THE COLONIAL TRAJECTORIES OF THE BENIN BRONZES: A STUDY IN PROVENANCE RESEARCH

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Abstract

This paper analyses the dispersal of the Benin Bronzes as a constitutive function of colonial power. It examines the colonial expropriation of Benin bronzes during the British Benin war of 1897, elucidating the processes through which artefacts were appropriated from the subjugated Benin City and identifying principal actors directly implicated. Utilising an array of primary and secondary sources—including targeted individual and group interviews, periodicals, archival records, exhibition catalogues, monographs, and scholarly journals—the investigation employs descriptive and analytical methodologies to interrogate historical contingencies. The analysis illuminates late-nineteenth-century British imperial imperatives that precipitated the military conquest of the Benin Kingdom, thereby intertwining colonial officials with the realm's artistic patrimony and treasures. It further reveals that, in the conquest's immediate aftermath, victorious British forces inaugurated the initial phase of systematic looting of bronze artefacts. A subsequent phase of colonial despoliation is delineated, commencing upon the military commanders' departure in March 1897 and extending beyond Nigeria's decolonisation in 1960; key participants in this inaugural stage, encompassing soldiers, their superiors, and civilian accomplices, are enumerated. The study also explicates the apportionment of looted spoils among on-site personnel and metropolitan colonial bureaucracies in London. Moreover, the influx of these artefacts into London and other European centres catalysed an ensuing wave of predation, orchestrated by missionaries, scholars, colonial functionaries, and antiquities speculators, characterised by egregious practices such as theft, unscientific excavations, and clandestine trafficking. Ultimately, the purloined Benin artworks were commodified through transactions facilitated by soldiers, colonial administrations, auctioneers, and diverse intermediaries, dispersing them into museums, public institutions, and private collections across Britain and continental Europe throughout the imperial epoch and thereafter.

Keywords: The Colonial Trajectories, Benin Bronzes.

I. Introduction

This paper presents a critical examination of the systematic expropriation of Benin bronze artefacts following the British Punitive Expedition of 1897. It advances a conceptual framework for understanding these objects not merely as art, but as significant cultural and historical documents of the Benin Kingdom, whose forcible removal constituted a profound act of colonial despoliation. The analysis delineates two distinct phases of acquisition: the initial, concentrated plunder by the military force and a subsequent, protracted period of dispersal facilitated by the new colonial administration. The structure of this work comprises seven sections. Following this introduction, Section Two provides a contextual analysis of the Benin bronzes, elucidating their artistic sophistication, technical complexity, and socio-political functions within the pre-colonial Oba's court to establish a foundational understanding of the appropriated corpus. Section Three, entitled 'The Road to the 1897 Expedition', interrogates the imperial and economic imperatives of the Pax Britannica in late nineteenth-century West Africa. It details the geopolitical manoeuvres and confrontational trade policies that precipitated the conflict, thereby situating the expedition within the broader

context of British imperial expansion and its consequent entanglement with the sovereignty of the Benin Empire.

Sections Four and Five form the core of this study, offering a detailed exegesis of the mechanics of the initial looting. Section Four chronicles the methodical seizure of treasures from the Royal Palace and other sacred sites in Benin City by the invading expeditionary force, spanning from the third week of February to the end of March 1897. Section Five subsequently analyses the formalized distribution of these spoils. It scrutinizes the roles of Rear-Admiral Harry Rawson, commander of the expedition, and Ralph Moor, Consul-General of the Niger Coast Protectorate, in apportioning the looted artefacts between the Foreign Office, the participating naval and military personnel, and the Crown, whilst also detailing the logistical apparatus for their transportation from the interior to the coast for shipment to Europe. Section Six, 'The Genesis of the Second Phase: Dispersal under Colonial Administration', investigates the activities of British colonial officials, missionaries, amateur ethnographers, and commercial art dealers in the subsequent years. It argues that the established colonial framework enabled a secondary, more diffuse phase of acquisition through methods ranging from opportunistic theft to coercive purchase, thereby perpetuating the outflow of Benin cultural heritage. Finally, Section Seven concludes that the dispossession of the Benin bronzes stands as a seminal case study of the extractive and ethically untenable practices that characterized British colonial rule in West Africa, the legacies of which continue to resonate in contemporary discourses on restitution and cultural repatriation.

