

Carolin Behrmann & K. Lee Chichester

INTERVIEW MIT ABBA ISA TIJANI

Seit 2020 hat Abba Isa Tijani das Amt des Generaldirektors der National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) in Nigeria inne. Zuvor war der Museologe und Anthropologe Associate Professor for Museology and Anthropology an der University of Maiduguri und dort kommissarischer Direktor des Centre for the Study and Promotion of Cultural Sustainability, Leiter des Department of Fine and Creative Arts und Stellvertretender Direktor des Universitätsarchivs. Er übernahm die Leitung der NCMM mit dem Auftrag, die Institution samt der darin zusammengeschlossenen rund 100 Museen und zwei UNESCO Weltkulturerbestätten zu reformieren und für die Öffentlichkeitsbildung und den Tourismus weiterzuentwickeln, gemäß den Gründungszielen „Education, Enlightenment and Entertainment“.¹ Als einer der größten Arbeitgeber im Kultursektor verwaltet die NCMM Sammlungsgegenstände, die bis zu 10 Millionen Jahre alt sind (im Falle menschlicher Überreste) sowie Artefakte, die über 10.000 Jahre zurückdatieren.

Eine der ersten Amtshandlungen Abba Isa Tijanis beinhaltete die Begleitung der Rückgabe von Beninbronzen aus den Sammlungen des Jesus College der University of Cambridge und der University of Aberdeen. Die beiden Universitäten unternahmen 2021 als erste britische Institutionen den Schritt, Objekte aus ihren Sammlungen, die bei der Plünderung des Königspalastes von Benin durch britische Truppen 1897 geraubt worden waren, an den nigerianischen Staat zu restituieren. Tijani war ebenfalls als Mitglied der Benin Dialogue Group maßgeblich an dem Prozess beteiligt, der in der Rückgabe der in fünf öffentlichen deutschen Museumssammlungen befindlichen Beninbronzen mündete.

Im Gespräch verdeutlicht Tijani die Bedeutung der Restitution auch von Werken aus privatem Besitz, deren Provenienz koloniale Gewaltkontexte involviert. Er appelliert an das moralische Empfinden, verweist aber vor allem auf die Chancen, die der Rückgabeprozess für eine längerfristige Zusammenarbeit zwischen europäischen Institutionen und Vertreter*innen der Herkunftsgesellschaften birgt – ein Prozess, im Zuge dessen beide Seiten durch den Austausch von Expertise und Erfahrungen profitieren können, insbesondere in einem universitären Kontext. Über die Vermittlung der Nigerianischen Botschaft in Berlin führten wir ein Zoom-Interview mit Abba Tijani im November 2023 in englischer Sprache.

Carolyn Behrmann (CB): Last year, five collections of Benin Bronzes from German public museums were restituted to Nigeria, an event which received much public attention and acclaim. As Director General and CEO of the National Commission of Museums and Monuments (NCMM) in Nigeria, you were majorly involved in the negotiations surrounding this restitution and in the work of the Benin Dialogue Group. Last December, ca. 20 bronzes were physically returned to Nigeria, more will follow. In your eyes, what does the restitution of works of art from West Africa that were looted by colonial powers mean to you and for your country? Are the restituted objects currently on display and if so, are they being shown differently than they have been so far in European museums?

Abba Isa Tijani (AIT): Of course the repatriation means a lot to Nigeria and to the people of Edo because this is something that we have been yearning for: That objects that were illegally taken, under circumstances of forceful invasion and destruction of property, are returned. If you look at it on ethical grounds, we find that there is no need for museums that are holding such stolen objects to keep these objects any longer. So that is why we made the case. And we are happy that museums, institutions, and governments are willing to negotiate with us and to reach agreement.

So far, we have received about 22 objects from Germany, I believe, and also from the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art and the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C., the Horniman Museum and Gardens in London, and a few other museums. So basically, we are facing the physical repatriation of these objects because we want to create a conducive environment for them to be stored and displayed in.

