The Repatriation of Benin Bronze and Decolonisation of Museums: Views from the University of Aberdeen

By:

Titilayo Adebola
Neil Curtis

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On 25 March 2021, the University of Aberdeen became the first museum in the United Kingdom (UK) to announce its commitment to repatriate a Benin bronze depicting the head of an Oba of Benin. On 28 October 2021, the University of Aberdeen fulfilled its commitment through a solemn handover ceremony held at its Kings College Centre. On the University of Aberdeen's part, Professor George Boyne, the Principal and Vice Chancellor and Mr Neil Curtis, Head of Museums and Special Collections, signed the handover agreement. On the Nigerian part, Prince Aghatise Erediauwa, representing His Royal Majesty the Oba of Benin, Ewuare II, Chief Charles Uwensuyi-Edosomwan SAN, Legal Advisor to His Royal Majesty, the Oba of Benin Ewuare II, Professor Abba Isa Tijani, Director-General of the National Commission for Museums and

Monuments, Mr Babatunde Adebiyi, Legal Adviser/Director, Legal Services, National Commission for Museums and Monuments and His Excellency, Suleiman Sani, Deputy High Commissioner of the Federal Republic of Nigeria in the UK, signed the handover agreement.

The handover agreement signed by the University of Aberdeen and the Nigerian stakeholders transferred copyright in images of the Benin bronze to the Nigerian National Commission for Museums and Monuments. However, the University of Aberdeen was granted a non-exclusive licence to use the images for any non-commercial purpose. Similarly, the agreement provides that all images and information relating to the Benin bronze held by the University of Aberdeen will be supplied on request by the Nigerian stakeholders at no cost and with no restrictions on their use. In this interview, Dr Titilayo Adebola, Editor, Afronomicslaw.org and Associate Director, Centre for Commercial Law, University of Aberdeen discusses the University's repatriation of the Benin bronze alongside the role of museums in the co-production of knowledge with Mr Curtis. Mr Curtis initiated and facilitated the negotiations for the repatriation of the Benin bronze with the Nigerian stakeholders (the Oba of Benin's palace, Edo State Government and the Nigerian Government) on behalf of the University of Aberdeen.

Titilayo Adebola: Why did the University of Aberdeen decide to return the Benin Bronze depicting the head of an Oba and what are your reflections on the process?

Neil Curtis (NC): The decision to return the bronze was simple because it was looted. As a process, it has been time consuming. I spent a lot of time discussing with different people to identify the right people to contact and understand their relationships with one other. I also read Nigerian news sites to ensure that we were engaging in the discussions and negotiations the right way. We had to be sensitive to avoid offending or missing out any important people. It was not a straightforward process.

Although we officially noted that we started the repatriation process in 2019, I had been trying for many years, but I could not find the right people to talk to. In particular, we felt it was important to be in touch with the Oba of Benin, the Edo State Government and the Federal Government of Nigeria, rather than

ignorantly selecting one party. It took a few years of background research to develop an understanding of the pertinent issues at stake. It was not until Professor Bankole Sodipo was suggested to me that we had someone who could introduce us to the relevant people and so commence the repatriation discussion. One of the difficulties with repatriation is how time consuming it is, but this is perfectly understandable because repatriation requires engaging in activities that matter to people. It is never quick or easy.

One of my concerns about repatriation is how expensive it is – in time, finances and emotions – for all concerned, but particularly for the people making the proposal. In the case at hand, the Federal Government of Nigeria covered most the costs for the repatriation including the transportation of the bronzes and the delegates' visit, while the University of Aberdeen covered the costs for the ceremony and entertained the Nigerian delegates during their stay in Aberdeen. The high-profile ceremony was appropriate in this case, but we have taken simpler and cheaper approaches in other cases.

TA: Did the University of Aberdeen make a digital copy of the Benin bronze? If so, was authorisation sought for this? The handover agreement states that the University of Aberdeen was granted a non-exclusive license to use images of the Benin Bronze for any non-commercial purpose. Please discuss the legal/intellectual property rights that the University has for digital or non-physical versions of the bronze.

