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**Display, Restitution and World Art History:  
The Case of the 'Benin Bronzes'**

**I have edited this long article to highlight only the portions that are relevant to a thoughtful discussion of the politics of restitution concerning the Benin bronzes, which were looted by the British military in 1897 from the West African country of Benin. So please scroll past the blank white sections to read the remaining text.**

### **Restitution**

The Berlin Benin display contained a documentary section on the events of 1897: blown-up photographs and illustrations from the *Illustrated London News* of subjects such as the British column advancing into Benin territory and the so-called crucifixion trees. There was also in this section a curious, military-grey painted panel with a slit, like a peep-hole into a cell, or the view from a pill-box. Which in effect is what it was. The view through the slit revealed one of the 1897 photographs of British soldiers sitting inside the palace compound surrounded by dozens of brass and ivory objects, plaques, figures and carved tusks roughly laid out on the ground.

This is the moral heart of the Benin art issue. It is the brute fact that stands behind all those modes of display, as anthropological artefact, as primitive art, as token of cultural difference.<sup>16</sup> It is how the objects got to be displayed in the first place, in London, Berlin or Vienna. It is their defining moment, the moment of their theft, and the moment, as it were, of their symbolic death within one form of life. It is also, of course, the moment of their emergence onto a world stage, and of their rebirth into another form of life. It is the moment of their passage from religion into art.

Unlike many similarly notorious cases, including the Parthenon marbles, there are no grey areas, no dubious contracts, no questions about whether those who were doing the selling knew what they were parting with. The Benin bronzes were stolen pure and simple. Or, rather, they were appropriated as war booty – and not for their intrinsic interest as art or any other thing, but in order to defray the costs of the punitive expedition, including support for the dependants of British casualties. They were not taken *for* the BM they were sold *to* the museum and similar institutions and private collectors through the medium of commercial dealers.

When we produced our Open University course, in the year of the bicentennial of the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade, the question of the ownership of the Benin bronzes, and whether they should or should not return to West Africa, was one issue that could not be avoided. The way we addressed this was to present two voices, each putting one side of the case, and let the students make up their own minds. The two voices were those of a black British artist and curator from Manchester, Kevin Dalton Johnson, and a white curator from the African department of the BM, Christopher Spring.

The question of the restitution of the Benin bronzes is one of those that seem simple at first glance but become very complicated the further one investigates. It is also highly emotive. Our speaker who favoured the return of the bronzes eloquently linked their theft to imperialism and slavery, which he described as ‘the African Holocaust’. He made the return of the sculptures to Nigeria a test case of international equality, and for him any counter-argument was tantamount to an endorsement of inequality and as such a symptom of continuing imperialism.<sup>17</sup> From that point of view, the sculptures were stolen and they should be returned to their rightful owners; while in the West, whether in private collections or in public museums, they are *de facto* hostages, severed from the cultural context that gives them meaning. This extends to the issue of the objects’ safety. To question the ability of Nigerian museums to protect them is to question the ability of Africans to manage themselves, and is as such symptomatic of continuing, albeit disguised, racism. Such arguments are also widely rehearsed on the Internet, notably in the publications of Kwame Opoku, and were the substance of MP Bernie Grant’s campaign, around the time of the centenary of the looting of the bronzes, for the Africa Reparations Movement. They continue to attract widespread support.

The other side of the argument is most publicly identified with the Director of the BM, Neil MacGregor and James Cuno, the Director of the Art Institute of Chicago. The nub of the argument is that the ‘universal’ or

'encyclopaedic' museum represents an Enlightenment project to preserve and display the manifold cultures of the human race for humanity as a whole, now and in the future; that such institutions do the best job of looking after them that can be done and that they have a responsibility to generations as yet unborn to do so. It will be seen that two themes are intermingled here: on the one hand an argument about security and safety; on the other a more complex moral argument about the question of 'cultural patrimony', about rights of ownership and about cultural nationalism as contrasted with humanity in a more universal sense. In addition to those already cited, the most nuanced discussion of these issues that I know can be found in the writing of the Ghanaian-American philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah.<sup>18</sup>

