

The African Bronze Art Culture of the Bight of Benin and its Influence on Modern Art

This article is dedicated to Dr. Leroy Bynum, the pioneer Dean of the College of Arts and Humanities at Albany State University (2006-2014), for his 22-years of devoted service to this institution.

Emmanuel Konde

Department of History and Political Science

Introduction

There are two “Benins” in West Africa. Both straddle the coastline area known as the Bight of Benin that encompasses, among other nations, Nigeria and the Republic of Benin. One is the former Kingdom of Benin in present-day Nigeria; the other a successor state of the former Kingdom of Dahomey, now called the Republic of Benin. These kingdoms were the products of two significant waves of social change that dominated Africa’s history from the earliest times to the 19th century: migration and state formation. Migration and state formation trends in Africa’s precolonial history often intersected and interwove. As John Lamphear observed, these trends involved internal population movements “that typically led to the formation of new societies, linguistic groups, and states.”¹

Historical evidence suggests that the rise of the two Benin kingdoms was influenced by similar social forces and that the founders of these kingdoms shared a strong cultural affinity. Consequently, both Benins developed a sculptural art form in bronze casting of high quality that probably issued from the same culture complex and shared experiences. If the peoples of the kingdoms of Benin and Dahomey were not originally the same people who were eventually separated by migrations occasioned by the struggles of state formation, at least a vibrant and dynamic culture contact between them culminated in a diffusion of arts and crafts that ultimately resulted in striking similarities between their bronze sculptures. There is also a likelihood that trade between the two kingdoms included exchanges in artistic products that influenced imitations and copiousness of material culture.

It is therefore not surprising that the bronze arts of the two Benin kingdoms are frequently confused by both amateurs and connoisseurs. Given the cultural and trade exchanges that took place between these kingdoms and the similarities of their bronze arts,

I thought it proper and fitting to present in this narrative the social and historical contexts which influenced the creation of this art form. To that end, this essay traces the origins of the kingdoms of Benin and Dahomey, the rise of the bronze art culture in the Bight of Benin, contact with Europeans, and how their artistic productions came to influence and shape the contours of modern European art. This essay is not an original research endeavor but a synthesis of existing narratives.

Historical Backgrounds

The kingdoms of Benin and Dahomey were contemporaneous with the better known West African empires of Mali (1200-1500 A.D.) and Songhay (1350-1600 A.D.), and ostensibly outlived the latter. Unlike the West African empires that flourished in the open hinterland savannahs of the region, Benin and Dahomey emerged in the forest and coastal lowlands of the contemporary republics of Nigeria and Benin. The actual genesis of the **Kingdom of Benin** is clouded in mystery, perhaps because the founders of the kingdom did not leave behind a written script of their exploits. Nevertheless, the kingdom's origin is dated to either the 12th or 13th century. Like most traditional narratives of origin, a few contending stories surround the origin of Benin. It is not clear whether the kingdom was founded by the indigenous Edo people of Benin or by one of the princes of her Yoruba neighbors in Ife. All agree, however, that some kind of affinity existed between the Edo and Yoruba since ancient times.

Whatever the origins of the Benin kingdom, and despite the controversy surrounding its founding,² some sources maintain that the indigenous people were known as the "Bini," from whom the kingdom got its name. Other sources suggest that the ethnonym "Bini" is perhaps derived from the groups that inhabit central and north-central Nigeria, where the word "binin" is said to mean "gated" or "walled area."³ And yet another version proffers that the indigenes of Benin are more properly called the Edo; that the words "Binin" and "Bini" do not feature in Edo language; and that these are non-Edo words of dubious origin used by Europeans to describe the dominant people of the Edo Kingdom and their language.⁴

Whether the word "Benin" or "Bini" is derived from the Yoruba phrase *Ile-ibinu* ("land of vexation"), a word probably uttered by Prince Oronmiyan in declaring that "only an Edo prince can rule over Edo land," is also contested. Osamuyimen Stewart argues that

the Yoruba-based etymology of “Benin” or “Bini” is doubtful since ample evidence suggests the existence of these words in Portuguese narratives about Edo dating back to the fifteenth century.⁵ Nevertheless, traditional accounts of the kingdom maintain that Benin was initially ruled by the *Ogiso* (“Kings of the Sky”) and 36 of these are accounted for.

Upon the death of the last *Ogiso*, his son and heir Elkaladerhan is reported to have abdicated the throne of Benin in favor of a place the Bini people called Uhe and the Yoruba call Ife. Elkaladerhan’s son, Oronmiyan, sent his own son, Eweka, to rule Benin in his stead. Thus, Eweka I became the first *Oba* of Benin.

During the early stages of the kingdom, power was located in a council of chiefs known as the *Uzama*, with the *Oba* as head chief. In the late 13th century during the reign of *Oba Ewedo*, however, a new balance of power was set in motion. Political power began to gradually shift to the favor of the *Oba*. By the 15th century when *Oba Ewuare Neogidigan* (Ewuare the Great) was ruler of Benin, power had become firmly centralized in the court and the *Oba* had emerged paramount in the realm. *Oba Ewuare* accordingly initiated certain measures to consolidate his power. He instituted a hereditary system of succession to the throne; undermined the power of the *Uzama* by creating more chieftaincies; and transformed the capital of the kingdom, Benin City, into a military fortress by erecting moats and defensive walls. From this base of power *Oba Ewuare* undertook the expansion of his kingdom outward from its Edo-speaking heartland.⁶

