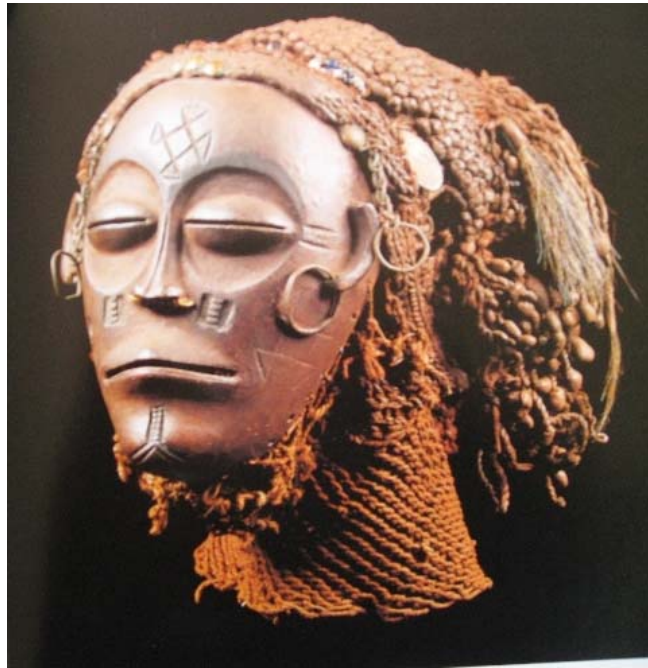


WHY DO EUROPEANS, EVEN INTELLECTUALS, HAVE DIFFICULTY IN CONTEMPLATING THE RESTITUTION OF STOLEN AFRICAN CULTURAL OBJECTS? WOLF LEPENIES AND THE ETHNOLOGY MUSEUM, BERLIN.

Universal culture can only be achieved when all cultures are able and free to make their contribution but this cannot be done when the guardians of one culture hijack the masterpieces of another culture.



Mask pwo or mwana pwo, Chokwe, Angola. Ethnology Museum, Berlin.

In a recent article in a leading German newspaper, *Die Welt* (*Welt On Line*), (http://www.welt.de/welt_Abschied_vom_intellektuellen_Kolonialismus.html) with the title, *Farewell to intellectual Colonialism; What Berlin can learn from the debate over the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris*. (1) Wolf Lepenies, holder of the Peace Price of the German Book Industry and recipient of several other academic distinctions, reminded me once again of the enormous difficulties Europeans, even intellectuals, seem to experience when they deal with African problems and above all, when they consider matters in which the interests of Europeans and Africans are involved. Somehow they seem unable or unwilling to give to Africans the same consideration as they give to others.

In his well-written article, Wolf Lepenies recounts the debate which raged over the museum built in 2006 on Quai Branly, Paris by the famous French architect, Jean Nouvel, to fulfil the wishes of the former President Jacques Chirac and his good friend, Jacques Kerchache, an art dealer who spent some time in jail for stealing a cultural object from Gabon, apparently a friend of André Malraux (who was arrested once for trying to smuggle an art object from Cambodia). The Parisian Musée du Quai Branly houses some of the best cultural

objects from Africa, Asia, the Americas and Oceania which were stolen by the French during the colonial era. (2)

Lepenies recounts that the establishment of the Musée du Quai Branly signalled the temporary end of the reorganization of the Parisian museum landscape which had started some thirty years previously with the creation of the Centre Georges Pompidou. In the new museum were to be housed objects which had been previously kept in two other Parisian museums, *Musée de l'Homme* and *Musée des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie*. The museum was an attempt to present in a new way non-western cultures in a European metropolis. The author mentions the first phase where 120 masterpieces from Africa and elsewhere, the so-called “arts premiers”, were in the “*Pavillon des Sessions*” in the Louvre, following the ideas of Andre Bréton and others, thus putting non-western and western on the same level. The aesthetization of foreign objects was linked with an attempt at normative correction of the Eurocentric conception which had dominated European museum culture for hundreds of years. This tension between aesthetics and ethics is considered by Lepenies as not only characteristic of Quai Branly but also of the situation of the ethnological museums in Germany.

