

A HISTORICAL REVISIT OF THE BENIN EXPEDITION OF 1897 AND IMPLICATIONS FOR NATION-BUILDING IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The punitive Benin Expedition of 1897 has remained a watershed in the histo-artistic tradition of Nigeria and in the annals of British colonial footprint. A lot has been researched, written and published about that infamous tragedy carried out by the British colonial misadventure. But the incident can never be over-emphasized in view of its impact on the Nigerian nation state. A periodic review of the subject matter is, therefore, imperative to update the facts, re-assess the consequences and reinforce the demand for the repatriation of the looted art works from British museums where they have been domiciled. This is exactly what this work has set out to do. This research gives a political background of the invasion as well as its effects both on the country and on the African artistic tradition. A narrative research method was adopted in this work to guide students of history and art historians to deeper appreciation of that clash of two cultures, African and European, and even provoke further investigation into that historical event

Introduction

One of the Africa's greatest contributions to human civilization is in the area of art. This thrived at a time when art was still an integral and inseparable part of religion, ceremonies and social engineering. Though the situation is no longer the same today, nevertheless, African art has occupied an essential portion of international intellectual discourse (Atkins 1974). Benin is one of the most celebrated chapters in African tribal art known for its bronze masks belonging to the ceremonial regalia of a powerful king known as the Oba. Other aspects of that art tradition include wooden figurines, brass sculpture and iron. The knowledge of Benin art came to the limelight from 1897 when a British punitive expedition carted away several thousand pieces mostly in bronze and ivory. These found their way to London and later sent into British and German ethnographic collections (Atkins 1974). This is the summary of that heart-rending, looting and attack of the historic art paradise of Benin at a time when imperialism was fast becoming an unfortunate reality. The implications of

this event were total. It not only brought about the looting of the ageless Benin art gallery but also nearly wiped out that generation of artists. That expedition literally put an end to the unique Benin art culture and created a missing link between the old and the new in the generations to come both in Nigeria and in Africa. The link has not been bridged ever since but rather has continued to widen. That iconoclasm has a far-reaching effect on our museums, history, art tradition and nation-building. These perspectives will be addressed in this attempt to revisit the issue using a historical approach. The discuss of this matter will remain a burning issue among historians, archaeologists, tourism experts and scholars of international relations and will remain so for a very long time to come.

It is now more than one century since that punitive step that brought down the Edo Empire which lasted from 1440-1897. It was Benin as the political capital that sustained that empire as it lasted. One may not appreciate fully what actually took place on that fateful day and its wider implications. It was an action

against African culture, art, tradition, development and justice. A demand will continue to be made for the return of that stolen legacy to their original domain where they will be more meaningful and better appreciated. All this will help to regenerate the history of the people as it affects their past and future. Osahon (n.d) confirmed that the invading British army carted away all valuable arts works after the campaign and what they could not steal, they burnt or destroyed. This is the darkest side of the whole tragedy because some of the ones they destroyed were without trace and were lost forever. There is no doubt that the controversy that trails the collections that form part of the looted art tradition will continue for a long time to come until justice is done.

Origin of Benin Kingdom

Benin is located in the present day Edo state, Nigeria. The history of Benin is a very interesting one. This is irrespective of whether one is coming from a historical, cultural or artistic point of view. The account of the origin of Benin has been mainly of three controversial versions. The land was said to have been occupied by the children of an unidentified ancestor called Idu. The people of Idu were said to have lived in 'Ubinu' and their name was later changed most likely during the reign of Oba Ewuare who changed the name to Edo (Agbontean-Eghafona 2001). According to this source, these founding fathers settled at the location today known as Benin around the early 7th century. The land was said to be rich in resources. In the words of Okpoko and Agbontean (1988), Benin oral tradition upholds autochthony insisting that the Benin inhabitants were aborigines and never came from

anywhere as claimed. The first families later grew into the thirty-one settlements. Finally, according to Omorogie (1982), it is believed that in about A.D 900, the thirty-one settlements came together under one authority to form the Benin Kingdom. This was said to be realized by one Igodo, who finally named the area after himself "Igodomigodo" around A.D 900 (Agbontean-Eghafona 2001). Egharevba (1956) supports that the kingdom initially known as Igodomigodo meaning "towns of towns" and "land of Igodo" is what is now known as Benin. Again, the ancestors of Benin were said to have migrated to the highland plains for safety from flood which overrun the lower surface of the earth. When the water receded, the surviving descendants of Idu, the ancestors of Benin settled in the area known today as Benin in about A.D 600.

