

**Statement
on the handling of the Benin Bronzes in German museums and institutions**

On Thursday, 29 April 2021, at the invitation of the Minister of State for Culture and the Media, Monika Grütters, a digital meeting took place on the further handling of the Benin Bronzes in German museums and institutions. The aim is to arrive at a coordinated position in Germany and to reach a common understanding with the Nigerian side. The participants in the talks were the directors of the German museums belonging to the Benin Dialogue Group, which hold the largest collections in Germany from the historical Kingdom of Benin (Nigeria), the responsible Cultural Affairs Ministers of the *Länder*, the City of Cologne, which runs the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum, and the Federal Foreign Office (FFO).

The participants are in agreement that addressing Germany's colonial past is an important issue for the whole of society and a core task for cultural policy. Fundamental political agreements have been reached and major steps taken in Germany over the past few years. Furthermore, German museums and institutions have implemented numerous measures to address the history and origin of their holdings. These include returning human remains and cultural objects from colonial contexts to their countries and societies of origin.

The museums participating in the talks have been members of the Benin Dialogue Group, with other European museums and representatives of Nigeria, since 2010. Significant results have already been achieved in this forum. In particular, the Benin Dialogue Group decided in 2019 to support the construction of the planned Edo Museum of West African Art (EMOWAA) in Nigeria.

Concrete steps

The participants agree that what happens with the Benin Bronzes is a vital element of Germany's handling of collections from colonial contexts, which is also the object of international attention.

The participants reaffirm their willingness in principle to make substantial returns of Benin Bronzes.

In addition, the participants agree to

- 1. create extensive transparency with regard to the Benin Bronzes in their collections and exhibitions;**
- 2. hold further coordinated talks on returns and future cooperation with the Nigerian side at an early date; in this context, one aim will be to reach an understanding with the Nigerian partners on how Benin Bronzes can continue to be shown in Germany;**
- 3. determine concrete actions and a timetable for the upcoming talks.**

Not only the museums that are members of the Benin Dialogue Group, but also numerous other German museums and institutions have Benin Bronzes or other objects from Benin in their collections. The participants invite these museums and institutions to join in the process outlined above.

I. Transparency

The participants agree to ensure the greatest possible transparency as regards the handling of the Benin Bronzes. The Contact Point for Collections from Colonial Contexts in Germany, funded jointly by the Federation and the Länder (the Contact Point), will therefore publish a list of all Benin Bronzes held in the museums on its website (www.cp3c.de) by 15 June 2021 – in addition to the information on museums' own websites. In addition, the museums will provide comprehensive documentation of the provenance of these objects and make it publicly accessible on the Contact Point's website by the end of 2021. Where Benin Bronzes are shown in exhibitions, comprehensive information will be provided on their acquisition context.

In the medium term, it is intended that, as part of the three-part strategy adopted by the Federation, *Länder* and municipal umbrella organisations, an independent portal for collections from colonial contexts will be created within the German Digital Library, making all Benin Bronzes, and in future other collections from colonial contexts, held in German institutions accessible online.

Furthermore, as part of the Digital Benin project based at the Museum am Rothenbaum – Kulturen und Künste der Welt (World Cultures and Arts, MARKK), Hamburg, and financed by the Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung, the Benin collections scattered around the world will be collated from 2022 in a central online platform, which will at the same time serve as the basis for colleagues in Nigeria designing the exhibitions at EMOWAA.

II. Talks on returns and future cooperation

The participants agree that talks with the Nigerian side about return processes and future cooperation arrangements between museums should be intensified. To this end, the Legacy Restoration Trust (LRT), a civil-society initiative to develop EMOWAA in Benin City, was established recently; it is supported by the Nigerian Government, the Governor of Edo State and the Royal Family of Benin. In coordination with the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media and the participants in the Benin Dialogue Group, the FFO began talks with them to sound out the possibilities for a uniform approach to the construction of EMOWAA as well as negotiations on storage and exhibition of Benin Bronzes in Nigeria. The most recent feedback from the Nigerian side indicates that the process launched in Germany by the Federal Government, the museums and the bodies that fund them is welcomed and supported.

