

THE NGONDO: TRADITIONAL AND RITUAL FESTIVAL OF THE CAMEROONIAN COASTAL PEOPLES



CULTURAL PARTICIPATION PEACE SOCIAL
COMMUNITY IDENTITY **STRATEGY**
INTERCULTURAL ARTS TRADITION

1. Background

As the economic capital and main gateway to Cameroon, the city of Douala is a cosmopolitan city of almost 3 million people, with an average annual population growth of 4.87%, or 150,000 new people each year. An industrial city where formal and informal activities coexist, Douala is composed of six boroughs and 150 neighbourhoods. It includes all the Cameroonian communities, with 240 different ethnic groups from different regions of Cameroon, and over 208 dialects, as well as many foreign



communities, with more than 30 consulates and nearly 50 nationalities. It is also a multi-faith city, with 56% Christians, 24% Muslims, and 20% of people who are followers of local beliefs.

Located at the bottom of the Gulf of Guinea, and neighbouring on Nigeria, Chad, Gabon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Central African Republic, and Equatorial Guinea, Douala is at the confluence of many economic flows, both inside the country and within Central Africa.

2. Douala and Culture

In the City of Douala, Agenda 21 is a testament to the essential role given to culture for sustainable urban development. As part of its development, public consultations were organised in each neighbourhood, to address issues of urban planning, sanitation, environmental conservation, biodiversity, and much more.

At the end of the process, a number of objectives were outlined, including "embedding culture in everyday life and throughout the city". This is evident in several actions, such as: enhancing Douala's cultural heritage, promoting mobility and exchanges between actors, networking to ensure the integration and promotion of associations and other local actors, developing citizen dialogue, and creating cultural spaces.

Based on this vision, a partnership was signed in 2008 with the SAWA Traditional People's Assembly. One of the aims of this partnership is to develop activities for the preservation and enhancement of the arts and local culture, which are symbols of the city's identity.

The city's community development policy promotes cultural diversity, inclusion, and social peace, highlighting the local culture, cultures of other Cameroonian regions, and of foreigners living in Douala. Furthermore, the city encourages local artists and creators, and supports many cultural activity initiatives around the urban identity of Douala.



3. Objectives and Project Implementation

1.1. Primary and Specific Objectives

The organisation of the "Ngondo" traditional ritual aims to strengthen co-existence within the population of Douala, specifically by strengthening ties with the Sawa community, comprised of many coastal peoples Douala, Bassa, Bakoko, Bakweri, Ewodi, etc.

Specifically, the Ngondo aims to:

- Create opportunities for meeting and exchange at urban events
- Promote the cultural identity of the Sawa peoples and strengthen the authority and sustainability of the traditional Sawa People's Assembly.
- Have a significant impact on the lives of communities living in Douala
- Develop economic activities related to culture

ALL THE STRATEGIC DOCUMENTS ADOPTED BY THE CITY OF DOUALA, SUCH AS AGENDA 21, THE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY, AND THE URBAN MASTER PLAN, WERE CREATED THROUGH A PARTICIPATORY AND TRANSVERSAL APPROACH.

1.2. Project Development

Main Actions Carried Out

The Ngondo is the traditional and ritual feast of the Sawa people, who are a coastal Cameroonian community from one of the four cultural areas of Cameroon. The Ngondo was established in 1949 for a commemorative purpose, on the proposal of Stéphane Ndoumbe Ekale of the Ngondo Committee, and under the supervision of the traditional assembly of the Sawa people. Originally, this Assembly represented the customary court of the Sawa people, until 1900 when it became an authority for



defending its interests, and subsequently an institution that fought for the independence of Cameroon in 1960.

Today, this event is a cosmopolitan festival where all cultures gather in Douala. This includes local ethnic groups but also inhabitants from Benin, Nigeria, Senegal, India, and elsewhere. The celebration is centred on values of social inclusion and non-discrimination based on gender, age, origin, or social status. Each year, the Ngondo festival is held on the banks of the Wouri River. It takes place throughout the month of November, and ends with a week full of cultural events leading up to the first Sunday of December. The main organising body is the Urban Community of Douala.

During the festival, a large number of cultural promotion activities are organised, such as visits to the six main townships of Wouri, a fair/exhibition, the reception of Cameroon's other ethnic groups as well as foreigners, dance competitions, traditional combat, races and boating, beauty competitions, ecumenical worship services on a theme, and Carnival.

The city's Carnival celebration attracts audiences from all walks of life in Cameroon, Africa and elsewhere. It includes a whole series of events such as contemporary and traditional music concerts, the organisation of gastronomic activities, street-painting, Ngondo Pecten, a day of hygiene and healthiness, or the hosting of a half marathon.

