

BOOK REVIEW

Ewuare: The Oba of Benin

Author- Ekhaguosa Aisien

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Reviewer- Osaisonor G. Ekhaton

Save for Oba Erediauwa's memoir *I remain sir, your obedient Servant*¹ and the pamphlet *A short biography of Uku Akpolokpolo, Omo n' Oba n' Edo Akenzua II, CMG, JP, LLD; Oba of Benin*² by Osadolo Edomwonyi other full-length book has been written on any of the forty Obas (Kings) of Benin Kingdom, Nigeria. This makes *Ewuare: The Oba of Benin*, a book of eleven chapters and 207 pages by Ekhaguosa Aisien a welcome addition to this slim list of biographies. The choice of Oba Ewuare Ogidigan as the subject of his book, according to Aisien, the Medical doctor turned historian, is because "the Edos regard Ewuare and his reign as the yardstick for measuring all other Obas of Benin, both in prestige and in achievement." This is why the Benin people say: *Egbe Ewuare era gie Oba se* meaning "Ewuare is the yardstick by which all other Obas of Benin are measured." In spite of Ewuare's larger than life stature in Benin traditional history and worldview, there has been no significant, detailed research on his life and leadership qualities.

The first part of the book contains four chapters which discusses the early life of *Oba* Ewuare and how he became king. The second section made up of two chapters deals with

¹ Oba Erediauwa *I remain sir, your obedient Servant*, Spectrum Books Limited, Ibadan, 2004.

² Osadolo Edomwonyi, *A short biography of Uku Akpolokpolo, Omo n' Oba n' Edo Akenzua II, CMG, JP, LLD; Oba of Benin* Bendel Newspaper Corporation, Benin City, 1981.

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the political and religious strides of Oba Ewuare and emphasizes his achievements in the area of diplomatic relations with other polities. The final part has five chapters that chronologically analyze and synchronize Benin myths and folk stories about the experiences and achievements of Oba Ewuare. The book ends with an appendix which is an article on five hundred years of European contact with Benin that Aisien had earlier published in a local Nigerian Newspaper. Each of these contributes to the intriguing revelations that the book provides about the person of Ewuare and sources of Benin history unknown before the publication of this book.

Three major areas of controversies addressed by the book are Ewuare's origin, achievements/contributions, and leadership. The first major controversy addressed surrounds Ewuare's origin, personality, and leadership. It debunks A.F.C. Ryder's suggestion that the changes associated with Oba Ewuare "might be interpreted as evidence of a new wave of foreign influence."³ by tracing his birth to the love affair between his father, Oba Ohen and his mother, Ovenmwen of Ute, thereby establishing his firm Benin parentage. He then fills a gap in information Oba Ewuare's early life with the story narrated by the Issele-Uku people, who take pride in the fact that they provided shelter for a Benin Prince who became the greatest ruler of Benin kingdom. He further posits that "If Ogun's Issele-Uku sojourn is accepted as a historical fact ..., then, it would be easy to explain the Uwaifiokun story as told by Benin folklore."⁴ He concludes this section with an explanation of the genesis of the conflict between Prince Ogun and Prince Uwaifiokun, the usurper, and how Ogun finally regained the throne based on Benin folklore. He discusses

³ A.F.C. Ryder, *Benin and the Europeans, 1485-1897*, Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd, London, 1969, 8.

⁴ Aisien Ekhaguosa. (2012). *Ewuare: The Oba of Benin*. Benin City: Aisien Publishers, p. 39

the roles of Okhuaihe, Edo, and Emotan, all of whom became significant personalities in Benin history.

The second part of the book focuses on the contributions of Ewuare to Benin history namely his invitation of the first Portuguese from Sao Tome to Benin guided by his protégé Okhuaihe. This resulted in the introduction of fire arms and coral beads, the establishment of trans-Atlantic trade, and the development of the river port at Ughoton into a commercial center. He concludes with a new interpretation of Ewuare's incineration of the city, seeing it as clearing away the old deities (a well-known ritual of Christian conversion) to make way for the introduction of Christianity to the Benin kingdom. The book then goes on to aver that it was during this time that human sacrifice was introduced to Benin, and that it is traceable to Portuguese Christianity. According to Aisien, "the religious sacrificing of humans is, of course, worlds apart from the judicial execution of humans carried out on criminal offenders and on the enemies of the state." To explain this transmogrification, he claims that at this time, Benin kingdom did not produce any red wine that could be approximated to the blood of Christ and human blood could have been taken literally to represent the blood of Christ.⁵ He posits that Chiefs Osah and Osuan, whose traditional ritual functions in the palace involved human blood, started sacrificing humans in continuance of the Christian ritual. What he fails to tell us is how they represented the accompanying body of Christ since they did not also produce bread.

It is significant to note that Aisien is silent about the dictatorial administrative style for which Oba Ewuare was renowned. Though Ewuare was a great warrior king who expanded

⁵ Aisien, pp. 165-166.

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the boundaries of the kingdom from Onitsha to Ekiti, he ruled his empire with an iron hand and obnoxious decrees. His neglect of these aspects of Ewuare's reign might be because they have been well documented by Egharevba and need no further repetition. However, an issue that Aisien raises but fails to explain is his assertion that Oba Ewuare's dynastic concern made him decree the return to primogeniture. If this were true, why did the king not allow Ezoti to succeed him under the principle of primogeniture instead of decreeing that all three of his sons must reign in succession after him. Such a decree does not indicate a genuine desire for peaceful succession. Aisien also posits that Oba Ewuare was killed by Ovia deity at Essi near Udo, which he "commanded before his death."⁶ This contradicts the popular belief that he knew the secrets of all deities and was not subject to them as a supernatural being himself.

Despite these issues, the book makes a major contribution to Benin history with its many stories. The twenty-six illustrations including maps, drawings, and pictures further enrich the volume and help the reader to imagine past events.

⁶ Egharevba, J. U. (2005). *A Short History of Benin*. Benin City: Fortune and Temperance Publishers, p. 17.