



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

Friday 16 March 2018, by [OPOKU Kwame](#) (Date first published: 3 March 2018).

**“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]**

We pointed out in our last article some of the strange ideas of the president of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, the body that controls the Humboldt Forum where African artefacts, formerly in the Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin, will be transferred. We assumed then that our clear exposition had shown the weakness of some of the reasoning behind his statements and ideas. [2] To our dismay, some of those ideas, coupled with new ones, have been repeated in recent statements. We plead the indulgence of the reader to bear with us while we look at some of these ideas, with Goethe on our side on the need to repeat the truth.

In an interview dated February 2018, 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)*. [3] 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 the history of violent attacks and robbery by Europeans in Africa and Asia is too well established. He would like to tell stories with the African objects when they are moved to the 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 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. [4] With such practices, true histories are submerged, with the ethnologists gladly

proclaiming that they have no monopoly of interpretation of the objects. Each visitor makes his or her own interpretation even if they have not studied ethnology; your interpretation is as good as mine even although I spent three years doing a degree in ethnology, and four years in 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* in Bode- Museum. This attitude matches perfectly the cry for more provenance research, as if nothing were known already about the objects displayed. [5]

In response to a question about Macron's suggestion to return African artefacts in French museums, Parzinger acknowledges 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 museums, or the political authorities?" Parzinger states that such questions must be decided by an international conference. The raising of such questions is part of the new credo of German authorities to plead ignorance about the African artefacts that have been lying in their museum for more than a hundred years. We shall answer these questions in an annexe. [6]

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 with reference to 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". [7]

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 3500 artefacts that were later sold at auctions in London, United Kingdom. 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. [8]

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

Many readers will immediately realise that there is no truth in 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. [9] We have answered this allegation in detail in several articles. [10]

Wherever possible, we shall no longer entertain or discuss about 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 historical 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. [11] We have already condemned without reservation this project that is an insult to the Benin people, the people of Nigerian and the [rest of] African people. 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 after more than 120 years since 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 people its position here. Its recent demand for unconditional return of Nigerian artefacts contradicts such a project. In our humble 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 crystallise frustrations and disappointments of many groups in Benin City and in Nigeria generally.

We were very surprised that Parzinger kept referring to the Holocaust Restitution scheme. We hope when we draw parallels or contradictions 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, he will not be surprised. 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*.

Is this a clear acceptance that official Germany committed genocide against the Herero and Nama [people]?

On three occasions 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 also proactively to 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". [12]

Parzinger wants international rules for settling looted artefacts questions and refers to the Holocaust restitution scheme. We have in a previous article suggested that there was no need for any international conference or any new rules. The United Nations General Assembly/United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation passed resolutions that urge the return of these artefacts to their countries of origin. This should provide enough guidance. In any case, we suggested that the performance of states in the Holocaust restitution cases was so not so great that that one could recommend it since, following its current speed, it could take decades before we see any return of African artefacts.

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"*.) [13] Lauder points out that 20 years after the signing of the Washington Conference Principles on Nazi-

Confiscated Art under which some 44 states were to identify and restore to the owners who had been unlawfully dispossessed of their artworks by the racist Nazi regime, not much progress had been achieved [14] and 73 years since the end of the last World War, one must still discuss about this issue. In view of the 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? Were such a system to be applied to restitution of looted African artefacts it might well take several decades to see any concrete results.

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 have instigated during the centuries of slavery and colonialism. In addition, there is the sheer greed and selfishness that has become the hallmarks of Western states and their museums.

How come that a museum such as the Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin, that holds some 508-580 looted Benin artefacts is unable to return, e.g. 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 shown during the exhibition- *Benin Kings and Rituals Court Arts from Nigeria*, 2006, in Vienna, Austria. During an international symposium organised in connection with the exhibition, the representative of the Benin Royal Family stated that if each of all the museums holding Benin artefacts returned one artefact each, the Royal Family would be satisfied. [15] 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 the artefacts of others. The remaining Western museum representatives kept quiet. The present writer responded and refuted the usual Western defences. An excellent opportunity was thus lost by the Western museums 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 realise the full implications of the quick answer by Feest. Musée du Quai Branly, Paris; Völkerkundemuseum, now World Museum, Vienna; Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin and others could have started a process of resolving the questions, which 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**

### **Answers to Parzinger's questions**

The President of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation raised questions as to "... which museum will return which object and for which reason and to which African museum? Who takes such a decision, the museums or the political authorities?" We attempt here to provide answers with examples relating to the Benin artefacts in the Ethnology Museum Berlin that are soon to be transferred to the Humboldt Forum.

Museum: Ethnologisches Museum/Humboldt Forum, Berlin, Germany.

Object: Bust of queen-mother, Iyoba Idia, Benin, Nigeria, now in Ethnologisches Museum / Humboldt Forum, Berlin, Germany

Inventory No. III C 12507

Ground: Looted in 1897 by British Invasion Army.

State: Through Nigeria to Oba of Benin, Benin City.

