

ILE-IFE TRIUMPHS IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM, LONDON: WHO SAID NIGERIANS WERE INCAPABLE OF LOOKING AFTER THEIR CULTURAL ARTEFACTS?

“A glorious display of Ife sculpture has arrived at the British Museum. Nobody — and I mean nobody — in Britain should miss it. Why? Because it changes our understanding of civilisation. Because it rewrites the story of art. Because it is a once-in-a-lifetime revolutionary event. If none of those is a big enough reason for you, then go along merely to enjoy some of the most graceful and lovely sculpture ever made. Trust me. You need to see this one.”

Waldemar Januszczak (1)



Head of Obalufon. Ife, National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria.

By all standards, the current exhibition in the British Museum entitled, *Kingdom of Ife: Sculptures from West Africa*, is outstanding. (2) This has been

acknowledged by most critics and commentators. The British press is full of praises and enthusiasm. An article by Jonathan Jones, entitled, “The divine art of the Kingdom of Benin” in *The Guardian* bears a headline declaring:

“Harmonious and humane, the sculptures of this lost African city have a greatness that any civilisation would recognise.”

The same writer states in another article in *The Guardian*:

“This is an exceptional exhibition, even by the high standards the British Museum has established in recent years. It is extraordinary because it brings together such a large number of masterpieces that have rarely or never been exhibited outside Nigeria before – and when I say masterpieces, I mean artworks that rank with the Terracotta Army, the Parthenon or the mask of Tutankhamun as treasures of the human spirit.”

“What we see here is an African classical art – by which I mean an art with a strong concept of order that gives it a special authority, whether it comes from Athens, China or Ife. Like that of ancient Egypt, the art of Ife is perfect, remote, godlike and yet – as with Egypt – when you look again it is highly observational, rooted in the real life of this lost civilisation.”(3)

Michael Glover, in *The Independent* declared: *“At the same historical moment that Andrea del Verrocchio was doing his wonderfully painstaking, high-Renaissance drawing of a female head which can be seen elsewhere in this building, anonymous artisans in Ife were working with brass, bronze – yes, these Africans knew all about bronze casting long before the Europeans arrived to show them how – copper and terracotta to produce a series of exquisite heads that are not only the equal of Donatello in technical brilliance, but also just as naturalistic in their refinement. So much for African primitivism.”* (4)

The Art Newspaper acknowledges that:

“the impact of these extraordinarily naturalistic works continues to resonate today” (5)

Richard Dormant describes in *The Telegraph* the quality of the sculptures as flabbergasting:

“This is the first show ever devoted to the sculpture of Ife anywhere in the world. The quality of the full length statues, portrait heads, ritual objects and vessels loaned by Nigeria’s National Commission for Museums and Monuments is flabbergasting. What can I say? Shows like this come along once in a lifetime.” (6)

Stephen Terence Welsh, Curator of Living Cultures at The Manchester Museum has described the Ife Crowned Head, in possession of the British Museum, shown as part of the exhibition as follows:

“This exquisite brass sculpture was one of the most important archaeological discoveries of the 20th century, it revolutionised the way academics and artists interpreted Africa. It is an iconic example of Yoruba artistry and engineering.”
(7)

The exhibition consists of some 100 impressive objects from Ile-Ife, the ancient spiritual city of the Yoruba in Nigeria loaned by the National Commission on Museums and Monuments of Nigeria. These outstanding objects are clear testimony to the extraordinary richness of Nigerian and African culture. Many Africans in the Diaspora, especially in Brazil, look upon Ife as their spiritual home and use the Yoruba language in their religious ceremonies that are largely based on Yoruba traditions.

