

# Benin Kingdom's Art Traditions and Culture

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## Abstract

This study works on Benin kingdom art traditions and culture. The methodology of these studies were based on field work and oral interview in writing the history of Benin kingdom and its monarchy. The various traditions in Benin City and its environs are also to be identified; potters, bronze casters were interviewed on the history of craft practice. The study also examines the symbolic meaning of each of the traditions. It projects the aesthetic qualities, and the effects of new ideas of the indigenous Benin people's craft, and how Benin culture in Nigeria are interpreted with respect to environmental influences from neighboring communities.

**Keywords:** *Benin Kingdom History, Benin Art, Benin Culture, Ancient Costume, Bronze Casting, Carving, Pottery, Nigeria*

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## Introduction

The Benin's occupy seven local government areas in Edo South senatorial district of Edo state, Nigeria Oral tradition has it that other tribes in Edo state migrated from Benin City. The Benin's are social, hospitable, accommodating and with outstanding records of art tradition in bronze work and other arts and they maintain a high standard of craftsmanship.

Benin City is the headquarter of Oredo local Government Area has developed to the capital city of the present Edo state which is home of culture, artistry and creativity. Benin kingdom became famous for its artistic arts production when an adventurous sea captain De Sequire discovered Benin court art in 1472. He returned to Portugal and described what he has seen in Benin kingdom on his visit to the coastal kingdom. (Elliot, 1973) recorded "in 1486 the Portuguese King sent Joao Alfonso d'Aveiro to Benin with some noblemen as an ambassador from one king to another. He came twice, and on his second visit he died in Benin City (as showed in Figure 1). The Benin court recorded the visit of Joao Alfonso d'Aveiro and remembered centuries later in the tradition of the royal court and was commemorated on the bronze plaques that recorded important events in Benin history. Because of these, the Oba and the king of Portugal exchanged letters for the first time in which some of the secrets of Benin were revealed to Europeans."



Figure 1. The visit of Joao Alfonso d'Aveiro. Commemorated on the bronze plaques credit. (Elliott, 1973).

## Historical Origin of Benin People

The history of Benin Kingdom from the earliest times to the present can be treated in three [3] phases. As recorded in (Uzzi, 2014) The first phase is the foundation period generally referred to as the Ogiso period [c. 900 – c. 1170]. The second period of the New Dynasty of Kings or Oba's [c. 1200 - 1897], while the third phase is that of Arts and craft, and its impact on Benin society.

The Benin Kingdom from the inception of its over 2054 years of existence is one of the greatest African Kingdoms. Founded by the Supreme God according to its myths of origin from 40 B.C. when the Ogiso Kings began to rule, and the Ogiso dynasty lasted for about 854 years' plus (Ebohon, 2019). The first Ogiso ruler ac-

According to (Igbafe, 2007) was Igodo, a prominent elder in his community [Odionwere] who exercised authority over the various small communities which collectively formed the kingdom known as Igodomigodo meaning land of Igodo or town of towns (see Figure 2). The most prominent among the known Ogiso rulers are Igodo, Ere, Orire, Oriagba and Owodo. The Benin kingdom began as a union of juxtaposed clusters of independent communities each surrounded by a moat. Tradition says that the last and worst of rulers of the Ogiso's dynasty was Owodo. (Egharevba, 1968) described his reign "as a long course of misrule, failure and anxiety". In the absence of any heir to Owodo, the people choose from among themselves Evian successor to Owodo since Evian was not an Ogiso, his choice of his son, Ogiamien as his successor in an attempt to legitimize his own dynasty was rejected by the people. This gave rise to the political factionalism, instability and disputes which formed the background of the new Eweka Dynasty.



Figure 2. Various small communities which collectively formed the kingdom known as 'Igodomigodo' credit (Uzzi, 2016).

