

Who Owns the Past? Through the Lens of the Bird of Prophecy

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ABSTRACT

The colonial era saw the forced removal of thousands of objects of African cultural patrimony. In the decades since the end of the colonial era on the African continent, innumerable calls have been made for the restitution of plundered and looted objects of cultural patrimony currently held by major western museums and private collectors. Through a case study of one such object, the Idiophone: Bird of Prophecy, this paper asks who should have jurisdiction in representing objects of cultural patrimony and the historical narratives in which they are rooted, and considers the role that the return of objects plays in the process of decolonization. This paper also presents an analysis of arguments against, and obstacles to, repatriation, in order to argue that museums today have a responsibility to repatriate objects acquired through looting or other exchanges which exploited colonial indigenous power dynamics.

CONTEXT

In 1897, British forces invaded the Kingdom of Benin in what would come to be known as the British Punitive Expedition of 1897. The city was looted and razed to the ground and its civilians decimated. Thousands of objects, including gold, ivory, and religious artifacts were brought back to Britain and other European colonial motherlands to be sold to museums, galleries, and private collections. Today, the British Museum alone holds over 900 of these “Benin Bronzes” – the largest collection of these artifacts, stored thousands of miles away from their cultural hearth.

The effects of colonialism manifest in various forms, and often with long-term implications that continue to resonate in the present day. According to the report, “The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage Toward a New Relational Ethics,” commissioned by Emmanuel Macron, western museums are believed to house over 100 times the number of objects of African cultural heritage than do of museums on the African continent (Sarr and Savoy), a disproportionate distribution largely the result of colonialism and imperialism in Africa during the 19th and 20th centuries. Therefore, museums today have a responsibility to repatriate objects believed to have been acquired irresponsibly, as a step in reconciling the complex aftermath of colonialism.

THE OBJECT

The Idiophone: Bird of Prophecy (*Ahianmwẹ-Oṛọ*), is a brass object in the form of a “long-beaked bird with outstretched wings” (possibly modeled after a kingfisher or ibis), atop a cylindrical shaft. The object is believed to originate from the Kingdom of Benin, Nigeria, and to date from between the 16th and 19th centuries. The Idiophone: Bird of Prophecy is an example of a percussion-sounded idiophone: Striking the bird on the beak with a metal rod creates a reverberating sound (Robotham and Kubik; The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, “idiophone.”). Despite its significance to the cultural history of the Benin people, it is currently sequestered in the subterranean storage units of the

Metropolitan (MET) Museum of Art (formerly the Museum of Primitive Art), in New York, some 8000 kilometers from Benin (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, "Idiophone: Bird of Prophecy [ahianmwē-oro]").

Ahianmwē-Orọ, meaning "Bird of Prophecy" in English, is a bird which the Edo people of the Kingdom of Benin believed was a messenger of the spirit world. The cry of the bird is considered prophetic: "If it cries 'OyaO' (disgrace), it portends danger or disaster. If it cries 'Oliguegue' (be grateful), it portends good favor, fortune or luck" (Digital Benin, "Ahianmwē-Orọ."). In 1515, while on his way to fight the Attah of Idah, Ọba Ẹsigie, the spiritual leader of the Benin people (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Benin."), demanded the Ahianmwē-Orọ be killed and used as a battle standard after it prophesied misfortune and the defeat of Oba Esigie's troops ('OyaO, OyaO'). Counter to the bird's divination, Oba Esigie proceeded to fight a victorious battle and subsequently declared that "Nẹ O gha yin Agbon, gheì daho Ahianmwē notiẹ oya", or "whoever wishes to succeed in life should not heed the bird of prophecy" (Digital Benin, "Ahianmwē-Orọ."). The Oba then commissioned the Igun-Eronmwon, the brass-casting guild of Benin, to create battle standards bearing the image of the long-beaked Bird of Prophecy.

