

Shifting Focus: Collaborative Approaches in the Kribi Archives Project

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Abstract: The Kribi Archives project is a collaborative project aimed at revitalizing a neglected local archive in Kribi, Cameroon, and transforming it into a sustainable, community-driven space for historical engagement, research and artistic exchange. Rather than presenting a theoretical framework, this article offers a reflection on the project's early stages and its collaborative approach. We try to unwrap the multiple layers which connect the coastal town of Kribi and the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, and we question how these entanglements shape our work. We approach the archive not merely as a repository of knowledge or a tool for preservation, but also as a catalyst for dialogue, creativity and inclusive knowledge production.

[collaboration, archive, practise, reflection]

The Kribi Archives project is still in its early phase. As we move forward, we would like to take this opportunity to reflect on some of our experiences so far and to share our thoughts on archives, collaboration and the principles that guide our work. Rather than presenting a theoretical framework, this text is mainly informed by our practical work. We aim to reflect honestly on both the opportunities and the challenges and frustrations that come with collaborative work. We also seek to situate our efforts within the connected histories of Kribi and Berlin, as well as within the history, present and future of the archive we are working with. In July 2023, artist Elsa M'Bala contacted the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin with an idea. She had recently been appointed director of a small archive in Kribi, a coastal town in Cameroon's South region. At that point a single room with knee-high stacks of documents lining all four walls and a window overlooking the Atlantic Ocean, the archive belongs to the Ministère du Tourisme et des Loisirs, which is located next door. Yet, despite its institutional affiliation, the archive had been left untouched for years, and no one could recall what it contained. Kribi's history is marked by colonial legacies, yet there have been few opportunities for local engagement with this past. The archive, Elsa believed, had the potential to become a productive and enduring resource for the community. Having previously lived in Kribi with her daughter, she envisioned a space where residents could explore region-

al history, arts and culture. This initiative is also part of a broader effort to decentralize cultural activities, as museums, archives, libraries and concert halls in Cameroon are largely concentrated in the capital, Yaoundé, and the largest city, Douala. However, similar initiatives in the area had previously failed due to short-term investments that lacked sustainable funding. The archive's connection to the Ministry provides it with a degree of security, and with promising collaborations already in motion – beginning with the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, and followed by a collaboration with the Museum der Kulturen Basel – the project already has a strong foundation.

The project's first major goal is to digitize the archive and make its contents accessible. Institutional support comes from regional Délégué Gabriel Barka and national Minister of Arts and Culture Bidoung Mkpatt, along with collaborations with the Musée National and the Archives Nationales. The digital materials generated will be shared with these institutions and the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin. Additionally, Kribi Archives will serve as a centre for information on material cultural belongings, as well as music and photographs from the region that are currently held in Berlin. We hope to grow this repertoire continuously with every new collaboration.

As part of this initiative, the team, in collaboration with the Ministère du Tourisme et des Loisirs, is also producing a booklet about Kribi, shedding light on the region's history and its connection to German colonialism in particular. This too is an effort to enhance access to historical resources. In the long term, the space will host events and small exhibitions, while also serving as a versatile hub for various projects, particularly those focused on research and the arts.

Elsa has been the archive's director since 2022. As a sound artist, she has developed projects in Germany, Canada, Jamaica and elsewhere. Since 2021, she has worked on multiple initiatives with the Humboldt Forum and the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, including a collaboration with the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv on historical and contemporary sound recordings from Cameroon, which will soon be accessible at the Kribi Archive too.

The team also includes Maria Ellendorff, who is deputy curator of West and Southern African 'collections' at the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, with a focus on partnerships with Cameroonian researchers, artists and policy-makers.

Joining more recently is Augustine Moukodi, a video artist from Douala, who accompanied us during our first project phase in Kribi, supported our endeavour in her calm and experienced way and introduced us to several political and other stakeholders. She is also involved in the CoMuse Project Mwano, which explores Cameroonian photographs in the Ethnologisches Museum's archives. Together, the team is planning a pop-up presentation of her research at the Kribi Archives in the near future.

