

# DISPLAYING LOOT

THE BENIN OBJECTS AND THE BRITISH MUSEUM



STAFFAN LUNDÉN



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Department of Historical Studies

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# Abstract

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## **Displaying Loot. The Benin Objects and the British Museum**

This study deals with the objects, now in the British Museum, that were looted from Benin City, present-day Nigeria, in 1897. It looks at how the museum represents the Benin objects, the Edo/African, the British/Western, and the British Museum. According to the museum, the Benin objects provide the “key argument” against the return of objects in its collections. The study pays particular attention to how the museum’s representations relate to its retentionist argument.

The museum maintains that it was founded to foster tolerance, dissent, and respect for difference, and that it today shows many different cultures without privileging any of them. The museum’s benevolent impact is exemplified by the Benin objects whose arrival in the West has led to the shattering of European derogatory stereotypes of Africans, thanks to British Museum scholars.

The study examines these claims and finds that they rest on flimsy or no evidence. The museum misrepresents and glorifies its own past and exaggerates its own contribution to Benin scholarship and the European view of Africans. The museum has shown cultures, not as equal, but as placed in a hierarchy, and in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century its scholars gave scientific legitimization to the stock stereotypes of Africans, such as the likening of Blacks to apes.

The analysis of the museum’s contemporary exhibition and accompanying publications show that the museum – still – represents self and other as different: the Edo/African is portrayed as traditional while the Westerner is portrayed as progressive.

The study concludes that, despite the museum’s claim to universality, its representations are deeply enmeshed in, and shaped by, British (museum) traditions and cultural assumptions. Paradoxically, while the statement of objectivity and impartiality is central to the museum’s defense against claims, it seems that the ownership issue strongly contributes to the biases in its representations.

**Keywords:** Benin, Benin bronzes, Benin objects, Britain, British Museum, colonialism, cultural property, Edo, heritage, loot, museums, museum studies, Nigeria, racism, repatriation, representation, restitution, war booty, Westernness.



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## Preface: A “trophy” in the British Museum

“Trophy.” While browsing through the British Museum’s homepage, looking at how the British Museum represents its collection of objects looted by British soldiers from Benin City in 1897, the word “trophy” in the caption of one of these objects caught my attention.<sup>1</sup> The caption read: “Bronze trophy head from Benin, Nigeria, between 1550-1650.” According to the dictionary, a “trophy” – from the ancient Greek *tropaion*, a victory monument composed of weapons from defeated enemies – is a prize, or memento, symbolic of an achievement or a victory. It is commonly used in connection with the cups and plaques awarded to winners in sporting contests, but may also refer to the head, or other body part, severed from a killed animal and kept as a sign of the hunter’s accomplishment. Alternatively, the word may denote the former possessions of a defeated enemy which have been taken as a token of victory. In this last sense the designation of the head in the British Museum as a “trophy” seemed apt. Yet, I was a little intrigued by the word

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1. <http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/world/africa/sculpture.html> (accessed 21 October 2006). The British Museum home page undergoes changes and this particular webpage, which introduced the museum’s collection of African “sculpture,” no longer exists. The “trophy head” is illustrated in Barley 2010, 39.

because I had never seen a museum using it to describe a Benin object before.

Reading a bit further I realized that I had made the wrong connection, that is, I had made an association *not* intended by the use of the word “trophy” in this “explanatory” label. The word did not refer to what this object became in 1897. It “explained” to the viewer what this object was in pre-1897 Edo society (“Edo” is the local name of the ethnolinguistic group which is often called “Benin” in the West).<sup>2</sup> The text related one contemporary interpretation of this particular type of head: they were cast by the Edo after victorious wars to symbolize the heads of defeated and decapitated kings, and were put in shrines to commemorate military successes.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the word “trophy” had nothing to do with the habit of the European

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2. Since the first contacts between the Edo and the Portuguese in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Edo has generally been referred to in the West with the names “Bini” or “Benin.” These names are derived from “ibinin” or “ubinin,” the name given to the Edo, by non-Edo. Picton 1997, 92, n. 1.

I have, after some hesitation, decided to call the objects looted in 1897 “Benin” objects (or loot), rather than “Edo” objects/loot. One of the main reasons for maintaining the name “Benin” here, a name which may be seen as a corrupt “translation” of an “original” (non-Edo) African name into Western idioms, is, as I discuss later on, that these objects have undergone various forms of transformations and translations since 1897, which means that their contemporary (Western) appearances and meanings to a large extent differ from their pre-1897 Edo appearances and meanings. This transfiguration of the objects in some ways parallels how “Edo” in the West has become “Bini” or “Benin.” Thus, I use the term “Benin” to highlight the contemporary hybridity and ambiguity of these objects, comprised today of both “Edoness” and “Westernness.” The reasons for calling these objects “objects” or “loot” rather than, for example “bronzes,” “ivories” or “artworks” will be treated below.

The word “Benin” in this study is not to be confused with the West African country Benin (officially the Republic of Benin) known as Dahomey until 1975.

In this study I refer to points in time through the use of the Gregorian calendar, also known as the Western or Christian calendar. I do not intend the use of this system of ordering time as an endorsement of Christianity or a Western perspective. For early dates I use the abbreviation BCE “Before Common Era” as this term feels somewhat less Christianity-centric than BC “Before Christ.”

3. On this interpretation, which derives from a contemporary Edo interpretation of these heads, see Ben-Amos Girshick 1980, 18, 1995, 26, Plankensteiner 2007a, 375, 463. Barley 2010, 39. On the problem of equating contemporary Edo interpretations of Benin objects with pre-1897 Edo interpretations, see Picton 1997.

colonial powers of looting their non-European enemies and displaying the loot in museum showcases as scientific specimens or hallowed artworks.<sup>4</sup>

In providing this label, the British Museum did what museums holding ethnographic collections usually do. They display and interpret ethnic others to Western selves with objects obtained, by force or by consent, from these others. Thus, in showing this particular object and its accompanying label, the British Museum was “only” following an established Western cultural practice of describing and interpreting foreign and distant cultures through objects.<sup>5</sup> The object and text visualized here is just one of many examples in a museum tradition which goes back a long way in Western society.

Showing and interpreting other cultures with objects and texts in museums may seem an innocent, even laudable, activity. According to the museums which put on this kind of exhibitions, gaining knowledge about others is a way of creating cross-cultural understanding and of promoting a sense of human communality. Most would agree that there is a merit in trying to venture outside the confines of what is – or appears to be – known and familiar, in order to acquire some knowledge and understanding of the unknown and unfamiliar, and therefore it is valuable to try to make an acquaintance with other ways of living. The alternative – to never make the attempt to look outside the confines of one’s own culture – would certainly be problematic.

Yet, there is *also* something troubling about this way of looking at other cultures, as exemplified by the label discussed above.<sup>6</sup> The

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4. The observation that ethnographic objects within the museum context have been classified in two major categories as (scientific) cultural artifacts or (aesthetic) works of art has been made by several authors including Clifford 1985a, 170-171, 1985b, 242, 1988, 198, 222.

5. Terms such as “self,” “other(s),” “foreign,” “distant” are, of course, problematic in that they imply there is one natural, normal, and self-evident ontological center and identity (the West and the Western white self). Hence, these words should be understood as being put in quotation marks in this text, to signal the troublesome taken-for-granted perspective implied by them. Cf. Mignolo’s discussion of the terms centre/periphery. Mignolo 1995, 336-337, n. 13.

6. For a general discussion on the visualization of non-Western cultures through the medium of ethnographic displays, see Dias 1994, cf. Mitchell 1992 and on

heart of the problem is perhaps captured by the – unintended – alternative meaning of the word “trophy” when used to describe an object looted by British troops that now resides in the British Museum. What are the consequences of the object being explained to the viewer through a reference to *one* custom – the Edo custom of casting heads of vanquished enemies and displaying them in shrines – while the other (sic) custom – the British custom of taking war booty from vanquished non-Western enemies and displaying these in museums – is not mentioned?

At its most basic, we attempt to explain the phenomena which we believe demand an explanation – that is, the phenomena which in some way or the other are considered to deviate from what we see as natural, normal, and taken for granted. We do not “explain” the phenomena which we think of as self-evident. This suggests that any “explanation” given – apart from its intended function of elucidating or revealing the phenomenon it purports to “explain” – to some extent, *separates* this phenomenon from what is regarded as normal and taken-for-granted. And vice versa: an absence of explanation places a phenomenon in the category of the obvious and natural.

If this proposition may be accepted, it implies that the British Museum’s “explanation” of an Edo cultural practice, and the corresponding lack of an “explanation” of a British cultural practice, creates a subtle differentiation between these two respective aspects of British and Edo culture. It locates British culture in the realm of normality and sameness and Edo culture in the sphere of deviation and otherness. If we also accept the proposition that there is a qualitative difference between normality and deviation, where normality is seen as being better than deviation, then this differentiation between British and Edo culture is also a hierarchization of British and Edo culture placing the British over the Edo.

To put the issue in a wider context: among the problems with museum exhibitions displaying ethnic others is that the process of viewing is inscribed in a number of interlinked power relations, cultural assumptions, and conventional wisdoms (that is,

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anthropological “visualism” Clifford 1986, 11-13, Fabian 2002 [1983], 105-141.

unquestioned and taken for granted “knowledge”), which these displays may reconfirm and reinforce. A central tenet in this package of knowledge and power which has provided the rationale for the collecting and displaying of ethnographic objects is that other cultures are in *need* of explanation, but one’s own is not, at least not using the same forms of representation that are used to describe other cultures. Among the consequences of this thinking is that in an ethnographic display the direction of the gaze is almost always one-way, from the Western viewer onto the non-Western viewed. The other is described, analyzed, visualized, and explained by, and for, the self, whereas the self – the museums and curators who create the representations of others and the museumgoers who look at these represented others – remains unproblematized, unseen, unspoken, and unaccountable. Hence, whatever amount of respect and admiration the display communicates about the non-Westerner, her or his traditions, thoughts, habits, or artworks, it serves to confirm the normality of the Westerner.

The British humorist P. G. Wodhouse once wisely said: “The fascination of shooting as a sport depends almost wholly on whether you are at the right or wrong end of the gun.” It is possible that something similar applies to the museum display and the relation between the exhibited and the exhibitor contained within it. Maybe it is more fascinating and fun to examine, than it is to be examined? This makes one wonder whether it is possible to reverse the direction of vision in the ethnographic display – to use the display as a prism to view the viewer and the producer of views. Perhaps it is. The ambivalent meaning of the word “trophy” when used to describe an object which may be seen as a memento over *both* Edo and British victories, does, I think, point to there being alternative ways of understanding objects which were once derived from faraway, but which now are inscribed in a Western cultural context. Such objects may (and, in my view, should) not only be used to look at non-Western culture and traditions. They may (and should) also be used to observe Western culture and traditions.

This study may be considered as an attempt to turn the ethnographic gaze around – to see the duck rather than the hare in the image – and to look at the objects looted in 1897 as being as much

British objects as they are Edo objects. In doing so one can utilize these British–Edo objects and the representations made of them at the British Museum to try to reveal, dissect, and analyze some of the peculiar practices, habits, traditions, hopes, desires, fears, and anxieties which are pertinent to this institution in particular, and Western (museum) thinking in general. I hope to show that this Western self is as strange as the non-Western other appears to be, or to put it differently, that Western culture is as much in *need* of “explanation” as any other culture.



# 1. Introduction: The making of Benin objects, the Edo, and the British

“The Caribbean Taino, the Australian Aboriginals, the African people of Benin [...] can speak to us now of their past achievements most powerfully through the objects they made: a history told through things gives *them* back a voice.”  
Neil MacGregor, director of the British Museum, 2010<sup>1</sup> (italics added).

In 1897, armed hostilities broke out between the Edo Kingdom and the British Empire. A British military force occupied the Edo capital, Benin City, and subsequently the territory of the Edo Kingdom was incorporated into the British colonial realm as part of the British colony of Nigeria. In Benin City, the British troops gathered together and carried off thousands of objects as war booty.<sup>2</sup> Many of the objects were acquired by museums, including the British Museum. The British Museum’s collection of Benin loot comprises of around 700 objects, making this museum the possessor of the world’s largest collection of Benin loot.<sup>3</sup>

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1. MacGregor 2010b, xvi-xvii. MacGregor served as director of the British Museum from 2002 to 2015.
  2. The total number of objects looted is unknown. A compilation by Luschan in 1919 gives a number of 2400 objects. Luschan 1919, 13. Since then more objects have become known and an estimate by Dark made in 1982 puts the number to “some four thousand or so, or perhaps more.” Dark 1982, xi.
  3. As far as I am aware, the British Museum has not publicly stated how many objects looted in Benin City the museum possesses. The estimate given here (around 700 objects) has been calculated by adding together the objects on an internal British Museum document listing “all the important items from Benin City” in the museum’s collection. The list includes “items used by the

The British Museum represents (shows) a number of these objects to the public through various representational techniques. Benin objects are on display in showcases in the museum and they are rendered on photographs on the museum's home-page and in publications produced by the museum. When shown, either in-house, on-line, or in books, the objects are accompanied with texts. These texts provide various bits and pieces of information,

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Royal Court and the higher ranks of Benin society" and excludes "items of domestic use, of plebeian origin or from provincial areas." The exact source of all the objects is not known, and thus the list may include some objects which were not looted in Benin City in 1897, but which have been obtained, by consensual or non-consensual means, at other locations and points in time. Five objects are listed as having been "collected during the Aro [punitive] Expedition 1901/1902" and one is stated to have been obtained "from a member of a punitive expedition against an area near Benin." MacLeod 1974, 1, 5, 11. Of these 700 objects, apart from the ca. 170 plaques, 55 objects were marked as being of "major importance" to which MacLeod adds "but quite frankly I regard about 30-40% of our Benin holdings as being of major importance and the Nigerian government would be pleased to have nearly any item returned to them." MacLeod 1974, covering letter to George Morris Ref. MDMcL/SG.

A search in the British Museum's on-line collection database for "Benin City" in the category Places yields 1125 search results (and a free text search with the word "Benin" gives 1824 search results), but these numbers should not be taken as an exact indication of the number of looted Benin objects in the museum, as they also include objects not looted in 1897 as well as photographs of Edo objects etc. (accessed 12 May 2016).

The world's second largest Benin collection is that held by the Ethnological Museum in Berlin. At present it numbers 535 objects (Peter Junge, Curator Ethnological Museum, Berlin, e-mail, 8 April 2013). According to Neil MacGregor, the British Museum's Benin collection is "considerably smaller than that, for example, in Berlin" (MacGregor 2010a). This statement is obviously not in agreement with the evidence available regarding the number of Benin objects in the two institutions (c. 700 objects in the British Museum versus 535 objects in the Berlin museum). That MacGregor's claims are not always supported by evidence, and that the facts available occasionally even suggest the reverse of what MacGregor states, will be a recurring theme in this study. Why MacGregor provides this (erroneous) information regarding the relative size of the two Benin collections is unclear. A cynic might note that his statement functions to deflect attention away from the British Museum onto another major possessor of Benin loot. I will in this study point to a number of incorrect or misleading statements produced by the British Museum, but I do not want to give an opinion on whether these statements are products of good or bad faith.

statements and narratives which the museum regards as relevant to communicate to the viewer in connection with making the objects publicly available. The texts connected to the objects not only comment on and “explain” the objects “themselves” in a narrow sense, they also represent and “explain” aspects of Edo culture. Moreover, the museum makes some statements which involve the Western world and the British (Museum).

This study looks at representations of, or containing, Benin objects created by the British Museum. In other words, it deals with what the British Museum communicates – i.e. the visual and verbal statements it makes – about, with, and through, the Benin objects to the public, and how the museum *makes* these objects when producing representations of the objects, and, in an inter-linked process, also *makes* the British and the Edo. What I mean by this perhaps cryptic assertion that the museum “makes” object and ethnic categories will, I hope, be clear as this study proceeds. For the time being I simply want to stress that the process of representing an entity cannot be separated from the process of making it, and that this applies both to the more conceptual as well as the more material aspects of our world. To represent a perceived entity – to show and make it meaningful to the viewer by describing, classifying, and interpreting it – is also to define and position this perceived entity and *ascribe* meaning to it – in short, to make, create, or construct it. To return to the example presented in the preface: when a Benin object is labeled a “trophy” this gives both an interpretation *and* a definition of the object.<sup>4</sup>

Upon consideration, it is perhaps self-evident that our “reality” comes into being and acquires meaning through being interpreted and communicated. This in turn suggests that everything from material objects to images, facts, ethnic groups, opinions, etc. are created through processes of cultural construction. Nevertheless, I highlight this point to counter the unreflective “common sense” view that the world and its concepts, entities, and categories, *precede* interpretation in an unproblematic manner. I believe that we especially tend to apply this kind of “common sense” thinking

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4. Cf. Butler 1997 on the performative function of language.

when considering materiality and tangible objects. That is, our notion is that the object with a set of naturally given and objectively definable characteristics is there “first,” and it is *then* described and interpreted in a value-free and non-arbitrary manner by, for example, a museum curator. Yet, an object “is” a much less absolute entity than it appears to be. The statements made about it – or fixed to it – which create and explain it, have a higher degree of arbitrariness than is generally assumed.<sup>5</sup> This also means that when an object is made and given meaning in a certain way, within a particular cultural and institutional context and knowledge regime, it is made in that *particular* way at the expense of other *possible* ways of making and giving meaning to it. How the Benin objects have been, and are, made at the British Museum – an institution which is part of a larger Western cultural, academic, and aesthetic context – forms an important thread in this study.

The other interconnected and arguably more important theme is how the museum represents – and therefore makes – the ethnic self and other, in this case the British (or the Westerner) and the Edo (or African). In particular it is concerned with how the museum characterizes the self, either through statements and narratives which explicitly involved the self, or through statements which are about the other, but which, apart from saying something about the other, also characterize the self through implication and negation (to briefly exemplify and clarify this line of thought, we may again recall the argument made earlier that the attribution of a Benin object as an Edo – but not a British – “trophy” has the double function of estranging Edo culture and naturalizing British/Western culture).<sup>6</sup>

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5. This is not to say that things do not exist outside human experience, but it is to say that they become part of human experience through being communicated within culturally determined frames of reference. Cf. Hall 1997a, 3, 15-19, 44-46.

6. “British” may be seen as a subset of “Westerner,” and often the museum’s making of a self is as much about the making of a “Western” as a “British” self, but in other instances, which will be discussed in this study, it is more concerned with the making of a “British” self, such as when a German is cast in the role of cultural and ethnic other.

Thus, summarizing what this study is about may perhaps be done with the following formulation: this study deals with the making of objects and ethnicities at the British Museum, as it applies to Benin objects, the British/Western, and the Edo/African. As will be seen, the museum's making of Benin objects and ethnicities is interconnected with the British Museum's vision of its contemporary role in society and of its imagining of its own history. Thus, a second important theme in this study is to look into how the British Museum makes its present-day identity through evoking the authority of its own (invented) traditions. The making of (museum) objects, ethnicities, and institutional identity are, of course, complex processes which may be explored from an almost unlimited range of perspectives. One aspect which stands in particular focus in this study is how these making(s) relate to the British Museum's position regarding claims for the return of objects in its collection. This is because, as I will come back to shortly, it seems that the ownership issue has a crucial role to play in these makings.

A point of clarification should perhaps be inserted here. I will use both the terms "make" and "represent" in this study and derivatives of these words (and, at times, near-synonyms, such as "construct," "create," "portray," etc.). The reasons for these variations are to some extent stylistic and aesthetic, to make the prose more varied, but I also use a variety of words because different words capture diverse aspects of what this study is about. As just pointed out, "make" highlights that the object is not there before being communicated: they are not simply "re-presented."<sup>7</sup> The word

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7. The term "make" may also include that, to some extent, the objects have been physically altered over time. As will be discussed, in 1897, in some instances, what arguably was one object, was split into different ones, and also since then, objects – especially their surfaces – have been meddled with in various ways. The objects have been cleaned, waxed, dewaxed, inventory numbers have been written on them, and so forth. Of course, the word "make" may suggest that the physical transformations the objects have gone through have always been of a profound and radical kind. Aside from the various surface treatments, and with some notable exceptions (such as when objects have been destroyed during the Second World War), the Benin objects have been physically rather stable entities over time. The minor changes to the objects are perhaps better covered with the word "alter" or "shape" than "make." The impossibility to find an all-encompassing terminology will be a recurring theme in this study.

“represent,” on the other hand, has an interesting vagueness to it: it can be synonymous with “show,” “describe,” “portray,” or other words dealing with the production of conceptual, verbal, or visual likeness, but it can also refer to the act of speaking or acting for, or on behalf of, someone.<sup>8</sup> This ambiguity is worth noting when it comes to the British Museum’s representations: do they only, or mainly, deliver likenesses of the objects, or do they also “speak for” any party or interest group? If the latter is the case, who do these representations speak for, and (how) does this affect the representations made? As will be indicated in this study, the museum goes further than making disinterested renditions of these objects. Another point of clarification: I sometimes write “representations *with*,” or “representations *containing*” Benin objects. The words “with” and “containing” are meant to remind that the representation is not only *of* the objects in a narrow sense, but that the objects are utilized to create and support claims about other issues – such as the past and present identity of the British Museum. Arguably, in these cases the objects “themselves” no longer take center stage, but are rather backdrops to these claims.

Why, then, is this study concerned with the Benin objects and the British Museum? There are many museums in the world, especially in its more affluent parts (and a number of these museums also possess Benin objects) and therefore there are myriads of museum objects available for study. Several of the points made (sic) in this study concerning how the British Museum’s making of the Benin objects are more derived from Western cultural practices than “objective” scientific principles could have been made in connection with a study of many other museum collections. In that sense, the choice to look at the British Museum and the Benin objects it holds in its collections may be considered arbitrary.

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To speak of the British Museum’s making of the British/Western, the Edo/African, and the British Museum, reminds us that such makings – in verbal and visual statements etc. – have a range of “real” effects, including, for example, on how those being defined in words and images perceive their own identity. Cf. Nederveen Pieterse 1992, 11 on the internalization of stereotypes.

8. This distinction between the different meanings of the word representation was made by Gayatri Spivak in her essay “Can the subaltern speak?” first published in 1988. Spivak 2010, 29-33.

Yet, among the factors which make the British Museum and its representations of, or with, the Benin objects an especially interesting subject for a detailed analysis, is the fact that the British Museum is not just “any” museum (which, of course, no museum is). It is a museum which some commentators call “one of the world’s greatest museums,” and the former British Museum Director David Wilson even called it “*the* greatest museum in the world” (italics added).<sup>9</sup> The Benin objects are one of several categories of object in this “great(est)” museum, where the museum’s right to continue to possess the objects has been questioned, and demands for return of these objects to their place of origin have been made. The alleged “greatness” of this institution may be seen as the composition of several interlinked and mutually reinforcing factors which include: a venerable age (the museum was founded in 1753),<sup>10</sup> a location in an imposing edifice in one of the major Western metropolises (London),<sup>11</sup> a large visitor number (around six million each year),<sup>12</sup> a sizable collection (between

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9. See, for example, Cuno 2009, 30 who declares the British Museum to be “one of the world’s greatest museums” and a 1997 consultancy report which states that: “The British Museum is one of the world’s greatest museums and one of the United Kingdom’s greatest institutions.” The report also calls the museum “a jewel in the nation’s crown.” Zan 2000, 22. David Wilson, director of the British Museum from 1977 to 1992, concludes his history of the British Museum by labeling it “the greatest museum in the world.” Wilson 2002, 344. According to the British Museum’s strategic plan for 2008-2012 the museum’s ambition is “to become firmly established as the best museum in the world.” British Museum 2008, 1.
  10. It is often stated that the British Museum was the world’s first “public” museum. The designation is debatable and depends on the definition of a “public museum.” The museum opened to visitors in 1759. There was (and still is) no entrance fee, but well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century visitors had to write in advance to obtain a ticket to gain entry to the museum. There existed other – more or less – publicly accessible collections before the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Anderson 2003, 1-2 gives the title “first public museum” to the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford which opened to visitors (for a fee) in 1683.
  11. The British Museum’s building (erected 1823-1846) with its neoclassical colonnaded façade and triangular pediment has become almost an archetype for museum buildings. Hooper-Greenhill 2000a, 11.
  12. A further 2 to 3 million people see the museum’s traveling exhibitions sent to various places in the world, and online visitors number over 24 million. British Museum 2013, 3-4. The museum estimates that the activities it undertakes in Britain reach more than 15 million people “particularly through broadcasting.” British Museum 2008, 11.



six to twelve million objects)<sup>13</sup> with a vast temporal and geographical range, spanning large parts of the earth and two million years of human history, and above all, that the museum possesses a number of the world's most renowned museum objects: the Parthenon sculptures, the Rosetta Stone, the Sutton Hoo helmet, the Lewis chessmen and several Egyptian mummies.<sup>14</sup> The list of the museum's most prized objects also includes some objects whose return has been demanded. The best known case is probably the Parthenon sculptures, but calls for return have also been made for the Rosetta Stone, the Lewis chessmen, and much less well-known material in its collections, such as human remains from Australia and New Zealand.<sup>15</sup> The size, range, and quality of its collections contribute to the status of the museum which in turn contributes to the status of its collections in a self-referential system: "great" objects and collections make museums "great" and "great" museums make their objects and collections "great." To this it may be added that one of the fundamental rationales for the museum institution is the assumption that it produces authentic knowledge – or reveals truths – about the world through the collection, studying, ordering, and display of authentic objects. This assumption may instill a feeling that a "great" museum with "great" collections therefore tells "great" truths, that is, that the statements made by such a museum are characterized by the highest degree of factuality, importance, and truthfulness.<sup>16</sup> Thus, a "great" museum, like the British Museum, wields a great

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13. Caygill 2009, 11. The higher number applies "if all the flints and sherds are counted separately."

14. According to a recent British Museum publication "[t]he British Museum is the most magnificent treasure-house in the world. The wealth and range of its collections is unequalled by any other national museum. The Rosetta Stone, the Parthenon sculptures, Egyptian mummies, drawings by Botticelli and Michelangelo, Assyrian reliefs, the Lewis chessmen and the Sutton Hoo treasure are all to be found here." Caygill 2009, dustjacket.

15. For other disputed objects in the British Museum, see Prott 2006, Willis 2008, O'Keefe in Prott 2009, 233, Skrydstrup 2010, 60, Bailey 2012. According to a British Museum memorandum referred to in Simpson 2001, 272 the British Museum between 1970-1999 received 27 "foreign" requests for return of objects in its collections. On human remains in the British Museum, see Bell 2010.

16. On the public perception of museums as trustworthy institutions which communicate truths and facts through authentic artifacts, see Rosenzweig & Thelen 1998, 105-108.

amount of power to define, judge, and give value, not only to objects, but also to past and present societies, individuals, ideologies, events, and, most importantly, a whole package of scientific knowledge and cultural assumptions in which these representations are embedded. The British Museum's hallowed status, its strong brand name, suggests that what this institution states, how it acts, and how these statements and acts are communicated by the museum through its representational venues – its exhibitions, home page, publications, and public programs etc. – and then further disseminated by, for example, media reports, popular books on art, culture, and history, have a not altogether negligible degree of importance in the contemporary world.<sup>17</sup> It is hardly controversial to say that the British Museum wields authority and power through its iconic status. Now, with great power comes great responsibility. In my view, it is of great interest to scrutinize how this “great” museum uses its power and the trust which it has from, I think, a largely unquestioning public. The issue is explored through a case study of how the museum *makes* the Benin objects and surrounds them with various authoritative statements and narratives.

As previously mentioned, the British Museum's Benin collection consists of about 700 objects, which makes it the largest Benin collection in the world. The collection contains (some of) the world's most famous Benin objects – a brass head of a Queen Mother and an ivory pendant mask [Fig. 1-2]. When the museum presents the most important objects in its collection in its various printed material, a Benin object is always included in the parade of outstanding objects. The Benin object chosen is usually either the head of a Queen Mother or the pendant mask, which thus joins the ranks of such celebrities as the Parthenon sculptures and the Rosetta Stone. For example, on the fold-out “Museum map” given to visitors of the British Museum, a Benin object, the head of a Queen Mother,

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17. The British Museum may also have an impact on certain segments of the museum sector. According to James Cuno, speaking as director of the Art Institute of Chicago, the British Museum is the “model” for the Art Institute of Chicago and for all encyclopedic museums. MacGregor and Cuno 2009. For a contrary view, where the British Museum “model” is used to illustrate the anti-thesis of good museum theory and practice, see Hooper-Greenhill 2000a.



**Fig. 1.** *The Sainsbury African Galleries, British Museum. The Benin ivory pendant mask.*

is on the list of 21 “highlight” objects to see, and it is one of the six objects illustrated on the map (other objects on the list are the Parthenon sculptures, the Rosetta Stone, the Lewis Chessmen, the Sutton Hoo ship burial finds, and an Egyptian mummy). Together with an Ife brass head in the British Museum (which will also feature in this study) [Fig. 3], these Benin objects count as among the most celebrated pieces of African “art.”<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup>. This assessment of the relative importance attached to the Queen Mother



**Fig. 2.** *The Sainsbury African Galleries, British Museum. The Benin Queen Mother head.*

head, the ivory pendant mask and the Ife head amongst the holdings of the museum is derived from the following British Museum publications. The publication *Masterpieces of the British Museum* includes the Queen Mother head and the Ife head among the museum's 250 "extraordinary" objects and the Queen Mother head is one of the 20 objects illustrated on the book cover. Hill 2009, 27, 86. *A History of the World in 100 objects* by Neil MacGregor presents the Ife head and a Benin object. MacGregor 2010b, 405-409, no. 63, 497-502, no. 77. Unusually, the Benin object is a brass plaque rather than the Queen Mother head or the ivory pendant mask (some of the consequences of, and perhaps a partial reason for, MacGregor's choice to use a plaque to represent the Benin objects will be discussed later on).



Fig. 3. The Sainsbury African Galleries, British Museum. The Ife head.

Of the five African objects illustrated in the *British Museum Guide* one is the ivory pendant mask, the other the Ife head. British Museum 1976, 270. The Ife head graces the cover of the publication *African Art in Detail* and the Queen Mother head and ivory pendant mask are included amongst the six Benin objects illustrated. Spring 2009, 72-73. Two publications on Benin “art” feature the Queen Mother head and the ivory pendant mask respectively on their covers. Ben-Amos Girshick 1995, Barley 2010.

The fame of these objects goes back a long time. They were celebrated for their artistic quality at the time of their acquisition by the museum and by 1920 the Queen Mother head had been chosen as a subject for one of the British Museum’s 204 post cards. Read & Dalton 1898, Read & Dalton 1899, Read 1910, British Museum 1920, 7 no. 112 [Fig. 10]. A museum publication from 1921, lists the ivory pendant mask and the Queen Mother head among the most noteworthy objects obtained by the Department of British and Mediaeval Antiquities and Ethnography since 1896. British Museum 1921, no. XLIX-L.



As a consequence of the museum's fame, the size of its Benin collection, and the renown of certain pieces in it – along with the fact that the looting in Benin City was carried out by British troops – discussions regarding the return or retention of Benin objects have had a tendency to focus on the British Museum's collection of Benin loot, rather than the Benin loot residing in other Western museum collections. The British Museum has not publicly declared its specific reasons for believing that the merits of keeping the objects in the British Museum are greater than the merits of transferring them to Nigeria. Yet, when British Museum Director Neil MacGregor outlined his argument against the return of any objects in the British Museum, the Benin objects had an important place in his reasoning. According to MacGregor, the Benin objects provide “the key argument” proving that taking objects from their original locations and putting them in museums has been beneficial.<sup>19</sup> What MacGregor means by this will be discussed in more detail further on, but it may already be noted here that the Benin objects have a significance for the British Museum which goes beyond the question of their own location and ownership as they provide the museum with an important rationale to support its retentionist position regarding other disputed artifacts. In short, it seems that the Benin objects mean a lot to the British Museum. This observation concerning the importance of the Benin objects for the British Museum, in my view, adds significance to an in-depth study of the British Museum's making of these objects and of the identity of the Edo, the British, and the British Museum.

When MacGregor structures his argument against return, he chooses not to address the ownership question head on by discussing the claims regarding different groups of objects. Instead he presents his overarching vision of the British Museum's purpose and *raison d'être* in contemporary global society. That the aims the museum sets for itself would not be possible to achieve if the

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Other famous Benin objects in the British Museum's collection and occasionally included in lists of its “art treasures” are a pair of ivory leopards (on loan to the British Museum from the British Queen) and a brass horn-blower. Grigson 1957, 70, pl. 143-144.

19. MacGregor 2009, 51.

museum's collections were diminished runs as a subtext throughout his argument. MacGregor's position on what the museum is and does can be summarized in the following way: The British Museum – in the spirit of the Enlightenment ideals held by its 18<sup>th</sup> century founders – collects, interprets, and exhibits objects for the benefit of the whole world. Through its collection, which spans the entire globe, the museum is especially gifted to show the “one-ness of the world” – that we are all members of one interconnected humanity where each individual or group is of equal value. Thus, the museum can, and does, show the world in ways which subvert the notion of seeing mankind in “categories of inferiority and superiority.”<sup>20</sup> The task of presenting the whole world to the whole world is performed by the museum staff “with knowledge rigorously acquired and ordered”; a formulation which implies that its displays and publications are created from a neutral and impartial perspective.<sup>21</sup> The museum's objects have a crucial role in this endeavor of evidencing the wealth and magnitude of mankind's cultural accomplishments, especially since many cultures have left no written records and thus we can only get to know them through their objects.

MacGregor does not deny that the geographical breadth of its collections is related to a particular historical situation and the British imperial domination of a large part of the world.<sup>22</sup> He also observes that it is often the winners – in this case the British and other colonial powers – who have written history. Yet, as MacGregor asserts, this silencing of the peoples subdued or annihilated through colonial conquest can be rectified by listening to their cultural products:

The Caribbean Taino, the Australian Aboriginals, the African people of Benin [...] can speak to us now of their past achievements most powerfully through the objects they made: a history told through things gives *them* back a voice.<sup>23</sup>  
(Italics added.)

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20. MacGregor 2004.

21. MacGregor 2010b, xviii.

22. MacGregor 2009, 54.

23. MacGregor 2010b, xvi-xvii.



Thus, in MacGregor's view, even if certain objects in the museum have been obtained through imperialism, the museum lets the peoples from which the objects were taken tell the story of their "past achievements." In short, MacGregor's position is that by letting objects from many places of the world "speak," the museum shows the world as "one" in an impartial manner, and to limit the scope of the museum's collection, by returning objects to claimants, would be to limit the museum's representational capacity.

As previously stated, this study is about the British Museum's making of various entities, ranging from the Benin objects to ethnic and institutional identities. At times, I will consider how the representations made correspond with the museum's policy on representation. That is, I will look at how the museum's aim of showing the communality and interconnectedness of human beings in an impartial way based on scientific principles agrees with its operationalization, or use, of the Benin objects. In other words, the general task which MacGregor sets for the museum is compared with how the museum actually makes a particular collection. I believe it will be clear from this study that the museum in this case often falls short of its own goals. I hope to show that the museum's concrete practice of making the Benin objects, occasionally, even stands in direct contrast to the intention of impartiality and scientific objectivity. Some of the museum's statements may be regarded as heavily biased, others as factually incorrect. Significantly, I think, the statements which are skewed or even false are the ones which are advocated as "evidence" to support the British Museum's retentionist position. In addition, the museum's representations in some instances also run counter to the museum's ambition to regard humanity as equal: they instead maintain a sense of separation between a normal, individual, rational, developed, and developing Western self and a different, collective, and traditional non-Western other.

This observation that there is a gap between aim and practice also leads me to consider *why* this is so. This discussion must, of course, be somewhat speculative, but I think that answers are to be sought in the museum's position on the ownership issue. The inalienability of its collections is an unquestionable axiom for the museum, and

therefore the museum refuses all claims for the return of objects to claimants.<sup>24</sup> Thus, non-return seems to be more of a starting point than an outcome of the museum's thinking about its purpose and function in society. The unquestioned retentionist dogma (which implies that retention is always a good thing and return is always a bad thing) is surrounded with various arguments regarding the museum's ability to make impartial representations with its collections to the benefit of a universal audience. The retentionist dogma makes it difficult for the museum to produce knowledge which may be seen as threatening to its own arguments used to buttress this credo. Thus, paradoxically, although the museum's claim to impartiality is a cornerstone in the museum's argument against return, the retentionist position has an impact on the museum's ability to produce knowledge which is *not* biased by its refusal to query or relativize its own fundamental belief in retention.

As previously mentioned, the British Museum makes (representations of) Benin objects through various venues. The main mediums for communicating these objects to the public are: the *Sainsbury African Galleries* in the museum and a number of British Museum publications on the museum's collections. Benin objects are also found among the collection highlights on the British Museum's homepage. In addition, Benin objects also feature in articles where MacGregor presents the museum's position concerning the ownership of the museum's collections.

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24. The museum can make exceptions from its retentionist policy when it comes to claims about human remains. The museum has returned – in the form of a long-term loan – a Kwakwaka'wakw mask to the Nambis Community of Alert Bay in British Columbia. Sanborn 2009.

In one notable case, when Nazi loot was discovered at the British Museum, the museum has paid compensation to the descendants of the former owners: [http://www.britishmuseum.org/the\\_museum/news\\_and\\_press/press\\_releases/2006/feldmann\\_drawings\\_decision.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/the_museum/news_and_press/press_releases/2006/feldmann_drawings_decision.aspx) (accessed 12 May 2016). By paying compensation the museum may be said to have solved the clash between two “universal” principles – the one principle being that the British Museum cannot part with any of the objects in its collections regardless of the circumstances under which the original owners were dispossessed of these objects and the other principle being that there is an obligation to right the wrongs connected to the Holocaust because of the exceptional circumstances surrounding this genocide.



**Fig. 4.** *The Sainsbury African Galleries, British Museum. Brasscasting section with Benin objects. Two ivory leopards (on loan from the British Queen) are in the showcase to the left and Benin plaques are on the far wall.*

On the premises of the British Museum, the Benin objects and some other West African castings, including the Ife head, are exhibited in the *Sainsbury African Galleries* which opened in 2001 [Fig. 4-6]. The total number of Benin objects on view is just over one hundred. The objects are shown in three freestanding glass cabinets and in a glass wall case. Several plaques – 58 in total – are displayed on a wall without glass protection. Wall panels provide explanatory texts, photographs, and a map of southern Nigeria. There are explanatory texts inside the glass cabinets and the objects are accompanied with texts of varying length. A TV monitor shows a short slideshow titled “Contemporary brass casting in Benin City.”

The exhibition has an accompanying publication, *Africa – Arts and Cultures*, which occasionally treats the Benin objects, either in the general text, or in the presentation of particular objects. The objects presented include the Queen Mother’s head and the Ife



**Fig. 5.** *The Sainsbury African Galleries, British Museum. Showcase with Benin ivory objects. The ivory pendant mask is on the middle shelf, and two ivory leopards (on loan from the British Queen) are on the top shelf.*

head.<sup>25</sup> The museum has also published a lavishly illustrated book specifically dealing with Benin objects called *The Art of Benin*, and a slimmer book on the brass Ife head entitled *Bronze Head from Ife*.<sup>26</sup>

25. Mack 2000, 14-15, 96-102.

26. Barley 2010, Platte 2010.





**Fig. 6.** *The Sainsbury African Galleries, British Museum. Showcase with Benin brass objects, mainly heads and pedestal heads. The famed Queen Mother head is to the right on the middle shelf.*

A Benin object (a plaque representing the Oba with attendants) and the Ife head are also included in *A History of the World in 100 Objects* by MacGregor.<sup>27</sup>

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27. MacGregor 2010b, 497-502.

On the British Museum homepage, the museum presents over 5000 highlights from its collections, including 14 objects presumably looted in Benin City in 1897.<sup>28</sup> Each of these Benin objects is represented through a photograph and an accompanying “explanatory” text. Among the objects shown are the previously mentioned head of a Queen Mother and the ivory pendant mask. The other highlights are three brass plaques (two of which render an Oba, or king, of Benin with attendants, the third of which is the upper body of a Portuguese person); an ivory armlet; four brass and bronze figures (a huntsman, a hornblower, and two Portuguese respectively); a brass head of an Oba; a brass helmet mask “for the Ododua ritual”; a brass head “for use in the worship of Osun,” and a brass “altar of the hand.”<sup>29</sup> The Ife brass head is also found among the museum’s highlights.

These representations, the in-house and online exhibitions and the various publications dealing with objects in the museum’s collections may all be seen as having been produced for the purpose of providing public access to the museum’s collections and are created following a tradition which goes a long way back in time.<sup>30</sup> Representations of Benin objects are also made in another, more recent, kind of museum communication produced for a different purpose. These communications have been generated as the museum’s response to the debates surrounding the museum’s right to continue to possess certain objects in its collections. Thus, they serve as a

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28. In 2016, shortly before the completion of this study, the British Museum’s Explore section which contained the highlight objects was removed, but the entries for them can be found through the Google Cultural Institute. There have been some changes in the texts. My quotes are from the texts as they appeared from about 2008 (and presumably earlier) up to 2015. Through the homepage it is also possible to search the British Museum’s on-line collection database of almost 2 million objects. The sheer number of search results yielded when looking for Benin objects here (over one thousand) probably discourages anyone but the devoted Benin buff from using this resource.

29. I here use the terms the British Museum assigns to these objects. Later I discuss why the brass head of an Oba might perhaps be better referred to as the brass pedestal head of an Oba.

30. The first official British Museum guidebook was published in 1808. British Museum 1808. The first non-official guidebook to the museum appeared only a few years after the museum opened to the public in 1759. Powlett 1762 (1<sup>st</sup> edition in 1761).

defense against claims to their return. Two articles by MacGregor which deal with this issue bring Benin objects into the discussion. The articles are “The whole world in our hands” published in *The Guardian* in 2004, and “To shape the citizens of ‘that great city, the world’,” which appeared in the edited volume *Whose Culture? The Promise of Museums and the Debate over Antiquities*, a publication which brought together various authors, most of whom spoke in favor of the “universal museum” (that is, a museum which has objects from many parts of the world) and were against the return of objects from museums.<sup>31</sup>

In its representations the museum makes many statements in texts which are more or less closely related to the Benin objects and which may refer to either single Benin objects, the corpus of Benin objects, or to designated subgroups within it (such as “plaques” or “heads”). These statements give information regarding, for example, the physical properties of an object, what material it is composed of, who donated it to the museum, the object’s inventory number, the function and symbolism of certain objects and motives in Edo society, or more general information concerning Edo society, the origin of metal casting techniques in West Africa, Edo contacts with the Portuguese, and the European reaction to the 1897 “discovery” of the Benin objects.

For the purposes of the present study, the statements the museum makes concerning the Benin objects may be divided into three main categories. The first category consists of those statements which interpret the objects within their Edo context and which provide general information about Edo society, history, religion, and ritual. The second category consists of those statements which relate to the 1897 Edo-British war and the looting of Benin City. The third category consists of statements which tell of the (positive) impact of the Benin objects on the West following their 1897 dispersal.

The vast majority of the information the museum provides in its exhibition, on its home page, and in the various publications belongs to the first category. Thus, the museum is predominantly

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31. MacGregor 2004, MacGregor 2009.

concerned with “explaining” the objects in an Edo context and “explaining” the Edo. The past tense is predominantly used, and the statements are mainly concerned with the pre-1897 situation, but the present tense is sometimes used and thus relates to contemporary Edo society.

In contrast to the relative abundance of statements on the objects in their Edo context, the statements the museum makes concerning the other two categories, the Edo-British war and the object’s reception in the West, are fairly brief and mostly limited to a couple of sentences. Yet, in all their brevity these statements are of interest for the present study. Particular attention will be given to those statements which regard the third category, that is, the statements which deal with the post 1897-reception of the Benin objects. The museum presents two narratives of this reception.<sup>32</sup>

According to the first narrative – which is communicated to the viewer in connection with almost all of the museum’s

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32. I use the word “narrative” or “story” here, since the information the museum presents about the reception of the Benin objects in Europe broadly corresponds to an Aristotelian concept of what constitutes an ideal dramatic narrative. In the Aristotelian definition, a good plot should include the following elements: a clearly defined beginning, which sets out the conflict between protagonist (the “hero”) and antagonist (the “villain), followed by a middle part, which is the point of highest tension and which has a decisive turning point, a *peripeteia*, which reverses the situation and sets the final outcome of the conflict in the end.

The narratives presented by the British Museum follow this structure: In the beginning the West showed contempt for Africans. Then the Benin objects came to Europe. A conflict is established between those Europeans who did not want to reverse their prejudiced view and those who challenged them. Eventually reason triumphed over ignorance and the European derogatory view of Africans disappeared.

The information about the European discovery of African art follows a similar structure (although the story does not build up tension by introducing an element of disbelief over the artistic quality of African art): First Europeans did not appreciate African art, but the arrival of the Benin objects started a process which made them change their mind. On narrative and representation: White 2004.

It may also be noted that these narratives follow the Cartesian logic of cause and effect: in the first narrative the arrival of the Benin objects was the cause which had the effect that the Europeans changed their mind on Africans, in the second narrative the arrival of the Benin objects was the cause which had the effect that the Europeans learned to appreciate African art.



representations of the Benin objects – when Europeans “discovered” the Benin objects in 1897 it was initially assumed that these artworks could not have been made by Africans, but eventually the skepticism regarding their true origin was overcome. In one of its publications the museum accredits a British Museum scholar with an important role in refuting ideas of foreign influence and establishing that the Benin objects were wholly African. When the Benin objects are presented by MacGregor, he adds that the realization of the objects’ indigenous origin shattered derogatory views of Africans, and thus that the Benin objects have done “*more than anything else* to change European perceptions of Africa” (italics added).<sup>33</sup> This statement – that European views of Africa crumbled through the realization that the Benin objects had been made by Africans – is also MacGregor’s “key argument” for the benefit of objects having been taken from their original contexts and put in museums, and thus (it is implied) it is beneficial that they remain there.

According to the second narrative, found in the exhibition in the *Sainsbury African Galleries*, the arrival of the Benin objects to Europe created appreciation for African art, which in turn had a major influence on Western art. Thus, these two narratives about the reception of the Benin objects share that they refer to the *beneficial* impact of the Benin objects in European society. Their “discovery” led to, according to the first narrative, the dismantling of Western stereotypes about Africans, and, according to the second narrative, an appreciation of African Art. As such, these stories are about positive change, development, and progress within Western society, regarding the evaluation of Africans and African material culture.

Now, looking back at MacGregor’s statement that the British Museum lets the makers of the objects speak of their “past achievements,” it may be observed that the British Museum does more than that. The narrative of the reception of the Benin objects is not solely about an Edo achievement (the artistic ability of the Edo) but it is also about a Western achievement: the achievement of Western society to overcome its own prejudices through academic

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33. MacGregor 2009, 51.

knowledge production. When a specific scholarly contribution by a specific individual is mentioned, it is that of a British Museum curator. This raises the question of who the museum represents (in the parliamentary sense, that is, who does it speak for) when making a representation of, or with, the Benin objects. Does the museum use its representational power *only* to let the past makers of objects “speak” to the whole world? Or could there be something *more* to the British Museum’s representations than even-handed and impartial objectivity?

The reception and interpretation of the Benin objects by Western scholars will receive a fairly detailed treatment in this study to see how the narratives about this reception presented today by the British Museum— and the museum’s role in it – agree with the available evidence. To forgo the conclusion of this part, it may be said that the evidence available gives a completely different image of these events than those created by the British Museum. The museum’s own involvement in them were far less glorious than the British Museum today proclaims to the world. The British Museum – allegedly one the world’s “greatest” museums – uses big words, but the veracity of these words is not necessarily that “great.”

This study has the following structure:

The next chapter sets out to discuss the theoretical framework for this study. Chapter three treats previous studies of the Benin objects and the debate over the return or retention of cultural objects. Chapter four overviews the 1897 Edo-British war. Chapter five considers the (changing) identities, meanings, and uses of the Benin objects through time, concentrating on their post-1897 Western contexts, but with a look into their pre-1897 Edo contexts. Chapter six presents the Ife objects, the circumstances of their discovery and conflicts over their ownership. Chapters seven and eight deal with the British Museum’s rationale for retention, and its links to the museum’s imagining of its foundation and history. These chapters also examine how the British Museum’s version of

its own past agrees with the documentary record. Chapters nine and ten present the museum's two narratives on the post-1897 Western reception of the Benin objects, and discuss to what extent they have a basis in the available historical sources. Chapter eleven takes a closer look at how the British Museum makes the Benin objects, the Edo, and the British through its exhibition, webpage, and various publications. Chapter twelve treats alternative ways of making representations. Finally, chapter thirteen summarizes the main conclusions of this study.



## 2. Modernity, museums, exhibitions, and objects

“I am apt to suspect the Negroes and in general all other species of men [...] to be naturally inferior to the Whites.” David Hume, philosopher, 1753<sup>1</sup>

This chapter aims to develop some points of departure for my enquiry into the British Museum’s making of Benin objects, the British, the Edo, and the British Museum. The study may be seen as part of, and a contribution to, a larger project – which has been undertaken by various scholars for at least half a century– to try to understand a particular phenomenon – the “museum” – and its relation to and impact on society.<sup>2</sup> Drawing on research in this field, in this chapter I will try to make a broad characterization of how “the museum,” and its main communicative tool, the museum exhibition, relates to a broader system of epistemological, ontological, social, cultural, economic, and political assumptions and practices, in short a “culture” or “value-system” which may be labeled “modernity,” “Western culture,” “Western civilization,” or the “white male norm.”<sup>3</sup> From here I proceed with an attempt to specify my own theoretical groundings.

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1. Valls 2005, 128-29.

2. For overviews of museological research, see McClellan 2008 and Shelton 2008.

3. I use these terms somewhat interchangeably. It may be noted that the culture or system of shared meanings which I here refer to as “Western,” “white,” or “male” should not be understood as only encompassing “Westerners,” or “white males,” but as reaching across geographical, ethnic, and gendered borders and affecting the world on a global scale.

For this I rely especially on works by Donna Haraway, Michel Foucault, and Edward Said. Haraway has been useful for her discussion on the problem of “objectivity,” while Foucault provides insights on the relationship between power and knowledge. Said, departing from a Foucauldian perspective, gives a framework for looking at the making of a Western self and its non-Western other. As I will come back to in the next chapter, when looking at the British Museum’s making of its own identity, I have found Benedict Anderson’s, Eric Hobsbawm’s and Michael Billig’s works on national identity useful. My approach to (museum) objects and their interpretation(s) owe to the writings of Arjun Appadurai, Igor Kopytoff, and Kate Sturge. All these authors have provided insights and inspiration for this study, although – as will be seen – most of them will not be explicitly present in my analyses. As outlined in the foregoing chapter, the material for analysis in this study mainly consists of verbal statements the museum makes through various representational venues – exhibitions, the homepage, and publications.<sup>4</sup> When looking at texts, I try to pay close attention to aspects such as the choice of words and the meanings they carry, what narratives are formed, what is made explicit and what is implied, and – importantly – what is left untold.

The chapter closes with a brief discussion of *one* particular sentence in an explanatory text provided by the British Museum on its homepage for a Benin object. Thus, this chapter goes from big to small things, from the broad characterization of modernity/Western culture down to one single sentence about a Benin object. It is an attempt to show the interrelation between this culture and one of its cultural expressions. It tries to “understand” and “explain” how this sentence has been formulated in the way it has at this particular location (the British Museum) at a particular point in time (the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century).

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4. There are, of course, many different ways of studying museums and their making of various entities. Other approaches include looking at visitors or staff by, for example, conducting visitor studies or doing participatory observations of museum staff. Such studies would have complemented this one, but would have required extensive enquires on their own. On visitor studies see Hooper-Greenhill 2006 and on participatory ethnographic fieldwork in museums, see MacDonald 2002.

What is a museum? While few, if any, academics today acknowledge “the museum” essence, the museum, or museums, may be said to exist as mental and cultural concept(s) and category(ies) which shape, and are shaped by, material and bodily manifestations and practices (such as buildings, collections, archives, exhibitions, staff, logos, homepages, policy documents, visitors, etc.).

When and where did the museum – as a concept, practice, and materiality – “originate”? By many reckonings, the origin of the museum can be traced back to the Renaissance era.<sup>5</sup> During the following centuries the number of museums in Europe multiplied. From the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, museums also began to be established in territories colonized by European nations.<sup>6</sup> The latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century especially saw a drastic increase in the number of museums created in, mainly, (Western) Europe and North America.<sup>7</sup> They were also founded in countries not occupied by the West, but which went through a process of modernization/westernization.<sup>8</sup> Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century the number of museums has constantly risen and today there are museums on all five continents and in most countries. The global distribution of museums is, however, very uneven, with a heavy concentration to the so-called “First” World.<sup>9</sup>

Which (whose) worldviews and norms have created this institution and what worldviews and norms are created through it? Which (whose) needs, desires, fears, hopes, and dreams does it fuel and fulfill? Who is advantaged and who is disadvantaged by it? Some scholars seeking “answers” to questions such as these have argued that the museum may be seen as being (among many other things) a product, aspect, and integrated part of modernity.<sup>10</sup> I find this characterization broadly applicable and a useful way of trying

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5. Impey & MacGregor 1985.

6. Sheets-Pyenson 1988, Prösler 1996, 24-2, Wright 1996.

7. Walsh 1992, Aronsson 2011, 31.

8. Prösler 1996, McClellan 2008, 5-6, Knell 2011, Wan-Chen 2012.

9. Lewis 1992, 18.

10. On the museum and its relation to modernity: Walsh 1992, Hooper-Greenhill 2000a, 2000b, 124-162, Kohlstedt 2005, Curtis 2006, Grahn 2006, 62-67, Keene 2006, Jones 2010, 186-190. On the museum and white capitalist patriarchy: Haraway 1984.

to grasp some of the peculiarities of the museum exhibition as a medium of communication and meaning-making.

The term “modernity” has been, and is, understood in a variety of ways, and may refer to a range of economic, political, social, cultural, aesthetic, scientific, technological, ontological and epistemological concepts and transformations. There is no consensus on the use of modernity as an epochal term. Different writers have diverging views on when this historical period “begins” and whether the present era represents a break with, or a continuation of modernity. Writers also differ in their application of various epithets (such as “Early,” “Late,” and “High”) to the term modernity.<sup>11</sup> Some writers see modernity as having begun during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries (the Renaissance) and as an epoch which follows after “the Middle Ages” and feudalism. Other writers seek its origin in the 17<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and connect it with writers such as Bacon and Descartes and with the intellectual movement known as the Enlightenment which championed empirical observation and analytical reasoning as a source of truth, knowledge, and progress.<sup>12</sup> Yet other writers use modernity as a term for a time period beginning around 1800, when the static world-view of earlier times was abandoned.<sup>13</sup> For the purposes of this discussion, modernity may be perceived as a set of doctrines and ways of thinking and acting, which traces their origins to the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries and becomes fully articulated during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. It may be seen as intrinsically linked to, formed by and forming, the triad capitalism, colonialism/imperialism, and scientism (whose cornerstones are Baconian empiricism and Cartesian rationalism). In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries it is also linked to nationalism, industrialization, and urbanization

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11. The following portrayal of modernity/Western civilization/white male norm draws upon the works of Haraway 1988, Best & Kellner 1991, Latour 1993, Dussel 2000, Mignolo 2000, Sörlin 2004a, 2004b, Venn & Featherstone 2006 as well as on the literature in the preceding note on museums and modernity.
  12. The epochal limits if the Enlightenment is also discussed. Some authors see it as limited in time to from the early 18<sup>th</sup> century up to the French Revolution in 1789, while other authors extend its origins back to around the middle of 17<sup>th</sup> century. Some bring its end forward in time, into the first decades of 19<sup>th</sup> century. Sloan 2003, 13.
  13. Best & Kellner 1991, 2-3.



as well as the New Imperialism of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (the British conquest of Benin City in 1897 is an “episode” in this phase of rapid Western territorial expansion).<sup>14</sup> In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, forms of consumerism became an important element of modernity.<sup>15</sup> To these “-isms” others may also be added, such as ethnocentrism, anthropocentrism (speciesism), androcentrism (sexism), biologism, and classism; all of which are important elements in the constitution of modernity and of a Western/modern concept of “humanity.”<sup>16</sup> Importantly, this notion of humanity is not necessarily one which has always included and granted equal rights to all human beings, not even all “Westerners,” but one which has privileged the white upper/middle class heterosexual male.

I take the late 15<sup>th</sup> and the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries as a starting point for the formation of modernity, because it is around this time when the European worldview (or rather: the worldview of, mostly, privileged European men) began to expand and transform through numerous

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14. Mignolo 2000, 22 stresses that the formation of the modern world (economically, politically, conceptually, etc.) cannot be seen in isolation from Western colonialism, and hence it should not be possible to speak of “modernity” without speaking about “coloniality” which is modernity’s “reverse and unavoidable side [...] its darker side, like the part of the moon we do not see when we observe from earth.” Mignolo’s study is concerned with “changing the terms of conversation as well as its content” by displacing the “abstract universalism” of a hegemonic “modern epistemology.” See also Mignolo 2009. Loomba 1998, 20-21 discusses colonialism as “an integral part of capitalist development.” On the relationship between nationalism and modernity, see essays in Delanty and Kumar 2006. Some writers (e.g. Gellner 1983) regard nationalism as a comparatively late (19<sup>th</sup> century) phenomenon and link it to industrialization and urbanization, while other writers trace nationalist sentiment further back to the Early Modern period, or even earlier. Smith 1986, 6-18 provides a brief overview of this discussion.
15. Venn & Featherstone 2006, 457 writes about “a new form of purification at work today which is seeking to bring about through a renewed modernization the age of the market and of the economic subject as its calculating agent.” Some authors describe this phase of modernity beginning in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century with terms such as the “second modern age,” “late modernity,” or “high modernity” Macdonald 2003, 11, n. 1.
16. To say that ethnocentrism, anthropocentrism (speciesism), androcentrism (sexism), biologism, and classism are integrated aspects in modernity or Western culture is of course not to say that non-Western cultures necessarily lack such characteristics. For example, on the making of the ethnic other in China, see Fiskesjö 2012.

discoveries in both the microcosm and macrocosm: with scalpels, sailing ships, astrolabes, cannons, and the study of ancient texts and artifacts these men started to encounter, explore, and map the human body, distant lands – and the flora, fauna, and peoples of these lands – as well as history, and came to establish their relation to (perceived) entities such as body, others, nature, and past. With time, they came to see themselves and their own minds as elevated above, separated from, and mastering, these entities.<sup>17</sup>

In the spheres of ontology and epistemology, modernity, especially in its 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century forms, entails a strong belief that reality is ordered according to laws which the human intelligence can grasp. Thus, it puts faith in rationality and in the possibility of discovering *objective* “truths” and “facts” about the world and of unveiling the principles which govern it. A related characteristic of the modern way of thinking is a will to *separate* “reality” into discrete (oppositional) entities and to order them in positions of superiority and inferiority – such as nature/culture, male/female. The belief in rational and objective knowledge is coupled to the belief in the detached and disembodied knowing subject who has unmediated vision of the object of knowledge. The notion of the detachment involves a strong belief in the possibility of isolating mind from body, individual from society, and the human knowing subject from the object of knowledge. It also presupposed the possibility of defining, *purifying*, and authenticating the objects of knowledge, of separating it from what it is *not* (as, for example, in the separation of nature from culture). The privileged sense to know the world is vision – to see is to know – but while the detached, disembodied

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17. On European expansion through sailing ships, astrolabes, and cannons: Law 1987. On 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century views of the great inventions compass, gunpowder, and printing: Boruchoff 2012. On the opening up and mapping of the human body: Sörlin 2004b, 86-96 As exemplified by Sörlin, on a metaphorical level, the exploration and penetration of “unknown” territories and of the (female) body could be seen as analogous. Further exponents of this thinking, from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, include the viceroy of India, Lord Curzon, describing the British entering of Lhasa as the taking of a bride’s virginity (Johansson 2012, 88), the gynecologist Anders Andersson likening the exploration of the uterus with the quest for the sources of the Nile (Nilsson 2005, 99-102), and Sigmund Freud calling female sexuality a “dark continent” (Khanna 2003, 48-49).

and dislocated viewer claims infinite vision, the viewer escapes being seen.<sup>18</sup>

From the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, another important element in the modern world-view is the notion of (linear) time and of progress.<sup>19</sup> Progress is seen as being either (or both) generated by technological innovations, by some law or principle (for example evolution), by ethnic collectives (such as the ancient Greeks or the white race) or created by various *individuals*, who through their achievements – in, for example, the spheres of science, politics, or the arts – make progress happen. That is, certain persons are perceived as being above, or ahead of, their own time and society and as furthering development and advancement through their extraordinary intellectual or moral capabilities and accomplishments – sometimes with the opposition of their contemporaries (as will be seen further on, this trope recurs in the narratives created by the British Museum).<sup>20</sup>

The belief in rationality and objectivity and the will to discover laws and principles which are valid outside the sites at which they have been produced often entails a claim to universalism. That is, particular ways of understanding and valuing the world are not seen as historical and culturally contingent theories offering partial (in both senses of the word) knowledge of the world, but as neutral, value-free principles available to disinterested explorers, scholars, scientists, and philosophers to reveal the world “as it is” and how it ought to be. The claim to universalism is in turn feeding and fed by a strong notion of Western positional superiority to other cultures, and consequently a need, and obligation, to impose European concepts, values, and belief systems (such as Christianity, capitalism, and civilization) onto other peoples *for their own good*. Thus, both greed and (perceived) altruism have been a major motivator for European conquest and domination.<sup>21</sup>

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18. Cf. Haraway 1988, 581 on “the power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation.” Latour 1993 discusses the moderns’ will to separate and purify.

19. Walsh 1992.

20. Fitzgerald 1996, 120.

21. Dussel 2000, Mignolo 2000, Mégret 2006, 274, 290.

Looking into the formation of modernity and the European self-perception from a technological perspective, it seems fair to say that another (more?) important factor in the notion of European superiority relates to the relative difference in technological – especially military – power which has characterized encounters between Europeans and the inhabitants of the rest of the world. For example, following Columbus’ arrival in Haiti (Hispaniola) in 1492, the Spaniards – armed with firearms, crossbows, iron swords, and horses – had a definite combat advantage over their opponents who lacked these killing devices. In less than two decades the Spaniards managed to reduce the native population on Haiti from around a million people to 60,000.<sup>22</sup> The conquest of Latin America (euphemistically referred to as “pacification”) was further facilitated by smallpox disease brought from Europe, which took a heavy toll on the native inhabitants. In many other parts of the world, the difference in fire power between the Europeans and non-Europeans was less distinct, and in some places, such as West Africa, the encounter with new diseases disadvantaged the Europeans (and their horses) and prevented territorial conquests for a long time. Yet, during the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the rapid Western technological development left most other peoples far behind, and through advances in medical science and practice, malaria and other tropical deceases could be held at bay.<sup>23</sup> The steam boat, the telegraph, the quinine and the ever increasing fire rate and range of the rifle and cannon – joined by the machine gun – facilitated territorial expansion. By 1914 the Western world dominated 85% of the Earth’s territory.

The assumption of European (male) superiority was felt, expressed, and legitimized by various European writers and “thinkers” from the late 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards. In 1547 the Spanish humanist, theologian and philosopher Juan Ginés de Sepulveda wrote the following in his *A Second Democritos: on the Just Causes of War with the Indians*:

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22. Sörlin 2004b, 28.

23. Diamond 1997, Curtin 1998.

The man rules over the woman, the adult over the child, the father over his children. That is to say, the most powerful and most perfect rule over the weakest and most imperfect. This same relationship exists among men, there being some who by nature are masters and others who by nature are slaves. Those who surpass the rest in prudence and intelligence, although not in physical strength, are by nature the masters. On the other hand, those who are dim-witted and mentally lazy, although they may be physically strong enough to fulfill all the necessary tasks, are by nature slaves. It is just and useful that it be this way. We even see it sanctioned in divine law itself, for it is written in the Book of Proverbs: "He who is stupid will serve the wise man." And so it is with the barbarous and inhumane peoples [the Indians] who have no civil life and peaceful customs. It will always be just and in conformity with natural law that such people submit to the rule of more cultured and humane princes and nations. Thanks to their virtues and the practical wisdom of their laws, the latter can destroy barbarism and educate these [inferior] people to a more humane and virtuous life. And if the latter reject such rule, it can be imposed upon them by force of arms. Such a war will be just according to natural law.<sup>24</sup>

He goes on to note that the Indians (in contrast to the Spanish whose "natural qualities" are "judgment, talent, magnanimity, temperance, humanity, and religion") lack "humaneness," "possess neither science nor even an alphabet," nor do they "preserve any monuments of their history." To the vices of the Indians he adds cowardice in battle against Spanish soldiers: "many times thousands upon thousands of them scattered, fleeing like women before a very few Spaniards." He also states that the Aztecs lack private property and are slaves under the will of their kings (which to Sepulveda is proof of their "natural servitude"). He repeats the argument that the Indians are inferior to the Spanish in the same way as children are inferior to adults, women to men, and apes to men. In the same treatise he also takes

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24. Schatzman 2013, 63, 74-77.

the opportunity to place the Spaniards foremost among the Europeans, exemplifying that, following the sack of Rome in 1527, “there were hardly any Spaniard among those who died of the plague who did not order in his will that the property stolen from the Roman citizens be returned,” a Christian duty “no one from any other nation [...] fulfilled.”<sup>25</sup>

Statements about European superiority over the non-European members of mankind flowed from the pens of many white men during the succeeding centuries with no acknowledgment that the writer’s own cultural affiliation or skin color may have a degree of influence on how he treats his subject. In 1753, the great skeptic and Enlightenment philosopher David Hume wrote the following in his *Of National Characters*:

I am apt to suspect the Negroes and in general all other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the Whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual, eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences. On the other hand, the most rude and barbarous of the whites, such as the ancient Germans or the present Tartars, have still something eminent about them, in their valour, form of government, or some other particular. Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction between these breeds of men. [...] In Jamaica, indeed, they talk of one Negro as a man of parts and learning; but it is likely he is admired for slender accomplishments, like a parrot who speaks a few words plainly.<sup>26</sup>

Immanuel Kant quoted Hume with approval in his *Observations on the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764), adding that the difference between the white and black races “appears to be as great in regard to mental

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25. Cowans 2003, 58-63.

26. Palter 1995, Eze 1997, 29-37, Valls 2005, Israel 2006, 593.

capacities as they are in color.” He also asserted that Blacks are “vain,” “have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling,” and are “so talkative that they must be driven apart from each other by thrashings.”<sup>27</sup> In his writings he also opined that Blacks were unable to govern themselves or to receive any higher form of education, and thus could only be trained to be slaves.<sup>28</sup> In contrast, Whites are given the highest accolade by Kant. Without any sense of irony he declared that “[h]umanity is at its greatest perfection in the race of the whites,” and:

The inhabitant of the temperate parts of the world, above all the central part, has a more beautiful body, works harder, is more jocular, more controlled in his passions, more intelligent than any other race of people in the world. That is why at all points in time these peoples have educated the others and controlled them with weapons. [...] [T]hey have all amazed the southern lands with their arts and weapons.<sup>29</sup>

Yet, Kant did not grant all Whites an equal share of the perfection. He did not think highly of (white) women. According to Kant, women are vain and lack intellectual capacity. He illustrates the point of female narcissism and intellectual inferiority by assuring that if women show an interest in books, it is not for their content, but only for their value as status symbols: “As for the scholarly woman, she uses her books in the same way as her watch, for example, which she carries so that people will see that she has one, though it is usually not running or not set by the sun.”<sup>30</sup>

The sources of truth and knowledge invoked to create hierarchies and justify white (male) supremacy shifted over the centuries. Sepulveda had referred to natural law, the Bible, and Aristotle. The 17<sup>th</sup>

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27. Eze 1997, 38-64, Mills 2005, Kleingeld 2007. The link between dark skin and lack of intelligence is made explicit in Kant’s claim that a carpenter’s skin color – “black from head to foot” – was “clear proof he was quite stupid.”

28. Kleingeld 2007, 576.

29. Eze 1997, 64.

30. Mendus 1987, 36.

and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries saw a – gradual – turn from classical and biblical scripture to rationalism and empiricism as the authoritative sources of knowledge. In place of sacred history came natural history and Renaissance kaleidoscopic cosmographies were exchanged for the systematic classification systems originating with Bacon and Descartes. The first to make a division of humanity within the emerging secular classificatory spirit was Francois Bernier writing in 1684, but Carolus Linnaeus's *Systema Naturae* from 1735 is usually regarded as the foundation moment for the modern concept of racial classification.<sup>31</sup> Linnaeus's taxonomy of flora and fauna incorporated human beings, which were divided into four varieties based on continent and skin color: *Europaeus albus* (white European), *Americanus rubescens* (red American), *Asiaticus fuscus* (brown Asian), and *Africanus niger* (black African). The 1758 and subsequent editions associated each of these varieties with one of the four temperaments (a concept derived from Classical Antiquity) and their related characteristics. The “gentle” European was governed by “law” whereas the “crafty” African was governed by “caprice.”<sup>32</sup> Later classification systems likewise placed the European at the top of the hierarchy and the rest of mankind in positions of inferiority, with the African at the bottom. Pigmentation, hair type, and especially head shape became important classificatory criteria, but the scientists also judged their subjects' degree of social development, as well as their intellectual capacity and moral standards. Georges Cuvier, one of the most influential zoologists in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, believed in three human varieties or races, which he confidently characterized in his *Animal Kingdom*:

The Caucasian, to which we ourselves belong, is chiefly distinguished by the beautiful form of the head, which approximates to a perfect oval. It is also remarkable for variations in the shade of complexion, and colour of the hair. From this variety have sprung the most civilized nations, and such as have most generally exercised domination over the rest of mankind.

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31. Stuurman 2000, Bindman 2002, 17, Syson 2003, 115.

32. Linné 1802 [1788], 9.



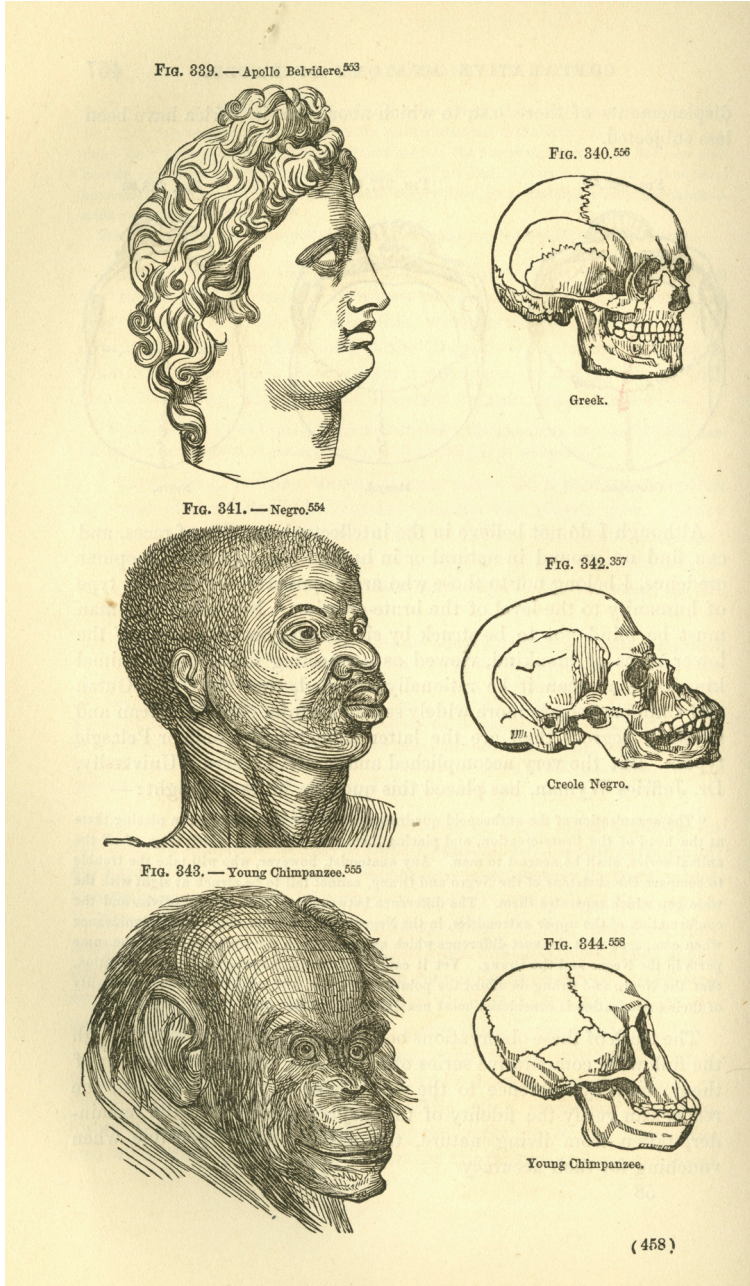
The Mongolian variety is recognized by prominent cheekbones, flat visage, narrow and oblique eyes, hair straight and black, scanty beard, and olive complexion. This race has formed mighty empires in China and Japan and occasionally extended its conquests on this side of the Great Desert, but its civilization has long appeared stationary.

The negro race is confined to the south of Mount Atlas. Its characters are, black complexion, woolly hair, compressed cranium, and flattish nose. In the prominence of the lower part of the face and the thickness of the lips, it manifestly approaches the monkey tribe. The hordes of which this variety is composed have always remained in a state of complete barbarism.<sup>33</sup>

Like the philosopher Kant, the scientist Cuvier considers the portion of humanity “to which we ourselves belong” to be foremost in physical beauty. The distinguishing mark of the Caucasian is the beauty of the almost “perfect oval” of the head. Neither the Mongolian nor the Negro head shape receives a favorable aesthetic evaluation by him. The Negro race has a “compressed cranium” and a prominent lower face, disqualifying this part of humanity from having good-looking skulls. The idea that the degree of the protrusion of the lower face could be used as criterion for sequencing the different races in a hierarchy from higher to lower emerged in late 18<sup>th</sup> century and remained in vogue into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The facial angle was determined by drawing a line from forehead to chin on a profile head. The ideal was a perpendicular line, and the degree of divergence from the perpendicular determined the place in the hierarchy. Illustrations in scientific and popular treatises showed how with the help of this criterion the white, yellow, red, and black races could be placed in descending order. Occasionally the ape is included below the lowest type of human (the Black). In the 18<sup>th</sup>, and until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the highest ideal is often represented by an example from Greek sculpture, for example the Apollo Belvedere [Fig. 7]. By as late as 1915, a publication juxtaposed an image of Julius Caesar with a black

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33. Cuvier 1827 [1817], 97, Curtin 1965, 23, Lindfors 1999, viii.



**Fig. 7.** White supremacy illustrated through comparison of chimpanzee, Negro, and the Apollo Belvedere. Illustration in Josiah Nott & George Gliddon *Types of Mankind*, Philadelphia & London, 10th ed. 1871 (1st ed. 1854).

man to show humanity in its highest and lowest form.<sup>34</sup> Despite pretensions to a scientific objectivity in more than one way, their own culture and traditions – in this case the authoritative voice of an aesthetic ideal linked to Classical Antiquity – held sway over the men who defined the yardstick for determining their racial, civilizatory, and intellectual supremacy over the rest of mankind. Not surprisingly perhaps, it is almost always a male head which exemplifies the different races in the diagrams, although one writer, the surgeon Charles White, wrote that the quintessence of human perfection and beauty was not only located in the European (assumed male) head – “that noble arched head containing such a quantity of brain” – but also in the breasts of the European female.<sup>35</sup>

From the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the hierarchies assigning different parts of humanity in a normative sequence from savagery to civilization were able to draw inspiration and authority from Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution.<sup>36</sup> Darwinian ideas also came in vogue to explain – and propose a cure to – all sorts of perceived ills from racial to social degeneration. Darwin’s cousin, Francis Galton, created eugenics as a field of scholarly enquiry.

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34. Haller 1971, Nederveen Pieterse 1992, 47-49, Savage 1997, 9-11, Bindman 2002, 79-123, 9-13, Kriz 2008, 70-115.

35. White writing in 1799 ends his text with the following eulogy: “The white European [...] may [...] be considered as the most beautiful of the human race. No one will doubt his superiority in intellectual powers: and I believe it will be found that his capacity is naturally superior to that of every other man. Where shall we find, unless in the European, that noble arched head, containing such quantity of brain [...]? Where the perpendicular face, the prominent nose, and round projecting chin? Where that variety of features, and fullness of expression; those long, flowering, graceful ringlets, that majestic beard, those rosy cheeks and coral lips? Where that erect posture of the body and noble gait? In what quarter of the globe shall we find the blush that overspreads the soft features of the beautiful women of Europe, that emblem of modesty, of delicate feelings, and of sense? [...] Where, except on the bosom of the European woman, two such plump and snowy white hemispheres, tipt with vermilion?” Craige 1992, 8. See also Bindman 2002, 218-219 and Schiebinger 1993, 64-65, who discusses breast typologies.

36. Gossett 1997, 66, 145.

Some scholars tried to gaze into the future. Kant predicted that except for the Whites, “all races will be extinguished.”<sup>37</sup> According to Darwin “natural selection is now acting on the inferior races” and “[a]t some future period, not very distant as measured by centuries, the civilized races of man will almost certainly exterminate and replace throughout the world the savage races.”<sup>38</sup> This “scientific” axiom, that humanity could be divided into higher “civilized” and lower “savage” races, and that the latter would “naturally” and inevitably succumb through contact with the former, were conveniently used to sanction Western territorial expansion and exploitation – even genocide.<sup>39</sup> In 1904, General Lothar von Trotha, the German military commander in South-West Africa, defended his decree of the annihilation of the Herero (a “racial war” in Trotha’s terminology) by referring to the “law of Darwin’s” and “the struggle of the fittest [sic].”<sup>40</sup>

While the authorities’ invocations to motivate and justify white superiority varied over time, similar tropes reappear in the descriptions of what characterized the non-Whites. The equation of non-Whites with children, women, and animals are common. It is found in the text passage from Sepulveda quoted above, and Hume’s comparison between the intellectual capacity of a black person and that of a parrot belongs to the same pattern of thought.<sup>41</sup> When Kant writes that Blacks can be “trained,” he uses a word (*abrichten*) which refers to the training of animals.<sup>42</sup> Hume and Kant linked animals and Blacks in a metaphorical and figurative way, but in the fields of biology and comparative anatomy the connection became literal. Already in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century naturalists in search of the

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37. Mills 2005, 175.

38. Weikart 2004, 186. Darwin also wrote: “The more civilized so-called Caucasian races have beaten the Turkish hollow in the struggle for existence. Looking at the world at no very distant date, what an endless number of the lower races will have been eliminated by the higher civilized races throughout the world.”

39. Qureshi 2013, 268-273.

40. Weikart 2004, 205-206.

41. The person that Hume referred to with the insulting comparison was Francis William. Palter 1995, 7.

42. Kleingeld 2007, 576.

“missing link” had compared “Hottentots” and orangutans.<sup>43</sup> To the physician Samuel Thomas von Soemmering, writing in 1785, the “cold facts” of anatomy evidenced that Blacks were “nearer to the ape.”<sup>44</sup> Thus, Cuvier’s opinion that the head shape of black people “manifestly approaches the monkey tribe” was neither novel nor controversial, but rather belonged to the stock repertoire of characterizing Blacks. Further on in this study, we will encounter a British Museum scholar, who at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century compared the Blacks’ anatomy to that of apes (both having protruding jaws for example), likened the Blacks’ “mental constitution” to that of a child, and – as one the Blacks’ few redeeming qualities – speaks of his “doglike fidelity” when working as a servant.

Another recurring theme in the Western imagining is that the non-Westerner is cruel and violent while the Westerner is not. On the contrary, Western territorial conquests and the subjugation of non-Westerners could be seen as evidence of Western civilizatory superiority, as is manifest in the passages from Kant and Cuvier quoted above where they state that the Whites have “amazed the southern lands with their arts and weapons” (Kant) and “exercised domination over the rest of mankind” (Cuvier). To Westerners, the violence of others was a sign of barbarity, the violence of Westerners a sign of civilization. A prominent set of ideas was that the non-Whites lacked development in the spheres of culture, morals, science, technology, and in political and economic organization. Sepulveda argued that the Indians lack of “science” and “alphabet” showed their backwardness, and similarly to Hume, the African’s lack of “manufactures,” “arts,” and “sciences” were proof of their inferiority. In those cases where there could be no denial that certain non-Europeans had developed extensive states, these societies were often seen as being ruled by tyranny, and their progress belonging to the past. Cuvier acknowledged that China and Japan had created “great Empires” and made “conquests,” but Eastern civilizations were now “stationary.” In his treatise he also opined that Persia, India, and China were characterized by “despotism”

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43. Nederveen Pieterse 1992, 40.

44. Schiebinger 1993, 140.



and were “effeminate,” echoing Sepulveda’s characterization of Indians as slaves under their sovereigns and lacking manly courage, thus “fleeing like women before a few Spaniards.”<sup>45</sup> To Westerners, the West was characterized by freedom and progress and the rest possessing the reverse of these qualities: servitude and stagnation, even degeneration.<sup>46</sup>

So far, the outline of modernity or Western culture given here has stressed its dark and sinister sides. These are aspects which need to be emphasized. As Sverker Sörlin observes in a recent overview of the Western history of ideas, no other “culture” or “civilization” can compete with the Western when it comes to killing human beings. Yet, as Sörlin also notes, paradoxically, it is in the Western world where the protests against genocide and other atrocities have been formulated perhaps more clearly than anywhere else.<sup>47</sup> These protests, and the formulation of human rights, have often come as direct responses to Western atrocities committed both against Westerners and non-Westerners. In a sense, Western “progress” in the theory of human rights has been propelled by the West’s own capacity for, and practice of, gross human rights violations.

The critique against the violations has partly drawn upon the same authorities and sources of knowledge as the ones used to legitimize them. When the monk and missionary Bartolomé de Las Casas protested against Spanish behavior towards the Indians in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, his critique was based on the Christian faith: because all peoples were created by God they had the right to personal freedom and property. The Spanish sinned against God through their mistreatment of the Indians, and the Spanish would be punished by God for their sins.<sup>48</sup> As time wore on, and science was pushing the Bible into the background as an authority and

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45. Cuvier 1827 [1817], 95-96. The Mongolians are associated with “superstition” while the Caucasians have “carried philosophy, science, and the arts to the greatest perfection, and for more than thirty ages have been the guardians and depositaries of human knowledge.” (ibid 99-100).

46. Wheeler 2000, 152-153.

47. Sörlin 2004b, 28. On modernity’s “dissident genealogy,” see also Venn & Featherstone 2006, 463.

48. Sörlin 2004b, 30-31.

explanatory force, the battles over the equality (or not) of mankind were fought more with “scientific” than theological arguments. When scientific racism gained ground in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and rose to prominence in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were riposting voices of scientific anti-racism, which used anthropological data to *refute* the idea of the existence of distinct human races and of the assumed superiority of one portion of mankind over all the others (I shall return to the subject of the different paradigms in anthropological theory in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century further on, because it directly relates to the different interpretations of the Benin objects made by scholars at that time).<sup>49</sup>

Ethnocentrism and cultural chauvinism have been a strong current in Western “thinking” and self-perception, and various Western cultural assumptions – disguised as universal truths and laws – have provided a major ideological foundation for Western expansionism, violation, and exploitation. However, there is also a Western tradition of cultural relativism and of making comparisons between Westerners and non-Westerners which are not to the advantage of the Europeans and which also question the universality of Western knowledge. Relativism is the main theme of the *Essais* (1580-88) by Michel de Montaigne.<sup>50</sup> In his essays he challenges the notion of an absolute truth, in favor of a historically and culturally specific one. In essay number 30 he compares “the Cannibals” with the Europeans. He observes that people tend to regard what is familiar as right, just, and normal, and what is unfamiliar as barbaric:

[E]ach man calls barbarism whatever is not his own practice; for indeed it seems we have no other test of truth and reason, than the example and pattern of the opinions and customs of the country we live in. *There* is always the perfect religion, the perfect government, the perfect and accomplished manners in all things.<sup>51</sup>

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49. Curtin 1965, 47, 55, 228-229, 241-243, Proctor 1988.

50. Handler 1986, Edelman 2011, Sörlin 2004b, 31, 37-38.

51. Edelman 2011, 40.

He does not deny that “others” commit acts of barbarity and cruelty, neither does he suggest that these cruelties should not be condemned, but that condemnation should be based on principle, not through a comparison with our own practices: “We may then call these people barbarous, in respect to the rules of reason: but not in respect to ourselves, who surpass them in every kind of barbarity.”<sup>52</sup>

Later writers arguing in favor of cultural relativism and equality (racial, social, and sexual) have similarly critiqued European atrocities abroad. For example, the radical Enlightenment philosopher Denis Diderot provides an impassioned defense of the indigenous populations of Africa and the Americas in his contributions to Guillaume Raynal’s *Philosophical and Political History of European Establishments and Trade in the Two Indies* (first published in 1770, second and third editions in 1774 and 1780). He rebutted the theological, racial, and economic justifications for slavery and invoked the rise of a black Spartacus who would lead the oppressed slaves in an armed struggle to regain their freedom.<sup>53</sup> Diderot was the main editor of the monumental *Encyclopédie* published between 1751-1772, where several articles preached toleration and respect for difference and subversively challenged both secular and ecclesiastical authority. The *Encyclopédie* provoked strong reactions: it was condemned by the Pope and the French crown (temporarily) revoked permission to publish it. Diderot served a prison sentence for his views.<sup>54</sup>

Hume’s and Kant’s ethnocentric views met both support and disapproval. Among Hume’s critics was anti-slavery activist James Ramsey, who denounced Hume’s view of Blacks and the idea of a correlation between physical attributes and intelligence, ironically asking why Hume, “a tall bulky man,” denied the capacity for “metaphysical subtilty” in those who lacked his white skin, when he might as well have denied it to those who lacked his “great bodily attributes,” that is, his obesity.<sup>55</sup>

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52. Edelman 2011, 32.

53. Israel 2006, 594, Strugnell 2011, 78.

54. Israel 2006, 162, Brewer 2011.

55. Ramsey 1784, 213-214.



Dissenting voices were occasionally heard from people who stood in various positions of subordination to the privileged white male center, and some writers drew analogies between different forms of oppression and injustices. Mary Wollstonecraft's pioneering feminist manifesto *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), presented married women's denial of legal status as a form of slavery.<sup>56</sup> The British abolitionist movement, which called for a halt in the slave trade and the end of slavery, mobilized activists from a broad social spectrum ranging from working, middle, to upper class. It included (white) women as well as (male) Blacks, such as the ex-slave Olaudah Equiano, whose autobiography described his own experiences as a slave.<sup>57</sup> In the 1820s, when most male anti-slavery activists argued for gradual abolishment, Elizabeth Heyrick was among the few who demanded not only immediate emancipation, but also monetary compensation to the slaves for their years of enforced servitude and suffering. In her pamphlets she also took a stand against war, poor prison conditions, capital punishment, the oppression of the poor, and cruelty to animals.<sup>58</sup>

The number of examples could be expanded, but those given hopefully suffice to illustrate that, since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, modernity encompasses a dissenting tradition which has challenged various received ideas and notions of white male supremacy, in favor of relativism, pluralism, and equality. Yet, the dissenting currents of thought may be seen as belonging to the margins, rather than the mainstream of Western world-views, and as having little impact on Western practices, at least in the short run. For example, the critique against Spanish atrocities in America led to the passing of

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56. Midgley 2011, 100.

57. The voice from below was also expressed in the form of social unrest and revolts with the slave revolt on Haiti being inspired by the French revolution.

58. In a way which resounded with the anti-slavery pamphlets' questioning white superiority over Africans, she challenged the idea of human superiority to animals, noting that humans surpass animals only in their power to inflict harm: "*They* are creatures of instinct: we of reason. *They* act from necessity: we, from choice. But if we refuse the guidance of reason, and abuse our free-agency, how are we their superiors, except it be in depravity?" (original italics). Ferguson 1998, 45. On Heyrick, see also Corfield 1986, Ferguson 1993 and Midgley 2011.

legislation for the protection of the native inhabitants, but these laws were hardly obeyed. The British abolishment of slavery in 1838 did not improve the living conditions of ex-slaves much. (The conflict between property rights and human rights was “solved” in favor of those who lost their property through slave emancipation. Huge sums of compensation were paid out by the British state to the former slave owners, *not* to the former slaves.) When speaking of dissent it should perhaps be added that the positions in the Western debates on the relation to various “others” have been far from clear-cut, with the same individual quite often expressing contradictory views, as seen from today’s perspective. For example, while Hume stood firm in his opinion on Blacks, he opposed slavery.<sup>59</sup> Kant abandoned his racial hierarchy and his pro-slavery sentiment changed into a harsh critique of slavery. He condemned European conduct towards the inhabitants of Africa, America, and Asia and the idea that non-Europeans and their possessions were “loot” given to Europeans “by nature.” However, he did not become more egalitarian and enlightened in all respects. No reformulation of his view of women can be detected in his writings.<sup>60</sup>

We shall now turn to Western knowledge production, zooming in on that produced in museums. From the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Europe developed a range of technologies and institutions for structuring, representing, and preserving the observations and specimens which were gathered from locations both near and far (in space as well as in time). The perhaps most important communication technique was printing which made it possible to reproduce texts, images, and maps in large quantities. The accompanying institutions through which the

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59. Palter 1995, 7-8. Hume made a minor revision of the text in the last edition of his essays posthumously published in 1777. The first two sentences of the text quoted above reads: “I am apt to suspect the Negroes to be naturally inferior to the Whites. There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion, nor even any individual, eminent either in action or speculation.” The other sentences remained unaltered. Thus, Hume may have changed his suspicion that *all* other “species of men” were inferior to Whites, but maintained that Blacks were. Palter 1995, 4.

60. Kleingeld 2007, 586-587. Cuvier and White were also against slavery. Strugnell 2011 nuances Diderot’s anti-colonialism.

world was organized and envisioned included libraries, observatories, anatomical theatres, laboratories, botanical gardens, zoos, and museums. Bronze and marble sculptures from Classical Antiquity were collected from an early date, and to this day Greco-Roman art objects – along with paintings and sculptures by European Masters from the Renaissance onwards – remain the most hallowed (and costly) museum objects.<sup>61</sup> Animals were also displayed and represented. For example, a rhinoceros, brought to Lisbon in 1515 as a gift from the Sultan of Gujarat to King Emmanuel I of Portugal – and drawn by Albrecht Dürer in a famous, much-reproduced picture – was sent to the menagerie of Pope Leo X in Rome, but drowned on its way there and arrived to the city as a taxidermic specimen.<sup>62</sup> Since then many animals have journeyed from distant places to museum showcases or storage rooms, occasionally passing via zoos, circuses, and other entertainment shows.

Human beings have similarly been transferred, dead or alive, from various places of the world to be incorporated into museum collections and displays, and in many cases, much like the animals, passing via zoos, circuses, and entertainment shows. As early as 1501 Inuits were displayed as living rarities in Bristol, in the 1550s a spectacle with Brazilian Native Americans was given in Rouen, and in 1603 “Virginians” were canoeing on the Thames.<sup>63</sup> When Angelo Soliman, court African in Vienna, passed away in 1796 he was skinned, stuffed, and enclosed in a glass vitrine in the Kaiserlich-königliche Hofnaturalienkabinett. He was joined by three other Africans who were prepared in the same way. Despite the protests of Soliman’s daughter, who wanted to bury her father, the display remained for half a century, until it was consumed in a fire

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61. On the sculptures given to the city of Rome in 1471, and later incorporated in the collections of the Capitoline Museums, see Shelton 2008, 482 and Paul 2012.

62. Bedini 1997, 111-132, Bassani 2000, 303-304, n. 28. What happened to the rhinoceros after its arrival in Rome is unclear. It is not documented in any extant museum inventory. Some 4,000-5,000 copies of Dürer’s woodcut were sold during his lifetime, and it has continued to be represented ever since. One of Dürer’s prints is in the British Museum. MacGregor 2010b, 482-488.

63. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991, 402, Lindfors 1999, vii.

during the 1848 revolt.<sup>64</sup> Perhaps the most well-known case is the fate of Sara Baartman, whose body aroused popular and “scientific” curiosity both in life and posthumously. Transported from South Africa, she was on show in London and Paris 1810-1814, her corpse dissected (and published) by Cuvier in 1815, and her skeleton and a cast of her body put in a museum showcase, first in the Musée National d’Histoire Naturelle, then in the Musée de l’Homme where she remained on public view until the 1970s.<sup>65</sup> An African – stolen from a fresh grave in Botswana in the 1830s and then prepared as a taxidermic specimen – was on public view in the Darder Museum in Manyoles, Spain as late as 1997.<sup>66</sup>

While the rhinoceros’s arrival in Europe was a result of peaceful contact between Europeans and non-Europeans, Europe’s more bloodthirsty policies in other parts of the world also brought a host of artifacts. In 1520, Aztec gold, silver, turquoise, and featherwork objects were exhibited in Toledo, Valladolid, and Brussels.<sup>67</sup> At the time, trade brought Chinese porcelain to Europe, and Edo and Sapi (in present Sierra Leone) workshops produced ivory horns, cups, spoons, and salt cellars which were specially made for the European market.<sup>68</sup> Museum collections of exotic objects – and human remains – grew in pace with Western exploration and expansion throughout the world. James Cook’s voyages in the Pacific in the 1760s and 1770s brought a host of specimens and artifacts which ended up in various European museums. The collection of non-European artifacts continued during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the

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64. Debrunner 1979, 145, Juteretzenka 2012, 171-174.

65. In 1995 a campaign for the return of Baartman to South Africa began, which included requests from Nelson Mandela to Francois Mitterand and Jacques Chirac. In 2002 her remains were repatriated and buried. Qureshi 2004. Ota Benga, from Congo, was displayed together with an orangutan in the monkey house in the Bronx Zoo in 1906, where according to a contemporary newspaper report “one had a good opportunity to study their points of resemblance.” A cast of Benga’s body and head is in storage in the American Museum of Natural History, New York. Bradford & Blume 1992, 181, Magubane 2009.

66. The remains in the Darder Museum were returned to Botswana and interred in 2000. Parsons & Segobye 2002.

67. Feest 1985, Shelton 1994, Turpin 2006, 64-65.

68. Ayers 1985, Bassani 2000.

second half of the century especially witnessed a rapid increase in more or less “systematic” ethnographic collecting, the foundation of specialized ethnographic museums, and the establishment of ethnographic departments within existing museums. The creation of ethnographic museum collections went in tandem with the creation of anthropology as a field of academic enquiry, with many of its practitioners holding positions at museums rather than universities.<sup>69</sup>

The early museums were only accessible to a very limited clientele, but from the late 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards museums began to open to “the public.” The Ashmolean museum in Oxford opened to visitors in 1683, and the Capitoline Museum followed suit in 1734.<sup>70</sup> The British Museum, as already mentioned, was founded in 1753 and opened to the public in 1759.<sup>71</sup> The collections of the Louvre, which date back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, became publicly accessible in 1793. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many museums developed an active interest in attracting a larger section of the population as visitors. This desire and perceived need to extend the audience beyond the upper strata of society may be seen as either (or both) driven by a genuine concern for the well-being of the less privileged or as a stratagem to form an obedient citizenry for the nation. Following urban riots in the early 1830s, Robert Peel, politician and founder of the London police, argued that “angry and unsocial feelings might be softened by the effects of fine arts” and thus an expanded National Gallery would contribute “to the cementing of the bonds of union between the richer and poorer orders of state.”<sup>72</sup> Four decades later, in 1875, Henry Cole, director of the South Kensington Museum (later the Victoria and Albert Museum) summoned museums – along with churches, parks, and cricket grounds – to the task of “elevating and refining” the “working man,” by keeping him away from two

69. Penny 2002, 24-38, Shelton 2006.

70. Pomian 1990, 42, Anderson 2003, 1-2, Paul 2012, 24.

71. Goldgar 2000. On the generally negative attitude in the British Museum during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century towards providing increased public access by, for example, Sunday openings, see also Ito 2014, 102-105.

72. Taylor 2012, 270. And for the art critic John Ruskin, museums provided an “example of perfect order and perfect elegance [...] to the disorderly and rude populace.” Ruskin 1908 [1880], 247, McClellan 2008, 21, 23.

temptations: the bed and the public drinking house. After church service on Sunday's, Cole preached, "all museums of Art and Science" should be open to let "the working man get his refreshment there in company with his wife and children." The museum visit will guide him to "wisdom and gentleness" and prevent him from finding "his recreation in bed" and "booze away" in the "Gin palace."<sup>73</sup> Like Cole, wealthy collector/scholar, Augustus Pitt Rivers, founder of two ethnographic museums in Farnham and Oxford, wanted to educate the working classes – especially its "more intelligent portion" – through museum visits. "For good or for evil," he wrote, "we have though proper to place power in the hands of the masses." These "ignorant" and "uneducated" masses are an easy prey to the "scatterbrained revolutionary suggestions" of "demagogues and agitators" who strive to make the masses "break with the past." As a remedy, the "educational museum" should inculcate the visitor with the "great knowledge" of "the facts of evolution" and of "the processes of gradual development." Thus, through objects and specimens arranged in sequence from simpler to more advanced forms, the visitor would be taught that "Nature makes no jumps" and that "drastic change" does not "have the sanction of experience." The "object-lessons" taught were that change occurs slowly and orderly, not by revolution.<sup>74</sup> Natural history museums were also enlisted to promote the societal status quo. In 1908, Henry Fairfield Osborne, president of the American Museum of Natural History in New York, argued the need for natural history museums by declaring: "Nature teaches law and order and respect for property."<sup>75</sup>

As stated earlier, a strong current of the modern or Western world-view is the belief that the West is superior to all other cultures, and linked to this belief is the belief that Western values and ideas are universal. Museums may be seen as an expression and generator of this belief. Yet, as also discussed earlier, the belief in Western cultural superiority has not been unchallenged: there is a (weaker) current of thought in the West which rejects Western

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73. Cole 1884, 368, Bennett 1995, 2.

74. Pitt Rivers 1891, 115, Coombes 1988, 61, Chapman 1991, 137, 162-163.

75. Haraway 1984, 20, Kohlstedt 2005, 594.

ethnocentrism and cultural chauvinism. In the history of museums it is possible to find examples of Westerners who have explicitly argued that one of the benefits of ethnographic museums was that they counter Western prejudices against others. Philip Franz von Siebold, who had spent three years in Japan, recognized in 1835 that “the majority of us – even educated Europeans” have been bequeathed with unfavorable views of non-Europeans through stories repeated over centuries. As an antidote, he suggested the creation of ethnographic museums, to make Europeans more knowledgeable about foreign cultures, to make them regard foreign habits and customs as less exotic, and to make them more respectful and civilized in their attitudes to, and behavior towards, non-Europeans.<sup>76</sup>

When MacGregor presents his view of the foundation of the British Museum he seems to suggest that its founders held ideas similar to those of Siebold – that knowledge of other cultures promotes tolerance. According to MacGregor, when Parliament decided to set up the British Museum in 1753, through the purchase of the collection of Hans Sloane, it was an act of “intellectual idealism, and political radicalism” which created “a public space for intellectual enquiry and the dissent that necessarily follows it.” He asserts that:

[T]he ideals articulated by the museum’s founders were without doubt part of the Enlightenment conviction that knowledge and understanding were indispensable ingredients of civil society, and the best remedies against the forces of intolerance and bigotry that led to conflict, oppression and civil war. [...] Study of the different societies and religions of the world would, it was hoped, generate tolerance and understanding. [...] [T]he scholar and visitor to the British Museum would see that there are many good ways of organising the world.<sup>77</sup>

76. Wieninger 2010, 3. On Siebold, see also Lundbæk 2001, 44. Siebold was critical of how non-Europeans were represented in earlier museum exhibits. According to Siebold, the cabinets of rarities, created in the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, displayed – as if on purpose – the most hideous examples of weapons, customs, religious objects, and other utensils to show the bizarre and inhuman nature of the so-called “savages.” Siebold 1843, 10.

77. MacGregor 2004.

MacGregor compares and contrasts the British Museum with Diderot's *Encyclopédie*. In MacGregor's view, both were aimed at challenging orthodoxies, promoting tolerance and respect for difference, but whereas Diderot was imprisoned and the *Encyclopédie* banned, the British Museum was established by Parliament.<sup>78</sup> MacGregor is clear that the hopes held by the museum's founders, that this institution would promote tolerance and understanding, have been fulfilled. He exemplifies the benevolent impact of the museum with a number of cases where scholars have made important discoveries through objects in the museum's collections. One of the cases is the Benin objects, which, according to MacGregor, changed the Western view of Africa. The sketch of British Museum history presented by MacGregor suggests that the museum has been detached from the darker sides of modernity, and that the museum instead belongs to the Western tradition, which has questioned notions of cultural superiority in favor of cultural relativism. Later on, this study will look into some aspects of British Museum history to see whether it validates MacGregor's claims regarding the radicalism of the British Museum and its promotion of cross-cultural tolerance. It is true that the British Museum, since its creation, has displayed artifacts from many different cultures. Non-European artifacts – and human remains – formed a (minor) part of Sloane's original collection and, as MacGregor points out, the British Museum was the first museum to acquire Maori objects from Cook's expedition.<sup>79</sup> Yet, the question is whether the museum has displayed foreign objects in ways which have challenged or confirmed received ideas and stereotypes. Have the exhibits stressed communality and equality rather than difference and hierarchy? And what "dissent" has stemmed from the British Museum? Could it be that the *Encyclopédie* and the British Museum were treated differently not so much because the British authorities were more liberally minded than the French (as MacGregor implies), but because the British Museum – in contrast to the *Encyclopédie* – did *not* offer any particularly daring challenges to established orthodoxies? Below, in chapter 8, aspects of the British Museum's history

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78. MacGregor 2004, 2009, 43.

79. On human remains in Sloane's collection: Day 1994. On the Maori artifacts acquired by the museum: MacGregor 2009, 43.



will be looked into to see whether the documentary record justifies MacGregor's portrayal of this institution as characterized by radical dissent, tolerance, and understanding.

But for now, a closer look will be taken at the organization of museums and of their exhibitions, as they often appear in their 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century forms, to see how they correspond to, and promote, a modern/Western/white male way of knowing and ordering the world. It was observed above that one characteristic of the modern way of thinking is a will to separate and purify.<sup>80</sup> This habit of mind, and corresponding practice of dividing the world into units and keeping the knowing subject apart from the object of knowledge is perhaps most clearly seen in the creation of various academic disciplines and in the traditional ideals of academic knowledge production which favors detachment, objectivity, and distance. Similarly, the organization of museums into various "types" – natural history museums, ethnographic museums, history museums, art museums and science museums/science centers – which are devoted to collecting, studying, and displaying within their respective subject areas (nature, others, history, art, and science) stems from, and reinforces, such a notion of segmenting and purifying the world, and of defining what these various (arbitrarily defined) chunks of the world are *not*. Thus, natural history museums display nature, *not* culture. Ethnographic museums display colored others, *not* white selves. History museums display the past, *not* the present. The art museum and science museum display art and techno-science respectively. None are concerned with society. Further "types" of museums may be mentioned – such as museums of medical history which display disease and insanity, *not* health and sanity, and more recent (mainly late 20<sup>th</sup> century) museum categories such as children's museums, women's museums and gay museums, which focus on the categories children, women, and homosexuality respectively, *not* adulthood, men, and heterosexuality. Yet, despite the list of various museum "types" and their respective subspecies appearing almost infinite (and thus seemingly all-encompassing), there is *one* museum type

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80. Latour 1993.

which is conspicuously absent, *one* important aspect of the world, *one* culture, which is not collected, preserved, analyzed, and put on display. There is, as far as I am aware, no museum specially dedicated to the visualization of Western culture. No museum is dedicated to displaying and explaining its ideologies, belief systems, material and bodily manifestations, and its impact throughout the world.<sup>81</sup> Needless to say, the reason that there are no museums focusing on this culture, is not that it lacks essence, because the same applies for all the other entities museums collect and display. Rather, the reason for the non-existence of museums of Western culture relates to a Western belief that the West is not a culture among others. As Bruno Latour poignantly remarks “[i]n Westerners’ eyes the West, and the West alone, is not a culture, not merely a culture” to which he adds the rhetoric question: “Why should the West and only the West not be a culture?”<sup>82</sup>

In museums, Western “culture,” instead of being the subject of display, is rather the concept and force *through* which the world is envisioned. The invisibilization of the representing culture is made possible because museum exhibits seldom traverse the border between what the museum is dedicated to display and other entities. This separation also serves to uphold the barrier between, on the one hand, the viewer and the producer of views and, on the other hand, what is on put view.<sup>83</sup> For example, the hallmark of the

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81. Among the range of museum “types” there are those whose subject areas are geographically or administratively defined, such as national museums and city museums, which display what is regarded as typical and characteristic of the nation or city in question, that is, what sets them apart from other nations and cities and gives them a unique identity. Thus, while these museums may display Western nations or cities (quite often in a celebratory tone) they do not focus on what is typical of westernness.

82. Latour 1993, 97. The Western notion of a fundamental difference – “the great divide” in Latour’s words – between us and them, Latour links with another Western belief: that non-Westerners are connected to nature while Westerners are separated from it. Latour also notes that Western studies of the West are almost always compartmentalized, that is, Westerners may study certain aspects of Western culture, but do not subject the West to the same essentializing and totalizing gaze which it directs towards its various others. He advocates a holistic “symmetrical anthropology” which scrutinizes the self in the same way as used to study others,

83. On the detachment of the viewer: Mitchell 1992, Macdonald 2003, 3-4.

natural history museum is the display of taxidermic specimens of wild, exotic animals such as lions and elephants. Broilers, cats, cows, hamsters, and other domesticated animals which blur the nature/culture divide are rarer.<sup>84</sup> In the habitat dioramas there are rarely any signs of human impact in the constructed wilderness – no empty beer cans litter the artificial grass and no power pylons line the painted horizon. Likewise, the ethnographic museums have preferred pure and distinct “others” to those which are the result of creolization and hybridization between white and non-white cultures. The “others” have been shown as fixed to geographical locations, but unlocated in time, and thus envisioned as somehow living outside it in a primeval state. While the ethnographic display may “explain” the societies, lifestyles, and cosmologies of others – how these others relate to their environment, what they tell in their stories and myths and so on – the parallel stories of the (on-going) cultural and ecological impact of westernization and market capitalism have often remained untold.<sup>85</sup> For example, few exhibitions on the peoples in the Amazon inform that the Yanomani in Brazil to this day have been killed by gold miners who extract gold to feed the appetite of consumers around the world who live *separated* from, and thus blissfully unaware of, what happens “on the ground” where the raw materials for their commodities are extracted.<sup>86</sup> The history museum habitually treats its subject – the past – as sealed off from the present, and the past shown is usually rendered in a favorable light.<sup>87</sup> If the darker sides of history are shown (such as exploitation of workers, racial prejudice, and gender inequality) these structural inequalities tend to be treated as safely contained within the past rather than as enduring into the present. Thus, the history exhibit tends to form a message where the passing of time is characterized by steady progress and development rather than continuity. The art museum generally furthers the ideal of art-for-arts-sake, keeping the

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84. Samuelsson 2008, 150-151, 154.

85. On ethnographic museums and displays: Karp & Lavine 1991, Karp, Kraemer & Lavine 1992, Coombes 1994b, 218-221, Simpson 2001, Shelton 2006.

86. On Yanomani massacred by gold miners in 2012: White Wolf Pack 2012.

87. On the past envisioned as distinct from the present, see Walsh 1992. On the past generally being rendered in favorable light, see Smith 2006 and Lundén 2012, 130-132.

art-works within the white cube and hermetically sealed off from the mundane world. The manifold, political, social, and economic functions of art (such as glorifying past and present owners, serving as marks to distinguish those who possess class and taste from those who lack it, providing an income for artists and dealers, etc.) are rarely treated.<sup>88</sup> Not many art exhibits address questions such as why most great artists in (art) history have been men and why so many great artworks depict naked women.<sup>89</sup> Science museums predominantly show techno-science as socially and environmentally detached and shun the negative effects of “great” scientific inventions. The history of techno-science is portrayed as one of unmixed progress for each and every one. Few, if any, science museums tell its visitors about the catastrophic consequences the rapid increase in market demand for rubber – which followed Dunlop’s invention of the air-filled rubber wheel – had for the population in the Congo Free State (as King Leopold’s colony was euphemistically called). Likewise, the science museum is probably the *least* likely place to find information on the destructive power of nuclear weapons and the greenhouse effect.<sup>90</sup>

In the organizational realm of museums, when any of the entities nature, other, art, past, and science are juxtaposed in various constellations, the links are created in ways which maintains the separation of these from the white self. In some remote corners of the world – such as on the Pall Mall in Washington, on the Upper West Side of Manhattan in New York, and the outskirts of London – there are actually (still) museums which bring together both the display of nature and others under one roof, although the wild animals and the colored humans are generally shown in separate galleries. The Smithsonian Museum of Natural History in Washington, the American Museum of Natural History in New York, and the Horniman Museum in London are museums which offer the visitor the opportunity to see both various taxidermic specimens of wildlife as

88. Werner 2009, 15.

89. For example, in 2012, in the Modern Art sections of the Metropolitan Museum, New York only 4% of the artists represented there are women, while 76% of the nudes shown in the artworks are female. <http://www.guerrillagirls.com/naked-through-the-ages/?rq=Metropolitan%20Museum> (accessed 12 May 2016). On gender bias in art museums: Wolf 1999, Tellgren & Werner 2011.

90. Fitzgerald 1996, Macdonald 1998, 15-16.

well as non-Western cultures in a single museum visit.<sup>91</sup> While these displays to some extent cross a nature-culture divide, it is the culture of others which is conceptually joined with nature, not Western culture. As neither of these museums provides an explanation, nor offers an apology, for these juxtaposed visualizations of animals and ethnic others (nor gives the reasons for the absence of Whites from the displays) they naturalize a deep-rooted Western cultural belief that “they” are connected to nature, while “we” are not.<sup>92</sup>

As for the will to separate and purify the world in museum displays, it may be observed that while a fundamental assumption behind the museum exhibition is that it shows the “real” world with “real” objects, the world as it appears in a museum is generally much more ordered, sanitized, idealized, comforting, and aestheticized than its external referent – “reality” – really is. In the diorama in the natural history museum the taxidermic specimens (which, generally, is either a single male animal, or a “family group” composed of a male, female, and one or two younger animals) appear without any deformities or symptoms of disease (such as scabies).<sup>93</sup> Likewise, the reconstructed interior of, say, a historic working or middle class home renders it as clean and in order, rather than as crowded, dirty, and as a place for on-going human activity.<sup>94</sup> The machines in the science museum are kept polished and in a pristine state, with few signs of grease and wear.<sup>95</sup>

Another important aspect of the belief in the separation of the knowing subject from the object of knowledge and the related faith that reality may be laid bare through neutral scientific and aesthetic principles is that the museum exhibition rarely reveals anything about its own construction. An exhibition seldom contains any information regarding from which theoretical perspective it departs, when it was built, and why the objects have been categorized and interpreted in a certain way rather than in another. The typical

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91. Bal 1992 discusses the combination of nature and others in the American Museum of Natural History, New York. I have not seen it discussed in relation to Smithsonian Museum of Natural History or the Horniman museum.

92. On this Western assumption, see Latour 1993, 97.

93. Haraway 1984, Machin 2008, Samuelson 2008, 163-172.

94. Porter 1988, Grahn 2006, 85, Berg 2012, 126-129.

95. Fitzgerald 1996, 119.

museum label, where the authoritative curatorial voice speaks, usually offers one single interpretation for each object (rather than, for example, giving several contrasting or complementary interpretations). The particular scientific and cultural perspectives which form the basis of the museum's representations appear to be the inevitable way to represent reality, and the exhibition thus serves to naturalize and legitimize these particular perspectives. This invisibilization of the various aspects of the process of representation – including all the personal, cultural, political, and epistemological factors which are a constitutive elements of the production of an exhibition – furthers the feeling that the exhibition presents “reality” in an unmediated way. In other words, that there is a direct and unproblematic correspondence between representation (the exhibition) and the reality it purports to represent.<sup>96</sup>

Now, crucially, that modernity/Western civilization/the white male norm is neither explicitly visualized or explained to the visitor does not mean that white men are absent from what is offered to the visitor for visual consumption. To make a simple typology of their presence in museum displays and architecture, it may be said that white men (and a few white women and non-white men) are visually and conceptually evoked in either, or both, of two (overlapping) functions: as *creators* of art-works, history, and knowledge, and as *benefactors* of art and knowledge production. As for the first of these functions, the art museum habitually includes the name of the artist to which the art-works are attributed (and an artwork may even be colloquially referred to by the name of the artist who made it: “a Rembrandt”). Natural history museums, history museums, science museums, and ethnographic museums frequently mention the names of various scientists, inventors, and explorers whose discoveries are presented for viewing (and these “discoveries” may take on the names of their discoverers and inventors, as is evident in names like “Steller’s Sea Cow” and “Dunlop tyres”).<sup>97</sup> The history museum frequently names important people

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96. Clifford 1988, 220 notes: “The *making* of meaning in museum classification and display is mystified as adequate *representation*. The time and order of the collection erase the concrete social labor of its making” (original italics).

