

BENIN TO BERLIN ETHNOLOGISCHES MUSEUM: ARE BENIN BRONZES MADE IN BERLIN?

*Berlin, Berlin, Berlin,
Benin bronzes burnt in Berlin?
Berlin boasts 482 Benin bronzes but
Benin bleeds badly.*

“The restitution of those cultural objects which our museums and collections, directly or indirectly, possess thanks to the colonial system and are now being demanded, must also not be postponed with cheap arguments and tricks.”

Gert v. Paczensky and Herbert Ganslmayr, *Nofretete will nach Hause*. (1)



Head of Queen Mother-Iyoba. Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin

The Benin Exhibition, *Benin: Kings and Rituals. Court Arts from Nigeria* goes to Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum from February 7 to May 25, 2008. The Berlin Museum für Völkerkunde, renamed Ethnologisches Museum as from 2000, was legally established on 12 December, 1873 largely due to the tireless efforts of Adolf Bastian (1826-1905), its first director who is considered by many as the founder of German Ethnology and who insisted on collecting cultural material from the peoples of Africa and Oceania who he thought would soon disappear due to contact with European civilization. (2) According to the catalogue of the exhibition, several German museums lent their Benin art works to the exhibition. (3)

Alone, the list of German museums holding African cultural objects is impressive and shows the extent to which the former colonial power plundered the colonies for art works.

It is not often remembered that the German museums have several art works from Africa and that Germany had been a colonial power on the Continent, having had under its control, Togo, Cameroon, German-East Africa (Tanganyika, Burundi and Ruanda) and German-South-West Africa (Namibia) until the end of the First World War. We leave aside the Brandenburger-Prussian colonies Gross Friederichsburg in Ghana, (1683-1718), Arguin, in Mauritania, (1685-1721). It should also be remembered that colonialist ideology in Germany did not start with Germany's possession of colonies nor did it end with Germany's loss of colonies after the First World War.

Many people do not even seem to recall that the infamous imperialist meeting that divided Africa among the colonizing powers, the Berlin Conference of 1884, took place in the then and now capital of Germany, Berlin under the chairmanship of Bismarck, the chancellor ("*Reichskanzler*"). Moreover, German ethnologists and archaeologists had been very active in Africa, the most famous being Leo Frobenius (1873-1938) who collected several thousands of artefacts from the Continent and made a contribution to the Africa collection of the Berlin Ethnologisches Museum. He considered forced labour and corporal punishment in the German colonies as necessary and fair. Leopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire seemed to have derived some inspiration for their negritude from an incomplete reading of his works but a thorough study of his works reveals his deep-seated colonialist and racist views. (4) He was also alleged to have stolen some items and was actually brought to justice. Glenn Penny recounts this story in his book, *Objects of Culture: Ethnology and Ethnographic Museums in Imperial Germany*:

"During his travels in Nigeria in 1911, Frobenius came into direct conflict with the British authorities concerning his collecting policies in what has come to be known as the Olokun Affair. This incident developed following complaints by the inhabitants of Ife, the sacred capital of the Yoruba country in southern Nigeria that Frobenius had mistreated and deceived them, and had taken away religious objects without their consent. The principal item in dispute was the bronze head of the god Olokun, which Frobenius claimed to have "discovered" in a groove outside the walls of Ife, but which the town's inhabitants accused him of stealing. As a result of the complaints, which followed Frobenius's departure from the city British authorities summoned him before an improvised British court and eventually forced him to return many of the items he had acquired from the area". (5)

When we recall the German colonial rule, a very brutal regime, remembered for its genocide of the Hereros and Namas in South West Africa (now Namibia), as revenge for the killing of some German settlers who had seized their land and were dominating, we may assume that the life of the Africans was not an easy one and that many of the art objects in German museums were obtained through coercion or intimidation even if presented as purchases or gifts. It should also be recalled that the colonial State was no "*Rechtsstaat*". (6) Outright force was of course not excluded beatings and caning were widespread, many times exercised by the employer for absenteeism from work and the death sentence was more often enforced in the colonies than in Germany itself. It is quite clear that the structural violence of the colonial situation and the frequent actual use of force by German colonial administrators and the German settlers made Africans amenable to parting with the objects the Europeans wanted. If the present German museum directors are not conscious of this, others in the colonies did not fail to notice this, Cornelia Essner has remarked:

"That the acquisition of ethnografica in the colonial time was on the basis of more or less "structural violence" will not be pursued in detail in this context. Some individual contemporaries were perfectly aware of this fact. Thus one Africa-traveller and resident of

the German Empire in Ruanda, Richard Kandt, wrote in 1897 to Felix von Luschan, Deputy Director of the Ethnology Museum, Berlin, as follows: "It is especially difficult to procure an object without at least employing some force. I believe that half of your museum consists of stolen objects." (7)

When some museums indicate that certain objects were given as gifts, one must remember that these were not gifts from the African people but from German adventurers, settlers or colonial administrators. Certainly, no African peoples would readily give away any religious or ritual object to a foreigner unless under considerable pressure to do so. Moreover, in a system of arbitrary rule and fear, it would not be very difficult for European administrators to persuade African subjects to give up even their most precious possessions. The reputation of colonial administrators, whether British, German, French or Belgian to resort readily to the use of force is well established. The history of the Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin and how the cultural objects there were procured are well discussed in the excellent book by Christine Stelzig, *Afrika am Museum für Völkerkunde zu Berlin 1873-1919*. (8)

That the colonial subjects of Germany were in no position to exercise freely full legal and human rights has been well documented in several publications: David Simo, for example, declared that

"Europeans were supposed to combat local alleged wildness to establish a civilized order, but colonization in fact established a reign of violence and injustice." (9)

Similarly, Helmut Stoecker in a study entitled, *"The Position of Africans in the German Colonies"*, declared ; *"The almost total absence of genuine liberalism among the Germans in the colonies, the grim and obstinate anti-African racism already referred to, and the preference for direct and openly practiced oppression all combined to make a situation possible in which "nearly every white man walks around with a whip... and almost every white man indulges in striking any black man he chooses to, as Colonial Secretary Bernhard Dernburg discovered in Dar es Salaam in 1907."* (10)

It is common knowledge that the Germans have some of the largest collections of African art in the world and in terms of quality, there is no gainsay that some of the best works ever produced on the Continent are in Germany, and particularly, in the Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin which has some 75,000 African works out of a total of 500,000 objects. Ample evidence of this is provided by the publications of the Museum. In an article by Frank Willett entitled *"Benin"*, it is stated that *"The Ethnological Museum Berlin considers itself lucky to be the possessor of the largest and probably most important collection of Benin art in the world"*. (11). Indeed, it was after the British Museum had realized how massive the German purchases of the Benin artworks were at the auctions by the British after the 1897 invasion and looting of Benin, that they sought more funds to increase their own stock. (12) Felix von Luschan (1854-1924), who succeeded Adolf Bastian as Director of the Ethnologisches Museum (1885-1911) is credited with making most of those purchases. He produced a famous work, *Die Altertümer von Benin* (1919) and was also credited with creating the infamous von Luschan's chromatic scale for classifying skin colour, which consisted of 36 opaque glass tiles which were compared to the subject's skin. Von Luschan was also known to have made some nasty remarks about Africans who did not accept the perception of themselves as the ethnologist assigned. He made nasty remarks about such educated Africans, calling them "trouser niggers" ("Hosen-niggers"). (13)

The German attitude and action towards restitution and compensation for art objects illegally acquired by them and reparation for large scale destruction of other peoples is very interesting. Whereas they are willing and indeed have returned art works stolen or seized by the Nazis from Jews and other Germans, and have paid reparation for Nazi atrocities against Jews, they are not willing to treat Africans in the same way. They have refused to return the

bust of Nefertiti to the Egyptians and are not even willing to lend it for a short period for an exhibition in Cairo in 2012. The demands of the Hereros of Namibia for reparation for the massacre of their people and the confiscation of their property are met with either arrogance or indifference. Whereas the German have set up a Holocaust Memorial in honour of the Jews killed by the Nazis, I am not aware that any such memorial for the Hereros or other Africans has been erected or is even contemplated. Ironically, many of the perpetrators of the first Holocausts are all honoured with street names in Germany.

Colonialism preceded Nazism and offered sufficient examples of brutality and racism. Whether German colonialism was a step towards National Socialism or not is not my main concern here. I am only arguing for the need for compensation and equal treatment. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that most of the basic characteristics of the atrocious and evil practices of Nazi system were already practised in the German colonies such as Südwestafrika (Namibia) - concentration camps, pass system and racial oppression, eugenicist ideas and practices of racial selection, territorial expansion and confiscation of property. (14) The transposition of these nefarious practices from Africa to Europe caused more shock than their implementation against Africans. Why?

It is also not our intention to make a general assessment of German colonialism, however important this may be. We believe nevertheless that an examination of the circumstances or atmosphere in which the huge collection of the Ethnologisches Museum was made is not completely irrelevant to the question of restitution and since most of this acquisition was made in the colonial period, that period must also be our concern.

As for returning the Benin art works, the German position has been made very clear by the Director-General of the State Museums, Berlin by signing the infamous Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums by the major museums of Europe and America. In a note in explanation of his signing this Declaration, Peter-Klaus Schuster stated that

“Through the Declaration, these museums wished to stress the vital role they play in cultivating a better comprehension of different civilizations and in promoting respect between them...”

The collections in Berlin were acquired through the art market or private commerce. No deal was in fact possible without a contract of sale or permission to export. This does not mean that nothing was sold or exported. But it does mean that all objects came legally into the collections”. (15)

Is the director-general completely unaware of German colonial history or does he simply prefer not to remember the political and socio-economic structures that made it possible to collect many of the objects that are now in the Berlin museums? Or has German colonial history, with all its genocides, massacres, expulsions, expropriation of land, concentration camps and other inhuman treatment, nothing to do with acquisition of objects for the ethnological museums in Germany, especially, the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin? I would hate to have to refer to the hundreds of books and articles on German colonial history written by Germans and others. (16)

The bold and categorical general denial by the Museum Director does not stand even a cursory examination of the facts. It is also interesting that at the same time as the museum directors were proclaiming that requests for restitution should be examined on case by case basis and that there cannot be any general decision to repatriate all objects, the same directors did not hesitate to make sweeping statements regarding the legality and legitimacy of all objects in their museums. It is true that strict logic and respect for historical facts are no longer relevant factors for many museum directors when it comes to protecting the objects they illegally hold in their museums. Moreover, the Director of the Ethnologisches Museum

was equally a signatory to the ill-advised preface in the catalogue of the Benin Exhibition. (17)

The astonishing view expressed by Peter-Klaus Schuster that all objects in his museums were legally acquired is, fortunately, not shared by many of his colleagues. Lüderwaldt from the Übersee-Museum Bremen stated in an International Symposium in 1979 that:

“When I now look at the source and history of individual collections and objects in the Übersee-Museum Bremen which I represent here and try to trace back, then I must say that abysses will be opened up; not that the objects were appropriated with violence as in Benin. There are other possibilities of illegal acquisition; there is gentle “force”. I therefore appeal to all museum officials to research the history of their collections; we would then show more understanding for the demands for restitution.” (18)

At the same Symposium, Kussmaul declared:

“If the demands are now restricted essentially to the colonial territories, then this is a substantial progress and all German ethnology museums have at their disposal so much materials from the old colonies that from these collections small representative collections could be given where the museum conditions are such that a museum official could defend the restitution, and where the objects of similar quality and similar times are today lacking.”(19)

Interesting enough, none of the museums claiming universality has a governing body which is any where near being universal and their budgets are wholly dependent on national resources. Are they then universal bodies with national budgets? This is clearly an absurdity which can be easily confirmed by a quick look at the laws and regulations concerning their operations. It is also relevant to notice that when the museums that pretend to have a universal mandate talk of cooperation with the African museums, they are only thinking of cooperation as regards the stolen African artworks. The museum directors can only think and act from a purely Eurocentric view point; they never consider the need for Africans to introduce European art and culture to the African public and the need for Africans also to have European artworks for the African museum public. How about sending some Picassos, Rembrandts, Rubens, Klimts and Goyas on loan to Accra, Lagos, Dakar and Nairobi? Should the African public not also be given the opportunity to see and study European art at first hand just as Europeans can go to London, Paris and Berlin to study African art icons? To raise this issue is already the sign of the beginning of the end for these pretentious universalists whose universe begins and ends in Europe.

