

Institution: SOAS
Unit of Assessment: 24A Anthropology and Development Studies: Social Anthropology
Title of case study: Promoting the Arts of Central Nigeria (Richard Fardon)
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>The first major international touring exhibition on the region, <i>Central Nigeria Unmasked: Arts of the Benue River Valley</i>, attracted up to a third of a million visitors between opening at UCLA's Fowler Museum in February 2011 and closing at the Musée du quai Branly, Paris, in January 2013, with intervening shows at Stanford University's Cantor Center and the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art. The exhibition, its 600-page catalogue, and extensive education and outreach programmes, substantially based on Professor Richard Fardon's research insights, were widely reviewed as a revelatory experience providing the public with a first comprehensive overview of the hitherto poorly understood arts of central Nigeria.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>The arts of southern Nigeria are widely celebrated: exhibitions on Benin, Yoruba, Igbo, or Kalabari are mounted frequently. By contrast, and despite their importance to European modernism, the arts of central Nigeria are little known, and there has never been a substantial exhibition of the whole of them. The reasons for this are several: central Nigeria is a patchwork of ethnic groups difficult to explain succinctly; the objects themselves are scattered between numerous international museum and private collections; documenting objects is particularly challenging as many of them lack attribution and known provenance; broader historical reconstruction is thwarted by the absence of archaeological research, the disruptions of Atlantic and Saharan slave trades, the religious wars of the 19th century, and the exodus of artefacts during the Nigerian civil war.</p> <p>In this context, art objects offer one of the few resources to reconstruct the history of this neglected region, but doing so demands extensive and painstaking scholarly work. <i>Central Nigeria Unmasked</i>, as catalogue, exhibition and website transforms our understanding of the Benue River Valley and fills in the missing zone between southern and northern Nigerian historic arts.</p> <p>Following ethnographic researches in Nigeria and Cameroon, Fardon was invited by Professor Arnold Rubin of UCLA to join 'The Arts of the Benue Valley' project in 1987. Rubin was a pioneer in the study of the extraordinary range of Benue Valley art and wanted to create an exhibition portraying the region as a whole, understanding art in order to elucidate history.</p> <p>Attempts were made following Rubin's death in 1988 to continue the project, and Fardon pursued relevant researches episodically through the 1990s. But it was not until 2005, with the firm pledge of collaboration from the Musée du quai Branly in Paris that the work of creating the exhibition resumed in earnest. With Professor Sidney Kasfir of Emory University, and under the direction of Dr Marla Berns, Director of UCLA's Fowler Museum, curatorial and editorial responsibilities for the Benue River Valley were divided into three: Kasfir was responsible for the Lower Benue, Berns for the Upper Benue, and Fardon for the Middle Benue, the most extensive of the three.</p> <p>The Middle Benue synthesis drew upon Fardon's fieldwork, archival and museum research, interviews with dealers and collectors, chapters from other fieldworkers, and close reanalysis of Rubin's original research. Most of this research was presented first in <i>Central Nigeria Unmasked</i> (2011); however, Fardon's initial accounts of Chamba figures and of masquerade traditions analysed comparatively were published in earlier versions revised, extended and corrected for the catalogue (outputs a and b). Two further publications represent the wider diffusion of the research: an exhibition preview in <i>African Arts</i> (output d), and a French translation of selected introductory materials (output e).</p> <p>The main achievements of the research and exhibition can be summarized as: delineation of</p>

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overlapping style regions, presenting objects within series of transformations; demonstration of the mobility of objects and styles, rebutting ahistorical perceptions of 'tribe'; illustration of innovation linked to individual artists which is unusual in shows on 'traditional' African arts; a frank reconstruction of the controversial circumstances under which colonial and post-colonial collections of Benue arts were assembled outside Nigeria.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- a. 2005 (co-author Christine Stelzig) *Column to Volume: Formal Innovation in Chamba Statuary*, London: Saffron Press, Afriscopes Series (159pp.).
- b. 2007 *Fusions: Masquerades and Thought-style East of the Niger-Benue Confluence, West Africa*, London: Saffron Press, Afriscopes Series (208pp.).
- c. 2011a (co-author Marla C. Berns) 'Central Nigeria unmasked. Arts of the Benue River Valley' *African Arts* 44 (3): 16-37.
- d. 2011b (co-authors and co-editors Marla C. Berns and Sidney Littlefield Kasfir) *Central Nigeria Unmasked: Arts of the Benue River Valley*, Los Angeles: Fowler Museum (608pp.).
- e. 2013 (co-author and co-editor Marla C. Berns) *Nigéria, Arts de la vallée de la Bénoué*, Paris: Somogy, Éditions d'art & Musée du Quai Branly (136pp.).

