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## Itinerary of a Cameroon Cross River Collection in Art Market Networks. An Analysis of Transaction Correspondence between Hamburg-Berlin-Leipzig

### ABSTRACT

Based on archival correspondence, this paper follows the itinerary of a collection from the Cross River area of Cameroon which entered market networks in 1908/9 through the colonial administrator of Odissinge at that time, Alfred Mansfeld. Therefore, this contribution investigates the liminal area between the field and the museum's showcase, focusing on the increased attention and the social relations generated by these objects in the course of a change in their location. The article looks at the actors and

their interactions around the common object of interest represented by Mansfeld's collections.

What actually happened to the objects once they departed from their places of origin to enter a capitalistic scheme of value? What significations and importance could they acquire? Paired with the analysis of archival materials found in the ethnological museum of Hamburg, this article is especially intended to analyze the path "Mansfeld's collections" took from the field through the market to the museum.

### Introduction

This paper aims at tracking the itinerary of a collection from the Cross River area<sup>1</sup> of Cameroon which entered market networks in 1908/9 through the colonial administrator

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1 The area extends on the border between Cameroon and Nigeria and comprises groups of people who may share common similarities and can prove to be distant or near cognates from a point to another. According to Mansfeld, there are six groups of Bantou family – Ekoi, Keaka, Bakogo-Balundu, Obang, Banyang, Anyang - and one of Sudano-Sahelian family – Boki. Alfred Mansfeld, *Urwald-Dokumente. Vier Jahre unter den Crossflussnegern Kameruns* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1908), 7. I am grateful to Stefanie Michels for her helpful remarks on this article.

of Odissige at that time, Alfred Mansfeld. The primary materials on which it relies are not the objects per se, since these are not present in the ethnological museum of Hamburg (today MARKK), but a wide range of correspondence that their purchasing gave rise to.<sup>2</sup>

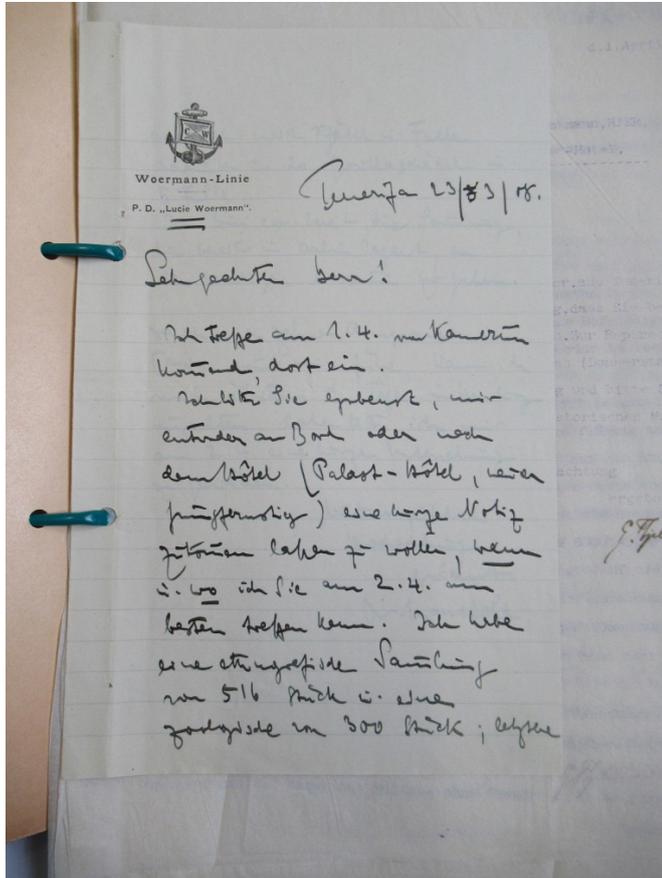


Fig.1: A letter from the Mansfeld correspondence, MARKK-Archive: 101-1 No. 70 and MARKK archive: 101-1 No. 439 (Author's image).

