

Museum Collections as Repositories of Scientific Heritage: The Ndzowain Portrait at the Buea Public Museum, Cameroon

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Abstract

This article examines how the Ndzowain portrait serves as a repository of scientific heritage. Museums in Africa offer a new avenue for scientific heritage information and for technological progress in understanding a particular society's human inventiveness. The Buea Public Museum in Cameroon is an exemplary museum that serves as a repository of scientific heritage. The museum's objects are renowned for their varied depictions of history, memory, socio-cultural norms, and indigenous knowledge systems. The article argues that by transforming objects into useful research, educational, and cultural resources, the museum contributes to the preservation of scientific heritage. This article employs qualitative research designs, interviewing 20 informants through a purposive sampling approach. Data collection involved primary and secondary sources, which were analyzed through descriptive and thematic approaches. Primary methods include semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, oral histories, observations, photographs, consultations with local authorities from the Kedjom Keku community, and consultations with heritage specialists. Secondary data were obtained from the University of Bamenda and Buea Central Libraries in Cameroon, and from the Departmental Library of History, Heritage, and International Studies at the University of Bamenda, Cameroon. This includes books, journal articles, and museum visit records. The findings reveal that the portrait emphasizes local artistry, social hierarchy, the fon's authority, and the historical memory of the Kedjom Keku people. The article recommends that, to conserve scientific history, museum collections in African museums need greater attention to documentation, preservation, and curatorial efforts, making museum space a scientific heritage for postcolonial Africa.

Key Words: Cameroon, Museum Collections, Portrait, Repositories, Scientific Heritage.

Introduction

In the postcolonial era, museums are adopting new ways to share the scientific heritage associated with their collections of "artefacts." According to Macdonald (2011), museums serve as centres for knowledge production, education, and research by safeguarding material evidence of human creativity, innovation, and intellectual traditions. Beyond museums' traditional role as custodians of cultural artefacts, museums preserve, document, and disseminate scientific heritage worldwide. Historically, museum collections have preserved indigenous knowledge systems that were marginalized in Africa by colonial epistemologies and modern scientific discourses (Ndoro, 2015). Significantly, through the collection, documentation, conservation, and interpretation of objects, museums contribute to the preservation of local histories, technological achievements, artistic expressions, and socio-cultural practices that constitute important dimensions of scientific heritage.

Scientific heritage in the museum institutions extends beyond the conventional understanding of science associated with laboratories and technological inventions. Agrawal (1995) and Nakashima et al. (2012) explain that scientific heritage is a multifaceted attribute that establishes indigenous knowledge systems, traditional technologies, social institutions, and cultural practices embodying forms of scientific knowledge developed through observation, adaptation, and intergenerational transmission. Scientific heritage refers to the accumulated tangible and intangible evidence of scientific knowledge, practices, technologies, collections, and intellectual traditions that possess historical, cultural, educational, and research significance and are preserved through museums, archives, and heritage institutions for the benefit of present and future generations (Kennedy et al., 2024; Nature Index, 2025). Museums therefore function as repositories of scientific heritage by preserving evidence of knowledge production and facilitating public understanding of science and culture (Peach & Burrell, 2025). Museum collections significantly contribute to scientific heritage because artefacts are interwoven with historical knowledge, technological practices, social organization, and collective memory (Ndoro, 2015). Kreps (2003) advances that museum collections constitute important repositories through which knowledge systems are preserved, interpreted, and made accessible to contemporary audiences. Lourenco and Wilson (2013) justify that in museums, scientific heritage is the shared collective legacy of the scientific community,

encompassing artefacts and specimens. Even though there is a plethora of scholarship in museum studies, the Cameroon collection receives little attention as a repository of scientific heritage.

In Cameroon, museums play a central role in safeguarding the local and national heritage of the ethnic communities in collecting, conserving, researching, and interpreting objects and knowledge systems associated with scientific ingenuity and innovation. Among the museums in Cameroon, the Buea Public Museum in the South West Region of Cameroon remains the focus of this article. The museum exhibits collections that document the political, cultural, and socio-economic experiences of the country's history. Among these collections is the Ndzowain Portrait from Kedjom Keku in the Bamenda Grassfields. This portrait signifies a dancing group associated with Kedjom women, who encompass fertility rites. The portrait is more than an artistic depiction; it embodies indigenous knowledge values relating to fertility, motherhood, leadership structures, artistry, cultural identity, and historical memory.

