

In your essay, discuss the Benin Bronze within the context of this module (i.e., stories that shape the world). Reflect on the significance of the Benin Bronze within the cultural context of the Yoruba as well as the post-colonial context today. - Gwenllian Anthony (1404702)

What is the significance of the Benin Bronze within the Yoruba tradition and within the post-colonial world of today? Within the context of "stories that shape the world," the Benin Bronzes represent an important narrative of cultural identity, colonial exploitation, and contemporary debates about restitution and cultural heritage.

Before reflecting on its significance, it is important to cover some context to understand the history of the Benin Bronze. The Benin Bronze is a collection of elaborately decorated sculptures, mostly made from bronze and brass but also from ivory, textiles, red stone, wood and leather. They mostly came in the form of cast relief plaques, commemorative heads, items of royal regalia, human and animal figures and personal ornaments (Benin Bronzes, N.D). The bronzes have been dated to around 1500CE onwards and they hail from West Africa, specifically Benin City. It is known that the kingdom of Benin supported artisans and merchants working with all kinds of materials, and these 'bronzes' were specifically made for the King's, or Oba's, royal court in the kingdom of Benin. The Oba is seen as a descendent of the Yoruba god, Oduduwa, and therefore makes him a divine being. Oduduwa is the creator orisha, or god, of the Yoruba people and is believed to have founded and ruled the first Yoruba city of Ife. It is said that the first Oba of Benin was a descendent of Oduduwa, and any groups of people who sought to establish political legitimacy were required to trace their descent from the Yoruba god. (Pemberton, J. 2005). The Benin bronzes were often commissioned for the ancestral altars of past Obas and Queen Mothers, both of which were very important figures within the Yoruba tradition, but also used in rituals to honour other ancestors and used in the accession of new Obas. Since the fourteenth century, each new Oba is required to create a shrine to his predecessor. These shrines would include freestanding heads which represents the destiny and character of the individual, as well as representing the qualities and leadership of the previous Oba. They most importantly served as a focal point for a living Oba's communication with his ancestor (Kingdom of Benin, N.D). The bronzes provide important documentation and a historical record of the kingdom, especially its dynastic and social history, but also includes a record of its relationships with other states, societies and kingdoms. One narrative that is well documented within the bronzes is the relationship between the Europeans, specifically the Portuguese, and the Kingdom of Benin. The Portuguese developed diplomatic, missionary and trade contacts with the Kingdom in the late 1400s and it is documented within some of the Benin Bronzes. An example of this is a figure of a Portuguese soldier wearing a

helmet with a four-pointed brim, armguard and breeches which dates to the eighteenth century.



Portuguese Man -
Credit to The British Museum



Depiction of Oba wearing coral beads
Credit to The British Museum

Although the plaques showcased international relations, dynastic history and social relationships, it is important to bare in mind that it is not reflective of the wider population of the kingdom. They do not include depictions of the farmers, the townspeople, women or children, which excludes the majority of the population of Benin City. The bronzes depicted political and mythological symbols that painted the Obas in a positive light. For example, plaques that depicted images of the Oba often showed him wearing a crown and tunic which are woven of red coral beads. The coral beads were a rare and valuable item that were traded from as far away as the Mediterranean, which was a symbol of the prosperity of the kingdom and its vast international trade. The success of the overseas trade was one of the main reasons for the Oba's power being associated with water, the ocean and river trade routes. There is a Yoruba myth that says that an ancient Oba of Benin once defeated the god of the sea, Olokun, in a wrestling match on the beach which resulted in the Oba taking red coral from her and using it for royal regalia ever since (Benin: An African Kingdom, N.D). The Yoruba also believe that coral possesses a mystical power and that any curse or proclamation made by the Oba while holding the coral shall come to pass (Peck, J. 2002). The significance of the coral beads is clear through Yoruba mythology and its inclusion in the royal regalia is an example of how integral myths are to the lives in the royal court of Benin.

