



## Fórum / The Forum

### Benin: Rise and Fall of the Empire of Noble Bronze

BENIN: VZESTUP A PÁD ŘÍŠE UŠLECHTILÉHO BRONZU

Barbora Půtová, Václav Soukup, Joseph Nevadomsky

Karolinum Press is currently preparing a monograph titled *Benin: Rise and Fall of the Empire of Noble Bronze* to be published next year. The book is written by the Czech anthropologist and art historian Barbora Půtová (Charles University, Prague), Czech anthropologist Václav Soukup (Charles University, Prague) and American anthropologist Joseph Nevadomsky (California State University, Fullerton, CA). The work is dedicated to the history, culture and art of the Benin Empire, renowned for its bronze artefacts whose artistic beauty is comparable with European Renaissance Art. Publishing the book will complete a unique project that includes the participation of prominent European museums and galleries. However, the book does not aspire to be a mere narration on the subject of African cultures “lost to history”. The tradition of artistic work, as well as customary practices, linked to traditional Benin art and culture are still vibrant in the Edo (Benin) region of modern day Nigeria. For this reason, the authors focus not only on the history and cultural heritage of Benin culture, but also on the continuity of its development which is reflected, in an original way, in the works of current Nigerian artists.

Symbols of the Benin Empire at the time of its peak included Benin City, a ruler titled Oba, and magnificent artefacts of bronze and ivory. The beginnings of the Benin Empire date back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century; however, archaeological research has indicated a long-lasting cultural continuity possibly reaching back to material discovered at Ife and Nok sites. The peak of the empire (“the Golden Age of Benin”) occurred between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. This period of internal economic and political stability saw the territorial expansion of the kingdom west to Lagos, north to the Niger and Benue Rivers confluence, and toward the Niger River to the east, and in the Niger River Delta. At the same time, trade and commercial contacts with Europe were established, and the first missionaries arrived, adding a religious influence to the cultural cosmolo-



Fig. 1. Commemorative head of the *Iyoba*, the Queen Mother of Benin. The bronze head of the Queen Mother was introduced in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by Oba Esigie out of honour and gratitude for the support of his mother, Queen Idia. Benin Empire, 16<sup>th</sup> century. The Trustees of the British Museum, London. Inv. no. Af1897,1011.1



Fig. 2. Woman in her bedroom, partly converted into an Olokun shrine. The chalk drawing under the chair indicates the spiritual contact point to the other world. Benin City, Nigeria, 1985. Photographed by American photographer Phyllis Galembo.

gy. The 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries saw continued expansion but also internal strains and strife between the palace chiefs and the town chiefs, a separation that divides the organization of the state into distinct domains, and allows for political manoeuvre. The deepest crisis occurred at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century following economic and political changes and ever increasing pressure from colonial powers. Yet, in spite of this, the Benin kingdom managed to maintain its political, economic and cultural independence; because of the strength of the kingdom, European influences and activities were of relatively limited account. But control over the Niger River trade and other contingencies meant that on 18 February 1897, the British Army invaded Benin and violently ended the independence of the Benin Empire.

British conquerors looted Benin City, sending over 2,400 artistic artefacts to Europe, which they subsequently sold off in public auctions to the most prominent world museums, galleries and private collections. The West stood suddenly face to face with the beauty of Benin bronzes. The majority of Benin bronze artefacts had been cast for ancestor altars or for ritual purposes. From this point of view, the Royal Palace in Benin was a unique “box” full of works of art that was mercilessly ransacked and the artefacts then dispersed in European and American art collections. However, in Europe the Benin artefacts took on a life of their own: their peculiar aesthetics, originality and artistic impressiveness influenced artists representing European modernists, e.g., the German expressionist group Die Brücke and Der Blaue Reiter or representatives of fauvism and cubism. Benin bronzes became a part of the world’s historic artistic heritage. Local objects for a kingdom transformed into global objects for the world’s audiences but unfortunately, just as the Greeks will never get to see the mar-

bles Lord Elgin removed from the Parthenon, the Bini no longer have ownership rights over the castings their artisans produced, and little chance to see “with their own eyes” the beauty of Benin bronzes.