The few objects we have received so far are still in the storage of our museum in Benin. This is because we are building a new facility there. So, the objects that are coming in will mostly go into that storage until the museums that are in planning have been built. We are talking about the Royal Palace Museum, the Benin Royal Museum, and also other private museums that are being built and that will collaborate with the Museum of West African Art (MOWAA) to see how we can properly store and present these objects so that people will be able to see them and also researchers will have access to them.

But our plan is also to exhibit these objects in the first quarter of 2024. So, by the time the gallery that is being built is ready, we will display some of these objects so that Nigerians, and particularly the people of Edo, can see that these objects are returning. And these are objects that have not been seen for decades. So now the public will be able to have a feeling of the objects and also relate with them.

K. Lee Chichester (LC): Shortly before the change of government in Nigeria, the ownership of the restituted bronzes was transferred to the Oba of Benin. Has this affected the plans for their display in the Museum of West African Art (MOWAA)? Can you give us some insights into the discussions taking place regarding this question in Nigeria?

AIT: The Gazette that was signed by the previous president was a response to the Oba's request to have the objects returned to his palace. It is being proposed that they be displayed in the Benin Royal Museum, which is going to be a government museum, as it's going to be managed by the NCMM. So, the fact that the name is Royal Museum doesn't mean that the palace will be responsible for the collections.

There's this feeling that maybe when these objects are displayed in private museums they could disappear. That is why the Oba wanted to secure the ownership of the objects, so that he will be part of the decision-making. But the NCMM law, which is already in place, surpasses any presidential Gazette. The federal government remains involved through the NCMM, which is the agency that will be looking after these objects. This law is an act of Parliament and there is no way a presidential Gazette can override an act of Parliament.

We have, however, submitted a revision of this law, which has already been passed by the National Assembly and is now waiting for presidential assent. We have reviewed our law because we have to be up to date with international developments, for instance, in response to digitization and many other things. The objects that we are repatriating are mostly held by museums that have advanced digitization. So, to use these digital data and to be in tandem with current developments, which also include debates regarding the different ethnic groups, we had to update our law: The antiquities will be under whose purview and at what level? All these things that had not been clarified before are now addressed in this new law. Once this new law is in place, there will no longer be any contention about the ownership of the objects.

CB: We have a specific question regarding private collections, which still contain many African objects – perhaps even more than are held by public museums. So far, you mainly addressed the responsibility of museums. At Ruhr University Bochum, a private collection is being displayed in the university's museum. As a university, we would like to set a best-practice example in dealing with questions of provenance. At the same time, we see it as a great advantage that we can teach students about African art history. Could you explain to us your position regarding private and university collections? How should we deal with works possibly stemming from colonial contexts in private collections?

AIT: Our outreach is not limited to museums and public institutions. The nature of private collections is not always known. But if we have a lead or hint, we write to them directly. Some museums also help us in identifying these private collections; they intervene and become intermediaries. The Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge, for instance, had some objects from private collections in their collection. This is something private collectors often do because they gain insurance and tax benefits. So, when we reached an agreement on repatriation with the university museum, they contacted the private owners, letting them know that they were transferring the ownership of all the Benin bronzes in their collection back to Nigeria. They asked the collectors about their position, as the museum could no longer hold on to these objects for ethical reasons. In this case, the private owners directed the museum to include their objects in the repatriation procedure.

So, this sort of thing does occur. But there is one thing I want the private collectors to understand: Our motive for this repatriation is that it's the right thing to do. And we think that the world of today will not want to see people hold on to objects which were taken illegally in a very violent way. And nobody will want to associate themselves with this kind of collection. That is why museums are restituting works, because they are public institutions and they cannot hide their collections – everybody knows about them. For this reason, they are very willing to be part of the repatriation procedure. But private collections are, you know, always private and therefore, until they are exposed, nobody knows about them. But I wonder, who will want to hear that they are holding objects illegally taken out of other countries or communities. There is definitely an ethical aspect to this. And we believe that most private collectors who have the conscience to really look at this logically will want to reach out to us. And we are willing to negotiate with them.

