

BRIDGING TRADITIONS AND ACADEMIA: AN EXPLORATION OF THE POSSIBILITIES FOR COLLABORATION BETWEEN BENIN TRADITIONAL BRONZE CASTERS AND UNIVERSITY-BASED PRACTITIONERS

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Abstract

The art of bronze casting has held a significant and appreciated role in Nigeria's artistic and cultural heritage. One of the visible instances of such cultural heritage is the Kingdom of Benin. The art was shrouded in secrecy and transmitted through hereditary guilds systems in ancient Benin, called the Igumeronmwun (guild of bronze casters). The guild was formally established during the reign of Oba Oguola in 1280 AD. Despite the massive interruption caused by the British punitive expedition of 1897, the guild was re-established in 1914 and has maintained its centuries-old tradition in bronze casting, even where sociocultural forces have altered. Over the past years, there has been greater- both formal and informal- Interactions between the University of Benin school of art and the local bronze casters in Edo State, Nigeria, which has heralded radical changes in practice and pedagogy of bronze casting practice. This paper thus explores the possible synergy that could exist between the Benin traditional bronze casters and Academics in contemporary learning institutions, such as the University of Benin. It highlights the way innovations involving the utilization of new materials, mechanical aids, and production techniques have been the gain of this collaboration, shortening significantly production cycle, time and expanding creative possibilities. Furthermore, it explains the benefit of this synergy with respect to technological advancement, economic development, and conservation of cultural heritage. The findings propose policy initiatives, create model apprenticeship programs, and craft educational curricula. Outreach programs are how collaborative efforts become formalized and standardized thus, providing greater sustainability to bronze casting in Benin City.

Keywords: Benin bronze casting, Traditional bronze casters guild, Nigerian art, Academic collaboration, Igumeronmwun.

Introduction

The bronze casting is of paramount significance in the Benin people's cultural and artistic legacy. It has a history that stretches to the reign of Oba Oguola, who reigned in 1280 AD (Odiahi, 2017). During his reign, there was a desire to introduce brass casting in Benin, inspired by artworks received from Uhe (Ile-Ife). To achieve this, he requested a skilled brass smith from the Oghene of Uhe, who sent Igue-gha. Known for his exceptional skill and creativity, Igue-gha established foundational designs for future generations. As a result of his contributions, he was later deified and continues to be revered by brass casters. (Egharevba, 1936). This marked the beginning of brass casting in Benin. The artists of the guild (Igun Eronmwon) were given great respect in Benin society because of the commemorative and ritual significance of the items that they created. The bronze casting is not only for aesthetics, however; the plaques and sculptures ordered by the guilds are said to be historical artifacts, narratives that tell the royal victories, society's religion and law (Britannica, 2023). The artifacts, some of which are now referred to as the Benin Bronzes, were produced to decorate the kings' palaces and worked extensively in consolidating the kingdom's identity.

In the late 19th century, the British punitive expedition of 1897 opened up hundreds of irreplaceable artifacts to looting and destruction. This unleashed unimaginable chaos on the tradition of bronze-casting. The guild was revived in 1914 despite this interruption, pushing the efforts to restore and maintain the tradition (Odiahi, 2017). The last several decades have witnessed the art practice being revitalized as fresh artists and schools of learning come together to innovate and keep the bronze casting practice vibrant. This essay therefore deals with the history of bronze casting in Benin, history of the traditional guild system, and existing gains through the interface between indigenous craftsmen and tertiary institutions in Edo state especially the university of Benin school of art. Through this, the essay endeavours to emphasize the importance of preserving this cultural heritage alongside innovations gained through the academic interface.