97. Steller’s Sea Cow was a large herbivorous marine mammal, which was

in history, such as Ramses II and Napoleon. Occasionally, an entire museum may be dedicated to one man's deeds. Examples of such museums range from the Picasso Museum in Paris to the George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum in Dallas, Texas.

As for the second function, museums frequently acknowledge those who have benefited the museum through the donation of either single objects, whole collections, or funds. The degree of visual prominence given to a benefactor often stands in proportion to the size of the donation, and the placing of the donor's name in (or on) the museum signals what has been donated. A donor's name may appear on an object label or – often written in large golden letters – over a doorway to a museum gallery or on the museum's facade.<sup>98</sup> The donors and collectors – whose main deed may be said to have been in possession of large monetary resources which they have transferred to the museums either in the form of objects or funds – are seldom explicitly acknowledged for having been very rich. Instead they are equipped with more “personal” and abstract qualities such as taste and foresightedness – qualities which made it possible for these individuals to, for example, recognize the value of a particular artist or art style before everyone else did.

Museums offer many things to view: animals, art-works, and ethnic others as well as white men, but there is a clear difference between how this last category (white men) and the other ones are supposed to be apprehended by the visitor. The (unnamed) animals, ethnic others and female nudes are not displayed to manifest themselves as individuals, but some larger entity – such as a species or a biotope (“elephant” or “Savannah”), an ethnic group (“Tuareg”) or an abstract concept (“beauty”). In contrast, the (named) men, and occasional women, are *not* meant to be seen as specimens, representative of a particular class or culture (such as the bourgeoisie) and its habits, habitats, and systems of value. Rather the inventors,

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“discovered” and described by Georg Wilhelm Steller in 1741. Within 27 years of its discovery it had been hunted to extinction.

98. Thus, entire museums may be named after donors. Occasionally, museums may even serve as the sepulchres of the individuals whose name they bear. An example of a museum-mausoleum is the Thorvaldsen Museum in Copenhagen, which contains the grave of the sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen. For other examples, see Reid 2013, 196 and Shelton 2008, 485.

explorers, painters, sculptors, and patrons of are supposed to be looked at as individuals having received the honor of, commemoration in a museum through their *own* personal deeds, qualities, and generosity. They are there to be admired, venerated, and celebrated, rather than scrutinized, categorized, and “explained.” Of course, by implication – not by direct correspondence – these persons who are invoked through their names, portraits, and busts also symbolize something more than “themselves” in a restricted meaning. The parade of artists, scientists and donors *also* sends a message with a touch of class, skin color, and gender. The system of privilege and domination which has made it possible for *some* (but not others) to perform various achievements and amass large fortunes is legitimized rather than questioned.<sup>99</sup>

To sum up so far: the museum exhibition may be said to operate through a complex interplay of presence and absence between the producers of views and what is put on view. The views are laid out and organized through a whole range of epistemological and ontological taken-for-granted, scientific ideals, cultural assumptions, and conventions. These practices and concepts belong to a system of creating meaning and attributing value – a culture – which may be named modernity, Western society, or the white male norm. This culture provides the framework and grammar *for* the representations, but is never the focus *of* the representations and “explanations.” Rather, the full “explanatory” and essentializing force is unleashed against the exhibitions subject – animals, non-Westerners, history etc. – and these entities are set apart from the self and the representing culture. As mentioned in the introduction, if the presence or absence of explanations demarcates a line of separation between normality and deviation, then museums and their exhibitions may be said to confirm the superiority of one particular culture, elevating it above everything else other cultures, nature, and its own historical trajectory – and thus cleansing it from contamination by such unpleasant things as, for example, colonialism, sexism, genocide, and ecocide.

At this point, it might be countered with justice that the characterization of museums and their displays given so far is too

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99. Duncan 1995, Lundén 2012, 123-124, cf. McClellan 2008, 281, n. 30.



monolithic and does not take into account the changes which have taken place during the last decades in exhibition policy and practice. From about the 1960s various critiques have been leveled against museums and many of the fundamental assumptions of the modern museum have been challenged. The critique, drawing from postcolonial, postmodern, environmentalist, and feminist perspectives, has come from both museum professionals and various breeds of academics and activists. It has had an impact on policy and practice, at least in some quarters of the museum community.<sup>100</sup> Ethnographic museums and their displays of ethnic others have been especially hotly debated.<sup>101</sup> The debate has been particularly strong and persistent in the white settler/invasor countries of Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States where the indigenous populations have protested against how they have been represented by museums. The debates over cultural representation have been closely linked with the question of ownership of objects in museum collections. From about the 1980s and 1990s, an awareness in many Western countries also appeared amongst the members of the white majority population that many of those others on display, now had become part of the countries populace and of the museums' audience. Ethnographic museums have been involved in the debates about multi-culturalism and become instruments in state policies to counter racism and promote integration.

Many ethnographic exhibitions now attempt to avoid the image of the other as distinct, faraway, and forever trapped in the ethnographic present, instead stressing aspects of cultural hybridity, creolization, and change over time. Western colonisation, including its negative impact on indigenous societies, has become a legitimate topic in exhibitions. Exhibitions are frequently curated through participatory representation and self-representation, thus giving power to the other to present her/his culture to the museum audience. Some exhibitions focus less on the Other and more on how the Western construction of others are linked to the creation of a Western self. Attempts to challenge and change some fundamental

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100. Macdonald 1998, 13-14, MacClellan 2008, 42-49.

101. Byrne 2013, 202-203.

Western taxonomic assumptions have also been made, but mainly in temporary exhibitions or through artistic interventions, rather than in the permanent exhibitions.<sup>102</sup> I know of no exhibitions, in an ethnographic museum or other museum which juxtapose, say, rubber tires, a machine gun, quinine, and Congolese masks in the same display case in order to explain the interconnections between technology, medicine, and anthropology in the colonization of the Congo, and to highlight the multi-faceted aspects of technoscientific “progress” – i.e. that which is progress for some is suffering and death to others. In the museum world, these respective “types” of objects – tires, machine guns, quinine, and masks – still belong to different “types” of museums: science museums, military museums, medical history museums, and ethnographic museums. Anyway, in contemporary museum exhibitions – and especially in ethnographic ones – deliberate attempts to break with (some of) the axioms which have informed representational practice for a long time are being made. However, it should be acknowledged that the changes are uneven within the museum world, affecting exhibition practice in various ways and with different intensity.

Now, turning to the object of this analysis, the British Museum’s making of Benin objects, the Edo, and the British, it may be asked to what extent the museum’s representations agree with or deviate from what I have here characterized as typical for (modern) museum displays, and in case of deviation, if they then conform to any of the “alternative” modes of representation which have made their entry into the museum world in the last couple of decades. To put the issue slightly differently: (how) has the British Museum responded to the critique which has been levelled against the modern museum and its representational apparatus during the last decades? Forgoing the results of the analysis it may be said that it is possible to detect influences from the debates on representation of cultural others in the *Sainsbury African Galleries*. For example, cross-cultural contacts and influences are an important theme of the exhibition and Edo culture is not presented as isolated and unchanging.

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102. An example is Fred Wilson’s juxtapositions of silver vessels and slave shackles. Corrin 1994, unpaginated p. 30., McClellan 2008, 107-108, Lundén 2012, 133. Cf. O’Neil 2006, 43-44.

In other respects, the exhibits are no exception to what I regard as the typical or modern mode of display. Overall, the line of division between the knowing subject and object of knowledge is maintained (this is not to say that the British and the West are totally absent from the representations, but, as will be discussed further on, these entities are portrayed in ways which signal British and Western individuality and progress that becomes contrasted with Edo collectivity, homogeneity and traditionality). Few, if any, attempts are made by the British Museum to visualize, problematize, historicize, or relativize the museum's own representations. Therefore, these representations of perceived material and cultural entities and historical events appear less as representations and metonyms and more as delivering an immediate and truthful presence of Benin objects, Edo culture and history. The illusion is created that the Benin objects are presented as they – naturally and objectively – “are,” that Edo culture (often portrayed in close connection with or through the objects) is rendered as it “is” and that historical events are told as they “really happened.”

Noting that the *Sainsbury African Galleries* does not reveal which theoretical building blocks it uses, I should perhaps say something on how my own study is grounded and what it wants to achieve. As stated earlier, it looks into the British Museum's making of the Benin objects, the Edo, the British, and the British Museum. It seeks to denaturalize, depurify, and problematize the British Museum's representations of these perceived entities. It wants to unpack the museum's construction of objects, human beings, and history and locate the constructs within their cultural context – which is the British Museum and Western culture more generally. I do this from a position which may roughly be described as aligned with the social constructivist position; one of the dominant paradigms in the social sciences and humanities today. Thus, my point of departure lies in a view of the world, its entities, and concepts which may be labeled as constructivist, processual, and relational rather than an as idealist, realist, or essentialist. Therefore, it rejects the belief that the world is stable and ordered, as well as the notion of universal truth and objectivity. It regards entities, categories, boundaries, and concepts

as created through processes of conceptualization and materialization rather than being simply “out there” anterior to interpretation. (Scientific) “knowledge” and “facts” – that is, the authoritative statements, representations, assemblages of data, and methods for analysis and explanations which are considered as offering relevant, useful, true, and meaningful information about “reality” in a particular society at a particular point in time – are seen as creations of complex social and material processes and power relations within the society where these truth-claims are made and accepted as true, rather than as being derived from observations of a reality wholly external to that society.<sup>103</sup>

How then, if there is no absolute universal truth (nor any naturally ordered matter) in this world, can anything meaningful be said about it? Donna Haraway in her discussion on the “objectivity problem” offers some useful guidance.<sup>104</sup> She points out that the opposite of universalism is not a total relativism. Both universalism and relativism imply a claim to be everywhere and nowhere and to be able to see everything from all perspectives. Instead, as an alternative to the totalizing perspective and omnipotent knowledge claimed by universalism (which Haraway calls “an illusion, a god-trick”), she offers the partial perspective and situated knowledge. Put simply, her argument is that, partial objectivities can be established at defined locations and positions, from where specific ways of seeing, and positioned rationalities, may be developed to look at aspects of the world. By adopting specific – and thus accountable

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103. I should perhaps say that my social constructivist position includes materiality in the concept of “social,” that is, matter matters in the “social” construction – or perhaps, then, the “social-material” – construction of concepts and things such as “reality,” “knowledge,” “the British Museum,” “Benin objects,” “Staffan,” “truth,” “Nigeria”. I point this out since various constructivist (structuralism, functionalism, semiotics, etc.) and discursive approaches are, or are seen as being, predominantly concerned with the intangible meaning-making systems such as language, texts, and linguistics (or visual representations such as images) and as not paying enough attention to materiality. For such a critique of social constructivism, see Barad 2003, 822, who favors an “agential realist” approach where matter is an active agent in an ongoing “material-discursive” process of materialization). Cf. Haraway’s term “semiotic-material.” Haraway 1988, 585.

104. Haraway 1988.

– sittings and sightings it is possible to make partial truth-claims.

Haraway is sympathetic to attempts at theorizing the grounds for seeing from the vantage point of the subjugated rather than the platform of the powerful, but warns that there lies a danger in romanticizing and/or appropriating the perspective of the less powerful while claiming to adopt their positions. There is no innocent or ideal position, such as that of the essential Third World woman, to speak from. Thus, while positions from the peripheries and depths are preferred to positions from the privileged center, there can only be partial connection to, not total identification with, the marginalized and subjugated.<sup>105</sup>

For my own study this means that while I am trying to adopt positions and perspectives which are, broadly speaking, “different” from those of the British Museum, it does not mean that I am trying to adopt, for example, an Edo point of view, or claim that I speak for the Edo. Obviously, there is no such thing as one essential Edo perspective. Edo society, like British society and any other society, is not a homogeneous entity, but subdivided along lines of gender, class, ethnicity, religion, etc., and thus there is not one single Edo or British view on the Benin objects.<sup>106</sup>

To say that my own perspective is “different” from that of the British Museum is of course not being very precise about my own grounding. I shall try to specify a little bit further what I think constitutes the “difference” between our respective viewpoints.

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105. Haraway 1988, 583-585.

106. Few enquiries have been made into the attitudes held by “the general public” either in Nigeria, the Edo State, the United Kingdom, or elsewhere regarding the Benin objects and, for example, the question of their future location. For the views of a group of schoolchildren in Benin City (who were in favor of returning objects to Benin City and displaying them in the museum there) see Agbontaen-Eghafona 2010. As far as I know, no similar studies have been undertaken in the United Kingdom (or elsewhere) on the topic of the right location of Benin objects. Presumably, most people in Britain or other Western countries with Benin collections have not heard about the Benin objects. Polls in Britain on the future of the Parthenon sculptures – one of the few cases which is more generally known outside academia and the museum world – suggests that a majority of the population support their return to Athens. A survey made in 1997 among museum staff in UK museums revealed generally positive attitudes towards the return of claimed objects. The British Museum did not participate in this survey. Simpson 2001, 272.

Our sitings – that is, the points from where we look – differ in that the British Museum looks from the British Museum (spatially and culturally etc.) onto the rest of the world (that is, the world which is outside the confines of the British Museum) and produces knowledge about this outside world inside the British Museum (and on the museum’s home page and in its publications). Thus, the museum puts many things – many objects and many “others” – on view, but *not* its own representational regime. By and large, the outside world as produced by the British Museum looks stable, consistent, ordered, and universally true. There is little, or nothing, to suggest that the world as it is staged by the British Museum is actually a product of certain intellectual and cultural systems of thought and practice, and that *other* ways of knowing and structuring the world are possible. In contrast, I try to look from a position somewhat “outside” the British Museum and at the museum’s representations.<sup>107</sup> When viewing, I attempt to question the apparent stability and consistency of the British Museum’s truth-claims.

To exemplify what I mean by all this we might – again – recall the ambivalent label “trophy head” discussed in the preface. As a starting point, it might be noted that my outlook differs from that of the British Museum regarding how to conceptualize this (and other) Benin objects in the British Museum – whether they “are” authentic Edo cultural products or whether they now have become hybrid Edo-British cultural products. Linked to our divergent view on what the Benin objects “are” is a contrasting view of what can be “learnt” from, or through, these objects – what is known and unknown and what is useful to try to get to know etc. The British Museum is primarily concerned with utilizing these objects to show and “explain” Edo society and to speak of the – artistic – accomplishments of the Edo, although, as was noted earlier, when representing the Benin objects the museum also takes the opportunity to speak of a Western – scientific and intellectual – accomplishment (the realization that these objects were indigenous, and the consequent shattering of European prejudice

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107. As Haraway 1988, 283-284 and Barad 2003, 828 observes, a total exteriority is not possible.

against Africans). The perspective adopted by the British Museum is built on the Western position and cultural assumption that Edo culture is unknown and needs to be known, while Western culture is already known. Thus, the British Museum tries to cast the illuminating explanatory light on “other” cultures, but leaves the source of the light, British/Western culture and the British Museum, in an unexplained shadow.

My perspective involves the strong hunch that Western culture needs to be analyzed, illuminated, and denaturalized as much as any “other” culture. I am interested in using these objects – and the whole system of representation into which they have been incorporated – to look at and “explain” aspects of British and Western society. This means that to me, for example, the object label “explaining” an object may be an equally important object of analysis as the object it claims to “explain.” Both object and object label are cultural products and thus cultural objects.

When looking at the British Museum and its making of the Benin objects – which in a broader, and more important, sense is about the making of the Edo and the British – I have found it useful to look at how these creations of both objects and groups of human beings are made and maintained through the linked processes of differentiation, categorization, and essentialization. The making of objects has already been touched upon, and I will come back to the subject in a while, but now I will focus on how the human continuum has been, and still is, divided into different categories, or strata. Humans tend to categorize themselves and other humans along various intersecting demarcation lines such as gender, class, age, corporeality, functionality, and ethnicity. Here, I am – mainly – concerned with the Western construction of two categories – a Western white self and a non-Western colored other – along an (imagined) ethnic or colored line and how the diverse individuals which are placed on the respective sides of this border are grouped together and attributed with a set of characteristics, which are often seen as oppositional to the characteristics attributed to those on the other side of the line of division.<sup>108</sup>

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108. Unfortunately, the study deals much less with the divisions into other

The literature on this general topic – the Western creation of a white self and a colored other – is, needless to say, vast. For this study I have drawn inspiration from Edward Said’s classic work *Orientalism* first published in 1978, which in turn built upon the works of Michel Foucault, especially on the concepts of discourse, power, and knowledge.<sup>109</sup> Firstly, a few words on the Foucauldian concepts of discourse, power, and knowledge and how they relate to the present study:<sup>110</sup> A “discourse” may be described as a created way of thinking, speaking, and acting about a “field” or “object” which is thus constituted, delineated, and characterized by the discourse. As already noted in the introduction, the characteristics of physical objects are not anterior to their interpretation, and the same applies for other entities and concepts. They come into being through discursive practice. Thus, the object of the discourse is created through the discourse. Here it might be inserted that the term “discourse” mainly brings up associations to language, speech, words, etc., and discourse analysis is often limited to the study of texts. However, in its Foucauldian sense the term is not restricted to verbal communication and also includes (non-linguistic) practice. Materiality in its various aspects is (therefore) also part of the discourse. Materiality is shaped by the discourse and shapes it.<sup>111</sup>

Foucault’s field of enquiry concerned, among other things, the definition and creation of “deviants” within Western society such as the criminal and the lunatic and the formation of academic disciplines (criminology, medicine, and psychology) and institutions (the prison and the asylum) to define, understand, control, cure, and normalize these “deviants.” An important aspect of the concept of a discourse is that while it deals with a given object, and thus produces “knowledge” about this object, it also produces limitations to this knowledge. Thus, while in this case academic disciplines and practices, such as medicine and criminology, are aimed at offering

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categories (such as those of gender and class) although these aspects are touched upon.

109. Foucault 1992 [1972], 1979 [1977], Said 2003 [1978].

110. Apart from Foucault 1992 [1972] and 1979 [1977] the presentation here draws on Hall 1997a and 1997b.

111. This aspect of the Foucauldian concept of a discourse is highlighted by Barad 2003, 818-819.



ways and methods to “know” a defined subject, they also create restraints on what is knowledgeable about this subject.

Therefore, the discourse sets the limits of what may be said and what may not be said about this subject, and how the statements about it may be made and ordered. The discourse defines what is true and false – it creates a regime of truth – and what counts as “knowledge.” This knowledge is linked to power. To have knowledge about an object is to have defining power over it and thus the power/knowledge affects the object. Power does not simply radiate from a specific center somewhere above us (such as the ruling class, the state, or the prison director) but is created (and negotiated) everywhere, in our daily practices and behavior. Power circulates, from up and down in society and there is therefore a “microphysics” of power.

Power is not only repressive but also productive, in the sense that it may be used to resist dominance. For example, human beings who through discursive practice become grouped together into various collectives (such as “women,” “Africans,” or “homosexuals”), which from the position of the dominant white male heterosexual middle class norm are seen as deviant, inferior, and other, may – sometimes even must – utilize their created identity in the struggle for the recognition of individual or collective rights denied them through their (perceived) belonging to the collective in question. Thus, the struggle for rights often simultaneously involves the questioning, maintaining, and reformulating of the collective identity bestowed upon people. The counter-strategy by those who want the status quo to remain may then be to point to the constructed nature of any such collectives which claim their rights have been denied, and to argue that we are all “individuals” within the collective “humanity.”

The contests for power and recognition frequently involve engaging with dominant symbols of order and oppression. As stated earlier, the British Museum is an iconic and authoritative institution. The claims against the British Museum and its – and, ultimately, the British government’s – resistance to these claims may be looked at as part of the struggles for power between various groups of human beings – on the one hand the collective “the

British” or, in a more general sense “the West” and on the other hand various (mainly “non-Western”) collectives on whose behalf the objects are claimed.

In a sense, looking at the debate about the return or retention of objects in the museum as part of a struggle to question the dominance of certain (ethnically, culturally, spatially, or politically defined) collectives over others, a comparison may be made between how the British Museum (and other museums in Britain) in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (involuntarily) became part of another struggle where the hegemony of one collective over another was challenged. Among the strategies used by suffragettes to bring attention to their campaigns to grant the collective British “women” voting rights was to damage museum exhibitions and museum objects. For example, in the National Gallery the painting *Rokeby Venus* by Velázquez was slashed by suffragette Mary Richardson, and in Westminster Abbey the Stone of Scone suffered light damage from a bomb. The British Museum, concerned by suffragette agitation demanded that “women should only be admitted provided a man would stand surely for their good behavior.” In spite of this precaution “one lady” managed to break “a number of panes of glass in the Asiatic Saloon with a chopper.” Another one made a “further onslaught [...] with a hatchet on a case in the first Egyptian room” and a third one attempted to start a fire in the exhibitions.<sup>112</sup> Obviously, there are many dissimilarities between how museum objects in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century became part of an engagement fought along the dividing line of gender and how museum objects, since the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, have become part of a struggle fought along the dividing line of ethnicity. In both cases the symbolic status of the museum institution (and its collections) make it a focal point, a battle field, or a contact zone where power is contested and exercised.

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112. *The Milwaukee Journal* 1913, Caygill 2002, 52. As far as I am aware Caygill’s publication is the only one from the British Museum which has made mention of these expressions of a human rights’ struggle affecting the British Museum. MacGregor 2010b, 620-625 in his presentation of a suffragette-defaced penny in the British Museum collection refers to the slashing of Velázquez’s *Rokeby Venus* in the National Gallery but makes no mention of suffragette actions in the British Museum.

Put in Foucauldian terms, my study may be said to be about the British Museum's institutional discourse (which may be seen as part of a larger discourse of Western "scientific" knowledge production) and how this discourse produces, and is produced by its object – both the non-Western other (and its implied, or explicit, counterpart the Western Self), and, in a more restricted sense, the museum object. The notion that the discourse puts constraints on what may be said and what counts as knowledge, means that I will not only look at what the museum states, but it is equally important to consider alternative statements *not* made, and alternative ways into which various entities (the British, the Edo, the Benin objects, etc.) *could* have been construed, constructed (or deconstructed). The museum's production of silence is as important as its production of speech. The realization that there is a "microphysics" of power – that power-knowledge is everywhere and embedded in everyday practice – means that I am not limiting the study to the statements made by the person(s) who occupy the top of the British Museum's institutional hierarchy, such as the Museum Director. I also look at statements made (and not made) by the museum in, for example, object labels and text panels in exhibitions, and – to some extent – the non-verbal communication produced through, for example, the selection and arrangement of objects and exhibition design.<sup>113</sup>

While Foucault was predominantly concerned with the creation of differences and essences (insanity, normalcy, etc.) within the confines of Western society, Said looks at how the Western world has created and constituted a spatial and imaginative entity called "the Orient" inhabited by a human, or not fully human, collective called "Orientals," and separated this entity from the Western Self – "the Occident." Each of the two entities – Orient and Occident – have been equipped with different essences and characteristics, often seen as the reverse to the ones belonging to the other entity. While, for example, the Orient has been characterized by stagnation, despotism, and mysticisms, the West has been characterized by development, freedom and rationality. Importantly, the qualitative

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113. Cf. Macdonald 1998, 3.

difference between these oppositional characteristics is almost always to the advantage of the Occident.<sup>114</sup>

Said's study is diachronic and mainly concerned with the time period from the end of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century until modern times. He analyses numerous Western texts about the Orient written by a range of scholars, novelists, and politicians, but it is especially the academic publications which are the focus of his attention. Like Said, I am interested in Western academic knowledge production about a non-Western other, how this other is constituted, and how in a reciprocal process a Western self is constructed. Said's study has been useful and inspirational for my own for several reasons. Our respective areas of enquiry are to some extent different, but also in many respects overlapping. While Said provides an historical exposé of Orientalism, tracing its transformations and changes (or lack of them) over time, my focus is mainly contemporary in that it deals primarily with the most recent representations of the Benin objects made by the British Museum. Yet, as already noted, the British Museum makes certain claims about the museum's history, the early reception of the Benin objects in the West, and the British Museum's role therein. Therefore, I am also looking at aspects of the British Museum's past, focusing on the knowledge production in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, at a time when the British Empire reached its largest geographical extension. Said's work has been inspirational for discussing the British Museum's production of knowledge in relation to British imperialism, as well as how to consider durability and change over time in its representations of non-Western others and Western selves.

Our respective studies are concerned with the imagining of what, in the Western tradition, has been considered as two different categories of human beings – the Negro and the Oriental. In many cases, however, all the non-Western peoples were seen as one entity in Westerners' eyes, with no differentiation made among the various ethnic groups.<sup>115</sup> In relation to the White – who was seen

114. Said 2003 [1978], 300.

115. Barkan 1992, 23. Nederveen Pieterse 1992, 212-223. Said sometimes uses the term "Orientalism" interchangeably with "Imperialism." In *Culture and Imperialism* Said develops the argument in *Orientalism* and gives it a broader

as developed and developing, the Negro and the Oriental shared many characteristics, in particular, they were both seen as not progressing on the civilizatory scale (at least not without the aid of the White). When a differentiation was made between the Negro and the Oriental it was generally made by locating them on different levels on the scale of development. The Negro was put at its lowest reaches and Africa was seen as a continent which saw little change or progress. The Orient, on the other hand, had been the place of great civilizations and mighty Empires. Yet, although the peoples of the Orient had made remarkable achievements, these belonged to the past. The contemporary Arab, Indian, or Chinese were seen as not being capable of repeating these glories of bygone days. The Orient, and its inhabitants, was characterized by stagnation, even degeneration.<sup>116</sup> There were some exceptions to the conventional wisdom that Africa had seen no development. Since the arrival of the Portuguese to West Africa in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, Europeans were in contact with extensive political organizations there created by the Ashanti, the Dahomians, and the Edo. Benin City, for example, was called “Great Benin” and was described with awe and respect by travelers in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>117</sup> Yet, with time, when the European powers gained in strength, confidence, and fire-power, the African kingdoms came to be seen according to the Oriental paradigm – as stagnant, degenerated societies ruled by cruel despots.

Every culture probably defines itself, at least partially, negatively and through contrast, and therefore, as stated above, when the West defines the Orient, it also defines itself as different to the Orient. Thus, the Western perception of the West is linked to its perception of the Orient. Crucially, Said insists, when looking at the Western creation of the Orient and Occident it needs to be taken into account that the imagining of these two entities occurs within a context of vastly unequal strength between the two.

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appliance than the Middle-East. He notes that many of the stereotypes about the Orientals recur in descriptions of other non-Westerners (Africans, Chinese, Irish, Jamaicans, etc.) Said 1994 xi.

116. E.g. Cuvier 1829 [1817], 96.

117. Bassani & Fagg 1988.

According to Said, it is *only* by including these positions of relative power in the analysis that it becomes possible to grasp the Western construction of the Orient and Occident. The creation of the Occident and Orient and their respective positions on scales of cultural, moral, and intellectual development is both constituted by, and constitutes, these positions of power.<sup>118</sup>

To somewhat simplify Said's argument, Orientalism – the production of an “Orient” – is composed of three elements. One is academic Orientalism, the knowledge production within a specialized academic field devoted to the study of the Orient. Knowledge about and representations of the Orient in this sphere are created by learned societies, universities, and foreign schools and disseminated through academic journals, learned treatises, lectures, etc. This academic Orientalism (which also includes museums and their exhibitions, although Said had relatively little to say about them) is the focus of Said's work. The second aspect of Orientalism, which is related to the first one, is a more general cultural assumption in the West about the “Orient.” This Orientalism finds its expression in the writings of poets, novelists, political theorists, philosophers, such as for example Emile Durkheim, Victor Hugo, Karl Marx, and John Stuart Mill.

Said emphasizes that the “knowledge” about the Orient which is produced is a representation of the Orient, i.e. descriptions and images of the Orient, which do not deliver the presence of any “real” Orient. Yet, academic Orientalism especially, Said argues, is built on the premise of a radical realism – that what is represented in, for example, scholarly books on the Orient reveal, or unveil, the Orient, as it is. Yet, as all forms of communication impose limitations on the raw reality which is to be communicated, and subject it to different conventions to make it translatable, these statements on the Orient, despite claims to the contrary, do not, and cannot, represent the Orient “as such.”<sup>119</sup> This means that Western representations of the Orient say more about the West than they say about the Orient.

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118. Said 2003 [1978], 3, 42.

119. Said 2003 [1978], 21, 72.

The Orient and Orientals portrayed, evaluated, and imagined in myriads of representations – ranging from learned scholarly works on Oriental morals to eroticized paintings of harem interiors – is, at first glance, harmless, as they do not affect the lands or people which the Europeans define, dream of, or desire. Yet, these forms of Orientalism feed into, produce – and are produced by – a third form of Orientalism, which is the political one. This Orientalism, created and maintained by politicians, militaries, traders, and colonial officers not only produces images of the Orient in political orations or doctrines, but – through conquest and occupation – it also shapes and restructures the territories considered to be the “Orient” in real ways. This has real, mostly negative, consequences for millions of individuals, who do not know that they, according to the Europeans, can all be brought together under the heading “Orientals.” Conquest and domination is legitimized by reference to knowledge in its scholarly or popular forms about the Oriental’s inferiority. The military and political subjugation of different Oriental races could then be taken as evidence of their racial, intellectual, and cultural backwardness and thus shape the – seemingly neutral, value free, and apolitical – academic knowledge which, in turn, shaped political decisions.

The link between brute political domination *over* the Orient and academic knowledge *about* the Orient is most evident when Said analyses the writings produced in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the British politician Arthur James Balfour and the British colonial governor Evelyn Baring Cromer who justified British colonialism through their knowledge of the Orient and the Orientals. Balfour’s argument for a continued British occupation of Egypt was that history had taught that these Orientals had never, and thus could never, develop a proper system of self-governance (like the British one). The only form of rule Orientals were capable of creating was cruel despotism, and it was better – for the Egyptians (and other Orientals) – to be governed by the British.<sup>120</sup> Thus, British and Western dominance was beneficial for the Orientals, as it liberated them from being ruled by Orientals.

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120. Said 2003 [1978], 37, 228.

Men like Balfour and Cromer not only claimed to know the history of the Orient, they also felt sure they knew what went on inside the heads of the Orientals. Cromer stated the “fact” that the Oriental’s “reasoning is of the most slipshod description” and that he is “singularly deficient in the logical faculty,” in contrast to the European, who is a “close reasoner” and a “natural logician,” whose “trained intelligence works like piece of mechanism.” To this description Cromer adds that the Oriental “will often break down under the mildest process of cross-examination.”<sup>121</sup> From the secure knowledge of what the Oriental in essence was and thus what the Oriental always had been, and always would be, it became possible to reject any evidence which contradicted this truth. For example, in Cromer’s view, Egyptian nationalism and calls for independence from the British was an “entirely novel idea” and “a plant of exotic rather than indigenous growth.”<sup>122</sup>

Cromer based his knowledge about the Oriental, and the authority to promote this knowledge as an undisputable truth, not only on his personal experience of governing two manifestations of the Oriental (Indians and Egyptians who in Cromer’s view were much the same) but also on references to various academic works, in particular the philologist Ernest Renan’s studies in comparative philology from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which had “proved” the inferiority of the Semitic languages to the Indo-European, and hence the intellectual inferiority of the Semite to the Indo-European. Thus, different techniques for knowing the Oriental – the academic disciplines of archaeology, history, philology, Egyptology, papyrology, as well as the colonial official’s “mild” cross-examinations of Orientals, provided similar results about the character and essence of the Oriental.

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121. Cromer 1908, 146-147, Said 2003 [1978], 38.

122. Marlowe 1970, 271, Said 2003 [1978], 39. Cromer 1913, 171, argued that the future of Egypt did not lie in the “direction of narrow nationalism” but in that of “an enlarged cosmopolitanism.”

Orientals were not the only ones which Cromer wanted to deny political influence. In later years Cromer became a leading champion for the anti-suffragette cause, and served as president of the Men’s League for Opposing Woman Suffrage and the National League for Opposing Woman Suffrage. Owen 2004, 378.



The position of relative strength also meant that the West could monopolize the image of the Orient. The Orient was defined, analyzed, and staged by Western scholars, novelists, and artists through numerous representations in books, articles, novels, paintings, and architectural styles which gained their status as truths about the Orient through their volume and endless repetition. There was no corresponding stream of representations to the Western audience created by “Orientals” which gave their view(s) of the lands they lived in, or of the representations of these lands and their inhabitants created by Western scholars. Thus, for example, no Oriental voices were raised against the common Western assumption of the intellectual inferiority of the Oriental, and the absence of any such voices seemed to confirm the truth of this conventional wisdom. Nor was the Orientals view of the Occident heard. As Said notes, while there are numerous statements about the Orient produced by Western scholars and novelists for a Western audience, there are few representations made by the Orientals themselves to this Western audience showing their view(s) of either Orientals or of Westerners. In the East there has not been, and still is not an academic discipline called “Occidentalism” or “Occidental studies.” There are no declared experts on the Occident called “Occidentalists,” who unite under the umbrella of finding and explaining to an Eastern audience the essence of a distant place called the Occident, while evaluating the moral and intellectual capabilities of its inhabitants. There are no research institutes created, no scientific expeditions sent, no specialized academic journals published, no gatherings at academic conferences and no university courses held, devoted to the task of explaining the elusive and mysterious Occident and the habits of the Occidental.<sup>123</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the focus in Said’s work is on academic Orientalism. The self-identity of this profession and its practitioners – who often call themselves Orientalists – is that the academic study of the Orient has produced, and continues to produce, unbiased and apolitical knowledge about this Orient, not affected by, and not

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123. Said 2003 [1978], 204-205. Since Said wrote his book the situation has changed slightly, and there is at present, for example, an Institute of Occidental Studies at the National University of Malaysia.

affecting, the cultural and political context in which this knowledge is produced. That is, from the Orientalist's perspective, it matters little that he is culturally and often geographically located in the Occident and studies and reveals the Orient from this position. A central element of Orientalism is that it – through a gradually expanding archive of data and more refined methods for analysis – creates truer, better, and more precise “knowledge” about the Orient over time.

However, despite its overreaching aspirations of scientism and rationalism, and the claim to be above partisan or small-minded doctrinal beliefs, the Oriental discipline is enmeshed in real-world historical circumstances, which, as already said, involves the unequal relation of strength between the Orient and Occident. Rather than being an assemblage of theories and practices which allows Westerners to understand the lands and peoples to the East of Europe as they “are,” Orientalism is a set of constraints and limitations of thought upon which any experience of these lands and peoples is incorporated. Said's project is not to critique “Orientalism” for having created the “wrong” picture of a “true” Orient because the Orient does not exist in an essential sense. He questions the very construct of an Orient and the Western need to define this Orient with certain characteristics – despotism, harems, fatalism, dervishes, religious fanaticism, the Sphinx, and so forth.

Said does not claim that the “raw reality” of the lands and peoples to the East of Europe brought together under the heading “the Orient” has not affected the representations made of these lands and peoples. Nor does he deny that academic Orientalism has created “positive knowledge” (that is data or interpretations which are not only essentializing stereotypes but which, in some sense, may be seen as factually correct) about these lands and peoples. On the contrary, during the time period Said concentrates on, from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present day there has been an increase in the Western geographical and historical knowledge of the world. But he points out that this accumulation of data and scholarship has not led to the dismissal and dismantling of Western stereotypes, but rather that these stereotypes have become more refined and sophisticated. Thus, the perception of the Orient and the Oriental has been influenced by new discoveries – made by archaeological

excavations, mapping of territories, decipherments of scripts, discoveries and translation of texts, etc. – but this new knowledge was incorporated within existing forms of thought about the Orient. These continuances are discussed in a chapter on contemporary Orientalism, in which Said (writing in 1978), looks into the writings of Henry Kissinger who portrays the non-Western mind in much the same terms as Cromer did half a century earlier.<sup>124</sup> In his preface to the 2003 edition, written in May 2003 when the United States and Britain launched their “illegal and unsanctioned imperial invasion and occupation of Iraq,” he notes that the same thinking – where the West and East are seen as two essentially different categories – is still present and continues to shape the world we live (and die) in.<sup>125</sup>

I find a number of arguments made by Said broadly applicable to my own study. A main thrust of Said’s work is to show that the academic knowledge production about the Orient (despite the Orientalists’ claims to the contrary) has not been, is not – and cannot be – neutral or value free, but has been and is part of an unequal relation of strength between observer and observed. I also find this point valid for the British Museum and its knowledge production. The British Museum claims to disseminate non-partisan knowledge, but – as I seek to make clear – the knowledge produced is created from a particular Western perspective and forms part of the relationship of power between observers and observed, possessors and the possessions. This study will examine the museum’s ethnographic displays at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This was a time when the British Empire was rapidly expanding and encompassed about a quarter of the earth’s population and total land area. As I believe will be evident, the accumulation of objects and production of knowledge by British Museum scholars cannot be seen in separation from this historical context. To *not* see this relation should

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124. Said 2003 [1978], 46-47, 284-328.

125. Said 2003 [1978], xiii. There are various estimates on the number Iraqi casualties since the 2003 invasion. According to Iraq body Count the number of civilian violent deaths is between 155,380 and 173,688, the total number of deaths including combatants being 242,000. <https://www.iraqbodycount.org/> (accessed 1 March 2016).

be, to paraphrase Said, an historical impossibility. As for the British Museum's contemporary knowledge production about the Benin objects, it is – as I also hope to make clear – intrinsically linked to the British Museum's possession of these objects.

Said stresses similarity over time – the durability of the Oriental discourse – and the increasing sophistication of the production of other and self. In a similar vein I wish to point out similarities over time in how the British Museum makes a Western self and a non-Western (in this case an African) other. Yet, I should perhaps already here stress that I do not mean that past British Museum representations of Africans are identical to those made today. Clearly, they are not. But I will try to demonstrate that the contemporary representations occasionally contain a residue of assumptions deep-rooted in Western culture about the “difference” between Westerners and non-Westerners. Thus, my argument is akin to Said's, in that I argue that the increased knowledge about Africa has not necessarily led to – or at least not only led to – a disintegration of the ideas and patterns of thought from the past, but rather to an increase in the degree of sophistication of such ideas and notions. Said makes a useful distinction between what he calls latent and manifest Orientalism. Manifest Orientalism is the various stated views about the Orient, while latent Orientalism is the almost unconscious notions and patterns of thought about the Orient. Said finds that the changes there have been in Orientalism are mostly confined to the manifest Orientalism, while the same ideas and stereotypes live on beneath the surface of what is explicitly stated.<sup>126</sup>

This distinction between what is explicitly stated and what is subtly implied is, I think, applicable to the British Museum's making of self and other. The issue will be discussed further on, but may already be illustrated with an example here. In the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, British Museum scholars made statements about the fundamental difference between the mental capacity of the civilized and the uncivilized (which have much in common with Cromer's characterization of the difference between

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126. Said 2003 [1978], 206.

the mental ability of the Oriental and the European). In its publications, British Museum scholars wrote in bold that the uncivilized – unlike the white Westerner who thinks logically and rationally – is governed by tradition.<sup>127</sup> Such statements regarding an essential difference between the rational, progressing Westerner and an irrational, traditional non-Westerner are not made today. Yet, when looking into the museum's contemporary displays and publications one finds that the Edo are connected with tradition and the Westerner (when represented) is connected with (scientific) reason and progress. Thus, these representations create a subtext where the Edo is enmeshed in, and governed by, Edo culture and traditions whereas the Westerner stands above, and acts independently of, Western traditions and culture. That these representations came into being may be seen as a sign and expression of a pattern of "thinking" which is deeply ingrained in Western mentality about the difference between the developing Westerners and the stagnant non-Westerners. As such, these representations are an expression of Western culture and traditionality.

While Said's *Orientalism* has been of value for this study, I do not necessarily follow Said to the letter in every respect. *Orientalism* could be criticized for having a tendency towards "Occidentalism," in that it creates a too rigid and homogenizing picture of Western knowledge production about the Orient. It pays less attention to dissonances within the discourse and the diverging views of the Orient produced by the West, such as, for example, the more positive images of the Orient, which were also produced. These idealizing and romanticizing projections – while certainly problematic in that, like the negative ones, they are essentializing and stress a difference between East and West – nevertheless carry the potential for questioning the inferiority of the Orient. In other words, Said ignores, or downplays, the productive aspects of discourse and its potential to resist dominance. As discussed earlier, while the West's positional superiority over the rest of humanity has been a dominant theme in Western thinking about self and other, Western modernity also has a "dissident genealogy" which,

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127. British Museum 1910, 31-32.

to various extents, has challenged Western dogmas, including Western ethnocentrism. To this may be added that the boundary between self and other has not been, and is not, always clear cut, and that the West also has its “internal” lines of demarcation for belonging and exclusion based on gender, class, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, etc. Often, though not always, these challenges have been offered by individuals who have stood in positions of alterity to a white male norm. In this study, when looking into the early scholarly reception of the Benin objects, it will be shown that the Benin objects were interpreted by some scholars in ways which confirmed the notion of Western superiority and African inferiority, and by others scholars in ways which challenged such derogatory views. While the former scholars all occupied a privileged position within Western structures of gender, ethnicity, and class, the latter scholars included both cultural “insiders” and “outsiders.”

As objects and their making and interpretation form an important part of this study I should perhaps say a few words on my approach to this topic. Our unreflected perception of objects is, I believe, in many ways essentialist and primordialist. That is, we tend to regard the function and meaning of an object in the time and place where it was once created and used as being equivalent to its real, primary, or most important function and meaning according to the formula: what the object was once made for, is still what this object “is.” This idea suggests that the meaning of the object is in some way intrinsic to the object itself, and thus unchanging and unchangeable. This general cultural assumption has its counterpart in, and derives its scientific legitimization from, museum practice which is perhaps most evident in the typical museum label that habitually explains the object by informing the viewer about the meaning and function in its “original” context – that is, the context the object was removed *from*.<sup>128</sup> As noted in the preface, the British Museum “explains” a Benin object by calling it a “trophy.” The term here refers to an assumed function of this object in Edo society, and thus implies that

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128. And if the object has gone through different uses in the society it was taken from priority is given to its assumed “first” or “original” use in that society.

the object is an Edo object which belongs to an Edo context, despite the fact that the object is now physically in the British Museum and is part of a Western cultural context. This notion, that objects are authentic primary evidence of a given original culture and therefore that their (unchanging) meaning can be disclosed by proper unbiased scholarship corresponds to MacGregor's idea that cultures "speak to us" through objects.<sup>129</sup>

A different way of looking at objects is offered by Igor Kopytoff's "biographical" approach.<sup>130</sup> Kopytoff's idea is, simply put, that objects, like human beings, have biographies or life stories. This means that objects go through different stages in their "lives," and that the meaning(s) given to them change over time with none of these meanings being more important than any other. Seen from this perspective it is of equal interest to learn that an object is now placed on a shelf of glass in a museum showcase in London as it is to learn that this object was once placed on a mud altar in Benin City. The current perception(s) of an object is a product of its cumulative history. Hence the relationship between the different stages in the life of the object deserves attention. For example, the meaning given to a Benin object within a museum context is linked to the meaning assumed to have been attributed to it in its Benin context (at its most basic this may mean that an object is considered – scientifically – important in the institutional setting of the museum because it is considered to have been – religiously – important in Benin society). The interpretations made of the object in the museum concerning its pre-museum meanings are also affected by the fact that these interpretations are made in a museum context (again, at its most basic this may mean that an object in an art museum is defined as an art-work, and thus the object is considered to have also been seen as an art-work in its original context).

To this diachronic approach, Arjun Appadurai adds a synchronic dimension: objects are not only invested with different meanings over time, but may be understood from divergent perspectives and valued differently at any time point by various human actors. These

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129. MacGregor 2010b, xvi-xvii.

130. Kopytoff 1986, 66.

actors incorporate the objects within different “regimes of value.”<sup>131</sup> These regimes of value stand in complex relations to each other and may be contradictory, incommensurable, reinforcing and/or complementary. An object is often simultaneously looked upon and valued along scales of financial, aesthetic, social, symbolic, scientific, and religious value. Objects may be, and are, placed in different milieus depending on what values and functions have been, and are given, to them by their possessors. Thus, Benin objects may be found in the salesroom of an auction house in London, on a mantel piece in a dining room in New York, in a showcase in a museum in Lagos, or on an altar in the Royal Palace in Benin City.<sup>132</sup> All observers need not be in agreement on whether the object’s current

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131. Appadurai 1986, 15, Appadurai’s and Kopytoff’s approaches have been further developed by, for example: Gosden & Marshall 1991, Roberts 1994, Myers 2001, Alberti 2005, Hoskins 2006.

132. For a photograph of Benin objects on display in a private home, see Perls 1992, viii. The photograph is included in a publication produced for the occasion of the donation of the Perls collection of more than one hundred Benin objects to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1991. The photograph shows Benin objects in the dining room of the art dealers and private collectors “Mr and Mrs Klaus G. Perls” (Mrs Perls own name Amelia is omitted) on Madison Avenue, New York. Hanging on the wall above the shelf with the Benin loot is a painting by Amadeo Modigliano, *Nu Couché* (Reclining Nude), thus allowing the viewer to gaze at exotic African art and European female nudity at the same time. Can the aestheticized voyeurism of refined Western high culture be summarized in a better way?

The Perls are celebrated in the publication for their “taste, sensitivity and knowledge” by the museum’s director Philippe de Montebello, characteristics which, according to Montebello, made it possible for the couple to bring together this collection (the fact it that was cash rather than anything else which made it possible to form the collection is tacitly ignored by Montebello). In the publication, Klaus Perls repays Montebello’s praise by thanking the Metropolitan museum for taking on the heavy responsibility of preserving the collection for posterity. Reif 1991, Montebello 1992, Perls 2002.

On the concept of “taste” – the ability to judge and value art according to aesthetic criteria – as a marker of social class and as an instrument for upholding class barriers, see Bourdieu 1984, and on the transformation of financial capital into cultural and social capital, see Bourdieu 1986. On art donations to museums as “donor memorials,” see Duncan 1995. In 1997 the Perls also donated the Modigliano painting to the Metropolitan Museum. The publication of the Perls collection begs many questions including that of whether the Perls ever considered donating the Benin objects – or the Modigliano painting – to a museum in Nigeria.



location is the right one, whether the current possessors value the object according to the right criteria, and whether they have the right to possess, or dispose of, the object. For instance, that an object is a salable commodity may be anathema to the notion that the object is an inalienable possession of a nation or an ethnic group.

To exemplify: when Sotheby's of London announced on the 20<sup>th</sup> of December 2010 that it would sell a Benin ivory pendant mask with an estimate of £3,5-4,5 million it aroused a storm of protests from Nigerians and four days later the sale of the object was canceled.<sup>133</sup> The symbolic significance and financial value of the ivory pendant mask (it was expected to break the auction record for African art) may be seen as being determined by a range of interlinked factors.<sup>134</sup> The perceived aesthetic quality of the object itself was one factor, but equally important was its symbolic link to four other ivory pendant masks. One of these is the previously mentioned pendant mask in the British Museum, which ranks as one of the most famous Benin objects in the world. All five masks are believed to have been looted from a chest in the sleeping quarters of the Oba (king) of Benin in 1897. The royal title of their previous owner is likely to have contributed to the status of these objects amongst the looters, and it was probably for this reason that two of the pendant masks became the personal booty of one of the highest ranking individuals in the British force, Ralph Moor, the British commissioner and consul for the Niger Coast Protectorate. A third pendant mask became the property of Henry Gallwey, who had an important position in the colonial administration in the Protectorate, and it was this pendant mask that his descendants were offering for sale in 2010.<sup>135</sup> One of Moor's pendant masks was sold to the British Museum in 1909 and has since been regarded as one of the most important Benin objects in the British Museum, and in the world. Apart from its royal ancestry, its

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133. Bailey 2010, Bailey 2011.

134. While the mask was expected to break the auction record for African art, its estimated price tag could be considered modest in comparison with the sums paid for European paintings, where the auction record in 2012 was \$ 119.9 million (£73.9 million) for a water-color version of Munch's *The Scream*.

135. In 1913 Gallwey changed his name to Galway.

fame has been derived from its visual appeal to the eye – the idealized naturalism in the mask appealed to the aesthetic regime prevailing in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – but also from the fact that it resides in a prestigious museum (which gains its prestige through its prestigious collections that includes this object). The British Museum mask is especially well-known in Nigeria as it was adopted as the emblem of the FESTAC cultural festival in Nigeria in 1977. Contributing to its renown is also that Nigeria asked for a temporary loan of the object in connection with the festival, but the request was rejected by the British Museum (on conservation grounds).<sup>136</sup> When Moor's second pendant mask – which is very similar to the one in the British Museum – was sold in 1958 it was exchanged for the highest sum of money paid for any object in the category of African art up to that point.<sup>137</sup> The purchaser was a Nelson A. Rockefeller who donated the mask to his Museum of Primitive Art in New York.<sup>138</sup> When the museum closed in the 1970s, its collections, including the mask, were transferred to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, a museum which, like the British Museum, ranks among the most renowned in the world. The other two pendant masks are in the Seattle Art Museum and the Lindenmuseum in Stuttgart respectively.<sup>139</sup> These are museums of lesser fame than the British Museum and the Metropolitan Museum, but that four out of five pendant masks were in museum collections made the piece offered for sale in 2010 *unique* as it was the only one still not irreversibly removed for the sphere of the market. It had an “almost mythical status as the one not yet in captivity” as one commentator put it.<sup>140</sup>

Hence, the estimated pecuniary value of the pendant mask to be auctioned was not only determined by the morphological qualities of the object in a narrow sense. That is, the price a purchaser would have to pay to get ownership of, and physical control over, this piece of shaped ivory did not solely relate to qualities residing

136. Greenfield 1996 [1989], Wilson 1989, 113, 120. Plankensteiner 2007a, 505, no. 287 (Layiwola).

137. Fagg 1957, Smith 1958. The price was £20,000.

138. On the Museum of Primitive Art and the acquisition of the mask: Vrdoljak 2006, 188-190, LaGamma 2014, 7.

139. Kaplan 2007, 142.

140. Bailey 2010, Opoku 2011a.

in the lump of materiality “itself,” nor to its own life history in a restricted sense, but to its symbolic relation to other entities, objects, individuals, institutions, and groups and their life histories. Interestingly, in this particular case the various, mutually contradicting and reinforcing, values invested in the object, which all contributed to its significance, and the consequently high asking price, may be said to have “backfired” on its current owners, as it – at least temporarily – became unsalable, that is, financially worthless.

In this case the object was offered for sale as a commodity. A commodity is different from a gift in that when the commodity is exchanged for the agreed price it does not leave any continued social relationship between seller and purchaser. By contrast, a gift creates a bond between the giver and receiver. Although formally, the giving of a gift is a one-way transaction, it still creates a debt to the receiver.<sup>141</sup> In the museum world the pay-back is often made by the public announcement of the giver’s name, which serves as acknowledgment of the giver’s altruistic act of having given the object to the museum without expecting anything in return. In other words, the museum rewards the giver with cultural and social capital for not having turned the object into financial capital by selling it to the museum (or any other party). Some of the consequences of this museum practice – of acknowledging donors but not sellers – within the field of the British Museum’s purportedly scientific display of the Benin objects will be discussed further on.

One additional remark concerning object biographies: although the analogue between human beings and objects is of use for breaking down some essentialist notions about objects it may reinforce others. Therefore it might be useful to call to mind one difference between human beings and objects. Human beings (at least according to prevailing Western notions about human beings as “individuals”) are fairly easily defined temporally and spatially. They have a clearly demarcated beginning (birth) and end (death) and are physically relatively stable entities between these two points in time. In case an

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141. Gosden & Marshall 1999, 173. The classic study of gift-exchange is, of course, Mauss’s *The Gift*, an enquiry into “the principle whereby the gift received has to be repaid.” Mauss 1969 [1954], 1.

individual (a word derived from Latin *individuus* “indivisible”) loses a limb or two, these severed body parts are generally considered as no longer being part of the individual or her/his biography.<sup>142</sup>

Objects are, I think, quite often conceptualized in a similar way, but there is reason to query our assumptions about the chronological and physical contours of objects. First, any object as it appears to us now has been composed from raw materials or by joining different objects, and thus there is not necessarily a self-evident point in time when the object and its biography “begins.” Secondly, following its “creation,” the object (apart from undergoing changes in its appearance due to time, wear and tear, etc.) may have been divided into two or more objects. Hence, it could be questioned in what sense a lump of matter as it appears to us now should be designated “an object” rather than, for example, “part of an object” or “half an object.” This is an issue which is especially pertinent to consider when looking at what is *now* seen as a “museum object,” because every museum object has come into being by separating and removing a lump of matter from an “original” context. The entity in the museum collection – the museum object – was not necessarily seen as one object in the “original” milieu it was separated from.<sup>143</sup>

To this it may be added that objects, unlike most humans, are sometimes made in groups (pairs, threes, etc.) with a similar appearance. Seen from the perspective of their “original” cultural

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142. Yet, some humans, such as Siamese twins, challenge prevailing notions of individuality.

143. On the excerpting of objects from their cultural contexts, see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991, 387-388: “The artfulness of the ethnographic object is an art of excision, of detachment, an art of the excerpt. Where does the object begin and where does it end? This I see as an essentially surgical issue. Shall we exhibit the cup with the saucer, the tea, the cream and sugar, the spoon, the napkin and placemat, the table and chair, the rug? Where do we stop? Where do we make the cut?” Kirshenblatt-Gimblett proposes that “ethnographic fragment” might be a better term than “ethnographic object” as it conceptualizes both the “physical act of producing fragments” and “the detached attitude which makes the fragmentation and its appreciation possible.”

As for the analogy between human beings (individuals) and objects, Jones (2010) points to a correspondence between the Western belief in the autonomous and detached individual and the Western belief in authentic and detached objects.

contexts, such similar, or near-identical, objects often belong together, conceptually and functionally. Much of Benin “art” was made in pairs, threes, or fours, etc.<sup>144</sup> Thus, it may be discussed (as it will be later in this study) which cultural perspective (Edo, British, or “universal”) the British Museum adopts when it , for example, singles out *one* of the two Benin objects in a pair and shows this object on its own as a singular entity instead of showing both together as a pair (this issue, of what constitutes “an object” links to questions about cross-cultural translation which will be touched upon below).

I highlight these problems concerning how objects are conceived, because it is all too easy to take the present appearance of an object for granted, and to think that the way an object is now defined and demarcated is its “natural” or “original” appearance. In this study I intend to look into some of the British Museum’s representations of what appear to be, and always have been, singular and autonomous objects. I will question some aspects of this singularity and autonomy and point to examples of how, in a pre-1897 Edo context, what may have been perceived as a single object – a whole – have been made into several, separate objects through a range of factors including the looting in 1897, the subsequent dispersal of the loot, Western academic scholarly knowledge production, and Western cultural assumption regarding the apartness, uniqueness, and singularity of art works.

In scrutinizing the British Museum’s making of objects I shall try to point to a paradox: although the British Museum attempts to show the objects as “real,” “authentic,” and “intact” (Edo) objects, it naturalizes the current appearance of the objects, created in a Western cultural context, and thus obscures the fact that their appearance in several important aspects is far removed from the “original” ones. Indeed, if the objects were looked on less as complete, intact, and naturally delimited entities and more as parts of objects or fragments of wholes, this would actually give more “accurate” representations of the meanings and functions of these objects in Edo society.

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144. Plankensteiner 2007, 279, no. 6-7 (Völger).

In the example given above concerning the pendant mask offered for sale, it should be clear that the conflict over the ownership of objects is linked to conflicts over their meaning. A battle over terminology is also a constitutive part of such struggles over belonging and interpretation. This is perhaps most clearly seen in the debate over the ownership of a set of stone objects from the Acropolis in Athens now in the British Museum – where some commentators call them the “Elgin marbles” while others call them the “Parthenon sculptures” (or “Parthenon marbles”) thus naming them after, and linking them to, either the person who removed them from the Parthenon or the building they were removed from.<sup>145</sup> I will come back to the question of how the objects looted in Benin City in 1897 – that is the things which I have chosen to call the “Benin objects” or, occasionally, the “Benin loot” in this study – have been named (and thus also defined, classified, and described) in the West and how the terminology and classifications which have come into use are linked to – both constituted by and constituting – certain Western cultural and “scientific” notions about what the Benin objects “are,” or ought to be. The issue about terminology, description, and classification in turn links to the question over the interpretation and ownership of these objects.

This discussion relates to taxonomic matters. Arguably, one of the main ways through which the museum institution produces knowledge and representations is through classifying and sorting objects, humans, time, and other perceived entities into various categories.<sup>146</sup> These ordering systems become manifested and materialized in the museum’s internal organization as well as in its external representations, such as departmental structures, object inventories, and exhibitions. Yet, any ordering may be considered arbitrary in the sense that it does not correspond to any naturally given order or ordering principles residing in, or between, the perceived entities themselves, regardless of whether these entities are chunks of the human continuum, of time, of materiality, or of anything else.<sup>147</sup> Still humans – must – order the world to make

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145. Yalouri 2001, 97-98, Webb 2002, 52-53.

146. On museum classification, see Jordanova 1989, 23.

147. On the messiness of the world and arbitrariness of ordering, see Law 1994 and

sense of it. Obviously, if the British Museum applied no ordering principles for the nearly 2 million objects in its on-line collections database, it would be of little use to anyone. Yet, among the problems with any system ordering is that it tends to appear as a non-arbitrary description of the world rather than as a system of thought imposed upon it. Through this naturalizing effect alternative ways of comprehending, and asking questions about, the world may be obscured. The British Museum database indexes its objects according to cultural origin, material, date, etc. Thanks to the data base it is possible to find out many things about the museum's collection. For example, it is easy to learn exciting things such as how many objects of bronze the museum possesses. However, the museum does not index its collections according to by which means the objects were removed from their original context, and whether this removal was made with or without the consent of any original owners. Therefore, for a study like this one, which is interested in the British tradition of looting non-Western enemies, it is not possible to use the database in any simple way to answer questions such as how many objects looted during colonial warfare the museum possesses, from which parts of the world the loot originates from, when these objects were looted, and so forth. Thus, the data base, a seemingly value-free, non-arbitrary research tool, has built in (ultimately culturally determined) limits on what it may be used for. It may reinforce the feeling that certain ways of thinking and asking questions about the world, museum collections, and human behavior are more natural and universal than others.<sup>148</sup>

In this study I look into some aspects of how the several thousand objects looted in Benin City have been ordered. In the discussion on terminology I touch upon how the various names given to the objects imply certain ways of sorting and valuing them. I also discuss how the British Museum relates the Benin objects to other objects in the exhibition context. In the highlights section each Benin object

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2007.

148. That said, it is better to offer a publicly available collections database than not (many museums do not) and the British Museum's database has been a valuable asset for my work.

presented has a link to “related objects.” These “related” objects are generally the other highlight Benin objects. As such these links are useful for knowing (a selection of) the museum’s Benin collections and (aspects) of Edo society. However, I intend to show that by rethinking these categories and by making links between Benin objects and non-Benin objects, alternative forms of knowledge may be created, which, in line with one of the aims of this study, casts interesting light on British and Western culture.

A further comment on the arbitrariness of ordering: ordering is not only arbitrary in the sense that ordering systems do not necessarily correspond to an ordering principle immanent in the objects themselves, they are also arbitrary in the sense that the categories created by one group of human beings does not necessarily correspond to the categories created by other groups of human beings. Thus, it is worth pointing out that when ethnographic objects are ordered in museums, the resultant order of things is not by default one which corresponds to those employed in the cultural context(s) from where the objects were taken. This is not to say that no such correlations might be there, nor that there is never any overlap between the ordering in the “original” culture and the museum culture. But it is to take into account the paradox that the “scientific” ordering employed in an ethnographic museum, performed to reveal and understand an ethnic other and her or his “reality,” does not utilize the same principles of ordering as this ethnic other does.

When looking at the translation of other aspects of a culture – whether these are words, concepts, or objects – into a new cultural context it is worth asking what is “lost” (and “created”) in translation and to what degree, and in which ways, the finished product of the translation process as it appears in, for example, a museum showcase in an ethnographic display, differs from the appearance this entity had in its “original” cultural context.<sup>149</sup> Kate Sturge, in her study of cross-cultural translation in anthropology and ethnographic exhibitions points to a dilemma that almost any translation tends to be caught up in: a translation of an entity which

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149. Sturge 2007. On what may be lost and found in translation cf. Clifford 2013, 297-299.



works smoothly into the linguistic or cultural idioms in which it is translated, has often been made at the expense of many aspects and nuances of the concept's "original" meanings, whereas a translation which maintains a lot of its "original" meanings is less easily grasped and appreciated in its new cultural context. In this study I discuss some aspects of how Benin objects (or parts of them) have been transformed and translated into a Western cultural context, to fit into the matrix for the appreciation of (non-Western) art. In this process these objects have become aesthetically pleasing and easily comprehensible art objects at the expense of many aspects of their "original" meanings.<sup>150</sup>

To sum up some of the main points of this chapter: departing from a constructivist perspective I contend that what is habitually regarded as "reality" does not exist in an essentialist sense, but is rather formed in ongoing processes of socio-material construction. The "reality" constituted is thus made in certain ways at the expense of other possible ways of making it. This study seeks to discuss how the British Museum makes Benin objects, the Edo, British, and the British Museum, and how the museum promotes one way of knowing these entities. In other words, the study is an analysis of the institutional discourse at the British Museum and the creation and reinforcement of a particular regime of truth – how certain ways of knowing, defining, and speaking become naturalized and seen as the "true" and "factual" way of knowing, defining, and speaking about these entities and the world more generally. Despite the insistence

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150. For a general discussion of how the West has created the category "African art" by selecting and transforming certain aspects of African material culture into "objects-of-art" which fit into Western cultural and aesthetic idioms, see Vogel 1991, Roberts & Vogel 1994. The creation of the category "African art" (which forms part of the larger category "primitive" or "tribal art") in many ways parallels how the Western world has constructed other categories of non-Western art by elevating select bits of materiality from various times and places to the status of "art" with little regard for whether these objects were seen as "art" or not in the societies in which they were once produced. On the creation of "Chinese art," see Clunas 1997, Pagani 1998, Barnes 2011, 395-6, and on how ancient Greek pottery, and prehistoric Cycladic stone figures respectively have been made into hallowed masterpieces, see Gill & Vickers 1995 and Gill & Chippindale 1993.

on the contrary, the British Museum's representations are spatially, culturally, and historically situated and – ultimately – political statements.

My argument will, I think, become clear as the study proceeds, but the point about the “radical realism” (to borrow a term from Said) which characterizes much of the museum's representations may be illustrated with an example from the British Museum's homepage. In the highlight entry for a Benin object which the British Museum refers to as *Brass helmet mask for the Ododua ritual* the text states: “This brass helmet mask *is* used in the Ododua ritual” (italics added).<sup>151</sup> Interpreted literally this statement is wrong. The particular helmet mask to which the statement refers to is *not* used in the Ododua ritual anymore. It *was* used in Ododua rituals until it was taken by British soldiers in 1897.<sup>152</sup> Nowadays, in the British Museum it may be said to “be” many things – for example, a museum object – and it may be seen as being “used” in a variety of ways, which include serving as a representation for a *type* of helmet masks which were, and are, used in the Ododua ritual, but this *particular* helmet mask is not used in the ritual anymore. Still, although the statement is “factually” incorrect, it is probably regarded by most readers as true, as they are familiar with the cultural convention at play here – that objects in museums often are “used” in a metonymic sense. The objects function as props for some larger entity, such as a culture or time period, or, in this case, a specific “type” of object (helmet masks used in the Ododua ritual). Thus, the reader accepts that the statement refers to how this “type” of helmet mask was/is used, not to how this particular object is used. A more factual statement, like for example: “This brass helmet was presumably used in the Ododua ritual in Edo society before it was looted by British troops” would have created another effect. To this statement could have been added: “It was later on incorporated into the collections of the British Museum where it has now been put

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151. In a similar vein, the entry for the *Ivory armllet* declares: “This armllet *is* worn by the Oba” (italics added).

152. This helmet mask, and others, were taken at Ughoton, When the British arrived at Ughoton a procession of masked men mingled with the Edo defenders. Fagg 1978 [1970], 36.

on display by museum curators as a museum object for you to look at.” An explanatory text of this kind would have broken the realism invoked by the British Museum’s representation, and the assertion that the object is an unmediated, pure, and authentic Edo object, which gives the viewer unmediated, pure, and authentic knowledge about the Edo. Such a statement would also, at least to some extent, have blurred the line of division between the British producer of views and the Edo viewed. Further, through the use of the second person pronoun “you” it would have addressed the viewer and made her/him part of the making of representation. Last, but not least, it would have pointed out that the object was removed from its original context without the consent of the Edo, and that the British Museum’s right to continue to possess this object is not uncontested. The “knowledge” the museum creates about this object – or rather, the way the museum makes the object and surrounds it with presence (of Edo ritual) and with absence (of the object’s manner of removal, the British Museum, the museum visitor, etc.) – becomes part and parcel of the museum’s power over it.

The statement made by the British Museum about this object is, of course, just one of many statements made by the museum about, or in connection with, the Benin objects. Yet, when analyzing more statements (as will be done further on) they may be said to show a rather coherent pattern with similar features to the one discussed here; they do little, or nothing, to break the illusion of realism of the representations, nor do they problematize the regime of knowledge which underpins these representations. They draw a line of separation between viewer and the viewed, as well as between the objects and the manner of their initial removal. This contributes to upholding a distinction between the Edo and the British, and – as will be discussed further on – these two ethnic categories are equipped with characteristics which suggest their differences rather than their communality.



### 3. The literature on Benin objects and on ownership of cultural objects

In the previous chapter I tried to sketch out the relationship between the museum (exhibition) and Western culture while signposting my own theoretical groundings. Here I want to say a few words on how my study relates to, differs from, and – hopefully – complements previous writings on the Benin objects and the issue of the ownership of cultural objects. The objects looted in Benin City have been extensively researched and published since they were brought from Africa to the Western world in 1897, and the present literature on the Benin loot includes dozens of monographs and hundreds of articles. This literature ranges from academic articles published in specialized journals to popular presentations in, for example, publications made in connection with various exhibitions.<sup>1</sup> What most of the literature has in common is that it regards the Benin objects as pre-1897 Edo objects. Thus, the texts “locate” the objects in their pre-1897 Edo context and attempt to “explain” them in relation to this context. As the Benin objects are an important source of information for pre-1897 Edo society, these texts are also part of an

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1. For a bibliography on Benin, see Charles Gore’s homepage: [www.cgore.dircon.co.uk](http://www.cgore.dircon.co.uk).

endeavor to reconstruct and envision this society.<sup>2</sup> Publications have dealt with questions such as the absolute and relative chronology of the objects, whether the artistic and technical skill used to produce the metal castings is of indigenous or foreign origin, the identification of the figures depicted on the objects, the cultural, political, and social meaning(s) of the objects in pre-1897 Edo society and so forth. Oral information provided by Edo informants has been an important source for this research. Some attention has also been paid to the post-1897 art production in the Edo State.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast to all the energy devoted to the Benin objects in their pre-1897 Edo contexts, much less interest has been shown in exploring the cultural, social, and political meaning(s) of these objects in their post-1897 Western contexts. Since 1897 these objects have been incorporated into various Western systems of exchange of money, objects, and prestige. Today, the majority of the objects are located in, and displayed at, various museums (mostly art museums, ethnographic museums, or museums which combine natural history and ethnography). Through a range of representational techniques – museum displays, popular and academic publications, etc. – “knowledge” about these objects has been created and disseminated to a predominantly Western audience. To some extent, the “knowledge” formed around these objects has had, and has, implications for the (Western) view of Africa and Africans (and by implication for the Western view of Westerners). These aspects of the objects’ biographies, or life stories, have been little studied.

The literature there is on the post-1897 Western life of the Benin objects mostly deals with their early reception. Among these works the only more detailed investigation is Annie Coombes’s valuable book *Reinventing Africa – Museums, Material Culture and Popular Imagination in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* from 1994, where two chapters analyze British news reporting relating to the 1897 Edo-British war and the scholarly writings produced between 1898 and 1900 by museum curators in Britain.<sup>4</sup> A number of the

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2. Brief overviews of Benin scholarship are given in Nevadomsky 1997 and Plankensteiner 2007c.
  3. Nevadomsky & Osemweri 2007.
  4. Coombes 1994b, chapters 1 and 3, see also chapters 6 and 7. A summary of

articles in the catalogue for the traveling exhibition *Benin – Kings and Rituals. Court Arts from Nigeria* treat the trade and reception of these objects in Germany from 1897 up to the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>5</sup> The literature which looks into the Benin objects in their contemporary Western museum context(s) is even smaller and limited to a few articles and a book chapter.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, it seems fair to say that the Western reception of the Benin objects is a field which is largely unexplored. This observation concerning the dearth of research about how the Benin objects have been incorporated into Western culture may be brought in relation to another observation made earlier: that the British Museum not only “explains” the Benin objects in their Edo context, but also – without hesitation – makes certain claims regarding their reception in the West, stating that the Benin objects changed the European view of Africans. These are claims which do not have any support in the existent scholarly literature. On the contrary, Annie Coombes, the only author who has discussed the possible impact of the Benin objects on the British view of Africans in some detail, actually argues the opposite to what the British Museum states. According to her, the Benin objects were interpreted in ways which made it possible for the British to reconcile their high esteem for Benin objects and a low esteem of the Edo and Africans in general. Thus, the Benin objects did not impact European negative stereotypes about Africa.<sup>7</sup> To forgo the conclusions of this study, my

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Coombes’s findings are given in Coombes 1994a and 1996.

5. Heymer 2007, Plankensteiner 2007b, 2007c, Völger 2007. See also Barkan 1997, Eisenhofer 1997a, 2001, Gunch 2013, Huseman 2013. On the early acquisitions by German museums, see Penny 2002, 71-79 and for the acquisitions of the Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm, see Östberg 2010a.
6. Among the authors who have analyzed contemporary museum exhibitions are Golding 2007, Phillips 2007, Sturge 2007, 171-173, and Bjerregaard 2013. Phillips compares the display of Benin objects at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the US National Museum of Natural History in Washington, the British Museum and the Horniman Museum in London. Sturge, in her study of cultural and linguistic translation in museum displays, treats the display of Benin objects at the Horniman Museum. Golding discusses Benin objects in the educational program at the Horniman Museum and Bjerregaard looks at the travelling exhibition *Benin – Kings and Rituals*.
7. Coombes 1994, 8-9 writes: “If the valorization of cultural production has any impact on a reassessment of the general culture and society of the producer,

own findings – bringing a larger material into the discussion than Coombes uses – are much in line with hers in this respect.

The debates concerning the ownership of cultural objects looted during warfare, foreign occupation, or through other circumstances where the “original” owners had few means to resist the removal of the objects in question are as old as Western literature itself, but have become more vigorous since about the 1970s in the wake of decolonization and the struggles for recognition and for civil, political, and cultural rights of the indigenous populations in the white Anglophone settler/invasor states Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States.<sup>8</sup> Contributing to the interest in these issues

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then the influx of sixteenth century carved ivories and lost wax castings from Benin City onto the European art and antiquities market, together with the subsequent proliferation of popular and ‘scientific’ treaties which their ‘discovery’ generated should have fundamentally shaken the bedrock of the derogatory assumption about Africa, and more specifically, the African’s place in history. Yet, as we shall see, this was certainly not the case. In fact, what the Benin example demonstrates is precisely the extent and the ways in which such contradictory beliefs could be maintained.”

8. Conventionally, Western literature begins with Homer’s *The Iliad*, where the opening line introduces the wrath of Achilles. This wrath is induced because Agamemnon has dispossessed Achilles of his recently acquired war booty – a human being named Briseis – and taken Briseis for himself. Agamemnon’s action was prompted by the fact that he had had to return *his* war booty – another human being – from the same raid to her family. The conflict between Agamemnon and Achilles is “resolved” when Agamemnon gives Briseis back to Achilles, together with some additional gifts as a compensation and apology. It is perhaps a sobering thought that the first expression of the “Western mind” concerns a conflict over the division of the spoils of war – in this case a foreign, female human being – among Greek, male victors.

The *Iliad* is certainly not the only fictional story which treats conflicts over cultural property. 20<sup>th</sup> century examples include the Tintin adventures *The Seven Crystal Balls* (1943-46) and *Prisoners of the Sun* (1948) where the plot evolves around the removal of the mummy and diadem of an Inca king from his tomb by a Belgian scientific expedition. The Incas eventually manage to repatriate the diadem by stealing it. Broekhoven 2003. The film *The Mask* (1979) by Eddie Ugbomah is about a plot to steal the ivory pendant mask from the British Museum and return it to Nigeria. The British Museum also features in the Hong-Kong karate film *The Legend of the Drunken Master* (1994) where foreigners (British diplomats) are foiled in their attempts to smuggle cultural relics out from China and take them to the British Museum.

Looking into actual cases of return of war loot, an early example is



is that since the beginning of the 1980s, the Greek government has vocally demanded the return of the Parthenon sculptures to Athens.<sup>9</sup> The thematic writings dealing with issues surrounding ownership of cultural objects are now voluminous. A bibliography published in 2003 runs to over 300 pages.<sup>10</sup> Many of these texts – ranging from monographs to articles in anthologies and specialized journals, solemn declarations, newspaper articles, and blog posts – may be described as more normative than analytical, presenting the case either for or against the return of cultural objects. Several authors have personal or institutional interests at stake in these debates. The discussions tend to focus around certain cases, or categories of objects, such as the Parthenon sculptures, artworks seized by Nazis, or human remains and sacred objects originating from the

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the statue of Harmodios and Aristogeitos, which was returned to Athens, allegedly by Alexander the Great, some 150 years after it had been removed from the Acropolis during the Persian occupation of Athens in 480 BCE and taken to Persepolis. Perhaps the first illegal appropriation of cultural property for “scientific” purposes was when the library of Alexandria borrowed, but never returned, the original manuscripts for theater plays from Athens in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE. Cicero won his fame on a court case which involved the appropriation of sacred objects by the Roman governor of Sicily, Gaius Verres. Miles 2008.

The more modern debates goes back to the time of the Napoleonic wars, when Quatremère de Quincy – in vain – protested against the looting of French troops in Rome. Following Napoleon’s defeat much of the Napoleonic loot was returned as prescribed in the peace treaty of Vienna in 1815. An early case of a British return of war booty occurred when a British judge ordered artworks, seized from an American ship during the Anglo-American war 1812-1815, to be sent to Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, to which they were originally destined. Prott 2009, 19-25.

9. The literature on the dispute over the Parthenon sculptures is vast. For some titles, see Fiedler & Turner 2003, 26-28. An excellent analysis of the claim for return is given by Hamilakis 2007, 243-286, and for an equally pertinent discussion of the British Museum’s retentionist position, see Sylvester 2009, 25-53. See also Gabriel 2010, 126-166.
10. Fiedler & Turner 2003. Some titles in this field include: *Museum* 1979, Chamberlin 1983, Greenfield 1996 [1989], Barkan & Rusch 2002, Fforde, Hubert & Turnbull 2002, ICOM News 2004, Hoffman 2006, Merryman 2006, Vrdoljak, 2006, Cuno 2008, Gabriel & Dahl 2008, Cuno 2009, Prott 2009, *Museum International* 2009, Forrest 2010, Gabriel 2010, Nafziger & Nicgorski 2010, Turnbull and Pickering 2010, Cuno 2012, Jenkins 2016. The two journals *International Journal of Cultural Property* and *Art, Antiquity and Law* publish articles on to the topic.

Aborigines, Maoris, or Native Americans. In comparison, the literature on the future status of objects looted during European colonial warfare and occupation in Africa and Asia is considerably smaller.<sup>11</sup> The Benin objects are quite often mentioned in the literature, but are not discussed in any depth. The articles dealing exclusively with the Benin objects are neither numerous nor lengthy.<sup>12</sup> Thus, in comparison with the Parthenon sculptures – the most widely known and discussed case where the literature includes a couple of monographs, several anthologies, and a wealth of articles discussing many aspects of the conflict over the Parthenon sculptures (in particular those relating to legal and legalistic issues) – the quantity of written material relating to the question of the ownership of the Benin objects is not overwhelming. In the literature there is one article which deserves a special mention in relation to my own study – Mark O’Neil’s “Enlightenment museums. Universal or merely global?” from 2004 – which critiques Neil MacGregor’s universalism and retentionism in his “The whole world in our hands” from the preceding year. I agree with most of O’Neil’s concerns and build on some of his arguments here.<sup>13</sup>

In relation to the dearth of literature on the objects removed as part of the imperial expansion into Asia and Africa it might be noted that the cases of actual returns from the former colonizing powers in the First World to former colonies in the Third World are not numerous.<sup>14</sup> Although it is hard to quantify the number of returns

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11. On Africa, see for example Pankhurst 1986, McGuire 1990, Eyo 1994, Appiah 2006, 115-1335, Shyllon 2006, Shyllon 2010, Martin 2010.

12. On Benin objects (and other objects from Nigeria) Murray 1942, Eyo 1979, Shaw 1986, Greenfield 1996 [1989], 118-125, Eyo 1994, Shyllon 1996, Erediauwa 1997, 33, Okediji 1998, Picton 1998, Willett 2000, O’Neil 2003, Shyllon 2006, Erediauwa 2007, Opoku 2008, Picton 2010, Östberg 2010, Opoku 2011a, 2011b, Picton 2011, Wood 2012, Adewumi 2015. For Opoku’s writings, see also <http://www.museum-security.org/?cat=13>.

13. O’Neil 2004. See also Curtis 2005, MacGregor & Williams 2005.

14. Instances of returns to Africa include the following cases: One hundred “works of art” and 1000 ethnographic “specimens” returned to Congo from the Africa Museum in Tervuren in the 1970s – many of which were stolen after the fall of Mobutu in 1997. Geluwe, 1979, Gryseels 2004. The lower half of a stone bird, returned as a “permanent loan” from the Ethnological Museum in Berlin to Great Zimbabwe in 2000, from where it had been taken about 100 years earlier. Previously, in 1981, four stone birds had been returned to

(and the relative proportions of actual returns in comparison to the number of requests made) it seems to be the case that more returns are effectuated within and between First World countries (and to the indigenous populations in these countries) than between the First and the Third World. Although, for example, museums and institutions in Britain contain a large number of objects obtained during colonial conquest and occupation, cases of return of such objects to former colonies are very rare. In those cases when objects in British collections have been returned, the return has been made to either recipients and locations within Britain or to recipients (aboriginal communities) and locations in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, or the United States. An intra-British (or English-Scottish) case of return is the Stone of Scone which was taken as war booty in Scone, Scotland, by the British King Edward I in 1296. The stone was placed under the coronation stool in Westminster Abbey in London where it remained for 700 years until it was transferred to Edinburgh Castle in 1997. Among the cases of returns to aboriginal communities is the Ghost Dance Shirt which the Kelvingrove Museum in Glasgow returned to the Lakota in 1999. The shirt was probably removed from a corpse following the Wounded Knee massacre in 1890 and was acquired by the museum in 1892 from a member of William Cody's (Buffalo Bill's) Wild West Show.<sup>15</sup> To my knowledge, the sole case of a return from the British Museum in the last decades is the return (as a long-term loan) of a Kwak-waka'wakw mask to the U'mista Cultural Society at the Nambis Community of Alert Bay in British Columbia, Canada. The mask, confiscated by Canadian police in 1921 following a potlatch ceremony, had been given to the British Museum in 1944. In 2005, after an eight year negotiating process the mask was handed over to the U'mista Cultural Society.<sup>16</sup> This case forms the exception rather than the rule at the museum (and it is not brought forward by the

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Great Zimbabwe from South Africa, while a fifth one remains in South Africa. Dewey 2006, 1-3, 28-31, Munjeri 2009, Tytgat 2009, Matenga 2011. In 2005, Italy returned the Axum Obelisk, which had been removed by Italian troops in 1937, to Ethiopia. Pankhurst 1986, 58-59, Shyllon 2003, 137-139, Mariam 2009, Scovazzi 2009. For other cases, see Östberg 2010b, 62.

15. Hooper-Greenhill 2000b, 158.

16. Sanborn 2009.

museum when it presents its retentionist policy). Going back in time, however, it is possible to find a few other cases of return from the British Museum. In, or about, 1873, the British Museum, at the request of the British government, returned a manuscript to Ethiopia which had been looted by the British in Maqdala in 1868, and, as will be discussed later, in the 1950s the British Museum returned a number of Benin plaques by selling them to the National Museum in Lagos.<sup>17</sup>

In the literature on contested objects there is a tendency to focus on issues pertaining to the objects' legal status and location rather than on how they are represented (shown). That is, the discussion seems more devoted to the question of who has the (best) right to possess the objects and where they should be physically placed and less concerned with what actually is (or should be) communicated with and through them.<sup>18</sup> Sometimes there is also a tendency to focus on return rather than on retention and thus more focus is placed on claimants than the current possessors. The debate over contested objects is typically given headings such as "the restitution debate" or the "repatriation issue," and it is perhaps symptomatic that a major publication in this field is entitled *The Return of Cultural Property*, although many of the cases discussed in the book are about objects which have *not* been returned, but are kept by various parties (mostly Western museums).<sup>19</sup> This tendency to turn the attention to return and requesters means that while many of the explicit and implicit reasons for return are presented (either from an affirmative, adversative, or more analytical perspective) the retainers and the reasons for retention are less commented upon.<sup>20</sup> For example, the point is often made that claims on cultural objects are linked to attempts to strengthen the

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17. The British Royal family has, on two occasions (in 1924 and 1965), also returned objects looted in Maqdala. Pankhurst 1986, Shyllon 2003, 134, 138.

18. This focus in the debate may be seen as linked to essentialist perceptions of objects, that is, that the notion that objects "are" and have stable meanings rather than being "made" and communicated.

19. Greenfield 1996 [1989].

20. See for example Skrydstrup 2008, 62 who probes the question "if repatriation is the solution, what then is the problem?", but does not go into the issue of what "problem" is solved through retention.

claimants (cultural) identity. Both those who are for and those who are against return are in general agreement of this point. What they disagree about is whether such identity building is a good or a bad thing. However, less attention is paid to the fact that non-return is not a neutral, value-free, and apolitical non-act. Hence, the claim to have the right to keep objects is linked to certain perceptions of the retainers' identity. It often entails a certain perception of the claimant's identity as well. This is not only because the creation of difference between selves and others is an important element in any identity building project, but also because the argument that the current possessors have the better right to the object in question tends to be linked with the argument of why the claimants have less right to it (likewise, claimants often formulate their claims not only based on a perception of their own identity, but also on that of the current holders). These constructed identities are often naturalized by projecting them backwards in time. This is a common strategy in any endeavor to form a collective identity and it is an almost inevitable element when creating identities to justify claims over objects which were lost and acquired long ago. Any collective or community (whether it is a claimant or possessor of an object) which currently claims to be an heir of an object may have an interest in extending the collective in question back in history, to make it seem as "naturally" existing at the point in time when the object was transferred. Conversely, it may also have an interest in severing or destabilizing competing claimants' links to the past to weaken the validity of their claim. Thus, both the arguments for return and retention relate to certain perceptions about who the current possessor and claimant are and previously were (and perhaps also will be in the future).

When an object is claimed on behalf of a nation state, it is often objected that nation states are constructs. The argument bears on an influential pattern of thought set by the scholarly literature on the formation of national identity, such as Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* and Eric Hobsbaw'n's edited volume *The Invention of Tradition*.<sup>21</sup> Anderson's classic argument is that a nation is

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21. Anderson 1983, Hobsbaw'n & Ranger 1983.

an “imagined community” because most of its members, including past and future generations, will not and cannot ever meet, and thus their sense of mutual belonging and identity must be formed around certain shared symbols and values, be it a common origin, culture, or language. Hobsbawn’s term “invented traditions” refers to how various rituals, customs, and ideas which are of quite recent origin, are given the appearance of having a venerable age to make them an integrated and natural part of a collective identity.

Hence, when national ownership over objects is claimed, the counterargument is: because the nation state is a construct – an “imagined community” – with a likewise constructed past – “invented traditions” – there exists no “real” link between a nation state and certain objects, especially if the objects were made and changed hands at a time prior to the constitution of the nation state in question. Thus, for example, some have argued that the Greek state founded in 1832 cannot claim ownership over the Parthenon sculptures because they were made in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE and removed from Athens in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. To this it is sometimes added that the idea that an ethnic group can trace its origin so far back in time links to chauvinistic, indeed racist, notions about racial and cultural purity.<sup>22</sup> It is certainly true that claims for return often go hand in hand with a nationalistic rhetoric and may be underpinned by problematic *Blut und Boden*-thinking.<sup>23</sup>

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22. Cuno 2008.

23. I write “often” because states’ claims need not be based on perceived genetic affiliation: many states claim ownership over oil, minerals, and other natural resources on its territory, and ownership over archaeological objects may likewise be claimed without basing the claim on ancestral descent from the objects’ makers. Greece nowadays mainly bases its official argument for the return of the Parthenon sculptures on the benefits of reuniting the sculptures in London with those in Athens. Gabriel 2010, 160.

Claims may also be based on the principle that when states cede territory they should also cede objects. Thurstan Shaw (1986, 46) puts the argument thus in relation to decolonization: “[W]hereas political self-determination has been conceded, its logical concomitant in the realm of cultural property is still resisted by the former colonial masters. We claim righteousness for having giving such countries their independence, and for giving many of them financial aid, yet we cling to their cultural property as if conditions of colonial times still obtained. [...] The territories have been handed back to the inhabitants, but many of their treasures have not.” Cf. Kowalski 2001, who

To all this one may add some of the insight of Michael Billig's *Banal Nationalism* from 1995. He points out that while "nationalism" tends to be associated with the far-right extremism and overt expressions of patriotism, it needs to be seen as a broader concept, and the naturalization of the nation should be understood as occurring in daily practices and expressions. As to how this routine, or banal, nationalism is expressed in familiar habits of language he suggests an analysis which becomes "linguistically microscopic," in that it pays close attention to the meanings attached to and created through small words such as "we" and "here."<sup>24</sup> In stressing how the creation of national identity occurs in common and constantly repeated behavior and formulations, Billig comes close to Foucault's argument of how discourse is created and maintained through its "microphysics" – in quotidian and customary, seemingly innocent, routines and expressions. One may speak about the making of a national discourse which defines and produces "knowledge" about what the nation or people was, is, and ought to be, and what it is not.

While the theorizing of the making of national identity has been used to look into the argument for return, less attention has been paid to it potentially offering a toolbox for shedding light on the argument for retention. Anderson's, Hobsbawm's, and Billig's ideas regarding how the nation is constructed may just as well be applied to other equally imagined and invented communities, including museums. As will be seen further on, in the case of the British Museum, it is clear that the museum's (constructed) past and traditions take center stage when legitimizing its continued retention of contested objects. As we will also come back to, the making of its objects functions in a similar way, in that the seemingly banal words attached to them and the representations made with, and through, them serves to naturalize the museum.

If the parallel between the creation of an organization and a nation seems a little strange, it might be worth noting that nations may start out as organizations. An important strand in Anderson's argument was to point to the process of the "naturalization" of

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presents examples of how this principle has been applied within Europe.

24. Billig 2013 [1995], 94.



administrative units. Looking at state formation in Latin America, Anderson observed that what began as more or less arbitrarily defined subdivisions within a bureaucracy for dominating and exploiting the natural and human resources of the vast land masses of a continent, eventually came to be thought of as nations. That is, people who governed a territory began to regard themselves and the territory as a natural unit. In the course of nation building, such entities (in Latin America and elsewhere) have been equipped with certain symbols (flag, national anthem, etc.) and with certain written documents (declaration of independence, constitution, etc.) which have defined the existence of the nation in a symbolic and politico-juridical sense. The nation's "people" (defined and ordered by the census) and its territory (the borders of which are delineated on maps and sometimes in the terrain) have come to be seen as having typical characteristics and features, which have identified the nation as different from other nations. To this aggregate of concepts and materiality, time depth has been added: through complex processes of remembrance, amnesia, and outright falsifications, a nation is equipped with a (glorious) ancestry, filled with decisive historical events, ancient traditions, foresighted and brave founding fathers, and so on. This ancestry is enacted and remembered in many ways, including the preservation and reconstruction of certain aspects of materiality (old ruins, historic buildings, archaeological artifacts, and museum's to hold them) and the erection of memorials and monuments (statues of great men, graves to unknown soldiers, victory monuments, etc.). An important aspect of this construction of the past is that the origin of various recent or contemporary concepts, ideas, and traditions are located far enough back in time to amalgamate them with the nation's history.

Similarly, every museum has come into being at some point in time by bringing together bits and pieces of materiality – a collection of objects, a plot of land, a building, people, etc. – and certain ideas and concepts (often codified in its founding statutes) regarding, for example, what the museum is for, what it should collect, and which scientific principles should guide it. Thus, a museum is an assemblage of matter, concepts, and symbols (built structures,



collections, archives, documents, employees, traditions, mission statements, logo, etc.), which becomes seen as a self-evident, more or less indivisible, entity by virtue of various cultural assumptions and traditions, and defined as such through various legal prescriptions and decrees. These often regulate the museum's domain or "territory," that is, its area of collecting (and its policy on accession and deaccession). Still, despite the museum's perceived consistency, stability, and boundedness – as expressed in for example its architecture (a typical feature of museum buildings being that they, like many other deeply symbolic buildings such as churches, are set apart from other buildings in the urban landscape) – a museum is in a radical sense no more naturally given than a nation state. Of course, a museum is a much smaller unit than most states and it could be argued that the museum staffs' sense of community need not be "imagined" in the Andersonian sense. It could be based much more on personal acquaintance and face-to-face contact than on shared values or a common "culture." This might be true for smaller museums but presumably not for larger ones, such as the British Museum with a staff of around 1000 people. Also, if the museum was founded a long time ago (as the British Museum was) can the bonds of belonging between the current staff and long dead founders and employees not be upheld through personal acquaintance.

To suggest that there are resemblances between the making of a nation and a museum is not to say that the processes of making nations and museums are identical in each and every respect. Both take many forms in theory as well as in practice. The identity formation in museums perhaps has less in common with the notion of ethnic nationalism (where the sense of identity and belonging is based on ethnic descent) than with the notion of civic nationalism (where the sense of identity and belonging is formed around certain shared values), although museum's may be very ethnically homogenous places, which promotes ethnocentric visions about what constitutes humanity (Natural history museums in particular excel in the genre of promoting the idea that humanity is equivalent to a white man, as in, for example, exhibits on evolution or human anatomy, where mankind is almost always exemplified with a white

middle-age male – occasionally accompanied with a woman and children in subordinate positions.)<sup>25</sup>

Later on the British Museum's arguments for retention will be presented, focusing on how they are articulated by MacGregor. As will be seen, the museum's past plays an integrated part when he formulates the museum's position. His vision of the museum's foundation, the founders' principles, and certain events in the museum's subsequent history – such as important discoveries made through objects in its collections – are brought forward, creating an image of the museum as a stable institution, whose founding ideals have endured from 1753 right up to the present. This constructed essence is used as part of the axiom that the museum cannot return objects to claimants. Any narration is in a sense a construct, but the constructs created may differ regarding to what degree they have a foundation in verifiable factual evidence. As will be discussed in subsequent chapters, MacGregor's version of the museum's past is a highly selective and speculative one. Many of his claims about the museum's past rest on flimsy or no evidence and appear more as stemming from contemporary wishful thinking than from a study of the historical records. Thus, we are here dealing with invented traditions which serve the present-day imagining of the British Museum as a community which has adhered to the same ideals through the two and a half centuries of its existence.

Perhaps it needs to be pointed out that while the present study deals with a group of contested objects possessed by a particular institution, it does not attempt to settle the issue over the future ownership and location of these objects, or of the Benin objects in any other museum. Thus, it does not seek to discuss whether the objects in the British Museum or elsewhere are better retained by their current owners or if the objects and their title should be transferred to museums in Nigeria (or to any other party).<sup>26</sup> Nor

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25. As found, for example, in the displays of the Natural History Museum, London. Samuelsson 2008, 204-209.

26. To discuss which individuals or institutions in Nigeria (the Edo Royal House, the Edo State or the Nigerian State etc.) are the rightful dispossessed owners and claimants to these objects also lies outside the scope of the present study. Other claimants may be suggested. See Okediji 1998.

does it discuss whether or not any compromise or collaborative approaches should be considered, such as long-term or permanent loans or shared ownership and curation. Rather, it seeks to scrutinize what the present proprietor of a major collection of Benin objects (considering itself to be the rightful possessor through its claim to have the capacity to make impartial representations) communicates with or through the Benin objects. Of course, questions regarding an object's ownership, location and representation are interconnected. By and large, ownership and physical possession of an object entails control over how it is made and represented. It is as trivial as it is important to note that the representations of the Benin objects (and of other disputed objects and their trajectories) in the collections of the British Museum are produced by the British Museum, not by their claimants. Also, the current ownership status and physical location of objects is in itself a kind of statement. Through retaining objects a museum not only states that the objects belong to the museum in question, but also that they *ought* to belong to that museum.



## 4. The 1897 Edo-British war

“[T]he chattering of the native troops is rather astonishing, one would think we are really amongst a lot of women.” Felix Roth, Benin Territories Expedition, 9 February 1897.<sup>1</sup>

The following brief historical overview will outline the background to why the British occupied Benin City and annihilated the Benin Kingdom. Benin City, which until 1897 was the capital of the Benin Kingdom, is located in present south-east Nigeria; it is today the capital of the Edo State. The Benin Kingdom traces its origins back to around the 13<sup>th</sup> century. European contact with the Benin Kingdom began at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century when Portuguese sailors first reached the coastline of what is now known as the Bight of Benin. The first known Portuguese visitor to Benin City was João Alfonso d’Aveiro who traveled to the city around 1486. The Portuguese established trading posts and trading links with Benin. Pepper, slaves, and ivory were bought from Benin with brass, cowrie shells, and cloth. The Portuguese also sent missionaries to the Benin court and some Portuguese served as mercenaries in Benin. Portuguese trade with Benin lost importance in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. During this time period French, Dutch, and British traders also began trading with Benin.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Diary of Felix Roth in Roth 1903, Appendix II, iii.
  2. For a history of Edo-European relations, see Ryder 1969.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, palm oil had become the most important export commodity from this part of the West African Coast. Palm oil was used as a lubricant for machinery and as an ingredient in soap products in a trade which was dominated by British companies. Consequently, the British government began taking an interest in the region and established the Protectorate of the Bight of Biafra in 1849 and the Protectorate of the Bight of Benin in 1852. Like their predecessors, the British mainly had small trading posts on the coastline and their influence did not extend far inland.<sup>3</sup>

However, from the 1880s there was a general change in the policy of the various European colonial powers. They began to expand their territories along the African coastline and into the hinterland in what has become known as “the Scramble for Africa.”<sup>4</sup> At the Berlin conference in 1884-85 Africa was cut up into different spheres of influence by the European colonial powers. The area which corresponds to present day southern Nigeria was recognized as part of the British sphere and British authority was established by the formation of a Protectorate in 1891, first named the Oil Rivers Protectorate (after the major export product) and then the Benin Coast Protectorate from 1893.<sup>5</sup>

The Kingdom of Benin was within the British sphere of influence, and it was a conflict over trading rights which brought about its demise, although as we will see in the following, the humanitarian card was also played by the British as an argument to take territorial control over the area. To the British, it was the custom of performing human sacrifices, which was the ultimate proof of Edo savagery, which needed to be stamped out.

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3. Ryder 1969, 239-240.

4. Ryder 1969, 260-265. On the “Scramble for Africa,” see Pakenham 1992.

5. Home 1982, 5. The area of the protectorate stretched from the Cameroon Colony in the East to the Lagos Colony in the West. (Lagos was a British colony established in 1861. Cameroon was a German colony established in 1884.) The area along the River Niger was the domain of the Royal Niger Company, a mercantile company which from 1886 to 1900 chartered the territory from the British Government and “administered” it in exchange for trading rights. In 1900 the territory of the Royal Niger Company was merged with the Benin Coast Protectorate into the Southern Nigeria Protectorate. As Layiwola (2007, 83) notes, the term “protectorate” is a euphemism.

In 1892, Henry Gallwey (whose name we encountered earlier in connection with the attempt by his descendants to sell an ivory pendant mask inherited from him), then serving as the vice-consul of the Oil Rivers Protectorate, managed to sign a treaty with Ovonramwen, the Oba (king) of Benin, where Oba Ovonramwen, in exchange for receiving the “gracious favor and protection” of the British government, considerably reduced the independence of the Benin Kingdom. According to the treaty, the Oba was not allowed to have diplomatic contact with any foreign nation without the approval of the British government. The treaty also gave Christian missionaries the right to carry out their activities in the Oba’s territories. It further stipulated that the Oba was to assist the British consular and other officers in “matters relating to the administration of justice, the development of the resources of the country, the interest of commerce, or any other matter in relation to peace, order, and good government, and the general progress of civilization.” Most importantly (for the British) the treaty also stipulated that all countries were allowed to freely carry out trade in the territories of the Oba. It remains unclear why Oba Ovonramwen signed this treaty as it gave him little in return for giving up much of his sovereignty. Presumably, he and the British made different interpretations of its content. It soon became clear that Oba Ovonramwen and the British did not agree on the concept of “free trade.”<sup>6</sup>

Trade in the Benin Kingdom was organized under royal monopoly. The Oba demanded gifts (a sort of “custom duties”) from the middlemen who carried out the trade. If these gifts were not satisfactory the Oba closed down the markets until further gifts had been delivered. Oba Ovonramwen did not cede control over the trade after signing the Gallwey treaty, and continued to close down the markets for periods of time to increase his revenues. These procedures frustrated British and local African traders as it made trade less profitable than desired. Although the levying of custom duties was not necessarily prescribed by the treaty, the British saw the Oba’s occasional trade bans as a breach of the treaty.<sup>7</sup>

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6. Ryder 1969, 265-272, Igbafe 1979, 42-48, Home 1982, 8. The full text of the treaty is found in Roth 1903, Appendix I.

7. Ryder 1969, 273, Igbafe 1979, 47-48.

To the British, Oba Ovonramwen's political and religious domination over the Edo was a hindrance to trade and progress. Despotism, tradition, and superstition stood in the way of development. The option to remove the Oba by military force was considered. In the report to the Foreign Office, after the signing of the 1892 treaty, Gallwey points out the economic potential of the district: "the great stumbling block to any advance being the fetish 'reign of terror' which exists throughout the kingdom of Benin." He adds that sending a "punitive expedition" may "eventually prove advisable."<sup>8</sup> Gallwey's superior, Counsel-General Claude Macdonald, in the covering letter to the Foreign Office in which the original copy of the treaty was sent, repeats the same message. He writes that "minerals, gum copal, gum arabic, palm oil, kernels etc exist in large quantities" in the territory, yet, "trade, commerce and civilization, however, are paralysed [sic] by the form of fetish government which unfortunately prevails throughout the kingdom." He predicts that it will be difficult to make the Oba and his priests abandon their "barbarous practices" and that a solution to the problem might in the end come through "a display and probable use of force."<sup>9</sup>

Although Gallwey and Macdonald showed some hesitation about a military attack on the Benin Kingdom – because military action would, in Macdonald's words, "paralyze trade for a long time" – other British officials advocated a more aggressive policy. Ralph Moor (whose name was encountered earlier as the first British possessor of the ivory pendant mask which was sold to the British Museum in 1909), who served as vice-consul in the Oil Rivers/Niger Coast Protectorate 1892-1896, and from 1896 as its commissioner and consul general, frequently wrote to the Foreign Office to seek their approval for taking to arms.<sup>10</sup> In a letter from September 1895, Moor writes that the Oba's system of rule prevented "any civilizing influences" and that "at first opportunity steps should be taken for opening up the country if necessary by force."<sup>11</sup> He repeats the

8. Home 1982, 8.

9. Ryder 1969, 272, Igbafe 1979, 44-45.

10. Ryder 1969, 277-283.

11. Igbafe 1979, 49-50. Home 1982, 8.



same message in a letter in June 1896 when Oba Ovonramwen had stopped all external trade from the kingdom:

I consider that if the efforts now being made [to make the Oba open the borders] continue unsuccessful until next dry season, an expeditionary force should be sent about January or February to remove the king and his juju men for the sufferings of the people are terrible.<sup>12</sup>

Traders with commercial interests in the area also advocated a military assault to promote the spread of civilization and trade. The Liverpool trader James Pinnock, in a letter to Macdonald lamenting that his business stood in danger of being halted by the Oba's commercial policy, argued that it was a blot to the government of the Niger Coast Protectorate that the Oba was allowed to interfere with trade and carry out human sacrifices. The solution was, in Pinnock's view, that "this demon in human form, the petty king of Benin" was "deposed or transported elsewhere, peace and order maintained, the roads and country opened up, teeming as it does with every natural wealth of the great hinterland of the world."<sup>13</sup>

The policy which Moor and the traders advocated had been used earlier against other local leaders who were seen as obstructions to British commercial interests. In 1887, Jaja of Opobo was kidnapped by the British and exiled to the West Indies, and in 1894 Moor captured Nana Olomu, after a naval bombardment of Nana's capital Ebrohimi, and exiled him to the Gold Coast.<sup>14</sup> The British Foreign Office, however, remained unconvinced of the wisdom of a military attack on Benin. Yet, it in the autumn of 1896 events progressed in a direction which eventually made the Foreign Office give its go ahead. Oba Ovonramwen had again closed all markets to outside trade, possibly as a reaction to the increase in prices

12. Ryder 1969, 282, Igbafe 1979, 53, Home 1982, 27.

13. Igbafe 1979, 51, Coombes 1994b, 31.

14. Ryder 1969, 275, Igbafe 1979, 62-63, Home 1982, 10-11, 19-20. These are the slightly larger military operations. Gallwey wrote that during his service in Nigeria between 1893 and 1902 the British sent "a punitive expedition every year" (*italics added*). Gallwey 1942, 98, cf. Annual Report 1896-97, 13-15, 1897-98, 10-12.

of European goods. He demanded one thousand corrugated iron sheets for the roofing of his palace from the Itsekiri middlemen before opening trade.<sup>15</sup> At the time, Moor had gone to England on leave. The person in charge who had to take care of the situation as Acting consul-general was James Phillips, an inexperienced official who had arrived only a couple of weeks earlier. In line with Moor's policy, Phillips's remedy to the halt in the trade was to bring the Oba to his knees with military force. In November Phillips wrote to the Foreign Ministry requesting permission to take military action against Oba Ovonramwen:

I am certain that there is only one remedy, that is to depose the king of Benin from his stool. I am convinced [...] that pacific measures are now quite useless, and that the time has now come to remove the obstruction. I therefore ask the Lordship's permission to visit Benin City in February next to depose and remove the King of Benin and to establish a native Council in his place and take such further steps for opening up the country as the occasion may require.<sup>16</sup>

In the letter he asserts that the people of Benin would be glad to get rid of the "tyrant" and in a post script he adds that the Imperial Treasury would suffer no losses for the military operations, because, he had "reason to hope that sufficient ivory may be found in the King's house to pay the expenses incurred." That Phillips was not purely concerned with the well-being of the people of Benin is clear from another letter where he writes that the revenues from the protectorate were "suffering" from the halt in the trade.<sup>17</sup>

In London, Moor gave Phillips's plan his full support, arguing that the trade expansion which would follow the expedition would offset the costs of the military operations.<sup>18</sup> However, the Foreign Office did not give its approval. A telegram with the reply that the operation must be "postponed to another year" was sent to Phillips on the 8<sup>th</sup> of

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15. Igbafe 1979, 47.

16. Ryder 1969, 284, Igbafe 1979, 55.

17. Ryder 1969, 283-285, Igbafe 1979, 54-56.

18. Igbafe 1979, 50.

January 1897. Yet, by that time Phillips was already dead. Instead of waiting for instructions from the Foreign Office, Phillips had decided to take the matter in his own hands. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of January Phillips set out for Benin City, not with an armed force, but with an unarmed party on a peaceful mission. He embarked on the journey with eight British officials and traders and 230 black carriers. Before leaving, he sent messengers informing Oba Ovonramwen about his impending visit. The messengers brought back a reply from Oba Ovonramwen that he could not meet the party at the time because he was celebrating the Ague festival, during which he was not allowed to see foreigners. He would, however, after about a month, give his reply when he could meet Phillips. Despite this answer Phillips sent the messengers back with the message that he intended to come anyway. Phillips pressed on with his party despite receiving several warnings about the dangers of doing so. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of January, the party was ambushed. Seven Whites were killed, only two managed to escape together with about 20 black carriers. Of the remaining ca. 210 carriers, many were killed, others were taken captive and enslaved.<sup>19</sup> This event, which has become known as “the Benin Massacre,” caused an outcry in Britain. The abovementioned trader Pinnock again called for the removal of the Oba with military force. This was not only to avenge the British dead, impose British authority, and promote trade (which would have included Pinnock’s own trading interests), it was

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19. Papers 1897, 15-22, Correspondence 1899, 18-22, Ryder 1969, 285-286, Igbafe 1979, 56-59, Plankensteiner 2007c, 199. Of the carriers which had been taken captive, several were sacrificed when the British Expeditionary Force advanced on Benin City. About a hundred of the enslaved carriers were freed by the British. Home 1982, 87, 107-108. It is worth highlighting that almost all accounts of the “Benin Massacre” only state that seven British were killed. The fact that a large number (presumably about a hundred) of the black carriers were also killed is rarely mentioned. Home’s account is exceptional in that it provides information on the fate of the black carriers. Barley 2010, 15 tells that “[o]ver a hundred people were killed” but as his text does not mention that Phillip’s mission was accompanied by black carriers, it rather creates the impression that all those killed were white. Among the few writers to show (a degree of) concern for the black victims is Pinnock who in February 1897 wrote: “Naturally all our sympathy has gone forth for the loss of this noble band of European victim [...] but our sympathy should also be extended – *almost, if not quite, as much* to the large body of followers who were slaughtered with them” (italics added). Pinnock 1897, 18.

also for the benefit of the people of Benin. Because the territory, in Pinnock's view, belonged to the British, the British government had both the right and duty to interfere:

Apart from all considerations of commerce on both sides the depopulation of the country by human sacrifices would be sufficient reason for Her Majesty's Government stepping in to suppress horrors more atrocious than anything depicted in the history of any country in what is practically British territory.<sup>20</sup>

The British retribution came quickly. A force of 1200 British and native troops, and between 1400 and 2100 native carriers was gathered in early February. The Benin Territories Expedition, commonly known as the Benin Punitive Expedition, was then sent against Benin City.<sup>21</sup> The Oba's troops, mostly armed with vintage firearms, bows, and old cannons, stood little chance against the British force, equipped with repeating rifles, Maxim machine guns, modern artillery, and rocket launchers. The British force captured Benin City on the 18<sup>th</sup> of February.

In what appears as a desperate attempt to stall the British advance, the defenders performed human sacrifices on a large scale. The killings were still carried out when the British entered the city and were only interrupted by the British take-over of the city. The members of the Expeditionary Force were evidently taken aback by the sight of numerous dead and dying victims and the smell of decomposing bodies, some of which had bloated and burst in the heat of the sun. The bloodshed and horrid stench which impregnated the city is a recurring theme in the various accounts of the expedition's participants.<sup>22</sup> Robert Allman, medical officer in

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20. Home 1982, 50.

21. Annual Report 1896-97, 7, Papers 1897, 35, Plankensteiner 2007c, 199. The various sources give different numbers of the native carriers. Because the force was orchestrated and led by the British, it may be referred to as "British," but this designation should not lead one to forget that, when including the carriers in the count, the non-British participants in the expedition outnumber the British.

22. Allman 1897, Bacon 1897, 86-97, Papers 1897, 27-29, 57, *The Times* 23 February

the Niger Coast Protectorate, reported that the putrid atmosphere caused nearly all the Europeans and the native troops and carriers to suffer from epidemic diarrhea, killing six of the latter. Allman, who was charged with the task of ensuring the sanity of the city with a workforce of one thousand carriers gives the following description in a letter to Moor on the 13<sup>th</sup> of March where he lists the numerous dead encountered in the city:

On the principal “sacrifice-tree,” facing the main gate of the King’s compound, there were two sacrifices (crucifixions), and lying around the foot of the tree there were seventeen newly-decapitated bodies and forty-three decapitated bodies in various stages of decomposition. On the “sacrifice-tree” to the west of the main entrance a woman was crucified, and at the foot of the tree four decapitated and eviscerated bodies were found. On going westwards [...] a sickening sight was met with. One hundred and seventy-six human sacrifices and decomposing bodies were found, the stench from which was so intolerable that the sanitary gang under my supervision had on more than one occasion to beat a hasty retreat. In the portion of the city to the south of the plain I came across five sacrifices (decapitations with terrible mutilations), and in the compounds in the rear of the King’s palace six more were found. On the main road, [...] eleven newly-decapitated bodies were found. [...] All the above mentioned were decently buried, besides upwards of 300 skeletons. In various parts of the city, but principally in the immediate vicinity of the King’s compound, huge “pits” were found, [...] seven of which contained human sacrifices, from fifteen to twenty in each pit, the dead and dying intermingled in these foulsome holes.<sup>23</sup>

Seven captives were rescued from these pits and, according to Allman, “upwards of six hundred human corpses” were cremated or buried.<sup>24</sup>

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1897, Felix Roth in Roth 1903, Appendix II, x-xii, Home 1982, 86.

23. Papers 1897, 57.

24. Allman 1897.

The British also looted the Oba's palace, the palace of the Queen Mother, and the dwellings of other high ranking Edo. The loot was brought together in the courtyard of the "palaver" (assembly) hall in the Oba's palace.<sup>25</sup> On the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> of February the troops blew up and destroyed the sacrificial trees and altars. The palace of the Queen Mother and other palaces were burned. On the 21<sup>st</sup> a fire accidentally broke out and left the Oba's palace in ruins causing the British to lose most of their provisions and some of the loot.<sup>26</sup> On the 22<sup>nd</sup> the naval troops began their march back to the coast with "carrier after carrier bearing ivory tusks," leaving the city in control of the troops from the Niger Coast Protectorate Force.<sup>27</sup> The remaining troops gathered more loot. Officer Herbert Walker wrote in his diary entry on the 12<sup>th</sup> of March that a recently arrived fellow officer "is now wandering round with chisel & hammer, knocking off brass figures & collecting all sorts of rubbish as loot."<sup>28</sup>

Oba Ovonramwen had fled the city, but surrendered himself and a number of his followers to the British in September of the same year. In the ensuing trial several of the Edo leaders were sentenced to death for instigating the ambush on the Phillips mission. Oba Ovonramwen (who was found not guilty on the charge of having participated in consenting to the attack) was deposed and sent into exile in Calabar.<sup>29</sup>

From the British perspective the expedition was a success. The costs for the expedition were £30,000, less than the estimated £50,000. The casualties in the force were small. Rawson reported only 8 dead (5 Whites, 3 Blacks) and 44 wounded (22 Whites, 22 Blacks) in the fighting and 7 more deaths from the effect of climate (5 Whites) and accidents (1 White, 1 Black).<sup>30</sup> To the British, the "little

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25. Bacon 1897, 91.

26. Roth 1903, 209, Fagg 1981, Plankensteiner 2007b, 34.

27. Papers 1897, 27, Bacon 1897, 99-109, Home 1982, 90-91.

28. *Nigerian Watch* 2014, Otzen 2015, cf. Allman 1897, Roth 1903, 217.

29. Ryder 1969, 291-294, Home 1982, 111-113. The exiled Oba became a motif for postcards from Calabar, see Nevadomsky 2006, 45, fig. 5 and <http://ihuanedo.ning.com/m/blogpost?id=2971192%3ABlogPost%3A8340>.