It seems every generation of Westerners has to “discover” the extraordinary beauty and sophistication of African culture even though Europe and Africa have been in contact, at the latest, since 15th century when the Portuguese sailed along the West Coast of Africa. It is true though that since then much of the relations between the two neighbouring continents has been taken up with the nefarious Slave Trade and the hateful racist colonialism. These two determining factors do not make for honest appreciation of the arts of Africa. Obviously, if you are going to enslave a people and exploit their resources, both human and natural, you are not tempted to praise the technical sophistication of their arts or the excellence of their craftsmen. Thus in all areas of culture Africans have been depicted as primitive and savage by Westerners who should have recognized at first glance that the achievements of the African peoples compare very well with those of others, including those of the Romans and the Greeks which are held in highest esteem by Westerners. Instead the label “primitive” has been attached to all things African - language, religion, music, dance and art. Westerners have denied to Africans the basic qualities that make us human: ability to express ourselves and reflect on our environment. This negation results in subsequent frequent astonishment that our arts are as good as those from other parts of the world. Ironically, many who proclaim we are primitive and that our arts are to be put in a different category from those of the rest of humankind have been very busy stealing and looting our artefacts. Thus, there is hardly a respectable museum in the Western world that does not have many African artefacts, the best having been stolen in the colonial days.



Torso of a king, Wunmonije Compound, Ife, National Commission for Museums and Monuments Nigeria.

The lavish praises which African exhibitions receive in the Western world cannot be attributed solely to the beauty of our arts and to the excellent craftsmanship of our artists even though both are deservedly admired. The denigration of all things African surely contributes to this excitement and astonishment. Many Westerners have considered and still consider Africans, contrary to all reality and evidence, as incapable of creative art at the highest level. The denigration of the African has a long European tradition going back to the philosophers of the so-called Enlightenment who brought much darkness to our relationship with Europe. Hegel, Kant, Fichte, Hume, Locke, Montesquieu, Voltaire and many others were apostles of European superiority who laid the theoretical foundations for European imperialism and racism. There seems to have been more respect for Africans and African culture until slavery, colonization, and the Enlightenment set in. The philosophers and scholars developed theories of evolution setting up a hierarchy of human development in which they put the Europeans on top and the Africans at the bottom. European art at the time, basically naturalistic representation, was made the standard by which others were to be measured. African art seen as abstract or conceptual, was put at the bottom and downgraded as primitive and poor attempt at the imitation of nature. Ironically, when Western artists sought ways of escaping the restrictions of their so-called classical art standards, they found a way out in African art to free themselves from the constraining European norms of naturalism and adopted the freer African style of abstraction. African art offered

more freedom of creation and inspired Braque, Derain, Epstein, Giacometti, Kandinsky, Kirchner, Klee, Matisse, Moore, Modigliani, Nolde, Picasso, Vlaminck and others. It is true though that the naturalism of these magnificent Ife sculptures is in great contrast to the more abstract forms of African art, especially sculpture, which inspired the modern European artists.



“Olokun”, crowned head, Ife, National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria

Some of our contemporary Western scholars who have imbibed the cultural foundations laid by the European Enlightenment, however modified in the course of time, have views that are not very far removed from those of their predecessors. In any case, not many seem to be in a hurry to denounce the old ideas of inherent European superiority. Indeed, many such as James Cuno and Neil MacGregor who attribute the origin of the “museum concept” to the European Enlightenment base their arguments for the retention of looted artefacts on similar undeclared assumptions of inherent Western superiority. In the absence of such assumptions, they would have no leg to stand on in trying to defend Western despoliation of Africa.

Some may be taken in by the lavish praises of the Ife exhibition. But did we not in the past hear similar praises for the Benin artefacts? Have Westerners not equally praised Egyptian, Ethiopian, Malian and generally art from West Africa and Central Africa? How come Westerners are constantly surprised by art from the African Continent? How come so many writers declare their unfamiliarity or that of their compatriots with African art, including Ife art? That many Westerners are not familiar with Ife art raises very interesting questions. What