Therefore, this contribution is not intended as a breakthrough provenance study of the objects; rather, it takes another look at what could be considered the backstage area between the field and the museum's showcase and tries to find out how a change in the objects' location mobilized great interest and generated a wide range of social relations. Who were these actors and how did they interact with each other around the common object of interest represented by Mansfeld's collections? What actually happened to the objects once they departed from their places of origin to enter a capitalist scheme of value? What significations and importance could they acquire? Paired with the analysis of archival materials found in the ethnological museum of Hamburg (letters), this article is interested specifically in analyzing the

market routes of "Mansfeld's collections" from the field until they reached their destination (St Petersburg Museum). The forensic analysis of these instances is based on the hypothesis that after the field of collection came also important commercial transactions, invisible to the public, which took place before the objects entered the museums, and that these transactions could be motivated among the potential actors either by purely mercantile intentions, patriotic inclinations, or the pursuit of fame. Furthermore, the commodification and commoditization<sup>3</sup> of the aforementioned artifacts, which had initially been intended solely for other purposes such as worship or other cultural or ritual

2 All correspondence quoted in the article is held at the MARKK archive: 101-1 No. 70 (File regarding offers of collection items. Cameroon-Mansfeld collection) and MARKK archive: 101-1 No. 439.

3 Hans Peter Hahn, *Materielle Kultur. Eine Einführung* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 2005) 89-91; Igor Kopytoff The cultural Biography of Things, in Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: University Press, 1986), 64-91.

performances, finally assigned them high financial, symbolic but also functional values in the new context which the communities of origin were obviously neither aware of, nor did they have a share in them. Would this already portend the future fate of African artifacts for the next generations until the present?

In fact, before the colonial hegemony on Africa was officially and internationally launched at the Berlin Conference (Nov. 1884 - Feb. 1885), many European explorers had already had the opportunity to travel around and across Africa. Their voyages led them to the discovery of many natural resources, peoples, landscapes as well as the material culture which generated increasing market interest from the visitors. Colonial officers, administrators, doctors, merchants, travelers, missionaries were to become pivotal actors of this specific colonial market, dealing directly or indirectly with partners in the metropolises. As a result, short or long-term networks evolved around the abundant artifacts in order to supply home institutions (ethnological or natural sciences museums). What were the foundations for such networks and how did Mansfeld's collections also shape relations among different actors as evidenced in their letters? How did this early commoditization open up a new era for African art in general?

## Network theory and Mansfeld-Thielenius-von Mendelssohn-Meyer-Adler Connexion

Networks arise from links or relations that bring persons, organizations together. According to this theory, actions of individuals in society are influenced less by social structures than by the personality of the different protagonists. The way actors in a given field interact, the frequency of their interactions may lead to statistical survey and furthermore to interpretation of their relations. At a microlevel one may find out what determines the interactions among different partners in the social space. While relations at the family level may be intense, profound and disinterested, the so-called instrumental relations may be mostly purpose-driven, thus generating social capital which, like other forms of capital, facilitates actions of individuals and allows them to reach their goals. Besides, different actors may not only be linked through direct but also indirect relations. Yet actors may also cluster around a common interest with a variety of expectations, with the outcome not necessarily always positive for each of the interacting persons.<sup>4</sup> Who are the persons involved in the following transactions, what is their quality and status in society? Does the specific quality of the object or its value now or in the future matter?

In the correspondence to be analyzed, four main actors appear, yet the network they formed cannot be viewed as a formal or permanent one, nor did they necessarily know each other before. The correspondents are Alfred Mansfeld, Georg Thilenius, Ernst von Mendelssohn-Bartholdy and Hermann Meyer.

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4 Herbert Schubert, *Netzwerkorientierung in Kommune und Sozialwirtschaft. Eine Einführung* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2018); Antje Reichert, *Grundzüge der Netzwerktheorie* (München: Grin-Verlag, 2009).

Alfred Mansfeld was born on 14 March 1870 in Tetschen (Austria). He trained as a medical doctor. From 1896, he traveled to Congo and Namibia, then known as German Southwest-Africa. In 1898-1899, he took part in an expedition to Central Brazil, the “Schingu Expedition”. In 1900/01, he was part of another expedition to China, before he was ordered to Japan in 1902. In 1903, he entered the German colonial service and in August 1904, he was appointed head of the station of Odissinge (in the present town of Mamfe), after his predecessor, Count von Pückler-Limpurg, had met his death during the “Mpawmanku wars” (1904-1906).<sup>5</sup>



Fig.2: A dance mask from the Cross River area. This is one of the many masks drawings from originals which, according to the author, lay in the Berlin Museum. Alfred Mansfeld, *Urwald-Dokumente. Vier Jahre unter den Crossflussnegern Kameruns* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1908, p. ii; 154/5).