Reassessing the Archive: Reflections on the First Visit

Colonial archives served as instruments of governance, designed for control rather than providing access. They functioned as bureaucratic tools to impose colonial rule, shaping how knowledge was collected, classified and withheld (Basu and de Jong 2016:5). Before our recent visit to the Kribi archive, we could not yet tell how old this particular archive was, nor could the Délégué in charge. Although many colonial archives were neglected upon independence by the newly formed nation states that succeeded colonial regimes and might still be widely untouched to this day (Basu and de Jong 2016), we doubted whether this particular one could be an archive from the German or French colonial period. Given the high temperatures, humidity and lack of ventilation or air-conditioning, we could not have imagined documents surviving this long. Based on the random samples we examined during our visit, we now estimate that the archive is not more than some forty years old. It therefore offers a glimpse into the region's more recent past, especially the vision of Kribi as a tourist destination with hotels (some of them very luxurious) and all sorts of leisure activities. Neglect appears to have set in only about fifteen years ago, perhaps coinciding with the rise of digitization. Yet no one had ever discarded the old documents since then. Though officials must have come and gone, the documents remained untouched, suggesting that they had a certain significance beyond their immediate utility. Their presence speaks to a recognition of their value, one that even outweighed the chance of repurposing what is arguably the best room in the building for office space.

Archives such as the one in Kribi are repositories of the past, whether long gone or relatively recent. They contain traces of specific places and past times, but they also inspire new questions, as they are necessarily incomplete, evolving and open to new readings (Hall 2001). However, to activate their imaginative and aspirational potential, they need to be accessible. By revitalizing the Kribi archive, we hope to create an accessible, community-driven resource that fosters dialogue, creativity and new ways of engaging with history. We want to think 'the archive' beyond its preservation as a space which brings people together.

And that is what it has done so far – bring people together and build a network. It started with Elsa meeting Délégué Barka in 2022, followed by her connecting with Maria at the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin in 2023, where she had existing contacts from previous projects. Together, we reached out to the Ministry of Culture in Cameroon, the Musée National and the Archives Nationales. When Elsa's daughter's visa didn't come through in time for our first joint trip to Kribi in 2025 – delaying Elsa's arrival – we reached out to Augustine Moukodi, a colleague and friend we knew from another project. Tina in turn contacted key stakeholders in Douala, such as a local media designer, who now helps us produce the booklet about Kribi's history and a website. She later accompanied us to Kribi as well.

In Kribi, we discovered that the state of the archive was worse than we had anticipated. When Elsa first visited in 2023, she had only a brief chance to see the space,



Fig. 1 Documents in Kribi Archive 2025 © Maria Ellendorff

without the opportunity to examine its contents or structural condition at all closely. This time, in March 2025, we were confronted with the full extent of its challenges – mouldy walls, no running water and a lack of air-conditioning or proper ventilation. Apart from being uncomfortable, these conditions posed a serious threat to the already fragile documents. Instead of diving straight into digitization, we first focused on making the space functional. We brought in painters, technicians, plumbers and carpenters to improve the archive’s basic infrastructure. By the end of the week, we had running water, electricity, freshly painted (and hopefully mould-resistant) walls and new shelves to begin organizing the materials. While we had yet to digitize a single page, we had laid the groundwork for a space where archival work could truly begin. It wasn’t the start we had planned, but it was the foundation we needed. Now the space is not just more practical, it is also fit for future projects, like workshops and small exhibitions.

At the end of this first phase of establishing contacts and laying the groundwork, Elsa and Tina organized a small opening event, screening one of Tina’s films outside the archive and offering the first chance for people to come together and engage with the archive.

What Does Kribi Have to Do With Berlin? Historical Entanglements

The Ethnologisches Museum Berlin currently holds at least 5,500 cultural belongings from Cameroon. Not least because of the war-related relocation and partial destruction during the Second World War, and the subsequent division of the 'collection' during the inner-German division, we are still in the process of recording the holdings in the database. As part of a cataloguing project, we are currently trying to determine the exact historical total of the Cameroon 'collection', the majority of which was appropriated and brought to the museum during the German colonial period of what is now Cameroon between 1884 and 1919. It is undeniable that the museum benefited from the violent seizure and exploitation of the country and its people. Although not all the belongings were appropriated by force, the unequal power relations of colonialism cannot be ignored, even in the case of supposed gifts or sales. It would also be wrong to assume that the local people were only passive victims in this difficult political situation. Many developed creative strategies of resilience or even outright resistance, while others took advantage of the situation to the best of their ability, forming alliances, concluding treaties, or establishing trade relations.