Decision: According to Statutes of the Prussian Foundation.

Authority for decision is an internal matter for the Foundation and other concerned institutions.

Similar answers apply to the following objects:

Altar Group with Oba Ewuakpe, Benin, Nigeria, now in Ethnologisches Museum/Humboldt Forum, Berlin, Germany.

Inventory No. III C 8165

Altar group with Oba Akenzua, Benin, Nigeria now in Ethnologisches Museum/Humboldt Forum, Berlin, Germany.

Inventory No. III C 8164

Commemorative head of an Oba, Benin, Nigeria, now in Ethnologisches Museum/Humboldt Forum, Berlin, Germany.

Inventory No. III C 8177

Female figure, Benin, Nigeria, now in Ethnologisches Museum/Humboldt Forum, Berlin, Germany.

Inventory No. III C 10864

Head of an Oba, Benin, Nigeria, now in Ethnologisches Museum/Humboldt Forum, Berlin, Germany.

Inventory No. III C 8169

Portuguese soldier, Benin, Nigeria, now in Ethnologisches Museum/Humboldt Forum, Berlin, Germany.

Inventory No. III C 20299

Saltcellar, Benin, Nigeria, now in Ethnologisches Museum/Humboldt Forum, Berlin, Germany.

Inventory No. III C4890 A, B

## **Annex II**

### **List of German holders of Benin artefacts**

Almost every German museum has its own collection of Benin artefacts but information on numbers of artefacts is not easy to obtain. Below is a non-exhaustive list of holders that we could identify,

from catalogues, internet and publications of the museums. In view of the growing interest of the public in these artefacts, perhaps the museums could publish a full list of the Benin artefacts they have been 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 following 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, the following German cities have each not more than 25 Benin artefacts - Braunschweig, Bremen, Dusseldorf, Freiburg, Göttingen, Hannover, Heidelberg, Hildesheim, Mannheim, and Ulm.

Kathy Curnow, *IYARE! Splendor and Tension in Benin's Palace Theatre*, 2016, p. 201, [WWW.IYARE.NET](http://WWW.IYARE.NET) Printed in the USA by Amazon.com

### **Annex III**

#### **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 in the United States of America that 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, United Kingdom, Germany and in 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?"

Queen-mother Idia, Benin Nigeria, now in British Museum, London, Great Britain.

Many private persons or institutions in the Western world have their collections but have so far not been touched by the plea of Nigerians to return the looted artefacts. The only case of return by a private person is that of the Briton, Mark Walker, who returned to the Oba of Benin artefacts that he inherited from his grand-father. [Man With Conscience Returned His Grandfather's Looted Benin Bronzes](#)

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 of 1897 when the British stole them from the palace of Oba Ovonramwen and burnt 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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## **P.S.**

Pambazuka News

<https://www.pambazuka.org/land-environment/parzinger%E2%80%99s-misconceptions-and-misrepresentations-about-restitution-african>

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## **Footnotes**

[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, München, 1984.

[2] K. Opoku, [“Parzinger’s Cri De Coeur: Genuine Plea for UN/UNESCO Assistance or Calculation to Delay Restitution of Artefacts?...”](#)

[3] Hermann Parzinger: “Es muss neue Erzählungen geben”

<http://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/humboldt-forum-und-kolonialismus-es-muss-neue-erzaehlungen-geben/20950392.html>

[4] K. Opoku [“World Museum, Vienna, Re-Opens: Renovated Premises for Cultural Objects of others but no Solution for Restitution”](#)...

[5] K. Opoku, [“Humboldt Forum And Selective Amnesia: Research instead of Restitution of African Artefacts”](#)...

[6] Annex I, Answers to Parzinger’s Questions.

[7] *“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.”

[8] According to Christine Stelzig, at one meeting where art from Africa was discussed at the Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin, and the Benin bronze were shown, it was mentioned that only Berlin was in possession of a relief plaque which, according to the information of the dealer in London, was already in London since 1879 and that it 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 recognise 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 a single 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 Europe before 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 ...](#)

[9] [Nigeria demands unconditional return of looted artefacts: A season of Miracles?..](#)

[10] K. Opoku. [How often does Nigeria have to ask for artefacts to be returned?](#)

[When will Western museums return their looted artefacts? - Elginism  
www.elginism.com/similar-cases/when...return...artefacts/.../1639/](#)

[Is the declaration on the importance of Universal Museums still valid?](#)

[Return and restitution of cultural property; Museum; Vol.:XXXI, 1; 1979  
unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001273/127315eo.pdf](#)

[11] 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](#)

[12] *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."

[13] <https://www.welt.de/kultur/kunst/article173179961/Raubkunst-Ronald-S-Lauders-Appell-an-D-utschland.html>

[14] Looted Art has all the relevant information on the Washington Principles.

[www.lootedart.com](http://www.lootedart.com)

[15] K. Opoku, "[Respect and Disrespect in Restitution of Cultural Artefacts](#)"