

Illegal Trafficking of Artefacts and Traditional Art Works in Nigeria. A Security Threat

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Abstract

This study attempts to examine the illegal trafficking of Artefacts and traditional art works as a security threat. It also addresses various views by some Nigerian scholars on this issue. The ways at curbing the notorious activities of looters or plunders is analyzed, some looted works are assessed using about two art historical approaches, formalism and Iconography. Illegal trafficking of the above mentioned items is not new in historical studies but the dimension it has assumed in the country, is of great concern. The need to find newer ways at controlling this canker worm is of urgent necessity.

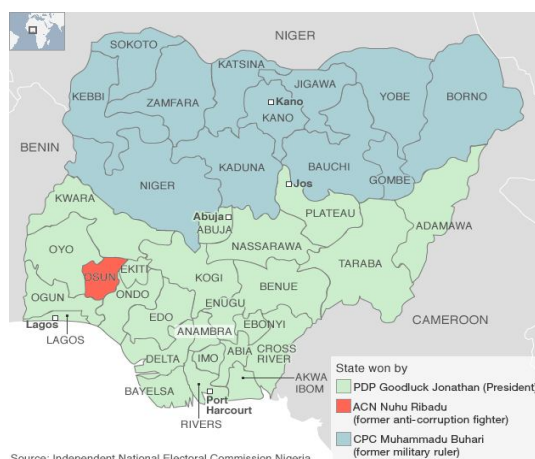


Fig.1. Map of Nigeria

Background to the Study

Since the mid-twentieth century researchers has continued to make reference to works of art not available in our National Museums across Nigeria. This is simply because such works have continued to reside in International Museums, galleries and private places around the world.

The question is, how did this happen? Of course we may like to use a more decent description to answer? Looting? Trafficking? Even plundering or simply stealing of Artefacts and works of art. It is however disheartening to know that all these descriptions, here carefully being planned out by the west, to adorn their museums, galleries and private homes why? We may ask? In order to make profit? Profit over that which is illegal? Call it tourist attraction or simply for educational values.

Nigerians have to travel miles just to see the works of their forefathers. In fact, many traditional shrines have been plundered simply as a result of taste or thirst. The act of Artefacts and art pieces trafficking is both of National and International concern. It has assumed astronomical proportions and subsequently, has become a security threat. It must be recalled that following the punitive expedition of 1897, British troops carted away from the empire large numbers of Artefacts. About two thousand five hundred (2,500) pieces left the Nigerian shores (Adepegba,1995) While some were sold to foreign offices, others were retained by members of the expedition (Dark,1973). A few private collectors bought pieces, like Pitt-Rivers the ethnologist as well as some public institutions like the British Museum and other museums across Europe and U.S. (Dark, 1973).

Art trafficking is not limited to the Benin experience alone. In 1910, after Leo Frobenius the ethnographer discovered and later likened the life pieces to the colony of the lost Atlantis; he was accused of stealing more than seven terracotta heads (Gillon, 1990). In fact, he was forced to leave the Olokun head behind which was found in the grove of Olokun, this he seemingly did. Unfortunately, during a visit to the city and after suspicious aroused by the casting of the Olokun head, it was discovered that the Olokun head was a copy. It was the British sculpture Leon Underwood in collaboration with William Fagg that made this discovery (Gillon, 1990). In other words the fate of the original Olokun head remains unknown.

Of recent the U.S. government returned on the 26th of July 2012, a number of smuggled priceless antiquities which include Ten Nok statues and one carved tusk (www.nigeriavillagesquare.com). It is however sad to note that neither the U.S. or Nigerian government is willing to disclose the identities of persons involved in the act. There has also been cases of stealing from our traditional shrine houses. It must however be noted that these dastardly acts are instituted in collaboration with the West such that historical and cultural pieces which adorn our shrine houses are looted daily without remorse. The security outfits in Nigeria have failed to check this continuous act of criminals in the country. One pathetic case which almost caused one of the researcher's freedom into Okpara-land was the looting of a traditional god.

Although during the researcher's visit, pictures were not allowed to be taken, the piece was eventually carted away in the Night by unknown plunderers. The purpose of this study however is to address the security problems that trafficking of our Artefacts and traditional art pieces have caused and to offer solutions. Some art-historical approaches like formalism and iconography would be used to examine the significance of these works. But emphasis would be on critical suggestions to funding lasting solutions to this act. Views of scholars as regards the issue of trafficking of Artefacts would also be examined. Before a proper investigation is conducted on this issue, the definition of what Artefacts, trafficking, looting and plundering must be determined.

