

The 1897 British Expedition in Historical Perspective: its Lessons and Challenges.

By Dr. Victor Osaro Edo

Introduction

The year 1897 marked the end of an era in Benin history, and is arguably the year that marked the downfall of the kingdom. In that year, the British terminated the indigenous monarchical rule in Benin in response to the assassination of certain British officials under the command of Acting Consul-General Phillips. The Benin monarch at the time, Oba Ovonramwen (1888-1897) was arrested, tried at the Palava House and exiled to Calabar where he died in 1914. Benin, therefore, entered an era of interregnum between 1897 and 1914. The monarchy was, however, restored in 1914 after the death of Oba Ovonramwen.

As a result of the British invasion and conquest in February, 1897, Benin which was the dominant kingdom in the Bight of Benin and Biafra became subjected to British rule and thus started the gradual and progressive adaptation of the institution of the monarchy with colonialism as the primary agency of change.

The British Expedition and the Fall of the Benin Kingdom

It is significant that the fall of Benin and its monarch should not be associated only with the British expedition of 1897. The Benin kingdom, like many other West African kingdoms in the nineteenth century, was a victim of the nineteenth century European imperialism launched at the Berlin West African conference of 1884-1885. It is significant that Benin had had a long commercial contact with the Europeans. After the Berlin conference, the fall of the Benin kingdom was inevitable. It would be wrong to say, as it is often asserted, that the massacre of the Phillip's party was the cause per excellence of the fall of Benin in 1897¹.

By 1884, Consul Hewett, representing the British imperial interests had signed spurious treaties with chiefs in the whole of the Niger Delta in which they (chiefs) promised to place their countries under the protection of the British Queen. As a result of these treaties, protectorate government was set up with its headquarters at Calabar. The Benin area fell within the province of the protectorate government even though the *Oba* of Benin did not sign any of these treaties².

By 1886, the activities of the Royal Niger Company had spread all over the areas surrounding the Benin kingdom. The various expeditions of the company must have created some feelings of apprehension in the Benin authorities. The cold reception accorded treaty agents and the attack on

Phillip's party (at the time of the great Igue festival when the Oba was to receive no visitors)³ were by tradition stimulated by the suspicion aroused by the fear of a possible invasion by the protectorate government agents. The fall of Benin from 1885 onwards, became inevitable and the attack on Phillip's party in 1897 merely provided the excuse and the occasion for the invasion and conquest of the Benin kingdom.

Following the capture of Benin and the suspension of the institution of the monarchy, the indigenous administration headed by the *Oba* was replaced by an alien administration. The year 1897 thus represented a land mark in the history of Benin. Indeed, sad enough, the Benin heritage typified by her arts and crafts were carted away. They now adorn the museums in Britain and other western European countries. Efforts to have them returned yielded no dividends; not even in 1977 during the Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC 77) that took place in Lagos, Nigeria. From 1897, forces were set in motion, which progressively challenged the traditional powers and influence of the Benin monarchical institution. With the consolidation of British authority, the Benin chiefs were compelled to adjust and adapt themselves to the changing political environment. Rather than defend tradition, some of them decided to find a place in the new dispensation and were used as "warrant chiefs"⁴ by the British.

After the infamous British expedition, a consequence of the attack on and killings of some members of the British party earlier in January 1897, and the subsequent deportation of Oba Ovonramwen to Calabar, the British had to find an alternative system of ruling Benin. They found an answer in the establishment of a Native Council. Having decided to set up the Native Council, the British were faced with the problem of the redistribution of power in Benin because they needed administrative assistants. They found a solution in the selection of some chiefs as members of the Benin Native Council (B.N.C.). The selection was, however, not determined by the existing tradition, but was based on chiefs who made an easy submission to the British officials.

The Native Council set up in 1897 consisted of the following chiefs: the *Iyase*, *Osodin*, *Obaseki*, *Ine*, *Uwangué*, *Ihaza*, *Ima*, *Obahiagbon*, *Osague*, *Ezomo*, *Ehonlor*, *Ero*, and *AyObahan*⁵. This Council was different in composition from the *Oba's* council of the pre-British era. Not all those who sat on the *Oba's* council were now appointed to the Native Council⁶. The traditional order of seniority of those chiefs appointed to the council was not respected. For instance, Chief *Osague* who was the head of the *Oba's* council was not regarded as such by the British officers. Instead, the *Obaseki*, a junior chief, was made the vice-president of the Native Council. According to Igbafe, it would appear that each chief was selected because he was reckoned potentially useful to the administration⁷.