It is not clear on what basis the Germans choose to treat the Africans' claim differently from those of the Jews. Is it on the basis of colour of skin or continental basis? Is the genocide of the Hereros any less atrocious than the Nazi atrocities? Are the long colonial suppression of the Namibian peoples and the illegal acquisition of stolen art objects not ground enough for restitution and reparation? It is interesting to note that the Germans who are asking the Poles to return German artworks the Nazis stole and hid in Poland, are not willing to do the same unto others. The Germans proudly announce everywhere their joy at the return of African art works, some 25,000 objects which the Soviets took during the Second World War and returned on German reunification. (20) One cannot help but feel that in the conscience of many Germans, there appears to be nothing wrong with oppressing and massacring Africans and stealing their goods but a similar atrocity should not be meted out to Jews. The self assurance with which the German officials talk about stolen African art objects is just amazing. One Director of a museum is in love with Nefertiti and would not allow her to leave Berlin. Besides, it appears the old lady cannot travel from Berlin to Cairo without some damage although she made the journey to Berlin decades ago, at a time when travel conditions were not as good as today! The commercial profit behind the German position is clear for every blind person to see. Many tourists flock to Berlin in order to visit the famous

lady, an advantage the Germans do not want to miss. Whilst one can understand this, there are no honest and serious justifications for keeping the Egyptian lady in Germany against her will and the will of her people in Egypt. The same goes for keeping Queen mother Idia of Benin in the Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin.

Within the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee dealing with restitution, a meeting was held on 19 November 2002 between Turkish and German representatives in Berlin with regard to the return of the Bogazkoy Sphinx to Turkey. *“Germany proposed keeping the original Sphinx and having a replica made to give to Turkey. Turkey proposed the return of the Sphinx to Turkey and giving a replica to Germany. Neither proposal was accepted.”* (21)

Will the Ethnology Museum of Berlin give, in a similar situation, a different answer from what the Völkerkunde Museum, Munich gave to a request by Prince Kum’a Ndumbe, from Cameroon (formerly, Professor at Free University Berlin and founder of AfricAvenir) for the return of his grand father’s royal symbol, the *tangue*, the bow of a ship which the Germans stole from the palace of the king Kum’a Ndumbe in 1884 before they burnt down his palace as reaction to the king’s resistance to German rule:

“Nowhere does this connection between ethnology and colonialism appear more clearly than in today’s exhibitions in ethnology museums. They show almost exclusively exhibits derived from the wars of plunder and conquest. Many of the efforts of the post-colonial discourse at relativization govern the policy of the ethnological museums. If one judges the “collections” by European law, then it is, in principle, a show of stolen goods. Even the hint to think about the restitution of the objects is considered as exaggerated or ignored. The founder of AfricAvenir, Kum’a Ndumbe, who requested from the Ethnology Museum, Munich the return of an object which was proved to belong to his father, received a response that the museum did not have enough money for that purpose. The museum could, however, at the costs of Kum’a Ndumbe, secure a duplicate for him.” (22)

In the acquisition of art objects and artefacts from the German colonies, the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin enjoyed a position of great significance. A decision of the *Bundesrat* (*“Bundesratsbeschluss - Decree of the Federal Council”*) of 21 February 1889 gave the Berlin Museum für Völkerkunde priority in the purchase of all ethnographic objects acquired from the German colonies. This meant that any ethnographical object from the German colonies acquired through the resources of the Reich had first to be sent to the Berlin Völkerkunde Museum which then determined whether it wanted to keep it or, in case of duplication, send it on to the other ethnographical museums in Germany. It appears there was very little fair distribution and the other museums complained. This gave the Berlin Museum an unchallengeable pre-eminence among Ethnology Museums. The 1889 decision was in effect an authorization to loot and plunder the colonies. Unlike the *Loi Griaule*, given to Marcel Griaule, the French ethnologist and leader of the Dakar- Djibouti expedition, to take whatever he wanted in the French colonies, the German law in effect encourage all German travellers to the colonies to plunder and loot. We know from the diary of Michel Leiris, *Afrique Fantôme* (1950) how such authorization was effected in practice.

Most of the time the museum had far too many objects as it could reasonably display or store. Quite a lot of the objects were collected by the German military in its various invasions of African territories and were considered as war trophies.

“Trophies, which were won in wars with the Zulus”, or concerning the gift of a wooden figure “taken from a group of figures erected around the tomb of an Nyam -Nyam chief.” (23)

Sometimes the military bought objects from the missionaries who had “persuaded” the Africans to give up their heathen objects for disposal by burning.

Sometimes symbols of power and regalia, e.g. throne of King Njoya, Mandu Yenu, was listed as a gift from the king symbolizing his recognition of the German Kaiser Wilhelm II. We can be sure that such gifts, if at all given by the Africans, were under tremendous military and political pressure.

In the various reports of the museum very little was said about the circumstances under which the objects were acquired. Definitely, nothing was stated about objects being acquired through the various punitive expeditions (“*Strafexpeditionen*”) of which there were many under German colonial rule whenever the Africans put up resistance. Apparently, the museum did not want to hurt the sensitivities of the German public who might be amazed at what was being done in their name and might start having doubts about the “mission of civilization” advanced as argument for colonization. Many of the ethnologists were of the view though that the collection of objects under war conditions for science was justifiable. Bastian and Luschan were definitely supporters of colonialism and the use of force to acquire ethnographic objects:

”Bastian’s eagerness for the collection of ethnographic curiosities also led to articulating a specific interest - above all in the African region. As a result, the ethnologist Bastian approved and supported the process of “opening-up the colonies.”

“Felix von Luschan was an unconditional supporter of German colonial domination since he considered the colonies above all as suppliers of anthropological and ethnographical materials.”(24)

One of the rare cases in which the museum’s report wrote about the circumstances surrounding an acquisition related to the Benin bronzes seized by the British after their conquest of Benin in 1897. The purchase of the many Benin bronze and ivory works by the Berlin Ethnologisches Museum and German benefactors was explained as follows:

“As the British annexed Benin in 1897, several unexpected booty of art works fell into their hands, a considerable part of which reached the Berlin Museum.” (25)

From the above, it becomes clear that any assertion that all the objects in the Berlin State Museums, and there are about five major ones, have been legally acquired is an unsupported and irresponsible statement.

But what about the acquisition of the Benin bronzes and other objects? The answer of the Germans, like that of the Austrians, is that they acquired Benin objects from the British by a valid contract. As is known a contract of purchase of a stolen or illegally acquired item is only valid if the purchaser had bona fides, “guten Glauben”. That is to say he was not aware that the goods had been stolen or illegally acquired. In the case of the acquisition of Benin bronze by the Berlin Ethnologisches Museum, it was known to all that these objects had been taken from Benin by the British as a result of their invasion and looting of Benin. According to Stelzig, at one meeting where art from Africa was discussed and the Benin bronze were shown, it was mentioned that only Berlin was in possession of a relief plaque which, according to the information of the dealer in London, was already in London since 1879 and that it was the only piece of this form that had reached Europe before the destruction of Benin by the British. Von Luschan, Director of the Ethnologisches Museum was one of the first persons to recognize that Benin bronzes came from Africa and not from some mythical place or people outside the continent: He also confirmed that not a single Benin bronze was in Europe before the Punitive Expedition of 1897.

“He, von Luschan did not know of a single plaque or a single head or other bronze art work that was in a museum, or in the art market or in private possession that came from Benin to Europe before 1897.” (26)

Thus the alleged purchases by the Germans, knowing fully well that these objects had been looted by the British in their invasion of Benin in 1897, are null and void.



Members of the British Punitive Expedition of 1897 against Benin with looted Benin ivories and bronze objects

In her comments of the presentation of the Benin bronzes by Luschan, Stelzig notes that he left out entirely the violent context in which the objects were acquired. The author also points out that the subject of the violent acquisition was also left out in the celebrations on 17-23 February 1997 of the 100 years Anniversary of the conquest of Benin by the British. The only exception here was Ekpo Eyo who criticised William Fagg for refusing to talk of “sack” of Benin and for presenting the plundering as an unofficial act by some British soldiers. Stelzig also adds that in the catalogue of the exhibition *Afrika: Kunst und Kultur* (1999) by the Berlin Museum für Völkerkunde there is no critical discussion of the violent context in which the Benin bronzes were acquired. It is simply stated in a contribution by Willet that when members of the British Punitive Expedition broke into the palace of the Oba:

“To their amazement, the soldiers came across there a great number of bronze objects and ivory works. In accordance with the customs of the period they seized these as reparations for paying the costs of the expedition and some of the officers were allowed to use part of the booty for private purposes.” (27)

Similarly in the next important publication of the museum, a catalogue of the exhibition *Kunst aus Afrika* opened on 26. August 2005 there is no critical examination of the violent circumstances of the acquisition of the Benin art works. The catalogue begins with a foreword by the Director-General of the Berlin State Museums, Peter-Klaus Schuster, boasting about the greatness of his museums and claiming the title of “Universal Museum” for his complex of 17 buildings and four Research Institutes and the exhibition by the Ethnologisches Museum on 1 January, 2004 entitled “Arte da Africa” in the Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil, Rio de Janeiro, a former colonial power displaying stolen art objects from Africa to descendents of former African slaves who were violently detached from Africa and sent to America. We are informed about the African collection of the museum totalling 75,000 objects and thus one of

the largest in the world. This self praise of stolen objects ends with a statement about *“The master works of Africa in the historical centre of Berlin”*. (28)

Thus the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin that is so proud of its collection of Benin art works did not find it worthwhile to discuss critically the circumstances under which these objects were acquired. A similar silence on the violent circumstances of the acquisition of the Berlin objects is also found in the very informative and interesting article by Paola Ivanov, entitled *“African Art in the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin”*, Ivanov proudly informs us that the Ethnologisches Museum possesses 482 Benin pieces but no where does she discuss or even mention the British military attack, looting and burning of Benin in 1897 which made these pieces available to the Germans. (29) Apparently many of the ethnologists approved of the use of force in acquiring ethnological artefacts. Adolf Bastian who is credited with the founding of the museum and was its first director was not averse to the use of force if this was necessary to procure objects from peoples he thought would soon disappear from the world under the impact of contact with European culture. He thought the British attack on Benin was a good example to follow in order to secure more artefacts. Bastian is quoted by H.Glenn Penny in his book, *Objects of Culture: Ethnology and Ethnographic Museums in Imperial Germany*, to have stated in a letter as follows:

“That military campaigns can bear fruit for scientific fields of research and can be exploited for this purpose, is evidenced by multiple examples - recently again through the results of the conquest of Benin - and already proven most sensationally during the earlier French expedition to Egypt, which (through concomitance of a staff of 120 academics, artists, technicians and engineers) laid the groundwork for the magnificent blossoming of Egyptology following the discovery of the Rosetta stone, the key to decoding hieroglyphics, which threw a flood of light onto the grayness of prehistoric times.” (30)

In her article on African Art in the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin, Paola Ivanov does not mention that when the Germans apparently bought most of the pieces in auctions organized by the British, they were fully aware of the violent and illegal circumstances of their acquisition. Nor is there a discussion or mention of the question of restitution. Ivanov happily informs us that

“the new presentation of the African collection was prompted by another event of great significance that occurred after the fall of the Berlin wall: the return of approximately 23,000 objects that had been considered casualties of war.” (31)

Would it not have been equally significant or even more significant if she could have announced at the same time that the Berlin Ethnologisches Museum was preparing to return to Benin some of the 300 Benin objects which were returned? Most probably such a thought has never crossed the mind of any of the German officials dealing with the matter. But what kind of sensitivity do the German officials have? If they expect the Soviets to return to them 23,300 stolen objects, why can they not think of the people of Benin and the other Africans from whom, on the museum’s own admission, they now hold some 75,000 objects in Berlin, not taking into account what there are in Hamburg, Bremen, Frankfurt, Köln, Dresden, Munich, Leipzig, Stuttgart Heidelberg, Darmstadt, Krefeld, Lübeck and other German museums?

