Rewriting History

In Order Not to Have to Face It

by Yves-Bernard Debie

FIG. 1 (above): F. Meaulle, "Massacre d'une Mission anglaise au Benin." From *Le Petit Journal* 323, 24 January 1897. Photo: Art Media - Heritage Images / Alamy Stock Photo.

FIG. 2 (right): Plaque: Warrior and attendants. Edo; Kingdom of Benin, Nigeria. 16th–17th century. Brass. H: 47.6 cm. Ex Sotheby's, London, May 20, 1964, no. 114; Paul Rose; Robert Owen Lehman, New York; Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, New York, until 1990. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1990. inv. 1990.332. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

On 29 April 2021, with great media fanfare, the German minister of culture, Monika Grütters, announced that Germany would restitute a "substantial" number of Benin bronzes to Nigeria beginning in 2022. "We are facing our historical and moral responsibility to shed light upon and own up to Germany's colonial past," she said.

Obviously, nay-saying scandalmongers like me will have to point out that "Germany's colonial past" has never included any part of what is now Nigeria, and that this "historical and moral responsibility" is, in fact, nonexistent. Instead, this has more to do with the politics of trade with the nation often referred to as the "African Giant" because of its large population and its importance as an oil producer.

Thomas Dermine, Belgium's new secretary of state, made a similar move on 6 July 2021, stating, "First of all, the transfer of property is a symbolic act in recognition of the fact that these objects were stolen. I have a four-year-old daughter, and when she brings something home from school that isn't hers, I tell her 'no, it's not yours, and you have to give it back.' The same is true of these Congolese pieces."

The Belgian declaration might, on the face of it, appear more reasonable than the German one, since it involves works that really did come from a former colony. However, even once one has gotten past the blatantly paternalistic tone here, the father would do well to explain to the child how and when these works were "stolen," rather than suggesting that the mere facts of their historical and geographical origins are enough to prove that they are tainted.

What is fascinating about the colonial repentance movement in which we are in the midst is that it erases the wrinkles of pre-colonial Africa, the reality of which it refuses to countenance. Colonial repentance is simply another angle of the myth of

the noble savage, and it attempts to propagate an idealized vision of the African living in a natural state in a paradise of tangled jungles into which the Westerner, the carrier of Original Sin, should never have ventured. We are to believe that all that is left of this "most perfect of worlds," since annihilated by the rabid colonizers, are the looted artworks now sequestered in Western private and museum collections. The colonial crime, surpassing all others in its ferocity and illegitimacy, is seen as so egregious that it eclipses consideration of who its victims really were. It matters little whether those victims were themselves executioners, colonizers,

or slave traders. Africa is taken as a whole, without any distinction between cultures, ethnic groups, individuals, or nations, and it must be indemnified for the colonization it endured.

Despite the doubts expressed by Claude Lévi-Strauss in his book *Tristes Tropiques,* the trope of the "noble savage," as expressed by so many from Pero Vaz de Caminha in 1500 to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, has long nourished an imagined paradise lost, but it as much as a myth today as it has always been. Regardless of his color, race, or continent of origin, from his earliest beginnings man has conquered, enslaved, looted, and built his empires on the ashes of those he has vanquished.

It is an affront to Africa and to the greatness of its pre-colonial kingdoms to suggest that its indigenous peoples can be reduced to groups of half-naked individuals with "souls as pure as those of chil-

dren" (Jacob 2000). The *obas* who ruled the ancient Kingdom of Benin (now part of Nigeria) from 1180 onwards were great warrior kings, slave merchants, and grand priests of a religion that freely practiced human sacrifice. They would not recognize themselves in the well-intentioned revisionist portrait of them being drawn today. The same holds true for their neighbors in Dahomey, the ancient royal dynasty that was disproportionately responsible for the Atlantic slave trade. El Hadj Oumar Tall was a warlord and slave trader who fought against the French under the auspices of *jihad*, and his sword was recently restituted to Senegal by France, amazingly enough as a symbol of peace. And what about Lusinga, the slave trader who used violence and the power of his muskets to impose his rule west of Lake Tanganyika in the 1870s? He reigned from a fortified village as the "sanguinary potentate" (Roberts 2012: 76), after having defeated the chiefs of the Cape Tembwe area and enslaved its population.

