

## Kingdom of Benin

Benin was an influential city-state in northwest Africa generally from the 15th to 17th century. It was founded by the Edo or Bini people in the 13th century, and by the early 14th century a royal court was in place. It was always ruled by a powerful king who was usually a former war leader. The kings, however, later became a more religious figure. The kingdom has been thought to extend throughout what is presently southern Nigeria. One of its most successful kings was **Ozoula**. During his reign, from about 1480 to 1504, Benin established many commercial and diplomatic relations with Portugal. The kingdom participated in a lot of trade with Europe. Some of the goods they traded included palm oil, ivory, pepper, and textiles. Another industry Benin took place in was the slave trade. Mostly POW's (prisoners of war) and women were traded, but in the early years, men of the tribe were also given away.

Gradually, the power of the kingdom decreased as the 18th and 19th centuries passed. Eventually, in 1897, the area was annexed to British Nigeria. While tribesmen still led the area, the real control was in the hands of the Europeans.

One of the richest arts that originated in Africa are some of the hand cast bronzes that came out of the kingdom of Benin. These became known as the Benin Bronzes. The casting of brass was strictly a royal art and anyone found casting brass without royal permission was faced with execution. Whenever a king or a major figure died, a beautiful commemorative head was cast out of bronze in his honor. These heads were displayed at shrines found all throughout the royal palace. Also found in the royal palace were eight wall-sized bronze plaques. Each plaque depicted kings, chiefs, and great warriors in battle. They each depict a different event in Benin's history. Many things including utensils and weapons have also been found, each hand cast with brass. As you can see, the Beninian people were very gifted in this fine art and it is one of the richest parts of their culture.

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Hand-Held Clapper with Bird of Prophecy (ahianmwon-oro), 19th century Cast copper alloy

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Gordon Hanes, 72.19.43

A Benin clapper is played by striking the bird on its beak with a metal rod. Typically, the bird has a long curved beak in which it grasps a round pellet, perhaps of medicine or magical substances. According to oral tradition, such clappers were first made during the reign of an oba (king) named Esigie in the early 16th century to commemorate his defeat of a powerful enemy. As the king was setting out with his warriors, they encountered the "bird of prophecy," whose cry portends disaster. Undeterred, the king ordered the bird to be killed and his army went on to a great victory. Thereafter, Esigie commissioned his royal metalcasters to create clappers surmounted by the "bird of prophecy." He decreed that his chiefs should sound them at court ceremonies to celebrate the oba's divine nature, which enables him to protect his people.

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Benin, Kingdom of Free Concise Encyclopedia Article. This article in Deluxe has twice as many words. Stay current with an Encarta Online Deluxe subscription -- [Click here for details](#) Benin, Kingdom of, West African state that flourished from the 1400s to the 1600s. Its capital was Benin City, in present-day Nigeria. Founded by the Edo or Bini people in the 1100s, it was ruled by obas (kings) who were originally war leaders, but later assumed a religious character. The kingdom probably controlled most of what is now southern Nigeria in its heyday. From the 1500s through the 1700s, Benin traded with European merchants. Its power declined in the 1700s and 1800s. It was annexed to British Nigeria in 1897.

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## Benin Art

We now turn to hierarchical (i.e. kingship) societies, the first being that of Benin in Nigeria. The Benin Kingdom, begun as early as the 15th Century, is ruled by a divine King called an Oba. Typical of the arts of most hierarchical societies, the art of Benin serves to preserve both the Oba and the kingdom he rules. The art also functions as mnemonic devices in recounting the history of the kingdom and those who ruled it.

The following three heads serve as portraits of deceased kings. They were originally placed on shrines along with other regalia associated with that leader. What are the common denominators of these three heads that make them characteristically Benin? What explains the differences in their styles? Can you date them by their styles and accoutrements? In general, review the dates for the four periods of Benin art and history.

The Queenmother (Iya Oba) has an important place in the Benin kingdom. What is her role? How do the following two works function in her capacity? While you are examining them, make note of the forehead markings, the projection from the bronze head, and the figures surrounding the ivory hip mask. What meaning can be attached to these varying motifs?

Not all hip masks are meant to commemorate Queen mothers. Examine this bronze hip mask discussed in Roy's catalog of the Iowa Stanley Collection. How does it compare stylistically with the ivory mask? What is its specific function?

Plaques, the majority of which date to the middle period (16th-17th Centuries), are important conveyors of Benin history. Specifically, they record ceremonies involving the Oba and his royal retinue. Review the themes you see represented in these two plaques (the first one shown in detail). What is the meaning of the mud fish in the second plaque as well as the stool and staff illustrated below it?

Animal representation has an important place in Benin art. In Paula Ben-Amos' article "Humans and Animals in Benin Art", we learn that the Benin people conceptualize their animals into three basic categories, each associated with different realms of their overall cosmology. Review those three categories. How would you categorize the animals represented in these three art forms?

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Benin Palace Ancestral Altar, dedicated to Oba Ovonramwen, Benin City, Nigeria photograph by Eliot Elisofon, 1970  
Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives

Once a powerful city-state, Benin exists today as a modern African city in what is now south-central Nigeria. The present-day oba of Benin traces the founding of his dynasty to A.D. 1300. In the late 1400s, a flourishing and wealthy royal court was in place, with a palace harboring a vast compound where metal smiths, carvers and others created objects for the king and his court. The casting of brass was an art controlled by the king himself; anyone found casting brass without royal permission faced execution.

The Edo--the people of Benin--associated brass, which resists corrosion, with the permanence and continuity of kingship. Fundamental to Edo belief, as well, was the veneration of ancestors, whose spirits were thought to protect the living. Cast commemorative heads of deceased kings were displayed on altars at numerous shrines in the royal palace.

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Benin Pronunciation: [benEn´] city (1987 est. pop. 183,200), S Nigeria, a port on the Benin River. Palm nuts and timber are produced nearby and processed in Benin. The center of Nigeria's rubber industry, palm oil and kernels are important exports from the city. Furniture and

carpets are also made. Benin served as the capital of a kingdom that was probably founded in the 13th cent. and flourished from the 14th through the 17th cent. The kingdom was ruled by the oba and a sophisticated bureaucracy. From the late 15th cent. Benin traded slaves as well as ivory, pepper, and cloth to Europeans. In the early 16th cent. the oba sent an ambassador to Lisbon, and the king of Portugal sent missionaries to Benin. The kingdom of Benin declined after 1700, but revived in the 19th cent. with the development of the trade in palm products with Europeans. Britain conquered and burned the city in 1898, destroying much of the country's treasured art. The iron work, carved ivory, and bronze portrait busts made (perhaps as early as the 13th cent.) in Benin rank with the finest art of Africa.cireperdue casting is still practiced there. Examples of Benin art are displayed in museums in the city.

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Benin, Bight of

northern arm of the Gulf of Guinea, c.550 mi (885 km) wide, W Africa, between Cape Three Points, S Ghana, and the Niger River delta, SW Nigeria. The bight was an important area for slave trading between the 16th and 19th cent. After the 19th cent. palm oil trading became of primary importance. In the late 1950s oil was discovered in the Niger River delta.

