



ANTHROPOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

Podcast Transcript

Travelling Artefacts: Engraved Elephant Tusks Benin

[00:00:00]

ZAINABU JALLO: Isabella Bozsa, certain artifacts bear violent histories and their associated scars, such as the engraved elephant tusk that was looted from the Benin Empire during the 1897 British invasion. Can you say something about this tusk?

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ISABELLA BOZSA: Yes, indeed, thank you. The elephant tusk at the Museum der Kulturen Basel came to Europe through a forced journey. In its context of origin, the Kingdom of Benin in today's Nigeria, the tusk was a part of a shrine dedicated to the ancestors of the kingdom. The engravings on the tusk are hinting towards historical events. In the carvings you can see dignitaries from the royal court wearing pearl necklaces, ceremonial swords, and ropes with coral beads. Europeans are also depicted. For example, one of the figures wears a cross on the breast, which points to early involvements of the Portuguese through trading and missionary activities in the area.

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You can also see some brand marks on the tusk. They bear evidence of its violent taking in a colonial context. In 1897, British soldiers burned and ransacked the palace of the king. The soldiers took several thousands of artifacts from the palace. Besides elephant tusks, there were sculptures cast in bronze and carved in wood. The artifacts traveled with the soldiers to the UK from where they were sold and distributed all over Europe. The museum acquired the tusk by a German trader called Umlauf, who had his company in Hamburg, a German port city.

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As part of the African collection, the tusk from Benin is still related to the descendants of the former owners, users, and producers in Nigeria and the diaspora. Members of the Benin Kingdom, who visited the museum in the framework of the Benin Initiative Switzerland, have made this very clear. The members of the delegation from Nigeria, as well as descendants who live today in the U.S., emphasized the ongoing



spiritual, emotional, as well as the historical value of the artifacts from Benin in the collection. If and where they will travel next and which particular meaning will be attributed to them in a new context are open questions.