

A TWENTIETH CENTURY HISTORY OF ABSENCE AND PRESENCE IN BENIN CITY: PRESENTATIONS AND REPRESENTATIONS OF OBJECTS LOOTED IN 1897

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The origins of the National Museum of Benin City go back to the 1930s, its collections as well as others in the city, tell a story of resilience in the face of absence and loss. In 1897, between 4000 and 9000ⁱⁱ objects were taken by the British during a "punitive expedition" from the city's royal palace and surrounding dependencies. A number of objects also remained behind in different hiding places and others have since been excavated or even bought "back". Many others have been recreated, copied (sometimes, in often over emphasized cases, to be later trafficked and passed off as fakes elsewhere) and there is an otherwise active production of royal court art that continues to this dayⁱⁱⁱ.

In the Benin concept of history, the city and its former territories constitute more than a centre, they were the "cradle of human civilization"^{iv} and local historians readily compare the British Empire at the end of the Nineteenth century to that of Benin^v. The position of the building of the Museum of Benin City^{vi} and its collections embody the paradoxes of a collective relationship to lost centrality and to an institution that has struggled to legitimate its place in civil society^{vii}. Lying at the centre of the city, though close to the royal palace, the museum is cut off from the town by a huge traffic roundabout that cannot be crossed on foot. Up until October 2016^{viii} it displayed a set of copies of some famous brass and ivory works taken in 1897 but that are today in Lagos' National Museum; these pieces from the 1897 loot were bought at high prices on the European and American art market in the 1950's by the founders of Nigeria's first museum established in the colonial capital^{ix}. Through their dispersal, sale, exchange and display, the ancestral cult objects taken in 1897 are best known internationally as "world art"^x. But how has their meaning evolved in the space from which they are essentially absent physically? What stories do they tell and what functions do they have in the museums, private and semi-private collections of Benin City^{xi}? The pieces created before 1897 are still present and often represented by forms that appear as contradictory to Western notions of "authenticity" and "antiquities" and that frame the deep relationship that the people of Benin City have preserved to the objects looted in 1897. In Benin City, heritage making practices hybrid forms, combining traditional points of view on conservation and display with those introduced more recently through the national museum system and through international collaborations^{xii}. It is a source of potential that current projects are seeking to harness and develop in a city^{xiii} that is experiencing many severe social difficulties^{xiv}.

The history of collecting and display of traditional objects in Benin City can tell us much about the distributed workings of translocated objects and their constant reconfigurations between regional, national and global ideologies of heritage.

i As a local project and a collection of Benin antiquities, the origins of the National Museum of Benin City can be traced back to the 1930s, to the figure of the historian Chief Dr. Jacob Egharevba (1893-1981) and to the further support of Oba Akenzua II who reigned from 1933 to 1978 and whose personal donation forms the core of the current collection officially established in 1946.

ii This is a high estimate provided by local historians in Benin City. Though it is perhaps an exaggerated one it underlines the sense expressed by many people interviewed that the true story about these objects is never told beyond Benin City itself.

iii On Benin art in the 20th century see: M'Bow Babacar et Ebohon Osomwegie, *Benin, a kingdom in bronze*, Fort Lauderdale, Benin City, Nigeria : African American Research Library and Cultural Center, Broward County Library; Ebohon Cultural Center, 2005.

iv Osadolor Osarhieme Benson, "Intricacies of a Great Past: A Survey of the Non-Academic Historiography of Benin", in Axel Harneit-Sievers (dir.), *A Place in the World: New Local Historiographies from Africa and South Asia*, Brill, 2002, p. 112.

v Interview with Chief and High Priest Osemwegie Ebohon of Benin City, interview 16th of March 2017.

vi The grounds are home to the administrative buildings related to the former colonial government's rule of the city. Some of them today serve as museum offices and reserves. The central building, opened to the public in 1973, was one of the last in a series of purpose built museums to join the ranks of the national museums of Nigeria driven mainly by the initiative of Kenneth C. Murray who created a general service of Nigerian antiquities in 1943.

vii Kokunre Agbontaen-Eghafona, « The Use of Benin Cultural Objects for Educational Programmes in Museums », *Nigerian heritage: journal of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments.*, vol. 11, 2002.

viii It is right now closed for renovation, it will reopen at the end of 2017 with the support of the Smithsonian Institut and the World Heritage Foundation.

ix Research in the archives of the National Museum in Lagos has allowed me to reconstruct the history of these acquisitions.

x On recent revisions of this notion see: Bodenstern Felicity et Troelenberg Eva-Maria, « Revisiter les "arts du monde": histoires critiques et défis contemporains », *Perspective*, vol. 1, 2017 (à paraître)

xi For example the Ebohon Centre is one of Benin's largest private collections of court art but many other homes of local chiefs present collections and ritual altars.

xii Kokunre Agbontaen-Eghafona, « If the Treasures are Returned. Views on Museums and the Cultural Heritage in Benin City », in Wilhelm Östberg (dir.), *Whose objects? Art Treasures from the Kingdom of Benin in the collection of the Museum of Ethnography*, Stockholm, Stockholm : Etnografiska museet, 2010. On traditional collection and conservation practices see: Kokunre AGBONTAENEGHAFONA et A. IKECHUKWU OKPOKO, « Curatorship of Benin Cultural Materials: Toward Integrating Indigenous and Orthodox Methods », *African Study Monographs*, vol. 25, n° 4, décembre 2004.

xiii Omorotioman Emmanuel Imadorie, *Nigerian Museums Restructuring, for tourism and sustainable development: a study of National Museum, Benin*, Masters Thesis, Faculty of Social Science, Univeristy of Benin, Benin, janvier 2015, 140 p.

xiv During my trip to Benin City I spoke with a number of University researchers working on the issue of human trafficking. One of the greatest challenges that the city has faced in the last three decades has been the "export" of young girls and women for prostitution networks in Europe. It is estimated that nearly every family in Benin City has in some way been affected by this phenomena and that 70% of Nigerian prostitutes in Europe originate from Benin City.