During his stay there from 1904 to 1914, Mansfeld collected a rich variety of objects from the Ejagham or Ekoi people, both artifacts and zoological material, which were destined for many museums.<sup>6</sup> He benefited from guidelines by Felix von Luschan to establish scholarly collecting criteria. Dr Félix von Luschan (1854 –1924), the Austrian-born anthropologist, ethnologist, archaeologist and explorer, who had also worked as tenured professor at the Berlin Charité medical school, and who in 1905 took over the Africa and Oceania department of Berlin Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde, had himself been very interested in Ekoi masks because of an associated myth about the possible use of human skin in their making,<sup>7</sup> and it is very likely that such masks also entered Mansfeld’s collections. Examining his correspondence allows us to glimpse the wide range of the collection. One of his letters is illustrated in Fig.1.

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- 5 Heinrich Schnee, *Deutsches Kolonial-Lexikon*, Bd. II. (Leipzig, 1920), 501; Stefanie Michels, *Imagined Power Contested. Germans and Africans in the Upper Cross River Area 1887-1915*. (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2004), 266-267).
- 6 E.g. Berlin, Dresden, Stuttgart, see David Zamenek, *Kunst und Kultur der Ejagham – auf den Spuren von Alfred Mansfeld*, <https://www.about-africa.de/kamerun-nigeria/112-kunst-kultur-ejagham-alfred-mansfeld> (7/02/2020).
- 7 Andreas Schlothauer, *Die Kamerun-Sammlungen von Gustav Conrau im ethnologischen Museum Berlin. Figuren der Bangwa (Grasland), sowie der Balong, Barombi und Banyang (Waldland)*, in *Humboldt-Forum. Kunst & Kontext* 9/ 2015, 26; Ernst Vollbehrr, *Mit Pinsel und Palette durch Kamerun* (Leipzig: List & von Bressensdorf, 1912), 52-53.

In this letter, he is planning to meet someone, obviously Georg Thilenius from the ethnological museum in Hamburg, in order to present his collections from Cameroon. The letter reveals that he possessed 516 artifacts of ethnological and 300 objects of zoological nature.<sup>8</sup> It is not possible to say with certainty whether the two partners were already in contact before, yet Mansfeld knew much about the needs of his counterpart, Georg Thilenius.



Fig.3: Some of the Ekoi masks documented in Mansfeld's book described by Thilenius. Alfred Mansfeld, *Urwald-Dokumente. Vier Jahre unter den Crossflussnegern Kameruns* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1908, 152).

Georg Christian Adolar Friedrich Emil Julius Thilenius was born on 4 October 1868 in Bad Soden. He studied medicine and natural science in Bonn and Berlin and submitted his dissertation to become a medical doctor in 1892. In 1896 he presented his habilitation thesis in the field of anatomy. Between 1897 and 1899, he travelled frequently to the German colonies in the Pacific and to New Zealand. During these trips he also collected a wide variety of objects of ethnological and anthropological interest. After a short stay in Breslau as head of the ethnological and anthropological department of the faculty of medicine, he was given a warm welcome in

Hamburg on 1 October 1904 as the first director of the city's ethnological museum which had been officially founded in 1879. Alongside Felix von Luschan, Thilenius is portrayed as one of the leading figure of German ethnology of his time. He was also a co-founder of Hamburg University where he occupied highly influential positions before his death in 1937, just three years after he left his post as director of the museum.<sup>9</sup> Expectations from the government were high, as were hopes and confidence placed in him, and he tried his utmost to meet them. This explains his ambition as first director to establish a truly renowned ethnological museum. A wide range of correspondence at the museum testifies to his urgent need to acquire a large variety of artifacts from different parts of the world,

8 Also see the letter of Thilenius to Mendelsohn-Bartholdy dated 4 April 1909, mentioning the figures, yet slightly different: according to the list received by Thilenius from Berlin, the ethnological objects match numbers 202-716; Thilenius then assumed that numbers 1-201 would suit the zoological part.