Lepenies seems to think that those societies he describes as “primitive”, (with inverted commas) will disappear and it will become increasingly difficult to understand their way of life and ways of survival. I do not know which peoples he had in mind but I would like to mention that most of the African peoples such as the Edo (Nigeria), the Bamun (Cameroun), the Yorubas (Nigeria), Akans (Ghana) etc whose cultural objects are in the Berlin Ethnology Museum have not disappeared and do not look like disappearing soon despite all the massacres and other measures of the colonial powers. It is not clear to me why he thinks it will in future be difficult to trace their ways of life. After all, we have had German, British and French ethnologists studying these societies for hundred years. Surely, there will be enough written materials on these African, Asian and Oceanian societies. Ancient Greece does not appear to be difficult to understand so why should Benin society be difficult to study in hundred years, whether it disappears or not? Is Lepenies' concern about societies disappearing very different from that of Felix von Luschan and the other German ethnologists who used this as justification for collecting artefacts, including the use of force? (3) Lepenies states that when these societies disappear, their “*characteristic objects will gradually detach themselves from their original context. Their chances of being preserved for the later period increases, when they are accorded the status of art works. The admiration and recognition of their beauty then replaces the reconstruction of the context of their development and effectiveness*”.

Lepenies is saying that making art works of artefacts is to increase their chances of survival. But is this a valid point in the context of the wholesale

looting of objects from Africa, Asia and Oceania? Lepenies seems to be wholly concentrated on the requirements of European museum visitors and their tastes. This is confirmed by his statement later that the basic mood after a visit to the Musée du Quai Branly is dignity and respect; the visitor is less astonished and admires more. Lepenies must have been talking only to Europeans who visited the Musée du Quai Branly. If he spoke to Africans he would have realised that the mood is one of anger at the robbery of all these objects by the Europeans and the feeling that there is no attempt to correct the crimes of the colonial period and that Africans are powerless at the moment to collect their property. Most Africans who enter large museums where there are stolen objects are generally revolted and feel they are in a thief's den. Some Africans have in the past avoided European museums in order to avoid recollections of the colonial times and its activities which are reflected in these museums. The representation of their own peoples has also revolted many sensible and sensitive Africans. They feel that to enter these museums is to ask for more insults and pain. The reader should look at the famous letter written by Aminata Traoré, a former Minister of Culture of Mali, when the Musée du Quai Branly was opened in 2006. (4)

One thing the Germans can learn from the experience of the French is not to construct a building which tries to reflect the Europeans' image of Africa as a continent of darkness or full of surprises, uneven grounds and full of unexpected turns. These are all prejudices of Europeans which do not conform to the African reality. Incidentally, Africa is the only continent which seems to have a nick name which has become for many Europeans almost official designation: "The Dark Continent." We never hear of a "Pale Continent", a "White Continent" or a "Grey Continent". To call Africa a dark continent is surely a reflection of the European imagination for no other continent has more daily light than Africa. If at all a nick name is allowed, the "Sunny Continent" might be more appropriate on condition that Europe and other continents are also given nicknames. For the sake of accuracy, should we not stick to correct geographical designations? (5)

The Germans will be better served by concentrating on the location of the building and the objects that will be housed therein. Any attempt to create a pronounced contrast to the buildings on the Museum Island will only perpetuate the perceived differential treatment for African arts and European arts, between the cultures said to be within the competence of the ethnologists and the arts cultivated by art galleries and art museums. The intellectuals could render a very great service if they would question the basic distinction made between those cultures considered "primitive" and those considered "civilized." They could ask whether this distinction which goes back to the Enlightenment philosophers was ever justifiable. David Hume, who never visited Africa or knew any Africans, denied the Africans any talent:

“I am apt to suspect the Negroes to be naturally inferior to the whites. There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion, nor even any individual, eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences.” (6)

The great philosopher, Hegel, who influenced Marx, denied that Africa had any history at all and suggested that Egypt be detached from Africa:

“Africa proper, as far as History goes back, has remained for all purposes of connection with the rest of the World shut up; it is the gold-land compressed within itself — the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of night. Its isolated character originates, not merely in its tropical nature, but essentially in its geographical condition.” (7)

“The northern part of Africa, which may be specially called that of the coast-territory (for Egypt has been frequently driven back on itself, by the Mediterranean) lies on the Mediterranean and the Atlantic; a magnificent territory, on which Carthage once lay — the site of the modern Morocco, Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli. This part was to be — must be attached to Europe.” (8)

It seems the British Museum, Louvre, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Berlin Museums and the large museums follow Hegel or at least similar ideas when they separate Egypt from Africa. But when there is disaster in Egypt or Sudan, even the museum directors must recognize that those States are in Africa.

