

**READINGS**

**IN**

**AFRICAN**

**STUDIES**



**Oyewo and Osunwole**

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## Chapter Two

# SOME BENIN COSTUMES AND THEIR RELATIONSHIPS TO THE COSTUMES ON THE ANCIENT ARTS OF BENIN

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Benin art is perhaps the most studied and widely published of all Nigerian ancient arts. After the removal of its valuable arts in 1897, they found their way into England from where they were dispersed to other more "liberal" parts of Europe and America. A large portion of Benin arts can today be found in central Europe, especially in Germany, and America. They got to these places through auction sales. The British, shocked and disappointed that the art objects they took from Benin were made of bronze, sold them off at give away prices. They had thought that they were made of valuable materials like gold. It is however interesting to note that today, Benin art objects which adorn numerous western museums are now the pride of their owners. They are very highly valued, heavily insured and are held under the best security systems. Interestingly Benin arts also occupy a pride of place in their being the most varied in terms of numbers, themes and material. In addition, they are now also valued for their cultural and artistic importance.

Non-Africans have carried out a substantial study of Benin arts. As anthropological methodology and study gained fashion early this century

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\*This paper was first read at the International Conference on Benin Studies: The Centenary Years 1892-1992 held at the University of Benin, Ugbowo Campus, Benin City, on the 23<sup>rd</sup>-27<sup>th</sup> of March 1992.

in Europe, many of the Benin art objects in European museum provided ready materials with which to put these new methods to test. In particular anthropologists and later, art historians began to study these art works. (See Adrian Gerbrands, 1957) The result is a very comprehensive and basic books on Benin art. The works of the early foreign scholars are often the basis for recent studies. Even though there are still several unanswered methodological questions in these pioneering works the illustrations in them are more complete than in any recent works on Benin arts. (See Von Luschan, 1919) This is because Benin art works in Benin and indeed Nigeria is significantly fewer than those in Europe and America. Today, Benin art works are even more widely dispersed than during the post 1897 period. The implication of this anomalous situation for local scholarship is the insufficiency of materials locally to tackle inherent problems in Benin art. In addition to the paucity of Benin art scholars, there is also the scarcity of funds to undertake field trips to study these works in detail outside their producer culture. We have had to rely on the illustration of Benin art gleaned from foreign books, which are scarce and expensive locally.

This anomaly has however not entirely deterred local scholars from the study of Benin or its arts. As I have mentioned earlier on, the illustrations from the early foreign publications have provided a body of Benin works, which would otherwise have been unknown within their producer culture, Benin. Luckily also, Benin art has the especial advantage of straddling the 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Then, but for the continuity of the art tradition into the 20<sup>th</sup> century after 1897 Benin/British war and the resultant deportation of the Oba Ovoramwen to Calabar, Benin arts might have ceased at that time. The fact that the Oba was and still remained the principal patron of all Benin arts and the fact that Benin possessed an efficient extensive and disciplined guild system which continued until a new Oba was installed in 1914 saved the arts from total collapse and imminent extinction. The brass casters guild simply took up from where they had left off after the 1897 war and when Eweka I ascended the throne of his ancestors in 1914. I have noted elsewhere that though thorny and problematic, the artistic productions of the interregnum period deserve

especial attention in Benin art history (Pogoso, 1997:31).

It has been somewhat easy, because of the early Benin relationship with Europe to classify Benin art. Indeed of all African arts, it is only in Benin that there is an ostensible chronological geography. Based on the economic successes enjoyed by the various rulers of Benin and their effects on the forms and content of Benin art, Fagg classified the arts into conceivable periods. This singular factor has enriched our understanding of not just Benin arts and history, but also its foreign affairs from the 15<sup>th</sup> century upwards. The result is that a study of features, formal and contextual and in fact the presence or absence of certain features have now conditioned a better understanding of Benin arts.

It is noteworthy, to mention that the use of plaques is unique to Benin in the whole of Africa. In the plaques, because of their two-dimensionality, which allows for a wider picture plane, better insights are got into social relationships, cultural practises, economic successes and military conquests to mention few. These parameters are the same ones that have aided the classification of Benin art as well as exposed much of its economic and social history in the early period. The availability of these plaques in Benin art and their elucidated contents have been a good pointer to the existence in Africa of both decorative and commemorative arts. Although some scholars have suggested that plaques in Benin may have been a concomitant effect of the Benin/European interaction, there are some manifestations of plaques belonging to the early Benin period, when Benin was yet to have any substantial contact with Europe.

