

Yorùbá identity and Western museums: Ethnic pride and artistic representations

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The encounter between different societies is often problematic and can take the form of a cultural clash, especially if it happens during postcolonial times, when specific stereotypes have deepened within social constructions and assumptions.¹ This chapter is based on the idea that 'the connection between past and future may be more fragile than is generally assumed [and definitely] it requires deliberate actions to maintain social organizations and cultural traditions' (Leeds-Hurwitz 1993: xxii). Specifically, it deals with the way Yorùbá people living nowadays in Great Britain relate to, interpret and classify their traditional ceremonial objects, as displayed in museums.²

The chapter is organized into two main sections and is based on the author's PhD research, carried out between April 2002 and January 2004, among the communities of Yorùbá immigrants living in Leicester and Nottingham.³ The first section will consider the historical and social changes that have occurred in the interpretation and definition of non-Western objects (with a specific focus on African/Yorùbá objects). The second section will focus on some of the results of the research. It will present the perception of Yorùbá people towards contemporary Yorùbás and traditional Yorùbá objects, within a postcolonial society and a postcolonial institution, such as the museum.

Museums and the 'other' cultures 1890–2005: From ideals of power and possession to intercultural bridges

In Yorùbá tradition, every time a new king was elected by his tribe, he was requested to open one of the carved gourds presented to him during the coronation ceremony. The contents of the chosen gourd, (e.g. salt, sugar, nuts or pepper) foretold to the community what style of reign was just beginning. Usually, the gourds used for this kind of ceremony were finely carved with symbolic geometric designs, which defined – in conformity with the Yorùbá cosmology and religious beliefs – the boundaries and the indissoluble bonds between the world of the spirits and the world of the living.

During the age of high imperialism (1850–1914), in order to satisfy the desire for possessions of many politicians, scholars and missionaries, thousands of

non-Western objects – like the Yorùbá gourd of the example – were brought to Europe and started to fill the glass cases of public museums, as well as the stores of private collectors. As a consequence, non-Western material culture (and the people who produced it) became symbols of Western social and economic ideologies. In the early nineteenth century, Britain had already achieved significant political and expansionist successes,⁴ but it was only with the completion of the Suez Canal (1869) that the British Empire started effectively to expand its supremacy to other states of the African continent.⁵ While the British colonizers were securing different African territories, back in Britain the Government was focused on the ‘attempt to shape a world system which both expressed and reinforced the gentlemanly order at home’ (Hopkins 1988: 6). Indeed, the British Government was aiming at the construction and the propaganda of the idea of the ‘Africans’, ghettoized into the negative category of ‘the others’. Without any doubt, in the last decade of the nineteenth century, the idea of the non-Western other, understood as different, unusual and uncivilized, started to be more consistently formed and publicized, as did the idea of the superiority of the Western race (Danaher *et al.* 2000). The public image of the uncivilized ‘other’, who did not fit into the social and aesthetic Western canons, became a necessary persona to justify colonialist conquests. The complex and different cultural system which formed non-Western societies was ignored and misunderstood by the West: in this nineteenth-century marketing strategy, cultural diversity was superficially extrapolated, exotically flattened and reshaped, in order to feed the Western imagination and to strengthen the idea of the superior Western civilization.

As public institutions, museums did not escape from this propaganda. On the contrary, exhibitions became pivotal centres of the colonial policy. Indeed, due to their public nature, museums became powerful means to promote imperialist interests and colonial responsibilities. As Black observes, ‘within the museum’s walls, the other serve[d] to reflect the self’s glory’ and ‘the museum fed the curiosity of its visitors ... and could satisfy the appetite for novelty as well as for nostalgia’. This happened at, for instance, the *Stanley and Africa Exhibition* (1890), set in the Victoria Gallery in London by Henry Morgan Stanley, and where each visitor, as an explorer, had to make his/her way through the jungle of objects, portraits and collections (Black 2000: 26; Coombes 1994).⁶