Definitions

Oxford dictionary (1999) defines Artefact as an object made by a human being.

Trafficking can be described as a deal or trade in something illegal (Oxford dictionary, 1999). in this case, it has to do with the illegal trafficking of artefacts and antiquities, (archeology.about.com/d/items/g/trafficking.htm). Now we know what artefacts and trafficking are, what is plundering or plundered or plunders? They include: to rob goods by force especially in time of war, pillage (archeologyabout.com/d.items/g/trafficking.htm). To size wrongly by force. To take as war booty. The definition of plunder could include the pillage, (or) to appropriate forcible as the enemy, pillage. Plundering could also mean the act of robbery.

Another word being used in this study is looting. What is looting? Looting can be defined as goods usually of considerable value taken in war, spoil. Looting can also be described as something held to resemble goods of value seized in war (dictionary.reference.com/browse/loot).To rob especially on a large scale and usually by violence or corruption.

Views of Trafficking By Some African Scholars and Observers

Quite a number of scholars have continued to cry out against this ill-timed trend. They include, Opoku (2008), Olisah (2008), Onifade (2008), Lasisi (2009), Adepegba (2009), Medeme (2011), Okeke-Agulu (2012), Abdallah (2012) Odupute (2012) and Empowered Newswire (2012) and many other too numerous to mention. Opoku (2008) says that hardly a day passes by without some call for the return of the stolen cultural objects of Benin. He talks about the people been incensed when they hear about the unjustified invasion of Benin by the British in 1897 and the looting and burning of Benin-City. He says emphatically that most African's cannot believe that Europeans who preached Christian morality were involved with stealing cultural objects of African's. Who, according to European propoganda had an inferior culture.

Opoku claims that most of these so-called primitive objects adorn museums in the United States, Great Britain, Germany and France. He even wonders what relationship exists between museums and plunderers. He further opines that there are growing signs that persons in the ruling class are beginning to feel the demands of the masses. And would sooner or later have to give serious consideration to these frequent demands. Speaking on the Benin artefacts, Olisah (2008) quotes one of the Edo State Governors Professor Oserhiemen Osunbor as calling for the repatriation of the stolen Benin works, in various museums across Europe and America. He suggested that if these artefacts cannot be repatriated for what ever reasons, then the British government can assist in other ways.

Possibly by putting something back in their place or assisting in developmental efforts in the arts, culture and tourism. It is this British and Western attitude that made a renowned art historian angry. Onifade (2008) writes that this anger stems from the knowledge of Western pillage of artefacts from Africa. Her anger is further expressed in her works earmarked for a solo exhibition entitled 1897.Com. In a historical account, she relates the manner in which the British had tactfully brought Benin under its suzerainty as a protectorate in a treaty of protection signed by the Oba in 1892. She narrated the whole ordeal that led to the Benin massacre and later consification of Benin cultural objects. Which in her words have been attracting huge price in the international market and a great loss in terms of profit to Nigeria.

Lasisi (2009) reveals that as prices of art works continue to appreciate in the local and international markets agitators for the repatriation of about 6,500 Nigerian antiquities have been estimated to about ₦313bn. He claims that the ones mostly affected are the Benin works. Looted by the British colonialist especially during reprisal attacks launched by the Queen's soldiers against the natives who were trying to resist imperialism in 1897. Lasisi, (2009) explains that from Philip Dark's work entitled Benin Bronze heads, styles and chronology, up to 6,500 Benin objects are in some 77 places across the globe. He claims that the British museum are in custody of 700 pieces while the Ethnology museum in Berlin holds over 500.

Adepegba (2009) looks at incidents of plundering of Nigeria cultural properties which come in form of looting, illegal, excavations, illicit trading of art works or art theft. Similarly, Medeme (2011) is of the view the foreign museums have continued to flaunt and exhibit the mask and other artefacts without recourse to their origin. In Medeme words, before now, a lot of people thought only one Idia mask existed, now people can see that others exist in the metropolitan museum of art, New York. Another in Seattle Art Museum as well as the Linden Museum, Stuttgart. There was even a fifth mask to be sold in 2011. Medeme (2011) reveals that an auction of the Ivory Pendant of Queen Mothers Idia and other Benin artefacts was to take place in 2011.

The pendant was expected to fetch between £3.5m to £4.5m or possibly more. He further added that the British Museum refused to return to Nigeria the Ivory hip mask of Queen Idia which was chosen as Festac symbol in 1977. Okeke-Agulu (2012) speaks on the laws governing cultural heritage in United States. He claims that it is lenient towards museums holding works like those of Benin origin. He further stresses that calls for the resolution of the problem caused by the British looters of Benin royal collection will not go away. And that Nigerians have learned to harness the popular power of the internet to demand action. Okeke (2012) writes that about 32 priceless objects currently risk repatriation on account of their failure to meet all legal standard.

