

The Benin Bronzes: Colonial Exploitation

Within the modern Western World, dominated by the legacy of colonialism and empire, we struggle to understand the importance and implication of certain objects to other cultures and nations. Especially in more modern times, with the advent of the internet and the incredible ability to find anything online, it can become easier to look past the impact of something as small as an A3 sheet of paper can have. This is what makes the sheer existence of the Benin Bronzes so incredibly important to understanding the modern international relations, of not just Britain and Nigeria, but of most colonial powers. In this essay, I will attempt to give a brief overview of the Benin Bronzes, and how they impact - and have impacted - the modern relationship between Britain, Nigeria, Benin and the wider Western World.

The Benin Bronzes have been famous for centuries, not only because of their status in the Western World, but the influence and impact that they held within areas of Africa up to (disputedly) 1000 years ago - Barnaby Phillips cites in his book "Loot" that Bronze working may have started in Benin in the time of "Oba Oguola... from about 1280" (Phillips; Loot - pg. 10). But to understand the origins of the Bronzes themselves, we have to understand how it was possible for them to be made in the first place - which is not as simple as it sounds. As previously cited, Phillips provides only one potential date for the origin of Bronze working in Nigeria and Benin, but there is no agreed consensus for when the bronze working actually started within Nigeria - later in the book, Phillips provides the information that some oral tradition within Nigeria cites the working of Bronze originating "hundreds of years earlier" (Phillips; Loot - pg.10). Bronze working within the area of Benin city is some of the oldest within Nigeria as a whole, and was the home of the entire modern Benin Bronze collection until their seizure by British forces in 1897.

When the Bronzes are discussed by most people, the religious significance of them is an often neglected topic. To understand why their impact, and loss, were so damaging to the Oba's and Nigerian peoples, we have to understand how the Yoruba religions, the pieces, and the ruling Oba dynasties, were connected. In much the same way as the Kings and Queens of England have been the heads of the Church of England, the Oba were the spiritual head of the Yoruba faith - connecting the numbers of different peoples within the area that we now know as Nigeria, but only 200 years ago was a diaspora of many different states. The practice of Yoruba faiths is different in some key ways to the beliefs of Western Christianity, for example, there is no "day of rest" in Yoruba, meaning that the method of worship isn't limited to only one day of the week, but is open for everyone to worship every day of the week, wherever they need or are able to. This is a policy reinforced within the faith itself, with Gods that hold influence or direct connections with areas in the world, such as specific rivers or mountains, meaning it is easier for people to worship the Gods and ask for their favour, while maintaining a more physical connection with the Gods - something that is only seen sparingly in Western Christianity. The position that the Oba held within Yoruba faiths is, as mentioned previously, tied in a similar way to the head of the Church of England like the King or Queen of England is - an intrinsic connection with the higher powers of the world. The Oba would rarely leave the palace, save for ceremonial and important matters, given the rank of divine that the Oba held within Benin society.

The pieces of art known as the Benin Bronzes have a wide date of potential creation, dating between the 16th and 17th centuries - and the distinction of what is or isn't a Benin Bronze is a matter of personal fascination. For example, a piece made prior to 1700, of

Bronze or Copper, wouldn't be classified as a Benin Bronze, as it wasn't seized by British



forces during the "punitive expedition" - but a piece made only a few days before the collection was taken would be named as one. The reasoning for this can be attributed to the colonial mindset of the British forces involved in the seizure of these pieces. They were simply Bronze pieces of art from the region of Benin, and as a result deserved no further elaboration or explanation, hence the name "Benin Bronze". This can also be seen in the colloquial, and oftentimes racist, names for the pieces. Take "Toochly-Poochly" for example, pictured to the left, which was seized, held by the British until 1974 when it was sold for £185,000 (£2.2 million when adjusted for inflation). Further attempts at selling on other pieces, as recent as 2016, have been met with increasing hostility and opposition, but have regardless been allowed to continue. This is only one of the pieces seized by the British expedition to Nigeria, and it's believed that over 5000

different pieces were taken during the operation - which was a colossal loss of history and culture for the Benin and Nigerian people, both then and now.

The piece given as the primary source, pictured to the right, for this topic is an interesting one, showing the Oba in "regalia and with symbols of royal power", a quote taken directly from the British Museums webpage on this piece. The fact that a piece of art depicting the Oba of Benin is held, not in Nigeria, but in London, is something that should not be ignored while discussing this piece. An even more stinging wound in relation to the piece is the items being held and worn by the Oba, given they're named as royal regalia - and the connection to the Yoruba faith - we can assume that they hold some religious significance within the faith. The animalistic nature of Yoruba based faiths can be seen within the piece, as the Oba is wielding two lion-like objects, widely regarded throughout the world as majestic or associated with leadership and kingship. Maybe more important to the subject of this essay, is where this piece has been kept since its seizure - not in Benin City with the Oba, but in London, with the British.

