

**City University London: Department of Culture  
and Creative Industries**

**The potential of digital representation: The  
changing meaning of the Ife ‘bronzes’ from pre-  
colonial Ife to the post-colonial digital British  
Museum**

Oluwatoyin Z. Sogbesan

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**THE FOLLOWING PARTS OF THIS THESIS HAVE BEEN REDACTED  
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## **List of Abbreviations**

<b>BM</b>	British Museum
<b>MOM</b>	Museum of Mankind
<b>OAU</b>	Obafemi Awolowo University

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## Glossary

<i>akori</i>	blue glass beads
<i>ase</i>	divine power
<i>egungun</i>	Yoruba masquerade or masked costume figure connected with ancestral worship
<i>Gbagida</i>	female Ooni of Ife
<i>Gombo</i>	Yoruba face markings
<i>Ifa</i>	a system of divination
<i>Ife</i>	wide [when not in the context of the place name]
<i>Ile</i>	home [when not in the context of the place name]
<i>Oba</i>	king
<i>Obalufe</i>	priest-king
<i>Obalufon</i>	a ruler of ancient Ife
<i>Obatala</i>	a Yoruba deity
<i>Oduduwa</i>	sovereign king, mythological progenitor of Yoruba people
<i>Ogane</i>	a ruler of ancient Ife
<i>Olokun</i>	sacred grove in Ife
<i>Olodumare</i>	Supreme Being
<i>Omirin</i>	Sacred room of the royal palace at Ife
<i>Onife</i>	spiritual head of Yoruba people
<i>Ooni</i>	king
<i>Oranmiyan</i>	a ruler of ancient Ife
<i>Ori</i>	the head [both physically and spiritually]
<i>Ori Olokun</i>	a Yoruba deity
<i>orisa</i>	deity
<i>Orunmila</i>	a Yoruba deity
<i>Sango</i>	a Yoruba deity
<i>segi</i>	blue glass beads

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### **Authors Declaration**

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been submitted, either in the same or different form, to this or any other University for a degree

Oluwatoyin Sogbesan

## **Abstract of thesis**

For many years, meanings and interpretations of artefacts that are taken to represent African culture including the Ife bronzes have been predominantly produced and fixed by a team of western curatorial experts (Ciolfi, 2012). Such museum practices have prevented visitors and the people being represented by the artefact from participating in the process of interpretation and meaning-making. In the particular case of the 'Ife bronzes', the previous meaning and implications of the Ife 'bronzes' as part of 'the cradle of the world', according to Yoruba oral traditions, are yet to be given the amount of attention they deserve. For a long time the interpretations and meanings produced by curators were drawn from the writings and accounts of earlier western travellers, explorers and colonial officials whose culture affected how the Ife bronzes have been perceived and interpreted (Coombes, 1997: Vogel, 1999). Today despite the impact of 'the new museology', strong traces of such biased interpretations and meanings are still evident in the framing of the Ife bronze head, exhibited at the British Museum Sainsbury African gallery as a 'funerary object' in postcolonial times. Such narratives highlight 'relations of power and not relations of meanings' (Foucault, 1980: 114).

These contemporary exhibitionary frames highlight the need for interpretations and meanings that will consider how changing roles, ownership, usage, political situations and geographical location have affected and will affect the Ife bronzes. In this thesis I carry out this work, documenting the social life of the Ife bronzes from pre-colonial Ife to postcolonial digital British Museum. I argue that there is a need for a new space that will encourage rewriting, revising and representing the Ife bronzes in a more capacious way to depict their changing meaning as they journeyed through time. This theory is in line with Hall (1997) and Foucault's (1980) theories that meanings and interpretations are not static but are affected by time and changing context.

The thesis therefore explores the multifaceted political, economical and sociocultural implications of the Ife bronzes. Despite these wider implications of Ife bronzes, they are still only too often shrouded in narratives that tend to validate the supremacy, civilisation and intellectual 'supremacy' of the West instead of substantiating the ingenuity, civilisation and intellectual capabilities of Africa. Digitisation is critically considered as offering a potential new space for representing Ife bronzes in a new light that might allow meanings with postcolonial ideology to emerge. Focusing on different periods involving the Ife bronzes (the pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial) the thesis explores the potentials of digital representation. The thesis concludes that digital representation but only combined with a critical contextual approach, have the potentials of initiating a more thorough decolonisation of the Ife bronzes through an inclusive participatory culture



## **Introduction**

The British museum currently holds around 350,000 artefacts from the African continent (Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas, 2013). Some of these collections were acquired sporadically, almost by accident and apparently with little enthusiasm, whereas at other times acquisition has been done eagerly. The artefacts enthusiastically collected were in the range of court art, mask and statues prepared to celebrate royal achievements, religious and cultural ceremonies (Stock, 2012: 69). However, the circumstances of acquisition of these African collections such as colonialism are likely to affect how the artefacts are perceived across the globe today. Also, the valuation and aesthetic biases of these collections most likely contribute to informing the re-conception of Africa and African art. These ethnographic collections of court art, include the 12<sup>th</sup> century Ife bronze head, which carry many meanings, but by definition they represent an intercultural encounter (Willett, 1960; 1967a). The complex history of these encounters are often forgotten, lost or obscured. However, such history has a bearing on how the objects in the museum collections have been interpreted and understood (Ayres, 2012: v). For an interpretation or a meaning to be significantly informative, museum information texts, frames and contexts need to inform visitors as capaciously as they can about the wider implications of the object that determines its value within the societies that produced and host it (Hall, 1997; Hooder, 2003).

Prior to the arrival of the British administration in Lagos Colony and Niger protectorate in 1861 and 1900, then establishment of the southern protectorate in 1900, afterwards the amalgamation of the southern and Northern protectorate that became Nigeria in 1914, Ife was a city-state (Falola & Heaton, 2008; Crowder, 1966: 21). The people of Ife were involved in trade with other parts of the world through the North African route in the 11<sup>th</sup> century (Wilks, 1962; Edwards & Tredell, 2008). Trading was for necessities such as salt, gold, leather goods and, most likely, copper. Such trading has been thought to be responsible for the introduction of the technical knowledge of the lost wax casting method used to produce the Ife bronzes. The analysis of the lost wax technique of the 12<sup>th</sup> century Ife bronzes according to Willett (1967a: 52) involves pouring molten metal through a cavity, constructed over a clay

mould that serves as a core for the final sculpture bearing all the intended final details. The clay core covered is smaller than the final cast and with beeswax or sometimes latex produced from cactus. A fine layer of clay is applied over the beeswax and allowed to dry before successive thicker layer is added. The fine layer is applied to retain the retailed impression and design made on the wax. Strips that act as runners are added from the top of the head where the wax cup is positioned and from which the metal is poured through the runners to the space occupied by the wax. The finished mould when dry is later baked in fire to melt the wax, which is collected and later reused.

By the 11<sup>th</sup> century Ife was a city-state ruled by a monarch and the bronze heads were valuable objects that were considered to be ‘kingly things’<sup>1</sup> in line with the theories of Gluckman (1959: 751). However, the Eurocentric ideology of degradation of non-Western objects came to dominate the understanding of the bronzes in the early twentieth century. This ideology was probably founded on the hypothesis that the African sculptures were known to be an abstract of the reality and the more ‘abstracted it was the more from reality the more typically African it was thought to be’ (Willett, 1967a: 13). The hypothesis might have also influenced the German archaeologist Leo Frobenius, who saw some of the Ife sculptures during his visit to the city in 1910. He associated their production to a Greek colony because of their idealised naturalistic figuration, which he equated with Greek classical art. Therefore could not believe the works had been made by African craftsmen but instead surmised them to be products of the lost city of Atlantis (Frobenius, 1911). Further disputes over ownership also led to disputes about the authenticity of Olokun head<sup>2</sup> (Willett, 1967a; Platte, 2010b).

Frobenius pointed out in 1913 that the ‘bronze work of Ife far exceeds that of Benin in its perfection and representative skills’ (Frobenius, 1913: 293). The bronze

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<sup>1</sup> Gluckman (1959: 751) described ‘kingly things’ as those objects whose commodity potentials are carefully hedged. As a result, the ‘things’ are of high value and are only seen during important occasions. These ‘kingly things’ have diverse and important implications.

<sup>2</sup> Ori Olokun head found by Frobenius according to Willett (1967a:15) has disappeared and the one displayed at Ife Museum and international exhibition has been found to be a copy made from sand casting (Fagg and Underwood, 1949).



artefacts collected during the Benin expedition however had striking similarities with the bronzes from Ife. These similarities and details involved in their process of manufacture and the naturalism style of representation also had impact on the European framings of African material culture. Before the discovery it is widely assumed that African art was classified as material culture within an ethnographic context. They were void of any aesthetic beauty that could attract the admiration of the west. As a result, the bronzes generated speculations as well as the notion that Africans did not create them but are most likely to be antiques of a Greek colony. They were not regarded as African because at the time African art was associated with abstracted sculpture that were far from reality (Willett, 1967a). Willett (1967a: 20) also suggested that the conventional features of recognising the origin of the art style might have prompted Frobenius summation that the bronzes were Greek, while Flinders Petrie thought they were of an Egyptian origin.

The end of colonial rule in Nigeria in 1960 further resulted in the reconsideration of late nineteenth-century cultural and political imperial paradigms. This has also subsequently generated substantial changes across many disciplines in the post-colonial era, including anthropology and museology. The changes across the discipline also affected museum practices. Where museums have found themselves under scrutiny, with calls for museums to take the centre stage of societal and communal developments that inspire better understanding of 'the other' and facilitate greater cross-cultural awareness. The museum's historical role as a mediator of the past has been argued as being mainly imperial in the way visitors perceive and identify 'other' cultures (Coombes, 1994). Hence, contemporary meanings and interpretations are likely to be influenced by the way the past is represented in museums. Such ideology and practices of representation, as I discuss in this thesis have now been widely discussed and contested in both academia and in museum practices (Simpson, 1996; Hooper-Greenhill, 1999). More recently, the introduction of digital technology, the use of the World Wide Web and the spread of the information society also have the potential to profoundly alter the traditional practice of exhibiting collections within museums. Museums have extended their mode of representation space through museum websites, but the extension of the museum's physical space into the virtual is only made possible through the digitisation of

artefacts. What possibilities might the digital have for extending post-colonial agendas?

Post colonial agenda in this case focuses on the shift within museum services from collection and conservation to being concerned with education, inclusion and engagement of both their audience and communities being represented (Simpson, 2001). A situation that probably will allow histories of former colonies represented within museums to be revisited and represented from new perspectives. Durran's (2002) opined that in specific instances curators need to find suitable versions to bring their different values into mutually beneficial alignment where interpretation will be to the benefit of everyone concerned. Thus the understanding of material culture as suggested by Durran (2002: 141) should involve respectful collaborations with those who make, use or otherwise know about things from their own special experiences. Durran's review of Moira Simpson's book '*Making representations: museums in postcolonial era*', further pointed out that where objects are physically located is probably less significant than how object based interpretation can contribute to critical discourse (Durran, 2002: 142). Emphasising the need for specialist in more and less developed nations collaborating across the divide of wealth and privilege. Such collection of experiences and collaborations however minimal are most likely possible thorough the possibilities of digitisation.

'Digitisation', as it is generally termed in museums, thus refers to the process of converting, creating and maintaining any type of original - be it paper, photographic prints or slides, three-dimensional objects or moving images - into a digital format that can be viewed via computer and other devices (Astle & Muir, 2002). Digitisation in this thesis is grounded on Knell's (2003) idea: the electronic recording of descriptive data about the artefacts that includes the digital representation or image of the objects. Although digitisation has the potential of becoming a new instrument for access and preservation, according to Knell (2003) it also has the potential to become a tool for re-representation of the 'other'<sup>3</sup>, expressing historical

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<sup>3</sup> The 'other' in this thesis is in line with Frantz Fanon concept of the 'other' as it appears from his writing to be the key concern in post-colonial studies. The colonizer believes, the '*Other*', has to be owned, altered and ravished - he is deceptive and fertile. (Al Saidi, 2014: 96)

evidence that could influence the emergence of new meanings. Whether this potential is realised, rejected or used to reinstate imperial museological paradigms is a question that this thesis explores.

### **Motivation**

I first directly encountered a bronze head from Ile-Ife during a visit to the British Museum's Sainsbury Africa Gallery in 2006. I became more interested in the bronzes in 2008 while researching museum meanings and the interpretation of African objects for my Masters of Art (MA) thesis. But before both visits I had seen images of Ile-Ife crowned heads used as symbols and logos of organisations and businesses within the southern states of Nigeria. This provided me with a fair amount of knowledge about the importance of the bronze artefacts to the Yoruba people as well as their significance in terms of the era they represented; however, I did not know what the bronzes were used for, or how they had ended up at the British Museum. I had visited the British Museum several times since 1999, but my first visit to the Africa Gallery came only in 2006 and for me raised many concerns that started with the very location of the Africa Gallery. The gallery is located in the basement of the 'Living and Dying' gallery, which seemed to emphasise and reinstate the idea about Africa being a 'land of darkness' and a zone responsible for the production of primitive art (Coombes, 1994: 2).

The Africa Gallery sponsored by the Sainsbury family and the Henry Moore foundation, was opened in 2001 (Phillips, 2008), and was curated by Christopher Spring, Nigel Barley and Julie Hudson (Spring et al, 2001). Occupying a space of 850 square metres and divided into five principal areas, the gallery provides a substantial and permanent exhibition space for some '600 objects drawn from one of the finest collections of African art and artefacts in the world' (Annual Review, 2001: 4). Despite such commendations, for me during my first visit, the gallery still resonates with the idea that Africa is imbricated in primitivism and degradation. When entering the gallery in 2006, one of the first texts to greet me was a quote from Sir Robert Sainsbury on an information panel stating that, 'what I am is someone who like primitives and were influenced by primitives' (British Museum, 2006). This

statement, as well as the very position of the gallery used, implicitly seemed to refer to everything in the gallery as ‘unsophisticated’, thus enforcing the idea of Western superiority over Africa. This disturbed me as a potentially influential framing proclamation, one likely to help shape how the objects are viewed and interpreted by visitors.

The British Museum curators adorned the introductory space with contemporary art from North, South, East and West Africa, and claimed that their intentions were for the works on display to ‘give the message that Africa is a place not simply where traditions are lost but where traditions are constantly invented and reinvented’ (Spring *et al*, 2001: 18). The information panel has since been changed and now contains a brief account of Moore’s admiration for African art (Phillips, 2008). But the idea impressed on the minds of the visitors from the original text in that moment will take a while to correct because curators are perceived to be representing a voice that speaks the ideology of the museum.

In the gallery of 2006, objects representing the different parts of Africa, from the north to the south and the east to the west, were classified into seven categories based on media, technology and function: woodcarving, pottery, forged metal, masquerade, brass casting, personal adornment and textiles (Philip, 2007). Each artefact displayed within the different categories had a text panel providing information to visitors. The text panel beside the bronze castings, especially the bronze head from Ife, enthralled me. The information claimed that Benin bronze castings were derived from Ife and stated that:

There are several casting traditions in southern Nigeria, including Igbo ukwu (9–10th century) and Ife (12–15th century). While local history declares that Benin brass casting technology is derived from Ife, this leaves unexplained a whole series of other traditions that are gathered together under the single name ‘Lower Niger bronze industries’. Their place and the development of African metallurgy remain unclear.  
(Sainsbury Africa Gallery information panel, 2008)

This label indicated that although the museum acknowledged where the artefacts were from they still lacked clarity about African metallurgy artefacts that could have resulted in the grouping of objects together as ‘Lower Niger bronzes’. The next label stated that:

The Ife heads were discovered by the German anthropologist Frobenius in 1910 and in 1938....he thought it more likely that they were to be explained through Greek influence via lost Atlantis than that they could have been made by Africans themselves, which is now held to be the case. It seem likely that such heads were used in funerary rites where the corpse was no longer present and asserted the indestructibility of kingship. (Sainsbury Africa Gallery information panel, 2008)

The information on the label seemed to me to be insufficient: it did not gesture towards all that Ife stands for, but only highlighted its relationship to the Benin bronze. The issue that texts are constricted by a limited number of words and are directed/explained at a particular level to ensure comprehension to children and young adolescents as well as adults could be accountable for the limited information. However this reason cannot be justified as the text still contained some important information like their use in funerary rites. Further to this, it might be difficult to “gesture” beyond this through a single or couple of artefacts as there is only one crowned bronze head amongst other Ife artefacts at the British Museum while the bulk of Ife artefacts are still in the town where they were made (Willett, 1967a: 17). Nonetheless, the entanglement of Ife in histories of colonial discourse, racial power, gender discourse and imperialism was omitted from the text.

The text was also silent about all the Ife bronzes’ functional uses; instead it emphasised their use in funerary rites, which seemed to be the least important of their functions (because the material, as well as the technology involved in their production, makes it difficult to see the bronzes as just funerary objects related to kingship) (Willett, 1967a: Blier, 2012). The Olokun head and the Obalufon mask for

example are not related to funerary rights but to divinity and coronation rights; Olokun for worship of the goddess of wealth and Obalufon mask for coronation ceremonies at Ife (Willett, 1967a, Blier, 2012: 386). There was also no information about the museum's own role in the histories involving the bronze head on display. Such information would perhaps indict the museum in its role as a colonial institution. Instead, the object seemed to not be located in relation to wider traditions, it was primarily being displayed as a piece of art (because it is being linked to art). As Coombes puts it, the British Museum is 'a repository for contradictory desires and identities where different communities have been implicated by narratives of belonging and exclusion' (Coombes, 1994: 2). I argue in this thesis that the information disseminated by the British Museum needs to be revisited to portray wider and more capacious historical contexts, ones that can kindle broader cross-cultural dialogues and allow the emergence of wider meanings.

I also expected that references would be made to other bronze heads in Ile Ife but this was not the case. While the head was referred to as 'bronze', the artefact is actually not made from bronze but from copper with slightly different compositions of zinc, lead, and tin (Willett 1967a: 55). Since they are not made from bronze, such terminology bronze could be said to be misleading in some way. However Willett (1967a: 55) pointed out that it was a term 'bronze' was usually applied to artistic metal casting composed of mainly copper. Unlike the limited information about the Ife bronze head, Benin castings and narrative adorned the end corner of the west side of the Africa Gallery. The large number of the Benin collection at the British Museum is most likely accountable for the vested interest. However with some Ife artefacts in storage, it also became evident that, the British Museum has space constraints, hence it is yet to portray its vast knowledge about its African collections. According to Spring *et al* (2001: 18) the curators intended to represent Africa within the Sainsbury African gallery as a place where 'traditions are constantly invented and reinvented'. Despite the intention of the curators, the space still resonates Africa as one primitive society without a voice. This could be due to the notion that curators act as an authoritative resource of information about the 'other', instead of embracing the role of facilitators who encourage the people involved with the culture being represented to tell their stories (Bauman, 1987; Wilkinson, 2011). Such

information, I believe, could lead to new discourses about how the Ife bronzes were made, why they were made, what they were used for and what led to them being buried before Frobenius alleged ‘discovery’ in 1910. It was these initial reflections that set this research in motion.

The artefacts from Ile Ife, including the five which are not copper alloy castings in storage at the British Museum (including the crowned head), were given a more capacious representation during ‘Kingdom of Ife: sculptures from West Africa’ which was a substantial exhibition. Santander sponsored the exhibition with additional support provided by The A. G. Leventis Foundation. The exhibition was co-organised by the Fundacion Marcelino Botin, in Santander, Spain and the Museum for African Art in New York, USA, in collaboration with Nigeria’s National Commission for Museums and Monuments (Drewal & Schildkrout, 2010). It was a cultural event attended by the present monarch of Ile-Ife Alayeluwa Oba Okunade Sijuwade. The exhibition emphasised the important cultural value of the bronzes to the Yoruba culture and the people they represent. According to the curator at the American Museum of Natural History, Enid Schildkrout, in her opening speech for the Dynasty and Divinity exhibition held in Spain, emphasised that the Ife artefacts substantiate the fact that ‘Africa has always been part of our world even though we do not acknowledge it’ (Schildkrout, 2009). She foregrounds how Africans created great works of art in urban cities and how their art had very complex technology and artistic vision.

Despite Africa being made up of 54 countries, many Western people still commonly think that Africa has no ‘civilised’ history based on representations that are entrenched in Eurocentric discourses on Africa. However, this is now subject to contestation (as I will explore in chapter 1). According to Schildkrout’s account of the 2010 ‘*Arte Ife en la antigua Nigeria*’<sup>4</sup> exhibition validated the fact that African has always been a continent of civilisation with sophisticated cultures, including where people resided in cities (Fundacion Botin website, 2010). Schildkrout (2010)

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<sup>4</sup> ‘*Arte Ife en la antigua Nigeria*’ is a Botín Foundation Project [http://www.fundacionbotin.org/arte-ife-en-la-antigua-nigeria-exhibition\\_fundacion-botin-sala-de-prensa-795305168980.htm](http://www.fundacionbotin.org/arte-ife-en-la-antigua-nigeria-exhibition_fundacion-botin-sala-de-prensa-795305168980.htm)

further points out that Africans were casting in pure copper at a time when Europeans did not possess this skill. Schildkrout's statement is most likely based on Willett's (1967a: 55) analysis that only the Obalufon mask and four of the life size heads, were more or less made of pure copper. There seems to be an urgent need not only to rewrite the information about African artefacts but also to make it more easily accessible to the public. It is noteworthy that, in order to make the artefacts accessible, in the Africa Gallery, the British Museum has introduced a stand for handheld objects (as opposed to keeping objects strictly behind glass). However, highly valued artefacts like the Ife bronzes are not included in the handheld section because they risk getting damaged accidentally. Despite the introduction of new ideas to foster accessibility, there were limitations to the extent to which the representation of African artefacts have been decolonised.

In the early stages of my questioning in 2006, I started to consider the advancements in technology, the widespread use of computers and the availability of smartphones that can be used to connect to the web; perhaps information about the artefacts could be made available online through digitisation? Digitisation might encourage discussions about the artefacts outside the museum's physical space. Visitors could reveal what they knew about the artefacts that might contribute to new meanings or new experiences without being restricted by the narrative of an institution. Despite the British Museum having an online presence, to my disappointment the artefacts probably due to high cost and labour intensive demands of digitisation are yet to be fully exhibited online. The 2010 exhibition, however allowed five Ife objects in storage to be brought out and photographed, including collections from Nigeria and these images were then used to create a printed catalogue. And of course, during the research itself, I realised that digitisation does not necessarily lead to decolonising narratives as digitising is a very complex issue.

Nevertheless, my research seeks to explore the potential and the changing representation of the Ife bronzes, in order to investigate how digital online representation and engagement could foster the emergence of new meanings in a post-colonial context. For instance, could it help the colonial-era (1900-1960) claim that the bronzes were part of the culture of Greek colony to become more widely



demystified, and the Yoruba cultures from which the artefacts arose could be better understood? Frobenius in his quest to find the answer to the great question of cultural development through interest in the Stone Age rock picture of man and animal led him to assume that rock picture might have spread through southern continent. He insisted that evidence of early civilisation might still be found. He ascertained that the culture of Ife and the Atlantic shore was older than the Islamic influence from the north or the Christian influence from Portuguese of Angola. He compared the religion in Ife to that of Etruscans of the legendary Rome and highlighted similarities in the use of glass beads (water storage) and architecture (Frobenius, 1913: 320). The suggestion from him is that there was a Greek colony and this is remembered in Greek narratives as a lost colony that was forgotten, and so Froebenius linked it to myths of Atlantis, claiming that the Etruscans might have voyaged to the African coast and planted a colony there (Hays, 1959). Inferring that Atlantis the home of Poseidon's posterity was probably named *Olokun* by the Ifians.

Frobenius further argued that the soul of the Yorubas are very likely 'un-African' (Frobenius, 1913: 319). He states that

‘we saw them educating their posterity on lines well organised and from points of view carefully considered; not merely from feelings, as with children of nature but knowingly and logically (Frobenius, 1913: 320) .

Though Frobenius was imbued with a racial ideology, the statement highlights the influence of his classical upbringing as it draws comparisons with mythical narrative. His argument was based on his observation of both the lifestyle and religious culture of the people which he felt were not the ‘tottering diabolic African grotesque’ in nature but ‘well formed, actual, godlike shapes, wreathed with legends, hallowed and distinguished by separate rituals’ (Frobenius, 1913: 320). Frobenius argued that though the Yoruba culture might have lost its freshness, he suggested that the method in which the Yorubas have preserved their culture indicates a likelihood of its evolution. Thus indicating that the Yoruba culture is likely to have evolved over time. He further related the Yoruba method of divination, meanings of primitive myths, the ideology of the ‘Templum’ and sixteen gods that ruled the world, which constitutes their religion to that of Etruscan because of its consistency (Frobenius, 1913).

Comparing the Yorubas to the ancient Etruscans through the ideologies with which the world is viewed, Frobenius (1913) argued that Yoruba philosophy must have been born and nourished on a pre-Christian, primeval foundation. However Frobenius analogy of the Yorubas being the remnant of 'lost Atlantis' or a primeval tradition is yet to be confirmed, as there are no documents or any transatlantic relations to substantiate the idea. Though evident that the kingdom of Ife likely attained high prominence in the 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century through their material artefacts. Ife was however superseded as a strategic city by the rise of Oyo and Benin in the fifteenth century (Akinjogbin 1992: i). Frobenius argued that the degeneration of the Yoruba kingdoms is further evident in the quality of bronzes later produced in the region due to the loss of their distinctive quality in relation to the old castings. How has Yoruba culture like the bronzes evolved since the 12<sup>th</sup> century? How have these changes if any influenced the interpretation of the Ife bronzes the same in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

Since the past decades have witnessed both expanded interest in material culture in the digital world, and the shifting meanings of museum artefacts, this research will serve as a resource to help analyse ways to bridge the gap created by cultural colonialism within museums. I was also prompted to pursue this research following Malraux's (1967: 12) notion of a 'museum without walls', of being able to exhibit artefacts free from the possible limitations of the museum walls. Malraux pointed out that museum 'owes much to opportunities that chance has thrown its way' (Malraux, 1967: 11). Thus inferring that whatever is exhibited within the museums is perhaps dependent on a combination of elements. For example, my visit highlighted the issue of the space constraints of the British Museum's Africa Gallery; some visitors were prevented from spending time with the artefacts and as a result they could not read the information labels describing them. Such space constraint implies that more objects are kept in storage never to be seen. Digitisation might also provide visitors with a space for both personal and group interaction with the artefacts in such a way that might reveal their wider implications. I argue in this thesis, however, that new interpretations might emerge only if historical evidence is published, wider understandings of their divinity are facilitated and visitors are allowed to use their

imaginations rather than the curators legitimising a single perspective. By doing so, digital representation can escape the fate of becoming just an extension of colonisation in the form of ‘digital colonialism’ (Robins, 2002; Wall, 2009).

The research aims to explore the potential of digital representation in the interpretation of the Ife bronzes within different contexts outside, albeit connected to, the museum’s physical space. It investigates the changing meaning of the Ife bronzes from pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial eras focusing on how they are framed by the British Museum.

### **Research questions**

In this thesis, I will argue that colonial framings are still being used within the British Museum to represent and define the ‘other’. This is problematic in a post-colonial era. I argue that there is a need for representation that involves the use of new technology to tell the historical facts and narratives that reflect the fuller implications of the Ife bronzes. This could facilitate the expansion of meaning of the bronzes and potentially help facilitate the popularity of post-colonial discourses. The key research questions I use to explore these inconsistencies are as follows:

- How has the meaning of the Ife bronzes evolved from pre-colonial Ife to the post-colonial digitised British Museum?
- How might digitisation challenge colonial narratives and include wider histories and earlier cultural meanings and status?

Subsequently, the following sub-questions will be explored during the course of this research:

- How have the Ife artefacts been represented and understood?
- How is digitisation being used to ‘decolonise’ museum artefacts?
- How is digitisation affecting the way the artefacts are represented and viewed?
- How could hidden Yoruba significant aspects of the artefacts be emphasised

- How can people be encouraged to participate in the generation of new meanings?

### **Literature review**

The study is concerned with ‘the potential of digital representation in the changing meaning of the Ife bronzes from pre-colonial Ife to the post-colonial digital British Museum. The research is influenced by three main disciplinary areas and theories: museology, post-colonial theory and digital cultural theory.

Within museology, my research has been influenced by a wide range of works including those of: Bauman (1987), Vergo (1989), Smith (1989), Vogel (1991), Coombes (1994), Barringer and Flynn (1998), Bennett (1995), Clifford (1997), Black (2005) and Simon (2010).

From the domain of post-colonial thinking, this research has been influenced in particular by the works of: Fanon (2008(1952), Bhabha (1994), Appiah (1995), Said (1978/2003), Simpson (1996) and Mirzoeff (2002(1998).

My research is also influenced by digital cultural theories, in particular the works of Manovich (2001), Astle and Muir (2002), Knell (2003), Cameron and Kenderdine (2007) and Parry (2010).

I will now sketch out some of the key arguments in these fields that are relevant to my thesis, and show why these books and debates are so salient for this research.

### **Museums and the representation of the past**

What is a museum? How are imperial museums perceived by their former colonies? The concept of the ‘museum’ is examined here from a historical perspective to provide a clearer understanding about the ideologies that have guided its establishment in its modern form.

In the early sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, museums were seen as ‘cabinets of curiosity’ belonging to the elites of Western society (Weil, 1995; Impey & MacGregor, 2001). These served as evidence of the travels and power of the rich and wealthy, whose artefacts were privately exhibited at the whim of the owner. Bearman (2008) argued that the museum is a storehouse of things that were consciously gathered from a natural or cultural context and placed in the setting of other things, thereby making representations for a purpose. The museum is described by Witcombe (2003) as an elite institution from inception that has assumed the responsibilities both for preserving objects and the ideas that were thought about them in the past and for representing and interpreting those ideas for the present (Bearman, 2008). Likewise, it is often suggested that museums emerged as privileged institutions that sought to manage cultural heritage by authorising selective stories of a formalised past (Duncan, 1991; Bennett, 1995; Foucault, 2002; Pollock & Zeman, 2008). Museums in their early incarnations were used to endorse power.

By the age of enlightenment, Bauman (1987) argues, museums were the places used to foster the ideology of ‘intellectuals’ offering new developments of knowledge, especially the encyclopaedic paradigm of knowledge. Bennett (1995) has also argued that museums became centres of modern relations between culture and government. Thus the public museum was not just a place to display culture but served as a place of reformation where a wide range of social routines and performances took place. The museums were established by the nation state as a means of inculcating notions of citizenship. From the perspective of colonies however, museums were basically institutions established by the West to exercise colonial sovereignty by displaying colonial artefacts as curios to ‘enlighten’ their citizens. Bauman (1987) further pointed out that the museum was a place where ‘intellectuals’ were made distinct from non-intellectuals. Eventually, then museums became spaces where those classified as intellectuals were empowered to become legislators of the culture of the ‘other’. As a result, they are able to authenticate ideas that were likely to be falsifications of reality (Bauman, 1987). Both Bauman and Bennett arguments reflect the shift from the museums role as only exhibiting elitism to being associated with

the production and dissemination of knowledge – albeit as the West and the intellectuals deemed appropriate.

Modern museum according to Professor Boyd Dawkins in 1892 was the outcome of renaissance that must keep pace with those great accessions to our knowledge of the history of nature and of man, which distinguish the new from the old learning. He pointed out that if it ceases to grow, it ceases to exist. He emphasised that the museum work will continue to evolve because there is no ‘finality in the accusation of knowledge’ (Dawkins, 1892: 13). The colonial museum on the other hand reflected the views and attitude of dominant cultures and material evidence of colonial achievements (Simpson, 1996: 1). Such colonial representations are bound to have influenced the perception of the western public about the colonies. But despite the effect of colonialism, the notion of the modern museums by Professor Boyd Dawkins seem to be progressing. Where museums are undergoing changes in the way non-western cultures are represented. However, the flexibility involved in museums today has impelled McTavish (2013: 3) to argue that the modern museum does not exist.

Museums are further characterised by their collection of impressive visual proponents, of representational strategies and modes of enunciation (Massage, 2007). The collections are of pivotal significance in understanding the concept of the museum as a place where objects are exhibited. Museums are also socially and historically located and ‘bear the imprint of social relations beyond their walls and the present; they are never just spaces for the playing out of wider social relationships but exist to create cultural context within them’ (MacDonald, 1996: 4). Such cultural context further highlights how museum exhibitions evolved as they showcase material evidence from the colonies. George MacDonald (1992) further describes the contemporary museum as a place for the dissemination of information rather than being a central repository for objects, and suggests that museums are endowed with institutionalised authority to act as custodians of the past who aspire to publicise these experiences of the past through varying modes of representation. In some cases, emphasis are placed on ways of connecting with the public whereby hands on experiences with the use of technology as a process of science becomes

paramount in exhibitions (Micklos, 2004). In the above scholars' accounts, modern museums are therefore understood as Western institutions established primarily for education through dissemination of information, fostering engagement, promoting experiences of the past in the present by responding 'dynamically to changing circumstances and the needs of visitors' (McTavish, 2013: 5).

By the colonial era, museums were being widely used for exhibiting colonial artefacts that was acquired through range of ways (such as purchase, donations, salvage and plunder) as imperial spectacles to educate and civilise the West to the detriment of the colonised (Coombes, 1994). Realising the significance of their part played in defining the 'other', Coombes (1994) made a powerful argument that Britain's power over its former colonies has been played out within the museum, through dynamic information and representations that depicts the subject positions of the main players (people being represented) in the colonial drama. She has defined museums as institutions that 'dramatise contradictory emotions' as they attempt to combine objects of different contexts together to produce new interpretations (Coombes 1994: 1). This is obviously a reading that tends to challenge the original cultural values that the colonial objects encompass. In addition, Charles Saumarez Smith an assistant keeper at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, has highlighted that museums utilise their institutional power to construct new meanings for artefacts in their collections (Smith, 1989). However, such displayed artefacts reveal aspects of cultural differences that emphasise some form of intellectual imperialism such as authoritative curatorial voices within the museum spaces. He emphasised that meanings ascribed to artefacts are likely to change due to the notion that artefacts are not static (Smith, 1989). As a result, artefacts derive their changing meaning through their history, and such history needs to be acknowledged. Curators can tend to interpret artefacts through their personal circumstances and culture with varying degrees of awareness (Vogel, 1991).

Bauman posited that not only do personal circumstances affect the curator but that the society that she or he hails from also influences how interpretation and meaning are constructed (Bauman, 1987). Since Western museums in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were entrenched in colonial thinking, it is most likely that the interpretation ascribed

to artefacts will produce meaning in the same light. One will expect that challenges to colonialism from post-colonialism would orchestrate a rethink about how the 'other' is represented to highlight historical evidence surrounding artefacts in museums' collections. However, this is not always the case, as the information panels describing artefacts can continue to depict colonial ideas of supremacy in the post-colonial era. Such colonial ideas echo older museum practices and methods of display that are sometimes now referred to as the 'old museology'.

A desire for change birthed the idea of the 'new museology'. This became the title of a book edited by Peter Vergo in 1989 and helped popularise a more critical approach pursued by many pre-eminent scholars in the field. This idea of 'a new museology' fostered critical approaches whereby museums were thought of in counterpoint to their old methods-based approach to the collection and presentation of objects (art, ethnographic or historic). Museums were interpreted using a range of new methodologies, ones which promoted the contextualisation of objects and placed the audience experience, in relation to the objects on display, at the forefront of a museum experience (Keith, 2010). Vergo (1989) for instance, argued that museum collections should not be just for the display of wealth, power or privilege but a place of study. He emphasised the need for a 'new museology' that considers multiple perspectives, the context of the artefacts and de-settling the museum frame, through which mass education of museum visitors becomes a priority. Such work called for significant attention to be given to museum's framing of objects and that consideration be given to their changing context. This included the frame of imperialism and the context of post-colonialism. The traffic between academic theory and curators meant that many institutions were affected by this new critical approach.

The realisation of the need for change in museum practices in representing the 'other' also indicates how that engagement between museum collections and museum visitors became paramount to the survival of the institution. To engage visitors, curators need to look beyond their own understanding, because it influences their judgement of the 'other'. Vogel (1991: 191) argued that 'museums provide experiences of most of the world's art and artefacts that does not bear even the



remotest resemblance to what makers intend'. Often this is because these collections were not intended to be seen in museums. Often it can also be due to a lack of knowledge of the culture and ideology that the artefacts represent; it can also be due to the notion that other cultures are deemed inferior and as a result should be interpreted in a way that exhibits the superiority of Western culture and ideology. Hence there is a need to make known as much as possible, of what the artefacts have represented so as to distinguish curatorial interpretation from the makers' intentions (Vogel, 1991). In return, museum visitors can be empowered with enough information to come up with their own interpretation based on accurate historical evidence.

To extend such recasting of museums as a critical site of public debate, the notion of new museology today needs to integrate contemporary technology into museums' everyday practice. Technologies such as the Internet have the potential for reducing the restrictions created by the museum's physical building, as the building perhaps re-enacts varying emotional experiences that are likely to affect how visitors perceive and interpret the collections within it. In this thesis I discuss therefore how new museology highlights the need for us to revisit museum representations and interpretations of the 'other' online, as these elements can influence how visitors form their understanding of the 'other'.

Emphasising the new museological stresses on accessibility, Pollock (2008: 15) argued that the museum is a 'site of concrete embodied social and directed encounter either through the exhibition or a different access to the collection.' However, it is not enough for museums to make their collections accessible; they also need to present historical information that might include the groups they want to present. Museums are widely seen as authoritative institutions where collections are stored for the better understanding of other people's cultures through the display of their artefacts. Purnell (2008) has pointed out that creating connections with other museums around the world is one other way of encouraging new meanings that could cause deeper understandings to emerge. By so doing, the meanings of an artefact disseminated by a museum could be compared with other meanings, thus highlighting its wider implications.

In sum, it is important to note that substantial changes about how the ‘other’ is represented have occurred within museums. However, these changes still do not yet go far enough and I would argue that there is too much ‘resting on laurels’ about how far there is still to go. My thesis highlights the need for a reframing of museum artefacts through the use of digital technology to address the prejudices of colonialism.

### **The colonisation of the Ife bronzes**

How were the Ife bronzes colonised? This will be examined bearing in mind the particular history of the Ife castings, most of which are in Nigeria. To provide a better understanding of how the Ife bronzes became colonised. I draw here on a range of literature from different historical periods to reveal the wider implications of the bronzes. Historical documents, however, are likely to be problematic. Farriss (1986: xi) argues that history is limited to what ‘past informants chose to record and what accidents have preserved’ and as a result might not be considered reliable. Equally, however, the impossibility of experiencing or directly observing the past made Farriss (1986) emphasise the importance of critically using historical documents. Similarly, I explore these documented histories to see how the Ife bronzes were understood in different periods. Historical documents are thus utilised to investigate the social life of the artefacts from when they were excavated through their continuous use and exchange. In the process this section highlights the bronzes’ supposed ‘discovery’ by the West in 1910 and claim for ownership as well as how different contexts of time and political power influenced the meanings and interpretations ascribed to the bronzes.

Historical documents such as diary entry from 1910, minutes of meetings of sub-committee of the trustees of the British Museum on antiquities, from 1940 and yearly reports by the keeper of Ethnography Department Mr H J Braunholtz to the sub-committee of the trustees of the British Museum from 1940. These documents illustrates varying perspectives about the coloniser and their colonies. It further highlights the limited resources in terms of space and staff experienced by the

department of ethnography that impacted on the services of the department (Braunholtz, 1940). The damage caused by the 2<sup>nd</sup> world war also contributed to the already cramped situation that resulted in the storage of large quantity of ethnographic material (Reports and minutes of subcommittee meeting, 1952). According to German anthropologist Leo Frobenius' account, 1910 marked the beginning of the Ife findings (Frobenius, 1913; Famoroti, 2010; Kuba & Hambolu, 2010). These documents indicated that the Ife bronzes were already in existence before the arrival of British colonial rule in Nigeria. Thus the 'discovery' was not from the viewpoint of the colonised, as they owned the bronzes, but for the colonisers though some were excavated and had been buried for a long time (Willett, 1967a). The sketchy accounts of the British resident administrator in Ibadan Nigeria, Capt. Cyril Hammond Elgee in 1907 and Richard Dennett in 1910 (an English trader operating out of the Congo in the early 20th century) substantiates the fact that long before the advent of colonialism curious Europeans had been permitted to visit the 'spiritual groves' of Ife, such as the one where the Ori Olokun was kept and worshipped without difficulty. This could account for how Frobenius was able to gain access to the *Olokun* shrine as discussed later in chapter two (Willett, 1960).

The 1910 document of Frobenius account substantiates the fact that the first 'discovery' of the bronzes in Ife was made by the German anthropologist Leo Frobenius, although Sir Hercules Read had written about the terracotta head from Iwirin grove in 1910 (Frobenius, 1910; Read, 1910; Willett, 1960). The term 'bronze', however, had been in existence since the British expedition of Benin in 1897 (Igbofe, 1970). Moreover, Frobenius' offer of 'gifts' in exchange for the bronze head depicting the Ori Olokun (a Yoruba deity) corroborated commercialisation as one of the ideologies of colonisation (Willett, 1960; Mirzoeff, 2002; Platte, 2010b). Having missed an opportunity in 1893 with the clue provided by the Nigerian as well as the opportunity of raising money for an expedition before British occupation of the kingdom of Benin in Nigeria, Frobenius began to develop a sense of persecution (Hays, 1959). Thus highlighting the competition between European nations in collecting. By 1904 he extracted funds from the Hamburg Museum for collection of specimen that led to the first German Inner-Africa Exploration Expedition. However this expedition was limited to the Congo as travels

to Nigeria at the time was more expensive. Hays pointed out that the terms of the contract also pressurised Frobenius to ‘collect as many specimen as he could lay hands on as cheaply as possible’ (Hays 1959: 284).

Frobenius exploration in Africa was marred with pilfering and aggression that raises questions about his professionalism in the acquisition of the *Ori Olokun*. Hays (1959) further questions the practices of Frobenius’ alleged ‘discovery’, stating that: ‘His adventures [in Nigeria] were destined to increase his sense of persecution to near paranoia’ (Hays, 1959: 285), and that:

Frobenius had none of the true ethnologist’s patience. He did not try to gain the confidence of the people, but merely extracted their possessions by a combination of browbeating and exploitation of greed (Hays, 1959: 286).

This statement clearly identified how the need for recognition, greed and the desire to enrich the collections of German museums were the primary reasons for Frobenius’ expedition. The artefact in this period moved quickly from being a votive item seen only when dug up during special festivals to being contested property under the colonial administration thus witnessing colonial rivalry in action (Frobenius, 1913; Willett, 1960; Platte, 2010b).

Documents from 1938 to 1959 highlighted the second ‘discovery’ of the Ife bronzes. This period was marked with archaeological discoveries that were used to challenging discourses of primitive art (Willett, 1967a: 13). Ironically, the period was also marked by the full-blown commercialisation of the bronzes. The claim of ‘discovery’ by the West further alienated the bronzes from their earlier intended meanings, names and traditional ‘values’ to the people they represent. Though many apart from the *Obalufon* mask and probably the *Ori Olokun* had been buried for long period of time (Willett, 1967a). Willett (1967a: 102) pointed out that Ife town was abandoned between 1850-1854 and 1878 and 1894 due to conflicts between city-states in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The conflict between Ife and Modakeke in the late nineteenth century led to the exile of Ife indigenes and the likely death of the original

custodians in exile, made it difficult to remember the burial places of the bronzes (Willett, 1960).

The period of colonial rule (1900 – 1960) was a period marked with ‘free for all’ exploitation and looting that resulted in the removal of the bronzes from their original territory. This resulted in some of the bronzes being taken to the United States of America. It was during this period of colonial rule that the bronzes first entered Western museums as curios and colonial booty. The bronzes were later subjected to tests that revealed a likely counterfeit of the Ori Olokun (acquired by Frobenius in 1910) during their visit to the British Museum in 1948 (Fagg & Underwood, 1949).

I further explored documents from the 1960s, the era just after Nigeria’s independence, and how the new political dispensation affected the way the bronzes were viewed and interpreted. As I explore in chapter 3, though there had been some changes in meaning and in how the bronzes were viewed, some of these changes did not take place until the 1990s, when the ideology of primitivism was more thoroughly interrogated through exhibitions such as Africa ’95 held at the Royal Academy. Despite the acknowledgement of the need for change, it was not until 2000 for some of these changes to become evident through means such as new dedicated spaces (the Africa Gallery at the British Museum being one). Further change occurred in 2007 when the entrance panel to the Sainsbury Africa Gallery was revised to remove the term ‘primitive’ (Philips, 2008).

With the introduction of digital technology into museum practices (Keene, 1996; Besser, 1997a 1997b; Hughes 2004; Parry, 2005; Parry, 2010), one would expect that the revision of the museum’s perception of the Ife bronze, which indicates interpretations of the colonial period (Coombes, 1994; Vartanian, 2013) might foster the emergence of new meanings and interpretations. However, the narratives on the British Museum website today still resonate with the old colonial ideology and limited knowledge, as I explain in detail in Chapter 5. Such colonial narratives can even be associated with the single-tone narrative expressed in the language of the former colonial administration (Fanon, 2008(1952); Edwards & Tredell, 2008). Such

exclusion of wider voices and limited modes of participation can probably be responsible for fostering an extension of cultural colonialism in the digital post-colonial era.

Although there are writings about the history of the Ife bronzes, this literature review also indicates that there is still a gap regarding their ‘discovery’. My thesis will therefore expand on the critical discussion of Frank Willett (1967a) and by extension will include the ramifications for digital representation and its associated issues. Due to simple reason that Frank Willett had not only written but had a first-hand account of Ife archaeological findings. Apart from the work of Frank Willett in 1967, the archaeology of Ife was also undertaken in broader historical perspective by Willett (1960), Ozanne (1969), Ekpo (1974), Garlake (1978) and Eluyemi (1986). It is also noteworthy that while the bronzes have witnessed different contexts that affect their meaning, this has yet to be subjected to a rigorous critical investigation. Also, after the 2010 exhibition that marked the centenary of the bronzes’ alleged ‘discovery’, it is sad to note that the bronzes are still shrouded in narratives produced from the perspective of the coloniser and not the colonised. My thesis seeks to explore and bridge this gap.

### **Post-colonial ‘decolonising’ the colonised through their artefacts**

Post-colonialism in this thesis is centred on the critique of the representation of the ‘other’ in the West, and the need for representation grounded on the philosophies of Fanon. Fanon (2008(1952): 5) posited that there is a need for ‘the shameful livery put together by centuries of incomprehension’ to be torn off. He professed the need for the ‘other’ to be understood without the need for being extricated or defined by colonial ideology. Fanon argued for a setting that would allow the ‘other’ to be seen from a preferred and not an imposed perspective (Fanon, 2008(1952)). This need is in recognition of the varying constraints that the colonial era placed on how the ‘other’ perceived themselves as inferior both between colonised to colonised and colonised to coloniser (Fanon, 2008(1952)). Said (1985) also argued that the West created a representational machine in order to control the colonised. Bhabha further highlighted that the central premise of post-colonialism lies in the opposition between the colonised and the coloniser (Bhabha, 1990/2013). However, Hall

expressed concerns that post-colonialism tends to be merely celebratory of the uncertainty of identity and meaning (Hall, 1996) as well as himself highlighting that political change was unstable. Hall therefore highlighted Shohat's (1992) criticism of post-colonialism for its theoretical and political ambiguity and emphasised the political potential of specific discourses without guarantee (Hall, 1996).

Shohat's (1992: 99) criticism of post-colonialism was due to its 'dizzying multiplicity of personalities, its a-historical and universalizing displacements and its depoliticising implications'. Shohat's criticism further highlights the unstable nature of the term, as it could be used in favour of either the colonised or the coloniser. She recognises, in short, that the term conveys different implications to different communities, as post-colonialism is open to varying contexts. McClintock also criticised the concept of post-colonialism for its 'linearity and its entranced suspension of history' (McClintock, 1992: 10). She emphasised that the discourses of colonialism are connected to race, class and gender in ways that promoted imperialism abroad and classicism at home. Imperialism and the invention of race, according to McClintock (1992: 5), are 'fundamental aspects of Western, industrial modernity'. As a result, they are phenomena that are likely to continue today and might be a challenge to eradicate.

Edwards & Tredell (2008) also emphasised the multiple uses of the term 'post-colonialism'. First, it has been used to reveal the asymmetrical power structures that lie behind colonial discourse. Second, it has been used as a political and ideological tool, advocating change through decolonisation. For both Shohat (1992) and McClintock (1992), although there is no stated universal period for the post-colonial, it is perhaps a term used and expected to mark the end of colonialism and its effects. Sadly however, the effects of colonialism irrespective of postcolonial ideology still resonate till date. In this thesis I emphasise that the multiple interpretations and temporalities of post-colonialism are likely to be factors for the reason as to why it is yet to have a more resounding impact in museums even whilst it has had an impact. As a result, therefore, the colonial paradigm still exists in some forms today.

Mirzoeff (2002/1998: 282) has argued that colonialism centred on commerce, Christianity and civilisation. The role of the colonial powers, because of their mission to 'civilise' the 'other', had consequences that still resonate in the post-colonial era. One of these consequences is referred to by Mirzoeff (2002/1998: 282) as 'visual colonialism'; this involves the production of maps, photographs and paintings and extends to collections of indigenous arts and crafts. Such objects were then assembled in vast collections in museums such as the British Museum and in the Museum of Mankind from 1970 to 1997 to explain and enforce as well as directly or indirectly define the colonised (Trustees of the British Museum, 1982). The colonisers therefore reinforced administrative authority over Africans through ownership of their visual materials. As a result, Africans were prevented from accessing their collections or providing narratives for them. The colonial plunders thus served as a platform for how non-Western colonies became known (Arowolo, 2010).

The British Museum exhibited Ife bronze further served as a means of seeing the people as well as learning about the culture the artefacts represent. It is important to note that we, people of the 19<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> centuries do not know how the Ife bronzes were used during the Ife kingdom 11<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> century. Although the bronzes were made for the Ife monarchy and as a result were likely to be seen only when used during special festivals. The bronzes have become widely known outside Ife since the arrival of the colonial power. Colonialism therefore can be said to be responsible for the bronzes' 'discovery', which resulted in various exhibitions outside Nigeria. These exhibitions, however, were probably neither held in honour of the original artists nor the objects as recognisable objects of art but as objects of 'curiosity' (Coombes, 1994: 2).

The bronzes were further used to display the superiority of the West through the language used in their description. Fanon (2008(1952) argues that such language of representation coerces the colonised into accepting the collective consciousness of the coloniser, which identifies blackness with evil and sin. According to Fanon (2008(1952), language was a way in which the coloniser created an inferiority complex in the colonised by putting to death local cultural originality. Such



language, according to Said, maintains exploitative attitudes towards the colonised (Said, 1989). The drive for sovereignty further led to the test of the bronzes for their material constituent. In 1948, bronzes were sent for restoration and possibly brief exhibition at the British Museum (Fagg & Underwood, 1949).

Leon Underwood's expressed concerns about the originality of the *Olokun* head intensified the need for the test. His concern was recorded in his diary on the 18/8/1945 and the scrutiny revealed that the commended artwork was a copy of a missing original (Underwood & Fagg, 1949). Though Underwood and Fagg (1949) findings had been challenged, the whereabouts of the missing original is yet to be unravelled. But the test validated by notable British individuals substantiates the premise that the existing Ori Olokun is a copy and not original. This test of the copy also highlights how knowledge put to work in institutions like the British Museum can in some way contribute to how visitors perceive and interpret the Ife bronzes (Foucault, 1980). Contrary to Underwood and Fagg (1949) claim of a copy, I argue in line with Platte (2010b: 80) that perhaps there is no copy and the existing *Ori Olokun* in Ife is likely the supposed original.

Foucault (1980) argues that not only is knowledge always a form of power, but that power is implicated in the question of whether and in what circumstances knowledge is to be applied or not. Foucault's ideology pointed out the importance of knowledge and power as opposed to 'truth'. Knowledge related to power not only assumes the authority of 'the truth' but has the power to 'become the truth' (Foucault, 1977; Bauman, 1987). From this light, knowledge and power can be held responsible for the formalistic representations of the 'other'. The 'truth' based on knowledge tends to be endorsed through power because the story remains the same irrespective of the period, setting or context. Foucault argued, however, that 'truth is not out power... Truth is a thing of this world; it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effect of power' (Foucault, 1980: 131).

Despite the availability of necessary documents outlining events surrounding the discovery of the bronzes, the dominant claim of falsification or a missing original of the *Ori Olokun* seem incomplete. As a result this thesis argues that the single

interpretation ascribed to the Ife bronzes has become widely accepted as ‘the truth’. Such an idea being represented as the truth, however, fails to reflect the idea of truth according to the society and the period. Foucault further argued that:

...each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth; that is, the type of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true, the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which it is sanctioned. (Foucault, 1980: 131)

Since post-colonialism acknowledges the end of the dominance of colonial rule, such stories of degradation need to be revisited to reflect the changes in the periods. Fanon (2008(1952) argued that situations must be considered from the standpoint of their time. Thus, facilitating the colonised to rewrite their story from their ‘own’ perspective and not from the perspective of the coloniser is important. Although there have been some very important anti-colonial museum displays, the post-colonial idea has yet to become more fully dominant, in part because museum information is put together by curators who themselves are often of the same society and culture as the colonisers, and in which anti-colonialism is present but not hegemonic. As a result, there is a good chance that colonial ideas are kept alive through the information disseminated about non-Western artefacts. No wonder Gikandi (1996: 14) described post-colonialism as ‘a code for the state of undecidability in which the culture of colonialism continues to resonate in what was supposed to be its negation’. Post-coloniality, he writes, ‘is thus the term for a state of transition and cultural instability’ (Gikandi, 1996: 14).

The post-colonial theorists mentioned above have substantiated the idea that post-colonialism is deeply embedded in colonialism. Thus, colonial ideas still exist only to be shrouded in post-colonial discourse. It might be expected that the inaccuracies in the narratives (Frobenius account and museum text) of the Ife bronzes would have been corrected in the twenty-first century, but instead the post-colonial era has only endorsed the erasure of terms that makes colonialism glaring. Hence, Gikandi stressed that ‘post-colonialism represents both a change and a lack of change’, whereby museum curators acknowledge the need for change but have yet to fully

carry out that change (Gikandi's interview Jefferess, 2006). This could also in part be as a result of the notion that the post-colonial paradigm has become dominant within interpretive institutions like museums. Are the inadequacies of museums and the whiteness of museum curators the result of a continuation of colonialism? The relaxed nature in implementing post-colonial paradigms is also often further blamed on the lack of funding to embark on the project. As a result, the same colonial descriptions have found their way into new spheres of exhibitions today. Therefore, there is a need for new spheres for the exhibiting of African artefacts that will not only increase access, but also empower Africans everywhere to write or participate in writing their own narratives. In the case of the Ife bronzes that are in Nigeria, in a Nigerian museum, such wider participation is likely to draw more attention to the interpretation of the bronzes from the perspective of the people and the city it represents today.

The above literature contains little in the way of post-colonial discussions of the Ife bronzes. Hence it seems meaningful in this thesis to re-examine the colonial experience of the Ife bronzes from a post-colonial viewpoint. This thesis, in line with Foucault, highlights the notion that power is not static and 'does not function in a form of chain, rather it circulates' (Foucault, 1980: 98). Foucault suggests that power and knowledge are always rooted in particular contexts and histories confined to time, whereby power permeates all levels of social existence from family spheres to the public sphere of politics. This is reflected in the changes that occurred in the implications of the Ife bronzes before, during and after colonial rule, as I will discuss extensively in Chapters 1, 2 and 3. Power was not returned directly to the Ife monarchy or the town of Ife but to the nation of Nigeria. By the 1970s, the bronzes were being used as symbols of national identity. This was made possible because museums were instructed during the Nigerian civil war (also known as the Biafra war) to rewrite their labels to 'omit completely any reference to the ethnic provenance of works' (Platte, 2010a: 62). Revising the museum narratives reflects various power shifts in the post-colonial era not only from the oppressed to the oppressor but from the oppressed-turned-oppressor. Such narratives could be created through the development and accessibility of digital photographs of the bronzes to reflect post-colonial discourse. Dealing with the formation of new narratives via the

issue of discovery and representation, I contend, can further contribute to post-colonial thinking about the Ife bronzes.

### **Digital representation**

It is important not to imagine digital representation as innocent because it could foster the continuation of colonisation. Hall (2003 [1997]) argues that representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchange is made between members of a culture. Hall pointed out that representation involves the use of language, of designs and images that stand for things being represented. Representation could be said to be reflective, intentional or constructive depending on the concept or context guiding the process. Hall argues that representation can be said to be reflective when the language used reflects an existing meaning in the world of objects, people and events. Hall's idea is in line with Foucault's (1977) idea in that it recognises the importance of language in representation, implying that representations are likely to reflect a language or discourse identified with a particular era. In this regards, meaning is dependent on a generally accepted implications as agreed either by a culture about themselves or about the 'other'.

This is further discussed with regards to the name ascribed to the Ife metal casting after their discovery. 'Bronze' became an acceptable name for the castings in line with western use of the term for artistic metal casting (Willett, 1967: 55). This name negates the name given to the artefacts by the culture that produced them. As such, the language reflects the likely material of production and now determines the identity of the artefacts and not its meaning within museum walls. Also, the continued use of the language of the coloniser in the representation of the Ife bronzes tends to ensure a continued repression of the language of the colonised, as it is an expression of the worldwide dominance of the English language (Daniels, 2009; Edwards & Tredell, 2008). Ironically, the National Commission of Museums and Monument in Nigeria use English language in representing Ife bronzes in Nigeria probably because it is the 'language of communication' in Nigeria (House, 2003: 556). Thus there is a need to represent the Ife artefacts through other mediums that might encourage the emergence of their wider implications and meanings outside the

museum walls. It is such need that brings about the consideration of representing the artefacts in a more capacious way including the potentials of digital representation.

Digital images have the ability to represent as well as helping to construct some 'outside referent: a physically existing object, historical information presented in other documents, a system of categories currently employed by culture as a whole or by particular social group' (Manovich, 2001: 15). Manovich (2001) suggests that software applications as well as the operating system on a personal computer also act as a form of representation. Such representations are also unavoidably of bias, given that they construct some features of physical reality at the expense of others. As a result they are used in organising data about artefacts to be represented in a particular manner that gives privilege to particular models of the world and humanity subjectively.

Digital representation is further affected by inaccessibility; this is also known as the digital divide. Kalay (2008: 6) argued that once information is captured in a digital format, the content could be easily disseminated. Who is the digital content disseminated to? How could the digital become inclusive of everybody? Despite the potential of digital technology, Kalay (2008) pointed out that such information would only be available to those who are in possession of a cell phone or a cable television. However, I will argue that such digital content will be available to people who not only own the 'ubiquitous personal memory device' (Giaccardi, 2012: 1) but those who are connected to the Internet and who possess online skills. Hargittai (2002) also argued that the digital divide exists due to inequalities of access to and use of the medium. Existing studies of differential Internet access and use highlight inequalities from different categories among various segments of the population (Bucy, 2000), with particular attention to education (NTIA, 2000); race (Hoffman *et al*, 2001); gender (Bimber, 2000); age (Loges & Jung, 2001); income (Goslee & Conte, 1998) and rural residence (Strover, 2001).

Despite the available studies on the digital divide, Hargittai (2002) argued that more detailed study is still required. She argued that the categories affected by the digital divide should not only be limited to people who can or cannot use the Internet, but

include levels of online skills among individuals. Online skills, according to Hargittai (2002), are defined as the ability to efficiently and effectively find information on the Web. The absence or reduction in such skills, as she points out, is likely to indicate that there is a second level of digital divide. Her argument points to the fact that having the facility does not automatically mean that the medium is being used to its full advantage. Instead of reducing the digital divide through the provision of Internet access, the divide is likely to be widened if the capacity to effectively use the Internet is low (Wilson, 2002). Therefore, more people are perhaps not likely to view the digital representations of artefacts if they lack the very skills required to find the museum's online exhibition.

Digital racism is another potential issue affecting the digital representation of the Ife bronzes. According to Daniels (2009: 3), the Internet has increasingly become an important front to contest the meaning of race, racism and civil rights because 'white supremacists have customised the internet technologies in ways that are innovative, sophisticated and cunning'. She emphasised that the secretive nature of the Internet allows the hidden agendas (such as political goals and white supremacy) intended by the people responsible for creating the digital representation of the Ife bronzes to be unknown. Thus digital media has also created an avenue for the expression and propagation of whiteness across national borders (Back, 2002). The challenges posed by digital representation do not diminish the constructive potential that is yet to be explored as regards the Ife bronzes. But, particularly as digital representation is still most likely to be funded by Western governments or organisations, it is important to question whether and to what extent 'digital colonisation' is an important part of 'digital representation'.

### **'Decolonisation' through digitisation**

How could digitisation be used to promote decolonisation? Although there have been various discussions within museology, post-colonial theory and digital media, there are still gaps that this thesis seeks to address. According to Gikandi (1996: 6): 'postcolonial theory is most useful in its self-reflexivity, especially its recognition that the colonized space was instrumental in the invention of Europe just as the idea

of Europe was the condition for the possibility of the production of modern colonial and postcolonial society'. Following the same line of thought, post-colonial theory should also include 'ideological tools to advocate for change and liberation' where such changes are likely to bring about the decolonisation of Africa' (Edwards & Tredell, 2008: 2). As a result, there is a possibility of utilising digital technology in the revision, rewriting and reinvention of Africa.

