



# MAKING MEANING FROM A FRAGMENTED PAST: 1897 AND THE CREATIVE PROCESS

Peju Layiwola

## Abstract

One of the most traumatic experiences that occurred in Africa at the turn of the 19th century is the Benin/British encounter of 1897. The plundering of thousands of works of art from the palace of the king of Benin by the British, now spread across several museums in the West, continues to be an issue that keeps recurring. Ever since that episode, 1897 has become a theme, which is explored by various artists in Nigeria in a variety of genres. This paper attempts to discuss some of the artistic engagement with this theme and how artists have sought to recapture the past in a variety of media.

**Keywords:** Nigeria, Benin, trauma, legacy, patrimony, restitution, exhibition, Monday Midnite, Ganiyu Jimoh

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## Biographical note

Peju Layiwola is a visual artist and art historian with an active studio practice, as well as a strong commitment to research. She has had several art exhibitions locally and internationally. Her most recent travelling exhibition and edited book, entitled *Benin 1897.com: Art and the Restitution Question*, is an artistic exploration of the Benin/British encounter of 1897. She has published several articles on the visual culture of Nigeria. Presently, she is associate professor and head of the Department of Creative Arts at the University of Lagos, Nigeria where she teaches art history.

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# MAKING MEANING FROM A FRAGMENTED PAST: 1897 AND THE CREATIVE PROCESS.

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In February 1897, British imperialist forces invaded and sacked the ancient empire of Benin, capturing the monarch, Oba Ovonramwen, who had been on the throne that had existed for over one thousand years. British forces comprising over 1,200 men accompanied by several thousands of auxiliary troops and locals used Maxim guns to mow down hundreds of Benin soldiers. British soldiers set the villages leading to Benin on fire and carted away thousands of priceless artefacts that constituted the archives of the kingdom, sending the king into exile in Calabar where he finally died in 1914. The looted works were taken to London where they were auctioned. The works now adorn the exhibition halls and storage rooms of several museums in Europe and America. The event of the British 'Punitive' Expedition to Benin constitutes what Olorunyomi describes as a 'schism that seems more orchestrated than real, but which has, nevertheless, major repercussions till to this day (in Layiwola and Olorunyomi, 2010, p.xix). That is to say, this schism has thrust upon humanity a major challenge. How do present-day Nigerians, who see themselves at the receiving end of an imperial legacy, make meaning of this disturbing past? What strategies have been employed to cope with the impact of the British expedition to Benin and the attendant loss of a large part of Africa's patrimony? This paper outlines recent artistic responses to this contested past. This paper focuses on the trajectory of contemporary artists who have recently found innovative and politically informed ways to address this formative episode of British-Nigerian colonial contact.

## Exhibiting and reclaiming the Benin treasures

106 years later, the debate over ownership of Benin cultural artefacts still continues. Several contemporary events have necessitated the recurrence of the discourse over Benin's contested cultural patrimony in both local and foreign places in recent years. One major event was the travelling exhibition of Benin works, *Benin Kings and Rituals: Court Art from Nigeria*, which opened in Vienna in 2007. This exhibition,

described as 'the most extensive Benin exhibition ever' (Wilfried Seipel in Plankensteiner, 2007, p.11), had over 300 Benin works taken from several museums across the globe on display, opening in Vienna and later moving to Berlin. It was shown in France and finally closed in Chicago in 2008. Following this show, the outcry for repatriation of cultural artefacts to their countries of origin became louder and persistent. While viewing the works during the opening in Vienna, a son of the reigning king of Benin, Omoregbe Erediauwa, broke down saying:

O my God, these people emptied our treasury. You cannot really imagine the scale of plundering that took place in Benin until you see these works physically. These are only 300 of the entire stock of 4,000 looted works. They really cleaned us out.<sup>1</sup>

Apart from the outright looting of works from Benin, a number of artefacts were destroyed in the fire that was set up on the third day of the siege laid by British soldiers in the Oba's (king's) palace. The loss of lives and property that followed the torching of towns and villages as the expeditionary forces made their way to Benin left a trail of fragmented lives and families in the wake of the 1897 event. Ogbechie clearly articulates this in the narrative of his personal family histories: 'The king's ouster disrupted the entire region under Edo control and its local economy collapsed. My grandfather lost everything' (2010, pp.76–77).