30. Papers 1897, 39, 42-44, cf. Bacon 1897, 148-149. There were several later deaths from fever. According to Home, the deaths and injuries among the native carriers were heavily underreported. Home 1982, 96, cf. Annual Report 1896-

war” was also a remarkable feat of British valor and organizational talent.<sup>31</sup> In less than two months after the death of Phillips, an expeditionary force had been gathered together from places as far apart as Cape Town, Malta, and London, and then made its way through dense bush terrain under heavy fighting and captured Benin City, thus avenging Phillips and putting an end to Edo human sacrifice. A few days after the fall of the city, the naval troops had re-embarked on the ships and were ready “for any further service.”<sup>32</sup> It was a triumph of technology and civilization over superstition and barbarity and it showed the global reach and might of the British Empire. In the words of Reginald Bacon, an intelligence officer participating in the force and author of *Benin – The City of Blood*, the swiftness by which the revenge had been brought was a feat “so marvelous that it is scarcely credible.”<sup>33</sup> In Benin City, within four weeks of its capture, a nine-hole golf course had been laid out with the home hole situated on the site where a crucifixion tree had formerly stood.<sup>34</sup>

Through subsequent military patrols to the countryside, the territory of the Benin Kingdom was soon incorporated in the domain of the Niger Coast Protectorate. The British immediately started to exploit its economic potential, including its rubber forests.<sup>35</sup> In the annual report for the years 1896-1897 Moor concluded that: “a rich country has thus been opened up to the influence of civilization and trade” and since “the people themselves are intelligent” they will, “when properly instructed [...] quickly pick up civilized ideas

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97, 7. The losses among the Edo fighting troops are unknown. Home suggests that there might have been several hundred dead and many more wounded. The number of people sacrificed by the Edo is also unclear. Allman’s accounts indicate it was in the range of six or seven hundred. Igbafe 1979, 71 claims that Allman’s account is an exaggeration and that it includes slaves which had died from natural causes but had been left unburied according to Edo custom. Home estimated the number to 400, probably by adding together those in Allman’s report in Papers 1897, 57, but omitting the 300 “skeletons” from the count.

31. Roth 1903, v.

32. Bacon 1897, 18-19, Papers 1897, 29, Gallwey & Clarke 1902-03.

33. Bacon 1897, 19.

34. *The Times* 19 October 1897, Gallwey 1942, 94, Barley 2007, 122, Huseman 2013, 3.

35. Igbafe 1979, 73-75.

and become keen traders.”<sup>36</sup> In the following years the British continued their territorial expansion and soon consolidated their hold over the area of modern Nigeria.

Oba Ovonramwen remained in exile in Calabar until he died in 1914. After his death, the kingship in Benin was reinstated with British consent and support. Oba Ovonramwen’s son, Aig-uobasimwin, ascended the throne as Oba Eweke II. As part of the restoration of the kingship, a new (smaller) palace was built. Two royal ancestral altars were erected, one to Oba Ovonramwen and a second one to other past Obas.<sup>37</sup> A number of pre-1897 ceremonies and “traditions” connected to the court were reintroduced, sometimes with modifications to fit the new times.<sup>38</sup> For example, the Ifieto, a group of men, who reportedly in older times had appeared naked during ceremonies, were clothed to not offend British sensibilities.<sup>39</sup> The custom of human sacrifice was not reinstated, and the sacrifice of leopards was replaced with the sacrifice of cows or other animals.<sup>40</sup> Many of the Igue rituals were joined together to coincide with the Christmas holiday period.<sup>41</sup> The researcher Laura Boulton, who was visiting Benin City around 1935, described the town as “peaceful, quiet, and orderly” and Oba Akenzua II, who had ascended the throne in 1933, as “a well-educated, intelligent young man” who ruled “in friendly cooperation with the British government” and read Chesterfield’s *Letters to his Son*.<sup>42</sup>

Last, but not least are a few words on the broader ideological and conceptual framework within which the British viewed the war. To them, the war was one where civilization, freedom (especially free

36. Annual Report 1896-97, 14, Igbafe 1979, 338.

37. See Talbot 1969 [1926] 3:1, 487, fig. 129 for a photograph of the altar to Oba Ovonramwen. On the altars, see also Blackmun 1988, 16.

38. The restoration of Benin kingship is discussed by Picton who stresses that it should be seen as an active process of cultural entrepreneurship and that Edo traditions should be regarded as more flexible and less stable than “Eurocentric notion of African traditionality would have us believe.” Picton 1997, 22.

39. Plankensteiner 2007a, 469-470, no. 252 (Aisien).

40. Plankensteiner 2007a, 279, no. 6-7 (Völger).

41. Plankensteiner 2007a, 447, no. 227 (Nevadomsky).

42. Boulton 1935.



trade), and progress stood against barbarity, oppression, and stagnation, even degeneration. Since long before Phillips's ill-fated mission, civilization, trade, and development had been Moor's and the trader Pinnock's battle cry and call to arms.<sup>43</sup>

The British press aired similar sentiments. An article in the *Illustrated London News*, which appeared when preparations for the sending of the expeditionary force were underway, characterized the Edo as a "degraded race of savages," indulging in "habits of disgusting cruelty," and in need of being rescued from their "groveling superstition and ignorance."<sup>44</sup> After the fall of Benin City, another article describes the city as "a hell upon earth" which had been captured by "a brave force of true British warriors" fighting "against all the obstacles of nature and savages" in "a holy war" undertaken to root out "satanic practices."<sup>45</sup> A verse commemorating Phillips and the others (Whites) who fell with him lauds the "pure and brave" who "out of darkness brought the day," their deaths putting an end to the "daily human sacrifices" and the "fetish tyrants" craving for blood.<sup>46</sup> As Coombes has noted, the coverage did not discuss war causes such as trade monopolies.<sup>47</sup>

It is perhaps hardly surprising that the British reports expressed negative views of their adversaries, demonizing and even vegetalizing them (according to one article, when fired at from tree tops, the return Maxim gun fire made the Edo soldiers fall from the trees "like nuts").<sup>48</sup> But the characterizations given by the white expeditionary members of Blacks "in general" and that of the black soldiers, carriers, servants, guides, and interpreters which worked for (or under) the British are also far from positive. White male superiority is created and maintained in a mental universe formed around oppositional pairs such as high/low, true/false, adult/child, culture/nature, mind/body, man/animal, male/female, hard/soft. According to Bacon:

43. Igbafe 1979, 51, Coombes 1994b, 31.

44. *Illustrated London News* 23 January 1897, 123, Coombes 1994b, 11.

45. Home 1982, ix- x.

46. Home 1982, 102.

47. Coombes 1994b.

48. *The Times* 27 March, 1897.

An average nigger of low type lies without compunction [...] out of absolute indifference to telling a lie or the truth [...] The brain of the black man is also very slow; when once fairly on a subject it works well, and he has good memory, but change from one point to another apparently his brain cannot do so quickly, and it will take some few minutes of waiting and patient interrogation before he thoroughly gets in touch with the new subject. They are not, therefore, easy people to manipulate from an intelligence point of view.<sup>49</sup>

Apparently, Bacon was frustrated by the difficulty of getting quick and reliable information from Blacks through interrogations (his words recalling Cromer's reference to "mild cross-examinations), and he blames *their* lack of intellectual capacity on the fact that "manipulating" them was hard. Yet, when Blacks enthusiastically gave their assistance his tone is still condescending. Asked to make a plan of Benin City, the Blacks who undertook the task where, in Bacon's words, "as pleased as children making a sand castle." Bacon acknowledges that the expedition owed "a great debt" to the black troops. They "did a lot of hard work, had a considerable amount of the fighting and reflected much credit on themselves and their officers," to which he adds that "[n]aturally the sun and climate generally did not affect them as much as the white men." However, "their mental capacities and traditions are so inferior to those of the English that it would be too much to expect that under privations or in sudden emergencies they would exhibit the same amount of *esprit de corps* and discipline" (original italics).<sup>50</sup> Bacon is here rehearsing a stock stereotype about "savages," that when suffering hardship – "privations" – they lack endurance and cannot exercise self-control (an idea closely linked to the idea of the savage's childishness). Bacon's claim that the black troops could not cope with "sudden emergencies" seems related to his insistence that the brains of the Blacks work slowly, and perhaps also reflects the notion that Blacks could follow given orders, but when new circumstances arose they

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49. Bacon 1897, 30-31.

50. Bacon 1897, 131-132.

were unable to take any initiatives of their own. Although not made explicit, his text suggests a reverse correlation between physical and mental capacities: the Blacks' strong bodies made them suitable for a physical "hard work," but their lack of "discipline" was caused by their weak minds.

A lieutenant Vernon Haggard (a nephew of the novelist Rider Haggard) perhaps expresses the most dehumanizing view when writing about the black carriers:

Their only redeeming feature is their fear and respect of the white man, and the fact that you can whack them as much as you please. After knowing them a short time one ceases to look at them as men and to consider them as something lower than asses.<sup>51</sup>

The accounts describing others reflect back on the speaking subjects, and occasionally provide glimpses of what was seen as constituting normal British masculine behavior. The expeditionary force was an all-male enterprise (save for three "nursing sisters" on board a hospital ship), but when taking care of and comforting the wounded and dying, the soldiers could behave in ways associated to femininity.<sup>52</sup> The surgeon Felix Roth describes in his diary a "heartrending" moment when the troops had come under heavy fire and suffered casualties. He could hear soldiers "speaking softly" to soothe the injured and "[i]t was a curious scene to see the unwounded, with their arms round the necks of the wounded, talking to them in tender womanish words." His wording suggests that "soft" and "tender" words were not normally used by the British men when talking to each other. Further comments made by Roth in his diary are also revealing for what they say about the male British self and its others. Roth was evidently baffled by the – to his mind – strange behavior of the native troops and in particular their talkativeness. Reflecting on life in a camp he writes: "It is a strange life, black troops lying about all over the place, laughing and gibbering like a lot of monkeys" and further

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51. Home 1982, 96.

52. On the three nursing sisters: Papers 1897, 13.

on he remarks that “the chattering of the native troops is rather astonishing, one would think we are really amongst a lot of women.” Apparently, British men were supposed to talk less than black men and (white) women.<sup>53</sup>

While the press generally expressed enthusiasm over the war and characterized it in terms of a struggle between civilization and barbarity, some dissenting voices were raised which drew attention to acts of barbarity, oppression, and wanton cruelty which had also been carried out amongst those who regarded themselves as civilized. When Pinnock suggested in 1896 that the troops employed in the Ashanti war should be used to suppress the human sacrifices in Benin and compel the Oba to do business with the Europeans, a writer in the socialist journal *The New Age* commented that Pinnock was more interested in his own profit than the well-being of the potential sacrificial victims. The writer suggested that the Oba could be dealt with later, when “we have stopped our too numerous and abhorrent human sacrifices” at home, referring to the conveniently overlooked circumstances that British factory workers were “dying off like rotten sheep,” living on less than starvation wages and enduring a work day of 15 or 16 hours in unhealthy workplaces.<sup>54</sup> A leader in the West African newspaper *Lagos Weekly Record*, likewise drew attention to the fact that atrocities were not just committed by

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53. Felix Roth in Roth 1903, Appendix II, ii-iii. x. Home 1982, 82-83, On emotions cf. the comment by Home 1982, 85, 93 that Rawson “wept openly” when the dead were buried. That this was taken note of suggests that such emotional expressions were evidently considered unusual behavior.

In his memoirs, Bacon gave the following characterization of Moor, “with men he was steel, with women he was wax.” Bacon did not elaborate this remark, but his text makes clear that he considered the former quality (to be “steel” with men) a good one, which could have taken Moor, “a born leader of men” to “the highest posts in the Empire,” and the latter one (to be “wax” with women) a “flaw in his character” which gave him “a life in a distant colony and a death deplored by all.” Bacon 1925, 192.

According to Home, Moor took up a position in the Oil Rivers Protectorate in 1891 following the disclosure of his affair with a married woman. In 1898, he married Adrienne Burns and Home suggests that this marriage with a divorced woman was disadvantageous to Moor’s career. He committed suicide in 1909. Home 1982, xiv, 12-13, 114-116, 123-124.

54. Coombes 1994b, 30-31.

the Oba by posing the rhetorical question: "What is the lynching of Negroes in the United States but human sacrifices?"<sup>55</sup> The paradox of spreading civilization through military conquest was also noted. When Moor conducted the Aro expedition in 1901-1902 it was commented upon in the following way in a letter from the businessman John Holt to the publicist Edmund Morel: "Wherever there are soldiers there must be war, particularly if you have helpless people to slay to get your ends quickly. Moor is at his work again killing people in order to make them more humane and civilized."<sup>56</sup> But opinions such as these which question the sharp distinction between civilization and savagery, and which highlight Western double standards were held by a minority.

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55. Coombes 1994b, 37.

56. Home 1982, 123. Edmund Morel was a leading critic of Belgian atrocities in the Congo.



## 5. Naming and framing the Benin objects

“Buried in the dust and dirt of centuries, in some of the houses were hundreds of bronze plaques of unique design; castings of wonderful details, and a very large number of elephants’ tusks of considerable age. [...] In addition to the tusks and plaques there was a wonderful collection of ivory and bronze bracelets, splendid ivory leopards, bronze heads, beautifully carved wooden stools and boxes, and many more articles too numerous to mention. A regular harvest of loot!”  
Henry Gallwey, former official in the Niger Coast Protectorate, 1930.<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter some aspects of the past and present making(s) of the objects looted in 1897 and their life stories will be discussed. The focus is on how the objects have been named, categorized, and valued in their post-1897 contexts. This chapter also deals with the interlinked issue of how some looted objects, or categories of looted objects, have acquired prominence and fame, and of how certain interpretations of these famed objects have been promoted at the expense of other objects and of other readings of objects of lesser or greater fame.

The aim here is not to try to define what these objects “are” or to argue that there is a correct interpretation or conceptualization of them. As should be clear from the previous discussion, the position adopted in this study is that objects do not have essential and stable meaning(s). Rather the objects and the manifold values and emotions

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1. Gallwey 1930, 241.

attached to, and evoked by, them have been, and are, created and recreated, in on-going processes of cultural (and material) construction and negotiation. New significances and interpretations are added to the objects over time and thus transform, amplify, or erase old ones. All endeavors to communicate these objects – to name, classify, and visualize them – are made from specific sites (social, cultural, geographical, etc.) and there is no neutral way of representing them. My own study is no exception. Hence, rather than embarking on the impossible task of giving an accurate description of any or all of these objects, I point to certain aspects of how the Benin objects have been made and remade through time and at different locations by various actors. I concentrate on verbal representations, but will also touch on visual representations such as how the objects have been displayed in museum exhibitions. Hopefully the presentation will show that the present-day conceptualizations of the objects are historically and culturally situated rather than given.

To my mind, there are several reasons why it is of interest to look closely at the making of Benin objects. One is that the question of their perceived identity is closely interrelated with the question of who their rightful owners are. Another is that their making in different ways connects with how the past is perceived, not only regarding how to judge the events of 1897, but also regarding which people in the past are remembered or forgotten. As will be discussed, the most valued objects have been possessed by people higher up in the social hierarchy (this applies both to Edo and Western society), and less valued objects have been owned by the less privileged. When certain objects are esteemed at the expense of others, this also has implications for who is kept in remembrance and who is relegated to oblivion.

To illustrate present-day conflicting interpretations of the Benin objects and their links to the ownership issue, I compare how the objects are presented by Neil MacGregor and the Oba of Benin, Omo N’Oba Erediauwa respectively. In his article “The whole world in our hands” from 2004, MacGregor introduces the Benin objects on display in the British Museum by describing them as “the Benin bronzes, some of the greatest achievements of sculpture from any period” and goes on to state:



The brass plaques were made to be fixed to the palace of the Oba, the king of Benin, one above the other, a display of technical virtuosity and sheer wealth guaranteed to daunt any visitor. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the plaques were removed and put in storage while the palace was rebuilt. A British legation, travelling to Benin at a sacred season of the year when such visits were forbidden, was killed, though not on the orders of the Oba himself. In retaliation, the British mounted a punitive expedition against Benin. Civil order collapsed (Baghdad comes to mind), the plaques and other objects were seized and sold, ultimately winding up in the museums of London, Berlin, Paris and New York. There they caused a sensation. It was a revelation to western artists and scholars, and above all to the public, that metal objects of this refinement had been made in Africa. Out of the terrible circumstances of the 1897 dispersal, a new, more securely grounded view of Africa and African culture could be formed.<sup>2</sup>

In MacGregor's presentation the objects receive their (post-1897) value as objects of art and as objects of knowledge. In his evaluation, they rank among the world's "greatest achievements of sculpture," and they provide a "new, more securely grounded view of Africa and African culture." What he says about the objects in pre-1897 Edo society stresses their socio-political function. They were expressions of royal power and of the sovereign's dominance over his subjects. The plaques in the Oba's palace gave a "display of technical virtuosity and sheer wealth guaranteed to daunt any visitor."<sup>3</sup> He goes on to state that the plaques were removed "at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century" (this is erroneous as will be discussed later on, the plaques were presumably removed in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century). The plaques were put in "storage" and in 1897 the "plaques and other objects were seized and sold." It is noteworthy that MacGregor does not specify *who* "seized and sold" the objects.

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2. MacGregor 2004.

3. MacGregor 2004.

His wording “civil order collapsed” and “Baghdad comes to mind,” suggests that the situation in Benin City in 1897 was similar to the one in 2001, when the National Museum in Baghdad was plundered by Iraqis in the wake of the American-British invasion. This gives the impression that it was the Edo rather than the British, who carried out the looting in Benin City!

It is implied in the argument that Benin objects are artistic “achievements” that these (art) objects can be understood and appreciated by a global audience, in other words, that they can easily and smoothly be “translated” across cultural boundaries with little of their meaning getting lost in the translation process. Oba Erediauwa explicitly challenges the assumption of translatability. He does not deny the objects’ artistic qualities, but stresses that to the Edo (referred to as “my people”) the objects are much more than art. To the Edo, the objects contain meanings which a beholder with little, or no, knowledge of Edo culture and society, cannot fully grasp. Oba Erediauwa also makes it clear who carried out the looting. In a speech read at the inauguration of the travelling exhibition *Benin – Kings and Rituals. Court Arts from Nigeria* in Vienna where Oba Erediauwa pleaded for the return of some objects, he states:

The exhibition is showcasing some of the works that made Benin (Nigeria) famous. It once again, reminds the world of a civilization truncated by the imperial forces of the colonialist.

The works on show at this exhibition are some of the 3,000-odd pieces of bronze and ivory works forcibly removed from my great grandfather’s palace by some Britons who invaded Benin in 1897. The British kept some of the loot for themselves and sold the rest to European and American buyers. [...] As you step into the exhibition hall today you will behold some of Africa’s most exquisite works. But it is important to note that they were not originally meant to be mere museum pieces simply to be displayed for art lovers to admire. They were objects with religious and archival value to my people. [...] Thus, the bronzes were records of

events in the absence of photography. Those of the works, which were not made for record keeping, were made for a religious purpose and kept on altars. So, as you step into the hall today, you will be reading, as it were, the pages torn off from the book of my people's life history; you will be viewing objects of our spirituality, albeit, *you may not fully understand its import..*<sup>4</sup> (Italics added.)

MacGregor and Erediauwa differ in their choice of words used to refer to, describe, or conceptualize, the Benin objects, which has implications for how these objects, their meaning(s), and their removal are perceived. Macgregor uses the words "Benin bronzes," "sculpture," "brass plaques," "plaques and other objects," and "metal objects." He states that the plaques were in "storage" when the British arrived to the city but he does not give any indication of where the "other objects" were located at the time. Oba Erediauwa writes "works," "pieces of bronze and ivory works," "objects," "bronzes," and "loot." Significantly, the word "works" is not prefixed by the word "art." His argument is not exemplified with reference to particular objects, but he says that some were made for "record keeping" and that others were made for "for religious purposes and kept on altars."

Thus, MacGregor highlights the plaques, making them into artistic masterpieces which once adorned a royal palace and intimidated its visitor, and which were later put in storage from where they were taken (unclear by who). He tacitly bypasses the other objects and any references to the archival or religious functions of the objects. Oba Erediauwa, in contrast, stresses that some objects functioned as a means to record and remember the past and that others had a spiritual significance. The word "loot" signals that the objects were taken without Edo consent, and the information that objects were "kept on altars" for "religious purposes" signals that objects were removed from sanctuaries by the British. Oba Erediauwa does not give any hints about the less pleasant side of their religious function in the past and the many lives which were taken

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4. Erediauwa 2007.

and lost at the altars. He does not mention the plaques or anything about their political or possible intimidating function.

There are also some differences between Erediauwa and MacGregor in how they narrate the circumstances surrounding the 1897 war and the looting of Benin City. Erediauwa says that the objects “were forcibly removed from my grandfather’s palace by some British who invaded Benin in 1897,” with no mention of any preceding events, like the killing of the Phillips party or the Gallwey treaty. Thus, in his account the British are the sole aggressors, and the outcome was that a “civilization” was “truncated.” MacGregor instead takes his starting point in the Phillip’s mission (and, like Oba Erediauwa, leaves out any further contextualization of this event in relation to the Gallwey treaty or British colonial expansion). According to MacGregor, a British delegation travelling to Benin City “at a sacred season of the year when such visits were forbidden” was attacked and its members killed. The British “in retaliation [...] mounted a punitive expedition” and took Benin City. In the end something good came out of “the terrible circumstances of the 1897 dispersal,” in that it increased (Western) knowledge about Africa. In his version, the blame for the events is more diluted. The British did not respect the prohibition to visit Benin City, but the Edo drew first blood and the British, in turn, responded with the “punitive expedition.” So, whose version of the start of the war is right? As seen in the previous chapter, the background to the conflict is complex, involving a long chain of events, which are difficult to summarize briefly. To take the story from the killing of the British diplomatic mission, as MacGregor does, is correct, in the sense that this was the immediate cause for the war. The Foreign Office had until then declined military solutions. Yet, it might conversely be argued that the “Benin Massacre” is hardly of major relevance if the war is seen in the larger context of colonial expansion of the time. It seems unlikely that the British would not have taken control over the Benin Kingdom sooner or later anyway. In that perspective, the attack on Phillips’s party does not need mentioning, as in Oba Erediauwa’s account. The writing of history involves the selection of certain events at the expense of a multitude of other events, and the promotion of certain interpretations

of these events at the expense of other interpretations of them. The problem of selectivity becomes acute in cases like these when providing short, condensed versions of complex events. Thus, in this case, it would be wrong to judge one of two accounts as more right or wrong than the other.

Now, one may suggest that the making of Benin objects functions in ways similar to how history is made, in that both history making and object making are selective and interpretative processes (and in this case, the two are intrinsically linked). To throw some light on one – among many – aspects of the problem of accurately “capturing” the Benin objects in words, we may consider the quote from Gallwey which introduced this chapter. Looking back at the events 30 years ago, he attempts to give an impression of the richness and diversity of what was discovered in Benin City by enumerating the (categories of) objects found: “hundreds of bronze plaques,” a “very large number of elephants’ tusks,” “a wonderful collection of ivory and bronze bracelets.” There were also “splendid ivory leopards, bronze heads, beautifully carved wooden stools and boxes” but Gallwey admits that his list is incomplete, and cannot be completed, as there were “many more articles too numerous to mention.” Yet, he has a collective term to refer to them all, which is “loot.” His text illuminates one of the difficulties in describing and conceptualizing these objects. The total number of looted objects is unknown, but it amounts to several thousand, none of which is exactly similar to any other, thereby making them “too numerous to mention.” This means that to communicate them they *have* to be grouped in categories and they *have* to be referred to with certain collective terms – such “art,” “bronzes,” “works,” or “loot,” none of which can adequately describe any and all of the objects or capture any and all of their meanings. It also means that some objects tend to become metonyms for all the others. As just seen, MacGregor focused on the plaques, while Oba Erediauwa focused on the objects removed from altars, which fitted their respective interpretations of (all) the objects as art objects (MacGregor) or religious objects (Oba Erediauwa).

Thus, how the objects are made is not a trivial matter. To look into aspects of how the objects have become what they are today considered to be (or not), the chapter will from here onwards proceed to put the making of the objects into a historical and cultural context. The ensuing discussion has been structured as follows. First, it will briefly present the British's motives for looting Benin City (as it relates to one aspect of the objects' making and evaluation). It then attempts to give an idea of the volume and heterogeneity of objects taken by the British, in line with one of the main themes in this chapter: the difficulty, or impossibility, of finding an all-embracing term to refer to all these objects and of ordering them in a non-arbitrary way. The chapter proceeds with treating some aspects of (some of) the objects' functions in pre-1897 Edo society, while commenting on the objects post-1897 degree of fame (or lack thereof). From here the presentation looks closer at the post-1897 dispersal and spread of the Benin objects, in particular their acquisition by museums and their integration in a scholarly knowledge production.

As will be shown, Western perception of the objects has not been singular, but a dominant trend in the conceptualization of the Benin objects is that they have been understood and valued within a regime of aesthetics as works of art. Some of the consequences of this conceptualization and valuing will be dealt with, for example how it agrees with a pre-1897 Edo conceptualization and valuing of these objects. The objects – and their respective life-stories – can be made in many other ways than they predominantly have been. Thus, towards the end of this chapter I look into some alternative interpretations of these objects, that is, interpretations which are usually not made when these objects are communicated. I do so departing from the observation that the respective sides in conflict over ownership of the Benin objects, despite their differences, have in common that they associate the objects with *positive* notions and values for, and about, the party which they consider to be the objects' rightful owners, whether it is mankind as a whole, the Edo, or the Nigerian people. As a contrast, I point to how the Benin objects may be connected to some of the less noble sides of human behavior. These links are sought both through some of the well-known objects and some of the less famed ones.

Why, then, did the British loot when they had taken control over Benin City? The extant published sources from the time of the event do not provide a clear answer inasmuch as they do not offer an explanation or justification for the looting. This suggests that the permission or order to loot (presumably given by Moor and Admiral Rawson, the military leader of the British Force) was regarded as entirely uncontroversial and that the option of not looting the city was never seriously considered. The British were determined to break the power of the Oba and his “ju ju priests” over the populace and put a stop to the human sacrifices. The British presumably knew that the Oba’s authority was partly vested in his possessions. Many of the objects were found on the altars smeared with blood. The removal of these objects were, akin to the destruction of the sacrificial trees and altars, part of an effort to put the human sacrifices to an end. Yet, the British also took many other objects which were not connected to any human sacrifices, such as for example, the plaques and the jewellery said to have belonged to the Oba’s wives. Moreover, a look at the conquest of Benin within a broader context of colonial warfare shows that the looting of Benin City was not an exceptional event. Although looting at the time had gone out of practice in warfare between “civilized” opponents, it was common practice in colonial warfare to loot the “uncivilized” enemy.<sup>5</sup> In connection with the sending of “punitive” expeditions, looting and the destruction of property (burning of dwellings etc.) was part of the retribution meted out by the victors over the vanquished enemy.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, looting was carried out to compensate the cost of warfare and to motivate and reward the troops.<sup>7</sup> These motifs

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5. Vrdoljak 2006, 47-53, 66.

6. The British burnt the Queen Mother’s palace and other dwellings in the outskirts of Benin City. It is not clear if this was part of the general punishment, or had to do with the evidence of human sacrifices encountered there, or if the destruction was prompted by tactical reasons to prevent the Edo from taking up positions in these places should they mount a retaliatory attack. Bacon 1897, 104, Home 1982, 88.

7. On rewards in the form of loot: Farwell 1981, 175-176. An 1864 recruitment poster for the British Army tempted the prospective conscript with the opportunities for “honours, promotions, rewards & immense sums of prize

for looting are attested in the writings of those involved. As mentioned previously, in the letter where Phillips asked for permission to attack Benin City, he remarked that sufficient ivory would be found in the Oba's palace to pay the costs of the military expedition. Gallwey, writing in January 1897 during the preparations for the assault on Benin City, also noted that the ivory found in the city "if not already removed [...] should fully pay the cost for the expedition."<sup>8</sup> Years later, when Gallwey looked back at his experiences from military operations in the Niger Coast Protectorate, he commented that the troops "used to revel in these forays, especially, as in the case of Benin City, when there was loot to pick up."<sup>9</sup> Hence, as to the manifold social, economic, and political functions of the objects, one Western "function" of these and other looted objects was to make the subjugated pay the cost for their own subjugation and to encourage the subjugators. The taking of loot was an integral part of the machinery of imperialism.

The loot – mainly taken because of its potential economic value and to provide memorabilia for the victors – comprised of objects which in their pre-1897 Edo contexts had a wide range of functions and meanings (and what has become one object in a post-1897 context, does not necessarily translate into one object in a pre-1897 context). The following generalized overview may give a sense of the range and diversity of the looted objects.<sup>10</sup> If nothing

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money" (i. e. money from the sale of loot). Farwell 1981, 211, Hevia 2003, 75.

In an apologetic essay, Fagg claims that the motive for looting Benin City was to stamp out the Edo human sacrifices. Fagg 1981. This may well have been a partial reason for looting the altars etc. but hardly explains the looting of other objects not connected with the human sacrifices.

8. Papers 1897, 22, cf. Gallwey 1893, 126 where he refers to "tremendous stores" of ivory in Benin City. It seems that Gallwey's fear that the ivory stores would be removed proved right. According to Roth 1903, xvii, the Edo managed to hide away some 500 tusks. Cf. Bacon's (1897, 91-92) account, which despite its praise of the workmanship and beauty of the looted objects, expresses a general frustration over how little of value was found at Benin City.
9. Gallwey 1942, 98.
10. Later will follow a discussion about the difficulties of naming, describing, and ordering the multitude of looted Benin objects and of translating them between different cultural contexts. The (re-)presentation given here, despite its aim to show the heterogeneity of the looted objects, is of course not immune to essentializing tendencies as it imposes certain categorizations and



else, it is telling of the thoroughness of the looters. The objects included carved elephant tusks;<sup>11</sup> brass pedestal heads;<sup>12</sup> brass, ivory, terracotta, and wood heads;<sup>13</sup> brass, ivory, and wood figures of humans and animals;<sup>14</sup> brass and ivory bells;<sup>15</sup> brass rings with figures;<sup>16</sup> brass, ivory, and wood *ukhurhe* rattle staffs;<sup>17</sup> brass heads of snakes;<sup>18</sup> a wooden door;<sup>19</sup> ivory door bolts;<sup>20</sup> iron and brass keys;<sup>21</sup> brass game boards;<sup>22</sup> brass crucifixes;<sup>23</sup> iron and brass Osun staffs;<sup>24</sup> brass altars of the hand;<sup>25</sup> glass mirrors and wooden mirror cases;<sup>26</sup>

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generalizations of the objects. For example, I here refer to, or make, a category, called “brass pedestal heads,” which includes objects which in pre-1897 Edo society may have had quite distinct meanings. The pedestal heads with royal regalia depict an Oba or a Queen Mother. Other pedestal heads without the royal regalia – the so-called “trophy heads” – may instead have shown defeated enemies. Ben-Amos Girshick 1980, 18, 1995, 26, Plankensteiner 2007a, 375, 463, Barley 2010, 39. Also, I simplify here by describing the cast metal objects as made of “brass,” although some (a minority) of these castings are rather “bronzes” (the nomenclature applicable to the copper alloy castings will be discussed in more detail further on).

11. Plankensteiner 2007a, 297, no. 37 (Eisenhofer), 376-378, no. 146-147 (Blackmun).
12. Plankensteiner 2007a, 370-375, no. 140-145 (Junge), 396-398, no. 171 (Kaplan), 413, no. 189 (Nevadomsky), 463-465, no. 245-246 (Osadolor).
13. Plankensteiner 2007a, 370-375, no. 140-145 (Junge), 396-398, no. 169-171 (Kaplan), 411-412, no. 187 (Dolz), 413, no. 189 (Nevadomsky), 463-464, no. 245-246 (Osadolor).
14. Plankensteiner 2007a, 278-279, no. 6-7 (Völger), 308-310, no. 54-55 (Curnow), 315, no. 61 (Blackmun), 398-399, no. 172, 402-404, no. 176-178 (Kaplan), 412, no. 188 (Seige), 438, no. 218 (Aisien), 445-446, no. 224 (Blackmun), 450-452, no. 232-233 (Dolz), 449-453, no. 228-232, (Nevadomsky, Dolz).
15. Plankensteiner 2007a 408-409, no. 181-183.
16. Plankensteiner 2007a, 480-482, no. 267-268 (Völger).
17. Plankensteiner 2007a, 410-411, no. 184-186 (Curnow, Plankensteiner).
18. Plankensteiner 2007a, 287-289, no. 17-19 (Curnow).
19. Plankensteiner 2007a, 405, no. 180 (Kaplan).
20. Plankensteiner 2007a, 290, no. 20-21 (Nevadomsky).
21. Plankensteiner 2007a, 290-291, no. 22-26 (Nevadomsky).
22. Plankensteiner 2007a, 345 no. 96-97 (Curnow).
23. Plankensteiner 2007a, 301, no. 43 (Eisenhofer).
24. Plankensteiner 2007a, 423, no. 201-202 (Nevadomsky). 476, no. 259 (Ben-Amos Girshick). Osun is the name of an Edo god.
25. Plankensteiner 2007a, 415-418, no. 192-194, (Ben-Amos Girshick).
26. Plankensteiner 2007a, 400-402, no. 175 (Blackmun).

ivory, wood, and brass cola nut containers;<sup>27</sup> brass ewers;<sup>28</sup> brass flasks and vessels;<sup>29</sup> brass aquamaniles;<sup>30</sup> iron and brass ceremonial *ada* and *eben* swords;<sup>31</sup> wooden chairs;<sup>32</sup> brass armrests;<sup>33</sup> brass and wood altar stools;<sup>34</sup> numerous – between 900 and 1000 – brass plaques depicting various subjects;<sup>35</sup> necklaces, rings, hair pins, and bracelets in brass, coral, agate, jasper, and glass;<sup>36</sup> brass arm-rings;<sup>37</sup> brass and ivory armlets;<sup>38</sup> brass and ivory pendant masks;<sup>39</sup> a leather and flannel cloth hat; a fiberwork hat covered in cowrie shells;<sup>40</sup> brass Ododua helmet masks;<sup>41</sup> a crocodile hide helmet;<sup>42</sup> a tunic in flannel cloth and leather with brass bells;<sup>43</sup> an iron and brass chain mail;<sup>44</sup> fans in cowskin, antelope skin and brass;<sup>45</sup> ivory

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27. Plankensteiner 2007a, 339-341 no. 88 (Ben-Amos Girshick) 434, no. 216 (Curnow).
  28. Plankensteiner 2007a, 424, no. 204 (Curnow).
  29. Plankensteiner 2007a, 426-431, no. 205-212 (Curnow, Ben-Amos Girshick, Dolz),
  30. Plankensteiner 2007a 432-433, no. 213-214 (Curnow).
  31. Plankensteiner 2007a, 305 no. 50 (Eisenhofer), 380-383, no. 154-156 (Curnow, Dolz).
  32. Plankensteiner 2007a, 303-304, no. 48 (Guggeis, Eisenhofer).
  33. Plankensteiner 2007a 487, no. 270 (Nevadomsky).
  34. Plankensteiner 2007a, 414, no. 190-191 (Ekunke, Völger), 444, no. 223 (Blackmun), 472-474, no. 256 (Ben-Amos Girshick).
  35. Plankensteiner 2007a, 279-284, no. 8-13 (Seige, Junge), 294-295, no. 28-31 (Eisenhofer), 312-313, no. 58-59 (Aisien, Blackmun), 316-317 no. 62-63 (Osadolor, Blackmun), 320-330, no. 66-73, 75 (Osadolor, Blackmun, Plankensteiner), 334-336 no. 80-82 (Blackmun, Plankensteiner), 338-339, no. 85-85 (Blackmun), 387-391, no. 163-165 (Blackmun, Nevadomsky), 418-422, no. 195-199 (Curnow), 434-435, no. 217 (Curnow), 438-444, no. 219-222 (Blackmun), 446-447, no. 226-227 (Nevadomsky), 449-450, no. 230 (Nevadomsky), 452-461, no. 233-238, 240-244 (Eisenhofer, Plankensteiner, Seige), 468-470, no. 252-253 (Aisien, Blackmun), 479-480, no. 265 (Blackmun), 492-494, no. 276 (Heymer).
  36. Plankensteiner 2007a, 346-350, no. 98-113 (Plankensteiner).
  37. Plankensteiner 2007a, 350-351, no. 114-117 (Curnow).
  38. Plankensteiner 2007a, 352-356, no. 118-125 (Blackmun).
  39. Plankensteiner 2007a, 358-365, no. 129-137 (Blackmun).
  40. Plankensteiner 2007a, 357, no. 126-127 (Plankensteiner).
  41. Plankensteiner 474-475, no. 257 (Ben-Amos Girshick).
  42. Plankensteiner 2007a, 458, no. 239 (Plankensteiner).
  43. Plankensteiner 2007a, 459, no. 244 (Osadolor).
  44. Plankensteiner 2007a, 305, no. 51 (Pfaffenbichler).
  45. Plankensteiner 2007a, 310 no. 56 (Dolz).

gongs;<sup>46</sup> ivory horns;<sup>47</sup> brass tobacco pipes;<sup>48</sup> brass lamps;<sup>49</sup> a Snider rifle;<sup>50</sup> swords;<sup>51</sup> spears;<sup>52</sup> crossbows and arrows;<sup>53</sup> four 16<sup>th</sup> century cannons,<sup>54</sup> and many jars of imported gin.<sup>55</sup>

These objects have a broad span in age – from those which, at the time of looting, were of recent manufacture (for example the Snider rifle) to those which were several hundred years old (for example the brass plaques) – and in size – from those over two meters long (tusks and cannons) to those measuring only a couple of centimeters (for example hairpins). The objects range in tactile quality from hard to soft, from solid to liquid. They are made in a range of materials, such as brass, bronze, carnelian, clay, coral, cloth, coconut, iron, ivory, and wood. Though looted in Benin City and its neighborhood, the objects have a diverse ethnic and geographical origin.<sup>56</sup> Most are of Edo manufacture, but often made of imported materials (brass, glass, coral, and cowrie shells) and sometimes owing to foreign cultural and stylistic “influence” in the choice of subjects and manner of execution. The European impact is especially strong – Portuguese soldiers and traders are a common motif on Benin objects.<sup>57</sup> Vessels and chairs resemble European models and it has been tentatively suggested that the manufacturing of the brass plaques was inspired by European book illustrations.<sup>58</sup> Other objects – such as crucifixes and some iron

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46. Plankensteiner 2007a, 314-315, no. 60 (Blackmun).

47. Plankensteiner 2007a, 318-319 no. 64-65 (Blackmun).

48. Luschan 1919, 502.

49. Roth 1903, 120-121.

50. *Illustrated London News* 10 April 1897.

51. Fagg 1953, 168-169.

52. Luschan 1919, 443-445.

53. Plankensteiner 2007a, 465, no. 250-251 (Osadolor).

54. Plankensteiner 2007a, 464-465, no. 247-248 (Osadolor).

55. The jars are visible on Fig 16 and 21.

56. Not every object was looted in Benin City. On a cache of brass objects looted at the city of Udo some 40 kilometers to the west of Benin City, see Plankensteiner 2007a, 445-446, no. 224 (Blackmun).

57. On European trade and stylistic influence Plankensteiner 2007a 293-305. Brass and glass was mainly imported from Europe, the coral from the Mediterranean and cowrie shells – used both for decorative purposes and as a currency – from the Indian Ocean.

58. Bassani & Fagg 1988, 101, Bassani 2000, 302-303. Barley (2010 75) rejects this idea.

*eben* swords – had been made in Europe.<sup>59</sup> Yet other objects have an origin amongst the Edo’s neighbors.<sup>60</sup> Some objects were movables, others, like the brass snakes on the palace roof, were immovable (although moved away from Benin City nevertheless). The snakes on the roof were meant to be seen, others, like a brass ewer placed inside a wall, were meant to be hidden from view.<sup>61</sup> The objects had various interlinked functions and meanings – religious, political, mnemonic, military, and aesthetic – and the objects’ owners occupied different positions within Edo society, though most objects would have come from members of the Edo social elite.<sup>62</sup>

The number and diversity of objects makes it difficult to find an adequate collective name encompassing all of them, and to impose any organizing principle for how to group them or to choose any (categories of) objects as more important, significant, or typical than others. According to which (whose) criteria should they be ordered? Should they be ordered according to material, age, size, shape, height, weight, color, (assumed) function in Edo society, cultural affiliation, past or present owners, or any other criteria? In this study I use the term “Benin objects” or occasionally “Benin loot” as a collective term for all of the objects looted in Benin City in 1897. I should perhaps clarify that while the term “loot” is nowadays mainly used by writers favoring a return of the Benin objects, I use it, not to express any opinion on the issue of ownership, but because, arguably, it is one of few terms which can be used to cover all the looted objects, in that what they all have in common is their manner of removal.<sup>63</sup> Other collective terms in use are “Benin art,”

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59. Plankensteiner 2007a, 305 no. 50 (Eisenhofer), 345 no. 96-97 (Curnow).

60. Curnow 2007.

61. Roth 1903, 219-220. Plankensteiner 2007a, 424-425, no. 204 (Curnow). According to Felix Roth “a large part of the loot was found embedded in the walls.” Roth 1903, 217.

62. On the mnemonic function of Benin objects, for keeping or creating select memories of the Edo past, see Ben-Amos Girshick 1999, 4-7.

63. The term “Benin loot” also covers objects looted during subsequent “punitive expeditions” in the territory (cf. Macleod 1974, 5, 11), as well as objects which were not looted by the British themselves, but whose removal was nevertheless closely related to the disruption of Edo society brought about by the military actions and the subsequent annihilation of Benin into the British colonial realm. An example of such an object would be a plaque in the Pitt

“Benin bronzes” or “Benin bronzes and ivories.” I will discuss these terms later, but first a few words on (some of) the objects in their pre-1897 contexts, concentrating on those (categories of) objects which are today the most well-known.

Many of the objects were looted from altars located in compounds in the royal palace as well as in the palace of the Queen Mother and in the dwellings of, mostly, high ranking people in Edo society. Several of the altars in the royal palace were ancestral altars dedicated to former Obas.<sup>64</sup> As is known from various descriptions and images produced by European visitors up to 1897, these altars were equipped with ivory tusks placed in brass pedestals in the shape of a human head. The tusks were carved with reliefs relating to the exploits and deeds of the Oba commemorated. In the center of some altars there was a brass figure group, rendering the Oba with attendants.<sup>65</sup> On the altars were also other objects, including

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River’s Museum in Oxford acquired in 1907 where the alleged provenance is described in the following way: “hidden away from our soldiers after the capture on the Punitive Expedition of 1897 and [...] brought to Lagos by a native trading woman.” Cf. also Felix Roth in Roth 1903, Appendix II, xvii-xviii (on coral stolen from the Oba). In many cases there is no information on the objects’ provenance, but as comparatively few Benin objects left Benin before 1897, the vast majority of objects of pre-1897 manufacture in Western museum collections are likely to be loot. However, the matter is further complicated by the fact that some pre-1897 objects were also sold –voluntarily it seems – by the Edo in the post-1897 period. Plankensteiner 2007b, 34-3. Thus, all objects in Western collections cannot be put under the heading “loot” (although the reason for selling could have included economic hardship suffered as a consequence of the war).

Among the few Benin objects known to have left Benin prior to the 1897 is an equestrian statue given to the trader John Swainson as a gift by the Oba of Benin in, or about, 1892. Karpinski 1984, Nevadomsky 2006, 46. A second objects is a fragmentary plaque purchased by Luschan in London 1899, said to have been in the possession of the dealer since 1879. Luschan 1900, 306, cf. Völger 2007, 218 who (inconvincibly) questions whether the plaque had actually been taken to Europe prior to 1897. A third object is a head given by the Amapetu of Mahin to the trader Eugen Fischer in the early 1880s. Curnow 2007, 178, 181, fig. 9. On a wood hen acquired by the Ethnographic museum in Leipzig by 1884: Plankensteiner 2007a, 412, no. 188 (Seige).

64. On ancestral altars: Ben-Amos Girshick 2007. For other types of altars: Gore 2007.

65. Ben-Amos Girshick 2007, 158, Plankensteiner 2007a, 470-472, no. 254-255



Fig. 8. Benin City 1891. Photo by Cyril Punch of ancestral altar with pedestal heads with tusks. Original caption: Juju altar, Kings compound, Benin City, May 1891.

a variety of brass figures, brass bells, brass rings, *eben* swords, and *ukhure* rattle staffs. Following the death of an Oba, his son, the new Oba, erected an altar for his father. Each such altar with its assemblage of objects – tusks in brass stands, figures, etc. – thus represented one Oba. The trader Cyril Punch who visited Benin City in 1889 and 1891 and who took a photograph of one altar [Fig. 8] observed that the brass objects on the altars were polished to keep the brilliance of the brass surface.<sup>66</sup> He also noted that older altars were no longer maintained, with cattle wandering about and displacing the objects on them.<sup>67</sup> Gallwey, visiting Benin City in 1892, reported that the altars were “besprinkled with blood” and, as related earlier, when the British entered the city in 1897 numerous human sacrifices had been performed at the altars and the objects were found “caked over” with blood.<sup>68</sup> Other altars were furnished

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(Ben-Amos Girshick).

66. Blackmun 1997b, 68.

67. Punch 1908.

68. Gallwey 1893, 130. Felix Roth in Roth 1903, Appendix, x.



with the skulls of sacrificial victims.<sup>69</sup> Months later, when the British broke up the ancestral altars, they were found to contain human bones.<sup>70</sup>

The brass anthropomorphic pedestals, numbering more than a hundred, belong to the stock repertoire of Benin collections.<sup>71</sup> At least one, often several, of these is illustrated in most publications giving overviews of Benin “art.” These objects are today generally referred to as “heads.” In this study they are called “pedestal heads.” Some aspects of the significance of the choice of words used for these objects will be discussed further on. The wide range of brass and ivory figures which stood on the altars included dwarfs, horsemen, Portuguese soldiers, hunters, and hornblowers. Some of these figures today rank as masterpieces.<sup>72</sup> The ivory tusks, numbering more than 130, are today much less famous: tusks are occasionally illustrated in publications on Benin “art” but, in comparison to the pedestal heads, the tusks tend to appear in fewer numbers and occupy less conspicuous places in these publications.<sup>73</sup> The *ukhure* rattle staffs also do not have a prominent place in publications and displays. It may be remarked that from an Edo perspective the rattle staffs were the essential items on an altar: when struck against the ground it called the attention of the ancestors for blessings or curses, while many of the other altar objects were more decorative in function.<sup>74</sup> As far as

69. Roth 1903, 64, fig. 72, 119-120, Luschan 1919, 5, figs. 7-8, cf. Gallwey 1930, 231.

70. Roth 1903, 218, Appendix II, xi.

71. Dark 1975, Junge 2007.

72. The two dwarfs in Vienna have been considered to be of exceptional artistic quality: Luschan 1919, 299 calls the dwarfs the most valuable of all Benin artworks, and Fagg 1963, fig. 25, declares that the dwarves “[w]ithout doubt are the finest of all Benin bronze figures.” Dark 1973, 22, ranks the dwarfs and the incomplete dwarf’s head in Berlin as “perhaps the finest achievements of all by the Edo artist in bronze.” See also Curnow 1997b, 83.

73. Cf. Plankensteiner 2007a where the catalogue includes three altar tusks: 297, no. 37 (Eisenhofer), 376-378, no. 146-147 (Blackmun)) and ten pedestal heads (370-375, no. 140-145 (Junge), 396-398, no. 171 (Kaplan), 413, no. 189 (Nevadomsky), 463-465, no. 245-246 (Osadolor). One of the pedestal heads is also illustrated on the back cover of the book and another one in the introductory pages, facing the preface (16-17). The altar tusks are only illustrated in the catalogue.

74. Blackmun 1997b, 69, Plankensteiner 2007a, 410, Barley 2010, 126.

I am aware, the British did not keep any of the skulls and skeletal remains found on, or inside, the altars.<sup>75</sup>

The accounts by European visitors provide much less information on the ancestral altars commemorating past Queen Mothers, but presumably these altars, located both in the Queen Mother's palace and the Oba's palace, were furnished in a similar manner as the ancestral altars to past Oba's.<sup>76</sup> A number of looted objects have been identified as probably having come from the Queen Mothers' altars. These objects include tusks carrying depictions of a Queen Mother,<sup>77</sup> pedestal heads in the shape of a Queen Mother,<sup>78</sup> Queen Mother heads,<sup>79</sup> and brass roosters.<sup>80</sup> Of these objects, four or five Queen Mother heads are by far the most famous. The British Museum possesses one of these, which competes with the ivory pendant mask, also in the British Museum, for the title of being the most well-known and celebrated of all the Benin objects.<sup>81</sup> The roosters have also been considered to be of high artistic quality and feature in many publications on Benin "art."<sup>82</sup>

In Edo society, the use of brass and ivory was mainly restricted to the Oba and the Queen Mother. The altars of those below them in social status were instead equipped with objects of wood and terracotta (thus, as to the functions of these objects in Edo society it may be said that they served to create, mark and uphold social

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75. Richard Burton visiting Benin City in 1863 brought along several skulls from sacrificed human beings, without any objections from the Edo. Burton 1863, 417. It would be interesting to find out what happened to these skulls, and whether they are preserved in any museum collection or not.

76. Nevadomsky 1987, Blackmun 1991, 61.

77. Blackmun 1991. Cf. Plankensteiner 2007a, 297, no. 37 (Eisenhofer).

78. Plankensteiner 2007a 396-398, no. 171 (Kaplan).

79. Plankensteiner 2007a 396-398, no. 169-170. (Kaplan).

80. Plankensteiner 2007a, 398-399, no. 172 (Kaplan). According to Kaplan brass roosters furnished ancestral altars to both Queen Mothers and Oba's. The testimonies from the members of British force leave it unclear from which altars they were looted. See Papers 1897, 28, Roth 1903, 218. See also the discussion in Nevadomsky 1987.

81. The other ones are in the Ethnological Museum in Berlin, the National Museum in Lagos (two heads) and the World Museum in Liverpool respectively. Plankensteiner 2007a, 396-398, no. 171 (Kaplan).

82. Fagg 1963, fig. 44, Plankensteiner 2007a, 398-399, no. 172 (Kaplan).



stratification).<sup>83</sup> Among the extant objects are a number of wood and terracotta heads and wooden hens presumably looted from non-royal altars.<sup>84</sup> They are occasionally included in publications on Benin “art,” though rarely praised for their beauty.<sup>85</sup>

The loot also includes a range of items, which in pre-1897 Edo society were carried or worn in various ceremonies – wooden staffs, brass and ivory pendants, brass and ivory armlets, wooden containers, mirrors, fans, gongs, cistrums, and iron swords. In most cases there is no information available from where these objects were looted, but the majority were presumably removed from various places within the royal palace. An ivory staff was reportedly looted in the “state apartment of the palaver house,” and five ivory pendant masks, worn by the Oba during ceremonies, were presumably all looted from an oaken chest in the sleeping room of Oba Ovonramwen.<sup>86</sup> As discussed earlier, all these masks have today acquired fame, the most famous of them all being the one in the British Museum. Other objects in the British Museum that are said to have belonged to the Oba are a coral cap, a coral apron, a coral shirt, an ivory staff, and a wooden stool. The stool was allegedly the one which Oba Ovonramwen sat on when he was sentenced to exile in 1897.<sup>87</sup> Among the objects used in religious ceremonies are a number of helmet masks used in the Ododua ritual.<sup>88</sup> Two such helmets, representing a female and a male respectively, rest on glass shelves in a display case in the British Museum. One of them (the one representing a female) is included among the museum’s highlights accompanied by the aforementioned text which confidently claims: “This helmet mask

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83. Roth 1903, 67-68, fig. 73, 217, Plankensteiner 2007a, 411-412, no. 187 (Dolz), 413, no. 189 (Nevadomsky).

84. I here refer to these objects as heads, although over half of the terracotta heads have holes in the crown, suggesting that they might have served as a support for ivory tusks. Ben-Amos 1980, 16-17, fig. 12.

85. Plankensteiner 2007a, 411-413 no. 187-189 (Dolz, Seige, Nevadomsky).

86. Ezra 1992, 15, pl. 8, Plankensteiner 2007a, 472, no. 255 (Ben-Amos Girshick).

87. Plankensteiner 2007a, 379-381, no. 148-152, (Curnow), 487, no. 271 (Plankensteiner).

88. Fagg 1978 [1970], 36, Plankensteiner 2007a, 474-475, no. 257 (Ben-Amos Girshick).

is used in the Ododua ritual.” Other wearable objects looted by the British include jewelry and pieces of personal ornamentation: necklaces, finger rings, hair ornaments, bracelets, and arm rings made in diverse materials: agate, brass, bronze, coral, jasper, and glass.<sup>89</sup> One hair ornament reportedly belonged to one of the Oba’s wives.<sup>90</sup>

The largest “subgroup” within the corpus of Benin loot is the brass plaques which number between 900 and 1000. The plaques were found by the British in a room in the royal palace. According to Gallwey they were found “heaped up anyhow on the floor of an empty house [...] simply thrown in a heap and uncared for” whereas Bacon describes them as “buried in the dirt of ages” in the room.<sup>91</sup> The plaques depict a range of subjects mostly related to Edo court ceremonies, including the Oba with attendants, Portuguese traders, court officials, battle, hunting and harvest scenes, and a variety of animals: mudfish, leopards, birds, snakes and crocodiles. Many plaques come in matching, though not identical, pairs. The plaques have holes for nails, and Olfred Dapper’s account of the palace dating to around 1640 describes the pillars in the palace as decorated with brass plaques. Subsequent accounts do not mention the plaques which suggests that they were torn down in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century during a civil war. The damaged plaques were not put back in place when the kingship was reinstated, but they were kept and preserved nevertheless (the reasons for which are unclear) until the British “discovered” and removed them in 1897.<sup>92</sup> The plaques which belong to the most well-known Benin objects, are found in many Benin collections, and are frequently reproduced in books. A few plaques have been ranked as masterpieces.<sup>93</sup> In

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89. Plankensteiner 2007a, 346-351.

90. Plankensteiner 2007a 349, no. 108 (Blackmun)

91. Bacon 1897, 91. Letter from Gallwey quoted in Read & Dalton 1898, 370. Cf. Forbes 1898, 52. The trader Cyril Punch, in his account of a visit to Benin City in 1889 mentions seeing the plaques in a storehouse. Ben-Amos Girshick 1999, 16.

92. Blackmun 2007, 162 suggests that plaques were used as a source for the motifs on altar tusks.

93. The perhaps most celebrated plaque is one with a bird hunt which is now in Berlin. Fagg 1963, 34, Plankensteiner 2007a, 493-494, no. 276 (Heymer), Plankensteiner 2007a, 284, no. 12-13, 454, no. 234-235 (Eisenhofer).

post-1897 Edo society the plaques acquired importance as a source to identify which dress to wear in ceremonies.<sup>94</sup>

We will shortly turn to the objects' (re-)signification in the post-1897 period, but first a brief note on the dating of the Benin objects, and on how the castings were manufactured. The objects looted in Benin are today generally dated from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, although a more precise dating of most of them remains uncertain.<sup>95</sup> The chronology of the Benin objects has been based on a combination of evidence provided by European descriptions of visits to Benin City, Edo oral testimony recorded from 1897 and onwards, the depictions of Europeans and European items (stools, clothes, weapons) on the objects, the thickness of the metal in the castings (the thinner castings supposedly belong to an earlier era when less metal was available) as well as on stylistic criteria.<sup>96</sup>

The appearance of Europeans (Portuguese) on the objects gives a *terminus post quem* (that is, a date after which the objects in question must have been made) of the late 15<sup>th</sup> century for many of the objects. Yet, European costume items and weapons continued to be rendered on Benin objects long after they had gone out of use in Europe. Thus, the appearance of such items on Benin objects does not provide secure evidence for attributing the manufacture of objects to the time period during which the item in question was in fashion or used in Europe.<sup>97</sup> The most securely dated objects are the plaques. The Europeans depicted on the plaques wear 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century clothes. As said above, the plaques are described in Dapper's account dating to the 1640s, but later visitors to the

94. Karpinski 1984, 57, Akenzua 2000.

95. On the dating of Benin objects: Dark 1975, 53-59, Eisenhofer 1993, 1997b, Nevadomsky 1997, 22, Ben-Amos Girshick 1999, 21-29, Junge 2007, Barley 2010, 26-31.

96. On the evidence provided by metal analysis: Junge 2007.

97. Some Benin objects combine the rendition of European items from different time periods. For example, a bronze figure in the British Museum (included among the collection highlights as *Brass figure of a Portuguese soldier*) renders a musketeer wearing early sixteenth century clothing, but holding a musket belonging to the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century. Picton 1995, 338, fig. 5.

palace do not mention any plaques. The Benin kings lost power in the mid-1600s and many of the plaques show signs of having been violently torn down, presumably in connection with the upheaval at the time. When the royal authority was reestablished towards the end of century, no new plaques were put up, suggesting that their production had come to an end by then.<sup>98</sup> For many other objects, and groups of objects, the dating is much less secure, and the dates given are mainly based on stylistic judgment. The reliability of dates built mainly, or solely, on the evidence of style has been questioned.

The metal castings are made with the *cire perdue* or lost-wax technique. The process of manufacturing is as follows: the desired object is modeled in wax over a clay core and coated with a second layer of clay. The assemblage is then heated which causes the wax to melt and flow out of the mold. Molten metal is poured into the hollow left by the wax. After cooling, the clay coating and core is removed, revealing the cast object. The cast may be further worked by chiseling.

The metal used in the Benin castings was predominantly transported from Europe on European ships. Before European contact, metal was imported to the region across the Sahara on camel caravans, but there are also indigenous sources of both tin and copper in Nigeria. Both the metal castings and the ivory carvings were presumably made in guilds associated with the palace. Metal casting, ivory working, and wood working were (and still are) male domains in Edo society.<sup>99</sup>

As stated earlier, the British had gathered together the loot in the assembly (palaver) house in the Oba's palace, where some of it was lost in a fire which swept through the city. Photographs show the British posing with looted objects. The loot was then divided. One part of the loot became the property of the Crown, and was put up for sale. Sales were held in the Niger Coast Protectorate and

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98. Dark 1975, 58-59, Plankensteiner 2007a, 287, no. 15 (Blackmun), Plankensteiner 2007b, 28.

99. Nevadomsky 2012, 26, n. 7.

later in England.<sup>100</sup> The other part was given to the British officers, who, it seems, got their share in proportion to rank.<sup>101</sup> Apparently, they also had the opportunity to buy objects. One officer, Major General Frederick Landon, second-in-command in the Niger Coast Protectorate Force, writing to his wife a few days after the city's fall, complained that he could get as much ivory as he liked but he could not get it transported out from Benin. Nevertheless, as well as the two tusks he "looted," he spent £8 on ivory and "also got a lot of little things to give to people."<sup>102</sup> Moor secured for himself some of the most prestigious pieces: the two ivory pendant masks, one of which is today in the British Museum, the other one in the Metropolitan Museum in New York. Other ivory objects obtained by Moor included the pair of ivory armlets also believed to have belonged to the Oba, and which today rest on the glass shelf next to the ivory pendant mask in the British Museum.<sup>103</sup> Apparently,

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100. Moor, in a letter dated the 5<sup>th</sup> of March 1897, reported that in February 1897, £800 had been realized from the sale of ivory. Igbafe 1979, 71. Luschan, wrote in July 1897 about a forthcoming auction in the second week of August in London where huge quantities of carved ivory tusks were offered. Penny 2002, 75. Cf. Luschan 1898, 161 and 1901, 4 where he reports that the tusks were sold first in Lagos and later on in London as "damaged ivory." Read & Dalton 1898 370, 372 writes about sales "on the coast" and in "the City" (i.e. London). Cf. "Sales by auction" in *The Times* 20 May, 24 May, 13 August, 20 August 1897.

101. The sources I have been able to consult for this study do not provide any details on how the looting was carried out and on how the loot was divided amongst the troops. The information that the British officers got their portion of loot according to rank is found in Home 1982, 100-101. It appears that the privates received no share of the loot, but some of them managed to get hold of some objects anyway. See Fagg 1981, 20 on a "sword of a common type" taken by an "ordinary member of the Expedition" and Plankensteiner 2007a, 393 no. 168 (Blackmun), on five ivory pendants obtained by the private William Kelland. This suggests that, in addition to the more or less organized gathering together of objects for the Crown and officers, individuals also took objects they found for themselves, with or without official sanction. I have found no information as to whether black officers and privates got any loot or not (though Home 1982, 91 mentions that carriers had "private booty"). For a general discussion of the various systems for divided loot employed by the British in colonial warfare, see Hevia 2003, 74-118.

102. Home 1982, 101.

103. Moor also obtained two brass stools, associated with the Oba, which are now in Berlin. Bacon 1897, 92, Roth 112-113, fig. 111, Tunis 1981, Plankensteiner 2007a, 444, no. 223 (Blackmun), cf. 472, no. 256 (Ben-Amos Girshick), as well as



Fig. 9. Benin objects in the home of Captain Neville, prior to 1930.

unlike Landon, Moor did not have to worry about such practicalities as transport: among the items he gained possession of was a late 16<sup>th</sup> or early 17<sup>th</sup> century Portuguese cannon.<sup>104</sup> Admiral Rawson got several objects, including a pair of ivory leopards which he sent as a gift to Queen Victoria.<sup>105</sup> Other officers put together collections of various size, ranging from a few pieces up to fifty pieces or

an ivory box. Roth 1903, 202, fig. 220.

104. Plankensteiner 2007a, 464, no. 247 (Osadolor).

105. Phillips 1995, 403, no. 5.60q (Barley).

more [Fig. 9, 18-19]. Many of these objects have since been acquired by museums but some, such as Gallwey's ivory pendant mask, still remain in private hands.

The first museum to acquire Benin objects was probably the Horniman Museum in Forest Hill outside London, which by April 1897 had acquired a batch of Benin objects from a member of the British force.<sup>106</sup> The British Museum petitioned Government to secure some objects for its collections. During the summer of 1897 a temporary loan to the British Museum of 304 plaques from the Crown's portion of the loot was agreed. In the following year, the British Museum managed to acquire just over 200 of these plaques as a gift from the Secretary of State of Foreign Affairs. The museum returned the remaining plaques to the Foreign Office which subsequently sold them.

The British Museum's collection has since been augmented with gifts and purchases of a range of Benin objects. The aforementioned Major General Landon sold a brass figure and one of the two ivory tusks he had looted to the museum in June 1897. William Ingram, the proprietor of the *Illustrated London News*, donated the Queen Mother head together with other objects to the museum in the same year. The Queen Mother head was immediately declared to be a masterpiece. British Museum curators Charles Hercules Read and Ormonde Dalton wrote that this "really charming head of a girl" was "probably the most artistic and technically perfect of all the castings in the round" and Dalton, even more confidently, pronounced: "As a work of art this head stands above all other things as yet brought from Benin."<sup>107</sup> Following Moor's suicide in 1909, the ivory pendant mask, the ivory armbands, and other objects which had belonged to Moor were purchased (for £37.10).<sup>108</sup> In Read's article publicizing the acquisitions, the pendant mask was praised as "the work of one of the best artists that the Bini court possessed" and Moor was hailed as a "good judge of the quality of native work" (as if it was his superior capacity to recognize and appreciate art rather than his superior

106. *Illustrated London News* 10 April 1897, Quick 1898, 251.

107. Read & Dalton 1898, 372, 382, Dalton 1898, 423. Roth 1903, 216, fig. 253 calls it "the finest piece of cast bronze art obtained from Benin."

108. MacLeod 1974, 6.



position in the British colonial and military hierarchy which made it possible for him to acquire some of the “best” pieces).<sup>109</sup> Among famed objects in the British Museum, mention should be made of the two ivory leopards, given to Queen Victoria by Rawson in 1897, which have been on loan to the museum since 1924. Among the objects of lesser fame acquired by the museum is the cannon obtained by Moor and donated to the museum in 1899. The cannon, which was probably of Portuguese manufacture has received little attention in the subsequent literature on Benin “art.”<sup>110</sup>

Other museums in Britain also acquired Benin loot. The Bankfield Museum in Halifax, and the Mayer Museum in Liverpool built up Benin collections from 1897 onwards. After the British Museum, the largest collection amassed in Britain was that of Augustus Pitt Rivers for his private museum in Farnham. Pitt Rivers bought his first Benin object in May 1897, and by his death in 1900 possessed 240 objects.<sup>111</sup> The Pitt Rivers museum in Oxford also brought together a Benin collection. Some of its objects were acquired from the estate of the traveler and writer Mary Kingsley.<sup>112</sup>

Dealers in antiquities and ethnographic specimens were quick to add Benin objects to their trade stock. In late May 1897 the auction house Stevens auctioned Benin objects (this was where Pitt Rivers purchased his first Benin object) and by August 1897 both Stevens and Hale & Son had published auction catalogues exclusively devoted to Benin objects.<sup>113</sup> The most prominent dealer in Benin objects was William Webster, who began selling Benin objects from November 1898 and offered a total of 562 Benin objects by 1901.<sup>114</sup> Other dealers selling Benin objects were Eva Cutter and William Oldman. The auction house Christie’s sold Benin objects in 1899, and numerous Benin objects have passed through the salesroom of Christie’s and Sotheby’s since then.

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109. Read 1910.

110. Plankensteiner 2007a, 464-465, no. 247 (Osador).

111. Pitt Rivers 1900, Plankensteiner 2007b, 33.

112. Roth 1903, 14, Dark 1982, xv, Coombes 1994b, 148. For Kingsley’s own comments on the Benin objects, see Kingsley 1899, 141-143, 456-457.

113. On these auctions, see “Sales by auction” in *The Times* 20 May, 24 May, 13 August, 20 August 1897.

114. Dark 1982, xv. King 2009, cf. Starr 1900, 17.



Initially the objects were offered at bargain prices.<sup>115</sup> Plaques from the official booty went for as little as £1, £3 and £5 with the more expensive examples costing only £20.<sup>116</sup> The prices soon increased, but the objects were still offered at – by today’s standards – very modest sums. Between 1898 and 1901 Webster sold brass bells for £4-5 and plaques for £10-30. Two bronze roosters went for £30 and £40, and a brass musketeer fetched £50.<sup>117</sup> The most costly items were the ivory tusks. In his catalogue from November 1897 Webster offered two tusks for £80 each and in 1900 the two tusks on offer cost £100 and £120. Although these prices, from a present-day perspective, may appear low, it is worth noting that in the catalogues of Oldman, Stevens, and Webster, Benin objects generally commanded higher prices than objects from Australia, Polynesia, South America, and elsewhere in Africa. Webster, for example, offered masks and figures from the Congo and Cameroon for between £1-4 and shrunken Jivaro heads provided by him cost a mere £30. No object commanded a higher price than the £120 demanded by Webster in 1900 for the ivory tusk.<sup>118</sup>

An increase in the prices of Benin objects came in the early 1930s when the Parisian art dealers Louis Carré and Charles Rattou bought up objects from British private collections which had liquidated due to the economic recession. Their marketing strategies included advertising objects by lending them to museum exhibitions in France and the United States, and they subsequently managed to sell objects on to museums and private collectors at much higher price. For example, a pedestal head bought at a London auction in 1930 for 165 guineas, was acquired by Pablo Picasso in 1944 in exchange for a painting valued at 350,000 francs (£1,850).<sup>119</sup>

115. Luschan 1898, 161, 1901, 4.

116. Dark 1982, xvi.

117. Dark 1982, xxii-xxiii. On the increase in prices, cf. Barkan 1997, Penny 2002, 71-79. Andree 1898 considered the Benin objects to be cheap.

118. King 2009, 61-63, Plankensteiner 2007a 34, Torrence & Clark 2011, 42. For prices paid for Benin objects, by the Museum of Ethnology, Vienna and the Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm respectively, see Heger 1916, 139 and Lindblom 1938, 193.

119. Paudrat 2007.

After the Second World War, Benin objects continued to increase in monetary value and break price records. When one of the two ivory pendant masks obtained by Moor, which was purchased by Professor Charles Seligman after Moor's suicide in 1909, was auctioned in 1958 for £22,000 (\$66,000) it was the most expensive African art object sold at the time.<sup>120</sup> The purchaser was Nelson A. Rockefeller, who placed the object in his Museum of Primitive Art, from where it was later transferred to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In 1974, a hornblower, bought by Ratton in 1931 for £220, changed hands for £180,000 (\$444,000). The undisclosed buyer paid a price three times higher than that paid for any other tribal art object at an auction up to that point.<sup>121</sup> The hornblower's present location is unknown. In 2007, a United States Museum, the Albert-Knox Gallery, sold a pedestal head for \$4.74 million (£2.3 million).<sup>122</sup> This buyer also remained anonymous and the object's whereabouts has not been made public. As mentioned previously, when the Gallwey ivory pendant mask was offered for sale in 2010 with an estimate of £3.5-4.5 million (\$5.4-6.9 million), it was predicted to become the most expensive African art object ever sold.<sup>123</sup> Other Benin objects have been purchased for, in comparison, more modest prices. For example, in 2009, two plaques were auctioned at Sotheby's New York for "only" \$278, 000 and \$458,500 respectively (£ 178,000 and 293,000).<sup>124</sup>

In 1897, German museums also quickly reacted to news about the "discoveries" in Benin City. The first German museum acquisition was a pedestal head that was obtained during the summer of 1897 by the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe in Hamburg.<sup>125</sup> Being better endowed and with better contacts with wealthy patrons than their colleagues in Britain, German museum curators managed to bring

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120. Fagg 1957, Smith 1958, Dark 1982, xvi.

121. Hutchison 1974, Paudrat 2007, 242.

122. Kennedy 2007, Paudrat 2007, 240.

123. Bailey 2010, 2011.

124. <http://alaintruong.canalblog.com/archives/2009/05/19/13781537.html>. For auction prices of some of the objects sold from the Pitt Rivers in 1965, see <http://web.prm.ox.ac.uk/rpr/index.php/article-index/12-articles/239-sothebys-sale-15-november-1965-2> (accessed 12 May 2016).

125. Zwernemann 1993, Plankensteiner 2007c, 206, Völger 2007, 218.

together collections which outsized many of the British ones. They made acquisitions both through German contacts in West Africa and dealers in England and Germany which enabled the ethnographic museums in Cologne, Dresden, Frankfurt, Hamburg, Leipzig, and Stuttgart to create large collections.<sup>126</sup> The Ethnological Museum in Berlin, which bought its first objects in London in August 1897, was especially vigorous in its acquisitions. By 1919 the museum possessed 580 objects, making its Benin collection even larger than that of the British Museum.<sup>127</sup> The Berlin collection has since shrunk, mainly due to losses during the Second World War, and today it contains 535 Benin objects, whereas the British Museum's collection has continued to increase during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. With around 700 objects the British Museum's Benin collection is now larger than that in Berlin.<sup>128</sup>

German private collectors acquired numerous objects, often passing the objects on to museums in exchange for prestige and decorations. In the summer of 1898 Kaiser Wilhelm received a pair of brass leopards (and a silver scepter which had formerly belonged to the king of Dahomey) from the German consul in Lagos, Eduard Schmidt. In return for this generous gift – which mimicked Rawson's gift of a pair of ivory leopards to the British Queen – Schmidt received the Order of the Red Eagle.<sup>129</sup>

126. Luschan 1919, 12-13.

127. Luschan 1901, 4, 1919, 9, 12-13, Plankensteiner 2007b, Völger 2007, 217-225.

128. The numbers for the Berlin collection are based on the following information which has been kindly supplied by Peter Junge, Curator at the Ethnological Museum, Berlin (e-mail 8 April 2013). The Berlin inventory book contains 674 Benin entries. However, 50 of these are plaster casts of objects in other collections. 24 objects were sold or exchanged in the 1920s. This means that at the beginning of World War II there were 600 Benin objects in the Berlin collection. At present the museum has 513 objects on display or in storage. A further 22 are registered in the database of objects which were returned from the Ethnographic museum in Leipzig in 1990-1992. These are in crates which have not yet been unpacked and thus their condition is unknown. This leaves 65 objects lost during, or after, World War II. In addition to the objects registered with object entries there are a further 53 small fragments mainly from plaques. It is not clear whether these are part of plaques in the Berlin collection or not. On the history of the Berlin Benin collection, see also Krieger 1957, 1973, Höpfner 1992, Ivanov 2000, 20-21, Plankensteiner 2007b, 39, n. 19, Völger 2007.

129. Franz 1899, 233, Luschan 1919, 5 n. 2, 335-336, fig. 492a-b, Plankensteiner 2007c, 204, fig. 8, On the Red Eagle Order awarded for museum donations: Zimmerman 2001, 168.

Outside Germany, sizable museum collections of Benin objects were quickly built up in Vienna and Leiden, and minor ones in Adelaide, Christ Church, Dublin, St Petersburg and Stockholm.<sup>130</sup> The creation of the Benin collection at the Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm offers a compelling example of how objects were traded for decorations. The majority of the museum's Benin objects were acquired through a trade-off with the German collector Hans Meyer. In 1902, Meyer offered the museum 613 objects from Africa and the Pacific, including 15 Benin objects, on the condition that in return he would be offered either the Order of the Polar Star or the Royal Order of Wasa, with the Grade of Commander 1<sup>st</sup> Class. After some haggling with the museum, where Meyer had to augment his gift with an additional 16 Benin objects and collections from New Zealand, New Ireland, and New Britain, an agreement was reached and he donated the objects to the museum. However, much to his disappointment, Meyer was only decorated with the Order of the Polar Star, without the Grade of Commander 1<sup>st</sup> Class.<sup>131</sup>

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century museums have continued to add to their collections of Benin objects and new museums have entered into the field of Benin collecting. Museums in France initially showed little interest for Benin objects and until the 1930s, when several objects were purchased for the Musée de l'Homme, had only acquired a few pieces.<sup>132</sup> French holdings of Benin objects are still not very sizable, but Benin objects are today on display both in the Louvre, in the *Pavillon des Sessions* inaugurated in 2000, and in the Quai Branly Museum which opened to the public in 2006.<sup>133</sup> In the United States, a number of museums such as the

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130. Starr 1900, 17.

131. Bedorf & Östberg 2010.

132. Luschan 1919, 10, Paudrat 2007.

133. Ironically, in the *Pavillon des Sessions* the Benin objects are displayed next to Nok terracottas, purchased from a Belgian art dealer in 1998 for £360,000, which are likely to derive from the contemporary looting of archaeological sites in Nigeria. On this affair, see Shyllon 2003, 142-148 and on looting of Nok sites, see Darling 2000. The juxtaposition of Benin and Nok objects (looted by the British and by local Nigerians respectively) may be used to pedagogically illustrate the "development" from a colonial to postcolonial world order, where Westerners no longer have to dirty their own hands to get hold of precious objects but can rely on the art trade. As Thurstan Shaw, puts it: "By

Field Museum, Chicago, the University of Pennsylvania Museum, and the Harvard University Museum built up Benin collections from 1898.<sup>134</sup> Other United States museums emerged onto the scene of Benin collecting later. The Art Institute in Chicago made its initial Benin acquisition for the Institute's Children's Museum in 1933 and the Metropolitan Museum in New York acquired its first Benin objects – a brass rooster – in 1950 (which was also its first object from sub-Saharan Africa).<sup>135</sup> Through subsequent additions the Metropolitan Museum can, and does, boast to have one of the world's "leading" Benin collections.<sup>136</sup> The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, which until 2012 only possessed one single Benin object, announced that it would welcome the further addition of 34 Benin objects following a donation from Robert Lehman, the great grandson of the founder of Lehman Brothers. The news of the acquisition was not happily received by all. The Nigerian National Commission for Museums and Monuments demanded that the objects should be returned to Nigeria rather than given to the Museum of Fine Arts.<sup>137</sup>

While no museum has bowed to demands from Nigeria for the return of Benin objects, it may be noted that over the years museums have sold or exchanged Benin objects. For example, in 1921 and 1923, the Berlin museum sold 17 Benin objects to contribute towards a new museum building.<sup>138</sup> In the early 1950s the British Museum sold 24 or 25 plaques to the Colonial Government in Nigeria for the planned National Museum in Lagos. Ten further plaques from the British Museum's collection were sold to, or exchanged with, dealers and collectors, the last such transaction occurring in 1972

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right of wealth' has now replaced "By right of conquest": 'Send a gun-boat' has been superseded by 'Send a cheque.'" Shaw 1986, 48. Perhaps it is needless to say that this theme is not taken up in the exhibition.

134. Hooton 1917, Plankensteiner 2007b, 36, Völger 2007, 219. Through a major donation of Benin objects in the 1960s the Benin collection of the Field Museum is among the largest in the United States.

135. MacKenzie 1934, Berzock 1999.

136. Montebello 1992.

137. Vogel 2012.

138. Krieger 1973, 118-119.

when an exchange was made with Robert Lehman.<sup>139</sup> Sales of Benin objects from museum collections have become rarer over time, but still happen: a relatively recent case being the Albert-Knox Gallery's sale of a pedestal head in 2007.<sup>140</sup>

Some (privately held) museum collections have been dispersed or merged with other museum collections. The Ethnographic Museum in Cranmore, set up by brewery owner Harry Geoffrey Beasley and his wife Irene Beasley in 1928, was closed in the early 1940s and its collections donated to various museums, including the British Museum who received 76 Benin objects in 1944. In 1954, The Wellcome Institute gave the British Museum some 130 Benin objects.<sup>141</sup> In the 1950s the Pitt Rivers Museum in Farnham, who needed to raise funds, sold an ivory pendant mask which was purchased (for £22,000) by the Linden-Museum, Stuttgart. The museum in Farnham was closed in the 1960s and the remaining collections sold, with many objects bought by United States museums.<sup>142</sup>

Europe's violent 20<sup>th</sup> century history affected the movement and physical integrity of Benin objects. During the Second World War the collections of the British Museum were evacuated into mines and other safe locations (the ethnographic collection being sent to Drayton House in Northamptonshire) and its Benin objects survived the war intact. The collections of the Liverpool museum were less fortunate. They were not evacuated and when the museum was hit by an incendiary bomb in 1941 some of the Benin objects were destroyed in the resultant fire.<sup>143</sup> The largest losses were incurred by the Benin collection at the Ethnological Museum in Berlin. When air bombardment of the city began, the museum's collections were gradually sent to various places in Berlin and elsewhere in Germany for safekeeping. The reserve or study collection, with

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139. Bailey 2002. The British Museum's sales will be discussed in more detail in the chapter 11. Further examples of museum deaccessioning by sale or exchange may be added. Dark 1982, xvi mentions a plaque exchanged with a dealer by the City Museum in Munich in 1951.

140. Kennedy 2007, Paudrat 2007, 240.

141. Waterfield 2009b. On Wellcome: Arnold & Chaplin 2013, 233-235.

142. Dark 1982, xvii. Waterfield 2009a, 50. The mask had been bought by Pitt Rivers from Webster in 1898 for £25. Kaplan 2007, 143, fig. 4.

143. Dark 1982, xvi. Tythacott 1998, 25.

some 400 Benin objects, was transported to Silesia in present-day Poland. These objects were seized by Soviet troops and taken to the Ethnographic Museum in Leningrad. The Berlin museum's display collections, which included 181 Benin objects fell into the hands of the Western allies and were returned to the Ethnological Museum in (West) Berlin in 1956. The objects sent to Leningrad remained there until 1977/8 when they were moved to the Ethnographic Museum in Leipzig as a sign of "friendship between communist peoples." After the fall of the Berlin Wall, between 1990 and 1992, the objects (whose destiny until then had been unknown to most) were returned to the Ethnological Museum in Berlin. However, many objects, including 65 Benin objects, are still missing.<sup>144</sup> Whether some, or all, of these are stowed away in a museum store, have been destroyed, or were stolen, is not known.

The documentary sources only offer rare glimpses into the fates and functions of the Benin objects in private hands. A photograph, which recently surfaced on a Brighton flea market, shows a room interior with several Benin objects – a pair of leopards, two plaques, an altar group and two hip masks – decorating a fire place [Fig. 9]. The location is most likely the residence of George Neville, a member of the British forces, and the photograph predating 1930 when his Benin collection was auctioned.<sup>145</sup> The arrangement at the fire place signals a certain degree of reverence for the objects and bestows them with some dignity. Other Benin objects have been put to humbler uses in private households. Reportedly, a brass horseman, given by Oba Ovonramwen to the trader Swainson in or about 1892, was used as a doorstopper in the home of one of his descendants for years before being sold to the Liverpool Museum in 1987.<sup>146</sup> According to Benin scholar William Fagg, in at least one case, a naked male on a plaque has had his genitalia removed by the plaque's owner in an attempt

144. On the history of the Berlin collection, see above p. 167, n. 128.

145. <http://benicek.livejournal.com/363475.html> and <http://brunoclaessens.com/2014/09/benin-treasures-on-a-pre-1930-interior-photo/#.VUedXPapobZ>. On Neville's collection, cf. *Lagos Weekly Record* 20 March 1897.

146. Nevadomsky 2006, 46. On Benin objects having served as doorstoppers cf. Murray quoted in Willett 1973, 10 who found a Benin figure, in the museum (?) in Benin City "hanging by its feet at the back of a door to keep the door shut."



to make the plaque “more suitable for display in the home.”<sup>147</sup> Fagg has also commented that objects in private collections have lost their pre-1897 patinated surfaces “due to the attentions of zealous housemaids,” which is a rare reference to the involvement of actors and activities other than those of a (predominantly male) social elite in the making of the Benin objects.<sup>148</sup> As for the physical appearance of Benin objects, it may be noted that Benin brasses, both in private and public collections have undergone various surface treatments, such as waxing and dewaxing.<sup>149</sup>

Not all Benin objects left Africa in 1897. A number of objects were retained locally in the Niger Coast Protectorate. Some of these have subsequently been taken to the West, with others remaining in private Edo possession.<sup>150</sup> Also, during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, further Benin castings have turned up through non-archaeological digging and during construction work in Benin City and elsewhere.<sup>151</sup> The finds in Benin City were kept in the palace in Benin City, while a cache of castings accidentally found at Lagos sometime before 1907 was purchased by the British Museum in 1930.<sup>152</sup> Other castings, belonging to various casting traditions, have also been unearthed in southern Nigeria during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, some of which were acquired by the British Museum. Following the find of several cast heads at Ife in 1938, the Colonial Government passed legislation outlawing the export of antiquities from Nigeria.<sup>153</sup> With

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147. Fagg 1958, 105, n. 3.

148. Moffett 1996, 2. Cf. Fagg 1953, 65 where he comments that Benin objects in private hands have been “rather too heavily cleaned.”

149. Schrenk 1991, Moffett 1996.

150. Dark 1982, xi-xii, Nevadomsky 1997, 26-27, figs. 15-16, shows two objects in Edo private hands (one of which was, however, stolen in the 1980s), cf. Nevadomsky 2004, 4, 86, Plankensteiner 1997b, 35. While the British brought with them the heads of the large brass snakes which had been placed on the palace roof, the body sections of these snakes were left lying about and some were reused by the pages as “duckboards” for standing on when washing their feet. Goodwin 1963, 144.

151. Dennet 1906, 188 observed that people had been digging for objects in the ruins of the royal palace.

152. On objects in Benin City: Talbot 1969 [1926] 3:1, figs. 144, 188, 227, Meyerowitz 1940, Meyerowitz 1943, Willett 1973, 8. On the Lagos find: Joyce 1930, Phillips 1995, 398, 401, no. 5.60j (Barley), Curnow 2007, 178.

153. Brauholtz 1940, 76, Fagg & Underwood 1949, 3, Shyllon 2006, 138.



the creation of a museum in Benin City in 1946, many objects were moved there from the palace. In the 1950s and 1960s a few Benin objects were discovered in controlled archaeological excavations in Benin City.<sup>154</sup> Occasionally, Benin objects surface at rather unexpected locations. For example, in 1972, four Benin objects, including a rare brass hornblower, were found in a broom cupboard at the McLean Museum and Art Gallery in Greenock, Scotland.<sup>155</sup>

The post-1897 circulation of Benin objects has mainly been restricted to Europe and the US. Yet, from the 1950s looted objects have been brought back to Nigeria through purchases, firstly by the British Colonial Government and, following independence in 1960, by the Nigerian Government. The purchases have been made both at public auctions and, as just mentioned, from the British Museum's collection of Benin plaques.<sup>156</sup> Yet, in addition to the returns to Nigeria through sale and purchase – that is through transactions occurring within the boundaries of law and performed by consenting parties – there has also been a counteracting flow of objects from Nigeria to the West, through theft and smuggling. Reports of objects stolen from museums in Nigeria go back to at least the 1950s, and numerous thefts were reported during the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>157</sup> Some stolen Benin objects which have turned up on the art market in New York and Zürich have been re-returned to Nigeria.<sup>158</sup> A Nigerian head of State may be counted among the thieves and traffickers. In 1973, General Yakubu Gowon made a visit to the National Museum in Lagos and took a brass casting from the displays to give to Queen Elizabeth II in connection with his state visit to Britain that year. The gift was made in recognition for British

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154. Willett 1973, 10-11, Nevadomsky 1997, 22.

155. Idiens 1987. The four objects had been donated to the museum in 1925, and since then fallen into oblivion. In 1985 they were acquired by the National Museums of Scotland, Edinburgh. Plankensteiner 2007a, 403-404, no. 177-178 (Kaplan).

156. Fagg 1953, Monzino 1981, Shyllon 1996, 249, Bailey 2002.

157. Willett 1973, 17, Dark 1982, xii, Eyo 1986, Eyo 1994, Jegede 1996, Posnansky 1996, Shyllon 1996, 250, 253, ICOM 1997, iv, 60-73, Willett 2000.

158. Eyo 1986, 207-210, Obayemi & Pemberton 1991, Eyo 1994, Shyllon 1996, 258-259, Willett 2000, 127-128.

support during the Nigerian Civil war (the Biafra war).<sup>159</sup> A second, less well known case of a Benin object being used as a gift to a head of State is an ivory tusk given by Abubakar Tafawa Balew, Nigeria's first Prime Minister, to President John F. Kennedy when Balew visited the White House in 1961. The tusk is in the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum in Boston.<sup>160</sup>

Benin objects in private and public possession have also moved back and forth over the continents as part of temporary and traveling exhibitions. The *Exposition de Bronzes et Ivoires du Royaume de Bénin* at the Musée d'ethnographie du Trocadéro in Paris in 1932 was perhaps the first international museum exhibition of Benin objects. The exhibits included objects from several German museums (Berlin, Dresden, Cologne, Munich, and Leipzig) and from the Pitt Rivers museum, Farnham. It was followed by the *African Negro Art* exhibition at the Museum of Modern art in New York in 1935 which again showed Benin objects from the museums in Berlin, Dresden and Leipzig. In these ventures public non-commercial interests and private commercial interests were intermixed. The dealer Charles Rattou was involved in the organization of both exhibitions, and most of the exhibits came from private collectors and antiquities dealers, the biggest lender of Benin objects to the latter exhibition being the dealer Louis Carré.<sup>161</sup>

The *Treasures of Ancient Nigeria* exhibition with Benin and other objects from various Nigerian museums travelled the United States and (Western) Europe in the early 1980s.<sup>162</sup> It has been observed that, potentially, it was this exhibition that triggered another movement of Benin objects: it seems to have stimulated market demand for Nigerian "art" and thus contributed to the thefts from Nigerian museums which occurred from the 1980s.<sup>163</sup> The hitherto

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159. Reynolds 2002, Nevadomsky 2004, 86.

160. <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKSG-MO-1963-2295.aspx>

161. Sweeney 1935, 41-43, Clarke 2003, 167-168, Paudrat 2007.

162. Eyo & Willett 1980.

163. Eyo 1986, 1994, 338. Jegede 1996 offers an alternative, or complementary, explanation for why museums were targeted from the early 1980s. He suggests that by this time the supply of the more easily stolen objects in shrines had dried out. On exhibitions stimulating market demand, cf. Posnansky 1975, 88, Brodie, Doole & Watson 2000, 53, Gado 2001, 58, 60, , Lundén 2004, 238.

biggest travelling exhibition is *Benin – Kings and Rituals. Court Arts from Nigeria* which brought together 300 objects from over twenty museums and which was shown at the Museum of Ethnology (now World Museum) in Vienna, the Quai Branly Museum in Paris, the Ethnological Museum in Berlin, and the Art Institute in Chicago between 2007 and 2008.<sup>164</sup> Benin objects from the British Museum have been shown in Japan and China, and those of the Ethnological Museum in Berlin have been exhibited in Brazil.<sup>165</sup>

The dissemination of the Benin objects also applies to what were once single objects. The University of Zürich collection has a headless horseman whose head is in the British Museum.<sup>166</sup> Another figure is divided between the National Museum in Benin City and the University Museum in Philadelphia.<sup>167</sup> Sometimes, such separated objects are brought together in a temporary exhibitions. In the above-mentioned *Benin – Kings and Ritual. Court Arts from Nigeria* exhibition, two two-part plaques (plaques which have a motif which extends over two plaques) residing in different collections were exhibited together.<sup>168</sup>

So far the narrative presented has concentrated on the actual objects “themselves” and their movement, physical integrity, locations, and ownership. It has outlined how through various actions and transactions— purchases, loans, gifts, exchanges, confiscation, bombing, thefts, smuggling, polishing, etc. – Benin objects have been gained, lost and rediscovered, accumulated and dispersed, preserved, altered, and sometimes even been destroyed. The objects have passed through, or remained at, diverse locations and institutions: museum stores and exhibitions, shelters, auction houses, and private homes. They have been possessed and handled by a range of people: museum curators, officers, dealers, artists (such as Picasso), royalties (such as Kaiser Wilhelm and the British Royal Family), presidents, and thieves (although the latter two categories, in at least one case, are not distinct). Agents of loss and destruction which appear in

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164. Plankensteiner 2007a.

165. Yoshida & Mack 1997, Dohlvik 2006, 36, MacGregor 2009, 50-51.

166. Fagg 1953, 166.

167. Willett 1973, 10.

168. Plankensteiner 2007a, 284, no. 12-13 (Junge), 454, no. 234-235 (Eisenhofer).

the story of the fates of Benin objects include a Luftwaffe incendiary bomb, over-zealous housemaids, and the Red Army.

These various actions, transactions, and movements account for one aspect of the objects' integration in post-1897 cultural contexts. Yet, Benin objects have been further disseminated beyond the rather narrow circle of those who have owned, tended, transferred, or in other ways come into direct tactile contact with the objects through a range of representational techniques, which include museum exhibitions and, most importantly, various print media where Benin objects have been described and visualized with words and images. Print representations, which are presumably the primary form through which Benin objects have become "known," include newspaper articles, academic and popular publications on art and cultural history, museum guide books, auction catalogues, posters, and post cards, etc.

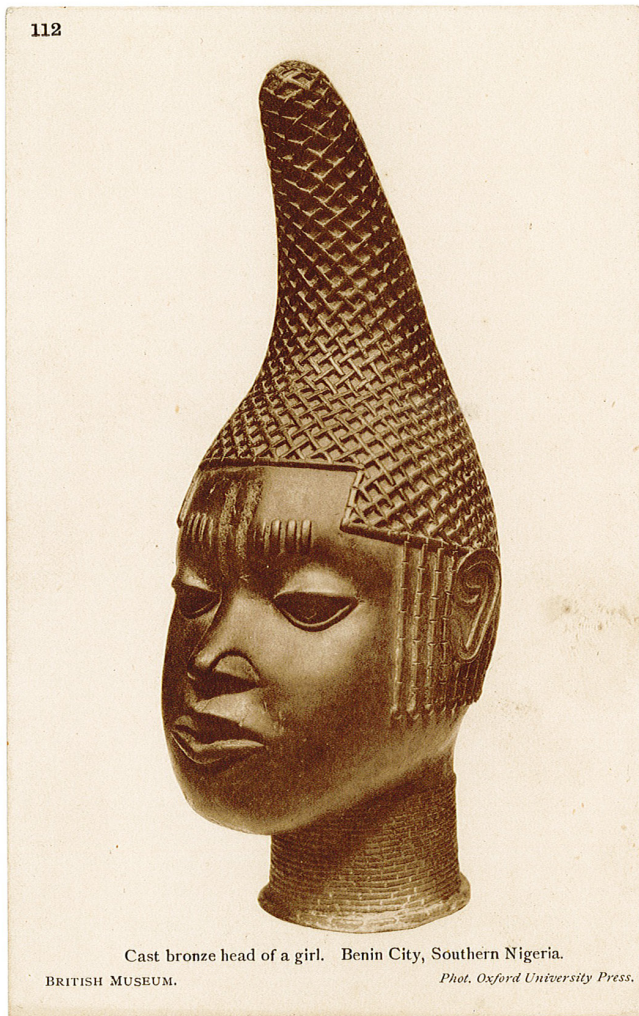
Benin objects were rapidly put on public view. In July 1897 "war relics from Benin" were added to the exhibits at the Naval and Military Museum of the Royal United Service Institution and, also in July 1897, "some interesting bronzes from Benin City" went on display at the Royal Colonial Institute.<sup>169</sup> In September 1897 the British Museum arranged a temporary exhibition of the 300 plaques it had on loan from the Foreign Office in the Assyrian Saloon.<sup>170</sup> Later, a selection of Benin objects were included in the permanent display of the Ethnographical Gallery, and Benin objects were mentioned (briefly) and illustrated in the museum's subsequent guidebooks.<sup>171</sup> By 1920 the British Museum's assortment of postcards included one with a Benin object – the Queen Mother head (referred to as "Cast bronze head of girl") [Fig. 10].<sup>172</sup> Other museums were also quick to put their acquisitions on display. These early displays seem to have been in accordance with the then prevailing practice for ethnographic displays. Numerous objects were crammed into glass showcases

169. *The Times* 1 July, 3 July, 1897.

170. *The Times* September 25 1897, *Illustrated London News* 16 October 1897, Carlsen 1897, Read & Dalton 1898, 370.

171. British Museum 1899, 100, British Museum 1910, 241, figs. 216-220, pl. XII-XIII, British Museum 1925, 252, figs. 232-236, 238, pl. XVI-XVII, Coombes 1994b, 27, 59-61, 234, n. 76, 82.

172. British Museum 1920, 7, no.112.



**Fig. 10.** *British Museum postcard, c. 1920. The Queen Mother head, here referred to as “Cast bronze head of a girl.”*

often with similar “types” of objects being grouped together, and with very little textual information on labels [Fig. 11].<sup>173</sup> From the 1920s, following a general trend of making the exhibits more accessible and attractive to visitors, some museums, like the Ethnological Museum in Berlin, began to display Benin collections in a more “arty” fashion

<sup>173</sup> Zimmerman 2001, 172-183.





Fig. 11. *Ethnological Museum, Berlin. Benin display, before 1914.*

with fewer objects in an exhibit and with the layout of the objects organized less according to typological classification than by aesthetic criteria in order to create harmonious and symmetrical compositions [Fig. 12].<sup>174</sup> These exhibits also seem to have been generally devoid of

174. On this general trend of exhibiting fewer objects and making the exhibits more spacious, see McClellan 2008, 124-132. On the debate in Germany: Blauensteiner 1931, 63-64, Zimmerman 2001, 194-198, 2002. On the British



Fig. 12. *Ethnological Museum, Berlin, Benin display, after 1926.*

any longer interpretative texts and visual aids such as photographs, reconstruction drawings, maps, etc. Benin exhibitions which contextualize the objects through such techniques appeared much later. Contemporary Benin exhibitions often meddle between contextualizing and object-oriented, aestheticizing approaches. Ethnographic museums usually prefer more contextualizing display strategies and art museums more object-oriented ones.<sup>175</sup>

In the press, the first descriptions and illustrations of Benin objects are already found in March 1897, when the *London Illustrated News* published an article about the objects acquired by the Horniman Museum. In August of the same year the journal published a short note illustrating the Benin objects in the possession of dealer Matthew Hale. In October it ran a longer article about the British Museum's exhibition of the Benin objects on loan from the Foreign Office, illustrating the article with a number of the plaques

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Museum: Read 1921.

175. On contextualizing and object-oriented displays: Clarke 2003, 174, Davalos 2004, 527-528.

in the museum.<sup>176</sup> Since then these topics – sales, acquisitions, and exhibitions – have been recurring in the press reporting on Benin objects.<sup>177</sup>

Museum curators lectured on and published their new possessions both to the general public and academics. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of November 1897, Read and Dalton at the British Museum gave a lecture on the Benin objects in the museum's collection for the Royal Anthropological Institute, and in February 1898 their article "Works of art from Benin City" appeared in the *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*.<sup>178</sup> An article by Henry Forbes at the Mayer museum in Liverpool. "On a collection cast-metal work of high artistic value from Benin City lately acquired for the Mayer Museum," appeared about the same time in the *Bulletin of the Liverpool Museum*.<sup>179</sup> These two articles are the first English-language academic publications on Benin objects (they were preceded by an article by a "Dr F. Carlsen, London," entitled "Benin in Guinea und seine rätselhaften Bronzen" published in *Globus* 27 November 1897).<sup>180</sup> Later in 1898, Dalton wrote a popular article entitled "Booty from Benin" for the *English Illustrated Magazine*.<sup>181</sup> In the following year Read and Dalton published their *Antiquities from the City of Benin and Other Parts of West Africa in the British Museum* presenting "a selection of the principal objects obtained by the recent successful expedition sent to Benin to punish the natives of that city for a treacherous massacre of a peaceful English mission." Henry Ling Roth at the Bankfield Museum – brother of surgeon Felix Roth who participated in the Expeditionary Force to Benin – published a number of texts on Benin objects from 1898 and onwards, including the monograph *Great Benin – Its Customs, Art and Horrors* in 1903.

Presentations and publications were also forthcoming from curators at German museums. In August 1897 Justus Brinckmann at the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe in Hamburg presented two

176. *Illustrated London News* 10 April, 7 August, 16 October 1897.

177. On sales of Benin objects, see Webb 1901, Hutchison 1974.

178. Quick 1898, 248, Read & Dalton 1898.

179. Forbes 1898, 70. The Mayer museum also ran a public lecture series with the title "Loot from Benin." Coombes 1994b, 140.

180. Carlsen 1897.

181. Dalton 1898.



Benin objects at the meeting of the Deutsche Anthropologische Gesellschaft in Lübeck and in March 1898 Felix von Luschan at the Ethnological Museum in Berlin lectured on the Benin objects for the Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte.<sup>182</sup> Luschan's first article "Altertümer von Benin" appeared in *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* later in that year.<sup>183</sup> In 1899 Luschan spoke about Benin objects at the *Internationalen Geographen-Kongresses* in Berlin and wrote several articles on Benin objects during the course of the following years.<sup>184</sup> In 1919 his three volume *Die Altertümer von Benin* appeared.<sup>185</sup> The spate of popular and academic publications on Benin objects has continued unabated during the 20<sup>th</sup> and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, although Luschan's *Die Altertümer von Benin* remains the heaviest and most comprehensive compilation of Benin objects.

Among the, perhaps unexpected, contexts where Benin objects have been rendered, one finds a Christmas card by the British Royal Anthropological Institute and the entrance doors of the Museum of Mankind, London.<sup>186</sup> Benin objects have also starred in film documentaries (including one by David Attenborough), on West African bank notes and on Nigerian stamps.<sup>187</sup> The ivory pendant mask in the British Museum was chosen as the logo of the 1977 FESTAC festival in Nigeria and featured on the FESTAC poster.<sup>188</sup> In the movie *The Mask* (1979) by Eddie Ugbomah, the protagonist tries to steal the ivory pendant mask and return it to Nigeria. Back in 1898, a "sacrificial sword" was included in a reenactment of the taking of Benin City held at the Royal Military Tournament in London featuring blackface British soldiers acting as Edo savages. Two photographs commemorated the event [Fig. 13-14]. The reviewer in *The Times* enthusiastically described the "vivid presentment" of the capture of Benin City as "distinctly a fine display" with such "promiscuous slaughter, as never was seen." His only criticism was

182. Buschan 1897, 347, Brinckmann 1898, CXXII, Luschan 1898.

183. Luschan 1898.

184. Luschan 1900, 1901a, 1901b, 1916.

185. Luschan 1919.

186. Fagg 1957, Coombes 1994b, 222, fig. 109.

187. Grob 1977, Walz 2005.

188. Greenfield 1996 [1989], 120, Plankensteiner 2007a, 505, no. 287 (Layiwola).



**Fig. 13.** Royal Military Tournament in London, 1898. Blackface British soldiers posing as Edo carrying out a human sacrifice with an ada sword. From photo album of Lieutenant Norman Burrows, who participated in the show.



**Fig. 14.** Royal Military Tournament in London, 1898. Blackface British soldiers posing as Black soldiers in the Niger Coast Protectorate Force with the captured Oba Ovonoramwen (cf. fig. 17). From photo album of Lieutenant Norman Burrows, who participated in the show.

that the staged “medical arrangements” were “disproportionate to the carnage.”<sup>189</sup>

Benin objects have also been reproduced in three-dimensional form: Luschan acquired over 40 casts of Benin objects from museum collections. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century copies (and fakes) of Benin objects have been produced to satisfy market demand from tourists, collectors, and investors.<sup>190</sup> Following the British Museum’s refusal to lend the ivory pendant mask for FESTAC, an ivory replica of the mask was made by the artist Joseph Alufa Igbinovia which is now in the museum in Benin City.<sup>191</sup> A large-scale brass version of the mask by the artist Uyi Omodamwen, was donated to UNESCO in 2005 by Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo. It is on display in the UNESCO headquarters in Paris.<sup>192</sup> The Benin objects and the photographs taken in 1897 have inspired a number of contemporary artworks, including the “Ens Project” by Leo Esamota, and “Whose Africa?” by Godfried Donkor.<sup>193</sup>

Following this overview of the physical spread of the Benin objects and their further dissemination in, mostly, print media, a closer look will be taken at how the Benin objects have been apprehended, appropriated, ordered, and valued in – and through – these post-1897 contexts and representations. As for the ordering of the objects it might be observed that when the loot was heaped up in the palace, there was already a tendency to sort it according to material. Some of the photographs taken in the city suggest that the ivory was kept separate from the metal objects [Fig. 15]. It also seems that the ivory was initially valued more highly than the metal objects. Ivory was an important and expensive trade commodity at the time and, as noted, both Phillips and Gallwey had anticipated that ivory would be found in Benin City. The quote from Landon above also suggests that ivory

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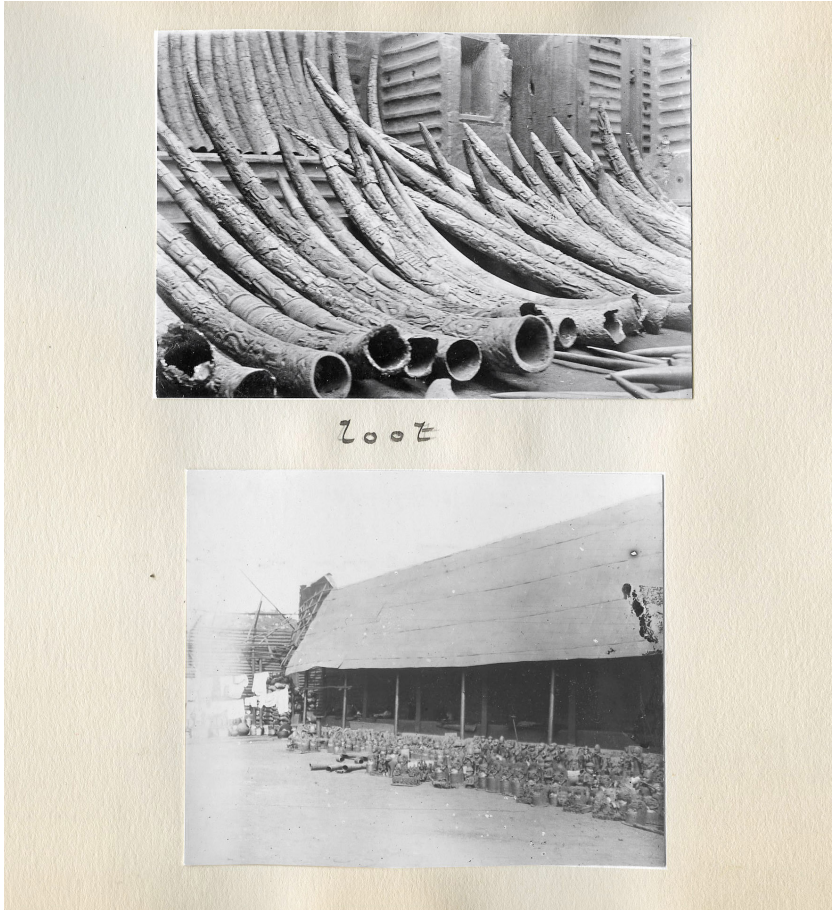
189. *The Times* 20 May 1898. The photographs discussed by Nevadomsky 2006, 47-50 are most likely from this show. The *ada* ceremonial sword which appears on the photograph with a staged human sacrifice is presumably the “sacrificial sword” used in the show.

190. Graebner 1911, 13, 20, n. 2, Nevadomsky & Osemwari 2007.

191. Plankensteiner 2007a, 505, no. 287 (Layiwola).

192. Östberg 2010b 52, 54.

193. Shelton, 2001, 237-238, Spring 2009, 66, 74-75.



**Fig. 15.** Two photographs from the diary of Captain Herbert Walker, showing ivory tusks and brass objects. Note the original caption “Loot”, and the washing in the far back on the lower photograph.

objects were the most sought-after ones, and it was the high-ranking dignitaries, like Rawson, Moor, and Gallwey who managed to get hold of the most prestigious ivory objects.<sup>194</sup> During the following years, when the trade in Benin objects developed, the carved tusks were generally more expensive than the other objects and the price record (£120) in 1900 was set by a carved tusk.<sup>195</sup>

194. Cf. the *Illustrated London News* 27 March 1897, 13 which refers to the loot as “valuable tusks and other curios.”

195. Torrence & Clark 2011, 42.





**Fig. 16.** *Benin City, 1897, the Royal Palace. British soldiers posing with Benin objects. Note the classic male legspread.*

The photographs also reveal another aspect of the value and meanings attached to the objects by their British captors [Fig. 16].<sup>196</sup> The photographs with British soldiers staring into the camera with looted objects laid out at their feet resemble in their composition the photographs of big game hunters posing with a killed prey, or part of the prey, such as its head, horns, or tusks. In each case the photograph portrays the captors with their trophies and it serves

<sup>196</sup> Plankensteiner 2007b, 23, fig. 3.



**Fig 17.** *Oba Ovonramwen on his way to exile on board the yacht Ivy in 1897. Behind him are three soldiers from the Niger Coast Protectorate Force.*

to document the victors' triumph and the defeat of their adversaries. A photograph of the captured Oba Ovonramwen seated on a chair flanked by soldiers with a chain around his feet follows the same iconography. Here it is not objects, or an animal, but a human being who is the captured prize [Fig. 17]. The objects had value to the British officers as they could function as physical and durable signs of the valor of their new owners. Back in Britain, some of them would attach labels to their trophies which commemorated the glorious moment of victory. One tusk received an engraved

copper plate with the following words: “Taken from a sacrificial shrine at Benin, West Africa by Captn. C. H. Ringer, East Lancs Reg., Feby. 1898 [sic].”<sup>197</sup> Lieutenant Burrows had himself photographed posing with three ivory tusks, the iconography blending hunting trophy and war trophy into one [Fig. 18, cf. 19].<sup>198</sup> Another photograph shows Benin objects surrounding a shield commemorating various military exploits [Fig. 20].

Apart from their status as war trophies, the object also acquired another value which is suggested by a drawing, based on a photograph taken in Benin City, showing British soldiers and Benin objects [Fig. 21]. Here the British are not looking into the camera or glaring into the distance, but at the objects. The iconography used is that of the scholar or connoisseur scrutinizing or evaluating an object. In contrast to the earlier photographs this image does not (only) signal the owner’s mastery over the objects, but rather a sense of curiosity invoked by it. Perhaps it even suggests admiration for it.

Thus, if my interpretation is correct, in the two photographs there are two sorts of values attached to the objects which may be discerned – one relates to the objects as mementos or souvenirs of war symbolic of British prowess and the defeat of barbarity. The other value relates to a feeling of wonder suggested by the objects, perhaps including a positive evaluation of the skill executed in their manufacturing. The former valuing of the objects – as trophies of war and memorials of Edo atrocities and British valor – was fairly soon pushed into the background in the favor of the latter, which saw evidence of a remarkable technical and artistic talent in these objects. Although the very first reports on the Benin objects produced in the aftermath of the fall of Benin City described the objects in pejorative terms and connected them with human sacrifices, they quickly received praise for their beauty and workmanship and were soon hailed as great works of art.

One of the earliest extant descriptions of Benin objects written after the fall of Benin City on the 18<sup>th</sup> of February is given by

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197. Paudrat 2007, 245, n. 15

198. See also photograph of the dealer Webster posing with tusks. Plankensteiner 2007b, 29, fig. 8.



Fig. 18. Lieutenant Norman Burrows with tusks. From photo album of Norman Burrows.

Moor in a dispatch from Benin City on the 24<sup>th</sup> of February. The dispatch gives a short description of the city with an emphasis on the evidence of large-scale human sacrifice performed by the Edo. Moor writes that on the “sacrificial altars [...] were placed the gods to whom sacrifice is made, mostly being carved ivory tusks, standing upright, mounted at base in *hideously*-constructed brass heads” (italics added).<sup>199</sup> An article in the *London Illustrated News* of

199. Papers 1897, 28, Cf. Boisragon 1897, 186 who refers to “hideous bronze heads.” His description is a slight reworking of Moor’s.





Fig. 19. Lieutenant Norman Burrows's Benin objects.

March 27<sup>th</sup> uses a similar wording. Under the heading “The horrors of Benin City” the writer describes the altars where “the people of Benin hold their hideous rites to their gods.” On these altars are “fetishes [...] which comprise elephants’ tusks and carved figures of ivory, brass, and bronze, having the most *grotesque* appearance” (*italics added*).<sup>200</sup>

While these two accounts, focusing on the atrocities committed by the Edo, give passing references to the objects on the altars by

<sup>200</sup>. *Illustrated London News* 27 March 1897.

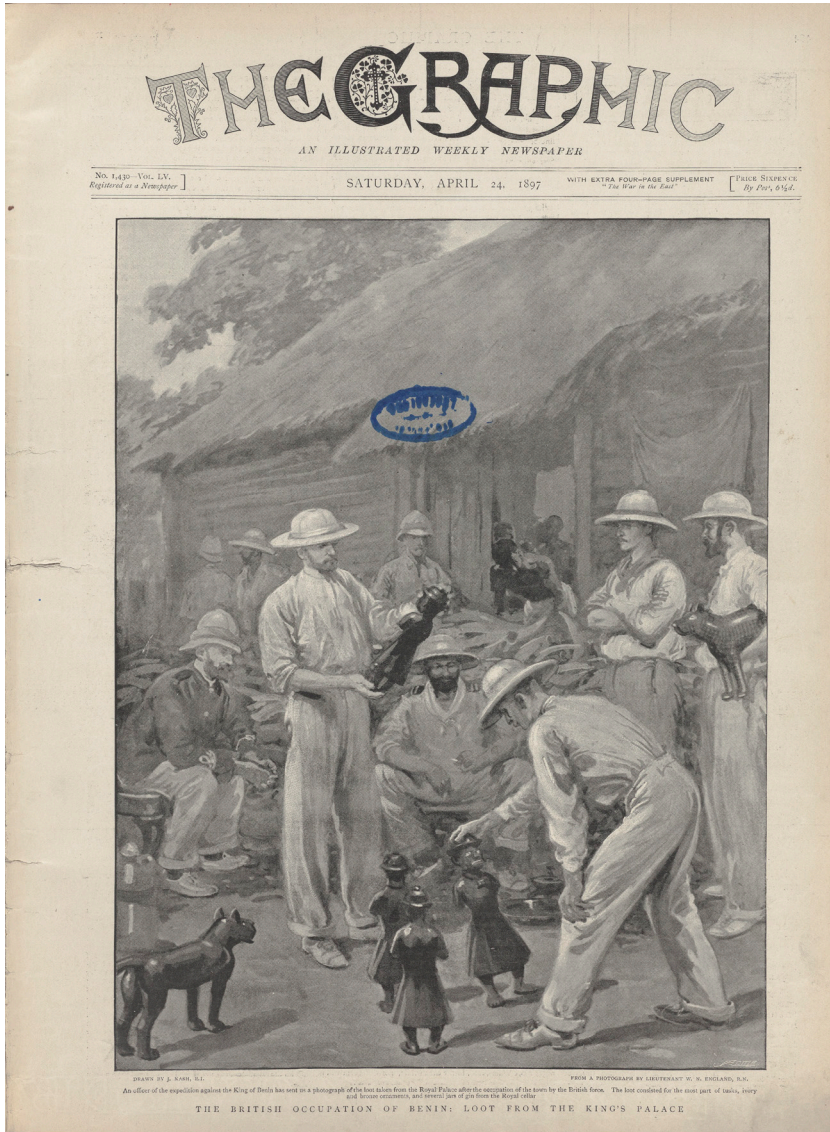


Fig. 20. Regimental shield and Benin objects. The shield commemorates military exploits. “Benin 1897” is inscribed in the lower right banner.

using adjectives which describe them in negative terms, no such derogatory words are found in the article “Spoils from Benin” in the *Illustrated London News* from the 10<sup>th</sup> of April 1897.<sup>201</sup> The article describes and illustrates a number of objects – referred to as either “spoils,” “relics,” “curiosities,” “curios,” or “articles” – brought from Benin by the officer W. J. Hider and acquired by the Horniman

201. *Illustrated London News* 10 April 1897.





