

# MUSEUMS AND THEIR VOICES

## A CONTEMPORARY STUDY OF THE BENIN BRONZES

WRITTEN BY  
Charlotta Dohlvik

SUPERVISORS  
Staffan Lundén and Peter Davis

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International Museum Studies, Museion, Göteborg University

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## **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation is concerned with the internationally renowned collection of Benin bronzes, often considered the repatriation icon of the African continent. The study looks at the way in which these objects are interpreted, presented and made accessible in museums today. Based on data collected from a variety of sources, it initially gives an account of the history and nature of the collection of Benin bronzes. This is followed by an examination of the way in which the objects are currently presented on public displays. The study looks more closely at a number of museum contexts, and explores some attitudes of the profession around the representation of Benin artefacts. One of the main conclusions of the study is that museum exhibitions offer a broad variety of interpretations about the objects' value and meaning.

## **1. BACKGROUND**

### **1.1 Introduction**

This dissertation seeks to examine the way in which the Benin bronzes are interpreted, presented and made accessible to the public in museums today.<sup>1</sup> As highly acclaimed artefacts from one of the great kingdoms of West Africa, often regarded as some of the most important cultural symbols of the African continent, these objects have been the subject of a great deal of interest, both within the museum world and in the arenas of scholarly research and more recently also in international restitution debates.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, many scholars in different academic fields have through the years conducted various types of studies on the Benin kingdom and its rich cultural material, based in large measure on the specific approaches and methodologies of each institutional discipline. A common feature of much of the research carried out at universities and museums is, however,

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<sup>1</sup> Conventionally called the Benin bronzes these objects are in fact a large collection that consists of a variety of items in different materials. Apart from metal, it includes pieces in materials such as ivory and wood. A more detailed description of the different types of artefacts as well as a definition of the specific category of objects under enquiry will follow. Worth noting is that the dissertation will use the term 'bronzes' to refer to the collection more broadly even though not all objects are castings of bronze.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Jeanette Greenfield, who holds a Ph.D. in international law, has included the Benin bronzes in her book on a great number of restitution cases of international significance. See Greenfield 1995, pp. 118-123. In the UK, the organisation Africa Reparations Movement (ARM) has been campaigning for the return of the bronzes, see <http://www.arm.arc.co.uk/home.html> (14-03-2006)

the attention given to issues relating to the historical role and developments of these objects. Among some of the most recurring themes are, for example, the bronzes' collection history and their social, political and religious role within Benin society.

A number of publications outline detailed stylistic chronologies for the different types of objects. The museum ethnographer William Fagg is one of several prominent scholars who have contributed to the development of a chronology for the artefacts on the basis of stylistic identification. Having worked mainly on the Benin collection in the British Museum his important book *Nigerian Images* was published in 1963.<sup>3</sup>

Fagg's pioneering efforts were later built upon by the anthropologist Philip J. C. Dark, who in 1975 published a stylistic chronology of the Benin bronze heads, a particular category of objects that will be further described in the following.<sup>4</sup> In addition to these stylistic typologies could be mentioned the research work undertaken by the art historian Barbara Blackmun. She has conducted fieldwork on Benin art, and is perhaps particularly renowned for her study from 1984 in which she outlines a stylistic chronology of the ivory tusks.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, in the anthropological field there are similarly a great number of scholars to be mentioned, among others R. E. Bradbury, who did extensive fieldwork in Benin in the 1950s, and Joseph Nevadomsky, Flora E.S. Kaplan and Paula Girshick Ben-Amos, who have conducted research in Benin more recently.<sup>6</sup> The last three will be referred to throughout the study, particularly the work by Ben-Amos who has published extensively on Benin since the 1960s, including her Ph.D. thesis from 1971.<sup>7</sup> One of her recent contributions to the understanding of the Benin kingdom and its artistic expressions is the richly illustrated publication entitled *The Art of Benin*, published in 1995 by the British Museum Press.<sup>8</sup>

The great quantity and variety of Benin artefact has, however, not only drawn the attention of museum professionals and university scholars of disciplines such as anthropology, ethnography and art history. Other areas covered over the years are, for example, the study of casting techniques and the metallic composition of the different types of Benin objects. Also in these fields there are many publications available, but perhaps the one that has seen the most scholarly attention lately is the one by Frank Willett, Ben Torsney and

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<sup>3</sup> Fagg 1963.

<sup>4</sup> Dark 1975.

<sup>5</sup> Blackmun 1984.

<sup>6</sup> Willett 2002, p. 42.

<sup>7</sup> Ben-Amos 1971.

<sup>8</sup> Ben-Amos 1995.

Mark Ritchie. Their paper ‘Composition and Style: An Examination of the Benin “Bronze” Heads’ published in 1994 is a metallurgical analysis of the commemorative heads.<sup>9</sup>

## **1.2 Many historical accounts**

The introductory text above is not a comprehensive and representative account of previous studies on the collection of Benin bronzes. Instead, its purpose is to contextualise the topic by illustrating that this particular group of artefacts have drawn the attention of a wide range of scholars over a considerable period of time. In an attempt to evaluate existing research, the introductory text however suggests that much of what has been carried out to date has had the overall aim of expanding the knowledge and understanding about the past. Issues of origins and date, various styles of production as well as past events in Benin and their wider influence in the region and beyond are all subject matters that have played a significant part in previous research efforts. It is for this reason that the present study will examine the Benin bronzes in terms of interpretation and representation from a mainly contemporary perspective.

Nonetheless, the general emphasis placed on historical phenomena and perspectives is by no means surprising considering the long and complex history of these artefacts and the society they originate from, a piece of history which is not only fascinating but also largely reflected in an array of local oral traditions and written records. It is not least as a consequence of the early and frequent contacts between a number of European powers and the kingdom of Benin, beginning with the arrival of the Portuguese towards the end of the fifteenth century, from which one can find a wealth of information in the forms of trade records, correspondence and various descriptions of Benin’s cultural life.<sup>10</sup> One of the best known and detailed accounts from this period of early European travellers and traders along the African coast is the book by the Dutch geographer Olfert Dapper (1636-89). His book entitled *Olfert Dapper’s Description of Benin* was published in 1668.<sup>11</sup>

It may also be noted that the specific circumstances under which the essential part of the Benin artefacts was appropriated, and subsequently brought to Europe, are well recorded in various forms of written material and pictures.<sup>12</sup> The particular moment of appropriation dates back to the important events surrounding the raid and subsequent looting of Benin City

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<sup>9</sup> Willett, Torsney and Ritchie 1994.

<sup>10</sup> Ben-Amos 1995, p. 20.

<sup>11</sup> Willett 2002, pp. 41-42. Dapper’s book is, for example, mentioned in the Horizon exhibition at the Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg, as part of the introduction to the African kingdoms of pre-colonial times.

<sup>12</sup> That these events are well recorded is, for example, pointed out in Dark’s study from 1975, p. 32.

in 1897. While this historical moment will be described in more detail in the following, it needs to be made clear that it was at this point in the history of British colonisation when thousands of artefacts were removed and taken as war booty.<sup>13</sup>

An interesting account of these events and the role that they came to play in relation to the British public and its perception of the African continent during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is given in a book by the art historian Annie E. Coombes. Using a number of case studies and making reference to the collection of Benin items taken by the British, the book explores a number of representations of colonial encounters in visual culture, more particularly how these views were discursively constructed and presented to the wider public. The book argues, *inter alia*, that the culture of Benin at the time of European colonisation was largely perceived as a degraded society, as part of a discourse on degeneracy.<sup>14</sup>

### **1.3 Limited in number but geographically scattered**

The events that surrounded the British raid of 1897 were decisive in many respects. Important to point out is that they not only led to the plundering of Benin and the removal of thousands of artefacts from their original source, but also to the destruction of Benin as an independent kingdom. Thus, the sacking of Benin City and the subsequent incorporation of Benin into the British Protectorate of Nigeria are historical events that fundamentally changed the social, political and religious circumstances surrounding the artistic production of bronzes and other cultural artefacts, activities that over the centuries had been carried out under a system of royal art patronage and control centrally structured around the kingship.<sup>15</sup>

Seen in this light, the year of 1897 serves as an important time marker in history. With regard to the production of cultural materials, it clearly represents a dividing line between, on the one hand, those objects that were made and formed part of an independent monarchical empire ruled by powerful kings, and on the other those artefacts that at a later stage have been created under different types of colonial and post-colonial constituencies. In consequence, what are conventionally called the Benin bronzes is a distinguishable corpus of objects

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<sup>13</sup> Difficult to find detailed information about the number of objects taken from the Benin kingdom, much of the literature speaks about thousands of objects. Slightly more specific is Nevadomsky, who states that about 3000 to 5000 objects were removed. See Nevadomsky 2005, p. 66.

<sup>14</sup> Coombes 1994, pp. 1-6, 11-15, 23-24.