The fragmentation of social and political lives of the people caused by the expedition, the climax of which was the exile of Oba Ovonramwen to Calabar, is revealed in the manner in which the art objects were dispersed. In 2007, the upper part of a two-part bronze plaque, which had been removed to London, was united with its lower part, which had been in Vienna since 1897, for the first time at the Vienna exhibition.<sup>2</sup> The travelling exhibition titled *Benin Kings and Rituals: Court Arts from Nigeria* was shown in Vienna, Berlin, Paris and Chicago. When it was announced that the works were to be shown in Chicago, the African community based in the city held a series of protests in front of the Art Institute of Chicago, one of the venues of the exhibition.

Beyond these exhibitions of Benin art, recent events on the international scene elicit comments, reactions and protests on account of the looted works. One of

1 Erediauwa Omoregbe broke down in the last hall while viewing the Benin works on display at the Museum of Ethnology, Vienna, in 2007.

2 For further details, see 'Relief plaque: Body of a Portuguese master of the circled cross in two parts' in Plankensteiner (2007).

such events was the widely announced Sotheby's sale in 2010. A 16th-century Benin Oba mask was to be auctioned for about £4.5million.<sup>3</sup> The assumed owner is a descendant of Lieutenant Colonel Sir Henry Gallwey, Deputy Commissioner and Vice Consul in the Oil Rivers Protectorate, who took part in the infamous British expedition. Protests organised by civil society groups and Nigerian intellectuals against this sale spread from the streets of London to social network sites. A few days later, the consignee pulled down the work from the auction. This is not to say that the sale may not have continued underground, but it is sufficient to note that it is no longer business as usual to profiteer from the loot; a loot which was forcibly removed during a bloody contest between Benin defenders and British soldiers.

The most recent addition to the debate is the controversial donation of over 32 Benin bronzes and ivories made by yet another descendant of the infamous expedition, Robert Owen Lehman, to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in 2012. The Nigerian Government, through the Director of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments reacted promptly and stated firmly:

We wish to also call on the management of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, US to as a matter of self-respect return the 32 works to Nigeria, the rightful owners forthwith.

(Yusuf Abdallah Usman cited in Opoku, 2012).

However, the Benin treasures are but one of many examples of looted art works from Nigeria. Artefacts have also been looted from the Nok area of Northern Nigeria. Like a cancerous sore, the 1897 historical episode keeps recurring and continually elicits responses from advocates of repatriation of cultural artefacts in Nigeria and across the globe. It has therefore not only become a reference point in the discourse of imperialism in Africa with several incidences of pillaging in other parts of the continent, but also forms a specifically disturbing legacy of British-Benin imperial encounter which the West can no longer negate, but has to come to terms with.

Despite the wide public protests mentioned above and official requests for repatriation made by the Nigerian state and the royal family in Benin, European and American museums and governments still refuse to return any of the looted artefacts. Kwame Opoku, one of the most outspoken advocates for the restitution of looted artefacts from Africa, particularly laments

<sup>3</sup> Other works for offering in the same auction were a carved altar tusk, two ivory armlets, a rare bronze armlet cast with Portuguese figures and a bronze sculpture.

the various flimsy arguments that emanate in the West against the request for restitution made by the owners of these cultural properties.

Today, this episode of British-Benin imperial encounter leaves behind photographs of a distraught king, Oba Ovonramwen, several unattended requests for restitution from both the Nigerian state and members of the royal family of Benin and a trail of nebulous theories justifying the handling of Benin's patrimony in Europe and the US.

### **Artistic engagements with a disturbing past**

Many Nigerian artists both in the Diaspora and in the homelands have responded to the 1897 saga. They have joined the clamour for the return of these cultural artefacts in multifarious creative forms. The following discussion brings together some of the most recent examples of these artistic responses.

Although not specific to Benin, Yinka Shonibare, a UK-based, Nigerian-born artist sets the pace for a more general, critical perspective on the plundering of Africa's patrimony in his installation piece *Scramble for Africa* (2003). This work poignantly captures the European quest for the natural and artistic treasures of Africa during the official partitioning of Africa between European powers at the Berlin Conference in 1884-85. In his installation, fourteen headless mannequins clad in Shonibare's signature style of wax print cloth sit at a table, with a map of Africa before them, as they 'stake their claims' to African territories. This way, Shonibare draws attention to the decisive moment of Europe's imperial project. At the Berlin Conference, the ground was set for European and, particularly, British territorial expansion – a bid that played out in Benin about a decade later.

