THE RETURN OF THE QUEEN MOTHER?

Art and Agency in Nigeria

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Figure 1: Figural heads upon a shrine in the Oba's compound in Benin City, 1891.

Within the vast collection of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art (The Met), there is a displaced woman sequestered away. In being located some five-thousand miles from her homeland of what is now Benin City, her cast brass eyes have glimpsed the outside world through exhibition only twice within the last thirty years.[1] She is the brass and iron representation of an Iyoba (Fig 1, Fig 2, Fig 3), a mother to the Oba (King) of the Benin Kingdom and a politically and ritually prominent figure in her own right.[2] Yet, before this entombment in an American museum, her still eyes had seen the royal lineage of her court revered. She had seen women of the same high title flex their powers as only second to the king. She had also seen the fiery destruction of her lavish palace by British colonial forces. After this, she was looted into the hands of those who set the grounds aflame. These violent processes of colonization that had seized this Iyoba from her home are the same processes that have abetted the disempowerment of Nigerian women within the realm of 20th-21st century politics. In that loss, however, lies a powerful link to help address the present. Conversations promoting the crucial goal of gender parity in contemporary Nigerian politics converge with discussions concerning the timely repatriation of artistic representations of women, such as the Iyoba, who played important ministerial roles within the nation's past. These

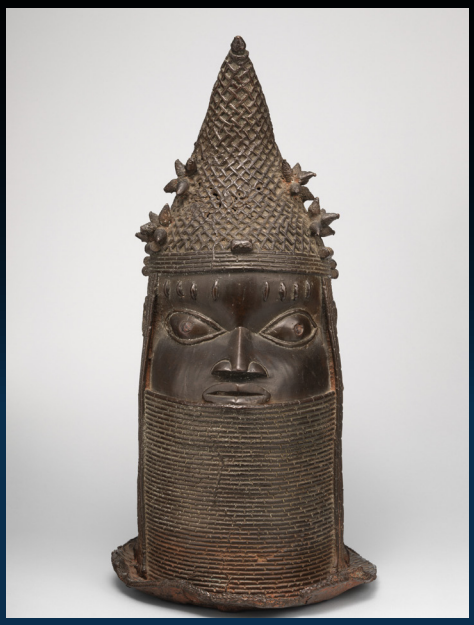


Figure 2: Edo peoples, Head of Iyoba, ca. 18th-19th century, brass (cast), iron, 53.3 x 26.7 x 27.3 cm, The Met.

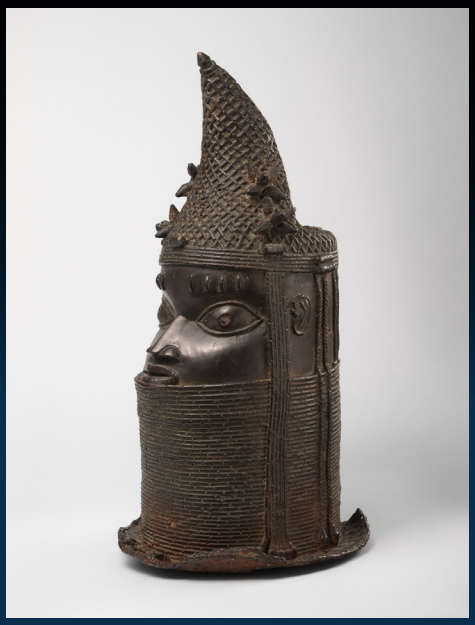


Figure 3: Edo peoples, Head of Iyoba, ca. 18th-19th century, brass (cast), iron, 53.3 x 26.7 x 27.3 cm, The Met.

distinguished past figures aid in legitimating women's expanding political agency in the present.

