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The Guild System and Socio-Political Engineering in Pre-Colonial Benin Kingdom

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Abstract

The centrality of the monarchical institution in Benin was a necessary outcome of the evolutionary process of the kingdom, as well as the interaction of different forces and sectors of the society into the administrative web in which the Oba was at the apex of configuration. Various sects, groups, organizations and associations in the kingdom were organized in such a way that their cardinal objective was to serve the interests of the monarch, but also their individual corporate interests as well as the interests of the general society. The guild system that flourished in pre-colonial Benin qualifies as one such organization which, though primarily economic in composition, ultimately became a veritable tool of political direction and social engineering in the service of the monarchy. This paper previews the genesis of the guild system in Benin, discusses its structural expressions and evaluates its societal expectations vis-à-vis the adept utilization of the multifarious institutions by the Oba as functional devices in balancing the competing forces that characterized the intricate politico-economic and social existence of the kingdom.

Key Words: *Guild System, Benin Kingdom, Oba of Benin, Socio-political Engineering, Pre-colonial*

Résumé

La centralité de l'institution monarchique du Bénin dans l'Etat d'Edo au Nigéria était un résultat nécessaire du processus évolutif du royaume, ainsi que l'interaction de différentes forces et secteurs de la société dans le réseau administratif dans lequel l'Oba était au sommet de la configuration. Diverses sectes, groupes, organisations et associations du royaume étaient organisés de telle manière que leur objectif principal était de servir les intérêts du monarque, mais aussi leurs intérêts individuels collectifs ainsi que les intérêts de la société en général. Le système des guildes qui a prospéré au Bénin précolonial est l'une de ces organisations qui, bien que de composition essentiellement économique, est finalement devenue un véritable outil de direction politique et d'ingénierie sociale au service de la monarchie. Cet article présente la genèse du système des guildes au Bénin, discute de ses expressions structurelles et évalue ses attentes sociétales vis-à-vis de l'usage efficace des multiples institutions par l'Oba comme dispositifs fonctionnels pour équilibrer les forces concurrentes qui caractérisaient la gestion complexe des affaires politico-économiques et l'existence sociale du royaume.

Mots clés: *système de guildes, Royaume du Bénin, Oba du Bénin, ingénierie socio-politique, précolonial*

Introduction

The Benin kingdom is reputed to be one of the oldest in Africa. It is also reputed to be one of the most widely known, most remarkable and at a time, one of the most powerful forest kingdoms on the Guinea coast. As early as the 15th century A.D., the identity and capacity of the kingdom was already known to Europe. What however brought the kingdom to worldwide recognition is the sophistication of its visual and creative arts in particular, as well as the high level of civilization that it attained as expressed in the political structure organized around a theoretically absolute monarchy, a vibrant and

internationally adept economic system, with a social order that exhibited flexibility and dynamism of such nature as to utilize institutionalize conflict as its operational model. Also, the heroic resistance that was put up to British imperial encroachment into the territory and heartland of the kingdom that sparked off crisis between Benin and Great Britain, and the eventual military subjugation of the former by the latter in the closing years of the 19th century, as well as the consequent looting of sophisticated works of arts from the Benin and the spread of such throughout museums, art galleries and private collections in most cities of the Western world resulted in global recognition of this great African potentate.

The origin of the kingdom is a subject that is shrouded in mystery and has become an issue of controversy that is still generating new arguments, insights and postulations. Some authorities at a time commonly laid claims to an Eastern or Egyptian location – a tendency that commonly reflects the trend that subscribed to the now debunked 'Hamitic hypothesis', which ascribed all meaningful developments in Africa to light-skinned people who initiated such phenomenon in the continent. Another aspect of the origin of Benin is the mythical story – whose authenticity cannot be established due to the fact that its genesis is shrouded in mysticism and situated in a period that cannot exactly be pinpointed, as well as adopting a regressive outlook to the beginning of time. This tradition holds that the high God, Osanobua created the world and one of his children (the youngest) that he sent down to occupy the earth was the founder of Benin and subsequently became the first Ogisó – a title that literarily translates as 'king of the sky'.