This thesis seeks to bridge the gap by emphasising the potentials of digital technology in decolonising artefacts embedded in colonial museum discourse. The digital arena provides considerable scope for plurality through the hypothesis of new stages, new cultural possibilities, wider geographical reach, and the move towards inclusive participatory culture. This thesis further emphasises the need for a participatory culture to be used in the process of digitising and interpreting artefacts in line with Kalay (2008). This process is likely to allow the inclusion of the language of the producer (for example, the original names of the Ife bronzes) plus the historical facts surrounding their production and looting to reflect post-colonial discourses. By so doing museums might be seen more frequently as a place where meanings and interpretations are made by the people and not for the people they represent.

### **Research methodology**

In this research I will analyse the changing meaning of the Ife bronzes from pre-colonial Ife to the postcolonial digital British Museum. This is a qualitative study that utilises a multi-disciplinary theoretical framework, drawing from post-colonial studies, cultural studies, social and cultural history, art history and museum studies. The theoretical material is explored at length in my literature review. It uses a mixed methodological approach that includes both primary and secondary research including theoretical research, archive research and historical research. A multi-method approach of collecting data is preferred because it adds rigour and depth to the investigation; moreover, the weakness of one method might be the strength of another (Flick, 1992; Singleton & Straits, 2010). Primary data collection is carried

out through in-depth interviews, observations, website analysis and document review (Creswell, 2009; Locke, Silverman & Spirduso, 2010; Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

Between September 2012 and November 2013 semi-structured interviews were conducted with 4 curators from the Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas, 3 documentation staff in the British Museum and Staff from Frobenius Institute Frankfurt/Main. I also carried out observations of museum space, artefacts and visitors' interactions with both. The British Museum website was analysed in most depth between September 2012 - December 2013. Archival documents such as departmental reports and minutes of meeting of the subcommittee of the trustees of the British Museum from 1940 were reviewed. Slides, catalogues and schedule of exhibitions held at both the British Museum and Museum of Mankind were also reviewed and analysed. Using these existing archives of textual and visual data, I discuss how the Ife bronzes were valued and interpreted before the colonial period, and their changing social implication in the colonial and post-colonial eras.

Document reviews are helpful in providing specific details to support or substantiate information retrieved from interviews, which can be used to make inferences (Yin, 2010). This study therefore gathers information from internal museum documents; museum exhibitions; the diaries of Leo Frobenius (the German archaeologist) and Sir Alan Burns (British governor of Nigeria from 1942 to December 18, 1943), who came into contact with the artefacts; newspapers, and government documents. This data is particularly useful in the early parts of the research because it highlights how the Ife bronzes were discovered and the role played by Western museums as the initial custodians (Singleton & Straits, 2010). Documents on the Ife bronzes are also used to provide insight into the relationship between the artefacts and the culture that created them, thus revealing how these artefacts can assist in the understanding of Ife culture. Secondary sources will be used to analyse the historical records following the traditions of Denzin and Lincoln (1998).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 participants from the Yoruba ethnic group (12 indigenes from Ile Ife and 28 from other Yoruba states of Nigeria). The 12 respondents from Ile Ife are also members of the Ife Club 20 UK branch



while some of the 28 participants are members of the Yoruba Awareness Foundation (YAF) (*Egbe Ipolongo Ede ati Asa Yoruba*) located in South London, and Yoruba Catholic Community Deptford. A combination of varying Yoruba speaking groups was considered due to reasons that they have sufficient underlying cultural and linguistic unity to consider them as a ‘single’ ethnic group believing they all descended from Oduduwa<sup>5</sup> (Bascom, 1969). As a result they are likely to have come across the bronzes from Ife. The participants from Ile Ife served as a control group, one considered most likely to emphasise the political and sociocultural meaning of the Ife bronzes.

As Keith (2010: 30) points out, the ‘data’ collected makes visible how specific communities are imagined, how projects are developed for ‘targeted’ audiences, and indicates how conventions in practice continue to perpetuate an air of exclusivity in institutions purportedly open to all. Contrasting and comparing the stated motivations and intentions of practitioners with observed practice through different exhibitions involving the Ife bronzes brings to the fore the challenges inherent in transforming words into actions. These challenges highlight how the mechanisms of essentialism, instrumentalism and exclusion can be applied in practice. The analysis of the process highlights the complexity of shifting the narrative and culture of museum – a shift that Keith (2010: 3) suggests ‘denotes the evolution in learning and audience development from a civilizing, transmission approach towards a participatory individual meaning-making approach’. This research also intends therefore to enhance the understanding of the agency of the museum and of museum practitioners, particularly during their engagement with representation and how meaning is constructed via museum representation. My research acknowledges that although the material cannot be static, meanings are likely to evolve through the new technology of representation that will perhaps include excluded communities.

Record of archaeological evidence will also be considered. Since there are few general accounts of the archaeology of Ife ever published before 1960, Frank Willett’s

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<sup>5</sup> *Oduduwa* is regarded by the Yoruba people as their mythical progenitor and founder who came down from heaven and instituted both the cosmic and political order in Ile Ife kingdom (Krapf-Askari 1969, Okelola 2001, Falola and Heaton 2008)

account of 1960 and 1967 will be considered as the up to date archaeological account ever documented after the discovery of the bronzes. His account highlights the importance of the archaeological findings in substantiating the culture of the Yoruba people as represented by Ife oral history. Ife archaeology constitutes stone, terracotta and bronze artefacts that were found at different times and at different sites within Ife. Willett (1960:233) argued that the present day inhabitants of Ife including the priest who could be regarded as custodian know very little about the figures and other object of worship. Due to lack of a unified identity as different priest give different accounts and different occasions. As this was the case in the 60's it is most likely that oral history today is most likely a continuation of accounts that resonated in the 60's and depends on which priest the individual is loyal to. However the absence of a unified description indicates a likely discontinuity of some traditions and practices.

The archaeology of Ife is somewhat hampered due to the construction technique in Ife that involved digging to prepare mud bricks on the site for the proposed building. Such construction technique according Willett (1967: 18) destroys completely the archaeological deposits. He pointed out that archaeological deposits have to be dated according to the youngest item present but Ife land use and building techniques allows older remains to be dug and added unto new walls. Hence such difficulty has resulted in the examination of the bronzes for valuable to information with the hope that the information will be substantiated from possible analogies from elsewhere (Willett, 1967:19). The archaeological evidence can however permit historical deductions that can throw more light into the history of Ife.

### **Ethical considerations**

Ethics according to Saunders et al (2007: 178) is the 'appropriateness of your behaviour in relation to the rights of those who become the subject of your work or are affected by it'. Following same line of argument, Blumberg et al (2005: 92) defined ethics as 'the moral principles, norms, or standards of behaviour that guide moral choices about our behaviour and our relationships with others'. Research ethics therefore involves how research topics are formulated and clarified, designing

of research , collection of data, processing and storage of data collected , analysis of data and findings in a moral and responsible manner (Sauders et al ,2007).

With the use of face-to- face interview in the collection of data, issues of confidentiality was dealt with by informing the participants about their right to anonymity at any period of the research. Confidentiality was also achieved by keeping data in a locked filing cabinet and password accessible computer files only accessible by myself. Permission was sought for images used during the pilot stage of data collection from the British Museum in line with the copyright law because the museum owns the rights to the images. The permission for use was granted based on the images being used for research and educational purposes in August 2011. The British Museum Anthropology library also provided permission for the images from *The Illustrated London News* to be used in the thesis.

In order to minimise any negative impact on the participants the City University ethical codes and guidelines was followed and all necessary documents were signed and submitted to the Senate Research Ethics Committee. Participants were provided a copy of the consent forms and a transcribed version of the interview was sent to them for any amendment. Each participant was asked if he/she will want his/her name mentioned in the write up and those who do not want to be named were not named in the write up. Participants were also told that if at any stage of the interview they wanted to reconsider their participations they were free to. Fortunately, nobody opted out in the middle of the interview. They were informed that if they needed to add or remove any information given they could do so by contacting the researcher at a later date. All the participants gave their informed consent freely without any intimidation and without being coerced and their confidentiality was guaranteed and respected.

## **Research structure**

This thesis is divided into six chapters.

Chapter 1 focuses on the historical background and cultural significance of the bronzes of Ile-Ife in and to Nigeria. It discusses the relationship of the Ile-Ife bronzes to the history of the Yoruba people and to both the ancient city of Ife and the contemporary city. The Yoruba people as an ethnic group, Nigeria as a nation, and the continent of Africa as a whole are treated as vital contexts of discourse in order to explain the changing meaning of the bronzes. The location of the bronzes before their ‘discovery’ and their current status in contemporary Yoruba, Nigerian and African culture is also investigated and analysed.

Chapter 2 focuses on the ‘discovery’ of the Ife bronzes by the West. It discusses the claim of ‘discovery’, highlighting relevant imperial and political contexts, and analyses the early stages of the bronzes being represented in the West. Crucially, it unpacks how they gained their new identity as ‘bronze’ – despite not containing any actual bronze – instead of their traditional identity. This chapter highlights the events that led to the introduction of the bronzes into Western museums and how the British public received them. In doing so it examines how the ‘three Cs’ of colonisation (civilisation, commercialisation and Christianity) have contributed to the commercialisation and reification of the bronzes.

Chapter 3 discusses the discourses surrounding museums and their representation of ‘other’ cultures. Focusing on how the bronzes have been represented in the British Museum, it traces this idea through the colonial period to how the ‘new museology’ has brought about a re-representation of the bronzes to portray post-colonial ideas. It argues that, despite itself, the museum is often a Western institution that fosters colonial ideas in the post-colonial era, and discusses how the museum idea of post-colonial representation might be considered ‘problematic’ because it can still carry colonial connotations. This brings the need for new spaces that will allow for a re-representation of artefacts that represent ‘other’ cultures.

Chapter 4 discusses digitisation as a tool that could potentially allow for the re-representation of other cultures in a more empowering way. The methods of digitisation and its advantages and disadvantages are also discussed. Possible issues that might challenge digitisation of the Ife bronzes, and that could mitigate against such an outcome (online racisms, the digital divide), are also highlighted. This chapter explores the argument that digitisation might be seen as a creative opportunity or a creative challenge to the practice of discriminating against ‘other’ cultures.

Chapter 5 focuses on the online presence of the Ife bronzes via the British Museum. The artefacts did not have an online presence when I started my research in 2010, despite the well-attended ‘Kingdom of Ife’ exhibition. Today, they have a partially digitised presence on the British Museum website and a presence on some other websites. How objects receive nomination for museum digitisation is discussed, alongside issues that affect digitisation such as funding and copyright licences. This chapter also turns towards the future and makes a critical analysis of how the artefacts might be represented in a more capacious critical way that challenges the colonial discourses and exclusivity of contemporary museum displays.

Chapter 6 sums up the findings of my thesis and points to directions for further research. Finally, the thesis identifies the fact that the Web, if well directed, can be a useful tool as well as offering a new space for the re-representation of historical facts about African artefacts within museum collections. This will go a long way to encourage Africans to tell their story free from the restrictions of the museum building. Thus, curators will become facilitators of cultural engagement that might result in new interpretations and meanings.

## **Chapter 1: History of the bronzes from the Kingdom of Ile-Ife**

### **Introduction**

This chapter will focus on the history of the Kingdom of Ile-Ife and the creation of the bronze artefacts under discussion. The focus on the history of the Kingdom of Ile-Ife is for better understanding of the people and the context likely responsible for the creation of the bronze sculptures. According to Alpers' (1991: 25) the 'museum is a way of seeing'. Alpers (1991) notion is based on the methods adopted to exhibit collections to become visually attracting and engaging. These methods of display and information displayed in museums have a tendency to influence how people are identified, perceived or categorised. As museum exhibitions unavoidably draws from the cultural assumptions of the society that owns the museum. Where such assumptions are likely to emphasise one element of a culture while it downplays another (Lavine & Karp, 1991). Hence there is a need for an historical account of occurrences that is not tainted with colonial ideology to aid better understanding of the Ife bronzes and the need for them to be accessible.

The people of the Kingdom of Ile-Ife belong to the Yoruba ethnic group in Nigeria, West Africa. However it is important to note that Pan Yoruba identities only emanated in the nineteenth century before which language or town was used to identify the people (Peel, 1989). This account centres on both ancient and contemporary Ile-Ife; the beliefs about Ile-Ife, and how these beliefs have been translated into the art and craft perhaps responsible for the creation of the bronze artefacts and the understanding of these artefacts today. The chapter further seeks to investigate whether there has been continuity in the culture and traditions of Ife from sometime between the 11<sup>th</sup> and the 14 centuries when the bronzes were created to the twenty first century.

This chapter will also examine the position of the Ife bronze heads within Nigeria before (1900, pre-colonial, the Lagos colony and Oil rivers protectorate) and after their 'discovery', (colonial, 1900-1960) as this might affect the way they are represented today (postcolonial, 1960-2013). The bronze artefacts socio-cultural and traditional implications for Ife indigenes as well as for other Yoruba speaking

groupings will also be analysed to give a better understanding of the bronzes' worth among the Yoruba people. Knowing a great deal about ancient Greece, the German ethnographer Frobenius thought the Olokun head was remains from the lost city of Atlantis. He was stunned by their 'naturalistic' style when he first saw the head in 1910, the bronzes are now usually thought to be 'realistic' and idealised portraits of the sacred rulers of the Kingdom of Ile-Ife (Willett, 1967a: 20). The bronzes from Ife have also been used to gesture towards issues of national and regional identity in the 60s and 70s after Nigeria's independence from British Colonial rule. As a result, they stand out as artefacts that might be used not only to 'represent' culture, but also to bring about a wider understanding and appreciation of the cultural, political and economical frameworks of the period they represent in the post-colonial era. Apart from being used to delineate long and complex histories of the region, the Ife art form both national and iconic paradigm of African art. However before examining the Ife bronzes in terms of its origin, original meanings, colonial meaning and postcolonial meaning, it is imperative to set the scene by examining the historical background of the Yoruba speaking people the bronzes are likely to represent culturally.

### **1.1. Historical background of Yoruba speaking people of Ife**

On the southwestern part of Nigeria lies the Yoruba land (as shown in Figure 1.1) and what is often repeatedly classified as one of the 'most advanced' communities in Nigeria and West Africa (Burns, 1921: 18). The name 'Yoruba' was derived from the Hausa and was applied originally to only to the inhabitants of Oyo (old Oyo empire) (Biobaku, 1973: Peel, 1989; 2003). The name is not unexpected, as Hausa was the language of communication in Oyo in the early nineteenth century (Peel, 1989: 202). Peel (1989) suggested that the extension of the term to the whole linguistic group only occurred in the nineteenth century at the hands of Christian missionaries and Yoruba speaking converts, as well as a Yoruba speaking Lagosian elite who engaged in the study of the language. The first use of the term 'Yoruba' in a generalised sense was by Reverend John Raban in his book titled '*The Eyo Vocabulary*' (Raban, 1832, Peel, 2003). The category Yoruba was derived from the Hausa term to describe members of the Old Oyo Empire. Peel referred to early

Christian converts, whose families had derived from the Old Oyo Empire, as ‘ethnic missionaries’ because they also became Christian evangelists who spread the message of education and Christianization through the means of standard Yoruba (Peel, 1989: 200). They were thus the ethnic intellectuals burdened with the responsibility of extending the Yoruba identity. Aside from the inhabitants of Oyo, these ethnic intellectuals in the person of teachers, catechists, and clergymen spoke the Oyo dialect, which was adopted from the translation of the bible and became what is today standard Yoruba. Peel established that the term ‘Yoruba’ basically became adopted only after Reverend Samuel Ajayi Crowther used it in the title of his book ‘Vocabulary of the Yoruba language’ in 1843 (Peel, 2003: 284). Before 1843, Yoruba speakers were known or identified by the various city-states such as Oyo, Egba or Ijebu (Peel, 2003).

Peel (1989) following on from MacDonald (1986: 333) further argued, that to understand the formation of a collective identity as a ‘Pan Yoruba people’ their history of the past informs their present. He suggested that the idea of a common Yoruba group was consolidated by the 1920s due to the introduction of new religion, education and migration. By 1976 for ease of access to the resources of the state a collective identity became more important, hence the Nigerian ethnic groups became well moulded. Further opportunities surrounding the Yoruba ethnicity can be historically substantiated, as Peel (1989: 201) pointed out that by the end of the nineteenth century, the ‘Yoruba ethnicity’ as a collective identity, was deemed a cultural project that became a political instrument’. This collective identity emerges partly as a response to conversion, education and the imposition of colonial regime. Hence Yoruba is one of the three ‘mega-tribal’ groupings (and the other two are Igbo and Hausa) that typify the complexity and regional political system within Nigeria (Peel, 1986: 200). Hence Pan Yoruba identity can be said to be more adopted during the colonial period and became an accepted identity in the postcolonial era.

Peel’s (1989) suggestion about the influence of the ‘ethnic missionaries’ in enlightening the Yoruba masses is further evident in the 1921 account of the Yorubas’ by Samuel Johnson. By 1921 Johnsons’ account had already adopted the



term ‘Yoruba’ to describe and identify the people. It is important to note however that as a native of Old Oyo, Reverend Samuel Johnson’s account has an Oyo based history. According to Johnson (1921), the Yoruba country lies to the immediate west of the River Niger (below the confluence) and was probably first known to Europe through the seventeenth-century explorers of Northern and Central Africa. Today, the Yoruba people, as suggested by Robert Smith (an expert on the history of Yoruba people of Nigeria), form the third-largest ethnic group in Africa’s most populous country, with more than 15 million people living in the rich forest farmland of southwestern Nigeria (R.S. Smith, 1988). Falola and Heaton (2008) have argued that Yorubas currently account for 20% (27,511,992 in the 2006 census) of the Nigerian population. According to the world fact book by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Yorubas have increased to 21% and account for 37,202,708 of 177,155,754 Nigerian population (Central Intelligence Agency, 2014). They are presently located specifically in the Ekiti, Kwara, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun and Oyo states of Nigeria, while a significant number can also be found in the Republic of Benin (former Dahomey), Cuba and Brazil (Olatunji, 1996; Adelodun, 1999; Atanda, 1980). It is interesting to note, in line with Peel (1986), that the Pan Yoruba identity has progressed further from city-states to regions and now states.



**Figure 1.1: Map of Yorubaland in Nigeria, Image by Akintoye in 2011**

Yoruba historical written accounts are based on and perhaps substantiated by oral records and take into consideration the unusually rich tradition expressed and conserved in many ways such as myths, philosophy, liturgies, songs, proverbs and *Ifa* (Yoruba deity) divination verses (Eluyemi, 1978). R.S. Smith (1988) argues that oral traditions, like other evidence, must be treated with particular caution, as they might be hearsay if not crosschecked with other available sources. Such hearsay accounts probably contain testimonies that have not been witnessed directly by the informant (Vansina, 2006). Gore also points out that oral traditions do not only capture a memorized or recollected past but rather are engaged in an 'active reconstruction of that past in relation to the exigencies of the present and are shaped by authorial voice like written text' (Gore, 1999: 478). Hence the social positioning and status of the person recounting the past -- either through written text or oral tradition -- have significant impact on how such record is perceived. R.S. Smith (1988) suggested that it is unlikely that much new written evidence will be discovered, as many scholars think it is possible that archaeology will reveal more information that will assist in substantiating both the written and the oral history of the Yoruba people. However, there has also been a wave of new accounts of written evidence written by 'non-elites or obscure aspirants to elite status' (Barber, 2006: 1).

R. S. Smith (1988) acknowledges that the Yoruba country is made up of different kingdoms, all having specific complex traditions preserved deliberately and ritually by officials; Ile-Ife happens to be just one of such kingdoms. Nonetheless, Peel (1989) argued that the unity that emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century within the Yorubas is based on similarity of dialect and shared customs albeit some Yoruba dialect are mutually unintelligible. Customs such as certain 'principles of political organisation, a number of religious cult, and traditions of dynastic descent from a sacred centre, Ile Ife' (Peel, 1989: 201). The Yoruba have many kingdoms governed by *Obas* (kings) and chiefs; these kingdoms have their own laws and at one time were all tributaries to one sovereign king (Oduduwa of Ile Ife), including Benin on the east and Dahomey on the west (R.S. Smith, 1988). Oduduwa's reign is suggested to have brought about the beginning of Yoruba kingdoms of varying sizes and importance because his sons and grandsons instituted them (R. S. Smith, 1988). Oduduwa was a king of ancient Ile-Ife regarded by the Yoruba people as their mythical progenitor

and founder who came down from heaven and instituted the political order (Krapf-Askari, 1969; Okelola, 2001; Falola & Heaton, 2008).

The earliest attempt to write a history of Yoruba land was made by Samuel Crowther, a native of the Oyo kingdom who had been enslaved, taken to Sierra Leone in 1822, and who subsequently returned to Yoruba land as an Anglican missionary in 1845. In 1843, Crowther published a study of the Yoruba language, to which he added by way of introduction a brief historical section comprising two parts: *Early Traditions of the Yorubans*, recounting traditions of the origins of the Yoruba; and *The Kings of Yoruba*, an account of the history of Oyo from around 1780 to 1840. Crowther's work serves as an antecedent to other writings on Yoruba history by Europeans and Yoruba indigenes alike.

By the 1880s there was an active interest in Yoruba history among educated Yoruba men in the Yoruba speaking areas (Law, 1976: 71). For example, in 1884, John Olawunmi George, an active member of the Youngmen's Christian Association delivered a lecture entitled 'Yorubaland' during one of the associations meeting. The lecture briefly traced the history of the Yoruba from their origin to the wars of the nineteenth century (Law, 1976: 71). In 1887, J. O. George at a subsequent meeting delivered a lecture on the impact of Christianity in the Yorubaland. By 1895, John Olawunmi George, a Lagos merchant from the southern Yoruba town of Abeokuta, wrote two lectures that were published in 1897, together with other material (some in Yoruba language), in a book entitled *Historical Notes on the Yoruba Country and Its Tribes* (George, 1897). In 1893, Otonba Payne, a Sierra Leonean whose family derived from the southern Yoruba kingdom of Ijebu and who served the British administration at Lagos in various capacities (including as Registrar of the Supreme Court from 1877 to 1899), published a formally historical work entitled *Table of Principal Events in Yoruba History* (Payne, 1893). Later, a village school teacher Aaron Sibthorpe published a 'History of the Akus or Yorubas' in the *Sierra Leone Weekly News* in 1893, and in 1909 he published a study of Yoruba origins entitled *Bible Review of Reviews: The Discovery of the Ten Lost Tribes, Yorubas or Akus* (Fyfe, 1992).

In 1921, Rev Samuel Johnson, a Yoruba clergyman, described the Yoruba people as ‘unlettered and their language unwritten; all that is known is from traditions carefully handed down from one generation to another’ (Johnson, 1921: 3). Later, in line with Johnson (1921), R.S. Smith (1988) concurred that, in the absence of writing, the Yoruba people, like many African societies, developed formal oral records of their past along with elaborate methods of maintaining these records for posterity. However, in 1976 Robin Law, in his study of early Yoruba historiography, pointed out that Yoruba history had been written down since the nineteenth century by clergymen and other educated Yoruba men in both Yoruba and English (Law, 1976). Law’s 1976 study therefore questions Johnson’s 1921 notion about Yoruba people being unlettered. This is because, according to Law, Yoruba history has been documented since 1812 by Muslim scholars and later by Yorubas who embraced Christianity.

Law also argued that Samuel Johnson’s history of the Yoruba far exceeds the earlier works of other Yoruba historians such as J.O. George, Otonba Payne, and Sibthorpe in sheer volume, literary quality and scholarly merit (Law, 1976: 72) and ‘the principal glory of Yoruba historiography’ (Law, 1976: 79). However, Johnson’s claim of the ‘unlettered’ and ‘unwritten’ status of the Yoruba people might be considered, and critiqued in two particular ways. First, we can consider this as potentially due to the fact that the idea of a common identity as ‘Yoruba’ was only initiated in the early nineteenth century and fully adopted in the twentieth century (Raban, 1832; Crowther, 1843; Peel, 1989, 2003). Secondly as being a result of the notion that Yoruba histories have been put together only with the use of known published works and have given little thought to the wealth and character of unpublished materials, oral traditions and histories. Besides, the absence of any comprehensive bibliography of early Yoruba historians might be considered a deterrent in keeping a track record.

Johnson’s 1921 account is further rendered questionable by circumstances surrounding the publication of his account of Yoruba history. His history of the Yorubas was written in 1897, although it was not published till 1921 (Law, 1976: 71). A Sierra Leonean of Oyo extraction, Johnson served the Anglican Church

Missionary Society as a schoolmaster at Ibadan and was ordained as a pastor at Oyo in 1888. He offered his work for publication to the Church Missionary Society, who rejected it on the grounds that it was too long and passed the manuscript on to a commercial publisher, where it got lost. However, Law (1976: 72) pointed out that Rev Johnson died in 1901, passing on the responsibility of publishing his notes to his brother, Dr Obadiah Johnson, who did not complete the task of rewriting his brother's work until 1916. After further delays due to the First World War, the history was finally published in 1921, by which time Obadiah Johnson had also died (Law, 1976: 71). Due to the delay in publishing Samuel Johnson's manuscript, it is unclear whether he actually considered the Yoruba people as unlettered or if his statement referred to how Yoruba history was preserved before the advancement of writing. It is not unlikely that, due to the late development of written text, some vital elements of Yoruba history may have been omitted, or gone unnoticed and unaccounted for.

Although Europeans had been trading on the coast since the fifteenth century, their role changed to that of 'proselytisers from the nineteenth century' (R. S. Smith, 1988: 4). However Yai (1994) persuasively argued that the intellectual climate of the Yoruba region was and is largely characterised by a dialogic ethos; there was a constant pursuit to exchange ideas, experiences and material culture, with each Yoruba city being a locus of interactions between intellectuals including herbalists, artists and poets. These intellectuals perhaps contributed to the creation of traditions that can inform people about various events that took place in Ile-Ife. Coupled with the notion that all these city-states engaged in long distance trade that probably have influenced them in one way or another. The dialogic ethos of Yoruba that Yai identified is significant for this research into the potential of more participatory representation.

This thesis focuses on the Yoruba as a people or as an ethnic group and not in terms of 'tribes', in line with Bascom's argument (1969: 6) that 'Yorubas do not constitute a tribe'. Though, there is sufficient underlying cultural and linguistic unity to consider the Yorubas as a 'single' ethnic group. Biobaku (1973) has also argued that

the Yorubas are united, to a large extent, by a common culture and tradition of a common origin: the town of Ile-Ife.

## **1.2. The ancient kingdom of Ile-Ife**

The city of Ile-Ife was surrounded by hills in the southern-forested region of Nigeria. The largest centralized states were the kingdoms centred on Ile-Ife that emerged and flourished from 11<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> century and Benin emerged by 1500 CE (Falola & Heaton, 2008: 16). According to Picton (2012: 63), Ife was a city of considerable size with an area perhaps three or four times the City of London during the same period.<sup>6</sup> Osasona *et al* (2009) have argued that the origins of ‘Ife natives’ are lost in antiquity. However, the rivalry between Ife and its neighbours the Modakekes who are refugees from Oyo who settled at Ife (Peel, 1989) were also likely responsible for the sparse history of Ile-Ife (Willett, 1960; 1967a). Willett (1967a: 102) pointed out that the conquer of Old Oyo by the Fulani in 1837 saw to the exile of the Modakekes from their homes in Oyo. However their admittance to *Origbo* district to the west of Ife by Oni Adegunle Abeweila resulted in inevitable unrest for the people of Ile Ife. Their presence as neighbours without peace led to the abandonment of Ife first between 1850-1854 and between 1878 -1894 (Willett. 1967a: 102). Willett further argued that these internal conflicts led to displacements that were perhaps responsible for the discontinuity in traditional practices, which in turn might have contributed to the loss of understanding of the history and use of objects among Ife inhabitants today (Willett, 1960: 233; 1967a: 103). Also the rise of Benin and Oyo, which led to the loss of Ife’s political aspect of its imperial status, and possibly the loss of control of strategic trade routes by the sixteenth century, is also a major change to be acknowledged (Akinjogbin 1992: i). Hence, to understand the origins of the people, one will need to unpack the past to appreciate the present.

In 1973, Biobaku suggested that the town of Ile-Ife was probably founded between the seventh and tenth centuries CE (Biobaku, 1973). In 1958, Jeffery argued that it had become a flourishing civilisation by the eleventh century (Jeffery, 1958). Carbon dating yielded from the work of archaeologists substantiated both these views, as it

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<sup>6</sup> Picton’s argument is based on a rough estimate based on the map of Ife and its city walls.

ascertained that Ife ‘was a settlement of substantial size between the 9th and 12th centuries’ (Willett, 1971: 367; R. S. Smith, 1988).

Picton (2012) argued that the wealth of the city at the key point on the local and regional trade network suggests that there must have been something worth raiding within the city. These raids and conflicts might have led to the expansion and contraction of the city walls. Historically, Ile-Ife was divided into five quarters: Irewo, Okerewe, Moore, Ilode and Ilare; within each quarter were compounds with family lineages (Eluyemi, 1978). The Ife kingdom is described by Krapf-Askari (1969: 3) and Obateru (2006:164) schematically as a ‘wheel, with the oba’s palace as the hub, from which roads radiated like spokes, and in relation to which the en-framing town wall represented the rim’ as shown in Figure 1.2.

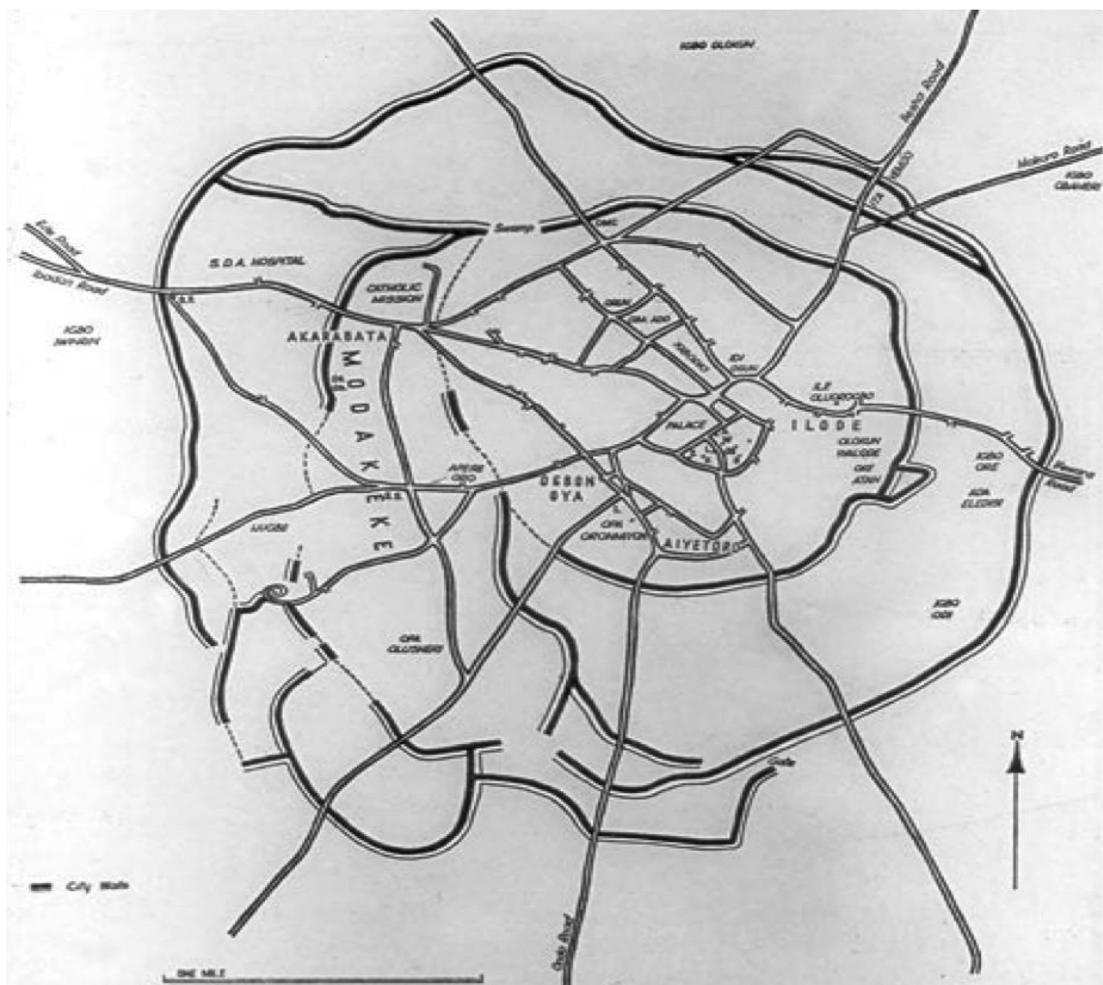


Figure 1.2: Plan of Ile-Ife, Nigeria, Image by Willett 1967a: 16.

Various scholars, including Johnson (1921), Lucas (1948) Crowther (1972) and R. S. Smith (1988), suggested that Ile-Ife was fabled as the spot where god created man (both white and black) and from whence they dispersed all over the Earth. According to Yoruba traditions Ife is the centre where the gods descended from heaven on an iron chain to create and populate the world (Willett, 1980: 32). As a result, Ile-Ife, according to Fabunmi (1969), is believed to be the cradle of the world with a history based on oral traditions. Okelola (2001: 2) referred to Ile-Ife as the ‘original home of all things, the place where the day dawns; the holy city, the home of divinities and mysterious spirits’. This might be the reason why all the major Yoruba rulers derive the sanctions of kingship from Ile-Ife.

Ile-Ife has been translated as the ‘spreading of the earth’, with *Ife* meaning ‘wide’ and the prefix *Ile* meaning ‘home’ – potentially referring to the creation of the whole world (R. S. Smith, 1988: 18). Harris (1997: 54) also describes Ile-Ife as ‘the place where things spread out, where people left’. There are suggestions that the present town of Ife does not stand upon its original site due to difficulty in establishing a coherent account of the past history of Ife (Crowder, 1966; R. S. Smith, 1988). On the contrary, Willett (1967a: 103) argued that based on the ‘numerous’ and varied antiquities found on the site, it is difficult not to conclude that Ile-Ife had existed on the original site for many centuries.

Despite the above suggestions, Ile-Ife is claimed to be ‘the mother city’ from whence all Yoruba people appear to have hailed: this is borne out by the fact that each princedom was founded and situated just a few miles from the mother city (Okelola, 2001: 2). However, the myth is retrospectively compared to Old Oyo Empire. This myth has often been thought to provide a charter for the Yoruba people, providing them with a ‘sense of unity’ through a common origin (Bascom, 1969: 10). According to Yoruba belief though difficult to prove and unlikely, Krapf-Askari (1969) suggested that Ile-Ife, is the oldest of all the Yoruba towns given that it was from Ile-Ife that all the other towns were founded (Krapf-Askari, 1969). Okelola (2001), in line with Lucas (1948), suggests that the Kingdom of Ile-Ife was considered the spiritual headquarters of the Yoruba kingdoms because it was thought of as the stronghold of indigenous worship. It can be argued from the above notions



that Ile-Ife has provided some sort of identity for the modern Yoruba, due to its role as a centre from which Yoruba culture emanates and a place for validation of Yoruba culture and authority. Presenting Ile-Ife as a bearer of Yoruba identity however negates the variations and conflicts between differing Yoruba peoples who until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw themselves in terms of collective identities as being very different and separate from each other. Thus highlighting that change is most likely to have taken place in Yoruba culture through time.

Yoruba culture consists of folk/cultural philosophy, religion and literature. According to Gbadegesin (1991), the philosophy of the Yoruba tradition is formed from various worldviews, myths and proverbs that are disconnected through Western ideas. Gbadegesin (1991) argued that African philosophy, to which Yoruba philosophy belongs, is not static and as a result allows for creative and innovative responses to various issues. He further argues that the absence of such creativity could mean that the society cannot survive due to the introduction of new contemporary realities (Gbadegesin, 1991). These philosophies tend to influence the culture of the people and vice versa. Hamilton (1999) argued that culture influences philosophy by providing it with the basic materials for reflection, while philosophy influences culture by posing a critique in various ways of its foundation. As a result, the manner in which philosophy influences culture might perhaps be considered in the place of *Ori* (the head) in Yoruba philosophy.

Blier (2012) quoting Ajibade (n.d:3) stressed that among the Yoruba till date, ‘the body is perceived to comprise of three principal parts: head, trunk and legs’. This ideology is translated into Yoruba art and sculpture like Ife bronzes where the head is emphasised ‘with a larger-than-life size’ proportion (Blier, 2012: 71). Lawal (1985) stresses that the head (*Ori*) is the most important part of Yoruba sculpture because it is seen as the locus of divine power of the supreme being in an individual; as it constitutes an individual’s life source, controlling personality and destiny. The ratio given to the head is considered by Yoruba scholars as a way of reinforcing the importance of the head as a symbol of ego and destiny (*ori*), personality (*wu*), essential nature (*iwa*), and authority (*ase*) (Abimbola, 1975:39; Lawal 1985; Abiodun 1994; Abiodun *et al* 1991:12). On the other hand, Ogunremi (1998: 113)

suggests that the head might highlight ‘the wealth or poverty of the nation...as equated with the head (*ori*) of the ruler of a particular locality’.

The *Ori* (the head) from the above scholars signifies both spiritual and physical assumptions. The physical head refers to the head as the part of the body that constitutes the brain and other vital organs, whereas the spiritual *Ori* is recognised as the bearer of the destiny that determines the personality of an individual (Lawal, 1985; Gbadegesin, 1991). Yorubas emphasise the physiological importance of the head; hence they place a higher premium on its metaphysical significance as the source of life and the essence of human personality (Abimbola, 1971: 73–89; Idowu, 1977: 170–75). In Yoruba sculptures, importance given to the head further highlights its ‘sociobiological importance as the coordinating centre for human existential struggle’ (Lawal 1985: 102). Although these concepts are probably significant factors, which might in part account for the importance placed on the head of the Ooni of Ile-Ife that resulted in the production of the bronze sculptures. It is important to note that these concepts of the *Ori* were elicited in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. How can they be imposed on the city-state of 500 years before?

The Ooni or *Onife*, in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century is considered as the spiritual head of the Yoruba people, is believed to be a sacred being because he sits on the throne of Oduduwa at Ile-Ife. Oduduwa has influence in other Yoruba kingdoms through ‘the sanctions of kinship, which is burdened with gods and their shrines and festivals’ (R.S. Smith, 1988: 13). However, Harris (1997) pointed out that there was a particular monarch called *Ogane* who reigned in ancient Ife whom modern scholars have identified as the ‘Ooni of Ife’ (Pereira, 1937; Krapf-Askari, 1969). Thorton (1988) on the contrary argued that ‘*Ogane*’ was not of Ife but a state (the Igala Kingdom) of the Niger-Benue Confluence. He further suggested that the Igala may have associated and identified with Yoruba traditions because of the new order that developed in Benin in 1720. As a result, the original traditions of the Yoruba may have blended with that of the Igala to create a composite in which ‘*Oghene*’ originally associated with Igala came to be identified with Ife (Thorton, 1988: 359). He argued that there is likely a possibility that the *Oghene* of Ife is a transformation of the *Ogane* once referred to the Igala kingdom.

Okelola (2001) acknowledges that it is hard to establish when the city of Ile-Ife was founded but recognises Oduduwa as the first king of Ile-Ife. However, Akinjogbin (1992), Olatunji (1996) and Adelodun (1999), contrary to Okelola (2001), suggest that there were most probably other Kings who reigned at Ile-Ife before Oduduwa led his people to Ile-Ife. This was established by archaeological evidence unearthed in and around Ile-Ife that dated back to 410 BCE and established that there had in all likelihood been human settlement in Ife before the advent of Oduduwa (Adelodun, 1999). Olatunji (1996: 8) also suggested from linguistic evidences that *Ikedu* tradition is the oldest of Ife that can attest to the origin of the Yoruba speaking people. He suggested that the institution of monarchical system of government might probably have existed before the time of *Oduduwa* whose advent was 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D or little earlier. Therefore Oduduwa presumably encountered indigenous people in the region around Ife even though he was credited for establishing a centralised state at Ife. Hence, it is possible there was a reigning king in Ife before Oduduwa. The bronze heads from Ile-Ife are likely not created during Oduduwa's reign as Ooni, but rather after and continued until the early part of the fifteenth century. It is important to note however that there is a major gap between the historical period of the 11<sup>th</sup> and 14 centuries city-state, producing copper alloy castings of Trans Saharan composition with an iconography that differs to that of Yoruba peoples of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century shaped by colonialism. The gap in the historical period of about 500 years is unaccounted for and might never be known

### **1.3. The contemporary city of Ile-Ife**

Currently, the city of Ile-Ife sits in today's Osun State in southern Nigeria, on the longitude 4.6 and latitude 7.5°N (Agbe, 2001). The city is popularly known as Ile-Ife and the people are referred to as Ife; they also refer to the town as *Ife* or *Ilurun*, which means 'the gateway to heaven' (Eluyemi, 1986: 16). Willett (1967a) also described how the modern city of Ile-Ife lies on the site of the ancient Ile-Ife Kingdom because the seventeen brass castings excavated from the Ife sites were in corresponding stratigraphic positions, confirming that a settlement of substantial size existed there between the ninth and twelfth centuries. Willett (1967a) also suggested

that terracotta sculptures and lost-wax (*cire-perdue*) castings were made in Ile-Ife from the early part of the last millennium. Picton (2012: 63) pointed out that the city layout today has a 'half remembered relationship' to its mythical past due to vast expansion with lots of modern buildings including a university. Ile-Ife's prominence in the ritual system like *Ifa* and *Ijala* (hunters chant) has facilitated the preservation of the city's significance in Yoruba culture despite its political decline (Harris, 1997). With noticeable structural changes to Ile-Ife, it is difficult to ascertain however much, the traditional heritage of Ile-Ife particularly the intangible cultural heritage in the form of festivals and rituals alongside many artefacts are still intact with little or no modification. This is difficult because we might never know what happened in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

#### **1.4. Artefacts from the Kingdom of Ile-Ife**

According to Flint (1966), the ancient city of Ife was a unique centre of civilization in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, distinguished by well-laid-out palaces and potsherd pavements as well as its sculptures in bronze and terracotta as revealed by archaeological findings. The first production of the potsherd pavement according to Ife traditions is assigned to the reign of *Gbagida*, a female ruler who has been listed as the sixteenth or nineteenth Ooni in the Oduduwa dynasty (R.S. Smith, 1988).

Bascom (1969) established through archaeological findings that ancient Ife was the centre of an important glass-making industry, which may have spread blue glass beads (*segi*, *akori*) across West Africa. During the classical periods of Ife, tentatively dated at 950–1400 CE, carved figures, stools and monoliths in granites and quartz as well as brasses and terracottas were produced. These works confirmed that Ife was an artistic and ritual centre of great importance.

The terracotta and bronze sculptures that exist from the ancient kingdom of Ife are remarkable, and have often been described as ranking among the masterpieces of world sculptures (Willett, 1960). According to Willett (1960: 239), 'the bronze heads from Ile-Ife can stand in comparison with anything which ancient Egypt, classical Greece and Rome or Renaissance Europe had to offer.' The article from the *Illustrated London News* article (1948) further emphasised that, in terms of technical

prowess, the sculptures can be compared to works of master sculptors such as 'Donatello'. These works provide evidence of great technical accomplishments from a complex society (Crowder, 1966(1962); Le Brun, 2012).

### **1.5 Ife archaeological evidences**

Ife archaeology comprises stone, terracotta and bronze artefacts that were found at different times and at different sites within Ife. Willett (1967a: 57) pointed out that sculptures in terracotta are 'far more varied in subject matter, style and size than bronze'. Essentially of same artistic style as the bronze, they consist both naturalistic and non-naturalistic representations. A range of castings was found in different contexts that ranged from accidental find to scientific excavations in Ile Ife. The Ife archaeological findings resulted from excavations between 1910 and 1972. However it is important to point out that the first find from Ile Ife was before 1910, an incomplete face made of terracotta had been brought to Europe (Willett, 1967a: 13; Eyo 1980: 10). The date of the discovery of the incomplete face and who brought it out of Africa is yet to be resolved. Willett (1967a: 14) from the incomplete terracotta face suggested that the piece was probably from Iwinrin Grove in Ife where a large number of terracotta used to be kept. He pointed out that there were evidences that substantiates there were more terracotta sculptures at the grove before 1934. By 1910 Ife people at Leo Frobenius request carried out the first known excavations that included the Olokun Grove outside the town to the north. Leo Frobenius in addition to uncovering the Ori Olokun from this excavation took back seven fine terracota heads, and a number of important fragments (Willett, 1967a: 14).

The next unplanned excavation was in 1938 during the digging of foundation trenches for a house at Wunmonije Compound in the middle of Ife (Willett, 1967a: 13). Thirteen bronze heads were discovered. By 1939 four more bronze heads and the upper part of a male figure wearing a beaded crown, were found together. The head at the British Museum was from this group of findings and happens to be the only head from Ife outside Nigeria (Willett, 1967a: 17). The find from Olokun Grove by Frobenius resulted in him being shown the Obalufon mask, said to be in the palace ever since its production. Due to their similarities, Willett has grouped the

Obalufon mask together with the find from Wunmonije Compound (Willett, 1967a: 19). It is noteworthy to mention that three out of the seventeen heads found had been crushed and damaged. Willett (1967a: 24) suggested they were probably crushed due to the collapsing shrine that housed them and were further damaged accidentally pickaxes used for digging up in 1938. In total, there were twenty-one metal casting from Wunmonije Compound including the head of a bronze staff discovered in 1949.

The Antiquities Services was established in 1943 in Nigeria and though Bernard Fagg, William Fagg and John Goodwin carried out the main season in 1959, the first scientific excavation was carried out by 1949 at *Abiri* (Eyo, 1980: 12). Part of the sites excavated included *Osangangan Obamakin*, *Olokun Walode* (Eyo, 1980). On 22nd November 1957, another discovery was made by workmen levelling the ground beside the road to Ilesha at Ita Yemoo. Unlike the first accidental find, this find was systemically in its approach (Willett, 1967a). It also led to the discovery of the first full bronze sculpture representing an Oni and his queen (Willett, 1967a: 32). Though one of the faces was missing and all efforts to find it proved unsuccessful (Willett 1967a: 31). An object referred to as an ash-tray and a pair of bronze staffs with human head were also discovered. An elaborate pot containing three more bronzes (a complete figure and a pair of ovoid mace heads each decorated with a pair of human heads) was also found.

Willett (1967a) pointed out that despite the relationship between the sculptures, the bronzes from *Ita Yemoo* are of different purpose from the life size heads of *Wumonije* Compound. The smaller sculptures from Ita Yemoo were considered to be artistically ‘vigorously modelled’ (Willett, 1967a: 50) than the bronze heads from Wunmonije compound. To Willett (1967a), these differences indicated the presence of either different artists or diverse purposes for which the sculptures were created.

In 1962-1963, another excavation where a second shrine was uncovered over an extensive potsherd pavement of about 70 square feet was conducted at Ita Yemoo (Eyo, 1980: 12). Frank Willett was responsible for the two excavations carried out at *Ita Yemoo* (Eyo, 1980). By 1969 Ekpo Eyo carried out an excavation at Odo Ogbe Street and Lafodigbo where other archaeological deposits ranging from round

globular pots to decayed human skeleton were discovered (Eyo, 1980). The last two sites excavated in Ife were carried out in 1971 – 1972 at Obalara's land and Woye Asiri by Peter Garlake. He discovered a series of pavement, a series of terracotta sculptures.

Though other excavations uncovered other impressive objects of terracotta, Wunmonije Compound and Ita Yemoo were the two sites where the metal castings were found. Willett (1967: 17) ascertained that from the casual finds to planned excavations, the range of Ife creations seems to have been unlimited. These archaeological findings aside making up the Ife art, has made it possible to understand the material and technology employed, as well as the culture of Ife more today. In total there are about thirty pieces of metal castings that makes up the Ife metallurgy collection (Willett, 1980: 33). However Finley (1971) argued that archaeological deposits are material evidence that are opened to varied interpretations. Where such interpretations are affected by the intellectual make-up, the period and culture as well as social and cultural background of the person (Finley, 1971: 169).

#### **1.6. Notable links with Ife artefacts (Nok, Igbo Ukwu and Benin)**

Out of all Ife artefacts, this thesis focuses on the bronze heads not just for the technicality involved in their production but for the wider implications they are likely to reveal about Ife's past in the present. For a better understanding I will investigate the likely link Ife art may have in common with other notable pieces from other parts of Nigeria. Such references perhaps would shed more light to why and how the bronzes were created and buried. Willett (1967a; 117) suggested that the art of Ife is likely derived from the Nok culture of the Northern Nigeria. Nok culture, which derived its name from the site, is said to have began as far as the middle of the first millennium BC (Eyo, 1980). The concept of 'Nok culture' only came into existence in 1943 with much credit to Benard Fagg<sup>7</sup> (Eyo, 1980: 3). Sculptures produced are largely of wood and terracotta however the site of production shows 'evidence of iron working' (Willett, 1967a: 110). Willett emphasised that the sculptures were

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<sup>7</sup> Bernard Fagg was at the time of Nok's discovery a cadet administrative officer with archaeological interest and training (Eyo, 1980:3)

distinctly African because they show a free use of ‘imagination in representing humanity’ (Willett, 1967a: 111). However unlike Bini and Yoruba (including Ife) Willett points out that the Nok sculptures initially lacked the naturalistic representations. But they were embellished with heavy collar of beads round the neck, arm and legs. In 1967, Willett pointed out that many of the characteristics of the Nok sculpture are later evident in Ife pottery sculptures and other parts of West Africa. He emphasised that whatever initial inhibition noticed on earlier Nok cultures were probably discarded by the time of Ife culture. For this reason and their age from radiocarbon testing, the Nok is considered the oldest known form of sculptural pottery Willett (1967a: 117). However the origin of Nok is yet to be resolved (Eyo, 1980: 5). Though Willett suggested that every sculptural tradition of West Africa is most likely derived from Nok culture, this proposition is most likely not tenable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Considering the notion that Ife was almost certainly occupied before *Oduduwa* (a mythic king) depicts that there is a likelihood of influx of different groups at different period from neighbouring villages that made Ife a composite kingdom. One of such groups to be considered are the Igbo who happen to be at war with the people of Ife till they were duly defeated with the assistance of *Moremi* (Obayemi, 1979). The defeat accounted for *Obatala* also known as ‘*Obatala oba Igbo*’ (the King of the Igbo) and other Igbo chiefs to be later absorbed into Ife (Obayemi, 1979: 164). Obatala was also known as the ‘chief artist’ (Obayemi, 1979: 168) and was suggested to be the founder and initiator of the art used for figurines that are used as votive objects at shrines. The Ife area of the Igbo people and culture according to Obayemi (1979) marked the culmination of an indigenous development that could date back to the 5<sup>th</sup> century. This argument implies that the use of figurines in shrines at Ife has probably been in existence since the 5<sup>th</sup> century. The Igbo/ Ife conflict and Igbo defeat brought about the fusion that perhaps saw to the birth of dynastic Ife. It is however difficult to accept that the Igbo people adopted into Ife are same as the Igbo people of Igbo Ukwu. For simple reason that the geographical location of Igbo Ukwu is a small town near Awka in eastern Nigeria.



Based on the radiocarbon dates Willett (1980) and Eyo (1980), suggested that the Igbo Ukwu people were early casters in copper and tin alloy in West Africa. Sutton (2001) pointed out that the Igbo Ukwu's were remarkable for elaborate burial (similar to practices in the Middle Nile region) and store of ritual and ornamental objects that included bronze metallurgy and artwork. However, the Igbo Ukwu metallurgy 'technical peculiarities' is yet to be traced to any known prototype (Willett, 1980: Sutton, 2001: 50). Sutton (2001) argued that the sheer quantity of glass beads in the Igbo Ukwu collection suggests that the people were probably responsible for its importation through commercial exercise. For the commercial exercise to be worthwhile, Sutton suggested that there must be valued 'commodity or commodities' in the possession of the Igbo Ukwu people that attracts such commercial interest (Sutton, 2001: 51). An archaeologist (Director of the Federal Department of Antiquities 1968 - 1979) Eyo (1980; 10) suggested ivory, pepper or other spices from the forest and slaves as some of the commodities that perhaps stimulated commercial interest. Sutton further argued that although there had been earlier mining of true bronze in Igbo land, those used for Ife bronze sculptures was made out of the ready made brass imported from North Africa and other Mediterranean countries (Sutton, 2001: 52). Hence it is impossible for Ife sculptures to be of any link to the Igbo-speakers of the eastern part of Nigeria.

The origin of Benin bronze sculptures unlike Nok and Igbo Ukwu are referenced to Ife by Obayemi (1979) though Benin brass casting origin is yet to be resolved (Ben-Amos, 1995; Gore, 1997). *Igueghae* (the brass worker leader during the reign of Oba Oguola) is credited to 'have initiated the on-the-spot brass casting in Benin' (Obayemi, 1979). *Igueghae* was given the title *Ineh* by the Oba but Ben-Amos (1995) pointed out that there are brass smiths in Benin before the time of Oba Oguola. The awards of titles were likely dependent on the incorporation of families into guilds, the introduction of a technique or a particular artistic form (Ben-Amos, 1995: 28). Oba Oguola deserves to be acknowledged as it was due to his request for a bronzesmith from Ife to teach the Bini how to cast bronze heads that *Igueghae* became prominent (Willett, 1967a: 132). Ben-Amos (1995) ascertained from Bradbury's 1951 notes that the Oba succeeded in enticing the brass smith to stay permanently in Benin. This single act could probably be another contribution to the

decline of brass casting in Ife. Traditions also reveal that the Benin dynasty is a Yoruba one with its lineage linked to *Oranmiyan* (Willett, 1967a: 132). A likely explanation why the deceased Oba's head was initially sent to be buried in Ife before *Oba Oguola's* request for a bronze smith.

However, before *Oba Oguola's* reign, there were brass smiths during the reign of *Ogiso* (about twelfth- thirteenth century) who produced small objects such as bracelets and bells (Ben-Amos, 1995: 28). Another version of the oral tradition credited *Oba Ewuare* for introducing the casting of commemorative heads and larger objects in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. But archaeology dates the Benin bronze to about thirteenth and fourteenth century (Ben-Amos, 1995: 28). *Oba Oguola's* request for a brasscasting smith however, can be held as one possibility of how the Ife bronze making technique and stylization infiltrated and influenced Benin bronze castings. This narrative does not undermine the notion that there are diverse narratives about the advent of Benin casting.

Investigating the link between Ife casting and other sculptures has highlighted similarities that indicate the probability of Ife sculpture being part of a larger artistic culture that has evolved over time. For instance, the use of beads as a common feature for Nok, Igbo Ukwu, Ife and Benin indicates a love for ornamentation and that there was a presence of a network either through trade that encouraged the assimilation of foreign ideas not only from neighbouring groups but also from the Western world. The use of beads in life and in death in the Middle Nile region, as well as the ostentatious nature of their burial can be compared not only with Igbo Ukwu burial but also Ife and Benin burial. The use of bronze as part of the grave goods in the Middle Nile region probably has some form of influence on Ife burial. However Sutton (2001, 49) pointed that though the beads in the case of Igbo Ukwu were Egyptian manufactured, though the route of the beads to Igbo Ukwu remain unresolved, it is evident they are from different sources. Unlike the Nok, Igbo Ukwu and Benin sculptures, the evidence of the actual spot of manufacture of the Ife bronze sculptures are yet to be uncovered (Obayemi, 1979: 176).

### **1.7. The bronze heads of Ile-Ife**

In 1910, Frobenius found the first crowned (presumed) bronze heads at the *Olokun* grove (as I will discuss in details in chapter 2) while in 1938 local builders found thirteen bronze sculptures of life-size heads of ‘naturalistic’ appearance during the digging of foundation trenches in Wunmonije Compound (as shown in Figure 1.3) (Willett, 1967a: 14; Trustees of the British Museum, 1982: 271; Tignor, 1990). Shortly, in early 1939, four more bronze heads were found together and unearthed together with the upper part of a male figure wearing a crown, an elaborate beaded neck-ring, armlets and necklace (Willett, 1967a: 15). In total seventeen bronze heads were unearthed but not at the same time. Wunmonije Compound which was only a ‘hundred yards from the back door of the palace’, belonged to the Ooni in the mid-nineteenth century and is situated in the centre of Ife town (Willett, 1967a: 14). The findings were reported in ‘The Illustrated London News’ as the ‘Mysterious Ife Bronze head’ (as shown in Figure 1.4). Two of the seventeen heads wore a crown with crest and rosette (one of the crowned head is at the British Museum). The upper part of a male wearing a beaded crown, an elaborate beaded neck-ring, armlets and necklaces was found in 1939 while more sculptors relating to the bronze heads were uncovered in 1957, (Willett, 1967a:15). Willett argued that the sculptures were unlike the stereotype of African art, but they all had ‘negro’ representation Willett (1967a: 13). Willett’s suggestion and the use of the term ‘negro’ illustrate the European art response to the Ife archaeological finds.

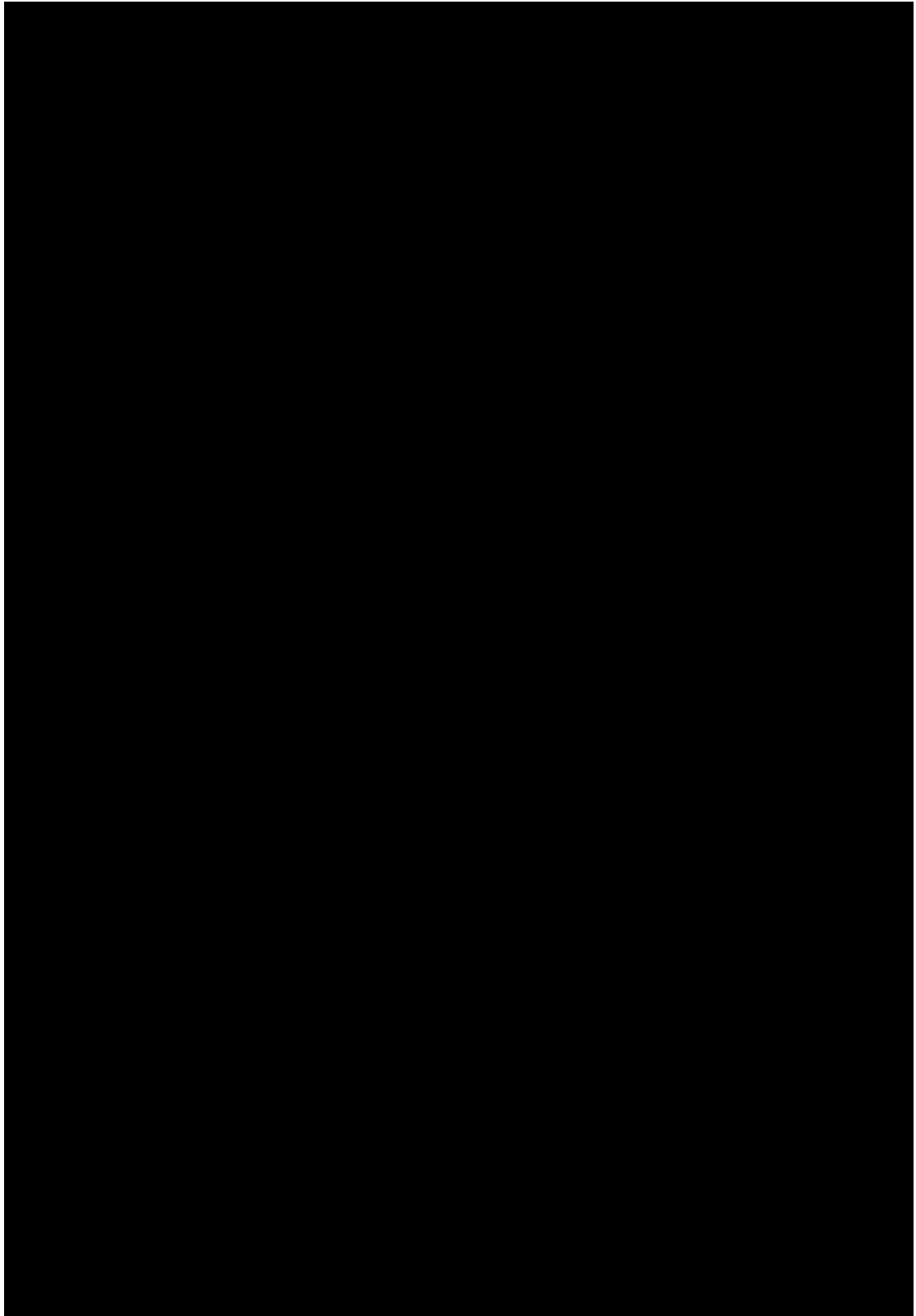
In the establishment of ancient Ife, Adelodun argued that sixteen branches represented the sixteen crowned heads of the main settlements established by the Oduduwa (Adelodun, 1999). Adelodun’s suggestion is considered problematic if there is a possibility that the bronze heads were not created during the reign of Oduduwa. However from Yoruba tradition, Willett (1980: 32) suggested that Oduduwa’s children spread out to found their own kingdoms throughout what we now know as Yorubaland. Though Crowder related in 1962, that the sixteen crowned heads could possibly be related to the life-size bronze heads that were excavated at Wunmonije Compound, it is yet to be resolved. In addition to these Ife artefacts a number of stone monuments and other objects were also uncovered. R. S. Smith however argued that the other objects have no ‘discernible stylistic connection with

the bronzes but held as anterior to them' such as monoliths, crudely carved figures of humans and animals and decorated stools (R.S. Smith, 1988: 11). All these artefacts were found mostly near the centre of the town, especially in areas near the palace, in the groves and shrines (R. S. Smith, 1988). The areas where the artefacts were found highlight the fact that they were associated with the power and reverence found in both the palace and the shrines.