<sup>15</sup> Freyer 1987, pp. 16-17.

created and produced under a system of royal patronage, thus amounting to a limited number of objects.

The two most extensive collections of Benin artefacts are today located in the Ethnological Museum in Berlin and the British Museum in London, while the third largest one is found in different museums in Nigeria, most notably in the National Museum in Lagos.<sup>16</sup> Acknowledging the political tension of this relationship it is not surprising, therefore, that this unique collection of objects in the more recent past has become a controversial issue in the international restitution debate. Nigeria has since the country's independence in 1960 made several requests for the return of artefacts but has so far not been successful.

The issue of restitution will be further described in one of the forthcoming sections of this study, however, regarding the bronzes' physical location it needs to be pointed out that they are far from limited to a handful of countries, although first taken to London after their appropriation, but scattered throughout a diverse range of museums and private collectors in many different countries.<sup>17</sup>

#### **1.4 Focus on representation and accessibility**

That the Benin bronzes are cultural artefacts of great admiration and significance while at the same time found in many museums make them an interesting case of comparison within the field of museums' institutional practices. This is one of my main points of departure for the present study.

At this instance, and for my purposes here, it should be made clear that the Benin bronzes currently in the possession of private collectors, or dealers, will not be attended to. Instead, what has been identified and formulated as the main research question of this dissertation is to critically examine how public museums working within different museum traditions choose to deal with these objects that are subject to such conflicting emotions and interests.

Entering this field of study and the great variation of research approaches and opportunities it presents, the dissertation will more specifically look at the Benin bronzes with regard to two major aspects within the museological field of research, namely the process of

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<sup>16</sup> Greenfield 1995, p. 122.

<sup>17</sup> Eyo 1994, pp. 335-337.

cultural representation and the issue of accessibility. These aspects will first be discussed in view of their wider theoretical contexts.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 Cultural representations: An introductory note

For the purpose of this study, the question of cultural representations refers to the manner in which the Benin bronzes are interpreted, communicated and exhibited to the general public within the institutional context of museums. My interest in this area is essentially a wish to understand some of the aspects around museums' discourses, in other words to examine how the voice of the museum is expressed through the presentation of cultural material in public displays. The term 'voice' is here used to describe the point of view that museums make through the display of objects.<sup>18</sup>

It should at this instance be emphasized that even though a large number of museums, as a rather uniform set of cultural institutions worldwide, are actively engaged in the arrangement and display of similar artefacts, they do not necessarily perceive and narrate them in similar ways. Instead, what needs to be recognized on a more general level of understanding is that the work of categorising, constructing and communicating various forms of cultural representations through textual and visual displays are complex processes that are strongly informed and constrained by a diverse range of structural, institutional and ideological factors. In other words, the making of representations in museums or elsewhere is neither apolitical nor fixed.<sup>19</sup>

In fact, the collection of Benin bronzes has in the recent literature on representational issues been held up as an example of how the construction of cultural representations has worked in the past. Based on short extracts drawn from Coombes,<sup>20</sup> Henrietta Lidchi has discussed some aspects around the making of cultural representations in the light of Foucault's notion of discursive formations. Referring to the close links between power and knowledge as well as the historical articulation of several sets of discourses around the Benin bronzes as shown by Coombes, Lidchi concludes her analysis of these historical events by pointing to museums' institutional power and the way it partakes in the process of exhibiting.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Crew and Sims, 1991, p. 163.

<sup>19</sup> Hallam and Street, 2000, pp. 6-8.

<sup>20</sup> Coombes, Annie E., 1994, *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture and Popular Imagination in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London.

<sup>21</sup> Lidchi 1997, pp. 191-194.

## 2.2 The debate over representation

Aspects of power, especially matters pertaining to colonialism and imperialism, has been the topic of considerable attention and interest in debates of recent years, both with regard to the language of museological research but also in several other scholarly fields.<sup>22</sup> Forming part of these academic discourses are the major issues of postmodernism and postcolonialism, which foreground a mixture of criticism of past museum practices encompassed in the Enlightenment ideals of objective knowledge and a realization of a different world order that since the decolonisation decade of the 1960s has entered into a composition of politically independent and sovereign countries.

Increasingly recognized in these debates of more recent years is the importance given to the issues of personal and group identities, claims to belonging and more generally the politics of recognition in the wider context of cultural diversity.<sup>23</sup> For example, with reference to the debates on multiculturalism, the philosopher and political scientist Charles Taylor has suggested that a new politics of recognition has entered into the public sphere as part of a general trend that emphasizes the close connection between recognition and identity.<sup>24</sup>

Within this framework of a growing identity politics, the ‘new museology’ as an emerging area of museum criticism and scholarship has called for a change of museums’ roles in society, a call which springs from a general discontent with old practices and a conviction that there is an urgent need for the development of a democratized politics of representation by making museums more open and accessible.<sup>25</sup>

There is a wide range of influential scholars within this academic discourse that argue in favour of changing forms of museological practices in an attempt to include more voices in the making of cultural representations. These important but difficult questions have, however, largely been placed within a Western discourse. In the newly published work *New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction* one can, for example, find that the texts are written solely by authors from the UK, Canada, the US and Australia.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, the book makes clear that “the essays call for the transformation of the museum from a site of worship

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<sup>22</sup> These issues are, for example, discussed from an interdisciplinary perspective in Barker, Francis, Peter Hulme and Margaret Iversen (eds), 1994, *Colonial discourse / postcolonial theory*, Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York.

<sup>23</sup> Rowlands 2006, p. 443.

<sup>24</sup> Taylor 1994, pp. 75-102.

<sup>25</sup> Vergo, 1989, pp. 1-3. For a more recent discussion about the area of ‘new museology’, see also Ross, Max, ‘Interpreting the new museology’, *Museum and Society*, 2(2) 84-103, July 2004.

<sup>26</sup> Marstine 2006, p. 8.

and awe to one of critical inquiry; they look to a museum that is transparent in its decision-making, willing to share power, and activist in promoting human rights”.<sup>27</sup>

Issues of representivity, in the light of the effects of underrepresentation and the uneven distribution of resources and capacity on the global level, present a major challenge to the larger museum world in its aim to include more voices. Particularly in view of the stereotypes that have existed of Africa and African cultures it is important to carefully consider the complex processes involved in representational work. Quoting the museum curator Mary Jo Arnoldi, she has given the following incisive description: “The politics of defining and representing Africans often has more to do with the interests of those with the power to represent African cultures than it does with understanding the groups being represented”.<sup>28</sup>

### **2.3 Approaches to exhibiting and display**

Turning to the public domains of museum exhibiting more specifically it is clear that the collection of Benin bronzes could be displayed in a number of different ways. This makes it necessary to recall some of the central themes and approaches in the field of museums’ institutional practices. Discussing the contemporary debates over the general value of cultural artefacts, Coombes has suggested that the collections of objects that once used to be the concern of ethnography currently “inhabit an ambiguous terrain somewhere between fine art and ethnography”.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, with reference to the Benin artefacts particularly, she has described this category of objects as having an ambivalent status “as neither art nor ethnography, but simultaneously both”.<sup>30</sup>

On the basis of these statements it is useful to refer briefly to some general display techniques in different museum traditions. Here, art museums exist within a tradition that arrange and display objects individually, with little focus on their contextual and original historical meanings. Implicated in this way of treating objects is the idea that the aesthetic qualities can be understood and appreciated from a standpoint of universality, in other words that all visitors may enjoy the aesthetic experience.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Marstine 2006, p. x (preface).

<sup>28</sup> Arnoldi 1997, p. 71.

<sup>29</sup> Coombes 1994, p. 217.

<sup>30</sup> Coombes 1994, p. 223.

<sup>31</sup> Davalos 2004, pp. 527-528.

In museums of ethnography, on the other hand, exhibitions are driven by interpretive ideas, and artefacts are thought of as representing a culture, not the individual. As such the objects are often displayed together with other artefacts from the same culture or geographical area, in addition to labels and time lines that provide the historical and social contexts in which the object can be understood. This technique is often labelled the contextual approach to museum exhibition.<sup>32</sup>

## **2.4 Accessibility**

In addition to the different conceptions of how to use and present museum objects through the work of cultural representations, the second major theme to be examined in this dissertation involves the issue of accessibility. The main reason for including this aspect specifically is that it relates closely to the contemporary discourse on cultural identity, ownership rights, and claims to intellectual and cultural property in the global world of today, in other words some of the issues that have been touched upon earlier on.

Within this framework of ideas it is clear that the long-lived domination of Western concepts, traditions and ways of thinking, out of which the public museum once emerged, at least in the sense we know it today, and the global problems that stem from the ideologies of colonialism and neo-colonialism are some of the factors that have placed the right of respect for cultural identity under critical discussion.

