

## INTERNATIONALISATION OF BENIN ART WORKS

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### ABSTRACT

The artworks of Benin are all about events and achievements, actual or mythical that occurred in the past. These art works was grounded on traditional values and religious beliefs, which also displayed iconographic affinities. Until 15<sup>th</sup> century A.D, Benin art items were not known outside the ancient Benin kingdom and commanded very little monetary and aesthetic values.

The internationalisation of Benin artworks first occurred by accident, because the Europeans that made it possible, were not aware of the art items before coming to the continent. The coming of the Portuguese in 1472 was the first of such event then the Benin artworks were used as exchange for Portuguese goods. The second was the looting of Benin art items, by the British soldiers, in 1897, in what was tagged Benin Punitive Expedition.

Other aspects of internationalisation include the display of Benin art items at various museums across the world Benin artworks uploaded in the internet and artefacts on display at various private museums.

The aim of this research is to find out why, when and how the Benin artworks became internationalised. This paper also looks at the extent, impact and significances of internationalisation of Benin artworks.

**Keywords:** Artefacts; Benin kingdom; Benin Art; Punitive Expenditure; Rituals.

### INTRODUCTION

Internationalization of Benin artefacts is the process through which the huge quantities of Benin art works get to the notice of the international community.

This famous Benin artefacts which include Woods, Brass/Bronze, Hand Craft and Ivory art works numbering tens of thousands was once unknown outside the ancient city of Benin Kingdom presently located in modern day Nigeria. According to Brook verifiable knowledge of the civilization achievements of many African people are still scanty while major archaeological discoveries in Africa came about by accident and report of early European explorers.

The peak of Benin arts occurred in the 15<sup>th</sup> century with the arrival of the Portuguese Missionaries and traders. Although the Portuguese met a military and economically advanced city their arrival sparks off a process of greater political and artistic development.

Benin art has been in existence since at least 500 BCE, although only made popular to Westerners after the Punitive Expenditure of 1897.

Benin arts were produced mainly for the court of the Oba of Benin - a divine ruler for whom the craftsmen produced a range of ceremonially significant objects. The Benin art works can be fully appreciated through the awareness and consideration of two complementary cultural perceptions: the Western appreciation of the artefacts primarily as works of art, and their understanding in Benin as historical documents and as mnemonic means to reconstruct history, or as ritual objects.

The innate value of these materials within Benin, the time and skill that were invested in working them reflects the earthly and otherworldly influence of the oba and the great wealth of his kingdom. Benin's royal arts belong to a tradition that favours convention even as it promotes creativity and innovation, especially as a reflection of royal prerogative. Through time, rulers have used the arts to interpret the history of the kingdom and to orient themselves with the past in an effort to support their own initiatives and define their images for posterity. The royal court arts of Benin were produced by groups of workers divided into guilds that worked solely for the Oba who also had the monopoly of the gold, brass/bronze and other materials used in the production of the artefacts.

The royal court art of Benin would have taken longer time and different path to get to the notice of the international community if not for the activities of the Portuguese and other Europeans travellers. But most remarkably the Benin Punitive Expenditure of 1897 ordered by the British government to punish Oba Ovonramwen and his subjects while the subsequent looting of Benin relics serves as a watershed.

Supporting this Dr. Christian Feest Director of Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna said and I quote.

'.....The military act (by the British against Benin) seems unjustifiable, however, we must recognize the role it (the military act) played in bringing these works of art to far broader attention. They are now forever on the map of the world art..... unquote. [Documents/Online Article & Journals/3rd Article/Benin art.htm - cite note-Andrea .26 Overfield-3](#)

## **CONCEPTUALLY CLARIFICATION:**

### **Internationalisation:**

According The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language Internationalization is to make something international in character, structure or outlook: to bring something to the notice of international community.

Second meaning of internationalisation is to place something under the control or protection of several countries.

For the purpose of this research the first definition of internationalisation was adopted i.e. the process through which Benin artworks was made known to the international community.

### **Benin artefacts:**

Artefact is an object made by human being especially one with archaeological, historical and or cultural values. Artefacts or artworks as used in this research includes art items made from brass/bronze, clay and wood, others are coral and leather materials by the Binis of the Benin ancient kingdom.