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The Oba and the Governor in Benin by Reuben Abati  
member, editorial board - The Guardian Newspapers (Lagos, Nigeria)

The history of the Benin kingdom has been marked by a continuous attempt by the monarchy to forge an alliance,

and strike a balance between the competing interests of the aristocracy and the town-commoners/non-hereditary chiefs creating a pull between monarchy and Republicanism. It is an aspiration that has not always worked. The Republican, irreverent instinct of the commoners often exceeds its imagined limits, and the palace aristocracy relying on tradition, insists invariably on its supremacy. What has always existed therefore is a delicate balance of power between the Oba and the chiefs. Now, and then, the Binis re-enact this drama. It ends, momentarily without a definite resolution until some day, another act is re-opened in the struggle between the palace and the town. In an age of democracy and human rights, and modern governments, the conflict between the throne, and the town is inevitable. Increasingly, men everywhere no longer see any reason why the claim to the blueness of one's blood, should become an excuse for living a subsidised existence at the expense of others. Democracy preaches equality of all persons. Aristocracy is by nature discriminatory: it erects structure of relations between the ruler and those who are called subjects. Two years to the 21st century, not too many persons still want to be referred to as subjects. Even in England, the aristocrats are being told to become citizens. Prince Edward for example, who would soon become the Duke of Cambridge, is learning to earn an independent living simply as Edward Windsor. This would seem to me to be the context for understanding the on-going battle in Benin City, and Edo State, in the old Mid-West, as it were between on one hand the Oba of Benin, Solomon Erediauwa II, and the Edo State military administrator, Navy Captain Anthony Onyearugbulem and between his Royal Highness and the Igbinedions (Lucky and his father, the Esama of Benin) on the other hand. The battle-ground for these gladiators is the on-going political transition programme, specifically the last gubernatorial election in which Lucky Igbinedion of the People's Democratic Party, had

sought the ticket to the Governorship position, against Lucky Imasuen of the All People's Party (APP). His Excellency Erediauwa II is said to have declared on December 30, 1998, that the people of Benin should vote for Lucky Imasuen of the APP. Which is to say that Imasuen was/is the Oba's candidate. The Edo State Military Administrator who had earlier warned traditional Rulers in Edo State, to remain non-partisan in the present political competition promptly issued the Oba of Benin a query, asking him to retract his statement, within 24 hours. The Oba ignored the Administrator's letter, and even went ahead to restate his political stand, for the avoidance of doubt. The Administrator, again issued another ultimatum, and a threat: if by 12 mid-night on January 7, the Oba of Benin had not complied with his earlier directive, he would cease to be Chairman of the Edo State Council of Traditional Rulers, and member of the State Security Council. To strengthen his directive, Navy Captain Onyearugbulem allegedly further threatened that he would deal with any Oba who flouts his directives. He disclosed that the state government is in possession of a video tape which implicates the Oba of Benin, and that a Panel of Enquiry may soon be empowered to censure the Oba. The Gubernatorial Election took place. Lucky Igbiniedion won. Lucky Imasuen lost. One Lucky was lucky, the other Lucky was unlucky. But the Binis since then have risen in support of their Oba. They are accusing the State Administrator of disrespecting the Obaship Institution. Princess Theresa Ogiogwa, the eldest daughter of the Oba of Benin, has resigned her appointment as State Counsel in the Edo State Ministry of Justice, to protest what she considers an insult to her father. The Edo State Youth organisation has issued a two-page communiqué. The Benin Forum, led by the Osaguobadiaye of Benin, has asked the State Military Administrator to withdraw his letter to the Oba, and apologise to the Bini people. Meanwhile, Benin Chiefs wanted to march to the palace to express solidarity with the Oba. They were stopped by the police. Other Traditional rulers in Edo State have declared that no one among them will occupy the position of chairman of the Traditional Council of Chiefs, as a replacement for Erediauwa II. The Benin Kingdom is used to this kind of power tussle. But in contemporary times, there are other levels of the conflict to be considered. The first point to be made is that the crisis between the Oba, and the Military Administrator, demonstrates the dilemma of the Benin monarchy under a modern government. Prior to 1897 when the British sacked the old Benin Kingdom in a retaliatory expedition, the Oba of Benin was the most supreme authority in the area known as Benin. The imposition of modern governance has eroded the monarch's authority. Post-colonial authorities have proved to be worse than the British. Traditional rulers, in order of protocol, are rated below state administrators. They have become civil servants to be issued queries and directives. What Onyearugbulem, has done, even if stupidly, is to re-affirm the supremacy of the new modern elite, and remind not just the Benin throne, but all other traditional institutions, of their increasing irrelevance. The other year, the Ooni of Ife, and the Emir of Kano were restricted to their domains by the Buhari government for travelling out of the country without official permission. Much later, the Abacha government deposed the Sultan of Sokoto, and put another man in his place. The late Olowo of Owo,

Sir Olateru Olagbegi was also once similarly deposed by the government of the Western Region. The country did not fall apart as a result. What Onyearugbulem has done then, is simply to insist on the rules of modern governance as opposed to the continued intimations of invincibility that traditional rulers love to enjoy. It would appear therefore that the institution of monarchy is an idea whose time is beginning to pass. The likes of Onyearugbulem confront the monarchy, convinced that they could do so, and get away with it. Part of the crisis is the increasing Republicanism of the people. It is instructive that the people of Benin are determined to protect their Oba. There is something about the mystique of the traditional institution. People love the ceremony that surrounds kings. They love to be reminded of the age of strong kings, and ancestors. But they no longer desire much beyond the ceremony. They are protesting and issuing statements of support for the Oba, yet the same people followed their instincts at the polls. They rejected the Oba's anointed candidate, and voted for Lucky Igbinedion.

Before 1897, this would not have happened. The supremacy of the authority of the Benin Oba is encapsulated in the Bini expression. Enobakhare Onode (the instructions of the Oba cannot be overruled). These days, Obas are routinely disobeyed. How many Binis still name their children Enobakhare? In the past, to be identified as an Oghionba (the enemy of the Omo'Noba) meant instant death. These days Oghionbas are heroes. They even win elections. We ought to be reminded of the simple fact that has emerged in this case. The people of Benin chose to vote for Lucky Igbinedion. In a sense, the Republicanism of the people makes the arrogance of military administrators possible. Except that whereas the people are willing to assert their political choice, still they do not want the Obaship institution to be disgraced. The present Oba of Benin is however, not a stranger to circumstances such as this. In 1992, in fact, in January 1992, exactly seven years ago, he was made to appear before an Election Petition Tribunal in Benin City where he was accused of supporting and influencing the election of Chief John Oyegun of the then Social Democratic Party as Edo State Governor. The petitioner at that time, is the same Lucky Igbinedion, who has now been elected Governor in 1999. In July 1992, the Benin palace banned Chief Gabriel Igbinedion, Esama of Benin, and father of Lucky Igbinedion, from the Palace. It is most likely that the present conflict would further throw up victims and losers. Of all the interested parties, the point to remember is that the Oba of Benin is one Governor who is not likely to go on leave or leave Benin City. Onyearugbulem would one day leave Benin City. Igbinedion would serve his term as Governor but the Obaship institution, with its deep memories, would continue to remain the principal custodian of the customs and traditions of the Benin people. As things stand then, the Oba may not recant, and apologise to Onyearugbulem. The Military Administrator is also likely to insist that his authority is supreme. The Igbinedions are standing by, enjoying the show-down. The Bini people are not amused. This has serious implications. After Onyearugbulem, the incoming Igbinedion government may be tempted to behave like a modern government and hence, seek to humiliate the Oba of Benin. I sincerely hope so. Edo State promises to be an interesting theatre in the Fourth

Republic, with the Palace and the Government carrying strong emotional baggages from the past. To ensure peace in Benin, government must wade into the crisis. Onyearugbulem, who seems to love trouble as the fish enjoys water, should be instructed by Abuja to make peace with the Oba. Benin chiefs, following the example of Obaseki and other Iyases in the past have always criticised and challenged their Oba but the Bini monarchy continues to survive as a reminder of the trials and glory of the Benin Kingdom. Lucky Igbiniedion and his father should visit the palace, soon, and reassure Erediauwa II of their good faith. If we would not abolish the traditional institution, we might as well learn to live with it and humour it. Monarchs still have a place in people's minds. That is one paradox we cannot wish away. Unfortunately. January 17, 1999 back to News Analysis by Reuben Abati © 1996 - 1999 Reuben Abati and The Guardian Newspapers (Lagos, Nigeria) OraclePANA. 8 March, 1996LAGOS, Nigeria (PANA)

