

Benin City, December, 2018.

His Royal Majesty - The Oba of Benin, The High Chiefs, His Excellency the Governor of Edo State, Commissioner for Art, Culture, Tourism and Diaspora Affairs, all Commissioners and Permanent Secretaries present, distinguished ladies and gentlemen present, all protocols duly observed, dear visitors, my dear friends,

## A New Deal

Thank you very much for the invitation and the possibility to show this photo exhibition here in the Oba's Palace at the Edo Festival 2018. It is a great honour to me. My name is Dr Lutz Mücke, I am a journalist and academic from Germany. I am the one who took these photographs and they are the result of an extensive journalistic investigation I initiated and lead on three continents in 2017 through 2018. A team of three Nigerian colleagues and two Germans cooperated on this. We tried to answer two main questions: How do western museums and collections deal with the fact, that they show and collect artefacts, which were looted and stolen from the Benin Kingdom in 1897? And: How does the Nigerian society and the Benin Kingdom deal with the loss of their cultural heritage?

These questions took me on an amazing 7 months investigation and journey to several countries across Europe, to the United States and – of course – to Nigeria. I will not bore you with endless explanations about the many outcomes of more than 90 interviews and the visits of dozens of museums and institutions. Let me bring just a few remarkable perspectives and reflections to your attention.

The first perspective is an anecdote from the United States: At the coffee shop at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, I met one of the worlds leading and most famous museum curators, an internationally highly regarded intellectual. Before I could even start to come forward with my first interview questions, the lady told me straight away, that she thinks, that the story of and the discussion about the Benin Bronzes are boring and outdated. She said, that she has been working on these topics for decades now and she assured me, that journalists had told already everything about the Benin Bronzes many times.

Well, New York is New York, and we got a complete other perspective from our

meetings here in Nigeria – in Benin City, Lagos and Abuja. Beside the very clear and interesting standpoints of His Royal Majesty and the Governor of Edo State about the return of at least a selection of the stolen artefacts it was also amazing to hear the clear statements of every day people on the streets of Benin City and in Lagos. Irrespective of their age, status, academic background or origin – most of the questioned people knew about the invasion and looting of the Benin Kingdom in 1897, most of them ask for the return of the stolen artefacts and – also important to underline – many of the people were emotionally very touched while answering. The trans-generational wound, the colonial trauma, the humiliation became visible.

So, dear friends, from these two very different perspectives alone you can imagine how tense, how delicate the whole matter and dispute still is. I also went to Cambridge University and spoke to the students at Jesus College about their repatriation initiative for a looted bronze rooster. I drove all the way up to Dr Mark Walker in Wales - the brave man, who brought back two Benin Bronzes to the Royal Palace in Benin City in 2014; two bronzes which were looted by his grandfather. I also met the initiators and members of the Benin Dialogue Group; I spoke to academics, experts in international law, politicians and cultural activists in a dozen countries. Leading people of the international art market gave surprisingly open insides in this multi-billion Dollar business; and famous artists like Adekunle Gold and Victor Ehikhamenor raised their voices in favour of the return of the Benin Bronzes. So, the research brought together a colourful, multi-perspective, thrilling mosaic about the history, present and future of the artefacts looted from the Benin Kingdom in 1897.

Today you find these stolen artefacts in approximately 60 Western museums - with some of the biggest collections in the British Museum in London; in the Ethnographical Collections in Berlin (soon to be shown at the newly built Humboldt Forum); at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York; and at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

Wherever I visited an ethnographical or art museums showing Benin Bronzes I took photographs, over 1,500. The photographs shown in this exhibition are from the museums in Boston and New York in the United States; from Vienna in Austria, from Stockholm in Sweden, von Berlin, Dresden, Munich and Leipzig in Germany and from London, United Kingdom.

But let me come back to the meeting at the coffee shop at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. The comments of the lady, the world famous museum curator, were of course more than wrong. She was not only completely wrong with her judgement, that the story of the Benin Bronzes is a boring one. Also her standpoint against the repatriation of the stolen artefacts stays more than questionable. She obviously has also not understood the dynamics of today's world where, information flows freely with billions of people communicating and exchanging ideas and perspectives across continents with speed and ease. A

world where public opinion is a major factor even and especially for the work of museums, which are there to educate people on very high ethical standards.

The outcome of our journalistic work were three dozens of articles published in leading Nigerian and German newspapers like the Guardian, the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung or the Leipziger Volkszeitung, amongst others. In Germany, the publications of whole series of our articles about the past, present and future of the Benin Bronzes contributed for sure to a shift in public opinion and public opinion matters a lot in this case. Because most of the German museums where looted Benin Bronzes are exhibited (more than 1,000 all together) are publicly owned and/or financed by tax payers money. Thats important to know, because it means these museums are part of the democratic political field.

I strongly believe that we need a “new deal” between Africa and the West, in many ways – economically, culturally and emotionally. The return of the cultural heritage which was stolen, looted and taken away under extremely unfair circumstances in great scale during colonial times is one very important point on our to-do-list. It is not only the President of France, Emmanuel Macron, who has understood that but, his repatriation initiative for African heritage which started in late 2017 caused a push for the whole debate so much that it came out of closed expert circles into the international political sphere.

Some academics calculated, that up to 90 percent of the important cultural artefacts were taken away from Africa during colonial times. Most of these heritage landed in western museums and private collections all around the world. So the Benin Bronzes stay pars pro toto symbolic for the whole African continent. These artefacts are of course priceless as a cultural heritage but, that does not mean we should forget their pure money value. The stolen Benin Bronzes alone are estimated to be 1 Billion US Dollars today.

But in order to reflect the whole drama of the situation a bit better, it is also helpful to have a short look at how the Benin Bronzes are exhibited. Some museums present excellent exhibitions which mention the whole story including the war and the looting of the artefacts. But many exhibitions focus tightly on art aspects and the meaning of the bronzes. Sometimes the brutal way of the artefacts to America and Europe is not even mentioned in the exhibitions or only on a little side board in the last corner of the exhibition or in expensive catalogues in the book store. Which again leads us to important questions: Who is shaping the worlds narratives, in which way and why? And do the exhibitions of many museums not tell sometimes much more about the exhibitors than about the exhibited artefacts?

It should go without saying, that is the supreme right of every people in the world to tell and form their own narratives according their history, understanding and experiences. These looted Benin Bronzes are an immanent element of the history of the Benin Kingdom, the people of Benin should also have the possibility and a

big share in telling their versions of history related to the artefacts. No doubt.

His Royal Majesty, the Oba made a wise point in our interview, when he underlined, that the stolen artefacts also function as cultural ambassadors of the rich cultural heritage of the Benin Kingdom, hence many of them should stay in the western museums, where visitors from all over the world see them. However, the call for the return of the most important artefacts goes on and the call of the Oba of Benin to have a palace museum showing and contextualizing returned artefacts is an excellent idea.

It is time to sit down with partners from Europe and the US and to negotiate about a new deal. For this new deal, I wish you all the best and I am convinced that you will succeed finally, because history and justice is with you.

Thank you very much again for the invitation!

Please accept the assurances of my high regards.

Dr Lutz Mücke

Contact: [lutzmuekke@web.de](mailto:lutzmuekke@web.de)

This investigation was supported by the German journalism organisation “Fleiß und Mut” and by Mercator Foundation. The team: Maria Wiesner, Eromo Egbejule, John Eromosele, Emmanuel Ikhenebome, Lutz Mücke.