

Religious Head of Benin

Albany High School

The Quest for the African Empire

### Position of the Benin Kingdom in Regards to Religion

Amidst the political turmoil in surrounding empires and kingdoms in the current year of 1374, the kingdom of Benin seeks to expand, but first and foremost to maintain stability and defend our own land. My main priority as the religious head will be to preserve our ancient traditions and follow the will of the Oba, our king and representative of God on earth.

The religion of our kingdom ties in very closely with our culture and allegiance to the Oba. We believe that the earth was created by the son of the Supreme God, Osanobua, and that the land on which we stand is the cradle of the world. Consequently, all land is originally Edo land.<sup>1</sup> A line of 31 Ogisos emerged from this act of creation followed by a lineage of Obas leading up to our current day Oba Egbeka. As a descendant of the Supreme God, he is himself a god and has a divine essence. The Oba is chief priest of our religion and leads the worship of all other deities. Indeed, under the Supreme God and the Oba, we are devoted to many other sub gods and goddesses and ancestral spirits. It is important in our society to worship the spirits of the ancestors because they have God's ear, as well as the power to cause harm to their living descendants. We pray to them daily and for special occasions to receive assistance and advice. Ancestors must always eat before their living descendants; we always dedicate pieces of food to them any time before eating or drinking. One can find altars dedicated to them in family homes, the palace, and communal settings.

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<sup>1</sup>"The Wealth," The British Museum; Morrison, Nzegwu, and Boyce-Davies, *Benin: A Kingdom*, 80.

In regards to life and death, we believe in two worlds: the invisible world inhabited by spirits, and the the visible world where all of us currently live. Death separates these two worlds and when someone dies, their spirit lives on in the invisible world. In addition, life after death may include reincarnation. In some cases a spirit is reborn into the same family in order to complete a mission in the interest of that family. When the Edo people are unsatisfied with their situation in life, they pray to God to have improved circumstances in their next life. We humans can be reincarnated fourteen times without fully departing from the earth.

Our king holds his power from the admiration and love from his people. Each guild in our country is created with the intention of supplying the Oba with whatever he may need.<sup>2</sup> Of the 40 guilds in the city,<sup>3</sup> all artists, leather workers, wood cares, beadmakers work to produce pieces for the Oba. Perhaps most notable is our guild of blacksmiths that have passed on their traditions through generations. The art they create is displayed in the royal palace for visitors to see. Often such visitors are awed by the skill and craftsmanship of our artists. Though iron ore smelting has existed in our lands for nearly two thousand years,<sup>4</sup> Oba Oguola first introduced the idea of casting figures out of bronze in the kingdom some one hundred years ago, and they remain a significant part of our culture today. The casting of the head figure is especially important as our worship of it brings us to closer to God and the Oba. The ability of artists, principally blacksmiths, to create pieces with a strong resemblance to reality from such simple materials connects them to the magic within everything, and for this they are immensely valued in the court of the Oba.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>"The Wealth," The British Museum.

<sup>3</sup>"What Was Life," BBC Bitesize.

<sup>4</sup>*Lost Kingdoms*, "West Africa," episode 4.

<sup>5</sup>Green, *African Kingdoms*, 44.

Because of Benin's location along the coast, we are well positioned for trade and we have had ties with the mediterranean for hundreds of years.<sup>6</sup> For currency, we use cowrie shells. We also trade with many other African groups, some as far as Western Sudan.<sup>7</sup> We produce goods of the highest quality, and the cloths our women produce are acclaimed for their beauty. While trades are made by private entities, all exports and imports must of course be approved by the Oba, who controls all business. Aside from the trade, the economy of the kingdom of Benin revolves mostly around farming and agriculture performed at the village level. All land belongs to the Oba, however, and each village must pay him tribute through representatives such as town chiefs.