According to Okeke (2012), British Museums and other public institutions across the globe, are making good fortune from them. About 28 bronzes and 6 Ivories illegally looted during the Benin massacre were recently donated to the museum of fine arts Boston U.S.A. by Mr. Robert Owen Lehman. Abdallah (2012) reacting to this controversial donation of 32 works of Benin are scandalous. He narrated the whole Benin Massacre saga and without mincing words pointed out that these art works are the heirloom of the great people of Benin kingdom and Nigeria. He argued that pieces form part of the history of the people. He further opines that it is saddening that the museum of fine art Boston U.S.A. who now claims to be the new beneficiary of these works said that the donations met legal standard.

Abdallah (2012) vehemently opposed the management of the museum of art concerning the illegal possession of these items and insists that they be returned to their rightful owners. Writing on this issue, Odupute (2012), agrees on the efforts made by the National Commission of Museums and Monuments (NCMM) in recovering some thousands of artefacts stolen from Benin by the British soldiers. He claims that Abdallah Usman had with an exhibition slated for London between September 13 and December 19 2012, intends to launch a fresh campaign for the return of the works. Speaking on the looted Benin artefacts, Prince Patrick Oronsaye on behalf of Chief Nosakhare Isekure re-echoed the call for the repatriation of looted Benin art works.

Similarly, the Empowered Newspaper (www.nigeriavillagesquare.com) talks about how the U.S returned some smuggled priceless Nigerian antiquities, including 10 Nok statues and one carved tusk. What is surprising is that the identities of these smugglers have been protected.

The newspaper claim that since 2007, Homeland Security Investigation (HIS) has repatriated more than 2,500 items to more than 23 countries. In respect to the smuggled artefacts the 10 Nok pieces and one tusk were said to have been stolen from a National Museum in Nigeria were the Director General is being investigated. Most of the scholars reviewed based their views on looting of artefacts, particularly Benin works, not much is said about the theft of traditional objects from the shrines. Most of the works looted were not analyzed and examined.

A Formal and Iconographic Analysis of some Looted and Recovered Artefacts and Traditional Works

Using two art-historical approaches of formalism and Iconography some looted pieces from the country are to be analysed. With formalism, art works are viewed independently of its context, function and content (Adams, 2001). Iconography emphasises content over form (Adam, 2001). It involves the description, classification and Identification of the subject matter (Oxford Dictionary of art, 2001).

One of the reasons the researchers are conducting an analysis of these works is simply to correct the wrong designation attached to them overseas. For instance, the head in Fig, 2 which is located in Boston Museum of Fine arts, U.S.A, is described as the head of a defeated neighbouring leader.

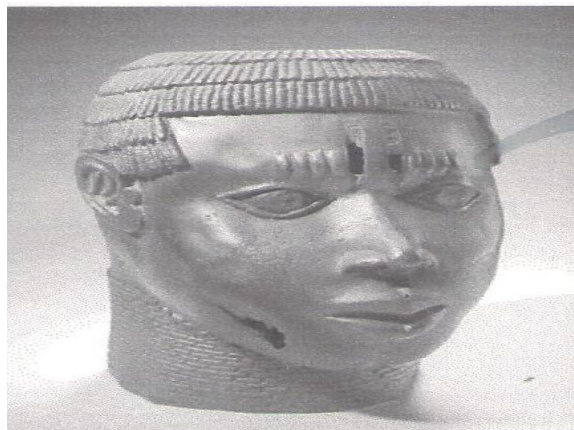


Fig. 2, Commemorate head of a defeated neighbouring leader. Late 15th- early 16th century copper alloy Robert Owen Lehman collection

First, how did the museum curator identify that the head belonged to a defeated neighbour? In 1963, William Fagg carried out his classification of Benin art pieces, which resulted into three periods. The early period which lasted from the fifteen to sixteenth centuries, the middle period was between the mid sixteenth to late seventeenth centuries. The late period which fell between eighteenth to nineteenth centuries. The early heads were light, so were the designs on them. These pieces are described as the classical period of Benin metal styles, because of the thinness of the brass used in its production as well as its semi-naturalistic style.

The middle period marked the interaction between the West and the Benin kingdom as well as the increase of materials. The heads here, had higher collar fittings as well as the forms corresponding with those of the plaques. Fagg (1963) then placed the late period from the eighteen century. He concluded that as a result of the abundance of materials the works became heavier and overly decorated. It was this observation that led Von Luschan (1919), to describe the period as “horro vacua”. The head in question is possibly the head of an early king.