**Fig. 21.** The Graphic April 1897. Drawing from photo. British soldiers in Benin City admiring(?) Benin objects. Original caption: "The British Occupation of Benin. Loot from the King's palace. An officer of the expedition against the King of Benin has sent us a photograph of the loot taken from the Royal Palace after the occupation of the town by the British force. The loot consisted for the most part of tusks, ivory and bronze ornaments and several jars of gin from the Royal cellar."

museum. Although several of the objects are clearly connected to Edo violence and savagery, one of them, among those which are not linked to bestiality, even gets a positive appraisal. The objects comprise of a “Snider rifle taken from a dead chief [...] two curios knives or daggers in brass sheaths, a couple of bronze handbells [...] two ancient carved ivory idols or official maces.” According to the description and interpretation of the objects offered by the article, the butt of the Snider rifle was “studded with upwards of one hundred brass-headed nails denoting the number of victims shot by the late owner with this particular weapon,” the bronze bells were “rung to announce a human sacrifice,” and the idols/maces “were carried by the high executioner.” The article then proceeds with objects which illustrate “a less savage side of the native life”: “a child’s bracelet in ivory” and “an ancient armlet inlaid with gold” the latter which “was probably an ornament worn by one of the King’s wives.” The list of the “array of spoils” is completed by “a couple of fans and a looking-glass frame of *finely* carved wood” (italics added).

Two months later – in June 1897 – Robert Allman, medical head of the expeditionary force, wrote an account of Benin City in the *Lancet*. His description of the city contains much of the same elements as in Moor’s, with references to human sacrifices, crucifixion trees, and a horrid stench, but the vocabulary used to describe the altars sets a different tone. According to Allman the altars were “decorated with large bronzes and enormous carved ivory tusks.” While the adjectives used here only refer to the size of the objects, Allman later on calls the Edo “most skilful and proficient” in bronze molding, ivory carving, and blacksmith work. He describes some bronzes as “*beautifully* designed, moulded, and cast,” and the ivory and wood carvings as “most *wonderfully* contrived and executed” (italics added).<sup>202</sup>

During the autumn of 1897, Bacon published his *Benin – City of Blood*.<sup>203</sup> As its title suggests, Bacon – like the previous authors – gives a vivid description of the carnage, bloodshed, and stench

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202. Allman 1897, 44.

203. The book must have appeared by November 1897 when it was reviewed in the press. Coombes 1994b, 229, n. 35.

in Benin City, yet the objects are described in favorable terms. According to Bacon, there were “*handsomely*-carved ivory tusks placed on top of very antique bronze heads” on the altars, and the “articles of value” which were “collected” in the city consisted of “tusks and bronze work,” the former being “*magnificently* carved” and the latter “of *wonderful* delicacy of detail.” The plaques found “buried in the dirt of ages,” are described as “really *superb* castings.” Among the other ivory works “the chief articles of note” were “two *magnificent* leopards.” He also reports the presence of “two large and *beautifully* carved stools [...] which must have been of very old manufacture” (the leopards are presumably the pair which Rawson donated to the Queen and the stools the ones obtained by Moor). Of note is that in Bacon’s – favorable – account of the objects, a new element – time depth – is introduced in the description of the objects by the words “antique,” “buried in the dirt of ages” and “very old manufacture.”<sup>204</sup> In the subsequent scholarly discussion on the dating of Benin objects, a connection between (old) age and beauty was often assumed: the objects judged to be of highest artistic quality were considered to be the oldest.

Bacon’s account also contains a comparison between the Benin objects and those produced by other peoples. Apart from the leopards “the chief articles of note” included “some bracelets suggestive of Chinese work” and, according to Bacon, the plaques “were suggestive of almost Egyptian design.” A resemblance between Benin objects and those of ancient Egypt had previously been seen by Allman. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, both Chinese and Egyptian art ranked high on the Western scale of artistic value. Neither could compete in quality with the art of Classical Antiquity and later epochs in the history of Western art, but among the various non-Western art traditions, the art of China and ancient Egypt were considered to hold an elevated position, above that of most other peoples.<sup>205</sup> Thus, the comparison between Benin objects and Chinese and Egyptian art is evidence of their positive appraisal.

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204. Bacon 1897, 87, 91-92.

205. On the Western evaluation of Chinese and Egyptian art, see Clunas 1997 and Moser 2006.

As these texts reveal, a generally favorable attitude to the artistic qualities of the Benin objects was quickly established. When the objects became the possessions of museums and entered into the field of academic knowledge production, the objects were firmly placed in the sphere of high art.<sup>206</sup> With the rise on the ladder of artistic worth, their significance as war booty, with its associations to Edo gore and British (military) glory, diminished. Scholars praised both the ivories and the metal castings, but it was especially the metal castings (referred to as “bronzes”) rather than the ivories which gained attention and admiration.<sup>207</sup> The castings were seen as record achievements both from a technical and artistic viewpoint. The advanced casting technology employed in the castings was judged to be vastly superior to the “crude castings of the average native African.”<sup>208</sup> The judgment of artistic excellence was made against the then prevailing aesthetic idiom which favored representational realism and idealism over abstraction and stylization. Representations of the human body were praised for being “life-like,” “sober,” and possessing “dignity”: qualities which distinguished them from the “caricatures of humanity” produced by, for example, the Ashanti.<sup>209</sup> The value of the Benin objects was emphasized by comparing them favorably to what was seen as some of the highest peaks in the history of Western art – the Renaissance and Classical Antiquity. In Carlsen’s article from November 1897 it is stated that the castings are technically comparable to the “good

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206. For the sake of completeness it may be noted that there are a few accounts of Benin objects which antedate the taking of Benin and the discovery of numerous human sacrifices there in February 1897. These accounts are generally positive. An article in the *Liverpool Daily Post* from the 21 of January 1897 calls the equestrian statue given to the trader Swainson by the Oba of Benin in or about 1892 “exceedingly quaint and well-modeled.” Karpinski 1984, 62. Favorable accounts are also given by Burton 1863, 279, 285, 408 and Gallwey 1892, 130.

207. On the supposedly inferior qualities of the ivories: Read & Dalton 1898, 372-373, Read & Dalton 1899, 14. At the time, the ivories, such as Moor’s pendant mask, which would later become the most celebrated examples, were still in private hands.

208. Roth 1903, 232.

209. Brinckmann 1898, CCCIII, Ranke 1898, 63, Read & Dalton 1899, 19, Luschan 1919, 260, 338.

European bronzes of the 16<sup>th</sup> century” and Read and Dalton wrote enthusiastically in their 1898 article that the *cire perdue* process used in the casting of these objects was the one:

by which many of the finest Italian bronzes of the best period were produced, and we thus find the Benin savages using with familiarity and success a complicated method which satisfied the fastidious eye of the best artists of the Italian renaissance.<sup>210</sup>

Dalton, writing in the same year about the Queen Mother head stated that “if a Greek sculptor had been called upon to reproduce the head of a negress, one wonders if he could have done it much better.”<sup>211</sup> In Roth’s evaluation, the Benin craft production “will hold their own among some of the best specimens of antiquity or modern times.”<sup>212</sup> The perhaps most panegyric words came from Luschan, who in his first article on the Benin objects proclaimed:

Our [sic] Benin bronzes equal the highest level of the European casting technique. Benvenuto Cellini, nor anyone else before or after him up to the present day, could have casted these better. In technique these bronzes simply stand at the highest reachable level.<sup>213</sup>

He also states that some pieces were equal to contemporary European art and in 1901, he wrote that the three or four best Benin “heads” ranked as “great art” worthy of comparison with “the good portrait heads of Antiquity.”<sup>214</sup>

The re-evaluation of the Benin objects from war trophies to high art is also reflected in the terminology used to collectively refer to these objects. In the *Illustrated London News* the two articles about

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210. Carlsen 1897, 313, Read & Dalton 1898, 372.

211. Dalton 1898, 423.

212. Roth 1898a, 161.

213. Luschan 1898, 150.

214. Luschan 1898, 153, 1901, 76.



the Benin objects from the 10<sup>th</sup> of April and the 7<sup>th</sup> of August 1897 both carried the heading “Spoils from Benin.” In May 1897, *The Times* wrote about a forthcoming sale of “several carved tusks and other trophies from Benin City collected by naval officers in the recent expedition” and two days later the same objects were simply called “trophies from Benin City.”<sup>215</sup> In July it wrote about the “war relics” from Benin which were on view in the Naval and Military Museum of the Royal United Service Institution. However, terms such as “spoils,” “trophies” and “war relics” soon became less common in press reporting.<sup>216</sup> By August *The Times* instead referred to the objects in forthcoming sales as “curiosities.”<sup>217</sup>

When museum curators started writing about the Benin objects, they seem to have mainly used a vocabulary which put the objects into the category of war trophies in titles for publications and presentations aimed for the popular audience. Dalton’s article in *English Illustrated Magazine* was titled “Booty from Benin” and the Mayer Museum held a public lecture series called “Loot from Benin.”<sup>218</sup> The titles of academic publications on the Benin objects which were forthcoming from 1898 often instead contained the word “art.” Read and Dalton called their first article “Works of art from Benin” and Roth named his two articles from the same year “Notes on Benin Art” and “Primitive art from Benin.” His monograph from 1903 was titled *Great Benin – Its Customs, Art and Horrors*.<sup>219</sup> Pitt Rivers, publishing a catalogue of the Benin objects in his museum in 1900, called it *Antique Works of Art from Benin collected by Lieutenant-General Pitt Rivers*. Apart from “art” the other term which came into common use in titles for scholarly publications was “antiquities”; such as in Read and Dalton’s 1899 publication *Antiquities from the City of Benin and other parts of West Africa*, perhaps inspired by Luschan’s 1898 article “Altertümer von Benin.”<sup>220</sup>

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215. *The Times* 20 May, 24 May 1897.

216. *The Times* 3 July, 1897.

217. *The Times* 20 August.

218. Coombes 1994b, 140.

219. Read & Dalton 1898. Roth 1898a, 1898b, 1903. Forbes’s 1898 article was called “On a collection of cast-metal work of high artistic value from Benin City lately acquired for the Mayer Museum.” Forbes 1898.

220. Luschan 1898, also Luschan 1901, 1916, 1919.

These shifts in the use of words in headings for articles dealing with Benin objects was also a cause and consequence of the authors' choice of which objects among the heterogeneous body of objects to include and which to omit in these publications. Furthermore, it also influenced and had influence on how the objects were ordered and given significance in these publications, as well as how the individual objects were interpreted. As to the ordering of objects, the article "Spoils from Benin" in the *Illustrated London News* from the 10<sup>th</sup> of April 1897, which presents the objects taken by officer Hider and acquired by the Horniman Museum, offers an interesting contrast to the later scholarly publications. The article begins the recital of objects with the Snider rifle (a breech loading rifle imported from Britain) explaining that the late Edo owner had killed numerous people with this weapon. The Edo were mainly armed with muskets, but it is probably no coincidence that the weapon taken by Hider and presented in this article is a modern rifle, a weapon equally deadly to the ones the British soldiers were equipped with. A musket, or a bow, seized from a killed Edo adversary would have served as evidence of Edo backwardness and primitiveness, but would hardly have signaled that the taking of its owner's life was a major achievement. The article then presents the two knives and proceeds to the bells and figures connected with human sacrifices. This is followed by the objects illustrating "a less savage side" of Edo life: two armlets (said to have belonged to a wife of the king and a child) and ends with the fans and the "finely" carved mirror. Thus, the presentation begins with weapons, of which the one which is presented first and which receives the longest interpretative comment is of recent European origin. The article then treats objects linked to the taking of human life through sacrifice, and progresses to objects belonging to women and children ending with the recognition of Edo artistic ability seen through a (wooden) mirror. Thus, objects evidencing Edo violence come first, and objects evidencing Edo artistic ability last.

This ordering is almost completely reversed in the scholarly publications which appeared from 1898 and onwards. These instead put the emphasis on the objects judged to be of highest artistic interest. Such objects tend to get a prominent place in

the publications, and the longest descriptions and discussions are devoted to them. The remaining objects are treated in a descending order of artistic value. Objects which are European imports or considered to be late in date generally receive little attention. The weapons – whether of Edo or foreign manufacture – which are found in various Benin collections, if mentioned at all, are often treated in a cursory manner. Although the publications may refer to the Edo human sacrifices in their presentation of Edo society, the text commentaries about the individual objects rarely refer to human sacrifice and bloodshed.<sup>221</sup>

The reorientation in interpretative focus *away* from associations to human sacrifice found in the April article in the *Illustrated London News* was an outcome of several factors. On one level, the reason for this shift may be sought in the circumstance that more information was gradually becoming available in the West about Edo society and the Benin objects. Thus, the Western understanding of Edo society became more multifaceted and more things could be said about the objects, making it possible to connect them with other aspects of Edo society than human sacrifice. Still, perhaps the foremost reason for the objects being so quickly disassociated from human sacrifices was that – according to Western cultural assumptions – “high art” occupies a lofty sphere of its own, elevated far above the less noble sides of human behavior. Thus, the concept of a “masterpiece” involves a strong notion of detachment from the grittier sides of the social context in which a “masterpiece” was (and is) produced, used, and consumed. To museum curators, and their audiences, the objects could not simultaneously be thought

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221. The Read & Dalton 1899 catalogue does not include any weapons although the British Museum Benin collection by then possessed some weapons such as the Portuguese cannon donated by Moor. Both Hooton 1917, 145-146 and Fagg 1953, 169 put an object – a rattle staff and a sword respectively which were reportedly found covered in blood – last amongst the objects listed. Some text commentaries, while connecting certain objects with human sacrifices explicitly point out that the object in question lacks artistic quality. Pitt Rivers (1900, 87, fig. 333-335) comments on an object (incorrectly) interpreted as an “execution block” that “such gruesome objects” have “barbarous carving and ornamentation,” thus maintaining the separation between (good) art and bloodshed.

of as connected to “hideous sacrificial rites” and as comparable to the master-pieces of Classical Antiquity and the Renaissance. Such a connection between bloodshed, stench and aesthetic and technical excellence would not only have contaminated the Benin “art-works,” but also the concept of “art” itself. The Benin objects *had* to be cleansed of blood, not only in the literary, but also in the figurative sense, in order to become “masterpieces.”

Another sort of detachment may be observed in the making of Benin objects into Benin “art.” The ivory tusks on the altars stood on brass supports in the shape of a human head. These anthropomorphic objects which carried the tusks are referred to with a variety of terms in the first publications. In their 1898 article Read and Dalton describe them as “cylindrical pedestals for [...] tusks” and a “stand for a tusk,” and Forbes employs the term “tusk-support.”<sup>222</sup> The dealer Webster, in correspondence, captioned these objects as a “socket for carved tusk” and in his sale catalogues they appear as a “bronze mask base for elephant tusk.”<sup>223</sup> The publications by Roth, Pitt Rivers, and Luschan which appeared from 1898 and onwards instead use the term “head,” and Read and Dalton’s publication from the following year employs both the term “human head” and “pedestal in form of human head.”<sup>224</sup> In subsequent publications the terms “stand,” “support,” “base,” “pedestal,” and “socket” are abandoned in favor of “head,” and this is today – with rare exceptions – the only one in use.<sup>225</sup> This shift in terminology conceptually disconnects these

222. Read & Dalton 1898, 372, Forbes 1898, 54-58.

223. Duchâteau 1990, 138, Webster *Illustrated Catalogue of Ethnological Specimens. European and Eastern Arms and Armour. Prehistoric and Other Curiosities* Vol 3, No. 21, 1899, no. 118. [http://raai.library.yale.edu/site/index.php?globalnav=image\\_detail&image\\_id=4329](http://raai.library.yale.edu/site/index.php?globalnav=image_detail&image_id=4329).

224. Roth 1898b, 237, Roth 1898c 178, fig. 24, Roth 1903, 81-82; Pitt Rivers 1900, 28-34, 48, cf. 40, 46, 70; Luschan 1898, 146, 161 (Luschan erroneously assumes that the “heads” could not have carried tusks, cf. Luschan 1919, 349), Read & Dalton 1899, 43-44, no. 3, 5-6. It is perhaps significant that Read & Dalton use the term “human head” for an object which they commend for the skill employed in its casting and which they presumably also considered to be of high artistic quality. Hooton 1917, 133, writes “pedestal in form of human head” and “head pedestal.”

225. For the use the term “head,” see for example: Marquart 1913, 1, Talbot 1969 [1926] 3:1, 926-927, Sweeney 1935, 41, Fagg 1958, 127, no. 158-159 130, no. 164-165, 167 use “memorial head,” Fagg 1963, figs. 11-12, 14-15 use “head.”

objects from their function to carry tusks and relocates them within a Western art paradigm. An important aspect of the traditional Western definition of an object as a work of art is that it has no other functions beyond that of creating an aesthetic response (a functional beautiful object rather belongs to the category “craft,” which ranks below “art” in this hierarchy of value). Crucially, while the history of Western art since Classical Antiquity is full of representations of human heads and busts, none of these carries an elephant tooth. By relieving them of the tusks, the Benin “heads” could be fitted into this representational framework (in this study I refer to these objects as “pedestal heads” a term which I have borrowed from Barbara Blackmun, one of few contemporary scholars who use this term).<sup>226</sup>

It might be noted that the notion of “fitting the frame” should not only be understood in the metaphorical sense, but also in the physical one. The respective valuing of the different (categories) of objects post 1897 relates to their representability and reproducibility in various Western representational techniques of which the museum exhibit is only one. The Benin objects have perhaps become more known through illustrations in various popular and academic books and articles than through the actual objects on display in museum showcases. The most well-known and most commonly reproduced objects are the brass plaques, the brass pedestal heads, and brass figures, whereas the carved ivory tusks, which initially were valued highly, are less frequently reproduced in books on Benin “art.” The plaques, pedestal heads and figures which generally range in size from ca. 30 to 50 cm are easily rendered as an illustration on a standard A5 or A4-page book page without much loss of detail. The plaques especially – which, according to one (unproven) theory, have been inspired by book illustrations brought by Portuguese traders – with all their imagery shown on one side of the object, make good book illustrations as they lose little when translated to the two-dimensional form. In contrast, the ivory tusks which may be over two meters long and have carvings all around are more difficult to make readable in photographic form.

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226. Plankensteiner 2007a, 377, no. 146 (Blackmun). Cf. Blackmun 1991, 55: “pedestal(s) in the form of crowned commemorative head(s),” Blackmun 1997a, 64: “pedestal.”

When the whole tusk is shown it has to be reduced in size to such an extent that the carvings are difficult to see, and as the carvings go around the objects, they cannot be shown with only one photograph.<sup>227</sup> Yet, perhaps the foremost reason why the tusks have lost value is that tusks do not have a place in the Western art canon. Thus the tusks and their carvings do not resonate with, and cannot easily be integrated within, the established norm. This, together with the difficulty of reproducing them in a photographic format in an attractive way, has degraded the tusks in the Western hierarchy of art and aesthetics. Both of these factors have contributed to the pedestal heads and tusks generally not being joined together in reconstructions in books on Benin art. Instead they are habitually kept separated from each other both conceptually and physically.<sup>228</sup>

The terminology used to refer to the metal castings is also illustrative of the making of the Benin objects into art. While the first non-scholarly accounts variously refer to the metal objects as “brasses,” “bronzes,” or “bronzes and brasses,” the scholarly literature, since its inception, has preferred to refer to the castings as “bronzes.” In their 1898 article “Works of art from Benin City,” Read and Dalton write “bronzes” and so do Roth, Pitt Rivers, and Luschan. That various words were used in the non-scholarly articles may have been due to the fact that when they were written, no metallurgical analysis had been undertaken to determine the metal composition of the castings. Thus it was simply not known to the writers whether the objects were made of bronze (an alloy of copper and tin) or brass (an alloy of copper and zinc). Interestingly,

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227. For examples of photographs of two tusks, measuring 238 and 200 cm respectively, see Plankensteiner 2007a, 376-378, no. 146-147 (Blackmun). Here the tusks are accompanied with fold-out line drawings. Cf. the photographs of two c. 50 cm ivory where the carvings are more easily discernible, Plankensteiner 2007a, 318-319, no. 64-65 (Blackmun). On the “reading” of an altar tusk, cf. Blackmun 1997, 64.

228. For a rare example of photograph of a pedestal head with a tusk, see Kaplan 1981, 14-15, fig. 15. The photograph significantly covers two pages to accommodate its subject. Cf. Ben-Amos 1980, 39, fig. 39, Vogel 1981, 137-138. A further reason for avoiding such arrangements in exhibits may be that some tusks are frail and difficult to display in an upright position for conservation reasons. I owe this observation to Jonathan Fine, at the Ethnological Museum in Berlin.

Read and Dalton's 1898 article, where they called the Benin objects "bronzes" contained a metallurgical analysis of objects in the British Museum's collection which stated that the metal castings consisted of "two distinct copper alloys" of which "[t]he former may be termed 'brasses' and the latter 'bronzes'."<sup>229</sup> Still, despite the statement that there are both brass and bronze objects (and the relative proportions of the number of "brasses" to "bronzes" being unknown), the article in which this analysis is published generally refers to the metal works as "bronzes." Forbes article, which was published about the same time, contained a metallurgical analysis of objects in the Mayer Museum showing that three out of the four analyzed objects were made of brass.<sup>230</sup> Further analyses published by Luschan in 1919 demonstrated that the brasses by far outnumber the bronzes.<sup>231</sup> Yet, despite this knowledge – available from an early date – that the corpus of Benin objects consisted of both "brasses" and "bronzes," the designation of the metal castings as "bronzes" became established.<sup>232</sup>

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229. Read & Dalton 1898, 374-376. The analysis was made by William Gowland, who examined the greater number of metal objects with a touchstone and made chemical analysis of fragments from four plaques. Gowland does not discuss the relative proportions of the number of "brasses" and "bronzes" in this body of material. He only states (incorrectly) that "[t]he plaques are generally of bronze and the statuettes, with a few exceptions of brass." Despite this (erroneous) evidence, Read and Dalton call both plaques and statuettes "bronzes." Gowland's analysis is reprinted in Read and Dalton 1899, 16-17. In this publication too, Read and Dalton generally refer to the metal objects as "bronzes."

230. An anonymous article published in *Nature* in the same year pointed out that "[t]he material of which these various objects is composed is not bronze, as has been generally stated in most of the accounts of them, but of a copper-lead-zinc compound." *Nature* 1898, 225-226.

231. Luschan 1919, 24.

232. The only exception is Forbes's article which refers to the objects as "cast-metal work" thus avoiding both the terms "bronzes" and "brasses." Forbes 1898. The issue of trying to put a name on the Benin metal works is further complicated by the fact that these objects also contain other metals in various compositions. Often they contain high proportions of lead. Some Benin metal castings contain both zinc and tin, which makes them neither "bronzes" nor "brasses" or perhaps hybrid "bronzes/brasses." Some authors prefer the term "copper alloy castings." On the metal composition of Benin metal works, see Werner & Willet 1975, Junge 2007, 192 with further references. The corpus of Benin loot also includes objects made of other metals, for example ceremonial



How can this paradox be explained? Why did these objects, known to contain both brasses and bronzes, receive the name “Benin bronzes” (rather than, for example, “Benin brasses and bronzes”)? Basically, this has to do with how the objects were given their “value” through being incorporated into Western value systems. It is perhaps significant that Read and Dalton’s usage of the term “bronze” is introduced following their comparison between the Benin objects and the “finest Italian bronzes of [...] the Italian renaissance.”<sup>233</sup> In the Western (art historical) value system the word “bronze” has a certain status which the word “brass” does not carry. Therefore, as the looted metal objects were seen as high art, they become the “Benin bronzes” not the “Benin brasses,” and this name in turn reinforced the notion that these objects were high art.<sup>234</sup>

The scholars who were the first to acquire and publish Benin objects saw these as great works of art and accordingly they described and interpreted them with a vocabulary consistent with this conceptual framework. This interpretation and vocabulary has endured to this day. Many publications about Benin objects contain the word “art” in their titles, and the objects are often collectively referred to as “bronzes” or, occasionally, as “bronzes and ivories,” although there are also publications which prefer the term “brasses” for the metal objects.<sup>235</sup> The British Museum follows the general trend of representing the Benin objects under the heading “art,” but it is not consistent in its use of terminology regarding the metal castings. The recent (2010) publication on the museum’s collection of Benin objects is entitled *The Art of Benin*. The book

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swords (mainly) made of iron. Plankensteiner 2007c, 380-383, no. 153-155 (Curnow, Dolz).

233. Read & Dalton 1898, 373.

234. Thus, when a fairly recent exhibition catalogue is entitled *The Power of Bronze. Royal Sculpture from the Kingdom of Benin* (Brincard 2004) the word “bronze” here fits well with the other words in the title “power,” “royal,” “sculpture,” and “Kingdom” and their connotations to the spheres of art, refinement, and splendor. The title of the publication would probably have sounded less arty if the word “bronze” had been exchanged for the word “brass” (a word which perhaps mainly brings music to mind). Cf. Barley 2020, 17.

235. See for example Ezra 1992, Ben-Amos Girshick 1980, 1995.

points out that the term “Benin bronzes” is a misnomer and consequently refers to the cast metal objects as “brasses.”<sup>236</sup> However, another British Museum publication from the same year about is entitled *Bronze head from Ife*. Throughout the book the Ife heads, are called “bronze heads” although the text points out that this term is a “convention” for objects that “correctly should be described as [made of] ‘brass’ or ‘zinc brass.’”<sup>237</sup>

What are the consequences of the Benin objects having being, and still predominantly being, put into the category “art”? And what would the consequences of other ways of conceptualizing these objects be? “Art” as a descriptive and collective term for the Benin objects is not necessarily wrong in the sense that it totally misrepresents any and all of the pre-1897 Edo meanings given to these objects. While the Edo language does not have a direct equivalent to the word “art,” some of the associations brought up by this word may, arguably, be said to correspond to certain aspects of the pre-1897 Edo valuing and appreciation of these objects.<sup>238</sup> What is perhaps problematic with the term “art” is that it gives importance to certain aspects of these objects’ meanings over others. In Edo society the objects may be said to have had a range of (interconnected) functions, values, and meanings – ritual, mnemonic, political, economic, social, cultural, etc. – and the term “art” emphasizes the aesthetic significance of the looted objects, at the expense of other significances.

The many book-titles about Benin objects containing the word “art” have no counterpart in an equal number of book-titles about Benin objects containing, for example, the word “religion” or “ritual,” or words such as “society,” “social system,” or “material culture.”<sup>239</sup> This is not to suggest that it is more correct to

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236. Barley 2010, 17, 22.

237. Platte 2010, 5.

238. Ben-Amos Girshick 1999, 145, n. 1. On the general problem of the translatability of the concept of art, see “Aesthetics is a cross-cultural category” 1996. See also Porter 2009a, 2009b, Shiner 2009. On “African art”: Blier 2000, 22-23.

239. Among the rare titles with use the term “material culture” instead of “art” is Coombes 1994b.

collectively refer to these objects as “religious” or “ritual” objects. The term “religion” is no less problematic than the term “art” and is also met with problems in its cross-cultural (and intra-cultural) appliance. A conceptualization of the Benin objects as “religious” objects would give emphasis to some objects amongst the corpus of Benin loot, but it would – like the term “art” – marginalize others. For example, the many weapons looted by the British are perhaps equally as hard to fit under the heading “art” as the heading “religion” (although weapons may be artistically decorated and warfare may be seen as integrated within a religious system).<sup>240</sup> Of course, that Benin objects are often visualized and described in exhibitions and publications under the heading “art” does not mean that their other meanings in Edo society are not “explained” to the viewer in the accompanying texts. As stated earlier the British Museum texts predominantly focus on the objects in their Edo context, as for example in the previously discussed “explanatory” text accompanying the *Brass helmet mask for the Ododua ritual* which stated that this helmet mask “is used in the Ododua ritual.”

This self-convoluting “explanatory” text highlights another aspect of categorizing and defining Benin objects as “art.” It serves to naturalize them as museum objects. By defining an object, or a category of objects, as “art,” one of the paradoxes inherent in many systems of museum categorization is avoided: namely that museums often ascribe a meaning or function to an object which it no longer has. For example, defining an object as a “ritual object” is to define this object by a function it lost when it was taken from its original context. In contrast, inscribing an object into the “universal” category art – which suggests that the object’s aesthetic qualities are immanent rather than culturally constructed – is also to suggest that the object was an art object even before it was incorporated into the collections of the (art) museum, and thus that the objects’ location in the (art) museum is “natural.”

There is a difference between, on the one hand, representing an object under the heading “art” and accompanying this

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240. For an excellent discussion on the many meanings and functions of weapons, see Spring 1993.

(unexplained) categorization with an explanatory text which states that *in Edo society* this object is seen as a “ritual object,” and on the other hand representing the same object under the (unexplained) heading “religion” or “ritual” and accompanying the object with an explanatory text which states that *in Western society* this object is seen as an “art object.” The difference concerns which aspects of the object’s meaning are communicated as being primary and (universally) given and which are communicated as being secondary and culturally specific.

So which words can be used as an overarching collective term to refer to the array of looted objects? The publication *Benin – Kings and Rituals. Court Arts from Nigeria* names the objects “bronzes and ivories.”<sup>241</sup> By exchanging the word “bronzes” for “brasses” this may seem an attractive and reasonably neutral, value-free, and matter-of-factly way of naming these objects. Yet, like any other term it gives priority to certain objects at the expense of others according to a (Western) value system. As we have seen, in the West, it is the “bronzes” and ivories in particular which have received attention and praise, with less significance given to objects in other materials, such as wood, terracotta, coral, etc. The importance given to the metal castings and ivories since 1897, to some extent corresponds to a pre-1897 Edo hierarchy of value, but is not in total agreement with it. Ivory and brass – which were reserved for the court and members of the elite – obviously had a high status in pre-1897 Edo society. Yet, coral – which was also a prerogative of the court and higher ranks of Edo society – was just as valuable, perhaps even more so, than both brass and ivory.<sup>242</sup>

241. Plankensteiner 2007b, 25.

242. In 1897 the price demanded for a royal bead robe by its owner on the Niger Coast was £1,000; a sum which would have been obtained locally by selling the beads individually. This may be compared with the prices paid for Benin objects in Europe during the following years where the price record set in 1900 for a tusk was £120. Plankensteiner suggests that the high prices paid in West Africa for coral may have contributed to the fact that little coral reached Europe. Plankensteiner 2007a 346, no. 98-99 (Plankensteiner). On the value and significance of coral, see also Gallwey 1893, 127, Bacon 1897, 29, Roth 1903, 83, Appendix III, xvii-xviii, on that Oba Ovonramwen “boys” had stolen the his coral, Gallwey 1930, 234-235, Ben-Amos Girshick 1999, 83, 124, Plankensteiner 2007a, 379-381, no. 148-153 (Curnow).

Thus, the objects should perhaps instead be referred to as “corals, ivories, brasses, bronzes, woodworks, etc.” Still, this way of grasping the body of objects with a name which delineates and groups the objects by their material may imply that this is the “natural” way of imposing subcategories on them. It may be that this ordering, where the crucial differentiating criteria is material, fits better into the museum way of ordering things than the pre-1897 Edo ways of ordering things. In museums, material is one important distinguishing category when naming and sorting objects, and such taxonomic systems based on material have an important place among the different categorizing systems used by museums.<sup>243</sup> In pre-1897 Edo society an object’s material qualities certainly had significance as it was intrinsically linked to its symbolic, spiritual, and social meanings. As mentioned earlier, the possession of certain materials – coral, ivory, and brass – was a way of making and marking social distinctions in Edo society. Yet, if the objective with a system of categorization is to capture the pre-1897 meanings of the objects, the objects are perhaps equally well, or even better, ordered according to their assumed functions within Edo society, such as “objects from (ancestral) altars,” “objects carried in rituals,” etc. rather than by material.<sup>244</sup> Of course, any ordering which involves the context from where the objects were looted must be tentative since the location of individual objects were rarely documented by the looters. To them, such information was not of value and hence it was not recorded. This non-documentation has had a significant impact on the subsequent conceptualizing of the Benin objects. It may seem more “natural” to make a primary description and categorization of an object, or a group of objects, according to what is known (the material an object is made of) rather than from what is unknown (such as its physical location prior to removal).

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243. Museums also use other taxonomic systems, based on chronology, geographical or cultural origin, collectors, donors, etc. Often different taxonomies overlap. In their 1899 publication on select pieces of Benin loot (and West African ivories previously in the museum collection) Read and Dalton subdivide the material into the following categories: “Ivories,” “Relics of king Overami,” “Bronze heads and pedestals,” “Masks, Wands,” and “Panels.” Read & Dalton 1899, Table of Contents.

244. This ordering is employed in Ezra 1992.

To this could be added that descriptive terms, which sort, unite, and separate objects according to material may serve to naturalize their location in a museum, an institution which habitually orders objects according to material. Thus, the question of how to conceptualize the Benin objects, and the interlinked question of which objects amongst these to represent and thus make representatives of, or metonyms for, the whole body of objects is linked to the question over their ownership. In what follows I briefly sketch the gradual emergence of this “issue.” As far as I am aware, no objections to the looting of Benin City are reported from the time of the event or in the immediate following years. In the West, the perception was that the taking of war booty from uncivilized peoples was right. The general attitude was that sending the so called Punitive Expedition was an entirely justified revenge for the killing of Phillips and it also had the additional effect of putting a stop to the Edo human sacrifices. Edo views of the looting were not documented. To my knowledge, the first record of Edo emotions to the looted objects is found in Richard Dennett’s work *At the Back of the Black Man’s Mind* published in 1906. Dennett writes that when “certain chiefs” were shown the photos of objects in Read and Dalton’s publication *Antiquities of Benin* “their surprise and satisfaction was very great, and they were glad to think that most of their ancient works of art still exist.” Dennett continues by expressing his wish that private collectors of Benin objects may in the future bequeath their collections to the British Museum, because “the future educated BINI as a British subject has a right to expect to find as full a collection as possible of these bronzes in this Imperial museum.”<sup>245</sup> This is – again to my knowledge – the first time that any consideration of the Edo’s “rights” regarding these objects is given in a publication. In Dennett’s view, the Edo – or rather the “future educated” Edo – has a right, in his capacity as a British subject, to find an extensive collection of Benin objects at the British Museum. To Dennett, it was self-evident that the future of the Edo lay in being “educated” subjects of the British Empire and that Benin objects ought to be in the British Museum, a museum which he tellingly refers to as an “Imperial Museum.”

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245. Dennett 1906, 189.

The case for the return of the Benin objects and other cultural objects to Nigeria was first made in the 1930s and the 1940s by British citizens linked to the colonial administration in Nigeria. In 1942, Kenneth Murray, Surveyor of Antiquities in Nigeria, published the article “Art in Nigeria. The need for a museum” where he made the argument for the return of Benin and other objects. He describes how powerful external influences had led to the gradual cession of various traditions and thus the abandonment and destruction of many cultural objects along with a general decline in the quality of artistic production in Nigeria. To counter this, he advocated the establishment of a national museum in Lagos and of local museums at Benin and Ife where the “evidence of past civilizations and achievements in arts” could be preserved and displayed to “help the Nigerian to have pride and confidence in himself.” He notes that while there are thousands of Benin objects in Europe, only a few have remained in Nigeria. In Europe, these objects chiefly have an “academic purpose,” but in Nigeria they are vital “for the cultural life of the country itself.” The need for a collection of Nigerian art in Europe “cannot be as vital as the need for one in Nigeria,” and therefore, a Nigerian collection “must contain first-rate works, not those which remain after the cream has been taken by foreign museums.”<sup>246</sup> These are relatively strong words, considering that they were expressed by a representative of the British colonial administration in the early 1940s.

About the same time, in 1940, the first regulations concerning the export of cultural objects from Nigeria were made. As already mentioned, in the 1950s, a number of Benin plaques were sold to Nigeria by the British Museum. In 1968, a new museum was planned for Benin City, but as it had very few objects to display, an appeal was made to those countries which had large Benin holdings to donate some pieces to the new museum. The appeal seems to have gone relatively unnoticed (and did not result in any returns). In the 1970s, when the British Museum rejected the request for a loan of the ivory pendant mask on the grounds that the object was judged to be too fragile for transport, the issue of

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246. Murray 1942, 247.



ownership of objects removed during colonial times received more attention in the media.<sup>247</sup> A short article by Ekpo Eyo, the director of the Nigerian National Museums and of the Federal Department of Antiquities, published in 1979, outlines the case for the return of objects to Nigeria and other former colonies. The argument is broadly similar to that made by Murray in the 1940s.<sup>248</sup> During the colonial era the impact of “foreign religions and governments” had calamitous consequences for the traditional culture and led to massive losses of cultural objects. These objects, removed through various means ranging from gift exchange to “sheer plunder” are only regarded as “curios or *objects d’art*” in the recipient countries while they have “overriding cultural and historical importance” in Nigeria. “Each country,” Eyo writes, should be able to “present within its own territory the relics and the ingenuity of its own people” as this “enables a country to create an awareness among its people, to instill a sense of pride in them and to inspire them to even greater achievements.”

Since then numerous appeals have been made from various quarters for the return of Benin objects. In 1991 Oba Erediauwa, in cooperation with the *Pan African Movement* of Nigeria, collected one million signatures worldwide for the return of the Benin objects.<sup>249</sup> During the 1990s the British MP Bernie Grant and the *African Reparations Movement* also organized a campaign for the return of the Benin objects – and other African objects – held in British collections. Their actions included a picket campaign outside the British Museum (a placard from this campaign has now achieved the status of a museum object/archive item in the Bernie Grant Archive). In 2000, Prince Edun Akenzua (brother of Oba Erediauwa) submitted a memorandum to the British Parliament demanding the return to the Oba of Benin of “all the cultural property belonging to the Oba of Benin” wrongfully taken by the British in 1897. The memorandum states that the objects are important “records” of Benin history and that the Oba and the Edo have been “impoverished, materially and psychologically” by their removal.

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247. Wilson 1989, 113.

248. Eyo 1979.

249. Shyllon 1996, 251.

The British “being the principal looters” should take “full responsibility” for the retrieval of the objects from various current holders. Alternatively, the British should pay pecuniary compensation to the Oba of Benin with a sum equivalent to the current market value of all the looted objects.<sup>250</sup> In the speech read at the opening of the *Benin – Kings and Rituals* exhibition in Vienna in 2007, Oba Erediauwa expressed his wish that “the people and the government of Austria will show humaneness and magnanimity and return to us some of the objects” which are in Austria.<sup>251</sup> All these calls for a return have been without results, as far as they have not resulted in the return of any Benin objects to Nigeria from Western public collections. The only returns effectuated have been made by private owners. In 1938, a coral headdress, said to have belonged to Oba Ovonramwen, was returned to the Oba of Benin, Akenzua II.<sup>252</sup> In 1957, Josephine Walker (granddaughter of Herbert Walker, who had participated in the 1897 Expeditionary Force) gave a 6 foot ivory tusk from Benin to the Jos museum. Fifty-seven years later, in 2014, a Benin brass bell and brass bird was returned to Oba Erediauwa by Adrian Walker, the great-grandson of Herbert Walker.<sup>253</sup>

Looking at the requests for the return of Benin objects there are differences between different claimants in how the argument for return is formulated, and who is considered to be the objects’ rightful owners. Murray and Eyo considered the Nigerian State the principal recipient and highlighted the cultural, artistic, and historical value of the objects for the inhabitants of Nigeria, whereas Prince Akenzua and Oba Erediauwa regard the Edo Royal House as the rightful owner and point to the religious and archival significance of the objects for the Edo. When the objects are instead claimed by MacGregor on behalf of the whole of humanity, he describes the objects in a manner which points to their aesthetic and visual

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250. Akenzua 2000, Opoku 2011b.

251. Erediauwa 2007.

252. Layiwola 2007, Plankensteiner 2007a, 88, 501-502, no. 283 (Layiwola). The return was made by G. Miller.

253. Layiwola 2014, *Nigerian Watch* 2014, Otsen 2015. The objects were returned with a copy of Herbert Walker’s war diary.

functions (both “universally” and in pre-1897 Edo society) and their sociopolitical, intimidating function in pre-1897 Edo society.

Despite their diverging viewpoints, a common thread runs through the arguments of these writers. They all stress the *positive* associations brought up by these objects for the ones they argue are the rightful owners, whether this is all of humanity (MacGregor), the Edo (Erediauwa), or the Nigerian people (Murray and Eyo). Correspondingly, there is a tendency to downplay the *negative* associations brought up by the objects (unless such negative associations can be associated with the other side in the conflict over return or retention).

As we have seen, MacGregor emphasizes the objects’ artistic qualities and the benefits of them being made part of Western knowledge production, which, according to MacGregor removed Western prejudices against Africans. Eyo’s general argument for the return of objects removed during colonial times is that each country should be able to present “the relics and the ingenuity of its own people” as this will foster “a sense of pride” and “inspire them to even greater achievements.” Similarly, Murray argued that return would “help the Nigerian to have pride and confidence in himself.” Oba Erediauwa points to the religious significance of the objects looted from altars for the Edo.

Thus the writers have in common that they connect the objects with good or unobtrusive human behavior. Yet, the objects may also be linked to a whole range of unpleasanties, exploitation, and cruelty exercised by Africans and Europeans alike, sometimes in cooperation. For example, looking into the biographies of the metal castings to a point in time before the moment of the casting of these “masterpieces,” and at the buying and selling of the metal used in these objects, some less noble sides of human behavior are encountered. Among the various trade goods which were offered, and accepted, in exchange for the metal were human beings. The Portuguese explorer Duarte Pacheco Pereira, who visited Benin in the 1490s, recorded “that the Kingdom of Beny [...] is usually at war with its neighbors and takes many captives, whom we buy at twelve or fifteen brass bracelets each, or for copper bracelets, which they

prize more.”<sup>254</sup> Although slaves were not the only commodity used to barter for the metal, it may nevertheless be asked what human suffering was involved in the procurement of the raw material used to cast various celebrated – and contested – Benin “works of art.” Questions such as this also relate to the issue over whom these objects belong to. One commentator, Moyo Okediji, has suggested that the rightful owners of the Benin objects are the descendants of the slaves who paid for the metal with their liberty and lives.<sup>255</sup> This suggestion brings issues of class into the equation of to whom the objects belong. In chapter 12, where some alternative forms of interpreting and representing are discussed, I will return to the topic of class in relation to the making of the Benin objects.

To sum up, the Benin objects may be made in many different ways and given a whole range of different meanings and values. They may be used to illustrate all sorts of human achievements from the good to the horrific. The making of the Benin objects involves naming, categorizing, and characterizing the objects in various ways and of creating various kinds of contextualizations, decontextualizations, and recontextualizations of the objects. This process involves giving prominence to certain (perceived) objects or (perceived) categories of objects, within the (perceived) corpus of looted objects, at the expense of other (perceived) objects, or (perceived) categories of objects. However, despite the myriads of possible ways of making the objects, it seems fair to say that the objects have predominantly been made into “art” for a universal audience. What may be considered problematic with applying this heading to the objects – given the strong positive connotations of this term and the notions of societal detachment invoked by it – is that it directs attention to the objects which are considered to be aesthetically pleasing, rather than the less beautiful ones. It

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254. Roth 1903, 4-6, Ben-Amos Girshick 1980, 5, 1995, 9. Plankensteiner 2007a, 296, no. 32-35 (Eisenhofer). See also Alpern 1995, 12-14. Cf. Plankensteiner 2007a, 346, no. 99 (Plankensteiner) on pearls exchanged for slaves. Around 1520, European traders could buy one female slave for 47 strings of pearls. On the Edo-European slave trade, see Graham 1965, Bondarenko 2007.

255. Okediji 1998.

sets these objects which please the eye in a conceptual framework which favors celebratory, object-centered readings of them. This is not to say that the Benin objects have only been understood within a formal regime of aesthetics, and that other ways of making them and their perceived owners are by default less problematic. Making the objects into “religious” objects for an ethnic group or “heritage” for a nation may likewise favor celebratory readings of the objects which detach them, and the designated collective to which they are regarded as belonging to, from the darker sides of human behavior.

I have preferred to refer to the looted objects as the “Benin objects” or occasionally “the Benin loot,” not because these words necessarily are the most correct or neutral words for describing them.<sup>256</sup> Like any other words these ones emphasize and naturalize certain readings of the Benin objects at the expense of others. The term “Benin loot” highlights *one* particular aspect of their contemporary meanings, namely that this is a group of objects which were removed from Benin under violent circumstances and whose ownership is contested. This emphasis may or may not be seen as problematic. It may give overdue attention to the question of ownership when this study seeks to show that questions of interpretation and representation are as important as the issue of ownership; as this study also seeks to show, however, these questions are inseparable from each other. Arguably, one advantage of the term “Benin loot” over the term “Benin art” as a catch-all term for all the looted objects is that it does not conflate post 1897-Western meanings with pre-1897 Edo ones, nor does it value any of the looted objects more than another according to a post-1897 scale of aesthetics.

A further comment on the choice of words. So far I have mainly discussed nouns (the ones used to refer to the Benin objects individually or collectively), but there is also reason to consider verbs, in particular the ones used to describe the removal of the objects in 1897. In this study I use the verb “looted” to refer to how the objects were appropriated. Not surprisingly perhaps, this terminology is different to that of the British Museum, which today does not use

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256. My use of the term “objects” is conventional, for the idea of replacing it with “things,” see Harrison 2013, 15.

this verb (nor the noun “loot”) in connection with these objects. The museum prefers a more euphemistic terminology to describe their removal from Benin City. The museum’s webpage states that the objects were “acquired,” “collected” or “found” during the British Punitive Expedition. The slightly stronger word “taken” is employed once. The word “booty” (and the word “taken”) is used in the exhibition in the British Museum, but all occurrences of these words are in texts which are from 1897. A text panel titled “The discovery of Benin Art by the West” states that following the conquest of Benin City “[t]housands of treasures were taken as booty” and that the “official booty” was auctioned. A nearby caption for a photograph from Benin City informs us that the photograph shows “a selection of booty, taken at Benin.” No other texts in the exhibition use these words, and apart from the information in another text panel that the objects “fell to the troops” and were “sold abroad,” the sole – indirect – reference to the fact that objects were removed from Benin City is given in an object label which states that this object (in a non-Edo style) was “found in Benin City.” The change of verbs, from “taken” in texts which are about events in Benin City in 1897 (that is, at a specific location and at a specific point in time) and a text which refers to an object in a showcase (which is assumed to be unallocated in space and time) subtly underline the transformation the objects undergo in the process from being loot to being museum objects. The objects are envisioned as having been “taken” then, but now – in the eternal, universal and placeless present – they have been “found.” It perhaps need not be pointed out that whether an object was “taken” or “found” depends on from whose perspective one looks at things, that is, whether it is from the viewpoint of past or present owners. Not surprisingly, the British Museum, despite its universalistic ambitions, adopts the perspective of the present owner, which is the British Museum. This is not to say that the word “taken” would have been a more neutral term, but rather to point out the impossibility of *not* viewing from a particular perspective when making objects.





## 6. The Ife objects

The Benin objects “discovered” in 1897 were the first lost wax castings from West Africa to become known to the Western world. On two occasions during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in 1910 and 1938, castings in the lost wax technique were discovered at the city of Ife, in what was by now the territory of the British colony Nigeria. These objects – heads in a naturalistic style, one of which is today a celebrity in the British Museum – feature in the British Museum’s narrative on the question of the origin of the metal casting technique in West Africa, and one of their “discoverers” is cast in an important role in this narrative.<sup>1</sup> Hence, to complement the previous chapter on the Benin objects I will here say a few words on the Ife objects. I will not, however, make a detailed investigation of their Western making, but rather focus on their discovery and the ownership controversies some of these objects have been embroiled in.

The first “discovery” was made by the German free-lance anthropologist Leo Frobenius on his expedition through southern Nigeria.<sup>2</sup> At Ife, the spiritual capital of the Yorubas, he “discovered”

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1. The British Museum also possesses a much less famed terracotta head donated in 1934. It is, to my knowledge, not mentioned in any British Museum publication.
  2. Frobenius, having had his thesis rejected at Basel University in 1896, mainly

a number of terracotta heads and a head cast in brass with the *cire perdue* technique.<sup>3</sup> The terracotta heads were dug up from the ground by locals and through an “excavation” organized by Frobenius. The metal head was unearthed by locals at Ife about a generation earlier. At the time of Frobenius’s arrival, the head was kept underground at the location where it had been found and was unearthed for particular ceremonies. Frobenius gained possession of the metal head, several terracotta heads, and numerous other objects and then left Ife. However, shortly afterwards his expedition was intercepted by the British District Officer Charles Partridge, who had received complaints from the inhabitants of Ife about Frobenius’s collecting methods. According to them, Frobenius had taken the metal head and some other objects without their consent. Frobenius claimed that the owners at Ife had sold the objects to him voluntarily and that he had paid good prices for them. The metal head, for example, had cost him 120 Schilling, or £6, and a bottle of whiskey.<sup>4</sup> Despite Frobenius’s objections, he had to return the metal head and a number of other objects. The incident led to a diplomatic protest from the British Foreign Office to the German government. The exact circumstances behind Frobenius’s acquisitions at Ife remain unclear, but even his supporters admitted in private correspondence that his behavior at had not been “unobjectionable.”<sup>5</sup>

In his publication of the expedition Frobenius put forward an elaborate theory where he tried to establish links between Yoruba culture and the Mediterranean region. Based on the evidence of what (in Frobenius eyes) were striking similarities between the art, architecture, and religion of the Yorubas and that of the Phoenicians, Etruscans, and other Mediterranean peoples he speculated

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worked outside the institutional establishment. He funded his African expeditions through wealthy donors (which included Kaiser Wilhelm) and the sale of objects from his expeditions to German museums. Marchand 1997, 157.

3. Frobenius and most subsequent authors have referred to this, and other, cast metal works from Ife as made of “bronze.” However, the majority of the Ife metal castings are made of brass. A few are made of more or less pure copper. Schildkroudt 2009-2010, 47, n. 3.
4. Frobenius 1912, 98, 112.
5. Penny 2002, 115-123. For Frobenius’s own version, see Frobenius 1912, 66-126.

that people of a “Western Mediterranean culture” had journeyed along the coast of Africa in the 13<sup>th</sup> century BCE and laid the foundations of the Yoruba culture. He found further support for this idea in Plato’s account of Atlantis, located beyond “the pillars of Heracles” (i.e. the Straits of Gibraltar) and argued that Plato’s Atlantis was the Yoruba country.<sup>6</sup> According to Frobenius, the ancient Yoruba culture was created by an “unnegro noble race” from the Mediterranean. Yet, with time the Yoruba culture become *verniggert* “deniggrified” and the present Yoruba culture was only a shadow of its former glory.<sup>7</sup> Frobenius’s theory of a sea-bound route of influence from the Mediterranean region to West Africa in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE, has had few, if any, supporters in the academic field.<sup>8</sup> As we will come back to, Frobenius’s Atlantis theory is today an important element in the British Museum’s narrative on the reception of the West African castings, and the publication *Africa – Arts and Cultures* informs that Partridge confiscated the cast head from Frobenius and gave it back to its owners.

The second discovery occurred in 1938 when at least 15 cast heads were discovered by accident during building operations close to the royal palace at Ife.<sup>9</sup> Twelve of these were eventually handed over to the Oni (king) of Ife. However, three heads – arguably the “best” specimens – were sold privately.<sup>10</sup> One head was purchased by a British citizen at Ife who sold it on to the British Museum in

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6. Frobenius 1912, 347-375.

7. Frobenius 1912, 87-88, 94, 99, 349.

8. See for example the review of Frobenius by Petrie (1914a) where Frobenius theories of an early sea-bound route of influence are rejected. Yet, Petrie also linked the naturalistic style of the Ife heads to the Mediterranean area, but placed the influence in later times and argued that it came overland. He considered the Ife heads stylistically “extremely close” to terracotta heads found at Memphis in Egypt, dating to the Persian period (5<sup>th</sup> century BCE). Thus, Petrie declared that the Ife heads “belong to the Perso-Greek civilization” and that “the idea, even the workmen, may have come from Egypt to West Africa.” Petrie 1914a, 84-85, 1914b, 169. For theories of Carthaginian influence, see Murray 1941, 74 and Taylor 1982, 317.

9. More cast heads were found in the following years. In 1937 a cast copper mask in the Oni’s palace was published by the Oni of Ife. See also Boulton 1935, 16.

10. Drewal 2009-2010, 10 calls the British Museum head the most complete of the three known crowned heads.

1939.<sup>11</sup> The two other heads were purchased (for £7) by the American anthropologist William Bascom who was conducting field work in the area. Bascom announced the find of the Ife metal works in an article in the *Illustrated London News* from April 1939 and brought the two heads with him when he left Nigeria for the United States in July the same year.<sup>12</sup>

Following the dispersal of the Ife heads, the Colonial government in Nigeria enacted legislation to control the export of archaeological objects.<sup>13</sup> In 1947, Kenneth Murray, at the Nigerian Antiquities Service, and Harland Duckworth, Nigerian Inspector of Education, in cooperation with Aderemi, the Oni of Ife, demanded that Bascom return the two heads to the Oni. Bascom initially refused, but facing the threat of being denied permission to carry out research in Nigeria, he eventually agreed to return them. The heads were officially handed over to Oni Aderemi in December 1950 and incorporated into the collections of the Ife museum.<sup>14</sup> Although Murray and Duckworth were persistent (and finally successful) in retrieving the heads from Bascom, they never requested the return of the head in the British Museum.<sup>15</sup> Like the 1910 discovery, the 1938 find features in the British Museum's presentations, and it is given a pivotal importance in one of MacGregor's accounts. However, the ownership controversy surrounding the 1939 finds are mentioned nowhere.

The Ife heads have generally been dated to between the 12<sup>th</sup> and the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The basis for this date has relied on two pieces of "evidence," one being a report from 1926 which stated that according to Edo history, brass casting was known before the arrival of white men and had been learned from Ife. The other being stylistic comparisons between the Ife and Benin castings, which has suggested to scholars that the Ife castings antedated those from Benin.<sup>16</sup> The argument builds on the assumption that Ife/Benin art

11. Brauholtz 1940.

12. Bascom 1939, cf. Bascom 1938 about the find of the first seven heads.

13. Brauholtz 1940, 76, Fagg & Underwood 1949, 3, Shyllon 2006, 138.

14. The Ife Museum was created in 1948 and opened in 1954.

15. Tignor 1990, Ottenberg 1994.

16. Talbot 1969 [1926], 29, 280, Sydow 1928, 215-216, Meyerowitz, 1940, 129, 131, Murray 1941, 74-75, 80, Fagg 1950b. Whether brass casting was actually

developed from naturalism to increased stylization, and the notion that the Ife heads are more naturalistic than the (most) naturalistic Benin heads, that is, the Benin objects which are considered to be the earliest ones in the assumed chronology of Benin material.

In recent years archaeological excavations have made it possible to work out a provisional chronological sequence of Ife material culture. A few heads have been found in datable contexts, and there are also thermoluminescence dates available from the clay cores of some of the cast heads. Today there is a general agreement that the majority of the Ife naturalistic metal heads date from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the early 15<sup>th</sup> century and that the metal mainly came through trans-Saharan trade routes.<sup>17</sup>

The (ancient) functions of these heads are unknown. Frobenius thought that the head he “discovered” was an image of the sea-god Olokun (whom Frobenius identified with the Greek sea-god Poseidon). The headdresses found on some of the heads suggest that they were associated with the Oni, the ruler of Ife. One theory is that the heads served as mounts for regalia in, or between, ceremonies.<sup>18</sup> Their present-day identities and functions include being travelling museum objects, and the Ife heads in Nigeria have frequently been loaned to exhibitions abroad. The first of these was an exhibition in the British Museum in 1948. Ife objects were also included in the *Traditional Art of the British Colonies* exhibition organized by the Royal Anthropological Institute for Colonial Month in 1949, and again in an exhibition held at the Imperial Institute in 1951.<sup>19</sup> In later times, Ife objects have been shown in the *Treasures of Ancient Nigeria* exhibition in the 1980s, and since then they have been part of the many exhibitions which have toured the (Western) world.<sup>20</sup> Earlier exhibitions with Ife objects include the MoMa exhibition in 1935 which showed (casts of) terracotta heads obtained by

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introduced to Benin from Ife has been questioned by Ryder 1965 and Willett 1999.

17. On Ife chronology: Drewal 2009-2010, 78-81, 170, n.25, 133, 142, 172, n. 145. Cf. 39, 63.

18. Drewal & Schildkrout 2009-2010.

19. Fagg 1949e, Fagg & Underwood 1949, I, Fagg 1951b, Platte 1910, 39-49, Kirk-Greene 2012, 10-11.

20. Eyo & Willett 1980, Drewal & Schildkrout 2009-2010.

Frobenius, and Bascom's heads were shown in exhibitions in the United States in the 1940s.<sup>21</sup> Like the famed Benin objects, the more well-known Ife heads, – in particular the so called Olukun head and the head in the British Museum, have been represented in many forms of media – ranging from scholarly and popular publications to postcards, stamps, and West African banknotes.<sup>22</sup> Again, much like the case with the Benin objects (and other cultural objects from Nigeria), Ife objects journey outside the boundaries of law. One Ife brass head was stolen from the Jos museum in 1987, and several brass heads and terracotta heads were stolen from the Ife museum in 1993 and 1994 (some of these have since been retrieved). Ife objects have also been looted from archaeological sites and some art museums in the United States have obtained Ife objects of uncertain provenance.<sup>23</sup> The story of the gradual Western “recognition” of African art is often told as a success story. Yet, this appreciation (or to put it differently: the Western construction and naturalization of the category “African art”) has a flip side in the thefts and archaeological site looting which occurs to feed, as John Picton puts it, the “art-hungry savages of the Western world” who are “unlucky enough to possess more money than sense.”<sup>24</sup>

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21. Sweeney 1935, 43, Fagg 1950a, 133.

22. Platte 2010, 59.

23. Phillips 1995, 411, no. 5.70, 428, no. 5.89 (Willett), cf. 525 (Fagg-Rackham) on privately held Nok objects “seen here for the first time,” ICOM 1997, iv, 60-73, Willett 2000, Brodie, Doole & Watson 2000, 53, Schildkrout 2009-2010, 3, Blier 2015, 381. On the return of an Ife object and Nok and Benin objects by the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, see <https://chasingaphrodite.com/2014/07/30/boston-mfas-provenance-research-reveals-the-illicit-trade-in-african-antiquities/> (accessed 19 May 2016).

24. Picton 2010, 2. Among the merits of the British Museum is that it has a strict policy on the acquisition of unprovenanced objects. Wilson 2002, 315-316. In contrast to the Louvre, the Metropolitan Museum, the Paul Getty Museum and several of the other self-declared “universal” museums, the British Museum has not been embroiled in scandals involving the acquisition of recently looted archaeological objects. However, the British Museum has been criticized because its own publication *British Museum Magazine* has accepted, and presumably still accepts, advertisements for dealers offering recently surfaced archaeological objects from heavily looted areas of the world. Ali & Coningham 2001, 30. On museums and the illicit antiquities trade, see Renfrew 2000, Brodie, Doole & Watson, 2000, Watson & Todeschini 2006. My own views on museum collusion with the trade are given in Lundén 2004 and Lundén 2012.

When Ife objects are communicated in exhibitions and art books, this aspect of the objects' contemporary life stories and of contemporary Western cultural behavior is rarely mentioned. As is the case with the Benin objects, the Ife objects tend to be made into pure Yoruba/African objects, rather than hybrid cultural products, and there is less focus on "explaining" the uncanny sides of their Western meanings, values, and trajectories.





## 7. The British Museum's rationale for retention 1: The foundation of the British Museum

“[A]ll that we know of him suggest that his attitude was liberal, unprejudiced and enlightened.” William Fagg, British Museum curator, 1970 on Hans Sloane, “founding father” of the British Museum.<sup>1</sup>

The British Museum's universalistic ambitions – the will to bring objects from many parts of the world and many different cultures together under one roof – have clashed with the idea that objects belong to the peoples and places from which the objects originate on more than one occasion. This chapter deals with how the museum has formulated its argument for the retention of contested objects in its collections. The conflict over ownership has come to the fore in recent decades, but was not unheard of in earlier times. Laws on the export of antiquities were introduced in many countries during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For example, Egypt enacted such legislation during the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. When Wallis Budge at the British Museum smuggled antiquities from Egypt in 1886-1887, he was sharply criticized for his actions by Consul-General Evelyn Baring (later to be Lord Cromer), who did not want the British occupation of Egypt to be utilized for spiriting antiquities away from the country. The museum trustees, however, had no such qualms and applauded Budge's actions.<sup>2</sup> As time wore on, more countries imposed or tightened export laws,

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1. Fagg 1970, 8.

2. Budge 1920, 81, 116-119, Reid 2013, 203-204.

and in an address given in 1921 Read expressed his worry that “the flow of treasures into our great museums” would diminish. The cause of concern was the news that regulations on the export of antiquities were about to be introduced in India. He went on to note that Greece, Italy, and many other countries in Europe and in Latin America had banned the export of antiquities. He declared such laws to be “repugnant to common sense” and assured that in the case of India, the idea of export regulations “did not originate with any native of that country, who was probably ignorant or careless of any such grievance until it was pointed out by some ingenious official.” Read also saw problems closer to home: the view of the director of the National Scottish Museum was that this museum had a vested interest in anything of Scottish origin. Read called this position “childish parochialism” comparable to “the views of the wildest of Zionists” who “appear to claim that they are entitled to preserve every privilege that belongs to their race or religion.”<sup>3</sup> What alarmed Read was that the expansion of the museum’s collections would be hindered, although he found some relief in his prediction that when export laws were tightened, smuggling would increase.

Maybe he was particularly concerned by the rising demands for local control over cultural objects as his own department had previously lost such a dispute. In 1898 the Dublin Science and Art Museum had appealed for the return of the Broighter gold hoard, found two years earlier and subsequently sold to the British Museum. In 1903 the court ruled that the objects were a treasure trove, and the British Museum was ordered to return them. Both sides argued that the objects were of “immense national interest” during the debates, but diverged on which nation they were of interest to. In a letter to the editor in *The Times*, Thomas Grattan Esmonde, a MP from Ireland, pointed out that England had “already possessed itself of so much of Ireland’s national property” and the little that remained there was held in great reverence, whereas in England the objects would be “but a drop in the ocean of its accumulations” of “spoils, gathered together from the ends

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3. Read 1921, 178-181.

of the earth.” The British Museum, in turn, argued that Ireland was “a part of England” and defended the museum’s right to “to *represent every portion of the British Empire* (italics added).”<sup>4</sup>

Claims for the return of museum objects became more numerous in the 1960s and 1970s, and one of the first cases to hit the British Museum was the loan request for the ivory pendant mask for the 1977 FESTAC festival in Nigeria. David Wilson, who worked at the museum at the time, recounts in his book *The British Museum – Purpose and Politics* (1989), that “all hell broke loose” when the museum had to refuse the loan because the object was deemed too fragile to travel to Nigeria. In an “extraordinary outburst of anti-colonial feeling” the museum was berated by the festival organizers, Nigerian politicians, and expatriate African artists in London. The museum was summoned to meetings with the Foreign Secretary, and “unthinking columnists” in Britain and abroad accused the museum of “colonial chauvinism.” The museum, in vain, tried to explain that their mask was only one of four, and that one of them was still in private hands and available for purchase (Wilson here refers to the mask owned by the descendants of Gallwey which appeared for sale in 2010). The museum also offered to make a replica of the mask in its collections and donate it to the festival. In addition, it pointed out that the British Museum had been “instrumental” in establishing the Nigerian National Museum, and had “steered many Benin objects from London to Lagos.” Wilson concludes his treatment of this case with the fact that the debate eventually died down and that the British Museum’s relations with professional colleagues in Nigeria “remain warm.”<sup>5</sup> It might be remarked that it is probably no coincidence that Wilson fails to mention that when the Nigerian National Museum was created, Nigeria was still a British colony and that some of the objects “steered” from London to Lagos were sold from the British Museum’s collections. Outing the exact origin of the objects might have suggested to the reader that the museum’s policy and practice regarding deaccession has shifted through time which, in turn,

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4. Leighton 1900, Esmonde 1900, Vrdoljak 2006, 88-92, Hoberman 2011, 15-16.

5. Wilson 1989, 113.

would have suggested that the museum's present position is historically contingent rather than universally given or sanctioned by history. If the ivory pendant mask caused "all hell" for the British Museum, it was probably a fairly temperate inferno compared to what was to come. The next major case concerned the Parthenon sculptures. When Melina Mercouri became minister of culture in Greece in 1981, she demanded their return, with the support of (in Wilson's words) "a vociferous, but comparatively small group of philhellenes in this country [i.e. Britain]" and "certain nationalistic elements in Greece," forcing the British Museum to fight out "a difficult and dirty battle in the press."<sup>6</sup> The attention surrounding the Parthenon sculptures has made it the *cause célèbre* of contested objects and a subject of continued concern.

The British Museum's argument against the return of objects in its collections was first formally expressed in a statement by the trustees in 1984:

Demands by Greece and others for the return of parts of the collections of the British Museum have consumed considerably time and energy in recent years. The Museum – with the support of government – has continued to withstand these demands and has sought to correct the lack of understanding of its proper function as a universal museum which plays a unique role in international culture. The Museum's collections are vested in its Trustees in accordance with legislation enacted by Parliament, which since 1753 has prohibited them from permanently disposing of any object (other than duplicates) and has required them to ensure that the collections are preserved for the benefit of international scholarship and the enjoyment of the general public. In fulfilment of this responsibility the Museum is open seven days a week, free of charge, throughout the year. The Trustees would regard it as a betrayal of their trust to establish a precedent for the piecemeal dismemberment of the collections which recognise no arbitrary boundaries of time or place in

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6. Wilson 1989, 114.

their enduring witness to the achievements of the human spirit.<sup>7</sup>

The museum's position has since been restated numerous times, with different wording and emphasis, but most of the elements of the museum's retentionist argument are contained in this statement. The central component in the museum's position is that it is a "universal" museum. Exactly what constitutes its universality is not clearly defined, but it relates to the museum's "unique role in international culture," that its collections are not limited by "arbitrary boundaries of time or place," and that the collections are preserved for the "benefit of international scholarship and the enjoyment of the general public." The statement also makes reference to the museum's status as a trust, and to its tradition and history by pointing out that legislation enacted in 1753 prohibits the museum from disposing of any objects (apart from duplicates).

A more elaborated version of the museum's position is found in Wilson's above-mentioned *The British Museum – Purpose and Politics*, in a chapter entitled "A museum for all nations." The chapter describes the museum's many international contacts which include, for example, various curatorial and research contacts with numerous museums around the world. These contacts result in an exchange of knowledge and expertise, travelling exhibitions, and loans of objects.<sup>8</sup> After the exposé of the museum's international connections – which from Wilson's account all seem to be non-political and friction-free – Wilson goes on to describe the museum's "difficulties" with its international contacts: some countries seeing objects "from their own past" in the collections "understandably" seek their return and they gain the support of "some people" in Britain, who with "passion and genuine feeling" argue that the museum's collections are "anachronistic relics of a colonial past." He goes on to note that the "feeling" of the nationals of the countries from where the museum's objects originate is not "uniform and is often ambivalent" regarding the return of cultural objects. To this

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7. Report of Trustees 1981-4 quoted in Wilson 2002, 323.

8. Wilson 1989, 106-117.

statement, which points out the obvious fact that not all inhabitants of a country are necessarily of the same opinion, Wilson adds with confidence: “Most are delighted that their own culture is displayed or available for study in one of the greatest museums in the world.” Yet, from time to time “sectarian or political considerations” surface which result in demands for return.<sup>9</sup>

He exemplifies with the case of the ivory pendant mask and the Parthenon sculptures (referred to as “the Elgin marbles” by Wilson); the former case giving, as recounted earlier, the British Museum “all hell,” and the latter forcing the museum into a “difficult and dirty” press battle. The museum’s argument for the retention of the ivory pendant mask has already been outlined (where the main argument, apart from the consideration of the object’s safety, was related to the object not being unique, that the British Museum had been “instrumental” in the creation of the Lagos museum, and the rather unspecific statement that the British Museum had “steered” objects from London to Lagos). The argument for the retention of the Parthenon sculptures is that they were legally acquired, that they have been publicly accessible since their acquisition, that they are displayed in a purpose-built gallery, and are well lit and well labeled etc. Apart from these considerations regarding the sculptures’ legal status and their access, Wilson points to a two-fold (positive) beneficial impact of their arrival in London. They helped shape the course of art history and political history in that they generated both interest in Greek artistic styles and sympathy for the Greek cause during the Greek War of Independence. According to Wilson, the display of the sculptures “did much to change European taste for classical art and to encourage a support for the then emerging Greek nation.” He explains this “change of taste” by assuring: “Up to the time of Elgin English and Continental taste was based on Roman antiquities. The Greek revival began in part with the introduction of the Elgin Marbles to the educated public of Western Europe.”<sup>10</sup>

Similar statements are made today on the British Museum’s home-page, where the museum presents the “main arguments” for

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9. Wilson 1989, 112-113.

10. Wilson 1989, 114-115.



the retention of the Parthenon sculptures. Here it is stated that “[t]he arrival of the sculpture in London had a profound effect on the European public, regenerating interest in ancient Greek culture and influencing contemporary artistic trends” and that:

It should be stressed that the acquisition by the British Museum of the Parthenon sculptures in 1816 helped to promote the surge of philhellenism in Britain that led to the involvement of European powers in the freeing of Greece and the ultimate creation in 1833 of the modern Greek state.<sup>11</sup>

In a similar vein, in a foreword to the British Museum publication *The Parthenon Sculptures*, MacGregor declares that these sculptures “appealed [...] to Philhellenes in their determination to bring about a Greek state, free from Ottoman rule.”<sup>12</sup>

Interestingly, these claims regarding the benign effects of the arrival of the Parthenon sculptures in London and to the British Museum ring somewhat familiar to what the museum states regarding the European reception of the Benin objects. As noted earlier, the museum presents two narratives on this topic. According to the first, the Benin objects shattered European stereotypes regarding Africans (thanks to the efforts of British Museum scholars). According to the second, the Benin objects led to the appreciation of African art which, in turn, had a decisive influence on the Modernist art movement. Thus, in both the Parthenon and the Benin case the museum argues that the acquisition and display of the objects in question influenced artists and artistic styles and had positive consequences for the respective (ancestors of) present-day claimants of these objects. Although not explicitly stated, the inferred message seems to be that the Greeks and the Edo (and Africans in general) owe gratitude to the British Museum.

It is beyond the scope of this study to discuss the European reception of the Parthenon sculptures in detail, but some remarks may nevertheless be made: doubtlessly the arrival of the Parthenon

11. [http://www.britishmuseum.org/about\\_us/news\\_and\\_press/statements/parthenon\\_sculptures/facts\\_and\\_figures.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/about_us/news_and_press/statements/parthenon_sculptures/facts_and_figures.aspx) (accessed 13 June 2016).

12. MacGregor 2007.

sculptures to Great Britain had an influence on European taste, pushing opinion towards favoring Greek art over Roman. Yet, Wilson's claim that the Greek revival "began in part" with the arrival of the Parthenon sculptures seems a little odd: the Greek revival is an architectural style which is generally dated from the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The arrival of Parthenon sculptures in London, where they were first put on display by Elgin from 1807 and then in the British Museum from 1816, contributed significantly to the popularity of this architectural style and for Greek sculpture, but Lord Elgin's actions cannot be claimed to have influenced the beginning of the style half a century earlier.<sup>13</sup> Elgin's removal of the Parthenon sculptures may instead be seen as a consequence of an interest in things Greek, rather than a cause for it (This point is of relevance for the general question of whether various "great men" of history are to be regarded more as *producers* or more as *products* of their own times and societies. There seems to be a tendency in the writings of the British Museum directors to favor the former view, that particular individuals think and act independently of society and contribute to its development and progress, rather than the latter view, that the thoughts and actions of individuals are by and large circumscribed and limited by a certain societal and ideological context.)

As for the British Museum's proposed link between the arrival in London of the Parthenon sculptures and Western support for the Greek cause, it seems fair to say that Philhellenism contributed significantly to sympathy for the Greek side. Still, the degree of impact the public display of the Parthenon sculptures in the British Museum had on the British, French, and Russian decision to support the Greek side in the Greek War of Independence is hard to assess. Of the three powers, the one most eager to support the Greek cause was Russia. British official involvement was perhaps mainly motivated by a desire to hold back Russian influence in the region.

Speaking of the "impact" of the Parthenon sculptures and other artworks from ancient Greece and Rome, and broadening the view beyond Europe, it is worth observing that Western esteem of Classical

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13. Crook 1995, 37, 40.

Antiquity and its cultural products is linked to a particular form of Western self-imagining, which has not purely had positive consequences for the world's population. In the European imagination, modern European society has generally been considered as being built upon the legacy of Greco-Roman civilization, and this civilization has been judged to have ranked far above all other ancient civilizations in its cultural, moral, and artistic achievements. Appreciation of Greek art has thus formed part of the European sense of superiority over all other members of mankind. This is (literary speaking) illustrated in the various drawings produced from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and onwards which presented human variety in a developmental sequence, where a black man exemplified mankind in its lowest, most brutish and uncivilized stage (occasionally with an ape below him in the series), and an example from Greek sculpture representing mankind in its highest, most refined and civilized stage [Fig. 7].

Returning to Wilson's argument for retention, he, after presenting the museum's position on the Parthenon sculptures, goes on to state the museum's argument for the retention of every single object in the museum. "There are," he tells, "a number of reasons why we cannot contemplate the return of *any* part of our collections to the country of origin" (*italics added*). These reasons do not include "local conditions" such as political stability, security, or "even past history," nor does the museum "hide completely" behind the law, because laws can be changed:

Rather we defend our retention on good philosophical grounds. The Museum was founded as a universal museum and has remained true to the ideas of its founders to this day. It is designed to present as complete and integrated a picture as possible of the development of different but related cultures through the ages. The establishment of the Museum as a trust with a board of trustees was surely intended to inhibit political, emotional, nationalistic or sentimental influence on the collections held in trust.<sup>14</sup>

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14. Wilson, 1989, 115-116.

Wilson draws a vivid picture of what he thinks would be the consequences of the alternative to retention. In his vision, the return of any objects would be akin “to start to dismantle” the museum, because if some objects were returned, it would set an unstoppable precedent for the return of other objects in the museum’s collection. Due to the British Museum’s exemplary status amongst the world’s museums, any return by the museum would have repercussions on “the other great museums of the world.” If the British Museum was “the first to give in,” other museums would be under pressure to follow suit: “if one domino falls, the rest will surely follow.” Thus, if the British Museum bowed to “unthinking, if understandable, nationalistic demands” this “would be to start a process of cultural vandalism which would make the politicisation of art in the 1930s in Germany look like a petulant child’s destruction of its dinner.” Wilson concludes: “In a period when all our aspirations are based on the hopes of international agreement, we cannot let narrow nationalism destroy a trust for the whole world. Great Britain cannot afford to deny the trust so wisely established in 1753.”<sup>15</sup>

In his public media relations, Wilson has put his argument more bluntly. He once compared the Greek Minister of Culture to a burglar, and he has suggested an analogy between the idea of return and Nazism/fascism. In a BBC interview he stated that to start to “erode” the British Museum’s “intellectual achievement” is to censor it, which is “like burning books” and “[t]hat’s what Hitler did.” He also declared:

To rip the Elgin marbles from the walls of the British Museum [...] is a much greater disaster than the threat of blowing up the Parthenon. [...] I think this is cultural fascism. It’s nationalism and it’s cultural danger. [...] If you start to destroy great intellectual institutions, you are culturally fascist.<sup>16</sup>

Summing up Wilson’s “good philosophical grounds” for his position, it might be noted that he draws up a distinction between return

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15. Wilson 1989, 116.

16. Hitchens 1997, 85-86.

and retention where the case for return is connected with concepts such as nationalism, fascism, Nazism, sectarianism, politics, unthinking, and passion. The case for retention, on the other hand, is linked to the concepts mankind, international agreement, intellect, responsibility, hope, etc. Arguably, the dichotomy between return and retention also means that each of the two also becomes connected with the reserve of the qualities which is connected to the other in this oppositional pair. Thus, if return is based on emotion and unthinking, this suggests that retention is based on careful consideration, reason, and rationality. Other writers see things differently, noting that Wilson's comparison with Nazism and fascism is perhaps not driven by reason alone, but may owe to Wilson's own emotional involvement in this issue.<sup>17</sup>

In the following, consideration will be given to how Neil MacGregor argues the case for retention by looking at two texts he has written. The first is the article "The whole world in our hands" published in *The Guardian* in 2004 and the second is a text entitled "To shape the citizens of 'that great city, the world,'" which appeared in the anthology *Whose Culture? The Promise of Museums and the Debate over Antiquities* published in 2009.<sup>18</sup> These two texts are among the few slightly longer articles by MacGregor where he outlines the museum's argument for retention, and thus they give valuable material for an analysis of his thoughts on the matter. They are also of interest for this study, because in both articles the Benin objects are an important building block in his argument. As mentioned previously, in MacGregor's view, the Benin objects provide the "key argument" for the benefit of taking objects out of their original context and putting them in museums.

MacGregor's case for retention has much in common with Wilson's, but in contrast to Wilson, MacGregor chooses to address the issue without much acknowledgement that objects in the British Museum's collections have been claimed. In the 2004 article, the Greek claim on the Parthenon sculptures is related to towards

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17. Brummer 2005, 146, cf. Korca 2005, 149 about respecting British "sentiment."

18. MacGregor 2004, 2009.

the end of the text, while in the article from 2009 there is only an opaque reference to “the discussion about [...] a modern nation’s cultural property” in the second last paragraph.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, instead of discussing the pros and cons of keeping or returning particular objects, MacGregor draws a broad picture of the British Museum’s past and present role in the world where the central message is that the British Museum is an “encyclopedic” or “universal” museum. Through the width and breadth of its collections, encompassing many cultures of the world, it can show the “oneness” of humanity, and thus speak to humanity as a whole. The museum has a unique opportunity to make the visitor see “the oneness of the world,” because “[a] collection that embraces the whole world allows you to consider the whole world.”<sup>20</sup> Linked to the idea of universality, is also the idea that the museum communicates with the whole world in various ways, through collaborative projects with indigenous groups and by lending objects to other museums. The inferred message is that the museum’s capacity for universal representation and dialogue would be impaired if objects in its collections were returned to claimants.

MacGregor (like Wilson before him) constructs his argument by making frequent reference to the British Museum’s past. In the two articles, about one third of the text deals with the museum’s origin and history. Three aspects of the museum’s bygone days are emphasized. First, the ideals and ideas held by the “Enlightenment founders of the museum,” secondly the legal and organizational status of the museum when it was established (that the museum was set up as a trust), and, thirdly, important discoveries made through objects in the British Museum and their beneficial impact on surrounding society. These Enlightenment ideas and ideals relate to notions of cosmopolitanism and tolerance:

The British Museum was established very specifically for everybody, for the whole world. Its founders had no doubt what its purpose was. It was established on the proposition

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19. MacGregor 2009, 54.

20. MacGregor 2004.

that through the study of things gathered together from all over the world, truth would emerge. And not one perpetual truth, but truth as a living, changing thing, constantly re-made as hierarchies are subverted, new information comes, and new understandings of societies emerge. Such emerging truth, it was believed, would result in greater tolerance of others and of difference itself.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, the “truth” which was to come from the study of collections from many parts of the globe was one of human communality and interconnectedness. Through objects representing many different societies and religions, “scholars and visitors” would learn that “all societies think and behave, effectively, in the same way” and that “there are many good ways of organising the world.”<sup>22</sup> The truth emanating from things gathered from distant lands would not only dispel stereotypes about others, but it would also stimulate self-reflection, because, according to MacGregor, the eighteenth century idea was “that if you think about other cultures, what you really discover is yourself,” and that “objects from other cultures tell us not only about distant peoples but about ourselves too, about our souls.”<sup>23</sup>

MacGregor contrasts the idea and hope that the study of things from abroad would generate tolerance, understanding, and self-reflection, with the strong anti-Catholic, anti-French, and anti-Semitic feelings held in Britain in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In this context, the foundation of the British Museum was “an act of intellectual idealism, and political radicalism” as its purpose was to foster “intellectual inquiry and the dissent that necessarily follows it.” The institution was not to be a place for scholarly enquiry alone, but one which engaged in contemporary issues and which through the “discovery of new kinds of truth” would counter various orthodoxies and fight the “forces of intolerance and bigotry.”<sup>24</sup>

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21. MacGregor 2009, 39.

22. MacGregor 2004, 2009, 43

23. MacGregor, 2009, 48, 50.

24. MacGregor 2004.



As for the organization and legal status of the museum, Parliament found a solution of “extraordinary ingenuity and brilliance.”<sup>25</sup> The museum was not to be run as a department of the state, but by trustees. The notion of trusteeship, which MacGregor describes as an “astonishing achievement of English and American law /.../ quite unknown in continental Europe,” meant that the trustees had an obligation to hold the objects for the beneficiaries, which in this case was, and still is, “all of humanity” including its future unborn members.<sup>26</sup> Trustees are by law not allowed to follow government orders, and consequently, the museum, MacGregor assures, “was in large measure removed from the political realm” and “set firmly outside the commercial realm.”<sup>27</sup> The idea that the trustees hold the objects for the benefit of all humanity also had, and still has, the implication that the museum’s collection cannot be sold off, but must be held together “for all of time.”<sup>28</sup>

The way in which the founders’ ideals and principles were realized is illustrated by MacGregor using major scientific discoveries made through objects in the museum. Two such cases are the decipherment of the hieroglyphs through the Rosetta Stone, and the reading of the “flood tablet” from Nineveh by British Museum assistant George Smith in 1872 – which told a story remarkably similar to the story of Noah and the Ark. These discoveries provided a new understanding of the world and questioned the authority of the scriptural tradition thereby changing “the status of all claims to exclusive truth of whatever kind.” A third case is the stone tools from Olduvai, discovered by “Professor” Leakey in the 1920s. When these objects, the hitherto oldest known manmade artifacts, were brought to the British Museum and exhibited there, they clearly demonstrated to the visitors “the [African] origin of their culture” and thus that “humanity is one.”<sup>29</sup> Incidentally (?), while

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25. MacGregor 2004.

26. MacGregor 2009, 43.

27. MacGregor 2004.

28. MacGregor 2004, 2009, 43, 54.

29. MacGregor 2004, 2009, 44, 51-52. That the stone tools were discovered by “Professor” Leakey is not the whole story of the find. The first discovery of Paleolithic tools at Olduvai in Tanzania was made by the (German) scholar Hans Reck in 1913, but Reck’s work was interrupted due to the outbreak of

MacGregor names the individuals responsible for two of the three scientific breakthroughs – Smith and Leakey – the name of the person responsible for the third, the decipherment of hieroglyphs, is omitted. Whether or not this is has to do with the fact that the first two are British and the third one (Jean-Francois Champollion) is French, is anyone's guess. The fourth case is the Benin objects, where the discovery of their indigenous origin shattered European stereotypes about Africans. As will be discussed further on, the British Museum has an interesting way of distributing shame and glory between British and non-British scholars when telling the story of the reception of the Benin objects.

MacGregor contrasts these examples from the museum's history of how objects can “speak truths,” dispel fundamentalist assumptions, subvert notions of cultural superiority, and help humanity to see itself as one, with two more recent examples of how objects in the British Museum have been appropriated for “political ends” by the regimes of modern states. The two examples are the Cyrus Cylinder and the Parthenon sculptures. MacGregor relates how the last Shah of Iran, when celebrating the 2,500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Persia, claimed that the Cyrus Cylinder was the first declaration of human rights, thus asserting an Iranian origin for the principle of human rights. From this example of how an object has become “a mantra of his newly constructed national identity” MacGregor proceeds to the Greek claim on the Parthenon sculptures. After the fall of the Colonels in Greece, the Parthenon sculptures became “an instrument of national politics.” Melina Mercouri argued that the Parthenon and its sculptures are the “exclusive cultural patrimony of the Greek people” because they embody “the values of democracy and indeed the very spirit of Greece as a modern, democratic, European nation.” To this description of the Greek case for return, MacGregor counters that these sculptures embody many other

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the First World War. Louis Leakey saw Olduvai tools in Reck's collection and in 1931, Leakey, (accompanied by Reck) made his first discovery of stone tools in Olduvai. Later, during the 1930s, Louis Leakey was joined by his wife Mary in the work at Olduvai. On Louis and Mary Leakey, see Derricourt 2011, 76-84. As far as I am aware, neither Mary nor Louis Leakey were appointed to a professorship.

things as well. Ancient Athens was in some sense a democracy, but it was also “a slave-owning society and an imperial maritime power” which funded the Parthenon and its sculptural program with the proceeds of tribute levied from other Greek City states.<sup>30</sup> The subtext of MacGregor’s argument is that the Greek claim is flawed, because it relies on a distorted version of history which only recognizes the “good” legacies of the past (such as democracy), but wants to forget its negative aspects (slavery, imperialism, etc.). Hence, the Greek request is part of a political project to create a national identity through a one-eyed view of the past. It is implied in MacGregor’s argument that these constructed identities, claiming a glorious past for a particular modern nation state, are both essentialist and chauvinist. They deny or downplay influences from cultures and peoples located outside the borders of the state in question, and the state gives itself credit for the invention of certain positive contributions to human history, such as human rights and democracy.

According to MacGregor, the separation of human beings into various invented collectives leads to conflicts throughout the world. In the Middle East, for example, “brutally oversimplified notions of identity manufactured and imposed upon cultures and communities /.../ sustain entrenched conflicts” and in “our own country [Britain], where many English view the European continent in general, and Germany in particular, through a distorted myth of inherited enmity.” Scots see the English through a “fictional history of opposition and oppression,” and the British National Party lives in a fantasy of a mythical, racially pure Britain.<sup>31</sup>

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30. MacGregor 2004. A minor point: MacGregor asserts that the funding of the Parthenon and the sculptures made them “the subject of intense political controversy at the time of their creation.” This may well have been the case, but there are very few contemporary 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE sources for the building project and none which refer to any controversy over the building project. Later sources mention the critique about using tribute levied from other Greek city-states for the erection of the buildings on the Acropolis, but it is impossible to determine whether these sources reflect 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE political events accurately or are post-5<sup>th</sup> century BCE inventions. Kallett 2005, 56-57.

31. MacGregor 2004.

To challenge ethnocentrism, chauvinism, and racism, the British Museum should “subvert the habits of thought that keep us from seeing other cultures except in categories of superiority and difference” and instead let “the objects speak of the oneness of the world.”<sup>32</sup> He exemplifies how the museum can do so with a number of objects from the museum’s collections. One example is the Throne of Weapons, acquired in 2001 from Mozambique. The object in question is a stool made of weapons decommissioned after the civil war in Mozambique. MacGregor explains that the throne is “part of a tradition in Africa of using the weapons of your defeated foe as a celebration of your victory” but also has the contemporary purpose of visibly taking the guns out of circulation. The museum has toured the throne to various places in the United Kingdom – schools, a shopping center in Newcastle, Belfast, Coventry Cathedral, and Pentonville Prison. At these places the throne provoked a strong response and stimulated debate about diverse but related topics concerning gun violence, reconciliation, and arms trade. At schools it inspired children to make “weapons out of farm instruments” (MacGregor probably means it the other way around) and in Belfast, “the idea of Africa having found a way of showing decommissioned weapons,” gave rise to discussions which “inverted all the normal [sic] assumptions about who can learn from whom.” Crucially, as the weapons, according to MacGregor, had been made in “Britain, Europe, the US,” it showed that Mozambique could not have had a civil war without the rest of the world helping by arming the fighting factions. Thus, the object is an eloquent and distressing illustration of the “dialogue between Africa and the world” which “speaks” of “a long relationship of commercial, political and military exploitation.”<sup>33</sup>

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32. MacGregor 2009, 43.

33. MacGregor 2004, MacGregor 2009, 48-51. There appears to be some confusion about where these weapons were actually manufactured. MacGregor (2004) states that they are from “Britain, Europe, the US” and MacGregor 2009, 48 declares: “I can tell you with confidence that every gun was made in a European or an American factory.” According to the museum’s pages for “Young Explorers” the weapons were made in “Britain, Germany and Russia.” Despite MacGregor’s “confidence,” the information presented by him (and on the “Young Explorers” page) seems wrong. It is not in agreement with the

Other objects and groups of objects in the museum's collections may also show how cultures interact: the Parthenon and its sculptures are part of a story that is not only national, but which reaches much further embracing Egypt, Mesopotamia, Turkey, India, Rome, and the whole of Europe. Since coming to London the sculptures have also become part of "another European and world story." Quoting Said from his 2003 edition of *Orientalism*, MacGregor summons the museum to show "the slow working together of cultures that overlap, borrow from each other and live together" in order to oppose (in Said's words) "the terrible reductive conflicts that herd people under falsely unifying rubrics [...] and invent collective identities for large number of individuals who are actually quite diverse."<sup>34</sup>

Most would agree that such generally formulated aims as those MacGregor sets for the British Museum – combating stereotypes and ethnocentrism, promoting tolerance and understanding, offering ways for visitors to consider contemporary social and political issues, etc. – are unobjectionable. Neither is it controversial to say that history and its material remains have been, and are, used – even manipulated – for various nationalistic and political purposes and that the concept of a national heritage has been instrumental in the shaping and homogenizing of a national citizenry.

It is also true that the borders of ancient cultures and modern states rarely correspond and that many, if not most, objects have connections with objects and cultures beyond the borders of the particular modern nation state whose national patrimony the objects are made part of. Clearly, it might be very difficult to illustrate such connections in a museum which only, or mainly, has objects originating from the territory of that particular nation state. A "universal" museum may be said to have a different

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(detailed) description in the museum's own publication of the throne, which informs that the weapons are from North Korea, Poland, Portugal, the Soviet Union, and Czechoslovakia. Holden 2006. Another strange detail is that MacGregor refers to the weapons as "looted guns" which they are not. As he himself writes, they were decommissioned, not looted.

34. MacGregor 2004.

representational capacity than a national one. In comparison to the national museum, the “universal” museum may be able to represent broader geographical regions, to show more cases of hybridization and creolization and to look at connections over longer geographical distances.

That said, MacGregor’s portrayal of the British Museum’s past and present knowledge production, its past and present relation to surrounding society, and its present-day relation to its own past, begs many questions. Central components in MacGregor’s reasoning are concepts such as “universal,” “oneness,” “connectedness” (of the world and of humanity), “knowledge” (or “truth”), and “tolerance.” A main tenet in his argument is the assumption that increased “knowledge” (especially about other cultures and of the connections between cultures) has led to, and leads to, increased tolerance and challenges ethnocentrism. As to how the museum produces this knowledge, it may be noted that in MacGregor’s use of the word “universal” two different meanings seem conflated. Implicit in MacGregor’s reasoning, and that of his predecessor Wilson, is that the museum and its representations are “universal,” *not only* in the sense that the museum’s objects originate from, and are today sent to, many different places in the world, *but also* in the sense that the museum and its representations are apolitical, unbiased, non-partisan, and objective. While the broad geographical range of its collections and its diverse audience may do justice to the designation of the British Museum as an “international,” perhaps even somewhat “universal” institution, it may be asked if this epithet should be applied to its production of knowledge and representations. Does having objects from many places of the world, and showing many different cultures to a global audience, by default mean that the interests, world-views, and perspectives of some subset of humanity (such as, for example, the British) are not prioritized over those of any other part of humanity when representations are produced?

In relation to this, it is worth reiterating that despite the museum’s name (the *British* Museum) and the wealth of its collections, there is one “culture” which is largely absent in its displays of various cultures. There is not much to see for a visitor who comes

to the museum looking for an exhibition on contemporary British or Western culture. Thus, a visitor who wants to learn about white, middleclass, heterosexual, male norms runs the risk of walking away disappointed, as there is no display explicitly addressing this “culture” in a museum claiming to show the *whole* world.<sup>35</sup>

As the absence of the representation and “explanation” of a given culture may be seen as a sign of the normality of that culture, the museum may instill the feeling that there is one particular culture, among all the cultures of the world, which is more normal than others. Consequently, it may also create the notion – among visitors as well as among staff – that the representations and knowledge claims made by that particular culture about all the other ones on display are not culturally specific, but “universal.”

MacGregor draws a picture of the museum as a stable, coherent entity, today always adhering to the ideals of the Enlightenment founders (echoing Wilson’s claim that the museum “has reminded true to the ideas of its founders to this day”). Through its status as a trust it stands firmly outside the realm of politics and works for the benefit of the whole world, not for any particular nation (such as Britain) or any other interest groups. Throughout its history it has been a place for “dissent” and novel thinking, and it has made important discoveries which have challenged various orthodoxies and authorities. It is implicit in this account that the past somehow links to the future: because the museum has made good in history it will continue to do so. Thus, the museum has had, and still has, positive effects on the surrounding society which is characterized by certain negative qualities and ideologies (bigotry, conflict, nationalism, politics, etc.). Yet, while the museum stands in contact with society and exercises a positive influence on it, the museum itself is not effected by any of these “bad” ideologies found in the surrounding society. Influence from the outside is limited to the adoption of a set of (good) Enlightenment principles in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and of standing in a (positive) dialogical relation with the world today through travelling exhibitions and loans.

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35. Not even the exhibition *Europe to the Present* in room 48 picks up this theme. Instead of presenting an essentializing overview of Western culture, it focuses on the history of design.



He does not deny that the museum has been “aided by a past of national wealth and imperial power” but recognizes no negative influence from imperialism on the museum and its knowledge production.<sup>36</sup> In a talk with Janes Cuno which is available on YouTube, he differentiates between the encyclopedic museum and imperialism: while both are products of the European encounter with the rest of the world from the 16<sup>th</sup> century and onwards, the two represent different, oppositional, aspects of this encounter. In contrast to the commercial and imperial ventures, the purpose of the encyclopedic museum was about “understanding, and comparing and making knowledge and through knowledge generating tolerance.”<sup>37</sup> Thus, in short, the museum’s relation to the outside world is one of selective osmosis, with good things passing in and out through the museum’s turntables and bad things being promptly stopped from either entering or leaving. “Good” Enlightenment principles enter the museum, are processed there for all of humanity in an unbiased manner, and then tolerance and understanding are disseminated to the benefit of the un-enlightened world. “Bad” things, such as ideology, politics, nationalism, and imperialism, lurking about in the outside world, do not pass the threshold, and neither do the museum’s communications reinforce such patterns of thought.

This is a view of institutionalized knowledge production which is the very opposite of Said’s position (and that of most academics who apply a constructivist approach to the making of knowledge).

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36. MacGregor 2009, 54.

37. MacGregor & Cuno 2009. MacGregor’s words are a reply to Cuno’s question about MacGregor’s opinion on the claim made by “some” that encyclopedic museums are imperialist. MacGregor’s answer goes as follows: “The encyclopedic museum is an aspect of the engagement with the whole world by essentially European societies from the 16<sup>th</sup> century on. Another aspect of that is imperialism of course. The two have gone... they have occurred at the same time. They have also been about something different. The museums was about understanding, and comparing and making knowledge and through knowledge generating tolerance. The imperial venture, the commercial ventures were of, course, different, and I think that the mission of the museums, the aim of the museum, to make knowledge deeper and to share it is something which has survived the imperial period.” From here MacGregor proceeds to argue that the collections of encyclopedic museums should not be divided, but kept together and presented to the whole world.

One of the main thrusts of Said's *Orientalism* was to show that academic Orientalism (which includes the knowledge production at museums) was not apolitical and distinct from political Orientalism, but that the two (together with Orientalism in its more popular forms) were deeply enmeshed in a mutually reinforcing, self-referential system producing much the same knowledge about the Orientals, where the different forms of Orientalism could prove each other's "truths." Although MacGregor quotes Said's *Orientalism*, his texts show no evidence of influence from Said's main argument. Of course, one does not need to agree with Said. Said could be criticized for drawing too homogenous a picture of the Western view of the Orient. As discussed earlier, the Western view of the West as superior to other cultures has also met with opposition from Westerners. Maybe the British Museum was a place of "dissent," as MacGregor claims, producing a different kind of knowledge than what was held in society at large? In what follows a look will be taken at the foundation the British Museum's history to see how it agrees with MacGregor's account.

MacGregor makes frequent reference to the museum's "(Enlightenment) founders" and their "founding principle(s)."<sup>38</sup> The founding principle included the idea that increased knowledge and the study of different societies would promote tolerance and understanding. Yet, while MacGregor is crystal clear about the pivotal importance of the founders and their principle(s) up to the present day – he assures that it is a "principle we seek to adhere to with everything we do" – his text is much vaguer when it comes to exactly which individuals he has in mind when referring to "founders." He mentions "Parliament," which took the decision to buy the collection of Sir Hans Sloane and the "MPs and grandees" who presided over the birth of the museum, but he does not give any more precise information about which among this large number of men held and expressed ideas about tolerance.<sup>39</sup> It is equally unclear where he finds the evidence that these (unnamed) founders believed that the study of different societies would generate tolerance. He quotes

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38. MacGregor 2009, 39, 43, 54.

39. MacGregor 2004.

the statutes and rules from 1755 which set forth many principles, but none are formulated in a way which suggests that the museum was particularly aimed at promoting “tolerance.”<sup>40</sup>

Among the few named individuals is Hans Sloane, but whether or not MacGregor counts him as one of the “founders,” whose ideals the museum should adhere to is not spelled out. He is introduced as “the donor of the museum’s founding collection” and in the talk with Cuno on YouTube, MacGregor speaks of the “very remarkable man named Hans Sloane” a doctor “who was very interested in being able to compare how different cultures did the same kind of things.”<sup>41</sup> MacGregor exemplifies Sloane’s interest in making cross-cultural comparisons with the shoes in Sloane’s collection:

He collects, for instance, shoes from all over the world to show that everybody wears shoes, everybody needs shoes, but the kind of shoes you would have would depend on the climate the kind of animals whatever [...] What he wanted to come out of that was that it is exactly the same with how you organize your society, your religion, whatever. That everybody does the same kind of things but does it in different ways. So he brought together this extraordinary collections of things from all over the world.<sup>42</sup>

Thus, MacGregor suggests that Sloane’s collecting was motivated by an interest in questions about cultural similarities and differences, which were to be studied from a point of departure which recognized a basic human communality. As presented by MacGregor, this appears to be a noble endeavor, and much in line with the museum’s aim of “understanding and comparing and making knowledge and through knowledge generating tolerance.”<sup>43</sup> The image created is in line with the characterization given by British Museum curator William Fagg – who we will encounter later on in

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40. MacGregor 2009, 40, 54.

41. MacGregor 2009, 39. MacGregor & Cuno 2009. A publication on Sloane dubs him “founding father of the British Museum.” MacGregor 1994a.

42. MacGregor & Cuno 2009.

43. MacGregor & Cuno 2009.

connection with the Benin and Ife objects – in the publication *Sir Hans Sloane and Ethnography* from 1970, where Fagg asserted that “all that we know of” Sloane “suggest that his attitude was liberal, unprejudiced and enlightened.”<sup>44</sup> However, despite (or because of?) the confidence in their claims, neither MacGregor or Fagg makes clear on what evidence their positive evaluation of Sloane is founded (although Fagg implies that he bases the moral characterization of Sloane on his “catalogues”). Existing documentary sources hardly support their views. Sloane (briefly) expressed his motive for creating his collection and for wanting it to remain for posterity in his will. His will from 1739 reads:

Whereas from my youth I have been a great observer and admirer of the wonderful power, wisdom and contrivance of the Almighty God, appearing in the works of his creation; and have gathered together many things in my own travels or voyages, or had them from others [...] Now desiring very much that these things tending many ways to the manifestation of the glory of God, the confutation of atheism and its consequences, the use and improvement of physic, and other arts and sciences, and benefit of mankind, may remain together and not be separated.<sup>45</sup>

Apparently, to Sloane, the purpose of the collection was to evidence God’s glory, to refute atheism, to improve “physic” (medicine) and “other arts and sciences,” as well as being generally beneficial to mankind. The wording cannot be claimed to signal any particular interest in studying different societies, making cross-cultural

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44. Fagg 1970, 8, cf. the equally panegyric remark made by Arthur MacGregor: “Prudence and application, combined with sober temperament, a philanthropic nature and a sense of Christian virtue marked every aspect of Sloane’s career from beginning to end.” MacGregor 1994b, 29.

45. Caygill 1994, 46-47, cf. MacGregor 1994b, 27. His second will from 1749 is stated in similar terms, motivating his collecting interest by the desire to enlarge “our knowledge in the works of nature” in order to promote “the glory of God and the good of man” (but there is no mention of atheism and its confutation). Neither does this document speak of the study of different societies, making cross-cultural comparisons, or furthering tolerance.

comparisons, or promoting tolerance. The lack of an expressed interest in foreign cultures is not surprising given that Sloane was primarily studying natural history and medicine. His collection of some 80,000 objects consisted mostly of natural history specimens and naturalia.<sup>46</sup> He also collected a wide range of other objects and more than half of the 2,000 items in his “Miscellanies” catalogue could today be categorized as “ethnographic objects” (although that category did not exist in Sloane’s time).<sup>47</sup> Unfortunately, Sloane’s extant writings do not specify his reasons for collecting these things. As suggested by British Museum curator Jonathan King, his acquisitions of exotic man-made objects appear to have been a side-line to his interest in botany and zoology and partly related to it. Objects made of different vegetable materials, such as bark, roots, grass, and animal skins may have intrigued Sloane as they illustrated the diverse uses of flora and fauna.<sup>48</sup> This interest, according to King, rather than any grand ideas concerning humanity or society, lay behind Sloane’s collecting of foreign objects. King also notes that Sloane did not influence the theorizing in this field:

Sloane was not inspired by his appreciation of contemporary political theory to a study of human nature. His ideas did not contribute to the early history of anthropology, and he was not interested by the philosophy of the Enlightenment current at the end of his life after most of his collecting was finished.<sup>49</sup>

Although Sloane did not explicate why he collected foreign cultural objects, he did formulate views on others and selves and the interrelationship between the two. In one of his works Sloane made an (figurative and literal) evaluation of people of color. In

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46. MacGregor 1994b, 28-29, Moser 2006, 44.

47. King 1994, 230. Delbourgo 2007, 11. The term came in use during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In British Museum official reports it is first attested in 1845. Brauholtz 1953a, 91, 93, n. 2.

48. King 1994, 238. On Sloane’s shoe collection, see also Caygill 2012, 129.

49. King 1994, 228. According to Ultee 1988, 13, Sloane was, predominantly an empiricist focusing on the “observation of matters of fact” with little inclination towards hypothesizing. See also Syson 2003, 114.

the same text he also expresses an opinion about the British and other Europeans. The text in question is Sloane's magnum opus, the two volume *A Voyage to the Islands Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers and Jamaica with the Natural History of the Herbs and Trees, Four-footed Beasts, Fishes, Birds, Insects, Reptiles &c On the last of those Islands* published in 1707 and 1725. Sloane stayed in Jamaica from December 1687 to May 1689 working as the physician for the island's governor (who died within 10 months of his and Sloane's arrival at the island). Sloane's book is mainly devoted to cataloguing the island's flora and fauna, but the introduction to the first volume gives a lengthy description of the island's geography, climate, and its human inhabitants.<sup>50</sup>

The inhabitants are divided into two groups: "Masters" and "Slaves." The first group is constituted by "Europeans" and some "Creolians," the second one by "Indians, Negros, Mulatos, Alcatrazes, Mestizes, Quarterons, &c." The Indians and Negros are described from their respective value as slaves, from a kind of cost-effective calculation, taking into account aspects such as how much work could be extracted from these slaves and the costs of keeping them alive. The Indians – who, Sloane informs, have been imported to Jamaica as the natives have all been "destroyed" by the Spaniards – are "very good Hunters, Fishers, or Fowlers" but are "naught at working in the Fields and slavish Work" and if severely beaten "are good for nothing." Therefore they are "very gently treated, and well fed." The Negroes "are of several sorts": those from the East Indies or Madagascar are "good enough," but "too choice in their Diet" being accustomed to eating meat in their home countries, and thus "do not well here, but very often die." Slaves from Angola "run away from their Masters" and "on hard usage" may kill themselves because they "fancy on their deaths they are going Home again." Among the Negroes, the ones from Guinea are the "best Slaves." Why this was the case is not explained, but presumably the Guinea slaves lack the negative qualities of the others: they survive on a meagre diet and may be hard pressed, with little risk of them committing suicide.<sup>51</sup>

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50. On Sloane's work: Delbourgo 2007, 2011, Kriz 2000.

51. Sloane 1707, xlvi-xlviii, liii.

Sloane makes it clear that the Blacks are better fit for physical strain and more resistant to bodily harm than the Indians. It seems that he was fascinated by the Blacks' capacity to withstand bodily injury as he gives a meticulous description of the various forms of punishments meted out to (black) slaves, and how they reacted to it. For rebellion the punishment was "burning them, by nailing them down on the ground with crooked Sticks on every Limb, and then applying the Fire by degrees from the Feet and Hands, burning them gradually up to the Head, whereby their pains are extravagant." For crimes of "lesser nature" the punishment was castration "or chopping off half of the Foot with an Ax." These punishments were endured by the slaves with "great Constancy." Slaves who attempted to run away received iron rings of great weight around their ankles or necks, or "a Spur in the Mouth." Slaves committing "Negligence" were first tied up by their hands and whipped "till they be bloody" and several of the switches of the whip were broken. "After they are whip'd till they are Raw, some put on their Skins Pepper and Salt to make them smart; at other times their Masters will drop melted Wax on their Skins, and use several very exquisite Torments."

Sloane finishes this catalogue of execution and torture methods by stating that these punishments may "appear harsh," yet are "scarce equal to some of their Crimes" and "are sometimes merited by the Blacks, who are a very perverse Generation of People." Sloane also asserts that the slaves are "more easily treated" by the English in Jamaica than they were in Guinea by their fellow country-men, and therefore the slaves "would not often willingly change Masters." To not leave any doubt about the righteousness and clemency of the English, he concludes that the punishments are "inferior to what Punishments other European Nations inflict on their Slaves."<sup>52</sup>

In Sloane's description slavery is presented as a win-win system, mutually beneficial for both masters and slaves. The English receive the fruits of the slave's work and the slaves are given the privilege of serving English Masters, rather than African or other European ones; their wickedness is kept in check by the English disciplining

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52. Sloane 1707, lvii.



them with firebrands, axes, iron rings, spurs, whips, pepper, salt, and molten wax.

Among the vices of the Negroes are that they “have no manner of Religion,” are “much given to Venery” and – if they escape their Masters control – become violent. In a passage where Sloane offers an apology for any inaccuracies in the information about the parts of the island “not inhabited”, the problems and dangers the traveler to these places encounters are listed. These include lack of lodgings, “Serpents and other venomous Creatures” and “Negros, who lye in Ambush to kill the Whites who come within their reach.”<sup>53</sup> On a more positive note he informs that – contrary to what is usually thought – the Negroes are not “haters of their own Children,” but have “great love for them.” He also observes that when Negroes die “their Country people make great lamentations, mournings and howlings about them expiring.”<sup>54</sup>

Some of the many glaring contradictions in his account – such as why, given the benevolence of the institution of slavery, the slaves would resort to suicide – is partly “solved” by referring to the slaves’ erroneous beliefs and lack of knowledge: slaves kill themselves, not because they prefer death to servitude, but because they think they will return home and become free. To the “scientist” Sloane, slaves hanging themselves or cutting their throats was *not* evidence for the cruelty of the institution of slavery, but for its justification. The suicides proved the stupidity of this “very perverse Generation of People,” and justified their servitude under their intellectual and moral superiors.

A few years after his return from Jamaica, Sloane married Elizabeth Langley Rose, widow of a Jamaican planter, and for the next thirty years augmented his income from his lucrative medical practice with revenue from slave plantations.<sup>55</sup> A “Black Boy” which he had received as a “present” served in his London household according to the fashion among the rich of the time.<sup>56</sup> Sloane’s collections

53. Sloane 1707, xlvi, lvi, 1725, xviii.

54. Sloane 1707, xlvi, lvi-lvii.

55. Kriz 2000, 39, Delbourgo 2007, 6, 2011, 75, Chakrabarti 2012, 78.

56. Delbourgo 2011, 75-76. On “chamber Moors,” see Nederveen Pieterse 1992, 124-131, Juterczenka 2012.

included body parts from black individuals, presumably slaves. His catalogue contains entries such as “the skin of the hand of a black,” and “the skin of a negro” as well “the foetus of a negro from Virginia.”<sup>57</sup> He also collected objects relating to slavery, including implements used to torture and murder slaves such as “a barbary Scourge with which the slaves are beaten made [...] [from] a palm tree,” a strap made from the hide of a sea cow “for whipping the Negro Slaves,” and “a noose made of cane made splitt for catching game or hanging runaway slaves.” Objects testifying to slave resistance are also recorded: “a bullet used by the runaway Negros in Jamaica” and “a coat of the runaway rebellious negros who lived in the woods of that Island.”<sup>58</sup>

His motives for collecting these objects are not explained, but his interest in objects such as the whips may have been related to his interest in the various forms of corporal punishment and their bodily effects. In his account of punishment methods he writes that the manatee (sea cow) whip had been prohibited on Jamaica because it was judged to be too “cruel.” This humanitarian concern is linked with a commercial one, since slaves with too many scars from whips were regarded as lazy and difficult to sell.<sup>59</sup> Perhaps to Sloane, the whip was a sign of British clemency, wisdom, and righteousness, evidencing British moral superiority over Blacks and other Europeans (especially the Catholic Spanish, whose cruelty to natives was frequently pointed out by Protestants to get the upper moral ground in the struggle for domination in the Americas).<sup>60</sup> Of course, given the absence of evidence we can only guess what interpretations Sloane made of this or other foreign objects in his collection (such as, for example, the shoes). Yet, his collection of items and body parts relating to slavery, his rational calculations on the economic value of different “types” of slaves, and his clinical, emotionally detached, description of the diverse ways in which slaves were tortured and killed, paired with his insistence on the (English) master’s benevolence, begs questions in

57. Day 1994, 71. Delbourgo 2007, 11.

58. Delbourgo 2007, 2, 2011, 89-90, 2012, 18, 2015.

59. Sloane 1707, lvii.

60. Delbourgo 2015, 5.

relation to MacGregor's portrayal of the "very remarkable" Sloane. In MacGregor's presentation, Sloane is given an exemplary status, prefiguring the future course of the British Museum as an institution which has championed tolerance and respect for differences. In the name of intellectual honesty, would it not have been better if MacGregor, when sketching the creation of the British Museum as a beacon of tolerance, rather than indulging in unfounded speculation on Sloane's shoes, had pointed to that what Sloane actually formulated in writing on colored others is about as far from the concept of "tolerance" as one can get?

Sloane's writings do not lend support to the idea that "tolerance" and "respect for others" were of particular importance to him. As far as I am aware, such ideas are not expressed in any of the museum's founding documents either. According to the statutes and rules of 1755 "the principal view and intention in founding the British Museum was to encourage and facilitate [...] greater progress in the several Branches of useful Knowledge" for "the good of the publick & the honour of the nation."<sup>61</sup> Thus, to the founders of the British Museum it was utility, public good and national honor which were of importance. The concept "tolerance" is conspicuously absent. This may make one wonder from where MacGregor got the idea that the British Museum's founding principles encompassed the concept of tolerance. The literature on the British Museum's foundation does not suggest so. None of the contributors to the edited volumes *Sir Hans Sloane – Collector, Scientist, Antiquary. Founding Father of the British Museum* from 1994, *Enlightening the British – Knowledge, Discovery and the Museum in the Eighteenth Century* and *Enlightenment – Discovering the World in the Eighteenth Century*, both of which are from 2003, connect the British Museum with "tolerance."<sup>62</sup> Some authors make a comparison between the British Museum and Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, in that both were concerned with promoting universal knowledge. MacGregor also compares the British Museum with Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, adding that

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61. British Museum 2003, 33.