There is different version of the circumstances in which the Eweka dynasty was established. One of the myth version as recorded by (Igbafe, *ibid.*) is that "the banished prince of Benin, Ekaladerhan, who was Ogiso Owodo's son, left Benin for Ughoton to escape from his executioners. After a brief sojourn and attempts to bring him back to Benin city, he decided to flee from his new home. Travelling through the village of Erua on the present Auchi road and through the forest, he surfaced in ile-ife, where he became king on account of his fortune telling abilities and magical powers. When the Benin's wanted a ruler, a delegation was sent to ask Ekaladerhan to return to Benin City. He subjected the chiefs from Benin city to a test by asking them to domesticate seven lice for three years and to return to Ife as evidence that they would be able to look after his son, arguing that he was too old to travel to Benin, and was in any case, not in the position to abandon his kingdom in Ile-ife. When the chiefs cultivated these lice on the head of Oliha's slave and returned to ile-ife with them in a well-nourished condition, Ekaladerhan

was presently surprised and decided to send his son, Oranmiyan, to rule in Benin kingdom (Ekaladerhan was the father of Oba Eweka).

Oba Eweka (1200-1255). Marked the beginning of Obaship in Benin kingdom he was succeeded by Oba Ewedo (1255-1280) it was Oba Ewedo that gave the kingdom the new name of Ubini which the Portuguese, on arrival recorded as “o Beny” from which Benin city was derived. Oba Oguola (1280) main notable achievement was the digging of trenches, the first Benin moat around the city in Oredo, to wade off attacks from his enemies and the introduction of Art (Brass casting). According to Benin tradition, Oguola sent to the Oni of ife for a brass smith in order to replicate bronze heads sent to him from ile-ife.

The fifteenth century marked the transformation of the kingdom of Benin into an empire under two capable rulers, Oba Ewuare I (1440) and Oba Ozolua (1481) it was during Oba Ewuare I that the city was renamed from Ubini after Edo. The change of the city's name to Edo, the city of love (edo n' evboahire) was to celebrate how his life was spared by the love of Ogiefa's slave. (Egharevba, *ibid.*) opined that he also encouraged ivory and wood carving in Benin and elevated Benin to the status of a city, and maintained a policy of aggressive conquest. Oba Oguola was the founder of Bronze casting; this art later became a flourishing trade in Benin City especially to the Igun-Eronmwon family which comprises mostly of two (2) families Osa and Inneh's families.

The “Oba” to the Benin's, is the representative of God on earth. When the artists are producing any work of arts either pottery or bronze work, etc. the Oba has to feature, the Oba has to be portrayed bigger than all figures in the composition. The Oba is seen as the link between the spirit world and the earth, therefore, heads of past Obas and heroes were deified and were worshipped as Deities.

### **Traditional Costume**

The ancient costume of Benin kingdom has been long in use, but still relevant in the modern time. The cultural importance's of Oba beaded Regalia of the Oba of Benin kingdom, dates back in history to the 16th Century and the contact with the Portuguese traders through the people of the Delta Region. But records show that even before that time in the 15th century beads were used for the head-dress of Oba Ezoti (1473). Figure 3 shows Oba Erediauwa and Oba Eweka II of Benin kingdom in full ceremonial regalia – Remarkable is his shirt of mesh necklaces of coral and high collar reaching from the shoulders to the chin. The winged head dress is a complicated shape with beads and upstanding forms. Crocodile masks and leopard head masks cost in bronze called uhums ekhue and other symbols hang from the waist. His arms regarded as the seat of his power are decked in numerous metal bracelets and wider wristlets deep set in ivory.

An attendant carries the Oba's sword (Ada) which, like the crown, shirt and shipers, is entirely covered weight and difficult to wear, and it is therefore usual for the Oba to be supported by attendants whining in Public.



Figure 3. Left, the beaded regalia of Oba Erediawa (2016 to date). Right, the beaded regalia of Oba Eweka II. Oba of Benin (1979 - 2016).

In the 16th and 17th centuries, it was reported by explorers to the Delta areas that the men were elaborately robed. Elaborate costume continued into the 18th century making much use of imported articles. The rights to such ancient styles are worn by the Oba and his chiefs and attendants for certain ceremonies (Figures 4 & 5). The upper part of the body was left uncovered. The lower part been covered with a white cotton cloth about a meter square, to serve as underwear. Over this a quality cotton cloth measuring from 14-18 meters long, was wound neatly around the hips and held at the waist with a narrow sash, decorated with fringes or lace at one end.

