

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 ne orders ofthe 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 Cityfor 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 sendpriests 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 thefaith . Hé) also sent some Portuguese traders who established tradingfactories at Ughoton, theoldportofBenin. neytradedinivoryBenincloths, pepper and other commodities in the King ofPortugal ~ interest. Owing to the unhealthy state of the country theircomínercesoonceased. ButJohnAffonsodAveiro 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 i"roved 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 thefirst 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 interrelationship 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 arcas 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

Túdor 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 arcas 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 arca. Benin too had its craft guilds which were situated in particular arcas 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 Mometre legacy of earth in the wet rainforests of today's southern Nigeria. More than 150 million man hours were spent enclosing 4,000 square Mometres with co~nity 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 Darfing (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 Wellesborough REC Victoria Centre Park Road Wellesborough 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 (ITV) 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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