

# Of Desecrated History, Memories and Values in Peju Layiwola's Recent Works

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## Introduction

A redraft of the popular nursery rhyme might just be necessary to set the tone of this paper:

*Pussy cat, pussy cat,  
Where have you been?  
I have been to London  
Not just to see the Queen  
But to request of her and her people  
To return all the STOLEN African artefacts  
In London and the entire West.*

This adaptation signifies a reversal of loyalty to royalty and standards since it is obvious that people revel in doing unto others what they cannot tolerate from others; people now go to equity with mucky hands. The queen in this context is emblematic of colonial authority at the time of the theft of Benin objets d'art in 1897 and other similar lootings in Africa and beyond during colonial rule. She also symbolises neo-colonialism postdating Nigeria's and other African states' independence, which has continued to witness the disparaging, on the one hand, and pillaging, on the other, of Africa's rich cultural heritage and treasures.

So much has been written about the events before and after the 1897 brutish British expedition to Benin, such that it may be assumed that all issues arising therefrom have been exhausted, but this is not true because, according to a Yoruba adage, 'as long as one's hair is lice-infested, the fingernails will continue to be bloodstained',<sup>1</sup> meaning that as long as the issues of restitution and reparation emanating from the 1897 expedition and looting remain unresolved, the expedition will continue to attract re-evaluation and opprobrium.

## Issues

This writer assumes that the motives and events leading to the expedition are well published and known and as such will proceed to the outcome which was the sacking and burning of Benin and the looting of about three thousand world-class artefacts by the brutish invaders in 1897.

The art of a people is a privileged glimpse into the soul of the group. Artefacts, apart from being treasures by themselves, are compendiums of the history, facts, ideology and civilisation of the people that produced them; and so are uniquely theirs to be cherished and protected. It is thus unfortunate that these sacred treasures of peoples the world over have been violated and plundered as a result of colossal greed, envy and insensitivity. This global violation of a people's heritage by Europe has prompted several studies and questions such as: 'Is the Stealing of Cultural Objects of Others a Specific Cultural Heritage of Europe, or Is It a Universal Heritage?'<sup>2</sup>

The depth of injury to the psyche, history, values and the very being of a deprived people cannot be quantified. By such pillaging, critical links in the chain and pages of history of the world generally and the people, specifically, have been severed. To worsen the situation, the artefacts are now housed in environments and contexts different from that which was intended for them by peculiar reasons of their making; they currently are like 'fishes out of water'. There have been clamours over the years for the return of these artefacts via internationally institutionalised agencies<sup>3</sup> and procedures, but these have been discountenanced and countered with arrogance and sophistry such as the view that it is the ownership, but not the location of these objects, that should change.