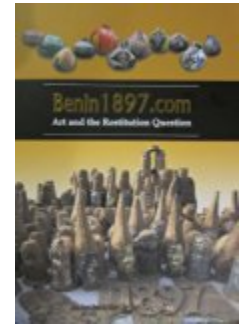


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Peju Layiwola. *Benin1897.com: Art and the Restitution Question*. Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria: Wy Art Editions, 2010. Illustrations. 244 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-978-902-703-3.

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## The Art of Benin Repatriation and the Repatriation of Benin Art

There are several features of this book that deserve review and comment. First is the title, intriguing and open to interpretation. The “.com” suggests commercial applications in terms of sharing the market on Benin brass castings. “Restitution,” too, suggests some form of financial liability rather than the more constraining repatriation. (Transfer of money and deeds is easier than movement of property.) Leasing cultural identity or creating new identities of ownership and transfer are viable options as the “.com.” Maybe cultural property is a loan agreement into which banks should venture, like subprimes and refinancing. Everything is negotiable in market economies. When money talks, heritage walks.

Second, Peju Layiwola’s book is about her art, the production of it, the exhibition that displayed some of it, and the accompanying symposium that opened the exhibition. Layiwola, noted for installation art, offers an exploration of Benin art, heritage, and repatriation as she interprets this in mixed media: clay, calabashes, and layered copper among them. The art is meant for us to reflect on the Benin kingdom, on its downfall and removal of palace objects, and especially on the political agenda of restitution. This is aided by the essays of various commentators.

Layiwola is the daughter of Elizabeth Olowu, an accomplished artist and a half-sister of the present Oba (king) of Benin, Oba Erediauwa. Princess Olowu is noted for her cement civic statuary. Daughter Peju is a studio-trained installation artist and university teacher. This

magnificently produced book celebrates daughter Peju’s art constructions, with essays about her and by her, and photographs of her work and workshop, as well as photos of family, friends, and conference associates. It contains essays from the opening symposium in Lagos (from where the exhibition traveled to Ibadan, Abuja, and Benin City).

Keenly observed accounts of her creativity permeate this text—narratives that warmly capture a place and time with emotional asides and that demonstrate how Layiwola’s lifelong affection for Benin has imprinted her imagination. One example of Layiwola’s work as shown here consists of gourds painted with images, each labeled with the name of a different Benin king. They are suspended in a way that reminds one of a roped lattice or patio divider. The one thousand terracottas mostly replicate late (ca. nineteenth century) Oba brass commemorative heads, although they are less detailed. Intended as protest art, they are not as symbolically potent or ascorbic as, say, Barbara Donahue’s *Amber Waves of Grain*, an exhibit of thirty thousand ceramic nose cones that represented America’s nuclear arsenal in 1986.

Several essays are a paean to her art, and suitably adulatory. A foreword by her uncle, the king of Benin, places her skills in family surrounds; a preface by Tunde Babawale (director of the Center for Black and African Arts and Civilization in Lagos) highlights the contemporary relevance of her art for education; and a note by Mimi Wolford (director of the Mbari Institute for Con-

temporary African Art in Washington DC) describes how she and Layiwola became close friends. There are, too, an anonymous “A Profile” about Layiwola, and an introduction by the artist that illuminates her socialization, schooling, and artistic training.

Also by Layiwola, “Resurrecting the Disappeared: A Recontextualization of 1897” is a memory lane recounting of how her family background intersects with her art. There may be a comparison here to Amir Nur’s 1969 *Grazing at Shendi*, 202 stainless steel semi-circular arches evocative of childhood memories of goats grazing in the Sudan.

Two other essays also use Layiwola’s background to explore her art. “Material Culture, Maternal Culture, Peju Layiwola’s Art and Its Obligations” by Mabel Ewrierhoma (professor of theater arts at the University of Abuja) takes off from the artist’s childhood as an emanation to dwell on feminism and women’s art. Inniversity of Wisconsin) takes us through the exhibition, seeing it as a metamonument that in its iconography depicts a multitude of subjects that synecdochically stand for Benin monarchs and subjects both before and after the Punitive Expedition of 1897. For High, a meta-monument is a postmodern construction that requires ambulatory viewing and critical reflection to comprehend how an art installation glorifies the past and connects it to the nostalgia of the present.

Interlarded among these encomia are serious examinations of repatriation by proponents, and this is the third feature of the book. The essays take the path of political rectitude in declaring Benin objects in Western museums as “looted,” “stolen,” “arrogant theft,” “aggressive art imperialism,” and “pillaged cultural heritage.” The essays are variously incisive, vitriolic, and explosive, but never petty. Beyond that, while Western museum defenders of their loot see their domain as a “curatoreum,” which, like a crypt or mausoleum, preserves the dead, the authors here see the Western domain as a “curatorium,” which destroys cultural identity as a crematorium destroys the dead. Trying to fathom how to resolve such oppositions is a mug’s game.