This second tradition of origin not only attempts to explain the background of the people, but also that of the dynasty that was in place before the present one. The Ogisó dynasty – 'Ogie' meaning

king and 'iso' meaning sky hence 'Ogiso' that literally translates into 'the king from the sky'—was credited with many innovations that have become hallmarks of development and the celebrated level of civilization attained in a wide sphere of the existence of the kingdom. Benin tradition holds some Ogiso rulers in very high esteem on account of their phenomenal contributions to the evolution of the Benin polity. The primary person in this regard is Ogiso Ere whose reign would have begun at about 980 A.D. and was the successor to the first Ogiso known as Igodo. Ogiso Ere is remembered in Benin tradition for many innovations amongst which is the creation of the royal throne – ekete, the introduction of the royal sword and staff of office – ada and eben, as well as the establishment of the class of royal reciters and chroniclers of events called Ughoron.

This group had the responsibility of recording the events and achievements of the various Ogisos by condensing such into songs, ballads and incantations. To achieve this objective, the Ughoron evolved a time scale based on age-grades. The design was such that the period between one age-grade and another ranged from twenty to twenty-five years, which was computed as one generation – re. This made it possible and convenient for the Ughoron to record the events of the reigns of Ogisos in years and generations, a task that was improved upon by the innovative use of clay figurines of such Ogisos, having symbols depicting their achievements inscribed on such artefacts. With this, a fairly accurate record of the achievements of such Ogisos was produced and maintained.

Another phenomenal development credited to Ogiso Ere was the ossification of the positions of the five elders known as 'Edion n'isen'. The members – whose titles were the Oliha, Edohen, Ezomo, Ero and Eholo n'ire – were the high chiefs of the community. The chiefs owed personal loyalty to the Ogiso and under Ere, they were granted leave to hold their positions for life. Much later, under Ogiso Orriagba, their

positions became hereditary utilizing the rule of primogeniture. Of primary importance to this treatise in the contributions made by Ogiso Ere to the economic and socio-political spheres of the Benin kingdom was the guild system, in which various craftsmen were encouraged to form associations with monopoly rights to produce, standardize and market their products. To facilitate their processes, the Ogiso gave the guilds political cover by being the patron of all the existing guilds.

Historical Antecedents of the Guild System in Benin

Prior to the institution of the guilds of carvers (Igbesanmwan) and carpenters (Owina) by Ogiso Ere and their enhanced professionalism, higher organization and greater integration into the palace by compulsory affiliation to one of the associations of retainers much later by Oba Ewuare, the various bodies of artisans have been in existence in the kingdom. A concrete example is that of iron smiths – Igun'ematon – who occupied specific quarters in the capital and other parts of the kingdom, such as Eyaenugie, Adaha and Ugboha. In their respective domiciles and crafts, these iron workers had already attained a remarkable degree of professionalism which conferred on them social recognition as masters of their vocations.

What Ogiso Ere actually did was to organize the loose association of these craftsmen into compact bodies that now had form and purpose, with a view to having them serve the needs of the royalty in numerous ramifications, increasing their professional efficiency, raising the standard of their productivity and increasing the welfare of the members of the guilds. To make the arrangement more germane to the interests of the kingdom, it was accepted by all ab initio that the Ogiso was the patron and overlord of all the guilds.

This singular act opened the floodgate for other professional craftsmen to band up into craft guilds and associations that rendered

service to the Ogiso and the community, and within a short while there flourished guilds whose activities covered various aspects of the social, economic, religious and spiritual as well as some strategic aspects of the existence of the kingdom. Consequently, there emerged guilds of wood workers or carpenters (Owina), weavers (Owina n'ido), pot-makers (Emakhe), hunters (Ohue), leather workers (Esohian), carvers (Igbesanmwan), royal reciters and chroniclers (Ughoron) and long-distance traders or merchants (Ekhen). There were also guilds of native doctors, dancers, drummers, bodyguards, butchers, town criers, acrobats, royal retainers, etc.