THE QUEEN MOTHER OF THE BENIN KINGDOM

Understanding how the figural Iyoba head housed in the Met's collection visually testifies to the heights of women's power within the Benin Kingdom from the 16th century onward begins with an understanding of the Iyoba title itself. Her role is frequently referred to as that of a Queen Mother, as her royal position is usually first derived from having given birth to the male ruler of the Benin Kingdom, though the term exists elsewhere in Africa amidst other unique contexts too. The bronze commemorative head referenced here was designed to occupy a sacred altar space that placed her within a lineage of the Kingdom's divine rulers (Fig 1).[3] Much like the similar heads that captured the appearance of an Oba, the Iyoba head was displayed alongside past title-bearers, implicity connecting her to the history of her nation. The continuity established by such a display did not just celebrate the continuance of the Iyoba role. Rather, the display extended her maternal qualities and established her as responsible for continuing the royal family and the state itself.[4] Edo historian Jacob Eghaverba offers a list of women to hold the title that would place the Met's 18th-19th century bronze as possibly representing eight different rulers.[5] (Edo being the majority ethnic group within the historic Benin Kingdom and the pres-

ent Edo State, Nigeria where Benin City is today.) She may depict the particularly wealthy Iyoba Ohogha II who had ascended to the position in 1752, as the coral-beadwork trailing down her side and surrounding her neck in rings suggests a rich ability to adorn herself in fineries from the ocean. However, no certain identity is so far gleaned. No matter which Iyoba she is intended to portray, it is also important to explore the context of the office beyond the role of mother.

"WOMEN IN NIGERIA TODAY WILL HAVE TO AND ALREADY DO NAVIGATE MALE-DOMINATED SYSTEMS OF POWER. COMPARABLE ASCENSIONS TO A 'MALE' AUTHORITY REFLECTED IN THE FIGURAL IYOBA'S LIFE CAN PROVIDE THE NECESSARY HISTORICAL LEGACY TO DO SO. "

For all the influence the Iyoba might hold, it is worth understanding that she bore the title within a system of rule that enshrined men as the primary axes of decision-making, both within the task of governing and beyond. Art historian Flora Kaplan suggests that a "male ethos" fundamentally underpinned Benin society. The kingdom surrounding the rule of an Iyoba was patrilineal, where divine leadership centered hierarchically around men. Her admission to this space was a unique possibility of exception, though this should not be taken to lessen her importance. Much of the Iyoba's authority was defined in proximity to masculine rule, not in spite of it.[6] All the way through the latest Iyoba N'Eurra, the woman bearing the title performed a more masculine identityin being honored later in life among the male chiefs of her kingdom.[7] Attaining the same dimensions of courtly function, she would deliberate cases and settle disputes within a publicly male position. The corresponding status was initially founded within the maternal role unique to her, but the death of her husband (the prior Oba) and the natural end of her body's ability to bear children made available a new extent of her power.

This nuanced dynamic of gender is eternally present in her bronze form too. The very metal comprising the Iyoba's head examined here was a royally privileged material. While the other male chiefs could have themselves carved in wood, it was only the queen mother and her royal son that could be eternalized in strong, durable bronze.[8] The longevity of such a material indicates a timelessness to her power, a power that can still resonate centuries removed from her period of rule. As for the exact

rendering of her features, biological sex has proven an unreliable tactic in differentiating Iyoba heads from Oba heads.[9] Socially-gendered definitions of power meant that the commemorative bronze heads of men share similarities and some ambiguities within their facial features. Fewer clues are offered towards her precise mannerisms, but she would have been expected to be exemplary of Edo womanhood as being restrained and submissive.[10] She would generally keep to the interior court of her palace as this was the space where her deliberations were made, so the head that publicly represented her allowed for an extended assertion of her power borrowing from a visual coding of maleness. Of course, as the figural head's distance from her homeland might suggest, this visual power would be broken from its roots as the Kingdom of Benin transitioned into the 20th century. One must ask, how did she get there?

GONE FROM THE PALACE AT USELU

The displacement of the Iyoba as a figure of authority, both in art and political power, takes place over a century of history in southern Nigeria. The Benin Kingdom had been visited by Europeans as early as the fifteenth century. [11] These earliest Portuguese visitors were primarily interested in purchasing slaves taken as captives of war and spreading a Christian faith through a variety of missionary efforts. While these objectives are important to note for constructing the Kingdom of Benin's history of interaction with European peoples, they are not within the period of colonization central to this narrative. Instead, it was the colonizing agents of the British Punitive Expedition to Benin in February, 1897 that enacted the violent uprooting of the Iyoba both in power and artistic representation. This expedition of some 5,000 British troops violently dismantled the Benin Kingdom. It was billed as a reprisal for the killing of James Phillips and his party only a month before. This prior group was purported to represent British diplomatic interests in the region.[12] However, this was merely a smokescreen deployed to justify a military expedition into Benin City that had been planned well before the events surrounding Phillips.