Today, the names Edo and Benin are used interchangeably. 'Edo' is preferred by the indigenes while Benin is said to be the corrupted version. Hide (1943) insists that 'Benin' as a term must have come from the European coinage. In his opinion, all the names that start with consonants including Benin/Bini are all suspected to have a foreign root.

There is a more popular version about the origin of the modern Benin especially in the 20th century which claims that Prince Oranmiyan was Oduduwa's son in Ife. He was said to have been deployed from Ife to rule Benin during one of the leadership crises that they went through. Tradition has it that an unpopular dynasty of the Ogisos was rejected by the Edo people. The prince was therefore asked to come and rule Benin. He came and later married a Benin daughter known as Erinwinde. She gave birth to Oba Eweka 1 who is

acclaimed to be the first in the reigning dynasty in which Oba Erediuwa is the 38th in the direct succession line. According to Agbontean-Eghafona (2001), Ogisos rule affected most profoundly the subsequent history of Benin. All these claims point to a possible ancient kingdom that has lasted for a very long time before the modern era that made everybody to forget how it all began especially as there was no written records.

It took the administrative sagacity and vision of the obaship of Ewuare the Great (1440-80) to strongly re-position the kingdom. He was a great warrior and a magician. He not only mounted the hereditary succession to the throne but also consolidated the throne extensively. It was Oba Ewuare that re-built the capital and constructed the city wall. He later became the supreme political, judicial, economic and spiritual leader. Consolidating on his foundation, it was possible for his successors to turn Benin into a flourishing trade hub in ivory, bronze and brass workers and wood carvers. The fame of the city in this regard lasted from 15th to 18th centuries. Agbontean-Eghafona (2001) maintains that the Edo civilization has lasted for over 600 years. During this period, its influence spread even to the fringes of Benin Republic and the Niger Delta.

Summary of the 1897 Benin Expedition

In November of 1896, an Acting British Consul, General James Phillips, requested from Britain the permission to invade Benin Empire. In the first quarter of 1897, without waiting for the reply to letter, he took a detachment of troops and forcefully moved into the ancient city of Benin. This he did under the false pretext of going to investigate an alleged ritual killing going on in the city. But the

real motive was to brutally subdue the kingdom and dismantle the age long Benin Empire. Predictably, the move was considered as an attack on the Oba's suzerainty and was promptly challenged. Following an intelligent report, the Oba dispatched a corresponding military strike force which laid an ambush on the invading soldiers. Phillips' column was caught totally unprepared and was completely annihilated. Only two British soldiers survived the onslaught in what has become known as the 'Benin Massacre'. The British government planned retaliation. In December of the same year, a British force of 1,200 soldiers under Admiral Consul General Rawson invaded the Empire and brought it down. Rawson's troops overran the empire, burned and looted the Benin City. The tragedy brought to an end the prosperous West African Kingdom of Benin. In the course of the punitive expedition, as it is popularly called, the political structures of the day were dismantled. The reigning monarch, Oba Ovonramwen, was arrested and sent into exile. The most unfortunate side of the notorious episode was the destruction of the unique and thriving artistic culture of the empire. The invaders carted away about 2,500 artworks to Europe as the 'spoils of war'.

Benin art: richness and utility

The body of Benin art was made up of objects in ivory, wood, iron, terracotta, leather and brass (Ben-Amos 1976). The Benin works of art have been classified and historically put into periods by Fagg (1965) and Dark (1973). It has been put into the period from 14th century to the present day. The origin of Benin art could be traced to the Ogisos in 10th century. Its utility was centered on securing the monarchy and centralizing the products of the villages that later came together to form the kingdom (Agbontean 2001).

Initially, because of their technical excellence, the Benin art was thought to be of non-African origin. But according to Atkins (1974), the genesis of the Benin bronze-casting tradition of 'lost wax' process is now known to be of indigenous history dating back to 13th or 14th century. This position has been strengthened by the Igbo Ukwu bronze casts which date even back to about 10th century (Nwala 2010).

One most important phenomenon that promoted the deliberate production of arts works for posterity was the guild system in pre-colonial Benin. According to Agbontaen-Eghafona (2001), the guild was sponsored by royal patronage and it brought the various professionals and craftsmen together to produce and supply their products. The members enjoyed a special status and lived along each other in a certain quarter in the royal city. They also held a special rank in the hierarchy of the Oba's court officials. The main reason

for the guild system was to supply some of its products to the reigning king and possibly to regulate the activities of members. Probably, the king would use the guild to assess the creativity, wealth and prosperity of his subjects. He may also have the preservation of the art tradition in mind. It is also possible that they formed part of the political class using their connection to influence political decisions. The guild was also used as an instrument of administration according to the desire of the Oba (Agbontaen-Eghafona 2001).

