

BENIN KINGDOM AND THE CRISIS OF ADAPTATION IN THE 19TH CENTURY

Introduction

The last two decades of the 19th century marked for Britain and the Benin Kingdom a new and important phase in their relation. The heightened search for raw materials for British industries led to the ending of the trade in slaves and the introduction of the so called, 'legitimate trade'. The development ended the era of informal commercial contact and in its place was inaugurated, the new milieu of forced acquisition of spheres of political and commercial influence in Africa by various European nations, including Britain. For Africans, the new development posed a lot of new challenges which called for adjustments on their part. The impact of the new relation, particularly, that of Britain on Benin Kingdom, will be the focus of this article.

Internal Situation

Administratively, the Benin Kingdom was roughly coterminous with the present day Benin Division of Edo State of Nigeria.¹ By the 19th century, the kingdom had begun to face a crisis of adaptation² as a result of several internal and external factors. First, at the domestic level, this was a period in which Benin was not particularly blessed with energetic rulers comparable to the 16th century kings such as Ewuare and Great. The incessant succession disputes for the throne, coupled with the civil wars they engendered, greatly accentuated political and social instability in the kingdom. The reign of Oba Obanosha was inaugurated in 1804 by a civil war in which over one thousand people lost their lives. His successor, Oba Osemwede, fared no better, as he too had to engage his rival, Ogbobo, in a most protracted bloody and destructive civil war. In the course of the civil war, Eredia-Uwa, as he was known before he became Oba osemwede, had to flee to

Ewokhimi in Ishan, for safety. The auspicious intervention of Ogie, his cousin, tilted the scale in his favour and this enabled him to eventually secure the throne. Odinovba who ascended the Benin throne in 1848 as Oba Adolo, did not do so on a platter of gold either. Despite his accession to the Obaship, his implacable rival, Ogbewekon, still remained a big thorn in his flesh. From Igueben in Ishan where he sought refuge, he instigated two rebellions against Adolo in 1853 and 1854. Both of these were crushed. It was only in 1880, when Ogbewekon died, that he heaved a sigh of relief. Oba Ovanramwen, the last of the 19th century kings of Benin, despite the fact that his succession to the throne was not disputed, as were the previous reigns, still put to death some notable chiefs, he claimed opposed his selection as king.

Notwithstanding the debilitating impact and unrest brought about by these perennial succession disputes and civil wars, the Obas of this period, particularly osemwede, Adolo and Ovonramwen, still managed to make occasional attempts at asserting imperial control over Ekiti, Akure and Owo in northeast Yoruba, parts of the Ishan country and western Igbo areas. Nonetheless, the last decade of the 19th century witnessed a considerable diminution of Benin's authority over its imperial domain. To a large extent, the kingdom had shrunk virtually to its heartland.

Coastal Trade

In spite of its fluctuating political fortunes, the Benin Kingdom by the later 19th century was still regarded as relatively prosperous. In 1892, Major C.M. MacDonald, Commissioner and Consul-General for both Oil River and Niger Protectorates, noted in 1892, 'there is no doubt that the Benin territory is a very rich and most important one. Minerals, gum arabic, gum copal, palm oil, kernels *et cetera* exist in large quantities'.³ But, unlike gold rich Ashanti where a miniature gold rush occurred in the 19th century,⁴ Benin proved a big disappointment in terms of mineral wealth as the kingdom lacked deposits of exploitable precious metals. Nevertheless, in catering for the economic well-being of the complex palace

associations and the chiefly classes during this period; Gray and Birmingham pointed out that,

Benin had developed to a far greater extent the necessary means of accumulating surplus goods, the necessary markets, guilds, taxation, and transport to meet the demands of foreign export.⁵

Also, Ikime, Alan Ryder and others,⁶ have shown that Benin, as early as the 16th century, had developed a complex economy which provided goods for both trade and domestic consumption.

Those who benefitted most from the exploitation of Benin's resources included the Oba, the head of the kingdom who was regarded as a divine monarch. The conduct of public affairs was vested in the Oba and his influential titled town and palace chiefs. Iwebo section of the palace chiefs, led by the most senior chief, Uwangué, were responsible for looking after the Oba's regalia and wardrobe, including the superintendence of his finances and trade. On Benin economy, Obaro Ikime has noted that,

The economy of Benin was based on both agriculture and trade... Her trade was widespread. She traded with the Yoruba country, with the Itsekiri to the coast, with the Nupe to the north and with Europeans.⁷

However, Benin's hold on north-east Yorubaland was undermined in the last three decades of the 19th century. Unable to defend Ekiti and Ilesha against the military incursions of Ibadan during the Ekiti Parapo war, Benin eventually lost the entire territory following the British intervention and the eventual cease-fire of 1886 which secured Ekiti independence from Benin hegemony.