In a similar vein, the Ghana-born, Nigerian-based experimental artist, El Anatsui, made a series of wooden panels depicting the Benin Conference in the 1980s. The electrically powered machines he uses for incising and cutting into the wood is reminiscent of eroded socio-cultural values of the people and the destructive nature of colonialism in Africa.

More specifically to Benin, a panoply of novels, theatre plays and films exists in relation to 1897. In 1966, Ogieriaikhi Enwinma wrote a book titled *Oba Ovoramwen and Oba Ewuare*. In 1971, the playwright, Ola Rotimi wrote and produced *Ovonramwen N' Ogbaisi*, a play, which became very popular in Nigeria and was adopted as a literature text for the West African Senior School Certificate Examination. As part of the centenary commemoration of the British expedition to Benin, Ahmed Yerima wrote, produced and directed a play, *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen* (1997).

Elsewhere, I have discussed Edo visual artists' engagement with the 1897 theme focusing on works of artists of the old traditions of metal work and woodcarving (Layiwola, 2007). Moreover, I included paintings and sculptures by contemporary Edo artists during the centenary commemoration of the Benin Expedition in 1997. The study was conducted against the backdrop of the artists' understanding and articulation of Edo mythology and belief systems. This paper, however, focuses on the trajectory of contemporary artists who have recently engaged with this theme in a manner different from those discussed earlier. Rather than produce works that reference only indigenous traditions and philosophies, these artists cast their ideas against contemporary readings of events occurring locally and globally. They show a more robust understanding of political issues and view history as multi-layered and complex. Through their works, the artists challenge official representations of the past and re-examine the meaning of the events leading up to and following the 1897 capture of Benin. In this essay, I examine five experimental works of my own, *1897.com*, *Oba ghato okpere*, *Chequered History*, *Theatre of War* and *What Next?*, which derive from my travelling solo exhibition *Benin 1897.com: Art and the Restitution Question* (2010). In addition, the musical

video *1897* by Nigeria-born, Belgium-based musician Monday Midnite, and two selected cartoons by Ganiyu Jimoh are analysed. All of these works provide greater political awareness of the British-Benin encounter both within the Nigerian public space and on global platforms such as the internet.

*Benin 1897.com: Art and the Restitution Question*, a travelling exhibition, was shown in Lagos from 8 April to 30 May 2010, and later in Ibadan from 20 August to 10 October 2010. In its four months of showing time in Nigeria, it generated a lot of discussions and provided insights into how a historical work can open up various streams of thoughts. The exhibition opened with a symposium attended by lawyers, culture workers, government officials, artists and academics. The accompanying publication of the same title had interesting reviews and it became a teaching text in several universities and tertiary institutions. The title's pun from cyber language on the '.com', the commercial domain name, became a metaphor for the overwhelming economic interest of the British in the sacking of Benin. Rather than follow the official history, which plays up the ambush of a British party on an alleged mission to appeal to the king of Benin to keep with the terms of an agreement over trade, the exhibition fully expresses the often suppressed



Figure 1.5.1: Peju Layiwola, *1897.com*, 2009. Installation: Terracotta, Inlaid copper, Twine, Cowrie shells, Cow Horns, Wood, Acrylic paint, Brass foil. Photo: Barbara Plankensteiner.

intent of the British to plunder Benin a year before the massacre. *Benin 1897.com: Art and the Restitution Question*, is the first exhibition of its kind in Nigeria dedicated to memorialising the event of the sack of Benin and was inspired by my visit to the Benin art exhibition *Benin – Kings and Rituals: Court Arts from Nigeria* in Vienna and Chicago in 2007 and 2008, respectively. It became necessary to respond to some of the issues the larger travelling exhibition at these numerous venues threw up, in the light of copyright, ownership of Benin patrimony and the continued possession of these works in foreign museums. In one of the essays in the accompanying catalogue for the exhibition, Freida High, an American art historian, describes the exhibition as 'a metamonument, a monument that refers to itself and others' (2010, p.15). This exhibition tells a story – a story of war, of losses, of death, pillage and intrigue. Yet, in doing so it also partakes in a healing process and attempts to assuage the pain and sorrow associated with the sack of Benin on its memorialisation of history.