So, what I want to say, in essence, is that even with the museums, when we negotiate, we first negotiate on the basis of transfer of ownership, that's our priority. We transfer ownership of these objects to Nigeria, from where they were illegally taken. The next level is the issue of repatriation. What are the terms? How do we negotiate? Since you are a museum and you've been displaying these objects for some time, we don't want to create a vacuum in your museum. We want to negotiate in a way that will give you some of the objects on loan, so that you can continue to display them. Now, your conscience is very clear and you will no longer be criticized by the public. It uplifts your integrity as a public museum that is doing the right thing. Thirdly, these objects are going to be ambassadors. We are happy to see that these objects continue to perform their functions in museums. This way, the public will understand something about these objects. Also, we will be able to jointly interpret, curate or provide more information

about these objects so that you will now have a better impression of what you are holding and showing to the public. All these are the advantages we get on both sides. So, we are not really saying that we want to take away all the objects and just leave a vacuum behind and that's it. Apart from the issues of transfer of ownership, we also collaborate in other areas of research, and this is where it comes to joint exhibitions or even some other exchanges. It's a very wide kind of benefit that we gain on both sides. So, even for the private ownership, I think, we will come up with some kind of logic. They are not like museums where we can give out a loan, but we can do other things. And I think there are also tax rebates and such things that may come up. So, we encourage philanthropists. I think it is possible, and there are many ways to do that.

LC: This is exactly what we would like to do with the objects that are displayed in Bochum: We would like for them to become the starting point for a deeper exchange between Nigeria and Germany, or Bochum and Benin City. Are there any examples of university collections or private collections that have already collaborated with you and are now displaying their works differently? As our display is currently purely aesthetic, without any information on the objects, we would also be interested in knowing what information you think should go along with the artifacts on display?

AIT: Yes, for example, in the recent exhibition at the Humboldt Forum, two of our education officers participated. But in terms of joint curation, we have not done that yet. I know that there is a museum, I think in Switzerland, that is preparing such a project, not with us but with a university in Benin that is also our partner – and we have said that we would like to be part of that. And of course, when transfer of ownership takes place, we definitely have a say regarding whatever information is presented in terms of interpretation, in terms of the content, and is part of the exhibition. That is perhaps the most important thing that we know whatever is being said about the objects is said in the right way.

So that's the other level on which we are collaborating. Even if it doesn't mean directly joint curation, but definitely in terms of supporting the information that goes along with the objects. We would especially like to collaborate with the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art in a joint curation of the repatriated objects in Benin. And then from Benin, the exhibition can travel to the Smithsonian. That's what we are trying to do.

CB: That is a very exciting perspective. We need more collaboration and provenance research about these objects. For a university collection, there is a scientific commitment to connecting

research with this exchange, as you said, using objects as mediators. This is what we want to build up in Bochum. But we also had a general question, about the future of the Benin Dialogue Group. So much has happened in the last years and the Digital Benin Database has become a central tool for research. Will you continue to work on the Digital Benin² platform and perhaps open it up to other fields, as for instance to private collections?

AIT: Before I answer your question regarding the Benin Dialogue Group: Provenance research is indeed very important. For example, the Swiss museums – there are eight museums in Switzerland that have Benin bronzes in their collections – they started provenance research themselves even before reaching out to us. They invited Nigerians from Benin, from Edo, from the university, and some from our staff, from the NCMM, to visit Switzerland and see the objects and discuss and interpret them. So, they did their provenance research even before reaching out to us to start the discussion of repatriation. Provenance research is key, it is important because it also clears your conscience. It gives you a broad base of information in terms of the movement of the objects and so on.

Then on the issue of the Benin Dialogue Group: This is something that we want to continue. We have agreed to continue, and I think the next physical meeting of the Benin Dialogue will be in Sweden. We also agreed to expand the membership – and in fact we have already expanded, some new members have joined.

