

Leadership (Abuja)

Nigeria: Centenary - Where Are Nigeria's 6,500 Artefacts Worth N313 Billion?

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Nigeria is famous for the large body of ancient artefacts of her rich cultural heritage. Created by various ethnic groups from time immemorial, these artefacts were an integral part of the peoples' cultures in the past. But today, many of these priceless treasures are no longer in the country; they are in public museums and private collections in Europe and the United States of America, illegally.

The artefacts, estimated to be in the region of over 6,500 are reported to worth over N313billion.

The president, Archaeological Association of Nigeria (AAN), Dr. Zacharys Anger Gundu, says many of these Nigerian artefacts are still being held in European and American museums in spite of several attempts made to have them repatriated to Nigeria.

He stressed that the artefacts were "stolen, plundered, or collected through stealth," and called on well-meaning Nigerians to join AAN in its quest to recover the treasures.

But how many Nigerians of this generation know about these artefacts to even appreciate and seek them out wherever they are? We hereby do a spotlight on these ancient treasures and the issues around them.

The best known of these are the Benin Bronze Works, Igbo-Ukwu Bronze Arts, Nok sculptures and other Nigerian terracotta pieces from places like Ife, Sokoto and Kwatarkwashi, Kano, among others.

As prices of art works continue to appreciate in the local and international markets, agitators for the repatriation of about 6,500 Nigerian antiquities illegally being held in various museums and other collections in European countries and beyond have put the monetary value at N313bn.

Mostly involved are Benin bronzes, ivories and other ancient works looted by British colonialists, especially during the reprisal attacks launched by the Queen's soldiers against natives trying to resist imperialism in 1897.

While the former director-general of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Dr. Joseph Eboeime, described as immoral the excuses often given by foreign museums for holding on to the antiquities, he said the number could be higher going by the fact that there are many others in private hands.

Eboeime said that it was an exhibition of Benin antiquities in foreign museums two years ago that suggested a reliable inventory of the antiquities in formal settings.

"From the catalogue produced for the exhibition, we now got the number of the Benin art works in such museums," he said.

The number in the catalogue of the exhibition which was organised by African Museum was 1,500.

The exhibition which held, among other places, in Chicago, United States, had Nigerian representatives in attendance.

While terracotta and Nok arts were also systematically stolen from Ife, Osun State, and some Northern parts of the country, it was from Benin, Edo State, that the heaviest volume of antiquities was removed and carted to various museums in Britain, Germany and other parts of the world.

Among others, an account by an art historian, Philip J. C. Dark, in his work titled, Benin Bronze Heads: Styles and Chronology, indicates that up to 6,500 artefacts of Nigerian origin are in some 77 places across the globe.

The Benin Bronze

The Benin Bronze is a collection of more than 1,000 commemorative pieces that originated in the royal palace of the Benin Empire. They were creations of the Edo people. The art, as was gathered, began in the 13th century and reached the climax of its production in the 15th and 16th centuries during the reign of Esigie (1504-1550) and Eresoye who later mounted the throne. In 1897, the British appropriated most of them during their invasion of the kingdom.

The Benin Bronze led to a greater appreciation of African culture and tribal arts in Europe. It appeared incredible that people, supposedly so primitive and savage, were responsible for such highly developed objects. Some even claimed that their makers' knowledge came from the Portuguese.

While the collection is known as Benin Bronze, not all the pieces are made of bronze. There are also pieces made of brass, of a mixture of bronze and brass, of wood, of ceramic, and of ivory, etc.

The pieces were made using lost-wax casting and considered the best sculptures made using this technique. The Queen-mother Pendant Mask is one popular artefact that adorns the Royal Court of Benin.

The Queen-mother Pendant Mask of the Benin Art

This is one of the most celebrated masterpieces of African art. The pendant used to be a prestigious object worn by the king on ceremonial occasions. The portrait is of a historical figure, Idia, the mother and close advisor to one of Benin's greatest leaders, Esigie, who ruled between 1504 and 1550. Framed by an elegant tiara-like coiffure and openwork collar in the likeness of an Edo royal woman, the preciousness of the materials and the refinement of the carving indicate that it was created by the exclusive guild of royal ivory carvers for the king.