The **Kingdom of Dahomey** was an amalgamation of African kingdoms spawned by three major migratory movements that took place from approximately 1300-1600 A.D. One of these came from the east of Dahomey, from among the Yoruba people of Nigeria; the other two movements came from the west, from among the Ashanti people of present-day Ghana and the Ewe-speaking *Alladahanou* people of Tado, in the southeastern part of Togo. The *Alladahanou* were led by three brothers who settled in Allada, where the oldest brother rose to be the king. In about 1625, the younger brothers left Allada and established two other kingdoms in the areas of Porto Novo and Abomey. About 20 years later in 1645, the kingdom of Abomey conquered and annexed the neighboring kingdom of Dan and the new name of the kingdoms of Abomey and Dan became Dahomey, which in the Fon language means “in the belly of Dan.”⁷

King Houegbadja, the reigning monarch of Dahomey at this time had solemnly decreed that his kingdom would continue to grow in size through the generations. Each new king would thereafter expand the kingdom through conquest, and would leave for his successor more territory than he inherited from his predecessor. Pursuant to this decree, each Dahomean king fought wars of expansion and each built a new palace next to that of his predecessor. Accordingly, Dahomey kings constructed a series of palaces in the city of Abomey, capital of the kingdom. This policy of territorial expansion resulted in the conquest of Allada in 1724, and in 1727 Ouidah was also conquered and added to the Kingdom of Dahomey.⁸ But a segment of the royal family of Allada migrated eastward and established a new kingdom in Porto Novo on the coast. The new Kingdom of Porto Novo successfully resisted Dahomean hegemony and competed with Ouidah for control of the Atlantic slave trade.⁹

Meanwhile, in 1730 the kingdom of Dahomey was attacked and defeated by its eastern neighbor, the Yoruba kingdom of Oyo, and forced to pay tribute. Dahomey recouped from this defeat and reached the height of its power during the reigns of kings Guezo (1818-1858) and Gélé (1858-1889). In 1823, king Gezo liberated Dahomey by defeating Oyo. Dahomean attempts at expansion eastward were met by the powerful Yoruba state of Abeokuta in Nigeria, which not only foiled the aggression but decisively defeated Dahomey in 1851 and 1864.¹⁰

The first Europeans to explore the Bight of Benin in 1472 were the Portuguese. But they did not begin trading there until 1553. The Dutch, English, French and other Europeans later joined the trade in the 17th century, which until the mid-19th century was dominated by the illegitimate commerce in African human cargo. Initially the volume of the slave trade was small but it increased rapidly from the second half of the 1600s to the 1840s. This marks the period when the area was called the “Slave Coast” by European slave merchants and the coastal kingdom of Ouidah served as the principal center of the trade in slaves. The European nations that were engaged in the slave trade maintained trading factories in Dahomey area, while the English, French, and Portuguese possessed fortresses in Ouidah.¹¹

The first French factory was established in Allada in 1670. It was moved to Ouidah the next year and eventually abandoned in 1690. In 1704 the French built a fort in

Ouidah that was named “Fort Saint Louis.” The Europeans abandoned their forts in Ouidah at the end of the 18th century. When the Atlantic slave trade on the Dahomean coast was abolished in 1848, this development permitted King Guezo to divert his resources to legitimate commercial activities. He began developing agriculture as a new source of prosperity for his kingdom and thus Dahomey became an important exporter of palm oil and other crops. But the abolition of the slave trade sapped the power of Dahomey to effectively maintain military superiority over neighboring kingdoms. Consequently, in 1851 King Guezo negotiated a commercial treaty with France. Subsequent fears of preemptive encroachment by British colonial expansion resulted in the establishment of formal French rule in Dahomey. The signing of commercial treaties between the French and Dahomey continued under the reign of King Gèlè, who ruled from 1858 to 1889.¹² The French briefly established a protectorate over the kingdom of Porto Novo from 1863 to 1865, and definitely concretized this arrangement in 1882. In the meantime other treaties that sought to secure the port of Cotonou for the French were concluded with the Dahomean authorities in 1868 and 1878, even though Cotonou was not actually occupied until 1890. The reigning King Gbehanzin of Dahomey, who ascended the throne in 1889, resisted the French claim to Cotonou. His resistance triggered a French invasion of Dahomey from 1892 to 1894, resulting in conquest and occupation of the kingdom. The French deposed and exiled King Gbehanzin and transformed the independent kingdom of Dahomey into a French protectorate.¹³

Origins of Bronze Art in West Africa

One of the areas of social expression for which the two Benins are notoriously famous is in that of art, particularly their exquisite bronze art. In many pre-European contact African societies, there existed systems of social division of labor by gender and specialization. In the Sudanic Empire of Ghana (700-1200 A.D.), for example, the four major clans of the ruling Soninke reckoned a system of division of labor by clan “that was instrumental in regulating the various functions of government.”¹⁴ Also, among the Dogon of Mali all members of the *awa* societies were carvers, while in the Congo artists also functioned as priests. However, more common in these societies was the separation of the two functions of artist and priest: the artist produced the sculptures, and the priest added the sacral touch on the figures. In the highly developed and hierarchically stratified

African states, artists usually constituted a privileged class whose members were formed in guildlike bodies that worked for the royal court and the ruling class.¹⁵