The book also includes unique photographs of Benin artefacts that are published by the courtesy of the British Museum, Pitt Rivers Museum, Museum für Völkerkunde Wien, Museum für Völkerkunde Hamburg, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin and National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria. The book has an anthropological dimension thanks to photographs by Joseph Nevadomsky, capturing traditional rituals, manufacture of bronze artefacts or everyday life of the current inhabitants of the Benin Empire. The book will be accompanied by authentic photographs capturing members of the Benin royal family in the context of royal ancestral altars, ritual objects, and ceremonial dress. The photographs were taken by the French photographer Daniel Laine and American photographer and professor of art Phyllis Galembo. Some Benin artefacts have been gouache painted by the Czech painter Petr Modlitba.

#### SAMPLE CHAPTERS FROM BOOK

##### Joseph Nevadomsky

*Cautionary Tales and Culture History in the Evolution of the Benin Kingdom: The Ogiso Era*

The Edo (Bini) creation myth is an origin story of the world. One version is that the creator god, Osanobua, had three children, Olokun (god of fertility, water, wealth), Ogiuwu (god of death and mortality), and Obiemwen (goddess of birth and reproduction). Osanobua then created the world by slinging a snail shell to earth out of which spilled sand that formed into the land, its firmness tested by either a chameleon or a toucan, over which god’s children would exercise their mystical hegemony. The relationship between these deities and their interactions with mortals is complex, layered as it is with intermediate deities and local superheroes transformed into supernatural forces. The snail shell tradition is a variation that mirrors evolutionist origin stories, even the “big-bang” event heralding the origin of the universe common to many culture myths.

The migration stories trace the Edo (Bini) to Egypt. This linkage is 20<sup>th</sup> century vintage conceived by Southern Nigerian propagandists to tie educated Nigerians into the sons of Noah story through Ham, the cursed son of Noah, sent to populate Africa. This Hamitic Hypothesis provided a format and a stimulus for incorporating the Edo and the neighboring Yoruba into the civilizations of Europe through a biblical connection. It also coincided with early West African nationalist urges, the Marcus Garvey Back-to-Africa Movement of the 1920s in the USA, a British post-Darwinian elitist humanism. Another tradition is an Ife origin and a hypothesized academic art historical theory of a Nok-Ife-Benin-(Igbo-Ukwu) trajectory of terracotta to brass-casting industries. This is problematic



Fig. 3. Palace horn blowers who announce the entrance of the Oba to a ceremony. The horns are ivory tusks with various carvings on them. They make a bellowing sound, similar to a herd of stampeding or excited elephants. Benin City, Nigeria, 1979. Photographic Archive of Joseph Nevadomsky.

in the sense that history, genesis, and politics are encapsulated: the dynasty of Benin kings supposedly came from Ife on invitation, perhaps a disguised story of conquest or possibly cultural influences that were reciprocal and regional since there is a joint affinity of ceremony, art, and government. Portuguese sources refer to a western potentate to whom Benin monarchs deferred and episodes of court ritual depict it, although local recounting now reverse the tradition suggesting that Ife originated from Benin. These merging, contrasting and opposed traditions reflect not only comparative ethnographies but can only be grasped by understanding the social and political motivations within which they came to the fore and perpetuations. The Ife-Benin linkage also reflects the likely mutual and reciprocal sphere of influences that existed in this region as expressed in the many variations and nuances of the connection story. While the above are origin-migration stories, the Ogois Era is an early development of indigenous social and political institutions. This prehistoric Ogois Dynasty is widely used by art historians and others as an acceptable springboard, a quick jumping off point from which to study the acknowledged brass and ivory art credited to the 14<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Europeans had been so amazed by the booty removed from the palace after conquest by the British Punitive Expedition in 1897 that initially they suspected its indigenous origin.