Esigie honoured Idia, his mother, for helping to secure his claim to the throne and for the wise counsel that she provided him throughout his reign. As a result of Idia's role, the title of Queen-mother (Iyoba) was introduced to the Benin Court, granting the mother of the Oba (king) equal authority to that of senior town chiefs.

Some of these objects were auctioned to public and private institutions in Europe and North America to defray the cost of the punitive expedition. At the moment, about 3,173 of the Benin treasures are distributed between 17 encyclopaedic museums in Western Europe and North America. Queen-mother Idia pendant mask, for example, is now in the Metropolitan Museum of Fine Art, New York, USA. Many of these museums have been known to auction these Benin treasures to beef up their revenue base. Virtually all of them have refused to consider overtures for the repatriation of these treasures to Nigeria.

The Esie Statue From Kwara State

Over 230 years after the discovery of the Esie Statue in Kwara State, the mystery surrounding its carvers remains unravelled.

The Esie Statue is made up of about 1,500 soap stones neatly seated in a semi-circle formation under a palm tree with the Oba Ere (king of the images) seated in the middle as if presiding over a community meeting.

Esie, about 53 kilometres from Ilorin, the capital of Kwara State, is an ancient Igbomina town in Irepodun Local Government Area of Kwara State that is rich in unique historical monuments. The statue was discovered in a thick forest near the community.

Although the inhabitants of the area have been unable to explain the origin of the Esie statue, legend has it that around 1775, a powerful hunter and founder of the town, Baragbon, discovered the statue.

In 1945, precisely 170 years after Baragbon's historic discovery and about two years after the founding of the Nigeria Antiquity Service, now known as the National

Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM), the British colonial government established the first museum in Nigeria, the Esie National Museum, Kwara State.

Nok Terracotta

The terracotta is a significant aspect of the culture of Nok people in Kaduna State. The terracotta art is believed to have existed between 2,000 and 2,500 years ago and constitutes most of the ancient artefacts in West Africa. The Nok culture had its beginning at about 1,000 BC but spread to the West African region at about 300 AD.

The year 1928 may have been forgotten by any other group of people but it will remain unforgettable in the hearts of Nok people. That was the year terracotta sculptures were first discovered in their soil during a tin mining operation. One of the miners found something other than the tin he was searching for. It was a small terracotta design of a monkey head.

Subsequently, more terracotta designs were found as the mining operation progressed. This time, it was a terracotta human head and a foot. It then dawned on the Englishman who was leading the mining activity, Lt. Col. John Dent-Young, that the Nok soil was also rich in cultural deposits and not only natural mineral resources they had set out to get.

Dent-Young, who saw that these discovered objects would be much valued in future, later placed the artefacts in a museum in Jos, the present capital of Plateau State. In 1932, more terracotta statues, 11 of them, were discovered intact near Sokoto. In 1943, more clay-made figurines were unearthed during tin mining near Nok village. One of the miners who had found a head quickly considered it a helpmate in his yam farm where he thought it could serve as a scarecrow. So, he took it home and placed it in his farm.

The Nok people of the ancient time were also hunters, farmers and famous iron smelting workers besides their popular terracotta sculpting. There was a measure of dexterity in the skill of the Nok people which enabled them to preserve the terracotta figures over a long period of time. Some of the statues were polished while some were broken.

However, they were valued highly across international boundaries, art and cultural markets. This is the reason why some of the artefacts were smuggled, perhaps by stealing, out of the country to Britain, France, Belgium, United States, Switzerland, Germany, Spain, Australia and Italy.

By 1993, a consortium of European art dealers plundering Nigerian art employed hundreds of diggers in the Nok valley and other parts of northern Nigeria where 3,000 terracotta finds were illegally recovered annually and taken to European and American art markets through Lome and Cotonou.

LEADERSHIP Friday also gathered that construction and development of the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) has considerably opened up the opportunities of plundering Nok terracotta. Big-time construction companies are rumoured to have plundered Nok terracotta in the course of construction and illegally shipped them out.

Though it is difficult to track where these Nok statues end up in Europe and North America, at least 50 pieces are currently in the collection of Gert Chesi in Schwaz, Australia. Mr. Chesi's museum, established in 1995, is called the "House of the People", and has the most splendid collection of Nok terracotta anywhere in the world.

However, there are revelations that Nok terracotta and other cultural artefacts in Nigeria were not smuggled only by foreign interests, as there were indigenous accomplices who acted as local agents for them.