Whether the artists originally developed as a separate class within the kingdoms of Benin and Dahomey, whether they had at some point in time practiced their art independently or were from the very beginning commissioned by their respective monarchs, cannot be ascertained here. Also blurry is when production of brass/bronze art actually began, since dating in pre-European contact African historiography is problematic. Nevertheless, it is generally accepted that the art of bronze casting in the Kingdom of Benin began in the 13th century, about 1280. The Oba of Benin is said to have employed a guild of artisans who lived in the same district of the city.¹⁶ With the patronage of the Oba, the selected artists were able to develop a special style of sculpture vastly different from the creations of artists in the rest of the region. Benin artists produced numerous fine bronze and brass heads, figurines, brass plaques, and large rectangular metal pictures that were used to decorate the Oba's palace.¹⁷



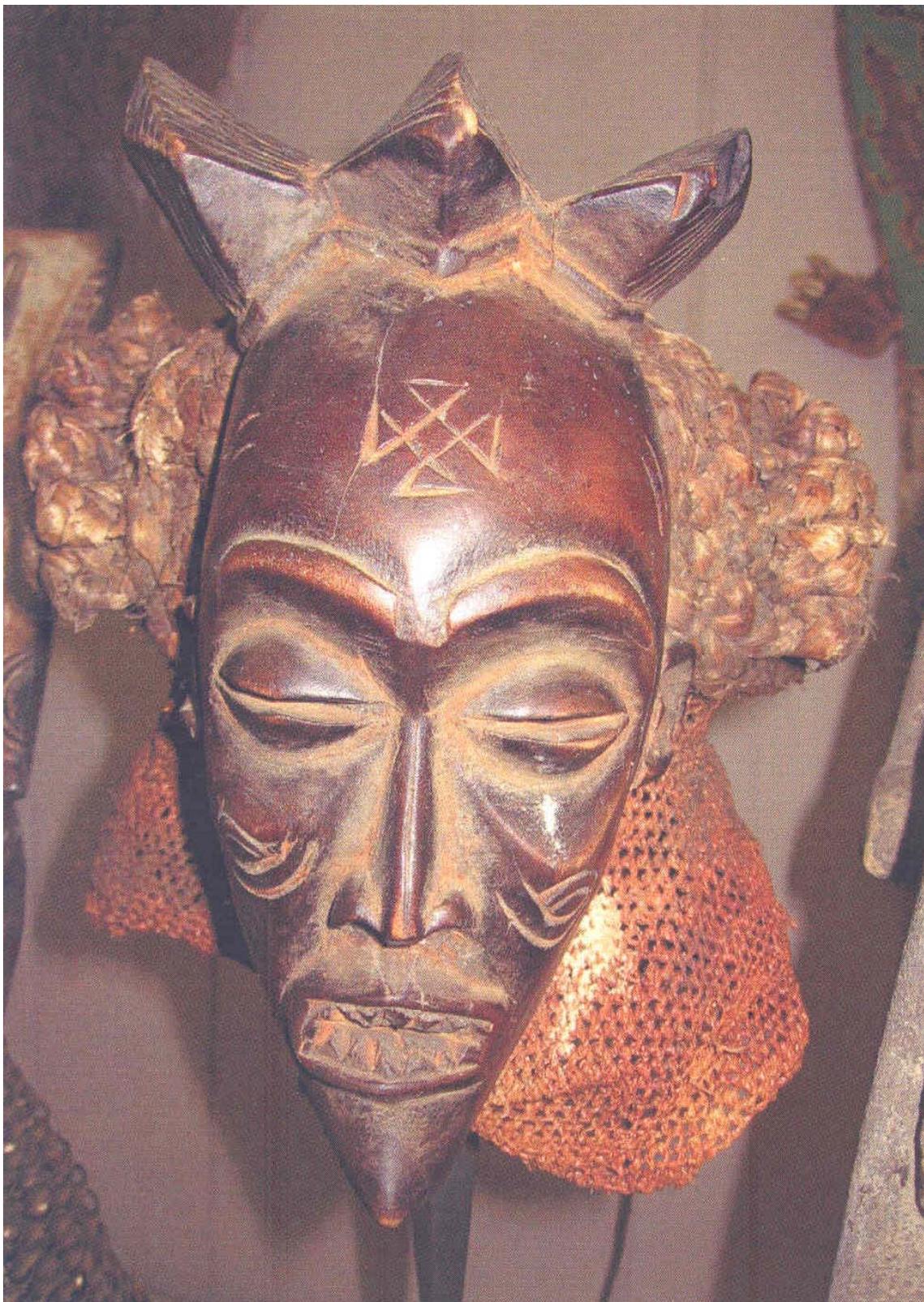
Memorial head, bronze, Kingdom of Benin, Nigeria. 1550 - 1650 A.D.



Commemorative plaque, bronze, Kingdom of Benin, Nigeria. 1550 -1650 A.D

Source: <http://www.museum.upenn.edu/new/exhibits/galleries/benin.html>

Benin thrived as an independent African kingdom for centuries after the centralization of monarchical power in the 15th century. Over the next three centuries the kingdom set up extensive long-distance trading networks to the south, north, east and west, and later with the Portuguese and other European nations. The items of trade were primarily ivory, palm oil, pepper, and later slaves. Benin prospered until the coming of the British in the late 19th century. To the South of Benin was the British colonial presence, and to the North the Islamic jihads and the Nupe kingdoms. These external pressures combined with internal civil wars to undermine and weaken the kingdom of



Benin Bronze Mask, from the Susan and William Rochfort Collection. Picture by Calandra Jefferson

Benin in the 19th century. The final blow to the fledgling kingdom came in February 1897, when the British moved into Benin in their attempts to wrest control of the territory from the Oba and open up trade.

