

Collaboration and Critical History. Notes on the conference 'Exhibiting Difficult Histories: Benin Objects and their Potential for New Forms of Representation' at the Humboldt Forum Berlin on 19 April 2024¹

No other objects have generated as much interest in the debate about looted art from colonial contexts in Germany as the iconic Benin objects of the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin. In the summer of 2021, the Ethnologisches Museum decided to retribute, to the country of origin, Nigeria, all 512 objects that had come to Berlin as a result of the so-called British Punitive Expedition of 1897. The museum leadership also felt compelled to completely redesign an exhibition on Benin that had been planned since 2015, having to do so in a very short period of time. Since then, the question of how the perspectives of members of the communities of origin and the representatives of national and international diaspora groups, who also insist on having a say, can be integrated into the exhibition concepts has become a far more pressing issue for the responsible curators than before. To mark the opening of a newly designed section of the Benin exhibition in the Humboldt Forum, the Ethnologisches Museum recently invited five renowned academics from Nigeria, the United States, Great Britain, Germany and Sweden to a symposium in Berlin. The organisers hoped their findings on 'exhibiting difficult histories' would provide inspiration for their own future exhibition practice.

In his welcoming address, Collection Director LARS-CHRISTIAN KOCH (Berlin) emphasised the Nigerian partners' ongoing desire to have their culture represented in the Humboldt Forum. Mr Koch highlighted the Ethnologisches Museum's central endeavour to enter into a process of collaboration with the various communities of origin in connection with controversial objects and to look for ways to represent this process in the exhibitions.

In their introduction, the curators of the Benin objects, VERENA RODATUS (BERLIN) and MARIA ELLENDORFF (BERLIN) described the extent to which the originally planned Benin exhibition, which would have featured more than 200 originals, had become a 'hindrance and cause of anxiety' at the Humboldt Forum given the looming restitution and a changed public climate for dealing with German colonial history. The curatorial response to this challenge, conceived for the final opening of the museum in September 2022,

¹ This text was first published in German on 14 May 2024 on the online platform H-Soz-Kult under the title 'Tagungsbericht: Exhibiting Difficult Histories: Benin Objects and their Potential for New Forms of Representation'.

would have been transformed into a 'process-oriented exhibition' geared towards constant revision. On the one hand, the number of historical exhibits was reduced to 50 objects and, on the other, the exhibition no longer focused on Benin's history as before, but on its artistic present and the restitution process. The exhibition showcases, which have now been newly opened as part of an initial revision, focus on the regional interdependencies of the historical Kingdom of Benin and its involvement in the transatlantic slave trade. This adjustment can be read as a reaction to the claims made over the past two years by diasporic communities, such as the New York Restitution Study Group, whose members, as descendants of the people enslaved by the Kingdom of Benin, are demanding a say in all restitution processes. Based on this complex discourse and representation situation, Verena Rodatus formulated the key questions of the symposium: 'How do we use the artworks in exhibitions to illuminate their painful history without reducing them solely to witnesses of colonial atrocity? [...] And how do we exhibit Benin's involvement in global, historical entanglements, such as the trade in enslaved people, that favoured the production of the brass works?'

ANNIE E. COOMBES (London), pioneer and doyenne of museum analysis critical of colonialism, opened the symposium with an overview of curatorial strategies used by various museums in Europe and Africa over the last three decades to negotiate difficult histories from colonial contexts. She began by calling for museum presentations not to take oversimplified 'narratives of decolonisation' as a starting point, but rather to complicate the idea of 'Difficult Histories' (from the symposium title) and to understand it as a form of history that is indeed traumatic, 'but crucially often underwritten by ambiguity and ambivalence, where blame is hard to apportion and where victim and perpetrator are actually much more closely intertwined than either would want to admit.' As examples of initiatives that have successfully challenged prejudices in European museums and created a greater diversity of voices, Coombes referred to projects such as the innovative 'Refugee tour guides' programme at the Wallace Collection in London in 2012 and an open storage facility developed by the Vancouver Museum of Anthropology together with indigenous people and created according to the classification system of the First Nations in 2010. Coombes also discussed a video installation at the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum in Cologne from 2015 that focuses on diaspora cultures. She pointed to the British Museum as an outdated counter-example, which not only uses works of African art in its Sainsbury African Galleries to present a glossed-over image of globalisation processes in the Niger Delta, but also instrumentalises them in projects such as Neil MacGregor's 'A History of