Ivanov declared that

“The ongoing discussion about the arts of societies which traditionally have been the object of ethnological research, and the recognition of these arts, is also reflected in the history of this institution. Indeed the museum has shaped the debate fundamentally.” (31)

Were there no critical voices among German ethnologists raising the issue of stolen art and the need for restitution as well as the colonial or neo-colonial method of presentation in the

ethnological museums? Was there in 2000 a total amnesia of all the critiques made in the 1970s about ethnology and its relationship with colonialism? Volker Harms wrote in his article entitled *“The Aims of the Museum for Ethnology: Debate in the German-speaking Countries”* as follows:

“Indeed, it was only in the context of quite another debate that began several years later and is still going on that inflation in the prices of non-European art objects was taken into account (e.g., Kussmaul). This debate was concerned with the return or restitution to their countries of origin of ethnographic objects that had been taken to Europe and later to the U.S.A. during the colonial oppression of the societies of the Third World. Beginning with a speech by the premier of Zaire, Mobutu Sese Seko, to the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1973, this discussion aroused considerable emotion, and it is no surprise that the question was also vehemently debated in the Federal Republic. Involved in the debate were, among others, Ganslmayr (1980), Auer (1981), and Kussmaul (1982) (see also Redaktion der Museumskunde 1982, von Paczensky and Ganslmayr 1984). In spite of the intensity with which the issue was debated, it has not so far had much influence on the educational work of museums for ethnology.” (32)

One can only speculate that there is a tacit agreement among some German ethnologists and museum specialists not to raise these issues. But is this honest scholarship? Are they afraid that by raising and discussing these issues they might conclude that the acquisition of the vast majority of the objects in the museums was only possible due to the colonial system which in turn was only possible because of the superior force of the Europeans and their determination to use force if necessary to achieve their objectives? They might also want to avoid the conclusion that Europeans have been largely responsible for making military force a relevant and decisive factor in the International Relations of the last five centuries. They may well ask whether these issues are for ethnologists but can they honestly and realistically ignore them, given the close relationship between ethnology and colonialism? Glenn Penny has remarked that:

“There is no question that, as George W. Stocking has argued, colonialism was the ‘sine qua non of ethnographic fieldwork’. Colonial expansion expedited the very act of going into ‘the field’ and provided many of the basic structures and conditions for ethnologists’ experience.” (33)

Looking at the publications and the practice of the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, can one subscribe to the following statement, from Anna Laura Jones, *Exploding Canons: Anthropology of Museums*.

“Despite the growing literature that criticizes the colonial context under which most non-Western art has been collected, few museums have dealt with this aspect of the history of their collections in exhibitions and catalogues. There is widespread agreement that museums served as ‘legitimizers of imperial exploitation’. Reconstructing the histories of particular collections can reveal painful stories of greed, theft, racism, and exploitation by respected scholars and institutions. Some authors feel that ‘no conscious anthropological remorse, aesthetic elevation, or redemptive exhibition can correct or compensate the loss because they are all implicated in it’. The sanitized histories of museums and collectors, which have so far dominated this trend of historicism, are hardly the heady stuff of ‘historical self-consciousness.’” (34)

Some German museum directors, like their Austrian, French, British and American colleagues write on the question of restitution as if the United Nations, UNESCO, and other institutions never existed. They treat these universal institutions with utter contempt by not referring to

their resolutions and recommendations. I have even heard the Director of the Museum für Völkerkunde Wien declare at an international symposium that we should forget about these organizations since they are ineffective. The United Nations, which represents the majority of persons on this earth has almost on annual basis recommended to Member States to return cultural objects to their countries of origin. For example, the General Assembly has in Resolution 42/7 of 22 October 1987, entitled “*Return or restitution of cultural property to the countries of origin*” emphasized the “*importance attached by the countries of origin to the return of cultural property which is of fundamental spiritual and cultural value to them, so that they may constitute collections representative of their cultural heritage*”. The same resolution also reaffirmed that the restitution to a country of its “objets d’art”, monuments, museum pieces and other cultural or artistic treasures contributed to the strengthening of international cooperation and the flowering of universal cultural values through fruitful cooperation between developed and developing countries. In the most recent resolution of 4 December 2006, (A/RES/61/53, para. 2) the General Assembly reiterated the importance of restitution to these countries and called upon all bodies of the United Nations and UNESCO as well as Member States

“to continue to address the issue of return or restitution of cultural property to the countries of origin and to provide appropriate support accordingly”.

Since 1972, the General Assembly has passed almost at every session a resolution on this item and yet certain western governments, especially those with museums holding extensive stocks of art objects of others, stubbornly refuse to implement these resolutions and behave as if they were not part of the international community or members of universal organizations such as the United Nations and UNESCO. They openly defy the Organization in such matters. One often reads statements that resolutions of the General Assembly are not binding as if to say no one should even give them any consideration. These resolutions represent the views of the overwhelming majority of mankind and those aware that the world does not begin and end with Western Europe and the U.S.A. would do well to show respect for the views expressed by such organizations.

One sometimes hears argument from the Austrians, Germans and others holding stolen art works in their museums that the owners have not asked for their return. This is an interesting argument. We know that for years the Egyptians have been asking for the return of Nefertiti to Egypt with no success. The Turks have been requesting the return of the Bogazkoy Sphinx with no more success but only to be insulted with an offer of a replica. The British have been refusing to return the Parthenon Marbles to Greece. Britain has persistently refused to return to Ethiopia stolen art works. When Nigeria asked Britain to loan a Benin ivory pendant mask, Iyoba which was the mascot of the Festival of African Culture (FESTAC, 1977), Britain refused. It is not therefore surprising that many countries are not asking for the return of stolen art objects. But is it really honest on the part of countries holding illegally objects of others to use this argument? Will Germany hand over the Benin artefacts if Nigeria asked for them? Must Nigeria ask for every single stolen object? Philip Dark, in his study, “*Benin Bronze Heads: Styles and Chronology*” refers to 6,500 objects of Benin art which are found in 77 museums and collections. (35) When one considers that many of these objects stolen in 1897 have not been seen since then by the owners, one realizes the hypocrisy of the situation. Nigeria has asked the British for the return of stolen art works. Must that State ask each and every one of all those countries and persons which got some of these objects after 1897 to return them? Should all States, on their own, not offer to return to owners objects that have been illegally transferred to their museums?

The following statement from Ekpo Eyo, leading expert on Nigerian art and former Director of The National Museum of Nigeria may be full of lessons:

“By the end of the 1960s, the price of Benin works had soared so high that the Federal Government of Nigeria was in no mood to contemplate buying them. When, therefore a National Museum was planned for Benin City in 1968, we were faced with the problem of finding exhibits that would be shown to reflect the position that Benin holds in the world of art history. A few unimportant objects which were kept in the old local authority museum in Benin were transferred to the new museum and a few more objects were brought in from Lagos. Still the museum was “empty”. We tried using casts and photographs to fill gaps but the desired effect was unachievable. We therefore thought of making an appeal to the world for loans or return of some works so that Benin might also be to show its own works at least to its own people. We tabled a draft resolution at the General Assembly of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) which met in France in 1968, appealing for donations of one or two pieces from those museums which have large stocks of Benin works. The resolution was modified to make it read like a general appeal for restitution or return and then adopted.

When we returned to Nigeria, we circulated the adopted resolution to the embassies and high commissions of countries we know to have large Benin holdings but up till now we have received no reaction from any quarters and the Benin Museum stays “empty”.” (36).

We wonder if Ekpo Eyo was aware at that time that there were in Berlin alone 482 Benin heads and that practically every German town had its own collection. The then Director-General of UNESCO, Amadou-Mahtar M’Bow, made an appeal to countries holding the cultural objects of others: *“The men and women of these countries have the right to recover these cultural assets which are part of their being”.* (37) The German delegate to UNESCO made a statement which might appear strange to some of the present museum directors in Germany:

“The cultural identity of a country or a people must be brought to the visitor’s attention. For this purpose, the presentation of objects and collections carrying such a message from those cultures is surely desirable. But the understanding of other cultures should also imply an understanding of these people’s wish to possess those objects and collections which are considered an essential element of their cultural heritage and their cultural identity. Otherwise one would hardly be able to understand the purpose behind the work of museum people because it would seem that the individual nation’s cultural heritage is judged after its present location and that the measure used is an ideological one.” (38)

Assuming that the African peoples have not requested the return of their stolen cultural objects, should this factor not be a ground for extensive speculation and research by those concerned with presenting African culture and for that very reason wish to keep African cultural objects? Where are the specialists on studies on psychology and mentality of peoples? Would such behaviour by a whole continent, with hundreds of different cultural groups, not be reason enough for concern by those whose personal interests or professional occupations relate to Africa? And where are the dissertations on this singular behaviour by a whole continent known for its rich diversity? Have they found here the unity which has escaped them for so long? Is this a trait of the traditional culture or a modern development arising from the contact with Europe? Is this a behaviour of the ruling classes or do the masses also share this trait? Where do the inhibitions for such demands come from? Are they afraid to make the requests or is someone exercising pressure on them? Are there some political, economic or military threats? Have they been pacified through gifts or other benefits and advantages, collective or personal to make them drop such requests? What kind of collective amnesia is this? If the African peoples and their governments are behaving in a different way from all others, this surely merits an examination.

The Germans have asked the Poles and Russians to return certain cultural objects but do not think of returning African objects to the Africans. The Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin

management is happy that certain objects they thought they would never see again, including 300 Benin bronzes, have been returned but have no plans to return any to the Benin people. The Egyptians have been asking for the return of Nefertiti but the Germans think the old Egyptian lady really belongs to Berlin and in any case is too weak to travel. The Nigerians have asked for the Benin bronzes but few are reacting and some even pretend they have never heard of such a request. Even officials of the Völkerkunde Museum Vienna have been heard to say publicly in interviews and on the radio that there has been no official request from the Nigerians! The Ethiopians are requesting the return of various objects, including over 300 hand-written historic documents stolen or looted by the British during their invasion of Magdala on 13 April 1868 and are getting the most discouraging and insulting responses from places such as the Universities of Edinburgh, Oxford, Cambridge and the British Museum.

In the Introductory Note to the catalogue of the Exhibition *Benin Kings and Rituals: Court Arts from Nigeria*, the Oba of Benin, Omo N'Oba Erediauwa CFR, after emphasizing how important the Benin works are as records of Benin history and objects of religious importance, declared:

“As you put this past on show today, it is our prayer that the people and the government of Austria will show humanness and magnanimity and return to us some of these objects which found their way to your country.” (39)

What else must a king of a people whose cultural objects have been robbed with violence by the British under well-known circumstances do? The Austrian reactions to this request have been the negative statements by the Director-General, Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien in the Preface to the catalogue of the Exhibition (co-signed with directors from Musée du Quai Branly, Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin and the Art Institute of Chicago) and in the Vienna newspaper, *Kurier*. (40) The modest request by the Benin royalty at the International Symposium on 9-10 May 2007 for some restitution was met by a total rejection of all claims for restitution by the Director of the Museum für Völkerkunde Wien at the Symposium in the Viennese weekly, *Falter*. (41) The Museum für Völkerkunde has so far refused to publish the proceedings of the Symposium and officials of the Museum still claim there has been no request for restitution by the Nigerians. Is this the beginning of a falsification of historical records?

It is interesting to note that the statement of the King of Benin is not first in the catalogue. Had a European monarch, Queen of Britain, King of Spain or King of the Netherlands written a statement for a catalogue on an exhibition on the culture of his or her country, would the editors have put it second after the preface by the directors and not the first in the book? Is this one of the subtle or not so subtle discriminations that Africans suffer? That kind of discrimination that has become so usual, and should we say, so natural that one does not even think about it? The preface of the directors is obviously an answer to the plea of the Oba and yet the answer comes before the question. The directors seem to have determined to nip the question of restitution in the bud. But they have wholly failed. By placing their statement of denial so prominently in the first pages of the catalogue, they have signalled to the reader that the most important question now, as far as the Benin objects are concerned, is their restitution. The statement of the directors overshadows whatever else comes later in the catalogue. They have put the issue of restitution clearly on the agenda for the next few years.

It will be interesting to see what the Berlin Ethnology Museum does as regards the information given on the various exhibits. Is the museum going to put out on display most of the Benin objects it has and thereby invite questions regarding its methods of acquisition as was the case in Vienna? An approach that might add fuel to the tensions already brewing in Chicago even before the exhibition arrives there, with threats of boycott and legal action by the large powerful Nigerian community there. Or is it going to follow the exhibition in Quai

Branly by putting out a limited number of objects, and not encourage discussions in the press? Will the aesthetic again triumph over the ethnological and thereby signal a fundamental directional change by the museum of Adolf Bastian and Felix von Luschan? Will Berlin confirm the triumph of the aesthetic or mark the resurgence of the ethnological?

