

## AN ASSESSMENT OF FOUR CENTURIES (15<sup>TH</sup>-19<sup>TH</sup>) OF BENIN ART PRODUCTION IN EVALUATING THE ROLE OF THE CRAFT GUILD SYSTEM IN BENIN POLITY

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**ABSTRACT** The artistic traditions of pre-colonial Benin were firmly established in the peoples way of life and maintained by traditional craft guilds specially designed for this purpose. The establishment of the guild system became a solid foundation for handicraft industries to emerge as an integral part of the economic, social and administrative organisation in the kingdom. The European contact which began in the fifteenth century coincided with the height of political powers of the kingdom. Such contacts in the mid fifteenth and sixteenth century influenced art production resulting in a period of beautiful innovations. By the seventeenth century, in spite of an increase in the number of European visitors, art production suffered as a result of political instability and inept reign. A revival was attempted by the eighteenth century under much capable rulers, but it could not match the previous achievements. By the nineteenth century, the gradual decline of the kingdom gave way to the decline of the craft guilds. The eventual fall of the kingdom resulted in the collapse of the system.

The major events of the four centuries demonstrates that Benin art was essentially a court art supported by royal patronage. It was hard for art production in the erstwhile kingdom to survive without stability and royal backing.

**Key Words:** Benin Kingdom; Pre-colonial Nigeria; Royal patronage; Guilds; Palace societies.

### INTRODUCTION

Benin was known to the Europeans as early as the second half of the fifteenth century. It remained independent until the punitive expedition of 1897. Through early trading contacts with various European nations, the stiff resistance to later European encroachment, and through the discovery of the exquisite pieces of art work, Benin art became widely known throughout the world.

Various studies (Dark, 1973; Ben-Amos, 1980; Igbafe, 1982), concluded that it was under the aegis of guilds of craftsmen that the Benin art grew, developed and continued over a long period. Under this system, various professionals and craftsmen were organised under royal patronage to produce, standardize and market their products under monopoly. This guaranteed a tight market as well as high quality production.

The origin of these guilds dates back to the earliest foundation of the Benin kingdom referred to as *Ogiso* era (Egharevba, 1966; Dark, 1973). This period is identified as about A.D. 900 (Egharevba, 1966; Onwuejeogwu, 1980). The guilds remained a formal institution until the fall of Benin in the nineteenth century. The guilds can

therefore be looked at as one of the longest surviving institutions in the Benin Kingdom with longer history than the present dynasty. Since their creation during the *Ogiso* era, the guilds increased in number and complexity as the Benin economic and political organisation increased in strength. The institution has been described as a contributing factor to the survival of the kingdom (Agbontaen, 1983: 38).

By the second half of the fifteenth century, when Benin made contact with Europeans, the development of Benin art under the guild system reached its apex. New raw materials, broadened experience, new design and representation of wider imaginative scope made Benin art unrivalled. However, the decline of the kingdom gave way also to the decline of the system, which had developed closely with the monarchy for centuries.

Discussion of the internal organisation of Benin from the perspective of the guild system over four centuries gives us a reliable historical reconstruction, based on both oral tradition and European records (Ryder, 1996). This paper is on the role the guilds played in the survival of the kingdom as an indigenous system that thrived for centuries, alongside with the monarchy. As the institution was indirectly responsible in spreading the name Benin around the world from the beginning of the twentieth century a closer look at the system is essential.

The paper highlights the internal affairs of this institution through the four centuries; its organisation, growth and development alongside the Benin monarchy to contribute to the understanding of this aspect of Benin historical past.

## HISTORY OF THE SYSTEM

The origin of the guild system can be traced to the earliest rulers of Benin c.A.D. 900-1130, who were referred to *Ogiso*. It is believed in Benin traditions as also indicated by archaeological investigations (Connah, 1967, 1975; Ryder, 1977) maintain that prior to the *Ogiso* era, i.e. before A.D. 900, numerous independent communities existed in close juxtaposition. These communities which later formed the Benin Kingdom have been identified today in areas and streets of Benin City (Omoriegbe, 1982).

