

BOOK REVIEW

‘Re-Righting’ the Illusion of Ogiamien in Benin Kingship

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Osayomwabo Osemwegie Ero and Simeon Owie’s *The Benin Monarchy and Ogiamien Connection: The Historical Facts* (2016) and David Edebiri’s *Ogiamien and the Illusion of Kingship* (2017) are two books that deal with the same subject and that should be of interest to students of Benin culture and history. The books have taken on the task of correcting an erroneous impression created by a section of the Ogiamien’s family prior to the coronation of the present Oba of Benin, Oba Ewuare II, in 2016.

Ero and Owie’s co-authored book comprises of eight chapters with eight appendices and photographs germane to the discourse, while Edebiri’s book of four chapters, appendices and a few photographs. Ero and Owie begin with the Ogiso dynasty (40 BCE - 1100 CE) in chapter 1 of their book. They trace the evolution of the Ogiso or king from the Odionwere system. Several issues prompted the Edionwere (oldest male community heads) to come together to establish a kingship system c. 40 BCE. Developments in the existing communities propelled Igodo, a young man of about forty years old, to assume the leadership of Evbuoto community. His sagacity encouraged several other independent communities to submit to his leadership with people coming to regard him as a “God-sent person.” He was described as “Oye vbe Ogie ne re iso” meaning “like a king from the sky.” Ero and Owie posit that this description was shortened to Ogiso and this became the title of successive rulers before the start of the second dynasty in about 1170 CE (p. 3). This transmutation of an Odionwere into an Ogiso was not without resistance from some Edionwere. Nonetheless, he succeeded in consolidating the area under his rule, renaming it *Igodomigodo*. The authors also summarize in a tabular form the thirty-one successive Ogisos who ruled until the interregnum in 1100 CE and their various achievements.

In chapter 2, Ero and Owie trace the origin and the development of the Uzama chiefs who perform the Oba’s coronation rituals to between 16 – 66 CE. Despite performing these rituals, the Uzama are not kingmakers since in Benin it is believed that kings are not made but born. The

role of the Uzama chiefs in the restoration and re-establishment of the Benin monarchy c. 1170 CE is also underscored by the authors. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the place of Evian (c. 1130-1170) and the emergence of his son Ogiamien Erebor in Benin history. Evian saved the people from a man-eating monster that had terrorized Igodomigodo. Following the dethronement and banishment of the last Ogiso Owodo, he was appointed an administrator (*okaevbo*). Using both oral and written sources, Ero and Owie debunks the claim that Ogiamien was ever an Ogiso and stress that Ogiamien was defeated by Oba Ewedo, who ascended the throne in about 1255 CE.

Ero and Owie in chapter 6 discuss the Obas of the Benin Kingdom from Oba Odolorre "Oranmiyan" (1170 -1200 CE) to Oba Erediauwa (1979-2016), showcasing their respective achievements. In chapter 7, titled "The Battle at Unueru and the so-called Ekiokpaga Treaty," they set straight the Ogiamien Trumpet's exaggeration of what happened at the battle of Unueru, indicating that it was not a treaty making event. Rather it was a show of the Oba's magnanimity since he did not execute the usurpers but forgave and restored them as subjects of the Oba. They also throw light on other less significant claims such as the Oba's visit to Ogiamien and the Ogiamien's ownership of the special door called Urho-Erinmwin using information from other historical sources.

Besides laying the fiction of Ekiopagha to rest, Ero and Owie devote chapter 8 to highlighting the institution of the Iyase, the title established by Oba Ewedo, and the exploits of the first Iyase Odigie Olomi. He was said to have been a blacksmith par excellence who not only killed two leopards in one day using 'buba' traps, but also made the winning of the war popularly known as Okuo Edoyo (war to quench) at Unueru possible. The victory ended the hostilities and insurgency of the Ogiamien at that time. The authors aver that at no time was there a treaty between the Oba and the Ogiamien as the latter was conquered in battle and made to obey the commands of the victor.

Edebiri's *Ogiamien and The Illusion of Kingship* is a smaller forty-four page book that recounts the early history of Benin in a more summary form. It is only a little more detailed in its unraveling of the story of the second dynasty which seems to have been a restoration of the bloodline of Ogiso Owodo. Following the death of Evian, the administrator during the interregnum, and his son Erebor (also known as Ogiamien) proclaiming his father a deity and attempting to impose himself as the ruler, the Uzama intensified their search for the son of

Owodo, known as Ekaladerhan. It had been gathered from intelligence reports that he had not been killed as directed but was living at Uhe or Ile-Ife. Edebiri's account states that at that point Ekaladerhan, already "a huge potentate in the land of his sojourn could not personally come due to old age and the position he then occupied in Ile-Ife society" (p.12). Instead, he sent one of his sons who began the lineage of the current Obas in the Benin Kingdom. The Uzama, in their wisdom, relocated the palace from the eastern axis to the western axis where he was crowned Oba. In 1255 CE, Oba Ewedo, fifth in the line of succession, built his palace at the present site. This was not without stiff opposition from the Ogiamien whose forces were vanquished by the superior army of Oba Ewedo. A few days later, the Ogiamien was summoned to a post-war meeting at Ekiokpaga, the site where the war took place, in order to make a formal submission and surrender the royal stool of the Ogiso kings which he had gotten from his father. Following his compliance, the Oba in his magnanimity made him an Uzama n'Ibie (a junior chief) in the Oba's palace. Oba Ewedo, to preserve the history for future generations, "decreed that the proceedings of the epoch meeting [sic.] be made part of the coronation ceremony of future Obas" (p. 17). In the last chapter, Edebiri maintains that Evian was never an Ogiso, merely an administrator, adding that Ogisanship, like Obanship, is by primogeniture in the Benin kingdom.

In conclusion, the authors have done a good job of 're-righting' the misconceptions of history and kingship in the Benin kingdom by a section of the Ogiamien family. At the same time, it should be noted that Edebiri's book lacks depth. It would be correct to say that most of the facts presented by the author are not new and the author fails to situate most of the events in their historical time frame. Lastly, Edebiri's language of presentation is lucid despite a few grammatical infelicities. Its slim size, however, will make it appealing to young readers.

Ero and Owie's book has more historical facts and greater depth. A major contribution by the authors is that they have unearthed the name and history of the first Iyase of the Benin Kingdom. This information is absent from Egharevba's *Concise lives of the Iyases of Benin* (1947) and thus fills a gap. It is a well-researched effort and the language is lucid, though a few spelling errors may be noted. The pictures are colorful and the explanatory appendices make it easier for readers to come to terms with Benin history. *Ogiamien and The Illusion of Kingship* and *The Benin Monarchy and Ogiamien Connection: The Historical Facts* are highly recommended for Benin

citizens, students, and researchers of African History and Benin Cultural Studies who want to have a better grasp of political evolution and the history of the Obaship in the Benin Kingdom.

References

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