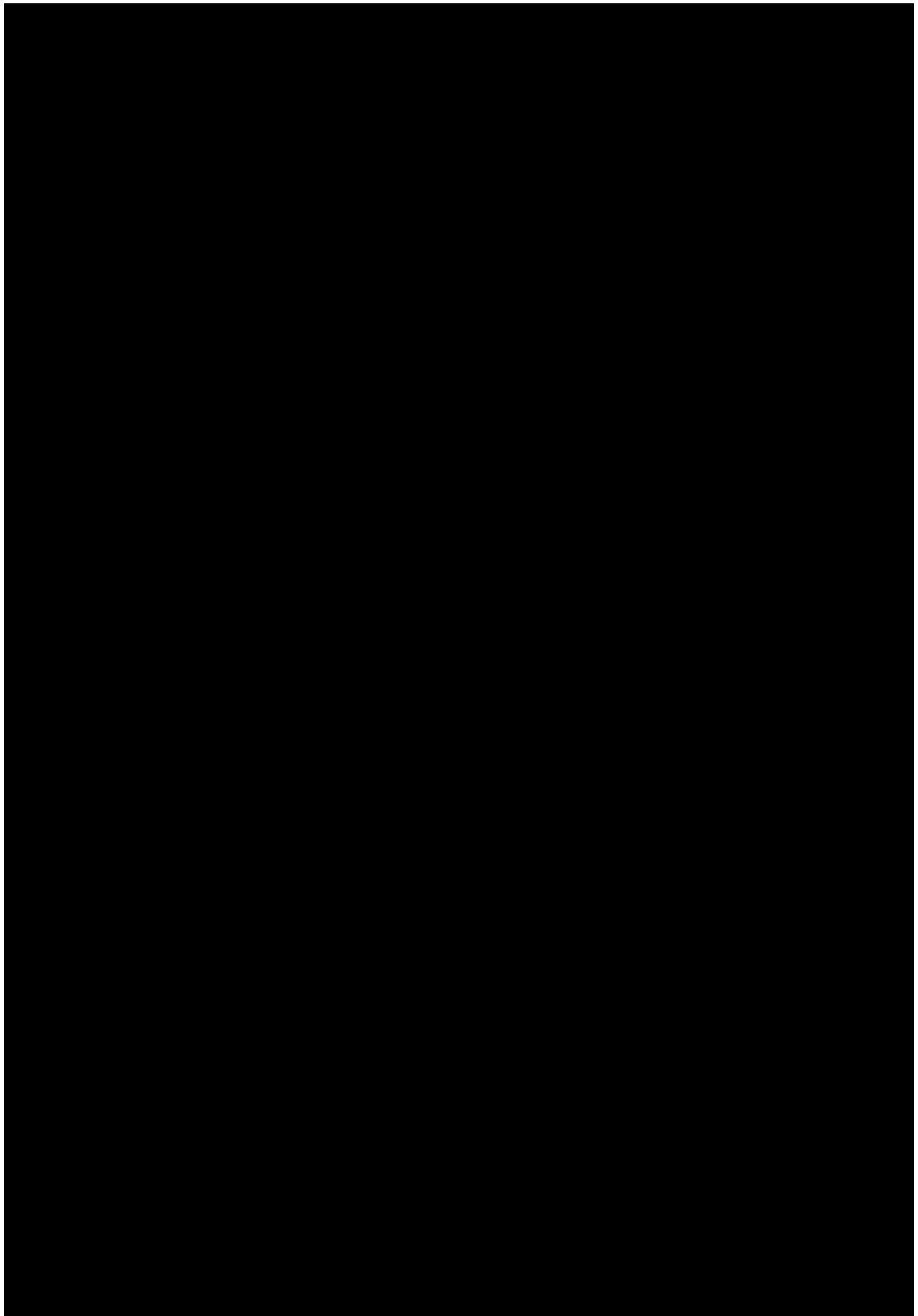
Contrary to Adelodun's (1999) hypothesis about what the heads represent above, Platte (2010a) proposed that the bronzes are all representations of male figures suggested to be past Oonis of Ile-Ife. Her suggestion implies that the bronzes only represent Kings within Ife and not other Yoruba kingdoms. However such suggestion seems problematic as it raises more questions rather than solve the unravelled mystery about the heads. For instance, the material constituents and production technique are likely to show some variation and changes between each of the sixteen heads if they were created at different period of the reign of different monarch. Though, there is an argument that there was a female Ooni, Gbagida (the sixteenth or nineteenth Ooni in the Oduduwa dynasty), who ruled Ife, however none of the bronzes depicts a female figure (R. S. Smith, 1988). As a result, one can surmise that at the time of the production of the artefacts in twelfth-century Ife, masculinity was important for public power and the production was during the reign of a male Ooni. Therefore I argue in line with Willett (1967a: 129) and Blier (2012) that the reign of *Obalufon* II is most likely responsible for the creation of the bronzes

As for the Ori Olokun, in 1894 Lieut-Colonel Ellis of the first battalion West India regiment described Olokun, as a male minor god (Ellis, 1894: 71). Nonetheless the name seems unlikely to be gender-specific as gender specification is dependent on location of worship, because the deity has both male and female personifications. In the kingdom of Benin, the *Olokun* is honoured as male, whereas the people of Ife have commonly thought of *Olokun* as the goddess of wealth and as the wife of Oduduwa (Rosen, 1989). Ellis however mentioned that the Olokun deity had a wife named Olokun-su who is said to live in the harbour bar at Lagos (Ellis, 1894: 71). From Ellis (1894) account, *Olokun* was the label given to an *orisha* in 1894 and it is difficult to link it as the label used in 11<sup>th</sup> -14<sup>th</sup> century. It will be difficult to

determine what *Olokun* was called or represented in the 11<sup>th</sup>-14 century. There is also no available evidence to substantiate if Olokun-su is worshiped in place of Olokun in Ife.



**Figure 1.3: Ife bronze head discovery reported in the illustrated London News 1939 showing the foundation trench in Wunmonije compound.**



**Figure 1.4: Ife bronze head discovery reported in the illustrated London News 1939**

By 1948 one of the crowned bronze head found at Wunmonije compound had been sold to the British Museum (as shown in Figure 1.5 below) and two others taken to the US (this will be discussed fully in chapter 2). In 1947– 48, an examination of the Ori Olokun along with other Ife bronze heads were carried out by Leon Underwood and William Fagg at the British Museum (Fagg & Underwood, 1949). Their analysis, did not only reveal that the *Ori Olokun* was cast by modern sand cast technique but that the heads were made from different composition. The word ‘bronze’ should therefore be understood henceforth as a cultural convention in line with Willett (1967: 55) as a term applied to artistic metal casting composed mainly of copper.



**Figure 1.5: Ife bronze head at the Sainsbyry African gallery British Museum (Photo: taken September 2012)**

The Ile-Ife bronzes, according to Willett (1967b: 34), resulted from the desire to commemorate and glorify divine kings and their courtiers, thus confirming the



relationship of the bronze sculpture of Wunmonije to the crowned heads. In line with Willett (1967b), Adepegba (1991) suggested that early rulers of ancient Ife such as Oduduwa, Obalufon and Oranmiyan were not merely deified after their reign but were considered as *orishas* (gods). Both accounts might demonstrate how the people today still hold their old kings in high esteem, believing that their spirits remain with them to protect them. In addition, Murray (1947) and Duckworth (1938) asserted that the bronze heads were part of the ancestral heritage of the Ooni of Ife and therefore are the lawful property of the Ooni of Ife.

The burial of the bronzes in the 19<sup>th</sup> -20<sup>th</sup> century, suggests that they were perhaps formally in use before their removal from everyday transactions. Although the reasons for their removal is yet to be resolved, they seem to have been concealed around the areas where they were either formally used or were still in use before their rediscovery (as was the case with the Ori Olokun). Willett (1967a: 14) declares that the Ori Olokun was dug and buried once it had dug up in the mid nineteenth century after which its being dug up for annual festivals. Thus, denoting that the Ori Olokun though buried, was probably in the custody of the priest in charge of the grove (Frobenius, 1911; Platte, 2010b). Willet (1967a) also argued that the bronze heads were periodically buried throughout the year. She emphasised that although they were not kept together in one place, they were sometimes grouped together if necessary. His argument suggests that the bronzes were probably deliberately buried by the people of Ife and accounts for the fact that the bronzes were all found together at the Wunmonije Compound. However this does not explain the reason for their burial in the first instance.

Though Willett (1967a) suggested that that the Ife bronze heads were produced over a relatively short period of time, the idea of being used for an elaborate second burial of the Ooni and members of his court might perhaps account for their burial as a group (Willett, 1967a: 131). Willett's idea is based on the common practices to sacrifice other human beings with the king when he dies. This idea might be founding for the 1938 discovery of thirteen heads but not Ori Olokun in 1910 and the four bronze heads 1939. On the other hand, another hypothesis for the burial of the head might be related with abandonment of the site as a result of the war between Ife

and Modakeke in nineteenth century. Although Willett, (1967a: 102) pointed out that the shrines at Modakeke originally belong to Ife because they are ‘much older than the advent of the Oyos’. This suggests that Ife initially occupied Modakeke and are likely to have buried the heads long before the abandonment in 1850. The possibility of earlier disturbances and upheaval among the Yoruba speaking group might likely be responsible for the burial of the bronzes long before 1850. Hence, the ejection of the Modakekes from Ife in March 1909 only led to more ruins before they started to drift back in 1922 but probably not account for their burial of the bronzes as the dates which the sites were abandoned are yet to be resolved (Willett, 1967a: 102).

Considering what might have influenced the bronze castings, Vogel (1981) argued that African artists (a group to which the Ife artists belong) had complete mastery of their materials and techniques, and created works that looked exactly as they intended. Therefore, the Ife castings might be a reflection of what the artist could see as well as what they imagined. As a result, there are suggestions that the bronze artefacts are ‘realistic or idealised portraits of sacred rulers of the kingdom of Ife’ (Willett, 1967a: 13). According to Hunt (1980), copper castings were used before writing was invented, hence the importance of objects culturally. In a society such as Ife that did not have writing, the object can acquire extraordinary importance as a visual record of that society’s existence and achievements (Johnson, 1921; R.S. Smith, 1988; Vogel, 1981). On the other hand, the castings were possibly a means of showing Ife’s wealth and importance in an era long before photography existed. Both views perhaps support the suggestion that Ife was a flourishing artistic and political centre in the twelfth century.

Willett (1967a: 27) argued that the ‘life size bronze heads were probably used on wooden effigies to symbolize the dignitas of the king’. The presence of holes on both sides of the heads below the ears might support this claim: fastening the sculpture to a structure through the holes might have provided a way of carrying the sculpture from one shrine to another. For this reason, Willett suggested that the bronzes have played a central role in a royal ancestor cult (Willett, 1967a). Their use and presence in shrines and groves or related celebrations thus place the bronzes in the position of being religious objects with some sort of value.

**11<sup>th</sup> - 14<sup>th</sup> Century**

Probable  
Production of Ife  
Bronze sculptures

**14<sup>th</sup> - 15<sup>th</sup> Century**

Possible Introduction  
of technique of casting  
into Benin

**1340-1840**

There is a gap of evidence

Disturbances and upheaval in  
Yorubaland probably resulted  
in the burial of the bronzes

Death of custodians in exile

Burial locations of bronze  
sculptures forgotten

Possibly change in cultural

**16<sup>th</sup> -17<sup>th</sup> Century**

Radiocarbon dates from sites shows the  
classical sculptures have ceased to be  
made but instead were reused.

**19<sup>th</sup> Century.**

A period of civil wars and major  
reconstruction of the Yoruba speaking city  
states makes it very hard to argue the  
continuity of cultural practices

**Table 1.1: Timeline of the Ife bronze heads from 11<sup>th</sup> -19<sup>th</sup> century**

## 1900

Beginning of British colonial rule in Nigeria.

## 1938

Builders' discovery at Wunmonije compound at least 16 bronze sculptures by builders

Bronzes and other archaeological findings were moved to the palace of Ooni for safekeeping

## 1948

Exhibited at the British Museum and returned to Nigeria

Cast copies of the bronze heads produced by BM and 16 original heads returned to Ile Ife Nigeria

Ori Olokun declared as a copy by Fagg and Underwood

## 1951

BM head Exhibited at 'The Festival of Britain'

## 1910

Frobenius finds and purchased Ori Olokun

The existence of Obalufon Mask revealed to Frobenius by the Ooni

## 1938

2 Wunmonije bronze heads purchased by William Bascom and taken to USA

Announce in *MAN* on page 201

## 1939.

1 crowned head purchased by British Museum

1 crowned head and 1 uncrowned head purchased by William Bascom

Described in *Burlington Magazine* (Vol. LXXV, pp. 151-5) by Mr. and Mrs. H. V. Meyerowitz The Illustrated London News, 8 April, 1939; April, 1939; by Bascom The British Museum Quarterly Vol.XIV,1940:75, by Braunscholtz

Order prohibiting the export of antiquities from Nigeria

## 1950

Bascom returns 2 bronze heads to Nigeria

## 1957

Discovery of more bronze sculptures at Ita Yemoo

<b>1960</b>	
Nigeria's Independence	
<b>1970</b>	
	BM head exhibited at Museum of Mankind in 'Divine Kingship in Africa'
<b>1985</b>	
Exhibited at Museum of Mankind in 'Treasures from the Ethnographic Collection'	
<b>1991.</b>	
	Exhibited at BM 'Man and Metal in Ancient Nigeria'
<b>1995</b>	
Exhibited at Museum of Mankind in 'Made in Africa' as part of Africa'95.	
<b>2000</b>	
	BM Permanent exhibition Sainsbury African Gallery
<b>2010</b>	
Kingdom of Ife Exhibition at BM and returned to Nigeria	

**Table 1.2: Timeline of the Ife bronze heads from 1900 – 2010.**

### 1.8. Materiality and technique of production

However, the term 'bronze' is best used for the artefacts through the history of British encounters. The examination of the bronze head by the British Museum between 1947 and 1948 revealed the elements used in their production (Underwood and Fagg, 1949). Willett (1967a: 55) pointed out that Bronze is an alloy of copper with 5 per cent of tin. He noted that the *Obalufon* mask and four of the life size heads are cast of more or less pure copper specifying that they contained 1 per cent or less other elements. Other castings had not more than 3-6 per cent of tin and usually less than 2 per cent. Willett (1967a) also argued that no matter the combination of the elements, lead and zinc always outweighs the percentage of tin. Though argued that none of the Ife heads are made of 'bronze', they are either copper or brass and not 'brass or brass zinc' suggested by Editha Platte in her museum visitor booklet '*Bronze Head from Ife*' (Willett, 1967a: 55). He emphasised that the term 'bronze' is used in describing the sculptures in line with the description used for any artistic metal casting consisting of copper.

The examination conducted by Underwood and Fagg in 1949 however only covers the *Ori Olokun* and not the whole collection of Ife bronze hence the analysis cannot be generalised. The fact that it took thirty nine years from the sculptures' discovery in 1910 to realise they were made from leaded zinc brass suggests that there was a lack of expertise and technology available to test their materiality at the time of discovery, or perhaps the issue was just ignored. Another limitation to the test might also be to avoid destruction of the artefacts since it might require the removal of a quantity of the material. The presence of such technology on site may have also ascertained the authenticity of the *Ori Olokun* and thus avoided speculation of a missing original. Although the test carried out at the British Museum shows that the material content of the *Ori Olokun* is the same as the other bronze heads, it ascertained that the technology of production was different (Underwood, 1949).

Fagg and Underwood (1949) deduced from their examination that the earlier method was by the lost-wax technique as opposed to the sand-casting technique used to produce the copy. Their claim suggested that the copy of the *Ori Olokun* was produced using materials from other antique bronze. Despite the different mode of

production, the presence of the same material elements qualifies the artefact as a bronze casting from Ife. Nevertheless, the ambiguity of the place of production has yet to be unravelled. Therefore, retaining the term 'bronze' may also have partly been for ease and consistency in taxonomy since the British colonial administrators described the artwork as such from the time of its discovery. Altering the taxonomy might also change the way visitors viewed and interpreted the objects. As a result, the object could possibly lose the power to create surprise and wonder, features intended by the colonial administration (Bennett, 1995).

According to Hunt (1980), the lost-wax technique used to create these artefacts was in existence before 4000 BCE. He emphasised that the technique was used for the production of small human and animal figures, in both naturalistic and symbolic representations, that served as votive objects to please the numerous gods associated with early religions. In addition, their conventional appearance stunned the European public as it reminded them of their own history (Coombes, 1994). Both Willett (1967a) and Hunt (1980) suggested that Ife people obtained the technical knowledge of lost-wax casting, as well as the raw material (copper-zinc alloy) used for the sculptures, from external sources. Hunt (1980: 78) suggested that it was 'most difficult to envisage' how the concept of lost-wax casting reached the African continent. More recently, Obeng (1986) has suggested that the technique might have been imported through the Trans-Saharan link, and later passed to Benin in the south. Considering the reference of Ife to Igbo Ukwu, in line with Sutton (2001: 52) it is most likely that before the establishment of the Trans-Saharan route, the shorter and less perilous route from the Nile to Nubia to the Chad basin and the Benue for trade might perhaps be accountable for the import of the technique to Igbo Ukwu then to Ife. However, Igbo Ukwu is autonomous and not imported but of independent convention (as it uses an undercut method of casting) so the raw material is likely directly transported through Benue trade route to Ife.

### 1.9. Cultural implications of the bronzes

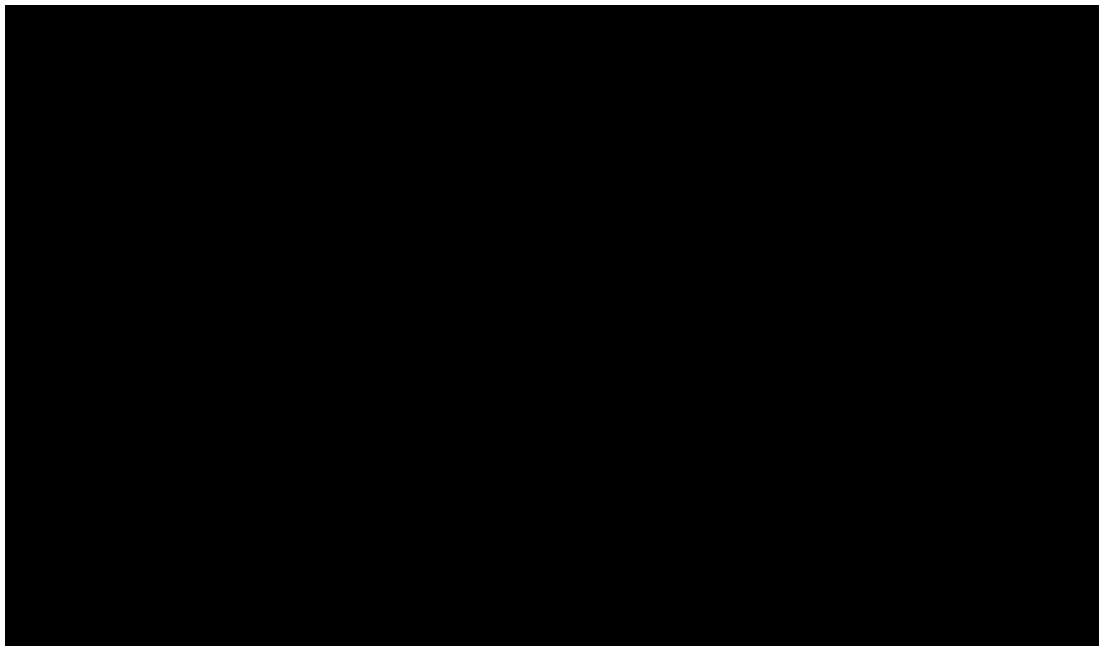
The early cultural implications of the bronze heads, as indicated earlier in section 1.3, are most possibly related to the Yoruba 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century philosophy surrounding the Ori (head). The association of the Ori with spiritual elements that qualify it ‘as the bearer of destiny’ informs both Yoruba indigenes and non-Yorubas about the importance placed on the head, especially that of their rulers (Gbadegesin, 1991: 36). Lawal (1985) also argued that Yorubas regard the head as the locus of the *ase* (divine power) of the *Olodumare* (supreme being) in the individual, constituting the person’s life-source and controlling their personality and destiny. He stressed that there are three modes of representing the head in Yoruba sculpture: the naturalistic, which refers to the external, or physical, head (*ori ode*); the stylised, which hints at the inner, or spiritual, head (*ori inu*); and the abstract, which symbolises the primeval material (*ori ipori*) of which the inner head was made (Lawal, 1985).

Lawal pointed out that although the fate of each individual is believed to have been predetermined in heaven before birth ‘into’ the earth, a good or bad destiny is no more than a potentiality for success or failure; a successful life depends on how well one makes use of one’s head here on Earth (Lawal, 1985). Apart from providing the individual with a source of inspiration and hope, Lawal emphasised that ‘*ori*’ symbolism offers the Yoruba a means of interacting more closely with the supernatural (Lawal, 1985: 100). This is most evident in the prolific use of anthropomorphic images in the worship of the deities. As most of the *orisa* (deities) are representations of mystical forces, they are seldom represented in person. As important as this Yoruba philosophy may be to the Yoruba people, it is absent in major exhibitions of the Ife bronzes with exception of the 2010 kingdom of Ife exhibition catalogue (these exhibitions are discussed in Chapter 3). However it is important to point out that one cannot assume that 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century beliefs applied in the same way in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Adepegba (1982) proposed that the surface patterns of Ile-Ife art, which includes the controversial vertical striations (as shown in figure 1.6), were facial markings, which have been modified into the present-day Yoruba facial markings. This marking demonstrates how the Yoruba people were able to differentiate themselves from



other people, thus encouraging a form of identification. This identification goes beyond ethnic groups to family units, where individual families are identified by a variation in the marking. Frobenius (1913) suggested that the striations were ancient markings that are no longer used by the Yoruba people. Willett (1967a: 23) argued that the idea that they are Yoruba tribal markings are ‘least unsatisfactory’ since the Yoruba no longer use these types of tribal marks. He related the marks to those found on bronzes from Igbo Ukwu in the Eastern region of Nigeria. And pointed out that the mark is still likely in use by the Ibo group over the forehead and temple known as ‘*itchi* scarification’ (Willett, 1967a: 23). In substantiating that the facial markings are in use till date by the Yoruba, Adepegba (1991; 1998) explained that the common Yoruba face markings with long and unbroken side-of-the-face elements are called *Gombo* and are found on the Olugburo in Ogburo near Ejigbo and Ogbomoso, the Olota in Iwo, Ibadan and the Alawo lineage in Awo. Claude Adouin (2006) emphasised that the marks are cultural realities and not speculations. Willett’s (1967a) and Adepegba (1998) arguments however did not only ascertain the importance of the use of facial scarification as cultural realities and identification of different groups but indicates the relationship of Ife and the Yoruba to other ethnic groups.



**Figure 1.6: Ife bronze head with vertical striation (Photo: Illustrated London News 1948)**

Adepegba argued that the former Ife vertical striations that were broken by three or four horizontal bridge lines at the level of the eye across to the ears have evolved into unbroken striations similar to *gombo* (Adepegba 1998). Such evolution highlights the idea that neighbouring ethnic groups like Nupe have influenced Ile Ife. Adepegba (1991) emphasised that Ile-Ifẹ royal heads and figures constitute two ruling lines in ancient Ife, namely the plain-faced lineage and the lineage with facial markings as shown in figure 1.5. These two lines of rulers in ancient Ife are supported by the rich interpretation of Ife myths of origin as suggested by Akinjogbin and Ayandele (1980). Adepegba (1991) further suggested a three-group division of the Ife heads based on whether or not they have facial markings or skin scarification as well as the types of markings: the plain-faced; faces with vertical striations, and faces with three bold gashes at the corner of the mouth. Adepegba concluded that, of the three groups, only the plain-face figurines and the striated heads and the bigger striated half figures were depicted wearing crowns (Adepegba, 1998: 159). Blier (2012) further suggests that the vertical line facial markings carries a rank that is different and in some ways higher than the plain faced royals. Based on the published thermoluminescence dates from the metal heads, in 1979 by Cavolcoressi & David, Adepegba concluded that the plain faced sculptures represented *Obatala* and the striated faced sculptures represented *Oduduwa's* lineage. Therefore the facial marking and plain face sculptures perhaps represents two different dynasties that ruled within Ile Ife. Probably the heads with the facial markings represented the reign of *Obatala* was *Oba Igbo* (king of Igbo) and chief artist (Obayemi, 1979: 168).

The generality of the facial markings, according to Johnson (1921), belong to the Ife natives. As a result, many ancient works depicting non-royals and women have same vertical facial marking (Blier, 2012). Blier (2012) argues that the facial markings appear to reference Ife royals as well as elites and the idea of autochthony but such practices were at some point outlawed. Despite the change of facial scarification due to political expediency, Blier (2012) in line with Adepegba (1991) emphasised that both the plain faced and the marked faced groups inhabited Ile Ife at the same period. R. S. Smith (1988) also argues that the facial characteristics of most of the sculptures are undoubtedly 'negroid' with striking similarities to the modern inhabitants of Ife

as well as family resemblances between different groups of sculptures. In these terms, the sculptures have been used to describe culture and traditions of the past as well as serving as a source of identification not only for the people of Ife but also for other Yoruba kingdoms.

According to R. S. Smith (1988), the art of Ile-Ife does not seem to depict 'actual' events, as no recollection exists in Ile-Ife today of the lost-wax technique by which all the bronzes were produced. R. S. Smith also concurred that Ife tradition throws no light upon its introduction or whence it came or the source of the bronze material (copper material containing little tin). Contrary to R. S. Smith, Eluyemi (1978) confirmed that some compounds and families in Ile-Ife presently practise metal casting using the lost-wax technique, as there is still demand for the objects for ritual observance. However, the art industry of Ile-Ife probably, suffered a remarkable setback from the 15<sup>th</sup> century since the castings are dated approximately 11<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> century when only few were created. Both local and foreign wars between 1852 and 1892 may also have contributed to further decline. These incidents brought about change through British disorganisation of traditional African societies and economies (Lloyd, 1971; Eluyemi, 1977).

#### **1.10. Reception of the bronzes within Nigeria**

Another issue worth analysing about the Ile-Ife bronzes is how Ife indigenes ~~and~~ in contemporary Nigeria perceive the artefacts. According to Beidelman (1997: 6), some Ife indigenes, and other Nigerian citizens, who have been converted to Islam and Christianity, have long been taught to hold such works in contempt 'as signs of a debased paganism'. Steiner (1994) also concurred that the main buyers and wholesalers of Nigerian traditional art are Muslims, who often express disdain or repulsion towards artefacts that they consider to be pagan objects. I argue therefore that the rejection or non-association of the people with the bronzes was a result of the aftermath of colonisation, which promoted the degradation of non-Western artefacts. As a result, there is a tendency for the bronzes to be less appreciated within the country where they were made, used and buried than in Britain or anywhere else in the world. However, Laitin (1986) pointed out that Ife's claim for its ancient civilisation in comparison to other Yoruba communities remains unchanged despite

the influence of Christianity and Islam in the adherence to elements of their Yoruba heritage. But the introduction and acceptance of the doctrines of foreign religions implies that the bronzes from Ile-Ife might have ‘less’ meaning for some Yorubas and Nigerians due to reduced attachment fostered by these new doctrines. This is however an indication of likely changes that probably occurred to the ancient civilisation of Ife over time due to external factors (sociocultural factors, westernisation and foreign religion) to some degree. On the other hand, Beidelman (1997) argued that the increasing admiration expressed for African art by Westerners seems to have brought about an emerging response of new and increasing admiration and pride.

The bronzes of Ile-Ife have become a symbol of Yoruba, Nigerian and African identity. Since their discovery in 1910 and 1938 respectively, the artefacts from Ile-Ife have been used as a source of identity to the people of Ile-Ife, the whole Yoruba ethnic group in Nigeria, and the diaspora. Frank Willett, an English archaeologist, anthropologist, and museum curator in 1939 argued that the subject matter of the art consisted of royal figures and their attendants and reflected the political ethos of the Yoruba city-state (Willett, 1967a). One hypothesis raised from the above, is that the bronzes were found in Ile-Ife, a Yoruba-speaking community with greater significance for Yoruba culture, in which the bronzes served as objects of worship in various traditional celebrations of deities such as Olokun, Obatala, Sango and Orunmila. However, it is likely articulating particular ideas about kingship at Ife during the 11<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> century, Lawal (1974: 243) also argued that the heads might likewise provide a focus for the devotee, thereby facilitating a more intimate dialogue with the Orisa (deities).

In the 1960s, a portrait of the Ori Olokun (god/ goddess of wealth) was used on the Nigerian six and five penny stamps as shown in Figure 1.7 and 1.8 below (Willett, 1960: 238). By the 1970s, the bronzes were being used as a symbol of national identity. This was made possible as museums were instructed during the Nigerian civil war (also known as the Biafra war) to rewrite their labels to ‘omit completely any reference to the ethnic provenance of works’ (Platte, 2010a: 62). This perhaps may account for the acceptance of their reproductions and images as a symbol for

national and regional identity. It is particularly interesting to note that the crowned bronze heads from Ife and the British Museum's ivory pectoral mask from Benin were used respectively as logos for the 1973 All-Africa Games (as shown in Figure 1.9) and the 1977 World African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC), both events were held in Lagos, the former capital of Nigeria (Platte, 2010a: 57).

The bronze heads are also depicted on African currency (Vogel, 1991: 333). Together with a panel from a Yoruba door, the bronze heads appeared on a 5,000-franc banknote issued by the Central Bank of West African State. Platte (2010a: 59) pointed out that Nigeria has never used the currency, as it is not part of the monetary zone for which the currency was made. Vogel (1994) suggested that the artefacts were depicted on the banknote because they were among the oldest and most elaborate work ever known from the region. They indicate how the bronzes have become a widely used symbol of 'universal' African heritage and by extension 'proclaiming the universality of Western art' (Spring et al, 1996: 58). More recently, in 2013, the unveiling of a huge sculpture of the Ori Olokun (as shown in Figure 1.10) at the Ori Olokun roundabout (formerly the Mayfair roundabout) in Ile-Ife by Osun State governor Rauf Aregbesola also emphasised regional identity (Lemuel, 2013).



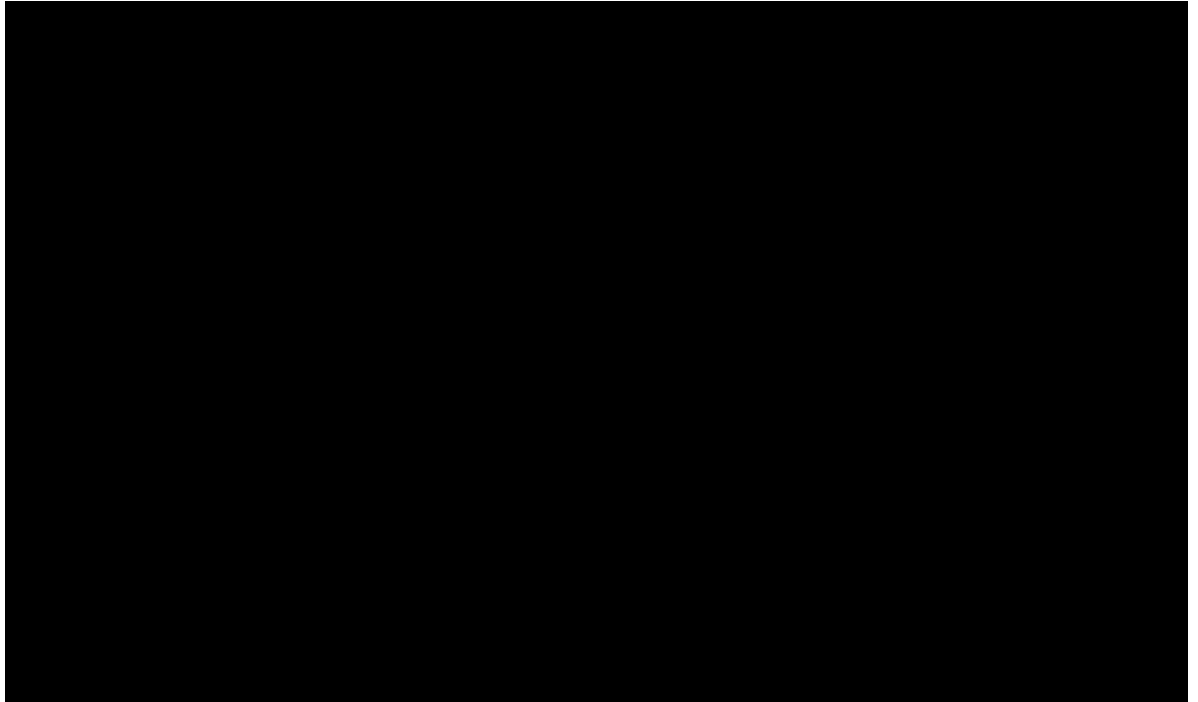
**Figure 1.7: Sixpenny stamp displaying British imperialism (Photo: Arthur Brooks)**



**Figure 1.8: Five-penny stamp Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum**



**Figure 1.9: Logo of the All-Africa Games held in 1973 in Lagos, Nigeria, by Cruioso**



**Figure 1.10: 32-foot statue of Ori Olokun in the suburbs of Ife town erected by the Osun State government (Photo: tvcontinental.tv)**

Despite the social and cultural importance of the bronzes, Beidelman (1997: 7) argued that the overwhelming masses of Africans have remained far more interested in selling such works in order to ‘surmount their grinding poverty’. Platte (2010a: 57) also argued that the celebrations in 1973 and 1977 respectively, as well as the Udoji Commission that witnessed the commoditisation of almost everything in Nigeria, led to a rapid increase in the production and sale of replicas of the bronzes.

According to Otobo (1986), the Udoji Public Service Review Commission was responsible for the review of the wage structure of the civil service in 1973 under the rule of General Yakubu Gowon (former Nigerian head of state in 1966 - 1975). This review saw an increment in civil servant salaries across the country that facilitated an ostentatious attitude to spending. However, the unappreciative attitude of Nigerians towards art in favour of expensive mass produced goods, combined with poverty might account for the mass production of popular, versions of Benin and Yoruba art for both African bourgeoisie and Western tourists who appear to consider them ‘prototypically African’ (Beidelman, 1997). Such desire for wealth, change in status, and influx of tourist probably not only increased production quantity of poor quality

art but also increased the willingness to ravage sites of archaeological value. In such terms, the people of Ile-Ife and Nigerians in general have willingly but unintentionally contributed to the widespread looting of archaeological sites and settlements with an artistic tradition.

The bronzes of Ile-Ife therefore to some extent are iconised as ‘a national patrimony whose central meaning transcends the Yoruba ethnicity that created them’ (Vogel, 1991). However, taken as a national patrimony, the bronzes only represent the Yorubas and do not outline the multiplicity of identities or ethnicities within the nation. In addition it also fails to point out the variation in Yoruba ethnic groups, instead portraying the Yoruba people as having a united front. Appiah (1992) pointed out that the multiplicity of African identities or ethnicities also affects the production of a multiplicity of notions about what constitutes art. I will argue, therefore, that these multiplicities not only affect what constitutes art but also affect every aspect of daily life as guided by beliefs held by each ethnic group. For that reason, instead of emphasising the diversity within Nigeria and the Yoruba ethnic group, we might consider how the bronzes of Ile-Ife are used to connect people and cultures together into ‘imagined communities’ beyond the boundaries of Nigeria. This is evident in the use of the bronze heads for national and international events.

### **1.11. Interpretations of the bronzes of Ile-Ife**

To understand the interpretations of the bronzes, each object needs to be discussed individually because they all have different interpretations within Ile-Ife and Yoruba cultural traditions. There are eighteen bronze heads: the Obalufon mask, three Ori Olokun heads (including the head at the British Museum), twelve life-size bronze heads (6 striated and 6 plain), and two badly damaged bronze heads. The Obalufon and the Ori Olokun head will be discussed in more detail in this chapter than the other works because they have been given more attention within Yoruba tradition and culture. As mentioned earlier, it is important to note that the prominence given to the head in Yoruba sculpture is a reflection of ‘its socio-biological importance as the coordinating centre of human existential struggles’ (Lawal, 1985).



### ***1.11.1. The Obalufon mask***

The Obalufon mask, (shown in Figure 1.11 below) a life-size copper mask from Ife, is one of the most ‘familiar, yet enigmatic, of all African works in metal’ (Blier, 1985: 383). In 1937, the Obalufon mask came into the limelight in Nigeria when the then reigning Ooni of Ife, Adesoji Aderemi, first published a picture of it (Aderemi, 1937: Blier, 1985, 383). Ooni Aderemi identified the mask as representing Obalufon II, a legendary early ruler of Ife who was credited with the invention of brass casting at that centre. Obayemi (1979: 175) argued that Obalufon referred to as the ‘god of brass working’ and intended to wear the brass mask over the face. Eyo and Willett (1980) date the mask to the 12<sup>th</sup> through 15<sup>th</sup> centuries CE. This life-size mask, according to Aderemi’s 1937 account, had been kept on an altar in the *Omirin* room of the royal palace at Ife ever since it was produced. Blier (1985: 383) stated that the Obalufon mask has ‘near flawless casting’, is made of ninety-nine percent pure copper, and is ‘one of the most beautiful and technically accomplished of all works from ancient Ife’. Willett (1967a: 29) pointed out that it is possibly the only Ife bronze work not to have been lost and found. The name ‘Obalufon’, according to Ogunba (1973: 99), is likely coined from the word ‘Obalufe’ (the title for certain Ife priest-chiefs), meaning ‘king or chief at Ife’ or the ‘the king or important person who owns Ife’.



**Figure 1.11: The Obalufon mask (Photo taken in 1948 © Trustees of the British Museum)**

Blier (2012) argues that many of the ancient Ife sculptures are identified today with individuals who lived in the era in which Ife King Obalufon II was on the throne and/or participated in the civil war associated with his reign. The analysis of the sculptures and other evidence suggests that Obalufon II was a key sponsor or patron of these ancient arts, an idea consistent with this king's modern identity as patron deity of bronze casting, textiles, regalia, peace, and wellbeing (Blier, 2012). According to Blier (1985), the role of the Obalufon mask in ancient Ife is yet to be understood thoroughly. Underwood (1949: 34) argued that 'the slits beneath the eyes indicate its use...in some sort of ceremony.' Cordwell (1958: 224) commented that it might have had a funerary use, asserting that an imposter pretending to be the former ruler returning from the dead might have worn the mask. Willett, in line with Cordwell, suggested that the work might have been worn during funerals. He noted that:

...in the course of Yoruba funerals nowadays an *egungun* masquerader takes it upon himself to speak as the voice of the deceased, to reassure the living that he has been satisfied with his burial....It is possible that this mask was used in such a funeral ceremony. (Willett, 1967a: 29-30).

Willett (1967a) also suggested that the mask might have been linked to an Ife tradition in which a servant impersonates the king by putting on the robes and crown of state in order to prolong the ruler's reign. This idea is in line with the Yoruba cultural belief that it is taboo to announce the death of the king (Adebileje, 2012). Hence, there is a need to continue the pretence that the king lives on by employing dedicated servants to impersonate the king. The mask is then used to hide the identity of the imposter. The people believe that the imposter is the king since the monarch is not often seen in person because he is regarded as a sacred being.

Contrary to Willett, Blier (1985) argued that the key to the mask's symbolism is found instead in the figure of Obalufon II himself, both as a historic ruler at Ife, and, following his death, as a deity of the Yoruba people. Blier's (1985) and (2012) analysis suggests that the mask was associated with coronation ceremonies and related rites of rulership transition at Ife. Fabunmi (1969: 11) elucidated that during Ife coronations the royal crown was placed on 'the head of Obalufon' before it was

worn by the new ruler. 'Obalufon' in Fabunmi's 1969 explanation could mean that the Obalufon mask in the Obalufon shrine represents Obalufon II. Fabunmi also pointed out the importance of the Obalufon priest in the coronation of new monarchs in Ife. He emphasised that Obalara the priest was a descendant of King Obalufon and till date the priesthood has been kept within the lineage of Obalara (Fabunmi, 1969: 10). This might be a way of ensuring the tradition's posterity. This claim confirms directly or indirectly the importance of the Obalufon mask in the coronation ceremony as oppose to funerary rites.

The account of the late Ooni Aderemi of Ile-Ife in 1937 (quoted in Verger, 1957) also suggested the possible use and importance of the Obalufon mask in coronation ceremonies. The king stated that 'the Ooni of Ife is proclaimed king at the temple of Oduduwa but he receives his crown the following day at the temple of Orisala (also known as Obatala) where it has been brought from the temple of Obalufon' (Verger, 1957: 439). Palau-Marti (1964: 22) in the same line pointed out that on the same day that the king is pronounced as the new Ooni, the new king pays homage to the dignitaries and people of Ife, showing them the throne of Obalufon. One can therefore argue at this point that the Obalufon copper mask is not only identified with Ife rule and, by extension, the transfer of royal power (Blier, 1985), but also authenticates the tradition of coronation in Ile-Ife, owing to its authoritative role in confirming who reigns as the new Ooni. There is also a possibility that the mask had political connotations. This is due to the idea that the coronation became invalid without a crown, as only a crowned king is recognised as the new Ooni. As a result, anyone acting as the Ooni is only considered as an imposter in the absence of the coronation rites of the wearing of the crown after it has been placed on the Obalufon mask. This perhaps might be a sign of respect to Obalufon the deity who represents the former king and worshiped in other parts of Yoruba land (Awe, 1971)

Blier (1985) further suggests that the mask was designed to be worn due to the slits (under the eyes and between the lips) and the holes (in the nostrils). However, the significant weight of the mask (12  $\frac{3}{4}$  lb) would need to be considered in relation to the length of time it was required to be worn, as the weight might be detrimental to the safety of whoever wears the mask. Willett (1967a: 29) argued that 'it is rather too

heavy to have been used as a dance mask'. Hence, it would be difficult to wear the mask for any ceremony for any length of time. On the other hand, Willett (1967a) comparing the weight with that of the wooden mask used in Ekiti argued that it might not be intolerable to wear. With lack of evidence to substantiate the Obalufon mask was ever worn, I therefore argue along with Blier (1985) and Fabunmi (1969) that, the mask is more associated with coronation rites than funerary rites.

The Obalufon mask is also associated with the deity Obalufon, who is worshipped all over Yoruba land. However, Bascom (1969: 49) argued that 'unlike most deities in the Yoruba pantheon, Obalufon is surrounded with considerable confusion in the literature.' Blier (1985) concurred with Bascom (1969) by pointing out that the confusion is true in the discussions of Obalufon's power, habits and associated symbols. According to Fadipe (1970: 333), Obalufon is the god of warriors; to Farrow (1988) he is the god of peace (peace of the kingdom); to Johnson (in Verger, 457) and Dennett (1969) he is the 'god of the prosperous empire.' Talbot (1968, II, 60, 87), on the other hand, refers to Obalufon as the god of fortune, success and greatness. The confusion as to the attributes of Obalufon among the Yoruba authors might have affected the way Western writers have described the deity. As a result, Obalufon has different interpretations and identities. However, all these identities are reflected in Yoruba oral history, which corroborates his characteristics at different stages of his reign as Ooni of Ife.

### ***1.11.2. The Ori Olokun***

The Ori-Olokun bronze head acquired by Frobenius in 1910 is fourteen and a half inches from the tip of diadem to the neckline and sixteen and three quarter inches from the edge of the forehead to the chin (Frobenuis, 2013: 310). The quality of its craftsmanship made Frobenius to liken it to the finest Roman examples. Olokun is an Orisa (deity) in Yoruba religion associated with the sea, and takes a male or female personification depending on what region of West Africa he or she is worshipped (Clark, 2007). According to Frobenius (1913) a legendary account associated the foundation of Ile Ife before to Olokun and was the only god worshiped in Ile Ife at the time (Frobenius, 1913: 306). However the Olokun is not only important for only the people of Ile Ife but all the Yorubas dwelling near the coast.

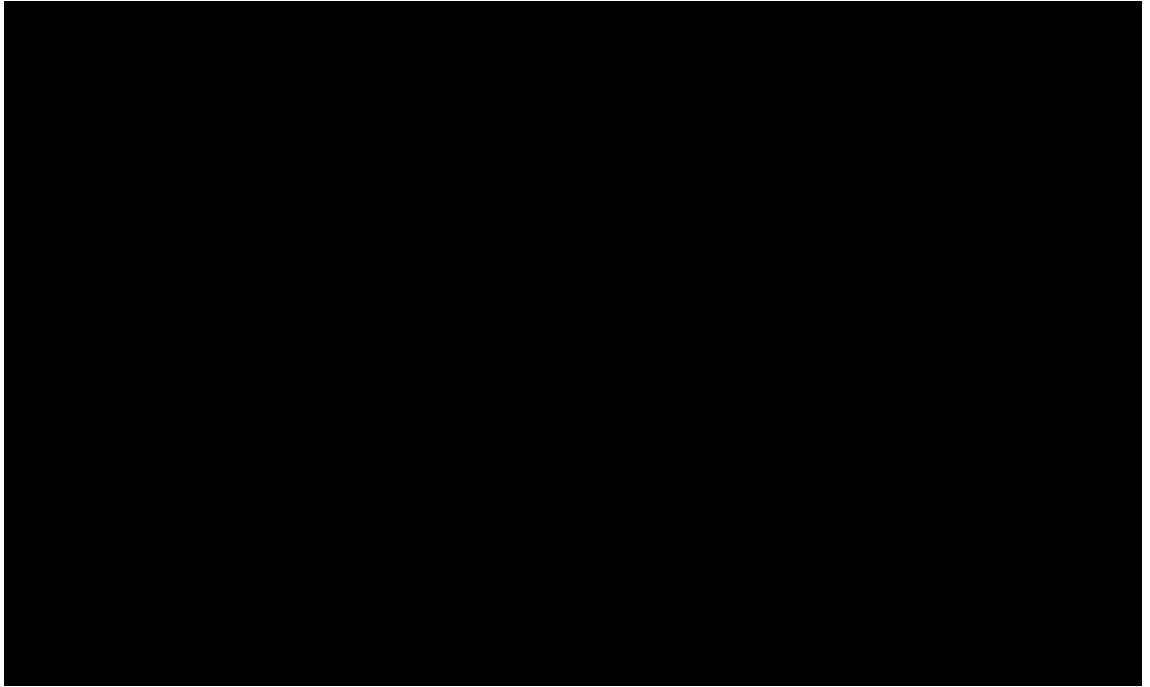
Hence the yearly worship even at Lagos (Frobenius, 1913). Olokun to the Edo (Bini) people of Nigeria is conceptualised and associated with fertility, purity and good fortune (Rosen, 1989; Ben-Amos, 1973). In 1957, Bradbury argued that Olokun is considered as the ‘bringer of children’ because it is believed that the path to the spirit world lies across the sea and the souls of those who have died, as well as those about to be born, must pass over the water (Bradbury, 1957: 53). It is also believed that the soul is blessed or cursed during this crossing of the water; hence Olokun is considered as the source of wealth and good fortune, while *Esu*<sup>8</sup> (the devil since Christianity and Islam) is responsible for all forms of ill luck (Ben-Amos, 1973). Ben-Amos (1973) further emphasised that Olokun’s kingdom abounds with joy, peace, enormous wealth and especially children. This claim is also evident in the invocation to Olokun (Westcott, 1962). Blier (2012: 76) proposed that Olokun was the ‘ancient Ife financial minister and later commerce, bead and sea god’.

It is perhaps not surprising that as the goddess of wealth Ori Olokun has been used as a corporate logo and in the branding of various businesses such as national television channels in Ibadan and Ile-Ife and the Odua investment company (one of the largest investment groups in Nigeria). Ori Olokun is also used as a decorative symbol on a wide range of objects within Nigerian homes and business organisations, thus resulting in the replication of the object in various materials. Platte (2010a) argues that Ife artefacts like Ori Olokun are made for decorative and gift purposes, but their production cannot be compared to the outstanding craftsmanship of the ancient bronzes. As well as being used as a logo for businesses and other important establishments, a sculpture of Ori Olokun adorns the main entrance to the Obafemi Awolowo University (founded in 1962 and one of the foremost universities in Yoruba land). To strongly emphasise identity and culture, the Ori Olokun is a main feature of the university’s seal and gate (as shown in Figure 1.11). It also features on the gate of the Lagos airport hotel as shown in Figure 1.12 and 1.13. The Ori Olokun

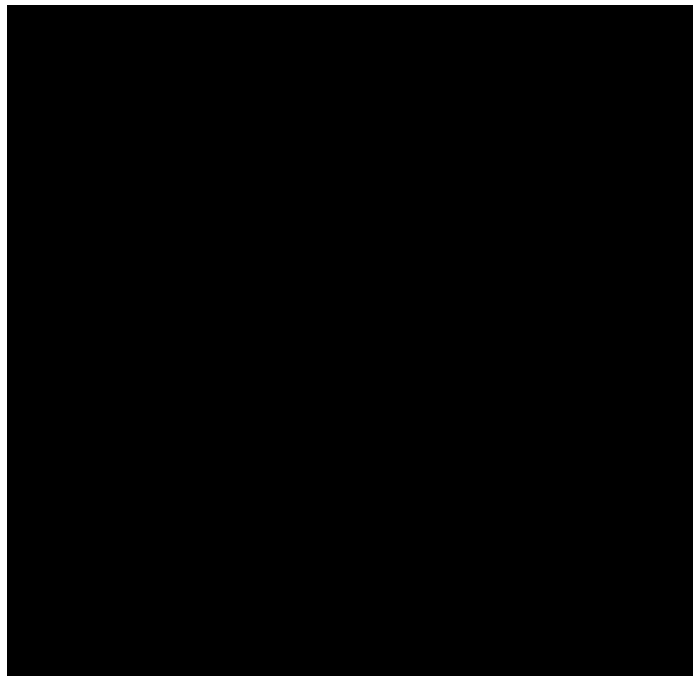
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<sup>8</sup> Esu is a deity in traditional Yoruba religion and because belief in him extends into the areas of philosophy and ethics. In the Bible and in the Koran, Satan and Al, shatan are translated as Esu in Yoruba translations of the Holy books (Ogundipe, 1978:4)

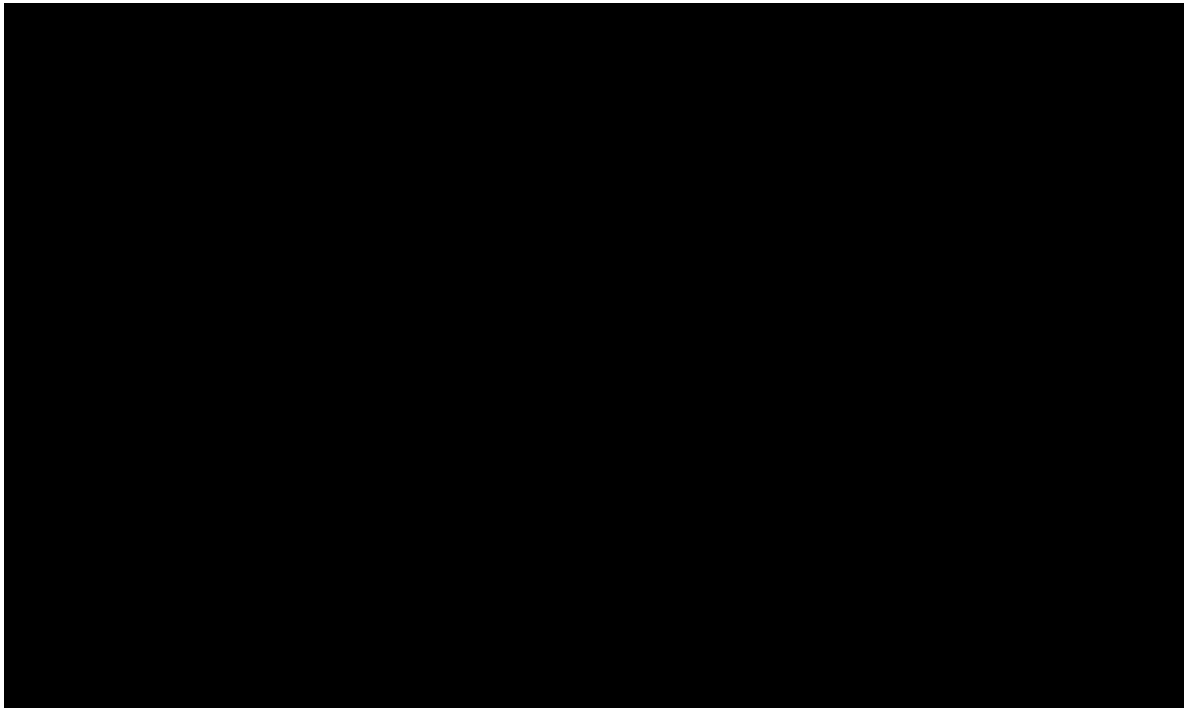
not only represents culture and corporate wealth but it is used across a range of different discourses.



**Figure 1.12: Sculpture of Ori Olokun at the entrance to Obafemi Awolowo University (Photo: Micaiah 2012)**



**Figure 1.13: A stylised representation of the Olokun head on the sign of the Airport Hotel Lagos (Photo: Editha Platte, 2007)**



**Figure 1.14: Olokun head as a modern icon (Photo: Editha Platte, 2008)**

### **1.12. Summary and conclusion**

This chapter discussed the bronze artefacts from Ile-Ife in relation to Yoruba culture and philosophy. It emphasised that the city of Ile-Ife is often framed as the centre of myth, history and identity for the Yoruba people and is positioned as the sacred centre where primeval creation took place, which oral tradition disseminates and salutes. The chapter highlights the notion that the Ife bronzes probably have references to a larger artistic culture like Nok and Igbo Ukwu. These references might also produce multiple implications within Ile-Ife, Nigeria and Africa that is likely to affect their interpretation and meaning. Such implications, however, are not limited to the cultural sphere but extend to political and economical discourses. Regardless of the variations in the Yoruba languages, the Yoruba people through the Pan-Yoruba identification of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have commonalities in their cultural and spiritual philosophies that might be difficult to trace prior 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, the Yoruba philosophy about the importance of the head seem to be represented in

the artistic tradition that perhaps could further elucidate the rationale for the production of the bronzes (Lawal, 1985). The bronzes might also substantiate other Yoruba philosophies that are gaining contemporary interest, which could allow for the emergence of new interpretations.

This chapter has argued that the reason for the burial of the bronzes was likely to be (a) a way of preserving them (b) cultural fusion from the Igbo as regards burial (c) protecting the artefacts from looters, as the city of Ife was continually invaded by its neighbours and (d) displacement due to dilapidation as a result of abandonment of the site due to war between Ife and their neighbours. With the return of Ife from exile, and the likely demise of the cultural custodians, burial sites and the bronze heads within the *Ooni's* compound were perhaps forgotten. The multiple interpretations and uses of the Ife bronzes from corporate logo to symbol of national unity and identity has further heightened the town's socio-cultural value, endorsing Nigeria in the world of art, and acknowledging the intellectualism of the Yoruba people. In spite of the cultural importance of the Ife bronzes, the people they 'represent' have at times actively contributed to their degradation. This might be seen as being primarily due to the influx of Westerners and the adoption of Evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity. The west probably introduced commercialisation while Christianity associated the artefacts with paganism – an ideological frame that served to detach Yoruba people from their heritage. The next chapter will discuss the social life of the bronzes from the perspective of Western discovery



## **Chapter 2: The social life of the Ife bronzes: from colonial ‘discovery’**

### **Introduction**

This chapter will focus on the ‘discovery’ of the Ife bronzes by the West. The chapter investigates the notion of discovery by unpacking the past and examines its likely influence on how the Ife bronzes are represented today. It will examine the clash of interests between the German archaeologist Leo Frobenius, the American anthropologist William Bascom, and the British administration in Nigeria. It highlights various political situations that came to light after the supposed ‘discoveries’ and discusses how these issues affect the presentation of the artefacts outside Nigeria. The chapter will further examine the effect of different cultural assumptions on the concept of gift and how colonisation could be an influence. Thus raising the need for revision and representation that is inclusive of past events, implications and values. I will investigate the Ife bronzes in this chapter, through the lens of the colonial era and will examine how and if imperialism continues to resonate through the presentation of the bronzes to the present day.

### **2.1 The social life of the Ife ‘bronzes’**

As we have seen in the last chapter, the bronze artefacts from Ife are products of the twelfth to thirteenth centuries and have been considered African masterpieces by Europeans since their arrival at the British Museum (Willett, 1967; Ardoin, 2006; Platte, 2010b). However, parts of their ‘social life’ from production to discovery remain a mystery to this day due to limited information about the history of their meaning and a lack of interrogation by earlier museum curators whose views were formed through imperial certainties. As a result, as we have seen in the last chapter, there are still questions surrounding the reasons for their creation, their makers, and the reason for their burial. The term ‘social life’ in this chapter is in line with Appadurai’s idea that ‘commodities like persons have social lives’ (1986: 5). This conception of ‘social life’ also gestures towards the related notion that things – such as the artefacts from Ife – can be in various ways a significant part of people’s lives as they travel and change meaning, just as people do (Miller, 1995: 141).

The artefacts acquire their social life from production through their continuous use

and exchange, where they gain qualities in relation to other things. Levi-Strauss (1987) also argued that the social lives of things in terms of meanings are built on exchange that is extended to gifts. This exchange is based on what Godelier (1999: 18) referred to as ‘composed symbolic systems’ (such as marriage rules, economic relations or religion) expressed by unconscious mental structures. In contrast, Weiner (1992) argued that exchange is not just based on reciprocity of gifts, as some types of gifts are kept out of circulation. Irrespective of the fact that some gifts are not reciprocated, they still have a ‘social life’ drawn up from the concept of their use and the value ascribed to them by their owners.

Godelier (1999: 11) argued that things create ‘bonds between souls’, because of the notion that things have souls just like the people who encounter them. Mauss (2008/1950) argued that, through either possession or exchange, things form an extension of persons and the people identified with them. In addition, Dant (1999: 1) pointed out that things have a social life due to the ‘social interaction that takes place between people and objects’. He further emphasised that the natural world is composed of ‘man-made things that provide a material environment as the context in which social interaction takes place’ (Dant, 1999: 1b). In the same vein, Lury (2011) suggests that the use of objects within society makes categorisations visible through the way they carry or communicate social meanings.

In the case of the Ife bronzes, their position within society is often taken to communicate all that Yoruba culture represents, thus acting as a key source of identity (as discussed in chapter 1). Since the artefacts form an integral part of the Yoruba Empire, they tend to hold some sort of value in how society is controlled. This is made visible in how the artefacts have frequently been related to the royal dynasty and the shrines – both ideas or places of incontestable power and authority – (Willett, 1967a) and, as my previous chapter describes, in their use on stamps, university logos and civic statues. Therefore, one will need to consider all the parts played by the artefacts outside Nigeria as well as the different positions occupied by the artefacts to write a capacious account or biography of them. Since the ‘discovery’ of the Ife artefacts in 1910, it is important to state that they have assumed different positions, as they have been affected by changes of ownership and context as well as

being in and out of zones of commoditisation.

In order to gain a better understanding of the wider implications of the bronzes, I will explore the social life of the artefacts from when they were ‘discovered’ in 1910 till the present day.

At present, Ife bronzes displayed in Western museums are still used to create surprise and wonder for museum visitors, but their lack of documentation often raises questions about their ‘authenticity’ as African objects. Despite the shifts in their ownership in the post-colonial era, it is also imperative to draw attention to the changing discourses the objects participated in from their discovery to their display in Western museums. This might shed more light on aspects that were omitted, whether deliberately or otherwise, during the colonial era, that might affect their meaning. In line with Farress’ (1986) suggestion, history is limited to what ‘past informants chose to record and what accidents have preserved’ (1986: xi). As a result, any history and information documented about the Ife artefacts at the early stage was likely to be produced within specific contexts of European interest in that particular time to justify their presence in the region. Such histories however, are still in circulation, and can be difficult to rewrite. Farress (1986) also argued that difficulties in reconstructing past systems of meaning are likely to occur, since one can neither participate in nor directly observe the life of the people in relation to the period in question. Nevertheless, we can usefully examine the interpretations given to these artefacts during the course of their social lives to date.

## **2.2. The ‘discovery’ of the bronzes**

As we shall see, the colonial presence in Ife meant that European imperial visitors would come into contact with various aspects of Yoruba culture. The Europeans’ position of authority offered them the opportunity to decide what to report as important and what to ignore about the culture of the ‘other’. Hence, ‘discovery’ is considered in this thesis to be an imperialist framing because the sculptures of Ife were in existence long before the arrival of Western explorers. Thus, Africa represented a playground for imperial power to carry out their imperial exploits (Coombes, 1994). In Ife, an imperial tussle for supremacy over the discovery of the

bronze head (*Ori Olokun*) broke out between the German archaeologist Leo Frobenius and the British administration in late 1910 (Famoroti, 2010; Platte, 2010b). Thus, accepting credit for discovering artefacts that were already in existence could be seen as a way in which colonial administrations demonstrated their power over their colonies. 'Discovery' therefore only takes into consideration the instant when outsiders (Westerners) encountered the sculptures. The 'discovery' was therefore a discovery for the Germans and the British administration, but not for the Ife indigenes.