The *Odionwere* system, the rule of the oldest man in a given community, underlay the political practice of these communities or villages. With this type of village, there was no central government to unify these various communities, but a common council called *Iko-Edionwere* solved intervillage problems. It was through one of common council meetings that a prominent *Odionwere* in a community organised a coup to assert his authority over all other thirty communities. He claimed his authority came from the skies (hence the name *Ogiso*). Thus began monarchical rule in Benin (Igbafe, 1975).

Igodo was succeeded by *Ogiso* Ere and to him goes the credit of creating the guild system. Praises are still associated with his name to date such as "Erediauwa" (Ere-strengthened prosperity) the name of the present day monarch in Benin City.

The guild system began with the effort to make the monarchical system secure. The various communities newly established to form a kingdom were not accustomed to the idea of a central government. Portions of products of various profes-

sionals within the communities were directed to their community head without regards for the *Ogiso*. This act was a threat to the monarch, as it showed that power was still concentrated in the hands of *Odiowweres* and not the *Ogiso*. Ironsmithing, in particular, was the bane in this case. Ironsmithing had existed before the *Ogiso* monarchy and was the most prominent trade and occupation in nearly all the communities. Since iron was used by other professions such as in carving, weaving, pottery, farming and warfare, it is believed that the possession of iron must have led to the political exploits of the period. It can easily be seen that it was one of *Ogiso* Ere's concern to organise the craft of ironsmithing so that supplies can be made first and foremost to him as the *Ogiso*. Therefore it was concluded that the bid at unity, the desire to ensure power, and need to organise the economic aspect of life of the communities made Ere embark on creating "centrally patronized units for the development of each of these economic activities" (Omoregie, 1982: 15).

The system became known as *Otu*, i.e guilds. In general, they were associations in various trades given monopoly rights by the reigning Oba, who saw the needs of such groups to produce, market, standardize and attend to their products.

The *raison d'être* of the system was for each guild to supply some of their products to the guilds, which reflected virtually all aspects of the economic needs of the kingdom. There were guilds of brasscasters, carpenters, butchers, ritual specialists, cattle keepers, doctors, drummers, town criers, ceremonial executioners, diviners, land purifiers, performers of funeral ceremonies for the Oba, guardians of Oba wives, repairers of the harem, river due collectors and even acrobats. There were at least sixty-eight guilds among the Edos (Marshall, 1939). Twelve out of the sixty-eight guilds dealt with arts/craft, hence known as the craft guilds. These included; architects, blacksmiths, brass casters, carvers, carpenters, costume designers bead-ers, tanners, sculptors, potters, weavers and cosmetologist (Dark, 1973; Obichere, 1981).

Benin kings understood the advantages from the formation of the guild systems with monopolistic rights to serve them. In other words it was a deliberate effort to foster the monarchical institution in Benin.

It is believed that the economic support given to the Benin kingdom by the craft guild was one of the basic factors responsible for the survival of the kingdom. Each guild established between c.A.D. 940 until the nineteenth century gave an obvious economic advantage to the Oba, the Palace and the entire Benin Kingdom. Few examples of the services from the guilds included the architects and mud sculptors constructing buildings and mud reliefs in the palace, and maintenance and polishing of the wall and figures. While the blacksmiths provided iron-based materials needed in the palace, the brass casters support for the throne was more of recording events (akin to taking photographs, or painting pictures). The brass-casters products were not merely works of art and display (HRH Oba Erediauwa, 1982) but recording of events. For example, when a king passed away, his successor would have a head cast in brass for the altar of the late Oba (Agbontaen, 1983).