The great Hegel did not have any good opinion about Africans: *“The Negro, as already observed, exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state. We must put aside all thought of reverence and morality - all that we call feeling - if we would rightly comprehend him; there is nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in this type of character.”* (9)

Hegel who never visited Africa stated that *“Among the Negroes moral sentiments are quite weak or more strictly, non-existent. Parents sell their children, and conversely children their parents, as either has the opportunity. Through the pervading influence of slavery all those bonds of moral regard which we cherish towards each other disappear, and it does not occur to the Negro mind to expect from others what we are enabled to claim. The polygamy of the Negroes has frequently for its object the having of having many children to be sold, every one of them, into slavery.”* (10)

Hegel’s knowledge or lack of it led him to proclaim that: *“In Dahomey, when the King dies, the bonds of society are loosed; in his palace begins indiscriminate havoc and disorganization. All the wives of the King (in Dahomey their number is exactly 3,333) are massacred, and through the whole*

town plunder and carnage run riot. The wives of the king regard their death as a necessity; they go richly attired to meet it. The authorities have to hasten to proclaim the new governor, simply to put a stop to massacre”. (11)

Kant also denied the Africans any capacity for creativity and thought the colour of Africans was a clear indication of their stupidity:

“The Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling. Mr. Hume challenges anyone to cite a single example in which a Negro has shown talents, and asserts that among the hundreds of thousands of blacks who are transported elsewhere from their countries, although many of them have even been set free, still not a single one was every found who presented anything great in art or science or any other praiseworthy quality, even though among whites some continually rise aloft from the lowest rabble, and through superior gifts earn respect in the world. So fundamental is the difference between these two races of man, and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in colour.” (12)

“And it might be that there were something in this which perhaps deserved to be considered; but in short, this fellow was quite black from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was stupid.” (13)

For good measure, Kant added that the Africans were inferior to the Whites: *“In the hot countries the human being matures in all aspects earlier, but does not, however, reach the perfection of those in the temperate zones. Humanity is at its greatest perfection in the race of the whites. The yellow Indians do have a meagre talent. The Negroes are far below them and at the lowest point are a part of the American peoples.”* (14)

The intellectual history left by the philosophers of the Enlightenment cannot be said to be one that is propitious for developing honest and unprejudiced ideas about social development outside Europe and many of the racial prejudices we have in Europe, both in ordinary life and in the social sciences have their origin in these philosophers. The museums which are largely the creations of the Enlightenment could not escape the grip of these foolish ideas. Is it not yet time for the Germans and the other Europeans to re-examine these philosophies as they affect their thoughts to-day? Present-day German intellectuals could ask themselves whether there is any justification for considering African art as primitive or backward, especially since modern art has only been possible thanks to borrowings and imitations from African art, especially, African sculptures. Could it be seriously argued that African art which contributed largely to the development of modern art remained itself at a standstill and made no progress at all? (15)

The prejudices against African culture, including the arts, could be a main theme for the museums in Berlin, not only for the Ethnology museum but for all. The Alte Museum could be used to explain why Egyptian Art is not included in the arts found in the Ethnology Museum. Was this largely due to Hegel's idea that Egypt does not belong to Africa and should be excised from the Continent? And why did Hegel prescribe this excision? His plan was to declare the whole of Africa as a continent without history and without any development and not part of world history. But he could not pursue this line of thought so long as Egypt was part of Africa. Egypt had been known to the Europeans since the Greek and Roman times as a civilization. He had the choice of either abandoning his prejudice or accepting that there had been development in Africa. He preferred to keep his unfounded prejudices and decided to sever Egypt from the Continent. After the severance of Egypt, what follows in Hegel's discussion is uncontrolled vituperation and unmitigated attacks against Africans. (16)

Lepenies states that all ethnological museums are faced with the question of how far they want to change to art museums of foreign cultures and depending on their location, there arises the question of how they deal with the "First Peoples", the original inhabitants and their own colonial past. He mentions Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the USA where it is no longer possible to establish an ethnological museum without consulting the members of the "Aborigines" about the conception, construction and management of the museum.

An ethnological museum in France had less to do with "Autochthones" but rather to deal with the colonial past. Here Lepenies thinks the Musée du Quai Branly failed and one can only agree with him. He mentions that *"the huge colonial collections cannot be seen at Quai Branly but have been placed in depots. Moreover, if and when the colonial past is mentioned, then in a brief and somewhat mild manner. The visitor learns that behind every object, there is an adventure - but there is seldom complete information on the history of the robbery and stealing. The so-called "primitive peoples" are beamed on the left bank of the Seine with highly sophisticated advanced technology to their innocent early past as if through a magic wand the period of colonialism could be deleted from history"*.

