Kwame Tua Opoku



# Parzinger's misconceptions and misrepresentations of the restitution of African artefacts

*"The restitution of those cultural objects which our museums and collections, directly or indirectly, possess thanks to the colonial system and are now being demanded, must also not be postponed with cheap arguments and tricks."*

Gert v. Paczensky and Herbert Ganslmayr, Nofretete will nach Hause.[1]

In an interview dated February 2018, Dr Herrmann Parzinger, repeating an idea of Neil MacGregor, former director of the British Museum and now a founding director of the Humboldt Forum, declares that we need new stories: *There must be new stories. (Es muss neue Erzählungen geben.)* [2] Like MacGregor, Parzinger is uncomfortable with the history of the looted African artefacts in Western museums and would like to tell a different history but knows that the history of Europeans' violent attacks and robbery in Africa and Asia are too well established. He would like to tell stories with the African objects when they are moved to a new location. Note the choice of words: 'stories' and not 'histories'. What never seems to occur to Western museum experts who want to tell the stories of others, especially Africans, is that Africans may want to tell their own histories with the objects now withheld from them. This appears inconceivable to many Westerners. Perhaps they think we have some irreparable congenital deficiencies that prevent us from telling our own histories.

The desire to tell stories rather than the histories of artefacts has become widespread with Western ethnologists, who invite specialists and even non-

specialists to tell their own stories with the looted objects.[3] With such practices, true histories are submerged, and the ethnologists gladly proclaim that they have no monopoly of interpretation of the objects. Each visitor makes his own interpretation, even if he has not studied ethnology; your interpretation is as good as mine, even although I spent three years earning a degree in ethnology and 4 years obtaining a doctorate. With this attitude, some exhibitions, pretending ignorance of the histories of the looted objects, refuse even to give you the barest information about the objects exhibited e.g. *Unvergleichlich – Kunst aus Africa im Bode Museum*. This attitude matches perfectly the cry for more provenance research, as if nothing were already known about the objects displayed.[4]

In response to a question about Macron's suggestion to return African artefacts in French museums, Parzinger says that it is an interesting suggestion but asks: "*Only, the question is: which museum will return which object and for which reason and to which African museum? Who takes such a decision, the museum or the political authorities?*" Parzinger states that such questions must be decided by an international conference. Raising such questions is part of the new credo of German authorities to plead ignorance about the African artefacts that have been lying in their museums for more than a hundred years.

Twice in this short interview, Parzinger challenges the general opinion that a large number of the artefacts in the ethnological museums are looted/stolen:

"*One should not always act as if all objects were stolen.*"

Speaking of the Benin bronzes, Parzinger again declares: "*But to say they are all stolen objects, so send them back is too simple, especially since many pieces were acquired from the market before the British punitive expedition.*"[5]

We do not know on what evidence the eminent archaeologist bases his view that many Benin bronzes were acquired on the open market before the British punitive expedition went to Benin City in 1897, deposed the king, killed many persons including Benin nobles and looted 3,500 artefacts that were later sold at auctions in London.

All the specialists we have read, and this is the general opinion among Benin scholars, state that before 1897 there were hardly any Benin artefacts in Europe and that it was after the notorious invasion that these objects were available on the European market. This was also the opinion of Felix von Luschan, who was instrumental in the Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin, acquiring some 580 Benin artefacts.[6]

To our utter surprise, Parzinger again declares that the Nigerians have made no demand for the Benin bronzes. He then refers to the idea launched by the so-called Benin Dialogue Group to have a permanent exhibition in Benin City whilst ownership of the looted artefacts remains with European museums.

Many readers will immediately realize that there is no truth to the idea that the Nigerians have not asked for the restitution of the Benin objects. Just a few weeks ago, the Nigerian National Commission on Museums and Monuments demanded that Nigeria's artefacts in Western museums be unconditionally returned.[7]

Wherever possible, we shall no longer entertain or discuss questions that aim at returning the discussions on looted African artefacts to the pre-Ouagadougou period and thereby seek to ignore or lessen the impact of the historic speech by President Emanuel Macron on the need to return African artefacts to Africa.

