

Selling Authenticity in the Bamum Kingdom in 1929–1930

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Note: Due to a last-minute copy-editing error, this article went to press with the ethnonym “Bamum” spelled (inconsistently) “Bamun.” Fine’s preferred spelling is “Bamum,” and we have changed all electronic versions of the issue of the journal to reflect that. This is the version of record.

In February 1930, Eugène Pittard, the director of the ethnological museum in Geneva, sought to expand his museum’s collections in an unusual manner. Instead of sponsoring an expedition to Africa or acquiring objects from former missionaries, instead of buying from established dealers in ethnographic specimens or the newer galleries that specialized in *l’art nègre*, Pittard wrote to an African man in Africa, a Bamum man named Mosé Yeyap (Pittard 1930) (Fig. 1).¹

Yeyap was the head of the relatively new *artisanat* in Foumban, a school and artists’ cooperative founded in 1927, and he was known as a key figure for collectors seeking to acquire works of art from the Bamum kingdom. Pittard’s letter explained that he “would like to assemble ... as true a picture as possible of the population of which you are a part, that is to say of the material life of this population. I am sending you by the same post [a list of] the kinds of things that would be the most interesting to have” (Pittard 1930). Pittard explained pointedly, “I insist on one point: Our intent is to have the oldest objects; those which have not been subjected to European influence.” He then listed for Yeyap the kinds of objects he had in mind: “sculpted wood masks, statues, sculpted horns, etc. ... sculpted drums with carved animals or other designs. Miss Debarge [a physician known both to Pittard and Yeyap] showed me drawings on paper that you made of sculptures. Is it possible to have these sculptures themselves?” (Pittard 1930).

Pittard’s letter, of course, epitomizes how European arrogance and fantasy informed the collection of African art in the first decades of the twentieth century. Pittard condescendingly and absurdly schooled Yeyap about Yeyap’s own culture and, by privileging his desire for “the oldest objects,” those supposedly untouched by “European influence,” Pittard revealed his adher-

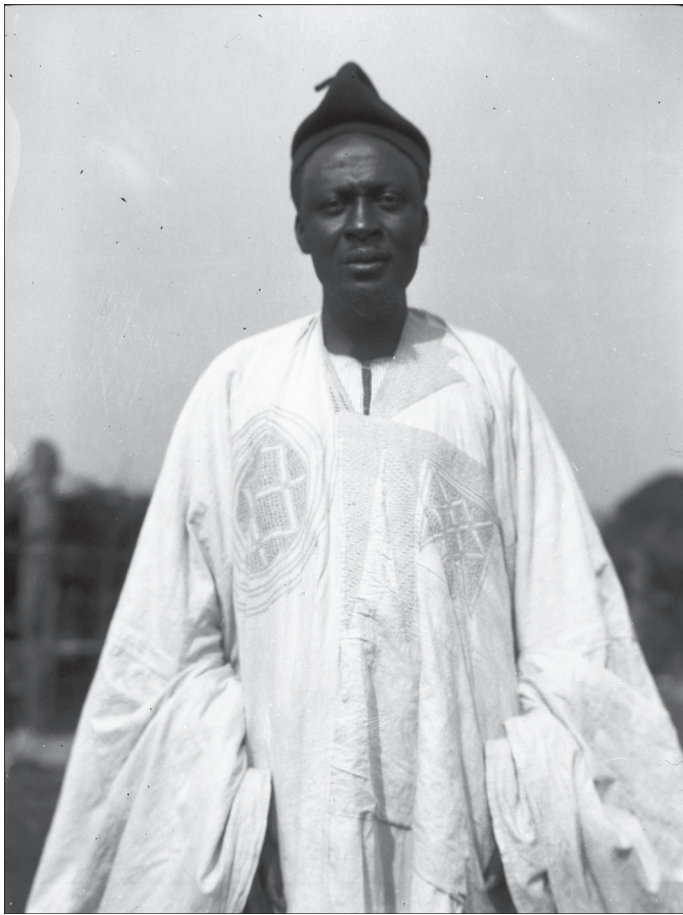
ence to the chimerical “ideal” of African cultures as isolated in time and space.

In a fascinating twist, however, we also have Yeyap’s response to Pittard. Yeyap answered back:

I thank you for honoring us by wanting to show our country in the Geneva Ethnographic Museum. I myself am especially interested in what characterizes the tribe to which we belong. I try to give back to our people a taste for all the works of decoration with which our fathers decorated their houses. I am sending by the same post a number of drawings done by the students of the artisanal school. I will endeavor to search for very old objects, but because they are rare and precious to us, I will wait to send them ... (Yeyap 1930).²

Yeyap did not challenge Pittard head on. Instead, his letter adopted and reflected back some of Pittard’s points of view—such as the idea that older Bamum objects were particularly “rare and precious”—while also subtly shifting the discursive terrain. Instead of making available older objects, Yeyap offered to provide Pittard with newer works from the *artisanat*, such as drawings.³

The exchange between the two men provides a concrete example of how African actors, in this case Mosé Yeyap, were enmeshed as coproducers in the elaborate fantasies about authenticity and African objects that Europeans and North Americans were so eager to spin in the first decades of the twentieth century (Osayimwese 2013). These fantasies, of course, have been a significant factor in shaping art historical scholarship and the preferences of individual and institutional collections of African art in Europe and North America. Although art historical discourse has paid more attention to how and why such fantasies were projected onto Africans and objects from Africa, this article, by examining a group of works from the Bamum king-



dom from the late 1920s, centers the field of inquiry on the strategies African actors used to shape those fantasies, reinforcing and confirming them.