9 Wulf Köpke, Bernd Schmelz, eds., *Hamburgs Tor zur Welt. 125 Jahre Museum für Völkerkunde Hamburg* (Hamburg: Museum für Völkerkunde, 2004), 38-41)

and Mansfeld's were one of the collections for which Thilenius campaigned passionately in order to benefit "his" museum. From the network theory perspective, one may hypothesize that Mansfeld and Thilenius' first contact was facilitated by a third person who brought them into contact, knowing the interest of the two protagonists. Nevertheless, as the two actors lived far apart, intense contact was only possible through letters. The object on which their common interest focused was the artifacts collection. The tandem formed by Mansfeld and Thilenius around the sale/acquisition of the artifacts would expand as other actors came into play, with Ernst von Mendelssohn-Bartholdy in Berlin and Dr Hermann Meyer in Leipzig entering the network.

Dr Hermann Meyer was another prominent anthropologist and ethnologist, who was born in 1871 in Hildburghausen and died in 1932 in Leipzig. He studied anthropology and ethnology in Strasbourg, Berlin, and Jena where he earned his doctorate. His interest in collecting adventures led him to Brazil for his first research trip known as the "First Schingu/Xingu Expedition" in 1895/96. He assisted the Bavarian anthropologist Karl Ranke, who died there. After his return, he became assistant at the ethnological museum in Leipzig in 1896. Later on he joined the second Xingu Expedition (1898-1899) to Brazil, during which he also collected, apart from Indian artifacts, more than 3,000 items of botanical species. By the time he received Mansfeld's collection, he was probably still busy at his father Herrmann Julius Meyer's publishing house "Bibliographisches Institut" in Leipzig, where he had started in 1903. His deep involvement in the colonization of South Brazil by German settlers (Petropolis, Florianopolis, Blumenau) earned him the "Deutsche Ring" in 1931, the highest decoration of the "German Overseas Institute" (Deutsches Auslands-Institut). Mansfeld and Meyer also knew each other, since they had both been members of the aforementioned second Schingu Expedition of South Brazil in 1898/89, which led to the consolidation of the German colony Rio Grande do Sul. Meyer, who had travelled in South America and become an expert through his ethnographic and zoological collections, was the right man for Mansfeld in the marketing of his collections.<sup>10</sup> The relationship between Hermann Meyer/Mansfeld and Ernst von Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, son of a very wealthy family of Jewish origin in Berlin, does not yet become fully clear through the letters, though the latter was known as a great patron of the arts.<sup>11</sup> Another actor who is referred to but whose correspondence is not preserved is Dr Adler in St Petersburg, who was in contact with Dr Meyer. All the aforementioned actors came to be connected through the collections as owner/seller (Mansfeld), middlemen (Dr Meyer and Ernst von Mendelssohn-Bartholdy), and potential competing buyers (Professor Thilenius and Dr Adler), with Meyer acting as pivotal person. How did these interacting persons, from their different positions on the stage, influence the successful or failed

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10 [https://www.ifl-leipzig.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Bibliothek\\_Archiv/Archiv\\_Findb%C3%BCcher\\_PDF/Meyer\\_Herrmann.pdf](https://www.ifl-leipzig.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Bibliothek_Archiv/Archiv_Findb%C3%BCcher_PDF/Meyer_Herrmann.pdf).

11 Art patronage was considered a pursuit of the wealthy, who voluntarily and without any profit aim offer their financial means to the realization of public projects. Therefore patronage was not solely for arts and culture, but also for science. It was free from state regulations and depended solely on the decision of the patron. Carla Schmincke, *Sammler in Hamburg. Der Kaufmann und Kunstfreund Konsul Eduard Friedrich Weber (1830-1907)*. Dissertation, online pdf.

acquisition of the collections? What does the case of Mansfeld's collections teach us about the transformations entailed in the movement of artifacts through different contexts?

