

Stealing history: The great debate on the repatriation of African cultural property

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By Deborah Gabriel

Last Thursday Liverpool Museums hosted a day of workshops and discussions around the issue of the repatriation of stolen loot taken from Africa. Black Britain examines the European arguments versus the African case for reparations.

In 1897 the British deposed the Oba (King) of Benin and burnt down his palace but not before looting his collection of bronze and ivory that was held in the palace. Today most of that collection is on exhibit at the British Museum in London. Many other objects which have both cultural and spiritual significance and even the remains of our African ancestors are held in western museums in Europe and America.

The African Reparations Movement which was spearheaded by the late Bernie Grant, a stalwart of the African community and social activist, mounted a campaign for the return of the Benin Bronzes and ivories to Africa in the late 1990s. Today the debate continues and pan African Reparations movements have picked up where Grant left off with campaigners, scholar activists and those in pursuit of solutions to global injustice carrying on his legacy and the legacies of those who have gone before him.

Dr Zachary Kingdon, who is curator of African collections at National Museums Liverpool and who was one of the speakers at the debate, commenting on repatriation told Black Britain: "Some African countries would argue that's the way it should be as that would promote tourism and people would have to come to Africa to see them. That's the minority view as far as I understand."

But what is the position of museums in the UK who hold many of Africa's stolen treasures on the issue of repatriation? "The museum's view is that we hold these objects for the whole world and we welcome anybody who wants to come and see them and study them..." Dr Kingdon said.

Thelma Sutton, a black academic who has just completed a research paper entitled: Museums and galleries as educative conduits: Are museums and galleries sites of mass communication that reproduce negative depictions of the black historical presence? told Black Britain: "It would be just as legitimate to send them back to Africa so that the world can go and see them in Africa and help the economies of some developing countries."

According to Dr Kingdon, African artefacts are a world heritage and western museums are catering "For a world audience... there is no single solution for all African objects, there just isn't and I'm a bit worried by this absolutist perspective...that everything has to go back..." But Sutton told Black Britain that such arguments being made: "Is about finding excuses to not do what needs to be done and to hold on to what isn't theirs. It's also about power and the west wanting to hold onto the treasures of their [former] colonies."

Esther Stanford, speaking as a community scholar activist in jurisprudence (the science and philosophy of law), told Black Britain that the museum's view that they hold the artefacts for the whole world was: "imperialistic." She said that the whole point was that our cultural property should not be on display in museums:

"A lot of the cultural property on display in museums were held in our culturally appropriate systems and institutions, in terms of our own palaces and shrines, because what accompanies this property is our own form of ritual, our own form of royal protocol...we wouldn't display things like that in a showcase for everybody to see."

Western museums say they hold the objects for the world

Professor Barbara, Bush also a panel speaker at the debate is a history lecturer at Sheffield Hallam University. Speaking about the removal of objects from Africa, Professor Bush told Black Britain: "The African people were not passive in this, they cottoned on quite quickly that missionaries and collectors also wanted artefacts from Africa and started manufacturing them."

Professor Bush said that as a result many museums including the British museum have fakes and that there is an assumption that people are passive and things are just taken away. "That is not so because people start to manipulate the demand themselves." But Sutton told Black Britain that it was important to look at the context of the so-called collusion: "How were people sold the idea of giving up their artefacts? From the west, because they wouldn't be seeing the artefacts in a global economic context."

Stanford told Black Britain that that it is correct to say that Africans were not passive in the taking away of artefacts from the continent: They actually resisted the taking away of this cultural property, but there was military force that was imposed on Africans and trickery. The whole issue of cultural property cannot be divorced from an African perception of human rights and people's rights."

Stanford told Black Britain that that much of the property removed from Africa was not treated as a piece of art for individual enjoyment as it would be in the west, but was part of the spiritual, cultural and material property connected to the land of different nation groups on the continent. Such artefacts tell the story of the journeys of different nations, such as the Benin Bronzes:

"The Benin Bronzes are like a chronological record as each bronze head represents an Oba going back to the 12th century. So our property performs multiple purposes, not just aesthetic in being able to look at and appreciate it, which is how art is seen in the western context."

