



**Staffan Lundén.** *Displaying Loot: The Benin Objects and the British Museum.* Göteborg: Göteborgs Universitet, Department of Historical Studies, 2016. Illustrations. 589 pp. Doctoral Thesis. ISBN 978-91-85245-67-4.

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## Loot!

This is a determined effort to prove that since its founding in 1753 the British Museum has not stood up to its lofty Enlightenment goals of tolerance, respect for difference, and cultural equality, as filtered through the Benin brass objects secured by the British Punitive Expedition of 1897. That year, the British invaded the Kingdom of Benin in retaliation for the death of members of a delegation sent to negotiate a trade agreement, against advice that the king of Benin was involved with sacred rituals. Staffan Lundén investigates how the British Museum (mis)represents its collection of Benin cast objects from that time to the present. The argument is situated in an Edo/African versus British/Western civilization dichotomy. Lundén argues that the British Museum—that great repository of cultural relics—has its self-conceptualization grounded in a superior intellectual morality based on universal goals that are never achieved.

Lundén sets out the theoretical framework in the chapter called “Modernity, Museums, Exhibitions and Objects.” His inquiry relies on Michel Foucault and Edward Said but draws immediate inspiration from Arjun Appadurai, Igor Kopytoff, and Kate Sturge. Situated in the beginning of modernity in the fifteenth century or thereabouts, his argument is that the Western claim to universalism feeds out of a strong notion of positional superiority. Altruism is little more than a motivator for European conquest and domination. The author shows how

the British Museum reinforces a certain regime of truth that privileged British imperialism. Lundén’s disquisition on knowledge production sets the stage for a sustained attack on the British Museum.

In “The Literature on Benin Objects and on Ownership of Cultural Objects,” Lundén explores the discourse on war booty. His reference base is Annie Coomb’s 1994 *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture and Popular Imagination in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*. With the exception of Coomb’s reference and references to Terence Ranger and Eric Hobsbawm’s 1983 edited *The Invention of Tradition*, Benedict Anderson’s 1983 *Imagined Communities*, and Michael Billig’s 2013 (originally published in 1995) *Banal Nationalism*, there is little examination of specific Benin objects except to say that they did not affect European negative stereotypes about Africa, a debatable proposition that he claims is in line with Coomb’s argument. His thesis is also framed by reference to Homer’s *Iliad* and Herg’s Tintin adventures *The Seven Crystal Balls* (1948) and *Prisoners of the Sun* (1949) that vicariously focus on war loot and cultural property. Reading footnotes here (and elsewhere) about the return of objects offers a cornucopia of facts and adds crucial fuel to his argument. Lundén cracks the door to introduce the British Museum policy of object retention.

Chapter 4, meanwhile, provides an overview of the 1897 British Punitive Expedition (or what the author

refers to as the Edo-British War). It is a short chapter that adds intriguing tidbits to the brief *war*. Lund<sup>Å</sup> has his slant, emphasizing a Victorian terminology of African savages that in Europe's imaginings go back hundreds of years.

Chapter 5 is a key chapter because Lund<sup>Å</sup> interrogates how Benin objects changed meaning both before and after 1897. It contains historical photographs and ethnographic commentary on various brass objects. Yet the emphasis is on the sale and holdings of Benin brasses. Lund<sup>Å</sup> tells us that no museum has bowed to demands from Nigeria for the return of Benin objects, though the British government did sell two dozen plaques to the then colonial government in Nigeria for the planned National Museum in Lagos. Some stolen and found objects have been returned to Nigeria. Lund<sup>Å</sup> in a fit of pique mentions that in 1973, the then head of state, General Yakubu Gowon, was among the thieves and traffickers because he raided the National Museum, taking a queen mother casting to give to Elizabeth II on his state visit (p. 173). Not mentioned by Lund<sup>Å</sup>, that head had been one of the cast objects returned by Britain in 1960 as a token gift to Nigeria on its independence. The street talk is that it will never again be returned to Nigeria!

But Lund<sup>Å</sup>'s vent is against the British Museum and Neil MacGregor as its recent avatar from 2002 to 2015. Lund<sup>Å</sup>'s rant condemns the retentionist policy of MacGregor that jives with James Cuno's argument that museums preserve and protect the world's heritage for the benefit of all (*Museums Matter: In Praise of the Encyclopedic Museum* [2011]). Lund<sup>Å</sup> leaves no caption of the Sainsbury gallery on African objects unexamined. It is a provocative prosecutorial assault, unyielding in its interpretative examination of the evidence.

After his short chapter on Ife cast objects, the circumstances of their discovery and conflicts over ownership, mainly the sale of two Ife heads to William Bascom in 1939 for less than twenty dollars, and his reluctant return of the heads to Nigeria, Lund<sup>Å</sup> devotes the remaining chapters to the British Museum's rationale for retention of the Benin cast objects as they relate to the museum's foundation and history, the British Museum's version of its past, and the gap between its mythic history and the documentary record. Two chapters are devoted to the post-1897 narratives of imperial acquisition, and how these narratives accord (or not) with the available historical sources. There are relentless commentaries on the falsity of the Enlightenment morality of the British Museum. How the British Museum creates the Edo and con-

structs the meanings of cast objects is explored through exhibitions, catalogues, and publications, including academic writing. Scholarship is skewered by his deftly aimed petard, sometimes to the point of overkill. In every instance the British Museum is found wanting. Chapter 12 treats alternative ways of making representation, although representations by a Swedish museum exhibition and the Sainsbury Gallery in the British Museum are clearly not in the same league.

I agree with some of his suppositions about the Sainsbury Gallery of Benin art my personal take is how the brass plaques are displayed in contrast to their previous placement at the top of the grand staircase that everyone witnessed as they entered the museum. The art of a grand African kingdom shown in the grand imperial museum of Great Britain strikes me as a more evocative visual commentary in any number of ways than the unsatisfactory way one enters the Sainsbury collection of African art, and the diminished placement of the Benin plaques. I admit to a royalty bias.

While I sympathize with the author's repatriation arguments as a general moral principle, and his sifting through a mountain of accumulated notes that justify them, I disagree on the pragmatic not judgmental level arguing that each call for repatriation must be made on a case by case situational basis. It is a political, not a moral, issue. In the case of Benin kingdom objects, I would not advocate repatriation. The National Museum in Benin City as a possible repository has half empty cases with labels that the objects are on loan but no one knows where. Maintenance staff considers the castings as *ajuju*, and caretakers are civil servants not curators. The museum is ill-kempt. Few visit it.

Some years ago Oba Erediauwa asked me about repatriation, at the time an issue popularly raised in England by politicians in constituencies of mainly British-Nigerian voters (with local coverage accompanied by a photo of an Ife head). Oba Erediauwa then felt that Benin castings should remain in the British Museum where they were safest. A few years before, BICC (British International Communications Corporation) had excavated a late period queen mother head while digging a cable trench near the palace wall on Airport Road. Apparently it had been thrown into a refuse pit. After infighting among potential contenders, it went to the Commission on National Museums and Monuments in Lagos and not to the University of Benin (that promised to build a museum but never did), or the Oba who by tradition owned it, or the local National Museum, Benin City. Who right-

fully owns it? The Oba? Benin City and the local university? Edo State? Nigeria?

Regardless of one's views on retention or repatriation, this book displays Lundén's diligence in inves-

tigative reporting and his extraordinary ability to suss out meanings attached to the Benin brass cast art by the British Museum, its curators, and those involved in Benin studies. The source material is worth a careful look as is the author's relentless examination of it.

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