During this period, a mass process started that, for several decades, would rank and re-represent non-Western cultures as subcultures that needed to be subjugated in order to be civilized: non-Western people became the target for anthropological research, as well as a sort of social panacea, useful to reinforce the idea of Western superiority. For instance, H. Huxley and J. H. Lamprey, the inventors of the standard measuring-grid, were recommending that ‘all aboriginal subjects [should] be photographed naked, their bodies posed in such a way that the viewer could make unimpeded cross-comparison with the anatomy of other racial groups’ (Maxwell 1999: ix). In addition, with reference to colonial responsibilities, museums started to be conceived more as ‘instructive amusements’, necessary for the ‘mental and moral health of the [Western] citizens’ (Bennet 1995: 19). As a consequence, by 1890 the museum scene was flourishing with national

and international exhibitions that, besides the educational and power-image advantages, raised the perspective of commercial benefits and recreational environments. Therefore, from cabinets of intellectual curiosities, museums became worlds of curious mysteries, where academic science and popular fantasy were married perfectly.⁷ There was a clear ambition to surprise the visitors and imperialistically to construct their experience and understanding: 'by mapping out the world, museums became synonymous with culture and education' (Black 2000: 26). For instance, in June 1904, Henry Balfour, the first curator of the Pitt Rivers Museum, speaking of museums in Britain said, 'I believe that ... [there] will arise institutions, which, even though they may be small, will take a definitive plan among the teaching units of our countries' (Balfour 1904: 398).

A catalyst of this change was the Education Act, in 1902, which contemplated the educational potential of museums – by soliciting school visits to museums – and generated debates concerning ethnographic collections as educational resources. As a consequence, most museums adapted and redefined 'their public image, in terms of educational prerogative' (Coombes 1994: 112). Ethnographic collections started to be displayed on the basis of the comparative approach, which served didactic purposes, through a prompt assessment of objects' similarities and differences.⁸ For example, between 1895 and 1916, the Arnold Ridyard Collection at the Liverpool Museum counted around 6,500 objects, mainly from West and Central Africa. During these years, the collection was initially organized according to taxonomic principles but then, due to a dramatic rise in the number, specimens were ordered according to their ethnographic group (Tythacott 2001).⁹ After the age of voracious collecting, there was a deeper Western understanding and a more accepting attitude towards the objects and towards the people who made such objects. This was because people started to understand the new objects and their cultures better, after having had them around for a long time. Undoubtedly, the transformation of the perception of non-Western material culture determined new ways to conceive and represent ethnographic collections and non-Westerners, within the Western museum context.

Over the past two centuries, museums have certainly made significant attempts to review their social role and have changed remarkably their attitude towards non-Western cultures and their objects. Indeed, if in the past ethnographic collections were conceived and represented as the material culture of disappearing societies, mainly preserved for the benefit and education of future generations, today the scene is markedly different (Peers and Brown 2003). Ethnographic collections are no longer interpreted as colonial trophies – although museums acknowledge that they are the result of the 'great age of museums collecting' (Peers and Brown 2003: 1) – and they are no longer portrayed as tangible proofs of disappearing and lost societies, which need to be displayed in a comparative, educational order (Simpson 1996). Since the middle of the twentieth century, Western exhibitions of non-Western material culture have gone through interesting changes: from a functionalist approach, museum displays have moved towards a more material-culture focus – intended to enhance and celebrate cultural diversities – to a people's interpretation focus.

Indeed, nowadays, Western museums are making considerable efforts to actively involve the source communities,¹⁰ after recognizing them as the direct heirs of ethnographic collections and after acknowledging that the memories of indigenous people and their descendents, related to their material culture, may be significantly different from those of Westerners (Cummins and Arinze 1996). Museum professionals are trying to be more aware (and to express this awareness in exhibitions) of the different perceptions and senses of identity of non-Western people, living outside their original country, in relation to their material culture displayed in museums (Szekeres 2002). Museums aim constantly to foster more interactive and cooperative dialogues between the museum and the descendants of the people who originally created these objects: only in this way, in fact, can the relationship between the host country, the 'adoptive' people and the original heirs lead to a feasible, cultural transmission of shared histories and traditions within the museum context.