### Václav Soukup

#### *The British Expedition and Conquest of Benin Empire in 1897*

Rituals did not help the Benin defenders stop the British from conquering their city and looting it. British soldiers did not have to search for valuable objects for very long. They found dozens of bronze relief plaques in the inner courtyard of the Royal Palace. Other beautiful artworks made of bronze, wood or ivory were to be soon found inside the palace. The conquest of Benin did not only mean looting, but also destruction of the original Benin architecture: in order to be able to defend the palace more easily, British soldiers pulled down some of the buildings. The final fateful blow was delivered by the blaze that went out of control engulfing the palace and part of the city. The looted city burnt for five days. The palace was evacuated in haste and many artefacts were irretrievably lost. Still, the booty the British intended to sell so that they could pay for the costs of the expedition was literally monumental. They transported to England over 2,400 Benin artefacts, of which many were sold in auctions. After the successful invasion, Admiral Sir Harry Rawson handed the former Benin Empire under British colonial administration, whose representatives claimed shortly later that this region rich in raw-materials had been finally opened to European trade within the British Empire.



Fig. 4. Chief Isekhure. Benin City, Nigeria, 1980. Photographed by French photographer Daniel Lainé.

### Barbora Půtová

*Benin Art After 1897*

The Benin artefacts were originally considered a war trophy rather than valuable artworks, mysterious and precious treasures of African court art. As soon as these objects became a valuable part of museum collections, the way they were perceived changed radically. Some Benin bronzes dating back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century were valued their artistic and technological elaboration even more than analogous contemporary European bronze objects. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century prominent world museums possessing Benin artefacts dedicated more space and effort to displaying these works in exhibitions, catalogues, and in expert studies or articles in magazines for general public. Despite a typical racial and ethnocentric adversity, Benin bronzes and other artworks found a viable place in the art market of connoisseurs, collectors and curators. “The arrival of the Benin artefacts on the international market of material culture began with a whisper but grew quickly into a roar (...)” (Penny 2002: 71).

### SAMPLE INTERPRETATION FROM BOOK

*Relief plaque: Oba in full regalia seated side on horseback*  
16<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> century, 38 x 43 x 4 cm, inv. no. Af1898,0115.44

The bronze relief plaque depicts the Oba in full regalia seated side on horseback. The horse has a harness hung with bells. The king is supported by two chiefs, Osa and Osuan, standing at the sides of his horse and he grasps their wrists. The attendant on the left side holds in his disengaged hand a staff with the Bird of Prophecy. The attendant on the right side is armed with a curved sword in an ornamented sheath. The third small figure wearing a loincloth and a baldric leads the horse by a single rein.

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Barbora Půtová focuses her research on the relation between art and symbolic culture. In particular, she takes aim at the anthropology of art. In the book, she focuses mainly on analysing and interpreting Benin art. Václav Soukup specialises in the origins of sociocultural system development and its functioning. He contributed especially with his chapters dedicated to the analysis of the history of Benin culture history and its political system. Joseph Nevadomsky specialises in the anthropology of ritual and religion, anthropology of myth and folklore, visual anthropology and contemporary anthropology. He taught for twenty years at the University of Lagos, and at the University of Benin, Nigeria. He has documented the installation rites for the King of Benin. At present he is researching vernacular architecture and religious cults in Benin City, Nigeria. He has many publications such as the essays in the *Sacral Rituals of Kingship in the Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century Former Empire of Benin* and articles on casting in Benin City.



Fig. 5. Relief plaque: Oba in full regalia seated side on horseback. He is flanked by chiefs Osa and Osuan. Third smaller figure leads the horse by a single rein. Benin Empire, 16<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> century. The Trustees of the British Museum, London. Inv. no. Af1898,0115.44