The continuing talks with the Nigerian side aim to find appropriate solutions at expert level through dialogue to take due account of the historical circumstances surrounding acquisition and of both sides' interests and expectations in respect of individual objects. A step-by-step approach is conceivable here. Discussions with the Nigerian partners are to cover not only returns to and cooperation projects in Nigeria, but also whether and how Benin Bronzes, as part of humanity's cultural heritage, can in future be shown in Germany as well.

The participants agree that further progress should be made not only in talks about the development of EMOWAA and returns, but also on the specialist inter-museum cooperation between German and

Nigerian museums and institutions begun in the Benin Dialogue Group. This includes training for future curators and museum managers, as well as the development of cultural infrastructure.

The International Museum Cooperation Agency currently being established by the FFO, in collaboration with the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media and the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, is intended to provide durable support for this process.

III. Process / procedure

The participants agree to determine, by the summer of this year, concrete actions and a timetable for the issue of returning Benin Bronzes. At the same time, the FFO, in coordination with the relevant museums and bodies that fund them, will hold further talks with the LRT and participating Nigerian agencies. The participants will together endeavour speedily to attain results that can be implemented. The funding bodies and their museums will put in place the legal and organisational conditions for this.

On the German side, the Federal Government talks will be coordinated on the part of the museums and the bodies that fund them by the Director of MARKK Hamburg, Prof. Barbara Plankensteiner, and the President of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, Prof. Hermann Parzinger. There is agreement that these two should be included in the FFO's upcoming talks in Nigeria and that talks about possible returns must be held in close mutual coordination. Coordination in Germany will be monitored by the Contact Point. The participants aim to make the first returns in the course of 2022. This chimes with the Nigerian side's plans for the completion of construction of the first EMOWAA buildings.

Conclusion

The next meeting of the Benin Dialogue Group will take place on 27 May 2021, at which point the museums participating in this discussion will report on current developments in Germany. The FFO plans to have further talks with Nigerian partners on the ground in the next few weeks.

The participants reaffirm that the aim is for the forthcoming talks to produce concrete results soon. The participating museums and the bodies that fund them will take the next steps with the necessary urgency, sensitivity and determination to attain results. The Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media and the FFO, in coordination with the *Länder*, will closely monitor and support the ongoing process of talks.

Participants

Prof. Monika Grütters Minister of State for Culture and the Media

Prof. Dr Hermann Parzinger President of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, Berlin

Prof. Dr Lars-Christian Koch Director of the Ethnological Museum and the Museum of Asian Art, Berlin; Director of Collections of the Museums in the Humboldt Forum

Theresia Bauer Minister of Science, Research and the Arts of Land Baden-Württemberg

Prof. Dr Inés de Castro Director of the Linden Museum, Stuttgart

Dr Carsten Brosda Senator for Culture and the Media in the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg

Prof. Dr Barbara Plankensteiner Director of Museum am Rothenbaum – Kulturen und Künste der Welt (World Cultures and Arts, MARKK), Hamburg, and spokesperson of the Benin Dialogue Group

Isabel Pfeiffer-Poensgen Minister of Culture and Science of Land North Rhine-Westphalia

Susanne Laugwitz-Aulbach Head of the Department of Art and Culture of the City of Cologne

Nanette Snoep Director of the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum, Cologne

Barbara Klepsch State Minister for Culture and Tourism in the Saxon State Ministry for Science, Culture and Tourism

Léontine Meijer-van Mensch Director of the Ethnological Museums in Leipzig, Dresden, Herrnhut

Dr Andreas Görgen Director-General for Culture and Communication at the Federal Foreign Office, representing Minister of State **Michelle Müntefering**

Dr Claudia Rose Chair of the Federation-Länder Working Group on dealing with collections from colonial contexts

Prof. Dr Markus Hilgert Head of the Contact Point for Collections from Colonial Contexts in Germany