

## **Swiss Benin Initiative (SBI): Renewed funding by FOC and start of Phase II**

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**The Swiss Federal Office of Culture (FOC) is funding the second phase of the Swiss Benin Initiative, thus continuing and extending the provenance research project on the Benin collections held in eight Swiss museums in collaboration with Nigeria. Phase II has its specific focus on joint exhibition projects and is breaking new ground in terms of international museum cooperation. The new project phase was launched on 1 June 2023.**

In the second phase of SBI, the Swiss museums have agreed to expand and deepen their research on their Benin holdings. Research and knowledge transfer are to be conducted in close collaboration with our Nigerian partners in universities, national museums, palace associations, and artisan guilds. This comprehensive view of the objects from both angles is new and entails a mutual exchange of knowledge and research involving descendants of the societies in which the objects originated. The findings of the joint research are to be presented to the public in 2024 in exhibitions, workshops, and similar events. This will also include – at the political and legal level in both Switzerland and Nigeria – the task of negotiating the question of how to deal with the Benin holdings from Swiss museums in the future. An important objective of the follow-up project is to show how both countries may benefit from the collaborative approach adopted by the Swiss Benin Initiative.

### **Phase II: Research, methodology, knowledge transfer**

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The close cooperation with Nigeria now enters the second project phase of the Swiss Benin Initiative; it was launched on 1 June 2023. With the help of funding by the Swiss Federal Office of Culture (FOC), the focus is now on the three areas of research, methodology and knowledge transfer:

#### 1. Open research questions

In addition to filling in remaining gaps concerning provenance, the project will also explore the objects' shift in meaning as well as the role of artisan guilds in the past and today. Our Nigerian partners consider it especially important to focus on the production of art and the art trade before and after 1897. New research findings will also play a pivotal part in this context, such as the origin of brass as an important raw material as well the question of slavery and the slave trade, from the Swiss as well as from the Nigerian perspective.

#### 2. New concepts of museum collaboration

In addition to research, one of the aims in the second project phase is to develop methods in support of the collaboration between museums in the Global North and their counterparts in the Global South. These should go beyond the findings of the Swiss Benin Initiative to date and include collaboration with other countries and societies of origin represented in Swiss Museum collections.

#### 3. Joint exhibitions and educational projects

A further objective is to develop in close collaboration with our Nigerian museum colleagues and researchers, new exhibition and education formats with the intention of enhancing the Nigerian perspective in the presentation of the objects. This is clearly a mutual enrichment since the effort to create new exhibition narratives involves not only Swiss museums but also our Nigerian partners where a number of new museum venues and exhibitions are in the making. In 2024, the museums involved in the SBI are planning various satellite shows, workshops, lectures, and similar events for the purpose of sharing the research and collaboration with Nigeria with a wider audience.

## **Joint research and knowledge sharing as a mutual enrichment**

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The world of museums is undergoing rapid change. The current processes taking place in museums in the light of global exchange help to democratize the institutions across the world and are guided by new ethical relationship commitments with the countries of origin. The Code of Ethics issued by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) emphasizes the importance of collaboration between museums and the “communities from which their collections originate.”

From the start, the Swiss Benin Initiative has conducted research in collaboration with our Nigerian partners which means that Nigerian historiography and museology as well as the local knowledge concerning the objects and their prehistory have been an integral part of the project throughout. The joint research on the objects' history is outcome-open and differentiated and therefore avoids mutual stereotyping and any preconceived "victim and offender" imagery. Owing to this collaborative and proactive approach, the Swiss Benin Initiative with its singular “Swiss way” has been internationally commended as exemplary.

It shows that provenance research has become a significant method for dealing with global collection histories, while the collaborative approach provides a sound basis for discussions on the objects' future. Collaboration in research and exhibition projects has provided the opportunity to develop new exhibition narratives and forms of knowledge sharing which include the Nigerian perspective and promise to be pioneering for museums in Switzerland and Nigeria alike.

Such internationally embedded research and museum collaborations help to strengthen the global network, provide impulses for new museum practices, and allow all participants to benefit.

The runtime for the FOC funding of Phase II of the SBI covers the period from 1 June 2023 to 31 May 2024. With immediate effect, the historian Daniela Müller joins the two project heads in her capacity as a research associate.

