

**THE PRESERVATION AND RESTITUTION OF NIGERIA'S
CULTURAL HERITAGE:
a symposium held on November 18th 2004
at the Museum of Unity, Alesinloye, Ibadan**

In the recent past the Nigerian Field Society has co-operated with various other bodies in the organisation of several successful events. On May 6th 2002, Professor John Picton of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, delivered a lecture on "The image of the horse and rider in Yoruba art" (see *Nigerian Field*, vol. 67, part 2) at the Drapers' Hall of the University of Ibadan, which was full to capacity. This lecture was given under the auspices of the N.F.S. in conjunction with IFRA (The French Institute for Research in Africa). NSIAC (The Nigerian Society for Information, Arts and Culture) combined with NFS (Ibadan) to host Professor Judi Byfield's lecture on "From ladies to women: post-World War II women's protest in Abeokuta" in July 2003. The discussion which followed was very lively as some members of the audience had witnessed the events in Abeokuta to which Professor Byfield alluded in her lecture.

When the Olympic Games held in Athens in 2004 focussed the attention of the world on the issue of the ownership of culture property, with particular reference to the Elgin Marbles, some members of LEGACY, and the Ibadan Museum Society and the Nigerian Field Society thought it appropriate to organise a symposium on "The preservation and restitution of Nigeria's cultural heritage". Operating on a budget even more slender than a shoe-string,¹ the organising bodies assembled an audience of 140 people (including 50 members of the staff of the Museum) in the Museum Conference Hall.

In his opening address, the Chairman of the occasion, the Hon. Justice B.O. Babalakin, J.S.C. (Rts.), C.O.N., emphasised the importance of cultural property to the nation's pride. He mentioned the *oriki* (praise poems) of the Yoruba which every family possesses, enshrining the deeds and character of their ancestors. Chief M. Okunola, Ekarun Babajiro of Ibadan, in his paper provided "An over-view of the Yoruba heritage", dealing with both the tangible and intangible elements of Yoruba culture which emphasises the values of diligence, modesty and courtesy. Dr. O. Pogoso, Senior Research Fellow in the Institute of African Studies of the University of Ibadan, focussed his paper on material culture, noting its importance in "piecing together the history of a people who had limited writing", and asserting cultural specificity in the face of globalisation. He paid tribute to Nigerian creativity, both past and present, and drew attention to the difficulties involved in preserving

¹We acknowledge with thanks donations in kind from the 7Up Bottling Company, Fan Milk, ZENCO and EFCO. An eight page souvenir programme was donated by INTEC, and the use of the hall and services of their staff by the Museum of Unity, Ibadan.

Nigeria's cultural heritage. These include the effects of the tropical climate (especially on organic materials), thefts and illegal exports, and the fact that museums are not part of Nigerian grass-roots' culture, a point that Dr. J.O. Eboime also made in his paper. However, Dr. Pogson maintains the importance of familiarising children with the culture of Nigeria beyond their own state of residence through visits to museums which should also organise educational and cultural activities. He acknowledges the complex nature of the problem of the restitution of Nigeria's artifacts and emphasises the necessity for providing adequate security in Nigeria's museums which require enhanced funding from government.

In his brief presentation, Professor Folarin Shyllon of the Faculty of Law, University of Ibadan,² dealt with the specific instance of three Nok objects illegally exported from Nigeria and sold by a Belgian art dealer, even though they feature on the Red List of objects protected by national legislation which may under no circumstances be put on sale.

Mr. Jide Famuyiwa, Curator of the Museum of Unity, Ibadan, presented the paper by Dr. O.J. Eboime, Director, Monuments, Heritage and Sites, N.C.M.M., Abuja, on "Nigerian museums and the preservation of the national heritage in perspective." This paper, while tracing the evolution of Nigerian museums during the colonial period due to the efforts of "men of conscience such as Mr. E.H. Duckworth³ and K.C. Murray," asserts the importance of "customary practice and usages [which] have continued to recognize the traditional institutions and associated functionaries as the custodians of communal cultural heritage." Dr. Eboime states the importance of royal palaces in Nigeria as "the rallying point of visual art, ritual, politics and dance", but notes that museums were... aimed at national integration" and objects from all over Nigeria "were brought together under one roof to express visually the national ideal."

After the Symposium, participants visited the Museum galleries and the speakers planted commemorative trees in the Museum grounds.

— Editor

²Professor Folarin Shyllon is the author of *Intellectual property law in Nigeria*, published by Max Planck Institute for Intellectual Property Law, Munich, Germany and Verlag C.H. Beck of Munich.

³E.H. Duckworth was the editor of *Nigeria Magazine* in the 1930's, a publication of the same vintage as *The Nigerian Field*.