CHANGING DISCOURSES OF AUTHENTICITY

During the 1910s and 1920s, the quantity of African objects that became available for collectors in Europe and in the Americas increased dramatically. This sparked new concerns and generated new discourses for distinguishing among African objects based on criteria of “authenticity” (Monroe 2012:454). Earlier collectors of African objects largely took for granted that the objects they collected, purchased, or plundered reflected the cultures and aesthetic sensibilities of the people who made and used them. Therefore, for example, the German ethnologist Bernhard Ankermann, who traveled to western Cameroon in 1908, worried little about whether the objects he collected and commissioned were “authentic” (Ankermann 1910:305–306).

Shortly thereafter, “authenticity” became a concern, and Europeans began distinguishing between more and less desirable objects from Africa based on new criteria.⁴ For instance, in late 1915 or early 1916, the New York art dealer Marius de Zayas wrote to Paul Guillaume asking him to guarantee the authenticity of a number of African objects (Biro 2010:n. 665). Multiple discourses undergirded the new concern with “authenticity.” Some theorists linked the undesirability of recent African works to ideas about degeneration (Monroe 2012:454, Coombes 1994:43–62), which had its roots in Lombroso’s medical studies (Harpham 1976:288). In other circles, the discourse centered on “disruptive foreign influences” (Monroe 2012:454) as summed up by Henri Clouzot and André Leval, who succinctly asserted that “the arrival of Europeans [in Africa] has broken the chain of traditions and dried up the sources of native art” (Clouzot and Leval 1919:313, Monroe 2012:454–55).

Regardless of the reasons that were given, dealers, curators, and collectors came to desire what they considered to be “authentic” African objects according to new criteria. The most desirable objects were older, preferably “precolonial” works. The most



1 George Schwab
Our friend, the interpreter, who got us things [Mosé Yeyap] (1929)
 Digital scan of nitrate negative
 2004.24.8431, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and
 Ethnology at Harvard University

2 George Schwab
View of Brass Effigy and Cultural Objects (1929)
 Positive scan of nitrate negative
 2004.24.8463, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and
 Ethnology at Harvard University



3 George Schwab
Man Posing with Carved Wooden Idols (1929)
 Positive scan of nitrate negative
 2004.24.8476, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University

common bases for distinguishing objects that were supposedly authentic from those that were not were age and use, which supposedly left telltale traces on the surfaces and in the condition of the objects in question (Monroe 2012). Objects seen to be contemporary were disparaged. Crucially, these ideas about authenticity elided a number of separate issues. They made age synonymous with use, and use synonymous with ritual. That is, old objects were to be seen as ritual objects, sacred and powerful and hence “real.”

The new criteria of “authenticity” created a paradox for African artists. The objects that were most sought by Western collectors were, by definition, the ones that African artists could not continue to make, regardless of how brilliant, talented, creative, or skilled they were.⁵ It was simply impossible in the present to create more old objects. By extension, works that were new were suspect. If old objects were authentic, new works had to be inauthentic, fake. By establishing criteria that differentiated between supposedly old works and more recent ones—automatically suspect as souvenirs or fakes in the galleries of Paris—art dealers were able to charge comparatively high prices for African objects (Monroe 2012:458). Similarly, collectors could feel more at ease paying the amounts demanded.⁶ Creating an economy of scarcity was a necessary factor in transforming African objects into expensive and desirable masterpieces.

African artists, craftspeople, and dealers, such as Yeyap, were not unaware of the changing preferences of European collectors, even if they did not necessarily know the reasons behind their customers’ new desires. Indeed, as Yeyap’s exchange with Pittard clearly shows, European clients were not shy about voicing their wishes. They asked for old objects, preferably carved works, representing supposedly “traditional” subjects. In response to these demands, African artists and dealers—who could not make or commission more such works—pursued clearly discernible strategies to meet the changing demands of their customers with the objects that they could make.

THE CHRISTMAS FESTIVITIES IN FOUMBAN IN 1929

Two of these strategies can be seen at work during an exceptional series of events that took place in the last week of December 1929. Mosé Yeyap organized a number of grand festivities over three days to celebrate the visit of the French governor, Théodore Paul Marchand, and to mark Christmas for the prominent minority of Bamum people who had converted to Christianity. The festivities included a mass baptism, masquerades, and a *grande manifestation* in the main market square of the city across from the royal palace. King (Mfon) Njoya,⁷ the charismatic Bamum monarch whose relations with French colonial officials had soured since 1918, also made an appearance, arriving at the events with a large armed and mounted retinue which was dressed in vividly colored costumes. Governor Marchand arrived late. But he took the time after his arrival to tour stall after stall of work by Bamum artists as well as displays of local agricultural products.⁸ The next day, the staged festivities continued with more “old dances with costumes and jujus” (Huguenin 2006:329).

The festivities organized by Yeyap likely served multiple purposes. They reinforced the presence and power of the Bamum Christian minority, they entertained the governor and other guests, and they presented a spectacular display of Bamum culture. But whatever their other purposes, the events were also an unparalleled opportunity to sell works by Bamum artists and artisans. Examining the events therefore provides an excellent opportunity to scrutinize the strategies Bamum artists employed to market their works.

STRATEGIC HISTORICISM

One strategy was to fashion new objects for sale in self-consciously antiquated—one could say historicist—styles. A series of photographs taken in Fouban over Christmas in 1929 by the American missionary and anthropologist George Schwab

LES ARTISANS DE FOUMBAN

(École d'artisanat créée par arrêté du 8 février 1927)

Broderies - Batiks - Bois sculptés - Cuivres - Coussins, etc.