These are just four examples of the many great African rulers who shared traits of brutality and cruelty as slave dealers, who vanquished other chiefs and peoples for the purpose of imperialistic conquest before they, in turn, were themselves defeated and stripped of the symbols of their military, religious, and royal power. Today, most would be tried and judged as war criminals, but we are to absolve them now simply because those who put an end to their rule were Westerners and not Africans.

FIG. 3 (far left): Court official. Edo; Kingdom of Benin, Nigeria. 16th–17th century.
Brass. H: 62.9 cm.
Taken from the royal palace during the 1897 Benin punitive expedition; Col. Le-Poer-O'Shea, 1897–1900; Sotheby's, London, March 8, 1957, lot 197; Carlebach Gallery, New York, 1957; private collection, until 1986; Sotheby's, New York, Nov. 18, 1986, lot 96; Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, New York, 1986–1991.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991, inv. 1991.17.32.
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FIG. 4 (near left): "Benin Curios."
From Robert Wilson, *The Life and Times of Queen Victoria,* c. 1901. Historical Images Archive / Alamy Stock Photo.

FIG. 5 (above): British soldiers during the 1897 Benin punitive expedition.
Photo by Dr. Robert Allman. CPA Media Pte Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo.

FIG. 6 (above right): Head of an *oba*. Edo; Kingdom of Benin, Nigeria. 16th century.
Brass. H: 23.5 cm.
Acquired by a West African mine official, before 1885. Ex John J. Klejman, New York, until 1958; Nelson A. Rockefeller, New York, 1958; on loan to The Museum of Primitive Art, 1958–1978.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979, inv. 1979.206.86.
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Conversely, the wholesale blanket condemnation of the colonial military conquests that were acclaimed in their time is done without even a hint of closer historical scrutiny. In 1884, with the support of local chiefs, Belgian military officer Émile Storms succeeded in putting an end to the Luba Chief Lusinga's slave trading activities. He had no question about the legitimacy of what he had accomplished, and when he received Lusinga's skull, it was his understanding that, in accordance with local custom, he should keep it along with Lusinga's carved fetishes, since doing so would cement his authority while diminishing that of the vanquished and eliminating

the legitimacy of any other succession claims (Volper 2012: 91–95). The French in Abomey in 1892 and the English in Benin City in 1897 acted similarly. But apparently, a crime must be evaluated differently if it was perpetrated by an African against an African rather than by a European against an African.

One would think that this double standard—which is, in fact, nothing less than racist—would seem intolerable even to those who practice it, albeit without realizing it. This would be negligible on an intellectual and historical level were it not for the fact that it has become the basis for this phenomenon of colonial repentance used to justify the restitution policies put in place by European governments, which are almost universally heralded positively by the media.

This doesn't alter the revisionism of the narrative that arose the 1950s relating that the punitive expedition of 8 February 1897—which was undertaken

FIG. 7 (left): Interior of the royal residence in Benin City after having been burned during the sack of 1897. Photo by Reginald Kerr Granville.
Photo: Zuri Swimmer / Alamy Stock Photo.

FIG. 8 (right): The *oba* of Benin Ovonramwen with guards aboard ship on his way to exile, 1897. Photo by Jonathan Adagogo Green.
Howie photo album, archives of the Mersey Maritime Museum.
Photo: CPA Media Pte Ltd. / Alamy Stock Photo.

against Benin City by the British in retaliation for the massacre of an unarmed diplomatic mission and its African porters—should be perceived as the archetype of "colonial looting." The mere mention of this event triggers a sense of justification for the immediate and unconditional restitution of the objects that were taken as war booty. All of the ingredients are present in this story: a mysterious and inscrutable nineteenth-century Africa; European imperialist pretenses; a colonial policy managed behind closed doors in London, Brussels, or Berlin; a pretext for intervention; a well-trained army followed by thousands of porters; a town that was centuries old but would be unable to resist for long; brutal fighting; subsequent looting; and, finally, destruction by fire.

