

Preparing for A105: historical sources

From Book 3 *Cultural Encounters*, Chapter 1 The art of Benin: changing relations between Europe and Africa I, pp. 16-20.

1.2 The Conquest of Benin in the 1890s

In 1897 Benin was conquered by the British. This was not only a traumatic break in the history of Benin, which brought to a sudden end the independence of the centuries-old kingdom; it was also a key ‘cultural encounter’ in the discovery of Benin art by Europeans. This section will examine the occupation and why it happened. It will also focus on how we know about the occupation. Earlier in the course you have looked at the nature of evidence about the past and about how it has been used by historians. The occupation of Benin raises interesting questions about the relationship between the two: how the evidence available shapes how history is written [...]

We have, therefore, no shortage of first-hand reports on the events surrounding the British conquest of Benin. As I hope you will have spotted, however, all the sources listed were written by British participants. Benin was an oral society and there are no accounts written at the time by the people of Benin. Nor is this simply a story of two sides. The British expeditions used large numbers of African carriers, and most of the soldiers involved in the conquest of Benin were also African. The written accounts all come from a small and quite atypical group of witnesses.

However, the written accounts were not the only way that the events were remembered. As in many oral societies, oral records were important in Benin society: ‘the recounting of history has been a highly valued form of intellectual activity [...] The transmission of oral tradition in Benin is done through story-telling’ (Layiwola, 2007, p. 84). A first written history of Benin based on such sources was published as early as 1934 (Egharevba, 1960 [1934]). Oral narratives, many of them relating to the royal house, and often supported by mnemonic devices – songs, proverbs, or visual artefacts which prompt memories and act as reference points – are an important source of information about Benin’s past. The events of 1897 were also integrated into oral narratives, which are widely remembered in Benin to this day.

Such narratives, however, work in a different way from historical documents. Whereas a written source preserves the words used at the time, so that the problem for the historian is to understand the document in its contemporary context, in memories and oral traditions ‘the past provides a subject in which the present continually interacts in order to produce a new consciousness’ (Layiwola, 2007, p. 83). Oral tradition does not preserve the sources in an independent form. Instead, it provides a continually developing interpretation which helps explain past events.

It would be easy to see this distinction as the same as that between history and myth which you encountered when exploring Stalin’s reputation earlier in the course. Myth, you will recall, was defined as a ‘popular idea concerning historical phenomena’, whereas history is ‘an account of past events based upon the interpretation of all the available evidence’ (see the introduction to Chapter 5 in Book 1). In fact, oral tradition has made a major contribution to African history. Later in this section we will look at one example of how it has contributed to our understanding of the conquest of Benin. The section, however, focuses on a different

issue. What happens if 'all the available evidence' from the period was written by one party? Does the fact that all the documentary accounts of the conquest of Benin come from British records mean that any history based on them will be irretrievably biased? Can historians write 'history' when the evidence is tainted in this way?