Outputs a and b were submitted to RAE 2008; output d is submitted to REF 2014

Awards and accolades: the catalogue, output d, was winner in the category of non-western art book at the *Festival International du Livre d'Art et du Film* in 2012 (<http://www.filaf.com/>); it was shortlisted as best English-language, international tribal art book of the year for 2011 by *Le Prix International du Livre d'Art Tribal* sponsored by *Tribal Art Magazine* in partnership with Sotheby's (http://www.pilat2011.com/index/pages/id_page-66/lang-en/). It was praised by the *New York Times* as one of three art books of the year suggested as gifts in 2011 (http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/25/arts/design/art-books-recommended-as-gifts-for-art-lovers.html?_r=2&scp=1&sq=art%20books&st=cse&)

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The exhibition in its four locations, its catalogue, extensive website (including video) and education programme shared the aspiration not just to show the staggering creativity and variety of the arts of central Nigeria, but also the complexity of the region's history and the interdisciplinary methods employed to understand the meanings, uses and histories of the art objects. The challenge was to synthesise these, turning knowledge of the objects and their complex itineraries into an approachable show of around 200 items, touching on space, style, history and agency. This was achieved by interweaving a journey, from west to east along the Benue River Valley, with object types and styles, such as maternal figures, masquerades and healing pots displayed as series.

Approximately 1,000 people attended the opening weekend at UCLA's Fowler Museum in mid-February 2011; 21,500 more visited before the exhibition's close in July (1, 3, below). The extensive education programme associated with the exhibition involved more than 5,500 primary and secondary school students (2). Together with museum curators, Fardon helped to produce simplified, concise versions of the catalogue texts and trained teachers in the use of educational resources, which remain available online and correlate with both national and California State standards for teaching across multiple subject areas. Three flexible units focus specifically on the arts of the Middle Benue: 'Ritual Intermediaries in Human Form', 'Middle Benue Ironworks', and 'Masquerades of the Middle Benue'. All draw heavily on Fardon's original research and benefit from his direct editorial and other contributions.

The exhibition then travelled to the National Museum of African Art at the Smithsonian Institution in

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Washington (4). Between September 2011 and February 2012 there were 156,853 visitors to the museum when *Central Nigeria Unmasked* was the major temporary exhibition. This represented a 17% increase in attendance figures over the previous year. The exhibition received much press attention throughout its US tour (13), but national press coverage was particularly notable during its time in Washington: *Afrostyle Magazine*, with an African-American readership online, positively reviewed and recommended the Washington exhibition to its readers (5, 14). CNN carried extended coverage on its television and online platforms (6).

The exhibition returned to the West Coast, to the Iris and Gerald B. Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University south of San Francisco from May to September 2012 (7). The online UCLA educational programme was linked to the Cantor website for use by school visitors. 71,941 visitors attended the exhibition following positive reviews in the *San Francisco Chronicle* and elsewhere. In a long-running and influential blog written primarily for African art collectors and dealers, John Buxton recommended the Stanford leg of the tour, 'I initially saw this exhibition in Los Angeles [...]. It is a superb and important show. If you are in the San Francisco area, you need to see this.' (8)

Further evidence of impact on this constituency is provided by Barry Hecht, a leading American collector of Nigerian Art, who has confirmed that the exhibition and catalogue increased interest in the art of the region, resulting in a number of private gallery shows in Paris in particular, and a more informed market for central Nigerian art objects with rising prices and museum acquisitions, particularly for Mumuye figures, of which Fardon had written a comprehensive reassessment (9).

The Musée du quai Branly (MQB), the preeminent non-Western art museum in Paris, was the final destination of the show from November 2012 to January 2013 (10). 1,800 people attended the opening and there were approximately 275,000 visitors to the MQB over the period (gallery entry figures are not kept). The extent of publicity and press interest in Paris was striking. The annual, dealers' non-western art festival, *Parcours des mondes*, in September 2012, was largely Benue-themed. There were 2,000 posters around Paris and *Le Guide du Visiteur*, a special *Paris Match* supplement, was distributed with the magazine and at MQB. The exhibition was favourably and extensively reviewed in 15 daily newspapers including *Le Figaro* and *Le Monde*, 22 weeklies and fortnightlies and 27 periodical publications (12, 13). *Jeune Afrique* introduced the exhibition as a quiet revolution ('*Il est des révolutions qui ne disent pas leur nom*') and concluded that the exhibition was important on several grounds: for its interpretation, for overthrowing inherited colonial conceptions in favour of African realities, and for revealing, often for the first time, pieces of great rarity. Radio (*France Culture*, *Radio France International*) and television coverage (*TV2*, *TV5*) was also significant. Based on the success of this exhibition, the Fowler Museum and Musée du quai Branly signed a collaborative programme for UCLA shows to tour to Paris (*L'Art des Lega* opened in late 2013).