- The monarch of Benin in midwestern Nigeria, Omo 'Oba Erediauwa, says the country should take its political crisis to the "oracle" for solution. Speaking Tuesday at his palace with the chairman of Nigeria's National Reconciliation Committee, Alex Akinyele, the traditional ruler said the oracle should be consulted particularly to resolve the Ogoni crisis in southeastern Nigeria. Ogoniland is home to author Ken Saro-Wiwa, who was executed along with eight others on November 1995 for the 1994 murder of four of their pro-government kinsmen. The executions led to international condemnation and sanctions against Nigeria. Ogoniland is one of the more than 250 ethnic minority groups in Nigeria, a secular state by constitution. Oba Erediauwa, a retired top civil servant, did not specify which of the hundreds of divinities should be consulted, but he said only such a move would end the festering crisis thrown up by the Ogoni crisis. Akinyele, former information minister and sports administrator, said his committee would recommend to government that Nigerian communities be reconciled for national development. He said his committee had been holding talks with family members of detained millionaire-politician Moshood Abiola, the undeclared winner of the June 1993 presidential election annulled by the previous military regime. Abiola is awaiting trial for treasonable felony after proclaiming himself president of Nigeria in June 1994. Akinyele said his committee would seek an audience with Abiola to resolve that crisis, based on "compromise, concession" and in the national interest. The Fishlegged Figure as Oba Ohen Fishlegged figures of various kinds are hallowed images in neighboring Yoruba kingdoms as well as in Benin, and like other ancient symbols, they encode many levels of interpretation. On the simplest level, any fishlegged figure in Benin portrays Oba Ohen, the paralyzed father of Oba Ewuare. The strangely shaped legs suggest power far beyond human capabilities and when Ohen overstepped the limits placed upon his rule by the Edo, he was stoned to death with pieces of orhue, pure white kaolin used for the purification of pollution. On this level, the fishlegged figure is a perpetual reminder of the people's right to resist any Oba who abuses his authority over them. Nevertheless, the fishlegged figure is paradoxically an emblem of honor. On

a deeper level, some Edo authorities claim that before Ohen was born into the human world, he was Olokun himself. His paralysis was a sign of his otherworldly, sea-bound origin. His strange legs and feet were like oriri mudfish, charged with forces that could destroy the fertility of the land if allowed to touch wet soil. In Edo belief, because every Oba is a descendent of Ohen, each has inherited similar powers that are manifest in his legs. Symbolically, the Oba suffers Ohen's paralysis and is therefore supported by two attendants when he walks. Yet he is believed to need neither human sustenance nor rest, and every Oba's supernatural capabilities are suggested in the motif of the fishlegged figure. EDV: MB, "Informatik f. Blinde", Uni Linz Edo Peoples, Benin Kingdom Nigeria Head of an Oba (uhumwelao), late 18th century brass and iron, 16 1/2 x 11 1/2 x 12 in. (42 x 29.2 x 30.48 cm.) Anonymous Gift. 53.12 The brass casting tradition in Nigeria can be traced to the Igbo-Ukwu bronzes from the 9th century A.D. Later Benin obtained its first brass caster in the first quarter of the 14th century from the Kingdom of Ife. It was during the 16th through 18th centuries that Benin brass casting reached its highest level. The great kingdom flourished until the end of the 19th century when the British led a devastatingly thorough punitive expedition into Benin City in 1897. These royal funerary portraits, cast in brass by the cire perdue (lost wax) process, were placed on altars to commemorate the deceased king in the royal palace at Benin City. More than one head was placed on the altars or shrines, built by the new Oba in memory of his predecessor. Originally this head was surmounted with a curved ivory elephant tusk which fit into the circular hole on the top with the tip of the tusk leaning against the wall of the royal shrine. The tusks were elaborately carved in relief depicting allegorical scenes, hieratic groupings of royal personages and, in some instances, Portuguese soldiers.

William A. Fagaly To Next Page To Previous Page For comments or suggestions contact [webmaster@noma.org](mailto:webmaster@noma.org) © copyright New Orleans Museum of Art Ozolua the Conqueror At the center of Row Six on Adolo's tusk is an image of Ewuare's son Ozolua the Conqueror (Ozolua n'Ibaromi) (figure 3). [Anmerkung] Although the linkage between oral history and archival documents is

tenuous, he seems to have been enthroned about 1481. During this, ambassadors from Benin travelled to Lisbon to meet the king of Portugal, and a trading center was built at Benin's port on the seacoast.[Anmerkung] Ozolua also seems to be the Oba who invited traders and missionaries to live and work in the capital, Benin City, and took Portuguese advisors with him on some of his extensive military campaigns.[Anmerkung] Eventually he allowed the Portuguese to conduct a school in his palace. Ozolua's son and some of the other Edo nobility became competent scholars, spoke excellent Portuguese, and were baptized as Christians.[Anmerkung] Ozolua's interest was not in scholarship or religion, but in persuading the Portuguese to let him buy arms to expand the borders of the Benin Kingdom. In Benin folklore, he is remembered for his insatiable appetite for conquest. In this well-recognized image, Oba Ozolua is easily identified by his "iron coat", the full-length garment of iron mesh that he always wore. He is pictured with coral beads over this armor. Two rectangular amulets hang from under the strings of beads on his chest, and long, loose panels that resemble mudfish are attached at the sides.[Anmerkung] Ozolua also appears in Row five of the Vienna Tusk Inv. No. 9931. On both ivories Ozolua is flanked by helmeted warriors with shields and spears. In one hand he holds up the eben ceremonial sword that is essential in court protocol, and on the Munich tusk the large faceted Ewuare bead (ivie Ewuare) to his right is a reminder of Benin's preeminence and the numinous attributes of Olokun that Ozolua's father brought to the kingship. Nevertheless, this is a cautionary motif. To the right of Ozolua stands his most trusted general and friend, Laisolobi (figure 3). The two are pictured sharing the same spear, because Oba Ozolua "would embark on no enterprise without Laisolobi".[Anmerkung] This faithful companion stood by him through every campaign. But Ozolua's thirst for battle knew no bounds, and long after he was advised that his army and his people were thoroughly tired of war, he always found one more town that he wanted to subdue. Ozolua's soldiers began to grumble, and eventually even Laisolobi turned against him. Ozolua seemed invincible because of the iron mesh that he always wore, yet Laisolobi knew when this warrior king removed this armor. Laisolobi told the enemy how to find Ozolua defenceless, and the conqueror was killed.[Anmerkung] EDV: MB, "Informatik f. Blinde", Uni Linz Motif Interpretation Although full explication of motifs on palace ivories is privileged information, the stories on which most images are based are common knowledge among the Edo people of Benin, and are retold in many different settings. Therefore officials in the traditional palace hierarchies, religious specialists, diviners, and storytellers are able to identify some of the figures on altar tusks that were carved in the past, even when the particular image is no longer used by the Igbesanmwan. Identification is more cautious when the significance of a motif has obviously changed over time.[Anmerkung] There are also motifs for which ambiguity is intentional, because the explanation can be made on many levels, depending upon the viewer's insight and sophistication. It is often necessary to use divination verses, proverbs, appellations of praise, and other figures and symbols in the contextual cluster of motifs, along with informed speculation to suggest the layers of significance embedded in the image. Moreover, in a few cases, too firm an identification is discouraged. In Edo belief, an Oba rules as a

