

## CURATORSHIP OF BENIN CULTURAL MATERIALS: TOWARDS INTEGRATING INDIGENOUS AND ORTHODOX METHODS

K.A. AGBONTAEN-EGHAFONA

*Department of Sociology & Anthropology, University of Benin*

A. IKECHUKWU OKPOKO

*Department of Archaeology, University of Nigeria*

**ABSTRACT** Prior to the establishment of institutions known as museums, men of various cultures have collected, cared for and displayed their cultural objects. This proposition was explored and applied to Benin City, Nigeria. The research investigated and highlighted the indigenous curatorial and conservation practices of the Benin people, drawing out similarities that existed, with such practices in today's museums. The paper proposes an integration of both indigenous and orthodox ways of caring for museum objects. The paper discusses the collection and care of cultural objects in seven historical collections from the purely religious, to the exclusively aesthetic. Caretakers (local curators) existed for the various collections identified. They were also enjoined to pass on the necessary education involved in the care to the next generation of caretakers. Furthermore, indigenously produced substances were consciously used to prevent degradation of objects. The incorporation of some aspects of the indigenous methods where applicable is recommended.

**Key Words:** Indigenous; Orthodox; Curatorial; Conservation; Integration.

### INTRODUCTION

The desire to collect, take care of preserve and even display objects of value seems innate in man. People of various cultures have been known to have had ways of collecting and looking after their cultural materials or artifacts of value before the establishment of institutions known as museums (*Encyclopedia Britannica* Vol. 12, 1975: 649, 660; Afigbo & Okita, 1985: 1). This fact has been investigated and found applicable to Nigeria as a country and Benin City as a case study.

The contemporary museum as a Western institution has guidelines, methods and techniques for taking care of, exhibiting and conserving artifacts. In addition, experts in these sub-fields of museography are trained accordingly, so most of the guidelines are widespread and universal. In Nigeria, for example, the British administration founded the Antiquities Commission in 1943 with the establishment of museums. The museums have been responsible for collecting, exhibiting and conserving Nigeria's cultural artifacts and monuments. Prior to the establishment of museums and the Antiquities Commission (now National Commission for Museums and Monument) one wonders how Nigerians collected and cared for, in their own indigenous ways and methods, historical and

important cultural objects which survived until the museums were established. However, P.J. Dark (1973: 29) claimed that R.E. Bradbury (who did extensive ethnographic field work in Benin City in the 1950s and 1960s) informed him that:

“much of the loot removed from Benin in 1897 was in a good state of preservation, showing that care had been taken of it. In fact, there were people in the palace whose job it was to look after its treasures.”

The present research was therefore carried out to investigate the techniques and methods employed by traditional custodians of Benin art in their collection and conservation of objects of cultural and historical importance prior to European contact. One of the questions that needed to be answered was “what was the ‘museum’ or repository before the colonial era?” If cultural materials of value fashioned before the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries not only survived the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries but also found places in the foreign museums, it becomes necessary to ask the following questions: (i) where were they kept? (ii) of what value were they to their owners before the Europeans arrived?, and (iii) how well were the objects preserved? Also how can we describe the Benin-oriented museum, or African-oriented museum?

If Nigerian museums, as we know them today are western institutions as colonial orientation, and if the concept of the museum today is universal, they may not be meeting the needs of Africans. It is thus necessary to seek ways and means of making museums African-oriented to suit the taste and needs of Africans. This was the outcry of African museum directors and workers recorded by Decker (1990: 108) who claimed that “neglect, ignorance, corruption and poverty have led to the decay and plunder of hundred of thousands of objects in West African museum collections.” An African-oriented museum, as suggested, might help in resolving some of the problems plaguing the museums in West Africa.

This paper thus seeks to integrate both foreign and local ways of caring for cultural objects within the museum setting. Ryder (1996: 3) mooted this idea in another context when he stated that in the 1970s, an approach in the field of medical anthropology in North America was devoted to the study of the healing arts of all ages and culture. With reference to Benin, he suggested that it might offer an approach to the exploration of the interaction between old and new in the understanding and treatment of illness in Benin. It is in this manner that this paper examines possible integration between old and new, the indigenous and the western and modern ways within the museum setting. Andah (1988: 5) also mentioned in his discussion, the need for an African approach to the anthropology of Africa, “a real need for African people to truly rediscover themselves and their cultural heritages.”

## METHODOLOGY

Data was generated from different sources. There were various categories of interviews: with key informants, one-on-one interviews and group interviews. Life histories of respondents who have played very active roles as custodians of Benin cultural materials were also used as data, or rather as supplements, to the oral interviews. They were used as a vehicle to learn about the socialisation process and personality development of respondents, who received training as local curators. Events witnessed during participant observation were also incorporated into the interview record. Other forms of ethnographic data were generated from the use of questionnaire and archaeological reconnaissance.

**Table 1.** Important Materials out of/from which Benin Cultural Objects Were Fashioned

S/N	Type of Material	Material Used	Sources of Materials	Products
1	Metal	i. Iron	Ore at the embankment at Igueoriakhi, Benin. Slags from Igbo Ala (Illah).	Tools, weapons, shrine figures, e.g. gongs and bells.
		ii. Brass/Bronze	Still subject of debate.	Decorative objects in royal shrines.
2	Wood	i. Hard wood	Forest.	Buildings, decorative objects, domestic utilities.
		ii. Camwood (Ume)	Swamp forest.	Camwood beads, dyed bone beads red.
3	Ivory	Elephant tusk	Hunting.	Shrine decorations, ivory accessories, e.g. bangles.
4	Bone	Animal, Fish	Hunting, fishing.	Shrine decorations, bone beads and pendants.
5	Shell	i. Sea shells (cowries)	The sea, sand banks and through inter-ethnic trades.	Shrine decorations, neckwear. Cowries, crown money.
		ii. Nut shells	Forest.	Neckwear, shrine decorations, waist chain/strings (akpolo).
6	Fibre	i. Cotton	Farms.	Thread, clothes, calico.
		ii. Reed	Forest.	Mats and bags.
		iii. Cane	Forest.	Ropes, baskets, trays.
		iv. Palm fibre	Forest; palm trees.	Sieves, mats, brooms, raffia bags and raffia cloth.
7	Leather	Animal skins	Hunting.	Bags, fans.
8	Clay/mud	i. Clay	Streams.	Pots, dishes and knobs of chalk.
		ii. Mud	Earth.	Shrine figurines, terra-cotta art, walls of building.
9	Stone	Rock pieces	Through trade.	Stone beads, shrine decoration.

