

Of heredity and Benin traditional system **Nov 2007**

By SEO Ogbonmwan



Omo N' Oba N'Edo
Oba Erediauwa
The reigning
monarch of ancient
Benin kingdom.

IN the last few months, we have read on the pages of some Nigerian newspapers descriptions of the roles and functions of the Iyase of Benin as regards other Chiefs, the Edo people and, more importantly, the Oba of Benin. Some of these roles and the terminologies used for them were, however, not sacrosanct. As such, they may confuse the non-Edo, apart from the fact that some of their connotations were also observed to be deficient. We believe that as Edo people, we should preserve our culture and protect it from all encumbrances and wrong interpretations even in the face of death of the elders, our culture and our tradition constitute our lives.

Before going on to the main subject of this discourse, we should define some terms used in some of the aforesaid publications so as to aid our understanding of the issue.

The Edaiken (Edayi n' Iken).

This is the title of the Oba (King)-apparent or, more precisely, the Oba-in-waiting or Oba-designate. It is reserved for the King's eldest son. The Benin tradition operates on the principle of primogeniture. So the throne passes to the Oba's eldest son as the custom is patriarchal. This principle is very paramount as it makes for stability of the kingdom and prevents in-fighting when the Oba dies. There is no question of any other chief or individual being second in line to the throne of the ancient Benin Kingdom because *aisagbonrio oba* (becoming a king is decided before birth).

The Edaiken title, which is conferred by the reigning Oba on his eldest son, has a long interesting history behind it. This will be dealt with another time. It is important to note that the first Edaiken was inducted by Oba Ewuare into the Uzama Nobles group to act as his eyes and ears within the group. The Edaiken, therefore, is one of the seven Uzama chiefs (Uzama n'ihiron) and they constitute the king-makers. Since the Edaiken is the one to be crowned, his membership of the Uzama chiefs is to ensure due process in accordance with the tradition and custom. There were six Uzama chiefs until the time of Oba Ewuare who added one to make them seven, an odd and a metaphysical number in Benin mythology and numerology. Oba Ewuare himself was a great metaphysician, warrior and empire builder.

The Iyase of Benin.

The Benin Kingdom has a structured administrative system for its' day-to-day running with the Oba as the administrative and spiritual head. In fact, we describe him as the custodian of our culture and tradition and the representative of the gods on earth. The running of the Benin Empire is based on an administrative hierarchy which is very different from those of Oba's heredity, immediate family hierarchy and inheritance to the throne.

The administrative set-up of the Benin Empire should not be confused with heredity to the Benin throne as they are entirely different. Whereas the Edaiken is next in line to the throne, based on heredity by primogeniture, he is not the next in line in the administrative hierarchy of the kingdom to his father, the reigning king. In Benin history, custom and tradition, the Edaiken has no palace or official role until his father joins his ancestors. Then, a palace is quickly built for him in Uselu village which is today a suburb of Benin City in preparation for his coronation. After his coronation as the new Oba, the Edaiken palace is quickly pulled down in the manner it was quickly built; there can never be two Oba's palaces in Benin. Such is the Benin tradition which is envied by other cultures. The expansive ground on which the dismantled Edaiken's palace was built would then be fenced as traditional ground in Uselu village.

Perhaps the administration of the ancient Benin Kingdom may be better understood if we compare it to the British system of governance where the reigning queen or king has a prime minister chosen by the people to run the affairs of the United Kingdom on a daily basis. The monarch also has a son who is the heir-apparent to the throne. A current example is the Prince of Wales, Prince Charles, who also does not have input to the day-to-day administration of the United Kingdom.

In the same way, the Edaiken of Benin has no role in the day to day running of the Benin Kingdom whilst his father is on the throne. Whereas, a son or daughter can become king or queen in Britain, in Benin Kingdom, only sons ascend the throne of their fathers and become Oba.

It is perfectly correct to describe the Iyase of Benin as the second-in-command to the Benin monarch; that is precisely what he is. That is why he is the prime minister of the kingdom. That is precisely what Oba Ewedo, who enunciated the title, Iyase (Ona iya se' uwa) more than ten centuries ago (1255 A.D.), wanted to achieve. An excellent comparison is the relationship between the British monarch and the British prime minister as earlier stated.