## Relations, Budget conditions, Making and Unmaking Prices

After Mansfeld's encounter with Thilenius in Germany during a holiday, the latter had been unable to proceed with the purchase of Mansfeld's collections because of another financial transaction. In a letter written in February 1909, he acknowledges the poor financial situation of his museum, which had caused him to lose the collection in the previous year. The letter reads:

Dear Sir

when you were in Germany on holiday last year you were kind enough to visit me and offer your collections for sale to my museum. The most unfortunate financial situation which arose at the time forced me to use the means in my budget in order to buy collections which were originally intended to be donated to the museum. Consequently, I had to renounce the purchase of your collections with a heavy heart. (Letter by Thilenius, dated 9 February 1909).<sup>12</sup>

In fact, Thilenius, who was at that time also lecturer at the Hamburg Colonial Institute, intended to find out if Mansfeld's collections were still available and convince him to sell them to his museum now. Besides, he also wished to acquire any other collections in the future. In this way, he was projecting their relationship as long-term and not as temporary. His strategies to achieve his goal also consisted in arousing empathy for his museum, which lacked sufficient funds, and an absence of any enquiry as to the quality of the objects, which he anticipates as "highly valuable", citing Mansfeld's book *Urwald-Dokumente* as an "excellent book" and thus implying a high quality of the artifacts.

Yet Mansfeld, who was back in the colony Cameroon, was unable to say more about the collections, which had been shipped from Hamburg harbour to Leipzig.<sup>13</sup> However, a new actor now entered the network and believed to act in Mansfeld's interest, Ernst von Mendelssohn-Bartholdy in Berlin-Grunewald (born 1846 in Berlin; died 1909 in Dresden), one of the greatest bankers of his time and also a well-known patron of the arts.

On 23 April 1909, Thilenius wrote a letter to Mendelssohn-Bartholdy about his recent correspondence with Mansfeld. In this letter, Thilenius once again pointed out the many difficulties of his museum, explaining why the museum had been unable to afford the

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12 The German original reads as follows: Sehr geehrter Herr Bezirksamtman, als Sie im vorigen Jahr auf Urlaub in Deutschland weilten, hatten Sie die Güte, mich aufsuchen und meinem Museum Ihre Sammlungen zum Kauf anzubieten. Die außerordentlich traurigen Geldverhältnisse, welche damals eintraten, haben mich genötigt, Sammlungen, welche ursprünglich dem Museum geschenkt werden sollten, aus den Mitteln des Budgets anzukaufen, und infolge dessen habe ich schweren Herzens darauf verzichten müssen, Ihre Sammlung zu erwerben (Letter Thilenius 09.02.1909).

13 Cf. letter by Mansfeld, 14 February 1909.

objects at the very moment that Mansfeld was in Germany. Furthermore, he alleged that Mansfeld had not only allowed him to view the list of the collection (the list was in Mendelssohn's hands), but that he had also suggested a price for that part of the collection which appealed to him, that is 5,000 Mark.<sup>14</sup> Yet, an answer to Thilenius' letter on 10 April did not come from Mendelssohn-Bartholdy which attests to the circulation of information in that newly formed network. Instead, the answer came from Hermann Meyer in Leipzig. Notably, the initial situation had shifted in the meantime due to new clients' interest in the collections. According to Meyer's letter to Thilenius of 24 April 1909, the two collections were transferred to St Petersburg care of a certain Dr Adler,<sup>15</sup> who also wished to acquire them. Meyer thus requests that Thilenius, in his own words, should "sincerely say if he really desires the collection"; furthermore, he "would feel particularly happy", if Thilenius could "name a specific price for the collections" (Meyer's letter of 24 April 1909), so as to decide if he should order the shipment back from St Petersburg, provided that no better offer was forthcoming from there.

The aforementioned answer shows that Thilenius' arguments had been beside the point for Meyer. As a scholar in the field as well as from a capitalist point of view, neither the history of Thilenius' encounter with Mansfeld, nor the promise made to him, the number of their exchanges or the financial difficulties of the museum would prevail over the economic aspect. Simply put, the collection can be conceded only to the highest bidder and not based on philanthropic motives. He concluded as follows: "I would be grateful if you could name a specific price for the collection in order to decide whether a return shipment from Petersburg [sic] is indicated, always assuming of course that a serious [!] offer is received from there."<sup>16</sup>

On 26 April 1909, Thilenius sent a reply confirming the firm intention of the museum to purchase the ethnographic collection, at the price of 5,000 Mark, as initially suggested by Mansfeld, and also expressed the desire to receive a list of the objects, since they still did not have any idea of the content of the collection. That Thilenius was ready to pay such a sum of money without having seen the collection or at least a list indicates how interested and eager he was; maybe Thilenius also hoped to flatter his correspondent by demonstrating blind faith. He even went so far as to claim that "the collection merits/is worth the price".<sup>17</sup> On this same day, 26 April, Mendelssohn-Bartholdy had sent the required list to Hamburg, but it had not yet reached Thilenius by the time he replied to Meyer. For this reason he kept insisting on the list, which they "would first of all like to see before

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14 (Cf. letter by Mansfeld dated 14 February 1909).