While the object has been identified as an idiophone, sources provide conflicting information on its purpose. One source suggests that it may have been used as a battle standard (Digital Benin, "Ahianmwē-Orọ.") while others suggest it is a ceremonial object for the annual Ugie Oro festival (Digital Benin, "Ahianmwē-Orọ."; MFABoston; Gunsch) or that it was used on altars and shrines (Digital Benin, "Ahianmwē-Orọ."). The Ugie Oro festival commemorated Oba Egisie's victory against the Idah Kingdom despite the warnings of both the Bird of Prophecy and his courtiers. During the Ugie Oro festival, courtiers would form a procession around the Kingdom of Benin while carrying bird-shaped idiophones and strike the beaks of the birds with a metal rod to create a reverberating sound. The subsequent cacophony was intended to represent the "empty noise" (Gunsch) of the advice of the original Bird of Prophecy and the doubts of the courtiers of Oba Egisie, while reminding onlookers that "the Oba is not subject to the fate of ordinary spirits" (Digital Benin, "Ahianmwē-Orọ.") and that therefore both courtiers and civilians should "defer to the wisdom of the king" (Gunsch). A plaque from the walls of the Oba's palace further supports this hypothesis. Illustrated on a Benin brass relief plaque in the possession of the British Museum is a procession of three courtiers, each carrying a cylindrical shaft atop which is a long-beaked bird (recognized as a bird idiophone representing the Bird of Prophecy) in their left hand and a striking-rod in their right (The British Museum, "Benin Plaques."). The plaques from the walls of the Oba's Palace are recognized as a series of work narrating the history, culture, and important moments of the Kingdom of Benin (The British Museum, "Benin Bronzes."), and therefore also validates the cultural and historical significance of the Idiophone: Bird of Prophecy to the Edo people.

When considering factors relevant to repatriation, it is important to recognize that the provenance record of the Idiophone: Bird of Prophecy reveals only part of the history of the object from the time it left the African continent. Despite the lack of provenance information, the Idiophone: Bird of Prophecy can be attributed to the Kingdom of Benin, and was likely a victim of the British Punitive Expedition of 1897 for a few reasons. Firstly, while idiophones of various makes and origin "are numerous and widely distributed throughout the continent" (Robotham and Kubik), the visual iconography of the Idiophone: Bird of Prophecy is consistent with that of Benin artwork and culture, and featured in the relief plaques on the wall of the Oba's palace. Not only are similar idiophones also adorned with the bird of prophecy – such as those in the possession of the Canterbury Museum and the North Carolina Museum of Art – confirmed to be of Benin origin, but most of these idiophones have records traceable to the British Punitive Expedition of 1897 (Canterbury Museum, "Staff, bird."; North Carolina Museum of Art. "Handheld Clapper with Bird of Prophecy [ahianmwē-oro]."), suggesting that the Idiophone: Bird of Prophecy may have an unrecorded history of similar inception. Furthermore, the example of another Bird of Prophecy object reveals that at least one similar object was obtained through the looting of the British Punitive Expedition of 1897. In 2014, this object was repatriated to the Nigerian people, as represented by the present-day Oba, from the private possession of a man whose grandfather had been involved in the British Punitive Expedition of 1897 ("Transcript of Stuff the British Stole, Season 1, Episode 2."). This example not only affirms the cultural significance of similar objects and, therefore, the need for their repatriation, but sets a precedent for doing so. This particular case is distinctive for its proactive approach to repatriation, but also highlights the lack of legal procedures for the repatriation of looted or stolen objects and artifacts. Moreover,

it sits in direct refutation of the argument that it is impossible to repatriate an object when a proper moral descendant cannot be established, especially when a lack of provenance is further complicated by shifting cultural/political/geographic boundaries. In this case, the Oba (the spiritual leader of the Benin Kingdom), was able to receive the object on behalf of the people for whom this object holds cultural significance.

The provenance of the Idiophone: Bird of Prophecy includes records of having passed, at an unknown date, through the Parke-Bernet Galleries – known as one of the largest auction houses in America in the mid-20th century prior to its acquisition by Sotheby Parke Bernet & Co., presently known as Sotheby's (The Frick Collection, "Parke-Bernet Galleries."). At some point afterwards, the Idiophone: Bird of Prophecy is believed to have passed through the hands of Adolph Schwartz, a collector from the Netherlands (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, "Idiophone: Bird of Prophecy [ahianmwēn-oro]"; Digital Benin, "Idiophone: Bird of Prophecy [ahianmwēn-oro]"). While the Dutch benefited from colonial relations in Africa, no information is available to contextualize Schwartz's acquisition of the object. In June of 1980, the Idiophone: Bird of Prophecy was once again auctioned in London at a Sotheby's auction (presumably from the collection of Mr. A. Schwartz), where it was then acquired by Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, founders of the Perls Galleries and collectors of Benin artifacts (Grimes; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, "Klaus Perls."). The Idiophone: Bird of Prophecy was amongst 153 "pieces of African royal art from Benin" gifted by the Perls to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1991, where it has since been exhibited thrice, most recently in 2000 (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, "Idiophone: Bird of Prophecy (ahianmwēn-oro).").