divine king with supernatural powers that are enhanced after his death. When his ancestral shrine has been dedicated by his son and heir, each tusk functions as a contact point between *agbon*, the mortal world, and *irinmwon*, the world of deities, ancestors, and spirits. The tusk is supported by a heavy bronze pedestal cast by the *guneromwon* bronze casters' guild in the form of a crowned royal head. There it symbolically suggests the *oro*, a tall protrusion that appears on the Oba's crown, as well as on the helmets of certain other nobles whose numinous attributes are inherited from the distant past. The ancestral altar is the focal point of *Ugie Erha Oba*, a yearly national ceremony honoring the deified spirit of the deceased king. Because each Oba is also identified with a much earlier ruler, this king may be associated with events that occurred long before his reign. [Anmerkung] It has been established with some certainty that the altar tusk in the Munich collection (Inv. 99.4) was among approximately sixteen similar ivories commissioned by Oba Adolo, who ruled from approximately 1850 to 1888 and encouraged a renaissance of fine ivory carving. [Anmerkung] They are dedicated to Adolo's father, Oba Osemwende, whose reign began about 1816 with his victory in a violent civil war, and the major motifs on this matched set of ivories portray warrior kings who ruled in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries. Altar tusks in Benin are carved and interpreted starting at the bottom row of figures (Row One) and moving upwards, with the key motifs placed along the center of the convex curve. In the case of the Munich ivory, the most significant images on the bottom portion of the tusk are in Row Two. In each hand a crowned male figure lifts up a coiled fishlike creature, and a small leopard appears just above his head (figure 2). Although the artists of the *Igbesanmwan* no longer carve this figure, the iconography of the motif complex indicates that it represents Ewuare Ogidigban or Oba Ewuare the Great (literally, "Ewuare the Superman"). [Anmerkung] EDV: MB, "Informatik f. Blinde", Uni Linz Oba Ewuare the Great A compilation of Edo king lists [Anmerkung] suggests that Ewuare's reign was in the late fifteenth century. He was the son of Oba Ohen, a figure of great conceptual significance in Edo history, mythology, and statecraft. [Anmerkung] At some point in his reign, Ohen was stricken by the High God Osanobua with a peculiar paralysis of his legs which made it difficult for him to walk. However, this affliction was also a sign that he and his heirs had supernatural capabilities and a special affinity with Olokun, the god of wealth, fertility, rivers, and seas. When the paralysis and its power caused Oba Ohen to abuse his authority as the ruler of Benin, he was executed by the Edo people. Ohen's son Ewuare was rejected as the crown prince, and had to flee into the deep forest. One night, when Ewuare was sleeping under a tall tree, he was awakened by drops of liquid falling on his face. When morning came, he was shocked to discover that a leopard was resting in the tree above him, and blood had dripped from the prey that it had eaten during the night. When he hastily arose to confront the leopard, he realized that he had also been sleeping upon the coiled body of a huge puff adder or viper, hidden under leaves at the foot of the tree. [Anmerkung] On the tusk, the size and dangerous nature of this viper are conveyed in the image of a small man struggling with a serpent (figure 2), and the leopard is pictured directly over Ewuare's head. Believing that supernatural forces were manifesting themselves, Ewuare interpreted each animal

as a glimpse of his destiny. The regal nature of the leopard, *ekpen*, symbolizes kingship among the Edo, and when Ewuare eventually defeated his enemies and became the Oba, the leopard was particularly associated with his reign. [Anmerkung] *Arhunmwoto*, the puff adder or viper, signifies good fortune because it does not need to seek out its food. It lies quietly, until an unsuspecting animal comes within its striking range. [Anmerkung] The viper's ability to attract riches stayed with Ewuare, and this serpent is associated with the tribute brought to his palace, as well as with Ewuare's ability to strike quickly at enemies of the state. Ewuare became the first of five warrior kings who presided over an era of unprecedented vigor and sophistication, and he may have been the Oba who was ruling when the Portuguese first arrived off the coast near Benin in 1472. [Anmerkung] EDV: MB, "Informatik f. Blinde", Uni Linz Olokun and Symbols of Kingship One tradition that suggests their arrival states that Ewuare made a journey to the sea, returning with beads of red coral to lighten the weight of the agate beads in his royal regalia. In this story the source of the coral was the undersea realm of Olokun, lord of the rivers and great waters of the world. Ewuare dived deep under the water to reach Olokun's luxurious palace. He saw that Olokun wore elaborate clothing intricately fashioned from networks of red coral, and Ewuare seized a beaded helmet and netted coral garments like those of the sea lord. The most precious object that he obtained from Olokun was the priceless red agate Bead of Kingship (*ivie okpaigbaurhu*), the bead that enabled him to surpass all other kings. [Anmerkung] Carrying these to Benin, he modeled his palace upon that of Olokun, dressed himself in the coral regalia, and ruled the land with a new mystery and magnificence. [Anmerkung] EDV: MB, "Informatik f. Blinde", Uni Linz Liminality and Paradox In figure 2, Ewuare's beaded crown is studded with large and costly pieces of red coral that simulate pepper fruit, a refreshing delicacy that tastes both sweet and hot, qualities suggesting the pleasures and vigor of life. On his chest, where triple strands cross, he wears the large faceted Bead of Kingship, also called the Ewuare Bead (*ivie Ewuare*), that often identifies the Oba in Benin art. In each hand he holds a coiled mudfish. In Edo perception, Olokun and the Oba are served by amphibious creatures like crocodiles, frogs, pythons, and mudfish, who freely pass between the water and the land and are able to live in both realms. Each of these creatures exists in two varieties, which are considered by the Edo to have opposite natures but are represented in ivory carving by an identical motif. For example, one type of mudfish, *ewi*, is delicious to eat and symbolizes feasting and prosperity. Another type, *oriri*, which is carved exactly like the first, is capable of delivering a dangerous electrical shock. [Anmerkung] As an ancient, non-literate culture, the Edo have made use of coded images for centuries in conveying their intellectual heritage through careful tutoring. Since paradox is appreciated as a vehicle for multilayered discussion of cultural values, much of Benin art embraces contradictory concepts. The mudfish in Ewuare's hands celebrate not only the luxuries that he brought to Benin through his journey to the sea, but also the fearsome capabilities of every Oba, that stem from Oba's paralysis and Ewuare's consequent relationship with Olokun. Images of mudfish appear on almost every Benin tusk, with similar paradoxical significance. [Anmerkung] To the right of Ewuare on Oba Adolo's altar tusk, just above

the small man with the serpent, is the frontal image of a seated monkey (figure 2). The creature's arms are oddly thrust under its knees and then raised so that the hands cover its eyes. All of the ramifications of this ancient motif cannot be discussed here, since it can be found on objects associated with kingship and the Orunmila system of divination, not only in Benin, but also in other art of the lower Niger, as well as in the Yoruba religious center of Ile Ife. [Anmerkung] However, on a basic level among the Edo the monkey is identified with Ewuare, through his long association with the deep forest and his purported ability to elude his enemies by disappearing into the treetops. When his pursuers cut down the Okha tree in which he was hiding, he turned himself into a *tugien*, a small monkey, and escaped. [Anmerkung] Ewuare is honored by the Amufi rite, in which skilled acrobats fling themselves into space from great heights, attached to a tall tree at the end of slender cords, descending and ascending in graceful spirals before disappearing into the upper leaves. Although Amufi has multilayered significance and origins, [Anmerkung] this ceremonial spectacle has been linked to Ewuare's ability to fly through the upper branches of trees, [Anmerkung] and he is praised as, "the small monkey who threw himself like a stone at a target" (*Atugien eme no y' egbe ere fi' ugbe*). [Anmerkung] *Atugien* is also clever, ambitious, and "left-handed" (a term describing a person skilled in occult magic). Oba Ewuare, who is strongly identified with the secrets of the deep forest, is praised for all of these attributes. [Anmerkung] EDV: MB, "Informatik f. Blinde", Uni Linz