By a broad definition artistic works have existed for almost as long as humankind: from early Pre-historic to the contemporary art; however, some theories restrict the concept to modern Western societies. The first and broadest sense of art is the one that has remained closest to the older Latin meaning, which roughly translates to "skill" or "craft," as associated with words such as "artisan." English words derived from this meaning include artifact, artificial, artifice, medical arts, and military arts. Benin ancient arts essentially started as royal court art, and was referred to as Royal Court Art of Benin” This is because the Oba or King of Benin had a monopoly of the art works.

The Benin arts was rooted on the traditional values and religious beliefs of the Benin people the arts were used to depict therefore religious, ceremonial and other common events and objects in their every day life.

Benin art works have been erroneously believed to have been introduced by the Portuguese. This might, perhaps stem from the fact that the Portuguese were the first white people to come to Benin as missionaries when they embarked on the exploration of West African coast in the 15th century under the direction of Prince Henry the Navigator. Because of the activities and early contact of the Portuguese with the people of Benin, some of the Benin bronze works bear representations of the Portuguese sailors who were the first European nation to dominate the whole of West Africa region. Artisans only produced their works for the Oba and were not authorized to sell to the public and were forbidden to work for anyone outside the palace. Oba Eweka II in 1914 lifted the restrictions on the sale of bronze art works leading to the sale to members of the public.

The Benin artworks have been variously referred to as primitive art, or simply, artefacts of African origin. But Benin people did not produce their works only for aesthetics or for galleries and museums. At the time Europeans were keeping their records in long-hand and in hieroglyphics, the people of Benin cast theirs in bronze, carved on ivory or wood. The Obas commissioned them when an important event took place which they wished to record. Some of them of course, were ornamental to adorn altars and places of worship. But many of them were actually reference points, the library or the archive.

Art works in the past were made only for the Oba’s court and in line with his own specification and commission. The royal arts were of two types sacred and secular, generally there are made up of: -

- a) Bronze memorial head of Oba
- b) Carvings of the Benin oral traditions and themes
- c) Artistic representations of court life, its rituals, history, altars, palace chiefs with ceremonial swords and royal queens in ritual dress
- d) Woods, Ivory and Bronze works of Lamp holders, Door bells Pillars etc

Today however the Benin arts are no longer solely produced for only royal affairs the system having been liberalized.

Ere was the second Oba in the dynasty of the Ogoiso who was credited with the establishment of guild system that produces Benin artworks for the Oba. The guild that worked the Oba’s art

items were affiliated to palace society, the Iwebo who were also in charge of the wardrobe at the king palace.

Portuguese had an impact on the traditional art of Benin, from across the sea they brought with them wealth and luxury items, the Portuguese were readily incorporated into the complexities of ideas associate with the god Olokun (ruler of the sea and provider of wealth) cast or carved images of the Portuguese sailors in 16<sup>th</sup> centuries attire appeared in a wide variety of objects on the bracelets, plaques, bells, pendants, tusks, masks and so on. The images of the Portuguese became an integral part of a visual vocabulary of power and wealth.

The ancient kingdom of Benin has a rich cultural heritage and its history is told orally, with its art as well as other symbols and objects that were created in the past. Bronze and Brass casting by the lost wax method was an active pursuit in Benin before the thirteenth century and eventually spread to other regions of Africa. This system is still in use today in Benin City, Nigeria by the descendants of the original sculptors the art of which has been passed down to several generations.

### **Benin Kingdom**

Centuries ago the land of Benin or Bini was called Igodomigodo other names given to the Binis were Ile Ibinu, which means the land of vexation supposedly by Oranmiyan about 1170 A.D. Edo by Oba Eware the great (1440-1473) and the city of blood and skull by Real Admiral Harry Rawson.

There are several versions of the origin of the Benin people which lay claim that the Binis descended from Osanoba (god) the present Monarchy Oba Erediauwa Omo n' Oba emphasized that the Bini people truly came from the youngest son of Osanoba.

Benin, the capital of defunct Benin kingdom is located in a high tropical rain forest about 80 miles west of River Niger bordered by the Ibos on the East and North West, Yorubas in the North and West, the Ijaw, urhobo and Itsekiri on the South.

It is primarily a rain forest zone of a low lying plain covered with porous, reddish and often plastic sand termed "Benin sand" the area is drained by a series of deeply entrenched river and small streams flowing in a general north south direction. The major rivers are Siluko, Orhinwon, Osse, Ikpoba and Ovia. There are few hills to the east. Benin has a tropical climate characterized by two distinct seasons i.e. the wet and the dry seasons.