The coastline of Dahomey, the notorious “Slave Coast,” was in the 16th century the scene of a dynamic African-European trade and the area from which the bulk of the “black ivory” was extracted and shipped to plantations in the Americas.¹⁸ Dahomean society was hierarchical, almost feudal, with the king exercising absolute power at the top. The exalted position of the king, firmly entrenched in the army and his personal armed guard, found expression in special privileges, an impressive court, and the observance of an intricate yet elaborate ceremonial etiquette. Dahomey was a society that attached great importance to privileges and wealth. Art, as it were, served significantly to satisfy the aesthetic requirement of the ruling class and gave expression of its wealth.¹⁹

Throughout the territory, from the defunct kingdoms of Bariba to the north and Dahomey in the south, the kings placed emphasis on the development of the arts and crafts. Weavers, jewelers, woodcarvers, potters, and iron and brass workers received monarchical patronage. The ancient Kingdom of Dahomey became a heaven for artists and craftsmen, while the Baname region was renowned for woodcarving, and Porto Novo famous for its Yoruba artifacts.²⁰ But the two most important branches of art were brass casting and the manufacture of textiles adorned with appliqué figures, which are still cultivated by special professional groups in the Republic of Benin. In the kingdom of Dahomey the artisans who produced them were exclusively employees of the king and chiefs. Artisans who made sculptures in brass lived in neighborhoods near the royal palace in Abomey and were united in family guilds. Brass figurines produced by them featured scenes of everyday life or depicted scenes of the Dahomean fauna. The human figures are *svelte*, with elongated bodies, and their surface finely embossed. Crafted exclusively *l’art pour l’art*, their function was mainly social, since royalty and other wealthy people liked to boast of owning these valuable objects.²¹

Colonialism and the Global Exposure of Benin Bronzes

The much vaunted Benin bronzes are a collection of more than 1,000 brass plaques from the royal palace of the Kingdom of Benin, looted by a British-led force in the “Punitive Expedition” of 1897.²² A brief narrative of the events of 1897 that resulted in the

decimation of Benin and the looting of its bronzes will set the stage for explaining the historical context that led to the sudden exposure of these bronzes to the world of art, and how they came to dominate and revolutionize it.

With the abolition of the Atlantic Slave trade in the early 19th century, the British redirected their attention on the West African coast toward what they called “legitimate commerce.” Legitimate commerce entailed the exchange of British manufactures for West African raw materials, particularly palm oil, which was a major lubricant for the European industrial machines. By the end of the century the British presence on the coast of Nigeria was well entrenched. Some areas of the Nigerian coastline were controlled by Whitehall, while others were under British trading companies. The Niger Coast Protectorate, established by the British in the Niger Delta and in the trading ports to the East, had by 1895 consolidated its authority on the coast. British authority, more frequently than not, was secured by force of arms over all the trading ports except the Kingdom of Benin, which insisted on retaining its sovereignty and maintaining its trading independence. The Benin kingdom’s economic independence contradicted the dictates of colonialism and thus was unacceptable to Britain.

In 1892, British Captain Gallwey had concluded a “trade and protection” treaty with Benin. But the trade conducted via the coastal Itsekeri middlemen was not as lucrative as the British Protectorate administration had expected. Because of this undesirable situation, pressure from the British administrations of the Lagos Colony and the Royal Niger Company began to mount on Mr. Ralph Moor, the Consul General of the Niger Coast Protectorate, to open up the hinterlands for trade. However, the Foreign Office was reluctant to authorize an armed expedition against the Kingdom of Benin. When Mr. Moor went to England on vacation in 1897, an Acting Consul General named Lt. James Phillips replaced him.

Upon assuming the position of Acting Consul General, Lt. Phillips requested permission from the Foreign Office to attack Benin and received approval. Phillips’ task was to depose the Oba Ovonramwen for his opposition to trading with Britain on the latter’s terms.²³ Phillips wrote to the Oba, indicating his intention to visit Benin City. Conflicting are the stories of whether the Oba replied Phillips or not. Some sources maintain that the Oba replied, urging Phillips to delay his visit because of some customary

rituals during which foreigners could not set foot on Benin City. The source further states that Phillips ignored several such messages, including the advice of a trusted Itsekiri chief. Other sources aver that Phillips received no response from the Oba. Consequently, with a party of nine British officials, traders, their servants and carriers, the British envoy proceeded to Benin.

The Oba and his subjects did not take kindly to this overt display of contempt from the foreigners. As a consequence, the British convoy led by Lt. Phillips was ambushed on a narrow forest path south of Benin City and all but two were wiped out by Benin soldiers. One of the numbers that perished was Lt. Phillips. Britain responded with a massive “Punitive Expedition” of over 10,000 soldiers. The British forces massacred many civilian subjects of the kingdom, razed the city to the ground, and looted countless pieces of art and antiques. Oba Ovonramwen was exiled to Calabar, a town in the far eastern part of Nigeria, and the kingdom of Benin was annexed to the British Protectorate of Southern Nigeria.

Initially, the looted Benin art treasures were treated with some kind of curiosity. However, as the wonderful quality of the ivory carvings and bronzes became appreciated and this was reflected in ever-increasing prices they fetched in the art auction rooms of the world, the Foreign Office sold considerable quantities to defray the costs of the expedition. Many British officers retained collections of their own and the British Museum acquired the leading collection. Some of these went to the British Museum directly from the Foreign Office as gifts, while others were purchased. Many went to the United States and Germany. The presence of Benin Bronzes in Europe and the United States exposed the high quality of workmanship expended on them. Familiarity with these works would eventually revolutionize western views of African art, and transform the designation of these from “primitive” to just simply “art.”