\*Most of the information was obtained from O. S. B. Omoregie (pers. comm., 1992) also see Omoregie (1991).

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### I. Pre-Colonial Repositories/Store Houses for Cultural Objects

The museum may be alien to the Benin vocabulary in that the Benin people did not have a museum designed in the modern fashion, but the people had some institutions or structures for the care and display of their cultural objects (Ebohon, pers. comm., 1996, See Appendix). If these institutions/structures did not exist, it would have been difficult in contemporary times for anyone to amass the large quantity of Benin collections in museums worldwide.

Institutions/structures or settings comparable to museums to certain degrees can be grouped into two main categories.

- i. Individual homes: The palace, individual homes/houses of chiefs, nobles and commoners.
- ii. Community buildings belonging to groups of people.

These two categories can be further sub-divided into six or seven types:

1. *Ikuen na'aru erha* - Parlour/altar for individual ancestral worship.
2. *Ugha erha'Oba* - The chamber containing altars for deceased kings.
3. *Oguwe edion* - Place for communal worship of past community leaders.
4. *Egun* - An altar containing valuable objects.
5. *Iwowa* - The treasury.
6. *Aru ulele* - Altar/store for worn out and broken objects.
7. *Aza emwin'are* - Bank or storage for valuables.

1. *Ikuen na'aru erha* may literally be translated as "father's parlour". In individual homes in the past, and in some traditional homes in present times, there is usually a raised mud platform with an altar in what is meant to be an important sitting room. The male head of the family (usually an extended family) called *Okaigbe* was in charge of affairs in the family hierarchy. He saw to the maintenance and worship of family ancestors. The family shrine housed most important objects that aided the *Okaigbe* in ancestral worship, i.e., recalling the identities of his ancestors. The altar itself is known as *aru erha* and it contains objects such as *ukhure* (carved staves or rattle staff). Each *ukhure* belonging to a named ancestor in addition to other objects were included, depending on the status of the deceased ancestor. The need to maintain the ancestral altar at the *Ikuen na'aru erha* is held so strongly by the Benin people that it has affected their laws of inheritance. Since the altar had to be maintained by the male head of the family, it is therefore mandatory for the first-born son of the family to inherit the family house called *Igiogbe*. The *Igiogbe* contains the ancestral altar. To continue with the tradition of maintaining the place (even today when many houses no longer have the *Ikuen na'aru erha*),

it is the law that the first son of a Benin man must inherit the house in which his father lived and died. The *aru erha* is also erected to serve as the ancestral altars of either the *Oba*, chiefs, and nobles and it serves the same purpose.

2. ***Ugha erha'oba*** is the "temple" or room housing the reigning *Oba's* departed predecessor ancestors' important objects. *Ugha* means room or chamber and *erha'Oba* means the *Oba's* father(s). In the palace, rooms/chambers were designated for commemorating past *Obas*. Important objects that belonged to the past *Obas*, or that could be used in identifying or associated particular *Obas*, were placed on the raised mud altars in these rooms. After the death of an *Oba*, the new *Oba* within three years of his accession to the throne must assign craftsmen to fashion out a bust or statue of his predecessor, and the bust as well as other paraphernalia, such as staffs and effigies (*ukhure* and *ilao*) to be used in recounting the predecessor's life history were placed on the altar erected to his memory (Dark, 1973: 4). Among other objects placed in *ugha erha'Oba* were elephant tusks carved with pictorial forms depicting events in the life of the departed *Oba*. Other furnishings were bells, altar tableaus called *aseberia*, the *ada* and *eben* (sword and scimitar). This setting in the palace cannot be likened to the modern museum, but the *Oba's* palace and the houses of some important chiefs (with their collections in their *aru erha*) maintained collections of art objects, which in fact displayed important cultural materials with historical background.

Before the punitive expedition of 1897, every *Oba* who reigned in Benin had an altar and room dedicated to his memory. As no king was considered inferior among the Benin people, there is the saying, "*Oba Igu Oba dia d'omwade ugha o ye*", which translates to, no king is subordinate to another; each is entitled to his chamber (Princess Kate Oronsaye, pers. comm. 1998).

3. ***Oguwe Edion*** is the place for communal worship of past *Edion* (communal leaders). The past leaders of the community were revered and worshipped as communal ancestors at *Oguwe Edion*, and their artifacts demonstrated important events and told stories of past achievements in the community. The entire community or village also preserved artifacts belonging to the community as a whole, most especially objects that recalled important events in their communal lives and that of past *Edionwere*. It was a public place, and the people who set it up or continued to worship there, used it in remembrance of past common ancestors/leaders. If any strange object was found during the course of tilling the soil, it was taken to the community shrine (*Oguwe Edion*) and preserved there. Hence ground stone axes found in Benin were kept in communal shrines and described as thunderbolts until archaeologists saw and identified them (Conah, 1975: 31).

4. ***Egun*** was to have been used and was very prominent in the earliest history of Benin. They were purposely meant to house clay figurines of the founding fathers of Benin, and other ancestors as well as objects associated with the ancestors. They have been described (Omoregie, pers. comm., 1992) as the rudimentary and earliest attempt in Benin at collecting objects associated with their ancestors, and used for ancestral worship. It can therefore be said that *egun*

evolved into other forms such as the *Ugha erha'Oba* or *Ikhuen na'aru erha*.

