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The Swiss Benin Initiative: Research and Dialogue with Nigeria

Eight Swiss museums have joined forces to investigate the provenances of their collections from the Kingdom of Benin in Nigeria. Aim of the initiative is to create transparency and generate synergies with a view to future research and dialogue with Nigeria, home of the works in question.

In spring 2021, a new joint research project supported by the Federal Office of Culture (FOC) with CHF 100,000 is to be launched centring on networked and cooperative provenance research regarding holdings from the Kingdom of Benin (Nigeria) in Swiss museums. The project "The Swiss Benin Initiative: Provenance Research and Transparency Concerning Collections from the Kingdom of Benin (Nigeria) Held by Swiss Museums" (SBI) is headed by the Museum Rietberg and involves eight cantonal and municipal museums in Switzerland which, together, are in possession of over a hundred objects from Benin. They include the following:

- Bernisches Historisches Museum,
- Historisches und Völkerkundemuseum St. Gallen,
- Musée d'ethnographie de la Ville de Genève,
- Musée d'ethnographie de la Ville de Neuchâtel,
- Museum der Kulturen Basel,
- Museum Rietberg der Stadt Zürich,
- Museum Schloss Burgdorf,
- Völkerkundemuseum der Universität Zürich.

Notably, it is the first time that the Swiss Federal Office of Culture is supporting a Switzerland-wide research project on colonial acquisitions from Africa although individual projects on this sensitive topic have already received support in the past.

Although no Swiss museums have faced restitution claims from Nigeria so far, it goes without saying that now is the time for museums to step up, assume responsibility, and initiate research and dialogue on this sensitive cultural heritage issue.

In this respect, the case of the Nigerian Kingdom of Benin is central and practically always heads the list in debates on the issue of restitution. Restitution claims have not only been an issue since Nigeria gained independence in 1960 and the UNESCO Convention came into force in 1970, respectively, or the Ethical Guidelines of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) were issued in 1986. For some years already, it has been widely acknowledged that any collection associated with the so-called British "punitive expedition" of 1897 meets the qualification of looted art. At the time, British troops had destroyed the royal palace in Benin City, dethroned the king, and plundered thousands of objects, which were then sold through the art trade to numerous museums and private collections across Europe, including Switzerland.

Information concerning Benin collections in Switzerland

Compared to former colonial powers, the case of the publicly owned Benin collections in Switzerland is special in so far as the international art trade and private collectors play an exceptionally important part. In total, we have in Switzerland 97 objects that can be allocated to the Nigerian Kingdom of Benin. They are distributed as follows: Bernisches Historisches Museum BHM (5), Historisches und Völkerkundemuseum St. Gallen HVM (8), Musée d'Ethnographie de Genève MEG (9), Musée

d'Ethnographie de la Ville de Neuchâtel MEN (18), Museum der Kulturen Basel MKB (20), Museum Rietberg Zurich MRZ (19), Museum Schloss Burgdorf MSB (3), Völkerkundemuseum der Universität Zürich VMZ (15). Roughly 40% of these objects were attained during the colonial era. With regard to the pieces purchased between 1899 and 1904, the connection to the "punitive expedition" is more than evident. But also as far as acquisitions from the later colonial period and the time after independence in 1960, it needs to be ascertained whether a connection with the "punitive expedition" exists through the agency of art dealers and collectors.

However, it should be noted that not all pieces looted during the British "punitive expedition" found their way to Europe and Switzerland immediately. Benin objects were also traded locally in Africa and this, of course, also raises questions as to the African agency in the global art trade. In addition, some of the Benin pieces in Swiss Museums were produced for the international art market well after 1897, some even after Nigerian independence in 1960.

The objectives of networked and collaborative provenance research

The new research project aims to investigate which of the Benin objects are directly linked with the "punitive expedition" and through which channels of the art trade they found their way to Switzerland. In addition, the aim is to identify all objects not directly associated with the "punitive expedition", and which were, for example, produced later or, as the case may be, purchased by African traders and later passed on to Swiss museums and private collectors.

Conducting provenance research on colonial collections comes with doing research in the archives of the former colonial powers, the countries of origin, as well as analysing the records of museums and art dealers. Considering the scope of the task, a collaborative project involving national and international partners is probably the best approach, especially with regard to the cultural heritage of old Benin City. On the one hand, each individual museum holds only a small number of Benin objects, but their provenances are often interlinked owing to exchange agreements between specific museums or because their collection histories overlap. On the other hand, the investigation of colonial objects resulting from violent acquisitions such as the British "punitive expedition" of 1897 is to be treated with priority.

