

Crimes of Empire: The Invasion of Benin Kingdom

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British colonial soldiers committed genocide in the Kingdom of Benin in 1897. They then looted some 4,000 pieces of art which have never been returned. A Nigerian film recreates the invasion, exposing the bestial brutality of Empire.

On Saturday 7 February, a packed British Film Institute (BFI) audience attended African Odyssey's hosting of 'Grand Theft Africa: History of the Benin Bronzes.' It opened with a one-hour presentation by historian and Pan-Africanist Dr Ama Biney on the historic and continuing 'scramble for Africa.' The focus of her presentation and theme for the film that followed was the 1897 invasion of Benin, which contributed to the greater African holocaust enshrined in our experience of enslavement, colonialism and neo-colonialism. The brutal desecration of Benin lives and culture through the theft of over 4,000 of its artefacts by Western Europeans seems to be a known but yet untold story. It led to the demise of the Great Benin Kingdom, marking a most significant period in the continuing scramble for African resources. During the invasion the Oba (King) was deposed and deported to Calabar on 13 September 1897 where he died 16 years later. The Nollywood director, Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen's film captures the horrific invasion in which Benin's well organised governmental system, cultural and spiritual traditions, kept in place for thousands of years, were callously disrespected by the British invaders. The event at the BFI was well timed to correspond with the anniversary on 10 February of the invasion. What follows is a reflection of the event as I attempt to capture the impression it left on me.

The past is present

One of the lasting messages of Dr Biney's presentation was that the 'past is not dead - that it lives on in the present.' This is how she perceives the impact of history. The infamous 'Scramble for Africa' in which 14 European powers voraciously supped around the 1884-1885 Berlin Conference table is a haunting and living legacy impeding the struggle for sovereignty and self-determination for many African states. Yet their lack of self-determination is linked to the unnaturalness of their construction, as these states represent the demographically modified appendages of the European imperialist project. Since the Conference preceded the invasion of Benin by over a decade it might appear accidental - or fortuitous. Likewise since the conference was held 130 years ago the social, economic and political instabilities associated with these states might suggest some natural inability to self-govern. Clearly this would be an ill-conceived perspective ignoring the deliberate and lasting impact of the Scramble.

This historical appendage made it possible for the Malian president to request help from France, its former colonial ruler, to intervene in the political crisis a couple years ago. Such interventions, whether sanctioned by African leaders or not, do not necessarily improve the conditions of the people they are supposedly called to assist; nor do they help to advance

the sovereignty of African states. Historically, the image of 'anarchy' and destabilisation through the creation of proxy wars has been used by Western governments to justify interference in the affairs of other sovereign states. Similarly, parallels can be made of the moral arguments about fighting Boko Haram terrorists in Nigeria and the 1897 invasion by the UK government. Some chaos or anarchy has to be created/detected for which the burden to solve becomes that of the all-saving Europeans. Their military power would give them unfair advantage and means to occupy. The 'humanitarian' guise of rescuing 300 school girls provided a perfect opportunity for the US-European military expansion to West Africa. Excessive foreign troops stretched across large areas of Africa means a military occupation that has little to do with 'saving girls.' The question is whether Western intervention is necessary or is this interference part of their imperialist strategy? In other words: Are matters made worse or better by their intervention?

In her talk, Dr Biney reminded us which European countries were among those 14 powers at the conference: France, Britain, Germany and Portugal. The map she used to more visibly imprint the dissection of the continent showed the dominance of the French and British. She allowed a resonant beat to sink into our hearts the poignant fact that around this inglorious table no African leader was present. Therefore it remains to be said that Africans should be left to resolve their own internal affairs. Their self-determination will always be blighted by the interventionist strategies of Western governments whose interests lie in the control of our resources.

Circumstances of the invasion

What was striking from Dr Biney's account was that prior to the 1897 invasion, between 1850-1880 there was a small European presence in Africa. They had coastal outposts from which they were exercising legitimate trade, particularly in palm oil and groundnuts. This trade had replaced the Trans-Atlantic Trade in human beings as slaves. The wanderlust of explorers, the crusading of missionaries and the avaricious traders combined to reshape the course of Africa's history. The European countries involved in the trade sought to advance and protect their own interests, establishing military outposts that would later double as holding forts for enslaved Africans literally bound for the Atlantic. These outposts (forts) remain, as I observed during a trip to Cape Coast and Elmina Castles in Ghana. But those erected on the other side of the Atlantic also remain in the Caribbean islands. During a visit to some of these at the end of 2013 there was a sense that Africans (in the diaspora) had little claim to the land/islands but were forced to import everything and instead focus their economic interest on tourism - another way of saying exploration. At every corner of these islands there are churches - since the missionary project was supported by the respective European states.

