

Sacred Artefacts, Colonial Plunder, Broken Ecologies: The Benin Bronzes and Ecological Justice

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This study investigates the Benin Bronzes as both material artefacts and ecological texts entangled in histories of colonial violence, epistemic erasure, and ecological injustice. It builds on recent scholarship on asymmetrical dependency (Winnebeck et al. 2023), which foregrounds, beyond human-human domination (Winnebeck et al. 2023), unequal relationships, including those between humans and sacred cultural objects, non-human life, and the environment.

The looting of the Benin Bronzes in the British punitive expedition of 1897, during which over four thousand bronze, ivory, and wooden artefacts were seized, exemplifies such asymmetrical dependencies (Coombes 1994; Hicks 2020). These objects, now scattered across more than 160 museums globally (Savoy 2018), are embedded with ecological, spiritual, and political meanings that go beyond their aesthetic valuation. While debates around restitution have largely centered on legal and ethical questions of ownership and repatriation (Savoy 2018; Hicks 2020), this project contends that such approaches insufficiently address the ecological and ontological dimensions of these objects. By engaging with indigenous ontologies that collapse distinctions between human, non-human, and divine, this project seeks to reconceptualize restitution as both cultural and ecological repair.

Benin Bronzes are ecological objects that embody and transmit knowledge about place, nonhuman kinship, and ritual time. They are material archives of a worldview in which the spiritual, ecological, and political realms were interconnected. The Bronzes serve as narrative devices that tell stories of flora, fauna, and otherworldly beings and relational and non-exploitative ontology of nature. Their looting disrupted and silenced these entanglements, and constituted an attack on the material forms through which environmental ethics, memory and worldview were preserved. The looting was accompanied by deliberate manufacture of ignorance to erase Benin ecological memory encoded in the bronzes.

Rooted in Edo cosmology, the bronzes were not merely decorative or symbolic; they were part of an integrated ecological and spiritual worldview that linked the material with the metaphysical, human with non-human, and past with present (Ben-Amos 1980; Ogbecchie 2010). Their forceful removal was not only a cultural crime but also an ecological disruption that fractured relationships between people, place, and sacred lifeforms.

In current environmental humanities and postcolonial studies, there are few frameworks that fully recognize looted artefacts as ecological texts and their displacement as a form of environmental injustice. The theoretical and empirical work proposed in this study aims to fill this gap by exploring the looting of the Benin Bronzes as a case of asymmetrical dependency and ecological violence. Thus, ecological justice demands environmental repair, restitution of Benin cosmology, memory, sovereignty, and sacred relations to land.