The Igun-Eromwon Guild in Eclipse: Colonialism, Commodification, and the Degradation of Benin Bronze Casting Traditions

By

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Abstract

This paper examines the impact of British colonial internationalization on the bronze-making profession in the Benin Kingdom between 1897 and 1960. The 1897 punitive expedition marked a catastrophic turning point, causing the dispersal of the Igun-Eromwon guild craftsmen and the temporary collapse of an industry that had flourished under centralized monarchical patronage since approximately 900 CE. The subsequent restoration of the monarchy in 1914 initiated a fundamental restructuring of bronze production, transforming it from a sacred, court-controlled enterprise into a liberalized commercial activity driven by external market demands. Drawing on archival sources and ethnographic research, this study demonstrates how colonial intervention dismantled the exclusive guild system that had ensured artistic excellence through rigorous intergenerational training. The removal of Oba oversight precipitated qualitative deterioration characterized by technological regression, thematic repetition, and the emergence of fraudulent practices—including artificial aging techniques and material adulteration—previously unthinkable under pre-colonial disciplinary structures. The research reveals the paradox of colonialism's dual effect: while British invasion internationalized Benin bronzes as prestigious art commodities coveted by European and American collectors, it simultaneously

eroded the indigenous knowledge systems and spiritual functions that had sustained the craft's integrity. The analysis contributes to broader debates on colonialism's cultural legacies, museum ethics, and the ongoing diplomatic negotiations for restitution of looted artefacts. It argues that the transformation of Benin bronze casting exemplifies how colonial economic imperatives subordinated African artistic traditions to global capitalist markets, with enduring consequences for post-colonial cultural production and heritage management.

Introduction

The Benin bronzes represent one of Africa's most celebrated artistic achievements, embodying centuries of sophisticated metallurgical expertise and serving as vital historical documents of the Edo people's political, religious, and social institutions. For nearly a millennium, the Igun-Eromwon guild of bronze casters operated under the exclusive patronage of the Oba of Benin, producing works of exceptional technical and aesthetic quality within a tightly regulated system that ensured intergenerational knowledge transmission and artistic excellence. This guild system, dating to the foundation of the Benin Empire during the Ogiso dynasty, functioned not merely as an economic enterprise but as a sacred institution integral to monarchical authority and ancestral veneration. The trajectory of this venerable tradition underwent catastrophic transformation following the British punitive expedition of February 1897. The military invasion, precipitated by colonial trade disputes and the ambush of a British diplomatic party, resulted in the looting of thousands of bronze artefacts and the dispersal of guild craftsmen who had fled the advancing troops. The subsequent seventeen-year interregnum (1897–1914) severed the institutional foundations that had sustained bronze casting, initiating processes of liberalization and commercialization that fundamentally altered the industry's character, purpose, and output.

This article examines the multifaceted implications of colonial internationalisation on Benin bronze craftsmanship, tracing the shift from royal monopoly to market-oriented production. It interrogates how British colonial policies dismantled the guild system's disciplinary structures, precipitating qualitative decline, fraudulent practices, and the erosion of indigenous curatorship. By analysing the

transformation of bronze casting from sacred obligation to commodified enterprise, this study contributes to scholarly understanding of colonialism's destructive impact on African material culture and the enduring legacies that continue to shape contemporary heritage discourse and restitution debates.

The Colonial Internationalisation and the Bronze Making Profession in Benin

The first impact of British colonial internationalisation on Benin Kingdom and her bronze making industries is the closure of the factories in mid-February 1897. The war time disturbance created by the advanced and sophisticated military weapons and such as rockets and maxim guns led to the craftsmen deserting the city for safety and closure of all the workshops for the first time since the unification of Benin under a central government in Ca. 900.[1] The craftsmen that were responsible for the making of the artworks, fled the city of Benin as the British troops drew near. The "guild members fled for their lives because of the capture of the city and the flight of the Oba."[2] This 'led to the dispersal of the members of the guilds to different parts of Benin Kingdom."[3] This impacted negatively on the Benin bronze industry. These craftsmen were custodians of a culture and tradition that had held sway for centuries, and their flight was a death knell on what was left of the pre-colonial bronze industry, as it had been established that the industry was

[1] Kokunre Agbontaen, *African Study Monographs,* I8(1): September 1999, 45-58, 45. See also, Graham Connah, "Archaeological Research in Benin City," Journal *of the Historical Society of Nigeria,* Vol. 2, 4, 1963; Kokunre Adetokunbo Eghafona, *Anthropology Matters: Living in The Intersection of The Humanities, Sciences and Social Sciences*, University of Benin 229th Inaugural Lecture Series, 5th December, 2019, 48; Idahosa Osagie Ojo, **"**The Benin Kingdom, 1800-1897: A Study in Political Economy" (MA Thesis, Department of History and International Studies, University of Benin, Benin City, June 2012) and Jacob Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin*, (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1968), 11; Irwin Tunis, Origins, "Chronology and Metallurgy of the Benin Wall Bas-Reliefs," (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis. University of London, 1979).

[2] K. Agbontaen-Eghafona, "An Assessment of Four Centuries (15th-19th) of Benin Art Production in Evaluating The role of the Craft Guild System in Benin polity", 55.

[3] Joseph Osagie and Frank Ikponmwosa, "Craft Guilds and the Sustenance of Pre-Colonial Benin Monarchy", *International Journal of Arts and Humanities*, Vol. 4. No. 13, (2015), 15.

struggling before the British invasion as "by the nineteenth century the gradual decline of the kingdom gave way to the decline of the craft guilds."[4] The British invasion led to the "temporary demise of the guild,"[5] which was fuelled by their departure by the craftsmen from the city. The subsequent revival of brass casting and ivory carving by the royal craft guilds was seventeenth years after when the monarchy was restored in 1914.[6]

Also, when Igun-Eromwon guild of professional bronze makers were restored back to their job in 1914 after 17 years, most tenets of the expertise and technology were already lost and the guild system fell into disuse because of the changing demands, economic needs, and the general process of colonisation, which transformed Benin economy from a corporate and institutionally oriented system to one based on the individualism of the new era. This much is emphasised on the change in the quality of the "technological differences between earlier castings and those of the twentieth century include thickness, filing, grinding, chasing, and welding."[7] The British invasion also resulted in the destruction of traditional curatorship that existed in the pre-colonial Benin kingdom. There was an *Iwowa* "described as the treasure house of art'[8] that served as a form of a museum where treasure objects were kept. "Its importance resided in the fact that it was no longer

[4] Kokunre Agbontaen-Eghafona, "An Assessment of Four Centuries (15th-19th) of Benin Art Production in Evaluating The role of the Craft Guild System in Benin polity", *African* Study *Monographs.* Vol. 18, No. 1, (1997), 45.

[5] K. Agbontaen-Eghafona, "An Assessment of Four Centuries (15th-19th) of Benin Art Production in Evaluating The role of the Craft Guild System in Benin polity", 55.

[6] Barbara Plankensteiner, "Benin: Kings and Rituals: Court Arts from Nigeria", *African Arts*, Vol. 40, No. 4, (2007), 86-87.

[7] Joseph Nevadomsky, Barbora Půtová, and Václav Soukup, "Benin Art and Casting Technologies", *West Bohemian Historical Review*, Vol. 4, Issue 1, (2014), 98.

[8] Kokunre Agbontaen-Eghafona and Ikechukwu Okpoko, "Curatorship of Benin Cultural Materials: Towards Integrating indigenous and Orthodox Methods", *African Study Monographs*, Vol. 24. No. 4. (2004), 200.

regarded as a collection of objects for religious purposes, but as a treasure house."[9] "The British expeditionary forces were said to have described such places as a treasury for objects distinct from those in shrines or altars."[10] The removal of the Oba's control and the liberalisation of the bronze industry significantly imparted the bronze workers. First, the British invasion, completely destroyed the exclusivity of the Oba over the production of artworks and control over the guild system. 'The punitive expedition destroyed the Oba's sole authority over the patronage of the art works and the craft guilds.'[11] Instead, at the restoration of the monarchy in 1914 when Oba Eweka II was installed by the British Colonial government after the interregnum, 'these guilds were allowed to produce art objects not only for the king, but also for sale to colonial officers, art dealers, and tourists.[12] Unlike, the period before 1897, the colonial and post-colonial bronze professionals are only interested in creating meaningless abstracts for their customers "and these bronze abstracts are given high sounding names or titles, which is vanity and unnecessary.[13] These bronze workers that were supervised by the pre-British political system to ensure excellent works of arts are produce were now left to be on their own under the colonial officials that neither experience the

[9] Kokunre Agbontaen-Eghafona and Ikechukwu Okpoko, "Curatorship of Benin Cultural Materials: Towards Integrating indigenous and Orthodox Methods", *African Study Monographs*, Vol. 24. No. 4. (2004), 200.

[10] Agbontaen-Eghafona and Okpoko, "Curatorship of Benin Cultural Materials: Towards Integrating indigenous and Orthodox Methods", 202.

[11] K. Agbontaen-Eghafona, "An Assessment of Four Centuries (15th-19th) of Benin Art Production in Evaluating The role of the Craft Guild System in Benin polity", 55., Michael Ediagbonya, Williams Duyile and Yemi Aluko, "A Study in Benin Guild System and the Monarchy from the earliest Times to 1897", *American Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Research*, Vol. 4, Issue 4, (2020), 215.

[12] Barbara Plankensteiner, "Benin: Kings and Rituals: Court Arts from Nigeria", *African Arts*, Vol. 40, No. 4, (2007), 87.

[13] Franklyn Egwali, "Ancient and Contemporary Benin Bronze – Differences and Similarities: The Content, Context and The Journey So Far*" Idea: Studia nad strukturą i rozwojem pojęć filozoficznych*, X X VIII/1, 2016, 319-332, 328.

bronze industry non interest in industrial development in their colonies. Despite the removal of the Oba, the artistic and cultural life of the Benin bronzes has "survived and adapted to changing circumstances under which new forms have developed as part of a contemporary society."[14] Also, members of Igun-Eromwon guilds of bronzes makers "no longer are restricted to the monarchical domain, but that the market has opened up to include a wider public, not least the local tourist market." [15]

The bronze making industry and few other industries that survived the destructive industrial policies of the British were since there was no substitute for its products from the coloniser's countries or any other part of Europe. The bronze works produced in Benin bears eloquent testimony to the artistic excellence and culture of the people. The complete absence of any substitute from Britain or any other part of Europe ensured that the products of Benin bronze were in constant demands both in England and elsewhere. British administrators and merchants began to purchase Benin bronze works some of which were used to decorate their homes and offices while some others were shipped to Britain for sales. Similarly, in 1935 a certain E. J. Dormer from California in the United States of America writes to the British consul requesting for the Benin bronzes. In his words, "I am taking the liberty of writing you to ask you if you would be so kind as to put me in touch with a reputable agent who would be interested in shipping me some of these bronzes. Would you very kindly ask him to give me full details concerning each piece. Size, weight, price delivered at the nearest Nigerian port."[16]

There are differences between the ways the Benin bronzes became to be handled since the conquest of Benin and the methods in the earlier period. Whereas the personnel of modern museums now care for the bronzes like other cultural objects,

[14] Charlotta Dohlvik, "Museums and their Voices: A Contemporary Study of the Benin Bronzes," (Unpublished Master's Thesis, Göteborg University, May 2006), 24.

[15] Charlotta Dohlvik, "Museums and their Voices: A Contemporary Study of the Benin Bronzes," (Unpublished Master's Thesis, Göteborg University, May 2006), 24.

[16] NAI, BP1080 Ben Prof. I: *Benin Bronze and Ivory work*, p.19.

the care of the bronzes in the pre-colonial era was carried out by households in Benin that held them in trust for the future generation as a matter of everyday task. Caring for their important cultural objects was a part of the daily life of those concerned.[17] Since the colonial era, the museums were set as deliberate effort to care for cultural materials, while the care of these materials in the past began with a religious connotation for which the objects were set aside. First and foremost, was for ancestral worship. The need to care for them grew, giving their spiritual importance in the society. The current museums protect the cultural objects, following their acquisition, whereas in the past the objects were acquired for some important functions, and therefore demanded protection. One major common feature of the traditional practices and the modern methods introduced by colonial rule was the exclusion of non-professionals from handling the objects.

The "reasons for the exclusion differ. The modern curators, to avoid damages and contamination, do not allow museum objects to be handled by visitors. Traditional custodians, on their part, forbid handling of the objects by just anybody because most objects are considered sacred." While theft of the objects was largely unknown or heard off as thieves dreaded the "spiritual repercussion of stealing sacred objects; theft in the modern museum exists and its occurrences usually minimised by the use of security equipment and guards."[18] Kokunre Agbontaen-Eghafona and Ikechukwu Okpoko also explain that "modern and traditional methods of caring for cultural objects differ, mainly because the initial aims and objectives also differ and that both traditional and modern ways of caring for cultural objects attempts at arresting the causes of environmental and physical/internal alterations have been made, including devising means of

[17] Kokunre Agbontaen-Eghafona and Ikechukwu Okpoko, "Curatorship of Benin Cultural Materials: Towards Integrating indigenous and Orthodox Methods," *African Study Monographs*, Vol. 24. No. 4. (2004), 207.

[18] Kokunre Agbontaen-Eghafona and Ikechukwu Okpoko, "Curatorship of Benin Cultural Materials: Towards Integrating indigenous and Orthodox Methods", *African Study Monographs*, Vol. 24. No. 4. (2004), 2007.

counteracting the effects of degradation."[19] It important to note that despite the establishment of Museums, several of the traditional methods of managing the bronzes persists and are still used by some traditional curators of Benin cultural objects despite the changes occasioned by colonial rule. Traditional custodians of the bronzes since colonial era no longer solely rely on the indigenous ways as they begin to combine some foreign materials and even method with their traditional substances. They now mix kerosene, camphor, and potash in eliminating termites from wooden objects and sometimes, brasso, an imported cleaning liquid for brass and silver is also used in place of the materials used of the pre-colonial era now lost. When brass is not available, they also resort to the use of lime and ashes in cleaning the objects and this was not done in pre-colonial era. In fact, "any available cleansing substance is now used so long as it is without negative repercussions and yields the expected results."[20]

Thus, Benin bronze works continued to attract a wide range of demand both from Europe and the United States of America. Yet the British administration did not do anything either to improve the method of production or improve its productive capacity. The traditional method of production which the British met at colonization continued throughout the period of British rule and after. Although captain Grunting and Mr. Oliver officials of the Cranmor Ethnographical Museum in London visited bronze casting areas in Benin in July 1935.[21] It was not with the view of improving the traditional method of bronze casting but merely for the purpose of obtaining information as to the origin and significance of the Benin bronze and ivory work. This traditional method of production earlier discussed in chapter one of this works exists in Benin today. Igun is famous for this craft and practitioners realize great wealth from the sale of their works which have wide

[19] Kokunre Agbontaen-Eghafona and Ikechukwu Okpoko, "Curatorship of Benin Cultural Materials: Towards Integrating indigenous and Orthodox Methods", *African Study Monographs*, Vol. 24. No. 4. (2004), 207

[20] Kokunre Agbontaen-Eghafona and Ikechukwu Okpoko, "Curatorship of Benin Cultural Materials: Towards Integrating indigenous and Orthodox Methods", *African Study Monographs*, Vol. 24. No. 4. (2004), 200.

[21] NAI, BP1080 Ben Prof. I: *Benin Bronze and Ivory work*, 1- 18.

range of both local and foreign demands. In contrast to bronze casting, palm wine processing was not regular among the people of Benin. The people's preoccupation with cash crops production further led to the abandonment of palm wine processing. The few palm trees that were tapped during the colonial period were done by the Igbo migrant tapers from east.

Colonial Internationalisation and Igun-Eromwon Craftsmanship

Deprived of the involvement of the Oba and the encouragement from his office as well as the moral twin that ties the society together, dishonesty manifesting in adulteration and forgery, which would never be thought of in the pre-British era became characteristic with the members of the professional group. This collaborated with improper training to worsen the bronze works of the colonial and post-colonial eras. Unlike before when the would-be bronze caster was trained by his father right from childhood into adulthood without distraction until the demise of the latter before he can be recognised, the present bronze workers do not wait for the passing of their fathers before setting out their own. In addition to this setback in training is the need for a formal education, or to learn other professions making the training process secondary. Unlike the current situation, the guild that made the bronzes in the pre-British era has a variety of services for the Oba and the Kingdom. They occupy a self-governing ward or a restricting unit were relevant socialization process where maintained. They also recorded of important events in art form and special functions performed for the Oba and the palace.

During the pre-colonial era, each guild including Igun-Eromwon was "affiliated to one of the palace society" in line with the nature of the services provided and discipline was very well maintained.[22] This arrangement was thwarted by the colonial government as they expelled the Oba to Calabar and removing the institutions and authorities in the palace. The colonialists thus destroyed the power of the Benin political institutions that helped the guilds and the craftsmanship together and as a result, the Guild became liberalized and every man became for

[22] Kokunre Adetokunbo Eghafona, *Anthropology Matters: Living in the Intersection of the Humanities*, *Sciences and Social Sciences*, University of Benin 229th Inaugural Lecture Series, 5th December 2019, 48.

himself and this brought in corruption, improper training and uncontrolled production of at works that became characteristic of the bronze industry. While organisational arrangement in the pre-colonial era ensures that the bronze industry "provided a link between the nobility and the commoners" and promoted the organisations in the pre-colonial Benin Kingdom, the colonial artworkers in Benin were not useful in the socio-political system or in the social and cultural setup of the colonial government.[23]

This and other series of distractions that confront the training period following the colonial dislocation have resulted to downgrading in the status of the members of the Igun-Eromwon in the post conquest era. The ingenuity of the pre-1897 era is now farfetched and most of the bronze works since the colonial era are repeated or simply copied. A careful look at the works done during this era will reveal repeated storyline when compare with those done before colonial imposition. Prevalent works since colonial era include thee Bronze heads, the queen mother's bronze head, head with four legs, ram heads, court officials with cross pendants, Oba with ceremonial sword, rattle snake, Altar Bell with Portuguese face, Altar rings, roaster, several plaques and pectorals, hip ornaments and waist pendants as well as sculpture of Oba and his attendant and "most of the concepts and themes are often repeated or copied so that when you have seen one, you have seen all."[24] Though, they are fascinatingly profound and alluring, they have severally been imitative and not originals as it was in the day of their fathers.[25] The low standard of the artistic nature of the bronzes today, therefore, is consequent of the fact that "most of the bronze casters are not adequately trained. Some who ought to be an

[23] Kokunre Adetokunbo Eghafona, *Anthropology Matters: Living in The Intersection of The Humanities*, *Sciences and Social Sciences*, University of Benin 229th Inaugural Lecture Series, 5th December 2019, 48.

[24] Franklyn Egwali, "Ancient and Contemporary Benin Bronze – Differences and Similarities: The Content, Context and The Journey So Far*" Idea: Studia nad strukturą i rozwojem pojęć filozoficznych*, XX VIII/1, 2016, 319-332, 322.

[25] Franklyn Egwali, "Ancient and Contemporary Benin Bronze – Differences and Similarities: The Content, Context and The Journey So Far*" Idea: Studia nad strukturą i rozwojem pojęć filozoficznych*, X X VIII/1, 2016, 319-332, 322.

apprentice for four to five years become impatient. They only stay for some few months and later establish their gallery where works they have hurriedly cast are displayed. And of course, many buyers and collectors do patronize them, but for hard-core collectors" that have been in the trade for a long time, the difference can still be spotted.[26] This was not the case in pre-colonial Benin where fathers and sons conversed and exchanged ideas for the development of the latter. Young boys were projected to grow and take over their fathers' skills and for these were trained up till demise of the father before the Son can set up his own factory.[27] While their learning increased with daily exposure during this period, their training intensifies and the youngsters, received instructions from those already in charge including their father and where the person in charge was the father or the guardian of the youngster, he stayed long enough as apprentice to master the techniques and procedures of the guilds as well as the discipline and patient required. Even though there was no certified education, training were effective and mainly through participating and observing older ones.

Prior to the invasion, there was an established guild system that specifically made artworks for the Oba.[28] It was an elaborate system whose organisation was not

[26] Franklyn Egwali, "Ancient and Contemporary Benin Bronze – Differences and Similarities: The Content, Context and The Journey So Far*" Idea: Studia nad strukturą i rozwojem pojęć filozoficznych*, X X VIII/1, 2016, 319-332, 329.

[27] Kokunre Agbontaen-Eghafona and Ikechukwu Okpoko, "Curatorship of Benin Cultural Materials: Towards Integrating indigenous and Orthodox Methods", *African Study Monographs*, Vol. 24. No. 4. (2004), 203.

[28] Eckart Von Sydow, "Ancient and Modern Art in Benin City", *Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 11, No. 1, (1938), 55 – 62, 61., Elayne Karickhoff, "The Aesthetic and Cultural Significance of Yoruba, Edo, and Igbo Sculpture in the African Art Collection, The Museum of Texas Tech University" (unpublished M. A. thesis, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, 1991), 45. Michael Ediagbonya, Williams Duyile and Yemi Aluko, "A Study in Benin Guild System and the Monarchy from the earliest Times to 1897", *American Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Research*, Vol. 4, Issue 4, (2020), 212.

restricted to just making artworks for the Oba.[29] These art objects made by the guilds were for 'the exclusive patronage of the Oba and his commission required Igun's casters to manufacture objects within the palace walls to ensure secrecy.'[30] These established guild system had existed for centuries and date back to the foundation of the Benin Empire during the reign of the Ogiso.[31] 'The famous Benin king promoted the works of craftsmen to produce their finest pieces.'[32] 'Their influence and the peaceful co-existence in the second half of the fifteenth century influenced the craft guilds towards periods of beautiful innovations rather than that of suppression. The craftsmen combined their new talents with their traditional ones with the latter still having a stronger impact.'[33] However, the events of 1897 altered the entire archetypal setup of the guilds and by extension the bronze industry as who pays the piper now dictates the tone. An Art hunter decided the bronzes to be made and not the Oba. Franklyn Egwali laments that the tourists and art hunters even "come with their pictures and concepts in mind. They determine which artform they intend to collect because some purchase these works

[29] Michael Ediagbonya, Williams Duyile and Yemi Aluko, "A Study in Benin Guild System and the Monarchy from the earliest Times to 1897", *American Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Research*, Vol. 4, Issue 4, (2020), 210-216, 212.

[30] Joseph Nevadomsky, Barbora Půtová, and Václav Soukup, "Benin Art and Casting Technologies", *West Bohemian Historical Review*, Vol. 4, Issue 1, (2014), 69.

[31] Kokunre Agbontaen-Eghafona and Ikechukwu Okpoko, "Curatorship of Benin Cultural Materials: Towards Integrating indigenous and Orthodox Methods", *African Study Monographs*, Vol. 24. No. 4. (2004), 202.

Joseph Osagie and Frank Ikponmwosa, "Craft Guilds and the Sustenance of Pre-Colonial Benin Monarchy", *International Journal of Arts and Humanities*, Vol. 4. No. 13, (2015), 4.

[32] Agbontaen-Eghafona and Okpoko, "Curatorship of Benin Cultural Materials", 202.

[33] Kokunre Agbontaen-Eghafona, "An Assessment of Four Centuries (15th-19th) of Benin Art Production in Evaluating The role of the Craft Guild System in Benin polity", *African* Study *Monographs.* Vol. 18, No. 1 (1997), 55-56.

only to be resold in their private galleries here in Nigeria or elsewhere – abroad." [34] Therefore, to make themselves relevant and survive in the all-competitive market, themes will continue to be repeated.

Forgery and professional dishonest has now characterized members of the guild of bronze workers. This has led to adulteration, which was unheard of in the pre-British Era. During the colonial era, the unwholesome practice of producing bronzes artworks to look like antiquity, that is those produce between the thirteen and fifteen centuries began. Though the bronzes can be said to be rooted in Benin casting traditions of the pre-British era with regards to concepts and finishing, many of them are not genuine and only made to look like antiquity. These fake bronze artefacts are processed in such a way that detecting them becomes arduous, complex.[35] Franklyn Egwali exposes the process of use by the bronze caster to fake antiquity. According to him, "the bronze is robbed with a certain chemical and later buried in the ground for days, weeks or months depending on the nature of ageing one wants to achieve." The more time its underground, the more it appears ancient. [36] When the artworks are exhumed from the ground, they are further worked on to meet the required standard but some of the "buyers are aware of this intrigue, which means it becomes the co-operation between the casters and some gallery owners here or abroad." [37]

Most of the bronze artforms "produced today can be said to be forged and devoid of honesty" and that to the unacquainted, "the casters classify all their works as

[34] Franklyn Egwali, "Ancient and Contemporary Benin Bronze – Differences and Similarities: The Content, Context and The Journey So Far*" Idea: Studia nad strukturą i rozwojem pojęć filozoficznych*, X X VIII/1, 2016, 319-332, 322.

[35] Barbara Plankensteiner, Director of Museum am Rothenbaum, Hamburg discussion with her at the University of Hamburg, Germany, on Thursday, October 29, 2019.

[36] Barbara Plankensteiner, Director of Museum am Rothenbaum, Hamburg discussion with her at the University of Hamburg, Germany, on Thursday, October 29, 2019.

[37] Barbara Plankensteiner, Director of Museum am Rothenbaum, Hamburg discussion with her at the University of Hamburg, Germany, on Thursday, October 29, 2019.

bronze pieces."[38] According to him, though the artists profess to "have used bronze materials in their production of these fascinating artforms," critical examination shows that the materials used this day are often brass not bronze; and that even the brass sometimes is "further adulterated with zinc materials, so that at the end of the production, what is observed is a whitish brass sculpture."[39]An assessment of some ancient bronze artefacts reveals that the forms were definite, sensitive and significantly commanding unlike the sculptures of today. It is easily seen that quality time and effort have been spent on them. The "forms, contour, texture, nature, stature and even colour were all adequately attended to,"[40] which means all aspects of the artefacts were brilliantly and adroitly treated but in today's bronze sculptures, "many forms are glossed over in the name of impatience or abstractism. This is especially true of college-trained sculptors or casters."[41]

The Benin bronzes produced after the British intervention are significantly different from the master pieces of the pre-colonial era. Unlike the light bronze artefacts, produced by their ancestors, the bronze sculpture of the Iguneromwon guilds of bronze casters produced since the advent of colonial rule are significantly heavier and cumbersome to transport. The reason for this significant dissimilarity in weight is not far-fetched. In the quest to urgently churn out several works in bronze to earn cash, when works to be cast in bronze are sent for firing and casting, as a result of

[38] Franklyn Egwali, "Ancient and Contemporary Benin Bronze – Differences and Similarities: The Content, Context and The Journey So Far*" Idea: Studia nad strukturą i rozwojem pojęć filozoficznych*, X X VIII/1, 2016, 319-332, 322.

[39] Franklyn Egwali, "Ancient and Contemporary Benin Bronze – Differences and Similarities: The Content, Context and The Journey So Far*" Idea: Studia nad strukturą i rozwojem pojęć filozoficznych*, X X VIII/1, 2016, 319-332, 322.

[40] Franklyn Egwali, "Ancient and Contemporary Benin Bronze – Differences and Similarities: The Content, Context and The Journey So Far*" Idea: Studia nad strukturą i rozwojem pojęć filozoficznych*, X X VIII/1, 2016, 319-332, 329.

[41] Franklyn Egwali, "Ancient and Contemporary Benin Bronze – Differences and Similarities: The Content, Context and The Journey So Far*" Idea: Studia nad strukturą i rozwojem pojęć filozoficznych*, XX VIII/1, 2016, 319-332, 329.

the traditional and perhaps careless way of casting, the work often fails in the process and this means starting all over again, which very burdensome, upsetting and time consuming. The lazy man's way around this is deliberately make the wax mould thicker than it should be and it is this thickness of the wax that shape that will be replaced with the bronze resulting to heavier and thinker products. The forefathers of the present bronze artists can afford to repeat the whole process of casting from the laterite, wax and finally into bronze.[42] This was because of the enormous investments that make the materials readily available and the belief in the quality of works and not the mass production of them for financial gains as it became since the renascence of the industry following the restoration of the monarchy.

Poor finishing is another feature of the Benin bronze industry that resurged after the restoration of the office of the Oba. Whereas deliberate finishing efforts, was "the hallmark of quintessential and iconic artworks in the era when the artist were monitored by the Oba, insufficient energy and impatient characterized during the colonial and post-colonial eras. Unlike the perfect nature of the bronzes in the pre-British era, finishing and detailing of today's bronzes has become a second placed endeavour since the British took over the Kingdom from the Oba. Another reason for this poor output is the impatient nature of the contemporary artists, who do not pay unreserved attention to configuration of their art forms. The artworks produced in Benin after colonial imposition are also devoid of inspiration and lack depth in storyline while the themes are often repeated and become monotonous. In ancient time in Benin, bronze sculptures produced most time possess very thought-provoking traditional storylines. For example, the deep story regarding Adesuwa and Oboro, the story of the war between the ancient Benin Kingdom and Idah, the three wise monkeys, the Portuguese Horsemen, three men striking clappers with the bird of prophecy, priests with cup, bowl and jug are profound and possess very thought-provoking and penetrating traditional stories which impacts positively on the lives of the people both in ancient and contemporary

[42] Interview conducted with Theresa Osaigbovo, aged, (n.g.) at the department of Fine and applied Arts, Faculty of Arts, University of Benin, Ekehuan Campus, Benin City, Nigeria on February 24, 2020.

times while "today's theme always borders on ephemeral and flirting themes such as bust of a chief, politician or perhaps a man committing suicide.[43]

The Colonial Liberalisation of the Benin Bronze Industry and the Implication

The British colonial liberalisation of the Bronze industry from the social, political and religious circumstances surrounding the artistic production of bronzes and other cultural artefacts has profound implications for the Benin people and their arts. First, the art of bronze casting was an obligation to the Oba in the pre-colonial Benin Empire, with the absence of the Oba, the guild of bronze manufacturers stopped production. The production activities of the bronze industries "over the centuries had been carried out under a system of royal art patronage and control" and this was "centrally structured around the kingship."[44] Following the interregnum, 1897 - 1914, when a new monarchy was restored in Benin kingdom with the title of Eweka II, *Iguneromwon*, the guild of bronze makers was revived to cast replicas of and replacements for the bronze works that were taken away especially from the royal shrine.

The guild was relocated to its present site at Igun Street but the technology has eviscerated and the inspiration anesthetized.[45] Compared to the production in pre-colonial era, the standard of the Benin bronze artefacts reduced and the quality plummeted. Charlotta Dohlvik laments that "with regard to the production of cultural materials" the British destruction of the Benin bronze industry and the looting of the bronze artefacts, "represents a dividing line between, on the one hand, those objects that were made and formed part of an independent monarchical empire ruled by powerful kings, and on the other those artefacts that

[43] Usman Adekunle Ojedokun, "Trafficking in Nigerian Cultural Antiquities: A Criminological Perspective *African Journal of Criminology and Justice Studies*: AJCJS, Vol.6, 1 &2, November 2012, 163-176, 326

[44] Bryna Freyer, *Royal Benin Art In the Collection of the National Museum of African Art*, Published for the National Museum of African Art by the Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington and London, 16-17.

[45] Nevadomsky, Půtová and Soukup, "Benin Art and Casting Technologies" *West Bohemian Historical Review*, Vol. 4, Issue 1, (2014), 75.

at a later stage have been created under different types of colonial and post-colonial constituencies."[46] In consequence, what is conventionally called the Benin bronzes is a distinguishable corpus of objects created and produced under a system of royal patronage, thus amounting to a limited number of objects.[47] Although, they were first taken to London after their appropriation, they are now scattered throughout a diverse range of museums and private collectors in many different countries.[48] Before the end of colonial rule, the Benin bronze artefacts were 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 history of the Benin Bronze was a custom that was tied to the monarchy which it was intended to serve. These artefacts were commissioned by the Oba before they could be made.[49] It was such that "brass casting was controlled and regulated by the Oba, the castings for him took place within the confines of the palace."[50] "Prior to 1897 Igun Street butted the southeaster corner of the palace. An exit from the palace led straight into the guild quarters."[51] The state of the Benin bronze industry before 1897, was that it was tightly controlled by the absolute monarchy. According to Robert Bradbury, "almost the whole production of brass-smith was

[46] Charlotta Dohlvik, "Museums and their Voices: A Contemporary Study of the Benin Bronzes," (Unpublished Master's Thesis, Göteborg University, May 2006),7.

[47] Dohlvik, "Museums and their Voices, 7.

[48] Ekpo Eyo, "Repatriation of Cultural Heritage: The African Experience," in Flora E.S. Kaplan (ed.) *Museums and the Making of 'Ourselves: The Role of Objects in National Identity*, (London: Leicester University Press, 1994), 335-337.

[49] Joseph Nevadomsky, Barbora Půtová, and Václav Soukup, "Benin Art and Casting Technologies", *West Bohemian Historical Review*, Vol. 4, Issue 1, (2014), 96.

[50] Charles Gore, "Casting Identities in Contemporary Benin City", *African Arts*, Vol. 30, No. 3, (1997), 54-61, 56.

[51] Nevadomsky, Půtová, and Soukup, "Benin Art and Casting Technologies," 96.

at the command of the palace and it consisted very largely of ritual and ceremonial objects."[52]

The state of the Benin bronze industry is however different from what initially obtained pre-1897. There is a variation in the way artworks have been done since the independent Benin came first under British colonialism and later as part of an independent Nigeria. In present times, "the Benin arts are on longer solely produced for only royal affairs the system having been liberalised."[53] The extend of the liberalised natured of the Benin bronze industry was such that during the interregnum, British colonial officials are reported to have commissioned some art works to be done be the casters. According to Barbara Blackmum, Henry Gallwey, is known to have commissioned a brass plaque from the Igun Eromwon, the palace brass casters guild, and Major Cockbum commissioned a wax figure suitable for bronze casting.[54]

When the Benin bronze industry was controlled by the palace, works of art were largely objects of the royal court depicted a ceremonial event or the commemoration of a special occasion, with the liberality that followed, after the royal mandate was lifted, the "castings now reflect a variety of styles."[55] Charles Gore puts the change; thus, the events of 1897 profoundly altered the conditions and sources of patronage for brass casting. The Igun Eromwon declined, although the chiefs appointed by the British used the opportunity for some commissions. However, the re-establishment of the Obaship under Eweka II in 1914 and the rebuilding of the palace offered new opportunities, especially with the founding of a craft school within the palace. It provided instruction on brass-casting, which

[52] Robert Bradbury, *The Benin Kingdom and the Edo-Speaking Peoples of South-Western Nigeria*, (London: International African Institute, 1957), 26.

[53] Chika Ananwa, "Internationalisation of Benin Art Works", *Journal of Humanity*, Vol. 2, No. 1, (2014), 43.

[54] Barbara Blackmun, "Continuity and Change: The Ivories of Ovonramwen and Eweka II", *African Arts*, Vol. 30, No. 3, (1997), 73.

[55] Joseph Nevadomsky, Barbora Půtová, and Václav Soukup, "Benin Art and Casting Technologies", *West Bohemian Historical Review*, Vol. 4, Issue 1, (2014), 96.

was restricted exclusively to members of the guild. Direct patronage by the Oba was thus renewed, albeit in modified form. Other sources of patronage resulted in increased commodification of brass artefacts. Brass as a medium was no longer regulated exclusively by the Oba, while casting could take place in workshops on Igun Street and other parts of Benin City."[56]

Hitherto the commissioned works by Oba mostly served the core purpose of royalty for the palace as a result 'the bronze and ivory carvings today viewed as significant works of art had a variety of functions in the court life and ritual in Benin. As court art their primary purpose was to glorify the godlike king and the history of the powerful empire.[57] In all, the function of pre-colonial artworks was to venerate the Oba and the depict the empire in positive light. 'These artforms are commemorative in function and are the sacred artforms that furnish altars used in royal ancestral worship of Benin Obas and Queen Mothers."[58]

However, the functionality of art in the liberalised Benin bronze industry is largely determined by other factors. The shift has tilted towards economic goals. Almost of artefacts are done for the purpose of sale in the art market and not as a commemoration of a special event. With the liberalisation of the Benin bronze industry, the purpose of the artworks and its function has inevitably changed. Mostly, "their manufacturing process is strongly influenced by the current economic international and local discourse."[59] This has been reported in respect of the "commodification" of Benin bronze casting that, "that brass casting got an

[56] Charles Gore, "Casting Identities in Contemporary Benin City", *African Arts*, Vol. 30, No. 3, (1997), 57.

[57] Barbara Plankensteiner, "Benin: Kings and Rituals: Court Arts from Nigeria", *African Arts*, Vol. 40, No. 4, (2007), 77.

[58] Sweet Ufumwen Ebeigbe, "The Rhetorical Function of Portraits from Benin, Nigeria", *Wacana Seni Journal of Arts Discourse*, Vol. 12, (2013), 5.

[59] Joseph Nevadomsky, Barbora Půtová, and Václav Soukup, "Benin Art and Casting Technologies", *West Bohemian Historical Review*, Vol. 4, Issue 1, (2014), 102.

economic boost in the 1950s when expatriate Lebanese began buying object."[60] The post 1897 years, have witnessed a multiplicity of brass casting beyond the traditional heartland in which it was centred. This is amplified by Joseph Nevadomsky during the centenary of the British punitive expedition, that 'there is now more brass casting activity in Benin City than ever before, and that technical changes and new motifs emerged, such as the remarkable plaque with trivet-like legs depicting a colonial official meeting a chief and his retainers."[61]

The pre-colonial Benin Empire had a bourgeoning reputation for centuries before the punitive expedition of 1897. This is evident from documented tales of the earlier European visitors to the city in the sixteenth and seventeenth century who were impressed by the size and layout of the city.[62] The empire's reputation that stirred up interest from European travellers, giving it an international perception within the sphere of European historical literature and its inhabitants of that period. The underlining interest of Europeans was economic in nature as they had trade links with Benin. In 'the fifteenth and Sixteenth century, Portuguese and English mariners visited Benin and exchanged the products of their countries for pepper, "elephant teeth", and palm oil.'[63] The change in the stance of European powers towards African territories in the latter part of the nineteenth century altered Benin's equanimous relationship with Britain who had acquired control of the territories surrounding Benin at the Berlin Conference of 1885 where Africa was partitioned amongst the European powers. As a result, an independent Benin

[60] Joseph Nevadomsky, "Studies of Benin Art and Material Culture, 1897-1997", *African Arts*, Vol. 30, No. 3, (1997), 27.

[61] J. Nevadomsky, "Studies of Benin Art and Material Culture, 1897-1997", 27.

[62] Paula Ben-Amos Girshick and John Thornton, "Civil War in the Kingdom of Benin, 1689-1721: Continuity or Political Change?", *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (2001), 358., Barbara Plankensteiner, "Benin: Kings and Rituals: Court Arts from Nigeria", *African Arts*, Vol. 40, No. 4, (2007), 77., Olfert Dappers, *Description of Benin* (Amsterdam, 1668),

[63] Alan Burn, *History of Nigeria*, 1st ed. (London: George Allen & Unwin Limited, 1942), 292.

under the stewardship of Oba Ovonramwen had to contend with the cloak of an expansionist Britain lurking around its borders. Policy differences on trade[64] eventually came to a head when a British party led by Captain James Phillip were ambushed and killed by a group of Benin soldiers in January 1897. The aftermath of this ambush was the subsequent invasion of Benin by the British in February 1897. The domino effect of this invasion was that when the British troops entered the Oba's Palace, a large cache of ritual and ceremonial objects which were the pristine artworks were discovered. The looting of these objects subsequently commenced. This triggered a sequence of events that turned Benin from a centre known of trade to earlier European visitors to a place with a finesse of art.

The Coded Bronzes and the Historiography of Benin Kingdom

Breaking the codes that were carefully embedded in the bronzes to understand the meanings and messages kept scholars busy during the colonial era and thereafter, when they first appeared in Europe. The bronze objects should be seen with an eye on cultural context, history, condition and aesthetics as well as dynamics and change. Also, these frameworks of interpretations should not be "isolated from each other, but instead, must be viewed synergistically, simply because the understanding of one is likely to be affected by the interpretation of another."[65] The primary purpose the Oba of Benin made bronze artworks was to preserve and transmit information about the kingdom. As such, the bronzes were encoded with concepts, beliefs and other messages that served as essential reference for the people of Benin and their political system. Throughout colonial era and beyond, the bronzes continued to perform these roles in exhibition and art discussion among museum staff and historians all over the world. In the exhibition, the central role of Benin City is underlined both in its historical and contemporary contexts. For example, several Benin bronze artefacts continue to form part museum exhibition. The exhibition at the Ethnographic Museum in Stockholm,

[64] Thomas Obinyan, "The Annexation of Benin", *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 1, (1988), 29

[65] Stephen Mellor, "From delicious to not quite right: Subtleties in discerning the authenticity of African art" *Objects Specialty Group Post prints*, Volume Fourteen, 2007, 4-31, 27-28.

focused on a selection of historically significant cities around the world, among others Jerusalem, Benares (Varanasi), Peking and Benin City. In the Benin section, the displayed artefacts, among these three commemorative heads, are exhibited to describe the city as an administrative and religious centre of the kingship. The exhibition texts highlight the importance of the royal palace and its significant art works in Benin City, and detailed descriptions are given about the powers of the Oba. The briefer texts are available in both Swedish and English, however, the longer ones are only in Swedish. This is surprising and appalling because the museum is part of the Swedish government museum authority with a mandate to deal with world cultures.[66]

British colonial rule in Benin completely internationalised the Benin bronze artefacts between 1897 and 1960. It also ushered in an era of unrestricted negative human activities on the Benin bronzes such as looting, vandalism, thefts, unscientific excavation of grave goods, iconoclasm, illicit trafficking, among others. British colonial rule transformed them from their initial purpose of documentation to subjects of diplomatic struggles that now involved several nations. As documents in the Benin kingdom, the Benin bronzes were systematically secured at Ugherhoba, where they were consulted from time to time by the most senior agents of the state. The bronzes represent a depiction of the events, personalities and values of the various era in which they were sculpted. Each of these works of art carries an underlining message about the history of the kingdom; government and politics; religion and belief system as well as the Oba's relations with the various institutions of title holders and the people. Arts in Benin Kingdom were not "arts for art's sake."[67] Throughout pristine Africa, arts had its purpose particularly religious worship as psychological purposes. Within the African space, therefore, arts had its utilitarian purposes, which were multi-dimensional.

[66] Charlotta Dohlvik, "Museums and their Voices: A Contemporary Study of the Benin Bronzes," (Unpublished Master's Thesis, Göteborg University, May 2006), 33.

[67] Focus group discussion held with curators and art historians at the office of the Head of Department, Department of Theatre Art, Faculty of Arts, and University of Benin on 02/24/2020.

With the translocation and commercialisation, the perception and utility of the bronzes altered as they became loots and items for criminal trafficking. The question of the morality of continuously keeping the looted bronzes in foreign museums has also catapulted the bronzes to subjects of multilateral diplomacy with Nigeria at the centre stage [68] The collapse of European colonial empire in Africa, stimulated the agitation for the return of the artefacts and they are now being negotiated among countries and non-state actors. Currently, talks and negotiation are on-going between Nigeria, Germany, Netherlands and the United Kingdom for the return of the bronzes. Despite, these efforts, Nigeria has been unable to receive constructive response for the return of the country's cultural objects from foreign museums with the British museum being derisive of all requests from Nigeria for the return of the looted artworks that they inherited from their fathers that invaded and colonise Africa. The request of the Oba of Benin for the return of looted Benin bronzes and other artworks has also been ignored. In the meantime, Nigeria has continued to show weakness in engaging European nations and their museums on the question of returns of stolen artworks. Nigeria, therefore "is yet to appreciate the fact that antiquities seized, looted or stolen by violence cannot return except through pressure."[69]

Conclusion

The British colonial internationalization of the Benin bronze industry between 1897 and 1960 represents a paradigmatic case of how imperial intervention fundamentally restructured indigenous African artistic production. The punitive expedition of 1897 functioned not merely as a military conquest but as a catalyst for the systematic dismantling of an intricate sociotechnical system that had sustained bronze casting excellence for centuries. The dispersal of the Igun-Eromwon guild members, the destruction of the *Iwowa* treasury, and the

[68] Opoku Kwame, "Compromise on the Restitution of Benin Bronzes," Feature Article *Modern Ghana*, Adentan, Accra, Ghana, Publish on May 2, 2011, available at https://www.modernghana.com/news/315254/compromise-on-the-restitution-of-benin-bronzes.html

[69] Zacharys Gundu, "Looted Nigerian heritage – an interrogatory discourse around repatriation" *Contemporary Journal of African Studies* 2020; 7 (1): 47-66, 58.

seventeen-year suspension of monarchical patronage irrevocably severed the institutional continuities that had ensured intergenerational knowledge transfer and artistic innovation. The restoration of 1914, rather than reviving the pre-colonial order, inaugurated a new era characterized by market liberalization, technological regression, and the commodification of cultural heritage. The transformation of bronze casting from a sacred obligation bound to royal authority into a commercial enterprise responsive to external demand precipitated qualitative deterioration evident in multiple dimensions: the substitution of brass for bronze, the abandonment of rigorous apprenticeship protocols, the proliferation of fraudulent antiquing techniques, and the thematic impoverishment of artistic output. These developments underscore how colonial economic imperatives subordinated indigenous aesthetic values to the extractive logic of global capitalism. Furthermore, the British administration's failure to invest in productive capacity or technical improvement—despite sustained European and American demand—illustrates the instrumental rather than developmental character of colonial economic policy. The bronzes became valuable commodities for export while the craftsmen remained entrenched in precarious, individualized production arrangements devoid of the corporate support structures that had previously sustained their profession. The contemporary significance of this historical analysis extends beyond academic historiography. The ongoing diplomatic negotiations for the restitution of looted Benin bronzes must account for the colonial transformation of production contexts; the artefacts sought for repatriation emerged from a system radically different from that which produces bronzes today. Understanding this discontinuity is essential for developing appropriate frameworks for heritage management, artistic revitalization, and the ethical governance of cultural property in post-colonial Nigeria. The Benin bronze industry's colonial experience thus serves as a critical reference point for broader discussions concerning the recovery of indigenous knowledge systems and the decolonization of African material culture.