Quite early in their existence, the Benin kings understood the advantages that they stood to gain from the institution of the guild system with monopoly rights over their specific areas of production, to primarily serve the interests of the royalty. In other words, it was a deliberate strategy on the part of the monarchy to benefit essentially from the economic value and surplus created by the guilds in their function of meeting other needs of the general society. In allocating specific time frames of evolution to these numerous guilds that sprang up all over the kingdom – records have it that there existed a total of sixty-eight guilds in Benin – it will become obvious that their evolution and growth spread across centuries from the Ogiso dynasty, through the period of political interregnum in the kingdom, to the second and successor of Eweka dynasty which is still in existent till date.

Thus, the origins of the guilds of blacksmiths, carvers, leather and wood workers, carpenters and bronze casters are solidly located in the Ogiso era. The specifics of their evolution also saw the transformation of some guilds from their initial status to newer terminologies or the expansion of their lineage from one particular family or ward into other more elaborate ones. With regard to the first instance, the guild of royal reciters and chroniclers (Ughoron) created

by Ogiso Ere was transformed into another body that came to be known as Ihogbe during the Eweka dynasty. For the latter instance, it was the case of the guild of leather boxes, shoes and accessories makers whose activities were initially reposed in the Ogiamien family in the capital city for a long time that later experienced a change by means of a royal decree issued in the reign of Oba Esigie. This decree liberalized membership of this guild (Isekpokin) and allowed new entrants from various backgrounds into the body.

A related case to the one above is that of the guild of carvers (Igbesanmwan) whose primary raw materials included wood and ivory. Though the guild had already been given formal existence during Ogiso Ere's reign, their activities reached a high point of recognition during the reign of Oba Ewuare who patronized them heavily and uplifted the guild from local to widespread prominence. The situation of the guild of weavers (Owina n'ido) is different from the above in that its origin is located in the reign of Oba Ohen who is reputed to have been struck with deformity. In the Oba's anxiety to hide his deformity from general knowledge on account of the fact that it will cost him the throne, it is reputed that he contracted the specialist weavers to produce patterns that covered his legs and hid the deformity.

The origin of the guild of bronze casters is fraught with some controversy that has been subject of interesting academic discourse. The popular tradition in respect of this issue is that related by Jacob Egharevba, who explains that Oba Oguola, anxious to imitate the works of art similar to those of Ife, requested a brass-smith from the Ooni and Igueghae was sent to him. While inferring on the one side that this tradition presupposes that the Benins learnt the art of brass-smithing from Ile-Ife, the same analogy could be used to establish a direct link to the claims that the Eweka dynasty originated from Oduduwa's lineage through his last son, Oranmiyan.

Phillip Dark is of the view that this 'borrowing' of art forms actually reinforces the dynastic links between Benin and Ife, but also quickly mentions that the style of brass-smithing displayed by the Benins was distinct from that of Ife. Another school of thought is of the opinion that this claim is not factual, on the basis that Igueghae is obviously a Benin name so he could not have been sent from Ile-Ife unless he had initially migrated to the latter town. This could mean possibly that he learnt the art in Ife and later returned to Benin, or that Igueghae – who is revered in Benin as progenitor of the brass-smiths, was the first Benin man to establish his fame in that field and has been deified by these followers as well as the populace on that account. Concluding, Phillip Igbafe submits that what is clear from the tradition is that Benin and Ife must have developed close ties of friendship to warrant the stories of exchange of princes and craftsmen.

Thus, it can be upheld that in the circumstances where the only source of information on such relationship is shrouded in the hazy mists of the past,... the evaluation of oral tradition itself demands a grasp of the social and cultural motivations which produce, perpetuate and modify them. They cannot be isolated from the contexts in which they are used in the society itself if African history is ever to be more than the rationalization of myth.

From the onset, the guilds were closely integrated into the administrative, political, social and economic fabric of the Benin kingdom, though the origins of the individual guilds can be traced to different reigns spanning the two dynasties. Different groups and professional craftsmen had existed in Benin before the monarchs instituted the practice of collapsing their talents into functional, specialized bodies so as to render services for the palace, guarantee the protection of the members, perpetuate their talents and skills, improve the level of economic development of the society and enhance the social organization of the kingdom. It is thus easy to

comprehend why the monarchy, which was the hub around which the entire socio-political and economic systems of the Benin kingdom rotated, became the pivot on which the foundation of the guilds was anchored due to their integral linkage with the socio-political and economic organization of the Benin kingdom in the pre-colonial era.