In spite of the duties performed, the basic economy of Benin rested on agriculture. Farms were highly cultivated. Even though there was a hunters guild, the rest of the populace were free to hunt. Oba did not pay for goods and services rendered to him, because the guild activities were taken to be the peoples contribution

towards their monarchs welfare. This naturally was of tremendous advantage to the Obas economic well-being. Sometimes in return for these service, each of the guilds received gifts of wives, kola nuts and food stuffs from the Oba.

Though the guilds worked mainly for the Oba, they also produced on royal permission for chiefs, and other important personalities of nobles, indigenous herbalists, and ritual priests. In fact when palace work was not too heavy, the guild members were believed to produce various objects through royal permission for Benin citizens who could afford them. So even though the guilds were seen served mainly the Oba, they also served themselves. The guild did not exist solely for the Oba; they were an integral part of the Benin economic system.

The economic role of the guilds can be described as a form of industrial societies based on the principle of division of labour (Igbafe, 1982). As inherent in the principle of division of labour the various craft guild grew to be quite interdependent. First and foremost, the works of brass casters and carvers, portraying palacial events and artistic designs and skills in pre-colonial Benin were often copied by the rest of the craftsmen. Their tools were also copied because the architects, brass casters, carvers, carpenters, leather workers, potters and weavers all depended on their tools for the blacksmiths. Likewise, the carpenters supplied the carvers with their wooden materials, while carvers supplied weavers with ivory needles. Finished products were also exchanged.

Membership in the guilds posed no problem as they continued to expand and grow because they were organised on family basis (Marshall, 1939) thereby ensuring that the needs of each of the Oba. When new needs arose and no guild for the purpose, the problem was resolved by the emancipation of slaves to form new guilds. Slaves also could be absorbed into old guilds to swell their membership as well as help in the production process (Igbafe, 1975b: 41).

By the fifteenth century the height of political prowess of Benin had been attained and no doubt that the guilds contributed much to it.

## GOLDEN AGE OF BENIN ART PRODUCTION

Benin historical records indicate that the golden age of Benin urban civilization got its roots from the reign of Oba Ewuare in mid-fifteenth century (Eghaevba, 1966: 13; Igbafe, 1975a: 8; Hull, 1981: 10). True enough Ewuare was responsible for transforming both the physical outlook and administrative organisation of the city. His reign also recorded military conquests (Egharevba, 1966; Ryder, 1977). Although many of the guilds had existed prior to Ewuare's reign, they were probably not as completely organised (Marshall, 1939). Oba Ohen in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century was believed to have begun the re-organisation of these guilds (Ben-Amos, 1980). Ewuare carried on the reorganisation into the middle of the fifteenth century, when the guilds became so effective that there remain enduring features traceable to Ewuare.

In oral tradition concerning the origins of arts/craft guilds, Ewuare's name is often prominent. It has even been mentioned in the controversial origin of brass casting (Agbontaen, 1990), although the account is far from established in academic history.

This popularity derives from the new spirit he infused into the organisation of the guilds. Art historians such as Philip Dark think that Ewuare was responsible for organising the brass casters into a guild.

The territorial organisation of the guilds into wards and sections, began also during Ewuare's reign. Benin was divided into two halves: the palace, *Ogbe*, and town, *Orre* (Marshall, 1939; Ryder, 1977; Ben-Amos, 1980). The town was further divided into areas, wards and streets, by guilds.

The guilds were thus specific areas of abode, and each had a headman. The city therefore was divided into a number of self-governing wards. Within each of the guilds, the members were organised on age-grades, the *Eniola* (junior) and *Edion* (elders). The *Edion* group consisted of title holders, who jointly formed the council of the guilds, and were responsible to the Oba for administering the guilds they represented. At the head of the council was the headman, who was in charge of both council and the specific guild he belonged to (Marshall, 1939).