have the museums been doing in all the hundreds of years they have been keeping African art? The museums have argued against restitution on the ground that more people see African art in their “great” museums than in Nigeria, Ghana, Egypt, Ethiopia etc. but it turns out that most of their people know very little about African art. Museums in Berlin, Frankfurt, London, New York, Paris and other Western cities have Ife and other African art but even critics and journalists admit lack of familiarity with Ife art. The exhibition shows an article in 1948 in the *Illustrated London News* with headlines such as “African art worthy to rank with the finest works of Italy and Greece” and “Donatello of Medieval Africa”. Many of those reviewing the current exhibition - *Kingdom of Ife; Sculptures from West Africa*” have been saying more or less the same things. Has nothing happened to improve the knowledge of Westerners about African art in the last sixty years? What about the works of Ekpo Eyo, Frank Willet, Leo Frobenius and others? What about all those Ife artefacts that Frobenius brought to Europe and sold to museums and private collectors to finance his travels? Has the important contribution of African art to modernism via the cubists and the expressionists not helped to make African art more familiar to Europeans? Why must African art and culture remain forever an unknown factor to Westerners although they have looted and stored in their museums some of the best art ever produced on our continent? Or will this habit of declaring lack of familiarity with African culture as a way of introduction to general pronouncements only end when the Western museums have got all our artefacts locked in their museums? A well-known museum director of a famous museum in New York has argued that since his museum did not possess Nok terracotta sculptures, he could not recognize one that was depicted in a photo in an article. His museum possessed thousands of African sculptures but he had been unable to obtain Nok terracotta from Nigeria. The implication of his argument was that only African artefacts in Western museums can be known by the general public and apparently recognized by the museum directors.

Leo Frobenius encountered or, to follow Western terminology, “discovered” Ife art in 1910. He attributed the works he saw to some lost Greek tribe since he could hardly believe that those were the works of Africans. Wole Soyinka, in his 1986 Nobel Lecture, criticized Frobenius for his schizophrenic view of Yoruba art and the Yoruba. Frobenius was overwhelmed by the beauty of Ife art:

"Before us stood a head of marvellous beauty, wonderfully cast in antique bronze, true to the life, incrustated with a patina of glorious dark green. This was, in very deed, the Olokun, Atlantic Africa's Poseidon."

But the same Frobenius also expressed contempt for the people he met at Ife:

"I was moved to silent melancholy at the thought that this assembly of degenerate and feeble-minded posterity should be the legitimate guardians of so much loveliness." (8) Ekpo Eyo, leading authority on Ife and Nigerian art, writes that Frobenius was astonished by the quality of Ife sculptures and observed that they were “*eloquent of symmetry, vitality, a delicacy of form*

directly reminiscent of ancient Greece and proof that once upon a time, a race, far superior in strain to the Negro had settled there”. (9)

Frobenius on arrival at Ife set about to collect artefacts but even the British colonialists had to restrain him in his collection frenzy. He wanted to take away a crowned head, “Ori Olokun” but was prevented from doing so by the British colonial administration which had received complaints from people of Ife about the activities of the German ethnologists. Still he managed to take many artefacts away that are now in the Frobenius Institute in Frankfurt, and in the Ethnology Museum, Berlin, Germany.

Glenn Penny writes in his book, *Objects of Culture: Ethnology and Ethnographic Museums in Imperial Germany* as follows:

“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”. (10)

The original “olokun” that Frobenius saw in 1910 has mysteriously disappeared. Ekpo states: *“The original “Olokun” head described by Frobenius is now represented only by a copy; no one knows where the original is. It is not impossible that Frobenius could have arranged for its subsequent replacement with a copy.” (11)*

Frobenius inspired Leopold Sedar Senghor and Aimé Césaire in their writings on Negritude. Many may share Soyinka’s view that Frobenius was a plunderer. He donated to Frankfurt some 4700 artefacts. Did he buy them all? For a European to be arrested in those days by the British colonial authorities on suspicion of having stolen artefacts, he must have been involved in some very shady business. We have the greatest respect for the founders of Negritude even though we cannot share an ideology or doctrine that attributes to Africans thinking processes that are different from those of Europeans, one based on emotion and the other on rationality. How can great writers such as Senghor and Aimé Césaire accept, even for a moment, such a basic racist distinction between human beings? Were they aware that Frobenius described the educated Africans

he met at the West Coast of Africa as “degenerate trouser-niggers and parasitic Negro clerks”? (12)

The example of Frobenius shows that admiration for African art does not exclude contempt for African peoples. It is like some Westerners who love Africa because of the fauna, others because of the animals but hate or despise African peoples.

This excellent Ife exhibition which is being held in the citadel with the most looted Nigerian and African artefacts demonstrates, beyond doubt the fallacies of the arguments advanced as justifications for not returning looted African artefacts. Surely, the main argument that Nigerians and Africans are not capable of looking after their artefacts cannot be repeated after this exhibition, if ever such evidence were necessary. Almost all the objects on show, excluding those already in the possession of the British Museum, came from Nigeria. Who looked after them in Nigeria? Some Americans and British or Nigerians? Of course, Nigerians cannot protect their artefacts against the onslaught of a well-equipped army with traditions of looting cultural artefacts.