The moral weight of the argument for restitution seems formidable. The Benin bronzes are stolen goods, their original meanings were embedded in the cultural and religious practices of Benin. It is a short step from there to argue that to display them in Western museums either as cultural artefacts or even as works of art, is to denature them, to trivialize them and to truncate their significance. At first glance, the counter argument seems shaky by comparison. Even if it is true that the objects are secured for the future by the conservation practices of the great museums, the Enlightenment-inspired claim that they are preserving culture for all of humanity is compromised by the power relations that subtend this situation. In a word, they are all in the West. There is a chasm between the 'is' and the 'ought'. And the chasm is filled with the toxic waste of slavery, racism, imperialism, the detritus of history-as-nightmare. In such a situation it is difficult if not impossible to arrive at a 'balanced' assessment of the arguments. History obtrudes, and inescapably frames the meanings of the objects.<sup>19</sup>

A more general issue, which forms a kind of backdrop to all these arguments, is the matter of identity politics. Our speaker in favour of restitution, himself a black British artist of Jamaican parents, felt able to speak throughout in the first person plural. From his position, it simply does not matter that he has never been to Africa, or indeed that on his one visit to Jamaica he was subject to criticism from locals for being 'British'. 'We' means 'black' and being black enables him to speak with authority, as a representative of those who have been robbed, on the question of the restitution of important cultural property. From that position, this identification overrides all other arguments and counterarguments, and has the further effect of rendering counterarguments hollow, even before they are articulated. They implicitly become excuses for the concealed interests of a different and undeclared set of identifications – principally 'white' and 'colonialist', which are held to subtend the speaker's discursive arguments whether he or she is aware of it or not.

Clearly this is only to begin to raise a far-reaching question. Even to articulate it raises the temperature, and to investigate it fully would take us far beyond the scope of the present article. I want to short-circuit the discussion by saying that I agree with Suman Gupta's argument that it is possible to retain a conception of identity as socially constructed, that is to continue to resist an essentialist politics of identity, and yet to reject an

identity politics according to which, to choose the most obvious examples, women and non-Western people have privileged positions on questions concerning the lived experiences of gendered and raced or ethnic being-in-the-world. That is to state the matter too crudely, but for present purposes it serves as a marker. All I shall do at this point is echo Gupta's argument in his study, to the effect that, while the institutionalization of social constructionist identity politics in literary studies and other humanistic and social sciences disciplines 'has been an enlightening and expansive process in some respects, it has also emphatically been one that has spread limits and constraints . . . curtailing free debate and exchange in significant ways'. In contrast, Gupta has argued that:

Any expression of a political position . . . is open to critical engagement and debate by anyone, anywhere . . . It does not matter who (as a gendered body) [and of course this goes also to questions of race and ethnicity] is articulating or acting in this political arena; all that matters is what basis of integrity, knowledge and understanding, and emotional investment (by a critical and communicative agent) is being brought to the arena.<sup>20</sup>

As I say, this is an issue with too many ramifications to resolve here, but to state it is a necessary prelude to the next part of my discussion, or perhaps I should say to the next episode of the story I am telling. I am not naive enough to believe that first-hand experience is going to cut through this Gordian knot; experience, we know, is always mediated. There is no straight way through this thicket. There appears to be a gulf between an unanswerable moral case – the return of stolen goods – and an undeniable fact that, at the present historical point, objects including the Benin bronzes are physically safer in institutions such as the BM than they would be in a comparable institution in Nigeria. Actually, I do not feel that the opposition is quite so simple. I think the really difficult problems are not between facts and values, but are squarely located in the field of values themselves, in arguments about cultural patrimony, nationalism and identity politics. But at that point, in 2008, I still had a blind spot for which no amount of intellectual debate seemed able to compensate. Reading arguments by museum people and critics such as Sally Price and Charles Gore, Neil MacGregor or James Cuno, or the artist Peju Layiwola or the philosopher Anthony Appiah, could not make up for the fact that I had never been to Africa. I am aware that 'seeing for yourself' has little currency in certain parts of academe. But for better or for worse I could not help feeling that in a matter of this kind, something about weighing the pros and cons in books, or even in seminar rooms and lecture theatres here in Britain, is lacking. There is a long tradition of this kind of thing, of course. Winckelmann never went to Greece, Arthur Waley never went to China. But, in my impasse, I felt I had to go to Nigeria, to Benin in fact. It might not help (and in the end I am not sure it did). But still I had to. However undecided I might remain, intellectually, politically and morally, I felt that something attaching to the experience of being in those places and talking to people there might at least put some foundation under my uncertainty that would be lacking otherwise.