The bronze arts of the Bight of Benin reached European via the agency of European colonization of Africa. Although it is nowhere documented that the French colonial enterprise in the kingdom of Dahomey resulted in the looting of Dahomean bronze sculptures as the British did the bronzes of the Benin kingdom, neither is there any documentation attesting to the fact that Dahomean art was acquired through purchase. European colonialism in Africa was predicated on conquest, subjugation, depredation, and

thievery. With the conquest of Dahomey in 1894, the French began to illegally transfer Dahomean artifacts to museums in Paris. Like the British did in the Kingdom of Benin, the French also stole the art works of the Kingdom of Dahomey.

Evolution of European Views about African Art

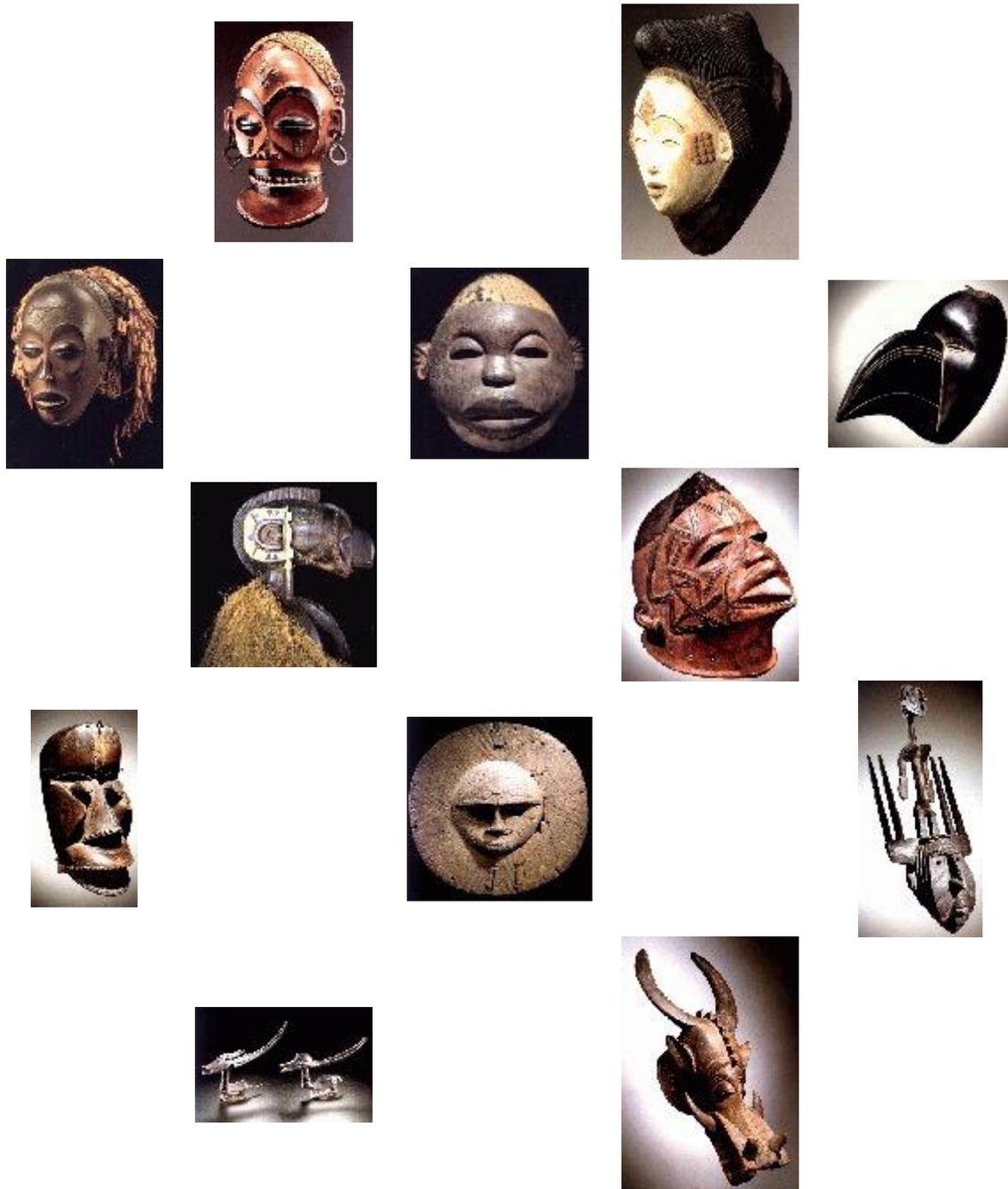
The presence of African art in Europe was no different from the manner in which the presence of African people was made manifest in the Americas. Both the artistic productions and the producers were spirited out of Africa to foreign destinations by Europeans. As the Africans were initially kidnapped, so to their art creations were initially looted. Trade, the consensual exchange of *goods* between Africans and Europeans, whether in human cargo or brass/bronze and wooden art, was later development. But the African people as well as their art were held in abject contempt by the Europeans who stole them. The historical pattern is too clear to be mistakable.