When Lepenies turns to the situation of the Ethnology Museums that are to move from Berlin-Dalhem to the centre of the German capital, in a reconstructed City Castle, yet to be built, opposite the present Museum Island, he states that colonialism must be a topic; Berlin was after all the place where in 1884/85 Bismarck called the Africa Conference at which the European powers divided Africa among themselves. The author then declares that *"The question of the treatment of one's own aborigines does not arise for the German ethnological museum."* This is an interesting declaration. It is true that there are no "African or Asian" indigenous people to contend with in building a museum

in Berlin and Germany. It is true that the author has mentioned that colonialism must be a topic. But that declaration, coming after the severe criticism on how the Musée du Quai Branly deals with the French colonial past gives the impression that the Germans really do not have any serious problems with the colonial past. He does not indicate that the German colonial history with its own share of genocides and other atrocities also has problems. He does not mention that the Germans have their own former colonial peoples such as the Hereros and Namas, with claims which have hitherto not been treated with serious consideration (17). The impression he leaves the reader is that there is a colonial past but not a very complicated one. The museum would simply have to tell the story.

For Lepenies, the main question is how the ethnologists would organize the presentation of the objects they now have in their museums: The crucial question, as he sees it, is whether there should be in the projected Humboldt Forum an ethnological art museum and whether ethnological “objects” would become “artworks”. He suggests that for Berlin it should not become an either or question but as well as. There should be a double vision which makes it clear to the visitor that what she sees depends on the arrangement of the curator and her own perception. It would appear that Lepenies has not seen the current Benin exhibition for he would have realized that much of what he seems to be suggesting has been achieved by the curators of the exhibition *600 years of Court Arts from Nigeria*. (18) The author’s own preferences become very clear when he suggests that the new ethnology museums in Berlin should be guided and managed by scholars. Here he is not referring to scholars from what he describes as “the traditionally weak German Ethnology” but the so-called Regional sciences, for example, Africanistic, Japanology and Iranistic. Lepenies has not demonstrated why scholars from Africanistic would be more suitable to run or manage the new museum than the ethnologists. Not a single argument is advanced why there should be a change from ethnologists to africanists.

Lepenies could have explained the main problem with Ethnology - the unfounded basic discrimination lying at the basis of the subject, i.e. the alleged primitivism of the peoples of Africa and other continents studied by the ethnologists. He is best placed to explain what the basic difference is between ethnology and sociology. Or was Lepenies afraid to raise this issue which would have led to a much wider issue? Western scholarship, including Sociology and the other disciplines all work on the assumption that Western society is superior to all. Despite all protestations to the contrary, Western intellectual history and tradition is still permeated with the foolish ideas of the so-called Enlightenment about Africa which laid down the basic framework for perceiving and studying Africans. There is not a single discipline, not even Law, that has escaped the malignant influence of the Enlightenment racism. Eric Morton has rightly concluded that “*Western historians and philosophers have allowed a racist*

perspective to influence western history, scholarship, politics, and education regarding race, racism, and the origin and spread of human culture.” (19)
Epistemological ethnocentrism is not confined to the ethnologists. It is a normal element of most scholarly work in the Western world.

Lepénies proclaims that the colonial era is at end and that only an intellectual colonialism remains: *“European colonial domination ended long ago and that only an intellectual colonialism has remained which looks at the non-western cultures only from Europe; in this process the manifold contacts between the non-western cultures is overlooked. An ethnologic history of contacts will put these contacts in focus. No other place would be better as the Humboldt Forum in the Centre of Berlin. That would be the long overdue renunciation of the Congo Act, a farewell to colonialism.”* As Lepénies knows, German colonialism did not start with German colonization nor did it end with the end of colonization; the ideologies, the economic relations and the colonialist mentality did not disappear at once with the end of German colonization. Much of this still remains in the mentality of the German peoples as it does in the minds of the British, French and many other European countries.

I am somewhat baffled by the declaration that colonialism ended long ago. What are forty years in terms of history? Can an intellectual really consider that colonialism ended long ago? I lived in the colonial times and saw the final formal declarations of end of British and French colonial rule in West Africa but it seems to me as if it were only yesterday, especially since most of the problems left by colonialism are still visible every where in Africa. The inequality generated by the colonial enterprise still dominates the relations between Africa and Europe which clearly reflect colonial ideas rather than the theory of sovereign States having relations of equality and mutual respect.