NC: The University has a variety of photographs of the head of an Oba, some taken recently as part of the documentation of the repatriation. This includes publicity shots, and detailed record shots, which we hope will be used to create a 3D virtual visualisation. The agreement we have will see us give copies of all these images to the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) and allow the university to use the images for any non-commercial purposes. I am struck that some of the photos of the Benin bronze that was in Aberdeen are now some of the most widely distributed on the internet.

While the copyright agreement is clear, I hope to agree with NCMM guidelines on the appropriate use of the images by the University. For example, while we will be able to use images of the Head of an Oba in University discussions of the

repatriation story, I would expect granting permission for third party users to be the responsibility of NCMM, rather the University.

TA: Who was responsible for drafting the handover agreement and what informed the content of the agreement?

NC: The transfer agreement was written collaboratively by me and Babatunde Adebiyi of the NCMM, without any disagreement or need for negotiation. It is based on those deriving from previous returns by Aberdeen. It included an unconditional transfer of ownership and responsibility of the Head of an Oba to NCMM from the time of the signing, a transfer of copyright in images, and an agreement to give copies of images and documentation to NCMM. A paragraph was proposed by NCMM stating that it would 'secure this object…in such a place and circumstances conducive until they can be exhibited at the Oba's palace or other agreed place(s).' This was inserted into the agreement without alteration.

A Memorandum of Understanding was also agreed and signed between NCMM and the University's Museums and Special Collections. This committed the university to providing all information it has about the items in its collections that originated from Nigeria, and expressed a wish to work together to enhance the knowledge about the collections and to establish cooperative relationships with communities in Nigeria. The proposed MoU was welcomed by NCMM and signed without alteration by me for The University of Aberdeen Museums and Special Collections and Professor Abba Isa Tijani for the NCMM.

TA: How did the University get into possession of Benin bronze?

NC: In the 1950s and 1960s, the honorary curator of the museum was the Professor of Anatomy, Professor Robert Lockhart. His work on anatomy included an interest in the living body, not just the dead body. He published a book called "Living Anatomy" with illustrated photographs; visual aesthetics mattered to him. This interest in aesthetics and beauty also seems to have driven him in his museum curation. For example, he created an exhibition and associated talk that showcased the diversity of hats around the world. He was able to develop the collection by using a bequest to purchase items at auctions. Unlike most of the rest of the collection, there was no connection between the university and the original collector. The Benin bronze was one of those. I think

he saw that Benin bronze as an example of African art and he wanted to emphasise the beauty of that.

TA: Was the Benin bronze included in any exhibitions organised by the University of Aberdeen? Is there any noteworthy information about the Benin bronze during the time it spent at the University of Aberdeen?

NC: I believe that the head of an Oba was on display in the University's Anthropology Museum in Marischal Collection from the time of its purchase to the 1980s. It seems to have been shown in a 1960 exhibition to celebrate Nigerian independence. It was also on display in a 2003 exhibition about repatriation and museums, which followed the return of a sacred bundle to the Kainai Nation (Blood Tribe) in Canada. However, other than that, it had not been on display since the mid 1980s.

TA: What are your thoughts about foreign artefacts exhibited in museums and repatriation?

NC: Many European Museum collections contain items from across the world, reflecting their trade and colonial relationships. It is important that museums in Scotland include the stories of their connections with the wider world, including when those stories are ones of inequality and exploitation. At the same time, those collections can be important to people elsewhere in the world. It is therefore essential that museums make information about the collections in their care available so that it is easy for people around the world to find them. Why would somebody in Nigeria, for example, think of coming to Aberdeen to look for materials? Are there ways we can make it easier for people to find materials?

While this can lead to a proposal for repatriation, there are so many other ways in which people can relate to items that originate in their community. Museums must be very open to talking to people to work out what best to do. Some things in collections may be everyday objects for which repatriation would not be relevant, but which can act as 'ambassadors', and build new relationships.