During the Benin Centenary celebrations, Elazar Barkan expressed the view that *“There is a real chance for restitution if the public can be persuaded to recognize the historical injustice of the loss: that within the context of its own time, the removal was viewed as an injustice, or at a minimum, that it would be considered so today”*. He further added that *“...it is easy to imagine that a museum in Glasgow, Berlin, Vienna or elsewhere bowing to demands, thereby creating even more pressure on other museums to act similarly”*. (42)

Was Elazar Barkan too optimistic? In any case, the museum directors in Vienna and Berlin have already given their negative answer in the infamous foreword to the catalogue of the present Benin exhibition. They have said we should forget the past and look forward; we should not judge past events with our present standards. The museum directors have consciously or unconsciously displaced the issue. Nobody is primarily concerned with sitting in judgement on past events or on actors who are not here to defend themselves. Although we reject and oppose the collective amnesia that the museum directors are recommending to Africans, our main interest is in the present situation where the best of African art has been stolen and brought to Europe.

The question of restitution is not a matter of judgement over past event. We are not interested in judging Captain Phillips and co. We are more interested in ensuring that art works which have been violently expropriated from Benin are restored to the people of Benin. The argument not to apply our present standards is obviously dishonest, spurious, immoral or at best amoral. This comes from museum directors in countries which have applied our modern standards in many cases. If their argument were to be accepted, we would not be able to try serious crimes. The Nazis were not tried in accordance with their own standards but the standards of others. Were they to be judged according to Nazi standards, none of them would have been punished. We are always applying our own standards because we have no other standards but those of our present times. We cannot apply Roman, Etruscan or some ancient Mali or ancient Ghana rules.

Barkan thought there was a need to convince the public about the injustice of the loss by Benin. With all due respect, the obstacle to restitution of cultural objects illegally in Europe and USA does not come from the public. The museum directors and officials and other anthropologists are the real obstacle. Some of them who have devoted a large part of their careers to preserving or studying these objects see in restitution the end of their career, if not the beginning of the end of the world. The general European public does not care about where African cultural objects are. It suspects they are to be found in Africa and is often surprised to realize that these objects are in Europe and the USA.

If all African cultural objects were to be returned today to Africa, I do not believe we shall see any protesters on the streets of European capitals. When the Italians returned the obelisk to Ethiopia, I did not hear of any riots or demonstrations. A public opinion poll in Europe will show that the overwhelming majority of Europeans, excluding museum directors and officials, will find it just that the stolen art objects are returned to Africa.

From the statements of museum directors, such as the ill-advised foreword in the catalogue to the present Benin exhibition as well as the infamous Declaration on museum of universal importance, it is obvious that they do not respect the feelings of the victims of imperialist aggressions; they do not care about historical injustice and do not realize or appear to understand that historical injustice is not about history but about present effects; at a

minimum, one would expect those working in the area of African art generally, and specifically Benin art, to be very worried that much of this art is not in Benin.

The participation of the Nigerians National Commission on Museums and Monuments and the Benin Royal Family in the current exhibition is a clear indication that, despite a long-standing historical injustice, there is goodwill to solve the problem of restitution in an amicable way. But what do we see as reaction from the European side? A discourteous and unbelievable confrontational arrogance which can only be interpreted as confirmation of support and justification of the historical injustice.

The request of the Benin Royal Family for each of the museums holding Benin art works was not even discussed but was met with a presentation of unbelievably weak arguments why there should be no restitution. The Austrians and the Germans have not seized on this great opportunity to try to resolve the question once and for all. They could have made an offer in exchange for a definitive renunciation of all further claims. One is gradually gaining the impression that the question of restitution will be better settled by politicians and not through any discussions with museum directors and officials who do not seem to have any ability to suggest a reasonable compromise. I am sure that German politicians aware that Berlin alone has some 482 Benin art works and that in Germany as a whole there may be a thousand of these works, would find no great difficulties in giving away ten or twenty objects in exchange for definitive settlement. After all, the Germans were not the principal perpetrators of the injustice.

The African demand for the return of the stolen cultural objects will not disappear for many of these objects are expressions of the deepest feelings of a way of life, an understanding of the universe and religious expressions. Europeans who like to present themselves as defenders of human rights, including the freedom of thought and freedom of religion have shown scant respect for African religions and religious sentiments. Europeans have not been bothered that by stealing our religious objects they prevent us from practising our religions and expressing our understanding of the world. A well-known dealer in African art, who has made a fortune from selling African cultural objects, is quoted by Sally Price to have declared in an interview with Radio France as follows:

“Certain anthropologists claim that an African or Oceanian who’s deprived of his fetishes is a person who dies spiritually. Well, that’s not true! Man is much stronger than that! If you take away a Sicilian woman’s crucifix that she inherited from her grandmother, she doesn’t give up her Catholic faith! She doesn’t mope away in sadness. She goes to the next town, she buys a crucifix, she hangs it where the old one had been, and she returns to her prayers!”
(43)

Is this the way the Europeans hope to preserve freedom of religion and thought?

Despite all this arrogance, Africans will continue to seek the return of these objects. Amina Traoré, former Minister of Culture, Mali, has in her famous statement on the Musée du Quai Branly, brilliantly expressed this sentiment in addressing herself directly to these objects imprisoned in a European museum where they do not receive the veneration and respect due to them. (44)

As far as I am concerned, the urgent appeal made by Theo-Ben Gurirab (Namibia), then President of the 54 Session of the United Nation General Assembly still awaits serious reaction and action on the part of those to whom it is addressed:

“Having expressed our human yearning for a new millennium, I will not shy away from calling upon the children of Africa’s invaders and slave-traders for an

honest and sincere apology, and upon the children of the victims, many of whom have been left stranded in the diaspora, for forgiveness. The horrors of slavery and destruction wrought upon Africa and its peoples cannot be forgotten. Now is the time for reconciliation and healing.

Such an act of mutual affirmation will never be truly complete unless Africa's sacred relics, icons, art works and other priceless cultural objects are returned lock, stock and barrel to their rightful owners. Today these stolen African treasures adorn public museums, libraries, art galleries and private homes in foreign lands. They must come home to assuage the pain and anger in the hearts of the succeeding generations of Africans. Now is the time for atonement, reflection and renewal to foster better human relations and rectify the ugly legacies of the past.” (45)

Kwame Opoku,
Vienna, 18 January, 2008

NOTES

(Unless otherwise indicated, translations from the German are by K.Opoku.)

(1) *“Die Rückgabe jener Kulturschätze, die unsere Museen und Sammlungen direkt oder indirekt dem Kolonialsystem verdanken und die jetzt zurückverlangt werden, sollte ebenfalls nicht mit billigen Argumenten und Tricks hinausgezögert werden”*,

Gert v. Paczensky and Herbert Ganslmayr, *Nofretete will nach Hause*, p.185, C. Bertelsmann, München 1984.

(2) Cornelia Essner, *Berlins Völkerkunde-Museum in der Kolonialära: Anmerkungen zum Verhältnis von Ethnologie und Kolonialismus in Deutschland* in: *Berlin in Geschichte und Gegenwart – Jahrbuch des Landesarchivs Berlin*, (Ed.) Hans J. Reichhardt, Siedler Verlag, 1986.

(3) Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett, Bremen, Übersee Museum, Cologne, Rautenstrauch-Koscewsky-Museum für Völkerkunde, Dresden, Museum für Völkerkunde, Dresden, Staatliche Ethnographische Sammlungen Sachsen, Hamburg, Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg, Museum für Völkerkunde Hamburg, Leipzig Museum für Völkerkunde zu Leipzig, Mannheim, Reiss-Engelhorn Museen, Munich, Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde München.

Other German institutions having Benin objects are: Heidelberg Sammlung der von Portheim-Stiftung - Völkerkundemuseum, Stuttgart, Lindenmuseum - Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde.

Other German institutions having African cultural objects are: Braunschweig, Städtisches Museum, Darmstadt, Hessisches Landesmuseum, Frankfurt am Main, Museum der Weltkulturen, Krefeld, Deutsches Textilmuseum, Lübeck, Völkerkundesammlung der Hansestadt Lübeck, Ulm, Ulmer Museum, Werl/Soest, Forum der Völkerkundemuseum der Franziskaner, Wuppertal and Völkerkundliches Museum der Vereinten Evangelischen Mission.

(4) Manfred Gothsch, *Die deutsche Völkerkunde und ihr Verhältnis zum Kolonialismus*, Nomos Verlag, Baden-Baden, 1983.

(5) H.Glenn Penny, *Ethnology and Ethnographic Museums in Imperial Germany; Objects of Culture*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill and London, 2002, p.116.

(6) See Peter Sack, „Grundzüge der Rechts- und Verwaltungsordnung im deutschen Kolonialreich“, Rüdiger Voigt/Peter Sack Eds. *Kolonisierung des Rechts. Zur kolonialen Rechts- und Verwaltungsordnung*, Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, Baden-Baden 2001, p41; see also Winfried Speitkamp, *Deutsche Kolonialgeschichte*, Reclam, 2005, p.70 :*“So wurden Pflichtverletzung bei der Arbeit oder das Verlassen der Arbeitsstelle mit körperlicher Züchtigung oder Kettenhaft bis 14 Tagen bestraft.“*

(7) *“Dass der Erwerb von Ethnographica in der Kolonialzeit auf der Grundlage mehr oder minder “struktureller Gewalt” erfolgte, soll hier in diesem Rahmen nicht näher verfolgt werden. Einzelnen Zeitgenossen war diese Tatsache im Übrigen durchaus bewußt. So schrieb der Afrikareisende und Resident des Deutschen Reiches in Ruanda, Richard Kandt, 1897 an Felix von Luschan, den stellvertretenden Direktor des Berliner Völkerkunde-Museums: Überhaupt ist es schwer, einen Gegenstand zu erhalten, ohne zum mindesten etwas Gewalt anzuwenden. Ich glaube, daß die Hälfte Ihres Museums gestohlen ist“.* Cornelia Essner, op. cit. p.77.

- (8) Christine Stelzig, *Afrika am Museum für Völkerkunde zu Berlin 1873-1919*, Centaurus Verlag, Herbolzheim 2004.
- (9) *Colonization and Modernization in Germany's Colonial Pasts*, (Eds.) E.Ames, M.Klotz and L.Wildenthal, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, 2005, p.110.
- (10) *Germans in the Tropics: Essays in German Colonial History*, (Eds.), Arthur J. Knoll and Lewis H.Gann, Greenwood Press, New York, 1987, p.125.
- (11) *Afrika: Kunst und Kultur* p.46.
- (12) See Annie Coombes, *Reinventing Africa*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1994, pp.59-60; see also, John Mack, *L'ethnographie: un catalysateur*, p.227 in: *Du Musée colonial au musée des cultures du monde*, P Maisonneuve et Larose, Paris, 2000.
- (13) Stelzig, op.cit.118.
- (14) See, Pascal Grosse, "What does German Colonialism Have to Do with National Socialism?" in: *Germany's Colonial Pasts*, op.cit. 115-13
- (15) *ICOM NEWS* no 1 2004
- (16) See Horst Drechsler, *Südwestafrika unter deutscher Kolonialherrschaft. Der Kampf der Herero und Nama gegen den deutschen Imperialismus (1884-1915)*. Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 1985; Horst Gründer, *Geschichte der deutschen Kolonien*, Paderborn: Schöningh, 2000; Helmut Bley, *Kolonialherrschaft und Sozialstruktur in Deutsch-Südwestafrika (1894-1914)*, Hamburg, Leibniz Verlag, 1968; Robert Cornevin, *Histoire de la colonisation allemande*, PUF, Paris, 1969. Helmut Strizek, *Kolonien Geschenke: Ruanda und Burundi unter deutscher Herrschaft*, Berlin, Ch.Links Verlag, 2006.
- (17) *Benin Kings and Rituals: Court Arts from Nigeria*, Ed. Barbara Plankensteiner, Snoeck, 2007.
- (18) "Wenn ich mir jetzt die Herkunft und Geschichte einzelner Sammlungen und Objekte im Übersee-Museum Bremen, für das ich hier spreche, ansehe und versuche zurückzuverfolgen, so muß ich sagen, daß sich dabei Abgründe auftun; nicht daß die Dinge mit Gewalt wie im Falle Benin angeeignet wurden. Es gibt auch andere Möglichkeiten der illegalen Beschaffung, es gibt die „sanfte“ Gewalt. Ich möchte daher an alle Museumsmitarbeiter appellieren, der Geschichte ihrer Sammlungen nachzugehen; dann dürfte auch von unserer Seite mehr Verständnis für Rückgabe-Forderungen aufgebracht werden." *Das Museum und die Dritte Welt*, Ed. Hermann Auer, K.G.Sauer, München, New York London, Paris 1981, p.155.
- (19) "Wenn jetzt die Forderungen im wesentlichen auf koloniale Gebiete reduziert werden, ist das ein erheblicher Fortschritt, und alle deutschen Völkerkunde-Museen haben aus alten Kolonien eine solche Menge an Material zur Verfügung, daß aus diesen Beständen kleinere repräsentative Sammlungen dorthin gegeben werden können wo die Museumsbedingungen so sind, daß man als Museumsmann die Rückgabe verantworten kann, und wo Objekte ähnlicher Qualität und aus ähnlicher Zeit heute fehlen." Ibid. (19)
- (20) See, *Ethnologisches Museum Berlin*, PrestelVerlag, Berlin, 1999, p.113; Hans-Joachim Koloss, op.cit.p.9

Announcement by the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin of an exhibition on 27 August 2005 at its website.