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## **Looking back on Phase I: The Swiss Benin Initiative: collaborative and innovative**

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The first phase of the Swiss Benin Initiative focused on basic research into the history of the collections involved. The provenance research was guided by collaboration, on the one hand between the eight participant museums in Switzerland, on the other with Nigerian scholars and museum specialists. In the Swiss museums, a total of 96 objects were identified as pieces from the Kingdom of Benin, with the number of items in the various institutions ranging from 3 to 21. The joint research was able to close significant gaps in our knowledge concerning the origins, production, and meaning of the objects as well as how they reached Switzerland. The findings were published in a joint **research report** authored by the anthropologist Dr Alice Hertzog and the historian Dr Enibokun Uzebu-Imarghiagbe (in English, edited by Dr Michaela Oberhofer and Esther Tisa Francini). One of the main results of the research revealed that 53 of the 96 objects stemmed from the military operation conducted by the British Army against Benin City, and classify as either “looted” or “likely looted”. The open and transparent communication concerning the research results also carried over into **the Benin Forum**, which both Swiss and Nigerian participants rated as forming a cornerstone for a new level of relations between the parties involved.

“The Swiss Benin Initiative uses a novel and innovative approach to engage the ongoing debates on the provenance and future of the Benin art objects in Europe. The crux of the Swiss Benin initiative is the engagement of and collaboration with Nigerian stakeholders. This will ensure that the voices and perspectives of Nigerians, especially, the Benin people, are included in the final outcome of the project.”

**Dr Enibokun Uzebu-Imarghiagbe**  
**Historian at the University of Benin City**

In the context of the Forum, the research report was formally handed over to the Nigerian delegation, which included, among others, the Nigerian ambassador in Bern, Baba Madugu, Director General Prof Abba Tijani and Theophilus Umogbai of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM), Prince Aghatise Erediauwa and Dr Charles Uwensuyi-Edosomwan as representatives of the Oba as well as scholars (Prof Kokunre Agbontaen-Eghafona, Dr Enibokun Uzebu-Imarhiagbe, Osaisonor Godfrey Ekhaton-Obogie) and artists (Samson Ogiamien, Phil Omodamwen, Patrick Oronsaye) from Benin City.

Furthermore, the **Joint Declaration of the Swiss Benin Forum** was issued on the occasion which had previously been prepared by the Nigerian delegation together with members of the Swiss Benin Initiative. The joint declaration addresses the future of the Benin collections held in Swiss institutions and, equally important, outlines the different forms of collaboration with Nigeria in the future.

The museums of the Swiss Benin Initiative have declared that they are open to the transfer of ownership of the 53 objects that were looted or very likely looted in in the raid of 1897. The transfer may involve the return, circulation, or loan of the objects to Swiss museums. At the institutional level, museum experts are currently assessing how this transfer of ownership can be effected by the various bodies involved. In addition, great emphasis was laid on joint scientific and museum projects in the future.

## **Background: colonial injustice and the significance of the transfer of ownership**

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To date, there is no international agreement that defines restitution claims resulting from actions of colonial injustice, or propose a concrete procedure for resolving the issue. Moreover, the question as to when we are dealing with colonial injustice and as to who has claim to reparation is complex. In the case of the Kingdom of Benin, the British colonial government sent an armed “punitive expedition” comprising roughly 2,500 soldiers and carriers to the capital of Benin City. In the course of the action, thousands of works were seized from the royal palace and the houses of dignitaries and sold to European museums and private collectors for the purpose of funding the British army and colonial administration.

Sceptics of the restitution claims argue that the British military action needs to be understood as a “wartime” action, and was thus in accordance with the “understanding of the law” at the time. For it was not until two years later that the Hague Convention Concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land prohibited the taking of war booty – which later became, emanating from Europe, International Law. In the case of the “punitive expedition” – again a Eurocentric concept – it is argued, with reference to the then reigning “laws of war,” that the descendants of the Kingdom of Benin have no legal claim to the looted objects now held in museums of the Global North.

But whose law is to apply in the case of 1897? From the viewpoint of the Oba (king) and of Benin society, the punitive expedition was not a “war” between declared enemy parties, but a case of looting carried out in the course of the colonial overthrow of a sovereign kingdom with a centuries-old history. The then reigning Oba, Ovonramwen, was dethroned by the British and sent into exile, the palace and large swathes of the city went up in flames, and many local people were either killed or wounded. As far as the treasures stolen from the palace are concerned, we are dealing with a violent appropriation conducted against the will of the objects’ lawful owners at the time. When questioned today, the people of Benin and Nigeria, respectively still see this act of colonial injustice as a painful incursion into their indigenous history. Hence, there is a strong desire, now as well as in the past, that their rightful cultural heritage, now held by and on display in museums across the globe, be returned to Benin and made accessible there. The first restitution claims date back to the 1930s, when Oba Akenzua demanded that the British Museum should return his father’s regalia. Since then, Nigerian museum scholars and politicians have yet and again demanded the return of objects held by museums in the Global North to be returned, as yet without success.

«In the Benin Kingdom people use tangible and intangible heritage to document and express their living cultural values. The Swiss Benin Initiative is one of the global projects designed to provide the needed knowledge base for Benin people to decipher and decode what have been documented by their ancestors. So the Swiss Benin Initiative could contribute to change the narratives in the restitution debates».