The Benin Bronzes: Towards a Working Definition

The collection conventionally designated as the Benin bronzes refers to a collection of more than four thousand cultural objects forcibly removed during the British military expedition, which culminated on 18 February 1897 in the violent conquest of Benin City, then the administrative headquarters of the Benin Kingdom and Empire. Although the designation "bronzes" is somewhat imprecise—given that the corpus comprises works executed in ivory, brass, copper, wood, and other media, with only a relatively small subset consisting of pure bronze—the term has, by long usage, become an encompassing label for these looted treasures. These artefacts, which embody extraordinary levels of technical sophistication and aesthetic refinement, are emblematic of the cultural heritage of the Edo people of present-day southern Nigeria. The most celebrated among them include commemorative bronze heads, leopard effigies, elaborately carved ivory tusks, delicately fashioned ivory armlets, unmarked ivories, executioners' swords, palace keys, rattle staffs, bells, mirrors, jewellery of various forms, wooden stools, boxes, jars of gin, as well as intricately modelled bronze masks and plaques, among numerous others.

Although today they are categorised primarily as "artworks," within their original context these objects were neither created for aesthetic contemplation nor confined to ornamental use. Rather, they functioned as integral instruments of political, ritual, and social life in a highly stratified polity governed by complex institutions and sustained by a polytheistic cosmology. Many of the artefacts were imbued with encoded symbolism, embodying concepts, beliefs, and historical memory that provided both moral guidance and political legitimacy for the monarchy and its nobility. They served to record dynastic histories, commemorate notable figures, and memorialise decisive events in the life of a preliterate kingdom, thereby operating as a visual and material archive of Benin's past. In this capacity, the Benin Bronzes fulfilled functions analogous to those of modern archival repositories: curated by specialised guilds, they were safeguarded within the royal palace and constituted a reservoir of values, worldviews, and historical consciousness. As such, they stood not merely as testaments to artisanal mastery, but as enduring instruments of collective memory, identity, and authority within the Benin polity. The Benin bronzes suddenly became the subject of global searchlights when Britain invaded, colonised the kingdom and looted her treasures and artefacts. The Benin bronzes have also become subjects of multilateral diplomacy involving countries with the stolen artworks, their museums that keep them,

descendants of the political leadership of the defunct Benin Kingdom, the people of Benin and the government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Also involved in the diplomatic tussle over these looted artworks are United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, UNESCO; the over 80 countries that signed the UNIDROIT Convention in June 1995 as well as multiple NGO, activist and civil rights campaign organisations. The bronzes, like other well-known artefacts with similar fate are now being discussed and the possibilities of their return to the original home negotiated between countries, non-state actors and individuals.

The Benin bronzes have also become a prime example of African cultural heritage materials kept in European and American museums and have come to exemplify African nations' alienation from their respective cultural environments, an effect that is amplified by the incredible number, formal refinement, and historic significance, for which the bronzes are famous. As subjects of high diplomatic meetings and discussions, they have attracted intense debate in the international system. Among the international actors include academia and university professors; activists and non-governmental organisations, museum professionals and curators, ambassadors, diplomats and high commissioners as well as heads of states and governments. International discussions and negotiations on the current location of the Benin Bronzes in relations to the place of origin and what they were meant for have attained high priority in diplomatic circles particularly in Nigeria, Ghana, France, Germany, and United Kingdom among others.

The Road to the Bronze Colonial Loot of 1897

The story of the bronze artefacts and their functionalities drastically changed at the end of the 19th century, when her Britannic fighting troops in pursuance of the imperialist economic agenda began to conquer independent states in Africa for material gains. The only desire of the colonialists in Africa, according to Joseph Conrad, was to tear treasure out of the land, "with no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe." With no sufficient explanations for war in Africa to the inquisitive citizenry, Great Britain like other European nationals began to seek for pretext. Generally, they came out with three main reasons for their military and commercial activities in Africa – 'to spread Christianity' and to 'civilise the natives.' Under this pretext, European nations began to brawl over African economic resources. The claim of Britain over Benin territories and indeed, the whole of West Africa, were recognised by other European powers at the Berlin conference in December 1884 – January 1885. On 12 January 1897, following the failure of a long diplomatic brawl between Britain and Benin with pressure on the Oba to grant free access to British traders into the Kingdom's economic resources and the large Empire, Rear-Admiral Harry Rawson, commanding the British squadron at the Cape of Good Hope was appointed by the British Admiralty to lead a war to capture the Oba and exile him; end his government and neutralise all the states agents; grant unrestricted access to British businesses and send as many treasures as possible to the colonial office to offset the cost of the War and merge the kingdom with the Niger coast Protectorate with Raph Moor as the Governor General. Philip Aigbona Igbafe stated that Rawson's troop was formally instructed to search the Oba's palace for ivory and artworks to 'offset the cost of the operations and to burn down the palace and hang the Oba.'