Oba Oguola was not only responsible for the invention of our praised bronze castings, but also for initiating the construction of the first city walls to surround and protect our capital, Ubini. The walls, made of earth, run over 10,000km and include several gates and a moat system for defense purposes. Even before these developments, Oba Ewedo built and began operating a prison system in our capitol. Because Ubini hosts the highest concentration of Edo people in the kingdom, development was absolutely necessary to accommodate the crowds. We currently have numerous broad streets and an effective sanitation system, and we seek to enrich knowledge and culture in our people. Our city hold a museum as well as a house of knowledge.<sup>8</sup> The Oba commands a well trained military and the weapons they use include spears, swords, crossbows and bows with poisoned arrows.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> "The Wealth," The British Museum.

<sup>7</sup> Morrison, Nzegwu, and Boyce-Davies, *Benin: A Kingdom*, 86. Morrison, Nzegwu, and Boyce-Davies, *Benin: A Kingdom*, 86.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 86.

<sup>9</sup>"The Wealth," The British Museum.

The spread of Islam throughout West Africa is said to have improved the quality of life of the kingdoms that have adopted it. However, I, as the religious head of this kingdom do not condone the dispersion of Islam. Our kingdom is prospering and has reached a high level of development without the help of Islam<sup>10</sup> and should continue to do so. While I recognize and accept that the influx of trade will no doubt bring certain Muslim people into our country, I will not tolerate the mass circulation of these nonsensical ideas and beliefs in our kingdom. Muslims believe only in one God, and to adopt their religion would be to ignore all other deities and spirits that live around us. The Ehi, for example, the guardian spirits of every living human, would be ignored, and the people of Benin would be left without the guidance and support necessary to achieve their destiny.<sup>11</sup> Our very own Oba is a god, yet those of the Islamic faith would claim he is not. We cannot risk angering the spirits that surround us everywhere and the spirits of our ancestors who worked so diligently to build this kingdom, and who continue to look after us in the afterlife. Islam also forbids the depiction of human representations, while we worship the head figure and encourage the creation of all bronze castings. Muslims would have our cultural art, a part of heritage, destroyed. The customs we have today go back since the beginning of the earth and it would be a disaster to allow Islam to ruin them.

Not only would the spread of Islam be purely sacrilegious to the Supreme God and all his deities, it would result in total loss of harmony in our country. Our society is carefully structured and functions efficiently with the way things are now. The Oba must maintain his control over the people. A drastic change in religion would not be good for the future of our country. We

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<sup>10</sup>Stewart, "Nigeria: The Edo of Benin," *Race and History*.

<sup>11</sup>Morrison, Nzegwu, and Boyce-Davies, *Benin: A Kingdom*, 86. Morrison, Nzegwu, and Boyce-Davies, *Benin: A Kingdom*, 118.

must defend our faith at all costs. In order to do so, we must consider the positions of those countries likely to affect Benin.

The current King of Ghana is Reidja Akba. His state, like Benin, is growing more autonomous as the Mali Empire weakens. Ghana was originally a very strong empire itself, but the rise of the Mali empire and the loss of control over popular trade routes caused it eventually to be taken over by Mali in 1237.<sup>12</sup> The economy of the people of Ghana, the Soninke, revolves around the trade of salt, camels, dates from the north, in exchange for timber and gold.<sup>13</sup> All trade is heavily taxed by the King.<sup>14</sup> The Kings of Ghana used to forbid Islamic merchants to stay the night in their cities,<sup>15</sup> but have since capitulated to the spread of Islam and accepted Muslim communities' integration. Mosques are now commonplace in Ghana as a result of Muslim merchants.<sup>16</sup> The Muslim Tarkur state was established in the eleventh century and soon after, the Almoravid movement swept over the empire, further influencing the rural peasants of Ghana. This movement encouraged the practice of fundamental Islam, a destructive and harmful way of life, and I do not approve of it. Nonetheless I commend the effectiveness it had in weakening the Tarkur State; the destruction of any Muslim State is favourable in my eyes, and my task would much be facilitated if Islamic groups destroyed each other before they infected Benin with their appalling way of thinking.

In Mali, Mari Djata has just died and Mansa Musa II is on the verge of taking the throne.

<sup>17</sup> However, Mari Djata has considerably weakened the Mali empire and Musa II is not likely to

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<sup>12</sup>"Ghana," The History Files.

