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## THE ROLE OF BENIN TRADITIONAL COUNCIL IN THE ADMINISTRATION OF BENIN KINGDOM.

BY

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### ABSTRACT

*The Benin Traditional Council is an offshoot of the Benin Central Council, and the institution seems to be unknown to many people who are not close to the Benin traditional system, and the functions of the council in the traditional administration of Benin Kingdom remain vague to such persons.*

*Therefore, this paper attempts to bring to the fore, the establishment, existence, coverage and functions of this very important institution in the administration of the Bini people. In fact, it was discovered that the functions of Benin Traditional Council are similar to the functions being performed by the Council of State in the contemporary Public Administration of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.*

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### INTRODUCTION

The belief among most western scholars was that pre-colonial African Societies had no system of administration, that is, no law, no order, no government and no civilization. This belief has long been seen as not only very erroneous, but also grossly subjective. (Edosa, 1994:1)

It has since been known that traditional African societies, indeed, had well-organized and well-established systems of administration where public order was provided and maintained, where laws were made and implemented; where tasks were executed, roads built, communal wells constructed, shrines and palaces built, village or town halls built, tributes or taxes collected. (Edosa, 1994:1)

One of the traditional African Societies to reckon with was the Benin Empire. Several centuries ago, at the time when Benin was called Igodomigodo, the geographi-



cal area now known as Benin was the hob of a conglomeration of little towns that developed or spread into most of the areas of modern Edo and Delta States. (Akenzua, 1979:7)

Throughout the 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 the Europeans made contact with the people of Benin in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, they had already established an administrative system which, till this day, baffled Europeans and earned for the capital of this "far flung" African country, the appellation City. (Akenzua, 1979)

The nucleus of this great civilization was the monarchy which the Binis perfected around the 18<sup>th</sup> century when after a series of experimentations with the Ogiso, and Ogiso Obas, they introduced a monarchical system that is based on the principle of primogeniture, beginning with Oba Ewuakpe (about 1712 A.D.). The principle of primogeniture, coupled with the establishment of the Benin Traditional Council has helped and is still helping in the administration of Benin. From the days of Ogiso Owodo until now, the system of direct ascension has endured making the Benin Royal family one of the oldest families in Africa. Its history spans more than 800 years. (Akenzua, 1979)

Benin City has remained as conservative as it was originally, but shifting slowly, sometimes uneasily, under the pressures of demands of modernity. Benin recognizes that all living organisms (including States and Cities) change. That change has reduced to mere historical fact, the political influence Benin exercised over places such as Eko (Lagos), which she founded at the time of Oba Orhogbua (about 1550A.D.), Ghana and Dahomey (now Republic of Benin), both across the borders of modern Nigeria, Onitsha on the Niger and many other places such as Asaba, Agbor, Issele-uku, Warri, Idah, Ondo, Owo, Ijebu – Ode, Idoani, Okpe, Aboh, Ora, Ubulu – Uku etc. Many of these towns actually owe their corporate existence to Benin. (Akenzua, 1979)

Benin is regarded as the cradle of black civilization, the home of culture, the heart beat of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, and its tradition has endured for so many years, and of all the empires of old West Africa, Benin Empire happens to be one of the best known in international studies.

In its own African setting, Benin was for many centuries, one of the greatest states in the West Equatorial Region ruling over a very vast territory to the west of the river Niger. Historical evidence shows that no one ever conquered Benin until 1897. (Igbinokpogie, Lawal and Ekhaton, 1997:11)

The Benin Empire had a very well integrated and organized administrative structures or institutions that worked to achieve the goals of the Empire, and these structures or institutions are still working in collaboration with each other to achieve the goals of the present kingdom. At the Apex of these institutions is His Royal Majesty, Omo N'Oba N'Edo, Uku Akpolokpolo, Oba Erediauwa, Oba of Benin



Kingdom who is ably assisted by the Benin Traditional Council.

Therefore, this paper attempts to bring to the fore, the establishment, existence, coverage and functions of Benin Traditional Council in the administration of the Bini people. In fact, it was discovered that the functions of the Benin Traditional Council are similar to the functions being performed by the Council of State in the contemporary Public Administration of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

## **BRIEF HISTORY OF BENIN**

The Benin people constitute one of the more than 364 ethnic groups that make up Nigeria. They are mainly concentrated in seven Local Government Council Areas of Edo State namely: Oredo, Orhionmwon, Ovia South West, Ovia North East, Uhunmwode, Egor and Ikpoba-Okha. Presently, these Local Government Council Areas comprise 47 wards. The population, according to the 1952 census was about 292,000 (including other Edo speaking groups). While the 1991 provisional census puts the population at 1,252,538 and as at today the population is about 6,000,000 persons. (Igbinkpogie, Lawal and Ekhatior, 1997)