*Egun* in present day traditional setting has been described as a private place containing sculptures, such as well-decorated pots. Some of these pots are sometimes used for ritual bath (Ebohon, pers. comm., 1996). However, the place itself also served as storage for art works and valuable cultural objects.

5. *Iwowa*, has been described as the treasure house of art, (Ebohon, pers. comm., 1996). The treasure house of art surpassed the *Egun*, as well as other collections of objects in various types of shrines or altars in importance. Its importance resided in the fact that it was no longer regarded as a collection of objects for religious purposes, but as a treasure house. In this regard, high ranking chiefs in pre-colonial Benin had their own *Iwowa*. Some of the objects in the *Iwowa* were items decongested from the long-standing collections that were used for ancestral worship but kept in other places. Also items of value or of personal usage were stored in the *Iwowa*.

6. *Aru'ulele*, is also an ancestral altar. On this particular altar, various items are kept, including broken objects, worn out objects previously used in/for worship. For example, if a wooden *ukhure* (carved stave) was termite-infested, it was not thrown away even after several attempts to get rid of the termites. On account of the respect accorded to the object, it was kept behind in this altar and allowed to disintegrate slowly or wear out completely. In such a case it is never claimed to be spoiled and hence thrown away. The respect accorded to the worn-out object should be the same as when it was new. While it is left on the *Aru'ulele*, the *Oba* or the chief can then place order for/or order another to be used in its place. Meanwhile he continued to accord due respect to the former, as though it was more valuable, until it was no longer be functional at all (Osemwegie, pers. comm., 1997).

7. *Aza emwin arhe* means the bank for valuables, or a storage place for valuables. While places like the *Iwowa* were exclusively meant for art works, *Aza emwin arhe* was for money, ivory, artifacts as well as coral beads and clothes. In fact, it also served as a storage place for valuable art collections.

## II. History of Special Care of Objects

The general care of specific artifacts in pre-colonial Benin can be traced alongside the history and structure of the traditional Benin society. The earliest form of curating or caring specially for cultural objects can be regarded as an element of the Benin family system (Omoregie, Omoruyi, Inneh, Osemwegie, pers. comm., 1992, 1994, 1997, 1997). Benin traditions claim that in the earliest history of Benin, the inhabitants lived in communities with the elders as their leaders. Each family maintained altars as memorials of their founding fathers. The family altars housed important objects that were cared for by the head of the families. The altars meant for the purpose were called *Egun*. Family members had to study the items on the altars as they were supposed to be conversant with the objects and what they represented. In that way traditions and stories about the past were preserved through the use of these objects.

The period in question is believed to be prior to A.D. 900, i.e., before the formation of any form of monarchy in Benin (Onwuejeogwu, 1980). These family altars were believed to have housed mud sculptures/figurines representing ancestors as well as pieces of carved items such as spears associated with particular ancestors and placed next to the figurines to help recall what the personality was known for in life. From the family structure it extended to the larger village set up. The family head was in charge of the family shrine and he presided over the worship of the family ancestors while the village council of elders were in charge of the village shrines and presided over the communal worship of the common (village) ancestors.

The system believed to have been established by the early settlers in Benin, was carried on into the establishment of the first dynasty known as the *Ogiso* era, A.D. 900. To facilitate the worship of past ancestors as well as rulers, a royal council of hereditary titled men called *Ughoron* was formed during the period. *Ughoron* means “keepers of the keys to the gates of heaven” or “worshippers of the ancestors.” The council was solely responsible for the upkeep of the objects that belonged to the ancestors in the royal shrines, and its members, over time, are believed to have passed on Benin oral history from generation to generation, aided by the mud figurines and the other objects. It is also believed that in order to differentiate one ruler from another, the sculptures were moulded in special ways with specific identifying marks, which the *Ughorons* could identify in their narrations. Members of *Ughoron* were regarded as the closest group to the *Oba*; they were also regarded as seers as they linked the past (rulers) with the present in their narrations.

During the reign of the third monarch in the *Ogiso era*, the guild system a compulsory scheme into which artists and craftsmen in the kingdom were drafted, was set up to facilitate the production of art works representing events and human efforts (Igbafe, 1982). These objects were then preserved in the royal shrine. Even at this stage, families still maintained their altars, but the responsibility of preserving artifacts related to both the achievements and the items of past rulers were left to the *Ughorons* who were in charge of the royal altars. It is believed that during this period, chambers like the *ugha erha’Oba* developed, (Omoriegie, Omoruyi, Inneh, pers. comm., 1992, 1994, 1997).

When the present dynasty was founded in about A.D. 1200, a royal society known as *Ihogbe* headed by two chiefs, under the titles *Ihama* and *Isekhure*, replaced the *Ughorons*. They took over the responsibility of caring for the royal altars and passing down the traditions. The royal altars (*Ugha erha’Oba*) containing the bulk of the royal “history” was thus preserved by the *Ihogbes*. Family altars were still maintained, and specific shrines to deities also existed and were cared for by individual priest or priestesses, as assigned by tradition.

Altars described so far can be regarded as either the *Egun* (the original altar containing ancestral objects), the *Ikuen n’arhuerha* (an individual’s ancestral altar), the *Oguwe Edion* (the communal altar) or the *Ugha erha’Oba* (the altar in the chambers for departed *Obas*), but the idea of *Iwowa* meaning the treasure house of art, surpasses the former, with regard to tracing the history

of special care of cultural objects. The *Iwowa* was no longer a collection of objects for religious purposes or for recording events, but that of a collection of treasures. In this regard, high-ranking chiefs in pre-colonial Benin had their own *Iwowa*. The idea of *Iwowa* is said to have probably developed after contact with the Europeans in the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries (Ebohon, pers. comm., 1996). The objects in the *Iwowa* were items decongested from long-standing collections in shrines or pieces commissioned through the *Obas'* permission for personal use. In the past, any high-ranking chief of worth had various shrines and altars in his house, and invariably an *Iwowa* later emerged, that is, the "treasury" of art objects (Ebohon, pers. comm., 1996). In this regard, *Iwowa* that existed in the palace was regarded in the past as the "traditional or indigenous national museums of the Benin" (Omoruyi pers. comm., 1994; Ebohon pers. comm., 1996). The British expeditionary forces were said to have described such places as a treasury for objects distinct from those in shrines or altars (see Kaplan *et al.* 1987). In other words, objects taken away from the palace in 1897 were not only taken from the shrine and altar collection but also from the *Iwowa*, which can be described from the perspective of this paper as the museum of the Benins.

