

The Protection of Cameroon's Cultural Heritage: Challenges and Prospects 1963-2024

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Abstract : Cameroon is endowed with a rich cultural heritage which presents in the form of monuments, architecture, material culture, geological formations, cultural festivals, forests and animal/bird reserves. This heritage has been under threat from looters, hazards, public works, industrialization, urbanization, war and the non-respect of legislation in force. Existing institutions, legislation, conventions and charters play a primordial role when it comes to protecting cultural heritage. In 1982, Cameroon ratified the UNESCO Convention on the protection of world cultural and natural heritage. Prior to this, the Federal Act of 1963 bearing on the protection of monuments, objects and sites of historic or artistic interest was the first legal instrument in force. It was followed by the creation of a Directorate of culture in 1972, whose activities received a boost from the African charter of human and peoples' rights of 1981. Presently, Law No. 91/008 of 1991 bearing on the protection of the national cultural patrimony and other related Charters ratified by Cameroon remain in force. Despite these strides, the problem of protecting cultural and natural sites persists, and the country has not tapped maximum benefits from the sector. In 2002 Haman Mohaman and Lazare Eloundou of ICOMOS Cameroon signaled that, this issue needed urgent attention; otherwise it would result to the disappearance of the rich cultural heritage of the country. This paper thus focuses on the existing legislative and institutional framework in Cameroon, with the objective to single out areas that should be improved upon. The spatial scope of the paper is the Grassfields of Cameroon, and the synchronic scope runs from 1963 to 2024. This paper argues that, the existing legislative framework, charters and conventions ratified by Cameroon can sustain its cultural/natural heritage. It is rather the disjointed form of the legislation and dispersed action by institutions and stake holders/actors on the field which raises an issue. The methodology applied the qualitative and quantitative approaches. Sources gleaned on decrees, conventions, charters and literature on cultural policy and interviews. On the field, surveys were accompanied by questionnaires targeting delegates of culture, tourism, public works, curators and custodians of cultural/geological formations. Findings reveal that, in the Grassfields, spectacular progress has been made in the West Region of Cameroon to preserve and valorize its cultural heritage, when compared to the North West Region and other parts of the country. The paper concludes that, the inclusion of the Bamoun Nguon and Douala Ngondo festivals in 2024 into the UNESCO list of intangible cultural heritage of humanity; together with a plethora of cultural heritage sites in the West Region; emanated from the use of existing laws, better protection and synergy of action on the field. The paper recommends that, a Cameroon cultural, tourism and environmental protection blue print 2035 is charted out. It also recommends the creation of one Ministry to manage all aspects of Cameroon's Cultural Heritage and by implication, a new legislative framework.

Keywords : Cameroon, cultural heritage, grassfields, legislation, protection.

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