

Digital Enhancement of African Museum Collections

Lessons Learned from the Virtual Exhibition Project “Heritage Costumes in Cameroon: Dressing up your Identity”.

Jean-Paul C. LAWSON, EUR Humanités Creation Patrimoine¹, UMR Heritages 9022- CY Cergy Paris University, France

Keywords: *Digital—Exhibition—Costumes—Museum—Cameroun*

CHNT-Reference: Lawson, J.-P.C. (2025). ‘Digital Enhancement of African Museum Collections: Lessons Learned from the Virtual Exhibition Pro-Ject “Heritage Costumes in Cameroon: Dressing Up Your Identity”’, *Proceedings of the 26th International Conference on Cultural Heritage and New Technologies*, Vienna and online, November 2021. Heidelberg: Propylaeum.

doi: [10.11588/propylaeum.1449.c20779](https://doi.org/10.11588/propylaeum.1449.c20779).

Introduction

The Ecole du Patrimoine Africain (EPA), in its mission to support young African heritage professionals, launched a call in September 2020, with the aim of selecting projects aiming at promoting African heritage wealth through digital tools. In responding to this call, a project for the design and production of a virtual exhibition on the theme: “**Heritage costumes in Cameroon: Dressing up your identity**” were submitted by Association “PatriMundus”. Among the projects selected, this project received financial support from the institution and its partners, funding that enabled us to travel to Cameroon from 30 April to 18 May 2021 to digitize the National Museum’s collection of traditional costumes.

Placed under the responsibility of the “PatriMundus” Association, this project is led by Jean-Paul Lawson, heritage and digital specialist, webmaster, community manager and doctoral student at the University CY Cergy Paris, whose PhD thesis topic is: “Mediation and digital enhancement in European and African heritage contexts: assets, values, practices, and circulation. Perspectives of local, national, and international influence in museums of black civilization in West Africa”, and Avenir G. Meikengang, a doctoral student in cultural geography at the same university and a specialist in Cameroonian traditional costumes.

Cameroon, land of heritage

Considered as Africa in miniature because of the diversity of its cultures and peoples, Cameroon bears the mark of an exceptional cultural heritage: landscapes, architectures, spatial arrangements, and objects that reflect both the history of civilisations and the intelligence of men in the exploitation of resources, as well as in the organisation of societies (Cafuri, 2004). Its intangible cultural heritage, rightly described as “living heritage”, includes, among other things, community gatherings, heritage

¹ Jean-Paul C. Lawson is a PhD candidate in Heritage studies at CY Cergy Paris University and University of Warwick. He’s also a chair of “PatriMundus”, an heritage association base in France. eMail: Jean-paul.lawson@cyu.fr

costumes, oral traditions, songs, knowledge of the natural environment, knowledge and skills related to ancestral healing methods, craft and culinary techniques, food, festivals, beliefs, etc (Dieye, 2013). Traditional costumes, an important category of cultural heritage, tell the story of peoples and their beliefs. Whether for everyday or festive occasions, they bear witness to a unique way of life, to ancestral customs and bring together past and future, traditions, and modernity. When we go back to the history of clothing, whose role was purely utilitarian, i.e., to protect the human body from bad weather, external aggression and to allow it to move easily, we can therefore affirm that the function or role of clothing has evolved by adding immaterial functions: ornament, decoration, thus becoming an ornament. From the tradition of making clothes from tree bark, we have moved on in Africa to Kapok fibres and finally cotton.

Digitization of the costumes of the National Museum of Cameroon

Our stay in Cameroon was the cornerstone of the realisation of our exhibition because it responded to two imperatives: to digitise the collection of costumes of the MNC (Figure 1 and 2) and to meet the craftsmen who designed these traditional costumes in order to interview them and collect their testimony on the ancestral techniques used to make these outfits.

Traditional costumes represent an important element of tangible and intangible cultural heritage. The intangible aspect lies in the ancestral techniques used to make these costumes. During the mission



Fig. 1. Shots of the National Museum's costume collection, (© Guy-Joël Ngankam Djougang. May 2021).



Fig. 2. Museum guides in training while taking photos of the National Museum's costume collection, (© Guy-Joël Ngankam Djougang. May 2021).

in Cameroon, the opportunity to go to Foumban (West Cameroon) to meet Dr Idrissou Njoya, artist and art historian, specialist of the “Ndop” fabric, who received us in his workshop and spoke to us at length about the role played by the ndop in the kingdoms of the West and the traditional skills associated with its manufacture, were presented to the team-project. This interview is available on the exhibition website.

Training staff of the National Museum of Cameroon in digital tools

This project was not just about digitizing the National Museum of Cameroon's costume collection. It was important for us to pass on our knowledge of digitization and heritage enhancement to the staff working at the National Museum (Galitzine-Loumpet, 2013). Thus, during the whole stay, the agents were trained in the handling of digital devices for taking pictures and recording videos, but also in the design of a website and the creation and management of an institutional Facebook page and Instagram account (Figure 3). It was a very rewarding “Learning by Doing” experience for all parties.

The online virtual exhibition

The period from 1 October 2020 to 30 April 2021 is the implementation phase of the project. The opening of this virtual exhibition took place on 31 August 2021 and the exhibition is available via the link <https://costumestradi.patrimundus.org/>.

On the website, the exhibition is presented into 4 parts corresponding to the cultural areas of Cameroon: **Grassfields, Sudano-Sahelian, Sawa and Fang-Beti-Bulu** (Figure 4). The exhibition also offers a virtual tour of the costume room of the National Museum of Cameroon.

Conclusion

Our intervention at this conference will therefore allow us to share our experience of conducting this project in a very particular African digital context, which draws its references from the use of numerous digital tools. It will also open discussions on the next stage of this exhibition dedicated to traditional costumes with the collection of the National Museum of Costumes of Grand Bassam in Côte d'Ivoire.



Fig. 3. Training of staff of the National Museum of Cameroon. (© Guy-Joël Ngankam Djougang, May 2021).

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L'Exposition



Fig. 4. Screenshot of the exhibition, (© Jean-Paul Lawson. October 2021).

Funding

This exhibition project is being funded by the Ecole du Patrimoine Africain, ICCROM & World African Heritage Fund, through the Youth-Africa-Heritage Program.

Conflict of Interests Disclosure

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Author Contributions

Writing – original draft, review & editing: Jean-Paul Lawson

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