These issues of globalization, profoundly linked to the repatriation debates over the ownership of artefacts, has raised important questions about museums' rights and obligations when displaying objects drawn from other places, and how to successfully exhibit objects in an attempt to represent the cultures of 'others'. For example, Simpson (1996) has addressed the question of the holding on to collections that are the result and expression of a period of European colonial and imperial expansion, in some cases also of looting and plunder.<sup>33</sup> Such issues raise underlying questions like: How should collections that are the product of imperial and colonial conquest be organized and handled by the museum community? And what are the wider responsibilities of museums today in the process of making their collections more accessible to an international public?

One significant viewpoint in this debate about the value of cultural objects and the appropriate physical location for them in terms of public access was introduced some years

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<sup>32</sup> Davalos 2004, pp. 527-528.

<sup>33</sup> Simpson 1996.

ago through the launching of the *Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums*. The Declaration, signed in December 2002 by the directors of some of the world's leading museums, boldly asserts that these are universal museums that hold collections for the world. Quoting the declaration, it states that "we should acknowledge that museums serve not just the citizens of one nation but the people of every nation."<sup>34</sup>

However, one the problems with this claim of universality in the name of all peoples is that these museums, although forming part of societies with democratic aspirations, have assumed this authority without the agreement of others. As such they have furthermore formulated a perceived legitimate base for how to reject calls of repatriation. This is, for example, the interpretation made by Mark O'Neill, Head of Glasgow Museums. In his article 'Enlightenment museums: universal or merely global?' he argues that "the credibility of the idea is undermined by its being deployed chiefly as a defence against repatriation claims".<sup>35</sup>

The text above does not to suggest that only so called universal museums have Benin bronzes in their holdings, but is rather an attempt to illustrate that matters around accessibility have been brought into focus in recent years. It also highlights the argument that museums are institutions in the service of the people of every nation, interpreted by some as a justification for the holding on to their collections. This argument makes it interesting to study the accessibility of the Benin bronzes.

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<sup>34</sup> "Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums" (including the nineteen signatories of the declaration), published in *ICOM News*, No 1, 2004. The roles and responsibilities of universal museums are in the same issue of *ICOM News* discussed by Geoffrey Lewis, Chair of ICOM Ethics Committee, as well as by some of the museum directors that have signed the Declaration.

<sup>35</sup> O'Neill 2004, p. 190.

### **3. SCOPE AND PURPOSE**

#### **3.1 The present time**

By exploring the way in which the Benin bronzes are interpreted, presented and made accessible to the public, this dissertation is an attempt to understand a little more about the cultural politics of museums and the power of representational work. As stated previously, the present study focuses on the contemporary situation. Although it would be both interesting and relevant to undertake an investigation within the larger framework of a historical analysis in order to compare various methods of display over a longer span of time, for example by looking into museums' archival material and exhibition work of the past, my choice of direction is motivated by the fact that the dissertation needs to be narrowed down to a manageable size in view of the time available.

Another reason for making a contemporary analysis is that it appears a useful research approach in consideration of the nature of much of previous scholarly work, with its emphasis on the origins and developments of the bronzes and the historical accounts of events. This is not to suggest that the complex history of the Benin bronzes is fully covered, let alone understood, but rather that the perspective gained through a contemporary study is well motivated in the light of the research works already in place.

#### **3.2 Public displays: museum exhibitions and web pages**

The empirical work carried out as part this dissertation is furthermore defined in terms of space. In this regard, it should be noted that the present study mainly concentrates upon the public aspects of museums, in other words the public face and the public voice of museums. Concerned with the way in which the Benin bronzes are shown to the public at large, the focus is more precisely placed on two of the main points of contact between the museum institution and the differentiated audiences to whom it presents its activities.

The first area to be investigated is the way objects are shown to the public eye in the context of *museum exhibitions*. It is obvious that the exhibition context represents a significant forum within museums, both as a medium of and setting for representation.<sup>36</sup> An increasingly important arena of communication of more recent times is also found in the information taking place through the presentation of objects via *museum web pages*, which is here defined as the second point of contact.

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<sup>36</sup> Karp 1991, p. 12.

### 3.3 A particular category of objects

As a last major delimitation, it should finally be made clear that the dissertation is concerned mainly with a specific group of objects, namely the commemorative heads. This choice has been made in view of the necessity of identifying a limited and manageable group of objects, bearing in mind that the collection of artefacts from the Benin kingdom consists of altogether thousands of objects.

However, while making this selection there is at the same time little doubt about the importance attached to the commemorative heads. As one of the most significant categories of Benin objects, these heads were traditionally created to be part of the furnishings of an altar to a deceased Oba.<sup>37</sup> Thus, made in memory of the kings the objects constitute the chronological records of past monarchs.<sup>38</sup> Although it has not been ascertained when the heads were first produced, thus indicating the age of the present dynasty, it is believed that the dynasty that rules today was founded in the 14<sup>th</sup> century or somewhat earlier with the installation of the first Oba.<sup>39</sup> Also with regard to the amount of commemorative heads it is difficult to give a precise number, although an often-stated estimation is that they amount to some 160 heads altogether.<sup>40</sup>

### 3.4 Aims and objectives

Following the intellectual and practical contexts discussed above, the research aim and objectives that guide this dissertation are formulated as follows:

<i>Research Aim</i>	To investigate the current status, presentation and access of the Benin Bronze Heads
<i>Objectives</i>	To define the history and nature of the collection of Benin Bronzes
	To locate the Benin Bronze Heads in museum collections
	To investigate how the Benin Bronze Heads and associated Benin objects are represented in museums via exhibitions
	To investigate how the Benin Bronze Heads are represented on museum websites
	To explore attitudes of the museum profession to the representation of Benin Bronzes

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<sup>37</sup> Dark 1975, p. 30.

<sup>38</sup> Greenfield 1995, p. 121.

<sup>39</sup> Ben-Amos 1995, pp. 20-21.

<sup>40</sup> Greenfield suggests that 160 heads were removed by the expedition in 1897. See Greenfield 1995, p. 121.

## **4. METHODOLOGY**

### **4.1 General approach**

The general research approach of this dissertation is one characterized by a plurality of methods. The study uses both quantitative and qualitative methods, as well as information collected from a variety of sources, such as a questionnaire study, interview material, direct observation, exhibition materials, web search and the use of secondary source materials. Each of these research methods, and how they more specifically relate to the research objectives, will be described in further detail in the sections that follow.

### **4.2 Questionnaire study**

#### *4.2.1 Some advantages and disadvantages*

In order to ascertain the physical location of the Benin commemorative heads and to obtain relevant data about how these are represented in the institutional setting of public museums, one of the principal research methods of this study involves the gathering of firsthand material through a questionnaire sent out by e-mail and ordinary post. This way of collecting information is generally viewed as a useful method in cases where the selected objects or the respondents of an investigation are dispersed over a large geographical area.<sup>41</sup> Thus, faced with the non-doable alternative of travelling to museums with holdings of Benin items, an option which seemed unreasonable both in terms of time and resources, the choice of sending out a questionnaire was a fairly easy way of gaining access to the field of respondents.

However, using a questionnaire form, combined with the fact that it was only possible to make a follow up visit in person to the Ethnological Museum in Berlin, is a methodological path that has its drawbacks. An obvious one relates to the problem of receiving high level of feed back from the selected respondents. From the 43 questionnaires sent out to museums for the purpose of this study, only 17 were returned. Thus, while the information obtained through the questionnaire can illustrate some indicative trends, it has at the same time been difficult to use the material to make broader generalizations about the way in which the Benin items are currently dealt with in the museum sector. Having said this, it is at the same time important to look at the non-responses as an informative outcome.

Besides the relatively low response rate, and the limits that this presents to the representativeness of the results, another disadvantage with a questionnaire study is that

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<sup>41</sup> Seale and Filmer 1998, p. 128.

through its standardized procedure it does not allow for the inclusion of too many questions, nor for further elaboration around the subject matter, in comparison with the methodological strategies applied in in-depth interviews done in person or by telephone.<sup>42</sup> Hence, looking at the replies received from the museum community with holdings of Benin bronze heads it should be emphasized that although some answers are more comprehensive others are kept rather brief.

Additionally, the lack of more detailed information is naturally linked to the very nature of conducting a questionnaire study. Through its reliance on the written word by museum professionals it obviously excludes a number of aspects that possibly would have come through in the use of direct observations. Such aspects would have been informative in many regards, not least when it comes to the subtle, and therefore more complex, messages involved in the exhibition context. Relevant factors in this regard are, for example, the variety of messages conveyed through the design and installation of objects, choice of lighting and sound, as well as the arrangement of artefacts in relation to others.<sup>43</sup> Although these are all aspects that come into play in an exhibition, and therefore impact on the viewer's visual experience of the objects exhibited, it is difficult to include them in a questionnaire study.