Requests for restitution of looted artefacts have generally fallen on deaf ears. The British Museum with which the Nigerians have organized this exhibition has refused to return, among others, the Benin bronzes which were looted by the British army in the nefarious “punitive expedition“of 1897. The invading army massacred innocent women and children, executed the Benin king’s close advisers, burnt Benin City and sent the Oba of Benin, Ovonramwen into exile. Demands for restitution have not till this day been satisfied. On the contrary, British Museum has sold some of the Benin bronzes to others and to the Nigerian Government. The museum has also refused to return to Nigeria, even for a short period, the ivory hip mask of Queen-Mother Idia which had been chosen as symbol for FESTAC 1977 (Second World African Festival of Arts and Culture) and thus obliged the Africans and Nigerians to produce a new version. As Sylvester Ogbechie stated, the famous hip pendant mask of Queen Mother Idia, was taken from the belt of Oba Ovonramwen after his surrender to the invading British forces. The king was made to kneel down in front of the British military resident of the town and rub his forehead thrice on the ground. (13) The humiliation of Ovonramwen is the humiliation of Benin, Nigeria and Africa. The hip-mask in the British Museum symbolizes the defeat, humiliation and powerlessness of Africans and is not merely an object of aesthetic contemplation. But do the people at the British Museum and the British Government care for the feelings of Nigerians and other Africans?

Critics have written about the Ife exhibition as if Ife and Benin were not connected. Here I am not referring to the traditional connection between the two cultures. According to tradition, Oba Oguala of Benin requested from the Oni of Ife that a bronze caster be sent from Ife to teach the method of casting an

instructor in bronze casting. (14) Critics have written laudable reviews about the Ife exhibition without mentioning the ongoing discussion about restitution of the Benin Bronzes. (15) No doubt many Westerners would prefer to concentrate on the exhibition at hand and forget about an issue which shows up the hypocrisy of present-day Westerners and the nefarious acts of their predecessors. But can Africans also adopt such an attitude? Can we pass over in silence the insult to the whole African continent by the refusal of the British Museum even to “lend” the ivory hip mask of Queen-Mother Idia for FESTAC? Incidentally, with regard to the present exhibition, we do not hear from the Nigerians any expressions of doubt that the objects lent to the British Museum would be taken care of or that they would be returned or that they are too delicate to travel; the usual explanations we are used to hearing from that museum when it has to lend any object or return an object to its country of origin even if for a short period. Also, insurance of the objects does seem to have been a problem for this exhibition.

The British Museum denies that any request has been made for the Benin Bronzes even though a petition has been made to the British Parliament. (16) Countless Nigerian institutions, including the Nigerian Parliament, have at one time or another expressed the wish to have the Benin Bronzes return home but to no avail. One may wonder whether the Nigerian Commission on Museums and Monuments which has been organizing exhibitions with Western museums ever raises the issue. We have no published accounts of their efforts in this regard. Whatever strategy is being pursued here has not been very successful and it is time to consider a change of approach. One may reflect on the fruitful approach of Zahi Hawass, the dynamic Secretary-General of the Supreme Council of Antiquities (Egypt). Since he took charge of that body in 2003, Egypt has recovered some 30,000 artefacts, including the recent batch of 25 thousand artefacts from the University of London, a neighbour to the British Museum in Bloomsbury, London. (17)

This exhibition which started in Spain and is now in London will go to the United States in August but sad to say, it will not go to Ife or to any other Nigerian or African city. We ask again a question already raised elsewhere. (18) Do the people of Ife and other Nigerian towns not need to see the Ife artefacts? It seems this exhibition is following the pattern laid down by the Benin exhibition. (19) Do other Africans have no need to see Nigeria’s cultural objects? Are we going to establish African unity in ignorance of the culture of a country like Nigeria with 159 million inhabitants?

To the question why the touring exhibition will not go to Africa, here is the answer of a curator of the exhibition, Claude Ardouin:

“This is due to the specific schedule of this tour. We will eventually work with our Nigerian partners at the NCMM to show the exhibition in Nigeria. We have no doubt that there are a number of leading museums on the continent with the required capacities to host it”.