62. MacGregor 1994a Anderson, Caygill & MacGregor 2003, Sloan & Burnett 2003.

Diderot wrote in his introduction to the seventh volume that he hoped that the *Encyclopédie* could make “our fellow men [...] love and tolerate one another.” From here MacGregor proceeds to state: “That’s what the context of the universal museum was meant to do.”<sup>63</sup> Thus, it seems that MacGregor’s “source” for that the British Museum’s founders wanting to promote tolerance is *not* any documents produced by, or relating to, the British Museum, but a text by a Diderot, written a decade after the foundation of the museum.<sup>64</sup>

To this it may be added that the whole idea of connecting the British Museum with the Enlightenment does not have a very long history. It comes to the fore in 2003 with the inauguration of the *Enlightenment – Discovering the World in the Eighteenth Century* exhibition produced to celebrate the museum’s 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and in its two previously mentioned accompanying publications. In this exhibition (which I will come back to in chapter II) and the publications, the British Museum is *made* into an Enlightenment institution, with, for example, British Museum curator Kim Sloan assuring that the museum was “a true product and even embodiment of the Enlightenment and certainly one of its greatest achievements.”<sup>65</sup> Yet, earlier publications on the British Museum and its history make little or no reference to the Enlightenment, or of its principles and values. They show reverence for the museum’s venerable age and traditions but without connecting them to the Enlightenment. As seen, Wilson, writing in 1989, looks back to the museum’s foundation and highlights aspects such as the fact that the museum was set up as trust (a point repeated by MacGregor), but the word Enlightenment is absent in Wilson’s account. Neither does Edward Miller’s *That Noble Cabinet – A History of the British Museum* from 1973 make any mention of the Enlightenment or of its principles.<sup>66</sup> If such principles were important at the museum, Miller (who had worked at the British Museum for thirty years) must have failed to notice this.

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63. MacGregor 2009, 43

64. By the way, Diderot’s introduction was published in the eighth volume of the *Encyclopédie*, not the seventh as MacGregor writes. See Diderot 1765.

65. Sloan 2003, 14.

66. Miller 1973.

Of course, looking back to 1753, it would be wrong to deny any influence of Enlightenment ideas on the museum's founders. "Tolerance" was in a sense an important Enlightenment concept and it *could* be argued that the founders included the promotion of "tolerance" under the umbrella heading of for "the good of the publick."<sup>67</sup> Perhaps the British Museum's founders wanted this museum to make (in Diderot's words from a decade later) "our fellow men [...] love and tolerate each other," even if they, for some reason or the other, did not put any hint about this purpose on paper. Still, rather than trying to read the minds and intentions of the museum's founders from non-existing evidence, it is, I think, methodologically more sound to look at what the museum has actually communicated to its visitors to see if there is a factual basis for the idea that the museum has promoted "tolerance" from its foundation and during its subsequent history.<sup>68</sup> In the next chapter some aspects of the history of the British Museum will be outlined to see how it compares with MacGregor's account of this "universal" institution. It will pay attention to both acquisition and display, with a focus on what the museum has communicated about cultural differences to its visitors. I believe this chapter will make clear that "love" and "tolerance" can hardly be claimed to have been guiding principles for this institution.

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67. In this context it might be reminded that the 18<sup>th</sup> century concept of toleration (the word tolerance came in common usage much later) was more limited in scope than the present-day "tolerance," as it was almost exclusively concerned with religious tolerance. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 2012, cf. Lough 1971, 196-270 for the *Encyclopédie*. As stated earlier, the British Museum was founded mainly as a natural history museum and a library, with no particular focus on the study of religion.

68. On the founders' political orientation, see Goldgar 2000, 223-224.

## 8. The British Museum's rationale for retention 2: The history of the British Museum

“At no period in the world's history has any one nation exercised control over so many primitive races as our own at the present time.” Charles Hercules Read, British Museum curator, 1910.<sup>1</sup>

When the British Museum was founded in 1753, its nucleus was the collection and library of Hans Sloane, the Harleian collection of manuscripts, and the Cottonian library. As mentioned, Sloane's collection focused on naturalia. At the time of its opening in 1759, and during the following decades, the British Museum was mainly a natural history and book collection led by a director who was titled principal librarian.<sup>2</sup> The displays were dominated by the natural history collections – plants, insects, minerals, shells, taxidermic specimens, etc. – but two rooms showed cultural objects including some Egyptian, Greek, and Roman antiquities, as well as objects from non-Western cultures.

The collection of antiquities was significantly boosted in 1772 when the museum acquired William Hamilton's collection of Greek and South Italian vases. The same decade also saw an increase in its natural history and ethnographic collections when numerous specimens and artifacts obtained during Cook's voyages to the Pacific and the American West Coast came to the museum. The acquisition of the Hamilton vases and the material from Cook's explorations

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1. British Museum 1910, vi.

2. Goldgar 2000, 205, 219, 221.

may be seen as indicative of how the collections of the museum expanded over the years and what kind of worth was assigned to different classes of objects. The Hamilton vases were acquired by purchase with a special Parliamentary grant of £8,410, whereas the objects from Cook's explorations were gifted to the museum. Well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Greek and Roman antiquities were about the only area where the museum's trustees were willing to spend any serious money.<sup>3</sup> Objects from cultures outside the Greco-Roman sphere came chiefly by donations. While the vases and statues from ancient Greece and Rome were recognized as having an intrinsic historical and artistic value in their own right, demonstrating the glory of Classical antiquity and the accomplishments of its artists, it was not necessarily the case that objects from elsewhere were primarily regarded as evidence of the achievements of their originating cultures. When the Admiralty donated the artifacts from Cook's voyages, it was insistent that its gift was displayed "in a particular manner and in a distinguished place as a monument of these national exertions of British munificence and industry."<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, when the museum acquired several Egyptian antiquities, including the (later) famed Rosetta Stone in 1802, it was not due to a particular interest in, or admiration of, ancient Egyptian culture. These objects had been ceded to the British upon the surrendered of Napoleon's army in the preceding year and were subsequently donated to the museum by the British monarch. When the Rosetta Stone was put on display in a temporary shed on the museum grounds, two sentences were painted on it: "Captured in Egypt by the British Army in 1801" and: "Presented by King George III."<sup>5</sup> These words emphasize its value as evidence of British military valor and of the generosity of its donor. Although it would be wrong to say that the acquisition of these objects was primarily motivated by an interest in the material remains of ancient Egypt, it would be equally wrong to say they were considered to have no scholarly value at all. Rather, their worth was composed of a *ménage*

3. Wilson 2002, 158.

4. Letter by Principal Librarian Matthew Maty. Miller 1973, 71.

5. MacGregor 2010b, 213. On the (negative) attitude of Principal Librarian Joseph Planta towards the Egyptian objects, see Moser 2006, 88.



*à trois*, which involved their manner of acquisition (booty taken from the French, and thus evidence of British accomplishments), their donor (the king), and their possible contributions to scientific knowledge. In 1804 the museum petitioned Parliament for a grant to create a proper repository for the Egyptian objects stating that in their present quarters they were not sufficiently protected against the weather, and thus “they may, in a short Time, be materially Defaced, whereby His Majesty’s gracious Intentions will be frustrated, to the Detriment of Science, and the Disparagement of these memorable Trophies of National Glory.”<sup>6</sup> Royal benevolence, science, and national glory all came together here.

The Egyptian antiquities seized from the French were the first pieces of monumental stone sculpture to arrive in the museum. They were to be followed by many more. During the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the museum continued to acquire stone sculptures and architectural pieces from the ancient Mediterranean area, focusing on ancient Greece. In 1805 the museum bought the prized Townley collection of classical marble, bronze and terracotta sculptures (a collection which has since lost much of its fame). In 1815 it bought the Phigalian marbles, sculptures from a temple in Bassai, Greece, and within a year the museum had acquired its, to this day, most celebrated possession: the Parthenon (or Elgin) sculptures, removed from the Athenian Acropolis by Lord Elgin, the British Ambassador to Istanbul. Following Greek independence in 1832, free-standing sculptures were no longer available from Greece, but they could still be obtained from Asia Minor. During the 1840s and 1850s the museum acquired the Nereid Monument from Lycia and the remains of the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus. The transport of the objects from various locations in the Mediterranean to Britain was often made with the help of the British fleet.<sup>7</sup>

Eventually the museum also began to spend money on objects from neighboring cultures which had preceded Greece and Rome. In 1819 the museum was offered a collection of Egyptian colossal sculpture, including a bust of Ramesses II from the British consul

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6. Acts and Votes of Parliament 1808, 88.

7. Jenkins 1992, 13-14.

in Egypt, Henry Salt. The museum, (reluctantly) purchased the collection for a mere £2,000 (compared to the £8,410 paid for Hamilton's vases, the £20,000 paid for the Townley sculptures, and the £35,000 paid for the Parthenon sculptures).<sup>8</sup> Another collection formed by Salt was purchased in 1835 for £4,805.16.<sup>9</sup> Egypt as a source of monumental stone sculpture dried up in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, partly as a result of laws regulating the export of antiquities being imposed in the country.<sup>10</sup> However, these laws did not prevent the growth of the museum's Egyptian collection. As mentioned earlier the museum's own employee, Wallis Budge, smuggled many objects out of the country with the "warm approval" of the museum trustees.<sup>11</sup>

The Near Eastern collections began on a modest scale. In 1825, all Mesopotamian antiquities were placed on display in "two glass tables," but from the late 1840s colossal sculptures and reliefs arrived, as well as numerous cuneiform tablets from Austen Layard and Hormuzd Rassam's excavations in Nimrud, Khorsabad, and Kuyunjik (ancient Nineve).<sup>12</sup> Later, architectural pieces and sculptures originating from further afield also arrived at the museum. With the dissolution of the East India Company's India Museum in 1879, the British Museum could acquire sculptures and reliefs from the Stupa at Amaravati, India.<sup>13</sup>

The library, the manuscript collections, and natural history collections also expanded over the years. A major contribution to the library was the donation of the king's library to the museum in 1823. As mentioned, numerous natural history specimens came from Cook's expedition in the 1760s and 1770s. The purchase of a large private collection of minerals in 1810 made the museum's mineral

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8. Henry Salt had gathered together his collection in collaboration with Giovanni Belzoni, an engineer and former circus strong man. Belzoni also appears in the annals of Edo history. He died in Ughoton (Gwato) the port city of the Benin Kingdom in 1823 and the first image of a Benin ancestral altar has been attributed (perhaps erroneously) to him. Plankensteiner 2007c, 157, fig. 8.

9. Moser 2006, 138-141.

10. Moser 2006, 173-174

11. Budge 1920, 81, 116-119, Reid 2013, 202-204.

12. Jenkins 1992, 158-161, Caygill 2002, 25, 33-34. See also Bohrer 1994.

13. Miller 1973, 318, Jenkins 1992, 211-212, Willis 1997.

collection the foremost in the world, and one of its principal attractions. The price tag (£13,727) shows that mineralogy was one of the fields which held status in the museum.<sup>14</sup> John Ross's expedition to Baffin Bay brought a polar bear and other Arctic animals in 1819.<sup>15</sup> At the time the museum could pride itself on possessing a hippopotamus, a llama, a musk ox, a Siberian elk, and three giraffes.<sup>16</sup> The expanding museum eventually outgrew Montagu House, a former stately mansion in Bloomsbury which had been purchased in 1753 to house its collections. Construction of a new museum building on the site, designed in a neo-classical style by Robert Smirke, began in the 1820s and was completed thirty years later. It is this building with its iconic temple-like façade which stands today.

As for ethnography, in the 1770s (perhaps as a result of the insistence of the Admiralty to give prominence to its donation), a separate room was reserved for the display of the museum's ethnographic collections. The collections were added to through gifts from travelers, traders, soldiers, missionaries, collectors, and royalties, but remained fairly small until the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the museum started to take a more active interest in objects from foreign peoples (and in British prehistory, another hitherto neglected area). This new interest is largely connected to Augustus Wollaston Franks, who worked at the museum from 1851 to 1896. According to Wilson, Franks "may be regarded as the second founder of the British Museum" and Caygill refers to him as a person "whose influence on the Museum equals if not surpasses Sloane's."<sup>17</sup> In 1866 the museum created a Department of British and Mediaeval Antiquities and Ethnography (ethnographic and medieval collections had previously been a sub-department of Oriental Antiquities) led by Franks.<sup>18</sup> Sizable ethnographic objects

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14. The collection came from the estate of Charles Greville, nephew of William Hamilton. Miller 1973, 113-114, Sloan 2003, 21.

15. Caygill 2002, 23.

16. Caygill 2002, 28.

17. Caygill 1994, 47, Caygill & Cherry 1997, Wilson, 1997, 1.

18. The museum's internal organization in various departments is discussed by Wingfield 2011, who shows that what was seen to connect prehistoric and medieval antiquities with ethnographic objects was that they all ranked low on the evolutionary (and aesthetic) scale.

brought to the museum include an Easter Island statue given by Queen Victoria in 1869, and a totem pole from Queen Charlotte Island purchased (for £35) in 1903.<sup>19</sup> Other additions were made from scientific expeditions, such as the Torres Straits expedition in 1898, and from military campaigns. On one occasion in 1868, a British Museum curator accompanied a British military force with the intent of securing war booty for the museum. Richard Rivington Holmes followed the army when it was dispatched against King Tewodros II in Ethiopia, and obtained many objects looted from Tewodros's capital Maqdala.<sup>20</sup> The conquest of Benin City in 1897 likewise brought large quantities of loot to the museum. Despite the growth of the ethnographic collections, they only formed a relatively minor part of the museum's collections and displays. A British Museum guidebook published in 1899 devoted just over three pages to the ethnographic exhibits, compared to 23 for ancient Greece and Rome, 20 for Egypt, and 13 for Assyria and Babylonia.<sup>21</sup> Yet, the relative insignificance of the ethnographic exhibits within the museum did not correspond to a lack of interest in them by the visiting public. Among the reasons for augmenting the museum's ethnographic collections was to keep on to its large visitor numbers when the popular natural history exhibits were removed from the museum in the 1880s; a scheme which was successful. Read, who succeeded Franks as keeper of the Department of British and Mediaeval Antiquities and Ethnography in 1896, wrote in 1901, that the ethnographic collections ranked second in public popularity only to the Egyptian mummies.<sup>22</sup>

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19. Caygill 2002, 40-41, 50.

20. Wilson 2002, 173-174.

21. British Museum 1899.

22. Read 1901, 17. Read had been hired privately in 1874 at the age of seventeen by Franks to register ethnographic collections bequeathed by Henry Christy. In 1880 he was appointed assistant in the Department of British and Mediaeval Antiquities and Ethnography, and served as its keeper from 1896 till his retirement in 1921. Wilson 2012b. In 1895, Ormonde Maddock Dalton started to work for the department, where he became assistant in 1901 and assistant keeper in 1909. In a reorganization in 1921, he was appointed keeper of the new Department of British and Mediaeval Antiquities. He retired in 1928. Myres & Pottle 2004.

The departure of natural history from the museum is a reminder that the story of the British Museum is not only one of growth and accumulation. Through the years the museum has parted with numerous objects and collections. In the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century many “duplicates” from the museum’s collections were sold to finance new purchases, and decaying natural history specimens were burned in bonfires. Sloane’s medical and anatomical collections were relegated to the Hungarian Museum in 1809, and ethnographica were exchanged with a private museum in the 1820s.<sup>23</sup> The collection of oil paintings, acquired over the years, was largely transferred to the National Gallery when it was created in 1824. The portraits of British notables went to the newly founded National Portrait Gallery in 1879.<sup>24</sup> The largest exodus of objects occurred in the early 1880s when the natural history collections were moved to a new site in South Kensington, although natural history formally remained part of British Museum until 1963.<sup>25</sup> In 1973 the British Library became legally independent, and by 1997 it had moved to St Pancras, taking with it many well-known documents such as the Magna Carta, the Beowulf manuscript, the Gutenberg Bible, and Nelson’s love letters to Emma Hamilton.<sup>26</sup>

Throughout the years several suggestions for partitions were made which were never realized. In the 1830s and in the 1860s, the creation of a separate museum for classical antiquities was considered, and in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was argued that the ethnographic collections should be housed in an independent museum.<sup>27</sup> The various proposals for new museums were mainly motivated by a desire to gain exhibition space and resources, but feelings about what properly went together were also expressed. When a repository for oil paintings by European masters was discussed in the 1820s, one member of parliament remarked that he

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23. Miller 1973, 71-72, 114-115, King 1994, 232.

24. Caygill 2002, 25, Dawson 2003, 36-37.

25. Caygill 2002, 43-44. The removal of the natural history collections from Bloomsbury had already been proposed by the principal librarian in 1836. Stearn 1981, 24, Anderson 2012, 68-69.

26. See British Museum 1962, end page, for a list of the museum’s star attractions which includes a letter from Nelson to Emma Hamilton.

27. Miller 1973, 220.

“did not like the idea of the great works of Raphael and Guido being placed in the same edifice with collections of animals and fossils.”<sup>28</sup> The creation of the National Gallery saved the oil paintings from the disgrace of being proximate to natural history collections, but the fact that Greek art was still under the same roof as taxidermic specimens upset some. One commentator complained that in the British Museum:

the noblest productions of human genius are placed under the same roof with objects of natural history. We go from the masterworks of the Parthenon straight up to the stuffed seal and buffalo; and two monster giraffes stand as sentinels before the gallery of vases.<sup>29</sup>

In other cases, a connection between cultural and natural history was sought. Read noted in 1899, with dissatisfaction, that the anthropological collections were split between the British Museum in Bloomsbury and its natural history branch in South Kensington, exemplifying with that while Maori artifacts were located at Bloomsbury, Maori skulls were three miles away in South Kensington. As a remedy, he proposed the creation of an Imperial Museum of Anthropology, which could fuse the collections of artifacts from the “primitive and uncultured races” with the collections of skeletal remains “illustrating the physical characters of man.”<sup>30</sup> These plans came to naught, but much later the museum’s ethnographic collections made a (relatively brief) sojourn from the premises in Bloomsbury to another location: in 1970 the ethnographic collections became the new Museum of Mankind, in Burlington Gardens. This museum was closed in 1997 and the ethnographic collections were returned to Bloomsbury.<sup>31</sup>

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28. Hansard 1825, 1266, Caygill 2002, 25. In some instances, paintings and natural history could be displayed in the same room at the British Museum. See Sloan 2003, 68-69 for an engraving from 1841 of the museum’s Zoological Gallery, which displayed horns, shells, taxidermic specimens, and portraits.

29. Pulszky 1860 [1852], II.

30. Read 1900, 866-867.

31. Wilson 2002, 282-283, Bolton 2008, 332, 338-341.

Summarizing this overview of its growth (and partitions), it appears that the British Museum has had rather shifting identities and priorities over the years. In terms of its collections, the museum's present appearance, as a museum of art, archaeology, and cultural history, is not strikingly similar to that of the institution founded in 1753 when it was foremost a library and a natural history collection. Yet, there are continuances over time, too. For example, several objects from the founding collections are still in the British Museum (while others are at the Natural History Museum, the British Library, or other institutions). Regarding its "universalism" and MacGregor's portrayal of the museum as an institution which has promoted tolerance and respect for difference through its world-wide collections, it is true that the museum did possess objects from many parts of the world from an early date. As MacGregor points out, it was the first museum to possess Maori artifacts from Cook's voyages (it was also the first to possess a kangaroo and it could boast to have the first giraffe seen in Britain).<sup>32</sup> However, it is equally true that it took a long time before the museum actively collected other objects than those from the ancient Mediterranean area. It is also important to remember that the acquisition, possession, and display of objects from many different cultures are not by default a reflection of tolerance or respect for these cultures, nor need it promote such sentiments. As seen above, to the Admiralty, the display of South Sea artifacts was to function as evidence of British accomplishments and to boost national pride. Even when curiosity about the originating culture is present, this need not equal a high esteem of that culture, nor is it necessarily coupled with a wish to look at the culture on its own terms. In his study of the collecting and display of sculpture in the museum from the early 1800s to the mid-nineteenth century, British Museum curator Ian Jenkins stresses that the outlook of trustees and staff during the 19<sup>th</sup> century was primarily Hellenocentric. To them, ancient Greece represented the apogee of art and their main interest in the material remains from other cultures (such as Egypt and Assyria) was that they illustrated successive stages in the artistic development

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32. British Museum 1842, 4, Caygill 2002, 18, MacGregor 2009, 43.



from its lowest rungs to the peak of perfection in the Parthenon sculptures. According to Jenkins, this evolutionary paradigm was not wiped out from the exhibition galleries until after the Second World War.<sup>33</sup>

Jenkins uses archive material at the British Museum as the main source for his study, and pays less attention to what the museum has communicated to its visitors through its official guidebooks. A look into these confirms much of Jenkins's conclusion: that the British Museum has placed different cultures in a hierarchy rather than as on an equal level. The evidence of the guidebooks hardly lends support to the notion that the museum has promoted tolerance or countered ethnocentrism and cultural chauvinism. The museum's first guidebook appeared in 1808, and in the following century it published many guidebooks under different titles in successive editions: *Synopsis of the Contents of the British Museum* (1808-1853), *A Guide to the Exhibition Rooms of the Departments of Natural History and Antiquities* (1859-1878), *A Guide to the Exhibition Galleries of the British Museum, Bloomsbury* (1879-1912). These guidebooks are predominantly descriptive, listing the main contents in the showcases in each exhibition room, giving a bare minimum of information on individual objects (but often naming the person from whom the objects have been acquired). The guides thus provide little direction on how to interpret or value the objects (and cultures) on display. Despite the generally "neutral" and "scientific" tone one finds expressions of nationalist sentiments and negative value judgements on cultural others in the guidebooks. In the 1816 edition, in a section on the latest acquisitions declare that the Phigalian marbles will be "contributing to the progress of the arts in *this country*" (italics added) and had Elgin not removed the sculptures from the Athenian Acropolis they "would, indubitable, have

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33. Jenkins 1992, 65-67, 230. Similarly, in her study of the collecting, display, and reception of Egyptian objects in the British Museum from its foundation up to the 1880s, Stephanie Moser observes that Egyptian objects were despised for a long time and their artistic shortcomings frequently contrasted with the perfection of Greek sculpture (although her work also demonstrates a wide spectrum of reactions to the Egyptian objects, including positive appraisals). Moser 2006. See also Wingfield 2011 who discusses how a hierarchical view of cultures influenced the museum's departmental organization.

fallen into the hands of the French, or been wholly defaced by the barbarous indifference or superstitious prejudices of the Turks.”<sup>34</sup> A comparison between different editions of the guidebook from the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century reveals the introduction of a hierarchical distinction between selves and others when non-Western objects are described. The 1808 guide describes the contents of the first room, which housed the museum’s ethnographic collections, as “[a] miscellaneous collection of works of art, from all parts of the world.”<sup>35</sup> The wording does not bespeak any particular positional relationship between the (British/European) viewer and the distant peoples whose artifacts are put on view. By 1842 the same objects became a “series of artificial curiosities from the *less civilized* parts of the world” (italics added), thus placing the peoples viewed below the viewer on the civilizatory scale.<sup>36</sup> Distance and difference are now not only geographical, but also expressed in terms of level of development. Later, the mark of distinction between self and other is expressed in racial terms. The 1859 guide states that the Ethnographical Room contains objects “belonging to all nations not of European race.”<sup>37</sup> Occasionally, the guidebooks offer glimpses of the colonial violence by which objects were acquired. The 1847 edition informs that some Chinese gilt figures were “[t]aken during the war from a private chapel behind How qua’s hong,” and the 1852 edition mentions “[a] wooden trunk in which the Sycee silver of the Chinese ransom was transported to England.”<sup>38</sup> The war referred to is the First Opium War (1839-42). Much like the words painted on the Rosetta Stone added to its significance and value by reminding that it had been taken from the French, the information in the guidebook about these Chinese objects made them into more than illustrations of the lives of distant peoples; they also became mementos of British military achievements and manly courage. It does not seem unreasonable to assume that such information did more to install a sense of national pride than respect

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34. British Museum 1816, xvii.

35. British Museum 1808, 4.

36. British Museum 1842, 5.

37. British Museum 1859, 102.

38. British Museum 1847, 6, British Museum 1852, 232.

for other cultures in the mind of visitors. It certainly did nothing to problematize by what right Britain had waged war on China and imposed a peace treaty which forced the Chinese to accept a “free trade” in opium.

Although the guidebooks make no direct comparisons between different peoples regarding their relative positions on the scale of progress, it can occasionally be read between the lines that some are judged to be more civilized than others. In the guide from 1896, both Babylonians and Assyrians (treated together as one entity) and the ancient Egyptians are considered to have reached quite a high stage of development, but it is evident that the Egyptians are seen as standing culturally above the Babylonians and Assyrians. All are acknowledged for their artistic achievements, but Egyptian art gets more praise than Babylonian and Assyrian art.<sup>39</sup> Babylonians and Assyrians are described as “a busy, pushing, domineering race – sturdy, warlike, and ruthless – inflicting on their conquered enemies punishments of savage cruelty.”<sup>40</sup> The Egyptians, in contrast, do not receive any comments on their martial qualities. A link between degree of civilization and racial affiliation is also inferred by the text. It states that the population of Mesopotamia was Semitic and amalgamated with immigrants believed to have come from Central Asia and belonging to the Turanian family.<sup>41</sup> The ancient Egyptians were part of the Caucasian family and resembled “the inhabitants of Europe and Western Asia.” The guidebook goes on to state that the ancient Egyptian “differed entirely from the negro” and that “civilization [...] did not enter Egypt from the south,” thus safely ruling out the possibility that the ancient Egyptian race and culture was of Black origin.<sup>42</sup>

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39. British Museum 1896, 37-38, 73.

40. British Museum 1896, 73.

41. British Museum 1896, 34.

42. British Museum 1896, 34. The evidence for asserting that the Egyptians were Caucasians and distinct from Blacks partly came from the Egyptologist Petrie’s study of ancient Egyptian depictions of Egyptians and foreigners. Casts of heads from Egyptian monuments (referred to as “ethnographic casts”) made by Petrie were on display in the museum to illustrate these “foreign races.” British Museum 1896, xi, 281. Petrie’s work, published as *Racial Types from Egypt*, had been commissioned by Francis Galton, the cousin of Charles Darwin, and

The guidebook gives some indications of how the exhibits were laid out in the rooms and in which order they were meant to be viewed. This ordering is indicative of how different cultures were evaluated. In the Ethnographical Gallery the main structuring principle was geographical, with compartments for objects from Asia, the Asiatic Islands, Oceania, Africa, and America. Within each compartment there were further subdivisions into geographical regions.<sup>43</sup> The geographical organization was occasionally aligned with an evolutionary “timescale.” The African section – beginning in South Africa – first mentions the bows, arrows, and digging sticks used by the “Bushmen” (who at the time were considered to rank very low on the scale of development) and then proceeds to the more advanced “Kafir” tribes. Similarly, the America section takes its starting point in the Tierra del Fuego, whose inhabitants were likewise seen as archetypes for primitive life.<sup>44</sup> The Oceania section commences with the “black races” of the Pacific, Australia, and Indonesia and continues with the “brown races” of Polynesia and Micronesia. The representation of Asia was divided between two rooms. Works of art from China, Korea, India, Japan, and Persia were not placed in the Ethnographical Gallery, but in an adjacent room – the Asiatic Saloon.<sup>45</sup> Left in the Asia compartment in the Ethnographical Gallery were mainly the objects from uncivilized “wild tribes” – such as the inhabitants of the Nicobar and Andaman Islands and the Siberian Yakuts. Yet, the division between the different rooms not only separated high and low cultures from each other, but also made cuts through the high cultures. While the artworks from Japan, China, and India were displayed in the Asiatic Saloon, the Asiatic compartment in the Ethnographical Gallery showed a collection of Japanese, Chinese, and Indian arms

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founding father of eugenics. Silberman 1999, 73.

43. British Museum 1896, 272-280.

44. Cf., for example, how Darwin commented on his encounter with the inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego: “I could not have believed how wide was the difference between a savage and civilized man: it is greater than between a domesticated and wild animal.” Brooke 2014, 352. According to the British Museum’s *Handbook to the Ethnographical Collections* the Fuegians “belong to a very low stage of culture.” British Museum 1910, 289.

45. British Museum 1896, 228-232.

and armor. These objects that belonged to a more violent (and less artistic) side of the great Asiatic cultures were apparently not unsuitable for the Ethnographical Gallery.

The connection between violence and assumed degree of civilization is worthy of some further consideration. As noted, the Babylonians and Assyrians were characterized as “domineering,” “warlike,” “ruthless,” and subjecting their defeated enemies to “punishments of savage cruelty.” No such negative evaluation is made of, for example, the Greeks and Romans. The characterization of Babylonians and Assyrians owe a great deal to how they appear in the Bible, but it is perhaps mostly inspired by the “evidence” of the Assyrian wall reliefs in the British Museum, which vividly depict the fate of those who tried to resist the Assyrian army: the viewer is presented with scenes with booty being carried away, cities on fire, and captives being tortured, beheaded, or impaled on stakes.<sup>46</sup> Greek and Roman historical sources testify that Greeks and Romans were not alien to indulging in similar excesses of “savage cruelty” towards their vanquished foes. Battle scenes belong to the stock repertoire of Greco-Roman art (as in, for example, the battle scenes of the Parthenon metopes). Renderings of the fate of defeated enemies, such as the taking of booty, burning of cities, and the execution of captives, are also not unknown in the Greek and Roman pictorial tradition.<sup>47</sup> Interestingly, although Greek and Roman cruelty is as well attested as that of the Assyrians and Babylonians, it is only the latter which are judged to be “warlike” and “ruthless” by the British Museum guidebook.

In the Ethnographical Gallery, the objects (referred to as “specimens” in the catalogue) on show – musical instruments, personal

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46. British Museum 1896, 87-89, 95.

47. Roman art developed a whole iconography visualizing the humiliation of defeated enemies (Östenberg 2009) with, for example, the Arch of Titus showing Roman soldiers parading with the seven-branched menorah and other spoils from the temple in Jerusalem, and the Column of Marcus Aurelius proudly presenting the burning of villages and the decapitation of prisoners. Greek art predominantly renders mythological or generic battle scenes. In depictions of the fall of Troy, Greek “heroes” are shown killing and raping helpless victims, such as the elderly King Priam, Hector’s child Astyanax, and Priam’s daughter Cassandra.

ornaments, clothes, paddles, fish hooks, etc. – represent a broad range of human activity, but weapons of various sorts are especially prominent along with other items connected to strange rites and perceived savagery. Apart from shields, spears, swords “edged with sharks’ teeth,” blow guns, and poisoned darts, the visitor is invited to gaze at “bones of chiefs eaten by cannibals,” “a necklace of human bones,” “four preserved tattooed heads,” and “two shrunk-en heads.” The “skulls of captured enemies, preserved as trophies” demonstrated that contemporary savages (like the Assyrians before them) showed no mercy to the vanquished.

The 1896 guidebook, like its predecessors, duly acknowledge when objects have been obtained through British military operations. For example, the reader is informed that a number of “crosses, censers, chalices, and other church utensils” were “chiefly obtained during the war with Abyssinia in 1868” and two tents and a shield “are interesting as having belonged to King Theodore.”<sup>48</sup> Apart from such information regarding the objects’ provenance, the only other hint in the guidebook to colonial wars and the impact on the spread of “civilization” to indigenous populations throughout the world is the laconic remark, made in connection with a portrait of a Tasmanian, that the Tasmanian race is “now extinct.”<sup>49</sup> Not surprisingly perhaps, despite the direct and indirect references to Western expansionism and its consequences, the guidebook does not label Westerners as “domineering,” “ruthless” or “warlike.” “Savage cruelty” is reserved for others.

The 350 pages of the 1896 guide are mainly descriptive and provide fairly little material for contextualizing or explaining the collections on display. Some years later, in 1899, the guide was slimmed down to 120 pages. This thinner guide appeared in similar

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48. British Museum 1896, 155, 279. In the collections of the British Museum is a sketch of the head of the dead King Tewodros II who committed suicide upon the capture of his capital Maqdala. Cf. Barringer 1998, 21 on the display of objects from Maqdala in the South Kensington Museum (later the Victoria and Albert Museum). The display included, according to a contemporary description, a “show-case full of victorious trophies, *spolia opima* of our late enemy, his Majesty King Theodore” and a portrait of “Theodore’s head as he laid defunct and bloody.”

49. British Museum 1896, 275.

editions until 1912. Compared to the 1896 guide, the new version is more didactic and “visitor-friendly” in that it pays more attention to interpreting the exhibits to the viewer. With the new format, the racial and cultural hierarchies implied earlier were now expressed much more clearly. While the 1896 guide did not make the comparison between the degree of civilization acquired by Babylonians, Assyrians, and Egyptians explicit, the 1899 guide declares that the civilization of the Babylonians and Assyrians “was far below Egyptian civilization.” The characterization of the Babylonian and Assyrian race as warlike and ruthless is repeated verbatim as is the assurance that the Egyptians resembled the inhabitants of Europe and Western Asia and were distinct from the Negros. To this it is added that the Egyptians had a “happy temperament” and “cleanly” habits.<sup>50</sup> The 1896 guidebook gave the Parthenon sculptures its unreserved praise (“the finest series of sculptures in the world”) and it is similarly stated in the new guide that they are “the most perfect sculptures ever wrought by the human hand” and that “[n]o people have ever equalled the Greeks in art.” It goes on by acknowledging the West’s debt to ancient Greece: “the best inspiration of modern European art have been derived from Greek art; and to the same source we still turn for our ideal models.”<sup>51</sup>

The section devoted to describing the contents of the Ethnographical Gallery explains the purpose of ethnography and the “educational value” of an ethnographic display. Ethnography is defined as the “scientific study” of the “manners and customs of particular peoples and their development from savagery towards civilization” and the various artifact in an ethnographic collection “such as the one here exhibited” indicate “the stage of savagery or of primitive civilization in which he exists.” The contents of an ethnographic collection “enable us to understand by what methods man, in his earlier efforts towards civilization [...], gradually advances towards the cultivation of the industrial and ornamental arts.” Thus, “[t]

50. British Museum 1899, 1, 18-19, 33.

51. British Museum 1896, 19, 1899, 2, 10-11, cf. 58 which states that ancient Greek pottery and vase painting were brought to “a pitch of excellence,” reached the “climax of perfection,” and that Greek vases have served as models for artists and makers of modern pottery.



aking them as a whole, the primitive races of to-day represent stages of culture through which our own ancestors passed on their upward path.”<sup>52</sup> In a sense, this statement that “our own ancestors” have been in a similar stage of culture as contemporary “primitive races” suggests human communality: we too were once at the level of development which they still live in, but it also reassures the hierarchy of race and culture. The peoples shown to the visitors behind glass are far away both in time and space.

In the 1899 guidebook the Ethnographical Gallery only receives three pages, but in 1910 the museum published its *Handbook to the Ethnographical Collections* which was largely the work of Thomas Athol Joyce, who had joined the Department of British and Mediaeval Antiquities and Ethnography as an assistant in 1902.<sup>53</sup> This 300 page book is mainly an exposé over the different peoples of the “uncivilized world,” describing their physical attributes (skin color, hair, height, etc.), assumed historical movements, degree of admixture with other races, customs, arts, habits, and so on, with occasional comments on their degree of civilization or primitiveness.<sup>54</sup> The introduction describes the birth of ethnography and its aims. The creation of this discipline has become possible because of two conditions, one is the “advance of geographic research” which has provided an “extensive knowledge of the uncivilized world,” the other is the discovery in the discipline of biology of the “theory of evolution” which has shown that “man himself is bound by inevitable laws of development” and that the idea of development is applicable to “human communities.”<sup>55</sup>

The handbook makes a distinction between the “purely scientific” and the “imperial” or “practical” significance of the collections.

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52. British Museum 1899, 98-99.

53. British Museum 1910 vii, Braunholtz 1953, 112, 114. When Joyce was recruited to the museum he took over most of the responsibility for ethnography. Read mainly worked with the medieval collections and Dalton focused on early Christian and Byzantine archaeology. In 1921, ethnography joined with ceramics and formed a separate department with Joyce serving as deputy keeper responsible for ethnography. Joyce retired from the museum in 1938. Myres & Pottle 2004, Howgego 2010.

54. E.g. British Museum 1910, 75, 76, 81, 289.

55. British Museum 1910, 1-2.

The preface, written by Read, declares that “[a]t no period in the world’s history has any one nation exercised control over so many primitive races as our own at the present time” and laments that this is not adequately “brought before the public in concrete form.”<sup>56</sup> Joyce explains some of the “practical” applications of the knowledge which is to be gained on a visit to an ethnographic museum by “the citizens of an empire like our own.” Merchants may learn about the material needs and artistic preferences of primitive peoples, and knowing “the reasons for native points of view” makes the managing of native territories “much easier” as it prevents colonial administrators from embarking into “costly blunders.”<sup>57</sup> However, this aim, of giving rulers insight into how their subjects think and reason, is not one which promotes a degree of cultural relativism or respect for the perspective of the ruled. Joyce explains how the mind of “primitive man” works:

The mind of primitive man is wayward, and seldom capable of continuous attention. His thoughts are not quickly collected, so that he is bewildered in an emergency; and he is so much the creature of habit that unfamiliar influences such as those which white men introduce into his country disturb his mental balance. His powers of discrimination and analysis are undeveloped, so that distinctions which to us are fundamental need not be obvious to him. Thus he does not distinguish between similarity and identity, between names and things, between the events which occur in dreams and real events, between the sequence of ideas in his mind and of things in the outer world to which they correspond. His ideas are grouped by chance impressions, and his conclusions often based on superficial analogies which have no weight to us.<sup>58</sup>

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56. British Museum 1910, vi.

57. British Museum 1910, 43. When Read and Dalton advocates the usefulness of the museum’s ethnographic collections in relation to colonial rule, they repeated an argument made by others, including the British Museum’s Association. Coombes 1994b, 127. An article in the *Museums Journal* from 1909, quoted by Coombes, wrote about “imbibing scientific knowledge” to the “Englishmen who are placed in authority over native races.”

58. British Museum 1910, 31-32.

The description is followed by a few examples of the “reasoning of a primitive mind”: a Tasmanian woman screamed when a French officer was pulling off his gloves, thinking he was removing his skin, Admiralty Islanders broke a mirror to look for the man inside, and people of the Marianne Islands, on first seeing a horse, believed that the bit was its food. Joyce concludes his brief exposé over “the simple methods of primitive reasoning” by making an analogy which suggests its infantile nature. He notes that “one pleasing result” of this way of thinking is “the imaginative, half-poetical language common to uncivilized men and civilized children.”

As noted, the guidebooks emphasize the violence and savagery of others. The handbook also contains many illustrations of weapons and the occasional photo of “[a] relic of cannibalism.”<sup>59</sup> The text however, sets a different tone, which contrasts with the image of the savage as a fierce warrior. According to Joyce, when fighting, the savage usually acts on the defensive. He predominantly tries to frighten the enemy and “combats to the death are rather the exception than the rule.” His text partly suggests a positive evaluation of savages (as savage warfare has few casualties), but also a more negative one, because the few lives taken in primitive warfare are a result of cowardice and inefficiency rather than anything else. In the foregoing paragraph Joyce stated that “[p]rimitive man has little notion of abstract right or wrong,” thus implying that ethical consideration or humanitarian concern could not be the cause for uncivilized war creating few casualties. He continues:

Trade, intermarriage, and war, as promoting alliances, or the establishment of a dynasty by a warchief, resulted in the expansion of large tribes and the growth of confederacies. The way was thus prepared for the more perfect organization of the state.<sup>60</sup>

Here Joyce suggests one explanation for how the path towards civilization may begin. Large tribes and confederacies expand through

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59. British Museum 1910, 8, fig. 2.

60. British Museum 1910, 28.

trade, marital alliances, and warfare, or through “the establishment of a dynasty by a warchief.” Exactly how war promotes the forming of “alliances” is not explicated, but perhaps Joyce means that tribes need to form alliances when threatened by enemies, or that “alliances” are forced through military aggression on subjugated enemies, and that this is one of the ways by which tribes and confederacies grow and expand. Hence, progress towards “the more perfect organization of the state” is linked to the creation of a ruling elite and military organization. Development, social stratification, and military aggression are interconnected, and thus violence becomes one of the prerequisites for civilization. The defensive character of primitive warfare is, in the long run, a curse rather than a blessing. Without a struggle for survival against one’s neighbors, societal progress does not occur.

It is of course difficult to know how the public responded to the museum’s exhibits and accompanying publications. The passage just discussed carries with it a potential for a favorable view of others – in their warfare, in contrast to ours, only a few are killed – and the guidebooks occasionally give positive comments on skillfully manufactured objects. It is also possible that visitors viewed certain objects in the displays with a degree of admiration.<sup>61</sup> Other objects, such as poisoned arrows, swords with shark’s teeth, and bowls for cannibal feasts presumably evoked a sense of horror and morbid fascination.<sup>62</sup> What was perhaps the most common visitor attitude at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is glimpsed by a comment in *The British Museum – Its History and Treasures*, which was one of many non-official guidebooks to the museum. The author, Henry Shelley, echoing Read, states that the Ethnographical Gallery hold the most attraction with the public, their only rival being the Egyptian mummy rooms. In the Ethnographical Gallery, even on the quietest days, one always finds “little crowds” usually indulged in “laughter and jokes.” The amused reactions indicate that visitors did not respond to the displays with respect for the peoples whose artifacts they gazed on. It seems more likely that

61. See for example the very positive appraisal of Bushongo figures. British Museum 1910, 222. Cf. Paudrat 1984 on this appreciation of “stylized realism.”

62. Arrow poison gets a lengthy description in Anonymous 1838, 10-11, 30-31. See also Richardson 1845.

these popular exhibits reassured a feeling of cultural superiority or, as Shelley, put it: “Perhaps the hilarity with which the ordinary visitor regards the object-lessons of ethnography arises from his overweening conceit of the value and importance of his own particular form of civilization.”<sup>63</sup> Perhaps the exhibits also created the sense that the contemporary world-order was not the result of particular historical circumstances, but that Whites were predestined by the “inevitable laws of development” to hold sway over the majority of the world’s “primitive races.”

When explaining the working of “the mind of primitive man” to his readers, Joyce makes it clear that there is a huge gap between “our” (adult European) and “their” (the majority of the world’s population) way of thinking and comprehending the world. The description recalls Cromer’s characterization of the sharp difference between the logical European and irrational Oriental and Bacon’s description of the slow working of the brain of the “average nigger of low type.” Despite the distinction made in the British Museum’s handbook between the scientific and the imperial/practical standpoint, it is hardly entirely coincidental that museum curator Joyce, in the pursuit of putatively disinterested “purely scientific” knowledge, defines the “mind of primitive man” in a way which bears a strong resemblance to colonial administrator Cromer’s description of Oriental thinking, and officer Bacon’s portrayal of the black man’s brain. Joyce and Bacon also shared the belief in of the childishness of the savage.

The discussion here has concentrated on the official guidebooks produced by the British Museum’s own staff. There were also many other guidebooks to the museum written by authors not connected to the museum.<sup>64</sup> The views on others (and the self) expressed in these works are often not dissimilar to those found in the museum’s own publications.<sup>65</sup> However, there is at least one guidebook which stands out as an exception. In David Masson’s *The British Museum – Historical and Descriptive* (1850) the presentation of the museum’s ethnographic collections gives a generally favorable view

63. Shelley 1911, 299.

64. See lists in Moser 2006, 287-290.

65. E.g. Anonymous 1838, 8-31, Richardson 1845.

of non-Westerners and highlights Western misconduct towards native populations. Masson is also critical of the museum's representations. He comments that the "five paltry cases" with Chinese objects cannot do justice to this vast civilized nation – "in some respects as advanced as our own" – with a population of 300 million, that is, nearly a third part of the entire human race. Adding to the difficulty of forming a just estimate of the "ingenuity and skill" of the Chinese is the common perception among Europeans that the Chinese are "corpulent and clever barbarians, who wear pig-tails, make tea and porcelain, [and] bandage the feet of their women." Masson, writing eight years after the first Opium War (and six years before the start of the second), expresses his hope that relations between China and Europe will improve in the future. In the part on North America he states that of the 16 million original "undisputed owners of the soil", there are now only 2 million left alive, the others having succumbed to small-pox or "the sword, the bayonet, and whisky." He is not silent on native violence, taking note among the displayed objects of some "genuine scalps [...] torn as trophies from the heads of dead or living enemies," but he also makes Whites partly complicit in the practice of scalping, commenting that the tomahawks and scalping knives are "universally of European make, even the remotest tribes being supplied with these instruments of death by traders from the west."<sup>66</sup>

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66. Masson 1850, 22-43. Edmund Powlett's *The General Contents of the British Museum* (1762, 37-38) the first published guidebook to the British Museum, in its brief mentioning of artifacts from the New World, also airs critique of the impact of the "polite Europeans" (the wording is ironic) on the indigenous societies there.

Powlett points to the exhibits which he thinks will attract and amuse ladies. Not surprisingly, it is the "beautiful" butterflies and shells which he believes will be of interest to them (xix, 106, 129, 180). Anyhow, his text reminds that the process of giving significance and value to objects (and consequently to whole cultures) may be highly gendered. The ethnographic objects were mostly collected by men (many military, and occasionally in the context of military expeditions) and, as noted, weapons came to have a prominent place in the displays. The male guidebook writers, at least subconsciously, seem to direct themselves to a male readership when they select objects for description and comment. (Cf. Anonymous 1838 which is written as a dialogue between three male visitors.) All this gave emphasis to the warlike side of those living in distant lands, and perhaps it would

Masson may in this respect be described as belonging to the dissenting tradition in the West, which draws attention to Western savagery. His guidebook shows that when writing about ethnographic exhibits, one could take the occasion to speak of Western prejudices and challenge the notion of Western superiority. Yet, nothing comparable is found in any of the British Museum guidebooks. Contrary to what MacGregor implies when he outlines the British Museum's past, its own guidebooks give ample evidence that the museum *cannot* be described as an institution which has challenged orthodoxies or promoted dissent from a position safely set outside surrounding society and mainstream ideas about selves and others. Rather than promoting tolerance and respect for difference, the museum has invited the viewer to look at different cultures not as essentially equal, but as placed in various positions on a scale of development whose top position is occupied by Western civilization. It is not tolerance, but hierarchy that seems to be the concept through which the museum has invited its audience to look at cultural difference.

According to the narrative communicated by MacGregor and in various present-day guidebooks and exhibition texts, it was this kind of ethnocentrism which was shattered when the indigenous origin of the Benin objects was realized by Western scholars following their 1897 dispersal. The claim is also made that the efforts of British Museum scholars was of pivotal importance for the discovery of the Benin objects' true origin. These claims will be discussed in the following chapter, although it may already be noted here that *if* a reversal of prejudices took place in the minds of Westerners with the help of British Museum scholars, its effects were not seen in the museum's own *Handbook to the Ethnographical Collections*, published more than a decade after the arrival of the Benin objects in Europe and the British Museum.

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have been better – for both selves and others – if the selves had spent more attention on contemplating the beauty of butterflies than the savagery of others.





## 9. The Western discovery of the indigenous origin of the Benin objects

“Mentally the Negro is inferior to the white.” Thomas Athol Joyce, British Museum curator, 1911.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter deals with what the British Museum communicates about how the West came to learn that the Benin (and Ife) objects were of indigenous, rather than foreign origin. The chapter begins with a presentation of how the narrative is structured by MacGregor and then looks into how it is formulated in the *Sainsbury African Galleries*, on the museum homepage, and in relevant publications. It finds that MacGregor’s version of these events and those communicated in the exhibition, homepage, and publications are broadly similar. By and large, they share a similar narrative structure, and it is implied, or sometimes made explicit, that the British Museum has positively contributed to knowledge production about the Benin objects. There are, however, also some significant differences in the various accounts of the reception of the objects which will be discussed. Following this overview of the museum’s present-day narrative, the chapter looks into the published writings of scholars who dealt with the Benin objects from 1897 onwards, in order to see how the museum’s narrative agrees with the documentary evidence. It shows that there are discrepancies between the two and that the museum vastly overrates its own (positive) contributions

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1. Joyce 1911, 344.

to the realization of the objects' indigenous origin. The claims made about the impact of this realization also seems exaggerated. Finally, the chapter looks into some of the possible circumstances which have caused the British Museum to dream up its distorted version of the reception of the objects.

The first time MacGregor presents his narrative about the Benin objects is in his 2004 article "The whole world in our hands." He states that when the objects arrived to Western museums "they caused a sensation." To scholars, artists, and the general public it was "a revelation" to learn that these sophisticated metal castings had been made in Africa: "Out of the terrible circumstances of the 1897 dispersal, a new, more securely grounded view of Africa and African culture could be formed."<sup>2</sup> MacGregor does not elaborate on the consequences of this "revelation" or the contents of this "more securely grounded view," but in a radio talk given shortly after the publication of the article he was explicit that the objects had a deep impact on the European perception of Africa and that their arrival in Europe was a very good thing:

One of the extraordinary things about the Benin bronzes is that when they arrived in London, they *completely transformed* the way people in Europe thought about Africa. It was the presence of the Benin bronzes and the extraordinary sophistication of making that made it completely impossible for Europeans to go on thinking of Africa as not having its own culture and a very great culture. The circumstances of the taking of the Benin bronzes were violent, as we all know, and there's a great deal to be said and debated about what happened there. But if we look at what happened when they arrived, it seems to me that from then on it was *totally beneficial*. It changed the way Europeans thought of Africa and it enriched a worldwide cultural tradition.<sup>3</sup> (Italics added.)

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2. MacGregor 2004.

3. MacGregor in Malik 2004.

He returns to the topic of the beneficial impact of the spread of the Benin objects in his 2009 article “To shape the citizens of ‘that great city the world.’” After his statement that a plaque exemplifies “the key argument for objects being taken out of context and put into different kinds of museums,” he continues:

The circumstances of the acquisition were, as you all know, hideous. The king of Benin had taken the British legation hostage. A punitive expedition was sent. And it was very brutal. This and other plaques had been installed on the front of the Oba’s palace but had been taken down before the British arrived. With the sacking of the Benin capital by the British, they were taken from the Oba and sold in Europe for the benefit of the British hostages and the soldiers. They are now in the museums of Britain and Berlin; the biggest collections of them are now in Britain, Germany, Vienna, Paris, and the United States. These objects, I think, *did more than anything else to change European perceptions of Africa.*<sup>4</sup> (Italics added.)

Thus, although the circumstances through which the objects were “taken out of context” were “brutal” and “hideous,” their dispersal and relocation eventually had positive consequences because following their arrival in various museums they had a paramount impact on the European view of Africa. Indeed, MacGregor’s wording that the objects “did more than anything else to change European perceptions of Africa” suggests that he considers the arrival of the Benin objects to the West as the single most important event in Euro-African relations when it comes to the shaping and transformation of the European concept of Africa.

While this is essentially the same message as proclaimed in 2004, the two texts have some differences. In 2004 he (correctly) states: “A British legation travelling to Benin [...] was killed, though not on the orders of the Oba himself,” but in 2009 he (incorrectly) states: “The king of Benin had taken the British legation hostage.” I have not seen this (erroneous) information about hostage-taking in

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4. Macgregor 2009, 51.

any other account of the events and have no explanation as regards MacGregor's source for it.<sup>5</sup> A similarity between the two accounts is that they both state that the plaques were no longer on the palace walls in 1897: according to the 2009 account they "had been taken down before the British arrived," and according to the 2004 account they are said to have been put in storage "at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century." In fact, the plaques had presumably been torn down around the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, that is, over two centuries before the arrival of the British. (The erroneous information provided by MacGregor has presumably been derived from the museum's exhibition and will be commented on in Chapter 11.)

A difference between the two accounts is that in 2009 MacGregor develops the story of what happened when the objects became known in Europe: Europeans initially doubted that the Benin objects were truly African, but eventually their indigenous origin was realized and this subsequently created a positive change in the Western view of Africa. Frobenius and his Atlantis theory serves to illustrate the initial denial of the objects being African:

Europeans could not believe that brass-working of this sophistication could be of African origin. It simply was not possible. Frobenius, for example, the Berlin mathematician, went to great length to argue that such plaques were proof that Atlantis must indeed have been off the west coast of Africa as Plato once proposed, since brass plaques of this sophistication could only have been made by Greeks. When it became clear that they were African a whole set of stereotypes collapsed; a whole set of hierarchies disintegrated.<sup>6</sup>

Another dualism which was not found in 2004, between believers and non-believers in the objects' African origin, is introduced into

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5. Could MacGregor's error be the result of a mix-up with another British "punitive" expedition, the one against Tewodros II in Maqdala in Ethiopia in 1868? *This* expedition was sent to free British citizens taken captive by Tewodros. Like the Benin expedition, it resulted in a large booty from which many objects were acquired for the British Museum.
  6. MacGregor 2009, 51-52.

the story here. For the sake of clarity, two factual errors in this account may be noted. First, it was *not* the arrival of the plaques or any other Benin objects in Europe in 1897 which inspired Frobenius to advance his fanciful idea about Atlantis. It was prompted by his “discovery” of a cast metal head and a number of terracotta heads at Ife in 1910. Secondly, Frobenius was *not* a “Berlin mathematician.” MacGregor has probably confused Leo Frobenius with the mathematician Ferdinand Georg Frobenius. The same narrative – of how initial skepticism regarding an indigenous origin was eventually overcome with profound consequences for the European view of Africa – also appears in MacGregor’s presentation of a Benin plaque in *A History of the World in 100 Objects* from 2010. He declares that when the Benin objects became known in Europe they gave rise to speculations about their origin and “many wild theories were put forward”:

It was thought that the plaques must have come from ancient Egypt, or perhaps the people of Benin were one of the lost tribes of Israel. Or the sculptures must have derived from European influence. [...] But research quickly established that the Benin plaques were entirely West African creations, made without European influence. The Europeans had to revisit, and to overhaul, their assumptions of easy cultural superiority.<sup>7</sup>

Hence, “[i]t is not too much to say that they [the Benin objects] changed European understanding of African history and African culture.”

When MacGregor presents the museum’s Ife head in the same publication the story follows a similar pattern.<sup>8</sup> (The errors from his 2009 account are however not repeated. Frobenius is labeled a “German anthropologist,” and his hypothesis about Atlantis having been located off the coast of Africa is related to his finds at Ife,

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7. MacGregor 2010b, 501.

8. MacGregor 2010b, 405-409.

not the Benin objects.) In MacGregor's version of the reception of the Ife objects, it was the discovery of several heads in 1938 which established for certain that Ife art was "a totally African tradition." The realization "exploded European notions of the history of art, and they forced Europeans to rethink Africa's place in the cultural history of the world." According to MacGregor, the word "Negro," which then connoted to slavery and primitivism, "could never again be used quite the same way." Therefore, "[i]t is hard to exaggerate what a profound reversal of prejudice and hierarchy this represented. [...] If you want an example of how things can change thought, the impact of the Ife heads in 1939 are I think as good as you'll find."<sup>9</sup>

Finally, in his preface to Barley's *The Art of Benin* from 2010, the significance of the Benin objects is again stressed.<sup>10</sup> MacGregor writes that the Benin objects "were initially used to bolster a colonial view of Africa but went on to help to completely transform it." This statement about a transition in the objects' use, from "bolstering" to "transforming" the "colonial view" is not explicated, but presumably refers to how the objects were first interpreted as being non-African with their true African origin being realized later on.

Summarizing MacGregor's accounts, a few observations may be made. Clearly, MacGregor accredits the Benin and Ife objects with a pivotal role for the transformation of the Western idea of Africa. In MacGregor's words, these objects "completely transformed," "collapsed," "disintegrated," "exploded," and "reversed" prejudices, stereotypes, and hierarchies and thus their importance are "hard to exaggerate." Still, despite the significance MacGregor attributes to the objects' integration into Western knowledge production, he does not detail the story of their reception. A number of points remain unclear. Exactly which scholars (apart from Frobenius) argued for a foreign influence? And which scholars refuted such "wild theories"? When did they do so, and when did their (correct) view become generally accepted? And what is the relationship between the 1897 "discovery" of the Benin objects and

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9. MacGregor 2010b, 405, 407.

10. MacGregor 2010a.



the “discoveries” of the Ife objects in 1910 and 1938? Have all three “discoveries” radically transformed European views of Africa? If so, are we speaking of several transformations?

The few temporal references and names dropped in MacGregor’s account do not clarify these matters. In his treatment of the Benin plaque in *A History of the World in 100 Objects* MacGregor states that “research quickly established” that the Benin objects were “entirely West African creations,” which suggests that the “wild theories” of foreign origin were laid to rest soon after the objects’ arrival in the West in 1897. Yet, he is silent on who carried out this research (and when it took place). The only other scholar mentioned in the text is a British Museum curator. According to MacGregor “one of the first people to encounter the plaques, and to recognize their quality and their significance, was the British Museum curator Charles Hercules Read.” This is followed by a quote from Read and Dalton’s “Works of art from Benin City” from 1898 where the authors express their surprise over the discovery of “so highly developed an art among a race so entirely barbarous.”<sup>11</sup> The quote is not further commented on, and Read’s and Dalton’s view on whether this “highly developed” art was indigenous or the result of foreign influence is not quoted. The only other place where MacGregor names any scholars who have dealt with the Benin objects is in his preface to Barley’s *The Art of Benin*, where it is again British Museum scholars who feature:

The British Museum can lay claim to a special place in the development of Benin scholarship. For at least a century, successive generations of curators, beginning with the pioneering Sir C.H. Read and O.M. Dalton, established an unbroken line of academic research that was continued by scholars such as William Fagg and John Picton.<sup>12</sup>

The general impression created by these two brief references, where Read and Dalton are labeled “pioneering” and Read is said to

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11. MacGregor 2010b, 501.

12. MacGregor 2010a.

have recognized the objects “quality” and “significance,” is that the contributions of the two curators in the “development” of Benin research were of the beneficial kind. Thus, the texts seem to imply that these scholars belonged to those who argued for an indigenous rather than foreign origin of the Benin objects. There is certainly no hint that any British Museum scholars may have explained the Benin objects as the result of foreign influence and, accordingly, may have “bolstered a colonial view of Africa.” Such erroneous beliefs are relegated to other – unnamed – scholars or the “Berlin mathematician”/“German anthropologist” Frobenius. It appears that the “special place” in Benin scholarship which MacGregor claims is something the British Museum can be proud of, and, by implication, that the world (and especially Africa) owes gratitude to the museum for its contributions to the knowledge production about Benin objects.

While MacGregor’s narrative begs many questions, the most important one is whether there is any evidence for its central theme – that the objects were first seen as having been created through external influence and that when their indigenous origin was established, a radical alteration of the Western view of Africa took place. If so, what was the British Museum’s role in this? Did the “pioneering” British Museum scholars Read and Dalton contribute positively to the research which “quickly established” that the objects were “entirely West African creations”? Below, the scholarly debate about these objects will be looked into, and the narrative may be said to be correct as far as the fact that scholarly opinion was divided between those who saw these objects as essentially indigenous creations and those who attributed them to foreign influence. Yet, the “pioneering” works of Read and Dalton can hardly be counted among those who stressed indigenous agency.

If MacGregor’s version of the reception of these objects cannot be derived from a close study of the extant source material (such as scholarly or popular texts published on the Benin objects from 1897 and onwards), then what is its basis? From where did he derive inspiration for his views? Put differently: where is the “knowledge” he produces, or recycles, situated, and to which discursive context does it belong? MacGregor’s texts do not contain footnotes or references

and thus locating his sources involves some guesswork. Yet, it seems fairly certain that the “knowledge” which MacGregor builds upon is that created by the British Museum. As will be seen below, there is a high degree of resemblance between his statements about the reception of the Benin loot and those communicated to the public by the British Museum in its text panels and publications.

It may seem to be pointing out the obvious to observe that the statements made in exhibits and books produced by a museum and those made by the museum’s director resemble each other. It is hardly surprising that the knowledge production within a museum occurs in a symbiotic relationship between various human agents (staff members with various positions within the museum hierarchy) and non-human agents (texts in publications and exhibitions etc.) in that museum. Yet, in relation to the British Museum’s claim to “universality” it is worth remembering of that all knowledge making occurs within a particular context from which it cannot be totally detached. In this case the institutional context is the British Museum. MacGregor’s view belongs to, and elaborates, a particular British Museum discourse.

Now, what “information” does the British Museum provide to its visitors about the reception of the Benin and Ife objects? In the *Sainsbury African Galleries*, a text panel with the heading “The Royal City of Benin” states that in 1897 “the Benin brasswork [...] so confounded current ideas about Africa that some refused to believe that it could be of exclusively Benin origin.” Another text panel about the Ife heads states:

The Ife heads were “discovered” twice, once by the German anthropologist Frobenius, when he visited Ife in 1910 and again when two hoards of brassware were unearthed within the palace walls in 1938. With their classic naturalism, on both occasions they confounded received ideas about Africa and African art. Frobenius thought it more likely that they were to be explained through Greek influence via lost Atlantis than that they could have been made by Africans themselves, which is now held to be the case.

On the homepage, the entries for the Benin highlights do not treat the Western reception of Benin objects in the West, but the entry for the Ife head declares:

The finds from Wunmonije Compound were published in 1938-9 and created a sensation in the western world. It was initially assumed that these beautiful sculptures could not have been made in Africa by African artists. The naturalism of the works gave them a portrait-like appearance and comparisons were immediately made with masterpieces from European traditions.

The sculptures from Ife are now rightly seen as one of the highest achievements of African art and culture.<sup>13</sup>

These “explanatory” texts about the reactions to the “discoveries” made at Benin and Ife at three different points in time (1897, 1910, 1938) describe them according to the same narrative formula: the initial Western reluctance to accept the objects’ indigenous origin was eventually overcome (but the visitor is not told when and how this change took place).

The subject is also treated in the publication *Africa – Arts and Cultures* edited by British Museum curator John Mack. Mack compares the Western reaction to the “discovery” of Ife objects with the reactions to the “discovery” of Benin objects (and perhaps this is the “source” for MacGregor’s mix-up between Benin and Ife objects). Mack refers to the story of how Frobenius, upon his encounter with sculpture of “strikingly classical naturalism” in Ife in 1910, came to believe that he had discovered the site of Atlantis, a Greek outpost in Africa:

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13. [http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight\\_objects/aoa/b/brass\\_head\\_with\\_a\\_crown.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/aoa/b/brass_head_with_a_crown.aspx) (accessed 30 May 2010, 19 August 2013). The same text appears at <http://www.bmimages.com/preview.asp?image=00530327001&imagex=8&searchnum=0002> (accessed 14 August 2016).

This [the idea that these objects were the result of ancient Greek influence] seemed to him much more likely than the – to us – obvious inference that such works could simply have been made by local African artists. This view was deeply rooted in Western scholarship, since naturalism was considered a sure sign of refined civilization whereas West Africa was seen as wild rather than civilized. Similar cultural-historical and racist assumptions dogged the perception of Benin castings when they first became widely known in the West following the British punitive expedition of 1897. All manner of “explanations” were offered for their being found in a West African city, from the lost tribe of Israel to ancient Egyptians and Portuguese mariners. The self-evident local African source was frequently ignored, and it was largely through the tireless efforts of the scholar Charles Hercules Read, a Keeper at the British Museum of the time, that it became generally accepted.<sup>14</sup>

Accompanying this narrative is a photograph of a man with the Ife metal head placed on a piece of cloth. The caption informs us that the photograph shows the head and its keeper in Ife, Nigeria, and that the photograph was taken by British District Officer Charles Partridge “after he had obliged Frobenius to return a number of items to the shrine.”<sup>15</sup>

On the facing page in this publication there is a text about the Ife head in the British Museum by the British Museum curator Nigel Barley, repeating the narrative about Frobenius’s Atlantis theory. Barley writes that the Ife castings, when discovered by “the German anthropologist Frobenius,” contradicted many assumptions about Africa, and that Frobenius, instead of questioning these assumptions, “found it more probable” that the pieces had been made in a Greek colony of Atlantis. “It was not until after the Second World War that William Fagg, of the British Museum, declared controversially that the Ife castings were wholly African and predated European influence of the fifteenth century.”<sup>16</sup>

14. Mack 2000, 101-102.

15. On the “Olokun Affair,” see Penny 2002, 115-123, Opoku 2008, 2.

16. The statement is echoed in Spring, Barley, and Hudson 2001, 34, fig. 26: “It was

These texts by Mack and Barley are among the longer texts by the British Museum about the reception of the Benin and Ife objects and they deserve some attention. Just as in the text panel in the exhibition, Frobenius is named but the reader is given no further names of scholars who came up with erroneous explanations for the occurrence of these works in West Africa. Thus, who it was that expressed the idea that the castings could be related to “the lost tribes of Israel, ancient Egyptians and Portuguese mariners” remains untold. Apart from Frobenius, the only named individuals are the British Museum curators Read and Fagg, and the colonial official Partridge. Read and Fagg are accredited with an important role in Benin and Ife scholarship respectively: it was “largely through the tireless efforts” of Read that the “self-evident African source of Benin art became generally accepted,” and Fagg “declared controversially that the Ife castings were wholly African.” The wording, alluding to tireless efforts and controversial discoveries, creates the impression that the Western world was reluctant to accept the African origin of the Benin and Ife objects, and that these two British Museum curators had an important role in making it finally accept the fact.

The narrative of the Western reception of Benin and Ife objects is here told as a story of progress in which the British Museum is given an important role. According to the narrative, the Western reception of these objects develops from falsehood (the art originates from abroad) to truth (the art is indigenous). The two named individuals who promote the correct interpretation are both British Museum curators; the one named individual who promotes the incorrect interpretation (foreign influence) is a German, Frobenius. The fourth named individual is the British District Officer Partridge, who forced Frobenius to return a number of objects to the Olokun shrine. Thus, the individuals who stand for truth and justice are British, the individual who promotes falsehood and carries out a misdeed is a German. Furthermore, as the texts clearly link the scholars who made the incorrect assumption about a non-African

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largely owing to the scholarship and tenacity of William Fagg, for many years Keeper of the Ethnography Department of the British Museum, that their [the Ife heads] ‘Africanness’ was finally accepted.”

origin to derogatory stereotypes about Africa, the narrative could be seen to imply that those who made the correct interpretation (that the objects were indigenous) had a much less prejudiced view of Africa and its inhabitants.

As for the sources of the narrative, it seems probable that it was inspired by an article by Read published in the *Burlington Magazine* in 1911. In this short article, named “Plato’s Atlantis rediscovered,” Read dismisses Frobenius’s theory of Greek influence on the Ife head.<sup>17</sup> Read also mentions that Frobenius had taken the head through fraudulent means from the shrine in Ife, and the article is illustrated with Partridge’s photo of the Olokun shrine (that is, the same photograph which is reproduced in *Africa – Arts and Cultures*). Read concludes the article by praising Partridge and England: “Mr Partridge is to be commended and England congratulated on his prompt action in preventing the sacred places of natives under our rule from being pillaged.”<sup>18</sup>

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17. Read 1911.

18. The Olokun affair illustrates that the history of European colonization of Africa was not only about white colonisers exploiting black colonized subjects, but that it involved many different processes of power-brokering between a range of interest groups and that – at times – the colonized subjects could benefit from the colonial power as a means of protection from other white men. Thus, including this “affair” in the publication *Africa – Arts and Cultures* is not without merit. However, one might observe that this is about the *only* reference in the whole book about collecting for Western museums. Thus, the reader might think that, among Western “collectors,” it was only Frobenius who behaved in morally dubious ways. Information about how the British Museum’s own collections were formed is largely absent. The sole reference to the looting in Benin City is the sentence in the quotation from Mack given above, that the Benin objects “first became widely known in the West *following* the British punitive expedition of 1897” (italics added). The sentence connects two events (the “punitive expedition” and the objects becoming known in the West) and puts the two events in a chronological order. Yet, it is not made clear how and why these two events followed each other, nor which agents were involved in the objects’ transfer to the West. This might suggest that their arrival there was a “natural” consequence of the Edo-British war.

On the topic of omissions in this book: there are few explicit references to *British* colonialism in Africa and its impact. The chapter “North, North-east Africa and the Sahara” is the only one which has a section on the colonial period. Here, the negative impact of the French colonial system on the artistic development in North Africa is mentioned (68, 74). The successful Ethiopian resistance against Italy is treated (67-68) and it is stated that the Mahdist state



As noted, in all the accounts discussed so far, apart from Frobenius, none of the scholars who came up with faulty interpretations are identified, and in *Africa – Arts and Cultures* British Museum scholars are hailed for their scholarly contributions. The only slight hint that perhaps not all was well at the British Museum is given in Barley’s *The Art of Benin* from 2010.<sup>19</sup> Overall his description of the reception of the Benin objects is the same as encountered earlier. Barley states that scholars at the time offered explanations about Portuguese or Egyptian influence (but does not mention any of these erring scholars by name). British Museum scholars Read and Dalton are however named and even given the epithet “enlightened researchers.” The two are accredited with having “dismissed wild theories of Indian manufacture,” but Barley admits that they also “homed in on traditions that stressed heavy outside influence.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, for the first time in a British Museum publication, it is hinted that British Museum scholars were also reluctant to believe that these objects were wholly indigenous. Yet, Barley leaves it unclear what kind of “outside influence” these scholars believed in and precisely which “traditions” they “homed in on.” Given that Read and Dalton were among the first to publish on the Benin objects it would have been interesting if he had shared his thoughts on how they were uninfluenced by “tradition.” It would also have been interesting if he had explained what kind of deeds – apart from

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in Sudan challenged colonization, but it is not told which colonial power the Mahdists attempted to challenge. The chapter on Central Africa refers to “Belgian and French role,” and that “British interest in the region has been limited” (125). The chapters on West Africa and on East and Southern Africa make no mention of colonization (apart from the above-discussed fleeting references to the “punitive expedition” and that Partridge obliged Frobenius to return the Ife head). A reader of this publication, unfamiliar with the history of European colonization, may infer that Africa was mainly colonized by the French, Italians, and Belgians, while in fact, of the European colonial powers, Britain occupied the most extensive territory. The reader who knows this, may still infer, from the absence of any reference to its consequences, that British colonization had no major impact on Africa. In the British Museum publication *Africa – Arts and Cultures* anything “British” is strangely absent.

19. Barley left the British Museum in 2003, and thus was no longer employed by the museum when writing this book.

20. Barley 2010, 19.

rebutting theories of Indian origin – made these two scholars worthy of the label “enlightened researchers.”

The only other scholar named in Barley’s text is Felix von Luschan, whose name appears twice. Significantly, perhaps, in one of these instances Luschan is associated with what, according to Barley, is an erroneous interpretation of a photograph from Benin City.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the text – by giving the epithet “enlightened” to two British Museum scholars and linking a “foreign” scholar with a faulty interpretation – in a subtle way creates an image of the scholarly reception of the Benin objects not dissimilar to that produced through the narrative of the Ife objects in *Africa – Arts and Cultures*, which linked incorrect (and racist) interpretations with a German scholar and correct (and, by implication, non-racist) interpretations with “tireless” and “controversial” British Museum scholars.

The pattern which seems to appear – that the British Museum praises British Museum scholars and puts non-British scholars in a much less favorable light – raises questions. Is it *entirely* coincidental that Barley, Mack, and MacGregor have portrayed past British Museum employees, and by implication the British Museum’s history, in such a positive light? Or could it be that the writers’ own institutional affiliation (the British Museum) and perhaps their ethnic identity (British) has, in some way or the other, contributed to shaping the narrative which they produce? The issue is not without significance, especially since the British Museum’s claim to “universality” implies that the museum’s production of knowledge is made from an impartial and unbiased position, guided by scientific principles alone, and *not* affected by factors such as the writers’ organizational and ethnic belonging.

Interestingly, the story of the reception of the Ife objects is also told in another British Museum publication, *Bronze Head from Ife* from 2010 by Editha Platte. The booklet identifies the author as a “senior researcher at the Frobenius Institute at the University of Frankfurt am Main.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, although this is a British Museum

21. Barley 2010, 26, 137, Luschan 1919, 348.

22. The front page of the book states that the book is by “Editha Platte, with Musa Hambolu.” (Hambolu is Director of Research, Planning and Publications at

publication, the text has *not* been written by a British Museum employee. Perhaps, then, this booklet may offer an insight on the issue of whether or not factors such as the writer's own institutional and cultural position influence the portrayal of the reception of the Benin and Ife objects?

Platte presents the European reaction to the discovery of the Ife objects as follows:

Made with a great deal of skill, the heads strongly reminded the European public of their own art history, and thus it was not believed that they had been created by African artists. Instead it was assumed either that they had been produced by an artist outside Africa and then imported into Ife or that they had been made inside Africa by an artist trained in Europe. It was equally speculated that the objects must be remnants of a Greek colony which had existed several centuries BC and that the Guinea coast was in fact the lost continent of Atlantis!

It was only after a series of technical and stylistic studies that experts finally came to believe that the bronze heads form part of an African artistic tradition, and represent one of the most outstanding productions of world heritage. As such they influenced not only their immediate environment but also the attitudes of the European public, policy makers, academicians and artists.<sup>23</sup>

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the National Commissions for Museums and Monuments of Nigeria.) The word "with" probably signals that Platte is the (main) author of this work. The following page states that Platte "has asserted the right to be identified as the author of this work." In my discussion of *Bronze Head from Ife I* regard Platte as responsible for the wordings in the text.

23. Platte 2010, 7-9. The dust cover of the book similarly states: "The stunning naturalism and sophisticated craftsmanship of the objects challenged Western perceptions of African art at the time, which was largely based around abstract wooden figures. It was consequently assumed at first that they must have been made by Europeans or under European influence. In time however, they came to be seen as wholly African."

The story, as told here, is structured in much the same way as in the accounts discussed earlier: at first, Europeans doubted that these objects were indigenous and sought evidence of influence from elsewhere, but “finally” their true African origin was established by “experts.” However, there is a difference in how the scholars associated with the British Museum and Platte at the Frobenius Institute relate the events. While Mack and Barley praise British Museum scholars Read and Fagg (and District Officer Partridge) and connect Frobenius with incorrect speculations and thievery, Platte tells the story without naming *any* individuals. Thus, in her version neither those who (erroneously) thought that the heads had been made by “an artist outside Africa” or by an artist “trained in Europe,” nor those who (correctly) eventually concluded that the heads belonged to “an African artistic tradition” are presented by name. She refers to the “speculations” about Atlantis, yet – despite Frobenius appearing frequently in the publication – the reader is given no hint that he was the one responsible for these “speculations.” Elsewhere she alludes to a clash between the “opposite characters” of Frobenius and Partridge, but is vague about what caused their conflict.<sup>24</sup> In contrast to Mack and Barley, Platte does not praise British Museum scholars. Nor does she taint Frobenius’s name with his ideas about Atlantis and his questionable collecting methods. Platte’s text – through references to the “technical and stylistic studies” by “experts” – is a celebration of Western scientific knowledge production in general, rather than a celebration of the British Museum in particular. When the accounts by the British Museum scholars (and its director) are compared to that of Platte, at the Frobenius Institute, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the authors’ institutional (and perhaps also ethnic) belonging has affected how they have chosen to narrate the discovery and reception of these objects. Apparently, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the perceived need to keep the reputation of one’s institution and academic ancestors clean affects how events which took place a century ago are portrayed.

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24. Platte 2010, 42.

There is another difference between Platte's account and that found in *Africa – Art and Cultures* (and in the text panels in the exhibition and the museum's homepage). The latter accounts "end" the narrative with the European realization that the metal works were of indigenous origin. They do not make any statements about the *consequences* of this realization. Platte, in contrast, adds a new element to the narrative. After relating that the (unnamed) "experts" had established that the heads were African she continues, "as such they [the Ife heads] influenced not only their immediate environment but also the attitudes of the European public, policy makers, academicians and artists." Exactly what kind of "influence" the Ife objects exercised is not told, but the assumption is that this influence was of a positive character. What could be the source of inspiration for making the claim that the discovery of their indigenous origin "influenced" certain "attitudes" of various groups of people?

A look at MacGregor's version of the narrative of the reception of the Benin and Ife objects suggests a possible answer. MacGregor also adds what happened when the indigenous origin of the objects was realized. In *his* version of events this discovery had profound repercussions as it "collapsed" and "disintegrated" European stereotypes, prejudice, and hierarchies. MacGregor's account could be assumed to imply that had these objects not been taken from Africa to Europe, Europeans would still see Africans as primitive savages. While Platte makes no such bold claims, it seems likely that the structure of her narrative has received impetus from MacGregor's. If correct, this suggests that not only does the "knowledge" produced by the Africanist "experts" influence the museum's director, but also that the "knowledge" produced by the museum's director influences the Africanist "experts."

To sum up the discussion so far: the British Museum creates a narrative where the history of the Western reception of the Benin and Ife objects began with astonishment and surprise and the rejection of the idea that they could be of indigenous origin as the objects did not fit into to the hierarchy of cultures which were taken for granted in Europe at the time. Instead, the objects were "explained"

as being the result of foreign influence. Eventually, the indigenous origin of these objects was understood. In some versions of the narrative it is implied or made explicit that British Museum scholars had an important role in this development. In MacGregor's version the realization that these objects were African had a profound influence on Western perception of Africa.

In the following a look will be taken at how this narrative corresponds to the available evidence on the Western reception of the Benin and Ife objects. Special attention will be paid to the publications on the Benin objects by the "pioneering" and "enlightened" British Museum curators Read and Dalton, as well as those of British Museum curator Thomas Athol Joyce (whose view on the "primitive mind" has already been discussed), as he also wrote about the Benin objects. Their views on the Benin objects will be compared to that of Felix von Luschan of the Ethnological Museum in Berlin. In connection with the discussion about the Ife objects, the writings of the "controversial" British Museum curator William Fagg will also be considered.

What were the initial reactions to these objects? What was thought about their origin? And did the opinions expressed by the British scholars differ in any significant way from those of other contemporary scholars? Before looking into the scholarly publications on the Benin objects, a comment may be made on one of the earliest published opinions on the origin of Benin "art." It is found in the article "With the Punitive Expedition to Benin City" published in *The Lancet* on July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1897 by Robert Allman, principal medical officer in the Benin Expeditionary Force.<sup>25</sup> His account is interesting as it both resembles and differs from those published by subsequent scholars. As noted earlier, Allman states that the inhabitants of Benin City were "most skilful and proficient" in its "chief industries" which were "moulding in bronze, carving on

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25. Allman 1897. Allman is preceded by a brief note in *Lagos Weekly Record* published a few weeks after the conquest of Benin. The text points to the "archaeological value" of the "bronze statues" from Benin which either "are of Egyptian origin as some suppose, or belong to the sixteenth century period of Portuguese naval supremacy." *Lagos Weekly Record* 6 March 1897, cf. *Lagos Weekly Record* 20 March 1897.

ivory and blacksmiths' work." He writes that in his wanderings about Benin City he came across "many bronzes and plaques which were evidently designed, if not executed, by the ancient Egyptians; many others were of more modern times and bore traces of the Portuguese, from whom the art has no doubt descended." Allman also notes the presence of equipment and material used for casting (melting pots, molds in various stages of completion, clay, and bees wax) in a compound close to the palace and offers a description of the technique by which the castings were produced. Interestingly, in contrast to many subsequent (scholarly) articles, his text does not express surprise over the discovery of these artworks in Benin City. Rather, his praise of the artistic capacity is in line with and a further confirmation of his generally positive view of the Edo: "From what I saw of the Benin tribe I certainly consider them splendid specimens of the negro race – tall, of fine physique, and not wanting in intelligence, as their industries and arts go to prove." Thus, although Allman traces Benin art back to (both) the ancient Egyptians and the Portuguese, he acknowledges the artistic capacity of the Benin people who had executed the extant objects. This suggests that the idea that the ultimate origin of the art-form was "foreign," was not in itself *necessarily* a reflection of a derogatory view of the Edo or Africans in general (though, as will be seen, the idea of a foreign origin was quite often linked to such views).

Moving on to the scholarly writings, the first articles published on the Benin objects were those by F. Carlsen, Read and Dalton at the British Museum and Henry Forbes, the director of the Mayer Museum, Liverpool.<sup>26</sup> Carlsen's article was published in November 1897 and the articles by Read and Dalton and Forbes appeared in February 1898. Carlsen, who had seen the objects in the Horniman museum and the plaques which were on display in the British Museum from September 1897, calls these "remarkable old bronze castings" the most interesting ethnographic discovery since the discovery of the ruins in Zimbabwe.<sup>27</sup> He writes of the "astonishment" caused by these "accomplished" and "remarkable" castings, which

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26. I have been unable to find any biographical information on this "Dr. F. Carlsen. London."

27. Carlsen, 1897, 312.



surpass in quality any hitherto known castings from West Africa. Among these objects he judges the plaques to be the most remarkable. He praises the technical talent evident in their execution, comparable to the “good European bronzes of the 16<sup>th</sup> century” and also considers them praiseworthy from an artistic point of view “taking into account that they are the work of Negroes.”<sup>28</sup> He states that the objects are of “undoubtedly indigenous manufacture” and of “true African nature,” but probably owing to some degree of influence from Europe. He suggests the possibility that a European founder present at the Benin Court in the 16<sup>th</sup> century had met indigenous metal workers whose skills he had used and further developed.<sup>29</sup>

Forbes, in his article on Benin objects acquired by the Mayer Museum, similarly stresses the amazement felt by scholars when encountering these objects. In the opening paragraph he writes that “students of West African ethnology” were “quite astonished” by the “high artistic excellence” and “the wonderful technical art” evident in the manufacturing of these objects from the “now, at all events, more than less barbarous region, the Niger Delta.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, Forbes adds to the sense of wonder by explicitly contrasting the artistic and technical excellence of the objects with the barbarity of the inhabitants in the region where the objects had been “discovered.” He offers some thoughts on “the mystery that surrounds the makers of these wonderful works”:

The probability is that the art may have been brought to the West Coast Hinterland by some European trader, prisoner, or resident, who, observing the skill of these people in the modelling of clay figures, [...] may have instructed them how to do the same in wax, and having overlaid their model with clay, showed them how to reproduce it in metal; and the art may have flourished only during the lifetime, or residence there, of these artificers, or for only a short time after their departure.<sup>31</sup>

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28. Carlsen 1897, 313.

29. Carlsen 1897, 314.

30. Forbes 1898, 49.

31. Forbes 1898, 69, cf. 66.

Thus, like Carlsen, he suggests that the metal casting technique originated from Europe. To this he adds an additional statement which was not made by Carlsen: the art presumably declined rapidly when the European instructors were no longer present.

Forbes also offers an alternative explanation for the impetus of the artistic skill and its subsequent detrition. He observes that “the Benin ‘free men’ and upper classes differ markedly from the slaves and lower orders both in color and features.” The “negro features and a black skin” of the latter contrast with the “olivecoloured skins and tolerable regular features” of the former, the difference being “as great as between the English patrician and the wretched peasant of Western Ireland.” Hence, the “explanation” for the presence of “such high works of art” in Benin could be that several centuries ago the city was taken over by “an offshoot” of a “Central Soudan race with the leaven of Abyssinian or even Egyptian influences among them.” With time, through “intercourse with the low coast tribes” they “gradually degenerated into their present low civilisation.”<sup>32</sup> Corroboration for the view of the decadence of the Benin people is given by referring to correspondence with Bacon – the aforementioned intelligence officer in the Benin campaign and author of *Benin – City of Blood* – who informed him that “the Bini were a decaying race without doubt.” Forbes also briefly mentions a third possible explanation for the objects’ origin: “the objects may, as Commander Bacon suggests to me, have been the spoils of some campaign, kept as fetishes.”<sup>33</sup> This is about the only time it is speculated in the (scholarly and popular) literature that the objects had not been made in Benin by its inhabitants, and it seems that Forbes does not consider this alternative very likely.

Turning to Read and Dalton’s article of February 1898, we find a number of thoughts that have already been encountered in the articles by Carlsen and Forbes. Like Carlsen, they compare the objects with Renaissance masterpieces, and like both Carlsen and Forbes they write about the surprise felt upon their encounter with these objects.<sup>34</sup> Rhetorically, the statement about their initial reaction to

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32. Forbes 1898, 69-70.

33. Forbes 1898, 69-70.

34. Who may have influenced who is difficult to determine. Carlsen’s text was the

the objects is structured in the same manner as in Forbes text, by contrasting “art” and “barbarity”:

It needs scarcely be said that at first sight of these remarkable works of art we are at once astounded at such an unexpected find, and puzzled to account for so highly developed an art among a race so entirely barbarous as were the Bini, and it must be confessed that the latter problem has not yet been solved.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, Read and Dalton identify, or create, a “problem” for which there is not yet a satisfactory “solution”: how could a “highly developed” art, comparable in quality with Italian Renaissance art, be found amongst the members of an “entirely barbarous” – that is, wholly undeveloped, – “race”?

Looking back at what was said earlier about the British Museum’s narrative about the reception of the Benin objects, this narrative stresses the initial sense of surprise and bewilderment caused by the discovery of these artworks, and MacGregor quotes the sentence above where Read and Dalton express their astonishment over this unexpected find among the “entirely barbarous” Edo. Clearly, the British Museum narrative is correct as far as scholars such as Carlsen, Forbes, Read, and Dalton are concerned. Yet, it

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first of the three to appear in print, but it is clear from it that he had been in contact with colleagues “here in London” including “the experienced staff at the African Department” (313) of the British Museum (presumably Read and Dalton) and he is not unlikely to have attended Read and Dalton’s lecture on the Benin objects on the 9<sup>th</sup> of November 1897.

The theme of amazement and surprise appears in news reports during the autumn 1897. The article “Benin antiquities at the British Museum” in *The Times* 25 September 1897 reported that “the technical perfection of the work are surprising evidence of the skill of the Benin native in the casting of metal.” The article also informs that the castings had been made with the same technique as “the finest bronzes of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries in Europe.” The contents of the article were probably based on information supplied by Read and Dalton. The article “Curios from Benin” in the *Illustrated London News* from October the same year about the Benin objects exhibited at the British Museum states that “[t]he number and excellence of the carved ivory tusks and castings in bronze or brass [...] have taken experts completely by surprise.”

35. Read & Dalton, 1898, 371.

might be remarked that this element of surprise is not found in the previous (admittedly very brief) non-scholarly accounts. As we saw above, Allman apparently had no particular problem with the presence of these objects in Benin City. Their quality rather confirmed his favorable view of the Edo. The idea of a “mystery” surrounding the presence of objects in Benin City seems to have been created and promoted by scholars.

So what answers did the “pioneering” and “enlightened” scholars Read and Dalton propose to the perceived enigma they had encountered? From the allusions to their scholarly deeds found in the British Museum’s contemporary narrative one would perhaps expect that the two – in contrast to other scholars – stressed indigenous agency rather than foreign influence (from Egypt or Portugal) and that they – again in contrast to other scholars – challenged the taken for granted “barbarity” of the Benin people or of Africans in general.

They did not. Their interpretations about the origin of Benin art are broadly similar to those proposed by Carlsen and Forbes, and while they wonder how it was that a barbaric race had made these accomplished castings, the concept of “barbarity” is not questioned. The main difference between their text and that of Carlsen and Forbes lies rather in style. Where both Carlsen and Forbes are explicit in their proposed answers to the question of where the art may have originated, Read and Dalton address the issue more indirectly and through allusions, carefully avoiding making any direct statements on the issue. Nevertheless, their position appears from the shattered references which are found in different places in their text. That they – like Carlsen and Forbes – consider the objects to have been made by the local population in Benin is evident. The makers of the objects are referred to as “Benin savages,” “savage metal-workers,” or “artificers.” (They are never called “artists.”) In one passage, which lauds the technical excellence in the castings, these “savage metalworkers” are said to have “served” a “sound apprenticeship,” a wording which hints that the credit for the accomplishment is due to the instructors as much as to the apprentices.

The identity of the instructors is not explicated in this passage, but in their short historical exposé of the Benin kingdom, where “possible conductors of foreign influence” are treated, Read and Dalton suggest that in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, “isolated adventurers” from Portugal or other European countries may have arrived at the Benin court, where their “mechanical skill” would have been “highly appreciated.” Later, when discussing the date of the plaques, and noting that their earliest date of manufacture is around the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, they add that the plaques were made “perhaps with the help of the Portuguese.”<sup>36</sup> Again, their reasons for suggesting that the Portuguese may have “helped” in making the plaques are not stated, but the idea is buttressed by an accompanying metallurgical analysis of some of the objects by William Gowland which indicated that the metal alloy came from the Iberian Peninsula. Gowland’s own theory about the objects origin and makers was that the objects were made either by crew members of Portuguese ships or by “natives who were taught by them.”<sup>37</sup>

While favoring the idea that the art was imported by the Portuguese coming from the coast, the authors do not rule out that there may have been long-distance contact with peoples to the north and east of the Benin Kingdom. When sketching the historical background to the Benin Kingdom, they note that from an early time “shreds and patches of Mediterranean civilization” may have drifted “with drifting peoples” into the “darkness of the interior” of the African continent and that “relations of some kind or other” may have existed between “the negroes of Guinea” and “some of the peoples of Eastern Africa,” adding, (in a footnote) that there are points of resemblance between the decorative art of Abyssinia and Benin.<sup>38</sup> However, while the possibility of an influx of “civilization” or “peoples” to Benin is acknowledged, it is reasonably clear from their text that they prefer to locate the source of stimulus to Portugal and Europe. Hence, their solution to the perceived quandary of how “savages” could have made objects whose technical qualities

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36. Read & Dalton 1898, 373.

37. Read & Dalton 1898, 375.

38. Read & Dalton 1898, 362, 364.

would have satisfied the “best artists of the Italian Renaissance” was that the objects had been created through European instruction.

Hence, in contrast to what the British Museum’s present-day narrative implies, Read and Dalton’s interpretations did not differ in any significant way from those of other “pioneering” scholars, such as Carlsen and Forbes. Putting the texts by these authors next to each other, it can be perhaps be argued that Read and Dalton express themselves in less prejudiced ways than Forbes, but they can hardly be called more “enlightened” than Carlsen. When Read and Dalton explicate their ideas in subsequent texts it becomes even more evident that they regard the objects as owing to European influence, and the positional superiority of the European teacher over his African pupil is pronounced.

Before looking into these texts it might be observed that the theme of degeneration is prominent in their 1898 article. They chart the history of a kingdom, styled “Great Benin” from late 15<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but which then “seems to have entered a period of decadence, only terminated by the episode of the present year.” This is followed by a description of the town itself, which since around 1600 had entered a “gradual process of degeneration” so that the town, by 1897, had become “little better than a large and scattered village.” They do not say what might have caused the decline of the Benin Kingdom, but state that it was “accelerated by the evil effects of sedition and civil war.”<sup>39</sup> A decline in artistic capacity is also suggested. After proposing that the plaques were made around the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century “perhaps with the help of the Portuguese” they note the possibility that manufacture could have continued later, but if so, it cannot be determined for how long. They add that “casting of an inferior kind continues down to the present time,” thus ruling out the possibility that any of the skillfully made objects could be contemporary. Their text implies an additional “explanation” to the presence of these objects in a town “in a state of decay”: the well-cast objects were all made in

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39. Read & Dalton 1898, 362-366. Their description of Benin City appears to have been influenced by Bacon’s *Benin – The City of Blood* and they ignored Allman’s more favorable view of the Benin City as a “large [...] town of about 20,000 inhabitants.” Allman 1897.

remote times when the Benin Kingdom stood at a higher cultural and artistic level, long before it plunged down into its present barbarity.<sup>40</sup>

The idea that the Benin people had learned the art of metal casting from the Portuguese did not go uncontested. In 1898, Henry Ling Roth, at the Bankfield Museum in Halifax, published the article “Notes on Benin Art,” where he disagreed with the “expressed opinion of Messrs Read and Dalton,” that the Benin art “was an imported one” from Europe. Roth’s argument was that Benin was discovered by the Portuguese in 1486 and by the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century native artists produced art of a “high pitch of excellence.” The artistic skills of the natives could not have developed so rapidly, because “I do not think the most enthusiastic defender of the Negro will credit him with such ability for making progress.” Therefore, Roth concludes, “the art was there before the Portuguese arrived in the country.” Yet, he admits it was probably not “indigenous” but had originated from ancient Egypt and reached Benin through trade routes.<sup>41</sup>

In the following year, Read and Dalton published their monograph *Antiquities from the City of Benin*. In this publication they elaborate their ideas given in their “preliminary sketch” from the year before. While the earlier paper marveled more over the technical rather than the artistic skill seen in the objects, they now also stress the object’s artistic qualities. The makers are called “natives,” “native pupils,” or “native artists.”<sup>42</sup> The earlier paper was rather imprecise about under whose supervision the artificers “served” their “apprenticeship” and only attributes the “help” to the Portuguese with caution, but Read and Dalton now appear more confident in stating that the “teaching” should be attributed to Europeans, and more specifically to the Portuguese. They refer to the instructors as “European teachers,” “Portuguese brass founders,” or “Portuguese artists.”<sup>43</sup> In addition to Gowland’s analysis, which had pointed to

40. Read & Dalton 1898, 373.

41. Roth 1898a, 171-172. On Roth, see essays in McDougall & Davidson 2008.

42. Read & Dalton 1899, 16, 19.

43. They consider it puzzling that no objects made by these instructors can be identified: “[I]t is strange that among the many examples of bronze casting



the Iberian Peninsula as a source of the metal, they find evidence for identifying the teachers as Portuguese in oral testimony obtained at Benin City in November 1897 by Moor and Ernest Roupell. The informants were six chiefs: the court historian Ariyo, the ju ju men Eseri, Ossa, and Osuan, master smith Ihollo, master wood carver Ihollo II, and master ivory carver Ine. According to the report to the Foreign Ministry, which Read and Dalton quote verbatim, the chiefs said:

When the white men came, in the time when *Esige* was king, a man named *Ahammangiwa* came with them. He made brasswork and plaques for the king [...] [and] the king gave him plenty of boys to teach. We can make brasswork now, but not as he made it, because he and all his boys are dead.<sup>44</sup> (Original italics.)

According to the account, *Ahammangiwa* was “a white man.” Read and Dalton judge the testimony as having “all the appearance of veracity” and providing a satisfactory explanation for the introduction of metal casting in Benin. Yet, although both the metal analysis and the oral testimony pointed to Europe, they consider the option that metal casting may have been practiced in West Africa before the arrival of the Portuguese. They find it hard to determine whether this was the case or not (and if practiced before Portuguese contact, whether it had developed locally or was of foreign origin). They touch upon the problem in two passages which read:

How far Europe is responsible for the art of casting metal into West Africa is a problem not easy to solve. Whether it is considered to be indigenous or not, it is fairly certain that

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by native artists no single piece has occurred that can be attributed to their European teachers. It was to be expected that the Portuguese brass founders in teaching their native pupils, would have produced models of their own, and that these would have survived, if indeed they had not been among the most valued possessions of the king.” As a solution to this absence, they write that works by the “Portuguese artists” may be disinterred in the future. Read & Dalton 1899, 19. To date, no such objects have been unearthed.

44. Read & Dalton 1899, 6.

the presence of Europeans and their extensive importation of brass into the country fostered the practice of casting and made it a common phase of native industry.<sup>45</sup>

Though it is conceivable that the art of casting in bronze may have spread from North Africa at a remote period, yet it must be remembered that antiquities in bronze are rarely found outside the area covered by the ancient civilisations. Perhaps the time has not yet arrived when it can be categorically stated that the West African negroes were or were not acquainted with the art of casting before they came in contact with superior civilisations in historic times. If they were so acquainted, they occupy a unique position among men of their race; if they were not, the rapidity with which they acquired an exceptional technical skill is in every way remarkable.<sup>46</sup>

Like elsewhere, their wording is cautious, and they prefer not to take a firm stand on the origin of the West African metal casting technique. Acknowledging the possibility that knowledge of the casting technique may have predated “contact with superior civilisations in historic times” they offer two alternative theories for the techniques’ origin: it may either have “spread” from North Africa at a “remote period,” or it may be “indigenous.” They have reservations for the hypothesis of a spread from North Africa, and it may be that, in case the technique is older than Portuguese contact, they consider a local origin more likely than one from North Africa.

While these two passages show that Read and Dalton did not totally reject the notion of an indigenous origin of the casting technique, they cannot be taken as evidence that they argued strongly for it either.<sup>47</sup> More importantly, these rather subtle allusions to the casting technique not necessarily owing to influence from “superior

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45. Read & Dalton 1899, 19.

46. Read & Dalton 1899, 27.

47. And their position cannot be called radical among scholars. Not even Forbes was completely alien to the thought that the art could have “developed among the Beni.” Forbes 1898, 66.

civilisations” are not worded in a way which questions the assumption that Africans generally stood on a lower level of development. Their assertion that if the “West African negroes” were acquainted with the technique before European contact, they occupy a “unique position among men of their race,” does not challenge the idea of African inferiority as such. The case becomes a curious anomaly to an order, which is saved by stressing how singular and “unique” the exception is. The same goes for the statement that if the West African Negroes had no knowledge of this technique before European contact, it is “in every way remarkable” that they learned the technique so rapidly.

Also, the idea that the technique might be “indigenous” is followed by the assurance – “it is fairly certain” – that the “presence of Europeans” and their imported metal “fostered” metal casting. The dependence on European influence becomes further accentuated in the next passage where they compare metal work from Benin and from Ashanti. Read and Dalton declare that “[t]he human figures from Benin far surpass anything of the same kind that has come from Ashanti,” and that Ashanti metal workers lack “any quality that can be called artistic.” Ashanti metal figures are “caricatures of humanity” far removed from the “dignity or life-like character” which distinguish the “sober presentments of the negro” found on many of the Benin panels.<sup>48</sup> The text infers that the only explanation for this vast difference between the “dignified,” “sober,” and “lifelike” Benin renditions of human figures and the Ashanti “caricatures” was that in the former case (Benin), the natives had learned from Europeans, while in the latter case (Ashanti) the castings had been made without European instruction. The subtext of the passage is that Africans have the potential to make good art under the right supervision, but Africans cannot develop an artistic ability by themselves.

Although Read and Dalton stress European influence in the Benin metalwork they also acknowledge the talent of the natives. “The complicated relief” on the majority of the plaques “would be no easy task even for European craftsmen” and “even when

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48. Read & Dalton 1899, 19.

the teachings of Europeans are taken into account, the skill of the native pupil is not the less remarkable.”<sup>49</sup> This acknowledgement of the “remarkable” native skill is, however, expressed with reservation. They see fault in how the dresses and weapons of the Europeans have been rendered, which they comment upon in the following way: “[T]hat the results are not artistically better shows only the limitations of the negro craftsman, whose eye had not attained to the refinement of presenting objects in their relative proportions.”<sup>50</sup>

Like in their previous article they date the plaques to around the 16<sup>th</sup> century. With a few exceptions, they do not attempt to date any of the other Benin objects. Among the exceptions are the “head of a young woman” (nowadays identified as a head of a Queen Mother) which they had singled out as “probably the most artistic and technically perfect of all the castings in the round” in the article from the previous year.<sup>51</sup> They argue that “the perfection of the work both from the technical and artistic points of view would indicate that it belongs to the earlier period of these works of art.”<sup>52</sup> Their wording suggests that they regarded Benin art as having stood at its highest level in earlier times from which it gradually degenerated.<sup>53</sup>

Read and Dalton do not offer an opinion on why the art may have declined, but when reviewing Roth’s monograph *Great Benin – Its Customs, Art and Horrors* published in 1903, Dalton proposes an answer. In his book Roth repeats the argument that the art must have existed in the Benin “quasi-civilization” before the arrival of the Portuguese because the Benin artists could not have developed their artistic talents in such a short time.<sup>54</sup> Dalton’s counterargument is that natives “presumably skilful in carving wood and

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49. Read & Dalton 1899, 16.

50. Read & Dalton 1899, 18.

51. Read & Dalton 1898, 372.

52. Read & Dalton 1899, 43, no. 4, cf. no 3.

53. Some objects are considered to be of “comparatively modern manufacture” Read & Dalton 1899, 42-43, no. 1-2. These objects do not receive any praise for artistic quality, cf. 44, no. 1-3, where the low (artistic) value is seen as an indication of these objects being more recent: “From the poor character of the work it seems probable that these objects are of later date.”

54. Roth 1903, 233-234.

ivory would find a transition to a tractable material like wax an easy matter if they had capable instructors.” He continues: “their best work would be produced almost at once while the effect of tuition was still fresh; and any subsequent change would follow the lines not of development but of deterioration.”<sup>55</sup> Thus, Dalton argues, although Benin craftsmen could learn how to do excellent art with “capable instructors,” their skill would only survive as long as the contact with these instructors lasted. As soon as this link was severed, the Africans degraded into making art of an inferior kind.

As already noted, the scholarly articles by Read and Dalton have a cautionary style, and they build their arguments more by indirect allusions than bold and explicit statements. The popular article “Booty from Benin” by Dalton, published in 1898, spells things out more clearly and proposes a solution to the perceived mystery of how it came to be that a particular African tribe in remote times produced high quality art. He rejects the idea of influences from the north: “[W]e must protest against all sensational and bizarre speculations which would implicate the august civilisations of the Nile [and] the Mediterranean in the affairs of a Negro kingdom.” Instead, he proposes an explanation for the occurrence of artworks in Benin, which is worth quoting at length:

There appears, therefore to be presumptive evidence that what external influence there was did not primarily come from any of the interior parts of Africa, but rather from the coast; while the actual craftsmen were inhabitants of the kingdom of Benin, reproducing processes perhaps taught them by instructors of superior culture. In spite of the prevailing English habit of regarding the negro purely from the standpoint of St James’s Hall, we must insist that the African has been a worker in metal from a remote period, and in this respect at least should be taken seriously. Granting, as we reasonably may, that metallurgy in some form was practised before the arrival of the early European voyagers, it does not require a great stretch of the imagination to suppose that

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55. Dalton 1903, 187.

existing facilities were now for the first time turned to full account and new processes introduced while the native talent for working in metal received an unprecedented stimulus. The scanty historical material which we possess tends to show that the Portuguese found Benin at the height of its vigour, and in the most favourable condition for the assimilation of what they had to teach. We shall be making no unjustifiable assumption if we suppose that while the floruit of Benin lasted, the arts old and new, flourished also; and that the decay of these arts kept pace with the degeneration of the kingdom and the increase of internal disorders. Such a theory explains the homogenous nature of the plaques, which all look as if they were executed within the limits of a singly brilliant period. To compare small things with great, Benin enjoyed an artistic Renaissance, of which these bronzes are the evidence. That Renaissance was due to the influence of a higher civilisation, the seat of which is to be found in Europe itself.<sup>56</sup>

What Dalton says here is that Africans under “the most favourable condition for assimilation,” that is, under exceptional circumstances, may be receptive to the teaching of “instructors of higher culture” and then produce good art, at least for a short time (and here the session of artistic production is linked to internal disorders rather than the absence of Portuguese instructors). While Benin enjoyed a brief “artistic Renaissance” it was dependent on “a higher civilisation [...] found in Europe itself.”

These words about the origin of Benin art – which make the gist of their scholarly articles explicit – are (to put it mildly) a little hard to reconcile with the British Museum’s claim that the “enlightened” Read and Dalton rejected wild theories of outside influence and crumbled prejudices about Africans. The opposite seems closer to the truth. The explanation they favored for the enigma of “highly developed” art being found among a debased people was to attribute the artistic stimulus to the teachings of a European “higher

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56. Dalton 1898, 428-429.

civilization.” About the only thing they have to say about negative European views of Africans is Dalton’s remark that “the African has been a worker of metal from a remote period and in this respect at least should be taken seriously” but it is unlikely that such words offered a challenge to notions of European cultural superiority.

It might be added that many essentializing judgements and expressions of then common stereotypes about Africans are rehearsed in their texts, such as their assurance that the “the negro is no horseman” because “want of patience” makes Blacks unable to train horses. (Although they do not explicate the idea, the notion that Blacks do not possess patience and self-control relates to the idea about their childishness.) They attribute exceptions to the rule that Blacks lack equestrian skill to influence from “Mahommedan peoples.” Thus, they “solve” the anomaly by applying the same logic as in the case of Benin objects: it is the result of foreign influence. Again, disturbing evidence is not allowed to question the idea of the Negro’s essence (they assure that “the African Negro is everywhere very much alike”) and place in the racial hierarchy, but is instead used to confirm it.<sup>57</sup>

The texts by Read and Dalton, from around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, contain little to counter the notion that Africans were incapable of producing good art without European aid. Yet, some years later – in 1910 – Read expressed a different opinion.<sup>58</sup> That year the British Museum acquired a number of ivory objects from the personal booty of Sir Ralph Moor, including the (later) famed ivory pendant mask. In the article where Read publishes the acquisitions, Benin ivory objects are for the first time held in esteem by a British Museum scholar. Moor is called a “good judge of the quality of native work” and both the mask and the armlets are praised for their “obvious artistic qualities.” Read declares that the mask, which he considers to stand on a higher artistic plane than

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57. Read & Dalton 1899, 29. They also ascertain that the ceremony of African courts is “absurd” and “wholly grotesque” (32). They extend the remark that “the African Negro is everywhere very much alike” to “savages” everywhere when stating that “the habit of imagining monsters [...] is born in the brain of savages in all parts of the world” (9).

58. Read 1910.



the armlets, “in design and finish is the finest thing that has come from Benin. The sculptor had a knowledge and observation, and a capacity for using both, that are but rarely found in savage Africa.” To this he adds that the “specimens” are interesting as they:

show conclusively that the Bini craftsmen were fully capable of producing work of quite as high a type, without the aid of European motifs, and as far as we can tell, without European suggestion. [...] A comparison of the mask [...] with any of the pieces showing European ideas is, of the two alternatives, rather in favour of the former.<sup>59</sup>

Read’s wording is different from that used in his earlier publications and finds its explanation in what follows. Read goes on to state that “various writers” have spent “a great deal of time” trying to trace “different origins for this very remarkable native art” and that “some enthusiasts have even gone as far as to attribute it to the influence of the art of ancient Egypt.” Exactly which writers and enthusiasts Read has in mind is not clear (Roth presumably), and the issue of an Egyptian origin is not further commented on. He continues that “a recent writer” is convinced that the “style and make” of the Benin objects resemble Indian castings and that Benin objects derive from “Indian models.” Here Read refers to the (German) scholar Wilhelm Crahmer who, in three articles published between 1908 and 1910, had proposed that Benin art was of a mixed Indo-Portuguese style which had come into being through Portuguese trade along the African coast up to India. Crahmer suggested that both European and Indian founders had taught the casting technique to the natives.<sup>60</sup> Read dismisses Crahmer’s ideas as speculations which “serves no useful purpose” and reassures his readers that the plaques are “unquestionably native.”

Evidently, Read eventually came to the conclusion that Africans – or at least some Africans, the Edo, at a distant point in time – could make art without European help. According to Mack, it was

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59. Read 1910, 51.

60. Crahmer 1908, 1909, 1910.

“largely through the tireless efforts” of Read that the “self-evident African source of Benin art became generally accepted” and it seems likely that Mack’s opinion is based on this article by Read. Yet, while Read here – in contrast to his earlier publications – stresses indigenous ability, it may be asked if Mack does not exaggerate Read’s scholarly endeavors and their impact. Mack’s words, referring to Read’s “tireless efforts” conjures an image of a determined scholar who, through research and publications, fights hard to convince a reluctant world that Benin art was indigenous to Africa, and who through his herculean efforts finally prevails. Is this an accurate description of Read’s contribution?

Read’s article is about two and a half pages long (plus one plate with the mask and armlets). Two of the text pages are mainly descriptions of the different objects acquired from Moor. The last half page is devoted to dismissing Crahmer’s idea and stating that Benin art was created without foreign influence. This is the *only* place where Read makes the claim about Edo capacity to produce good art on their own accord. It may be pointed out that although Read now acknowledges that “savage Africa” could produce capable artists without outside influence, he does not use this revelation to question the concept of African savagery as such. His wording, that this artistic skill is “rarely found in savage Africa,” suggests that he considers the case more as a curious exception to the general principle of African incapability to produce high quality art, than as evidence to challenge the idea of the cultural inferiority of Africans. Thus, Read’s text hardly lends support to a claim that the realization that Africans could produce high-quality art without outside stimulus had a significant influence on Western views of Africans.<sup>61</sup> As far as I am aware, Read never returned to this subject throughout the rest of his career. Given that Read’s entire writings on the matter comprise half a page in an article totaling two and

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61. In stressing the exceptionality of the case Read airs a similar sentiment to that expressed by Moor more than ten years earlier than he wrote that the natives of Benin “formerly experts in the casting and working of metals, and also in the carving of wood [...] are above the average [among Blacks] as regards intelligence.” Moor in Annual Report 1896-97, 14, cf. Gallwey in Annual Report 1897-98, 7, on two boys from Benin being “very much sharper” than the average.

a half pages, it could be questioned if it is accurate to describe Read's efforts in this particular field as "tireless." Likewise, it may be asked on what evidence Mack bases his claim that it "largely" was through these "tireless efforts" that the African origin of Benin art became "generally accepted." The scholarly literature produced in the following years does not lend support to the idea that Read's opinion had any major influence on the future development on Benin studies. His opinion was not widely discussed or quoted.<sup>62</sup> That not much importance was attached to Read's revelation (either by Read himself or other scholars at the British Museum) is suggested by the fact that there is not a trace of it in the British Museum publications which appeared in the following years.

In 1910, in the same year as Read opined that the Edo could make good art without Europeans helping them, the British Museum published its *Handbook to the Ethnographical Collection* written by Joyce.<sup>63</sup> Although Benin objects are comparatively well represented in the illustrations of the handbook – five plaques and the "Bronze head of a girl" are illustrated with photographs – Edo material culture only receives one single sentence in the text which declares that "the Bini acquired the art of bronze casting by the *cire perdue* process from the Portuguese of the sixteenth century."<sup>64</sup> Read's article and the handbook were published in the same year, and it is possible that the British Museum's acquisition of the mask and Read's subsequent insights about the artistic capacity of the Edo came at a point in time when the handbook had already gone to print. This would then explain why this publication is silent on Read's revelation. Yet, 15 years later, in 1925, when the second edition of the handbook appeared – and the text of this second edition had accorded to the preface been modified "in accordance with the growth of anthropological knowledge" – there is still not a trace of Read's insight of 1910. Although the ivory pendant mask had now been added to the illustrated Benin objects, there is no mention of it or any other ivory works in the text. The text only

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62. To my knowledge, the only scholar who refers to him is Luschan, who draws upon Read's authority to refute Crahmer's theories. Luschan 1919, ix.

63. British Museum 1910, vii, Braunholtz 1953, 112, 114.

64. British Museum 1910, 241.

repeats verbatim the first edition's sentence about the Edo having learned bronze casting from the Portuguese.<sup>65</sup>

In subsequent decades British Museum scholars published very little on the Benin objects. What appears in print are mainly brief notes in the *British Museum Quarterly* presenting recent acquisitions by the museum, and these do not contain any further consideration of the issue of whether Edo artistic talent was indigenous or not. Two such notes by Joyce from 1928 and 1930 only restate that bronze-casting by the *cire perdue* process was introduced by the Portuguese. Another acquisition note by curator Hermann Braunscholtz from 1929 declares that "the artistic impulse of the Benin people attained its highest and most distinctive form of expression in bronze and ivory" in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries "partly no doubt in response to the stimulation of recent European contact."<sup>66</sup> It is not until much later, around 1950 that a British Museum scholar – William Fagg – takes up the discussion about whether the *cire perdue* technique and the artistic skills seen in the West African castings were indigenous or due to foreign influence.

Thus, Mack's idea that Read's "tireless efforts" made the African origin of Benin art "generally accepted" does not hold up to closer scrutiny. To describe Read's efforts in this particular field as "tireless" seems a little odd, and, more importantly, is it not possible to detect any major influence from Read's 1910 article in the subsequent literature, not even in that produced by the British Museum.

Neither in the *Handbook to the Ethnographical Collection* nor in his short articles on recent acquisitions does Joyce elaborate his statement that the Edo learned the *cire perdue* technique from the Portuguese. Thus, we are given no explanation why, among all the possible statements which could be made about the Benin castings, Joyce preferred to make this one, and what implications were to be drawn from this circumstance. However, in another text Joyce puts this statement about the European origin of the *cire perdue* technique in a wider context. Joyce is the author of article "Negro" in the eleventh edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* published in

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65. British Museum 1925, vii, 251-252, pl. XI.

