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## The Changing Phases of Power and Civil Administration in Benin Empire Before Colonialism

Victor Osaro Edo

The paper examines the structure, nature and character of governance and civil administration in Pre-colonial Benin up to the period of its loss of independence to British colonial administration. It analyses the processes of change in Benin from the era of the Ogisos through the period of the republican administration to the establishment of monarchical system of government. Benin's history from the earliest times to the beginning of colonial rule was dynamic and witnessed monumental changes in the structure and character of the empire. The monarchy had its fair share of the turbulence, but it remained the most resilient of all traditional institutions. The monarchy provided the pivot around which the forces of change gravitated; setting the pace and dictating the direction of its dynamism.

Several centuries ago, at the time when Benin was called *Igodomigodo* (land of *Igodo*), that geographical area now known as Benin was the hub of a conglomeration of little towns or villages that developed or spread into most of the areas of present day Edo State of Nigeria. Throughout that period, *Igodomigodo* made steady progress, especially in the areas of spiritual, philosophical and administrative development. Its efforts were largely concentrated on the arrangement of human order so that by the time Europeans made contact with the people of Benin in the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Ryder, 1977, p. 31), they had already established an administrative system that baffled the Europeans and earned for the capital of this far flung African country, the appellation "city."

This study examines the changing phases of power and civil administration in Benin from this early period of the *Ogiso* termed *Igodomigodo*, an appellation

coined from the name of the first *Ogiso* – Igodo (Obagodo); through the period of republican administration (the interregnum) to the establishment of monarchical system of government. It is significant to state from the outset that *Ogiso* was the name of a collection of rulers that reigned in Benin before the monarchical period starting with the emergence of Oranmiyan from Ile-Ife. Oranmiyan eventually gave birth to *Eweka 1* before taking leave to found the Oyo Empire. The three phases in the life of the Benin Empire will now be discussed piece by piece.

### ***The Ogiso Era of Benin History (c. 900 – c. 1170)***

The nucleus of the great Benin Civilisation was the monarchy, which the Binis perfected around the 18<sup>th</sup> century when, after a series of experimentation with the *Ogiso*, and some of the past *Ogiso* rulers, they introduced a monarchical system that is based on the principle of primogeniture, beginning with *Oba Ewuakpe* about 1712 (Egharevba, 1968, p. 39). However, it is significant that the *Ogisos* laid the foundation for the structure of civil administration in Benin, which the *Obas* of the second dynasty later built upon, as from about 1200 A.D., when the republican experience failed.

Indeed, the history of Benin monarchy dates back to the *Ogiso* era, which has been traced to about the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Although it is not possible in a study of this nature to give a full account of all the *Ogisos*, it is believed that there were 31 of them before the arrival of prince Oranmiyan from Ife (called Uhe by the Binis) (*Eweka*, 1992, p. 4). The great Benin historian, Jacob Uwadiae Egharevba, also corroborated this figure. The *Ogiso* rulers are believed to have laid the foundations for most of the subsequent developments in Benin. Indeed, this is all part of a compressed mythology wherein presumably remarkable quasi-historical figures achieve incredible feats (Igbafe, 2007, p. 43). The first *Ogiso* was Igodo (also known as Obagodo) who handed in an effective system of administration. Under him, for example, his unification of the numerous clusters of independent communities gave rise to Benin City and a centralized administrative system. The last *Ogiso*, Owodo, was banished from the kingdom for maladministration. However, the most prominent of the *Ogisos* was the second, Ere. Ere was regarded as the greatest *Ogiso* ruler. He was credited with many achievements and innovations including the creation of the four elders, popularly known as 'kingmakers', *Oliha*, *Edohen*, *Eholor n'Ire* and *Ero*. These individuals survived into the period of the present dynasty, but a part of Benin mythology states that they were advocates of consolidation. (Egharevba, 1968, p. 4). *Ogiso* Ere is credited with the transfer of the *Ogiso* palace to Uhunmwidunmwun, a local village, but now a central part of Benin City (Egharevba, 1968, p. 3). This is said to have been a more favourable location than Ugbekun, the original site, but both were in fact local villages.

Above all, he was reputed to have organized the Bini into various art and craft industries and established guild systems to facilitate specialization (Edo, 1991, p. 20). These art and craft industries date from antiquity, for tradition holds that Ere of the *Ogiso* dynasty (first Benin dynasty) founded the guilds (Dark, 1971, p. 8). Unfortunately, the best of these products, collected and sent to the *Oba's* court; were either destroyed or carried away during the British conquest of Benin in 1897.