The style corresponds with other Terracotta heads of the same period. A critical analysis of this head shows the Benin hair shape and style, cultural marks, geometric facial features as well as a beaded neck. If it were to be, the head of a neighbouring culture, the marks on the fore head, would have been different. The Benin artist also executed personalities from other cultures and races. This trait was clearly depicted in Fig. 3, which shows a figure of a Portuguese soldier.



Fig. 3. Portuguese rifleman Edo peoples, Benin Kingdom, Nigeria, 16th century Copper alloy “Robert Owen Lehman Collection “Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

The Portuguese arrived the Benin kingdom in about the fifteenth to sixteenth century. Since, their arrival a lot of interaction from cultural to military forms has been taken place. Some Benin art works, records the presence of these soldiers. The Portuguese came into the kingdom with arms and materials for the production of their art works.



**Fig.4, Relief plaque showing a battle scene Edo peoples, Benin Kingdom, Nigeria, 1550-1650 Copper alloy
“Robert Owen Lehman Collection “Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston**

A critical look at this work shows a procession rather than a battle field, as described by the museum. In the plaque, hierarchy of soldiers are displayed on it. The larger figure seems to be very outstanding. The smaller figures, seem to carry out different functions like the horn blower, and other warriors. On the right hand side of the plaque, is a figure which seems to be holding the other on the neck and sticking a gun-like object to him. But this act should not only be looked as a battle. It could simply be a ritual act or even a sign of superiority by the Benin Overlords. A horse which has Idah influences was also represented here.



**Fig.5, Horseman Edo peoples, Benin Kingdom, Nigeria, 16th century Copper alloy “Robert Owen Lehman
Collection “Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston**

The horseman in Benin culture is a common motif. Most of these depictions, show elements of other cultures. That is apart from the depiction of Benin kings, queens officials and nobles other cultures of great importance were depicted. It is indeed sad to not that this wonderful piece, still lies in Boston Museum U.S.A. for a proper analysis to be conducted on it. However, it is evident that, this wonderful horse rider seems to wear a collar style evident in some Idah pieces. The crown on its head, is not similar to the types noticeable in Benin. Even the horse is not decorated the like Benin animals. The horse seems to show a relationship, with that of fig. 4.



Fig.6, Relief plaque showing a dignitary with a drum and two attendants striking gongs Edo peoples, Benin Kingdom, Nigeria, 1550-1650 Copper alloy “Robert Owen Lehman Collection “Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Plaques are a form of historical records in relief form. It appears the British in 1897, looted quite a lot of these plaques. This piece in question shows a king-like figure drumming with two attendants. A critical analysis of this piece reveals that the figures do not exactly represent the Benin people. It is the duty of the court artist to represent events that occur in the palace. This includes; the presence of important personalities, entourages or even messengers from other neighbouring kingdoms, or vessel states to Benin.

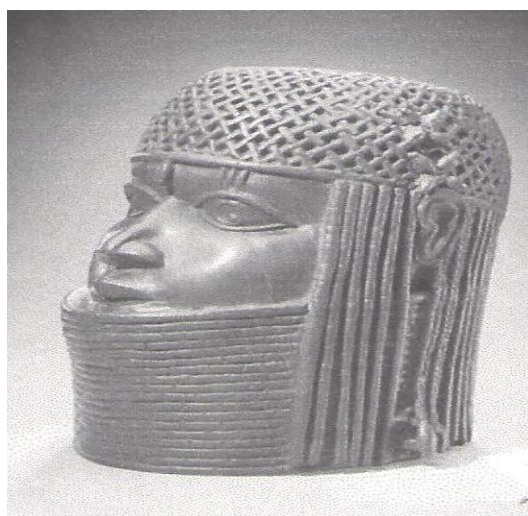


Fig. 7, Commemorative head of an Oba (king) Edo peoples, Benin Kingdom, Nigeria, late 16th century Copper alloy “Robert Owen Lehman Collection “Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

In 1963, Fagg attempted a classification of Benin-Court art into three periods. The early, middle and late period. This head in question, belongs to the middle period where the heads systematically cover the lower lips, and is more decorative than the early period. This period marks the period of the plaques.



Fig.8, Nok Terracotta, looted and returned 500 BC -200AD

This piece is highly classical, and marks another period in the development of the Nok terracotta. Quite a number of scholars have continued to attempt classifications on Nok terracottas. Some include; William Fagg (1963), Cornelius Adepegba (1995), Ekpo Eyo(1977) to mention but a few.