TARIF :

Tissu gabaque rehaussé broderies neutres ou polychromes (entièrement brodé) <i>Le mètre carré</i>	100 frs
Tissu gabaque rehaussé broderies neutres ou polychromes (demi brodé — bordure) <i>Le mètre carré</i>	60 frs
Service à Thé (nappe de 1.50 x 1.50).....	150 frs
— — 6 serviettes de 0.50 x 0.50.....	72 frs
— — 6 serviettes de 0.25 x 0.25.....	36 frs
Batiks du pays, bleu sur blanc ou bistre sur blanc. — <i>Le mètre carré</i>	50 frs
Tissus du pays en bandes gabaque, coloris différents. — <i>La pièce</i>	de 30 à 40 frs
Tissu gabaque vierge de 2 mètres x 1 mètre.....	de 20 à 25 frs
Tabourets sculptés. — <i>La pièce</i>	de 35 à 50 frs
Tables sculptées (suivant dimensions et motifs).....	de 150 à 800 frs
Calebasses perlées polychromes.....	de 100 à 200 frs
Couteaux, sagaies, coupes-coupes, sabres.....	de 5 à 50 frs
Fauteuils rotin.....	de 30 à 40 frs
Fauteuils pliants cuir « Napoléon ».....	40 frs
Serviettes cuir.....	25 frs
Coussins cuir.....	de 50 à 100 frs
Tapis raphia polychromes doublés natte.....	100 frs
Coussins et sacs raphia polychromes.....	de 2 à 10 frs
Panneaux bois sculpté genre lambris 1.50 x 0.50. — <i>La pièce</i>	30 frs
Fresques de panneaux 2 mètres x 0.13. — <i>La pièce</i>	30 frs
Panneaux de 0.50 x 0.50. — <i>La pièce</i>	27 frs
Objets cuivre (grenouilles, serpents, cloches, cavaliers, groupes, pipes, encriers, etc.).....	de 5 à 350 frs

Et tous autres objets sur demande de devis

NOTA. — Ces prix s'entendent marchandise livrée à Fomban, les frais de transport de toutes sortes restant à la charge de l'acheteur. Les marchandises voyageant à la charge de l'acheteur. — Aucun article livré ne sera repris.

Adresser les commandes à MOSE YEYAP, directeur de la Mutuelle d'Artisanat de Fomban
(Joindre un timbre pour réponse)

shows the kinds of objects offered for purchase at the time. The selection is not markedly different from the what was available in the late 1950s (cf. Hirschberg 1962). There was a tremendous variety on display: figural stools, masks, shields, carved figures, drums, embroidered fabrics, beaded calabashes, ivory, fantastical cast brass works, and musical instruments (Figs. 2–3). The

vast majority of the pieces were not older objects, but contemporary works. Nonetheless, they resembled the kinds of objects that were known as representative of royal art from the kingdoms in the Cameroon Grassfields during the German colonial period (roughly 1900 to 1915). But by 1929 in the Bamum kingdom such objects had become anachronisms.

Royal taste and patronage had changed noticeably around 1916 and 1917, about the time that King Njoya first formulated his own religious system, Nwet Nkwete (which syncretically fused elements of Bamum religious beliefs and practices with Christianity and Islam), and then abandoned this project to embrace Islam. Around the same time, a large portion of the Bamum population, especially the elite, also converted to Islam or Christianity. Simultaneously, and probably partially as a result of the king's religious politics, older forms of sculpture, beaded figures, masks, elaborately dyed fabrics fell from favor. Such objects largely ceased to be commissioned, made, and circulated.

Although not all areas of the arts were immediately transformed, the shift in the emphasis of royal patronage fostered new styles, art forms, and approaches to architecture and decoration. These developments found visual expression in King Njoya's project to build a new brick palace, completed in 1922, at the heart of the city of Fomban. The construction of the palace employed the majority of artists and artisans over a period of years, and its effects on artistic production should not be underestimated (Tardits 1962:256). The palace represented a radical departure from the immense pillared grass and mud structures that had characterized the Bamum capital for generations, though King Njoya had been experimenting for years with new construction techniques (Osayimwese 2013:12–14, Labouret 1935).

Just as crucially, during the 1920s the French administration that replaced the German colonial authorities sidelined King Njoya, reducing his power, authority, and resources and suppressing much of the visual culture of the Bamum monarchy.



4 Advertisement for the *artisanat* of Fomban, *Journal officiel des territoires occupés de l'ancien Cameroun*, April 1927 (236):227.

5 George Schwab
Native Cloth in Hand Drawn Designs (1929)
Positive scan of nitrate negative
2004.24.8470, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and
Ethnology at Harvard University



During this period the festivals of Nguon and Nja⁹ ceased to take place and the palace associations that were largely responsible for administration in the kingdom and which performed their own dances and masquerades were suppressed or became largely defunct (Geary 1990:116, Tardits 2004:54, Loumpet-Galitzine 2006:460). By the end of the decade, the king spent most of his time in reduced circumstances in his summer residence at Mantoum on the kingdom's eastern border (Eloundou and Ngapna 2011:32).

These events decisively severed the links between artistic production before World War I and after. Objects that had been made for the royal court before the war to replace objects that had worn out, to expand the royal collections, to provide objects for the palace societies, or to furnish objects that King Njoya could give or sell to German visitors and officials, in large part lost their purpose and stopped being made. Instead, a growing number of works in other styles and media, such as panels carved with reliefs, richly illuminated manuscripts, and increasingly spectacular drawings assumed new importance (Loumpet-Galitzine 2002, Nicolas and Ncharé 1997, Tardits 1962).