15 No further information available for now on him, who he was and how he received mandate to act in the name of the museum of St Petersburg.

16 The German original reads as follows: "Es wäre mir lieb, wenn Sie mir möglichst einen bestimmten Preis für die Sammlung bieten können, um zu entscheiden, ob eine Rückbeförderung von Petersburg angebracht ist, vorausgesetzt natürlich, dass von dort überhaupt ein [!] ernstliches Angebot erfolgt." (Letter of 24 April 1909).

17 Letter from Thilenius to Dr Meyer, 26 April 1909.

making a final decision”; also, “it is evident that a final decision cannot be taken without any knowledge of the collection”.<sup>18</sup> This change of attitude may have had consequences.

Two days later, Meyer sent a reply to Thilenius, promising to do his utmost to send the list. Yet again, the situation shifted: the collections were still in St Petersburg, and if Thilenius wished to inspect them, they could only be forwarded to Hamburg if he were prepared to bear the transport charges. In any case, according to Meyer, shipping would only be envisioned in the event that St Petersburg were no longer interested. He justified this decision as follows:

Would you then bear the transport costs in such an event? It would however only be worth considering if the Petersburg museum did not have intentions on the collection, which it paid to have sent to them. The price offered by Petersburg for both collections, respectively the price suggested to me by Dr Mansfeld, represents in proportion the price you demand for the one collection. So if Petersburg accepts, the collection had better remain there in order to avoid unnecessary transport costs, especially as you are unable to commit to an acquisition outright. (Letter Dr. Meyer to Thilenius 28 April 1909).<sup>19</sup>

As soon as he received the list and the abovementioned letter, Thilenius was highly enthusiastic and ready to accept the transport, hoping to keep the collection. On the next day, 29 April 1909, he sent a reply stating his readiness to receive the collection at his own expense. A series of letters then ensued among the different actors.<sup>20</sup> On 19 May 1909 Thilenius received another postal delivery from Meyer, informing him about the interest of the Petersburger Museum in the collection. According to Meyer, the Petersburg Museum was willing to pay the total amount of 6,000 Mark, irrespective of the transport charges. Matters evolved similar to an auction, where only the highest bidder gets the goods. Meyer suggested a higher bid to Thilenius:

Dear Professor,

Shortly after receiving your esteemed letter I had a letter from Dr Mansfeld where he agrees with my proposal to sell the collection to Petersburg. Therefore, and in order to avoid an unnecessary transport of the collection back and forth, I wrote to

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18 Letter from Thilenius to Dr Meyer, 26 April 1909.

19 The German original reads as follows: “Würden Sie dann in diesem Falle die Transportkosten tragen? Es dürfte das allerdings wohl nur dann in Frage kommen, wenn das Petersburger Museum nicht auf die Sammlung, die es sich auf eigene Kosten hat hinkommen lassen, reflektiert. Der von Petersburg gebotene Preis für beide Sammlungen, bzw. der von mir Herrn Dr. Mansfeld vorgeschlagene, entspricht im Verhältnis dem von Ihnen geforderten Betrage für die eine Sammlung. Sagt also Petersburg zu, dann würde die Sammlung dort am besten bleiben, um unnötige Transportkosten zu vermeiden, zumal Sie sich ja nicht von vornherein zur Abnahme verpflichten können.” (Letter Dr. Meyer to Thilenius 28.04.1909).

20 From the first letter of Mansfeld to Thilenius in March 1908 until Thilenius’ final item of correspondence to Meyer sending him the list he had received from Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, more than twenty pieces of correspondence are preserved in the Museum’s archives.

Petersburg and asked first of all which price they were suggesting, and I received the answer that they were willing to pay 6,000 Mark for it.

Consequently, I kindly ask you to let me know if you wish to outbid this price, in this case I would direct the collection to Hanburg, or otherwise allocate the purchase to Petersburg. In this, I am certainly acting in the interest of Mansfeld, who asked me to handle the sale at the time and who is keen to achieve as much profit as possible from the objects.