Within the compound even rich men wore the simple attire of a loin-cloth and wrapper. Poorer men wore 'beluko,' a short kilt-like loin-cloth made from locally woven cloth with bare torso. When an important chief is brought for audience with the Oba, he was not allowed to cover the body above his waist. Draped about his hips was the long like a crinoline, sometimes silk fabric was used. Quantities of coral beads and gold jewelry eventually accompanied this striking costume (see Figure 5, left).

The Benin's usually wear European dress, but on festive occasion the old chief's ceremonial dress reappears. The upper portion of the body is left naked, the only decoration being the coral necklace which denotes a chief. The lower part of the body is swathed in many yards of white cloth to form a shirt like covering. The illustration shows the chief with a grass plaited fan decorated with red leather cross and a ceremonial brass sword.

The hair of Benin chiefs is cut in a special way so as to allow a high ridge of hair to run across the head from ear to ear.



Figure 4. Left, Ceremonial paraphernalia of Oba Ewekw II credit wells-crimson (2019). Right, Ceremonial paraphernalia of Benin chiefs credit Negri (1976).



Figure 5. Ceremonial robes of Benin chiefs credit Edo National.

The Benin's recognize the importance of women in the community, but there are no women chiefs in Benin Kingdom. However, the women have their ceremonial dress. The main feature is the wig of human hair which is built up on a high frame and decorated with coral beads, such wig is only worn by Benin women especially the princesses, Olori's (Figure 6, left). The coral necklace denotes her status in the community. Her face has been tattooed with the juice of the indigo plant (see Figure 6, right). Figure 6, right showed casual dress of mother and child, the small boy is holding a box made from hides; it is for carrying gifts to the Oba of Benin who is the overlord of the Benin's. Her choice of dress and color remain unchanged, particular attention is paid by the woman to the patterns selected of which the manufacturers are fully aware. Usually they are bold in arrangement and such articles are telephones, ships, train, flowers, animals and fish are produced in repeat patterns. The head cloth is of silk or some material tied over the head. The skirt is usually made in two pieces and reaches to the ankles.

The illustration below in figure 6, left shows the royal Benin women while the right images shows a royal mother traveling to the local market or for visitation.



Figure 6. Left, Ceremonial dress of Benin Royal women. Right, Casual dress of mother and child traveling to the local market.

Marriage ceremony in Benin kingdom “Oronmwun” is the social arrangement (rites) by which a man and a woman are joined together and recognized by the society they live in (Ero, 2000). Opines that “in the past, babies/girl were betrothed to boys or men by their parents, but today, its more popular to see young men and women of marriage age coming together to court till they decide to marry. When they have made up their minds to marry. An introduction ceremony is conducted where the suitor in company of a few relatives brings some wine to introduce him to the girl’s parents. The father calls his daughter and if she acknowledges that the suitor is the person she wants to marry, the father then can accept the wine and a date is fixed for the traditional marriage ceremony where the girl is elaborately dress in beaded costume (figure 7). Traditional marriage ceremonies always take place at the residence of the bride’s father. Who is also supposed to give his daughter away.



Figure 7. Preparing for marriage.

It is within the ambit of costume in a bridal ceremony that other sub cultures such as greetings and courtesies will be interrogated. This is because, apart from being yardsticks by which families and their offspring are easily recognized publicly, they are important milestones in assessing the character of persons especially that of youths that are ripe for marriage and wanting to be accepted by another family as one of their members. There are specific greetings in Benin that are associated with particular families and it is from these greetings that unfamiliar members of an extended family know themselves. This act of recognition is very important in modern day social structure to enable relatives show patronage and support to one another as well as preventing them from committing certain social taboos or sacrileges that may have far reaching consequences on the offenders and the entire family at large. Such offences include sexual affairs or murder.

It is in this respect that Benin aggregates themselves with the culture of “omoluabi” in Yoruba terminology, or “omonabiese” in Edo language. According to (Igbino, 2010:80-82) “The Benins as well as the Yorubas, share exactly the same beliefs and philosophy about the concept of Omoluabi and what it portends for personal, community, and national progress and development.” Continuing, he observed that “Consequently, an Omoluabi or Omolnabiese is marked by goodness, trustworthiness, consciousness, decent moral living, obedience, faithfulness, love, patriotism, mercifulness, patience, truthfulness and ability to meet civil responsibilities and obligations.”