*1897.com* (2009), the title piece of the exhibition, comprises 1,000 terracotta heads as a reference to the 3,000 to 4,000 objects plundered from the Benin palace (Figure 1.5.1). In the historical writings, there is

no precise number associated with the looted works. There has been a clamour for an inventory of works looted from the Benin palace. This installation recalls the manner in which the ancestral heads, plaques and other object types were laid out on top of the shrines and in the bedchamber of the king from where they were stolen by British soldiers. In the same fashion, the 1,000 terracotta heads were spread across similar platforms. Although the works stolen were mostly made of bronze and ivory, terracotta was the chosen media for this work. A few of the heads were covered with layers of copper and brass metal. The colour of the fired, red clay is reminiscent of palace shrines on which these heads were placed. The catalogue comments that '[t]hey who once enjoyed the splendour of the palace are now trapped behind glass walls in foreign lands' and refers to the new display of Benin artefacts in foreign museums, away from the freer spaces in the palace where they served religious functions (Olorunyomi, 2010, p.xix). They are largely representations of memorial heads – comprising an Oba and a queen mother head, as well as a simple plaque form.



Figure 1.5.2: Peju Layiwola, *Oba Ghato Okpere (Long live the King)*, 2009. Installation: Gourds, fishing Line and acrylic paint. Photo: Barbara Plankensteiner.

Apart from the numerous works, which were plundered, a number of works were destroyed in a fire that engulfed the palace of the king. Some of the classical Benin ivories still bear the burn marks of the fire. A number of terracotta pieces in *1897.com* were patinated with oxides to create a burnt effect on the memorial heads. Cow tusks are representative of the ivories stolen from the Benin palace. Thus, they become a metaphor for expressing the pillage that transpired in 1897. While the Benin treasures lie in foreign lands, the artist, in the case of *1897.com*, is left to pick amongst the detritus of the dunghill of slaughterhouses while valuable works remain in foreign museums.

Today, many Benin artists do not have the opportunity of viewing the works done by their predecessors in Western museums. They resort to looking at photographs in books and catalogues, sometimes to replicate them in a bid to reconnect with the past, as well as to earn a living. When the banished king Oba Ovonramwen died in Calabar in 1914, his son Oba Eweka I ascended the throne in Benin. The new king sought to restore the memorial shrines, which had been desecrated by the British soldiers. He commissioned new heads from the guild of casters. The installation piece, *Oba Ghato Okpere* (*Long Live the King*) (Figure 1.5.2), made in 2009 and shown in the exhibition, is a postmodern approach

to memorialising the kings of Benin. It is made from 113 gourds etched with names of past kings (Oba) and mythical leaders/sky kings (Ogiso) of Benin. The gourds represent the years that have elapsed since 1897. Each king is identified by motifs associated with his reign such as the 1978 commemorative fabric of Oba Akenzua II, made by my mother, Princess Elizabeth Olowu. Seventeen calabashes are left without designs to represent the period of interregnum when the throne was left vacant with the banishment of Oba Ovonramwen to Calabar. This period was characterised by turmoil and intrigue. The British reduced the political influence of the King and almost obliterated the institution of Benin monarchy. Oba Ghato Okpere became one of the most attractive of the entire set of works on display. Despite its reference to a disruption of the political system in Benin, its meaning was almost subsumed by its aesthetic appeal, as the audience used it as a backdrop for their personal photographs. Facebook sites were awash with images of the installations and people used it as screensavers on their phones and computers.