The specific quarters of guilds were named after the guilds. For example, the ward for brass casters was called *Igun Eronmwon*, while that of carvers was called *Igbesanwan*. These street names still exist in Benin today. The guild council was responsible for the internal administration of the guilds within their specified quarters. For this reason the guilds may be regarded as administrative units in pre-colonial Benin (Igbafe, 1979: 9).

Within the administrative units, the headman, also the head of the council of the guild elders, took charge of the day-to-day administration of the guild. Both the council members and the headman had numerous duties, with the headman having more to perform. These duties included settling all minor cases brought forth by guild members, except for cases involving witchcraft and homicide. Inter-two guild cases were settled by the concerned councils. Guild headmen also collected the stipulated tributes, organised youths for public works and mobilised the adults for war at the command of the Oba. They were also in charge of law and order within their own guilds or wards. Thus, within each separate area in pre-colonial Benin, law and order was maintained internally by the people responsible to the Oba.

The council headman was responsible for the guilds to conform with the norms acceptable to the palace. Essentially this concerned producing for the palace, and anyone else on royal permission. The craftsmen were able to produce for the market at times of small orders from the court. The headman also had to ensure women stayed away from the production. In the event of the female contamination of the implements and other violations of taboo, he was to perform the purification ceremony.

The headman and his council members also organised the age-grade of members within guilds, a relevant socialization process to enable members absorb the duties of the guild. Responsibility for the success and failure of the guild before the Oba rested with the headman. He was also responsible for the education of his successor. In this way the history, development, as well as the continuity of the Benin of production and in other spheres was ensured.

The guild head also spearheaded the group in the worship at the guild's shrine during ceremonies and festivals, when the guild's specific dieties/shrine were appeased. The headmen also represented the guilds at 'conferences' whenever prob-

lems arose in the kingdom. Members of guilds were mostly common people in contrast to the nobility. It is popularly believed that it was again in Oba Ewuare's time that the craft guilds were affiliated to the noble members of the Iwebo palace societies. The link between these two groups of people in Benin bridged the class structure in pre-colonial Benin polity (Agbontaen, 1983).

The palace societies consisting of three main groups managed the palace. They performed specific political and social functions. They were avenues for channelling competitions among the noble groups and indirectly enabled the Oba to maintain stability and political balance (Ben-Amos, 1980: 20; Simpson, 1936). The *Iwebo* nobility were in charge of the Oba's beads, his regalia, wardrobe, the maintenance and production of artistic work and decoration in the palace. The second society, *Iweguae* was to have been created by Oba Ozolua in the late fifteenth to early sixteenth century. They looked after the Oba's person, his welfare and health, and private life. The third society, *Ibiwe*, was in charge of the Oba's harem. This society was the last of the three to be recognised as a palace society during the reign of Oba Akenzua I in the eighteenth century.

The affiliation between the guilds and palace societies was strongest under Oba Ewuare. In a system where the centralized monarchy and highly placed nobility were assumed to be detached from the non-titled citizens, the affiliation provided a linkage between the various social classes in Benin.

It is appropriate, therefore, to see Ewuare's period as the beginning of the golden age of Benin. This was not only a time when Benin fame and power began to climb to its zenith, but also an age when art and craft production attained their highest peak of excellence in organisation and production. Though Philip Dark claimed that the Benin royal arts began to flourish from the fourteenth century, and improved further under Ewuare in the middle of the fifteenth century (Dark, 1973: 47). But it is more likely, as drawn from oral accounts (Agbontaen, 1983) that there was a steady growth of the arts from the time the guilds were established and that the Ewuare reign saw the arts to flourish. Ben-Amos (1980: 8) concluded that fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were an age of conquest and artistic flowering. "The golden age of Benin." Oba Ewuare in the mid-fifteenth century therefore laid the foundation for the famous sixteenth century kings of Ozolua, Esigie, Orogbhua and Ehengbuda (Igbafe, 1975a).

This success during Ewuare reign was the result of the high level internal organisation within the kingdom. Since the guild were territorial units, the internal order maintained within the guilds reflected the political organisation at the lowest level of hierarchy where order and peace were similarly maintained.

