

# The Australasian Review of African Studies

## African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific

Volume 32 Number 1 June 2011

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## AFSAAP and the Benin Bronze - Building Bridges?

**Tanya Lyons**

*ARAS Editor*

As the editor of ARAS I have been arguing (I hope not in vain) with the vague and disillusioning ERA rankings processes that have relegated for years this journal into the elusive category of “C”. Accepting the era in which we live (pun intended) in Australia, where getting published in the so-called “A” ranked journals is seemingly the only path to academic success, I am heartened by the support of the numerous authors and scholars who continue to submit their high quality research and articles to ARAS. Indeed this particular issue demonstrates the quality of articles submitted, and I am sure both the successful and unsuccessful authors would agree that the double blind peer review process is as stringent as any A ranked journal. At the very least, when assessing this journal for “A” ranking tendencies any likely reviewer should be provided with an important insight into African Studies in Australasia.

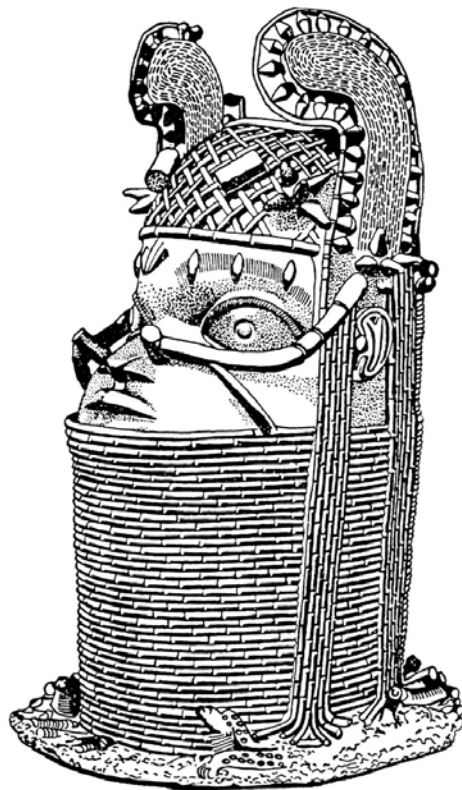
In this issue of ARAS I admit to a small indulgence – in generating a debate regarding the AFSAAP logo, the Benin Bronze head. Members of AFSAAP may recall my email request sent out earlier this year asking for any stories or history behind the choice of logo. This was mainly inspired by my children’s school holiday trip to the South Australian Museum. My six year old son Harry found in a glass display cabinet (just near the main entrance - see Figure 1), a Benin Bronze head - and he said



**Figure 1. ‘Bronze’ head of an *oba*, Benin city, Edo people, Nigeria. South Australian Museum, A.6523.** This head, along with a carved elephant tusk, was purchased from W.D. Webster, an English dealer, by David Murray and presented to the Museum in April 1899. David Murray was a wealthy merchant, a member of the Parliament of South Australia, a collector of Old Master prints and sometime member of the Museum’s Committee.

“Mum isn’t this the mask on your book that you write?” I was as surprised as he was to see this in the museum. We must have walked past it dozens of times without noticing it. What kind of Africanist am I, that I was not aware of this collection in my local museum? Indeed, in my 16 years of AFSAAP membership I have never stopped to consider the logo’s history. The following is an update for the institutional memory of the African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific.

David Dorward, a founding member and former President of AFSAAP wrote back to me via email in January and stated that:



**Figure 2. AFSAAP Logo**

“The image is a Benin Bronze of the Late Period taken from Frank Willett’s *Ife in the History of West African Sculpture* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), p. 155. AFSAAP paid Frank for the copyright by making a contribution, to the Hunterian Museum at Glasgow University where Willett was Director and Titular Professor. ... Tom Spear and I negotiated the deal shortly after the establishment of AFSAAP and the adoption of the logo. ... One of the reasons we used the late Benin head is that it was similar to the Benin heads in the South Australian Museum [A06523] and another in the Canterbury Museum in Christchurch [EA 1977.468], New Zealand— thus linking what was then the main body of AFSAAP membership. Willett’s sketch was similar to both, albeit not

an exact copy of either. However, we wanted a sketched image that would reproduce well in black and white” (see Figure 2).

Upon receiving this email I quickly contacted the Canterbury Museum in New Zealand to confirm if they still had their Benin head in the collection. They did. Roger Fyfe from the Canterbury Museum stated in his January 2011 email reply that “Until I received your email I was completely unaware of the existence of AFSAAP, which is surprising given that Canterbury Museum has a much used African collection.” He also noted that “Some years ago Dr David Dorward, then at La Trobe University, did a quite detailed inventory assessment of the ca 15 pieces

of Benin art in Canterbury Museum. There was an exhibition proposal that unfortunately did not gain any traction in either Australia or New Zealand.” The surprises were all around. And the institutional memory begins to resurface. Unfortunately any plans to reinvigorate such an exhibition, as once planned by Dorward, were thwarted this time by mother nature and likely indefinitely put on hold, due to the tragic earthquake that devastated Christchurch, New Zealand in February 2011. Soon after this email correspondence from Roger Fyfe, the Canterbury museum was closed. The extent of the damage is unknown to this author.