Extensive scholarship on museum studies in Cameroon has examined issues relating to heritage interpretation, cultural tourism, identity formation, symbolism, object provenance, and the role of museums as research and educational centres (Ndambi, 2004; Ngitir, 2011a; Nwanchan, 2016; Abam, 2019; Fonjong & Tanyi, 2023; Wihbongale, 2024; 2026; Wihbongale & Eyong, 2025; Tambia, 2026). Other studies have focused on museum provenance, royal collections, inventory management, and cataloguing practices, highlighting the importance of documentation and collection management in preserving cultural heritage (Notué, 2006; Ngitir, 2011b, 2018; Ngitir & Monteh, 2012; Njinwo, 2015; Mancho, 2023). A further body of literature explores the challenges facing museums in Cameroon, including funding, conservation, management, and public engagement (Ndambi, 2004; Ngitir, 2012, 2021; Baneh, 2020; Wihbongale & Tum, 2023; Wihbongale, 2024).

Although these studies have significantly contributed to understanding the role of museums in preserving indigenous knowledge and cultural heritage, limited attention has been paid to how individual museum objects function as repositories of scientific heritage within Cameroonian museums. This gap is particularly evident in studies of the Buea Public Museum, where research has largely centred on heritage interpretation, setbacks, symbolism, and heritage preservation, with less emphasis on the scientific knowledge embedded in specific artefacts and visual representations. Moreover, there is a paucity of empirical research examining how museum objects preserve and communicate indigenous knowledge systems, social institutions, historical memory,

and community-based forms of scientific heritage. This study addresses this empirical and knowledge gap by examining how the Ndzowain Portrait at the Buea Public Museum serves as a repository of scientific heritage, contributing to broader debates on museums, indigenous knowledge systems, and heritage preservation in Africa.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach using a historical-ethnographic case study design. Historical-ethnographic research is particularly useful for examining how communities adapt traditions while maintaining their cultural identities over time (Beach & Larsson, 2022). The design combines historical research methods with ethnographic fieldwork to examine how the Ndzowain Portrait at the Buea Public Museum serves as a repository of scientific heritage. The historical component focuses on oral histories and material culture, while the ethnographic component emphasizes participant observation, interviews, and lived experiences. This design was appropriate for the article because it enabled the use of multiple sources of evidence, facilitated a rich contextual understanding of museum artefacts, captured lived experiences and historical changes, supported interdisciplinary inquiry, and enhanced the interpretation of material culture.

Population of the Study

The study population comprised individuals with extensive knowledge of the museum discipline and the Ndzowain dance. These included museum curators, museum attendants, regional delegate of arts and culture, staff of the delegation of arts and culture, traditional ruler, custodians of culture, intent students, dancers, and academic researchers. Their diverse experiences and expertise provided valuable insights into how the Ndzowain Portrait serves as a repository of scientific heritage.

Sampling Procedure

The study employed purposive sampling to select participants who met predefined research criteria. Purposive sampling involves the deliberate selection of informants based on their knowledge, experience, and relevance to the research objectives (Tanah & Encho, 2017). This approach was appropriate because it enabled the researcher to engage participants with extensive knowledge of museum studies and the Ndzowain dance in Kedjom Keku. Two inclusion criteria guided participant selection. The first criterion focused on participants directly involved in museum studies, including museum curators (2), museum attendants (5), a regional delegate (1),

and staff of the delegation (2). The second criterion targeted individuals with broader knowledge of museum studies and the Ndzowain dance, including a ruler (1), academic researchers (2), custodians of culture (2), dancers (3), and intern students in the museum (2). In total, 20 participants were purposively selected for the study.

Data Sources

The study utilized both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data were obtained through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, focus group discussions, and photographic documentation. Secondary data were collected from relevant books, journal articles, and institutional documents accessed at the University of Bamenda Library, the Buea Central Library, and the Departmental Library of History, Heritage, and International Studies at the University of Bamenda.

Data Collection Methods

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews constituted the primary method of data collection. A total of 30 participants were interviewed based on the established inclusion criteria. Participants were categorized into three age groups: young adults (20–35 years), adults (36–50 years), and elderly persons (51 years and above). This categorization ensured the inclusion of multiple perspectives regarding museum activities and the ndzowain dance. Interviews lasted between 40 and 60 minutes and, where permitted, were audio-recorded.