Parzinger refers to Macron's speech but obviously with little conviction about its necessity or usefulness. He acknowledges that other European countries such as Belgium, Britain and Germany cannot ignore the suggestions of the French president, but apparently he is not recommending the Ouagadougou Declaration. He stays in the period before 28 November 2017.

Parzinger refers to the insulting idea launched by the so-called Benin Dialogue Group to have a permanent exhibition in Benin City of the looted artefacts whilst ownership remains with European museums.[8] For my part, I can only condemn without reservation a project that is an insult to the Benin people, the peoples of Nigeria and the African peoples. It could have been conceived only on the arrogant assumption that the Oba of Benin and the Benin people do not deserve to have back the Benin artefacts that were stolen by the British in 1897 in the notorious punitive expedition. The looters are here rewarded again, more than 120 years after the violent attack by foreign forces coming from afar. Those who lost their lives and property in that imperialist invasion are once again being treated with utter disrespect and contempt. We pray they and their ancestral gods do not hear about this last demeaning injury. Those Nigerians and Africans involved in this scheme must explain to the Oba of Benin and his people why they accept such a scheme. The National Commission on Museums and Monuments (NCMM) surely has a duty to explain to the Nigerian peoples its position here. Its recent demand for the unconditional return of Nigerian artefacts contradicts such a project. In my opinion, if that scheme is implemented, it will be sowing the seeds of easily imaginable future conflicts in Benin, between the Oba and his people, between Nigeria and the Oba, between the Western "owners" of the looted Benin artefacts and Nigeria. The exhibition of looted artefacts could crystallize the frustrations and disappointments of many groups in Benin City and in Nigeria generally.

I was very surprised that Parzinger kept referring to the Holocaust restitution

scheme. Let's hope he will not be surprised if parallels are drawn or contradictions pointed out between the German handling of compensation for the victims of the evil and atrocious Nazi regime and the lack of response to African demands for colonial reparations. Indeed, Parzinger uses the word "genocide": "Der Maji-Maji-Krieg ist hier kaum bekannt, hat aber eine ähnliche Dimension wie der Genozid an den Herero und Nama." – "The Maji Maji War is hardly known here, but it had a dimension similar to the genocide of the Herero and Nama."

Is this a clear acceptance that Germany committed genocide against the Herero and Nama?

On three occasions Dr. Parzinger draws parallel to the Holocaust scheme: "*Similarly, as in the case of Nazi-looted art, it must be reconstructed from the beginning. Similarly, as in Nazi-looted art, we want not only to react to restitution demands, but to proactively research and thus strengthen international cooperation. Provenance research is complicated and takes time. There is no reason for me to avoid this and we do not do that in the case of Nazi looted art.*"[9]

Parzinger wants international rules for settling looted-artefacts questions and refers to the Holocaust restitution scheme. There is no need for any international conference or any new rules. The United Nations General Assembly/UNESCO passed resolutions that urge the return of these artefacts to their countries of origin. This should provide enough guidance.

A recent speech by Ronald S. Lauder, President of the World Jewish Congress, with the significant heading "*Each looted art work throws a shadow over Germany.*" ("*Jedes geraubte Kunstwerk wirft einen Schatten auf Deutschland*") fully confirms this opinion. The speech ends with the appeal "*Do the right thing! Do the right thing.*"

(“*Tun Sie das Richtige! Tun Sie das Richtige.*”) [10] Lauder points out that twenty years after the signing of the Washington Conference Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art, under which some 44 states were to identify the stolen artworks and restore them to the owners who had been unlawfully dispossessed of them by the racist Nazi regime, not much progress had been achieved and 73 years since the end of the last world war, one must still discuss this issue. (11) In view of this rather unfavourable criticism by Lauder, one wonders why Parzinger refers to this scheme. Is it the slow pace of implementation of the agreed principles that he favours?

On reflection, it is amazing that with all their resources, Western states and their museums have not been able to resolve the issue of restitution of looted African artefacts. This is, we believe, at least partly due to the absolute lack of respect for Africans, based on the racism Europeans manifested during the centuries of slavery and colonialism. In addition, there is the sheer greed and selfishness that have become the hallmarks of Western states and their museums. How come a museum such as the Ethnological Museum, Berlin, which holds some 508-580 looted Benin artefacts, is unable to return, say, 100 of those objects to the Oba of Benin? Benin artefacts are not part of German culture.