It is within the framework of culture of courtesy that the Benins have evolved a unique way of saluting and paying reverence to their Obas which they expect all the visitors to the palace of the Oba to emulate. (Ogunyemi, 1979:61) notes. “Now this is how you’ll greet the Oba. Clench your right fist, raise the hand up, bend your elbows like this and shake it at him with the other hand holding your bent elbow- all in reverence.”

### **Hereditary**

This is a socio-cultural system by which the Benins regulate the society and establish peace and order. The culture of hereditary in Benin kingdom is very sacrosanct and has been in existent from the period of the founding of the kingdom. It is a system whereby authority is transferred by members of the family unit and the ruling class for a smooth and rancor free administration in the kingdom. (Egharevba, 2005:4) views that “About one hundred villages in Benin kingdom have hereditary chiefs (Enigies) who are descendants from sons of the different Ogisos (first rulers of Benin kingdom). He further noted that this method was emulated by subsequent rulers during the Obaship period.

### **Taboos**

Taboos are known as “awua” in Benin language. These taboos include rules and etiquettes put in place to regulate the society and to check peoples’ excessiveness or restrict persons of dubious intentions within socially accepted standards and practices. Taboos can be generally applied throughout the society where it becomes binding on all persons or sometimes they are applied through certain social organs such as religion. (Ebohon, 2010:272) contends that when an adherent contravenes its rule, Olokun (the goddess of the river) will unleash certain



calamity on the person. As a result, Olokun adherents are expected to abide by the rules and abhor practices that are offensive to the goddess. Some common taboos in Benin includes abhorrence from eating in the dark, desisting from committing incest, not killing or eating vultures and not making love in the farms etc.

### **Food**

Like all societies, Benin people prepare and consume food for personal, communal and festival purposes. There are varieties of traditional foods in their cuisine and their modes of preparation sometimes differ from their uses. The way a particular food is prepared for domestic consumption is different from the way it is prepared for communal or festival need and there are women that specialize in preparing meals meant for special social purposes. In spite of the wide spread presence of national, continental and inter-continental cuisine arising from mass mobility, westernization and the internet, Benin still boasts of a handful of some special traditional cuisine such as “emieki” or corn meal, “akasan” or corn cake, “bobozi” or cassava flakes, “uloka” or bean cake, “eba” or cassava meal.

In the past and even in present day, certain categories of food are delicacy for the elderly or sick persons and pounded yam is the most outstanding food specially meant for elderly people or father of the home or those that are recovering from ill health. This is because yams commonly known as king of crops and are scarce especially towards the planting season. Moreover, preparing pounded yam is usually a laborious task especially before the era of machineries when human labor is required throughout the process of preparing a pounded yam meal. Today, pounding machines have reduced the stress on humans.

Notable traditional soups in Benin society are “black soup” which main ingredients are derived from ground fresh edible green leaves, banga soup derived from palm kernel and “egusi” or melon soup and “ogbolo soup” which major ingredient is derived from juggernaut seed.

### **Arts and Craft of Benin Kingdom**

The ancient city of Benin is known for her great artifacts in the area of bronze-making sculpture, monuments as well as art works that contributed a great deal to her historical civilization. Most notably the collection of brass plaques and commemorative heads, it contributes to a greater extent, to the development of Benin City via tourism, and employment generation as well as enhancing and promoting the cultural heritage. The famous bronze of the kingdom of Benin depict full figure and head, but include plaques decorated in high and low relief with scenes of warriors, chiefs and Portuguese traders. The bronze plaques also illustrate the local architecture, revealing major palace structures with tall central towers. The Benin bronze caster uses lost-wax technique in casting it metals, the artists employed this technique long before the emergence of European influences.

The wealth of Benin Kingdom in slaves, palm oil and petroleum resources as well as bronze and ivory cannot be overlooked. Also the mastery in magical art earned

them the respect of people nearby and far and wide. Oba Oguola was the founder of Bronze casting; this art later became a flourishing trade in Benin City especially to the Igun-Eronmwon family which comprises mostly of two families Osa and Inneh's family.

The Benin's use the knowledge of moulding and carving in Bronze casting. It was observed that Bronze casting claims the highest place in the traditional art and craft of the Benin's, especially in Nigeria and African scenes. Oral tradition has it that during the olden days, Bronze casting works were not works that were kept at any body's disposal. But only to the Oba of Benin shine. Among all Benin artistic traditions, Bronze casting is more popular.