*Theatre of War* (2009) (Figure 1.5.3) is a graphic illustration of the various intrigues and dramatic episodes that characterised the attack on Benin up to the time of the British trial of the king and his men, held several months after the expedition. It is



Figure 1.5.3: Peju Layiwola, *Theatre of War*, 2009. Terracotta and copper wires, 200cm by 210cm. Photo: Barbara Plankensteiner.

an assemblage of terracotta plates with inscriptions revealing the various commands of attack and the day-to-day accounts of battle by British soldiers. These terracotta tablets reveal details of ammunition expended in the battle to conquer and take charge of a people's land and possessions. The commands on the plaques adapt text from the 1898 House of Commons Parliamentary Papers, titled 'Papers relating to the massacre of British officials near Benin, and the consequent punitive expedition'. The *Theatre of War* tablets read:

Proceed to Benin, Proceed at once, Send gunboat to Benin, Send forces with knowledge of native warfare, all houses destroyed to the ground, homes set ablaze, Ugiami village razed, Enemies grounded, Benin defeated, Queen rejoices ...

*Theatre of War* (2009) points out the contradictions in the official narratives of the British/Benin encounter. Dispatches to the home office reporting the ambush, claimed that the Phillips party was 'unarmed' and 'peaceful', sometimes reported also as 'unescorted'. Yet eyewitness account observes that, 'when they heard shots fired in front; they tried to get their revolvers out of their boxes, but could not find the boxes' (Captain Boisragon and District Commissioner, Locke, paraphrased in House of Commons Parliamentary Papers, 1898, p.18).

The British party comprising 9 Britons and 250 African carriers had ammunitions in their boxes in response to an earlier command by Vice Consul Phillips that officers could carry revolvers 'but that they were

not to show them' (House of Commons Parliamentary Papers, 1898, p.20). *Theatre of War* launches history and at the same time critiques the action of the British soldiers sitting in the midst of their loot in the courtyard of the palace. Some of the plaques read: 'Photo session, Officers Look up, Say cheese. SNAP'. Furthermore, the work reveals an early reference to manipulation of various ethnic groups in the region. Hausa fighters were hired as hit men and compensated with biscuit and rice while Itsekiri men were hired as spies (House of Commons Parliamentary Papers, 1897, Africa. No.6, quoting Acting Commissioner Gallwey to Foreign Office, p.21).

As the war was underway against the Benin defenders, members of the expeditionary forces could not conceal their interest in the rich natural resources in the region. One of the members, simply described as Fletcher, took out time to obtain samples of rare plants and noted the rich resources of palm oil, kola nut and rubber trees in the region. All these actions are inscribed on the terracotta tiles and strung together with copper wires. The work concludes on a sad note of defeat. It shows the eventual collapse of the Benin defenders: the hanging of the loyalist to the king. The inscriptions state: 'June 27 Ologbosere tried, found guilty, June 28 executed, Iguobasimi surrenders, trial continues, search for Overami continues ...'

In my interpretation of this final inscription, Oba Ovonramwen was never captured.

Following closely to this work is the triptych titled *Chequered History* (2009) (Figure 1.5.4). This work, made in polyester resin, combines segments of textures and



Figure 1.5.4: Peju Layiwola, *Chequered History*, 2009. Polyester and glass, 230cm by 100cm.  
Photo credit: Peju Layiwola

symbols found on several Benin plaques and masks in the British Museum. An earlier version of this work was made in 2003. The work refers to the fragmented histories and experiences deriving from the British encounter. Africa, like a chequered/draught board, became a playfield for colonial powers.

At the time the *Benin 1897.com; Art and the Restitution Question* exhibition was being conceived, another artist, Osaigbovo Agbonzee, who goes by the stage name Monday Midnite, was working on the musical version commemorating the events of 1897. Through the internet, we both connected and eagerly shared our visions. Midnite's rap music video (4min 19sec), titled *1897* was released in 2009. Midnite produced two versions of the *1897* sound track. The second version he dedicated to a lost friend. His video visibly shows his disgust for the pillaging of Benin works through the lyrics and imagery used for the footage. Monday Midnite appears in a white T-shirt with the popularly published photograph of Oba Ovonramwen aboard the ship that took him on exile to Calabar. This photograph was taken by an Ijaw artist, photographer J. Adagogo Green, in 1897. Written boldly on the top of the photo is the inscription 1897. The video opens with the artist rapping along the streets of London. Some of the shots are taken against the background of Buckingham palace. Midnite's intention is to carry the protest to the doorsteps of the Queen. He sings:

Please take my plea to the palace of the queen,  
she needs to take a hint and do the right thing,  
make amends for the evil you did. (lyrics cited in Layiwola and Olorunyomi, 2010, p.11)<sup>4</sup>

