

IS NATIONALISM AS SUCH A DANGEROUS PHENOMENON FOR CULTURE AND STOLEN/LOOTED CULTURAL PROPERTY?

“The charge of nationalism (whether outdated or au courant) is frequently levelled at those seeking the repatriation of cultural treasures to those nations and communities from which they were extracted. But nations have always used their own material culture as a means of constructing and expressing their national identity. There is nothing implicitly damaging or divisive in that. However it becomes so when the objects being used are not indigenous to that country but instead material extracted from other nations during periods of imperial conquest or colonial adventure.” Tom Flynn (1)



Queen-mother Idia, Benin/Nigeria, now in the British Museum.

Could the demand for her return by the African States participating in FESTAC be nationalistic whilst the refusal by the United Kingdom is not? (2)

In recent months, some writers such as James Cuno have been throwing about the accusation of nationalism as if it were such a bad phenomenon for culture or, indeed, as if it were incompatible with culture or somehow bad for cultural development:

“Nationalist retentionist cultural property laws segregate the world’s cultural property within the borders of modern nation-states. Most often, as I have discussed them in this book such laws are focussed on antiquities; that is, on works of art made long before there were nations. National and international laws, regulations, and agreements typically define antiquities as works of art made at least 150 years ago. They claim antiquities found (or thought to have been found) within their national borders as a nation’s patrimony, as important to that nation’s identity and esteem, and not to our understanding of the world. Quite explicitly, they claim them as a nation’s property, as bearing the imprint of a national identity.” (3)

Cuno has gone so far in his attacks on the nation-State to declare that it has no rights over antiquities found on its soil:

*“Anthony Appiah said something wonderful in his book *Cosmopolitanism*. He says, Look we don’t know who made these Nok sculptures, these ancient sculptures that are found today in Nigeria. We don’t know if they were made for royalty or for one’s ancestors or on speculation. But what we know for sure is that they weren’t made for Nigeria. Because at the time there was no Nigeria.”(4)*

It is here conveniently forgotten that the 1970 UNESCO *Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property*, vests in a State such as Nigeria the duty and the right “to protect the cultural property existing within its territory against the dangers of theft, clandestine excavation, and illicit export?”

Does this terracotta belong to Nigeria or to the looters who supply western museums?



Wikipedia.

One of the three stolen/looted terracotta pieces bought by the French even though they were on the ICOM Red List of items forbidden to export. Nok sculpture, Nok, Nigeria, now in Musée du Quai Branly, depot of Louvre, inv. No. 70 .1998.11, Paris, on renewable loan from Nigeria to France for 25 years.

Alan Behr, a strong supporter of Cuno has declared that “*The most telling part of Cuno’s thesis is his warning that the impulse to hoard antiquity is related to the perils of excessive nationalism*”. He goes on to make this astonishing statement: “*Although Cuno is too gracious to drill his argument through the next level - that the final stop on the line to nationalism is fascism and that the result of ethnic and religious purity is all too often persecution and worse - the implications cannot be ignored*”.(5)

Neither Cuno nor Behr offers any evidence that nationalism has any deleterious effect on restitution or on culture except that it prevents the large museums from continuing their old practice of taking objects from wherever they want. It also appears that they resort to accusations of nationalism only when there is a discussion on restitution of stolen or looted cultural objects that are in the so-called “universal museums” in the western world. We are still awaiting their explanation why nationalism in the case of claimants is somehow less respectable but not in the case of the western retentionists who are hanging onto stolen or looted property.

Neil MacGregor, Director of the British Museum, an ally of Cuno and vehement proponent of the “universal museum” does not go so far as his American colleague. He seems to accept the nation-State as an important institution in the area of culture. He indeed states that he deals only with States in the question of restitution. In answer to a request from a Pan-African movement in London, for the repatriation of stolen African objects in the British Museum, Macgregor referred to the museum’s policy on de-accession. The Director of the British Museum also added that: *“We are only able to consider requests from a representative body, such as a national government. We have never received a request for the repatriation of any artefacts in our collection from an African government.”*(6)

I have also heard a senior official of the Ethnology Museum, Vienna, in a broadcast transmission with the Austrian national radio on the occasion of the opening of the Benin Exhibition in Vienna, 9 May 2007 declare that the Oba of Benin could not claim restitution of the Benin bronzes since he was not a subject of International Law.

Similarly, during the Symposium organized by the Ethnology Museum, Vienna, 10 May 2007, the Director of the Museum tried to establish a difference in interest between the Nigerian State and the Edo (Benin) people, thus acknowledging the role of the Nation-State in restitution matters.