<sup>13</sup>Hill, "The Spread," Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education.

<sup>14</sup>"Civilization Overview," TimeMaps.

<sup>15</sup>Hill, "The Spread," Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education.

<sup>16</sup>Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, "The Trans-Saharan," *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*.

<sup>17</sup>"Mali Empire," The History Files.

hold any real power. Also a trade economy, Mali exchanges gold and copper for salt from the north at several specialized different posts.<sup>18</sup> The original founding king of Mali, Sunjata Keita was not Muslim, and originally gold miners were properly discouraged from practicing Islam; gold mining depended on their connection to their traditional beliefs. Unfortunately, Malian Kings have now entirely adopted Islam. Mansa Musa made his famed pilgrimage to Mecca less than a century ago, and the empire is overflowing with Islamic learning and culture. Timbuktu especially hosts mosques and peoples of high intellect of Muslim faith who have imposed their beliefs on the natives.<sup>19</sup>

The economy of Songhai is also one of trade, but it is divided into a system of clans much like our own guilds. Clans include fishermen, carpenters and metal workers.<sup>20</sup> Songhai is a state with multiple ethnic groups, but is nonetheless an Islamic state. The people of Songhai are seeking to expand and create an empire. I can only see this as detrimental to my kingdom's traditions; expansion of Songhai would mean further expansion of Islam. Sunni Ali Kulun, a prominent figure in the empire, was raised by Mansa Musa himself<sup>21</sup> and valued for his military capabilities despite being an official hostage since the control of Songhai by Mali in 1325. He escaped back to the capital Gao of Songhai where a revolution is taking place. Though his location is unknown at the time, he holds much power and respect over his people and will be a key figure in the events that will play out in the near future.

The Mossi Kingdom is the most closely aligned with our country's beliefs. An allied group of three independent kingdoms: Tenkodogo, Ouagadougou, and Yatenga, they have

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<sup>18</sup>"Civilization Overview," TimeMaps.

<sup>19</sup>Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, "Trade and the Spread," *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*.

<sup>20</sup>"Civilization Overview," TimeMaps.

<sup>21</sup>Walker, "The 20 Greatest," *Everyday Life In An Early West African Empire*.

expanded their lands in minor raids of stateless peoples by the Niger River. The people farm and cultivate land but control several key trade routes as well. As for the religion of the Moose, their customs strongly resemble ours with the belief in a High God and the worship of sub gods in addition to the ancestors. Islam, though present, has not taken hold of the people in Mossi and they remain faithful to the old beliefs.<sup>22</sup>

I currently do not wish for Benin to go to war with these countries, or to change the religion of those dwelling within the boundaries. While all land is originally Edo land and I look upon expansion of Benin favourably, I do not think it wise to risk the security of our people and city in order to enter a three sided war. Nonetheless, I believe it essential to defend Benin's religion and I will support efforts to prevent Islam from spreading further. The Mossi kingdom's resistance to Islam and peaceful nature align with our kingdom's views and an alliance with their state could have potential benefits in ensuring security of both parties involved. In addition to working abroad, there are internal methods that I am willing to use to maintain the unification of the people. In Benin we have several deities, that look after different aspects of our life. In order to have the support of the people, I would suggest that the Oba expand the shrines dedicated to a certain deity to emphasize their importance. This way, the Edo people can be influenced into placing their motivations and efforts in the direction the Oba and I desire.<sup>23</sup> For example, in case of war, we would place attention on the shrine of Ogun, the god of war and metal work<sup>24</sup>. The attentions of the people of Benin would also be focused on war therefore and the people would be more willing to fight for the country.

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<sup>22</sup>Finnegan, "Mossi," in *Encyclopedia of World*.

<sup>23</sup> This was a strategy used by Oba Ewuare in the 15th century regarding Portuguese relations and thus not in present, but could still be applied to the situation. Green, *African Kingdoms*, 44.

<sup>24</sup> Ose, "Shrines and Deities," *The Nigerian Observer*.

Defense is our strength in the kingdom of Benin, both in terms of warfare and the spread of religion, and I will not hesitate to use this advantage to the best of my capabilities as religious head.



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