Nature and Structure of Guilds in Benin

The organization and structure of the guilds was in two perspectives. One was directly internal to the guilds, while the other one was exogenous to them but closely interlinked with the first. In the case of the former, each guild was either organized along the lineage of a particular family (for example the Isekpokin guild being vested in the Ogiamien family) or in a particular quarter in the city (Igbesamwan for carvers) or still, in the final outlook, in a particular village or settlement within the kingdom (Oregbeni for elephant hunters, Ugboha for blacksmiths and Idumwun-owina for carvers and carpenters).

In the first level of organization, the arrangement was such that the guilds were structured on family basis. Respective families were ascribed to certain specific guilds and their numbers were complemented by the infusion of emancipated slaves. It was common practice to find an Oba creating a new guild, whenever and wherever such need arose, by emancipating slaves and placing them under a titled chief or a favoured and loyal subject.

The headship of the guilds was reposed in the elders (Edion) whose responsibilities included indoctrination and supervision of the juniors (Enola) in the guilds. To attain the rank of an Odion or headship of the guild, the candidate either gets it by having the position conferred on him by the Oba, or by inheriting it from the immediate predecessors and lastly, on account of being the oldest person (Odionwere) in that guild. In the second level which was exogenous to the guilds, they

were of necessity affiliated to one of the palace societies in line with the services that they rendered for the Oba. This therefore meant that each guild was linked to the Iwebo, the Iweguae and the Ibiwe palace societies. It was for this reason that guilds such as those of the Oba's doctors (Ewaise), bodyguards (Isiemwenro), land purifiers (Evborhan), and witch-diviners (Oguanogbe) were affiliated to the Iweguae palace society which was in charge of looking after the Oba's general welfare.

The guild of wood workers (Igbesanmwan), leather workers (Esohian), weavers (Owina n'ido) and bronze-casters (Igun-Eronwon) were similarly affiliated to the Iwebo palace society, which was responsible for the Oba's regalia, wardrobe and the other paraphernalia of royal office. The guilds of drummers (Ikpema), acrobats and musicians that entertained the Oba and others during ceremonies and other special ritual occasions were equally affiliated to the Iwebo palace society. Lastly, the guilds responsible for the Oba's wives (Erunrie), the repairers of the harem (Inenogu) and the blacksmiths that provided utensils and other domestic items (Ogunimeto) were all affiliated to the Ibiwe palace society which had the responsibility of taking care of the Oba's harem.

It is noteworthy to establish here that the palace societies did not exercise direct control over the guilds. What obtained was a close and functional relationship by which the various palace societies identified which guild was to satisfy a particular need for the Oba, and then ensured that such demands were met. In such an informal manner, the palace societies to which the guilds were affiliated only exercised oversight controls over the various guilds linked with them. It was in this second level of relationship that the societal relevance of the guild was played out to its fullest capacity.

Guilds as Instruments of Societal Engineering in Benin Kingdom

The strategic relevance of the guilds in the Benin kingdom can be located in their contributions to the political, economic and socio-cultural aspects of the life of the kingdom in many ramifications. In the political arena, the guild system helped to lubricate the process of local administration in the kingdom. On the one side, members of a particular guild were quartered in the same area of the city or domiciled in a particular village for easy identification and location. Every new member thus necessarily resided in the same area as the guild he has joined, and the guild was responsible for the daily management of the vicissitudes of their members and that of the quarter. Since these quarters were in actual fact sub-units of local administration both within and outside the capital of the kingdom, the guilds subsequently became adjuncts of the local administration of the kingdom. Phillip Igbafe explicitly clarified this scenario when he expressed thus:

Within the guilds the day-to-day affairs rested on a dual basis of age-grades and possession of guild titles. The two age-grades were the Enola and Edion (juniors and elders) ... The Edion and the title-holders in the guilds formed the guild council and were responsible for the internal administration of the guild. The guild titles, which were quite distinct from titles belonging to the palace societies, were acquired either by grants from the Oba or by inheritance ... and because the guild council was responsible for the internal administration of the guild, they could be regarded as administrative units in pre-colonial Benin.

