



BAMENDA MUSEUM

By J. F. Gwellem



The arts and crafts of the primitive past and the result of search into the traditions of our ancestors are best preserved by the creation of museums, like the one at Bamenda. As far back as 1959, Mr. Dickson Read of the Department of Antiquities, Jos, Northern Nigeria, undertook a very big task of assembling and reorganising articles of antiquity by extensive travels into the suburbs, where many « Julu » masks, tools and other paleolithic materials were gathered and conveyed back to the Bamenda Museum.

These were difficult to obtain. Some were offered as gifts whereas others were purchased at high cost. Mr. Read, no doubt, was struggling to preserve the past for those living now and those to be born whilst also keeping our traditional heritage alive to visitors.

That is why Bamenda Museum is today the venue for the artistic traditions of the people who mostly live in the grassland region of Cameroon.

At the entrance into the Museum, in the Mankon Community Hall, the visitor's eye meets with horror the war shields — a collection from Meta — which were used in defence during their tribal feuds. They hang conveniently in position as they were held when a warrior used them to keep away bullets or shafts from an enemy, whilst clasping a spear in the other hand. The present cane shields used by our police are of more improved design.

A feathered masquerade from Wum Division, clasping a spear just as it appears at ceremonies is also set to surprise the unwary visitor.

Before the introduction of matches, fire was produced in very many ways throughout Africa. In the grassland area of Cameroon, it was produced simply by using a set of fire-making tools. These comprised: a small leather bag containing palm-cotton, flints, iron striker and tinder, which are still used today by the people of Babungo.

It was the custom to announce a warning to dogs during a hunting spree by using a wooden whistle. This was necessary when groups of hunters couldn't trace their original steps or when dogs were needed to follow new animal tracks. Many of these whistles were attached to skins and sealed with small calabashes in which gun powder was preserved from going damp. Still today, wives of traditional rulers still wear head-beads, decked with cowrie shells. The same shells are sometimes used on fly-whisks, and are a prominent spectacle at ceremonial occasions.

The Bamenda Museum depicts a detailed study of house-hold utensils which are steadily being replaced by the pans, basins, buckets, chairs, spoons, etc.

Mr. Martin Asongwed, Curator of the Museum since October 1, 1959, describes a journey he and Mr. K. C. Murray made into the villages of northern

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Mamfe, for the collection of specimens. Mr. Murray was former Director of Antiquities in Nigeria. "It was a travel", he says, "in which we at some places came across a flood of specimens, which though the villagers delighted in showing us they did not wish to release. We only got some on loan."

The Bamenda Museum still has a long way to go in the preservation of the past for the teaching of posterity and for the interpretation of the arts of our people to each other. So many more specimens are required or else our theoretical lessons to posterity about what our past generations did would utterly fail.

Taking pride in the old arts and crafts is not a one-man business. The brass works of Bafrenge, the wood carvers of Babanki, the smiths of Babungo, those who preserve our history. It's more descriptive than written history, so to speak.

The Bamenda Museum, then remains a place where the history of Cameroon shall continue to be recorded for those unborn. The possibilities for improving it require the overall support of the people of this territory. For fear of decay, the authorities should take steps to safeguard those specimens already in hand. As stated earlier, the study of the past does not only concern the anthropologist, journalist, historian, writer or teacher. It concerns all who seek invaluable experience and this gives the museum particular importance to the community.



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