About 1,200 Royal Marines, sailors and Niger Coast Protectorate Forces coordinated the attack. Nine ships, H. M. S. St. George, Theseus, Phoebe, Forte, Philomel, Barossa, Widgeon, Magpie and Alecto were used to bring in troops to the coast and the army invaded Benin, the capital city of the Benin Empire and Kingdom via three coastal routes - the Ologbo creek, the Jamieson River line to Sakponba and the Ughoton creeks. The Philomel, Barrosa and Widgeon with six canoes were detailed off for Gwato Creek and the Phoebe, Alecto, and Magpie for similar duties up the Jamieson River at Sakponba while the rest when through Ologbo creeks. Having disembarked on land, the march on foot followed as they headed inland through the creeks of the Niger Delta and the thick undergrowth typical of the dense tropical rain forest, where 'the only means of transportation was by carriers.' On

February 9th, the fighting began, capturing Sakponba on the 11th and Ologbo on the 12th, the troops advanced from Ologbo on the 14th, with the Benin soldiers keeping up a running fight and contesting every turn. After 10 days of bitter fighting, the Sakponba column, and the main column reached Benin City but the Gwato column was defeated and routed by a section of the Benin troops commanded by War Chief Ologbosere. The troop finally captured Benin after firing some rocket tubes into the city.' Homes, religious buildings and palaces were set ablaze by the conquering soldiers. On the third day, the blaze grew out of control and engulfed part of the city. War Chief Ologbosere and several others retreated into the districts and began long guerrilla warfare against the British colonial army.

The First Phase of Benin Bronze Colonial Loot, January – March 1897

Immediately after the Benin resistance collapsed in the British-Benin war of 1897 and the Oba palace captured, the British colonial army began to search the palace of the Oba for treasures as they were instructed in their dispatched letter. Reginald Bacon, who was one of the commanders later recall that the store houses in the palace were full of all sort of items and artworks including "several hundred unique bronze plaques." These artworks were so beautifully refined that the looting soldiers erroneously thought that they were made by the Egyptians. According to them, the objects are "suggestive of almost Egyptian design, but of really superb casting" The soldiers "picked up whatever they could carry and took them to the Oba's Council Chamber and a central courtyard, next to their make-shift staff headquarters." The looting continued as the invading army broke into Ugha-Erhoba to loot the finest works of arts of the Kingdom – those made of bronzes. Ugherhoba is translated literarily as "see the Oba's father;" "the Oba's father's room;" or "portrait of the Oba's forebear." It actually means the domain of the Oba's forbears; the realm of the past Oba; the domain of the Oba's lineage or guidance/consultation of the past Oba. In a focus group discussion, Kokunre Eghafona, a Professor of ethnography described Ugherhoba as the room of, or access to the past Oba while Osarhieme Benson Osadolor, a professor of history defines it as the realm for all the past Oba of Benin reserved for the guidance of the present and the future ones. According to Eghafona, when an Oba passes on, the incoming Oba commissioned the best members of Iguneromwon to make a bronze cast of him and the major landmarks of his reign before ascending the throne. Her position was supported by Osadolor, who emphases that until this bronze pictorial representation of the past Oba with his deed is completed and accepted as a code that tells the true story of the diseased Oba and of his reigned, it will not be accepted and the new Oba cannot ascend the throne. This is why the pieces at Ugherhoba were spectacular and the invaders found several "altars to some deceased Oba, decorated with carved tusks, cast metal heads and more statues" The doors, according these colonialists were lined with stamped brass as were parts of the rafters, and the king's house was rather a marvel and was "divided into many magnificent palaces, houses, and apartments for the courtiers, and comprised beautiful and long square galleries," which were all searched and the treasures in them looted.