In calling up iconic images of British power and authority, he uses the image of Queen Elizabeth II and her son, Prince Charles, and grandsons, William and Harry. Here, he conflates historical periods and continually takes swipes at the British royals who, he affirms, approved of the events of 1897 and were beneficiaries of the pillage. This closing of generational gaps emphasises the fact that the past is in continuous dialogue with the present. Midnite includes other British personalities such as the former Prime Ministers, John Major and Gordon Brown. Photographs of Ralph Moor and Captain James Philips, members of the expeditionary force and chief protagonists in the pillaging, are also featured in his clips. Other buildings captured in the video are the Parliament building and the British Museum, which holds the largest collection of looted Benin works.

4 For the video, see [www.youtube.com/watch?v=eQeY9DMLNeQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eQeY9DMLNeQ).

Midnite's words speak against British propagandist's description of Benin as 'the city of blood' (Bacon, 1897, p.11), a reference to the practice of human sacrifice and subsequent screaming headlines in British tabloids of the day, which was one of the excuses put forward for the sacking of Benin. Regardless of Sir Reginald Bacon description of Benin as the city of blood, Midnite turns the table around in accusing the British of spilling more blood than was shed in Benin for ritual purposes:

I was born in the city of bronze; the Brits came and turned it into the city of blood, subjugated and brutalized my people ... The evil they perpetuated, orchestrated „, the shooting, the burning the looting

(cited in Layiwola and Olorunyomi, 2010, p.11)

He claims to abhor killings of any kind and compares two unconnected historical episodes of violence, referring to both as terrorist attacks. Midnite affirms that the 1897 attack was worse than the terrorist attack in London on 7 July 2005. As in the *Theatre of War*, Midnite enumerates the number of ammunitions and shows the strength of force that overran Benin. Some of the Benin icons he uses are the Queen Idia Mask in the British Museum and the bronze statue of Oba Akenzua I. His remix of the music video is an equally intense a critique of the British action. Very similar to the older version, he goes further to include footage of a few more influential British personalities: David Cameron and Nick Clegg. Midnite continues to include unrelated issues as footage in his video. His reference to the 2012 royal wedding between Prince William and Kate Middleton goes to show that regardless of the occasion, he extends his criticism to descendants of the British royal family, as well as British politicians in power. In addition to the photograph of the British Museum, he includes images from the exhibition catalogue of the exhibition held in Vienna. The image of Oba Akenzua I on the front cover of the Vienna catalogue is also used to direct our gaze to museums housing some of the controversial works of art. Midnite's voice is unmistakable as he solicits for the return of the Benin artefacts:

Bring back the treasures you stole from Benin  
Let the souls of my ancestors rest in peace  
Cos they're hanging just sitting in limbo  
Hard for them to extricate and let it go  
I appeal to the conscience of the common Brits

(cited in Layiwola and Olorunyomi, 2010, p.11)

No less caustic are the cartoons of Ganiyu Akinloye Jimoh (Figures 1.5.5 and 1.5.6), an artist who comes from Ejigbo in Osun State, Nigeria, and studied Graphic

Design and Art History at the University of Lagos. Jimoh claims he was inspired by the verbal satires of the Nigerian musician, Fela Anikulapo Kuti, in the making of his cartoons. He was also greatly inspired by the *Benin 1897.com* exhibition and sought to extend the idea in the form of digitally enhanced cartoons. Two cartoons from the artist's oeuvre specifically dedicated to the 1897 event are discussed here.

The first cartoon illustrated here, *Double Standard* (2010), offers a more animated depiction of Benin classical sculptures. Here, the bronze head of an Oba and an Idia mask, representing male and female gender respectively, assume human forms and are kept in shackles in a similar way in which Oba Ovonramwen was during his capture. The atmosphere appears charged with emotions. The sculptures appear in a rather mournful state, with tears running down the face of Queen Idia. Both figures are tied together and held down by a weight, which bears the inscription 'Imperial commerce'. In the background is inscribed: 'Africans illegally in Europe must leave. African objects illegally in Europe must stay' and refers to the double standards in British policy. Both captions draw allusions to the huge income generated from the sale of Benin artefacts in auction houses, as well as Western museums, particularly the British Museum, which sold duplicates of Benin plaques to the Nigerian Government in the 1950s.