However, in relation to African material culture displayed in Western museums, it is interesting to note that Western colonial stereotypes of the past have produced today a unique way to make African objects culturally acceptable. The interpretation of African material culture in museums has mainly shifted from the socially recognized category of ethnographic specimens to that of artistic pieces. For example, in the *African Worlds Gallery* at the Horniman Museum, it is possible to find contemporary art objects, displayed close to the ethnographic objects that have been the source of the artistic inspiration. And indeed, exhibited in one of the displays, there is a painting by the Yorùbá artist Ademola Akintola, which represents an Ifa divination tray.¹¹ In this specific museum case, the Yorùbá divination tray has become a colourful piece of African art and, as such, it has probably become more intellectually accessible to the Western public.

Furthermore, when considering African material culture in Western museums, it seems that the uniqueness of the different African groups has been progressively absorbed within a sort of pan-Africanism. This is a consequence of the colonial period and of the Western approach to non-Western countries: a sort of flattening categorization that, for instance, has opposed the West to Africa. Bearing this in mind, if we tailor this idea of categorization to the Yorùbá group, a good example is provided by the Sainsbury Galleries at the British Museum in London. When entering the Sainsbury Galleries, visitors are presented with impressive, artistic displays of ceremonial masks, pottery, religious objects of different African regions and groups. In order to appreciate the exhibits, visitors require a high level of knowledge of African culture. Yorùbá objects are immersed in this jungle of concepts, images and geometries and their cultural uniqueness is absorbed into highly artistic and aesthetized displays (Pole 2001).

But what is the perspective of African people towards Western museum displays? How do members of the African Diaspora (and specifically, of the Yorùbá Diaspora) relate to their traditional heritage in museum displays? How much have past stereotypes affected this relationship? The next part of this chapter will present the views of some members of the Yorùbá Diaspora living in Britain towards their traditional objects, presented in Western museums.

Yorùbá pride and artistic displays

So far, the chapter has presented how, shaped by political and social ideals, Western museums over the centuries 'have amassed, archived, and displayed [non-Western] objects while often ignoring or distorting their cultural meaning' (Edward and Sullivan 2004: xv, xvi). The case of non-Western traditional objects (and specifically of religious and ceremonial objects) is an interesting one. This is because in Yorùbá society, religion is the foundation and the all-governing principle of life: it is the base to every activity and gives meaning to everything, including everyday objects (Bo?laji 1973).

This part of the chapter will present an overview of the ways Yorùbá people, members of the Yorùbá Diaspora in Britain, relate to their traditional religious objects, displayed in Western museums. It will not, however, discuss the notion of religion among Yorùbá diasporic groups, since this is not the focus of the paper. Instead, the following part will centre on the idea that 'the social world is a rich and complex place, with frequent subtleties of implication' and also that 'people are ultimately responsible for creating the meaning they use, [meaning which is] often conveyed through minor details of everyday [verbal and non-verbal] behaviour' (Leeds-Hurwitz 1993: xvi).

This section is based upon the fieldwork of the author's PhD research, carried out among some members of the diasporic Yorùbá communities in Leicester and Nottingham, between 2002 and 2004.¹² The main research methods used for this part of the study were individual interviews and focus groups. Sixteen individuals, aged between 21 and 60 years old, took part in the research.¹³ At the time of the research, most of the participants were residents in Britain. All the Yorùbá participants were immigrants, living in Leicester and Nottingham, and they were therefore all members of the Yorùbá Diaspora.¹⁴ Names, addresses and contact details of the people were gathered through the help of a local museum,¹⁵ local churches (attended mainly by Nigerians) and through word of mouth among the local Yorùbá community.

The majority of the participants were Christians, of the Born-Again Christian community.¹⁶ The author's initial intention was to involve a larger and more assorted sample of Yorùbás. However, to engage with and involve Yorùbá people in this research proved to be extremely difficult and challenging. These difficulties were faced in the beginning of the research and they were mainly due to the mistrust and reticence of Yorùbá people towards the researcher (an outsider to the Yorùbá community) and the research topic (traditional African religion, which they had rejected because they had converted either to Christianity or to Islam). Nevertheless, these issues helped the author in understanding better the participants' ideas of Yorùbá identity within British society, their personal knowledge of and relationship with their traditional religious objects and their experience and understanding of Western museums.