Europe's contact with Africa spawned the enslavement of Africans from the 15th century onward and was followed by colonization of the continent in the 19th century. This dual experience of subjugation effectively reduced the African continent to an appendage of Europe, and African people to laborers of Europeans whether as slave or colonial servant. Whether for good or ill, "Africa became merely an object in the hands of extra-African interests"²⁴ to be profaned, insulted, trampled upon, and defined by her European conquerors. The art of Africa was not spared the humiliation of Europe's scorn. Much like African religions that Europeans called "primitive" and their practitioners defined as "savage," "primitive" and lacking in either imagination or emotion,²⁵ so too African art was designated variously as "primitive art" and "tribal art."

Yet it was during the late 19th century that the English naturalist Charles Darwin had postulated in *The Descent of Man* (1871), on the basis of limited evidence available at the time, that Africa will probably prove to be the cradle of humankind.²⁶ Darwin's view was greeted by many an educated European mind with skepticism. Many great minds of the day found Darwin's idea incredulous. They wondered how their ancient ancestors, superior humankind that they were, could have descended from the same species as the primitive Negro African.²⁷ It is no wonder that like the people of Africa, their homeland was dubbed the "Dark Continent" by Europeans and their art designated as "primitive" far removed from the advanced creations of the Greeks, Romans, the Renaissance, and

modern European art. Accordingly, in conjunction with the intellectual vogue of the times, E. Grosse would confidently write in 1894: “The sentiments of primitive art are narrower and cruder, its material poorer, its forms simpler....”²⁸

Magical Faces of Africa: Gallery of African Masks



Source: Claude Rilly, *Magical Faces of Africa*. Nov. 29, 2006.
<http://www.culturekiosque.com/art/exhibit/masks.htm>

One observer of this European penchant for denigrating things African, C. Einstein, would in 1915 comment that:

There is hardly any art that is approached by Europeans with so much distrust as that of Africa. They are disinclined to recognize it as art and regard the contrast between its products and the accustomed continental concepts with a contempt and scorn that have actually created a special terminology of rebuttal.”²⁹

Even so, the movement toward accommodating, if not accepting, African art as art seemed ineluctable. This was evidenced by the acknowledgement by other Europeans of the same period that “... all art is composed in a social setting; it has a cultural content”³⁰ and that “...it is impossible to discover a single fundamental difference between European and non-European art.”³¹ Gradually, but assuredly, it was the meaning assigned to art by Europeans that was changing, while African art stood its ground. In the final analysis, it was Europe that embraced African art by taking the first step to recognize that “the distinction in art is based on subjective factors rooted in ourselves, in our aesthetic approach, in our familiarity with certain artistic forms, in certain limitations of public taste.”³²

The decisive turning point that signaled a change of heart and sentiment, if not mind, about African art occurred after the First World War. Whether it was the collective trauma caused by the Great War or something else, “the petrified art of prewar times proved impotent and inadequate for expressing the phenomena of dissolution, turbulence and chaos following the overthrow of the old idols.”³³ New interests loomed in the horizon, and these naturally extended to sculptural art. Hence, The Devambez Gallery of Paris arranged the first exhibition of African and Oceanic sculptures in 1919, and in 1920 Blaise Cendrars’ *Anthologie nègre* was published. At about the same time, the *Action* published the opinions of such luminary artists as Picasso, Lipschitz, and Cocteau about African art. More than a decade earlier, Picasso began what is known as his *Époque Nègre* (Negro Period) from 1907-1909 that resulted in African carving technique being copied in paint. This included “forms arrived at by the African carver for esoteric purposes, and exaggerated through long tradition, slavishly reproduced in the studios in Paris and London.”³⁴

The momentous shift ushered by the First World War, combined with the opinions of European art masters, silently brought to an end the European fashion of disparaging

African art. By 1926, the ethnologist E. Vatter could justifiably state that "... primitive art as well as the hitherto similarly neglected prehistoric and medieval European art constitute nowadays an integral part of art as a whole."³⁵ Notice that the primitive art of Africa could not be included in the pantheon of artistic creations unless as an attachment to prehistoric and early medieval European art. Two years later in 1928, art historian and aesthete E. Von Sydow, would state that "... we are justified in speaking of primitive art instead of merely primitive carving."³⁶

In 1935 Dora Clarke opened her article published in the *Journal of Royal African Society* with the following words:

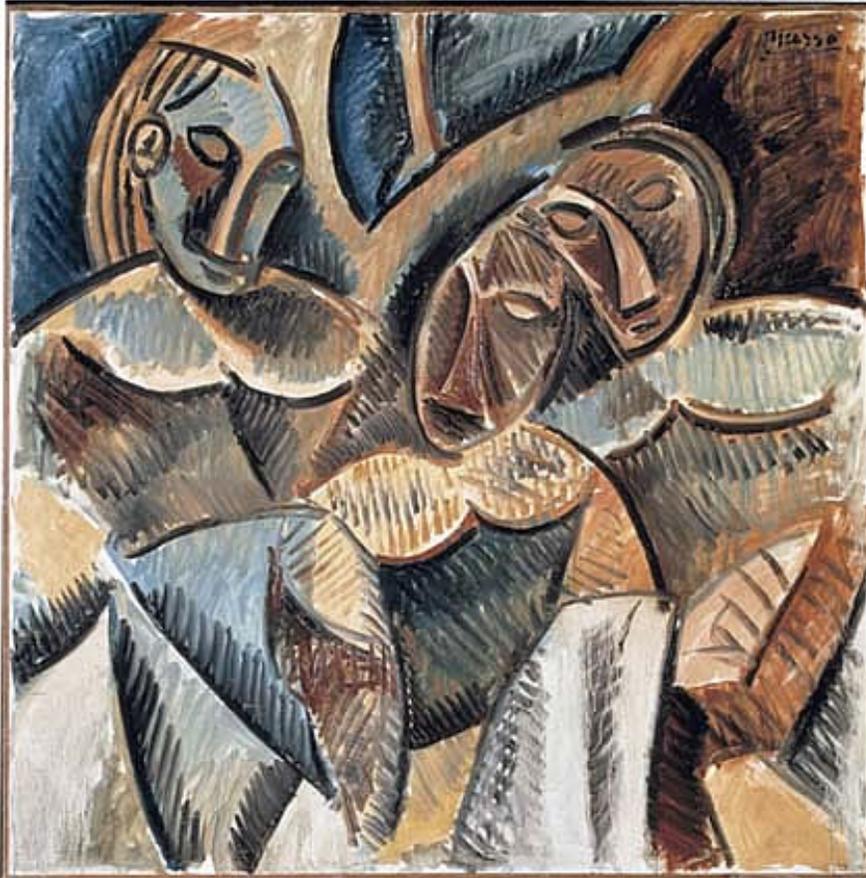
It is strange to look back only about fifty years and realize how our feeling about African sculptures has changed. The first carvings brought to England seem to have been considered interesting only as ethnographic curiosities, with no understanding of their artistic significance. When Captain G.W. Neville, returning in 1897 from the punitive expedition to Benin brought back a wonderful collection of bronzes, they were looked upon as "hideous idols" and packed away into a cellar, where they lay forgotten for years.³⁷

