

*'...it is with assured pride that we can say that this book is unique
among all current publications on the Benin kingdom.'*

- Omo N'Oba Ewuare II, Oba of Benin



The Benin Monarchy

An Anthology of Benin History

A Wells-Crimson Publication

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'We are not makers of history. We are made by history.'
Martin Luther King, Jr.



By Royal Warrant of Appointment to
His Royal Majesty Oba Ewuare II
Oba of Benin

*The Anthology:

26 Contributing Editors

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'As we present this anthology to the world, we are persuaded that the contribution of our people and recognition for our noble civilisation will go far beyond mere reminiscences of the many distinctions which we have become famous for.'

- Omo N'Oba Ewuare II, Oba of Benin.

The Benin Monarchy

An Anthology of Benin History

Edited by Oriiz U. Onuwaje





FOREWORD

‘The Benin Monarchy: An Anthology of Benin History, while building on previous narratives, brings together the manifold intersecting worlds of our finest traditions, history and modernity to create for the reader a chronicle that illustrates all the features, personalities and dynamics that have framed our monarchy—and a kingdom as fascinating and intriguing as ours among the whole community of humanity.’

‘With the authority vested in me by Almighty God and our ancestors, I granted approval to the publishers to convene historians, anthropologists and essayists to put the history of our kingdom in perspective as we, the most intimately concerned participants in this epic, can tell it, in its truest details.’

‘The Benin heritage is here to stay; for if history is a collection of daily experiences, the predestined mainstay that powers our monarchy against the vicissitudes so copiously documented in this anthology bears testament that the sun will never set on a civilisation characterised by the determination of its people to affirm their heritage and demonstrate their unique endowments to human civilisation as it inexorably moves onwards.’

Excerpts from FOREWORD by
His Royal Majesty,
Omo N’Oba N’Edo Uku Akpolokpolo, Ewuare II.
Oba of Benin.



Infused with the grandeur, history, artistic accomplishments, and challenges that have arisen over the centuries, *The Benin Monarchy: An Anthology of Benin History* is an expansive examination of the history of a nation. This comprehensive book is destined to become a must-have item in the collections of those who have an interest in or a passion for African history, including of course every Bini person, Nigerian and African.

With contributions from historians, anthropologists, and essayists, this sweeping anthology is intended to be both informative and documentary in its scope. As the kingdom of Benin, now a part of Nigeria, has endured in spite of historical affronts and hardships, the arts, culture, and history of Benin now re-emerge in these pages for the world to appreciate and honour.

Superb photographic images of Benin artwork illustrate this impressive book. Highly prized by museums around the world, these prized artworks clearly indicate the sophistication and artistic skill of Benin society. The inclusion of anthropological-style photography will also fascinate the reader.



P R E F A C E

As happened elsewhere in what became Nigeria, European Christian missionaries attempted to evangelise the Benin court. They failed. On the whole, the Benin monarchy has maintained a sturdy neutrality in this matter of Christianity, even to the present day. The chief custodian of Benin civilisation will not yield ground to 'foreign' religions.

'If we may take a giant leap now into the invasion of Benin by the British in 1897, my views are stated in detail in my book The Fall of Nigeria. The killing of Europeans and a number of their African soldiers by Benin soldiers, the pretext for the Punitive Expedition of 1897, was, in my view, the consequence of the arrogance of the British vice-consul stationed in Warri. He had the courtesy to seek permission to visit Benin. He received the Oba's reply to the effect that he was busy with an annual festival, during which strangers are not allowed in Benin. The vice-consul defied the Oba's reply and set out for Benin with some of his white officials, traders and African troops. The Oba's forces engaged the British intruders, killed all the British officials and quite a number of their African soldiers. The Oba was, in my view, defending his kingdom which, at that point, had not yet been occupied by the British despite a subsisting treaty of protection. That encounter has gone down in the British records as the Benin Massacre. The Punitive Expedition took far more lives, saw the looting of priceless works of art in Benin and destruction of parts of the palace and city. The Benin Massacre was, for me, perpetrated by the so-called Punitive Expedition, not the killing of a few British officials who were violating the territory of an African ruler, in disobedience to the ruler's message to the British not to visit Benin at that time. As usual, it was a case of might is right...'