The Early Periods and the Iguneronmwon Guild

The bronze casting in Nigeria is a very old tradition that is highly embedded in the history of Ife, Igbo-Ukwu, and Benin civilizations. Of the three civilizations, only Benin has continuously practiced bronze casting and hence has made it its continuity and distinctive cultural identity. The earliest recorded history of bronze casting was during the reign of Oba Oguola in 1280 AD, when he invited a bronze master caster from Ife to come and instruct Benin craftsmen in the art of bronze casting. This encounter therefore resulted in the formation of the Iguneronmwon guild (Plate 1), a hereditary organization that was famed to produce bronze works that glorified the kingdom and its rulers (Odiahi, 2017). The Iguneronmwon guild occupied the rank of the most sacred organization of the kingdom, most likely because it was immortalizing the kingdom's history in bronze for generations to come. The guild members, known as Igun Eronmwon, were extremely renowned in Benin society and created pieces that were ceremonial and commemorative (Odiahi, 2017).



Plate 1: The Entrance to Igun (Bronze Casting) Street, Benin City.

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/atqnewsmedia/posts/igun-street-is-a-stone-throw-from-ring-road-roundabout-where-the-benin-national-/2827806384156394/>

The British Punitive Expedition of 1897 and Its Ultimate Aftermath

In 1897, the British launched a punitive expedition against the Kingdom of Benin which terminated in the violent invasion and ransacking of Benin City. During this operation, an estimated number of 3,000 to 5,000 irreplaceable artifacts, predominantly comprising bronze and ivory creations of significant historical and cultural value were forcibly removed from the royal palace and its environs (Hicks, 2020; Docherty, 2021). These objects, which include ancestral heads, memorial plaques, and Ritual objects were subsequently commodified in the art market or exhibited in great museums throughout Europe and North America. Such a wide distribution not only separated the artefacts from their cultural and religious setting; but it was also a significant break with the long tradition of bronze casting in Benin.

The systematic destruction of the palace and disbanding of the royal guilds dismantled the institutional and spiritual framework that had supported the casting tradition for centuries (Igbafe, 1979). As a result, the Benin bronze-casting heritage suffered a significant decline, with both production and transmission of knowledge severely hampered.

The Restoration and Continued Functioning of the Guild

In accordance with the previously discussed losses, the Igneronmwun guild was officially reinstated in 1914 (Odiahi, 2017). That it managed to survive without the traditional patronage of the palace is testimony to the strength of the institution and respect still given to the institution. In recent times, about 1990, the guild has had to face the challenge of new trends and innovations, especially in terms of engagement with practitioners, universities and other institutions of higher learning in Edo state. This association between the universities (such as the University of Benin school of art) and traditional craftsmen has generated seeds of positive change in the bronze casting practice as well as pedagogic practice, i.e. through material exploration, equipment innovation, and production techniques.

Academic and Traditional Bronze Casters' Interaction Dynamics

The 1990s was the decade of a very important phase in the development of bronze casting technology in Benin City. Directly under the supervisory eyes of Mr. Benson Osawe (1931 - 2007), Kenneth and Godwin Eboh, alias the "Skeles" introduced the new and experimental techniques of casting that became an option to the conventional laterite mould investment technique, and other forms of innovations that changed the Benin bronze casting historical narrative. Some of these innovations are summarised as follows:

Investment Mould with Plaster: The traditional bronze casters of Benin employed laterite as one of the old materials for creating moulds. Skeles replaced laterite with plaster of Paris (POP) so that the castings could be made finer and more intricate as depicted in plates 2 – 6.



Plate 2: Invested Moulds in Traditional Laterite Method. Source: <https://www.oluwalanu.com/post/bronze-casting-in-benin-a-unique-retrieved>, June 11, 2025.



Plate 3: The Traditionally Invested Laterite Moulds. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=670962282962547&id=155689984489782&set=a> Retrieved, 9/6/2025



Plate 4: Sprue-Wax Work with Core. Source: NJK Studio University of Benin, 2021.



Plate 5: The Researcher Investing with Plaster. Source: NJK Studio University of Benin, 2021.



Plate 6: Completed Investment Ready for Dewaxing. Source: NJK Studio University of Benin, 2021.

Electric Bellows instead of Hand Bellows: Hand bellows were originally used to blow air into the furnace (Plate 7). Skeles substituted the above with electric bellows (Plate 8), which gave a more controlled and constant source of heat and thereby, castings were enhanced in quality.