Clarke's statement is symptomatic of the way Europeans have viewed West Africa since the first recorded encounter in the 15th century. The European attitude has always been patronizing of Africa and everything African. But Clarke is far from reporting the truth. The British soldiers who looted the Benin bronzes knew exactly what they had stumbled upon, because it was these same soldiers who concocted the tale that the sculptures they had stolen must have been made by the Portuguese, the Egyptians, or the lost tribes of Israel."³⁸ Another version of this external origin of the Benin bronzes is reported by Annie E. Coombes. It maintains that the bronzes were of Egyptian origin, or that the knowledge was taught to the Edo of Benin by some white man.³⁹

Enter Pablo Picasso: The Influence of African Art on Europe

African art would influence and shape the contours of modern European art, just as the ancient African civilization of Egypt had influenced and shaped the march of civilization in the Western world from the Greeks, the Romans, to the modern Europeans. The latter development was unveiled by Napoleon when he invaded Egypt in 1798; the former by French looted West African art that were discovered at the Musée d'Ethnographie in the Palais du Trocadero, Paris in 1907 by Pablo Picasso. In both cases,

France played an important role in exposing, albeit inadvertently, the spectacular achievements of African civilizations to the world.



Three figures under a tree 1907 99 x 99 Oil on canvas

Source: Andrew Mulenga, "Picasso and Africa," *The Post, Zambia*. April 19, 2006.
http://www.postzambia.com/post-print_article.php?articleId=9143

The first exposure of Africa's grandeur came in the wake of Napoleon's expedition to Egypt, when the French scholars who had accompanied him concluded that the ancient Egyptians were Negroid. Vivant Denon, one of the original members of Napoleon's expedition, described the physiognomy of the Negroid-creators of the ancient Egyptian civilization as having "...a broad and flat nose, very short, a large flattened mouth...thick lips, etc."⁴⁰ The second exposure, which is our primary concern here, occurred in 1907, when the man who would dominate painting in the 20th century came face-to-face with African masks in the Trocadero Museum and was inspired to copy the techniques of the so-called primitive African artists.

Worthy of investigation and discussion is why this change in Europe's estimation of African art taking place at this time. Perhaps because much of what the art connoisseurs of Europe had once called primitive art, especially African bronze and wood carvings, littered the art museums of Europe. Once the value of these art pieces were recognized, imitated and transformed into objects of capitalist profit-making by European artists such as Pablo Picasso, African art lost its native ethos, its primitive attributes, its savagery. Indeed, it is instructive to note that Pablo Picasso had personally confided the source of his inspiration to André Malraux in 1937, but was not reported until 1974 after his death:

Everybody always talks about the influence that the Negro had on me. What can I do? We all of us loved fetishes. Van Gogh once said, "Japanese art—we all had that in common." For us, it's the Negroes.... When I went to the old Trocadero, it was disgusting. The Flea Market. The smell. I was alone. I wanted to get away. But I didn't leave. I stayed. I understood that it was very important: something was happening to me, right? The masks weren't just like other pieces of sculpture. Not, at all. They were magic things... The Negro pieces were *intercesseurs*, mediators.... I always looked at fetishes. Understood; I too am against everything. I too believe that everything is unknown, that everything is an enemy! Everything! Not the details—women, children, babies, tobacco, playing—the whole of it! I understood what the Negroes use their sculptures for. Why sculpt like that and not some other way? After all, they weren't Cubists. Since Cubism didn't exist. It was clear that some guy had invented the models, and others had imitated them, right? Isn't that what we call tradition? But all the fetishes were used for the same thing. They were weapons. To help people not to come under the influence of spirits again, to help them become independent. Spirits, the unconscious (people weren't talking about that very much), emotion—they're all the same thing. I understood why I was a painter. All alone in that awful museum, with masks, dolls made by the redskins, dusty manikins. *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* must have come to me that very day, but not at all because of the forms; because it was my first exorcism painting—yes absolutely.⁴¹

We can visualize Picasso at the Trocadero Museum transfixed, enraptured by those solemn African masks staring at him and he staring back at them and thus Cubism⁴² was born. Picasso could not have invented Cubism without African art.⁴³ The rest is history! Pablo Picasso's ambivalence and tentativeness notwithstanding, through him modern [European] art was born of primitive [African] art, African "fetishes", if you will, in 1907.