Although the 'collection' includes cultural belongings from all regions of Cameroon, the regions most prominently represented are those that were most intensively frequented by Germans during Germany's colonial occupation. The largest part of the 'collection' comes from the Western Grassfields, a region particularly known for its royal art and culture. The current exhibition at the Humboldt Forum also focuses on these artistic traditions and the cultural heritage of this region.

The physical belongings are complemented by 17,500 photographs, 150 audio and video recordings and thousands of pages of written documents.

At first glance, the entanglements between the museum's 'collection' and Kribi might not seem obvious. The database lists 43 cultural belongings as originating from Kribi, a comparably small number.¹ Yet, walking through the streets of Kribi, you still see how deeply inscribed the German presence is in the face of the town.

The depth of the connection between Berlin's 'collection' and Kribi's own archive became clear during our first official meeting with Délégué Barka in March 2025. As a present, we brought two copies of photographs from the Berlin archive that had been taken in Kribi. One depicted a wooden boat in shallow waters, crowded with at least thirty people. At either end of the boat, flags with three horizontal stripes – two dark, one white – were visible. The foreground showed a strip of beach and the background some large trees. For anyone unfamiliar with the area, this photo could have been taken anywhere along the coast.

However, the Délégué recognized the location immediately when we gave him the copy of the photo and pointed out of the window of his office, where we were sitting.

1 In comparison, the Bamum 'collection' – one of the largest – comprises more than 1,000 cultural belongings.



Fig. 2 Photo from the archive of the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, taken by Robert Lohmeyer in Kribi 1908 (VIII A 4287) © Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz

He took us on to the veranda, which is located at the back of the ministerial building, overlooking the ocean. It became instantly clear that the photograph had been taken just a few metres from where we were standing. What appeared in the image as trees in the background was, in reality, a small island marking the entrance to the lagoon and the harbour behind it. It was the very harbour that had long served as a gateway for locals returning from fishing at sea and that had attracted Germans to settle here. It was also the very harbour that inspired the French and Chinese to build one of the largest deep-sea ports of the area in Kribi.

Kribi is a coastal town of approximately 60,000 people. It is best known for its pristine white beaches, swaying palm trees and outstanding seafood. Unlike the bustling streets of nearby Douala, the town is quieter, with lighter traffic, and while the weather is warm, a refreshing ocean breeze often provides relief.

Its location by the ocean has made it a key site of economic and geopolitical interests. While Kribi has long served external powers by exporting resources, it has rarely benefited equally from the wealth generated by these industries. It remains without a space where local people can engage critically with the history of their town. This absence is partly a legacy of Cameroon's centralized political system, introduced during the French colonial period, which concentrated resources and institutions in the capital Yaoundé and, to some extent, the former capital of Douala.

Before the colonial intervention, Kribi was home primarily to the Mabi and Batanga people, who lived in villages scattered in and around the area of the present-day town. Its natural lagoon served as a protected harbour where fishermen could load and

unload their boats shielded from the rough Atlantic waters. This natural advantage made Kribi an important site for trade and transportation.

When Germany declared Cameroon a protectorate in 1884, Kribi's strategic position became a key asset for the occupiers. They took advantage of its coastal location and its connection to the interior via the Kineke River, using it as a hub for exporting raw materials extracted from the so-called *Hinterland*. During this period, Kribi was transformed into an economic centre for German interests, while local communities bore the brunt of colonial exploitation and violence.

The German administration met frequent resistance from the local population. The first documented armed confrontation between Germans and the Batanga occurred in 1889. One German report states: 'Es wurden im Ganzen in 8 Ortschaften 106 Hütten und 21 Kanoes zerstört, sowie 3 Gefangene gemacht.' ('A total of 106 huts and 21 canoes were destroyed in 8 villages, and 3 prisoners were taken.') (Bundesarchiv R1001/3356:11).

