

DECOLONIZATION THROUGH REPATRIATION

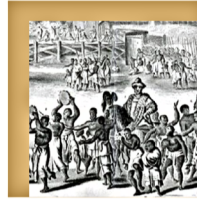
Analyzing the effects of colonization in West Africa through **Art Reclamation**

Many communities in West Africa are still reeling from the loss of countless cultural artifacts which European and American colonizers ripped from the continent over the course of their centuries-long occupations. To this day, the entrustment of West African countries with the stewardship of artifacts from their own communities has not been fully achieved, actively denying them the right to tell their own stories and histories through their own material heritage.

Benin has been formally requesting the restitution of anthropomorphic brass statues taken during the invasion of the Abomey place in 1892 since 2016. The statues have spiritual and historical significance for the Nigerian historic city, and are valuable cultural artifacts and heritage.

These statues are part of a collection of 26 artifacts that Benin has requested from France, but whose repatriation is hampered by legal issues. Their requests have been repeatedly turned down by France, which claims that they are now part of French cultural property and heritage.

The famed Benin bronzes were stolen in 1897 and ended up in museums and private collections all over Europe. The bronzes, currently housed in the British Museum in London, more than any other series of artworks, made African art visible to Europeans, piqued the curiosity of researchers, artists, and the general public. They have, however, become a kind of shorthand in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa for colonialism's murderous era - and its libelous legacy.



Colonial History

The European race to partition and colonize African territory is often dismissed as a minor facet of the political and economic conflicts that erupted between Europe's new

industrial states from about 1870 to 1914. During the Benin Expedition of 1897, when imperial authority of Southern Nigeria was being reinforced, British forces looted the majority of the plaques and other items.



Cultural Context

Between the 14th and 19th centuries, the Kingdom of Benin, in modern-day Nigeria, was rich in sculptures made of various materials such as iron, bronze,

wood, ivory, and terra cotta. The royal palace was mostly decorated with ivory artifacts and bronze reliefs which were used to depict the heads of kings and queen mothers, were popular types of art in the Kingdom of Benin. Other bronze objects, often overshadowed by figurative bronze sculptures, exhibited the expertise of their craftsmen.



West African Art

Traditional sculptures, masks, vivid textiles, and jewelry are all part of West Africa's cultural legacy, which is inextricably linked to the land and its people. In their original form,

most of these paintings were depictions of the natural and spiritual realms. West African art is far from arbitrary, relying on dynamic intersections of materials, techniques, and motifs that are vital to West African identity. The motif and pattern-making is essential to its culture as it carries powerful meaning and references significant cultural identities; evident in the regions textiles, arts, and craftwork.



Timeline

The British Museum has about 900 artifacts from the old Kingdom of Benin in its collection. Over 100 are on show in the Museum's galleries in a constantly changing display.

Objects from Benin are also loaned out on a regular basis all over the world. A variety of archival connected to the Benin Bronzes and their collection history are also housed in the British Museum's collections.