Yorùbá identity within British society

As mentioned above, the participants were members of the Yorùbá Diaspora in Britain.¹⁷ Among a diasporic group, the construction of a communal identity is

essential. This communal identity helps to define the diasporic group as a distinct social and cultural constituent of the host community. Therefore, among diasporic groups, the notions of culture and traditions become fluid and constructed and a process of continual redefinition of their communal identity is implied, as well as 'self-conscious appropriations and rejections of elements of traditions' (Dudley 2002: 143). This is done in order both to strengthen the sense of the communal identity and to make more evident the differences from people outside the diasporic group.

In relation to the concept of communal identity among diasporic groups, the researcher aimed to investigate the idea of Yorùbá communal identity among members of the Yorùbá Diaspora, within the context of contemporary British society. All the Yorùbá participants showed a very strong sense of identity: they all highlighted the idea of Yorùbá identity (Yorùbáness) and of the pride associated with it. As one of the participants explained, it is 'a great thing to be Yorùbá [and] it is something to be proud of, because Yorùbá is a rich culture'. However, during the discussion it became clear that a contemporary definition of the word 'Yorùbá' is quite difficult: in fact, it is a complex concept indicating a culture, a nationality, a country within a country and a body of religions.

In addition, members of the Yorùbá Diaspora seem to have reacted to the adoptive British society by strengthening their tribal pride and by feeling special in the name of their origins. Indeed, within the host society, diasporic Yorùbá groups have tried to re-define themselves by underlining their divine and mythical origin. For example, a female participant stated that Yorùbá people are the people of Oduduwa, 'the descendants of Oduduwa, the progenitor of the Yorùbás': she emphasized that Yorùbás are the 'children of a king' and, even back in Nigeria, people of other ethnic groups are very respectful to individuals with Yorùbá origins.¹⁸

Personal knowledge of traditional Yorùbá religious objects

In the conditions of uncertainty and vulnerability typical of diasporic movements, objects understood as 'private mementos may take the place of interpersonal relations as a depository of sentiment and cultural knowledge' (Parkin 1999: 31). In the context of this chapter, the importance of this concept is evident. Indeed, the chapter argues that, once moved from their original place into a new environment, cultural objects may assume new meanings and values.¹⁹ Through them, diasporic groups tend to strengthen their sense of communal identity or assume a new cultural distinctiveness. On the basis of this, the researcher intended also to investigate the extent to which traditional religious Yorùbá objects were regarded by members of the Yorùbá Diaspora as depositories of Yorùbá cultural knowledge, as well as the extent of the influence of Western stereotypes towards cultural objects.

As mentioned, the discussions included the presentation of some pictures of traditional, religious and ceremonial Yorùbá objects. Almost all the participants were reluctant to speak about such artefacts, because of their new faith and because they looked upon traditional beliefs and traditional religious objects only as part

of their past.²⁰ Therefore, the comments provided on the images were strongly influenced by the participants' religious background. Nevertheless, they appeared still to believe in the power of traditional religious objects and in the consequences they could incur by having to deal with such items. This suggests that the relation of members of the Yorùbá Diaspora towards their traditional religious artefacts has been influenced by Western, religious stereotypes. As von Laar states:

for many centuries, Westerners have tried to impose their own ideas of what Christianity should be, often backed up by the forces of colonial political power and the imposition of patterns and models in line with the fashionable ideologies of Europe.

(von Laar 2006: 8)

It was evident, during the discussions, that the adoption of new faiths and resettlement into a new context has changed the Yorùbás' perception of and attitude towards traditional, religious and cultural objects: outside their homeland, the new (social and religious) context has created a new, unsympathetic view of their cultural heritage. In relation to this, participants added that traditional religious objects have become meaningless to them (although they acknowledged the power and effectiveness of some objects) because they have been exposed to public viewing. In Nigeria, such objects are not meant for display but for private and initiated worshipping.

The Yorùbás and their experiences of museums

Museums are social and educational institutions that reflect, to a certain extent and in a distinctive way, the needs and tendencies of the societies that host them. In the first part of this chapter, we saw how, in the past, the ideas of non-Western cultures were shaped according to historical, social and political European terms and stereotypes.²¹ However, as societies change, so do museums and the approach taken to interpreting non-Western collections. On the contemporary museum scene, professionals are making considerable efforts to be more aware of the different identities of non-Western people, in relation to their objects displayed in museums. On the other hand, Western museum representations of African (and in this case of Yorùbá) material culture are still very much pan-Africanist, artistic interpretations.