the World in 100 Objects' to uncritically propagate and legitimise an outdated universalist museum model. Coombes discussed in detail the significance of contemporary Nigerian artists for European museums with regard to the reappraisal of the looting of Benin City by British soldiers in 1897. Artists such as Victor Ehikhamenor, Taiye Idahor and Phil Omodamwen, who are represented in the Benin section of the Humboldt Forum, would take on the role in ethnological museums of providing critical commentaries on established historical approaches. As Sharon MacDonald critically added in the subsequent discussion, such artists also provide a link to Benin's social present with their works, in this way covering potentially controversial areas of responsibility in exhibitions that curators are sometimes reluctant to address directly. Using the example of four museum 'flagship projects', the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa in Cape Town, the Palais de Lomé in Togo, the Musée des civilisations noires in Dakar and the Museum of West African Art in Benin City, Coombes illustrated the widespread desire in large parts of Africa to place not the tragic aspects of the 'difficult legacy' of colonialism, but a consistently Africa-centred historiography and art historiography at the centre of a museum programme, that corrects the Western perspective. In addition to these museums that are geared towards international appeal, Coombes believes that we should not lose sight of the diverse local initiatives in various regions of Africa, which often address the difficult issue of memorialising conflicts between different ethnic groups in a more convincing way than national museums that focus on uniform group identities.

STAFFAN LUNDÉN (Gothenburg) presented a comparative study of the Benin exhibitions at the British Museum and the National Museum of Benin City with a special focus on the questions of how the museums present painful and controversial aspects of the past. Whose stories are emphasised or concealed in the process? Using the topics of 'scientific racism', 'colonial plunder', 'human sacrifice', 'slavery' and 'gender hierarchies' as examples, Lundén was able to convincingly demonstrate that both museums use different strategies of 'neutralisation' to interpret historical contexts to the advantage of their own institutions. While the British Museum, for example, tries to minimise the consequences of the looting of 1897 by referring (historically incorrectly) to the compensation it provided for British victims, and uses Felix von Luschan rather than the British curators as an example when discussing the topic of 'scientific racism', the Benin City Museum discusses the subject of 'human sacrifice' completely detached from the realm of religion and ritual and solely in the context of law and justice, ignoring known historical facts. Lundén devoted particular attention to the class perspective using the example of new research findings on

the compensation paid to British officers ('Hamilton's pajamas') compared to the failure to compensate the families of the 124 indigenous porters killed in the aftermath of the British 'punitive expedition'. Lundén spoke in favour of an intersectional approach, which should take greater account of the previously neglected categories of 'class' and 'gender' alongside the analytical category of 'race' when examining 'difficult stories' from colonial contexts.

KOKUNRE EGHAFFONA (Benin City) reported on the lack of interest among the local population in Benin City in the artefacts from the former Kingdom of Benin exhibited in the National Museum. She believes that the main reason for the stagnation in visitor numbers over the past 20 years is the disruption of traditional storage and presentation methods for Benin objects in the context of colonisation and the adoption of a Western exhibition style with its 'predictable museum glass displays'. The latter have remained alien to the local population to this day. In order to counteract this development, she argued in favour of an exhibition practice geared towards African needs, which should not present exhibits such as the Benin bronzes as objects of art worthy of admiration, but rather emphasise their everyday ritual significance. As an orientation for such a change in presentation, she referred to her research findings (based on interviews with palace dignitaries and members of the royal family) on the very complex traditional forms of presentation of cult objects in the palace and on family altars. Eghafona combined her vision of innovative exhibitions as a 'play of enlightenment, stimulation, amusement, and instruction' with an appeal to Western museums to be more mindful when adopting colonially influenced terminology in their exhibition work.

