

THE INSTALLATION OF A BENIN MONARCH: RITE DE PASSAGE IN THE EXPRESSION OF ETHNIC IDENTITY IN NIGERIA

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BENIN CHIEFTANCY

Benin City, the ancient hub of the Benin Kingdom, is today the administrative capital of Edo State; one of the 36 territorial-administrative units in Nigeria that were progressively created by successive military regimes (1966-1999). These states were more or less created on the basis of ethno-linguistic homogeneity and within the framework of the provincial system adopted by the British indirect rule system; which tended to strengthen paramount Chieftaincies where they existed and created them where there were none.

Within the modern Nigerian nation-state, these « Chieftaincies » have become the rallying points of ethnic solidarities for both the emerging elites and the grassroots (ordinary people), who are yet to be reconciled with the colonial legacy and form of government.

THE POWER AND AUTHORITY OF THE BENIN OBA (KING)

Benin Kingship and Chieftaincy (Oba) dates back to the 12th Century and constitutes the rallying point of Benin cosmology, political organisation, tradition and history. In fact, only in rare cases such as homicide does a Benin citizen resort to the Police. The Oba (King) is the source of wisdom, the owner of the land and people. He exercises the power of life and death as symbolized by the royal sword that constitutes a central element of his paraphernalia of office. His palace is the hub around which the Government of the Benin Kingdom revolves. He awards honours and titles with carnelian beads to deserving and loyal citizens. He could strip any citizen of a non-hereditary title. He was, and still is, perceived as the living manifestation of the Benin royal ancestors, whose national altar is located within his Palace grounds. The ancestors are represented by carved staves, bronze memorial heads and other ornaments such as brass bells, decorated elephant tusks, ivory horns and other paraphernalia.

Each Benin household also has a lineage altar dedicated to the family ancestors, whose powers are believed to derive from the royal ancestors. This altar is under the custody of the eldest male who stands between the living and the death. Every year, at the annual royal festival (Igwe), each family is obliged to pay homage to the Oba (King) and reverence him as the ancestors' representative on earth.

This involves gestures of kneeling and crawling from a distance towards the Oba, who seats leisurely on his throne to acknowledge the obeisance before a cheering crowd of family members, friends and royal personages, including women, youths, drummers and children as well as other loyalists from far and near. It is a great pride and honour for any Benin traditional and modern elite to be recognised by the Oba through the bestowal of titles symbolised by beads and decorated brass swords. The Oba's Palace is the judicial and religious centre of the Benin, bubbling with ritual and secular activities year round. Every month of the year and every week are marked by festivals and rituals which culminate in the Igwe (thanksgiving) festival in December.

Today, any aspiring politician at local and national levels should seek the blessing of the Oba, who would invoke the ancestors for his favoured candidate. Once adopted and ratified by the royal father (the King), the candidate is sure to be elected as the chiefs rally around the candidate as a sign of solidarity with the Oba. It is instructive to note that the Nigerian military elite always cultivated the support of Chiefs and « traditional rulers » in their bid to gain legitimacy and retain power.

INSTALLATION CEREMONIES AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF ETHNIC SOLIDARITIES

Installation and investiture ceremonies offer a playing field for any analysis of the dynamics of ethnicity and its manipulation by Nigerian military and civilian elites in their competition for power. The installation of a Benin monarchy typifies in a most dramatic manner the ongoing cultural constructions of ethnic difference involved in « the dialectics of the national project ».

Based on field material collected by this author between 1978 and 1979 during the installation ceremonies of the present incumbent to the Benin throne, this paper attempts to elucidate the relationship between place, memory and meaning in the continuity of Benin Kingship, the invention of tradition and the construction of ethnic identity in Benin-Nigeria. Essentially, an attempt is made to show how the past has led to the present as well as how history is used, and created, by the Benins and its elites in the installation and investiture process.