In most countries of Africa and Asia, nationalism is generally accepted as a powerful ideology without which the histories of many countries would be difficult, if not impossible, to understand. Many of these countries were indeed established by powerful nationalists who united their people around the concept of “nation” in order to drive out the imperialist European rulers.

The heroes of Independence were all nationalists: Gamal Abdel Nasser, Ahmed Ben Bela, Kwame Nkrumah, J.B. Danquah, Nnamdi Azikwe, Obafemi Awolowo,

Mahatma Gandhi, Pandit Nehru, Jomo Kenyatta, Tom Mboya, Leopold Sedar Senghor, Sekou Touré, Modibo Keita, Amilcar Cabral, Agostinho Neto, Samora Machel, Sylvanus Olympio etc.

Regarding culture, there is no doubt that the recent remarkable developments in music, dance, theatre, art, literature in many African countries were due to the strong nationalist impulse that accompanied Independence and the freedom from colonialism and its ideology of European superiority. Indeed, one can even go further and argue that the main problem in many African countries is the absence of an established genuine nationalism which could oppose and control the dangerous centrifugal forces of ethnicity and secession.

Some Europeans and Americans may pretend that nationalism is a dying force in their countries. But who can understand French, German, British, and American cultures without first having some basic ideas about their nationalisms which sometimes took the form of colonialism and imperialism? Try to understand French, German and British monuments without some ideas about their nationalisms. Can one understand the importance of Nelson's monument in Trafalgar Square without some idea about the clash of British and French nationalisms resulting in the defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte? And how did the Rosetta Stone come into the British Museum instead of being sent to the Louvre? Can one understand Louvre, British Museum, the Ethnology Museum and the other State museums in Berlin, without some knowledge of French, British and German imperial and colonial histories? Why are the biggest museums mostly in the capitals of these European countries? The very name of the British Museum indicates its nationalistic nature: it is "British" and not "Nigerian" or "Italian". Ingrid Rowland has put it very well in her excellent review of Cuno's book:

"Cuno's prime example of an encyclopedic museum is an institution whose name, the British Museum, suggests no small connection with the idea of nationhood, and certainly its possession of the Rosetta Stone snatched out from under the Corsican nose of "Boney" Bonaparte was the cause in 1802 and ever afterwards of considerable nationalist glee. (So was the purchase of the Elgin Marbles from the Ottoman governors of early nineteenth-century Athens.) The British Museum was undoubtedly a product of Enlightenment idealism, as Cuno repeatedly notes, but that idealism more than coincidentally assumed that being British was the best of all possible human conditions, just as Boney, across the Channel, assumed that true Enlightenment could speak only French, and was willing to pillage the Vatican Museums to prove his point. The great encyclopedic museums were predicated, perhaps to a one, on the idea that their local public constituted the world's best people, and hence the most deserving to stand in the presence of high culture, with a smattering of primitives to drive that sense of superiority home." (7)

We would certainly not argue that nationalism is the answer to our problems. This concept has been used to support all kinds of vicious practices by Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, António Salazar and General Francisco Franco, well-known European tyrants. We would not want to be seen or appear to be defending such evil persons. That is a job for their supporters in Europe and those who tolerate the wicked heritage they left to European culture. However, should other nations be brought anywhere near the atrocities of these dictators simply for daring to reclaim the return of their stolen or looted cultural objects by Europeans and Americans? Are those issuing such outrageous warnings not minimizing the nature and effects of the inhuman and devastating crimes of the European dictators? Surely, to request the return of your stolen cultural object is not a crime. Such a request cannot, and should not, be in anyway aligned with the atrocities of the European dictators. We all deplore without reservation the atrocities committed in the name of nationalism and the base tendencies of certain nationalisms.

Most of the pressing problems of our times require international solutions which go beyond the borders of the current nation States. But is this a reason to pretend that the nation-State is an obstacle to urgently needed solutions to settle the long standing question of restitution? Should one only observe the nationalism of some countries and leave out the nationalism of others? I often do not know whether to cry or to laugh when such criticisms come from Europeans and US Americans who live in some of the most nationalistic States. One has only to look at the immigration policies of these countries which are often downright racist even if not formulated in racist terms; the objectives and effects are to exclude certain races deemed undesirable. These States have also not shown themselves to be very co-operative when it comes to matters such as the problem of child soldiers. These great nations opposed at the United Nations the raising the age for recruitment into armies to 18 years. They argued that their best soldiers were those recruited at 14! So much for the care of the young and tender.

If nationalism were so bad, why do the European States and the USA have institutions designated as “national”? Why do they have national museums, national theatres, national operas, national orchestras, national choirs, national conservatories and national libraries?

