

# Art of benin essay sample

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The ongoing dispute about the ownership and location of Benin art remains a controversy over whether it should be returned to its place of origin. It is vital to observe the “ encounter” between (Woods, 2008, ‘ THE ART OF BENIN’, p. 7) Europe and the kingdom of Benin, when the Benin artefacts were initially plundered and confiscated in the “ punitive expedition” (Mackie, 2008, ‘ 1897: the ‘ punitive expedition’, p. 23). The British opinion of the Benin people as a “ savage and brutal” (Loftus, 2008, The British Museum and the Benin ‘ antiquities’, p. 52), race led them to question how an “ entirely barbarous” (Read and Dalton, 1898, ‘ Antiquities from the City of Benin...’, in Reading 2. 6: ‘ Works of art from Benin City’, Loftus and Wood, ‘ The Art of Benin...’, p. 84) civilisation could produce such “ sophisticated works of art” (Loftus, 2008, The British Museum and the Benin ‘ antiquities’, p. 52). The British also questioned whether these Benin bronzes were “ ‘ relics’ of a lost African civilisation” (Coombes, 1994a, ‘ Reinventing Africa...’, in Loftus, 2008, p. 52) that has subsequently reverted back to a more primitive society. The present location of these artefacts is the result of the biased British perception of Benin society. The British intention was to be “ benevolent educators” (Coombes, 1994a, ‘ Reinventing Africa...’, in Loftus, 2008, p. 53) on the Benin bronzes, controversially claiming altruistic motives of becoming “ the civilised keepers” (Coombes, 1994a, in Loftus, 2008, p. 53) of the artefacts, defending their aforementioned “ benevolent” ownership despite their pecuniary interests.

Seized out of Benin, the artefacts were considered “ war booty” (Mackie, 2008, Looting the art of Benin, p. 30) and their ownership remains controversial because they were considered “ ‘ the only things of value”

(Mackie, 2008, p. 30) that could be taken back to Britain to be sold. They therefore translated into their “‘ aesthetic’ value”, closely linked to their “‘ mere economic” worth (Wood, 2008, *The Benin Bronzes And Modern Art*, p. 58-59). Their ownership remains controversial due to the irony of the British devaluation of the very people, who produced these works of art. Readily and conveniently relegating any notion of the Benin people as civilised, this view may have been acceptable under an imperial world order but remains contentious in a modern context, possibly because of the development of post-colonial ideology and independent government.

Chris Spring, representing the British Museum, believes that the Benin Bronzes should remain in the possession of the museum, as returning them will not “‘ right old wrongs” (Spring, AA100 DVD ROM ‘ *The Art of Benin*’ 01. mp3). In his view, making Benin art available to everyone is crucial for educating people about African culture, arguing that if Benin art was returned to Africa, then people of all nationalities could not learn about African culture (Spring, AA100 DVD Rom ‘ *The Art of Benin*’ 05. mp3). Stating that it is vital that Benin art remains in its current location “‘ alongside all the great cultures of the world” (Spring, AA100 DVD Rom ‘ *The Art of Benin*’ 02. mp3), Spring promotes “‘ reparation through education” (Spring, AA100 ‘ *The Art of Benin*’ 05. mp3) to alleviate racism and ignorance towards Africans. Suggesting that a “‘ great work of art” (spring, AA100 DVD ROM ‘ *The Art of Benin* 03. mp3), such as the Benin bronzes, belongs to all “‘ humankind” (Spring, AA100 DVD ROM ‘ *The Art of Benin*’ 03. mp3), Spring encourages viewing it in a universal context rather than losing everything it can reveal about the Benin culture if it was returned to Africa.

He further argues that Britain will subsequently lose access to the beauty and rich culture of Benin. Spring also believes that British Museums can successfully share their “ expertise” (Spring, AA100 DVD ROM ‘ The Art of Benin’ 05. mp3) with their African contemporaries. Although well-meaning, Spring’s suggestions that the Benin bronzes are currently respectfully exhibited among other great cultures of the world, granting them equal global recognition and educating the public about African culture, the ownership of the bronzes remains problematic. Spring’s “ reparation through education” strategy does not necessitate Britain as the ideal or exclusive location and/or owner of the art; African culture could be equally and perhaps better exemplified if the artefacts were returned. Moreover, the controversy of acknowledging the actual ownership of the art is not fully addressed, masked by the supposition that its current location is optimum to teach its cultural value.

O. J. Eboreime counter’s Spring’s argument, maintaining that Benin’s extraordinary art holds significance in its place of origin, reflecting “ the history of the Benin kingdom...court life...from...the middle 16th century to the” early “ 17th century” (Eboreime, 2000, in Reading 2. 7: ‘ Recontextualising the Horniman’s collection of Benin bronzes’, in Loftus and Wood, 2008, ‘ The Art of Benin...’, p. 85). Eboreime describes the plaque in Plate 3. 2. 28 (Unknown Artist, ‘ relief plaque showing Ezomo Agban, deputy commander in chief of the Benin Army...’, AA100 Illustration Book, Plates for Books 3 and 4, p. 59) based on his “ Edo background” and his knowledge of “ Edo historical and ritual discourse”, giving a detailed interpretation of the plaque’s symbolism in Benin culture at that time, comparing it to “ living

traditions and rituals” seen at “ annual Igwe festivals” (Eboreime, 2000, in Reading 2. 7: ‘ Recontextualising the Horniman’s collection of Benin bronzes’, in Loftus and Wood, 2008, ‘ The Art of Benin...’, p. 85).