A representative selection from the large holdings of the African collection in Berlin, one of the world's most significant, awaits the visitor, an exhibition of exquisite works that span more than five hundred years' time. For the first time since the end of World War II works are shown, which - long presumed lost in war - had actually been transported by Russian troops to Leningrad in 1945, later stored in Leipzig, and then returned to Berlin. The exhibition encompasses an area of c. 1000 sq m, in which more than 200 pieces, the majority dating from the end of the 19th century until the Second World War Included in the display are approximately 30 of the returned objects as well as 40 recent acquisitions.

See also:

Gibt es eine Kontinuität zwischen diesen Ausstellungen und heutigen [Ethno-Shows](http://www.antropologi.info/blog/ethnologie/ethnologie)?:
www.antropologi.info/blog/ethnologie/ethnologie.

[Ethnologue Leo Frobenius und der koloniale Blick auf Afrika](http://www.antropologi.info/blog/ethnologie/ethnologie)
www.antropologi.info/blog/ethnologie/ethnologie.

[Christoph Seidler: »Opfer ihrer Erregungen«: Die deutsche Ethnologie und der Kolonialismus](http://www.iz3w.org/iz3w/Ausgaben/)
www.iz3w.org/iz3w/Ausgaben/

[Hat sich in der deutschen Ethnologie seit 100 Jahren nichts verändert?](http://www.antropologi.info/blog/ethnologie/ethnologie)
www.antropologi.info/blog/ethnologie/ethnologie

["Unbedarftheit gegenüber kolonialer Vergangenheit": taz über African Village im Augsburger Zoo](http://www.antropologi.info/blog/ethnologie/ethnologie) www.antropologi.info/blog/ethnologie/ethnologie

['Weiße' Geschichte - deutsche Version: Kolonialgeschichte im öffentlichen Straßenbild allgegenwärtig](http://andersdeutsch.blogger.de/stories/589155/) <http://andersdeutsch.blogger.de/stories/589155/>

See also, „Nofretete geht auf Reisen“ www.nofretete-geht-auf-reisen.de

(21) *Report of the Twelfth Session*. CLT-2003/CONF.204/2 Paris, February 2003.

(22) *“Nirgends scheint dieser Zusammenhang zwischen Ethnologie und Kolonialismus deutlicher als in den heutigen Ausstellungen in ethnologischen Museen. Ausgestellt werden fast ausschließlich Exponate, die aus Raub- und Eroberungszügen stammen. Viele Bemühungen des postkolonialen Diskurses um Relativierung bestimmen die Politik ethnologischer Museen. Bewertet man die »Sammlungen« nach europäischem Recht, so handelt es sich prinzipiell um die Zurschaustellung von Diebesgut. Schon allein der Hinweis, über die Rückgabe der Gegenstände nur nachzudenken, wird als völlig übertrieben bewertet oder ignoriert. Der Gründer von AfricAvenir, Kum'a Ndumbe, der vom Museum für Völkerkunde in München einen einst nachweislich seinem Vater gehörenden Gegenstand zurückforderte, bekam zur Antwort, das Museum habe nicht genug Geld dafür. Das Museum könne aber auf Kum'a Ndumbes eigene Kosten ein Duplikat für ihn anfertigen lassen.“* „Wie der Europäer das exotische „Andere“ entdeckte und es bis heute in ethnologischen Museen ausstellt,“ www.jungle-world.com/seiten/2007).

See also, Ursula Trüper, „Ein König am Katheder“, www.taz.de/index; Maritta Tkaleck, “Seele, geraubt für deutsches Museum“ Berliner Zeitung, www.berlinonline.de/berliner-zeitung, where she indicates that the German officer who stole the bow, Max Buchner, had been mandated by the Völkerkundemuseum, München, to collect art objects. The museum’s records indicate that the ship’s bow was bought in 1884 by the then director of the museum Dr. Stefan Eisenhofer is quoted as saying that it was not known from whom the museum director bought it. The catalogue of the museum indicated it was part of war spoils. A recent attempt to secure a museum guide met with the answer that the museum had no museum guide!

(23) *“Trophäen, die im Kriege mit den Zulus gewonnen wurden” oder die Schenkungen einer Holzfigur, die der um das Grab eines Nyam-Nyam Häuptlings aufgestellten Gruppe entnommen ist*. Stelzig, op.cit.p.209. See also Penny, op.cit.113.

(24) *“Bastians Sammeleifer nach ethnographischen Novitäten führte auch dazu, ein spezifisches Interesse an bestimmten - vor allem afrikanischen - Regionen zu artikulieren. Infolgedessen befürwortete und beförderte der Ethnologe Bastian den Prozeß der „Erschließung der Kolonien“*. Cornelia Essner, op.cit.p71.

“Felix von Luschan stand vorbehaltlos hinter der deutschen Kolonialherrschaft, betrachtete er doch die Kolonien in erster Linie als Lieferanten für Anthropologica und Ethnographica”. Christine Stelzig, „Felix von Luschan: Ein kunstsinniger Manager am Königlichen Museum für Völkerkunde zu Berlin“, *Macht und Anteil an der Weltherrschaft; Berlin und der deutsche Kolonialismus*

(Eds) Ulrich van der Heyden/Joachim Zeller, Unrast Verlag, Münster, 2005, p.131.

According to his own statement, Luschan requested a zealous missionary who had already burnt African wooden cultural objects and informed Luschan about this victory for Christianity, that in future he should send such old wooden sculptures to a museum, after he had thoroughly examined their significance. See p.10, Luschan, *Völker Rassen Sprachen*, Deutsche, Buch-Gemeinschaft, Berlin, 1927. Luschan seems to have had a very readable style.

See also H.Glenn Penny, Chapel Hill and London, The University of North Carolina Press, 2003, p.110

(25) *“Als die Engländer im Jahre 1879 Benin annektierten, fiel ihnen unerwartete Beute an Kunstschätzen in die Hände, von denen ein beträchtlicher Teil in das Berlin Museum gelangte.”* Stelzig, ibid. p.319.

(26) *“Er, von Luschan, kenne weder aus einem Museum, noch aus dem Kunsthandel, noch in Privat-Besitz auch nur eine einzige Platte oder einen einzigen Kopf oder sonst ein aus Erz gegossenes Kunstwerk, das vor 1897 aus Benin nach Europa gelangt wäre.”* Stelzig, ibid. p.368.

(27) *“Zu ihrer Verblüffung stießen die Soldaten dort auf eine große Anzahl von Bronzegüssen und Elfenbeinschitzereien. Den Gepflogenheiten der Zeit entsprechend beschlagnahmten sie diese als Reparationszahlung für die Kosten der Expedition, wobei es einigen Offizieren gestattet wurde, einen Teil der Beute für private Zwecke zu verwenden”*. Stelzig, pp.319, also Ekpo Eyo, “The sack that was.” <http://www.dawodu.net/eyo.htm>, “The Dialectics of Definitions: “Massacre” and “Sack in the History of the Punitive Expedition” *African Arts* 1997: XXX, Nos. 3 and 4, pp 34-35.

(28) “*Meisterwerke Afrikas in der historischen Mitte Berlins*“. *Kunst aus Afrika*, p.11. Eds. Peter Junge and Paola Ivanov, 2005.

(29) Paula Ivanov, “African Art in the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin“, *African Arts*, Vol.33, No3, p.21. Ivanov mentions in this article, that the Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin has 482 Benin objects (p21) but P.Roese in his article, “Felix von Luschan (1854-1924) und Benin - Hans Grimm gewidmet”, (*Tribus*, Vol.48, 1999, pp.173-182) states that Felix von Luschan secured for the Museum 580 pieces. Anja Laukötter, in her excellent book, *Von der “Kultur” zur “Rasse” – vom Objekt zum Körper : Völkerkundemuseen und ihre Wissenschaft zu Beginn des 20.Jahrhunderts* (Transcript Verlag, Bielefeld, 2007,P160), cites Luschan as follows:

“*Im ganzen sind rund 2400 Benin Stücke zu meiner Kenntnis gelangt: davon sind 580 in Berlin, 280 im Brit.Museum, 227 in Rushmore (die von Pitt Rivers hinterlassene Sammlung), 196 in Hamburg ,182 in Dresden, 167 in Wien, 98 in Leiden, 87 in Leipzig, 80 in Stuttgart, 76 in Cöln und 51 in Frankfurt a .M.*“

What explains this difference of some 98 pieces? Perhaps the Ethnologisches Museum kept the best 482 and distributed the remaining 98 to the other German museums?

In this connection, it may be useful to look at the very interesting study by Charlotta Dohlvik, *Museums and their Voices: a Contemporary Study of the Benin Bronzes*, Master’s Dissertation, May 2006, Göteborg University. Dohlvik states that “*the largest collection of Benin items are found at the Ethnological Museum in Berlin*”. The author also found out that the “*collections of Benin heads are strongly concentrated in museums of Western Europe and the United States*” and that “*The often-heard statement about the collection of Benin material being dispersed all over the world is thus a point of description that should be expressed with some moderation*”.p.29

See also Gisela Völger, *Curator, Trader, Benin Scholar - Felix von Luschan –An Austrian in Royal-Prussian Museum Service*, in *Benin Kings and Rituals* (Ed.) Plankensteiner ,pp.213-225. Völger gives the following distribution figures for the 2400 objects said to have reached Europe:

In Germany: Berlin 580, Hamburg 196, Dresden 182, Leipzig 87, Stuttgart 80, Cologne 73, Munich, Braunschweig, Mannheim, Freiburg and others in Germany not more than 95 items.

Outside Germany: British Museum 280, Pitt Rivers Museum (Oxford) and Pitt Rivers country residence, Rushmore in Farnham/Dorset 327, Various members of the Punitive Expedition of 1897 300, Leiden 98, Chicago 33, St. Petersburg 40, Vienna 167.

Laukötter, gives the following distribution, following Luschan: of the 2400 objects that left Benin: 580 in Berlin, 280 in British Museum, 227 in Rushmore, the Pitt Rivers Collection, 196 in Hamburg, 182 in Dresden,167 in Vienna, 98 in Leiden, 87 in Leipzig, 80 in Stuttgart, 76 in Cologne, and 51 in Frankfurt am Main. Laukötter, op.cit. p.160.

(30) H. Glenn Penny, op.cit.110.

(31) P. Ivanov, op. cit.20.

(32) Harms *Current Anthropology*, Vol.31, No 4, Aug-Oct., 1990, p459.

(33) H.Glenn Penny op.cit.p.12; Anja Laukötter, *Von der “Kultur” zur “Rasse”*, pp44-47; see also Christopher Seidler, “Victim of its own excitement: German Ethnology and Colonialism.”