The same holds true for Digital Benin: I think it's an important database for everyone really. It tells you all about the Benin objects. We have our own collections in that database, as well. And private collections are also very important because, for me, there is no difference. It's just the matter of the ownership, who is holding the objects. But I think it is important that any private collector who wants information can go to Digital Benin.

CB: Thank you, this leads to another question we have, because currently the platform and debates are very concentrated on the Kingdom of Benin. But there are other regions and ethnicities in Nigeria from which objects were also stolen. Do you think the discussion is enlarging also in a regional way and expanding beyond Benin?

AIT: We have a lot of people who are contacting us criticizing our approach on the Benin Bronzes. They are saying that they are not the only artifacts that were taken out of Nigeria illegally. What about the other ones? What about other bronzes or, the soft stones? What about the Nok terracottas that were really widely illegally taken out. So yeah, we talked about this

issue. It's only that the Benin issue is so glaring and the circumstances under which these objects were taken in mass are so clear, that is why it's receiving so much attention. But it's not like they are more important than the other artifacts that were stolen.

So, when we write to museums, unless we know that they only hold Benin bronzes, we ask for all objects from Nigeria that were illegally taken out of the country. Our endeavor is not restricted to Benin bronzes. It comprises all the artifacts that left Nigeria illegally and, of course, it's against our law for any antiquity to be taken out of the country. Not any export permit or clearance is ever issued for antiquities, only for contemporary arts. So, if an object is going out, and even antiquities are going out of Nigeria, it is going on loan to museums for exhibition, or maybe for conservation, but there are no other reasons. This is why we have the Benin Dialogue Group involved, and also Digital Benin. People think that we are only addressing issues of Benin, but that is not the case.

CB: In the Bochum collection, for example, there are Nok sculptures, Ere Esie, Tada... It is a broad collection of objects from different regions of Western Africa. Therefore, we were interested in how much this is being discussed in Nigeria and if you think there is a need for specific databases for these objects, or if Digital Benin and the Benin Dialogue Group will include artifacts from other regions, as well. But, as I see, you are working on this.

AIT: Yes, absolutely. Currently. Of course, with you it could be a new chapter for us, even though we have had a similar case with Cambridge. But also, we can discuss and see how to deal with these objects that are privately owned. How we can reach some kind of agreement. That could be something that you can think about and see how we can discuss along that line and what kind of support we can give also in terms of research.

CB: I think this is a very important perspective for us because we would like to set an example as a university collection. Exhibiting these objects against the background of the latest challenges in provenance research requires new approaches.

AIT: And the other thing is that, you know, being a university, I also feel that it is right if the owner can agree for transfer of ownership to Nigeria. But we can then look at giving works on loan for you to continue with your teaching. That's another way to look at it – it's not necessarily that we want to take away the objects and bring them back to Nigeria. We will have more than enough here. But we want to make sure that all the objects that we are bringing back to Nigeria

are properly stored and displayed. We don't want to engage in just getting the objects back, you know. By all means, it's not like that.

As a university, we are very happy to see that you continue to use these objects for teaching and learning, for research. But of course, if the ownership now comes to us, then all the credit lines will indicate that they are on loan from us. This can be something that we can look at. And, of course, as time passes, we can also engage in further exchange, for instance, if you want some additional objects, we can arrange for you to show more objects. So, yeah, that would be the first steps.

CB: We don't want to take any more of your time, but thank you a lot for all these insights. We hope to stay in contact for further cooperation. Thank you so much for your time.

LC: Yes, thank you very much for these valuable insights and the information on steps to take.

AIT: Nice meeting you, thank you.

Transkription: Chisom Duruaku



Abb. 1: Screenshot des Zoominterviews mit Abba Tijani, 3.11.2023, Carolin Behrmann, Lee Chichester, Abba Isa Tijani, Allison Valentine

¹ „NCMM Profile“ auf der Webseite der National Commission for Museums and Monuments, online unter: <https://museum.ng> (Stand 30.04.24).

² Webseite von Digital Benin, online unter: <https://digitalbenin.org> (Stand 30.04.24).