With the colonial era came the western pattern of museums; and when plans for the Benin Museum under the Antiquities Commission were being made in 1944, the Benin monarch specifically recommended to the colonial officers, Chief J.U. Egharevba, a Benin historian versed in the traditional history of the Benin people, as the first curator. Chief Egharevba truly documented Benin history and culture, and gave valuable insights into the antiquities of Benin, especially the museum objects, which hitherto were put in foreign museums with inadequate or unsuitable documentation.

In the history of caring for Benin art/historical objects, the colonial rule made way for the two distinct forms: the old (i.e., the traditional/indigenous) and the new ways of caring for Benin cultural objects. The old way/form was adopted in the traditional altars, storehouses, and treasure houses of art, while the new way/form was practised in the museums.

### III. Traditional/Indigenous Care of Cultural Objects

#### *1. Class of persons designated to care for objects*

Just as we cannot strictly call any of the repositories for cultural objects in pre-colonial Benin a museum, so we cannot call those individuals assigned to care for the objects "curators" in the actual sense of the word. However, in each of the various repositories, the following persons were known to be in charge.

Individual Home Collections (in a Commoner's Houses): The *Okaigbe*, who was the head of the family, was in charge. He had access to the collections and so prevented wrong handling by others. He performed roles that could be equated with those of the modern curator.

Communal Altars/(Communal) Collections: The *Odionwere*, who was the

community head, and his appointed assistants were in charge. His assistants were usually his sons or male relatives.

Homes of High Ranking Chiefs: The Chief himself was in charge, with his male children or male relatives as assistants. The relatives were called “*Na ko bo re’yo*”, meaning, “men whose hands have been placed by the appropriate authority to touch the objects and the altar.” The chief or *Odionwere* had to bless the hands of any male relations before the ancestral altar could be maintained or cleaned, and when sacrifices were to be made (Inneh, pers. comm., 1997).

During the entire *Ogiso* era (A.D. 900-1130), the *Ughorons*, a class of titled chiefs in charge of ancestral worship, were solely in charge of the royal altars and collections (Omoregie, pers. comm., 1994).

During the monarchical era, A.D. 1170 to the present, the *Ihogbes*, a group of chiefs known to be members of the extended paternal family of the *Obas*, were in charge of the royal altars. The *Ihama* and the *Isekhure* were leaders of the group of chiefs (Isekhure, pers. comm., 1997).

Within the palace society, the *Iwebo* group headed by Chief Uwangue were specially designated as keepers of the *Obas’* treasures (wardrobe and regalia). These treasures, generally seen as his constituting ceremonial attires of beads and woven clothes, also included brass, ivory, wood and metal objects. The *Iwebo* palace society was affiliated to various craft guilds that regularly supplied the *Oba* with necessary art works. The *Iwebo* therefore was responsible for the upkeep of the valuables in the palace. In this regard, it is likely that this group was more closely associated to the objects stored at the *Iwowa*, the treasury of art, than to the functional altars.

The *Iweguae*, a second group of the palace society, comprising a group of chiefs, was in charge of the palace in general and the *Oba’s* personal and domestic servants. Certain guilds were affiliated to the *Iweguae* palace society, one of which was the *Isimwenro* that kept the war implements of the *Oba/Edo* people. The *Isimwenro* was headed by the *Amagizemwan* derived from the Portuguese word, *Amarix*, which meant store-keeper (Osemwegie, pers. comm., 1997). Since the members had knowledge of the procedure for keeping the implements, they can also be counted as local “curators.”

## 2. Training of local curators

Informally fathers and sons conversed and exchanged ideas, and since young boys were expected to grow up and take over their fathers’ positions or trades, their training intensified over time while their learning increased with daily exposure. Youngsters, especially those belonging to specific guilds, received instructions from those already in charge. Where the person in charge was the father or “the guardian” of the youngster, the young boy stayed long enough at home to master the techniques of caring for objects (Isekhure, pers. comm., 1997). In the formal settings of palace societies, the elders of *Ihogbe* were said to have taught the *Isekhure* for a specified period of time through instructions and guidance. However, since there was no formal type of education in pre-

colonial Benin, training was mainly through participating in and observing what the older ones did (Isekhure, pers. comm., 1997).

Also those who opted for the traditional priesthood, as a profession required some form of training. Two types of initiation were required: (i) the minor training, (*Ikebo/Isoro*), for seven days and (ii) the major training, (*Akhurebo/Iyoga*), for fourteen days. The trainees apprenticed under a trained priest for the specified period, receiving the basic tutorials and necessary training. At the end of their apprenticeship the young men celebrated their “graduation” and they received their master’s authorisation to practise as priests (Ebohon, pers. comm., 1996).

### 3. *Curating and conservation techniques*

The traditional curator in pre-colonial Benin assumed the role of the conservator as well. To most of our informants, the two methods were one and the same, entrusted to one person or a group of persons. The terms were interchangeable in local parlance. To curate and to conserve objects were the same task for the caretaker or custodian of the objects/collections.

The need to care for the objects and to prevent them from alterations and decay arose from the value placed on the objects. Consequently, there was always the need among the Benin people to seek ways and means of keeping their cultural objects from the ravages of time and other forms of ageing and decay (Omoregie, pers. comm., 1994).