6 Unidentified artist
Chief's seat (ca. 1929)
Wood, pigment; 85 cm x 50 cm x 50 cm
30-2-50/B4950, Peabody Museum of Archaeology
and Ethnology at Harvard University

7 Unidentified artist
Flywhisk (ca. 1929)
Wood, cloth, glass beads, cowrie shells, horsehair;
56.5 cm x 17.7 cm x 8 cm
30-2-50/B4945, Peabody Museum of Archaeology
and Ethnology at Harvard University

Newer objects that represented royal taste after 1917 were not prominent among the objects for sale in Foumban in the late 1920s and early 1930s. An advertisement for the *artisanat* in the *Journal officiel du Cameroun* (Fig. 4) listed objects for sale such as carved stools, batik fabrics (*ndap*), sculpted tables, beaded polychromed calabashes, knives, swords, sabers, and cast brass objects. The advertisement also listed numerous Western-style goods, such as tablecloths and armchairs, which the *artisanat* also made available in different styles for purchase at specified prices. Although Schwab took a large number of photographs of the objects for sale in 1929, his images reveal comparatively few Western-style objects or works of art in the styles that reflected

Bamum royal taste after 1917. Where the photographs show objects in newer styles, forms, or genres, the works often hew to a certain historicist logic. Embroidered tablecloths (e.g., Fig. 5), for instance, incorporate historical Bamum motifs from before 1917: buffalo masks, double-headed snakes, double gongs, as well as familiar patterns, such as the triangular pattern *kpatu* (four heads), which had been worked on many older royal objects.

The objects that Schwab actually purchased, like his photographs, also illuminate the kinds of things that were for sale. The missionary bought a range of works of art and handicrafts. Many of them were new. A few were possibly older. But the majority of the objects to which Schwab gravitated resembled royal objects from before World War I, such as a small two-figure stool (Fig. 6), which loosely resembled a miniature replica of the great, beaded two-figure thrones that were closely associated with Bamum monarchs, at least since the reign of King Njoya's father, King Nsangu, in the 1880s. Similarly, Schwab acquired a flywhisk adorned with a sculpture of a human figure embroidered with colorful glass beads and cowrie shells (Fig. 7), which is instantly recognizable as akin to the royal flywhisks associated with the Nja festival (e.g., Geary 1983a:Fig. 77). Schwab's flywhisk appears to be new, but by 1929 the Nja festival had not been celebrated in years.

The prominence of new objects for sale that resembled older, well-known works shows the extent to which artists in Foumban by 1929 chose to reach back, passing over the manifestations of more recent royal and European taste, to create works that recalled an earlier moment in Bamum art history. The styles of these objects implicitly affirmed their connection to the past and

therefore helped to satisfy the demands of European and North American collectors.

STAGING AUTHENTICITY

A second strategy was to use or display objects in contexts that "authenticated" them. This strategy centered not on the appearance of the objects themselves, but on using them in ways that suggested their age or presenting them in contexts that appeared to establish their ritual use. The logic of this strategy, of course, subverts the equation of supposed age with "authenticity" by asserting that if an object was used (or seen to be used), then it must be so embedded in local culture or practices that it could not have been made primarily to be sold to Europeans or Americans.

In pursuing this strategy, artists and dealers in Foumban went to considerable lengths to fashion or to take advantage of circumstances that could be seen to attest to the "authenticity" of the objects they were selling. Over Christmas in 1929, for instance, many of the objects for sale were used in the festivities themselves.

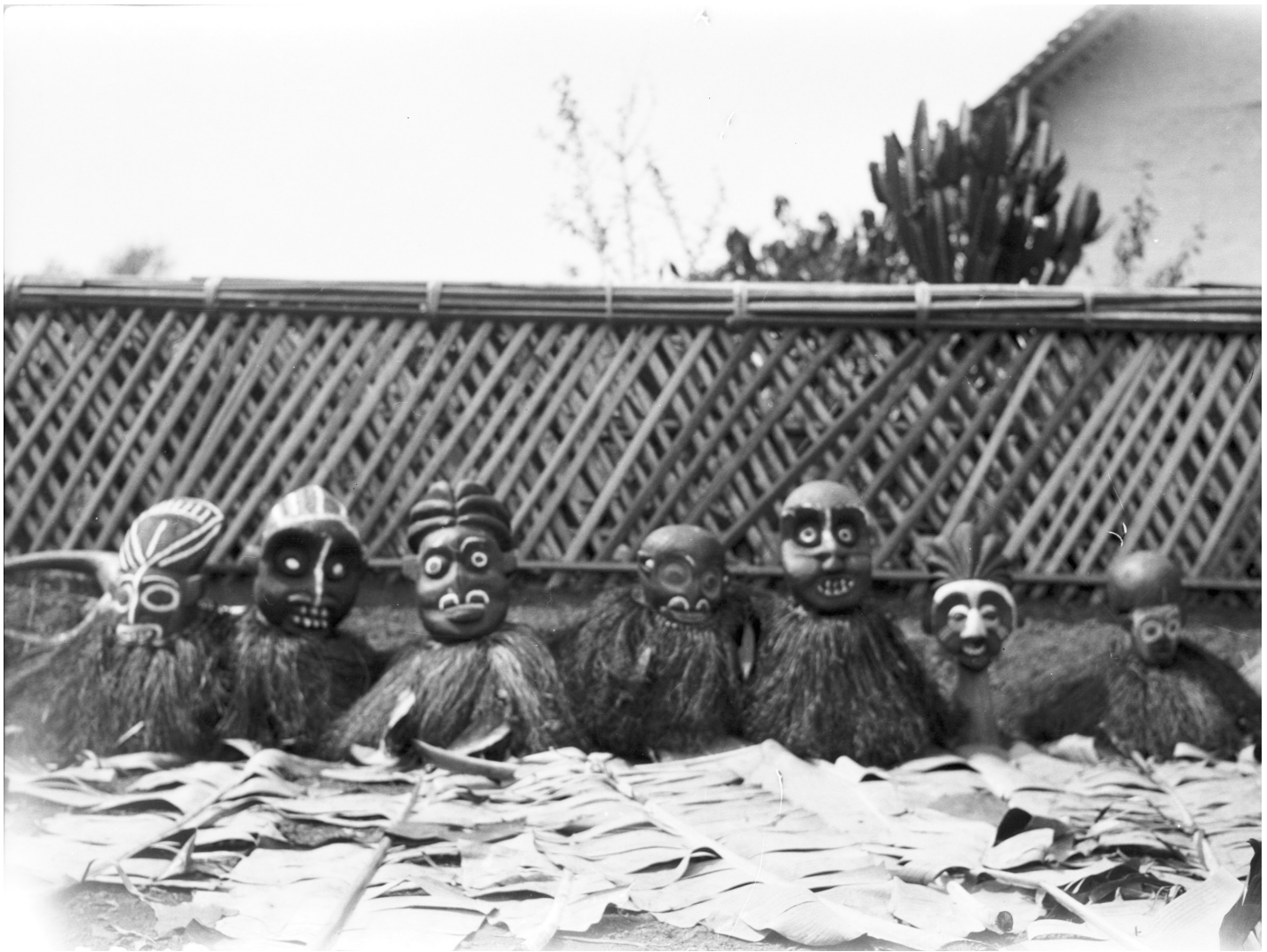
The French missionary Eugène Huguenin described the events as "ancient dances with old costumes, the public appearance of certain masks and jujus (secret societies)... [T]o be complete, it would be necessary to record the sharp ululations of the women, the screaming sounds of the Hausa musicians, and the cheers of the crowd" (Huguenin 2006). Schwab described the events in more detail:

Great were the doings planned for the reception & entertainments of his Excellency [Marchand]. ... Several of the secret cults were out & dressed in their masks & whatnot—[It was the] first time [the] public, i.e., non-members ever saw them. And the big "doctors" of the land. Also the king's riders, horsemen, musicians from whose music may we be delivered ... old warriors in their costumes & [enter]tained us in a fitting mock fighting manner near the administrator in a special pavilion. ... Then there had been planned an exhibition of Bamum arts & crafts, with old-time pieces in evidence—heirlooms many ... The exhibit of which I sent some 75–80 negatives to Dr. Hooton at Harvard, was duly held to the boredom of his Excellency (Schwab 1930b).

Schwab's photographs document that many of the objects that were used in the festivities could also be bought. Masqueraders danced or progressed with masks that were later offered for sale (Figs. 8–9). Musical instruments were played, and then they (or others like them) were available for purchase, and so on.



8 George Schwab
Cult Members in Phase of Stunts. Seen for First Time by an Outsider (1929)
Positive scan of nitrate negative
2004.24.8446, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and
Ethnology at Harvard University



One can conclude that the use of the objects in the festivities was, at least in part, a sales strategy. Although it is impossible to be entirely certain, it is unlikely that the supposed rituals, masquerades, and dances were in fact Bamum court masquerades, secret society dances, or festivals from earlier periods. Close scrutiny of the descriptions of the festivities in 1929, however, reveals few of the features that characterized Nguon or Nja, nor is there much evidence to suggest that they reproduced palace society rituals.¹⁰ By 1929, the grand festivals had already ceased to take place for a number of years and the palace societies also appear to have ceased to function. Tardits, for instance, claims that the *mutngu* society ceased to exist around 1921 or 1922 (Tardits 1980:849). It is more probable that the Christmas performances drew on and mixed together disparate elements of earlier masquerades and dances, creating something new that seemed to appear like established ritual. Based on the extant sources, however, it is not possible to ascertain firmly what the Bamum people who participated in the events or observed them really thought about what was taking place. Nonetheless, one can rule out that what was staged in 1929 was an intact revival of dormant Bamum palace rituals.

The objects that were being used in 1929 were not the same objects that had been used in earlier palace masquerades. The

9 George Schwab
Cult Masks on Exhibition (1929)
 Positive scan of nitrate negative
 2004.24.8482, Peabody Museum
 of Archaeology and Ethnology at
 Harvard University

masks used in 1929 lack many of the characteristics of Bamum palace masks, such as the lavish use of glass beadwork and copper sheeting (Fig. 10). A number of the palace objects had already been sold or given to German collectors, while others still form the core of the Bamum palace collection today (Geary 1983a). Moreover, many palace objects and the public rituals that pertained to them were photographed extensively by German researchers, missionaries, and traders. Indeed, these objects and images have become crucial sources for interpreting the art history and history of the Bamum kingdom in the German colonial period (e.g., Geary 1990, Geary and Ndam Njoya 1985). The masks, instruments, and costumes that Schwab photographed in 1929 were plainly not the same objects still in the royal collec-

tion or that Germans had collected or photographed a decade or more earlier. It is more likely that the masks from 1929 were related to village—not court—masquerades or were entirely new.