Esigie and the Portuguese There are many stories that concern Ozolua's brilliant and literate son, Oba Esigie, and there are often references to him on Benin ivories. Although the carvers of Adolo's altar tusks did not use Esigie as a key motif, two tusks from Vienna (Inv. No. 9931 and Inv. No. 64.659) bear a number of images related to this popular ruler. These tusks are part of a set of eleven large ivories which were apparently carved between 1819 and 1850. The carvers have made use of images of Esigie that were invented for a slightly earlier royal altar set, along with additional motifs that refer to the lineage of the Ezomo, a hereditary war captain, rather than to the Oba. [Anmerkung] Esigie's motifs bear a direct relationship to the oral traditions, and also to documentary history. It is claimed in Benin that the Portuguese built three churches in Benin City as well as the school in the palace, and that some of Esigie's fellow scholars eventually became priests with the title of Ohonsa. According to folklore, Esigie and the other baptized Edo nobles often wore Portuguese clothing and followed European customs. [Anmerkung] Archival documents recount that in the first decade of the fifteenth century (when Esigie was a prince) many luxuries were brought to Benin as gifts from King Manuel of Portugal: jewelry, clothing of taffeta, satin, silk, and linen; and a fully caparisoned riding horse. [Anmerkung] Esigie's association with horsemanship is strong in traditional history, [Anmerkung] and he is also the ruler who is credited with commissioning many hundreds of bronze reliefs that were kept brightly polished in his palace. [Anmerkung] Perhaps it was his patronage of the guner onmwon bronze casters, as well as his many Portuguese friends and associates, that led to Esigie's appellation "Ologbenronmwon ne ebo", the "Shining Bronze White Man". [Anmerkung] There are reminders of this historical period in Row One of almost every Benin tusk. In images like the one in figure 4, the

long-haired, bearded men who stand with beads, cloth, bronze currency, and/or weapons in their hands celebrate Benin's fruitful economic interaction with European traders, yet they also signify the prestige of Esigie's reign, and the ceremonies and customs that he initiated. Sometimes these long-haired men are accompanied by a musketeer (fig. 5), and there is often a mounted horseman nearby (figure 6). One popular motif is a man in Portuguese clothing, often with a cross on his chest, holding hands with an Edo who wears beaded regalia as well as a European hat (figure 7). The two figures are immediately identified in Benin today as "Esigie with a Portuguese missionary", or alternatively, "Esigie with an Ohonsa priest". EDV: MB, "Informatik f. Blinde", Uni Linz

From Ivory to Bronze In the same row where these motifs appear, the central figure usually portrays Esigie (figure 7) in a pose and costume taken by the Igbesanmwan directly from the bronze reliefs (figure 8). In his right hand he holds a long, thin unwenrhiontan ceremonial wand that is an essential attribute of many palace rituals. The duplication of Benin court motifs in bronze and in ivory is not unusual, for it is customary for the Igbesanmwan to use old and revered works of art in the palace for inspiration. While it is tempting to conclude that the bronze caster intended the original image to portray Oba Esigie, one must remember that if the relief in figure 8 was cast during the sixteenth century reign of Esigie, the identity of the person who is portrayed might have changed by the time these tusks were carved three centuries later. Nevertheless, central royal motifs are conscientiously preserved in Benin, and there are indications, beyond those presented here, to suggest the accuracy of the identification. [Anmerkung] The tusk motifs are in their original context, and they may easily reflect the context in which the bronze reliefs were once displayed. Therefore a brief and speculative investigation of this example and others that may portray Esigie is justified. Every aspect of the regalia of the Oba is significant, and no detail is added casually to his costume. In other instances in which the costume and pose of the figure 8 official appears, there is sometimes a beaded belt that hangs low over the right hip. Although many types of waist ornament can be worn by chiefs in Benin, a beaded belt can be worn only by an Oba, and only at specific ceremonies. [Anmerkung] This suggests that a figure with a beaded belt may represent a ruler, and that when the beaded belt is present and the costume is duplicated except for differing headgear (figure 9), the same Oba may be depicted in differing rituals. [Anmerkung] The identification of the pose and costume with this ruler can probably be extended to include other minor clothing variations (figure 10). On the tusks, one constant in most images of Esigie is the end of a fringed sash hanging over his belt on his left hip. However, many uncrowned figures on both the tusks and the reliefs, are also portrayed with a sash and except for his representations in European clothing, Esigie's attire includes some form of beaded headgear. In other contexts on the altar tusks, Esigie sometimes holds a small netted spherical rattle in front of his torso, [Anmerkung] and in this ceremonial aspect his costume can include a decorative belt, a fringed sash combined with a tall hip ornament, and a beaded crown with oro protrusion (figure 11). In the bronze reliefs as on the ivories, any individual can be duplicated, possibly for emphasis or symmetry (figure 12). [Anmerkung] EDV: MB, "Informatik f. Blinde", Uni Linz

Some Women Honored in

Ivory In addition to the kings who are specifically portrayed on Benin's altar tusks, there are also recognizable queens. Esigie is often accompanied on the ivories by his remarkable Iy'Oba or Queen Mother, Idia (figure 13). This strong royal woman occupies a unique place in Benin folklore, because of her unprecedented role in promoting her son's kingship. Although twice she marched personally to war on his behalf, her military skill is not overshadowed by her formidable knowledge of the occult. Idia symbolizes female insights and psychic powers which are believed to be very different from those accessible to men. As the first woman to be honored with the title and prerogatives of Iy'Oba, Idia is also praised as the ideal that every subsequent Queen Mother is expected to emulate. Her constant vigilance on her son's behalf is crucial to the well-being of the nation. [Anmerkung] Idia's protective image is ubiquitous, sometimes as a central motif, but more often it is near the center of every altar tusk, where the Oba is flanked by two supporting figures. Since Esigie's reign, eighteen rulers have elevated their mothers to this honored position. [Anmerkung] The Iy'Oba's installation takes place in the Oba's palace, making use of an ivory staff depicting her in royal regalia. [Anmerkung] The ivory Queen Mother staff in figure 14 and others like it have often been identified as representations of the Oba, because the Bead of Kingship is at the center of crossed beaded strands that she wears. However, the distinctive pattern of curved tattoos on the abdomen is reserved exclusively for Edo women. Idia is also occasionally represented with the ivie okpaigbaurhu in bronze altar pieces and on eighteenth and nineteenth century altar tusks, although the reason is unclear. Perhaps the symbol is inappropriate because Idia enabled Esigie to seize this essential bead from his brother Aruaran, who was Ozolua's heir apparent. She also cured Esigie of madness caused by the curse that Aruaran had placed upon the bead. [Anmerkung] Idia is apparently the only person except for the Oba who is portrayed with this symbol of the monarchy. In the ivory staff figures, Idia plays the instrument that cured Esigie, an iron bell or gong; [Anmerkung] in figure 14, however, the gong and its striker have broken off. Other women who appear on the altar tusks include attendants who protect the Oba at palace ceremonies with small rectangular psychic shields (figure 15), [Anmerkung] and at least one famous queen, Iden. In figure 16, this seventeenth century queen appears in duplication next to a crowned figure whose legs are curved and shaped like mudfish. There are from one to three of these fishlegged figures on every altar tusk, and the ivories apparently commissioned by chiefs rather than the Oba display the greatest variety in their crowns and the implements that they hold. [Anmerkung] EDV: MB, "Informatik f. Blinde", Uni Linz The Fishlegged Figure as Oba Ewuakpe On still another level, each of the many variations of the fishlegged figure is in some way an emblem of a specific Oba. The particular image in figure 16 commemorates Oba Ewuakpe, an embattled king who ruled during a very troubled period in the seventeenth century. The traditional story of Ewuakpe's rule involves the heroic role of Queen Iden, his favorite wife, who is portrayed beside him. Except for a less elaborate crown (which is not always consistent on other tusks), there is little differentiation between Iden's image (figure 16) and the image of Idia (figure 13). Nevertheless, their roles are distinct. Edo traditions suggest that at some point in the early seventeenth century, there was a