Lepénies seems to wish to continue Ethnology without the ethnologists when he talks of “ethnological history of relations”. Why must the relations between Nigeria and China or between Benin and Asante be described as ethnological? I am especially concerned about the idea that the relationships between the countries represented by objects in the Ethnology Museum should be the focus of the new museum. Is this an undeclared attempt to re-write history? Everybody knows that what links the artefacts from Benin with those of Papua New Guinea or Congo is not their relationship with each other or the contacts of peoples in those countries with another. Indeed there was before colonization very little relationship between peoples of West Africa and those of Asia or Oceania. What undoubtedly unites all the objects in the Ethnology Museum is the fact that they were from conquered territories and peoples dominated and exploited by Europeans. It is the colonial domination that gave unity to these objects the collection of which was facilitated by the colonial administration. The most recent museum guide of the Ethnology Museum states this: “The greatest

number of objects, however, came to the Berlin museum during the colonial period.” (20) It is therefore the relationship of these objects and their peoples with Germany or Europe which explains their presence in Berlin. Any other perspective would be a falsification or distortion of history. What then is the objective of Wolf Lepenies? Does he want to avoid the discussion of the colonial relationship, the questions of restitution and possible reparation? What does he mean when he says colonialism should be a topic for the new museum if it is not going to examine and study the relationship between Germany and her colonies and former colonies?

Lepenies writes about the new museum he envisages as appropriate symbol or act of the final renunciation of the Congo Act. He reads history differently from many of us. A final renunciation of the agreement on partition of Africa surely cannot be the establishment of a museum which keeps all the stolen African objects and only serves to buttress Berlin’s tourism industry. No benefit can be derived by the Africans and other victims of western colonialism and imperialism from a new museum in Berlin. It will be a cheap and not very honest way out of an act which had serious consequences for the people of Africa and the world. We have not entirely recovered from those consequences. Surely a more tangible act would be first to return most, if not all, of our stolen objects, officially apologise for the genocides and other inhuman and unspeakable deeds of colonialism and make some reparation for the damages. Are European intellectuals afraid to go that far? Do they not dare to follow the logic of the historical acts of their forefathers? Have they become as pragmatic as the politicians? It used to be thought that intellectuals examined problems in their totality and left it to politicians to implement the solutions which were proposed but now it appears there is no desire to go to the roots of problems and examine logically the appropriate remedies.

Wolf Lepenies who has written a foreword to a book entitled, *Beyond Eurocentricism*, (21) is himself not free from eurocentricism for it is obvious from his comments on the Musée du Quai Branly that he read only the criticisms of the museum written by Europeans and not by Africans or others from the countries where the museum objects were stolen. The Africans who wrote about the new museum were mostly not so much concerned with the architecture of Jean Nouvel and its aesthetics but with the content of the new museum, namely the stolen goods transferred from the two museums, *Musée de l’Homme* and *Musée des Arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie*. They were concerned about questions of ethic as Wolf Lepenies but saw the issue as the legality or morality of returning or not returning the stolen items. Lepenies understands under ethic doing justice to the evaluation of the arts of the other. Africans understand under ethic not only being fair in the judgement of the arts of the other but also doing justice to the art of the other by restoring to him his stolen art objects so that he can continue his chosen path as indicated by the looted works. (22)

Lepenius is concerned with the creation of the cultural identity of Berlin, an identity created with the stolen objects of others, including African objects. Nefertiti comes readily to mind in this context of using the stolen cultural objects of others and even arguing against the original owner, that the object has become more part of its new country than the original home! Here he joins the ranks of the supporters of the infamous *Declaration of the Value and Importance of Universal Museums* (2002). They argue that the African and Asian objects that have been stolen and kept for hundreds of years in European and American museums have become part of the culture of the countries of those museums. (23) A moment's reflection shows how untenable this proposition is.