Nigeria was a colony under British administration from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century (Edwards & Tredell, 2008). Despite British rule, explorers and travellers visited the land from other Western regions such as Germany. Frobenius, the German archaeologist, was one of such explorer who anticipated returning to Germany with archaeological findings (Frobenius, 1911). He 'discovered' the first of the three crowned bronze heads, the *Ori Olokun*, and other antiquities in 1910 and planned to dispatch them to Germany (Kuba & Hambolu, 2010). The *Ori Olokun* was unearthed in the grove of the Yoruba deity Olokun and named after the deity as '*Ori Olokun*' (the head of the river god or goddess) (Famoroti, 2010; Platte, 2010b). Although Frobenius claimed to have 'discovered' it, Willett's (1967a) and Platte's account (2010b) proves that the sculptures had been kept in the custody of the Olukun priest before Frobenius' exploration. The head was consistently dug up annually for festivals and buried afterwards (Willett, 1967a: 14). In addition, the priest might have been responsible for concealing them in the earth as a form of cultural or religious practice.

One can consider the claim for discovery within the context of imperial competition from Frobenius account, where he stated that:

...our happiness reached a climax, when we came to Ife and found as we had predicted in 1894, in the depths of the earth those treasures that verified the incalculable age and classical depth of this culture. Jealous and brutal envy (on the part of the British E.P.) snatched the greatest part away from us. But the facts are clear, held safe in our archive in ink lead, paint and pen as well as in photographs. (Frobenius, 1911b)

The imperial competition in the case of Ife was between the German archaeologist Frobenius and the British administrators while the American anthropologist contributed to their removal from their place of origin by ‘smuggling’ them out of Nigeria (Tignor, 1991: 430). The British administration wanted to have full control over its colony; hence the need to restrict Frobenius’ activities within Ife. This led to imperial competition that reflected national prestige displayed in honour of being pioneers in making significant archaeological discoveries (Platte, 2010b). According to Frobenius (1912), two Africans he had made contact with in 1894 in the ports of Hamburg had informed him about Yoruba mythology and their stone monuments. The information had increased his awareness about the importance of Ife. By contrast, the British administrators in Nigeria appeared to be unaware of the Ife sculptures. For this reason, Frobenius accused the British of ignorance. He argued that the English did not find anything of ‘value’ because ‘they ignored all that is important’ (Frobenius, 1912: 1, 76, 80).

Frobenius’ accusations confirmed the existence of the artefacts in Ife before the invasion of both the British and the Germans in the late nineteenth century. Platte (2010b: 79) further argued that Alfred Burdon Ellis’s (soldier and writer) book, *The Yoruba Speaking Peoples of the Slave Coast of West Africa*, published in 1894, might also have influenced Frobenius. Despite Frobenius’ initial awareness, his financial incapability prevented him from going on an expedition to Ife. Three years later, to his disappointment, the British became the first to ‘discover’ Benin in 1897 (Coombes, 1994; Platte, 2010b: 79). Frobenius’ disappointment was confirmed in his words that ‘museum materials’ worth hundreds of thousands of marks would be sold by returning British officers and merchants while he was left without any support for his own expedition to find more genuine and sincerer art than that found in Benin (Frobenius, 1912; I, 31).

Frobenius’ disappointment with his British counterpart Charles Partridge (deputy administrator in Ibadan) could explain why he did not ask the British administration for permission for his expedition. Hence the challenge he received, which resulted in his trial for unacceptable appropriation of antiques (Platte, 2010b). In spite of

discovering the objects in Ife, whatever name they were identified with came to an instantaneous halt in the presence of their colonial 'superiors'. In 1894, Ellis pointed out that the position of Ife, as part of the slave coast of West Africa, further necessitated disregarding the voices of the indigenes and instead regarding the voices of their imperial powers (Ellis, 1894). Colonialism further implied disregarding and silencing the voices of the colonised (Edwards & Tredell, 2008). Consequently, it is obvious that the imperial powers deliberately ignored the cultural implications of the sculptures, particularly the fact that they had been in existence before the colonisers' arrival.

Further to the alleged discovery, Frobenius (1911) claimed he paid £6, along with other gifts, to the priest in exchange for the sculpture. Hays (1959: 290) pointed out that Frobenius was allowed to buy the head for twenty shillings and a bottle of whisky. Twenty shillings today is worth just £1 (The British Money System, 2014). However, there seems to be a misconception in the terms of exchange that resulted in misunderstandings from both parties. Contrary to Frobenius' claim, the priest's understanding of his acceptance of the money was as a gift, as in Yoruba culture this most likely would have been a sign of friendship and a token of appreciation for visiting the shrine (Platte, 2010b). As a result, the priest's acceptance of Frobenius' money might have been for the bronze head to be loaned for documentation purposes. However, Frobenius' intention was clearly to buy the bronze sculpture and return with it to Germany. Language barriers between both parties required the presence of an interpreter, who may have included erroneous interpretations to attain the desired antiquities (Platte, 2010b). Hence, one can regard such discrepancies in the terms of exchange as deceitful, as the priest did not understand that Frobenius wanted outright ownership of the Olokun. Appadurai (1986: 15) suggests the presence of discrepancies within the rules of exchange and value can be understood within 'regime of value'. He argued that the regime of value involves culturally shared assumptions for commodity exchange. Where there is consistency with both the very low and the very high sharing of standards by the parties involved in commodity exchange, there is a shared regime of value (Appadurai, 1986). In the case of the Olokun exchange, however, the priest and Frobenius shared different cultural assumptions that affected the terms of exchange. Their regime of value was

most definitely not shared.

The second ‘discovery’ was by local Ife builders in 1938, when seventeen bronze heads were unearthed during construction work at Wunmonije Compound (Willett, 1967a: 18). According to Willett’s (1967a), account, the locals were responsible for the accidental discovery that resulted in the unintentional damage of some of the sculptures. The damage might well have been because the builders were not searching for antiquities (Willett, 1960) and were therefore using pickaxes instead of archaeological tools in the excavation.

Finally, an organised archaeological investigation carried out in 1957 at Ita Yemoo led to the findings of bronzes that included a corpus of terracotta heads (Willett, 1967b: 33). The exploration was led by Bernard Fagg (British archaeologist) and Frank Willett (a doyen of Ife archaeology). The exploration was organised by the government’s Antiquity Service in Nigeria under British administration. According to Willet (1960), these bronzes are responsible for Ife’s prominence in histories of bronze casting.

The second discovery of 1938 was also not without issues of deception and intrigue. This is because the discovery of the artefacts was not immediately reported to the authorities at the time (the Ooni of Ife and the British District Officer) (Tignor, 1990). Out of the seventeen bronze heads uncovered, only twelve were turned over to the Ooni of Ife and graced his palace until the Ife Museum was constructed in 1950. Two were badly damaged while the remaining three pieces were sold to private buyers without the knowledge of the authorities (Fagg and Underwood, 1949). William Bascom, a young American anthropologist, carrying out fieldwork in Ife in 1937–1938, purchased two of the three most elegant pieces. Each head cost Bascom £7 10s 0d. The remaining one was bought for £5 by an ‘impecunious’ British newspaperman Mr Bates working for the *Nigerian Daily Times*. He eventually sold his bronze to Lord Clark for £100, who in turn donated the head to the British Museum (Tignor, 1990: 425).

Bascom returned to Northwestern University Illinois United States of America with his acquisitions to write up his field notes for his PhD thesis. As a result of his publication in 1944, Bascom became one of the world's leading experts on Yoruba culture and society (William Fagg referred to him as an expert on Yoruba sculpture). Tignor (1990) pointed out that students of Melville Herskovits (whom Bascom was studying under) were expected to bring back artefacts from the field so as to add to an ethnographic collection being assembled at Northwestern University. The university expected each artefact brought back to be 'legitimately acquired'. However, Tignor emphasised that Bascom, without informing the authorities, 'claimed that the Nigerian authorities knew of his intention to assemble representative samples of Yoruba art and culture' (Tignor, 1990: 428).

The exhibition of the heads (at Northwestern University and travelling exhibitions sponsored by the university) received a wide circulation that 'earned Bascom a level of prominence enjoyed by few professional anthropologists', let alone one just starting his career (Tignor, 1990: 428). Although he claimed not to be seeking immediate monetary gain, his professional reputation as a Yoruba scholar was greatly enhanced and could have brought him more than the money. Also considering the fact that Bascom was a close associate of the Ooni and as a result enjoyed the close support of the Ooni of Ife for his research, his act could be considered as a betrayal of trust. Thus, Bascom's idea of taking the artefacts largely worked for his own personal and professional gain, than for the good of the Yoruba culture or the preservation of the artefacts, as he claimed (Bascom, 1939). However, the idea of preserving artefacts that authenticated the Yoruba culture as Tignor (1991: 430) suggests is a 'familiar western plea'. If a quest for preservation was indeed the case, Bascom would have informed and kept the Ooni up-to-date with details of the exhibition.

This betrayal of trust resulted in a series of events that led to Bascom's restrained visit to Nigeria (Tignor, 1990: 431). Due to the widespread success of the exhibition reported in the *Illustrated London News*, there was a swift and angry response from Nigeria led by two 'formidable' British officials: Kenneth Murray (an education officer at the time and subsequently Surveyor of Nigerian Antiquities) and E.H.



Duckworth (organiser of Nigerian exhibitions and later editor of the cultural journal *Nigeria*) (Tignor, 1990: 429). As a result, Bascom was not welcome in Nigeria either as a visitor or a researcher after his departure during the Second World War until the controversy over the Ife heads was resolved with the support of the Ooni of Ife. Tignor pointed out that the unresolved removal of the artefacts by Bascom led to the passing of antiquities bill by the Nigerian government, 'rendering it an offence for anyone to remove any antiquity from Nigeria without securing in writing the consent of the government' (Tignor, 1990: 429).

It was after the war first from 1946 to 1948 and then again in 1950 that attacks were raised at official levels, confronting and demanding Bascom to return the heads (Tignor, 1990: 430). By this time, Murray and Duckworth were favourably positioned and could make their influence felt in high government circles. Although their arguments according to Tignor (1990: 430) were standard 'Third World claims', remarkably Murray and Duckworth were British colonial officials and not Ife indigenes and their claim was most likely substantiated because of their colonial status. Murray and Duckworth argued that the heads were 'a valuable part of Nigeria's artistic and cultural heritage' (Tignor, 1990: 430). They also pointed out that Bascom still smuggled the heads out of Nigeria despite an 'oral understanding' between them and Bascom 'not to take away any Yoruba antiquities' (Tignor, 1990: 430). It is interesting to note that it was the British and not Nigerians that were at the forefront of the fight for the return of the artefacts from the United States of America even when Bascom claimed he purchased the artefacts. Although Murray and Duckworth were justified in their claim, according to Tignor's (1990) account, I would argue that the claim was a way of enforcing a British power over the region as experienced by the German anthropologist Leo Frobenius. This is understandable as Nigeria at the time was under British colonial rule (Edwards & Tredell, 2008).

In addition to their claim, Murray and Duckworth asserted that the artefacts were the Ooni's lawful property because they were part of his ancestral heritage. As a conciliatory gesture, the Ooni of Ife offered to allow Bascom to take castings of the heads and to display the replicas in the United States if he agreed to return the originals (Greenet & Lynch, 1947: Tignor, 1990). The heads acquired by Bascom

were finally returned in 1950 as a form of donation to the museum in Ife where they are exhibited to this date (Tignor, 1990).

### **2.3. The ‘gift’ as a form of exchange for the Ife head**

However, the artefacts also fall into the paradigm of ‘gift’ and because this is both significant and controversial, I want to spend a little time here theorising this exchange. A ‘gift’, according to Godelier (1999), is a voluntary act by an individual or a group, which may or may not be solicited by the person or persons who receive it. This definition is in line with Mauss’ (1950/2008) idea that giving creates obligation. Following Durkheim, Mauss (1950/2008) considered the notion that the theory of the gift is the theory of solidarity. It implies that the gift signifies a kind of support for the culture of the recipient. Godelier (1999) further suggested that in the West more value is placed on unsolicited gifts; however, this might not be the same in other societies. Every society places different values on gifts and the principles of giving are guided by the prevailing culture. Mauss (1950/2008) pointed out that exchanges and contracts in primitive societies, take place in the form of gifts, which in theory, are voluntary. On the other hand, Mauss emphasised that in reality gifts are given and reciprocated obligatorily (having a legal, moral or religious requirement). I would also add that context (cultural or environmental) is a determinant of whether gifts are given voluntarily or obligatorily.

There is a need, therefore, to consider the context when analysing gifts and the situation surrounding giving, as this will allow for a better understanding of what constitutes ‘giving’ within a society. Giving in Ife or within the Yoruba society, for example, is dependent on cultural context. Kinglake (1951) argued that the chiefs or kings owned everything and anyone within the limits of their domain because they were regarded as divine. It is impossible to give what is not in one’s possession, and giving therefore requires permission. Such cultural context might be responsible in determining what is presented as a gift and what can be reciprocated obligatorily or voluntarily. Mauss (1950/2008: 3) further opined that, regardless of the generosity of the gift, ‘the gesture accompanying such transactions is only based on polite fiction, formalism, or social deceit’. These deceptions, however, could serve to camouflage the obligation and self-interest behind the idea of the gift in the first instance.

Godelier (1999) also argued that, irrespective of the social context responsible for the act of giving, the rank of the individuals or group involved need to be taken into consideration. Bearing in mind that their position within the society precedes the gift, it may also determine the obligation to follow the act. Such obligations could prevent the receiver from accepting or coerce them into accepting as well as reciprocating the gift. Godelier's (1999) argument is in line with Mauss' (2008/1950) idea that the act of giving is a concatenate of three obligatory acts: giving, receiving and reciprocating. A gift therefore though culturally determined, can be affected by the social position of the participants.

Frobenius (1911) claimed to have paid £6, including other gifts, to the priest in exchange for the sculpture. It is not clear in what context the gifts were accepted, but for Frobenius it resulted in him gaining access to and possible ownership of the Ori Olokun (Platte, 2010b; Frobenius, 1911). However, there needs to be an acceptable value equal to the value of the desired goods for any form of exchange to take place or be considered. As a result, the position of 'gifts' at the shrine needs to be understood within varying contexts: within the context of the Yoruba<sup>9</sup> culture as regards visits to the shrine; within the context of the positions of the participants; and within the motives behind the gift.

According to Mauss (2006/1950), commerce and gift are two separate kinds of activities. He argued that commerce involves an exchange in exact value, whereas a gift is spontaneous and free from ulterior motives. Mauss therefore thinks that a gift is a 'pure gift' if nothing is expected in return (Douglas, 2006: x). For there to be a 'pure gift', however, there has to be some cultural assumption that constitutes a culturally accepted principle of giving (Appadurai, 1986). Douglas (2006: x) also suggested that 'a gift that does nothing to enhance solidarity is a contradiction'. This implies that the gift given by Frobenius to the priest at the shrine should have been in support of the culture and everything the Ori Olokun represented. This is contrary to Frobenius' desire of taking the artefact away from its original domain to Germany

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<sup>9</sup> The Yoruba culture governs and determines how things are done in Ile-Ife due to the idea that Ife is considered the cradle of the Yoruba people (Johnson, 1921).

(Frobenius, 1911). All Frobenius wanted was to devise a means of convincing the priest to hand over the artefact to him. One can therefore conclude that the gift presented to the priest was not in solidarity with the Ife people and their beliefs as regards the Ori Olokun. Rather, it was about Frobenius attaining his goal on the colonial discovery record.

The 'gift' in the context of Yoruba culture as regards visits to the shrine further connects to works in anthropology and philosophy. According to Mauss (2006/1950), the major transfer of goods has been by cycles of gift exchange since the beginning of human civilisation. He argued that each gift is part of a system of reciprocity that engages the honour of the giver and the recipient, implying that one expects every given gift to be reciprocated either immediately or later. This in turn sets up a perpetual cycle of exchange within and between cultures (Mifsud, 2007). In some cycles, the return is equal to the gift, producing stable systems. On the other hand, an unstable system might result when the return exceeds the gift. Such excess, according to Mifsud (2007), creates a competitive generosity, or an escalating contest for honour, where the person who gives the most valued gift is honoured over the person giving the less valued one. Contrary to Mifsud (2007), Levi-Strauss (1987/1950) argued that a social phenomenon made the entire social domain a combination of forms of exchange, the origins of which were to be sought in the deep-seated unconscious structures of the mind and its capacity for symbolisation. His emphasis is that exchange takes place through the combination of all sorts of substitutes.

Mauss (2006/1950) also suggested that there is a force behind the reciprocity of the gift in archaic societies. In line with Mauss's idea, Godelier (1999: 7) further extended the idea and argued that 'gifts are not simply sharing what one has, but of fighting with what one has.' I will further extend this notion and argue in line with both Mauss (2006/1950) and Godelier (1999) that the 'gift' is not only a means of 'fighting with what one has' but also a means of fighting for what one needs or desires. Due to the simple reason that Frobenius needed to make his name known as an archaeologist who discovered the most important artefacts, he seemed willing to go to any lengths to prove his point that his English counterpart 'ignored what was

important' (Frobenius, 1912: x). I therefore argue that Frobenius' gift to the priest was made not only to possess the Ori Olokun but also to fight his colonial counterpart (the British administration) for what he needed using what he had. This fight is expressed in Frobenius' statement, as he considered himself the first person to 'discover' what he referred to as 'the treasure that verified the incalculable age and classical depth of Yoruba culture' (Frobenius, 1911b).

On the other hand, the acceptance of the gift by the priest fails to pass for an agreement to Frobenius' request to buy the artefact. There was no consent to the terms of exchange, due to the fact that the transaction was not based on the same cultural principles of exchange. Hence, the priest's agreement to loan and not to sell the object to Frobenius is subjective. One can then suggest that the priest, would not give what belonged to the shrine and the community to an individual. As the Ori Olokun was a votive object of importance not only to Ife indigenes but also to other Yoruba people who visited the shrine.

Levi-Strauss (1987) pointed out that exchange exists only through the combination of all sorts of substitutes (kinship, economy and culture). The Yoruba culture's attitude to gifts is in accordance with both Mauss' (2006/1950) and Levi-Strauss' (1987) notions of gifts and the exchange of gifts, in the sense that visitors to the shrine presented gifts in return for the priest to consult the deity (the Ori Olokun) on their behalf. The gift served as a form of access that allowed the visitor to make their request at the shrine. Supporting this notion is the Yoruba adage: '*ti eniyan ba dami si iwaju ki o le tele tutu*' (if a person pours water on the floor then he can tread on easy ground). It implies that there is already a preconceived idea of receiving when you give (reciprocity). The culture also supports the idea that one should not visit the shrine or the priest empty-handed. This practice is akin to the biblical instruction of not attending the tabernacle empty-handed (*Deuteronomy* 16:16).

I therefore agree with Mauss' (2006/1950) argument that 'there is no free gift', because something is received in return for the gift. Consequently, the 'gift' might be of equal or greater value than the reciprocated object. The undefined nature of Frobenius' gift, due to lack of documentation, makes it difficult to suggest that it was

of a lesser value than the artefacts that he claimed to have bought. However, since the artefact is imbued with invaluable cultural worth, according to the Yoruba tradition, no amount of money can be considered to be of equal value as the Ori Olokun.

Owing to the religious value attached to the artefact, it is most unlikely that the priest intended to sell or give it away, irrespective of the colonial administration's position at the time. According to Weiner (1992: 6), some possessions are not easy to give away because they are 'imbued with intrinsic and ineffable identities of their owners'. The item is considered as an inalienable possession kept by its owners from one generation to another within the closed context of a family, group or dynasty. In this case, the Ori Olokun belongs to the Ife people, although kept by the priest in charge of the shrine and as such did not belong to the priest. Weiner (1992) suggested that the loss of such inalienable object diminishes the self and, by extension, the group to which the person belongs. As a result, giving the artefact to Frobenius could have resulted in the loss of right of ownership by the Ife people to the German anthropologist. The British administration however, tried to restore this right to their advantage when they had authority over their colonies. Weiner (1992) further suggested that other issues such as theft, decay, the failure of memory and political exercises are among the irrevocable forces that might separate an inalienable possession from its owner.

Furthermore, Frobenius' (1913) account relates how his team convinced the priest to release the artefacts. Frobenius states that 'Bida [the interpreter] confessed later on that, to save himself a little trouble and to smooth the road of negotiations, he had translated things the other way round in the real "negro" fashion' (Frobenius, 1913: I, 103). Bida was the Togolese prince whom Frobenius met and hired on his previous expedition as a translator and expedition manager. As a African, one might have expected Bida to be truthful to his fellow African, but his loyalty was to Frobenius – maybe for reasons of economic gain. Despite Bida knowledge of the importance of the Ori Olokun to the shrine as well as being familiar with the intricacies of exchange in Yoruba society, he decided to misinterpret because he knew the priest would not easily part with such an inalienable possession. Thus, the use of deceit in

the transaction introduces another way in which an inalienable possession can be lost. Such deceit renders the exchange null and void.

The position of the British colonial administration in Nigeria perhaps compelled the priest to give the Ori Olokun to Frobenius and his team. The priest inability to distinguish between a German from a British, might have also resulted in mistaken Frobenius for a member of the British administration. As a result, a 'master and slave' relationship was at play stirring intimidating fear on the part of the priest (Hays, 1959).

Godelier (1999) argues that the act of giving creates a 'relationship of solidarity' between the giver and the receiver (Godelier, 1999: 12a). As a result a mutual agreement is established whereby the giver shares what he has with the receiver and vice versa. He also mentioned a 'relationship of superiority', where the one who receives the gift is indebted to the giver (Godelier, 1999: 12b). As a result, the act of giving tends to establish a difference between the participants that brings about an inequality of status. Godelier (1999) further emphasised that if there is any form of inequality in existence, such as hierarchy, the gift only expresses and legitimises the existence of that hierarchy. One can thus argue that there is a possibility that the Ori Olokun was given to Frobenius under compulsion based on the supposed superiority and hierarchy of the colonial presence in Nigeria. According to Mauss, the act of the priest might also be seen as an act of politeness towards Frobenius. Hence, the presence of gift within the context exchange annuls the claim for discovery instead the artefact was purchased.

#### **2.4. 'Bronze' as a new identity for the Ife sculptures**

The Ife sculptures' journey to a new identity began from the initial encounter with Frobenius in 1910. Appadurai (1986), Clifford (1988) and Smith (1989) have argued that artefacts have the possibility and tendency to change their status as they travel through history. This implies that each point of their journey from their original domain can bring about a new function and a new identity. This identity can be dependent on the ideas and influences of the new owner. For instance, Frobenius argued that the Ori Olokun was perhaps an artefact from the lost city of Atlantis

(Frobenius, 1913). Perhaps the fact that Africa did not have a Bronze Age influenced his judgement. As we will see, the ‘bronze’ status of the sculptures has been significant in different ways and at different times.

In addition, Hunt (1980) pointed out that the advancement of metallurgy (including the lost-wax technique of production) across a wide area brought about a rise in the importance of goldsmiths and coppersmiths in the latter half of the third millennium BCE. Consequently, local rulers and aristocrats increasingly patronised goldsmiths and coppersmiths. This act might have extended to Ife through established trade routes. As a result, the production of the bronzes might have been introduced by an outsider or by Ife locals trained by outsiders. Further doubts about the availability of copper in Ife raised concerns about the provenance of the artefacts, suggesting that they must have arrived in Ife through trade or other external sources rather than being made on site (Willett, 1967a). These claims further justify the presence of external influences in the production of the bronzes. Perhaps Europeans doubted that the bronzes were genuinely African objects because most African artworks from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were either made of wood or from other perishable materials (Vogel, 1981). However, the sculptures were made by a technique that was not thought to be known in Africa at the time (Hunt, 1980; Schildkrout, 2010). Hence, uncertainties about the sculpture that Frobenius found as being an African object at the point of its discovery possibly affected the acceptance of its original name. As a result, Frobenius referred to the sculpture as being from the ‘lost Atlantis’, with a Greek connotation, rejecting the original name ‘Ori Olokun’, and thus inserting it into Western classical mythology (Frobenius, 1911).

Owing to the chicanery of a member of Frobenius’ team, as we have seen, the priest handed the sculpture to Frobenius. Shortly after, the sculpture assumed a new role as a piece of evidence in court, as opposed to its original position as a votive object. The trial was held because the British colonial administrator considered Frobenius’ acts of acquiring antique objects as an ‘unacceptable appropriation of antiquities’ (Platte, 2010b: 75). The accusation resulted in a trial that lasted for five days, from 17 to 22 December 1910. During the trial, the Ori Olokun stood as a piece of evidence to prove Frobenius’ unauthorised acquisition of the object from Ife. It was



during this period of cataclysm that the sculpture attained an additional identity as a 'counterfeit'. As a result, doubt was thrown on the authenticity of Ori Olokun. Leon Underwood's expressed and recorded concerns about the originality of the Olokun head in his diary on the 18/8/1945 and the scrutiny revealed that the commended artwork was a copy of a missing original. Fagg along with Underwood also opined that the Ori Olokun that is displayed in exhibitions of Ife is a counterfeit (Underwood and Fagg, 1949). Their claim is supported by Frobenius' own account that he 'purchased the bronze head for six Pounds and promised to return to them (the Ife priest) a galvanic that is a precise copy while the people wanted the original returned, selling us alone the right to copy it' (Frobenius, 1911: c).

The intention to produce a copy, as stated by Frobenius, suggests that a possible copy was made in 1910 shortly after the discovery. On the contrary, Platte (2010b) suggested that Frobenius' intention to return the copy from Germany proves that the Ori Olokun was not reproduced within Nigeria, hence, the idea that he reproduced a counterfeit and kept the original himself might be unfounded. However, this claim of a possible copy made by Underwood and Fagg (1949) might also be considered as erroneous and a scheme of the West to strip the object of its magnificence. However tests conducted in 1948, at the British Museum, proved that the technique and the material constituents of the Ori Olokun is of a later period unlike the rest of the bronze collection (Willett, 1967a). Nevertheless, Platte (2010b) pointed out that it would be difficult to reproduce a copy using the lost-wax technique within a short period. The likely circulation of a copy in place of the original thus raises question about the whereabouts of the original. Walter Benjamin also critiques such challenges associated with distinguishing copies from original in his book titled '*The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction*'. Therein, he argued that reproduction could place a 'copy of the original in situations beyond the reach of the original itself' (Benjamin, 2008: 6). As a result, there is every tendency for the copy taking the place of the original unbeknown to museum audience.

Interestingly, Platte (2010b: 74) further argued that it was only after the allegations that the Ori Olokun head is a copy and not the original that the sculpture was

considered as ‘African masterpiece’. A consideration that substantiates the association of ‘superiority’ to Western objects and Western art over that of ‘the other’. If the sculpture was original, perhaps the West might lay claim to it. Associating Ife with a counterfeit is indicative of how the West downplayed or ignored any other form of civilisation. Coombes writes that even when there is evidence of ‘civilisation’ as defined by the West, it is always downplayed or unacknowledged, thus qualifying Africa as one of several ‘degenerative societies’ (Coombes, 1994: 11). An association of Africa with degradation is also evident in the change in Frobenius’ stance when he first came into contact with the Ori Olukun bronze. At first he appreciated the sculpture:

Before us stood a head of marvellous beauty wonderfully cast in antique bronze, true to the life, incrustated with a patina of glorious dark green. This was in very deed, the Olokun, Atlantic Africa Poseidon. (Frobenius, 1911)

Frobenius’ words demonstrate how initially he did refer to the head as bronze and acknowledged its original name as Olokun. Though Frobenius was ecstatic over the magnificence of Africa’s past and its ancient religion as represented in the artefacts Hays argued that he had nothing but contempt for the living members of the race (Hays 1959: 286). Hays pointed out that his not only hated the semi-civilized but referred to them as ‘trouser niggers’ and further blamed the British missionaries for the soft treatment of the natives. In same line, Soyinka pointed out that Frobenius ‘disregarded the very people who had created the artefact that lifted him to the realms of universal excellence’ (Soyinka, 1986).

Frobenius claimed that he was:

Profoundly stirred, I stood for many minutes before the remnant of the erstwhile Lord and Ruler of the Empire of Atlantis. My companions were no less astounded. As though we have agreed to do so we held our peace. Then I looked around and saw – the blacks – the circle of the sons of the venerable priest, his Holiness the Oni’s friends, and his intelligent

officials. I was moved to silent melancholy at the thought that this assembly of degenerate and feeble-minded posterity should be the legitimate guardians of so much loveliness. (Frobenius, 1911)

Frobenius' statement clearly demonstrates the immediate idea of the 'superiority' of the West over Africa. The Nigerian renowned writer Wole Soyinka clearly has foregrounded how Frobenius' statement implies a direct invitation to a free-for-all race for dispossession, justified on the grounds of the unworthiness of the keepers. As a result of this statement, the writer Soyinka, in his Nobel lecture in 1986, criticised Frobenius' as 'schizophrenic' due to his oscillating descriptions of the *Ori Olokun* bronze head and the keepers (Soyinka, 1986). After considering the sculpture from Ife a masterpiece, Frobenius denigrates the very people whose technical skills and handiwork has brought him fame. Associating Ife with a forgery is another form of 'degradation'. Europe expects Ife, as a degraded society, to lack the necessary civilisation that could result in the production of an artwork that could be regarded as a masterpiece. This was an often-used approach by Europe to undermine the significant evidence of the flourishing ancient societies in Africa (Coombes, 1994).

The idea of civilisation is based on Western accounts and definitions and not considered within African contexts and standards. Africa in such a paradigm is positioned in a place where there is 'no culture, no civilisation, and no long historical past' (Fanon, 2008(1952): 21). Consequently, considering civilisation from an African context might lead to a better understanding of the objects and the people who made them. But paying attention to African ideas of civilisation would clearly contravene or jeopardise the authority of colonial powers. Rev Brian Kingslake in his 1951 article titled '*The art of the Yoruba*' opined that no modern African could begin to produce works of art like the unearthed Ife bronzes. He argued that though bronze castings were still in production in Benin, they were only copies of old models because the sculptors had lost their creative genius. It is most likely that the loss of such distinct creativity is what the British classified as 'degradation'. Implying that African art could only be distinctive if it was in the past.

The sculpture assumed a new identity as a 'bronze' sculpture during the trial as well as when Frobenius first set eyes on it, suggesting that the term 'bronze' came from

Europeans. Willett also highlighted the European basis for the term 'bronze' for any artistic metal castings, (Willett 1967a: 55). The term 'bronze', however, has been used since the 1897 Benin punitive expedition (Coombes, 1994). Led by the British administration, this expedition resulted in the looting of bronzes and other valuable ornaments from Benin. Recognising the similarity of Ife artworks with those from Benin might have led to the categorisation and identification of Ife collections as 'bronze castings' by the British administration. Despite having individualised identity in terms of sizes, events surrounding their production, and who commissioned them, the sculptures have frequently been given a unified identity as 'Ife bronze heads' to the present day.

## **2.5. The consequences of colonial rule on the Ife bronzes**

Colonial rule in Africa led to an influx of Westerners to Nigeria and eventually, the presence of these Westerners led to events that directly or indirectly affected the Ife bronzes. Platte (2010a: 42), pointed out that Frobenius' publications, and the plaster copies that ended up in African collections throughout the world, may have contributed to the 'partial fame' of the Ife sculptures. Mirzoeff (1998: 282) has pointed out that colonialism centred on 'commerce, Christianity and civilisation'. The role of the colonial powers, despite their mission to 'civilise' the 'other', also had consequences in the way the colonies perceived themselves. One of these consequences, as mentioned earlier, is said to be 'visual colonialism', which saw to the production of maps, photographs and paintings and extended to collections of indigenous art and crafts. These objects were then assembled in vast collections to explain and enforce, directly or indirectly, the colonial order. Thus, the colonial plunders served as a platform for how non-Western colonies were identified. The collections to which Ife bronzes belong were a means of seeing the people who originally made and owned the objects. Despite the fact that the bronzes are traditional objects made for the Ife monarchy and as a result were only seen when used during festivals, they became commercialised through commoditisation as discussed in the previous chapter (as a result they became popular due to various exhibitions held outside Nigeria).

## **2.6. Commoditising the Ife bronzes**

The Ife bronzes can be considered as commodities because they have been bought and sold at different times. Appadurai argues that objects considered as commodities are objects that are bought and sold and for such objects to be sold or desired, they are also required to have some form of value (Appadurai, 1986). This value can be traditional, economical or political, and ascribed either by the people who created the object or by the people acquiring it – the attribution of value is a two-way transaction involving both the owner and the person who desires the object. Simmel (1978) argued that the culture and environment of a region or society could also help determine the value of an object where value is not inherent in an object but relies on the judgement of the subject. The subject does not exist independently but belongs to and interacts within a society bounded by culture. Thus, culture determines a generally accepted value for an object. This might also be the case for the Ife bronzes subsequently to their arrival in the West, since their original production was not for economic exchange but traditional and political purposes. Appadurai argues that ‘value is embodied in commodities that are exchanged’ (Appadurai, 1986: 3). Kopytoff (1986), in agreement with Appadurai, concludes that a commodity is a thing that has value and is exchanged in a discrete transaction for an equivalent value. As a result, the Ife bronzes can be described as objects that carry some form of value.

The Ife bronzes, in line with Simmel (1978), Appadurai (1986) and Kopytoff (1986), can be considered as embodied with value that is dependent on culture and ownership. Before considering the objects as sacred objects, one can first consider them as ‘kingly things’ in line with Gluckman (1943/1983). Since it is suggested they played a role in a royal cult, it is possible that the royals commissioned the bronzes by employing the services of coppersmiths from outside Ife (Hunt, 1980). In addition, the royal symbols on some of the bronze sculptures like the heads and the full bronze figure confirm that they belong to monarchs (Willett, 1967a; Adepegba, 1991). These symbols went as far as identifying the presence of two ruling dynasties of Ife: the bronzes with striations represent one dynasty, while those without striations represent the second dynasty (Adepegba, 1991). Appadurai (1986/2012: 12), analysing Gluckman’s idea, suggested that the main function of royal objects is

to serve as a sign of royal domination or sovereignty. In these terms, the Ife bronzes are cultural objects that carry huge historical and mythological significance (for Yoruba people) and were not originally produced as objects of economic exchange. In line with Appadurai's analysis, the Ife bronzes display the rank and status exclusively reserved for the monarchs. Conceivably, the presence of three crowned heads among the bronzes might be to honour the ruling king, which could be the original reason for their creation. Furthermore, being 'kingly things' accounts for the location where seventeen of the artefacts were unearthed.

Willett (1967a) concurred that the bronzes resulted from the desire to commemorate and glorify divine kings and their courtiers. In addition, Kopitoff (1987) argued that 'kingly things' are precluded from being commoditised. Since the objects are intertwined with serving the people, their prohibitions are upheld culturally and collectively. In the case of the Ife bronzes, the people of Ife perceive them as votive objects used to please their gods during festivals at the groves (Hunt, 1980). Hence, their interment might be a way of excluding them from daily transactions in order to retain their significance.

The bronzes were objects of cultural significance, but the arrival of Frobenius in 1910 brought about the commoditisation of these formally precluded objects. This is because during his encounter with the Ori Olokun, Frobenius placed monetary value to demonstrate his desire for the artefact when he offered to buy the sculpture. In the same line, Bascom in 1938 also placed monetary value on the two best pieces from the 1938 discovery (Tignor, 1990). Consequently, the presence of money in both instances, if analysed within Appadurai (1987)'s theory, commoditised the objects as that which the 'value can be exchanged for money'.

Another instance of commoditisation occurred in 1939, when the British Museum acquired one of the crowned heads. Records show that this object had been sold and resold before being finally handed to the National Art Council Fund (Platte, 2010b). Bascom had purchased the other two crowned heads. One can therefore state that the presence of Westerners in Ife resulted in the commoditisation of Ife's cultural artefacts. Consequently, these commoditisation activities orchestrated their arrival in

Western museums, where they continued their journey. They have also been involved in museums as part of paid exhibitions where visitors pay a fee to view them. As a result, the bronzes' 'traditional' and/or 'cultural' values have become desired commodities in the twenty-first century (I will explain this in more detail in chapter three).

## **2.7. Summary and conclusion**

The social life of the Ife bronzes denotes their position in different contexts. These contexts have informed how their identities and meanings have evolved over time. The most interesting of all is that foreign citizens and not Ife indigenes themselves wrote most of the historical accounts of Ife bronzes. As a result, some of their accounts are staged through Western ideologies of intellectualism and supremacy. However, museums have based their texts and interpretations on the account of these early European explorers. It is important to stress that the bronze heads were in existence long before the Europeans came to know about them. Therefore, they were not 'discovered'; rather, they were acknowledged and opened to the rest of the world through degraded modes of representation.

The varying forms of exchange that transpired between Frobenius and the priest as well as purchases made by Bascom and the British Museum further constitute to the act of degradation. By offering money in exchange for an object that serves and represent a community did not only reduced the object from a votive to an everyday object, but also depicts how the west disregarded the traditional heritage of 'the other'. Placing a monetary value on an object whose worth is much more than the money can offer. In light of changing context and meaning through their journey, it is imperative to revise, rewrite and represent the bronzes using new methods of presentation that will be inclusive of past events, implications and values. The next chapter discusses how the Ife bronzes have been exhibited within the western and in particular the British Museum.

## **Chapter 3: The Ife ‘bronze’ in the western museum**

### **Introduction**

This chapter examines the social life of the Ife bronzes once brought into the western museum. In doing so, it examines the discourses surrounding museums and their representation of ‘other’ cultures. It analyses this issue initially on summarising and analysing key westerners in these areas. Focusing on how the Ife bronzes have been represented in the British Museum since their discovery in 1938, it therefore traces this ideological practice through the colonial period to the moment when idea of the ‘new museology’ brought about a need for the representation of the bronzes to portray post-colonial ideologies. This chapter argues that, despite itself, the museum is often an institution that continues to foster western imperial ideas in a post-colonial era, and discusses how the museum’s idea of post-colonial representation might sometimes be considered as ‘problematic’ because it can still carry colonial connotations. The chapter further builds an argument emphasising the need for museums to rethink their position rather than remaining the authoritative imposer of what they consider as facts about other cultures. This is based on the premise that it is not possible to fully represent and interpret a culture without drawing on the knowledge from one’s ‘own’ culture (Vogel, 1991). Hence the possibilities of allowing the ‘other’ to tell their own story might correct the colonial ideas being disseminated to portray post-colonial paradigms. For post-colonial practice to be more fully grounded in new museology, there is a need for spaces that allow for a multiplicity of voices, where varying perspectives resonate without placing one culture as superior over another. The birth of new museology is therefore analysed as a potential move towards democratising the artefacts that represent ‘other’ cultures through the voices of the people they represent. To begin with, however, let us consider the context of the western museum, which the bronzes first entered.

### **3.1. Evolution of the museum**

In 1849, James Buckingham, a prominent English social reformer, suggested that the application of practical remedies through the provision of public spaces such as museums would help bring about ‘sanity’ and ‘transformation of the inner man’ that



would be evident on the exterior. For this reason he argued that high culture could be used as a resource to regulate the field of social behaviour. Buckingham further suggested that individuals would be endowed with the means for self-monitoring and self-regulation through the combination of culture and a modern form of liberal government (Buckingham, 1849). By 1888, Thomas Greenwood, a reformer and campaigner for museums and libraries, suggested that museums and free libraries were as important as any other amenities to the development of the mental and moral health of citizens. By 1895, museum administrator George Brown Goode referred to museums as ‘passionless reformers’ because they served as a tool for reformation but not necessarily for leisure (Goode, 1895: 17). Thus museums were established as a means by which the powerful elite exhibited their desire to control the behaviour of ‘lower’ citizens and to provide ‘rational recreations’.

This tendency has been capaciously analysed by Tony Bennett (1995) who emphasised how museums in the early late nineteenth century were created for the purpose of civilising the population. This population mainly involved the working-class citizens who the government thought needed some form of transformation. Therefore, the very formation of museums can be argued as a response to the idea that culture is a useful tool in governing. Bennett (1995: 19), taking up Foucault’s ideas, therefore argued that culture was used as a ‘vehicle for the exercise of a new form of power.’

Foucault (1986), also, described the idea of museums and libraries as ‘heterotopia’ – places in which ‘all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and invented’ (Foucault, 1986: 24). He argued that both museums and libraries were ‘heterotopias of indefinitely accumulating time’ that were peculiar to nineteenth-century Western culture. Foucault further suggested that:

...the idea of accumulating everything, of establishing a sort of general archives, the will to enclose in one place all times, all forms, all tastes, the ideas of constituting a place of all times, all epochs, all forms, all taste, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is in itself outside to time and inaccessible to its ravages, the project of organising in this a

sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place, this whole idea belongs to our modernity. (Foucault, 1986: 26)

Whilst drawing on this paradigms, Bennett (1995: 2), also followed Foucault to point out that 'science' should be credited for museum development in the nineteenth century; it 'steered museums from chaos to order' and, due to the advances, science had made, museums moved 'from error to truth'. Bennett (1995) therefore takes up David Murray's idea that 'specialisation and classification' are the distinguishing features of modern museums (D. Murray, 1904: 231). For Bennett (1995), such classification and specialisation encouraged the birth of the various types of specialist museum that enabled objects to be arranged in such a way that encourages 'an understandable view of the world'. However, as David Murray in 1904 pointed out, the pre-modern museum was more concerned with creating surprise or provoking wonder. Therefore, the genealogy of the modern public museum as described by Bennett (1995) shows how its formation was politically focused. Bennett's notion of museum genealogy therefore has a different emphasis from Hooper-Greenhill's (1988) idea of a museum genealogy that focuses on classification and display as well as different emphasis in subject positions.

Clay (1994) argued that museums have historically cultivated the image of documenting and exhibiting artefacts and artworks that exemplify 'the best in human endeavour'. The initial act of establishing museums involved taking artefacts from their current context of ownership and inserting them into a new environment (Smith, 1989). The environment therefore provides the artefacts with different meanings than those ascribed when they were privately owned. Extending this observation, Coombes views the museum as an institution that has the ability of 'dramatizing' contradictory emotions from the way in which they try to combine objects of different contexts together to give a new interpretation (Coombes, 1994: 1). She feels this idea enacts a challenge to those cultural values mythologised and therefore neutralised as part of a shared heritage, and thus points out the ways museums have trivialised some aspects of the cultures they represent through the way they present artefacts in their collections.

The western museum has therefore also often been seen as one of the places that illustrate 'man at his noblest', by exhibiting artefacts that are considered to be outstanding or extraordinary when compared to the technology and civilisation of a people at a particular period (Malraux, 1967: 10). The western museum was primarily a vista: of glass boxes that were used to protect objects from damage and act as a barrier between object and visitor, resulting in a limited interaction (Alexander & Alexander, 2007). This limited interaction between visitor and object led to a reduced engagement in contrast to contemporary interactions. This idea was contested by Malraux in 1965 who suggested the museum was a place for 'learning and teaching and an absurd concert in which contradictory themes are mingled and confused in an endless succession' (Malraux, 1967: 10).

### **3.2. The emergence of the new museology**

According to Vogel (1991), and Vergo (1989) the new museology primarily came about due to dissatisfaction with the old museology. The old museology was mainly about museum methods and museum administration, whereas the new museology is concerned with critically interrogating the purpose of the museum (Vogel, 1991). As seen, the new museology, was also often an attempt to transform museums from being elitist and socially divisive institutions to being places of social inclusion that foster social change (Duncan & Wallach, 1980; Pearson, 1982: 34; Hooper-Greenhill, 1988: 224; Bennett, 1988b; Merriman, 1989: 165). Ross argued that museums have become more accessible, where the old 'atmosphere of exclusiveness and intellectual asceticism has largely given way to a more democratic climate' (Ross, 2004: 86).

The new museology discussed how museums continue to exist as important institutions, there is a need for them to rid themselves of their discriminatory image and attitudes, and abandon monolithic visions of history. In the same line of reasoning, Lawley (1992) argued that the new museology is about redefining the purpose of museums in terms of deciding how to serve their communities, including the people being represented. He suggested that

'museums must come to terms with a plurality of pasts that are

sometimes in conflict with one another. As one of the 'principal means by which people gain access to their history, museums must dismantle the cultural barriers that impeded widespread participation in their activities' They must become more community-focused, and museum workers must look to the people they serve, rather than to their peers, for approval (Lawley, 1992: 38).

The methods involved in museums can also be interpreted in line with Bauman's idea of 'intellectuals' (Bauman, 1987: 2). Museums often assume the role of the intellectual constituting a collective political, moral and aesthetic authority of man's knowledge. This collective idea is often based on the decision and ideas of both the political and the economic body responsible for funding the museum services. However, the collective idea of intellectuals is meant to be a widely open invitation towards achieving a global societal import, to which anyone considered as an intellectual can contribute. It is important to note that these collective ideas seem to be selective, as it was limited to the Western elite. Hence it is not surprising that 'the intellectuals', according to Bauman (1987: 2), 'draws its meaning from the collective memory of the Enlightenment era' – an era considered to resonate in museums till date.

In recent times, however, there has been a shift in the authority of so-called 'intellectuals' due to the shift in museum priorities. This shift in priorities brought about the need for changes in the presentation of ethnocentric, aristocratic or 'legislated' accounts of a region's history and culture that includes grand narratives of class, nation and empire that, until now, have prevailed in the public museum since its eighteenth-century origins (Ross, 2004: 90). Bauman (1987: 5) pointed out that the knowledge produced by intellectuals is not bound by 'localised communal tradition'. The intellectuals validate knowledge about a culture as they see fit, which earns them an extraterritorial status. Irrespective of whether such knowledge is an unjustified notion about the culture being presented, it gets enacted.

Bauman's (1987) idea of 'the intellectuals' seems to have been the underlying factor that guided museum practices in the past. Now, with power apparently moving away from the premise of the elite few to the masses, there has been a review of museum practices. Such changes need to take into consideration the changed awareness of

diverse audiences and publics, a commitment to facilitating wider access and dismantling cultural barriers that can foster the mediation of social difference. With the new museology, museums are not regarded as the sole authority of knowledge but rather take on an interpretive role (Bauman, 1987). In relation to Bauman's idea that museums are moving from the role of knowledge legislator to an interpretive role, I argue that, rather than taking on an interpretive role, new museology is about museums shifting from an authoritative role to that of being facilitators of knowledge. My argument is based on Vogel (1991) and Vergo (1989)'s ideas that a society and prevailing culture has an effect on how artefacts are perceived and framed within museums.

For the new museology to be more fully realised, the potential to interpret artefacts and cultures will need to draw on the knowledge of the people they represent, irrespective of whether they are considered as being from a non-intellectual part of society. Bauman (1987: 4) argued that 'order cannot precede practices and as a result cannot serve as an outside measure of their validity'. He further suggested that only models of order make sense in terms of practices, which validates the model. One can therefore deduce from Bauman (1987) that the method of classification to bring a form of order to collections within museums needs to be validated within the culture that produced the objects. Bauman also emphasised that such validation criteria has to be within a tradition that is upheld by the habits and beliefs of what he called 'community of meaning' and is in need of no other test of legitimacy (Bauman, 1987: 4). Therefore, new museology can be said to be the realisation of the need to retell wider stories that is inclusive of diverse 'community and meaning' an ideology also validated by wider social moves towards a 'multicultural' agenda (Lavine and Karp, 1991:1).

We also need to consider how the increasingly pervasive information society fundamentally alters museum's everyday practice of displaying material objects. Technology such as the Internet and the availability of personal computers has encouraged freedom of expression; people can apparently project their thoughts and ideas for whoever is interested (Giaccandi, 2012; Kalay, 2008). This allows search engines to become tools for both entertainment and education. Engagement is

fostered through the web as well as encouraging the faster exchange of ideas across locations. The adoption of these technologies into museums often makes them appear as a new entity, that requires new spaces, new collections and a new audience. However, massively controversial, another form which I am concerned with here is how a museum collections can be digitised. 'Digitisation' has in many ways become the new watchword for access, engagement and preservation of museum collections, thus opening up the museum's framing of artefacts to allow them to be viewed from multiple perspectives (Parry 2007; Knell, 2003: 133).

Digitisation, as discussed earlier (in-depth in chapter four), involves the conversion of material to digital formats that can be transferred and viewed with the use of a computer. Many museums today are witnessing a growing digital appreciation as their primary aim shifts from servicing collections of material heritage to 'serving society' by providing and enriching visitors with the information to develop their knowledge (MacDonald & Alsford, 2010: 72). I will argue below that, although there has been a tremendous shift in the way museums operates due to the emergence of what we might term 'the new digital museology' the transformation is by no means complete. Before this, though, we need to examine the role of the museum collections

### **3.3. Museum collections**

Vergo (1989) argued that museum collections have dual functions: as places of study and as places of display. As a place of study, the collections were used to inform the museum visitor and provide an understanding about 'man' and the world. As a place of display, museum collections assume the function of display of wealth, power or privilege. Vergo (1989) argued that both functions of the museum collection were inherited as a justification and as a dilemma by the earliest public museums. He points out that museums are not only tasked with displaying their collections to the curious but also with engaging in the education of the public. This notion of mass education is still very much evident today and indeed has renewed focus as museums try to provide access to the information they hold about their collections.

Prown (1993) argued that museum collections provide a way in which the past can

be directly re-experienced with our senses and thus provide a way of getting at historical beliefs. This is due to the notion that, apart from having artistic and historical significance, objects have the ability to spark conversation (Simon, 2010). Pearce (1992: 47) also commented that, ‘objects hang before the eyes of the imagination, continuously re-presenting ourselves to ourselves, and telling the stories of our lives in ways which would be otherwise impossible [...] Our idea of identity resides more in objects than in ourselves’. Drawing on material culture, museum education and history of education theories, we can argue that objects, although apparently dumb, can be involved in a dialogue with us, when placed within open interpretative contexts. Pearce’s idea highlights the possibility of museum collections playing varying roles including providing new insights into history and new interpretations. However, these new roles will depend on how visitors are encouraged to use their imaginations, thereby inspiring the democratisation of museum collections, where collections are allowed to ‘speak for themselves’.

Simon further argued that the capacity to spark dialogue is based on the idea that both the artefact and the experience that they enact all constitute what is termed a ‘social object’ (Simon, 2010: 127). Social objects, according to Simon (2010: 128), are described as ‘the engines of socially networked experiences, the content around which conversation happens’. Here social objects either have one or more of the four qualities of personal, active, proactive (‘provocative’ in box below) or relational (‘relational’ in box below fig. 3.1). The emphasis is placed on the notion that objects have a social life that is acquired and accumulated based on their position and utilisation within a specific society (Appadurai, 1986: 19; Miller, 1994). As a result they have the capacity to inform us about the past.

It is important to note, however, that objects for both Pearce (1992) and Simon (2010) tend to focus more on physical items. I would emphasise how museum collections today include digitised objects because they are part of the artefacts that cultural institutions collect, preserve and present. Such objects also lend themselves to being used in educational programmes and are often designed to ‘create experience’ (Simon 2010). Therefore, digitised objects can also be considered as social objects that are able to spark conversations that are likely to enact new

interpretations and understanding.

**Nina Simon's four types of social objects**

**Personal:** Objects to which people have a personal connection, that generates an immediate story to tell.

**Active:** Objects that directly and physically insert themselves into the space between strangers, for example, the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace.

**Provocative:** An object that is a spectacle in its own right.

**Relational:** Objects that explicitly invite interpersonal use by requiring several people to use them at once, for example telephones or board games.

**Figure 3.1: Qualities of social objects by Simon (2010: 130–2)**

According to Prown (1982), museum collections have the ability to serve as a representative source of information. Therefore, one might argue that the Ife bronzes represent one of the ways the Yoruba people present their material world, and that such artefacts provide different and perhaps more 'information' than words. Prown (1996) argued that the deep structural meanings of such artefacts can be 'sprung loose' by moving beyond cataloguing them as historical facts to analysing them as artistic fictions. As I explore in the next chapter, such 'artistic fiction' can and have been translated through the use of digital technology to provide information about artefacts to the public in a way that often creates new discussions, new experiences and possibly new meanings.



### **3.4. Museums and meaning-making**

The issue of the relationship between museums and their audience has been frequently discussed as a challenge in recent times (Simon, 2010). Such challenges are due to various reasons, ranging from marketing - oriented desires for visitor engagement to a new museological style investment in how meanings are constructed through the artefacts displayed. Artefacts have a complex presence in museums that is subject to multiple interpretations and meanings. Furthermore, individual objects possess a complex range of meanings and acquire greater complexity when grouped with other objects. However, in the right circumstances, the objects are able to speak for themselves, as well as generating debate among those who encounter them (Black, 1999). Thus, museums have to keep in consideration their audience type as well as their expectations as regards meaning-making. Black (1999) has highlighted how there is an on-going conflict in museums concerning history. He pointed out that museums are struggling to negotiate between the desire to present a single-voice, linear narrative of the past and an ambition to act as a place of pluralism and inclusion that recognises the contribution made by everyone in society. Smith (1989) also suggested that the most insistent problems faced by museums is the notion that artefacts can and should be dissociated from their original context of meaning. As a result, museums regard themselves as having 'superior authority' (Smith, 1989: 9).

Most contemporary public museum's initial responsibility remains preserving the safety of artefacts within a 'neutral' environment where the artefacts are transferred from the world of private ownership to that of the public realm. In these terms, it is not the responsibility of the museum to change the meaning of the artefacts but to make known all available information about the artefact, whilst considering that museum meanings are to be interwoven into the rich diversity that each visitor brings to the objects (Black, 1999). Black (1999) further pointed out that museum objects provoke responses in visitors by way of the feelings, thoughts, fantasies and memories that they enact in a human mind. Hence, the problem associated with meaning-making in museums can be further broken down to an epistemology of how artefacts are perceived and represented by museum curators and how they are perceived and understood by museum visitors (Smith, 1991). Responses from both

museum visitors and museum staff could also be considered as 'content' and as a two-way process that contextualises objects and provokes new thoughts in contemporary times (Nakou, 2005: 2).

Smith (1991) foregrounds the idea that, due to the fluidity and complexity of the activity of meaning-making, there is no straightforward definition of the dynamic of how this process works in relation to artefacts. This problem combined with populist democratic and marketing agendas has created the imperative for museums to seek ways in which they can engage their visitors more closely. Meaning in museums is further constructed in relation to the collections that the museum holds (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). The meaning of the collection is not solely dependent on the systems of judgement of values peculiar to the institution itself but is deeply rooted in the upbringing, prejudices and education of the curators (Vergo, 1989). As Vogel (1981) argued, every artefact displayed in a museum exhibition involves placing a certain construction upon the history surrounding the object. Beyond the information panels, there is a subtext comprising innumerable diverse and often contradictory strands woven from the wishes and ambitions of the people involved in putting on the exhibition.

These contradictory strands are imprints that are influenced by the museum director, curator, designer, sponsor and scholar, and by the society and the political, social or educational system that nurtured them (Vogel, 1981). This means, as Smith (1989) highlights, that one of the key features of museums is that the meanings attributed to the artefacts are not arbitrary but rather formed and sustained by the prevailing culture of a society. The influence of the society where an artefact is exhibited goes a long way to influencing the meaning ascribed to that artefact. Socio-cultural ideas are thus disseminated through the museum.

Meanings can also be constructed depending on the relationship an individual might have with an object. For example, someone identifying as from the Yoruba ethnic group would probably have a particular relationship with the artefacts from Ile-Ife due to beliefs that the Yoruba people hailed from Ile-Ife. Ile-Ife to Yorubas, represents a collective identity and the artefacts are the only piece of concrete

material evidence existing to substantiate that connection. However just like every other visitor, they bring a multiplicity of different attitudes, expectations and experiences to the reading of an artefact. This implies the specificity of knowledge (Smith, 1989). For example, Yorubas who have adopted either Islam or Christianity, and been taught to view the artefacts through the lens of idolisation, are likely to bring new meaning to the fore.

Another issue affecting meaning-making in the museum is the methods curators have used to represent history. Some curators have a personal approach of representing historical and aesthetic significance (Vogel, 1991). Such representation has a tendency to affect how visitors perceive and understand the text that describes the artefact and how they perceive the museum too. For example, some of the explanation provided might not be explicit about all that the artefact stands for. The visitor might consider the curator's story as being influenced by imposing authority – for example, where the reasons that led to the artefact's removal from its 'natural environment' are not mentioned. This allows the visitor to imagine or fantasise about what could be the 'true' story. As a result, if they had an experience of the artefact before viewing it at the museum, this knowledge will be of higher appreciation than that put forward by the museum.

Furthermore, artefacts do not transmit meaning to the museum audience by existing in a space of their own, but are prone to several constructions of meaning (Smith, 1989). The construction of meaning is dependent on many other aspects of representation such as the design, the context of other objects within the exhibition, the visual and historical representation and the environment as a whole. This confirms that the meaning ascribed to artefacts can change at any given time depending on the angle from which it is viewed. These points of view are not only affected by the positions of the institutions in the transformation of their significance, but also from day-to-day observations as different people view them and subject them to their own interpretation. Therefore, museums need to take into consideration the fact that their visitors are not passive recipients; the objects have the ability to provoke imagination and allow the visitor to add new content to their existing knowledge and understanding (Black, 1999). As a result, visitors are able to

construct their own meanings that assist towards the democratisation of the object, as well as the democratisation of meaning-making.

Democratisation of objects, however, can only be attained if the various information and context surrounding the objects are made readily accessible. Such information is often embedded within the system of knowledge that can only be evaluated from within and not outside the respective traditions to which the objects belong (Bauman, 1987). One can then suggest that the relationship between an individual and an object is based on the knowledge possessed about the object. As we have discussed, such knowledge depends on the context in which the artefacts are being viewed, which assists in the construction of meaning different from that which the museum displays. This idea is based on the assumption that looking at an object is a source of knowledge not just about itself but about larger processes (Jordanova, 1989: 3). One can argue that Western culture today dominates how the traditional culture of the Yoruba people, as represented by the Ife bronzes, is interpreted from the standpoint of colonisation and imperialism.

In recent times, in the era of ‘new museology’ the need for museums to move away from their ideals of rigid taxonomy and classification to a much more conscious sense of the role of the spectator in interpretation has been emphasised (Smith, 1989). I will argue that this can only be achieved if museum holdings are made accessible to their visitors through a variety of display methods, including that of online digital representation. However, it is important to bear in mind that poor digitised representation might fail to achieve such an aim. As I discussed more extremely in chapter 4 this mode of representation, also contributes significantly to meaning-making (Jordanova, 1989). Smith (1989) emphasises that the technology of display needs to take into consideration conservation, the status of the artefacts to be displayed, and the nature and purpose of museum scholarship. These are the areas in which museums need to adjust their activities bearing in mind that artefacts are not neutral but complex and subject to changing meaning. Finally, it is important to note that the way artefacts are presented can also lead to, but not fully determine, what visitors experience and learn.

### **3.5. Museum representation**

As Stuart Hall (2003 [1997]) has influentially elaborated representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture. For Hall, representation involves the use of language, designs and images that stand for things being represented; it is the link between concepts and language that enables people to either refer to 'real' world objects, people or events or to imaginary worlds of fictional objects, people or events (Hall, 2003: 17). Such processes of representation involve what he referred to as 'systems of representation' (Hall, 2003: 17). These systems of representation consist not just of individual concepts but of different ways of organising, clustering, arranging and classifying concepts and establishing complex relationships between them. The two main types of system of representation are mental representation and language (Hall, 2003). Mental representation involves the correlation of all sorts of objects, people and events with a set of concepts to form a meaning, while language is involved in the overall process of constructing meaning. These two key systems of representation, according to Hall (2003), are needed for the interpretation of meaning. Hall's summary of how representation works is clearly relevant within the realms of museum practice to understand the way meaning is constructed. The museum representation of culture involves organising, clustering, arranging and classifying concepts and establishing complex relationships to inform their audience.

Hall (2003) further summarises representation as involving three approaches – reflective, intentional and constructive – depending on the concept or context guiding the process. Representation is said to be 'reflective' when language, drawing and painting are used to reflect an existing meaning in the world of objects, people and events (Hall, 1997: 24). In this paradigm, the meaning is said to be within the object, event or people and is dependent on a generally accepted language used either by a culture about themselves or about the 'other'. For instance, if we consider the name ascribed to the Ife bronzes, 'bronze' became an acceptable name for the artefacts by the West after their discovery (Willett, 1967a). This name negates the name given to the artefacts by the culture that produced them. The language reflects what was thought to be the likely material of production that now determines the identity of the artefacts. However, as Willett (1967a) pointed out the Ife heads are not made of

bronze but of zinc and lead. The term 'bronze' therefore carries association of western identification today.

The use of language, drawings and painting to reflect or imitate a 'real' object is what Hall (1997) referred to as a 'mimetic' theory of representation. Following Saussure, Hall argued that although drawings often bear resemblance to real objects, drawings are considered to be signs because they are in two dimensions. It is the use of language that creates the link to the 'real' object. Such semiotic theories of representation affirm the importance of language in representation of the 'other'. Thus, museum text is a means by which curators communicate the meaning of their collections to their audience, a mode of communication traditionally often favouring the culture of the curator more than the culture being represented (Vogel, 1991). As a result, the language used can possibly ignore the language that best describes the collection. This raises the issue of the extent to which the representation of Ife bronzes at the British Museum reflects the ideas and culture of the West to which the curators belong.

