

sovereignty of the Oba (Plankensteiner 2007:19). Given the lopsided nature of the treaty, the Oba, whose authority in the kingdom was unchallenged until the British came, may not have been aware of the full implication of the treaty. The British who felt bad about the continued restriction placed on trade by the Oba decided to go see the King of Benin to persuade him to keep to the terms of the agreement. In December 1896, an emissary comprising nine Britons and two hundred and fifty African carriers led by Vice Consul James Phillips set out on this mission. This visit was intended to be a 'peaceful one' even though the two hundred and fifty African carriers were bearing boxes containing weapons! Itsekiri middlemen had sent warnings against this visit and the Oba had explicitly sent messages that he was not able to receive any visitors as he was performing a sacred annual ceremony at the time. He asked that the Phillips party postpone their visit. Disregarding these messages, the party marched on to Benin. On 4 January 1897, they were ambushed. Only 20 African carriers (out of 250) and 7 (out of 9) Britons survived the attack. The British government set out on a punitive expedition. Ships stationed off the coast of Africa and Malta were assembled. Their destination was Benin. Under the leadership of Rear Admiral Harry Rawson, 1200 marines, 5 companies of Hausa and 1,700 carriers carried out reprisals for the ambush (Ibid. 2007:119).

Although Benin forces put up a strong resistance, they were overpowered by the British. As the British troops closed in on Benin, farmlands and villages were torched. The king and chiefs fled the city which was almost completely deserted. The palace became the headquarters of the British army. On the third day of the invasion of the palace, a fire was reported to have broken out which destroyed the palace and most of the city.<sup>6</sup> The shrines were desecrated while several valuable works of art were plundered from the palace and the king's bedroom. A number of art pieces were destroyed in the fire. These works, comprising a wide range of object types in ivory, jewellery and textiles, were auctioned to offset the cost of the expedition while some valuable works were kept by members of the expedition.

In August 1897, the Oba, after a humiliating trial, was declared not guilty but was then exiled to Calabar. Two of the chiefs involved in the ambush committed suicide. Home (1982, cited in Plankensteiner 2007) reports that it was more honourable to do so. The other high chiefs found guilty were sentenced to death. In England, the loot was put on display in the Royal Colonial Institute in London in June 1897. The British Museum became the new home of several of these works such that in 1899, Ormonde Maddock Dalton and Hercules Read produced a catalogue of the collection published by the museum. Subsequently, in 1899, 1902 and 1930 several auctions were carried out, many drawn from the collection of the British expeditionary team. One of such was the auction held in May 1930 from the collection of George William Neville. His obituary in the newspaper dated November 30, 1929 read 'One of Neville's exploits was to accompany the punitive military to Benin in 1897, from which he returned with a remarkable collection of Benin curiosities'.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, as Home observes, many of the works were not sent to Britain as war booty but were distributed amongst members of the expedition who shared it according to their rank (Plankensteiner 2007:32, citing Home 1982). The British soldiers took many exotic pieces and disregarded the fact that these were once religious objects used in the service of the proclaimed 'fetish' gods.

Gill (2008) further remarks on the context of removal of these works of art described as 'chilling':

An eye-witness at the inquest into the death of one of the British officers mentioned that the British troops turned their Maxim guns on the defenders who fell from the trees "like nuts" ("The Death of Captain Byrne", *The Times* March 27, 1897).<sup>8</sup>