On the other hand, until the late 19th century, Benin trade with the Europeans was virtually a royal monopoly. Europeans were barred from the hinterland and could therefore not establish direct trading link with the kingdom. The farthest the Europeans got was Ughoton on the Benin River and it was the main port of Benin. At Ughoton, the Oba stationed his trading agents who conducted business with the Europeans and in addition collected custom duties on his behalf. Bradbury indicated that the Uwangué

and Eribo were responsible for the task of supervising trade with European merchants at the river port of Ughoton⁸. The items of trade sold to the Europeans included ivory, slaves, cloth, pepper and wax. Indeed, the Oba accumulated much of his wealth through the sale of his ivory which Landophe estimated to be over 3,000 when he visited Benin in 1778. According to him, the king was regarded as the 'principal vendor of ivory to Europeans.'⁹

Many of the tusks were obtained through the Oba's customary right to own one tusk of every elephant killed in the kingdom. The Oba also occasionally sponsored trusted private traders to trade on his behalf. It was in this way that Agho Ogbed'oyo acquired his wealth under Ovonramwen. According to Egharevba,

He (Agho) persuaded Oba Ovonramwen to give him money and men to begin trade, and he traded in palm oil, kernel, et cetera to the river ports especially Ughoton for exchange of goods such as rum in casks, demijohn, machetes, native cooking salt, fine cloths et cetera. A few years after, he made a great profit both for Ovonramwen and himself; and eventually acquired a mass of wealth.¹⁰

This prosperity did not last long.

Benin and legitimate trade

The latter development was due largely to external factors over which Benin had no control. The forward policy of the British government implied the harmonious march of trade and flag in fostering British economic interest. As a result of the scramble for Africa in the 1880s, Britain began foisting treaties on the people of the Niger Delta. In 1885, the Niger Coast Protectorate was declared, but it was not until 1891, however, that Britain decided to assert its control over the areas, with the appointment of Claude Macdonald as the Commissioner and Consul-General. A number of vice-consul and other officials were appointed at the same time Macdonald was. One such vice-consul, Gallwey, was given jurisdiction over the Benin Rivers in the Western Niger Delta. Benin fell incidentally within the district under Gallwey's authority.

As was noted earlier, up until that time the Oba of Benin had continued to run the socio-political and economic affairs of their

kingdom unhindered. In matters of trade, the Oba exercised royal monopoly over certain items of merchandise and also determined on what terms non-Benin traders were to participate in such trade within his domain. Things were to change, however, for the worse for Benin with the inception of the era of 'legitimate trade' and its incorporation as part of the Niger Coast Protectorate. European trade, which had earlier flourished in Benin up to the 18th century, had greatly declined by the first decades of the 19th century.

Ughoton, Benin's foremost port, had ceased to be of any commercial relevance, especially with its replacement by such Itsekiri coastal ports as Jakpa and Ebrohimi, founded by Chief Olomu in 1865. Backed by his powerful fleet of war canoes, Chief Olomu was able to dominate other rival Itsekiri houses and to control virtually all the trade in palm produce on the Benin River, enforcing his monopoly at its source in the hinterland. This situation led to a deterioration in Benin-Itsekiri relations and even led to war in which Benin supported Uwangue against the Olu of Itsekiri. Since Oba Osemwede lacked the resources for a water-borne attack against the Olu, the most he could do was to place a curse on him, an indication of how low militarily, Benin had sunk. Through his strong arm tactics, Olomu was able to establish himself firmly on the Benin River, a fact which the British recognized when they appointed his son, Nana, Governor of the River in 1879. In 1884, the Itsekiri signed a protectorate treaty with the British which implied their loss of sovereignty. Thus, the Itsekiri who lived along the coast, exploited their strategic advantage by playing the role of middlemen between the Bini and the European traders on the coast.

On his part, the Oba imposed some dues on the Itsekiri, who had to pay a certain amount in goods before they were allowed to trade. Failure by the Itsekiri to meet their tax obligations meant the stoppage of trade by the Oba until the necessary conditions were met. In taking such action, the Oba merely wanted to maximize his opportunities in the European trade. The Itsekiri, who also levied similar dues on the European traders in their domain, later turned round to accuse the Oba of restricting trade; a case of the kettle calling the pot black.