'Intentional' representation, on the other hand, takes into consideration the intended meaning of the producer (the speaker or the author) (Hall, 1997). This meaning is based on the language system of the producer that is embedded in their culture. Given the importance of language to communication, the language of the producer needs to be understood for the effective communication of the intended meaning. Thus language cannot be said to be private, as it has to be shared. Hall (1997) pointed out that the meaning of 'private thought' has to negotiate with other meanings of the word and images. Hall (1997) therefore proposed that the combination of both these individually one-sided approaches is the constructionist approach.

The constructionist representation approach takes place when meaning is constructed using a representational system, concepts and signs (Hall, 1997). This approach takes into cognisance the existence of the material world and how materials are interpreted through language (Culler, 1976). Museums works can be understood through a constructionist approach of representation, where objects such as the Ife bronzes are

seen as signs and languages through which meaning is communicated (Barthes, 1967). However for culture, meaning depends on larger units of analysis such as narratives, statements, groups of images and ‘whole discourses that operate across a variety of texts and areas of knowledge about a subject that have acquired widespread authority’ (Hall, 1997: 42). Hence, for representation to bear ‘full’ meaning it will also need to take into consideration every aspect of culture that affects the object directly or indirectly as indicated. In the same line, Foucault (1980: 114–5) said that he believed that ‘one’s point of references should not be to the great model of language and signs, but to that of war and battle. The history, which bears and determines us, has the form of war rather than that of a language: relations of power not relations of meaning.’ Foucault’s (1982) theories could in some ways be seen as different to semiotics; he proposed an open system of representation, unlike semiotics, which has a possibility of confining the process of representation to language, thus treating representation as a closed system.

As an open system, representation has the ability of connecting more intimately with social practices and concepts of power. Thus representation can also be described as a source for the introduction of social knowledge. As Foucault (1982) argued how human beings understand themselves in our culture aids our knowledge about the social, the embodied individual and shared meaning. Foucault (1982) was concerned with the context surrounding an event or an object, as this can bring about knowledge that in turn produces meaning. His idea was not just focused on meaning, as with Saussure and Barthes, but on the production of knowledge through what he called ‘discourse’. Discourse, according to Foucault (1982), is a group of statements that provides language utilised in expressing or representing knowledge. Hall (1992: 291) concurs that ‘all social practices have discursive aspects’, thus emphasising that social practices involve meanings that in turn shape and influence what we do. As a result, meanings are expected to change as the contexts responsible for their creation change. This is coupled with the fact that it is most unlikely that the same phenomenon will occur across different historical phases.

In line with Foucault’s (1982) and Hall’s (1992) ideas, one can argue that the prevalent situation (historical or political) of a period has a tendency to affect the

way events, objects or people are represented. For this reason, museum representation is expected to reflect various changes in meaning as affected by different eras. Therefore, language alone will not produce a true meaning, but discourse that is historicised will produce knowledge that will bring about a better meaning that informs understanding. Eventually this can facilitate understanding through the comparison of how the Ife bronzes were viewed in the colonial era and in the post-colonial era.

Foucault's (1982) theorisations and discourse are also very historically grounded, as he argued that it constitutes 'relationship of power, not relationship of meaning'. Foucault's notion of representation recognises that in each period, discourse produced forms of knowledge, objects, subjects and practices of knowledge that vary completely from period to period. The difference in the periods also implies that evidence of any form of continuity is unlikely. Therefore the idea of using discourse in the representation of the Ife bronzes is considered important in this thesis in line with Foucault (1982), as it facilitates the understanding of the Ife bronzes during different periods (pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial). These different periods are likely to have an effect on their representation as well as on the meaning constructed from the representation. Various exhibitions of the bronzes at the British Museum will be considered to highlight how their meanings might have changed over time.

It is most likely that a constructive approach of representation is adopted by the British Museum, where new meanings are assigned to objects and past events to reinforce their conception of what constitutes representation of African people and culture. In this section, I will explore to what extent exhibition of the bronze head have been and probably continue to be deep-rooted in the legacy of imperialism.

Five exhibitions that have showcased the Ife bronzes will be analysed to highlight some of the issues surrounding their representation within the British Museum. Before analysing the exhibitions, it is imperative to spend sometime discussing the institution of the British Museum



### **3.6. The British Museum**

The British Museum was established on the 7th of June 1753 by an Act of Parliament and on 15th January 1759 opened to the public (Crook, 1972, Trustees of the British Museum, 1982). Its foundation collections were – ‘the products of two traditions, one historical and the other scientific: the antiquarianism of sixteenth and seventeenth century England’ (Crook 1972: 48). Crook stressed that the British Museum was ‘essentially British in its conception’ (1972:119). The ‘Britishness’ of its concept will most probably affect how every other object is perceived.

Although the sheer quantity and the vastness of Sir Sloane’s collections formed the chief foundation of the British museum, the museum in fact had three founders: Sir Robert Cotton (1570-1631), Robert Harley, Earl of Oxford (1660-1724) as well as Sir Hans Sloane (1660-1753) (Miller, 1973: Crook 1972). Sir Robert Cotton had accumulated ‘the finest collection of medieval manuscript in Britain’ (Crook 1972: 39). Robert Harley was a patron who specialised in fine bindings, collected books and manuscripts. Sir Hans Sloane was a physician, naturalist and traveller and according to Crook is also collector of vast range of objects; his botanical collection was of the time, considered the ‘finest natural history collection in the world’ (Crook, 1972: 42).

Despite being populated by the possessions of these three men, however Crook argues that the real founder of the British Museum was the House of Commons because without this impetus these collections would not have been brought together as ‘The British Museum’ (Crook, 1972). Sir Hans Sloane’s private museum was one of ‘the sights of London’, and located on No 3. Bloomsbury Place (Crook, 1972: 44). The final home for these collections was to be Montague House in Bloomsbury owned by the Earl of Halifax and interestingly, the new property was not far from where they first started their public journey in Sir Sloane’s private museum.

In advocating for the needs of the ethnographic department after the removal of the National History Collections in 1885, Braunholtz quoted the first keeper of the department, Augustus Wollaston Frank who reported that ‘it is in this branch of the museum collections that the popular interest will mainly centre (Braunholtz, 1970:

38). Frank's opinion was observed in 1901 when Sir Hercules Read pointed out that the ethnographic collection, after the Egyptian mummies, received most interest from visitors (Read, 1901). The ethnographic collection was expanded during the great exploration and colonial enterprise of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, earning the museum the title 'the old curiosity shop in Great Russell Street' (Trustees of the British Museum, 1982: 7).

### **3.7. The Ife 'bronzes' in the British Museum**

According to Smith (1989: 7), the British Museum is 'the most important institution in dominating the public consciousness of what a museum is'. Thus, whatever information is disseminated about artefacts in their collection tends to be accepted as 'the truth'. Colonial discourse can be said to be one key driving force of the British Museum, since the museum is considered to be responsible for promoting 'Enlightenment' ideas categorising of human culture foregrounding European pre-eminence, and historically inculcating the notion of the civilised and the uncivilised (Naik, 2013).

The Department of Ethnography<sup>10</sup> established in 1946, brought African art and culture into a more predominant position at the British Museum (Braunholtz, 1970). Prior to 1946, the department was part of the Department of Oriental Antiquities and Ethnography. Braunholtz argued that this expansion of the ethnographic collections was sporadic and accidental as a result of 'geographical exploration and colonial enterprise (Braunholtz, 1970: 37). Through increasing African collection, Bernard Fagg (co-founder of the Nigerian museum system), was responsible for introducing the art and heritage of Africa to London the wider western world by 1952 (Reports and minutes of meeting, 1952). This began with the conservation and exhibition of the Ife antiquities at the British Museum, and was followed by a series of exhibitions and publications that received international acclaim, particularly in France and the US, where appreciation of African art became significant in the 1950s and 60s mainly through 'primitivism' lens.

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<sup>10</sup> In 2004, Ethnography Department was renamed Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas in 2004 to reflect geographical designation (British Museum website, 2013).

However, due to ever-increasing space constraint as a result of increasing number of ethnographic collection and the damage caused by the war, the Museum of Mankind at Burlington Gardens off Piccadilly became the home of the collections in 1970 (Report to Subcommittee, 1950; Crook, 1972; Trustees of the British Museum, 1982). The collections that formed the 'ethnography' department came from the indigenous people of Africa, Australia and the pacific Islands, North and South America and from certain parts of Asia and Europe (Trustee of British Museum, 1982).

The Museum of Mankind according to art critic Richard Dormont in his article titled '*Africa in a thrilling new light*' was the ground for the full-scale recreation of an African village. He thought the Museum of Mankind display of African objects to be more educational in focus than the theatrical display of the new gallery of the British Museum at Bloomsbury (Dormont, 2001). Dormont (2001) pointed out that the tiny fraction of the collection put on display at the Burlington museum was used to illustrate the customs and ceremonies of the indigenous peoples they represented. Hence the installations were not based on the visual aesthetics of the objects as art, but as ethnography. The limited number of collections on exhibition was in line with the policy of displaying fewer objects in 'an attractive' manner (Braunholtz, 1970).

There were four exhibitions held at the Museum of Mankind between 1970 and 1997 that included the Ife bronze head. One of such exhibitions was titled 'Divinity and Kingship in Africa' from 15<sup>th</sup> December 1970 till the 14<sup>th</sup> of October 1973. Despite being included in the exhibition, Benin was chosen to represent the idea of African kingship. Fagg (1970: 8) points out that Benin was chosen because its collections are very large and forms 'a unique kind of constellation about the concept of the divinity of the king'. The variety of the collections meant that multiple representations could be achieved (Fagg, 1970). It is therefore not a surprise that photographs of Ife bronzes were omitted from the printed publication of the exhibition. However, despite praise being accorded to the Benin collections, Fagg emphasised that the kingship of Benin and Benin bronze casting was imported from Ile Ife between the eleventh and the fourteenth centuries (Fagg, 1970; Read & Dalton, 1899). The

collections were exhibited in a reconstructed palace to represent them in their original context according to Fagg (1970: 2) was the ‘first attempt’.

The Ife bronze head was also part of the exhibited collections in the exhibition titled ‘Treasures from the Ethnographic Collections’ (as shown in Figure 3.2 below). There were five exhibitions with this title held at the Museum of Mankind between the 12<sup>th</sup> of December 1975 and 31<sup>st</sup> December 1977. The bronze head (as seen in Figure 3.2) was part of the collections exhibited in between 4<sup>th</sup> March 1984 and March 1987. Whilst information from this time is scant in the archives, it is clear that these collections largely framed the Ife bronzes as from ‘other’ cultures, fetishizing their difference and their ability to represent ‘Africa’.



**Figure 3.2: Ife bronze head displayed in ‘Treasures of the Ethnographic Collections’ (Photo taken in 1985 © Trustees of the British Museum)**

The move back to the British Museum in 1997 saw the representation of African artefacts in a new light, from objects of curiosity to objects that could be viewed as art. Harrod has argued that such abrupt changes in ideology can often leave collections stranded and devoid of meaning (Harrod, 2003). Therefore we might

consider how the focus of the new African gallery as art rather than ethnography could be responsible for a loss of one important strand of ‘traditional’ historical narrative and meaning of the artefacts. The Museum of Mankind was closed in 1997, and all the African collections were moved to the British Museum’s main site in Bloomsbury (Tribal Art, 2014). This was the beginning of a new journey in the presentation of Africa within a British post-colonial museum discourse.

### ***3.7.1. The 1948 exhibition of Ife bronzes***

On 10<sup>th</sup> June 1948 plans was approved during the sub-committee meeting of the trustees of the British Museum to have an exhibition in the ethnographical gallery that is intelligible and attractive to the general public (Reports and minutes of meeting, 1948). The 1948 Ife exhibition was based on the loan of the Ife bronzes from the Ooni of Ife and the Nigerian colonial government (Braunholtz, 1948). Though recorded as being held in 1947, the exhibition took place in 1948 in the King Edward VII Gallery (now room 33) in British Museum. The keeper of the ethnographic department Mr Braunholz reported that the Ife bronzes were displayed in the central wall case over a background that was intended to represent the context of their discovery as shown in Figure 3.3 (Reports and minutes of meeting, 1948). Having been buried, the artefacts featured discolouration that might have been as a result of the clay earth or as a result of colour used as decoration. The green patina of the bronzes was set off by a background of hessian distempered in a warm brick-red or terracotta colour approximating that of the red earth at Ife. Although a temporary exhibition, the Ife bronze heads were primarily displayed as colonial achievement to create surprise and wonder for museum visitors.

Given that the 1948 exhibition took place during the colonial era, it had colonial discourse as its main driving force. The publication of an illustrated monograph<sup>11</sup> of the Ife bronze heads along with moulding of important objects from British colonies was also approved during the subcommittee meeting of 1948 (Report and minutes of meeting, 1948). According to the minutes of 10<sup>th</sup> June 1948, permission was required at the time, as export of antiquities had become prohibited from the owners for cast

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<sup>11</sup> Although it was mentioned in the minutes of the meeting held on the 10th of June 1948 the monograph could not be located in the Anthropological library of the British Museum

to be supplied to other public institutions. Since Nigeria was a British colony, such request will be directed to the British Museum who at the time became owners of the cast copy of the bronze heads. It is imperative to note that there was no documented record for the permission to cast or own the cast copies. Hence this marks the beginning of the shift of ownership of copyright of the bronzes through visual colonialism.

Despite acknowledging that nothing like the bronzes had ever been discovered in Africa, the use of distempered hessian in their representation communicates otherwise. Fagg & Underwood, (1949: 2) pointed out that the distempered hessian (because it looks like a rough and unsophisticated material) was used to highlight the 'earth at Ife'. One could infer instead that the 1948 representation attempted to emphasise the indigenous characteristic associated to the bronzes than the royalty they represent from a city-state. In line with Coombes (1994), it was a way of reaffirming the degradation of the collection. The exhibition presented fourteen bronze heads (as shown in Figure 3.3) as two were badly damaged and could not be part of the exhibition, while the *Ori olokun* head was exhibited separately with the British Museum Ife bronze head (as shown in Figure 3.4).



**Figure 3.3: African bronze heads displayed at the King Edward VII gallery (Photo taken in 1948 © Trustees of the British Museum)**





**Figure 3.4: Ori Olokun head and British Museum Ife bronze head displayed together at the King Edward VII gallery (Photo taken in 1948 © Trustees of the British Museum)**

This exhibition can also be seen as a way of gaining the support of the British public on the need to ‘civilise’ the people considered as ‘primitive’. African art, to which the Ife bronzes belong, at the time were tagged or classified as ‘artificial curiosities’ in the developing collection of the British Museum (The British Museum, 1996: 5).

Africans were attributed as primitives of the world and the art from the region was termed primitive art. This primitive art serves as an entrance into civilisation. As Coombes puts it, the representation was ‘historically reconstructed as a product of monolithic imperial propaganda’ (Coombe, 1997: 2).

### ***3.7.2. The Festival of Britain, 1951***

Proposals for an international exhibition to celebrate the centenary of the Great Exhibition of 1851 led to the Festival of Britain in 1951. In May and September 1951, the Festival of Britain was held to include an international component. For this reason, three exhibitions about the Commonwealth were held at the Imperial Institute in South Kensington; several bombs had hit the British Museum during the war, which had resulted in the evacuation of its collection (Craggs, 2011). Littler (2006: 2) argued that what was defined as ‘the Commonwealth participation’ in the Festival consisted of only a handful of practices at the time when Britain’s imperial power was waning. As a result, she considers how such exhibitionary gestures were intended to be ‘imperial benevolence’, which often, in its own way, continued such dreams of expansion (Littler, 2006: 7). To the public, Britain wanted to be seen as the generous master while the colonies were the recipients of that goodwill.

One of the exhibitions depicted life in various colonies, with ‘carefully staged living history displays of subordinate natives and imperial triumph’ (Littler, 2006: 1). The second focused on ‘colonial progress’, and the third was titled ‘The Art from the Colonies’; this was intended to represent all the territories of the British colonies (West Africa and the Pacific at the time) (Platte, 2010a: 45). Drewal & Schildkrout (2010) pointed out that more than half of the objects used in all three exhibitions came from Nigeria and included Ife bronzes and terracottas. Among the Ife bronzes exhibited were the bronzes lent by the then Ooni of Ife and the two heads taken by Bascom to the United States of America. Although Platte (2010a) claimed that the rich selection of non-European art was generally welcomed, the way the objects were represented was criticised. The criticism stemmed from the fact that the 1951 exhibition only displayed objects from the colonies. Kenneth Murray an archaeologist and teacher, who became Nigeria's first surveyor of antiquities in the newly created Nigeria Antiquities Service (which became the Nigerian National



Commission for Museums and Monuments in 1979) and a connoisseur of the Nigerian art pointed out that ‘the display reminded him more of the objects in a china shop than works ranking among humankind’s greater artistic achievements’ (Platte, 2010a: 48).

Kenneth Murray’s criticism emphasised the fact that the institutes method of representation reduced the Ife artefacts to ‘bric-à-brac’ that could be found within everyday currency. The ambiguous role of the artefacts was related to the changing status of the empire at a time of decolonisation. However, main purpose of the festival was to illustrate Britain’s ‘greatest contribution to civilisation’, past, present and future, in the arts, in science and technology and in industrial design (Art Council of Britain, 2014; Littler, 2010). Mirzoeff (2002(1998) argued that the need for ‘civilising’ the colonies was one of the fundamentals of colonisation. Thus Britain failed to acknowledge the presence of civilisation before colonisation as substantiated by the bronze head. As a result, Britain was implicitly placed as the ‘facilitator’, the provider of aid that was used in civilising the colonies and moving colonised people from primitivism to industrialisation (Littler, 2010). Since this exhibition was held during the colonial reign in Africa, the act of reduction could be interpreted as a way the imperial institute contributed to establishing and publicising British supremacy over its colony, thus propagating the ideology of the empire.

Although Conekin amongst others has argued that the festival was overtly one celebrating Empire, the poor publicity of these particular exhibitions did mean that they were not well attended (Conekin, 2003; Littler, 2010). The sculptor Henry Moore, however, in an interview about the exhibition, expressed his appreciation for the objects and respect for the nature of the materials (Platte, 2010a), albeit in a patronising tone. According to Littler (2006: 2), the festival was a way in which the government graciously let the ‘dominions and colonies know that they had permission to celebrate too’. In this regards, the Ife bronzes therefore were represented again (similar to 1948), as objects testifying to colonial prominence and achievement.

After 1951 the Ife bronzes were exhibited between 1970-1997 at the Museum of Mankind an extension of the British Museum (as discussed earlier). In 1991, Ife bronze head was exhibited at the British Museum as part of the paid exhibition titled 'Man and Metal in Ancient Nigeria'. The exhibition was held in room 28(main entrance)<sup>12</sup> from the 15<sup>th</sup> May till 1<sup>st</sup> September 1991. This exhibition was the first attempt to represent the Ife bronze in a new light as an object testifying to the power and divinity of kingship before the penetration of Europeans into Africa. Despite this acknowledgement, the pamphlet highlighted varying range of interpretations by also pointing out their likely use as 'funeral effigies'.

### **3.7.3. *Africa: The Art of a Continent, 1995 ('Africa '95')***

According to Spring et al (1996), the major Africa '95 exhibition (as shown in Figure 3.5) by the British Museum was a postcolonial project that was geared towards correcting the erroneous notions of Africa held by the British people. The exhibition was dubbed 'the Royal Academy blockbuster' (Garlake, 1995: 10). Spring et al pointed out the popular assumptions held by British people about Africa was (and probably is) that 'Africa is thought to be a place exclusively of famines, dictators, diseases, and ecological disasters' (Spring et al, 1996: 46). The exhibition also tried to show that myth was a strong and enduring element in the ways in which Africa and the West saw each other. However Spring *et al* (1996) did not mention the main ideology of 'Africa '95 was to involve artist as curators whereby the first voice would come from Africa. Such focus highlights the notion that Africans who are seen as originators and mediators of objects on display that represents Africa would best describe Africa (Vogel, 1991). Garlake described it as a way of confronting the problem of 'white gate-keepers' (Garlake, 1995: 11). Despite this main focus, African artefacts, to which the Ife bronzes belong, came under the heading of 'ethnography' in the late nineteenth century (Burt, 1996). This heading is as a result of distinguishing the artefacts from what is considered as the civilisation of Europe, thus bestowing superiority to European collections (Court, 1999). Hence, the label of 'primitive' later changed to 'ethnic' or 'tribal' as the case may be to avoid insulting people being represented.

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<sup>12</sup> The room numbering at the British Museum has continuously changed over time as a result the number does not correspond with the latest up to date map.

The Ife bronze head was exhibited in the ‘Made in Africa’ collection (as shown in Figure 3.6) of the Africa ’95 exhibition held at the Museum of Mankind (Spring *et al*, 1996: 58). Spring *et al*, argued that the classic cast brass head (12th–15th century) of an Ooni is ‘a staple of those art of the world coffee-table books whose real import is to proclaim the universality of Western art’ (Spring *et al*, 1996: 58). One might argue, therefore, that this exhibition did not fully achieve the original intention of correcting the way Africa is perceived, instead asserting the authority or influence of the West on Africa. The exhibition failed to highlight reasons behind the creation of the bronzes and what might have informed how they are represented in the post-colonial era. Instead, the exhibition propagated the salient message of the three main reasons for colonialism (civilisation, commercialisation and Christianity). It also emphasised how the West had influenced Africa and African art instead of foregrounding that Ife was an established civilisation long before the invasion of the West.



**Figure 3.5: Welcome panel at Museum of Mankind for Africa ‘95 Exhibition. (Photo taken in 1995 © Trustees of the British Museum)**



**Figure 3.6: Ife bronze heads displayed under the title ‘Made in Africa’ (Photo taken in 1995 © Trustees of the British Museum)**

According to Spring *et al* (1996), limited resources made it impossible to install new exhibitions; therefore, a programme of progressive ‘Africanisation’ of the museum’s galleries was undertaken by curators to ensure that by the autumn of 1995 an African theme would dominate the exhibition spaces. As is often the case, ‘Africa and African culture tends to be defined by people who are not themselves Africans but unambiguously Europeans’ (Burt, 1996: 4). Thus, one tends to ask, whose Africa was being displayed? The exhibition as pointed out by Burt (1996: 6) could be said to range from the manifest destiny and ‘survival of the fittest’ that justified ‘European conquest of Africa in their so-called civilisation mission of the colonial period, and the economic development policies that now seek to integrate everyone within the global economy’. More compassionate images supporting arguments in defence of the victims of these brutal philosophies are often ineffective and paternalistic. Court (1999) also emphasised that the Africa ’95 failed to succeed in its goals of challenging old western ideologies about African art. For Africa, Burt (1996) argued that the issue in this one-sided Western debate with other cultures has moved from the export of Africans as slaves to the conquest of their lands more

recently to the formation of nation-states and now to the promotion of capitalist economics through aid and development programmes. For the West, 'darkest Africa' became and remains a powerful symbol of the primitive and, as far as art is concerned, 'primitive' often seems to be a criterion for defining what is Africa. Despite the clear influence of the new museology, like the 1948 and 1951 exhibitions, the 1995 exhibition failed to represent the Ife bronzes in the light of new perspectives.

#### ***3.7.4. The Sainsbury Africa Gallery's permanent exhibition***

As I discussed earlier in this thesis, 2001 witnessed the opening of the Sainsbury Africa Gallery at the British Museum, curated by Christopher Spring, Nigel Barley and Julie Hudson. All three curators specialised in African artefacts but are not themselves of African heritage (British Museum website, 2013). The Sainsbury Africa Gallery is highly aesthetic, with white walls, boutique lighting, a metal tree displaying pottery and plaques hung up on poles. The entrance of the gallery originally bore a quote from Sir Robert Sainsbury on an information panel that has since been removed (Phillips, 2008). Sir Robert is quoted as saying, 'what I am is someone who likes artists who like primitive and were influenced by primitive' (Phillips, 2008: 87). This quote in itself sets a tone for the entire exhibit and is bound to affect how the objects displayed are perceived. The quote in a colonial context perhaps raises no question, as African objects were perceived via a notion of degradation. However, in the post-colonial era, the quote might represent varying perspectives that could affect how the visitor views the artefact. On the one hand, the quote might be perceived as a form of challenge to Western ideology because the introductory space was adorned with contemporary African art pieces from Egypt, North, South, East and West Africa. On the other hand, it might be perceived as glorifying and displaying the influence of the West on Africa and African art. A third interpretation could be, as the western view of the past, which is different from a western view of today. These interpretations however are ambiguous.

As Dubin (1999) points out, museums have moved to the 'forefront in struggles over representation and over the chronicling, revising and displaying of the past' (Dubin, 1999: 5). Dubin's (1999) argument highlights the challenges museums face as a

result of representing 'other' cultures through Western perceptions and ideas of art, however, the curators' declared intentions were otherwise. Spring (2011) declares that 'these works, we hope, give the message that Africa is a place not simply where traditions are lost but where traditions are constantly invented and reinvented'. Adeleo (2012) argued that the concept and ideas might be lost on the average museum visitor, who would not necessarily take the time to contemplate the purpose and function of the gallery. Within the exhibit, the visitor was thrust into a setting that the museum has created not only to elevate the status of the objects, but also to promote their artistic and aesthetic features that make them more than bronze sculptures from Ife. Therefore, it seems the museum's intention, is to show them in western frame as artworks.

Dean (2006) has argued that for the west, showing African objects has long been considered a problem. This problem is in part a result of deciding what should be considered as art and what is not art. She pointed out that the problem is likely to be related to the fact that people everywhere sometimes make aesthetic distinctions between objects. As such, certain things are valued above other things owing precisely to aesthetic distinctions. On the other hand, Dean (2006) argued that art is said to be a special category of things and practices composed of sub-categories defined variously by medium, function, geographic provenance and value, which are not recognised worldwide. Art categorisation therefore can be described as geographically specific.

Unlike the Western idea of art, the bronze heads created in honour of the Ife monarchy were intended only to be seen during certain festivals and consequently record the history of Ife in memory of the deified Ife forefathers. Appiah (2006) argued that the Ife bronzes were produced from within a world of meaning created by Yoruba ancestors and thus are able to make connections beyond just being art objects. Such connection is through identity, which he feels is powerful and should be acknowledged. However, the Ife bronze in the Africa Gallery of the British Museum is placed in a glass case beside other iron objects and re-contextualised, by attempting to make it art. In this case, the curators have taken an object that originally had a far greater purpose and turned it into an aesthetically pleasing object

of art through the way it is represented. This can be related to McEvilley's (1985) summation on a similar problem at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. He pointed out that 'Western egotism is still as unbridled as in the centuries of colonialism and sovereignties. The museum pretends to confront the "Third World" while in reality, they are co-opting it and using it to consolidate Western notions of quality and feelings of superiority' (McEvilley, 1985: 349). I similarly would argue, therefore, that the scandal about Africa did not cease with the end of European empires but continues within museums through their representations of the 'other'.

Despite the conscious attempt to move from presenting Africa as curios, the British Museum's African gallery still propagates the atmosphere of colonial prowess. The imposing façade and alienating information panel still present the museum as part of the sinister Foucauldian power/knowledge discourse underpinning Western sovereignty. Such sovereignty is further expressed through the article written to commemorate the opening of the gallery where the curators stated that the 'west discovered Ife heads at least twice' (Spring et al, 2001: 34). However, this claim as discussed in chapter 2 was not the case. Harrod (2003) suggested that such claims are due to the fact that the removals of some of the African cultural artefacts were part of the glorified imperial exercise; as a result, the provenances of some of the objects are unknown. The collections also have the potential to trigger angry political post-colonial debate due to the dubious circumstances surrounding some of the artefacts' acquisition (Harrod, 2001). Regarding the Ife bronzes, the colonial impact on Nigeria was responsible for the commoditization and commercialisation of the artefacts, thus leading to the purchase of the head presently displayed in the Sainsbury Africa Gallery of the British Museum (Willet, 1967a). Other Ife objects lie un-exhibited in storage, and the complex historical events surrounding the objects are yet to be significantly acknowledged in the Africa Gallery.

The location of the Africa Gallery in the basement of the museum means the room is reliant on artificial lighting – ironically, much unlike the Africa it intends to represent. This might be interpreted as a way of substantiating the idea that Africa is a 'Dark Continent' (Coombes, 1994). Another element of portraying Africa as a degraded society is the introductory text the visitor encounters at the entrance to the

gallery. The text informs the visitor about the British sculptor Henry Moore and the philanthropist Robert Sainsbury's shared love of 'primitive' art (this text has been removed). In a bid to please the sponsors of the gallery, the text also affirms ideas of the West about Africa and African cultural objects. Other information panels within the gallery are also silent about the political background to the collections. The panels for the Ife bronze, for example, said little about the chicanery surrounding its discovery and acquisition.

The ambitious idea of covering the whole African continent in one gallery means that the context of regional and cultural narrative is left out of the way objects are presented (Harrod, 2003). Thus, Africa is presented as one whole instead of a continent with different regions and different cultural perspectives. The gallery is presented predominantly in terms of materials and techniques, such as ceramics, woodcarving, textiles, forged metal, and cast brass, and lacks a chronological order. This category regime Harrod (2003: 17) describes as 'a bit old fashioned'. The use of short films running in the gallery in the time frame of the display is also deemed as mysterious because it inhabits the ahistorical world of the ethnographic. Thus, historical accounts surrounding the artefacts presented are not taken into consideration despite the fact that they change with time. As a result, the artefacts tend to be disconnected from the culture that produced them. Clifford (1988) also argued that there is an ethnographic present as it is always in the past. Therefore, the presentation of Africa will benefit a great deal from a narrative that takes into consideration the historical narrative in a chronological manner. Harrod (2003) further suggested that the use of oral history could reveal the purpose of most of the artefacts represented; this might assist in the understanding of the culture presented without leaving the visitors more puzzled after their visit.

Despite praise for the British Museum's Africa Gallery, one can argue that there is a need for revisiting the presentation. For example, there needs to be a clear distinction between African contemporary art and African cultural materials. No wonder Harrod (2003: 15) considered this gallery to be the 'most problematic of the Museum's outstanding permanent displays'. It is clear that there is a need for a larger space that would allow for a full narrative to be given for each artefact displayed. However,



acquiring a larger space to display Africa in terms of its regional identities is not likely to happen in the near future. Therefore, digitisation and use of the Internet could provide an extended space where each artefact could be displayed from varying perspectives. If properly handled, the digital platform could allow for the display of the artefacts as art as well as within an ethnographic material culture. This might eventually allow museum visitors to engage based on whether they choose to view the cultural object as an artwork or as an ethnographic object.

### ***3.7.5. The Kingdom of Ife: Sculptures from West Africa, 2010***

In 2010, the British Museum opened a temporary exhibition curated by Julie Hudson and Claude Ardouin and Hassan Arero, the first black African curator to be appointed by a British museum (Sharpe, 2010; Europa, 2011). This was clearly a major breakthrough since Arero specialises in African and Caribbean Diaspora communities and the pastoral cultures of Kenya and East Africa. The main focus of the exhibition was the bronze, stone and terracotta sculptures from the Kingdom of Ife. Sharpe (2010) quoting curator Julie Hudson points out that the aim of the exhibition was to change people's understanding of African art. This aim tends to be a continuation from Africa '95. The objects were displayed in simple glass cases with enough light to enable the museum visitor to see all the beautiful detail in each work. Beside each object were huge panels of information informing visitors of the great wealth and innovation of the Ife Kingdom, even describing the Kingdom as 'cosmopolitan'. Despite the amount of information provided Portisch (2011) criticised the exhibition for indicating different interesting strands that fails to relate to one another. Portisch argues that the different strands can benefit from a single complex story that weaves together the archaeological material, technical aspect of production, historical aspect and their relevance today (Portisch, 2011).

Although Portisch (2011) views seem valid, I argue that these exhibits worked much better than that of the Sainsbury Africa Gallery. The ideology of decolonisation was implicit, as the exhibition allows for the reframing of the Ife bronzes from multiple contexts. The artefacts were represented to cover various contexts such as monarchy, power, structure, festivals and funerals in Ife between the twelfth and nineteenth centuries. Another merit was the fact that an African curator educated in Africa, was

involved in the exhibition whereas, with the Sainsbury Africa Gallery, the curators specialised in African visual culture, but are not Africans. Although Spring (2003), the Africa Gallery curator, pointed out he consulted people of African descent, the information panel often did not reflect this consultation.

Although the curators for the Sainsbury Africa Gallery may have collaborated with Africans and those of African descent, the tone and message from the Sainsbury Africa Gallery about the Ife bronze still largely professes Western notions that can be linked to the bronzes' discovery within the colonial context. Thus substantiating Picton's (2006) notion that old stereotype is hard to change. It does not reflect the voice of the people who profess to own the artefacts in any way. Hence I would argue for the need of a representation method that will allow for multiple perspectives.

On the other hand, the 2010 exhibition seemed to rely more on informing the visitor through the use of panels, and allowing the objects to 'speak for themselves'. This allows the bronzes to be seen within their context of use, in line with the ideas of Laclau and Mouffe (1990). Laclau and Mouffe (1990) argued that it is impossible to determine the meaning of an object outside of its context of use. Their argument implies that museum representation needs to take into consideration that, although physical objects exist, they have no fixed meaning. However, they are able to take on meaning and become objects of knowledge within discourse. Interestingly, the museum seems to only highlight their use as funerary objects and fails to emphasise their role in discourse of gender, power and coronation.

In the same line of thought, I will argue that the Kingdom of Ife exhibition could be the beginning of correcting Western habits of representing the bronzes merely funerary objects. There are many interpretations and meanings ascribed to the bronzes, but these are determined by discourses. Vogel (1991) argued that the West is only able to represent and interpret African objects based on their culture serving as a point of reference. She explains that, 'many Westerners feel too sharply their ignorance of the original contexts of African art and are too ready to let it blind them to the art's visible qualities' (Vogel, 1991: 1). Therefore, museum curators'

backgrounds tend to influence the way that anything African is viewed because they are prone to see the object from a familiar discourse, especially the discourse that stems from the colonial era. The Kingdom of Ife exhibition could be argued as being a step in the right direction towards allowing the bronzes to take on more multiple meaning and become more often objects of knowledge within discourse. In spite of the success of the exhibition, it lasted only two months, as it was a temporary exhibition.

With the cost implication of changing museum installations pointed out by Spring (1996), the Ife bronze of the Sainsbury Africa Gallery is likely to bear imposing narratives that are yet to be revised. Also the position of the gallery at the basement of the imposing building of the British Museum could also add to the ideology of degradation (Coombes, 1994). In line with Coombes (1994), Thomas (2009), argues that the building can also bring about contradictory emotions for the visitors regardless of the intentions of the curators. The British Museum as a national museum with a neoclassical façade using an imposing single sided narrative through its representations can be perceived as an institution that propagates the idea of imperialism within its walls. Hence the need for a new space would allow for representation in a way that would facilitate a historical discourse that considers the original owners beyond the walls of the museum. Also, as the British Museum claims to be a repository of the heritage not only of Britain but of the whole world; ‘part of its obligation should be to make its collections more widely available’ (Appiah, 2006: 12). The availability of the Ife bronzes should not be limited to a physical space but made accessible through publications, and above all through the Internet. Hence the need to consider new ways that are offered by digitisation that allow them (copies and original) to be represented within varying discourses with postcolonial ideology.

### **3.8. The Ife bronzes in the post-colonial era**

In this section I will examine the post-colonial discourses to explain the meaning of the concept in relation to the Ife bronzes. This is due to changing contexts that make the term ‘post-colonial’ take on different meaning to different communities (Shohat, 1999). According to Trumbler (1993/2007), post-colonialism is concerned with what

occurs or exists after the end of colonial rule. Although the period is not specified, scholars like Edwards & Tredell (2008), Ashcroft et al (2002(1989), McClintock (1992), Shohat (1992), Bhabha (1990) and Spivak (1988) Said (1985), seem to highlight the post-colonial as a period that marks the end of colonial rule. However, some scholars like Fanon (1952), Selmon (1991) and Loomba (2007)) seem not to agree with this ideology, believing that colonialism has continued to exist in a subtle way due to its multiple meanings and that decolonisation has spanned three centuries ranging from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the Americas, New Zealand and South Africa (Loomba, 2007). Contesting the period of existence of the post-colonial could perhaps contribute to its varying implications. No wonder Hall (1996) argued that the post-colonial tends to be merely celebratory of the colonised and emphasised the uncertainty of identity and meaning. Taking a similar line, Shohat (1992) argued that the unstable characterisation of the post-colonial has made it vulnerable to either the colonised or the coloniser, since the term most likely represents different contexts to different communities.

This different implication is also evident in the various discourses and unresolved debates of post-colonial criticism (Edwards & Tredell, 2008). Following on, McClintock (1992) criticised the concept of post-colonialism for its linearity and its entranced suspension of history. Such suspension could be due to the combination and clashes the concept brings to discourses of difference, race, language, gender, representation, diaspora, violence, travel, memory and globalisation, which also affect the Ife bronzes. On the contrary, Edwards & Tredell (2008) argued that different regions reveal asymmetrical power structures that lie behind the imperialist discourse. Thus, the post-colonial concept not only depicts a linear structure, as suggested by McClintock (1992), but also an evolving power structure.

Edwards & Tredell (2008: 2) emphasised that the concept of post-colonialism is often used by writers to refer to specific historical events that might include ‘political movements, liberationist struggles or specific historical events or specific moments in the drive towards decolonisation.’ For instance, Fanon (2008(1952) points out the importance of decolonising the self from the colonial perception of inferiority. He argued that the effect of colonisation is not the domination of the black society or the

psychological impact it has on how the coloniser perceives the colonised, but on how the colonised perceive themselves. Like Fanon, Said (1993) argued about the multiple ideology of representing the other as one with shared identity. However, Homi Bhabha (1990) refuted the idea that there is a shared identity among former colonial states. He highlighted the notion that the post-colonial needs to be individualised so that the opposition between the colonised and the coloniser can be viewed from specific situations. As a result, there is no identical situation; the entire situation highlights some level of political imperialism and dominance.

In line with Edwards & Tredell (2008), I discuss the post-colonial to reveal (a) asymmetrical power structures that lie behind colonial rule in Nigeria and (b) as a political and ideological tool, advocating for change through decolonisation of the Ife bronzes. Post-colonialism as regards the Ife bronzes focuses on the end of British colonial rule of Nigeria in 1960 till today (Edwards & Tredell, 2008).

Although post-colonial writings reveal unresolved concerns about cultural imperialism, globalisation and iniquities in economics and political influence (Edwards & Tredell, 2008: 2), this section is centred on the critique of the West's representation of the Ife bronzes. It examines the need for representation of the Ife bronzes towards decolonisation as grounded in the philosophies of Fanon (2008(1952)). Fanon posited that language is at the centre of the predicament of colonisation, marginalisation and servitude. This hypothesis tends to be the fundamental idea that guides the need for decolonisation and is a viewpoint that has guided post-colonial discourses. Therefore, language also serves as a representational tool responsible for the way the Ife bronzes are understood in the West.

Fanon argued that language could be used for classifying, imprisoning, primitivising and decivilising the other (Fanon, 2008(1952)). The power of language in storytelling and representation is also emphasised by Ashcroft et al (2002). Fanon (2008(1952)) argued that language becomes a tool used by the coloniser to foster universality as well as acting as an indicator of both cultural difference and power inequality. Fanon further expressed that such universality brings about the 'disalienation' of the artefacts (Fanon, 2008(1952): 30). As such, the Ife bronzes remain colonised by the

language of representation, which consists only of the English language. I argue that the absence of the language of the colonised thus further demonstrates the power of the British. Likewise, the language would only be correct in line with the culture where it is used and would not present the ideology of the colonised. The language of representation therefore is what informs museum visitors about the artefacts, since language has the 'power to name' and constructs the lens through which understanding takes place (Edwards & Tredell, 2008: 30). It is sad to note that language thus perpetuates the continuous colonisation of the Ife bronzes in the post-colonial era.

The Ife bronzes, like any other material culture, allow people today to have an idea of the past. Jordanova (2012: xx) argued that artefacts are 'deposits of political ideas, aspirations, events and relationships'. From Jordanova's (2012) argument, the Ife bronzes are artefacts that can inform us of the processes involved during the colonial era from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. These artefacts are also likely to inform their viewers about various events that they have been involved in within the local and international community through the language used in museum narratives. Within Ife, the artefacts serve as a memory of a once-vibrant trade route of a city-state where kings reigned with supreme power (Willett, 1967a). Ife bronzes further bring to the fore the role of masculinity in public power and authority in the kingdom of Ife, thereby highlighting issues of gender (Littler & Naido, 2005). This suggests that women were in the back stage of affairs or not considered in issues regarding public power. It further validates the presence of the asymmetrical power structures that rob individuals of liberty and freedom (Jordan, 1981; Edwards & Tredell, 2008).

On the other hand, in the West the bronzes served as curios that evoked surprise and wonder in their colonial middle-class viewers (Bennett, 1995). These viewers of the colonial era allegedly believed that the Ife bronzes were not produced in Africa but might have been imported because Africa had no bronze age (Wrigley, 1960). As a result, the West identified themselves as intellectuals who legislate over the interpretation of other cultures, thus validating the representation of racial difference (Bauman, 1987). Such categories of difference – constructed through colonising

language of distinctions such as ‘us’ and ‘them’; ‘civilised’ and ‘savage’; ‘Christian’ and ‘heathen’; ‘self’ and ‘other’; ‘subject’ and ‘object’ and ‘colonised’ and ‘coloniser’ – are exposed and challenged through post-colonial philosophy (Edwards & Tredell, 2008: 17). A classifying move associated with colonial dominance saw to the silence of the colonised. As a result, the Ife bronzes assumed the position of objects that denote hierarchical difference based on nationality, religion, race, gender and ethnicity.

I further argue in line with Fanon (2008(1952)) that even the language used in identifying and describing the Ife artefacts was another move of the coloniser to highlight difference and hierarchies. This is evident in the use of the term ‘bronze’ in identifying the sculptures instead of the original names used by the colonised. However, Africa never declared that the sculptures were bronzes, as the British used the term in relation to the region after the Benin expedition of 1887 (Igbofe, 1970; Willet, 1960). Consequently, the Ife indigenes were robbed of their voice and influence, as there was no space in which their voices could be heard. Thus, the Ife bronzes displayed in the West further validated the power of the West; in this schema, Europe saw itself as civilised, while Africa represented the uncivilised other in the colonial era.

According to Selmon (1991), the term ‘post-colonial’ does not necessarily denote the post-independence historical period in once-colonised nations but rather locates a specifically post-colonial discursive purchase in culture. He emphasised that the post-colonial era begins the moment the colonial power inscribes itself onto the body and space of its other. For instance, the establishment of the Ife Museum (an imperial institution) in 1950 was used in propagating colonial ideology long before Nigeria’s independence in 1960, demonstrating how the British administrative rulers inscribed their ideas within Ife. It is probably a way in which the colonial power maintained indirect control over their colonies via cultural, political and economic channels. By so doing they still had access to the collections of Ife one way or another despite the bronzes being permanently displayed in Ife.

Adam and Tiffin (1991) further argued that the post-colonial is conceived as a set of

discursive practices that are in opposition to colonialism, colonialist ideologies and their contemporary forms. There is a shift from Western ideas to a redefinition of cultural practices and description of objects from their colonial other to reflect their 'real' meaning. However, this is not the case in the British Museum context, as some of their labels are yet to express post-colonial meanings or descriptions. Post-colonial theory therefore helps us to understand how what we know about Africa is what explorers such as Frobenius, the British administrators, explores, missionaries and travellers have informed the world through texts, interpretations and images placed in museums. Furthermore, such information has also affected the way Africa views itself; hence the question of 'authenticity' will remain an issue as Western ideology continues to infiltrate the former colonies.

Jordanova (2012:1) points out that the sense of sight 'shapes our experience', implying that our experience of the past actually start from when we set our eyes on objects from the past. However, the way the past is experienced is dependent on the viewer and in what context he or she views the artefact. This is because visitors only see what museum officials want them to see, either through their visual representation or through written narratives and interpretations. For instance, the text beside the bronzes in the British Museum only describes the sculptures through an European understanding of their use as funerary objects. I argue therefore that museum texts fail to establish the importance and changing value of the Ife bronzes in relation to the culture they represent, thus providing the visitor with a less elaborate, single-sided explanation. Despite new ideas about the bronzes in the light of post-colonial ideas, they are still defined within the premise of imperial context to emphasise British continuous dominance (Coombes, 1994).

### **3.9. Summary and conclusion**

The museum is a place that holds records of the past for better understanding of the past in relation to the present. The ability to provide more open and capacious cross-cultural information about events, however, will allow museum visitors to have a better comprehension of what happened in the past, and such information can be used to establish a social paradigm not based on falsification. The history of Ile-Ife has been dominated by chronological accounts of exploits and archaeological



expeditions. Where archaeological materials have been used to validate a single sided narrative. This has led to colonial reports divorced from oral or social histories that are deemed insignificant in the high stake of power. Furthermore, European supremacy due to colonialism has also determined how the culture and objects of visual culture of non-Europeans are represented. This has gone a long way in affecting how the Ife bronzes have been identified and described. However, the Ife bronzes are historically important because they substantiate the existence and civilisation of Africa before European exploration. It also reveals events that include, for example, dates from the pre-colonial (before 1896), colonial (1896–1960) and post-colonial (1960 onwards) periods.

Investigating the way the Ife bronzes were exhibited during the colonial and post-colonial eras also provides an opportunity to engage in a comparative historical analysis and from here I would argue towards the need for a new space that is free from anything related to imperial dictation. This space is important as the building of the British Museum for various reasons might ‘evoke in visitors pain or pride, nostalgia or anger, great achievement or heinous crimes’ (Thomas, 2009: 28). Crook also pointed out that ‘a building is the product not only of the man who designed it, but of the society which pays for it, lives in it and looks at it’ (Crook, 1972: 15). His statement emphasises the importance of the ideology that guides the purpose of the building as well as the culture acceptable to that era. As a result whatever takes place within the building is guided by the prevailing philosophy of the society at the time. Due to these emotional reasons, it is important to consider whether digitisation might offer the opportunity for improving and decontextualising the official and public discourse such museum narratives might have triggered. Although the Internet is likely to provide a new space for display, as well as offering visitors the opportunity to become participants in a way that is not supported by the museum physical space, it is not innocent of bias. In addition, the potentials of the digital could provide an opportunity for decolonising the Ife bronzes. The next chapter will discuss these complexities of digitisation and the postcolonial.

#### **Chapter 4: Digitisation**

## **Introduction**

Chapter 4 discusses digitisation as a tool that could potentially allow for the representation of other cultures in a more empowering way. This chapter examines how digital technology has continued to transform the process of re-creating, representing and understanding the past in the twenty-first century. It focuses on digital photography as a method of digitisation, discussing its advantages and disadvantages. The chapter further investigates possible issues that might challenge the digitisation of the Ife bronzes, and explores how museums could mitigate against such an outcome. Issues of online racism and the digital divide are also highlighted. It explores the argument that digitisation might be seen as a creative chance or a creative challenge to the practice of discriminating against ‘other’ cultures.

### **4.1. Digital technology in museums**

The continuous transition from an industrial age to an information age has prompted museums to re-evaluate their role and acknowledge the concerns and changes challenging contemporary society on all fronts such as culture, technology and the environment. As MacDonald & Alsford puts it, in their article ‘the museum as information utility heritage is ‘an integral part of our present’ (MacDonald & Alsford, 2010: 72). It is imperative that museums are relevant and responsive to the information needs of modern society, so as to prevent the idea of being abandoned for the other institutions of knowledge that have adapted to the information society (MacDonald & Alsford, 2010).

The history of digital technology within the museum started in 1960, with the advent of the first adopters of ‘automation’ (Lynch, 2000; Parry, 2010: 9). Automation involves the application of a growing range of information technologies to the management of collections (Lynch, 2000). According to Parry (2010), the 1970s saw the emergence of standards and of professional bodies related to museum information management. The 1980s witnessed the rise of local networks, multi-media and micro-computing, while the 1990s was the period of the web, interoperability and mass digitisation. Finally, the start of the new century brought about the evolution of mobile and social media (Parry, 2010). Therefore the use of

digital technology within the museum cannot be said to be new. However, it brings about new dimensions to the method of data recording, preservation, representation, meaning and engagement (Kaylay, 2008; Giaccardi, 2012).

Kaylay (2008) suggested that the limitless affordance of the digital goes a long way in affecting the meaning of the represented content in terms of the cultural image it creates. This new dimension in the introduction of digitisation is not only for a collection-management database but also for the exhibition of museum collections. Digitisation in this thesis will focus more on space, access, representation, interpretation, learning, objects, meaning production and sustainability, as related to the Ife bronzes following the traditions of Parry (2010). Parry (2010) refers to space, access, interpretation, learning, objects, production and sustainability as the vocabulary of museum practice. Although meaning-production is not included in Parry's list of museum vocabulary, I argue in line with Hall (1997) that the production of meaning is what brings about understanding.

Manovich (2001) argues that new media is culture encoded in a digital form; hence, digitisation is a huge part of new media. Digitisation, however, could be perceived as another platform that can serve as a threat to or an extension of museum practices. Digitisation might result in new perspectives for the vocabulary of museum practice, or it might become a tool for sustaining the old ideology that guided museum practices. Regardless of these possibilities, the introduction of computer technology into the museum world has informed, shaped and in some situations challenged the sector (Lynch, 2000; Parry, 2007, 2010; Kaylay, 2008; Giaccardi, 2012).

For instance, the introduction of mainframe computers to museums in the 1960s was welcomed, albeit with the misconception that they were meant for museums with large collections that could afford the expensive equipment (Williams, 2010/1987). These mainframe computers were introduced for the purpose of transformation, which involved moving the museum's stock of information from paper (museum card catalogues housed in wooden file drawers) to electronic format (Jones, 2008). Transformation, according to Garlake (1995: 12), is 'painful, exhilarating, intellectually intractable and often visually alienating'. However, she argues that it is the same transformation that we owe cultural creativity. Despite the fact that the

operations and maintenance of the computers were complicated and needed the service of a skilled data processor, the machines were perceived as magical and were mainly used for the management of collections (Williams, 1987; Parry, 2010). Two systems, GRIPHOS and SELGEM, were among the first database-management systems used with the mainframe computers in museums (Vance, 1986).

The 1970s version (minicomputers) was welcomed by the museum community, as they were less expensive, easier to operate and occupied less space (Parry, 2010; Williams, 2010). On the other hand, there were pitfalls from previous projects resulting in inadequate electronic versions of their inadequate manual system's information (William, 1987). This was due to the work of uninformed museum officials who lacked familiarity with the basic concepts of data processing. However, the 1970s also witnessed an increase in the need for museum information management and sparked the development of a software market aimed at the museum community. This gave rise to the first generation of collection-management systems that have been in use in museums till date (Jones, 2008).

The 1980s witnessed the proliferation of microcomputers to the museum world (Williams, 2010). Williams (2010) pointed out that microcomputers were easier to use than both mainframe and minicomputers, as they did not require the service of trained data processors. The absence of a data processor meant that the cost of microcomputers was well within reach of most historical institutions of every size and scope. Therefore the 1980s saw museums being introduced to the possibilities of the computer age as never before. However, computers were yet to be used to disseminate information about museum artefacts to the public.

The 1990s witnessed a significant increase in the use of computer systems in museums, with improved performance, functionality and usability, including the first stage of exploiting external networks (Williams, 2010; Parry, 2010). At this stage emphasis was more on matching inventory control with supporting public and research access. According to Roberts (2000), the 2000s witnessed the rise in computer systems and network investments within the museum. The pervasive use of computers might have informed the move from inventory to information focus as well as the development and delivery of access to museum resources. Government

support for access and public expectation for access of information could also have been responsible for the convergence and collaboration between museums, archives and libraries. This was to encourage the sharing of resources between various institutions beyond geographical boundaries.

#### **4.2. Digitisation and digital theories on representation**

Computers, according to Williams (1987), have become imperative in the museum world and are used in tasks ranging from record management to actual exhibitions, thus helping shape visitor experiences. Witcomb (2003) also suggested that the introduction of multi-media technologies into the museum world would be an extension of the museum's media sphere, encouraging curators to become 'facilitators' rather than figures of authority, resulting in openness to popular culture and the recognition of multiple meanings. Likewise, as a result of television and computer, museums are faced with a new audience who are not used to reading labels and text but are accustomed to having information supplied to them visually (Williams, 1987).

Seeing, according to Mirzoeff (2002/1998: 3), is 'a great deal more than believing these days'. Mirzoeff's notion is perhaps due to the availability and wide use of smartphones, laptops and tablets with Internet facility that allow easy access to information on anything and everything in our daily lives (Mirzoeff, 2002(1998); Giaccardi, 2012). As a result, the virtual is becoming increasingly favoured for the dissemination and sharing of information to a wider audience in less time than face-to-face encounters. Thus, the virtual world has become not just part of our everyday life, but to some extent is our everyday life itself. To become part of that everyday life discourse, there is a need for the digitisation of museum artefacts such as the Ife bronzes.

McLuhan (1964: 3) states that 'we become what we behold, we shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us'. McLuhan posits that new ways of perceiving the world, which are embedded in knowledge structures and societal transformation, enable the development of tools that emulate new social and theoretical ideas. In this regard, digitisation is vital not only for the preservation of heritage but more for social interaction and transformation. Giaccardi further refers to digital technologies

as ‘ubiquitous personal memory devices and social media technologies’ (Giaccardi, 2012: 1). For museums to be able to reach their audience, they therefore need to derive new methods geared at attracting and engaging an online audience, as well as retaining their physical visitors, through the efficient application of the digital.

The newly ubiquitous personal memory devices and technologies further challenge the original mission of museums, which was more about the preservation of artefacts (as discussed in Chapter 3), thus indicating the need for a transformation in how museums operate. Recognising the need for such transformation, Hooper-Greenhill (1995) argued that the mission of museums in the twenty-first century should be more about the dissemination of information, implying that there needs to be a shift in museums’ practices with regards to how information about their collections is disseminated. Roy (2011) argued that new media is neither a universal remedy nor a cause for fear, but rather a highly flexible tool for people to develop effective historical connections. Faced with the need to engage a wider audience and saddled with the responsibility of making the inaccessible accessible, museums are thus required to embrace new methods of representation and dissemination. Poole (2010) also suggests that museum collections should be made accessible through a wide range of media. This need could possibly account for the introduction of new media in the form of digitisation into the museum’s world.

Despite the increase of computers in the home and office environment, museums are slowly accepting computers as a tool that can augment daily output with a minimal amount of expense and effort. However, the gradual introduction of new media can be perceived as a threat to the established culture and practices of the museum or as well as an ‘opportunity to reinvent itself and ensure its own survival in the twenty-first century’ (Cameron & Kenderdine, 2007: 35) Such threats in the form of psychological obstacles are likely to be evident in both African and Western museums. For Africa, it is a fear of the extension of imperialism through digital colonisation of African artefacts, since the West largely funds digital technology. For the West, this fear is of the likely loss of professional authority of curators. Both fears are likely related to issues associated with transformation, as neither the benefits nor the relevance of digital technology are fully understood (Garlake, 1995; Abungu, 2010). However, this thesis will explore the use of digitisation as an

opportunity to open up the Ife bronzes and other vistas onto the past from an increasing variety of perspectives.

Digitisation refers to the process of converting, creating and maintaining any type of original, be it paper, photographic prints or slides, 3D objects or moving images, into a digital format that can be viewed via computer and other devices (Astle & Muir, 2002). Knell (2003) argues that digitisation is the electronic recording of descriptive data about the artefacts that includes the digital representation or image of the objects. It is an innovation associated with the development of digital electronic storage and transmission of cultural expression converted into binary codes that can be read and stored by computers (Hesmondhalgh, 2007). Kalay (2008) argues that digitisation endows a new form of cultural heritage representation, offering abilities that older forms of representation could not achieve. Together, these scholars acknowledge the presence of a material object before digitisation can take place.

Kalay (2008) argues that digital representation profoundly influences content representation, management and communication, thus encouraging the emergence of new interpretations. According to Pavlov and Paneva (2005), digital representation brings the ability to share and update information, encouraging relevant feedback due to access anywhere and anytime. Although digitisation provides innovative methods for the preservation of artefacts and facilitates access to cultural heritage, it raises many issues around the authenticity of the electronic copies of the objects. As a result, there is a threat that digitised artefacts might sometimes be viewed as an inferior reproduction or an imitation that is likely to affect the way an online audience engages with real artefacts.

#### **4.3. Authenticity of material culture in a digitised format**

The value system of materiality tends to place a form of limitation on the idea of the digitisation of artefacts. Kalay (2008) amongst others argued that one of the most powerful features of the physicality of cultural heritage is its perceived authenticity. Authenticity, in this regard, is related to the way one can touch, feel or see artefacts from an ancient civilisation in an unmediated way. Kalay (2008: 6) suggested that the unmediated engagement enacted through the physical presence of the artefact creates a 'palpable connection with the past' that is not achievable through the

mediation of a computer monitor. She emphasised that the screen of the monitor acts as a barrier that provokes a sense of detachment and encourages disbelief due to childhood conditioning to seeing things on screen as unreal. Following on from Kalay (2008), I argue that the likely barrier imposed by the computer screen could also be related to the barrier imposed by museums' glass cases. This is due to the fact that museums' glass cases also provoke a sense of detachment, as visitors are not able to touch, smell or feel the artefact.

The value of material authenticity over the technological reproduced copy is further supported by Benjamin's (1969) theory. Benjamin (1969/1999: 3) maintains that an original artwork has an 'auraic' presence defined as the essence of all that is transmutable from its beginning, ranging from substantive duration to its testimony to the history that it has experienced. This can be true for the Ife bronzes, as they were not produced to be viewed originally in museums because they were 'kingly things' but produced for the royal cult of the Ife Kingdom before their 'discovery' by Westerners (as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2) (Willett, 1967a: Kopitoff, 1987). However, the objects have moved into everyday sphere and are reproduced digitally. Benjamin (2008: 3) also pointed out technological reproduction of the work of art is something else'. Implying that there is a likelihood that the digital format of the bronzes are new materials in their own right and perhaps not perceived as copy of the original. Following on from Benjamin's notion, mechanical reproduction through digital technology could be perceived as a threat to the artefacts' 'essence', which could in turn affect their value, interpretations and meanings. Alternately, and as Benjamin too arguably hoped for, they could render the fetishisation of the original unnecessarily.

The concept of aura as referred by Benjamin (1969/1999) is determined through links to materiality or original fabric and by tracing the original origin of the object. As a result, Benjamin (1999/1969) argues that aura is not possible for reproductions because the aura of the work of art withers in the age of mechanical reproduction. Like mechanical reproduction, social condition also affects the aura (Benjamin, 2008: 9). It is this social conditions that invariable affect the thought and the way people see things. Mechanical reproduction of the artwork, according to Benjamin



(1969), specifically destroys the presence of the work; thus the work no longer has a unique existence at a place. Following on, Cameron (2007) suggests that aura is the real object's enchantment such as its presence, but most importantly is its message-bearing abilities and the persuasiveness of its origin through associated stories and ascribed social meanings that are an important element in invoking its awe.

The reproductive and productive aspects of mechanical reproduction, according to Benjamin (1999/1969), fail to include the changes that the artwork may have suffered in physical condition as well as the various changes in ownership. He pointed out that:

Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and in space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence. This included the changes, which it may have suffered in physical condition over the years as well as the various changes in ownership. The traces of the first can be revealed only by chemical or physical analysis, which it is impossible to perform on a reproduction; changes of ownership are subject to a tradition, which must be traced from the situation of the original. (Benjamin, 1969: 220)

Developing these lines of thought, Baudrillard, one of the most important critics of cyberspace and the virtual world, argued that virtual reproductions would be sold as a perfect equivalent of the 'real' object and act as a continuous, faithful and objective reproduction (Baudrillard, 2000: 1), thus portraying technology that aids reproduction as an instrument for destabilising the real and true. Baudrillard further argued that all historical and political truth would be reduced to information – 'a semiotically self-referring existence' (Baudrillard, 2000: 11). To Baudrillard, information technology represents a medium that diminishes the value of human subjectivity itself, emphasising that meaning would be lost within the network of communications. The 'real' is therefore replaced by simulation. Baudrillard (2000: 164) stressed that reality is being 'murdered' by the process of validation and the virtual world. Baudrillard's (2000) argument further indicates that visitors would not be able to distinguish the replica from the real due to the emergence of convincing

surrogates that affect the ability to engage the senses and trigger emotional responses and memories, consequently making the ‘real’ objects become obsolete.

These arguments not in support for reproducibility by Benjamin and Baudrillard are interesting in a museum digital content. Posing the copy as an opposing force undermines museum culture and practice in that they have traditionally been custodians defining object value and meaning, in particular the concepts of material authenticity, originality and aura. Benjamin (1969) further viewed mechanical production hopefully as a means of resistance, rather than unification; and although his idea focused on fine art, it can be transferred to other cultural forms such as material artefacts representing cultures such as the Ife bronzes. Like other valuable cultural artefacts, there might be concerns regarding authenticity if the artefacts are considered for reproduction digitally or otherwise. However, it is important to note that, since the intervention of the West, the Ife bronzes have been reproduced for various reasons (as mentioned in Chapter 1) utilising various media such as pencil drawings, photographs and castings (Frobenius, 1911; Vogel, 1991; Platte, 2010b; Kuba & Hambolu, 2010). Since museums work through material objects, digitisation is not a move to replace the impact of material artefacts but to enhance the ‘original’ objects and improve accessibility and engagement. It is perhaps because of, rather than despite the wide spread of reproduced versions of the Ife bronzes, that the original casts still create stares of wonder.