The size of the palace and the number of arts and treasure mean a long time of searching and looting of objects. At the centre of the looting military team was Admiral Harry Rawson Holdsworth, who commanded the invading army and Ralph Moor, the Consul-General for the Niger Coast Protectorate. The Consul-General immediately informed the British foreign Office of the discovery of the huge store of metallic art works in the Oba palace. According to him, bronze plaques were found both in the main palace and in the "storage rooms." These military loots were the most precious and valued artworks of the Benin Kingdom including "richly carved tusks, delicate ivory armlets and fine bronze masks and plaques."

Still fully armed with weapons of war, the soldiers, accompanied by their civilian accomplices began to search the city for art works and other valuable treasures and they found more in large and specially designed houses with shrines. Some of these specially designed houses belonged to high-ranking chiefs in the kingdom and several other wealthy people who could afford to design their altars with complex artworks. Since each house had

a shrine and the compound searched included not only those of the nobles and Queen Mother but several others across the city including religious buildings, the military raiding and plundering took days with soldiers extricating and gathering art objects and other valuables treasures as instructed before the mission commenced. Some of the treasures they picked outside the palace include terracotta heads, wooden carvings, tusks and several items. They also looted many of the bronze artefacts from the craftsmen workshops and the production guilds. Then, they proceeded to Iwowa, which they described as "the treasure house of artworks" and looted the treasures therein. The Iwowa, according to Kokunre Eghafona, was a museum-like collection of objects for religious purposes. The search for treasure in the city was easy as it was deserted save some elderly and the weak, almost everyone including the Oba himself fled as the British maxim guns approached. The personal notes of many of these looting colonial soldiers such as Reginald Bacon, Albert Lucy and Robert Allman, who served as the as Chief Medical Officer for the invading colonial army attest to this house-to-house search of treasures by soldiers and their civilian collaborators that accompanied the expedition. For instance, the Chief medical officer explain that they "spent some time rooting around the Oba's palace and surrounding streets in the aftermath of the British victory" and that they found much to admire, such as the cowrie shell inlays of mud seats and couches in the palace. In his words, "in my wanderings about the city, I came across many bronzes and plaques." Similarly, Albert Lucy of the Royal Marines was among those who scout the town for treasures. He later wrote that he wandered around the city with great curiosity.

In the city, the soldiers found many houses; religious building decorated with carefully designed Ivory tusks and other act works. They were looted with no respect for the Benin religious beliefs or the gods that these artworks venerated. Even the carriers, which were mainly Hausa, got in the act of looting. In his memoirs, Captain Walker described how they strutted around "decked out in the most extraordinary garments." Most of the objects looted were assembled in front of the Oba palace and the soldiers took photographs with some of them at the background and foreground. These art works and treasures, which were translocated and transported by the colonial invaders, were very valuable and cherished in the Benin Kingdom. Most particular are those they took from the palace, the places of worship and the homes of the high chiefs including, the Iyoba and the numerous wealthy families spread across the City and they all, according to Mohammed Aliyu, "had their utilitarian purposes in their respective societies."

Sharing and Transporting the Colonial Loots

Some of the items looted from the city include "richly carved elephant tusks, delicate ivory armlets and fine bronze masks and plaques. Raph Moor and Admiral Rawson had a discussion and with their lieutenants on the sharing of the loot among the soldiers and the civilian members of the invading military team and they agreed that reasonable loot should be allowed to everyone that participated in the military operations. So, the two leaders, Raph Moor and Admiral Rawson began to share the treasure. The first and the best share of the bronze loot went to Queen Victoria, who was queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland from 20 June, 1837 to 22 January, 1901. Admiral Rawson carefully selected the best looking four pieces of two tusks and two leopard figures for her. The ivory leopard figures were spectacularly unique and about "twice the height of a domestic cat and each was made from five separate tusks" while the leopards' spots were "pieces of copper, knocked into round depressions in the ivory" and they now decorated the Buckingham Palace. The next share of the Benin bronze loot went to the commander of the colonial army, Admiral Rawson. He collected a bulk of other treasures for himself and his family, of which the nature and quantity remain unknown. The third person to convert Benin arts and treasure to himself after Queen Victoria and Admiral Rawson is Raph Moor. Moor gathered a bulk of treasures for himself including the popular Queen Idia mask in ivory and his wife continue to sell of these treasures for money, long after his death.