#### *4.2.2 The respondents*

Since, to my knowledge, there does not exist a comprehensive list of museums with Benin bronze heads, the present study has made use of the published work by Dark (1975) in order to identify the relevant respondents. His study 'Benin Bronze Heads: Styles and Chronology' includes a list of museums and collections with holdings of Benin material.<sup>44</sup> However, since Dark specifically examines the bronze heads, one could assume that the list refers to this particular category of objects. Another weakness with the listing is that it gives only very rudimentary information, simply specifying the name and the geographical location of each collection without providing any further details about issues such as the size of the holdings.

Based on Dark's study, the task of locating and acquiring the necessary contact details to the particular museums was made through the tedious efforts of web searching. It should here be noted that it in this process sometimes was difficult to locate a number of museums that had changed names or had been subject to reorganisations, in addition to those museums that do not keep their own websites.

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<sup>42</sup> Seale and Filmer 1998, pp. 127-128.

<sup>43</sup> Karp 1991, pp. 13-14.

<sup>44</sup> Dark 1975, pp. 90-91. The list's heading is "References to Museums and Collections of Benin Art".

### *4.2.3 The questions*

The questions asked in the questionnaire form were formulated on the basis of the two key themes of the thesis, in other words the issues of representation and accessibility. Choosing between the alternatives of asking open, closed and pre-coded questions to cover these aspects, the use of open questions was found most useful since it allows for more informative answers.<sup>45</sup> The letter of introduction, in which my research and myself was introduced, and the questionnaire form are here appended.<sup>46</sup>

Of the two areas of questioning, the first one was designed to collect information about the number of Benin bronze heads held in the museum collection and how many of these were on public display in exhibitions, in addition to questions about the availability of languages. These aspects relate to the issue of accessibility.

The purpose of the second area of questions was to ask the respondents about the way the artefacts are shown in the exhibition context, in other words how the making of various cultural representations are carried out through the work of public displays. In processing and analysing the data obtained, the first area of questions was easily transferred into numbers of objects and the availability of languages, while the data from the second set of questions were used to look for information that stood out as generally interesting and relevant. A more detailed analysis was then made on the basis of this process.

### **4.3 Web search**

The aim of the web search was to systematically examine whether the objects are presented on museums web pages. Providing means of accessibility, the web has become an increasingly important medium for museums in their mandate of serving the general public, particularly an international audience. This is not to say that everyone has the opportunity to access the internet, but rather that many more people can visit a museum via the web than in person.

The museums consulted for the web search were those that through the questionnaire study had confirmed their holdings of Benin bronze heads.

### **4.4 Qualitative interview and observation**

To gain a greater understanding of the nature and history of the Benin artefacts, the way they are displayed in the exhibition forum and to explore some professional attitudes, a visit was

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<sup>45</sup> Seale and Filmer 1998, pp. 130-131.

<sup>46</sup> See Appendix 1: Letter of introduction; Appendix 2: Questionnaire form

made to the Ethnological Museum in Berlin.<sup>47</sup> This museum was not only chosen since it is renowned for having one of the largest collections of Benin artefacts, but it was also thought that the visit could provide important addition information to the literature on Benin bronzes encountered earlier on in my own research process, much of which has been written by scholars in Britain and the United States.

At the Ethnological Museum, presently situated on the outskirts of what used to be West Berlin, a face-to-face interview was carried out with Peter Junge, Head of the Africa Department and the Department of Communications.<sup>48</sup> It had mainly the form of an unstructured interview in order to allow for much greater flexibility and depth about the topic, although the previously sent out questionnaire was used as the starting point. The interview was recorded via handwritten notes, and was furthermore supported by exhibition material that presented the main ideas of the displays. It should additionally be pointed out that the interview was centred around not only the commemorative heads but the collection of Benin bronzes at large. The interview was followed by the observation of the artefacts on display in *Art from Africa*, an exhibition which opened to the public on 27 August 2005.

#### **4.5 The use of secondary sources**

As well as using various primary materials, the dissertation has used a range of data deriving from secondary sources. This has not only provided me with relevant information about the specific topic and the theoretical discourses at large, but has generally been helpful in the process of placing my study into the wider field of existing research.

In the light of the large body of literature available on the Benin society and its material culture, a major concern that had to be taken into account at an early stage of my research process was to make a careful selection of written materials that reflected both width and depth and as such was both balanced and representative. In this context it should be mentioned that the global imbalances of influence and resources of today are of course also found in the academic field, a situation which in large part explains the dominance of scholarly research from Western universities and museums.

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<sup>47</sup> My visit to the Ethnological Museum in Berlin took place on 24 April 2006.

<sup>48</sup> Ph.D. in Ethnology, 1979, Free University, Berlin.

## **5. HISTORY AND NATURE OF THE BENIN OBJECTS**

### **5.1 Initial comments on their characteristics**

Although often referred to as the Benin bronzes when discussing the large collection of artefacts originally made in the kingdom of Benin and taken as war booty in 1897, the term ‘bronze’ is a somewhat misleading terminology for a number of reasons. To begin with, it gives the impression that these objects only consist of items made of metal. It is in this context worth pointing out that what was appropriated and brought to Europe in connection with the British raid in 1897 were not only metal works but also artefacts made in other materials such as wood, ceramics, ivory, leather, beads and cloth.<sup>49</sup> When examining the materials of the commemorative heads it is, for example, possible to identify different types, most of them being of bronze or brass while some are of wood, terracotta and ivory.<sup>50</sup>

Secondly, the term ‘bronze’ is a misnomer since it seems to indicate that these objects are all castings made of bronze, i.e. an alloy mainly of copper and tin. Metallurgical analyses of later date have, however, shown that they have a different composition, generally an alloy of copper, zinc and lead in various proportions.<sup>51</sup> Often they are referred to as items of brass, i.e. made of copper and zinc.

### **5.2 Place of origin**

The historical context surrounding the collection of bronzes can be traced back to the social, political and religious life of the ancient kingdom of Benin in West Africa with Benin City as its capital, not to be confused with what is now the modern state of Benin. The history of the kingdom, as mentioned earlier, is generally considered to date back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century or somewhat earlier with the installation of the first Oba.

However, due to the conquest of Benin City as a result of the so called British punitive raid<sup>52</sup> of 1897 the kingdom ceased to exist as an independent empire. The raid was staged as a result of the murder of a number of British officials. It was when the British trade delegation, under the direction of the vice-consul G. R. Philips, insisted on a visit to the king, despite being told that it was not an appropriate time due to a sacred ceremony, that some of the

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<sup>49</sup> Ben-Amos 1999, p. 21.

<sup>50</sup> Dark 1975, p. 25.

<sup>51</sup> Coombes 1994, p. 228 n.1.

<sup>52</sup> This historical event has become widely known as the ‘punitive raid’. It is, however, a term which cannot claim to be neutral.

king's chiefs arranged an ambush. The attackers killed most of the delegation, and as a consequence the British decided to launch a raid as an act of revenge.<sup>53</sup>

The raid took place at a time when the Benin kingdom, according to the European view, was portrayed as a violent empire where slavery and human sacrifice rituals were practiced.<sup>54</sup> More broadly it also needs to be understood in the historical context of European colonialism, more particularly the partition of the African continent towards the end of the nineteenth century. It was during this period in history that the overwhelming part of the African continent was colonized, a process which only took about twenty years and which was almost completed by the year 1900.<sup>55</sup> In the case of Benin specifically, it was to a large extent the king's monopoly on ivory and other trading goods that constituted a major obstacle to the British interests of economic and political expansion in the West African region.<sup>56</sup>

Besides the appropriation of thousands of artefacts, the events of 1897 thus brought about a number of other fundamental consequences, such as the removal and exile of the king as well as the incorporation of the Benin kingdom into the wider political context of the British Protectorate of Nigeria, an area which after the colonial withdrawal in 1960 became the independent state of Nigeria. As a result, what once used to make up the territory of the kingdom of Benin is now part of southwest Nigeria, and Benin City is today the capital of the Edo State in Nigeria.<sup>57</sup>

### **5.3 Treasures of the royal palace**

Looking at the history of the bronzes and other artefacts from the Benin empire it needs to be emphasized that these cultural objects used to play a significant part in the particular setting of a highly centralized monarchical system. Benin was in the pre-colonial era an independent empire headed by an Oba and his court, and it was in the realm of the divine ruler that the political and spiritual powers were concentrated. This was a situation that also applied to the creating of cultural material within the Benin society.

Thus, found under the authority of the monarch and the chiefs were members of specialist guilds that were engaged in the production of bronzes, ivories and other artefacts for the royal palace, some intended for the palace walls and shrines while others were items of

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<sup>53</sup> Greenfield 1995, p. 120.

<sup>54</sup> Freyer 1987, p. 10.

<sup>55</sup> Davidson 1994, pp. 4-5. It is worth mentioning that only Ethiopia and to some extent Liberia remained outside colonial rule in Africa.

<sup>56</sup> Coombes 1994, pp. 9-11.