On discussions and negotiations, one question will be who should the museums talk to and what rights do they have? In some countries, the national government is clearly the correct body, but in other places, direct contact with

originating communities can be essential. For example, with the Benin bronze, we felt it was very important to talk with the Royal Court of the Oba, the Edo State Government, the Federal Government of Nigeria and the National Commission for Museums and Monuments. We put in a lot of effort to ensure that we were doing that.

Currently, there are no international laws governing repatriation of items collected during the peak years of European colonialism. For example, the UNESCO 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property does not apply to items acquired prior to 1970. Some states have laws that has given rights to Indigenous people, such as the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), but it does not apply outwith the United States of America. Currently UMAC (the International Committee for University Museums and Collections of the International Council of Museums) is considering Guidelines on Restitution and Return.

I mentioned the costs of repatriation and restitution earlier. The impact of colonisation is enormous and it was much more than taking some items that have ended up in museums. Former colonial powers must address these at national levels and not just assume that restitution is only the responsibility of museums. Indeed, there needs to be more discussion about who should pay for the costs of repatriation. It seems unfair if all costs should be borne by the museums, and even more so if (as is normally the case) a lot of the costs fall on the people making the proposal – particularly if it relates to an item that was looted. Should we be persuading government to allocate money to support people to repatriate materials?

TA: Discuss other repatriations that the University of Aberdeen has been engaged in and what inspired those repatriation.

NC: The first repatriation with which I was involved was in 2003, when a sacred bundle, a headdress, was returned to the Kainai First Nation in Canada. Subsequently we returned ancestral Maori remains to New Zealand and have been working to see the return of Aboriginal Australian ancestral remains.

TA: Why are museums important?

NC: I do not think there is a single answer. Museums have only been around for 200 or so years and are tightly bound up with modernity – capitalism, colonialism, industrialisation and nationalism – rather than being universal or innately important. I, therefore, want to turn the question upside down. What does society want from museums? Are they just about celebrating local heritage or caring for a supposedly uncontentious collective memory, or can we do better by using those collections in new ways to understand how complicated history is and the number of different perspectives that need to be understood? I like it when a museum tries to challenge and make people think differently about where they are and who they are.

For example, Aberdeen has always been connected with the rest of the world, such as through the 17th century Baltic trade and the Canadian fur trade. There were also Aberdeen-educated doctors, missionaries, administrators and soldiers across the British Empire. How do we explore that broader collective memory? It would be very easy for it to be self-congratulatory, but what about the connections with the world that are not pleasant? The Museums Association has just launched guidance on decolonising museums which should help museums think more about what their audiences.

TA: What is the role of museums in the production, prioritisation and dissemination of knowledge?

NC: We need to think more about co-production by recognising that expertise does not only lie in museums and universities. Everybody who visits the museum creates their own knowledge. How can we do that in a way that gets them thinking critically and gets them understanding that there are many different stories and then think about how those different stories are valued. When curating an exhibition, working with other people to tell those stories - whether that is with students, academic staff, or people elsewhere- as co-producers is the ideal. Sometimes, the same object can tell different stories to different people. It is hugely complicated but it is about producing knowledge, not just displaying knowledge.

Curating an exhibition starts with some sort of idea. That could be because a researcher has been working with the collection and they have so many rich stories about the collection. Sometimes, a landmark event can inspire an

exhibition, such as the University of Aberdeen’s 525th anniversary last year. The next step is moving between the idea and the collection, because sometimes the idea can be lovely, but you do not have anything in the collection to support it. Or sometimes you have a lovely collection, but the ideas are not sound when you start thinking about them. An exhibition that works well brings both of those together with the stories illuminating the objects, and the objects illuminating the stories. But we have to go through that process to work out what will make a good exhibition. That is, not just an exhibition that we will like, but one that visitors would be interested in and can engage with. Visitor interests and motivations are very varied: while some want exhibitions that display facts, others want a more contemplative or aesthetic experience. Meanwhile, some visitors are primarily there for a social experience. It is also important for exhibitions to be relevant to current cultural, social and political concerns and so have an appeal, while being grounded in scholarship and a search for the truth.

TA: Discuss the current collections in the University of Aberdeen's Museum and Special Collections and how it curates its collections.

