

**ON COLONIAL THEFT AND THE URGENT CASE FOR
RESTITUTION OF THE DUEIN FUBARA
A PRELIMINARY RESEARCH REPORT**

By

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In 1916, the British colonial officer and ethnographer stationed at the Degema district, in the current Niger Delta region, southern Nigeria, carted away a collection of sacred objects including the Duein Fubara objects from various Kalabari families. These objects imbued with profound spiritual significance was later bequeathed to museums in the United Kingdom, where they remain domiciled today. Over a century later, I find the associated histories and colonial reports of their removal unsettling, hence my decision to engage in this research, that aligns with a growing call around global restitution debates; a conversation marred by historical erasure, conflicting colonial narratives, and the enduring legacy of epistemic violence. At the core of this controversy, lies not just a case of ownership, but also an unjust scapegoating of Derrick Idaketima Braide, radical preacher, who was prosecuted by a colonial court, branded an iconoclast and wrongfully imprisoned, as well as the systemic obscurity of the Kalabari voice within restitutive justice dialogues.

Contextualizing the Talbot Era and the Transfer of the Duein Fubara

The Duein Fubara objects, wooden figures, ancestral masks, and ritual regalia were central to the spiritual and social fabric of the Kalabari people. Used in ceremonies honoring ancestors and deities, they symbolized continuity between the living and the dead. Their removal coincided with a period of aggressive British colonial expansion, when officers like Talbot often framed their plunder as “salvage ethnography,” claiming to “rescue” artifacts from supposed indigenous neglect.

In the foreword supplied by Roy Sieber to Nigel Barley's book, the *Foreheads of the Dead*, we find colonial involvements in the movement of the *Duein Fubara* overseas. Sieber uses the term "fortuitous intervention" in his description of the movement of the objects to Britain by the then colonial District Officer (D.O) Percy Amaury Talbot in 1916. Sieber remarked that the works which formed a primal part of the trading canoe houses were placed in the care of the district officer, in the bid to prevent their destruction by a fundamentalist Christian cult headed by a self-styled Elijah II, Garrick Idaketima Braide.

Talbot's own accounts, echoed by later scholars like Robin Horton and Nigel Barley, assert that he intervened to prevent the objects from being destroyed during local religious reforms. Horton, a British anthropologist, argued that Kalabari chiefs voluntarily entrusted the artifacts to Talbot for safekeeping, fearing their desecration during a shift toward Christianity. Barley, meanwhile, romanticized Talbot as a "preserver" of culture. Yet these narratives starkly contradict oral histories from Kalabari elders, who maintain that the objects were taken under duress, without consent, and during a time of violent colonial subjugation. The conflicting accounts reveal a pattern of epistemic violence: the privileging of colonial records over indigenous testimony, effectively silencing those most affected by the theft.

Vilifying Garrick Idaketima Braide

At the core of the colonial justification for transferring the *Duein Fubara* was the vilification of Garrick Braide, an influential and charismatic preacher. At about 1916, Braide was accused of leading an "iconoclastic" movement that sought to destroy traditional religious objects, including the *Duein Fubara*, as part of his evangelical Christian crusade. Colonial authorities had him imprisoned under the pretext of his actions as proof of indigenous "barbarism", and carefully projecting their role as "protectors" of culture. This colonial fabrication, remains fictional as it crumbles under scrutiny; Braide's movement was less about destruction than resistance. His radical religious views were interpreted as challenging the colonial authorities and the power of pro-local chiefs aligned with British interests. By his imprisonment, there was a dismantling of a political threat, that provided a moral alibi that enabled Talbot's confiscation of the artifacts. Braide's story exemplifies how colonial powers manufactured villains to

legitimize cultural theft, a tactic that continues to distort restitution debates today.

Epistemic Violence and the Erasure of Kalabari Agency

The absence of the Duein Fubara in global restitution debate is deliberate. Epistemic violence, the deliberate silencing of non-Western knowledge systems succeeds in rendering the Kalabari voice invisible in museums and academia. British institutions housing the artifacts, such as the Pitt Rivers Museum and the British Museum, catalog them through a colonial lens, while scholarly works, including those by Horton and Barley, repeat Talbot's paternalistic claims without critical engagement with Kalabari oral histories. Such epistemic violence equally extends to modern restitution discourses, where high-profile cases like the Benin Bronzes dominate headlines, while the Duein Fubara remain unconsidered, trapped in a Eurocentric framework that deems their provenance ambiguous. The result is a cyclic redundancy, where museums demand evidence of ownership that colonially perpetuated violence itself destroyed.

Conflicting Narratives and the Need for Ethical Restitution

My field interviews in Bakana and Bonny, locations where Braide's Christ Army church exists, and indeed other towns within the Kalabari region showing how the debate around how the Duein Fubara were acquired underscores the urgency of centering marginalized voices. While Talbot's defenders agree that he fortuitously saved the objects; Kalabari families insist the works were forcefully as well as ideologically removed. Contemporary scholars must confront this dissonance by acknowledging the power imbalances inherent in colonial record-keeping. Talbot operated in a context where coercion was normalized, and his writings cannot be divorced from his role as an agent of empire. Restitution, therefore, is not merely a legal issue but a moral one. The Duein Fubara are not relics of a dead culture but living embodiments of Kalabari identity. Their continued presence in British museums perpetuates the trauma of displacement and denies the Kalabari people the right to reconcile with their heritage.

Considering that Talbot possessed an avid interest in these cultural objects, it is possible that the tenants of Braide's teaching inhibited the flourishing of a tradition that aided their production. We might never fully understand

what transpired, but a Kalabari family would never trade or gift their ancestral screen for anything, as it is symbolic to showing the nakedness of their father to the world. The historian especially from the colonial end, has never been ideologically innocent and the colonial project has always been circumscribed by an aggressive looting of indigenous cultural artefacts. As the global restitution movement gains momentum, it is time to confront the epistemic violence that has hidden these artifacts in plain sight. The truth is simple: what was taken in injustice must be restored in justice.