Participant Observation

Participant observation enabled the researchers to compare participants' narratives with actual practices and activities. Observation sessions lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and involved participation in cultural festivals, particularly performances by the Ndzowain dance group, and visits to the Buea Public Museum. Field notebooks were used to record observations, oral testimonies, and contextual information.

Focus Group Discussions

Two focus group discussions were conducted with members of the Ndzowain dance groups, namely the Abongbife Ndzowain Dance Group and the Kedjom Keku Cultural Development Association (KEKCUDA) Ndzowain Dancing Group in Buea. These discussions provided valuable insights into participants' lived experiences, cultural practices, meanings attached to this

dance, and patterns of site utilization that might not have been fully captured during individual interviews.

Photographic Documentation

Photographs were used to support the study's objectives and provide visual evidence of heritage resources and cultural activities. Images were obtained from the Buea Public Museum by the researcher with permission.

Validity and Reliability

To enhance the validity and reliability of the findings, interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. The recordings were replayed several times to verify the accuracy and completeness of the transcripts. Methodological triangulation was achieved with multiple data collection techniques, including interviews, observations, focus group discussions, and photographic sources. The integration of these diverse sources strengthened the credibility, dependability, and trustworthiness of the findings.

Methods of Data Analysis

The collected data were transcribed and organized using Microsoft Word. Data analysis followed a content and thematic analysis approach. The researchers repeatedly read the transcripts, coded relevant information, and clustered similar codes into broader categories. Themes and sub-themes were subsequently generated through thematic analysis. Photographic data were analysed using iconographic interpretation to identify symbolic meanings and cultural representations. The findings were interpreted in relation to existing literature and participants' empirical perspectives.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were integral to the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and were provided with consent forms before participation. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of the information they provided and were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage. These measures helped create a comfortable environment that encouraged participants to share their knowledge, experiences, and perspectives openly.

Findings and Discussions

Findings

The Origin of Buea Public Museum, Cameroon

The town of Buea conveys historic memories to Cameroonians. First, Buea was one of the former German capitals (1902–1916). Secondly, it harbours built colonial edifices such as the Prime Minister's Lodge, the Old Bismarck Fountain, the Old Native Scholl, and the Old German Burial Ground, which are examples of German relics (Ardener 1996, quoted in Wihbongale and Eyong 2025, 122). When Cameroon gained independence in 1960, President Ahmadou Ahidjo¹ reorganized and established new museums to conserve the country's cultural heritage. For instance, Federal Law No. 63-22 of June 19, 1963, was enacted to emphasize and regulate the organization and conservation of monuments, artwork, and locations of historical, artistic, archeological, and cultural significance to the indigenous people. This law forbids the export of material cultural resources and protects immovable and movable property (Ndambi, 2004). An interview with the Chief of Service for Cultural Heritage and Museums explains that in 1972, another Federal Decree No. 72-DF-216n of 22 April 1972 was passed by Ahidjo. This decree was aimed at protecting and preserving the nation's cultural heritage. In addition, the decree reorganized the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Vocational Training, which permitted the construction of provincial museums at the seven provincial headquarters in Cameroon at the time (Njie, Pers. Comm., December 10, 2025). Applauding the new public museums, Ndambi (2004) explains that public museums were institutionalized museums that were directly created, owned, controlled, funded, and run by the government, which met the International Council of Museums' (ICOM) requirements for museum functionality.

The Buea Public Museum, for example, was one of the newly established museums in the seven provinces at the time of its creation in 1972, but when operational in 1975. It aimed to gather and preserve cultural artefacts from the Southwest jurisdiction (Southwest region). These artefacts served as the country's origin, reflected the people's past civilization, while the museum was considered a site of memory for future generations (Achimbi, Pers. Comm., January 15, 2025). The Buea Public Museum is located in Buea at the Regional Headquarters of the Southwest Region, Cameroon. It is adjacent to the court junction at the premises of the Regional Delegation of Arts and Culture. It is found in a small space in the delegation building, about 8m by 5m (see

¹ First president in Cameroon, from 1960 to 1982.

figure 1). The objects were acquired through purchases, donations, seizures, and interactions with local chiefdoms. It provides distinctive knowledge to some Cameroonians, helping them understand the national and local narratives of the past. Nanda (2004) alludes that museums serve as a major driver in nation-building and sustainable development. President Paul Biya² issued Law No. 91/008 of July 31, 1991, on the protection of national, cultural, and natural patrimony. This regulation places strong emphasis on protecting material remnants from annihilation or exploitation. This legislation strengthens museum programmes by fostering greater awareness of Cameroon's cultural heritage nationally and internationally. Consequently, the Buea Public Museum has experienced increased visitation from both domestic and international audiences (Itoe, Pers. Comm., December 10, 2025).