How the objects were presented in 1929 was key to establishing their authenticity and status for the foreign visitors and observers. It was the use of the masks and other objects in the festivities that gave them their status as “authentic,” transforming them from recent works into things that were desirable to Western collectors, or “upgrading” them from village objects into objects that could be construed to belong to the royal court. This can be easily grasped by closely examining one example in particular. The 1929 festivities mark the first recorded appearance of a large, newly carved two-figure seat and footrest (Fig. 11). The seat, but not the footrest, is in the collection of the Musée des arts et traditions in Foumban today (Fig. 12).¹¹ Schwab photographed the seat and footrest extensively. In one image, they stand alone at the edge of the market where the stalls displaying goods for sale were arranged. But in others, they are the center of an elaborate tableau (Fig. 13): An unidentified man,¹² sits grandly atop the seat, his feet on the footrest. He holds a beaded figural flywhisk and is wearing a loincloth and an elaborate headdress. In front of the man on the seat are two trophy calabashes adorned with human bones. To the man’s left are bare-chested women, while on his right is a man holding a skull and a person in a masking costume. The captions to Schwab’s photographs of the tableau describe the scene as a Bamum “chief and his supporters.”¹³ The seat is “the king’s seat and footstool.” The women are “the king’s favorite wives,” and the man holding the skull is a “witch doctor.”

At first glance, the seat and footrest appear similar to the earlier grand two-figure thrones of the Bamum monarchs (Fig. 14). The seat, like the thrones, consists of a carved openwork hollow wooden cylinder that serves as a seat and is surmounted by two figures, male and female, wearing carved loincloths and headdresses. Similarly, the people Schwab photographed in connection with the seat appear to conform to what a Bamum notable or king might have looked like in a bygone era, with a loincloth and elaborate festival headdress, surrounded by people associated with him.

But such first appearances are also deceptive. The seat differs in a number of crucial ways from royal two-figure thrones in the Bamum kingdom. For one, there is no indication it was meant to be beaded, and the cylinder of the seat is composed of alternating rows of carved human heads rather than interlocking double-headed serpents. The form and iconography of the seat and footrest are a simultaneous avowal and disavowal of its similarity to the two-figure thrones that are symbols of Bamum monarchy. The appearance of the people surrounding the throne is also a fantasy. The costumes mix what appear to be older elements with newer styles—the seated man is wearing trousers under his loincloth and his headdress is only an approximation of the king’s dancing costume headdress (Fig. 15). The men immediately flanking the seated figure are wearing modern robes in a style that had become popular since the German colonial period, and it would have been unthinkable for women from the royal family, queens or princesses, to allow themselves to be photographed bare-chested, especially after King Njoya had converted to Islam. The photographs of members of the Bamum royal family, of



10 Unidentified artists
 Helmet mask, 19th or 20th century
 Wood, copper, glass beads, raffia, cowrie shells; 66
 cm x 35.6 cm x 27.3 cm
 Metropolitan Museum of Art 1978.412.560
 The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Purchase, Nelson A. Rockefeller Gift, 1967
 Photo: www.metmuseum.org

nobles, and of ritual figures taken during the German colonial period, as well as contemporary descriptions of fashion in the kingdom (e.g. Rein-Wuhrmann 1925:38–45), establish clearly that dress of the people Schwab photographed in 1929 was highly unusual.

Moreover, there is also evidence that suggests that Schwab must have known that what he was photographing could not be as he described it, and that the tableau of the supposed “chief” on the “king’s” seat, surrounded by his “favorite wives” and a “witch doctor” was a fantasy. Schwab’s letters about his time in Foumban show that he had a reasonable grasp of the political situation in the kingdom, the tense relations between Yeyap and

King Njoya, and he actually photographed King Njoya, wearing a turban and richly embroidered robes.¹⁴ He must have known that the man on the two-figure seat was not the king.

Using the seat as though it were a royal throne, placing it in the center of an elaborate but false tableau, and dressing in ways that seemed to evoke the distant Bamum past were actions that created a visual context for the new seat and for the other objects in the photographs. The supposed scientific objectivity and objective truth that photography as a medium often was thought to enjoy imparted to the objects an aura of “authenticity.” The photographs also created lasting visual evidence that evinced that reality. The presentation, the staging of the seat and the people around it, obscured the clear distinction between past and present, allowing things that were made in the present to be understood and seen as belonging to the past.

The staged festivities provided further visual proof of the authenticity of the objects being used in them. If the festivities were “real,” then the objects that were used in them and displayed for sale were “real” as well. The festivities furnished evidence that the objects for sale, even if new, were also organically connected to historical Bamum culture and art and thus could be safely acquired by collectors seeking “authentic” African art.



ART AND ARTIFICE

The staging of festivities and the presentation of objects in historical styles appears to have largely convinced the Europeans and Americans. Although the foreign observers understood that the events had been contrived for the reception of Governor Marchand, this did not prevent them also from believing that what they saw conformed to (earlier) Bamum rituals. Huguenin, for instance, wrote that the events were “demonstrations,” suggesting simultaneously their artifice and their authenticity (Huguenin 2006). Schwab reported back to his mentor in the Presbyterian missionary organization in Philadelphia that he was witnessing the doings of “secret cults” and “[witch] doctors”

11 George Schwab
The King's Seat and Footstool (1929)
Positive scan of nitrate negative
2004.24.8472, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and
Ethnology at Harvard University

12 Unidentified artists
Two-figure seat (ca. 1929)
Musée des arts et traditions, Foumban, Cameroon
Photo: Mark D. DeLancey, 2013





13 George Schwab
Bamum Chief, on Sculpted Throne, with Supporters (1929)
 Positive scan of nitrate negative
 2004.24.8451, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University

(Schwab 1930b). Both men clearly seem to have subscribed to the belief that, although the context in which they were witnessing the events was artificial, nonetheless many of the things they were seeing represented the revelation of previously secret rituals and objects. As Huguenin explained, “When the natives dance, even just as a demonstration, one feels that their old nature takes over, and it quickly becomes a frenzy. If Mosé Yeyap organized this demonstration, it was to reveal certain jujus which, through this act [being revealed], lost their significance.” Yeyap’s actions, according to the missionary, aimed to “deracinate ... old superstitions that retard the development of the tribe” (Huguenin 2006:330).