The Benin monarch rules indirectly through his chiefs, while chiefs rule indirectly through the Odionweres who also rule through the Okaeo of the villages and streets in the city. The highest title of all the town chiefs (Eghae vbo n'ore) is that of the Iyase of Benin (Egharevba, E. Eweka). The Iyase of Benin is chosen from the king's numerous chiefs by the Oba himself, unlike the British prime minister who is chosen by the people. But their administrative functions are very similar.

The title, Iyase, unlike some of the other chieftaincy titles, is not hereditary. The Oba chooses his Iyase as he pleases and they are usually highly disciplined chiefs, with huge amount of traditional and innate knowledge of the state, custom and tradition. He also has total commitment and allegiance to the preservation of the Benin monarchy, tradition and custom. More importantly, on the Iyase rests the defense of the Benin Empire. Benin Chiefs are called Ekhaemwen (Okhaemwen for singular). They are divided into two main groups; Eghaevbo n'ore and Eghaevbo n'ogbe.

This latter group is closely connected with services to the Oba in the palace and are largely restricted to societies of Iwebo, Ibiwe and Iwegue. The leader of the Iwebo is the Uwangu of Benin. It is also not a hereditary title. The Uwangu is also chosen from amongst the numerous Iwebo chiefs as the king pleases. The former, Eghaevbo n'ore, constitutes what Egharevba called the 'Council of State.' This group of chiefs is headed by the Iyase of Benin.

In the days past, when the Benin army went to war, the Iyase was the commander, while the Oba of Benin is the commander in chief in English terminology. Our oral tradition has it that only the Iyase of Benin can ask the Oba questions on behalf of the citizens of the empire during 'ita-emwen' (parley) in 'eguae'maton' (palace hall). Contrary to what we read in some of the newspapers, credited to Nosakhare Ise-ukhure, the Iyase is NOT Okao evien-oba (head of the slaves). In fact, neither the Iyase nor the Benin people he represents are evien (slaves). They are Benin citizens and subjects to the crown (Oba) and not slaves to the Oba as was reported in the alleged press briefing. The Ise-ukhure of Benin (custodian of the ancestral spirit staff of the royal family of Benin) is the priest responsible only for Erinmwin-Idu, which is the family household deity of the royal family.

The king, on behalf of the royal family, owns the shrine of the royal ancestry. The Ukhure (ancestral spirits staff), which symbolizes that ancestry, is under the care of the Ise-ukhure, hence the priest title. Unlike a chieftaincy title, the 'Ise-ukhure' is not conferred by the Oba. It is not a chieftaincy title but a hereditary function by the Ise-ukhure family and it passes from father to son. He is described in Benin as Isekhure n'' osi' Oba (Isekhure, the friend of the king)

Our king says the last word on any issue and thereafter, no one else speaks on that same issue. In Benin parlance, we say 'egue'oba emwen se'. That means; once a case reaches the Oba's palace, it has to be resolved as it cannot go elsewhere. These cases are decided by the Ekhaemwen, amongst whom the Iyase is the most senior, while the Oba listens to the arguments for and against, after which he makes his pronouncement. After a publication by the Benin Traditional Council chaired by the Omo n'Oba or any release from the palace of the Oba of Benin signed 'The Palace,' there will be absolutely no need whatsoever for anybody to hold further press conferences on such issue. It has been finalized and closed. Such is our tradition.

In recent times, during the politicking before the last general elections, there were so many individual press releases about issues which had been commented on by the Benin Traditional Council. To have attempted to wade in then might have infuriated some of the participants and lead to committing the same offence one had pledged to correct. We respect our Oba and the customs and tradition of our people and it is our duty to correct misinformation through the media for posterity.

People should know when to draw the line in politics Some do not. A few weeks ago, a popular politician was described as the "Iyase of Edo" in one of the newspapers. This is very wrong as there is no Iyase of Edo. The title is "Iyase of Benin." We corrected that publication immediately on the World Wide Web and we have been waiting

patiently for the politician to correct the erroneous publication in the same newspaper. So, far no correction has been published.

While various individuals and groups try to arrogate to themselves powers and positions that are not theirs, we as the eghele of the empire will continue to be on guard to correct, inform, educate and ward off encumbrances and incursions into our customs, tradition and history.

Dr. Ogbonmwan sent this piece from UK