But what are the values and implications of an identity built on the bases of stolen items of the others? What does such an identity tell us about the culture and morality of such a people? Lepenius could have asked, if he went beyond the limits of eurocentricism, what about the identity of the Africans whose religious and cultural objects have been stolen and are now in the Ethnology Museum of Berlin? What about the identity of the people of Benin whose finest works are now in Berlin, some 600 objects of the best whereas the museum in Benin City does not have that much? The British Museum of course, holds some 700 of those pieces. Some of those objects that express the deeper feelings and aspirations as well as the cultural identity of the people of Benin are now in Berlin and should now serve to express the identity of the city of Berlin? How does Queen-mother Idia fit into the Berlin mythology? Berlin may be considered by Europeans to be more important than Benin and hence the need to pay attention to its identity and the components and symbols of its identity. But for Nigerians and Africans the identity of Benin is absolutely important. It is not by accident that the mascot of the FESTAC 77 was chosen from the Benin art, namely the hip mask of Queen mother Idia, now in British Museum, London. The British refused even to lend it for a short period. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, has a second one of this Idia mask. Is the identity of Africans so unimportant that even European and American intellectuals do not realise that the stealing by Europeans and the absence of our cultural objects, in addition to all the other things they have stolen from us and done to us, hurt our inner most feelings?

The Germans seem prepared to make amends and compensation for victims of Nazi atrocities but colonial atrocities do not seem to worry many Germans who often add that their colonial period was short (1885-1918). They do not seem to understand that that period was long enough for the victims of their colonialism and also long enough for experimenting with the evil methods which the Nazis perfected later - concentration camps, racial discrimination, spoliation of land and goods, deportation, extermination and arbitrary rule. If European and

American intellectuals cannot understand how Africans feel about these factors who else can?

Europeans of our days must realize that many Africans seem prepared, some reluctantly, to forgive the Europeans of previous generations for the atrocities they committed against Africans on condition that these nefarious and wicked plans of the colonialists are recognized for what they were: intentional and systematic despoliation and extermination of peoples in order to obtain what the unbridled greed of 17th-20th Century Europe and America led them to believe they needed. Recognition of this fact and corresponding compensation for the incalculable damage should be the minimum consideration (24)

What most Africans are not prepared to accept or forgive is the continued implementation of ideas and policies of yester years. We are definitely not in the mood to accept the confirmation of evil policies which are well-documented in history. If the present generation of Europeans and Americans are not willing to condemn the evil policies of their ancestor and continue to confirm their validity then they should not be surprised that most Africans consider them even worse than their ancestors. Whereas one may be able to find excuses for the past deeds, however untenable, there are absolutely no excuses for present day Europeans for following paths they themselves have in writing condemned as evil.

To condemn eurocentricism and at the same time to consider what and how objects stolen with violence from Africa and Asia can contribute to the identity of Berlin, where Africa was divided in 1885 by the Europeans and in the capital of the German colonial Empire seems to us somewhat insensitive. Present day Germany has no need of robbing Africans of their cultural property. The German or Berlin personality or identity does not need the 350,000 stolen objects in the Ethnology Museum, Berlin, not to talk about the other stolen African objects, such as the bust of Nefertiti. Ethical and legal considerations should lead German intellectuals to plead for the return of all these objects except those which the owners consent to leave in Europe. This should be considered as the minimum sign that the evils of the past are condemned by the present generation and that they are seeking to take new paths in their relations with Africa and Asia. They should abandon any belief that one can overcome the past without any effort and without any critical examination of the past. They should consider “*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*” (“coming to terms with the past”) as relevant not only with regard to the Nazi past but also the colonialist past. Colonialism did not come to an end with the end of colonization any more than Nazism came to an end with the termination of Nazi domination in Europe.

It should be recalled that most Africans and African artists have not been able to see the masterpieces of African art since these pieces have been kept in Europe for hundreds of years. Can one imagine a situation where most European artists have not seen the widely acclaimed masterpieces of European art?

Imagine how Europeans would feel if many of their masterpieces such as those listed here were all in Africa - Arcimboldo, Braque, Botticelli, Bourgeois, Bernini, Cézanne, Chagall, Courbet, Dürer, Dali, Gauguin, Giorgione, Klee, Klimt, Manet, Monet, Munch, Miró, Nolde, Picasso, Pollock, Raffael, Rembrandt, Rodin, Schiele, Tizian, Van Dyck, Warhol, etc.