According to Kome Epule, a former Provincial Delegate for Information and Culture in the South West Province, who initiated the museum's expansion and development, as cited in Ndambi (2004), the Buea Public Museum experienced significant institutional growth during the early 1990s. The museum was officially inaugurated on May 20, 1993, by Oben Peter Ashu, then Governor of the South West Province. According to Njualement (Pers. Comm., January 20, 2025), a former museum attendant at the Buea Public Museum, the Provincial Delegation of Culture relocated the museum to its present site on October 12, 1993 (see Figure 1). Since its establishment, the museum has benefited from the service of dedicated personnel, including one curator and five museum attendants. Mr. Ngole Peter served as the museum's sole curator from 1975 to 2002. Subsequently, the position of museum attendant was held by Achimbi Grace (2003–2007), Ekwoe Margaret (2007–2011), Njualement Quinta Lekeaka (2012–2023), Njie Esongo Josephine (2023–2026), and Kpuyuf Mary Benita Lamnyuy (2026–present). These individuals have played significant roles in the preservation, management, and promotion of the museum's collections and heritage resources. Despite its significance in preserving and promoting Cameroon's cultural heritage, the museum has experienced numerous challenges, including structural deficiencies, limited exhibition and storage space, the deterioration of collections and infrastructure, inadequate funding, and adverse climatic conditions, all of which have affected its operations and long-term sustainability (Wihbongale, 2025; Tambia, 2026).

² Second president of Cameroon from 1982 to present

Figure 1. Buea Public Museum Building



Source: Photographed by Researcher, 2025.

The museum exhibitions are grouped into two categories, antiquities and ethnographic. The first category includes the antiquities objects, containers, wooden bowls, spoons, mortars, stools, baskets, and dance equipment (a mask, rattles, drums, a headdress, and broomsticks). Traps, nets, spearheads, crossbows, dog bells, and dane guns are examples of hunting and fishing gear. Statues of the "Dakat Society" from Fontem and wear such as waist beads (jigija) from the 17th century. The second category of objects is ethnographic items created by modern artists. This consists of straw hats, seats, stools, drums, masks, wood sculptures of people and animals, clay pots, household utensils, and photographic portraits (Lita, Pers. Comm., December 10, 2024). In addition to antiquities and ethnographic objects, the museum houses geological and zoological specimens that contribute to its educational and research functions (Ekwoke, Pers. Comm., March 24, 2025). Over time, the museum's collections have expanded beyond the South West Region to include artefacts and specimens from the North West and West Regions of Cameroon. This expansion reflects the government's continued commitment to safeguarding Cameroon's cultural heritage and promoting national cultural values. To strengthen these efforts, Decree No. 2004/003 of 21 April 2004 was enacted to promote Cameroon's cultural heritage through education and public awareness (Ngole, Pers. Comm., December 20, 2024). Within this legal framework, the Buea Public Museum is recognized as an important institution for advancing education, research, and the preservation of the nation's cultural heritage (Wihbongale and Eyong, 2025). Among the museum's collections, particular attention is given to the Ndzowain Portrait, which embodies the cultural heritage of the Kedjom Keku people. As a museum object, the portrait serves as a

repository of scientific heritage that represents the heritage, identity, and historical memory of the Kedjom Keku community.

Historical Background of the Ndzowain Dance, Kedjom Keku

Historically, the Ndzowain Portrait preserved at the Buea Public Museum (see figure 2) served as a visual representation of the renowned women's dance institution of Kedjom Keku. The origins of the Ndzowain dance were traced to the migration history and subsequent settlement of the Kedjom people. According to Ntang (personal communication, December 20, 2025), the dance emerged in response to the social challenges faced by married women who experienced difficulties conceiving or bearing children after several years of marriage. Such women were often subjected to mistreatment and social pressure from their husbands and in-laws, who frequently attributed infertility to the women themselves. Within the community, these experiences generated emotional and social hardships for affected women. In response to these challenges, women increasingly sought assistance from traditional health practitioners, commonly known as diviners, traditional doctors, or herbalists. These practitioners were widely believed to possess the knowledge and spiritual capabilities necessary to address infertility and other reproductive difficulties.