SUMMARY OF INSTALLTION CEREMONIES (1978-1979)

The ceremonies of the present Oba (King) of Benin, Omo N'oba N'edo, Uku Akpolokpolo, Oba Erediauwa II can be divided into five broad sequences:

- 1) The formal initiation of Prince Solomon Akenzua, the first son of the deceased Oba Akenzua II into the Benin Royal Palace.
- 2) Prince Solomon's investiture with the title of Edaiken (crown prince) at the mini palace in Ogbe Quarters.
- 3) The performance of Iyan-hien rituals in which the Prince's royal status was consolidated integrating him into the 7 - man Benin Elderhood Council of State. This involved lavish and public provision of feasts for all the Benin chiefs. (At the crown Prince's Palace at Uselu Quarters)
- 4) The performance of the burial rites of his late father Oba Akenzua II (at the Crown princes' palace in Uselu Quarters).
- 5) The coronation and installation of Prince Solomon Akenzua as Omonoba Erediauwa (At the Usama Palace).

In August 1978, Prince Solomon Akenzua formally received the title «Edaiken of Uselu», having been initiated into the palace. He stayed in an improvised and miniature palace erected in fine prefabricated wood at the palace grounds at Uselu Quarters outside the City walls. Here he resided for about six months, holding courts, performing rituals such as the Iyanhien and the burial rites of his late father.

On Thursday, March 15th 1979, the Edaiken and his retinue of attendants left Uselu Palace symbolically climbing a palm tree, crossing the remains of the city outer walls in a slow and colourful procession towards the coronation shrine at Usama, where another miniature palace of prefabricated wood and zinc had also been erected. The Uselu palace was left to turn into a sacred bush, as it is today. On March 22nd the Crown Prince visited the Benin villages of Egor and Use, where he chose his dynastic name by an ancient rite of divination performed by descendants of his maternal uncle.

At about 3.30 a.m. the following day he was crowned and then finally moved into the permanent palace at Ogbe Quarters, situated within the innermost city walls. After seven days, there was a mock battle with a rival Chief Ogamien, who was defeated. An ancient agreement by which the chief was said to have surrendered his land to the Oba was re-enacted. This involved the sprinkling of some sand into the Oba's open palms by the Chief who henceforth took his place among his other chiefs.

PLACES AND MEMORY

Each of these ceremonies involved a series of processions and passages across historic and sacred places, which were either commemorations of some past events, re-enactments of long-standing Bini customs and practices, or the heroic deeds of past Obas, chiefs and mythological figures. It involved movements across boundaries, sacred places, the city walls and the symbolic climbing of a palm tree intended to demonstrate physical fitness.

At each station sacrifices of goats, dogs and chicken were offered.

The initiation of Prince Solomon into the palace and the Elderhood Council involved the payment of homage and sacrifices of goats and dogs at main royal shrines: Ugh'Ozolua (Oba Ozolua's shrine), Aro EdionEdo (altars in honour of Benin's founding ancestors) and Iyantor (the earth deity). The successful initiation was celebrated at the « Holy Aruosa Church » an indigenised Benin version of the Portuguese 15th century Capuchin Mission.

Oba Ozolua was a warrior king who reigned between 1483 and 1504. He fought many wars of expansion and was renowned for his mythical powers.

An efigee, dedicated to Oba Ozolua, stands alone within a quadrangle adjoining the main palace at Ore-Edo (city centre). Here, obeisance and sacrifices are made to this culture-hero of the Benins. The heir-apparent sacrifices were intended to bestow upon the Crown Prince the same mythical and military powers as those of Oba Ozolua.

Aro Edion-Edo is the shrine dedicated to the spirits of the collective dead of Benin-City. Situated at the access to the main public entrance to Benin palace, it houses an altar upon a raised dais, on which wooden staves dedicated to the collective dead of the city are placed. Here their powers are invoked and propitiated for the wellbeing of the initiate and the kingdom. The Edion-Edo shrine is the first of fourteen places of call in all processions related to title-taking of a candidate honoured by the Oba. Here the heir-apparent demonstrated his dexterity in dancing with the royal brass blade (sword) in honour of the ancestors.

The Iyantor shrine is dedicated to the Earth goddess. It lies in the Erie Quarters, about half a kilometre from the Royal Palace. The Erie quarters were traditionally the area of town where the daily needs of the royal harem were serviced. Sacrifices of goats and dogs were made in honour and propitiation of the Earth goddess in order to promote productivity and fertility.

Before his coronation on March the 15th 1979, the heir apparent had visited well over fourteen principal shrines located in the different quarters of the city and the outlying villages and country-side. All these visits involved trekking on bare feet accompanied by a retinue of palace and town chiefs as well as admirers, drummers, diviners, market women and men which including the author.