**Benin Bronze Head Mask, Canterbury Museum, REF: EA1977.468**

In light of the comments regarding the custodianship of artefacts made by Kudzai Matereke in his article “Looking beyond the Benin Bronze Head: Provisional Notes on Culture, Nation, and Cosmopolitanism” in this issue of ARAS, it is poignant that the duty of care for any artefact is also fallible to the forces of nature. My concern of course is more so with the helpful staff at the Canterbury Museum, their friends and family and in particular Roger Fyfe who so helpfully provided the detail of this Benin Bronze Head and was so keen to reconnect with AFSAAP.

Nonetheless, this tragedy provides AFSAAP with a renewed opportunity to strengthen the trans-Tasman Africanist network. The next issue of ARAS is evidence of step one of this project as we welcome the intellectual input of Dr. Jay Marlowe from the University of Auckland in New Zealand – (see <http://www.education.auckland.ac.nz/uoa/jay-marlowe>) as our guest editor for the special issue on the Sudanese Diaspora in Australasia.

My next correspondence was with the South Australian Museum regarding the Benin Bronze head in its collection. This also unearthed what is now an important contribution to this issue of ARAS, by the Museum’s Senior Curator of Foreign Ethnology, Barry Craig, with his article “The Badcock Collection from the Upper Congo.” Craig provides an important historical analysis of the process of ‘collecting’ and the context from which it was collected. It thus provides an unwitting response to the concerns raised by Matereke, about the relevance of such artefacts in the contemporary world (ie. Australia), for the cosmopolitan.

The task now for AFSAAP is to consider the relevance of its historically chosen logo and to celebrate its role in building and maintaining bridges across the Tasman, and also importantly across the Indian Ocean to the African continent, and with the African diaspora globally.

Indeed, Donald Denoon’s tribute to Ulli Beier in this issue, reminds us of the importance of inspiring individuals and families in bridging the cultural divides across nations and peoples. AFSAAP is more than the sum of its parts, but still depends upon such individuals to make it work, and to encourage the development of the future generations of scholars in this field, such as Samantha Balanton-Chrimes and the other emerging scholars represented below.

The 2010 AFSAAP Postgraduate Prize winning essay by Balanton-Chrimes is entitled “The Nubians of Kenya and the Emancipatory

Potential of Collective Recognition.” In her article published below, she argues that the politics of recognition is fundamental in the African context to the identity and social, economic and political well being of marginalised communities in Kenya. Her field research conducted with the ‘stateless’ Nubian community demonstrates the importance of the collective recognition of tribal affiliations. Her findings offer a clear analysis of the unequal distribution of resources in Kenya, based on ethnicity and ‘tribe,’ and thus to the disadvantages across the community and nation.

In another example of these disadvantages, Abdi Dahir Osman, Vivian Lin, Priscilla Robinson, and Darryl Jackson have provided an account of “Policy and Governance Issues in Kenya’s Border Towns: The case of Wajir groundwater management.” In their article, they argue that the mainly minority Somali ethnic groups located in Wajir county, North East Kenya are disadvantaged and marginalised in the political and economic processes, in particular as they relate to policy formulation and practice in terms of water and sanitation, and subsequently primary health needs in that community.

In comparison to the above, in Sierra Leone the government has centralised control over forestry resources in order to ‘conserve’ the resource under threat from various levels of incursion, for the purposes of ‘exploitation’ and timber production. Paul G. Munro and Greg Hiemstra-van der Horst argue in their article “Conserving exploitation? A political ecology of forestry policy in Sierra Leone,” that new legislation, rather than enabling community subsistence, has disabled their ability to access this resource. The authors argue that such a policy is not new, and is essentially more of the same inherited from the colonial era.

Ogaga Okuyade tackles the similar issue of abundant resources that lead to nothing but poverty and turmoil for the marginalised communities at the centre of the globalised commodity export trade. In his article “Oil, Environment and Resistance in Tanure Ojaide’s *The Tale of the Harmattan*,” Okuyade explores the poverty and violence engendered by a continuum of capitalist exploitation in the Niger-Delta. Poetry is utilised to understand the local and global implications of the oil industry and the failure of the Nigerian government to implement policies that would protect the environment, and is similar to the concerns expressed by Munro and Hiemstra-van der Horst.

All of these papers in this issue of ARAS have in common a central theme of marginalization and exploitation. The Nubian community in Kenya are marginalized through the politics of identity, as are the minority Somali groups in Wajir county. The timber forests of Sierra Leone and the oil fields of the Niger-Delta, are simply exploited, often with violent repercussions in terms of environmental and community destruction. These themes are framed by the debate regarding cultural artefacts and museum collections; a debate central to the African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific's choice of logo – the Benin Bronze head.