Some of these essays are primed to “history” as fraud, and restitution as legit payback. Sola Olorunyomi (who teaches performance and media art at the University of Ibadan) offers “Hmmm ... 1897? Or an Introduction,” hitting the reader with a discursive rebuttal of a colonial master text: what he calls the “mortifying lingo of colonial speak,” a reference to the bug-bear “civilizing mission”—and argues that the events of Benin’s

past set the textual agenda (p. xx). The reinterpretation of the 1897 British Punitive Expedition now includes plays (e.g., Ola Rotimi’s *Ovonramwen* [produced in 1971, published in 1974]) and the 2009 rap musical track *1897* by Osaigbovo Agbonze (alias Monday Midnite). In “Art, Anonymity, Anger and Re-appropriation,” Benson Eluma (freelance writer) comments on the artificial distinction between “looted” Benin art and “contemporaneous” Benin art, or between “authentic” value and “repro” ersatz.

“Negotiations for the Return of Nok Sculptures from France to Nigeria: An Unrighteous Conclusion” by Folarin Shyllon (dean, Faculty of Law, University of Ibadan), an expert on cultural property, goes beyond his knowledge about Nok terracottas to offer details about the Benin Idia ivory hip mask requested for loan by Nigeria from Britain for the celebrated 1977 FESTAC (the Second Festival of Black and African Arts and Culture). Britain refused, and an excellent replica, equally iconic, carved by a young man from the Benin Arts Council replaced it as the logo for the festival. Dipping into subaltern studies, Sylvester Ogbegie (associate professor of art history at University of California, Santa Barbara) in “The Sword of Oba Ovonramwen: 1897 and Narratives of Domination and Resistance” tells us the effects that the collapse of the Benin kingdom had on the political economy of outlier groups, such as the Western Igbo, expressed in the telling phrase by one of the Ogbegie family: “Uwa kpu ekpu” (the world turned upside down).

“Of Desecrated History, Memories and Values in Peju Layiwola’s Recent Works,” by Akin Onipede (Department of Creative Arts at the University of Lagos), is a travail that laments the violation of a people’s cultural heritage and shows how Layiwola’s art excites the conscience to expose Western chicanery. Kwame Opoku is a polemicist on cultural affairs willing to take on the likes of anti-repatriation advocates, such as James Cuno (director of the Art Institute of Chicago). Opoku is noted for positing sharp and lucid rebuttals. In “One Counter-Agenda from Africa: Would Western Museums Return Looted Objects if Nigeria and Other African States Were Ruled by Angels?” he takes up the hoary issue of secure and suitable locations for repatriated objects; this leads quickly to observations on obscurantist African leaders, indigenous looters, and local nonchalance. He takes head on a practical consequence of repatriation: what to do with returned loot and where to chamber it?

There is a lot of petrol in these contributions, a fair share of angst and anger, retorts, and shifts in linguistics-

tic discourse from the language of the managers of art to the language of putative owners. The arguments for the repatriation of Benin objects are remarkably intelligent rather than histrionic. What remains wobbly and largely off stage is the fact that Nigeria's museums are so unkempt and mismanaged as to not deserve that restitution.

Layiwola's creations are meant to make a statement and the symposium papers published here are meant to highlight that. But there is a disconnect between her art and the repatriation issue. The gourds and clay busts do not have *that* symbolic or monumental impact. What do they evoke? Are they compelling? Layiwola's pieces *can* be seen as playful or as profound, whimsical rather than channeling one's thoughts to repatriation, and a celebration and remembrance of dynastic continuity; nostalgia for a kingdom past its glory but still intact in some ways. The gourds, each painted with the name of a king are a fun garden partition, like large chimes swaying in a rain forest breeze. Other installations are incredibly thoughtful: *Chequered History III* (2009), of polyester, glass, and acrylic, expresses the fragmentation of Africa as a consequence of the Berlin Conference of 1884 and of colonialism. *Theatre of War* (2009), terracotta and copper, documents a timeline of the Punitive Expedition and par-

ticipants. Compare her installations to the Benin plaques that once graced the wall of the left staircase and confronted visitors upon entering the British Museum, not necessarily a display of imperialism though the aggregation of plaques can be surmised that way, but arguably a glorious display of the historic art of a West African forest kingdom. Maybe Layiwola's installations harbor the same ambiguity and discursive complexity.

Of real value is the color catalogue that occupies the second half of the book. In addition to workshop photographs, the major installation pieces are described from inception and meaning to production and arrangement. Of particular importance is Layiwola's insistence on utilizing her art as teaching aids for school children and community groups to bring about a level of cultural awareness of historical patrimony. She melds art practice and social activism without outrage or stridency. This is really where her art succeeds. While it may not garner the international attention or allure of Christo's *The Gates* (2005) or *Running Fence* (1976), her art serves as an anthem and a beacon. Like the *AIDS Memorial Quilt Project* laid out on the Washington Mall in 1987 that commemorates and calls attention to those who died of AIDS, Layiwola's art exerts an educational force in its own dominion.

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