«When the heir apparent marched through the streets the entire city was swept along in exaltation ... not just of historical remembrance, communal solidarity or spiritual transformation, but also of textual riches and brilliant display.» (Nevadonsky 1984:50)

In addition, the heir apparent visited the outlying villages of Egor and Ekhon where he was further endowed with supernatural powers. Egor, about 15 kilometres from the city, is the native village of his maternal great-grandfather where his new dynastic name «Ere dia-Uwa» was revealed through divination. However, this was kept secret until coronation day.

At Ekhor, 30 kilometres from the city, the Oba visited the Ovia shrine, located, within a traditional forest reserve, a grove where hunting and farming are strictly forbidden. Ekhor is one of the settlements where the secret depths of Benin culture are hidden and learned by the heir-apparent; it is an extension of the King.

Two main deities, Orhian and Ovia, are located within the sacred forest. Orhian was the founder of Ekhor and with his magical powers he had impressed King Ozolua of Benin. He had made many futile attempts to kill him, and because of him, thereafter Orhian's name was changed to Ekhor, meaning "the aggressive and brave one".

Ovia is dedicated to a Benin Princess who married the king of the neighbouring Yoruba kingdom of Oyo. Having been constantly ill-treated, she turned herself into a river and found her way back to Benin where she is deified as Ovia. The dog she took to Oyo constitutes one of the principal components of sacrifice in Ovia shrine today.

The festival associated with Ovia, in which the Oba of Benin blesses and curses as appropriate, takes place on thirty-year cycle. He blesses the loyal and faithful and curses the evil spirits, banishing them from the land.

In each of these shrines, the Oba performed sacrifices and received blessings and powers from the ancestors and their supernatural agents. Memorial heads in bronze are deposited reminders of the heir-apparent's pilgrimage.

The crowning ceremony took place at the early hours of the morning (about 3.00 a.m.) on March the 14th 1979 at the Usama grounds (the abandoned palace of the early kings), about half a kilometre from the main palace.

Before moving to the main palace, located within the inner city walls, the king had to cross an improvised bridge where he had an encounter with a Benin noble, Chief Ogamwen, who challenged him to a duel three days thenceforth. At the battle (of Ekiokpagma), Chief Ogamwen was defeated and was forced to hand over his territory to the new king.

LEVELS OF MEANINGS

These acts and rituals are re-enactments of episodes in the dynastic past well known in the oral traditions and histories of all Benin natives. Originally, the first three Oba's before Ewedo (1255 AD) lived with the six councillors of State (Uzama) in the same territory. As the Uzamas became too powerful and meddlesome, Oba Ewedo moved away overnight to a new site in the present palace, which had been constructed in topmost secrecy.

The crossing of the bridge is a re-enactment of the Oba's crossing a river that had once existed in that territory. He was ferried across by Oba loyalists.

The encounter between Ogamwen and the Oba is said to be a re-enactment of the initial opposition to the new Oba's occupation of the territory under the authority of the powerful noble Chief Ogamwen of Benin.

Thus, three days after the coronation of the new king, a mock battle takes place between the Oba's army and that of Ogamwen, who is defeated. The surrender of his territory is ritually dramatised through the pouring of a sample of the earth (sand) into the Oba's palms. Thenceforth, the Ogamwen becomes one of the king's subjects and one of his recognized chiefs.

At this point we must ask if the Benin Kingship rituals of 1979 held precisely the same meanings that they would have had before the British «invasion» of 1897; given the massive economic and political changes that have taken place since then.

Indeed, at the exegetical level, the Benins claim that the rituals are exact stereotypes of the past.

Perhaps in 1914, when the Nigerian nation-state was formally inaugurated by the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates, it could have been argued that the colonial administration simply overlaid the indigenous structures, institutions and ideology with the system of indirect rule. But to suggest that well over sixty years later Benin society and culture retained their original forms within the framework of the Nigerian nation state would be misleading. The late R.E. Bradbury (1973), pioneer British anthropologist on Benin studies, put it succinctly:

Ritual episodes ... constitute, for the Edo (i.e Benins) themselves, explanatory models for their own society ... nor are they static models for it would be possible to produce evidence to show that they are deliberately altered to meet circumstances which are recognized to have changed.