Dr. Omoregie identified two major ways in which the Benin people curated/preserved their valuable cultural objects.

The first was by building structures such as altars or storage rooms that served as collecting centres, for example, *Egun, Ogwue Edion*. In each of these centres only recognised personnel, the *Okaigbe*, (head of the family) or the *Odi-onwere* (oldest man in charge of a community) or assigned officials, had access to the collections and were authorised to handle the objects. As a result, damages caused by humans while handling or transporting the objects was greatly reduced.

The second way the Benins cared for their cultural objects comprised the various techniques adopted to protect the objects through cleaning and preservation against environmental and internal causes of alterations. Care for each object involved specific methods that were tested over time, found to be in conformity with the traditional standards and environmentally suitable. Mud sculptures are possibly the oldest form of objects collected. The shrines, altars and structures housing the collections were also made of mud. These mud repositories were cleaned and scrubbed regularly with extra mud as well as cow dung and charcoal (Ebohon, pers. comm., 1998). It was claimed that the cow dung and charcoal made it difficult for ants and some other destructive organisms to infest the wooden objects. Furthermore, Chief priest Ebohon said certain herbs and shrubs were planted next to these repositories; these plants emitted repellent odour that prevented termites from attacking the wooden objects. Mud shrines were also cleaned with mud and white kaolin (*Orhue*). These substances were

also used in cleaning terra cotta objects (Ohonbamu, pers. comm., 1997).

For cleaning the objects, halved coconut shell husks, burnt corncobs, plants with sandpaper-like leaves (*ebe amiemie Ficus exasperata*) and locally made sponges (*Ihiyon*) from plant fibres served as brushes. Iron objects were cleaned with palm kernel oil called *Asikoto* (Isekhure, pers. comm., 1997). However, several informants reported that because iron corrodes, no serious cleaning was done on iron objects, and the people were careful to avoid such objects coming in contact with water, which corrodes iron. The objects were cleaned according to seasons and designated times and festivals.

Brass objects were known to show green rust (verdigris) and the methods for cleaning them are as follows: According to Inneh (pers. comm., 1997), brass casters usually polished their art works with lemon or lime and sand. The cleaning brought out and brightened the original hue and, shine of the objects in contrast to a dull colour that came with aging. People also made conscious efforts to keep them out of the rain. Some informants (Isekhure, Oronsaye, Ebohon, 1997, 1998, 1998) reported brass objects were regularly cleaned with lime and ashes, and the treatment “made the objects shine like gold.” It was furthermore claimed that in the past, it could take up to one month to shine the brass objects in the palaces, and that was because the officials in charge took great pains in cleaning the objects. Furthermore, according to Chief Isekhure (pers. comm., 1997), *Asikoto* (palm kernel oil) was also used in cleaning the brass objects in order to prevent corrosion or growth of verdigris.

Objects made of ivory were kept in the part of the house or palace with high temperature to ensure constant heat (Isekhure, pers. comm., 1997). Ivory objects were also polished with palm kernel oil. They were also cleaned with ashes and then washed with sponge made of burnt corncob. The local black soap was also used in washing the ivory objects. If the objects were relatively small, they were soaked in water and then scraped with a sharp implement possibly made of iron. These objects were then scraped with *ebe amiemie (Ficus exasperata)* leaves that were like sandpaper in texture. Other objects made of bones, shells or stone were washed with soap, sun dried and polished. Beads were kept in cam wood powder to preserve them as well as to retain their red colour, after which they were polished with cotton cloth when ready for use.

Leather and fibres were sunned regularly and brushed with locally made brushes.

Wooden objects were first of all carved out of selected durable woods. Staves (*Ukhure*) for example, were carved out of the kola nut (*Cola acuminata*) or the *Iroko* tree (*Chlorophora excelsa*). Most other wooden objects such as *Ilao* (wooden ancestral heads) were also carved out of wood that the people had identified as strong and durable.

However, when mildew, termites and other agents of decay settled on the wooden objects, the following methods were used in cleaning them:

1. The objects were sandpapered with the *ebe amiemie (Ficus exasperata)* leaf.
2. The wood was polished with palm oil to stop the attack by insects.

3. Wooden objects, such as the *Ukhure*, were sometimes washed with the traditional black soap and water and then rubbed with *Ediagbon* (coconut oil).

After being washed or cleaned, sun dried and polished, the objects were kept in the repositories/shrines that were specially prepared to ward off insects.

According to Isekhure (pers. comm., 1997), the *Ukhure* and some other wooden objects were kept from deteriorating with the use of animal blood. Apart from the animal blood, *Asikoto* (palm kernel oil) was also used on some wooden objects. Also, according to Omoregie (pers. comm., 1994), wooden objects were used until replacement was necessary, but once a year, during the *Ehor* (new year ceremonies), all ritual objects were cleaned and brushed with water or cleansing agents, such as oil, and local leaves.

When the objects were broken or destroyed beyond conservation, they were sent to craftsmen for repair or reconstruction, but if beyond repairs, they were kept on the *aru'ulele*, an altar on which such various items were kept. They were left at the backspace of the shrine to finally disintegrate completely (Osemwegie, pers. comm., 1997).