Pottery has been an old tradition in Benin too and Africa in general; it is mainly practiced where there is abundant supply of the raw materials, which is clay. The traditional potters do not make use of sophisticated equipment's like throwing wheels, kilns, blungers, etc. In any case, traditional potters produce pots that are used in special ceremonies e.g. Olokun cult, yam festivals and house hold use. (Emokpae, 2001:115) states that "Olokun pot is for the goddess of water; they are carried on the head by newly initiated Olokun priest in Edo state." (Fowowe, 1999:43) points out that pottery making seemed to have been restricted to the rural communities. Intense potting activities went on at Useh (a village about five kilometers west of Benin) and at Oka (another village south-west of Benin City), Uwelu (between Useh and Benin City) and Orha (where pottery with "rope" decoration is made.

The Benin's pottery types are several but most of the pottery types fall into four main functional groupings, namely:

- Food bowl "Ovbi-uwawa"
- Cooking pots "Uwawa"
- Flasks and coolers "Akhamen," "Ovbi-eluba" and "Duama"
- Ritual or cult pots "Ovbiakhe olokun" Usomwan uwawa"

The types and functions vary, depending on the subgroups and village that is producing the pots.



Figure 8. Left, ritual or cult pots "Ovbiakhe olokun" courtesy: National Museum. Right, Ritual Pot.



Figure 9. Cooking pots "Uwawa."



Figure 10. Left, flasks "Akhamen" courtesy: National Museum. Right, a water storage pot.

Arts and crafts now hardly appear in school curriculum, where it appears there are no teachers to teach the subject. (Broni, 2004) observed that most of the objects of pottery have lost their functional role to other objects as a result of development perception, religious beliefs and other factors. (Udeme, *ibid*) went further to say that "new converts were made to believe that everything indigenous is fetish. For this reason, the converts stopped making pots. Presently the emergence of white collar jobs is gradually affecting the pottery business; there is mass movement of people from village to city. Also because of formal education children now have the opportunity to pursue diverse careers other than being tied to traditional craft; because most of them don't want to spend their time in the village. (Uzzi, 2004).

Oka which used to be a potting village near Benin has been taken over by modernization, making it difficult for potters to carry out open air firing, while clay which used to be gotten free is now very expensive and difficult to get. The mass production of traditional flask and coolers "has dropped drastically because of alternative products." (Ekwere, 2002) observed that "Our domestic markets have witnessed the influx of industrial containers such as aluminum pots, pans plastic figs, buckets and basins, porcelains and enamel ware." This development constitutes serious threat to the traditional craft. Western education has influenced traditional potters of Oka to move into making flower pots and planters. The only occupations of Igun-Eronmwon family and Oka community (village in Benin City) that have been passed from generation to generation are Bronze casting for men while pottery

for women. Apprenticeship training was always given to the younger generation about the craft of the entire community.

### Igue Festival in Benin

One of the most important festivals the Benin's carry out on a yearly basis is Igue festival. During this festival a lot of merriment and dancing takes place. The local alcoholic drink, palm wine is usually served on this occasion. The container used in serving this drink is usually a pot "owaluba." Coconut and colanuts are cut into 21 pieces served in a small pot used for prayers and thanking God for a successful year. (Udeme, 2006) asserts that "the introduction of Christianity and formal education has had a serious effect on the tradition."

### Conclusion

Benin's traditional Culture has come a long way despite little or no encouragement from the state / Federal government, Arts and Culture activities are still going on in Benin, Oka, Usen and its environs. They still produce wonderful Bronze and beautiful pots. In almost every house in ancient Benin kingdom you will see Bronze head, cult pot "ovhiakhe olokun" or "akhamen" water flask. I strongly recommend that government should not let Crafts suffer extinction. The Benin's Artists should be alleviated by giving them short-term loans, organizing workshops and encourage them by collecting some of their works and exhibiting it Nationally and internationally. Government should look into the closure of Fine and Applied Arts Department in College of Education, and introduce Pottery into school secondary school curriculum. Finally, modern methods of kiln firing should be exposed to the Potters and Bronze casters through organized workshops.

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