Both Bronzes so far pictured within the essay have come from the British Museums online catalogue, where they are labelled as being "acquired" in Benin - a convenient way to not take any sort of responsibility for the seizure of the pieces. Even where the pieces are kept within the museum building is a way to hide away from the origin of the pieces in London, as they are kept in a room hidden away below the main floors, enveloped in the dark. It can be argued that this is to minimise the controversial nature of the pieces in modern discussion, but can provide a more emotional reaction from those with a connection to the pieces. Victor Ehikhamenor, an artist from Benin, made the poignant statement that it was like "visiting a relative behind bars" (Phillips; Loot pg. xxi), which is a statement that rings true more in the piece given as the primary source, since it shows a clearly more high ranking individual. It would be, for example, as if the official portrait of the Queen were stolen, placed in a foreign nation, and shown off to those with no connection or



respect - a deeply offensive and insensitive action. However, the portrait of the Queen would have probably been treated with more respect than most of the Benin Bronzes have been, indicative of the more hostile reaction that British institutions have against their former colonies, especially Nigeria.

In this section of my essay, I want to talk about the impact of the Benin Bronzes on modern British-Nigerian relations, since it has been a dominant matter within both countries, and across most of the post-colonial Western World. I first want to start off by clarifying that this relationship isn't an exclusive one between Britain and Nigeria, most other colonial powers share a similar one with at least one of their former colonies. Interestingly, France has taken a slightly more reconciliatory approach with the colonies of Burkina Faso and Benin, formerly Dahomey, to name a few, with President Macron making the famous "African heritage can't just be in European museums and private collections" comment. Unlike the British Museum, the French have returned several of the Benin Bronzes to Benin, along with many other pieces, such as the mask of Ranavalona III, which France has returned to Madagascar.

Other European museums have made their intention to return some pieces clear to former colonies, with museums in Austria, Germany, Scotland, among others declaring their intention to, along with ones in Sweden and the Netherlands. This is one of the largest developments in post-colonial art repatriation, with the Benin Bronzes being at the forefront of the discussion - the Benin Dialogue Group, formed of nations currently holding the Benin Bronzes, and Nigeria, with the intention of returning the pieces home - is one of the most important groups working on the repatriation of stolen art pieces. An argument can be made that the Benin Bronzes are only as important in this discussion because of how violently they were taken, and how astonishingly beautiful they are. While a great many of the pieces are set to be returned, mostly by Germany and the Ethnological Museum of Berlin in, originally 2022, but now 2023, a huge amount remain in other colonial museums, like the British Museum, which has the single largest collection, followed by the aforementioned Ethnological Museum of Berlin, and only then the Nigerian National Museum, based in Lagos.

On the topic of how relations between the two nations have been dominated by the Bronzes, and their retention by the British Museum, it can be quite difficult to understand from a Western perspective the damage done. For example, most Nigerian people feel as if there is a part of their nation still under European occupation, even with the formal occupation of Nigeria ending in October



1960 - this is an unfortunately uncommon sentiment held by many nations throughout the former British Empire. Some other examples of this are the Aboriginal Shield taken from Australia, pictured to the top right, and the incredibly influential and easily identifiable Moai statues, taken from Rapa Nui, pictured to the top right.

To conclude my essay, I want to emphasise how important the pieces are to resolving, and understanding, the incredibly complex and personal issue of colonial repatriation of art, and how emotionally and politically impactful it can be for many different groups of people. I also want to reflect on the way that the continued retention of art by groups such as the British Museum, of art not just from Benin, but places as far away as Easter Island and Australia, can be a continued controversial and political issue, and how deeply driven people involved in reclaiming the pieces of art. I hope that, in this essay, I have been able to convey how complex an issue this is, and how crucial coming to an agreement on the issue, and the repatriation of the objects, can and is. I also hope that by providing more international examples, it can give an idea of the scope of colonial exploitation, and imperial influence in the post-colonial world. It's also been in an attempt to highlight the lack of sensitivity within institutions such as the British Museum.

Authors Note:

This topic has been of great interest to me, and I hope to continue on this topic through my own research and further study at the University. I do want to apologise for the lack of elaboration in some places, I've found it very difficult to expand on or focus on one specific part of this study, given the vastness and interconnectivity of the topic.

References List:

"Loot" - Barnaby Phillips 2022.

Assorted links and all images have been sourced from the British Museums online collection.