If the nation-State were such a dangerous phenomenon, why does the majority of the world, led by the Europeans and Americans still accept the following: national symbols, national literature, and national sports - see the recent Olympic Games in Beijing and the various football competitions, national heroes etc?

Europeans and Americans have had a long period in which the nation-State, a centralizing and generalizing force, organized and supervised their industrialization

and modernization processes. They can afford to sneer now at those States that are at stages they themselves passed long ago. But should they ignore or forget their own histories? Incidentally, is nationalism, like many other ideologies, not claimed as invented by Europeans? We were taught at school, in those days when the unfounded claims of Europeans to have invented everything worthwhile, was not challenged, that the French revolutionaries fought in the name of mankind, for the rights of man (they did not think of the women who had few rights in those days). But once they were successful, it became clear they only fought for Frenchmen and proceeded to enslave others and conquer other countries all, no doubt, in the interest of their revolutionary ideas.

For suggesting that some of the thousands of the stolen or looted cultural objects in the depots of European and American museums should be returned to their countries of origin, one is warned that we are not far from Hitler and Fascism. This accusation comes from countries where fascist agitation and propaganda are openly practised and violent racist groups are allowed to propagate their teachings of hatred. It makes us wonder whether those who use lightly accusations of fascism or warn that fascism is the next step after nationalism really know what they are talking about.

No where is the idea of nation so pervasive as in France, Great Britain, Germany and the USA. One has to compare the emphasis on “nation” in these countries with what we know from Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda and South Africa to realize how far behind the African countries are in their acceptance and utilization of the concept of nation. So who is being nationalistic?

It is clear that Cuno and his supporters do not like the concept of nation-State which is at the basis of our present world order primarily because it gives countries such as Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon a certain amount of control over their own resources and cultural artefacts. These opponents of nationalism turn out almost invariably to be persons who would like to see the world governed by the forces in place. They would like to have a free-for-all situation where the stronger get what they want and the weaker ones can go to hell with their complaints. This explains the attack on UNESCO:

“It is time to question whether the nation-state bias of UNESCO and its Conventions has proven it to be a help or hindrance to the protection of the world’s cultural and artistic legacy. To date, some thirty years after it was drafted, UNESCO 1970 has failed, and failed because it has no teeth: it cannot contradict the authority of its Member States.” (8)

One wonders whether those who make such attacks realize that the system and structure of UNESCO as well as that of the United Nations is a reflection of the present world structure which is based on the nation-States. No serious alternative has as yet been proposed by those unhappy with the present system whereby Ghana, Nigeria and Mali have each one vote just as France, Great Britain and the United States also have one vote each. Some would like to give more power to the European States and the USA.

At this time and age, opponents of the nation-State should be aware that when things get really worse, even the most fervent proponents fall back on the nation-State. The recent turmoil on the world banking and finance world has seen the supporters of the free-market all run to their nation-States to bail the free enterprise system out. What motivation, if not nationalistic, prompts the US president to bail out Wall Street? Nationalism is still force in the USA and the United Kingdom as well as in Ghana and Nigeria.

Cuno and his supporters should bring evidence why “retentionist nationalists” in some countries - Egypt, China, Turkey, Greece, Italy and Nigeria - are to be suspected in their motives for demanding restitution but “retentionist nationalists” in USA, Great Britain, Germany and France are not to be questioned in their motives for holding on to looted or stolen cultural artefacts. When Egyptians ask for the return of Nefertiti, they are being nationalistic but when Germans refuse her return, what are they? Internationalists? Nigerians asking for the return of the Benin bronzes are suspected of nationalism but what about the British who stole the bronzes in 1897 and are refusing to return any of them? Surely there is something wrong in the unbalanced and unequal treatment of demanders and retentionists.

We have not found the source or the grounds for this disparaging use of the word “nationalist” in the attacks of the western retentionists against those supporting restitution and await their full explanation. In the meanwhile, I read the excellent book by Christopher Hitchens, *The Parthenon Marbles* (9) who pleads for the return of the Parthenon Marbles to Greece. I know of no better book on the case for restitution of looted or stolen cultural objects than this. The arguments are clearly and cogently presented. I found in this useful book, a report on an interview said to have been given by David Wilson, then Director of the British Museum who threw the accusation of “nationalism” and “fascism” at the supporters of restitution. The statement is so remarkable in its violence and its lack of logic that I feel everyone should read it:

“In a BBC television discussion on 15 June 1985, Sir David Wilson, Director of the

British Museum, was invited to contrast his opinions with those of Melina Mersouri. Sir David had already exhibited a certain lack of gallantry when, on an earlier visit to London, Mrs. Mercouri had expressed a wish to visit the Museum and view the marbles. On that occasion he had said publicly that it was not usual to allow burglars 'to case the joint' in advance. But once before the cameras he easily improved on this ill-mannered exaggeration. 'To rip the Elgin Marbles from the walls of the British Museum' he said, 'is a much greater disaster than the threat of blowing up the Parthenon'. This might have been thought hyperbolic, if Sir David had not gone on to say, in response to a mild question about the feasibility of restitution:

Oh, anything can be done. That's what Hitler said, that's what Mussolini said when he got Italian trains to run on time

The interviewer, David Lomax, broke in to say:

You are not seriously suggesting there's a parallel between...