The eventual arrival of the British expedition and the subsequent sacking of the capital city was a monstrous episode of imperial violence. Historian Dan Hicks describes the campaign of violence as a broad destruction of Edo life, culture, belief, and art.[13] Within the year, the expedition's intelligence officer, Reginald H. Bacon, published a biased account of the bloodshed in and around Benin City. His perspective on the events falls much into the same narrative trappings that permitted the expedition's cruelties in the first place. The very first page of his text might almost read as comically

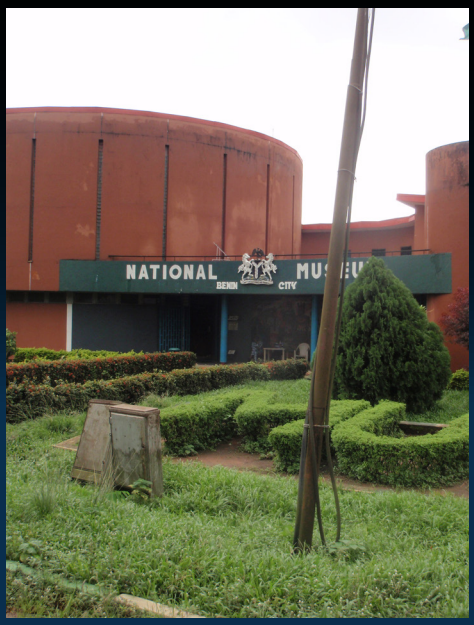


Figure 4: Exterior view of the National Museum in Benin City, Photograph taken by Dipo Tayo

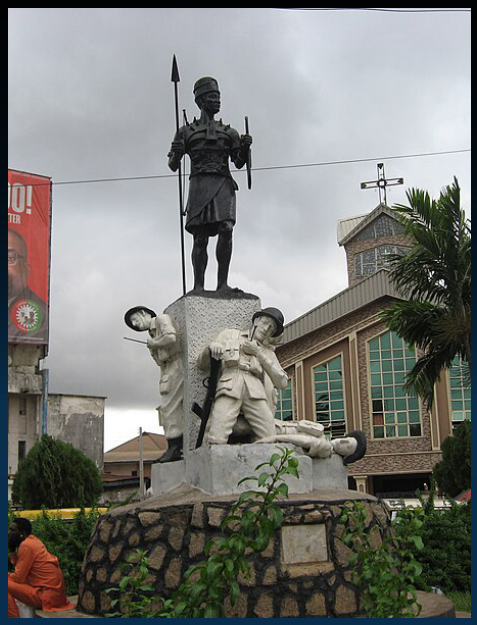


Figure 5: A statue in King's Square, Benin City depicts a Benin warrior standing over defeated colonial soldiers, Photograph by unknown photographer

prejudiced, if it were not for the wave of tragic violence that would follow its generalizations. Bacon regards the King and all his peoples of Benin as being savage, debased, absent of religion, and careless towards life.[14] Relying on his observations for anything approaching reasonable historicity would be foolish, but his characterization of this episode in Benin's history can yet provide insight into the mindsets of colonial agents that brutally founded the political and cultural restrictions that this article takes interest in.

The colonial attitudes that sanctioned the fiery dismantling of the Queen Mother's position are most clearly reflected in how the destruction of Iyoba Iyeha's (the then reigning Iyoba) palace is described.[15] Bacon's writing betrays a disdain for her position as he reports that one Captain Campbell had destroyed the Queen Mother's House, in the process "burning one more of the head centres of vice in the city."[16] Following from the earlier casting of the Benin Kingdom as uncivilized, his words appear intended to frame the carnage as necessary for implementing whatever degree of order the machine-gun-toting British brought with them. The palace at Uselu is here reduced to be representative of something perverse: something

"HER LIPS WILL BE FOREVER UNMOVING, YET SHE SPEAKS TO AN URGENT NEED FOR RESTITUTION OF MATERIAL CULTURE."

in need of destruction by the colonial viewer.