This Native Council formed the main instrument of government during the interregnum. It represented a few chiefs of the nobility class in Benin. It combined judicial functions with legislation and was directly controlled and presided over by the political officers, who were responsible for most of its administrative decisions. The Native Council represented a centralisation of power in the extreme, totally at variance with Benin traditional practices. Unlike the Native Council, the pre-British central council in Benin left much of the local issues to the villages under their *Enigie* and *Edionwere*⁸.

The deportation of Oba Ovonramwen as we have seen is significant in evaluating the changing fortune of the Benin chiefs in the new administrative structure. The exit of the *Oba* created a vacuum in the pre-British hierarchical political system for the institution of the monarchy. It turned the chiefs to stooges of the British as they easily succumbed to alien rule and undermined their positions and traditions of Benin. It became clear to the chiefs that their roles in the traditional political structure had been distorted by the incursion of alien values and system of government, and that they were to adjust themselves to the changing situation. Even before the deportation of the *Oba*, the realities of the situation were made known to the chiefs.

Before *Oba* Ovonramwen and the chiefs who were assembled at the consular court on the 7th of September, 1897, the Consul-General, Sir Ralph Moor, made the following public declaration:

...now this is the Whiteman's country, there is only one king in the country
and that is the Whiteman... Overami is no longer king of this country – the
Whiteman is the only man who is king in this country and to him only service
is due...⁹

With this pronouncement, Moor defined in very clear terms the position of the traditional authority in Benin vis-a-vis the new British officers who represented the conquering power.

At this juncture, the question arises, what are the challenges and lessons that can be learnt from the British Expedition of 1897 to Benin. The next section will now focus on this.

Challenges and lessons from the 1897 British Expedition

There was a period of interregnum, which lasted for seventeen years (1897-1914). During this period, the paramount chiefs created by the British administrators occupied the hitherto cherished position of *Eghaevbo n'Ogbe* (palace chiefs). Tributes were no longer going to the *Oba* who was now in Calabar, but to the British. There were no more pages to go to the districts for the purpose of getting supplies of food to the *Oba*. The *Oba's* farm, which was manned by free labour

and supervised by the *Eghaevbo n' Ore* (town chiefs) was now left only to be plundered by the people.

Many of the chiefs became poor as the sources of extra wealth were now blocked by the British. Even the daily *Eguaematon* (court) was cancelled. In its place, the Native Council was created. Only the paramount chiefs were allowed to attend the Native Council. The British took over the control of the affairs of Benin and abused the traditions by the change in power structure and administration. The selected or chosen chiefs became wealthy and power drunk as they became popular before the British administrators, but very unpopular before the majority of the people.

Since the British administrators did not consider the laid down institutions of title-groups and grades in Benin, those who would serve them faithfully and loyally struggled to be seen in order that they might be promoted. Hence, the privileged paramount chiefs devoted their lives to the services of the Whitemen in order that they might be seen and honoured: one of such hardworking chiefs was Agho Obaseki, who was made a paramount chief, among several others, in the created institution of paramount chiefs¹⁰ during the interregnum. This was the time Chief Agho Obaseki came to the notice of the British.

The new structure of administration typified by the Native Council and the policy of paramouncy culminated in the rise and elevation of Chief Agho Obaseki¹¹. The role played by Agho Obaseki was a great challenge to the institution of monarchy in Benin. It was also one in which great lessons were learnt. But even more important was the fact that the force of tradition withstood the storm and the monarchy was restored with time. Herein lies the trust of this paper as we shall see later.

It is worthy of note that Chief Agho Obaseki, given the new dispensation, dominated the Benin Native Council. By sheer strength of character, sterling qualities of leadership, outstanding ability to control men and willingness to carry out the wishes of British officers, Chief Agho Obaseki rose to the position of being the 'mouthpiece' of the other chiefs. However, he was to become a stumbling block to the restoration of the monarchy.

Indeed, by 1914, the British officials realised that the government in Benin had become isolated and could not really identify itself with the people. Therefore, they decided to reinstate the monarchy for a number of reasons. First, the substitute of a Native Council to replace the *Oba* and perform his duties had not worked. Second, the Warrant Chiefs so created did not receive the favour of the people. Third, the British were faced with the difficulty of making the newly favoured chiefs acceptable to the people. This political reality, posits Igbafe, in many ways compelled a change in the administrative structure in Benin¹². The people demanded for a change of administration basically because the paramount chiefs were corrupt. For instance, some of the chiefs were accused

of illegal exaction of tributes, financial mismanagement, abduction of women and the organisation of unauthorised courts¹³, which was hitherto not the case in the pre-British era where the *Oba* exercised traditional restraint. The absence of such a check by the *Oba* during the interregnum encouraged corruption, which characterised the administration of the paramount chiefs in their districts.