How can Africans, and for that matter, African artists learn to appreciate their cultural traditions when their masterpieces are all in Europe? How do we develop aesthetics when all or most of our masterpieces are away, hidden in societies which have no particular use for those pieces? How is the collective memory cultivated, corrected, modified and polished when those significant masterpieces are not available? African art objects are often historical records and it is ironical that those who often proclaim that Africans have no history seem bent on detaining the objects that are records of historical events and thus enable us to reconstruct our history. The Benin bronzes constitute a record of Benin history but are of no use for an understanding of the history of Berlin. So who should keep these records? And why do Europeans keep African objects which they do not need and cannot even display for lack of space? The museum guide of the Ethnology Museum states clearly that: “By far the largest segment of items is not on display, but is stored in the study collections.” (25) So why keep stolen items you do not need and refuse to return them to the owner who needs them and has been for hundred years asking for their return? The museum has some 75,000 pieces, more than the stocks of probably all the museums in Africa. These are the sort of questions European intellectual should be asking themselves. The situation is very similar for the British Museum, London, Louvre, Paris, Musée du Quai Branly, Paris, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York and all the major museums in the Western world. Do European intellectuals approve the denial to Africans of their right to developing their culture with their own cultural objects? This situation should worry all genuine intellectuals and those interested in the arts and intellectual history. It is this total insensitivity to the needs of others that has given Europeans a very bad reputation in Africa as people who are only concerned with their selfish interest and pay no attention to any rules of morality where their interests are concerned; their greed and avarice are constant factors in the African’s perception of European morality (26)

We have in several articles on the internet demonstrated systematically, the weaknesses of the arguments of those defending the non-restitution of African cultural objects by the American and European museums. Most museum directors have wisely refrained from giving any comment, seeing that they have no valid reason, in morality or in law, for retaining stolen objects, in their museums, mostly in their depots. However, one museum director of a leading museum in the Western world, made a written comment admitting directly and explicitly his lack of familiarity with African cultural objects, even though his

museum has hundreds of African objects. True the European and American museum officials do not need all to know much about African culture or indeed be interested in African art. For many of these officials, Greek culture seems to be the beginning and end of all that is valuable in culture. But where then is the argument about their need for African cultural objects so that they can teach their people to appreciate African art?

Lepenies and other German intellectuals raise the issue of restitution of Benin bronzes with Prof. Hermann Parzinger, the new President of the Prussian Heritage Foundation (Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz) which is the governing authority of the State Museums in Berlin. Since the Germans are asking the Russians and the Polish for restitution of German cultural property which the Russians had seized during World War II or which the Germans had deposited in Poland when that country was under German control, it would seem to most of us logical that the Germans also start discussions with other Governments, for example Nigeria about the Benin bronzes that are in the Ethnology Museum, Berlin. How the Germans can ask others for restitution without thinking about also returning to others their illegally or wrongfully acquired items is something most of us find difficult to understand. The season for restitution must be for all and not only for Europeans.

It is certainly not my task to defend Ethnology in Germany but I must confess I was somewhat surprised by this frontal attack against the ethnologists by Lepenies who is himself a sociologist by training. He does not offer any argument or evidence of the alleged weakness of Ethnology in Germany. How would he feel if someone were to state that Sociology was weak in Germany, without offering or attempting to advance some arguments? He would no doubt be aware that most of the objects or artworks in the Ethnology Museum were collected by ethnologists such as Luschan, Bastian and co. I have my own criticism of the ethnologists which is applicable to ethnologists outside Germany too. Lepenies criticism is directed solely against German ethnologists and I am not sure whether the French, the British and American ethnologists are any better. I am also not sure that the scholars in Africanistic are much better than the ethnologists as far as Africa is concerned and in particular, that they can manage such museums better than the ethnologists. But the essential point is surely not the relocation of the museums but the re-examination of their functions and the legality and legitimacy of the thousands of stolen cultural objects they hold in their museums. What views of the world are they to project? The wholly prejudiced views of the Enlightenment philosophers or the image of other countries and societies as emerge from their cultural accomplishments?

“Enlightenment philosophy was instrumental in codifying and institutionalizing both the scientific and popular European perceptions of the human race. The numerous writings on race by Hume, Kant and Hegel played a strong role in articulating Europe’s sense not only of its cultural but also racial superiority”

E.Chukwudi Eze, *Race and Enlightenment*, (Blackwell Oxford, 1997, p.5.)

Kwame Opoku, 27 April, 2008.

NOTES

- (1) “Abschied vom intellektuellem Kolonialismus; Was Berlin aus der Debatte über das Musée du Quai Branly in Paris lernen kann“
http://www.welt.de/welt_print/article1858177/Abschied_vom_intellektuelle_n_Kolonialismus.html
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