The editor of NEXT noted: *“All attempts by NEXT to get the views and comments of Nigeria's National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) about Kingdom of Ife, failed”.* (20)

It is interesting to read what Dr. Joseph Eboime, former director of the NCMM stated in this regard in the catalogue of the exhibition: *“We hope that this book, and the exhibition on which it is based, will reach the general public in Nigeria, the many Nigerians who live beyond our borders, and the international audiences who will be able to see it in Europe and the United States”.* (21) The possibilities for the realization of this wish should be examined against the background of a general public that cannot read or write English and which is more at home in seeing cultural objects and not just reading about them. Moreover, can the average Nigerian afford to pay for the catalogue? Clearly, an exhibition that will not go to Nigeria and Africa can be considered, as far as the Nigerian and African publics are concerned as practically non-existent. Moreover, we should recall that both the United States and Britain put severe restrictions on the grant of visa to Nigerians and other Africans. It is excluded that these countries grant a visa to a Nigerian who wants to enter the country for the sole purpose of seeing the Ife exhibition or the many Nigerian artefacts produced by his predecessors that are now in those States. So what does the Nigerian people gain from an exhibition such as the Ife exhibition which is shown only in Europe and United States of America?



Quartz stool from shrine at Oluorogbo, Ife, Nigeria, now in British Museum, London, United Kingdom

According to a press release of the British Museum, “*Throughout 2010 the BM will stage a series of Africa-related events, activities and displays to celebrate the 50th anniversary of independence of not only Nigeria (1 October 2010) but of 16 other Africa countries.*” (22) That the British Museum and other Western museums would be arranging exhibitions on Africa and other events to coincide with the 50th anniversary of Independence raises some questions. Is this cynicism or genuine joy and sympathy? What grounds do Western museums have for celebrating African Independence or to join in the festivities marking the end of the oppressive and racist Western colonial system?

Western museums, especially the self-styled “universal museums”, can be considered as symbolizing the anti-thesis of African Independence. They are the great beneficiaries of colonial robbery and despoliation. They are the depositaries of colonial looting and stealing of African artefacts now lying in their basements and other depots. It is true that some of the fanatic Western retentionists have argued that museums have nothing to do with the colonial system but all serious and honest observers recognize the plain and simple truth: though the umbilical cord between the so-called “universal museum” and colonialism may be severed, the fundamental connections are still there. (23) A quick visit to the Louvre, British Museum, Berlin State Museums, The Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren (Belgium) and others will confirm this.

In the specific case of Nigeria, a celebration of 50th anniversary of Independence by the British Museum is remarkable when we recall that in the last 50 years the Nigerians Parliament have called for the return of some of the looted artefacts, especially the Benin Bronzes without any success or even sympathetic hearing from the British Museum and other Western museums. These calls have been treated with the utmost contempt. Since the artefacts were looted by the invading British army, Western museums and their governments have acted as if it were their God-given right and duty to keep the looted Benin artefacts.

If the British Museum, the Ethnological Museum, Berlin, the Ethnological Museum, Vienna, the Ethnological Museum, Leiden and other Western museums want genuinely to celebrate the 50th Independence of the Nigeria, they could seize this occasion by making a bold gesture of returning some of the Benin bronzes. They could at least adopt a more conciliatory approach to the issue of restitution rather than their traditional arrogant attitude which has no basis in morality or legality.

A celebration of 50th Independence anniversary of African States by the Western museums brings into sharp focus the fact that even after half a century, cultural artefacts that symbolize political authority still remain with the former colonial powers that took them away as war trophies and confirmation of their superiority. These cultural objects should have been returned at the dawn of

Independence and yet after half a century there is no sign of a change. Our inability to recover our cultural objects after decades of Independence cannot contribute to confirmation of our Independence. On the contrary, it demonstrates beyond all doubt the hold of the former colonial powers on our countries. Worst still, the beneficiaries of colonial loot and plunder want to celebrate with us. It is like a person who has stolen your cds inviting you to your birthday celebration, suggesting you might bring some Afro-beat hits which he could not take away on a previous occasion. They want to celebrate with us an anniversary of the end of colonialism but they do not want to give up any of the benefits of colonialism. So what do they really want to celebrate?