#### 4. Effectiveness of traditional substances used for curatorial care

To the indigenous people who used the substances, the effectiveness was measured by the result as listed below:

1. Bone objects were washed with black soap and sunned to keep it dustfree and improve the shine.
2. The traditional cleaning agent on brass/bronze objects acted as a scouring powder and made them shine. The palm kernel oil served as anti-rust and lubricant, thus preventing corrosion.
3. Cleaning clay/terra-cotta objects with white kaolin and water served as a sealant for the cracks and breakages.
4. Fibres that were sunned and brushed were laundered, scoured and bleached, and looked and smelt clean.
5. Cleaning of iron with palm kernel oil prevented oxidation, thus prevented rust and served as anti-oxidant.
6. The washing of ivory with black soap and at times sandpapered resulted in scouring and shine.
7. Sunning and brushing leather products improved their condition.
8. Cleaning the mud shrines with charcoal and adding mud paste served as a sealant and added coating. With its offensive odour the cow dung (applied occasionally) repelled termites.
9. Washing objects fashioned out of shells with black soap gave it shine/lustre.
10. Stone objects washed in black soap gained some lustre.
11. Wood, when dusted and cleaned, had polish and shine added to it. However, animal blood poured on *Ilao* and *Ukhure* did not serve conservation but ritual purpose; it degraded the wooden object even faster.
12. Red beads kept in camwood (*Baphia nitida*) powder gained lustre.

Some of these substances were in their natural state; others were processed, e.g., the black soap (*Ukhen* or *Evba khue Edo*).

Content of the Indigenous black soap

- Ashes from burnt plantain and /or  
burnt coconut shell  
burnt cocoa pod.  
(soda ash)
- Palm oil.

The ashes were mixed with water and filtered through a cloth laid in a basket. The filtrate was put in a clay pot and boiled until it thickened. It was then mixed with bleached palm in sufficient quantity, and the soap was ready.

Most of the objects were cleaned at intervals, say, within a period of three to six months (Omoruyi, Ebohon, Ohonbamu, Oronsaye, pers. comm., 1994, 1996, 1997, 1998).

The long-term effects of these products on the cultural objects were not known. They produced the desired effect for a couple of generations; but they also had advantages and disadvantages.

#### IV. Comparison Between Traditional Practices and Modern Methods

Whereas the contemporary museum serves as an institution set aside for the care of cultural objects, the care of such objects in the past was carried out by the Benin people as a matter of every day task. Caring for their important cultural objects was a part of the daily life of those concerned.

The museum, was set up as a deliberate effort to care for cultural materials, while the care of these materials in the past began with a religious/spiritual connotation, for the objects were set aside first and foremost for ancestral worship. The need to care for them grew, giving their spiritual importance in the society. The current museums protect the cultural objects, following their acquisition, whereas in the past the objects were acquired for some important functions, and therefore demanded protection.

One major common feature of the traditional practices and the modern methods was the exclusion of non-professionals from handling the objects. However the reasons for the exclusion differ. The modern curators, to avoid damages and contamination, do not allow museum objects to be handled by visitors. Traditional custodians, on their part, forbid handling of the objects by just anybody because most objects are considered sacred. Whereas theft of the objects was not considered important traditionally as thieves usually dreaded the spiritual repercussion of stealing sacred objects; theft in the modern museum exists and its occurrence is usually minimised by the use of security equipments and guards.

Modern and traditional methods of caring for cultural objects differ, mainly because the initial aims and objectives also differ. However, in both traditional

and modern ways of caring for cultural objects attempts at arresting the causes of environmental and physical/internal alterations have been made, including devising means of counteracting the effects of degradation.

#### V. Traditional Practices Still Persisting

Some of the practices described under traditional curatorial and conservation methods are still current, and are still used by some traditional custodians of Benin cultural objects, although traditional custodians do not solely rely on the indigenous ways. They combine some “foreign” materials with their traditional substances in their methods. For example, they mix camphor, kerosene and potash in eliminating termites from wooden objects. Sometimes Brasso, an imported cleaning liquid for brass and silver, is used in shining brass/bronze objects. When brasso is not available, they resort to the use of lime and ashes in cleaning the objects (Ebohon, pers. comm., 1998). Thus any available cleansing substance is used, so long as it has been observed to yield the expected result.

#### VI. Analysis of Indigenous Curating Substances

Substances and materials used for curating and conserving Benin cultural objects were obtained locally.

Table 2 shows the local materials employed and the traditional methods of curating and conservation.

**Table 2.** Materials and Curatorial/Conservation Methods

S/N	Name of Material	Local Name	Method of Curatorship and Conservation
1	Bone	<i>Ugboloko</i>	Washed with black soap and sunned.
2	Brass/Bronze	<i>Oze</i>	(i) Cleaned with lime or lemon and sand, or lime or lemon and ashes. (ii) Polished with palm kernel oil.
3	Clay/Terra-cotta	<i>Eken</i>	Cleaned with water and white kaolin.
4	Fibres		
	(a) Cotton	<i>Ukpokon ohu</i>	Washed with black soap and dried.
	(b) Reed	<i>Ikhian</i>	Sunned and brushed.
	(c) Cane	<i>Asan</i>	Sunned and brushed.
	(d) Palm fibre	<i>Ume</i>	Sunned and brushed.
5	Iron	<i>Ematon</i>	Cleaned with palm kernel oil.
6	Ivory	<i>Akeni</i>	Washed with black soap and dried.
7	Leather	<i>Okhian</i>	Sunned and brushed.
8	Mud structures	<i>Eken</i>	Cleaned with charcoal and swept; the platforms re-coated with mud paste. Cow dung applied once in a while.
9	Shells	<i>Ughoghon</i>	Washed with black soap.
10	Stone	<i>Ugbe/Okuta</i>	Washed with black soap.

(continued)

11	Wood	<i>Erhan</i>	(i) Dusted. (ii) Brushed. (iii) Depending on the type of wood, washe with black soap and rubbed with palm kerneloil or coconut oil. (iv) Animal blood poured on wooden objects such as <i>ilao</i> (altar heads) and <i>ukhure</i> (carved staves) once in a while.
----	------	--------------	--

## VII. Environmental and Internal Alterations that Affect and Change Cultural Objects

Generally there are three major causes of alterations to cultural objects, which demand attention.

These are:

- (1) Temperature, humidity, atmospheric pollution and lighting.
- (2) Internal alterations, such as biological, physical, chemical actions within the object itself.
- (3) Human (during handling and transportation of the objects).