“*As conclusion, it can be noted concerning German Ethnology and its relations to German colonialism, that most ethnologists of that period limited themselves to what they considered as fundamental research. Political statements such as those of Thurnwald or Mühlmann were*

rather the exceptions. However, these two were leading representatives of the discipline. Their gaze through the colonial glasses of “other peoples”, shows that for them the “Others” always served as surface for the projections of their own German (or European) greatness. It is exactly this scientifically transmitted feeling of self-worthiness, that is responsible for the persistent continuity of the claim to superiority.”

<http://www.iz3w.org/iz3w>

See also Christopher Seidler, “*Opfer ihrer Erregungen: Die deutsche Ethnologie und Kolonialismus* „Als Fazit läßt sich über die deutsche Ethnologie und ihr Verhältnis zum Deutschen Kolonialismus festhalten, daß die meisten Ethnologen jener Zeit sich auf das beschränkt hatten, was sie für Grundlagenforschung hielten. Politische Aussagen im Stile eines Thurnwald oder Mühlmann bildeten eher die Ausnahme. Dennoch waren diese beiden führende Vertreter des Faches. Ihr Blick durch die koloniale Brille auf »andere Völker« zeigt, daß ihnen die »Anderen« immer nur als Projektionsfläche für die eigene deutsche (oder europäische) Größe dienten. Es ist genau dieses wissenschaftlich vermittelte Selbstwertgefühl, das für die zählebige Kontinuität der Überlegenheitsansprüche mitverantwortlich ist.“

<http://www.iz3w.org/iz3w>

(34) *Annu.Rev.Anthropol.* 1993, 22:201-22, p.214.

(35) Phillip Dark, “Benin Bronze Heads: Styles and Chronology”, in: *African Images: Essays in African Iconology*, (Eds.) Daniel F, McCall and Edna G. Bay Africana Publishing Co, New York, London 1975 p.32.

(36) *Museum*, Vol. XXL, no 1, 1979, Return and Restitution of cultural property, pp.18-21, at p.21, Nigeria.

(37) *Ibid.* p.2.

(38) *Ibid.* pp.12-14.

(39) Barbara Plankensteiner, *op.cit.*p.3

(40) *Kurier*, Mittwoch, 9 Mai 2007, p.37.

(41) *Falter*, 22/07, p.6 ; see also *Die Presse*, Feuilleton, Mittwoch, 9. Mai 2007, p.37

(42) Elazar Barkan, “Aesthetics and Evolution; Benin Art in Europe”, in: *African Arts* Vol.XXX, No.1, Summer 1997, 36-41, at 41.

(43) *Paris Primitive: Jacques Chirac’s Museum on the Quai Branly*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2007, p.156

(44) Those who can read French are encouraged to read the full statement issued by Aminata Traoré, a great intellectual of our times, on the occasion of the opening of the Musée du Quai Branly. This text *Musée du Quai Branly et Immigration choisie: droit de cite* has been published at many places e.g. AFRIKARA - www.afrikara.com

« Enfin, je voudrais m'adresser à ces oeuvres de l'esprit qui sauront intercéder auprès des opinions publiques. «Vous nous manquez terriblement. Notre pays, le Mali, et l'Afrique tout entière subissent bien des bouleversements. Aux dieux des chrétiens et des musulmans qui ont contesté votre place dans nos coeurs et vos fonctions dans nos sociétés c'est ajouté le dieu argent. Vous devez en savoir quelque chose au regard des transactions dont certaines acquisitions de ce musée ont été l'objet. Il est le moteur du marché dit libre et concurrentiel supposé être le paradis sur Terre alors qu'il n'est que gouffre pour l'Afrique.

Appauvris, désemparés et manipulés par des dirigeants convertis au dogme du marché, vos peuples s'en prennent les uns aux autres, s'entre-tuent ou fuient. Parfois, ils viennent buter contre le long mur de l'indifférence, dont Schengen. N'entendez-vous pas les lamentations de ceux et celles qui empruntent la voie terrestre, se perdre dans le Sahara ou se noyer dans les eaux de la Méditerranée? N'entendez-vous pas les cris de ces centaines de naufragés dont des femmes enceintes et des enfants? Si oui, ne restez pas muettes, ne vous sentez pas impuissantes »

(45) UN.Gen. Assembly, 54 Session, 1st Plenary Meeting, 14 September 1990-A/54/PV.1

ANNEX I

FELIX VON LUSCHAN

The catalogue of the exhibition *Benin Kings and Rituals* presents him as follows: “*The Austrian Felix von Luschan, curator at the Berlin Museum of Ethnography, recognised the importance of the art of Benin even before the “discovery” of African art by the classic Modernist artists. It is above all von Luschan and his acquisition policy that are responsible for the presence of important Benin collections in Austrian and German museums; thus, he can be seen as the patron of this exhibition initiated and carried out by the Museum für Völkerkunde in Vienna and developed in collaboration with the Ethnologisches Museum-Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, and that is presented in this catalogue.*” (p11).

For this we are made to feel indebted to the Austrian/German ethnologist. But is this right? Europeans may indeed feel obliged to him for saving them from their massive ignorance generated by decades of racial arrogance and the consequent blindness to the characteristics and abilities of all human groups including Africans, from whom the Europeans are said to, have descended. But do we Africans owe him such a great debt? Did any Africans ever doubt that we are also human beings and therefore possess the normal qualities and abilities of all human beings, including the ability to use the art to express our world views?

The very high praises showered on von Luschan, however deserved, arouse suspicion that this is being done to avoid examining the other activities and views of the famous ethnologist and his associates; that he had very little respect for Africans and other peoples, that he and other German and Austrian ethnologists, philologists, musicologists and lawyers, carried or supervised research on prisoners of war in war camps, for example, at the “Half-moon Camp”

(“Halbmondlager”) at Wünsdorf, near Berlin. The ethnologists made detailed descriptions of prisoners, made finger prints, measured heads etc. Musicologists made the prisoners sing in their languages which were then recorded. Imagine asking for example, a West African in prison to sing “Sweet Mother” or “Yaa Amponsah” or a similar popular song! The materials thus collected were saved in Berlin and Vienna and used as teaching materials in museums and universities. Even a mosque was built for the Muslim prisoners with a view to brainwashing them to support the Germans in the First World War. See Lange, “*A History of the Typical: Scientific Researches in the Prisoner-of-War Camps from 1915 to 1918*” vilp.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/exp/lange/history-typ.html.; see the film “*The Half-moon Files: A Ghost Story*” by Phillip Scheffner and the exhibition by Britta Lange and Phillip Scheffner “*The Making of the Half-moon Files*”; The Ethnologisches Museum Berlin organized in 1996 an exhibition on “*Muslims in Brandenburg*”, Margot Kahleyss: *Muslime in Brandenburg - Kriegsgefangene im 1. Weltkrieg. Ansichten und Absichten*. (2. Auflage Berlin 2000); Luschan saw in the presence of the prisoners on German soil a great opportunity to study all races of mankind and all skin colours. He thought some groups were better studied here than in their home land:

„Wir haben hier in unseren Gefangenenlagern eine schier unübersehbare Menge der allerverschiedensten Rassen vertreten, alle Erdteile und alle nur jemals an Menschen beobachteten Farben. Ein Besuch in manchen dieser Lager ist für den Fachmann fast so lohnend wie eine Reise um die Erde, und manche menschliche Gruppen können jetzt hier sehr viel besser und bequemer studiert werden als in ihrer Heimat.“ cited at p.274 Anja Laukötter;

“We have in our prisoners camps an obvious number of very different races represented, from all parts of the world and all different colours of human beings that have ever been observed. A visit to some of these camps is for the expert almost as rewarding as a journey around the earth and some human groups can now be better and comfortably studied here than in their home countries.”

Michael Vetsch, „Rassentheorie der deutschen Anthropologen“, www.grin.info. Regarding von Luschan’s ideas on race see, inter alia, *Global Dimension of Racism in the Modern World: Comparative and Transnational Perspectives* AFH-Information (Arbeitsgemeinschaft historischer Forschungseinrichtungen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland e V) Nr.122 vom 27.07.2007; John David Smith, “Anthropologist Felix von Luschan“, *The Funnel* Vol. 41 No.2 Summer 2005, pp.47-48; A.Zimmerman, op.cit; H.Glenn Penny, *Ethnology and Ethnographic Museums in Imperial Germany*, Chapel Hill and London, The University of North Carolina Press, 2001; Anja Laukötter, op.cit.pp.272-279.

Felix von Luschan was head of a section of physical anthropology in the Royal Prussian Phonographic Commission which was responsible for the Prisoner of War Project. He introduced the methods of physical anthropology used in the German prisoner of war camps. He supported studies on these camps and encouraged his students Egon von Eickstedt (1892-1965) and Otto Reche (1879-1966) to join the prisoner of war projects. Eickstedt in his work on the Sikh in the prisoners of war camp, “*Rassenelemente der Sikh*” (*in Zeitschrift für Ethnologie 1920/21, Berlin*) thanked Luschan for his help. Previous to those investigations being undertaken, a group called “*Indian Independence Committee*” had protested to Luschan: “*The Sikhs especially will strongly resist on religious grounds any attempt made by Europeans to touch any part of the body and more particularly the head. Further, such measurements are associated by Indians with criminals.*” But apparently no attention was paid to such a protest. (p.33, Kahleyss). The atmosphere in the prison camps has been described as follows by Andrew D. Evans:

“The camp dynamic replicated and even heightened the dominance of anthropologists, enjoyed over their subjects in many colonial contexts. A comparison between the POW projects during World War I and the well-known German South-Sea Expedition of 1908-10 is particularly useful in this regard, especially because several anthropologists, including Paul Hambruch and Otto Reche, participated in both enterprises. On the South Seavoyage, ethnological and anthropological study took place in a militarized atmosphere, in which scientists often used weapons and threats of violence to force their subjects to hand over cultural artefacts or participate in measurements. And to this end, scholars often arrived at indigenous villages backed by armed escorts. The situation in the camps was similar. The wartime prison milieu was also militarized, and the anthropologists clearly had the backing of the German army to conduct their studies.” “Anthropology at War: Racial Studies of POWs during World War I” in (Eds). H.Glenn Penny and Matti Bunzl. *Worldly Provincialism*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2003, p.214

Luschan was definitely obsessed with collecting evidence of what he thought were peoples about to disappear. His book, *Anleitung zu wissenschaftlichen Beobachtungen auf dem Gebiet der Anthropologie, Ethnographie und Urgeschichte* 1914,(VDM Verlag, Saarbrücken2007) contains advice to the Germans visiting the colonies on how to collect materials, including e.g. skeletons, skulls and brains. He advised that there are places where for a piece of soap one could get a skeleton! (p.5) *“es gibt viele Gegenden, in denen man ein Skelett für ein Stück Seife oder für eine Stange Tabak ausgraben lassen kann“*. Skeletons were to be collected en masse. Incidentally, Leo Frobenius was also put in charge of German prisoner of war camps in Rumania where Indians and Africans were sent in order to work on farms. The death rate at those camps was very high due to bad health conditions and malnutrition. Frobenius published a picture book entitled, *The Peoples Circus of our Enemies. (Der Völkerzirkus unserer Feinde*, Berlin, 1916) Luschan also asked a Lieutenant Ralf Zürn, stationed in Okahandja, South-West Africa, just after the massacre of the Hereros by the German colonialists begun: *“If you are aware of any possible way in which we might acquire a larger number of Herero skulls...”* The lieutenant responded that this would be possible *“since in the concentration camps taking and preserving the skulls of Herero prisoners of war will be more readily possible than in the country, where there is always a danger of offending the ritual feelings of the natives”*.p.245 Andrew Zimmerman, *Anthropology and Antihumanism in Imperial Germany* (2001).

During the Second World War, anthropologists used similar methods in Vienna, National History Museum on some 7000 persons, including Jews and other prisoners of war. See, Andrew Evans, “Capturing Race: Anthropology and Photography in German and Austrian Prisoner of War Camps during World War I“ in (Eds.) Eleanor M. Hight and Gary D Sampson, *Colonialist Photography Imag(in)ing Race and Place*, Routledge, 2004, pp.226-257: see also, Marius Turda and Paul Weindling, *Blood and Homeland: Eugenics and Racial Nationalism in Central and South East Europe*, Central Europe University Press,2007.