These “ festivals” included celebratory “ songs”, rituals” and customs (Eboreime, 2000, in Loftus and Wood, 2008, p. 85), validated in Plate 3. 2. 28 (Unknown Artist, ‘ relief plaque showing Ezomo Agban...’, p. 59), where “ the deputy commander...Ezomo Agban” is in “ ceremonial war regalia” (Eboreime, 2000, in Loftus and Wood, 2008, p. 85), commemorating the conquest of his rivals. Eboreime portrays African culture with respect and dignity by highlighting the specific role of this plaque within Benin culture, giving authenticity to his interpretation by drawing on his own cultural heritage to validate his case. Eboreime places higher cultural value on Benin art, illustrating its place in centuries of tradition as the legacy of the Benin people. Controversy lies in the clash of ideas represented by Spring and Eboreime as they stand for a wider conflict in terms of the perceived superiority of each culture, depending on perspective. Therefore, the location and ownership of the Benin art is a complicated issue.

Kevin Dalton-Johnson (Black Arts Alliance) also expresses that these bronzes should be returned to Africa as rightful owners due to holding a specific role in the “ cultural heritage” of Benin, describing how it resulted in sudden unexpected disorder to the Benin society after the infamous seizing of these bronzes. (Dalton-Johnson, AA100 DVD ROM ‘ The Art of Benin’ 01. mp3)

Dalton-Johnson expresses that this “ cultural heritage” should be reinstated as the “ colonial legacy” (Kevin Dalton-Johnson, AA100 DVD ROM ‘ The Art of Benin’ 02. mp3), has ceased, the Benin people should have the right to

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decide its ownership and location. Further stating that Africans are competent enough to lend them out to other museums so that the bronzes can be recognised and appreciated. Dalton-Johnson believes that knowledge about these artefacts should originate from its own people and returning them to Benin would accomplish that.

The aesthetic status of Benin art can also be contentious as it rivalled some art in European courts at the time it was recovered. Equally exquisitely created, it held par in Europe, for example, in “ the depth and complexity of the casting” (Wood, 2008, *Anthropology and aesthetics revisited: art and contemporary Africa* p. 75). However, as the Benin bronzes did not correspond to the “ racist picture” of a “ primitive” people promoted by “ Victorian anthropologists” due to imperialist values, the works were considered “ puzzling artefacts” (Wood, 2008, ‘ *Anthropology and aesthetics revisited: art and contemporary Africa*’, p. 76). Benin art was displayed “ uncomfortably between historical weaponry and textiles” and was “ part ethnographic display, part art exhibition” (Wood, 2008, ‘ *Anthropology and aesthetics*’, p. 73), which dismissed its aesthetic value. However, there has recently been a “ shift” in how Benin art is exhibited.

The Horniman Museum in London has done this effectively by placing each plaque, “ in its separate space” (Wood, 2008, *Anthropology and aesthetics revisited: art and contemporary Africa* p. 75). Supplemented with data of the past and present culture of Benin written in Edo language, with “ English as a translation below”, (Wood, 2008, p. 75) the cultural origin of the art is prioritised, honoured and celebrated within the display. Relevant, informative anthropological material also pays homage to the bronzes as <https://assignbuster.com/art-of-benin-essay-sample/>

historical records for Benin because there are no known documented accounts of Benin's rituals or culture. However, the cultural value of the art still cannot be fully validated out of its geographical context, due to its removal from its anthropological roots.

Examining one of the Benin plaques (Plate 3. 2. 27, Nigeria, plate XVIII from Read, C. H. and Dalton, O. M., 1898, ' Works of Art from Benin City', Plaque 1), the "cire perdue" technique (Read and Dalton, 1898, ' Antiquities from the City of Benin...', in Reading 2. 6: ' Works of art from Benin City', Loftus and Wood, ' The Art of Benin...', p. 84), a method of bronze casting, was supposed to have been used to craft the Benin bronzes, similar to how " many of the finest Italian bronzes" (Read and Dalton, 1898, in Loftus and Wood, 2008, p. 84) were made. The balanced, symmetrical composition of this plaque seems to represent order and organisation, suggesting an appreciation of how best to represent a subject, which contradicts the aforementioned Victorian view.

A high-ranking individual grasping a leopard in either hand is depicted to represent a person of strength. The elaborate belt also suggests an authoritative and decorated figure, while the rigid, ornate and detailed neck beading portrays wealth. This is indicative of attention to detail that can only be found in a complex, highly-skilled and practised people. The intricate detail of the headdress also shows expert craftsmanship, suggesting it to be a powerful image like that of " a God or king" (Read and Dalton, 1898, in Loftus and Wood, 2008, p. 84). Therefore, it is still controversial to see the Benin Bronzes as just extraordinary pieces in western museums and could undervalue the importance they hold to their culture in place of origin.

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