The perspective outlined above was concurrent with that of Alan Ryder when he upheld that: ... in the course of time, a high proportion were filled from families of the capital with a tradition of service in the palace. A period of palace service in the lowest grade may have been obligatory for all freeborn male subjects of the Oba ... a considerable proportion of those who served in the lower ranks could still return in

due course to their villages, thus helping to establish those links between the court and the people which were an important element in the political equilibrium of Benin. Thus the whole of the free adult male population became integrated with the palace organizations through which there were brought into some degree of personal relationship with the Oba.

Again the inter-linked nature of the activities of the guilds fostered administrative opportunities in the kingdom. The activities of the guilds over-lapped in such way that each guild was able to meet the needs of others while simultaneously serving the interest of the Oba and the community at large. For instance, the blacksmiths made cutlasses, axes, chisels and other tools for carvers and carpenters; the elephant hunters provided carvers with tusks while the guild of bodyguards received their weapons from the blacksmiths as well. This inter-dependence helped in no small way to foster greater cohesiveness in the society as the interests serviced by the guilds tended to overlap continuously.

Another important political and administrative function of the guilds, to which reference has earlier been made peripherally, can be seen from the nature of their affiliation to the various palace societies. The existing practice then was that the guilds would make use of the section of the palace ascribed to the palace society to which they were affiliated. By this means, messages from the Oba could be easily passed to them for whatever need was to be met, while their demands and petitions could be sent to the Oba through the same channel. This two-way communication channel played a crucial role of bridging the gap between the Oba and the guilds (in which ordinary citizens were the majority) through the instrumentality of the palace societies.

In the economic sphere the guilds were established to monopolize production, standardize their products, market and maintain their product lines. In some cases, they were also responsible for the collection of special levies, titular fees and induction charges which were all remitted to the royal treasury to boost the economy. Again, whenever the Oba needed anything the guilds concerned were requested to make such and these were given as gifts to the monarch in recognition of his being their overlord and grand patron.

Outside of meeting specific demands for the Oba, the items manufactured by these guilds were sold to other chiefs, influential personages in the kingdom, as well as the general populace. By these acts, the guilds generated revenue for their own upkeep and equally contributed their quota to the advancement of economic opportunities in the kingdom.

In the aspect of social relevance, the guilds performed a vital role in the society. Benin socio-political configuration was such that the palace societies were reserved for the lineages of chiefs and aristocrats, while the guilds were populated by the ordinary subjects and manumitted slaves of the kingdom. The possibility of social schisms that would have arisen from such class differentiation in the society were nullified by the fact of the affiliation of all guilds to one of the three palace societies, through which a two-way communication link was established between the monarch and the subjects. The social bridge thus established helped to create a sense of belonging and feeling of recognition of relevance in the members of the guilds, thereby emphasizing the generally accepted and important ideal that all the subjects were literally the monarch's servant – even Oba. In the aspect of international relations, that is relations between Benin as a sovereign kingdom and other principalities both within the region and abroad, the guild system played important roles in numerous

ramifications. The guilds were institutional media through which the Oba of Benin could express recognition to other sovereigns or confer acceptance on the selected rulers of some vassal states in the locality.

Benin traditions hold that Oba Esigie sent a gift of a brass crucifix, definitely made by the guild of brasssmith, to the king of Portugal in the sixteenth century. In a related development, it is commonly held that the bronze mask given to the Obi of Issele-Uku by the Oba of Benin is a way of recognition of the pre-eminence of the Obi over other similar kings in his area. These items mentioned in the two instances were produced by the guilds in Benin. Another way in which the guilds played a crucial role in Benin's international relations was in the diplomacy of foreign trade. This was conducted principally through the avenue of the guild of long distance traders generically called Ekhen – of which Igbafe has identified three main categories. These were the Ekhen-egbo (forest traders) who traded to Ekiti areas and places as far away as Ilorin with transit camps at Usen and Akure. Towns and kingdoms such as Ikole, Otun, Idanre and Ikare were transversed in the course of their trading activities. The other trading associations were the Ekhen-Oria which traded to the Esan areas and had Ehor as their base camp of operations, while the third was the Ekhen-Irhuen that traded to the Owan areas of northern Edo heartland.