In 1899, the Bulu, living further inland, launched an attack on German positions in Kribi, temporarily pushing them back. The Germans answered with a military campaign, a so-called *Strafexpedition* (punitive expedition), for which they recruited local fighters to fight alongside German soldiers. Locals who fought for the Germans (often dying in large numbers) were called 'collabos' by fellow Cameroonians and often faced repercussions for years to come.

In 1914 the Batanga, led by their leader Madola, joined plans for an uprising against the German occupiers. Their efforts aligned with those of the well-known anti-colonial resistance fighters Rudolf Douala Manga Bell and Martin-Paul Samba, who sought to overthrow the Germans with British and French support. However, their plans were betrayed, leading to the execution of Madola, Manga Bell and Samba, among others. Many Batanga then fled Kribi and only returned after the First World War, an event that is still commemorated every April with a major celebration in the town.

Kribi's economy today is still shaped by large-scale industrial projects that primarily serve external interests. Just outside the town, a gas-fired power plant that is 56% owned by an independent power producer supplies electricity to seven of Cameroon's ten regions. From September 2024 to February 2025 the power plant was switched off due to unpaid debts the Cameroonian government owes to the independent power producer, causing significant power outages.

Meanwhile, the Port of Kribi has been rapidly expanding, driving people from their homes. It is set to become Cameroon's largest port. The first phase of its development cost approximately \$568 million, with 85% of the finance provided by China's Exim-bank. The remaining 15 % was covered by the Cameroonian government, binding the country to long-term debt repayments to China.²

2 Additionally, the finance was tied to the state-owned China Harbour Engineering Company (CHEC), which handled major construction contracts, ensuring that a large portion of the investment remained within China's economy. It is assumed that, should Cameroon fail to meet the repayment terms, Chi-

These developments are not coincidental but direct consequences of colonial interference. Additionally, the absence of institutions for historical reflection reinforces a cycle in which Kribi's past and present remain largely dictated by outside forces. Addressing this imbalance requires not only recognizing Kribi's historical significance but also creating spaces where local people can engage critically with their histories and shape their own narratives for the future.

Laying the Groundwork: Collaborative Beginnings in the Kribi Archives Project

Extractivist practices are still prevalent in the area, particularly within large-scale industries. Museums, which have themselves profited significantly from extractivist forms of colonial governance, are now attempting to reposition themselves as postcolonial by including Indigenous stakeholders and members of the source communities, and framing these initiatives as collaborative. 'Collaboration', although lacking a universal definition and therefore without standardized aims and approaches, has undoubtedly fostered critical self-reflection and, in many ways, even transformed the museum landscape. Still, museums have often benefited disproportionately from these kinds of partnerships (Boast 2011:66), which tend to produce exhibitions or publications targeting their own audiences.

In this project, we aim to create a dynamic space that in the long run serves multiple actors in Cameroon and beyond, functioning as a space for research, exhibition and experimenting with different formats. One initiative is to bring the 'Gästezimmer' or guestroom, a discursive format of the Collaborative Museum at the Humboldt Forum, to Kribi. This format allows guest researchers and artists to present their work at the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst and to engage with an interested public. We want to adapt this format either digitally or in-person. By doing so, we leave the 'echo chamber' of the Museum and encourage a dialogue with a broader and more diverse audience face to face. Our aim is to foster exchange, while also addressing the tendency to prioritize museum interests over local needs. If that means we must fix a mouldy wall before we can start digitizing, then that is what we shall do.

As we continue working on this project, we recognize the responsibility that comes with unlocking the potential of a local archive, and we strive to embrace the unexpected challenges that will undoubtedly come our way. Our collaborative approach aims

nese stakeholders might negotiate long-term concessions or increased control over port operations. The terminals are run by private companies, which pay fees to the Port Authority of Kribi (PAK). The Container Terminal, for instance, is operated by a consortium led by CMA CGM (a French multi-billion dollar company), Bolloré (another French multi-billion dollar company) and CHEC.

not only to revitalize the archive as a repository of historical and local knowledge but also to foster an inclusive environment for knowledge production. By bringing together residents, artists, researchers and institutions, we seek to create a space that reflects the rich tapestry of Kribi's past, present and future.

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