Consequently, women experiencing challenges related to conception and pregnancy sought refuge and support from these traditional practitioners, whose interventions became closely associated with the emergence and development of the Ndzowain institution. When these women and their families consulted diviners, they were taken to a sacred shrine situated beside a flowing stream known as *Chunyingong* or *Chu-fam*. At Chu-fam, the diviners performed ritual cleansing ceremonies in which the women were washed as part of a spiritual and therapeutic process. During the ritual, the women were given a peace plant and a calabash, adorned with beads around their waists and necks, and anointed with palm oil, among other culturally significant artefacts. As the ceremony progressed, the diviner and his entourage sang songs invoking divine blessings for fertility and successful childbirth. Some women who participated in the ritual also sang supplicatory songs, appealing to God and the ancestors for the gift of children (Aleh, Pers. Comm., December 20, 2025).

Following the ritual prayers and songs, the diviner filled the calabash with water from the stream and poured it over the woman's body. This act symbolized purification, blessing, and fertility, as the water was regarded as sacred and was commonly referred to as “peace water.”

Within the community, successful conception and childbirth following the ritual were often interpreted as evidence of the efficacy of the spiritual intervention and divine favour. Consequently, when a woman gave birth, relatives, neighbours, and community members gathered to celebrate through singing and dancing, expressing gratitude to God and the ancestors. Over time, these celebrations became an important social and cultural practice within the various quarters of Kedjom Keku and urban centers. They came to be associated with *Nkiewain*, a communal expression of joy and thanksgiving following childbirth.

The popularity of the Ndzowain dance subsequently extended beyond Kedjom Keku, becoming an important medium for preserving and promoting the community's cultural heritage. The Luwain Abongbif Ndzowain Dancing Group emerged as one of the most prominent cultural groups associated with this tradition. Similarly, the Women's Wing of the Kedjom Keku Cultural Development Association (KEKCUDA) established Ndzowain dance groups in major urban centres such as Buea, Douala, Bamenda, Limbe, and Yaoundé. For example, in the mid-1970s in Buea, the ndozowain dance contributed significantly to the transmission of indigenous knowledge, cultural values, and community identity across generations and geographical locations (Abong, pers. Comm., December 20, 2025).



Source: Photographed by Author, January 14, 2026

According to an interview with a museum attendant, the Cameroon Museum Fans (CAMUFA) donated the portrait to the Buea Public Museum in January 2026. The donation supports part of a broader effort to preserve and promote the cultural heritage of Kedjom Keku. According to a researcher, the portrait contributes to preserving Cameroon's rich cultural diversity and was

incorporated into the museum's permanent collection. As a museum object, it served as an important educational resource for the public, researchers, students, and museum interns, while supporting heritage interpretation, research, and cultural awareness (Nsom, pers. Comm., January 11, 2026)

The Ndzowain Portrait as Repository of Scientific Knowledge

The Ndzowain Portrait, preserved at the Buea Public Museum, was a significant component of the Kedjom Keku people's cultural heritage and extended beyond its aesthetic value as a work of art. As a museum object, it embodied important aspects of scientific heritage by preserving and communicating indigenous knowledge systems, traditional craftsmanship, historical memory, cultural values, and educational practices. The portrait also served as a medium for cultural transmission, facilitating the preservation and dissemination of community knowledge across generations. Through its symbolic representations and associated cultural narratives, it reinforced collective identity and documented the intellectual and cultural achievements of the Kedjom Keku people. In this context, the portrait was conceptualized as a repository of scientific heritage within the Buea Public Museum.

Preservation of Indigenous Knowledge Systems

The increasing scholarly interest in indigenous knowledge systems across diverse disciplines has contributed to their recognition as an important component of scientific heritage. As a result, these knowledge systems have been increasingly applied in museums to support cultural preservation. Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) constitute a cumulative body of proven and tested knowledge developed by local communities through sustained interactions with their environment and continuous observations of ecological and social change (Rankoana, 2021). Such knowledge is transmitted from one generation to another through oral traditions, demonstration, observation, and imitation (Mafongoya & Ajayi, 2017; Nyahunda, 2024). As a culturally embedded system of understanding, IKS shapes community perceptions, values, and interpretations of the world (Dube & Munsaka, 2018). Wan Razab et al. (2026) further described IKS as a complex web of wisdom, practices, and worldviews rooted in the enduring relationships between Indigenous communities and their environmental, cultural, and social contexts.