Excerpts from the PREFACE by
Obaro Ikime - Professor of History



Chapter 1

Benin Kingdom: The Growth of an African Civilisation

Explaining how the climate, geography, guild traditions, and dialects influenced the formation of the Benin Kingdom, this chapter by Osarhieme Benson Osadolor explains how Benin grew into a fully developed African civilisation. A fascinating set of theories about the origins of the Benin people is discussed, immediately followed by an extensive history of the line of monarchy.

Chapter 2

The Origin of Benin Kingdom and its Monarchy

The origins of the kingdom of Benin are further examined by Frank Ikponmwosa. He delves into the variety of migration myths and origin stories that permeate the history of Benin and relates how the tradition of monarchy became an essential part of society.





The Oba with Chiefs Osa and Osuan, with Europeans in the background

Oba Palace, Benin City Photo: Oriiz Onuwaje

Chapter 3

The Interregnum and
Establishment of
Oranmiyan-Eweka
Dynasty

Dynastic traditions and contentious interpretations of kingship lines are discussed by Uyilawa Usuanlele, including the theory that the embalming of the body of another royal (200 miles away) with Benin chalk established the foundation of a dynastic empire.

Chapter 4

The Oranmiyan-Eweka
Dynasty

Uyilawa Usuanlele, explains the history and origins of the hotly debated principle of primogeniture and why the acceptance of this was controversial at the time but has been retained since.





Chapter 5

**From Oba Oranmiyan
to**

Oba Ewuare II

Beginning in the 13th century
and moving forwards through
40 different Obas

This chapter is an overview of Benin kings in the second period of Benin history from c. 1170 up to the present day (2017). The history of kings can often reveal much about a people, an era and a nation.

Kokunre Agbontaen-Eghafona presents accounts of early Benin kings. Although written documentation is not always available, oral accounts were passed on across the generations. These may have taken on some of the trappings of mythology or folklore along the way, but they are still valuable historical records; moreover, they cannot be said to be entirely unwritten: as far back as ca. AD 970, a tradition of artwork existed where mnemonics were cast in clay to serve as visual reminders in the recalling of the oral history (orature) of the people and kingdom.

Chapter 6

**Great Benin:
From Kingdom to
Empire-Building,
1440–1897**

Reigning from the mid-1400s through to the late 1800s, the story of the Warrior Kings of Benin and their Frontier Conquest is related by Osarhieme Benson Osadolor. This was the expansionist Golden Age of Benin.





Bronze figure of a king; Benin Kingdom court style; Nigeria, 18th-19th century
Photograph by Franko Khoury National Museum of African Art Smithsonian Institution

Chapter 7

The Administrative and Political Structure of Benin Kingdom

- Origin, Significance
and Uses of the
Benin Chiefs' Regalia

In this chapter, Victor Osaro Edo details the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial modes of governance in Benin including the political hierarchy of the present day.

The significance of the Benin chiefs' regalia (by Aiko Obobaifo) is also explored in this chapter, with a variety of photos illustrating the appearance of the various types of ceremonial dress.

Chapter 8

The Military Organisation of Benin Kingdom

The evolution of the military system of the kingdom of Benin, from the period of the Warrior Kings onwards, is extensively examined in this chapter by Osarhieme Benson Osadolor.





Chapter 9

**Benin Traditional
Religious Practices:
Origin of Worship
at
Holy Aruosa Cathedral**

The traditional religious practices of Benin are examined by Victor Osaro Edo and Idahosa Osagie Ojo. This chapter includes information about the traditional belief in the head as a means of direct communication with God and the establishment of the Holy Aruosa Church in the Kingdom of Benin in the 15th century.