Benjamin also argued that mechanical reproduction removes objects from their entrenchment within the ‘fabric of tradition’ (Benjamin, 1969: 223). However, Benjamin’s (1969) ideology of mechanical reproduction arguably does not consider the fact that museums survive by consciously gathering objects from a traditional or cultural context and placing them in the context of other things to make a purposeful representation (Witcombe, 2003). In the absence of the ‘real’ object, museums use a replica to perform the role of the real (Malpas, 2008) and of course new meanings and interpretations are constructed based on the assumptions of the curator and social context (Vogel, 1991).

Developing the same line of argument, Hooper-Greenhill (2000) suggested that the physical nature of an object is subject to change through time either deliberately or

accidentally. This implies that the meaning and use of a material object, which induces 'aura' changes whenever the ownership and environment changes (Hall, 1997). This results in a new form of aura at every change. Thus, 'aura' is not static but developed through relationship and the worth placed on an object by a society. I argue therefore that aura can be personal and individually attributed depending on the experience and relationship of an individual with an object. Museums, however, can also create a new kind of aura if the object's copy or original is represented in a right context that can 're-enact aura' in relation to the period they aim to exhibit. Moreover, producing a copy would mean that more people are likely to have access to enjoy and at the same time understand its wider implications. Such information can provides an insight to an artefact's presence in time and its significance to the tradition it emerged from.

Malpas (2008: 15) argued that culture is inseparable from materiality; it is 'always tied to materiality' due to the blurring between material and non-material heritage. This also indicates how culture can be authenticated through the materiality of an object. However, as Benjamin (1999/1969) argues aura that validates authenticity originates from an object's association with ritual. Such rituals tend to be threatened because mechanical reproduction separates the object from its defining nature and its accumulated history, thus jeopardising its authority. By implication, digitising the Ife bronzes might alienate them from traditions and endanger their value and authority. On the contrary, Ife bronze at the British museum was already alienated from such tradition since its purchase. Contrary to Benjamin (1968/1973), Cameron (2007) points out that the decision to digitise involves an active process of value and meaning-making equivalent to that of physical objects. This enacts the curatorial process of selecting what is significant, what should be remembered or forgotten, and what categories of meaning (such as classification, cultural values or aesthetical values) are given pre-eminence.

Cameron (2007) maintains that the value of 'the real' is increased through being digitised. Digitisation works to enhances its social, historical and aesthetic importance 'owing to the resources required in the compilation of a 3D rendering, and through distribution' (Cameron, 2007: 57). This is also in line with the National Library of Australia's Guidelines for Preservation of Digital Heritage on the notion

that the procedures employed in selection of material collections for exhibition are transferred to the process of selection for digitisation. The guideline states that:

What to keep is based on the same criteria as non-digital materials and where selection is based on criteria in collection policies, knowledge of materials and their context and most importantly defining the elements of the materials, which gives the object their value. (Library of Australia Guidelines, 2005: 69)

Cameron posited that, for the digitised material to be validated, it must take its place alongside what has been validated as 'valuable' (2008: 173). Her argument therefore substantiates the notion that for anything to be digitised it has to be valuable in the material world.

Wells (1994: 121) optimistically views the capacity for endless reproduction and wide circulation afforded by photography as a 'way to world peace that can be followed without any very grave risk of collision with the warring political forces and the vested interest of today'. He views the technology of reproduction as embodying the possibility of moving beyond the antagonism of contemporary politics and towards a global digital museum commons through the production of what he calls 'Permanent World Encyclopaedia' involving the collecting, indexing, summarising and release of knowledge through micro-photography (Wells, 1994: 122).

In the same line of thought is the idea of an imaginary museum where photographic reproduction can be used to bring works of art from the whole world in a new format on an accessible platform (Malraux, 1951). This imaginary museum, as suggested by Malraux (1951), seemed impossible in his time before the European war, but today, thanks to modern technology, images are frequently reproduced and digital technology has separated the photograph from its paper support. In making the public independent of the exhibition hall we are witnessing the birth of the virtual museum – a new kind of museum that is the product of the prodigious evolution of the imaginary museum (Battro, 2010). Despite the potential of the digital, as Benjamin (1969) indicated, that mechanical reproduction encourages the reproduction of the cultural object as it becomes available to anyone, anywhere. Hence, highlighting the ability of the digital to foster accessibility.

Similarly, Malpas (2008) argues that both film and photography operate by means of their capacity for the reproduction of visual images and can also be used to virtually represent already existing objects and events. Benjamin (2008: 6) also suggests that photography (which today obviously can also be digital) can 'bring out' those aspects of the original that are unattainable to the naked eye but accessible to the lens. Thus bringing audience much closer to the object. Likewise, Giaccardi (2012) argues that digitising opens up artefacts to more participatory ways of interaction. Therefore, the act of separating artefacts from their original contexts and placing them within remote museums after their discovery is no different from digitising the artefacts because they are already alienated objects. Instead, the digital format can perhaps provide a platform to represent the artefacts along with multiple interpretations, substantiating cultural significance and the environment where they were discovered. This also allows the possibility of manipulating the information in both spatial and temporal ways before being transmitted to remote viewers (Kalay, 2008).

Since information, according to Druker (1994), is the key asset for any organisation, museums are now rethinking their position in the present technology-driven age. Consequently, MacDonald (1992) reframes museums primarily as places or organisations responsible for the dissemination of information rather than being a central repository for objects. The objects are, however, only important when they contain information that can be communicated through a variety of media (Witcombe, 2007). Such media need to provide high-quality interaction between real objects and real people (Poole, 2010).

#### **4.4. Materiality and the virtual within the context of digital exhibitions**

Until the nineteenth century, works of art were predominantly a representation of something, whether real or imaginary (Malraux, 1967). The material world is involved with the signs of power through accumulation that carry authority through evidence, knowledge, privilege and the passage of time (Benjamin, 2008; Malpas, 2008; Witcombe, 2007). On the other hand, the virtual world is often seen as modern, popular, immediate, temporary and 'democratic', and often referred to as 'the other' in relation to its material counterpart (Witcombe, 2007: 35). A material

object, according to Manovich (2001), is a self-contained structure limited in space and time; it is fundamental and clearly described from other objects both semantically and physically. In contrast, Levy (1998) describes the virtual as something that is not quite there, something intangible with an absence of existence, as the complement of the real or tangible, thus emphasising the ephemerality likely associated with the virtual.

Graham (1999: 159) claims that the virtual is not a semblance of something else but an alternative type of entity with properties similar and dissimilar to those with which it is contrasted. He suggests that virtual objects have their own right and as such must be attributed a distinctive form of reality (Graham, 1999). Following on, Cubitt (1998) argues that every digital object, like the older technology of print or film, is however a unique object with its own physical and aesthetic qualities. However, while museums have been about material things, the virtual is sometimes regarded as a departure from the tangibility that had defined the venue, visit and vocation of the museum, thus raising questions of authenticity and trust (Parry, 2010). Also, Battro (2010) claims that photographic and digital reproductions are not original works but are more or less successful replicas on different support systems. This signifies that the virtual should be an extension of the real museum, since a walk through a museum is not the same as looking through a photograph album or visiting a website.

An understanding of art and material culture therefore depends on the quality of the space and special experience, which reflects the power of the museum as a physical site. Therefore, publics often choose museums over schools and the media as the 'most trusted' cultural institution, with the presence of the artefact acting as an impartial material witness (Rosenzweig & Thelen, 1998). The visitors believe that the material artefacts displayed in a museum tell a story, but forget that the story they tell is told within the curatorial and architectural framework where new meanings are imposed by the museum (Ciolfy, 2012). This may be because the artefacts have been separated from their acquired authenticity immediately they are removed from their original, historical, physical and emotional place (Parry, 2010).

This also indicates that although the physical museum presents real objects, visitors tend to forget that museums impose on their viewers an absolute new relationship as regards the artefacts exhibited. They thereby 'liberate artefacts from their expected function'; for example, transforming portraits into pictures (Malraux, 1967:9). It is imperative to note, therefore, that it is not only reproduction that can destroy the aura and authenticity of an object but the conscious removal from its original domain of tradition and rituals, which exposes them to being reactivated for different purposes that might be based on economic, educational or political reasons (Benjamin, 1969; Gere, 2002). Hence, the virtual reproduction of material objects placed on websites raises similar debates removing an object from its 'authentic' context and into the museum environment (Parry, 2010).

Museums' main characteristics as social spaces where visitors engage with material objects is as a result of social interactions that occur between the visitors and the objects; virtual spaces, by contrast, can often be thought of as isolating and lacking in meaningful contact (Bandelli, 2010). However, the virtual realm is also a space that allows the visitor to carry out series of instructive actions that exceed the limit of a photographic reproduction, such as getting very close to a particular artwork or object and zooming in on a particular property while at the same time obtaining information on the work and artist (Battro, 2010). This substantiates the idea of space, according to Merleau-Ponty (1996), as being separated into both 'physical space' and 'geometric space'.

The physical space involves real spatial things and the relations between them, which subjects encounter in practical life; the geometrical space is space presented to a subject engaged in rational reflection rather than practical activity (Merleau-Ponty, 1996). Parry (2010) further suggests that there is a difference between real objects displayed in a museum and their virtual reproduction in an online environment. He indicated that the contrast between the real and the virtual can be misleading as well as obscuring their commonalities, simplifying the multiple meanings that objects acquire through cultural history. The use of digitisation in an exhibition context can therefore be understood as a tool for accessing interpretations and re-experience, one infrequently understood as a material expression in its own right, that continues to some extent operate within the traditional informative framework.

#### **4.5. Object interpretation in the digital sphere**

Malpas (2008) argued that mechanical reproduction will not only affect the physicality or materiality of the object but will further affect the production of a multiplicity of interpretations. He substantiates his point by adding that virtual representation, apart from integrating dynamic elements and allowing accessibility to hidden aspects of artefacts, will not affect aura in as much as 'it does not masquerade as the real thing' (Malpas, 2008: 18). This implies that viewers need to be aware that the object being viewed is linked to an original somewhere, as this might affect how the interpretation is constructed. According to Tilden, this empowers curators to practise the guiding principles of heritage interpretation. Tilden (2008(1977) argued that heritage interpretation should be more than finding facts and information but about empowering visitors to understand the heritage themselves through personal meaning and inspiration. Tilden recognised the importance of the interpreter in place of the museum curator in facilitating visitor understanding. This recognition informed Tilden's definition of interpretation as:

...an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by first-hand experience, or illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information. (Tilden, 2008: 17)

This definition, although focused on interpretation, also identifies that museum objects can be represented through varying media that includes the digital. As a result, Benjamin's (1969) theory may seem to be at odds with contemporary cultural practices, as both material and ostensible non-material culture affects issues of interpretation. However, the shift from analogue to digital brings with it enormously increased reproductive and productive capacities for what Malpas (2008: 17) terms 'virtualism' – the creation of entirely new works and even new domains that are nevertheless highly realistic in their own terms. The digital representation and reproduction of the Ife bronzes is thus likely to re-enact and encourage the continuity of discourses that might allow for new trends of interpretations and meanings to emerge.



Adopted as a guide for interpretation in this thesis are Tilden's (2008(1977: 18) six principles of interpretation:

1. Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile.
2. Information, as such, is not interpretation. Interpretation is relevant based upon information. But they are entirely different things. However, all interpretations include information.
3. Interpretation is an art that combines many arts, whether the materials present are scientific, historical or architectural. Any art is in some degree teachable.
4. The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction but provocation.
5. Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part and must address itself to the whole rather than any phase.
6. Interpretation addressed to children (say, up to the age of twelve) should not be a dilution of the presentation to adults but should follow a fundamentally different approach. To be at its best it will require a separate programme.

Whilst some of these principles are contentious for example, Foucauldians would critique point 2 of Tilden's six principles are still useful and in use informing curators that interpretations should not be one-sided but should endeavour to present a more capacious picture that would likely aid understanding. I would argue that the principles used in interpreting within the museum space should be extended to the digital sphere. Interpreting, according to Tilden's third principle, indicates that the material composition of the Ife bronzes could also play a significant role in the interpretation ascribed to them. Cameron (2007) suggests that the past would be at the service of the object reclaimed through its digital counterpart as it has the ability to illustrate, reiterate and pass on a set of social relations constructed for the 'real'. As a result, an interpretation inclusive of the past could perhaps validate a collective social memory for a particular people (Hall, 2005).

Ciolfi (2012) posited that in museums for many years curatorial teams of experts worked to produce fixed interpretations and meanings for artefacts. However, Ciolfi

(2012: 71) indicated that curators' decisions were kept 'invisible', as they offer museum exhibits as 'given and authoritative' rather than as a product of their professional practice, sets of values, intentions and meanings. Such 'old museology' meanings, however, as we have seen are subject to radical change in accordance with the prevailing practice and culture of the curator. In recent times, visitors are often encouraged to gain a voice whereby they can question museum content and layout, making the museum a place for debate where they can leave traces of their own meanings and interpretations (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992; Ciolfi, 2012). These efforts attempt to bridge the gap between a museum's visitors and its curators. The digital sphere provides another opportunity to narrow that gap by allowing everyday people to contribute to the interpretation of artefacts that can be used in identity discourses (Giaccardi, 2011).

In reflecting on the different strands involved in the construction of interpretation, Malpas (2008) also argued that something as intangible as language could be classified, as it is imbued with materiality in the form of speech, marks and signs and adds value to the visual. Hence, Malpas like Fanon (2008 (1952), Foucault (1977) and Hall (1997) identified the importance of language in the construction of interpretation from different perspectives. I argue, therefore, that for an interpretation to be more fully capacious, it needs to take into consideration the original language and implications of the language on how interpretation is constructed. Different expressions and words are likely to have varying implications to different communities, which is likely to affect how meaning is constructed. The digital sphere allows the merging of both materiality and non-materiality within the same space to provide a better understanding of museum artefacts. As a result, it can encourage public participation as much as the physical museum space.

#### **4.6. Methods of digitisation**

Bearing in mind that there are various methods of digitisation (including the optical character recognition method, photographic method, lithographic method and video-graphic method), this research explores digitisation through the digital photographic method. Digital photography is discussed in this section as a method of digitisation because it has the capacity to become a tool for capturing and preserving both

tangible and intangible heritage (Silberman, 2008: 81). Digital photography also falls into the categories of digital media that, according to the New Heritage Conference (2006), have the capacity to record not only the tangible and intangible essence but also the cultural heritage and the society that created or used the site and by extension the artefacts. I extend the term 'site' to include artefacts in line with the Convention of World Heritage (UNESCO, 1972). The convention defines heritage in terms of places that have universal value and that are to be protected for future generations to appreciate and enjoy. Such places, like Ile-Ife, came into the limelight because of artefacts that are considered to be of universal value (Schildcrout, 2010). As a result, Coyne (2012) argues that artefacts are included in the definition of heritage that needs to be protected and preserved.

Recent advances in web technologies, as well as virtual and augmented reality, present an opportunity for museums to exhibit their resources online. This provides the potential of expanding and extending their services to a wider audience beyond the physical walls of the museum. However, Silberman (2008: 11) argued that whatever technology is being used has to be 'developed, democratised and made more widely accessible'. Digital cameras tend to fit into Silberman's description, as it is easily accessible, affordable and easy to operate. Museums have the ability to create a definitive record of works of art both for public interpretation and for digital preservation in case the material artefacts ever get damaged or destroyed (Silberman, 2008). Pavlidis et al (2007) emphasised that the method of digitisation depends largely on the nature of the subject of recording as well as the purpose of its recording. Therefore, the digital photographic method would perhaps not be suitable for some objects; as a result, other methods of digitisation would then be utilised.

Coyne (2012: 163) argued that amateur digital photography is an art of 'permutation and cherished misjudgement' that allows for the production of surplus images. She emphasised the difference between digital and analogue film-based photography; apart from the sheer quantity of images that can be produced by both professional and amateur, digital photography encourages a unique process of collating, sorting, editing, archiving, embedding and sharing large numbers of images (Silberman, 2008; Coyne, 2012). Such quality production, due to continuous improvement in the

technology, allows the photographs to be used over and over again without reducing their quality. As a result, even professionals insert them in presentations, catalogues, reports, webpages and blogs (Coyne, 2012). This is very evident in the British Museum catalogues and flyers that were used to publicise the 2010 exhibition of the Ife artefacts.

The quantity and quality of digital photographs are due to both rapid development in photographic technology and the availability of cameras on smartphones, laptops and tablets, which are readily available for use at any time and anywhere (Coyne, 2012). Photos are readily available to be consumed on the screens of smartphones, laptops and tablets, and are easily accessible through image-sharing sites such as Flickr. That way, digital photography can allow the input and involvement of visitors, local and associated community groups and other stakeholders of various ages and backgrounds to participate in its distribution and interpretation. According to Silberman (2008), this participation has transformed cultural heritage sites from static monuments into places and resources of learning and reflection about the past. Silberman further emphasised the fact that collections could become ‘resources for sustainable community development and intercultural and intergenerational dialogue’ (2008: 89). Coyne (2012) further argued that digital photographs have become formal modes of evidence-gathering that are major instruments to professional working.

Despite the benefits of digital photographs, Patel et al (2003) criticised most current museum websites because they tend to take a 2D-only approach, thus presenting the viewer with flat images of cultural artefacts with textual description in a web-based catalogue format. Pavlidis et al (2007), on the other hand, suggested that 3D digitisation of cultural heritage should be the first step of the overall process of the complete recording of objects and monuments. This could be because the 3D digitisation is likely to record the artefacts in relation to current temperature, humidity and air currents that the 2D counterpart might not record (Silberman, 2008). However, Silberman (2008: 88) argued that neither 2D nor 3D capture the ‘essence’ of the artefacts but only contribute to its empirical description. Patel et al (2003) also suggested that digitisation, which aids virtual representation, can include

many types of media objects that are likely to capture the essence of a museum artefact, such as 3D models, object movies, pictures, video, image sequences and textual descriptions.

It is important to note that photography can improve on the view of the naked eye, as the photographer is able to target subjects close up via zoom and wide-angle format (Coyne, 2012; Benjamin, 1969). Coyne pointed out that digital cameras are also built with technology and software that allows them to have secondary functions as a 'telescope, microscope and periscope' and makes them a reliable multi-functional device (2012: 163). As a result, digitisation has the potential of developing to include more forms such as videos and textual descriptions to produce a rich representation.

According to Silberman (2008), digital photography cannot take the position of a real object. However, I argue that it has the potential of preserving artefacts for future generations as well as allowing stakeholders to participate in its creation, interpretation and distribution of a digitised format at minimal cost. The purpose of digital recording varies from archiving, digitisation for presentation, and digitisation for commercial exploitation (Pavlidis et al, 2003). This implies that digital data processing and storage, archival and management, representation and reproduction are all aspects that are considered before digitisation takes place. However, this idea only considers digitisation projects carried out within cultural institutions and does not include digital photographs produced randomly by individuals who have contributed to making the past part of the ever-expanding virtual presence through social media and image-sharing websites. Such input from the public has caused both the nature of authenticity and the role of interpretation to be re-examined and redefined to include the public.

On the other hand, the digitisation of objects is a field of continuous research and development that can offer many possibilities, again under the scope of a specific digitisation plan (Pavlidis et al, 2007). Despite the variation in digitisation, Pavlidis et al (2007) pointed out that there are other variables that affect the digitisation method selected by an institution, such as available resources. With the advent of high-definition digital cameras, digitisation through digital photography, however,

proves to be more economical in terms of the resources required. Coyne (2012) argued that digital photographs are deposited in very large numbers from digital cameras to be sorted arranged, ordered, compared and shared.

The ease of availability of digital photography also makes it problematic in nature. Silberman (2008) for instance argues that digital photography often operate ostensibly with little regard for the authority of professionals and experts. Silberman (2008) also argued that digital photography further challenges the authority of institutions and heritage practices, in that anyone can create digital content easily, anywhere and at any time. With this richer, if contentious data model of digital representations of museum collections, museums can now build online virtual museums complete with interactivity in virtual or augmented reality environments. Such a virtual museum affords further advantages in that it is possible to display artefacts that would normally be inaccessible except to a selected few. This might include exhibits that cannot be made available due to their fragile nature or because of other preservation issues, or those that cannot be displayed simply due to a lack of physical space (Patel et al, 2003). I would emphasise that digital photography could therefore assist in populating the digital universe with digitised artefacts; and yet how they are organised, and through one by which 'frame' remains key questions.

#### **4.7. The digital universe**

According to Seel (2012: 3), the 'digital universe' is a term that describes a global human environment saturated with intelligent devices that enhance our ability to 'collect, process and distribute information'. Gantz et al (2008) argued that the digital universe has continued to expand as a result of faster growth in cameras, digital shipment and better understanding of information. Their research pointed out that the digital universe would be ten times larger in 2011 than it was in 2006. This is as a result of the amount of information created, captured and replicated, which is likely to exceed available storage in 2007 (Gantz et al, 2008). However Gantz et al's prediction have long been exceed as more people are now connected online through ubiquitous persona memory devices and social media technology (Giaccardi, 2012). Interestingly, Gantz et al's (2008) findings indicated that Internet access in emerging countries is also a contributor to the expansion of the digital universe. Such findings

emphasise the ideology that, from inception, the digital was a Western idea that failed to include emerging countries like Africa at inception.

As technology become prevalent in everyday life, Seel (2012) argued that it is responsible for connecting people twenty-four hours a day. This has led to a continuous growth in the amount of digital content created. Despite this growth, Gantz et al (2008) emphasised the importance of an inclusive participation of individuals in creating a digital universe through user activities. Such activities, such as taking and uploading pictures, account for approximately 70% of the digital universe (Gantz et al, 2008). This emphasises the prevalence of the visual in communication. Cameron (2005) argued that there is a possibility with the digital that collections' documentation might be reconceptualised to form new knowledge models in line with contemporary theoretical, pedagogic and public access concerns. Such new knowledge is acquired from interaction with the world as a result of experiences organised and stored in each individual's mind (Orna & Pettitt, 2010).

Knowledge becomes personal when external experiences are transformed into internal knowledge; hence, as Orna & Pettitt, (2010: 29) puts it, 'knowledge belongs to us more surely than most of our possessions'. This is because the way individuals experience the world is peculiar and becomes inherent to that individual (Orna & Pettitt, 2010). The digital device, according to Seal (2012), has improved access to knowledge. However, unlike the physical museum space, Gantz et al (2008) argued that not all information created and transmitted gets stored and by 2011, almost half of the digital universe will not have a permanent home. This emphasises the ephemerality of the digital universe as a space that cannot be relied upon. In acknowledgement of the instability of the digital, the UNESCO Charter (2003:1) states that digital heritage is at risk of being lost and that its preservation is for the benefit of both present and future generations.

This statement further emphasises that authenticity or ownership of digital intellectual material are not the only issues with the digital context; short life span is also an issue. Despite the short life span of digital content, with about 5 billion people getting connected to the Internet, all are expected to be creating and

consuming content and the digital universe will continue to be populated (Seal, 2012). This is made possible through the availability and access to the Internet either through personal gadgets such as mobile phones, tablets and laptops. As a result, the lack of digital content around the Ife exhibition as I will discuss in the next chapter implies that the artefacts and the culture they represent fail to be part of the digital universe. Museums' digital content can thus be created through users' activities through creation, replication or captured content that is distributed through personal digital devices. The digital universe is a composition of knowledge production and sharing and can also exclude emerging societies that are yet to be connected.

#### **4.8. Digital racism and colonisation**

According to Wojcieszak (2010), the Internet facilitates communication, allows for cheap content creation, and makes it possible for geographically dispersed users to converge in homogeneous online groups. She emphasised that some of these groups provide a safe sanctuary for such previously marginalised individuals as white supremacists. However, 'marginalised individuals' can be better understood as those who were formally colonised and deprived of a voice (Edwards & Tredell, 2008). It remains the case that, unbeknown to many online users, digital racism exists that are driven by white supremacists (Daniels, 2009). Daniels (2009) emphasised that white supremacists are often educated, sophisticated and well-informed intellectuals, as opposed to the assumption that they are 'gap-toothed, ignorant and uneducated' (Daniels, 2009: 3). Such analysis has indicated the existence of racial inequality. Digital racism in this thesis also implies cyber racism but this is extended and enabled through the availability and use of various personal digital devices (Back, 2002; Daniels, 2009).

In examining the issue of digital equality, Daniels (2009) argued that the speed associated with the Internet has facilitated the expansiveness of racism beyond geographical boundaries. This has contributed to the white supremacy movement in Europe and North America (Back, 2002). Daniels (2009) estimated about 1,500 non-American and about 2,500 American white supremacy websites to be online in 2003 alone. The figure today may be higher due to the increased use of tools such as smartphones, laptops and tablets that are readily available and connected to the



Internet (Kaylay, 2008; Wojcieszak, 2010; Giaccardi, 2012). This allows more people to have the chance to construct affordable websites that exclude and include the 'other' at will.

Daniels further argued that racialised masculinity is 'constructive of white supremacy', thus highlighting that digital racism is gender-specific. On the contrary, Kuichi (2010) argued that white supremacy is not gender-specific; hence it is inclusive of white women and female white supremacist voices are readily available in the public sphere. Although Daniels' (2009) idea of white supremacy in the digital world is used to interrogate ethnicity, gender and sexuality, in this thesis it is used in investigating imperial ideology as regards Eurocentric supremacy over Africa. This ideology extends in various forms seems to transcend from the colonial era to the present day and is likely to be disseminated through digital technology.

Likewise, the overwhelming funding of digital technology by the Western world makes it difficult to challenge the idea of digital imperialism. Digital technology might in some ways be perceived as a tool for authenticating the dominant voice of the West. In extreme and serious cases, the inability to decipher the agenda behind some of the websites also poses a challenge in identifying cloaked websites. Thus, digital racism is very likely to transpire without being challenged, as white supremacists have customised the Internet in ways that are 'innovative, sophisticated and cunning' (Daniels, 2009: 3). For example, Daniels (2009), through textual and visual analysis, illustrates the ways in which 'hate' websites conceal their agenda, describing how oral-history data from the Library of Congress can be used towards presenting slavery as 'humane' or how an organisation that denies the Holocaust can flaunt itself as a source to which 'countless scholars, researchers, and journalists have turned' for 'solid and reliable information' (2009: 130). This is because, although more people rely on information online, not everyone possesses the skill to distinguish the racial websites referred to as 'cloaked white supremacist websites' (Daniels, 2009: 3).

Following on from Daniels (2009), the use of the Internet to disseminate both digital images and narratives about the Ife bronzes is not detrimental in itself, but it

obviously becomes questionable when the narratives are brought into contact with those which are perhaps one-sided and validate the story of white supremacy over Africa. Such narratives, disseminated through websites, substantiate the ideology of imperialism in the post-colonial period. Although the Internet arguably allows a degree of openness and accessibility that was unattainable in the colonial era, it can tend to be an exclusive privilege for those who not only have access but can also contribute to discourses that relate to their identity. Daniels (2009) further argued that the ideology of white supremacy was prevalent in the print age, but digital technology has led to its widespread raise today unlike ever before. I would emphasise however, that the openness of the digital technology that aided the expansion of white supremacy could also become the tool for stopping its propagation, for the simple reason that, due to the openness of the digital sphere to criticism, it exposes power relationships, dominance, oppression and injustices.

However, the inability of the colonised to challenge online texts (visual or print) can also be equated to the print age, when the colonised voice was silenced. This could lead to the digital colonisation of groups who have historically been oppressed and discriminated against. Also as countries that missed the industrial revolution ended up being colonized, in the same order countries that will miss the digital revolution will become digitally colonised by developed economies (Koutonin, 2012). Digital racism and colonisation, then, is not limited to a geographical location but is part of a more widespread digital divide.

#### **4.9. The digital divide**

Kalay (2008) argues that, once information is captured in a digital format, the content can be easily disseminated. The question then becomes: who is the digital content disseminated to? How can the digital become inclusive of everybody? Daniels (2009: 81) suggested that the gap in owning a computer and having Internet access reflects a parallel inequality commonly referred to as the 'digital divide'. The digital divide, according to Norris (2001), can be understood as a multi-dimensional phenomenon encompassing three distinct aspects, namely: the global divide, the social divide and the democratic divide. The global divide concerns the divergence to Internet access between the industrialised and the developing societies; the social

divide concerns the gap between the information rich and information poor; while the democratic divide identifies the difference between those who either do or do not have access to digital technology to engage in whatever way in public life (Norris, 2001). Thus, the Internet can be used as ‘a medium of politics that furthers the process of estrangement in social life by neutralising the potential of political interaction’ (Koch, 2005: 162). The digital divide is therefore concerned with all forms of inequalities (political, social and economic) that arise or are likely to arise from the universal level to the individual level through the use or lack of use of digital technology (including the Internet).

Kalay (2008) argues that, despite the potential of digital technology, information will only be available to those who are in possession of a cell phone or to a cable television. Therefore, lack of digital technology and facilities automatically alienates people from any information that is disseminated digitally. I argue that such digital content will be available to people who not only own the ubiquitous personal memory device (Giaccardi, 2012: 1), but those who are skilled in its use and connected to the Internet. Seal (2012) also argued that full Internet access, where mobile phones are upgraded to 3G and 4G services, may be a solution to bridging the digital divide between the information ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ on the planet. This emphasises the power of the Internet, which is fundamental for an end–end communication (Wojcieszak, 2010).

Kalay (2008) suggested that the digital, through its power of communication, has the potential to aid a participatory culture. But the question arises of who will participate in what, since participation can only occur if there is equal access to the Internet. I argue therefore, in line with Kalay, that an inclusive and participatory culture is one that includes everybody and anybody who can connect digitally irrespective of gender, race, age, educational background, class, status, geographical location and all that constitutes the digital divide. However, the varying contexts of inequality implies that there is a wider gap in the digital divide despite large numbers of people getting connected to the Internet (via smartphones, tablets or laptops) and constitutes a challenge to digitisation (Norris, 2001; Hargittai, 2002; Giaccardi, 2012).

Hargittai further argued that the digital divide extends to another level, which she referred to as the 'second-level digital divide' (firstmonday.org, 2001). Her reason for a second level of digital divide is due to the lack of specific skills and abilities in how to effectively use the medium. I argue, however, that although there is a widening gap in the digital divide, effective skills and abilities can be classified and analysed under education. Education, according to the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, has consistently been a predictor of access to the Internet and is likely to affect the level of Web use skill (NTIA, 2000; Hargittai, 2002). In those terms, bridging the digital divide is paramount to an inclusive participatory culture but it will be a while for the span created by the widening gap to be bridged. As a result, only a selected few are digitally enabled and connected via the Internet while others remain excluded.

Norris (2001) argued that the digital technology has the potential to boost productivity and enhance the economy. He emphasised that the economically stable Western world would continue to benefit, while poorer societies lag behind because they are 'plagued by multiple burdens of debt, disease and ignorance' (Norris, 2001: 5). Following Norris (2001), one can also argue that the continual economic disparity between the West and Africa, and between communities and between individuals, could be a deterrent to bridging the widening digital divide.

Warschauer (2004) has proposed that the digital divide can also be widened through digital content being created online. She pointed out that digital content that is being created does not necessarily 'meet the needs of diverse communities around the world' (Warschauer, 2004: 81). Thus, social exclusion is likely to occur when the content as well as the language utilised for online text (visual and print) resonates with a one-sided narrative and a dominant language (Fanon, 2008(1952); Daniels, 2009). According to Walcott (1970: 3), language is not a place of retreat; 'it's not a place of escape, it's not a place of resolution. It's a place of struggle.' Thus, language has the potential of widening the digital divide between the West and Africa, as it could be perceived as a tool used in fostering imperial ideology.

The pangs of the digital divide therefore are felt beyond geographical boundaries and indicates that one can reside in the Western world and still be alienated from online discourses about digitised museum artefacts. Despite the challenges associated with digitisation, Pickover (2009) argued that whatever is not digitised ceases to be part of history. This emphasises the need for digitisation; as people continue to interact in the digital sphere, whatever cannot be located online ceases to be part of history both past and present. Such argument work to substantiates the need for digitisation in encouraging an inclusive participatory culture.

#### **4.10. Justification for digitisation**

To Gere (2002: 11), digitisation is ‘the whole panoply of virtual simulacra, instantaneous communication, ubiquitous media and global connectivity that constitutes much of our contemporary experience’. It is an important and constitutive part of development and to some extent determines its form. Its vast range includes digital film, digital television, virtual reality, digital special effects and multi-media. Digitisation, as suggested by Marty (2008), is merely information represented in electronic form and is the latest in a long series of information science and technology advancements dating back thousands of years that have brought new expectations and new opportunities to people across the globe, aiding the ideologies of globalisation.

In Adegbija’s pitting statement, (2003), globalisation refers to the desire to integrate and to make universal the different systems of the world; fashioning the world into a cultural, economic and technological melting pot, making the world speak with ‘one voice’ on vital issues. Globalisation can also refer to the globalising tendencies of capitalism’ or to the situation where one country or community has to rely on another for its needs, encouraging universal thinking and bringing about integration of the countries of the world (Buckley & Ghauri, 2004). The geographical and economical rise of information and communication technology and transportation, as well as the general rise in technology, has encouraged the shift from the idea of museums as repositories of objects to museums as repositories of knowledge (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992; White, 2004). Therefore the need to provide access to information about

objects, in addition to opening up the objects themselves, has made museums become crucial global information utility (MacDonald, 1991; Black, 1999).

This change in role and the world being seen as a global village has also triggered more interest in how people, information and technology can work together to enhance the museum experience for museum professionals, visitors and all users of museum resources. This has resulted in the proliferation of portable, handheld, pocket, wearable as well as implantable devices whose main purpose is to 'transfer real-life data into digital form and make them more suitable for storing, manipulating and exchanging' cultural data (Milekic, 1999: 13). Furthermore, since culture can be expressed through physical or other goods, trade in art and culture has become an explosively growing activity with the introduction of new technologies (Ghosh, 2003). It is therefore imperative to recognise that the latest technology affecting museums' positive operations globally is digitisation through multi-media and communication media, which makes the sharing of information much easier (Ghosh, 2003; Abungu, 2010). Globalisation is often understood as 'glocalisation' and is therefore not to make culture disappear but, on the contrary, to invest new meaning in the local incarnation and expression that appears to influence societies everywhere (Lidsitz & Munby, 2000).

Contemporary museum visitors today often come with new expectations and ask questions that rely on an unprecedented level of information access; they expect most of the answers to be available online to be accessed wherever they reside in the world. This can only be made possible through digitisation. The needs of the new museum visitors reflect the challenges, needs and expectations that have emerged since museums have adapted to their new role in the information society (Marty, 2008). The introduction of satellite technologies and other vehicles such as the Internet has made the dissemination of information and cultural artefacts that determine how societies think, how much they know of and relate to the world around them and even how they dream easy to deliver to homes (Ghosh, 2003).

According to Marty (2008: 33), the ability to make a 'virtually infinite number of perfect copies of digital surrogates and transmit them great distances with no loss of quality offers new levels of interactivity between objects and users'. It removes

objects from the constraints of physical space and present arrangements impossible in physical galleries with the use of hyper media and multi-media, and provides remote access to information resources for visitors, scholars, researchers and students. The ability to target unique information needs by either broadcasting information resources to an individual user or to wide audience is frequently taken in museum culture to be a key advantage of digital information representation.

#### ***4.10.1 Access to collections and knowledge***

The prospects that digital technology present for the dissemination of knowledge about cultures represented in museums has been considered by MacDonald and Alsford (1997) as a key factor needed in transforming museums, as it brings about an opportunity for accessibility in an unthinkable magnitude. Their idea for a virtual museum goes beyond the digitisation of resources in individual museums to the collaboration of multiple institutions (museums, libraries, archives, historic sites, scholarly societies, etc.) combining their digital resources (MacDonald & Ashford, 1997; Loran, 2005). The idea of making collections more accessible and disseminating knowledge to the widest possible audience is clearly a positive one. However, Loran argued that several authors warn of the dangers of museums just providing ‘more information to more people’ and not really taking advantage of the interactive capacities of information and communications technology (Loran, 2005).

Donovan (1997) argues that merely opening up museum collection databases to a wider audience, considering their object-centric information should not be considered sufficient. He suggests that museums should aim to provide their databases in a format that can be of interest to a broad range of users. This can be through the creation of a compelling online experience through the provision of context and storytelling that stimulates curiosity, exploration and serendipity (Donovan, 1997). Following on, Dierking and Falk (1998) emphasise how the capacity of new technology can help museums ensure better understanding in visitors with varying backgrounds, interests and knowledge levels, therefore increasing conceptual accessibility. The new technology has the capability to offer visitors learning options, interactivity and various degrees of depth of information. Anderson (1999) suggests suggests the use of a ‘learning model’ for creating digital content

rather than an 'information provision' model. This might be because the learning model will require a museum's audience to question what has been represented instead of accepting the museum as the final authority.

#### ***4.10.2 Reaching a broader and more diverse audience***

The Internet can allow museums and museum content to reach global audiences, even in their own homes. Loran (2005) argued that through the use of the web, museums can reach people who are not able to visit the museum, or who are not inclined to do so and as a result attract new audiences. Also, the interactivity capability of the media is sometimes taken as being particularly appealing to children and young audiences (Loran, 2005). According to MacDonald and Alsford (1997), museums cannot remain aloof from technological trends if they wish to attract such young twenty-first-century audiences. On the other hand, as museum audiences for digital resources are growing fast, the demographic information about web users indicates that they are likely of the same social status as the traditional museum-visiting audience (MacDonald & Alsford, 1997; Keene, 1998; Terras, 2010). This might suggest that it is the very same people who visit museums who are also interested in their online presence. Instead of increasing the number of visitors by appealing to a younger age group, online access might therefore be seen as a treat created for the museum's traditional visitor (Hooper-Greenhill, 2012).

In 2001 Ross indicates that more than 70% of the UK population now has access to web technologies, from their homes, schools or offices (Ross, 2001). According to the UK Office of National Statistics almost three quarters of adults in Great Britain used the Internet everyday (73%) in 2013, with 6 out of every 10 adults (61%) using a mobile phone or portable computer to access the Internet 'on the go' (Office for National Statistics, 2013: 1). But despite this advancement of web technology in the UK, one cannot say the same for countries such as Nigeria. As a result, there will be some form of digital divide where some people are disadvantaged from viewing online collections even if they want to. The imperative to digitise will not be hampered by such digital divide, however, because not digitising for any reason implies that the artefacts in question cease to be part of history (Pickover, 2009). An



improvement towards bridging the gap in the digital divide is evident in current developments in technology such as smartphones that enable surfing the Internet, cheaper perhaps and interactive digital television. These have allowed a broader spectrum of society to gain access to whatever is digitised and exhibited online through social media platforms (Giaccardi, 2012).

#### ***4.10.3. Creating new relationships with audiences***

Many critics and academics such as Giaccardi (2012) argues that digital technology through social media encourages a ‘participatory culture’. This is due to its capability of involving diverse audiences from different geographical locations in discourses about a particular artefact. In such a way, the meanings and values that individuals and communities ascribe to such artefacts are made known. Jackson’s (1998) idea for using information and communication technology puts people first, encouraging applications that are user-driven, to create social relationships and promote participation with the incorporation of users’ expertise and views. This idea happens to be in line with the new trend in museology, where the audience is expected to be the centre of attention so as to strengthen their relationship (Kotler & Kotler, 2000; Kotler et al, 2008; Ciolfi, 2012). Jackson (1998) supports the idea of collaborative knowledge creation or open documentation, which stresses the value of developing knowledge about collections collaboratively with the public. As a result, the public are empowered to include their interpretations by making specific areas of collection databases open to public contribution (Jackson, 2008; Giaccardi, 2012).

Morrisson and Worts (1998) also pointed out that the use of information and telecommunication technology (ICT) to exhibit museum collections has the potential of bringing the visitors’ story into the interpretive process; connecting the content of the activities to the visitors’ lives; connecting objects to people, places and purposes; connecting people to people, and people to resources (Loran, 2005); facilitating and encouraging playfulness; personalising the message through stories and narrative; involving visitors in making decisions, choices and judgements; providing multiple perspectives and viewpoints; creating responsive environments; and providing relevant information. This idea can only be made possible if museum collections are first digitised (converted to information), thus enabling the easy transfer of

information, as well as empowering users with the skills required to use such digital resources creatively (Anderson, 2000; Hargittai, 2002).

Furthermore, Walsh (1997) argues that the tone of institutional authority characteristic of museums does not work well on the web, because its interactive characteristics have great potential to develop the museum voice into ‘an infinitely richer and truer dialogue with the world.’ Hence the potential of web media to change museums’ communication with users in an exceptional manner is credible and can bring about a change in the way museums are viewed by the public (Ciolfi, 2012). Ciolfi (2012) further argued that museums’ online presence would allow the use of digital tools such as social media to comment on museum exhibitions, thus leaving social traces that become a form of active participation. Such justification for digitisation could be a step in the right direction towards the further decolonisation of the Ife bronzes.

#### **4.11. Digital decolonisation**

Giaccardi (2012) argues that heritage meaning and values are not attached to artefacts, building or sites, but arise as the result of repeated and on-going interactions in the lived world of ordinary people (Byrne, 2008). The Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society emphasised the importance of people’s participation and engagement in the representation of artefacts that represent their localities and identity (FARO Convention, 2005). The convention, according to Fairclough (2009), is not about the protection of materiality of what constitutes cultural heritage but of the management of changing context. Such convention acknowledges that the changing context affects the construction of meaning. As a result, heritage institutions and practitioners like curators are encouraged to use emerging information technology to encourage visitors to actively participate and interact with artefacts (Simon, 2010). However, such ideas are yet to be evident in the British Museum. This might be due to the notion that there is limited knowledge about the potential the new digital technology possesses in connecting people’s experiences that can contribute to the construction of meaning (Giaccardi, 2012). Giaccardi (2011) further argues that, although increasing attention is being paid to the construction of personally and socially meaningful experiences,

issues of heritage value and their wider social significance have yet to be placed at the heart of the design, management and renewal of heritage experience.

The opportunities created by digital technology go beyond consumption and distribution of information to empowering ‘the other’ to create their own ‘shared culture, heritage and landscapes’ (Fairclough, 2012: xvi). This will empower through participation within and from outside the museum’s physical space. It is the process of participation, however, that Fairclough (2012) suggests will create a new culture as well as a new shift of viewing the ‘other’ through new frames. His suggestion is based on the notion that digital technology has the capability to ‘dissolve the walls between experts and the lay, between the past and the future, between us and the other’ (Fairclough, 2012: xvi).

Digital technology thus has the potential of encouraging a ‘participatory culture’ that can lead towards the decolonisation of the Ife bronzes (Giaccardi, 2012: 1). Participatory culture, according to Jerkins et al (2007), does not simply involve the contribution of every member but implicates that every member must ‘believe they are free to contribute when ready and what they contribute will be appropriately valued’ (Jerkins et al, 2007). This kind of culture tends to contradict the rules of copyright that guides museum practices and ownership of the digital image because it can facilitate the free sharing of information and cultural materials, thus empowering the emergence of multi-faceted narratives that present the bronzes in a more capacious manner.

Giaccardi et al (2012) points out that the nature of our artefacts and the ways in which we share them are changing. This is a result of the availability of smartphones that have combined functions that enable participation unrestricted by location or schedule (Giaccardi, 2012). People are able to capture and share their lives with others who are able to include their own perspectives. As a result, it brings the past to matter in the present, helping people to tell the stories about the bronzes without fear of prejudice. Digital technology not only provides an opportunity to widen the visitor experience from personal to communal interaction, but also highlights the shift in narratives from the intellectual to the non-intellectual (Fairclough, 2012). This fosters the importance of multiple perspectives that include the views of the formerly

colonised. Such views are alleged to raise post-colonial discourses because they will not be one-sided from the institution but gathered from everyday people, with the curator assuming the role of a facilitator (Witcombe, 2007).

According to Gikandi (1996: 6) 'postcolonial theory is most useful in its self-reflexivity, especially its recognition that the colonized space was instrumental in the invention of Europe just as the idea of Europe was the condition for the possibility of the production of modern colonial and postcolonial society'. In the same line of thought, post-colonial theory should also include the use of the digital technology in the revision, reinvention and representation of Africa. Such revision could foster the inclusion of multiple views and narratives that could allow a better understanding or new meanings to emerge, thereby giving people a more central position in creating networked meanings and, even more importantly, contexts that are subject to rapid change and renegotiation (Van Oost, 2012). That way, the bronzes are opened up by mobile and other social technologies through social media platforms beyond the walls of the British Museum.

#### **4.12. Digital inclusion through social media platforms**

Social media according to Kaplan & Haenlein (2010: 61) is a group of Internet-based applications that is built on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 that allows the creation and exchange of user generated content. Fletcher and Lee (2012: 505) suggested that social media is a type of media dispersed through online social interactions and takes on a variety of forms including social networking sites, blogs, wikis, podcasts, photo and video sharing, social bookmarking, and virtual environments. As a product of digitisation, social media has enhanced engagement and fostered active participation at varying levels and platforms beyond geographical boundaries. These social media platforms such as the social networking sites (twitter, Flickr, Facebook) have been used not only by individuals but also by museums to reach and engage a wider audience. Aside its effectiveness in creating awareness, it allows for engagement and participation in the discussions and interpretations of collections. Thus creating an online community of participants with an affirmative collective memory of their heritage (Silberman & Pulser, 2012). Such collaboration enables the joint and simultaneous creation of content by many end users as

presented in Nigerian Nostalgic Project and Nigerian focused Pinterest (discussed in chapter five). Kaplan & Haenlein (2010: 62) suggested that such collaborations are probably the ‘most democratic manifestation of user-generated content’. Where participant demonstrate some form of liberation in their approach towards interpretation and representation. Thus exhibiting an individual but collective opinion about an artefact. Social media therefore can be used to create a multi-way communication network that allows museum and the wider audience to learn from each other and contribute to the creation of content that can enhance and strengthen relationships (Fletcher and Lee, 2012).

Despite, its benefits, the social media requires commitment and time for it to be effective for museums and their audience. As failure to manage or work on content could probably lead to lack of interest resulting in passive instead of active participation and eventually loss of audience (Chan 2008; Waters *et al*, 2009). However, Fletcher and Lee (2012) argued that museums would particularly benefit from the interactive element of social media because of its usefulness for communications with their stakeholders. Thus suggesting that without strong relationship with stakeholders, museum could cease to exist (Fletcher and Lee, 2012). Such platform not only allows for museums to be heard but for their visitors to be involved and be allowed a voice through inclusion. Social media has the potential of encouraging a the richness of dynamic, ever-evolving, participatory heritage praxis that is distinct from the older static conception (Silberman & Pulser, 2012: 13). As a result, cultural heritage are opened to cultural changes that are likely to affect their meaning and how they are interpreted. Hence I argue in line with Silberman & Pulser (2012) that social media not only foster interaction through communication but has the power to stimulate ever evolving community-based reflection and conversation on past, present and future identities. As it is through inclusive participative culture that new ideas and interpretations about museum artefacts like the Ife bronze are likely to emerge.

#### **4.13 Summary and conclusion**

In considering new ways that are offered by digitisation, this chapter has highlighted some of the many positive and potentials the technology can facilitate within and

around the museum world. It can further promote new relationships that can encourage understanding in a new way as well as dialogue between a museum and its audience through social media. However, there are problems as well as possibilities including the digital divide and digital imperialism. Nevertheless it is possible for vast collections within a museum to be made accessible to its audience in new ways that fosters the inclusion of wider perspectives on past, present and future identities. These new modes of representation could also include teaching their audience how to use their online resources creatively and help in bridging the gap created by the digital divide. The emergence of new meanings and interpretations are therefore possible when the audience is given the chance not only to explore but also allowed to participate by including their own perspective about museum artefacts on social networking sites. Despite the issue of the digital divide, which is not limited only to geographical boundaries, it is imperative to make the past a part of the present. It is with this idea that we will explore the digital representation that disseminates the account surrounding the artefacts from the Kingdom of Ile-Ife.

## **Chapter 5: The Ife bronzes online at the British Museum**

### **Introduction**

This chapter focuses on the online presence of the Ife bronzes via the British museum website. The artefacts did not have a sizeable online presence when I started my research despite the well-attended temporary British Museum exhibition of 2010 titled ‘The Kingdom of Ife: Sculptures from West Africa’. The 2010 exhibition however, produced basic details used on the website and spawned some discussion on the net. Today, however, the Ife bronzes have a partially digitised presence on the British Museum website and comprises one original bronze head and seventeen cast copies. The presence of the bronzes on the British museum website suggests that they are likely to be used on some other websites. This chapter explores the Ife bronzes’ digital representation, analyses how objects receive nomination for digitisation, and examines associated issues that affect digitisation such as funding and copyright licences.

The digital content (visual and text) of the British Museum website is analysed to provide a clearer understanding of its African content, of which the Ife bronzes are a part. The analysis also focuses on the effect of digital mode of representation on interpretation of Ife bronzes. The analysis further highlights the effort of the curators and other museum staff to utilise the opportunities offered by the Internet to exhibit collections that have long been in the museum’s storage. The chapter interrogates whether the British Museum has an under-utilised online presence and questions whether this might be perceived either as a work in progress or as a misuse of space. Finally, the chapter highlights the need for further strategies of digitisation to encourage an inclusive participation of the people being represented throughout all the necessary stages to avoid what might be considered as digital imperialism – an extension of imperialism in the post-colonial era.

### **5.1. The British Museum’s digital history: the internal database**

As stated earlier, the online database of the British Museum is the culmination of a computerisation process that began in 1976 (Stevens, 2012). The British Museum has the biggest collections-management system in the world to date. The British Museum’s COMPASS project was officially launched in June 2000 and ran till 2007. COMPASS was an online display of about 1,400 objects from the huge range of the

British Museum's collections. COMPASS offered a variety of interfaces for exploring the British Museum's collections in new ways, by enabling visitors to gain a fuller understanding of objects and their contexts. This was achieved by providing easy-to-use search tools and linking and connecting items from all the museum's collections thematically. As a result, the website was expected to provide a rich knowledge base and deeper understanding of the collections. The COMPASS project was made possible through the implementation of digitisation techniques.

Digitisation, as discussed in Chapter 4, indicates expanding possibilities for the museum world. According to Hughes (New York University assistant director for humanities and computing), digitisation encourages the promotion of new relationships that can encourage new modes of learning as well as dialogue between museums and their audience (Hughes, 2004). MacDonald and Alsford (1997: 43) further supported the need for digitisation within museums and affirmed that 'museums cannot remain aloof from technological trends if they wish to attract 21st century audiences. Tomorrow's museum visitors will be people for whom computers and multimedia have already played a prominent part in their lives through schooling, recreation, and work experience.' Therefore, for the British Museum to be relevant to its twenty-first-century audience, it needs to have an online presence that implies having their collections digitised.

Such perceived need for an online presence, for the British Museum, led to partnership with Fathom in 2003. According to Ann Kirschner (president and CEO of Fathom), the organisation's partnership allows for the use of digital medium to project aspects of the collections distinct from those that the Museum has rendered so captivating in its physical space, introducing new and loyal visitors alike to entirely unique educational experiences online' (Kirschner, 2002). Kirschner's (2002) statement substantiates the idea that digitisation will bring about a new space for re-contextualising museum artefacts, thus serving as an extension to the museum's physical space.

As we have seen, the British Museum presents itself as one of the world's largest museums, committed to 'making collections from ancient and living cultures



available for research and enjoyment in the widest possible manner and to the broadest possible audience' (British Museum website, 2013). Its mission is to encourage visitors to compare and contrast human material culture from across the globe and throughout time, thereby promoting the understanding of world civilisations. Initially, before the advent of digitisation, this was only possible by visiting the museum in person, although of course, its 'aura' was widely promoted. Digitisation in this thesis as discussed in the last chapter, means the electronic recording of descriptive data about the artefacts that includes the digital representation or image of the objects (Knell, 2003). As the last chapter analysed, and as Keene that digitisation can result in the possibility of giving people access 'to all that the collections stand for as never before' (Keene, 1998: 2). But to what extent does it do this, and how is this information online depict the digital history evolving in the British Museum?

According to Tanya Szrajber (Head of Documentation at British Museum), the British Museum's digital history started in 1976 with the use of a bespoke system – BMUSE –in the Department of Egyptian Antiquities (Szrajber, 2012). A pilot project for objects in the Department of Ethnography commenced in 1978. By 1979, the BMUSE records were transferred to the MDA (now Collection Trust) multi-user GOS system, on Hewlett Packard computers. A specialised staff was put together to input data. 1980 witnessed the database becoming the creation of an inventory due to interest from the National Audit Office and Public Accounts Committee. As a result, the project was extended to departmental collections.

By 1988, an online system with terminals was introduced (MAGUS) and data was transferred to it from the GOS system. 1993 saw the registration of new acquisitions by curatorial departments that led to the need for a replacement system that could accommodate the growing number of collections. The need to transfer records from the previous 'legacy system' to a system that was updated and in line with modern and international museum standards led to the development of a collection-management system called Merlin (Szrajber, 2012). Merlin (as shown in Figure 5.1 below) is a collections-management system based on MUSIMS, a system modelled specifically to support modern museum-management procedures (Systems

Simulation website, 2013). It was created by System Simulation Limited (SSL), came into operation in 2000 and is still in use today. Merlin is used to build the online collection database that became accessible in 2007 to the public through the British Museum website (Szrajber, 2012).



Figure 5.1. Screenshot 2013-10-23 at 17.22.13: British Museum Merlin Collection Management

The ultimate aim of putting together a dedicated team in 1979 was to create a catalogue record for every object registered in the British Museum collections. The British Museum's digital history, therefore, started with an internal database. This notion is confirmed by my interview with some of the British Museum staff, including the curator of West African collections, Fiona Sheales; the Head of Documentation, Tanya Szrajber; and the web liaison officer, Julia Stribblehill. These staff members' responses about the use of Merlin included:

Merlin is our database designed especially for the museum. People were employed to transfer old paper records, card indexes and documents that gave details about things like provenance, donors' details, and acquisition details. All that information was put onto and is still being put onto Merlin. It is an enormous, huge task. Every single department in this

museum has access to Merlin and Merlin is the central database for absolutely everything that the museum holds in its collections. (Interview, Sheales 2012)

I have to stress that the records were written for internal use, that was the original function, and since we have the records, we could not rewrite them for public use. (Interview, Szrajber 2013)

It is an external version of what we have internally. Cataloguing the museum is a digitisation project but it is also a collections-management issue. (Interview, Stribblehill 2013)

The comments indicate that the move towards digitisation by the museum was initially geared towards collection-management purposes, basically involving the transfer of collection records from nineteenth-century hand-written ledgers to a digital format.

When we first started, when we first got our hands on the computer, on this database, the task in hand was to just get records on there. (Interview, Sheales 2012)

However, Stribblehill pointed out that digitising the museum collections was also about collections management and fulfilling duties to the British Museum Trustees rather than the to general public:

It is a digitisation project but more a collections-management issue, where we are recording our collections in the best way to give information about what the collection is. But the fact that it is online is for accessibility and we are doing it for the trustees. We have a duty towards our trustees and to do that we have to take photographs of the objects, and if you have the photograph of an object it helps to protect the artefacts. (Interview, Stribblehill 2013).

The collections of the museum at the time of cataloguing in 1979 were held in ten departments: Coins and Medals; Egyptian Antiquities; Ethnography; Greek and Roman Antiquities; Japanese Antiquities; Mediaeval and Later Antiquities; Oriental Antiquities; Prehistoric and Romano-British Antiquities; Prints and Drawings; and Western Asiatic Antiquities (System Simulation website, 2011).

By September 2002, British Museum staff had completed cataloguing five of the former ten collecting departments – equivalent to a staggering 1.3 million records

representing 2.5 million objects from the estimated 6 million registered objects in total. The Merlin system currently manages in excess of 1.7 million records and continues to grow. The database went live in 2002 and currently offers catalogue records for 2 million objects, 774,010 of which have one or more images (British Museum website, 2013).

According to web liaison officer Julia Stribblehill, as of November 2013:

The museum is adding just under 1,000 records and just under 2,000 images a week. We are working through as best we can but obviously we have got approximately 7 million objects and we have catalogued about half that. We have got 2.1 million records, which equates to approximately 3.5 million objects. (Interview, Stribblehill 2013).

It has taken about 34 years for 3.5 million objects to be digitised, catalogued and displayed online. Thus, continuous work will be required by the museum to be able to put all the objects in their collection online. Sheales mentioned that, whenever there is a new project, the database continues to be populated. She said that:

Every time that we get an object out of the storeroom or an object out of where it's been kept, we now take record shots of it and we add in any information we can into Merlin. That is a standard curatorial practice now. (Interview, Sheales 2012)

Julia Stribblehill also pointed out that there is no rigid structure for how and when items are catalogued:

The museum has 10 dedicated photographers for 7 million objects, which is going to take a while, so departments have cameras issued and they can take photographs. Basically it tends to be that if you go to look at an object you tend to go with the camera with you. It is definitely more about when we can than anything structured at the moment. (Interview, Stribblehill 2013)

It can be resolved, therefore, that the creation of the internal catalogue database led to the creation of the British Museum's online collection database known as the public version of the museum's website. However, even this is not the main priority of the British Museum. Julia Stribblehill starkly stated that:

The website is a by-product of something else we are doing rather than an end in itself. (Interview, Stribblehill 2013)

Stribblehill's statement indicates that the museum website is likely not completed and has the tendency of changing depending on what is carried out within the internal database.

## **5.2. The British Museum's public website**

In this section, I will describe and analyse the public end of the British Museum website, which consists of the collections database, so as to highlight the diverse functions of the website. I will discuss why and how the digitisation projects within the museum are funded and how collections are selected for digitisation. Copyright licence is investigated to analyse how it could serve as a deterrent to accessibility considering that it is a tool for creating marketing opportunities for the museum. I will also discuss offline and online visitors as well as users and accessibility to interrogate whether an online presence has an effect on museum visitor numbers. The display of the Ife bronzes displayed on the British Museum's website are then focused on and problems highlighted. Online collaboration will also be considered as another way in which the British Museum can use the web to engage a diverse audience for museum artefacts. This will assist in determining how digital representation might affect how meanings are constructed and how African artefacts are interpreted.

### ***5.2.1. Description of the present British Museum website***

This section outlines a description of the website before discussing how digitisation projects are funded. The British Museum's online presence, aside from being a by-product of the internal database, is undoubtedly created in recognition that thousands of websites regularly display digital images to the general public (Besser, 1997a). Having an online presence is today considered indispensable and a museum's recognition of the idea that their visitors might visit other museum sites; not having an online presence would result in a reduction in visitor numbers and status. Equally, an online presence can also be perceived as a desire by the British Museum to extend

or continue to hold its status as ‘the world’s greatest repository’ by offering its visitors a choice of viewing the museum collection in a digital era. It is therefore likely that new trends in viewing the museum collections have an effect on scholars, the public and museum staff in terms of access and understanding (MacDonald & Alsford, 1997; Loran, 2005; Cameron, 2007).

The museum presently has an online presence through a dedicated website as well as other websites through collaboration projects such as the COMPASS object tours, the Ancient Civilizations educational sites that support the National Curriculum, and the ‘A History of the World in 100 Objects’ project conducted in collaboration with BBC Radio 4 (discussed below). The online presence has resulted in the aim of displaying the British Museum’s entire digitised collection on the museum’s website, where new records and images are added every week (British Museum website, 2013). Such displays could be described as being in line with Anderson’s (1999) notion of how digital content is created as an information-based model rather than a ‘learning’ model, as the website predominately lists the artefacts and provides an image but does not encourage any form of public interaction. Based on the information model, the Ife bronzes have been part of the database since 2010 due to the exhibition titled ‘the Kingdom of Ife’ and can be viewed on the museum’s website.

The British Museum’s website was initially designed and launched in 2003. Cogapp redesigned the website in 2006 to provide a platform for the museum’s future developments (Cogapp website, 2013). The website is used for different purposes including collection management, marketing, general information, collaborative digital research projects, research and public online access to the museum collections (Szrajber, 2012).

Although there will probably be changes in the future, at the time of writing (2014) the homepage is divided into sections and offers visitors a choice of nine languages (as shown in Figure 5.2). However, only the initial introductory pages are translated into languages other than English (German, Spanish, French, Italian, Russian, Chinese, Korean and Japanese) and none of the nine languages represent Africa

except through the imperial idea that colonised African nations are expected to be able to speak either English or French (Fanon, 2008(1952). This further alienates formerly colonised people from their language and by extension their culture in a post-colonial era (Edwards & Tredell, 2008). The absence of other languages further excludes online visitors whose languages are not published from interacting with the museum's database. Nevertheless, the introductory page contains only basic information about the location, floor plans and facilities offered by the museum. Hence, when a language is selected, it is interesting to note that other key information on the website, including the floor plans, are still in English. Visitors who only understand the languages published are therefore able to access little or no information from the introductory page.

The British Museum website constitutes four main sections. The first section is for announcements and advertising new exhibitions, events, lectures and other programmes as well as offering a link to the blog page (as shown in Figure 5.2). Tickets for exhibitions and events can be booked and purchased online via this section. The second section highlights the current exhibitions, events related to the exhibitions, related products and the online collection database (as shown in Figure 5.2). Visitors are encouraged to either search through the museum's online collections or search by clicking the highlighted objects. The third and fourth key sections comprise eight small sections that include a museum shop where books, jewellery and sculptures can be purchased (as shown in Figure 5.3). The shop also highlights objects linked to the permanent and temporary exhibitions on sale. Membership is one of the small sections where the museum offers members certain privileges and also solicits for donations and gifts. The kids' section, tagged 'Young Explorers', offers events, activities and games for children and families. The blog section highlights research work undertaken from behind the scenes and comments and contributions by curators, scientists, conservators and other museum staff. This section tends to serve as a space that points museum visitors to the notion that the knowledge repository of the museum involves various professionals who work behind the scenes.