Therefore, Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) constitute an important aspect of scientific heritage correlating with the Ndzowain Portrait at the Buea Public Museum. According to the Regional Delegate of Arts and Culture, the portrait conveys and preserves indigenous knowledge relating to fertility and childbirth among women in Kedjom Keku. According to community beliefs, women experiencing fertility challenges received blessings through ritual practices involving water poured from a calabash by the Fon or other respected dignitaries, including the Cheufon (kingmakers), women who had given birth to twins, and women who had experienced successful childbirth. These rituals symbolized fertility, healing, and divine blessing. In this context, the Ndzowain Portrait serves as a repository of indigenous knowledge by documenting the historical and cultural significance of the Ndzowain women's dance in Kedjom Keku. According to a museum attendant, the Ndzowain dance was traditionally performed during joyous occasions, particularly following the birth of a child or the celebration of significant achievements within the community and among Kedjom Keku diaspora communities. The dance symbolized unity, celebration, and the central role of women in preserving and transmitting cultural values across generations (Lamnyuy, pers. Comm., January 11, 2026).

Preservation of Artistic Heritage

The museum attendant quotes that “museums are homes of heritage.” This means museum spaces are widely recognized as repositories of artistic heritage, where creativity, skills, and cultural expressions of communities were preserved for future generations. In this light, the Ndzowain Portrait at the Buea Public Museum represents an important element of the artistic heritage of the Kedjom Keku people. Through its visual representations, the portrait depicts various aspects of local material culture, including handcrafted beads worn around the waist and neck, traditional dress styles, body adornments, calabashes, and the peace plant (nkeng), all of which were closely associated with the Ndzowain institution. These artistic elements constitute valuable cultural artefacts that provide insights into the aesthetic traditions, craftsmanship, and cultural expressions embodied in the Ndzowain dance (Tombe, pers. Comm., December 20, 2025). Consequently, the portrait serves as an important medium for preserving and communicating the artistic heritage and indigenous knowledge of the Kedjom Keku community.

For instance, the calabash carried by women during Ndzowain dance performances symbolized fertility and blessing within the Kedjom Keku community. According to the ruler of

Kedjom Keku, water from the calabash was ceremonially sprinkled on women seeking fertility, reflecting indigenous beliefs and practices surrounding potency and motherhood. Known locally as Nshofwan, the calabash served multiple functions beyond ritual performance. It was commonly filled with palm oil for newborns to rub their navels and to store drinking water for infants (Tall et al., 2020, p. 13). The diverse uses of Nshofwan demonstrate the practical and symbolic knowledge embedded in local material culture, thereby reinforcing the role of the Ndzowain Portrait as a repository of indigenous knowledge and scientific heritage.

Evidence of Oral Traditions

According to a researcher, museum artefacts serve as important repositories of historical memory, preserving and communicating the cultural experiences and values of societies across generations (Koni, pers. Comm., December 28, 2025). Amongst the collections of the Buea Public Museum, the Ndzowain Portrait functions as a pragmatic object that embodies and conveys the oral traditions of the Kedjom Keku community. Oral tradition refers to knowledge transmitted orally across generations through stories, myths, legends, songs, and other expressive forms, particularly in preliterate societies (VijayaKumari, 2018; Moss & Mazikana, 1986, quoted in Wihbongale and Eyong, 2025, 127). Wihbongale and Eyong (2025) observed that museums serve as cultural and educational centers that support the teaching and study of history while exposing visitors to the oral traditions, cultural knowledge, and historical experiences of communities. According to an intern, the Ndzowain Portrait serves as an educational resource through which visitors can learn about the traditions, beliefs, and historical heritage of the Kedjom Keku people (Takor, pers. Comm., January 11, 2026).

For instance, through the museum attendant's narratives, visitors learned how fertility challenges were traditionally addressed within the Kedjom Keku community through Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS). These oral traditions were communicated alongside the historical interpretation of the portrait, enabling visitors to understand the cultural beliefs, practices, and knowledge associated with the Ndzowain institution. In this light, the portrait served as an educational medium through which indigenous knowledge and historical experiences were transmitted to contemporary audiences. This demonstrates that museum artefacts are not merely objects of display but also repositories of oral traditions and historical knowledge (Bofua, pers. Comm., January 11, 2026). By preserving and communicating such knowledge systems, the

Ndzowain Portrait functioned as a repository of scientific heritage, safeguarding the cultural identity, collective memory, and historical consciousness of the Kedjom Keku people.

