

How honest the Europeans? "

Alexandre Kum'a Nduembe III, Prince of Cameroon, has completed high school in Germany. And only much later learn that a work of art from family ownership is in a museum in Munich. He wants it back.

Interview: Martina Scherf

He is a professor, poet, writer and in his homeland a prince - Alexandre Kum'a Nduembe III. In April, he took part in a discussion on the culture of remembrance at the Five Continents Museum in Munich, the former Völkerkundemuseum. There is the tangué of his grandfather, a royal signature that the former director of the museum robbed 140 years ago in Cameroon. The prince wants her back. But it is about more: the reconciliation of Africa and Europe. For this he works tirelessly with his foundation Afric-Avenir International.

In the foyer of the museum, two former school friends are waiting for us. For them, he is the "Alex" with whom they spent their defining years at the Maria-Theresia-Gymnasium in Munich. You have photos with you, from the carnival, Alex dressed as Bayer, a friend as an African prince, and from the class trip to Hamburg, including Reeperbahn. He was one of us," say his friends. He himself did not always feel this way.

SZ: Prince Kum'a Nduembe III, let's talk about money. We are standing here in the museum in front of a piece of art that was stolen from your family. Do you know what the tangué is worth?

Prince Alexandre Kum'a Nduembe III: A quarter of a century ago, the then Bavarian minister for culture, Zehetmair, stated: "According to conservative estimates, the Tangué is worth half a million marks. We are now in 2025, experts

could reassess something like that, the art market plays a role. But we are not interested in money. It's about our peoples having a need to find themselves. For us, these artefacts are not soulless. You have to heal, protect and reconcile the cause. It can't replace any money in the world.

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For almost 30 years you have been fighting to bring the Tangué back to Cameroon. Zubin Mehta, at that time general music director in Munich, spoke up for you. He handed my letter to the minister, Zehetmair's answer was: Since the property is in the ownership of the Free State of Bavaria, it can already be

The 2023 report "Atlas of Absence: Cameroon's Cultural Heritage in Germany" concludes that more than 40,000 objects from Cameroon are in German museums, more than in Cameroon itself.

And these are only the public collections, there are also private ones. Most of these works are not exhibited, they are in depots, they are not even researched. Many thousands more were sold or destroyed. This shows that the argument of scientificity is only advanced. The colonizers were doing something different then.

What do you mean?
They wanted to cut off the roots of people, to erase all spiritual. The Christian missionaries played a leading role. Do you see that whip in the display case? They used to whip out the fathers if they didn't send their children to a Christian school. What you have here is the work of the devil," they said, we are the true God to you." But why did they bring this work of the devil to Europe? You have even sent people and demonstrated in so-called "Völkerschau" on public places in Germany.

When you give the objects back to the Africans, they don't handle them carefully, it is now often said, or they even sell them. This may happen in one case or another. But in the vast majority of cases there is a very great awareness of the cultural significance of these objects. There are works in Cameroon that are 900 years old - their owners have obviously taken good care of them. Bénédicte Sa-voyn und Felwine Sarr ...

...the two scientists who have been Mandate of the French President Macron 2018 a report on the African cultural heritage

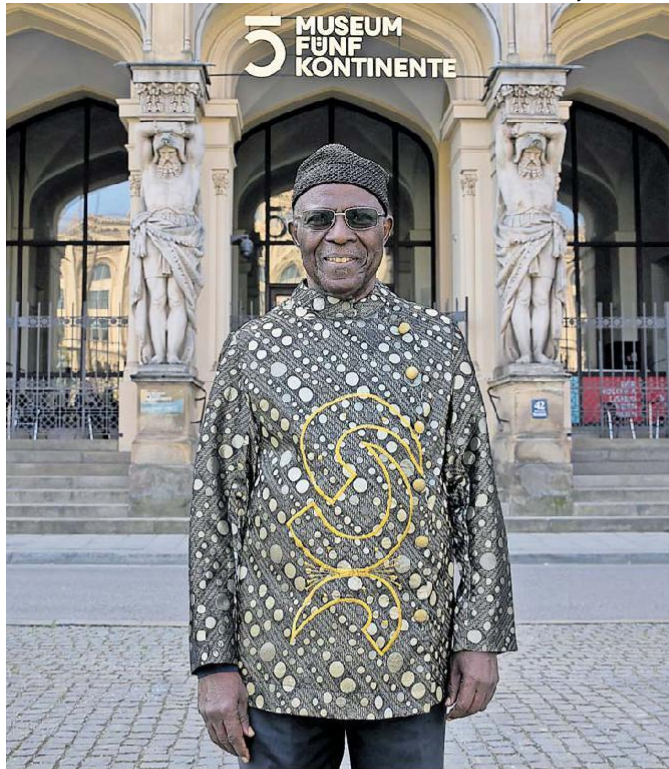
and thus an international debate set in motion ...

...were able to attend the Ka-Merun king of Bafoussam himself convince. The Africans must know who they were before the Europeans came, and who they are today. Only then can they create in the modern world risk acting. So far they have been told: You have done nothing. Your salvation is, what Europe brings. But the euro model remained foreign, it works in Africa not. We have a different past unity. And we need resources to explore erased history and find our identity.

Is this awareness really widespread among the governments in Africa? What do school children learn about history?

The African Renaissance is in full swing. There is an up-and-coming generation of young people: scientists, artists, start-ups. We have observed a rapid development. Of which the European media almost never act. They carry the same picture of poor, hungry people, of cataclysmic animals - or of elephants and lions. Africa is Europe's direct neighbour. If this ignorance persists, it will not bring a good future for both continents. But back to your question: No, being aware is not yet widespread in Africa. Some schools still pretend that our history began with the arrival of Europeans. Politics, economy and churches have contributed to this up to now.