Plate 7: The Traditional Hand Bellow System. Source:

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=670962282962547&id=155689984489782&set=a>. Retrieved, 9/6/2025.



Plate 8: Electric Bellow in Use. Source: NJK Studio University of Benin 2022.

Piece-mould Casting: This enabled the successful replication of intricate designs in large-scale production with precise detail (Plate 9). Before now, casters used to painstakingly model repeatedly copies of intended concepts one after another. Despite its strenuous presentation, it was time wasteful; but the synergy with university trained casters has brought about the use of piece moulds that enables mass production, as shown below.



Plate 9: Replicated Wax Works Mass Produced from Piece Moulds. Source: <https://www.oluwalanu.com/post/bronze-casting-in-benin-a-unique-art>. Retrieved June 11, 2025.

These innovations, to which the orthodox guild initially opposed, served as a stimulus to new avenues of collaboration between formal schools of higher learning and local craftsmen. Visibly under the guidance of the late Osawe, the Skeles syncretized these innovations and tradition and thereby rendering both efficient and scholarly productions of higher standards (Plate 10 and 11).



Plate 9: The Improved Casting Through Innovation.

Source: Njk2021, crucifix, Bronze, 9ft × 6ft, Njk Studio, University of Benin.



Plate 10: The Improved Casting Through Innovation.

Source: Njk2023, Crest, Bronze 36" × 36", Njk Studio, University of Benin.

In view of the above, tertiary institutions in Edo state, especially the University of Benin have incorporated better practical methods with emphasis on metal casting into their sculpture and metal design sections. They train students in this regard through assignments, industrial training attachments, workshop, and apprenticeship with veteran professional casters, and this has led to good cross-fertilization of technique, beauty, and pedagogy. Significantly, the University of Benin has been at the forefront in forging synergies by adopting a curriculum that incorporates design thinking principles and traditional craft practice. In addition, the Museum of West African Art (MOWAA) in Benin City has been engaging in partnerships with institutions like the University of Benin aimed at enhancing heritage management and safeguarding traditional practices.

This is funded by provision of access to world-class laboratory facilities and documentary resources, which is being translated into research and development activity in the practice of bronze casting. This collaborative initiative will not only refurbish Benin tradition of bronze casting, but it would

also translate it into a focused area of development and research over time, integrating traditional artisanal expertise and that of the university scholarship.

Prospects for Collaborative Partnerships between Academic and Traditional Bronze Casting Traditions

Technological Advances: Periodic association has enabled the innovation of new equipment and materials and thus improved the efficiency and quality of the casting process. For instance, electric blowers have replaced hand bellows in generating an equivalent source of heat. Plaster moulds have also improved the intensity of achieving designs more intricate than that of laterite moulds (Plates 2 - 8). All these technologies have improved the complexity of the casting procedure and accuracy of the art works to be cast.

Academic Progress: The practice experience provides the students with different experiential learning experiences. The University of Benin is among the institutions of art that have incorporated the metal casting practice in the school curriculum. Students receive apprenticeship and field study with master casters where they can share style, pedagogy, and technique. The experience further enhances their tactile knowledge and appreciation of art.

Economic Empowerment: The cooperative atmosphere has also assisted in creating employment opportunities within the youth of the community and the ability to generate additional opportunities. Bronze casting in Benin is presently a vital economic practice, with foreign and local customers showing interest in business involvement. Moreover, institutions and workshops have provided platforms for the artisans to expose their talents, resulting in increased sales and economic benefits for the locals. The return of Benin Bronzes to local institutions abroad is likely to boost tourism, which will benefit the regional economy in the end.

Artistic Development

The combination of scholarly experimentation and traditional aesthetics has significantly changed the nature of bronze items made in Benin City. New forms and finishing have been introduced through innovative experimentation with modern themes as well as ancient techniques (Plates 11 - 15). This combination has extended the art field and enhanced the reputation of Benin bronze casting; for instance, the traditional artists now achieve and retain sparkling shiny lustre through buffing and lacquer fixative; a practice for finishing jewellery and metals including bronzes in the Metal-Design section of the university of Benin. However, an improved finishing that is scholarly as earlier mentioned in this regard (Plates 13 and 14).