Sir David was unrepentant:

Yes, I am. I think this is cultural fascism. It's nationalism and it's cultural danger. Enormous cultural danger. If you start to destroy great intellectual institutions, you are culturally fascist.

LOMAX: What do you mean by cultural fascist?

WILSON: You are destroying the whole fabric of intellectual achievement. You are starting to erode it. I can't say you are destroying, you are starting to erode. I think it's a very, very serious, thing to do. It's a thing you ought to think of very careful, it's like burning books. That's what Hitler did, I think you've to be very careful about that.

LOMAX: But are you seriously suggesting that the people who want the Elgin Marbles to go back to Greece, who feel there's an overwhelming moral case that they should go back, are guilty of cultural fascism?

WILSON: I think not the people who are wanting the Elgin Marbles to go back to Greece if they are Greek. But I think that the world opinion and the people in this country who want the Elgin Marbles to go back to Greece are actually guilty of something very much approaching it, it is censoring the British Museum. And I think that this is a bad thing to do. It is as bad as burning books". (10)

This is an extraordinary performance by a former Director of the British Museum. One can sympathize with his desperation in face of the mounting pressure to return the Elgin Marbles to Athens and the great presence of the unforgettable Melina Mercouri in London. But can anyone excuse his shameful performance?

With the hope of having contributed to clearing away this diversionary accusation of nationalism, the retentionists of the western museums should now offer more solid arguments, if they have any, for holding on to stolen or looted cultural objects from other countries. They should not present us arguments that do not help in understanding or solving the issue of restitution of stolen or looted cultural objects that are in the European and American museums. Their untenable contentions obscure the issues rather than enlighten us on the asymmetric nature of power in the colonial and imperialist system that made such illegal and unjustified robberies possible. The unresolved problems arising from colonialism will not simply disappear and the earlier serious efforts are made to reach acceptable solutions, the better for all of us.

Kwame Opoku, 28 September, 2008.

When will she be freed from German captivity?



Queen Mother Idia, Benin, Nigeria, now Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin.

NOTES(1)

(1) Tom Flynn, [The Parthenon Marbles again: Nationalism rears its noble head](#)

<http://tom-flynn.blogspot.com>

(2) This ivory hip mask represents an image of the Queen Mother Idia, mother of Oba Esigie, who ruled Benin in the 16th century. Another Idia hip mask is in the [Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York](#). The mask has become a symbol of Pan Africanism and was used as the official logo of FESTAC 77, an African cultural festival. When the Nigerian Government requested the British to lend the mask for the purposes of the African festival the British refused. After all kinds of excuses, that the mask could not travel, they asked for a high insurance premium which the Nigerians were willing to pay but the British finally refused. This great disrespect to the people of Benin, all Nigerians and the entire continent of Africa has not been forgotten but apparently the British Government does not care. I have no sign or information that such an insult will not be repeated. It would have been a magnificent opportunity to make some amends, albeit small, if the British Parliament had passed a law immediately after this disgraceful refusal to make the return of Queen-mother Idia possible.

(3) James Cuno, *Who owns antiquity? Museums and the battle over our ancient heritage*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2008, p. 124.

(4) Cuno in interview of January 27, 2008 with Richard Lacayo, "A Talk With: James Cuno" <http://www.elginism.com/20080201/976/>

(5) Alan Behr, "A Humanist Plea for Free-ranging Antiquities," *Culturekiosque: Art and Archaeology Book*, <http://www.culturekiosque.com> See our response Kwame Opoku, "A Plea for Fair and Equal Treatment"

<http://www.modernghana.com>

(6) In a letter dated 20 July, 2007 from Neil MacGregor to the Pan-African organization, Ligali.

(7) Ingrid Rowland, "Found and Lost". Review of *Who Owns Antiquity* by James Cuno. *The New Republic* <http://www.tnr.com>

(8) James Cuno, op. cit. p.153.

(9) Verso, London, 2008.

(10) Hitchens, pp. 97-99.