The investment in the belief that the festivities were demystifying older superstitions was crucial. The foreign visitors, especially these missionaries, were confronted by a dilemma. On the one hand, they were witnessing festivities, dances, and masquerades that they knew to be staged with many objects that had been recently made and were for sale. After all, the festivities had been organized to celebrate the governor’s visit and the Christmas holiday, not because it was the usual time and place for Bamum festivals. On the other hand, the visitors wanted deeply for the events to be more than mere staged performances and the objects to be something other than fantasy things created to sell to them. By believing that they were witnessing the public revelation and demystification of important Bamum pagan rituals and objects, foreigners from Europe and the United States were able to resolve their dilemma: for the demystification of Bamum rituals to be effective, the dances, objects, and jujus, had to be “real.”¹⁵ In their zeal, the foreign missionaries chose to believe that the audience for the events was Bamum people who had not yet converted to Christianity or who could be wrenched away from Islam. Despite the fact that they knew that the festivities were being staged for the governor and for them, the visitors chose at crucial moments to suspend their awareness that they



14 Unidentified artists
Two-figure throne and footrest (*mandu yenu*), second half of the 19th century
Wood, glass beads, cowrie shells, cloth; 174 cm x 126 cm x 155 cm
III C 33341 a, b, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin
Photo: Ethnologisches Museum zu Berlin, Martin Franken

themselves were an intended audience. They chose to ignore the strong probability that the “natives” were managing them, shaping their beliefs about the events and the objects in circulation around them. The artifice of the festivities, for the foreign visitors, lay in reenacting rituals to convince Bamum audiences that the masquerades and dances (and the objects associated with them) were powerless and ineffective, not in making the foreigners believe that the rituals and objects were “real.”

Huguenin and the other visitors were driven by their own fantasies, illusions, and prejudices. Neither Huguenin nor the other Western observers in 1929, such as Schwab, actually could have known whether the dances they saw were “ancient” or the costumes “old.” Schwab visited Foumban for only a brief period at the end of 1929, and Huguenin’s experience in the Bamum king-

dom was also limited. In fact, none of the foreigners in Foumban by 1929 had been in the Bamum kingdom for more than a few years, and those years corresponded with the period in which Bamum festivals and masquerades, as they had been performed between 1902 and 1920, had not taken place. The foreigners simply were not in a position to know whether what they were seeing were old dances, old ceremonies, old rituals, or not. None of them had actually witnessed Nja or Nguon, let alone the dances, songs, and rituals associated with the palace societies. Moreover, it is extremely unlikely that they were familiar with the photographs that German visitors had taken of festivals and masquerades before World War I. Similarly, the Western observers in 1929 also could not have known whether the masks and “*jujus*” they were presented with were in fact secret objects. How could they? Their epistemological horizon was limited. How Huguenin, Schwab, and the other Americans and Europeans present interpreted the events unfolding around them depended on what they must have been told or on their own imaginations, stereotypes, and preconceptions. They could hardly have verified their interpretations.

The festivities were a prominent constituent of an economy of authenticity that mobilized a version of the past that was sharply at odds with the reality of the present. Royal art and patronage had changed, the king had been stripped of power, and the Bamum elite had embraced versions of Islam and Christianity. Bamum art and history over the period of German, then French colonial rule was characterized by rupture and change, not continuity. Yet, the strategies that Bamum artists and art dealers pursued to accommodate the changing demands of their foreign clients and customers depended on creating an illusion of unbroken continuity. This approach to authenticity made possible a sleight of hand, a way of resolving the paradox created by the fantasies of Westerners about African art that simultaneously valued objects made by African artists and artisans, but only if they had not been made by contemporary Africans. It made it possible for the artists of the Foumban *artisanat* to accommodate the new demands of Western purchasers and to market their work within the new system of values.

The economy of authenticity and the strategies pursued by Bamum artists to promote their works functioned well. George Schwab did not buy merely a few works of art in Foumban in 1929, he acquired an entire truckload:

I bo[ugh]t all I could pile on ... our truck. In fact our boy and myself had to hunch & fit in our feet dangling outside from that place [Foumban] to Kribi! If you get to Harvard some time you might ask to see the stuff which was of about three cubic tons of ship space if it had no other wei[gh]t (Schwab 1930b).

Schwab bought an immense slit-drum topped by a carved human figure, shields, stools, masks, carved panels, a doorframe, ornate brass castings, a carved figure representing a captive or slave, as well as other objects. These objects made their way into the collections of Harvard’s Peabody Museum. But, as Yeyap’s correspondence with Pittard makes clear, the American missionary was not alone in turning to Yeyap and his artists to assemble a collection of art from the Bamum kingdom. Careful observation of the photographs Schwab took in Foumban in 1929 reveals

a number of objects that were subsequently sold to or acquired by Europeans and North Americans that have found their way into other public collections. For instance, the Musée du Quai Branly holds two such objects, a statue (71.1934.171.8) and a mask (71.1934.171.29). At least one other object, an anthropomorphic pillar (71.1962.59.2), quite possibly also appears in one of Schwab's pictures, though it is not possible to be certain. Additional research would probably reveal other objects in other collections as well.