Yours sincerely

gez. Herrmann Meyer (Letter Dr. Meyer, 19.05.1909)<sup>21</sup>

As might be guessed, the Hamburg museum was unable to afford such a sum of money. Thilenius complained again about the difficult financial situation of the museum, the reason why he could not bid higher. He seemed sorely disappointed, especially as he was about to lose a collection which Mansfeld had already offered him personally for 5,000 Mark. Unable to afford the requested price, he finally gave up in his reply dated 21 May 1909:

I regret this all the more since I would have been pleased to see this collection become the property of my museum, especially as Dr Mansfeld himself offered it to us for the price of 5,000 Mark. Under these circumstance we must certainly entirely refrain from an acquisition.

Yours sincerely

Thilenius (Letter dated 21 May 1909) .<sup>22</sup>

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21 The German original reads as follows: "Sehr geehrter Herr Professor, kurz nach Eintreffen Ihres werten Schreibens erhielt ich von Herrn Dr. Mansfeld einen Brief, in dem er sich mit meinem Vorschlag, die Sammlung nach Petersburg zu verkaufen, einverstanden erklärt. Ich habe daher nach Petersburg geschrieben und, um ein unnötiges Hin- und Hersenden der Sammlung zu vermeiden, zunächst gefragt, welchen Preis man dafür anzulegen gedächte und die Antwort erhalten, dass man bereit sei, 6000 Mark dafür auszugeben. Ich bitte Sie darum deshalb höflichst, mir mitzuteilen, ob Sie diesen Preis überbieten wollen, und würde dann umgehend die Sammlung nach Hamburg dirigieren, andernfalls dem Petersburger Museum den Kauf zusprechen. Ich handele dabei durchaus im Sinne Mansfelds, der mich seinerzeit mit dem Verkauf betraute, und dem es darauf ankommt, einen möglichst hohen Gewinn aus den Sachen zu erzielen. Mit vorzüglicher Hochachtung gez. Herrmann Meyer" (Letter Dr Meyer, 19 May 1909).

22 The German original reads as follows: "Ich bedaure dies umso mehr, als ich gern gesehen hätte, dass diese Sammlung in den Besitz meines Museums übergegangen wäre, zumal Herr Dr. Mansfeld sie uns selbst für den Preis von M. 5000.- angeboten hat. Unter diesen Umständen müssen wir selbstverständlich von einer Erwerbung gänzlich absehen. Mit vorzüglicher Hochachtung Ergebenst gez. Thilenius" (Letter dated 21 May 1909).

Three days later, Meyer would confirm that the collection would definitely remain in the Petersburg Museum and requested the return of the list:

Dear Professor,

Unfortunately I note from your letter dated 21 May 1909 that you are not in a position to acquire the Mansfeld collection at the requested price, which I regret in the interest of your museum.

I kindly request the return of the collection list.

Yours sincerely

Hermann Meyer

(letter from 24.05.1909)<sup>23</sup>

As in a duel, Thilenius/Hamburg finally lost to Dr Adler/Petersburg. This surely explains why there is no trace of the aforementioned Mansfeld collection in the Hamburg museum. Nevertheless, Mansfeld and Thilenius remained in contact, so that on 7 July 1909, Mansfeld could send three pieces of inscribed paper wrapping a mixture of burned finger nails, human hair and plants which he had collected from Haussas to be analysed. In the meantime, he also suggested another Cross River collection to Thilenius at a cost of 2,000 Mark, as well as offering his collections from the Xingu Expedition, China and Japan. Thilenius was looking forward to be able to afford these collections, pending the budget conditions in the following year 1910.

## Conclusion

The analysis of the trajectory of Mansfeld's collection between Cameroon-Hamburg-Leipzig-St Petersburg reveals how collections travelled through space and time. It also sheds more light on the wide range of actors that could interfere in the commercial transactions between the "collector" and the museum as final destination of objects. It shows how Georg Thilenius, as first director of the ethnological museum of Hamburg (today renamed MARKK), had been keen to acquire one of the first collections from an area whose art or cult objects were famous among scholars, especially the masks which were often said to be covered by human skin. This scholarly interest probably also contributed to an increase in the economic value of the artifacts.