A collaborative project generates synergies for provenance research and advances research networks between the museums involved as well as between Switzerland and Nigeria.

1. Networked provenance research in Switzerland

The joint project aims to contribute to the growth of knowledge concerning the objects' origins not only in individual museum but across institutions and the entire country. A network approach makes complete sense here because we often find in museum holdings multiple interlinkages between involved collectors and art dealers.

2. Basic research on the art trade and on Switzerland during colonial days

The project promises to open the door to new insights and knowledge concerning Swiss involvement in the national and international trade of non-European artefacts, and will thus shed light on the role of individual Swiss actors during the colonial era as well as during the time around and since Nigerian independence.

3. Provenance research in collaboration with Nigeria

Provenance research focusing on colonial acquisition contexts requires research in archives and in the countries of origin, including the consideration of oral history. The aim is to elaborate on and interpret these shared histories with our Nigerian partners from the royal palace, the national museum, and various national research institutions.

4. Openness and transparency

Transparent communication of research findings forms the bedrock of the ongoing and future exchange with Nigeria and its diaspora in Switzerland. Cooperation with Nigeria is key to the way we deal with the works and their histories in the future.

The Swiss Benin Initiative in Dialogue with Nigeria

As part of the Swiss Benin Initiative, the project on provenance research forms the starting point and basis of a constructive dialogue about the future of the objects with Nigeria. Engagement with the colonial history inscribed in the objects is a unique chance to discover new forms of memory practice in close exchange with our Nigerian partners and to jointly process and reformulate this problematic period of history. The question of restitution also needs to be addressed.

Project development and transparent communication

The FOC funded collaborative project is scheduled to run from the spring of 2021 to the summer of 2022. Research on the different provenances is in the hands of an research associate in Switzerland and a historian based in Nigeria. Apart from carrying out research on the networks built up and entertained by museums, collectors, and dealers, the project also involves liaising and collaborating with Nigerian partners in museums and at the royal palace in Benin City. Upon conclusion of the project, a detailed report on the findings is to be published in German, English, and French, and communicated in Switzerland as well as Nigeria. The results from the research are also to be published on the websites of the various museums involved. Supplementary events such as workshops, symposia, and exhibitions are also planned.

The Swiss Benin Initiative is in close exchange with other research and collaborative projects (e.g. Benin Dialogue, Digital Benin or the working group “Colonial Provenances” of the study group Provenance Research e.V.).

Project lead and main contacts

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Additional information concerning Benin collections in Swiss museums

Bernisches Historisches Museum

The project is focused on five objects from the collections of the Bernisches Historisches Museum, although only four of them are definitely from Benin City. The four objects were acquired in 1903, 1920, and 1995. Despite the fact that some of these pieces were obtained much later, a link to the "punitive expedition" of 1897 cannot be ruled out for any of them. The provenance of the fifth object, an ivory jug from Nigeria which had already been in Bern ten years before the museum was founded in 1894, is to be investigated in order to clarify any potential connection to Benin City although there is evidently no link to the infamous "punitive expedition". Should this potential connection be confirmed, it would mean that the jug represents the oldest object from Benin City in Switzerland.

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Historisches und Völkerkundemuseums St. Gallen

The collection in St Gallen holds eight objects from Benin. They date back to the 18th or 19th century. All eight belong to the total of 140 objects that HVM obtained from the collection of Han Coray in 1940. Meanwhile, the origin of the bronze relief C 3173 has been established, while the origin of the commemorative head C 3172 has been partially determined. Both objects are probably associated with the "punitive expedition" of 1897. With regard to the other six objects, the question remains still unresolved.

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Musée d'ethnographie de la Ville de Genève

Nine pieces in the MEG's municipal collections come from the Edo Kingdom in Nigeria. All were acquired by the museum on the European art market between 1901 and 1965, except for the last one in a "modern style", which was bought in Lagos, Nigeria. An previous inventory number on the large ivory tusk (MEG Inv. 021934) and the burn marks on its surface seem to prove that it was captured from the royal palace during the British "punitive expedition" of 1897, as was the brass belt mask (MEG Inv. 020501), which was published in a sales catalogue of the English antique dealer W. D. Webster in 1900. Two altar bells (MEG Inv. 022819 and 027421) and a wooden commemorative head (MEG Inv. 031761) were probably created before 1897, but their provenance could not yet be traced beyond the museum's purchase from the previous owner. Further research is necessary to determine the date and circumstances of their transfer to Europe. The three brass sculptures should also be subjected to a provenance study, as their style points to a Nigerian creation at the very beginning of the 20th century, but their path from Nigeria to the Swiss and European art markets has not yet been examined.