It has been demonstrated that the whole coronation ceremonies involved ritual episodes across boundaries, within shrines and altars that are of historical and cosmological significance to the Benin people. All these are vocalised in oral discourses embedded with myths, songs and ritual drama, as well as a rich artistic tradition.

It is noteworthy to discuss the tension generated over a few cases of forced compliance of non-Benins who had refused to shave their hair during the burial rites. The Commissioner of Police in Benin took sides with the dissidents arguing that it was illegal to force people to shave. A timely intervention from the chief, the Inspector-General of Police, who transferred the Commissioner of Police away from Benin, saved the day.

All Benins and associates were united and were proud to belong to "the Benins who still keep their culture and tradition alive". The apparent humiliation of a government police official by the military government who sided with the Oba rather than the police is instructive of the way the military employed ethnicity in their "divide and rule" strategy, which lay behind state creation and the increasing segmentation of civil society in their bid to hold on to power. Consequently, demands for states and local government areas increased by the day with third-class chiefs asking for reclassification to higher grades, backing these requests with invented traditions, genealogies and histories.

Perhaps the Igbos of South-eastern Nigeria typify these inventions of traditions and movement from ascephalous, non-centralised polities more than any other group in Nigeria.

In the 1930's the Igbos had protested massively against the imposition of Chiefs upon their traditional republican institutions. Tapping on the advantages of chieftaincy and ethnicities in attracting "federal presence" in the form of amenities and development projects, many Igbo communities have today created first-, second- and third-class chiefs. These chiefs have become advocates and links for their communities in their competition against the more ancient and traditionally centralised kingships of Benin, Yoruba and the Hausa-Fulani.

CONCLUSION

Using Benin installation ceremonies as paradigms in the deployment of space and memory to generate levels of meanings, the phenomenon of ethnicity and class in contemporary Nigeria has been touched upon. The Benin kingship, like other players in the political landscape in Nigeria, is adjusting to demands in the macro socio-political spheres, which invariably involves ritual adjustments in time and space.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

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I am indebted to Rev. Father (Dr.) A.C. Edwards former Head of Ethnography, National Museum, Nigeria and Dr. Susan Drucker-Brown, who encouraged this study. The latter's unrelenting encouragement and her published work on Mamprusi Kingship have been very useful, see Ritual Aspects of Mamprusi Kingship, African Studies Centre, Cambridge 1975.

R.E. Bradbury, The Benin Kingdom and the Edo-Speaking Peoples of South Western Nigeria, Int, Afr. Inst. London 1957, Passim.

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Ses map, Uselu which is about four miles from the palace at the city centre is today part of the metropolis, Oredo.

Egor and Use are said to be the villages of the maternal grandfather of Emeka I who initiated the second dynasty that has continued unbroken to this day. Rituals were performed in several ancestral shrines existing in these places.

See the contents to Eghareuba, J.U. A Short History of Benin, Ibadan 1936.

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R.E. Bradbury, Benin Studies, O.U.P. 1973, p. 249-50.

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Member was one of the old trading kingdoms in the Niger Delta, now grafted into a Rivers State created from the old Eastern Region in 1967.

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ABSTRACT

The Benin Kingdom in Nigeria is one of the most ancient Kingdoms in Africa, dating back to the 9th Century AD. It reached its height in the 15th and 16th Centuries. However, it was humiliated in 1897 by the British Army of occupation, which saw to the massive looting of Benin antiquities as well as the burning of the extensive palace.

Benin City is now the capital of Edo State, one of such 36 territorial-administrative regions, which were progressively created by successive military administrations. Oftentimes these states were created along existing broad ethnic configurations.

Within the context of competition for the so-called "**National Cake**" of Nigeria, ethnic solidarity has become strategic for the expression of identity and elite rivalry in the competition for centrally-controlled resources (i.e. oil).

The installation of a Benin Monarch provides an arena for the consolidation of Benin ethnic identity. It entails rituals and rites of passage, involving important shrines, deities, and pilgrimage routes where the heroic deeds of monarchical ancestors are re-enacted and their powers incorporated into the "**ethnic ethos**".

This paper builds on the field material collected by the author in the course of the coronation of the present monarch in 1979 in order to elucidate the relationship between place-memory and meaning in the continuity of Benin Kingship, the transformation of tradition and the manufacture of ethnic identity

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