TUKUFU ZUBERI (Philadelphia) gave a talk on the process of redesigning the Africa Galleries at the Penn Museum in 2017–2019. In addition to findings from numerous research discussions with African museum curators, he was guided in particular by the experiences and needs of members of the African diaspora, for whom museums have long been 'very hostile spaces'. The central aim of the curatorial renewal was therefore the 'decolonization of the museum narratives', which made the colonialist imprint on the representation of African material culture in Western museums visible. Drawing on insights from Critical Race Theory, Zuberi explained that true decolonisation goes far beyond the museum and requires a profound change in global economic inequalities, dominant Western epistemologies and a reshaping of relationships with marginalised communities. Underlining the importance of his curatorial reference points of Africa and the Afro-

diaspora, Zuberi used the example of the Benin objects to illustrate the new exhibition practice pursued at the Penn Museum, which he described as a combination of postcolonial provenance research and socio-historical contextualisation. Things got exciting in the ensuing discussion when Deadria Farmer-Paellmann, director and founder of the New York Restitution Study Group, which sees itself as the mouthpiece of the African-American diaspora, turned to the curators present directly and confronted them with the question: 'what kind of efforts are you engaged in to ensure that all of us have a say concerning the repatriation of the relics [the Benin bronzes]?' The only answer to this question was provided by Zuberi, who argued vigorously in favour of a stronger involvement of diaspora groups in restitution processes. He put forward the thesis that the greatly delayed international perception of this interest group had to do with the desire 'to forget about the connections between colonialism and enslavement.'

In his concluding commentary, which was unfortunately very brief due to the time constraints, JAMIE DAU (Mannheim) related the findings and propositions presented by the speakers to his field of work, provenance research. While Annie Coombes' talk opened up the perspective for him of linking the art historical approach more closely with a historiography focused on violence in the future, he interpreted Tukufu Zuberi's approach, geared towards the history of the translocation of cultural assets, as an example of a mutually beneficial connection between provenance research and exhibition practice.

In summary, it can be said that the organisers succeeded in further deepening the discussion on museum strategies in dealing with Benin objects through the comparative perspective on case studies from Nigeria, Great Britain, the United States and Germany. It is true that complicated key questions such as how objects associated with 'difficult history' could be presented in an adequate historical way without reducing them exclusively to their witnessing of colonial atrocities, remained largely unanswered. However, it became very clear at the conference that a convincing museum approach to objects from colonial contexts can only consist of listening to the different voices of communities of origin and diasporic groups and bringing them into a balanced relationship with one another in exhibitions. At the same time, it became evident that problematic aspects of the history of partner countries can be sensitively contextualised and must not be excluded from the exhibition context without losing academic and political integrity. As far as the question of museum representation is concerned, especially in the context of 'difficult histories' such

as that of the Benin objects, the magic word of the coming years will undoubtedly be 'collaboration' – as a look at the international museum landscape confirms.

Conference overview:

Welcome: Lars-Christian Koch (Berlin)

Introduction: Verena Rodatus (Berlin) / Maria Ellendorff (Berlin)

Annie E. Coombes (London): Engaging Histories, Envisaging Futures

Staffan Lundén (Gothenburg): On the 'Benin Bronzes', Hamilton's pajamas, Powis's mother and the Potentials for New Forms of Representation

Kokunre Agbontaen-Eghafona (Benin City): Indigenous Exhibition of Benin Cultural Objects in Reviewing the Display of 'Benin Bronzes' in Nigeria, Europe, and America

Tukufu Zuberi (Philadelphia): Colonial, Neocolonial, & Decolonial Projects: African Material Culture

Commentary: Jamie Dau (Mannheim)

Moderation: Verena Rodatus (Berlin) / Maria Ellendorff (Berlin) / Gitti Salami (Berlin)