Whilst they protected their claim along the coast, the real loot and ventures lay in the interior, which for many were yet unexplored. The increasing competition to discover and exploit Africa's wealth naturally led explorers deeper into the interior. The Berlin Act, furthermore made it necessary for each European power to 'inform each other of its claim' to a portion of territory and establish the claim legitimately by 'occupation.' As we see today the interventionist strategy has its base in history whereby European governments used the internal disputes of African micro-states to push moral arguments about why they needed to be governed by external intermediaries. Some of the moral arguments were founded on the alleged principle of civilising Africans from their fetishisms and traditional practices, including human sacrifice. As Dr Biney noted, Europeans exaggerated these customs and practices in order to serve their own interests. Although the Europeans claimed to be

concerned about internal slave trade and general conflicts in Africa, with the exception of the Yorubas no mention was made of internal slavery in the Berlin Act. Dr Biney argued that contrary to the supposed anarchy in Africa, most of West Africa was peaceful with well-organised states and strong rulers.

A sinister agreement

By the time of the invasion, Benin was expanding, having subsumed smaller states into its Kingdom through military force. The Edo region, in which the City of Benin was situated, was discovered by British explorers venturing deeper into the hinterland. The impressive cultural artefacts, along with the discovery of vast amounts of rubber leant fervour to the mission to totally colonise the region.

Oba Ovonramwen, who had inherited a kingdom at war not only with other states but with its own internal struggles, had to establish firm leadership but was loved and respected by his people. The British knew this. In 1891 the British Vice Consul H.L. Gallwey took a spurious treaty to Oba Ovonramwen. He didn't sign the treaty but instead authorised one of his chiefs, who clearly couldn't read English, to do so. According to Dr Biney the terms afforded protection for the Oba by Queen Victoria in return for loyalty to Britain; he could not entertain any other foreign power. There also had to be free trade with Britain and the kingdom had to receive missionaries. When the Oba flouted these terms a new treaty was devised aimed at forcing the Oba to submit to the British Empire.

Genocide: calling it by its name

Following his own orders, and perhaps owing to some despotic trait and loyalty to the British Crown, the Acting Vice Consul James Phillips ignored warnings not to enter Benin, when at this time a sacred ceremony was in swing. But he persisted to enter the City. This was regarded by the Benin chiefs as a challenge to the sovereignty of the kingdom for which they retaliated by killing Phillips and six other British men. This presented Britain with the opportunity of war against the kingdom and 1,500 soldiers primarily made up of Africans from other colonised territories were dispatched to avenge the killing of the seven Britons; two of them had escaped. The defeat of Benin, as Dr Biney explained, was due to the 'superior technology' of British weaponry. The Africans were admirable adversaries but their machetes, bows and arrows couldn't compare. Though available on the continent, there was limited access to machine guns which would have aided their combat. Even if they could obtain the machine guns, there weren't enough soldiers trained to use them. The outcome of this unfair advantage was genocide in which thousands Africans lost their lives. Shamefully this wholesale sacking of the Benin Empire also culminated in the grand theft of cultural artefacts bestowing the history and heritage of the Benin people.

'The totality of the plan'

Another striking observation in Dr Biney's presentation was the citation by fellow historian, Toyin Falola, who attributed the defeat of Nigeria (Benin) to the series of 'so-called little wars' waged by Britain as a decided method that 'boosted the idea of imperialism.' In other words, these little wars were by design part of a bigger plan for total domination. Former African leaders, like Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah and Ahmed Sékou Touré of Guinea Republic, posited pan-African unity, calling for a level of consciousness that would recognise the 'totality of the European plan' - a systematic, well-practiced strategy of divide and rule.

Colonialism was replaced by neo-colonialism after extending pretentious arms of independence.

When Ghana gained its independence in 1957 as the first country in sub-saharan Africa to do so, Nkrumah made it clear that unless all African territories were liberated, none were. The vision of total liberation of its people and of all the macro and micro African states would be the appropriate response to this 'totality of the plan' by Britain, US and other Western European nations still intervening in African affairs.