The Bini people belonged to the kwa language group and the former kingdom is presently located in Nigeria.

The Benin kingdom was built around the Oba and three other chiefs in the pre-colonial political organization: the chiefs are Uzama or the king on akerk, Ehbaebo n' Ore the town chiefs and Eghaevbo n' Ogbe the place chiefs.

The Oba was the centre of this organization in theory he has absolute power but the title holders that formed the hierarchy wielded extensive influence the extent of which depended on the personality of the Oba. This system of government was sustained from the earliest times to the period of the exiled Oba Nogbaisi Ovonramwen in 1897.

The Benin homeland (not to be confused with the modern-day Republic of Benin, which was formerly known as Dahomey), has been and continues to be mostly populated by the Edo (also known as the Bini or Benin ethnic group). The title of Oba was created by Oba Eweka I, the kingdom's first 'Oba'.

At the height of its power, the influence of Benin extended westward along the coast of Eko which is in the present day Lagos State and beyond westward to Ekiti which marked the boundary between Benin and the old Oyo Empire eastward to river Niger and some Igbo land and southward to the Atlantic Ocean.

### **CHARACTER OF BENIN ART WORKS:**

Artists all over the world produce items with distinguishable character and styles this is because artistic impressions naturally follow ideas, items, materials and events taken from immediate environment.

However the art history of Benin is slowly being reconstructed; theoretical approaches by German historians, Von Luschan in particular have recently been revised mainly by William Fagg, Dark Philip et al. What is known however is based on myth, oral tradition and interpretations of known visual artefacts. According to Ben-Amos, Benin arts has proven hard to interpret because of the non-literate nature of the ancient inhabitants of the defunct Benin Kingdom. Ben-Amos wrote that there are gap in the literary backup as would be seen in other cultures.

The character and style of Benin artworks can be look at through the various aspects of Casting, Carving, Sculpture, Beading and other Handcraft like weaving.

Casting in the ancient city of Benin had several theory of origin according to Inneh, these origins fall into two broad types; one is non-Africa while the other has it that Benin brass/bronze casting originated from Ile-Ife. Bronze or brass casting was said to have been established in Benin by Oba Oguola (1280-1290). The Benin castings were executed according to the patterns which follow the motifs sanctioned by tradition and specific knowledge passed through the generations. The distinctness makes them easily distinguishable from other styles. The Benin casting were made to depict human heads and so many other life events some of which were in plaques, free standing and others for burial ceremonies. The bronze plaques produced in the middle ages illustrate legends and often tell stories of materials, events and royal occasions.

The greatest prove of origin of the Benin arts came with the accidental discovery of carbon dating, during the experiments connected to the production of atomic bomb. The carbon-14 dating process when applied to the Africa art items showed that most artefacts had been produced centuries before contact were made with the Europeans.

According to the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary 7<sup>th</sup> edition, carbon dating is a method of calculating the age of very old objects by measuring the amount of different forms of carbon in them i.e. dating prehistoric objects by measuring the decay of radioactive isotope of carbon contained in the object based on their content of carbon-14.

The accidental discovery of carbon dating and its application thoroughly debunked and laid to rest the racist theory that artworks produced in Africa were of European origins. Theories like the Hamitic hypothesis and the Atlantis hypothesis, for instance, Leo Frobenius, a German explorer, announced to the world that Terra Cotta heads and art items done by the Yorubas were the work of the Atlantis, the legendary lost continent.

### **SIGNIFICANCES OF BENIN ARTEFACTS:**

Arts in Africa were primarily magical-religious in nature and were founded on beliefs about life and death and about life after death. Sculptures, bas-reliefs, carving, metal works, music and dance all served a specific and often functional end and their creation was guided by rules belonging to the world of magic.

The meaning and the importance of the Benin royal court art can be viewed by examining their usages and value in the everyday life of the people of Benin from the ancient to the contemporary. This would be pursued through the following; Visual History, Shrines/Altars, Masquerades, Memorials, Decorative/Aesthetic and Monetary values.

#### **Visual History:**

Benin art history is mostly speculative as it is based on fragments of documentary evidence, well-known oral tradition and observation of iconography. The ancient inhabitants of the Benin Kingdom were non-literate as such there are lacks of supplementary written materials on their artefacts. Conversely every single art item they produced was history on its own and in most cases artefacts tell more accurate stories of events, time and place than written version. Benin plaques for instance gave historical insight as it portrays contemporary activities e.g. a plaque that depicts European men on armour armed with crossbows and harquebus. Knowing the date of such weapons one can place it in time to know the way of dressing and life in the city at that time.

