

# Cultural encounters

[Parts of the World](#), [Europe](#)



Read carefully the following piece of text. What does it tell us about cross cultural encounters? In analysing this text and what it tells us about cross cultural encounters, we must ask and answer several questions. What is the interpretation of the text? What do we understand from the text? How was the text wrote? Who was it wrote by? And, is it representative of both sides? In interpreting the text we see that it is a piece taken from the " Trial of Chief Ologobosheri" and it is a statement from a native witness. The witness statement seems to back up the findings that Chief Ologobosheri is guilty. The general feel of the statement is that the British forces are ambushed without bearing arms and consequently defenceless against a savage force. However we must understand how this period of history came about and who wrote it. the trial was used by the British as a way of showing a civilised way of defending their actions in Benin. The British culture, as raised in the text, was one of fairness and playing a straight bat. We see this in the text "...the white man landed with plenty of boys, but they had no guns or arms to fight with. " The interpretation being that the British had come in peace, without bearing arms. However another interpretation could be that even though they did not carry arms, they had come in great numbers as a show of force. The text also interprets the Benin natives as one of savages and uncivilised, the text saying "...the massacre took place...as they lay in the bush with guns and machetes". The text leans towards the culture of the British, in the trial, as one of innocent until proven guilty. It's interpretation is that the British came in peace and by fair means. However the statement given by the Benin native is one of barbarism in refusing to listen to the message of the white man and massacring defenceless men. However we must also look

at who wrote this text and was it a fair representation of both sides? Clearly it is a statement which shows the cross cultural differences between the British and Benin peoples. What it also shows is a weighted biased towards the British occupancy of Benin. It shows the British as civil, fair and cultured. Whilst the Benin people are seen as savage and primitive. It is seen as a trial to show British fair play and civility, innocent until proven guilty. However even though it is described as a trial "...it is not conducted according to any formal body of law" (The Art of Benin, Book 3, ch 1, 1. 7). The trial was conducted by the British and a verdict given within one day and swift punishment taken. Clearly we can see the text and trial as not being representative of both sides and was used to hand down punishment and show to the world British cultural civility against a barbaric force. How did the idea about race and the primitive influence art from Benin after 1897? Within the following essay I will demonstrate how race and the primitive influenced the way the attitude of the west changed after Benin in 1897. The essay will identify and answer the questions. How was Benin seen prior to 1897? And how did the primitive influence Western European thought after 1897? In 1897 the British invaded Benin, upon entering Benin City they came across outstanding works of craftsmanship and art. These artefacts were taken back to Britain and sold to museums, private collectors, art historians and scholars. Since the invasion of 1897 European attitudes have changed significantly towards this Benin art. When Benin art was first brought back to Britain it was a matter of debate. Prior to 1897 little was known of the Africa's and their culture. The natives were seen as uncivilised and primitive. John Ruskin, a Victorian critic, had said that there was no " pure and precious

ancient art" in Africa. (Ruskin 1897 p12). Indeed art was seen in the nineteenth century as an area reserved for European Christian tradition. Fine art was seen as a representation, " through painting and sculpture as the believable illusions of figure in coherent space". (The Art of Benin : Arts Past and Present p61). Indeed non western and non Christian cultures were seen as primitive and to some extent savage and beyond artistic thought. However the bronzes and carvings brought back from Benin were of excellent craftsmanship and as such the thinking of the western art world began to change. In an extract from The Times, after an exhibition of bronze plaques at the British Museum in 1897 says"...the technical perfection of the work, are surprising evidence of the skill of the Benin native (Loftus and Wood 2008 p79). With the birth of the avant garde movement came more challenges towards the nineteenth century view of race and the primitive in relation to art. Challenges to the pre existent view of the Christian white bourgeois values as the representation of fine art. The avant garde movement took the primitive as their subject of idiom and art became an education through history, geography and cultural awareness. African art had a huge impact on modern art, with famous avant garde artists such as Matisse and Picasso being influenced by what they encountered. The influence of the primitive is very apparent in some of their works. We can see this influence with African masks in Picasso's " Les Demoiselles d'Avignon". Since 1897 avant garde artists have come across a variety of primitive African artwork that has caused great interest, " Picasso himself was overwhelmed by a visit to the Trocadero Museum. " (Loftus and Wood 2008 p59). There developed a link between bourgeois hypocrisy and those

who were seen as primitive and unfortunate in the undeveloped poor. Art with distortion, as seen in Benin art, through avant garde ideology can be viewed as an extension of non conformist ideas. In that deep truths, feelings and emotions are seen. However Benin art was not without flaw and as such gave argument to the purist's in the art world. When we talk of this subject, we must add that the avant garde movement looked upon African art as a means to extend their own artistic intellect. The movement was mixing art with the unknown and the "magical powers ascribed to African carvings ...by tapping into the power of the primitive fetish". (Art of Benin 2. 2 p70). The educational aspect to the Benin art cannot be underestimated. The art brought different cultures together. Through the artwork Britain was given an insight into the life of a different society. One of culture, artistic temperament and intelligence. Consequently changing the attitudes of the past from that of savagery and barbarism. In museums Benin and other African artefacts were displayed along side other forms of media all dedicated to explaining the primitive forms of life. However those avant garde artists influenced by African primitive art did not take in the historical aspect of the work they admired and how this art functioned in the culture of its African society. For the avant garde movement the Benin art acted as a stimulus for the expression of their own art. What we can say is that the avant garde movement raised the profile of African art after 1897. "The concept of art that is to say was largely reserved for the Europeans" (Loftus and Wood 2008, p61). Many sophisticated cultures were not seen as properly producing art in the western sense so primitive Africa was not even mentioned. Nowadays this outlook is completely different, arts are welcome

from all cultures. Since 1897 Benin and other African art have played a key role in the history and culture of Europe. Benin art began influencing artists such as Picasso which began a different movement bringing more interest and attention in African art. European attitudes have drastically changed towards Benin art. To conclude we can say that Benin art extended the thought process of what art should be defined as. The influence of African art began to gain speed once the barriers of race and the primitive came down. In bringing down these barriers and seeing the collection for what it was - art. We extended our knowledge of world history and culture. Sources. Ruskin (1897). Loftus and Wood (2008) The Art of Benin (Open University 2010)