series of weak rulers. These men yielded to various coalitions of chiefs and lost the attributes and authority of divine kingship. In mid-century when Ewuakpe was chosen as Oba, he challenged the chiefs in an effort to restore the centralized authority of the monarchy. Refusing their efforts to depose him, he fought a long and bitter civil war to win his right to rule, and to insist upon succession to the throne. One of his emblems is the short, thick pestle staff (ukhurhe-ovbido) in the left hand of the fishlegged figure, symbolizing the eventual resolution of this protracted conflict. [Anmerkung] In oral history he is presented as a ruler without treasure, regalia, food, or followers, who was thoroughly rejected by the Edo people. [Anmerkung] Even his wives have deserted him, except for his favorite, Queen Iden. In addition to the pestle staff, Ewuakpe is identified with the akpata bow harp, and his songs of loneliness and misery are remembered and performed in Benin. To end the impasse between Ewuakpe and his people, Queen Iden resorted to divination and learned that only a human sacrifice could bring Ewuakpe the prerogatives of his forebears. Against Ewuakpe's strenuous objections, she offered herself as this sacrifice, and her death miraculously brought about reconciliation, the renewal of Benin's divine kingship, and lavish tribute from Ewuakpe's subjects. EDV: MB, "Informatik f. Blinde", Uni Linz Cultural Continuity in Twentieth Century Benin Among the Iguleronmwon bronzecasters of the seventeenth century, the theme of Ewuakpe's rejection and subsequent restoration to kingship inspired major works of art, and in recent years a revival of the theme has taken place in Benin. [Anmerkung] In 1959, the late Chief Ineh, leader of the Iguleronmwon, cast a figure of a king playing the akpata that was much admired, [Anmerkung] and this seems to have aroused new interest in portraying Ewuakpe. Since then the renewal of Ewuakpe's tribute has become a popular tableau subject among the bronzecasters. One of the finest of these recent tableaux is in Munich (s. Kat. Nr. II/1.16) in which this newly crowned Oba receives the chiefs and his former followers who bring generous but belated gifts to the palace. He plays his akpata bow harp, and this time the songs are of Queen Iden and her sacrifice. The visual and performance arts of the Benin Kingdom are exceptionally rich in their iconography, because each nuance of gesture, costume, and other symbolic detail has been honed and reinforced through long centuries of non-literate communication. The well-being of the people has depended upon their ability to justify the structure of their complex state, and to remember the mythic foundations that undergird their ancient culture. Each altar tusk, in its semi-public but sacred role in the ancestral shrine of an Oba or a chief, was once part of an ensemble that linked agbon with erinmwon, an Edo leader with his ancestors, and Benin with its past and its future. Because the motifs on the tusks are in context, the identities and values that they encode are more accessible today than those of the isolated bronze sculptures and reliefs that repose in Benin collections. With the informed assistance of knowledgeable Edo craftsmen, poets, elders, and scholars, the ivories may yet provide keys to unlock more of the significance of Benin's art. EDV: MB, "Informatik f. Blinde", Uni Linz Bibliography Baker 1942 Baker, R. St. B.: Africa Drums. London 1942. Ben-Amos 1967 Ben-Amos, D.: Ikponmwosa Osemwegie: A Young Bini Poet. In: Nigeria 94 (1967), 250-252. Ben-Amos 1975 Ben-Amos, D.: Sweet Words: Storytelling

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**Dahomey** Benin, formerly Dahomey officially Republic of Benin, republic (1990 est. pop. 4,732,000), 43,483 sq mi (112,622 sq km), W Africa, bordering on Togo in the west, on Burkina Faso and Niger in the north, on Nigeria in the east, and on the Bight of Benin (an arm of the Gulf of Guinea) in the south. Porto-Novo is the capital and Cotonou is the largest city and chief port. Other principal towns include Abomey, Ouidah, and Parakou.

**Land and People** Benin falls into four main geographic regions. In the south is a narrow coastal zone (1–3 mi/1.6–4.8 km wide) fringed on the north by a series of interconnected lagoons and lakes with only two outlets to the sea (at Grand-Popo and Cotonou). Behind the coastal region is a generally flat area of fertile clay soils; this is crossed by the wide Lama marsh, through which flows the Ouémé River. In NW Benin is a region of forested mountains (the Atacora; highest point c. 2,150 ft/655 m), from which the Mekrou and Alibori rivers flow NE to the Niger River (which forms part of the country's northern border). In the northeast is a highland region covered mostly with savanna and containing little fertile soil. Although there are 42 ethnic groups in Benin, its population is divided into four main groups, the Fon, Adja, Yoruba, and Bariba. In addition, there are four major linguistic groups—Fon, Yoruba, Voltaic, and Fulani. The Fon-speakers, who live in the south, include the Fon, or Dahomey (Benin's largest single ethnic group), Adja, Peda, and Chabe subgroups. The Yoruba live in the southeast near Nigeria, the group's main homeland. The Voltaic-speakers live in central and N Benin and include the Bariba and Somba subgroups. The Fulani live in the north. French is the country's official language; Fon and Yoruba are the most widely spoken vernacular tongues in the south and at least six indigenous languages are spoken in the north. Nearly three quarters of the inhabitants follow traditional religious beliefs; some 15% are Christian (largely Roman Catholic) and about 15% (living mostly in the north) are Muslim. Benin's population is concentrated in the southern portion of the country and in rural areas.

**Economy** With relatively limited natural resources, Benin is one of the world's least developed nations. The economy is overwhelmingly agricultural, with most workers engaged in subsistence farming. The chief crops are corn, sorghum, cassava, beans, rice, cotton, peanuts, palm oil, coffee, cocoa, and tobacco. Large numbers of goats, sheep, and pigs are raised. Private farmers have been resistant to government plans to bring all land under state control. There is a sizable freshwater fishing industry, and some sea fish are also caught. Most of Benin's few manufactures are either processed agricultural goods or basic consumer items; the main products include palm oil, palm-kernel oil, palmetto, soap, textiles, footwear, jute sacks, cement, and ginned cotton. The country's mineral resources, which include chromite, low-quality iron ore, ilmenite, and titanium, have not as yet been exploited on a large scale. Petroleum was discovered offshore in 1968 and has been increasingly exploited, becoming Benin's largest export by the early 1990s. There is also a developing tourist industry. Benin has limited rail and road systems, and they are almost exclusively in the southern and central parts of the country. Rail lines run along the coast and from

the coast to Parakou and to Pobé; rail lines are being extended to Niger. In the 1980s, Benin began to develop its hydroelectric potential through the Mono River Dam project. The chief imports are foodstuffs, beverages, tobacco, petroleum products, textiles, clothing, machinery, electrical equipment, motor vehicles, and metals; in addition to crude oil, the principal exports are cotton, palm products, and cocoa. Droughts in the 1970s and 80s, however, resulted in a decline in the production of palm oil. The annual cost of imports usually far exceeds earnings from exports. The leading trade partners are France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Japan. Benin is an ACP (African, Caribbean, and Pacific) member of the European Economic Community.

**Government** Since 1991, Benin has been a multiparty democracy, with a unicameral national assembly. The president is the head of state. The president and the members of the legislature are popularly elected. Administratively, the country is divided into six provinces.

#### History

**Early History** Little is known about the history of N Benin. In the south, according to oral tradition, a group of Adja migrated (12th or 13th cent.) eastward from Tado on the Mono River and founded the village of Allada. Later, Allada became the capital of Great Ardra, a state whose kings ruled with the consent of the elders of the people. Great Ardra reached the peak of its power in the 16th and early 17th cent. A dispute (c. 1625) among three brothers over who should be king resulted in one brother, Kokpon, retaining Great Ardra. Another brother, Do-Aklin, founded the town of Abomey, and the third, Te-Agdanlin, founded the town of Ajatche or Little Ardra (called Porto-Novo by the Portuguese merchants who traded there). The Adja living at Abomey organized into a strongly centralized kingdom with a standing army and gradually mixed with the local people, thus forming the Fon, or Dahomey, ethnic group. By the late 17th cent. the Dahomey were raiding their neighbors for slaves, who were then sold (through coastal middlemen) to European traders. By 1700, about 20,000 slaves were being transported annually, especially from Great Ardra and Ouidah, located on what was called the Slave Coast. In order to establish direct contact with the European traders, King Agaja of Dahomey (reigned 1708–32), who began the practice of using women as soldiers, conquered most of the south (except Porto-Novo). This expansion brought Dahomey into conflict with the powerful Yoruba kingdom of Oyo, which captured Abomey in 1738 and forced Dahomey to pay an annual tribute until 1818. However, until well into the 19th cent. Dahomey continued to expand northward and to sell slaves, despite efforts by Great Britain to end the trade.