#### **Shrines and Altars:**

Some Benin artworks were made for shrines/altars and other ritual context, through which local trajectories of religious ideas and practices were articulated. Shrines and their associated artefacts mark out social categories, relations between the worlds of the living (Agbon) and that of the dead (Erinmwin). There were places of worship in every household the founder or the eldest son mediates relation between the ancestors and the living family members through metaphysical relation defined by his deceased father. The Oba is positioned in multiple ways to own many ranges of shrines he holds unique relation to the spirit world which he exercises on the behalf of the various groups that comprised the Benin kingdom. Artefacts were always used to set up altars and shrines and to consecrate altars for rituals and sacrifices. Carved images at the altars are taken as direct representation of the spiritual being or deity being worshiped.

#### **Masquerades and Juju:**

African art from the ancient to the contemporary is sated with tens of thousands of face and head mask which can be used for Masquerade and juju dance. In some culture in Africa e.g. the Ibo's

masquerades exist as a cult exclusively reserved for adult male who must first pass through some secret initiation and oath taking.

In Benin culture however face mask were mainly carved for the reasons other than dance and masquerade. One the most famous face mask of the Benin, is arguably Queen Idia's Face Mask now in London Museum, was made for memorials and decorations.

**4.4 Memorials:** ancestors worship was a prevailing phenomenon in Africa this was rooted in the belief in life after death and in reincarnation. At the death of an aged Africa a prescribed burial rite must be conducted so that the soul of the deceased can be accorded a proper place in the spirit world. Both secular and sacred arts of the Benin had deep attachment to memorials images dedicated to the deceased. All bronze heads that depict the Oba's, Queen mothers and other loyalties ever produced were first and foremost made for memorials. Sculptural images of popular Obas were erected at conspicuous street corners while individuals venerate wooden images of their deceased parents.

#### **Monetary Value:**

The Portuguese established international trade with the Benin as from 15<sup>th</sup> Century whereby military protection against the enemies of Benin as well as luxuries items were exchanged for Benin's pepper, cloth and art items. From the beginning Ivory was a major export product in the trading exchange with the Portuguese. Impressive examples of these exported arts are the delicate ivory spoons with figurative and finely carved handles which ended up as precious show pieces on the tables of the renaissance monarchs and survived in several art cabinets.

The real monetary value of the Benin arts in the contemporary may not be fully ascertained due to the ostentatious nature of artefacts. Though several attempts had been made towards this for example Akeem Lasisi asserted that illegally held Benin arts has a monetary value of three hundred and three (313) billion Naira or thereabout.

#### **INTERNATIONALISATION PROCESS OF BENIN ARTEFACT:**

Verifiable knowledge of the civilizations and achievements of many African people is still scanty, but in most parts of Africa scientific efforts to uncover the archaeological evidence about little known cultures is only beginning. Mostly major archaeological discoveries in Africa have come about by accident and through the report of European travellers.

The internationalisation of Benin art works first occurred by accident, the first was the coming of the Portuguese in 1472 then the Benin art items were used as exchange for Portuguese goods. The second was the looting of Benin art items, by the British soldiers, in 1897, in what was tagged Benin punitive expedition. Others include Benin arts in museums across the world, Exhibitions of art items and Art items displayed in the internet.

#### **Contact with the Portuguese:**

The peak of Benin arts occurred in the 15<sup>th</sup> century with the arrival of the Portuguese missionaries and traders. Although the Portuguese met a military and economically developed city their arrival catalyzed a process of greater political and artistic development. Oba Eware the great was the first Oba of Benin to come in contact with the Portuguese, Ruey De Segueira

visited Benin City in 1472 during his reign from that point Benin history became available as part of the European record.

In 1485, another Portuguese John Alfonso D' Aveiro visited Benin City bringing with him coconuts and guns. As a result of this direct contact between Europe and Africa, European education became important to Africans.