<sup>57</sup> Ben-Amos 1995, p. 9.

regalia.<sup>58</sup> These creations were not only made for the king, but also exclusively owned by him.<sup>59</sup> Largely commemorative and ceremonial in function, the Benin items are thus artistic and technical achievements that symbolises a great deal of wealth and status. In other words, their character is one which is far from the supposed primitiveness that typifies some of the past accounts. For example, in the book *Primitiv konst* (Primitive art) published in 1947 by the ethnographic museums in Stockholm and Gothenburg the cultural material of Benin is presented together with other so called primitive peoples.<sup>60</sup>

#### **5.4 Some contemporary aspects**

While the present study focuses on the Benin bronzes produced up to 1897, it is nonetheless necessary to briefly comment upon some contemporary aspects. The important point to note in this regard is that the wide range of cultural activities in Benin not only developed and formed part of pre-colonial times. These traditions have instead continued to play an active role in Benin society throughout the twentieth century up to and including that of contemporary times, partly as a result of the reinstatement of the Benin monarchy in 1914.<sup>61</sup>

From this, it would be incorrect to assume that the culture of Benin is a vanished and dead culture of the past. A more appropriate description would be to say that the artistic and cultural life has survived and adapted to changing circumstances under which new forms have developed as part of a contemporary society. Most notable among these developments is the fact that the productions by the casters and artists today no longer are restricted to the monarchical domain, but that the market has opened up to include a wider public, not least the local tourist market.<sup>62</sup>

Contemporary aspects on various forms of artistic achievements in Benin is, however, a subject matter that has received very little scholarly or curatorial interest over the years, let alone been documented in writings. Nevadomsky, with a broad interest in Benin works, foregrounds these issues in the article ‘Casting in Contemporary Benin Art’, recently published in *African Arts*. Reflecting upon the situation, mainly explaining the lack of information and research as a result of both disinterest and dislike for modern creations in academic circles, he describes the sorry state of affairs by stating “[t]here is no repository of

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<sup>58</sup> Freyer 1987, p. 9-10.

<sup>59</sup> Greenfield 1995, p. 120.

<sup>60</sup> Statens etnografiska museum, Stockholm / Etnografiska museet, Göteborg, 1947.

<sup>61</sup> Freyer 1987, p. 18.

<sup>62</sup> Nevadomsky 2005, p. 74.

twentieth century Benin art”.<sup>63</sup> Along the same lines, Nevadomsky points out that only a few museums in Europe and the United States these days recognizes the power of modern forms of Benin productions in their exhibition work.<sup>64</sup>

### **5.5 The return of objects**

If the contemporary aspects around the Benin society and its cultural achievements have received little attention from the community of academic scholars and museum professionals over the years, the debate over the bronzes’ current location in relation to their place of origin has been a subject surrounded by far more interest and controversy. Often viewed as the sheer repatriation icon of the African continent, the corpus of artefacts from the Benin empire has in the international restitution debate been put forward as a case alongside other high profile cases such as the Parthenon sculptures.

On the African continent, the debates on the value of the artistic cultural heritage became increasingly influential when the struggles for independence from European colonial control started to bear fruit from the early 1960s. Providing the necessary ground for the question of cultural identity to be placed on the national agenda of the newly independent states, political demands for self-governance were then supplemented by cultural aims in the process of national development.<sup>65</sup> In the case of Nigeria, independence was declared on 1 October 1960, in the year that was proclaimed ‘Africa Year’ by the United Nations, and with it came initiatives to highlight the country’s art and culture history.<sup>66</sup>

The decision by the Nigerian government to build a National Museum in Benin City should be seen against this background. The new institution had its roots in earlier museum establishments locally, but it was not until June 1973 that the National Museum, of modern design and located in the commercial centre of Benin City, was opened.<sup>67</sup>

Preceding the opening of the museum was, however, the problem of assembling Benin artefacts that could be shown to the public. As a way of dealing with this situation, Nigeria decided to make an appeal for restitution through the International Council of Museums (ICOM) at its General Assembly, asking for donations from those museum institutions with

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<sup>63</sup> Nevadomsky 2005, p. 69.

<sup>64</sup> Nevadomsky 2005, p. 69.

<sup>65</sup> Eyo 1994, pp. 332-334.

<sup>66</sup> Davidson 1994, p. 137.

<sup>67</sup> Kaplan 1994, p. 55.

large holdings of Benin works, although out of this general appeal to the world community of museums came no response.<sup>68</sup>

In addition, Nigeria has over the years been involved in the purchase of Benin bronzes as a way to bring back artefacts. This process began in the 1950s when the British Museum started to sell off a considerable number of bronzes, most of which were bought by Nigeria. These sales have in more recent time become a controversial issue, highlighted and commented upon in the British media as a result of the release of a declassified report. According to the media coverage, the position of the British Museum is that it now regrets these sales.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Shyllon 2003, p. 136.

<sup>69</sup> BBC News, 'Benin bronzes sold to Nigeria', dated 27 March 2002, found at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/1896535.stm> (11-02-2006)

## 6. THE LOCATION OF THE BENIN BRONZE HEADS

### 6.1 List of museums

Below is an outline of the 43 museums that formed part of the questionnaire study carried out for the purpose of this dissertation, with details about the received information about the number of heads in the museums' collections and on public display. It should be noted that the listings includes both the responding as well as the non-responding museums, although all of them, according to Dark's study from 1975, have holdings of Benin material.<sup>70</sup>

Table 1. List of museums, which responded to the questionnaire

<b>Name and location of museums</b>	<b>Number of heads in the collection</b>	<b>Number of heads on public display</b>
GERMANY		
Linden-Museum Stuttgart, Stuttgart, Germany	4 heads	4 heads
Übersee-Museum Bremen, Bremen, Germany	3 heads	2 heads at exhibition, 1 head public depot (open for public once a month)
Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum für Völkerkunde, Cologne, Germany	5 heads (4 metal, 1 wood)	None
Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, Hamburg, Germany	1 head	None
Museum für Völkerkunde Hamburg, Germany	Reply: Africa showroom dismantled and packed.	
Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde München, München, Germany	3 heads	2 heads
Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin, Germany	20 heads	5 heads
SWITZERLAND		
Museum Rietberg, Zürich (art museum), Switzerland	1 head	1 head
Museum der Kulturen, Basel, Switzerland	1 head	None
UK		
National Museums of Scotland, Edinburgh, UK	4 heads	None. Benin material will be used in new displays from the year 2011.

<sup>70</sup> See Dark 1975, pp. 90-91.

Bristol's Museums, Galleries and Archives, Bristol, UK	1 head	None
Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, UK	1 head	1 head
Marischal Museum, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, UK	1 head	None (a replica of a head is on public display)
Royal Albert Memorial Museum & Art Gallery, Exeter, UK	1 head	1 head
Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery, Glasgow, UK <sup>71</sup>	3 heads	2 heads will be on display at the re-developed Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery, 1 head currently on display at St Mungo Museum of Religion Life and Art
World Museum Liverpool, Liverpool, UK	5 heads plus 1 fragment (damaged during the WWII), and 1 recent copy	5 heads
USA		
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA	17 heads	9 heads
<b>TOTAL NUMBER OF HEADS</b>	<b>In collections: 71 heads</b>	<b>On display: 33 heads</b>

Table 2. List of museums, which did not respond to the questionnaire

<b>Name and location of museums</b>	
AUSTRIA Museum für Völkerkunde, Vienna, Austria	Closed for reconstruction 1/3/2004-spring 2007
DENMARK National Museum, Copenhagen, Denmark	No reply
GERMANY Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden, Dresden, Germany	No reply
The Museum der Weltkulturen, Frankfurt, Germany	No reply
Museum für Völkerkunde, Leipzig, Germany	No reply
Reiss-Engelhorn-Museen, Mannheim, Germany	No reply

<sup>71</sup> Closed since June 2003, the Kelvingrove is due to reopen to the public in the summer 2006.

HOLLAND National Museum of Ethnology, Leiden, Holland	No reply
IRELAND National Museum of Ireland, Dublin, Ireland	No reply
NIGERIA Benin Museum, Benin City, Nigeria	No reply
National Museum, Lagos, Nigeria	No reply
Jos Museum, Jos, Nigeria	No reply
SWEDEN Museum of Ethnography, Stockholm, Sweden <sup>72</sup>	No reply
SWITZERLAND Völkerkundemuseum der Universität Zürich, Zürich, Switzerland	No reply
UK Brighton Museum and Art Gallery, Brighton, UK	No reply
The British Museum, London, UK	No reply
USA Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, USA	No reply
Albright-Knox Art Gallery, New York, USA	No reply
Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Cambridge, USA	No reply
American Museum of Natural History, New York, USA	No reply
The Field Museum, Chicago, USA	No reply
The Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, USA	No reply
The Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, USA	No reply
The Saint Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, USA	No reply
UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, Los Angeles, USA	No reply
University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Philadelphia, USA	No reply
National Museum of African Art Smithsonian Institution, Washington, USA	No reply

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<sup>72</sup> The Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg has one Benin bronze head on loan from the Ethnographic Museum in Stockholm. The object forms part of the Horizon exhibition.