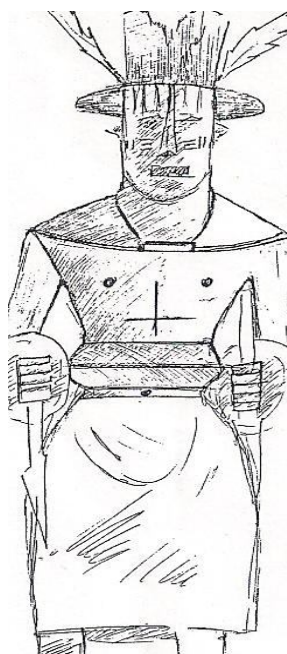


Fig.9, Urhobo figure stolen from Okpara inland, Agbon Clan, in 1996.

In 1996, during a research exercise carried out by one of the researchers, this figure adorned the shrine of Okpara. One still remembers, the Priest stressing on the powers of this piece, and insisting that pictures are not to be taken. Eventually, the piece was looted away from the shrine house. What was sad was that, for security sake, pictures were not allowed to be taken, if one was allowed to take these pictures, those pieces would have been returned.

Solutions and Recommendations on Issues of Trafficking of Artefacts and Traditional Objects

Going from the analysis of these works, it is indeed evident that if these piece were in our museums, a deeper analysis would have been conducted. A more critical analysis has to be done to achieve the real essence of these figures. However it is not enough for these analysis to be done overseas and in their own context. These works need be in their original settings before a full analysis can be obtained, some of the titles given to- the works are not appropriate. In fact, some of the works, if deeply analysed are not all of Benin origin but how can we prove this?

What can therefore be done? Government and other private organizations should make it their priority to address the issues of repatriating those looted works of Nigeria, for researchers to carry out more studies. As regards, security, more security outfits should be established in all museums and galleries in Nigeria. Not only that, shrine houses which house some these artefacts and art forms should be adequately secured. Individuals willing to turn to Christianity, should not burn their works but call for the services of a Museum official or curator. Many works have been lost through this process. These pieces represent the histories, origin and aspects of the culture of our people, burning them is like burning our identity.

Still on solutions and recommendations, more scholarships, grants and educational tours can be organized within and outside the country. Write-ups about figures outside the country should be encouraged and published. This may help to ginger the foreign museums from further auctioning of these pieces. A large chunk of Benin, Ife, Nok and other Nigerian works still reside in other lands without proper documentation. Persons of great art-historical understanding should be made to assess and analyse these works. Carnivals depicting Benin art and others should be conducted annually to show the historical significance of the works. People should be made to see the positive aspects of these works as historical documents, not as fetish objects.

A trip to a foreign country in Europe or America, reveals that Christians still pay a lot of money to see these pieces and others in their museums. On solutions to artefact trafficking, art and culture should be brought back to our school curriculum. In fact arts should play a major role in our school curriculum from primary through secondary and eventually at tertiary levels. This would help people to appreciate works of art. Competitions as well as awards should be given to artist as well as historians in the knowledge of their cultures. In fact, a new subject called cultural studies which would contain the visual arts and history of Nigeria should be introduced. More so, bill boards and posters that show cultural objects should be placed in strategic areas reminding people about their significance.

Finally, militants who have given up their arms, should be retrained and used as security agents to curb the looting spree in the Nigeria in general.

Conclusion

From the foregoing it is indeed obvious that if some of these recommendations are carried out the activities of looters, plunderers and traffickers of cultural objects would be drastically reduced. The government, individuals, Museums and security outfits have roles to play, as regards the safe keeping of our artefacts. In the institute of African studies alone, its museum has come under the hands of art thieves on more than two occasions. Security needs to be beefed up in places like this. If all recommendations as well as processes of security are executed the frequent activities of theft will be reduced.

However, as for countries holding Nigerian artefacts overseas, it may be a blessing in disguise. Simply because to many in Nigeria, works like the Benin art pieces should be destroyed. Why? Because quite a number of them attribute the countries predicament to the presence 'of these works, some still say that the event of festac "77" brought both spiritual and physical hardship to Nigeria. Our question is? Is Festac responsible for the corrupt practices of our leaders? Or were the spirits let loose and Nigerian's automatically were controlled by the spirits to be corrupt?

Or would the government be able to provide the security they have received overseas for a hundred years? Even if government brings them all back (artefacts) would they get the attention they are receiving overseas? However, we must realize that one of the major impetus for artistic change in Western European art were these looted African pieces. In other words, Africa has also contributed immensely to the development of western European art of the twentieth century.

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