So I went. I visited the National Museum in Lagos. I visited the National Museum in Benin City. I visited the brass casters district there, now

designated a Unesco World Heritage site. I spoke to artists and academics in Benin and presented a research seminar at the University of Lagos. These experiences add up to a story in themselves, though it is one that I must leave aside for now. Nigeria is a powerful and vibrant country, but it presents difficulties for a stranger. It is difficult to get to and it is difficult to get around without help, even with the greatest hospitality and practical assistance it is possible to provide. Nigeria is potentially a rich country, but actually a poor one. Partly this is to do with deep-rooted corruption within the political system. Partly it is to do with the effects of the IMF Structural Adjustment programmes which have enforced privatization on the economy. That is to say, the West is not without responsibility for the state of the country.

Given that background, it is not surprising that the state of the National Museum in Lagos leaves much to be desired, or that the condition of the provincial museum in Benin City is worse. An enormous injection of funds would be the precondition for even beginning to reach a level of facilities commensurate with the most unmodernized museum in Europe or North America. Sad as it may be, that is the reality of the situation. None of the criteria of security or preservation raised by the arguments about the universal museum can be met. I take that as an unhappy fact. What is at issue is whether it matters. While I was there I was told that the Ford Foundation was engaged in the early stages of a proposal to renovate the National Museum to the tune of tens of millions of US dollars. Personally I would have thought the US would have to spend what it has been spending on its wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to even begin to make museum facilities and infrastructure in Lagos of a standard comparable to the norm in Europe. Hopefully work on this scale will happen in the future. In the wake of the current technological revolution Nigeria will eventually become prosperous and a museum like the Acropolis museum in Athens will emerge. At the present time, we are not in that situation.

One of the things I found most interesting was that, in discussing the issue of 'restoration' in the here and now, there were different positions evident within Nigeria as well as here in Britain. In the discussion following my talk at the University of Lagos, there is no question that there was a basic sympathy for the project of returning the Benin bronzes to Nigeria and a justifiable prickliness about their retention by Western museums. But there were different inflections to people's concerns. I will try to discuss two of them.

Here is the contribution by Professor Rufus T. Akinyele, an historian and at that point the acting Dean of the Faculty of Arts:

This isn't a question as such, it might be a way of finding some kind of compromise between the two views. Looking at the issue of restitution, and whether to retain the works of art in Europe or whether to bring them back home – I am not trying to turn back the hands of the clock, but when we repatriate these works of ours, are we sure they are not going to find their way back [i.e. to Europe] through illegal means? We also want these things to be shown to the outside world. But one thing I also know is that where they are now, these works of art are busy generating funds for different countries. It is possible to assess, say for the last ten years, how many people have visited the British Museum – and on the basis of that you can work out a formula . . . you can do the ratio – two to three or whatever – you allow them to take a

percentage and then you repatriate a percentage back to the source, to their original homeland. In that case we shall be happy. They will be staying where they are, but we are also getting something in return.<sup>21</sup>

Professor Akinyele seems to acknowledge the problem of corruption and the black market in stolen antiquities. He thus argues not for a return of the objects themselves so much as for a share of the income derived from their display abroad to be reimbursed to their place of origin, as a form of investment in Nigerian art and culture. A minor but not insignificant point is that the professor seems not to acknowledge that entrance to the BM is free. He believes that a proportion of the entrance fees can be repaid to the country of origin. Whereas precisely this is, of course, one of MacGregor's main points: entry is free. Or, at least, and this would be a Nigerian point, it is free to anyone who has managed to get to England. But Professor Akinyele's oversight is a small one. Some recompense along those lines could and should be made. Now. In the fullness of time, when Nigeria is open and prosperous and home to high-standard museums, surely some kind of circulating system of the sculptures should operate. In the meantime the provision of direct financial recompense (in addition to other long-term work by Western museums in developing museums and cultural practices in Africa, which are extensive and continuous) seems a modest and justified demand.

Nonetheless, a very different and more radical point of view was passionately argued by Dr Bruce Onobrakpeya, one of Nigeria's most senior artists and cultural ambassadors:

The other thing I want to talk about is this 'restitution'. I take the position of the monarch of Benin. He wants this art to be brought back because they are not just mere 'things'. They are things that reflected the history and reflected the culture, reflected the religion; and where there was writing in the West, this art stood for writing, stood for the collective memory of the people. Now when you think of them this way, they show the young people who are being born, who have no access to the knowledge that has been recorded by the older people, the older generation, and so they are not able to grow as fast as they should have done. So I take the position of the monarch – Bring these artworks back!