#### Colonial History

In 1863, Porto-Novo accepted a French protectorate, hoping thereby to offset Dahomey's power. During the 1880s, as the scramble for Africa among the European powers accelerated, France tried to secure its hold on the Dahomey coast in order to keep it out of German or British hands. King Behanzin (reigned 1889–93) attempted to resist the French advance, but in 1892–93 France defeated Dahomey, established a protectorate over it, and exiled Behanzin to Martinique. During the period 1895–1898 the French added the northern part of present-day Dahomey, and in 1904 the whole colony was made part of French West Africa. Under the French a port was constructed at Cotonou, railroads were built, and the output of palm products increased. In addition, elementary school facilities were expanded, largely under the auspices of Roman

Catholic missions. In 1946, Dahomey became an overseas territory with its own parliament (whose authority was limited to relatively unimportant local matters) and representation in the French national assembly. In 1958, Dahomey became an autonomous state within the French Community.

**The Post-Colonial Period** On Aug. 1, 1960, Dahomey became fully independent. The country's first president was Hubert Maga, whose main support came from Parakou and the north and who was allied with Sourou Migan Apithy, a politician from Porto-Novo. Independent Dahomey was plagued by governmental instability, caused by economic (especially fiscal) troubles, ethnic rivalries (especially between inhabitants of the north and south), and social unrest. In 1963, following demonstrations by workers and students, the armed forces staged a successful coup d'état, putting Justin Ahomadegbé into power (in alliance with Apithy). In 1965 the military replaced this government with one headed by Col. Christophe Soglo. Soglo was ousted in late 1967, and a younger army officer, Lt. Col. Alphonse Alley, came to power with the goal of reestablishing civilian rule. Elections in May, 1968, were held under a cloud of suspicion (important politicians were not allowed to take part), and the results were subsequently disallowed. Later in 1968, Dr. Émile Zinsou was made president, and he gave way in 1969 to Lt. Col. Paul-Émile de Souza. Dahomey tried to hold elections in 1970, but severe disagreement between northern and southern politicians led to their cancellation. Instead, a three-man presidential council (consisting of Maga, Ahomadegbé, and Apithy) was formed; each member was to lead the country for two years. The first leader was Maga, who in May, 1972, was replaced without incident by Ahomadegbé. However, in Oct., 1972, the military again intervened, toppling Ahomadegbé and installing an 11-man government headed by Maj. Mathieu Kérékou. This was Dahomey's 11th change of government since 1960. To distance the modern state from its colonial past, Dahomey was renamed the People's Republic of Benin in 1975. Kérékou declared Benin a Marxist-Leninist state. Benin sought financial support from Communist governments in Eastern Europe and Asia. Continual strikes and coup attempts resulted in the formation of a repressive militia. After social unrest and economic problems (the nation's only commercial bank closed in 1988) beset the country, Marxism was renounced as a state ideology in 1989. After a 1990 national conference and a referendum provided for a new constitution and multiparty elections, Nicéphore Soglo defeated Kérékou and became president in 1991.

**Bibliography** See W. J. Argyle, *The Fon of Dahomey* (1966); I. A. Akinjogbin, *Dahomey and Its Neighbours, 1708–1818* (1967); Patrick Manning, *Slavery, Colonialism and Economic Growth in Dahomey, 1640–1960* (1982); Samuel Decalo, *Historical Dictionary of Benin* (2d ed. 1987); C. Allen and M. Radu, *Benin and the Congo* (1988).

## THE OBA

The Oba (pronounced to rhyme with robber) or king of Benin was supreme - he was both the- spiritual and political leader of his people, much as, were. the, monarchs of England after the Reformation; Jacob Egharevba describes the power of the Oba:

*"(He) is an absolute ruler and resides in Benin City, the capital of the Benin Empire. The chiefs under him (Dukes or Enigies) are appointed by him and owe allegiance to him and he rules through them no orders of the King must be carried out by them and his decision is final, though a certain amount is left to the chiefs who are carrying out the law. "*

The most powerful and famous Obas ruled in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The chart shows a plaque thought to represent Oba Esigie who ruled from about 1504 to 1550 -about the same time as Henry VIU of England. This is how Jacob Egharevba records Esigie's achievements:

*'Esigie had his mother Idia made Queen and sent her to reside at Lower Uselu. Ever since, every Oba of Benin has given his mother the same title, Iyoba of Uselu. "*

*"It is said that John Affonso dAveíro (from Portugal) came to Benin City for the second time during this reign.*

*He advised the Oba to become a Christian Esigíe therefore sent an Ambassador to the King of Portugal, asking him to send priests who would teach him and his people the faith. In reply the King of Portugal sent Roman Catholic missionaries and many rich presents, such as a copper stool, coral beads and a big umbrella with an entreaty that Esigie should embrace the faith. Hé) also sent some Portuguese traders who established trading factories at Ughoton, the old port of Benin. They traded in ivory Benin cloths, pepper and other commodities in the King of Portugal ~ interest. Owing to the unhealthy state of the country their commerce soon ceased. But John Affonso dAveiro with the other missionaries remained in Benin to carry on the mission work, and churches were built.. The missionaries went with Esigie to the Idah war which took place 1515-1516. "*

*"Esigie encouraged and improved the brass work which had been introduced to Benin by the Oba Oguola. He invented astrology and he could speak and read the Portuguese language. During this reign guns were used in Benin for the first time. "*

Today the Oba retains a culturally significant role and is seen by the people of Benin to maintain the traditions and ceremonial duties of the Oba of Benin.

## **THE POWER OF THE OBA**

The power and wealth of the Oba were manifested in Royal Insignia and Regalia, in which the special reverence due to the Oba were symbolised. One such symbol was the leopard which was regarded as the Oba's animal. Live leopards were caught in the forests around Benin, and according to Olfert Dapper's engraving (shown on the chart) were paraded around the city on chains during festivals. The leopard (as king of the forest) played much the same symbolic role as the heraldic lion for the kings and queens of England.

Coral beads are a sign of rank and status and would be presented by the Oba to chiefs and court officials. The coral beads would be mainly worn around the neck, although the Oba's ceremonial costume consists of items of coral clothing such as a special head dress and a coral tunic of immense weight as can be seen in the photographs on the chart.

Representations of the Portuguese became symbols of the Oba's authority. They appeared on brass plaques and carved ornaments such as the waist mask shown on the chart.

## **THE STRUCTURES OF GOVERNMENT**

The system of government remained more or less the same during the whole era of the second dynasty from the first Oba until the sack of Benin by the British in 1897. The Oba ruled through three groups of chiefs. They were:

*The Uzama* (or Kingmakers) whose titles were hereditary and who had ceremonial duties.

*The Palace Chiefs* who were appointed by the Oba and had various responsibilities for aspects of the court and the Oba's household. These chiefs wielded a considerable amount of power, ,

*The Town Chiefs* who were appointed by the Oba and had particular duties in administration of city matters. They included the Prime Minister and the Army Commander.

Over the years the number of chiefdoms were gradually increased by the Oba. The inter relationship of the chiefdoms was complex (see the diagram in Andrew Forson's Benin Source Pack).

## **WHERE THE OBA LIVED - THE CITY OF BENIN**

These are some descriptions of the Oba's palace and the city:

*" The king ~ court, which makes a principal part of the city.. is on a very great plain... The first place we come into is a very long gallery... As soon as we are past this gallery we come to a mud and earthen wall, which hath three gates, at each corner one, and another in the middle, the last of which is adorned at the top with a wooden turret like a chimney, about 60 or 70 feet high. At the top of all is fixed a large copper snake whose head hangs downwards. "*

### **Van Nyendael a Dutch trader (1702)**

This description can be compared with the plaque of the palace on the chart.