Plate 11: Realistic Bronze Bust Revealing Influence of Interaction Between Traditional Casters and University-Trained Artists. Source: <https://rexclarkeadventures.com/igun-street-cultural-heritage-of-benin-bronze-civilization/>



Plate 12: The Improved Cast Results.
Isiagbon 2023, Okpanovie, bronze, 36×33", Owina, Benin



Plate 13: An Improved Finishing (Lacquered Bronze) Figure from Igun Street. Source: <https://rexclarkeadventures.com/igun-street-cultural-heritage-of-benin-bronze-civilization/>



Plate 14: Improved Finishing on Themes in Traditional Benin Bronzes. Source: <https://rexclarkeadventures.com/igun-street-cultural-heritage-of-benin-bronze-civilization/>



Plate 15: Typical Present Day Igun Street Showing Mixture of Old and New Concepts and Forms.
Source: <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=2827806120823087&set=pcb.2827806384156394>.

Enhanced Cultural Interaction

This alliance has made the potential of bronze casting other than in guild restraints and has made greater access to this art and great-scale cultural exchange possible. International interaction and involvement in international exhibitions have made the world at large come and share in the splendid art legacy of Benin. This interaction ensures respect and appreciation of cultures and therefore international appreciation of Benin's art craftsmanship.

Overview and Recommendations

The synergy between the Benin City bronze artists and educational institutions can revitalize and preserve a very rich cultural heritage. To do this optimally, however, the following are recommended:

Establishing apprenticeship framework programs: It is necessary to have extensive training programs involving the guild members and university instructors. The programs can possibly integrate the transfer of traditional knowledge with knowledge of contemporary methodologies with the aim of ensuring the continuation and enhancement of the craft. The Igbo apprenticeship system, being very long in contributing significantly towards the transmission and continuity of artisanal knowledge, can be a good model for such programs.

Public awareness programs: The aura of mystery that pervades the working of bronze and brass needs to be cleared for the general populace and art collectors alike. The statement emphasizes the need for Public Awareness Programs to **demystify the processes involved in bronze and brass casting**, particularly in cultural centers like Benin where such practices have long been enveloped in secrecy, ritual, and technical complexity. This "aura of mystery" stems from the guild-based traditions, sacred customs, and the high level of skill required - factors that often make the art seem mystical or esoteric to outsiders. Clearing this mystery is essential to making the art form more accessible and understandable, not only to the general populace but also to art collectors, curators, and enthusiasts' appreciation of the historical, cultural, and technical dimensions of bronze and brass artwork can enhance wider awareness and informed interest. Finally, the call is for well-designed educational initiatives in the range of exhibitions, public lectures, studio tours, workshops, and documentaries, that illuminate the art form's significance and relevance. In creating receptiveness and sensitivity, such activity would ensure preservation of the tradition while establishing its value in contemporary cultural and artistic discourse. More education can enable a

greater appreciation of the cultural heritage of bronze and brass and the technologies that go into their creation. The establishment of the Museum of West African Art (MOWAA) in Benin City, with modern research and conservation technologies, is a big leap towards raising public awareness and sensitivity towards these cultural objects.

Policy Support: The governmental institutions and cultural organizations need to offer financial assistance in terms of grants and workshops to encourage collaborative artistic endeavours. Institutional support from bodies like the Nigerian Export Promotion Council and the National Museum and Monument would go a long way to improve market access and international visibility for Benin bronze casting.

Mutual understanding and respect: This leads to constructive dialogue that encourages mutual respect between academic and traditional stakeholders. These can involve the exchange of views and the provision of an open forum for preservation and development. The use of participatory strategic planning allows for the preservation of the Benin bronze casting art that has been in existence for centuries while at the same time developing to address contemporary aesthetic and economic needs.

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Appendix A: Fieldwork Interviews and Visits

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