There was no problem as such with handling of the objects, since their repositories or shrines were accessible to the public. Our concern therefore is with the environmental and internal alterations.

**Table 3.** Environmental and Internal Alterations on Material.

S/N	Materials	Environmental and Internal Alterations.
1.	Bones	Cracking and flaking.
2.	Bronze/Brass	Algae; reduction and oxidation (redox.) due to air and moisture, cracking.
3.	Clay/Terra-cotta	Cracking and breakage
4.	Fibres	
	(a) Cotton	Aging, fungi, reduction and oxidation, shrinkage.
	(b) Cane	Fungi, reduction and oxidation.
	(c) Reed	(Decay and rot), fungi.
	(d) Palm fibre	Rot, fungi.
5.	Iron	Reduction and oxidation (redox).
6.	Ivory	Cracking.
7.	Leather	Fungi, redox., shrinkage.
8.	Mud structures	Flaking, cracking, attrition.
9.	Shell	Attrition, cracking, distempering.
10.	Stone	Cracking and attrition.
11.	Wood	Fungal decay, woodworm and rot.

## VIII. Advantages and Disadvantages of Indigenous Curating Methods

The curating methods devised by the Benin people in the pre-colonial era proved relatively effective. The methods to some extent delayed the aging process of organic objects and reinforced non-organic objects that had tendency to break, flake or undergo attrition.

The materials used for curatorship were obtained locally, from the immedi-

ate environment and their usage did not require special training in conservation. Moreover, the knowledge of their usage was known not only to custodians of the cultural objects but also to the general populace interested in caring for such objects.

From the chemical analyses of each substance, the following was known:

**Black Soap:** The soap possesses a chemical composition similar to that of other soaps, but is very gentle on objects. It contains glycerol that improves the gloss of objects washed with soap.

**Lime and Lemon:** Since unripe fruits are used, it contains citric acid which has the necessary corrosive property needed for the cleaning of brass or bronze. The corrosive power of the acid is however not very strong, and it is not expected to cause problem. The use of sand and ashes is to introduce some friction that is meant to remove stubborn dirt from the bronze surface.

**Palm Kernel Oil:** The oil merely lubricates and polishes the surface of the object. The lubrication is expected to reduce cracking and flaking and ultimately reduce internal cracks.

**Kaolin:** Kaolin contains very fine sand that is not as coarse as the sand used for bronze objects, but it still serves as an abrasive.

**Charcoal:** Ground charcoal functions as an abrasive and also as a deodorant; in some cases it reduces the alterations that may occur in colours.

**Cow dung:** Its cleaning potential is similar to that of soap. It is a preservative because its odour and taste repels damaging organisms and so reduces fungal growth. Cow dung however can constitute a health hazard since it is a waste product. As human waste, it may contain worms and bacteria in spite of the fact that it discourages the growth of microorganisms that affect the objects kept in mud structures.

The use of the above methods and substances are quite inexpensive. The various substances are also generally very gentle on the objects/materials. Apart from the smell of cow dung and its likely health hazard, most of the other materials are chemically safe for use. These indigenous substances also do not seem to have high material-degrading potentials, and so will not affect the structure of the material from which the objects were fashioned.

However, modern lubricants, sealants, anti-finish agents and chemicals specially designed to treat museum objects naturally have displaced the indigenous methods in the modern museum. The improved and modern methods proved easy to use in the museum. It has been argued by the contemporary museum workers at the Benin Museum that the traditional ways are too cumbersome and outdated to fit into the museum setting (Olorunnipa, pers. comm., 1998). It is also believed that the indigenous methods had no standard for measuring the quantity of a particular treatment to be used. The fact that the traditional treatment methods are not documented is probably another disadvantage. Further arguments put forward are that the modern methods are cheaper to use in the long run. Palm oil/palm kernel oil, for curatorship, may be wasteful in terms of food supply. Wood ashes used in making the main detergent were difficult to burn without adverse consequence of environmental pollution if the burning is

carried out on a large scale. Sources of materials used were also seasonal and the supply unstable, thus creating the problem of scarcity (Ukpomwan, pers. comm., 1998).

It has also been argued that palm oil when used over a long period causes discoloration and stains the objects that on account of its colour properties. Also the use of lime on the bronze objects, although it produced the shine required, over the years may have a corrosive effect.

Opponents of the use of the traditional methods have also pointed out that some of the methods proved messy, like the use of cow dung and charcoal for cleaning the mud shrine. Most importantly, these methods were not subjected to experiments to measure the long-term effectivity. They served their purpose in pre-colonial Benin when it suited the era socially, economically and technologically. Today, however, such methods can clearly be described as dated, given modern technological development and especially because they were not improved upon or refined for centuries (Ukpomwan, pers. comm., 1998).

However, it must be noted that the traditional curatorial methods were abruptly discarded through the influence of Europeans and their museums. In this regard, most of the arguments on the inadequacy/shortcomings of the traditional methods could have been taken care of, if traditional curatorial methods were allowed to stay and develop.

#### IX. Alternative Curatorial/Conservation Methods

The following are the recommendations on alternative curatorial and conservation methods for Benin cultural materials from our knowledge of the indigenous "museum" methods. All indigenous treatment of objects must comply with the universal principles that guide conservation (see UNESCO, 1975). In the case of Benin objects;

- (a) All treatments applied to objects must be documented.
- (b) Falsifications and additions to the structures of objects must be avoided.
- (c) A complete description of an object before and after treatment should be documented so that the principle of reversal when possible can apply.
- (d) Decayed parts of objects should not be replaced but treatment should prevent further decay.
- (e) The look of the object must not be renewed and "the aging of the original material should not be removed or disguised" (UNESCO, 1975).

1. There should be routine minor cleaning of objects, i.e., dusting and polishing with soft cloth. Objects not in display cases are easily covered with dust, especially when the floors of the galleries are swept daily.