They produced for various purposes which included cult, religion, entertainment, authority and history. Their arts carry a lot of mnemonics especially of the clay figurines, mud sculptures, wooden objects, iron works, ivory and other figures including brass. Their architectural structures were mainly of mud and clay (Egharevba 1946^b).



Renowned Benin figure head used for 1977 Festac in Nigeria

Benin art is multi-layered with each layer re-enforcing the power of the kingdom and its divine rulers. It is the richness and uniqueness of this art legacy that has put Benin and by implication Nigeria on the world map. They were made of brass and ivory which represent the full blast of image of Benin art. The controversy surrounding the origin of Benin art has not been fully settled. Suffice it to say that some of the art pieces include some extraordinary objects from the Yoruba kingdoms of Owo and Ijebu which reflect the powerful influence on Benin artistic traditions. Supporting this opinion, Eghrevba (1946) said that all these were done in a deliberate design to preserve the past of the kingdom. In his words,

In ancient days when the knowledge of books and literature were unknown in African, brass casting or pictorial writing were the only methods for the preservation of the recovery or events in Benin, as a result of her civilization on the Bank of the Niger (Egharevba 1946:6).

The Benin court also functioned as a museum without assuming the modern definition or understanding of the word. The court artists devised mnemonics to help them in remembering. They needed some of these objects to preserve the memory of the past obas. The Ughoron was a special class designed to record events as early as the Ogiso era (Agbontaen 2001). Altars were erected in images of ancestors with very elaborate paraphernalia such as spears, arrow, shield, or other items which the ancestors wear in the past. All these put together help the traditional custodian in-charge of recording to perform well. Perhaps this explains the numerous art works which

the British troops saw in Benin in 1897. For instance, when a king dies, the succeeding Oba could contract out his image to be cast in bronze used to decorate an altar in the palace in his remembrance (Dark 1973). It is some of these pieces of art that have given a lot insight into the early history of Benin before the advent of writing.

The figure may depict a member of Ewua, a group of palace officials who wake the Oba each morning and perform a ritual or ceremony recalling the origin of the Benin dynasty. This way they confirm the legitimacy of their rule and glorify their own reigns. The Benin art was also meant for recording historical events. It also reveals historical connections between Ife and Benin. For instance, excavations at Owo threw up a lot of 15th century terracotta figures that closely resemble the naturalistic brass and terracotta sculptures of Ife (Poynor 1976). There was a lot of collaboration among various professionals noticed in Benin art. Such was the type that existed between a sculptor who carved the wood image and a ritual expert. It was the later who would transform it into an object capable of healing illness, settling disputes, safeguarding the peace and punishing wrong dowers (Poynor 1976).

Eliot (1963) added his voice by stating that officials in the royal court learned by heart what was important to the king and to themselves, and these facts would be handed on for hundreds of years. Ordinarily, people told stories of the past. But many things were left out, or changed, or just forgotten. But archaeologists have begun to study what is left of old Benin, and have described its houses and walls, its tools and weapons, its ornaments and its graves. It was a kind of integral art that accommodated a lot.

According to 'Nigeria house', so much has been argued about the connection between Benin art and Ife art. Though both traditions use same technical process to produce their art and probably the same reason which include the glorification of their kings, gods and the immortalization of their ancestors, but their similarities do not go beyond these (www.Nigerian_house.gif). It has to be noted that the differences are more pronounced than what actually united them. While Benin art was conventionalist that of Ife was known for individual portraiture. Again, Ife heads were made with portraits of person in mind while those of Benin were from imagination. Furthermore, Benin arts seem to be impressive representation of spirits and have no individual character as human beings. Probably, the Benin artists learn the technique of casting from Ife but did adopt Ife concept of art. There is also evidence of evolution of Benin bronzes but not in the Ife corpus.

Implications of Benin art for nation-building

Art has profound contributions to make towards the development of any nation because of various functions and benefits it delivers for national development. Without doubt, art is at the center of the traditional society and part of traditional religious practices. These practices include various sacred ceremonies to the gods or deities which promote the spiritual wellbeing of the kingdom. Usually these art objects are invoked to achieve various results. This is because some of them have been empowered through various potent sacrificial substances, incantations and rituals which give special life force to them. Some are devoted to promotion of

peace and general welfare of the people.

Benin art also supported social development mostly exhibited through masks. Those masks feature in various community festivals or ceremonies such as yam festivals and other annual community festivals. During these occasions, various masquerades were displayed to entertain, educate and instruct and indeed aspects of socialization process. These masks are also used in puberty rites, marriages ceremonies and by various other ceremonies required by age group all in the process of social engineering. All these made for social cohesion and stability.