A clear demonstration of this greed that has become the creed of Western states and their museums was seen at the exhibition *Benin Kings and Rituals Court Arts from Nigeria* in Vienna in 2006. During an international symposium organized in connection with the exhibition, the representative of the Benin royal family stated that if each of the museums holding Benin artefacts returned one artefact each, the Royal Family would be satisfied. [11] What was the reaction of the Western museums? To my surprise, the then-Director of the Völkerkundemuseum, Vienna, Christian Feest, immediately responded, without hesitation, that it was impossible to envisage such a return and advanced the usual weak argument for holding other people’s artefacts. The remaining Western museum representatives kept quiet. The present

writer responded and refuted the usual Western defences. The Western museums thus lost an excellent opportunity to solve the issue of looted Benin artefacts in Western museums. So much has contempt for Africans become part of the Western mind that many of those present did not immediately realize the full implications of Feest's hurried answer. The Musée du Quai Branly, Paris, the Völkerkundemuseum, now the World Museum, Vienna, the Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin and others could have started a process of resolving the questions that are still with us after 12 years.

Austria, Belgium, Britain, Germany, Switzerland and other European states holding looted African artefacts are surely better served by following the path indicated by the French president Macron than by following Parzinger's ideas about elaborating new international rules that may throw the whole issue into disarray, raise more questions and not solve any of the present problems.

*Looted without rules, African artefacts can be returned without rules.*

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**ANNEX I – LIST OF GERMAN HOLDERS OF BENIN ARTEFACTS:**

Almost every German museum has its own collection of Benin artefacts, but information on the numbers of artefacts is not easy to obtain. Below is a non-exhaustive list of holders that we could identify from catalogues, the Internet and the museums' publications. In view of the public's growing interest in these artefacts, perhaps the museums could publish a full list of the Benin artefacts in their possession. I understand that within the context of the so-called Benin Dialogue

Group, lists of the Benin collections of members of the group have been exchanged, but true to the well-established attitude of the museums, they do not feel obliged to inform the public.

Berlin – Ethnologisches Museum/ Humboldt Forum – 580.

Cologne – Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum – 73.

Dresden – Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde – 182.

Frankfurt am Main – 51.

Hamburg – Museum für Völkerkunde/Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe – 196.

Leipzig – Museum für Völkerkunde – 87.

Munich– Museum Fünf Kontinente – 25.

Stuttgart – Linden Museum-Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde – 80.

According to Kathy Curnow, each of the following German cities have no more than 25 Benin artefacts: Braunschweig, Bremen, Dusseldorf, Freiburg, Göttingen, Hanover, Heidelberg, Hildesheim, Mannheim and Ulm.

Kathy Curnow, *IYARE! Splendour & Tension in Benin's Palace Theatre*, 2016, p. 201, WWW.IYARE.NET. Printed in the USA by Amazon.com

**ANNEX II- BENIN ARTEFACTS IN PRIVATE COLLECTIONS IN GERMANY:**

In the discussions on the restitution of looted Benin artefacts, attention is generally focussed on the major public museums in Europe and the USA, which tend to have large collections of the precious treasures that are sorely missing in Benin City and

Nigeria and indeed on the whole continent of Africa. The story that Benin artefacts are spread all over the world is, of course, a myth. The truth is that most of the Benin artefacts are in the Western world, especially the United Kingdom, Germany and the United States.

It is very doubtful whether, outside Nigeria, any African country has even one such Benin artefact. Do Africans not need to know about the famous Benin bronzes, especially since the image of Queen Mother Idia has become a pan-African symbol since FESTAC '77, when the British Museum arrogantly refused even to "loan" the ivory hip mask to Nigeria?

Many private persons or institutions in the Western world have their collections but have so far not been touched by the Nigerians' plea to return the looted artefacts. The only case of return by a private person is that of the Briton, Dr. Mark Walker, who returned to the Oba of Benin artefacts that he inherited from his grandfather. Man With Conscience Returned His Grandfather's Looted Benin Bronzeshttps://www.modernghana.com/.../man-with-conscience-returned..

Other private persons and institutions do not seem to be moved at all by the plea to return some of the looted Benin artefacts.

