

Okpame Oronsaye, *Summon My Ehi to Ugbine*, BoD, Books on Demand, Norderstedt, 2016, 80 pages. ISBN: 978-3-7386-5226-3

This slim book has an ambitious aim: to tell the truth about the British conquest and destruction of Benin City in 1897. According to the author Okpame Oronsaye, every scholar and writer which hitherto has dealt with the subject has done it in a “shamelessly prejudiced and massively distorted” way (p. 10). His book is an endeavor to set the record straight.

The book’s argument is developed in six chapters, which outline the history of Edo-European relations from the late 15th century up to 1897. In Oronsaye’s view, previous writers have erred on two accounts in particular. The first regards the intentions of the British delegation which was attacked by an Edo force at Ugbine on 4 January 1897, an event which caused the British to launch their “Punitive Expedition” against the Benin Kingdom. The second concerns who started the fire that, following the British occupation of Benin City on 18 February, swept through the town and destroyed the Oba’s palace on 21 February.

According to the established version, the delegation led by Acting Consul-General James Phillips traveled to Benin City to compel the Oba of Benin to open up the borders for trade. Phillips had previously asked the Foreign Office for permission to attack Benin City, but instead of waiting for the – negative – reply from London, he decided on approaching the Oba by diplomacy. Thus, the expedition, consisting of nine British and over 200 native carriers, was unarmed, save for the British officers who had brought along their revolvers, which were kept in boxes, to not scare the Edo.

This story of the delegation’s purpose is essentially wrong, Oronsaye claims. The delegation did not come in peace. The carriers were really soldiers from the Niger Coast Protectorate Force, and their repeating rifles were hidden in the “head

packs.” The mission was to abduct the Oba and steal his ivory (pp. 40-41).

Scholars are also mistaken when they write that the conflagration which ruined the Oba’s palace started accidentally. Rather, Oronsaye maintains, the palace was burned down on purpose, perhaps to hide that the British had looted it (p. 51).

Oronsaye takes the opportunity to recount a range of Western atrocities from the Roman gladiator games to Wounded Knee and the Sharpeville massacres. He suggests that denying the truth about the conquest of Benin is comparable to Holocaust denial, which, he reminds us, is a crime in many countries (pp. 71-74). He ends the book by declaring that until all the objects looted in Benin City are returned to their “rightful owners,” everyone in possession of these treasures will continue to be regarded as “thieves and receivers of stolen goods” by the Edo (p. 76).

It is easy to share the author’s indignation over Western acts of barbarity. No culture can compete with the West when it comes to killing human beings. Yet, this does not mean that Westerners are the only ones capable of violence, nor that they are to blame for all misfortunes. As Gayatri Spivak has discussed in her essay “Righting wrongs” (2002): to admit that the colonized have been wronged does not necessarily imply that the colonized are inherently innocent. Achille Mbembe (2004) has similarly criticized attempts to idealize the non-Western other, notably the construction of an “innocent African,” not complicit in the slave trade. Thus, whatever one thinks about British colonialism, one needs to resist the temptation of seeing the events surrounding the annihilation of the Benin Kingdom in Manichean terms as a struggle between evil Westerners and good Africans.

So, what is the basis for Oronsaye’s reinterpretation and does it hold up to closer scrutiny? His idea that Phillips’s delegation was armed (which is also the basis for his claim that its aim was to kidnap the Oba) rests on two entries in the diary of

Felix Roth, a doctor in the Expeditionary force against Benin City. Roth wrote about the fighting outside Benin City on 18 February, that he noticed, “by the ping of the bullets, that the natives must be using repeating rifles, the firing being so heavy and quickly delivered” (p. 64, quoted from Roth’s diary in Roth 1903, ix). On the following day, he notes, that when the belongings of Phillips’s delegation were discovered, no weapons or ammunition were found, and thus “the natives having most probably used them against us” (p. 64, quoted from Roth’s diary in Roth 1903, xii). From these two passages, Oronsaye concludes that undoubtedly some of the repeating rifles used by the Edo had been captured from Phillips’s delegation (p. 64). Yet, all that Roth states is that the Edo were in possession of repeating rifles and that the (unspecified) weapons taken from the Phillips’s mission were presumably used by the Edo. Clearly, Roth’s opinion cannot be taken as evidence that the repeating rifles were taken from the Phillips’s mission. As Oronsaye writes elsewhere in his text, the British had noted already in 1895 that the Edo were in possession of some repeating rifles (p. 26).