Nigerian dealers in antiquities are alleged to be complicit in the plunder as some of them are known to have close business relationship with European art dealers.

Igbo-Ukwu Bronze

Present-day Igbo-Ukwu is located in Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State. Igbo-Ukwu is widely known as an ancient city of bronze and is said to hold the largest and the earliest known bronze artworks in sub-Saharan Africa that dates back to the 9th Century AD though it has not received as much publicity as Benin Bronze and the Ife and Nok Terracotta. However, Igbo-Ukwu craftsmen were working with bronze centuries before those of Ife.

According to findings, the Igbo-Ukwu bronze works were discovered for the first time in 1939 by a villager, Mr. Isaiah Anozie, while digging beside his home. This excavation site is today known as the Igbo Isaiah, which is a stock house of regalia.

Owing to the discovery of Igbo Isaiah, the Nigerian government requested formal excavations from the archaeologist, Thurstan Shaw, in 1959, which led to the discovery of two other sites: Igbo Richard (a burial chamber) and Igbo Jonah (a disposal pit), containing other ancient artefacts.

Artefacts discovered range from jewelries, ceramics, a corpse adorned in what appeared to be full regalia, a ritual pottery vessel, a scabbard, pendants with a ram head and another with a scarified human face, a bronze bowl, a pear-shaped bowl, fly-whisk handles, crowns, breastplates and staff ornaments.

Features Of Igbo-Ukwu Bronze

Igbo-Ukwu bronze works differ in design and alloy composition from those of Ife and Benin arts. Their surface decorations reflect the mastery of the craftsmen, an artistic technical ingenuity that lacked known prototypes. It was also indicative of a well structured society with wide-ranging economic relationships. For instance, it is believed that the bronze found in the burial chamber (of a high personage) was part of the furniture of a forerunner of the Eze Nri, a priest king who wielded religious power over large parts of the Igbo region well into the 20th century. Then, of course, there was the old (and sometimes still-whispered) practice of burying certain persons in fine clothing, along with living attendants.

The bronze pendants were in the form of animals such as elephants, leopard, rams head, and insects like flies, beetles and grasshoppers arranged in symmetrical order.

There were also geometric designs of parallel lines, triangles, circles and raised dots overlaid with fine threads, pellets and spirals. A good example is the roped bronze vessel.

Most of the Benin bronze works were plundered from the Kingdom following the 1897 punitive expedition. It is estimated that more than 3,000 works of art, including what was later adapted as the FESTAC logo, were stolen from the palace, shrines and houses of ranking Benin chiefs. Other Nigerian artefacts in the West were plundered during the colonial period and the Nigerian Civil War. It is on record that Leo Frobenius, whose expeditions to Africa were a front for major ethnology museums in Germany, visited Nigeria between 1910 and 1912. Within two years, he carried off (through 'purchase' and stealth) 5,670 Nigerian heritage treasures which are scattered between the Leo Frobenius Institute in Frankfurt and the Museums of Ethnology in Hamburg, Leipzig, and Berlin, all in Germany. He is also implicated in the theft of the Olokun Head in Ife and its replacement with a counterfeit.

Another notable example is the Tiv Naakaa incident of between 1929 and 1930. British misunderstanding of Tiv sacred heritage led to the widespread confiscation of Tiv sacred objects under violent and humiliating circumstances, and all such objects were shipped abroad.

This ugly trend is still lingering. It is known that in 1987, nine objects were stolen from Jos museum. It peaked in 1990 when Nok and North-Western Nigeria (Kwatakwoshi's) archaeological sites were massively robbed of their treasures. In the 1990s, an estimated 429 treasures were stolen from 33 museums and institutions across Nigeria and 34 Esie soap stones were stolen between 1993 and 1995 from the Esie Museum. It was reported recently that the government of France has returned some valuable Esie artefacts stolen from Nigerian in 2011 and seized by customs officials at the Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris. The value of stolen treasures from Nigerian museums has been estimated at 'hundreds of millions of dollars'.

Though the international instruments on ownership and repatriation of archaeological resources are understandably skewed in favour of art consuming countries of the West, Nigeria must seek to exploit the small windows open for repatriation to push along with countries in Africa and elsewhere that are also victims of such plunder.

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