As well as the inclusion of red coral beads to convey the authority of the Oba, some plaques contain images of mudfish, leopards, crocodiles and pythons all of which represent different political and social qualities as well as mythological stories. Mudfish are often depicted on the bronzes as they are able to live in and out of water in the coastal regions of West Africa, symbolising the authority the Oba has over both domains. They also symbolise peace, prosperity, fertility and the Oba's position between the mortal world and the spirit world of Olokun, due to the mudfish living close to the riverbank (Peck, J. 2002). In Benin cosmology, leopards are seen as the king of the tropical rainforest, so the depiction of leopards symbolises royal power and the dominance of the Oba over his people and kingdom. Also, leopards were often sacrificed to ensure the prosperity and well being of the kingdom which would have been a big part of their superstitious belief system. In Benin City, crocodiles are seen as the 'policemen of the waters' and are associated with the god of waters, Olokun. The inclusion of crocodiles symbolises the Oba's authority to punish wrongdoers, specifically having the powers to take human life, as the Oba did in earlier times. Pythons were also considered to be linked to Olokun, but also to the god of nature, Osun, who is associated with fertility and the feminine spirit (Peck, J. 2002). Another example of Yoruba mythology appearing within the bronzes is the fish eagle. The fish eagle appears in many of the Benin bronzes and it is said to predict good or bad fortune, depending on its cry. The myth that is linked to this creature says that a previous Oba, Esige, was once warned by the fish eagle, to not go to war with the Igbo people. Esige ignored the prophecy and went ahead to defeat the Igbo in battle, proving that he was powerful enough to overcome the cry of the fish eagle. The creature was then used as a symbol of power, strength and a reminder of how the Oba is above the normal dangers of bad

omens (Benin: An African Kingdom, N.D). The constant inclusion of these symbols highlights how important connecting to Orishas and to Yoruba mythology is to the Oba and his people. It is clear that their mythology is not a collection of fairytales, but a way of being, a part of their history and a part of their daily lives.

In a post-colonial context, the debate surrounding the repatriation of the Benin bronzes in recent years has sparked similar debates across many historical items around the world. The debate is mostly centred around the ways that historical items were acquired and the legal ownership of said items, such as the bronzes. At the end of the nineteenth century, the trade across the Nigerian coast was largely dominated by the British and there was a power shift from West African kingdoms towards a mostly European control. The newly industrialised European nations, which were supported by new military technologies, started to use their superiority to develop the territorial land-grab which is known as the 'scramble for Africa'. Alongside the transatlantic slave trade that devastated West Africa, this new found aggression ultimately led to major clashes between the British and Benin City. In January 1897, an allegedly peaceful trade mission by the British was attacked on the way into Benin City, which resulted in the deaths of seven British delegates and 230 of the mission's West African carriers (Benin Bronzes, N.D). This triggered a large retaliatory expedition by the British military which was called the 'Benin Punitive Expedition', and they captured Benin City in February of the same year. The occupation saw many casualties and the destruction of the kingdom, including the Oba's palace. The British looted thousands of objects that had spiritual, ritual and ceremonial importance from the palace and its storage. Although the incentive was to punish the Oba and his kingdom, they also targeted royal treasures to sell them to finance the invasion (Lesseliers, A. 2023). Many of the looted items were distributed among members of the expedition but also sold to private collectors and museums back in the United Kingdom. Looting, theft and imbalance of power are often the reasons why foreign artefacts are found in historically colonial museums, hence why there are many debates about the repatriation of stolen items. Nigeria has spent the last few decades urging museums across the world to return its artefacts and in 2002, the Federal Ministry of Information and Culture formally requested that "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" (Lesseliers, A. 2023). Although it has taken some time, the last couple of years has seen the mass return of the Benin Bronzes to the royal court of Benin. This includes items from the Netherlands, the United States, France and the United Kingdom.

It is clear that the Benin bronzes hold a great significance to the people of Benin City and the wider region of Nigeria. Many are sacred items that are often used as a gateway between the mortal world and the world of the Orishas, but also serve as reminders of Obas passed and Benin City's dynastic history. It is their connection to the divine, to their beginnings, to their ancestors. The Benin bronzes are worth more than their monetary value, they have symbolic and cultural importance. It is

clear that the British did not see it that way when they looted thousands of items from the royal palace. They looted the bronzes to pay for the expedition and for personal gain, which suggests that they only saw the monetary value of these items. Maybe this is due to the fact that the British don't have an equivalent to the Benin bronzes. Artefacts are often, but not always, seen for their monetary value and not their cultural significance. This is clearly not the case with the people of Nigeria and their fight for the repatriation of the bronzes. The bronzes are a hugely significant part of their belief system, their history and their culture and it is important for them to be able to learn about their own heritage through their ancestral artefacts.

References

Benin: An African Kingdom, N.D. The British Museum. Available here: https://www.britishmuseum.org/sites/default/files/2019-09/Benin_art_Nov2015.pdf

Benin Bronzes, N.D. The British Museum. Available here: <https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story/contested-objects-collection/benin-bronzes>

Kingdom of Benin: Royal Head C.1650. N.D. Royal Collection Trust. Available here: <https://www.rct.uk/collection/72544/bronze-head>

Lesseliers, A. (2023) *Repatriation of the Benin Bronzes: An Ethical and legal discussion?*

Peck, J. (2002) *Court Art of Benin*. Pitt Rivers Museum. Available at: <https://prm.web.ox.ac.uk/files/beninpdf>

Pemberton, J. (2005) *Yoruba Religion*.