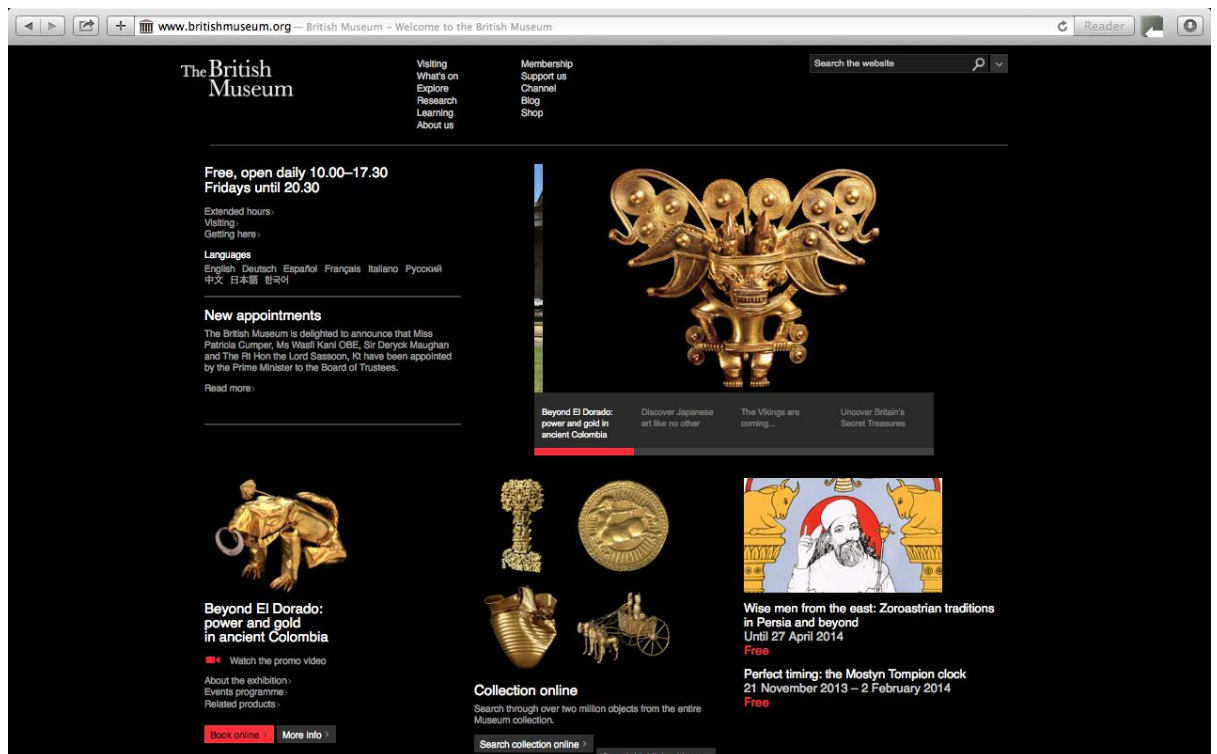


Figure 5.2. Screenshot 2013-11-08 at 23.46.27: the present homepage of the British Museum

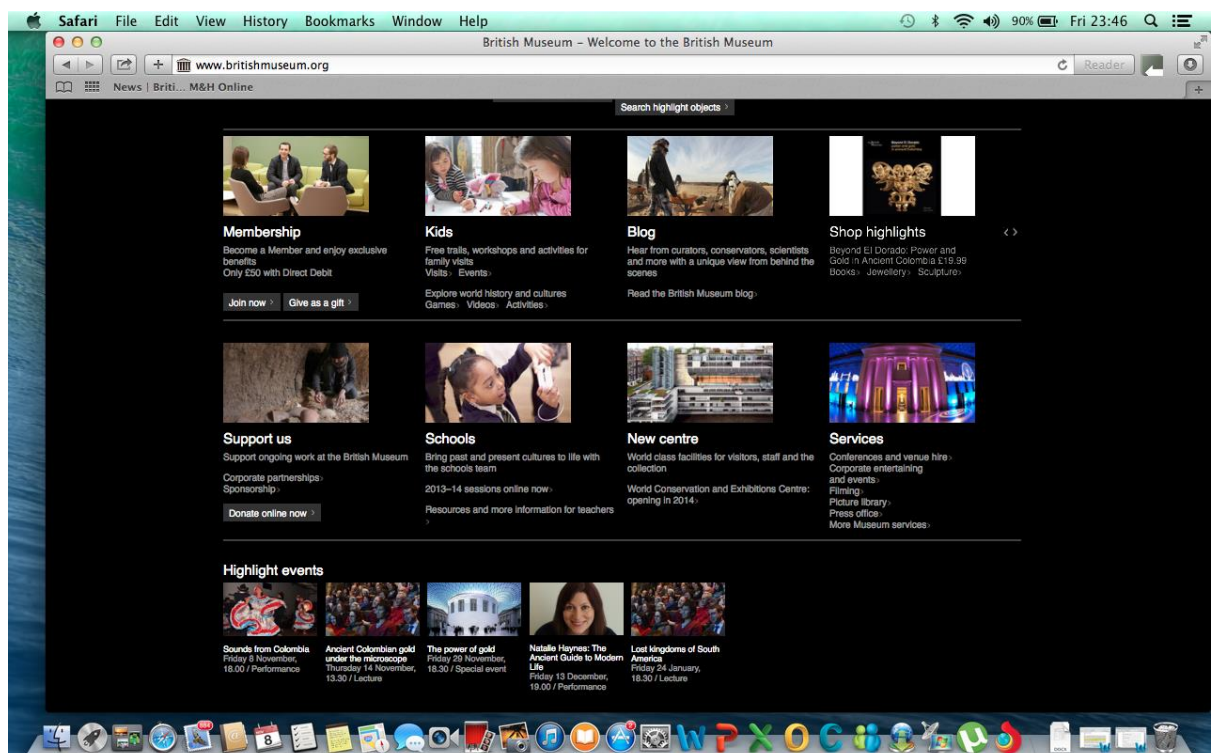


Figure 5.3. Screenshot 2013-11-08 at 23.40.40 showing various sections on the homepage of the British Museum



The section for schools serves as a resource for schools and teachers. It includes digital learning. When I interviewed her, Sheales highlighted how the website also serves as an educational resource:

Teachers as well use this catalogue, as resources and I know that the department of learning volunteers and audiences are developing things that can be used online that teachers can use when they are teaching youngsters. So again it is being used in an educational way, not just in a purely research way. (Interview, Sheales 2012).

Another section is used to highlight various ‘services’ on offer within the British Museum. Those services include conferencing and venue hire, corporate entertainment and events, filming, picture gallery and the press office. There is an additional section about donations to support the work of the museum such as corporate partnership and sponsorship. Another section announces the opening of the World Conservation and Exhibition centre in 2014. Finally, the fourth key section highlights events and lectures that take place within the museum.

One can argue that the British Museum website is not only an educational tool but also a commercial one. This is evident in the way the museum website is not merely a way for the museum to exhibit its collections but a tool the museum uses to solicit for funds, sponsorship and marketing. This is the British Museum’s way of seeking alternative methods of funding and is in line with Poole’s (2010) argument that in the current financial climate it is particularly necessary for museums to find alternative ways of funding. Therefore, in those multiple ways the website serves as an access point between the museum and their visitors, partners and stakeholders.

### ***5.2.2. Funding for digitisation***

In the UK, the government department dedicated to art and culture – the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) – requires all government-funded museums, and the national museums in particular, to adopt access and audience development policies and to make the ‘best use’ of ICT (Lang & Reeve, 2006). This illustrates how the UK government is committed to the provision and funding of digital learning networks, the creation of digital cultural content, and universal ICT access

that established the necessary conditions for the development of the digital dimensions of museums (Loran, 2005). This requirement has made digitisation something that all libraries, museums and archivists will have to do sooner rather than later, even when it can be an intimidating challenge (Holley, 2004). Thus, government funding can be perceived as an important determinant for digitisation projects.

According to museologist and cultural content consultant Margarida Loran, the most important funding initiatives that directly or indirectly benefited museums from 2002 were:

- the New Opportunities Fund (NOF) Digitisation Programme: £50m to create learning content on a large scale.
- the DCMS/Resource ICT Challenge Fund: £500,000 (2 years) to encourage smaller museums to make innovative use of ICT.
- the People's Network: £170m to connect all UK public libraries to the Internet, including content, infrastructure and training.
- DCMS funding of £13m to develop projects for Culture Online 2002–2004 (Loran, 2010).

In 2008, the World Collections Programme (WCP) was funded by DCMS till 2011 to establish two-way partnerships with institutions in Asia and Africa, and increase their access to UK collections and expertise (World Collections Programme website, 2013). Among other projects, the yearly £1 million enabled the British Museum to carry out digitisation projects to aid wider electronic access. Digitisation of museum collections, however, is being driven by government directives through funding so as to provide access to collections. Despite the availability of funds, the project that was dedicated towards Africa concerned conservation training and not the creation and sustenance of African digital collections in Africa or elsewhere. Therefore, revisiting the historical information held by the West is given less priority.

The British Museum is funded partly by grant-in-aid from the government, via the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). Funds are also boosted by

revenue-raising activities such as onsite retail, catering, corporate hire, sponsorship income, Great Court trading, 'Friends' of the museum, organisations and also through patrons and donors schemes. The British Museum's funding is dependent upon meeting performance targets agreed between management and the DCMS (British Museum Finance Department, 2001). These relate to areas such as increasing the numbers and categories of visitors, boosting self-generated income, expanding virtual access to the collections, longer opening hours and raising the number of outreach projects. However, Sheales pointed out that:

Occasionally the museum is able to get funding and we are able to run a project specifically to enhance the records that we have on Merlin. These projects are quite few and far between because it's quite difficult to get someone to fund something like that as it is basic museum work at the end of the day. (Interview, Sheales 2012)

We have other priorities; digitising is a lot to do with funding and time and museums are kind of pressed for both at the moment and funding and time are the major issues. (Interview, Stribblehill 2013)

Both statements highlight the need for the British Museum to think of funding their digitisation projects through imaginative channels that perhaps result in partnership projects. Consequently, the economic situation implies that funders are more stringent about spending money on digitisation projects if they are not supported by evidence that substantiates that the project will create resources that will actively allow for new kinds of use (Hughes, 2004). Hence, accessibility alone is not perceived as enough reason to undertake digitisation projects. However, the current state of technology perhaps provides the possibility for changes in current uses of collections, as it allows all that the collection stands for to be available for both research and enhancing the understanding of museum visitors. This might place digitisation in a position to create new spaces where everything related to a collection can be digitally sourced through collaborative projects.

Digitisation, according to Loran (2005), provides museums with new opportunities to achieve their goals by increasing access to museum collections and knowledge in an unprecedented way; by broadening and diversifying audiences; and by enabling visitors to participate in and enhance the museum experience. On the other hand,

Managing Director of Cogapp Alex Morrison (2010) suggested that digitisation projects can also offer an opportunity for online fundraising. His argument is based on the rationale that 30.1 million adults as at 2010 in the UK access the Internet on a daily basis. However, this number excludes other European countries and the US. Morrison (2010) emphasised that the large potential online audience is comfortable in making online donations. This idea of online donation is already in use by the British Museum and can be explored for new projects where communities being represented could be more than willing to donate and participate.

### ***5.2.3. Selecting objects for digitisation***

According to librarians Hazen et al (1998), the process of deciding what to digitise determines all the major stages of project implementation. Selection for digitisation is described as a complicated process that can be compared with selection for purchase, microfilming and withdrawal and with other strategic decision-making that is integral to the work of librarians and museum curators (Hazen et al, 1998). Library and information specialist Kaul (2001) argued that selection involves a meeting of experts, authors, library and information scientists, archivists, curators and other relevant professionals specialising in a discipline of concern and asking them to give names of documents and collections that need to be selected.

In the same line of argument, digital collections scholar Hughes (2004) suggests value, significance to the overall collections, patron demand and interest in the materials as key criteria to be considered when selecting for digitisation. Hughes condenses this into three main principles as the main philosophies for digitisation: informational content of the original material, demand for the material, and condition of the original (Hughes, 2004). However, the British Museum's West African curator states that it is only when visitors know about an object that they are likely to have an interest in the object that can result in its demand. She states that:

Ever since we had the Ife exhibition here that was very successful a few years back there has been interest in that collection. (Interview, Sheales 2012)

Hence there is a need for the correct historical facts about Ife collections to be made known to visitors. Archivist and chief conservationist Vogt-O'Connor (2000: 45) further argued that selection for digitisation 'involves choosing among a number of options using informed judgment and selection criteria'. Such selection criteria is to ensure that resources are invested wisely in digitising the most significant and useful collections at the lowest possible cost without placing the institution at legal or social risk. Legal risk, according to Vogt-O'Connor (2000), refers to copyright issues.

Poor selection, on the other hand, could lead to the digitisation of materials that are unusable or of little value (Hughes, 2004). Thus 'value' plays an important role in the selection of collections to be digitised. There is a likelihood that only things considered to be of value according to the culture and taste of the curators might get the chance to be selected for digitisation. Cameron (2007) argues that the decision to digitise involves an active process of value and meaning-making equivalent to that of physical objects. Contrary to Hughes (2004) and Vogt-O'Connor (2000), Cameron emphasised that the curator's authority is enacted during selection. The curatorial process involves selecting what is significant, what should be remembered or forgotten, and what categories of meaning (such as classification, cultural values or aesthetical values) are given pre-eminence (Cameron, 2007). As a result, curators are accorded the power to make decisions that can significantly affect the content and accessibility of museum collections, not necessarily in tune with public demand as specified by Hughes (2004). Therefore it is only what is made accessible that can become of interest to the public.

Nomination, evaluation and prioritisation are the three phases of selection process identified by Vogt-O'Connor (2000). This three-stage process, according to Vogt-O'Connor (2000) is employed as a strategy to identify and remove materials deemed as problematic during selection for digitisation. She also emphasised that the approach produces a 'smooth workflow regardless of the amount of available funding' (Vogt-O'Connor, 2000: 46). Inferring that funding is not a sole determinant for digitisation rather digitisation is dependent on the decision of stakeholders of which the curator is at the top of the cadre.

The process outlined by Vogt-O'Connor (2000) fails to address the importance of the

object to be digitised, as there is a possibility that there is no useful information about the object to inform museum visitors. I argue, therefore, in line with Hughes (2004) that, no matter the amount of available funding, the available information content of the original material plays a paramount role in the selection process. The British Museum's West African curator also shares this opinion:

I happened to have done my fieldwork on Ashanti gold in Ashanti Ghana, so when I got the job as a curator, it was easier for me to convert some of the work I have done into doing a catalogue on the Ashanti gold. So it was a very easy one to do. There is no one at the moment in my department who has real in-depth knowledge of Ile-Ife so we will probably have to ask someone to come in and do that for us or find someone who will be willing to give us their field notes on some of them. Again this all takes time to set up. (Interview, Sheales 2013)

Despite the outlined procedure involved in selecting objects for digitisation (Vogt-O'Connor, 2000; Hughes, 2004; Kaul, 2001; Hazen et al, 1998), my interview with the British Museum web liaison officer Julia Stribblehill states otherwise. She indicated that there is no limit to what can be digitised, but the museum is restricted due to limited resources (both financial and human):

There are no structured criteria to what can be digitised. However, Prints and Drawing are working through their collection because they have some funding. We have 30 photographers but this number is not enough for 7 million objects. So whenever we are going to bring out things for exhibition, pictures of the objects are taken. It is basically done as and when we can. We scan the objects then digitise depending on the project. We have other projects going on and we have some prioritised over others and it's a lot to do with funding and time. When we do get funding and time it also depends on what is included in the funding document. Hence, we tend to digitise things around exhibition or publication that requires a record shot. (Interview, Stribblehill 2013)

Of course digitisation will always comes down to two things: time and money. (Interview, Sheales 2012)

In the same line, the Head of Documentation Tanya Szrajber states that:

We give all our collections equal attention. However, each department also has a responsibility for their own records. (Interview, Szrajber 2013)

The responses suggest that every object in the museum collection carries equal value and have equal rights to being digitised. As a result, the British Museum is less likely to follow strict rules for deciding what artefacts to digitise in their collection. Since the museum is required to carry out documentation of all collections, digitisation is most likely to be carried out on all their collections at some point of the documentation process.

In spite of the importance of the selection processes outlined, Hughes (2004) suggested that copyright status of the original materials is also an important factor to consider during selection criteria for digitisation.

#### ***5.2.4. Copyright licences***

Copyright licence is explored in this chapter to highlight the potential of using museum digital artefacts to break free from colonial ownership. To highlight the potential, however, there is a need to clarify the various contexts in which copyright law exists and how it could also be perceived as a deterrent to accessibility. Copyright started as far back as 1710 in London, as the status of Anne. It concerned ownership of ‘copie’ in a book that amounts to exclusive right to print and publish (Craig et al, 1998). The law of ‘copyright’ from the first English act has protected authors in reproducing copies of their books and by extension others’ writings. The origin is traced to the Berne Convention in 1886, which was revised at Paris in 1896, at Brussels in 1948, at Stockholm in 1967 and at Paris again in 1971. It and amended in 1979, when many countries of the world signed the various treaties of each convention (Swan & Shan, 2010; Fabunmi, 2007; Onatola & Dina, 2005/2006; US Copyright Office, 2000).

Copyright in the eighteenth century was limited to the reproduction and distribution of prints from original work. Copyright law today covers much broader ground and is not limited to literary, artistic and musical works but extends to protect architectural works and computer software that includes some kind of database (Hughes, 2004). According to Craig et al (1998: 1), copyright law is ‘a form of legal adaptation, a response to new technologies in the reproduction and distribution of human expression’. Digital librarian Uzuegbu (2011) also defines copyright law as a

universal concept and a form of protection for ideas created, provided by the laws of any sovereign state. This idea of the universal concept, however, fails to identify the communal nature of Africa when it comes to the production of knowledge. Hamelink (2000: 163), in recognition of the African communal ethos, proposes that ‘... legal rules on intellectual property should not exclusively focus on the individual inventor but should also recognize the communal production of knowledge and protect this accordingly’.

In acknowledgement that copyright law works through derivative work rights, performance rights and display rights, Craig et al (1998) pointed out that the law is about the right to use and to authorise the use of copyrighted works in a number of ways. However, the use of the Internet, which defies physical distance, revolutionises the use and distribution of texts, images and sounds and raises the question of ownership and authenticity. The new technology has made copying and reproduction easier and cheaper while at the same time reducing the cost for advertisement and distribution (Boyle, 2010). As a result, copyright law covers the social, cultural and economic trends released by the new technology. The wide coverage of the Internet that tends to account for the changing nature of copyright law might be accountable for Patterson and Lindberg’s (1991) notion of the disparity of the law. Patterson and Lindberg (1991) argued that copyright is a confused and confusing body of rules. This might be as a result of the blurring of boundaries between the laws that constitute intellectual property laws due to the emergence of technologies like computer software that further contributes to the confusing nature of copyright law (Boyle, 2010).

Copyright is an intellectual property right (like patent, trademark and industrial design) that provides limited monopoly to creators of original material ranging from literary work to sound recordings (Hughes, 2004). It is the oldest and most renowned law among the range of laws within the intellectual property law that governs rights over cultural production (Boateng, 2010). Patent law provides a limited monopoly for new and inventive products, processes and designs; trademark law prohibits products’ imitators from passing off their goods or services as the products of others; and copyright law protects ‘original work of authorship’ (Craig et al, 1998: 2). These



laws protect artistic works, scientific and industrial innovations, and symbols or words that distinguish a business or product from its competitors (Boateng, 2010). However, it is possible for one product to cross the boundaries of all three laws.

Intellectual property law, to which copyright law belongs, is mostly developed in Western industrialised countries, and the rights in such property are the subjects of international treaties (Craig et al, 1998). Boateng (2010) argued that intellectual property law regulates the circulation of culture. In other words, the law is not limited to protection but also covers how information is distributed. By so doing it has the power to subvert indigenous ideas and propagate information as documented by Western authors. This is evident in the British Museum collection database's description of the Ife bronzes. By subverting the indigenous meaning and identity known by the Ife people, one can argue that intellectual property law not only regulates distribution but 'exercises power' through the distribution of culture.

Posey and Dutfield (1996: 230) further argued that intellectual property law constitutes 'legal rights that can be attached to information emanating from the mind of a person if it can be applied to making a product that is made distinctive and useful by that information'. According to Drahos (1996: 5), intellectual property laws are rules that govern privileges that regulate the ownership and exploitation of abstract objects in many fields of human activity. Craig et al (1998) further argue that although copyright touches on artistic, cultural and moral sensibilities it is marked by historical peculiarities and difficult policy dilemmas. Such dilemmas on one hand can be associated with the notion that artistic materials such as the Ife bronzes belong to a different era, thereby making it difficult to identify their original creator. On the other hand, the artistic material is likely to have exceeded the number of years that might allow the artefact to be considered for copyright licence, as in the case of the Ife bronzes.

Intellectual property law, to which copyright law belongs, can also be described as a means through which the market (of a particular product or idea) is protected from the public (Boyle, 2010). Reichman (quoted in Boyle, 2010: 4) argued that intellectual property law is a device for 'market making'. This means that there have

been argument to abolish ‘copyright’ and to introduce ‘copyleft’ shared property such as through creative commons licences. By excluding others from invention or expression, the law allows the author to make money by allowing others to pay for the privilege of getting access to the invention. Since copyright, as argued by Hughes (2004), involves the protection of original work from unauthorised reproduction to the benefit of the creator, one would think it would be to the benefit of the owner. However, this is not always the case: the British Museum benefits from the Ife bronzes by creating a new product from the original. Therefore, it is through the ownership of copyright of new products such as digital photographs that a market is created. The idea of market creation could be seen as commercialisation and fits in with the concept of colonialism that is about controlling and benefiting from the resources of the colonies. Stribblehill ascertains through the commercial potential of owning the copyright of images of the British Museum collection that:

People are generally happy to pay for things that are commercial and commercial companies pay for copyright, which means we can take more photos and there are more things people can use. (Interview, Stribblehill 2013)

The museum has positioned itself as an authoritative source of images depicting world cultures and historical artefacts, including ceramics, sculptures, prints, drawings and paintings (British Museum Images, 2013). Hence the justification for the ownership of the copyright licences to the photographs in the British Museum collections. Although images could be used free of charge in scholarly and academic contexts, commercial usage is highly restricted and attracts a fee. Charging for commercial purposes could be partially interpreted as opposing the museum’s founding policy. Bodard (2010), a scholar from the Centre for Computing in the Humanities, argues that the British Museum’s founding philosophy of free access for ‘all studious and curious persons’ suggests not just free entry to the museum in Bloomsbury but also free access to the collection online (The Stoa Consortium Website, 2010)

The idea of a fee for commercial purposes emphasises the economic dependency of the museum and its reluctance as a public-sector institution for others to profit financially from it. Therefore, companies and individuals who cannot afford the fee

and want to avoid legal issues stay away from reusing the museum's images. Consequently, the digital photographs of the Ife bronzes further assume the position of an originally created work of art in need of protection. The result, as expected, is a copyright licence that belongs to the British Museum, as it assumes the position of the creator whom the law protects. By contrast, Boyle (2010) argued that copyright licence is meant to be to the advantage of the public. The support for the public is further substantiated in Brandeis' claim that:

...[t]he general rule of law is that the noblest of human production, knowledge, truths asserted, conceptions and ideas become after voluntary communication to others free as the air to common use. (Brandeis, 1918)

In other words, materials and ideas in the public domain are for the common use of the public and do not require protection. The Ife bronzes, however, have been in the public domain before and since their discovery; hence any form of right that hinders or limits their use might be regarded as a form of 'enclosure' (Boyle, 2010: 40).

According to information scientists Britz and Lor (2004), the problem is that Africa lacks a legal tradition of 'owning and protecting' information. Hence, the concept of 'immaterial legal objects' does not exist in Africa's legal terminology. Rather, there is a widespread belief in Africa that ownership of information is not vested as a property right but that knowledge, as a benefit to all, must be shared freely between people (Boonzaaier, 1990). Britz and Lor (2004) argued that Africa's philosophical approach to information has contributed to the misuse and exploitation of indigenous knowledge by many developed nations. Therefore, individual intellectual property rights have not succeeded in protecting the cultural heritage of Africa from all forms of exploitation. In relation to the case of the ownership of images of the Ife bronzes, one would expect that the copyright licence would belong to the Ooni (king of Ife), the Ife community or to Nigeria as a nation. On one hand, the bronzes were created to immortalise the Ooni's ancestors (Willett, 1967a); on the other hand, they represent Nigeria's national identity (as discussed in Chapter 1). One can argue therefore that the British Museum's ownership of the copyright licence to the digital photographs can be perceived as an extension of British colonial authority over its former colony. I further argue that the ownership of copyright is an act of 'digital colonialism'. However, it is important to note the contradiction in how the British

colonial administration did not expect works that were thought to be significant and requiring protection to be produced by people considered as inferior. Although it was the West's 'discovery' of the Ife bronzes that placed the bronzes in the public domain, the discovery does not constitute a right of ownership.

#### ***5.2.5. Offline and online visitors***

The British Museum website is a platform from which visitors can access the museum collections online without visiting the museum physically. However, has the museum having a website changed the nature of visitors to the museum? Has the website expanded visitor numbers or reduced them? Has it changed the demographic of the people who visit the museum? For example, large numbers of visitors coming to the museum could adversely affect the quality of the experience that the museum provides (Cannon-Brookes, 2001; Maddison & Foster, 2003). The British Museum website could serve as a tool for reducing congestion while at the same time providing access, since it provides an avenue by which visitors can view collections in their own personal space and at their own pace.

According to economists Maddison and Foster (2003), increased visitor numbers are not simply beneficial they can also result in overcrowding, queuing, noise, occasional shoving and ultimately an inability to view the exhibits. Increased visitor numbers could further steer museums towards the incurrment of imposed cost in terms of security, maintenance and upkeep. This cost, however, would likely be passed on to visitors through the introduction of admission charges. Maddison and Foster (2003) further argued that a charge depends on the level of demand to see a collection, which varies according to the season. This emphasises the likelihood that such imposed cost might not be met during seasons with low attendance. Consequently, the introduction of charges might jeopardise the policy of 'access for the many rather than the few' (Maddison & Foster, 2003: 7). This is because only visitors who can afford the admission charge will have access to the collections, leaving out a larger section of the public.

Conversely, Maddison and Foster (2003) pointed out that the use of the Internet to

allow individuals to experience a 'virtual' tour of the museum collections was unlikely to eliminate costs entirely, as a virtual tour of the museum collection may not yield the same satisfaction as a physical visit. The cost associated with the technological requirements for viewing the online collection might outweigh the benefits of reduced congestion at the physical site. Congestion, can also occur online, causing the website to crash if it is not built to withstand high visitor traffic. Thus the website can be an extension of the museum exhibition space but cannot simply be used as a tool for reducing congestion. Furthermore, if used to control congestion, it then becomes a tool that perhaps impedes access instead of facilitating access as intended by British Museum policy.

The website is clearly intended to serve as a tool for searching and viewing the collections of the British Museum. The museum's collection database comprises two versions, one accessible to the curators and internal staff, and the other accessible to the general public. This 'public' access, however, depends on the availability and ownership of a computer and Internet access. Thus, one can argue that the mere inclusion of an object on the collections database does not imply that it is made accessible to the public. The curator and documentation staff comments highlight differences between the two versions:

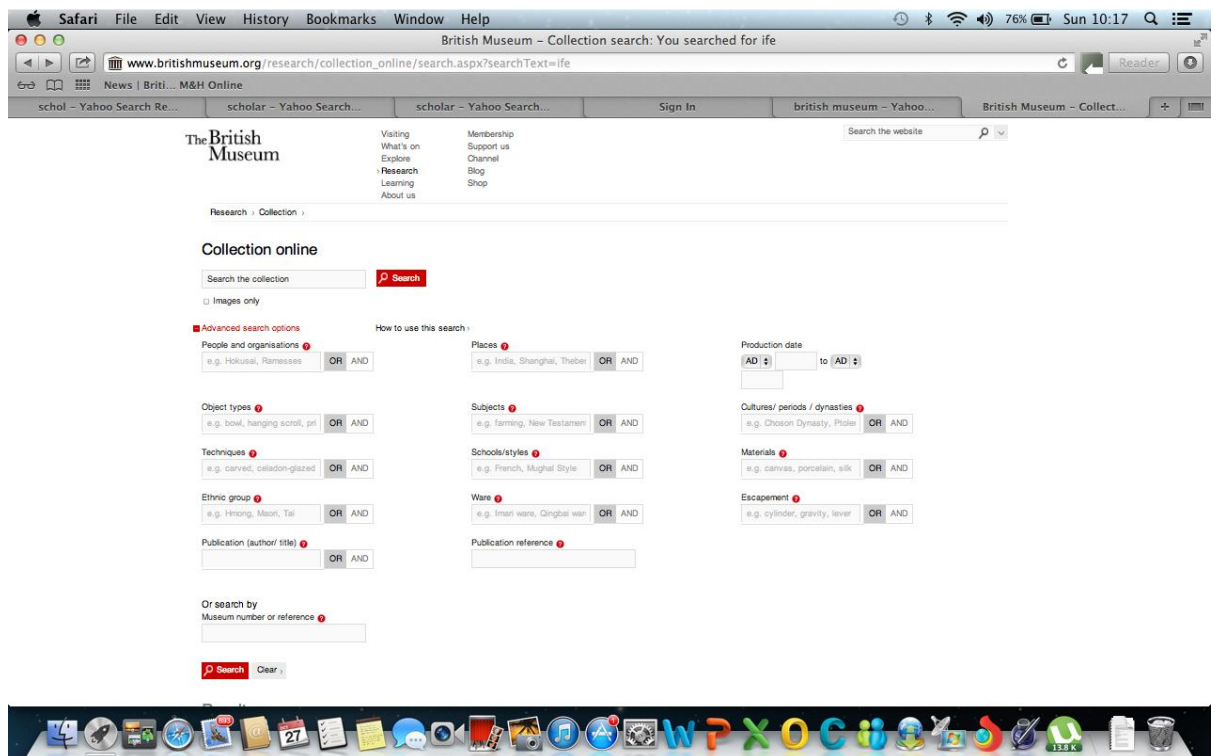
It is looked at as an overview by specific departments so all the entries are standardised; people don't get away with putting strange terms in there that don't mean anything to anyone else and, of course, on the public version of the collections database the public gets the option to tell us when we get it wrong. (Interview, Sheales 2012)

It is an external version of what we have internally. (Interview, Striblehill 2013).

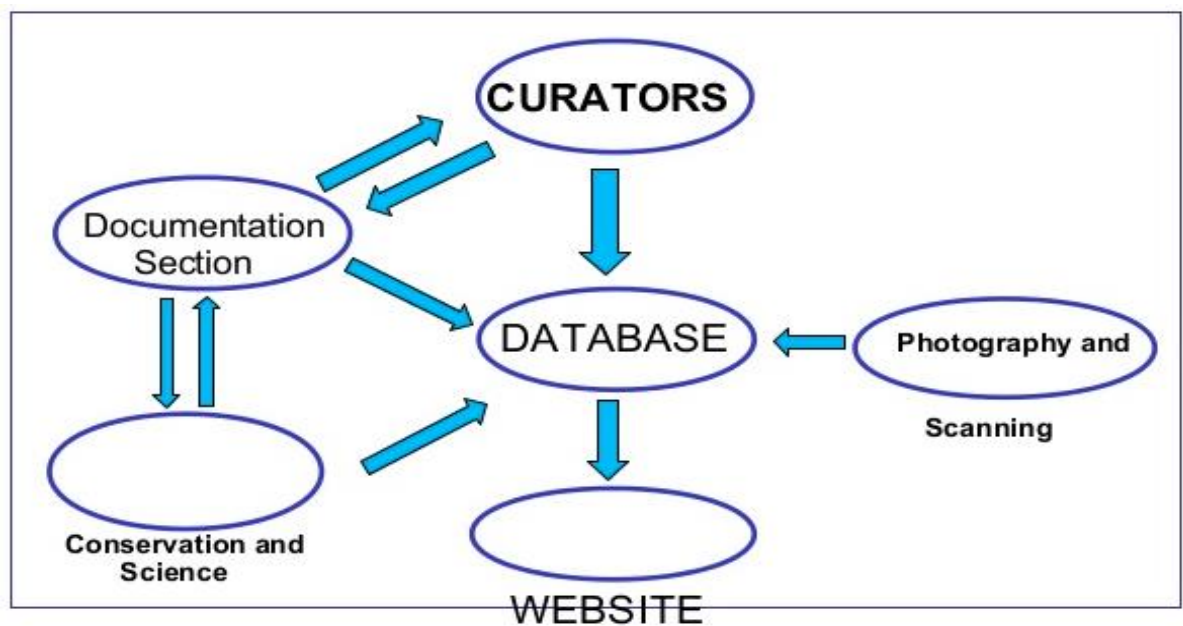
Therefore the website is not just for exhibiting collections but serves as an external end of the internal database more like an external gallery for visitors. There are two categories of how to search for objects on the British Museum's website, with a dedicated page for instruction or a guide on how to search the collections database. Despite the available instruction, the British Museum should in my opinion introduce users on how to use the digital catalogue database creatively; as Anderson (2000)

and Hargittai (2002) suggests, this would create an opportunity for closing the widening digital divide.

The online instruction guides visitors to search the database collection through the general search box, through an advanced search option, or through both options. The advanced search option allows users to use different categories or hierarchies such as ethnic group, place, material or culture to organise their search for a more focused result (as shown in Figure 5.4). This includes the option to view collections with photographic images, as the database is lagging behind on object images. The sources of information on the website are from the register, record cards, catalogues and other publications, direct curatorial input, scholars, scientific and conservative data, public comment and the objects themselves (as shown in Figure 5.5 and 5.6) (Szrajber, 2012). Although Szrajber (2012) mentioned a long list of contributors, the database lacked input from those whom the objects represent. As a result there is a tendency that such information again influenced by the idea of Africa according to Western ideology.



**Figure 5.4:** Screenshot 2013-10-27 at 10.17.57 showing the two options of searching the British Museum's collection database



**Figure 5.5. Academic knowledge within the British Museum (Szrajber, 2012)**

The goal of the British Museum today is to make available an online database that will contain a record of every object in the museum's collection, with associated conservation and scientific reports where available (British Museum website, 2013). The online database, however, contains records of the collections that serve as an internal inventory aimed at recording what is known about each object. As a result, the online database seems lacking in important historical facts about the collection because it was intended for internal use and designed primarily for collections management. Statements from the museum staff interviewed substantiate this argument. They stated that:

Primarily, the database was designed to support curatorial and research work, where much of the text is specialised in nature and terminology. (Interview, Sheales 2012)

The main thing for us is to let the public know what we have in the best possible manner with as much detail. But given how big this collection is obviously there will be some better records and there will be some not-so-good records. But I think ours (BM) is regarded as one of the best database collections in the world. (Interview, Szrajber, 2013)

From Szrajber's statement one can deduce that she acknowledges that there are

problems with some of the museum's records, but still it is taken as exemplary and she blames the problem on the large size of the museum collection. Despite the shortfalls, the museum's digitisation projects of its collections have made significant contributions to preserving and increasing access to the cultural heritage of nations through collaborations (such as one with BBC Radio 4, discussed below) both nationally and internationally (Holley, 2004). In addition to increasing accessibility, the curators expect that the online collections can be used and interpreted in new ways not previously anticipated to advance research and broaden understanding of the cultures they represent. This new use of the museum collections is made possible through developments in digital technologies and the interoperability of systems that enable cross-sectorial participation (such as internal collaboration between the museum's ten departments, other external organisations, the heritage sector, media sector and educational sector) and harvesting of 'metadata', while the Internet provides the delivery mechanism (Holley, 2004). Funding, however, is required for these digitisation projects to materialise.

<b>Identification Numbers</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Accession Number (Registration Number)</li> <li>- Other Numbers (e.g. excavation number)</li> </ul>	<b>Production and Authority</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Producer or Authority (person or organisation)</li> <li>- Ethnic Name</li> <li>- School or Style</li> <li>- State</li> <li>- Period or Culture</li> <li>- Date</li> </ul>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>Acquisition provenance</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Person or organisation</li> <li>- Price and Valuation</li> </ul>
<b>Object Descriptive fields</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Title</li> <li>- Overall Physical Description</li> <li>- Object Name</li> <li>- Materials</li> <li>- Techniques</li> <li>- Pottery Ware</li> <li>- Subject</li> <li>- Serial Number and Denomination (Currency)</li> <li>- Escapement (clocks and watches)</li> <li>- Dimensions</li> </ul>	<b>Associations</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- People, Places, Events and Titles</li> </ul>
<b>Inscriptions or marks</b>	<b>Location, Exhibitions and Loans</b>
<b>Geographical provenance</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Findspot</li> <li>- Place of Production</li> </ul>	<b>Comment</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Curatorial</li> <li>- Object Condition</li> </ul>
	<b>Conservation and Science</b>
	<b>Administrative data</b>

Figure 5.6. Fields used in cataloguing collections data in the British Museum (Szrajber, 2012)



### ***5.2.6 Users and accessibility***

As mentioned earlier, new way of viewing also requires teaching museum audiences how to use their online resources creatively so as to reach groups that are likely to be left out (Anderson, 2000). Carson (2008: 9) pointed out that the move for an online presence might be recognition of the notion that everything, including museums, ‘goes through a life cycle’. This life cycle involves what he describes as ‘being born, it builds, it booms, and eventually and inevitably it busts’ (Carson, 2008: 9).

Carson’s (2008) idea could be interpreted as envisaging the possibility of museums becoming irrelevant, as their visitors tend to seek other means of viewing culture. One of the ways the British Museum has managed the issue of not going ‘bust’ is by being relevant in current concerns such as the use of technology. This includes allowing software developers to produce their own applications that can directly manipulate and reuse the data (British Museum website, 2013). This new usage allows interactivity with the collections that could encourage new interpretations because the audience is given the chance not only to explore but also to use their imagination and creativity. Eventually, this event takes account of the museum’s educational mission.

As the first UK art organisation to publish its collection semantically (denoting signs symbols and languages that can aid meaning), the British Museum has the potential to harmonise and build data relationships with other organisations. In support for the openness and accessibility that the semantic framework offers users, Dominic Oldman, (the British Museum’s Information System Development Manager), stated that:

The publication of Collection Online in 2007 represented a major milestone for the Museum and dramatically improved accessibility to the collection through the Web. The initiative was widely praised and since 2008/9, the volume of traffic to the Collection Online has grown by 82%, with 17.8 million page views in 2010/11. This new Semantic version will provide a new degree of accessibility, and allow others the ability to work closely with the data, obtain new insights and produce innovative applications. (Oldman, 2013)

The openness of the British Museum, although considered as a positive improvement, is likely to be plagued with fear about the possible erosion of curators' authority. More people can gain access to and are able provide knowledge about museum objects without the endorsement of curators (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992; Ciolfi, 2012). This could jeopardise the move towards digitisation for 'accessibility'. On the contrary, the idea of digitising demonstrates that losing visitors in the museum's physical space does not threaten the British Museum. Rather it could be argued as a recognition and appreciation of the fact that people nowadays are used to determining the setting in which they appreciate culture (Besser, 1997a). Likewise, the move can also be interpreted as an acknowledgement in line with Gorman's idea that 'cyberspace is littered with the productions of ignorant, semi-literate, and/or crazed individuals', which creates the need for 'a site that visitors can trust' (Gorman, 2003: 14). Thus, the British Museum's online presence can become one such key trusted heritage site.

Digital scholar Melissa Terras, Deputy Director of UCL's Centre for Digital Humanities (UCLDH), has argued that the increasing online collection by amateurs and other competitors is likely to become a challenge for museums such as the British Museum because the collections are most likely to function as twenty-first-century cabinets of curiosity (Terras, 2010). Carson (2008: 11), in line with Terras (2010), suggested that digitising comes as a result of the realisation that modern visitors have ceased to be 'patient onlookers' but rather want to be 'active spectators' in museum projects. Thus there is a need for the British Museum to make its collection more creatively accessible to visitors. However, Besser (1997a) argued that digitisation goes beyond accessibility to interactivity. Donovan (1997) also warns that simply providing access to museum collection databases (and object-centric information) is not enough.

Donovan (1997) encourages museums to provide context and storytelling, and to stimulate curiosity, exploration and serendipity so as to create compelling online experiences and be of interest to a broad range of users. In the same line of argument, Dierking and Falk (1998) emphasised how the capacity of new technology to offer

visitors learning options, interactivity and various degrees of depth of information will help museums ensure better understanding of visitors with varying backgrounds, interests and knowledge levels, therefore increasing conceptual accessibility. Anderson (1999) suggested that a 'learning model' that would take into consideration ideas suggested by Donovan (1997) in the creation of digital content, rather than the 'information provision' model, be used by museums, as the information model only supports access rather than encouraging the interactivity that is likely to stimulate curiosity. Contrary to the main arguments mentioned by the above scholars, the British Museum website is yet to utilise the storytelling, context-based ideology outlined by Donovan (1997). Instead as indicated, the museum has adopted an information provision model (Anderson, 1999) that would perhaps exclude public participation in the construction of meaning and interpretations.

As a means of assessing the British Museum's online accessibility, Terras and UCL team analysed the British Museum's online user data from 18 June 2009 to 17 June 2010. The website was analysed to reveal the number of times an individual web page was accessed and from where, using the IP address (Steven, 2012). The researchers found that 37,000 searches were made on the database during that period and that 30% of the people using it were return visitors. Terras (2012) argued that the analysis demonstrated that the database was having an 'appreciable effect on scholarship'. She implies that the database has been very useful not only in educating the public but for research purposes. Her argument was supported by the result of the analysis that showed that 50% of respondents said that they used it predominantly for academic research, while 12% was for non-academic research purposes.

The analysis substantiates the notion of improved accessibility where more visitors were able to view the British Museum's collection without physically stepping into the museum. Particularly, technological advances mean that people can surf the Internet with their phones and so there is an increased audience using digital resources (Ross, 2001). Terras' (2012) analysis of the website, however, was about accessibility and as a result was not concerned about the content or the information being accessed. My interview with curator of West African collections Fiona Sheales revealed that the content and information was skeletal. She pointed out that:

Staff time was limited when the system was first brought in and training obviously took a while to roll out so the collections were digitised as batches of things. Over time curators like myself have come along and, as and when we have the time and resources, we try to do a better job of it. Often they are basic skeletal records that have been added on to the database just to get something on there. (Interview, Sheales)

Terras' (2012) analysis emphasised that, despite the skeletal information on the British Museum website, online users increased. However, the demographic information about the museum's web users indicated a similar profile to that of the traditional museum-visiting audience in terms of income, education and location (MacDonald & Alsford, 1997; Keene, 1998).

In the current economic climate, where all cultural institutions are encouraged to justify their existence and their services, the analysis can be translated as justifying the museum's investment in terms of use and demonstrable improvement in scholarship. The analysis can be interpreted as an attestation that digitisation will not reduce visitor numbers. In addition, I will argue that by putting information about the collections online through digitisation, the curator's authority will not be challenged but will be augmented through visitors' active participation. This is due to the notion that the task of digitisation will require continuous research by curators about their collections. As more people are able to view digitised images online, curators' knowledge is likely to be challenged due to the openness of the information about the collection. But if curators are able to keep abreast of their collections, they are more likely to earn the respect and confidence of their visitors.

The 'democratising effect' of digital access will still need to be moderated in some way as curators, through their knowledge, might emerge as the authoritative voice that validates important information online (Bessers, 1997a: 118). Such moderation will allow visitors to question museum content and layout and make the museum website a place of debate where visitors can leave traces of their own meanings and interpretations (Ciolfi, 2012). This will further encourage inclusive and active participation, as various stakeholders are likely to engage in contributing to and

distributing online content. The authority of curators is further secured with the fact that all that is digitised and exhibited online has institutional backing and guidance, unlike some of their online counterparts.

Terras' (2012) statement that the British Museum database is 'a well-used, well-loved resource' could be further interpreted in a number of ways to highlight other issues associated with digitisation. User analysis revealed that 29% of visitors were from the UK, while 18% originated from the US. The database was most used by people conducting scholarly research. What resonates from this analysis is the extent of the effect of digital divide on what might be considered democratic. This is because the analysis of the users only considers people within the geographical boundaries of the 'developed world' (Norris, 2001; Daniels, 2009). As part of the developed world, it implies that online users are educated, with Western civilisation, industrial and economic advancements (Norris, 2001). Hence, users outside developed geographical locations are most likely to have limited or no access (Abungu, 2010). Therefore, only those who can access the collections consider the database useful; it cannot be rated in the same way outside Western geographical locations. This confirms the idea that access to digitised collections and their preservation, especially in the longer term, may be problematic (Britz & Lor, 2004). Pickover and Peters (2002) pointed out that the problems are not just technological, but also of economic, political, legal and moral context. Terras' (2012) statement, however, does not endorse the database as perfect and without need for improvement but is an acknowledgement of its usefulness. Hence, there is a need for a regular review of the information on the database to examine all that the artefacts, like the Ife bronzes, might imply.

Further restrictions are as indicated earlier, could also be caused by language barriers. The simple reason that the website is written mostly in English creates a barrier for non-English-speakers, who most likely will view the photographs but cannot access the supporting information. Hence, they are alienated from contributing to the interpretations or likely meaning of the objects even if they have a relationship with or prior knowledge about the object (Fanon, 2008(1952)). This is in line with the notion that the English language only expresses the English person's

point of view, and does not adequately articulate the ideas and views of non-English-speakers (Kincaid, 1988). As a result, non-English-speaking visitors have limited access and cannot leave any feedback online. Coupled with the fluidity associated with museum objects and the associated practices of acquisition, preservation, display and interpretation (Gurian, 1999), leaving out their original identity alienates the object from being part of a past. Conversely, retaining the producer's original name for the bronzes connects them to their original culture and gives the object power to re-enact experience.

Although writing information about objects in so many diverse languages might seem impossible, retaining the original names in the original language of the artefacts' origin would be seen as empowering 'native voice'. Native voice in this case is defined in line with McMaster (2007: 72) not merely as 'native people talking' but in terms of representation, authority, perspective and visibility. Thus, such native language acknowledges the original name given to the object by the culture that produced it and not imposed by the cultural assumptions of a dominant group (Fanon, 2008(1952); Edwards & Tredell, 2008). This is due to the ideology that language has the power to name and therefore to construct the lens through which understanding takes place (Fanon, 2008(1952). Edwards & Tredell (2008) further argued that language is the most potent instrument in cultural control; therefore, the language of the colonial power played an essential role in the process of colonisation. I argue, therefore, that the absence of the Yoruba language in relation to the Ife bronzes could be perceived as a subtle way of propagating the ideology of imperialism and white supremacy over Africa (Daniels, 2009).

Such exclusion of language further prevents the object with the opportunity to communicate and transmit information as well as provoking past experience for audiences who are not British. Gurian (1999) postulated that the intangibility of the object, such as its information, is what provides opportunity for meaning to be debated. Likewise, Malpas (2008) argued that, although language could be classified as intangible, it is imbued with materiality in the form of speech marks and signs, and adds value to the visual. As a result, the viewer is accorded the power of 'subjectification' where necessary instead of indirectly stated by curators. Hence

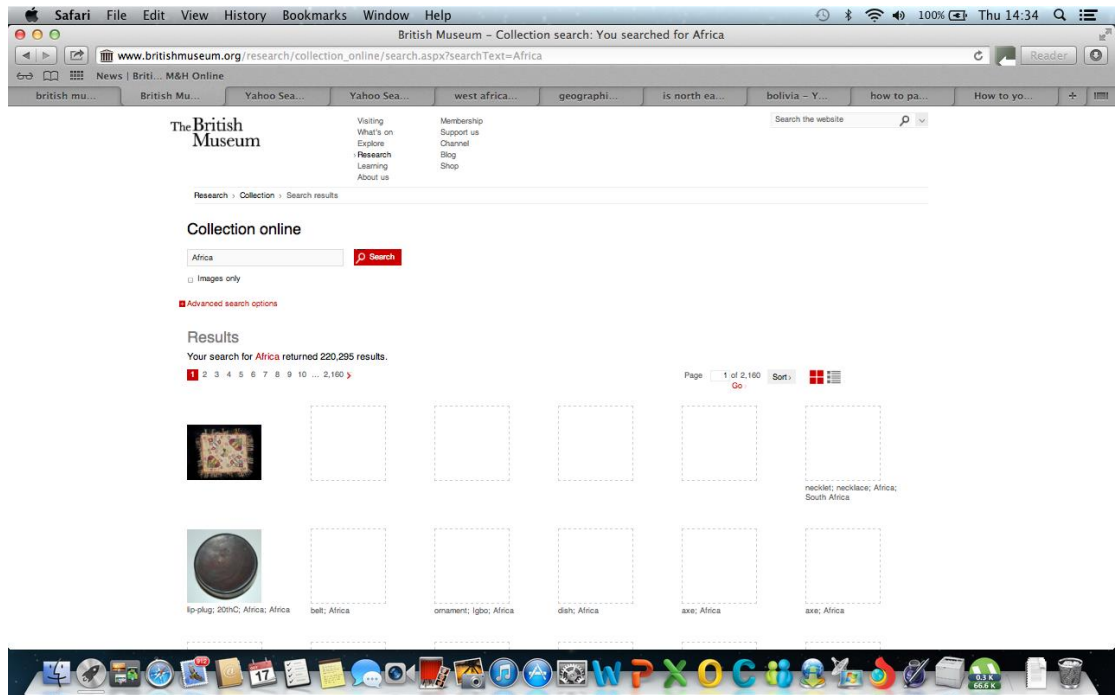
Malpas identified the importance of language in the construction of interpretation from different perspectives. I argue, therefore, that restricted access, either to correct information or an image of an object, can be as good as no access.

#### ***5.2.7. The British Museum's African collection online***

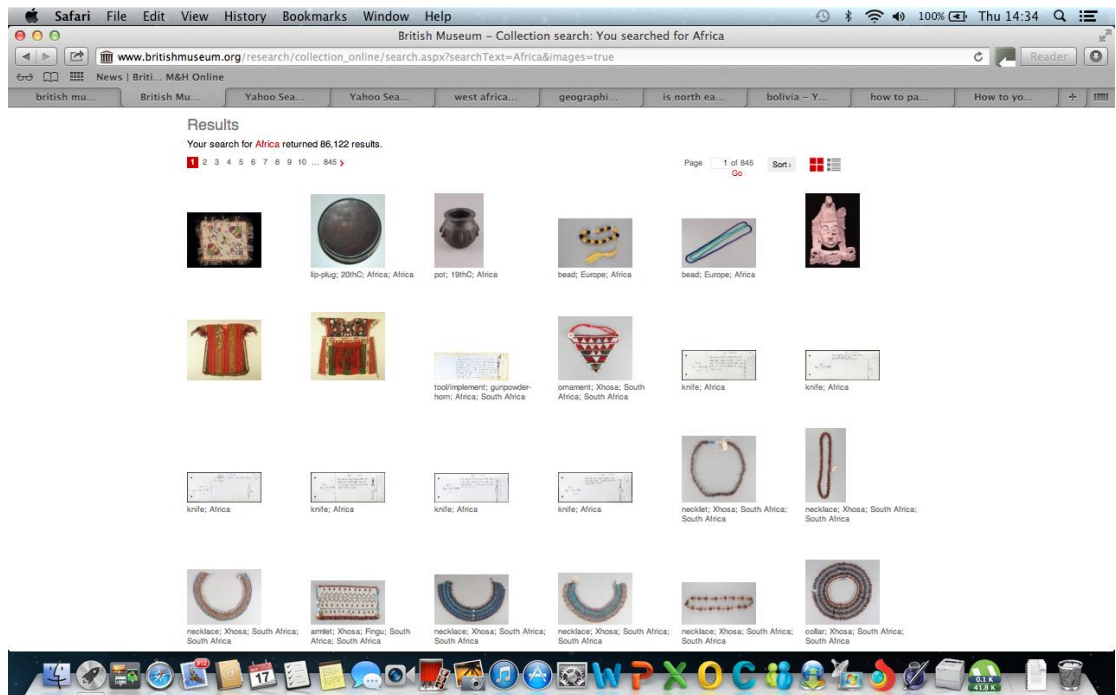
A search through the British Museum website to find out about African objects and how they have been described and interpreted revealed the following. Using the general search term 'Africa' (as shown in table 5.1 and Figure 5.7) returned 220,295 named objects on 2,160 pages. However pages 41–44 were objects from the US; this shows that the 220,295 total also includes some objects not related to Africa in any way but that might have similar words. This anomaly was pointed out to the web liaison officer, Julia Stribblehill, during my interview. Of the total 220,295 objects online, 86,122 objects had images along with their description as shown in Figure 5.8.

Search	Total objects	Total pages	Objects with images	Number of pages	Objects without images	Pages without images
Africa	220,295	2,160	86,122	845	134,173	1,315
South Africa	19,984	196	9,753	96	10,231	100
North Africa	17,570	178	8,636	85	8,934	93
East Africa	9,224	91	2,948	29	6,276	62
West Africa	9,632	95	3,564	35	6,068	60

**Table 5.1: Content according to African geographical boundaries**



**Figure 5.7. Screenshot 2013-10-17 at 14.34.07 showing African objects with and without images**



**Figure 5.8. Screenshot 2013-10-17 at 14.34.33 showing African objects with images**



Using new search terms in terms of geographical boundaries, the result showed that North Africa had 17,570 objects on 173 pages. 8,636 had images on 85 pages, leaving 88 pages of objects without images. 8,934 named objects on the website had no images attached to them. A search using the term 'South Africa' returned 19,984 objects on 196 pages, utilising only 96 pages for 9,753 (less than half of 19,984) objects that have images. 'East Africa' returned 9,224 objects on 91 pages, of which 2,948 had images on 29 pages. 'West Africa' returned 9,632 objects, 3,564 of which had images on 35 pages. The number of digitised West African objects online, however, is contradictory to the number provided by curator Fiona Sheales. She claimed that:

The African collection as a whole has around about 200,000 objects and it's growing all the time. Of those, objects from West Africa number around 75,000 to 80,000 objects. (Interview, Sheales 2012)

Sheales also emphasised that:

Africa was one of the first collections to be put on the database and there was no time to do photography. That is why when you search on the public database you don't always get a picture because the photography is lagging way, way, way back compared to the actual accessioning of the records onto Merlin. (Interview, Sheales 2012)

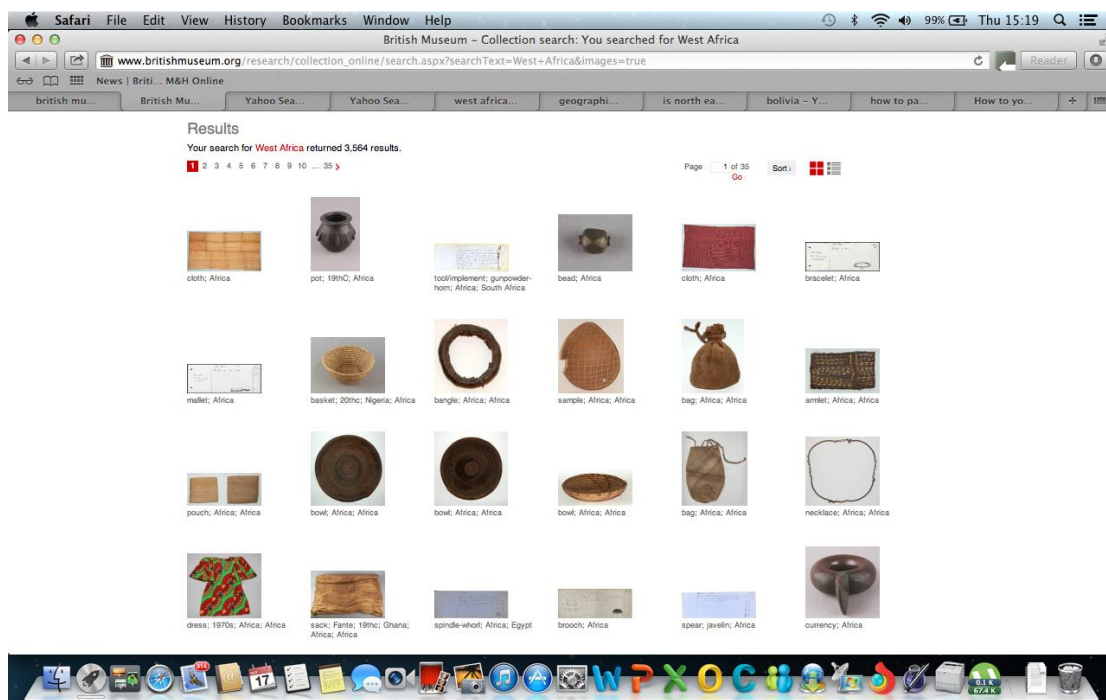


Figure 5.9. Screenshot 2013-10-17 at 15.19.45 showing objects from West Africa with images

The search for 'West Africa' (as shown in Figure 5.9) however included Nigeria, and Ile-Ife located within Nigeria. 'Ife' returned 86 objects, including objects from other parts of Nigeria, such as Benin, and other parts of the world outside Nigeria, such as Iraq. 66 objects had images, while 20 had no images. 9 representations of bronze heads are plaster replicas of the originals. 1 black and white photographic print of the Ori Olokun and 1 original bronze head that can also be viewed in the Africa Gallery of the British Museum.

Search	Object without	Pages	Objects with	Numbers of pages	Total objects	Total pages

	images		images			
West Africa	6,068	60	3,564	35	9,632	95
Nigeria	6,121	60	4,457	44	10,578	104
Eastern Nigeria	18	1	10	1	28	1
Western Nigeria	60	1	30	1	90	1
Eastern Nigeria	468	5	480	5	948	10
Southern Nigeria	224	2	519	6	743	8

**Table 5.2: Content according to Nigeria's geographical boundaries**

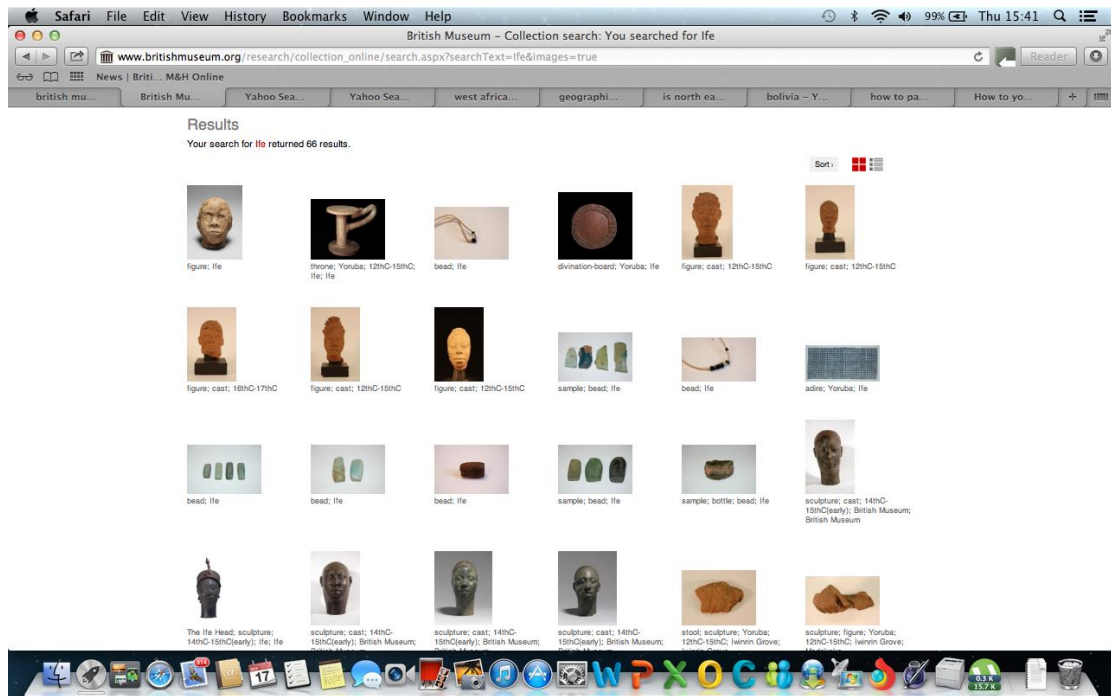
From the above table (5.2), it is evident that there is a discrepancy between total West Africa digitised content and total digitised objects from Nigeria. West Africa comprises 16 countries (Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo) and is expected to reflect a total number that outnumbers that of Nigeria. However, this is not the case; the objects from Nigeria outnumber that of West Africa, thus raising questions about how the objects are categorised.

The disparity is further extended to the total objects from Nigeria. A combination of all the geographical locations gives a total of 1,809 objects instead of 6,121 objects and reveals a total of 770 objects that are without images, thus publishing 9 pages without images of the objects listed. This might be useful for the British Museum's internal database but provides the audience with little understanding of what the objects represent, in line with the popular notion that 'photographs speak louder than text'. As La Grange (2005) points out that photographs benefits from being seen as a piece of the real as well as but having a prestige of art. Hence lack of a photographic

image might imply that the audience is not able to understand what is being described and cannot relate to it in any way. In her book titled ‘On Photography’ Susan Sontag emphasised that ‘photographs are physically mute’ but speak through the voice of texts written with them (1978: 108). She argues further that ‘words do speak louder than pictures. Captions do tend to override the evidence of our eyes’ (Sontag, 1978, 108). However, she acknowledges that caption cannot restrict the multiplicity of meanings carried by a picture. In line with Sontag (1978), I contend that photographs and capacious texts should work together to the benefit of both the audience the museum want to reach as well as the people or culture being represented.