The museums in this country like to hide the origin of their objects behind euphemisms such as "acquired", "donated". In the case of the tangué, it is now established that he was stolen from your grandfather Kum'a Mbape. Why hasn't it been returned yet?



LET'S TALK ABOUT MONEY WITH PRINCE ALEXANDRE KUM'A NDUEMBE III.

The Bavarian art ministry has to answer this question. It is clear: the family of Bele Bele has elected me as a legitimate successor to the throne. There is also a place for the Tangué. I have donated a 3000 square meter plot of land owned by the family to the AfricAvenir International Foundation in Douala. A cultural center was built there, with library, archive, publishing house, a Dokto-randenschule. And because we are still waiting for a response from Germany, we have to build a Tangué. He was consecrated, many people came to see him. The German ambassador also had his picture taken.

When did you first learn that the real ship's jewelry is in Munich?

Only in the 1990s, as part of my research. 30 years ago I went to the Maria-Theresia-Gymnasium in Munich, not so far away from the museum.

But I had no idea that a piece of my family history was displayed there.

Young princes were sent to Germany."

How did you get to do your Abitur in Munich?

There was a tradition in our family that young princes were sent to Germany. My children have also attended schools in Germany. When I arrived here in 1961 at the age of 15, my German host parents, Fritz and Lydia Eberle, picked me up at the main station in Munich. I couldn't speak German and went straight to eighth grade. Probably not an easy start?



The Tangué comes from Cameroon and once adorned the bow of the royal Bootes at ritual rowing competitions. PHOTOS: FLORIAN PELIAK

In German I was not graded the first two years. English and French I could, the rest I might have acquired quickly. I had good teachers. In history we learned a lot about National Socialism. But nothing about Africa, let alone kolonialism. As if Germany is in the international race for raw materials, the end of the 19th, century reached its peak and was associated with so much suffering, would not have participated at all. I found that strange.

As a young man, you could have chosen to live comfortably in Germany and earn money quickly. But you went the intellectual way and began to research the colonial system. How did it happen? Was the only African in my school and wanted to know: Who am I? A teacher asked me, before several

Classes to give a talk about Cameroon. That's when I started researching. **After graduating from high school, you went to the Studi-um of German Studies in Lyon.** After Germany lost its colonies at the end of the First World War, France became our second colonial power. I also wanted to get to know this world better. My master's thesis I wrote about the German colonial empire in Cameroon.

You discovered your family background ... We experienced the violence quite personally several times: My grandfather Kum'a Mbape went to co-operate with the Germans in 1884. He made it clear to them in writing: I will not unwire a protection contract. I do not want your money, get your flag back in front of my palace." As a result, the German consul Max Buchner, who later received the Bavarian Order of

ethnological collection in Munich, and Admiral Knorr bombar everything. Marines murdered and looted. Thus the royal sinship, called Tangué, came to Munich.

That was not the only atrocity. 30 years later, the German Rudolf Duala Manga Bell, who had studied law in Germany, believed in German law and later became king in Duala, has been hanged for alleged treason in 1914 and his entire property has been destroyed. His son, Prince Alexander, who at the age of four joined the court of Emperor Wilhelm II, had been sent and served as officer in World War I, returned to Cameroon, which was now French. He fought for years for the return of the family property. When he married the daughter of a German and a black Cuban pianist-

te, she was not allowed to accompany her husband to Douala - the French maintained the separation of the Rassa. There is a lot of pain in this story, but we must not be bitter.

African scholars will not really listened to."

You then did a PhD on Hitler's plans for Africa.

Leading German historians told me: You won't find anything there. Hitler only wanted to go east." But my research, especially in the state archives of the GDR in Potsdam, revealed: Hitler wanted a middle-african colonial empire in cooperation with the racist South Africa of the apartheid policy. I was the first to look at the Kolonialdokumente from Hitler's chancellery. And I realized: there was a continuity from the colonial administration to the Nazi state. Mass murder, forced labour, racial laws, death marches, concentration camps, all this had its precursors in the colonies. The genocide of the Herero and Nama in Namibia is now recognized by the federal government. But there are countless other documents of the brutality of the colonial rulers.

You completed your habilitation at the Otto-Suhr-Institute of the Freie Universität Berlin, where you taught for ten years. Then you returned to Cameroon. Did you also find sources for your research?

That's the problem. Almost all documents are from foreigners, most of them written in German. But how can one come back with an erased memory of historical events? So we travelled throughout the country in the 1980s with a team of researchers from the University of Yaoundé, financed by the Cameroonian presidency, and conducted 176 interviews with very old people who were still alive or knew stories from their parents. 18 volumes are published, funded by the Gerda-Henkel-Stiftung. Unfortunately, only three have been translated into German. We do not have the money to transcribe and translate 20 more volumes.

Isn't there a greater interest today?

Unfortunately still too little. These statements of Ka-merun's contemporaries are also a part of German history. We need much more international cooperation. But it seems that still reigns

a colonial spirit in many institutions: We Germans have money and culture, the Africans are poor, ignorant and in need of help." This attitude prevents dialogue at eye level. African scholars are not really listened to. I have often had to experience this myself, as a university teacher, as an author, as a person. And that, although Germany is my second home since my youth days (laughs).

You can laugh about it?
Yes, of course. You see where you see, only egg-ness on earth," write the Ba-rock poet Andreas Gryphius. The people here in Germany don't know who I am. In Cameroon I am met with great respect. Since I am a scholar, writer and successor to the throne of Bele Bele in Douala. It goes parallel, we live with the tradition and the Mo-derne. Eventually the Germans will understand that too. And realize that the Tangué belongs to our family.