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Statement by Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin, social anthropologist specializing in cultural property and ownership, prepared for the

**“Forum: Restitution and Beyond” at Museum Rietberg, Zürich, 26 October 2024**

- The “Benin Bronzes” are not the same as in the pre-1897 era. They have become unique documents of world history, the world-wide interconnections among various countries, institutional and private actors. They all have participated in the process of shaping the “Benin Bronzes”(B.B.) and what they are today. They have to be considered as shared heritage (comparable to UNESCO World Heritage) among these actors.

All these actors have different perspectives and knowledge on the B.B., and this multi-perspectivity needs to be told and not only the embellished history the 21<sup>st</sup> Benin court which ignores critical histories even told by earlier Nigerian scholars, contemporary witnesses, such as Jacob Egharevba, a member of the Benin nobility, or the Edo Historian Professor Philip Igbafe. They wrote about slave hunts, Benin kings enslaving co-Africans and selling them to mostly European slave traders (for manilas) as well as about the practice of human sacrifice in royal rituals.

Unlike the neighbouring Yoruba, the Benin court has never officially acknowledged or apologized for these crimes against humanity and war crimes to the descendants of slaves in the US, the Caribbean and Brazil. Unlike the Republic of Benin, Nigeria has never offered citizenship to the descendants of slaves who were sold as de-humanized goods – as commodities – in the transatlantic slave trade. The Benin exhibition of the Museum Rietberg focusses on the 21<sup>st</sup> Benin Court version and its perspective of history by eclipsing (and even denying) other perspectives, even if they are based on first-hand reports, such as of the Yoruba war chief Ojo Ibadan who was in the service of the Benin king and acted as one of the leaders of the deadly attack on the unarmed British delegation that was followed by the punitive expedition of 1897.

- What were the criteria of the Swiss Benin Initiative for selecting Nigerian “partners”? What were the criteria for excluding possible “partners” and why? Have scholars/curators from the Slave Trade Museum in the port city of Calabar been involved in the meetings of the Swiss Benin Initiative as well?
- The Rietberg exhibition does not tell that hundreds of “Benin Bronzes” are in the national museums in Lagos and Benin City and open to the public. The claim that Nigerians needed to go to Europe or the U.S.A. to see Benin collections is simply wrong. Nigeria had – until shortly after Independence – one of the finest collection as the prominent Benin specialist and Director of the Museum am Rothenbaum in

Hamburg, Barbara Plankensteiner, wrote. However, these museums have been grossly neglected due to lack of sufficient governmental funding. A large portion of these Benin artefacts have “disappeared”, that is, they have been stolen, as former General Directors of the Nigerian National Commission for Museums and Monuments publicised in despair already decades ago.

- Nigeria’s former president, Muhammadu Buhari, decreed last year that all Benin collections, including those from foreign museums expected to be transferred to Nigeria in the future, will become the private property of the Benin court. The newly elected President, Bola Tinubu, has confirmed this decision. Consequently, on the occasion of his inaugural visit to the Benin court in May 2024, the new General Director of the NCMM handed over a Benin bronze and a wooden stool from German museums to the Oba.

Comment: The transformation of a national cultural property into private property is a fall back into capitalistic property thinking as part of the free-market economy with its principle of profit maximation based on the private property of the means of production. Culture property as kept in museums is something else. This transfer of ownership (not explained in the exhibition) is not compliant with the ICOM (International Council of Museums) regulations (Code of Ethics) which Nigeria has signed. This autocratic decision and its implementation undermines the legislation, Nigeria’s democratic state structure and the rule of law.

By “returning” the “Benin Bronzes” to the 21<sup>st</sup> century Benin court, Swiss political authorities would assist the re-feudalization of Nigeria and the re-empowerment of their autocratic potentates and contribute to the continuing process of Nigeria becoming a failed state.

**Further reading:**

- 2023 Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin: *Provenance research between politicized truth claims and systemic diversionary tactics*. In: Sandkühler, T. Epple, A. and J. Zimmerer (eds.): *Historical culture by restitution? A debate on art, museums, and justice*, pp. 67-90. Wien/Köln: Böhlau
- Further publications on the “Benin Bronzes” see <https://www.uni-goettingen.de/de/publikationen/29496.html>