However, the British were in the process of reinstating the monarchy when the deposed *Oba* Ovonramwen died in exile on 13th January, 1914¹⁴. Given these developments and the popular demand for the restoration of the monarchy by the people, the British immediately restored the institution that year. In fact, popular opinion in Benin (with the exception of a few chiefs) clamoured for the *Oba*'s son, AiguObasinwin, to succeed his father. This was in accordance with the events of 1906 when AiguObasinwin led other chiefs in a movement to remove Chief Agho Obaseki and restored *Oba* Ovonramwen¹⁵. Thus, with Ovonramwen's death, AiguObasinwin was to Benin chiefs and people, the only logical and traditional successor to his father. AiguObasinwin did not, however, find it easy to regain his father's throne, for the British nearly planted Chief Agho Obaseki as the *Oba*.

Before the installation of Prince AiguObasinwin (the *Edaiken* of Uselu and heir apparent to the throne of Benin) as the *Oba* of Benin, the British administrator, Captain Moor, had to face the challenge of an *Uzama* chief, the *Ero* of Urubi. The British wanted to put into practice the 'Indirect Rule' as practiced in the Northern part of Nigeria. The only trusted man who could do the administrative work for them was Chief Agho Obaseki. Encouraged by the British and compelled with his own ambition, the *Obaseki* made efforts to become the *Oba* of Benin. According to Pa Oghagbon Aiguedowan, Chief Obaseki carved his front door to look like that of the *Oba*¹⁶. All other *Uzama Nihiron* (kingmakers) except Chief Izedomwen, the *Ero* of Urubi, agreed to serve under Chief Agho Obaseki if made the *Oba* of Benin. The *Ezomo*, Chief Osarogiagbon, was a relation of Chief Agho Obaseki¹⁷. It seems that this relationship between Chief Agho and the *Ezomo* influenced the support, which the *Obaseki* had from other chiefs.

According to Pa Aiguedowan, the *Ezomo*, in giving support to the *Obaseki* said that he would serve under anybody as long as the British had sanctioned that person as *Oba*. Chief Izedomwen, the *Ero* of Urubi, was said to have vehemently opposed the *Ezomo* and others who supported Chief Agho, the *Obaseki*. Izedomwen told the British officer, Captain Moor, that in the tradition of Benin, it is the same rule that governs the succession to the office of every *Uzama* chief and the *Oba*. As the *Uzama* chieftaincy is hereditary, so also is the *Obaship* in Benin¹⁷. According to Bradbury, dynastic continuity was the first axiom of Edo political values, and there was almost universal agreement that AiguObasinwin was the only acceptable candidate¹⁸. The views of Chief Izedomwen were taken by

Captain Moor who instructed Prince AiguObasinwin to perform all the traditional rites of his father and become the Oba of Benin.

It is worth noting that the issue involved in the succession of Prince AiguObasinwin to the throne of his ancestors highlighted the extent to which the British had influenced the political structure of Benin during the years of interregnum. Traditionally, the *Edaiken* of Uselu succeeded to the throne at the death of an *Oba*. The *Edaiken* of Uselu was (and is still) the official title of the heir apparent to the Benin throne and was bestowed on an incumbent's first son. It was, therefore, surprising that Chief Agho, the *Obaseki* of Benin, who had become a very powerful and influential chief collaborated with the British to oppose the custom of the land. Besides, he was backed by some senior chiefs who, contrary to tradition, connived to get him installed as the *Oba* of Benin, but failed¹⁹. Those chiefs tried to convince the British officer that the *Obaseki* would be a good *Oba* of Benin, because he had been an integral part of the colonial government. The reason for the support of some of the senior chiefs might not be unconnected with the recognition the British had given to Chief Agho Obaseki for his role in the British conquest of Benin and his continued relevance in the British administration since 1897.

In fact, the *Obaseki* would not have turned down the opportunity of founding a new dynasty. Indeed, James Watt, then Resident of the Benin Area would certainly have welcomed the accession of the government's most trusted agent had there been any chance of legitimising it. However, it was soon made clear to him that any move to install the *Obaseki* as *Oba* would be strongly resisted by the chiefs and the people²⁰.