NC: The University is responsible for a huge museum collection of almost 300,000 items. As a rough summary, this includes geology collections – fossils, minerals and rocks – medical collections, zoology, herbarium collections of plant specimens, scientific instruments, as well as materials on human life. For the human culture collections, the two biggest areas are the history of Aberdeen and the Northeast of Scotland area, and the collections relating to the British Empire. Students from Aberdeen became missionaries, doctors, governors and soldiers in the empire, and they collected things and donated them to the university. The collection comprises very high quality, interesting and varied items. But how much does it tell you about the people who made and used the materials, and how much do the collections tell you about the people who collected them?

In many ways, the University has not chosen its collections; it has received what people have given. A 100 years ago, there was a real intent to collect. The Professor of Anatomy, Robert Reid, who saw himself as an anthropologist, was interested in collecting from all over the world. Some of the inspiration for that was a belief in race. He wanted to show both the physical and cultural

anthropology ‘reality’ of race. Students visiting the displays would also be able to learn about places that they would go to work in, such as New Guinea, where they would then go on to collect more and send it back to Aberdeen. One of the important things about the University's museum collection is that it is driven by relationships with alumni. It is not a purchased collection, which is where the Benin bronze is unusual because it was purchased.

TA: What is the relationship between museum collections and colonisation?

NC: It is so striking that the collections from West African collections in the University and other Scottish museums come from Nigeria, Ghana and so on, whereas in France, they are from Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Benin, Cameroon etc., reflecting colonial patterns. That is such a bias. If we are to build relationships today, with people whose material is in Aberdeen, we are building relationships with countries that previously were British colonies. From an European viewpoint, it would be very interesting to see how Britain, France, Netherlands and Germany relate to West Africa in different ways. Colonialism was not simply the same across the sub-region, it varied hugely.

As I mentioned earlier, colonialism lies at the heart of museums. It is therefore arguable that decolonisation of museums is logically impossible, but that history needs to be revealed and new relationships of greater equality need to be created. The UK Museums Association has just published guidelines supporting decolonisation in museums. These address all aspects of museum work, including work with collections as well as how exhibitions, but also covers who works in museums and how staff can be supported. Decolonisation can be very emotional and personal. However, the work is needed, not just because of the significance of the collections to people who have previously been excluded, but also because of the need to be truthful about the stories associated with the collections.

TA: How are law, politics, national agenda setting and international relations considered in a museum curation and collection?

NC: Museums are all different. As a university museum, we are perhaps more focused on questioning, querying and challenging the contexts of collections. We are perhaps less bound to seeing the collection as a treasure – unlike a

museum caring for national collections – and more towards seeing it as the basis for the creation of knowledge. We therefore have a procedure for considering repatriation, not a policy, that has developed over the past 20 years' experience and that can consider each case as a new way of thinking. I am pleased that the University of Aberdeen's criteria were largely adopted for the UMAC Guidelines on Restitution and Return. By trying things and working things through, we have been able to give some leadership around the world on a good approach to repatriation.

TA: Please share your final thoughts on museums, collections and repatriation.

NC: We have not mentioned environmental sustainability and the climate crisis - flying materials and people around the world for exhibitions and conferences and the ways in which museums use air conditioning to look after their collections are not sustainable. However, museums can be places for people to learn more about the environment, the impact of humanity and what can be done to prevent disaster.

The university's foundational purpose: being open to all in the pursuit of truth for the benefit of others, drives our position on sustainability, inclusivity and our approach to repatriation. Seeking the truth, even if uncomfortable for some people, is so important. Rather than falling into the oppositional stances that he 'culture wars' are fostering, museums need to use their collections and places to think more deeply about who has rights in collections, how differing stories can be told, and how to encourage respectful and challenging debate.

Repatriation is a powerful way of re-thinking what collections mean, and how museums relate to people. I have found that the cases I have been involved with have given me a much richer insight into what museums can do – far beyond the specific cases themselves.

View online: The Repatriation of Benin Bronze and Decolonisation of Museums: Views from the University of Aberdeen

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