Because of the military strength of Benin kingdom the Portuguese were at first unable to make slaves of it people as Europeans did in other kingdoms of Africa. The Portuguese entered into an agreement with the Benin whereby military protection as well as some luxurious items were offered to the Benin in exchange of Benin artefacts. These items included coral beads, cloth and brass, while the Benin supplied them with pepper, locally made cloth and other spices. Goods like coloured fabrics and coral beads from Mediterranean Sea became mark of affluence among the rich and the nobles of the Benin.

The Benin artefacts were important because it prevented the Benin from depending economically on the Portuguese; but most importantly it serves as exposition of and internationalization of the Benin artefacts to other part of the world.

### **Benin Punitive Expedition:**

The Benin Massacre prepared the ground for the punitive expedition carried out in 1897 led by Harry Rawson commander of the squadron at the Cape of Good Hope. The field commanders were instructed by their commander-in-chief to burn down all Benin kingdom's towns and villages, and hang the king of Benin wherever and whenever he was captured.

The moment the British invaders attacked and secured the city, looting began. It was an exercise that was carried out by all members of the expedition. Monuments and palaces of many high-ranking chiefs were looted. Most of the plunder was retained by the expedition with some 2500 (official figures) religious artefacts, Benin visual history, mnemonics and artworks being sent to England. Later in the year the looted artefacts were auctioned in Paris most of the bronze were purchased by the Germans, some were retained and kept at the London Museum, e.g. the original face mask of Queen Idia that was used as symbol for Nigeria festival of arts and culture (FESTAC) held in Nigeria in 1977.

The Benin artefacts was said to have been copied and the style integrated into the art of many European countries and had strong influence on the early formation of modernism in Europe.

The looting of the Benin artefacts by the British, it auction at Paris where collectors from many European countries bought the art items was one of the major event that helped to expose and brought to the notice of international community the Benin artefacts.

### **BENIN ARTWORKS IN MUSEUMS:**

The looted Benin royal court arts by the British soldiers were auctioned in Paris in late 1897 by the government agents, the proceeds was used to defray the cost of the expedition. Most of the items were bought by the Germans; later British government repurchased some of these and took them back to London at the British Museums. The display of the art items in the museums



around the world, mark the beginning of a slow and long European reassessment of West Africa arts.

About 6,500 Nigerian art items mostly Benin bronzes are being held in various museums and at the homes of private collectors abroad. According to Dr. Joe Eboreime, director general of National Commission for Museums and Monuments Nigerian artefacts are on display in more than 77 places across the globe. The British Museums is having about 700 items, the Ethnological Museums in Berlin about 500, while two museums in Glasgow currently have 22 items.

#### **VII. EXHIBITIONS OF BENIN ART ITEMS:**

Collectively owned art items are in modern time shown to the public for advertisement, education and other reasons. Some of these artefacts are national in nature and more of visual history which cannot be offered for sale; while their monetary values may not be fully ascertained. In other cases individuals or groups of artists that produced the art items were long dead while their descendents cannot be traced.

The looted Benin artefacts during the British punitive expenditure of 1897 had been displayed at international exhibitions across the world; for instances on 9<sup>th</sup> May to 3<sup>rd</sup> September, 2007 there were exhibition of Benin artworks in Vienna and three other European cities. It was a joint event organized by Austria, United States, Germany and France the exhibition started from Vienna and went round to other cities in USA, Germany and France.

#### **BENIN ART ITEMS IN THE INTERNET:**

There are hundreds of thousands literatures in the internet these written materials serves as a powerful back up to the visuals arts. In addition there are lots of art pictures uploaded to the internet, art lovers and collectors can from any part of the globe download or print out these art pictures. There are so many websites that advertise artworks for sale and artefacts worth thousands had been bought and paid for via online. Online art whether money transactions are involved or not is a powerful medium of exposure and internationalization since it can be assessed from any part of the world.

#### **CONCLUSIONS:**

The art works of Benin which was produced to be consumed locally got to the notice of the international community due to outside factors. These include the coming of the Portuguese to the Benin City in 15<sup>th</sup> century and the British punitive expenditure of 1897. Others are the display of Benin arts at museums abroad and international exhibitions of Benin art items across the globe. This process has also served to popularise the history and culture of the Benin, Nigeria, Africa and indeed black people all over the world.

It is however unfortunate that some of the ancient art items of the Benin are still being currently held outside the shore of Nigeria illegally. According to the racist view of those that held the

illegally acquired art items, (the artefacts) represents world heritage which can only be kept safe outside Africa continent. The above excuse of the foreign governments is not only insulting but immoral and criminal.

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