Conservation of Intangible Cultural Heritage

In my view, museums serve as important spaces for the preservation and safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage recognized by communities. Intangible Cultural Heritage refers to practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills as well as the instruments, objects, and cultural spaces related to them, that communities, groups, and even individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage (UNESCO 2004; Qui et al. 2022; Hou et al 2022; Lv 2025). UniProject (2026) defined Intangible cultural heritage as covering the unique forms of expression of various ethnic groups and regions, especially language, art, songs, festivals, and more, which is a precious wealth that carries human wisdom and historical memory. Through the collection, documentation, and interpretation of cultural objects, museums contribute to the preservation of this heritage. In the case of the Ndzowain Portrait at the Buea Public Museum, the artefact preserves and communicates the traditions, beliefs, and indigenous knowledge associated with the Ndzowain women's dance, thereby serving as a repository of scientific heritage. For instance, the songs sung at Ndzowain ceremonies offered significant cultural narratives that, when explained to museum visitors, foster intercultural dialogue and enhance understanding of Kedjom Keku cultural heritage. These songs expressed a variety of messages about fertility, forgiveness, gratitude, and divine benefits (Vunogah pers. Comm., December 20, 2025). Significantly, beyond their entertainment value, the songs served as channels for spiritual and cultural expression, reinforcing social cohesiveness and passing along indigenous wisdom to future generations. More so, the portrait serves as a tangible representation of living heritage. As a result, the Ndzowain Portrait contributes to the interpretation and preservation of these songs, helping to protect the intangible cultural heritage of the Kedjom Keku community.

Contribution to Heritage Tourism

Museums are institutions that contribute significantly to heritage tourism in Cameroon and Africa at large. Through the exhibition and interpretation of diverse collections, museums such as the Buea Public Museum shape visitors' understanding of cultural, natural, historical, and contemporary dimensions of society. Arumugam et al. (2023) explain that a unique blend of

culture and heritage associated with such museums makes them particularly interesting destinations for a visit. In addition, it enables tourists to participate in historical and cultural activities that deepen their knowledge of, appreciation for, and understanding of a nation's history and culture. Therefore, heritage tourism refers to tourism experiences related to or derived from historical sites or practices. Broadly, heritage tourism concerns cultural, ethnic, and historical aspects of the past that attract tourists and travelers (Chang 1999, quoted in Zhu 2021, 3). Timothy and Nyaupane (2009, quoted in Yang and Wall 2022, 1074) describe heritage tourism as a type of special interest for visitors who are seeking to experience heritage assets through historical landscapes, archaeological sites, museums, architecture, artwork, religion, and tradition. The Ndzowain Portrait at the Buea Public Museum served as an important attraction for visitors seeking to understand the cultural heritage, social practices, and indigenous knowledge systems of the Kedjom Keku people. According to a museum internship student, the portrait stimulated visitors' interest by presenting visual and historical narratives that reflected the community's cultural identity and way of life. Consequently, the portrait contributed to heritage interpretation, visitor education, and the promotion of cultural tourism within the museum space. As a result, the portrait serves not only as a repository of scientific heritage but also as a cultural tourism asset that enriches the visitor experience and promotes heritage awareness (Ngule, pers. Comm., January 11, 2026).

Discussion and Limitations

The findings demonstrate that the Ndzowain Portrait extends beyond its function as a visual artefact and serves as a repository of scientific heritage by preserving and communicating indigenous knowledge systems, artistic traditions, oral histories, intangible cultural heritage, and heritage tourism values within the Kedjom Keku community. This finding aligns with scholarly perspectives that conceptualize scientific heritage as encompassing the knowledge, practices, material culture, and intellectual achievements of societies that are preserved for future generations (Lourenço & Wilson, 2013; Kennedy et al., 2024). The study revealed that the portrait preserves Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) relating to fertility, childbirth, healing, and social well-being. The rituals associated with the Ndzowain institution, including the use of sacred water, calabashes, peace plants, and ritual songs, reflected a locally developed body of knowledge that guided community responses to reproductive challenges. These findings support arguments by

Rankoana (2021) and Wan Razab et al. (2026) that indigenous knowledge represents a cumulative system of tested practices and wisdom developed through sustained interaction with the environment and society. Therefore, the portrait, functions as a medium through which such knowledge was preserved and transmitted to visitors.