## 6.2 Comments on the list

Glancing through the list above there are a number of aspects that should be highlighted in more detail. To begin with, it is interesting to observe that many different types of museums are represented, from art museums to ethnographic and even natural history museums. This in itself is a revealing piece of information since it gives some idea about the underlying philosophy of how the collecting and acquisition of material from non-European cultures has been perceived and carried out in the museum sector in the past, an issue which still has major relevance for the contemporary thinking about the value of cultural artefacts.

With regard to the geographical location there are several other noticeable features. The obvious one is that the collections of Benin heads are strongly concentrated to museum collections in Western Europe and the United States. The often-heard statement about the collections of Benin material being dispersed all over the world is thus a point of description that should be expressed with some moderation.

Furthermore, looking at the artefacts on a country basis it comes as no surprise that a large part of the Benin objects are to be found in museums in Great Britain, since it was the British who initially brought them to London. Instead, what is more intriguing is the extent of artefacts in various museums in Germany. In fact, the largest collection of Benin items is today found at the Ethnological Museum in Berlin. In a recent publication from the museum, it is stated that “The Ethnological Museum is fortunate to hold the largest and arguably the most important collection of Benin art in the world.”<sup>73</sup>

The reasons for this huge quantity of Benin objects in German museums can be traced back to the events following the so called punitive raid of 1897. After the fall of Benin, and as the objects arrived in England, it was decided that they would be sold off to the international market of cultural material to cover the costs of the raid. This was done through frequently held sales at the auctions houses in London within a rather short period of time after the objects had been appropriated. In addition to the availability itself, there was an immense interest among the network of German ethnologist for the Benin artefacts at the time. Indeed, it was generally felt among German collectors that they in fact were more appreciative of these treasures than the British.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Willett 2002, p. 46.

<sup>74</sup> Penny 2002, pp. 71-79.

## 7. HOW THE OBJECTS ARE REPRESENTED VIA EXHIBITIONS

### 7.1 Displayed in the context of repatriation

As was shown in the long list of museums above, the Marischal Museum at the University of Aberdeen has only one Benin bronze head in its collection. Though it is not on public display, a plaster replica of a bronze head is currently on view at the museum's entrance.

While the museum has not provided any specific information in the questionnaire form about the manner in which the replica is presented, it has supplied material about the way the museum recently used its original Benin bronze head as part of an exhibition about repatriation.

The exhibition entitled *Going home – museums and repatriation* was on display from 2 November 2003 – 25 January 2004. It focused on a number of repatriation cases, such a sacred head-dress to the Blood Tribe/Kainai Nation in Canada, the replica of the Lakota Ghost Dance Shirt as an illustrative example of the successful return of the original shirt, the collection of Moko mokai (Maori tattooed heads) as well as the case of the Parthenon sculptures. With regard to the Benin bronze head, the following text was presented:

Benin bronze head: Soldiers in the British Punitive Expedition of 1897 looted bronze sculptures from Benin City in Nigeria. They are now in museums and private collections throughout the world, where they have been used to show that African art is far from primitive.

Since independence in 1960, the Nigerian Government and the Oba of Benin have been asking for their return. However, most museums have resisted, pointing out that the National Museum of Nigeria has one of the best collections in the world. Another concern has been a number of thefts from West African museums which have led to material appearing on the black market, while the president of Nigeria took a bronze head from the museum to present as a gift to the Queen.<sup>75</sup>

Although a short text cannot claim to give a comprehensive picture of all the relevant details, it is interesting to pay attention to the selection of information in this text. From this point of view there are a number of comments to be made. One is the complete absence of references

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<sup>75</sup> Copy of text about the Benin bronze head, on display in the exhibition *Going home – museums and repatriation*. Questionnaire feed back from Neil Curtis, Marischal Museum, University of Aberdeen, April 2006.

to the time period before the raid of 1897, as if the bronze sculptures had had no function before the British brought them to Europe.

The statement about the way in which they have been used in museums and private collections over the years furthermore supports this view since it in an indirect way seem to indicate that these objects since appropriation have had an important role to play in showing that the peoples who were in fact the subject of the looting are not to be associated with primitiveness. That African art has been presented as far from primitive is in addition a statement that would need some rephrasing. As has been noted earlier in this study, museums have not refrained from using the notion of primitive art to describe African art in the past.

Worth noting is also the parallel that can be drawn between the looting in the past and the thefts of more recent times, although the consequences of these acts are not reflected upon in the text. While many of the Benin objects were in fact auctioned off to the international market of material culture after the raid in 1897, as has been described previously, today cultural objects similarly end up on the global market of collectors.

Finally, with regard the debate about the value and importance attached to the bronzes it is evident that the text only mentions the reasons for *not* handing the objects back. Nigeria's reasons for requesting the repatriation of these artefacts are left out of the discussion. This highlights the problems when the museum 'voice' is used to speak about an issue which for the museum may be seen as sensitive.

## **7.2 Presented in their historical and contemporary contexts**

While the Marischal Museum at the University of Aberdeen brings up the important topic of museums and repatriation, however without giving proper attention to the complexity around these matters, there are other examples of exhibitions that present the significance of the bronzes by placing them in their historical and contemporary contexts. The Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery in Glasgow has taken such a contextual approach.

Alison Kelly, curator of the Benin story for the new displays in Kelvingrove,<sup>76</sup> explains in the questionnaire that the exhibits, which are planned to open in the summer 2006, intend to look at the function and meaning of the bronzes in their religious, political and social context.<sup>77</sup> Referring to the original intention of their creation, pointing out that these

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<sup>76</sup> E-mail correspondence with Mark O'Neill, Head of Glasgow Museums, 13 March 2006.

<sup>77</sup> Since the museum has not yet open, Kelly Alison was not able to provide information about what languages will be available in the galleries.

objects would have been found on religious shrines within the royal palace, the displays will clearly bring into focus the contextual setting prior to the event of 1897.<sup>78</sup>

Additionally, it is interesting to note that the displays in Kelvingrove will focus on the ways in which Benin and its material culture were narrated and represented to the Western audience after the destructive looting in 1897. Quoting Alison Kelly, she writes that:

The punitive raid is dealt with and is pertains to the story both of how the Bronzes came to the ‘West’ and also the stereotype that existed (and still exists) of African religions. The destruction and looting was later justified on account of the Benin people partaking in human sacrifice. It was this side of Benin religion that was highlighted in the media. After the looting it took some time before western scholars could accept that these bronzes came from a native African tradition of casting. In western society they were admired for their beauty but became divorced from their original religious context, which was interpreted as being degenerate.<sup>79</sup>

From the text above, it seems probable to assume that the ideas of the previously mentioned publication by Coombes have been used as a source of reference, particularly with regard to the conceptual ideas around degeneracy. It is here useful to draw attention to what was outlined already at the outset of this dissertation, namely Coombes’ argument that the images of Africa during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were centred on a ‘discourse on degeneracy’.<sup>80</sup>

As an example of the derogatory and racist mindset of that time one could in passing tell the infamous story about the German ethnographer Frobenius, who on a visit to West Africa in 1910 found brass and terracotta heads of such significance that he thought that he had discovered the site of ancient Atlantis. These events are briefly described and commented upon by Nigel Barley of the British Museum who states that this explanation “seemed to [Frobenius] much more likely than the – to us – obvious inference that such works could simply have been made by local African artists”.<sup>81</sup>

Returning to the Kelvingrove Museum in Glasgow, it is also worth pointing out that these displays clearly are driven by the objective to highlight the links of continuity between

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<sup>78</sup> Questionnaire feed back from Kelly Alison, Curator, Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery, Glasgow, received in March-April 2006.

<sup>79</sup> Questionnaire feed back from Kelly Alison, Curator, Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery, Glasgow, received in March-April 2006.

<sup>80</sup> Coombes 1994, pp. 11-15, 23-24.

<sup>81</sup> Barley 2000, pp. 101-102.

past and modern times. Not only is the Oba recognized as an important figure in contemporary Benin, but the Glasgow Museums have also been engaged in the commission of a contemporary item of brass casting. During the summer 2005, the artist Lucky Oboh designed a sculpture entitled 'The Pot of Life' which was then cast by Ikpomwosa Inneh in Benin City. The curator Alison Kelly explains that this exhibition approach is a way to "raise awareness of both the surviving tradition of the 'Lost wax method' and the varieties of religious experience in contemporary Benin".<sup>82</sup>

Against the background of Nevadomsky's viewpoint, i.e. that only very few scholars and museums in Europe and the United States are interested in including modern forms of Benin productions in their work, it thus seems that the Kelvingrove Museum has embarked upon a rather uncommon approach as how to present artefacts from Benin. What is communicated is the link between historical and contemporary meanings of cultural artefacts, while at the same time acknowledging the so called punitive raid.

