Erica P. Jones

Palace Museums in the Cameroon Grassfields

Sites of Inclusion, Exclusion, and Alienation

In an average year, the museums in the Cameroon Grassfields host a wide range of visitors including international tourists and expats, members of the diaspora who return home to visit, students, academic researchers, and Cameroonians interested in art and culture. The Grassfields museums consciously set out to serve the needs and expectations of these local and non-local populations in different ways. Exegesis obtained through extensive interviews and comments left in museum guest books in the museums in the kingdoms of Baham, Bafut, Mankon, and Babungo revealed the following trends. Tourists visiting the museum look for authenticity and an opportunity to experience something new, unexpected, and distinctly foreign from what they know. The urban Grassfields populations and members of the Grassfields diaspora visit these museums with an expectation of entertainment and to experience a sense of nostalgia. A rural population living in closer proximity to the palace and museums, will play out their current concerns about modernity, monarchy, and history in the museum. This final group's perceptions of their local kingdom's museum are rooted in issues that are deeply personal, such as political inclusion and exclusion, ownership of culture and cultural objects, agency of the local population to shape their own heritage, and the right of the palace to benefit economically from the kingdom's cultural heritage. It is this last series of themes that I will examine here.

Grassfields peoples are constituents of many communities; they are members quarters with in kingdoms, language groups, a range of religions, political and professional associations, cultural societies, and age and gender related *njangis*. Where non-local visitors may view the museum experience with a sense of detached

interest similar to knowledge consumption in an institutionalized format, in the Grassfields, local individuals approach the museum through the lenses of their various communities, seeing the museum as a place that contains both their kingdom's history and the varied aspects of their living culture. The relationship between local communities and their museums is profoundly complicated in that it is a manifestation of larger social and political conflicts in the kingdom. As anthropologist Johan Pottier has noted, "inquiry into cultural hegemony must not be confined to the question of how constructs of 'the Other' result from power relations embedded in the colonial past, for intellectual hegemony exists not only between regions and cultures, but also within them." The intellectual hegemony espoused by palaces and dominant traditional political bodies *within* local Grassfields cultures has the greatest influence on community perceptions of the museum. Community responses to museums parallel the broader question of who objects or ascribes to the cultural hegemony of the palace. Some members of these kingdoms are as likely to laud the museum as deride it as yet another way that the king, or fon, enriches himself, and some, while seeing the benefit and appeal of museums, still approach them with ambivalence, uncertain of the role they can play in their lives, if any at all.

A Museum for the Community

There is a broad disconnect between how palace museums want to be seen as community museums and how they are perceived by the community as palace museums. In order to construct these museums, it was necessary that the curators re-contextualize the courtly objects in a new public setting. Monarchs in the Grassfields have always used public displays of art to show their wealth and power, but this was largely accomplished through grand building projects or the display of objects taken from enemies, while locally produced art objects were generally housed in palace storage rooms that were inaccessible to the majority of the population. The objects on view in the museums today were taken from these palace storerooms and moved to the museum space adjacent to the palace where they are

re-presented as pieces of a preserved common heritage.

When objects are reframed in terms of heritage, it is inevitable that certain memories and traditions are privileged over others. As Stuart Hall noted, when traditions, and, in this case, traditional objects, are valued simply for their role as ritual objects, they become essentialized and their meaning is fixed in an idealized past. The idealized past in this case manifests itself as a preference for objects that reference the practices of the era of transition to the early-colonial period around the turn of the 20th century. Emphasis on this time period is hardly surprising as it represents the most recent point in time when the kingdoms were at the height of their influence. After the German explorers first made contact with the kingdoms of the Grassfields, the fons experienced a succession of outside forces from colonial powers to the current national government that have appropriated their powers. In an attempt to bolster their current status, fons carefully chose to locate the museums at historical, socially significant sites, often on the grounds of the long-standing palaces, promoting an explicit tie to local religion. The museums are not only able to rewrite their colonial history – or ignore it altogether – but they also largely ignore recent histories of change, thereby situating the museums in an imagined past.

The heritage narratives produced through the objects housed in the four aforementioned palace museums are complex interplays of myth and memory. Michael Rowlands has noted that in the specific example of the museum at Mankon, the heritage presented in the museum affirms the central position of the palace and the king in the construction of Mankon identity, and this narrative excludes many alternative interpretations of the local history challenging the position of the ruler. This is similarly seen in the museum at Babungo, which makes no mention of an ongoing, divisive contest for power in the kingdom that has dominated local politics for decades. It is hardly surprising that ruling parties use the museum to their benefit and eliminate any dissenting voices from the narrative. The approach taken

in these museums, whereby memory and heritage effectively manifest as a pre-colonial nostalgia, produces a fictitious past that validates the current authority of the palace. It also allows the palace to create a narrative that purportedly provides a precedent for the present rights taken by the palace, giving the modern manifestation of Grassfields kingship the patina of historical authenticity.

Village Politics and Class Exclusion

A large percentage of the population claims no familial ties to the palace, and while it may appear that this population would have the least complicated relationship with the palace's narrative of kingdom history, this group tends to feel the most distance from the museums, citing a sense of exclusion and alienation. While I met locals over the course of my research who had visited the museum, there were many more people who had never visited their museum and felt they couldn't do so. I spoke to both men and women from all four kingdoms who expressed this sentiment, but the issue was best summarized for me one afternoon at a women's meeting in Babungo. The composition of this group included women with and without palace ties, making it difficult for the women without palace connections to fully speak their minds for fear of repercussions. Many of the women spoke of their pride in the museum, desire to visit it, and, in spite of potential reprisals, their anger and disappointment that they were not able to do so.

