistic works and of course, had no history before the arrival of the Europeans. (11).



*Commemorative sculpture of a princess, so-called 'Bangwa Queen.' Bangwa, Cameroon, now at Musée Dapper, Paris, France. (12)*

Given the arrogant and hostile attitude of Western museums to restitution of African artefacts that was established by James Cuno, Philippe de Montebello, Neil McGregor and others we are always pleased to hear from a Western museum director who is not hostile and offers help even if we recognize the



enormous difficulties in her proposals. We need all the support we can get to convince the Western world that it is wrong to steal/loot African cultural artefacts and to insist on keeping the stolen items. (13)

In order to facilitate offers of help in matters of restitution, African States also do their basic homework: they must establish clearly and publish widely a list of artefacts they seek to recover from Western States, stating precisely the locations of the objects and naming the relevant museums. After more than 50 years of Independence, such a task would surely not overwhelm our States. (14)



*Kings throne kuofo, Banka Cameroon, now in Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin, Germany.*

Kwame Opoku, 1 September, 2014.

## **NOTES**

1. <http://journalducameroun.com/>
2. [fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Galata - Museo del mare](fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Galata_-_Museo_del_mare)
- 3 <http://www.museidigenova.it/spip.php?rubrique230>

4. *Ethnologisches Museum Berlin*, Museum Guide, Prestel Verlag 2007. English Edition, p. 114.

5. For background information see the statement by Prof. Kuma Ndumbe III,

*'Les débuts de la résistance des peuples camerounais à l'occupation coloniale - Déclaration solennelle du Prince Kum'a Ndumbe III'*. [www.africavenir.org/de/ueber-africavenir/prinz-kuma-ndumbe-iii.html](http://www.africavenir.org/de/ueber-africavenir/prinz-kuma-ndumbe-iii.html)

Ndumbe, *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich in Kamerun. Wie Deutschland in Kamerun seine Kolonialmacht aufbauen konnte. 1840-1910*. Fondation AfricAvenir Editions, Exchange and Dialogue, 2008, Berlin. 2008.

On violence under German colonial rule in Cameroon, see Uwe Schulte Varendorff, *Krieg in Kamerun, Die deutsche Kolonie im Ersten Weltkrieg*. Ch.Link Verlag, Berlin, 2011.

Stefanie Michels, Parfait Bokohosi, Ulrike Hamman and others,

*Kolonial Beutestücke* [forum-recht-online.de/.../FoR1103\\_078\\_michels-bok](http://forum-recht-online.de/.../FoR1103_078_michels-bok)

6. <http://www.modernghana.com/news/451636/1/benin-plan-of-action-2-will-this-miserable-project.html>

7. K. Opoku, 'Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums: Singular Failure of an Arrogant Imperialist Project': <http://www.modernghana.com>

K. Opoku, 'K. Is the Declaration on the Value and Importance of the Universal Museums now worthless? Comments on Imperialist Museology' <http://www.modernghana.com>

8. K. Opoku, 'Return of Two Looted Benin Bronzes by a Briton: History in the Making', <http://www.modernghana.com>

Peju Layiwola, 'Walker and the Restitution of Two Benin'

<http://www.modernghana.com>

9. K. Opoku. 'Did Germans Never Hear Directly or Indirectly Nigeria's Demand for Return of Looted Artefacts?' <http://www.modernghana.com>

10. Ekpo Eyo, 'Benin: The sack that was,' [www.dawodu.net/eyo.htm](http://www.dawodu.net/eyo.htm)

11. Hugh Trevor Roper, former Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford, declared as late as 1963 as follows:

*"Undergraduates, seduced, as always, by the changing breath of journalistic fashion, demand that they should be taught the history of black Africa. Perhaps, in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none, or very little: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is largely darkness, like the history of pre-European, pre-Columbian America. And darkness is not a subject for history."*

Hugh Trevor-Roper, *The Rise of Christian Europe*, Thames and Hudson, 1965, p 9

Trevor-Roper was undoubtedly among the worst of those denying African history and hence our humanity. He was in this respect following Hegel. But was he worse than any of our contemporaries who, although not denying openly and directly, our history and humanity, refuse to contemplate the return of our cultural artefacts and justify their withholding on the basis of some African incapacity? Were the old-fashioned racists, such as many of the so-called European Enlightenment thinkers, any worse than

our contemporary Westerners who find it difficult to accept the proposition that peoples should keep their cultural artefacts; any artefacts acquired through force or stealth consequently should be condemned. How can those who condemn the threat or use of force in international relations, not accept that the acquisition of artefacts through the threat or use of force cannot be legitimate? Many contemporary Westerners do not seem to have moved much further away from 18<sup>th</sup> century European racist thinking.

See, K. Opoku, "Is the Stealing of Cultural Objects of Others a Specific Cultural Heritage of Europe or is Universal Heritage?" <http://www.modernghana.com>

**12.** A long note by Christies indicates that the Bangwa Queen was collected by a German colonial explorer, Gustave Conrau who was in contact with Felix von Luschan and donated it to the Berlin Völkerkunde museum, now Ethnologisches museum. Since the figure is from a royal shrine, it must have been looted or at least taken without notice of those responsible for ancestral shrines. For many scholars and dealers in the West, so long as an object has left Africa before 1970, year of the UNESCO Convention (*Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property 1970*) there is no point in tracing the origin of the object further back in history. The names of collectors and dealers are rolled out as "provenance" of the object but this does not explain the full history of the object and how it left Africa. It is almost as if the possession by Western dealers or collectors cleanses the object of the initial opprobrium attached to it by the illegal or wrongful taking.

13. K. Opoku. " Is the Stealing of Cultural Objects of Others a Specific Cultural Heritage of Europe or is it a Universal Heritage ?", <http://www.modernghana.com>

14. K. Opoku, "Reflections on the Cairo Conference on Restitution: Encouraging Beginning", <http://www.modernghana.com>