### **7.3 Forming part of an overarching theme**

At the Ethnographic Museum in Stockholm, a number of Benin artefacts are currently forming part of an exhibition on *The City*.<sup>83</sup> The exhibition focuses on a selection of significant cities around the world, among others Jerusalem, Benares (Varanasi), Peking and Benin City.

In the Benin section, the exhibited artefacts, among these three commemorative heads, are displayed to describe the city as an administrative and religious centre of the kingship. The exhibition texts highlight the importance of the royal palace and its significant art works in Benin City, and detailed descriptions are given about the powers of the Oba. The shorter texts are available in both Swedish and English, however, the longer ones are only in Swedish. This is surprising, or rather appalling, since the museum is part of the Swedish government museum authority with a mandate to deal with world cultures.<sup>84</sup>

In the exhibition, the central role of Benin City is underlined both in its historical and contemporary contexts. In one of the captions, for example, it is stated that the city throughout its history has been the centre of the kingdom. To place the artefacts in their

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<sup>82</sup> Questionnaire feed back from Kelly Alison, Curator, Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery, Glasgow, received in March-April 2006.

<sup>83</sup> Since the museum did not respond to my questionnaire, this section is based mainly on a description of the exhibition supplied by Staffan Lundén. He visited the exhibition on 27 April 2006.

<sup>84</sup> In Swedish, Statens Museer för Världskultur (The National Museums of World Culture).

contextual setting is important. Yet, the strong emphasis on the continuity between historical and contemporary times gives the impression that the city and its people have not undergone considerable changes in the past. It is as if the events of 1897, when the kingdom in fact ceased to exist as an independent empire due to the colonial takeover, did not have an impact on the social fabric of society. The critical period of colonial rule is in this way erased from the broader historical understanding of the Benin culture.

Although it is unfortunate that the exhibition avoids the sensitive issue of the 1897 event and thus the whole question of who has the right to own their cultural objects, it should at the same time be pointed out that the exhibit gains from its thematic approach. That the Benin bronzes are well placed to be part of an exhibition about cities need not to be further elaborated upon. The objects were, as has been pointed out previously, originally part of an urban royal court setting.

Additionally, the exhibition philosophy of choosing an overarching theme is appropriate from another perspective. In the main, it presents an opportunity of how to deal with some of the difficulties associated with the exhibiting and display of 'other cultures', an issue which has become the subject of much attention in more recent years. Ulla Wagner of the Ethnographic museum in Stockholm explains in her article 'Presenting «The other» - Dilemmas for Ethnographic Museums' that the museum has taken this thematic approach in the exhibition to allow for more integration between 'us and them'. To avoid 'the exotic' in the representation of others, the exhibition thus attempts to stress the comparative understanding by placing 'us and them' within the same frame.<sup>85</sup>

#### **7.4 Shown as works of art**

The exhibition *Art from Africa*, on display at the Ethnological Museum in Berlin since 27 August 2005, has taken yet another exhibition approach. Here, the presentation of artefacts and texts has been done through the usage of a combination of different display traditions, although without any elaborate technical installations. While presented in the context of a museum with a long history of ethnological collections, the exhibition has chosen to focus on the artistic and cultural importance of Africa by stressing the individual objects' character as works of art.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Wagner 1998, pp. 88-90.

<sup>86</sup> Interview with Peter Junge, Ethnological Museum, Berlin, 24 April 2006.

On the one hand the traditional features of a typical art exhibition comes out strongly. The objects are shown individually and in isolation, spotlighted and in a dark setting. On the other hand, introductory panels, a map of Africa, as well as labels for each artefact have been included in order to further contextualize the topic. For an art style installation it is thus interesting to note that the exhibition has included many additional objects as well as rather long written texts.<sup>87</sup> On display in the exhibition are about two hundred objects from the museum's Africa collection.<sup>88</sup>

It should in this context be pointing out that the museum has an extensive collection from Africa, amounting to some 75,000 objects in total. Internationally it is particularly renowned for its collections from the kingdom of Benin, Cameroon, the Congo and East Africa.<sup>89</sup> A central figure for the acquisition of these collections was the ethnologist Felix von Luschan, the curator of the Africa and Oceania collections from 1885-1911. More than anyone else he is the person behind the impressive holdings of Benin artefacts that are now found in the museum's collection.<sup>90</sup>

With regard to the current exhibition, Peter Junge explains that it attempts to give an impression of the artefacts as works of art. Identified as a major theme is therefore aspects of African art history. The exhibition looks at both the stylistic developments of African art and its stylistic contemporaneity, in other words how art of African cultures has developed over time and in relation to other cultures during the same period of time. Highlighting these issues the exhibition attempts to convey the message that African art is neither primitive nor without history.<sup>91</sup> These statements are emphasized already in the one page exhibition folder. It reads as follows:

The idea of isolated ethnic groups without history is a European colonial heritage. Africa like every other continent had its own historical development, which can be seen also in the history of art. African societies were interconnected by trade and other forms of exchange. Economic relations existed also with Europe, the Mediterranean, Arabia, and India. These were accompanied by exchange in artistic forms.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> My observation of the exhibition *Art from Africa*, Ethnological Museum, Berlin, 24 April 2006.

<sup>88</sup> Exhibition folder "Kunst aus Afrika", Ethnological Museum, Berlin.

<sup>89</sup> Junge, Peter (ed.), p. 293.

<sup>90</sup> Interview with Peter Junge, Ethnological Museum, Berlin, 24 April 2006.

<sup>91</sup> Interview with Peter Junge, Ethnological Museum, Berlin, 24 April 2006.

<sup>92</sup> Exhibition folder "Kunst aus Afrika", Ethnological Museum, Berlin.

The text above makes clear that works of art need not to be de-contextualized, but can be understood as one aspect of a broader cultural history. Looking at issues of accessibility in terms of languages, the exhibition includes information in both German and English. The introductory panels of the main sections of the exhibitions as well as the audio guides are in both languages, while the texts of the individual objects are in German only.

Concerning the question of accessibility it is important to note that the Ethnological Museum, forming part of the State Museums of Berlin, is one of the signatories of the Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums.<sup>93</sup> Asking Junge about the history of the acquisition of the Benin objects and which community of visitors the museum is serving, his viewpoint was generally that these artefacts were bought, that Nigeria has made no recent claims, and that the museum now keeps them for the international public.

In this context, Junge mentioned that the current exhibition on Africa, although slightly different, had been on display in Brazil, as part of an international exhibition project. Shown in Rio de Janeiro, Brasília and São Paulo during 2003-2004, it had then attracted more than one million visitors. As a sign of its success, Junge pointed out that the exhibition, which partly aimed to underline Africa's importance for Brazil, had been seen by a very large number of people coming from very poor living conditions.<sup>94</sup>

In connection with the question of serving an international public, it was also mentioned by Junge that there is currently a museum cooperation project around a forthcoming exhibition around the Benin artefacts. The key museums of this project, which started in 2000-2001, are the museums in Vienna, Bonn and Berlin, although other museums may lend objects for the exhibition as well. It will be a touring exhibition, and is planned to open in Vienna in May 2007.<sup>95</sup>

Summing up the presentations and the ideas within the Berlin museum, it is difficult to be critical about the way the exhibition presents the Benin objects as works of art since it also contextualises the artefacts. Thus, in the discussion whether to stress context or objects, it seems that a combination between the two can be a convincing way to help shape people's images of other cultures.

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<sup>93</sup> "Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums", published in *ICOM News*, No 1, 2004.

<sup>94</sup> Interview with Peter Junge, Ethnological Museum, Berlin, 24 April 2006. See also the exhibition catalogue 'Arte Da África: Obras-Primas do Museu Ethnológico de Berlim' ('Art from Africa: Masterpieces of the Ethnological Museum, Berlin'), edited by Peter Junge.

<sup>95</sup> Interview with Peter Junge, Ethnological Museum, Berlin, 24 April 2006.

## 8. WEBSITES AND A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

Looking at the websites of those museums that had confirmed their holdings of Benin bronzes via the questionnaire, the web search was carried out in order to examine the degree of accessibility via the internet.

From this one can draw the conclusion that many museums do not use this channel of information to reach a wider audience. Although some presented their exhibitions or collections in general terms, there are only few that describe the Benin collections. In Germany the situation is worse since many museums have little information in English. For example, in the case of the Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde München, there is only an English summary about the museum.<sup>96</sup>

Concerning the two museums in Switzerland, the question of language provides better access to the websites. However, while the Museum Rietberg mentions the Benin bronzes in passing saying that it has 17<sup>th</sup> century bronzes of the royal capital Benin in Nigeria<sup>97</sup>, the Museum der Kulturen only have general information on Africa.<sup>98</sup>

While there are a number of less-informative websites in the UK as well, for example Bristol's Museums, Galleries and Archives and the National Museums of Scotland, there are also two major exceptions. One is Pitt Rivers Museum.<sup>99</sup> It has a good collection site, from which one can access the objects catalogue. The database provides detailed documentation. Missing, however, is an image of the museum's only bronze head.