Riot (2011), the second cartoon, represents the Benin artefacts themselves requesting freedom from foreign museums, which Monday Midnite, in his rap video, considers as prison houses. Jimoh transforms the altarpiece depicting Oba Akenzua I (now in the Museum of Ethnology in Berlin, and also used to illustrate the catalogue for the exhibition in Vienna)



Figure 1.5.5: Ganiyu Jimoh, *Double Standard*, 2010. 12.7cm by 17.8cm. Courtesy of Ganiyu Jimoh.

into the central figure of a protest. But rather than Oba standing with two attendants as in the original work, the two figures have been turned into images of protests. Jimoh successfully creates a scenario of protest led by the Benin artefacts. All three figures hold placards with various inscriptions calling for their release from confinement. One signposts read: '114 years in exile: Enough is enough', 'Prison protest: African antiquities on rampage', 'No to illegal captivity'. Another signpost reads, 'The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing'. The phrase derives from Irish statesman, author, orator, political theorist and philosopher, Edmund Burke (1729–1797). He is mainly remembered for his support of the cause of the American Revolutionaries, and for his later opposition to the French Revolution. Jimoh's reference to this phrase indicts successive Nigerian governments, who have over time shown a lukewarm attitude to repatriation of cultural artefacts. He also draws inspiration from the words of American civil rights activist, Martin Luther King Junior (1929–68). His epochal speech 'I have a dream', delivered in 1963, launched him as one of the greatest orators in world history. Jimoh's words, like King's are multilayered. While King advocates for a free America where people of all creed and religious background will co-exist in



Figure 1.5.6: Ganiyu Jimoh, *Riot*, 2011. 12.7cm by 17.8cm. Courtesy of Ganiyu Jimoh.

peace, Jimoh expands on his message using freedom as a metaphor for the repatriation of Benin cultural artefacts.

On the platform where all three figures stand, Jimoh provides a list of museums, which have holdings of Benin artefacts. This list, albeit not exhaustive, represents the views of universal museums. The declaration on the value and importance of universal museums was signed in December 2002 by eighteen Western museums. This declaration has come under strong criticism by a renowned advocate of restitution, Kwame Opoku. Opoku who observes that the fact that these so-called universal museums, who claim to keep in trust for mankind the art treasures of the world, are all located in the west. This invariably, excludes a large number of Africans from viewing the works made by their ancestors.

He further asserts:

A declaration seeking to confer Immunity could have come from a constituted political authority with legislative or quasi[-]legislative authority such as the UNESCO or the United Nations. But the major museums have been in defiance of the UN and UNESCO[,] which have in resolution after resolution insisted on the need to return cultural artefacts to their countries of origin and have supported Greece in its claims for the Parthenon/Elgin Marbles.

(Opoku, 2010)

Jimoh's cartoon is a critique of these Western concepts that emphasise self-interest at the detriment of other views, particularly those from Africa. Art has

therefore become a potential vehicle for expressing the feelings of several artists from Nigeria (about colonial conquest in Africa) via the specific example of the looting of Benin. The artists' messages of deprivation and exploitation are portrayed in different ways. Through the use of public sculptures, paintings, performance art, cartoons, installations and new media, the 1897 plundering of Benin remains an evergreen theme.

### Conclusion

In 2010, *What Next?* (Figure 1.5.7), an installation of all the moulds used in casting the 1,000 heads in 1897.com, was displayed on grounds outside the usual gallery space and allowed to simply disintegrate under the forces of the weather. This installation sought to symbolise a return to mother earth – a sign of rebirth and rejuvenation. *What Next?* and *1897.com*, which are both negative and positive views of the ancestral heads, signified the fact that there are two sides in telling the same story. History, therefore, may not always be a true reflection of historical facts. So far, the historical accounts of the British-Benin encounter have been largely dominated by official documents written by the British and passed on as authentic truth. Today, this British perspective is being challenged by alternative voices. This is what plays out in the works of the Nigerian artists discussed in this article. The open-ended nature of *What Next?* represents the unfinished story of a past in the present which, in the years to come, is going to be told and retold with renewed vigour.



Figure 1.5.7: Peju Layiwola, *What Next?*, 2009. Plaster of Paris. Photo: Peju Layiwola.

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