2. For objects fashioned from specific materials, the following treatment is recommended:

- (a) **Bone Objects:** Routinely dusted with soft cloth to remove dust. Yearly washing in black soap, *Evba khue Edo*, is recommended.

- (b) **Brass/Bronze Objects:** Should be left in cases for display. Those not in cases should be dusted routinely. If object is infested with algae or verdigris (green rust), a treatment of unripe lime or lemon and ashes is recommended. On-the-spot treatment is recommended for cleaning the particular spot where the rust is. The entire object should not be cleaned.
- (c) **Iron Objects:** Rust on iron objects can be cleaned out with palm kernel oil.
- (d) **Ivory Objects:** Routine dusting for ivory objects suffices. However, yearly washing of the object with black soap, light sponge (and water) is recommended to remove dust particles in tiny crevices.
- (e) **Mud Sculptures, and Clay/Terra-cotta Objects:** Wet cleaning is not recommended; routine dusting suffices.
- (f) **Shells and Stone Objects:** Routine dusting, and yearly washing with black soap and water.
- (g) **Wooden Objects:** Routine dusting with soft cloth is recommended. Yearly routine polishing with palm kernel oil is also recommended.

The knowledge of caring for objects as done in Benin's past can still be utilised as an interim substitute, of modern conservation materials. More importantly, the knowledge must be made available in the education of Nigerian museum workers, as well as in museums that possess Benin materials.

## CONCLUSION

The paper has identified and explained relevant past indigenous knowledge on the care of Benin cultural objects. The indigenous methods in conservation, considered effective for the pre-colonial era, may be considered crude in the 21st century. The use of the indigenous curating/conservation materials is quite inexpensive and the materials are readily available alternatives to the commercial products in Nigeria.

The various indigenous substances recommended for use, such as the black soap, palm kernel oil, lime or lemon juice, sand and ashes, are generally very gentle on the materials and the objects (Ukponmwan & Jideonwu, pers. comm., 1998). Apart from the odour and likely health hazard of cow dung, most of the other materials are chemically safe for use in contemporary museum. Also, these traditional/indigenous materials seem to have low material degrading potentials and so will not affect the structure of the museum object itself.

This paper can serve as a basis for future research into the use of alternative and indigenous methods in museums in general. There is a need also for research into their relevant conservation properties, for which purpose specific substances need to be identified and their analyses made not only of the Benin methods but also of the alternative methods available to other museums in Nigerian and elsewhere in Africa.

## REFERENCES

- Afigbo, A.E. & S.I.O. Okita 1985. *The Museum and Nation Building*. New Africa Publishing, Owerri, Nigeria.
- Andah, B.W. 1988. *African Anthropology*. Shaneson, Ibadan.
- Connah, G. 1975. How archaeology can supplement history: The example of Benin. In (T. Shaul, ed.) *Discovering Nigeria's Past*, pp.27-38. Oxford University Press, Ibadan.
- Dark, P.J.C. 1973. *An Introduction to Benin Art and Technology*. Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Decker, A. 1990. Lost heritage: The destruction of African art. *ART News*, September Issue: 108-119.
- Encyclopedia Britannica 1975. 'Museum' in *Macropaedia*, 12: 649-662. Helen Hemingway Benton Publishers, Chicago.
- Igbafe, P.A. 1982. *The Guild System in Benin. Lectures of the Lost Treasures of Ancient Benin*. National Museum, Benin City.
- Kaplan, F.S., N.S. Ukwu & E.N. Arinze 1987. Nigeria. In (V. Jackson, ed.) *Art Museums of the World*, pp.802-822. Greenwood Press, Connecticut.
- Omoregie, O.S.B. 1991. *Benin Under the Ogiso Monarchy: Foundations of Edo Civilisation, Vol. 1 and II*. Neraso Publishers, Benin City.
- Onwuejeogwu, M.A. 1980. A study of the cultural evolution of Benin kingdom. *Nigerian Journal of Arts and Culture*, 1(2): 18-35.
- Ryder, A.F.C. 1996. Benin studies: The state of the art. *Benin Studies Newsletter*, 1(1): 2-4.
- UNESCO 1975. *The Conservation of Cultural Property, (Museums and Monuments, xi)*, The UNESCO Press, Paris.

## APPENDIX: The List of Informants

- Ebohon, O. 1996, 1998, Resident of Benin City, Chief Priest and Founder of Ebohon Centre for Art and Traditional Religion.
- Inneh, D. 1997, Resident of Benin City, Historian and Son of Late Chief Inneh Ni'Igun (Head of the Brass Casters Guild). Also Former Secretary to Oba of Benin, Omo'no Oba Eredi-auwa.
- Isekhure, N. 1997, Resident of Benin City, Chief Priest of the Benin People (The Isekhure of Benin).
- Jideonwu, O. 1998, Senior Lecturer, Chemistry Department, University of Benin.
- Ohonbamu, D.I.D. 1997, Resident of Benin, Benin titled Chief.
- Olorunnipa, A.E. 1998, Chief Ethnographer, National Museum Benin City.
- Omoregie, O.S.B. 1992, 1994, Resident of Benin, Custodian of Benin Tradition and Culture.
- Omoruyi, A. 1994, Resident of Benin. Former Curator National Museum Benin. Founder Aghama Arts Gallery and Editor Benin Series.
- Oronsaye, K. 1998, Resident of Benin City, Princess of Benin Kingdom, Daughter of Oba Eweka of Benin (1914-1933).
- Osemwegie, I. 1997, Resident of Benin, Custodian, Benin Customs and Traditions. Traditional Bard.
- Ukponmwan, O. 1998, Professor of Chemistry, University of Benin.

————— Accepted January 14, 2004

Author's Name and Address: K.A. AGBONTAEN-EGHAFONA, *Department of Sociology & Anthropology, University of Benin, PMB 1154, Benin City, NIGERIA.*  
*E-mail: Kokie@uniben.edu*