The second museum to mention in the UK is the World Museum Liverpool. In comparison with Pitt Rivers Museum, it has a less academic way of presenting the Benin bronzes. Including beautiful pictures, the website gives informative captions about the kingdom, the Oba and the artefacts in an attempt to interpret a wider history. Worth noting is that the museum has in its collections an altar head which dates back to as early as the 15<sup>th</sup> century. As explained on the website, this item thus dates back to the earliest period of bronze sculpture in Benin.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> See <http://www.voelkerkundemuseum-muenchen.de/inhalt/html/home.html> (20-04-2006)

<sup>97</sup> See <http://www.rietberg.ch> (10-05-2006)

<sup>98</sup> See <http://www.mkb.ch/en/home.html> (20-04-2006)

<sup>99</sup> See <http://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/> (20-04-2006)

<sup>100</sup> See <http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/wml/humanworld/worldcultures/africa/theedokingdom/altarhead.asp> (20-04-2006)

In addition to its easily accessible website, the World Museum Liverpool is interesting from another point of view as well, namely the question of languages in the exhibition context. While for example Pitt Rivers and Royal Albert Memorial Museum provide information in English only, the museum in Liverpool has in the questionnaire form stated that it provides leaflets with brief information on ten key objects in nine languages, namely Albanian, Arabic, Chinese, Czech, French, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and Somali.<sup>101</sup> Without knowing whether the Benin items are included in these ten objects, it is still clear that the institution makes efforts to live up to its name of being a world museum.

Lastly, on the website of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York the information about the Benin artefacts is outlined in both text and images. One head of an Oba is found under 'Collection Highlights', which consist of one hundred specially selected works of art. The museum also provides a 'Timeline of Art History'. It highlights many of the Benin items in the collection along with some contextual information.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Questionnaire feed back from Zachary Kindon, Curator of African collections, World Museum Liverpool, National Museums Liverpool, received April 2006.

<sup>102</sup> See <http://www.metmuseum.org/home.asp> (20-04-2006)

## **9. CONCLUSIONS AND FINAL REMARKS**

### **9.1 To define the history and nature of the collection of Benin bronzes**

The first objective of this study was to define the history and nature of the collection of Benin bronzes. This section has shown that the bronzes can be seen as both treasured and contested objects with a complex history. It can be stated they are ‘sensitive’ objects in the sense that their interpretation is caught up in the larger discussion on how to look upon cultures, in other words whether the cultures in which these objects were produced are to be regarded as advanced or primitive. Linked to this is also the discussion about the bronzes’ uncertain status, i.e. that they are neither art nor ethnography but in many ways both.

### **9.2 To locate the Benin bronze heads**

The appropriation of Benin artefacts in 1897 and the subsequent dispersal of artefacts explain why the bronzes are now found in many different museums. With the objective to locate them in order to gain some views on issues of representation and accessibility, the study has looked at a particular category of objects, namely the commemorative heads. Through a questionnaire, the study has located 71 heads in various museums in Western Europe and the United States.

### **9.3 To investigate how the Benin bronze heads and associated Benin objects are represented via exhibitions**

The third objective was to investigate how the Benin objects are represented via exhibitions. The study has examined a number of exhibition contexts, mainly based on data from the questionnaire study and interview material. The main conclusion to draw from this analysis is the museums offer a variety of interpretations about the meaning and value of the bronzes. The four exhibition contexts discussed has been identified as:

- Displayed in the context of repatriation
- Presented in their historical and contemporary contexts
- Forming part of an overarching theme
- Shown as works of art

Ironic to note was that it was in the exhibition on repatriation issues, in itself an important topic for the museum world to bring up, that the objects were interpreted from a very Western perspective, mainly pointing to the bronzes’ contribution to the appreciation of African art in the West without giving information about the culture from which they derive.

#### **9.4 To investigate how the Benin bronze heads are represented on museum websites**

As the fourth objective, a web search was carried out. It showed that only very few museums make their information about their Benin items accessible on the internet. This was particularly the case in German museums. Herein lies a major challenge if museums are to live up to their mandate of serving the public at large.

#### **9.5 To explore attitudes of the museum profession to the representation of Benin bronzes**

Lastly, the study has explored some attitudes of the profession to the representation of Benin bronzes. From the analysis of the interview material and the voices coming through in the questionnaire study, it can be concluded that the Benin bronzes are subject to much attention and admiration.

#### **9.6 Some concluding remarks**

It would be both interesting and relevant to make further studies on the collection of Benin bronzes in their contemporary settings, for example by making deeper analysis of only a few exhibitions, looking at additional installations, or using other methodological approaches. While this study has attempted to offer some perspectives on the selective narratives made through public displays it has for obvious reasons not accounted for the effects of this communication, in other words how the messages are perceived by museum visitors, neither how the processes of making representations are performed and implemented.

These types of questions open up a different set of questions, such as: Has there in the interpretive process been an interaction of cooperation between the curatorial staff and the culture(s) being represented? How influential has the voice of the scholarly trained academics been in relation to more subjective interpretations? And how do museum narratives impact upon social relations as well as ideological and philosophical assumptions in current global situations? These are some important questions that could be addressed in subsequent research.

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## APPENDIX 1: Letter of introduction

Göteborg, xx March 2006

### Questionnaire to museums with collections of Benin Bronzes

Dear Colleague,

My name is Charlotta Dohlvik. I am currently writing my Master's dissertation in International Museum Studies at Göteborg University, Sweden. The aim of my research is to investigate how the Benin Bronze Heads are presented and made accessible to the public in museums today.

Because the Benin Bronze Heads are spread throughout many museums it will not be possible for me to personally visit all the museums with holdings of this material.

Therefore this questionnaire is sent out to your museum and a number of other museums, which according to Philip J.C. Dark 'Benin Bronze Heads: Styles and Chronology' in *African Images: Essays in African Iconology*, (eds.) Daniel F. McCall and Edna G. Bay, Africana Publishing Company, New York/London 1975, have Benin Bronze Heads in their collections.

I would be very grateful for your assistance in filling out the questionnaire that follows and return it to me **before 10<sup>th</sup> of April**, either by e-mail, mail or fax:

**E-mail:** [cdohlvik@hotmail.com](mailto:cdohlvik@hotmail.com)

**Postal address:**

Charlotta Dohlvik  
c/o Staffan Lundén  
Museion, Göteborg University  
Box 111, SE 405 30 Göteborg, Sweden

**Fax no:** +46(0)31 773 57 23 (Att. Charlotta Dohlvik/Staffan Lundén)

Please note that your answers will be used for my research only and will not be distributed for further usage without your prior consent. Thanking you!

Yours sincerely,

Charlotta Dohlvik (cell phone: +46-(0)708 807 124)

For more information about the Programme:

Master's Programme in International Museum Studies: <http://www.museion.gu.se/museumstudies>

Department of Museion: <http://www.museion.gu.se>

## **APPENDIX 2: Questionnaire form**

### **Questionnaire to museums with collections of Benin Bronze Heads**

#### **A) DETAILS OF YOUR MUSEUM**

Museum's name:

Owner of museum (government, private, other):

Name of contact person:

E-mail:

Telephone:

Fax:

Address:

#### **B) QUESTIONS (if the space provided is not enough, please use the back of the sheet)**

- 1) How many and what type of Benin Bronze Heads do you have at your museum? (please specify if the objects are owned by the museum or on loan)**
  
- 2) How many Benin Bronze Heads do you currently have on public display?**
  
- 3) What kind of information does the exhibit have on:**  
(alternatively, the questions 3 a-d may be answered by enclosing a transcript of the exhibition texts currently on display)
  - (a) the function and meaning(s) of the Benin Bronzes in Benin society prior to 1897**

(b) the events of appropriation in 1897

(c) the function and meaning(s) of the Benin Bronzes in the post-1897 period (e.g. their function as a source of inspiration for Modernist art)

(d) technical aspects (e.g. the material composition of the Benin Bronzes and the technique of manufacturing)

4) In what language/s is the information about the Benin Bronzes available to the museum visitor?

(a) In exhibition texts

(b) In guided tours

(c) In audio guides

(d) Any other means (e.g. exhibition guide books)

*If you wish to make any further comments about your display of Benin Bronzes please do so by using the back of the sheet. I thank you very much for filling out this questionnaire. Your participation is highly appreciated. Lastly, I would like to ask if you would be willing to participate in an in-depth interview in person or by telephone.*

*Yes, I am willing to participate*

*No, I am not able to participate*

*With many thanks and my best regards,*

*Charlotta Dohlvik*