EXTENDING THE PARADIGM

The strategies for authenticating objects that were on display over Christmas in 1929 reflect an interpretation by Bamum people of what Westerners wanted and expected, a reprojection back onto European and North American audiences of their own projections onto Africans in an endless feedback loop. This loop also empowered certain African agents, enabling them to capitalize on their talents, find employment, and sell the objects they made. The logic of this feedback loop, however, required Bamum artists and agents aware to be aware not only of the historical styles within the kingdom itself, but also of the expectations of their new Western clients and customers. Nor was the logic of this feedback loop limited to objects from the Bamum kingdom or Cameroon Grassfields. There was, in principle, nothing to prevent Bamum artists from also making “authentic” objects associated with other areas in Africa.¹⁶

Indeed, today the *artisanat* of Foumban is known not only for making contemporary objects that resemble older Bamum works of art but for its astonishing range of objects that appear like art from other parts of Africa. Cast brass heads in the style of works from the Benin kingdom, masks that resemble works from Igboland, figures covered with nails, like those from Congo, and new inventions, such as huge brass figures called “Tikar” are all made in workshops in and around the Bamum capital. Such production, one may contend, represents a logical extension

15 Bernhard Ankermann
Tanzkleid des Königs, rechte Hälfte (1908)
Black and white positive
VIII A 5331, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin–
Ethnologisches Museum



of the strategies that were so prominent in 1929. Perhaps some of the first concrete steps of this extension, when Bamum artists began making objects that appeared to be from other parts of Africa, also can be discerned in a curious exchange between Schwab and Yeyap. After his return from Foumban, Schwab wrote to Earnest Hooton, his mentor at Harvard, that in order to purchase the objects it was not enough to pay in cash: "I had to promise him [Yeyap] a book with plenty pictures in English, French, or German—all of which he reads and talks, on African art, 'with plenty, plenty, pictures'" (Schwab 1930a). Yeyap apparently wanted to see what other objects from Africa Europeans and North Americans also found desirable. Despite the mocking

tone Schwab's letter conveys, he was perhaps able to make good on his promise. When Donald Scott, the assistant director of the Peabody Museum, wrote back to Schwab on Hooton's behalf in 1930, he included photographs, presumably of African objects: "You will find enclosed also twenty-five prints of subjects, ... as possibly being of interest to your native friend" (Scott 1930).

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Notes

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1 Today Yeyap (ca. 1895–1941) is primarily remembered as a convert to Christianity and a political and cultural opponent (and cousin) of the Bamum monarch King (Mfon) Njoya (e.g., Nelson 2007, Dell 2013).

2 Yeyap's letter presents an interesting puzzle. Written in an assured and flowing hand, it is possible that it was not composed by Yeyap alone, but in combination with someone else, possibly a native French speaker, whose identity is not known.

3 Drawings by Bamum artists from this period have consistently drawn the attention of scholars (Savary 1977, 1979; Nicolas and Ncharé 1997; Loumpet-Galitzine 2002). Despite the attention, other than Loumpet-Galitzine's work, little progress has been made toward a history of the genre.

4 Sidney L. Kasfir (1992) admirably addressed the historical lability of the idea of authenticity and its logical incoherence.

5 A corollary of this epistemological regime of "authenticity" is that, as Joseph Nemadovsky noted, many of the works that are "nearest to us in time" are "farthest away in art historical documentation" (2005:69).

6 The prices of New York collector John Quinn's African objects, for instance, which can be gleaned from his acquisition ledgers from the first decades of the twentieth century in the New York Public Library, ranged from \$875.00 to \$60.00 or less. As such, the prices are similar to those of many works by modern artists, such as Picasso, available in New York at the time.

7 King (later Sultan) Njoya lived from ca. 1879 to 1933 (Jeffreys 1962).

8 Such displays of objects for sale did not begin in 1929, but also took place at earlier times. For instance, an unknown photographer, possibly the Basel missionary Eugen Schwarz, photographed a similar display of beaded calabashes and other objects in 1913 (Geary 2008:Fig. 22).

9 Nguon and Nja were the two main annual royal public festivals in the Bamum kingdom in the last decades of the nineteenth and first decades of the twentieth century. They featured elaborate public displays of masks, dancing, and costumes. Claude Tardits provides an extended description of Nja (Tardits 1980:790–93) and Nguon (Tardits 1980:783–87).

10 Christraud Geary's careful analysis of photographs has provided crucial evidence for understanding the Nja festival (Geary 1990). In the 1920s, the mission-

ary Anna Rein-Wuhrmann published a description of the Nguon festival as she remembered it from her time in Foumban before World War I (Rein-Wuhrmann 1925:64). Less evidence is available about palace societies, but the Berlin ethnologist and curator Bernhard Ankerermann was able to photograph rituals associated with the *mbansié* palace society: Bernhard Ankerermann, *Männer mit Trommeln und Rasseln? Bansié—Tanz—Begleitung*, 1908, Photograph. VIII A 6766, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin—Ethnologisches Museum.

11 Steven Nelson has analyzed the circumstances surrounding the creation of the Musée des arts et traditions (Nelson 2007).

12 The man conceivably could be one of the regional "chiefs" installed by the French regime in the 1920s. However, my efforts to identify him using Schwab's photographs during a research trip to Foumban in 2013 were not successful.

13 One of the images from Schwab's series was published in Christraud Geary's important reevaluation of the history of Bamum thrones (Geary 1983b:Fig. 12).

14 The photograph is held in the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology: George Schwab, *Bamum King Njoya*, 1929, positive scan of nitrate negative, 2004.24.8416.

15 Subsequent scholars sometimes have made similar leaps of faith. For instance, Simon Dell argues that the events in 1929 represented a display of previously secret instruments pertaining to Bamum palace societies, especially *mbansié* and *ngurri*, and that the festivities themselves were to be understood by Bamum audiences as a new Nguon festival. He concludes that this display showed the powerlessness of the palace societies at that time and, like Huguenin and Schwab, that the display of the objects reduced them from ritually effective objects to mere things (Dell 2013:42–43).

16 Christopher Steiner has analyzed this issue in relation to art from West Africa later in the twentieth century (Steiner 1994).

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