Chapter 10

**Economy and Society
in
Pre-Colonial
Benin Kingdom**

In this chapter Frank Ikponmwosa examines the economy and society of pre-colonial Benin and details how day-to-day trade evolved into a trading relationship with Europeans by the 15th century.





Chapter 11

Benin Royal Art: Artistic and Hand-Crafted Artefacts

This history of the Benin royal art, most notably the collection of brass plaques and commemorative heads, is followed by an examination of the intricate ivory pieces and rattle staffs which symbolise the collective authority of the ancestors. Barbora Půtová, Václav Soukup and Joseph Nevadomsky are the contributing authors of this section. The use of the lost-wax technique in metal casting is discussed and it is noted that the metal-working guilds in Benin employed this technique long before the emergence of European influences.



Chapter 12

The Guilds of Benin: Artefacts, Antiquities and Arts

The guild system of that was patronised by the royal monarchs was carefully nurtured for centuries, thus allowing the arts to flourish in Benin kingdom. Kokunre Agbontaen-Eghafona examines the history of this tradition and offers an explanation of the differences between artefacts, antiquities and art.







Chapter 13

Heroines and Queen Mothers of Benin Kingdom

- *Okuku Nogboka*: Head Dress Fit for Queens and Princesses
- *Usukporhu*: Defending the Oba and his Harem

The role heroines and Queen Mothers who led by example in Benin kingdoms' history is highlighted in this chapter. Written by Iziengbe Pat Ebuka-Onuoha, this chapter explains away any misconception of African women as weak, vulnerable, or inferior and offers today's young women an inspiration from the past.

The history and social relevance of *Okuku*, elaborate female hairstyles that have beads and brass blades woven into them, is well documented by Idahosa Osagie Ojo.

A description of the history and significance of the *Usukporhu*, the queen who defends the Oba and his harem is written by Osaisonor Godfrey Ekhaton-Obogie, who captures and throws light onto this previously undocumented and important part of the coronation process.



Chapter 14

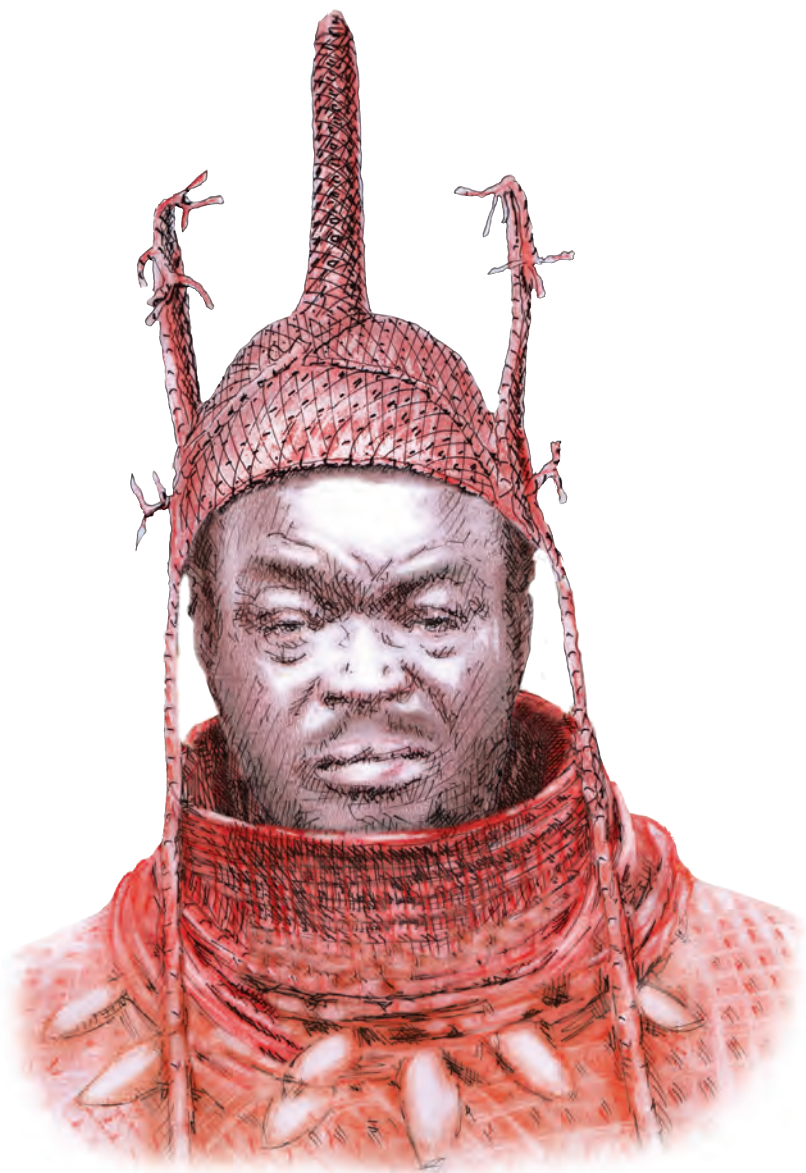
Oba Ovonramwen N'Ogbaisi:

1888 - 1914

The Last King of
Independent
Benin Kingdom

Oba Ovonramwen N'Ogbaisi was the last ruler of a wholly independent Benin before it came under colonial rule. His story, and the emotional tale of Benin's invasion by the British, is told by Philip A. Igbafe, who analyses and counters the often over-dramatised earlier commentaries in the country's history.





Artist's impression of Omo N'Oba Ovonramwen N'Ogbaisi



Chapter 15

Oba Eweka II:

1914 - 1933

**The Resilience
of the
Monarchy**

In a blending of traditions with the new colonial reality, Oba Eweka II firmly established the resilience of the Benin monarchy and was responsible for engineering the recreation of the kingdom of Benin. This period of history is examined jointly by Osaisono Godfrey Ekhaton and Festus Imuetinyan.





Chapter 16

Oba Akenzua II:
1933 - 1978
The Grandeur
of Royalty

The reorganisation and modernisation of the kingdom during the reign of Oba Akenzua II (1933 to 1978) rebuilt and re-established Holy Aruosa as the headquarters of the Benin National Church. This period is examined by Victor Osaro Edo.



Chapter 17

Oba Erediauwa:

1979 - 2016

The Philosopher King

A biographical examination of Oba Erediauwa 'the Philosopher King' by Michael Ediagbonya.





Omo N'Oba Erediauwa



Chapter 18

Oba Ewuare II: The Philosopher and Diplomat King

The Making of an Oba
*Modernity Steeped
in Undiluted Tradition*

The final chapter comprises a brief biography of the current Oba of Benin, Omo N'Oba Ewuare II. It also explores coronation rites and traditions, highlighting how ancient ways and ceremonies have been maintained alongside contemporary society's need for modernity.



Note from the Editor

'A common thread that runs through all the essays is the antiquity and glory of the monarchy, whose story is also that of the Kingdom of Benin. The kingdom's economy, social life, governance and military, as well as the production of the sophisticated and varied artworks by which the monarchy and people have preserved their culture and kept records, are all eloquently presented. The essays are complemented by an extensive collection of images of Benin artworks sourced from Omo N'Oba's own collection as well as museums and private collections across the world.'

This compilation is presented to stimulate further research into Benin history, traditions, and culture and to ensure that these are fully documented for posterity.'

Excerpts from -
Note from the Editor - Oriiz U. Onuwaje

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The background of the entire image is a close-up, detailed view of a tiger's fur. It features a pattern of dark, irregular black stripes on a lighter, golden-brown or tan base color. The texture of the fur is visible, with individual hairs and the way the stripes flow across the skin.

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