Wood and Ivory carving guilds existed since the *Ogiso* era (Egharevba, 1966; Dark, 1973), but these craft groups developed through Ewuare's patronage (Egharevba, 1966). In Benin oral traditions, man called Eghoghomagha is highly revered by guilds of carvers and carpenters for new designs in wood and ivory carving. Eghoghomagha was said to have been encouraged by Oba Ewuare. His designs are still being used today by carvers in Benin. The carvers even lay claim, though erroneously, that Ewuare began the guild. Evidence of these designs in wood have perished. However, his designs are claimed as similar to those existing in ivory carving (Agbontaen, 1983).

Ewuare's reign is also said to have introduced the wind instrument of fife (*Eziken*) and the royal band (*ema-edo*). Other guilds he developed included the guild of costume and bead workers (who made the royal beads and scarlet cloth (Egharevba, 1966; Ben-Amos, 1980). His creation of the Iwebo palace society boosted the work of the costume and bead workers guilds.

The architect guild is dated to this period. Houses made largely of mud and wattle before Ewuare were now generally built with mud wall designs. These became the trademark of the architect guild, and indicated the position and political status of the occupant of the house (Agbontaen, 1983). The palace was rebuilt on a larger scale. The inner defensive wall of the city was constructed by Ewuare (See Egharevba, 1966; Ben-Amos, 1980), most probably with the help of an organised group such as the architects guild.

Ewuare is popularly associated with military success, and the craft guilds were indirectly involved in his military conquests. The brass casters were mobilized to produce various military objects. Items such as *Ada* and *Eben* (Schimiter and sword) as well as brass masks were sent to vassal lords by the Oba of Benin as emblems of his authority (Ben-Amos, 1980).

Oba Esigie reigned during the "Golden Age," c. 1504 and continued with Ewuare's patronage of the arts to a greater extent than any of the later kings (Hull, 1981: 11). Esigie was also reputed to have continued in Ewuare's style. He further organised the royal society of *Iwebo*. With this, the Benin craft industry reached greater heights (Dark, 1973).

## EUROPEAN CONTACTS PRIOR TO 1897

Benin oral traditions claim that a man called Ogbeide (nicknamed Okhuaihe, now deified in Benin during the reign of Oba Ewuare, used divination to attract Europeans to visit the kingdom. When all else had been felt accomplished within the kingdom except having contact with the white man, Okhuaihe used divination to draw Ruy de Sequiera to Benin in 1472 (Egharevba, 1974). First record of Europeans to reach Benin between 1472 and 1485 included Ruy de Sequiera in 1472, and Joas Affonso d'Aveiro in 1485 (Ryder, 1977; Egharevba, 1966). These Portuguese recorded accounts of the city as "one of the most prosperous and best organised cities south of the Sahara (Hull, 1981: 10; Kaplan, 1981: 77)." Their records mentioned the powerful city guilds, included the carpenters, wood carvers, iron workers brass workers, weavers and bead workers. These were in fact the majority of the craft guilds (Hull, 1981). At this time, the guilds were under titled chiefs who helped to maintain order within the city (Hull, 1981). By the time of the Portuguese arrival, the craft guilds had already attained a level of high political development.

The ship captain, the crew and the nobility back home, also recognised and employed the African carvers and craftsmen (Kaplan, 1981). There were Portugese attempts at religions conversion and trade, all of which had an artistic and cultural impact, involving the Benin monarch in trade. The items were coral beads, fabrics for ceremonial purposes and a great quantity of brass: This was in exchange for

Benin slaves, pepper and ivory. The brass and iron manillas supplied created a great boom to the brass casters in Benin. The availability of raw material for the brass casters enabled them to introduce new designs and forms into Benin Art. Some art historians see this as responsible for the Benin craftsmen moving further away from the Ife influence to develop their own style (Kaplan, 1981).