ARGUMENTS FOR REPATRIATION

At present, "universal museums" such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art hold in their possession the tangible cultural patrimony of many cultures from all over the globe. This effectively alienates objects of historical and cultural importance from African individuals and the geographical and cultural contexts in which these objects would be best understood. Much of the global south, including Africa, faces systemic disadvantages including visa restrictions and a wealth gap which limits individuals' abilities to access museums internationally. As a result, many African individuals are geographically isolated from objects of their cultural patrimony. Those who are able to access these museums find themselves viewing these objects thousands of miles away from their cultural and geographic origins, amongst a disunited collection of objects from a "monolithic Africa" (Cuno, pg 120). Exhibited African works are often curated with a lens which exoticizes their African heritage. Works are presented as comparable to those from Oceania or from prehistory and are juxtaposed against European artworks in a greater historical timeline. These exhibitions often delimit African works as "other" and supplemental to the central, European narrative of history prevalent throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. This practice is problematic for multiple reasons, but especially because it strips indigenous African communities of their ability to present the story of African objects in the context of African history. Instead, these objects are held in comparison to, and within, a larger Eurocentric narrative.

Perhaps due to the large proportion of African cultural patrimony that they hold, most western museums are limited in their capacity to represent their African collections, with many displaying only a limited collection of "masterworks" and neglecting the greater portion of the collections (Effiboley). The Idiophone: Bird of Prophecy, for example, has not been taken out of storage since 2000 (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, "Idiophone: Bird of Prophecy [ahianmwēn-oro]"). Museums' reluctance to display artifacts with dubious provenance may also be influenced by an increasing sense of guilt over dubious acquisitions, as calls for repatriation grow louder and the museum-going public increases in awareness of the unethical means by which many objects were acquired. While we cannot judge the past by the values of the present, it seems likely that museums are becoming less able to ignore their ethical responsibilities in response to historical injustices.

Despite the establishment of new infrastructure to facilitate the guardianship of historical objects by the cultural communities and moral descendants of those from whom these objects were originally removed, many western museums are skeptical of the abilities of museums on the African continent to properly care for these objects, and do not trust these organizations to return objects lent to them (Cuno, pg. 123) – echoing a paternalistic and colonial

attitude towards African people and institutions. The Idiophone: Bird of Prophecy, despite having been loaned to an African art exhibition in Zurich, Switzerland in 2000, has yet to be loaned to museums on the African continent (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, "Idiophone: Bird of Prophecy [ahianmwēn-oro]").

Many western museums, with various degrees of acknowledgement of colonial history, consider the objects as "properly resid[ing]" within their care (Dowden), and cite the "white man's burden" in their successful guardianship of objects which may have otherwise been destroyed if not for the intervention of these museums to preserve these objects (Robertson, Pg 14). These claims are largely ignorant of the cultural and spiritual "care" of artifacts of cultural patrimony, such as the ceremonial and cultural practices which would have grounded these objects' significance within their indigenous communities. While some of these objects have since been spiritually deactivated, either intentionally or through loss of knowledge between generations, many still carry spiritual, cultural, and historical ties to groups in the present day. While it is unclear if it is still spiritually active, The Idiophone: Bird of Prophecy holds immense significance for the cultural history of the Edo people.

CONSIDERATIONS AGAINST REPATRIATION

In recent years, western museums have become increasingly aware of calls to repatriate objects looted or irresponsibly acquired back to the moral descendants of the communities to whom they were taken from. In response, museums have offered a series of statements – often similar amongst major museums – defending their claim to these artifacts.