For Dr Onobrakpeya, the situation is different from that of Professor Akinyele. As far as he is concerned, the sculptures have their cultural meaning in the religious ceremonies of the court of Benin. They are stripped of those meanings when they are kept elsewhere. And, no less importantly, the cultural life of the people of Benin is impoverished by their absence. For those reasons, the sculptures should be returned now. I think this argument is very powerful. And, I have to say, it splits me down the middle. In some ways the simplest response would be to accede to it and have done. It is logically straightforward, it is ethically forceful indeed and it regards people as more important than objects.

So why do I find myself hesitating before it? I think I have two types of reason. One concerns a conception of culture and society, the other concerns a conception of art. As I understand it, the present King of Benin is the descendant of absolute monarchs, and no royal palace in history has been a democratic institution. I feel it is important to distinguish between arguments about returning the bronzes to public museums in Nigeria and

returning them to the royal palace for use in religious ceremonies. Historians of Nigeria and Benin, including John Picton and Charles Gore, have argued that the prevailing history of the Benin royal dynasty is far from the long-running legitimacy of the widely promulgated image.<sup>22</sup> It represents a form of hegemony that conceals both ruptures in the dynastic succession itself (including client status to the British before independence) and the existence and legitimacy of other more popular cultural-religious practices within the wider society of Benin (before colonization, during it and since independence).

For my part I am a secular post-Enlightenment European intellectual and I have no wish to bolster royal power anywhere. This obviously brings up further arguments about cultural imperialism, cultural pluralism, the imposition of Western models, in short questions of power relations and legitimacy. Some convoluted questions ensue. As a republican in England am I committed on anti-colonialist grounds to support the claims of a monarch in Africa? Am I, by resisting the claims of an African monarch, perpetuating the power relations of British imperialism? Whatever labyrinths these questions subtend, and whatever monsters lurk in them, my belief at this time is that I do not want works of art to be removed from public view, from public accessibility, whatever the nature of claims about the matrix of beliefs and practices whence they historically emerged. I would feel exactly the same about a work of Christian religious art being removed from the National Gallery and placed in an Italian monastery or about the portrait of a Spanish king being removed from the same museum and hung in a Spanish royal palace of the present day. That said, it must also be acknowledged that 'public accessibility' is relative. As Dr Onobrakpeya himself forcefully, and rightly, argued – in the contemporary condition of 'Fortress Europe', let alone within the prevailing conditions of global wealth distribution, the collections of the BM and similar institutions can scarcely be claimed to be 'accessible' to Africans.

Accepting that important qualification, my response goes to a set of post-Enlightenment more or less socialistic beliefs about power and the public sphere. Yet it also goes to a second set of concerns, about a particular conception of art. These I want to try and discuss in a separate and final section.

But first I have to try to clarify my position on the demand for restitution. I have already said that I have misgivings about removing the bronzes from an art context and resituating them in a less than fully public, potentially exclusive social context oriented around religious practice and the exercise of political power. But the question of restitution into a museum situation in either Benin or Lagos is substantially different. As I see it, the moral case is in principle unanswerable, whereas the practical situation is very different. I say 'in principle', but I do not think that principle extends to the removal of all Benin works to Nigeria any more than it would make sense to return all Impressionist paintings to France. I think what I think is this. At present little can be done: the existing museums are dilapidated and any works returned would be at risk (though financial recompense is another matter). If, however, the Ford Foundation plan materializes over the next few years I should have



thought there was an unanswerable case for the BM to contribute sufficient works from its enormous Benin holdings (only a small proportion of which are actually on display in the BM) to enrich any new displays in the National Museum in Lagos as part of the planning of that museum. This would at least disperse some of the bad feeling engendered by the BM's refusal to lend the famous Benin ivory mask to the Festac exhibition in 1977. This was still a *cause célèbre* in the debate following my paper at the University of Lagos in October 2008, and regarded as evidence of Western bad faith (despite the BM's repeated claim that the loan was refused on conservation grounds). More than that, I would say there should be some symbolic transfer of ownership of the Benin works back to the Nigerian state (not to the monarch of Benin) with the concession of permanent loan to London (or elsewhere) of the works required for display there. In time, when Nigeria has become more stable politically and economically, I would hope for a system of exchanges between those Western museums that currently have Benin holdings and new museums in Nigeria, on an equal footing. There is, after all, enough to go round; and it is important to reiterate that the works – any works – ultimately 'belong' to humankind rather than to a transient state apparatus.

### Conclusion

So I want to come back finally to the argument about the Benin bronzes in the BM and elsewhere, and to the various debates over their mode of display and the question of their repatriation to Nigeria. As to mode of display, I take it that this is quite a simple matter. We have moved beyond treating things from outside Europe as not-art. (By the same token the producers or owners of things from 'outside Europe' are quite keen to have them designated as 'art' in a global marketplace.) Equally I think we have moved beyond separating things from their context under a rubric of universal form.