Two sample pieces were immediately sent to London by the Commander of the

invading army, Vice Admiral Sir Harry Rawson for initial analysis at the British Museum while the others were selected and grouped into two categories tagged official booty and unofficial booty. As directed by Raph Moor, the invaders carefully arranged the official booty of over a hundred of brass plaques and several tusks and then packed them for upward shipment to the Colonial Office in London to upset the cost of the war. These official booties reached the colonial office, London in June and July of the same year and they were described as "sitting in six 'very bulky' cases in the quadrangle." The soldiers and their civilian colleagues began to share the unofficial booty according to their ranks and position in the colonial mission in Benin. For instance, Rawson's chief of staff, Captain George Egerton, got more than a dozen bronzes and tusks while Lieutenant Walter Cowan took a heavy, curved and balanced executioner's sword, with an ivory and silver handle among other things. Lieutenant William Crawford Cockburn who fought alongside Walker during the advance from Ologbo got himself a large shipment of loots, now impossible to quantify. From this personal loot, he later "sold seventy-two pieces to the British Museum alone and also donated" several others.

The sharing continued and there were plenty of artworks and treasures to go round, and not just for the officers but for all the invading soldiers and the civilians that accompanied them including those that waited at the coast. They rumpled and shared Benin artworks and treasures like greedy sons scrambled over their diseased father's estate. Even after they had taken the finest ivory carvings, brass heads and statues, there were still rattle staffs, bells, mirrors, necklaces, bracelets, rings, masks, wooden stools, boxes and even jars of gin, for the junior ranks." Lieutenant Norman Burrows of the Niger Coast Protectorate Force is among those who got numerous pieces of the finest bronzes such as five cast heads, various assortments of statues, stools, carved tusks, three plaques, among others. He made a financial fortune out of them through sales. For instance, between April and June that same year, he sold "ten of his Benin Bronzes to the great collector Lieutenant-General Augustus Pitt Rivers, for a total of £185." Apart from those sent to colonial office, all the soldiers got their own treasure for their private use. Some of these soldiers include Commanders William Stokes Rees and James Startin, Commander Reginald Bacon, Lieutenant Herbert Child, Lieutenant-Colonel Richard Gabbett, Captain George Egerton, Lieutenant Walter Cowan in charge of carriers, Gilbert Stephenson, Admiral Sir Walter Cowan, Stuart Nicholson, who served under Rawson on the St George and had the enormous responsibility of supervising water supplies during the attack on Benin, Captain Ernest Roupell, who took the Oba's surrender, Lieutenant-Colonel Bruce Hamilton, who led the soldiers of the Niger Coast Protectorate Force on the Benin Expedition among several others. Some of the carriers, which form the portage system that aided the military mission, also got some artworks and other treasures. Lady Adrienne Moor, the widow of Raph Moor inherited her husband's loot, which he brought from the military raid of Benin City. "This included two of the five ivory masks taken from the Oba's bedchamber and two carved ivory armlets." Lady Moor believed that her husband's sickness and death is connected with the conquest of Benin Kingdom and the unjustifiable looting of its treasures and thus these splendid pieces of looted artworks from Benin, which she inherited, served only as painful memories of her husband and of West Africa as the White Man's Grave. Thus, she took them to a retired merchant navy captain and "dealer in Japanese and Chinese art, John Sparks and the price at which she sold them is yet to be confirmed.