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23 Sehr geehrter Herr Professor, aus Ihrem Schreiben von 21.05. 1909 habe ich leider gesehen, dass es Ihnen nicht möglich ist, die Mansfeld'sche Sammlung zu dem geforderten Preise zu erwerben, was ich im Interesse Ihres Museums bedauere. Ich bitte höflichst um Zurücksendung der Sammlungsliste und verbleibe mit vorzüglicher Hochachtung Hermann Meyer (letter from 24.05.1909)

Besides, some individuals contributed in professionalizing the sector, not only specializing as artifacts traders, but also creating their wealth from this market while becoming internationally famous like Umlauff or Konietzko.<sup>24</sup> Some of them could travel to remote areas; meanwhile others would rely on middlemen from colonies for their supply. The state or museums would also finance expeditions of scholars in the colonies with the mission of collecting artifacts or zoological specimen. This also contributed in shaping ideas of the local inhabitants towards their art production, which progressively shifted away from sacred objects – therefore inappropriate, tacitly or openly prohibited for the market– to commodities. The arrival of Franz and Marie-Pauline Thorbecke in 1912/13 in Foumban is a good example illustrating this transformation or shift in mentalities of the local populations through the growing economic interest in African artifacts from abroad. In this case it is not the object initially travelling to a new environment, but the idea coming to the place of production, entailing a change in situ due to new demand. In personal account Ms Thorbecke wrote: “Our house is just like a museum, we traded fabulous treasures, mostly from women who practically overran the house when they realized that they could get money, tobacco, fabrics, perfume, mirrors for their pots, baskets and jewellery from us“.<sup>25</sup>

Yet this increasing economic value would also entail desacralisation/profanation in some cases,<sup>26</sup> as well as large-scale African art trafficking, which intensified during the colonial period, but does persist, albeit in other forms today, through the internet, through exhibitions programs which facilitate the removal of artifacts but not their return, but also through theft.<sup>27</sup> The example of these Mansfeld collections also showcases the permanent rise in value that the commoditization of artifacts have undergone out of their original place of creation, due to constant quest for them and competition among potential Western bidders. The prices fetched by a Kota figure<sup>28</sup> or the Bangwa Queen (originally collected by Gustav Conrau in the Cross River neighbouring area of Bangwa<sup>29</sup>) in Musée

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24 Cf. Achim Schäfer, Peter Müller, Heinrich Umlauff (1869-1925) und das Historische und Völkerkundemuseum St. Gallen (HVMSG), in: <https://www.about-africa.de/kunst-und-kontext/ausgabe-04-2012/396-ethnologische-schaufiguren-sankt-gallen>. (12/12/2019); Hilke Thode-Arora, Die Familie Umlauff und ihre Firmen – Ethnografica-Händler in Hamburg, in *Mitteilungen aus dem Museum für Völkerkunde Hamburg*, Bd 22 (1992), S. 143-158.

25 The German original reads: “Unser Haus ist das reine Museum; wir haben fabelhafte Schätze eingehandelt, meist von Weibern, die uns das Haus förmlich gestürmt haben, als sie merkten, dass sie bei uns Geld, Tabak, Stoffe, Parfums, Spiegel für ihre Töpfe, Körbe, Schmuckwaren bekämen” (Thorbecke 1914: 54).

26 Michel Leiris, *L’Afrique fantôme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951).

27 Jean-Paul Notué, Bianca Triarca, *Bandjoun. Trésors royaux au Cameroun* (Milan: Continents Editions, 2005), 23.

28 Kwame Opoku, Price of Kota Sold in Paris is Interesting but what about Loss to Creators and Original Users?, in: <https://www.pambazuka.org/governance/price-kota-sold-paris-interesting%E2%80%A6>, consulted on 02/02/2020.

29 Andreas Schlothauer, Die Kamerun-Sammlungen von Gustav Conrau im ethnologischen Museum Berlin. Figuren der Bangwa (Grasland), sowie der Balong, Barombi und Banyang (Waldland), in *Humboldt-Fo-*

Dapper in Paris are more examples of the changes to which African art is subject far from African soil and the imagination of the original producers. A question increasingly raised today is that of the exact collecting circumstances of the artifacts in the colonial era. Many years after formal colonization, can we say that these communities now benefit from their art treasures from the past or today being integrated in this new scheme of value?

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