In the guilds, the various craftsmen in Benin were encouraged to form associations with monopoly rights to produce, standardize, market, and attend to their products. Ere gave the guilds patronage. In this way, there emerged the guild of wood workers (*Owinna*), the carvers (*Igbesanman*), leather workers (*Esohian*), the hunters (*Ohue*), the weavers (*Owinnanido*), and the pot makers (*Emakhe*). Ere was also reputed to have founded the *Ogiso* market (*Ekiogiso*), now known as Agbado market to add a fillip to the economic activities in his kingdom (Edo, 1990, p. 10).

Under Ere, peace reigned throughout the kingdom because of his practice of dispatching town criers to pronounce the injunction of peace once there was dispute in any part of his kingdom. The injunction has survived to this day in the saying that "Ere forbids quarrel" (*a wua ne Ere*). Significantly too, Ere introduced the royal throne (*ekete*); the round leather box (*ekpokin*); the swords of authority of the Benin monarch (*ada* and *eben*); the beaded anklets (*eyen*); and the collars (*odigba*) as well as the simple, undecorated crown for the *Oba*. The introduction of domestic articles like wooden plates, bowls, mortars, and pestles carved by the *Owina* is also credited to *Ogiso* Ere (Igbafe, 2007, p. 43).

It is significant that the political centralization of *Ogiso* rule enabled the settlement of disputes by the common political authority; this gave the kingdom a sense of unity and through the sharing of a common goal, purpose, or destiny. The *Ogiso* are believed to have planted monarchical traditions into the Benin political system in spite of later stresses, strains, and the fact of autonomous villages or village groups overlaid by centralization under the *Obas*.

As noted above, the last *Ogiso* was Owodo, whose reign Egharevba (1968) describes as "a long course of misrule, failure and anxiety." He was supposedly banished from the kingdom. At the time of his banishment, Owodo had no successor because his only son and heir-apparent, Ekaladerhan, had earlier left for an unknown destination having been secretly granted freedom by those sent by his father, Owodo, to execute him as sacrifice to the gods to enable him have male children (Eweka, 1992, p. 6). Record has it that Ekaladerhan founded Ughoton, which was, in fact, called Iguekaladerhan (the land of Ekaladerhan). It is believed that Ekaladerhan first settled at a place called Ughoton after several months of wandering in the jungles. Hunters from Benin stumbled on him in the forest and after their return to Benin, he packed up his tent and left because he was afraid that the hunters would tell of his existence and his father would

give fresh order for his arrest and execution. As he feared, the hunters reported their discovery whereupon his father sent soldiers along with them to go and arrest him. But by the time they arrived, Ekaladerhan had gone (Eweka, 1992, p. 7). Afraid that they would not believe that they did not meet him (after all was Owodo not once deceived that Ekaladerhan was executed when, in fact, his life was secretly spared), soldiers and hunters stayed put. It was they who, in fact, founded Ughoton and named it after Ekaladerhan.

Ekaladerhan's chance arrival at Uhe, however, changed his fortunes. His adopted name, Izoduwa (later corrupted, but meaning literally in the Edo language "I have chosen the path to posterity," is symbolic and has obvious reference to the story of his life just in the same way as Oranmiyan, the name of his eldest son. It was the search for Ekaladerhan that took the Binis to Uhe. But when he was located and his identity became known to the search party, Izoduwa refused to return with them because of his old age. But after testing the sincerity of their intention he sent one of his sons, Oranmiyan, to accompany them to Benin.

Meanwhile, Owodo (the last and worst ruler of the *Ogiso* dynasty) eventually died without a successor, Ekaladerhan being the only male child. Hence, there was an interregnum during which Evian became an administrator of Benin land. This leads us to the next phase of Benin history, the republican era, the interface between the *Ogiso* era and the Eweka dynasty that marked the beginning of the controversy surrounding the person of the legendary 'Oduduwa' as to whether he originated from Benin or Ile-Ife. However, this piece is not intended to join in the ongoing, but heavily flogged debate as its focus is well defined, namely, an examination of the changing phases of power and civil administration in Benin before colonialism.

### ***The Republican Era of Benin History (c. 1170 – c. 1200)***

Between the end of the reign of Owodo, the last *Ogiso* and the inception of the Oranmiyan/Eweka dynasty, Benin experimented with a republican form of government in the absence of any heir to Owodo, Ekaladerhan having been banished. According to Egharevba's historical account, during Owodo's reign, a man called Evian came to prominence. At the time, there was a great monster called Osogan, which killed many people at Okedo – now known as Ikpoba slope in Benin City. The harassment took place mostly on *Ogiso* market days. Because of this, the market was nicknamed *Agbayo-Aigbare*, meaning "We go there together, but we never return together." On a particular market day, so the story went, Evian armed himself with a red hot iron rod which he trusted into the mouth of the monster that eventually perished and was heard of no more. Evian was hailed as Evian *nu rie ebe*, which translated means "Evian who prevents danger." It was

this single act of gallantry that brought Evian to prominence and he was then selected to administer the Government of Benin after the banishment of Owodo for ordering the execution of a pregnant woman (Eweka, 1992, p. 8).