The Genesis of the Second Phase of Benin Bronze Colonial Loot

The hunt and loot of Benin arts and treasures continued after the colonial soldiers departed in March 1897. This second phase of the Benin bronze loot was clandestine and thus, covered in secrecy. Though it began in March 1897, it became norm after the consolidation of colonial rule and lasted even after Nigeria got political independence in 1960. The British colonialists also came with Christianity, which brought about changes in the spiritual beliefs and conversion of many Benin people, who were in trust of arts objects for the future generation such as the Iyase in 1934. This Christian belief led to the destruction of a sizable number of this cultural object describing them as fetish and idolatry

while other bulks of treasures particularly artworks were moved to Europe by the missionaries. The works that were spared by the military invaders were turned over to the missionaries, which were later shipped to many of the countries. Those spared by the Christian missionaries were taken by colonial administrators and art hunters. Thus, looting, stealing and illegal exportation of the Benin bronzes continued till the 1960s. During this period, hundreds of thousands of cultural properties were carted away by "colonial officials, missionaries, researchers, adventurous, art hunters and traders." Nearly all the bronze works of the pre-colonial Benin are in Europe. The situation is same throughout Africa particularly where Arts flourished before contact with the Europeans. Research has shown that that 90 to 95 per cent of African heritage is to be found in major world museums outside the continent and nearly all of them got there through questionable circumstances.

While the British Museum have 69,000 art objects from sub-Saharan Africa, the Welt Museum of Vienna have 37,000, the Museum Royal de l'Afrique in Belgium have, 180,000 and the just completed Humboldt Forum have 75,000; the Vatican Museums and those of the Muse du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, 70,000. The colonial administrators in Benin continued to sell Benin art objects. According to Ralph Moor by the end of April 1897, Benin ivory sales had raised more than £800 for the protectorate and that only in June 1898, between £1,200 and £1,500 was raised for the protectorate government by the local sale of Benin loot and that most of this was from the ivory. The unscrupulous display of the bronzes and other treasures looted in Benin by the British army caused a stirring in Britain. In early 1898, Ralph Moor, visited his colleagues in the Africa Department of the Foreign Office in London and handed out about "eight or nine Benin Bronzes as trophies to those who had assisted him." This provoked a stirring in the Foreign Office of, if not quite conscience, at least mild concern as to whether the British soldiers in Benin had behaved entirely correctly by looting the treasures of the Kingdom. Some were confident that prize or booty had been recognized for years in particularly during foreign wars and that there was "no reason to assume the Auditor-General or House of Commons would ask difficult questions."

The Benin bronzes also became part of the historic competition of European powers over African territories and economic resources. Kathryn W. Gunsch observes 'that the intra-European colonial competition for African resources also 'coloured the reception of the Pergamon and Benin reliefs" as European trading firms scrambled for them. According to her, the acquisition of the Benin bronzes by other European nationals from British curators and soldiers mark the genesis of the "professional rivalry among European museums." The Germans were steps ahead of their English counterparts during this competition. Barnaby Philips reports that German museums professionals responded with alacrity to the arrival of the Benin Bronzes in Britain and that in August 1897, Felix von Luschan, the assistant director of the African section of the Museum heard of an "upcoming auction in London" and hurried there to make his first purchases. He was amazed by the quantity and quality of the Benin objects on sale and was determined to get more and so, he sent an instruction to the German Consul in Lagos, Eduard Schmidt, to buy any Benin Bronzes that he came across there. Luschan had the support of Hans Meyer who was a publisher and patron of German ethnographic studies. Meyer was mystified by those in Britain who saw the Bronzes as little more than war booty, and after a successful buying trip to London, he wrote to Luschan that it was actually a riddle to him that the English let such things go for money. Either they have too many of them already or they have no idea what these things mean for ethnology, cultural history, and art history. He expressed his joy that his country we have these magnificent specimens from Africa.

These struggles for the Benin Bronzes and the high demand for them by European Nationals stimulated more hunting for the left-over art works in Benin by the colonialists. Consequently, the departure of the invading soldiers did not stop the looting of the art works and treasures. It continued with each visit from a colonialist, a missionary or an ethnographer. For example, Commander James Startin of the Barrosa did not arrive in Benin City until 12 March 1897 and Startin – a fervent evangelical much admired for his courage –

had walked through the night, all the way from Ughoton, losing his escort and carriers along the way but arrived feeling quite fresh. 'Mad as a hatter!' Walker wrote. 'Is now wandering round with chisel & hammer, knocking brass figures & collecting all sorts of rubbish as loot.' Walker himself left Benin on 15 March. He had spent his final day busy packing his own spoils of war. He marched down towards Ughoton with Moor and a column of soldiers of the NCPF who struggle under the weight of looted treasures.