Prince AiguObasinwin was later crowned the *Oba* of Benin on 22nd July, 1914 with the title of Eweka II. From this time on, the relationship between Eweka II and Chief Agho Obaseki became strained. Also, at this crucial time, according to Chief Omo Osagie, the late *Iyase* of Benin, Chief Okizi²¹, the *Iyase* of Benin then, died and the post of *Iyase* became vacant. As the *Iyase* (Prime Minister) is the next to the *Oba*, the British administrator influenced the *Oba*, Eweka II, to bestow the chieftaincy of *Iyase* on Chief Agho Obaseki²², which was immediately carried out. Although the Bini (Edo), like the Baganda of Buganda²³, cherished their monarchical institution and were happy at the restoration of the monarchy, they did not like the post of the *Iyase* given to Agho Obaseki²⁴, but there was nothing they could do under the circumstances. The position of the *Iyase* is the second highest office in the Benin political hierarchy. Chief Agho Obaseki, elevated to the post of the *Iyase*, thus became the second highest office in the Benin political structure or administrative setting.

Thus, with the restoration of the monarchy, the British introduced the indirect rule system into Benin, making use of the *Oba* and his chiefs as their agents in exploiting the kingdom. However, the implication of this new development is tremendous. First, the *Oba* ceased being the sovereign

ruler of Benin. Second, the Benin Native Council as constituted became executors of the orders of the colonial agents posted to the area by the British Native Council as well as the areas covered by their authorities did not conform strictly with the traditional political arrangement of the pre-colonial period. For instance, Igbafe indicates that contrary to tradition, Agho Obaseki, a junior chief in Benin was appointed paramount chief for Benin²⁵. Forth, the roles of the paramount chiefs that became elevated as a result of the political development of 1897 changed considerably as examined above. They had to execute order from the District Officers or Residents who were their political superiors. This political situation prevailed in Benin until 1914 when monarchy was restored.

It should be noted that the British did not want to restore the *Oba* to his former status. The authority of the *Oba* was severely curtailed. In Igbafe's assessment, the most important aspect of the restoration is to be found in what was not restored²⁶. What was restored was a caricature of the traditional monarchy. There were strict limitations on the powers of the *Oba* and his chiefs. The *Oba* was stripped of his ancient power and in the letter of his appointment, it was stipulated that, "except as conceded by the Resident, the (restored) *Oba* lost all rights and authority over the land of his ancestors, these rights being vested in the English monarch and his representatives. Similarly, the *Oba* lost the power to collect and impose taxes, the power of appointment and selection of his chiefs, the power to make and change the laws of his people²⁷ without the consent of the Governor or his representative, namely, the Commissioner appointed to his territory by the Governor-General²⁸. As it were, the British expedition of 1897 thus opened a new vista of modern administration in Benin in which the *Oba* and his chiefs became instruments of governance. Hence, all through the colonial period and even up till now, the monarchy was never to recover from the shock of February 1897 and had never been independent ever since.

Conclusion

From the afore-stated, it could be seen that the *Oba* had been divested of his traditional powers. This means that the powers of the chiefs were also limited considering the erosion in the powers of the *Oba*, but a few of them, especially the *Iyase* gained more powers and influence during this period. Yet, the whole people in Benin were happy at the restored monarchy, the symbol of their society, customs and tradition. It was at the coronation of *Oba* Eweka II that the *Uzama Nihiron* performed their duty of crowning the *Oba*²⁹. The head of the *Uzama* chiefs, the *Oliha*, did the crowning. All the chiefs, except Chief Agho, paid their homage to the *Oba* in the traditional way. Chief Agho Obaseki did not pay homage to the *Oba* because he considered himself equally fit for the position, especially given the fact that he too had unsuccessfully contested for it.

As it were, from 1897, the control of power by the *Oba* shifted to the British and certain selected chiefs led by Chief Agho Obaseki. Hence, there was a change in the Benin political structure

between 1897 and 1914, until the institution of the monarchy was restored with certain limitations. We can then see that the monarchy was restored under a new dispensation, which superseded traditional administration. Thus, the monarchy under the new dispensation must exercise powers allowed by the colonial masters. In the process, the monarchy was faced with new challenges as a result of the administrative changes that had taken place.