Invasion 1897, the film

It fulfilled a lifetime ambition of the Nollywood director Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen to produce a film about the invasion of Benin but also to screen it in the City of London. His diminutive figure was overshadowed by lofty aspirations and confidence as he beamed from the BFI podium. That the film, a Nollywood production, was even being screened at the BFI was another achievement he credited. In September last year filmmaker Nadia Denton curated a weekend centred on the rise of Nollywood. This was held in conjunction with the launch of her book, 'The Nigerian Filmmaker's Guide to Success: Beyond Nollywood'. This film builds on the commitment by the African Odyssey's programme of 'inspirational films by and about the people of Africa.'

The film opened with harrowing scenes of violence, with heads cleanly swiped by machetes and lobbed across my unsuspecting imagination early on. We were forewarned about the violence but I wasn't prepared for the immediacy of it. These scenes of violence were interspersed in the film, building particularly during the invasion itself where graphic depictions of cannon explosions, bodies burning, machine gun killings, machete executions that exposed the impact of the devastation to African lives. Though the 'white men', as they were called in the film, lost their lives, this was disproportionate because Africans were fighting both for and against the British.

Dubious cast

Apart from the recognisable Rudolph Walker and Charles (Chucky) Venn (both from Eastenders) most of the cast were unknown to UK audiences or were acting for the first time. This might explain the awkward staccato diction of some of the actors, especially those playing English soldiers who hardly seemed committed to the process. I wondered if this was to do with cultural allegiance - the difficulty or pressure to show one's culture in its true (in this case negative) light. For me the most remarkable acting was by Mike Omoregbe who played Oba Ovonramwen. He was committed to portraying the strength, complexity and anxieties of the Benin leader. He brought to life the image of this proud, powerful warrior king that Dr Biney barely had time to show us during her talk. He was convincing in embodying the spirituality and beliefs in ancestral traditions that underscored the King's life and that of his people. Surprisingly, we were later told it was Omoregbe's first acting role and that he was a priest whose faith wouldn't approve of the traditional spiritual practices the film promoted so well. This shows the open-mindedness of Omoregbe and further reveals the daringness of Imasuen who cast him.

The role of the British museum

After the brutal opening scene, the film moved into present day to encapsulate the umbilical link with the past. A Nigerian descendant attempts to retrieve one of the Benin Bronzes from

the British Museum. During the court hearing he refuses to plead guilty of theft, because he claims that he was restoring the items, stolen by the British, on behalf of his family. It wasn't intended to be but this was somewhat comical. Yet, I imagine many Africans who visit the British Museum feel the same compulsion. I do. To mark the centenary of the invasion in 2014, the film was screened at the museum, amidst some security anxieties about protests and demonstrations. This is another of Imasuen's accomplishments and speaks of the unabashedness of the British authorities about their grand theft of African resources. Perhaps they consider this screening some kind of concession. I see it the way Dr Biney regards the presentness of the past which will continue to speak until justice is done. Indeed, the penultimate scene in the film in which Oba Ovonramwen is captured was ominous. Throughout the film his speeches were deliberately elevated by the use of proverbs and allegories in contrast to the bland exchanges between the British soldiers. In his last speech he expressed prophetic sentiments of exacting justice.

The African perspective

From the BFI podium and to welcome audience response Imasuen said he wanted to make a film that was unapologetically from the African perspective. He achieved this by privileging the views and motivations of the Africans, showing particularly that they were concerned with preserving their cultural heritage and protecting their sovereignty. The invaders on the other hand were ignorant, blood thirsty and greedy; ready to wage an unjust war to strengthen their own empire thousands of miles away. The visualisation of African courage during the invasion reinforced Dr Biney's account about their bravery during combat; that they were not passive bystanders but ready warriors to defend their kingdom. Although many of the soldiers in the British army were Africans, I think the film was making a point in depicting this. The stark blue uniforms worn by the soldiers vividly conveyed a problem. As long as Africans see themselves as separate and divided, each state can be manipulated by the colonisers to commit soldiers to fight against the other. I'm trying to imagine a day I'd see a film whereby European soldiers (white) are en masse fighting on the side of Africans against another European aggressor. Africans need to be committed to identifying a unity of interest. When it comes to advancing their interests European leaders, as the film depicts, are two-faced and two-tongued. They conspire together, though they don't always agree, to protective their collective and nationalistic aims. Somehow they've convinced African leaders they need to act differently.