## **ESTABLISHMENT OF THE BENIN TRADITIONAL COUNCIL**

The Benin Traditional Council was originally set up under the Local Government Edict 1976.<sup>28</sup> The Edict since replaced by Traditional Rulers and Chiefs Edict 1979 came into effect on 10<sup>th</sup> June 1977. The area of authority of Benin Traditional Council spans through Oredo, Egor, Ikpoba/Okha, Orhionmwon, Uhunmwode, Ovia North East and Ovia South West Local Government Councils, (which constitutes the present Benin Kingdom). (Local Government Edict, 1976)

Its president is the Oba of Benin. It consists of sixty-nine members including the president. The names of its membership are stated in appendix two. The Traditional Councils in the State were inaugurated by the then Military Governor, Commodore Husaini Abudullahi on 19<sup>th</sup> September 1977. The first meeting of Benin Tradition Council was held on Monday, 31<sup>st</sup> October, 1977 at Oba's Palace, Benin City at 10.00 a.m. with His Royal Majesty, Oba Akenzua 11 as President. (Eweka, 1983:1)

## **FUNCTIONS OF THE COUNCIL**

The functions of the Traditional Council are as set out in section 47 of the Traditional Rulers and Chiefs Edict 1979, and these are:

- (a) To formulate general proposals by way of advice to the local government or to all local government in its area,
- (b) Where applicable to harmonize the activities of such local governments through discussion of the problems affecting them generally and by giving advice and guidance thereon to such local governments.
- (c) Where applicable, to co-ordinate development plans of such local governments by joint discussion and advice.
- (d) Where requested by the Governor or as the case may require, by one or



all the local governments in its area, to assist in the assessment of rates in consultation with such local government or local governments in the area and their subsequent collection.

- (e) To give support for arts and culture.
- (f) To assist in the maintenance of Law and Order
- (g) To advise on any matter referred to it by the State or Federal Government of Nigeria.
- (h) To make representations or express opinions to State Government or any other organization on behalf of the local governments in its area collectively on any matter of concern to the area as a whole whether or not such a matter is within the legislative competence of any government or local governments.
- (i) To advice on questions relating to chieftaincy matters and control of traditional titles. (Bendel State Law No. 53 of 1977)

In fact, the entire functions of Benin Traditional Council can be likened to the functions of the Council of State in the Nigerian Public Administration. Under the Third Schedule, Part 1 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, the Council of State performs the following functions:

- (a) Advise the President in the exercise of his powers with respect to the:
  - (i) National population census and compilation, publication and keeping of records and other information concerning the same.
  - (ii) Prerogative of Mercy
  - (iii) Award of National Honours
  - (iv) The Independent National Electoral Commission (including the appointment of members of that commission).
  - (v) The National Judicial Council (including the appointment of the members, other than ex-officio members of that council), and
  - (vi) The National Population Commission (including the appointment of members of the commission);
- (b) Advise the President whenever requested to do so on the maintenance of public order within the federation or any part thereof and on such other matters as the President may direct. (Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999)

In summary, the Council of State plays a purely advisory role to the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. And by way of comparison, the Benin Traditional Council plays a purely advisory role to His Royal Majesty, Omo N'Oba N'Edo, Uku Akpolokpolo, Oba of Benin, the Federal Republic of Nigeria, State Governments and Local Government Councils whenever requested to do so on matters of traditional administrative system. It is very clear that the Benin Traditional Council is more articulate, well conceptualized, more pervasive, and therefore a forerunner to the Council of State in the temporary Public Administration in Nigeria.



## CONCLUSION

The Benin Kingdom has come of age with a well-organized, structured and articulated administrative arrangement, which pre-dates the modern administrative system in the contemporary Public Administration in Nigeria. The Bini people are regarded as the cradle of black civilization which expansionist move would have covered the whole of Africa by now, if not for the brutal intervention of the British colonial master. The expansionist quest by them was only an attempt to realize or operationalize the common Bini saying that: "Oba yan oto se evbo ebo" meaning Oba owns all lands in Africa and to Europe.

The British invasion of the Empire in 1897 brought with it a negative truncation of the developmental and expansionist quest of the Bini people, but unfortunately for the British exploiters, their invasion only served as an encouragement for the Bini people and its subsequent Monarchs to concretize their administrative and political mechanism, thereby bringing about a formidable, articulate, well organized and managed Kingdom that will last forever.

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