**Osaisonor Godfrey Ekhaton-Obogie**  
**Historian at the Institute for Benin Studies**

The Swiss Benin Initiative research project goes from the assumption that Switzerland holds Benin objects which were looted by British troops during the colonial era and later found their way to Swiss museums by means of the international art trade – despite knowledge of their violent appropriation. The Nigerian partners expressed their appreciation to the Swiss Benin Initiative and the Swiss museums involved for proactively approaching them to jointly conduct research on ambiguous provenances and together discuss the future of the objects, despite the fact that Switzerland never owned colonies but, as it shows, was economically involved in colonial ventures.

“It must be noted that Switzerland never raided Benin nor participated in the looting of the royal palace. It is therefore very worthwhile to commend the BIS for initiating this idea. It is equally important to commend the Federal Office of Culture of Switzerland for supporting this (...) splendid work they are doing. We look forward to a future of greater collaboration with the BIS and other museums in Europe.”

**Prof. Abba Tijani**  
**General Director NCMM**

## **Outlook: Negotiating the terms in Nigeria**

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The SBI research project collaborated with partners at state, local, museum as well as scientific levels right from the start. In the joint declaration of the Swiss Benin Forum, participants agreed to recommend the transfer of ownership to the "original owners". The term was endorsed by both Prof Abba Tijani as Director General of the National Museums and Prince Aghatise Erediauwa as the official representative of the Palace.

The recent statement made by the outgoing President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Muhammad Buhari, suggesting that the returned Benin objects should pass into the ownership of the current King of Benin, Oba Ewuare II, caused an international stir and led to widespread discussions in the international media. Numerous articles in connection with restitutions to Nigeria from Germany raised the question as to whether objects looted by the British colonial army should be returned to the modern Nigerian state or the Oba of Benin.

It remains to be seen how the new government under President Bola Tinubu will decide. It is only then that negotiations concerning the transfer of ownership, permanent loans or the circulation of objects between the various museums involved in the Swiss Benin Initiative and Nigeria can begin. Then it is up to Nigeria to decide as to who the appropriate negotiating partner will be and whether some of the objects will later go on display in the planned Edo Museum of West African Art (EMOWAA) or in the new Royal Palace Museum in Benin City.

Irrespective of the legal question, with regard to the research and educational efforts conducted in the context of the Swiss Benin Initiative, the museums in Nigeria along with the palace as well scholars and artists at home and in the diaspora remain important partners. Responsible for collaborative projects at the museum level in Nigeria is the National Commission for Museums and Monuments along with their 52 local museums, some of which look back on a history that reaches back to colonial days, and which are, by law, and based on their broad competence responsible for the preservation of Nigeria's cultural heritage.

For Benin society, the royal palace and the King of Benin represent an important institution. Like many other regional leaders, the Oba is named in the constitution as a traditional ruler. The current Oba, Ewuare II, is a direct descendant of Oba Ovonramwen who was exiled by the British colonial authorities. Notably, the Oba is not primarily a private person but a figure embedded in a complex palace society and supported and controlled in office by numerous dignitaries with various duties and titles. Not only in Benin, in the diaspora, too, the Oba is and remains an important figure of identification.

"The Oba of Benin plays a very important role as a result of his status as the king of the Benin people. In the precolonial times, he was the pivot around which the sociopolitical, economic and religious lives of the Benin people revolved. Till date, the Oba still greatly influences the lives of the Benin people, his position is further strengthened by the constitutional recognition of traditional institution by the Nigeria constitution."

**Dr. Enibokun Uzebu-Imarghiagbe**  
**Historian at the University of Benin City**

The fact that recently a discussion has arisen on the Nigerian side as to whom the Benin objects actually belong and where they should go on display, that is, either in the projected Edo Museum of West African Art or in the planned Royal Palace Museum, is part of the internal Nigerian negotiation process and will be decided on within the Nigeria. The multiple meanings the objects hold in their capacity as African World Culture Heritage items have undergone changes over time. While in Benin they possess significant spiritual value, serve as historical archives, play an important role in ancestor veneration, and serve representational purpose, the forces of history transformed them into spoils of war and commodities and then into highly praised museum objects and works of art. To date,

members of the royal family, such as Prince Aghatise Erediauwa, have a close emotional and spiritual relationship with the objects, as he so impressively described during the Swiss Benin Forum.

## **USEFUL INFORMATION**

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### **Links:**

- More on the Swiss Benin Initiative (SBI) at [rietberg.ch/bis\\_en](http://rietberg.ch/bis_en)
- Go to the official SBI report at [rietberg.ch/bis\\_en#report](http://rietberg.ch/bis_en#report)
- **Joint Declaration** and further information at [rietberg.ch/bis\\_en#swissbeninforum](http://rietberg.ch/bis_en#swissbeninforum)

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