The apparent obviousness of the crime would seem, at the very least, to justify the return of the material seized by the infernal British infantry, especially given the recent German paradigm. However, upon closer examination, the evidence for the colonial malfeasance disintegrates to the point where it ultimately becomes indistinguishable from the crimes of the martyred city. The situation is not unlike the conquest of Dahomey by General Alfred Amédée Dodds that I have discussed in these pages in the past (Debie 2018).

We will not dwell here upon the murder of the young British Consul James Robert Philips and seven members of his staff, and the massacre of several hundred African porters, though in English eyes, this justified the infamous punitive expedition and the ensuing battle that resulted in heavy casualties on both sides (Gantly 2010: 275). Let us focus instead for a moment upon the vision of horror that confronted the British mission as it approached the capital of the Edo Empire. All contemporaneous accounts agree that Benin City richly deserved to be called the "City of Blood," the name it was given by Sir Reginald Bacon in his campaign journal, which was published in 1897. The atrocities that had been committed in Benin City were described in detail, most notably by the expedition's physician, Felix Roth: "All about the houses and streets are dead natives, some crucified and sacrificed on trees, others on stage erections, some on the ground, some in pits, and amongst the latter we found several half-dead ones." "The whole road is strewn with dead, crucified, and beheaded bodies in all states of decomposition, most of them blown out to double their size by the strong rays of the sun." "Three hundred yards past the king's compound the broad road which passes through Benin City is covered with bodies, skulls, bones, etc., most of the bodies being headless." (Schädler 2020: 68). These descriptions were confirmed in 1960 by Oba Akenzua II: "It must be stressed here that in those days, Binis were, almost to the point of fanaticism, devoted to their gods, although those gods were insatiable in their lust for human blood" *(ibid.)*. Former British Museum curator William Buller Fagg related that in 1958 some older people in villages around Benin City were still complaining bitterly that the British had "ruined the country" by forbidding the human sacrifices that were indispensable to the prosperity of the kingdom and its inhabitants (Fagg 1992: 37–42).

Obviously, the objective here is not to cast disgrace upon nor censure the ancient Kingdom of

Benin, but rather to remember historical facts that are nowadays swept under the rug and ignored. Yet these explain the context in which the works from Benin were brought to Europe. The reports and the personal journal of Admiral Harry Rawson, the leader of the expedition, demonstrate that he was fully cognizant of the connection between the art objects that were the symbols of the *oba's* power and the extensive human sacrifice he had witnessed. In order to put an end to the latter, he felt it was necessary to confiscate or destroy any and all of the instruments that were linked with these intolerable and savage ritual acts.

Legitimate criticism of European colonial activity in Africa must not be allowed to descend into a kind of overindulgent revisionism that blends anachronism with repentance in a vague, selective, and idealized vision of an earlier time and place. It is ironic that blind hatred of colonialism could result in a kind of hatred for the colonized themselves, inasmuch as this makes them disappear and, with them, the roots of their identities to which the works in private and museum collections in the West and in Africa truly bear witness.

The restitution of African artworks for any reason and at all costs, without consideration for the common history that connects Africa with Europe, represents nothing more than a misguided and simplistic attempt to erase the "colonial crime." It is a replacement for a real effort to come to grips with a complex past that is too often judged before it is understood.

Every record has been destroyed or falsified, every book rewritten, every picture has been repainted, every statue and street building has been renamed, every date has been altered. And the process is continuing day by day and minute by minute. History has stopped. Nothing exists except an endless present in which the Party is always right.

George Orwell, *1984*

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