66. Joyce 1928, 1930, Braunscholtz 1929. Also Joyce 1931.

1910-1911, and in this article the Benin castings and ivory carvings are referred to.<sup>67</sup> It is of interest to look at how the Benin castings and ivory carvings fit into and corroborate Joyce's portrayal of the Negro. Of course, what also makes it interesting to look into what is written here is that the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* – much like the British Museum – is an authoritative institution. It has an almost equally venerable age (it was founded in 1768) and by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century it had earned a reputation of containing scholarship of the highest standard and repute. This “monument to the learning of the Anglo-Saxon race” (as one reviewer hailed the eleventh edition) was marketed as containing “the sum of human knowledge.” Whereas the academic publications discussed hitherto presumably had a rather limited readership, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* reached tens of thousands of readers mainly in Britain and the United States. Prepublication sales of the eleventh edition in the United States alone reached a staggering 33,000 copies.<sup>68</sup> Thus, in terms of the impact of the British Museum's learned opinion on the Benin objects (and on Blacks generally) for Western ideas of selves and others, this publication is of importance.

The underlying premise of the article is that the Negro (race) exists in an essential sense, that is, that the term “Negro” corresponds to a real racial entity – “a pure Negro type” or a “true Negro” in Joyce's words – which may be defined by certain physical, mental, and cultural characteristics, distinguishing this “pure” or “true” Negro from other members of mankind. Joyce acknowledges that to a certain extent the Negro has intermingled with other races (the Libyans, Hamitic races, and the Arabs) and thus that the Negro is subject to some variations in terms of physical appearance, mental conditions, and culture, yet, the idea of an essential Negro, which is manifested through “typical representatives,” is not questioned. To conjure and enact the Negro, the article defines and describes the physical, intellectual, and cultural characteristics of the Negro. As for physical attributes, those typical of the Negro are dark skin (which, the article informs us, is also distinguished by

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67. Joyce 1911.

68. Kogan 1958, 169-172.

a characteristic odor), dark curled hair, broad and flat nose, large teeth, a massive cranium, and a “less voluminous brain, as compared with the white races.”

The relative likeness of the white man and the Negro to the higher apes is treated. In one respect – the character of the hair – the white man stands in closer relation to the higher anthropoids than the Negro, but in many other respects – the length of arm, the tendency to prognathism, the massive cranium, the flat nose – the Negro is more closely related to the higher apes, and thus “the Negro would appear to stand on a lower evolutionary plane than the white man.”

The article then proceeds to a description of intellectual characteristics, which takes its departure with the declaration: “Mentally the Negro is inferior to the white.” According to “a long study of the Negro in America [which] may be taken as generally true of the whole race,” the Negro children are sharp and intelligent but in the adult period the intellect becomes clouded. The author of the study, Filippo Manetta, explains this arrest in mental development, with an arrest in the development of the black man’s brain. Whereas the white man’s brain grows with the expansion of the brainpan, the Negro’s brain stops developing with the premature closing of the cranial sutures.<sup>69</sup> Joyce admits that evidence to support this theory is lacking, but still finds it “reasonable even “probable” as a contributing cause to the mental inferiority of Blacks. He adds that “the arrest and even deterioration in mental development is no doubt very largely due to the fact that after puberty sexual matters take the first place in the Negro’s life and thoughts.” Another contributing factor, according to Joyce, is the environment. The African tropical climate and the fertility of the soil have made life easy and the struggle for existence has thus been reduced to a minimum. Therefore, the Negro has not developed “the restless energy which has led to

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69. The “study” referred to is Manetta 1864, which was written in favour of the Confederates during the American Civil war and in defence of slavery. In Manetta’s view the only way to (partially) civilize Blacks was to hold them in slavery. Vellon 2004, 40. The section referring to Manetta’s “study” and some other parts of Joyce’s article comes from the article “Negro” by Augustus Keane in the ninth edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* from ca 1883, reprinted in the tenth edition from 1901-1903.

the progress of the white race.” An implicit analogue is here made between the arrest in intellectual and cultural development. Unlike the white man whose mental capacity develops from childhood, through adolescence and matures in adulthood, the Negro’s mental capacity does not progress beyond childhood. In contrast to the white man, who has passed through various stages of development from savagery to civilization, the Negro has remained in a primitive stage. Intellectually and culturally the Negro is undeveloped. Joyce repeats that the mental inferiority of the Negro to the white (and yellow) races is “a fact,” but that it “has often been exaggerated” and that it is not fair to evaluate his mental disposition by tests in, for example, mental arithmetic taken from the environment of white man. Joyce also notes that in certain capacities the Negro surpasses the white – acuteness of vision, hearing, sense of direction, and topography – but that:

For the rest, the mental constitution of the Negro is very similar to that of a child, normally good-natured and cheerful, but subject to sudden fits of emotion and passion during which he is capable of performing acts of singular atrocity, impressionably, vain, but often exhibiting in the capacity of the servant a dog-like fidelity.

Following this passage – which compares the mental constitution of the Negro with that of a child, and which uses the metaphor “dog-like” to describe one of the “Negro’s” (few) positive characteristics – there is a passage where the Benin metal castings and ivory carvings are referred to:

Given suitable training, the Negro is capable of becoming a craftsman of considerable skill, particularly in metal work, carpentry and carving. The bronze castings by the *cire perdue* process, and the cups and horns of ivory elaborately carved, which were produced by the natives of Guinea after their intercourse with the Portuguese of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, bear ample witness to this. But the rapid decline and practical evanescence of both industries, when that intercourse was



interrupted, shows that the native craftsman was raised for the moment above his normal level by direct foreign inspiration, and was unable to sustain the high quality of his work when that inspiration failed.

This statement concludes the treatment of the Negro's mental characteristics and the article then goes on to present the forms of Negro culture. Like in the previous parts of the text, categorizing and essentializing statements are heaped on each other. Joyce states that the Negro is foremost an agriculturist. Cattle-breeding is also practiced, but mostly in tribes of mixed origin (that is, in tribes which also incorporate foreign racial elements). The Negro's social conditions are usually primitive, but on occasion kingdoms have been established. The Negro is principally a vegetarian, but cannibalism "in its simplest form" is found in Africa, and "the cannibal tribes eat human flesh because they like it." "Negro religion" varies from fetishism, nature worship, to ancestor worship and "the Negro attitude to the supernatural is based frankly on fear." The article ends by treating the influence of Islam and Christianity. The greater success of Islam in gaining proselytes is explained by the difference between the two religions. For the Negro, Christianity is "not sufficiently categorical, but leaves too much to the individual," whereas Islam is "simple, categorical and easily comprehended." Thus, the article manages not only to establish the inferiority of Blacks to Whites, but also the inferiority of Islam to Christianity.

The Negro created by Joyce is a being which lacks physical, mental, and cultural development. The Negro is a slave under emotions, and the mind of the Negro is preoccupied with thinking about sex. Although Joyce stresses the inferiority of the Negro he also makes some remarks of a more forgiving nature. It is acknowledged that the "Negro" is "normally good-natured and cheerful" and may, in the role of a servant, show "a dog-like fidelity." Among the good qualities of the Negro is also that he may become "a craftsman of considerable skill" and produce work of "high quality" as evidenced by the Benin castings and carvings. Yet, importantly, this rise in ability is subject to the condition that he is "given suitable training" and, more importantly, that it lasts only as

long as the “direct foreign influence” is maintained. As soon as the foreign inspiration disappears, the skill evaporates and the African falls back to his “normal level.” Thus, although the example of the Benin castings and carvings shows that the Negro has *some* ability to learn from those who are intellectually and culturally above him, it also shows the limitations of his capacity for development. That the Negro cannot maintain what he has learned suggests that the lack of development is inherent to his nature and not the result of particular historical circumstances.

The example of how the Negro may learn from the white race develops the same notion as expressed in the preceding acknowledgement that the Negro, when serving (white people), may show fidelity and obedience in the same way as a dog is obedient and loyal to its master, and carries out the tasks which his master has trained the dog to perform. The relationship between dog and dog-keeper is comparable to that between a European teacher in bronze casting and an African pupil. Just like the dog’s master controls the dog’s baser instincts and turns the dog into a faithful servant, the European master may exercise a positive influence over the Negro, control his impulses and turn his energies into useful purposes either as a servant or as a craftsman. Similarly to how the dog is incapable of independent thinking and serves as a mere extension of his master’s will and intellect, the Negro cannot cultivate and further the knowledge and skills he has gained from a superior intellect. The text carries with it the implication that there must be guidance from the white race in order for development to occur in Africa, and the control of the white race must remain in order for the level of development to remain. As such, the Benin case becomes part of a justification for colonization, where the relation between colonizer and colonized is analogous to that between teacher and pupil or that between master and dog. Earlier we observed the similarity between the stereotypes expressed by people occupying various positions in the colonial hierarchy from its highest echelons (Lord Cromer) to its lower ranks (intelligence officer Bacon, for example), and those found in British Museum publications. Comparing Joyce’s “scientific” treaty and the account of the members of the British expeditionary force to Benin

perhaps makes the point even clearer. The prejudices rehearsed by Joyce about the mental inferiority of Blacks and his comparisons between the anatomy of Blacks and that of apes (and his reference to the Blacks “doglike” fidelity) bears resemblance to the views expressed by the British expeditionary members, such as Bacon’s statement about the slow working of the Black man’s brain, Felix Roth’s comparisons between Blacks and monkeys, and Haggard’s view that Blacks are not to be regarded as “men” but as “something lower than asses.” In the accounts by the military men the comparisons with animals are more figurative than literal, but in the scholar Joyce’s text the animalizing sentiment gains the status of scientific truths: when he describes the Black as closer to the apes, this is not a mere metaphor, but an anatomical “fact.”

The derogatory views of Blacks aired by Joyce have a long history in Western thinking. Despite its pretensions to scientific objectivity, his text is an expression of Western traditionalism, and it is an amalgam of intellectual debris which had been accumulated over time. Some of the ideas he is expressing had been repeated over the centuries while others were of comparatively recent origin. The dogma that others are cannibals goes back to, at least, the 15<sup>th</sup> century, whereas the claim that the Black has a “tendency to prognathism” (a protruding jaw), and the belief that mankind could be arranged in a hierarchy based on the facial angle (according to the principle that the less a face and jaw jut forward the better) dates back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The theory that the early closing of the cranial sutures arrested the Black’s mental growth was first proposed by the anatomist Louis Gratiolet in 1856.<sup>70</sup>

The notion which underpins Joyce’s text – that mankind consists of different races which can be arranged on a scale of development from barbarity to civilization – was commonplace at the time of writing. However, as discussed in chapter 2, there is also a long Western tradition of dissent from such hierarchical views in favor of more cultural relativistic and pluralistic outlooks. Later on in this chapter, we shall return to the ways in which the criticism against Western cultural chauvinism and ethnocentrism was

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70. On Gratiolet: Gossett, 1997, 75, Spencer 1997, 445.

formulated in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but a main argument was that there were no clear differences between the (so-called) races, regarding, for example, intellectual capacity. Hence, the degree of technical and social development attained in different parts of the world was seen as the result of historical circumstances rather than innate racial qualities. From this it followed that all members of mankind had the same disposition for making progress.<sup>71</sup> Joyce does not explicate whether or not the Negro could develop, but the way he presented the Benin case – one of the few examples of prolonged peaceful contact between Africa and Europe – suggested little capacity for advancement. The Benin objects demonstrated that *not even* when gaining access to knowledge and facilities used to produce art of high artistic quality could the Edo (a proxy for all Africans) “really” learn. The artistic skill disappeared as soon as the influence from the teaching was no longer maintained. Thus, the deterioration of Benin art was proof that the African could only be artificially civilized.

Joyce’s article was in line with a colonial worldview and served to legitimize it. The prejudices he airs, such as the likening of Blacks to animals, are Western cultural constructs, but the *real* effects – on social relations and on minds and bodies – of this kind of thinking are worthy of consideration. Haggard, in charge of the carriers in the Benin Territories Expedition, makes the physical repercussions of such views explicit when in the same breath he characterizes Blacks as “lower than asses” and says that their only “redeeming feature is their fear and respect of the white man, and the fact that you can whack them as much as you please.”<sup>72</sup> In contrast to Haggard’s account, Joyce’s “scientific” treaty did not delve into how Whites should treat the intellectually inferior Blacks, and unlike Haggard, Joyce did not hold any direct power over Blacks. He did, however, lecture to British colonial administrators on the anthropology of “native races” and one may certainly wonder what “knowledge” they brought from these lectures and what consequences this had for the peoples these administrators were set to

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71. E.g. Finot 1906, 290: “It is fruitless to maintain the theory of the mental inferiority of Negroes and the consequent impossibility of civilizing them.”

72. Home 1982, 96.

rule over.<sup>73</sup> To this it should be added that it was not only in the colonies where Whites exercised domination over peoples of color. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* had a wide readership in Britain and an ever larger one in the United States. In the United States, at the time, Blacks in general occupied a position at the bottom of the social pyramid and racial segregation was legal. Lynching was still common. Between 50 and 60 Blacks were killed yearly by lynch mobs at the time when the eleventh edition, containing Joyce's article, was published.<sup>74</sup> The victims were tortured and killed by various methods, mostly by hanging but sometimes by being burned to death slowly. Victims could have their fingers and toes cut off by axes, or their teeth pulled out one by one, while they were still alive. Frequently they were castrated. After the act, body parts and postcards showing the lynching were circulated to install fear in the whole black population. Allegedly, lynching was used to punish rapists, and part of its justification was to keep the sexual appetite of black men in check to protect (white) women.<sup>75</sup> While it would perhaps be wrong to claim that Joyce's article had a direct influence on this American cultural behavior – just as it would be wrong to claim a direct casual relation between his writings and lectures on British colonial administrators' treatment of their subjects – one may note that what he wrote fitted into the image of black males driven by their uncontrollable sexual lust. The characterization of Blacks as lustful predatory animals, given by those who spoke in favor of lynching, resonated well with Joyce's "scientific" article on the subject. Proponents of lynching would have found much to agree with in his text, in particular his assurance that "after puberty sexual matters take the first place in the Negro's life and thoughts" and that the Negro is "subject to sudden fits of emotion and passion during which he is capable of performing acts of singular atrocity." Joyce here conveniently backed prejudice with the authority of both the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and the British Museum.<sup>76</sup>

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73. Howgego 2010.

74. Sullivan 1918, 145.

75. Gossett 1997, 269-273.

76. In scholarly circles, Joyce's article found approval with Harvard professor and plant geneticist Edward Murray East. His *Heredity and Human Affairs* from

To summarize the discussion so far: if one compares the “information” which the British Museum today presents about its contributions to knowledge production about the Benin objects, with what was actually written by British Museum scholars Read, Dalton, and Joyce on the subject, it seems fair to say that the museum gives a highly selective, if not distorted, version of its own contributions to the field of Benin studies. Mack clearly states that it was the “tireless” Read who made the Europeans aware of the indigenous origin of the Benin objects, and while Barley and Macgregor are much more vague about what the views of the “enlightened” and “pioneering” scholars Read and Dalton were, their texts hint that Read and Dalton contributed positively to research on the Benin objects. Joyce is not mentioned anywhere. These explicit or implied claims that the British Museum scholars were among those who argued for an independent rather than foreign origin of the Benin objects are not corroborated by the available evidence. The initial publications by Read, Dalton, and those of Joyce did *not* argue that Benin art had been created independently of foreign influence. While recognizing that the extant objects had been made by natives, they regarded the technology and art as an import from a “superior” or “higher” civilization, that is, from Europe. Not even Read’s singular acknowledgement of indigenous artistic capacity questioned the concept of African savagery, as he pointed out how exceptional this case was. Thus, the Benin objects were *not* interpreted by these scholars in ways which challenged assumptions of racial and cultural superiority and inferiority. Instead of challenging any such notions and patterns of thoughts, the interpretations offered by these scholars were made within such taken for granted frames of reference and served to reinforce them. In short, the British Museum’s knowledge production which was prompted by the “discovery” of the Benin objects confirmed rather than broke down any hierarchies.

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1927, evokes the authority of Joyce, “the ethnologist of the British Museum,” to support East’s own view of the intellectual inferiority of Blacks, although East declared that “the truth is a little more unfavourable to the negro than Joyce admits” (190-191).

Interestingly, in terms of the Benin objects and the intellectual consequences of their arrival in the West, there was actually a Benin scholar who saw evidence in these objects of native artistic and technical ability and explicitly used this as an argument to challenge derogatory views about Africans. This scholar was Felix von Luschan of the Ethnological Museum in Berlin.<sup>77</sup> Luschan acquired Benin objects from August 1897 and managed to build up the largest of all Benin collections for the Berlin museum in the following years.<sup>78</sup> He also wrote extensively about them. His first article “Die Altertümer von Benin,” which presented a number of objects in the Berlin museum, appeared in 1898.<sup>79</sup> In 1901 he published another collection in the Stuttgart museum.<sup>80</sup> A further article “Über Benin-Altertümer” appeared in 1916.<sup>81</sup> In 1919, after a long delay due to the war and other circumstances, his three-volume *Die Altertümer von Benin* appeared.<sup>82</sup> Benin objects are also referred to in his 1899 talk “Über die alten Handelsbeziehungen von Benin” (published in 1901) and in his book *Völker, Rassen, Sprachen* from 1922.<sup>83</sup>

Luschan gives the Benin objects the highest accolade in his article from 1898. He equates the Benin castings with the very best of the European casting tradition, declaring that neither the Renaissance artist Benvenuto Cellini – representing the apogee of the European casting tradition – nor anyone else before or after him could have cast these objects better. Certain objects compete with contemporary European art, and technically, the objects stand at the highest reachable level.<sup>84</sup> As for the technique, Luschan states, the issue of whether it had originated and progressed to these heights independently or with the help of foreign stimulus,

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77. Luschan, originally from Austria and trained as a physician, worked as a curator at the Ethnological Museum in Berlin from 1886 to 1905, and served as its director from 1905 to 1910. Following his departure he took up a position as professor of human anthropology at the University of Berlin. Irek 1990, Völger 2007.

78. Luschan 1919, 8.

79. Luschan 1898.

80. Luschan 1901a.

81. Luschan 1916.

82. Luschan 1919.

83. Luschan 1901b, 1922.

84. Luschan 1898, 150, 152.



perhaps from Europe, must remain open. However, this question is of minor importance. What is infinitely more important is that these artworks, which certainly had been executed by Africans and whose style was “purely African, definitely and exclusively African only,” are evidence of an “indigenous great and monumental art.” This realization should be accredited with a “general and moral importance” as it showed the fallacy of the “present, especially in many of the so-called ‘colonial’ circles, prevailing disregard of the Negro.”<sup>85</sup> Apparently, in Luschan’s view, the Benin objects had a value which went far beyond their importance for academic enquiries about Africa. The evidence they provided about indigenous African artistic and technical achievements had much larger “general and moral” implications.

He does not expand on this side of the topic in his 1898 article, but when speaking about Benin’s old trade contacts at the *Internationalen Geographien-Kongresses* in Berlin in 1899, Luschan uses the Benin objects as part of an argument to refute a number of stereotypes about Africans and as a plea to recognize their humanity. Drawing on Dapper’s 17<sup>th</sup> century account of Benin and other early European sources, as well as on the evidence from the Benin objects, he shows that Benin stood in close contact with other peoples long ago. Thus, contrary to the beliefs of some ethnologists, the West Africans are not “ethnically genuine” and cannot be regarded as “pure savages” or as “children of Nature totally uninfluenced by any foreign culture.” Luschan also stated that Africa had invented the technique of iron smelting and that Africans had mastered the metal casting technique. Therefore, Blacks are not to be seen as, or treated like, “savages”:

Human beings which have brought casting to absolute perfection, human beings to whom with almost absolute certainty the discovery of iron working may be attributed, human beings about whom we now know that they have for centuries stood in reciprocal contact with recognized cultured peoples (*Kulturvölkern*) may not be regarded as half-apes.<sup>86</sup>

85. Luschan 1898, 153.

86. Luschan 1901b, 611, cf. 1902 where he states that Europe owes the invention of iron smelting to Black Africa. Luschan thought that iron metallurgy had

Yet, the consequences of this realization for the ethnologists are of slight importance compared to its great “moral consequences.” With “horror and disgust” we learn again and again about the behavior of certain Europeans in Africa. These Europeans, who rightly may be labelled “white savages” because “they think and act like savages,” despise black people and subject them to the most brutal forms of mistreatment, including the habit in Congo of cutting off the hands of those who fail to deliver the required amount of rubber or ivory. While such atrocities may sometimes be ascribed to the personal brutality of a single individual, they would be committed less often if the broad layers of the European peoples were made aware that “the culture of the so called ‘savages’ is not inferior to our own, only different.”<sup>87</sup>

Thus, Luschan delivers an attack on the notion of European supremacy and African inferiority by reminding about African cultural achievements – the invention of iron smelting and mastery in casting – and of European acts of cruelty, exemplified by the atrocities in Congo. He also challenged the idea of cultural purity by pointing to the extensive trade between Benin and other cultures in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Benin objects contribute to the argument as they provide evidence of native technical skill in casting and that items depicted on the objects themselves are indicative of extensive and long-distance trade contacts.

In subsequent publications from 1901 and 1919, Luschan restates his views from 1898 that Benin art – although subject to influence from abroad – is “purely African, definitely and exclusively African only” and that the quality of the Benin objects proves derogatory views of Blacks wrong.<sup>88</sup> While in 1898 he had left the question of the origin of *cire perdue* technique open, he later opts for the idea that the technique preceded Portuguese contact in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In the article “Über Benin-Alttertümer” from 1916, and again in

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developed in Africa and spread northwards to Europe and Asia. Nowadays, it is believed that iron metallurgy was invented in Anatolia from where it spread to the Mediterranean and Eurasia, but whether the technology also reached from the Mediterranean to the south of the Sahara, or if the iron technology in sub-Saharan Africa is an independent development, is still debated. Alpern 2005.

87. Luschan 1901b, 612.

88. Luschan 1901a, 9-10, 13-15, 1919, x-xi, 15, 22-23, 510.

his *Altertümer von Benin* from 1919, he states that it is his personal belief that the technique had probably spread from ancient Egypt, although he is careful to point out that solid evidence to determine whether it had reached Benin from the north of the Sahara or via Portuguese contacts (or was autochthonous to West Africa) is lacking.<sup>89</sup> As to the question of the origin of Benin art – an issue which he distinguishes from the issue of the origin of the casting technique – he comments in 1919 that “psychologically, it is not without interest” that certain serious authors “with great stubbornness” have attributed Benin art to foreign influence. Luschan here redirects the enquiring gaze from the Benin objects to the European scholars, subtly implying that these scholars opinion is more determined by their own prejudices than anything else. In favor of regarding Benin art as indigenous he draws attention to the fact that naturalism is not alien to African art, letting a naturalistic wooden Ekoï mask from Cameroon exemplify that Negro art may reach a “monumental height” without any influence from Europe.<sup>90</sup>

In his book *Völker, Rassen, Sprachen* (Peoples, Races, Languages) from 1922, the Benin objects are again part of the argument to refute derogatory views of Africans. The overall thrust of this book is to challenge the notion of racial difference and of racial superiority and inferiority.<sup>91</sup> Although the book sums up a lifelong career, it is written against the backdrop of the current debates on race in Germany. In his discussion about the Jewish race – where he denounces the existence of such a “race” – Luschan observes that it “recently” has become fashionable to claim that the swastika is an Aryan or Germanic symbol and that it is being used for anti-Semitism. (Luschan may here be referring to the adoption of the swastika as the official symbol of the Nazi Party in 1920.) He calls such claims about the swastika being a uniquely Aryan symbol both “naïve” and “childish,” because the swastika is found in many cultures.<sup>92</sup> In the chapter on “Africa” Luschan notes that some

89. Luschan 1916, 311, 1919, x. See also 1910, 409.

90. Luschan 1919, 510-512.

91. Rusch 1986.

92. Luschan 1922, 175-178. On Luschan's opposition to anti-Semitism, see also

ignorant laymen still call black people “savages.” To counter the notion of the “savagery” of Africans, he argues that foreign influence on Africa has been underrated and refers his book *Altertümer von Benin* which has shown that through the millennia Africa has been in contact with other cultures. For example, the *cire perdue* technique which is widespread in West Africa probably originates from ancient Egypt.<sup>93</sup> Thus, to Luschan, influence from another culture is not a sign of the inferiority of the receiving culture. To him, that Africans have received and blended elements of Egyptian culture into their own is rather evidence which refutes the idea that Africans stand on a lower level of cultural development. Luschan adds that for decades he had argued “*that there are no other savages in Africa, than some maddened Whites*” (original italics) and that the atrocities committed by the Belgians in Congo have proven him right a hundred times over. He proceeds to argue that if many colonial governments do not begin to value indigenous African cultures more highly, Old Africa, already weakened by the four S’s – *Skclavenhandel*, *Schnaps*, *Syphilis*, *Schundwaren* – (slave trade, liqueur, syphilis, trashy goods), will soon disappear.<sup>94</sup> The four “S’s” allude to, and parody, the three “C’s” – Christianity, Civilization, and Commerce – which in the colonial rhetoric were supposed to raise Africans from savagery. Thus, Luschan is here denouncing the notion of African inferiority and mocks and reverses the European idea of who is “civilized” and who is a “savage.” Interestingly, for the present discussion, is that the West African *cire perdue* castings contribute to the argument.

A comparison between Luschan’s writings on Benin objects and those of Read, Dalton, and Joyce reveal vast differences. Read, Dalton, and Luschan all expressed the view that the Benin objects were equal to Renaissance masterpieces, but they drew very different conclusions from this. Read and Dalton marveled over the artistic capacity of “savages,” but they did not question the concept of “savagery.” Instead they strove to maintain the relationship

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Massin 1996, 90-92.

93. Luschan 1922, 50.

94. Luschan 1922, 50

between the civilized white and the primitive African by locating the source of influence to Europe. Read's eventual realization of indigenous artistic talent stressed the exceptionality of the case, thus turning it into a strange and curious anomaly to the "normal" lack of African artistic capacity. In Joyce's texts the decline of Benin art becomes evidence which fitted into and corroborated his general characterization of the Negro, as a being occupying a place between the white and the anthropoid apes on the scale of development.

Luschan, in sharp contrast, argued that these objects, made by Africans, were proof of African ability and that Africans were neither "savages" nor "half-apes." He did not deny foreign influence on Benin and West Africa, but rather emphasized the extensive contacts between Benin and other parts of the world. However, to Luschan, that West Africa had received impulses from abroad was not a sign of the inferiority of the receiving culture and the superiority of the giving culture. Instead it showed the concept of cultural purity to be flawed. Cultures blend into each other and a rigid hierarchy of cultures cannot be maintained. This was a view of cultural contact and cultural hybridity that was radically different from that expressed by Dalton and Joyce, to whom the decline of Benin art was caused by the withdrawal of Portuguese influence. Their reasoning suggested that different cultures are somehow incompatible, or at least, that impulses from "higher" cultures cannot survive in a "lower" culture.<sup>95</sup> Luschan – in contrast to Read who paired his acknowledgement of indigenous artistic talent with noting the rarity of the case – also argued that Benin was not the sole example of the African capacity for producing "monumental" art.

How was it that Luschan and the British Museum scholars interpreted the Benin objects so differently? Their contrasting interpretations need to be seen against the background of the intellectual

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95. Luschan was also of the opinion that Benin art declined after the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but he attributed the decline to a general political and social decline in West Africa caused by European influence: the slave trade and the import of liquor and gunpowder. Luschan 1919, 329. To Read and Dalton the decline of the Benin Kingdom was instead due to internal factors such as civil war.

and scholarly milieus these scholars worked in. At the time, British and German anthropology approached their subject of study – non-European human beings and their cultural products – with very different interpretative paradigms and goals. Read, Dalton, and Joyce were steeped in a tradition heavily influenced by the British anthropologist Edward Tylor’s scheme of human development. In this scheme, various segments of mankind occupied different positions in a normative sequence of cultural achievement from “savagery” to “civilization.” Tylor had laid out the method by which to place mankind on the ladder of development in his work *Primitive Culture* from 1871:

The educated world of Europe and America practically settles a standard by simply placing its own nations at one end of the social series and savage tribes at the other, arranging the rest of mankind between these limits according as they correspond more closely to savage or to cultured life.<sup>96</sup>

When assigning the different races or peoples to their respective place on the scale of development “the principal criteria for classification” were:

the absence or presence, high or low development, of the industrial arts, especially metal-working, manufacture of implements and vessels, agriculture, architecture &c, the extent of scientific knowledge, the definiteness of moral principles, the condition of religious belief and ceremony, the degree of social and political organisation and so forth.<sup>97</sup>

The goal of the British anthropologists working within Tylor-inspired frames of reference was to attribute designated groups of human beings into various positions in the chain of development, and to find the eternal laws which governed development (and degeneration).<sup>98</sup> Qualitative differences between human beings

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96. Tylor 1871, 23-24, Stocking 1987, 162.

97. Tylor 1871, 23-24, Stocking 1987, 162.

98. Stocking 1987, 185.

were sought and Western ethnocentrism was taken for granted. Indeed, it was the fundament on which the methodology was based since the crucial criterion for attributing a race or culture to its place on this scale was the degree of resemblance to, or difference from, the Whites who occupied the top of the evolutionary chain. Racial determinism was a persistent undercurrent of thought and perceived physical differences (regarding, for example, intellectual capacity) were given a high explanatory value when it came to “understanding” why different races had attained their respective level of progress. Race and culture were often seen as intrinsically linked, bound, and stable entities.<sup>99</sup> To Read, Dalton, and Joyce, the Benin objects – products of high artistic quality found amongst people standing at a low position in the chain of development – provided a curious anomaly in this evolutionary scheme. Thus, the Benin objects posed a problem which needed to be “solved,” and the solution they found was to attribute the artistic and technical excellence of the Benin objects to European influence: the Benin objects were the creations of European minds, executed by African hands. By locating the intellectual and creative stimulus of the Benin objects in Europe, the putative evolutionary hierarchy was saved and reconfirmed.

Luschan approached his subject from a very different perspective. In Germany, the most influential anthropologist in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Adolf Bastian, strongly opposed the evolutionist assumption that mankind could be arranged on a ladder of development where the Whites represented its highest form. To Bastian, and other leading anthropologists, the multitude of cultural phenomena encountered throughout the world was the result of intricate historical processes rather than being determined by innate racial characteristics or a universal law of development.<sup>100</sup> In certain respects the dominant trend in German anthropology in this time period may – from the perspective of today – be labelled

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99. The anthropologist William Holmes put the notion of a correlation between culture and body succinctly: “Man’s physical evolution and anatomical structure correlate directly with his activities – race and culture are intimately connected.” Holmes 1902, 353.

100. Bunzl 1996, 51-52. On Bastian: Penny 2002, 21-23.



anti-racist and cultural relativist, where tendencies to dehumanize non-Europeans and to regard them as “savages” were met with opposition.<sup>101</sup> Bastian was congratulated by his colleagues for having fought a “thirty year war” for the recognition of “the full dignity of all humans, including the despised and neglected ‘savages’, once considered half-animals.”<sup>102</sup> Luschan – who had been recruited to the Berlin Museum by Bastian in 1885 and served under Bastian’s directorship until Bastian’s death in 1905 – worked in, and carried on, the tradition of Bastian’s humanitarianism.<sup>103</sup> Luschan strongly opposed the idea that there were essential racial differences within the human species.<sup>104</sup> To him, the perceived differences between the so called “races” were the result of climatic and social factors. Most races were perfectly adapted to their natural environment and thus could not be evaluated in terms of inferiority and superiority. Neither could any objective criteria – regarding for example morality, cleanliness, absence or presence of writing, the custom of human sacrifice, etc. – be established to distinguish between the so-called “cultural peoples” and the so-called “savages” or “natural peoples.” The more one learns about the “natural peoples,” Luschan argued, the more one realizes that “there is never a border that surely and sharply separates them from the ‘cultural peoples.’”<sup>105</sup> Luschan repeatedly stressed that non-Europeans were not “savages,” reserving the word “savage” to those Whites who mistreated the native inhabitants.<sup>106</sup>

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101. Massin 1996.

102. Ranke 1896, 91, Massin 1996, 96.

103. According to Massin (1996), from the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the leading scholars Bastian and Rudolf Virchow had passed away, cultural chauvinistic views gained ground in German anthropology and scholars with hierarchical notions of race and culture came to occupy central positions in the academic establishment. Some of these scholars, including Eugen Fischer, Luschan’s successor at the chair of human anthropology at Berlin, eventually became Nazi supporters (see Proctor 1988, 140, for a photograph with Eugen Fischer and Martin Heidegger at a Nazi rally). Luschan, however, in the main, remained faithful to the humanitarian ideals of his predecessors until his death in 1924. His wife, Emma von Luschan, who survived him to 1941, was harassed by the Nazis. Irek 1990, 23

104. Luschan 1902, 1922, 187-188.

105. Luschan 1902, 169, Massin 1996, 102.

106. Luschan 1922, 50, 187-188.

From Luschan's view of humanity, the Benin objects did not create an enigma which needed an "explanation" in the way they did to his British colleagues. Rather, the artistic and technical excellence of the Benin objects became a further piece of evidence to challenge the assumption of Western superiority and African inferiority. This is why he assigned "a general and moral significance" to the fact that Africans were able to create artworks which could compete with the highest achievements of European art.

To my knowledge, among the scholars who published on the Benin objects in the last years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Luschan was the only one who explicitly and persistently argued that the Benin objects proved derogatory views of Africans to be wrong.<sup>107</sup> Therefore, *if* any Benin scholar is to be singled out and accredited with a role like that which Mack gives to the "tireless" Read, then the scholar should be Luschan. His publications on Benin objects easily dwarf the writings of Read on the subject, which makes Luschan a more worthy recipient of the epithet "tireless" than Read. This is not to suggest that the unreserved praise which Mack gives to Read should simply be transferred to Luschan. From today's perspective, Luschan's views on race, humanity, and colonialism often appear paradoxical and contradictory.<sup>108</sup> For example, while Luschan was adamant that there were no inferior races, he was equally sure that there existed inferior individuals in every society. He was a proponent of eugenics and argued that society should protect itself from "antisocial elements" and reduce their numbers. He considered crime to be a hereditary disease and recommended that criminals should be kept in "complete and permanent isolation" to prevent them from reproducing.<sup>109</sup>

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107. Raffaele Pettazzoni, a historian of religion who published on the Benin objects, made the same point at least once. He wrote that with the discovery of the Benin objects "the dogma of African stupidity was shaken once again." Pettazzoni 1912, 600.

108. Rusch 1986, Massin 1996, 102-106, Smith 2002, Völger 2007, Opoku 2008, 7.

109. On Luschan's views of eugenics: Luschan 1922, 188, Massin 1996, 104-105, Smith 2002, 34, Weikart 2004, 41, 54, 95, 137. On his militarism and glorification of war: Massin 1996, 105-106, Smith 2002, Weikart 2004, 198. On his favorable view of lynching: Irek 1990, 22. Luschan's attitude to colonialism

Although Luschan seems to be singular among those who wrote articles devoted to Benin objects in pointing out that these objects challenged the concept of African inferiority, other scholars who questioned European ethnocentrism and derogatory views of Africans also referred to them. One scholar to do so was the (Jewish-German-U.S. American) anthropologist Franz Boas. Boas, born and educated in Germany, emigrated to the United States in 1886, where he eventually became one of the most influential anthropologists. Working within the tradition of German racial liberal and cultural relativist anthropology, Boas was, from the 1890s to his death in 1942, a vocal critic of Western cultural chauvinism and racial prejudices.<sup>110</sup> In a speech delivered to black students at Atlanta University in 1906 he denounced the idea that “the present weakness of the American Negroe” is “racially inherent.”<sup>111</sup> As part of his refutation of black inferiority he lists a number of contributions to the development of human culture made by Africans. His first example is the invention of iron smelting, which he (like Luschan) considered to have been made in Africa, from where it had spread to the rest of the world. He also praises the “artistic industry” of native Africa, and states that a walk through the African museums of Paris, London, and Berlin and seeing the African works on display there is “a revelation.” The Benin castings are, according to Boas, also worthy of a “mention in passing,” because “although, perhaps due to Portuguese influences have so far excelled in technique any European work, that they are almost inimitable.” Boas acknowledges the possibility that the Benin castings owed something to Portuguese impulses, but he nevertheless includes them in his short exposé of African cultural achievements.

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is treated by Rusch 1986. According to Rusch, Luschan was not an opponent of colonialism as such, but advocated improvements in colonial policy. With the slogan “knowledge is power” he argued that anthropological research could be useful for colonial powers in facilitating governance in the colonies. Luschan 1902, 171.

110. Barkan 1992, 76-90, essays in Stocking 1996b, Baker 1998, 99-126, Lewis 2001. On Boas’s hybrid Jewish-German-U.S. American identity: Liss 1996, 156-157, 162, 167-178. Luschan and Boas had been colleagues at the Ethnological Museum in Berlin and corresponded with each other. Massin 1996, 92.

111. Boas 1906.

His reasoning seems to be similar to Luschan's: these works, executed by Africans, are evidence of African artistic and technical ability regardless of whether the casting technique originated from Europe or not. Credit is due to the Africans who made the objects, not to the Europeans from whom the technical know-how may have been learned.<sup>112</sup>

The (black U.S. American) scholar-writer-politician William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, who was then teaching history at Atlanta University, was in Boas's audience. DuBois recounted that Boas's presentation of the thousand-year long history of the sub-Saharan black kingdoms made a huge impression on him, as this history had never been told to him before.<sup>113</sup> Nine years later, in 1915, Du Bois published his own work, *The Negro*, the subject of which was to present a "general history of the Negro race" to refute the idea that Africa was without history and culture before European colonization. He notes that while there is no "general history of the Negro race" there are many books on Africa. Yet, none of the authors of these works write "from the point of view of the Negro as a man." He also notes the tendency to assign any cultural development in Africa to outside influence.<sup>114</sup> In the book he outlines the history of Africa and describes the cultural achievements of Africans, ranging from skills in social organization to industry in art and technology. Luschan's praise of Benin art from 1898 and a positive account of Yoruba art and culture from Frobenius are quoted verbatim. But Du Bois also points out that scholars have tried to wrest these cultural achievements from Africans and locate their origin elsewhere:

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112. Alexander Chamberlain, who wrote his doctoral thesis for Boas, makes this point explicit in his article "The contribution of the Negro to human civilization" from 1911. The article argues that, contrary to the view existing in the "minds of some Americans afflicted with acute Anglosaxonism and Negrophobia," Africa has made great contributions to human civilization. Chamberlain includes the Benin castings among these contributions, and while he notes that the casting technique (and other elements in African culture) may owe to foreign impulses, he stresses that the Africans have "adopted and skillfully improved these influences for their own use." Chamberlain 1911, 488, 493.

113. <http://www.webdubois.org/BoasAtlantaCommencement.html> (accessed 7 June 2016).

114. Du Bois 1970 [1915], 147.

Efforts have naturally been made to ascribe this [Yoruba-Benin] civilization to white people. First it was ascribed to Portuguese influence, but much of it is evidently older than the Portuguese discovery. Egypt and India have been evoked and Greece and Carthage. But all these explanations are far-fetched. If ever a people exhibited unanswerable evidence of indigenous civilization, it was the west-coast Africans. Undoubtedly, they adopted much that came to them, utilized new ideas, and grew from contact. But their art and culture is Negro through and through.<sup>115</sup>

This passage is clearly written in polemic against the theories put forward by scholars such as Crahmer, Dalton, Frobenius, Joyce, and Read. (Joyce's article on the Negro in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* is referred to as "ridiculous" by Du Bois.)<sup>116</sup> Like Luschan and Boas, Du Bois does not deny foreign influence in West Africa, but his wording shows that he sees the process of cultural contact not as a hierarchical one where Africans are passive recipients of the teachings of a "higher" civilization. He instead emphasizes the active part of the native population in the process of taking over ideas from abroad. The Africans have adopted and transformed foreign impulses within their own culture and used these impulses to their own benefit.

Returning to the issue of how the British Museum's contemporary narrative about the European reception of the Benin objects agrees with available evidence, it might seem that there is a degree of truth in MacGregor's claim about the positive impact of the arrival of the Benin loot in the Western world, if the writings of Luschan, Boas, and Du Bois are taken into account: the Benin (and Ife) objects were included in an argument to refute racial hierarchies. Although these attempts to counter Western stereotypes were not made by British Museum scholars, they have been made by others (and MacGregor is not explicit in the refutation of European derogatory views being due to British Museum scholars).

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115. Du Bois 1970 [1915], 37-38.

116. Du Bois 1970 [1915], 147.

Yet, MacGregor goes much further than making the observation that some writers have used the Benin objects as a case in their fight against Western prejudice. Reading MacGregor's texts literally, it is difficult to interpret his statement that the Benin objects helped to "completely transform" the colonial view of Africa in any other way than that he is convinced (or wants to convince his audience) that the Benin objects have been of paramount importance for the European understanding of Africa. His claim that "these objects /.../ did more than anything else to change European perceptions of Africa" actually suggests that he is of the opinion that no other events has been more important in reshaping the European view of Africa, than the discovery of the Benin objects.

This is a bold statement which requires careful consideration. Clearly, since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, there have been significant changes in the West as to what is considered legitimate and objective statements about Africans and other non-Western peoples. For example, when Read, in the preface to the 1892 and 1899 editions of *Notes and Queries for Anthropology*, regarding the intellectual capacity of those who were the subject of anthropological enquiry, claimed that "the savage in the lower stages of culture" possesses a "limited range of vocabulary or of ideas," this was a rather uncontroversial standpoint at the time among British anthropologists.<sup>117</sup> Likewise, when Joyce, in his article in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* from 1911, stated that the mental superiority of Whites over Negroes was "a fact," he could ignore the minority who opposed the facticity of this statement. Yet, such views about innate racial differences, expressions of what today is labelled "scientific racism," have been increasingly challenged during the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nowadays they belong to the murky margins rather than the mainstream of Western expressed opinion about non-Westerners.<sup>118</sup>

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117. Read 1892, 87-88, Read 1899, 87-88, Urry 1993, 24-25, Stocking 1996a, 120-121.

118. The views of Joyce and Filippo Manetta – whose work Joyce refers to – still have their supporters. Joyce's article in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* is today quoted with approval in white supremacist blogs and journals, and there is one webpage in this genre with a lengthy article (illustrated with children dressed as Ku Klux Klan members) which praises Manetta.

Although there have been considerable changes in the Western view of Africa since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it may be discussed whether the “colonial view of Africa” has, as MacGregor puts it, been “completely transformed”; a wording which may suggest that the Western mind has been cleared of *all* its stereotypes and prejudices against Africans. As pointed out by Said, while many manifest expressions of Western superiority over others have disappeared, they live on in latent forms as deep-rooted patterns of thought which are voiced in more subtle manners. Leaving aside the discussion of how profound these changes have been, we may turn to the central issue: has, as MacGregor states, the realization of the indigenous origin of the Benin objects been a main, or even *the main*, driving force behind changes in the Western view of Africans?

It is very difficult to find evidence to support this claim. Arguably, for MacGregor’s point to hold true, one would expect the Benin objects to have had a pivotal position in 20<sup>th</sup> century debates on questions regarding the capabilities of different races. This is hardly the case. Although the writings of Luschan, Boas, and Du Bois show that the Benin objects were used as ammunition in such debates, it cannot be said that the Benin objects held center stage in them.<sup>119</sup> Many authors who also questioned the notion of European cultural and racial superiority did not refer to the Benin objects, and not even Luschan, Boas, and Du Bois argued that the Benin objects provided them with the crucial piece of evidence which finally laid Western stereotypes to rest. Rather, the Benin objects were one of many examples – but *not* the final proof – of African capability. Significantly perhaps, Boas’s work, *The Mind of Primitive Man* from 1911, which is an extensive challenge of the assumed

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119. I have limited the discussion here to these texts by Luschan, Boas, and Du Bois. A more extensive study of the reception of the Benin castings and of Western debates on Western cultural and racial supremacy may well locate additional authors who advocate the Benin castings as an example to challenge derogatory views of Africans (as well as additional authors who like Read, Dalton, and Joyce integrate the Benin castings in line with their prejudiced views), but even if the body of material might be increased it will not, I think, significantly change the picture, and validate a claim that the Benin and Ife castings have been of great importance in these debates for (re-)forming the Western view of Africans.



European racial and cultural superiority, does not mention Benin objects. The present-day literature I have consulted which provides general overviews of, and discusses the causes for, changes in Western views of non-Westerners during the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century do not lend support to the idea that the Benin objects have had any significant impact on these views. Extensive studies on the topic, such as Lee Baker's *From Savage to Negro. Anthropology and in the Construction of Race 1896-1954*, Elazar Barkan's *The Retreat of Scientific Racism. Changing Concepts of Race in Britain and the United States between the World Wars* and Jan Nederveen Pieterse's *White on Black. Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture* do not contain any references to Benin objects.<sup>120</sup> MacGregor appears to be alone in his belief in the paramount influence of the Benin objects on the transformations of Western views of others.

It is beyond the reach of this study to map out and discuss in detail the causes for the changes in the Western perception of Africans (and other others) during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but these changes are better seen as part of major geopolitical transformations in the cultural, economic, political, and social landscape during this time period, rather than as caused by the arrival of any particular group of objects to the West. When the Benin objects were taken to Europe the perceived racial, cultural, and moral distance between the Whites and the various colored peoples was arguably greater than ever before and after. The rapid technological development in the Western world during the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century seemed to reaffirm the superiority of the Whites over the rest of mankind. As long as machine guns and other civilizing instruments were used against non-Western enemies, the increased efficiency in weapon technology was largely regarded as synonymous with an increase in the level of civilization. A major blow to the idea that technological and cultural advances went hand in hand came with the First World War when these weapons were turned against other Whites. From the 1920s, pessimism over the merits of Western "civilization" and "progress" began to gain some ground, although in British anthropology, scientific racism

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120. Baker 1998, Barkan 1992, Nederveen Pieterse 1992.

was not seriously challenged until the 1930s (at least partly, as a reaction to the racial doctrines of Nazi Germany).<sup>121</sup> The first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century also saw a new phase in colonization. Around 1910, the rapid colonial expansion in Africa and elsewhere had come to an end, simply because, with few exceptions, there was no more territory to conquer. Nederveen Pieterse suggests that when the African's position in relation to the Westerner was transformed from an enemy hindering colonial expansion to a colonial subject, the Western image of the African also underwent a change – from fierce warrior-savage to submissive child-savage.<sup>122</sup> In this period various systems of indirect rule were introduced in the colonies, sometimes as concessions to increasingly vocal protests by their inhabitants. One of Britain's colonies, Ireland, acquired independence in 1921. Within the Western countries previously taken for granted hierarchies of class and gender also became increasingly challenged throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In many Western countries suffrage was extended beyond the male economic elite to eventually include all adult citizens. If the First World War had a major impact on the notion of Western superiority over the rest of mankind, the Second World War did even more to challenge such ideas. It showed that Westerners (or at least Germans and Austrians) could outdo all others in savagery, and it did much to discredit scientific racism. Also, during the Second World War, to counter Nazi imperialism and racism, various doctrines were formulated which stipulated the right of every people to choose its own form of government. These doctrines (eventually) also came to be seen as applicable to the inhabitants of the European colonies.<sup>123</sup> After the Second World War the process of decolonization began. In 1948, three years after the war, India gained independence. Ghana was the first African country to become independent in 1956. Nigeria followed a couple of years later in 1960. The post-war years were also a time of internal decolonization and human rights struggles.

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121. On inter-war British anthropology: Kuklick 1991, Barkan 1992, Stocking 1996a.

122. Nederveen Pieterse 1992.

123. Pearce 1982. The impact of the Second World War for illuminating American hypocrisy and double standards regarding racial equality at home and abroad is noted by Baker 1998, 193.

In the United States, during the 1950s and 1960s, the civil-rights movement achieved the abandonment of the laws on racial segregation, while in South Africa the apartheid system remained in force until 1994.<sup>124</sup> The fight for independence has involved iconic figures such as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, and Nelson Mandela.<sup>125</sup>

The Western perception of self and other and the academic “knowledge” production about Africa and Africans is caught up within these larger historical processes. Africanist studies – the “scientific” enquiry and the evaluation of Africans and their cultural products – have contributed *both* to reinforce and to debunk taken for granted assumptions about African inferiority and European superiority. The evidence from anthropometric studies, and craniometry in particular, have been used to prove as well as to disprove the idea of racial and mental differences between Whites and Blacks (and other peoples of color).<sup>126</sup> Likewise, the Benin objects have been interpreted from diametrically opposite perspectives and with different results. Some writers – Dalton, Read, and Joyce – who were confident in their belief that Africans stood below Whites in level of mental and cultural development, interpreted the Benin objects in ways which did not question, but rather consolidated, this hierarchy of human beings and cultures. Other writers – Luschan, Boas, and Du Bois – who opposed such thinking, interpreted these objects in ways which challenged the notion of African inferiority. It is, I think, impossible to state which of these two interpretations has had the most impact on Western views of Africans. Presumably, neither has contributed very much to it. As said before, the Benin objects have not held a central stage

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124. To this it needs to be added that despite the formal equality achieved in many spheres, deep-rooted stereotypes and patterns of thought live on. On the durability of internalized stereotypes, cf. Nederveen Pieterse 1992, 11.

125. Many more names could be added, such as Léopold Senghor, a leading personality in the *négritude* movement, who was appealed by Frobenius’s (later) writings which praised black African purity. Marchand 1997, 168-169. Paradoxically, in a sense, Frobenius may be judged to have meant as much, or more, for African self-confidence than any of the scholars discussed in this study.

126. On craniometry: e.g. Massin 1996, Barkan 1992.

in the debates on human “races.” To claim that these objects “did more than anything else to change European perceptions of Africa” is to make a generalization which over-rates their importance, and which – crucially – ignores the more negative contributions to the view of Africans made by Dalton, Read, and Joyce, whose insistence on foreign dependence buttressed notions of European supremacy and African subordination.

Hitherto the presentation of the Western reception of the Benin objects has concentrated on the time period up to the years around 1920, where the expressed opinions about the Benin objects included those (Read, Dalton and Joyce) who attributed the technical and artistic excellence more to foreign teachers than indigenous pupils, and those (Luschan, Boas, and DuBois) who saw in these objects evidence of indigenous talent, regardless of whether the technique was of foreign origin or not. As for the sources of outside influence, Read, Dalton and Joyce looked to Portugal and Europe, while Roth preferred Egypt. Luschan too considered an Egyptian origin of the *cire perdue* technique likely, but did not see it as a sign of native inferiority. In what follows, consideration will be given to the writings on the Benin objects from the 1920s and onwards. The focus is on these two issues: scholarly opinion on the source of influence for the technique and naturalistic style (Portugal or Egypt), and how the question regarding foreign versus indigenous agency is presented. The discoveries made at Ife, in 1910 and 1938, will also be treated, as well as the discoveries made at Igbo-Ukwu in 1938 and in the 1960s. This is because the British Museum makes certain statements regarding the Western reception the Ife objects, and because the Ife and Igbo-Ukwu finds have relevance for the question of whether West African knowledge of the lost wax technique predated Portuguese contact or not. The presentation will, I think, show two things. Firstly, during the 1920s, the idea that the *cire perdue* technique and the naturalistic style was brought to West Africa with the Portuguese was abandoned in favor of the view that *cire perdue* casting was practiced before the advent of the Portuguese, and that both the casting technique and naturalistic style was ultimately of Egyptian origin. The view that the art and

technique had reached the Edo via Ife became popular. Secondly, the kind of language used by Read, Dalton, and Joyce, which expressed intercultural contacts and influences in dichotomized relations between “teacher/pupil,” “civilization/savagery,” was also abandoned. Thus Benin culture and art becomes seen as an expression of indigenous rather than foreign capacity. These two shifts, the relocation of the source for Benin art from Portugal to Egypt, and a less hierarchical view of the relationship between Blacks and non-Blacks are not necessarily related. Amaury Talbot, for example, who in the 1920s argued against the theory of Portuguese origin in favor of an Egyptian one, derives all development in West Africa to influence from racially superior foreigners. He states that due to the “constant influx of white blood from the north and east” the Nigerian had evolved into a “comparatively high and intelligent type” and that Yoruba (Ife) and Edo civilization – the latter “with its extraordinary fine bronze and brass work” – was the creation of “semi-white invaders.”<sup>127</sup>

These changes in scholarly opinion and attitude may be attributed both to internal development within the field of Benin studies itself and to external influences. The internal development includes such aspects as scholarly persuasion, but in particular the emergence of new “evidence” from Edo oral sources as well as new discoveries of objects (at Ife and Igbo-Ukwu) and of indigenous copper sources, the latter of which is of crucial significance for the question of whether the *cire perdue* technique was autochthonous or not. External influences relate to general changes in the Western perception of Africa and Africans which took place during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which in turn reside within the larger social and geopolitical transformations outlined earlier. Thus, while it is not the case that the Benin objects have propelled changes in the perception of Africa and Africans (as MacGregor claims), it might be argued that, over time, the perception of the Benin objects have changed along with the shifts in the perception of Africa and the Africans.

A look at the editorial changes (or lack of them) made in Joyce’s article Negro from 1911 in subsequent editions of *Encyclopaedia*

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127. Talbot 1969 [1926], 18, 28, cf. 278.

*Britannica* might illustrate the point of the interdependence of the evaluation of the African (in particular regarding mental capacity) and the evaluation of the Benin objects (whether they were the products of indigenous or foreign talent). In the 1922 and 1926 editions, Joyce's article is reprinted without any changes: thus, the mental inferiority of the Black to the White is still a "fact," and among the very few positive qualities of the Negro is a "doglike fidelity" and that he – if "given suitable instruction" – may become a skilled craftsman. This is immediately followed by the declaration that the rapid degeneration of the art when "the direct foreign inspiration" was interrupted, shows that the Negro was momentarily raised above his "normal level." Thus, the case of the Benin art corroborates the point of the mental inferiority of the Negro to the White.<sup>128</sup> However, in the edition from 1929, the article has been edited. Under the new heading "Mental qualities" the anonymous author has replaced the section on the mental inferiority of the Negro with a quote from Alexander Carr-Saunders book *The Population Problem* from 1922 stating that comparative studies of the differences between the Negro and the "modern European" show that:

there seems to be no marked difference in innate intellectual power. The differences are rather differences in disposition and temperament. [...] The apparent arrest of development may not be so much an inevitable result of the kind of mental faculties which are inherited as the coming into play of a peculiar tradition.<sup>129</sup>

In contrast to Joyce's article, which called the mental inferiority of the Negro a "fact," it is here cautiously suggested ("there seems") that there is no significant difference in inherent intellectual

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128. These two editions are reprints of the 1911 editions, augmented with three supplementary volumes. The supplements contain no update relating to Joyce's text for the article "Negro." Only the text under the subheading "Negroes in the United States" is complemented with statistics on population growth in the United States. Willcox 1922, 1926.

129. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 1929.

capacity between Whites and Blacks. That there is an “arrest of development” is not questioned, but this “apparent” arrest is assumed to be caused more by “a peculiar tradition,” than by inheritance. Thus, the lack of intellectual progress is due to cultural factors, rather than being biologically determined. Further on, but still under the heading “Mental qualities” the article repeats the sentences from 1911 (and 1922 and 1926) that the Negro, when “given suitable training,” has the capacity to become a skilled craftsman and that evidence for this is found in the bronze casting and ivory carvings made by the natives of Guinea following the arrival of the Portuguese in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. However, the next sentence, found in the earlier editions, stating that the Negro was momentarily raised above his normal capacity and fell back to making inferior art when the Portuguese contact was interrupted, is not repeated in the 1929 edition. Thus, according to the way in which the text is organized here, the artistic capacity of the Negro becomes evidence which supports a less static and somewhat less hierarchical view of the relationship between the intellectual capacities of Negroes and Whites, compared to the articles in the earlier editions. The artistic skill shown in the Benin objects suggests that the Negro has artistic potential and is not inevitably inferior to the White.

Elsewhere, the article has preserved Joyce’s text and thus rehearses many of his condescending views. It is still said that regarding certain physical characteristics, the Negro “stands on a lower evolutionary plane than the white man, and is closely related to the higher anthropoids,” that cannibalism “in its simplest form” is found in Africa, that Islam is “simple, categorical and easily comprehended” and so forth. The article was reprinted in the same form as late as 1956.<sup>130</sup>

While to some extent the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* kept up to date with scholarly development and softened the rigid hierarchy of Whites and Blacks in the 1929 edition, no such repositioning seems to have been made in the British Museum during the 1920s. As noted before, very little was written on the Benin objects by

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130. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 1956. The article from 1958 was a complete rewrite. Herskovits 1958.



British Museum scholars during the 1920s and 30s. What was published was restricted to brief notes on recent acquisitions, where it was again stated that the *cire perdue* technique derived from the Portuguese. The *Handbook to the Ethnographical Collections* from 1910 takes the same position and repeats it in the second edition from 1925.<sup>131</sup> Joyce's text in the handbook does not contain a characterization of Negroes, but as already mentioned in the previous chapter, it describes "primitive man" as an intellectually deficit being – a "creature of habit" who thinks slowly and with little capacity for analysis. In the second edition of the handbook from 1925, the passage on primitive thinking was left wholly unaltered.<sup>132</sup> The British Museum can hardly be described as having belonged to the vanguard in the fight against Western ethnocentrism and prejudices.

We shall now turn to the Ife heads, and the story of their Western reception as told by the British Museum. To recapitulate, the narrative presented in the exhibition, home page, and the texts by Barley, Mack, MacGregor, and Platte are structured in much the same way as the story of the Western reception of the Benin objects: when these objects were discovered attempts were made to explain them away as being the result of foreign influence. However, such erroneous beliefs were eventually vindicated through the efforts of Western scholarship, or, more specifically, according to Barley, by a British Museum scholar – William Fagg – who after the Second World War "controversially" declared that the Ife objects predated Portuguese influence and were "wholly indigenous." In MacGregor's version, the Ife heads had a profound impact on the Western view of Africa and Africans. According to MacGregor, while Frobenius had speculated in 1910 about Greek sculptors from the lost island of Atlantis, the 1939 publication of the heads found in the preceding year confirmed that the heads belonged to "totally African tradition" and that "it is hard to exaggerate what a profound reversal of prejudice and hierarchy this represented." Thus, "the impact of the Ife heads in 1939" is a good example of how "things can change thought."

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131. British Museum 1910, 241, British Museum 1925, 251-252.

132. British Museum 1910, 31-32, British Museum 1925, 30-31.

As to differences between these accounts, it might be observed that MacGregor puts the realization of the heads' indigenous origin to 1939, while Barley dates it to after the Second World War. In contrast to MacGregor, the British Museum home page states that in 1938-1939 the objects were *not* seen as indigenous; Platte's text seems to suggest the same thing (although it is not entirely clear if she refers to the situation in 1910 or the late 1930s).

Obviously, all of these versions of the reception of the Ife objects cannot be correct. So, which of them (if any) is? Concerning the discovery in 1910, the narrative is right insofar as theories of outside origin were advanced. Frobenius did try to link the Ife culture to the Mediterranean, and speculated about population movement, via Atlantis, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century BCE. However, Frobenius's idea was not generally accepted. Read rejected it and so did Luschan.<sup>133</sup> As for the discovery in 1938, when the British Museum's homepage (and Platte) suggests that the reaction was that the objects "could not have been made in Africa by African artists" and that "it was assumed either that they had been produced by an artist outside Africa and then imported into Ife or that they had been made inside Africa by an artist trained in Europe," this is hard to reconcile with the evidence.

In the first publication of these objects, the article "The legacy of an unknown Nigerian 'Donatello'" which appeared in the *Illustrated London News* in April 1939, the author William Bascom states that these objects had been made by "Negro bronze worker[s]" and that "it would seem entirely reasonable, failing proof to the contrary, to look upon this art as an indigenous development."<sup>134</sup> While Bascom leaves the door open for the possibility that the technique and "even the particular style of these heads" could have been introduced by the Portuguese, he prefers to see both as indigenous. Other scholars – Eva Meyerowitz, Herbert Meyerowitz, and Kenneth Murray – writing about the Ife castings in the following years reject the idea of a Portuguese influence completely.<sup>135</sup> They date the castings to

133. Read 1910, Luschan 1910, 409, 1919, 511.

134. Bascom 1939.

135. Meyerowitz, Eva & Herbert 1939, 155, Meyerowitz 1940, 129-130, 1941, 89, Murray 1941, 76.

the 12-14<sup>th</sup> century, that is, to a point in time pre-dating the arrival of the Portuguese in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, and thus rule out the idea that their creators had received impulses from European art traditions and techniques.

It appears that no scholar at the time suggested that the Ife castings were made “by Europeans or under European influence,” as stated by Platte.<sup>136</sup> In this respect, MacGregor is right when he writes that the heads were regarded as indigenous in 1939. Yet, he also boldly claims that “it is hard to exaggerate what a profound reversal of prejudice and hierarchy this represented.” It seems that MacGregor might be overrating the impact of the objects in 1939 (and thus contradicts his own statement about the difficulty of exaggerating these objects’ importance). As observed by Platte, the outbreak of the Second World War a few months after the initial publication of these objects drew attention to other concerns and the objects received fairly little public interest at the time. The head acquired by the British Museum was, I assume, evacuated with the rest of the museum’s collections during the war, and was thus removed from public view. It was not until a decade later, in the late 1940s that the Ife heads received wider attention through temporary exhibitions and media coverage.<sup>137</sup> Indeed, in connection with the *Traditional Art of the British Colonies* exhibition, held during Colonial Month in 1949, Fagg took the opportunity to challenge some paternalistic views of Africans and other colored peoples. Responding to the claim made in a leading article in *The Times* that these peoples should “participate in the more sophisticated culture and political development of the ruling race,” he countered that there was much to learn from “our colonial brothers” in the cultural, social,

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136. The only writer known to me who sees European influence in the Ife castings is the artist Leon Underwood who suggested in 1949 that the casting technique may have come to Ife in the 14<sup>th</sup> century together with “a Roman or Renaissance portrait style.” Underwood 1949, 3, 13, 25. Platte 2010, 54-55, in her presentation of Underwood’s contributions, fails to mention this theory of his.

137. Fagg & Underwood 1949, 1, Fagg 1949e, 1951b, Platte 2010, 39-49, Kirk-Greene 2012, 10-11. The two Ife heads taken by Bascom were exhibited in the United States during the 1940s. Fagg 1950a, 133. The terracotta heads brought to Germany by Frobenius had been exhibited there and casts of these heads were included in the 1935 MoMa exhibition. Sweeney 1935, 43, Ivanov 2000.

and political spheres. For centuries, British art and culture has been enriched by continental masterpieces, but the “equally great works of the best African and Oceanic tribal masters remain unknown.” He hoped that the public would take the opportunity to learn from the exhibition “at which the African genius especially is seen at its finest and in astonishing variety, from the Ife sculpture which outdo Praxiteles in naturalism to the awe-inspiring cubism of the Niger delta tribes.” He also added that in other fields “our culture [...] would be enriched by a fuller knowledge of the ‘primitive’ cultures,” exemplifying with that “some African tribes have practiced democracy for centuries in a manner unparalleled in ancient or modern Europe.”<sup>138</sup> Here Fagg clearly utilizes the Ife objects – and “tribal” or “traditional” art generally – in an argument to counter some prevailing Western ethnocentric assumptions. Still, it seems unlikely that the Ife heads in 1949 profoundly reversed prejudices and hierarchies. In connection to this, it could be added that Fagg’s own position on the issue of human diversity was hardly radical or ahead of its time. In the following year when UNESCO announced its “Statement by Experts on Race Problems,” Fagg, as spokesman of the Royal Anthropological Institute, raised objections. He expressed the institute’s support for the main purpose of the statement of abating racialism. However, he judged “certain views” expressed in the statement to be “highly controversial,” such as its claim that “race is less a biological fact than a social myth,” and the suggestion that the term “ethnic group” should be substituted for “race” in everyday speech.<sup>139</sup>

Looking back to the 1938 discovery at Ife and its significance for the question of the origin of the *cire perdue* technique in West Africa, it is also perhaps less dramatic than implied by MacGregor. As seen in the discussions about the Benin objects, the idea of a European origin of the *cire perdue* technique in West Africa had been seriously questioned earlier. Luschan, and other scholars, had argued that knowledge of the technique antedated Portuguese contact and suggested it originated from Egypt.<sup>140</sup> Luschan tenta-

138. Fagg 1949a, 1949b, cf. Harries 1949.

139. Fagg 1950c, 1950d, 1950e, Hazard 2012, 48-52.

140. Scholars who proposed an Egyptian origin include: Brinckmann in Ranke

tively dated some Benin objects to before the arrival of the Portuguese in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, but was careful to point out that in the absence of securely dated objects from excavations, the question of whether or not the *cire perdue* casting technique was known in West Africa before Portuguese contact must remain unanswered.<sup>141</sup> In the chronology proposed by Struck in 1923, which was based on the dates attributed to different objects by Luschan in his *Altertümer von Benin*, the first phase of Benin art was dated from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>142</sup>

Important new “evidence” in favor of the hypothesis that lost wax casting was practiced before the advent of the Portuguese came with the publication of Amaury Talbot’s *The Peoples of Southern Nigeria* in 1926. Talbot reported that “according to Bini history,” which he judged to have been handed down “fairly accurately,” metal casting “had been known for long ages before the coming of the white man.”<sup>143</sup> (Edo tradition had apparently changed since 1897 when informants connected the origin of the technique with *Ahammangiwa*, a man who was identified as being white.)<sup>144</sup> The idea that Portugal was the source of the *cire perdue* technique lost popularity among scholars and in 1935 Wilfrid Hambly stated in his *Culture Areas of Nigeria* that “the hypothesis that bronze casting was introduced into Benin by the Portuguese now finds no supporters.”<sup>145</sup>

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1898, 63, Stoll 1902, Marquart 1913, XLII-L. Scholars who favored a European origin include: Hagen 1899 (1900), 15-16, 1917 (1918), 1-5, Buchner 1908. Strieder 1932 argued that the Edo had learned the casting technique from German artillerymen.

141. Luschan 1916, 311, 1919, 510-512.

142. Struck 1923, 142, 145.

143. Talbot 1969 [1926], 29, 280. Talbot suggested that the casting technique had been introduced to the Edo from Ife, but it is unclear in his account if this idea had any support in “Edo tradition” or not. Cf., however Thomas 1918, 185, who reported that Edo brass workers traced their ancestry to Ife. See also Einstein 1921, 12, Eisenhofer 1993, 78.

144. Or, there may have been different “traditions” on the origin of the casting technique. If there was a change in tradition, one may wonder if this change was a response to the kind of sentiment most clearly expressed in Joyce’s article in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* which related the Portuguese origin to the intellectual backwardness of black people.

145. Hambly 1935, 400, cf. 468: “a consensus of opinion is against the suggestion

Thus, when William Fagg, in his article “The antiquities of Ife” in *Magazine of Art* from 1950, dates the Ife castings from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> century and argues that the Edo had learned the *cire perdue* technique from Ife rather than from the Portuguese – this can hardly be described as very “controversial” views for its time.<sup>146</sup> What was novel – perhaps even controversial – was that he pointed out that the Ife naturalistic style could have developed independently in Africa without outside influence. Although some – Luschan and Bascom – had previously argued that the naturalistic style need not be of foreign origin, others – Eva and Herbert Meyerowitz, Murray, Talbot and Hambly – derived both technique and style from Egypt (or other places in the Mediterranean or the Near East). In this sense, Fagg’s view represented a break with a dominant thought in the scholarly literature. Yet, Fagg did not completely reject the notion that naturalism was of foreign origin, as he concluded the discussion by stating that it is “difficult not to attribute at least the germ [of naturalism] to influences from ancient Egypt.” Exactly how these “influences” had come to be and affected the Ife naturalistic castings he did not explain, but elsewhere in the article he suggested that the Yoruba and other tribes had migrated from near the Nile valley to West Africa.<sup>147</sup> Similarly, in the article “De l’art des Yoruba” in *L’Art Nègre* from the following year, he states that Ife naturalism need not be attributed to a foreign race, but that the most valid working hypothesis is that the Yoruba journeyed from the Orient, perhaps the upper Nile valley, during the first centuries of the Christian era, and brought with them the *cire perdue* technique and the “germ” of realism from “Greek art.”<sup>148</sup> It is not until some years later – in *The Sculpture of Africa* from 1958 – that he is confident that Ife naturalism had developed independently without any “influences” from Egypt or anywhere else, although he is still of the opinion that the *cire perdue* technique had “diffused” from North Africa or the Nile valley.<sup>149</sup> He does not give an opinion

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that the Portuguese introduced casting in bronze and brass.”

146. Fagg 1950a, also see 1950b, cf. Jeffreys 1951, 87.

147. Fagg 1950a, 131, 133.

148. Fagg 1951a, 116.

149. Fagg in Elosophon and Fagg 1958, 59-60. See also: Fagg and Willett 1962, 369-

on whether the technology was brought in by population movement or other forms of contacts, but in *Nigerian Images* published in 1963 he hypothesizes that it was introduced by “highly cultured immigrants from the Nile valley or elsewhere.”<sup>150</sup> The argument the idea that the casting technique was of foreign origin was to a large extent built on the then prevailing assumption that there were no sources for copper in Nigeria suggesting that the metal – and presumably also the techniques for working it – must have been imported from abroad.

As stressed by Luschan, without data from archaeological excavations, the chronology of the Benin objects and the question of the origin of the casting technique remained conjectural. He had hoped that archaeological field work could have been carried out in Benin City, preferably by the Berlin Museum and the British Museum in cooperation, but these plans never materialized.<sup>151</sup> The (limited) amount of archaeological excavations eventually undertaken in Benin City from the 1950s to the 1970s has done little to clarify the chronology of the Benin objects and the origin of the casting technique.<sup>152</sup> However, crucial evidence in favor of the *cire perdue* technique most likely having developed in West Africa, independent of influence from metalworking technologies elsewhere, has come through stylistic, technological, and metallurgical examination of the quantities of bronzes found at Igbo-Ukwu, as well as the examination of local sources for tin and copper.<sup>153</sup> At Igbo-Ukwu, a number of bronzes were first accidentally discovered in 1938, and subsequent systematic excavations in the 1960s produced many more examples. Radiocarbon dates from the excavation dated the bronzes to the 10<sup>th</sup> century, making them the oldest hitherto known *cire perdue* castings from West Africa, predating Portuguese contact by several centuries. When the Igbo-Ukwu finds were

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370, 373.

150. Fagg 1963, 30, cf. 25.

151. Luschan 1919, vii.

152. Nevadomsky 1997, 22.

153. The discussion here on the Igbo-Ukwu bronzes is based on Chikwendu *et al.* 1989 and Craddock *et al.* 1997.



published in the 1970s, the excavator and other scholars proposed that these bronzes had been made of imported metal and that the *cire perdue* technique ultimately derived from north of the Sahara. A main reason for suggesting that the copper and the technique were foreign imports was that, at the time, no copper sources had been discovered in Nigeria. Although some writers queried the assumption that Nigeria did not possess copper ore, it was nevertheless seen as more likely that the metal – and the *cire perdue* technology – had been imported from abroad. As the excavators later admitted, this hypothesis was buttressed by “a very real, if unarticulated feeling” that the native population of this rain forest area could not have created these sophisticated metal-works without outside help.<sup>154</sup>

Since then, sources of copper have been located in the vicinity of Igbo-Ukwu and it can be assumed that the copper and tin for the Igbo-Ukwu bronzes derive from such local sources. Moreover, further considerations of the objects themselves have suggested that the *cire perdue* technology is an independent development. The metal working technology used for the Igbo-Ukwu bronzes differs in some important ways from the metal working technologies used elsewhere at the time. Firstly, in contrast to the contemporary Mediterranean/Middle East *cire perdue* castings, the Igbo-Ukwu objects are not genuine hollow-castings (in which the clay core is suspended inside the outer mold with pins), but they are made with a clay mold projecting deeply inside the casting. In the Mediterranean and the Middle East this technique was abandoned in the first millennium B.C.E. Secondly, the technique of working sheet metal, commonly used in the Mediterranean and the Near East, appears to have been unknown at Igbo-Ukwu. Thirdly, all the Igbo-Ukwu bronzes which have been examined are made of bronze, whereas in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, brass had been the prevalent alloy since after the collapse of the Roman Empire. Finally, the Igbo-Ukwu bronzes do not have any clearly recognizable stylistic parallels elsewhere. Taken together, this evidence strongly suggests that the Igbo-Ukwu bronzes are indigenous in design, execution,

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154. Craddock *et al.* 1997, 406.

and material, with minimal or no influence from beyond West Africa.

Thus, although it can now be stated with a high degree of certainty that *cire perdue* casting was indigenous to West Africa, it is of importance to observe that this revelation has appeared in fairly recent times, during the 1980s. MacGregor asserts that the Benin objects “transformed” a “colonial view” of Africa, but the West African castings became fully independent of foreign influences more than two decades after Nigeria, and the other West African States, became politically independent.

To draw the discussion on the Western reception of the Benin objects and the British Museum’s version of it to a close: the case for the Benin objects being indigenous was made early on, but it was not made by British Museum scholars. The issue of the origin of the *cire perdue* technique was settled only fairly recently. As for the Ife objects, Fagg’s contribution should be acknowledged, but it was less dramatic than the British Museum suggests. The impact of these objects on Western stereotypes about Africa is difficult to assess, but is hardly as important as MacGregor claims. Consequently it seems fair to say that the British Museum’s narrative of the reception of the Benin objects and of the British Museum’s role therein, does not agree with the available evidence. This conclusion – that the British Museum’s version of the events is highly distorted – leads to the question of *why* the museum today presents the objects’ reception in the way it does. On what “sources” is it based and what needs and desires does this invented tradition serve to fulfil?

Obviously, the Western reception of these objects could have been narrated in many other ways. For example, if the story was told as a struggle between good and bad scholars arguing for an indigenous or foreign origin respectively, there is no particular reason why Read and Dalton could not have been made into the villains and Luschan, Boas, and Dubois made into the heroes in this drama.<sup>155</sup>

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155. Other researchers who could have been cast as heroes are the ones who established the indigenous origin of metal casting through their work on the Igbo-Ukwu bronzes and local copper sources. These scholars include Vincent Chikwendu (Department of Archaeology, University of Nigeria) Thurstan

The narrative, instead of celebrating Western science in general and the British Museum in particular, could have been made into a cautionary tale of how “facts” and “truths” are not discovered by disinterested scholars working in a vacuum, but rather created within specific cultural and intellectual contexts where factors such as the writer’s skin color and ethnic identity may have a degree of influence over her or his opinion on “purely scientific” matters. Joyce and Du Bois’s diverging evaluation of “the Negro” were presumably not entirely unrelated to their own skin color, and Boas strong stance against racism was not unrelated to his Jewish identity. So why has the narrative taken its particular form in the British Museum, with its focus on celebrating British Museum scholars?

On one level, the “explanation” can be found in the (British Museum) sources on which the narrative is based. It appears that the “factual” basis – or inspiration – for the narrative has been provided by a (selective) reading of texts by British Museum scholars Read and Fagg. The two texts by Read which echo in the contemporary narrative are the article from 1910 where he repositions himself in favor of the indigenous capacity of the Edo artist to counter Crahmer’s theory of an Indian origin, and his article from 1911 where he dismisses Frobenius’s Atlantis theory and praises

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Shaw (Archaeology Department, University of Ibadan), Alphonse Umeji (Department of Geology, University of Nigeria), Janet Ambers, Paul Craddock, Duncan Hook (Department of Scientific Research, British Museum) and Ronald Farquhar (Department of Physics, University of Toronto).

A perhaps suitable candidate to supplement Frobenius in the role of a – racist – villain is the famed (British) Egyptologist Petrie. He rejected Frobenius theory of population movement from Greece in 13<sup>th</sup> century BCE, but shared Frobenius conviction of a foreign origin. Petrie believed that the idea, or even the craftsmen, to which the Ife heads could be attributed had journeyed from Egypt to West Africa in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Petrie 1914a, 84, 1914b, 169. Petrie was a white supremacist who, convinced of his personal intellectual superiority, proscribed that on his death his carcass should be decapitated and his head preserved for future research. On Petrie and his head, see Silberman 1999.

On the question of who has contributed what to the debate of the origin of Benin art, it is worth noting that scholarly opinion on the issue has been influenced by views expressed by Edo informants from 1897 onwards. The “knowledge” about these objects has been formed in inter-cultural processes and is – like the objects themselves – a hybrid product.

Partridge for stopping Frobenius's thievery. The idea that Fagg's views were "controversial" may derive from Fagg's article "A bronze figure in Ife style at Benin" from 1950 where he presents his argument that the *cire perdue* technique was not of Portuguese origin, as a more original idea than it was.<sup>156</sup> Moreover, in the article he vaguely states that "most scholars" in the years following the arrival of the Benin objects to the West believed in a Portuguese origin.<sup>157</sup> Through this imprecise wording he omits mentioning that these scholars included Read and Dalton, and that other scholars, in particular Luschan, did not accept this view. In his writings Fagg carefully avoids any critique of Read and Dalton.<sup>158</sup> Adverse comments are instead reserved for Luschan. In *The Sculpture of Africa*, where Fagg proposes his own chronology of Benin objects, his harsh verdict on Luschan is that he ignored "some of the elementary rules of scientific method" and was "not qualified" to suggest a chronology of Benin objects. Fagg accuses Luschan of building a chronology "based largely on his own unsupported conjectures" but representing his "well disguised" speculations as "definite" and backing them "with the full weight of his authority." This has "mislead" many scholars who have uncritically accepted his dating of the Benin objects. The "unqualified respect" paid to "the master's authority" is easily seen in the work of "his disciple" Bernhard Struck and "other German scholars." Fagg suggests that a "fresh start" is needed in Benin studies which makes an "unprejudiced collation" of the material from Benin and neighboring regions to develop a new chronology.<sup>159</sup> Interestingly, as discussed by Stefan Eisenhofer,

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156. Fagg 1950b.

157. Fagg 1950b, 69. cf. Phillips 1995, 404, no. 5.61 (Willett).

158. Fagg may even lead his reader to believe that Read and Dalton (like Fagg) located the source of the casting technique to Ife. Fagg (1978, 10) states that in 1897 officers "recorded the story of the origin of Benin bronze-casting at Ife in Yorubaland" and that "[t]hese traditions are given at length in the book *Antiquities from the City of Benin* by Sir Hercules Read and O. M. Dalton, published by the British Museum in 1899." However, as discussed above, according to the oral testimony recorded in 1897 and published by Read and Dalton, bronze-casting had been learned from *Ahammangiwa*, "a white man," not from Ife (Read & Dalton 1899, 6) and they used this evidence to support their view that the casting technique had been taught by Portuguese teachers.

159. Fagg in Elisofon and Fagg 1958, 57-58, cf. Fagg 1951a, 103-104 where Luschan is

despite Fagg's insistence on making a new start, the scheme for the stylistic succession of Benin art proposed by Fagg is in many ways similar to that of Luschan and Struck. Fagg's aggressive tone towards Luschan's scholarship may be seen as a strategy to establish his own authority.<sup>160</sup> Regarding how Fagg presents the impact of Luschan's – in Fagg's view – unsupported speculations, one may recognize a pattern familiar from later British Museum publications. The identity of the scholars who bowed to the authority of Luschan, are revealed only as far as that Fagg lets his readers know that they included Luschan's "disciple" Struck and "other German scholars." No other scholars are presented by name or characterized under the heading of an ethnic epithet. Perhaps the trend seen in the contemporary publications where British Museum scholars are praised and foreign scholars are given the blame for erroneous interpretations owe something to the authority of Read and Fagg?

Looking at the coming into being of the British Museum narrative at another level, it may be observed that it is consistent with (and a building block) in the version of the museum's history presented by MacGregor. In his portrayal, the museum has always been an institution where the pursuit of knowledge has been conducted by scholars largely independent of external (negative) influences such as ethnocentrism and racism prevailing in surrounding society. MacGregor's standpoint is very different from the social constructivist view of knowledge production, which regards the formation of knowledge as interdependent with social contexts and power relations. To an enquirer approaching the topic from this perspective, it would have come as a surprise if Read and Dalton – two scholars working in a discipline which took the hierarchization of human beings on a qualitative scale of development from savagery to civilization for granted and who considered themselves as belonging to the very top of this pyramid – had reached conclusions which seriously shocked the bedrock of the assumptions on which their own privileged position was based. Yet, this is not the view of knowledge production adopted by the British Museum who

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accused of having made "hazardous and personal interpretations" which have caused "lasting disorganization in certain museums."

160. Eisenhofer 1997.

prefers to see its own scholars (but not Frobenius) as untainted by any prejudices.

Certain elements in this narrative have a long prehistory, in that they derive from an – uncritical – reading of texts of past British Museum scholars, but it seems that the narrative itself is a rather recent invention. As far as I am aware, it first appears in the *Sainsbury African Galleries* inaugurated in 2001 and in the accompanying publication *Africa – Arts and Culture* from the same year. Why does it appear at this point in time? As discussed earlier, calls for the return of the Benin objects were already made in the early 1940s, but did not gain wider attention until much later. It made headlines in the 1970s when the museum rejected the loan request for the ivory pendant mask and again in the 1990s when a relatively strong campaign for the return of the Benin objects was launched. Also, since the 1980s the museum has been in the spotlight concerning the Parthenon sculptures. It is possible that the museum's narrative has partly come into being as a result of a need to justify its refusal to the return of objects in its collections (As noted, the British Museum presents a similar narrative about the Parthenon sculptures, regarding the positive effects of their removal for the Greek nation.) While this suggestion remains conjectural, there can be little doubt that MacGregor relates (his version of) the narrative to his retentionist position. According to MacGregor the positive impact of the Benin objects on the Western audience offers the “key argument for objects being taken out of context and put into different kinds of museums.”

The discussion presented here might raise some doubts as to the extent to which the Benin objects really offer a “key argument” in favor of objects being “taken out of context.” It might also call into question another implicit axiom on which the British Museum bases its retentionist argument: that the museum can, and does, present the collections in an objective and impartial way without any particular bias (and that it has done so throughout its history). This claim of impartiality would imply that the museum's position on the ownership does *not* influence its knowledge production and the representations the museum makes. Yet, a close look at the British Museum's narrative about the Western reception of the Benin

objects, might suggest the very opposite: that the museum's position on ownership and its making of "knowledge" are deeply enmeshed.<sup>161</sup>

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161. I have here focused on how the narrative about the reception of the Benin objects has been formed within the institutional context of the British Museum. For the sake of completeness, it should be said that the British Museum is not alone in creating fanciful interpretations of the early scholarly discussions of the origin of the technical and artistic talent seen in the Benin objects. Coombes claims that Read and Dalton's initial 1898 publication of the Benin objects argued the case for an Egyptian or Portuguese origin, but that their interpretations in *Antiquities from Benin* of 1899 had gone through "several significant shifts," and that they now suggested that the objects could be have been of independent African origin. She suggests that their change of view was linked to a strategy (deliberate or not) for gaining financial support. By making the objects independent of foreign influence their domain in the Ethnographical Department was secured and, according to Coombes, "this highlighted the importance of ethnography as opposed to the already well-endowed Egyptology department of the museum." She concludes that "one thing is certain," the case illuminates the "negotiative processes [...] with institutional and other political factors at play" in the knowledge production at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Benin objects became one further example to support her overarching argument that knowledge was shaped more by cultural assumptions and opportunism than by the "factual" evidence available. Coombes 1994a, 108-109, 1994b, 57-62, 1996, 151-153. However, the problem with her theory is that it rests on an erroneous reading of the Read and Dalton's texts. As seen in this chapter, their interpretations did *not* go through any significant changes between 1898 and 1899. In 1898 they cautiously suggested a Portuguese origin, and while in 1899 they did mention the possibility of an Egyptian or indigenous origin, they were now even more confident in attributing the technical and artistic stimulus to Portuguese teachers. As I hope to have shown in this chapter, the knowledge created about the Benin objects today is, like in the past, not free from the influence of wishful thinking and attempts to make the Benin objects fit into preconceived patterns. Following the 1897 "discovery," these patterns concerned the difference and hierarchy of humans (Read, Dalton, Joyce) or their similarity and equality (Luschan, Boas, Du Bois). Today the Benin objects becomes evidence to illustrate the nature of past Western academic knowledge production. The British Museum fabricates a narrative which suggests its own research has been carried out by disinterested, enlightened scholars, untainted by prejudice or other social or political factors (racist views being reserved for a German). In contrast, Coombes, in her quest to prove how deeply enmeshed the making of knowledge was in worldly matters and everyday politics, instead overemphasizes such influences, and thus she – like the British Museum – manages to come up with an incorrect interpretation of Read and Dalton's view on the origin of the Benin objects.

On imaginative scholarly interpretations, cf. Penny's (2002, 72) claim that the plaques "were damaged when British soldiers used their bayonets to tear them from the palace walls."





## 10. The West discovers African art through the Benin objects

“Benin treasures caused an enormous sensation, *fuelling* an appreciation for African art which *profoundly* influenced 20<sup>th</sup> century Western art.” Text panel in the Sainsbury African Galleries, 2001 (italics added).

The previous chapter discussed the story told by the British Museum of how reluctant Europeans eventually came to understand that the Benin objects were made by Africans. This chapter will look into a further claim made in the museum’s exhibition which is similarly about the positive effects of the looting of Benin City: that the arrival of the Benin objects in the West contributed to esteem of African art in general, which, in turn, had an impact on Western art.

But before looking into this claim, a few words on yet another statement about the museum’s scholarly contributions found in one of the its publications: in *The Art of Benin*, Barley suggests that it was thanks to the British Museum that Europeans realized the artistic qualities of the Benin objects. Writing about the early reception of the Benin objects he states that they were first regarded as “‘curios’ rather than art [...] and would not be classed as art until much work had been done, principally by generations of curators at the British Museum.”<sup>1</sup> This statement, which attributes an important deed to “much work” by “generations of curators at the British Museum”, resembles Mack’s claim that it was “largely through the tireless efforts” of Read that the indigenous origin

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1. Barley 2010, 17.

of Benin objects became “generally accepted.” Like Mack, Barley exaggerates the British Museum’s influence. As should be clear from the presentation in chapter 5, it did not take a very long time (“generations”) for the Benin objects to be recognized as art. It is true that the earliest brief popular reports from spring 1897 used a vocabulary which signals that the objects were thought of more as “curios” than “art,” but they were soon praised for their aesthetic qualities. Some of the academic publications which appeared from 1898 onwards carry the word “art” in their titles, and there was a broad scholarly consensus about the objects being of high artistic value, with the most panegyric praise coming from Luschan.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, Barley’s idea appears inconsistent with his own text. On the same page where he states that the objects were not classed as “art” until much work had done by “generations” of British Museum curators, he *also* states that when the objects were exhibited in London in 1897 they caused a “worldwide sensation” and that the “highly naturalistic” objects were “mostly in keeping with Victorian notions of artistic good taste.” Felix Roth’s description of the sacrificial altars which calls the “idols” found on these altars “beautiful” is quoted. Barley’s text may make anyone wonder: why did it require the efforts of “generations” of British Museum curators for the objects to be regarded as “art,” when the objects were already in keeping with an idea of “artistic good taste” in 1897?

In relation to Barley’s claim it is worth observing that William Fagg at the British Museum was among the Benin scholars who have been *less* enthusiastic about the aesthetic qualities of Benin art. In his work *Nigerian Images* from 1963 he expresses his opinion (stated as a fact) that only a few Benin pieces are of “superlative quality” while the majority of the corpus of Benin objects are characterized

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2. Among the scholars who questioned this positive appraisal were Buchner (1908) and Crahmer (1908, 1909, 1910) with Crahmer putting the term “Benin art” within quotation marks. Both stress the mixed character of Benin objects and of the Edo culture in general (a “pseudo-Negro culture” according to Crahmer 1908, 364). Buchner clearly makes cultural (and racial) impurity part of his negative evaluation of the Benin objects and their creators. According to Buchner (992) the Benin objects, are “clumsy hybrid creations” made by “dark half-Portuguese” founders.

by an “artistic sterility.”<sup>3</sup> Like most scholars – including Read, Dalton, and Luschan – Fagg saw the chronological development of Benin art as one of gradual decline (which he considered to be a reflection of the gradual political decline of the Benin Kingdom).<sup>4</sup> The late period in Benin art (from the late 17<sup>th</sup> century to 1897) was, in Fagg’s view, a period characterized by a “general vulgarity and emptiness.” Although, according to Fagg, a few pieces in this period manage to transcend “the general triviality,” he assures that others are “tasteless” or of “remarkable *naivité*.” When pointing to the low artistic value of the mass of Benin objects he states that only a few justify Luschan’s “hyperbolic reference” to the notion that Cellini could not have made them better. He fails to mention that Read and Dalton, like Luschan, compared the Benin castings with the masterpieces of the Renaissance. Fagg is much more enthusiastic about the artistic quality of the Benin ivories and his unreserved praise goes to the castings of the Lower Niger Bronze Industry, a term he coined to accommodate a range of castings not belonging to the Ife and Benin casting traditions. According to Fagg, the castings of the Lower Niger Bronze Industry represent “art in its purest form” and he estimates them to be “the very pinnacle of Nigerian artistic achievement.”<sup>5</sup> Fagg here, in a sense, praises his own discovery.

Now we shall turn to the idea that the West came to recognize the qualities of other forms of African art through the Benin objects. The text panel “The Discovery of Benin art by the West” in the *Sainsbury African Galleries* boldly proclaims that: “Benin treasures caused an enormous sensation, *fuelling* an appreciation for African art which *profoundly* influenced 20<sup>th</sup> century Western art” (italics added). This statement is made immediately after the information about the sale and dispersal of the Benin loot. The source of this “information” is probably Fagg. In *Nigerian Images* under the heading “How African art came to Europe” he writes that:

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3. Fagg 1963, 20.

4. On Fagg’s chronology, see Eisenhofer 1993, 78-93, Eisenhofer 1997, Junge 2007, 190.

5. Fagg 1963, 20, 38-40.

the irruption, then, of Benin art to Europe helped to create an atmosphere of growing respect for the artistic capacities of the “primitive” peoples, and it was under the influence of this that, less than ten years later, the great artistic innovators of Paris and Munich found in the direct and poetic dynamism of tribal art the sanction for their rejection of imitative in favour of conceptual art.<sup>6</sup>

And in another place in the same publication he assures that:

the historical accident of the Benin expedition of 1897, may be said to have provided the catalyst which made easy the penetration of the European universe of art by ideas and inspirations from the ‘primitive’ world, with incalculable effect in the experimental beginnings of modern art.<sup>7</sup>

A similar view is expressed by Fagg in an article from 1949, the only difference being that Read and Dalton’s *Antiquities from Benin* are here given an important role in the unfolding of events which led to the discovery of African primitive art by Parisian avant-garde artists: “The Benin Expedition of 1897, and the publication by Read and Dalton in 1899 of the antiquities there obtained, provided the sounding board from which eventually, a full decade later, the echoes reached the ears of certain artists,” and thus modern art, “owing much to the primitive, gained [...] a complete ascendancy” in Paris.<sup>8</sup> What Fagg suggests is that were it not for the conquest of Benin and the publication by Read and Dalton, Western art history would be poorer. He also implies that credit for the achievements of artists such as Picasso and Braque are also due to the British Museum.

According to the unhesitant testimony of the text panel and Fagg’s publications, the arrival of the Benin objects in Europe paved the way for European recognition of African art. Is this fact or fiction? Clearly, in the early 1900s Western art began to take a path towards aesthetic ideals and means of expression which

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6. Fagg 1963, 20.

7. Fagg 1963, 19.

8. Fagg 1949d.

corresponded to what was seen as the ideals and forms of “primitive art” from Africa and Oceania.<sup>9</sup> Several avant-garde artists acknowledged that their encounter with ethnographic objects from these places influenced their own art. Elements in art-works by these artists sometimes closely resemble ethnographic objects. For example, in Pablo Picasso’s painting *Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J. R. M.)* from 1907, which has been accredited with a canonical status in the development of Western modern art, the faces of two of the sex workers depicted call to mind African or Oceanic masks. Picasso had made a visit to the Musée d’ethnographie du Trocadéro in that year and the objects displayed there made a strong impression on him.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the British Museum text panel is not incorrect in stating that African art had had an impact on Western art. Whether the adjective “profound” is the best word to describe the degree of impact may be discussed, but the statement as such is not out of alignment with the evidence available about the appreciation and appropriation of African forms in the Western art tradition.

But was this appreciation of African art in turn stimulated by the arrival of Benin objects in Europe as the British Museum text panel and Fagg’s account tells us? The simple answer is no. The aesthetic appreciation of Benin art following its dispersal in 1897 has very little relation to the aesthetic appreciation of African art expressed by European avant-garde artists from the early 1900s. The aesthetic appreciation of Benin and African art occurred within two largely

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9. The interest in “African art” was mainly directed towards certain categories of objects such as anthropomorphic masks and figures from West Africa and the Congolese region. Thus, the term “African art” is a highly selective one. On the Western invention of “primitive art”, see Clifford 1985, Price 1989, Errington 1998.

10. The various sources of inspiration in non-Western objects are discussed in Rubin 1984b. Picasso at the time also frequented brothels and he himself referred to this painting as *Le Bordel d’Avignon* (The Avignon brothel), but it has been canonized under the sanitized name *Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J. R. M.)* (The Avignon damsels). Richardson 1996, 10-27, Green 2005, 43-73. For readings highlighting the heady mix of sexism and exoticism in this much hallowed painting, see Duncan 1989, Chave 1994, Duncan 1995, 115-118. A radically different reading, which suggests an implicit critique of colonialism, is given by Leighten 1990. Green 2005 interprets the painting as ambiguous in its evocation of social, cultural, and racial hierarchies. For a re-interpretation and re-contextualization of the painting by Fred Wilson, see Corrin 1994, 10.

*competing* paradigms for judging aesthetic qualities. The praise expressed by Read, Dalton, Luschan, and other scholars for the Benin objects was made within the then prevailing Western paradigm for judging good taste which favored representational realism and classical idealism. They equate Benin with the masterpieces of Classical Antiquity, the Renaissance, and contemporary times. Words used to praise, either Benin art in general or the individual objects considered as the most beautiful and artistically accomplished, are “lifelikeness,” “realism,” “naturalism,” “dignity,” and “monumentality.”<sup>11</sup> The dissimilarity in spirit between the Benin objects and other art-works from Africa is often emphasized.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast to the scholars who evaluated Benin objects against the mainstream paradigm of representational realism, Picasso and the other pioneers of the modern art movement found aesthetic qualities in African masks and anthropomorphic figures when searching for alternatives to what they saw as the tyranny of realism in Western art. To them, “primitive art” from Africa and the Pacific was attractive because of its simplicity and abstraction. Now, this does not mean that these artists only looked at the art traditions which were seen as characterized by abstraction. They could also find inspiration in objects from art traditions which were seen as governed by the ideals of realism. Or to put it differently: in these art traditions they came upon examples with deviated from the realist idiom.

However, the avant-garde artists working in Paris at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century do not seem to have taken any notice of

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11. Brinckmann 1898, CCCIII, Dalton 1898, 423, Read and Dalton 1898, 19, Luschan 1919, 260, 338. Ranke 1898, 63 writes that in the corpus of Benin objects are expressions of a “realistic as well as an idealizing artistic concept.”
12. Roth 1898a, 170, Read and Dalton 1898, 19, Buchner 1908, 992. The notion that there is a profound qualitative difference between Benin art and other forms of African art has been rehearsed many times. Cf. the opinion of a reviewer writing in *Time* from 1935: “Plain gallery-goers sometimes find it difficult to understand much of an art [i.e. African art] which has nothing whatever to do with the civilized European concept of Beauty, but which stems directly from the basic emotion of fear. But one fact is plain to all eyes: in any showing of African art the bronzes and carvings of the vanished Kingdom of Benin are definitely superior in spirit and technique to other Negro art.” *Time* 16 December, 1935. For a related view expressed in 1995, see Barkan 1997, 93, n. 7.



Benin objects. Picasso is known to have bought a Benin object, but this was only in 1944. The lack of interest in Benin art by French artists may or may not be related to the circumstance that very few Benin objects were on display in French museums. Unlike their British and German colleagues, French museum curators did not take part in the frenzy for Benin loot from 1897 and onwards, and consequently very few Benin objects were acquired by French museums. It was not until the 1930s that major exhibitions of Benin objects were put up in France.<sup>13</sup>

In Germany the situation was different.<sup>14</sup> The museums of Berlin, Dresden, Hamburg, and Munich had acquired large Benin collections which were on public display. Some German avant-garde artists took an interest in Benin works by making sketches of Benin objects and occasionally paraphrasing them in their own art. For example, Max Pechstein made a woodcut in 1912 where the motif is evidently based on a famed Benin plaque with a hunting scene in the Berlin Ethnological Museum. An etching by Pechstein was also based on a drawing of a Benin female head. Yet, although examples such as these would make it possible to claim that Benin objects had a degree of “influence” in the development of Modernist art in Germany, it is clear that this influence was of minor importance. The German avant-garde drew inspiration from a whole array of ethnographic objects from Oceania and Africa, as well as from European medieval art. Benin objects did not have any special status among the objects which these artists studied, sketched, and occasionally paraphrased in their art-works. August Macke mentions “the Negro bronzes from West African Benin” as a source of inspiration, but he calls them “equally as expressive” as Easter Island idols, chiefs’ collars from Alaska, wooden masks from Caledonia, and Notre Dame chimeras. Tellingly, of the more than one hundred sketches of ethnographic objects made by Emil Nolde in the Ethnological Museum in Berlin, with its extensive holdings

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13. Paudrat 2007, Gunsch 2013, 29-30.

14. This paragraph is based on Heymer 1984, 2007, and the catalogue entries by Heymer 492-495, no. 277-279 in Plankensteiner 2007a. See also Paudrat 1984, 139 who rejects Fagg’s claim that the Benin objects paved the way for the recognition of African art.

of Benin objects, only *one* sketch shows a Benin object, and significantly, this sketch was not used in a painting by Nolde. The Benin object chosen by Nolde was one of the “late” Benin objects which Luschan had characterized as “bad.” It is perhaps equally telling that the above-mentioned etching by Pechstein, based on a Benin head, was entitled *Palau Mädchen*, that is, “Girl from Palau” (Palau is an island in Micronesia, at the time a German colony). That a motif based on a head from Benin in Africa could evolve into depicting a woman from Palau in Micronesia suggests that to these artists it mattered little from which particular (non-Western) culture the individual objects originated.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, although some German avant-garde artists (unlike their French contemporaries) took an interest in Benin objects, there is nothing to suggest that these objects had any special significance to them. The British Museum’s claim about the Benin objects “fueling” an interest for African art is unfounded. Of course, it might be argued that neither the British Museum text panel nor Fagg’s text explicitly state that any artist was directly influenced by the Benin objects. Fagg’s text instead speaks vaguely about the arrival of

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15. As for the relation of the European avant-garde and Benin art, it might be mentioned that in the following years when African art began to be appreciated within the frame of European Modernism, Benin art was not always judged positively. In the influential work *Afrikanische Plastik* from 1921, Carl Einstein interprets and values African art according to Cubist aesthetic principles. He finds “perfect examples” of these aesthetic principles in African art, but Benin (and Ife) art does not meet his criteria for artistic excellence. His verdict on Benin and Ife artworks is that, although technically these works are “record achievements,” they are a stylistically inferior. He sees an influence from Europe in them and this “affinity with European common taste” is not to their advantage. Einstein’s view influenced some later writers, who, like Einstein, looked at African art mainly through the lens of Modernism, and who (consequently) were less enthusiastic about the artistic qualities of Benin art. (Heymer 2007, 250-251). Other writers judged Benin art more from the perspective of classical naturalism, and gave Benin objects their unreserved praise. This praise was sometimes made by making implicit or explicit comparisons between Benin art and what was seen as the highest achievements of the Western art tradition; in the tradition of Luschan, Read, and Dalton. The art dealer Carré, for example, lauding Benin objects in 1935, refers to Benin as “the Athens of Africa.” Paudrat 2007, 245, n. 37. Carré also stressed the remoteness of Benin art to the “geometric stylization” of the “art nègre” which recently had become the “fashion of Paris.” Gunsch 2013, 30.

Benin objects helping to create “an atmosphere of growing respect” for non-Western art. A claim about a certain “atmosphere” coming into being is difficult to either refute or confirm with any evidence. Still, the discovery of African art by the European avant-garde is better sought in developments within the European art tradition than in any influence from the arrival of the Benin objects in 1897. In this context it might be observed that European artists had begun looking outside Europe and towards non-Western cultures in the search for the “natural,” the “exotic,” and the “primitive” well before 1897. Among the more well-known artists who did so was Paul Gauguin, who painted Tahitian motifs in the 1890s.<sup>16</sup>

In sum, there is no particular relation between the influx and spread of Benin objects from 1897 and the “discovery” of African art in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A more accurate text in the British Museum would have read: “Western aesthetic appreciation of Benin art had little, or no, impact on Western appreciation of other forms of African art.”

So why then does the exhibit present incorrect information? One explanation would be that the museum has here uncritically reproduced the “knowledge” of its own curator, William Fagg. Yet, while it seems very likely that the text panel is inspired by Fagg, this does not explain why it was necessary to provide any information at all on the relationship between the discovery of the Benin objects and the discovery of African art in the short space available on the text panel in the exhibition. Could it be that again – despite the museum’s claim to scientism and impartiality – the ownership issue has had an effect on the museum’s production of “knowledge”? On the text panel, the statement comes right after the sentence which presents the looting in Benin City. Thus, the text establishes a contrast between the destruction in Benin City and the good effects which came out of the removal and dispersal of the Benin objects. The structure recalls the one used by MacGregor when he contrasts the “hideous” and “terrible” circumstances of the 1897 events and the positive impact of the objects’ arrival in the West, shattering European stereotypes about Africans. In both

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16. Willett 1970, 35, Rubin 1984a, 2, 7-13.

cases the (incorrect) information provided may be said to function in a similar comforting way: the good consequences of the looting (Western appreciation of Africans and of African art respectively) make up for the looting itself.

It might be that Fagg's belief in this narrative is derived from a similar need to justify the looting and the British Museum's ownership of its Benin objects. In 1949 he already took a somewhat defensive stance on the issue, remarking that in 1897 there were foresighted men who "apprehended, more or less clearly, that there was around them a heritage which should be preserved for Nigeria and the world, and which was beginning to disappear at an accelerating pace." Among these one could "without cynicism" count the "captors of Benin", such as Moor and Rawson, "for, but for the British action, the fragile ivories and discarded bronzes would quickly have suffered a far worse fate than the marbles left by Elgin on the Parthenon."<sup>17</sup>

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17. Fagg 1949c, 114, cf. 1953, 165, 1980.

## 11. The Sainsbury African Galleries: Benin objects on display

“In Benin, at coronations and during the important annual ceremony of Igue, the Oba sacrifices leopards in the belief that this will ensure his mystical power and the well-being of his people for another year.” Object label in the *Sainsbury African Galleries*, 2001.

The previous two chapters dealt with the narratives which the museum creates about the Western realization of the indigenous origin of the Benin objects and the impact of the Benin objects for the Western discovery of African art. In this chapter I will treat further aspects of how the museum makes the objects, the Edo, and the British. The focus is on the representations communicated to the visitor in the *Sainsbury African Galleries*, but the discussion will also look at the Benin highlights on the museum’s home page, with occasional glimpses into two British Museum publications, John Mack’s *Africa – Arts and Cultures* and Nigel Barley’s *The Art of Benin*.<sup>1</sup>

A visitor to the British museum enters either through the monumental entrance on Great Russell Street or through the less monumental, but still imposing, entrance at Montague Place. The visitor who approaches the museum via Great Russell street passes through the iconic neo-classical façade, where huge ionic columns

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1. My visit to the Sainsbury African Gallery and the other galleries discussed in this study took place in November 2009. For the discussion of the *Enlightenment – Discovering the World in the Eighteenth Century* and *Collecting the World* exhibitions I also rely on additional photographic documentation made in May 2016 by Mattias Bäckström.

carry a pediment adorned with the sculpture group “The progress of civilization” from the 1840s.<sup>2</sup> Entrance to the museum is free and at the reception desk one may pick up a museum map which explains how the museum has organized its display of the world within the available architectural space. The map reveals that the exhibition consists of 95 galleries on eight floors. On the lower floor is gallery 25, which is named “Africa. The Sainsbury Galleries” on the map (on the signs leading to the gallery it is referred to as “The Sainsbury African Galleries,” or “Africa. The Sainsbury African Galleries”). It is reached by taking the stairs (or elevator) down from gallery 24, *Living and Dying. The Wellcome Trust Gallery*.

These gallery names are worth some comment as they are in themselves interesting cultural products. All galleries in the museum have a number (from 1 to 95) and a name which signals the general content or topic of the gallery in question (e.g. “Africa,” “Living and Dying”). In addition, many galleries are also named after the various entities which have made a smaller or greater monetary contribution towards the production cost of the gallery in question (e.g. Sainsbury, Wellcome Trust). On the museum map a sponsor’s name appears in 30 out of 95 gallery names. The sponsor names are: John Addis, Selwyn and Ellie Alleyne, Michael Cohen, Sir Harry and Lady Djanogly, Arthur I. Fleischmann, HSBC, Rahim Irvani, Sir Joseph Hotung, (alternatively Joseph E. Hotung or Joseph Hotung), A. G. Levantis, Mitsubishi Corporation, JP Morgan Chase, Paul and Jill Ruddock, Raymond and Beverly Sackler (6 galleries), Sainsbury, Asahi Shimbun, Roxie Walker, Wellcome Trust, Weston, and Wolfson. At the Clore Education Centre is the BP Lecture Theatre, the Claus Moser Room, the Samsung Digital Discovery Centre, the Hugh and Catherine Stevenson Lecture Theatre and the Raymond and Beverly Sackler Room. Last, but not least, there is the Ford Centre for Young Visitors.

Thus, among the first things a visitor to the British Museum encounters is an impressive list of predominantly male names and names of corporations.<sup>3</sup> But why? To cut a long story short: the

2. On the sculptures: Gidal 2001, 11-12.

3. The ratio male to female names is 12 to 7, that is, about two thirds of the names are male. There are six galleries with a male name only (John Addis,

wealth of sponsors' names found here has its origin in the cuts in government funding to the public sector which was part of the neoliberal economic regime introduced in the UK in the 1980s. With weakened government support, the British Museum has, like many other museums in the country, actively sought private sponsors for its exhibitions.<sup>4</sup> A look at the museum map suggests that it has been successful in this endeavor. While the British Museum is to be congratulated on the money received, the long list of sponsor names raises questions about power and representation, especially if seen in relation to the museum's alleged supra-political neutrality and recalling what was discussed earlier on how gift-giving makes the receiver indebted to the giver. One question is what direct or indirect influence sponsorship money may have on exhibition content.<sup>5</sup> Could it be that the museum's wish (need) to attract future sponsors might have at least *some* impact on how it profiles itself and which (permanent or temporary) exhibitions get funded? It is perhaps not entirely unreasonable to suggest that some sponsors might be less keen to opening the purse for a museum which exhibits, for example, the darker sides of the impact of neoliberal capitalism, the power of multinational companies, and the unequal distribution of wealth (between women and men, within states, and between different parts of the world)?<sup>6</sup>

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Arthur I. Fleishman, Michael Cohen, Rahim Irvani, Sir Joseph Hotung, Claus Moser) but only one gallery which includes a female name unaccompanied by a male one (Roxie Walker). When a gallery contains both a female and a male name, the male name always precedes the female one. (Selwyn and Ellie Alleyne, Sir Harry and Lady Djanogly, Paul and Jill Ruddock, Raymond and Beverly Sackler, Hugh and Catherine Stevenson). Apart from companies and foundations, British Museum patrons seem to consist of heterosexual couples and single men.

4. Wilson 1989, 89-95, 108. On the financial crisis for the UK museum sector in the 1980s under Thatcherism, see Macdonald 2002, 31, 53, n. 26.
5. Another is the question of why the British Museum does not express any gratitude to its biggest contributor, all the British tax-payers who duly pay their taxes (instead of putting their money in tax havens). Why are only wealthy individuals and companies thanked despite the fact that their contributions only make up for a minority of the museum's budget?
6. Wilson 1989, 94 mentions that in 1988-1989 the museum got private funding for the *Treasures for the Nation* exhibition (from British Gas) but not for the *Shadow of the Guillotine* exhibition on the topic of British attitudes to the

But this is a topic which cannot be pursued here. Let us recommence the journey to the Benin objects. Going down the stairs from *Living and Dying*, the visitor finds an inscription on the stone wall which reads “The Sainsbury African Galleries. Dedicated to Henry Moore OM CH.” The first text panel the visitor encounters is headed “The Sainsbury family and Henry Moore.” It gives a kind of “explanation” for the gallery name and the dedication to Henry Moore. The opening line declares that the “links” between the Sainsbury family, Henry Moore, and the British Museum are “especially close”: Sir Robert Sainsbury bought a sculpture from Moore before he had been recognized as “one of Britain’s greatest artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,” Robert and Lisa Sainsbury’s son was Moore’s godson, and Moore was “influential” in introducing Sir Robert to the British Museum’s African and Pacific collections. Moore is

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French Revolution. Wilson does not expand on why the former exhibition attracted a sponsor and the latter did not. Perhaps the theme of the former – art treasures “saved” for the British nation – is one which a sponsor feels more comfortable with than that of the latter, with its possible “political” overtones. On the growing importance of corporate sponsors over state-provided funds and their possible influence over exhibition design in the British Museum, see also Shelton 2006, 75. Shelton implies that the aestheticizing design of the Mexican and African galleries owes to them being funded by the private sector. On donor influence, see also Bolton 2008, 343-344. On the British Museum and the BP, see Brown 2016.

Of course, all money comes with some strings attached, and it may be argued that government funding is problematical in certain respects. There are certainly topics which might be sensitive for the state and museums may impose self-censorship to attract state money. However, there is a difference between the money from the public and private purse in that the public sector (hopefully) is subject to control by democratically elected bodies, which the private sector is not.

Mention may be made of the fact that the practice of naming galleries after sponsors is not entirely novel at the British Museum. Gallery 18, named “Greece: The Parthenon” on the museum map, does not include a sponsor name, but it is also known as “the Duveen gallery” after the art dealer who funded it in 1930s. During the building of the gallery, Duveen, acting without the consent of the museum, instructed the workmen to clean the Parthenon sculptures with steel brushes in order to make them look better in “his” gallery. Jenkins 2001. Present-day sponsors are presumably not allowed to interfere with the objects in the galleries in the way Duveen did, but nevertheless, this case offers a cautionary tale to museums about what “philanthropists” might be up to.



quoted as stating that his encounter with works of African carvers encouraged him to be more “adventurous and experimental,” and the text ends by informing that Moore and Sir Robert both admired (in Moore’s words) “the wealth of experience and inspiration to hand in the Ethnographical galleries of the British Museum.”<sup>7</sup> The two also “passionately” wanted the museum’s African collections “re-housed in a new gallery.” Thus, the text states that Moore was (positively) influenced by African art in his own art and it seems to suggest that the creation of the *Sainsbury African Galleries* somehow owes to the “passion” of Moore and Sainsbury. The exact link between their “passion” and the building of the new galleries is not elaborated on, but apparently they were sponsored by the Sainsbury Trust and the Henry Moore foundation.<sup>8</sup> This text panel is about the only reference in the exhibition which refers to its creation and which connects its production to any individuals. The museum visitor is not provided with any information about when the exhibits were created, by whom, and for which reasons.

Another introductory text panel states that the galleries “provide an insight into aspects of the cultural life of Africa, past and present,” that they “include artefacts drawn from the entire continent and from many historical periods,” and that they “also feature important works by some of Africa’s foremost contemporary artists.” There is also a floor plan on the panel which shows how the exhibits are organized spatially. The first compartment of the exhibition is titled “Introduction/Contemporary artists.” Turning to the left the visitor comes to the section “Woodcarving,” followed by “Forged Metal,” and “Pottery.” Going to the right the visitor comes to the section “Masquerade” which is followed by “Textiles,” “Personal Adornment,” and “Brasscasting.”

Why this arrangement has been chosen is not commented upon in the exhibits, but the article “The Sainsbury African Galleries at the British Museum” by British Museum curators Christopher Spring, Nigel Barley, and Julie Hudson published in *African Arts* in connection with the opening of the exhibition in 2001, explains

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7. The text panel quotes from Moore 1981, 10, 96.