We were told that the aging administrator (Evian) nominated his son, Ogiamien, to succeed him. Such nomination was not acceptable to the Edo people noting that he was not an *Ogiso* and after much internecine war, Edo people went in search of a king and this eventually led them to their exalted prince now fully settled as a king at Uhe. It is significant that the people rejected the choice of Evian's son, Ogiamien, as his successor in an attempt to legitimize his own dynasty. This gave rise to the political factionalism, instability and disputes, which formed the background of the new Eweka dynasty.

Indeed, the era of republican administration was not a particularly fruitful one in the history of civil administration in Benin. The period witnessed political strife and anarchy. Hence, the Benin elders (*edion*) resorted to oracle divination and constituted a search party, which was then sent to look for the long banished prince. The train, led by Chief Oliha, inevitably ended at Uhe, where Ekaladerhan had established. It is significant that over the years, as a result of the struggle between the *edion* (elders) and the king for supremacy, the group name '*edion*' came to be known as Uzama. As it were, the republican experiment failed. Thus, the Binis desired a monarchical form of government.

However, one significant lesson that can be drawn out from the development so far is that the men and women who lived through various segments of at least a millennium and a half of Benin royal history took active part in the design and construction of Benin monarchy as it later emerged in the last phase of power and civil administration in the Benin Empire before the era of colonial rule. In a vital sense, they believed that they owned the social institutions that housed their kingdom. Having collectively invested so much in the building of their state, they have acted as its owners. They rewarded those kings who advanced the fortunes of the state with adulation and high praise – rarely matched anywhere else in the ancient African world. But they were also known to have meted out severe punishment to those of their kings who degraded their state and threatened the people's welfare. Benin kings were powerful people within their domain and outside of it. But their power was a result of paying close attention to the affairs of the state and their unmatched ability to listen to the complaints of even the littlest man and woman in the kingdom. Kings who failed in this respect have occasionally suffered disgrace from actions of the people. That was how the first dynasty of the *Ogiso* and indeed the republican administration were terminated. Without doubt, the people played a significant role in the dissolution of the *Ogiso* dynasty; in their rejection of attempts by a non-royal aristocrat to be their king and in the creation of a new dynasty by

way of the deliberate invitation by the people to a neighbouring kingdom for a royal prince to help out with their crisis of governance.

### *The Obaship Era of Benin History (c. 1200 – c. 1897)*

The people's rejection of Ogiamien as successor to Evian marked the beginning of the present Obaship dynasty in Benin. Whatever the current polemics on the origin of the Benin dynasty dating from the 13<sup>th</sup> century, from all available evidence, it seems clear that there were a people who lived in Benin before an invitation was sent to Ife for advice on good governance. Thus, the 13<sup>th</sup> century marked a significant landmark in the changing phase of power and civil administration in Benin, which lasted up to 1897, when *Oba* Ovonramwen the last independent *Oba* of Benin lost his suzerainty to the British colonial administration in the face of superior weapons.

Nevertheless, this phase of Benin history witnessed momentous developments and initiatives by the successive *Obas* of Benin, particularly *Oba* Eweka I (1200-1235), *Oba* Ewedo (1255-1280) and *Oba* Ewuare the Great (1440-1473). These *Obas*, among others, carried out reforms that reshaped the nature and character of administration in the Benin kingdom and empire. For instance, the manipulative skill of *Oba* Eweka I led to the formal institutionalization of the *Uzama* chiefs – the oldest among the Benin title holders. Before his reign, this class of chiefs was not called *Uzama*, it was referred to as *edion*, meaning elders. It was Eweka I who formally institutionalised the order and called it *Uzama*. It is significant that the *Uzama* title, particularly the first four - *Oliha*, *Edohen*, *Ero* and *Eholo n' Ire* – antedated the Oranmiyan dynasty (Edo, 2001, p. 3). The four elders as the *Uzama* were then known, jointly ruled Benin with the *Oba*. The *Oba* was only regarded as first among equals (Edo, 2001, p. 4). Bradbury opined that tradition identified the *Uzama* with the elders whose request resulted in Oranmiyan being sent from Ile-Ife to found a dynasty at Benin (Bradbury, 1967, p. 13).