The Great Ngondo vigil brings together all the patriarchs and members of the participating communities. Many key events of the festival take place there, including the semifinal of the traditional combat, the final of the beauty contest, or even choir activities.

The water mass is the highlight of the festival, with the immersion of the sacred vessel on the banks of the Wouri River. This is done to establish a deep connection between the invisible world and the People of the water. At the end, one member carries out the interrogation of the "manes" and the interpretation of the "omens". It is also at this time when the traditional combat final, the nautical parade, the canoe race, the urban parade, the announcing of the results, and the presentation of the awards are held.



The Ngondo also helps other regular or occasional activities, which generally aim to strengthen co-existence, peace, and urban identity. Additionally, traditional leaders of the north-western region of Cameroon, called Fon's, met with the Sawa officials on the banks of the Wouri River.

In 2017, the festival was organised in cooperation with international partners from Benin. Collaborations with Nigeria, Senegal, or India are planned for 2018 and for future years. Alongside the annual festival, the construction of a Sawa Cultural Centre aims to create a place and a cultural platform benchmark for initiatives.

The budget of the Ngondo Cultural Festival is nearly 185,000,000 CFA Francs (282,000 Euros). It currently generates revenue from the sale of handicrafts, but the economic model is still being defined.

The main obstacles to the organisation of the festival are:

- The poor state of the 11 hectare site where the events are held, which is still under development and improvement, and which is particularly affected by fluvial erosion
- Difficulties in ensuring adequate funding, relative to the budget estimates, prior to the festival, particularly because some payments must be made before the event. This could demoralise some groups. This situation was narrowly avoided in 2017 thanks to a substantial budget supplement.
- The late mobilisation of certain partners and target communities.

4. Impact

1.1. Direct Impacts



Impact on Local Government

- Taking into account the unique cultural composition of Douala in its urban development policy, especially regarding the report of the Sawa people
- Harmonious relationships between municipal authorities and traditional authorities
- Intensification of education and awareness-raising activities for the preservation of the environment.

Impact on Culture and Cultural Stakeholders in the City

- Preservation and enhancement of Sawa cultural identity, other local cultures, and even foreign cultures
- Promotion of the local arts and crafts community
- Renew confidence for artists to help them present their art to the general public

Greater Impact on the City or Territory and its Population

The project has had a profound effect on the Sawa people, residents, and non-residents alike. The activities also targeted local associations, athletes, shops, and local and foreign businesses.

- Strengthening the sense of belonging for the Sawa community
- Increased interest in engagement with the Sawa people and their cultural practices (cooking, clothing, genealogy, dance, language)
- Promotion of co-existence between communities
- Development of economic activities, especially commercial activities related to this festival
- Increasing attractiveness for the city internationally

1.2. Assessment

The project was first evaluated internally by the monitoring committee for the implementation of the Partnership Agreement of the Urban Community of Douala/Ngondo. Preparatory consultation meetings were organised, as well as feedback sessions on the progress of each activity. Also, a gala evening of exchanges and gratitude was held with the partners of the event.



Regarding external evaluation, surveys and interviews were conducted with guests and the public. Local and national radio and television broadcast about the event. Furthermore, the closing Mass is broadcast live. A newspaper titled "Ngondo Magazine" is published annually to inform the public. Finally, a representative of the President of the Republic, as well as several members of the government and heads of diplomatic missions were present.

OVER THE YEARS, THE EVENT HAS BROUGHT TOGETHER AN INCREASING NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS, NEARLY 85% OF LOCAL BUSINESSES, AND AROUSES GREAT INTEREST FROM THE SAWA PEOPLE AND OTHER ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES.

1.3. Key Factors

The key factors for the success of this project include:

- Support from local community leaders
- Commitment by the Urban Community of Douala (CUD) to support and promote the event
- The management of Ngondo - as a traditional gathering - by the Senior Leaders who are strongly involved in the management of public affairs of all kinds
- The federation of actors around the organisation of the event (partners, patrons)
- Representation of the Highest National Authorities;
- The broad participation of the population in the various organised activities.

1.4. Ongoing Work

The next Ngondo festival is being organised. The event will be an opportunity to improve several areas, especially concerning the organisation of Carnival in the City of Douala. To this end, additional resources need to be found both in terms of technical and material resources (organisation and promotion, site development, equipment, etc.) and financial resources (support for guests and the public, payment for performances, trophy costs, and event communication).

5. Further Information

The Urban Community of Douala was a candidate for the third annual "UCLG Mexico City – Culture 21 International Award" (November 2017 - May 2018). The jury for the award drew up its final report in June of 2016, and requested that the UCLG Committee on Culture highlight this project as a good practice in the implementation of Agenda 21 for culture, and as a special mention for the third awarding of the Prize.

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