At the risk of setting a precedent for the return of objects and thus instigating a large-scale emptying of major Western "universal" museums, many museums (particularly larger institutions such as the British Museum) have been wary of repatriation claims and have coded into their policies of conduct guidelines which hinder, if not entirely prevent, the deaccessioning of objects in the museums' collections (Robertson, 21). In addition, many museums do not see themselves as morally obliged to return objects, as they were not the thieves, but rather simply institutions which benefited from the colonial exchanges, with the preservation of human history in mind. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, where the Idiophone: Bird of Prophecy is housed, leaves deaccessioning in the hands of the Board of Trustees and Executive and Acquisitions committees, but appears to be somewhat flexible, having returned three African art objects with dubious provenance, including a pair of Benin brass plaques, to Nigeria in 2021 (del Valle et al.).

In cases in which a museum is willing to deaccession an object, repatriation requires identification of two major factors: the provenance of an object, to determine whether it has been legitimately acquired, and, in the case that an object has been acquired irresponsibly, to whom an object should be returned. Importantly, not every object needs to be repatriated. Despite concerns the colonial trade relations were influenced by imbalanced power dynamics in favor of the colonists, some were given as gifts, objects exchanged through trade, or legally sold to museums and collectors. Additionally, some objects have been spiritually deactivated and are held by museums with the consent of the indigenous African community, or were made with the intent of catering to a European audience and have no spiritual meaning (Schildkrout and Keim). These objects may also be exempt from repatriation.

It is important to consider that museums must invest a significant amount of resources into provenance research in order to even begin a process of repatriation. In the case of the Idiophone: Bird of Prophecy, what was once the Kingdom of Benin lies outside the geographical borders of the present-day state of Benin, therefore making repatriation to a state difficult. Even if the ambiguous provenance of the object could be sufficient justification to repatriate, the museum must determine a moral or biological descendant to whom they can pragmatically return the object. As it is impractical to repatriate an object to a community or the public at large, repatriation to a state, museum, or individual (such as the Oba) on behalf of the population may serve as an alternative. The caveat to this solution, however, is that there exists no frameworks holding an individual accountable for the sharing of cultural patrimony on behalf of the public once the object is within their possession (Cuno, pg 122).

Some museums, if unwilling to repatriate, are at least willing to negotiate terms of loan to museums located on the African continent, or to consent to the creation of duplicates. While some see the repatriation of a replica as

both insulting and inadequate in reconciling colonial history, for states in which political unrest or environmental factors may place an item of cultural patrimony at jeopardy, the repatriation of a copy can ensure the safety and preservation of the original while providing citizens and moral descendants some access to the objects of cultural patrimony.

In most cases, however, museums are loath to part with objects in their collections. The claim of a “universal museum” for global cultural heritage is one which many museums use in defense of their collections (Robertson, Pg 11). Most major and “universal” museums are located in world cities, attracting millions of visitors each year and generating revenue for the upkeep and maintenance of their collections. Many of these museums argue that due to their geographic advantage, it is in the best interest of these objects to remain in their possession as they are thus able to share an object with the greatest number of people, including scholars and researchers from major academic institutions in their vicinities (Robertson, Pg 11).

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, questions regarding the repatriation of objects are not limited solely to questions regarding provenance and the identification of moral descendants, but also speak to actions required to reconcile the impacts of colonial history in the 21st century and beyond: Namely, the role of museums in balancing the preservation of the past with serving the educational needs and cultural continuity of the people whose cultural and historical patrimony reside within these spaces. Museums play an integral role in both the explicit and implicit representation of cultures. Thus, the inclusion of diversity in the teams who curate museum experiences and represent objects of cultural patrimony is fundamental in giving systematically disadvantaged African communities an opportunity to reclaim their cultural heritage and gain empowerment over their own histories.

While no calls have as yet been made for the return of the Idiophone: Bird of Prophecy, there is strong evidence to suggest that alternative methods should be considered for its present representation, care, and upkeep, if not its eventual repatriation to the jurisdiction of the Oba or an African museum. Alternatively, there exist calls for repatriation for thousands of African objects (in addition to an innumerable list from other cultures and regions) – with as much, if not more evidence in favor of their return – which have yet to be fulfilled. Ultimately, questions regarding repatriation – and ultimately decolonization – are complex, and demand not only resources and dedication on the part of museums and historians, but also an increase in public awareness through education regarding colonial legacies and the path towards reconciling that history.

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