Dr.Stelzig mentions in her book, *Afrika am Museum für Völkerkunde zu Berlin*, the suggestion from Luschan after his travel to South Africa in 1905 that the Khoisan should be put in some form of reservation to prevent their disappearance. (He had been several times in Egypt but presumably, he like other Europeans who had great respect for the Egyptians and their culture, following Hegel, did not consider Egypt as part of Africa)

“In früheren Jahrzehnten pflegten hie und da einzelne Buschmänner in Burenfamilien als Diener und manchmal auch als “Kuriositäten“ gehalten zu werden, wie man bei uns vielleicht Papageien hält; aber mit der zunehmenden kulturellen Erschließung des Landes hat sich dieses Verhältnis auch mehr und mehr geändert, und die Buschmänner gelten für viele Kolonisten jetzt wieder wie vor einigen Jahrhunderten als schädliches Raubzeug, das je eher je besser ausgerottet werden muß. Erst wenn die Kolonialverwaltungen einmal einsehen

werden, daß ein Volk nicht von einem Jahre zum anderen von der Jagd zum Ackerbau übergehen kann, dann wird man sich vielleicht dazu entschließen können, die letzten Reste der alten Urbevölkerung von Afrika in einer Art von Reservation zu sammeln und den Leuten hie und da einmal ein paar Schafe zu schenken, in dem selben Sinn etwa, wie wir heute Menagerien unterhalten und Raubtiere in ihnen füttern. Aber man müßte sich bald zu einer solchen Maßregel entschließen, sonst möchte es leicht für immer zu spät sein.“ Stelzig, op.cit. p.94; see also, Anja Laukötter, op.cit. p.61

”In earlier decades, there used to be kept here and there Bushmen who served in Boer families as servants and sometimes also as “Curios”, just as perhaps we keep parrots; but with the increasing opening of the country to civilization, this relationship has changed more and more, and the Bushmen are once more regarded by many colonists, like in previous centuries, as a dangerous prey that should be eliminated, the earlier the better. Once the colonial administrations realise that a people cannot change from one year to another from hunting to agriculture, one would then perhaps be able to decide to gather the last remaining members of the earlier inhabitants of Africa in a form of reservation and once a while, here and there, make a gift of some sheep to the people, in the same way as we keep a menagerie today and feed the wild animals. But one must decide soon on such a measure otherwise it would be easily too late forever...” p.94

Luschan seemed also to have been very much worried by the progress being made by the “Ethiopian Movement in South Africa “with their motto of Africa for the Africans. He warned that if the influence of that movement went on as he saw, soon the Africans will be the only masters of Africa (“*schwarzen Erdteils*”). He suggested that man kept an eye on that movement and where possible, either nip it in the bud or at least direct it in a direction which is least hostile to European interests: “- *nicht aus den Augen zu verlieren und sie, wo es noch angeht, entweder im Keim zu ersticken oder wenigstens in Bahnen zu lenken, die unseren eignen Interessen weniger feindselig sind.*“ (Stelzig, p.116).

One can be a very good scholar of African art, indeed have a very high regard for African art and still be contemptuous of Africans. Luschan called Africans who refused to be photographed in traditional or tribal costume, “Hosen- nigger”, “Trouser nigger” See Andrew Zimmerman, *Anthropology and Antihumanism in Imperial Germany*, University of Chicago Press, 2001, pp.30-35:

“Although Africans and Pacific Islanders at the exhibition allowed photographs of their performances, many objected to having photographs taken by the anthropologist working with the exhibition, Felix von Luschan. Often they did not allow Luschan to photograph them individually at all. Even those who did let themselves be photographed often insisted on wearing European-style clothes for what they seem to have regarded as personal portraits... This resistance aroused the fury of Felix von Luschan. In his published account of his studies, in the volume commemorating the exhibition, he labelled many individuals, “limited”, “impudent” or “ill-bred.” He particularly despised a man named Bismarck Bell, a political leader who refused to be photographed in anything but black tie.” (p.30)

“Luschan’s tirade against Bell exceeds anything written about any other performer at the exhibition, both in length and in venom: “a delightful original” and an incomparable mixture of idiot and “trouser-nigger” (p.32).

“By wearing trousers, Bell disrupted the binary oppositions that underwrote anthropology, colonialism, and, indeed, the very idea of Europe. Instead of representing natural humanity unconcealed by culture and history, Bell played the role of an anthropologist, revealing and disrupting the workings of the social and cultural system of imperialism.

By refusing to be photographed in their costumes, Bismarck Bell and other performers threatened to transform Luschan's anthropological images into demonstrations of the fabricated nature of primitive culture (which is, indeed, how I use them). Luschan dealt with this threat to his own discourse by describing, in the volume commemorating the exhibition, those who openly refused to cooperate with this ethnic construction as "trouser-niggers", especially in Cameroon, meaning a non-European who took on certain reputedly European habits (such as wearing trousers)". (p.33) See also Anja Laukötter, op.cit. p.78.

Luschan has also been quoted as saying that Negroes are incapable of becoming Christians: "*Neger nicht zum Christentum fähig seien*", Anja Laukötter, *Von der "Kultur" zur "Rasse" – vom Objekt zum Körper: Völkerkundemuseen und ihre Wissenschaft zu Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts* (transcript Verlag, Bielefeld, 2007, p.27). He was presumably not aware that some Africans such as the Ethiopians had been Christianized centuries before some Europeans even heard of Christianity. It could of course also be that he was aware of this but following the distorted thinking of Hegel and others, he regarded the Ethiopians as not being Africans!

Some times Luschan is presented as some sort of hero because he was among the first Europeans to recognize that Benin art objects did indeed come from Africa and not from somewhere else as other European art specialists thought. See also the very appreciative article on von Luschan from Stefan Eisenhofer, "Felix von Luschan and Early German-Language Benin Studies", p.62-67, *African Arts*, 1997, Vol.XXX, NO.3, The Benin Centenary

In an article entitled "Felix von Luschan (1854-1924) und Benin: Hans Grim Gewidmet", Peter M. Roeser refers to the fact that Luschan never visited Benin and expresses his astonishment that he could write a masterpiece on Benin art which is even today considered an outstanding reference book, with some outdated passages in view of more recent researches: "*Das erstaunlichste an den Arbeiten v. Luschans ist die Tatsache, dass er selbst Benin nie besucht hat.*" (TRIBUS, Vol.48, 1999, pp.173-193 at p.174.). Whilst sharing the astonishment of Roeser, I reflect a little further on what this means for African art criticism. That a person can stay in Berlin in 1919 and produce a masterpiece on Benin art without ever visiting Benin surely also says something about the conditions of the production of the work in addition to his own intellectual capacity which has often been rightly praised. Could an African scholar, even today, stay in Nigeria or Ghana and produce a book on European or German art, not necessarily a masterpiece, without ever visiting Europe or Germany? The answer is certainly, no. The main difference between the conditions in which the German ethnologist produced his masterpiece and that of the hypothetical African scholar is that by 1919 there were enough Benin cultural works in Berlin for the scholar to study whereas even today, 2008, there is not a single piece of major European or German art work in Africa which will make such an attempt a fruitful proposal. One is even tempted to say that what Luschan did in Berlin could not have been done in Benin and still cannot be done from there since most of the important pieces are in Berlin or in the British Museum or in some European and American city.

It is not surprising that most of the persons writing on African art (as opposed to those producing African art) are outside Africa and are in Europe and the United States where most of the best pieces of African art are to be found (British Museum, Musée du Quai Branly, and many other American/ European universities and museums). It is generally agreed that the best place to study African art is not Lagos, Accra, Nairobi, Bamako but London, Paris or Berlin.

Felix von Luschan seemed to have been a writer difficult to pin down to any clear position on many matters. For every statement he made against a particular issue, one could find at

least another one for it. He stated for example that the distinction between “*Naturvölker*” (“primitive”) and “*Kulturvölker*” (“civilized”) is not really tenable and that the more knowledge “we” (presumably only Europeans) have of many other cultures, the less sure this distinction appears. But almost in the next sentence, he declares that the “really civilized peoples” (“*die wirklichen Kulturvölker*”) are not the subject matter of ethnographic research. (p.2, *Anleitung*)

Sometimes Luschan expressed in the same book somewhat slightly different views on the same subject. Thus in his *Völker Rassen Sprachen* (Deutsche Buch-Gemeinschaft, Berlin, 1927) he states at p.20 that iron casting was introduced into Egypt by black Africans and from there spread to Marseille and the rest of Europe: “*Nach Ägypten ist es anscheinend schon sehr viel früher von dunklen Afrikanern eingeführt worden, wie ich (Z.F.E.1909) nachzuweisen versucht habe. Aus den östlichen Mittelmeerländern ist die Eisentechnik rasch auch nach den westlichen verpflanzt worden, hat vermutlich von Marsilia (Marseille) aus große Teile von Westeuropa beeinflusst.*“ On page 111 of the same book we read: „*Im allgemeinen wird allerdings der fremde Einfluß auf Afrika immer sehr unterschätzt, obwohl man ihn, wie ich in meinem Buche, „Die Altertümer von Benin, Berlin, G.Reimer, 1919, gezeigt habe, durch Jahrtausende zurückverfolgen kann. So stammt z.B. die an die Küste von Oberguinea weitverbreitete Bronzetechnik mit dem Guß in verlorener Form vermutlich aus dem alten Ägypten. Ebenso ist auch die geistige Kultur der Neger nicht ohne fremde Anregungen geblieben.*“

Luschan is known to have been a member of the Eugenics movement and strongly supported this movement the end result of which was tragically demonstrated in the Nazi period. Views expressed by Luschan were fairly anti-humanist:

“A key tenet is that not all human life is equal. Those deemed unfit or minderwertig in German, often translated as inferior, but literally meaning 'having less value' could thus be targeted for elimination. In a 1909 speech to the Society for German Scientists and Physicians, the anthropologist and eugenicist Felix von Luschan made the dichotomy between the valuable and the inconsequential clear in his response to the question, "Who is inferior?" "The sick, the weak, the dumb, the stupid, the alcoholic, the bum, the criminal; all these are inferior", von Luschan maintained, "compared with the healthy, the strong, the intelligent, the clever, the sober, the pure" (p. 95). Generally, two overlapping categories were expendable: the disabled (especially the mentally ill) and those who were economically unproductive. Non-European "races" too, were consigned to moral oblivion as a result of the contribution of evolutionary theory to racial science.” in review by Jonathan Judaken of Richard Weikart's *From Darwin to Hitler: Evolutionary Ethics, Eugenics, and Racism in Germany* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan) 2004. [H-Ideas](#) (June, 2005).

Similarly a report of a conference had this to say about Felix von Luschan:

“John David Smith (University of North Carolina at Charlotte) also used a biographical approach to explore the influence of American racism on the thinking of Austrian anthropologist Felix von Luschan. During a trip to America in 1914 and 1915, von Luschan sought to find laws in heredity by studying and measuring thousands of African American adults and children. Although he initially argued for genetic commonalities of all people, challenged notions of white supremacy, and believed that all “races” had some inferior traits, he supported eugenics to rid societies of seemingly inferior members and later abandoned non-racial anthropology.”

(Global Dimensions of Racism in the Modern World: Comparative and Transnational Perspectives, Heidelberg, 12.07-14.07.2007.Organizers, Manfred Berg, Simon Wendt, Curt Engelhorn, Heidelberg Center for American Studies) For some very interesting information on eugenics in Europe, see *Blood and Homeland: Eugenics And Racial Nationalism in*

Central And Southeast Europe, 1900-1940, by Marius Turda and Paul Julian Weindling, Central European University Press , 2006.)

Von Luschan also made a few remarks on persons of bi-nationality, persons of mixed parentage whom the Germans call "Mischlinge": *"There is an old proverb that the Lord God created the white man and the coloured man but the Devil created the person of mixed race."* (*"Es gibt ein altes Sprichwort, unser Herrgott habe die weissen Menschen erschaffen und die Farbigen, aber der Teufel die Mischlinge."* (p.57, Völker Rassen Sprachen).

Although Luschan expressed the view that the person of mixed races was not per se inferior and that a certain amount of mixing may be useful, he was clearly against mixing and warned the Europeans against race mixing:

"England, France and Germany are equally distinguished for the great variety of their racial elements. On the other hand, we are all more or less disposed to dislike and despise a mixture of Europeans with the greater part of foreign races". Luschan is said to have later tried to reduce the importance of this statement cited in Anja Laukötter, p.108, *Von Kultur zur Rasse*, 2007 Luschan was convinced of the permanence of racial and national antagonism:

"The respects due by white races to other races and by the white races to each other can never be too great, but natural law will never allow racial barriers to fall, and even national boundaries will never cease to exist. Nations will come and go, but racial and national antagonism will remain [...]" Laukötter, p.102.