This cruel, fraudulent reinvention of the palace's symbolic identity into another - one which attempts to justify the Iyoba's removal - is in line with patterns described by contemporary theorizations on gender and race within colonial situations. In her essay "The Coloniality of Gender," feminist philosopher Maria Lugones describes a violent system of gender concurrent with colonization that reduces and erases the participation in ritual and governance of nonwhite, non-male individuals.[17] The palace at Useulu was perhaps the most monumental representation of the Iyoba's place within these spheres. Its burning symbolically reduced that power, the "vice" discussed by Bacon, to ash in a stroke of violence. Materially, the burning of the palace and the larger sacking of Benin City destroyed the office. A living Iyoba would only be crowned again nearly one-hundred years on in 1981.[18]

This gendered process within Bacon's account becomes clearer when comparing the Uselu palace's fate to that of the Oba's. The Oba's palace was initially left standing and only later fell victim to flame in an event dubiously rendered as accidental.[19] Amidst these events though, Bacon summarily describes every other center of ritual or governmental prominence, including the Uselu palace, as "fetich places burned", doubling down on the condemnation of a female power. The Oba's palace instead is metaphorically subsumed into the new colonial order when Bacon writes that "the King's house is the palace of the White Chief…"[20] Examining this duality of consideration further within the terms of Lugones, she offers that women in the colonial situation came to be socially defined in relation to men. Male became the default, and that outside the default would have no power, no participation.[21] Women's power in proximity to men was a feature of the Benin Kingdom, yes, but its nuances appear to evaporate as the relation between the Oba's court and the Iyoba's is severed. The latter is razed to the ground. The former is hoisted up as the new center of a white male regime. The European morals and codes of the era that guided the policies of British colonial administrators made no room for women's participation, even as specific as that participation may have been the precolonial kingdom.[22] The first Oba since the sacking of Benin City, Eweka II, ascended to his kingly position in 1914. Resulting from these colonial exclusion of women in political office though, his mother Eghaghe was only given the title after she passed. The British administration had rejected the multiple attempts to do so during her lifetime.[23]

Alongside the destruction of the

central seat of her power, the art objects that represent the Iyoba's strength were systematically looted from her courtly spaces. Figures describing the total scale of looting roughly place the number of art objects stolen from Benin somewhere around 10,000.[24] Of the 2,000 objects looted from the Oba's palace alone, ten percent consists of court art featuring the Iyoba.[25] These objects have been severed from their land of origin and the projected indications of women's power they carry disrupted too. Lugones argues that the disempowerment of women requires a great degree of control over information and image.[26] With the bronze Iyoba head stuck firmly within the collection of the Met, who now controls that information? Who now controls her image? Certainly not women in Nigeria to whom such factors would matter most. The reaffirmation of such control back into those hands would serve to aid a reversal of the process that Lugones describes. Greater still, that reversal can extend to redress the dangers of colonial legacies within the world of art and beyond.

BELONGING

Restitution, the returning to their rightful owners, of objects looted through colonial violence has been a constant point of contention between former subjects and colonizing nations through the late 20th century, into the 21st. In 2021, The Met itself had returned three objects with origins in the Benin Kingdom to the Nigerian National Commission for Museums and Monuments, which manages the Benin City National Museum.[27] Disappointingly, little information is offered in the corresponding press release about the return of yet more objects. While promoting international collaboration, the language employed still affirms the Met as a possessor. In addressing these questions, art historian Benedicte Savoy provides a useful way to define the absence of restitution. In the spaces of the formerly colonized, she qualifies these absences as painful, unhealed wounds that grow more acute over time.[28] Within the spaces of the colonizer, instead the presence of the objects showcase processes of violent colonial appropriation. This appropriation extends not just to the objects themselves, but to the histories they visually convey. Hence, the convergence of women's disempowerment and the absence of historic art objects depicting them. Just as investigating the colonial situation through a lens of gender illuminates targeted systems of gendered oppression and violence, doing the same to collections of looted art objects holds the potential to directly target and dismantle the harmful legacies of these actions.