The intention of the research was to take account of the voices of Yorùbá people in relation to their traditional objects displayed in museums and to investigate their idea of museums. In fact, the Yorùbá participants were also asked about their individual experiences in museums (both African and Western) displaying Yorùbá objects – specifically, traditional religious objects. From the responses, it was evident that the display of Yorùbá material in Western museums was a sensitive issue for them. Indeed, although they seemed to be generally pleased that their culture has been exhibited (and thus acknowledged) in museums, at the same time they felt deprived of a past and heritage that was brought to the West

as exchange merchandise or as trophies and became part of artistic and pointless displays. As one of the participants explained:

for the people who brought [these objects] here, these objects did not mean anything to them; they just got them for artistic display . . . but for us, these objects have a value . . . and to have them in a country or in a context that is not their own does not make any sense.

Museum displays, in fact, were described generally as pointless by the participants because most of the artefacts exhibited have a spiritual life of their own and 'in [the original] traditional society, these objects were separated from daily life, kept in private places and accessed only by those capable of managing their power' (Haakanson and Steffian 2004: 156). All the participants wished the repatriation of the items (since people back in Nigeria do not have many opportunities to see such objects any more) or, at least, for a more evident and active involvement of Yorùbás in the display setting and presentation. In order to ensure visitors realize the complexity and beauty of Yorùbá culture and in order to obtain the correct names of and information about the objects presented, participants suggested that Western curators should study this kind of artefact in its own original context, namely Nigeria. These suggestions and comments highlighted an understanding of museums as 'static, monolithic institution[s] at the center of the power' (Witcomb 2003: 89) rather than open and interactive spaces for debate and cultural exchanges. Indeed, from the research it was evident that Yorùbá participants indicated an urgent need and wished for a stronger cooperation and dialogue between museum curators and non-Western people.

Concluding thoughts

We must now turn to some concluding thoughts. This chapter has been concerned with traditional Yorùbá material culture displayed in Western museums and the ways members of the Yorùbá Diaspora relate to it. The chapter aimed to present briefly the historical and social changes that have occurred in the interpretation and definition of African material culture in Western society and museums. It has discussed how the Western museum interpretation of African objects has changed over the last two centuries: from curiosities which enhanced colonialist politics, to scientific specimens useful for educational purposes; and from artistic pieces to three-dimensional cultural links.

The chapter has then continued by presenting some results of the author's PhD research, carried out among some Yorùbá diasporic groups of Leicester and Nottingham. It has aimed to describe the contemporary Yorùbá perception towards their traditional religious objects, displayed within a postcolonial institution, such as the museum. From the research, it emerged that members of the Yorùbá Diaspora living in Britain are trying to proudly strengthen their sense of communal identity (Yorùbáness) within the hosting society. In addition, members of the Yorùbá Diaspora seem to have been influenced by Western stereotypes, in

terms of their relation towards their traditional religious objects. This attitude is the result of the fact that their local traditions have been too often misunderstood by the Westerner and have been associated with the stereotypes of primitive and uncivilized. Finally, the chapter has explained that Yorùbá immigrants still nourish a sort of mistrust for the museum: indeed, the Yorùbá participants made it clear that, although they were pleased to see their cultural objects presented in museums, at the same time they felt deprived of their heritage, which had become part of artistic displays.

The chapter, therefore, intended to underline that, nowadays, members of the Yorùbá Diaspora have an uneasy relation towards their material culture displayed in museums. This is because they cannot identify themselves with the ways their culture and objects are presented in museums. Indeed, it is not Yorùbá identity or traditional Yorùbá religious objects that are present in museum, but what museum professionals and Western visitors need and want to be displayed. As a consequence, it just so happens that the 'interests of the community should coincide with those of government' (Witcomb 2003: 85), rather than the opposite.