In recent time, Benin history has been undergoing a re-interpretation. In fact, the historico-cultural landscape is currently the subject of vigorous debates to debunk the Ife/Benin relations exposed by Egharevba's version of the history of the Edo. Although this paper does not attempt to discuss this subject, it is important to point out that on whatever side scholars stand, they should seek to substantiate and corroborate their claims with vivid evidences which must be gleaned from the enormously rich tradition and culture of both towns. They should seek answers in and outside the large available body of literature in both towns and also among their neighbours.

This chapter is only an attempt to chapter some of the royal costumes of Benin in order to make some clear statements about their relationship with the costumes deputed on its ancient arts, and thereby to establish a linkage between contemporary Benin dress and ancient Benin arts. This paper relies heavily upon Read and Dalton (1968) and Von Luschan (1919) and a few other publications for its illustrations.

The impetus for this study arose out of the uniqueness of the attire of the Oba of Benin among other monarchs in southwestern Nigeria. In Benin, the Oba never just wears expensive and exuberant versions of vogue or current outfits. The Benin Oba actually maintains a wardrobe of numerous significantly rich outfits for his office, position, stature and person. Indeed these attires are very different from the common every day and typical Benin dress. In fact, if anything, the casual Benin attire that is not socially restricted (See Osemwingie Ebohon, 1972) the eyon, is of numerous types and although included in the Obas wardrobe, may not of necessity be used. He has instead, long flowing robes; long skirt-like wears with blouses and of course the beaded dress.

This chapter examines first of all, the royal paraphernalia as they are presently used in Benin and then seeks their relationships in the early Benin arts with the aim of, first of all, establishing traditional/cultural continuity in the forms of dress. Then it also investigates the social significance of the use of dresses and finally attempts to locate possible chronological developments and their implication for Benin history.

Eweka (1989:34) elucidates the position of the Oba of Benin as being the embodiment of their tradition and culture, the sacred kingship and the focal point of the Benin political system. The Oba is the head of the nation and his person is held sacred. He was, still is, and will always be the source of customary laws. He is the spiritual head and once exercised legislative judicial and executive powers over Benin. The Oba holds court with his chiefs to attend to the complaints from his subjects. He must give approval for the commencement of all major festivals and rituals. He is thus in fact, next to the gods. It is to be expected therefore that the Oba so situated should possess some unequalled qualities and so this paper will concentrate only on his paraphernalia.



The paraphernalia of the Oba are numerous. They are unique to his person and position. The use of these attires depend largely on the personal disposition of the Oba as well as, of course, the level of importance of the occasion he is attending to or presiding over. Generally, the highest of the Oba's attires is referred to as the *ewu ivie* (beaded dress) (Plate 1). There are believed to be at least three categories of this type of dress and each of them is styled in a unique manner befitting of the sacred position of the Oba. They are only slightly different from one another by the inclusion of certain accomplishments. The differences are easily discernible when put on by the Oba. The most prestigious of the Oba's attires are the ones usually worn during the coronation ceremonies as well as during other very high festivals such as the ancestor festival - *ugier'oba* and the *igwe*. It is the all coral bead dress for which the Benin Oba has become very famous in real life and in ancient and contemporary Benin art. Others in the same category but of lesser prestige include *ewu ede* and *ewu abigan*, each differing from the other by the ostentatious use of ornamentation, trimmings and accessories Ebohon (1972: 91-93), confirming the variety of royal regalia puts the *ewu ivie* in the first position and goes on to illustrate at least two others.

The Oba also wears *odigba*, the beaded bangles and necklaces and he has a great array of these. They range from the simple to the complex with ring-like forms usually seen around the Oba's neck. The Oba's *odigba* are specially made and some of them are according to my source made of the earliest beads to reach the Benin shores. Although certain chiefs have now earned the privilege of wearing the *odigba*, like *odigbo okofo* and *odigba esi*, they are usually worn on very special occasion. It is only the Oba who wears the ivory bangles. He has an exclusive authority to wear these and they are also specially produced by the appropriate guild, in a variety of designs. The Chiefs were permitted only to wear bangles made of bronze.