The ready availability of brass did not directly cause the change in style and techniques of the Benin craft men. It was more due to contacts with the Portuguese Craft guilds, especially the brass-casters and carvers, which were responsible for recording events in the palace, were highly influenced by the contact and mixture of the two cultures. Historians usually conclude that this period was a time when the finest of all the works of Benin art was produced (Ryder, 1977: 98; Dark, 1973: 2). For example, the famous memorial heads, placed at the ancestral shrines is said to become more stylised and thicker. The famous queen mother's head also could be dated to this period. Idia, the mother of Oba Esigie, is regarded as one of the famous women in Benin oral traditions as the woman who went to war. Thus, the Benin craftsmen depicted her in brass, on account of the feats she performed during the Igala War.

Plaque-making in brass has been dated to Esigie and his son, Orhogbua (Agbontaen, 1983). These plaques depicting the activities of the local merchants, hunters, soldiers, and the Oba's family and entourage were hung in the palace buildings and walls. It has been suggested that plaque-making was introduced by the Portuguese because the background motif resembled the oriental and western European motif, with which the Portuguese became familiar in the mid sixteenth century (Hull, 1981). However Benin oral tradition claim that plaques of wood had and sculptures in mud preceded those of bronzes. The plaques were to have been arranged in series to depict a saga. (Personal Communication; Omorie, 1992).

The Portuguese traders and sailors patronized Benin art, and craftsmen were then allowed to produce for the foreigners. This European experience resulted in the production of excellent art works including the magnificent saltcellars, ivory spoons with handles beautifully carved in animal and bird motifs, and hunting horns, all of which were sold to the sailors for Portuguese nobility.

Today such excellent works are found in several private collections. The saltcellars sometimes depicted European horsemen and nude figures with wings (Kaplan, 1981). These were indeed a great contrast to what the craftsmen designed prior to the European contact. These works reflect the influence from the Portuguese and great skill of Benin craftsmen to imbibe new ideas. One should resist the temptation to attribute the beauty of the art works at this time solely to the Portuguese influence. It was on account of the existing skills that the Europeans took delight in the products and they stimulated the craftsmen's techniques.

The designs introduced at this time endures today (Dark, 1973: 4). The Portuguese themselves were also represented in the Benin art works. Heads, as well as full figures were carved and cast on brass amulets and ivory tusks, and brass plaques. Portuguese weaponry was also portrayed and designs of floral motifs and musketeers were depicted (Hull, 1981: 11).

Benin art was also influenced by the contact with India (Dark, 1973: 4). The craftsmen copied Indian articles found in the baggages of the Europeans, such as books

and paintings.

The guilds, particularly the brass-casters and carvers, spent more time in the palace during this period of increased visitors from Portuguese to record events.

All Benin craft guilds experienced a boom. For example, the Portuguese contact brought imported fabric into the royal compound, such as red flannel as well as velvet, fine silk and cotton (Hull, 1981: 14). This in turn, influenced the weavers, because within a few decades after this contact, the cotton weaving was very prominent in the kingdom. The clothing styles changed, and became more elaborate (Hull, 1981). The Portuguese also traded coral beads with the Benin. The guilds of bead-ers, and Oba's costume makers worked them onto royal outfits (Agbontaen, 1983: 72).