Fardon delivered public lectures, participated in tours and trained museum guides at the first and last stages of the tour and with Berns presented the catalogue at FILAF in Perpignan (where it won its category of art books published in 2011). One distinguished audience member in LA was Enid Schildkrout, Chief Curator at the Museum of African Art in New York, who travelled to attend the opening and generously praised the exhibition and Fardon's contributions (11):

'I would like to say that your participation as a senior researcher and curator for the major international exhibition organized by the Fowler Museum at UCLA made a significant contribution to scholarship and to the general public's understanding of African art and culture. Having been a museum curator for more than three decades, I am well aware of how difficult it is to translate research on sometimes obscure subjects to the public. Exhibitions are an excellent way to this, and in this case the sound scholarship underpinning this first ever regional presentation of the arts of the Benue valley was made accessible to audiences [...].'

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

1. Fowler Museum, UCLA web page featuring information about the exhibition and relevant multimedia materials: <http://www.fowler.ucla.edu/exhibitions/benue> [Most recently accessed

14.11.13].

2. Fowler/Cantor educational materials drawing on Fardon's research:

http://www.fowler.ucla.edu/sites/default/files/curriculum/CentralNigeriaUnmasked_Curriculum_Unit_2.pdf [Most recently accessed 14.11.13].

3. All data relating to visitor numbers was provided by curators at the four venues or through recourse to institutions' annual reports. Correspondence and other documentation can be produced on request.

4. Smithsonian Institution web page detailing exhibition: <http://africa.si.edu/exhibits/benue/> [Most recently accessed 14.11.13].

5. Afrostyle online magazine review of Smithsonian exhibition: <http://www.afrostylemag.com/ASM7/issue5/central-nigeria-unmasked.php.html> [Most recently accessed 14.11.13].

6. CNN piece on Smithsonian exhibition:

<http://edition.cnn.com/video/data/2.0/video/international/2011/10/17/inside-africa-journey-art-nigeria.cnn.html> [Most recently accessed 14.11.13].

7. Cantor Museum, Stanford webpage detailing the exhibition:

http://museum.stanford.edu/news_room/benue.html [Most recently accessed 14.11.13].

8. Recommendation in influential blog: <http://arttrak.blogspot.co.uk/2012/08/i-initially-saw-this-exhibition-in-los.html> [Most recently accessed 14.11.13].

9. Testimonial, Barry Hecht, art dealer and collector of West African art.

10. The Musée du quai Branly web page detailing the exhibition:

<http://www.quaibrantly.fr/fr/programmation/expositions/expositions-passees/nigeria-arts-de-la-vallee-de-la-benoue.html> [Most recently accessed 14.11.13].

11. Testimonial, Enid Schildkrout, Chief Curator at the Museum of African Art, New York

12. Evidence cited of impact in broader fine arts readership:

a. *Magazine Beaux Arts* 1/11/12 pp. 134-9.

b. *L'oeil* 1/12/12 pp. 68-73 '7 clefs pour comprendre l'art du Nigeria'.

13. Evidence cited of impact on wider reading public: *Los Angeles Times*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *New York Times*, *Le Monde*.

a. *Los Angeles Times*: <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/culturemonster/2011/02/previewing-central-nigeria-unmasked-at-the-fowler-museum.html> & <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/feb/06/entertainment/la-ca-masks-20110206> [Most recently accessed 14.11.13].

b. *San Francisco Chronicle*: <http://www.sfgate.com/default/article/Central-Nigeria-Unmasked-at-Cantor-Center-3896464.php> [Most recently accessed 14.11.13].

c. *New York Times*: http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/25/arts/design/art-books-recommended-as-gifts-for-art-lovers.html?_r=2&scp=1&sq=art%20books&st=cse& [Most recently accessed 14.11.13].

d. *Le Monde*: http://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2012/12/12/et-au-milieu-coule-la-benoue_1805131_3246.html [Most recently accessed 11.11.13].

14. Evidence cited of impact on wider readership about Africa and African Americans:

'The Arts of the Benue', by Stephen Williams in *New African* January 2013 No 524 pp. 74-77.