A POLITICAL PRESENT

Shifting to the position of women with Nigeria's political spheres today, scholarship with roots in studies

of international policy highlights their precarious presence and how the identity of the Iyoba can be employed to help. Some scholars of global policy have indeed already utilized the term 'Queen Mother' in referencing a past foundation from which initiatives of women's leadership in sub-Saharan nations can be constructed.[29] Nigeria is of special concern among them. Compared to nations considered more forward in gender parity, Nigeria is noted as a critical zone for improvement as only seven percent of its parliamentary body consists of women. Similarly, a harmful male-dominance is reflected in the nation's 1999 constitution too, as it bears a recognized lack of absence of women's input.[30] Among the challenges that define this level of limited participation, the most relevant of them is that of recognition. Owing to the patriarchal identity of the nation, women's feats within Nigeria's multiplicity of cultural histories are routinely devalued or outright ignored in media coverage.[31] Similarly, Nigerian political parties normalize women's exclusion by interpreting culture and religion through male-centered lenses. Institutional political action by Nigerian women is a difficult task because the very space to launch such action is routinely denied. Moving beyond the imposition of outside colonial gender values discussed earlier, Lugones' theorizations account for this internal struggle between the nation's men and women. She notes a collaboration between Western colonials and the men of a colonized population that together target women, leading to larger consolidations of explicitly male power.[32] There exists a great need for the heightened presence and action of women in Nigerian politics and this need will only grow with each passing year.

> " WITHIN THE SPACES OF THE COLONIZER, INSTEAD THE PRESENCE OF THE OBJECTS SHOWCASE PROCESSES OF VIOLENT COLONIAL APPROPRIATION."

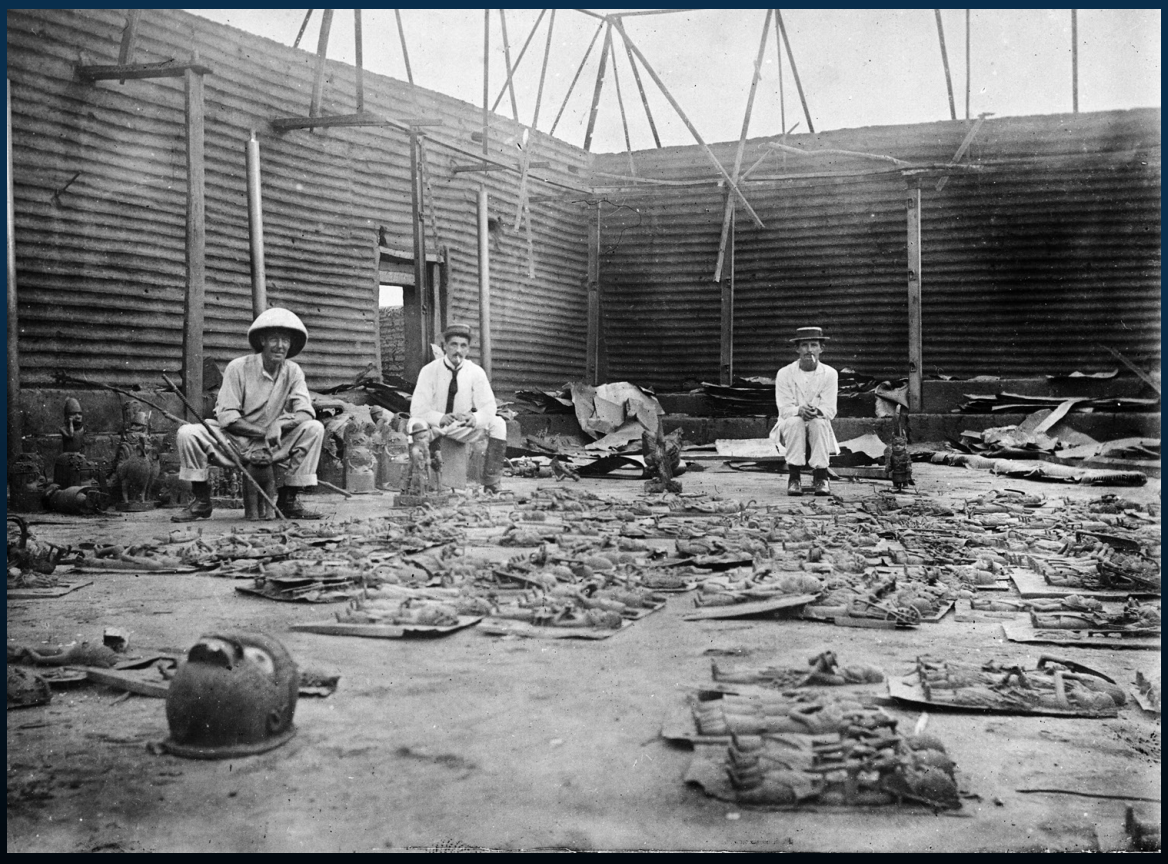
Of course, this description of Nigerian politics is not to wholesale discredit the work and presence of women within the nation. The same pieces of scholarship that make warnings surrounding their positions invariably begin with mentions of valuable progress that has thus far been made. Within the realm of history and culture specifically, the oral tradition of southern Nigeria still extols the Iyoba, particularly that of Iyoba Idia (the first to bear the title in 1504), as a celebrated figure of state defense.[33] Discussing the Iyoba identity at large, one must remember that her own power was similarly defined within an otherwise patriarchal society. As women in Nigeria today must navigate male-dominated systems of power, comparable ascensions to a 'male' authority reflected in the figural Iyoba's life can provide the necessary historical legacy to do so. Bolstering what progress is already present, the restitution of a material culture that provides an inexorable lineage for nuanced women's authority then appears poised to aid contemporary women's issues of recognition through history, culture, and politics.