Traditional Benin art has a high therapeutic role to play in nation building. Several Benin indigenes wore several empowered objects and talisman considered capable of either warding off evil forces or serving as protections. According to Osahon (n.d), Chief Ogiamien ancient edifice has remained a means of display, film production, family meeting and a point where idioms/poems are recited including lullaby and storytelling. These create profiles which soothe social life.

The monuments have tremendous cultural tourist potentials which can generate huge revenue for the local community, family and government in general when well harnessed and projected. Benin history and architectural design serve as educational and research center for cultural bodies and students all over the world. Since art in itself embodies plastic, poetry, drama, literature, music and history, it follows that we have archaeology, engineering, philosophy etc all connected with it. Iconography as we know is the study of meaning and concept of beauty. It,

therefore, builds on what we have as our collective heritage. Moreover, within the traditional African society, dance plays a central role in the important social, ritual and educational life of the people. The Benin facial masks must be the brain behind the ever delightful performing African dance, entertainment and relaxation which generally sustains culture as an instrument of national unity.

According to Igbafe (1986), art is a very useful instrument of cultural propagation. Great civilizations have been known through their art. The grandeur of nations has also been promoted through their great works of art. It addresses itself to both the known and the unknown and produces the form that promotes continuity to the nation. When art takes its rightful place in the scheme of things in Nigeria, it will become a watershed in national development. It will also show that all cultures and peoples of Nigeria are actually of one cultural continuum and one people.

Art can also form the main thrust of a robust diplomatic outreach and panacea for national unity which Nigeria so desperately needs now. This is because it illustrates more than any other thing the beauty of state formation. The rise of Benin kingdom together with its art is the story of systematic bringing together of different peoples under the Ogisos rulers and later under the new Eweka dynasty (Igbafe 1974). It could be said to have laid the foundation for the modern station of Nigeria.

The 1897 tragedy was a minus to Benin development which was already in top flight. All the indices of a fast developing nation were already in place and perfectly functional before they struck. The political institutions as

undemocratic as they were, kept a stable prosperous empire in place. The socio-political and economic signals were very good and a strong foundation laid for a viable modern state. All these suffered a serious setback with that singular incident.

However, the splendor of Edo civilization has continued to thrill the world and has remained an international brand and a reference point. The fantastic artifacts are unique in world history which represents the earliest civilization among black Africa. It has remained famous for its sophistication in social engineering. The Benin *Obaship* institution is still one of the most revered and ancient which has formed a perfect blend for both the old and the new.

Critique

The 1897 destruction of the Benin art tradition by a detachment of British soldiers has remained a challenge facing the preservation of African and Nigerian art. The consequences of that singular act of art vandalism will remain with us for a very long time to come. It will continue to stand out as one of the darkest moments of colonialism and the impunity associated with imperialism. However, some have argued that the events of the Benin massacre have somehow been over-reported and the damage over-orchestrated. But nothing can be farther from the truth. The reverse could even be said to be the case. Since media as at the time were controlled by the perpetrators, it is not unlikely that more people than reported may have perished and more precious art works destroyed than known to records.

Without doubt, the Benin art and indeed African art are very rich and inspirational. So much of it has also been

deposited in picture books. There are deeply illustrated texts which show little or no conceptual significance. Some of such books are written through western perceptions and poorly interpreted. In addition, there abound also language problem associated with Benin art especially between 1900 and 1950. In commenting on Benin art, so much pejorative words have been used and spelling mistakes. To a large extent, the books could not be said to be good in iconography. Iconography is the study of the function which an art form is supposed to perform. Some of the works written by western on Benin art could not be well understood if the author does not go deep into the tradition that produces such iconographical art.

There is also the problem of over-celebration of Benin art from the point of view of literature that could be said to be more than enough for the study of Benin art. There could be the possibility of duplication of topics and facts. There is no gain saying the fact that Benin art is one of the most written about in Africa. Culturally and artistically, Benin art has promoted national development and unity but criticized for having very few wooden sculptures.

Conclusion

The inglorious termination of the thriving Benin art tradition by the British army of occupation in 1897 has remained a very sad column in the historical experience of Nigerian march to nationhood. The Benin art legacy which was interrupted could have remained a huge reference decimal in African art history. The fact that the attack also dismantled the powerful political empire goes to show how much damage it brought to Nigerian political and

economic history. The implications have been quite enormous and can never be fully quantified. It affected the past, present and the future of the country. Though the country has moved on after that, but the dialogue and diplomatic pleasure for the repatriation of the stole legacy must be sustained until justice is done.

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