Dr Kingdon agreed that the issue is not just about the physical removal of objects from Africa but the change of context of their use. "Intellectually and from a cultural and symbolic point of view, some of these objects have been extracted from their symbolic home and symbolic contexts." But commenting on the issue of reparations, Professor Bush told Black Britain: "If you talk about simply restoring stolen treasures, which is the African reparations movement line, there are deep problems."

She cited the Congo: "What has happened to all the collections that they had is that it's all been ripped off, gone into the illegal international art market...the museums are destroyed, degraded, there's no money to look after them, no-one cares about them..."

But Professor Bush admitted that this reproduces certain stereotypes about Africa not being capable of looking after things. "But the conflicts in the Congo are not just rooted in colonialism, there are other problems...over resources...things are to do with the modern era as well."

Stanford told Black Britain that it is important to look at the issue of returning stolen artefacts in the context of a pan African reparations movement: "Which looks at repairing the mindsets of some of our people, it's about restoring the true value of what

this property means.”

She also stressed that although a minority may have colluded in the looting of African treasures: “You don’t judge the whole of the people by the action of the few people who succumbed at the threat of warfare and subjugation, decimation of people’s nations, displacement and Martial Law that occurred through colonialism of the African continent.”

Property belongs with the African people in their place of origin

Professor Bush said that part of the debate was also the whole ideology of museums: “The museum is a western construct that grew out of western modernity when people wanted to measure, classify and collect and then it became popular spectacle at the end of the 19th century.” She told Black Britain that museums came about because ordinary people wanted to be able to view the exotic artefacts.

Sutton agreed that: “Museums and galleries were formed to exoticise Africans in the first place. That’s why exhibitions and museums were set up.” Stanford argued that cultural artefacts evolved out of the historical consciousness of African people and are also historical records and therefore do not belong in British museums that take these artefacts out of their intended context. She told Black Britain:

“In effect they are taking our humanity and putting it on show and it also assumes that the best way to preserve, promote, recognise and value these artefacts of civilization are to put them in a museum. That is not the way in which we preserve our culture.” The African way of preserving culture is to pass the knowledge, systems and rituals down the generations and part of the culture is actually a form of resistance to continued oppression and exploitation.

Professor Bush argued that the debate is largely about art and artefacts from archaeological digs in Africa such as masks, terracotta and other objects that have religious significance. But she told Black Britain that religious significance changes over time: “If you are talking about restoring those artefacts to Africa who do you restore them to?”

But Stanford told Black Britain that Africans have the right to restore themselves and reclaim their property and to seek out more appropriate ways of preserving African culture: “It is not appropriate for westerners, Europeans and white people to be determining for us where this should be. You wouldn’t expect the Queen of England to be buried in Nigeria and for us to intern her body for all and sundry to see,” she said.

Professor Bush did agree that the way forward is for people in the African Diaspora to be more involved in how objects are displayed and represented in western museums. She told Black Britain that it is an ongoing debate: “To what extent the local community participates [and] to what extent their history is represented.”

Sutton told Black Britain that the way in which African culture is presented and portrayed in western museums is denigrating to this day. Dr Kingdon admitted that museums have a cultural legacy of imperialism which resonates through the buildings, exhibitions and collections:

“That turns people off as they feel that it is a medium that in the past...is denigrating to African culture. People think I don’t want to go to a museum where my culture is considered low down on the hierarchy of cultural evolution.”

But Stanford was far more critical. She told Black Britain that retaining stolen cultural property from Africans was clear evidence of the lack of value placed on African

humanity: "We are still treated as though we are 3/5ths human and having our spiritual and human potential displayed in museums treats us as though we are objects and animals in a zoo."

She concluded: "Ultimately, the removal of this property went against African law and our own indigenous concepts of our sense of peoplehood and nationhood. This property belongs with the people."

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