By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Portuguese monopoly of the Benin trade had been broken and Benin began to trade with the Dutch, French and the British (Ryder, 1977). However in spite of the increase in contact, the seventeenth century did not continue in the same artistic vein of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Internal conflicts plagued the seventeenth century. Kings began to lose both their authority and aura. One such king was Ohuan c. 1606, who had to show himself naked to the Benins to confirm he was man, as he had feminine features. His prime minister rebelled against him. He died childless and the throne rotated among different branches of Royal family for the next six reigns (Egharevba, 1966: 34). Oba Akenzua c. 1641 acceded to the throne at 16. He allowed the long-stored treasures in ivory, bronze and wood to be looted and carted away. He also gambled away coral beads in games of dice with chiefs. Ahenkpaye c. 1675 was dethroned. He imposed harsh laws which affected art production, such as demanding application fees and commissions for beads (Egharevba, 1966: 36). The instability with the rulers had a resultant effect on art production. By the last decade in the seventeenth century, the Benin kingdom were in politically turmoil. It was torn by civil wars and territorial boundaries were greatly diminished (Hull, 1981: 11). Art production followed the political pattern of the kingdom.

Oba Ewuakpe c. 1700, was initially neglected by the Benins and the craftsmen paid no dues to him against the original principle (Egharevba, 1966: 37). Again, loss of art works incurred; when he was rebelled against, properties were seized (Egharevba, 1966: 38). Art production in fact reflected the socio-political situation that existed within the Benin kingdom. When there was peace and tranquility in the kingdom, the resultant leisure led to a flowering of art works. But craft industries slowed down considerably during periods of instability. To a large extent art is a product of leisure and talent as well as a result of patronage.

With Oba Akenzua I and his son, Eresoyen, both in early eighteenth century, attempts were made to revive the internal organisation of the kingdom. The art forms which these rulers promoted reflected their efforts and success. Unlike the seventeenth century kings, Akenzua increased trade with the Dutch and prospered. Metal was imported as well as varieties of fabrics such as damask, silk and linen. With the new prosperity and abundance of goods, the brass casters had a wide range of objects to be cast in brass (Obichere, 1981; Hull, 1981).

Oba Eresoyen developed the arts of the kingdom to a greater extent than his father, Akenzua I, with increased trade and importation of brass. Eresoyen revived

the art began around 1740. He tried to attain Esigie's standard in both the political and religious spheres (Ben-Amos, 1980: 37). The famous brass stool, fine leopard figures and brass cocks could be dated also to this period. Eresoyen is credited to have introduced the "house of money," the mud house decorated with cowries on the walls. He also introduced the ivory flutes to Benin (Ben-Amos, 1980). But Oba Esigie's standard could not be matched. The kingdom was much smaller and the flow of tributes declined. This economic situation within Benin affected the art and craft guilds and production level fell. More of the guild members concentrated their efforts on farming and hunting (Hull, 1981). Nevertheless, Eresoyen brought the Benin Kingdom out of the doldrums, and his successors inherited "a stable, prosperous and moderately expansionist kingdom" (Ben-Amos, 1980: 38).

By the nineteenth century, after ceasing ivory trade with the Dutch, the Benin experienced an increase in slave and palm oil trade with the British (Ben-Amos, 1980). Locally, the political scene was never stable. There had been succession disputes and two civil wars. By 1816, a usurper of the throne, Ogbebor, set fire to the palace and destroyed numerous treasures. Ogbebor is said to have been more responsible for depleting Benin art works than the punitive expedition (Personal Communication; Chief Obariase, 1994). It is further claimed that the items taken away by the British in 1897 was only but a fraction of what was lost in this 1816 inferno. However, this fact is not common knowledge among the Benins who did not know the actual value of their art works until it was publicized by the British expedition.

With unstable internal conditions, the international condition was worse off. The ties with Ife had been cut off, the trade with the north was disturbed by the Fulani Jihad, and in the south, the kingdom was confronted by bandits, and former trading neighbours became hostile (Hull, 1981). The craft guilds managed to survive in the war-torn country on a smaller scale. The carvers produced wooden chiefs, stools, storage chests and wooden memorial heads instead of brass (Hull, 1981). Finally, the relationship between Ovonramwen, the Oba, and the British towards the closing years of the century led to the capture of the city by the British in 1897.