Notes

1. See V. O. Edo "The Benin Monarchy, 1897-1978: A Study in Institutional Adaptation to Change" (Unpublished Ph.D Thesis, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, 2001), P. 31
2. Ibid. P. 32
3. See J. U. Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin*, 3rd edition (Ibadan: I.U.P., 1960), P. 49. It was during the Igue festival that the *Oba*, by tradition, was not to receive any visitors or strangers. The Bini (Edo) people regarded this festival and still do, as one of great importance. It was supposed to mark a time of rededication by the Bini people to their king. The festival also marks the end of the year and the beginning of a new one.
4. For a detailed discussion on the Warrant Chiefs; see A. E. Afigbo, *The Warrant Chiefs: Indirect Rule in South Eastern Nigeria, 1897-1929* (London: Longman, 1972).
5. J. M. Simpson, Intelligence Report, Benin Division, Ministry of Local Government, Benin (1936) P. 6
6. P. A. Igbafe, "Indirect Rule in Benin", *Tarikh*, vol. 3. No. 3 (1970), p. 31.
7. *N.A.I* BD 13/2 Handing Over Notes, W. B. Ruman to R.D.N Raikes, 6 April, 1908 cited in P. A. Igbafe, *Benin Under British Administration: The Impact of Colonial Rule on An African Kingdom, 1897-1938* (London: Longman, 1979), p. 122.
8. *Ibid*, pp 122-123
9. P. A. Igbafe, "British Administration in Benin, 1907-1920", (unpublished Ph.D Thesis University of Ibadan, Ibadan, 1967), p. 180 and P. A. Igbafe, *Benin under British Administration: The Impact of Colonial Rule on An African Kingdom, 1897-1938*, (London: Longman, 1979). P. 118 as indicated by original source of quotation – P.R.O.F.O. 2/213 meeting with king Ovonramwen and Chiefs of Benin city, 7 September, 1897 and also, *N.A.I* C.S.O 1/13 vol. F.O. No 120, "Continuing reports on Proceedings at the trial of the king of Benin and chiefs responsible for Massacre" 18th October, 1897, pp110-111.
10. P. A. Igbafe, "British Administration in Benin, 1897-1920"p. 193
11. For a detailed study on Chief Agho Obaseki, see P. A. Igbafe, *Obaseki of Benin*, (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1972).
12. P. A. Igbafe, *Benin under British Administration*, p. 136
13. *Ibid*, p. 197
14. *N.A.I*. CSO 1/32 5, "Lugard to Secretary of State" (Harcourt), 4th February, 1914.
15. P. A. Igbafe, *Benin Under British Administration*, p. 141.
16. Interviews held with Pa Oghagbon Aiguedowan, c. 86 years, Benin city and Chief J.A.B. Ero, c. 49 years, an *Uzama* chief, Benin City by Odaro Ogbomo Obano on 24/12/1973 and 27/12/1973 respectively cited in O. O. Obano, "Some Aspects of Chieftaincy in Benin Since 1914" (B.A. Long Essay, submitted to the Department of History, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, 1974), pp10-21
17. *Ibid*.

18. R. E. Bradbury, *Benin Studies*, (London: International African Institute and Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 97
19. Interview held with Pa Eguaevon Uhunaghowo, C. 114 years, the *Odionwere* of Ihokhin in Orhionwon Local Government Area of Edo State on 25/12/ 1994 by V. O. Edo "The Benin Monarchy, 1897-1978: A Study in Institutional Adaptation to Change, (Unpublished Ph.D Thesis, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, 2001), p. 42.
20. R. E. Bradbury, *Benin Studies*, p. 97; see P. A. Talbot's Brief Survey of Benin Political History under British Rule dated 7/9/1910.
21. See O. O. Obano, "Some Aspects of Chieftaincy in Benin Since 1914" (B. A. Long Essay submitted to the University of Ibadan, Ibadan, 1974) pp. 10-21
22. *Ibid.*
23. See J. W. Nyakatura, *Anatomy of an African Kingdom: A History of Bunyoro – Kitara*, Translated by Teopista, edited with an introduction by G. N. Uzoigwe (New York: Nok Publishers International, 1973), pp. 101-130
24. Interviews held with Chief David Edokpolor, c. 75 years, Benin City, 12/12/1998 and Pa Eguaevon Uhunaghowo, c. 114 years, *Odionwere* of Ihokhin, Edo State, 25/12/1994 cited in V. O. Edo, *The Benin Monarch, 1897-1978: A study of Institutional Adaptation to Change*" (Unpublished Ph.D Thesis, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, 2001), P. 44.
25. P. A. Igbafe, "Indirect Rule in Benin" *Tarikh*, Vol. 3, No. 3, (1970), pp 29-40.
26. P. A. Igbafe, "The Benin Water Rate Agitation, 1937-1939: An Example of Social Conflict" in *J.H.S.N.* vol. 4, No. 3, (December, 1968), pp. 355-373.
27. See V. O. Edo, *The Benin Monarchy, 1897-1978*"pp 200-203.
28. Enugu Archives Conference c. 168/194 as in P. A. Igbafe, "The Changing Status of the Obas of Benin under Colonial Rule and Since Independence" in M. Crowder and O. Ikime, *West African Chiefs: Their Changing Status under Colonial Rule*, (Ile-Ife: University of Ife Press, 1970) pp. 278-279.
29. Since most of the ceremonies were secret, an uninitiated person, like the present writer, cannot be informed of what really happened during the coronation.