Endnotes

¹See John Lamphear, “Two Basic Themes in African History: Migration and State Formation,” in Phyllis M. Martin and Patrick O’Meara, eds., *Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), p. 83.

²Ewaen Edoghmiyoia, “Re-Yoruba Origin Controversy: Prof. Ade-Ajayi’s View is Politicised, Ethnicised and Ahistorical. www.edo-nation.net/edoghmioyal.htm.

³See “Binin Empire,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kingdom_of-Benin

⁴Osamuyimen Stewart, “The Edo of Benin, Nigeria,” www.edo-nation.net/stewart1.htm

⁵Ibid.

⁶“Benin,” www.ijebu.org/benin/

⁷ See “Benin,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*. 2006. Encyclopedia Britannica Online. 8 Nov. 2006. <http://www.britanica.com/eb/article-9110773>, which refers to this as “on the belly of Dan:” and www.benintourisme.com/ang/country_info/dth.history.htm, whose designation “in the belly of Dan” is adopted here. Also, *Encyclopedia Britannica* referenced above avers that “Dan was a rival king on whose grave Dahomey’s royal compound was built.”

⁸“Ouidah Slave Port.” 8 Nov. 2006. <http://www.pbs.org/wonders/Episodes/Epi3/ouidah.htm>

⁹“Benin,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*. 2006. Encyclopedia Britannica Online. 8 Nov. 2006. <http://www.britanica.com/eb/article-9110773>

¹⁰“Benin,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*. 2006. Encyclopedia Britannica Online. 8 Nov. 2006 <http://www.britanica.com/eb/article-55089>)

¹¹Ouidah,” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ouidah>

¹²www.benintourisme.com/ang/country_info/dth.history.htm

¹³ “Benin,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*. 2006. Encyclopedia Britannica Online. 8 Nov. 2006. <http://www.britanica.com/eb/article-55090>

¹⁴John G. Jackson, *Introduction to African Civilizations*. Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1970, p. 200.

¹⁵Bodrogi, *Art in Africa*, p. 16.

¹⁶“Tribal African Art Benin Style,” www.zyama.com/benin/

¹⁷”Bronze Sculpture: Art of Benin, Nigeria,” www.rebirth.co.za/sculpture/bronze.htm

¹⁸Tibor Bodrogi, *Art in Africa*, Budapest, Hungary: Kossuth Printing House, 1968, p. 47.

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 47-48.

²⁰www.journeymart.com

²¹Bodrogi, p. 48.

²²“Benin Bronzes,” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benin-Bronzes>

²³“The British and the Benin Bronzes,” www.arm.arc.co.uk/britishBenin.html

²⁴Werner Schmalenbach, *African Art*. Glyn T. Hughes, trans. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1954, p. 10.

²⁵Op. cit., John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*. Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1969, p. 11.

²⁶Patrick J. Munson, “Africa’s Prehistoric Past,” in Phyllis M. Martin and Patrick O’Meara, eds., *Africa* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1973), p. 62.

²⁷See Kevin Shillington, *History of Africa*.-Revised Edition. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989, 1995, p. 1.

²⁸Op. cit., E. Grosse, *Die Anfänge der Kunst*. Freiburg-Leipzig, 1894, p. 293, by Tibor Bodrogi, *Art in Africa*. Budapest: Kossuth Printing House, 1968, pp. 9-10.

²⁹Op. cit., C. Einstein, *Negerplastik*. Leipzig, 1915, p. v, by Tibor Bodrogi, *Art of Africa*, 1968, p. 11.

³⁰R. Firth, *Elements of Social Organization*. London, 1961, p. 162.

³¹A. A. Gerbrands, *Art as an Element of Culture, Especially in Negro-Africa*. Leiden, 1957, p. 138.

³²Bodrogi, 13.

³³Ibid., p. 11

³⁴Clarke, pp. 129-130.

³⁵E. Vatter, *Religiöse der Naturvölker*. Frankfurt a. M., 1926, p. 7.

³⁶E. von Sydow, *African Sculpture*. Africa. Africa 1928/I, p. 213.

³⁷Dora Clarke, “Negro Art” Sculpture from West Africa,” *Journal of Royal African Society*. Vol. 34, No. 135, p. 129.

³⁸“Bronze Sculpture Art of Benin,” www.rebirth.co.za/sculpture/bronze.html

³⁹Annie E. Coombes, *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture and Popular Imagination in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995).

⁴⁰ See Edith Sanders, "The Hamitic Hypothesis; Its Origin and Function in Time Perspective," *Journal of African History*, X, 4, (1965), p. 525.

⁴¹"Europe and African Art," http://ethnographica.com/african_art_and_europe.htm

⁴²Cubism was an offshoot of Modernism. Modernism had begun in Europe in the 1890s when, in view of contemporaneous techniques, a trend of thought began to assert the necessity to thrust aside previous norms in their entirety, instead of merely revising past knowledge. This movement in thought and action permeated the entire social fabric. A rebellion of sorts against what was considered stale knowledge from the past, modernist artists, thinkers, writers, and designers confronted the new economic, social, and political trends of an emerging and fully industrialized world. See "Modernism," <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Modernism>

⁴³ "African art gave Picasso an idea," <http://www.azcentral.com/arizona-republic/aizonaliving/articles/0624>