8. Spring, Barley & Hudson 2001, 18.

its layout.<sup>9</sup> According to the authors, a decision was taken not to organize the displays chronologically, by starting in the distant past (Olduvai Gorge), or to focus on the iconic pieces of the canon of African art. Instead, the “ordering principle” chosen was to “group the exhibits largely according to the materials of which they were made.” This ordering is “less arbitrary” than it might appear at first, “as a whole philosophy often underlies each different material and technology, and this can be used as means of shedding light on African history and social life.” This ordering is intersected with themes such as “trade/history, male/female, ancient/contemporary which crosscut the different sections.” Rather than creating a distillation of “Africanness,” the exhibition aims to “highlight the continent’s extraordinary diversity – cultural, geographical, ethnic, and artistic – and its immense impact on the rest of the world.”<sup>10</sup>

In the article the curators also explain another display principle. In the long-running debate about whether to exhibit objects “aesthetically or ethnographically,” they chose an approach where, on the one hand, “the installation itself is highly aesthetic” with “white walls, open displays, enormous but very light cases,” but where, on the other hand, the “information panels and labels” are “strongly ethnographic” so that the display can “work at both levels” providing aesthetic appreciation of the objects as well as ethnographic information about their functions and uses. The videos in each section also show objects, similar to the ones on display, in use in their “original” cultural contexts.<sup>11</sup>

Before continuing into the exhibition, a comment should be made about its disposition, which may be seen as a response to some of the critique which has been levelled against an earlier paradigm for ethnographic exhibitions. According to the critics, ethnographic exhibitions have generally presented the other, on a tribe-by-tribe basis, and the different tribes – often represented through objects which were collected decades, even centuries, ago – have been envisioned as either extinct or living in time-less ethnographic present, in which there is no change over time or

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9. Spring, Barley & Hudson 2001.

10. Spring, Barley & Hudson 2001, 18, 21, 24.

11. Spring, Barley & Hudson 2001, 37.

cultural contact with other “tribes” or the rest of the world. In the *Sainsbury African Galleries* the geographical/tribal straightjacket has been loosened by organizing the exhibits by material and general themes, and by highlighting transcultural contacts, hybridity, and contemporaneity throughout the exhibits.<sup>12</sup>

Having entered the exhibition’s first room “Introduction/Contemporary artists,” the visitor may turn right, walk through the “Masquerade” section, and come to the part of the exhibit which on the floor plan is marked “Brasscasting.” Here the Benin objects and some other West African castings (including the famed Ife head and a few objects from Igbo-Ukwu unearthed in 1938) are found. Most objects on display are brass (and bronze) castings, but there are also objects in ivory, coral, a terracotta head, a wooden head covered with brass, and two swords (mainly) made of iron. The total number of objects shown is a little more than a hundred.<sup>13</sup> About half of these are exhibited in three freestanding glass cabinets arranged in a row and a glass wall case. The rest, 58 plaques, are displayed along a wall.<sup>14</sup> Explanatory texts are provided on large wall panels, on panels inside the showcases, and on object labels [Fig. 4-6].

The introductory panel to this part of the exhibits, headed “Brass casting,” provides some information on the history of brass casting and on the symbolic and social functions of brass in West Africa. It states that the earliest known castings, the Igbo-Ukwu bronzes, were made from local ore using local casting technology and that brass was a precious metal which was associated with kingship. Control of brass and casting was an important element of royal authority, but today, while brassworks are still commissioned for the court, they are also sold to a wider public.

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12. Spring, Barley & Hudson 2001, 18, 21.

13. This means that about one out of seven objects in the museum’s Benin collection is on display.

14. The plaques have no glass protection. On my visit I observed one of the museum’s voluntary guides touching the plaques repeatedly while giving a tour. I asked if she was allowed to do that and she answered she was not.

Continuing to the next glass case running against the wall is a text entitled “The royal city of Benin” which briefly outlines the history of the Benin Kingdom and its contacts with the West. It states that Benin has been powerful state in West Africa since at least the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and that early European accounts of the city were favorable, but when European interests encroached on the area, Benin was described as a place of oppression and human sacrifice. In 1897, after a British diplomatic mission had been attacked, a British “punitive expedition” conquered Benin City and exiled Oba Ovonramwen. Many objects “fell to troops and others were sold abroad to defray the costs of the expedition and compensate the victims.” This statement (which will be commented on later) is followed by the statement discussed earlier that Benin brasswork, previously unknown in the West, “so confounded current ideas about Africa that some refused to believe that it could be of exclusively Benin origin.” The text ends by stating that the monarchy was restored in 1914, that Benin City is now a “large modern city” and that “a form of the court ritual” has been reinstated and is maintained to this day. The panel includes a map of southern Nigeria showing the location of Benin City and other places referred to in the exhibit.

In the showcase there are also two juxtaposed texts headed “Prester John” and “Olokun” which explain how both the Portuguese and the Edo tried to incorporate each other into their existing worldviews. According to the panel “Prester John,” it was accepted knowledge in Europe that the Christian kingdom of Prester John lay in some distant land, and when brass crosses were found in Benin, the Portuguese assumed that his kingdom was not far away. The panel headed “Olokun” relates that, in Edo thought, the Portuguese became associated with the god Olokun, who lives below the sea and sends wealth to this world. The Oba had defeated Olokun in battle and taken the coral regalia from him. Depictions of the Portuguese commemorated the victory.

In the case there are a number of objects of non-Benin origin: a bronze figure and a bronze head from southern Nigeria, four

bronzes from Igbo-Ukwu, and the famed brass head from Ife.<sup>15</sup> The Ife head is accompanied by the previously discussed text about Frobenius and his Atlantis theory. The remaining objects in the showcase are all Benin objects: a brass horseman, a brass Portuguese soldier, a brass figure wearing a cross around his neck, a brass cross, a coral hat, coral necklaces, coral wristlets, as well as two *eben* swords and one *ada* sword (mainly) made of iron.

Continuing past a doorway to the next wall there are three text panels which serve as the starting point of the exhibition for the visitor who comes down to Africa with the elevator and enters through the doorway. The text panels are headed “The discovery of Benin art by the West,” “The Benin plaques,” “Cast brass plaques from Benin City Nigeria, 16<sup>th</sup> century.” Beyond these, the brass plaques are displayed on the wall, with only a wire forming the line of demarcation between the plaques and the visitors. The first text panel “The discovery of Benin art by the West” reads:

The West discovered Benin art following the sack of Benin City by the British in 1897.

In the 1890s Benin resisted British control over southern Nigeria. In March [sic] 1897, retaliating for the killing of British representatives, a punitive expedition conquered the capital. Thousands of treasures were taken as booty, including around 1000 brass plaques from the palace.

The Foreign Office auctioned the official booty to cover the cost of the expedition. Large numbers of ivories, brass and wood works were retained and sold by the officers.

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15. According to the object label one of the bronze figures from southern Nigeria was “part of a large hoard kept in a cult house until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.” The entry in the collections database informs that this object was taken with more than sixty other objects when the British destroyed a ju ju house at Allabia in 1904. Among the objects confiscated and sent to the British Museum were bells, horns, human skulls, ivory tusks, a ju ju stool ornamented with goat skulls, manillas, spears, a sword, and staffs.

Benin treasures caused an enormous sensation, fuelling an appreciation for African art which profoundly influenced 20<sup>th</sup> century Western art.

About 16 museums, mostly in Britain and Germany, purchased the works, notably the British Museum and the Berlin Museum. In the 1970s, interest in Benin grew. Now, around 85 museums in 18 countries have Benin collections, the largest being in Britain, Germany, the US and Nigeria.

Between the 1950s and the 1970s the British Museum sold around 30 objects to Nigeria.

The text is accompanied with a map of southern Nigeria (identical to the one on the text panel “The royal city of Benin”) and a photograph taken in February 1897. The photo shows British soldiers, some native carriers or soldiers, and a donkey. In front of them are a number of Benin objects made ready for transport away from Benin City. The photo is captioned: “The Benin expedition, 1897. In the foreground is a selection of booty, taken from Benin City, including a brass plaque.”

The second text panel “The Benin plaques” states: “When the British reached Benin City in 1897 the royal palace was being rebuilt with brass sheeting, and some 900 brass plaques from the old building were found half-buried in a store house.” (The careful observer might note that the number of plaques have dropped since the previous panel where they were said to be “around 1000.”) The text also explains that the plaques were cast in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and were attached in matching pairs to the wooden pillars of the Oba’s palace. A drawing from Dapper’s 1668 publication showing a court procession with Benin City in the background accompanies the text.

The third text panel “Cast brass plaques from Benin City Nigeria, 16<sup>th</sup> century” has a plaque affixed to it and a text stating that this plaque shows the façade of the palace with plaques attached to the pillars supporting the palace roof. The plaque thus indicates the way the plaques were installed in the palace.

Next to this panel is an installation with 56 plaques arranged one above the other in eight columns. On the top row are plaques rendering leopards. Motifs on the other plaques include the Oba with attendants, court dignitaries, Portuguese traders and battle scenes. Matching pairs are often displayed next to each other.<sup>16</sup> To the right of the installation is a solitary plaque rendering the Oba with two kneeling attendants and two Portuguese in the background, one of whom holds a brass manilla. The accompanying text informs that brass rings were imported from Europe and used for trading in Africa or were melted down to provide raw material for the Benin brass castings.

A little further on, on the next wall, is a screen with a slideshow entitled “Contemporary brass casting in Benin.” It shows photographs of men carrying out the successive stages of the manufacture of brass ware from wax images to a finished product.<sup>17</sup> It also exemplifies some of the contemporary uses and functions of these castings through photographs of objects being worn by the Oba and attendants in a royal ceremony, objects placed on a royal ancestral altar, as well as objects for sale in a tourist shop.

The exhibit also has three freestanding showcases with Benin objects: one which contains ivory objects, the other two house (mainly) metal castings. For the visitor coming through the main entrance, the first showcase encountered is the one with ivory objects, containing some of the museum’s most famed Benin objects [Fig. 5]. On the top shelf are the two ivory leopards, given to Queen Victoria by Admiral Rawson in 1897 and on loan to the British Museum since 1924. On the shelf below are the ivory pendant mask and two ivory armlets (all three from the personal booty of Ralph Moor). The case also contains five Afro-Portuguese ivories: three saltcellars, a horn, and a spoon. On the bottom shelf is a text headed “Insiders and outsiders” which explains the restrictions in the circulation of these

16. On the installation, see Spring, Barley & Hudson 2001, 28.

17. Men dominate in every scene shown. All the attendants in the royal ceremony are male, and so is the shop-owner (?) on the photograph with objects for sale. The sole appearance of women – as by-standers – is on a photograph showing men pouring brass into a mold. Casting in Benin City is (still) exclusively carried out by men. Nevadomsky 2012, 26, n. 7.

objects: ivory saltcellars, horns, and spoons could be sold to foreigners and were brought from Africa to Europe as souvenirs, but the ownership and use of ivories which had an inlay of brass or copper wire (like the ivory pendant mask) was the privilege of the Oba.

In the next showcase, the text panel on the bottom shelf has the rubric “Heads and hands” [Fig. 6]. It informs that brass heads were only cast for the altars of Obas and Queen Mothers, while chiefs might have wooden memorial heads with brass sheeting and brass-casters heads of terracotta. Certain powerful individuals would also have an altar of the hand to which offerings might be made before engaging in difficult enterprises. The objects in the showcase are: two brass altars of the hand, one for an Oba and one for a Queen Mother respectively, the famed Queen Mother head, three Oba pedestal heads, and a Queen Mother pedestal head. (These objects have a holes for ivory tusks, but the British Museum follows the standard usage of referring to these objects as “heads.”) Further, there is a terracotta pedestal head and a wooden head covered with brass. The showcase also contains a “head for use in Osun worship” and “two heads worn in the *Ododua* masquerade” (original italics). One of the *Ododua* “heads” is the object which is called “Brass helmet mask for the *Ododua* ritual” on the museum’s homepage. (That the object is designated “head” rather than “helmet mask” in the exhibition is probably to make it fit better into the general theme of showcase.) In addition to these objects of Benin origin, there is a pedestal head executed in a style which diverges from that of the Benin pedestal heads, and which was presumably made at neighbouring Udo. The label explains that in the 16<sup>th</sup> century the city of Udo challenged Benin City over the control of the Benin Kingdom and marked its independence by manufacturing its own brass heads.

The text panel in the last display case has the heading “Animals in art” and provides information about animal symbolism in Edo religious, social, and political thought. In this showcase, the objects (all made of brass or bronze) include a cockerel, an aquamanile in the form of a leopard, a horseman, a box in the form of a horse’s head, a python head, a stool in the form of two intertwined mudfish, a plaque showing the Oba holding two leopards, and the a



lid of a vessel showing elephants. The label for this object explains that “occasionally elephants might be sacrificed on royal altars” (a piece of information which might make the visitor wonder exactly how an elephant is sacrificed *on* an altar).

The explanatory texts in the exhibition are provided on two “levels”: on text panels, placed either on the walls of the room or inside the showcases, and on object labels, placed next to their respective objects. The text panels have a heading (e.g. “Brass casting,” “Heads and hands”), a shorter or longer text (ranging from 64 to 200 words, the mean average is c. 130 words), and are often accompanied with an illustration. The texts provide information on topics such as metallurgy, the symbolic and social functions of the objects in Edo society, contacts between the Edo and the West (from the Portuguese contacts in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century to the 1897 war), and the Western reception of the objects.

The object labels carry a heading which defines and describes the object (e.g. “Head of an Oba”) beneath which there are two lines which state which material(s) the object is made of (e.g. “Cast brass”), its geographical/cultural origin and (assumed) date of manufacture (e.g. “Benin, Nigeria, 18<sup>th</sup> century”). Below this, written in smaller letters, is the word “Ethno.” followed by a number (e.g. “Ethno. 1897.12-17.2”). This is the acquisition number, and the visitor might figure out that the first four numbers refer to the year the object was acquired by the museum, in this case 1897. The visitor who looks closely at the objects will see that the acquisition numbers are often also written on the objects. On several labels the acquisition number is followed by the words “Given by” and the donor’s name. (e.g. “Given by Mrs H. Beasley”). The label for the pair of ivory leopards, states: “Loaned by H M Queen Elizabeth II.”

In addition to this information, the majority of the object labels also have explanatory texts. These texts range from 9 to 74 words, the mean average is 20 words.<sup>18</sup> The texts mostly provide

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18. The total amount of text in the exhibition, communicated on panels and object labels, comprises of about 3200 words, roughly equally divided between panels and object labels. (This count does not include the “object data” on the labels regarding the objects acquisition number, ethnic/geographical origin, date, material, and donors). The slideshow “Contemporary casting in Benin

information about the object's function and meaning in Benin society. For example, the ivory pendant mask is accompanied with the text: "This mask is usually identified with Idia, the mother of Oba Esigie, who established the special place of the Queen Mother in Benin society. It was probably worn around the neck, suspended from the loops at either side." The famed head of a Queen Mother is accompanied with the text: "A special altar for Queen Mothers was maintained within the royal city." Some labels explain about intercultural aspects of the objects, such as the label for a 16<sup>th</sup> century Afro-Portuguese ivory saltcellar which states that saltcellars were made "as souvenirs for visiting foreigners" by carvers who "often worked from Western pictures and book illustrations," and the label for the (iron) *ada* sword which states that its blade was made "in Europe to Benin design." There is, however, next to nothing in the object labels on the objects' post-1897 trajectories in Western society. The only exception is the information in the label for the ivory leopards that they were "a gift from Admiral Rawson, commander of the Benin Punitive Expedition, to Queen Victoria in 1897." No other label informs about an object's Western ownership history (apart from what may be gleaned from the formula "Given by," found on many labels, which gives the name of the person or institution that was the last in the chain of post-1897 owners before the object was incorporated into the museum's collections). Thus, for example, that the ivory pendant mask and the two ivory armlets were the possessions of Ralph Moor is not mentioned. This may be compared with the label for the ivory armlets which gives away that in pre-1897 Edo society the armlets were the possessions of the Oba. Thus, the visitor is informed about the identity of the high-ranking person who owned the object before 1897, but not about which high-ranking person the ownership passed onto in 1897. Some aspects of how the objects are "made" by the museum will be discussed in a while, but it may already be observed here that the explanatory texts in the object labels, focusing on the objects in their Edo contexts, rather than their British/Western contexts,

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City" is not included in the count.

make the objects more Edo/African than British/Western. In this respect, the objects are given the appearance of being “pure” Edo objects which, in turn, creates the impression that they are “pure,” unmediated sources for scientific knowledge about (and aesthetic appreciation of) Edo art and society. The representation upholds the distinction between viewer and viewed, subject and object (sic), representor and represented.

In addition to its display in gallery 25, the museum also represents Benin objects to the world through its homepage. The museum’s select collection of highlights includes 17 Benin objects, 14 of which may be assumed to be loot from 1897.<sup>19</sup> The objects include the Queen mother head, the ivory pendant mask, three brass plaques (two of which render the Oba of Benin with attendants, the third the upper body of a Portuguese person), an ivory armlet (one of the two from Moor’s booty), four brass and bronze figures (a huntsman, a hornblower and two Portuguese people), a brass head of the Oba, the previously discussed brass helmet mask “for the Ododua ritual,” a brass head “for use in the worship of Osun,” and an “altar of the hand.” The Ife head is also included among the highlights.

These web representations of Benin objects are of interest, not least because, arguably, they are much more accessible to the world than those made on the premises of the British Museum. Those who have the privilege of being able to visit the museum may look at the web-presentation before or after the visit.<sup>20</sup> The

19. [http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/explore\\_introduction.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/explore_introduction.aspx) (This webpage was removed in 2016, but the highlight objects can be accessed via Google Cultural Institute.) The three objects which are not loot from 1897 are *Brass manilla*, *Ivory salt cellar* and *Ivory salt cellar with boat*. The two ivory salt cellars (both probably from the 16<sup>th</sup> century) belong to a group of objects which are generally referred to as Afro-Portuguese ivories, produced for the European market by Edo and Sapi (in present Sierra Leone) workshops. Bassani and Fagg 1988, Bassani 2000, 285-304, cf. Mark 2007. The *Brass manilla* (probably dating from the 19<sup>th</sup> century) was manufactured in Europe. It is linked to the Benin objects by the text entry which states that “[r]esearch by British Museum scientists has shown that objects like these were melted down and made into works of art such as the Benin bronze plaques.”

20. Entrance to the British Museum is free, but the difficulties of obtaining a visa to visit the UK as well as the travel costs prevent the vast majority of

object entries are organized as follows. To the right is a photograph of the object, shown either against a black or white background. To the left is a heading which describes (or rather ascribes a meaning to) each object (e.g. “Brass helmet mask for the Ododua ritual”). Beneath the heading, defining and naming the object, are words on two lines setting the geographical/cultural origin of the object and its date of manufacture (e.g. “Benin, Nigeria. 16<sup>th</sup> century AD,” or “Edo peoples, 16<sup>th</sup> century AD. From Benin, Nigeria”). Beneath the photo the dimensions of the object are stated, down to a hundredth millimeter (e.g. we are reliably told that the *Brass plaque of a European* has the following dimensions: “Length: 35.500 cm, Width 37.000 cm”).<sup>21</sup> Slightly below this information on the physical proportions of the object is a series of letters and numbers. Each series begin with the letters “AOA,” followed by a number individual to each entry. These letters and numbers are the acquisition number. For example, the aforementioned *Brass plaque of a European* has acquisition number: “AOA 1898,1-15.2.”<sup>22</sup> On four entries, in the space between the dimensions and the acquisition number, the name of the donor of the object is written. Thus, the viewer is informed that two objects (*Commemorative head of a Queen Mother* and *Altar of the Hand*) were a “Gift of Sir William Ingram,” that one (*Brass head of the Oba of Benin*) was a “Gift of Mrs H. G. Beasley,” and that one (*Brass figure of a Portuguese soldier*) has been “Donated by Mrs Harry G. Beasley.” One entry gives the name of the collector of the object: *Brass figure of a Portuguese soldier holding a musket* was, according to the museum, “Collected by Ralph Locke.”

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the world’s population from visiting the museum building.

21. These measures, given down to a hundredth millimeter, add to the aura of scientific accuracy and truth which surrounds the representations of the Benin objects. My argument that the Benin objects, far from being represented in a universally correct scientific manner by the British Museum, have been squeezed into and transformed within Western frames of reference is also valid for these measures. A look at the measures the museum provides for these objects shows that the measures have been rounded off into whole or half centimeters. The objects have been fitted into the metric system.
22. The one who cares to compare the way the acquisition numbers are written in the exhibition and on the homepage may note a difference. In the exhibition the accompanying letters are instead “Ethno.”)

On some of the entries the words “Africa, Oceania, Americas” appear beneath the acquisition number. Why the names of these three continents are written here is not explained to the viewer, but it probably gives a general feeling that the objects in some way or other relate to this – very broad – geographical region (consisting of all land outside Eurasia). Those knowledgeable of the departmental structure of the British Museum will understand that the objects belong to the Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas (formerly the Ethnographical Department). The viewer may also connect the names of these three continents with the letters “AOA” in the acquisition number, and understand that the letters are an acronym for the department.

Most entries also contain the link “Related objects.” There are slight variations between the entries as to which objects constitute these related objects. Most entries show ten Benin objects from the catalogue of highlights (that is, the related objects are a selection of the 17 objects found by a search for “Benin”). Each entry also has a link “Related articles” which brings the viewer to the article “Benin craft,” a short article about past and present craft production in Benin.

In addition, each entry has a heading “Shop online,” beneath which there is a publication, or a T-shirt, available from the museum’s online shop. Products recommended include: *Africa – Arts and Cultures* (£16.99), *African Crafts* (£6.99), *African Designs* (£9.99), *Archaeology in Southern Africa*, (£5.00), *Silk Throughout the African Continent* (£10.99) and a “Butterfly T-shirt” (£19.99).

On each entry there is also a text of varying length, spanning from 66 to 250 words, the mean average being ca. 200 words.<sup>23</sup> The topics covered are roughly similar to those in the exhibition with an overall focus on “explaining” the objects in their pre- and post-1897 Edo context. There is next to nothing on the objects’ uses and functions in their post-1897 Western context.

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23. The total amount of words in the texts accompanying the Benin objects is about 3500. Although a much smaller number of objects are represented online than in the exhibition (less than 20 on-line compared to over one hundred in the exhibition) the total amount of text in the online representation (c. 3500) and the exhibition (c. 3200) words is roughly equal.

So how does the British Museum make the objects, the Edo, and the British through these representations? First something on how the museum makes the objects. As stated by the exhibition curators, the *Sainsbury African Galleries* use an aestheticizing approach. This also applies to the display of the Benin objects. As elsewhere in the exhibition, it is the objects which are meant to be seen, not the surrounding exhibitionary apparatus (the showcases, text panels, etc.). The design is neat and sober. It does not catch the eye, but rather blends into the background and is in harmony with the aesthetic objects. The curators describe the showcases as “light” and in their words the “wall of Benin plaques [is] floating on slim poles.”<sup>24</sup> While some of the text panels are rather prominent and hard to miss, others are more discrete, such as those placed at the bottom of the freestanding showcases. The few accompanying illustrations are all rendered in a fairly small scale and thus do not compete with the objects for the visitor’s attention.

On the topic of the British Museum’s (visual) making of the Benin objects, it might be noted that a few of them underwent surface treatment prior to their display in the galleries. Some Benin objects in Western collections have had a layer of lacquer or wax added to them. These coatings are nowadays often removed, both for aesthetic and conservation reasons.<sup>25</sup> The entry in the collection database for the pedestal head in Udo style states that it was found to be “suspiciously shiney [sic] on prominent areas” because it was “probably lacquered.” To prepare it for exhibition it was “rubbed vigorously with acetone on cottonwool until a satisfying ethnographic matte-ness was attained.” Another object (one of the two heads/helmet masks for the Ododua masquerade) “had shiny areas [...] from a previous coating of lacquer” and the treatment “reduced the “shny [sic] effect of the object.” As the surface coatings have been added after 1897, their removal makes the objects into more “authentic” or “genuine” pre-1897 objects in a sense, but in another sense it does not; in pre-1897 Edo society the brass objects were generally polished to make them bright and shiny.<sup>26</sup>

24. Spring, Barley & Hudson 2001, 37, Bolton 2008, 344, 349.

25. Schrenk 1991, Moffatt 1996.

26. Ben-Amos Girshick 2007, 158.





Fig. 22. *The Sainsbury African Galleries, British Museum. "Head of an Oba."*

The objects chosen for display from among the museum's ca. 700 Benin objects are those which mostly fit well into the exhibition's aestheticizing approach. The museum's collection of objects looted in Benin City contain numerous objects which are less easily harmonized with the "art" concept, such as, for example, a cannon and numerous other weapons (bows, crossbows, swords, daggers, etc.), but no weapons are on display. Neither is any of the museum's many carved ivory altar tusks present to accompany the two



**Fig. 23. (Top)** British Museum. *Upper part of a two-part plaque.*

**Fig. 24. (Bottom)** World Museum, Vienna. *Lower part of a two-part plaque.*



(pedestal) heads on display.<sup>27</sup> As discussed earlier, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the ivory tusks were the most expensive Benin objects, but they have since been overshadowed by other (types of) objects. This is because the tusks, both literally and figuratively, have not fitted into the frames of Western art and representational forms. That none of the ivory tusks in the museum's collection are found in the present Benin exhibition is perhaps due to such reasons. An ivory tusk does not look very "arty" and the long curved shape makes it fairly bulky. A two-meter tusk would have taken up a lot of space in a showcase, and to provide space for the tusk, other objects (with a more attractive appearance) would inevitably need to be exiled into storage.

As for the "making" of art, it may be reiterated that when the British Museum (in line with common usage) use the term "head," rather than, for example "pedestal head" for the objects which once served as bases for the tusks, the absence of the ivory tusks is made less noticeable [Fig. 22]. The term "head" makes the object in question into a coherent, complete (art) object, while a term such as "stand for tusk" (used by Read and Dalton in 1898) would have drawn attention to the object's function in its original context, and signaled that it is only part of a whole.<sup>28</sup>

Another example of how a seemingly neutral, descriptive name makes the object into a complete entity may be given. Among the museum's Benin highlights is an object which bears the name *Brass plaque of a European* [Fig. 23]. At first sight this appears to be an entirely uncontroversial and straightforward description of what is rendered on this plaque, or in other words, what this object "is." Yet, this name might be compared to how the same object was named in Read and Dalton's *Antiquities from the City of Benin* where it made its first appearance in the scholarly literature. Read and Dalton referred to the object as "An imperfect panel, showing the

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27. Another noteworthy absence is that of *ukhuru* rattle staffs, despite the focus in the texts on Edo beliefs and rituals. As pointed out by Barley the rattle staffs may be considered as the liturgically most important of the objects found on a Benin ancestral altar. Barley illustrates two rattle staffs from the British Museum's collection. Barley 2010, 33, 126-127, figs. 89-90.

28. Read & Dalton 1898, 372.

*upper part of a figure of a European*” (italics added).<sup>29</sup> Arguably, this is a more accurate name than the present one, as the European is incomplete. His lower body and legs are missing. The contemporary name draws attention away from this circumstance. This may seem a rather petty observation until it is realized that the lower part of his body is found on a plaque in the World Museum (formerly Museum of Ethnology) in Vienna [Fig. 24].

The two plaques were evidently cast together, perhaps by the same craftsman/artist (named “Master of the Circled Cross” by Fagg), to be displayed one above the other in the Oba’s palace. They presumably shared a fate similar to the other plaques, being torn down in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and later kept in a storage room until they were “discovered” by the British troops in 1897. If they were kept together at this point in time is not known. Certainly, in 1897, no one noted that the two plaques, in a sense, belonged together and they ended up in London and Vienna respectively.

Realizing that the motif – executed by, in Fagg’s view, one of Benin’s “finest” artists – runs over two plaques it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that the two plaques should be reunited, be it in Benin City, Lagos, London, Vienna, or elsewhere, so that their composition may be seen and appreciated in its entirety for the benefit of local and global audiences.<sup>30</sup> Yet, this is impossible, because both the British Museum and the World Museum in Vienna consider their collections inalienable and neither museum seems willing to deviate from this principle.<sup>31</sup> Their retentionist position prevents the two plaques from being brought together.<sup>32</sup> Thus, the

29. Read & Dalton 1899, 45, pl. 12, no. 2.

30. There are a number of plaques with the motif running over two plaques, but no museum holds both joining plaques of the same composition. Fagg 1963, 34. Plankensteiner 2007a, 284, no. 12-13 (Junge), 454, no. 234-235 (Eisenhofer).

31. On the position of the World Museum in Vienna on restitution, see Opoku 2008.

32. They were displayed together in the travelling exhibition *Benin – Kings and Rituals* and juxtaposed (on two separate photographs) in the exhibition catalogue. Plankensteiner 2007a, 454, no. 234-235 (Eisenhofer), cf. 284, no. 12-13 (Junge). Significantly, the two parts of the plaque are here referred to as “Upper body of a Portuguese” and “Lower body of a Portuguese.” According to the text by Stefan Eisenhofer, that one plaque came to London, the other to Vienna are “typical examples of Europeans’ careless treatment of

object(s), split between two collections, may create a sense of uncertainty about the axiom that museums should never part with any of the objects in their collections, raising questions such as: what is most important, a “whole” collection, or a “whole” object?

Another observation may be made. As mentioned, the British Museum’s highlight entries often contain the link “Related objects,” which connects the highlights with other highlights in the museum’s collections. It is as trivial as it is important to note that the link “Related objects” never links to an object in another museum collection. The entry for *Brass plaque of a European* does not have a link to “Related objects,” but if such a link had been provided, it would, following the standard adopted by the British Museum, probably have linked to other Benin objects in the museum’s collections. Yet, in a way, the plaque with the upper body of a European is more closely related to the plaque with his lower body in Vienna than any of the Benin objects in the British Museum. There is no particular scientific reason why the entry could not provide a link to the object in Vienna, although there may be many practical and cultural obstacles which prevent this (at the time of writing, the World Museum in Vienna has few objects on-line, and the plaque is not among these).

The concept of “related objects” can be discussed in connection with many, if not most, Benin objects, as they were often made and used in pairs, threes, or fours, etc. For example, the British Museum’s famed ivory pendant mask closely resembles an ivory pendant mask in the Metropolitan Museum in New York. They are both from Moor’s booty and are assumed to have been found together with three other ivory pendant masks (one in the Lindenmuseum in Stuttgart, one in Seattle Art Museum, and the other withdrawn from auction in 2010) in a chest in the room of Oba Ovonramwen.<sup>33</sup> A second example is the British Museum’s celebrated head of a Queen Mother, which is similar to Queen Mother heads in the Ethnological Museum in Berlin, the National Museum in Lagos, and

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the art treasures they encountered during the conquest of Benin.” See also Bjerregaard 2013, 255, fig. 14.4.

33. Kaplan 2007, 142.

the World Museum in Liverpool respectively.<sup>34</sup> There are no records on from where these heads were looted, but they might all come from the same altar. A third example is the helmet masks used in the Ododua ritual, which may be seen as forming a group with the other heads/helmet masks used in the Ododua ritual that are now in collections in Berlin, Lagos, and the National Museum of African Art in Washington.<sup>35</sup> Thus, although all these objects in the British Museum's collection "relate" to objects in other museum collections, these links are not made by the museum. Arguably, the links to objects within the museum's own collection and the absence of links to objects in "foreign" collections, give the impression that the museum's own collection is a much more closed, natural, and coherent whole than it "really" is.

Other objects, which in their "original" Benin contexts belonged together, were also separated in 1897. The object which is referred to as *Brass head of the Oba of Benin* on the homepage (and "Head of an Oba" in the exhibition) could be seen as related to any of the ivory tusks which once stood on such (pedestal) heads. As noted, although there are several ivory tusks in the museum's collection, the present display contains none and therefore the (pedestal) heads are not joined with any tusks.

Here a comparison with the Benin display which stood in the British Museum in the 1950s may be made. A photo from 1954 shows a number of tusks placed on heads/tusk pedestals [Fig. 25]. The arrangement (which is hypothetical in that it is not known

34. Plankensteiner 2007a 396-398, no. 171 (Kaplan).

35. Curnow 1997a, 52, 94, n. 30. One advantage of linking similar objects in different collections would be that it could show the viewer that there are different ways of representing these objects. For example, the Metropolitan Museum of *Art* (italics added) represents its ivory pendant mask in a more "arty" fashion than does the British Museum. The photograph on the homepage of the Metropolitan museum renders the subject with a much stronger play between light and shadow than the photo on the British Museum homepage. The text entry for the Metropolitan mask assures that the mask "is a sensitive idealized portrait depicting its subject with softly modelled features." <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/318622?=&imgNo=0&tabName=gallery-label> (accessed 8 May 2016). Such jargon is absent from the British Museum's presentation of this (and other) Benin objects.



Fig. 25. *British Museum. Benin exhibit, 1954.*

which heads and tusks belonged together) also included some other objects which would have stood on a Benin altar, such as bells, figures, and rattle staffs. The display thus went some way towards recreating an “original” altar context. In a sense, the display in the 1950s took a more ethnographic than aestheticizing approach, although it may be pointed out that it presented a sanitized version of this “original” context and it avoided stark realism. The objects were displayed on a rectangular wooden (?) plinth rather than on

a reconstructed mud altar and the assemblage was not sprinkled with red paint, suggesting human blood.<sup>36</sup>

If in certain ways the British Museum puts the Benin objects into the (universal) category of art, it also locates them in an Edo context. The texts are largely concerned with the objects' ritual and symbolic functions in Edo society. In this respect, the information provided is in agreement with Oba Eredieuwa's interpretation of the objects when he speaks of the objects' "religious and archival value to my people." Yet, the "information" the museum provides about the plaques gives them an identity which seems to underplay their value in pre-1897 Edo society. The text panel headed "The Benin plaques" declares: "When the British reached Benin City in 1897, the royal palace was being rebuilt with brass sheeting, *and* some 900 brass plaques from the old palace were found half-buried in a storehouse" (*italics added*). This sentence might raise an eyebrow or two for anyone knowledgeable about Benin objects. It contains two statements: the first that in 1897 the palace was undergoing reconstruction with brass sheeting, and the second that the plaques from the "old palace" were found in a storehouse. Both statements are factually correct. Yet, as they are joined by the copula "and," the sentence suggests a (casual) link between the rebuilding of the palace in 1897 and that the plaques were located in the storehouse at the time. However, there is no particular connection between the late 19<sup>th</sup> century building operations and the storage of the plaques: the plaques were probably already torn down in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and later recollected and put in storage. When the palace was rebuilt by Oba Ovonramwen in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and furnished with brass sheeting, the plaques had presumably been stored for about *two hundred years*. Yet, the structure of the sentence suggests that the rebuilding of the palace and the storing of the objects are somehow related, implying that the

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36. The present exhibition makes no attempt to arrange the objects in a manner mimicking an "original" context. However, the text panel "Heads and Hands" is accompanied with a reproduction of a watercolour, made by a British officer, which shows an altar with tusks and pedestal heads, an altarpiece, bells, and altar rings. On the altar some areas are painted red, but most visitors will probably not realise that this represents blood.



plaques had been taken down *because* the palace was being rebuilt. This is how MacGregor has understood the text (if this text is his source for his 2004 article “The whole world in our hands”). He states: “At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the plaques were removed and put in storage while the palace was rebuilt.”<sup>37</sup>

Barley, in *The Art of Benin*, also connects the abandonment of the plaques and the rebuilding of the palace in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. He states that during the “extensive rebuilding” of the palace, the beams in the Oba’s bedroom had been covered in brass sheeting and the roofs were made of layers of sheet brass or galvanized iron, adding: “Given the greater availability of imported brass, the plaques were no longer needed.”<sup>38</sup> Thus, his text infers that the plaques functioned to decorate the palace and had been discarded recently when imported brass became available. This, in turn, implies that the plaques were no longer of any value to the Edo when the British looted them (which then might suggest to the reader that the British saved them from destruction). Barley’s text is clearly at odds with what may be considered mainstream scholarly opinion about the plaques. Although it is not known for which reasons the plaques were kept for centuries rather than being melted down, the fact that they *were* kept is a clear indication that they were valued in some way or other by, at least, some Edo. Needless to say, there is a difference between portraying the plaques as discarded junk or as treasured heirlooms kept through the centuries. It is not entirely without significance when looking at the question of ownership of these objects.<sup>39</sup>

Leaving the topic of how the British Museum makes the Benin objects, the discussion will proceed to how it makes the Edo and the British, or more generally, how it makes Africans and Westerners. A quick glance at the displays in the Brassworking section reveals that it is mostly concerned with the Edo/Africans with less

37. MacGregor 2004. According to MacGregor 2009, 51 the plaques “had been installed on the front of the Oba’s palace but had been taken down before the British arrived.”

38. Barley 2010, 16-17.

39. As for where the museum has received the idea that the plaques had little importance for the Edo, one may note that Fagg describe the plaques as “discarded.” Fagg 1949c, 114 and 1953, 165.



emphasis on the British/Westerners. The latter are however not absent. Cultural interaction is one of the overarching themes of the *Sainsbury African Galleries*, and the Brassworking section examines the cultural contacts between the Edo and Europe. About half of the total amount of text in the text panels involves the West and Westerners – with information ranging from that Benin castings were made of imported metal, the circumstances of the objects removal in 1897 to Frobenius’s ideas about Atlantis. In the object labels, on the other hand, Europe and Europeans are much less present. The objects are predominantly interpreted as part of an Edo societal and conceptual context, not a British/Western one (although the West appears occasionally such as, for example, in the information that an iron *ada* sword was made in Europe to Benin design). Looking at the total amount of text in the exhibition, about three quarters of it is about the Edo/Africans and one quarter is about the British/Westerners. The gaze is mainly, but not solely, directed at the Edo. However, and importantly, apart from this quantitative difference regarding the attention paid to the Edo/Africans and the British/Europeans, there is also a significant qualitative difference to which there is reason to return to shortly.

So what does the exhibition say about the Edo? Obviously, any attempt to portray an ethnic group with about a hundred objects, a few thousand words and a couple of images is doomed to be grossly generalizing. As mentioned, ethnographic exhibitions have been criticized for their tendency to present non-Western societies, cultures, or “tribes” as somehow frozen in time and place, that is, as distinct, closed entities in which there is no development or change, no internal divisions or fractions and no intercultural contact with others. Part of the problem with museum representation may be inherent in the collections themselves. When a collection (as is the case with the British Museum’s Benin collection) was “collected” in the distant past and predominantly comes from a (male) social elite, its display poses many representational challenges if the aim is to tell a story which also includes the present and society’s less privileged members.<sup>40</sup>

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40. Barkan 1994, Picton 1997b, Bjerregaard 2013, 253-254.

Yet, from the texts in the exhibition it appears that the curators who created the exhibition have given thought to such problems. Among the many, in my view, very positive qualities of the exhibition is that, in certain respects, it manages to give a picture of Edo society as *not* being entirely static, homogenous, harmonious, and separated from other ethnic groups. As noted above, intercultural contacts and cultural exchange are a main theme of the Africa exhibition, and it is well represented in the Brasscasting section. In the texts there is a comparatively large amount of information about the various contacts between the Edo and Europe from the late 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards, ranging from the predominantly peaceful early contact to the hostile (the 1897 war). Another main theme in the Africa exhibition – the meanings and social uses of different materials – is also prominent in the Brasscasting section which offers glimpses of how the rules for the possession of ivory and brass were part of maintaining and regulating symbolic and social borders both within Edo society and between the Edo and the outside world. The texts explain that ivory objects with an inlay of metal were not exported to foreigners, and that in Edo society different materials signaled the owner's social status: royal ancestral altars would have pedestal heads of brass, chiefs' altars would have heads of wood covered with brass sheeting, and the brass casters' altars would have heads of terracotta. The label for "Two heads worn in the *Ododua* ritual" (original italics) touches on the relationship between the (royal) center and its periphery. The brass heads were worn in the royal *Ododua* masquerade in Benin City but the wooden masquerade headpieces of *Ovia*, which were worn elsewhere, were normally not permitted into the city. The text at least gives a hint that Edo society was more than royalty and the ceremonies associated with the court. (The hint would of course have been made much stronger if such a wooden masquerade headpiece had been exhibited in the showcase. There is a difference in emphasis between mentioning the existence of a type of object on a label and putting one on display.)<sup>41</sup> The showcase dedicated to animal symbolism touches on aspects of gender and social

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41. To my knowledge the British Museum does not possess any *Ovia* masquerade headpieces. On the *Ovia* masquerade and its relation to the *Ododua*, see Curnow 1997a, 51.

organization. Dangerous and aggressive animals such as leopards and elephants were associated with the Oba and prominent chiefs. Queen Mothers – while “classified as males” – were associated with less aggressive animals, like the cockerel. Town chiefs, “the institutionalized opposition to the Oba,” wore a felt costume imitating the scales of the scale anteater – an animal which, when threatened, rolls itself into an impregnable ball making it invulnerable to attack from a leopard. The text accompanying the pedestal head in Udo style says: “In the 16<sup>th</sup> century the city of Udo made an attempt to take over the Benin Empire and, as mark of independence, began casting its own brass heads.”<sup>42</sup> This label exemplifies that political and symbolic power is not stable but struggled over, and that contests for political dominance often involve contests over the control of symbolic power. The label, with its reference to a historical event and the time marker (“in the 16<sup>th</sup> century”) also “historicizes” pre-1897 Edo society. The texts give a few more indications of change over time in Edo society, for example, that before human heads were permitted on ancestral altars to chiefs, carvings of rams were used, and that during the early 16<sup>th</sup> and late 17<sup>th</sup> century, brass heads become more elaborate “coinciding with the increased wealth and influence of the Oba.” These references, in all their brevity, signal that pre-1897 Edo society was neither stable nor static.

The exhibition does not include any objects which postdate 1897, but post-1897 events and the present are referred to in the text panels with time markers such as “now,” “nowadays,” and “still.” The images in the slideshow “Contemporary brassworking in Benin City” show objects being cast, for sale in a shop and in use in court ceremonies. The present is characterized by both continuity and change. The text panel “The royal city of Benin” informs us that the monarchy was restored in 1914 and that Benin City is “now a large modern city” where “a form of the court ritual has been reinstated and is vigorously maintained to this day.” According to the text panel “Brass casting” the “control of brass and casting was an important element of royal authority” and brassworkers “nowadays

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42. On the Udo style and tradition(s) connecting brass casting with Udo, see Fagg 1963, 38, Ben-Amos Girshick 1995, 34, Plankensteiner 2007a, 445-446, no. 224 (Blackmun).

[...] still work for the court but [...] they increasingly enjoy a wider public and their castings are even marketed abroad.”

Contemporary times are also referred to through the use of tense in the texts which varies between the past and present tense when describing Edo beliefs and rituals. In some cases the use of tense reflects a distinction between those practices which today have been abandoned (past tense) and those which are – still – practiced (present tense). For example, the label accompanying the coral hat, necklaces, and wristlets explains: “Wearing coral regal, the Oba (king) *presents* himself as the earthly counterpart of the seagod, Olokun. The coral *was* strengthened by an annual offering of human blood” (italics added). Thus, the text communicates that coral is nowadays part of the royal outfit, but that the Edo no longer carry out human sacrifices.

However, in other cases the present tense is used when the past tense would have been more appropriate. For example, one object label states that during the Igue ceremony the Oba “sacrifices leopards,” and another label states that “[t]he *ada* sword [...] is carried in ceremony before the Oba by a naked page.” However, the leopard sacrifice, formerly performed during the Igue festival, has nowadays been exchanged for a cow sacrifice and the palace pages, who used to be naked, received uniforms in 1933.<sup>43</sup> While the wording that “a *form* of the court ritual” (italics added) has been re-instituted signals that present-day court ceremonies are not identical to pre-1897 ones, the texts (apart from the inferred information that human sacrifices are no longer carried out) do not exemplify changes or innovations in the court ceremonies. Thus, the general impression created gives emphasis to continuity rather than change in Edo traditions. This impression is strengthened by that there is little on the impact of Westernization on Edo society. Benin City is described as a “large modern city,” but neither texts nor images contain much on how Benin City is affected by the West. For example, while the exhibition has comparatively large amounts of information on the “traditional” Edo gods and beliefs, there is no mention of the dominant religion in contemporary Edo society being Christianity.

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43. Curnow 1997c, 79.

As for the contemporary uses of Benin objects, the emphasis is again more on “traditional” than “modern” ones. Viewing the images in “Contemporary brassworking in Benin City” the visitor sees ancestral heads placed on altars and other objects worn in rituals, but nowhere does the exhibition, with words or images, say that, for example, the ivory pendant mask served as the logo of the 1977 FESTAC cultural festival. Nor is there any hint in the exhibition that there is an “issue” over the ownership of the Benin objects. However, that the present-day functions of Benin objects in Nigeria include serving as museum objects is inferred by a text panel which says: “Now, around 85 museums in 18 countries have Benin collections, the largest being in Britain, Germany, the US and Nigeria.” Yet, this acknowledgement that Nigerian museums hold sizable Benin collections is neither reflected in the highlight entries nor by MacGregor. The web presentations only inform the reader that there are Benin objects in “various museums in England, Europe and America” and MacGregor, when listing the “biggest collections” of Benin objects, refers to those in “Britain, Germany, Vienna, Paris and the United States.”<sup>44</sup> One may wonder what has caused this silence on the existence of Benin collections in Nigerian museums. Whatever the reasons for this omission, its effects deserve to be contemplated. Many writers have observed that the museum institution has become an emblematic sign of modernity, progress, and civilization.<sup>45</sup> When MacGregor and the British Museum’s home page fail to include Nigeria among the

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44. MacGregor 2009, 51. Similarly, MacGregor 2004 refers to Benin objects in “the museums of London, Berlin, Paris and New York.” The inclusion of Paris in his list of cities with (major) Benin collections seems a little strange. The Quai Branly collection, the largest in Paris, only contains about 40 objects, which does *not* qualify it as one of the more sizable Benin collections. The museums in Chicago, Cologne, Dresden, Hamburg, Leiden, Leipzig, Oxford, Philadelphia, and Vienna have collections ranging in size from about 80 to over 200 objects. Luschan 1919, 13, Östberg 2010, 68.

45. McClellan commenting on the spread of museums over the world, including former colonized countries, notes that “museums have emerged as a universal sign of civilization that no nation-state or self-respecting municipal government can afford to ignore.” McClellan 2008, 5. Apparently, the British Museum’s homepage and MacGregor ignore that there are museums in Nigeria.

countries with major museum collections of Benin objects, Nigeria is relegated to a place outside modernity. It reinforces the romantic image of Africa as a traditional, distant, and exotic place untouched by Westernization, or, to borrow an expression from Johannes Fabian, denies its covalence.<sup>46</sup>

That the image of contemporary Edo society given by the British Museum focuses more on continuity of tradition than on change is perhaps not necessarily a bad thing in itself. Every society is in some sense “traditional.” There is no society which does not follow or invent “traditions.” However, it deserves to be noted that the museum’s emphasis on Edo traditionalism contrasts with its representation of the British and Westerners, to which we shall now turn. The British/Westerners is *not* imagined as adhering to tradition, but rather as progressing and abandoning old beliefs and ways of thinking. This is most evident in the two narratives the museum presents about the impact of the Benin objects in the West, which become tales of development and expanding knowledge: with the realization of the indigenous origin of the Benin (and Ife) objects, Western prejudices and ignorance collapsed, and through the Benin objects the West learned to appreciate African art.

The British also make their appearance when the museum presents the circumstances of the objects’ removal from Benin City. This is explained on two text panels. “The royal city of Benin” and “The discovery of Benin art by the West” (the reason why similar information is provided on two panels is probably that both serve as introductory panels for visitors entering it from different directions). According to the panel: “The royal city of Benin”:

In 1897 following an attack on a British consular mission, a British punitive expedition took Benin City and sent the King, Oba Ovonramwen, into exile. Many of the brass objects from Benin City fell to the troops and others were sold abroad to defray the costs of the expedition and compensate the victims.

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46. Fabian 2002 [1983].

The text on the other panel, entitled “The discovery of Benin art by the West,” reads:

In the 1890s Benin resisted British control over southern Nigeria. In March [sic] 1897, retaliating for the killing of British representatives, a punitive expedition conquered the capital. Thousands of treasures were taken as booty, including around 1000 brass plaques from the palace.

The Foreign Office auctioned the official booty to cover the cost of the expedition. Large numbers of ivories, brass and wood works were retained and sold by the officers.

A comparison between these descriptions of (past) British customs and cultural practices (i.e. the custom of looting “uncivilized” enemies) with the texts which are about (past and present) Edo customs and cultural practices, reveals significant differences as to how the behavior of the British and the Edo are put before the reader. Generally, the texts about the Edo first describe a behavior and then “explain” it within an Edo cultural context (Edo social structures, beliefs, myths, rituals, and so forth). The following quote, from the object label for a plaque with the Oba holding two leopards, may serve as an example:

In Benin, at coronations and during the important annual ceremony of Igue, the Oba sacrifices leopards *in the belief* that this will ensure his mystical power and the well-being of his people for another year. (Italics added.)

The use of tense in this text has already been commented on. What is of interest here is that the text “explains” the Oba’s motif for sacrificing leopards to the reader. He carries out this ritual every year because he believes that this will ensure his “mystical powers” and the “wellbeing of his people.” In this case, the text is about an Edo ritual practice, but other texts deal more with social symbolism and practices. For example, the exhibition provides the information that control over the production and circulation of



prestigious brass objects was an important element for upholding royal authority. One of the objects' functions is thus "explained" to the viewer, who is simultaneously informed that Edo society had strict social hierarchies.

In contrast, the two text panels about the British looting and the division of loot only describe actions, without placing them in their larger British and Western historical, cultural, and social context. The texts relate that the booty was divided into two parts, one part "fell to the troops" or was "retained and sold by the officers." The other part became the "official booty," which was sold to "cover" or "defray" the costs of the military operation and "to compensate the victims" (a wording which suggests that all the "victims" of these events were on the British side!). This piece of information implies that, at least partly, the income from the sale went to a good cause and, while using the proceeds from looting to pay for the costs of warfare may appear unethical, it does not seem irrational to do so.<sup>47</sup>

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47. Different sources give divergent information on which costs the sales of "the official booty" were supposed to cover. Fagg 1953, 165 states that the booty was removed "as a kind of indemnity towards the costs of the expedition" and in 1981, 21 he claims that it was sold "to defray the cost of pensions for the killed and wounded." Strangely, in the 1981 article there is not mention of that revenue went to cover expedition costs and in 1953 there is no mention of pension costs. The information provided by Read in the preface to Read & Dalton 1898, suggests that the proceeds went to yet another purse. Read writes that the objects were "sold for the benefit of the Protectorate" (Read & Dalton 1898, v). It seems that the information in the text panels, referring to expedition costs and compensation to victims is based on Fagg's 1953 and 1981 accounts.

To my knowledge, the information that the money from the sale of the objects went to the pensions for the "killed and wounded," appears in the Benin literature for the first time around 1980 (see also Connor 1980), that is, in the wake of the heated debate surrounding the British Museum's rejection to lend the ivory pendant mask for FESTAC-77 and the demand for return which were made at that time (e.g. Eyo 1979). Providing compensation for the wounded and the widows of those killed may be seen a good cause and perhaps the statement that the money was used for this purpose is part of the justification for the continued retention of these objects. I have not been able to enquire further into the matter of how the income from the sales were actually distributed, and thus the question of how much, if any, revenue went to the pensions of the (British) victims must remain open for the time being.

However, what is perhaps more important to note is that the absence of a broader contextualization of the looting makes it appear as though it was an isolated incident rather than an expression of a habit of thought and behavior. Clearly, the looting of Benin City was *not* a unique or singular event. When looting Benin City, the British “only” followed a well-established tradition. To mention a few instances of British looting: in 1868 when the British captured Maqdala in Ethiopia, they seized an enormous booty.<sup>48</sup> Likewise, in 1874 – and again in 1896 – when, Kumasi, the Asante capital (in modern Ghana) was sacked, a large war booty was taken.<sup>49</sup> In 1903-1904, during the invasion of Tibet, over 400 mule loads of objects were carried off from Tibetan monasteries.<sup>50</sup> The British were not the sole colonial power which practiced looting: the looting of Yuanmingyuan (the Summer palace) in 1860 was carried out by both British and French troops.<sup>51</sup> In 1900, during the suppression of the Boxer rebellion, a wave of looting – and massacres and summary executions – followed the occupation of Beijing by British, French, German, Japanese, Russian, and United States troops.<sup>52</sup>

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48. A number of objects were bought for the British Museum by Richard Holmes, the “embedded collector” from the British Museum who, conveniently, had accompanied the British army in the war expedition to Maqdala.

49. Greenfield 1996 [1989], 116-118, Appiah 2006, 115-116. Several objects from Kumasi are in the British Museum, such as the *Kra* gold disc, which is illustrated in Mack 2000, 95, from the indemnity the Asante had to pay to the British in 1874.

50. Carrington 2003, 104. More than 200 objects were acquired by the British Museum. Carrington 2003, 109. n. 123.

51. On the British Museum’s purchases of loot from Yuanmingyuan, see Harrison-Hall 1997, 222, 224.

52. The looting was carried out both by soldiers of the occupying forces and by the Westerners (and Chinese Christian converts) which had been besieged in Beijing. The missionaries seem to have been particularly active in the looting, purportedly to provide money for the relief of Chinese Christians. One missionary wrote an essay “The ethics of loot” in which he stated that “I only regret I didn’t have more time to loot instead of leaving it to others.” The atrocities and massive looting, however, became heavily criticized at the time and it was pointed out by some critics that the looting was in violation of the Hague Convention of 1899 to which all the invading countries and the Qing government was party. Thompson 2010, Hevia 2003, esp. 197, 208-219, 231-240.

Importantly, the point is not so much that looting was “customary” at the time, but that it was customary and sanctioned only in colonial wars. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, looting had gone out of practice in warfare between European nations and was eventually banned in the emerging international legislation which regulated warfare between “civilized” belligerents. Looting was however still standard practice during colonial warfare, that is, when conducting war against those who were considered to be uncivilized opponents.<sup>53</sup> Thus, the looting which followed the occupation of Benin City resided in a particular belief system and world view which distinguished between a civilized self and uncivilized other and whose corresponding practices included, for example, colonization and imperialism (which entitled the civilized to take the lands of the uncivilized). This is not “explained” to the visitor by the British Museum – nor that it was this sorting of humanity which lays behind the establishment of the academic discipline of anthropology, as well as the creation of ethnographic displays in museums where the artifacts of the uncivilized were put on view for civilized museum visitors.

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53. To give a short overview of the policy and practice of looting in European warfare: the taking of booty and the removal of the art treasures was common until 17<sup>th</sup> century, and was supported in the legal philosophy at the time. The jurist Hugo Grotius (1583-1645) opined that pillaging was permitted during armed conflict. Norberg 2007, 72, Vrdoljak 2006, 64. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century the practice of looting vanquished enemies became less common. The large-scale removal of artworks by Napoleon may be seen as a return to an earlier practice, and the peace treaty of Vienna in 1815 prescribed the restitution of the Napoleonic loot to their former owners. After the Napoleonic wars, the taking of booty largely went out of practice in the warfare between European nations. (More or less organized and officially sanctioned large-scale looting reemerged with the German – and Soviet – seizures of art works during the Second World War.)

Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, bans against plunder were being introduced in the emerging “international” legislation as a reflection of the growing sentiment that plunder was not just. Vrdoljak 2006, 66, O’Keefe 2006, 13-34, Forrest 2010, 63-67. The 1874 Brussels Declaration prohibited pillage and the destruction or confiscation of works of art. These prohibitions were reproduced in the 1899 Hague Convention. Since a declaration, in contrast to a convention is non-binding agreement, there were no legal obstacles to the looting of Benin City, and anyway, “international” conventions did not apply to “uncivilized” peoples. Mégrét 2006, Vrdoljak 2006, 47-53.

In addition, if the practice of looting during colonial warfare says a great deal about how the West viewed the outside world through racial and cultural hierarchies, the distribution of loot in 1897 says just as much about class hierarchies *within* Western society. According to the text panels, one part of the booty “fell to the *troops*” or was “retained and sold by the *officers*” (italics added). There is a slight discrepancy between these two sentences regarding who the recipients of the booty were. The words “troops” and “officers” are not synonyms. “Troops” generally consists of both privates (the majority) and officers (the minority). In this case it seems more correct to refer to the recipients of the loot as (white) “officers” rather than “troops.” There is some uncertainty on how the loot was divided and who got what and by which means, but clearly, the vast majority of the loot was obtained by the white officers according to rank, with the rest – white privates, black officers, privates, and carriers – receiving very little of it. While one of the two text panels says that the “officers” retained and sold “large numbers” of objects, it does not elucidate *why* the main beneficiaries of the looting were the (white) officers. The silence serves to naturalize this state of affairs.

On the topic of silence about class in British/Western society: among the few things the exhibition reveals about the objects’ post-1897 destinies is that the ivory leopards were a gift from Admiral Rawson to Queen Victoria. Again, the information is presented as a matter of fact, without any further explanation or contextualization provided. Here the British Museum misses an excellent opportunity to illuminate a Western cultural behavior, especially prevalent amongst the upper echelons of society and the royalty. As noted in chapter 5, following their dispersal in 1897, the Benin objects become part of an “economy” where objects, through various transactions, were exchanged for prestige and recognition. Rawson’s gift to Victoria finds a parallel in the gift of two leopards to Kaiser Wilhelm.

The museum visitor learns many things about the Benin objects, such as their social and religious functions in Edo society. In the process, the visitor gets to know certain aspects of Edo society, regarding, for example, belief systems and social stratification. In contrast, the few glimpses there are of the objects’ post-1897 lives

in Western society do not explain their meanings and functions in a similar way. What are the effects of such silences and statements? Perhaps the visitor walks away from the exhibit believing that in Western society these objects are only objects of art or scientific objects. The visitor is certainly not reminded that Western society also has its class hierarchies. Perhaps also, on a more general level, these texts, explaining Edo behavior but not Western behavior, create a subtle distinction between the Edo and Westerners. It gives the impression that the Edo acts according to the norms and rules set by their culture, while the Westerners act as independent rational subjects according to their own free will. The Edo are envisioned as part of a collective and the Westerners as individuals. Or to put it differently: Edo culture and cultural behavior are exoticized and Western culture and cultural behavior are naturalized.

While the exhibition, in certain respects, puts the Edo and the British on an unequal footing, it should be added that the exhibition at least once juxtaposes Edo and Westerners (in this case the Portuguese) in a manner which stresses communality rather than differences in human behavior and thinking. The two text panels headed "Prester John" and "Olokun" relate to how both the Portuguese and the Edo tried to fit each other into their respective worldviews. The Portuguese saw evidence of the proximity of the kingdom of Prester John in the Edo cross symbol, and the Edo saw the Portuguese as messengers of the seagod Olokun, bringer of wealth.

Similarly, in *Africa – Arts and Culture*, Mack points out that myths are produced by West Africans and Europeans alike:

Local rulers [in Nigeria/West Africa] were often keen to adjust their own genealogies to confirm links with rising dynasties, as in *contemporary* Nigeria they may *still* be revised in the light of the origins of a new regional government or president. Benin origins are claimed by many smaller Nigerian peoples, while Benin kingship is locally traced back to Ife. Europeans, of course, brought their own mythologies to bear. When Frobenius, the German ethnographer, visited Ife in 1910, he was astonished to find brass (and terracotta) heads

of strikingly classical naturalism in the grove of Olokun. [...] Equating Olokun with the Greek sea-god Poseidon, Frobenius convinced himself that he had discovered the site of ancient Atlantis, a Greek outpost in Africa.<sup>54</sup> (*Italics added.*)

In these texts, both Edo and Westerners (at least the Portuguese and a German) are equipped with culturally determined frames of reference. The juxtaposition of Edo and Western meaning-making processes calls into question the division between the (rational) Western self and its (irrational) non-Western other. However, Mack's text does not completely erase the distinction between Westerner and non-Westerner. While Mack is explicit that the revision of genealogies "still" happens in "contemporary Nigeria," he does not give any corresponding examples of *contemporary* European mythmaking. The kind of world-views and mythologies (of white supremacy and African inferiority etc.) to which Frobenius's Atlantis theory belong are ones which most readers will probably locate at a comfortable distance from contemporary British/Western ones. Thus, the text infers that while the Nigerians *still* continue in their tradition of inventing traditions and genealogies, the Westerners have *now* progressed beyond that kind of primitive thinking and behavior. It is slightly ironic that on the following page, Mack inadvertently gives an example of contemporary Western mythmaking when he declares his conviction that his academic ancestor at the British Museum, the "tireless" Read, made the Europeans accept the indigenous origin of the Benin objects. So much for Western progress.

Barley's *The Art of Benin* also juxtaposes Edo and Western cultural behavior. For example, in a caption to a photograph of Oba Akenzua II and the British Governor of Nigeria in 1936, Barley compares "two different idioms of power," one which exaggerates bulk, the other which exaggerates height. The swathes of cloth below the waist of the Oba make him look larger, and the British governor's tight uniform, built-up shoes, and high plumed hat make him look

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54. Mack 2000, 101.

taller.<sup>55</sup> Barley also has something to say about past British/Western systems of belief. As for the British reaction to the Oba closing down the market during the autumn 1896, he comments: “For the British at that time free trade was assumed to be natural, almost divine, and they unhesitatingly opposed its restriction wherever they found it.”<sup>56</sup> That is, his explanation for the British reaction, the sending of Phillip’s ill-fated diplomatic mission, relates to assumptions and rationalities which were culturally specific, but not necessarily universally true. He is also clear that today, as in earlier times, the world is understood through culturally determined frames of reference and preconceived ideas. “One view,” Barley writes, of The Age of Discovery is that “myth was replaced by scientific knowledge of the outside world,” but the history of contact between Europe and Benin suggests “that the two more often go hand in hand.” Thus, “exploration was less a matter of finding out what was there than fixing on the map what was already felt must exist.” This is illustrated by how Portuguese explorers of the 15<sup>th</sup> century were driven by the “urgent quest for the realm of Prester John.” Barley continues:

Myth continued to envelop and shape the interpretation of Benin through the nineteenth century in the Europeans who saw the kingdom as the very embodiment of the “heart of darkness,” and extends nowadays to the contemporary use of its artefacts as proud national symbols on banknotes and in touring exhibitions. In the age of satellite navigation, we *continue to orient ourselves by mythical maps*.<sup>57</sup> (Italics added.)

Barley presumably includes all inhabitants on planet Earth in the category “we” who “nowadays” use “mythological maps,” yet his examples of those who mythologize are limited to (West) Africans. As it is only in West Africa where Benin objects have been put on banknotes, the phrase “the contemporary use of its artefacts as proud national symbols on banknotes,” must refer to the West

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55. Barley 2010, 44, fig. 28.

56. Barley 2010, 15.

57. Barley 2010, 12.



African use of Benin objects in creating a national identity. What the reference to “touring exhibitions” means is unclear to me (and, I assume, to most readers). I guess that the sentence might mean that the artifacts are also “national symbols” in touring exhibitions. Clearly, a contributing reason for a country or museum to send Benin artifacts to an international touring exhibition could be national pride, and this would apply to all countries which lend Benin artifacts to travelling exhibitions. If Barley’s sentence is meant to be understood in such a way, it might be that he also includes Westerners amongst those who think “mythologically,” but if so, his point is so well hidden that probably few will get it. Regardless of what this opaque sentence means, it is perhaps significant that Barley directs the reader’s attention to touring exhibitions, not permanent ones. The word “museum exhibitions” could have invited the reader to think over what contemporary uses these objects are put to in, for example, a permanent exhibition in the British Museum.

Nowhere in this publication does Barley provide any clear examples of contemporary Western mythmaking or of the continuity of Western traditions, behavior, myths, and beliefs from the past into the present.<sup>58</sup> But he does give Nigerian ones. Echoing Mack, he suggests that ancestral links are created and denied in contemporary Nigeria in a way analogous to how such links may have been created and re-created in the Benin Kingdom. Discussing the tradition that the Benin kingship originates from Oramiyan, of the neighboring Yoruba, he asserts:

The Yoruba element in Benin may have been expected to vary, being either stressed or muted according to circumstances, *just as* other peoples of the Niger Delta, *more recent-*

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58. In this respect his text differs from MacGregor’s foreword which makes a comparison between the Benin Punitive Expedition and the Falklands war: “Although not one of the major military operations of the time, it [the punitive expedition] had a high profile, being seen as a vindication of national honor. In many ways, it was the Falklands Expedition of its day, with emotional farewells to the ships, a rapid and decisive outcome and reception of victorious forces at Windsor by the Queen, to whom objects from Benin were presented.” MacGregor 2010a.

ly, maintained or denied an ancestral link with the Benin kingship itself during the shifting fortunes of the Biafran war.<sup>59</sup> (*Italics added.*)

Also, according to Barley, there are “well-documented cases of Obas casually removing” Benin brassworks “from altars to present to passing European visitors as souvenirs.” He adds: “The presentation by General Gowon, President of Nigeria, of a Benin head to Queen Elisabeth II while on a state visit in 1973 *merely continues the tradition*” (*italics added*).<sup>60</sup> One may argue whether Gowon’s gift in 1973 should “merely” be seen as an expression of the continuity of tradition from 1892, but the main question is: given that, as Barley asserts, *all* of us orient ourselves by “mythical maps” inherited from the past, why is there this insistence on Edo/Nigerian mythmaking and traditionalism but silence on British/Western mythmaking and traditionalism?

It would not have been difficult to add corresponding British and Western examples. As to the opportunistic muting of ancestral links, the name of the reigning British Royal House provides a case in point as good as any. Its present name, the House of Windsor, dates from 1917 when King George V, due to anti-German sentiment in Britain during World War I, dropped the old name House of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha.<sup>61</sup> In a similar move to hide an embarrassing German ancestry, in 1947, the future King George VI anglicized his family name from Battenberg to Mountbatten.

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59. Barley 2010, 44.

60. Barley 2010, 33. The “well-documented cases” probably here refers to the gift of a brass horseman from Oba Ovonramwen to the trader John Swainson in 1892 (Karpinski 1984, Nevadomsky 2006, 46) and perhaps also the gift to the trader Eugen Fischer of a cast head in the early 1880s by the Amapetu of Mahin. Curnow 2007, 178, 181, fig. 9. A brass figure and other objects obtained by a Dr. Ziemann were reportedly given to him in 1902 by Oba Ovonramwen, at the time exiled to Calabar (Dark 1982, xi), but it is doubtful if this is correct.

61. The anti-German feelings peaked in 1917 when German air-raids with Gotha G IV bombers reached London. In the same year, Tsar Nicholas II (a cousin of King George) had been forced to abdicate, raising fears that monarchies might also be abolished also elsewhere. To sever the German links, King George ordered his family to relinquish all German titles, and German relations were stripped of their British titles.

Barley's wording makes Oba Ovonoramwen and General Gowon's gifts examples of the continuity of a Nigerian tradition of "casually removing" objects to give away to foreigners, but a similar case may be made for the continuity of a Western tradition of accepting gifts of such ill-begotten objects. When Queen Elizabeth II received Gowon's gift of the head, he had just stolen it from the National Museum in Lagos, she could, following Barley's logic, be described as "merely" following the example of Queen Victoria who, in 1897, received Rawson's gift of two recently looted ivory leopards, which are now on exhibit in the British Museum (although Elizabeth II was presumably unaware of that the head was stolen property).<sup>62</sup>

To this it may be added that the "tradition" of giving objects from vanquished foreign enemies to heads of state and then putting the objects on public display still lives on in some parts of Western world. In 2004, a pistol, confiscated from Saddam Hussein upon his capture in 2003, was presented to George Bush. The hand-gun, allegedly one of Bush's "most prized possessions" was later transferred to the George W. Bush Library and Museum in Dallas. As an aside, the pistol in a way, gives a glimpse of an example of Western reluctance to confront its own mythmaking. At the museum, the exhibits are organized thematically around key decisions taken by Bush during his presidency. One of these was the decision to invade Iraq to eliminate weapons of mass destruction, and in the displays, the pistol – a potentially lethal weapon – becomes symbolic of the victory over Hussein. Incidentally (?), the accompanying sign does not mention that the gun was unloaded – that is, harmless – when Hussein was captured. Had it done so it could have reminded us that Hussein was much less a threat than the war-mongers claimed and that his fabled weapons of mass destruction belonged to the realm of fantasy.<sup>63</sup>

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62. Reynolds 2002, Nevadomsky 2004, 86.

63. Bumiller 2004, Fruehling 2007, Natta, 2009, Pilkington, 2009. The sign for the pistol reads: "Saddam Hussein's Pistol - 9mm Glock Model 18C Automatic Pistol confiscated from Saddam Hussein during his capture on December 13, 2003. Members of the U.S. Army's 1st Brigade Combat Team from the 4th Infantry Division presented the framed gun to President Bush on March 1, 2004." (E-mail Brandon Zogg, George W. Bush Presidential Library, March 18, 2014.)

Bush may also illustrate many other Western beliefs. At least once Bush has declared that God had told him to end tyranny in Iraq, and he has also expressed his conviction about the universal benevolence of “free trade” and of the obligation to spread it worldwide. In his National Security Strategy of 2002, Bush declared that the United States will “defend peace by fighting terrorists and tyrants” and it “will actively work to bring the hope of democracy, development, free markets, and free trade to every corner of the world.”<sup>64</sup> This rhetoric, with its mix of economic and humanitarian interests, may be compared with that of Moor and the other proponents of a military attack on Benin in the late 1890s. With abundant examples of Western traditionalism and mythmaking at hand, one may wonder why Barley has only given Nigerian ones. Despite the great merit of him pointing out that myth plays a role in people’s minds and actions to this day, the absence of non-Nigerian examples in the text gives a lingering sense that some parts of humanity mythologize more than other.

One may enquire how self and other are constructed elsewhere in the British Museum since a visitor to the African galleries is not unlikely to visit more exhibits in the museum. To look into each and every exhibition in the British Museum in detail is beyond the reach of this study, but as far as I can tell from cursory glances of the displays, it seems that what applies for the Benin exhibit generally also holds true elsewhere. The focus is on others, not selves. Like in the *Sainsbury African Galleries*, the Western white self may be present through implication, such as in the names of various discoverers, scientists and donors, but the self is not made foreign, essentialized, and “explained” in a similar fashion to how the other is.

At first glance, the exhibition which the visitor passes on its way to *Africa – Living and Dying in the Wellcome Trust Gallery* – may appear to offer an exception. In this exhibition, inaugurated in 2003 for the museum’s 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the introductory panel states that the displays explore how “people everywhere deal with

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64. *The Guardian* 2005, National Security Strategy, 2002 Available at: <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article2320.htm>

the tough realities of life and death.” The exhibition puts both British and others on view, but there is a certain lack of symmetry as to how the two are rendered. The British are shown through the centrally placed artwork “Cradle to Grave” by named artists which presents the medical histories of two named individuals, described in the introductory panel as “a typical man and woman in Britain today.”<sup>65</sup> Thus, the life stories of two people become the reference point from which the viewer may draw wider implications about the use of medicine in British society. The surrounding displays in the gallery either present case studies of how peoples around the world relate to different aspects of their reality (such as how Arctic people relate to animals and how Maori communities relate to other Maori communities) or explore cross cultural themes (such as sickness and death). In contrast to the central installation, these displays do not focus on specific named persons representing the ethnic group in question. Instead, in these texts the anonymous curatorial voice “explains” the thoughts and customs, feelings, and thinking of homogenous ethnic groups in which there are no individual divisions. For example, the visitor is told that when Maori groups receive guests they follow “tribal protocol,” that “[i]n Papua Guinea every death in a small community leaves a void,” and that “in many Catholic communities in Europe” people pray to saints for health and have presented ex-votos “for centuries.” In the display there are photographs, presumably from Britain, but no accompanying explanatory texts about British culture. Thus, exactly how the Protestants or the secularized deal with health issues (apart from taking medicine), or relate to death, animals, and guests is explicated nowhere. Questions such as whether or not the British follow “tribal protocol” or if they mourn their dead remain unanswered. Lissant Bolton, the exhibition’s curator, writes in an article that “Cradle to Grave” is intended to produce an othering and relativizing effect of Western habits.<sup>66</sup> Presumably it does to some extent. Yet, the contrasting representational techniques used to

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65. For a (positive) evaluation of “Cradle to Grave,” see Mordhorst 2009. It would have been interesting if the exhibition had expanded on how it defined “typical” since health and life expectancy is much related to class.

66. Bolton 2008, 350.

display selves and others may result in the self not being as othered as much as others are. The format makes the exhibition's message ambiguous and despite the aim of presenting a non-hierarchical, non-ethnocentric survey of diverse ways of handling the basics of human existence, one may wonder if the exhibits accomplish this. There is a chance that *Living and Dying*, much like the *Sainsbury African Galleries*, reinforces the idea of selves as characterized by individualism, progress, and rationality and others (Arctic peoples, Catholics, Maori, Papua Guineans, etc.) by collectivism, tradition, and beliefs.<sup>67</sup>

Another exhibition which involves the British/Western self, and more specifically, the British Museum self, is *Enlightenment – Discovering the World in the Eighteenth Century*, which also opened for the museum's 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2003. It is housed in gallery 1, built in 1823-27, in Greek revival style and forming the first wing of the present museum. The main theme of the exhibition is the emergence of scientific enquiry during the long Enlightenment era, from about 1680 to 1820.<sup>68</sup> The introductory panel explains: "The Enlightenment is the name given to the age of reason, discovery and learning" that "changed the way that people viewed the world" and that the exhibition "focuses on the Museum's early collections, recreating that sense of first amazement and exploring some of the ways that people in Britain viewed their world and its past." The displays are organized in seven sections: Ancient Scripts, Art and Civilization, The Birth of Archaeology, Classifying the World, The Natural World,

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67. There are objects in the exhibition which potentially *could* have been used to illuminate some of the darker sides of Western of culture and techno-science, such as the artwork "The Atomic Apocalypse" by the Linares Family in Mexico City. It includes one of four horseman of the Apocalypse, seated on the Earth's globe wielding an atomic bomb. However, the caption – instead of pointing out that among the blessings of scientific progress is that there are now nuclear arsenals available which would bring about genocide and ecocide on a global scale – prefers to relate the artwork to the Mexican Day of the Dead tradition, explaining that depictions of death are produced for this festival. The caption turns attention away from the threat of nuclear holocaust, reducing the artwork to an illustration of a Mexican tradition. Why this reluctance to confront the destructiveness of Western culture?

68. Sloan 2003, 13-14.

Religion and Ritual, and Trade and Discovery. The objects on display come from the museum's own collections and from other institutions including the Natural History Museum and the British Library. The objects are exhibited "to convey a sense of how objects were organised and displayed during the eighteenth century." Thus, the museum uses the medium of the meta-exhibition to recreate how objects were viewed at that time.

According to an accompanying brochure, the Enlightenment was a time "when people – including the collectors who created the British Museum – used reason and first-hand observation of the world around them to understand it in new ways." The introductory text to the section on The Natural World explains in a similar wording that during this period "[p]eople relied less on Biblical texts and ancient Greek and Roman authors and more on first-hand observation and clear reasoning to gain knowledge" which led them "to observe, collect and classify the works of nature." The exhibition focuses on the birth of scientific enquiry (and of the British Museum), but it does not skirt around the larger geo-political context within which the scientific discoveries were made nor does it neglect some of the darker sides of geographical discovery and exploration. The introductory panel to Trade and Discovery states that "[c]olonisation of new lands [...] accelerated during the Enlightenment" and that "[t]rading companies such as the Honorable East India Company ran their own armies." In the text about Oceania it is told that Cook's voyage to Australia led to the sending of convicts and soldiers there in 1788 which "changed the course of a continent and the people who inhabited it." The visitor learns that the Americas were "exploited" by the Spanish and the British and that "[n]ative populations were devastated by epidemics and warfare and their culture suppressed by the Europeans." The text on Africa informs about slavery and the fate of the Ghanaian William Ansah, sent to on a trading mission to London but sold into slavery in Barbados – a fate from which he was later rescued.

There is one section which takes a critical stance against some of the cultural assumptions which underpinned the era's quest for knowledge. In Art and Civilization it is related that Enlightenment scholars tried to trace the development of art from its assumed



primitive origins to its assumed peak of excellence in ancient Greece, and that the Greek ideal became a standard against which the art of other peoples were judged. This section also looks forward in time beyond the Enlightenment era and traces the legacy of these ideas. It even critiques how the British Museum came to rank cultures:

In the nineteenth century, British Museum curators arranged objects in the galleries to illustrate what had become an accepted idea of the progress of ancient civilisations. The Museum abandoned this approach in the twentieth century, when it learned with others to value cultures, not in comparison to ancient Greece, but in their own terms.

The texts in this section clearly emphasize the ethnocentrism which imbued the birth of art history. One could have wished for further information on how the evaluation of art and culture was often interlinked with ideas about race, but still, within the space available, the section about Art and Civilization manages to offer critical reflections on the collecting, study, and display of ancient art. However, this section forms an exception in the exhibition. The others portray the foundations of diverse fields of scientific inquiry – archaeology, biology, philology, etc. – in a rather triumphant style. Recurring words in the texts are “new,” “scientific,” and “modern.” In the way the texts are structured, the transition from old (incorrect) to new (correct) ways of knowing and organizing the world, become stories of virtually unqualified progress. For example, the section on Ancient Scripts, relates that during the Enlightenment the study of ancient texts went from being a “collector’s hobby” to “the science known as philology” defined as “the analysis and comparison of written language.” Through the discovery, decipherment, and translation of texts, “new worlds and cultures” were “revealed,” and the Rosetta Stone, the key to reading the hieroglyphs, “has become an icon [...] of all attempts to understand the ancient past in its own terms.” What it means to “understand” the past “in its own terms” is not explicated, but it suggests an ideal of reading the past in a correct and unprejudiced way, and of not using the knowledge revealed to serve any partisan needs in

the present. The wording makes the creation and professionalization of philology a success story of expanding human knowledge. A similar narrative is formed in the Birth of Archaeology, where the “new discipline” archaeology is described as having “evolved” from antiquarianism. While antiquarianism is associated with incorrect interpretation and nationalism, “modern archaeology” is not.

Sloane appears in several of the sections. In *Classifying the World* he exemplifies the shift in world view and collecting practices. His collection, stated to have focused on the rare and exceptional, is described as “old-fashioned even by the standards of his own day,” yet, his “insistence on representing living as well as past cultures, are evidence that the Enlightenment had begun to shed its light on his collection.” In *The Natural World* it is told that he wanted to “increase both the happiness and the wealth of humanity,” and that his “interest in natural history grew along with his income” (which is an acknowledgment that collections were bought with money and that not each and every one had equal means to participate in the era’s quest for knowledge).<sup>69</sup> He introduced drinking chocolate in Britain and his *Natural History of Jamaica* was “the first [...] detailed catalogue of a country’s natural history and artefacts.” The display also contains a quote from Sloane, where he tells that the Jamaican tody, was “one of the most beautiful small birds I ever saw.”

Sloane reappears in the section on Trade and Discovery where the introductory panel begins by explaining that Sloane’s collections “included pipes, shoes and other everyday objects” which “formed the beginnings of an ‘ethnographic’ collection at the British Museum.” The text also tells that objects brought back by voyagers were “increasingly [...] used to provide knowledge about the variety of different ways of life of people around the world.” The final sentence declares: “The growing realisation of the shared humanity of the people of the world was a distinctive feature of Enlightenment thought.” The texts in this section (like all the other sections except

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69. And Joseph Banks is described as “wealthy” and “servants” are included on the list of people accompanying Banks on his journeys. Thus, the exhibition gives some indications of the class structures of the day and that the “discoveries” of the privileged few relied on the work on the many less privileged whose names are not held in remembrance today.

for Art and Civilization) do not mention the further “development” of the academic study of different peoples in the following centuries, but it is easy to get the impression that, as time wore on, the growth of knowledge about others and the growth of collections of their cultural products at the British Museum equaled a growing realization of the shared humanity of the world’s inhabitants.

All in all, the exhibition communicates a predominantly favorable image of the birth of modern science. “[T]o catalogue and to classify” are presented as benign activities and the Enlightenment becomes a force for good which the museum is made part of. The laudations to the Enlightenment, scientific enquiry, and the British Museum are implied in the exhibition rather than made explicit, but in the accompanying publication things are spelled out more clearly. “The foundation of the British Museum was one of the most potent acts of the Enlightenment,” according to the unhesitant verdict of British Museum curator Kim Sloan, who also informs that the museum was “a true product and even embodiment of the Enlightenment, and certainly one of its greatest achievements.”<sup>70</sup>

The way the exhibition tells the story of the Enlightenment, its ideas about cultural others, and the – implied – legacy of those ideas, at the British Museum and elsewhere is *one* way of telling this story. But there are a range of other possible narratives available. For example, the scientism of the era created the impetus for scientific racism which was to gain prominence in the following two centuries. Another way of characterizing the change in the perception of human variety of the era would be to say that it went from differentiating human beings primarily on the basis of religious beliefs to differentiating them primarily on the basis of bodily characteristics. In line with the general shift from seeing truth as emerging from scripture to seeing it as radiating from “reason” and observable “facts,” people were sorted less by their religious creed (Christian/heathen) and more by their skin color and skull shape (white/colored).<sup>71</sup> Told in this (also simplified) way, the story of the

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70. Sloan 2013, 13-14.

71. On this transformation, see Wheeler 2000.

shifts in the way people were perceived during the Age of Reason would have given emphasis to the double-sided nature of scientific “progress,” and that change is not in each and every respect equal to “development.”

There are several places in the exhibition where illuminating the troublesome aspect of scientism and the desire to classify would certainly not have been out of place. For example, when the exhibition states that Linnaeus “revolutionised” the study of the natural world in 1735 by “developing modern taxonomy” it could have informed that he also incorporated human beings into his classificatory system: he judged the variety to which he himself belonged as the foremost of them all, and relegated the African to the bottom of the hierarchy. Similarly, a reminder about the ethnocentrism and scientific racism which might inform scientific enquiry would have been apt in Ancient Scripts. Comparative philology may at first appear to be a harmless discipline, but in fact it had in common with art history (and many other disciplines) that it was not always about studying others on their own terms or making comparisons between selves and others which were favorable to the others. As discussed in chapter 2, the 19<sup>th</sup> century philologist Ernst Renan concluded that the Semitic languages were inferior to the Indo-European which was also proof of the intellectual backwardness of the Semites. As Said observed, Renan’s academic treatises, in turn, were one of the sources for Cromer’s “knowledge” about the inferiority of Egyptians and part of the justification for British domination over Egypt.

Likewise, the texts about Sloane and the birth of ethnography at the British Museum could have been told differently. The exhibition speaks about slavery, but slavery is not allowed to come close to Sloane. Hence it is not mentioned who grew the cacao or sugar for his chocolate or from where part of his income came. His book on Jamaica not only catalogued natural history and contemplated the beauty of the birds. He also described methods for torturing and murdering Blacks – “a very perverse Generation of People” – in Sloane’s words. It would certainly have been possible to problematize the faith in rationalism and scientism, with, for example Sloane’s reasoned opinion that slaves kill themselves in the belief

that they will be free and journey back home.<sup>72</sup>

Had the section on the creation of ethnography dealt with the British Museum's subsequent history (like Art and Civilization does), it might well have pointed out what kind of popular and scientific knowledge came out of the study of different peoples at the British Museum during the 19<sup>th</sup> and into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as in, for example Joyce's opinion about the mental inferiority of the Black to the White, and that Blacks stand closer to the apes than the white man. Such information would then have invited a comparison with Linnaeus's categorization of human beings, suggesting another side of the legacy of the Enlightenment.

The British Museum chooses to tell the story of the birth of modern science in a manner where the problematic aspects of scientific enquiry become peripheral to, rather than integrated in, the narrative on progress of knowledge. Of course, there are many ways to recount the creation, professionalization, and institutionalization of academic knowledge production, all of which cannot be included in an exhibition. This is not to critique the museum for having told the "wrong" story in the Enlightenment exhibition. Yet, the (perhaps evident) circumstance that these representations, which involve the British Museum, are created by representatives of the British museum needs reiterating. When the British Museum paints the picture of the Enlightenment's scientific endeavors in a brighter rather than a darker color, it also affects which image of the British Museum it creates. Equating the British Museum with the ideas and ideals of the Enlightenment, the museum lets the bright light it casts on the Enlightenment reflect back on itself.<sup>73</sup>

72. On Sloane's involvement in the debate on "race," see Malcolmson 2016, 75-85.

73. Space does not permit a full discussion of the exhibition's two accompanying publications and the presentation on the homepage. In the publications, while some articles have a celebratory tone (e.g. Sloan 2003), others offer more problematizing perspective on the period and its "achievements" (e.g. Durrans 2003, Syson 2003, see 115 on Linnaeus's classification of humans). The texts on the homepage are predominantly celebratory, and with very little on the era's colonial expansion. For example, under the heading Trade and Discovery one reads about the East India Company and that its officials "studied the cultures of the people with whom they lived, collected further artefacts and published illustrated accounts that provided information about the lives and cultures of people around the world." There is no mention that the East India Company

A similar trend of the museum hailing itself through a circular route may be observed in the adjacent gallery (room 2) which houses the exhibition *Collecting the World*. The introductory text announces that “This room celebrates some of the collectors, who in different ways, have shaped the Museum over four centuries.” According to another text:

The world in the twenty-first century is a changing place and the Museum of the world changes with it. During its long history, the Museum has become a place where all cultures can be shown, but none privileged, all faiths represented, but none preached.

The text leaves it unclear exactly *when* the museum became a place where no culture was privileged or preached, but from the displays it is easy to get the impression that this happened earlier rather than later in time. The section Expanding Horizons deals with how the museum began to increase its areas of collecting in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century beyond the ancient Mediterranean cultures to include British prehistory and non-European cultures. Two important figures are presented: British Museum curator Augustus Franks, who “has been described as its [the museum’s] ‘second founder,’” and his friend the collector Henry Christy. The exhibits inform us that Christy’s “concern for peoples whose lives and cultures were threatened by colonialism inspired him to collect objects from the places he visited” and “[a]s a Quaker, Christy believed that all people are born equal. He hoped that his collection would preserve world cultures and aimed to show how and why societies differ without being inferior or superior to one another.” Upon Christy’s death in 1865, Franks made sure that the collection was incorporated in the museum: “This placed objects from remote cultures around the world alongside those of more familiar civilizations,” and “[t]he collection was classified and arranged systematically, anticipating what would become the new discipline of ethnography.”

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conquered large parts of India (and that it smuggled opium to China).

The texts give a similar message as those about Sloane in the Enlightenment exhibits where the “beginnings” of ethnographic collecting are envisioned as a story of progress, without any mention of ethnography’s darker sides. As there are no indications to the contrary, it is easy to get the impression that at the British Museum, Christy’s collection was displayed according to his intention of showing cultures as not “inferior or superior to one another” – an attitude which, incidentally, sounds remarkably similar to that of MacGregor who wants the museum’s collections to “subvert the habits of thought that keep us from seeing other cultures except in categories of superiority and difference.” This is not the place to discuss if the British Museum describes Christy’s motifs for collecting accurately, but it is worth asking: if the British museum felt it necessary to relate this information about Christy’s aims and hopes regarding his collection, why did it fail to inform that the practitioners at the British Museum in the “new discipline of ethnography” did *not* use his collection – and the other objects (including the Benin objects) which were later purchased through the funds he had bequeathed – according to this intention. As discussed, the aim of British ethnography during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was not to show cultures as equal, but to arrange them in a sequence from primitive to civilized and to unveil the laws of development. The British museum’s ethnographic collection did not become evidence of human equality, but rather of Western superiority.

On the topic of the making of the British Museum’s identity, it seems that the Enlightenment exhibition has inspired MacGregor’s portrayal of the British Museum’s creation and history. The text on Trade and Discovery *could* be the “source” for MacGregor’s statements about the “remarkable” Sloane and his shoe collection, which, to MacGregor, illustrated Sloane’s interest in “being able to compare how different cultures did the same kind of things.”<sup>74</sup> While the exhibition text says nothing about Sloane’s reasons for collecting shoes or other foreign objects, could it be that MacGregor has here extrapolated the three ingredients, Sloane, shoes, and

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74. MacGregor & Cuno 2009.



shared humanity, and with them created the idea that Sloane was interested in the study of cultural diversity and human communality? Since MacGregor assures that the museum follows its “founding principle” with “everything it does,” and since the museum today is interested in cultural diversity and making cross-cultural comparisons (as in *Living and Dying*) perhaps there is a need to imagine a precursor for that idea amongst the museum’s founders?

Before returning to Africa, there is one further exhibition which should be commented on. Among the many cultures on display in the museum there is one which stands apart from the rest regarding its relation to the self. For many centuries the West has imagined itself as building on the legacy of Classical Antiquity. For example, the poet Shelley famously exclaimed “We are all Greeks” and before him the art critic Benjamin Haydon, less famously, expressed his hope that the Parthenon sculptures having “fled for protection to England” would “give new vigour to British Art” and that “their essence [would] mingle with our blood and circulate through our being.”<sup>75</sup>

Such pronouncements of a total identification with the legacy of ancient Greece in general, or the Parthenon sculptures in particular, are hardly made nowadays, but there is presumably a sense among many that Classical Antiquity is part of the Western self in a way which other cultures are not. This may make it of interest to look at what the British Museum has to say on this matter. Reading the introductory text to the Parthenon Galleries, the visitor learns that:

Athens became the principal city-state of Classical Greece. The Parthenon, the temple of Athena Parthenos, was the city’s most important building. It was built between 447 and 432 as the crowning achievement of Athenian political, economic and artistic prowess. Still today it represents a standard of excellence for western civilisation, both as perfection in craftsmanship and as evidence of *supreme intellect* in design. (Italics added.)

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75. Haydon 1817, 285, Webb 2002, 85.

These four sentences are interesting in many ways, especially the last one which not only connects “western civilization” with “perfection in craftsmanship” but also with “supreme intellect in design.” The wording “represents a standard” leaves it very unclear if we are here dealing with facts or beliefs, and in case we are dealing with beliefs, who holds them and why. Had the text stated, for example, “In the Western tradition the Parthenon has been regarded as evidence of perfection in craftsmanship and of supreme intellect in design” or perhaps “Many Westerners still believe that the Parthenon represents... etc.” it would have made it more evident that we are dealing with beliefs rather than facts and that such beliefs are located in a cultural context. There is also a noteworthy difference between the last sentence and the first three. The first three put the Parthenon in its 5<sup>th</sup> BCE political context, and relate it to Athenian self-aggrandizement. No such contextualization is offered by the last one. The absence of an explanation might suggest that the Western idea of the Parthenon as the embodiment of Western intellectual superiority is “given” and, furthermore, that it has been, and still is, a politically innocent and harmless notion. It leaves aside that ancient Greece and the Parthenon have been an important building block in the Western belief of its own supremacy (a belief illustrated, literally and figuratively, in the “scientific” and popular treaties, which let a Greek sculpture typify mankind in its highest and most perfect form [Fig. 7]). But more importantly is that, as far as I am aware, there is no other label in the museum which connects any other culture with a “supreme intellect.” The British Museum uses its defining power to state many things about others – including, for example, that the Oba believes in “mystical powers” – but it is only “Western civilization” which is associated with a “supreme intellect.” This is hardly in agreement with the museum’s ambition to show all cultures as equals and to counter (Western) ethnocentrism.

After this detour into some of the museum’s other exhibits, we shall return down to Africa and mention some further aspects of how the displays here focus on Edo culture rather than British/Western culture. In connection with this one may note a tendency to distance the objects from the circumstances of their removal

in 1897. Two text panels in the exhibition make it clear that the objects were looted by the British and there is also a photograph of objects ready for transport from the city. The word “booty” is used in the text and in the caption for the photograph. However, the object labels contain no references to the objects’ removal, save one label – that of the pedestal head in Udo style – which states that this object was “found in Benin City,” a wording which implies that the object was somehow lost prior to being “found” by its (unstated) discoverer. When the labels inform about the objects’ physical location in Benin City prior to their removal, the Edo are the implied agents in the sentence. For example, the text for a Portuguese soldier states: “Small figures such as this were placed on ancestral altars.” One may compare the information which could be provided about individual Benin objects in 1898. In Dalton’s article *Booty from Benin* we read about two figures that “were originally fixed on a stone pedestal from which they had to be broken off” and the caption for the illustration of one of the figures states that it was “found by an officer of the Benin Expedition in a Ju-ju house.”<sup>76</sup> Apparently, Dalton was not embarrassed by the fact that the Benin objects in the museum’s possession were loot taken by British soldiers. On the contrary, to him and his audience it probably added to the objects’ value, as they were not only a source of ethnographic information and evidence of supreme craftsmanship (of ultimate European origin), but also a testimony to British manly valor.

The highlight entries also downplay the objects’ identity as loot. It is only the entries for the three plaques that make any mention of how the objects left Benin City and the wording used is cautious. The entry for *Brass plaque showing the Oba of Benin with attendants* states: “Many of the plaques now in the British Museum were *acquired* during the British Punitive Expedition in 1897” (italics added) and the entry for *Brass plaque of a European* repeats this sentence

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76. Dalton 1898, 423-424, figs. 3-4. The “information” implying that the objects were broken off from a stone pedestal appears incorrect. The damage to them likely occurred at a much earlier date, in the mid-1600s, when figures such as these were violently torn down from the roof of the palace. Cf. Plankensteiner 287, no. 15-16, (Blackmun). One may also wonder if the officer in question actually “found” the object by himself or if he received it when the spoils were divided.

verbatim, only exchanging “collected” for “acquired.” It scarcely needs to be pointed out that the words “collected” and “acquired” connote to systematic and documented forms of gathering for scientific purposes which hardly describe the ways in which the loot was brought together and dispersed in 1897. Moreover, the word “many” fails to give an indication of how many of the plaques in the museum were “collected” by the British in 1897. Presumably *all* plaques in its collection were looted at that time.<sup>77</sup> The third entry for *Benin plaque: The Oba with Europeans* is more to the point. It states that “most” plaques in Western museums “were *taken* from the palace during the British Punitive Expedition in 1897” (italics added).

Now a few words on what the museum has to say about post-1897 owners of these objects. As mentioned, a number of object labels state who has donated the object to the museum. This acknowledgement of donor generosity is made with the formula “Given by” followed the name of the donor and (occasionally) the donor’s title. The donor names which appear are: Mrs H. Beasley, the British Museum Friends, F. Carpenter, E. Cordner, the Foreign Office, the Government of Southern Nigeria, Sir William Ingram, Sir John Kirk, H. Thompson, Mrs. Webster Plass, the Trustees of the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum, and W. Young. The highlight entries acknowledge that objects have been given by Sir William Ingram and by Mrs H. G. Beasley/Mrs Harry G. Beasley. The wording may render a comment on the relation between British (Museum) naming practices and Western hierarchies of class and gender. Only the two men who are “Sirs” have a full first name (Sir William Ingram, Sir John Kirk), the other men only receive an initial (F. Carpenter, E. Cordner, W. Young) and the two women’s own first names has been exchanged for those of their husbands (Mrs Webster Plass and Mrs H. Beasley/ Mrs H. G. Beasley/Mrs Harry G. Beasley). Apparently, at the time when these object labels were made for the exhibition (which opened in 2001) tradition still held such a firm grip over the British Museum that

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77. The *only* plaque known to have reached Europe prior to 1897 is a plaque now in the Berlin Museum. Luschan 1900.

the acknowledgements of donors were made in a way which reflect and reinforce gender and class inequality. Yet, there is also progress at the British Museum. A decade later, in Barley's *The Art of Benin* from 2010, female donors have their own first names (e.g. Margaret Plass, Irene Marguerite Beasley) and the male donors receive full first names (when known). William Ingram, is no longer referred to as "Sir."<sup>78</sup>

The only other mention of a post-1897 owner of Benin objects (apart from the British Queen and Rawson) is found in the highlight entry for *Brass figure of a Portuguese soldier holding a musket* which states: "Collected by Ralph Locke." The entry is exceptional in that nowhere else does the museum provide information on who "collected" an object. Ralph Locke was a – minor – official in the Niger Coast Protectorate, and one of the two (white) survivors of the attack on Phillip's retinue (the so-called "Benin Massacre"). Following his rescue he was sent to England to recover. Thus, he did not partake in the assault on Benin, and presumably acquired this, and other, Benin objects on the market. "Collected" should in this instance be understood as the first known post-1897 owner of the figure, not the one who "collected" it in Benin City. What is perhaps a little strange with this sole notice of a "collector" is that known "collectors" of the highlight objects include much more historically significant figures, such as Ralph Moor, who, in his capacity as commissioner and consul-general of the Niger Coast Protectorate (1896-1900) and high commissioner of Southern Nigeria (1900-1903), played a pivotal role in the events which led up to the conquest of Benin City and the annexation of the Benin Kingdom into the British colonial realm. A coincidence or not, but the presence of Locke's name and the absence of Moor's turn attention to Edo violence and British victimhood rather than vice versa.<sup>79</sup>

78. Barley 2010, 143-144. However, Barley is not entirely consistent in the abolishment of titles. John Kirk is still titled "Sir" and so is Augustus Wollaston Franks (and Queen Elizabeth II is "Her Majesty"). Margaret Plass is occasionally referred to as "Mrs." (No male donor is labelled "Mr.")

79. In 2016 when the highlight entries were transferred to the Google Cultural Institute, there were some changes in the texts which may be mentioned very briefly. The links to related objects are gone, so is the online shopping.

As for the other objects, about half of the labels in the exhibition contain the formula “Given by” followed by the donor’s name. The visitor is not informed how, and from whom, the remaining objects have been acquired. These objects have been acquired through purchase. The museum habit of naming donors but not vendors reflects the mechanisms of the gift giving system. A purchase is paid for with cash, while the pay-back for a gift is public recognition. On a practical level, this habit of naming donors but not vendors reflects that the British Museum wants to encourage people to give, rather than sell, objects to the museum. This policy is understandable, yet not entirely unproblematic from the perspective of how the museum (re-)produces knowledge about the post-1897 trajectories of Benin objects. Although the text panels state that objects were sold in 1897, the lack of references to purchases in the object labels may give the viewer the impression that after 1897, the Benin objects have predominantly changed hands through donations and that the museum has mainly, or only, acquired Benin objects as gifts. Had the museum provided the corresponding information on purchases (i.e. “Sold by” or “Purchased from” followed by the name of the vendor and the price paid) it would have provided a less one-sided view of the objects post-1897 meanings and values. In addition to aesthetic and scientific values, the objects have a monetary value and a fair number of Benin objects have been purchased by the museum. Information on vendors would also have broadened the social scale of owners of Benin objects slightly. There are no “Sirs” among the vendors of Benin objects to the museum. The lack of any references to the fact that objects have been bought is

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Vendors of objects are now named and Locke is joined by Moor as a collector of Benin objects. The entry for one of the plaques states: “Many [plaques] now in the British Museum were looted from the royal palace in Benin City by British troops who attacked Benin City during a military expedition in 1897.” The entries for the other objects lack information about how they left Benin City. Interestingly, a gradual transition in vocabulary regarding the objects’ removal may be discerned in the entries. As far as I have been able to reconstruct the history of these entries, the use of the word “acquired” and “collected” were found in entries dating from before 2008, the one with the word “taken” was created around 2009-2010 and in 2016 the museum has finally chosen the word “looted.”

perhaps not entirely unrelated to the circumstance that in Western belief systems the “high” spheres of academia, culture, and art have an uneasy relationship with the commercial sphere, with its more “mundane” connotations. The former spheres risk becoming polluted, or profaned, by the latter, if they are allowed to come too close to each other. If for example, the object label for the renowned ivory pendant mask had stated that it was purchased (together with two ivory armlets) for £37.10 in 1910 from Charles Seligman (who had acquired the objects from Moor’s widow after Moor’s suicide) it would have broken a cultural convention. Information on vendors would also bring the museum and its acquisitions a little closer to the looting and looters. The museum’s first major acquisition was made in June 1897 when some 60 Benin objects were acquired from Captain William Crawford Cockburn, a participant in the Expeditionary Force to Benin City. Three of these objects are on display, but as they were purchased (for a total of £45 for all objects) the object labels contain no information on by what means and from whom the museum acquired them.

Another aspect of the purchases is that some of these were made with the proceeds from the sale of Benin plaques in the museum’s collection. The exhibition tells that “[b]etween the 1950s and the 1970s the British Museum sold around 30 objects to Nigeria,” but again no explanation is given for this cultural behavior. The impetus for the sale was that in 1949 the museum had been offered an ethnographic collection from Africa and America from the late dealer William Ockelford Oldman for £15,000.<sup>80</sup> The curator of ethnography, Hermann Brauholtz, considered at least half of the objects “highly desirable” for the museum. Because the widow Dorothy Oldman was unwilling to sell objects singularly, Brauholtz recommended the museum buy the entire collection. Apart from the museum’s funds and a grant from the National Art Collections Fund, the purchase was to be financed by selling the objects in the Oldman collection “surplus to the museum’s requirements.”

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80. The information presented here on the sales derives from Bailey 2002 and archive material from the British Museum in the folder *Removal of Plaques from BM Collections*, which contain excerpts from the minutes of the trustees and various lists of the plaques sold or exchanged by the museum.



Braunholtz expected to be able to sell the “unwanted” American objects to New Zealand, the African objects to the United States and some Benin objects in the collection to Nigeria. These sales were estimated to raise a total of £5,000. In addition, Braunholtz recommended selling twenty to thirty “duplicates” from the museum’s collections of Benin plaques to Nigeria, which would bring in no less than £3,000. Some of the objects from the Oldman collection were also to be used for exchange with other museums.

In a second report, Braunholtz wrote that about 30 plaques “were for practical purposes duplicate specimens, and therefore surplus to the Museum’s requirements.” He suggested methods of how to dispose of these to offset the expenditure on the planned purchase of the Oldman collection, or to use it for future purchases of ethnographic objects. He recommended that the museum offered two or three plaques to the Nigerian government as a gift, that a small number of plaques were to be classified as available by exchange, and that a larger group, up to 20 plaques, should be offered for sale to the Nigerian government for £100 to £150 each, the price being “a moderate valuation.” In a supplementary memorandum Braunholtz reports that he had been “unofficially” informed by Kenneth Murray, surveyor of antiquities in Nigeria, that any proposal for exchange would be regarded favorably and that “if a gift of Benin bronzes were made to Nigeria, the British Museum might confidently expect a reciprocal gift of equal value.” Murray had also let it be understood that it would also be helpful “for the future development of Nigerian Museums, if, in making such a gift, the [British Museum] Trustees were to express the hope that a suitable museum accommodation might be provided for their exhibition in the near future.” At the time, Murray and others petitioned the Nigerian (colonial) government to establish museums in Nigeria. It appears that Murray wanted a gift from the British Museum in the hope that it would give an occasion to have the support from the British Museum for this cause (according to the “logic” of gift giving that if the Nigerian government received a gift for free, it would be pressured to repay the generosity by providing funds for housing the gift).

The British Museum trustees agreed to the purchase of the Oldman collection on the terms Brauholtz had suggested. It also authorized the disposal of the “duplicate” Benin plaques by sale or exchange (but declined to offer any plaques as a gift referring to the need to secure funds for the purchase of the Oldman collection). In November 1949, the Oldman collection was acquired and Brauholtz went ahead with selling the “unwanted” objects to museums and private collectors according to his plan (although the bulk of the African collection was eventually sold to University of the Gold Coast instead of to museums in the United States). He also undertook the sale of the duplicate Benin plaques. In 1950 ten plaques were sold to Nigeria for £1,500. After this sale, it seems that Brauholtz worried about how to price these plaques as they rarely come out on the open market. To solve this quandary, he suggested that before any further plaques were offered for sale to Nigeria, the museum should sell “a few typical pieces” through a reliable art dealer to “ascertain their approximate present value.” Brauholtz suggestion (which from a present-day perspective appears rather strange) was approved by the trustees, and four plaques were sold through the dealer Sidney Burney for a total of £1,100.

In 1951, a further 13 plaques were sold to Nigeria for a total of £1,050. Two plaques were exchanged with the Nigerian Antiquities Department for a Benin plaque of a type not represented in the British Museum and an Angolan stool (the stool came from the collection of Admiral Rawson which Murray had purchased wholesale in 1949). Also in 1951, the British Museum sold four Benin objects from the Oldman collection – a Portuguese soldier, a pectoral, and two armlets – to Nigeria for £410. Two years later, in 1953, a further plaque was sold to Nigeria, and in 1954 another plaque went to West Africa (although it remains unclear if it was to Nigeria or to the Gold Coast).

The Oldman objects, the plaques, and the proceeds from the sales of the plaques were also used to obtain objects from dealers and collectors. In 1952 a Benin figure was acquired from the dealer John Klejman in exchange for three small plaques (valued at about £450), which the Nigerian government had declined, together with an additional payment of £400 from the £1050 received from the

sale of plaques to Nigeria. In the same year, the museum exchanged a carved ivory tusk (valued at £250) from the Oldman collection, for an Afro-Portuguese ivory cup from Sierra Leone (valued at £150) and £100 in cash from Klejman. In 1953, the museum exchanged a fragmentary plaque (valued at £210) with five objects, a soapstone figure from Sierra Leone, three wooden Yoruba figures, and a brass figure from Benin (valued at £140) plus £70 in cash from Klejman. In 1958, a plaque was sold to Klejman for £450 to recoup the museum's reserve fund for a purchase of an ethnographic collection from the Philippine Islands. In 1960, a plaque was sold through Sotheby's for £900 to reimburse the reserve fund for a purchase made the preceding year from Irene Marguerite Beasley of a Benin brass staff and an Afro-Portuguese ivory horn. The last deaccession of Benin plaques was made in 1972, when two plaques were exchanged for a horseman owned by the collector Robin Lehman. According to Fagg, who proposed the exchange, the plaques were valued between £2,000 and £2,500 and the horseman at £8,000-10,000, but Lehman, a "good friend of the Department" was nevertheless content with the exchange.<sup>81</sup>

These sales and exchanges of "duplicates" from the museum's own collections and of "surplus" objects from collections that were bought up wholesale may seem peculiar when viewed from 21<sup>st</sup> century museum policy and practice. They blur the boundaries between curator and dealer, between (museum) collection and market, between (museum) object and merchandise. However, at the time, such transactions were common practice and entirely uncontroversial. The minutes of the British Museum trustees are filled with approvals of requests for the disposal of duplicates from its various departments to finance new acquisitions. The practice of buying whole collections and passing on parts of these was also common. "Unregistered" Fijian objects were exchanged as late

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81. In Fagg's proposal for the exchange to the trustees, he informs that the horseman had earlier been in the Pitt-Rivers museum in Farnham, and its "departure abroad" was "greatly regretted." The museum would suffer "no artistic or other loss" by the disposal of the two plaques, and as similar plaques were included among the plaques earlier sold to Nigeria, "the transaction would not be open to political criticism."

as 1976. Some other Benin objects have also passed through the museum in this way. In 1947, the museum purchased a collection of over one hundred ethnographic objects, including many Benin objects, from the executors of a Philip Smith for £150. Thirty Benin objects were incorporated in the museum's collections and seven were used in an exchange with the Musée de l'Homme in Paris. The Benin objects and three "duplicates" from British West Africa (Congo, Sierra Leone and Nigeria) from the museum's collection were swapped for sixteen objects from French West Africa (Guinea, Ivory Coast, and Mali).<sup>82</sup>

The sales and exchanges of Benin plaques served two main purposes – to augment the British Museum's own collections and to provide the nascent National Museum in Nigeria with a representative Benin collection. The plaques were offered at a very favorable price to Nigeria, perhaps at about half of their market price. Nowadays, the British Museum defends its retentionist position by referring to its "universalism." In the 1950s another sort of universalism and sense of international solidarity was present, which called for restitution (by sale, at a moderate cost) of the plaques to Nigeria which, was then still a British colony. The British Museum's sale of Benin objects are of interest, not least as they cast light on a (museum) ideal of another era which worried less about the integrity of the collection and its involvement in the commercial sphere. It could (therefore) rectify the lack of Benin plaques in the country of origin by the sale of "duplicate" plaques from the British Museum's collection. Parting with museum objects in this way is anathema today in a large part of the museum community. If it is for better or for worse may be discussed. But one point, in my view, seems clear. The case adds to the argument already made that the post-1897 lives of the Benin objects may serve to illuminate certain aspects of Western culture. The British Museum's lack of information and explanation of Western post-1897 involvement in the Benin objects not only misses an opportunity to make the objects into less pure Edo objects than hybrid British-Edo ones, but also

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82. The Musée de l'Homme objects are now in the collections of the Quai Branly Museum.

fails to make Western culture the subject of the same scrutinizing gaze which is directed towards Edo culture.

To sum up the discussion of the exhibition of Benin objects: despite the Benin objects having been incorporated into Western culture for more than a century and that they may be considered being hybrid Edo-Western objects, the exhibition focuses on them as Edo objects and predominantly looks at Edo society. The ambition to “explain” Edo society may serve to naturalize and normalize British/Western society. This does not mean that what the museum communicates about Edo society is in itself necessarily problematic. In my view, among the many qualities of the display is that, within the confines in terms of space and the amount of objects and textual information it can provide, it manages to present Edo society as not stable, homogenous, and unchanging. Aspects of class, gender, cultural contacts, and historical change are included in the presentation, although the emphasis is more on the continuity of tradition than on its transformation. However, what I find problematic is what is communicated about the (often) absent referent – Western society – since the exhibition may install the feeling that contemporary Western culture lacks the qualities which are shown in Edo society such as obedience to traditions, gender and class hierarchies, and so forth. The glimpses of Western society given here and there may reinforce such a notion. The Westerner of the past is shown to have been governed by his world-view (exemplified by the Portuguese search for the kingdom of Prester John and Frobenius search for Atlantis) but contemporary Westerners are never associated with any erroneous or irrational preconceived notions. But what could the alternative look like? How might representations be made which do not create a subtle differentiation between the perceived categories of Westerner and non-Westerner? This topic will be treated in the next chapter.



## 12. Alternative forms of making representations

“This is a museum object.” Text panel in the Museum of Ethnography, Stockholm 2002.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the British Museum’s exhibition of Benin objects has relatively little to say about Western culture. It predominantly directs the visitors’ gaze towards the ethnic other, in this case the Edo. In its avoidance of exhibiting the Western self it falls within the mainstream tradition for museum exhibitions which habitually refrain from putting the Western white male self on display on the same terms as it displays its various others. As also discussed previously, this mode of exhibiting may be considered problematic in that it confirms the normalcy of the proclaimed self and the deviation of others.

This chapter will delve into some alternatives to this dominant representational paradigm. It will begin by presenting an exhibition which utilizes objects from non-Western cultures to interpret the Westerner rather than the non-Westerner. It then proceeds with a discussion about categorization to suggest how the juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated objects may be another strategy to look at Westerners (the objects I will discuss here and seek to connect are Benin objects, dum dum bullets, and soap adverts). The chapter finishes by looking into how aspects of gender and class may be introduced into the analysis to complement and perhaps



also blur and undermine the ethnic categories within which the Benin objects are usually understood.

I should perhaps point out that I do not intend to claim that there is one correct way of making objects and ethnicities at museums or elsewhere. My intention is rather to open up some vistas in the discussion on (museum) representation. When I draw a contrast between my examples and the displays in the British Museum this is not to suggest a Manichean dichotomy between good and evil displays or between old and new ways of exhibiting. Rather it is about showing that there are other ways of exhibiting which result in other representations.

I will begin with an exhibition in the genre of ethnographic exhibitions which, unlike “traditional” ethnographic displays, does not attempt to provide knowledge about others for the selves by putting others on view, but which seek to display the making of knowledge about others (and, crucially, how selves are also made in this process). In this respect this exhibition is not unique. In recent decades many exhibitions have been made which problematize the construction of knowledge in various ways. I have chosen this example since it has not been discussed in the literature previously, and since it uses some novel approaches.<sup>1</sup> Also, it has a section with Benin objects which is relevant to discuss in relation to the British Museum’s Benin display.

The exhibition in question is *Bringing the World Home – A Piece of Swedish History* which opened in 2002 at the Museum of Ethnography, Stockholm.<sup>2</sup> The exhibition is about the material and intellectual baggage which has been brought to Sweden by explorers, scientists, and missionaries, and how this tangible and intangible luggage has been communicated in various forms – exhibitions, school books, radio programs, etc. – to a Swedish audience, creating ideas about Swedishness and otherness in a reciprocal process. As made clear in the subtitle of the exhibition – “a Piece of Swedish History” – the emphasis is not on the other but on the self. The

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1. For other examples, see for example Lidchi 2006, Roberts 2008, Yoshida 2008.

2. I here use the museum’s own English exhibition title. Its Swedish title is *Med Världen i Kappsäcken. Ett Stycke Svensk Historia*, which translates into “With the World in a Knapsack. A Piece of Swedish history.”

perspective is historical, but the exhibition emphasizes that the notions and representations of others which have been rehearsed through the centuries are part of our present-day cultural and intellectual luggage. The exhibition is presented as follows on the museum's homepage:

Ideas about the world “out there” have layered in our minds over the centuries. The exhibition [...] tells about Swedish travellers and explorers and what they brought along in their knapsacks. As shown in the exhibition, their knowledge and discoveries were transmitted home in various ways and, today, that knowledge is part of our cultural knapsack.