Though he said the film was unapologetically from the African perspective there was a massive oversight by the director. In the last scene, in which the African descendent achieves victory in court for his alleged attempted larceny of the Benin Bronzes he is embraced by his European partner fully clad (in the court) in the cultural orange beading, including a crown, found in Nigeria. They hugged, once, twice and then they kissed long. I was disappointed by this seemingly out of place addition - gutted that after all the pronouncements against the 'white men' and the blatant caricaturing of Queen Victoria that Imasuen felt he needed to close the film with this lasting image. Throughout the film and in keeping with social history of the day there was lack of agency in the depiction of the African women. However, I wonder at the insensitivity to African women by reinforcing a tired stereotype of a successful African man (symbolised by the raised hand of victory, mirroring Nelson and Winnie after the former's release from prison) and his European (white) woman. Imasuen tried to pass it off as a 'cultural marriage' claiming that he didn't want to be seen to be preaching hate. But for me this scene was a wasted effort, no love angle of this kind was necessary. It seemed as though it was about compromise and a lack

of total conviction.

The same could be said of the decision not to use a Nigerian language and maintain the subtitles (which were in English despite all the actors speaking in English). His rationale for this was about trying to 'reach' a wider audience. One wonders how far that reach needed to be given the 170 million population of Nigeria. The 'reach' ought to be seen as coming from those who are interested in evolving cultural representations, not our complicit perpetuation of cultural imperialism through the predominance of the English language. Still respect is due to him for producing a film that tells this true story intrinsically from the worldview of Africans.

The artefacts and the grand theft

We saw clipped scenes of not only British but other European soldiers grabbing the loot from the decimated City of Benin. As well as Britain Dr Biney mentioned Sweden, Holland, Germany and the US as being beneficiaries of this looting. Imasuen related a story about seeing one of the Benin pieces on sale in the US for \$54,000 and tried to compute how this sum would transform the lives of contemporary Edo artisans. With regard to the artistic feel of the film, there was a moderate attempt at this. There were some shots of the landscape; the red earth beautifully contrasting the tropically green trees gave a sense of the place. This was complimented by simple yet striking cultural costumes like the white puffy bottom half robes of the chiefs, the elaborate warrior vestments, including the visible crafting of their machetes and the impressive garments worn by the Oba. The achievement of this is commendable especially because the project was self-funded.

Imasuen commented during the Q&A that the craft and skill of creating those stolen artefacts has not been lost. There were shots of the bronze smelting, as homage to the skill and craft involved in producing the looted Benin bronzes.

Reparations

In her final remarks Dr Biney emphasised a call for reparations and restitution to account for the devastating loss of African life and the grand theft of thousands of Benin artefacts residing in the European museums and private collections Chicago. Despite attempts by the Edo people to secure the return of these treasures there has been no recognition of their claim. Imasuen recounted that during the build up to screening the film at the British Museum items were returned to the Benin Royal family by a descendant of one of the British men who looted the wares during the invasion. The emphasis on reparations highlighted the necessary and humane response in the 21st century to ameliorating the devastation of African cultural heritage under colonialism. This is part of a wider movement for reparations with which Dr Biney recommended young people to become involved.

Conclusion

The past does not only intrude but makes certain demands on the present. As I contemplate the stern face of Oba Ovonramwen, the confidence in his stature, I perceive an irrepressible spirit that will not rest until justice in some form is achieved for his people. In this way he can be said to embody the ancestral spirit of millions of Africans who perished during the holocaust or maafa (genocide). The combination of historical documentation from Dr Biney's presentation and the artistic and cultural representation by Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen's film provided excellent insight about the circumstances of the invasion. This was followed by

lively debate during the Q&A which included on the panel along with Dr Biney and Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen, Nadia Denton, Mike Omoregbe (the Oba) and BFI's David Somerset, Charing.

I agreed with two memorable remarks. One stressed that the director didn't have to pander to any suggestion he might be preaching hate in his film; that after all Africans were treated inhumanely in our brutal encounters with Europeans and we had nothing to apologise to them for; that in fact we're still awaiting apology from them. The second asked that Imasuen took more care in the way he spoke about the value of African art. There was some miscommunication that suggested he would rather have compensation for the total value accumulated over one hundred years of theft, rather than having the artefacts themselves returned. The point was that we must appreciate both the artefact and their monetary worth, because if we didn't and any slackness in our expressions about this would potentially send the wrong message and further hamper the campaign for reparations. I commend the effort of the African Odyssey team who brought the event to us in collaboration with Tony Warner of Black History Walks. Sponsors of the film, including Sapetra and Greenwich TV, and promoters j2 knosults were represented and to them too I express gratitude. Overall it was good to be there, the pre-screening presentation was great and despite some of its contradictions the film, as Nadia Denton summed up contributed to a necessary debate about the importance of history to the question of sovereignty and self-determination.

Click on the link to the official website for [Invasion 1897](#).

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