Ikegobo to the Iyoba

Altar to the Hand, Unknown West African Artist, 18th/19th C, 21.3 x 26.7cm diameter at base; 21.3 x 23 x 23cm. The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham.

Transcript

Hello, my name is Adwoa Owusu-Barnieh and I'm a classical literature and civilizations graduate from the University of Birmingham. I am going to be talking to you today about a marvellous artefact: an 'Ikegobo'. This was an altar to the Queen Mother of the Edo people of Benin (now Southern Nigeria), and was traditionally used as part of their worship of the hand. This Ikegobo, cast in bronze, is of a cylindrical pedestal form with seven figures around it in high relief, the central figure representing the Queen Mother, or 'Iyoba', herself. It was crafted using the lost wax technique – a notoriously complex process, the brilliant use of which here is testament to the sophistication and technical ability of the Edo.

For Benin, contemplating its art is one of the ways we can keep its history alive. In my opinion, we all have the ability, and maybe even the social responsibility, to keep the contextual history behind the art we consume in collective memory. I will now give a short summary of Benin society; explain what the artefact actually is – what it shows, the context of the society that produced it and why I think it's so important to take an active interest in what art can teach us about the world and ourselves.

The Kingdom of Benin is in the tropical rainforest of what is now Southern Nigeria. The Edo people of Benin are ruled by their King, or 'Oba'. They hold that in the Oba is combined the political expertise and spiritual powers that flow from his divine ancestry. The origins of the kingdom are largely unknown – possibly lost forever – but it clearly dominated parts of West Africa from as early as the 13th century.
The role of the Iyoba was created in the 16th century by Oba Esigie for his mother, Iyoba Idia. The last Iyoba – Agahua N'Errua – was given the title in 1981. She was the first title-holder in almost 100 years, dying in 1999.

To understand why a Queen Mother of Benin hadn't existed for 100 years, we must address the impact British colonialism has had on Benin culture. It is known that Sir Ralph Moor, the First High Commissioner of the British Southern Nigerian Protectorate, saw in the virgin Benin forests a wealth of economic opportunity and, as such, was determined to bring British rule to Benin – in his own words – "by force, if necessary".

In 1897, Admiral Sir Harry Rawson undertook the so-called 'Benin Punitive Expedition', nominally in response to the ambush and massacre of a previous British-led party. His expedition captured Benin City in February 1897, setting the Oba's palace alight and destroying the town and much of its wooden artefacts in the process. Thousands of artworks were seized and then sold by the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Benin remained a part of the British Empire until 1960. It is important to understand why these Benin artefacts are now mainly held in the 'West', and the colonial history of the Benin Bronzes is of great significance when it comes to debate for repatriation. I will come back to this later.

This Ikegobo shows the Iyoba as the central figure, easily identified by her specific attributes as well as the size of her figure in relation to the others. I find myself drawn to the Iyoba's head. The head, an element of religion in Benin, is believed to be the locus of reasoning – affecting an individual's ability to realise their potential in life. The Iyoba's hands – clenched in fists with extended thumbs – are a common motif found on Ikegobos. In Benin belief, the right hand reflects the personal effort needed to prosper in the world. The Iyoba is recognisable by her iconic coral-bead crown; it has a high, forward-pointing beak, known as a chicken's beak, the tip protruding out further. She is also adorned with a high, beaded collar coming up to her mouth. Her coral shirt normally denotes the status of a high-ranking chief.

That the Iyoba figure on the altar has her reason, achievements and status highlighted, seems to be a reflection of the belief that an Iyoba is 'chosen' - she is predestined for her role before she is even born and her success is the result of both destiny and personal ability. Young virgins often accompany the Iyoba, and they can be identified as such on this altarpiece from their only 'clothing' being jewellery. They are wearing strands of beads around their necks and ankles and sport a crescent-shaped 'up-do'. The fan is positioned in such a way as to protect their modesty. It is likely that the female attendants are intended wives of the Oba – sent to the Iyoba to serve her and learn proper palace procedure until they reach puberty.

The culture of Benin views a woman's most important status as that of mother. This Ikegobo may be acknowledging not just the Iyoba's success in producing the Oba, but her role in preparing the future wives of the Oba for *their* role as royal queens – one of whom will become the next Iyoba by being the first to produce a male heir. The figures framing each side of the altar are male attendants – most likely eunuchs. Men were not permitted to touch or come too close to the royal queens, thus the relatively large space between them and the female attendants.

The Ikegobo in the collection was lawfully purchased by the Henry Barber Trust in in 1948 from a London dealer, and, whilst the Barber Institute stays informed on the international conversation regarding restitution and repatriation, its future destiny, along with the many other Benin artefacts in Western museums, sits within a larger political debate – itself informed by changing public attitudes and pressures. The Barber does not deny or conceal the colonial history behind this Ikegobo and whilst it is on display here I think we should focus on regarding Benin bronzes such as this one through the narrative of the culture that produced the artefact. In the midst of the repatriation debate, I think we must make more of an effort to bring to the fore the Benin society that the Punitive Expedition of 1897

sought so violently to erase.

This Ikegobo was produced some time between the late-18th to early-19th century, by the Royal Artisan Guilds of Benin. These guilds are incorporated into the court organisation as part of the 'Iwebo', the palace association. Created to commemorate an individual's ability to achieve success through their own actions, cast-bronze Ikegobos were owned solely by the Oba, Iyoba and privileged chiefs. In Benin, certain materials were ascribed both 'colour' and meaning. Bronze is associated with Ogun, the god of metalwork, and identified with the colour red. The metal is symbolic of kingship's ability to endure forever because bronze neither rusts nor decays. It is also believed to ward off evil. Red, a symbol of life and danger, represents the forces of creation and destruction that keep Benin City alive.

This Ikegobo to the Iyoba would have been offered prayers and sacrifices to bring wealth and prosperity – wealth in this context most likely being pregnancy and children. The Iyoba is the quintessential woman in Benin, embodying the virtue and accomplishments desired by and of women in society. Benin's art consciously invokes its history, expressing the roles and ranks of the myriad people who make up the kingdom. A former collector of Benin art described the bronzes as 'one of the most supreme products of the general human tendency to immortalise our achievements'; but I think it is much more than that. The Kingdom of Benin in its praise to the hand teaches us to exalt in our relationships with each other and with the Earth, encouraging us to celebrate the efforts that lift us and our communities.

I do not agree with the actions of the Punitive Expedition. I do not believe that it is morally right to be so preoccupied with power and wealth that you are willing and able to disregard anyone's humanity. Whilst the lasting legacy of British 19th century racist propaganda, used to support colonial conquest, can never be adequately quantified, today in the 21st century

the majority of people denounce the impact of British colonialism in Benin. What the British did in Benin, as they did on occasion elsewhere in the world in the name of Empire, was horrific. But it is not unspeakable.

Now that the Benin Bronzes find themselves relegated to worldwide displacement, I choose to see it as an opportunity to speak about Benin culture, to learn and celebrate a society which the British Empire sought to erase. This is an opportunity that we should all seize with both hands.

Further Reading

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Music composed and performed by Jack Davies.