#### **The city**

*"At first the town seems very large: when one enters it one comes at once into a great broad street, which appears to be seven or eight times broader than the Warme Street in Amsterdam; this extends straight out, and when one has walked a quarter of an hour along it one still does not see the end of the street some Netherlands say that the street stretches still so much further-so that it may be considered that that street is a mile long. "*

### **D.R. a Dutch traveller writing in about 1600**

#### **The houses**

*"The houses in this town stand in good order, one close to the other, like houses in Holland. Houses in which well-to-do people dwell, have two or three steps to go up, and in front have an ante-court where one may sit dry, which court or gallery is cleaned every morning by their slaves, and straw mats spread for sitting on. Their rooms or apartments within are four square, having a roof all round, which, however does not join in the middle, but is left open so that the rain, wind and daylight can enter. In these houses they lie and eat, but they have special little houses for cooking, as well as other huts and mona. The common houses are not built like this, for they have only one straight wall, in the middle of which there is a wooden door. They do not know how to make windows, but such air and daylight as they have comes in at the roof. The houses are, however, all alike red, and were surrounded by walls, which they make of the earth they dig up, and which is greasy and sticky and mostly red; this earth they water and work it up much as we do mortar at home, dab it wet on top, one piece on another, and let it dry. They make the walls about two feet thick, so that these are not easily upset, for it sometimes happens that a heavy rain comes which washes down the walls and gives them much to do. "* **D.R. a Dutch trader writing in about 1600**

Village houses today are still sometimes built to traditional designs using traditional methods as shown on the chart. The outer courtyard areas were often used for storytelling and the inner courtyards would be for the male and female living quarters and for cooking.

## **SIMILARITIES WITH TUDOR TOWNS**

Tudor towns were often overcrowded with narrow lanes that became very muddy when it rained. It was possible to build houses of several storeys due to the different building materials available, so there was a very high population density in the big towns. It was the closeness of the houses that spread the Great Fire in London in 1666. Many cities, such as London and York, were surrounded by walls, as was Benin. Distinct areas of the town were given over to particular crafts, where a guild would have its headquarters and ply its trade. Names such as Threadneedle Street or Tanners Row suggest the original nature of trading in the area. Benin too had its craft guilds which were situated in particular areas of the town.

## **CITY GUILDS**

One of the most important guilds was that of the brass casters. Until fairly recently it was assumed by Europeans that the skill must have been introduced to West Africa from Europe, but modern dating methods show that some of the plaques were made in the early 15th century. Most of the casts were made using the lost wax process which is complex and requires considerable skill. Brasses belonged to the Oba and his family and were made for the palace and the many shrines devoted to the Gods and ancestors. Plaques were used to adorn the palace and brass heads were often hollow to hold a highly carved elephant's tusk. Other freestanding models were made, including animals, bells, ornaments, a brass stool and female heads thought to show the Queen Mother, possibly Esigie's mother. Today, the brasscasters are still members of particular families, through whom the skill is handed down, and they live and work on Igun Street in Benin City. Other early guilds included those of physicians, diviners, ironsmiths, carvers, carpenters and clothmakers. Hunters were also considered professionals and the leopard and elephant hunters had their own guilds.

## **BENIN CITY WALLS AND THE EARTHWORKS**

The city walls, according to oral tradition, had been built by Oba Oguola and Oba Ewuare. The *iya* or earthenworks extended over huge areas in the forest regions around Benin. The mounds and ditches can still be traced in the forests today and the city walls can be seen in Benin, although in many parts they are becoming damaged and neglected. Excavations of parts of the walls have been carried out and have shown them to be at least 500 years old. The city walls were most probably defensive but there is disagreement about the role of the earthworks in the surrounding forest. Connah (an archaeologist) considers that these earthworks were not mainly for defence (to keep enemies out) but were more likely to mark out farming boundaries around villages.

*"Centuries of hard work left a 16,000 Metre legacy of earth in the wet rainforests of today's southern Nigeria. More than 150 million man hours were spent enclosing 4,000 square Metres with conical banks and ditches before this colossal task was abandoned in about the mid 15th century AD. For the last 500 years the forests have brooded silently over what is arguably the largest, single, archaeological phenomenon on this planet. "*

**Patrick Darling (archaeologist) 1989**

**TRADERS FROM OVERSEAS** By the tenth century Benin was already part of an extensive external trading network that linked up north and east Africa, the Mediterranean, the Middle East and beyond. Thus there was indirect contact with the Europeans before the 1480s when the Portuguese first made trading contact with Benin. The Trans-Saharan trade routes were well established and salt, ivory, kola nuts and people were traded by Benin with other parts of North and West Africa. Benin had access to goods such as gold, cloth, pepper and beads and this was one of the reasons why the Portuguese and later the Dutch and English were so keen to trade with Benin.

The Portuguese first set up a trading post at the end of the 15th century. They traded copper, cloth and later, guns. The Oba, who controlled all trade routes, sold pepper and ivory. Trade was usually carried out at the port of Ughotan and the Benin merchants drove hard bargains. The currency was cowrie shells and the more valuable brass 'manillas' shaped like bracelets. The English first began to trade in the mid 16th century, followed by the Dutch who dominated trade in the 17th century.

## EVERYDAY LIFE

People have lived in a sustainable way in the forests around Benin for thousands of years. They learned how to use natural resources for housing, health and craft purposes and refined their knowledge over the centuries. Although there is not a great deal of evidence of how ordinary people lived in the past it is possible to reconstruct a good deal of family life by investigating long standing traditional practices today.

## FARMING

The majority of people in the Benin area still make their living from farming. The main way of family farming is to clear some land of trees and bushes and then plant it with vegetables for the year. This plot is then left for a few years so that the soil can recover its goodness and a new plot of land is cleared. This is sometimes called 'shifting agriculture'. Some families also keep goats and chickens. Any member of a village may select any piece of land provided somebody else has not already chosen it and that its former ownership is checked and permission obtained from the local chief or the Oba. Yams and cassava are the main crops and maize, plantains, cocoyam, cassava, beans, melon, peppers and okra may also be planted. Chillies and maize are not indigenous and were introduced from the Americas. The men and boys choose the sites, clear and burn the bush, hoe the ground and do most of the planting. Women and girls do the weeding and everyone works together to gather in the harvest, sort and store it.

## MARKETS

Many of the early European visitors observed the practice of holding large outdoor markets in Benin.

*"These markets and traffickings are keld and arranged in a very orderly manner, and everyone who comes to market with his wares or merchandise knows where to go and settle down with them, i.e, at which place it is customary for an article to be sold. - Women are much employed as sellers. D.R. about 1600*

Open air markets are still held today, as seen in the photograph on the chart, where people can sell their farm produce and can buy just about everything under the sun.

## BELIEFS

There is believed to be a supreme creator God (Osanobua) and a number of children of God and many saints. People erect altars to their ancestors in their homes through which they maintain contact with them. These beliefs only came to be denigrated by Europeans in an attempt to justify the slave trade in the 18th and 19th centuries.

There is no evidence of any permanent or widespread conversion to Christianity or other religions until the late 19th century. Today many people are Christians or Moslems but still retain elements of their traditional religious practices.

son after he had ascended the throne, she was consulted in affairs, of state. She had her own court and her own army; the troops of the mother of Esigie, with her as their Captain played a major part in defeating the Idah, in the war against them.

Emotan and Ovia are two well known women saints and women played their part in religious ceremonies and festivals. Women were storytellers and musicians. There is evidence to suggest they owned property, directed household affairs and ran the markets. They produced all the pottery and many other craft goods, including baskets and cloth. Although women were not that visible they played a full and important part in Benin society.

## RESOURCES FOR TEACHING ABOUT THE KINGDOM OF BENIN

**The Benin Project** - Northants Black History Group c/o Wel11ngborough REC Victoria Centre Park Road

Wel11ngborough Northants NN8 1HT contact: Andrew Forson 0933 278000 *This is an invaluable source of information on teaching about Benin and produces a regularly updated list of resources and sources of information. including Museum collections.*

**Benin: An African Kingdom**, Channel Four Schools Television (I13TIYTV) plus Teachers' Guide, International Broadcasting Trust/ETC, 1994 **Benin Source Pack for Key Stage 2 and Benin: Key Stage 2: How to find out about Benin**, Northamptonshire Black History Group. **Benin: An African Kingdom**, World Wide Fund For Nature, 1994 **The Kingdom of Benin: National Curriculum History, Key Stage 2**, Commonwealth Institute, 1992 *Other useful material*

**Benin: Pictures from an African Kingdom**, Museum of Mankind, 1992 (Free) **An Outline History of Benin for Key Stage 2**: Andrew Forson, Historical Association 1993

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