

A TWO PAGE HISTORY OF BENIN

DR SEO OGBONMWAN KSC.

Dear Dr O, It is an impossible task to write a two page history of Benin; as I promised, I would try although the task is daunting.

Benin is the centre of the world '**Edo ore isi agbon**' that is the belief in oral tradition. The history of Benin is woven with the history of the ancient Benin Kingdom which at the height of its power extended beyond present day Benin Republic to the Ewe speaking area of Ghana to the west; extended to the Niger River in the east and to the River Niger again in the north and bound by the Bight of Benin in the Atlantic ocean in the south.

The present day Benin is what is left after political manipulation and re delineation of the boundaries of the kingdom on restoration of the monarchy in 1914 by the British. Benin City proper (Oredo) is the area of Benin surrounded by the moat; the unexplored an unpreserved largest man made historic and defensive structure in the world.-

The present Edo State of Nigeria is home to Edo people. In spite of different variations in Edo dialects, the language is Edo. These people are all from the same quaver as they left Benin at different times in the history of the ancient Benin Kingdom. All Onojie or Enijie or Onogie or Enogie of towns and villages in Edo State are all blood relations of the Oba.

The history of Benin will be divided into three parts for this purpose.

The first period spans the arrival of Edo people from the Nile valley to Igodomigodo and the reigns of all Ogiso to the last one Ogiso Owodo

The second period spans from the end of the inter regnum to the annexation of the Kingdom by the British forces in 1897.

The current period spans from 1908 when Oba Eweka the 2nd was crowned and more precisely when the monarchy was restored and authority bestowed by the British to the present day. There have been three Obas in this period, Oba Eweka who restored the monarchy and power from the British after the deportation of Oba Ovoramwen to Calabar; Oba Akenzua who campaigned for the creation of Mid West Region and the present Oba Erediauwa who is a product of Cambridge university, a seasoned civil servant in the public services of Nigeria and a keen writer doing all in his power to straighten the history of Edo people.

During the period of the inter regnum when Igodomigodo was difficult to govern, diviners recalled that there was a surviving son of the last Ogoiso Owodo who was banished due to the treachery of the principal wife Esagho and the messengers by altering the message of the diviners.

Ekaladerhan refused to come back to the city of his birth as he was very old but sent his son Omonoyan in his place. He found it difficult to rule but had a child from the daughter of the Enogie of Egor who gave birth to a son later crowned Eweka the first.

We have had 38 Obas, most leaving their foot prints in the sand of Edo land. Oba Esigie was the first to come in contact with Europeans (Portuguese) and had an ambassador in the court of the King of Portugal. Oba Ewuare a physician, magician, hunter and warrior constructed Akpakpava Road and renamed the kingdom EDO.

The history of Benin is documented in wood carving, brass casting and oral tradition and it is authentic.

The system of government is a mixture of autocracy, democracy and gerontocracy. The Oba has absolute powers but there is an Iyase (Prime Minister) who heads the town chiefs who can argue or disagree with him on rare occasions, there are the palace chiefs and the Uzama ni Ihinron who are the King makers. The title of the Edaiken (Edayi Ni Iken) has a long history behind it; is the heir apparent who lives away from his father and is not

allowed to use the title until the Oba joins his ancestors. Succession is by primogeniture hence there is no in fighting for the exalted position when the Oba transcends unlike in other communities.

The Edo excels in arts. The wood carving industry is located in Owina, brass casting in Igun and weaving in Ihumwunidunmwun. The Benin artist perfected the lost wax method which they still use till today. After the sacking of the Kingdom by the British forces, a large number of the art works were looted and can be found in major museums in Europe and America. The most popular is the Idia mask which was the mascot for Festac 77 and symbol to many Black and Edo groups around the world.

Edo people are farmers, hunters, traders, fishermen and great travellers. Today they live in extended family homes in the villages and towns and this forms the social security system where 'everyone looks after everyone else'.

There are numerous festivals in Edo land to commemorate important events in the history of the Kingdom. The most popular is Igue Festival which takes place about Christmas time, the Ehor, new yam festival, Ikpoleki and the initiation of one age group into another.

Generally Edo people believe in the supreme God who is Osalobua (Osanoghodua) who they put first in everything. They also serve or remember their ancestors. In recent history there have been many deities introduced into the City from adjoining tribes like the Yoruba and Christianity by the missionaries.

Edo people are Pickwickian in nature, respectful, kind, friendly and ferocious in battle.

They greet with reference to their family which in a way identify them; for example la Emorę, la 'Giesan, La 'Tose, la 'Umogun etc, about 56 in all.

Due to the poor economic state of Edo land today, Edo people can be found in the remotest part of mother earth but one thing is certain, they never forget home as they cherish Edo land, the land of the red soil.

SEO

JUNE 2005