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Notes

- 1 Postcolonialism is a complex concept. However, in the context of this chapter, with the terms 'postcolonialism' and 'postcolonialist', the author will refer to 'an intellectual effort at managing the aftermath of the colonial past in an era when official political relations of colonialism had all but ended' (During 2000: 388).
- 2 The word 'Yorùbá' describes both a language and an ethnic group living across Nigeria and the Republic of Benin.
- 3 Anna Catalani was an AHRC scholar between October 2003 and October 2005.
- 4 These achievements included the capture of the Cape of South Africa and the control of different ports along the African coast.
- 5 In 1901, Nigeria became a British protectorate and Yorùbáland was officially colonized by the British Empire.
- 6 Henry Morgan Stanley (1841–1904) was a foreign correspondent for the *New York Herald*. In 1871, he was sent on an expedition to Africa to find the Scottish missionary David Livingstone. From his journey, he brought back a remarkable amount of objects, which were organized in a five-section exhibition, enriched by maps and detailed charts, geographical information, and information on rainfall, population, religions and minerals distribution (Coombes 1994).
- 7 It is important to mention also the missionaries' exhibitions and collections, which became a way to support the colonialist ambition of power by stimulating pitiful feelings towards the uncivilized and idol-worshipping Africans (Ajayi 1965; Coombes 1994).

- 8 Other examples of the comparative approach in museum displays of the time are provided by the Royal Albert Museum (Exeter), the Horniman Museum (London) and the Pitt Rivers Museum (Oxford).
- 9 Arnold Ridyard (1853–1924) was a shipping engineer from Liverpool with a particular interest in Central African power figures.
- 10 According to Laura Peers and Alison Brown, the term ‘source communities . . . refer both to these groups in the past when the artefacts were collected, as well as to their descendants today’; and again ‘source communities have come to be defined as authorities on their own cultures and material heritage’ (Peers and Brown 2003: 21).
- 11 The term Ifa indicates a system of divination in Yorùbá religion.
- 12 It is fair to say that the sample of Yorùbá people interviewed for this research does not claim to represent the whole diasporic Yorùbá population. However, these Yorùbá people do give a ‘close-up, detailed [and] meticulous view of particular units, which may constitute processes, types, categories, cases or examples which are relevant to or appear within the wider universe’ (Mason 1996: 92).
- 13 Six women and ten men.
- 14 Overall, the author carried out three focus groups and three individual interviews organized around four main themes: definition of being Yorùbá, knowledge of traditional Yorùbá religions, knowledge of the purpose of traditional Yorùbá religious objects and individual museum experience. Initially, the author intended to carry out only focus groups. However, due to personal commitments, it was not possible for some of the participants to take part in group discussions: in these cases, therefore, it was necessary to carry out individual interviews. During the discussions and interviews, pictures of some traditional Yorùbá religious objects were shown to the participants, who could comment on them and provide any kind of information about them. All the objects in the photographs belonged to a Nigerian collection of the eighteenth century, hosted in the Brewhouse Museum, Nottingham. Participants agreed to take part in the research, provided that they did not have to see or to deal directly with the objects but only with images of the objects, considered not as real or harmful as the objects themselves.
- 15 The Brewhouse Yard Museum in Nottingham. The museum had an ongoing cooperation with an African artist from the art centre ‘Emaca’ (Nottingham) who, at the time of this research, suggested the author to contact a Yorùbá person, owner of an African Shop in Nottingham.
- 16 The term ‘Born-Again Christian’ is used in branches of Protestant Christianity. One participant was a Muslim and another participant was a traditional believer.
- 17 After 1965, the term ‘Diaspora’ started to be used to define dispersed ethnic groups. According to Tölöyan, nowadays ‘Diaspora’ exists in three overlapping but distinct forms: first diasporas exist as ‘actual social formations made up of individuals, extended families, small groups and the relations conducted between them . . . Second, diasporas exist as multiple imagined communities. That is to say, they are constantly articulated by their own individual and institutional members, who construct and disseminate numerous representations of what they are, what their diasporic experience feels like and what it means or it should mean. . . .; the third form of diasporic existence is wholly discursive’ (Tölöyan 2003: 56).
- 18 Oduduwa is the mysterious and divine founder of the Yorùbás.
- 19 The category ‘cultural objects’ includes also religious objects, which have been the example for this chapter.
- 20 Eleven participants were of the Christian faith; one of them was of the Islamic faith and only one said to be a traditional believer.
- 21 Including African culture and specifically Yorùbá culture.

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