The Oba wears *ukugba* to which is usually attached a special bell which it is believed, adds spiritual power to his movement. The *ukugba* may at times be called *ukugba ododo* or *ukugba ivie*. To his attire are several other attachments, which I have noted, from my study of various photographs, added perhaps at the discretion of the Oba. Also at his feet

are shoes made of beads. But each of these additions however has significant symbolism when used. When all these accoutrements are put together for an outing, that is when we have *ehaen-egbehia oghivie*.

The Oba has other types of dresses that appear to have been influenced by the Benin contact with Europeans, particularly the obvious *capuchin*-like attire. This is substantiated by the interesting fact that such attires are not depicted on the Oba of Benin, or in fact Benin personages in the Benin arts. Some of these kind of attire include the long flowing dresses that are illustrated by Ebohon (1972:95 and 97). They are either in black or white. In one case, (Ebohon: 1972: 95) the black garment (Plate 2) is referred to as the *iron* dress. In the illustration, the Oba Akenzua wears a peculiar crown, which confirms the large variety of royal paraphernalia. The other dress (Plate 3), in white was according to Ebohon (1972: 97), designed by Benin tailors at the request of the Oba after 1933 (Ekhaguosa Aisien, 1986: 52-58). He does not give further details but investigation confirms that the form of dress might have truly evolved at that time because authoritative sources insist that such attires were not common to the royalty before then. The dress is a white flowing garment that appears to consist of a blouse or jacket worn over what appears to be a flatted and flowing gown. It is similar in form to the habits of the clergyman and here again points to the influence of the *capuchins*. More significant however is the cap or crown that tops the dress. The cap also in white is raised in the front giving one the impression of a crown. Both regalia, black and white, have long sleeves reaching up to the wrist. Finally, their design does not appear to have considered the tropical African climate. It may have been a casual dress of the Oba., although some of the palace and town chiefs now use it frequently for court business.

The Oba Ovormwen, in the much-publicised picture taken shortly before being sent in to exile in Calabar is depicted wearing just an *eyon* over only a few beads on a bare body. This manner of dress is casual and common in Benin, whether with nobility or not. A small blouse may be worn over the *eyon*, upon which the coral beads are arranged. It can only be imagined that while much of what the Oba put on depends largely on his discretion, mood or occasion, there is still a great deal of freedom of

choice and combination from among his store of royal paraphernalia.

Benin art as I have mentioned earlier on are in both two and three dimensions. The advantage here is that all their depictions can be truly easily discernible. An observation of a large body of Benin art works both in Nigeria and outside evidence them as belonging to the same stylistic continuum. Moreover, a stylistic connection that transcends the various periods is also evident. In fact, whether of the early, middle or late depicted in the arts are recognisable and insights are got into social relationship through the sizes of the personages depicted, especially in the plaques.

The plaques and indeed the three-dimensional Benin sculptures reveal a wide variety of dresses. Easily discernible among them is the coral bead dress of the Oba. This is the most commonly used. The reason cannot be distant from the fact that the art centred on the chief patron, the Oba. Therefore in most depictions of the Oba of Benin in Benin art, he invariably is wearing the ceremonial coral bead dress. However, a few others exist where the Oba is depicted with the casual eyon over a bare chest with a few strings of beads reminiscent of the Oba Ovoramwen as already noted. But one significant point worth mentioning is the great variety of crowns with which the Oba figures are depicted. Von Luschan (1968:143) depicted up to thirty different types of head wears and attempts to link some of them with foreign crowns. A stylistic affinity seems obvious between some of these crowns and the head wears of early European visitors to Benin.

Although it would appear that some royal dress borrows greatly from the Europeans during the contact period, it seems to me that the society sought to maintain and keep what was unique to it. This accounts for the non-depiction of the Oba in dress other than the coral bead dress in many Benin plaques. It is my view that the coral bead dress, considering the nature and value of the material in which it is made, and the importance of coral beads in Benin culture, is the original form of the Benin Oba's ceremonial attire of office. In fact some of the illustrations of Benin arts in Dalton and Read evidence the attires as being in several forms. There is little doubt that much might have changed in form over time but some

of those depicted in Dalton and Read suggest a tunic-like form. Today, the blouse is worn over an *evon* or *ebuluku* from which flows down several coral beads. To this basic dress are a lot of other accoutrements, neck beads, bangles, anklets and other paraphernalia of office; especially those in from of protective charms.