Ile-Ife triumphs in British Museum, London. Will British Museum masterpieces come to Ife/Abuja? Praises are good but actions are even better.

Ilé ahun là npa ahun sí. Yoruba Proverb. (24)

Kwame Opoku, 17 April 2010.



Brass head with crown, Wunmonije Compound, Ife, National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria.

NOTES

1. Waldemar Januszczak, “*This African art is heads above the rest*”

<http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk>

Rachel Campbell also declared: “*Head sculptures on show at the British Museum are so stunning that our ancestors said they couldn’t be African*”.

<http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk>

2. The exhibition, co-organized by the Fundación Marcelino Botín, Santander, Spain and the Museum for African Art, New York, in collaboration with the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria, has been in Spain (30 July to 20 September 2009) and is from March 4 to June 6, 2010 in the British Museum. In Spain and in the USA the exhibition and catalogue are entitled *Dynasty and Divinity; Ife Art in Ancient Nigeria*. The travelling exhibition goes to the United States from September 19, 2010 until April 8, 2011. The exhibition will not be shown in any Nigerian or African city.

3. <http://www.guardian.co.uk> ; <http://www.guardian.co.uk>

4. <http://www.independent.co.uk>

5. <http://www.theartnewspaper.com>

6. <http://www.tele+raph.co.uk>

7. <http://www.museum.manchester.ac.uk>

8. Wole Soyinka, "This Past Must Address Its Present," Nobel Lecture, December 8, 1986,

http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1986/soyinka-lecture.html

9. Ekpo Eyo, *Two Thousand Years of Nigerian Art*, Ethnographica, London, 1977, p.100.

10. H.Glenn Penny, *Ethnology and Ethnographic Museums in Imperial Germany*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill and London, 2002, p.116.

11. Ekpo Eyo, and Frank Willett, *Treasures of Ancient Nigeria*, William Collins, London, 1982, p. 11. Edith Platte writes in *Bronze Head from Ife*, (The British Museum Press, 2010, p. 42): “Frobenius was an uninvited if highly experienced, explorer and ethnologist, visiting Ife for just a few weeks and provoking arguments with most of the people he encountered. It is quite possible that he took the head and left behind a replica, as it was suggested in negotiations with the Oni at that time. However, it could also be the case, as suggested by Willet, that the reproduction was made sometime between 1910 and 1934, when it was brought to the palace for safekeeping”.

We have so far no information about efforts being made to find the missing Olokun. Given the apparent importance of this piece of sculpture, one could imagine that attempts would be made to trace its whereabouts, whether in Berlin or Frankfurt. We also do not know whether Interpol and other bodies specialized in tracing lost, looted or stolen objects have been contacted. Or is nobody interested in discovering how an important artefact seen in 1910 by a famous German ethnologist who took away lots of objects has disappeared? In this connection, it would be interesting to know which Nigerian artefacts have been taken away from the country, where they are located and what attempts have been made to recover them. This would also help to clarify stories one hears about objects sent out for exhibitions in West that never came back. The reputation of Westerners is such that most Africans believe they come to our continent to take whatever they can lay their hands on. Some also remember the Christian missionaries who ordered that cultural artefacts they described as heathen be brought to them for destruction only to realize later that many of them ended in Europe. One recalls Vatican’s request for such artefacts for exhibition in Rome where half of the objects remain till today. Jeanette Greenfield comments in her excellent book, *The Return of Cultural Treasures* (Third Edition Cambridge University Press, 2007, p.100) as follows:

“A vast collection of ethnological objects is held by the Vatican Ethnological Museum in Rome. There are more than 60,000 objects, with approximately 10,000 from Africa, 10,000 from the Americas, 20,000 from Asia, 6,000 from Oceania, and another 15,000 labelled ‘prehistoric’...

“In 1925 Pope Pius XI organized a missionary exhibition extolling missionary work all over the non-western world. About 100,000 items were sent and after the exhibition only about half were returned. The Pope proclaimed the formation of a new museum, the Pontificio Museu Missionario-Etnologico, so

that the ‘dawn of faith among the infidel of today can be compared to the dawn of faith which... illuminated pagan Rome’.