In their trade functions, items such as salt, utensils, ivory carvings as well as bronze and brass artifacts, finished goods in leather, pepper, woven cloth as well other Benin products were exported from the kingdom by these trading guilds and on their return journey home, they brought back items manufactured in areas such as Nupe (glass, beads), Jukun (potash, copper), Akure (palm oil product, cloth, art works), Igboland (slaves, palm oil, palm products, artifacts) etc. The diplomatic functions of these guilds of traders spanned not only the trade sectors, but equally included their functions as envoys of their

monarch, the Oba. These long distance traders carried the culture and civilization of their kingdom to other areas, interacted with and even inter-married into many of their collaborating societies, and most often times acted as agents by providing information to the Oba about their observations of developments in the kingdoms and societies they transversed in the course of their trading activities.

By the time of the Portuguese arrival in Benin at about 1472 A.D. (Ruy de Sequiera) and again around 1485 A.D. (Joas Affonso d'Aveiro), the trade and craft guilds in Benin had already attained a high level of institutional development.³⁶ The Portuguese traders and sailors patronized Benin art and craftsmen were then allowed to produce for the foreigners. Benin arts, crafts and the relevant guilds as well as the economy of the kingdom received a boost from contacts with other places such as India, and on account of this, the guilds particularly that of the brass-smiths, carvers and royal reciters, spent more time in the palace recording events that occurred during this period of increased visitors from Europe and other continents.

By the 17th and 18th centuries, Portuguese monopoly of Benin trade had been broken and Benin began to trade with the Dutch, the British and the French.³⁸ However, the political crises that bedeviled the kingdom within the same period led to shrinkage of economic fortunes, which resulted in low productivity from the guilds. This had reverberating effects on the level of societal development in the kingdom, as the economy was closely intertwined with the politics and social advancement at the time. With unstable internal conditions, the regional and international situations were worse off. The ties with Ile-Ife and other major Yoruba kingdoms had been cut off, the trade with the north was disturbed by the Fulani jihad, and in the south the kingdom was confronted by unsavoury development of vassals claiming independence and former trading neighbours in the coastal region becoming hostile.

In the atmosphere of uncertainties created by the foregoing activities, the guilds in Benin kingdom remained focused on their original objectives which were to serve the Oba – their overlord, to monopolize production in their relevant sectors, to standardize their products, to develop the appropriate professional ethics for their vocation, to instill in their members the ethos and philosophy of an integrated, complimentary existence with other such bodies in the society, to provide for the well-being of its members as well as to guarantee their collective economic and social security from unfortunate circumstances. It is instructive to point out here that the guild system of the Benin kingdom remained extant and efficient until the later part of the nineteenth century when the kingdom was confronted and eventually over-run by the imperial forces of Great Britain. The results were disastrous for many of the guilds, and their relevance eventually waned as the new colonial power spread its tentacles across the kingdoms and societies that make up Nigeria.

Conclusion

The guild system that was established in Benin played crucial roles in the social and politico-economic engineering aspects of the life of the kingdom. They served as facilitators in the political and administrative machinery of the kingdom, helped to enhance the economic development of Benin and by their integrative roles in the social sector, acted as an effective device in mitigating whatever schisms may have resulted from the configuration of the kingdom into distinctive classes. In sum, the guild system in the Benin kingdom showed how indigenous institutions were adapted to address the challenges in pre-colonial African societies with a view to using such mechanisms to further the collective interests of the kingdom as a whole. Credit for the international recognition accorded the visual arts of Benin must be awarded to the guilds that were institutionalized in the principality. In contemporary times, the

surviving guilds that still practice their craft, though in highly limited and distilled forms, continue to exhibit traits that are reminiscent of the high level of artistry and civilization attained by the Benin kingdom in times past through the instrumentality of the guild system.

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