Roth’s diary is Oronsaye’s only source for his hypothesis that the delegation was armed with rifles. And the other sources contradict this idea. For example, when the British put on trial those responsible for the attack on Phillips’s mission, no one argued in defense that it was armed. Chief Ologboshi, who was sentenced to death for instituting the massacre, explicitly said in his statement that the British “had neither guns nor matchets [machetes] to fight with.” His line of defense was rather that he had acted on the order of the Oba, and would have been killed if he had not obeyed (Correspondence 1899, 21).

Oronsaye’s other claim, which the British deliberately burned down the Oba’s palace, rests on a passage from the logbook of Private Albert Lucy of the Royal Marines (p. 50). The logbook was sold at an auction, 3 December 2014 (Bonhams

2014), and to my knowledge, this is the first time the existence of this document has become publicly known. Oronsaye should be credited for having brought attention to it. The sales description contains excerpts from the logbook, including a passage where Lucy tells that “next day we went out to burn down the Queens Palace and our Bluejackets went out and burned the King's palace.”

Lucy's account differs from that found in other sources which state that while the Queen's palace (and the compounds of the “big Chiefs”) were burned down on purpose, the fire in the Oba's palace was started accidentally by some carriers (Bacon 1897, 102-109; Papers 1897, 28, 38; Fagg 1981).

Obviously, either Lucy or the other sources are wrong. What, then, is the likelihood that the British torched the Oba's palace on purpose? According to Reginald Bacon's account, the British intended to turn that part of the City containing the King's palace into a defensible post to be held by the Niger Coast Protectorate Force, after the other troops had departed. The British had also taken their wounded and baggage to the palace area. When the fire started, the wounded had to be evacuated hastily and the British lost most of their provisions (and some of the loot) in the blaze. It seems indeed a little strange that the British would choose to set fire to their own wounded and supplies. I have not had access to the full text of Lucy's logbook and thus cannot offer an explanation for why he writes that the King's palace was burned by the British, but perhaps there was a mix-up with some of the many other dwellings which they burned intentionally. (Needless to say, it is of paramount importance that Lucy's logbook is published in its entirety.) There are, to my knowledge, no other sources indicating that the fire which destroyed the palace was started on purpose by the British, although there was a contemporary suggestion that it had been started by the Edo to regain some of the objects (Plankensteiner 2007, 34). From the British accounts it is clear that

they did not make a secret of the fact that they torched dwellings; nor did they try to hide that they had looted the palace. Had the British burned the palace willfully, they would hardly have had reason to deny it.

In sum, Oronsaye's alternative view of what happened in 1897 is not convincing. Unfortunately, his book also contains many "minor" errors, such as his statement that the plaques were ripped from pillars in the palace (p. 50), that the loot was sold in Paris (p. 61), and so on. Typos abound, the referencing is a little haphazard, and the bibliography omits much of the relevant secondary literature (e.g. Igbafe 1979; Home 1982).

I have recently written about how the British Museum today distorts the story of the Western reception of Benin objects. The museum downplays the racism of the British Museum curators who published the Benin objects at the turn of the 20th century, and it erroneously credits these scholars for the discovery of the indigenous origin of the Benin objects. I suggested that the museum's complacency regarding its role in Benin scholarship may be linked to its search for arguments against the return of the objects (Lundén 2016). Oronsaye's work may be seen as an example of how the other side in this debate similarly bases its version of the past on wishful thinking rather than on a careful examination of the documentary record.

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