Consideration must be given to how private persons and institutions could be persuaded to return Benin artefacts in their possession, for all Benin artefacts of good quality, whether in public or private possession, are part of the loot that the British stole in 1897 from the palace of Oba Ovonramwen when they burned his city down.

The number of private holders of Benin artefacts in Germany is not known, but one

can get an idea of the quality of Benin and African arts in private hands in Germany by consulting books such as Dorina Hecht and Gunter Kawik (eds.) *Afrika und die Kunst – Einblicke in Deutsche Privatsammlungen*, 2010, Kawik Verlag, Bottrop, Germany.

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[1] "Die Rückgabe jener Kulturschätze, die unsere Museen und Sammlungen direkt oder indirekt dem Kolonialsystemverdanken und die jetzt zurückverlangt werden, sollte ebenfalls nicht mit billigen Argumenten und Tricks hinausgezögert werden." – Gert v. Paczensky and Herbert Ganslmayr, *Nofretete will nach Hause*, p. 185, C. Bertelsmann, Munich, 1984.

[2] Hermann Parzinger, "Es muss neue Erzählungen geben", http://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/humboldt-forum-und-kolonialismus-es-muss-neue-erzaehlungen-geben/20950392.html

[3] K. Opoku, World Museum, Vienna, Re-Opens: Renovated Premises For Cultural ...

[4] K. Opoku, Humboldt Forum And Selective Amnesia: Research Instead Of ...

[5] "*Man soll nicht immer so tun, als wäre alles zusammengeklaut.*"

"*Aber zu sagen, es ist alles gestohlen, also zurück damit, ist zu einfach, zumal etliche Stücke auch schon vor der britischen Strafexpedition auf dem Markt erworben worden sind.*"

[6] According to Christine Stelzig, at one meeting where art from Africa was

discussed at the Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin and the Benin bronzes were shown, it was mentioned that only Berlin was in possession of a relief plaque that, according to the information of the dealer in London, was already in London in 1879 and was the only piece of this form that had reached Europe before the destruction of Benin by the British. Felix von Luschan, Director of the Ethnologisches Museum, was one of the first persons to recognize that Benin bronzes came from Africa and not from some mythical place or people outside the continent: He confirmed that not a single Benin bronze was in Europe before the punitive expedition of 1897.

"*He, von Luschan, did not know of asingle plaque or a single head or other bronze art work that was in a museum,or in the art market or in private possession that came from Benin to Europebefore* 1897."

"*Er, von Luschan, kenne weder aus einem Museum, noch aus dem Kunsthandel, noch in Privat-Besitz auch nur eine einzige Platte oder einen einzigen Kopf oder sonst ein aus Erz gegossenes Kunstwerk, das vor 1897 aus Benin nach Europa gelangt wäre.*"

Christine Stelzig, *Afrika am Museum für Völkerkunde zu Berlin* 1873-1919, Centaurus Verlag, Herbolzheim 2004, p. 368.

See also K. Opoku, Benin To Berlin Ethnologisches Museum: Are Benin Bronzes Made In ...

[7] Nigeria Demands Unconditional Return Of Looted Artefacts: A Season ...

[8] K. Opoku, "We Will Show You Looted Benin Bronzes But Will Not Give Them Back: Second Defeat and Permanent Humiliation for Benin?"

"European museums to 'loan' looted Benin bronzes. Pambazuka News"

[9] "*Ähnlich wie bei der NS-Raubkunst muss der ganze Weg rekonstruiert werden. Ähnlich wie bei der NS-Raubkunst wollen wir nicht nur auf Rückgabeforderungen reagieren, sondern proaktiv forschen und dabei internationale Zusammenarbeit stärken. Provenienzforschung ist kompliziert und braucht ihre Zeit. Es gibt für mich keinen Grund, sie auszuhebeln, wir tun das auch bei NS-Raubkunst nicht.*"

[10] https://www.welt.de/kultur/kunst/article173179961/Raubkunst-Ronald-S-Lauders-Appell-an-Deutschland.html

[11] "Looted Art has all the relevant information on the Washington Principles.",www.lootedart.com/

[12] K. Opoku, "Respect and Disrespect in Restitution of Cultural Artefacts", https://www.toncremers.nl/kwame-opoku-respect-and-disrespect-i...