Buying and selling of the Benin bronzes became commonplace in Europe during the colonial era and the British Museum was not let out. In 1910, Read and Dalton made an important Benin purchase of some artworks from Benin. The anthropologist Charles Seligman sold them the Queen Idia mask in ivory with the tiara of Portuguese heads, which have been admired and, in recent decades, contested vigorously. It was one of the pair that had belonged to Moor, and that Lady Moor had got rid of after his death in September 1909. Seligman bought both masks as well as Moor's other Benin ivories, for £50, from John Sparks, the dealer in Chinese art. He kept one mask for himself, and passed the other to the British Museum, which paid him £37 10 shillings. Read was overjoyed; the British Museum now possessed, he believed, the best thing that has come from Benin and the museum's new mask showed conclusively that Edo craftsmen could produce superb work and suggestions.

The sales of Benin objects spread to important auction houses in Britain within the first two years of the sack of Benin Kingdom. The most important auction house of the period was Covent Garden at 38, King Street in Central London. It has been used for auction since 1776 and became a useful source of Benin objects shortly after the sack of Benin. In May 1897, when Lieutenant-General Augustus Pitt Rivers bought the first Benin Bronzes of 'Carved Tusks, the house was presided over by J. C. Stevens. Several other bronze objects were to follow. Henry Stevens presided over the sale of hundreds more artworks from 1898 to 1904. The British had used Benin's gory rituals to justify their invasion and the Covent Garden now exploited them for commercial opportunity and trading in horror and salaciousness. The Garden sold a Benin plaque at an 1898 auction that he said to depict "a juju king and executioners going to sacrifice" and had been found 'freely drenched with human blood'. Pitt Rivers bought it for eleven guineas. At the same time, the director Garden sold what he described as 'Executioners' Bells', which would have "sent many a tremor through the hearts of the unfortunate natives. No one knew who would next be led to the altar to adorn the arms of the truly awful crucifixion tree. He did not let his imagination hold him back. Four bronze figures, he wrote, had broken off a frame upon which 'the condemned slave had to lay his head, to be beaten into pulp by the clubs of juju priests, the more blood that was splashed the more pleasure the king and his chiefs enjoyed but They fetched fifteen guineas. Henry Stevens advised that an object described as a juju nail with the figure of a squat god for its head was 'a truly horrible thing, but it ought to be very valuable. Unfortunately, it sold for only two guineas. A moment of levity brightened the horror; when 'the keys of the King of Benin's harem' were displayed, they were so large that everyone laughed, even the non-jocular Henry Stevens himself. No wonder an historian of the StevensAuction Rooms wrote that 'at the time of the Benin sales an imaginative visitor must have almost beheld the very rostrum in a nimbus of lurid light, and the rooms illuminated with the bloodshot rays of a gory sunset.

II. Conclusion

In the final analysis, the Benin bronze colonial loot was one of the several unethical events that characterise British colonial rule in West Africa and it was motivated be economic benefits. The British colonial conquest of Benin Kingdom in February 1897 marked the beginning of the Benin bronze loot and the resultant clandestine trade in the objects. Next to the fall of Benin under the British maxim guns bequeathed by the industrial revolution, was the search at the palace for treasures. Despite the fact that the invading army got more than they expected after the search at the Oba Palace, they conducted house to house search for Benin treasures with focus on the most outstanding building in the

conquered city. The military victory of the British colonial soldiers set the first wave of internationalisation of the bronzes by looting and transporting them to England by the military personnel. From England, the bronzes were sold to other European countries. The arrival of the looted artworks in London and other European cities pave way for a second wave of internationalization. European art hunters, most especially British and Germans began to hunt for Benin objects and this continued after 1960 till this day. It also ushered in an era of unrestricted negative activities on the bronzes such as thefts, unscientific excavation and illicit trafficking, among others. The theft of the bronzes also altered their perception and utility as they became loots and items for galleries and exhibitions. Although, they were first taken to London after their appropriation, the Benin bronze artefacts are spread all over the world with the largest collections being the Ethnological Museum in Berlin with 508 pieces and the British Museum in London. The continuing holding of the bronze artefacts has become a "controversial issue in the international restitution debate and Nigeria has since independence in 1960 made several requests for the return of the artefacts but has so far not been successful."

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