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Musée d'ethnographie de la Ville de Neuchâtel

The Musée d'ethnographie de Neuchâtel holds eighteen objects which are in some way or another connected with the kingdom in Edo State. Seventeen are modern pieces fashioned after old models and were purchased by Jean Gabus on a mission to West Africa in Benin City in 1963 (MEN 63.16.1-17). The relief plate ascribed to the dealer Speyer was inventoried in 1952 (MEN 52.1.1.). According to Felix Luschan, the object was obtained from the dealer Arthur II Speyer and originally came from the Royal Ethnographic Museum in Berlin. Between the date of the purchase by Arthur Speyer and the arrival in MEN, there are still a few questions to be clarified.

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Museum der Kulturen Basel

The Museum der Kulturen Basel (MKB) holds twenty objects known to have originated in Benin City. A first group of nine objects arrived at MKB shortly after the British "punitive expedition" of 1897. The Annual Report of 1899 notes: "The acquisitions made in the past year, as in the case of almost all ethnographic collections across the world, were definitely influenced by the recent events in Benin. As you will remember, the destruction of the city of Benin by the British revealed a multitude of artefacts of exceptional merit, at least as far as Negro standards go. The spoils of the Benin war were thrown on to the market this year, and we believed it was our duty to salvage at least a few samples from this culture that has now disappeared for good." The second group is a very heterogenous one and includes eight objects. These were acquired by MKB from different individuals between 1901 and 1905. The third group comprises three objects which are probably not directly linked with the British "punitive expedition" of 1897. In a written note, a certain Hans Ernst Barth (1861-1920) is mentioned as the previous owner. He is said to have purchased the objects from an "old Benin chief in Lagos". With exception of the first group, urgent research is required to reconstruct the paths by which these other objects found their way to MKB. In particular, it will be an exciting but challenging task to find out more about the acquisition of a group of figures and two leopards purchased by the Museum der Kulturen in 1907. Known clues up to now include Benin City, an "old Benin chief in Lagos", Hans Ernst Barth, and Fritz Sarasin; what we do not know are the circumstances and contexts of the respective "handovers".

Museum der Kulturen Basel

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Museum Rietberg

The holdings of the Museum Rietberg include nineteen works from the Kingdom of Benin. They can be grouped into four categories. In the case of three objects we have definite traces to the "punitive expedition" of 1897: these include a hip mask, a carved ivory tusk, and a carved ivory armlet. Of two pieces we know that they were sold only decades later and therefore do not make up part of the spoils brought to Europe after the "punitive expedition": one piece was purchased in Benin City in the 1930s, the other was offered for sale by a Nigerian art dealer in Zurich in the 1960s after Nigeria had gained independence. With regard to the large majority of works, we can only make out traces to the European art trade, dealers, and collectors, but none of them reach back further than the early 1920s. This is where research is needed first and foremost. A few pieces plainly date back to the period after 1897 and are therefore not connected with the aforementioned military actions.

Contacts see above

Museum Schloss Burgdorf

The ethnographic collection of the Museum Schloss Burgdorf holds three pieces from the Kingdom of Benin. They were acquired from private collectors in the 1970s and 1980s. In terms of style, they appear to be of more recent date and therefore stand in no connection with the "punitive expedition" of 1897. The research project will hopefully provide definite clarification as to the circumstances and shed more light on the collectors and dealers.

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Völkerkundemuseum der Universität Zürich

The collection of the Völkerkundemuseum der Universität Zürich holds fifteen objects that can be assigned to the Kingdom of Benin. They are from the collection of the Swiss collector Han Coray whose collection was pawned by the Schweizerische Volksbank in 1931 and sold to the Sammlung für Völkerkunde of the University of Zurich in 1940 in parts. What is known is that Han Coray did not purchase his collection in Africa but on the European art market. What we do not know is where and from whom he purchased the various pieces of his collection. What is also unclear is which of these objects were looted from the royal palace in Benin by the British "punitive expedition" of 1897. The Völkerkundemuseum hopes to gain clarity and certainty with regard to the actual provenance of its Benin objects through the joint research conducted by the collaborative project.

Völkerkundemuseum der Universität Zürich

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