

Ikegobo to the Iyoba

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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

The Ikegobo to the lyoba is currently on display at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts. This is an altar to the Queen Mother of the Edo people of Benin (now considered part of Southern Nigeria) and was traditionally used as an element of religious 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 lyoba – or Queen Mother – herself. It was crafted using the Lost Wax Technique – a notoriously complex process; the brilliant use of it here is a testament to the sophistication and technical ability of the Edo.

For Benin, contemplating the full narrative behind their material artefacts is one of the ways we can uphold the history of their culture. I believe we have the social responsibility to keep the contextual history of the art we consume in collective memory. This podcast will include a short summary of Benin society; explain what the artefact is – what it shows, the contexts of the society that produced it, and why it is important to take an active interest in what art can teach us about the world.

The Kingdom of Benin is in the tropical rainforest of what is now Southern Nigeria. The Edo people of Benin are ruled by their Oba, or King. 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 lyoba was created in the 16th Century by Oba Esigie for his mother, lyoba Idia. The current Oba [Ewuare II] posthumously bestowed the title of lyoba to his mother, Princess Eghiunwe Akenzua, at his coronation in 2016. The last lyoba – 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 an lyoba 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, destroying the town and much of its wooden artefacts in the process. Thousands of artworks were looted and then sold by the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office to pay for the cost of the British expedition. Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi was exiled to Calabar, where he lived until his death in 1914. 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 Global West, and the colonial history of the Benin Bronzes is of great significance when it comes to calls for repatriation. Repatriation is the act or process of returning something to its place of origin. Whilst this term is most often heard in relation to items, it can also apply to people returning or being returned to their home country.

For the Edo people of Benin, the Benin Bronzes are narrative vessels – not solely artefacts, as incorrectly labelled by Western institutions. Enoti Ogbemor, founder of Nosona Studios and Benin-based artist, said "They were created to tell stories, to hold memories and to pass these stories and memories from one generation to the next." In many ways, the Benin Bronzes are the vessels through which the ancestors of the Edo tribe are remembered.

This Ikegobo shows the lyoba 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 lyoba'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 lyoba'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 lyoba 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 *lyoba* figure on the altar has her reason, achievements and status highlighted, seems to reflect the belief that an *lyoba* 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 *lyoba*, 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 updo. 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 *lyoba* 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 *lyoba*’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 may become the next *lyoba* by being the first to produce a male heir.

The figures framing each side of the altar are male attendants. 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 on the altar.

This *Ikegobo to the lyoba* was lawfully purchased by the Henry Barber Trust in 1948. Whilst the Barber Institute stays informed on national conversations regarding repatriation, the final decision on the location of this artefact rests with higher powers. In October 2021, Cambridge University became the first UK institution to repatriate a Benin Bronze to Nigeria. Since then, the University of Aberdeen and Great North Museum: Hancock have also announced plans to repatriate Benin Bronzes to Nigeria. In my opinion, keeping Benin Bronzes displaced in museums and private collections across the UK and elsewhere in Europe prolongs the original colonial violence of their looting.

The Barber Institute of Fine Arts does not deny or conceal the colonial history behind the *Ikegobo to the lyoba*. For the duration of the time it remains on display within the Barber, the Barber commits to focusing on regarding the Benin Bronze through the narrative of the culture that produced the artefact. The Barber Institute is a partner in the Digital Benin

initiative. Digital Benin will bring together photographs, oral histories, and rich documentation material from collections worldwide to provide a long-requested overview of the royal artworks stolen in the 19th Century. The Barber's commitment to transparency surrounding the Ikegobo to the lyoba also extends to the Learning & Engagement programme within the gallery, ensuring that the Kingdom of Benin sits at the centre of education regarding the Bronze. Amid the movements towards repatriation, we must ensure that the cultural legacies of the Benin Kingdom are not overshadowed by colonial narratives.

It is worthwhile to question the ability of a British cultural institution to accurately reflect the narrative behind the Benin Bronzes when they cannot adequately recognise the significance of the Benin Bronzes as mediums for telling the spiritual and ancestral narratives of the Edo tribe. Nigeria's National Commission for Museums and Monuments set up the Legacy Restoration Trust in preparation for the return of their looted artefacts. British-Ghanaian architect David Adjaye has designed the Edo Museum of West African Art (EMOWAA) with plans for the new cultural museum to open in Benin City in 2025. This museum will house the Benin Bronzes returned to Nigeria and will have the appropriate infrastructure for restoring and maintaining artefacts.

This Ikegobo was created 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 are 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 lyoba would have been offered prayers and sacrifices to bring wealth and prosperity – wealth in this context most likely being pregnancy and children. The lyoba 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.

The Kingdom of Benin in its praise to the hand teaches people to exalt in their relationships with each other and with the Earth, encouraging the people of Benin to celebrate the efforts that uplift them and their communities. Whilst this message can be universal, it is important to remember that the Ikegobo to the lyoba would likely have remained within Benin, for the purpose of religious practice, were it not for British colonialism.

I do not agree with the acts 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 to disregard humanity and attempt to rewrite history. My stance is by no means unique. Whilst the lasting legacy of British 19th Century racist propaganda, used to support colonial conquest, can never adequately be quantified, the 21st Century has seen steps made to return Benin Bronzes to Nigeria.

The Benin Bronzes should be considered as classic works of art. When engaging with the Benin Bronzes, there are a few questions I would encourage you to consider:

- What does the Ikegobo to the lyoba tell you about the Kingdom of Benin?
- How have cultural practices been preserved within Benin City today, despite colonial violence?
- Should the UK government be required to ensure the repatriation of all Benin Bronzes to Nigeria?
- How does the creation of the Edo Museum of West African Art decentre the Global West from African – and more specifically Benin – art?
- How have the artistic techniques heralding from Benin influenced art and artists across the globe over the centuries?

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