Continuity is established in the use of the *ewu ivie*. In fact the restriction of its use to the more important ceremonies and coronation are indicators of their sacred importance in Benin royal dress, and this may have conditioned its continued use today. In spite of the use of certain types of dress which have affinities with Oba's *ewu ivei* by certain chiefs, I understand that in all the cases, such manner of dress of the other chiefs are indicators of their positions in the palace structure and hierachy. At times also, they may be indicators of their particular office. I think that this is a significant situation, which requires further study. The examples of the *Iyase* is important here. The *Iwebo* (keepers of the royal ragalia) grafted for him, a special type of headwear or helmet, taking into consideration his office as the warlord (not the Prime Minister as usually erroneously quoted). The *uzama* (hereditary chiefs) also have their own unique headgears worn during *iron* ceremony, and the *Isekhure* has the headgear called *ewu ivie akpan* which is unique to his office.

Commenting on the attire of a miniature bronze figure described as Ife in style but found in Benin, the late Ooni of Ife, Sir Adesoji Aderemi is reported to have said in 1948 in London that the dress and ornamentation of the figure corresponds to his own coronation regalia. This figure has been used to trace the origin of brass casting in Benin. But its regalia are distant in form and content from that of the Oba of Benin's coronation attire earlier noted. It seems to me therefore that the figure dated 1420±60 cannot be Benin inspired. But it is significant that it was found in Benin. Egharevba's explanation that it marks the beginning of Igueghae's works is untenable. Why would Igughae, brought to Benin to teach the art of brass casting start producing works in a foreign style? Or did he simply bring it with him from Ife. At any rate, Benin Kingship predates the object. The royal regalia of Benin may have been in use before the arrival of the figure in Benin. And therefore it may not have influenced royal

## Benin paraphernalia.

The most recent thermoluminescence date got from Benin is that instigated by Flora Kaplan (1981) and performed at the Museum Allied Science Centre for Archaeology, University of Pennsylvania. The typical early Benin head produced a date of 1485 and 1525, but the standard error margins of the dates are not indicated. Adepegba believes that the dates are more recent than the end of the 14th century, traditionally associated with the origin of Benin (Adepegba: 1991: 5). These dates considered the use of the forms of dress of the Oba couldn't have been later than then. It appears obvious that before these objects, the culture had advanced and had been sustained enough to be referred to as a tradition. Benin culture is unique in many ways. This is manifest in various aspects of their life and culture. In the north-western part of Yorubaland, where Benin influence is believed to have reached, there is a deep-rooted cultural similarity in dress, language and architecture but evidences of borrowing from these areas are scarce in Benin.

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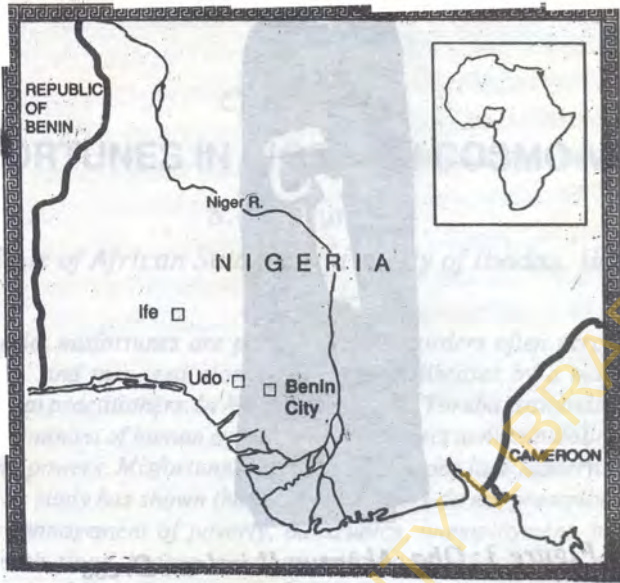
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*Figure 1: Map of South-Western Nigerian: Showing Benin-City*



*Coral beads dress*

*Figure 2: Oba Akenzua II in the Coral Bed Dress*



Figure 3: Oba Akenzua II in Iron Dress



Figure 4: Oba Akenzua II in White Robe sesigned after 1933

Figure 2: Oba Akenzua II in the Coral Bed Dress