Here is an interesting view expressed by Luschan in an ethnology book intended for general use where he contributed the section on Africa:

"In the meanwhile, those most knowledgeable about South Africa praise the Hottentot half-castes in general and the "Bastards" from Reheboth and Rietfontein in the English area as extraordinarily useful and suitable people. Similarly, especially in Cape Town itself, different half-castes, also those from Kafirs and Malays stand out, through their intelligence and have reached respectable posts in the local administration. It is also clear from the beginning that half-castes have combined intelligence and the other good mental qualities of the white parent with a great deal of the worthwhile characteristics of the black races, especially with their much greater resistance to all sorts of tropical diseases. I will not go so far as to put the case for a mixing of blacks and whites that goes so far, for example, as we find in many Portuguese colonies but still I would like to believe that in the attempt to forbid such mixing, one could easily go beyond the objective. I myself regard certainly the ten million Negroes and especially, the two million half-castes with which the United States is blessed as a part of the population with of doubtful value, and I consider it as highly necessary, that every colonial power endeavours to keep the home country free from Negro blood, but I would like to assume that for the time being, the question, for example, how far half-castes in the tropical protectorates should be useful for the mother land, should remain open." Felix v. Luschan: „Afrika“ in: Dr.Georg Buschan (Ed.): *Illustrierte Völkerkunde*. (Strecker & Schröder in Stuttgart, 1910, p. 379.)

„Inzwischen werden gerade von den besten Kennern Südafrikas die Hottentottenmischlinge im allgemeinen und auch in besonderen die „Bastards“ von Rehoboth und die von Rietfontein im englischen Gebiet als ungewöhnlich brauchbare und nützliche Leute gerühmt. Ebenso fallen auch gerade in Kapstadt selbst verschiedene Mischlinge, auch solche von Kaffern und Malaien, durch ihre Intelligenz auf, und sie haben es sogar zu sehr angesehenen Stellen in der Kommunalverwaltung gebracht. Es ist ja auch von vornherein klar, dass Mischlinge gerade die Intelligenz und die anderen guten geistigen Eigenschaften des weißen Elternteiles mit allerhand wertvollen Eigenschaften der dunkeln Rassen kombiniert haben können, besonders

mit ihrer so viel größeren Resistenz gegen Tropenkrankheiten aller Art. Ich will damit durchaus nicht einer so weitgehenden Vermischung von Schwarzen und Weißen das Wort reden, wie wir sie z.B. in manchen portugiesischen Schutzgebieten finden, aber ich möchte doch glauben, daß man in dem Versuche, solche Vermischungen ganz verbieten zu wollen, leicht auch über das Ziel hinausgreifen könnte. Ich selbst betrachte sicher die zehn Millionen Neger und ganz besonders die zwei Millionen Mischlinge, mit denen heute die Vereinigten Staaten gesegnet sind, als einen Volksbestandteil von sehr zweifelhaftem Wert, und ich halte es für durchaus notwendig, daß jede Kolonialmacht bestrebt sei, sich in der Heimat vollkommen frei von Negerblut zu erhalten, aber ich möchte annehmen, dass einstweilen die Frage wenigstens noch offen sein sollte, inwieweit etwa in tropischen Schutzgebieten Mischlinge für das Mutterland von Nutzen sein könnten.“

Felix v. Luschan: "Afrika" in: Dr. Georg Buschan (Ed.): *Illustrierte Völkerkunde*. (Strecker & Schröder in Stuttgart, 1910, p. 379)

Would the Nigerians and the Benin Royal Family have agreed to organize such an exhibition under the patronage of Felix von Luschan if they had the information above? In all probability, the issue of patronage never arose in the negotiations between the Nigerians and the Europeans. It is likely that the first time they realized that the exhibition was to be under the patronage of Luschan was when they saw the text in the catalogue. The Europeans may wish to honour Luschan if they ignore his contribution to eugenics and his measurements of prisoners, and all that this implies in the continuities of German history as far as minorities, the handicapped are concerned. But must Nigerians and other Africans honour him? Must Benin honour him for arranging for the purchase of 580 Benin cultural artefacts knowing fully well that these had been illegally and violently robbed from Benin by the British? Were the British doing Benin a favour by taking away their most valuable cultural objects? Is the purchase of stolen goods ever a service to the original owner who has lost his or her property? If we object to the Western political hegemony and to the Eurocentric epistemological order, there is no way we can admire or honour those who favour or contribute to these two mutually supporting elements.

What about the Oba Ovonramven who resisted British pressure in defence of his people and was forced into exile and died in exile? Does he not deserve to be honoured along with all those who lost their lives as a result of the British aggression of 1897? Did they all die in vain? Some of those who never condemned the British attack but were more excited by the opportunity provided by British aggression to secure Benin objects for their studies are now glorified with praises for having recognized that Benin art was made in Benin and that it was, in its magnificence, equal to the best in Europe? Something seems to be wrong here. How much self-abnegation, self-denial can the beneficiaries of the British aggression legitimately require from the victim of the colonial act of oppression?

ANNEX II

OBA OVANRAMWEN



Photograph by the Ibani Ijo photographer J A Green Oba Ovonramwen with guards on board ship on his way to exile in Calabar in 1897. The unusual gown he is wearing hides his shackles. From the Howie photo album in the archives of the Merseyside Maritime Museum.

The story of Benin has been told several times but I found the short account by Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie very useful: “In February 1897, an elite British force of about 1200 men (supported by several hundred African auxiliary troops and thousands of African porters) besieged Benin City, capital of the Edo Kingdom of Benin, whose ruler, the Oba Ovonramwen sat on a throne that was a thousand years old. The British Punitive Expedition used Maxim machine guns to mow down most of the Oba’s 130,000 soldiers and secure control of the capital city. They set fire to the city and looted the palace of 500 years worth of bronze objects that constituted the royal archive of Benin’s history, an irreplaceable national treasure. The king and his principal chiefs fled into the countryside, pursued by British forces who lay waste to the countryside as a strategy to force the people of Benin to give up their fugitive king. According to Richard Gott, for a further six months, a small British force harried the countryside in search of the Oba and his chiefs who had fled. Cattle was seized and villages destroyed. Not until August was the Oba cornered and brought back to his ruined city. An immense throng was assembled to witness the ritual humiliation that the British imposed on their subject peoples. The Oba was required to kneel down in front of the British military “resident” the town and to literally bite the dust. Supported by two chiefs, the king made obeisance three times, rubbing his forehead on the ground three times. He was told that he had been deposed. [Oba Ovonramwen](#) finally surrendered to stem the slaughter of his people. Many of his soldiers considered his surrender an unbearable catastrophe and committed suicide rather than see the king humiliated. A significant number, led by some

chiefs, maintained guerilla warfare against the British for almost two years until their leaders were captured and executed. The remaining arms of the resistance thereafter gave up their arms and merged back into the general population.” <http://aachronym.blogspot.com>

See also, Ekpo Eyo, “Benin: The sack that was” <http://www.edo-nation.net/stewart1.htm>

Praise Songs to Oba Ovonramwen

If you saw the King they captured
He is like the python of the water.
But if you saw the white man who captured
Ovonramwen
He is skinny like a twig.

The day finally came;
The inevitable happened.
Aigubasmwin-nogie,
The eldest son of Ovonramwen,
Prepared to go to Calabar.

When he arrived,
He called on the white people.
He said, “I come to plead with you
That you give me my father’s corpse
That I can take it to Benin to inter”.

The white people refused.
They said, ”We can’t allow this.
We can’t allow this.
Today makes three days
Since the lump of chalk was buried.”
Ovonramwen the mirror, the
fair-complexioned one!

(Extracts from “Praise Songs to Oba Ovonramwen”, *African Arts*, summer 1997, pp42-43)

ANNEX III

The Case of Benin

Memorandum submitted by Prince Edun Akenzua

I am Edun Akenzua Enogie (Duke) of Obazuwa-Iko, brother of His Majesty, Omo, n'Oba n'Edo, Oba (King) Erediauwa of Benin, great grandson of His Majesty Omo n'Oba n'Edo, Oba Ovonramwen, in whose reign the cultural property was removed in 1897. I am also the Chairman of the Benin Centenary Committee established in 1996 to commemorate 100 years of Britain's invasion of Benin, the action which led to the removal of the cultural property.

HISTORY

"On 26 March 1892 the Deputy Commissioner and Vice-Consul, Benin District of the Oil River Protectorate, Captain H L Gallwey, manoeuvred Oba Ovonramwen and his chiefs into agreeing to terms of a treaty with the British Government. That treaty, in all its implications, marked the beginning of the end of the independence of Benin not only on account of its theoretical claims, which bordered on the fictitious, but also in providing the British with the pretext, if not the legal basis, for subsequently holding the Oba accountable for his future actions."

The text quoted above was taken from the paper presented at the Benin Centenary Lectures by Professor P A Igbafe of the Department of History, University of Benin on 17 February 1997.

Four years later in 1896 the British Acting Consul in the Niger-Delta, Captain James R Philip wrote a letter to the British Foreign Secretary, Lord Salisbury, requesting approval for his proposal to invade Benin and depose its King. As a post-script to the letter, Captain Philip wrote: "I would add that I have reason to hope that sufficient ivory would be found in the King's house to pay the expenses incurred in removing the King from his stool."

These two extracts sum up succinctly the intention of the British, or, at least, of Captain Philip, to take over Benin and its natural and cultural wealth for the British.

British troops invaded Benin on 10 February 1897. After a fierce battle, they captured the city, on February 18. Three days later, on 21 February precisely, they torched the city and burnt down practically every house. Pitching their tent on the Palace grounds, the soldiers gathered all the bronzes, ivory-works, carved tusks and oak chests that escaped the fire. Thus, some 3,000 pieces of cultural artwork were taken away from Benin. The bulk of it was taken from the burnt down Palace.

NUMBER OF ITEMS REMOVED

It is not possible for us to say exactly how many items were removed. They were not catalogued at inception. We are informed that the soldiers who looted the palace did the cataloguing. It is from their accounts and those of some European and American sources that we have come to know that the British carried away more than 3,000 pieces of Benin cultural property. They are now scattered in museums and galleries all over the world, especially in London, Scotland, Europe and the United States. A good number of them are in private hands.

WHAT THE WORKS MEAN TO THE PEOPLE OF BENIN

The works have been referred to as primitive art, or simply, artifacts of African origin. But Benin did not produce their works only for aesthetics or for galleries and museums. At the

time Europeans were keeping their records in long-hand and in hieroglyphics, the people of Benin cast theirs in bronze, carved on ivory or wood. The Obas commissioned them when an important event took place which they wished to record. Some of them of course, were ornamental to adorn altars and places of worship. But many of them were actually reference points, the library or the archive. To illustrate this, one may cite an event which took place during the coronation of Oba Erediauwa in 1979. There was an argument as to where to place an item of the coronation paraphernalia. Fortunately a bronze-cast of a past Oba wearing the same regalia had escaped the eyes of the soldiers and so it is still with us. Reference was made to it and the matter was resolved. Taking away those items is taking away our records, or our Soul.

RELIEF SOUGHT

In view of the fore-going, the following reliefs are sought on behalf of the Oba and people of Benin who have been impoverished, materially and psychologically, by the wanton looting of their historically and cultural property.

- (i) The official record of the property removed from the Palace of Benin in 1897 be made available to the owner, the Oba of Benin.
- (ii) All the cultural property belonging to the Oba of Benin illegally taken away by the British in 1897, should be returned to the rightful owner, the Oba of Benin.
- (iii) As an alternative, to (ii) above, the British should pay monetary compensation, based on the current market value, to the rightful owner, the Oba of Benin.
- (iv) Britain, being the principal looters of the Benin Palace, should take full responsibility for retrieving the cultural property or the monetary compensation from all those to whom the British sold them.

Akenzua, Edun (2000). "The Case of Benin". Appendices to the Minutes of Evidence, Appendix 21, House of Commons, The United Kingdom Parliament, March 2000.