All through the 1880s the European traders tried to impress upon the Oba the need to abrogate the dues he imposed on non-Bini traders, and the practice of stopping trade to the coast whenever the traders refused to pay the necessary charges. Despite appeals by various Europeans, including the British vice consuls as well as other officials of the Royal Niger Company, the Oba still refused to change the system. In an attempt to break the impasse and gain access to the riches of the hinterland, Gallwey, the Vice-Consul of the Benin Rivers, became more determined to sign a 'protection' treaty with the Oba of Benin.¹¹ After a prolonged delay, Oba Ovonramwen reluctantly granted him audience in March 1892 and the anticipated treaty was signed after much arm-twisting and blackmail, between Gallwey and the Oba's chiefs. The Oba was, in any case, suspicious of the Vice-Consul's intention and so personally refused to sign the treaty. In whichever way one may look at it, the signing of the treaty was tantamount to accepting British rule. But whether the Oba and his chiefs saw it in that light is a different matter. For the Vice-Consul, the treaty provided a perfect excuse for interfering in the internal affairs of Benin. For instance, it now became mandatory for the Oba of Benin to accept the advice of the Consul in matters of internal and external policy. The trade of Benin was to be thrown open to all and sundry while Christianity was established by force.

Consequently, between 1892 and 1896 the enemies of Benin, including European officials, traders and their Itsekiri middlemen, searched for excuses to enable them bring the Oba to heel. When the threat of force failed initially to achieve the desired goal, frustrated and exasperated European sojourners to the kingdom, began to see nothing good in Benin and its rulers. The British defeat of Chief Nana Olomu in 1894, conquest of Brass in 1895 and the accusation in 1896 that the Oba had closed all the markets in his territory, heightened the isolation, desperation and the sense of foreboding which hung ominously over Benin.

Benin's downfall after its incorporation as part of the Niger Coast Protectorate was just a matter of time. This came rather swiftly. In late 1896, the Acting Consul General, James R.I. Phillips,

embarked upon a visit to the Oba of Benin ostensibly to persuade him to lift the ban that was placed on trade. Unfortunately, Phillips' ill-fated visit came at an extremely awkward period when the Oba was observing annual festivals and would therefore not entertain visitors to his kingdom. But, no amount of entreaty would detract Phillips from his stated objective. His fool-hardiness was to cost him, his party of six Europeans and over two hundred African carriers their lives at the hands of Benin soldiers who ambushed them on 3rd January, 1897. The incident presented the *casus belli* for the punitive expedition which sacked Benin on 17 February, 1897. With this unique event, the chequered history of the Benin monarchy and the ancient kingdom came to an inglorious end. Oba Ovonramwen the last of the 19th century Benin kings was sent on indefinite exile to Calabar and never came back. Thus economic interest and the desire to 'put the Oba in his place', prompted the British conquest of Benin.

Notes

1. R.E. Bradbury, *Benin Studies*, London: Oxford University Press, 1973, p.48.
2. A.G. Hopkins, *Economic History Review*, No. 12, 1968, pp. 580-606.
3. P.A. Igbafe, "The Fall of Benin: A Reassessment", *Journal of African History*, Vol. XI, No. 3, 1970, p.388.
4. Ivor, Wilks, *Asante in the 19th Century*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1975; pp. 637-665.
5. Richard Gray and D. Birmingham, "Some Economic Consequences of Trade in Central and Eastern Africa in the Precolonial Periods" in R. Gray, *et. al.* (eds.), *Pre-Colonial African Trade*. London: Oxford University Press, 1970, p.21.
6. Obaro, Ikime, *The Fall of Nigeria: The British Conquest*, Ibadan: Heinemann Education Books, 1977.
J.U. Egharaevba, *A Short History of Benin*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1966.
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7. Ikime, *Op. cit.*, p.145.
8. Bradbury, *Op. cit.*, p.65.
9. Ryder, *Op. cit.* p.206.
10. J.U. Egharaevba, *12 Works Kraus Reprint Nendeln*, 1973, pp. 40-41.
P.A. Igbafe, *Obaseki of Benin*, Ibadan: Heinemann Books, 1972.
11. Ikime, *Op. cit.*, p.155.