## THE IMPACT OF THE PUNITIVE EXPEDITION ON ART PRODUCTION

The British invasion and capture of the capital city of independent Benin in 1897, "marked the end of Benin as an independent kingdom and the beginning of a new era of socio-political and artistic change" (Ben-Amos, 1980: 43). In spite of the recognition of the works of the African craftsmen as early as the fifteenth century by the Portuguese, the works of art found by the British invaders were not easily accepted by the unbelieving world. This probably was due to the circumstances of the discovery of these works of art. In the fifteenth century, there was peaceful communication between the Europeans and the Benins. The art works that were made for the Portuguese nobility were sold or exchanged for other goods. Although the works were recognised or admired, they were not regarded as sensational.

Benin has acquired a notoriety as a result of the publicity given to her alleged human sacrifices and the attack on the Phillip's party early in 1897. After the capture

of Benin-City, the British were dazzled by the artistic ingenuity revealed by the works found in the palace for the Benin monarch. These were more than 2,000 art pieces, objects ranging from memorial heads, snakes, ram heads, cocks, elephant tusks to ceremonial swords, stools, chests, plaques, all beautifully carved in wood or ivory, or cast in brass.

Many Britons did not believe that such art works were made by African craftsmen. While the attention of the world was focused on the art works carried away from Benin by members of the British expeditionary force, the disturbance created in Benin by the British conquest had led to the craftsmen themselves deserting the city for safety. This situation led to the temporary demise of the guilds (Egharevba, 1966). The works of the craft guilds, slowly deteriorated with the political situation in the kingdom halted with lack of supervision and directives from the monarch as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century (Agbontaen, 1983).

The members of the British naval expedition took home with them thousands of the objects found in the palace. The craft guilds ceased temporarily to exist but their products began a new lease of life on the way to fame. Gradually artworks were dispersed into museums and private collections in Europe, particularly in Germany, England and the United States.

The punitive expedition destroyed the Oba's sole authority over the patronage of the art works and the craft guilds. Guild members fled for their lives as a result of the capture of the city and the flight of the Oba. (Arinze & Nkata, 1982: 8). The fallen kingdom was depicted by the aggressors as a place full of human sacrifices, and crucifixion pits with decomposing bodies—a city of blood (Brinkworth, 1954), and the world doubted whether the same Benin people were responsible for the works of art.

The period immediately after the expedition was one in which, interested and inquisitive parties set out to find out more about the Benin Kingdom. Scholarly interest became evident soon after the expedition and by 1899, works on Benin had been written by Read & Dalton, Pitt-Rivers in 1900, Hagen in 1901 and Ling Roth in 1903. Benin, thus began to acquire a world wide fame as the home of art. However, the guild system fell into disuse because of the changing demands, economic needs, and the general process of westernisation, which transformed Benin economy from a corporate and institutionally oriented system, to one based on the individualism of modern times.

## CONCLUSION

After the 1897 punitive expedition, Benin art was dispersed and acquired a world wide fame. The Benin guild system as an institution was largely responsible for this fame. In pre-colonial times, the guild system actively promoted the development and growth of indigenous craft industries in Benin. The guilds fulfilled a role which the circumstances of the period recognised and encouraged. The famous Benin kings promoted the works of craftsmen to produce their finest pieces. Their influence and the peaceful co-existence in the second half of the fifteenth century influenced the craft guilds towards periods of beautiful innovations, rather than that of

suppression. The craftsmen, combined their new talents with their traditional ones with the latter still having a stronger impact.

However, inspite of increased European contacts in the seventeenth century, further upsurge of the excellency in art could not be attained. This article has demonstrated that the level of economic growth in the society, the demand of the ruling elite and the needs of the people dictated the nature and character of the output of the art guilds in pre-colonial Benin. As long as the socio-political situation which justified and encouraged the guild system remained, art production flourished. With the fall of the kingdom and introduction of colonial rule with its new economic opportunities, tastes and the resultant social change, the former system and its products began a long process of adaptation, which continued under the impact of modernization.

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