12. Eike Haberland (Ed), *Leo Frobenius on African History, Art and Culture*, Marcus Wiener Publishers, Princeton, 2007, p.59. In his enthusiastic foreword to this book, Leopold Senghor declared: *“Now, to celebrate the centenary of his birth, we have a Leo Frobenius Anthology. The great German ethnologist has thoroughly deserved this memorial in the second half of the 20th century, of which one of the characteristic features will be the emergence of the African countries on the international scene. For no one did more than Frobenius to reveal Africa to the world and the Africans themselves”*. p.vii.

“It was Leo Frobenius who gave us both the vision and the explanation, at the very moment when, having completed our studies, we were entering upon active militant life, with the concept and the idea of Négritude under our belts. It was Frobenius who helped to give the word its most solid, at the same time its most human significance.” p.viii.

Sylvester Ogbechie has an assessment of Leo Frobenius which seems fairly balanced:

“Contemporary scholarship is deeply divided about the legacy of Leo Frobenius. He was the first Western ethnographer to document some very important aspects of African art, the first Westerner to publish information about the famous [Ife](#) royal sculpture, and he led an important team of scholars who created meticulous documentation of many forms of African art and culture during several expeditions to Africa. Nevertheless Frobenius disbelieved the evidence of his own eyes/experience and tried to claim Ife culture for a mythical Atlantis. He wrote with grudging respect for the artworks but less consideration for the people who produced these works. He was very impacted by the racial ideologies of his time with significant implications for his scholarship but I think a review of his archives compels respect for the prodigious nature of his research focus.”

<http://aachronym.blogspot.com>

It is indeed very difficult not to be impressed by the tremendous amount of works that Frobenius published and the quality of his output.

13. <http://aachronym.blogspot.com> For details on the refusal to “lend” to Nigeria and Africa, the ivory hip-mask of Queen-Mother Idia, see K. Opoku, “Once in the British Museum, always in the British Museum”, <http://www.modernghana.com> See also, Wayne Morrison, *Criminology*,

Civilization and the new World Order, Routledge-Cavendish, Oxon, 2006, pp. 233-242

14. William Bascom, *African Art in Cultural Perspective*, W.W Norton and Co. New York, London, 1973, p.22; Ekpo Eyo and Frank Willett, op. cit. p.42. Enid Schildkrout, *Kingdom of Ife; Sculptures from West Africa*, p. 44. Frank Willett, *Ife in the History of West African Sculpture*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1967, pp.154-155.

15. For discussions on the restitution of the Benin bronzes, see Peju Layiwola, *Benin 1897 com Art and the Restitution Question*, 2010; Kwame Opoku, “Formal Demand for the Return of Benin Bronzes: Will Western Museums Now Return Some of the Looted/Stolen Benin Artefacts?” <http://www.modernghana.com>

Monday Midnite, 1897, <http://www.youtube.com>)

Crown Fraud: Stolen Benin Bronzes & British Museum
<http://www.youtube.com>

16. See Annex below.

17. K. Opoku, “Egyptian Season of Artefacts Returns: Hopeful Sign to be followed by others?” <http://www.modernghana.com>

18. K. Opoku, “Are Major African Art Exhibitions Only for the Western World?” <http://www.modernghana.com>

19. K. Opoku, “Benin Exhibition in Chicago,” <http://www.modernghana.com>

20. NEXT, <http://234next.com>

21. Henry John Drewal and Enid Schildkrout, *Kingdom of Ife: Sculptures from West Africa*, The British Museum Press. London, 2010, p. X, Printed in China.

22. <http://www.britishmuseum.org>

VOANews.com <http://www1.voanews.com> “The exhibition celebrates the 50th anniversary of Nigeria's independence. Curator Julie Hudson says it also highlights just how long and rich is the region's history.”

23. Those who may be tempted to believe or accept that the presence of so many objects from former British colonies in the British Museum have nothing to do with the British colonial empire, are advised to read the excellent book of Annie E. Coombes, *Reinventing Africa*, Yale University Press, London, 1994.

24.” *One should make a stand in defence of one’s rights and property, even to the death.*” Oyekan Owomoyela, *Yoruba Proverbs*. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, 2005, p.429.



Queen-Mother Idia, hip mask, Benin, Nigeria, now in British Museum, London, United Kingdom.

ANNEX

APPENDIX 21

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.

March 2000

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk>