

# Histo-Cultural Discourse on the Igue Festival, Pre/Post Benin Invasion and the Reparation Debate

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## ABSTRACT

In the growth and development of ancient Benin kingdom into a rich and powerful community that flourished in festival celebrations, and artistic splendor, the kings and people fought and won several wars except the war with the British Empire in 1897. The British overthrew the monarchy that had ruled the kingdom for almost a thousand years and replaced it with an interregnum that lasted for seventeen years until the monarchy was restored in 1914. This paper provides an analysis on the celebration of the *Igue* festival. *Igue* is a cultural and spiritual event, and visitors are prohibited from visiting the kingdom during the festival, especially the Europeans whose presence and economic interest in the kingdom had been regarded with suspicion for some time. This injunction Captain James Phillip, the British Consul disregarded and paid for with his life and that of his cohorts prompting a reprisal attack and subsequent looting of the kingdom's artifacts. This study explores the rich cultural heritage of the Benin Kingdom as seen through the lens of the festival. It also examines the historical context of the festival, impact of the British invasion, and the consequences of the fall of the monarchy and the looting of its treasures. The paper takes a look at the ongoing efforts to repatriate the looted artifacts and highlights the implication of the return of these historic treasures to the people of the kingdom. It concedes that repatriation without restitution is not enough. This paper adopts a histo-cultural approach to the study.

**Keywords:** Festival, looting, artifacts, monarchical plunder

## INTRODUCTION

Contacts between the peoples of different cultures, communities and nations have been on-going since the early millennium. Much of inter community communication precedes the period of the Bible which is replete with several accounts of trans-communal encounters. In the sub-Saharan region, contacts between the Berber merchants of North Africa and the Arabs with the early kingdoms of West Africa such as Ghana, Mali, Songhai and Kanem-Bornu empires are recorded in various history books (Conrad, 2010; Jansen, 2018; Amoah-Boampong, 2016; Hiribarren, 2016). Similar contacts between Benin and the outside world have been observed as far back as the sixteenth century (Aremu and Ediagbonya 2018). These early contacts

with neighbouring kingdoms such as the Igbos, Yoruba and Dahomey based on trade and spiritual consultations brought about the desire to expand and bring some of these kingdoms under her rule. Justifying why the monarchy at some point in history exercised political influence over places like Eko (Lagos), Ghana, Dahomey, Onitsha, Asaba, Agbor, Issele-Uku, Warri, Idah, Owo etc. with some of these towns actually owing their corporate existence to the Benin kingdom (Etsename, 2004). The Benin kingdom has a vibrant history and a rich cultural heritage. It was renowned for its advanced artistic traditions, including bronze casting, ivory carving, and intricate beadwork (Gunsch, 2017). Central to Benin's cultural identity was the celebration of festivals, which showcased the kingdom's art, music, dance, and religious rituals. However, the festival celebration, which is emblematic of the kingdom's spiritual thrust and cultural pride was instrumental to the tragic invasion by the British in 1897 (Phillip, 2021). The unfortunate dethronement and suspension of the second phase of the monarchy that was inaugurated in 1200 with the crowning of Eweka 1, disrupted the traditional dynamics in the kingdom. This was a monarchical rule had been in place for about seven centuries (Ekhaguosa, 2006). Oba Eweka 1 was crowned in 1200 after the reign of Ogiso Owodo ended (Owodo was the last of the thirty-one Ogisos to rule the kingdom since its inception (Ebohon, 2010).

## FESTIVAL CELEBRATION IN BENIN KINGDOM

Benin has a network of festivals that are woven into *Ugie* (celebration) which is the umbrella of all festivals in the kingdom (Ehianu and Idumwonyi, 2015, Egharevba, 2019). *Igue* festival is one of the celebrations under *Ugie* and it signals a solemn period in Benin City during which many rites are observed for the spiritual cleansing of the society (Izu, 2012). Hence, *Igue* is always celebrated in the last month of every year. As part of the celebration are the observation of some taboos which include abstaining from late return from the farm, abstinence from quarrelling, no blood shedding as well as restriction on visitors to the kingdom. These regulations were to ensure the efficacy of the rituals and prayers rendered to God and the ancestors (Cunningham and Reich, 2006). *Ague* is a ritual within *Igue* festival during which offerings and intense prayers are made on all ancestral altars in the palace in association with fasting (Orobator and Aiguobarueghian, 2020). Another festival is the *Ugie-Oro* (Omoera and Aluede, 2011, Abbe, 2015), the celebration of the bird of prophecy introduced by Oba Esigie in 1506 after his victory over the Igalala people. *Ugie-Ewere* festival is celebrated in Benin during which all evil spirits causing havoc are symbolically chased out of the society with smouldering sticks held by the people and thrown into the forest, after which the leaf symbolizing peace (*ebe-ewere*) is plucked and brought home as symbol of communal peace and friendship (Orobator and Aiguobarueghian, 2020). Other festivals and celebrations include Olokun festival celebrated in Urhonigbe town. *Ugie-Nene*, *Ugie-Eroba*, *Ugie-Nobo*, and *Eho* that are celebrated in the month of September every year to pay homage to the family ancestors.

*Igue* festival is celebrated at the family unit and lasts from nine to fourteen days accompanied with dance and funfair (Nevadomsky, 2015). Another festival celebrated in Benin is the state Festival for Arts and Culture, which used to be an annual festival. It used to be organized by the Ministry of Arts, Culture and Tourism (MACT) in association with the Edo State Council for Arts and Culture (ESCAC), but like most traditional festival, its observance has fizzled out. Generally, Benin kingdom's festivals are classified as palace festivals, social festivals and religious festivals to worship gods such as Olokun, Ogun, Orunmila, spirits, ancestors and to commemorate harvest (Ukwandu and Izu, 2016; Abbe, 2015). Festival celebration in Benin City is a significant event that brings together the community, reaffirm cultural identities, and pay homage to past monarchs and heroines, and honour ancestral spirits. Festivals such as the *Igue* festival marks the renewal of the Oba's (king's) power and mysticism in the kingdom. These celebrations involved elaborate rituals, artistic displays, masquerades, and other performances that espouses the kingdom's cultural diversity, commemorate its artistic mastery and prayers for economic prosperity (Cunningham and Reich, 2006). It was during the celebration of the *Igue* festival that Captain James Phillip, a soldier

representing the Queen of England attempted to forcefully gain entry into the kingdom, and in the bid to resist his intrusion and desecration of the community's taboos and spiritual cleansing (Roese, 2008), they were attacked by the kingdom's forces and killed.

## BRITISH INVASION OF BENIN

Motivated by geopolitical and economic interests, and a desire to avenge the killing of Captain James Phillip, and his convoy ruthlessly killed by the Benin City's army, the British launched a punitive expedition against the Benin Kingdom in 1897 (Ioraa, 2023). The invasion aimed to overpower the Benin King, establish political and economic control, and exploit the community's rich and diverse forest resources, especially timber, rubber, gum, palm oil and numerous other products. Initial skirmish arose during the celebration of *Igue* at the end of 1897 when a British trade/military contingent under the leadership of Captain James Phillip attempted to enter the kingdom forcefully in spite of the fact that he was informed that visitors were not welcomed at such a period when the community was undergoing spiritual cleansing, neither does the king welcome visitors to his palace until the end of the festival. However, the authors speculate that Captain James Phillip seeing himself as the embodiment of the colonial master of this vast West African territory (which his country Britain intends to bring under their total control), hence refused to accede to the dictates of a traditional ruler whom he sees as subordinate to him, inimical to his country's economic desire, and whom they understandably out power in terms of military capacity (Ehkaguosa, 2006). Captain James Phillip refusal to heed the advice of the chiefs sent to meet them at the border resulted in a fatal skirmish in which he lost his life. Some months later, the British retaliatory force, under the command of Rear Admiral Harry Rawson, launched an attack on the kingdom, and after a long struggle resulted in the capture and exile of Oba Ovonramwen, the destruction of the royal palace, and looting of the kingdom's numerous prized artifacts. The plundering of the wealth and resources of conquered territories has always been a justifiable act in warfare (Thompson, 2004).

## INVASION AND LOOTING OF ARTIFACTS

Prior to the confrontation with the British, the production of art works especially wood carvings and bronze works according to Nevadomski (2014), were very lucrative, prestigious and revered in the kingdom as the Obas had monopoly and control over them. Until recent times, art patronage globally was predominantly the preserve of the royals (Court art), who were the only class of people with means as they controlled the commonwealth of their subjects. It was reported that in the Benin Kingdom:

*"...the tusks of every elephant killed were the property of the Oba, the Divine Ruler, who retained one tusk for himself and offered the other one for sale" (Fisher, 1988, 68).*

The palace established and funded guilds that were responsible for training artists, production and co-ordination of art works in the kingdom. The headquarter of the guilds was situated in the palace while the major production centres of woodworks and bronze casting were respectively located at Igbesanmwan (Omoruan and Uzzi, 2022), and Igun district of the city (Odiahi, 2017). These art works were mostly carvings and bronze replicas of past kings and heroines of the kingdom which when produced were sent to the palace for storage or used for decoration. This accounts for the presence of a large number of prized artifacts in the palaces. The kings used them as gift items to visiting kings and very important personalities, while they also presented sceptres to rulers of territories they had conquered as symbols of their authority. Some of these artifacts that initially found their way to Britain and other European cities as gifts became objects of admiration. Secondly, the report that they were produced in Benin suggest that there must be several more of such precious artifacts there. Hence, the British were convinced that any financial loss incurred in the course of attacking the kingdom will eventually be defrayed from the spoils of war. In

addition, this was seen as an opportunity to gain direct access to the hinterland (Ekejiuba, 1972) to exploit the numerous forest products they have been paying huge sums of money to purchase from the likes of King Jaja of Opobo and Nana of Itsekiri who acted as middlemen between them and products coming from the interior. With this information, the British monarchy and government were convinced that any eventual war or loss accrued in the cost of the war will be economically expedient. There were however some humanitarian reasons such as human sacrifice behind the British attack and conquest of the kingdom (Osador and Otoide, 2008).

The looting of Benin artifacts by the British troops was an act of cultural theft and pillage. Thousands of priceless artifacts, including bronze and ivory sculptures, royal regalia, and other cultural treasures, were removed from the royal palace (Willet, 2018), and the residences of many of the nobles such as Chiefs Uso, Ologbosere and Obarisiagbon, who were implicated in the death of Captain James Phillips and his entourage. The looted artifacts were later sold, dispersed, and found their way into private collections and museums around the world, including the British Museum in London where a large cache of the artifacts is exhibited till date.

## CONSEQUENCE, RESULT AND LEGACY

As a people whose belief in the supreme God is linked to the divinities, past kings and illustrious ancestors that act as intermediaries between them and the Supreme Being, the removal of the images from their traditional shrines, grooves and other sacred places affected their spiritual and psychological well-being. These divinities are often represented in artistic carvings and bronze castings which account for the flourishing of the practice in the community. Furthermore, the loss of these artifacts has had a devastating impact on the kingdom's cultural identity and artistic traditions. The removal of these artifacts from their original contexts and relocation to new settings resulted in the desecration of their myth and power, distortion and misrepresentation of information surrounding them. The looting also fuelled debates by numerous international consultants and pressure groups on cultural repatriation and the ethics of retaining looted cultural artifacts (Osuagwu, 2020).

Another consequence of the looting of the artefacts is that the proposed plan to return the first set of artefacts to the community brought about a media confrontation between the state government that was not in existence at the period the artefacts were removed, and the traditional authority which are the original owners of the artefacts, which modern day political expediency has made a subject of the state government (Aidelokhai, 2022). This crass situation was compounded by some independent groups supporting both parties in the dispute on who should take custody of the returned artefacts. This has led to the reopening of previously sheathed suspicion between the palace authority, and the Obaseki's family whose grandfather Chief Agho Ogbeideyo Obaseki, was the Iyase of Benin kingdom at the time of the invasion, and next in rank to the king. He was installed as a puppet ruler following the emplacement of indirect rule system after the king, (Oba Ovonramwen) was dethroned (Nigeria Television Authority (NTA) drama series "Aiguobasinmwin") (Ihonde, 2001). It is fait accompli that the man whom the British installed as the traditional ruler during the period that they established and consolidated their rule in Benin kingdom is the one whose grandson is the Governor of the state some 125 years later (Ohunmwuango, and Urhoghide, 2019), when the European countries implicated in the saga are attempting to return the looted artefacts. This coincidence in one way or the other engendered the resurgence of suppressed historical animosity between these foremost families in the kingdom.

Between 1897 and 1914 when the monarchy was suspended, the British established some administrative structures through which they ruled the community. Agho Ogbeideyo-Obaseki, the grandfather of the incumbent Governor of the State acted as head of the traditional authority. By the time the monarchy was

restored in 1914, and Oba Eweka II was crowned, he found most of the Benin chiefs and their sons too wealthy and powerful (having amassed influence and wealth through appointments into various important positions in the kingdom) that he could no longer exercise sufficient authority in the dispensation of justice in the kingdom (Edebiri, 2005). Incidentally, Oba Ovonramwen, the father of Oba Eweka II and some prominent Benin chiefs including chiefs Ero, Obarisiagbon and Ologbosere (Ekhaguosa, 2006, Izu, 2012) who were accused of complicity in the murder of Captain James Phillip and his teams were among the first to be tried under the new judicial system with Agho Ogbeideyo-Obaseki as the presiding traditional head of Benin kingdom.

The reformation in the Benin administrative sector began during the time of Agho Ogbeideyo as regent in the kingdom, however, it was in the reign of Oba Akenzua II who mounted the throne in 1933 that these changes became fully grounded. Oba Akenzua II was the first Oba of Benin that had formal education having attended Government School Benin City and King's college, Lagos (Von Hellermann and Usuanlele, 2009). In Benin kingdom, it was customary for an Oba to marry his first daughter to the Iyase, his next in command. In spite of the circumstance in the kingdom when Oba Eweka II became Oba and Agho Ogbeide-Oyo the Iyase, Oba Eweka II got his second daughter Princess Ebose married to Chief Agho Ogbeide-Oyo in June 1919 in order to maintain this long-established tradition especially at a very delicate period in his rule when he was still regarded by the British and Iyase Ogbeide-Oyo with suspicion. The marriage was meant to cement their relationship and put the past behind them. However, Agho Ogeideyo passed on, on 9th of September 1920 barely a year after the marriage (Edebiri, 2005). Chief Agbonifo Obaseki replaced his father Agho Ogbeideyo-Oyo as the new Iyase of Benin in 1920 but relinquished the title during the reign of Oba Akenzua II who was crowned in 1933. Iyase Okoro Otun was appointed by the Oba as replacement.

In his early years in office, Oba Akenzua II ruled through the Native Authority System through which he exercised sole authority over the kingdom. Soon people began to resist this system. In the attempt by the Oba to placate the people, he established a council known as "Iguobaziro" (I confer with the king) but this was not satisfactory either, as the people petitioned the colonial administration requesting for Benin Native Authority to be democratized. In the fore front of this agitation was Mr. H. O. Uwaifo who was later invited together with some members of the Benin Community on 15th February 1938 to a meeting with the Chief Commissioner of Southern Provinces Mr. G. G. Shute Esq., Mr. H. F. Marshall the District Officer Benin Division and the Resident (Edebiri, 2005). The agitators for change succeeded and were requested to submit a proposal that will make Benin Native Authority more democratic. The result of the proposal led to the release of the H. F. Marshall Report of 1938 which till date is an important reference document in traditional jurisprudence in Edo and Delta States. Prior to this time the people had confronted the Oba on the Forestry law, the building rule and water rate law which made them pay high taxes and tenement rates. Between 1941 and 1942, the attacks on what the people referred to as the Oba's highhandedness became sporadic and intense so much so that the people under the aegis of Iyase Okoro-Otun and H. O. Uwaifo urged Benin people to boycott the palace and with threats to depose the Oba. Oba Akenzua II was compelled to attend a meeting of the Benin Community Association at the residence of Iyase Okoro-Otun, and with the intervention of several traditional rulers around the area, some of the vexatious laws were relaxed and peace was achieved (Edebiri, 2005). On 27 July 1943, Chief Omokha Ogiuvbe otherwise known as Okoro Otun passed on.

Due to the rising power of the Iyase in Benin kingdom and his stirring of several agitations by the people against the monarchy, the Oba became reluctant to appoint a new Iyase to fill the vacant post and later abolished the title (Bradbury, 2013). In the schism that ensued with the abolishment of the title, there was stalemate in the appointment of another Iyase for many years until in a surprising move the Oba replaced the title with a more malleable one "Obadeyando" (Oba overshadows Benin people) of Benin kingdom in 1947. He went on to declare the Iyase title as "oghionba" (enemy of the Oba). This announcement resulted in series of protests across the kingdom spearheaded by Benin Tax Payers Association (BTPA), and they

petitioned the colonial masters insisting that the Oba must repeal his announcement and restore the Iyase title, or on the other hand replace the new title with “Edodeyanoba” (Edo overshadows the Oba), if he is so enthusiastic in renaming the title. The intention of this change of title from Iyase to Obadeyando was to psychologically subject the people of Benin City under the Oba. In the end, the Oba heeded the demand of the people and restored the title to its previous state. The 1953 and 1959 Federal elections effectively removed political authority from the monarchy and placed it in the hand of the people with members elected into the Benin Parliament (Edebiri, 2005). The reality of the loss of power in Benin kingdom was expressed by Oba Erediauwa, the father of the present monarch in his speech on Saturday 30th November 1996 on the occasion of the Appeal Fund Raising Ceremony of the great Benin Centenary in Calabar. He observed that of all the kings in Benin kingdom from the time of Oronmiyan (1200 A.D.) till date (1996) the most talked and written about Oba is Ovonramwen, the last independent king of Benin Empire (Plankensteiner, 2016; Archival Global Resources 1996: 1).

While the issue of the abolition of the Iyase title raged on, a new group known as Edo Young People Party (EYPP) emerged in support of the Oba. They castigated the Benin Tax Payers Association for attempting to deny the Oba the right to decide over traditional matters in the kingdom. The group had D. E. Uwaifo as Chairman and J. O. Edomwonyi as secretary. In the ensuing dispute between the two groups, the Oba called for peace on the advice of the Benin Resident Administrator and revoked his earlier announcement to abolish the title of Iyase of Benin kingdom and appointed Chief S. I. Idehen, the Esogban and third in command in Benin kingdom as the new Iyase in 1948. The Benin Tax Payers Association (BTPA) which majority of its members belonged to the dreaded secret Ogboni cult revolted at the news of the announcement of Chief Idehen as the new Iyase, who because of his age they called a “dead wood.” They petitioned the colonial masters and threatened anarchy in the kingdom if the Benin Divisional Council was not allowed to propose a candidate for the office. Consequently, due to pressure mounted by the British Resident, the Oba withdrew the title from Chief S. I. Idehen leaving the title for the most preferred candidate Honourable Gaius Obaseki who was nominated by the Benin Divisional Council, a council which he chaired and was therefore unanimously approved on 18th April 1948 (Edebiri 2005:56). The fact that the Oba later accented to the choice of Gaius Obaseki as Iyase (Bradbury, 2013) demonstrates the power shift from the Oba to the people. After the death of Honourable Gaius Obaseki on 12th April 1956 no other member of the Obaseki family was appointed to the exalted position of Iyase until the reign of Oba Erediauwa who conferred the title on Chief Hon. (Justice) Andrews Otutu Obaseki, the senior son of Chief Gaius Obaseki in December 1994. The appointment of Chief Hon. (Justice) Andrews Otutu Obaseki as Iyase of Benin kingdom made the title hereditary to the Obaseki family. However, the researchers observe that there has not been any other member of the Obaseki family appointed to that exalted traditional office since then.

It is worth observing that the British invasion of the empire, greatly compromised the authority of the Oba, giving certain categories of people in the kingdom the audacity to challenge, and in some cases disobey the authority of the Oba which hitherto was unheard of in the kingdom. The British intervention in the society was selfish and commercial while they hypocritically engaged the Bible as a tool to coerce the people into accepting their rule. Records indicate that there was active involvement of the Anglican Church in slavery that dehumanized and killed millions of Africans and impoverished their communities for centuries until it was abolished decades before they invaded Benin kingdom (Oakes, 2012).

## **ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES OF OBA EWUARE II**

On coming to power, Oba Ewuare II reorganized the administrative structure and environmental outlook of the palace. Previously, royal family members formed part of the work force in the palace holding important offices, while pedestrians roamed the palace premises all day long. Oba II changed the status quo, replaced most of the previous employees and curbed loitering and unauthorized parking of vehicles in the palace.

Some members of the workforce were redeployed to other government units mostly to surrounding local councils where the Oba exercises influence. He appointed a new secretary to the palace and reconstructed major palace structures such as the ultra-modern reception hall inside the palace, residence of the Oba, the reception wing and the gate (Aihevba, 2019). Contrary to a previous arrangement when the gate was manned by civilians, a mini police post has been put in place with the presence of the police force round the clock. This reorganization brought about a halt in loitering in the palace premises. Similarly, various trading posts dotting the palace environment where food, drinks, books, traditional costumes and artefacts are on sale have been shut down or re-ordered.

He established for the first time a palace cultural troupe known as Benin Royal Troupe. One of the most significant achievements recorded in the reign of Oba Ewuare II was the great awareness created on the issue of the looted artefacts and their occasioned return (Nwauche, 2021). The demand for the return of the looted artefact began in the reign of Oba Akenzua II who in 1938 received the looted and distinguished coronation regalia from Britain. This call was continued by his successor Oba Erediauwa. Hence, in 2014, Doctor Walker, the grandson of the leader of the British punitive expedition to Benin kingdom that took place in 1897 returned two bronze heads – the cock and an ancestral head that were in the possession of the family. When Oba Ewuare II was crowned, he made it clear in his speech during the ceremony that the struggle to return the looted artefacts (Bodenstein, 2022) will be one of his cardinal objectives. The Oba stated that, “the return of all the treasures taken away will begin a new era of Benin history and civilization”. Five years later with immense lobbying by the federal government, the state government and the palace authorities, agreements have now been reached with some of the people and institutions in possession of some the artefact to return them. This is a very significant achievement considering its importance in the history, culture, religion and psyche of the people.

Another significant achievement of the Oba is the compilation and unveiling of the Red Book entitled “The Benin Monarchy – an Analogy of Benin History” which was launched on the day of his coronation (<https://rhbooks.com.ng>History>) The Red Book is a comprehensive and picturesque compilation of Benin art and history. It is a voluminous compilation that was sold for one hundred and fifty thousand Naira during the coronation ceremony. As at the time the researchers visited the palace, the price of the book has been reduced by fifty percent to make it affordable to most citizens, but it was no longer available. The Oba also instituted traditional legislation to end female trafficking (Osiogun and Osarenren, 2019), he abolished the erstwhile restive community Youth Associations and replaced it with Community Development Association (CDA's), which he announced will be headed by Solomon Arase a retired Inspector General of Police. A (Omojiade and Negoro, 2014) significant achievement recorded too, was in the quelling of the tension between the two major political parties in the state – the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP), and the All-Progressives Congress (APC). This feat was achieved prior to the 2020 gubernatorial election in the state. Following a period of unrest and apprehension, the Oba played host to the gubernatorial candidates of the parties, Godwin Nogheghase Obaseki, and Osagie Ize-Iyamu and some of their supporters in his palace to broker a truce between them, which ushered in calm in the state (Odion, 2022). In spite of the fact that the peace meeting was criticized as biased in some ways, hostility between the members of the two political parties ceased and the election was conducted in a free and fair environment. He also established the Benin Royal Museum, which will be the repository for the returned looted artefacts. All of these were achieved within the first five years of his reign and was meant to be celebrated on his birthday October 2020 but was postponed and later celebrated on Monday 12th December 2021 together with the handing over ceremony of some of the returned looted Benin artefacts.



Figure 1: Examples of Benin bronzes displayed at the British Museum in London, Britain.

Source: REUTERS/Toby Melville/File Photo (January 25, 2023).

The preparation for the reception of some of the looted artefact by Britain, Germany and the University of Aberdeen in Scotland was an occasion that highlighted the differences between the two leaders in the state with each of them laying custodianship of the properties. This ding-dong between the two leaders in the state started with the plan by the state government to establish a Legacy Restoration Trust (LRT) – Edo War Arts Museum for the repository of the artefacts, while on the other hand the palace was making a separate arrangement to keep the returned artefacts in the proposed Benin Royal Museum (BRM). These conflicting arrangements brought about diverse statements from the state government and the palace in the month of October 2022 as to who will take possession of the ancient crafts. The researchers observe that the resultant tension by these different opinions was however quelled when the federal government announced that the artefacts will be returned to the real owners: the palace authority. On the 12th of December at an auspicious ceremony attended by the Nigerian High Commissioner to Britain, the Director General (DG) National Commission for Museum and Monuments, Babatunde Adebisi, the Permanent Secretary, Federal Ministry of Arts and Culture, The Emir of Kano, Aminu Ado Bayero, Charles Edosomwan (lawyer to the palace), as well as a number of traditional rulers across the country, the documents enabling the Oba to take possession of the artefacts were signed and transferred. This put an end to the controversy surrounding the custodianship of the returned artefacts. It is important to note that only a fraction of the looted artefacts has been returned to Benin City so far. Majority are still out there in private collections and government museums all over the world with the most controversial one been the Queen Idia mask (the symbol of FESTAC 77), which is still at the British museum in London (Kuper, 2021). The seeming misunderstanding between the state governor and Oba Ewuare II was captured in a post in the social media on 14th July 2021 by one Joseph Eniola (PhD) writing in support of the state governor in reaction to an earlier post on 10th July 2021 in favour of the Benin monarch entitled “Benin monarch on return of artefacts (Live-Arise News)



– Arise exclusive on Oba of Benin.



Figure 2: Some artefacts handed over were part of 72 Benin items in the Horniman's collection. Source: Christian Sinibaldi – The Guardian, 28, Nov. 2022.

## NEW STRUCTURES

In spite of the temporary standstill in the repatriation of the artefacts, there is great optimism that previous diplomatic, media, and individual efforts made to advocate for their return will yield more results in the future. This hope has given rise to certain controversy that has prompted the state government to build a new cultural, tourist, and entertainment centre named after Sir Victor Uwaifo, sculptor, inventor and the most successful and popular musician in the community (Uwaifo, 2018). The Sir Victor Uwaifo entertainment hub is located in the former Nigerian Observer newspaper building along Airport Road in Benin City, where the tabloid had operated since its inception in 1968. The new tourism hub has a hall with cutting-edge audio and lighting technology for holding public performances. It has also facilities for the training of young artists in the state. On the other hand, the prestigious Oba Akenzua II cultural centre (Dolz, 2020) has served as the location of socio-cultural events in the state, as well as the office of Edo state council of arts and culture since its commissioning in 1995. In 2016, after Adams Alliu Oshomhole's term as governor of the state came to an end, he turned over control of the centre to the palace authority, an action which appeared not to go down well with his successor, Godwin Obaseki. To this end, the researcher observed that, the Oba Akenzua II complex is being reconstructed with the main hall converted into a number of cutting-edge micro cinema halls and the main lobby a gallery. However, it was reported that the civil defence, a security organization of the government stormed the centre in the month of June 2023, shot sporadically into the air, evacuated and locked up the premises (Oriakhi, 2023). It is hoped that this impasse will be resolved to enable the completion of the centre and establishment of the Benin royal museum not only to enhance the promotion of cultural and tourist activities in the neighbourhood, but to provide a permanent and befitting site managed by the original owners of the artefacts for effective protection and security of these treasured

and abused artefacts from being further abused in the hands of an ill motivated and disillusioned class of civil servants.

## CONCLUSION

The festival celebration, British invasion, and subsequent looting of Benin artefacts represent a dark chapter in the history and culture of the people. However, the ongoing efforts for restitution and repatriation is offering hope for the restoration of the Benin artefacts and the acknowledgment of historical injustices perpetuated by the British and their allies in their quest for political and economic dominance of a once flourishing and wealthy African kingdom. Sustaining the efforts at returning these cultural treasures unjustly removed from the Benin kingdom in the nineteenth century will not only rectify past wrongs but also foster cultural understanding and appreciation in a globalized world of the twenty-first century.

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