Search	Listed object without images	Pages	Listed objects with images	Pages	Total objects	Total pages
Africa	134,173	1,315	86,122	845	220,295	2,160
West Africa	6,068	60	3,564	35	9,632	95
Nigeria	6,121	60	4,457	44	10,578	104
Southern Nigeria	224	2	519	6	743	8
Ife	20	1	66	1	86	1

**Table 5.3: Content relating objects from Ife to objects from Southern Nigeria**



**Figure 5.10. Screenshot 2013-10-17 at 15.41.58 objects with images from Ife**

During my interview with the West African curator, Fiona Sheales, in 2012, I mentioned that the search for Ife brought up 34 objects. Sheales pointed out that:

Quite a few have got images obviously because the Ife exhibitions meant that we got lots of things out of store for it and they all got photographed whether we used them or not, though there are one or two that haven't been used. (Interview, Sheales 2012)

Sheales' statement reveals that the exhibition titled 'The Kingdom of Ife: Sculptures from West Africa' was a driving factor in the digitisation of the Ife artefacts. The exhibition allowed objects to be brought out from storage, photographed, then used for online display. Hence, prior to the 2010 exhibition, there were limited Ife artefacts on the British Museum website. It is also important to note that the discrepancies with object numbers online clearly illustrates that the website has problems. One of these is with the way it is key worded, and I discussed this with the web liaison officer, Julia Striblehill. This might be why Ife is 'barraged' due to the facilities in the search facilities.

#### ***5.2.8. The Ife bronzes online via the British Museum website***

Digitisation projects that involve African collections, according to librarians and information scientists Britz and Lor (2004), seem to be mainly confined to relatively small, specialised collections. Interestingly, Britz and Lor (2004) pointed out that many of the digitisation projects that involve African collections are being undertaken outside Africa. This raises the questions to what extent are heritage digitisation projects being undertaken inside Africa? Research shows that there are just a handful of digitisation projects within Africa (Britz & Lor, 2004; African Resource Service, 2003; DISA, 2003; UNESCO, 2003). Even where digitisation takes place in Africa, digitised African heritage forms only a comparatively small part of the website's content (Britz & Lor, 2004). Intriguingly, access to this digitised content is by subscription that incurs a fee. Clearly, therefore; digitisation in Africa does not necessarily equal accessibility. The reduced presence of digitisation projects in Africa, especially West Africa, makes the presence of the Ife bronzes on the British Museum website highly favourable in terms of global access. Interestingly, it was the 'discovery' by the West that gave the bronzes acclaim and publicity in the first place (Frobenius, 1910; Platte, 2010b; Kuba & Hambolu, 2010). Today, it is the technology developed by the Western world that is used to make the bronzes part of world history.

Nevertheless, the bronzes can only be part of history if the information about them, including their names, is in accordance with the creators' intention rather than what the West thought they should be. On the other hand, lack of written documents about the bronzes mean that the creators' intention might not be known but can be inferred from the people they represent, especially the Ooni of Ife. There are claims that the bronze heads represented the Ooni's forefathers and that the Obalufon mask was in his possession at the palace at the time the bronzes were discovered (Blier, 1985; Picton, 2010). Also, the fact that the bronzes were discovered in Wunmonije Compound, which belonged to an Ooni in the mid-nineteenth century, substantiates the Ooni's claim of ownership (Willett, 1967a). As a result, descendants from the royal family, including the Ooni, should be allowed a voice in telling the story of the bronze heads. The bronzes also represent the West African black community, as

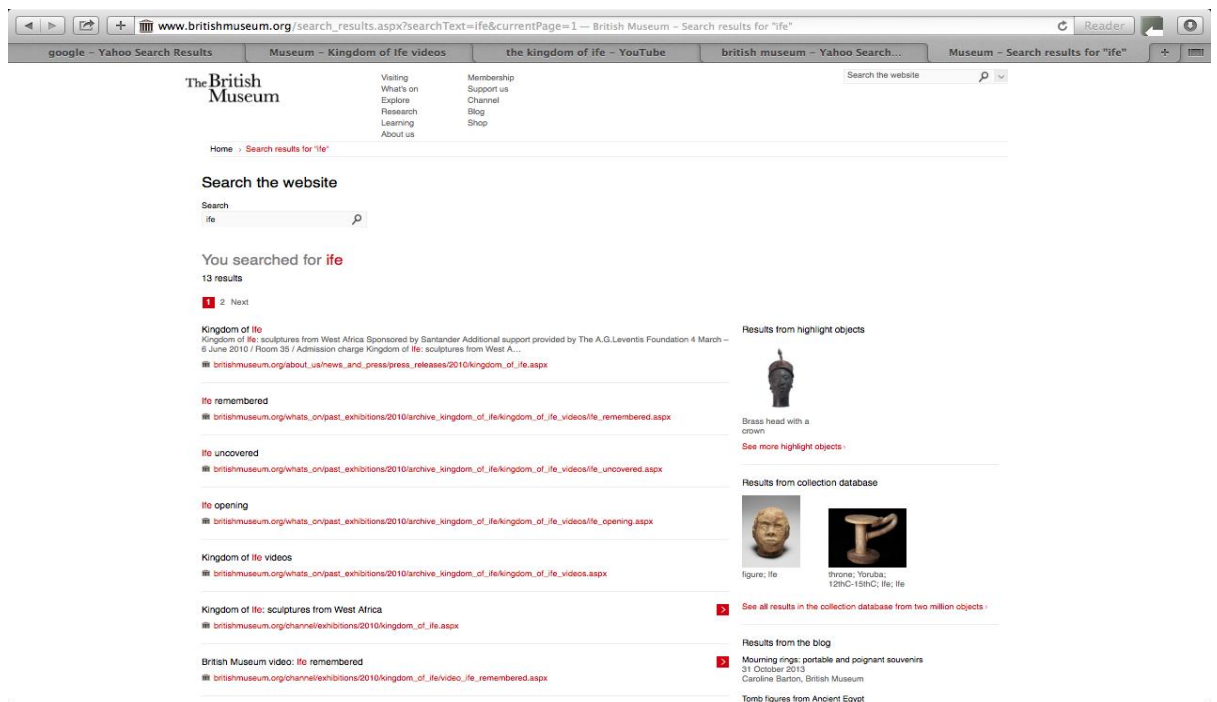
imagery of the bronzes was used as the logo for the 1973 All-Africa Games and at the 1977 World African Festival of Art and Culture (FESTAC). Moreover, the bronzes have a national implication for Nigeria as an icon of national identity (Willett, 1960). Thus, allowing different groups to participate in the interpretation and rewriting of information about the bronzes would signify the British Museum's move towards achieving a decolonised history about the artefacts and the people they represent.

The place of the Ife bronzes as part of the British Museum's online collection attests to the notion that the bronzes are significant to the history of the culture they represent (Britz & Lor, 2004). Being digitised (photographed and displayed online) and displayed as part of the British Museum's collection implies that the Ife artefacts are an important part of world history. Pickover (2009: 8) argued that 'there is the danger that everything that is not digitised will not only become unimportant but also will, to all intents and purposes, cease to exist' (--) '...whatever is available on the Internet becomes the history, all the history there is' (Pickover, 2009: 8). Likewise, Veirum and Christensen (2011: 7) argued that 'if something is not found on the Internet, it probably does not exist at all'. These scholars' argument is based on the idea that we live in an information age, where the Internet defines many aspects of human existence. Therefore locating the Ife bronzes online makes them part of history that can be accessed and possibly remembered by people because it has the tendency to change.

The number of Ife objects on the British Museum's website has increased since 18 September 2012 and includes four videos of the 2010 'Kingdom of Ife' exhibition. The four videos (as shown in Figure 5.11) are 'Ife remembered', 'Ife uncovered', 'Ife opening' and 'A night at the museum'. In addition to the videos there are 86 objects on the British Museum's online database representing Ife, of which 20 objects are without photographic representation (British Museum online collection, n.d.). Out of the 66 objects with photographic representation, there are 11 representations of bronze heads: 1 original head with crown brass casting, 1 black and white photographic representation of a crowned head, and 9 plaster casts of life-size heads. The plaster casts, unbeknown to the Ooni, were some of the eleven casts made in

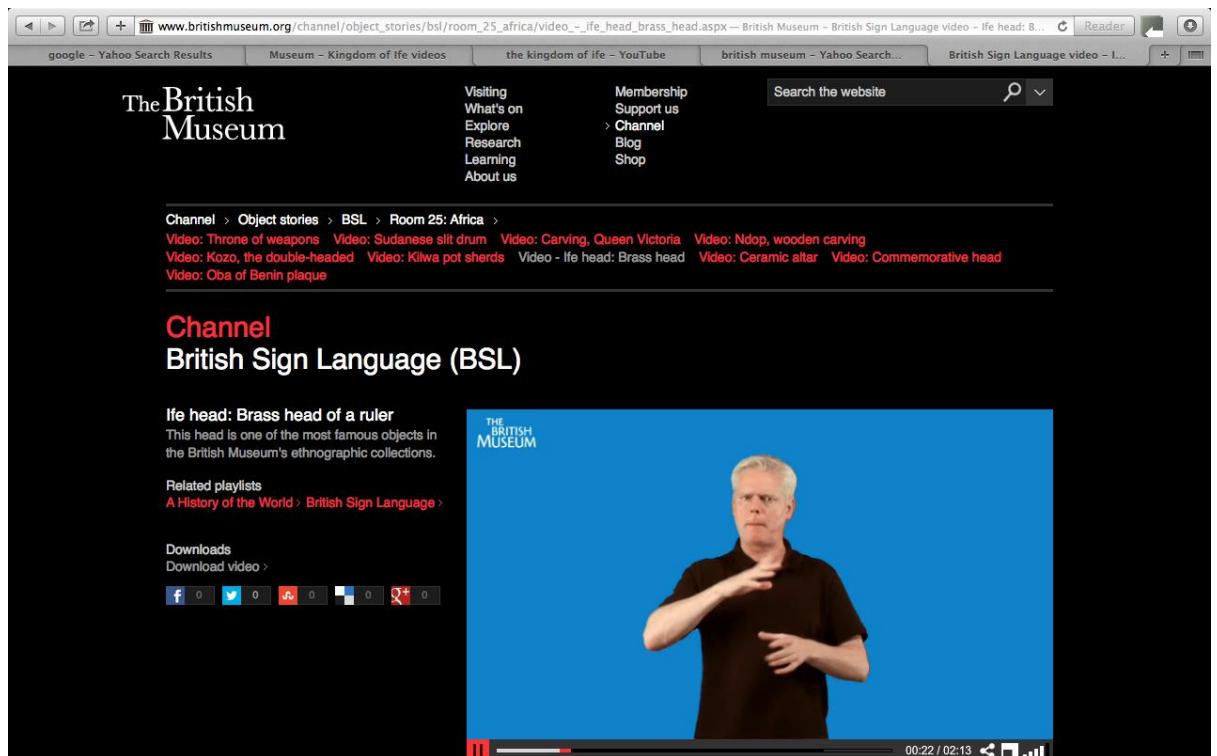
1948 when the bronzes were sent to the British Museum for conservation treatment (Willett, 2004). Complimenting the content by way of accessibility is the sign language session (as shown in Figure 5.12).

English is used to describe each object. According to Britz and Lor (2004), the use of English on the website allows digital technology to be perceived as ‘a form of cultural imperialism’. Britz and Lor (2004: 216) further argued that the use of English displaces the ‘orality’ that allows the original owners to give the intended meaning of the objects being displayed. The absence of other languages permits Western culture on the Internet to have an overwhelming influence. In the case of the Ife bronzes, the description online is largely taken from the perspective of Frank Willett (late doyen of Ife archaeology), whose interpretation and meanings are perhaps not those intended by the creators (Vogel, 1991). Although, Willett’s ideas were put together during the colonial era of British administration, they are most likely the most related or near accurate to what the creators might have intended. However other perspectives will provide the much needed interpretation with wider implications.



**Figure 5.11. Screenshot 2013-11-04 at 22.22.47 showing various links to ‘The Kingdom of Ife’ exhibition**





**Figure 5.12. Screenshot 2013-11-04 at 21.53.38: the use of sign language to disseminate information about the Ife exhibition**

Despite websites playing an increasingly important role in terms of access and audience development goals, the extent and effectiveness of their contribution is still not known (Loran, 2005). I will argue that the extent of their effectiveness can only be determined if museums are able to ascertain their effectiveness to the cultures they represent. This might be achieved when varying perspectives of interpretation are allowed through interactive engagement of the audience. In line with Loran's (2005) view, online audience research and summative evaluation of usage have an important role to play if the British Museum wants to understand the impact of displaying African heritage online. But equally, more engagement with the objects' place of origin, and the interpretation and engagement of present-day Nigerians, needs to be made if the legacies of museum imperialism are to be redressed.

#### **5.2.9. Online collaboration**

The British Museum's online presence is not limited to the museum's website; digitisation has made collaboration possible with other institutions. Such collaborations include one with BBC Radio 4 – 'A History of the World in 100

Objects', (as shown in Figure 5.13) while a partnership with SOVA (national mentoring and volunteering organisation) was executed through the talking objects project in August 2010. This idea of collaboration is in line with Chief Executive of the Collection Trust Nick Poole's assertion that museums need to collaborate both within and outside their field of work to share their experiences and knowledge and be open about the lessons learned and the methods used (Museum Computer Group Conference, 2010).

'A History of the World', , is a narrative history of the world using 100 objects nominated from the British Museum, created from two million years ago to the present day, and telling their stories through a BBC Radio 4 programme first broadcast in 2010. These programmes were 15 minutes long and focused on objects from the British Museum collections that represent various cultures and people of the world. The script was written and narrated by Neil Macgregor, the director of the British Museum. Both the script and voice recordings of the programmes can be accessed via the BBC Radio 4 website. The programme can be viewed and listened to either by individual object or by themes, including leadership and government; art; religion; money, trade and travel; war; sport and entertainment; death; communication, science and technology; food and farming (BBC Radio 4 website, n.d.). The British Museum website can also be linked to from the BBC Radio 4 website, thus offering the audience access to more information directly from the museum where the objects are on display. As a result, the audience are introduced to all the records the museum holds about the object in question.



Figure 5.13. Screenshot 2013-11-21 at 01.47.59: the homepage of ‘A History of the World in 100 Objects’

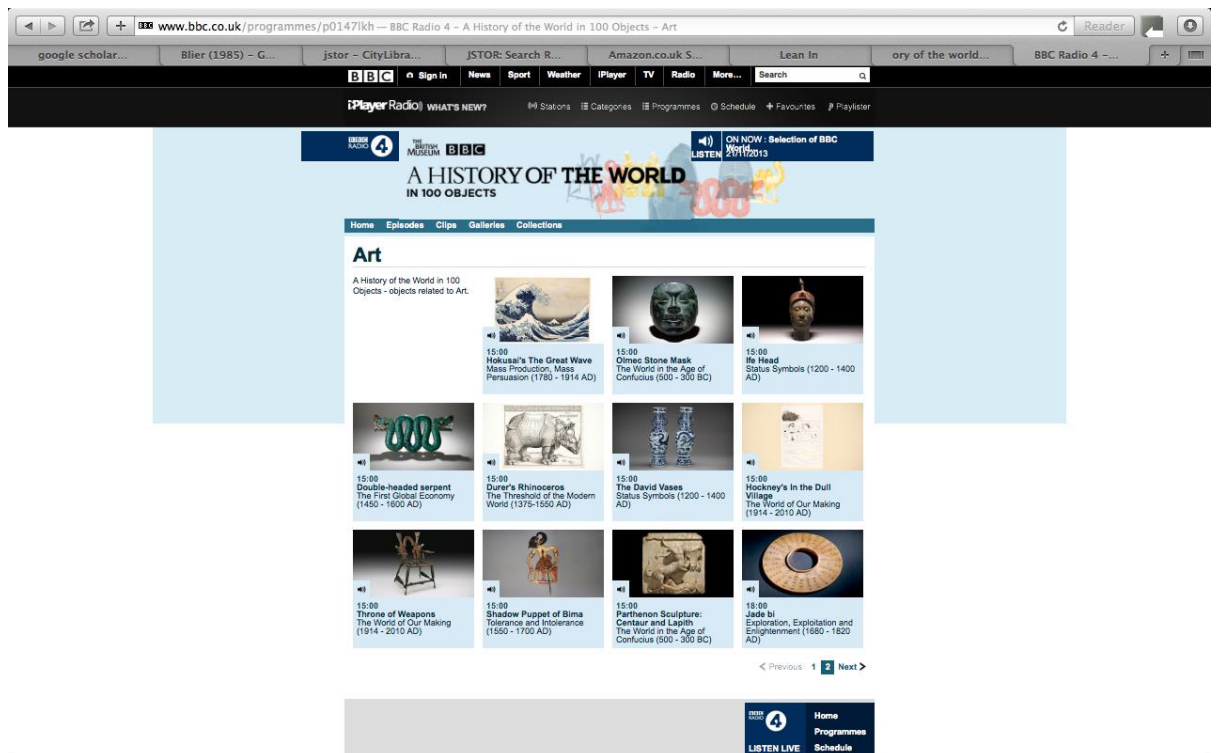


Figure 5.14. Screenshot 2013-11-21 at 01.50.51: objects categorised under ‘Art’

The first series of the programme ran between January and February 2010. The second series ran between May and July 2010, and featured an Ife bronze head as object 63. The final series ran between September and October 2010.

The Ife bronze head is part of the 100 British Museum objects used to tell ‘a history of the world’. The head is the 63rd object, is categorised under the ‘art’ theme (as shown in Figure 5.14), and is discussed as the third object in the ‘status and symbol’ episode that consists of objects from 1200 to 1400CE. The category is somewhat different from the views of Editha Platte, senior researcher at the Frobenius Institute. She argued that the head is not only important as a work of art but also as a cultural object that carries ‘huge historical and mythological significance for the Yoruba people’ (Platte, 2010a: 9). Nevertheless, ‘A History of the World’, unlike the British Museum website, displayed three photographic images showing different views of the Ife bronze head including a map illustrating where Nigeria is on the world map and a stamp that substantiates the value ascribed to the bronze head as an object of national identity (as shown in Figure 5.15).



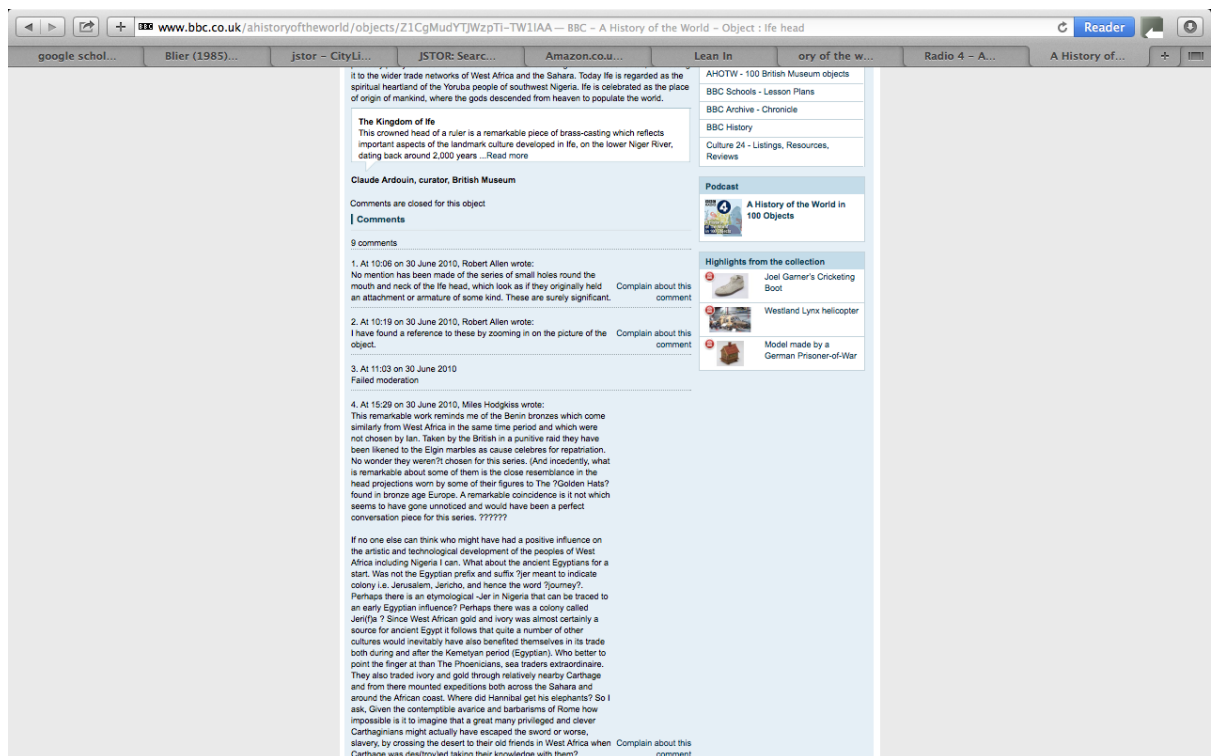
Figure 5.15. Screenshot 2013-11-21 at 03.03.50: the Ife bronze head in a different context

The audio narration by Neil MacGregor is substantiated with visual illustration. The narration of the Ife bronze head involved two Nigerians: the renowned Nigerian-born novelist Ben Okri, and Babatunde Lawal, Professor of Art History at Virginia Commonwealth University in the US. Contrary to the British Museum's website, 'A History of the World' therefore attempted included the views of the people who are being represented who have prior knowledge of and a relationship with the Ife bronze head. The project also acknowledged the fact that there were discrepancies about their origin when they were discovered. They were also referred to as being framed in the 'negro' tradition in *The Illustrated London News* of 8 April 1939, a word then associated with slavery and primitivism (MacGregor, 2011).

The British Museum's website, on the other hand, only described the bronze head based on the record and writings of British anthropologist, archaeologist and museum curator Frank Willett. According to Vogel (1991), Western writers tend to only describe an object based on their own understanding and culture, not from the perspective of the creator or the people being represented.

Audience involvement and engagement through comments and feedback is also evident on the website of 'A History of the World' (as shown in Figure 5.16). Those comments and questions regarding the bronze head can be found at the bottom of the page dedicated to the object. The thread of discussion revealed interaction between curators from the British Museum and the BBC Radio 4 audience. On the British Museum website, on the other hand, there are no indications of any form of visitor engagement, although visitors are encouraged to leave unseen email feedback. The feedback is directed to web liaison officer Julia Stribblehill. She states that:

I deal with the feedback and queries on the database and I see some of the varieties of things people are interested in. (Interview, Stribblehill 2013)



**Figure 5.16. Screenshot 2013-11-21 at 03.09.10: comment thread from the audience on the Ife head on BBC Radio 4's 'A History of the World' website**

As a result, the audience cannot see previous posts online and are not likely to leave their traces on interpretations or meanings of the artefact. This could be interpreted as a drawback; some questions raised could have been answered before, thus saving time for both the audience and museum staff. I argue therefore that the British Museum website has yet to utilise the full potential of digitisation in fostering an inclusive participatory culture as defined by, for example Giaccardi (2012). No wonder that the 'A History of the World' project received many plaudits (Brown, 2011). Michael Portillo (chair of the judges) praised the project for its 'truly global scope'. He said that it 'combined intellectual rigour and open heartedness' and went 'far beyond the boundaries of the museum's walls' (Brown 2011).

The realisation of the project involved collaboration at different levels. The British museum, the BBC and more than 500 other museums, across the country came together in an ambitious partnership that gained a widespread global audience (Miller, 2011). In appreciation of the many possibilities introduced to museum

collections through digitisation, Portillo commented: ‘above all, we felt that this project, which showed a truly pioneering use of digital media, has led the way for museums to interact with their audiences in new and different ways. Without changing the core of the British Museum’s purpose, people have and are continuing to engage with objects in an innovative way as a consequence of this project’ (Brown, 2011). In the same line, Stephen Deuchar, Director of the Art Fund, called ‘A History of the World’ a ‘museological tour de force’ that epitomises all that is great about curatorship in the UK today (Brown, 2011). Deuchar’s commendation can be interpreted as recognition of the outcome of new museology and of curators’ role as facilitators in allowing the perspective of the people or culture being represented to be involved in the construction of interpretations ascribed to objects in their collections.

The ‘History of the World’ project tends to lay emphasis on the importance of the past in the writing of history acknowledging mastery of ‘art’. Hence, ‘A History of the World’s’ website used the objects to tell its history of the world. As a canon it does participate perhaps in implying that objects nominated and displayed or made accessible ‘can become part of history, while whatever is omitted has the tendency of being forgotten’ (Pickover, 2009: 11). Neil MacGregor, director of the British Museum, while examining the bronze head from Ife as part of the ‘History of the World’ posited that ‘discovering our past is discovering more of ourselves. To become what we want to be, we have to decide what we were. Like individuals, nations and states define and redefine themselves by their histories’ (MacGregor, 2011). The past therefore can be an important part of the present only when it is made known in its pre-imperial context rather than tainted to portray a level of superiority of any group of people. Unlike the British Museum’s text, the voices and ideas of notable Africans were heard in ‘A History of the World’, as they were involved in the project. The project thus provided a platform for the artefact to be to some extent curated by people who hailed from the culture it represents.

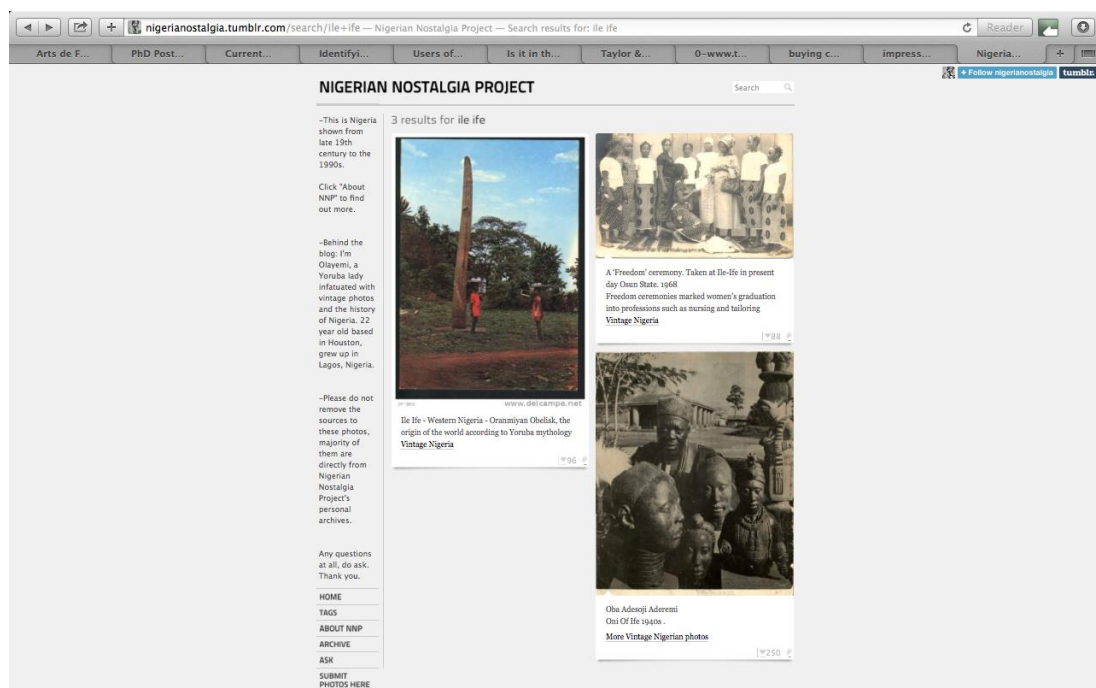
#### ***5.3.0. Ife bronze online presence via social networking sites***

The online presence of the Ife bronzes on the British museum website suggests that they are likely to be used by a range of users and placed in different context of



significance. Such online presence includes Nigerian Nostalgia Project, Pinterest and other blogs. Thus indicates that there are ranges of ways in which the images are used and interpreted online that includes discourse of repatriation.

The Nigerian Nostalgic Project is a blog that involves collecting photographs (including video and sound-bytes) depicting scenes and people from Nigeria between the mid-19th century and 1980 (Nigeria nostalgia website, 2014). Initially created on Facebook, the project has benefited from social networking sites in reaching wider audience. The project today serves an estimated 6 million Nigerian online users. Through inclusion, participants have pieced together through photographs, commentary and discussion, the fragmented history to form a collective identity.



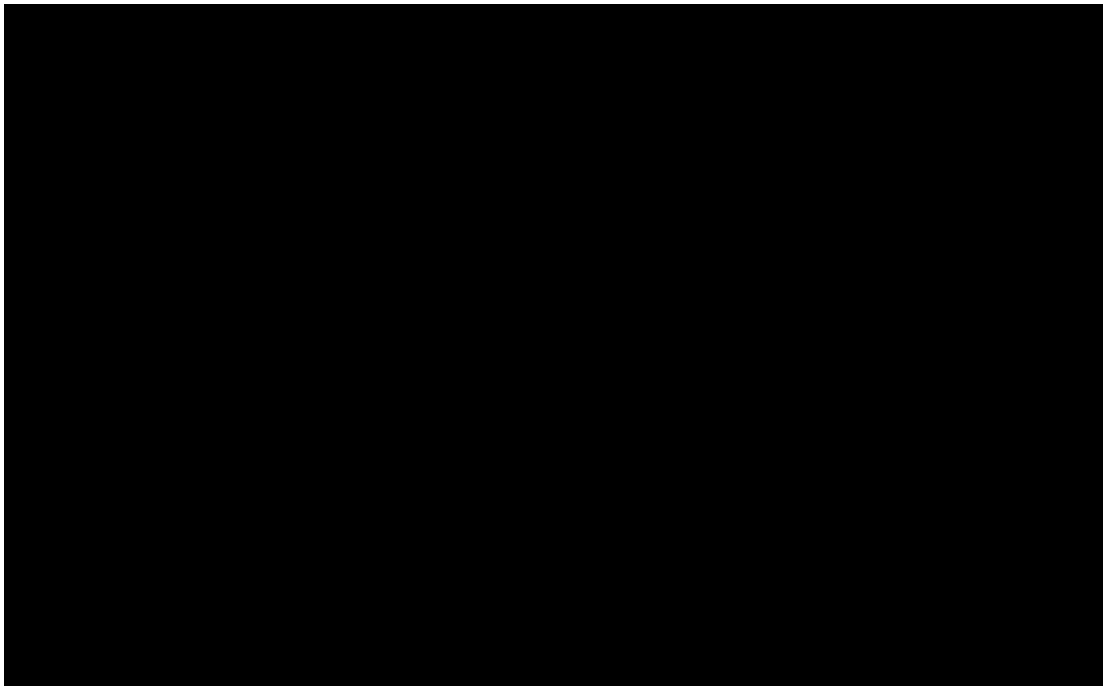
**Fig 5.17. Screen Shot 2015-03-17 at 17.39.26: Images representing Ile Ife on the Nigerian Nostalgic Project website.**

The site, presents pictures from a variety of sources that highlight lifestyle, achievements, values, thought processes, and standards that existed in Nigeria prior to 1980 in contrast to what holds today through an interactive participatory experience. Thus utilising the digital media to bring together and make relevant past



events that occurred prior to digital era. Unlike the British Museum website, the Nigerian Nostalgic Project is a user generated content site, that provides a sense of collective identity for participants. This has been fostered because the group have used the digital to

Utilising same concept of user generated content as the Nigerian Nostalgic project is Pinterest. Pinterest is a visual discovery tool that allows ideas to be found, saved and reused by participants (Pinterest website, 2014). It also allows content to be described by either text or audio recordings. As a result, participants are encouraged to be creative and save their ideas on the website for reuse by others. Thus creating a multi-way communication beyond geographical boundaries. No wonder it was described as the 'hot social networking site for 2012' (Social media-Pinterest, 2014). Unlike the Nigeria Nostalgic Project that is limited to Nigerian historicity, Pinterest however is not limited in scope and concept.



**Fig 5.18 Screen Shot 2014-10-11 at 14.46.48. Images of Ife bronzes amid other sculptures on Pinterest website.**

These ideas of online presence where users generate the content by reusing or tagging them allows for an inclusive participatory culture yet to be achieved by the

British Museum. It further illustrates that there are range of ways that the bronzes are used to validate individual or collective identity.

### **5.3. Summary and conclusion**

This chapter highlights the fact that there are few digitisation projects that involve African collections and only a handful are carried out in Africa. Thus the British Museum's online collections project is considered an opportunity for the bronzes from Ile-Ife to be viewed and reused by a wider audience. This is made possible by the British Museum staff and curators dedicated effort to exhibiting these collections that represent cultures of the world online to make them more accessible. The drive for accessibility is therefore responsible for the design and development of the museum's dedicated collection-management system. As a result, the museum's website has continued to be populated with more objects. The British Museum's ownership of the objects, however, implies that the museum also owns the copyright licences to the digital copies displayed online. This idea of ownership could be responsible for the production of copies of the Ife bronzes when they were brought to England for conservation purposes in 1948. In addition to the duplicity of gaining cast copies from the originals, the museum lays claim to the copyright licence of their images. This act by the museum could be argued to be an extension of imperialism in a subtle way, whereby the British continue to demonstrate their purported superiority over their former colonies in the post-colonial era.

Although displaying collections online is likely to encourage accessibility, the idea of copyright licences might also jeopardise accessibility; it tends to impose some form of limitation, thus commercialising the digitised collections. Consequently, exhibiting a photograph of a copy might be perceived as a danger to the original exhibited in Nigeria because the audience are more likely to be struck by the copy without realising that there is an original elsewhere. More importantly perhaps, accessibility and increased engagement could be fostered if the British Museum linked the copy of the Ife bronzes on their website to the originals in Nigeria. The information presented on the website however is based on the writings of Frank Willett's writings, whose accounts though first-hand are probably produced within

specific contexts of European interest and concerns of that particular time. Hence not taking into cognisance any changes that might have emerged in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In spite of the shortcomings of the British Museum website, the collaboration with BBC Radio 4 to present 'A History of the World in 100 Objects' utilised the potential of digitisation to a larger extent, due to the rich variety of the format used in presenting and representing the Ife bronzes. Thus the collaboration project tended to represent a post-colonial discourse offering narration and interpretation of the bronzes in new light. The BBC project further involved a representation of the people and culture the bronzes represent as well as allowing the audience to participate through their comments, thus empowering the curators to play out their roles as both 'facilitators' and 'authorities' on the subject. This is evident as audience were inspired to use their imagination and to participate while referring back to the curators for answers and clarification. The online space is also used as an archive for storing all contributions and encourages audience engagement, whereby discussion threads can be followed and utilised as a resource for education and research.

Unlike the British Museum website, the BBC Radio 4 programme, Nigerian Nostalgic Project and Pinterest are analysed as projects that can inspire the emergence of changing meanings of the bronzes. New meanings and interpretations however, might probably emerge through the British Museum website if there were dedicated pages or a linked webpage that allowed for an in-depth story of the bronzes to be told within varying contexts. Instead, the published record online lacks the richer implication of the bronzes, reducing it to meanings written during the colonial era. An in-depth story can also be augmented by including voices of the people the bronzes represent. Thus, allowing them to tell their story by themselves brings a different kind of richness that might encourage the decolonisation of the bronzes. One can argue, therefore, that the British Museum is yet to explore the possibilities associated with digitisation.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

### **6.1. Conclusions**

This chapter sums up the findings of my thesis and points to directions for further research. The thesis concludes that the web, if well directed by museum professionals, can be a useful tool for engaging museum visitors and involving them in the construction of meanings and interpretation. Likewise, the museum website could also be a new space for revising and re-presenting historical truths about African artefacts, such as the Ife bronzes within and beyond museum collections. This can also go a long way to encourage Africans to tell their stories about artefacts without restriction from the imperial baggage the museum's building is likely to have. By encouraging a more inclusive participatory culture, curators can become facilitators of cultural engagement and discussions that might result in the emergence of new post-colonial interpretations and meanings.

From the outset, the British Museum was central to my research, and it will also be at the centre of this final discussion. My conclusion argues that it is imperative to study individual cultural artefacts such as the Ife bronzes and particularly, specific histories, in order to avoid unhelpful abstractions or generalised critique when approaching the sensitive subjects of representation, racism and colonialism that affect museums' ethnographic collections. The thesis has highlighted how there have been notable changes in how the British Museum represents 'the other', gradually presenting the Ife bronze head in a new light and helping to remove the most extreme forms of perception.

However, as we have seen, there is still a long way to go to accomplish the post-imperial ideologies opened up by the new museology and post-colonial theory. In this chapter, I conclude that in the British Museum, the Ife bronzes that represent Yoruba culture, the nation of Nigeria and West Africa, are still shrouded in narratives that propagate the idea of colonialism in a subtle way. This has also been the case online when viewed via the British Museum's online catalogue database, as the description provided tells a one-sided story. Such stories continue to propagate

the ideology of supremacy of Britain over its former colony of Nigeria. Although the British Museum claims to propagate knowledge about world cultures, the use of the dominant colonial language can be interpreted as a way of propagating the idea of white supremacy (Daniels, 2009).

My conclusion, drawn from both primary and secondary evidence, indicates that digital representation could be an extension of colonial practice thus becoming digital colonisation. According to Koutonin (2012) countries that missed the industrial revolution ended up to be colonized, in the same order countries, which will miss the digital revolution will become digital colonies of developed economies. This is because the West (developed economies) is considered as the powerful and knowledge-centered information force. Digital colonisation is likely apparent as the digital technology (such as smart phones, laptops and tablets) as well as the funds for digitisation projects are provided by Western government (Adelson & Olding, 2012). In addition, British Museum single story representations can propagate Imperial British ideologies of the 'other' as oppose a version that considers a wider implication according to the people being represented. Digitisation can become a liberating tool for decolonising the Ife bronzes only if it involves an inclusive participatory culture, one free of colonial power dynamics, as discussed in Chapter 4. My thesis therefore challenges the single-sided narratives of the bronzes promulgated by the British Museum and recommends a more inclusive participatory digital representation based on the wider potentials of digital technology, used in capacious ways to foster engagement and participation.

The use of digital technology can provide a new way forward for achieving the aim of new museology to reflect post-colonial ideology. This does not imply that digital representation is innocent but rather that it has great potential for decolonising the artefacts that represent 'other' cultures. I refer to the term 'post-colonial' here from the perspectives of Fanon (2008(1952) to reflect the importance of the language of the colonised. I also argue in line with Foucault (1977) and (1980) that new narratives need to reveal the non-static nature of power. Thus the narratives in the museum space and online need to reflect inclusion of the people being represented as they are allowed the chance to participate in telling their stories. Since there is a

possibility that the imperial museum's grandiose physical space and structures are likely to influence how these artefacts are perceived, it is about time for the potential of the digital sphere to be put to good use. Digital space presents an opportunity for a multi-faceted perspective that radiates from individual to collective experience. This would reflect how shifts in power, context and time affect interpretations and meanings. In that way, museum curators could become facilitators while the museum audience become creators of content and contributors to history.

The research started as a drive for the Ife bronzes to be digitised and represented online with the notion that they would become accessible to a broader audience. However, through the course of the research I realised that the Ife bronzes simply 'being digitised' was not the main issue; rather it was a question of how digital representation was constructed and how it could be used to bring about their decolonisation. This was a more complex issue, and one that needed to consider how the information being constructed and distributed about the bronzes online would impact on the creation of meaning, on how the people are represented in terms of identity, and what exactly the different interpretations of the 'bronzes' have been and why. My focus then shifted from simply focusing on 'digitising' to examining the bronzes' changing meanings as they travelled through time. I also became more interested in how the current British Museum narratives have failed in sufficiently reflecting these changes and their involvement in the colonial free-for-all race for dispossession, but have now worked more in the direction of making the meaning of the Ife bronze static in a changing world.

One limitation the thesis has had to deal with has been the limited availability of writings on the Ife bronzes. Written documents were limited to the 1960s, a few in the 1970s and a couple in the twenty-first century linked to the 2010 exhibition, which marked the centenary of the first alleged 'discovery' and 50 years since Nigeria's independence. Ironically, Europeans who were operating in relation to particular institutions (commercial and national enterprise, religious missions and other institutions) wrote large percentage of the available written document responsible for writing a large percentage of the available documents. Hence, the

bronzes were discovered and inserted into the British Museum at a time when the African voice in the Western record was very limited. As a result, there is an inevitable shortage of 'indigenous' commentary from the period. This is a typical reflection of the circumstances under examination. Early documentation of events revealed some of the conditions that could account for this silence, as discussed in Chapter 1. This is in line with Benthall's (1992: viii) argument that archives and texts are to be understood as 'precious deposit[s] of human understanding and misunderstanding'. However, these documents are often inconsistent and one-sided, as they relate to the past from the point of the coloniser and not the colonised and in turn from the presenter and not the represented. The understanding of the context with which historical documents were written brought about the need for a revision of the narratives that describes the Ife bronzes and open discussion of these absent narratives.

## **6.2. Thesis framework and findings**

For better understanding of the conclusion, it will be helpful to revisit the framework of the thesis and to recapitulate the findings outlined in the previous chapters and draws out some of their implications. The mixed methodology adopted in this thesis has allowed several overlapping cultural spheres and histories to be explored through its analysis and representation and its research into the accounts and thoughts of the collectors. This has allowed the study to engage in a close examination of a number of different subjects: the value and meanings of the artefacts; pre-colonial implications; colonial encounter and implications; the digital British Museum; and the discourses that surrounded the collection of ethnographic material for nineteenth-century museums.

In the thesis I have examined the changing meaning of the Ife bronzes from:

- (a) pre-colonial Ife (before 1900)
- (b) during the British colonial administration in Nigeria (1900–1960) and
- (c) from post-colonial Nigeria to the digital British Museum (1960–2013).

The changing values of the bronzes have been extensively analysed through the investigation of their social life, focusing on varying contexts within the boundaries of Nigeria and Africa, as discussed in Chapter 1. Likewise, the implications and changing values have also been interrogated after the bronzes' 'discovery' within the context of the West outside Nigeria in Chapter 2, in relation to postcolonial theory and museological debates in chapter 3.

I have examined a wide range of historical documents in Chapters 1, 2 and 3, which have indicated that the meanings of the Ife bronzes have not been static since their discovery. The meanings have changed throughout the journey of the bronzes from Ile-Ife to the British Museum. Such meanings were directly influenced by the prevailing circumstances that allow new ideologies, identities and discourses to emerge within a particular era. In the pre-colonial era, the bronzes were known as either votive, kingly things or objects attesting to power. In the colonial era, their meaning changed to being curios, copies and primitive objects. In the post-colonial era, the bronzes were first seen as ethnographic objects and then as work of art. Their changing identity has influenced how they are interpreted, thus giving them a non-static meaning.

To begin with, I explained how the circumstances of use of the Ife bronzes are crucial in terms of determining their value and meaning. In Chapter 1, I analysed the values associated with the Ife bronzes through their social life within Ile-Ife and Nigeria. Their association with the monarchs who were the elite of Ile-Ife and of neighbouring cities like Benin were also discussed. The bronzes' association with trade that involved people from different parts of the world before the establishment of British colonial rule in Nigeria was found to involve a level of civilisation that questions the idea of Western 'discovery'. At the time, only the rich and influential of the period could afford the services of the craftsmen (allegedly from outside Ile-Ife) who could produce the life-size copper alloy casts. The possibility of transatlantic trade substantiates that Ile-Ife was an established city-state long before the influx of Westerners, thus challenging the idea of degradation and primitivism as recorded by the West. The chapter also demonstrated how civilisation at the time has



since been predominantly considered from within the cultural and linguistic understanding of the West and not from the perspective of the Ife people.

The association of the bronzes with the monarch, the elite and the wealthy further indicates the value placed on the bronzes among the Yoruba ethnic group. First, as a 'kingly thing', the Ife bronzes were seen as objects that symbolised authority and the power of kingship in Ile-Ife. This chapter indicated that within the context of power, gender was downplayed, as the bronzes were only associated with masculinity (Rea, 2011). Despite historic documentation of there being a female Ooni, Gbagida (the sixteenth or nineteenth Ooni in the Oduduwa dynasty), and the evidence has never been represented in either the Ile-Ife or the British Museum narratives of the Ife bronzes (Smith, 1988). As a result, one can infer that masculinity was important for public power and royalty as suggested through the narratives of the bronzes of twelfth-century Ife.

Possible association with femininity is also associated with the Ori Olokun, a deity regarded as either male or female depending on what area of West Africa he/she is worshipped in (Clark, 2007). The emphasis on the masculinity of the Ife bronzes highlights the relationship of gender and power in determining the value bestowed on the bronzes. Chapter 1 also analysed the British Museum narrative that connects the Ife bronzes with funerary rites to discover that the value of the Ife bronzes goes beyond being used only for funerary rites to being objects that represent authority, royalty, religion and identity. Such identity extends beyond the boundaries of Nigeria.

In Chapter 2, I examined the social life of the bronzes from the perspective of the West. It established that the idea of the 'discovery' of the bronzes is unfounded given that (a) the ideology of discovery is for the West and not for the initial owners and (b) the presence of gifts as a form of exchange in any case annuls the notion of discovery. This chapter therefore examined the Western cultural construction of the Ile-Ife 'bronzes'. The chapter discussed how British colonisation (from 1900 to 1960) brought about devaluation and a new identity for the copper alloy sculptures. They became known as bronzes, curios, or degraded objects from a society framed as

desperately in need of civilisation (Gore, 2008). Thus the bronzes were alienated from their original name and tradition, and inserted into new spaces called museums. It further emphasised how commercialisation, civilisation and Christianity – the main purposes of colonialism according to Mirzoeff (2002(1998) – contributed to the reframing and devaluation of the bronzes.

The colonial era provided publicity for the bronzes but at the same time brought about their commercialisation, thus leading to the purchase of the head presently displayed in the Sainsbury Africa Gallery of the British Museum (Willett, 1967a). This chapter also critiqued how commercialisation of the bronzes started in 1910 from the alleged exchange between Frobenius and the Olokun priest (Willett, 1959; Platte, 2010b), an exchange that likely involved trickery and the exertion of force (Hays, 1959). As both the German anthropologist and the British administrator sought supremacy of recognition over power and ownership of the ‘discovery’, the Olokun became evidence in court (Platte, 2010b), a new identity far from the revered powerful votive in the life of the devotees.

The ‘bronze’ sculptures remained in the context of shifting political power. I emphasised that the exchange of gifts between the colonised and the coloniser was a profoundly unequal exchange as there was no shared ‘regime of value’ (Appadurai, 1986: 15), as the Olokun priest and Frobenius shared different cultural assumptions that affected the terms of exchange. Likewise, the lack of policies regarding the transfer of heritage objects led to the removal of the bronzes from Nigeria as colonial loot. As a result, the bronzes became ‘violently dislocated, displaced and deprived of origin’ (Okunowo, 2012: 201). Chapter 2 further indicated that some of these removals became reframed deceptively through the discourse of providing ‘care’ for them in the British Museum. The material test carried out by British anthropologists Underwood and Fagg, further contributed to downgrading the quality and the value of the artefacts (Underwood & Fagg, 1949). Ironically, it was only after the claim of a copy that it was finally recognised as an African object (Platte, 2010b). The test further led to the creation of cast copies by the British Museum now displayed digitally via the British Museum website. The chapter also highlighted that the

alleged discovery by the colonial administration led to the population of Western museums with African heritage.

In Chapter 3, the development of the museum as a colonial institution using the Ife bronzes to ‘enlighten’ their audience was unpacked highlighting the effect of imperialism on objects and interpretations. In Britain, the objects were displayed as curios denoting their ‘primitiveness’ instead of the creativity and civilisation of Africa – similar to what Coombes say of Benin bronzes (Coombes, 1994). It is notable that Europeans did not know how to cast in copper at the time the bronzes were being produced in Africa (Schildkrout, 2010). Further alienating Africa from taking credit for the creation of the bronzes, in 1913 Frobenius suggested that they were from ‘lost Atlantis’ (Frobenius, 1913). The colonial display of power brought about a new dawn to the bronzes as they moved from being votive or kingly things to objects of curiosity and finally to exhibits of sovereignty. It was a move that made the Ife bronzes objects that demonstrate the supremacy of the coloniser and not the colonised.

In my analysis of various exhibitions of the Ife bronzes in Chapter 3, I looked at four stages of a discursive development:

1. In 1948 the bronzes were exhibited as curios represented to create surprise and wonder in the British audience at the expense of the Ife people. It was a way for the colonisers to solicit the backing of British citizens to support the idea of ‘civilising the colonised’. This representation aided a biased, racist position where Britain played the ‘white supremacist’ over its colony Nigeria.
2. Although Nigeria became independent of colonial rule in 1960, it took thirty-five years before post-colonial thinking was used in reinterpreting Western museum narratives of the Ife bronzes. The post-colonial effect was first decisively felt in western museological canals in 1995 when African artefacts, including Ife bronzes, were represented as ethnography in the ‘Africa ’95’ exhibition. This political shift encouraged a new representation

that moved museums from being directly racist. However subtle, imperialist discourses were still at play.

3. By the twenty-first century, representation in the British Museum's Sainsbury Africa Gallery still bears the imprint of imposing ideology, whereby narratives of the Ife bronzes depict how Britain perceives Africa. It highlights an awakening for researchers to seek for evidence of the voices of the people being represented.
4. As argued in Chapter 5, in the post-colonial digital British Museum, imposing narratives are evident through single-sided stories of curators that propagate the ideas of colonial documents. The British Museum's digital space is yet to reflect any form of participation in the interpretation of the Ife bronzes, thus emphasising the dominant voice and inhibiting the artefacts from becoming digitally decolonised.

In addition, Chapter 3 examined the British Museum as an institution identified with colonial era, through their exhibitions with narratives of primitivism that presented the colonies in a degraded light, thus validating British colonial supremacy. Such narratives were responsible for how the British public identified and constructed meaning about artefacts that represent other cultures. Such meanings were also influenced by the prevailing 'whiteness' that serves as a reference point for construction of meaning (Vogel, 1991). The post-colonial era brought about a new critical frame that influenced how the Ife bronzes were viewed. It further emphasised the need to reconsider the effect of the museum frames on the artefacts they exhibit, making it possible to see the artefacts from multiple perspectives as opposed to the single frame presented by museums. 'New museology' became a catchphrase to replace the 'old' method of museum practices.

Despite the shift from colonial to post-colonial, and from old museology to new museology, the idea of African art was still downplayed as indicated by the ambiguous and often uncritical use of the term 'primitive' within the British Museum. As post-colonial thinking progressed, there was further need to represent

the bronzes in a new light. The ideology of post-colonialism to foster inclusion and allow the Ife bronzes to be seen outside the museum frame has, however, yet to be fully realised. Post-colonialism, which perhaps served, as a springboard for the ideology of new museology although not directly connected to it, has not made any impact in how the bronzes are interpreted in the British Museum. Although with post-colonialism the colonised have started to gain recognition as a community with a voice that needs to be heard, its realisation is still incomplete.

Revisiting the museum narratives of artefacts that represent the 'other' assists in thinking through its journey across different spaces and different contexts. Schwarz (1999: 33) suggests that 'comprehending the past in the present is arguably the least developed aspect of post-colonial research'. This thesis, however, has highlighted both the need and usefulness of digitisation in allowing the past to be reflected in the present, as this is a crucial contribution to the construction of meaning and emergence of new decolonised interpretations. The meanings of the Ife bronzes today on the website is presented through the meaning constructed within museum representation that stands for and symbolises its essential values. Sadly, as museum visitors identify with these selective single-tone narratives in museum representations, they are most likely to become subjects to the museum's dominating meaning instead of using the information to construct a new meaning (Hall, 2005). This is because the narrative reflects the paradigm of the governing power in both time and context that are seen as timeless. In line with Hall (2005) and Foucault (1977), I conclude that narratives interpreting museum artefacts need to reflect the passage of time to reveal changing circumstances. As a result, the narratives representing Ife bronzes in the colonial era need to be opened to contestation, renegotiation and revision reflecting the post-colonial era.

To translate the palimpsest of the post-colonial to the museum world is to open artefacts enshrined in colonial narratives in a most capacious manner that might reveal their wider implications. Hall identified that, as there are many ways of 'being black', there are also many complementary but different ways of being represented (Hall, 2005: 31). It is with this realisation that utilising digital representation might allow the capacious meaning of the Ife bronzes to emerge in British Museum

representation. This might see the colonised not only allowed to tell their story but also empowered towards making the story universal thus connecting the remaining Ife bronzes in Nigeria to the original one at the British Museum. Hall identified the benefits associated with visual imagery but also attested to the fact that it needs to be supported by extensive oral histories, artefacts and political memoirs that can recreate experiences of the past in the present.

Chapter 3 also analysed how post-colonial theory affects the interpretation of the Ife bronzes. The inconsistency in the definition of post-colonialism is discussed to indicate that the contradictions associated with post-colonialism have to do with multiple interpretations of the term. The chapter discussed how the ideologies of new museology, informed by post-colonialism, also informed the discursive shifts within the British Museum from a racist institution to an institution that encourages inclusion. The thesis indicates that there is need for more inclusive post-colonial participatory culture from represented communities. Such participation will encourage a multiple-perspective narrative that empowers British Museum visitors to construct meaning and interpretations that considers historical evidence.

In Chapters 4 and 5, I have analysed the potential of digital representation to question how digitisation might challenge colonial narratives to include a wider range of histories and earlier cultural meanings and status. The chapters indicate that by adopting an inclusive participatory culture, the formerly colonised could be empowered to tell their stories to challenge museum imposing narratives. By so doing, digitisation can become a tool for facilitating interpretation, in accordance with an amended version of Tilden's (2008(1977) six principles of interpretation, as it empowers the visitor to include their personal meaning and inspiration. Inclusive participatory culture therefore will include both individual and collective memory of experiences that create multiple perspectives inclusive of earlier meanings and status as opposed to the static predominantly one-sided perspective of the British Museum curators (Giaccardi, 2012; Ciolfi, 2012).

Chapter 4 critically examined the potential of digitisation in representing in order to set up clearly formed analysis of Ife artefacts. I emphasised that, despite the

advantages associated with digitisation, it is important not to imagine that digital representation is always innocent. If it is not carried out critically or strategically, it might further 'colonise' the artefacts and end up becoming 'digital colonisation'. Digital colonisation is at its most extreme in forms of digital racism that emphasises 'white supremacy' over the 'other' (Daniels, 2009). White supremacy can be propagated through a more subtle hidden agendas and language used in disseminating the ideology that the 'other' is a subordinate of a superior race. Through a critical account of the key issues identified, including authenticity and ownership, the chapter emphasised that critical digital curating is a tool that can encourage a post-colonial inclusive participatory culture beyond the context of the digital divide.

In Chapter 5, I analysed the British Museum website to examine how digitalism has been utilised to represent the Ife bronzes. It explicates that despite the post-colonial ideology that redefines identity through the narratives from the perspective of 'the other', the British Museum is yet to see the bronzes from the perspective of its original cultural owners. Instead, museum practices that support the colonial interpretation of the bronzes still guide the narratives included on the website. However, the British Museum's collaboration with BBC Radio 4 in presenting 'A History of the World in 100 Objects' presents the Ife bronze in a more resoundingly post-colonial frame by including the voice of the 'other'. Threads of discourses between the public and the curators also allow the audience to leave traces of their participation online. Such discourses can further be included as part of the content of the presentation as it adds to the understanding of the Ife bronzes. Although the British Museum contributed a great deal to the BBC Radio 4 programme, the museum is yet to implement a similar post-colonial strategy in presenting the Ife bronzes on its own website.

Using Internet search engines, and through interviews with curators and other museum staff, the chapter further emphasises that there are only a handful of digitisation projects that involve African collections; hence the British Museum's website has provided the Ife bronzes an opportunity to be viewed by a wider audience. I emphasised that, despite the time and effort of the curators, the adoption

of a predominantly singular perspective, referred to as the information model by Anderson (1999), has resulted in a narrative that is not yet sufficiently contemplative, experimental or evocative. Such narratives allow only the emergence of a one-sided interpretation that defiles the principles of interpretation by Tilden (2008 (1977)). As a result, the British Museum's digital representation is unfortunately in some ways an extension of the early western museum practices of imperialism; the bronzes are still far from being fully decolonised.

Although the digitised representation encouraged collaboration, as with the BBC Radio 4 'History of the World' series and possible reuse by other users, it has also increased commercialisation through ownership of copyright licences that have further alienated the bronzes from their early Yoruba cultural meanings and implications. In this light, the thesis has established that digital technology has been used to enhance the dominance and authorised narratives that have continued to dominate the Ife bronzes, thus replacing the creative power of both the individual and collective memory that assists in meaning-making. Decolonisation does not immediately eliminate, compel or wipe out unpleasant memories, but it will be a step in the right direction for post-colonial discourses to be generated around through narratives of museum artefacts. It is my hope that this research has contributed towards such a shift.

### **6.3. Contributions this research has made**

There has been increasing work in examining and theorising connections between museum display, imperialism and colonialism (Karp & Levine, 1991; Coombes, 1994; Clifford, 1997; Hooper-Greenhill, 1997; Barringer & Flynn, 1998; Simpson, 2001). However, there has been little that focuses specifically on the changing meaning of the Ife bronzes, or on the relationship between post-colonial thought in museum and digital representation. This thesis is an attempt to bridge this gap in the literature. The goal was to uncover information that was useful to academics, students, the British Museum and its audiences, while at the same time contributing to the scholarship surrounding collections that represent 'other' cultures.



In examining the British Museum's framing of the Ife bronzes, this research has highlighted the inconsistency associated with the colonial 'discovery' of the bronzes. I maintain that 'discovery' of the bronzes was for the West and not for the Ife people who are the legitimate owners of the bronzes. By investigating different periods, my thesis indicates that time and context affect meaning, and as a result meaning and interpretations are not static. The changing meaning of the bronzes has been analysed to emphasise that the British Museum narratives of the Ife bronzes have been carefully written to suggest a static imposing implication that not only subdue the western museum's part in colonial looting but also denotes the endorsement of the supremacy of Britain. However, such imposing narratives can be contested through the potentials offered by digitisation.

#### **6.4. Directions for further research**

The thesis has also argued that lack of funding should not be a hindrance to revisiting, reviewing and rewriting museum narratives. Digital representation through varying channels of participation can be explored to encourage the inclusion of ethnic minorities without necessarily building new spaces within the museum. Channels such as having a dedicated webpage for each artefact where people can include their own interpretations and meanings would be appropriate. Therefore, digital representation removes the imposing museum building from the equation when interpretation and meanings are being constructed. By utilising all the possibilities that digital representation offers, festivals, music, personal accounts and other related relics could be included in the narratives and exhibition around the Ife bronzes.

As discussed in Chapter 5, there is a need for museum narratives of the Ife bronzes to be contested, renegotiated and revised to include a variety of perspectives, as people have different knowledge, experiences and relationships with the artefacts. Such relationships will affect how meanings and interpretations are constructed. This is likely to be true for all African artefacts that were either purchased or acquired through looting during the colonial era. The continent during the colonial era experienced European vandalism that resulted in the looting of Africa's visual artefacts and the desecration of African royal palaces and places of worship. Despite

the well-documented historicity of the looted artefacts, the British Museum is yet to include such claims in their narratives. As a result, the British Museum is responsible for presenting a single-sided story that eliminates their role in colonial injustice.

For the British Museum to promote understanding of 'world civilisation' there needs to be a shift towards facilitating narratives of those formerly designated as the 'other'. It needs to include multiple perspectives that include the accounts of the people being represented as oppose to the singular and partial perspective displayed. For instance, the website could be designed to link dedicated pages that allow the people being represented to contribute to the interpretation process. These interpretations and meanings can then be related to those provided by the custodians. This is in line with Foucault, who pointed out that:

Every society has its regime of truth, its general politics of truth, that is the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true, the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned... the status of those who are charged with saying what comes as true. (Foucault, 1980)

By allowing people to participate in the process of interpretation and meaning-making, the museum curators thus assume the place of facilitators instead of riding on an authoritative role over its cultural interpretations.

Since power permeates through every level of social existence, it is important for the museum to acknowledge the new conception of power with which it exists. The notion that power is never monopolised and as a result circulates from one group to another depending on the prevailing situation is highlighted (Foucault, 1980). This contests the idea that power mediates in a single direction from top to the bottom where the reigning authority legislates over the 'other'. The end of colonialism birthed the post-colonial era, resulting from the independence of British former colonies such as Nigeria. However, the British Museum narratives have yet to acknowledge the shift in power as regards the Ife bronzes. Power should not only be discussed from the perspective of the colonised to the coloniser, or from the oppressed to the oppressor but throughout all levels related to the bronzes.

Comparative studies of the changing power dynamics from the coloniser to the colonised will provide further insight into power dynamics within different units (Ife indigenes, the Yoruba ethnic group, the nation of Nigeria, and West Africa as a whole). Other researchers will need to examine how these new digital projects are initiated and the effect of inclusive participation on emerging meanings, analysing precisely how they are serving to assist in the recovery, revitalisation, resilience and decolonisation of Ife peoples. It is my hope that, having extensively analysed and challenged the narratives of the British Museum, this thesis can be used as a resource in interpreting and constructing further wider meanings for the bronzes within the digital sphere.

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