In addition, the article demonstrates that the portrait contributes to the preservation of artistic heritage through its representation of local craftsmanship, dress styles, body adornments, beads, calabashes, and other material expressions associated with the Ndzowain institution. These artistic elements embody both aesthetic and practical knowledge, illustrating how material culture can function as a vehicle for preserving community history and identity. This observation reinforces the view that museum collections preserve not only objects but also the knowledge systems embedded within them. Another significant finding concerns the role of the portrait in preserving oral traditions. Museum attendants and cultural custodians communicated narratives associated with the Ndzowain dance, fertility rituals, and community values to visitors, thereby transforming the portrait into an educational tool. This supports previous studies that identify museums as educational institutions that facilitate the transmission of historical knowledge and cultural memory (Wihbongale & Eyong, 2025). Through interpretation and storytelling, the portrait helps safeguard collective memory and historical consciousness among both local and international visitors.

The article also highlights the importance of museum collections in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. The songs, rituals, beliefs, and performances associated with the Ndzowain dance remain embedded within the portrait's interpretation and significance. These findings resonate with UNESCO's understanding of intangible cultural heritage as living knowledge, practices, and expressions transmitted across generations. The portrait, therefore, bridges tangible and intangible heritage by providing a physical representation of living cultural traditions. Furthermore, the findings reveal that the portrait contributes to heritage tourism by enhancing visitor understanding of Kedjom Keku culture and stimulating interest in indigenous knowledge systems. Through heritage interpretation, the portrait enriches visitor experiences and promotes cultural awareness. This finding supports scholarship emphasizing the role of museums as important cultural tourism destinations that foster learning, cultural appreciation, and community engagement. Collectively, the findings demonstrate that museum objects should not be viewed solely as exhibition pieces but

as dynamic repositories of scientific heritage that preserve knowledge, memory, identity, and cultural continuity. The Ndzowain Portrait exemplifies how a single museum object can embody multiple dimensions of heritage and contribute to education, research, cultural preservation, and sustainable heritage tourism.

Although this study made substantial efforts to examine how the Ndzowain Portrait serves as a repository of scientific heritage, some limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study focused on a single museum object within the Buea Public Museum, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other museum collections and cultural contexts. Second, the research relied predominantly on qualitative data derived from oral testimonies, interviews, observations, and documentary sources. While these sources provided rich contextual insights, some historical accounts were based on participants' recollections and interpretations, which may be subject to recall bias. Third, the study was confined to the Kedjom Keku cultural context and did not undertake a comparative analysis of similar heritage objects in other museums or communities. Finally, the concept of scientific heritage remains an emerging area of inquiry within the Cameroon museum, resulting in a limited body of literature available for theoretical and comparative engagement. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into the role of museum objects in preserving indigenous knowledge systems, cultural memory, and scientific heritage.

Conclusion

This study examined the Ndzowain Portrait at the Buea Public Museum as a repository of scientific heritage among the Kedjom Keku people of Cameroon. The findings demonstrate that the portrait extends beyond its aesthetic and artistic value to preserve and communicate Indigenous Knowledge Systems, artistic traditions, oral histories, intangible cultural heritage, and heritage tourism values. Through its visual representations and associated narratives, the portrait documents community knowledge relating to fertility, childbirth, cultural practices, social values, and collective memory. This article establishes that museum collections are important repositories of scientific heritage because they preserve both tangible and intangible dimensions of culture. In the case of the Ndzowain Portrait, the museum object functions as a medium through which indigenous knowledge, historical experiences, artistic expressions, and cultural traditions are transmitted across generations. The portrait also contributes to education, research, heritage

interpretation, and cultural tourism by enhancing public understanding of the Kedjom Keku community. The study contributes to museum and heritage scholarship by expanding the discourse on scientific heritage within African museums and demonstrating how individual museum objects can serve as repositories of indigenous knowledge and cultural memory. The study articulates that museum collections should be recognized as valuable sources of scientific heritage and encourages museum professionals, researchers, and policymakers to strengthen efforts aimed at documenting, preserving, and interpreting indigenous knowledge embedded within museum collections.

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