It is worthy of mention too that following the step already taken by *Oba* Eweka I, traditions tell us that the *Edaiken* (the title of heir apparent to the Benin throne) was created and added by *Oba* Ewuare the Great to the *Uzama* group. Chief Egharevba's account does not tell us that other *Uzama* chiefs were also kingmakers, which brings us to the conclusion that the *Uzama* were originally four in number during the *Ogiso* era. The basis for this conjecture is that both *Oloton* and *Edaiken* came into the *Uzama* group after the *Ogiso* era in 1200 A.D., while the *Ezomo* became an *Uzama* chief in 1713 A.D. during the reign of *Oba* Akenzua I (1713-1735)-bringing the number of the *Uzama* chiefs to seven.

Beside the *Edaiken*, *Oba* Ewuare the Great created many other titles as a counterpoise to the power of the *Uzama* chiefs. The inclusion of the heir-apparent

in the order of *Uzama* by the monarch could be seen more as a political strategy to check the rising power of these chiefs and also to ensure that his interest was more directly represented in that order. Thus, in order to assert their superiority over these elders, the successors of Eweka I, notably Ewedo and Ewuare the Great, had to create new title orders – the *Eghaevbo n'Ogbe* (Palace Chiefs) and *Eghaevbo n'Ore* (Town Chiefs) to assist in the administration of the expanding state. This policy, perhaps, accounted for the less important role, which the *Uzama* chiefs played in the administration of Benin from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, with the creation of more titles by the *Oba*, the monarchy was able, by playing one order against another, to assert itself over the different grades of chiefs and particularly the *Uzama* chiefs who progressively sank into relative obscurity over the years. For, with the institutionalisation of the principle of primogeniture and the creation of the *Edaiken* title, the *Uzama* who were traditionally regarded, as kingmakers no longer had roles to play as kings were born and not made. Hence, what we have in Benin given the strategic displacement of the *Uzama* who had dictated the pace in the earlier periods of Benin history are now chiefs who officiated at the coronation of the *Oba* and not kingmakers (Edo, 2001, p. 1).

However, as it turned out, the new offices created by the *Obas* of Benin in the pre-colonial period did not only change the fortunes of the *Uzama* group of chiefs, but enhanced in particular the newly created title of the *Iyase* (prime minister), which was superimposed on the *Uzama*. The *Iyase*, the head of the *Eghaevbo n'Ore*, became dominant in Benin politics over the years and even up to and throughout the colonial period. The *Iyase* came to be portrayed as the focus of opposition to the *Oba's* power. The *Iyase* was the commander of the Benin army before the 18<sup>th</sup> century when the position devolved on the *Ezomo*-an *Uzama* chief - (Eweka, 1992, pp. 27-33). It was *Oba* Akeuzua I in 1713 that transferred this role to the *Ezomo*. Although the *Oba* had the exclusive right to confer titles on people, the *Iyase* wielded much power in this process because he was the one who publicly pronounced the title the *Oba* had granted in private.

Indeed, the *Iyase* (prime minister) was and is still seen as the Chief protagonist of the people against the power of the palace. This was true because the best interest of the people lay in the maintenance of the balance between the *Oba* and his 'servile' palace chiefs (*Eghaevbo n'Ogbe*) on the one hand and the town chiefs on the other. In the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the different *Iyases* had acquired much power, which almost lured one of them (Agho Obaseki) into the ambition of violating the principle of primogeniture by aspiring to the throne of Benin.

It is worth mentioning that the *Eghaevbo n'Ore* (Town Chiefs) formed an opposition in the state council. Unlike the Palace Chiefs, the *Eghaevbo n'Ore* chiefs included a proportion of men who had achieved wealth and influence



independent of the palace. Led by the *Iyase*, this group always opposed any unpopular measures taken by the council. Thus, the *Eghaevbo n'Ore* under the leadership of the *Iyase* provided a powerful check on the implementation of unpopular measures and decisions. Indeed, even though falling outside the scope of this discourse, the *Iyase* – Okoro-Otun – was the rallying force during the water rate agitation between 1937 and 1939, when the people kicked against *Oba Akenzua II*. Also, the *Iyase* was the leader of the Edo in the dispute over the building rules in the early 1940s, when threats to depose *Oba Akenzua II* were made. (Edo, 2001, p. 9-10)

In conclusion, it is worthy to note that the *Iyase* became the mouthpiece of the people, and with the coming of colonial rule became elevated to the position of prime minister, the second highest office in the kingdom, next only to the *Oba*. Yet, it is significant that the history of power and civil administration in Benin from the earliest period up to 1897 (the beginning of the era of colonial rule) was dynamic and challenging, with one event leading to the other; in particular, the Benin society witnessed monumental changes in the structure and character of the state throughout the three phases examined. It is no gain saying that on the whole, the monarchy had its fair share of the turbulence, but it remained the most resilient of all traditional institutions. The monarchy provided the pivot around which the forces of change gravitated, setting the pace and dictating the direction of its dynamism throughout the period of this study and even thereafter as events in Benin history has shown up until the present.

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