The exhibition has an extensive exhibition catalogue *Med Världen i Kappsäcken* (With the World in a Knapsack). Thematically the exhibition is structured around a number of travelers who have had an impact on how Sweden has come to “know” the world. These include the “apostles” of Carl Linnaeus, explorers Adolf Erik Nordenskiöld and Sven Hedin, zoologists Eric Mjöberg and Sten Bergman, as well as missionaries in the Swedish Congo mission. Each section tells outlines why these people went abroad, what they expected to discover or achieve, and what they brought back home, both in terms of objects and “knowledge.” Although the exhibit gives glimpses of what these travelers “saw” out there and displays objects they collected which now are part of the museum's collections, the overall focus is on how their findings were communicated in Sweden. This focus is perhaps most evident in the simulated milieus included in the exhibition. Simulated milieus “recreate” and envision slices of space and time; this display technique has traditionally been used in ethnographic museums to metaphorically transport the visitors' gaze to foreign places to provide snapshots of the life and habits of “natives.” In this exhibition the simulated milieus are all set in Sweden. They show some of the transmission points and modes of communication through which others have been communicated to selves. Thus, through the simulated milieus the museum represents a part of the processes of representation.

In the section on Adolf Erik Nordenskiöld (who was the first to “discover” and travel through the North-East Passage in 1878-80) there is a recreation of a part of the exhibition created at the Royal Castle in Stockholm in the 1880s with the objects the Nordenskiöld expedition collected. Thus, the exhibition exhibits an exhibition, and the visitor may both look at the objects and at how they were displayed and looked at more than a hundred years ago. The explanatory text points out how Nordenskiöld’s journey became a source of national pride and a celebration of Swedish manliness. The meta-exhibition is also used in the section about the Swedish Congo mission. The exhibition here shows a partial reconstruction of a mission house in the town of Söderfors where objects brought from the Congo by the missionary Josef Ekstam were put on display. The text asks what these objects could have meant to the Swedish viewers:

How did the inhabitants of Söderfors look at these objects? Did they look at them as idols which made the light of Christianity shine so much brighter? Or as skilfully executed objects made by human beings well versed in sustaining themselves?

The text captures many different aspects of looking at others and their cultural products: that the viewing may create a range of feelings, from superiority and distance to admiration and communality. Thus, the exhibition here suggests that it would be an over-simplification to characterize the past view of others as *only* prejudiced and racist, or as *only* beneficial, creating respect and tolerance for the lifeways of distant peoples. The Swedish Congo mission is put in the wider colonial context. The texts state that King Leopold’s Congo was one of the most brutal colonial regimes known and that one of the worst genocides in modern history was committed here. The ruthless exploitation of humans and nature is illustrated with a number of photographs. One shows stashes of ivory tusks about to be loaded onto rail road carts for transport to meet the Europeans’ insatiable demand for piano keys and ivory objects. Other images show conscript workers in chains, a man who has had

both hands been cut off in punishment for having failed to deliver rubber, and a man looking at the severed foot and hand of his five year old daughter. The constables at a rubber plantation had killed his wife, daughter, and son. The text panels point out that it was in this oppressive context that the missionaries worked, but some of them also became the best informed critics of the colonial regime.

What is characteristic of the traditional ethnographic museum display, and in particular the ethnographic diorama, is that it brings the viewer closer to the “natives,” but also keeps them at a safe distance. Despite the proximity, the separation between self and other is maintained: there is no blurring of boundaries between the two. The conceptual distinction is often upheld physically with a glass screen. In this exhibition the border between the visitor space and recreated milieu is sometimes porous. In some parts of the exhibition the viewer may become viewed. The section on Sten Bergman (a zoologist working in New Guinea in the 1950s) shows a living room from the era on a slightly raised platform. The visitor may walk up the podium, sit down in an arm-chair or the sofa and hear a radio broadcast by Bergman through a loud-speaker. Bergman’s voice describes the peoples of New Guinea as living in a primordial state of existence and practicing cannibalism. The texts explain that these stories about savagery and culinary cannibalism reinforced Swedish notions on “normality.” Here, sitting in this 1950s living room, the visitor to some extent becomes part of the recreated milieu and may be looked at by other museum visitors.

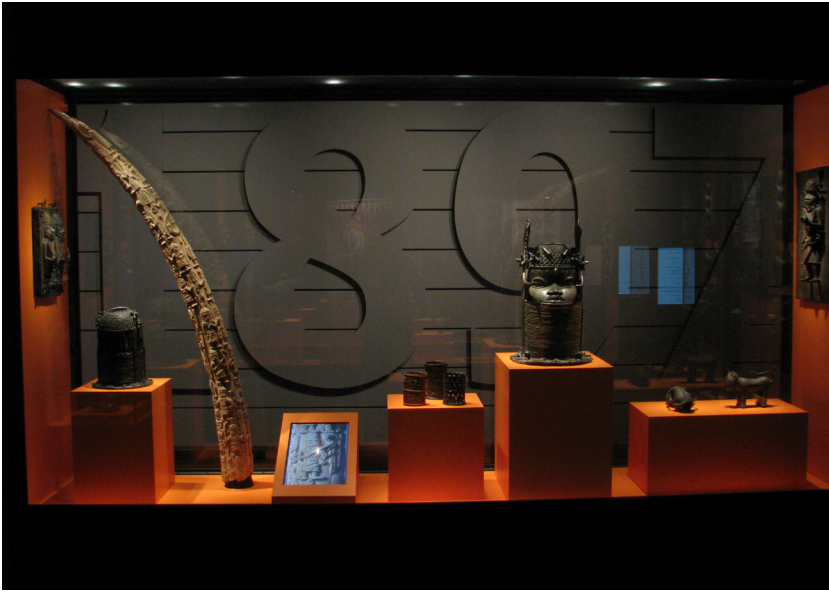
The exhibition predominantly focuses on problematizing representation, but two sections (added in 2009) also bring up the question of ownership of cultural objects and human remains – exemplified by the Benin objects and human remains from Australian aborigines. The museum has about 40 Benin objects, the majority of which originate from Hans Meyer, who donated his collection at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in exchange for a royal decoration (see chapter 5). The section with the Benin objects is called “Vem tillhör föremålen? Konstskatter från kungariket Benin” (To whom do the objects belong? Art treasures from the kingdom of Benin). At the entrance to the exhibition the ownership issue is presented with a number of quotes on a wall where different

individuals express their view either for or against the return of Benin objects in Western collections to Nigeria. On the opposite wall there is a video showing interviews with six people of Edo descent living in Stockholm. Those interviewed expressed their satisfaction and happiness that these objects were at the museum and none of them proposed a return to Nigeria. One interviewee commented that the museum lacked an *eben* sword to accompany its *ada* sword, and hoped that the Oba of Benin would donate an *eben* to the museum. Thus, as far as the museum presents an answer regarding the future of the museum's Benin objects, their continued retention is favorable. The rest of the exhibition presents a number of Benin objects – plaques, tusks, pedestal heads, etc. – with explanatory labels which “explain” them in their pre-1897 Edo context. The year 1897 is written with large numbers on a wall and text panels and a slide show give glimpses of Edo history, the 1897 war, and the subsequent dispersal of Benin objects [Fig. 26]. There is also a contemporary brass casting by Uyi Omodawen of Oba Ovonramwen on his way to exile. This casting shows that brass casting is still practiced in Benin City, and thus exemplifies an aspect of the continuity of tradition there. A video with bustling traffic scenes from Benin City communicates that Benin City is not isolated from the global reach of Western modernity. The museum has also produced a small book in Swedish and English titled *Whose Objects? Art Treasures from the Kingdom of Benin in the Collection of the Museum of Ethnography, Stockholm* or *Vem Tillhör Föremålen? Konstskatter från Kungariket Benin i Etnografiska Museet* edited by museum curator Wilhelm Östberg.<sup>3</sup>

The other section which deals with ownership issues is called “Eric Mjöberg – Skelettsamlaren” (Eric Mjöberg – The skeleton collector). It tells the story of human remains stolen from aboriginal burial sites in the Kimberley region in Australia in 1910-1911 by the zoologist Eric Mjöberg, who then smuggled the skeletons out of Australia and brought them to the Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm. They remained there until 2004 when they were repatriated to Kimberley and interred. Thus, the bodily remains

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3. Östberg 2010a.



**Fig. 26.** Bringing the World Home, *Museum of Ethnography, Stockholm*. Section *To Whom does the Objects belong?* Benin objects, including two pedestal heads, two plaques and a tusk. “1897” written on wall behind.

which are the focal points of this part of the exhibition are physically absent from it. The story of their removal and return is told through photographs, quotes from Mjöberg’s popular publication *Bland Vilda Människor och Djur i Australien* (*Among Wild Men and Animals in Australia*), and other material including a video of the fumigation ritual performed in 2004 by Warren Foster and Peter Francis to purify the ancestral remains before they were sent back. The exhibit also provides a broader contextualization of the collection of human remains and ethnographic objects in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This part of the exhibit delivers a scathing critique of Western “scientific” knowledge production about cultural others and its links to colonial conquest and domination. Visually, the epistemic violence is illustrated on a small screen with a slideshow alternating photographs of ethnographic objects (spears, boomerangs, shields, clubs, etc.) arranged in typological series, and photographs of Australian aborigines. The photographs suggest a parallelism between the sorting of material culture into object types and

the sorting of human beings into racial types. The accompanying text refers to these photographs, produced to create and illustrate material and human classification, as “abusive.” The text adds that the taxonomies were created by divorcing people and objects from “their original contexts” and by forcing “Western classification and meaning” onto them, leaving no room for the “the peoples’ own concepts and beliefs.” It also states that this was “common practice” during colonial expansion.

This exhibit also treats Western aesthetic appreciation of ethnographic objects at the time. It states that the positive appraisal of the art of (some) primitive peoples was not in agreement with the general characterization of them possessing a low level of culture, and that this contradiction was “solved” by hypothesizing that the artistic skill had been introduced by more highly cultured peoples in the past. Mjöberg’s opinion exemplifies the ethnocentrism implicit in the evaluations of the artistic quality of indigenous art. The yardstick was the prevailing Western artistic fashion. Mjöberg found the objects from Kimberley “tasteless”, but was more positive about objects from New Guinea and from Queensland in Australia, the latter, in his verdict, showing “cubist” and “futuristic” tendencies.

A few observations about the similarities and differences between the *Sainsbury African Galleries* and the *Bringing the World Home* exhibition may be made. The two exhibitions are roughly contemporary, the exhibition in the British Museum opened in 2000, and the exhibition in the Museum of Ethnography two years later in 2002 (some parts were added in 2009). Nowhere in the *Sainsbury African Galleries* is it mentioned who is behind the representation of Africa provided by the museum. In contrast, at the introduction to *Bringing the World Home* there is a list of 30 people involved in its production, including those responsible for the “content,” “design,” “carpentry,” “object conservation,” “light composition,” and so forth. This list of names of the people who created the exhibition, at least, gives a hint that the knowledge and representations provided to the visitor has been constructed and designed, although, of course, the names say very little about the larger political and



cultural context in which the exhibit was produced. It could be argued that names signal an overdue emphasis to the individual in the process of exhibition making, at the expense of regarding it as a product of an institutional discourse. Neither exhibition states when it was produced. Why exhibitions rarely communicate the production year may be discussed: on an ideological level it may relate to the idea that it communicates eternal truths and thus this information is redundant. On a practical level it may relate to that exhibitions can undergo changes during their life-time, and in such cases a production year becomes misleading. The accompanying publications to both exhibitions name the authors of the different texts (and both have a publication date). Looking at dissimilarities between the two publications, one may note that while there is very little in *Africa – Arts and Cultures* on the problems of representation, such issues are discussed *Bringing the World Home*. Two chapters in the book, “Whose voice do we hear?” and “Museum objects have many lives,” by museum curators Karin Wagner and Wilhelm Östberg respectively, overview several aspects of the debates on the problem of representing cultures and objects. They discuss topics such as essentialism, voice(s) and the ethnographic present. The essays have a short bibliography, thus giving some information on how the exhibition is theoretically positioned. Works referred to include Said’s *Orientalism* and Appadurai’s and Kopytoff’s articles on the social life of things.<sup>4</sup> As for the epistemological position of the exhibition, Östberg explicitly points to the manufactured and unstable nature of knowledge:

Knowledge is today something much more provisional and constructed than it was for the devoted researchers, enthusiastic travellers and bold adventurers who created the foundation for the Museum of Ethnography.<sup>5</sup>

Östberg exemplifies the problem of museum representation by discussing how to give justice to the multitude of intertwined

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4. Östberg 2002, Wagner 2002. See also Wagner 1998.

5. Östberg 2002, 385.

meanings attached to the *minkisi* (singular *nkisi*) – powerful ritual objects from the Congo – in the museum’s collection. He introduces the discussion by recounting how, together with a colleague from the Congo, he opened a box with *minkisi* in the museum store and how the colleague gasped and turned around saying: “These are things one should not see.” While Östberg was well acquainted with the literature on the *minkisi*, it was not until he saw his colleague’s reaction that he came to feel the power of the *minkisi*. Östberg continues by going through some of the many other identities the *minkisi* have acquired over the years. To the Western missionaries and military men in the Congo the *minkisi* were heathen idols, which were acquired by consent or by force. Present-day meanings of *minkisi* range from esteemed and costly art objects (such as a “Congo fetish” sold at Sotheby’s New York for \$1.3 million) to hallowed museum objects, like the ones returned by the Tervuren museum in Brussels in the 1970s to the National Museum in the Congo (at the time Zaire) where they became national treasures. Many of these were stolen in 1997 when Kinshasa was taken during the uprising which ousted Mobutu from power. Östberg writes:

When we exhibit a *nkisi* it should really be in a showcase in the shape of a multisided prism where each side represents one of the roles and meanings it has had – and it would be especially needed to have glass which mirrors its future still unknown meanings. To only have a label like “Powerful object from Congo c. 1910” is really to say very little about a *nkisi* and perhaps above all, to give undue authenticity to only one of many realities.<sup>6</sup>

How this representational dilemma was “solved” in the exhibition will be discussed shortly, but first a few more comparisons between the *Sainsbury African Galleries* and *Bringing the World Home*. Obviously, the main difference between the two exhibitions is that they are about different topics. The British Museum exhibition uses

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6. Östberg 2002, 380.

African objects to inform about Africa, while the exhibition in the Museum of Ethnography uses non-Swedish objects to talk about Sweden and Swedishness. Yet, as the British Museum exhibition is also about Africa's interaction and contacts with the rest of the world, the West occasionally appears in the exhibition, such as, for example, in the (not very accurate) narratives on how the Benin objects' arrival in the West broke down Western stereotypes and paved the way for the "discovery" of African art. In this respect the British Museum treats the same topic as the Museum of Ethnography: how the "knowledge" and objects which reached the West were received and shaped in a Western context. Yet, whereas the Museum of Ethnography focuses on what this encounter between self and other has meant for the perception of the self, the British Museum highlights how it influenced the Western perception of others, claiming (erroneously) that it challenged derogatory views of Africans and led to an appreciation of African art. This evolutionary perspective, that Westerners become more enlightened through an increase in knowledge, is avoided in the Museum of Ethnography which stresses continuity rather than change in the Western views of others. What it has to say on, for example, Western appreciation of non-Western art is not formulated in a celebratory way. It is made clear that this appreciation was ethnocentric in its outlook, in that Western modernistic art provided the aesthetic benchmark against which the primitive art was judged, and that high esteem of "primitive" art did not necessarily correlate with appreciation of its makers.

The Museum of Ethnography does provide some information on others, particularly in the section which displays the Benin objects. Much like the exhibition in the British Museum, it locates and explains the objects in their pre-1897 Edo context. Both exhibitions signal that brass casting is performed to this day, in the British Museum there is a slide-show on contemporary brass casting and in the Museum of Ethnography there is a casting which was commissioned by the museum. The two exhibitions differ in that modernity is more emphasized in the Museum of Ethnography's rendition of Benin City. The British Museum only communicates through text that Benin City "is now a large modern city", whereas

the Museum of Ethnography shows a video with traffic scenes from the city. The exhibition also gives more emphasis to the events of 1897 and the subsequent dispersal of the Benin objects in its presentation than the British Museum does: “1897” is written in large numbers on a wall signaling the importance of the events of this year. The explanation given for the conquest of Benin City is that the British took control over the coastal areas and trade during the 19<sup>th</sup> century in what is today Nigeria. The British saw the Benin Kingdom as an hindrance to their territorial expansion and therefore Benin City was taken and the king exiled (in contrast to the British Museum, the Museum of Ethnography makes no mention of the killing of the Phillips’ party). The slideshow has a number of images of British soldiers with Benin objects, the dealer Webster posing with tusks, and a letter from Webster to the museum in Vienna offering three plaques. It also says that Hans Meyer donated the majority of the Benin objects in the Museum of Ethnography in the hope of receiving something which was “hotly desired” at the time – a Swedish Order of the Polar Star. Like the British Museum, the Museum of Ethnography states that the arrival of the Benin objects to the West caused a “sensation” to which it is added that before 1897 people in Europe did not have much knowledge about the Benin Kingdom (but unlike the British Museum it does not claim that objects had any effect on Western stereotypes or that it led to the appreciation of African art).

The Museum of Ethnography also has something to say about Edo beliefs. A text panel with the heading “A sacred kingdom” reads:

The king is not only a political leader. He is also a spiritual guarantee for the wellbeing of society. That the king has divine traits is perhaps less recognized today, but most agree that he possesses power. Also today the ceremonies at the court are important events which attract many participants. Tradition is strong but not static.

This statement may be compared to that in the British Museum about the Oba sacrificing leopards in the belief that this would ensure his mystical powers and the wellbeing of his people. In a

sense, both statements are reductionist and essentializing (like any statements about anything complex), but the one in the Museum of Ethnography gives a less categorical impression of Edo beliefs. The wording “perhaps less recognized,” “most agree,” and the final sentence “tradition is strong but not static” signal that not everyone is of the same opinion regarding the sacredness of the king and that ideas change over time. There is no attempt to tell the visitor what the Oba’s beliefs on this are.

It is only once that the Museum of Ethnography signals that adherence to “tradition” is not necessarily an unmixed good for each and every one. The exhibition provides some background to the brass casting by Uyi Omodawen commissioned by the museum, by stating that his family has made castings for the court for 500 years. The craft is passed on from father to son, to which it is added that “the daughters are not allowed to learn casting.” Of course, what could be seen as problematic with statements such as this, which give a negative evaluations of others – and in this case a named person – is that it might suggest a qualitative difference between self and other (they still have gender inequality caused by tradition, we have not). In this case it might convey a feeling that amongst Westerners, metal working is an ungendered sphere, while in fact, it is still a predominantly male domain in Western society.

A significant difference between the two exhibitions is that while the British Museum nowhere mentions the question of ownership, this is a major theme in the Museum of Ethnography’s display of Benin objects which also provides the title of this section of the exhibition. This difference is even clearer in the publications. Neither *Africa – Arts and Cultures* nor *The Art of Benin* makes any mention of the ownership issue or, for example, the debacle surrounding Nigeria’s request to loan the ivory pendant mask for FESTAC 77, but several contributions to the Museum of Ethnography’s publication *To Whom do the Objects Belong? Art Treasures from the Kingdom of Benin*, address the topic. An article by Prince Akenzua is a plea for the return of the Benin objects, and an article by Kokunre Agbonton-Eghafona discusses the proper location of the objects if they were to be returned. A number of arguments for or against return is discussed in Östberg’s concluding article.

As mentioned, the ownership question is presented in the exhibition by a number of quotes with arguments for the objects' return to Nigeria or for their continued retention in Western museums. There are also a few short texts by the museum which present some "information" on the issue, and these may be said to be slightly tilted towards retention. For example, one text about Benin collections in the world states that the largest collection of Benin objects is in Nigeria, and that large Benin collections are today at the British Museum, the ethnographic museums in Berlin, Vienna, Hamburg, and Oxford, the Field Museum in Chicago, and the Metropolitan Museum in New York. Thus, all the Benin objects in the various museums in Nigeria are added up into one category which is compared with that of individual museums in other countries. Presumably the total number of Benin objects in museums in both Great Britain and Germany is higher than the country total for Nigeria. Had the distribution of objects been calculated in this way it would have given a different impression of the world-wide distribution of Benin objects. In the exhibition and publication the Benin objects are often referred to as "art objects," which, as discussed earlier, is not an entirely uncontroversial or innocent term in relation to the ownership issue.

The museum's choice of words illustrates one aspect of the problem with the use of the museum's seemingly objective curatorial voice. Words are needed to talk about things, but as no words are entirely neutral, it is impossible to uphold impartiality. So what to do about this problem? In another part of the exhibition an interesting strategy to deal with the issue of giving justice to diverging perspectives has been chosen. In the section on the Swedish Congo Mission there is a part which deals with the different meanings attributed to *minkisi*. *Minkisi* had an important place in Congolese religious practice and were used for a wide range of ritual purposes. They could be shaped in a plurality of forms ranging from simple baskets to anthropomorphic figures. These objects – especially the anthropomorphic figures – aroused the curiosity of Western explorers, academics, missionaries, and artists and were collected in large numbers. It is not possible to attribute one "meaning" to these objects, neither in the societies in which they were produced nor in



**Fig. 27.** Bringing the World Home. *Museum of Ethnography, Stockholm. Section on the Congo Mission.* Minkisi nkondi.

the Western societies in which they were received.<sup>7</sup> To explain how these objects have been, and still are, understood within different regimes of value – with no such value necessarily being greater or any interpretation necessarily being more correct than any other – the museum has chosen to display four *minkisi nkondi* (a “type” of *nkisi nkondi*) presenting each of these with a different interpretation. The *minkisi nkondi* are placed in four showcases arranged in a row [Fig. 27]. Inside each showcase there is a short text label placed below the *nkisi nkondi* [Fig. 28]. Going from left to the right, the texts in the four showcases reads as follows:

First showcase:

Perspective 1: In 1897 Mpono Malambukila describes the figure: “The one which tells the truth”

7. Cf. MacGaffy 1998.



## Second showcase:

Perspective 2: From a letter written by a missionary in 1897:  
 “This wooden idol is the god which the pagans worship.”

## Third showcase:

Perspective 3: A colonial officer notes: “God, used in witchcraft and to punish. Taken during a punitive raid in a village in Lower Congo September 1898.”

## Forth showcase:

Perspective 4: From the catalogue of an international auction house: “Standing Congolese sculpture in a classic style. Artist unknown. Nails hammered in aggressively. Provenance: Swedish missionary collection.”

The four *minkisi nkondi* look fairly similar, but as the texts give radically different interpretations of each of them, the exhibition signals that these objects do not have one essential meaning, rather that they can be understood in many ways depending on the position of the viewer. The use of the heading “perspective” in each text also underlines that the curatorial voice speaking in the label does not attempt to be “objective” or “neutral,” but rather presents a particular point of view. The texts are short, but at the back of the showcases there are panels which elaborate the four themes.

Each panel is divided into two parts, the upper part comprising of a photograph with an explanatory caption beneath. Below this is the heading of the panel followed by a text. On all the panels, there is an identical line drawing of an *nkisi nkondi* and the text: “The sculptures in these four showcases are *nkisi nkondi*.”

The panel at the back of the first showcase shows a photograph of a man who the caption identifies as Ngono Ndemo, “a healer and ritual specialist.” Below is a text which reads:



**Fig. 28.** Bringing the World Home. *Museum of Ethnography, Stockholm. Section on the Congo Mission. Nkisi nkondi.*

Nkisi nkondo (Congolese perspective c. 1900)

“This is a sculpture with power. It can solve conflicts. It searches the truth. It can attack thieves and other wrongdoers and the victim will be stricken with illness. The power is awakened when the nail is driven into it. “If I lie, punish me with the same torments as I inflict on you.” In this way an oath was sealed.

The *nkisi nkondi* could also find unknown thieves and subject them to misfortune.

The panel behind the second showcase shows a photograph of a figure being burned in a bonfire. The text reads:

Nkisi nkondi (the perspective of history of religions)  
*Nkisi nkondi* have often been called nail fetishes. Fetish is Portuguese and means amulet, but the word has also been used more generally about objects with magical power. A misunderstanding among the European travellers and missionaries was that the Congolese worshiped the fetish and sacrificed to it. The Africans were thus considered to practice a primitive form of religion, which got the name fetishism.

The Africans were placed at a lower stage of development than other races. In museums their objects were not compared to the art treasures from world religions like Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity or Islam, but with objects from vanishing cultures.

The third panel shows a drawing of the military post in Vivi, Congo. The text reads:

Nkisi nkondi (the historical perspective)  
 In European museums the objects from Africa were testimonies to conquest made and the peoples which had been subjugated. The *nkisi nkondi* which was acquired during punitive expeditions against rebellious groups became a trophy of war.

Between 1975 and 1982 Belgium returned 700 objects to the National museum in Zaire. There they were hailed as national treasures.

When Laurant Kabilas rebel troops entered Kinshasa in May 1997, many objects were stolen from the museum to be sold on to private dealers abroad.

They had now become stolen goods and soon acquired a new identity; internationally wanted museum objects.

In the fourth panel is a photograph of Picasso in his studio surrounded by “exotic” sculptures. The text reads:

Nkisi nkondi (the art historical perspective)

During the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century African sculpture appeared in Paris. A large exhibition in 1907 became a decisive encounter with African art for Picasso, Braque, Matisse and many other artists.

The artists of the time exploited the African art in the same way as the colonisers, it was their vision of Africa which counted, not the knowledge which existed in the African villages.

Today African sculpture are valued to enormous sums on the market. But this *nkisi nkondi* is not an investors object. It is a museum object, which rests in stores and showcases with climate control and alarms. It belongs to eternity, not the market.

Thus, the exhibition presents these objects from four different perspectives, one Congolese from c. 1900, and three more diachronic perspectives: one represents the academic interest in them, one represents a more historical/social/political perspective, and one represents the art historical perspective. An exhibition can be understood in many different ways by the visitors, but presumably this exhibition manages to convey the message that an object's meaning and significance lies in the eyes of the beholder, and that the different values attributed to it are creations of particular historical and contemporary circumstances. To borrow the terminology of Donna Haraway: the exhibition represents different positioned knowledges. Or to use that of Kopytoff and Appadurai: it communicates that objects have biographies and are understood within different regimes of value. It is noteworthy that in the last

three perspectives, some of the different meanings the objects have acquired in museums are acknowledged: in Western museums they have served as material evidence for evolutionary ideas and as signs of the domination of colonial subjects, whereas in Zaire they have become national patrimony. The last text speaks of museum practice and ideology here and now. It points out that this *nkisi* “is a museum object” protected by climate control and alarms. The sentence might be understood as a defense for the museum’s possession of the object, but the – pompous – wording that it belongs to “eternity” makes the sentence somewhat ambiguous, creating a kind of subversive “othering” of museum practices.

To capture the differences between the British Museum’s representations in the *Sainsbury African Galleries* with those in *Bringing the World Home*, one may perhaps do so by comparing the two texts “This helmet mask is used in the Ododua ritual” with “It [the *nkisi nkondi*] is a museum object.” The two texts are roughly contemporary and both refer to objects of African origin. Yet, the two texts bestow the objects with two radically different identities and use them to look at two different cultural practices and beliefs. The British museum connects the helmet mask to the Ododua ritual and Edo religion, while the Ethnographical Museum connects the *nkisi nkondi* to the Western practice of putting objects in show cases and hints that museums believes in “eternity.” Why are the two texts so different?

On a simple level, this of course relates to the fact that the two exhibitions have different foci. The *Sainsbury African Galleries* is primarily about Africa, while *Bringing the World Home* is primarily about Sweden (or the making of Swedishness). This then “explains” the different interpretations of the objects as either Edo/African or Swedish/Western objects. This prompts the question: why have these different perspectives been chosen? To attempt an answer, one may compare the two exhibitions’ portrayals of the self, and perhaps especially what they have to say about the role of museums and academic knowledge production for the image of the other. As discussed, the British Museum takes the opportunity to create a laudatory story about the overcoming Western prejudices

(reserving incorrect and racist assumptions for the German Frobenius), where British Museum scholars are implicitly or explicitly given an important role. The exhibitions *Enlightenment – Discovering the World in the Eighteenth Century* and *Collecting the World* also present a predominantly positive image of Western knowledge production and of the British Museum. What the British Museum has to say about the Western discovery of African art also takes the form of a story of progress. The Museum of Ethnography, on the other hand, provides a more sinister portrayal of Western knowledge production and of museum representations. It links this knowledge production to colonial expansion and points out how low esteem of African influenced how the display of cultures were organized at museums, with African cultural objects being kept apart from the “art treasures” from peoples deemed to be more advanced. As for the Western appreciation of art from Africa and other non-Western peoples, it states that appreciation was ethnocentric and exploitative in character.

It would be of course be reductive to suggest one single cause for the making of representations having taken such different forms at these two institutions, but perhaps one might suggest that the two institutions’ diverging positions on the question of return of cultural objects in the collections plays a part in this. In contrast to the British Museum which rejects all claims, the Museum of Ethnography has on occasion returned objects in its collection. Returns by the museum include a Maya stele, stolen at an archaeological site in Guatemala in 1965 and returned in 1994, and the return of the museum’s largest possession – a totem pole – which had been removed from the Kitlope valley, British Columbia in 1928 and was returned to the Haisla First Nation community in 2006.<sup>8</sup> On a number of occasions the museum has also returned human remains to New Zealand and Australia.

Arguably, this attitude that the return of objects is not a great calamity for the museum means that it does not have to keep its guard up when it comes to how it represents museums and Western knowledge production. There is no need to create stories

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8. Jessiman 2011.

which insist on the benevolence of museums and that all objects in museum collections must remain there forever. On the contrary, the museum can problematize museum representation and raise the question of ownership. As for its Benin objects, a further advantage is that none of its Benin objects belong the world's most famous ones, and it is less likely that it will be under strong pressure to return any of them. This perhaps also applies to most of the objects in its collections. In general, its collections are not very spectacular and it is unlikely that it will be subject to a multitude of claims for return. In this respect the British Museum is much less fortunate, its most treasured objects are also the ones whose return has been requested. Being a "great" museum with "great" collections is not always an advantage.

The exhibition *Bringing the World Home* uses objects originating from outside the West to (mainly) look at Westerners. In what follows I will look at other possible strategies to illustrate aspects of Western culture. One way of doing so may be by challenging generally taken for granted taxonomies and by connecting objects which at first seem entirely unrelated. As outlined in chapter 2, what is perceived as different categories of objects are generally put into different "types" of museums – art is exhibited in art museums, ethnographic objects in ethnographic museums and so on – and seldom are the demarcation lines trespassed. But if they were? In my opinion, one of the most interesting examples of a crossing of boundaries between different categories of (museum) objects is found in the artist Fred Wilson's installation/exhibition "*Mining the Museum*" created with objects from the Maryland Historical Society in 1992-1993. The purpose of the exhibition was to make heard (some of) the muted voices contained in museum objects. Among the exhibits was a showcase labelled "Metal work 1793-1880." In the showcase there were silver vessels and slave shackles, all made in Baltimore. By bringing together these "art" objects and "utilitarian" objects Wilson showed that the refined "high culture" and the pleasures of the wealthy are interdependent on the exploitation of the poor: the silver for the coffee pots and the coffee and sugar contained in them may have come from



slave labor.<sup>9</sup> Wilson brought forth Walter Benjamin's point that we ought to regard "cultural treasures" with "horror," because they "owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries." Thus, according to Benjamin: "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism." Benjamin also observes that the manner by which these "cultural treasures" are transmitted from owner to owner is also tainted with barbarism; they are the "spoils" which the victors have taken from the conquered.<sup>10</sup>

Much of this is also applicable for the Benin objects. The merchandise exchanged by the Edo to obtain the metal to cast the Benin objects included slaves. Surely, slave shackles – or other objects relating to slavery – could equally well be included in a display with Benin objects as in a display with silver coffee pots. Arguably, this would be especially appropriate in an institution such as the British Museum, whose origin, like that of the Benin objects, is interconnected with the transatlantic slave trade. It is even remotely possible (though perhaps not very likely) that the body parts of Blacks in Sloane's original collections were traded for the metal used in some of the Benin objects now in the British Museum.

And what other objects could be added to look at another "barbaric" aspect of the Benin objects' biographies, namely their transmission from Edo to Western ownership in 1897? As discussed earlier, at the time, looting had gone out of practice in warfare between "civilized" opponents, and was banned in the Hague convention of 1899. Thus, there was no legal deterrent to the looting of Benin City. Yet, even if a binding "international" convention had been in force in 1897 it is very doubtful if it would have had any effect on the British behavior in Benin City, because the "international" laws regulating the conduct of war were generally not seen as applicable to uncivilized peoples.<sup>11</sup> The legalistic argument was

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9. Corrin 1994, unpaginated p. 30. Wilson 2002, 122-124, McClellan 2008, 107-108, Lundén 2012, 131.

10. Löwy 2005, 46-57.

11. Mégret 2006, Vrdoljak 2006, 47-53. The idea that "international" laws only applied between civilized peoples and could not be extended to include the

that these laws only applied between contracting parties (nations) and as savages were not signatories to these laws they could not apply to them. The other argument for excluding the uncivilized from these laws was that they built on the notion of reciprocity. Because savages and barbarians could not be expected to behave in a civilized manner and conduct warfare according to these laws of war, it would only put the civilized at a disadvantage against the uncivilized enemy if the civilized obeyed the rules of war unilaterally. The 1914 British military manual explicated: "It must be emphasized that the rules of International Law apply only to warfare between civilized nations [...] They do not apply in wars with uncivilized States and tribes."<sup>12</sup>

This double standard, that one set of rules should be applied in warfare with civilized opponents and another set of rules applied in war against un-civilized opponents probably finds its most gruesome expression in the British justification for the use of dum dum bullets against non-Western opponents. The background to the creation of the dum dum bullet was that during the Chitral Campaign in India in 1895, it was reported that the ammunition used by the British did not inflict large enough wounds on their enemies. To remedy the perceived problem the dum dum bullet was developed in the years 1895-1899. It was a missile designed to maximize the shock of injury by fragmenting upon impact. When the dum dum bullets were employed in the field by the Tirah Expeditionary Force in 1897-1898 a British medical expert described with satisfaction the complicated wounds produced by dum dum bullets as "enormous," "very severe" and "of the most terrible description."<sup>13</sup> In Europe the British were criticized for having developed this type of ammunition. It was seen as having contravened the spirit of the St Petersburg Declaration of 1868 forbidding the use of exploding bullets. The Hague Convention

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peoples which were defined as uncivilized (by those who defined themselves as civilized) was commonplace. In his treaty "A few words on non-intervention" from 1859, John Stuart Mill wrote: "To suppose that the same international customs, and the same rules of international morality, can obtain between one civilized nation and another, and between civilized nations and barbarians, is a grave error." Mégret 2006, 278-279.

12. Mégret 2006, 279.

13. Spiers 1975, 3.

of 1899 also included a ban on the use of expanding bullets like the dum dum bullet. The British voted against this provision and later refused to sign the convention.<sup>14</sup> At the Hague conference, the British delegate, John Ardagh, justified the perceived British need to use this kind of bullet by drawing up a contrast between the behavior of the civilized soldier, who stops fighting when wounded, and the savage warrior who continues to fight despite his injuries.

In civilized war a soldier penetrated by a small projectile is wounded, withdraws to the ambulance and does not advance any further. It is very different with a savage. Even though pierced two or three times, he does not cease to march forward, does not call upon the hospital attendants, but continues on, before anyone has time to explain to him that he is flagrantly violating the decision of the Hague Conference, he cuts off your head. For this reason the English delegate demands the liberty of employing projectiles of sufficient efficacy against savage races.<sup>15</sup>

The notion that “savage races” were constituted differently physically and mentally from Whites underpinned the idea that the ammunition used against the civilized was inefficient against the uncivilized. A tough body and an uncontrollable mind made the savage more resistible to injury than a white man. When wounded, the white man’s body and rational intellect tell him to withdraw from battle, but the savage, instead of retreating to safety when hit, becomes enraged and continues forward to seek revenge. The idea about strong-bodied and dull-minded others have a long history in the Western tradition, and for example, finds its expression in Sloane’s interest in the effects of torture on black slaves and in Joyce’s description of the mental constitution of the black as “very similar to that of a child, normally good-natured and cheerful, but subject to sudden fits of emotion and passion during which he is capable of performing acts of singular atrocity.”

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14. Mégret 2006, 271.

15. Mégret 2006, 293.

That savages can withstand more bodily injury than a white man is made explicit by Surgeon-Major-General John Hamilton writing in 1898. In his description, the difference between white man and savage is further emphasized by likening the behavior of the latter to that of a ferocious animal, thus evoking another well-rehearsed trope about others. After describing how the small caliber ammunition could pass through the body without causing “immediate collapse” he continues:

In European warfare this was of comparatively little consequence as civilized man is much more susceptible to injury than savages. As a rule when a “white man” is wounded he has had enough, and is quite ready to drop out of the ranks and go to the rear; but the savage, like the tiger, is not so impressionable and will go on fighting even when desperately wounded.<sup>16</sup>

Another argument by Hamilton for the use of dum dum bullets was that savages do not obey the rules of war (which includes sparing prisoners and non-combatants) but “if successful wage war of annihilation and dispatch armed and unarmed, wounded, sick, men, women, and children alike.” He goes on to suggest that if projectiles more efficient than those which are to be used against a “civilized” enemy are not used against savages it might “lead to English men and women falling human sacrifices to some African Ju-ju in some African city of blood.”

Clearly, these references to “human sacrifices,” “Ju-ju,” and “city of blood” are used by the author to conjure an image of ultimate savagery which draws on descriptions of Benin City. Yet, my point by looking into the ideology behind the justification for the development and use of dum dum bullets is not to show that, at least once, the Edo came to epitomize the essence of savagery and that Edo atrocities became part of the rationale for using dum dum bullets against all savages.<sup>17</sup> Rather, I want to highlight that both

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16. Hamilton 1898, 1251.

17. The dum dum bullet was not used by the so called punitive expedition to Benin. In January 1897 when the expedition was prepared, the authorization

the idea that it was right to develop and use dumdum bullets against savages (but not against civilized enemies) and the idea that it was right to loot savages (but not civilized enemies) and make these looted objects into museum objects resided within the same conceptual framework. It was a conceptual framework which drew a sharp distinction between civilization and savagery, and placed one part of humanity – the savages – in a limbo where the humanitarian rights which were granted to another part of humanity – the civilized – did not necessarily apply.

Earlier, in the discussion on the highlights entries, it was mentioned that these entries contain “related objects.” These “related” objects are all Benin objects (in the British Museum). The underlying notion for relating Benin objects to other Benin objects is that they all belong to the same “culture” – Edo culture – and that these objects may teach us something about this culture. Yet, as argued earlier in this study, the Benin objects “are” as much British objects as they “are” Edo objects. Or to put it differently, they are constituted of both Britishness and Edoness. What the Benin objects have become today is difficult to understand without relating them to Western worldviews. This is perhaps most evident in the case of the tusks-in-brass stands which have been separated into the two categories “tusks” and “brass heads,” but it is also true for all other Benin objects, for example, in the sense that they have now acquired an identity as museum objects in ethnographic collections.

If one accepts that the Benin objects are also British objects, or hybrid Edo-British objects, this means that they can teach us about British ideology, beliefs, and habits. Arguably, given their hybrid nature they may be particularly suitable to shed light on what to the British constituted as non-Britishness. The dumdum bullet, created by the British (and manufactured in the Indian factory Dum Dum, hence its name), may also be seen as a hybrid object in that it cannot be understood without relating it to British notions of non-Britishness. The dumdum bullet was a projectile to be used against the category of peoples which were studied, collected, and

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for the manufacturing of dumdum bullets in India had just been given. Spiers 1975, 4.

exhibited by the, now, former Department of Ethnography and the present Department of Africa, Oceania and Americas.

At first glance, it may seem absurd to argue that Benin loot and dum dum bullets are in any way “related” objects. Yet, seen from the perspective developed here, it is perhaps not at all farfetched to suggest that Benin objects and dum dum bullets could be mentally and visually connected. MacGregor seems to be of the opinion that museum collections should be used for self-reflection. He assures that “objects from other cultures tell us not only about distant peoples but about ourselves too, about our souls.”<sup>18</sup> Utilizing objects “from other cultures” for introspection is an agreeable aim. To this one may add that no object is purely “other,” and that the cultural hybridity of objects is an especially interesting area to explore when scrutinizing the making of the self. The delineation of boundaries between self and other and the creation of contrasts between the two is an important element in the process of identity making. Hence, by juxtaposing Benin objects and dum dum bullets and by explaining that the looting of the former objects and the development and use of the latter objects resides within the same ideological framework – which drew a sharp distinction between our civilization and their savagery – one may shed light on that ideological framework, or to paraphrase MacGregor, one may look into “our [Western] souls.”

What additional objects could be included in this soul-searching, to show how the distinction between the Western self and its others was created and propagated and, how this conceptual roadmap in turn, was linked to the urge for colonial expansion and domination? Perhaps a bar of soap. When Moor and others argued the need to conquer Benin City and depose the Oba they suggested its mutual benefit for the Edo and British alike. Human sacrifices would come to an end and the light of civilization would be spread to this barbarous area of Africa. The territory was rich in natural products and the British foresaw an increase in trade which would have a civilizing influence. Profit and altruism conveniently went hand in hand. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the dominant trade product from this part of West Africa was palm oil; it was

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18. MacGregor, 2009, 50.

presumably development of commerce in this product that was hoped for (although it was pointed out that the area was rich in many other resources, including gum trees). Palm oil was used to grease the machinery for the industrial revolution and it was also an ingredient in soap. The late 19<sup>th</sup> century British soap consumption and its links to the ideology of imperialism, have been studied by Annie McClintock.<sup>19</sup> She argues that in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century – when British soap consumption soared to 260,000 tons a year – soap had become a sign of “Britain’s evolutionary superiority” and served as a mark of distinction between savagery and civilization. For example, an advert for Pears’ Soap from 1899, with an image of a captain in white clothes washing his hands in a ship cabin, announced:

The first step towards lightening The White Man’s Burden is through teaching the virtues of cleanliness. Pears’ Soap is a potent factor in brightening the dark corners of the earth as civilization advances, while amongst the cultured of all nations it holds the highest place – it is the ideal toilet soap.<sup>20</sup>

The surrounding images show a naval vessel, a sailing ship, boxes with soap being unloaded on a shore, and a standing white man handing a bar of soap to a seated dark-colored native whose hands reaches out towards the bar of soap. His pose and gesture suggests adoration of the white man and the bar of Pears’ soap. The text and image imply that the “cultured” captain’s ship is bound for the colonies. With clean, white hands, the captain is going to “teach the virtues of cleanliness” to brighten and enlighten “the dark corners of the earth” with his cargo. The civilizing potential of soap is brought up by another Pears’ ad with a black man gazing at a bar of soap from a crate washed ashore from a shipwreck. The ad proclaims: “The Birth of Civilization.” Another advert shows a black child receiving white skin after a bath with Pears’ soap. As these adverts suggests, apart from “practical” functions (removing dirt and maintaining hygiene) a bar of soap and its everyday use may have a symbolic

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19. McClintock 1995, 207-231.

20. *McClure Magazine* 1899, October, following p. 480.



function and may be part of a mental landscape which symbolically connects white skin, purity, and cleanliness and distinguishes them from black skin, impurity, and filth. These adverts illustrate how utility and ideology are interconnected and how ideology may be manifested in domestic commodities and daily rituals. McClintock argues that the “scientific racism” of the era was complemented with “commodity racism,” which likewise propagated white supremacy, but reached through to a much larger section of the population. Other ads’ for Pears soap rendered the cleansing of the dirty working class, exemplified by a dark coal miner, or drew from an analogue which connected whiteness and cleanliness with Classical Antiquity. Pear’s soap ads were not exceptional. A whole range of products were marketed by utilizing an imagery relating imperialism, civilization, and commerce. According to McClintock, “[n]o pre-existing form of organized racism had ever before been able to reach so large and differentiated a mass of the populace.”<sup>21</sup> Or as an Englishman recalled from his youth in the 1930s: “Empire was all around us, celebrated on our biscuit tins, chronicled on our cigarette cards, part of the fabric of our lives. We were all imperialists then.”<sup>22</sup>

Thus, an exhibition which wants to shed light on the creation and maintenance of a symbolic and political realm which placed the civilized self in possession of superiority over its uncivilized other may well choose to juxtapose Benin objects, dum dum bullets, and soap (or soap adverts). Such an exhibit could show some of the rights and duties which the civilized gave themselves in relation to the uncivilized. The uncivilized were the peoples whose territories the civilized could conquer, the ones which the civilized could kill with dum dum bullets, and those whose artifacts the civilized could loot and put on display in museums. All this was for the benefit of the uncivilized who were in need of guidance from their masters in matters of military technology, scientific knowledge, commercial spirit, and personal hygiene.

This is not to suggest that this is the right or best way of making an exhibition with Benin objects, nor is it to fault the British

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21. McClintock 1995, 209.

22. Nederveen Pieterse 1992, 91.

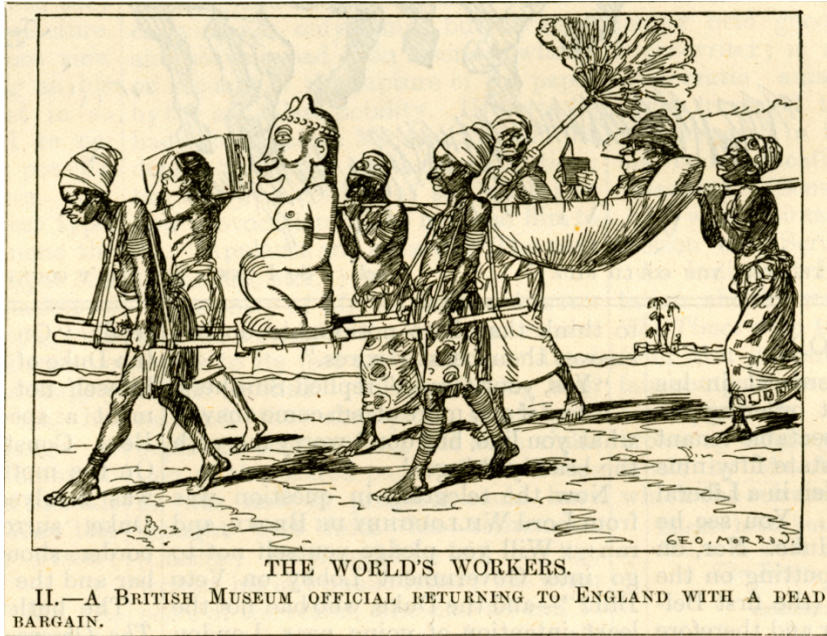


Fig. 29. *Punch* 1911.

Museum for how it displays Benin objects, but it is to indicate an aspect of how ordering is culturally constructed, and that through novel constellations of objects, representations may be created which communicate other messages than those which tend to be made through more conventional modes of ordering.

To this it may be added that the notion of seeing the acquisition of museum objects as part of a larger web of exploitative black/white power relations is not entirely anachronistic. The thought occurred to some “back then.” A cartoon published in an edition of *Punch* magazine from 1911 shows a group of six Blacks walking through a desert landscape [Fig. 29]. Two of them are carrying a statue, presumably a native “idol,” on a kind of stretcher. Another two are burdened with a white man in a carrying hammock. Of the remaining two, one is cooling the white man with a large fan and the other carries his suitcase. The man in the hammock smokes a cigarette and reads a book. Behind his back is a pillow. Apparently, the journey through the desert is not strenuous to him, but the image suggests that it so to the carriers. In contrast to many

depictions from the time, these black carriers are not depicted as particularly muscular. Their somewhat skinny bodies contrast with the opulent shape of the statue and the rounded face of the man in the hammock suggests that he is also a heavy cargo. At least one of the carriers appears to be struggling with the weight. The drawing is entitled: “The world’s workers. A British Museum official returning to England with a dead bargain.”

The image, which is the second in a series of 15 cartoons captioned “The world’s workers” suggests the ways in which some capitalize from the work of others: the “achievements” of the privileged few relies on the work of many less privileged, and these “achievements” are not even possible without the work carried out by the less fortunate who are not credited for their work. The first image in the series shows a white man planting trees. According to the caption he is an official at the British Post office planting gum trees. The humor is that this is something a post office employee would never do. He is dependent on the workers in the colonies who extract gum arabic from acacia trees, which is used as an ingredient in the glue for sealing envelopes. This cartoon was drawn three years after the Belgian state had taken over the Congo from King Leopold following the public outcry against the atrocities committed against the native population coerced into extracting gum by Leopold’s troops. It is possible that the cartoon conjured up the image of the outmost cruelty inflicted on the workers who produced this component in the glue used by the post office official. Another analogy was perhaps also suggested by the two images: that in both cases the desired items – gum and museum objects – were produced and procured under questionable circumstances. While this interpretation of a “link” between the two images remains conjectural (I admit that this may be more of a 21<sup>st</sup> century reading of the images than an early 20<sup>th</sup> century one), it nevertheless suggests the possibility that rather unorthodox thoughts could arise and unexpected connections which revealed some of contradictions of the then existing order (of things and of humans etc.) could be made a century ago.

I have now looked at the Benin objects in post-1897 Western society and how they can illustrate some of the darker sides of



**Fig. 30.** *Ethnological Museum Berlin. Altar group with Oba Ewuake, slaves and decapitated bodies.*

Westernness. Similarly, they can be used to look at pre-1897 Edo society and illustrate some of its less pleasant sides. As already mentioned, the Benin objects may have been cast in metal acquired in exchange for slaves (a practice in which both Edo and Westerners were complicit). Following the objects' biographies forward in time, from their moment of creation to their manifold uses and functions in pre-1897 Edo society, it is easy to relate them to other forms of cruelty and exploitation. The connection between the





**Fig. 31.** *Ethnological Museum, Berlin. Altar group with Oba Akenzua I, slaves and decapitated bodies.*

altar objects and human sacrifice has already been touched upon. This aspect of (some of) the objects' function in Edo society was evident to the British soldiers in 1897, who found objects on altars caked with blood: it was also stressed in the very first reports in the West. For better or worse, these associations between the objects and bloodshed were quickly pushed into the background. While the objects have been cleansed of blood, there are a number of them



**Fig 32.** *Altar group of Oba Ewuake. A decapitated body.*

which depict the corpses of sacrificed humans.<sup>23</sup> Two altar groups in the Ethnological Museum in Berlin show a large centrally placed figure flanked by two smaller figures [Fig. 30 and 31]. In one of the altar groups, the central figure is rendered with a European-style helmet. In the other, the central figure wears the full royal regalia including a coral bead crown. In her study of the two altar groups, Paula Girshick Ben-Amos interpreted the two large figures as Oba Ewuakpe and his son Oba Akenzua I respectively, and the smaller figures flanking them as slaves/palace attendants. On the base of both altar groups are two diminutive decapitated human bodies. The victims' hands are tied behind the back and the severed heads gagged [Fig. 32].<sup>24</sup> The relative difference in scale between the people depicted on this altar group, from the towering Oba, to the much smaller slaves, down to the tiny beheaded corpses may serve as an illustration of the various degree of value given to people within Edo pre-1897 social hierarchies and the violence which could be inflicted upon, and suffered by, those at the bottom of the social pyramid.

The corpus of Benin figurative objects may also be used to illustrate aspects of the respective valuing of the female and male gender in pre-1897 Edo society. The human figures shown are predominantly men.<sup>25</sup> The females mostly depicted are the Queen Mother and her attendants. A rare rendition of a woman is found on the altarpiece with Oba Ewuakpe: one of the two slaves flanking the Oba is female. This is unusual, not only given the general paucity

23. Ben-Amos Girshick 1999, 77, fig. 27, Plankensteiner 2007a, 480-482, no. 267-268 (Völger).

24. Ben-Amos Girshick 1999, 74, fig. 25.

25. Kaplan 2007.

of representations of women but also in that a woman here appears as an attendant to an Oba, who “normally” would be surrounded by male slaves only. What is also at odds with the general iconography is that Oba Ewuakpe is shown in a European-style helmet instead of the customary coral bead crown. These breaks from the representational convention presumably symbolize the lowly status the Oba had temporarily been reduced to after a rebellion. The rebellion had stripped the Oba of both power and possessions and the altarpiece signals the Oba’s humiliation by exchanging the beaded crown for a simple helmet. That he is attended by a female slave – rather than by male slaves only – is a further sign of the Oba’s poverty and utter disgrace.

The altar group of Oba Ewuakpe was presumably meant to express and commemorate Oba Ewuakpe’s triumphal return to power and the re-establishment of a righteous rule and an “ideal” social hierarchy. That order was restored is shown on the altarpiece with his son Oba Akenzua I, wearing the proper coral bead regalia and flanked by two male palace attendants. Such a reading of past events and of Edo social structures may have been intended by those who occupied the top of this social hierarchy. However, through the objects’ references to the Oba’s temporary ousting from power, it also contains the possibility of alternative, subversive readings which suggest a less static view of Benin society and history, and that power and memory in Edo society, as in other societies, were not only imposed, but also opposed, questioned, and resisted.<sup>26</sup>

To Girshick Ben-Amos’s analysis, one point could be added which may serve as a reminder of what might be lost in the translation process when three dimensional objects are made into two-dimensional illustrations. The case also shows that, quite literally, it is worth viewing things from different perspectives. In her publication (like in most other ones) the altar groups are reproduced with photographs taken frontally or from a slight angle, where one sees the Oba and the two attendants/slaves. It is these figures which are discussed in her reading of the altar group. In their Edo pre-1897 context, the altar groups would have been

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26. Ben-Amos Girshick 1999, 134-136.





**Fig. 33.** *Altar group of Oba Akenzua I from the side, showing the Queen Mother and two female attendants. From Luschan's Die Altertümer von Benin, 1919.*

placed at ancestral altars [cf. Fig. 8]. Thus, the altars groups would predominantly have been seen frontally, but it would also have been possible to look at them from the side as well. If one does so, one sees a row of people behind the Oba and his attendants. On the altar group with Oba Ewuakpe, two figures have been broken off, but on the altar group with Oba Akenzua I all three are preserved

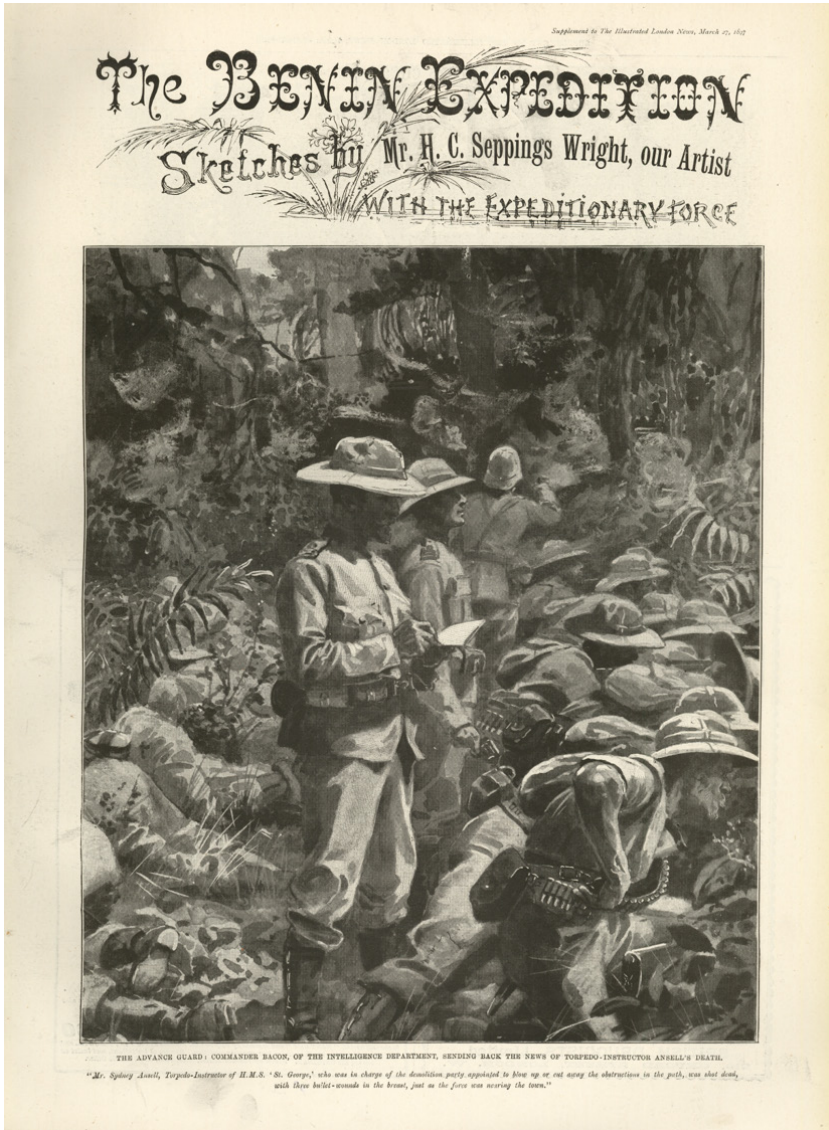
[Fig 33]. The figures are the Queen Mother and her two female attendants. The diminutive size and position of the women in the back say something about their relative importance to the Oba. In their Edo context, these women were much less visibly prominent than the Oba and his attendants, but they could be seen. Interestingly, when the altar groups in the post-1897 period have been reproduced in books for the Western audience, the women have become virtually invisible (the illustration reproduced here of the altar group of Oba Akenzua I is from Luschan's book *Die Altertümer von Benin*, which to my knowledge, is the only publication which shows the altar group from the side).

The two Benin altar groups with Oba Ewuakpe and Oba Akenzua I show the valuing of human beings in Edo society. The renditions lack realism in that the people are scaled according to their social value and importance rather than actual size – in reality a king is not three times taller than his servant. The scaling of people according to rank is common in the corpus of Benin objects. To a museum visitor, this iconographic convention may (correctly) suggest that Edo society was unequal. In line with what has been argued earlier in this study this may be problematic if the visitor gets the feeling that Edo society was characterized by something (social stratification) which does not exist in Western society. This is a general problem in that any critique of others may suggest the superiority of the self. In this case, an antidote may be to compare Benin objects with Western depictions which likewise lack realism in that they follow iconographical conventions elevating some above others.

In 1897 the *Illustrated London News* sent its artist Henry Seppings Wright to accompany the British Expeditionary Force to Benin City. His illustrated report was published in March 1897 as a supplement to the journal.<sup>27</sup> The text and drawings have the appearance of an eye witness account of the advance on and the taking of Benin City (but it is unclear to what extent Seppings Wright actually saw what he described and depicted: according to Bacon he arrived to

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27. *Illustrated London News* 27 March 1897.



**Fig. 34.** Illustrated London News March 1897. Intelligence officer Bacon writing a note next to covering privates.

Benin City two days after the fighting was over).<sup>28</sup> His illustrations have been analyzed by Annie Coombes in terms of what they reveal

28. Bacon 1897.



SUPPLEMENT TO THE ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS, MARCH 27, 1897.—3

T H E B E N I N E X P E D I T I O N .



THE FIRST FIGHT AT OLOGBO.

*"The enemy had taken up a position in the bush all around, firing, shooting, and playing tom-toms. Colonel Hamilton, with one company of Hussars, and Lieutenant Fyler, with one Martin, then advanced up the clearing. The enemy retired before our heavy fire, and were driven on to Ologho village, which was then killed, razed, and captured."*

Fig. 35. Illustrated London News March 1897. Standing officer and privates lying down.

about the relation between Whites and Blacks.<sup>29</sup> As is clear from the textual sources (including that of Seppings Wright) the fighting troops consisted of both black and white troops as well as black

29. Coombes 1994b, 17-19.



**Fig. 37.** *Illustrated London News* March 1897. Original caption: “Lieutenant Robertson defending the rear-guard in the final advance on Benin City.”

carriers. The black troops did a lot of the fighting. Still, in the drawings, Blacks only appear in the capacity of carriers. As Coombes also notes, the Blacks are rendered as susceptible (or cowardly) in a way which the Whites are not. In a scene with the attack on Benin City, a black carrier is shown covering his ears to protect himself from the blast of an explosion, but the Whites are not bothered by it.

Perhaps even more interesting is what these illustrations say about the relation between white officers and privates. The fighting scenes all follow a similar iconography. The privates are shown firing at the enemy lying down or crouching to protect themselves from return fire. The officers, on the other hand, are apparently not in need of protection. They are shown standing or half-seated, as if they were invulnerable to bullets. The illustration which graces the cover of the *Illustrated London News* supplement shows Bacon standing calmly writing a message next to covering privates [Fig. 34]. Similarly, a second illustration renders Lieutenant Fyler standing next to his troops, who are firing with rifles and a Maxim machine gun [Fig. 35], and in a third one we see soldiers lying down and their commander half-seated behind them [Fig. 36]. The caption

explains the motif as: “Lieutenant Robertson defending the rear-guard in the final advance on Benin City.” The caption felt no need to mention the 13 privates in the picture. Despite their pretensions to realism and purported function of providing snapshots of what “really” happened, these images, where the heads of the officers are always positioned higher than those of the privates, are rather depictions of social relations. Much like the Benin altar groups and other Benin objects express the valuation of people in Edo society, these illustrations express Western value hierarchies.<sup>30</sup>

Here I let Western depictions illustrate Western social hierarchies and Benin depictions illustrate Edo social hierarchies. Of course, given the hybrid Edo/Western nature of the Benin objects, they may be used to look at aspects of Western society. Their post-1897 ownership histories are especially telling of the Western structuring of human beings according to class, ethnicity, and gender. The division of loot in 1897 among the (white) victors speaks volumes. For example, Admiral Rawson, in addition to the two aforementioned ivory leopards, awarded himself with many other objects including an ivory tusk which is now in the British Museum. According to the British Museum’s catalogue the tusk is “carved all over in relief” with various figures and measures 188 cm. Rawson’s large ivory tusk may be compared with presumably the only object obtained by his clerk, Midshipman T. W. S. Sneath, which is now also in the British Museum: the catalogue describes

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30. My analysis of the *Illustrated London News* has focused on the illustrations. These images are of course found in a larger context in this journal, including adverts for a range of products: cigarettes, prams, rifles, roller skate, tableware, etc. There are some adverts which have direct bearing on the topic of the making of the images of whiteness. Facing the last page of the report from Benin is an advert for Beethams Glycerine and Cucumber, declared to be “the Queen of toilet preparations” and guaranteed to keep the skin “soft, smooth, and white.” Thus, whiteness is both an absolute and a relative concept, it distinguishes the white from the black race, but amongst Whites, whiteness may be cultivated. Thus there are different shades of white and the Whites may have this quality to various degree. There is also an advert for Pears soap, “the soap of today,” which shows the upper body of a woman from behind. Her exposed white neck and shoulders stand out in contrast to her dark clothes and hair and the shaded background. Here the association is to whiteness and femininity (as in the “fair sex”).

it as an “unfinished” carved ivory figure, measuring a mere 26.7 cm. Clearly, size mattered when the loot was distributed. Just as the relative proportions of the figures on the two altar groups in Berlin says a great deal of Edo social hierarchies, the relative proportions between Rawson and Sneath’s tusks may be equally illustrative of British social hierarchies.

As to how the post-1897 possession of Benin objects has been structured according to gender, it may be noted that the various owners of Benin objects have mostly been male. The private collectors which acquired Benin objects from 1897 and onwards include very few women, and the public museums which acquired Benin objects were, with very few exceptions, the exclusive domain of men. The development during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century can be seen as characterized by both continuity and change. The male dominance in Benin scholarship has been broken in the last decades, and museums are now the workplace for both women and men, though, men still often dominate the top ranks within the museum hierarchy. For whatever it is worth making such a comparison, it may be noted that the relative number of women to men depicted on Benin objects is actually greater than the relative number of women to men who have been appointed to the position of director of the British Museum.<sup>31</sup>

Midshipman Sneath’s small tusk suggests that paying attention to some of the un-arty, and now largely forgotten, looted objects may shift the perception of the historical events from the well-known and privileged to those below them in rank. To this it should be added that there were many who received no rewards at all and only met suffering and death. The numbers are highly uncertain, but in terms of the casualties on both “sides” in the Edo-British conflict, it seems that the largest number of deaths occurred lower down in the social pyramids; on the British side among the carriers, and on the Edo side among those whose who were sacrificed to stall the British advance. The number of people sacrificed (which

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31. As far as I know there are no statistics on the respective number of women and men depicted on the Benin objects or any of its subgroups, such as for example, the plaques. The exact number of female British Museum directors through the ages is zero.



included both carriers from the Phillips mission, but also many low ranking Edo) may be as large as that of those who fell in battle. On the British side, many casualties among the carriers may have been caused by maltreatment by British officers. The conflict tends to be seen as one between the British and the Edo, that is, it is drawn along an ethnic demarcation line, and emphasis is given to the violence and suffering inflicted across that line. As a complementary perspective one may regard it as clash between two elites (with vastly different fire power) and their respective retinue of subordinates who were ruthlessly exploited by both sides. It is possible that as much violence was inflicted along the “class” boundary as that of ethnicity.

The various examples given here hopefully shows that an exhibition (or other representation) with Benin objects need not focus on the Edo alone. Benin objects of lesser or greater fame may be looked at from a wide range of perspectives (in both a figurative and a literal sense) and they may be connected with other objects, concepts, and ideas in many different constellations. Through such an exhibition the Edo and Westerner would ideally be put on display on the same terms. If the exhibition, for example, shows aspects of tradition, irrationality, and hierarchization in Edo society it would then balance this representation by showing Western society as equally traditional, irrational, and hierarchical. This may be a way of crossing the boundary between the West and the rest, and suggest human communality.

I am not arguing that this is the only or best way of showing Benin objects, or that such an exposition would by default be without its representational problems. To this it could be added that some of the concepts I am suggesting here are actually found in the British Museum’s representations of the Benin objects. Occasional glimpses of Westerners are given and some cross-cultural parallels and comparisons between the Edo and the Westerner are provided. The Benin exhibition juxtaposes how the Portuguese and Edo tried to incorporate each other into their respective world-views. The Edo saw the Portuguese as messengers of Olokun and the Portuguese saw in the Edo cross evidence of influence from the Kingdom of Prester John. Barley, in *The Art of Benin*, suggests a

parallel between British and Edo society in that in both societies, power and status were expressed through clothing, the difference being that height was emphasized in British society, bulk in Edo society. These are, in my view, excellent examples and I have no quarrel with them. What I find problematic are those cases when the British/Western is drawn into the story of the Benin objects and is represented as different from – and implicitly better – (more developed, less traditional, etc.) than the Edo, or some other other (such as Germans).

As said, the traditional ethnographic exhibition focuses on “explaining” the other, but not the self. This is problematic, but the absence of the self from the displays at least means that self and other are never directly juxtaposed or compared in the exhibitions, and their respective positions on a scale of value are not explicated. When Westerners are nowadays added to the representations in ways which subtly signal a difference between self and other (we are rational, they are traditional) rather than similarity (we are all traditional and irrational) this may, at worst, suggest an even greater distance between self and other than in past exhibitions.<sup>32</sup>

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32. I am here generalizing the traditional ethnographic exhibition and its relation to more recent modes of display. A concrete example would be the exhibition *Divine Kingship in Africa* in the British Museum’s filial Museum of Mankind. Fagg 1978 [1970]. This exhibition created by Fagg in the 1970s is solely about the Edo, and, in contrast to the *Sainsbury African Galleries*, there is no mention of deeds by “enlightened” British Museum scholars or a German misdeed.



## 13. Making progress at the British Museum?

“The British Museum is an Enlightenment ideal.” *Towards 2020. The British Museum’s Strategy*, 2013.<sup>1</sup>

This study set out to discuss how the British Museum makes, or represents, different entities: the Benin objects, the Edo, the British, and the British Museum. In this chapter I summarize some of the main points of the study, and return to the questions of how these makings may connect to the museum’s retentionist position. I will also say a few words on how my findings relate to the question of ownership of cultural objects.

On the topic of how the museum makes its own identity, one may start with the, perhaps obvious, observation that the past is important at the British Museum. Yet, history is held in reverence not only in the sense that the museum contains many hallowed ancient objects (housed in a building of venerable age), but also in the sense that the museum’s traditions are said to provide guidance in the present, and set the museum’s course towards the future. MacGregor, when explaining the museum’s contemporary function, looks back to the founding moment in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Recurring words in his texts are “Enlightenment,” “founders,” “ideals,” and “tolerance.” He assures that the museum seeks to adhere to its “founding principle” with “everything” it does. The

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1. British Museum 2013b, 2.

picture he presents of the museum is one of consistency and continuity over time, not change or rupture.

The museum's making of itself is not only expressed in MacGregor's articles, but it is also physically manifested on the museum premises. The Enlightenment gallery, inaugurated to celebrate the museum's 250 years of existence and located in the oldest part of the museum, materializes the idea of the British Museum's birth as an Enlightenment institution. To each and every person – “ordinary” visitors, staff, trustees, etc. – the gallery (and accompanying publications and web presentation) serve as a reminder of the institution's genesis.

The amalgamation of the British Museum and Enlightenment are also invoked in various documents. For example, in the British Museum's strategic plan *Towards 2020* under the first heading “Principles and Purpose” the opening sentence solemnly declares: “The British Museum is an Enlightenment ideal.” After this proclamation of what constitutes the museum's essence, the plan goes on to state that it is the responsibility of the museum's trustees to make this ideal “in each generation, a *continuing* reality” (italics added). Following this opening, the museum's foundation is presented in much the same way as by MacGregor. The museum was created by Parliament in 1753 “to foster the study of human societies through time and across the globe,” and its collection was “to be available, free of charge, to all visitors native and foreign.” In contrast to the continental museums it was not a royal collection, but one for the citizen. It was a trustee museum (the first of its kind), and this form of governance “ensured it could not be controlled by Government, but must be preserved and managed in the interest of its beneficiaries present and future.” The museum's purpose “then and now” was “to be a place of scholarly inquiry.” The paragraph concludes: “In the 250 years of its existence, it [the museum] has contributed significantly to the world's understanding of itself. It *continues* to do so” (italics added).<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, despite the purported respect for the museum's Enlightenment tradition, the idea of connecting the Enlightenment and the British Museum does not have a very

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2. British Museum 2013b, 2.

long history at the British Museum. Histories and accounts of the British Museum antedating the Enlightenment exhibition seem unaware of this connection. For example, Wilson's 1989 book on the British Museum does not contain the word "Enlightenment."

However, in his article "The British Museum. Collections and politics" from 2012, he calls the British Museum a "product of the Enlightenment."<sup>3</sup> Encapsulating the "spirit of the Enlightenment" it was "an extension and illustration of contemporary philosophical thought." Like MacGregor, he suggests an analogy between the museum and Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, claiming – erroneously – that the first fascicule of the *Encyclopédie* "had appeared in the year of its [the museum's] foundation." (The correct publication date for the first fascicule of the *Encyclopédie* is 1751, two years before the foundation of the British Museum.) Wilson refers to the many critics who "pleading for the restitution of the Elgin marbles" have made the "unthinking" charge that the museum was a "colonialist" institution. Denying the accusation, he declares that "in fact, however, the spirit of the Enlightenment and scientific research were central to the Museum's function throughout Britain's imperial period." Having thus established what the kernel of the museum is, he can explain away anything which does not fit into this image as a result of external influence. To Wilson, whatever external influence there was, it never profoundly influenced the museum's Enlightenment core values. Stressing that the museum has always collected everyday objects, he suggests an unbroken line of continuity regarding collecting and scientific enquiry from the formation of the collections of the "polymathic" Hans Sloane right up to the present. He does not try to hide that the museum has also collected prestigious items – such as Classical and Egyptian sculpture – but then so did "most other northern European countries." Nor does he deny that "growing imperial tendencies" allowed the museum to collect widely, and he admits that during the imperial era, the staff "*occasionally* slipped into a colonialist mind-set," but he adds that "it cannot be too strongly emphasised that acquisition

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3. Wilson 2012a, 171. The former British Museum director Robert Anderson also makes the British museum into an Enlightenment institution. Anderson 2012. Anderson was director of the museum from 1992-2002.

policy was simply a *continuation* of the Enlightenment tradition of exploration and taxonomic enquiry” (italics added). In short, Wilson’s portrayal of the museum strongly resembles that given by MacGregor: everything good at the museum comes from within, from its Enlightenment tradition, everything bad comes from the outside, and does not have any deep impact on the museum. He concludes the article by assuring his readers that today the museum “refreshes” and “disseminates” its scholarship “in a manner and *tradition* initiated by its founder” (italics added).<sup>4</sup>

Thus, the key concepts for Wilson are “tradition” and “continuation,” and these concepts relate to the museum’s internal Enlightenment values. Any imperialist slips only occurred “occasionally” through external influence. Wilson is not the first one to use this method of constructing identity by labelling any disturbing anomalies as foreign. As Said observed, Cromer employed it to counter Egyptian calls for independence by declaring these ideas to be a “plant of exotic rather than indigenous growth,” and when the Benin objects challenged their view of African inferiority, Read, Dalton, and Joyce claimed that the objects were the result of inspiration from a “superior culture.” Wilson uses the device to create the self, while Cromer, and the British Museum scholars used it to create the other, but in each case the pattern of thought is the same: what does not fit is declared to be foreign.

Wilson does not exemplify the imperial slips, but in his history of the British Museum he admits that when the British Museum sent its employee Holmes to accompany the military campaign to Maqdala, the museum trustees were too closely involved in imperial affairs. This is about the only time he acknowledges that there are “less glorious” episodes in the British Museum’s history.<sup>5</sup> Thus Wilson’s idea seems to be that close cooperation with an invasion force is not a good thing, but for the most part the museum can claim innocence from participation in imperialism. The thought is similar to that presented by MacGregor and in the museum’s strategic plan. Both assure that the British Museum (unlike continental

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4. Wilson 2012a, 171, 174, 178, 181.

5. Wilson 2002, 173-174.



museums), through its status as a trust, has been, and is, set apart from world of politics, and that it works on behalf of the whole of humanity without any partisan interests. The strategic plan states that the museum status as a trust “ensured it could not be controlled by Government” which recalls MacGregor’s statement that the trustees are “not allowed by law merely to follow government orders,” and that the museum, since its foundation, has been “in large measure removed from the political realm.”<sup>6</sup> These declarations of independence from Government may suggest that the museum has not been implicated in British imperialism.

It may well be true that the British Museum has not been controlled by Government, and it is possible to find examples of how it has defied government officials. One such case would be when Wallis Budge, despite the protests from Evelyn Baring (later Lord Cromer), smuggled antiquities from Egypt with the approval of the museum’s trustees. While this case is not brought forward by Wilson or MacGregor to validate their point of the trustee’s independence, it does illustrate that the museum, for better or for worse, could act independently of political considerations.

However, the museum’s relation to Government is of minor relevance for the question of the museum’s relation to imperialism. The insistence that the museum was, and is, not allowed to follow government orders, and the implication that this set the museum apart from politics seems to rely on a simplified understanding of how power is exercised. It runs contradictory to what Foucault and Said argued. One of the main points of Foucault’s works on power is that they counter the common perception of power as (only) exercised by orders from the top of the power structure down to various subordinates who execute the orders given. Instead, power, which is intrinsically linked to knowledge, is found everywhere. Similar ways of thinking and acting – the same discourse – dictate people’s behavior regardless of their position in the system.

Said, following Foucault, did not accuse academic Orientalism of following governmental orders. His point was rather that the same knowledge about the other was created and reproduced in

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6. MacGregor 2004.

diverse fields in Western society, in the political field as well as in the academic field, and that this knowledge was part of the maintenance of domination over the Orient.

Thus, it matters little whether or not the museum was controlled by Government, nor whether the British Museum sent staff members to collect with army expeditions. What is of interest is the kind of knowledge produced by the British Museum. As seen in the discussion on the Benin objects, the statements made by the museum on the positional relation of self and other were essentially similar to those of the colonial officials. All reassured the superiority of the civilized white self over its primitive black other, the latter frequently being placed close to apes or other animals, in either a figurative or literal sense. Such “knowledge” was part and parcel of the ideology of colonialism.

We will return to the Benin objects in a while, but first some more words on how the museum constructs its own past. On occasion it presents stories about its past and present other than those which insists that the museum has been an apolitical entity working altruistically for the whole world, not for any particular sovereign or nation, and that it has been “set firmly outside the commercial realm.”<sup>7</sup> A somewhat different picture of the museum’s involvements in politics and commerce than that given by MacGregor is found in the preface to the museum’s account and financial report for 2013 written by Niall FitzGerald, chairman of the trustees. He states: “For 260 years the British Museum has been one of Britain’s great ‘invisible exports’ both in terms of our work internationally and the enormous contribution we make to the UK economy.” He exemplifies with the large number of foreign tourists to the British museum and the exhibition *Mummy – The Inside Story*, taken to Mumbai by its sponsors British Petroleum and Reliance. The exhibition was “a phenomenal success and was used as a reception venue by Prime Minister David Cameron on his trade mission to India.”<sup>8</sup> Fitzgerald’s words, stressing the economic

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7. MacGregor 2004.

8. British Museum 2013, 3. Fitzgerald does not explicate what merchandise Cameron and his delegation wanted to sell to India. The offer included Eurofighter Typhoon warplanes.

utility of the museum throughout its history and up to the present can perhaps be explained by the fact that they are found in the preface to a document which states how the museum has spent the money received from the public purse, sponsors, and other benefactors. This suggests that the picturing of the museum's past might be subject to variation depending on the circumstances. In other words, the story told is a particular version of the museum's past created to serve certain purposes in the present. With regard to the portrayals by MacGregor, Wilson, and in the Strategic plan, is it possible that the controversy over ownership of cultural objects has had an impact on them?

Interestingly, MacGregor is not unaware that the past might be distorted in such conflicts. When challenging Mercouri's claim for the Parthenon sculptures, he points out that it relies on a selective reading of history. Against Mercouri's idea that the Parthenon is the embodiment of the Greek democratic spirit, he counters that ancient Athens was "a slave-owning society and an imperial maritime power." Thus, the Greek claim rests on projecting current ideals backwards in time to establish a link between now and then. It proscribes the existence of a Greek spirit which has endured through the millennia to make ancient Athens part of the contemporary Greek "we," considered by Mercouri to be the rightful heirs of the Parthenon sculptures. Yet, MacGregor questions such links by stressing how different the ancient Athenian ideals and realities were from contemporary ones.

There is no denying that Mercouri presented the case for the return of the Parthenon sculptures with the kind of arguments MacGregor rejects. She spoke of the Parthenon sculptures as "a tribute to the democratic philosophy," as "the essence of Greekness," and as the Greek's "noblest symbols of excellence."<sup>9</sup> It is easy to agree with the point that this metaphysical argument relies on a problematic understanding of concepts such as people and nation, and of their endurance over time. Also, within its 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE context the connection between the Parthenon and the Athenian

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9. Speech given by Mercouri to the Oxford Union in 1986: <http://www.greece.org/parthenon/marbles/speech.htm> (accessed 10 August 2016). Gabriel 2010, 128, 151, Cf. McClellan 2008, 252, 322, n. 63.

democracy is, at best, unclear. When the Parthenon and the other buildings were erected on the Acropolis, Athens was a democracy (in the ancient Greek sense: by including adult free men, but excluding women, slaves, and immigrants). However, most Greek city-states, whether they were democracies or not, erected temples. The impressive scale of the Parthenon had more to do with Athenian economic wealth (linked to military might) than by any “democratic” philosophy. Presumably, many Athenians saw the Acropolis buildings as a testimony of the success of their form of government, but as the building program was directly or indirectly subsidized by the profits of the Athenian Empire, many other Greeks may have regarded it as a symbol of imperialism or of the hypocrisy of having double standards for selves and others: promoting freedom at home and domination abroad.<sup>10</sup> In short, the Parthenon can be made into many things depending on the perspective taken, but Mercouri’s claim rests on promoting one particular identity to make it fit one particular understanding about what constitutes Greek “essence.”

Now, could it be that MacGregor constructs the British Museum in much the same way as Mercouri constructs the Greek nation? And when Wilson writes about a “tradition initiated” by the museum’s founder, could it be more correct to describe this as a tradition invented by the present?<sup>11</sup> As I suggested in chapter 3, a museum is not a more natural entity than a nation is. Its essence might be constructed in ways comparable to how a nation is imagined and its past invented: by bringing together select ideas, concepts, events, human beings, and bits and pieces of materiality, joining them into one, and adding a glorious origin. In any identity building project the past tends to be of crucial importance. In short, to be is to have been. To establish precedence, contemporary values are projected back in time, and through remembrance and amnesia the constructed essence is equipped with desired qualities and purged of undesired ones. In Mercouri’s case it was about conveniently forgetting Athenian slavery and imperialism and remembering democracy (or, at least, certain aspects of the Athenian democracy). In the process

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10. Beard 2002, 44.

11. Wilson 2012a, 181.

of remembering and forgetting, (select) material remains of the past and the (present-day) values attached to them, play an important role. When making national identity, ruins, archaeological sites, and museums become strong visual and material reminders of the nation's origin. The materiality and apparent authenticity of ruins and museum objects give the impression that they communicate the past in a direct unmediated and truthful way. However, objects and ruins are also made through selective and interpretative processes. An instructive case is how the Acropolis was "purged" of all post-classical remains after it was declared a protected archaeological site in 1834 to make it match the vision of an ethnically pure nation descendant from the spirit of ancient Greece.<sup>12</sup>

To my mind, the analogy of the construction of national identity is applicable to how the British museum's identity is made. Indeed, in certain ways the making of Greek national identity bears resemblance to the making of British Museum identity. As said, the making of national identity relies on a selective use of historical sources and material remains, the latter of which may be preserved and interpreted in museums. Now, the British Museum is a museum, and its interpretations are not only part of the making of British identity, but also of its own, as I think I have managed to show in the case of the Benin objects. To this it should be added that the museum has its own meta-museum – or museum within the museum – namely the Enlightenment gallery. Without pressing the analogy too far, it could be suggested that the Enlightenment gallery has become a focal point for the museum's identity, similar to how the Acropolis and Parthenon have become the focal point for Greek identity. It is a convenient site to remember and forget the past, and like the Acropolis it is a place where the subsequent history is absent, thus making the link between present and past appear so much tighter.

MacGregor and Wilson essentialize and idealize the museum by evoking a transcendent Enlightenment "spirit" or "principle" which (although it is unclear how) becomes immanent in the museum's practices through the centuries. Their accounts of the museum's

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12. Beard 2002, Lundén forthcoming.

history mix fact with fiction. Some of their statements are founded and factual, such as, for example, that the museum should be open to “natives as well as foreigners” – a direct quote from the museum’s original statutes. Yet, they make other claims about the museum’s past which rest on little or no evidence. This is especially the case with MacGregor’s claims concerning the relationship between the museum, the Enlightenment, and the concept of “tolerance.” Apart from stating that the British Museum was founded during a time period known as the Enlightenment era, he does not evidence the claim about the Enlightenment “ideals” held by its founders or how these ideals were implemented in the operations of the museum at the time. MacGregor did not find the evidence for the museum being founded to promote “tolerance” in the museum’s statutes or the writings of its “founders,” but in Diderot’s *Encyclopédie*. This is not to deny the possibility that the men who created the museum were influenced by Enlightenment ideas. Perhaps the founders believed that the increase in knowledge would promote tolerance, but if they did and if this idea contributed strongly to the museum’s foundation, and, more importantly, if it was incorporated in the museum’s subsequent policy and practice, then this is something which needs to be demonstrated by relevant source material, not by reference to Diderot.

While MacGregor and Wilson make much out of little or no evidence, they pass by other. Not everyone involved in the British Museum’s foundation was always overwhelmingly tolerant to others in their attitudes. MacGregor speculates about the “remarkable” Sloane’s shoe collection, but ignores what Sloane actually wrote about others. Sloane’s scientific and detached description of torture and execution methods reserved for slaves in Jamaica are, at least to my mind, a little hard to reconcile with the concept of “tolerance.” Speaking of slavery, it is slightly ironic that MacGregor brings up the fact that Athens was a slave-owning society and an imperial maritime power when the Parthenon was built, since this is a fitting description of Britain at the time when the British Museum was founded. Sloane was himself a slave owner and many of the British Museum’s most prized possessions were brought to it in close cooperation with the British fleet.

Another parallel between the making of national identity and of museum identity may be suggested. When national identity is made it often involves the naturalization of the nation's present borders by projecting them backwards in time, conveniently forgetting lands lost and that some areas may have been acquired in fairly recent times. This adds to the feeling that the nation, in its present form, is a given entity rather than the result of particular historical circumstances. A museum's "territory" is also subject to alterations in the sense that its domains of collecting may change over time. When the British Museum's strategic plan states that the museum was founded "to foster the study of human societies through time and across the globe" and when MacGregor assures that the "[s]tudy of the different societies and religions of the world would [...] generate tolerance and understanding," these are statements which function to make the British Museum into a coherent (and benevolent) institution through time. They conveniently forget that at its foundation, the museum's main strength was its natural history collection and its library. The interest in a systematic study of the peoples outside the Mediterranean area does not appear until the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the purpose at the time was not to promote "tolerance" and "respect for difference," but rather to illustrate the "inevitable laws of development" from savagery to civilization. The more correct statement that the museum was founded to study all branches of knowledge, including fields such as botany, cultural history, geology, medicine, zoology, etc. would have signaled that the institution back then was in many ways *different* from what it is today. Since collecting and studying taxidermic specimens, dried plants, shells, and minerals hardly promotes cross-cultural tolerance, such a statement would also have questioned the degree of importance the museum's founders attached to that concept.

The making of a national identity is not only performed through reference to primordial origins, and it is not only expressed through grand national monuments such as the Acropolis, or political orations from the country's leaders. Billig points to the banal nationalism, and how the nation is constantly made and remade through



ingrained everyday routines and speech. In Foucault's terminology, the nation is constituted through discursive practices. Similarly, the British museum's identity is not only created through the Enlightenment exhibition or through grand declarations in its strategic plan or by its director. The making of the museum into a stable entity with an honorable history also occurs in a range of other areas, including what it communicates with and about the objects in labels and explanatory texts. As discussed, many of the individual and collective names it gives to the Benin objects function in this way. For example, the term "head" and names such as *Brass plaque of a European* subtly conveys a sense of wholeness of the objects, the collections, and the museum which would not have been signaled by the alternative terms "pedestal head" and *Brass plaque of half a European*. This is especially true for the last name: had it been accompanied by the information about the whereabouts of the other half of this European it would have drawn attention to circumstances of the objects removal in 1897, and a less glorious aspect of the object's (and the museum's) history.

At the museum, the objects are predominantly seen as Edo objects (in a cultural sense, not in a legal one), rather than hybrid Edo-British objects. A cause and consequence of this is that the texts are mainly devoted to explaining the objects in their pre-1897 Edo context, and in doing so they also explain aspects of Edo society, regarding, for example, gender and class hierarchies, and the circulation of prestige materials. There is less emphasis on the objects' subsequent post-1897 biographies in Western society, and the little there is on this (for example, the information that Rawson gave two leopards to Queen Victoria, and that the leopards are on loan to the museum from the British Royal House) does not attempt to explain Western cultural behavior similar to how Edo cultural behavior is explained. While the circulation of prestigious items in Edo society is illuminated, which also illuminates aspects of how power is exercised and upheld in Edo society, there is no corresponding information regarding the transfer of valuable gifts in Western societies and its implications on the maintenance of class hierarchies. The representational bias serves to distance the represented culture (Edo) and naturalize the representing culture,

both Western culture in general and the museum's own culture in particular. Statements such as "This head is used in the Ododua ritual" rather than "This head is used as a museum object" puts the focus on Edo practices instead of Western ones. Contradictory as it may seem, the making of an object into a museum object involves *not* declaring it to be a museum object, but rather stating that it is something else, in this case an Edo ritual object.

That the focus of the explanatory force is directed towards the Edo rather than the Westerner is not a novel phenomenon. The museum's ethnographic collections have been created to explain others. Thus the exhibition is part of the museum's discourse which is part of broader discourse for anthropological science and ethnographic exhibitions. Visualizing, systematizing, and explaining others, not selves, has been the main purpose behind the creation of ethnographic collections and displays. Of course, the "knowledge" about others was also thought to provide "knowledge" about the self. Read and his colleague's believed that the study of peoples in various stages of development would unveil the laws which had given the Whites superiority over these peoples. At another level, the creation of the collections could also in itself be seen as evidence of achievements of the ones who had brought the objects to Britain from afar. This did not only apply to Benin objects. As mentioned, the Admiralty wanted the objects from Cook's journeys to be displayed as a "monument of these national exertions of British munificence and industry." The information that Chinese objects had been taken during the opium war would similarly have served to praise British national qualities, though in this case the focus was on military prowess and not munificence. The cultural practice of acknowledging donors in object labels also bestows honor to the wealthy and privileged ones who have made the donations.

Now, one may ask, why are the representations made in the way they are, rather than in some other way? Why, for example, is Barley's book titled *Benin Art*, and not *Benin Loot*? The British Museum declares itself to be universal museum – of and for the whole world – but from the "universal" perspective (whatever that would be) there is hardly a given reason why the title chosen should be preferred to other possible alternatives. Part of the answer is, of

course, that these statements are part of a particular Western discourse and tradition, since the Benin objects were already valued as “art” in 1898. But the issue could be considered in a larger context.

Said insisted that the knowledge production about selves and others needs to be seen in relation to the unequal power relation between the two. The making of knowledge cannot be regarded as exterior to that context. The unequal power relation is not only political and economic, but also representational and epistemic. Said reminds us that this meant, and means, that for all the numerous representations made of others in the West there was no counter-vailing flow of representations made by these others which showed their view of themselves or of Westerners. It is stating the obvious that it was the British who looted Benin City and brought objects to London, rather than Edo who looted London and brought, say, the Crown Jewels, Turner paintings, and the Magna Carta to Benin City. Nor was it the Edo who went to other places of the world bringing back objects obtained by force or consent from local inhabitants, to publish them in academic treatises and put them on display in museums in order to demonstrate their own evolutionary superiority.

Museums dedicated to exhibiting others are predominantly found in the so-called First World, but not the Third and Fourth. Museums in Africa display African objects, not all the non-African cultures of the world. Thus, there is no counterpart to the British Museum in Benin City which puts on a display of all the world’s cultures and peoples, including the British, and which uses its defining and essentializing power to characterize these. The Benin objects on display in Benin City and elsewhere in Nigeria are treated as Edo, Nigerian, and African objects, not as Western ones. Thus there is no display there which explains the Benin objects in relation to Western cultural practices and assumptions, such as the idea that putting loot on display promotes tolerance. There is no text – analogous to that in the British Museum about the Oba’s belief in the beneficial consequences for his people of the leopard sacrifice – which states that the director of the British Museum believes in a mystical Enlightenment power which permeates the British Museum and brings wellbeing to the world.

Of course, that Western ethnographic displays are only about others is a simplification. As discussed earlier, due to the critique which has been voiced since about the 1960s, both from outside and inside the museum sector, there are now exhibitions with ethnographic objects which, to various degrees, also look at Western selves. About one third of the articles in the catalogue for travelling exhibition *Benin – Kings and Rituals. Court Arts from Nigeria* are about the reception of Benin objects in the West, mainly focusing on their early reception. It also contains an introductory note with Oba Erediauwa's speech read at the opening of the exhibition in Vienna, which was discussed in chapter 5. As noted, he challenges the conceptualizing of the objects as "art" and uses the term "loot." However, his perspective appears to be just that: a particular perspective on, and diverging opinion from, the general consensus that the objects are "art." This is also the term used in the title of the exhibition and its catalogue.

As for the British Museum's Benin display, it also includes the Westerners in various ways. It does present some "information" which involves their Western value as objects of (scientific) knowledge and aesthetic contemplation. But two aspects stand out regarding the statements about the objects post-1897 Western reception which contrasts with the other statements made. The tone is celebratory, at least as long as it concerns the British (Museum), and at times the statements are out of alignment with the documentary record. The objects become elements in a story glorifying Western knowledge production in general and the British Museum in particular.

As discussed, the Benin objects are integrated in MacGregor's story about the positive contributions of the British Museum throughout its history. According to him, the discovery of their indigenous origin shattered European derogatory views of Africans. Frobenius is used to exemplify those who held the incorrect view that the Benin objects were not African. Which scholars held the correct view MacGregor does not mention, but he writes that the British Museum has a "special place in the *development* of Benin scholarship." From the "pioneering" Read and Dalton, "successive *generations* of scholars" at the museum have established an

“*unbroken line of academic research*” (italics added) right up to the present. British Museum Curator Mack is more explicit, when he declares that it was thanks to the “tireless” Read that the objects’ indigenous origin was realized. Barley states that many scholars believed in a Portuguese or Egyptian origin, but circumvents saying exactly what the opinions of the “enlightened researchers” Read and Dalton were. He gives them credit for dismissing “wild” theories of Indian origin, but his veiled admittance that they “homed in on traditions that stressed heavy outside influence” leaves it unclear what were their views on the matter. As Read and Dalton were among the first to write on the Benin objects one may wonder which “tradition” Barley refers to. In contrast to the British Museum scholars and its director, Platte (at the Frobenius Institute), chooses not to mention Frobenius by name when referring to theories of an origin from Atlantis. Instead, she tells the story of the Benin and Ife object’s without naming any scholar. As discussed earlier, the exhibition in the British Museum also presents a second narrative about the Benin objects reception in the West: that the Western discovery of the Benin objects led to the “discovery” of African art which, in turn, had an impact on modern art.

I believe it is evident from my discussion of the reception of these objects that this “information” presented by the British Museum is widely off the mark. In particular it fails to acknowledge the views of the scholars Dalton, Read, and Joyce on the question of whether the objects were the result of indigenous or foreign talent. As they make clear they locate the source to a “higher civilisation,” namely Portugal. To Joyce, the Benin objects were evidence supporting his verdict of the mental inferiority of the Black to the White. The views of these scholars can hardly be described as “enlightened.” What they wrote did more to strengthen than challenge prevailing racial and cultural hierarchies. At the time there were those – Boas, du Bois, Luschan – who used the Benin and Ife objects as evidence to challenge derogatory views of Africans, but their contributions are not acknowledged by the British Museum. The museum rightly acknowledges Fagg’s contributions, but MacGregor’s claim that the realization of the indigenous origin of the Benin (and Ife) objects shattered European stereotypes of Africans cannot be validated.

Likewise, the second narrative presented by the museum, that Western appreciation of the Benin objects led to the discovery of African art, is unfounded.

Similar to how the story of the foundation of the British Museum is constructed – by referring to some evidence, ignoring other, and making interpretations which are at best highly speculative, at worst entirely unfounded – the story of the Benin objects is constructed by picking some sources and neglecting others. It is easy to get the impression that these accounts have been formed by an anxious desire to keep the British Museum and its past scholars clear from having made erroneous and racist interpretations, rather than a wish to provide the reader with a factual account of early scholarly interpretations of these objects. To a certain extent the narrative which the museum creates today is uncritically adhering to its own scholarly tradition. That is, the museum recycles the views of the scholars it praises. Some “information” owes to Fagg’s ideas and to the image Fagg wanted to give himself. Fagg’s avoidance of any critique of Dalton and Read may also have contributed to the present positive evaluation of these scholars. The positive characterization of them also seems to build on a selective reading of Read’s own scholarly “contributions.” It utilizes two shorter articles by him in which he criticizes Frobenius and Cramer (and where he actually acknowledges that the ivory pendant mask is a rare case of indigenous artistic talent in “savage” Africa), but ignores the publications Read wrote jointly with Dalton, as well as other texts by Dalton and Joyce. MacGregor, in turn, seems to base his version on the “information” provided by the exhibit and by the publication *Africa – Arts and Cultures*, which he elaborates according to his desires, claiming that Benin and Ife objects changed the European view of Africa, thus making them “the key argument for objects being taken out of context.”

According to MacGregor, the British Museum conducts its scholarship “with knowledge rigorously acquired and ordered.”<sup>13</sup> To my mind, it does not always live up to this standard. I do not want to be impolite, but as an aside, I note that in one of MacGregor’s own

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13. MacGregor 2010b, xviii.

accounts he does not even get the basic facts right, such as when he states that Frobenius was a mathematician, that the Oba had taken a British delegation hostage, etc.<sup>14</sup> While none of these errors have any direct bearing on his main (erroneous) message about the Benin objects' beneficial impact on Westerners, they suggest that the "knowledge" in this case has been "acquired and ordered" by means less rigorous than one might expect for a director of the one of the world's greatest museums. Likewise, former director (and professor emeritus in Archaeology) Wilson does not always have the chronology in order when writing about the British Museum's history.<sup>15</sup>

Regardless of what caused these errors, the main question remains: how should we explain this focus on the museum's past and the distortions of it? The image of the museum's past presented is used to state what the museum's ideals should be now and in the future. Yet, these ideals – such as promoting tolerance and equality – are not particularly controversial and could be argued for without reference to the museum's founders and without creating a tradition from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present day. Here it might be inserted that not all museums show a similar pride in their history. Today some museums – especially ethnographic museums – treat their history from a perspective of critical reflection rather than veneration. They take a humble, at times apologetic, attitude to their own pasts, stressing that the collections have been formed during the colonial era and in a colonial mindset, and suggest that hierarchical views of humanity have been promoted on past exhibitions. This admittance of a murky past may also involve the recognition that collecting methods may have been unethical, which brings up the question of return of objects; some museums even have a positive attitude towards return. To fulfil their contemporary function (which may be formulated in a similar fashion to how the British Museum does it, by using buzz words such as tolerance, etc.) these museums now engage in a process of decolonizing the mind, and of

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14. MacGregor 2009.

15. As for the publication year of the first volume of Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, Wilson could have fact-checked with his own book where the date is correct. Wilson 2002, 14.



acknowledging that Western ethnocentrism and deep-rooted patterns of thinking and categorizing have influenced and continue to influence museum practice.

This is not the attitude of the British Museum. It does not make any apologies about its history, nor does it express uncertainty about its past and present benevolent impact on the world. This high self-esteem seems to be reflected in the museum's former strategic plan which declared that "confidence is high" at the museum and that it "has the opportunity to become firmly established as the best museum in the world."<sup>16</sup> Yet, despite the insistence to the contrary, there is perhaps some uncertainty at this institution which comes to the fore when the museum's integrity seems threatened. Perhaps, when its ownership over certain objects is challenged – including its most cherished possession, the Parthenon sculptures – security is sought in imagining the institution as an unchanging entity which has always adhered to its founding principles and must continue to do so in the future.

As said, Mercuri's claim for the Parthenon sculptures relies on creating and linking the three entities of the Greek nation, the Parthenon, and democracy, as well as of extending this trinity through time from the 5<sup>th</sup> century to the present. It may be suggested that similarly, in order to defend its retention of the Parthenon sculptures and other contested objects, it becomes important for the British Museum to fuse people (founding fathers, trustees, generations of scholars), Enlightenment ideals, and collections into one coherent entity which has endured two and half centuries.<sup>17</sup> In this way the institution is made to be the same now as back in time when it acquired the Parthenon sculptures and other contested objects. Most importantly, a line of continuity is establishing from the 21<sup>st</sup> century right back to 1753 when the founding documents declared that "the collection be preserved intire without

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16. British Museum 2008, 3.

17. The metaphors sometimes used to refer to the people connected to the museum, such as "founding father(s)" (MacGregor 1994, Wilson 1989, 126), "generations of scholars" (MacGregor 2010a), or "generations of curators" (Barley 2010, 17) make the museum into a kind of family or people with blood line relations. While perhaps no one takes such biological metaphors literally, they suggest coherence and continuity over time at the British Museum.

the least diminution and separation” and that it “shall remain and be preserved [...] to all Posterity.”<sup>18</sup> It is not in the interest of the museum to create a picture of its past which points to policy and practice having been subject to variation through the centuries. To stress rethinking and renewal is to suggest that the museum need not follow its “founding principle” with “everything” it does. This would open up for the possibility that the axiom of not parting with any objects in its collections is negotiable.

The repeated insistence that the museum was founded to study and compare different cultures and societies throughout the world also needs to be seen in this context. Admitting that the museum was predominantly focused on natural history and its library in the beginning might have suggested that the museum’s present identity is a result of *not* having adhered to the letter of the principle of keeping the collections together “to all Posterity.” The museum as it stands today as a museum of global cultural history is the result of having parted with many collections: anatomical specimens, paintings, natural history collections, and the library.

Of course, the British Museum’s representations of its past is a product of a whole range of entangled ideologies and processes both within the museum and in society at large, as well as the belief in many fundamentals (including, perhaps, at times an overestimation of the possibility of producing objective, impartial knowledge, which is detached from its institutional and cultural context). I am not arguing that the museum’s position on the ownership issue is the sole contributing factor for how it makes representations, but that within the web of ideologies and axioms, the axiom of non-return, directly or indirectly, has had a significant degree of influence on how it portrays itself as a stable, unchanging institution which has made good through the centuries. In this history, the museum’s

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18. Wilson 1989, 126, Caygill 1994, 50, MacGregor 2004, MacGregor 2009, 54. Above I suggested a parallel between Greek identity building and that of the British Museum. National identity formation takes different forms and relies on different tangible and intangible concepts. The importance attached to the founding act by the British Museum may be compared to United States nationalism which puts emphasis on the constitution and the United States founding fathers.

version of the reception of the Benin objects is an important element and it seems reasonable to assume that this narrative has also been shaped by the museum's position on the ownership issue.

Thus, contradictory as it may seem, while the claim to impartiality is one of its main arguments in favor of its continued retention of various contested objects, it appears that the British Museum's position on the ownership issue has a profound influence on how it represents its own history and the reception of the Benin objects. A comparison with the Benin exhibition in the Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm, a museum which on occasion has returned objects to claimants and which is under no particular pressure to return its Benin collection, suggests that this museum is much freer than the British Museum. The Museum of Ethnography does not make any declarations regarding the benevolent impact of the arrival of the Benin objects, the deeds of its curators, and it does address the ownership issue in its exhibition (although one may find that its presentation is titled towards retention). This is not to state that the two museum's different positions on the ownership issue are the only explanation for the difference between the two Benin exhibitions, but that their contribution to it is not insignificant.

It looks like the British Museum's famed collections are not only a great asset for making representations, but also a hindrance to it. Presumably, it is the Parthenon sculptures – the most hotly debated objects it possesses – which have the greatest impact on the museum. To paraphrase Gayatri Spivak, the museum's privilege is also its loss. The museum's present position appears to be that return would limit its capacity to show the whole world to the whole world, make cross-cultural comparisons, promote tolerance, and so forth. It could be argued that the opposite is the case, that the return of objects would augment its representational capacity. A change in policy might remove some of the blinders being put up today, and it might, for example, enable the museum to take another view of its own past and its links to colonialism. I am writing this not to take a position on the issue of return or retention or to suggest that the Benin objects would by default be better represented by any of its claimants. In this study I have concentrated on how the British Museum's represents the Benin objects,

but I have also touched on how Oba Erediauwa represents them. His representation also forgets certain aspects of the objects' many meanings. My study might suggest that rather than focusing on the question on to whom these objects belong, it is also worth asking how the objects should be made or represented. What stories and connections have been silenced hitherto? What stories could and should be told with these objects? Mindful of what Walter Benjamin says about cultural treasures, there are reasons to regard these objects not only with a sense of awe or pride, but also with horror. This applies to their whole biographies from their creation up to the present. In a certain sense, ownership of these hybrid objects is less important than what is represented through the objects. Yet, ownership entails control over who is allowed to make representations with and through the objects, and, as I hope to have made clear, it matters who makes the representations. Unless one regards it as entirely coincidental that the narrative created by British Museum representatives portrays the British Museum in a favorable light (and a German in negative light) and that the story told by a scholar at the Frobenius Institute does not scope out fame and shame in this way, one must acknowledge the possibility that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century factors such as institutional, and perhaps also ethnic, belonging, also play a part in scholarly knowledge production. Whether we like it or not, the – arguably more important – question of what is represented with, and through, the objects, becomes inseparable from the – arguably less important – question of who makes the representations. Makers and making cannot be held apart.

Lastly, a few words on the British Museum's making of self and other. According to the museum's strategic plan, "[i]n the 250 years of its existence, it [the museum] has contributed significantly to the world's understanding of itself. It *continues* to do so today" (italics added). The implication of this statement is that the museum's making and dissemination of knowledge in exhibitions and publications has been of a positive kind, for example that it has, in MacGregor's words, subverted the habit of viewing mankind in categories of superiority and inferiority.

In this study I have looked at how the museum presented the world to its visitor at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The exhibitions certainly did not promote human equality. The main organizing principle was by culture and geography, with different cultures in different galleries (e.g. ancient Greece and Rome, ancient Egypt). The British Museum guidebooks imply, and sometimes make it explicit, that some cultures are more advanced than others. At times the level of cultural development is linked to racial affiliation. With its strong emphasis on art, especially sculpture, progress was perhaps most clearly communicated to the visitor in the development of art. Its lowest rungs were displayed in the Ethnographical Galleries. Assyria and ancient Egypt represented more advanced levels, and the highest point of artistic development was to be found in Greek art, the apogee of which was seen in the Parthenon sculptures. A British Museum guidebook from 1870 explains that Phidias, who was involved in the sculptural decoration of the Parthenon, was “the greatest sculptor of both ancient and modern times;” the guidebook quotes a text by the sculptor John Flaxman praising Phidias’s “superior genius” (a wording which suggests a link between artistic skill and intelligence).<sup>19</sup> Later guidebooks reiterate the praise of Greek art and of the Parthenon sculptures and make it clear that European art owes its “best inspiration” to that of ancient Greece. On a more general level, most visitors probably felt that their own culture was built on the legacy of ancient Greece and Rome. The Classical world was part of the self in a way which the other cultures were not (a notion reinforced by the Greek revival architecture of the museum). Visitors who studied the museum’s *Handbook to the Ethnographical Collections* or read Joyce’s article “Negro” in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* could be reassured in their feeling of superiority. In the Handbook, Joyce “explained” how the mind of primitive man functioned by stating, for example, that primitive man cannot distinguish fact from fantasy and was not able to “distinguish [...] events which occur in dreams and real events,” and that primitive man did not have the capacity of coherent reasoning as “his conclusions [are] often based on superficial

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19. Nichols 1870, 244-245.

analogies which have no weight to us.” In the article on the “Negro” he pointed to out that the Negro’s anatomy was closer to that of apes and that the Negro was intellectually inferior to the White.

Of course, this is the past, and the present staff cannot be made responsible for the views held and representations made (and the consequences of these representations for those represented) by past curators. Yet, it is of interest to look at the representations the museum creates today. One would like to think that the museum has now laid to rest the idea of trying to explain how others think, and that the idea of the superiority of the Parthenon sculptures has long since been passed to the intellectual dustbin.

But is this the case? A casual look at the British Museum’s displays suggests that things are now fine. The different cultures on display are not put in any hierarchy; and the art of some cultures is not judged to be better than that of other cultures. Yet, what might be regarded as problematic is not so much what the British Museum says about the other cultures, but what it implies about the relationship between the Western self and the non-Western other. As noted, there is no exhibition devoted to Western culture, and this absence may suggest the normality, and hence superiority, of this particular form of culture. Also, when the Westerner makes occasional appearances in the exhibits, a subtle gradation of Westerner and non-Westerner can be detected. This is not the place to scrutinize every British Museum exhibit, but the analysis made here of the representations relating to the Benin objects shows this to be the case. The past and present Edo tend to be connected with culture and tradition. At times, this is also applies to past Westerners (or at least the Portuguese and a German) but not the present ones. In a subtle way, the Edo become traditional and the Westerner progressive. This is perhaps most clearly seen in Barley’s insistence that all of us orient ourselves by mythological maps, though this is only exemplified with how Nigerians create myths. Moreover, the exhibits do not entirely shun away from describing how others think. We might recall the text for a plaque of an Oba with two leopards which states that “the Oba sacrifices leopards in the belief that this will ensure his mystical power and well-being of his people.” Reading this sentence literally, the use

of the present tense means that it refers to the reigning Oba, Oba Erediauwa, and his “belief.” It states that Oba Erediauwa believes in a casual connection between an animal sacrifice and the assurance of mystical powers (mystical to whom?) and the well-being of his people. Rituals, ceremonies, and tradition do not have essential and stable meanings and are maintained, changed, or disregarded for a range of reasons which involve a broad spectrum of considerations of religious, cultural, social, and political nature. In contrast to the British Museum, I do not want to give any firm opinion on what Oba Erediauwa’s beliefs is regarding this matter, but if I might hazard a guess, it would be that his motivation for performing the sacrifice is more multi-faceted and complex than the British Museum label indicates. Of course, an object label has to be short, and when attempting to explain or contextualize the object it accompanies, it can only offer a partial explanation. Still, one might wonder, in the (unlikely) event that the British Museum were to put on an exhibition on, say, British Royal ceremonies, what explanation would it offer as to motives of the Queen for performing these rites?

I write unlikely, because, as we have seen, the British Museum is reluctant to direct the essentializing gaze towards selves. Or rather: the museum tries to include selves in its representations, but when it does so, the outcome still tends to be one which fails to essentialize the self as much as it essentializes the other. The self is not dependent on her culture like the other. The Westerner becomes characterized by individuality, rationality, progress, and the non-Westerner with the opposite of these characteristics.

But why? A partial answer may be suggested by again recalling Said’s insistence that knowledge production must be seen in the context of power. In the exhibitionary context this means that there are few exhibitions which challenge the idea of the West as rational and progressive, and the rest as irrational and traditional. There is no counterpart to the British Museum in Benin City which puts all the world’s cultures and peoples on display, including the British. Thus, one finds no exhibition which explains that when British receive guests they follow “tribal protocol” or that the British mourn their dead. Nor is there a chance to admire British artworks, learn



about British class and gender hierarchies, and have the objects' social meanings explained (such as that they might enhance the prestige of their owners and are circulated according to complex rules regarding the exchange of money and gratitude, etc.). Neither are there exhibitions which present various British traditions, initiation rituals, and more or less irrational beliefs. This is not because it would not be possible to portray the British in this way – fox hunting, the use of periwigs in court, David Cameron's pig-gate – may all exemplify old or recent traditions and rituals which do not all exactly appear progressive and rational. In short, the absence of a strong, countervailing flow of representations which challenges the traditional Western belief in its own rationality and superiority, means that this belief may live on.

To insist on the importance of tradition is not to argue that the representations made today are the same as in earlier times. Said made a distinction between manifest and latent Orientalism, arguing that the many stereotypes about the Oriental which were openly stated in the past still live on beneath the surface as subconscious patterns of thought, making their appearance in statements in much less explicit ways than in former times. Perhaps something similar applies to the “development” of British Museum representations. One hundred years ago Joyce stated that Blacks are intellectually inferior. For obvious reasons no such declarations are made today by the British Museum. Yet, the text in the Africa exhibits states that the Oba believes in a “mystical power” and in the Parthenon gallery Western civilization is connected with a “superior intellect.” Of course, these texts are only two examples taken from great many texts which are found in the British Museum. Still what is of interest is that, to my knowledge, among the many texts found in the British Museum explaining the world's different cultures to the visitor, there is no text which connects any other culture than the Western with a “superior intellect” and no text which connects contemporary Westerners with beliefs in a “mystical power.”

A possible explanation of the statement about the connection between “Western civilization” and “supreme intellect” coming into being could be that it was produced in an institutional and cultural context where the tradition of the intellectual superiority of

Westerners was not felt as a completely alien concept. This may or may not be the case, but regardless of what motivated the writing of this text, it might contribute to the image of self and other found in the previously discussed representations of Benin objects which connect the Edo with (irrational) traditions the Westerner with (rational) progress. Given that there is so much evidence for Western traditionality at the British Museum and that it holds its own (invented) traditions in such reverence, it seems slightly paradoxical that the museum insists on rendering others, but not Westerners, as traditional and not progressive. Despite the museum's good intentions of presenting all human beings as equals, it might on occasion, to paraphrase George Orwell, give the impression that some are a little more equal than others. This is a concern, not only for the museum, but for the whole world.



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In 1897, British troops conquered and looted Benin City, present-day Nigeria, and the British Museum acquired the world's largest collection of Benin loot.

Today, the museum suggests in its exhibitions and publications that the Western discovery of these technically and artistically accomplished castings shattered derogatory views of Africans – thanks to the efforts of British Museum scholars.

But what truth is there in this story?

This book scrutinizes the information presented by the museum and finds that it rests on flimsy or no evidence. On the contrary, the source material reveals a murkier and more sinister past than the museum is willing to disclose.

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