Nonetheless, this does not, to my mind, necessarily imply that we 'move beyond' a concept of art in the sense that the aesthetic object must needs become a vehicle for acquaintance with the wider culture.

In my view it remains important to continue to treat the 'thing' as an object of attention in its own right. This is one of the consequences of independence. The spectator has the choice whether to move on to a deeper cultural understanding of the piece in relation to its originary productive context. This is not necessarily the same as responding to it as a work of art and going on to make something else. It is no less important to register that originating socio-cultural context does not confer *the* meaning of the work (any more than does the intention of the artist in a more psychological sense). If we know anything from postmodernism, it is that meanings are plural, constructed and mutable. There is nothing

wrong with picking something up and running with it, or, in more polite contemporary language, 'translating' it. The fact that Picasso ill-understood the socio-religious function of African masks does not detract from the significance of *Demoiselles d'Avignon* in the history of art, be that European art or 'world' art. Neither, of course, does it preclude someone else from making a valid work of art out of a critical encounter with Picasso's historically specific encounter with Africa, wherever they live. These things are not mutually exclusive.

I think I have said what I want to say about restitution. All I would emphasize is that I do not think all works of art should go back to where they came from: all Viking art in Iceland, all Impressionist painting in France, any more than all Benin art in Benin. What I would hope for is that at some point in the future a beautiful, secure, air-conditioned museum comes to pass in Benin City, perhaps along the lines of the Luxor museum in Egypt, which could house a comprehensive display of Benin works, and that interested visitors from all over the world could travel to Benin City to see them, and perhaps experience other manifold and complex aspects of the culture which gave birth to them.

Even if that situation were to happen, I do not think *all* Benin works of art should go there. Though I do think it would be perfectly proper for works to circulate between Benin, Berlin, London or wherever on a mutually agreed basis according to programmes worked out independently by museum specialists in all those countries in accordance with an international law formulated for the purpose (that is, without national political coercion). But that situation does not exist at the moment. There is a real danger that if works were returned to Benin in the present political and economic situation, they would be lost: either through physical decay or through various forms of theft, looting, etc. There is a further chance that, even if they were not lost, they would become difficult of access within the palace – and to my mind this is only marginally less serious than the matter of physical loss. They would be lost as art, as 'world art', indeed.

This suggests to me a further important consideration. For I do not agree with the argument that showing objects in glass cases in museums is to debase them, to denude them of their 'proper' meanings. As it happens, the 'glass case' argument is something of a rhetorical red herring. Modern museums often try to move away from glass display cases, other than for purposes of safety and preservation. To my mind, to be involved in an imaginative transaction with a work of art, to contemplate it for itself, to reflect upon it, even to appreciate the technical skills of its fabrication if they are germane to the experience, is in no way secondary to a different sort of transaction wherein the object is a component within a religious ceremony; or, for that matter, a political injunction, or any other kind of contextualizing framework. It is 'texts' and not merely 'contexts' that have claims on our attention. I do not think it is any bad thing to escape the thrall of religion; quite the contrary, I think it is far better to engage in critically self-conscious reflection about the works of our fellow human beings conceived precisely as that, especially if this requires some imaginative work to understand the Other. I am not inclined to concede the tenets of secular humanism either to a theocratic imperative or to a brand of cultural

relativism that in fact depends precisely on the space of secular humanism for its own functionality.

Learning can undoubtedly be done and done well in a context where something was made and used. Why else would I myself have wanted to go to Africa rather than just read about the Benin bronzes? But this does not mean that a large proportion of what I know was not got from books. Ideally, I think, the acquaintance with a culture, the achievement of a sympathetic relationship to the Other, involves a dialectic of learning and looking in a variety of situations, some more or less contingent (this armchair, that library), some more or less essential (in the present case, the streets and buildings and people of Benin, Lagos, etc.; in another case, the river Nile and the tombs and temples of the Ancients). Part of my concern with identity politics is that I am suspicious of the claim that there is something congenitally inauthentic about a Western person's looking at an African sculpture in a museum; and, conversely, that authenticity resides in encountering it, not as a sculpture, as a work of art deserving of attention in its own right, but as a component of ritual. I am interested in works of art as part of an open situation, part of an open-ended self-consciousness about relations between different Others. That kind of openness is not something I readily associate with religion (any more than I associate it with the operation of spectacle, bureaucracy or market forces). But it is something that I associate with art.