CONCLUSION

It is by this interrogation of the past and present that the bronze woman, the revered head of the Iyoba, within the depths of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's collections comes into view. She is separated from her origin through dispossession over space and time. Yet, there her metallic form rattles and stirs with symbolic purpose in redress-

ing narratives surrounding women much like herself. She points to the dynamic identities and political presence of historic women within a patriarchal kingdom. She underpins and inspires the novel possibilities by which similar efforts might be carried out within the nation of today. Her lips will be forever unmoving, yet she speaks to an urgent need for restitution of material culture. She speaks to the urgent need to expand political opportunities for Nigerian women. She only needs to be in the proper space: the space of public view in the care of the present state descended from her own. The implications of her return might register not just within the bounds of Nigeria, but for other nations with histories of women's disempowerment and cultural dispossession. As wider trends of scholarship and action within spaces of historical display shift towards ideas of decoloniality, indigenous authority, and equity, her own history, both symbolic of art and identity, may prompt needed reconciliations and restitution the world over.

Figure 6: British soldiers of the Punitive Expedition display looted objects within the burnt remains of the Oba's compound. Photograph taken by Reginald Kerr Granville.



Endnotes

"The Return of the Queen Mother" by Caide Tomaszewski

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Photograph taken by John Ochieng, Demonstrators hold placards and chant slogans during the protests in Nairobi, 2022, Getty Images Archive Photos.

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Figural heads upon a shrine in the Oba's compound in Benin City. Photograph taken by Cyril Punch, Ancestral Shrine Royal Palace, Benin City, 1891, 1891, Wikimedia commons.
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Edo peoples, Head of Iyoba, ca. 18th-19th century, brass (cast), iron, 53.3 x 26.7 x 27.3 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

British soldiers of the Punitive Expedition display looted objects within the burnt remains of the Oba's compound. Photograph taken by Reginald Kerr Granville, Interior of Oba's compound burnt during siege of Benin City, 1897, Wikimedia commons.

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Exterior view of the National Museum in Benin City, the institution to which three objects of The Met's collection were restituted. Photograph taken by Dipo Tayo, National Museum, Benin City, 2019, Wikimedia commons.
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A statue in King's Square, Benin City depicts a Benin warrior standing over defeated colonial soldiers, Photograph by unknown photographer, Statue of a Benin Warrior at the King's Square in in Benin City, Edo State, 2024, Wikimedia commons.
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Ragazza Abissina. Photograph taken by Scozzi Attilio. Taken by 1900. https://www.loc.gov/ item/2020760349/.