These women shared the overwhelming sense that they were intentionally being excluded from the museum experience. They felt that they were unable to attend the museum because they couldn't visit the palace without an invitation from the fon, which would only be granted during public festivals when community members visited the palace. An unspoken element of gender discrimination is present in this assumption since women in Grassfields kingdoms are much less likely to be in the palace compound than men. This drastically limits their opportunities to visit the museum at the invitation of the fon. There was also a sense of ire from the group that they, like many in the kingdom, had donated time and resources for the

construction of the museum, and yet they were never invited to visit. In addition to all of these barriers to entry was another significant problem, they were unable to pay the entry fee.

My discussion with the former chairman of the Babungo Traditional Council, Ndong Tumenta Mathias, who served as chairman throughout the entire period from conception to construction of the Babungo Museum, clarified the palace's position on this subject. In spite of how the museum is billed, it was always conceptualized as a tourist attraction, and Mr. Tumenta specifically asserted that "those who patronize the museum should be strangers." Further, he stated that the palace attendants do not allow just anyone in the palace and that the Babungo people "give a lot of respect to [their] fon, [they] respect the palace, [and they] fear the palace." Most people acknowledged that housing the museum in the palace compound is a natural choice since the palace is the center of the culture, the first place that visitors stop, and a safe setting to guard the objects. Yet, as a place that carries such importance in the kingdom, locals are reluctant to go there and palace officials were counting on this. At the same time, palace organizers did not anticipate that discouraging local visitors would be a problem because, as Mr. Tumenta claimed, "It has never been our practice to go and see things we already know." He and others believed that the function of displaying community heritage is to draw outsiders to the kingdom rather than provide entertainment or education for the people of the kingdom. While the entry fee required of all visitors is a straightforward barrier to local people visiting the museum, the psychological barrier of the palace is far more potent. The women in Babungo did not necessarily view their exclusion from the museum as barring them from their traditional culture or their history, but rather the museum is emblematic of the ways in which the palace largely ignores the locals, taking from them at times and rarely reciprocating.

For everyone in the village, the visitors who come directly to the palace, visit the museum and palace, and then leave is noticeable. Everyone I spoke with in the

Northwest Region acknowledged that, at this point, the only people who benefit from the museums—financially, politically, and socially—are members of the palace. The economics of museums and the tourist trade have a significant impact on local perceptions of museums and these perceptions also shed light on the ambivalence felt by many about their palace. One way to understand views of museums by different social groups is through political scientist Jean-Francoise Bayart's theory of the "politics of the belly." Bayart contends that there is a widespread system of accumulation of shared resources by the political and elite classes that enrich these classes while leaving little for the common citizen. The elites, in local parlance, *chop*, or eat the resources, essentially consuming all the resources that were intended to be shared. Political scientists view these shared resources as both social and financial in nature, as exemplified by international development funds or resources allocated to members of the military, and in both of these examples the monies and goods are clearly meant for the benefit of the broader society.

Cameroonians in the Grassfields are sensitized to the monetary value of their culture, and it seems as though heritage, art, and culture are increasingly being considered as classes of shared resources being eaten by the elites of the kingdom. It can not be denied that one goal of the museum building project was to monetize these art objects as a means of bringing income to the kingdom, and surely most development projects are aimed at bringing more than just knowledge to a community. This project found a way for the objects to generate revenue, without being sold. If the museums are intended to bring money into the palace and kingdom, then local perceptions of the museum institution can be understood as thinly veiled perceptions of how the palace is holding up its mandate; and in this case the response is a condemnation of the palace's failure to redistribute the resources, financial and intellectual, as expected.

Conclusion

The museums in the Grassfields are contentious spaces, places where, for some, the

objects are of secondary importance to the values that are contained by the idea of the museum. Local communities recast the function, accessibility, and value of the museums in a way that reflects their perspectives on contemporary kingdom politics, the utility of traditional culture, and an increasing tourist trade. In perceiving the museum, the locals see the institution more than the objects within, and they appear to care more about how this specific institution is functioning in their specific kingdom. While the museums may not be a means by which the local population orients a sense of self, local perspectives of the museum are indicators of how local communities view status, their kingdoms, and what they see as the future direction of their culture.

Dr. Erica P. Jones *is the Associate Curator of African Artsat the Fowler Museum at UCLA. She received her Ph.D. in Art History at UCLA, specializing in African art. Since joining the Fowler Museum in 2015,Joneshas organized multiple exhibitions, among them: The Art of Hair in Africa*(2015), *exploring the Fowler Museum's collection of African hair pins and combs*; *Pantsula 4 LYF: Popular Dance and Fashion in Johannesburg*(2017), *highlighting the evolution of this competitive dance practice in the townships of South Africa*; *Dining with Kings: Ceremony and Hospitalityin the Cameroon Grassfields*(2017-18), *focusing on the connection between food culture androyal power in thisvibrant art producing area*; *and Meleko Mokgosi: Bread, Butter, and Power*(2018), *showcasing a new painting cycle by the young, emerging artist from Botswana. Jones has received the Edward A. Dickson History of Art Fellowship at UCLA, an Arnold Rubin Awardfrom the Fowler Museum, and the research for her dissertation, The Multiple Lives of Objects: Museums, Memory, and Modernity in the Cameroon Grassfields, was supported by a J. William Fulbright Graduate Fellowship. Her publishing has been concentrated on the arts and museums of the Grassfields, and she is the author of the forthcoming book accompanying the exhibition Bread, Butter, and Power.She continues to research in her primary areas of interest, specifically museums, heritage, and popular culture.*